

The Life Bowl Project:
A Study in Transformation

By
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Starting Point



Here is where we started. Not very beautiful, is it? Just like a lot of people, if we glance at the surface, all we see is old, peeling bark, rough edges, and misshapen form. Useless, perhaps? A waste of effort? We'll see.

A Closer Inspection



What we see on the outside often gives us a clue to the inside. If we change the lighting a bit, we start to see possibilities. Hmm . . . There are some interesting patterns, created when the tree was growing, and perhaps under duress. Alas, it's

hidden under rough bark. What's in there, anyway? Is there anything of value? Many people also bear life's scars, stresses, disappointments, and worries and they show, don't they?

Keep Looking

Judging from this angle, there doesn't seem to be much point in taking the effort to try to make something beautiful. The surface is so rough; we can't see anything with potential.

*Sound like someone you've met
(maybe in a mirror)?*

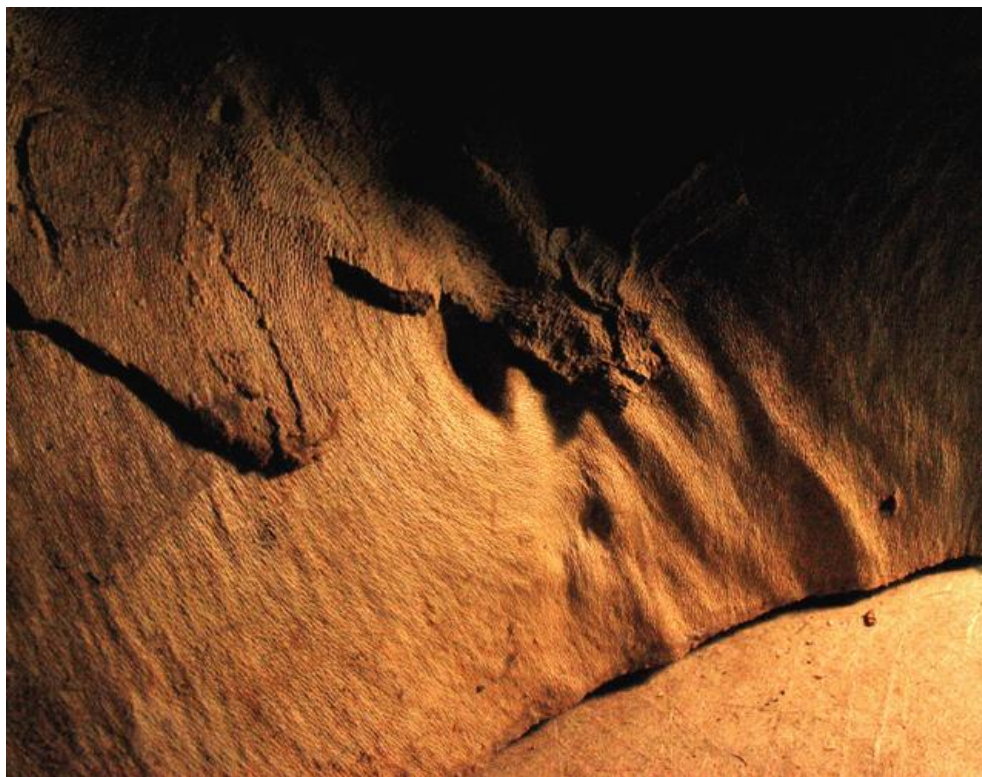


Just Below the Surface



*A few minutes with a rasp to create some smoothness, and look what we see! A little beauty?
Could it be? Can you see it yet? Look at the grain to the upper right. It wasn't visible before,
except to a trained eye. Like the eye of the Father, perhaps?*

Telltale Marks



Aha! Some tell-tale ridges. These are formed when the tree is under stress. Sometimes this can mean beautiful grain underneath called "fiddleback." Highly desirable grain patterns often leave clues on the surface, but they can be easily missed. If we can learn a lot from a seemingly valueless lump of wood just by looking at it, what about the people who are all around us? Aside from harvesting this wood from a large felled tree, we haven't really done much of anything except look at it, and peer just below the surface. And we see . . . possibilities.



First Step

The first thing we need to do is to scrape off that nasty bark, the outer shell the world sees. Some of it comes away easily, other bits hang on tight. This requires a chisel, hard and sharp, along with some effort.

Old Knot

The bark is real tight around this old knot. Once, something was trying to grow here, but it died or got chopped off. The tree was trying to cover the wound. Old knots can reveal striking grain, sometimes not. All I know is this wood is going to be tough!



Lop Off What Juts Out



Next, we need to take off the stuff that was out of shape, just to round it up and balance it a bit before the real art-work of metamorphosis begins.

The First Few Whacks

Finally on the lathe, things are spinning and chips are flying. The cuts are interrupted, though, and the going is tough because of the shape of the thing. It's badly out of round, with hollows and missing pieces that cause the tool to bounce and the artisan to get tired. Not smooth sailing yet!



Seal It Up



Well, done for the night. The wood is still wet and heavy, so we have to seal it up to keep it from drying too quickly. If we just let it sit there, it might crack and be ruined. When a person is undergoing the extreme stress of change, sometimes we have to slow down. Can you see the grain patterns emerging beneath the sealant?

Cracked Anyway

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of the artisan, the wood is under so much stress, it cracks as it starts to dry. Sometimes this happens regardless of the drying technique. The grain on this piece of Sycamore is quite twisted, and the wood was wet as can be at the start. So, it cracked, and not just a little. In fact, no matter how hard the artisan tried, the cracks just got bigger and bigger. Now, many artisans would have given up on the piece. There is a common word for pieces that crack like this.



KINDLING!

But, this bowl is not destined for the fire. You see, this is a Life Bowl, and it is a metaphor for how people respond to change, even when the change is positive, taking them from worthless to infinitely valuable. So, what to do? Craft the ragged cracks into something beautiful. That's what the Father does when our lives seem to crack under the strain of change.



*The Life Bowl Project
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Ragged to Rich

So, the next step was to clean out the ragged edges of the cracks and to actually deepen them to reduce their rate of growth. It took a lot of time and even some special cutters to get the edges cleaned up. Every time the work restarted, there were more and more cracks forming!



There was no staying ahead of it, so the thing to do was to simply seal it to the extent possible with a special adhesive and let it dry until the cracking stopped, or at least slowed down. This piece was getting to be more and more of a challenge. Some pieces (people??) resist the metamorphosis to beauty.

Fill the Hurts with Gold

What if the cracks that came from all the stress are filled with something precious, like gold?

“How would that change anything?” you might ask. Instead of ragged, ruinous cracks, perhaps replacing them with streaks of gold will change our perspective. Perhaps you can imagine where we are going with this. Can people do the same thing? Can we help them see differently?



This was the first of two applications of gold fill. It took a lot more than expected. The cracks were very deep, and were numerous.

Who Fills Cracks with Gold?



We usually think of cracks as defects. Many people would not dream of investing in artwork with cracks in it. Filled with gold, they aren't defects any more, are they?

The cracks filled, we start to see the true potential of the piece. See that hollow? That's permanent. There is no way to remove enough material to eliminate it without ruining the piece. But, it is now covered in gold. Are there some things in your past that leave a hollow place?



Remember, not long ago this was almost kindling. But, we have much left to do.

Now Begins the Tough Part

So far, all we have worked on is the outside! We still have the other half to finish, the inside. This is where the going got really rough. The cracks on the outside were only half the battle. After remounting the Life Bowl on its base, the next step was to core out a large chunk of the inside. This technique saves a core to create another piece and also



saves time. However, it is rather a brutal process, using a large, curved cutting tool and lots of force. Here is how it looks after the coring cuts are finished. The next step should be very simple and easy, and that is to separate the core. This usually means a quick snap with a lever and it pops right out.

