

Mblem

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Words from Nick
RVC Column
Nick Sanford
Regional Vice-Chairman

The ballots have been cast, the votes tallied, and the results have been announced. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your Regional Vice-Chairman for the next two years. This first installment of my monthly column will serve primarily to take care of some procedural issues, so don't let a less than exciting article deter you from coming back next month. Let me start by thanking Ike and Lewis for running against me. This position is a representative of the people from the region and competition for the office has allowed your opinion to show. Let me also thank Mike Seigler for his four years of service. He has represented our region well and I am sure that I will lean on him many times during my term. Finally, a thank you goes out to Central Alabama Mensa for encouraging me to run for this position and the support they have already shown. Let me move on to discuss this column. Publishing my writings is optional, so you may see some gaps. Rest assured that I will write something every month and if you would like a copy then feel free to e-mail me. I'm sure we will get things posted to the regional website (www.region5.us.mensa.org) in short order. My goal with this column is to keep you informed with what is happening at the national level and to discuss the major issues that affect our region.

It is my intention to attend all of the Regional Gatherings in our region and to have a "rap session" at each one. This will be your best opportunity to discuss your thoughts and mine. I am your representative and I sincerely want to hear what you have to say. In addition to the gatherings I will do my best to visit the groups in the region when the opportunity presents itself. Of course I can also be reached by e-mail, phone, and snail mail. The one bit of substantial information that I would like to discuss this month is the Annual Gathering. It will be held during the July 4th weekend in Birmingham Alabama. I strongly encourage you to attend. It is not often that this event is held close enough that you can drive to it. Thank you again for allowing me to serve our region.

Editor's Note: Welcome our new RVC. Nick's note was meant for July but since he sent his note on June 17, missing our deadline for July issue, we enjoy reading his comment in August.

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Easy reading this issue:*
- *Take off calendar page and stick it on the refrigerator door with a magnet.*
- *Read pages 1, 2, & 3.*
- *Also coordinators column*
- *You are done!*

It's a Poor Craftsman Who Blames His Tools

David Skaar

I am now several days past the traditional submission date for the Mblem, and just earlier today, I was contemplating giving up and not writing anything. Writers block and depression (over missing the submission date, again) had set in, and all I had for ideas was the same old idea that I've been playing with in my head for many months, and I was getting pretty tired of it. But, inspiration struck me just this afternoon, and I came to believe that I could tie together several old ideas with my new inspiration, write it up, and get those old ideas out of my head. So now, instead of doing some writing for my job, that actually matters, I'm doing this. Whether this will be worth reading (any more than anything else I've written), I can't say, but I hope to get some satisfaction out of it. You didn't think that I was doing this for the readers' benefit, did you? It's solely for me, and any readers that get in the way of my words are merely collateral damage.

The idea that I've been pondering for a long time now, and have mentioned once or twice in previous articles, is how difficult it is to make a straight line. So, I pose the question to you – when you need to draw a straight line, how do you do it? Most people would get a ruler, or other such “straight”-edge, place it appropriately, and draw the line. That's all well and good, but how is the ruler made so that it is straight? With another straightedge, probably. And so on back, until some point, where a straight line had to be made without the benefit of some other previously manufactured straight line. If I were stuck on a desert island, or had to rebuild civilization after the complete collapse of human society, and needed a straightedge, I think I'd be in serious trouble. I do know that a perfectly still liquid surface is perfectly flat, and that such a surface of molten tin is used as the base for molten glass, in order to make perfectly flat plate glass. This plate glass can then be used as a reference surface for creating other flat or straight surfaces. That's fine, but I don't know how to refine tin, and only have vague ideas on the correct mix of sand and lime for plate glass. Even then, the molten tin is not actually flat, but follows the curvature of the earth, which doesn't matter for practical purposes, or unless the molten tin is several miles long. On a related note, I know of a radar test site that has a perfectly flat concrete strip between the radar emitter and the target, which is several miles long, and for which the earth's curvature has been corrected. I believe that this strip was constructed using laser surveying to establish a straight line, but again, if I were trying to rebuild civilization, I don't know how to make a laser. Also, a laser's beam is only perfectly straight if the medium through which it passes is completely uniform. Changes in air pressure or humidity can deflect the beam, as I observed in a physics lab demonstration, in which a laser beam traveling through a fishtank is severely curved by a density gradient established in the water with lots and lots of sugar.

I think my point here is that nothing is perfectly straight or flat, just straight to within a certain tolerance of error, for the practical purposes needed. Circles and spheres are the

same way. When my civilization got to the point of needing a circle, I could use two pins and a string, but the string will stretch a little, and the pins will shift and bend a little, so I hope my circle doesn't need to be perfect. The axles, shafts, and ball bearings that function in cars, computers, and all sorts of other indispensable devices are straight, round, and circular to a high degree, but only to a certain limit that is defined to be necessary. Disk drives and cooling fans (both of which have failed on the computer I am using right now), or alternators (like the one that failed in my car) will fail when the tolerances on the bearings are incorrect, due to manufacturing defects, uneven wear, a buildup of crud, or all sorts of other factors. The fact that they hold out as well as they do is practically a miracle if I think about it too much. Our entire economy and society has become based on items that are so common and cheap as to be disposable, but which are of such complexity and precision manufacture that they would be impossible to make without other astoundingly complex and precise devices.

