

Honesty and shop safety

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I tend to be a very careful guy when it comes to shop safety. I never chisel toward my belly, use goggles and ear muffs (okay, most of the time) and I have the roll up door open and a fan running when I'm using a noxious finish.

But there's the rub – that admission above that my safety practices are in play 'most of the time.'

I try to always be focused, to always replace the blade guard, even when I only intend to make 'one quick cut.' I don't use my fingers to propel a piece of wood past the spinning cutter and I never, ever start the lathe on a new setup without standing to the side.

I've done these things hundreds of times without a problem and I expect to go to my grave with all my digits intact. But here's the rub – I can't count the number of times I'd used a ladder without incident, right up to the moment I fell and broke my back.

Now, I could tell you that my back injury and resulting residual problems have cured me of ever again doing something stupid, or even something stupidly. But I'll leave that sort of fantasy to the politicians. Truth be told, I'm human and occasionally I get careless or hurried or just plain tired and that's when (*insert expletive*) happens.

I was turning without removing my wedding ring recently and the spinning jaw chuck gave me a practical reminder of why I should always take off my ring before I turn on the lathe. I was lucky and my injury was limited to a couple of blood blisters where the flesh got caught between ring and the jaw prongs.

The thing is, luck is not a reliable feature of an effective safety regime. I could go on about the dumbass things I've done in the shop or elsewhere but I'd like to finish this writing session with some semblance of ego intact. So let me just leave you with this hint from someone who's been cutting wood for decades:

One of my greatest safety tools is honesty. When I've had a close call, I always – yes, ALWAYS – tell Mary about it. What happened, how it happened, what should have happened. Always.

I find that having an intelligent and insightful person who cares about me watching my moves is one of the best ways to help me stay safe. Just admitting my own carelessness or lack of foresight enlists my fragile ego in not wanting to have to do so very often. And knowing the risks, Mary frequently checks on me. Am I too tired? Should I be doing xxxx? Do I need help? And yes, her second guessing can sometimes be annoying but after three decades of marriage, we'll be okay.

Enlisting Mary as my ad hoc safety monitor is one of the best shop habits I've ever developed. Almost never do I respond to her query by saying 'Nah, I'm gonna keep going.' Because I've learned that the person trying to get the piece completed tonight (me) is not always the best judge of whether it's smart to keep working.

So I told Mary about the ring incident the same day it happened. And now that my finger is healed, time to put the ring back on. If only I can remember where I put it for 'safekeeping.' Sshshsh – don't tell Mary!