



Kids, Tools, and Joy

One advantage of trading my toolbelt for a keyboard is that I deeply enjoy those times I do pick up the tools. Working on a side job, on a Boy Scout Eagle project, or as I did on Thanksgiving, on my sister-in-law's house, is nearly as much fun now as when I first strapped on a toolbelt at 18.

Back then, I felt honored to be entrusted with turning an expensive pile of wood into some thing for people to use and enjoy. That was a long time ago, and by the time I gave up earning my living as a carpenter, the realities of heat, snow, rain, mud, and time constraints had taken the simple joy of using tools to make stuff and eroded it down to an easily ignored nub.

As good as it is now to turn wood into dust, watching kids realize they can pick up a piece of steel and use it to shape their world is even better. Not all kids have that affinity. But when you meet one who lays claim to the same innate ability to use tools that drew so many of us into the trades, an intergenerational bond clicks.

I see it in a couple of the boys in the Scout troop I help lead. These are kids who struggle with school, as I did. Tool users don't get the point of schooling that doesn't teach how to build stuff. Why would anyone bother? We're hardwired that way, and no number of parent-teacher conferences or hours with the guidance counselor can change that.

Every so often, I get to show these kids some carpentry. You can almost see the light go on. Their eyes brighten, and they become assertive and confident as they realize their competence. I hope it sticks, that this moment begins to show them their

worth, and that they can find enough similar moments in the coming years of adolescence to survive an educational system that focuses on academics at the expense of technical skills.

Back to Thanksgiving: Carl, my six-year-old grandnephew, was there, and he helped me install a handrail for his grandmother. Carl is developmentally slow — he might be at the level of most kids half his age. But he knows what he likes.

After setting up to cut the railing on a chop saw, I warned him, "Cover your ears — big noise." Carl dutifully covered his ears, and when the cut was finished, he shouted in delight, "More noise!" When he got to help predrill the railing, I thought he'd burst. No person has ever struggled harder to reconcile an intense desire to focus on the task at hand with an equally intense desire to dance the happy dance.

By now you're wondering what's my point? It's this. It's really easy to allow our day-to-day struggles make us forget the joy of sinking a nail with a couple of deadly accurate hammer blows, or of splitting a pencil line with a circular saw. Most people don't have, understand, or value those skills. Often, we don't value them, either. Would you want your kid to marry a deck builder?

The kids know, though. Those Boy Scouts whose eyes shine as they sink nails while their academically gifted brothers bend them, they get it. Carl gets it in a big way. We, on the other hand, often forget it. And that's a mistake.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Engel". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Andy Engel
Editor

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we want your two cents.

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