With his sister and his brother the young man came, to the house of his grandfather Joseph. Everything in the house recalled the old man’s ways. His sister remembered how grandfather would play music, and so she chose his old piano for her own, in memory of him. His brother thought there might be something of value in grandfather’s collection of old coins, and so he chose that, and took it away with him. But the young man felt himself drawn to the dusty cluttered garage, where waited, on a workbench, among the clutter of tools and curls of shavings, a massy block of rough-hewn wood.

In the dim light of the old garage his grandfather would grapple that baulk of timber, and the blows of his mallet could be heard early in the morning, and at night, the regular panting and wheezing of the rasp. Having heard the sound of grandfather Joseph at work on it, the young man now looked upon it for the first time. He had gone out there to the garage to claim it, for of all grandfather’s things he had chosen it, or it had chosen him.

It was meant, he saw, to be a figure of his grandmother, whom the young man had loved as much as he had loved his grandfather. So when he carted the craggy block to his own home (it took the efforts of his friends to help him bear it off and bring it in), and set the old tools in order about him, and regarded the task of bringing the sculpture to completion, he felt caught up in a labor of love, his own love for both of his grandparents, and theirs for one another. The love of his grandparents had been shared in life, and completed in death; and now it sought a different completion in the medium of the wood. It was the young man’s privilege to participate in this completion. From the rough-hewn block of wood it called to him, as David had called to Michelangelo from within a slab of Carrara marble. The young man felt in his hand the heft of unfamiliar tools, and made ready for the first time to use them.

His right hand raised what he knew to be the mallet, though its bell shape was strange to him. His left hand steadied the chisel that he prepared to strike. It was a chisel...
of modest size, as he feared to ruin the work with his unpracticed hand. But he could not bring himself to strike decisively. He felt the wood resist him, he saw his first blow nick the wood, and it seemed to him as if he were a child who was playing where he shouldn’t and had marred a fine old table with a scratch. The young man sensed his incapacity, and took comfort in the realization that it was not his place to make what had been left unmade. Still holding chisel and mallet, he backed away from the block, and looked at it afresh: not with more respect, but with a different kind of respect.

Shadows fell upon the bench, and where they lay upon the block of wood they flattened out curves, deepened cavities, eclipsed surfaces, rendered angles newly salient. The shapes of the sculpture no longer seemed the same. When he had first seen it, the block of wood had jutted out into the enclosing space of the garage with confident materiality. Now its shape seemed elusive. The young man carefully side-stepped to his left, keeping his eyes upon the block of wood. As he moved, what he saw changed. What had seemed a flat plane broke up into facets; a rounded prominence retired into shadow; a surface that had seemed smooth now appeared scarred by the grain of the wood. The young man returned the mallet and chisel to their place upon the workbench. In the coming days, he promised himself, he would study the block of wood from every angle, and make a sketch of what he saw from each perspective. Thus he would understand what was really there, before setting out to change it or improve upon it.

And so he sketched, but his drawings did not encourage him. Each angle of view revealed a different silhouette, each silhouette a different expression, even a different grandmother. Eyes that from the front seemed sweet, appeared rueful when viewed from the left side. From the right side, this slight ruefulness deepened into a look of grieving or suffering. It all seemed to depend on the slant of the eyebrow.

A flatness in the modeling of the cheek, and a tightness to the mound of the mouth, gave the figure a certain grimness. Or so the figure seemed when viewed from the right. From the left quarter, a rounded cheek and generous mouth gave the figure a sensuous feeling; but the left profile, exaggerating the upper lip and eclipsing what seemed from other angles a groove connecting nose and mouth, displayed arrogance. The young man did not like to think of his grandmother as arrogant, although he allowed that she had a certain brute fortitude or strength.

Which of these aspects and qualities of character the finished sculpture would express, depended, the young man saw, on him. The shapes at present were at best roughed out: in some respects, barely indicated. Everything could be played up or taken back with the merest nick of the gouge. Depending on how deep his chisel might bite into the wood, grimness or arrogance or sweetness might come to be the dominant character of the figure, though the other aspects might remain as recessive traits, still visible when point of view and source of light combined to call them forth. Perhaps, no matter how he finished the work, it would not be too late to give it a favorable
appearance, if only he could find in his house a place to display it that would restrict the angles from which it could be viewed, and control the light.

Musing thus over possibilities, responsibilities, and second chances, the young man suddenly was struck by a thought that caused his flesh to shiver. Through days of careful observation and study he had circled the block of wood, viewing it from every angle, raising a candle above the block or lowering it, to consider light and shadow. But he had not, until now, considered that the block of wood could be turned upside down! He had assumed, from the start, that he knew which end was up. But if the material showed itself differently from every angle, should he not throw open the question of its basic orientation? Having posed this question, he saw as if for the first time how roughly modeled were the shapes that he had been interpreting. Perhaps they were not really cheeks, mouth, and eyes.

