

from our correspondent in Mt. Vernon

## Stacking Wood

by Fred Bloom

In a few weeks I will be getting a new valve installed into my 74 year-old heart. This year my aortic stenosis progressed from the high end of moderate to the low end of severe, so if they don't do something my heart will soon fail.

I moved to Maine as soon as I finished my professional training because my wife and I, both from St. Louis, wanted more than anything else, to live our lives in Maine. She died eight years ago, and our children moved out long ago. I am the last one remaining in the old farmhouse that we moved into the day we arrived in Maine in the summer of 1974.

One of our first purchases was a Jotul woodstove which we set up in the fireplace of what we call the middle room, which was the kitchen of this house when it was built.

Every year since then getting the wood in has been a part of my life. As I grew older I gradually was reduced to buying wood cut and split, but I still bring it in myself.

So what is the point? Well, this year everyone is assuming that I am having someone do this for me- obviously because they know that I'm scheduled for heart surgery. I also wondered how it would go, since carrying a basket of laundry up from the basement is enough to start me breathing heavy. But, a couple of weeks ago I cleaned out the shed, stacked the remainder of the old wood outside under a porch roof and started bringing in the five cords that have been weathering outside beside the woodshed all summer.

Generally, the first round I can do three or four wheelbarrow loads, then with 20 or 30 minute breaks, I can do one or two more rounds of two, maybe three, loads each. It's coming along, and fortunately I'm retired so I can work a little bit every day. But, why am I doing it?

When my kids told me that I could not abandon my wife's flower and herb garden after she died, I didn't try to move in and take care of it myself. I knew I was incapable of doing a good job of managing her garden, and I didn't want to turn my retirement into a study of gardening. In that instance I hired someone who comes half-day every week and does in that time what I couldn't do if I were to spend a half-day every day out there. His level is beyond pro. He's a master.

But, having said that, it becomes clear to me now that, in the case of stacking wood, I am a master. I wasn't intending to say it in that way, but the reason I don't hire someone to stack the wood is because no one could do the job that I do.

What I like to say to the imaginary apprentice, whom I frequently talk to as I am working, is that you don't stack a tier of wood, you build a tier of wood. Where each stick goes matters, and is a matter that requires attention. But- and this is the mysterious part of stacking wood- that attention is not a mental attention.

At first, yes, you have to think if the base row is straight, so the tier won't bulge in the middle, and it has to go up plumb, so you have to take into account that as you add more tiers the floor will sag under the huge weight of wood, causing the previous tiers to tilt forward. Thus, the first two tiers need to tip back slightly. And you have to think that to fit all seven tiers in, you have to squeeze them in at one end so you don't run into the electrical box when you're coming up with the last one.

And at first, when you're paying attention it's with the mind. You're thinking about where the wood goes. But, then as you get into the work, as you start to sweat and get tired, your concentration begins to shift from your mind to something else. You're not thinking anymore. You're just into it. Now each stick of wood finds it's own home. Nobody is deciding anymore where it will go. The wood just goes where it wants to go.

It is then that the work that you're doing is the work of a master.

I once told a friend who still lives in St. Louis that a tier of wood is a work of art. He laughed, so I sent a photo of the face of a tier of wood, cropped so that you wouldn't notice immediately what it was- just the pattern of shapes it made- so it was like an abstract painting.



Nothing I could do would give me more satisfaction than stacking the wood. Other things could give me equal satisfaction. Re-reading some of the scenes in *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky (Pevear/Volokonsy translation) or the scene of Birkin finding the lost rings and surrendering himself to Ursula in *Women in Love* by D.H. Lawrence, or the slow movement of the Dvorak cello concerto played by Yoyo Ma- these things could equal the satisfaction, the spiritual joy, of stacking wood, and certainly those fabulous parties with everyone up and dancing to the fabulous music of the sixties- true joy of ecstatic communion- equal, yes, but nothing could be better.

So that is my answer to those who would say that I should hire someone to stack my wood for me.

How sad that in the lives we lead, most of what happens is on a screen. We actually forget that we have a body, until we get stiff from sitting and have to shift our position on the couch. Entertainment is not spiritual joy, and can never be. To reach that joy, we have to be present and involved, body and soul, in a way that entertainment makes impossible. It's for that reason that entertainment leaves us always hungry for more. It's because it excites us while at the same time leaving us outside- observing. That's its purpose, actually- not to satisfy, but to keep us coming back for more- like an addiction.

Joy and fulfillment only come from what is real. What is real is what you actually do, what you are involved in, drawn into, and a part of. It's completely ordinary. It's not anything special. God is in small things, as Arundhati Roy would put it. That's what the Zen master meant to convey when a monk asked him, what is the Way? With this the monk was asking him, what is the way to enlightenment, to ultimate fulfillment, to the absolute spiritual reality? What is the road to heaven? The master said, "Chop wood; carry water."



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