



Build a Foundation, Pull Up Your Roots

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The mists cascade over the rolling mountains known, and named, for the smoky haze. The trees sway in the morning breeze and I breathe in deep. I am at home in the mountains of Western North Carolina, finally. Sometimes I think I can feel the pulse of the quartz that bubbles to the surface of the soil all over our land. The home itself grew from the ground out of nothing. Or so it seems right now, while you're reading this.

It wasn't always here, this 120 square foot house that shelters us. This land, raw and wild, became ours in the summer of 2007. We broke ground two years later on the site where our tiny house now stands.

Let me start the story near the beginning.

Act 1: Concrete Evidence

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." – Henry David Thoreau

On a weekend in May, 2009, I tapped into a hidden strength I didn't know that I had. Our site, inaccessible by car or truck, fought us at every turn. While many might consider us crazy, that was by design. To aid in our build, we bought a used ATV to get supplies from the road to our building site faster than on our shoulders, but the ATV was unreliable at best. On this late spring day, we set out to pour the eight concrete piers that would become our home's foundation.

We prepped the site weeks before and excavated the eight holes with a rented two-person auger. We hoped to begin pouring the concrete then, but the project had a mind of its own. We were just the pawns. Our



task? To mix and pour the piers by ourselves in one two-day weekend. Oh, and did I mention that neither of us had ever poured concrete piers before?

First, we placed and leveled cardboard tubes, called Sonotubes, in the pox scars on the mountain. Matt, as a perfectionist, wouldn't rest until the margin of error was non-existent. I'm firmly in the "it looks good enough," camp. My lazy ways were overruled. Our biggest job involved transporting a small, borrowed cement mixer, thirty gallons of water, and twenty-four hundred pounds of unmixed cement to the building site. 300 vertical feet. Up a mountain. The ATV threw a temper tantrum and declared that it would take no more than three bags at a time. If we pushed, it screeched its disapproval. We wasted half a day of our limited time driving back and forth, unloading bags of cement, one after another, and doing it all again. Then, we mixed and poured concrete for the rest of the day. By this time, it was already after noon on Sunday.

We were a well-oiled machine. One bag of concrete and one gallon of water filled the mixer each time. Bucket after bucket went into the tubes. As each pier set, we added the bolts to secure the posts that would eventually become the framing of our tiny home. With my hands and face caked in cement, I couldn't even visualize the house. Function in my joints seized from the concrete and exhaustion. The light faded as we scrambled to finish. Our panic manifested in different ways. Matt worried about perfecting every step and I fretted that we wouldn't have enough time to clean up and drive three hours back home for work the next morning. Anger flashed in flames with cruel reds and unforgiving oranges, punctuating our raised voices. I couldn't dam the flow of tears as frustration grew. As the last light of the sun dipped below the mountains in the same blaze of fire, we set the last anchor bolt in the wet concrete of pier number eight under the sickening yellow glow of a flashlight. Anger turned to apprehension as we hustled to clean up the worksite, pack the car, and leave the mountains.

The car's clock read 11:30 when we finally motored down the mountain, now shrouded in darkness. The ghosts of Appalachia haunted the silence of the gravel road. The only sound was the tires grating on tiny rocks that echoed loud enough that we were sure our rural neighbors would wake.

Though we both felt the pull of sleep, we kept ourselves awake to drive in shifts. Over three hours later, we were finally back in Atlanta. Our 2700 square foot home didn't feel alien yet, but it would over time. I knew a couple of hours of sleep wasn't enough, so I left a voice mail at my office letting them know I wouldn't be in first thing. It was the first time I let our project affect my work, but it wouldn't be the last. We dropped everything inside the door and zeroed in on our bed, crashing to oblivion.



In my mind, it was years before the gravity of what we had accomplished finally set in. Over time, the memory began to change.

