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Seeking Sacred Ground

Writing a Spiritual Memoir about an Everyday Life

“I am building a studio, a sacred space—nothing more than a small shed, really. It is taking shape, for the moment anyway, mostly in my mind’s eye. It is spare and simple, earth-toned, constructed of wood and stone. It blends in with the back rise as if it has emerged from the soil itself.”

--From the preface of *The Sacred Shed on the Edge of the Ravine* by B.R. Bodengraven

When North Shore writer B. R. Bodengraven set out to build a studio shed in the back yard of her Topsfield, Mass., home four years ago, she hoped that the activity would help her adjust to the departure of her grown children from the family homestead. It ended up doing far more than that.

As Bodengraven hauled rocks and leveled the shed’s building site, she realized that she was developing a reverent relationship with the land. As she insulated, hammered and stained her shed, she became enmeshed in the natural rhythms of the outdoors, with the animals and insects and plants of her back yard, and unexpectedly enchanted by the forest and wetlands of her yard’s adjacent ravine. Shed construction assumed far more significance than Bodengraven ever imagined. Her recently released memoir, *The Sacred Shed on the Edge of the Ravine*, outlines exactly what that significance might be.

The idea for writing her book, says the author, arose organically from the journals and diaries she kept during the initial construction and completion of her shed. Written in the first-person, present tense, Bodengraven’s book invites readers into the storied world of Boston’s North Shore, the challenges of shed construction, and one woman’s attempts to create new meaning from old memories.

“Many people have written about the experience of taking themselves away to a small structure of solitude,” says Bodengraven. “Henry Beston did it in his memoir *The Outermost House*, as did Anne Morrow Lindbergh in *Gifts from the Sea*. Then, of course, there was Thoreau.”

Bodengraven says there are many ways into her book, that it can be read simply as an intimate travelogue of Boston’s North Shore, for instance, or as a mystical nature diary. But she describes her book as a spiritual memoir—a genre that dates back thousands of years.

“Spiritual memoirs are defined by two essential elements,” Bodengraven says. “The first is that an old self is dying and a new self emerging. Typically, the two are involved in a wrestling match. The second is that the story is always backlit by a divine presence. This presence, as I experience it through nature, or Creation, during the building of my shed, is the central underlying character of my book.”

The shed itself provides the framework for Bodengraven to write about her transforming life and the challenges of meaning-making in the 21st century. The fact that her shed is located only 20 or 25 yards from the top of her driveway and in clear view of her house has no bearing on her ability to find solitude or meaning within its walls, says the author.

“My shed is a special place and has offered me so much more than I dared hope,” says Bodengraven. “I think my book reflects that.”

The Sacred Shed on the Edge of the Ravine is for sale on Amazon.com.

For information about ‘The Sacred Shed’ Writing Workshops developed in conjunction with the book, contact B.R. Bodengraven at thesacredshed@gmail.com.

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About the Author

Barbara R. Bodengraven has been a writer and “human dowsing stick in search of the divine” her entire life. Small-town newspaper journalist, freelance travel writer, daily diarist, and mid-life graduate student of theology, she has been published in *Country Living* magazine, *Victoria* magazine, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Washington Post* as well as in many other publications and media outlets. She has worked as a communications professional and consultant for the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Episcopal Divinity School, Trinity Church Boston, and Weston Jesuit School of Theology, where she received a Master’s of Theological Studies degree in 2005 and served as editor of its quarterly magazine, *Light & Life*, from 2005 to 2008. ***The Sacred Shed on the Edge of the Ravine*** is her first book.