

Boats, not tupperware

It's spring and my grandfather has won the lottery. He is one of those people who from the outside appears to have constant luck. We'll soon drive down to the shop in the vintage car with the smokey smell. His hand is crunching the ticket as he says that we can get whatever we want. I open the door with squares of multi coloured glass, and we step into the mild day. The calm breeze lifts what's left of my grandfather's hair and I wonder what it's like to stroke it.

My grandfather and grandmother's house sits right by the ocean, close to the local harbour. I've been to that harbour many times. My mom and dad has a boat there. Once, we hit a skerry with that boat. My mom and dad had to put on their life jackets, but we weren't allowed to panic unless my mom did. She had grown up on boats and probably could have swam us all to shore if she had to.

(this first childhood memory should be featured in both English and Norwegian - perhaps on a separate card)

I remember the look of my grandfather's brown glass coffee cups, and I remember the way his hallway smelled of tobacco. Fractions of memories from a child's understanding of her family's ways. Yet, up until now, I've know very little about my grandfather's craft and those areas of his life which did not revolve around a grandchild. This project has therefor become a way of connecting with him as an adult, based on conversations with my family and those familiar with his practice. Since embarking on the writing of this text, I have come to realise that my grandfather was in fact an inspiring man who should be looked to for guidance. His approach to the overwhelming craft of wooden boat building is astonishing, and through this text I hope to share his inspirational approach to craftsmanship with those devoted to creative practice today. I hope his work can help you cultivate your own creative practice and by that convince you to trust, slow down and believe in your abilities.

Neuroscience shows that there are great benefits to being near, in, on or under water (Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, 2014). Its rhythmic motions and consuming power can embrace you if you let it, and along with the smell of seaweed and salt, comes stress relief and a happier mind. In fact, it's been proven that water makes you better at what you do (Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, 2014), a fact that might become easier to believe as you read through these pages.

The man of which this book is about, lived long before the ocean was seen as a medicine. My grandfather's father, and his father before that, made barges for transporting goods down the river. My grandfather, Odd Johnsen, effectively grew up at their studio, watching the magic of wood as they handled the natural material in their work. His early years would later become a catalyst for a life of observation, engineering and an understanding of the relationship between a boat and its sea.

The value of observation

To me, Odd Johnsen was a grandfather. To the outside world, he was a craftsman. He spent his life perfecting the techniques of his practice, starting with the act of observation (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Without any formal education, Johnsen looked to the ocean for knowledge. He carefully observed the way a boat forces its way through the waves, slowly starting to understand the craft he would go on to nourish. At 15 he created his first boat (Iren Johnsen, 2021). To make a boat by hand demands a certain skill in engineering, which must have come naturally to Johnsen (Iren Johnsen, 2021). He started on a small scale, and through years of devoted practice, he went on to develop functional self-designed boat templates. He soon expanded his use of scale and today we can look back at his work as typically larger boats at around 30 feet (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

Johnsen's studio was situated where the river from the inlands meets the ocean by the coast. The studio had an everlasting, oppressive heat, due to the steam used to curve wooden planks (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Smells of linseed oil and salty water mixed with the rhythmic sound of waves as they hit the brew, made his workplace one of nature. Johnsen worked alone for most of his career, handling everything from the point of collecting his preferred material in Oslo, to the sea launching when the boats were finished (Iren Johnsen, 2021). His development of a unique rolling and tilting launch technique, goes to show his ability to take on overwhelming projects without giving in to the stress that so often follows (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

The task of moving a boat five times the length of oneself might seem to call for a great deal of muscle strength. But rather than asking for people's help every time a boat was finished, Johnsen used the resources available to him. This, as well as how he used observations of the sea to learn about boat building, are good examples of his motto: "It's the steady that pulls", meaning "Slow and steady wins the race" (Iren Johnsen, 2021). You don't always need the finest education or the fanciest tools to create. What matters is the effort and devotion put in to one's practice. As I look back at Johnsen's life, I can not help but think that this motto must have been what got him through his 39 years of business.

A question of value

During Johnsen's career, the plastic boat went from being non-existent to becoming the norm (Iren Johnsen, 2021). It promised easier maintenance and more speed due to its lighter material (Tim Bossie, 2010). By Johnsen's time of retirement, the number of wooden boat builders in the area had gone from 15 to 4 over 25 years (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Wood was of course what Johnsen was used to, but I find it hard to believe that Johnsen refused to work with plastic solely due to being conservative. Could there be something else about the wooden material that interested him as a maker?

Trond Birkeland, a boat builder working in Oslo today, seems to believe that wooden boats appeal to emotions, rather than function (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). The motors of wooden boats have a rhythmic beat to them, much like the ocean itself. The wooden hull protects its crew from the ocean's otherwise harsh thrusting sounds (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). On a wooden boat, we are also forced to embrace a slower pace. The boat is not made for travelling with speed, but rather with tranquility. Perhaps this slow pace, which seems to be a red thread through the concept of wooden boats, is the reason why people love and care for wooden boats even today.

When we are in close proximity to water, the part of our minds that processes memories is triggered (Shweta Venkatramani, 2018). This might explain why Johnsen kept working with wood, even after the emergence and normalisation of plastic. If we have stronger memories of that which connects to water, it would make sense that we would want our boats to stay the same as they have always been. With wooden boats comes the memories of our parents and grandparents, as they themselves cruised the local sea landscapes during our own childhood years (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). As the sun warms our skin and the smell of petrol fills the salty air, we are taken back to the many times we've felt that exact feeling before. We embrace the nostalgia, and by doing so, we might also hope for things to be as they were back then. Therefore, the wooden boat does not only become a boat for those who enjoy a slower pace at sea, but perhaps also for those who wish for time to stop completely.

Although Johnsen was not one for advertising, he developed a slogan, which has become one of his signature sayings amongst my family: "Wood is for boats, plastic is for tupperware" (Iren Johnsen, 2021). I imagine him saying this with a humorous tone, yet the essence of the slogan feels like a highly relevant comment on consumerist culture. In today's society we must often choose between

craft and mass production, and thus between the more expensive quality, and the cheaper, but shorter lived alternatives. As we choose quantity over value, I wonder if there will continue to be a place for those who choose to focus on handmade craftsmanship. There are of course people still using wooden boats today, but to me the 15 to 4 ratio speaks for itself.

Johnsen's faithfulness to nature

The Johnsen crossers, as the boats were called, gained a good reputation during Johnsen's career (Iren Johnsen, 2021). The boats can be recognised by their attentively crafted *krysserhekk* (Trond Birkeland, 2021), a distinctiveness seen on certain boats where the helm is hidden under the surface and the afterdeck is directed upwards (Wikipedia, 2021). They are harmonious boats, often large in scale and clinker built (Trond Birkeland, 2021). The Johnsen crossers' hulls are made from oak, pine or oregon pine. Its interior and top structure from the warmer mahogany.

Whilst plastic emerged about a hundred years ago, wood is an ancient invention. In fact it is an essential building block for life as we know it on earth. As the tree absorbs our sighs of breaths, it also provides us with fresh air to take in. By effect it lays before us the opportunity of life. A tree can easily outgrow a person if let be and its ability to move at such slow, yet steady pace could perhaps be looked at with resemblance to the motto of Johnsen's "steady pulling"?

Even after it's been chopped, a tree continues to live as it reacts to its contrasting natural forces of water and temperature. Even in it's afterlife, wood does not naturally curve at the wish of its craftsman. It needs to be steamed and bended, using heat and clamps (Iren Johnsen, 2021). A great deal of patience is required. The timber slowly gives in, embracing the shape of that which will later come together to form a neat and functional curve. Of course, untreated wood reacts to water, so a wooden boat builder will have to oil his material several times, making sure the oil forces its way through the plank (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

The wood oriented furniture designer, George Nakashima, firmly believed that trees have a soul (Matthew Johnsen, Ca. 2010-2021). By using wood in his designs, Nakashima felt that he got the closest to intimacy with nature as one could (George Nakashima Woodworkers, Ca. 2010-2021). Johnsen might have had a slightly more pragmatic relationship to the material. Wood was familiar and therefore the rational choice. Yet, by choosing to work with wood, he, although perhaps not intentionally, chose to stay connected to nature and the forces that came with it. As concluded, wood has abundance of life, but so does the ocean itself. To some, his hand made approach might also indicate that his very nature became part of the boats he crafted, resulting in a closed circle of natural touch points.

Poem about natural touch points (look at ocean songs for inspiration)

A poetic mirroring of the ocean

As people, we have the whole world at our fingertips. Yet the fewest of us choose to leave the familiar environments of home. Like salmon, we might stray off for a moment or two, but for most of us there is always something pulling us back. This might feel like a spiritual force, or perhaps just a longing for the comfort that follows the familiarity of home.

Boats became a huge part of Johnsen's four daughters' upbringing (Iren Johnsen, 2021). He himself had spent his childhood at and by the ocean, and his daughters were taken on boats from the moment of baptism. In a way the ocean became their home, similar to how it is home for the boat.

The ocean's bigger than life ability can swallow you whole when visited at the wrong time. Yet it can give new life if visited when most needed. It steals your ability to decide for yourself, and so

you're forced to meet life as it strikes. For those in awe of the sea, a boat is the perfect tool. The smallest of boats brings you close to the surface. So close you'll start to see what's below. A larger scaled boat will care for your safety. It carries you through the massive waves that you could not defeat alone. The relation between the boat and the ocean goes beyond the purpose of transportation.

Although it might not have been created with that intention, the rhythmic sound of the wooden boat's motor, as well as the movement of the boat in water, is poetically in line with how the ocean moves to that same rhythmic beat. The wooden boat does not plow through waves, as we humans so often do when we take on nature as our counterpart. It rather moves in harmony, subtly mirroring its powerful medium, like a passenger along for the ride. Never does it attempt to become the ocean's master.

You won't know before you've tried

"We think of our father with pride and a lot of him lives on through us: his work ethic, his urge to create and of course, his sense of humour. We have inherited his ability to believe in ourselves, which has led to us not being afraid. He has given us gumption and due to him we have become more independent than most women" (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

I have already mentioned two of my grandfather's mottos: "It's the steady that pulls" and "Wood is boats, plastic is tupperware". Now I will mention a third, perhaps the most inspiring of the three: "You don't know if you can until you've tried". As simple as it sounds, challenging oneself and continuing to believe in one's abilities when failing, is not always easy. Yet, the motto shines through every part of Johnsen's work, from his ability to build a boat business from scratch, to his devotion to craft. As one spectates his work, it's clear that his ability to embark on unfamiliar routes led to results much larger than he must have imagined when he built his first boat in his father's studio. I hope the following images will inspire you to take on the challenges that may arise in your own practice, by choosing gumption and urge over fear and neglect. *(after this chapter a series of impressive boat images should follow - to emphasise the motto)*

What now?

To Johnsen, boat building was an occupation above anything else. It is not until recent years that wooden boat building has been recognised as the culture and craft it is today (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Yet, as a craftsman I do imagine him having a wish for his boats to live on after him. Most of his boats are still around today (Iren Johnsen, 2021) and with the right care, a wooden boat will go on to live forever (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). In order for it to do so, the boat must be set to sea early in the spring, to keep the wood from cracking (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Equally, as the boat season comes to an end, it must be taken up early enough for it to dry before the first freeze (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). Sanding and varnishing must be performed regularly, and if not tended to properly, time will take its toll (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020).

As kin, it comforts me to think that my grandfather's motions, creativity and spirit lives on as new generations attracted to sea, lets him make his way through the unconditional ocean through endless water journeys. In a way, he got the chance at a second life, and if the boats are properly tended to, he might be able to live forever. And isn't it the creative's dream to have a piece of themselves to live on after their passing?

Of course, the infinity of Johnsen's craft hugely depends on the ever changing generations of the now. Birkeland suggests that wooden boat's worst enemy is bad owners (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). Because, in the same way that water can be merciless to people, it can tear down the cornerstones of a wooden boat, taking advantage of the material's liveliness and willingness to

decay. So should we fair for Johnson's boats and the chances that there might not be people around to nurture his work in the future?

Through his time as a boat builder, Johnsen experienced at least two major floods (Iren Johnsen, 2021). The walls of his studio had water marks 1.10 meters from the ground and Johnson had to row out to the studio as he attempted to save that which was not nailed to the ground (Iren Johnsen, 2021). As the water went back down, he returned to his craft, as he rebuilt and fixed what had been damaged. Perhaps whilst doing so, uttering "It's the steady that pulls". So if Johnsen's boats were to decay at some point in the future, I'd like to imagine him approaching this fact as he approached life and craft in general: with ease, calm and invincibility.