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INTERVIEW

Shelf Unbound: Your chapters are based on St. Benedict's stages in becoming a monk. I also found an echo of a monastic philosophy in your acceptance that any day on the job site could be your last, a perspective that helped you take action despite your fear of making a costly error. What parts of that philosophy are still present in your life today?

Andrew Hoffman: I feel very strongly in the idea of pursuing a calling. I believe everyone has a purpose and they need to be still and listen to that inner voice in order to find it. Unfortunately in today's hectic, loud, and commercialized world, many of us do not spend time searching for that true sense of direction that is our own. We tend to go with the crowd or

what the crowd thinks has value. Think how great a world it would be if everyone followed their own inner passion and purpose!

I think one reason I left home building was a feeling that I had more to offer the world than creating such opulent homes for wealthy clients. I love every house I built but felt that my calling had a deeper social purpose to it. Sometimes I question that decision, but one thing I learned only after I left carpentry was the love I derive from writing. I really love it.

Shelf: Your book was really a page-turner for me as an amateur carpenter, but I wonder at what point you realized that your experience could be made into such a compelling book?

WARNING—THIS BOOK MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR CAREER. Andrew Hoffman's memoir recounting his journey from a cubicle-dwelling chemical engineer to a full-fledged custom homebuilder is the opposite of a cautionary tale. Instead it recommends taking the road less traveled—specifically the one that heads toward a dream borne of passion, which, happily for Hoffman, also ends up being the road to success. Hoffman, or “Stuff” as he is inexplicably nicknamed by the master builder under whom he studies, recounts his work on three homes, each progressively larger and involving more responsibility and mastery. To call this memoir a page-turner may seem incongruous, but this was one of those books I was tempted to pull out at long traffic lights, unable to wait any longer to find out who was to blame for the out-of-plumb wall at the Shaw house or whether or not the Colorado carpenter's bad influence would infect the rest of the crew. While *Builder's Apprentice* constructs its story around the building of homes, its themes will resonate with those striving to find meaning in their life's work.

—Jennifer Wichmann

Hoffman: It's hard to say. I knew that mine was an unusual experience and I wanted to write about it soon after I finished my last house. But taking 20 years to reflect before actually writing helped me to be more introspective and thoughtful about what the book is really saying. Had I written it right after the experience it would have been more of a collection of events and less about what they meant. I didn't show it to anyone except my editor until it was done, and only when I started getting positive feedback did I know I had something special that touches people. That response is very gratifying.

Shelf: The love of carpentry drew you into building—the joy you got from creating “your trap door” on the Rogers House was palpable.

How did that love change or transform as you moved away from pure carpentry and into the site management aspect of building a house?

Hoffman: Oh, I still loved it. I loved being in the center of all the action of dozens of subcontractors and directing the construction of those individual elements. Building with my hands is a unique pleasure, and I never gave that up. But thinking how, for such a large crew, to make the house a reality was a pleasure that I relished as well.

Shelf: I noticed that your publisher is a part of the Green Press Initiative, a movement to preserve ancient rainforests and natural resources through the use of recycled, chlorine-free paper. Does the appreciation of wood that you developed as a carpenter influence your perspective on the environment and consumer consumption?

Hoffman: Actually, this is a tough question. I teach about sustainability now, but in this book I write about building a 29,000-square-foot home. No one really needs that much space, but it was truly a work of art, one that I and the crew took great pride in building. There was a lot of large dimension redwood in the house, and I did feel some guilt at first seeing the Muir Woods. But, in the end, this book is about the love of craft and the guilt I feel is short-lived. The choice to print with the Green Press Initiative was something that both the publisher and I believe in.

Shelf: There was a shadowy undercurrent that ran through some of Jack's dealings with difficult subcontractors. The implication I drew was that custom home building in New England was tangentially connected to organized crime and required the ability to either literally or figuratively hurt others. Did this "darkness" lead you away from continuing as a homebuilder?

Hoffman: I wouldn't extrapolate from Jack to the entire construction industry in New England. There is no doubt that it is a tough business (as I am sure it is everywhere), but not all were connected to organized crime. And honestly, to this day, I don't know what to make of Jack and his statements intimating such. He was an enigma in many ways. But I can also say that I could not have resolved many of my more difficult problems without his force and strength, either directly (through dealing with the pool contractor) or indirectly in the way he supported me and gave me strength to take action myself. This didn't lead me away from custom building though.

Shelf: A great deal of the book is devoted to your growth as a supervisor/manager of the workers and subcontractors on the building site. Your struggles and milestones are very similar to those most supervisors and managers face in the workplace—being a friend vs. being the boss, a younger worker supervising an older employee, realizing when it is time for an employee to move on, ensuring promises and contracts are delivered on. Are these lessons you are able to put into practice in your current role as a professor?

Hoffman: Absolutely. In fact, I wrote a series of blogs for the *Harvard Business Review* based on management lessons from the book (i.e., how to fire someone). You can see them on the book's web page [webuser.bus.umich.edu/ajhoff/memoir.html]. I use the stories as ways to illustrate many of the points I want to make in the classroom. They make my lectures vivid and give me a great deal of credibility as one who actually ran a company. Oddly, there are not many business school professors who can say that.

Shelf: You built a series of homes with Jack, your mentor and employer/partner over several years, but then left that work for

the life of a professor. Did you experience a similar calling as you did with building when you made that change?

Hoffman: Yes, but it is harder to define. There is less of a tangibility to being a professor than a contractor. If someone walked into one of my homes and said it was a piece of junk, I'd look him dead in the eye and say he didn't know what he was talking about. If someone grabbed one of my books or articles and said it was a piece of junk, I'd have to ask why he thought that. In many ways I associated more with the identity of builder than I do with the identity of professor. I'm not sure why that's so. It could be because of the tangibility and clarity of building. It could also be because of the strength I drew from Jack. I really wanted that to come out in the book—the power of a mentor in your life.

Shelf: At the end of the book, you mention that you make an annual pilgrimage to the world of home building. However, you also tell readers that your tools were in storage at your sister's home for 20 years. There seems to be a chasm between building at such an intense and exclusive level and not building at all. Yet at the end of the book you tell readers you are a homeowner, ready to renovate your own home. What kept you away and what brought you back?

Hoffman: I still did lots of carpentry in the interim—I renovated my sister's second floor, my brother's kitchen, built a deck for another brother, did Habitat for Humanity projects, etc. I never left it; I just had no place to put my tools while I lived the meager existence of a student in Cambridge. And no matter the scale, it is still immensely pleasurable to look at something I created with my hand and my imagination. My home now has a wood floor, window seat, and many other changes that I feel great satisfaction looking at. —