

OLIVER'S HOMESITE BY THE LAKE

by
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My son and I landed on the lake with mixed feelings. Our good friend Oliver had passed away only five months earlier. I had been asked to see what he had left behind at his homesite, and to bring back whatever might be of value.

I will never forget that trip. It became a journey through my friend's life and personality, and it brought back lots of good memories.

The trail led me from the lake up to Oliver's place—his little isle in the forest, “in the middle of nowhere”. It was so peaceful!

We walked past his cache made of poles. It had a system for collecting water from the roof into a little pond. I had to smile, remembering that the door to the cache opened automatically when you put the ladder in place. Oliver loved to figure out new ways to do things, and especially to find functional solutions to practical challenges.

Then we passed the warehouses, also made of poles, with shelves for tool storage and with containers dug down in the ground to keep food cool in summer. I could still see the grizzly-made hole in the wall. Oliver had never fully repaired it. He said he needed the hole to remind him that everything is perishable.

It felt good to be back “with” my friend. I sat down on a stump and looked around.

Oliver's frugal little place had several small buildings scattered around. I realized that every single one of them was built differently. Oliver was always trying to improve. Always!

On my left hand was Oliver's two-story (!) doghouse. The roof was covered with straw, the walls with birch bark. At that moment I remembered his enthusiasm when he discovered those building techniques in Norway some years ago. He could hardly wait to go back home and try them out himself.

One of Oliver's sayings was “If you need something, make it!” He sure did!

To the right I could see that some of the simply made Conestoga-like tarp-sheds were still in pretty good shape. The framework of bent saplings was holding up well, still protecting the sleds he had stored inside. Those buildings weren't exactly good looking, but as Oliver always said, “What works is beautiful!”

Between the buildings stood a lot of peeled poles, stacked up tipi style, ready to use. It brought back a memory from Norway. Oliver had just seen me cut down a tree. I needed a log, and left the top of the tree on the ground. Oliver stopped me and said: “Rein, you have now killed something. Out of respect for the tree, you should use it all! Peel the rest of it and store it. You'll find a use for it sometime”.

Oliver asked a lot of himself, and also of others. He wanted the world to change, and he wanted all of us to do the right thing. “The world is full of people who say one thing and do something else”, he said. “To save this beautiful planet, we all have to live responsibly, close to nature, and not use more than our fair share of the world's total resources”.

I really admire Oliver for trying to live as he talked.

I had helped Oliver build this house about 15 years earlier. I remember him sitting on his bed, working on a new wood plane with a great deal of passion. Suddenly he said: “You should treat your tools like friends. If you treat them well and never forget to maintain that friendship, they will always be there for you when you really need them. They may even save your life!”

Oliver wasn’t really satisfied when it came to my respect and passion for tools. When I hit a small rock with his beloved axe, he acted as if I had hit him. He sighed: “Well, as long as you don’t do anything to my saw, Rein. That would take me a whole day to fix”.

The very next day I hit a nail with his saw. I didn’t dare to tell him, and he never mentioned it.

Although Oliver lived all by himself, way out in the wilderness, he still had a great interest in keeping informed about happenings in other places in the world. His small house was full of books of all kinds. I used to think of him as “the man who had a book about everything”.

Oliver craved perspective! He was always engaged with something he had recently read. Seeing him sitting on his bed, I thought of all our nice long talks and discussions through the years, always about essential or fundamental questions in life.

My son and I spent two days sorting his things and deciding which of his tools to take back to “civilization”. We carefully carried them down to the float plane on the lake, hoping that these close “friends” of Oliver’s would continue to be meaningful to others.

Before the plane took off, I asked the pilot to circle Oliver’s tiny place one last time. I was thinking: Oliver chose to live simply, but he certainly had a great impact on a lot of people, both in my native Norway and in the U.S.

Something a firefighter once said came to mind: “No one seems to get to know this guy without being affected. He does something to you”.