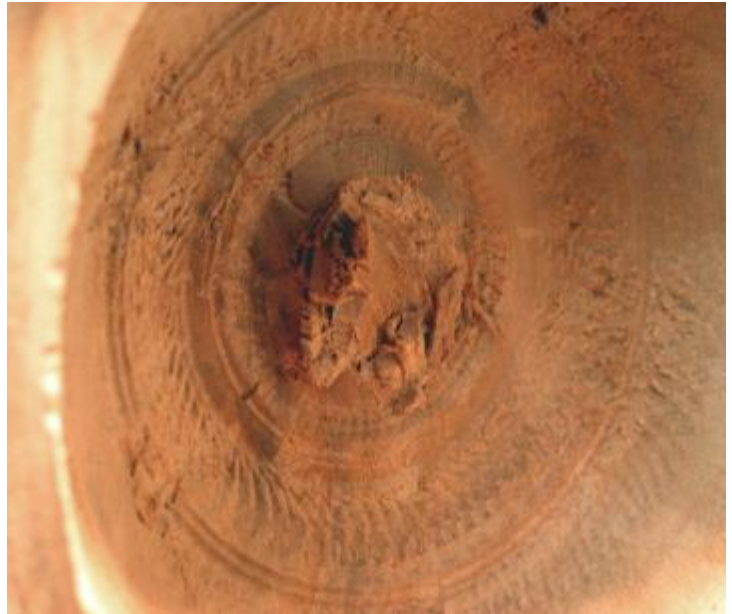
But not this time. You may have guessed by now that this bowl was not going to allow its metamorphosis to come easily.

Refusing to Let Go

Our Life Bowl is like a lot of people. Working the outside is one thing. Oh, the outside may crack and then get prettied up, but when it comes to inner beauty, we would rather hold onto what we know and resist transformation.

When it came time to snap out the core, it would not let go! It flexed and moved, but stayed stuck. It literally took a hammer and chisel to cut the fibers at the bottom.

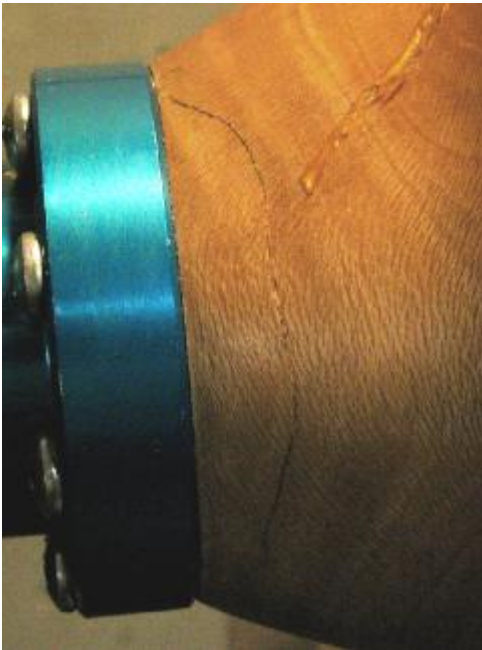
Even then it had to be wrenched free. Here we can see why. See that grain at the bottom? It is shaped almost like a



corkscrew instead of being straight across the bottom. This made the bottom of the bowl hang onto the core, almost as if it had tentacles. So it is with our old ways of thinking! If only we could let go, perhaps change would be smoother.

The Nasty Core

Here is a shot at what came out. See those fibers? They were so firmly rooted that taking them out actually cracked the bottom of the bowl where it was re-mounted.



Now, this is bad because it can be dangerous to continue.

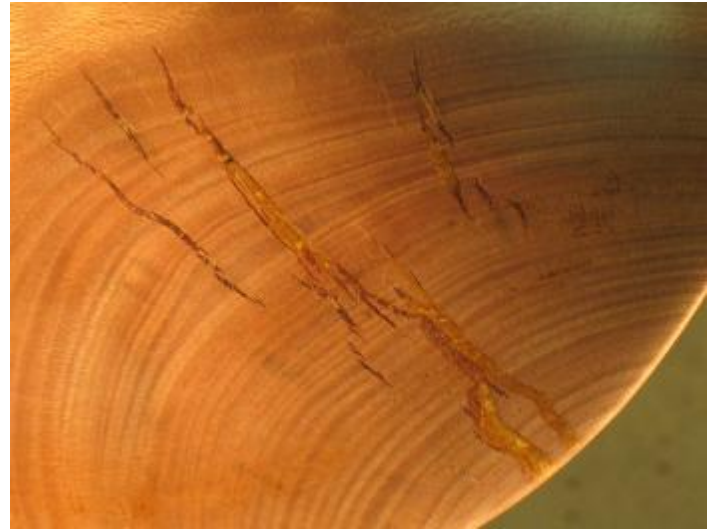
See the crack? If the bowl were to break off spinning at lathe speeds, it would fly off and do a lot of damage, and not just to itself! The artisan has a choice to make.

