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To construct with your own hands even a small office in the woods is to see your assumptions about nature and self knocked down and more than a few new truths nailed down in their place.

Building A Room of My Own

By Michael Pollan

I NEEDED A PLACE TO WORK. THAT AT least is the explanation I prepared for anybody who asked about the little building going up, very slowly, in the woods behind my house. I was building a "home office," an enterprise so respectable that the Government gives you a tax deduction for it. The fact that it would also be a room of one's own, a temple of solitude off the beaten track of everyday life, was a part of the plan I kept to myself.

Since I am someone who lives in his head much of the time — who makes his living as a writer — this probably sounds reasonable enough, if perhaps a little dreamy. What made considerably less sense, however, was that I wanted to build this place myself, with my own two unhandy hands. This part of the dream would entail a journey for which I was singularly unprepared, a journey into a realm where I had never attempted anything more ambitious than the weatherstripping of a window. It was a journey that certain comfortable abstractions would not survive, including one called lumber. That particular euphemism fell one snowy morning in January, the day a flatbed truck from the lumberyard backed four massive timbers of fir — prone trunks more than 20 feet long — into my driveway: so these were the trees I was proposing to turn into the frame of my little house.

Since each timber weighed more than a quarter of a ton, the lumberyard had sent two men to help unload. A friend also happened to be on hand, and after taking a few minutes to small talk and gather ourselves for the task, the four of us slid one of the timbers off the flatbed and, with a collective groan, hoisted it up onto our shoulders. Moving at an almost ceremonial pace, we walked the great trunk up the long, snow-crusted incline to the barn where we planned to work on the frame till spring, when we would raise it on its site out in the woods. "We" consisted of myself and a friend named Joe Benney, who, at 27, is one of those geniuses of the how-to you still

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PEDEN. DRAWING FROM CHARLES R. MYER & COMPANY.

sometimes meet in the country, a man equally at home in the realms of stone, steel, internal combustion, gardens, guns and plumbing as well as wood. Working on a hourly basis, Joe had agreed to be my Virgil.

Although these logs had been squared up and dressed at the mill, it was impossible not to be conscious of them as trees — and not to feel slightly abashed at what had been done to them on my account. Simply by picking up the phone and placing an order for four 20-foot pieces of 6-by-10 Doug fir, appearance grade, I'd set in motion a chain of events that was as momentous as it was routine. To fill my order, at least two mature fir trees, green spires as old as the century, had been felled in a forest somewhere in Oregon and then trucked, or floated, to a mill in a town called McMinnville. (This much I knew from the yellow cardboard tag stapled to the end grain.) There they'd been skinned of their bark and, after several passes through a saw and then a planer, transformed into the slabs of salmon-colored lumber sprawled on the floor of my barn, looking more than a little forlorn.

It's hard not to feel sentimental about such majestic pieces of wood, especially today, when we recognize the preciousness of old trees more than we once did. Each of the timbers in my barn, destined to serve as the corner posts of my building, cost $150, a figure that manages to seem both exorbitant and — considering what they are, or were — paltry at the same time. Since the corner posts would be a conspicuous element of the interior as well as the exterior of the building, Charles Myer, an architect and old friend who'd designed the structure for me, had specified the highest-grade clear — that is, knot-free — fir, wood that is typically found only in the unbranched lower trunks of the oldest trees. It is the fate of precisely such Douglas firs, and the creatures whose habitat depends on them, that loggers and environmentalists have been fighting over in the Pacific Northwest, a fight that has already closed down hundreds of sawmills like the one in McMinnville, and turned fir into one of the most precious of woods.

The reason Charlie had specified such large timbers was that he'd conceived of the building as a kind of primitive hut carved out of the woods. The archetypal hut consists of four substantial corner posts (whole trees in some accounts) surmounted by a gable made of timbers only slightly less substantial. A primitive hut's construction should recall the forest from which it springs, and that's more easily done with 6-by-10 timbers than with slender sticks of what carpenters call two-by.

