

The Truth about DIY

By Jay Kobor

One look at my bookshelf would reveal to any observer a deep-seated, sometimes tragic truth about my life: I am obsessed with how-to books. With titles like *Home Improvement 1-2-3* and *Basic Plumbing Illustrated*, these books explain, in detail, exactly how the reader can accomplish tasks that are ordinarily delegated to paid professionals. They are written for people who prefer using their own hands to build, repair, or remodel and who get satisfaction from seeing the results of their labor. This attitude of taking things into one's own hands has been termed do-it-yourself (often seen abbreviated as DIY) and has given birth to an increasingly popular DIY culture.

My first experience with DIY came when pipes in the wall of my mother's bathroom began leaking and a plumber was called in to do the repairs. In order to gain access to the pipes, he said it would be necessary to break open the wall. The actual plumbing might be simple, but the demolition and subsequent rebuilding of our wall would be an involved procedure. It was shaping up to be an expensive job. As I stood there in the bathroom examining that unfortunate wall, it occurred to me that I am not fundamentally any different from the plumber. "I have five fingers on each hand and a decent head on my shoulders," I thought. "Why in the world can't I just do it *myself*?" I explained the epiphany to my mother, who noted with skepticism that I lacked the tools, skills, and experience of a professional. This was true indeed, but I pled my case, and we struck a deal. She would purchase the necessary tools, and I would do the work free of charge. The experience had lasting impacts on my life. My compensation for this and future

projects has always been the tools I earned, the skills I learned, and an expanding sense of confident self-reliance.

Every DIY undertaking requires equipment and materials. Whether it's the yarn and needles used in knitting or tools and lumber for building, a minimum investment is always made to acquire these essentials. The size of this initial accumulation can vary greatly; however, there is one phenomenon common throughout all DIY culture. It's a universal experience that weaves together the fate of all crafters and hobbyists. Lurking around the corner, in the near or distant future, there is always *another project*. Each new project requires new equipment and materials, some that are so specialized for a task that they are rarely used after its completion, and the inevitable result is an ever-growing cache of tools and left-over materials.

The tools, which are vital to any project, take on a special significance. In concert with knowledge and skills, they empower oneself with an extraordinary feeling of autonomy and personal independence. It's not unusual for a hobbyist's reverence of tools to substantially outgrow their efforts to do any actual work; they become collectors. My own life is a continuous balancing act: a tight-rope walk along the fine line dividing those who use and those who merely own tools. Aspiring to completely utilize my investment, I always bring along a special toolbox on road trips. The aggregation of tools it contains has more than once allowed me to repair a breakdown en-route. During one long journey, I conjured up an engine repair involving an old tee-shirt, a piece of hose, and clamps that worked brilliantly as I drove home across several states. I shudder to imagine the towing and mechanic bills that were averted.

This miracle repair and others like it do come at a cost. The very tools that enable this sense of freedom and self-governance must first be purchased. The price tag can be quite high,

and any person who strides toward self-sufficiency must consider how to fund these purchases. An age-old justification, frequently given to spouses for such financial outlays, is that the cost of equipment is offset by the savings inherent in doing a job yourself. It's reasoned that, once the tools are acquired, they will always be immediately available for future projects. The underlying logic is true enough that I bring home most of the tools that catch my eye.

Amassing a collection of tools fortifies one's allegiance to DIY. When a large enough investment has been made, less glamorous side effects of a DIY obsession begin to appear. The feeling of obligation to undertake more projects finally cascades under the accumulated weight of previous expenditures. Purchases that were once believed to be liberating can instead become a mental contract for taking on more projects than can actually be completed. People in this situation think to themselves, "I bought all this stuff; I might as well use it."

Honest attempts to actually use all the DIY paraphernalia eventually lead to overly ambitious undertakings. Born of innocence and inexperience are the projects that begin with wild expectations of ease and simplicity. Seeing only the tip of an iceberg, a naïve hobbyist approaches these projects with misplaced confidence; waiting silently beneath the surface are all the hidden snags. Unforeseen complications chop up the flow of work and hold the project in stasis while heads are scratched, how-to books are consulted, and yet another pilgrimage is made to the hardware store. I hold these instances responsible for well-known phrases like, "Honey, I need another tool to finish this up," and "I really didn't think it would take that long."

A project that takes longer than anticipated can grind down the sensation of time to an immeasurably slow and miserable pace. With a fire of pride burning from behind, there is little choice but to push on toward completion; it's far too late to consider hiring someone with

experience. In these situations, the thrill of learning is crushed under immense pressures of frustration, and the absolute limits of patience are repeatedly tested. One time, I even convinced myself that rebuilding the engine of my vehicle would save time and money. The only redemption from that project was its eventual completion. After six weeks of cursing in a dark garage with a bank account exhausted from spending, I folded and had to admit that, “I should have left this one to a professional.”

Despite all of the difficulties, I continue to seek out DIY experiences and sometimes ask myself, “Why keep doing this?” It’s easy to grasp the negative aspects of an unpleasant experience, because they’re always most prominent. A worthy challenge is the winnowing away of unconstructive bitterness in order to unearth the sweet subtle wisdom that remains. The DIY attitude has captured my imagination, and I’ve been gifted in return with precious opportunities for self-exploration. I’m no longer convinced that DIY projects are always a cost- and time-effective alternative to calling in a pro. The vast wealth of self-discovery that exists within every undertaking is what keeps me going back, again and again, for more.