

# To Build a Cabin

## Tanzania to Tennessee



Joe Napora

with Erek Napora's "Letters from Tanzania"

# Forward

This book is meant to be as much of a why-to book as it is a how-to book. The internet makes easily available all of the information needed to build a log cabin. If you want to know how to build a cabin, then the instructions are a mouse click away. But there would still remain the why.

We started building the cabin nine years ago in 2007. There wasn't nearly as much information available then, but there was enough. And we used some of it. But with a little experience and good carpentry skills, the building techniques are not daunting. We often found ourselves with hammer in one hand and a book in the other that illustrated what now seem like simple techniques but then seemed puzzling.

But that's the nature of all learning: you start from what you know and go forward. And for us going forward was in a sense going backward, over forty years back.

The whole back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s has been largely discredited, at least in terms of its aspirations to make a fundamental change in how America farms, lives, develops community. Discredited, but not totally. And not for us.

The land upon which the cabin sits was made safe from suburban development by those 70s idealists who bought the land and placed it in trust for someone who

would in turn keep it safe by using it, living on it, building on it, keeping it as part of the wider farm community. They knew that real community is land based. And they knew that the "why" is all about community.

The building of the cabin then has not been an isolated affair. This is not the story of one person heading off into a wilderness and conquering some part of it as if on an heroic quest. Building the cabin was in all parts a communal venture. Building the cabin was a process, the experience of being a part of that community of family, friends, and neighbors, even those distant friends from the 70s. And even those friends from Tanzania.

Because it meant so much to me, it's easy for me to exaggerate the importance of Erek's and Megan's and my experience of Africa. Erek lived there 14 months. Megan about three. Me, less than two weeks. But we all lived during those times a simple existence. It was not primitive: it was a combination of the simple and the technologically sophisticated.

The cement block cabin where Erek stayed has a single solar panel, enough to power a couple lights and his laptop. Erek's Maasai friend Isaya was as traditional as his forbearers who lived there thousands of years before. Except. Except that he had a cell phone. There were no land

phones. There were no good roads. To arrange meetings with people, it made sense to call ahead or text because it was cheaper. (For him, writing began with the phone). Like his ancestors he used the available technology, and he used it selectively.

We have tried to do the same. Building the cabin was not a return to some primitive lifestyle: it was an expression of a new primitive, one that uses technology but not uncritically. After all, the first technology that made fundamental changes in world culture was writing. And of necessity, we embrace the technology of writing. Anyone reading this preface has acknowledged this. But writing, as with all technologies, is not all positive. It joins us with others, but also isolates us from face to face contact. It can forge distant community, and it fractures near community. But we have no choice but to accept the benefits of writing. But we do have a choice as to how we use modern technology: the computer, internet, email, social media. We somehow need to strike a balance between the new technologies and the old, the virtual world with the physical, mind work and hand craft, together. Building this cabin is one expression of that attempt.

# 1 The Beginning Point(s)

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,  
but in the expert's there are few.

— Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*



# What is the (Starting) Point?



This is a story about building a log cabin, but like every story ever told it is more than just a story. There are no simple stories if for no other reason than this: a story demands an audience. And the relationships between the storyteller and the audience, and the story and the teller, and the story and the audience, cannot possibly be simple. When I first talked to friends about writing a story about building the cabin, they said that it would probably be a simple one. About my hesitation, they said, just do it. From start to finish, foundation to roof, explain what you did and use the pictures taken as you worked. That was nine

years ago. I've hesitated that long. Because it's not simple. How can it be, if I can't even figure out how to start telling it? How does a story begin, where should it? And when?

If this was only my story, I would probably begin with an ending: the remains of the foundation of a building, wood stacked from logs that I cut and hauled to a mill and then back to my building site. I dug out the basement ruins of an old building site. I hired a man with bulldozer and backhoe to run a water line from a spring to the basement. Instead of waiting for me to dig out the spring by hand, he used the back-

hoe. Using the power of the machine to do a job that needed the careful use of the hand shovel ruined the spring. The water changed course. And so did I. That beginning was also an ending to my own dream of building my own house when I lived in New Brunswick, Canada in the early seventies.