The primitive hut is a myth, really, a story about the origins of architecture in the state of nature. As the story goes, architecture was given to man by the forest, which taught him how to form a shelter out of a quartet of trees crowned by pairs of branches inclining toward one another like rafters. Like many myths, this one is fanciful but also in some deep sense true, for architecture as we know it is unimaginable without the tree. Speaking of the very first structures built by man, Frank Lloyd Wright wrote that "trees must have awakened his sense of form." It is the tree that gave us the notion of a column and, in the West at least, everything else rests upon that.

If the idea of a hut dictated the big, treelike timbers, the timbers in turn dictated the building's system of construction. It would be a variation on the traditional post and beam, in which the frame of a building is made up of large and generously spaced vertical posts joined to horizontal beams. Traditionally, the joints were of the type known as mortise and tenon: the ends of each beam are chiseled into a protruding shape called a tenon that is inserted into a matching notch, or mortise, carved into the post. Until the 1830's, when builders in Chicago invented the modern balloon frame, in which relatively light pieces of lumber are joined with nails, virtually all buildings built out of wood had post-and-beam frames held together with mortises and tenons.

Traditional post-and-beam joinery requires a specialized set of skills not many carpenters possess anymore, so Charlie had proposed an idiot-proof alternative involving a store-bought piece of steel and a handful of nails. But Joe would have none of it. He insisted that we mortise our posts, despite the fact that no one would ever see the joints in question. "Doesn't matter," Joe said when I, feeling powerfully attracted to the idiot-proof, tried to point this out. "We'll know."

ON THE FIRST DAY OF WOODWORK, JOE SHOWED UP WITH AN incongruous pair of tools: a set of fine chisels with ash handles and a beat-up chain saw. The chain saw was to cut our posts roughly to length; this would constitute the first cut made in our fir, and as I was afraid he might, Joe insisted I make it.

I am petrified by chain saws, a phobia I don't regard as irrational or neurotic in the least, but there was simply no way to decline the Homelite Joe held out to me without suffering a loss of face. Even though Joe and I shared no illusions I had any clue what I was doing as a carpenter, it would have been a mistake to compound my ignorance with a lack of pluck right at the beginning. So, straining for nonchalance, I took the chain saw, gave its starting cord a yank, and held on as the machine leapt menacingly to life.

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But cutting the fir timbers proved unexpectedly easy, perhaps because there were no imperfections in the wood, no knots or bark to frustrate the blade and provoke its willfulness. The snout of the saw moved like a cleaver through the soft, cheddary wood, its gasoline howl — deafening indoors — the sole evidence of effort or resistance. For the first time, I noticed the sweet, elusive aroma of fresh-cut Doug fir, an oddly familiar perfume that nevertheless took me the longest time to place. But then there it was: roasted peanuts and hot spun sugar, the summery scents of the fairground.

Trading a chain saw for a chisel, which I needed to cut the mortise in my post, is to trade one way of knowing a piece of wood for another. The chain saw acquaints you with certain general properties — a wood's hardness, its aroma — but the chisel discloses information of a fineness any machine would overwhelm. Something as subtle as the relative density of its springwood and summerwood — the two distinct rings a fir tree lays down each year — the beveled tip of the chisel's steel blade will scrupulously transmit to its ash handle and then through that to your hand.

Tap by tap, the blade of the chisel gradually ate into the body of the tree, and the material it encountered there felt less like wood than dense flesh — almost like a slab of tuna. As long as it remained sharp, the blade sliced easily through the wood's layered grain, raising a plume of curled shavings I half-expected to be moist to the touch.

After some practice the tool began to feel light and alive in my hand, almost as though it knew what it was supposed to do. Which in some sense it did. Like any good hand tool, but especially one that has been fine-tuned over centuries, a well-made chisel contains in its design a wealth of experience on which the hand of a receptive user can draw. Working properly with such a tool awakens that experience, that particular knowledge of wood; at the same time it helps to preserve it. When the

