

A SOLSTICE CELEBRATION

By David Morse

These are dark times. When I contemplate two more years of George W. Bush in the White House, and when my own best struggles on behalf of Darfur seem to come to naught, I take heart from folks in my own community. I want to beam a particular joy to you from my town in rural eastern Connecticut.

The day before the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, turned into one of the finest here in Mansfield. Greg Cichowski got his post-and-beam house raised. Greg is rebuilding the old Ash House, which goes back to the mid-1700s. The house stood on property purchased by the ever-expanding University of Connecticut. UConn had allowed the house to fall into decay before auctioning it off. Greg rescued it. He paid \$7,000, as high bidder. Mike Atrens, a local designer, drew floor plans and elevations of the historic structure. Then Greg, with helpers, marked all the beams as they disassembled the Ash House, and trucked them away, along with the original floorboards, doors, hardware, raised paneling and a barrel-style corner cupboard.

None of the original timbers was good enough to use, after so much neglect, and after they'd sat in Greg's yard for four years waiting while he built the stone foundation. Not to be dissuaded, Greg used them as templates to replicate the original frame out of new oak.

The stone foundation required Herculean work. Greg, a pharmacist, is meticulous in everything he does, from making maple syrup to telling a story. And the foundation walls were massive - four feet wide at the bottom. He would have tapered it as he went upward, to 18 inches, in the traditional way, but the local building inspector, who was new on the job, wouldn't allow it. Greg argued that the original structure had lasted two and a half centuries on such a foundation. But the building inspector was stubborn. It wasn't in his "book." So Greg had to keep it four feet wide all the way up to the finished layer of cut stone on which the oak sills would rest. This required twice as much stone and twice the time. Greg, who works full time filling prescriptions, took three and a half years to complete the stonework.

Many of us wondered whether Greg would ever finish. Or at least we couldn't imagine ourselves taking on such a job. But Greg had a vision. And he did finish, at the end of the summer of 2006. In September the oak beams got delivered and the carpentry crew - master carpenter Don Aitken and his assistant Kyle Bailey - set to work, measuring and cutting everything precisely. Don is a state policeman when he isn't building or rebuilding old houses.

So on this particular day, the last day before the winter solstice, the Ash House rose like a Phoenix, a dream come true. A dream suddenly made palpable. Early that morning, as the crew assembled, Greg brought out shot glasses and his maple syrup liqueur and they drank a toast to Peter Newcomer, who was close to both Greg and Don - a carpenter who radicalized Greg politically, or at least tamed his Republican bent, and used to say to him impatiently, "Greg, we're not building a fucking piano." Peter had died unexpectedly four years ago. But he was here, as surely as anyone.

The day was cold and clear. No one knew quite how long the house-raising would take. Greg had lost sleep for two nights worrying that something would go wrong, that the timbers wouldn't go together quite right or that someone would get hurt. But Don had measured everything three times, and it went up surprisingly fast.

In the old days we would all have been lifting the bents into place with main force and poles. Today, most of us were watchers. A crane was doing the heavy lifting. But the spirit was that of a house-raising. This was by its nature a public event, a moment in history, the re-founding of a proud old house. And for those of us who are part of Greg's and Emine's circle of friends and neighbors, the circle that had gathered at this solstice was something special.

Sometime around noon, Emine, whose Turkish stomach-mantra at that hour is "The hungry bear doesn't dance," brought out a big pot of stew for all of us and a basket of Turkish rolls. She and Jennifer, their yoga teacher, ladled the stew into pottery bowls Emine had made.

So good to celebrate something so local and so fine. Even knowing we are doing nothing at this particular moment to save the world - just resurrecting this old house. Even recognizing that this salvation is a luxury, in a world in which so many are homeless, so many are refugees. For now it is enough to break bread together, to savor the very particularly of the moment, the energy of community flowing all around us, and to understand in the plainest terms that perseverance in the service of imagination is powerful.

So. A happy, happy Solstice! And all the other religious holidays. May our love and strength and common vision grow as the days get longer.

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