

Bark House: The McCurry's of Highland Craftsmen

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January 25,
2011

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Servant leadership is the concept wherein an individual or individuals identify their own flourishing with the flourishing of something greater. That 'something greater' could be their organization, community, a greater cause, humanity, the planet, or the divine.

On a visit to Spruce Pine, NC, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I discovered servant leadership, and how it can be life-affirming to both humanity and the planet, first hand.



Highland Craftsmen is a company with much of what the world needs today. It makes me think of the mythic image that may have been the United States at some point in the distant past – *a pure can-do-anything entrepreneurial spirit grounded in deep core values and a strong moral compass*. And, in this case, at the center is a desire and willingness to pour heart & soul into making a difference in the world at large by focusing on your immediate community.

I first met Chris McCurry, co-founder of Highland Craftsmen, after giving the keynote to open the Mountain Green Sustainable Communities Conference in June of 2010, on the beautiful campus of Warren Wilson College. After the event, Chris started talking to me about Bark Houses.

Bark Houses?

Yep.

In the open-air exhibit tent, Highland Craftsmen had a booth. Chris showed me some of their product, talked about her company, and the fact that their product had numerous certifications, including Cradle to Cradle Gold certified. Having followed Bill McDonough's work for 20 years, I am familiar with the Cradle-to-Cradle certification, and the rigors that a company has to go through to achieve Gold level certification.



William McDonough talks about Highland Craftsmen Inc. Barkhouse Brand Shingles

https://youtu.be/oY-2IRn_g8s



barksiding.com
for more information about Cradle to Cradle Gold Bark House Brand Shingles

<https://youtu.be/d5K7ttwFFAI>

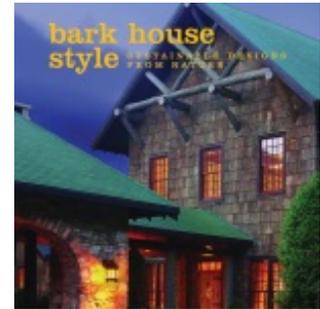
While this spiked my interest, it was the combination of Chris' passion and intelligence that really captured me. As I was leaving, she gave me a copy of her beautiful coffee-table book to take home, and invited me to come visit.

It took almost five months before I was able to free-up a couple days to get back up to the area. There were several companies I wanted to learn more about, and potentially profile, in the Asheville, NC area, so I was looking forward to the trip.

Upon arrival in Spruce Pine I met Marty McCurry, co-founder of the company with wife Chris. The knowledge, care for their community, southern hospitality, love, and exhilarating entrepreneurial spirit that both Marty & Chris exude and demonstrate captivated me for the next eight or so hours.

If there were 20 people around a campfire, Marty would be the magnetic storyteller that captured the attention and imagination of everyone. Big man, bigger heart, quick mind, deep soul, and all with a global sophistication that is also grounded in the wisdom of place that is the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina.

Sitting inside Marty's office, the paneling is all bark. It smells great, and you feel kind of like you are in an office, but more like you are outside in a tree-house. After about 30min of initial conversation, Marty started me on a tour, much of which is captured in the video below. But first, some interesting history on bark houses, and brief background on the company.



HISTORY

Before the widespread cutting of timber began, many Native American peoples lived in bark houses of many different types. In this region they built bark wigwams from wide sheets of birch and similar bark. Later, for a short period of time from about 1895 – 1920 in a limited geographic region of western North Carolina, the original style of bark house (actually meaning bark shingle) appeared. Architect Henry Bacon championed it when he founded the Old Linville square-bark shingle, which was before he created the Lincoln Memorial.



In the early 1900's a blight began infecting The American Chestnut, and in a few decades that keystone specie had disappeared from some nine million acres of eastern forests. The humble yellow poplar – or tulip poplar – took its place and was widely harvested for

industrial purposes. Its bark however, and other elements of the tree, were considered waste and left to biodegrade or be burned as fuel.



COMPANY BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

In the mid-late 1980's, with a desire to use more natural elements in home construction, Marty McCurry became fascinated with bark shingles. He attended NC State in Chemical Engineering and Forest Resources, and made his living as a builder. During this time period Chris and Marty got married, and Chris told Marty that, one day, she would like to live in a bark house.

Later while at the UNCC School of Architecture in 1990, Marty did textural studies on poplar bark and began researching it as a building material. The McCurry's invested six years in educational research and preparation, studying not only the potential product and market, but how to form a company *while also creating an industry where one did not exist*. No small feat. The result was the formation of Highland Craftsmen Inc. in the early 1990's.



