SIRI HELLE - THE HAND MADE TALE

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INTRODUCTION:
In which my hands teach me a new way of looking at the world

It's really far too hot out in the baking sun. Far too hot for protective clothing and safety earmuffs and a hot-motored saw; too hot for the chopping block and the axe: the sweat streams off me, mingling with the sawdust and needles from the spruce tree I'm working on. I drink and drink water from the river that runs past the cabin I'm working beside but never quench my thirst. And still I continue.

It isn't because I must. Nobody is paying me to chop down the tree, strip its branches, chop it into suitably-sized chunks, split them into logs and stack them along the back wall of my little cabin, a cabin without electricity that lies half an hour's walk from my hometown of Holmedal, pretty far out on the coast but otherwise pretty much in the heart of the western Norwegian county of Sogn og Fjordane. Nobody would blame me if I didn't do it and opted instead to lie on a rock in the river dangling my feet in the water, for example – or to do what I actually ought to be doing: working in front of a computer screen.

Still, there's one thing I know for absolutely certain: There's nothing else I'd rather be doing. Once I get into the flow of log-splitting; once the logs, the axe and I find our rhythm, I can keep going for any amount of time. The work fills my body, the repetitions fill my head and, right now, this – chopping my own firewood – is the very meaning of life.

And so the thoughts flow. It was probably at some point as I stood there chopping, cutting and splitting, that it dawned on me: my hands are my starting point for grasping the world.

In them – and what they can do, are allowed to do and can't do – I find joy and a sense of achievement. In them, I can sum up most of what is right and wrong with society, I think.

This is the story of how I found my way back to my own hands; of learning to feel at home in a cabin; of a desire to create and a remote desire to construct a building myself, with my own hands; a desire that became a reality – in the form of an outhouse.

I like building things. Making things. Producing, creating, bringing things about. And I hate making things. Both statements are equally true. The difference between the two? A sense of achievement (and sometimes the tools). The point is not necessarily whether I manage to do what I'm attempting straight away, but whether it feels as if I have some chance of managing it eventually.

And those two things – the fact that I like to make stuff and that I must work to achieve it – are precisely what I wish somebody had told me before. Because as a girl who did well at school, it was taken as read that I would choose to study subjects that opened the door to university. And then I would go there.

That isn't what happened. When I was 28, I started a practical agricultural school instead. And there, among milking cups that stuck fast in the wrong place, goats that disrespected me, potatoes I impaled on my fork and an axe that wouldn't land where I wanted it to, I found out what I'd been missing all these years. I hadn't been using my whole self. I had forgotten my body. Forgotten my hands.

I don't think I'm alone in this and that is why this book isn't just about me. Workers – craftspeople – are necessary and we must fight as hard as we can to retain them. But in order to be truly capable of seeing and valuing the work they do, they cannot be the only people to have a practical understanding.

Not all of us can be craftspeople, not all of us can have a practical job. Not all of us can whittle our own cutlery, produce our own food or build our own outhouse. But after doing practical work myself, I think everybody must have an opportunity to use their whole self.

What happens to the body when it is no longer used for regular physical labour? What happens to our hands and what happens to the society we have spent time and effort creating?

Once upon a time, all of us were rope makers. Back then, we stripped the bark from lime trees in spring, left it to soak over the summer and made lime bast rope out of the sodden fibres. We knew every millimetre of the finished product and knew what it was good for, and how much work lay behind it. And so we took care of it, too, and we weren't afraid to haul our children up on it. We

relied on what we knew. Nowadays, we cannot do that any more – and have to rely on CE labels instead.

If we can no longer change a zip, we have to rely on cheap store-bought trousers. The fewer tyres we change, the less we know about the car to which we entrust our lives. The fewer people know how much work goes into replacing a window or growing a cauliflower, the more difficult it becomes for carpenters and farmers to get fair pay. I could go on and on.

Because this transition – the fact that the majority of us have gone from being producers to consumers, from creators to thinkers, from practitioners to theorists – is one of the greatest changes in our modern society. And yet we don't talk about it very much.

