

Overcoming the Fear of Sharing

Text and Photography by Brent Graber, aka Mr. Smiley

Sometimes it's all around us. You can feel it creeping into a conversation—that hesitation to talk about exactly how we do what we do. Sometimes fear keeps us from sharing a technique with another glass artist, because somehow it might cause our world to come crashing down. I've seen it stop a really good conversation in its tracks. It's fear, plain and simple. Fear that sales are based on what other people are doing and not on what we're doing. Fear that another glass artist can come in and take food off our tables. Have you kept some tasty little morsel of knowledge a secret? Do you think that your sales are based on what other glass artists are making?

I've felt that fear. When I was getting ready to teach my first class, that fear had a grip on me and shook me to the core. I made phone calls to instructors who had been teaching for years, hoping that more experienced instructors might be able to help with this horrible feeling I had in the pit of my stomach. My gut told me that if I taught people to do things exactly as I did them, my sales would dry up and my kids would go hungry. My first instinct was to hold something back. Could I teach a class and just not give them that little tidbit of information that ties it all together? No, I couldn't hold back. That would be giving them less than what they paid for. It's just not in my nature to keep information about glass to myself.

Then I thought that maybe I could ask them nicely to be respectful and not step on my toes. If I brought a picture of my kids with empty plates in front of them, maybe they would respect my sales venues and wouldn't compete with me in the marketplace that I had worked so hard to carve out. I mean, just look at those cute kids' faces! My past has taught me enough about people that I know you can't force anybody to respect you, so that idea was out, too. I didn't know what I was going to do about this nagging feeling in my belly. It was telling me to be afraid of other glass artists, to try and place limits on other human beings, and to be selfish with what I've learned. These are not qualities I wanted to embrace or even see in myself.



We can go much farther together
than we can on our own.

Origins of Fear

Part of this fear of sharing has strong roots in our past. I wonder how much more we would all know about glass if that fear didn't play such a major role in glass history. How many glass secrets went to the grave, because the masters who devoted their lives to this medium didn't share their discoveries with the world? Glass has a very romantic past . . . full of secrets, tradition, mystery, and murder. I love hearing the stories about how glass secrets were held so dear that if you got caught smuggling them out of Murano, the sentence was death. There is a part of me that really likes that mysterious aspect of our past, because it has kept glass just out of reach. There's something magical about attaining the unattainable—breaking into that inner circle and knowing what very few others know. It comes with a heavy price, however, and ultimately limits how far we can take this art form. I don't know when I'm going to leave this place, so when I figure something out, I try to share it with somebody right away.

I am so glad that I got over the fear and decided to teach everything to my students. I've taught boro classes all over the country. I've shared exactly what I do and how I do it with countless glassworkers, and it's been a wonderful experience. I start every class with a little speech about the dreaded "C" word—copying! I tell everybody that I don't have an issue with copying, and that I do not claim ownership of the knowledge I've gathered. I try to encourage my students to do anything their hearts desire with the information I give them. I don't limit their creative freedom or their selling venues. I encourage them to go out and sell as much work as they can sell. If they want to make pieces just like mine, I'll show them anything I know how to do. I have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of respect that glass artists have for one another.



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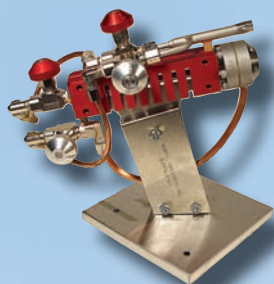
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The Results of Sharing

Now that I've shared my knowledge with other glass artists and assured them that they are free to do what they want with the pieces they make . . . How have my sales been affected? Surprisingly, they went up! Sales have never been better. But how can that be? I've trained my competition. I've actually shown people how to make my bread-and-butter pieces, and they are making them—pink hearts, implosions, and many others by the hundreds or maybe even thousands—and they are being sold all over the place! How could that gut-wrenching fear I felt so strongly have been wrong?

Why are my sales going up instead of down? I've spent a good, long time pondering that question. My conclusion is that the fear I felt was based on a lack of confidence in my unique ability to make something that is my own. I had doubts about my own unique style and thought maybe my work was just like everybody else's. What I've learned is that my sales are based on my own work, both on and off the torch. If I'm making something that is appealing and it's affordable to the people who like it, when I make it available to those people, they will buy it. In short, my sales are based on *me* and the things I do every day and not on what anybody else is doing.

There are billions of potential customers on this planet, and my marketplace is almost as limitless as glass itself! We do not have to get into price wars or fight other glassworkers for certain shops or galleries. We can explore markets that other artists aren't even selling in. Realizing this was a turning point for me as a glass artist and instructor. Now that painful, gut-wrenching fear is gone. I am free to share anything and everything I know with my peers, my friends, and my students. It feels really good to live life and work without that fear holding me back.

Reaping the Benefits

If we share what we know with others, they may be able to use that color combination or technique as a stepping-stone toward even more wonderful discoveries, and chances are they'll share that, too. If we can stop fearing each other, we no longer compete. We work together. I don't view other glassworkers as my competition. You are, rather, my coworkers. Fear tells us that other glassworkers will copy us, and that's just not true. Most artists don't want to copy things that other people are making. Glass artists want to create their own unique vision in glass.

There is a relatively new movement toward sharing knowledge without fear. I've seen it give birth to wonderful conversations, where people are laughing, torching, smiling, and sharing themselves with each other into the wee hours of the morning. I truly believe we can go much farther together than we can on our own. It's a beautiful thing when glass artists get together and help each other succeed, and I can't wait to see where it leads.

If you want to know how I do my boro color thing, you can attend one of my classes at a teaching studio, find me online at www.LampworkEtc.com, get my video *Boro Basics—Off-Mandrel Techniques* from my website, or catch me at a show. I don't have any secrets, and I look forward to showing you anything I know how to do.



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