Woodworking as Spiritual Practice
by Paul Mueller

Last year in conversation with a therapist a hot topic was my isolation from others in the midst of a congregation and my separation from any active spiritual practice. He asked me for suggestions, and I found myself saying that I would really like to take a course in woodworking at the local vocational arts college. The suggestion came as a bit of a surprise to me, but the more I thought about it the better it sounded. But, I remember asking, W.W.C.D? What would the congregation do, or rather, think? Would they object to my taking this time for myself? I signed up and took the course. In the year I have built two matching oak nightstands, and a large mirror-part of a bedroom set I hope to complete.

Woodworking centers me. Before any single action, I must consider a several different but connected factors. What about the grain pattern? Are the measurements correct? Has the fence been set on the table saw to the correct dimension? Blade at correct height? Safety glasses on? Now, and only now, make the cut. And when you do, all is well. Well with the wood, because its beauty and strength begin to be revealed and start to be understood. Well with me, because I have devoted myself to this single act in all of its multiplicity.

In making the cut, I can feel myself flow with all the preparation and all the planning. This cut, at least, is not rushed, not being made only half or less informed. This cut is mine to make, and so mine to enjoy. And when this cut moves to the bench, where it is successfully matched with one already made, the pleasure is physical to be sure, but is also a pleasure in the deep place of being.

Once, when cutting the pattern of a line of oak leaves which would decorate the sides of my mirror, I found that I had moved to a place in which I was aware of the blade, the wood, and my hands—my fellow woodworkers seemed to disappear. In sharing that incident with some of them, they said it was a common experience. It becomes you and the wood, you and the machine, creating beauty together.

The people in the class with me are not my congregation. And I would not take such a class with a group of UU's. A necessary piece of spiritual development for me is to be outside of who I am and have to be most of the time.

These good folk are something quite different. They have different life goals than many in my congregation. They have other perspectives. They see things differently. Yet, they see me very well, and I see them. We can communicate encouragement, information, plans and ideas and never once be in the class structure of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Here the questions are about wood. And about machines. And about how we can safely and accurately work with both to produce something beautiful.

Woodworking as spiritual practice makes me warmly aware of the goodness of the
people around me. Woodworking removes me from the criticism of an imagined ideal, on my part or that of others, and instructs me to desire accuracy. Woodworking demands my willing commitment to the time it takes to be accurate. It is not in a hurry, and neither should I be. In the midst of great roaring of machines and splintering of wood, knowledge of its rituals keeps me safe. In the presence of all my personal doubts and fears, it makes me a co creator of beauty and so confirms my usefulness to and in the world. Woodworking shapes me for ministry, and I like it that I take time to explore my Self.