We modern Westerners are trained to do specialized salaried work and buy whatever else we need to live. Not only were we not designed for this – most of us don't even want to live this way.

But are we in any way encouraged to develop those useful, practical, wise hands of ours? We advise bright young people to choose a life behind an office desk, while the less academic among us get to learn a practical trade.

Yet nobody is a born craftsperson. Everybody has to learn. And the feeling of getting to learn – of going from being bad to becoming better and, eventually, good enough; of becoming proficient in a craft – is nothing short of special.

The sense of achievement. Getting the axe to strike the log where I want it to, not just once but every time, gave me a sense of achievement I cannot compare with very much else.

Yes, I think this feeling is so fundamental that should not in any way be the sole preserve of those who are supposed to make a living from it.

It tells us something about a need that cannot be satisfied by life in the knowledge society. The need that makes us buy books about firewood, campfires and barns, beer-brewing and learning to knit. The creative drive: the need for a task that produces an outcome without any external recognition.

In many ways, this book is a paradox. Because I, the author – who will go on to claim that we must all have an opportunity to use our hands for practical purposes, increase our appreciation of craftwork and the manual trades – actually earn my living from sitting in front of a computer, thinking and printing. As a thirty-year-old I got my first column – *From the Serving Dish* in *Dag og Tid* newspaper – a column I still write, and since then it's snowballed.

I had a lot to say and a way of conveying it. It was relatively easy to get people to pay to hear about the thoughts, experiences and knowledge I eventually acquired about food, food production and the primary industries. All at once I was "something in the media".

Just what everybody wanted to be ten years ago. That's what I am. I get paid to write and have opinions about this and that.

Of course I like writing. I like the feeling of being able to describe something precisely, something really complex and important; being able to communicate feelings to others in a way that enables them, too, to understand, maybe even to share in my experiences, thoughts and opinions. I like the feeling of my fingers flying across the keyboard, sometimes almost faster than my thoughts. I like words and I like getting to engage in public debate. But my job isn't the most important thing I do. Nor does it allow me to use my whole self.

Building an outhouse, on the other hand – an outhouse that is the only one of its kind in the entire world – *that* required me to use my whole self. When such a sense of achievement, of experience, of identity and roots – not to mention so much joy, playfulness and fun – can stem from building such a tiny, simple building, how much more creative joy might there be out in the world just waiting for somebody to use it?

We cannot go back in history: cannot, should not and do not all wish to become self-sufficient. But we cannot, should not, ought not and must not lose all contact with our workers' hands, either.

Chapter 1
In which I teach myself to love a chainsaw

The tree doesn't want to fall. I'm alone at the cabin and the big tree closest to the cabin wall doesn't want to come down. I tug as hard as I can, drive in all the wedges I have to hand but the tree stands just as steady. And worst of all, I was so eager to make sure I cut the entire trunk that I cut my way through the hinge: the hinge I left between the felling cut and the directional notch – which the tree is supposed to snap along in a controlled way in order to fall in the direction I want it to – now has a large hole. In the middle, thankfully, but still: the tree is standing but I don't know how much it is standing on. Damn.

I knew the tree would be difficult, that it wouldn't fall all by itself. Too many of its branches were on the wrong side of the tree for that. The Sitka spruces my grandfather conscientiously planted in the post-war years are now so densely packed together that there is neither sunlight nor room for any branches in the middle of the group of trees. The branches have to grow out of the forest. Towards the walls of my cabin. I can't fell the tree in that direction.

That's why I've been putting this off, standing beneath the tree trunk, arms around it, as I peer up to calculate the tree's centre of gravity. I agree with myself that it could be worse, but it could certainly be better too. What's more, I have to admit that the trunk is the thickest I've dealt with up here. Around half a metre in diameter, just thick enough that I can't make the excuse that the chainsaw blade is too short. Felling this tree should go perfectly fine. All I have to do is not do anything wrong.

