

OLD TREES TELL WHICH WAY THE WIND HAS BLOWN

BY DOUGLAS A. SMITH

My father and I stood on opposite sides of the old white pine. Our heads were turned upward facing a bright blue October sky. Each of us had a hand on the trunk as if the rough bark could tell us what went on inside. Our eyes rested on the few remaining branches that trailed off the upper most part of the tree. The branches were almost totally free of the prominent long green needles that emanate from a healthy white pine. The branches favored the south side of the tree where I now stood. Those on the north side seemed to bend from some unknown force that stunted their growth and turned them south. Just down from the branches long lines of sticky light gray sap emerged from a series of holes and trailed down the bark. I knew these holes were made by the large woodpeckers that came more frequently in the fall and spring after and before the tourist came to enjoy the lake over which the tree stood. Each year when I returned to the lake in the late spring I often would look out upon the white pines in front of our cabin to see where new holes had appeared and how much larger the previous ones had become. On these spring and fall days I often heard the woodpecker's rat-a tat-tat in the surrounding forest and even occasionally would gain a glimpse of them darting by.

"Old trees tell which way the wind blows" my father seemed to say to no one in

particular. We continued to move in our circle, until my father with a little sadness in his voice suggested that we needed to bring this particular tree down. We had been coming to this spot on the north end of Lake George in Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York since the year after I was born. My Dad was an Indiana farm boy, the oldest of five children who thought Lake George and the mountains that surrounded it was like nothing he had ever seen before. In 1936 he had begun a career at General Electric in Schenectady, NY about two hours south. Electricity was a key to the future and my father intended to be part of that future ... in fact he intended to lead it single handedly if needed. Shortly thereafter he married my mother. By 1946 there were four children and enough money in the bank to buy the land on which we now stood and build a rough cabin. This old white pine had witnessed it all.

"Quiet water seen through trees" he said, this time looking directly at me. "Come again" I said. "Quiet water seen through trees. It has to be one of the most beautiful set of words in the English language. What do you think?" My dad was just that way, full of ambition and energy, with a quick wit and a quick temper, but also reflective and spiritual. He had a spiritual side that he often kept locked away, but when it emerged (I later came to appreciate) it was deep, profound and insightful.

On this Columbus Day week end in 1962 as a junior in high school his spiritual side probably fell on ears that couldn't decipher the deeper meaning of what he was sharing. Not that I didn't enjoy hearing it. It was almost as if somehow I knew that at some future date, I would find a key to understanding what he was saying. I mean it wasn't totally lost on me, but I had so many things I would rather do than try to contemplate the most beautiful words in the English language or consider what an old tree could tell us.

"You want me to take it down" I asked? I think I knew what he would say next. Not his agreeing that I should take it down, but the stern warning that came along with it.

"Yea, take it down But for God's sake don't hit the shed! I built that shed you know" he added.

"Don't hit the shed." The words entered my ears, but couldn't find a way out. They stuck there and churned up feelings that started me thinking about guess what ... hitting the shed. We stepped back from the tree and continued to look up and then out at the islands and bright colored leaves that surrounded the lake.

I loved to fell trees. I really was pretty good at it. I could land a tree within a foot or two of where I wanted. My brother and I would make a competition out of it and by so doing had sharpened our skill. Felling trees, cutting it into logs and splitting it for firewood was the type of yard work I loved. On the other end of the spectrum was digging holes and planting trees, while my dad would direct the digging, the size of the hole, the amount of manure to add, the

way the new tree would face, the way the "saucer" of dirt around its base would be constructed, the manner in which we would stamp it down so there were no air pockets around the roots ... I mean if I had a thought at all about how it was to be done, I learned quickly to keep it to myself. Ah, but to fell a tree back in the woods without any supervision. With just my brother and the competitive juices it stimulated, now that was nirvana.

"Well let's get started" he said.

This was not good. He was going to be there while I did this. Even worse he was going to be 'advising' me every step along the way "don't hit that shed!"

"Dad, why don't you head into Hague and get your paper and coffee while I get the chain saw out?" Going into the Hague General Store, getting a cup of coffee and talking with Bob Hoyt, the owner of the store was a Saturday morning ritual on these fall week ends. They always talked about the same things, like what kind of winter it would be or how high or low the lake level was, or how there had already been snow up in the high peaks of the Adirondack Park. But it was a way for him to unwind and unwinding was something my father increasingly needed as he climbed the proverbial corporate ladder.

