

BE SAFE - Safety Tip of the Month (Gary Guenther)

Working near the chuck, and Workshops

The reason for the *Be Safe* column is to remind us all of pitfalls surrounding the use of machine tools, and lathes in particular. One can never know about accidents averted, but we can use accidents as alerts and teaching tools to hopefully prevent the same thing from happening to others. Several days ago, I met a woodturner with a large bandage on one of his fingers. To be purposefully graphic, his finger had been split open to the bone and required seven stitches to repair. In his own words, it happened in the blink of an eye – so quickly that he could only try to understand the full event after the fact. What he remembers is that his bowl gouge contacted the rotating chuck. Evidence indicates that, thereafter, the cutting tip was thrown into the wood, resulting in a huge catch, and the tool and his hand then got involved in some bad places. Needless to say, a trip to the ER was necessitated. He is not looking forward to seeing the result on the first change of the dressing – nor showing it to his wife. Hopefully his finger will heal, but this brief, momentary lapse is going to cost him a lot of pain, frustration, and lost turning time, not to speak of gaining him the “admiration” of his woodturning colleagues.



How can we learn from this? Personally, I don't like to work on the headstock side of the wood, near the chuck. There is less room for error there, and fewer options for a good outcome if a problem occurs. Sure, we all do it, and sure, we have gotten away with it, but the potential for a bad outcome is there. When I find myself working on that side, I don't like it, and I ask myself: “Is this really necessary?” Often, the answer is “no”, and I change my plan of attack on the piece. I am much more comfortable working on the tailstock side, away from the chuck. After this experience, I will be more reticent than ever to work near the chuck. We never plan to have an accident, and it makes sense to do what we can to lower the probability.

There is one more noteworthy thing about this mishap – it occurred during a Workshop. The turner was working on a “strange” lathe and doing “new and different” things. Learning is very important to us as woodturners, but it is important that this growth comes safely. If there's anything I've learned, it's that woodturners are individuals, and we each have our own zones of comfort and ways of doing things. As we always say, if it doesn't feel right, stop, and rethink the situation, and don't bow to peer pressure.