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Everyman's Xanadu

A house is a home when it shelters the body and comforts the soul

by Phillip Moffitt

I'm sitting in a log cabin in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains in east Tennessee. It is an early gray winter morning and the chill of the outside air slides in through the cracked chinking in the cabin walls that I should have filled in last fall. This cabin was built in the 1930s from assorted old, used logs by a woman named Missy Thompson who died some ten years ago. Although I've been its owner for a number of years and made major changes in the structure, it still feels like Missy Thompson's cabin. And I like that. It's as though I'm allowed to use it without taking on the burden of ownership that so often comes with having a place you like.

I used to dream of a house or an apartment so perfect in size, in views, in access to a park for walking and jogging, that my life could be built around it, and, of course it would be a great life. I have spent almost twenty years believing in this dream or variations of it—a house on a sandy beach or a great little city apartment and a second (the real) home in the country only a short drive away. Ah, yes, that's all it would take for true happiness. And most of my friends shared similar dreams. Somehow, in the last couple of years those dreams have started to recede in my imagination. It's not that I appreciate a good dwelling any less; in fact, the older I get, the more time I spend at home. It's just that now I know that the sense of home I've sought isn't to be found in a structure.

On this particular winter morning, I'm sitting at an old cherry table that serves as my desk, located in the sleeping-loft part of the cabin. I'm staring out the window at a gray squirrel scrambling from limb to limb in a barren oak tree. There is a quilt, sewn in the 1800s, covering my legs, and I'm sipping tea sweetened with honey as I begin to recover from a restless night.

Turning in my chair, I can see the living room downstairs, where, on the mantel above a granite fireplace, there sits a collection of turn-of-the-century photographs of both my mother's parents and my father's parents and a few of their grandparents, all Appalachian mountain people. Their photographs are very appropriate for this old cabin. These people, far more than I, would look at home sitting on the back porch looking out into the woods. They would have been very comfortable sitting there, listening to Missy tell her story of how in the Depression she had to build this cabin and raise two boys on her own. For they, too, had known hard times.

I am a person who lives a split life, dividing my time between Knoxville and New York, and, to a lesser degree, London and L. A. Each time I return to this cabin the first thing I do is walk over to the mantel and look at those photographs; one in particular is my favorite. It is a picture of my mother's father, Andrew Clinton Allen, taken when he was in his

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early teens, standing with all the members of his family in front of their home. When friends and business associates from other cities come to Tennessee with me, they are never quite sure what to make of this picture—shaggy and coarse country folk in bib overalls and shapeless dresses staring out at the camera with guarded eyes. The house behind them, itself built of weathered logs, is where they all lived, in a mountain hollow called Big Poor Valley, so far back in the mountains it was a day's ride on the wagon to the nearest town in the early l900s and is not too easy to get to even today.

Once I made a pilgrimage to what remains of that house, stood in the overgrown yard, with the crumbling house behind me, and had my picture made in the exact same spot where my grandfather's picture was made almost seventy-five years earlier. I don't often tell that story, nor say that at that moment I felt some emotional change beginning within me. It was then that my dream of the perfect house started to fade.

Not only do the walls of my cabin have cracks in the chinking, the cedar-shake roof also has a problem—a little leak at some as yet undiscovered spot. And I cannot seem to find exactly where that is, despite having replaced a good part of the roof looking for it. I've concluded that the leak and I are going to be together as long as I'm here. Still I love this old cabin. It's got enough space to allow my restless self to roam from room to room, having a different experience in each. There are comfortable places for sitting and talking and a bedroom great for sharing; its windows allow the eyes to join the outside to the inside in an expansion of experience that opens the soul.

What I started to realize that day, standing there among the weeds in my great-grandfather's yard, is that the most important purpose of a house is to give "full" shelter. For a house to provide full shelter it must serve a person's emotional as well as physical needs. To experience full shelter in a house or apartment is to find comfort there when one is tired, to find inspiration when one is afraid or defeated. Love itself somehow seems to flow more easily within such a shelter. Standing there looking at that old house, I knew that my dreams of a perfect place were obstructing my vision of full shelter. I had been focusing too much on getting everything right—the "packaging" of the place—and too little on how it would nourish and shelter.

It is not clear to me why standing there in that yard elicited this emotion. Maybe I was feeling the drive of the generations, those that had worked their way first to America and into Big Poor Valley and then out of it. All my life I have felt connected to the despair and the small joys of those who came to live and struggle in these mountains and hills. Many times I've thought that my life is but an extension of the far more painful efforts of those who came before me.