My cabin is what many Norwegians would still call a proper cabin. Around 25 square metres, with no electricity or running water, and no access by car. When my grandfather Steinar Helle got the cabin up here – into the mountains behind Holmedal, my childhood village by Dalsfjorden – in the early fifties, it really was on the mountain too. With a view and all.

That's no longer the case. It's more like the little hut in the forest that Grandma moves the family out to in Norwegian children's classic *Eight Children Move House*.

But it's so good. The two-kilometre walk from the road with a height gain of 300 metres is just enough to get your heart rate up and your mental pulse down, but not so far that it isn't possible to carry most things up there. Once there, the cabin lies in a beautiful spot beside a river that is always deep enough to swim in, often just too deep to ford and full of the freshest water imaginable. The cabin has a cast-iron wood stove that serves both for cooking and keeping the cabin warm, a fireplace, home-made cabin furniture, the world's most cramped kitchen and far too many old paraffin lamps that I can bring myself neither to throw out nor use.

I inherited the cabin after my father died, but it was many years before I realised just what a treasure I'd acquired. Yet over the past six or seven years, this is where I've felt most at home. Maybe it's to do with the fact that I have a project: Grandfather planted the trees, but he would agree with me that they have now served their purpose. It is time to clear them away, to regain the view and the sunlight.

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The spruce must fall

I wasn't a farmer (yet), but at agricultural school, I finally got to use my whole self, hands and all, and got to hone my skills on tools I initially had little faith in my own capacity to master. One of them was the chainsaw.

To say that working with the chainsaw immediately resonated with me would be an exaggeration. For one thing, it was impossible to get hold of a pair of protective boots that would fit my tiny size 36 feet and I felt like a clown wading around in the oversized, over-clean protective clothing. The helmet and visor felt absurd when faced with the small willow twigs we started our training on.

We learned to make a directional notch – a notch in the trunk that the tree will fall down into – and a felling cut. You saw an open triangle facing in the direction you want the tree to fall in. Then you make a felling cut through the

tree at roughly the same height (preferably slightly above, never below), cutting straight through until a five- to eight-centimetre hinge remains. If the centre of gravity is right, the tree will then fall over the directional notch and the hinge will snap just before the tree hits the ground. You can help it along by driving wedges into the felling cut, thereby tipping the tree in the correct direction.

Maybe what we were trying to do first and foremost was become pals with the killing machine in our hands. You don't need to have seen *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to understand that a lot can go wrong with a jagged, razor-sharp chainsaw hooked up to a petrol motor. And the more scared you are of the saw, the further away from your body you hold it, the weaker you get – and the more dangerous it becomes.

I felt stupid and clumsy for a long time. Right up until the day it went wrong, in fact. It was a pretty big spruce, and I lost control of the saw, cutting into the hinge. I realised I had to get away but not how fast I needed to do so. Luckily, my teacher was right beside me. He almost lifted me clear just before the tree landed on the spot where I had been standing. Thanks for that, Marco.

After that, I was scared for a while. I became one of the people who went around picking up twigs – which is about as boring as I now find the chainsaw fun. It couldn't end this way. I wanted to get back on the horse. My mother gave me a chainsaw for my thirtieth birthday – and then there was nothing for it but to get started.

Now the chainsaw is an extension of my hands. I know which sound means I can't push it any further, and how to attack branches that are stuck in the ground so that the saw won't get caught between the branch and the trunk, and jam. My saw, a Husqvarna 445, has become a work comrade I respect rather than fear. It is time to attempt the big, heavy tree.

The first thing I do is climb up with a rope, tie it tight, pull it across the clearing I've sawn out and tie it firmly to another tree. Then comes the directional notch. Beforehand, I've measured roughly how far into the trunk I need to cut – about a quarter of the way. I carefully make sure that the bottom cut is parallel to the ground and make some fine adjustments: it's a good feeling, being able to remove precisely those millimetres you're after with this crude machine.

