

Example 2: The Recurring Object

My grandfather never taught me how to build things. He taught me how to fix things, which is harder, and involves spending a long time staring at something that is broken before you do anything about it.

His workshop in Savannah was the first place I ever felt comfortable not knowing the answer. In school, not knowing was something you disguised as quickly as possible. In the workshop, staring at a cracked drawer rail or a stripped hinge for ten minutes before picking up a tool was not a sign of confusion. It was the work. "You fix it wrong if you fix it fast," he told me once, the way people say things that have been proven true enough times to become policy.

Junior year, our robotics team was three weeks from competition when we identified a structural weakness in the drive train. I was the team lead. I made the call to leave it, because fixing it would cost us a week we could not afford. We lost in the second round when the chassis cracked under load, exactly where we knew it was weak.

Sitting in the gymnasium afterward, I thought about the workshop. My grandfather would not have recognized the logic of leaving a known problem unsolved because fixing it was inconvenient. The entire point of diagnosing a problem correctly is that it tells you what you must do, not what you have time to do.

We went back the following year. I redesigned the chassis from the ground up, starting with the failure point instead of the motor specs. We placed third in the state.

My grandfather died the spring of my sophomore year. The workshop is still there. My uncle has it now, though he mostly stores things in it rather than fixes them. I kept the level my grandfather used for forty years, the one with the bubble that sits just slightly left of center. He told me the only way to use a warped level is to know it is warped.

That has turned out to be useful advice in more situations than I expected.

What works here: Opening specificity: The opening makes a distinction precise enough to feel like the writer's actual thought, not a paraphrased lesson. Stakes: The robotics failure has real competitive and team consequences, established without self-pity. Self awareness: The insight arrives through the contrast between two situations rather than being stated directly. Forward momentum: The warped level pays off the opening image and delivers a philosophy without explaining it.