

I write this after several days of sitting in the dark.

We had a couple of blackouts this summer: no refrigerator, no telephone service, no recharging the cell phone, no computers, no bedside lights for night reading. My primitive cooling system depends on keeping the windows closed and the curtains drawn all day, and using fans to keep the air circulating at night. No fans, either. The house was so stultifying that I made a bed for myself on the second-floor porch off my bedroom (where no skunks could find me). My son Theo helped me drag out a mattress and hang mosquito netting from the arbor, but he balked at helping me spread the sheets: "I've done the man job, Mom. I don't do sheets." I lay on my back, gazing up through the netting, thinking about being an infant in a carriage. The moonlight sparkled through the wisteria, which hung in thick, concealing swags at the head of the bed. I slept like a baby.

Then came the thunderstorms, lashing through the garden with a terrifying ferocity. Trees came down all over the county. The next night my flashlight went dead. I found myself wandering through the house, ghostlike, in the dark. I know this house so well, know where every piece of furniture, every pile of books, every carpet, sits. I have the navigational skills of a bat. I often walk through the house late at night without turning on the lights; if I'm having difficulty sleeping, it helps not to expose myself to brightness. You move slowly, with more deliberation. It's good practice for the possibility of one day going blind. You know exactly, with body memory, how many steps to the bathroom, to the refrigerator, to the children's beds. It is a gift to know a house so intimately. But somehow, knowing that I didn't have a choice about the darkness was a little frightening.

I found myself thinking about this recently when I was up in Rhode Island at the building site that was once my beach house. The old house had to be torn down due to rot; I hadn't been expecting this turn of events and have barely been able to catch up, emotionally, to what is happening. A friend ran into the woman who sold me the house more than a decade ago, and told her of the sad turn of events. "Oh, yeah," she said. "We knew that house was rotten when we sold it to her." Nice, eh?

For now, suffice it to say that although the new house is going up on roughly the same footprint (as required by code), it is a completely transformed and unfamiliar house. There is no recreating the old. This house is modern. It replaces a house that went up in the '50s, part of the tiny inventory of modernist dwellings in my town, where

there is a strong preference for a good old-fashioned shingled salt-box. The new house is framed in; the windows, gorgeous and heavy, have been installed; the plywood floors are down. I've visited the house periodically as it has been going up; it has been an education. If you watch your own house being born, you have an intimacy with it that can't be gained by any number of conversations with the people who come in to fix it down the road. The knowledge is thrilling.

In its framed stage, the house looked like an elegant piece of sculpture. As I sat admiring its clean, airy lines, the electrician appeared. He was an amiable young fellow, all business and good cheer.

"Where do you want the lights? Where do you want the switches? What lights go with which switches? Do the outdoor lights work from upstairs as well as downstairs?"

He began to uncoil his spools of plastic-coated wiring, drilling holes in studs, snaking the wire through the walls, clipping it to the ceiling, connecting it to the metal switch boxes.

As I watched this frenzy of activity, I realized we were at a turning point. Energy would soon be coursing through those wires. I could suddenly imagine living in this box. Light seems to be the beginning of home—but of course. You think of a candle burning in the window on a winter's night, or the fire in the hearth, or the light on the porch in the late summer night. Electricity is the nervous system of a house. I had simply never thought about it before, having taken it for granted that there is light with the flip of a switch.

On that score, judging by the power failures across the country this summer, we are in for a rude awakening. We need a much deeper appreciation of the gift of energy; if we don't honor it, and use it respectfully, we stand to lose much more than the air-conditioning that makes summer bearable for many.

I went back to the house two days later as the electrician was finishing up his work. The white plastic now roped through the entire building; he proudly led me to a box in a closet that was full of neatly organized wires.

"See? The place where all the wires in the house end up is called the Home Run!" And I am on my feet, cheering the electricians of our world. Their work is one of those everyday miracles.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR