

Sunday best

15 Oct 2021

I've been turning small bowls of late. Turning bowls is a great skill-building exercise and the splits and checks that magically appeared in my madrone cuttings dictated that most of my madrone-based projects be fairly diminutive, anyway. Hence, the 'small.' No matter; madrone is wonderful to turn, especially while still fairly wet and I love both the process and the gorgeous result, so there you go.

On a lark, I turned a chunk of Olivewood the other day and was blown away by the colors and patterns revealed as I worked. With just a bit of beeswax to bring them out, this may be the most striking item I've turned to date. I placed it alongside a recently completed madrone cup and I have to say they exhibited a glorious contrast – the warm, rich milkiness of the madrone set against the swirling browns and reds and blacks of the olive. I love that an aggregate of an hour at the lathe revealed such diverse beauty.

I suppose it may have occurred to you where I'm going with this: perhaps an epistle on human diversity? Actually, while it could have been that – I mean I thought of it as I read my last paragraph so I can't blame you for following the same trajectory – my imaginings actually went in a different direction. Holding these little bowls up to the light, I found myself thinking about my parents getting their children ready for Sunday mass.

You know the drill – Mom made sure we bathed the night before and laid out suitable clean clothes; Dad enforced the donning of said apparel and made sure no errant facial smudges had appeared overnight. And just before loading up the family station wagon, he always licked his thumb and used the moistened digit to tame a rebel strand of hair. I never understood that part since my brother and I sported extremely close-cropped helmets of stubble but that was the drill.

My parents were proud of their kids and the Sunday ritual was not about correcting flaws but rather, putting our shining faces in the best light. And while I'm not much of a formal dresser and it's been years since I wore a tie and decades since I attended church, these remain warm memories of my parents' pride in family.

Working wood stems from an impulse not unlike the one that drove my folks to clean and dress up their kids, I suppose. Just as my parents sought to reveal the children under all the dirt and scuff marks, I work to find the beauty under the bark.

Bottom line – while I am proud when someone comments on the quality of my joinery, the ultimate reward comes when a viewer can't help reaching out to touch the finished project and comments on the beauty of the wood itself. Because while working wood requires skill and experience in making useful items, it's mostly about revealing what the tree itself has to offer.

I love wood. And I love the feeling – yes, a conceit on my part but what of it - that in turning it just so and applying a bit of polish, I'm revealing it at its Sunday best.