Either abandon the piece or try to work around it. After testing the remaining strength by putting pressure on it to see how much it moved, the artisan concluded there was enough strength left if the cracks were sealed with an

aggressive glue, just to hold it steady. Still risky, but this is a Life Bowl, remember?

Making the Inside Beautiful

Once the core was gone and the cracks stabilized, the inside got beautiful pretty quickly. But, the cracks from the outside became visible as the walls of the bowl were made thinner. Usually, the thinner the walls, the more elegant and graceful the bowl



becomes. So, these cracks (some of them already filled with gold) had to get sealed, too. The artisan decided to leave a few of the cracks alone, unsealed. Why? As a reminder of our



imperfections, even after a work of transformation. After shaping, scraping, and lots and lots of sanding, it was time to start sanding. (What?) This kind of bowl takes an incredible amount of sanding. Many give up on this almost-last step. Sanding removes those almost invisible rough spots and tool marks. Final sanding is the real key to beauty.

Like our spiritual beauty, we never quite get it to be perfect, but the finish can be breathtaking.

One Last Cutting Step

Remember that cracked foot? We haven't taken care of it yet. Time to re-mount the bowl one last time to take the foot off. OFF? Yes, all the way off. That last remnant of the old gets removed. This is a very tricky process. We have to hold the bowl by the top edges. With the tendency to crack, if the chuck is tightened too much, the bowl will



shatter and truly be lost. We can support some of the cuts, but at some point, the last little bit has to come off. Well, this Life Bowl had one last surprise. After removing the support to take the last few cuts to take off the remnant of the foot, the artisan experienced the dreaded "catch." Remember the nasty gnarled grain at the bottom? Well, it caught the tool, which in turn pried the bowl from the chuck. The Life Bowl went flying across the room, bouncing onto the concrete floor. A very sickening moment. The artisan, fearing the worst, gingerly picked the bowl up off the floor. Thankfully, it survived with only a minor mark in a couple of spots! Easily repaired with some hand-sanding. Wow! A disaster averted because the bowl hit a paper bag that was on the floor. Sometimes, we need more grace than skill!

The Last Nub



That little nub left over had to come off with a hand grinder. The hours on the lathe were over!

Sealing in the Beauty

The last steps are finally here. The real “payoff” comes in the last two steps as we edge closer to perfection. Like our own lives, we never become perfect, but the Father seals in what He revealed, and then polishes it for the rest of our lives. Just like this Life Bowl. Here, the artisan applies the first of two coats of



a wiping varnish called tung oil over a three day period. Then, after a final smoothing with ultra-fine steel wool, there is one last thing to do.

Making it Shine

The artisan uses three buffing steps, starting with a brown rouge, then white diamond compound, and then with a super-soft wheel and carnauba wax. This hard wax can only be applied with heat, which is supplied by the friction of the spinning buffing wheel. Kind of a neat ending, don't you think? Even the final luster comes with effort and some heat.



Fingerprints of the Master

The artisan has to work hard to avoid fingerprints. This is where life differs from art. In our lives, we want to see the fingerprints of the Father on us. Remember those tell-tale patterns in the rough bark that we could not see beneath? The patterns that hinted of something beautiful within? This Life Bowl has one last gift to show us. There, in the swirling grain patterns, the artisan discovered some interesting marks.



You decide what they resemble, OK?

The Life Bowl



Your life may have left you looking and feeling like that hunk of wood we started with. You may have deep wounds that open up as you try to journey with the Lord Jesus alongside. You know, the artisan with a gouge is a lot like a gardener with a pruning shear. Remove what does not bear fruit, and the rest will grow and flourish. The cutting process is painful. It takes time. It leaves scars that He fills with the precious gold of Himself.

Thankfully, the Father stores up hidden potential in each of us, and then allows it to reveal itself over time, like the piece of wood we started with.

The Life Bowl project spanned a period of about two and a half months. The artisan was undergoing some very painful pruning while working on it. At every step, a new obstacle emerged. With every new challenge, the artisan was forced to evaluate not only the project, but himself as well. Completing the work required new approaches and techniques never tried before the Life Bowl came along.

I am that artisan. I hope this story fills you with the hope of the Spirit.

Blessings,

John