

## **In the Midst of My True Life**

In the morning the sun rises over Mt Ida and shines into the bedroom of my strawbale house. If it's winter there could be snow, ten centimetres of white over the stone wall, or frost silvering the grass and toi tois. In summer there'll be wild poppies ablaze with red, the grass as tawny as the hills. And if there's a wind, the rippling tussocks will show which way it blows.

*...Wind again. The clouds  
fused over Blackstone Hill. Maybe snow  
the paper says. The tussock flicks like hair...*

In that time after our ending, I drew the design of a house where I could wake to the sun and write. There'd be a blaze of gold in my room. Now, the mud walls hold the luminescence of lime. The floor is pressed and trowelled earth, oiled with linseed. It glows with its own richness - that of beginnings, of standing right where you are. Yellow curtains at the window. Outside, there are sheep on Rough Ridge, making their way through tussock and tor.

I once read of a writer who lived in her bedroom. She did everything there - eating, writing, reading. But she didn't have a house to finish. Another coat of earth plaster for the sitting-room, another coat of lime.

*...the walls still*

*curve and dip under your hand*

*there's mud and straw*

*you know how things arise -*

*yet to walk in and feel*

*that presence of light*

*is to know how things*

*transform...*

Women write to me and say: I always wanted to build a strawbale house, or a rammed earth house...and now my husband has died... now my partner has left....now I'm on my own I want to...

We have forgotten we can build our own houses. How capable we are. I am anchored in this house where every wall holds the memory of my hand.

Perhaps more people want to build a natural house but curtail themselves. I held a dream of building a natural house through 37 years of marriage and partnership. What is it that prevents us from realizing our dreams? Is the force of conventionality too strong? Or is it that when you lose much of what you value, you're ready to take a risk, and do what you believe in.

*...I'm juggling fear and awe:*

*my private regrets, a past snuffed,*

*the fact of this house at all...*

Perhaps, when we have suffered loss, the drive to build a life that holds more meaning can lead us to consider building our own shelter. Like, say, Carl Jung, who with grief at the death

of his mother, built his stone tower at Bollingen. “At Bollingen,” he wrote, “I am in the midst of my true life. I am most deeply myself.” As I helped build my house, I too felt with each beam I lifted into place, each nail, each bale of straw tucked into the wall, each handful of mud and hawk of plaster that here, along with a structure that arose physically in the landscape, I was remaking my life. Giving myself strong foundations, a protective roof. Not only a place to dream, but I the dreamer created anew in this place, with the hills on each side and the mountains at the end of the road.

What if one person says to another, *we could build a natural house*, and does just that. Following conscience rather than convention. “Such an act is no mere vagary,” American author, farmer and conservationist Wendell Berry writes. “It is the basis and essence of political liberty.”

*...be a warrior in terms of what it takes.*

*It's not just the cold,*

*sometimes it's the strength to get up.*

*To rise up. Restraint*

*is another word for imagination...*

I want to trust we will one day rediscover natural building. Could this help provide more sustainable housing solutions? Auckland architect Min Hall, asked just this in her Master of Architectural thesis. Yes, she concludes. “Straw, timber and earth ... have the necessary material characteristics to produce enduring, healthy houses on a sustainable basis.”

But why hasn't natural building become mainstream? Hall quotes Ellen Jackson's 2009 Master's thesis 'Self Reliance and Earth Building in New Zealand': “...the largest reason

why the surveyed population did not want to live in earth buildings was because it was unfamiliar or unknown to them.” (2009, p.174)

Staff at Placemakers are hardly going to start talking about mud. ITM doesn't advertise house-lots of straw bales. I want to shout from my high-pitched roof, 'Mud rules! Lime is the queen of all building materials. Build from this earth, and respect it.'

In this I know I am going against convention. At the pub one night, when the locals had heard I wanted to make an earth floor over my concrete floor, the ribbing began. Especially from the trio at the bar - farmer Barry, truck driver Grim, and tradesman Wayne.

“You'll be able to plant potatoes on your kitchen floor,” Barry had said, and laughed.

“And after that a crop of beans,” said Grim. He'd laughed too. I just smiled back at them. I felt on solid ground. The ground that comes from being free to believe in something and to have the strength to carry it out.

“*How* deep are you going to make it?” asked Wayne, at least beginning to think logically about it.

“Half an inch,” I said. He nodded, but still looked bewildered. “On top of concrete?” On top of perfectly good concrete. I had no funds to cover it with anything else. I had piles of left over clay and sand in the backyard, and a part bale of straw. I'd learnt how to handle a trowel. It seemed immensely logical to me, if you had the chance to make something yourself, out of something as free and natural as dirt, then do it.

“I have a question for you Barry,” I say.

“Ask away.”

“Why are the bulls roaring? I heard them out on the hill when I was finished on the mixer.”

“I've got two in one paddock, and three in another,” Barry said. “And I'm thinking now there's probably five in one paddock. And being males, they've got a bit of sorting out to do.” The three males laughed.

The publican brought us over free chips. Enough for everyone in the bar. We stood around the counter with our cold beers, hot fries.

“Give us a yell and I’ll come over and have a look at what you’re up to,” said Wayne.

“Making her kitchen muddy,” said Grim. The truck driver who would come even on a Saturday if I needed sand, driving the company’s JCB up the road with a scoop. And Barry turning up in the middle of foot trimming, blood on his cheek, to bring me baling twine for retying the strawbales. They might not understand the work I do, but they respect work, and the doing of it.

That night in bed I went over the day – the straw sifted through an old wirewove bed, the clay too. And wedged under the bowl of the concrete mixer, the old bath, finally full of a lumpy, grainy mix – a recipe I hoped I’d got right.

