

# We're All In This Together ...aren't we?



*I suspect that this attitude has a lot more to do with Vermont than it does with me. It is that old New England spirit of frugality—not charity—at work.*

When you own a house, you sometimes feel as though you are at war. Not one of those epic, all-or-nothing clashes where, in the end, only the winner is left standing. More like one of these modern, “low intensity,” wars where one side makes a move and the other reacts and, at the end of the day, nothing much has changed. It is the same old stalemate but both sides have paid a price.

You sometimes feel alone in this fight. Alone and outgunned. You are up against age & decay, various animals to include bats in the attic and carpenter ants where wood has gotten wet and rotted and, above all, with the weather. Everything from ice dams in the winter to hail stones in the summer. Your house can be struck by lightning or, in the same thunderstorm, a high wind might drop a three or four hundred pound branch from a pine tree squarely on your roof.

After one of these skirmishes, you assess the damage, do what you can on your own, and then call for help.

The first time in my life as a homeowner that I had to call in the cavalry was for a septic system that needed ... well, I didn't know exactly what it needed. But it surely needed help.

I was new to Vermont and had brought with me a city-bred attitude about business dealings with plumbers, electricians, carpenters and other people you called to fix things you couldn't handle yourself. I was, in short, suspicious and ready to argue over the price, the extent of the repairs and the quality of the materials. That's the way it was done in New York.

The man who arrived with his backhoe lived fairly close by. He was a true Vermonter from a family that had been here for generations. We knew each other by name and waved when we passed on the road. But this, I told myself, was business.

I watched warily while my neighbor dug up the leech field. But he was an artist with that backhoe and that softened my suspicions a little. When he'd moved enough earth to make an assessment, he shut down the machine and got down to talk.

“Here's our problem,” he said and, at first, I took no notice of the pronoun as he went on to explain how some of the pipes that led off from the tank to the leech field were clogged and needed to be replaced. He added something about junction boxes and I found myself wishing that I'd done

some research on just how septic systems worked. But this was before the Internet and I don't know where I would have gone to make a study.

So I listened and pretended to understand what my neighbor was saying about “our” problem.

“Now there's a couple of ways we can go,” he said, sticking with the third person plural.

He went on to describe one solution. Then another.

“Now,” he said, “if we go that second way, we won't have to do near as much digging, we won't have to buy as much new pipe, and we can save ourselves some money.”

He said this in a sort of low, confidential tone. As though we were getting over on someone.

Of course, who “we” were getting over on was ... “him.”

Less time on the job for him, meant he would be paid less. But that didn't seem to be the way he was thinking.

“Go for it,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Glad you see it that way.”

As though, being a flatlander, I might not have.

It was, I told my wife later that day, the strangest business negotiation I'd ever been involved in. But the bill came in at about half of what I was expecting and I could certainly live with that.

In the years since that episode I've had all sorts of people as allies in the endless struggle to keep the house upright and in good repair and most of them think that way. Last winter, the ice dam monster attacked and I wasn't quick enough with a counter attack.

The insurance adjustor came by, looked at the damage and sent me a check. I called a man who has had my back through many of these crises. He came by and took a look at the job. I told him what the insurance company had paid and he said, “Oh, hell. We can do a lot better than that.”

And he did.

I suspect that this attitude has a lot more to do with Vermont than it does with me. It is that old New England spirit of frugality—not charity—at work. And isn't it comforting to know, these days, that it still survives anywhere on earth? ♦

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