From there, the puzzle pieces of the house snapped into place easily. At least, it seemed easy in comparison. With help from friends along the way, the structure grew in small increments. First the posts and the floor joists appeared in place. Then the walls rose. It was capped by a roof, and one day we could stand inside the 120 square foot shell and see the possibilities.

Act 2: I Quit

*“Never look back, unless you’re planning to go that way” – Henry David
Thoreau*

It was three more years before fear gripped me again. As our home filled out with each trip to the mountain, we were closer and closer to leaving our comfortable lives in Atlanta behind to embrace this new experience. I longed for this freedom more than I had ever wanted anything in my life, but terror flooded every cell in my body.

The house, while very much a real thing, was a symbol of so much more. There are a variety of reasons for building a tiny home. Some want financial freedom and others crave environmental accountability. For most, it’s a combination of reasons we’re unable to articulate. And for me, the three years we spent traveling three hours away from where we lived to build a small home in the mountains was the embodiment of my next steps. With a tiny house, I had the freedom to quit but I wasn’t entirely sure I had the fortitude. Maybe it was a crutch, but maybe not. The only way I would know was to let go.

These feelings pounded through my veins day I gave my notice.

An angst I hadn’t known since writing bad poetry at age sixteen steamrolled me in bed at night. A racing heart and sleep don’t peacefully coexist. Did you know unexplainable itching is a sign of anxiety? I know now. The anxiety shifted its weight on an early April day while the wind was still sharp and showers prophesized the coming flowers. I quaked in my ergonomic desk chair, afraid that my quick pulse and darting eyes would betray me. I could hear the blood in my veins. “I Quit!” had to be scrawled on my forehead in thick, black sharpie.



I shook uncontrollably as I padded into my boss's office, my body language timid. I held the envelope out to her and said, my voice faltering, "I need to give you my notice." She looked at me, wide-eyed, without a word. In the pause, I sat down hard on the chair that faced her desk. "The tiny house is almost done and we're moving to Asheville." I felt compelled to fill the silence.

A few moments passed before she added her voice. To my surprise, she was excited for me. It was real now. I would live in my own tiny home. I had said it out loud to the people who would be affected the most by our decision, besides Matt and myself. There was no turning back now.

"Maybe you can work remotely," she offered with exuberance.

"I would be open to that," I said. Though I was leaving to start a new life, a safety net sounded less terrifying.

Over the course of the weeks to follow, the idea of working remotely was shot down by my coworkers. To this day I have no idea why. I can only imagine the worst. They couldn't wrap their minds around why I would quit.

After I left it was apparent that completely pulling up these roots would be the better choice by far.

My last day finally arrived. I spent my final weeks tying up loose ends, leaving no knots untightened. My successor was successfully trained. Eight long years with the same people, and the curtain finally fell. "The End" scrolled across the screen. While I was good at what I did, and my coworkers were good people, I spent years suffocated by an invisible fog.

My coworkers gave me a gorgeous potted plant as a gift on my last day. New roots I could plant by the tiny house.

Within a year the plant had died.

Intermission

"When God made me born a Yankee, she was teasing." – Indigo Girls

The transition was smooth. Smoother than we thought. Our lives in this 120 square foot, off-grid home surpassed our expectations and our previous adventures in suburbia. This was how we were meant to live. Benefits bloomed like wildflowers from hidden cracks and crevices in the landscape.



Now, I rise each day with the sun as its warmth streams through the tiny house windows. My feet, in fuzzy socks, pad softly down the ladder and I put on a pot of water for tea. The touch of one button initiates the whirl of my computer and I settle into my morning routine. Then I type. My job now? Writing. For a living. People pay me. This was what I always wanted.

There are things I am responsible for in the tiny house. My day isn't all pajama-wearing and tea sipping. Eventually, I slip on my shoes, step outside, and fill jugs of water from the spring. Three gallons fill the water filter inside. In Atlanta, we wasted so much water each day but in the tiny house, use is down to just five gallons a day, complete with showers and overall cleanliness. Gray water collects in a bucket outside, hung under the shower drain. I dump the murky water into our small reclamation system over pumice and river pebbles that naturally filter the water, safe now for the yellow irises planted in the artificial wetland. Chores are a nice break from the daily routine. These are words I never thought I'd say after years of dishwasher convenience and lazy nights of nothing but marathons of mindless TV.

