



Good Read

Unhandy Man

MIDDLE AGE WAS APPROACHING, AND STEVE FRIEDMAN FELT LISTLESS.
WERE THERE ANSWERS SOMEWHERE IN HIS TOOLBOX?

NOT TOO LONG AGO, I decided to build a bookshelf.

Proficiency with tools has always been important to me. As a college student, I carried *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* wherever I went. Three decades later, I recommended *Shop Class as Soulcraft* to friends in distress as well as to people I barely knew but who seemed sad. I promised that working with their hands—hammering and sanding, measuring and tightening—might bring them the kind of peace that yoga, therapy, and prayer never would.

I never read either book. Except for seventh-grade shop class, where I sawed and varnished a cutting board that turned out to look like a hideously deformed bluegill, most of my experience at handiness was aspirational, if not outright dishonest.

Even now, when people ask how my work is going (I'm a writer), I say I'm "hacking away" or "tweaking" or "polishing" or "restructuring" or "adding some layers." When I am feeling especially ineffectual, I tell anyone who asks (and some who don't) that I am "torquing" a piece of work. I make myself sound more like a granite-jawed, flinty-eyed motorcycle mechanic and less like a middle-aged man with poor posture and lower-back pain.

Did I need to build a bookshelf because the muscular verbs were no longer doing the trick? Because I found myself overweight and underearning, and if I was going to suffer a crisis, I wanted it to be something less overtly humiliating than hair plugs? Would I really be "building" anything if I merely mounted a shelf using brackets and screws? Only fake torquers ask such questions.

I Googled "how to mount a shelf." I strolled to the neighborhood hardware store. According to the instructions, I would have a shelf mounted in 15 minutes.

Two hours and 45 minutes later, I shone with sweat. My neck ached. My fingers were cramped and crisscrossed with mysterious cuts. My left big toe was bruised and swollen. On the floor, mocking me, a hammer. On my apartment wall, taunting me, smeared, redrawn, smeared again, pencil lines. Hiding somewhere underneath my bed, a ruler and some screws. But there, on the wall, a three-foot-long, foot-wide plank of self-affirmation.

The next day I borrowed a power drill and mounted my second 15-minute shelf—in two hours. The day after that, I explored the secrets of the mysterious floating shelf. That was when I learned the maddening properties of the abomination known as drywall.

It was a tempestuous week. I discovered the simple but mighty "toggle bolt." I dropped "toggle bolt" into conversation whenever I could. I ascertained that toggle bolts were absolutely necessary when working with drywall, especially when the criminally named tool known as the stud finder failed to locate a single stud. This was not the only sad wisdom I accrued. I became acquainted with an ingenious-looking, screwdriver-size drill, only to discover that it did not perform so well when I was trying to drive inch-long screws into what turned out to be concrete.

I worried. I wondered. Did working with shelves provide just another obsessive path down a self-involved, solipsistic tunnel to nowhere? I was familiar with a few of those paths. I remembered with some embarrassment the winter I left a steady job to write a novel and ended up staying in bed every day for a month until 11 a.m., eating cold pizza and reading books on Hitler. Would my time be better spent on something less self-obsessed, more useful?

After another week of contemplation, I caught myself. Mechanics with thousand-yard stares don't wonder. Flinty



**Why did I need to build a bookshelf?
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eyes don't worry. I am a rock, I am an island, etc. Rather than fret, I installed a 15-minute shelf in 83 minutes, then another in 55 minutes. By week's end, I could put up a 15-minute shelf in 38½ minutes.

And then there was no more space in my apartment.

HANDS IDLE, TOGGLE BOLT-LESS, I gained weight. Building—I mean mounting—shelves had kept me busy and taken my mind off things. Now what? There was Chubby Hubby ice cream. And chocolate sauce. There were television shows about unfriendly visitors from distant solar systems. There was a lot of what my therapist calls "self-defeating rumination." Maybe there was some whipped cream. These activities, I realize now, are the things I had hoped my shelf building—sorry, shelf mounting—would replace: unhealthy markers of a poorly adjusted middle age; ill-chosen coping devices that served as distractions from the endless meh of daily life; diversions from the melancholy knowledge of ineluctable death.

It's the curse of the existentially weary shelf builder who has run out of wall space. I needed to create meaning in my life. But what kind? And how?

There were endless options, and I found them all wanting. Rescue an abandoned pit bull from the pound? Join a running group? I don't love animals, and I'm somewhat inert. I replaced the flapper in my toilet tank and felt a

pleasing surge of manly peace, but it was short-lived.

I took refuge in high-minded crankiness. I decided that the things we think matter don't. Not shelves. Not careers. Not a bigger apartment. Not trading stocks. None of it mattered. I decided that we humans were nothing but two-legged beavers busily building doomed multistory dams with three bedrooms and river views.

It was a long month. I cut back on alien-abduction docudramas and midnight descents into sugary oblivion. My younger sister telephoned, and when I told her I thought I had a line on some interesting new toggle bolts, she said she was worried, that I should get out of my apartment and exercise. So I took a long, moody hike through the hardware-store aisles but averted my eyes from a floating corner shelf with a handsome profile. Why torture myself? Afterward, there was some self-defeating rumination. Maybe there was a very large piece of frosted coconut cake.

I tried yoga and meditation. I cut out coffee, added fish oil pills. Still, no peace, no purpose. I selected some of the groovier volumes from my new shelves, books from my college days that I hoped might help. "Cherish not a thought," Cleobulus the Lindian, one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece, suggested. "Be superior to pleasure." In theory, sure, but both are problematic for a neurotic with a sweet tooth. "Put forth effort, self-controlled, always with strong resolution," counseled Mahapajapati Gotami, the first Buddhist nun. That was a little more like it, but still, a little insipid sounding, not to mention labor-intensive. I longed for a command as clear as the one Abraham received from the Greatest Shelf Builder of All. Why couldn't I hear it?

There was only one place to look for that answer. Top shelf, dusty volume. "Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness," read a line attributed to Sigmund Freud.

Love and work. Not a bigger bank account or a shinier watch or a silkier suit. Not a gallon of vanilla milkshakes or an alien-abduction miniseries with rich character development and impressive production values. Not two-inch-thick cypress shelves. Love and work. Simple. Doable. The first I could achieve by practicing kindness, serving others, by being the best son, brother, uncle, and friend possible.

Work? It wasn't the shelves that mattered. I understood that now. It was the building—I mean mounting—of them. It was the work. It was acting with intent, paying attention. "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water," the Buddhists say, "and after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

As long as I created something and did so with care, respect, intention, and humility, and without worrying too much about the outcome—or at least not worrying so much that I forgot the sanctity of the process—I might find purpose. Peace.

Still, I have no more shelf space.

I'm considering napkin holders.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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