



## Renewability Makes Something Valuable, by Martin Prechtel

In the village, people used to build their houses out of traditional materials, using no iron or lumber or nails, but the houses were magnificent. Many were sewn together out of bark and fiber. Like the house of the body, the house that a person sleeps in must be very beautiful and sturdy, but not so sturdy that it won't fall apart after a while. If your house doesn't fall apart, then there will be no reason to renew it. And it is this renewability that makes something valuable. The maintenance gives it meaning.

The secret of village togetherness and happiness has always been the generosity of the people, but the key to that generosity is inefficiency and decay. Because our village huts were not built to last very long, they had to be regularly renewed. To do this, villagers came together, at least once a year, to work on somebody's hut. When your house was falling down, you invited all the folks over. The little kids ran around messing up what everybody was doing. The young women brought the water. The young men carried the stones. The older men told everybody what to do, and the older women told the older men that they weren't doing it right. Once the house was back together again, everyone ate together, praised the house, laughed, and cried. In a few days, they moved on to the next house. In this way, each family's place in the village was reestablished and remembered. This is how it always was.

Then the missionaries and the businessmen and the politicians brought in tin and lumber and sturdy houses. Now the houses last, but the relationships don't.

In some ways, crises bring communities together. Even nowadays, if there's a flood, or if somebody is going to put a highway through a neighborhood, people come together to solve the problem. Mayans don't wait for a crisis to occur; they make a crisis. Their spirituality is based on choreographed disasters -- otherwise known as rituals -- in which everyone has to work together to remake their clothing, or each other's houses, or the community, or the world. Everything has to be maintained because it was originally made so delicately that it eventually falls apart. It is the putting back together again, the renewing, that ultimately makes something strong. That is true of our houses, our language, our relationships.

It's a fine balance, making something that is not so flimsy that it falls apart too soon, yet not so solid that it is permanent. It requires a sort of grace. We all want to make something that's going to live beyond us, but that thing shouldn't be a house, or

some other physical object. It should be a village that can continue to maintain itself. That sort of constant renewal is the only permanence we should wish to attain.

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*Published at [www.awakin.org](http://www.awakin.org) on Apr 25, 2016*