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# SAWDUST AND SOUL

A Conversation about Woodworking and Spirituality

William J. Everett  
AND John W. de Gruchy

An American ethicist and a South African theologian reflect on their work with wood and how it has helped them find creativity and meaning in experiences of both loss and transformation. Through their friendship, correspondence, and work together they have developed a rich narrative about the way this craftwork has shaped their relationships with family, friends, and the natural environment. Their conversation invites both craftspeople and religious seekers to join them on a spiritual journey toward fresh insight and inspiration.

"The title and subtitle are exactly right. This is 'A Conversation about Woodworking and Spirituality' in which 'sawdust flies in all directions, but the soul also takes wings.' So, reader, prepare to pause often to reflect on your own life journey as you listen to Everett's and de Gruchy's. This is wisdom beautifully communicated. The added poetry, illustrations, and photos only enhance it."

—Larry Rasmussen

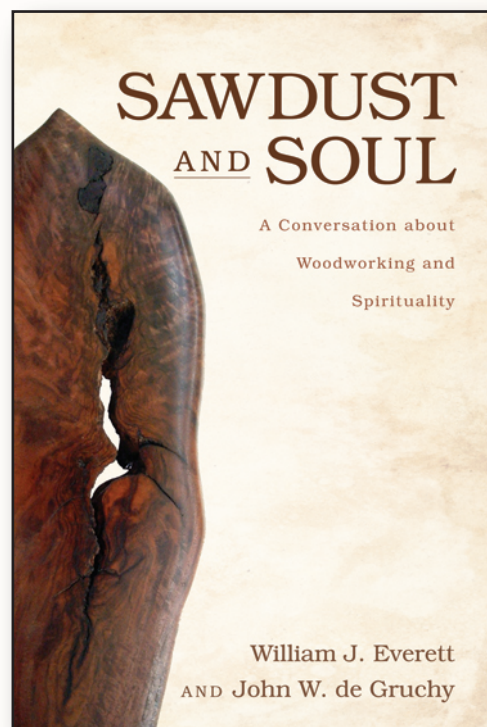
Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, NY

"This absorbing and often moving conversation about friendship, faith, and the wood-worker's craft invites us to explore the inner journeys that accompany the working and shaping of wood. The obvious joy of the authors in their soul-deepening craft will strike an immediate chord with fellow woodworkers—and invite some who have not yet felt the warm texture of newly planed wood grain under their fingers to go out and buy their first tools."

—Peter Storey, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

"In *Sawdust and Soul*, I felt like I was standing across a workbench from two friends reminiscing, philosophizing, and reflecting about woodworking, the influence it has on their lives and their relationship. The journey I experienced with Bill and John resonates with my own."

—Gregory Paolini, Director of Operations, Gregory Paolini Design LLC, World Class Woodworking, Canton, NC



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**William J. Everett** taught Christian ethics in graduate schools for over thirty years before turning to woodworking. In addition to his academic books and articles, he is the author of *Red Clay*, *Blood River*, an eco-historical novel, as well as *Turnings*, a collection of his poetry. He lives in the hardwood forest of western North Carolina with his wife, Sylvia, a liturgical artist in many media.

One of South Africa's most celebrated theologians, **John W. de Gruchy** is also a woodworker, with pieces in many churches, schools, and homes throughout the country and abroad. Among his recent books are *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* and *Led into Mystery*. He and his wife, Isobel, are members of the Volmoed Christian Community near Hermanus, South Africa, where he writes, gives seminars, and does woodworking, while Isobel paints and writes poetry.

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WILLIAM J. EVERETT  
and JOHN W. DE GRUCHY



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SAWDUST AND SOUL

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**For Sylvia and Isobel,**  
without whose encouragement, patient indulgence, and appreciation  
we couldn't make the sawdust or lift our souls.

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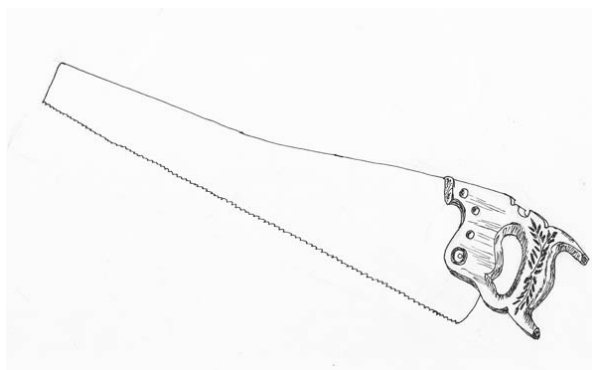
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## Acknowledgments



Isobel de Gruchy's poem "When I Think Olive" appeared earlier in Isobel de Gruchy, *Walking On: Poems, Prayers, Pictures* (Hermanus, South Africa: published by the author, 2013).

William J. Everett's poem "The Fall" appeared earlier in William J. Everett, *Turnings: Poems of Transformation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

The drawing of the tulip poplar tree on p. 18 is by Isobel de Gruchy and reproduced here with her permission.

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## About This Book



We were originally drawn together by our common interest in theology and public life, with me in the United States and John in South Africa. But we soon discovered another deep connection—a love for wood and woodworking. Early on in our friendship when John was visiting us in Boston, we went together to a party in one of the grand old homes near where Sylvia and I lived. All the wood paneling, the floors, and the furniture in the house were made out of cherry. It was a stunning testament to a time of giant trees and elegant craftsmanship. We marveled together about the wood and the craft while others milled about in academic conversation. Our friendship in wood had previously begun one evening in Cape Town the year before. But now it was sealed and our conversation began in earnest.

Over the years since then we have talked off and on about the way working with wood has shaped not only how we work with words, but how we live our lives. Woodworking has been a life-giving complement to our work as academic theologians. Like many others, in our retirement this work of our hands has become a transforming vehicle for discerning what it is to live a life “in the spirit.” Woodworking has been essential for navigating our way into this phase of our lives—in my case more as a fresh expression of my previous interests, in John’s more as a necessary complement—bringing balance and enabling fresh creativity. So it was that for John’s retirement colloquium at the University of Cape Town in May 2003, I presented a paper about woodworking, spirituality, and ethics, in which I lifted up the importance of woodworking for his theological work. Much to the amazement and fascination of his colleagues from around the world, John also displayed, and then we commented on, some of his turned bowls and other outcomes of his woodcraft.

