Celebration Poem
for the Bicentennial of the East End Meetinghouse,
now Falmouth's Synagogue
June, 1997

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I
How old is anything?
this house, standing now
for a double century
embraces us, but it isn't
two hundred years old.
Just consider your fingernails,
or the number of hairs on your head.
How old are you?
The trees grew
taking up ancient dirt and rain,
ancient air and time —
then they were timbered, seasoned,
planed and carried along,
cut, drilled, nailed,
painted, scraped and shingled
over and over again.
What we call a building
was dedicated in 1797;
that is, words were said
fashioned out of ancient air
by people who wanted to say them then;
by people we would recognize
as people, but so strange to us,
in the way of their thinking almost unthinkable,
all now unknowable, as we are to them...
This would be a shock to them —
a Synagogue? Where once
the fierce web of text and tax and doctrine
displayed for any passer by
why this place had a bell,
was shingled plain and white-edged,
had pews with doors
and galleries for poor and black
who took the stairs
and sat until doomsday in the back.

II
It is both pleasure and irony
in this ancient, tinder-dry
fragment of history
to sit and breathe a new life
whose every molecule participates
equally in agelessness.

Early photograph of the East End Meeting House and carriage shed, from a glass plate negative.
Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.
The first lesson therefore is this:
Never forget
just who you are,
how some part of the earth
is locked in wood, some in stone
and some in a flesh
made to sing and celebrate
with a bewildering variety of forms
the light and spirit
from seven candles to the morning star
where Job himself in every cell felt
humbled and thoroughly blessed.

III
Out of the strange fire of this century,
that left this building whole
but printed numbers with consuming precision
on the forearms of millions:
on the strange weather of this century
that knocked the steeple right off the roof
where heresy could not:
the decline of certain families
and the rise of others;
an aurora of tolerance or indifference,
of loss and new possibility –
out of these things
was this building delivered new to you.
And from Prague by way of Nazi looting,
and restorative Episcopalian gift,
came the old words, the oceanic texts,
anchor and buoy and current
to this sea of life experience –
The Torah, spiritual fire
burning its way into the beating heart,
taking this building into a flame
that says I will illuminate
but destroy nothing.
Here is the second lesson:
do not destroy but shed light,
give hope; take the given gift,
reach back and touch those gone,
reach forward and embrace time.
How old is that?
Only as old as any of us who care
and love God, who cared
and loved God, who will care
and will love God.

IV
We all say, 200 years,
what a marvel!
You could equally say
200 years, how horrible!
But what does the building say
what does the Torah say
what do the foundation stones
say about themselves?
They sing out of time
and in the uses of time
and the uses of life in time.

So do not think
there is any time here today
that has not come and gone away
a hundred thousand times already;
the time that opportunity of gift
and giving affords us.
Are you alive today?
breathers of ancient air, eaters of ancient molecules,
speakers of ancient words and sacred will —
are you alive today?
Then is the East End Meetinghouse
living still.
Here is the third lesson:
you, and you, and you, and so on...