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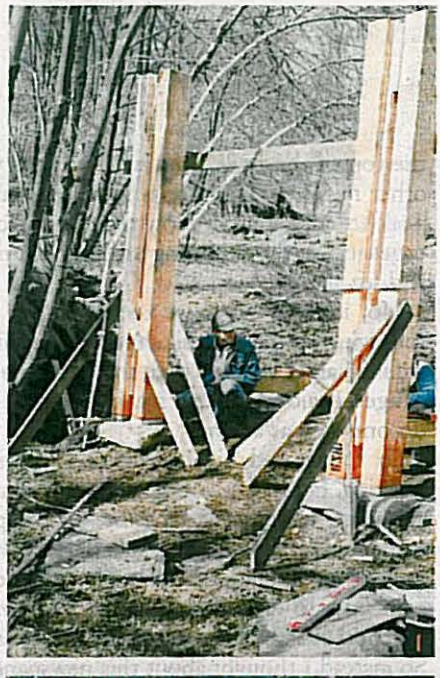
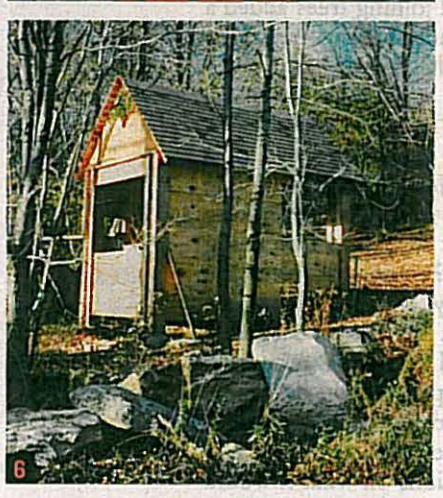
chiseling was going especially well, it reminded me of what it is like to work with an exceptionally well-trained animal; if I paid close enough attention to what it wanted to do, even let it steer me a bit, the chisel had things to teach me.

After Thoreau cut down the pine trees for the frame of his hut at Walden, he hewed and mortised the logs himself, a process — an intimacy, to judge by his account of it — that he felt had somehow righted his relationship to the fallen trees. "Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree," he wrote, even though "I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it." I used to think this was a too convenient rationalization for Thoreau's having done something that ordinarily he would have deplored. This is, after all, the same Thoreau who once composed an elegy for a pine tree felled by a lumberman ("Why does not the village bell sound a knell"). Suddenly we're supposed to believe that the care he has taken hewing these pines, the purpose to which he has put them and the knowledge they have yielded are enough to compensate for the sacrifice.



Working the wood: 1. The author between corner posts. 2. Charles Myer, the hands-on architect, nails wall plates. 3. Joe Benney prepares a gable. 4. From left: the author, Charlie and Joe ease in a rafter. 5. What will be the office view. 6. The shape in the landscape.



Now that idea no longer seemed self-serving or crazy. It was the work that purchased this intimate knowledge, and its price, fair or not, is indeed the death of a tree. Though it's probably wrong to think that only the handworker, with his traditional tools, gains such a close acquaintance with trees. The lumberjack working with his screaming chain saw knows trees, too, he just knows different things. Both, however, can fairly claim to know the tree better than any of its more distant admirers.

MORTISING BY HAND TOOK FOREVER, BUT ANY TIME I GRUMBLED about the cumbersomeness of traditional joinery compared with nailing together a frame of 2 by 4's, Joe would spring to the defense of the post and beam. Timber frames are structurally superior to modern balloon frames, he contended, and they make a thriftier use of a tree; the extra passes through a saw needed to turn a log into 2 by 4's wasted far more wood (in the form of sawdust), not to mention energy.

As soon as we had raised our posts outside on their footings and fitted the floor beams into the notches we'd chiseled, I could see there was a certain poetic economy in post-and-beam framing, in the way it seemed to carry the treeness of lumber forward into a building. The vertical posts performed like trunks, exploiting the strength of wood fibers in compression, and the horizontal beams acted very much like limbs, drawing on their strength in tension. Also, the mortises and tenons locked together in a satisfying knotlike way; instead of the superficial attachment made by a nail, the beam nested into the body of the post almost as if it were a bough.

But soundness and sentiment aside, it seemed to me that, as much as anything else, it was the very difficulty and mystique of traditional framing that commended it to a carpenter like Joe. Since not everyone could do it, those who could were entitled to a special status. It's no accident that, until the invention of the balloon frame, the housewright, or joiner, ruled the building process from design to completion, wielding the sort of cultural authority and prestige that architects do today.

