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Greening My Life: A Green Building Pioneer Takes on his Most Challenging Project

David Gottfried
Regenerative Publishing (November 2010)
Softcover $16.95 (215pp)
978-0-692-00889-8

“Earnest” and “well-intended” are perhaps not the adjectives a writer yearns to hear about his efforts, but they are appropriate (and well-intended) in this case. While David Gottfried doesn’t manage to pen any passages memorable for their literary value here, he nonetheless leaves the reader with a potent message of agency that continues to resonate long after putting his book down.

Gottfried is the founder of the US Green Building Council, the leading green building organization in the world, and the folks who brought us the LEED standards by which all sustainable design in the country is today measured. In this ambitious memoir he sets out to record a more personal task: applying his successful professional standards to his own life in order to quantify and improve various aspects such as finding (and keeping) a fulfilling relationship, building a family, and using his well-proven business discipline to improve his own health together with that of the planet. With some false starts, happily, in these attempts he succeeds.

Descriptions of childhood dinners learning business lessons from his father are touching, as is Gottfried’s self-consciousness in sharing his adult life with his parents (from whom, like most of us, he still seeks approval). The author’s growing pains, however, are at times too explicit—blow-by-blow accounts of unexceptional everyday conflicts with his girlfriend/wife that could only be of interest to those who actually know them. (The protagonist of *Low-Impact Man*, a recent film about a Manhattan family that lives without creating trash for a year, was also criticized for its naval-gazing capacity, so it may have to do with a debatable “selfless or selfish?” aspect of the subject matter itself). Still, Gottfried is prepared to recognize and share his own interpersonal failings in his effort to become the person he wants to be. And that ability reflects the same rigor necessary in popularizing and adapting notions of sustainability we’ve managed as a society to resist until very lately. Those who are renovating a house to incorporate green building materials and methods of construction couldn’t have a better mentor. The best passages in the book examine the details of Gottfried’s own such home building project (something he knows instinctively and communicates effortlessly), which conceptually mirrors his pursuit of the immaterial, more elusive and ongoing search for contentment. May his personal quest inspire others to follow their own nagging inner voices to lead more fulfilling lives, green or otherwise.

JULIE EAKIN (January 20, 2011)

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