Shaken by this thought, unsure whether he should nurture or repress it, the young man felt as if it were his world that had been turned upside down. In excitement and worry, he leaned the weight of his body against the baulk of timber, circled it with his arms, and grappled it. He rocked it back and forth, feeling the weight of the wood and of his own preconception, both resisting him as he sweated in a strange, intimate, and dangerous dance. Then of a sudden the block broke free of its placement, and rolled over on the bench. Winded and feeling weak, the young man staggered back, half anxious lest the massive block should roll with crushing force upon him.

What he saw stunned him. The block was not a statue of his grandmother at all, for there, still rocking a bit on the bench, was the great figure of a dancing bear! There were the massive haunches, the world-devouring belly, the primal energy! What a release, to be freed from the project of representing his dead grandmother, of choosing how to capture the complexities of her virtues and vices, of resolving his relationship to her, of insinuating himself into his grandparents’ private feelings for one another. Was he not free to dance in a moonlit forest clearing with this manic bear? Did he not hear its thumping steps in his own heart; could he not call it forth from the warm wood, and bring the wild woods into his own life?

Bear the dancer; bear devourer; bear shape-changer! For in his energy the young man saw that there was that in him that could make Bear, or Faun, or Naiad, or Sailor, or Pilgrim. He shared the playful confidence of the child who, lying on a hill-top on a summer day, sees each cloud assume new shapes and then dissolve and reform. With such pleasant childlike entertainment he felt the stirrings of a more adult passion, the assumption of a creator’s responsibility for fixing a shape in the midst of its metamorphoses and claiming as his own the product of his imagination. The young man rejoiced in the realization that he was free to make of this block of wood whatever sang to him, whatever danced with him, whatever he wanted most to bring into being. So excited was he that he felt he could not do any carving just at that moment. It would be
wrong, in any event, to use up this new magic in one night’s work. Let the feeling be a bridge to tomorrow, when he would take up his mallet and chisel as if for the first time, and wield them with the confidence of an artist.

But if, on the next day, the thing on his workbench still seemed open to almost endless possibilities, that openness seemed to have lost some of its savor. The young man tasted, it is true, a certain satisfaction in his new wisdom. He felt that he had grown up, had left behind a restrictive illusion. But there was little comfort and no excitement in the feeling. He did not know — this was the simple truth the day brought home to him — what to make of this thing that he had taken as his inheritance. Almost he regretted the passing of the simpler terms on which the commission had first commended itself to him: the completion of his grandfather’s work.

What he felt that he really wanted to do was to rush out of the studio and find others among his friends who had made the same discovery. What a good time they could have together in the cafes, congratulating themselves upon the discovery that it’s all in how you look at it! How they could look down on those who still felt bound by someone else’s design! Imagining this companionship gave the young man a fleeting pleasure, but he called himself back from it, and once more faced the block of wood. Self-congratulation for the loss of illusion would get no carving done, on this day or on any other.

He looked upon the wood with a feeling almost of resignation. He had no will to work. Yet he was not hopeless, for he knew something about art and about himself that offered a slim promise of guidance. What he knew was that his sculpture should be beautiful; he knew that he wanted it to be beautiful. So he was not, finally, desolated by his freedom to shape the wood, since he felt that there was a proper way to exercise this freedom: in the making of something beautiful. He no longer knew or cared just what his grandfather had wanted to make from the block of wood; but he trusted that his grandfather had his eye on beauty. And the young man felt that he would be far from dishonoring his grandfather if he set his sights on this goal that had called to his grandfather and to so many others, and would always call so long as there were creators to hear.

The young man held his carving in abeyance, then, while he undertook the study of Beauty. His mallet and chisels and gouges he stored respectfully in their proper places in his workshop; he kept them oiled and free from rust; but his labor was not with them. His days he spent walking through museums and galleries, admiring and learning from sculpture that is commonly thought to be beautiful. His nights he devoted to lectures on beauty in art, or to careful reading of the greatest treatises on Aesthetics. He learned what there was to learn about the modeling of shapes, about balance and proportion.

There came a time, late at night in his reading, when he allowed himself to
recognize squarely what had been whispering to him in the museum corridors and among
the library shelves: the truth that there is no one truth about Beauty. There were as many
angles on the idea of the Beautiful as there were ways to view the block of wood out in
his workshop. Yet this recognition bore with it none of the novelty and exhilaration he
had experienced that night when he had first taken it upon himself to overturn the block
of wood. It was like receiving an old friend, this acceptance that the Beautiful has never
been defined, and is never likely to be. The young man did not feel shaken. He did not
feel that there was no point in trying to make something beautiful from the wood that
awaited him. He felt that he could take the block as it was, and try to make it more
beautiful, all the while knowing that, in his inexperience and with his limited vision and
gifts, he might fail. He might leave the mass of wood less beautiful than he found it, or
less open to the possibility of beauty. Accepting this, he walked the path to his
workshop, entered, and set his hands upon the block of wood. Taking up a rough-toothed
rasp, holding it with his right hand on the wooden handle and guiding it across the wood
with his left, he felt for the first time the rounded shapes.

