

V-Cuts

by Matt Rosenberg

It's no big secret. My house is small. My wife and my children are aware of what I have been doing in the basement. They hear my footsteps, though I try to affect a casual attitude on my way up the stairs. They see the bathroom door close behind me. They know what has happened.

I have repeated this procedure many times over the past three years. I have established a routine, staunching, disinfecting, and bandaging the lacerated finger. I struggle to hold one end of the bandage steady beside the cut with the thumb of my uninjured hand as I use all available digits to wrap the wound. Then I try to put an impassive expression on my face as I leave the bathroom, pretending that there has been no injury at all.

One might imagine that I would be better at this by now, or at least more discreet. But no matter how carefully I administer first aid and clean up after myself, I always seem to leave some tiny, red drop of evidence behind on the edge of the sink, or sometimes the tub, once or twice on the light switch cover at the top of the basement stairs. Despite my best efforts to keep my injury to myself, my family knows what I have done.

There is nothing intentional or compulsive about my brand of self-harm, though some who know me might suspect otherwise. I am simply a very clumsy man. My lack of both fine and gross motor coordination has been in evidence since early childhood. My first-grade teacher was troubled by my early attempts at legible handwriting. The school music teacher was concerned by my inability to skip during movement activities. I was referred to specialists for both issues and regularly pulled out of my classroom for individualized therapy. Yet all these years after professional intervention, I continue to cut myself in the basement. Though I was a veritable expert at skipping by the time I graduated from elementary school, I trip and stumble up the stairs in my mad rush for Band-Aids.

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It is absurd that I whittle. To present this sentiment more accurately, and imbue it with more drama, I will say that I pose an immediate threat to my own safety when I whittle. If I were to go even further, and formulate a question based on this information, it would be this: Why do I whittle?

A sympathetic reader would argue that it was through some indefatigable desire to conquer my personal limitations that I chose a hobby that clashes with my natural skill set. What an inspirational statement to be able to make; against all odds, he whittles! I could certainly support this thesis by referencing previous experiences that showcase the strength of my determination.

Let us take for example, my personal relationship with the guitar. Why might someone with notoriously poor coordination choose to play an instrument that requires the musician simultaneously do completely different things with their left and right hand? It must be the unquenchable fire of the human spirit!

This was the notion that moved my father the first time he saw me play the guitar in front of an audience.

I had begun to scratch around at the instrument years prior, struggling to learn open chords and trying to write songs. I had worked my way from comedic ineptitude to passable mediocrity and had attained an unjustifiable level of confidence when my dad attended a performance at a bar in Manchester, New Hampshire.

I was a member of a two-person band that had gained a very small amount of notoriety in certain pockets of the Boston area music scene. We performed humorous originals and quirky versions of cover songs for occasionally receptive audiences. Some people called themselves our fans; we were on a first name basis with all of them. Sometimes we made a little bit of money, though rarely enough to pay for more than the gasoline required to transport my bandmate and myself to gigs, then back home to the apartment that we shared in a town called Contoocook.

Finally, we scheduled a performance early enough in the evening, and close enough to my father's home, to justify his attendance. He had spent the duration of my childhood in IEP meetings with my teachers, knitting his brow over my bilateral coordination. Now here I was, performing miracles before his eyes. I was chording with

one hand, finger picking with the other, and vocalizing in a way that might charitably be described as singing.

It did not matter that he, my stepmother, and my fiancée constituted half of the audience that evening. He did not seem to notice that the other three bar patrons were visibly annoyed that the activities onstage were hindering their conversation. He was watching years of physical and occupational therapy paying off with dividends. He must have felt like he was living in the dramatic climax of an inspirational movie.

I believe that my father's eyes were wet with emotion that night as I got off the stage. He was proud of me. But I do not think that my desire to play the guitar was ever informed by a drive to surmount any personal obstacles. I was fanatical about Rock 'n' Roll. I enjoyed the attention of strangers. I had an enormous ego and believed myself to be remarkably clever. It was inevitable that I would eventually try to play music and to perform onstage.

Nor do I believe that my whittling habit is informed by any desire to prove any level of mastery over my motor skills. So why do I do it? I have sliced through three pairs of safety gloves in as many years. I have visited urgent care twice with lacerations that I could not get to stop bleeding on my own. What is my motivation?

I have successfully bandaged my finger without too much struggle. Now I am back in the basement with my knife and my 1x1 piece of basswood. A drop of blood has spread along the grain, and I am able to cut it away without removing too much wood.

I strop my blade though I probably don't need to; it is plenty sharp. I have made a neurotic game out of this chore. Using my left hand, I hold the handle of my paddle strop at an acute angle with my workbench. With my right hand, I hold the bevel of the blade flush against the rawhide surface. I slide the knife away from me, down the strop ten times. Then I flip the knife and run it toward me once. I flip it again and slide it away from me nine times and toward me twice. I continue in this manner until both sides of the blade are equally stropped.

When I first started whittling, I would test the sharpness of my knife by cutting a patch of hair on my forearm or slicing through a piece of paper. Now I just look at the

facet I am able to cut at an angle through a piece of wood. If it is smooth and kind of shiny, my blade is sharp.

I was introduced to whittling, at least the concept of whittling, by Clyde, my stepfather. He was the first person that my brother and I had ever met who owned a Swiss Army knife. He carried it with him everywhere, and it seemed to offer the solution to every problem. No loose clothing thread was left uncut or screw untightened when Clyde and his knife were around.

In our minds, that knife was exciting and exotic. It had come to embody certain primary features of our stepfather's identity. To us, it seemed like a natural manifestation of the youth that he mythologized for our benefit, and the not-completely-conventional adulthood that he had grown to inhabit.

Clyde often regaled us with stories of his feral childhood in rural Arkansas. He was the youngest of a large family; the sibling closest to him in age was nearly twenty years older. With parents who were senior citizens, too tired to monitor the movements of an energetic child, he was often left to his own devices in the wilderness surrounding his home.

Clyde lived a kind of Neverland life in the woods. He frequently placed himself in danger, pitting himself against the elements or the nefarious plots of rival children. A young boy listening to his stories might easily conjecture that the only thing keeping my stepfather alive in those days was a two blade, Victorinox Swiss Army knife.

By the time my brother and I got to know him, Clyde made the most use of his knife on Christmas morning. My mother, who owned a toy store, had made an art form out of wrapping presents. The scene beneath the tree was always beautiful, cleanly creased wrapping paper and impenetrable coils of expertly knotted, scissor-blade-curved ribbon. Not gift would have been possible to open without the help of Clyde and his knife. He was like a surgeon, sliding the blade between paper and bow and making the upward cut with a speed that could barely be tracked by the human eye. It was like a magic trick, undoubtedly perfected in the wilds of Arkansas.

Every summer, I would spend six weeks with Clyde and my mother at their home in Upstate New York. During the school year, I lived in New Hampshire with my father. It

was during one of these visits, when I was about ten years old, that Clyde made a parental decision. He had determined that it was time for me to become a man.

Coming home from work one afternoon, he picked me up at the house. He made room in the passenger seat of his car by throwing various tools and fast-food wrappers in the back seat. Then he told me to get in and together we drove to a local sporting goods store where we purchased my first knife.

Red plastic reflected the fluorescent lights in the store's suspended ceiling like a candy-colored mirror. The blades dazzled the eye with their gleaming newness. The lifetime warranty seemed as solemn and profound as a blood oath between soldiers in battle. Holding that knife in my hand for the first time made me feel like I had been given the key to one of life's great secrets. I felt powerful.

I spent a lot of that summer vacation alone in a designated corner of my mother's office, practicing what Clyde taught me, going with the grain and cutting away from myself to avoid injury. I sharpened a lot of sticks. I rounded the corners of a lot of discarded bits of two-by-four. It was paradise.

I now realize that my father exercised Herculean restraint when I was returned to him at the end of the season with my fingers covered with Band-Aids and a Swiss Army knife in my pocket. He was a safety-conscious man. He was intimately aware of the tenuous relationship that existed between my brain and my fingers. In his imagination, he had played out any number of dangerous scenarios involving my peculiar brand of hand-eye coordination.

I admire my dad for his reaction. He did not take the knife away, though he would have been justified in doing so. Nor did he rage at my stepfather for having unilaterally made such a decision. The only thing that my father did was to make a rule: I could not whittle alone. He had to be with me every time I used my Swiss Army knife.

I soon lost all interest in whittling.

My dad may have known what he was doing all along. He probably realized that forbidding the use of the knife would set up some kind of resistance response. I would certainly rebel. I would whittle on the sly.

He may have picked up on the allure that the knife represented for me as a symbol of independence. Alone, I was free to experiment with it, holding it in different ways,

cutting at different angles. I was at liberty to learn from my mistakes and to cut myself in the process. I didn't mind sustaining a few injuries. In fact, I felt proud; this was no kids' hobby. I was a man alone with a knife.

My father must have known that his presence would rob the experience of its mystique. He did not have to take away my knife. He just had to be there.

I had made the first four V-cuts before I sliced my finger. The two in front define the separation between the chin and the chest of my figure. The two separating the back of the head from the shoulders are slightly higher. When I connect them with slices across the width of the wood, the resulting angle creates a rigid jaw line.

When you watch a YouTube tutorial about whittling or look at a photograph in the pages of *Woodcarving Illustrated*, V-cuts always look clean and precise. Draw a straight line across your wood. Angle one cut up from below the line and one cut down from above. The two cuts meet at the center below the surface. A triangular slice of wood falls away, leaving a beautiful, even notch across your work. In this case, that notch is the first step in defining the head of the figure that I am carving.

