

Always a Generalist

There's a constant tension between aspiring to develop a skill and then taking it to the highest level of execution and aspiring to learn lots of different skills only to become merely good with them. This is true in all crafts and, in fact, in all professions. It's obviously true in the sciences -- where the pinnacle of achievement remains knowing absolutely the most about the smallest (or narrowest) -- as it is true in medicine and, I assume, in law, economics, and other fields about which I know relatively little. But I'm writing now about woodturning and it is here that I'm dealing with that tension.

I wrote two months ago about learning to turn spheres. To the extent that I've been able to work in my cold shop during the winter months, I've learned a lot and made reasonably good technical progress. Most of the spheres that now come off my lathe are, well, pretty spherical. At least that's how they look if viewed casually. And they're smooth and lovely to touch since I sand them to 1000 or 1200 grit. That gives a wonderful tactile quality to their surfaces. But if studied really carefully, and especially if put back on the lathe, subtle flats and bulges reveal themselves. So it's best to close one's eyes and enjoy the sensuousness. I need to turn several more spheres to fill a large pine bowl that I turned when I aspired to turn large bowls. That's been my short-term goal -- to fill the bowl. And right now I have more blocks of wood with an unrealized sphere inside than I have need for finished spheres.

It is tempting to keep at it. Turning spheres can be a meditative experience -- particularly the sanding. There are no design problems to solve. There's just the challenge of getting the largest possible ball out of the rectangle or cube that I start with. Perhaps there's an opportunity to become a renowned sphere-turner. Dare I even dream of being known for spheres as J. Paul Fennell is known for piercings, David Ellsworth for hollowforms, Cindy Drozda for finials, or Johannes Michelsen for hats? Why has no one filled the sphere niche? Regardless of the improbable opportunity, I know that I'm not going to be that person because I'm starting to feel the familiar urge to do something else.

In first learning to turn, I think it is critically important to learn to make a variety of things. Typically, this means starting with spindles. The oft repeated truism is that the skills developed in turning spindles are basic to turning all other shapes. I agree. It is important to not short spindle turning in a headlong rush to turn bowls, platters and other more exotic forms. Spindle turning is itself fun, instructive, and challenging. It is often quick and, therefore, satisfying and entertaining. Why, after all, are spin tops and mushrooms among the favorites at public demos? And it is rewarding. Some say that spindle turning is really the only way to make a living by turning wood.

My first class was at John Campbell and taught by Alan Leland. We spent an eternity of two days on beads and coves before moving on to a box, a goblet, a platter, and a hollow ornament with a cap and finial. Needless to say, none of my turnings were particularly good. Still, I've kept and enjoy them despite their faults. The most enduring benefit from that initial class, and something for which I'm most grateful, is the broad exposure to a range of projects and, with that, an awareness of the numerous paths that one can follow.

This brings me back to the issue of specialization. As a physician, I practiced neurology -- a specialty that required four years of unique training. To my patients and for the medical communities in which I practiced, I was a specialist. And from one practice setting to another and one career interval to

another I focused my attention on different areas of neurology – stroke, multiple sclerosis, HIV/AIDS, epilepsy and a few others. This was comparable to turning spindles, then bowls, then spheres, and then platters. Enough focus for enough time to become competent, even expert, but never the best at that subspecialty or skill set. I was then, as now, temperamentally a generalist.

I have great admiration for the people who have the motivation and focus to become true specialists. For bowl turners, to fully master the shapes and proportions, to learn coring, to make smooth finish cuts, and to achieve elegant final finishes requires dedication and repetition. But then, there are always further levels of specialization -- thin walled bowls, natural edge bowls, segmented bowls, functional bowls, carved and embellished bowls, end-grain bowls, green-turned bowls etc. In that respect, woodturning is no different from science, medicine, law, economics, furniture making or ceramics. To rise to the top and gain recognition for doing something so well, or so innovative, or so unique that that “something” becomes identified with your name, one needs to do more and more of less and less. One must continue to push a singular envelope. That is where both the challenges and the glory lie.

For me, however, that focus or dedication carries a couple of major risks – fatigue and boredom. (We won't mention the risk of failure.) So my ideal work strategy is to broaden my range of projects for a while. For example, interspersing spindle projects like elaborate wands and simple handles with bowls and platters. And then narrow my attention to one type of turning, like my spheres. And then broaden before narrowing again. So after my big bowl is filled with spheres, I'll need to turn some bowls and platters if only to show myself that I remember the steps. Then I expect to narrow my attention once again. I'm looking forward to turning a whole bunch of finials. Watch for them.