Job Description

Perfection Is an Insult to the Gods

BY TRACY KIDDER

ANTICIPATING: Consider in your life what you do, either at work or leisure, that demands near perfection. Do you build models, sew, fly fish, bowl, or play an instrument? Do you perform chemistry experiments, dissect insects, balance books, count change, set type, tune engines, or balance tires? Write about a task you perform which demands exacting procedures.

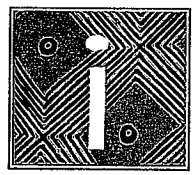
ichard sits on a stack of two-by-tens, the one on which Jim presented his framing plan. The big pile of wood gives off a delicate aroma, like a woods with a pine-needle carpet. The stack makes a clean, fragrant, somewhat expensive picnic table for Richard. Sitting on it, feet dangling over the edge, he shakes his head over that day's Lindy cake, in order to ensure his partners' jealousy, and dislodges the pencil from behind his ear. It vanishes down a crack between the boards. "Whoops," says Richard, peering after it. "This pile just ate my pencil." The next day at lunchtime, Richard finds his pencil, on the ground, between two twelve-foot-long two-by-tens, which are all that remain of the pile.

Finish work never seems to end, but the frames of houses go up swiftly. And time passes quickly for Apple Corps when they're framing.

Ned stands on soggy, sandy ground and measures the distances between the bolts that protrude, threads up, out of the top of the foundation's gray walls, and Richard bores the necessary holes in a length of the two-by-six,

pressure-treated southern pine. The board slips down right over the bolts. "The first piece of wood. Yaaay!" cries Richard. They install another piece of sill, then another, and then Ned says, "Wait a minute." The sills are sticking out over the edges of the foundation a little too far. Ned and Richard investigate. They measure the two-by-six lengths of pine, which are supposed to be five-and-a-half inches wide. These are five and five-eighths. Maybe they were sawn wrong. More likely, they sat outside and absorbed an eighth of an inch of water. Richard pulls the wood off the bolts. "We can't make this house thirty feet and a quarter inches right at the *start*," he says. They begin again. "It's just work," says Ned.

Observing this scene from the other side of the foundation, Jim nods approval. He says the difference between amateur and professional carpenters lies in the facts that pros make few mistakes and when they err they make corrections at once. Thus they prevent both brooding and remorse. Half an hour later, Jim drives a nail that splits a fresh piece of lumber, one he's spent some time cutting and installing. "This piece of wood just split from end to end," he says. He stares at the ruined board. Then he beats on it with his large framing hammer. But hadn't he said that a pro doesn't brood over an error? "That's right. But I never said you don't let it upset you." He wallops and wallops the board, tearing it along the grain. Jim smiles. He tosses the ruined wood aside. "I never said *that*. Send this back to the factory."



It's clear they do not like to leave mistakes behind. When Ned bends a nail, he withdraws that nail, pounds it straight again, and hammers it back in. Nails are cheap. Time costs the carpenters much more. But Ned seems interested not merely in correcting errors. He wants to erase them.

Each carpenter owns a short-handled crowbar with a rounded claw, known as a cat's paw. There's nothing like a cat's paw for extracting nails from mistakes. "What would a carpenter do without a cat's paw, Ned?"

"Buy one," Ned replies.

None of them carries his cat's paw, but each knows where it is. If he makes a mistake, he has to go and get the tool. They prepare for errors. They don't assume that errors will occur. When one of them does make a mistake, he usually blames it on whichever of the team happens to be absent or out of earshot at the moment.

"Oh, no!"

"Blame it on Jim."

For now, Jim usually gets the blame. Almost hourly it seems, he leaps over the trench near the foundation and trudges off up the hill, briefcase in hand, toward the phone in Jules Wiener's red horse barn, so he can call the lumberyard or a subcontractor or one of the utilities or Jonathan. Jim rarely accepts abuse without retorting, though. He makes a practice of signing his partners' mistakes. "Richard was here," he'll write in pencil on the wood at the sight of a withdrawn nail. In Apple Corps parlance, a carpenter gone sloppy is "a beaver," "a jabronie," or "a Hoople," and "thrashing" is the disjointed set of bad procedures that leads to "cobby" work or, worst of all, "a cob job." The last is a very old term. In one of its earliest meanings, *cob* meant a lump of something, and in medieval England to "build in cob" meant to make a house out of lumps of clay, earth, even manure. It was not thought to be a form of high-quality construction. "Cob job" probably came across the ocean with the first New England carpenters and has survived in such sanctuaries of the old-fashioned as the hilltowns. The term is more usual there than in the valley. The carpenters don't remember exactly when they first heard the expression, and they do not know its history, but it has the right pejorative sound for the kind of act that none wishes to be truly guilty of committing. When one of Apple Corps accuses another of thrashing or beavering or cobbing up some piece of work, he usually does so falsely, sometimes even in order to praise, but they also seem to be warning each other and themselves of the nearness of sin.

