HUNGER DRAWS US

ROBERT HANLON

Our hunger draws us in waves across the time zones to early, midday, and evening meals, nearly always set out on some type of shared, standing shelf.

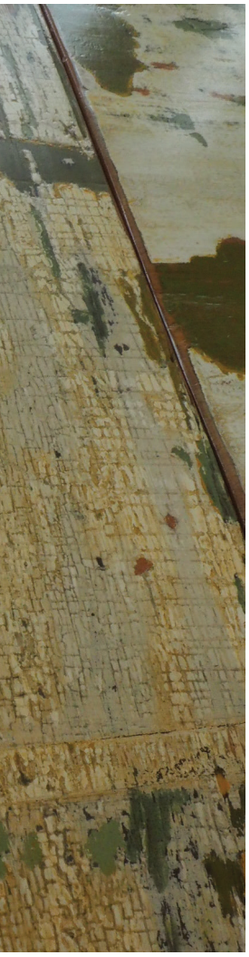
I built my first house with blankets and chairs under the handy roof of our dining room table. At age ten I moved to the back yard, where I built a three-story tree house using pine boards from the basement coal bin of our 1803 farmhouse. As I nailed them up, the coal dust rained down.

This was the beginning of a lifetime of building things, mostly houses and tables. For the past 30 years I have made my living crafting tables with pine boards taken from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England houses. These boards have become precious and costly, but I'm also drawn to what has been picked over in the dumpster: boards that have been painted, plastered, split, plumbed, and wired. I want problems to solve and stories to tell. I hear "re-purposed" or "recycled," but the boards I dig out of the dumpster are SAVED. The story is Redemption.

Wabi-sabi is the quintessential Japanese aesthetic. "Wabi" is the kind of perfect beauty that is seemingly-paradoxically caused by just the right kind of imperfection. "Sabi" is the kind of beauty that can come only with age.[1]

The surface of a table tells the story of the material and the maker. It's what you see and touch. It's the color, the form. It's where the transcendence is.

Wood grain tells the story of years, recording the date and rainfall with a line. A fat quarter-inch band of white spring growth says 1690 was a wet one. Broad vertical saw marks record water-wheel technology from another era. Carpenters leave their marks. Layers of paint—sometimes 300 years' worth—recall the atmosphere of their rooms, even the emotional tone of a generation.



Some of my boards have their first, ancient coat of lichen-dyed milk paint, but most have about ten more layers over that—oil, shellac, lead, latex, acrylic, enamel. I have sanded and scraped and stripped these boards, un-painting a pattern that seemed already to exist, running time backwards. I seem to like doing things the hard way, mostly by hand, often pushing a single-edge razor between two colors of paint to get the one I want, revealing, like an annular ring, a hopeful day from some other century. I feel as though I become one with these stories—me and my now-arthritic hands.

My favorite table tops are a composition of strong, unintended paint patterns where one board masked another, like the zigzag of a stair stringer across a wall, or the scrolled stencil of gingerbread cottage trim: boards telling the story of their lives at the hands of men. Some tabletops are a single board—or two or three—but others are a bricolage of dozens of painted fragments. These abstract patterns look so much like art that I started hanging them on the wall.

Art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.
—Flannery O'Connor

Tables come in many shapes, but for me the perfect table is a rectangle. Most rooms are collections of rectangles: windows, doors, rugs, walls, cabinets, paintings. The size and scale of a table wants to figure prominently in this composition. Round, square, or oval, tables can nicely center a box of rectangles; but if they are large enough to seat more than a handful of guests, they get thick and further separate people from each other. Wide is good for serving dishes and table decorations. Narrow is good for persons.

Like a picture frame, a rectangle unites its contents and separates them from the world. It can be extended indefinitely, both figuratively and literally. I have, on occasion, put ten of my tables together to feed 75 people.

A good rectangle for most houses is two to three times its width in length. In 30 years I have made hundreds of dining tables and the dimensions of three by six-to-eight feet would describe most of them. It wasn't my idea; I just made what people asked for.

The space under the table is an important part of the design. I prefer a four-legged table to one with a trestle or pedestal because it leaves that space open. The simple, tapered legs holding up most of my table-tops appear to have no style except their get-out-of-the-way humility. They declare their limitations and say, "nothing extra." The high-style name was given to the tapered leg by George Hepplewhite; it's the Shaker name that stuck. The tapered leg could preach a Shaker sermon; it looks ready to break out into a Shaker dance. Leave room for feet and light. Be strong, balanced, alert. Serve!

Tables, like chairs, involve considerable compromise. Chair makers have agreed for centuries on about 17 1/2 inches for the height of a chair seat. Tables are nearly always 29-30 inches tall. People are all different sizes and have legs and torsos of various lengths, and yet we all sit in the same chairs and at the same table. That we endure this inequity without much notice or complaint is, perhaps, why we manage to get along at all.

A table is a meeting place. Think conference tables, bargaining tables, work tables, operating tables, and altars. Altars are all of the above.

The use of the definite article before "table" (as in, "come to the table") presumes that table is a thing, that table-ness transcends all the particular examples that may possess it. If part of a table's essence is its capacity to draw people together, then a particular table may or may not possess this quality. A picnic table might, and a banquet table might not.

Eat at the kitchen counter on tall stools or recline around a coffee table. Put your plate on a railing and eat standing. Use the top of a cooler on a blanket. Stand in front of the open refrigerator bare handed. The table is a thing that transcends, and where food is gratefully eaten its essence is evoked, even when absent.

Am I asking too much of tables, wanting them to convey deeply human sentiments, to mean more than what you see, to be art, to be unique, to tell stories, to deliver the gospel? Wouldn't it be enough for tables to blend in with the décor and be sturdy and have no white rings from misplaced glasses of iced-tea?

It's not just our stomach that draws us to a table; it is also our heart-and-soul hunger. This is the hunger that draws us to the table in the Upper Room. That table has extended into human history, even to this moment, as the bread and wine are somewhere being raised up together over it.

Robert Hanlon makes furniture and paintings in Essex, Massachusetts where he and his wife, Patty have a custom furniture and art gallery.

1 Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1994).

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, THE DINNER TABLE WAS THE ONLY PLACE OUTSIDE CHURCH WHERE WE PRAYED OUT LOUD TOGETHER . . . IT STILL IS.