In this little book we share some reflections on the way this life with wood has brought about a broadening and deepening of our own lives. We



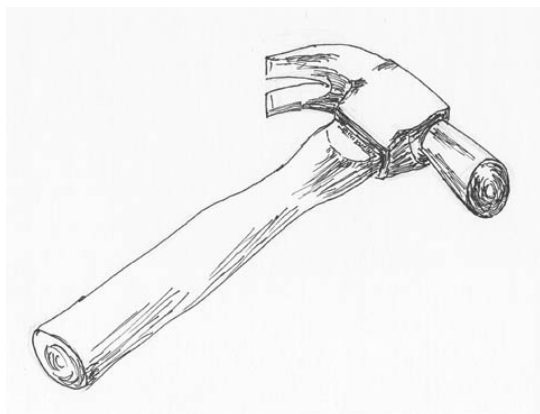
use our experience not just to craft meditations illustrating previously held convictions, but as an entrance into new understandings, practices, and sensibilities. In doing so, we invite you to join our conversation about the ways woodworking has shaped our “spirituality,” our way of being in the world, whether you are an “all thumbs” theologian, a seeker, a pilgrim, or a practical woodworker. We’ve even included a glossary at the end to help you with any terms with which you may not be familiar, and had some fun in compiling it. While we both speak and write our own form of English, we decided to use American spellings and retain the Imperial measurements of feet and inches, even though we both agree the metric system is far easier for woodworking! But we use both the American “shop” and the British “workshop” to describe the place where we do our woodworking.

We need to make clear that this is *not* a handbook for woodworking. While we describe some of our experiences and techniques, we are not seeking to instruct you in woodworking. For that you can turn to one of the fine books or magazines noted in the bibliography or, if you are so fortunate, to programs at your local schools or woodworking clubs. And please be mindful that while woodworking is a great hobby, it involves sharp tools and machinery. So make sure you take all safety rules seriously.

We’ll start with how we got into this craft. Then we’ll talk about the way the world of trees that we inhabit has shaped not only us but our whole culture. We then turn to what we have learned from some of our own projects. At the end we’ll reflect on how woodworking takes place in communities of relationships between generations and among friends.

Working with wood can be a deeply solitary activity, but it always takes place in relationships—with wood as well as people. Among these are the many associations, clubs, and informal networks that have enabled us to improve our woodworking. There are also many people to thank for this journey—parents and grandparents, wives and sisters, children and grandchildren, colleagues, and friends in wood. You’ll hear us talking about our friends who have helped us with their skills, their tools, their shops, and their thoughts about the craft they love. The voices of our children will also enter the conversation as they pick up in their own ways where we leave off. We also want to give a special thanks to Isobel de Gruchy, who has graciously supplied the line drawings of tools that beautify the book’s transitions, labored over the production of the photos accompanying the text, and also made some editorial suggestions.

Well, John, let’s start talking! The project is waiting. Why don’t you kick off and tell us something about your life in woodworking?



# Living with Wood



## *John's Story*

Thanks, Bill. As you know I have just finished a book on my life in writing as an academic that I've entitled *A Theological Odyssey*, so it's about time to share the story of my life in woodworking. Writing, woodworking, and playing sport intersected my life from an early age. As a teenager I dreamt of writing a murder mystery, but I gave up after a few pages. At school I was more interested in cricket and hockey than in Latin and Mathematics. Yet by the time I went to university in my seventeenth year I had taught myself to type and enjoyed writing the essays that from then on became a constant part of my life.

My father Harold always had a workshop. He made the furniture for our first family house, including two large teak Morris Chairs, which I inherited but no longer have. He taught me the basics of woodworking and bought me a second-hand lathe when I was still in junior school. I have no idea what happened to it after I left home. Woodworking was part of the junior school curriculum, at least for boys, so it was there that I was taught elementary industrial drawing and developed my rudimentary woodworking skills. But even though I was not particularly good at either, the smell of boiling horse-hooves glue pellets on the gas burner remains part of my memory, and a pen and inkpot stand I made from mahogany still sits on my study desk.

My younger son Anton would later do woodwork throughout his high school years, and did much better. But, alas, woodworking is no longer an option in the vast majority of schools in South Africa, including those to which we went. This is an enormous pity and loss, as has been the demise of the apprenticeship system. There are signs that both will be re-introduced, something that cannot come quickly enough. To learn to use your brain in

the school room and your muscle on the sports field are obviously important, but so too is learning to appreciate the creative arts and crafts that add such value to life and to the community, whether as a profession or hobby. I was fortunate to be introduced to all these at school, and they remain important, giving my life some necessary equilibrium. Developing this balance has become important over the years on my journey into becoming more fully human and, in the process, nourishing my soul.

Although I have always had my own workshop since Isobel and I were married and, from time to time, made furniture and other items needed for our various homes over the years, woodworking increasingly took a back seat as my work in a congregation, my involvement in public life, and my life as an academic (and much travel), took centre stage. It was not only woodworking that suffered; I fear that amidst everything else I could not have been a very good father. But Steve and Anton got something of their own back, for my workshop became a bicycle repair shop (their sister Jeanelle was party to some of their exploits as well, though she now denies it!), and the chisels I had once kept sharp were put to uses other than those for which they were intended.

Life was difficult, hectic, and sometimes fearful during the final years of the struggle against apartheid in which our whole family, many colleagues and friends, as well as our local church, were engaged in one way or another. But then Nelson Mandela walked out of prison, a new era dawned, and the rest is history, though the journey towards a transformed society is still in its infancy. These dramatic changes affected all of our lives, not least my own, giving us a new freedom. I was able to start research projects that were no longer focused on the church struggle against apartheid, though still usually related to Christian faith and public life. But as the 1990s progressed it was becoming clear—at least to Isobel, if not to myself—that the intensity of the previous years had taken its toll on soul and spirit as well as body. And the gusto with which I was now involved in new writing projects was not helping to restore the balance so necessary for a meaningful and productive life.

