



The Shingle Lady

I can tell you, readers of the Edge, what one Cannon Beach artist/craftsperson does in the winter: she shingles. Her shingled walls decorate many of the finest homes, commercial, and public buildings on the north coast. For Laurie Beers walls, dormers, and gable ends present fresh canvasses, framed and awaiting the artist's eye and hand. She selects from her palettes a variety of materials crafted by mills from the northwestern United States and Canada: Number 1 and Number 2 Western Red Cedar shingles (Laurie eschews #2 shingles -- poor grain and minimal longevity), raked shakes, longer "Hollywoods" and "Royals", and a miscellany of decorator shapes harking back to Victorian styles.

A freshly shingled structure, the product of Laurie's patient and arduous application of straight-grained red cedar shingles, is a visual delight. A spectrum of tints -- ranging from dark browns and burgundy reds to peneche blonde -- characterize a typical sidewall. The visual effect pleases the eye; repetition and variation both vie for attention. The play of salt, wind, rain, and sunlight on their surfaces transmute these colors to silver gray.

Laurie selects her shingle lots with great care. Poor shingles fail quickly and take much longer to apply. This week her project requires 37 squares (a "square" of shingles covers 100 square feet). The shingles, of an exceptionally high grade, were sawn and woven into bundles at the A. and J. Shingle Company in Kelso, Washington. Fine, well-seasoned old growth cedar characterizes this lot. The Dueber family will have an extremely durable and long-lived skin on their new home.

Basic shingling woodcraft appears reasonably simple to the casual observer. Successive "courses" of shingles rise on a house's walls, each shingle receiving two nails or staples approximately 1" to 1 1/2" from the edge of individual shingles. Shingles come in various standard lengths from 18 inches to 24 inches; widths are random, ranging from about 3 inches to 11 inches. Gaps between the shingles of a specific course and the gaps on shingles in a course immediately above must be 1 1/2 inches apart. Error potential for the home handyman abounds. Wavy course lines, leaks, shiners (exposed nails inadvertently rusting), and non-level courses plague first time shinglers.

Laurie's work, if not truly art, is high craft. She brings patience, honed skills, pride, and an exceedingly critical eye to the job site. Each shingle is spaced precisely the width of a poker chip from the two adjacent to it. If shingle irregularities occur, Laurie hand-planes the edges of each offending shingle. Most contractors place interior and exterior corner boards vertically at wall ends. Shingles butt against these corner boards in common practice. Not Laurie. She prefers "weaving" shingles at corners, a process requiring much greater time and expertise. Each shingle must be shaped and sculpted in a delicate taper mating it to its corner neighbor.

Laurie initially encountered subtle resistance from male tradesmen. Exceedingly attractive, she grudgingly tolerated the jibes, catcalls and hijinx from "the guys." Now her position is secure. Consensus among contractors here at the Edge is that she is, quite simply, the best.

Not for the frail, tentative, or faint-hearted, applying shingle siding requires sinew and grit. Scaffolds, ladders, planks, and shingle bundles move from the ground up the sides of buildings. Conditions during winter months on job sites are less than ideal. Jello-like mire, slashing rain and chill winds tax Laurie most days. A new home without gutters installed allows a curtain of rain to fall on a shingler working up walls below. Water



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I visited Laurie this week at her latest project. Perched aloft on her plank 36 feet from the ground, she deftly fitted lustrous sidewall shingles to the last six feet of a gable end wall. With the last pieces of the cedar jig saw puzzle assembled, the mosaic of the Dueber family's exterior wall stood complete. I salute the artist on yet another composition marvelously conceived.

The shingled works of Laurie Beers may be visited at numerous sites. The Professor will apprise you of locations on request.

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February, the cruelest month. The solstice and holy days over, the gathering of the light. The swelling of expectation, the rising of sap, the vague lust for result damped by a spring not yet come. From this is derived the hexagram of Courtship and the ritual surrounding Saint Valentine's Day. Yes, hide the children, a column about love.

Long before the advent of greeting cards, overpriced chocolate, and wild weekends in Aspen, western civilization had evolved a notion of romance that presents considerable challenge to modern couples. The notion was courtly love, the elevation of mating to high art. As a practice, it has not stood the test of time.

Love is the most potent of magic and courtly love a powerful ritual form. A morality play for two, it celebrates the ardor, respect, and unswerving devotion of man for woman, woman for man. The ritual's success depends, not upon a delicious and fatal attraction, but upon honor and trust between two human beings, the willingness of a man and woman to accept roles in which each is both the giving and the gift.

Courtship is the high magic of faith, the highwire act of yin and yang, the seeking of union between twin forces of nature, the evocation of complementarity and the evocation of shared wills and common dreams. Now, of course, one must be watchful for signs of codependence, victimization, and the sin of enabling behavior. For lovers, these are not easy times.

In its quaint naivete, courtly love assumes that both parties are of good character, possessed of honor, and sharing the best of intentions. That, in short, their hearts are in the right place. There is nothing random or willynilly about courting, nothing properly called a dating game. Courtship embodies the notion of the proper match: the idea, not altogether lacking merit, that one should apply the same standards to one's own mating habits one would apply to one's springer spaniel.

This isn't to say that, in days of yore, there were not lies told, agendas misrepresented, and horrible mistakes made; or that, then or now, only the pure and the well-intentioned ever find romance. We are, after all, dealing with humans in a probabilistic universe just trying to get through the night. Courtly love does not deny human frailty; it merely sets moral ground rules recognizing courtship as a no-nonsense affair, a very personal piece of what the ancients called, in all seriousness, the Great Work.

The most crucial and ignored aspect of courtly love is, small surprise, the most demanding. The faint of heart may want to sit down. In order for the love of a knight for a lady to be the holy mission and vision quest it is, the object of his devotion must be, at least to his mind, unattainable. For courtship to be what it is, the search for the divine in the touch of a hand, those paying court must have no hope of success. They must recognize their goal to be an impossible dream and, at the same time, behave as if it were fact. Had Lancelot believed for a moment his love for Guinevere had the smallest chance of consummation, he would have thrown himself on his sword.

There is no contradiction in this. The noblest pursuits are always those without hope of completion: the search for truth comes to mind, and beauty, and perfect understanding. So it is with romance and courtly love. Unless we believe our heart's goal is beyond us, that this woman or this man so far exceeds our worth as to constitute an object to be venerated from afar, the magic of our courtship is not high but low. As Saint Francis of Assisi said of another love: In order to see God, we must give up all hope of seeing God. Courtship is the humility and selflessness that prepares the vessel.

So it goes. The purist acts, those rituals with the most chance of succeeding, are those without lust for result. Courtly love is the celebration of desire without need. The ritual of courtship is, personal ads notwithstanding, neither mysterious nor complex. We must simply love without hope of being loved in return. There is no higher magic than this. Not even a weekend in Maui.

Happy Saint Valentine's Day.

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