

## Hammering Out a Vocation

I WAS BORN IN 1951 and lived out my childhood in Rydal, an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. My father was a gregarious, capable lawyer who commuted into the city by train. My mother went back to college to complete her undergraduate studies when my sister and I were still quite young, and followed through to a Ph.D. in history. In a proper autobiography there would be a significant ethnic backstory to fill in – the cultural disparity between my father’s Eastern European Jewish roots and my mother’s German Jewish background, the thrust of Reform Judaism toward assimilation, the sense of being outsiders in an America where anti-Semitism was still evident, and the lingering pall of the Holocaust.

But that was the world of my childhood as I understand it from the perspective of half a century. The way it seemed to me then was that the “Nazis” and “Japs” had been soundly defeated, the Holocaust was ancient history like everything else that took place before I was born, the world was fast outgrowing anti-Semitism, and science was conquering diseases so fast that all of them would be vanquished before my generation was old enough to be vulnerable. I grew up swaddled in the belief that tragedy was over, that wars, persecution, and disease belonged to the past, and that, while bad things might happen to people in books and in other places (such as those starving children in India for whom we

ate everything on our plates), they did not happen in the world I inhabited.

There was a day when, as a small boy, I found a day-bed mattress at the top of the stairs. With great effort I maneuvered it off the landing until it started to descend the green carpeted steps on its own. I hadn't thought any further ahead than that moment, and delight flashed to fear as the mattress rapidly gained momentum and, abruptly, punched a hole in the wall opposite the bottom landing. Then – amazing! – broken chunks of granular white plaster, jagged splinters of rough wood lathe, and, most impressive of all, a dry, empty cavity behind the wall, a secret world. It had never occurred to me that there might be anything behind the painted surface. This was my mental state growing up: life was all surface. The discovery of depth, when it came during my college years, did not have the drama of a mattress smashing through a wall. Rather, a capacity for reflection seemed to emerge as gradually and fitfully as a child learns to walk.

One of the first tiny steps occurred the summer before my senior year at Germantown Friends School, when I participated in an American Friends Service Committee work camp in Owatonna, Minnesota. Our group of student volunteers lived in a bat-infested barn housing a Salvation Army store in one corner of the ground floor. It was 1968 and three of us were fledgling hippies who hung out together. There was Larry, with whom I would laugh until we collapsed to the floor, and Fred, who was moody, ironic, and intense as a Janis Ian song. What I found particularly incomprehensible about Fred was that he was in analysis. I wasn't unfamiliar with Freud, but I simply couldn't imagine what Fred found to be so miserable about. And, while I remained mystified, the simple fact of Fred, and his disdain for my own reflexive cheerfulness, was a chink in the smooth surface of life. Now I knew there was a cavity behind the wall, even if I didn't have a clue what might be inside.

Three summers later, my nineteen-year-old self lay sprawled on a

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bed, reading a book on social activism. Not that I had become a committed social activist – I was a college student working as a gardener on Nantucket. An antiwar, longhaired, pot-smoking, pro-civil rights student who had marched on Washington and been tear-gassed at Fort Dix for peace and justice, but a self-absorbed student nonetheless. That summer, the full extent of my daily activism consisted of choosing the colored elastic with which I would tie back my ponytail. Black symbolized Bakunin and anarchy, red was for Trotsky and socialism, blue matched my eyes.

The name of the book I was reading is lost to memory, but the gist of its message was that working to improve people's material circumstances isn't enough. Even if you manage to relieve their hunger and physical discomfort, you will not have touched their spiritual needs, which are what really matter. Better to be hungry and cold, but spiritually nourished, than to feast by a blazing hearth with spiritual emptiness gnawing away from inside.

Although I strongly suspected that no starving person would agree with the author's contention, I detected a certain truth in his words. Having attended a Quaker secondary school, I had seen many generous people – teachers, social workers, philanthropists, psychologists, Peace Corps volunteers, political activists – trying to help others through life's difficulties. Unfortunately, to my young eyes, the helpers didn't appear to be particularly happy or fulfilled themselves. There had to be more to life. The phrase "Physician, heal thyself!" came to mind, and it occurred to me that I should find out how to live my own life well before I presumed to help others. If I had to date my journey into craft, this was the moment it began.