I vividly recall the day on which Isobel told me in no uncertain terms that I had better find a hobby and get my life more in balance. She was right. But my workshop was a shambles, my tools rusty and blunt, and my skills, such as they were, all but forgotten. Yet, after a moment's reflection—it took not much longer—I resolved to return to my workbench, rescue my chisels, and make sawdust again. I don't think Isobel had a clue as to what this would mean—or cost, for that matter—when she encouraged me to buy new tools and get going again, or in terms of the time I would devote to doing so. But she was delighted, not least because at the same time she was developing her own skills as an artist and poet after years of doing community work and

teaching school mathematics. We were both in search of a more balanced life as we began to think ahead to the so-called years of “retirement,” a notion that could mean becoming bored to death, or alive to new possibilities. Fortunately we had the resources to avoid the former and pursue the latter. In that regard we are privileged, but also enormously grateful.

Anton re-introduced me to woodturning during a holiday we spent at the Moffat Mission in Kuruman, on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, where Steve, his older brother, was the director during the 1990s. I was hooked. So one of the first pieces of equipment I bought for my renovated, though small, workshop was a No 1 Record woodturning lathe. Then I had the opportunity, during a sabbatical in England in 1998, not only to write a book on *Christianity and Democracy* but also to attend a woodturning course given by Alan Batty in the Yorkshire cathedral town of Ripon. He helped me get the basics more or less right, but he was also a stickler for perfection. I am not sure he regarded me as amongst his better pupils, but I undoubtedly benefitted from his tuition. On another occasion I took a course in wood carving in the English Peak District, and although I have not done much carving since then (a few pieces are the exception), it was a good experience. I cannot recommend strongly enough to anyone keen to get started in woodcraft that you find a mentor. On our return to Cape Town from our sabbatical in England I resolved to enlarge my workshop, buy a bigger lathe with a swinging headstock to turn large bowls, and join a woodturning club.

Around that time, my brother-in-law, Ron Steel, who had long been my companion in various ventures, retired from the ministry, and with his wife Elsie and family came to live in Cape Town. Ron was an avid woodworker and was also beginning to develop an interest in woodturning. So together we joined the Pinelands Club and twice a month for several years participated in its meetings. What a learning experience that was! We were introduced to tools and techniques, watched and shared in practical demonstrations, rubbed shoulders with some remarkable turners, marveled at their skill and output, entered competitions, received excellent critique, and even progressed to what was designated an “advanced level” of woodturning. Above all, we became passionate wood turners. And I also learned that some things had changed since the days of shop class.

Having learnt much from feminist theologians over the years, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when towards the end of our sojourn in the Pinelands Woodturners club several women joined and soon established themselves as accomplished turners. I know that sounds patronizing, for why should they not excel at woodturning as at everything else? I suppose it is just because woodworking has always seemed such a men's thing, something like rugby and cricket! But seeing that there are now women's

rugby and cricket teams, why not wood turning? The circle has turned, and none too soon. I am sure it started in the US before it did in South Africa. In fact, I now recall that several years before women joined the Pinelands club, I visited a craft festival in Hyde Park, Chicago, where I met a woman turner whose exquisite work inspired me. Be that as it may, I owe much to that club in Pinelands and to Ron's companionship along the way. Ron himself later managed a large solid wood furniture factory and continues to make fine furniture as a hobby. Children establishing a home are very fortunate beneficiaries of such a father's craftsmanship!

Then you entered my workshop. While we had originally talked of collaborating on our research in Cape Town that year, I ended up taking my sabbatical in England, while you and Sylvia stayed in our house. But it only took one evening before we left for us to discover that our interests extended well beyond doing theology; we also shared a passion for woodworking, and a zany sense of humor—something very necessary both in friendship and in the workshop.

Over the succeeding years, as you and I have moved into "retirement," we have found every opportunity we can to share our woodworking interests together, whether during your visits to Cape Town or Volmoed, where we now live, or ours to your home in Waynesville, North Carolina, a part of the United States, which is a Mecca for woodworkers. As I write this piece, I am looking at the bookcase we made on one occasion for my study, which now houses my Bonhoeffer collection—another passion. Above, on the veranda overlooking the valley below, are two Adirondack chairs we made on your most recent visit, with some help from Serghay van der Bergh, about whom I will say more later. And now we are busy writing together—but writing about woodworking, and in the process making connections with our journeys into theology, social ethics and public life, and the nurturing of soul.

In thinking about our lives in woodworking and those of others who have inspired and guided us, I guess we have come to distinguish woodworkers by their skills and the kind of work they do. Some are carpenters who do essential work in building homes, others are furniture makers whose skills are similar but not the same, for they do more refined work in order to produce items that are both functional and beautiful. Then there are the cabinetmakers. These are the saints of woodworking, those we reverently read about in *Fine Woodworking* magazine and whose work is a marvel to behold. I am nowhere near that end of the spectrum, nor would I regard myself as a maker of fine furniture, but I am inspired by those who set the pace, just as I am by the witness of those who courageously struggle for justice and peace, or those whose spiritual depth, compassion, and insight enrich and challenge us all.

It strikes me that the difference between good and bad craftsmanship is not unlike the one between good and bad religion. It is not the discrepancy between the simplicity of a Shaker chair or the elegance and beauty of a Restoration cabinet, but between a shoddy piece of work and one that has integrity. We need saints, whether of the spirit or the craft, to remind us of that difference and that there are still mountains to climb. But, as you would remind me, we can't all be saints, and there is forgiveness for failures; in fact, a mistake at the workbench can often lead to an exciting new creation. Woodworking, after all, is meant to bring happiness and delight, not sadness and despair. Knowing that helps when you get tired and cut your fingers, when lovely wood is butchered or sawdust overwhelms the soul, or when tempted to throw in the towel and confine our failures to the firewood pile. Writer's block and woodworker's frustration are much the same. When the joy goes out of what you are doing, shut up shop for a while, watch a movie or go for a walk. But get back to the laptop and bench as soon as you can.

