

Ceil's Front Porch

I can still see the mountain in my mind's eye. And imagine the breeze, a pocket of cool air. It left the top of the mountain and rushed down the steep slope, crossed the floor of the valley spread out before us, came towards me, jumped over the railroad tracks about a half mile away and climbed the grade up to the porch to dust a coolness across my brow. As I sat on a wicker rocker and listened to whom I chose to call my elders. Friends, more or less, who I would learn from if I kept my sights on what was important in life and not on all that glittered from every corner of my young man's world.

I learned a lot on Ceil's front porch, but perhaps not what anyone would have guessed. I mostly sat and just listened to everyone as I gazed across the valley at Overlook Mountain, the same geological formation that hovered over Woodstock, NY, some 8 miles away. Sometimes I'd offer an opinion on what I heard. Most of the folks sitting around any of the conversational circles that formed would nod as if it was OK for me to speak, but not really necessary. In my thirties I was accomplished in my own sphere, but I was a decade or more younger than most of my porch mates and didn't know anything they would consider useful.

Oh, I could lecture about memory modules, virtual communication channels and other technical subjects related to the industrial films I produced ... "You make films, Dave? Do you know Marlon Brando?" ... but no one would have been interested. Surprisingly I wasn't bothered by people not wanting to hear what I had to say. My ego seemed to shut down on Ceil's front porch. I needed applause less when I found myself wrapped up in someone else's story.

My life had reached a point where I needed to decide how much to allow a dawning career to impact my family life. And my social life, too. That I cared much about the latter was a surprise to me. I had always thought the actions and lives of those around me to not have much of an effect on me. I was now coming to see that was untrue. In fact, those around me would shape my essence more than I imagined.

At that time we lived smack in the middle of what had been a rural valley, until the state built a super highway right down the length of it and high tech workers moved in with their high-powered commuter cars. Many of the visitors to Ceil's porch were from families who had lived on the surrounding land for generations, older men and women who farmed most of their lives and now sat on porches on weekend afternoons and spoke of their former existence. I was more than a little weak on topics like How to Fix a Manure Chain, How to Plow a Headland pattern, how the honey bees would do this year and what

was a decent rolling herd average for a dairy farm of only eighty cows. It was 1974 and I would have never planned to adopt “Thank God I’m A Country Boy” as my favorite song the following year.

But even if I seldom understood the conversation, listening to men and women who could manipulate rocks, soil and trees to build a homestead had a comforting effect on me. I came home early one morning from a barn fire and would not have traded giving a successful technology presentation for my night running the pump on the fire truck to help save a family’s home. It renewed my faith in humanity to know there were still people in the world who could husband animals and produce food for the table, who could take care of themselves and their families without resort to cash and credit cards, corporate intrigue and ass-kissing. What I loved about Ceil’s front porch was the bare-bones competence I saw in people who were independent. Their wealth was rooted in the dirt beneath their feet.

Ceil would have not known or cared much about the skills of her guests and their varied knowledge. Her purpose in the covered dish suppers and afternoon coffees was not to bone up on the best way to keep leaves out of her cistern. She hosted a continuing soiree that held our dreams, our opinions and our stories. She wanted a front row seat to all of it. Intensely interested in people and their lives, one could view Ceil as either a gossip or an astute student of humanity. Most of us who gave it any thought considered her the latter. The porch may not have been a complete library of human experience, but Ceil cataloged the lives she saw taking place around her.

I thought I was there for the content, considering it important to know, for example, how to balance an iron shoe on a horse I’d probably never own. But what I was learning about was me ... what excited me, what calmed me, what made me feel human.

Ceil was there for the drama she saw squeezed out of human hearts as they wrestled with themselves and each other. Ceil gazed directly down into the well of human existence while I was only just discovering how to be human and pretending to live in an earlier time.

In good weather, life as we knew it continued to roll out on Ceil’s front porch. She and her husband, Roger, kept the 1930’s era house spic and span and inviting. A crisp coat of vanilla colored paint set off the balusters and railings of the porch, while the grey painted floor was covered by a bone colored sisal carpet on each side of the grand stairway that came up from the lawn in front of the home. Cedar shakes covered the outside walls of the house, weather-worn to a grey and brown patina by the rain and snow blowing down off the mountain during the wetter parts of the year.

Ceil’s natural inclination was always to be in the center of what was happening among the people she loved (and sometimes didn’t.) I’d watch her putter from the kitchen through the house to the porch, stopping at each little circle of people to listen in. The topics on a summer afternoon could be anything from “stories of old” about people like Aunt Betty who carried a kitten around in her bosom, sometimes to church in the winter. Or we might hear “stories unfolding,” in other words the current gossip.