A year later, having spent the summer in Mexico learning Spanish, I moved to Nantucket Island in search of "real life." My intent was to earn the remainder of my college credits through independent study. I didn't know what real life was. I just knew that in school I seemed to be experiencing life secondhand.

Nantucket was not then the wealthy enclave it is now; the ghosts of the nineteenth century were still in possession – and I mean this fairly literally. The Nantucket I knew as a child, starting with family vacations in the 1950s, was an isolated backwater of deteriorating old houses furnished with the hundred-year-old salvage of the island's whaling heyday. At the time I moved there, in 1972, there were only three thousand year-round residents, almost all of whom were island-born except for fifty or sixty hippie immigrants like myself. A mild collision of cultures ensued that one could stereotype as hippie-meets-redneck, but it was not particularly antagonistic. For a twenty-year-old it was a magical time and place.

I arrived on the island with three years of college behind me, a low draft number, and a box full of Marvel comic books. The low draft number argued for staying in college at the University of Pennsylvania. When my student deferment ran out, I intended to serve time in jail as a conscientious objector rather than report to basic training. The box full of comic books was research material for one of the three independent study courses I took that fall – a sociological evaluation of comic-book readership through story content, graphics, and advertisements.

But what I really did that fall was begin my own life, to the extent that one can while one's father (my parents now being divorced) is still paying the rent. I was free to do what I wanted, when I wanted, as long as I wrote those papers. Admittedly, what I wanted to do was pretty simple stuff. Walks over the moors. Walks on the beaches. Walks through town. Pick rose hips and plums and grapes as each came in season and learn to make jelly. Cook pies and stir-fries and bake bread. And, every evening, get stoned with my buddy Al and listen to Incredible String Band records for hours on end.

In December, I sealed my final term paper into a manila envelope and dropped it in the mail. I had accumulated enough credits to graduate, so right before Christmas I started looking for a job. A

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I had no specific career ambitions, although it was now time to earn a living. What I did have was the desire to discover a better way to live than my parents' generation appeared to have found. In this I was very much a representative of my own generation. We grew up in a prosperous, postwar America where, despite every sign of worldly success, adult life looked shallow and, in the twin shadows of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, morally bankrupt. Today we would use the word *unfulfilled* instead of *shallow*, but the concept of fulfillment as a life goal was not current in the sixties. Our parents were children of the Great Depression. For them, the bottom-line measure was economic security. In any case, I looked at the grown-up world and said, All this for what? My life and those of many of my contemporaries may be seen as attempts to answer that question – not theoretically, but in practice.

The search for a good life was not the relatively simple matter of getting from point A to point B over difficult terrain (which better describes the path to success in an established profession like medicine or law). It was more like being a fifteenth-century European explorer navigating with maps on which a known, finely detailed world is bordered by sketchy depictions of legendary continents and fabled cities – a voyage over uncharted seas to find out what really lay beyond.

We were all looking for accurate maps of the world, my friends and I. My best friend from high school, Scott, was studying Buddhism under Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. A close friend from college, Tom, was learning to organize strikes and boycotts under Cesar Chavez. I was too skeptical of gurus, politics, and office work to journey alongside either one. Thinking of this now, a Jackson Brown lyric of that era comes to mind: "Together we went traveling, as we received the call / His destination India, and I had none at all."

Although I may not have known where I was going, I had at least figured out that the work I chose would continue to shape me, so I knew I had to choose carefully. Obvious as that may seem today, at the time it was a major realization. I grew up in a world where, as characterized by physician and author Abigail Zuger, “the adult brain was considered an immutable machine, as wonderfully precise as a clock in a locked case. Every part had a specific purpose, none could be replaced or repaired, and the machine was destined to tick in unchanging rhythm until its gears corroded with age.”<sup>3</sup> As a child I had assumed that the process of growing up ended when you finished college, after which you stayed the same person for the rest of your life. Only as I approached adulthood did I realize that life is a process of continual becoming.

### *Carpentry*

The work I chose turned out to be the work that chose me. The first person to offer me a job that December was a carpenter. He might just as easily have been a plumber or an electrician, since building trades were prevalent on Nantucket.