Once I start on the felling cut, there's no way back. The tree trunk is thicker than the length of the chainsaw blade, so I have to stick the saw straight in on one side, parallel with the hinge and circle around the trunk, like a fan. Three times I stop to drive in wedges. That prevents the tree trunk from settling on the blade and trapping it. I come around. The tree is standing steady as a rock. I start to drive in the wedges. I strike and strike and strike. Nothing happens. The Sitka spruce has grown quickly, far too quickly: the timber is soft and it looks as if the wedges are simply sinking into the trunk. My pulse starts to climb. Did I saw straight the whole way around? I had to take the saw out to drive the wedges in – did I fail to follow the same track – might there be a woodchip inside there holding it back? In again with the saw – I poke about slightly at random here and there to get a sense of it, and all of a sudden, I find I've sawn through the hinge. In the centre, fortunately, so there's no risk of the tree landing on me. But still: it's the mistake I really shouldn't have made.

I venture around to the front of the tree and tug on the rope. Lean on it with all my weight. Nothing happens. I don't have any strength at all. What now? I dare not go to bed with a half-felled tree outside my window. A message ticks in from my aunt. She and a friend are on their way to a nearby mountaintop and wonder if I would like to come along. I would not. But should I ask them to come here and help me? Not quite yet.

Can the sailor in me help the forestry worker? I need more force on the rope. Transfer of energy. If I make two loops in the middle of the rope and pull the end through a few times I should, in theory, increase the force with every round. I try, and it works: I pull in an entire half metre.

Again, I check out the wedges – they're looser and I drive them further in. Back to the rope again. And so it goes for a couple of rounds. I pull. Strike. Pull. Strike. And pull. Now I can't manage any more. My arms were long ago sapped of strength. I lean on the rope one more time but don't feel as if anything is happening at all. Then I hear it: the sound of a tree starting to fall. The branches sweeping through the branches of the other trees; the swoosh as the huge tree slips through the air and, at last, the noise of the hinge cracking – always a good sound. Since I'm now standing on a slightly different side of the tree than usual –

the place where it will land in fact – there's a tiny touch of fear, but even with heavy protective shoes, it isn't hard to run away and I still manage to enjoy the sound.

That feeling. The tree fell precisely where I wanted it to. That's one thing. The cabin is still standing. That's another. I managed it. Single-handedly, with my own hands and my own rather new knowledge. That is the most important thing. The fact that I was the one who worked out what needed to be done. Big heavy tree versus small, newly trained woman: an away victory – damned if I'm not David, standing here gazing at the tree that lies vanquished on the ground, hands raised to heaven like a champion nobody can see.

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Hands grip, weigh, grasp, interpret and understand. For us and with us. They lift, place, stretch out and save things that are about to fall; thread the cotton straight through the needle and loop it through the wrinkled fabric in even stitches – even on the back, where no eyes will be able to keep track. Hands handle firmly and decisively when they know what they're meant to do and feel their way cautiously through the room when it is too dark for our eyes. Bravely, they reach out ahead of us, into the unknown.

Sometimes they gently stroke the wet skin on a face. Yet you should never doubt that they can lash out in a nanosecond if necessary. Place the right hands around the neck of a violin and they can convey centuries-old feelings to thousands of people in a great hall. They can cross fingers, bang on a table, throw salt over a shoulder and stop a black cat from running across the road. Get the cat to settle purring in the crook of your arm.

Once upon a time you sat there with far too many of your own fingers on a café table, incapable of finding anything to talk about because you were so horribly aware of those fingers that couldn't stop fidgeting – until they found the other set of fingers and hands that, of course, lay equally confused on the other side of the table, and all twenty of them realised: this is where we belong.

Yes, I spend a fair amount of time thinking about hands. My own too. Everything they can and can't do. Sometimes, like when I sit down at a piano, I'm simply overcome with admiration for them: how can they remember this Debussy piece I haven't played in at least five or six years? Because it must be my hands that remember this, mustn't it? My head rarely has a clue, or not of the details at any rate. How do they create the expression in the music?