Some years have passed since I stood in my great-grandfather's yard, and I've learned to see a little better since then, to focus my priorities. But sometimes I still lose track of what I have learned.

Last summer, I spent two weekends as a guest in two different homes in the Hamptons on Long Island, the summerhome haven for New Yorkers. Each was an old farmhouse, turn-of-the-century or older; both hosts were well-to-do New Yorkers who could afford to arrange their environment as they wished. But what a difference in the approach they took. One couple had chosen to continue to rent a house they loved on the island, year after year. They paid a price for this choice— they could not really fix the house, make it perfect, so there were numerous little discomforts. The other couple had taken the opposite approach: they bought their farmhouse, used a good architect and a very good decorator. The place looked great; everything worked, the colors matched, the

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place was simply beautiful to the eye and luxurious in its comforts. I spent one weekend in this house and my initial reaction was very positive. I, too, like creature comforts, and I admired the place, room after room. However, as the weekend went on I found the house closing in around me. My bedroom was beautifully done had a nice view, and the common rooms were laid out in a very accommodating way, so that one had a choice of being alone or with others. Yet I slept poorly there and was always looking for an excuse to be outside. I kept asking myself why this was happening, and I started to see that everything had been so controlled, made so perfect, that this farmhouse had lost the natural identity and feeling that came with its original function. By Sunday morning, the only place I found comfortable was the wraparound porch with its view of the ocean. Inside, the house was so cut off from its own soul that it could not give shelter to mine. Yet it was a showcase.

A month later, I spent a weekend with the second couple. I had never been to their farmhouse and my first reaction was that I would not be comfortable there; there was a lack of privacy and up-to-date comforts. To my surprise, as the day wore on and evening came, I was absolutely delighted to be there. There was space in this house for me.

I later asked myself if the personalities of the hosts were the real factor, and my conclusion was no, both couples were pleasant to be with, and in neither instance did I spend all that much time in their company. It was simply a matter of how they had handled their homes. Nor is it the excessive amounts of money spent for renovating that caused my reaction. I've been in apartments in New York, London, Paris, and Stockholm that were far more expensively done, yet the actual experience of being in them was wonderful. Similarly I've been in modest homes simply done and experienced the same claustrophobia.

What is it that allows one to create a full shelter for oneself or others? I've reflected on this on many occasions in my own nomadic search for a life-style. I have a friend who lives in a one-bedroom city apartment with no chairs anywhere except the kitchen. The living room has a piano, a stereo system, a few lamps and art objects, and beautifully cared-for floors. It is strange to describe, but it is a wonderful apartment to be in, and all of his friends use any excuse to visit him there. A woman I used to date had a special ability to find places and then treat them with a unique touch, so that they became enchanting. I never understood how she did it, but her places reflected the fact that she had learned to be good to herself. Another woman I used to see dwelled in truly awful places, each one uniquely sterile and confining. I liked both of these women. Yet one had acquired the ability to make a place of comfort for herself and the other had not.

I tell myself I've acquired some of this ability to create my own place of comfort. I look about this cabin and see it as part of my proof.

Oh, I never learned how to make it less dark in the corners, and it always feels a little musty. I am a single man, maintaining more than one home, and most of all, living a life alone. I have few overnight guests, even fewer parties, and am seldom in one place for more than two weeks at a time. I am most fortunate to enjoy the benefits of such an existence, but it exacts a price in broken chinking and leaky roofs. Frequently I arrive in one place or another with nothing to look forward to but an evening of work, and sometimes I have the overpowering feeling that weeks and months have gone by and I have done nothing more than react to a "to do" list.

About a year ago, I installed skylights over the main room of the cabin. Small streams of sunlight—almost like spotlights—move from one place to another throughout the day, first hitting

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the rug, then the granite of the fireplace, then a clay jug on the mantel. It's a great thing to sit up here in the loft at my table and just watch the sun unfold its light show. It scares me to realize how little time I've had even to sit here and watch it dance through a day—in the last year, maybe twice.

Looking at all those stern faces in the pictures on the mantel, I think that some of them are clearly filled with anticipation and appreciation of life. What would they say of me and my wanderer's way of living? Of the twenty or so people pictured there, certainly some wandered a bit, and surely they or their parents got settled in these mountains only after much wandering. Would they smile with approval? understanding, at least? satisfaction, maybe, if they knew about me? On the other hand given the cost of their struggle, would they understand a man who continually creates struggles for himself?

These are questions I cannot answer, but I can fix myself another cup of tea and sit in the rocking chair in front of the fire. In my shelter.