One of the joys in "retiring" to Volmoed, a Christian retreat centre nestling among the hills and vineyards of the Hemel en Aarde Valley near Hermanus, is that we were able to build our own house—designed by Julian Cooke, a great architect and friend over the years—and include in it plans for a large workshop. This has become a wonderful sanctuary over the past decade. Not only is it big enough to include all my tools and machines, but also large enough for at least two people to work together in it on various projects such as you and I have undertaken. In it, Ron has taught me to turn segmented bowls and Anton helped me build the staircase banisters in our house and the extensive bookshelves in my library. To share such a passion with friends, relatives, or children is very special and I still look forward to more opportunities to come.

Serghay has been a more frequent companion in the workshop. He is a younger member of the maintenance staff on Volmoed who has taken a special interest in woodworking and has become my unofficial "apprentice" during periods in his schedule when he is able to join me. I learn as much from him as he does from me. After all, he has built his own house! He also has no compunction in reminding me about the safety rules we have



established, on measuring twice before cutting, and striving for perfection when tempted to cut a few corners.

My life in writing and woodworking! How fulfilling this has all been. But it is also an expression of something deeper that has to do with the work of the spirit of creativity, inspiration, empowering, and aesthetic awareness. The truth is, my life-long journey in the church, academy, and public life have become inseparable from the workshop, giving my life added meaning, enjoyment, nourishment, and direction. This is, I have come to believe, the work of the Spirit, whose activity is not confined to religion or to the soul (understood as some rarefied ghost in the machine we call the body), but embraces life in all its dimensions, relationships, joys, and sorrows, and crosses boundaries of time and space. In the process, sawdust flies in all directions, but the soul also takes wings.



### *Bill's Story*

Ah, John, the chips and sawdust are inspiring you to poetry! There are so many similarities in our stories, but also some different paths as well. Unlike you I grew up among trees, but not among woodworkers. Washington, DC was filled with trees among its low buildings. Living on its edge, I roamed an abandoned farm at the end of our street, trapping squirrels (don't ask), ripping out the surveyors' stakes (yes, I have a criminal past), and constructing lean-tos and tree platforms from the branches available on the ground. At one point I built an underground fort (being a youth, I called it a fort), only to discover that it flooded in heavy rains. Stick to tree houses, at least till lightning hits.

At most, wood was a construction material for the barns, fence-posts, and houses on the family's dairy farm in Virginia where I spent all my non-school time. I got to know wood as locust, oak, pine, and maple. My father (a William Jr., with me being a third) was a businessman, and at best a tinkerer and repairman. In those days being the "third" meant you would follow in your ancestors' footprints, but obviously I didn't. Through wood I first learned what it was to repair things. A farm, I came to say, is a repair waiting to happen, whether it is a broken fence or a hole in the shed roof.

But there was one exception to this strictly utilitarian view of wood. When I was thirteen I too was introduced to the world of woodcraft through



my school's Shop Class. That it was strictly offered for boys did not strike me as strange either. Boys were supposed to work with heavy materials. Girls were supposed to sew, cook, and run the household. That we would soon live in a world where this made no sense was an unacknowledged corrosive that finally did away with shop and home economics. Only recently have these enterprises begun to reappear in the schools as tools for living that are open to both girls and boys. Like you, I have seen the emergence of fine woodworkers and turners like Laura Mays at the College of the Redwoods, Dixie Biggs, or Betty Scarpino, who is also editor of *American Woodturner*, by the way. And there are many others.

It was in Shop Class that I discovered sophisticated tools (for that era) like the router, the lathe, and the metal press. I don't remember the teacher's name, a man with gruff demeanor and sure hands, intent on passing on his skills to boys who didn't really know what shop skills were for, but who loved the chance to take some wood and change it into bookends, bowls, and magazine racks.



My magazine rack was made of mahogany or something close to it. After residing for some decades with my parents, it returned to me upon their deaths. A few years ago I coaxed it apart—we used water-soluble hide glue then, no fancy aliphatic glues—and repaired some damaged joints. There were the old mortises I had made with a router that must have sounded like a freight train. Cleaned out, some edges repaired, and the rack stood ready once again to house the magazines I can't bear to throw

out after they are read. It held a lot of *National Geographics* until I started giving them to my son Eric.

The magazine rack reminds me that wood is a potent vehicle of memory. It is like an ancient ancestor who remains among us, reminding us of stories that are the backbone of our own development. Objects of wood also remind us as human beings that we are people of the trees, primordial workers of wood, creatures whose unity of hand and mind make us what we are.

While I went on to live increasingly through my world of ideas, language, and speech, the intense satisfaction of my experience in those shop classes remained with me, tugging at me as I emerged into a career of teaching, writing, and public speech. I had little awareness that many of the craft

values realized in shop were also guiding the way I wrote, thought, and engaged in the administration of academic affairs.

My only effort in woodwork took place in my mid-twenties, when I constructed an elaborate stand for the sound equipment and records that had accumulated in my collegiate and graduate school years. Made of numerous slats and threaded rods, with one diagonal bracer board, it was designed to be taken apart for the many moves of a scholar's early life. Needless to say, it was so intricate I only disassembled it under dire need. I finally passed it on to a friend and it disappeared from my life, a fleeting testimony to ingenuity and the paucity of tools, space, and resources at my disposal. But I was helping raise three kids, too, who have reminded me that I engaged in enough woodworking during those years to pass on some skills and attitudes.

Eric, a Star Trek fan at age seven, remembers how we built a small closet in his bedroom that was the base of a rocket ship, with a painted façade, a control room, and all sorts of Wizard-of-Oz controls. It was, he says, his first stage set. He went on to major in theater in college and has spent much of his career designing and building stage sets. Of course, he says, "I don't have to be as concerned about how it looks close up!"

My daughter Aneliese tells me that my matter-of-fact involvement of her in my projects taught her confidence with tools and habits of work that she has carried into her work in graphic arts and jewelry design. I really never thought about these things. It was just the way we did things together. "Always productive," she would add with a grin.

At one point in those interim years there emerged a very small, seemingly insignificant symbol of the meaning of woodworking in my life. It was a time, as Dante said, that I came to an impasse—"a dark wood"—in my life. My usual guides had fallen away and I couldn't see how to link the story of my past to a viable future. It was then that I took a small piece of wood—pine or spruce—and carved a small boat as a symbol of the unknown journey ahead, a journey that took me to a new life with my beloved Sylvia and a developing new understanding of my vocation. Wood was not only a vehicle of memory but of hope and transformation. These themes have been at the heart of much of my life and work ever since—themes that have pressed with persistent nudging to a deeper work with wood as well as words.

It was only when we built our retirement home, complete with a large basement blasted out of our mountainside in the Smokies, that I was able to start assembling the machines, workbenches, and shelves that would become the workshop I have worked in for the last twenty years. The extra cost of a full basement was one of the best investments I've ever made.



## *The Enchantment of Trees*

It was for me, too, Bill. And it's fortunate that both of us live surrounded by trees. Your home, high up on the slopes of the Appalachians above Waynesville, is located in a forest of cherry, walnut, and maple. Our home is built on a ridge looking down the Hemel en Aarde Valley, near Hermanus, a coastal town 100 miles southeast of Cape Town, widely known as the whale capital of the world. Next to our house is a small forest of tall pine and eucalyptus trees that link earth and heaven. From our deck you can see many more trees on every side, stretching over the farm and down the valley, trees of every shape and size, with leaves of many shades of green—eucalyptus, plane, oak, camphor, yellow-wood, wild olive, cottonwood, keurbooms, poplars, boekenhout, waterberry alders, and the ubiquitous invasive aliens, pines, bluegums, and Port Jackson willows. It is not a case of us not seeing the wood for the trees; when we see the trees we already have a sense of what lies hidden behind the bark and the outer rings of sapwood. We discern the heart wood deep within that gives the furniture we make its quality, texture, and rich colors.

Many years ago, when I was a graduate student in Chicago living in Hyde Park, I noticed one of my professors, Ross Snyder, walking past our window on the sidewalk. He suddenly stopped in front of a tree, I forget the kind, and then, so it seemed, he began talking to it. I was dumfounded, and even more so when later I found out that he was, indeed, having a conversation! I no longer think he was a little peculiar. Thomas Pakenham, in his wonderful books *Meeting with Remarkable Trees* and *Remarkable Trees of the World* tells about his many encounters with trees across the globe, including South Africa where he has spent much time.



John, the story of Ross Snyder reminds me that the sermon I gave as a senior at Yale Divinity School was entirely a soliloquy directed at the large maple outside the windows flanking the chapel. In talking to the tree, as in later years I talked to a large bowl of dirt (that's another story!), I was entering into the world of associations we have with trees, as well as reifying in some sense their very mystery, their very otherness. If Ross and I are crazy,

at least we aren't alone! We both have acted into the ancient mystery of the tree.

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Ancient and yet very personal, Bill. And we owe our life to them. I am told that the first trees began to evolve 300 million years ago and within another 100 they covered the earth as the most successful plants of all. They also live longer than any other living organism on the planet. They are fundamental to life, they provide food, and their wood can be used in many different ways. In short, they are an amazing part of the plant kingdom, so varied and complex in kind, in shape and size, in texture and color, that it is almost impossible to classify them with complete accuracy. But once you start working with wood, you need to get to know trees, the strengths and weaknesses of their wood for the tasks at hand, and how best you can help them begin their new life whatever that might be.

For instance, the trees in the Appalachians are wonderful for furniture making. I envy you going out of your shop into the forest to select a tree for your next project. When I look at them I see order, stateliness, clear lines, regular patterns, straight grain, consistent color, and can already imagine a cabinet or table that would grace any mansion. I love working with such wood, along with ash, beech, white and red oak, mahogany, teak, rosewood—but all of these have to be imported into South Africa at considerable expense. So I shudder in alarm when you feed off-cuts into your woodstove! I take comfort that you live in the middle of a forest that continually replenishes itself, fed by abundant water and rich soil. Our climate and depth of soil, by contrast, varies greatly from one end of the country to the other. It can't nurture and sustain forests on such a scale. With a few exceptions, the Knysna forest being one, we have nothing as extensive as those that stretch along the Appalachian Mountains or the Cascades and Rockies in North America.

All the trees on Volmoed are strikingly textured and colorful, but are individually precious for their beauty and shade, and have not grown without a struggle. I marvel how each tree has its own character and seems to belong to the place where it has taken root, even if imported from elsewhere. These trees are seldom available for my workshop, unless blown over in a storm, and only a few can be turned, carved, or used for furniture. Most do not grow straight, but are gnarled and shaped by wind and weather, by their varied genes, and by their location on the farm. As we live in the midst of the Fynbos kingdom, one of the six floral kingdoms in the world, we have

to work hard to control invasive species. We have an ongoing struggle to eradicate them, or at least control them. They provide wood to make charcoal and logs to burn for warmth and cooking, but are not much value in my workshop. Pine and meranti aside, when I need wood for special projects I hasten to my favorite timber merchants appropriately named “Rare Woods” in Cape Town or “Exotic Woods” in Hermanus. Blackwood, stinkwood, oak, African rosewood or walnut, Brazilian peppercorn, cedar, balau, imbuia, kiaat, jacaranda, and camphor are the ones I love to work with most, but some are now difficult to obtain, others are listed as invasive aliens by government and cannot be planted, many are increasingly expensive, not least because we have mismanaged and abused them for far too long. So you and I are amongst the growing numbers of people who oppose the wanton destruction of forests, and try to ensure that the wood we use in our workshops is harvested sustainably.

The truth is, without trees there is no life. Trees turn carbon dioxide into oxygen, without which we cannot survive. They provide fruit that nourishes us, medicines that heal us, shade that protects us, wood to heat our homes, beams for our roofs, and planks for our doors and floors. Without trees we would only have plastic chairs and tables and metal bookcases. Without trees there would have been no boats and ships, and as my forebears arrived in South Africa from Europe by sailing ship, as did your pilgrim ancestors in New England, we would not be where we are without sturdy oak timber. Without trees there would be no pencils and paper, no baseball or cricket bats, and no wood from which to turn bowls or make furniture. Perish the thought! Even alien trees provide firewood for those in deep rural areas without electricity and are of use in many other ways. And, until the recent evolution of digital books, without trees there would be no books, including this one. The list of the roles trees play in our lives may not be endless, but it is remarkably extensive. No wonder we should care for the trees and strike up a better relationship with them.