This idea of requiring a straight line to create a straight line and the idea of infinite regression of precision occurred to me when I was fighting a table saw. In woodworking, being able to make a straight cut is pretty important, and the assumption is that you can just run a board through a saw and get a nice, smooth, straight cut. This was not happening with my saw. In order to make a straight cut, a table saw has a flat top, to slide the board across, a flat fence, to slide the board along, and a flat blade, to slide the board through. If anything is aligned incorrectly, guess what happens. In my case, it turns out that the blade was wobbling, which will most definitely ruin the cut. The fix turned out to be a \$2 piece of metal, about 1 millimeter thick, that fills a gap and holds the motor assembly steady. Those unfortunate souls who consistently read my articles, and are cursed with excessive recall, may remember my story about attempting to replace the brake shoes in drum brakes. In that fiasco, I replaced several existing spring-retaining pins with supposedly identical pins, that were, in fact, about 1/16" different in length, and made the brakes impossible to reassemble. I'm trying to decide if I'm particularly cursed for things like this to happen, or if I keep running into these things because I tempt fate so much. So, these were all ideas that I have had running around in my head waiting to be writing down for posterity, but I was hesitant, because I wasn't sure where it was all going. Then, today, I saw the movie *Once*. This movie is about people who are all brought together through love of music, and the desire to create music. The element of this movie that inspired me was that the musicians involved were drawn together by mutual recognition of musical ability, and that by coming together, they were inspired (and challenged) to be better individually, to make the group better as a whole.

. (Conti. To P. 3, Tool)

(Conti. From P. 2, Tool)

This reached a peak when the group went into a recording studio with a bored sound technician who was expecting to waste his time, but was there because a paycheck was involved. When the music started, the technician recognized the ability of the group, and became involved in doing his job as best he could to make the recording as good as possible.

My point here, is that ability can bring out or improve ability, just as a straight line can be used to make more straight lines. Dale Dauten, who writes a newspaper column as "The Corporate Curmudgeon" has a take on this in the world of business. He believes in critical masses of competence. In an organization where laziness and incompetence are prevalent, competence and motivation are not rewarded, and usually discouraged because it makes everyone else look bad. The competent either stop making the effort, or find a better job. However, if enough motivated and competent people get together, they start bouncing off each other, and inspiring each other because of what they see the group accomplishing. Any lazy and/or incompetent people either have improved their work, quit, or get fired. In this way, a self-sustaining organization of high productivity and morale is formed. Most successful startup companies fit this model (a lot of unsuccessful companies probably fit the model too, so it's no guarantee).

One more important factor regarding ability is the difference between skills and tools in the final product. Entire books have been written on sharpening woodworking tools, and the difference it can make in the end. One author stated that most of the highly skilled and successful woodturners (makers of wooden bowls, chair legs, and other such rounded wood items) succeed due to their outstanding skills, but in spite of their tools, which are dull, badly maintained, or old and abused. With tools that are optimally shaped and sharp-

ened, less effort is required to create finer pieces. But, a skilled woodworker with a crooked straightedge can compensate for it, and still produce work that shows their ability. In Once, the musicians are using old instruments that weren't that good to begin with (the lead guitar player/singer has holes in his guitar from abuse), but their abilities are still obvious, and show past the limitations of the instruments. A good musician with a crummy instrument, or a good craftsman with crummy tools, is still clearly good, despite the external limitations. No matter how good the guitar or the chisel, if you don't know how to use it right, you're not going to create anything worthwhile. This is a fact that the manufacturers of golf clubs hope that the amateur players never figure out, or they won't be able to sell oversize metal woods and extra-long flying golf balls as cure-alls to players who won't get any benefit from them until they stop swinging like a rusty gate.

For a final bit of ego stroking, the intelligence of Mensans always shows through, no matter the circumstance, right? Maybe not, I have a little housekeeping work, and ego deflation of myself to take care of. In the article I wrote about MindGames, and what makes a MindGames winner, I made a few factual errors. I misattributed the famous line about "best laid plans..." to Robert Frost, when of course, it was written by Robert Burns. Also, I unjustly maligned the card game San Juan, when I intended to justly malign its boardgame counterpart Puerto Rico. Replace the former name with the latter wherever necessary, and I stand by my comments. Thanks to a Chicago Mensan for pointing that out to me (but what a Chicago Mensan is doing reading my writing is beyond me). I have no one to blame but myself for these errors, as I knew what I meant to say, but showed faulty recall and error checking. In this case, my work suffered because the poor tools I used were one and the same with my poor abilities.

Double Dactyl

Aaron J. Rabushka

huffin' it, puffin' it,
William the Conqueror
rolled over England in
ten sixty-six

scorning persuasion
the Britons' equation to
Billy's invasion was
"Yecch! what a fix!"

Editor's notes: Aaron Rabushka is a musician who also transcribed the following for band. In his word:

Don't forget to tell all of your band-directing friends

...about Aaron Rabushka's stunning new curtain raiser that is now available from MMB Music! If you want to spark your band and your audience to a rollicking good time you need look no further than his transcription of Joseph Haydn's sparkling overture to *L'Incontro Improvviso* (The Unforeseen Encounter), a comic opera with an exotic Turkish setting! Its bustling overture is alive and kickin' with witty melodic turns, resounding fanfares, the clang of "Turkish" percussion, and Haydn's characteristic twists of the unexpected. The outer movements display their composer's exuberant mastery of making a little bit go a long way, and the central Andantino provides a relaxing contrast to their joyous clangor. Rabushka's transcription brings this overture's classic-period vitality into the sound of the modern concert band while retaining some of the characteristic 18th-century results that Haydn achieved from turning the limits of the instruments of his time toward high-spirited triumphs of musical invention. You can find information about the performance materials at

http://www.mmbmusic.com/concert_music/mmb_details.aspx?id=17517 and http://www.mmbmusic.com/concert_music/mmb_details.aspx?id=17518, and you can request sound samples directly from MMB's Concert Music division at 800/543-3771 (phone) and 314/531-8384 (fax).

Coordinator's Corner

Ellen Muratori

Usually Games Night has the largest attendance at Triad's events, but a couple of months ago we were surprised by an overwhelming crowd at Winston-Salem's Supper. Twenty-two came. We could have used a room to ourselves. So much conversation to share, and only the closest seats to share it with! (We have fun with the title of the event, which is THTHth. Thecond Thursday at thix-thirty. How's that for alliteration!)

Conversations at Greensboro's Wednesday lunches are never-ending. Those of us who take this interlude from work have to drag ourselves back to the job. The lunch group in Greensboro brings together different members at different times. We tried bringing the topic of BOOKS to the table twice, but always the talk begins with something else. Thus, moved-in newcomer to our group, Joe Lyons, accompanied occasionally by Connie, or daughter Jennifer, brought up the subject of Theater and Classical Music. Melinda Kite posed the question: What are the pros and cons of working from one's home? Max Harless always brings swift wit to the table, and Cathy Harless has shared her experiences and photos of working in the costume of a clown. Tom Tyson and Alan Fields ping-ponged a subject I've forgotten. BB Byrd missed the topic of Gov't vs Church re Marriage; but she briefly shared the talk when we finally got to BOOKS. New member, Juan Boyce, on his day off, July 4, got an earful of Mensa experiences. Roger Lyons, in absentia, brought his book "Brother Harold and Roger" to our attention. Kathy Fields held sway with fascinating facts concerning the brain. By the way, the above recall of topics is a potpourri of four different Wednesday lunches! If you haven't been to a Mensa lunch or supper, you've missed out on a wide range of topics. Not to mention the wide range of opinions!

Maybe we should consider an "Evening of Books", and keep the shorter topics for lunchtime. Till next, Ellen

"I Told You So", "Hind Sight Is 20/20", and "Surprises" at Large Column Shiangtai Tuan

Recently some news items sounded some resonant chord for me. They struck me in different fashions:

Surprises: The stock market went record high.

Hind sight is 20/20: These are things sound very reasonable when it happened but "Why didn't I think of it!" Corn production is a good example. For a while, the news about being able to use corn to produce fuel was very exciting. Now that we have put into production. Guess what. Because of demand, price of corn goes up. Now they need more farm land to grow corn and farmers moves to corn production. As a result, food prices go up. Then they calculated and found out that even if we use all possible land in the US to plant corn we can only produce one tenth of the fuel we are importing now. On top of that, it takes energy to convert corn into fuel. Guess what they use, imported oil. One news report said that it took two gallons of imported fuel to produce three gallons of corn fuel. Almost defeat the purpose! All these sound so reasonable. My V8 moment. How come I did not think of it?

"I told you so" category: Well, I may not have announced on Mblem but I have always maintained that drinking bottled water is silly. American tap water has been known to be good for drinking. Added fluorine and chlorine

make it better for dental health. When the jet-set people started to pay money for Perrier water I thought it was extremely stupid. It gets sillier when more and more people started to drink "mineral water", "spring water", and "distilled water." It may be cynical to say that the bottling company simply bottles the tap water and ships it to another city to sell. I am waiting for the day when people demand to breathe air that is shipped in plastic containers. Finally, it has made the news recently about the disadvantages of bottled water. Generally speaking, there is nothing wrong with tap water. If you are worried about lead, use some filter system. On the other hand, bottled water is not controlled and may even contain some bacteria. Most importantly, shipping water unnecessarily wastes a huge amount of resources, creates more plastic bottles than all other drinks combined. In any case, I think bottled water is a great convenience when you want to carry a small amount of water with you like going out jogging. However, drinking bottled water instead of tap water is an extreme form of waste. There are people who have no electricity and running water. We do have running water but we buy water separately for drinking. I wonder what people would do next, buying bottled water for bathing? For wash machine? For dishwasher?