Carpentry was new to me, and that first job was not a promising start. We were a young three-man crew left to hold the fort while the boss wintered in the Caribbean. The lead carpenter, Kendrick, was a West Indian who mostly thought about meeting girls with “powe’ful thighs.” Neither he nor Bobby, a ruddy-faced construction worker from South Carolina, knew enough to make us productive. There were days when we only managed to fit one rake board to a gable between the three of us, all the while freezing our asses off (as we put it) in the February cold.

My father wasn’t happy with my choice of work. He’d always assumed I’d pursue a professional career such as law, medicine, or even, God forbid, architecture. He wasn’t prepared for his son to

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become a tradesman. More than once he said, "You'll regret doing work that doesn't challenge your mind." But from the start there was a mind/body wholeness to carpentry that put it way ahead of what I imagined office work to be. Nonetheless, I did make time that winter, while my brain was still tracking in an academic groove, to take the law school admission test, just in case my father turned out to be right. My mother, on the other hand, was fully supportive. If I had chosen to rob banks for a living she would have been proud, so long as I did it well.

Skilled labor was completely new to me. Back in high school my father had given me the nickname Helpful Henry after I dropped and shattered a light bulb while changing a ceiling fixture in the kitchen. That nickname, with its implication of ineptitude, was mine to inhabit or not, and I didn't really want it. I see it now as my father's projection of his own disinterest in mechanical matters. He couldn't have pointed to the carburetor under the hood of his Pontiac LeMans and he didn't care. In the Jewish-American culture in which my father grew up, working with your hands dropped you many rungs down the social ladder. Yet carpentry provided an identity into which I was eager to grow. The carpenters I knew on Nantucket were young off-islanders who, like me, had moved there to find a different sort of life. They were independent, irreverent, competent, and self-reliant. I couldn't wait for the day when the soft leather of my new hammer holster would be as scarred and weathered as theirs.

In taking a job as a carpenter I was challenging elements of a story I had inherited from my parents and their parents before them about who I was and how the world worked. But I was not a lone rebel. The ideas I was trying out permeated the culture of the time like spores of wild yeast. The process of rewriting the story by which I found my place in the world was simultaneously both personal and generational.

### Carl Borchert

In January 1973, the Vietnam War ended and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced the end of the draft. For an apprentice carpenter who had been expecting a draft notice any day, the world became more luminous. I no longer faced an imminent detour to Vietnam or prison.

Then, in March, I was offered a job on a more dynamic carpentry crew. My new employer, Carl Borchert, had worked as an engineer outside of Boston, designing weapon systems for Raytheon, before moving his young family to Nantucket to build a more morally attuned life (plate 1). Carl was six foot six, full-bearded, and Abraham Lincoln thin. The one time I saw him trip and fall, he went over with the slow-motion grandeur of a redwood.

Carl's thinness was deceptive, though. One Saturday afternoon, my friend Al slid my 1967 Toyota Corolla off one of the dirt roads that crisscross the open moors of Nantucket. The rear passenger wheel hung in the air about five feet above a cranberry bog, and we exited the driver's side quite gingerly so as not to tip the car over the embankment. In those days a Toyota was not much more substantial than a tin can with a windshield, and Al and I were strong young carpenters, but we couldn't budge the car by lifting the rear bumper. So we walked to the Polpis Road and hitched into town to find Carl, confident he could solve any practical problem. To our surprise, instead of hooking up a winch or a towrope, Carl simply stood in the bog, hefted the Toyota onto his shoulder, and shifted it back onto solid earth, easy as pie.

I worked for Carl about a year and a half, building vacation houses from the ground up. He was not an easy boss, but he ran a cheerful, motivated crew, and I learned a tremendous amount. The other carpenters were Billy, a red-haired stoner and early EST cultee<sup>4</sup>; Dave, a scruffy Boston tough whose idea of a joke was "What do Germans

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like to do at the beach? Fry kikes and shoot Segals!"; and Joe, a family man who was so tightly wound that he wouldn't pick up female hitchhikers on placid Nantucket Island for fear of being accused of rape.