I had landed in Ceil’s neighborhood when I drove my high-powered commuter car into a driveway about two miles away and bought a house right there in the sticks. My journey into what I called God’s Country had begun when I decided to leave a stultifying upper middle class neighborhood where I often sat outdoors in the summer listening to lawn

mowers and the bedlam of children in swimming pools. I wanted a more private and primitive existence. I longed for crisp mornings in the fall and entertained thoughts of running back from the chicken coop with a few eggs to be cooked on an old iron stove. I imagined warm summer evenings as I pranced around with the kids on a soft green lawn growing beside our own dirt road down in the woods.

I purchased the remains of a mountain farm. Fourteen acres of pasture and woods and an old farmhouse. There were assorted other buildings, among them an old hay barn bent over as if in a graceful curtsy, falling in upon itself as it headed towards the ground. The house was structurally sound, but very much in need of paint, wallpaper and the decorative touches necessary to make it a comfortable home.

Lucky me, I didn't have to farm the property in order to eat and pay my bills. I certainly didn't have the energy of those who lived in the old house before me. They handily drew a living from the soil and the animals. But I would have survived neither the sheer amount of work nor the colossal boredom of living an hour (by buckboard) from the nearest town. I would have been struck dumb by the prospect of living out on a back road all alone with no other human contact for weeks at a time. How the inhabitants of a remote farm in the 1800s kept themselves sane was always a wonder to me.

After our move to the farm, an elderly neighbor named Harold would stop in the kitchen from time to time and point out where his family had kept their old kitchen table in the center of the room when they owned the house decades before. His younger sister, Elsie, had entered the world on the table top three quarters of a century ago. His sister's birth was evidently the first bit of biology he had witnessed. His face would light up with wonder and with his finger he'd point to a spot on my Ethan Allen Harvest Table.

"She came out right there," he said. "I remember it like it was yesterday. Right there next to your sugar bowl."

He told me this story often and each time he'd wait a beat before continuing his revelation. "An hour later I was eatin' my beans and pork butts right there on that very spot."

Elsie was gone by then. She never married and spent her entire life within a few hundred feet of that spot on the table where my white bowl sat. I thought of her every time I sprinkled sugar on my oatmeal. She was one of a growing number of ghosts occupying the house. There must have been many spirits resident while I lived there, but most of the time my family was oblivious to them, busy as we were with our lives. We put our heads down, ignored the immortal beings and lived a normal family life just as they had when they were alive.

I invested the earnings from my high tech job into restoring the old farmhouse and exasperated my family as I coaxed them to live like we'd all been born a hundred years earlier. There were no electrical outlets in the bedrooms up on the second floor. We used mechanical Mickey Mouse clocks to get us up in the morning until I wired the rooms after three years. There was no heat in the upstairs bedrooms or toilets until about the time my daughter got married. I told her young husband he was getting a girl who was marrying for the simple pleasure of shared body heat. I wasn't just trying to save money. I was keeping the old farm house primitive to justify other areas in my life. Somehow, my living style helped me to ground other areas of my existence that needed to be kept to their basics.

I'd arrive home at night from the offices of a large corporation a few miles away. I jumped out of my suit and into bib overalls, then got busy with the chores. Some jobs couldn't wait for a change of clothing.. I'd find hay in my suit coat pocket when I gave an executive presentation the next day. Putting my feet up on a colleague's desk one morning, I saw the horror on his face as a gob of manure plopped off my wing tips on to his calendar. After that, he called me Mr. Douglas in honor of the lead character in the television series "Green Acres."

On Ceil's front porch I seldom related what I thought were funny stories about our living without modern amenities in an old farmhouse. Many of my listeners would have wondered what was amusing. Growing up without electricity or automatic heat was simply part of their early lives. Country living often contained some degree of privation, then and now. John William, who was my age, remembered water freezing in a glass on his bedside table when he was a boy. Edgar, slightly younger than I, attended a one room school house through the sixth grade and remembered taking the coal ash from the single heating stove out to the ash dump each morning. So did I.

Ceil's porch didn't simply blossom out of nowhere for no reason. What probably brought most of us together was our shared attendance at the little white church farther down the King's Highway. Brought up strictly Catholic, I found being Protestant a terrific emotional release. The music was delightful and the message wasn't that much different than what I'd been brought up to hear, except that it was like a local weather report compared to the great Catholic battlefront communiqués I was used to hearing in Sister Mary Jean's class in fourth grade. Every thing in Catholicism had been so heavy. Solutions had been militaristic, world-wide Jesuit campaigns to eradicate the enemy. In the little white church, neighbors of differing opinions sat down at a covered dish supper and somehow got along as they made agreements to work together.

On Christmas Eve everyone in the little hamlet jammed into the church, no matter what their religion, bank balances or politics. We didn't stay apart because of anything we'd been taught, we came together because we were neighbors. With everyone in church on that frozen night, we lit up the building with just our little candles. The only light in the hamlet that cold and snowy night came weakly through the stained glass and curled around the snowy pine boughs hanging below the windows.

And there were Easters with warm breezes drifting through the windows, as we stood in prayer with heads bowed among believers who actually prayed about the coming week. The pastor, even twenty years into his career, was still nervous on Sunday mornings before his sermon. At least every other month he discovered something new about himself, life or the spirit that he would carefully try to craft into a message, hoping those of us sitting out in the 150 year old pews would hear his heart and join his spirit. Many of our minds were elsewhere, however, having arrived at church in a rush, children trailing behind us, after a week of pure greed or a weekend of the wrong kind of spirits.

Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon or an evening the Pastor would join us on the porch. Everyone loved him, but he always saw himself as apart from us. I could never decide if it was a good or bad thing for him, but I left the man to a life that to me at times seemed more chosen than lived.

It was too cold on winter nights to meet on Ceil's front porch, but the fireside was often available in the living room. Waiting for the storm to end, waiting for the coffee to

perk, waiting as many of us did one night to hear if Kenny had rescued the fire truck by backing it over the train trestle in a snow storm. There was the night early one spring we waited to hear if the ambulance had gotten through the flooded valley to deliver old Granny to the hospital.

It's probably true most people who came to the porch believed they were simply visiting, while for Ceil it was a means of keeping track of all of us, those she loved or at least found amusing. For me it was more. The visits were a healing, an affirmation of what was just then becoming important in my life, the witness of simple human exchanges taking place among ordinary people. I was a young man becoming a young father with a wife and children. I was beginning to build a dimension of my life that had come as somewhat of a surprise to me. Boyfriend, bridegroom and career worker were becoming husband, father and neighbor.

I have no idea why I spent my thirties and forties emulating an old farmer lifestyle that had never been part of my own family's "city Irish" background. But I had a lot of fun. I don't know why listening to Ceil's friend Rett speak of the best way to build septic system drain fields or old Dan remembering his cows one by one, pet name by name, gave me a feeling of the world being in capable hands despite what pundits were saying on the Nightly News. Or that at least a few young adults could take care of the business of the world as I listened to Dougie figure pump pressures out loud in his head as he spoke with Albert about the fire company's new pumper truck. But all of the conversations on Ceil's front porch, all of the sometime arguments, all the love and the tears and sometimes ill feelings among neighbors ... all of them ran a lot closer to the ground we really lived on than the fakery that came to us from our television sets or movie theaters.

I'm sure some of the people on any given summer Sunday evening stood looking across the pasture at Overlook Mountain and wished they could stay on the porch forever. For me these were the years of keeping my eyes close to home and concentrated on my family, a growing son and daughter, a young wife becoming a beautiful woman, a home to rebuild and carry us into old age. Feeling safe in my cocoon, for a while I tried to avoid looking out into the world any farther than Ceil's porch. But creation's pull is inevitable for anyone with a pulse and eventually we were enticed away to our separate destinies.

My wife and I kept going in life. We grew older. At some point we joined in the dramas of our adult children as they launched their own families. But eventually we faded away and allowed the kids to have their own lives.

Humans come and go. We all arrived on Ceil's porch from somewhere else and eventually we left for another somewhere else. Staying in any one spot forever is seldom a good option. Not if we want a worthwhile life. I don't know the limitations suffered by Harold's sister, Elsie. But if she ever worried about her soul she probably wasted her time. When she died after an entire life spent within walking distance of the kitchen table she was born on she would not have had a soul to worry about. It would have been worn down to nothing by the sameness in her existence.

Ceil's husband Roger died and she sold the house. Later she moved south to be closer to her daughter. My wife and I sold our farmhouse and moved to the coast of South Carolina. We email Ceil from time to time. She still loves us and cares about our family.

I used to think that life held the possibility of special things happening more than once. I no longer believe that. I'm close enough to the end to see no time left for repeats. There

will never be another little white church on Christmas Eve. There will never be quite the set of people in my life who taught me so much about plain old living and there will never be another place to have learned it that was like Ceil's front porch.

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