



Scraping By ...

Do you believe that inanimate objects can have feelings? On the face of it, such an idea seems impossible, and I for one, don't believe such a thing for a minute. But I had an experience recently that made me wonder ...

Because I am a professional woodworker, my tools are of course very important to me, and I generally take good care of them. I sharpen my knives and chisels as soon as they lose their edge. In fact, I keep my sharpening stones placed right beside me whenever I am carving, so that I don't have to disturb the work when a tool becomes slightly dull. I simply turn to one side, do the sharpening, and turn back to work, the whole process usually taking only a few seconds.

I remember reading a book about Japanese craftsmen many years ago, and the writer mentioned that 'it is a great insult to a Japanese craftsman if you pick up one of his tools and test the sharpness.' I keep this in mind whenever I visit other carvers, and am careful not to touch any of their tools. I myself am not so sensitive about this, and if you visit me, I won't get angry if you 'test' one of my chisels on your finger. But I should warn you that some of them are indeed very sharp, and you certainly might cut yourself!

The steel in many Japanese tools is a very high quality, and a well-made tool can last very many years. Of course, the more you sharpen a blade, the sooner it will wear out and need replacing, but in the case of a tool that is not used every day, it can indeed last a very long time; I am still using some of the very first chisels that I bought back when I was just a beginner at printmaking, more than twenty-five years ago. It is one of those old tools that I want to tell you about today; I think its feelings are hurt, and it is currently refusing to cooperate with me.

A few months ago, I built a special 'damp box' to hold the paper for my recent large scroll project. As you may know, paper for woodblock printmaking has to be kept moist through the entire printing process. This particular print is so large and has so many colours, that printing takes many weeks, so I need a special box to keep it damp.

In order to trap the moisture inside, the box is made out of tough plastic sheet. As I was making it, I found that I needed to trim off some of the hard plastic at one point. I couldn't find my rough cutter knife, so I reached out, picked up one of my woodcarving chisels, and used it for the job. This was a big mistake. The very rough plastic caused part of the delicate blade to chip.

I of course stopped using the chisel immediately, and later that day, I spent some time carefully re-sharpening it before replacing it in my toolbox.

But ever since then, this particular chisel refuses to work properly! I thought that I may have sharpened it incorrectly, but no, I have tried repeatedly, and it still won't work. All I can think is that it is angry at me; for all of its life it has been used for delicately slicing wonderful cherrywood, and is now upset at being used roughly for cutting that piece of plastic.

I'm not quite sure what to do; I have of course apologized to it for my careless behaviour, and I again re-sharpened it, oiled it carefully, and let it have a rest from work. But it still refuses to cooperate ...

I can just hope that after enough time goes by, it will gradually regain desire to join the rest of my tools in productive work. How long does your partner take to recover after you do something foolish to make her angry?

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