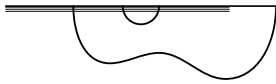


The Guitar Maker

*An Exploration of
Wisdom, Design, and Love*

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From Chelsea to Sigüenza



ALL PROBLEMS ARE AT THE INTERFACE; EACH ONE OF THEM HAS A SOLUTION.

That's what my dad used to say when we had a conflict, or when something went wrong in our house. I never understood what he meant until I was an adult, married, with children. I don't know why I am thinking about this now; it must be the boredom. I am in the Metropolitan airport waiting for my flight to Madrid, delayed two hours already. It is the middle of a very hot summer, and the airport is crowded, noisy and humid as never before. There are some who wander around to kill time, and there are others who look busy, but are probably wandering as well, in their minds. I am glad I decided to keep this book in my carry-on luggage, so I can read it while I wait. I've read this book before and learned a lot from it, but I need it again for the trip to Spain. It is about guitarmaking, my hobby and passion. Actually, it is more than that; it is my business and my profession. Many years ago I took a short course on guitarmaking in Boston, and since then, but

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not before going through many difficulties, I've been running my own business: a small guitarmaking shop in Chelsea, a town in south-east Michigan.

More people are arriving and the room is becoming hotter and noisier. It is always interesting to see how people say goodbye at airports. Each goodbye is the rupture of a link, the modification of a relationship. A young couple far away, on the other side of the room, is going through that situation. She is leaving, but he is staying. She is crying, but he is not. They are living the same moment in time and space, but under totally different perspectives. What makes the difference is that they are going to pull the link that connects them. Their connecting feeling at the mental and physical interface is going to be altered. This alteration produces pain, and the pain becomes the problem.

My dad's theory was that any problem could be interpreted as an alteration, a change, or a rupture at the interface of any two entities sharing or trying to share something. However, I was frustrated with his theory because he never provided a solution to such problems, even though he always said that all problems had at least one solution. Now that he is gone, I guess it is my duty to finish his inconclusive theory, but it is a difficult task for me. Twenty years have passed since his death, and I've only figured out that when the problem is between two people, a simple solution is to use empathy and compassion towards the other person. It always works. Sincere and profound empathy, the one a mother has for her child, is what it takes to resolve a conflict between two people. When one is empathetic and compassionate, one wears the shoes of the other person, lives his experience, and understands the issues from another point of view.

As I was saying, I make guitars for a living. I am good at it, and sell enough of them to support my family. However, there is something I want to improve; something I could not learn in Boston that I can't explain even to myself. That is why I am going to Spain. I want to spend some time with one of the finest luthiers of classical acoustic guitars. Once there, I hope to discover and fix the problem. It may sound stupid that I can't even understand the problem myself, but that doesn't surprise me. Many people

live their entire lives without knowing if something is wrong with them.

I put my suitcase on a table and sit in the waiting room until it is time to board. Everybody stares at me when I handle any kind of weight. Idiots! I simply ignore them; I have learned how to deal with them throughout the years. This is how I am since the day of the accident, that's it. Yes, that's it.

Once I comfortably sit, two pretty women pass by in front of me. I fake reading my book to show indifference, as I watch their well-cared-for feet with sexy red nails, and their tight skirts wrapping their bodies, elegantly and gracefully displayed, with a subliminal message screaming 'look at us' that few women can convey. After they pass, but not before I notice how all men around me were turning their heads towards the pair, I put my book on my lap and see this tall and old guy sitting across from me. He looks at my book with curiosity. I sense his inclination to start a conversation.

"Guitarmaking?" He asks with interest as he grabs his glasses to make sure he can read the cover. "I didn't know we manufacture guitars in Michigan," he says jokingly. "I used to work in manufacturing too, but in a big scale manufacturing company."

The guy is graceful when he talks, and exudes feelings of serenity and wisdom. "What did you make?" I ask quickly while I put my book away and lean towards him.

"Well, I worked in a car company. I didn't make anything by myself, I was a link of the whole chain, but I knew the process very well because I worked for them for 14 years."

"Oh, I see," I respond. His shirt pocket, full of pens and pencils, gives away his profession. "Are you an engineer?"

He takes a look at the wall clock and says, "I used to be."

"Not anymore? Why?"

"I quit after those 14 years, in 1995. I got tired of all that, became a consultant, made even more money, traveled around the world, and here I am, on my summer trip to Denmark."

I realized this man is someone special. His attire is simple, humble, clean and fresh, far from the typical Midwestern style. He wears khaki pants, a white shirt and those small John Lennon type

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glasses; he's tall, slim and baldheaded. He doesn't use any finger ring, or a watch in his wrist. He's in his late sixties, and an African descendant for sure. I feel intrigued and want to know more about him.

"What do you do in Denmark?" I ask with an eager voice.

He looks at me, ponders my question for a few seconds, and responds, "I go to a small town called Ribe to visit an old friend of mine, Ole Rasmussen. We have been visiting each other for the last 10 years, each summer. Sometimes I go, sometimes he comes. It's a short visit of a couple of weeks. We simply talk about anything that comes to our minds: engineering, philosophy, art, moral values, and of course, about optimization, which pretty much ties all these together."

