



On a Knife Edge

I had a visit last week from a woodblock carver - a young man who is apprenticing with one of the workshops downtown - and he was of course quite interested in looking at my tools, just as I myself was many years ago whenever I had a chance to visit the workshop of another carver. There are of course unspoken 'rules' that come into play on such occasions; one never - and I mean *never* - touches another craftsman's tools without permission. It happened to me once that during a television interview, one of the production staff reached into my toolbox and picked up one of my carving knives. I'm a pretty easy-going guy, so I didn't get upset about this, but I did tell him that he had better not try such a thing when visiting one of the older craftsmen, or he would find the interview getting pretty 'cold'!

In this current case, knowing that the young carver would handle the tools carefully and treat them with respect, I had no qualms at all about letting him touch and inspect them. It was the only way that we could have an intelligent conversation about their shape and condition.

As I watched him pick them up for inspection I knew what must be going through his mind. Cultural rules quite severely circumscribe his ability to express himself openly and freely in this situation, especially considering that he is more than thirty years my junior. It is simply not permitted for him to say anything that could conceivably be taken as criticism. So he spoke only in a vague and general way at first, until I told him that it was OK to be more open, as I am neither particularly thin-skinned, nor am I traditionally trained. So we had a good discussion about my little collection of tools, about any number of esoteric things that would be of no interest to most readers - the sharpening angles, the level of carbon in the steel, and many other such points.

It was interesting though, that the verbal reticence wasn't a one-way street. Any number of times during our conversation I too had to be careful about what to say. Because although my senior status in our relationship gives me a free pass to handle and criticize his tools, it gives me no such permission when involving his 'oyakatta', the master of the workshop where he is training. There it becomes my turn to be vague and general - I can say nothing that might be implied as criticism! And given that my own way of doing things - mostly arrived at by self-exploration over the years - is quite different from what he is learning in that workshop, the opportunities for trouble here are many! The last thing I want is for him to go home and start replying to his master, "But David does it like *this* ..." That would put an end to his visits pretty quickly!

And these visits are indeed going to become more frequent. Story A Week episodes aren't really the place to be making major announcements about my business affairs, but I can perhaps 'leak' that there was an important reason for young Sato-san to be here, and for him to be studying my tools so intently. I have hired him (part time at first, and with the permission of his workshop master) to be the manager of a new venture that is getting under way here this spring - my Mokuhankan print publishing venture is going to expand to include the supply of tools for woodblock printmaking. And we are going to do it in an interesting way; rather than simply offer tools similar to those that are currently on the market, we are doing it 'from scratch'. We are designing a line of carving tools by specifying everything from the type of steel in the blades, to the shape of the handles, the dimensions, right up to the final packaging. And we are doing so with a 'damn the torpedoes' approach to the quality/cost trade-off that is always present in such calculations.

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We are going to produce the kind of tools that we want to use ourselves, and which have not been available for a great many years. Given that the yen is at its highest ever level these days (making Japanese exports very expensive), and that the market for such items is not exactly what one would call robust, this might not seem like the most sensible approach. But we are disgusted by what we see all around us in this field - a terrible race to the bottom, as all the other suppliers cheapen their products to the point where it is embarrassing to look at the stuff. We think it doesn't have to be like that.

And anyway, given that the chance of success is pretty remote, might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, right?

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