The mission of Highland Craftsmen is: ***“to decrease the impact of construction and harmonize with nature. This mission relates to environmental, cultural, social and economic sustainability.”*** Per the company website,

“Poplar Bark House shingle siding is made with bark that is removed from yellow poplar trees before they are shipped to sawmills for use in furniture and other manufacturing. The shingles are kiln-dried to prevent shrinking and cracking, and they contain no chemical additives. They resist infestations and can meet municipal building-code standards for flammability.”

It's a wonderful waste-into-resource story. The bark off of trees, considered a 'waste byproduct' of the forest industry, can produce one of the most green / sustainable building products on the market. Bark “waste” is used as siding, as laminates for interior paneling, facing doors, cabinetry and more. Bark siding can actually last longer than you will, and with no maintenance, and it is naturally fire retardant and a natural insulator.

Think about this as compared to, say, vinyl siding. Vinyl siding, or uPVC weatherboarding, has extensive negative effects on both humans and the environment. According to the Healthy Building Network, “the adverse health effects to workers in vinyl chloride monomer

and PVC production facilities, residents near those facilities, first-responders at fires involving PVC, and consumers living and working in buildings with PVC components.” OK, bark is about as natural a product as you can get. So no toxins in that manufacturing. Then, when the bark finally does reach its ‘end of life’ in 80 or 100 years or so, drop it on the ground, and it will naturally biodegrade.

Highland Craftsmen has received national acclaim from publications ranging from Architectural Record, Fine Home Building, Green Builder and Eco Home to Luxury Living, American Bungalow and Arts & Crafts Home. They are a certified and audited B Corp, and have received Chain of Custody (CoC) certification from the top three US affiliated companies: the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the Program for Endorsement of Forestry Certification (PEFC).



ON TO THE TOUR

Leaving Marty’s office we stepped a few feet into left into the hallway to begin learning about cabinet fronts and poplar molding. In each video, take notice of the small subtleties which continually arise that demonstrate Servant Leadership.



<https://youtu.be/admPKSnq3m4>



<https://youtu.be/6v5G4UGaaZA>

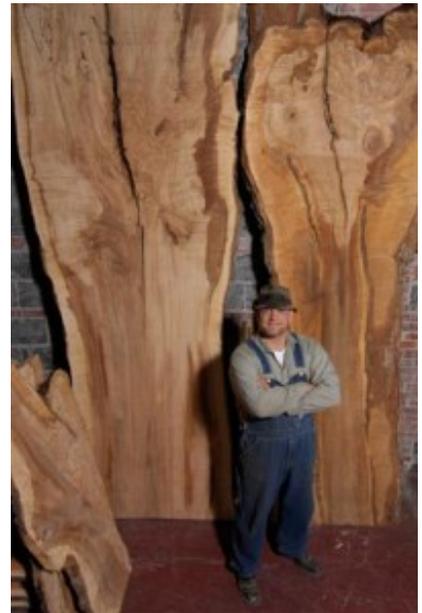


<https://youtu.be/ev13YCebjGI>



<https://youtu.be/VdPEmpVGQAM>

The *REALLY* large reclaimed trees they encounter are cut into slabs. These massive wooden slabs are extraordinarily rare because they come from trees that are indigenous to the East Coast. These pieces are turned into amazing tables for conference rooms and dining halls, counter tops for bar areas and kitchens, desks, coffee tables and more. They've even made a bed out of tree limbs for a design competition that would be right at home at Hogwarts.



SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership is obviously not an ego-driven approach where an individual, leadership team, or board is trying to maximize the organization for his or her personal gain (be it power, wealth, status...). Servant leaders are, for lack of a better term, conscious leaders. They are conscious in that they are fully aware that their flourishing is based on the interdependencies of all the stakeholders – be it their team, their organization, their community, their family, etc. – for all are interconnected, and everything is interdependent.

Per Wikipedia:

Servant-leaders achieve results for their organizations by giving priority attention to the needs of their colleagues and those they serve. Servant-leaders are often seen as humble stewards of their organization's resources (human, financial and physical)...In order to be a servant leader, one needs the following qualities: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth and building community. Acquiring these qualities tend to give a person authority versus power.

The McCurry's go to great lengths at every step to serve all their stakeholders. Whether it is procurement, design, development, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, sales, or ongoing customer service – everyone receives stellar treatment.

Prior to launching Highland Craftsmen with Marty, Chris was a practicing holistic nurse. With her holistic approach and capacity to nurture integral to the core of her being, she merely shifted from



healing patients to growing human capacities while healing the planet. With Chris, every interaction comes with a focus on interdependencies. Whether it is product design, working with company contractors or community leaders, marketing, or creating new processes, “inclusion” and “interdependencies” are integral to every step.