The shift from post-and-beam to balloon framing (named for the dubious-seeming lightness of the new structure) marks an important historical shift, and not merely in building technique. For between the two types of frame stands a gulf of sensibility as well as technology. This is something my own building helped me to at least begin to appreciate, since its frame was actually a hybrid that drew on both traditions. After Joe and I had raised the main posts and beams, we traded our chisels for hammers and nails. The building's floor and sections of its walls were all to be framed out of conventional 2 by 4's and 2 by 6's, in the way most wooden structures have been put together since about 1850 or so.

Now that we were swinging hammers rather than tapping chisels, I felt as if I was back on at least semi-familiar ground. But on the first morning of floor framing, I noticed Joe watching me closely as I pounded nails, clearly weighing whether or not to interrupt.

"Can I show you a better way to do that?"

"What — to hammer a nail?" I was incredulous, and then, after he explained what I was doing wrong, crestfallen: it turned out I didn't even know the proper way to swing a hammer. It seems I was holding the side of the hammer with my thumb, a grip that forced my wrist to deliver most of the force needed to drive the nail. Joe reached over and moved my thumb down around the shank of the hammer. Now as I brought the hammer down I felt a slight loss of control but a substantial gain in power, for suddenly the tool had become an extension of my whole arm and not just my hand. Joe never said it, but I'd been holding my hammer as if it were a tennis racquet poised for a backhand, a realization that heated my cheeks with embarrassment. Once I corrected my grip, I found I could drive a big 10-penny nail through a piece of two-by with half as many blows as before, and the business of framing moved smartly along.

It wasn't hard to see why balloon framing had caught on. Where it had

taken the two of us to raise and manhandle our posts and beams into position, I was able to frame most of the floor by myself in less time than it had taken me to mortise a notch. It is only after struggling with 6-by-10 posts that you can understand how carpenters could ever have thought of 2-by-4 studs as sticks — by comparison, these were as easy to handle as toothpicks.

Though this wood, too, was Douglas fir, I was only dimly aware of this fact, and would not have noticed had the yard slipped in a few pieces of pine or spruce. Balloon framing doesn't acquaint you with the particularities of wood in the way post-and-beam framing does, and it's easy to forget that these are trees you're working with. In this sense 2-by-4 framing is a more abstract kind of work than timber framing, with an industrial rhythm that places a far greater premium on the repetitive task and the interchangeable part. Which is why an amateur like me could frame a wall in an afternoon.

What I was discovering in the course of framing my little building, an entire culture had discovered in the middle of the last century. Contemporary accounts of the new technology brim with a kind of giddiness at the rapid feats of construction it had suddenly made possible — houses put up in days, whole towns rising in weeks. Since a couple of men could assemble one of the new frames without the kind of group effort or specialized skills needed to raise a timber frame, a pioneer family could now build a house just about anywhere they wanted to, even out on the treeless prairie, and in just about any style. By comparison, the technology of timber framing — communal, hierarchical and conservative by its very nature — had been supremely well adapted to the kind of close-knit religious communities that had settled the forested East. Looked at from this perspective, the new way of cutting and joining trees added a powerful centrifugal force — and a force for individualism — to the settlement of the West.

THE CULMINATION OF TIMBER FRAMING ARrives with the raising of the ridgepole, a moment of high drama that Joe approached as one of his biggest scenes. For weeks now, I'd been asking him how we were going to do it — should I be lining up some sort of crane for the day? — and for weeks Joe had been telling me not to worry, that he'd figure out something when the time came. But it was definitely on his mind. During breaks, I'd follow his gaze as it slowly traveled up from the top of the walls to the overhanging trees, only to suddenly plunge again; I guessed he was testing out scenarios (a block and tackle maybe?), running calculations on what it would take to lift a 4-by-10 ridge beam 16 feet overhead.