It was in changing them that he came to know them best. He guided the rasp as
its abrasiveness deepened hollows into clefts, broke up planes or rounded them into
mounds. Sometimes he felt that he, or anyone, would admire what he had done, feel that
he had made something strong or lovely or mysterious. Often he regretted a cutting too
deep or a smoothing away of what had been alive and interesting. Sometimes he could
undo these effects, but not often. This was not additive sculpture, the easy molding and
remolding of clay until it suits. This was subtractive; a possibility once taken away could
not be restored, at least not without effects felt throughout the work.

These discoveries, transmitted to his hands by the tools with which he now
gained familiarity, of what he could do and not do, and of what could not be undone,
steadily came to occupy the mental and emotional place in him that earlier had been
taken first by his commitment to finish the statue of his grandmother, and then, in
succession, by his awareness of the block’s openness to new interpretations, his
exhilaration and his disability, his effort to define the Beautiful as a goal and his
acceptance that he would never know much about that goal apart from what he did with
his hands. There was so much that he could get wrong that no longer did he feel any
satisfaction in the thought of going to the cafes to celebrate the truth that there was no
one way of getting things right.

Now that he was working with the wood, daring to offer interpretations of it
with chisel and gouge and rasp, willing to let the shavings and sawdust go, he came to an
understanding of the limitations of his chosen medium. It had checks and cracks, this
wood, that ran across the surface and sometimes deep into the heart of the old stump, for
that is what the block proved to be. The young man could not wish them away. If he
rapped his chisel toward such a crack, or worked his gouge into it, the wood might split.
The medium would not allow itself to be an extension of his will; it had its own ways.

He tried his hand at bits and endpieces of wood from lumberyard scrap heaps, old log piles, heaps of firewood, deadwood gathered from the roadside. He saw that what could be done with fruitwoods like cherry, apple, or pear, with their memory of blossoms, their grace and hardness, could not be imitated in a dark and somber wood such as walnut, or in tough and springy hickory. To the extent, now, that he thought about his first attitudes toward his work, he remarked wryly on their common assumption (for all their opposing tendencies) that wood is wood and sculpture is sculpture. Now it seemed to him that every wood, almost indeed every individual piece of wood, had its own possibilities and limits.

The old block of wood, his inheritance from his grandfather, still unfinished on his workbench, was (he knew now) a stump of oak: grainy, coarse-fibered, and tough. The young man came to find these obstinacies beautiful in their way, suitable expressions of the enduring truth that wood is warm and alive, and that the sculptor’s calling is not to overcome but to express that vitality. The grain of the wood was especially lovely. Just here, the young man thought, he would work his gouge along the grain, bringing out its direction with a hard crispness. There, in modeling that curve, he would turn against the grain, breaking the fibers less crisply and leaving behind a rougher texture for the eye to admire and the hand to feel. And so he worked on into the night, in memory of him who had first set chisel and rasp upon the block, in hope that he would, for all the clumsiness in his fingers, bring forth from the still-warm wood a more pleasing shape.

Notes and Questions on the Parable

1. The young man discovers that his situation affords him a certain creative freedom, but that this freedom is not unbounded. What accounts for the young man’s “elbow room” for creativity? What limits constrain the exercise of this creativity?

2. The story that you have read is a parable. A parable is a teaching story: one that offers a “lesson,” if only a rather obscure one. What “lesson” relevant to the study or practice of law might the parable offer?

3. It is sometimes said that emphasis upon creativity, especially individual creativity, is a distinguishing characteristic of the modern age. It is also sometimes said that modernity’s preoccupation with individual creativity is misguided; that it undervalues the merits of reason, tradition, or discipline. While this critique of creativity as a problematic aspect of modern individualism has extended to law as well as to other fields of endeavor, it would be wrong to say that only in modern times has the practice or study of law concerned itself with the value of creativity. The following parable reveals how the
ancient tradition of Jewish legal study has placed an affirmative value upon the creative labor that should enter into the reception and transmission of the law.

What is the difference between the Written and the Oral Law? To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had two servants and loved them both with a perfect love. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and each a bundle of flax. What did the wise servant do? He took the flax and spun a cloth. He took the wheat and made flour. He cleaned the flour and ground, kneaded, and baked it, and set it on top of the table. Then he spread the cloth over it and left it until the king would come.

The foolish servant, however, did nothing at all. After some time, the king returned from a journey and came into his house. He said to his servants: my sons, bring me what I gave you. One servant showed the wheat still in the box with the bundle of flax upon it. Alas for his shame, alas for his disgrace!

When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, he gave it only in the form of wheat -- for us to make flour from it, and flax -- to make a garment from it.*

Note that this Talmudic parable leaves the nature of the wise servant’s creative labor amply open to interpretation. What does it mean to say that he made flour and a garment from the law as it was entrusted to him? Did he give it a creative new interpretation? Did he apply it to new problems? Was his creativity more a matter of applying or enforcing the law than of seeing new meanings in it?