When I left Canada to return to college in Ohio, I often thought of what my short stay, five years, in rural New Brunswick meant to me. I was teaching art in the St. John public schools. I had bought some land, cut the wood and had it milled. My hope was to build a house, then develop the land into a farm. In the early spring my then wife and I built a large tipi where we would live while I worked toward that dream, the hand-built house, a self-sufficient family farm. When winter came, it was obvious that the dream of farm and family were coming to an end. And I learned from living those few months in that tipi was a respect for the materials of what it is that gives us shelter. Tipis were never meant for the damp cold of the Maritimes. And the wood that I cut, milled, and stacked would await some other hand. I had too much to learn about building, and I had too many reasons to return to Ohio. This poem appeared in one of my early publications called, as is the poem, Port-

able Shelter; it became a constant reminder that I left work undone, that someday this drive for a hand made shelter would be turn into something permanent.

### Portable Shelter

From a deed found in the Hampton, New Brunswick claims office:

On the South, being bounded by the Bay, following the shore from a cedar stump 200 rods Easterley to a hacmatac post, then Northerley, bounded by the Wildernesse.

A new pioneer  
the old man calls him  
pulls inward. Tempered  
beaten, ground  
from an old file  
his draw-knife shaves  
curls of bark. Long lines  
and rough  
form a pile at his feet.  
The wood  
must be made smooth  
as a song long on vowels  
swept by the wind. With  
care for the blade  
the knots are rived. He  
has chosen trees crowded  
and young stopt  
with a one-inch top

and six-inch butt.

Claimed from the worm.

18 poles tied mark the center.

Pine, spruce, heavy hacmatac,  
and one cedar for the lift pole.

All shaved smooth  
and sanded. Oiled, caressed,  
pointed to bit the earth.

An anchor offering  
no resistance to the rain.

Not lost is a pain  
that grows from hope denied.

A worm's slow progress  
inside. Eating  
a path that has a beauty  
of its own. A poem  
written in cursive.

Minute attention given  
to each letter's  
cutting edge. With due respect  
to this poet there is  
his gross neglect  
of the materials. There grows  
no lodgepole pine. The damp  
proclaims itself. Moss  
grows on cedar shingles.

A sure sign  
if only the mind

humbles itself to the eye.

Two hundred yards of canvas  
and two miles of thread  
are the signatures of the days

and the nights of work  
that are the measure  
of this shelter. A tipi  
designed for the Plains.

Mildew on the north.  
Fiber rot. Yet not  
all is lost to decay.

For six months he shared this  
second skin with wife  
and children. The moon's  
several faces. And the sun.

Many years later, the story continues. Now it isn't just my story, not even mainly mine. It's Erek's, the third of my four children. And it is his wife's, their friends' and neighbors'. And it's a story that now contains the accounts of building not just this log cabin but another house, a timber frame stucco house that adjoins the cabin, and another house that we work on now, a possible retirement house, a guest house, perhaps a family house that my grandchildren will use someday. All of those stories began with the story of the cabin. But still, when and where?

One obvious beginning for the story would be a late morning on May 26, 2007. Jason, my oldest son, drove with me from Cincinnati to help his brother tear down two old and mostly rotted cabins in order to clear a building site and salvage as much good wood as possible to use in the new cabin. Two days later, we returned to Cincinnati.

Tearing down the buildings was necessary, even fun. A little destruction leading to construction. We used a neighbor's truck to



pull down the walls of the buildings and watched them crash in piles of splinters, shattered boards, and rotted logs. But it wasn't a satisfactory beginning, and not the real beginning of the cabin.

Building the cabin begins in Africa. That's improbable and truer. Erek had spent 14 months in Africa studying elephant behav-

ior. He lived on a wild animal preserve in Tanzania. His studies there lead to a Masters of Science degree from Georgia Southern University. While there he also learned much about having to do without many of the conveniences and superficialities of modern life.

He got his water from a storage tank that collected rainwater, then with a foot pump pumped the water to a tank on the porch roof to gravity feed it to the sink, shower, and toilet. He stayed in a cement block building with two small solar panels to power a couple of lights, his phone, and his laptop computer. There was no electric service for many miles, yet many of the Tanzanians had cell phones. His solar panels allowed him to charge their phones as well.