On the appointed Saturday we began indoors, framing the two end gables — the triangles that hold up the roof at either end of the building. At the apex of each triangle, we left a 4-by-10-inch gap between the two rafters: this was the slot in which the ridgepole would ultimately sit, once we had managed to raise the gables into position. It seemed as though we might still want the crane (the gable assemblies themselves weighed a couple hundred pounds apiece, the ridge beam even more), but Joe said all we would need was one more pair of hands to raise the ridgepole, no particular skill required. So I arranged for an exceptionally tall friend named Don to come by later that afternoon.

After we carried the first gable out to the site, Joe carefully arranged a pair of ladders and set a 2-by-10 plank across the top of the walls. "O.K. Mike, here's the plan," Joe said. "First we turn the gable upside down and inside out. Then, together, we lift the thing just high enough so that this rafter tail here hits that spot there on the plate. You're going to have to balance everything right on that point long enough for me to climb up onto the top of the wall. Then we pivot the whole assembly this way until the other rafter tail hits that point over there, and slide the 2 by 10 under the peak to hold it up. Follow me? Then you get up on the other ladder, and together we flip the thing around, shimmy it forward, and then get under and lift it to vertical."

No, it made no sense to me either, none whatsoever. I told Joe that following his plan was like trying to learn origami over the radio. He wasn't smiling, and I realized then that what we were about to do was not without danger. I said to Joe that maybe it would be better if he just told me what to do one step at a time.

So I followed his instructions, moving first this way and then that, hoisting, holding, pivoting, and then climbing on cue, an obedient pyramid ant, not even aspiring to grasp the big picture, and trusting utterly in my carpenter-turned-choreographer. And then, astoundingly, there we were, each of us holding one side of a 300-pound assembly that we'd managed somehow to raise high into the trees without a crane. I wanted to cheer, except that I was still holding my breath as I waited for Joe to brace the gable. So instead I thought about this newspaper article I'd read that claimed men are especially adept at mentally rotating an object in space, a skill I'd never had much reason to appreciate before. Women supposedly have the edge in verbal agility, which seemed much the better deal. Not today. And here it was, right in front of me, a full-dress display of the male genius.

After raising the second gable, we were ready to set the ridgepole. Don, the six-and-a-half-foot friend I'd recruited for the event, arrived as Joe and I were preparing to mark and cut the gorgeous length of knot-free fir we'd selected for the building's spine. This timber, too, had come from Oregon, according to the stencil on its flank. My tentativeness handling such a piece of wood had vanished; I felt well acquainted with fir, if not quite friend, not foe either. I took up the circular saw, found my mark and worked the blade through the familiar wood flesh, breathing in its sweet midway scent.

"This is what you call a ridgepole?" Don was slightly horrified at just how big the beam was: "I was picturing something a bit more bamboolike."

"We call it a ridgepole to make it feel lighter," Joe said. "But it's really a big tree with the bark taken off and a few corners added."

As Don and I shouldered the ridgepole from the barn out to the site, Joe trotted out ahead, climbing up into the frame to receive it. Now Don, his face reddening with the strain, pressed his end up over his head barbell-style while Joe guided it to a spot on the wall plate; I then did the same with mine. Don and I joined Joe up in the frame, as he directed a new choreography that had the two of us manning opposite gables while he flew back and forth across the structure, helping us each in turn to hoist and then align our beam ends over their intended slots. Don's end went down first, sinking comfortably into its wooden pocket; I watched his tensed expression suddenly bloom into relief. My end needed some manhandling to force the beam down into its slot, where it didn't seem to want to go.