"My name is Walker, by the way," I interrupt.

He extends his arm, shakes my hand. "Kwame, *born on Saturday*."

"What? What did you say?" I reply.

"Kwame means *born on Saturday*," he explains. "You know, my ancestors are from Africa, so, as with many African names, it has a meaning."

I nod. By looking at his boarding ticket, I notice that he is taking the same flight that I am. This makes me curious, and I ask him why is he going to Spain. He rests back on the chair and explains to me that his flight stops in Madrid, then continues to Amsterdam where he'll change to another airplane to finally get to Copenhagen. He takes a second look at the wall clock and says, "I need to make a call, would you excuse me?"

As he walks away, I think about him. I should find a way to get in contact with him while I am in Europe. I have the feeling that he may help me with my guitars too. But there is a problem; I have to be in Spain for the first eight days taking this intensive workshop on guitarmaking. I planned this trip for two years, and I won't change it for anything in my life now.

I reach for my pad and try to remember the name of the Danish town he mentioned. How do I write that? Reeby? Rybee? Damn! These Danish names are always difficult to spell. Well, at least I know his friend's name, Oly Rasmussen ... I think. I glance up and

see him coming back. I put my pad inside the suitcase and wait for him.

“Hi, I’m back. I had to call my wife. She isn’t well. She had a heart operation a year ago and she is still recovering from it. My daughter, Alice, is taking care of her while I am away.” He pauses for a while as he looks vaguely to the floor perhaps thinking about his wife.

I interrupt the silence to maintain the conversation. “I hope she recovers soon,” and I pause for a moment. “I know what it feels like to have a sick person in the family. Some years ago, my daughter, Christina, was diagnosed with leukemia. It was terrible news for my wife and me, not to mention to my younger son, Gabriel, who didn’t speak for weeks after he learned about it. We were devastated for a period of two weeks until we received a call from the hospital one afternoon. It had been a mistake in the laboratory results. Someone else’s results were given to my daughter, and she actually hadn’t had any illness at all.”

“What a relief,” Kwame sighs.

“Yes, it was,” I continue. “But, you know, from bad news something good always comes out. I promised to myself to take care of my children the best I can, day by day, forever. That is what I’ve been doing ever since.

Kwame smiles. “Thank you for your story; it gives me encouragement.”

I change the subject and say, “This friend of yours in Denmark is really special I suppose.”

“Yes, he is amazing. When we talk, we talk! It’s as if he knows how to get the best out of me, and at the same time, I get the best out of him. It’s definitely a mental exercise for both of us.” He smiles with a thoughtful expression as if his friend were next to him.

“Did I tell you I was going to Madrid?” I ask. “It is a business trip. Actually, it is more like a training for me. I want to learn some new tricks from one of the great luthiers in Spain. When I come back, I hope to be able to design and make better guitars.”

“Oh, that means you have your own business.”

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“Yes, I do. It’s a small acoustic guitar shop with one employee, my apprentice, Manuel, who is becoming quite a fine luthier. I am responsible for the design and construction of the guitars, plus running the business.”

“And what kind of guitars do you make? Are they country music guitars, or those guitars that they use in classical concerts?”

“I make both, but I prefer making the classical acoustic guitars. They require more skill and precision to satisfy the more demanding client, the professional guitar soloist of chamber music.” I pause to check the schedule board, but the flight is still delayed. “And do you still do consulting? What kind of consulting is it?”

He laughs. “I am an old retired engineer my friend. I don’t do it very often now. But what problem can I solve for you, if any?”

What a nice opportunity he is giving me! “Well, I am going to be honest with you. My guitars are not selling well. My clients are not satisfied with the final product, not because of the quality, which I personally make sure is the best, but they say my guitars are not at the level of those built in Spain. I think that the problem has to do, in my opinion, with the design, or maybe with the construction process. I have made quite a few excellent guitars, but I am not consistent and sometimes, as I said, they don’t perform or sound like Spanish custom-made guitars.”

“Well, if your problem is improving the design, then I think I can help you. Even if the construction process is not consistent, I may be able to help you too. You will have to teach me a lot though, because I don’t know anything about guitars, my friend. Actually, I have never had one in my hands.” He laughs aloud, and fixes his glasses that were about to fall.

“This is great, Kwame. I appreciate your offer. I may need it.”

“However, there is a condition,” he replies promptly.

I look directly at his eyes. I wonder what he may say. “What is it?”

“Well, the lessons come with a caveat. What I teach is not only design, but much more. It’s the relation between design and nature, and how to create better designs to live in harmony with our environments. To me, *design* is a very big word that we use too lightly nowadays. I cannot talk, or teach about it, without

explaining other subjects as well.” He looks at me as if waiting for an answer.

“It sounds good to me.” I say, “I have no problems in learning more. In fact, I always say we should learn something new every day.”

What he doesn’t know is that my concerns go beyond design as well, but I sense we both can learn from each other. Life, happiness, love, and trust are as important to me as the perfection of my guitarmaking techniques.

“Then, my friend, we are going to have a fruitful friendship,” he says while doing a thumb up sign with both hands, and with a bright smile on his face.