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# Michael Lamm interviews himself about the art of tinkering

[Michael Lamm](#) on Mar 1st, 2019



**Michael:** Is it still all right if I call you Mike? Or do you prefer Michael?

**Michael:** Mike's fine if you let me call you that, too.

**M:** Okay, then, let's get to it. Here's the question: Do you think we tinkerers are a dying breed?

**M:** You say "we." Does that mean you're a tinkerer, too?

**M:** Well, sure. We're one and the same person, aren't we? So if you're a tinkerer, so am I. But back to the question: Do you consider tinkering a dying art?

**M:** In some ways I do; in others, no.

**M:** Now there's a definitive answer. What do you mean?

**M:** Well, if you look at our generation—the great geezer generation—we grew up with mechanical things, and it was natural...nearly a compulsion...to take those things apart. When I was a little kid, and even in my teen years, I must have ruined half a dozen cheap clocks and watches taking them apart. I always felt guilty when I couldn't put them back together.

**M:** Didn't your folks get mad at you?

**M:** Oddly enough, no. They didn't encourage me to ruin things, but they didn't stop me either. I think they knew I was learning.

**M:** Learning what?

**M:** A lot of different things. Even though I never did figure out how to put those clocks and watches back together, I did learn what made them tick. But more importantly, it gave me the courage to take things apart. I think a lot of younger people today don't have the guts to do that—to open something up to see what makes it work. And if they're not brave enough to break open a clock or dig down into the bowels of, say, an old phonograph, they're not likely ever to work on their own cars or the dozens of gadgets around the house that break or go wonky.

**M:** Why do you think that is? Are today's kids more fearful? Or do they lack curiosity?

**M:** Well, for one thing everything's more complicated nowadays. Complex machines tend to be intimidating, especially if they involve electronics. And it's rare to find anything that doesn't include a microchip or some form of mini computer. Plus modern gadgets are often sealed. The manufacturer doesn't want you to see or know what's inside. They don't want you to try to tinker with or fix these things because, first, they can be dangerous to work on and, second, they want to sell you a new one. So there's almost a commercial conspiracy against tinkering.

**M:** So you think kids don't want to tinker anymore?

**M:** Oh, they do, but they're interested in an entirely different kind of tinkering. Today, mechanical things tend to be totally yesterday. Today's kids seem a lot more interested in spending time on their smart phones or playing video games.

**M:** How does that involve tinkering?

**M:** Smart phones are basically miniature computers; in fact, they'll do a lot more than conventional computers. So the kids' compulsion now is to find out what their phone/computers can do, how far they can push them, and they'll explore that to amazing lengths. In a way, that's tinkering.

**M:** But they don't actually take their smart phone apart to see how they work, do they?

**M:** You know, it's funny. They could take them apart, and I'm sure some of them have, but unlike an old alarm clock, they won't be able to figure out how it works. There's just a green circuit board in there with a bunch of solder joints. No clue to how it works.

**M:** And yet....

**M:** ...and yet they're curious, and they'll work on apps or make up games or they'll get in trouble sending pictures and messages—more serious trouble than we had a chance to get into.

**M:** So you think tinkering isn't a dying art?

**M:** Mechanical tinkering, yes; electronic tinkering, no.

**M:** Does that mean a modern teenager will never learn, say, how to work on his own car? Or fix a leaky faucet? Or take things apart for the sheer joy of seeing what's in there?

**M:** Never say never. Some kids—and a few late bloomers—will work up the courage to see how something works and will even figure out how to fix it. We now have a smaller population of tinkerers, and there'll probably be even fewer (relatively speaking) in the future, but they won't go extinct. In some ways, if necessity is the mother of invention, tinkering is the father. People don't need to tinker as much as they used to, but tinkering's fun and educational, and fixing things gives tinkerers a great sense of pride and accomplishment. So tinkering might be a dying art, but it's not dead by a long shot and probably never will be.