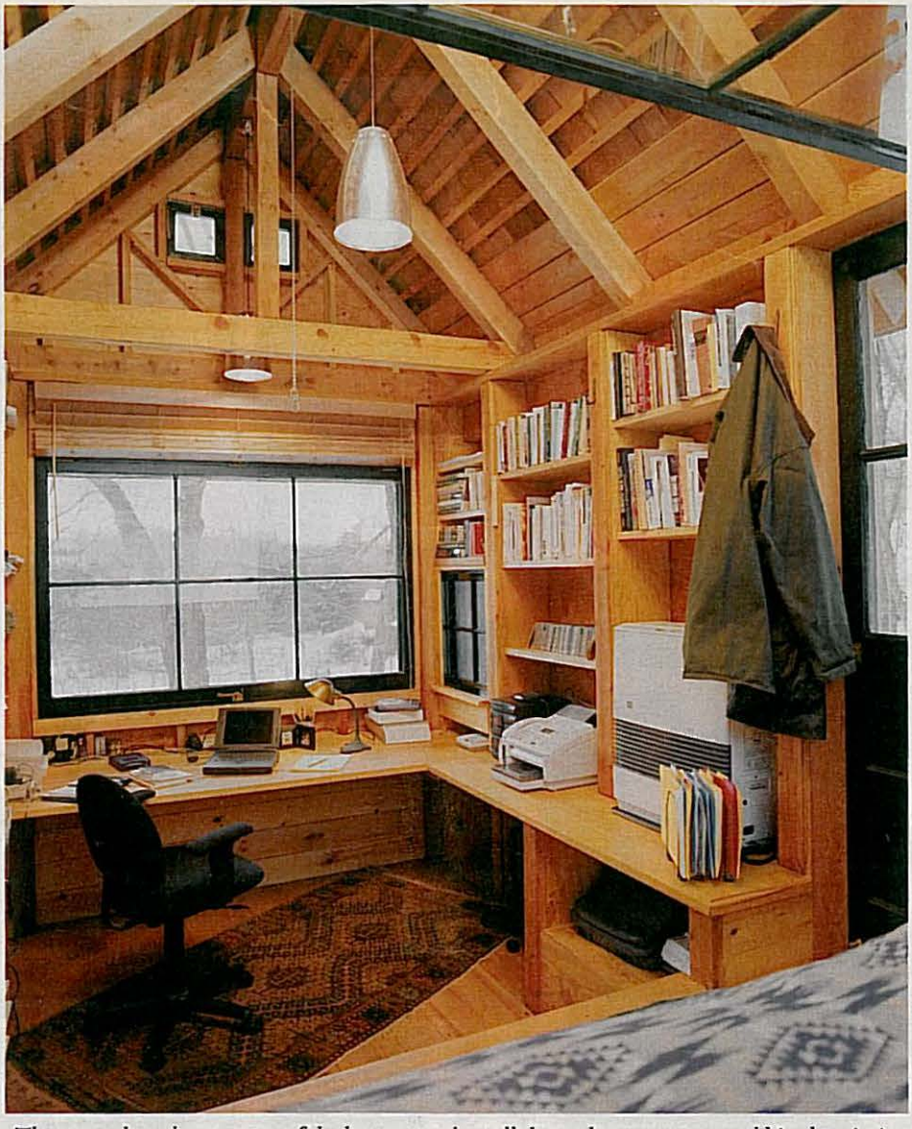
"Time for some physical violence," Joe advised, as he handed his big framing hammer up to me. Now I pounded mightily on the top of the ridge beam — holding the hammer correctly, I might add — and inch by inch it creaked its way down into its slot, the tight-binding wood screeching furiously under the blows, until at last the beam came to rest on its king post, snug and immovable. That was it: the ridgepole set, our frame was topped out.

I asked Joe to hand me his big carpenter's level; along with the tool he gave me a look that said, You're really asking for it, aren't you? There was exactly nothing we could do, after all, if we discovered that our ridge beam

The hanging of the conifer manages all at once to celebrate a joyful accomplishment – the transformation of trees into a dwelling – and force a recognition that there is something vaguely shameful in the very same deed.

was not true. I laid the level along the spine of the building. From where he stood Joe had the better view into the tool's little window, and I read the excellent news in his face. "It doesn't get any better," Joe said, reaching out his palm for a slap. None of us wanted to come down from the frame, so we stood up there in the trees for a long time, beaming dumbly at one another, weary and relieved.

IN COLONIAL TIMES THE topping out of a frame was followed by a ceremony, half-solemn and half-raucous, that invariably included the nailing of an evergreen bough to the topmost beam. Most of the ceremony has been lost to time, but the tree-hanging survives. Even today on a balloon-framed split level in the suburbs you'll often see a conifer tacked to the ridge board before the vinyl siding goes on. I've seen steelworkers raising whole spruce trees to the top of a skyscraper frame high above midtown. Perhaps it's nothing more than superstition, men in a dangerous line of work playing it safe. Or maybe there's some residual power left in the old pagan ritual.



