

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

19. The Man Who Has Everything

17 August 2014

I produced a few online photos of my house in Bovina for the therapists to judge its fitness as a place for me to continue my rehabilitation. Beyond suggesting a short handrail by the front steps and a hand grip near the bathroom toilet, they thought it would be an excellent place for me to carry on with my mission. Both Lisa and Jean were impressed by the house's simplicity and economy. Yet to me it is my palace, better than many former kings or queens of England or France could claim. It has fresh running water and a cook stove. It is flooded with sunlight and is cozy warm in winter for very little cost of fuel. In addition, there is electricity, Internet, and telephone. What more could I want?

I have always been blessed with the basics of existence—and then some—and never wanted for any of them. I am grateful for every bit, morsel, and stick. I have never been envious of the possessions or station of others because I realize what is required to acquire them. I have all I need; I have enough.

In my opinion, money costs too much, especially in terms of the time and effort necessary to get it. Worse, one needs to relinquish or sacrifice so many simple pleasures merely to acquire more things that bring so little happiness for so short a time. Fortunately, that acquisitive spirit has never made much sense to me. I suppose I am by nature a bit of a slacker and an under-achiever. Perhaps I am un-American in stating that I have enough and do not want more. I am satisfied. I am blessed.

The house in Bovina began its life as a garage that my partner and I little-by-little over the course of four years turned into a small jewel-box of a house. One-third is devoted to a bathroom and bedroom, each with many windows to permit as much sunlight as possible to enter. The remaining two-thirds of this 24-by-26-foot (600-square-foot) space is comprised of kitchen, dining area, living room, and a small work corner, all in one undivided space. Here there are more windows, and the doors to the adjoining bathroom and bedroom are French doors, thereby allowing the southern sunlight to stream in.

The house, which we call Casa Bovina, is fitted with the usual modern conveniences of moderate price. It's heated with a very efficient wood stove with a large glass window so that the fire can warm us psychologically as well as physically. The decor is simple and uncluttered, with cedar wainscoting and unadorned plaster walls. Though I am an artist, I have none of my own work hanging. The windows and doors, all looking out on woods or meadow and the mountains and valleys beyond, provide all the art and scenery I require. Best of all, it is always changing and invariably beautiful, all without having to acquire or deaccession anything.

The new apartment condominiums in New York City near Carnegie Hall boast bathtubs of Carrara marble that cost more than my entire house, property and everything in it and on it. Yet I can get just as wet in my own tub and it requires far less energy to draw and heat the water. I am blessed beyond measure.

My last job in Chicago before moving to New York was as a gardener for a city landscape designer. Perhaps that term conjures up wide vistas and earth-moving equipment. The work I did for the woman (Sally Callender) who employed me entailed planting and maintaining city gardens and small yards and rooftop planters. I found it to be very satisfying work in which I also got to make use of my wood-working and cabinet-making skills. In the off-season I was employed decorating yards and houses for Christmas. Later, it was spring cleaning, both indoors and outside, and the assignments often included various handyman projects where required. It was the most varied job I'd ever had, and it was impossible to become bored. I was also paid well and liked all my co-workers.

At one client's penthouse I designed, built, and installed huge planter boxes that accommodated small ornamental trees. I made other boxes for tall grasses, shrubs, and flowers. After carting tons of black dirt, mulch, and gravel across their pure-white carpet with my cohorts—during which process we expected at least one slapstick accident—the owners returned home early to inspect our work. They were enormously pleased and no accidents had occurred except in our Laurel-and-Hardy imaginations.

The owners were a professional couple in their mid-thirties with no children and plenty of money to indulge themselves and get whatever trinkets they desired, including the gorgeous rooftop garden we had just installed. When they realized I was the one who had designed and constructed their planter boxes, they seemed especially effusive in their praise.

"I wish I had the time to work in my garden, building and growing things," the husband told me. "You are incredibly lucky to be in this line of work." I agreed that indeed I was. "Maybe if your company has any openings..." the wife joked. "I'll mention it to Sally (my boss)," I replied, keeping the joke aloft.

I realized then that the nice apartment and furnishings in a tony neighborhood carried a very high price tag. I felt very sad for the young couple who earned far too much money to be able to afford and enjoy life's simpler pleasures, such as tending a garden and making things with one's hands. The experience confirmed for me again how incredibly fortunate I was. I am still. I am the man who has everything.