And I know, from what you said about your early sermon, one of those relationships is really a sacred one. After all, trees figure prominently in most religious traditions as they do in the Bible. They demarcate sacred space as well as have symbolic significance. The Buddha was enlightened beneath the Bo tree. In the Psalms trees shout for joy and clap their hands. Jesus likened people to trees that bear good and bad fruit, and was eventually crucified on a cross of wood, sometimes also referred to as a tree. In fact, the story of trees runs all through the biblical narrative, not only as an important source of food but also providing symbols for life-giving creativity as well as the seduction of power. “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of

life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:4b–9).

According to the Genesis creation myth, God planted many trees in Paradise and invited Adam and Eve to enjoy their fruit. But these two trees take center stage. Adam and Eve are encouraged to eat the fruit of the tree of life, but forbidden that of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We can readily understand the first, but the prohibition to eat the fruit that enables us to know the difference between good and evil seems strange. Surely that is a part of our growth towards full maturity? After all, some great theologians, starting with Irenaeus in the second century, interpreted the “Fall of Man” as a necessary stage in human development, so we should not press the metaphor of the tree of knowledge lest we miss the point—humans proudly positioning themselves beyond good and evil as the measure of all things. God tells humans not to eat of its fruit because in doing so they will think they know everything, that they can control and dominate everything, and that they can use everything for their own ends and purposes.

There is another angle that is worth thinking about. The Hebrew words translated “good” and “evil” have a wider reference than the English words. They actually speak of a split in our personalities. If the fruit of the tree of life brings wholeness, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil splits us apart. Pleasure, beauty, and the good can no longer exist without pain, ugliness, and evil. Tasting the fruit of the tree of death injects into our being a tension in which despair battles with hope. If the tree of life heals us because its fruit brings together the disparate parts of life, reconciling them and renewing us, the tree of death plunges us into ambiguities, giving us knowledge that is separated from wisdom. We become incapable of living in freedom and empowered to do the good.

Yes, indeed, our ancestors in faith knew a thing or two about the significance of trees. That is why the tree of life frames the biblical narrative from the opening chapters to the closing ones in the book of Revelation. And in the middle of the story stands the tree on which Jesus was crucified (Acts 5:30). Reserved for the worst of criminals and terrorists, and later blasphemed in the burning of crosses and lynching trees of the Ku Klux Klan, the cross has become a symbol of the tree of life that brings healing and reconciliation to people and nations—thus awakening the hope that in the end all things will be restored and renewed in a new Paradise, as in John’s vision in the book of Revelation of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2).

There is also a lot in contemporary mythic literature involving trees and the stark struggle between good and evil. In Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* the Ents protect the forests from the dangerous Orcs. They are tree-like

creatures who actually become trees like those they protect. They are powerful creatures who had been taught how to talk by the Elves. So when war broke out between the Elves and the awful tyrant Sauron and his minions, the Ents came to their rescue. The myth of the titanic struggle between the Ents and Elves, on the one side, and the Orcs of darkness led by Sauron, on the other, is symbolic of the struggle between the forces of life—namely the forests—and the forces of death—unrestrained technology, symbolized by the dark mines from which comes the iron ore to make weapons of mass destruction.

The struggle symbolized by trees and wood, on the one hand, and iron and steel, on the other; between the saving of the forests which give life, and their destruction for profit by powerful machines owned by powerful institutions, is the struggle between the use of technology for the good of the earth and its inhabitants, and the abuse of technology for greed and exploitation. The dark forests of older times that symbolized danger for travelers and folk living close by have been replaced by the dark mines at ever-increasing depth that produce precious metal and other minerals at enormous cost, not least of lives, and the metals needed to make the machines of war and terror.

There can be no gainsaying the enormous benefits of science and technology, and the many machines they have made possible. I write on a laptop computer that is more powerful than any that existed when men were first sent to the moon. I would be lost without it. Every time I go to the doctor or the dentist, I rejoice in the advances of medical technology, and I marvel at the way my ISUZU bakkie (what you call a “pickup”) keeps going. I gladly embrace the speed and ease of global travelling, despite the hassles of airports and the size of the seats. And all the machinery in my workshop is the outcome of advances in woodworking technology, even the hand tools that many a woodworker cherishes. Yes, I am a fan of science and technology, and I confess that I daily add to the carbon footprint that endangers the world. So I need to remind myself constantly—for the sake of my soul, if nothing else—that technology makes weapons, harmful drugs, and pollutes the earth. Ah, yes, and what about turning wood into massive clouds of carbon monoxide? That is why I return again and again to ponder the wonderful myth of Paradise.

Every day as I wake up and look down the Hemel en Aarde Valley, this tree-filled vision comes to mind and feeds my soul. But even this daily reminder did not prepare me for a recent visit to a mythically charged and mysterious “enchanted forest” that lies a few miles away over the distant hills. I couldn’t wait to tell you all about it, because it embodied in splendid



fashion our conviction that learning to love trees helps us recover a sense of the mystery of soul and the mystery that enfolds us and which we call God.

So here's the story of our visit. Less than an hour's drive from Volmoed, hidden behind the hills above Stanford and Gansbaai, lies a beautiful valley. And in that valley is a forest of indigenous trees named Platbos—an Afrikaans word meaning "flat woods or forest." An information pamphlet describes it in this way: "Platbos is a mystery forest. Growing upon an ancient sand dune with neither a river nor spring to sustain it, the forest survives the hot, dry summer months by drawing moisture from the morning mists that bathe its thirsty canopy." Numbered amongst its trees is a milkwood reputed to be a thousand years old. On the surrounding hills fynbos flourishes, and invasive aliens struggle for control. But in this enchanted forest above a sand dune with neither a river nor a spring to sustain it, indigenous trees grow and flourish.

I don't know the botanical names of the trees in the forest, but let me mention their popular names and how they are described by those who lovingly manage Platbos and extract their essences. The milkwood is the tree of wholeness; the white pear, the tree of joy; the rock alder, the tree of bliss; the bladder nut, the tree of self-knowledge; the wild peach, the tree of courage; the hard pear, the tree of forgiveness; the spike thorn, the tree of loving kindness; the saffron wood, the tree of tears; the sea guarrie, the tree of inspiration; the wild olive, the tree of faith; the pock ironwood, the tree of intuition; the cherry wood, the tree of serenity; and the white stinkwood, the tree of light. Their names, let alone their smells, conjure up a world of mystery and enchantment.

Platbos reminded me that forests are the stuff of fairy tales and legends. In olden times, they were the boundaries between villages, and most villagers seldom ventured alone into their foreboding darkness. They were places where danger lurked, strange things happened, monsters hid, aliens dwelt, and big bad wolves ate straying boys and girls. It was not impossible, as C. S. Lewis once said, that an ogre might live less than an hour away! But Platbos is not a place to fear, it is a place to be renewed, to regain a sense of proportion, a place to discover oneself and share with others your deepest thoughts. You can walk through its shaded paths, sit under its trees, marvel at its shapes and forms, and sometimes on a moonlit night you might even see a shy leopard seeking its prey, or a striped genet clinging to the branches of a stinkwood tree.

It is true that the Old Testament prophets sometimes identified enchanted forests or sacred groves with idolatry, superstition, and sorcery, yet for Ezekiel and some of the psalmists, trees also provided metaphors for the renewal of life, anticipating the day when the trees of the forest would



clap their hands and sing for joy (Ps 96:12). Or as St. Paul puts it, the whole creation groans in expectation of a humanity that has come to its senses and begun to care for it with renewed love and energy (Rom 8:22).

We are fortunate to be living in an age today when people across the globe are seeking to reclaim the enchanted forests that are so necessary for life in its fullness, protesting against the greed that destroys the trees that renew the very air we breathe. For we have come to see that if you rid the world of its enchanted forests and all that they symbolize as well, you rid it of the essences of life. So it is not surprising that there is a hankering for places of enchantment to which we can retreat in search of solitude and the renewing of soul. This is not naive romanticism; it is the recognition that we need such places and spaces for the sake of retaining our humanity and renewing our souls. A walk in an enchanted forest can lead us deeper into the mystery of the incarnate God through whom “all things have been created,” and “in [whom] all things hold together.” Which reminds me of an intriguing verse in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the most important of the apocryphal gospels from the first centuries of Christianity. It is a saying of Jesus: “Raise the stone, and there you will find me; cleave the wood, and there I am” (77). It was probably excluded from the New Testament because it seemed to support the idea that everything is God, what we call pantheism. It is also a reminder that the Spirit of God is the energy that pervades and gives life to the whole of creation. After all, the whole earth is the Lord’s and everything in it is a sacrament of God’s beauty and love. No wonder the trees of the forest clap their hands and sing for joy.



### *Wounded Whole*

The Platbos story resonates a great deal with me, John, because you might say I live in an almost mythical forest, right on the edge of the Pisgah National Forest, abutting the Shining Rock Wilderness. We live in the presence of one of the largest tulip poplar trees in the state of North Carolina. Almost twenty feet around at its base, reaching up over a hundred feet and an equal span across, it sings out the changing seasons on our mountain-side. We are not its owners. We are only temporary guardians. Our arborist guesses that its age is over two hundred and fifty years—older than the US Constitution. Cherokee ancestors hunted underneath it, an orchard

stretched beneath it until only a few years ago. Until we built our driveway a small spring emerged beneath it. There is a hollow at its base and we surmise it escaped the lumberjacks because of the damage caused by a thunderbolt long ago.

Many of us have some important trees in our lives. They are part of our planet's lungs, source of the very air we breathe. And, of course, they are festooned with religious meanings, from the tree of Eden's paradise to the tree of Revelation's new heaven and new earth. As you said, the more we realize our symbiosis with trees, the more we can be energized to bring our life back in balance with its very source.

The tree became a symbol of one of the first steps I took toward trying to get more balance in my own life. It was 1999. I was asked to give a brief talk at my seminary about faith, healing, and spirituality—not exactly my field—but I accepted. At the time, as I looked out my study window at the tulip poplar, my feet were hurting and my back was all knotted up like a twisted cedar that's been in the wind too long. I really hurt, so I couldn't split those locust logs or work on the stone retaining wall I had so carefully designed during faculty meetings.

Having used up all my Calvinist stoicism I finally called my doctor. He told me I had *plantar fasciitis*. All I could think is that my feet must have acquired some fascist tendencies. Furthermore, he intoned, standing around in Atlanta lecturing when I should have been lying under the tulip poplar had thrown my back out. He said he'd send me an instructional brochure. And try not to walk too much.

Immediately people started crawling out of the woodwork like Job's friends—telling their stories, sharing their remedies, exercises, names of massage therapists and recipes for herbal remedies, some of them containing ginseng or bourbon. The massage therapist was really great. She wore bib overalls, which made me feel comfortable. Her hands were very strong but I trusted her.

The tree told me: Now you might learn something—about roots that don't hit the ground right, about lightning, and about how to live because you have a hollow spot inside. You might even have a shot at wisdom. When you give that talk to those seminary people, remind them about the lightning in their life, about the things that hurt where they touch life's ground, about the hollow places that spare us from ourselves, that let us live.

And you can tell them about what it means to have people come from thousands of miles away to cut you into pieces. They love to cut everything into little pieces—minds, bodies, souls, spirits, knowledge, land, work, time, and space. And then they send the pieces all over the world in order to put things back together in a different way. So that things and living creatures

are all split up commuting, connecting, networking, hurrying every which way.

At that point I broke in with my burning question: But why do my feet hurt?

Then I heard the tulip tree say: They hurt because they aren't an instrument. They're you.

The tree was right, of course. How many ancestors had told me that my body was an instrument of my mind, my soul, my spirit? Wesley said: Be useful. Calvin said: Be an instrument of God. And back and back it went. The mind and soul were reasonable, they claimed. The body was a raging beast of passion. Tame it, discipline it, control it.