"Yeah, OK. You need anything in Hague?" I shook my head as I walked toward the shed. "I will be back in a bit. Just don't hit that shed!"

Ten minutes later he was driving out the driveway. I knew now was my time to make my move. My brother was a freshman at Dartmouth, two hours to the east of us and he had too much school work to join us that

week end, so I was on my own. I got out the saw, circled the tree. Considered how it was leaning, where the branches were, the ground around the base of the trunk, what the wind was like and somehow 'mushed' all this together in my teenage head and decided where to make my lower cut. I would cut a wedge out of the base on the side I wanted the tree to fall and then move around to the other side and cut straight across the tree just above the wedge. It really wasn't all that tough, I had done it a hundred times before and other than the shed there wasn't really much damage I could do. In effect I had 340 degrees or so of direction I could land this "old wind direction teller" and not hurt a damn thing. It was only in those remaining 20 degrees that this behemoth would do damage and that was to the shed that my father had built. The very one he warned "don't hit the shed!"

Often I made a target to see if I could fell the tree on the target. In this case I walked out about 40 feet from the trunk of the tree and stuck a stick into the ground where I wanted the tree to land (far away from the shed). I would try to drop the trunk so it landed on the stick. I didn't often hit my target, but I was seldom more than a few feet away. I had completed my first cut and was well on the way to removing the wedge from the tree and feeling particularly good when I heard my dad's car in the gravel driveway. He couldn't possibly be back that fast. He always stayed and drank his coffee; rambled with Bob and read his paper, but here he was getting out of his car and walking toward me. "Don't hit the shed!"

The words echoed out to the islands and back ... so much for taking this tree down without supervision.

He stood over me, so close I could almost feel his breathing. He began his admonition about the shed and as he did so I revved up the chain saw, but somehow I seemed to still hear his words even above the noise of the saw. I didn't move as fluidly now. I began to reconsider where I would make the upper cut. My muscles seemed a little more tense, my heart rate a little quicker. Inside my leather gloves my hands were a little less pliable. I felt the moisture of my sweat inside my gloves. I stood back and looked up the trunk, walked around and looked up again, then looked over at the shed. I went to make my last cut. The one that would send it down to earth, onto the small stick I had so blithely pushed into the ground earlier. My dad knew this was the time he should get far away so no matter which way it fell he would not be in its reach. I could swear as he retreated he pointed at the shed. I pushed the saw blade into the trunk on the opposite side and above the gap I had previously cut. The saw dust flew out as I pumped the oil button to keep the blade lubricated. I continued cutting making an adjustment here or there, trying unsuccessfully to put the shed out of my mind. In fact it seemed the shed occupied my entire mind. Like there was only room inside my mental chamber for the shed and what would happen if I hit it. I continued to cut. I thought by now I would feel the tree start that slow lean toward the earth, but nothing seemed to happen. Then I felt it start. Yes it was starting just the way I wanted. Maybe I would even hit my

wooden stake! It started to groan and then crack. Slowly at first then with a little more speed it started to head toward the earth and my strategically placed target.

I stepped back and watched it falling away. It should have been accelerating now, but instead it seemed to slow and then almost stop. I wondered if I would have to give it a little more cut, when it started again, but this time it took a decided left turn away from the stake I had put into the ground ... and toward the shed. It stopped again. I could make another cut and move it back on course. I approached the tree and then I heard a snap and that beautiful old pine, the one with the wood pecker holes and

spindly southern pointing branches and beautiful dark gray bark began a rapid march to the ground and to the shed. I watched helplessly as it careened through the center of the shed. The center roof beam collapsed, the windows at either end exploded, the door jumped off its hinges, and the wheel barrow and lawn mower inside collapsed as the bags of manure and fertilizer sent clouds of smoke into the air.

And over it all I could hear “GOD DAMNIT!!!! I TOLD YOU NOT TO HIT THE SHED!!!”

New shed (sorry dad)...



About the author Doug Smith has served as the CEO of three different international food companies over the past 15 years. In August of 2004 he was diagnosed with an incurable form of blood cancer. This put him on a journey to learn, write and speak about two key interests of his; leadership and happiness. While he continues to serve as Chairman of Best Brands Corporation, he also teaches a course at DePauw University entitled “The Considered, Consequential & Happy Life” and lectures on both leadership and happiness at corporations and universities. He is a frequent lecturer at Canyon Ranch. Doug has a BA from DePauw University, an MBA from Dartmouth College and an Honorary Doctorate from DePauw.