

Cheap and easy

16 May, 2021

Those were the words that caught my eye, 'cheap and easy.' Not, mind you, in that I immediately clicked the link to see what sage advice this YouTuber had to offer. Rather, those words identified this vlog posting as one I can afford to skip. And usually, that's just what I do.

I should explain. It's not like I want to avoid anything inexpensive. But when someone says 'cheap,' it does not convey the same semantic reference as 'inexpensive.' Same goes for 'easy.'

I spend a lot of time in the YouTubiverse, observing folks doing woodworking. I am a woodworker myself and I always welcome a chance to learn something or just to see what cool things people are making or great ways they go about the craft. But in searching out the nuggets, I've learned there's a lot of fools' gold to be found. And judging by how the algorithms that choose what to list first are set up, it seems like lots of people don't care about searching out the high-carat content. Which is a shame.

One big advantage we have over our pre-web ancestors is that pretty much anyone can share their knowledge and experience. One big downside is that almost anyone can share their ignorance and lack of experience. And lots of folks are fairly adept at making their schlock sound like advice from a pro. So, for the serious student of (name your learning realm), one of the necessary academic skills is learning to separate the wheat from the chaff.

If you're lucky, when you go to buy a new camera you have a Frank or a Naomi (the friends I went to) to provide reliable advice. But for most subjects, you have to seek out the worthy teachers from among a sea of strangers. I like to think I've built some skills around applying this sorting function. So I thought I'd take a minute or two to share some of what I've learned. Before we begin let me stress that I can't tell you how to find the good guys, necessarily; this missive is strictly about avoiding those other folks. And of course, take what I say with a grain of salt because, well, who says I'm right?

So, you have a topic to explore and you enter the keywords in Google (or, or... I'm not touting Google here) and hit the key. In an instant, 1 zillion, four hundred twenty-three gajillion and seven entrees are found. And among the front runners are several entries whose titles include the words 'cheap' or 'easy' or both. Now, I have to say, if I'm looking for a way to keep dandelions out of my yard without killing all dandelions everywhere, cheap and easy might just be the way to go. Past history with dandelions indicates there's nothing easy about it but what do I know? I'm willing to listen.

If, on the other hand, I'm looking for a good way to carve a piecrust edge tabletop, I'm looking for expert advice from someone who has done this lots of times with great results most of those times. In this case, there are ways to do it relatively cheaply using hand tools or you can do it easily with a significant investment in machinery. But cheap AND easy just ain't gonna happen. My bottom line is that most things worth having are worth a bit of effort, struggle even. Replacing skill and effort with shortcuts that include more expensive tools or machinery... Well, what's the point? Go direct and buy the thing from someone who makes it well and in sufficient volume to keep the costs within sight.

"The perfect way..." is another titling device that pretty much guarantees I'm not interested in hearing what this person has to say. There is no perfect way. If there was, we'd have just a few car models, one type of cherry pie, and a never fail opening line for when trying to meet a potential spouse. Enough said.

“Quick” can go either way. If it’s a half hour before the guests arrive and I forgot to make a dessert, ‘quick’ could be just the modifier I’m looking for as I frantically compare what’s available in my pantry to recipes. But many other things simply can’t be done both well and quickly. Making a quart of my beeswax finish is going to take about an hour, including decanting, cooling, etc. Of course, it could be that you consider an hour to be a brief moment of time but at my age an hour might represent a significant chunk of the time I can count on having left in the tank. Besides, I enjoy making wood finish from beeswax.

I could go on and on but I’ll close with one last titling convention of which we should all be wary. And here ‘tis: any title starting with numbers should raise the eyebrows. I’m talking about “The Three Essential Steps.” Or “The Seven Best...” Because, who says? How did this person decide three or seven was the right number? I’m especially unimpressed when the number is divisible by five. When someone comes up with a list that convenient, chances are they started with the number rather than finding the best ways and then just deciding how many to share.

Look, folks, you can find advice on just about anything you’d care to name. But there’s advice and there’s advice. I value my time on earth, every minute and second of it. And I just don’t have time to spend on things that aren’t worth having or chores that aren’t worth doing, and doing well.

(NOTE: There are times when I write these entries and it seems like I should end with a loud Harrumph! This is one of those times.)

Harrumph!