Sometimes my V-cuts are clean and even. Sometimes, they are messy and I have to go back with my blade, removing renegade slivers of wood from the center of the crease. If I am not careful, I could make the cut worse by doing this; I could create ugly, shallow knife marks along the "V."

I was thinking a lot about my stepfather three years ago when my family spent a week in Pennsylvania. My wife and children and I had rented a house in Amish Country with my father-in-law and my sister in law's family. We had planned the trip months prior and, shortly before leaving, we learned that Clyde had passed away. His memorial service was scheduled for a few days after our return, so my plan was to spend some of the vacation writing a eulogy.

Clyde and my mother had been house flippers before the term had come into vogue. They had spent much of their married life purchasing charming, if somewhat rundown homes, moving in and renovating them, then selling them at a profit. I don't think they had ever intended to do this kind of work together, but opportunity coupled with their peculiar set of inclinations and talents guided them in that direction.

Clyde had an unschooled knack for these projects. Though it had never been his profession, he had been involved in some form of building and construction since his late teens. He seemed to have the ability to walk into any home and make a loft, a skylight and a deck appear out of thin air. Friends and neighbors were always amazed at the magic that he and my mother made together.

But Clyde did little to protect his health and safety when he renovated homes. He spent years breathing in the dust from drywall, fiberglass insulation, and other building materials without ever thinking to use a facemask. My stepfather spent the final years of his life battling a prolonged respiratory illness that finally killed him.

Enjoying a family vacation while writing a eulogy is a bittersweet experience.

My eulogy centered largely on Clyde's talent for myth making. I wrote about a question I had asked him when I was very young, about his prematurely gray hair. He'd told me a story about how his hair had once been black and his pillow had once been white. One morning, after being awakened by frightening dreams, he was shocked to discover that a mysterious color reversal had taken place during the night. His hair was now white and his pillow was black. I described another instance, when I asked him about the thinning patch at the back of his head. When he was a boy in Arkansas, he'd explained, somebody had given him a baseball but could not afford to provide a mitt or bat. Clyde stood alone in the woods, trying to figure out what to do with the gift, pressing it to the top of his head and twisting it back and forth until his hair began to fall out.

I used these comedic remembrances to illustrate Clyde's creativity and talent for improvised whimsy. They were presented and received in this spirit during his memorial; I made friends and family laugh on a sad day.

Those comedic explanations Clyde created for a child illustrated another aspect of his inherent creativity. If his gift of a Swiss Army knife seemed a blood oath connecting me to Clyde, it was also one linking me to the whimsy and creativity he represented.

I make another V-cut to separate the feet from one another. Then I slide the edge of the blade across the top and sides to create a stop cut. When I make gentle slices to the cut, it creates a division between the tops of the shoes and the bottoms of two baggy

pant legs. These cuts are satisfying; if the knife has been properly stropped, the shoes shine just a little.

When I narrow out the backs of the feet, my block of wood begins to look like a recognizable human figure.

While we were in Pennsylvania, my family visited a farm that had once been owned by an Amish family. The property was preserved as a kind of museum campus; each of the outbuildings was set up to demonstrate some aspect of Amish life. We wandered past fields where goats and cattle grazed, poking our heads into silos and sheds. We were never quite sure if we were experiencing an authentic representation of local culture or a well-designed tourist trap, but it was a beautiful day and we were having fun.

In one small barn, a man sat on a stool, with a knife in one hand and a piece of wood in the other, quietly whittling. On the walls surrounding him, shelves displayed some of his finished work, lots of birds, some letter openers, a couple boats. The man seemed to specialize in roosters made from sections of branch that forked into two smaller twigs. He'd carved the roosters' heads out of one of the twigs and the tail out of the other. The tail feathers were made by running the knife from the end of the twig to the base of the fork so that thin strips of wood curled up in arcing plumes.

The man greeted my children by asking their names. He put down his whittling and used a wood burner to personalize a small chip of poplar for each of them. He then invited us to look around the barn.

After a minute or two of polite browsing, my boys wandered back outside to find their cousins while I got sucked into this man's world. I had not realized that I'd had so many questions about whittling until I had the opportunity to ask. I wanted to know how he kept his blade sharp. He walked me through an elaborate ritual involving a wet stone, sandpaper of various grits, and stropping compound. I asked about the decorative rings that he'd carved around the handles of his letter openers. He explained the V-cut that has fascinated me ever since.

I purchased one of the man's books and asked him to sign it for me. When I left the little barn, I had been inside for longer than I had realized. My wife, my children, my sister in law's family, and my father-in-law had gathered together just outside the door. They had been making jokes about what I could possibly have been doing in there for

such an extended stretch of time. Perhaps, they joked, I would be Amish when I finally emerged.