Other times, they can't even manage to falter their way through something as basic as Bella Ciao on the accordion. Stupid fingers, I think then: nothing but bum notes and they can't even work together.

"It's important for you to have tough skin on your hands," my mother happened to comment recently, and I saw then and there that it is. In the same way as I feel sexier, stronger, more feminine and more straight-backed when I'm in my working clothes, in my carpenter's trousers, cap and a singlet that shows off my shoulder muscles – which are actually pretty well-defined right now because I work with them – than I do in a dress, stockings and lipstick, I'm happiest with well-worn hands. I'm most inclined to show them off when there's a good, hard lump on the top of my lowest finger joint, when there's a dark tinge around my cuticle, maybe a splinter here and there, or a little cut that I've stuck some gaffer tape on (it doesn't hurt, mind, I don't need a plaster – it's just so impractical to bleed over everything).

I'm unhappy when my hands start to itch: that tells me I've been working too long at the computer again, that the good, coarse working skin is growing out; that if I don't do something about it, my hands will become soft and smooth again in a matter of days. It goes so quickly: after just a week, all that good work has vanished.

Quite simply, what I achieve with my hands has a pretty big impact on the way I think about myself. It can go both ways. Right now, as I stand in a car park somewhere outside Rælingen feeling pretty small and alone, it seems to be going against me. To get here, I've taken two buses from Oslo, where I'm on a visit. Now I stand looking in through a shop door, and don't know if I dare go in.

This shop probably has a tool I want to use to test out my working hands and my practical understanding**:** a wood-splitting knife or froe.

The froe is, in fact, somewhere between a knife and an axe: a narrow rectangular blade with a 30-centimetre edge. The edge is convex, like the edge of an axe, but it is used for cutting or piercing, not chopping. Sticking straight up from the blade at a right angle is a loose haft.

In many respects it doesn't look like a very useful tool. It's heavy and unbalanced in a way. But the froe seems to be exactly what I need if I – perhaps the first person ever to do so in history – am going to attempt to cut wood shingles out of Sikta spruce.

I have made cladding out of juniper branches for two-and-a-half of the outhouse walls. Or rather, one of them is half covered by a steel plate, which stands behind the area where the muck will end up: the plate can be removed and the outhouse emptied if that should ever be necessary. So there are one-and-a-half walls to go: but one of them has the door in it, so it's small and short, and juniper cladding may make it clunky and odd-looking, I've thought.

Then came the snow, early this year, and all at once, my juniper construction material was effectively buried and totally inaccessible. So I started to do some lateral thinking about the remaining walls. I started thinking about wood shingles. I've read about them in a Jon Godal book and realise I have seen them on the roofs of stave churches: flat, thin wooden "tiles", cut, chopped or carved out of logs chopped to a suitable length, lengthwise so that the rings remain and laid one on top of the other in many layers, half overlapping at least. If done properly, they are compact enough to stop water from getting in.

What's more, these wood shingles can be planed and adapted and tarred or oiled to offer protection against water, rot and damp at least as long as any other roof would. Wood shingle roofs have been found that date back to the 13th century. So they've been there for more than eight hundred years.

It goes without saying that my wood shingles aren't so carefully made. Nor will they last that long, even though they will hang vertically on a wall and not on a roof, and will therefore be less exposed to the damp. But Sitka spruce doesn't exactly possess the ideal qualities for wood shingles: on old shingles, the rings are no more than two millimetres wide and there are no knots in the shingles. In my forest, the rings are more like eight to ten millimetres wide and the wood is

far from knot-free. Do I have the nerve to go into a shop and tell them about this kind of thing? Do I have the nerve to go in there at all?

Yes, you could say that specialist shops cause me a certain amount of anxiety. Shops full of people who know more than I do. Even though I know that this is precisely why the shops exist – to sell me things from which I can learn more and help me make the right choices – I'm still not happy here, in the same way as I don't like delivering my car to the workshop to change the brakes, or hiring a plumber or going to the hairdressers for that matter. A peculiar business.