While not listed in the Wikipedia definition above, *Patience* is indeed also a virtue of Servant Leaders.

In the early days, the McCurry’s had innumerable conversations over several years with loggers, city council members, designers, builders, standards agencies, etc. They were looking for new solutions and how things could be done in new and different ways. They would continually bring diverse, and often traditionally oppositional parties (loggers and environmentalists, for example), to the table. Continually running up against, “Oh, that’s impossible.” And, “But that’s never been done before” never slowed them down. They kept asking questions which focused collectively on, “How can we make this happen in a way that works for everyone?”

Over time they made a significant investment in the community at large, as well as in downtown Spruce Pine. Articles have compared their level of nurturing to that of wineries’ and the detail involved in cultivating grapes. Only in this case, the individuals ‘picking the grapes’ are rugged loggers.

Because there was no model for what they were trying to create, they had to invent it. In talking with the loggers and studying the logging industry, they learned it would be impossible to do what they were asking the loggers to do. Really. Impossible?

The loggers would have to stand on the side of a steep mountain, and carefully remove the bark from the tree. Being still filled with water, the bark is *extremely* heavy. They would next have to manhandle it and get it to a different truck without it breaking. Yea, right. The loggers would have to get as much for the bark as they did for the tree to make it viable.



To paraphrase Marty, ‘We look at the big picture – all of it – as an overall exchange with all of the interdependencies, rather than from just a monetary perspective...eventually we knew we could find a point, a blend, where it would work for everyone.’ Another way of looking at this type of exchange is that, from my perspective, in everything they do at Highland Craftsmen, Marty & Chris seek to be *life-affirming*.

Their specific approach to creating their own *life-affirming niche* resonates with the biological perspective of mutualism, or symbiosis, found throughout nature. At no point were the McCurry's looking only to "take" and "make" and "create a profit." What ended up working was based on years of developing symbiotic relationships steeped in mutual respect. These symbiotic relationships are with the loggers, the economic development folk, area and regional builders, the folks in the agencies that develop building standards and codes, nationally renowned architects and designers, and many others.

The words of poet Alexander Pope come to mind. He said, "Consult the genius of the place in all things." Planners, green building professionals, designers, environmentalists, biologists, and others will often refer to Pope and the concept of "the genius of the place." It's about the nature of the place and accessing it and adapting whatever you are striving to do, to the context of the place. Allow it to infuse the design and decision making process. John Todd has called it, "the elegant solution predicated on the uniqueness of place."



The McCurry's have effectively consulted the genius of place that is the Blue Ridge Mountains in western NC. Highland Craftsmen reflects the local genius of the natural environment, the cultural history, and the current skillsets of those living and working in the region. Over time, they've worked with about 350 local loggers. Chris talked to me about the context of these working relationships...

"When they are contemplating jobs and work and what they want to be and what is life-affirming – they make their personal choices. For example they don't want to work 12 months out of the year, they only want to work 9 months, and take the winter off to do things like go hunting, or traveling. You are not going to capture that person in a 9-5 job, it isn't going to happen. It's not who they are. They are not going to be beholden to you. Your rule is not their rule. They are independent and strong. There is an old Scottish background that's is strong in this area, with rules of independence and doing it 'my way.'

"They show up with their tools and material. They just show up, we work it up, and they get a check before they leave that day. It matches what they need for their lives. We give daily checks."



"It's challenging for our accounting. Any businessperson would say 'you can't do that.' ' You can't run a business when you don't get a PO from your vendor for their material. And you can't run a business where you can only gather that material in the summer months and you have to warehouse it the rest of the year. You have to guess and hope you don't over buy or under buy. You simply can't run a business like that."

Yet the McCurry's *do* run a successful business 'like that.' And they also do *many other* things any schooled MBA would say simply can't be done, *and* run a successful business. Their attitude and entrepreneurial passion is reminiscent of Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, who I met in the late 1990s. Two of her quotes that resonate here, "To succeed you have to believe in something with such a passion that it becomes a reality." And, "Potential entrepreneurs are outsiders. They are people who imagine things as they might be, not as they are, and have the drive to change the world around them."

Chris & Marty would individually say that it is working not just for them, but also for the people who are attracted to come and work for and with them. It is working for the people who are the vendors who bring material to them. It is working for the people who buy the product. It is working for the community. It seems to be working for everyone and everything involved, including the natural world. They'll talk about how they 'get the intersection of the New York architect and that Loafers Glory logger sitting in the yard together having a great conversation. It is a cross cultural experience that benefits everyone.'



I think it is working for all the parties because Marty & Chris ensure that it does. They have created a *life-affirming niche* with Highland Craftsmen by being Servant Leaders.