

Slow Learner

This year, I'm committed to mastering the art of turning a sphere. I suspect that my interest in spheres and how they're made stems from my attachment to a set of bocce balls that have been a family treasure for my entire life. They're made of Brazilian Jacaranda and have a deep rich reddish color. They're hard and heavy and, after years of being stored in uninsulated garages, are only a little out of round. I believe that they're 80 to 90 years old since my Italian grandparents were forced out of Italy by Mussolini in the late 1930's. They immigrated to Brazil and joined a community of Italian ex-pats until WWII ended. The bocce balls came from Brazil to the US with my father where they were loved but rarely used. My childhood interest in balls gravitated toward basketballs. These were rubber and held no fascination.

For decades before I was ever introduced to turning, I would occasionally heft these roughly six inch spheres and puzzle over how they were made. After I started turning, I made a couple of attempts at turning a sphere. One yielded a pretty good hemisphere. But I couldn't figure out how to get out from between centers. I ended up with a reasonable small model of a water tower. My next sphere could be charitably described as a misshapen egg with a nipple. After that, I gave up for several years.

At the AAW meeting in Pittsburgh I went to a demo given by Christian Burchard on turning spheres. And it was there that the process of turning a sphere started to become demystified. In Joe Dickey's class at Maryland Hall two years ago, Joe also turned a sphere. His approach was similar to Christian's, with a few variations. I have notes and drawings which I'm now relying on to get me started.

This brings me to my real topic, namely the different ways that we learn new skills. We talk about the difference between visual (book and illustration) learners and auditory (lecture or instruction) learners. This is an oversimplification at best. Throughout my education, I fell more into the auditory camp. Although, in the sciences, hands-on experiences like chemistry lab were critically important. These don't fit well into the visual v. auditory distinction. In the hothouse of clinical training after the first years of medical school, hands-on training was vital. When learning a procedure, "see one, do one, teach one" was perilously close to reality.

Learning to turn isn't so different. If you think about it, learning any turning skill depends on knowledge about wood, tools, and the sequence of steps that one follows to produce a thing. These skills we largely acquire by reading, watching and listening – requiring visual and auditory learning whether from a book, a live demo, or a video. But real mastery of a turning skill requires the mastery of physical technique -- the development of muscle-memory and what, for lack of a better term, we call "touch." All the u-tube videos and how-to books in the world won't give us mastery. Rehearsal, however, will. Which means having to try, and to fail, and to try again and again and again. Fortunately, in wood turning this process is more forgiving than in medical training.

Generally, I'm not one who embraces the idea of perfection. I really don't believe that there is a perfect bowl, or a perfect goblet, or a perfect candlestick. There are bowls and goblets that possess awe inspiring beauty – enough that someone might compare them to perfection. And there are bowls and goblets that are wonderful while falling short of the mark. Fortunately, without a Platonic idea of the perfect bowl, goblet or hollow-form, we're free to be endlessly unique in our approach -- with the

common goal of creating a thing of beauty. Yes, we have basic rules, a golden mean, Fibonacci numbers and other guidelines -- but no absolute criteria.

Spheres, however, are different. They are, by definition, perfect. All of them – regardless of color, texture, hardness, weight, or species of wood. So if it is impossible to improve on the form, what does it mean to get better at turning a sphere? And how will I improve? The answer appears to be with the acquisition of technique – a combination of layout, sequence, tool presentation, and repetition to establish muscle memory and touch. All were notably absent with my first sphere.

I searched “How to turn a wooden sphere” on Google. There were 2,650,000 “results” in 0.5 seconds. I’m going to assume that all are not helpful. At the top of page one were nine youtube videos ranging in length from 1.52 to 15.18 minutes – enough for me to binge-watch for a whole evening. But before I do that, I’m going back out to my shop to rehearse the technique shown to me by Christian Burchard. My measure of improvement, beyond successfully completing a sphere, may be the time it takes. Right now and for the past two years, time has stood still in my shop. That’s when the clock battery died. My first sphere took from sometime after lunch until sometime before dinner. When I’m satisfied that I’m on the path to my goal of mastery, I will invest in an AA battery and start the timer.