I pluck up my courage – if I've got this far, I simply can't turn back – and walk into the shop. I see the froe straight away. Just as swiftly, I hear the question I've been dreading: "How can I help you?"

There's nothing for it but to jump straight in: I talk about the cabin and the outhouse and the useless Sikta spruce. And am met with perfect understanding.

"A froe is what you'll need, then," says the shopkeeper.

"Is it difficult to use?" I ask – because I might as well.

"Well, is any craftwork actually easy?"

The shopkeeper looks at me slyly. I sigh, smile, pay and leave – one froe the richer. In spite of everything, it feels good.

Then there's only the rest of it left: finding out how to use it, for example. To the best of my knowledge, nobody I know has used a froe before. I can't even find any decent YouTube videos – the surest sign that whatever you're doing is pretty niche. But according to Godal, it shouldn't be all that difficult – a skilled wood shingle maker can make 1,000 shingles in a day. The only thing for it is to give it a go.

I have a fresh tree trunk to hand. I cut it into logs that are 13 inches long (because I've read that this is how long the shingles need to be if they're to be hung on a wall), trying to avoid the worst of the knots, and it sort of works. I place the haft in the holder on the blade. It doesn't seem to fit very firmly at all. I give it a little bang with the sledgehammer. Is it in place now?

I position the froe across a log of around 20 centimetres in diameter. I hold the haft firmly with my left hand, using my right to strike with the sledgehammer

– and absolutely nothing happens. The froe shows no sign of wanting to penetrate the log. I try again. Once more. The haft comes loose, flies out of the hole**;** the hand that was firmly gripping it follows and it's pretty painful. Damn! The haft flies across the bog – apparently I've thrown it away.

I carry on for a while. Banging, trying, getting nowhere and becoming increasingly enraged. The haft simply comes loose and there's no question of getting the blade to penetrate the log. I take a deep breath. Fetch a bucket of water. Put the haft in it and go for a long, steep hike.

The next morning, I leave the haft where it is. I get out my biggest cleaving axe and a long stick instead. I place the axe in the middle of the log and hit it with the stick (no, I wouldn't dare assume my aim with the axe is that good) – and after two blows, the log splits in two. I do the same thing again – split the halves in two – and it's easy-peasy.

But now, like it or not, it's the froe's turn again. Out of the bucket it comes and yes, the haft has swollen and is very much more firmly attached to the blade – a promising start. Then I position the froe a centimetre into the quartered log, from the centre outwards. Now the blade has plenty of free space on either side. I strike the end of the blade carefully with the sledgehammer, holding onto the haft with all my might – and darn it if it doesn't work: the blade buries itself in the wood, mostly the outer end, and I have to strike a small blow on the inner part, between the shaft and the log. That works too, but this shingle is turning out very thin: the froe is burrowing its way outwards, so I strike it again as I try to straighten it up. It doesn't work; around halfway down the log, the blade jumps out but regardless of the fact that it's only half as long as it should be eventually, I have my first shingle.

And it gets better. The very next time, I manage to cut through the whole log, producing a lovely, flat shingle, roughly a centimetre thick, thirteen inches long and three to four inches wide. Soon I have a stack.

Now and then I hit knots. I bash my way through them. Sometimes the shingle snaps. Then it becomes firewood, kindling – good to have. Eventually, the log becomes too narrow to make any more shingles, so the rest of it becomes firewood too. I split it once with the axe – done. After a while, my haft hand can

sense where the froe is heading and I can correct its course by altering the amount of pressure I apply and where I strike with the sledgehammer hand. Fun. A laugh.

It's also a laugh hanging the shingles on the wall. The first thing I realise is that I can't nail them into thin air. Initially I try putting up planks that run the length of the wall, but the laths I have to hand are too fragile: they snap and offer little resistance to the hammer.

Once again I'm happy to have almost infinite amounts of timber because I end up screwing roundwood poles along the wall, one on top of the other, then nailing the shingles firmly onto them. One nail through the first shingle; place the next one beside it, overlapping; one nail through the overlap fastens both new and old shingle. More fun.