Usually, if one of them wants praise, he has to administer it himself. When Richard fixes a cobby piece of work, he "tunes it up" or he "fusses with it," and what comes out well is "custom," and for all of them a very good result is "perfect," "perfect enough," or "perfect or equal." And in nearly every case, a satisfactorily completed piece of the job is good enough for whatever town they happen to be working in, in this case, "good enough for Amherst."

"Close enough for Amherst," Ned pauses over his hammer to say. "It's a joke, but it's also a way of keeping perspective. Don't lose the building for the stick. You're always making value judgments, you know, about what's straight or plumb, but sooner or later you gotta nail it. You've got to have confidence it's right enough, or if it's not, that you can fix it."

On the second day of framing, the fourth partner, Alex Ghiselin, joins them. They set up, as they will every morning, a small factory beside the foundation:

generator, extension cords, ladders, sawhorses, electric and hand-driven saws. "Tooling up," as they call it, they buckle on belts and make themselves into roving hardware displays, hammers and numerous pouches hanging from their waists, red handkerchiefs in their back pockets, pencils behind their ears. Proper and efficient framing is the art of thinking ahead with clarity, of seeing the end in the beginning, and they have made the exercise of forethought, which is the opposite of thrashing, part of their daily routine in all departments of house-raising.

Alex is their cutter nonpareil. He likes nothing better than to get from Richard an order for thirty two-by-tens, all fifteen feet, five and three-eighths inches long. Alex writes down the numbers. He sets up the company's radial arm saw and the portable bench Jim once built for it. Then Alex measures that prescribed distance down the bench from the saw's blade and nails down a piece of wood at the spot. The end of each successive two-by-ten he'll place against this stop. It takes him a couple of minutes to set up the jig, but once it's done he can cut one board after another and measure only occasionally to make sure that nothing has moved.

henever they can, the carpenters assemble a portion of the frame out on the open ground, where they don't have to hang off ladders and there's room to swing their hammers freely. Then, standing on the foundation's walls and on stepladders, they install the construction, a section of floor joists, say, into its place within the frame. Most of the failures of most spare-time carpenters stem from misplaced haste. They haven't got much time. They want to see results at once. Apple Corps spends time now to save time later. It's a form of deferred gratification, which, the psychologists say, is the essence of true adulthood. Apple Corps has acquired the knack for looking calmly on the future. They always pause to remove any nails from boards they cast aside. The practice cuts down on tetanus shots. It was not always this way, but most of them have worked together for ten years now, and they have learned consideration.

Erecting girders, from stepladders set on the basement floor, Richard and Alex struggle to speak geometry. "Move it five-sixteenths that way. No, out that way, toward Pelham. No, up. Whoops. No, down. This sounds like *Sesame Street*," says Richard.

Richard climbs out of the cellar. He studies and restudies Jim's intricate framing plan. He does so out loud: "Oh, I'm being confused right now. That seems rather odd. Unh-hunh. Ohhhh. I see. I see what happened. Oh-*Kay*! Yup, right where it should be. Excellent. Just where it should be. Okay. Good." He adds, addressing Alex, "A *custom*-fit girder." Richard emits a guttural sound, which could imply some twisted pleasure.

"Nicely done," says Alex.

"Custom," says Richard. "I think we're winning."

When he is going well, Alex cuts lumber quickly and to within a thirty-second of an inch of the specified lengths. They attempt to keep their frame within about a sixteenth of an inch of perfection, which is about as accurate as their tape measures are, and more precise, in fact, than wood and weather allow. They work in sunshine and a few days into the framing, they even get their shirts off for a while. On the next day, a cold drizzle falls. Jim, who is responsible for worrying, measures the first floor's frame at the end of one sunny day and finds it jibes exactly with the numbers on his plan. Two rainy days later, he measures it again and finds that the bottom deck has grown a quarter of an inch along one wall and not at all along the others. They can easily rectify the discrepancy in the next level of the frame. Jim expected this to happen. He is not disappointed. He says again, "Perfection is an insult to the gods." They often speak about the fact of imperfection. The words must have a consoling ring for them.