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Someplace Like Home

If I Had a Hammer

Dave Milano

The Urge To Build (UTB) has been infecting men for as long as anthropologists can tell and probably way before that. It was men who built the pyramids, the Roman aqueducts, and the Great Wall; men who assembled Stonehenge, carved the monuments of Easter Island, and erected every backyard shed from Greece to Grand Rapids. Women, on the other hand, didn't.

UTB is a virtual epidemic in men, while women seem to enjoy near perfect immunity from it (unless you count the urge to rearrange the furniture, or repaint the bathroom, or make frowny faces at the new kitchen plan). Even today, smack in the middle of the gender uniformity era, most architects and builders are men, and it's generally men who discover when an architect or builder is needed. That's just the way it is.

I've been a builder since I was two or three years old. Back then, sand piles and sticks and wooden blocks were my concrete and steel, calling to me, begging to become something else—usually something bigger. I built splendid, happy piles of mud and detritus that were houses and forts and roads, then demolished them to make room for more. Not much has changed since then. The unassembled still compels; entropy continues to annoy.

Fortunately for men, there is never a shortage of good reasons to build. Unsheltered animals and machinery, a tree without a house, previous projects needing revision, and two-hundred-pound rocks in stump holes seem to just appear out of nowhere. (That last might easily have been dragged into the woods, but ended up tilted against a tree in the yard, a fractional building project obviously being better than none at all.)

For me, building with stone soothes UTB symptoms like nothing else, probably because stone is such an elemental building material



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(not unlike sand and sticks and wooden blocks) and because the tools used to work it—hammer, chisel, and pry bar—are pleasantly austere and sober.

That's about the only explanation I can offer for our henhouse steps, which are made of fieldstone hand-picked from our woods, laid dry for that natural, last-a-lifetime effect. Wife Mary, apparently feeling that this particular project required closer-than-usual supervision, donated a full day to help build them. Afterward, obviously impressed with the stout, snug laminations, she asked, "How much stone is here?"

"I don't know, exactly," I answered. "Probably a ton and a half. Could be more."

"Hmm." She squinted. "Why is it that our front steps are not nearly as nice as our chickens' steps?"

"Oh, because, well ... hey, wait! There's a great idea! We could bust out our front steps and build new stone ones. We'd have to lay in a gravel bed with perforated pipe connected to the foundation drains, of course, and extend out for a new landing, but that's no big deal. And that stone leaning there against the tree would make a perfect start. You busy tomorrow?"

"You're on your own bucko," she said. "I'm rearranging the furniture." 🐔

Dave Milano is a former suburbanite turned part-time Tioga County farmer. You can contact him at someplacelikehome@mountainhomemag.com.



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