It goes so quickly. My hands are enjoying themselves, playing with hammer and nails. They like it, can't move onto the next one fast enough. Up and up it goes and I have to get the ladder out; invigorated, I take a coffee break up there – I give myself time for that – lay my head back and look up at the tree canopies, thinking that they really aren't all that bad after all, those Sikta spruces of mine.

My trees don't grow straight upwards, they twist around themselves as they grow, the way trees generally do when they grow quickly or there are too many other trees around them. That's why not all my shingles are perfectly flat, and some of them have knots distorting them, of course, so my wall isn't perfectly flat either. It'll just have to do. If they fall off, I can always make new ones to replace them. In fact I'm almost looking forward to some of them falling off so I can make some new ones and put them up again.

The end of the nail on the index finger of my left hand is purple. My right hand is still vibrating a bit after all the sledgehammering. I have an irritating blister on my palm between the ring and little finger. The skin around my nails is splitting – it'll need moisturising – and I must remember to tweeze out the splinter in the inner part of my left thumb. Why can't every day be just like this?

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Truth be told, I wouldn't have believed I'd ever be on such friendly terms with an axe. I'd barely laid hands on one before I turned 25 and so I realise it's hardly surprising I was a bit clumsy with it to start off with. But it doesn't help to say that when a person is standing there, failing and failing to hit the big round logs while everybody else around them is splitting thin sticks as easy as pie. It's often difficult for me to be humble and open enough to learn something from people who are more skilled. It's something I'm working on.

But the axe is one tool I'm proud to say I've become pals with by using it all by myself. Where nobody can see me. I have discovered that there's nothing tricky about chopping firewood: it's just a matter of practising and practising – chop by chop by chop your body realises what it's meant to do; the action becomes ingrained and in most cases I hit the spot I'm aiming for.

In this way, the entire construction project has given me an opportunity to test out, play and make mistakes using a new side of myself. It has been frustrating and hard going, but at the same time, and indeed most importantly, it has given me a peace I all too rarely feel.

Although I am a girl, although I am strong on theory and was good at school, although I clearly don't have any visible problem with sitting still, I do have this need to create: physically, practically and with my own hands.

The goal was to get something done. Not to sit and cobble something together and take it apart and put it back together again until it was perfect, but to create a result. I am no expert TV carpenter and although it's absolutely fantastic that they exist and become celebrities now, maybe it's okay to speak out about the fact that you don't have to be a jack of all trades to try and create something yourself.

Now and forever, it's about the fact that not everything has to be perfect – because if it did, nobody would ever get started. And you have to start, you have to sense what fun it is to build something, even if it's just a slightly wonky, thoroughly charming outhouse: so the point is the sense of picturing for yourself how it's supposed to be, and knowing what steps you need to take to make that happen – which tools to use, all the way down to the fact that the roofing screws

are nut head screws, so I'll need an adaptor for the drill. I've learnt this and now I know it.

The outhouse at my cabin has given me new hands. I love my hands after a day's work on walls, roof and floor. The feeling that my wrist has become a bit broader is mostly my imagination, but I have no doubt that hands become cleverer the thicker the skin on their fingers becomes.

The entire contents of this book can be summed up in the motto "conservation through use". From busy fingers to the big landscape, none of them can be scrimped on. None of them are worth the paper they are written on unless actions follow words.

So now it's up and out. Out and build. Out and tear down, dig, hammer, nail, chop, screw, fell, plant, harvest, weed, slaughter; up and spin, sew, fix, crush, play, measure, make, create, bake, rake, smoke, stroke, strive, struggle and play.

Out and conserve – out and use.

All at once, the outhouse is finished. The next morning I sit there. I leave the door open, out onto my forest. I can just see the corner of the cabin through the doorway. And I'll be darned if a little goldcrest doesn't land on one of the spruce trees out there.

I sit there for a long time but I won't say much about how it felt. I think you understand. Let me just put it this way instead: that won't be the last building I'll make**.**

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