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published in *The Christian Science Monitor*
941 words

Home is Where Affection Calls

“Home’s not merely four square walls.

Home is where affection calls.”

I placed the embroidered sampler on a section of barn wood I intended to leave on the wall. The living room floor in the old cabin was a welter of old barn wood that had been put up as finish for the interior walls, old wallpaper from under the barn wood, dust, and nails I’d pulled from barn wood as I tore it from the walls.

To my inner eye, the living room was already finished, with the order and tranquility pictured in the embroidered log cabin with smoke drifting from its chimney.

Jon rattled into the yard in our pickup, home from irrigating the meadows. I bumped awake in sudden dismay. I had no bath water heating on the wood-burning cookstove, no dinner ready.

Jon walked in and looked at my project with wonder. “What happened?” he asked, and he stepped carefully between piles of lumber. The shadows in the room seemed to lengthen suddenly. I wondered for the first time if my redecorating project was such a good idea. I hadn’t filled the kerosene lamps yet, either.

“Well, I was reading this afternoon, and it was dark in here with all this barn wood, so I thought I’d take most of it off and just leave a little here and there for an accent...”

Jon looked at the one orderly corner, which held my sampler. “Where’d that come from?”

“I bought it in Sumpter. It’s what keeps me going in the middle of all this mess.”

The chaotic living room, the wood-burning cookstove, the kerosene lamps, and the pitcher pump at the kitchen sink were the outward evidence of a life which had taken an eccentric twist I hadn’t counted on. My wildest imaginings hadn’t prepared me for life in this out-of-square cabin, where a marble placed on the kitchen floor rolled downhill like a kid on the way to the candy store.

“How much did it cost?” Jon asked, breaking into my thoughts. Our budget was tight, almost nonexistent.

“Twelve dollars.”

“Any dinner?”

“No.”

Jon looked at me with tired amusement. “Home’s not merely four square walls. Home is where affection calls, twelve dollars,” he recited, running the price into the verse as if it belonged there.

“Yeah,” I sighed. He grinned wickedly and headed for the kitchen.

I put Jon’s bath water on to heat while he filled the lamps. The nearest pizza place was 13 miles, over Huckleberry Summit, so I fixed lentil tacos with sprouts, homemade whole wheat tortillas, salsa, and cheese, and Juniper and Amanda, our daughters, giggled over the antics of “Old monkey,” who always set two spoons by each plate instead of one.

As we ate dinner, Jon told us about coyotes and hawks he saw on the meadow. I began to think maybe we lived in a pretty nice place after all. The front door stood open to a spring breeze, and night hawks swooped and called and formed a musical counterpoint to the laughing, splashing sounds the girls made as they washed dishes after dinner.

Jon irrigated meadows the next day, and I stayed home with the breakfast dishes, piles of lumber, dust, and two little girls who were good company for each other.

Over the next few days, as I heated water for baths and dishes, filled lamps, and cared for Juniper and Amanda, I cleared away debris and put the room in order. Juniper and Amanda played in the other rooms and outside, as chock-full of activity as jack-in-the-boxes. I smoothed wallpaper onto the walls and hung curtains I’d made from an old quilt top.

Jon often quoted my verse with the “twelve dollars” tacked onto the end. Though patience and tolerance are the hallmarks of an affectionate marriage, I finally told him to knock it off.

We lived on the ranch in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon eight and a-half years, and during the first two, Jon came home to chaos often as I painted, tore down walls, laid carpet, and put in windows, sometimes with his help and sometimes without. The house started to look better and began to feel more like home for all of us.

My friend Ingrid helped me put up a new ceiling.

Our neighbors, Scott and GERALYN came by, and I bribed Scott with a piece of my famous chocolate cake to put a window in for me. I grew to love the cabin. I brought in baskets of dried grasses and flowers from the fields.

We decorated the walls with Juniper and Amanda's artwork and prints of Van Gogh and Monet from magazines which Joanne, the bookmobile librarian, saved for me.

At night, a hush fell over the valley so that even the animals and birds were quiet. The only sound was the crackle of the fire and an occasional party of coyotes hooting, hollering, and laughing over jokes and tricks too wild for us to guess at. Our dog whined at them, uncertain whether he wanted to be invited or was glad to be safe at home. The lighted lamps gave off a golden radiance which filled the house and made it a beautiful place, a place fit for dreaming.

The sampler hung in the living room and grew sooty from the smoke from our fires and the lamps. It reminded me of our home, and of the affection which bound us together, affection which had to be as strong as nails, warmer than carpet, more beautiful than art work, and worth more than twelve dollars, more than any amount of money you can name.