

# Construction - deconstruction - reconstruction

Some time ago we bought a 65 year old home which bar a few adjustments was basically in its original condition. After living there a year we — with heaps of help from a mate who is a builder, a structural engineer and our parents — took the roof off, re-arranged all the living areas, put on a new top storey, re-wired, re-plumbed 80% of the house, strengthened the foundations, remodelled the entrance areas and introduced some indoor/outdoor flow. In order to do this we had to pull down two large concrete chimneys, rip off the old and by now rusting roof, lower nearly all the ceilings in the house and remove a large amount of internal cladding to expose the wall structures. The majority of this work happened over three to four days and created an enormous mess and a very exposed house.

To build the new we had to take apart much of the original construction. This meant lots of hard work (especially carting 4 skip loads of concrete rubble up a long Wellington path) and living in a very open, tarpaulin covered house. In the deconstruction phase timber, window frames, doors, roofing materials and fittings were assessed as to their usefulness as materials for the new house. We had to do this as we prepared to put the next storey on. Some windows, doors, timber and mouldings were kept to be used again. Others had to be chucked out because of borer, rust or because they were broken in the process of pulling them down. Some decisions were difficult to make - should something stay or go. The header tank for example looked to be OK but the plumber advised getting a new one and the old water cylinder which we had planned on keeping began to leak with all the jack hammering on a nearby chimney. The stair balustrade we'd planned on getting rid of actually seemed to fit the new shape of the house so it ended up staying. Throughout this period there were definitely a number of moments when I wondered if this was such a good idea after all and whether the builders would be able to make it into a home again.

Inevitably towards the end of the project but before the majority of the roof was replaced a once a year rip roaring southerly blast came through with teeming rain, heavy hail and gale force winds. During those four days I really wondered if we had done the right thing, did we have enough buckets to catch the drips and would the roof blow off completely. It was a pretty vulnerable period.

Building houses and building our faith have much in common. In our Christian journey of faith there are often times when the original construction has to be remodelled and this begins with de-construction work. The first part of the de-construction process involves carefully dismantling. This is the hard tearing down of the old with sledge hammers and crow bars. Each piece of the structure

has to be considered as to its usefulness for the next stage. If it is redundant or no longer able to do its job it must be replaced, strengthened or repaired.

In faith and houses the de-construction phase is hard work, work that often seems counter productive, messy and tough going. And when you've been doing it a while there is often a very vulnerable feeling as you realise this is now a very flimsy structure. If you're like us — and Murphy's law applies — a southerly is sure to blow in just when things are the most open and unprotected.

According to Sallie McFague, deconstruction underscores “the necessity of developing ‘negative capability’— the ability to endure absence, uncertainty, partiality, relativity, and to hold at bay the desire for closure, coherence, identity, totality.” She goes on to say:

“Deconstruction cautions us against trying to save ourselves through our constructions. The temptation to seek security, in a vast number of complex ways, against the abyss, the chaos, the different, the other, the unknown — whatever threatens us. By seeking security through our own constructions, we refuse to step outside the houses of language we have erected to protect us from the emptiness and terror we cannot control. Our safe havens, called dogmas and orthodoxy, become absolutes, giving the illusion of being certain, being “on the inside”, having the truth<sup>i</sup>.”

The next phase involves building the new house out of the materials retrieved from the old one and the incorporation of a number of new materials. This is the reconstruction phase. To do this the sledge hammer and crow bar must be replaced with the level, and string line. Care and precision is needed as each new section is worked on. Again the same is true in rebuilding our Christian faith. There are times when the faith we've held to is no longer relevant, meaningful or viable. At these times we need the courage to de-construct those parts that have passed their use by date; at least for us. But that is only half the story. To remain faithful to Christ and remain people on the journey of faith we must also do the demanding thoughtful work of reconstructing our faith. Finding and forming a faith that is credible for the next phase of the journey. When all the de-construction and reconstruction work is done the house is again ready to afford a safe home and an enjoyable place from which to live.

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<sup>i</sup> McFague Sally. (1987) Models of God. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. pp25-26