ONE GOOD TURN

Fine furniture makers agree there is a restorative aspect to their craft that is often unrealised until a crisis, be it imposed or mid-life, prompts action. By Kathy Mexted

Like virgin rain seeping into the cracks of a parched earth, Phoebe Everill's "ashram", Mittagong's Sturt University, sent shards of light into the sepia corners of her soul.

The awakening allowed her to leap the chasm between life as a carpenter and renovation specialist to that of fine-furniture maker. She is now the only accredited female designer and maker (and current Chair) of Studio Woodworkers Australia, the peak body for professional woodworkers in Australia.

"I used to walk into galleries and be so envious of the beautiful woodwork I was seeing. I'd have to walk out, usually quite upset, because I knew I was capable, but hadn't acquired the skills to produce such fine work," Phoebe says.

With a need to express her creative, rather than just her commercial side, Phoebe approached her 50th birthday by devoting the next two and a half years to her studies, and she remembers the "moment" when the restorative process began.

"That moment was when I saw the first real shaving off a plane that I'd just fettled. I got a perfect shaving. I'd like to tell you I got it bronzed, but I think I just made more. Sometimes when we're doing a variety of timbers they look like shavings of chocolate. I get that moment and I see it with students also. A belief that things are finer, possible and more available than I thought. It is an opening of the soul; a spiritual moment. I had another amazing moment when I cut and fitted my first set of dovetails and they fitted perfectly. I walked around showing them off and the tutor joked, 'You've peaked too early.' Joinery is all about making those perfect connections. Even when you know you can do them, you're still surprised when they go together," she says.

What Phoebe was learning was nothing new to her teachers and as a teacher herself now, she agrees with them that their art form attracts people doing life changes. There is something in the modern world, where making is lost, that is restored when we get lost in making. Phoebe's mentor, David Upfill-Brown, from Gerringong, NSW, likens the Zen-ness of making to Johannes Vermeer's painting, "The Lacemaker" which shows a young girl completely absorbed in her activity.

"We are taken out of ourselves because we're so engaged and time doesn't matter. There is a spiritual aspect to what we do," says David. "Many of the people who come to us are middle-aged professionals looking to do something out of hours, to transport themselves from the daily grind. I had a surgeon come to me to learn how to carve a six-foot-large vertebrae. He needed to get out of his surgery and engage in something that transcended all his daily issues and cares. A lot of professionals are delighted to be doing something concrete. To look back and say, 'I made that' is something we makers take for granted."

Rejecting the notion of "art for art's sake", English writer and philosopher Alain de Botton claims art, including design, as "a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves."

Indeed the makers all know that timber is an intractable material that while usually compliant, can up and slap the expert in the face. It can bring the best of them to their knees, and David Upfill-Brown knows that the most difficult students are the perfectionists who are terrified to make a mistake. "The perfectionists need to learn that everything isn't on the line and that the worst we can do is make really nice firewood. Some days it's quite possible that the shavings on the floor are more valuable than the piece on the bench."

Perth-based furniture maker and teacher Neil Erasmus came to woodworking through his father when he decided wine-making for was not for him. "I committed that I would do my best by the wood and the wood would give me a living. Thirty-seven years later, I'm as smitten as when I began," he says.

In Queensland's Samford Valley, Roy Schack takes only four students at a time and says he can quickly gauge the mood of a person as they interact in the room. "Within 20 minutes they have started to shed the week's stresses. With woodworking you have to learn the fundamental tools and from there you can be as creative as you want, and most people are totally blown away by what they are capable of. I teach them to exhibition standard and they can't believe it."

Roy had one student who came to him in his mid 30s from an advertising and design background. Once he began making with wood, he quickly realised that he needed that tangible result for his creativity and has now established himself as a furniture-maker. Another student with a minor disability quickly realised that his ability to turn and make furniture set him squarely in the same making league as his colleagues. It only took a few classes for him to enjoy what he was doing and settle into it.

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For Phoebe, the studio and classroom have specifically enabled her to offer progress for some marginalised women seeking a safe environment in which to reintegrate into the community. These few students came to her of their own accord, and as their fear slowly subsided they were able to take tentative steps forward by creating a tangible functional artwork. "I am very protective of my students and all makers know that part of our work as teacher is as a counsellor. I have to 'make' now. It's absolutely integral. If I'm not making, I'm not connected. For me it was a way of bringing light, life and hope where it was needed for me."

"There is a synergy between our thought processes and the need to make, and I think it is a primal instinct. Our hands are natural tools with a direct connection to the brain," says Roy. "I think all this electronic stuff we are bombarded with now makes us crave a slower life."