Six months in, the next chapters of our new adventure were scribbled on the scraps of paper cluttering the surface of the newly lived-in tiny home.

Act 3: The Tree

“Even if I knew that tomorrow that the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” – Martin Luther

The night before Halloween in 2012, as we prepared to spend two months with our families for the holidays, we packed up the tiny house. A winter storm of extinction-level proportions closed in over the Smoky Mountains. That afternoon, between packing sessions, Matt went outside just as the heaviest winds whipped through the canopy of brown and gold. “I need to move the chairs off the deck,” he said as the door slammed behind him sending tremors through the house.

We built a deck, and called it the Folk-N-Ale, shortly after moving in. At twelve by twelve, it more than doubled our living space. On the deck stood a table and chairs so we could entertain or enjoy our dinner under the trees. With the storm rolling in, their stability was in question.

I've already established Matt as a perfectionist, right? I watched out the window as he moved the chairs against one tree. He stopped, contemplated, and moved them against another. Then, deciding that the



first tree was superior, moved them back. After some time, he finally determined the chairs were, in fact, safe and ran back inside just as the winds picked up ferocity.

Minutes later, as he settled on the sofa with his back to the window, movement caught my eye. From my vantage point I watched as a massive, dead eastern hemlock caught the tempest. That hemlock had been a source of consternation for a while, and we knew it would come down one day. We just hoped it wasn't on the house. The cracking sound was amplified by the landscape. I pointed and stuttered, "The tree. That tree!"

Matt jerked his head around and we both watched the tree crash directly toward the deck where he stood only seconds before. What happened in the fraction of a second felt like an eternity in slow motion. A tall, but skinny, adolescent tulip poplar deflected the dead trunk, sacrificing itself for the Folk-N-Ale. Otherwise, the tree would have been a direct hit. Instead, it crashed directly on the chairs so lovingly placed beneath a tree for shelter in the storm. Brown, plastic shards exploded into the atmosphere. Obliterated.

We were paralyzed. There was nothing we could do but watch. We were just grateful that the direction of the destruction was woodwise, and not housewise. I knew that living in a tiny house would be hard and I knew there would be moments of frustration, but I never knew that I could watch a tree fall in the woods and be grateful it didn't crush my house.

The tree, like the foundation and like the plant skeleton still anchored next to the house, was another monument to the hard work, sheer luck, and unexpectedness of our new lives.

From the moment we nailed the first two by fours together, I knew this was a project unlike any other. We raised the walls. We designed the interior. We moved in. We lived comfortably in this tiny home as easily as if we had done it our whole lives. And we learned and grew from our experience.

Curtain Call

"Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water." –Zen Proverb

Sitting on the Folk-N-Ale with a beer in my hand, I drink in the calm of Appalachia. In front of me is my tiny home, just a few years old now. To my left, I can peer through the trees and catch a glimpse of some of the oldest mountains in the world. I'm part of that history now, too.



My cat lounges in the window where I can see her, soaking up the dappled sunlight that filters through the forest. The same sunlight powers our house and our lives. I am content.

There is freedom all around me from the cackling of the crows harassing a hawk in the distance to the light rustling of the bright green tulip poplar leaves with each gust of warm wind. The wood from the fallen hemlock waits in neat piles for us to place them in the outdoor fire pit once the sun goes down, which it does earlier on our mountain than anywhere around us. We are above the horizon.

Before it gets too dark, I'll fire up the burner on the outdoor kitchen and whip up a meal. Our weekly trek to the farmer's market rewards us with a boon of fresh ingredients from nearby farms. In our lives we've built a foundation, torn up our roots, and planted them again, over and over.

It's never been about the house.