I have been saving the face for the end. The finer details of the nose and eyes make me nervous. They are not as forgiving as the large features like the arms and legs. A misplaced cut could destroy the entire carving.

I use a pencil to draw a centerline down the front of the head, then I cut in just below the middle of the face to define the bottom of the nose. It's a clean cut. I am emboldened as I slice up to it from the chin. It's a nice little stop cut. So far, so good.

I really did not expect to start whittling when I bought that book from the Pennsylvania whittler. I liked the pictures, and something inside me always gets excited by the idea of a personally autographed copy of anything. But I could not actually picture myself sitting on my back steps fashioning roosters out of tree branches. Still, when we returned from our trip, I dug up an old pocketknife from my basement and tried my hand at a letter opener of my own.

It was not a good letter opener. The decorative V-cut on the end of the handle created an upcropping of jagged splinters. The inconsistent width of the edge rendered it unfit to open mail of any sort. I decided to try to make a better one.

Perhaps this is the typical manner in which people get hooked on this hobby. Though I never set out to overcome any personal limitations, I keep thinking that I can whittle better than I whittled last time. It could be that this mentality makes whittling more of an addiction than a hobby.

Painting is not nearly as treacherous as whittling. At least I do not risk carving my finger with the paintbrush that I co-opted from one of my sons' watercolor sets. It is a test of my dexterity though. I emit a quiet grumble when my watered-down acrylic paint drips from the neck to the shoulder of my little figure, creating more skin where a shirt should be. Luckily, it is a light color, and I should be able to paint over it after it dries.

The stop cut that separates the shoes from the pants creates a kind of barrier, a dam to control runaway paint. There is a clean division between black and khaki. I am still kicking myself for not making a similar cut to define the soles of the shoes.

My younger son has started whittling. He did not want any instructions at first. He just wanted to engage with the wood on his own terms without any disruptions or outside influences. I was lucky to get him to wear a pair of safety gloves.

His first whittling attempt was difficult for me to watch. I pretended to work on my own project while I stood beside him at the basement workbench. I feigned nonchalance as he picked up a knife and started carving, but I was covertly tracking every movement of his hands. Each cut affected my ability to breathe. I am sure that I was wincing with every pass that his blade made through the wood, preparing to run for the Band-Aids at any moment. A cut on one's child's finger hurts so much more than a cut on one's own.

He did not cut himself during that first effort. He has now been whittling with me for a couple of months. He never cuts himself.

I have learned to relax when we whittle together. We don't say much. Sometimes he will swallow his pride and ask for advice, usually about the stop cuts that define noses. Sometimes I will ask him for his opinion regarding my projects. He is brutally honest.

I think about my father's rule that I could not use my knife unless he was around. It was not unreasonable. The same rule exists for my child and his knife. Perhaps my father was not strategizing my loss of interest at all. Perhaps he was thinking of a way to capitalize on time. My father never knew how to talk with children; he was certainly never able to dazzle us with harrowing tales of his youth. But he was generous with his time, and he celebrated his sons' childhood.

I remember my father laughing when an associate asked him what he liked to do for fun.

"I don't do things for fun," he said. "I watch my kids do things for fun."

I admire my father's parenting style.

I was a competitive swimmer when I was young. Each weekend, my dad would drive me to far-flung meets around Southern New Hampshire. He would read when other children swam, and cheer when I swam, and then he would drive me home.

Swim meets are not entertaining, and early morning drives on a midwinter New Hampshire Saturday are not pleasant. My father had a strategy for making the time in the car go faster. He had purchased a variety of audio cassettes of old comedy radio

broadcasts. We never talked much as we drove, but we sat in the car, listening to Abbott and Costello, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Fibber McGee, and laughing.

If I had continued whittling as a child, and followed my father's rule, we would have had more time to sit together, comfortably not talking. Perhaps one of us would quote a line from "Who's on First" every few minutes. It would have been nice, perhaps nicer than whittling alone. Also, I would be a more skilled whittler today, perhaps with fewer lacerations on my fingers.

My father shared time and my stepfather shared mythology. I was not thinking about this when I started whittling, at least not consciously. It certainly was not the reason that I found this hobby, but perhaps one of the reasons I continue whittling is to share a kind of quiet passion. I stand next to my son at the workbench. We exist in the same space as we engage a common interest. Together, we cover the surface of the workbench with wood shavings as we struggle with our stop cuts and V-cuts.

Matt Rosenberg lives with his wife, two children, and crazy dog in Manchester, New Hampshire. He teaches at a Montessori School, where he works with children from four to thirteen years of age. He plays the electric ukulele in a Rock 'n' Roll band. He enjoys whittling and playing basketball with his younger son, losing philosophical debates to his older son, and being happily exhausted at the end of the day with his wife.