Being fresh out of school, I was accustomed to frequent feedback. Good grades mattered. But Carl wasn't one to praise, although he assuredly let me know when my work wasn't up to standard. One day, I was hammering vinyl-clad windows in place, missed a nail, and cracked the vinyl. A few minutes later, try as I might, I made the same mistake again. That was when Carl added the growled phrase "numb nuts" to my growing carpentry lexicon. It was several months before I figured out that Carl's signature on my paycheck was the full measure of his approval—the only one I was likely to see and the only one that really mattered. I had graduated into the working world.

For all that, Carl Borchert had a nature as true as a granite block. You knew upon meeting him that the rough, honest surface carried right through to the core — that he possessed a reliable moral compass. I don't mean by this that he was absorbed in a deep inner conversation or was self-righteous. His morality found expression in the integrity of his actions. As a builder, for example, he didn't do the fanciest work, but every step in the process was done solidly, soundly, with no corners cut. And just as he chose carpentry over weapons, so Carl eventually chose restoration over new construction. He didn't want to contribute to the overbuilding of Nantucket as it became clear that the lovely, quiet, open-spaced island that he loved was doomed to overdevelopment.

The house that Carl built for his family, a pole barn, was a metaphor for the man. No plasterboard interior, no trim, no finish. The aesthetic of the inside was formed by the exterior and structural components. Telephone poles, redolent of creosote, ran floor to ceiling at wide intervals. Between them, the interior walls were formed by the backside of tongue-and-groove exterior sheathing. Looking

up to the ceiling, one saw the underside of second-story pine floorboards, framed between floor joists.

When I picture that house now, I see late-afternoon sunlight streaming through the west-facing kitchen window. A small vase of yellow and purple wildflowers, translucent in the raking light, sits on the worn maple table. Kitchen paraphernalia and books crowd the unfinished pine shelves on the wall opposite. A tacked-up postcard shows a large, bearded man standing at a sink piled comically high with dishes, with a caption that reads, "Because a man's got to do what a man's got to do." The only building in sight is a small barn down across the meadow, where Carl and his wife, Karen, keep horses, goats, and chickens. By the barn is an extensive vegetable garden, fenced to keep the deer out. On the far side of the garden is a marshy expanse where wild iris bloom in spring, and beyond the marsh rises the low, scrub oak forest of Nantucket.

To the northeast, behind the house, is a major icon of my life: Carl and Karen's clothesline. Two cross-barred, gray-weathered posts rise out of the grass, with lines of sash cord strung between. It may not sound like much, but set in the mown meadow between house and wood, that clothesline possessed a simple, functional beauty that bespoke an entire way of life.

### *The Carpenter's Life*

September of 1973 marked the beginning of my second year on Nantucket. My father, visiting, said that my newly muscled fingers looked like swollen sausages. My hands had indeed changed, and I had newfound confidence in them. On Carl's crew, I saw an entire house grow under their care. In my spare time, I bought an abandoned 1952 Ford pickup for twenty-five bucks and put it back on the road, figuring things out as I went along (plate 2). Mostly I worked with parts that I surreptitiously scavenged from other abandoned

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vehicles, plus the occasional new item ordered by mail from J. C. Whitney. I replaced the brakes, brake cylinders, transmission, starter, and fuel pump; rebuilt the carburetor; put in new sparkplugs and distributor cables; rebuilt the bed; and much more. I spent as much time under that truck with a wrench as I did driving it. I don't know which I enjoyed more.

I had a new dog, too, Bear Boy, whom I had saved from execution at the pound when his first owner gave up on him. Bear was a slight, handsome, black Lab mix – an incorrigible mutt who couldn't have cared less about relating to humans. His only interests were fighting and fornication. When a bitch was in heat anywhere on the island, Bear would be gone for days, enthusiastically brawling with other suitors outside the domicile of his intended, until I finally received the predictable call from Linda Cahoon, the dogcatcher, telling me where to retrieve him.

I also started my first beard that September, partially to keep my face warm through the coming winter's outdoor work, partially as another step to becoming whoever I might be. So much was changing in my life – I was changing so much – that I half expected, half hoped to see a more seasoned, knowing face emerge from the cocoon of my beard the following spring.

Along with learning to tell one end of a nail from the other, I was *discovering new ways to be in the world*. In junior high and high school I had been the youngest in my class and slow to reach puberty; I had been small, relatively nonathletic, and occasionally bullied. I had taken refuge in being smart – or, to be more precise, in trying to be smarter than others. But as a carpenter on Nantucket I found that the competitive aspect of my personality separated me from other people. What I wanted, and what was available to me, was community. I had left college looking for real life, and now I had found it. Intuitively, I knew I was on the road to discovering what a good life might be.

