CHAPTER ONE

A Shared Hunger

THERE WAS A TIME when I assumed that becoming a master craftsman would be a process of enlightenment. My hands were still ignorant then, and I was searching for an occupation in which I could forge an adult self. Eager for competence, I thought that having one's craft together would mean having one's life together. Today, having become reasonably competent as a furniture maker, I know better. Spiritual enlightenment is not on the table. Still, the notions that drew me into the workshop forty years ago were not without consequence. The footing on which I started my journey has shaped my choices, concerns, and experiences throughout, and my transcendent expectations for a life in craft were rewarded in more palpable ways.

These days I teach more than I build. My students are adults from a wide variety of backgrounds, many with lives that could be considered highly successful by any normative standard. Yet, consistently, I find that they have been drawn to woodworking by a hunger similar to that which first impelled me. They do not invest time, money, and effort traveling to Maine to cut dovetails with hand tools because they need little hardwood benches, which are the introductory-class projects. What lures them is the hope of finding a deeper meaning by learning to make things well with their own hands. Many go on to set up workshops of their own, and more than a few develop a passion for woodworking they describe as transformational.

Beyond the red clapboard walls of our school I encounter many more people who express the same sort of longing. The banquet of work, leisure, and consumption that society prescribes has left some essential part of them undernourished. They are hungry for avenues of engagement that provide more wholesome sustenance.

The craft of furniture making is not a cure-all for this condition, but it functions as a source of meaning, authenticity, fulfillment – call it what you will, for the moment – for many people of my acquaintance. The same is true of other self-expressive, creative disciplines. They may not lead to the profound transfiguration to which I once vaguely aspired, yet their satisfactions are well matched to the earthly nature of our spiritual appetites. Furniture making, like all contemporary crafts, is a road less traveled. Yet it has much to reveal about the risks and rewards of sustained creative effort – about what art is and why it matters – in the context of our shared search for a better way to live.

Here I should mention three well-regarded authors who have already offered extracts of craft as antidotes to the spiritual deficiencies of modern life. Most iconic for my generation is Robert Pirsig, whose 1970s best seller, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,* was presented as a meditation on the subject of quality. Pirsig lays out his central theme in describing how two young mechanics had carelessly repaired his bike:

> The mechanics in their attitude toward the machine were really taking no different attitude from the manual's toward the machine, or from the attitude I had when I brought it in there. We were all spectators. And it occurred to me there *is* no manual that deals with the *real* business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all. Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted. On this trip I think we should notice it, explore it a little, to see if in that strange separation of what man is from what man does we may find some clues as to what the hell has gone wrong in this twentieth century.[1]

Pirsig's view, as he develops it, is that a good life may be found through craftsmanlike engagement with the actions, objects, and relationships of ordinary experience, through caring about what you do. If you choose to ride a motorcycle, then being able to repair a fouled spark plug becomes a moral imperative.

Thirty-five years later, sociologist Richard Sennett surveyed the same landscape from another station point in *The Craftsman*, where he asks what the process of making things reveals to us about ourselves. In particular, Sennett critiques current social and economic conditions for depriving workers of the satisfactions inherent to "doing a job well for its own sake," which is the essence he distills from craft. His solution is to cultivate an "aspiration for quality" in our workplaces and schools.[2] Like Pirsig, Sennett employs the ideal of quality, in the sense of caring about what one does, to address broad philosophical questions: What is the nature of work? What is the nature of a good life?

These same questions animate *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, in which author Matthew Crawford argues that our educational system and our occupational structures are deformed by a prejudice against manual labor. He punctures the myth of white-collar superiority by pointing out that today's corporate workplace has been rationalized as relentlessly as the industrial factory of a century earlier. Creative thought and decision making are centralized into the hands of small cohorts of experts, so that only rote work gets distributed among the worker bees. As a result, the average white-collar employee feels, accurately, like a replaceable cog in a soulless machine; work has been stripped of its potential to provide meaning and fulfillment. In counterpoint, Crawford asserts that significantly greater job satisfaction may be found in manual trades that engage a worker's cognitive, problem-solving abilities, such as his own vocation of motorcycle repair.

Although each identifies a different culprit, all three authors believe that some primary defect in contemporary culture severs the

satisfactions of individual agency from the things that we actually do. (Broadly speaking, Pirsig faults the Aristotelian underpinnings of Western thought, Sennett faults the culture of corporate capitalism, and Crawford faults the pernicious effects of the Cartesian mind/body divide on education and the workplace.) Their indictments sound like nostalgia for a time when people found greater fulfillment in work because an aspiration to quality was ingrained. But, as any furniture maker who has looked at antiques with a skilled eye knows, quality has always been tailored to the cost constraints of time and materials. Really, what Pirsig, Sennett, and Crawford are asking is not where quality has gone, but how we can cultivate the aspiration for quality in today's world.

Several decades ago, as we were walking down a crowded Manhattan sidewalk, an acquaintance named George Trow told me that you have only to step a degree or two outside of normalcy to gain an illuminating perspective on it. Certainly that described George, who wrote for *The New Yorker* and flew as close to the sun of genius as anyone I've known. At that moment he was musing on his own predicament in life, but in the years since I have come to realize that the vantage point from my workbench is similarly askew. Furniture making, practiced as a craft in the twenty-first century, is a decidedly marginal occupation – economically, socially, technologically, and culturally. Yet it also happens to be premised on the selfsame ideal that Pirsig, Sennett, and Crawford each end up prescribing. For all of them, the key to a good life is the engaged pursuit of quality. As a craftsman I have the opportunity to turn that key every day, whether or not I actually do. The yardstick of quality is always in plain sight at the workbench.

While craft may be a byway of contemporary culture, its divergence offers a revealing prospect onto the main thoroughfare. The view from my workbench is complementary to those of Pirsig, Sennett, and Crawford. Our core difference is the role that we assign

to creativity. Where they pay it little attention, my experience has been that the effort to bring something new and meaningful into the world – whether in the arts, the kitchen, or the marketplace – is exactly what generates the sense of meaning and fulfillment for which so many of us yearn so deeply. The dedication to quality that they prescribe is essential to productive creative engagement, but it is only a component, not the effort itself.

Craft is just one arena for creativity, but it is the one I know intimately. My intuition from the day I first picked up a hammer was that making things with a commitment to quality would lead to a good life. What I propose here is to retrace my steps with reference to larger frameworks – historical, sociological, psychological, and biological – to discover how and why that intuition turned out to be valid. What is it about creative work, and craft, in particular, that makes them so rewarding? What are the natures of those rewards? What, as Sennett asks, does the process of making things reveal to us about ourselves? As a furniture maker attempting to draw upon his own experience to illuminate such universal questions, I confess in advance to an ingrained pragmatism. The answers that make sense to me tend to be firmly rooted in the loam and muck of the world as I have found it, and that is where I'll begin.