Would it work, though? I’d never seen an earth floor being plastered, or even seen an earth floor except in a book. I held that picture in my mind – the glowing floor. A floor made out of what was there.

Once a year, the local high school brings the high achiever class here. We meet at the pub for coke and chips and a talk. Then I bring them to my house. I help them make lime wash. I show them my walls. I want them to feel how simple it is to contribute to your own shelter. I want them to have hope.

If someone calls in when I’m plastering, I pass them a bucket of earth plaster. *Put your hand in it*, I say. *Put some on the wall*. There’s a joyous response. The mix of fermented straw, clay, sand, sawdust and water is cool and tactile in your hand. It squidges between your fingers, it smooths and curves under your palm. You are a child crouched by a stream again, enthralled with mud.

When I massaged earth into the contoured shape of the walls, I thought it could be a living, breathing animal. The house could be its own entity. And why not? Each time I come home I greet my house like a companion. Does saying I love my house, and my house lives, sound mad? Time after time, when people first step in the door, there is a silence, akin to awe. *It feels different*, people say. They breathe, and look around. They're not sure what it is, other than the hush of the walls. I stand beside them, feeling it too.

How vulnerable we were during construction. My son-in-law, Sam, and I up on the top beams with the wind against our thighs. 43 degrees and only the outline of walls for shade.

*... up with the drill, the hammer,*

*the skillsaw,*

*sun like lava*

*on my thighs and knees...*

When building a house, you're aware of all a house gives you. From the first roll of building paper and run of iron screwed to the joists, shelter begins. With the first wall blocked in, respite from the wind. And when windows replace tarps, light returns and the line of hills and the grass.

Where I sit in my house looking out to the hills, I can imagine this house from the foundations upwards. Those first few days on site, the pick falling into the clean, dark earth, and each scoop of the spade tidying the foundations trench so that it ran true and deep behind me. "In our wake, the path we have taken trails out behind us," Kathleen Dean Moore writes in *Wild Comfort*. In her essay, she is on a small boat, lost in mist and waves. In the same way,

my future was uncharted in front of me, but the wake of the straight-sided trench – that showed I was going somewhere. I even had plans.

And I know the pitch of the roof: on top of the ladder holding onto a red sheet of iron as it bucked in the northwester, and Sam calling “Hold tight!”

I know the quarry my lime came from, in the dry hills at Dunback. Calcium carbonate, friend to humans for five thousand years. Burnt at 1000° C it becomes calcium oxide. Added to water, calcium hydroxide. Mixed with sand (one part lime to four parts sand) and water, spread over the earth plaster, it fixes carbon from the air and returns to its natural state, calcium carbonate. An almost carbon neutral substance to use in building.

*...When I get up I start the mixer*

*tumbling, add lime, the sand*

*flecked with gold.*

*I know what joy is, spreading this*

*simple cloak on mud...*

Beautiful, ethical, breathable lime.

When I spread the earth plaster onto my concrete floor, that joy returned. I lifted cold handfuls out of the bucket and pressed it onto the floor. Five, six, seven handfuls. Then I took my wooden float and smeared them, pressing, the mud shifting under the wood until it became one smooth surface. I changed to the steel trowel and pressed it firmly on the mud surface, running the trowel in one gliding motion, until the mud became a sheen of flat floor. And when that area was done I turned to my bucket for the next handfuls. Hour after hour. The floor my earthen wake behind me.

There are strengths we can lose when we are two by becoming dependent. By forgetting what we are capable of. While we were building together, Sam pulled me up when I didn't rely on myself. "You can't go on in life always expecting a man or someone else to do things for you," he'd say. "You have to work out ways to do things yourself." This to a person who couldn't get lids off jars. How much strength does it take? Do what I can, I learnt, then do what the job requires. Plastering under the curve above the window, the trowel upside down and the mud falling again and again into my face and onto the wide windowsill, until one small amount stuck, and another amount stuck, and some fell down, and some stuck. Me cursing inside at my ineptitude. The mix too soft, but trowelling it up over and over until the job was done.

How hard it is to not be skilled but to do something anyway, to want my work to be excellent and know that it isn't. To know I'm doing skilled women's work that's been passed down through the centuries but not in my culture.

How hard it is knowing my own dad was a fine plasterer and taught my brothers but not me – because I didn't ask, because I wasn't interested, because I didn't know about earth, or that he would die, or how plastering is not just solid or fibrous or gib stopping, but with earth can be the foundation of shelter. It's an art. And it's a simple, joyous pleasure. Self-taught, I inch towards that sense of pleasure in a job well done. My father running his hand over someone else's work, and then that nod of respect to craft.

On the mixer, just before the sun went down behind the willows, and the bulls began to roar, the sun flung its last colours up onto the mountains, so that the white snow became gold and tangerine. When I turned the mixer off, there was the noise of the stream again, rippling under the willows on my boundary, a clattery noise under violet clouds. Water, and sky, and

the feel of the mud mix cool in my hand, it's solidness akin to what I felt inside, a linking to the natural world, and to all the women builders who had gone before me, the enjarradoras, the earth plasterers, the ones who made shelter for their families.

Here, the sheep are big bellied on the lower slopes, and newly shorn. The black bulls pace the fenceline. I tuck a tarpaulin over my mud, weight the tarp with boulders. The tawny brown mix gives me hope for a future where I can still provide for myself, still dream of things that are possible, resourceful, and respectful to our planet. Still strive to do more than I think I can.

When the day is finally done, I move my laptop to the small table near the fire. The orange glow warms the stone surround, keeps the house a steady heat for me, and for my drying floor. There's a wind up, blustering and buffeting the west wall and singing in the flu. The house has its arms around me.