### *First Epiphany*

Fast-forward a little more than a year, to November 1974. I have fallen deeply in love and my girlfriend and I are caretaking the Heller estate, a two-hundred-year-old cape on a hundred acres of land half-way out the Hummock Pond Road. I'm still pounding nails for Carl Borchert. My hammer holster is weathered and scarred. Gail works as a cleaning lady for Mrs. Mitchell, a wealthy elderly woman whose house has been frozen in time since the moment her husband died, twenty years before. Not a frayed, monogrammed towel or a thread-bare linen sheet has been replaced.

The Hellers are in Florida for the winter. They have left two elderly, incontinent dogs in our care. Pookie is a blind German shorthaired pointer. Pepi is a deaf Weimaraner with senile dementia. Every morning before breakfast our walks to the far end of the property combine pathos with slapstick comedy. Pepi forgets we're taking a walk, drifts off, and can't hear me call. Pookie follows the other dogs until she crosses the trail of a deer, at which point she joyously chases down the scent until she runs head-first into a tree. Bear Boy picks up the trail that Pookie has started and is sometimes gone for hours. Meanwhile, back at the house, Gail washes the piss-soaked towels the old dogs use for bedding and mops the concrete floor of the laundry room where they sleep. Aside from the dogs' room, though, the old house is a special place. On cold weekend mornings I light fires in all three downstairs fireplaces and we have friends over to breakfast. After a few hours, the radiant brick hearths seem to awaken the old house to memories of earlier centuries.

Gail is an aspiring weaver. A cherry loom occupies one end of the dining room, and she has applied to Capellagården, a crafts school in Sweden. I am intent on a career designing and building houses on spec, but have applied to the school's woodworking program so that we can travel to Sweden together.

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The design for this cradle, found in a book, was the author's first furniture project.

It's almost Thanksgiving, and our friends Nils and Joyce are expecting their first child at any minute. They are the first among our peers to have a child, so this is a major event, mysterious to us all. I decide to make them a cradle, thinking that I might as well get some furniture-making experience now that we've applied to school.

Next to the Heller house is a barn with a single rusty table saw in an unheated workshop. Working from a photograph in a book, I buy pine and dowels from the local lumber yard and set to work. Furniture making turns out to be considerably different from carpentry. It requires joinery: bridle joints to assemble the triangular frames that curve like Gothic arches at each end of the cradle, and mortise and tenon joints to secure the aprons that traverse the ends like a

suspension bridge. It entails sensitive shaping with a rasp and file to make the wood gentle to the hand and eye. It demands a precision that reveals the slightest gap or flaw.

After three days of intense focus, cold, and solitude, the cradle is complete – a miraculous birth in its own right. I have somehow transformed benign intent into a beautiful, functional object. This is my moment on the road to Damascus. I am overtaken by a most unexpected passion. Within two months of making the cradle I will quit my carpentry job to make furniture full-time in the Heller barn. In the meantime, Gail and I will be turned down by Capellagården.

Back in 1974 one did not routinely meet furniture makers. There were few craft fairs, there was no *Fine Woodworking* magazine. In the entire nation there was only one small Woodcraft store where you could buy traditional woodworking tools such as mortise gauges, and those had to be imported from England. Out in the barn, fingers numb with cold, I could believe I was rediscovering a lost art. After the cradle I built a ladder-back chair, then started on a rocker. My meager guides were two books that I was given for Christmas by Gail and her sister. (My father gave me a drawing board and drafting equipment, although he was no happier with furniture making than he had been with carpentry.) I also had a friend, Jon, who had spent a few months sanding for a woodworker in New Jersey. Between us, we could usually figure out the sequence of steps for a given project.

As my woodworking horizons slowly expanded, I designed each new project around whatever technique I wanted to learn next. My goal was to become a proficient craftsman; design was a secondary consideration. So began a decade during which the challenges of furniture making consumed me. While my friends would talk and listen to music at a bar, I'd sit there sketching chairs on napkins. I gave little thought to practicalities such as income. I simply inhabited my passion.

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