



REFURBISHED

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OUR CULTURE IS OBSESSED WITH perfection. We want air-brushed photos, designer-label jeans, six-pack abs, and ten thousand likes on our Facebook page. We compare our houses, our physical bodies, and our internal feelings to the images we see online. This tendency to pick on ourselves is reflected in one of my home remodeling projects.

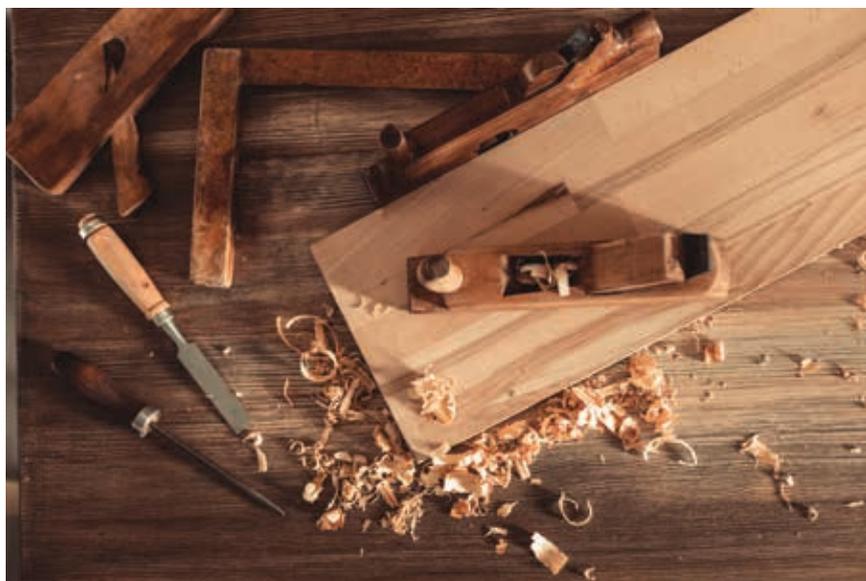
The rocker-glider I'd inherited from Mom's estate didn't really fit in with my living room decor. Built in a country style with brown oak woodwork and

faux suede fabric it stuck out amidst my sleek, black-and-cream-colored contemporary furniture. The suede fabric had faded to a well-worn patina. But I loved that the chair held Mom's energy. When I rocked in it, I imagined myself being rocked in Mom's arms.

A friend with interior design flair said, "Why don't you stain the frame black? You're a great seamstress; you could sew new cushion covers."

I'd worked part-time for two years in an upholstery studio, so I knew my friend was right. I could transform the chair. By

image credits



taking the cushions apart, I'd be able to use the old coverings as a pattern. I ripped out the seams, ironed the pieces flat, and calculated how many yards of fabric to purchase. The newly purchased black-and-camel-colored print had a similar contemporary vibe to the rest of my furniture. I laid out the old cushion coverings on the new textured fabric, cut out the pieces, and started sewing on evenings and weekends. The completed cushions were studio-worthy pieces of art.

Dismantling the wooden rocker base proved to be more of a challenge. At the upholstery studio, my job had been that of a seamstress; I'd never worked with the frames. Hundreds of staples held a foam protective layer

in place over the seat springs. With a new staple remover and some muscle power, I removed all the staples as well as the screws that held the seat and arms to the base. I labeled and stored each set of screws for the reassembly that would come weeks later.

With the various chair parts resting on a couple of sawhorses, I began to sand off the old finish. I hadn't gotten too far when I realized that to do a truly professional job, the base would need to be disassembled further. I didn't have the right tools to remove the bolts that held the glider mechanism to the chair base.

I took a photo of the bolts and texted a brother who is in the construction business.



“What type of tool do I need in order to remove bolts that look like this?”

His reply came back, “A socket wrench set and ratchet. You'll need either metric or US standard tools.”

The chair had been manufactured in the US, according to a label affixed to the frame. When I went to the hardware store, I guessed correctly that the bolts were standard, not metric. Using the right tool made the task of removing the bolts almost like child's play. With the base completely disassembled into its component parts, the job of sanding off the brown stain became much simpler as well. I could reach all the dowels, the flat, planed pieces responded well to a hand-held sander,

and the stain removal progressed at a faster clip.

A few days later I applied the first layer of stain to the light-colored wood. After allowing the stain to dry overnight, I applied a second coat. When that had dried, it became apparent that a third layer of stain would be necessary to create an even espresso, near-black finish. Even after that coat, it seemed as if there were small, isolated places where the stain didn't cover as well. The imperfections seemed to jump out until they were all I could see.

While bemoaning these blemishes with a friend, he asked, “Are you a perfectionist?” I replied, “Of course I am. That's what makes my projects look as

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if they've been done by a professional!" We both laughed. However, I also vowed to take a second look at my chair as well as at the manufactured store-bought furniture in my house.

What I found is that the metallic-topped tables in my living room had small imperfections in the stained legs. When I set a cup of tea on the hammered metal top, I don't even notice the small imperfections in the stained legs. It's just my own craft projects that I pick at and expect perfection. I need to do my best work and then let go of the small errors. The small variations in the finished rocker are integral to its beauty.

No one has come up to the reassembled chair and said, "Oh look, you missed a spot. There's no stain on the bottom righthand side of the glider armrest." No one has pointed out the blemishes. Instead, they've "oohed" and "ah-ed" over my transformed chair and how I gave it a whole new character.

A changed fabric and black lacquered finish allowed the rocker to transcend its former self.



Refurbishing furniture seems easier than reforming my personal character flaws. When I look at my life, I pick and poke at myself in a similar manner as I did with the rocker. I scratch at my failures, point out the errors I've made, and decry my mistakes. I want zero flaws, no blemishes allowed; no failures, only upward success. Yet what gives our lives depth and allows us to be of service to others is not always our successes. Sometimes it's our failures that bring us closer to other people.

The various failures and sorrows I've endured are what allow me to be empathetic to others. Even though my former husband and I spent years in therapy, our marriage ended in divorce. The pain of divorce, the struggles

in life as a single woman and a single parent have given me insights that allow me to empathize with women in similar situations. The pain of losing a sibling to death gives me a perspective on grief that allows me to relate to others. My failure to negotiate a higher salary when I started a new job has become an example of "what not to do" when I give presentations on career negotiations. It is through grief, loss, and failure that I admit my humanity, reach out to others, and allow myself to be embraced by love. Yes, I still want to be professionally successful. Yes, I still want to be happy in relationships. Yes, I still want my reupholstery and sewing projects to be noteworthy.

What I learned by refurbishing Mom's rocker-glider can be applied to my life. Removing the brown stain, changing the old fabric, and applying a chic black patina made the chair fit with my other contemporary furniture. I change the fabric of my life by offering what I've learned about grief, loss, and failure to others. I can transform my life, by applying the "new colors" of love instead of hatred; patience instead of impatience; gratitude in place of self-pity and complaints. Just like Mom's chair, I can change, renew, and restore my life to a happy and useful one. The small imperfections that remain—in the chair and in myself—are woven into this process we call life. I get to celebrate and enjoy both: the refurbished chair and my renewed life. ❁