The warmth and symmetry of the hewn wood recall the author to nature and his place in it.

I've read many explanations for the evergreen hanging, all of them spiritual in one degree or another. The conifer is thought to imbue the frame with the tree spirit, or it's meant to sanctify the new house, or appease the gods for the taking of the trees. These interpretations seem reasonable enough, yet they don't account for the fact that someone as unsuperstitious and spiritually retarded as I am felt compelled to go out into the woods in search of a evergreen after we'd raised the ridgepole. Joe probably would have done it if I hadn't, but it was my building, and there was something viscerally appealing about the whole idea, the way it promised to lend a certain symmetry to the framing process, tree to timber to tree. But now that I've actually performed the ritual, I'm inclined to think there's more to it than that. Like many rituals involving a sacrifice, there's an emotional wrench right in the middle of this one. The hanging of the conifer manages all at once to celebrate a joyful accomplishment — the transformation of trees into a dwelling — and force a recognition that there is something vaguely shameful in the very same deed.

Sacrifice seems to be an inescapable part of our condition — we kill to eat, we chop down trees to make our houses, we exploit other people and the earth for our gain. One of the things a ritual does is help us to frame, acknowledge and ultimately even find joy in the paradoxes of being human, reminding us at once of the power and the shame undergirding our achievements. Without such a double awareness, we're apt to find ourselves either plundering nature without restraint or descending into self-loathing and misanthropy. Perhaps it's not surprising that most of us bring either one of those attitudes or the other to our conduct in nature nowadays. For who can hold in his head at the same time a feeling of shame at the cutting down of a great oak and a sense of pride at the achievement of a good building? It doesn't seem possible.

And yet right there may lie the deeper purpose of the topping out ceremony: to cultivate that impossible dual vision, to help foster what amounts to a tragic sense of our place in nature. This is something I suspect the people who used to christen frames understood better than we do. To cut down a tree, to build a house, their rituals imply, is in some way to alienate ourselves from the natural order, for good and bad. The topping-out ritual, with its peculiar mix of solemnity and celebration, must have offered the early builders a way to square the shame and the nobility of this great, dangerous accomplishment.

I'm more than a little embarrassed to utter any such words in connection with my own endeavor, so distant from my world do they sound. But along with the remnants of the old rituals, might there also be at least some residue of the old emotions? I remember on that January morning when I took delivery of my fir timbers, how the sight of those fallen trees on the floor of my barn had unnerved me — "abashed" was the word I'd used. In the battle between the loggers and the northern spotted owl, I'd always counted myself on the side of the owls. But now that I wanted to build, here I was, prepared to sacrifice not only a couple of venerable fir trees in Oregon but a political conviction as well.

So maybe it was shame as much as exultation that brought me down off the frame that early summer evening, sent me out into the woods in quest of an evergreen to kill. Joe had forgotten which you were supposed to use, pine or hemlock or spruce. I decided any conifer would do. It was spruce I came upon first, and after I cut down the little tree and turned to start back to the site, holding the doomed sapling before me like a flag, I saw something I really hadn't seen before: the shape of my building in the landscape. The simple, classical arrangement of posts and beams, their unweathered grain glowing gold in the last of the day's light, stood in sharp relief against the general leafiness, like some sort of geometrical proof chalked on a blackboard of forest. I stopped for a moment to admire it, and filled with pride. The proof, of course, was of us: of the powers — of mind, of body, of civilization — that could achieve such a transubstantiation of trees. *Look at this thing we've made*! And yet nothing happens without the gift of the firs, those green spires sinking slowly to earth in an Oregon forest, and it was this that the spruce recalled me to. Joe had left a ladder leaning against the front gable. I climbed back up into the canopy of leaves, the sapling tucked under my arm, and when I got to the top, I drove a nail through its slender trunk and fixed it to the ridge beam, thinking: *trees*! ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PEDEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES