

Going Through the Grits

Category: Stories

written by Scott Newport | December 30, 2016

Scott Newport

It was another day at a renovation project on the fourth floor of an office building. Glancing at my iPhone, I noticed that my buddy Dave had called a couple of times. Now, coming down a stepladder for what seemed like the hundredth time, I saw his name pop up again. This time I set down my hammer and found a quiet place.

“Hey Scott, ol’ buddy, I got a request,” Dave said. “Last week at hunting camp, a friend of mine was impressed with my restored knife. As we were sitting around the campfire, I told him that you’re kind of a blacksmith, and that you refurbish knives. I wonder if you could fix up his, too. He lent it to me, and I want to return it to him as a Christmas present.”

After work, I picked up the knife from Dave and headed home. There I walked into my workshop, a few yards from my house, set the knife on my bench, then went up to the house.

Stepping inside, I received a text: “Hey Scott, it’s Ryan and I’m not sure what to do. Hospice wants to come talk with us on Monday.”

Ryan is a young guy referred to me about a year ago by Children’s Special Health Care Services here in Michigan; I often mentor dads and families with children who have a terminal illness.

Earlier in the day, Ryan had texted me that his younger son had been readmitted to the pediatric intensive-care unit and was struggling to breathe.

I’d texted back that I would be praying for him, and that we could catch up by phone in the morning.

“The conversations at the hospital have been scary today,” he’d replied. “And what a way to spend a Friday.”

Standing there, at the top of the stairs, I said a prayer for him. Then I walked back out to the shop, sat down at my bench and examined the knife.

It was old, but of good quality; the leather sheath was broken in but intact, and the dull blade was rusty. Gingerly rotating the blade within my fingers, I could tell that it had been sharpened before, but only on one side.

With the flip of a switch, I started up my grinder and touched the blade to the sanding belt. Steadily, I worked my way through a series of belts, from the coarsest-grit sandpaper to the finest—a process known as “going through the grits.”

Time passed. As the clock ticked past six, I kept right on. The smooth rasp of grit against steel and the sight of the sparks bouncing off the surface felt almost magical. I found the whole process soothing—especially now.

You see, this week was the anniversary of my own son's death. He died seven years ago, the day after Thanksgiving, at age seven.

After finishing the grinding process, I paused to inspect the blade through my bench magnifier. Assorted divots and heavy scratches still scarred the steel. To achieve a perfect polish, I'd have to go back over those blemishes.

So I carried out the grinding process once more, working my way through the coarse 120-grit and 150-grit sandpapers and finishing with superfine 400-grit.

Again, I peered through the magnifier. The imperfections were still there. As I headed over to grab a fresh sanding belt, Ryan texted me again: "Sounds good, we can talk tomorrow."

Something about this stopped me in my tracks.

It might not be a good idea to go through the grits again, I thought. If I keep trying to get the knife perfect, there'll be nothing left. I mean, who wants a knife with only half a blade?

Checking out the blade again under the magnifier's illuminated glass, I felt my thoughts turning to Ryan and his son. Quickly, before I could let myself go there, I grabbed a piece of softened sandpaper and started to refine the blade by hand.

Holding the knife under the magnifier, I also saw my hands, with their own grooves and dings from a hard day's work.

I knew that the finish paper couldn't remove the knife's deepest scars; but the polishing would give the whole blade a mirror finish, something I thought its owner might appreciate.

Awakening this morning, I rolled over to check my phone and see if Ryan had tried to contact me.

Lying there, I tried to figure out what I could say to him today. I never want to tell families that everything will be okay, or try to take away their grief. I tell them that I'm just there to listen and to help them navigate the journey of living with a sick child.

I also started to think about the knife. *If I grind it anymore, I'll destroy it.*

An idea came to me: *Maybe I can tell Ryan about the knife, and how it was made by a blacksmith, years ago. Maybe we can talk about the original creator's dream for the blade. Maybe it was a Christmas gift for someone—a gift that's been passed down to its present-day owner. With all the wear and tear on this knife, there's no doubt that it holds a mountain of stories*

within its core.

I thought about my boy, Evan, and about Ryan's son, Kaleb. In a way, they might be a bit like that imperfect steel, I reflected. I know the doctors don't want to keep trying interventions that may take Ryan's son's life. Maybe I can talk to him about how some things are better not fixed, and that maybe it's okay to just polish them up a bit. Man, I just don't know—but there's something there, I feel it. Maybe I shouldn't say "better not fixed..."

I was asking God for the right words. *Please, Lord, show me the way.*

I know that, for me, it's the memories that keep me going. Even though my Evan was also not perfect and had numerous deep scratches and divots, the memory of his glowing face is a perfect fit for the sheath in my own life—one I carry with me every day. The experience of living with a very sick child forges a deeper appreciation for life, an enduring spirit of hope that I can pass down to my family and the ones I serve. It's never easy to talk about a child's impending death, but maybe the reflections I've received today will one day help those whose hands I hold through the journey of not being able to take out all the scratches.

Yeah, scratches stink, don't they? But without them, there would be no proof of how we lived. And, thank the Lord (the original blacksmith), He doesn't use a magnifier.

Now, in the heart of the Christmas season, I pray that my reflections today can be a gift for Ryan—one that we both can share. And maybe, just maybe, I will share this story with Dave and his hunting buddy. I'm sure that they have a few things in their lives that can't be fixed, either.

Don't we all.

About the author:

Scott Newport is a carpenter by trade and has been in the remodeling business for nearly forty years. He volunteers with the Patient and Family Centered Care advisory council of CS Mott Children's Hospital, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, serving regionally and nationally as an advocate for families with sick children. "My biggest passion is family mentoring, and I have a special interest in supporting dads. I always know I've made a connection when I get an email that reads, 'Hey Scott, are you going to be up at the hospital this weekend?' I believe that until we make a personal connection with a family, it's almost impossible to have those important and often difficult discussions." His stories can be found in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies, and he is regular contributor to the [ChiPPS E-Journal](#) published by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Story editor:

Diane Guernsey