His soon to be wife, Megan, visited for a couple of months. She had already learned many of the skills their African friends used to prepare food, wash clothes, and grow food. Megan grew up in Kingsport, Tennessee on an educational pioneer farm called The Exchange Place, where she had learned weaving, soap making, bread baking, and other self-sufficiency skills that impressed African friends that Erek had made. She and Erek had gone to college at Warren Wilson, a small liberal arts col-

lege in North Carolina that required twenty hours a week of work to pay part of the tuition. Her work was at the farm; her degree sustainable agriculture.

At Warren Wilson, Erek worked on the grounds, learning about plant life and how to safely use a chainsaw, and they both learned much more: how to work together with others, how such work creates community, the integration of head and hand learning. They were well prepared to learn more from their time in Tanzania, like the importance of providing one's own food, the personal "psychic" costs and rewards of eating meat, what it means to kill an animal for sustenance.

With only a knife, he slaughtered and butchered a goat. His Masaai friends used a machete; Erek hadn't gotten that good, but he learned a lesson in economy. They used the machete for everything, from chopping wood to peeling an apple. While his friends taught him the intricacies of how to properly slaughter a goat, he also learned what the homily "waste not want not" really means.

Using an old pan inverted onto a bed of hot coals, he cooked a roast. Any Boy Scout could have done the same. But cooking this way wasn't for a weekend

camping trip. It provided another lesson, something to be reminded of when he returned to Tennessee, another lesson in doing well with less.

My wife Barbara and I visited in December, 2005. We stayed ten days and met Erek and Megan's new friends. We stayed with him in his simple house, ate his simple meals, lived for a short time his simple life. It was clear that Erek had learned a lot in the short time he had been in Tanzania. He



had learned Swahili, well enough to surprise strangers who couldn't believe that a tall white man could speak their language so well. They called him Twiga, Swahili for giraffe. He and Megan were anything but the "ugly Americans" who travel with little interest or knowledge of the local culture.

It was clear to me that they both had also learned something more valuable and

something that would prove to be even more practical: they learned about how the communal life seems to be inversely proportional to the material. You can have more things or more people in your life. It's not a simple equation, but it's true more often than not: more material goods, less community.



# 2

## After Africa, Letters Home

From Tanzania  
to Tennessee



Here are some letters and pictures that Erek sent from Tanzania in 2005. They help to provide some context for his and Megan's decision to start a farm in Kingsport.

Habari yako (how is everyone): Rosie and Ugali

5/30/05

My first group email. Sorry about that. It is just a lot easier for me to write things once as opposed to over and over again. I got in Sunday night after about 20 some hours of flying. But it wasn't too bad because I didn't have any layovers to speak of. Although they did manage to leave one of my bags in Amsterdam (of course it was the one with all of my clothes). But they brought it out here to my doorstep which was pretty impressive considering it is about an hour and some away and mostly very bumpy dirt roads.