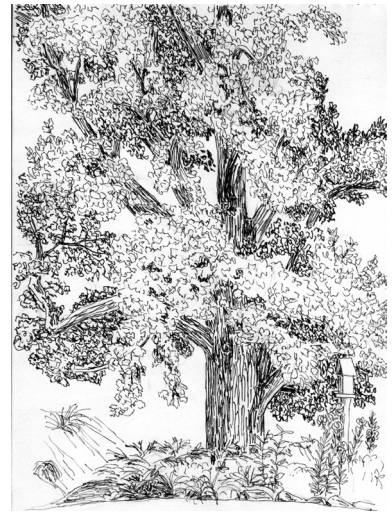
Over the centuries we came to think of this fleshy instrument as a kind of machine with replaceable parts. And because we thought of our bodies in instrumental terms, we treated those who served our bodies as instruments. And we extended that to all the other creatures in the world as well. And so our world of instruments upon instruments not only can dominate the earth but turns back upon us, subjecting us to a world of mind over matter, of meetings over muscles, schedules over metabolism, typing and tapping over tendons and tissues. Crawling through the labyrinths of bureaucracy, piecing together the fragments of a life on turnpikes and elevators, we feel our muscles knotting, our tendons tearing, our heads splitting. And then there finally comes that painful time when we feel the lightning and touch the hollow that might save us, let us live.

We've reached the limits of our instrumental reason and its tyranny over bodies, nature, people. We are no longer merely an instrument, but now we have the chance to be embodied selves, where feet can talk, backs can cry, and brains can listen. How can we put it? Not instruments, but co-respondents. Respondent to ourselves, respondent to other creatures, to trees and to water, earth and air. Not so much to dominate as to take in and give out. To breathe, to have spirit flowing through our lungs. We're trying to put our life and world back together so it co-responds with the deepest impulses of creation.

And so I gave that talk a few months later. I concluded by saying that I didn't know where this journey was going. Looking back, it was a first step. The tulip poplar was giving me patient permission to begin. It's a very patient tree. It's seen a lot of pain, a lot of cutting, a lot of splendid beauty. And it's still growing, eliciting some poems along the way.

Wind wrought lightning  
seared  
the tulip poplar,

cauterized  
her cambium,  
ripped off her skin,  
struck from the pith  
an incensed offering  
to natural wrath.  
Yet living on  
she opened grateful leaves  
to rain  
to sun,  
received the rings  
of spring's embrace  
around her hollow core,  
endures more years  
than our Republic  
wounded  
worthless  
saved from lumberjacks  
and greed.  
Now lofty leafed in April  
she greets the sun  
shows off exuberant in May  
slips off her patchwork dress in fall  
and waits in winter  
bare-knuckled  
fighting winds  
shaking off the snow  
branded  
marked  
but unlike Cain  
resplendent in the glory  
of God's mercy.



*About the Sawdust*

We're going to talk a little more about soul later on, Bill, so maybe before we go any further, I should interject some thoughts on sawdust. After all, it's part of the title of this book, and we make lots of it. I'm reminded of a German proverb which reads: "Wo gehobelt wird, da fallen Spähne!" Loosely translated it means that shavings fall to the ground wherever shaving takes place. You can't shave and expect no shavings. I learnt this proverb after a long conversation with our mutual friends Wolfgang and Kara Huber about sawdust—what interesting topics for conversations woodworkers (and even theologians) get into! I mentioned that you and I were writing this book called "Sawdust and Soul." But they didn't know what sawdust meant. So we discussed all the possible German translations and concluded that, as in English, so in German, there are at least two words that can be used. These distinguish between the small specks of dust that result from sawing wood, and the shavings that are made when you plane wood. Of course, when you turn wood on a lathe you get plenty of both because you cut, shave, and sandpaper! Today the up-market vacuum cleaners used in a workshop collect shavings in one bin while the sawdust, being lighter, is sucked into another.

There is an ongoing conversation on the web about how people use sawdust and shavings, some of it quite graphic and not particularly salubrious! Making particle boards and fake snow, providing grip on wet or icy roads, soaking up oil spills, feeding plants, starting a fire, filling wood holes and defects, chasing away weeds, lightening up cement, and providing fuel for boilers. I have also discovered that there is a sawdust art festival, several design studios called "sawdust," someone called the sawdust girl, and even a sawdust mountain, which is described as "a melancholy love letter of sorts," whatever that means! There is also a web page of sentences in which the word "sawdust" occurs. I quote the one I like best: "The unreduced nose of the wine combines figs, apricots, nectarines, scented candle wax, and hard wood sawdust."

Sawdust may have many uses, but it is also toxic. When it gets into your eyes it burns, when it gets into your body it can cause serious allergies, and some is also carcinogenic. It is precisely for this reason that there is such a strong emphasis today in woodworking, especially when using power tools, on the need to wear dust masks, and to suck up sawdust not just from the floor after you have finished working, but as it comes off your machines and before it gets into your lungs. It is not so much the shavings and dust particles you can see that are the problem, but the very tiny specks of dust that float in the air and get into your eyes, your lungs, and, I might

add, into your hair as well! So I've learned not to mess with sawdust, it is an irritant and can be a killer. Besides which, Isobel gives me a hard time when I traipse sawdust into the house!

Jesus would have been very familiar with sawdust from working in his father's workshop. So it is not surprising that he uses sawdust as a metaphor when referring to a spiritual blindness that destroys relationships, preventing us from seeing ourselves, others, and the world as we should. But it is, as Jesus also says, nothing compared to having a whole chunk of tree, bark and all, in your eye! "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" he asks his hearers. Jesus is speaking about the danger of judging others—something we are all prone to do, and sometimes do too often for our own and others' good. But the saying could apply more widely. If we have sawdust or logs in our eyes, we not only cannot see the wood for the trees, but we also cannot see the trees. Not only do we fail to see the beauty around us or the good in other people, but we also fail to see the plight of people who suffer from poverty, illness, and old age, or the despair in the eyes of angry unemployed young people. All of which is a reminder of the need to wear safety goggles in the workshop when working with machines to prevent the odd splinter getting into your eyes.

I guess that all this talk about the toxicity of sawdust, and the other dangers lurking in the workshop (and there is more to come!) may well prevent some from venturing in and exploring the possibilities of wood-working or turning for themselves! So maybe we should reassure them that as long as one takes the necessary safety precautions, the workshop is more a place to retreat to for the renewing of spirit than a danger zone housing hazardous power tools! In fact, when the problems of the world get on top of me, I make a beeline for my shop.