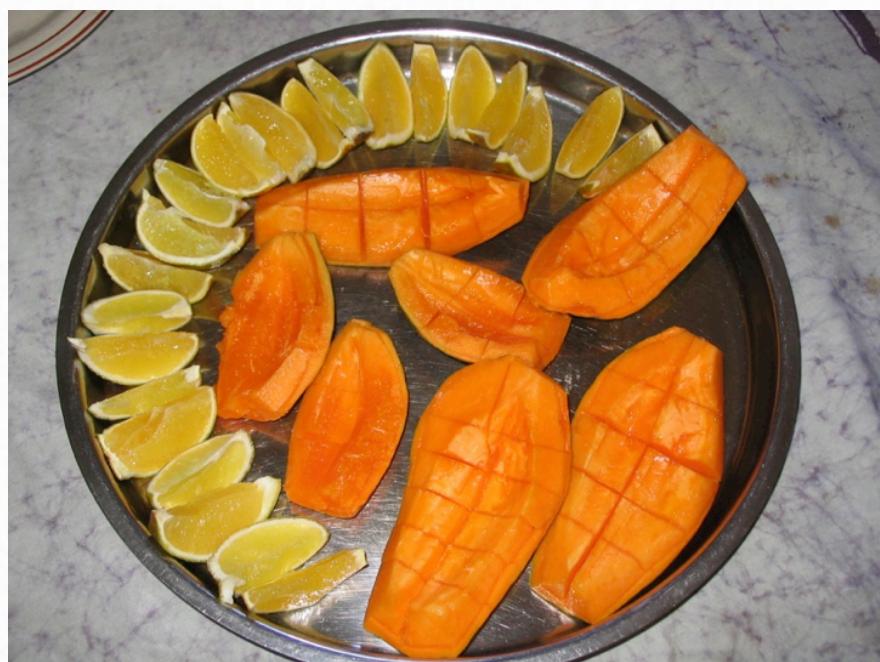
So much has happened in this last week, much more than I am used to. Dhaval and I are getting along very well. I have met with the chairmen of two villages. One (Miti Mirefu) is very close by and it is where Rosie, our housewoman, lives. The other (Tinga Tinga) is a Maasai village. Both of those we went to with Kosianga who is the ranch manager and somewhat in charge of everything that goes on here. I say somewhat because the owner is a micromanager and nothing here happens without his approval and knowledge. Both Kosianga and Thomas (who leads walking safaris)

can speak English, which helps. There is another couple here, both from Europe; they are in charge of the orphanage/wildlife rehabilitation. One sad/funny thing is that I can already speak more Kiswahili than them, and they've been here for a year and a half. They aren't legally allowed to keep wild animals so there really isn't a lot that they can do here. But they have a lot of books that they said I could borrow, and they can be friendly to us.

Everyone has a smile and tries to help me speak Kiswahili. I have been studying for hours everyday and working with Dhaval on it too. I have my greetings and good-byes down pretty good, and I know some other words and verbs and how to use positive and negative in the present and past tense. I still can't follow too much of what Dhaval says to everyone, but I hope that by the time that Dhaval leaves (July 4th) I will be able to communicate better. That is pretty much my number one priority now: learn Kiswahili.

I miss everyone lots. Right now each day is so new and overwhelming that I don't have time to dwell on who isn't here, but I still find myself wondering how a year is going to go by without all of my family and friends.. Kosianga said that I need to forget about that side of the ocean and em-

brace this side of the ocean. So, that's what I am going to try and do.



Having Rosie around to cook and clean has taken some getting used to. It's weird having someone bring your meals and all of that. But, everyone here of any standing has a housekeeper. For breakfast we eat fresh fruit (oranges, bananas, papayas, and toast). The papayas here seem to taste better than the papayas that we ate in Costa Rica for some reason. I actually like them here. For lunch we generally snack on some bread, bananas, and sweet crackers. Dinner is very good. We can pretty much get whatever we want to eat that doesn't require refrigeration. So it is generally rice and some sort of vegetable sauce, usually made out of tomatoes, potatoes and some other kind of vegetables. Sometimes fresh peas, spinach, or what-

ever else is in season. Rosie is a very good cook but we have to ask her to make it spicy. Often instead of rice we eat ugali. Ugali is the corn based starch that everyone here eats.

You boil fine corn flour/meal and then it forms into a large mass of cooked stuff . You then pull of pieces of that and form a little depression in the piece and then use it to scoop up the sauce. It is very good. My diet here is pretty starch heavy, but I requested some beans so that we could have some more protein in the diet. I am also going to get some peanut butter. It's been very good so far.



I have seen tons of elephants. Lots of them are coming to the waterhole every-day.. It has been really cool getting to see so many of them around. We have spent some time at the waterhole, some going with the rangers on patrols, some walking in the bush, and some doing other stuff. I have also seen warthogs, impalas, baboons, vervet monkeys, blue monkeys, two species of gazelles, dikdik, zebra, and on one of the drives we saw four giraffes far away and got pretty close to three ostriches. There are also tons of birds that I am trying to learn. It is kind of overwhelming because I am trying to learn plants (so far we've identified over 20 species of woody trees and shrubs), animals, the ranch, the culture, and the language. I am just hoping that sometime all the information that I am putting in will be able to come out. Well, that's about it.

I love all of you,

Erek

6/5/05