

Calculated Risk: Left Behind



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The smallest sprout shows that there is really no death?

— Walt Whitman

Late last summer they took down a giant oak near the center of my small town, located about 25 miles from the nation's capital. Aerial photos of the area show Washington Grove, Maryland as a tiny green enclave in a sea of raw suburban sprawl. Nicknamed "a town within a forest," large trees are as common in Washington Grove as skyscrapers are in New York City. The town's trees are almost sacred. Our beautiful trees are loved and protected and regularly looked after by an arborist. Perhaps that's why it was such a shock to happen upon that felled oak while out walking one Saturday afternoon.

I must admit that I had never really noticed this particular tree before. It was just one of many whose hundreds of branches and thousands of leaves shade our little community and provide a home for a variety of living creatures.

The first day we came upon it, the downed tree was already sawed into several pieces. We gazed with awe at the towering structure brought low by the hands of man. My daughter and son counted the rings to try to calculate its age. They lost count somewhere around 150. I was astounded to touch and smell the wood of that massive trunk which had been standing before the town itself, which was established about 10 years after the Civil War. Even before my great grandparents were born, this tree had been growing quietly in a world without computers, without automobiles, without telephones. It was a world that I could not even imagine. Such a tree is a living symbol of permanence in a world that too often seems very transient. Still, one day it was there in its usual place, unremarkable even in its largeness; the next day it was gone, and with it living and working space for the myriad song birds, squirrels, and insects for whom it had been headquarters.

Of course it did not vanish into thin air. For weeks the trunk and branches lay filling the walkway in the middle of town as workers slowly demolished and carried off bit by bit the massive carcass. And there was something else left as well. On that first morning that we came upon the fallen tree, I had looked up to see the gaping hole it had left behind in the canopy. The yellow sun in a blue, blue sky shone through disturbingly bright. More than anything else, more than even the loss of the tree itself, that void where a tree should have been filled me with a feeling of sadness and emptiness.

With each week that passed more of the tree was cleaned up and removed. Sawdust and debris were scattered

everywhere, though soon this too became less noticeable as the rain washed away the dust and the autumn winds carried away the leaves. But even as the material thing that had been the tree disappeared, the hole in the sky, the void, remained undiminished — a reminder of what had been.

I never found out why the tree was taken down. Perhaps it was sick, or in someone's way, or perhaps it was just time for it to go. Maybe I will never know or understand the reasons it was felled. It is difficult to see something of such seeming permanence simply vanquished and to contemplate that it is no more. It is difficult to make sense of it.

Shortly after New Year's Day, I again walked past the place where the tree had been. Only the base is left now. The sawed off trunk is about four feet high and forms a platform so wide that three people can stand together on it. I stood upon it and gazed skyward at the hole in the sky. Winter sunshine streamed down through the gap and warmed my face. I visualized the spring when the leaves of the surrounding trees would emerge and begin to fill the hole. I thought about the dozens of trees that the people of our town will plant this year, the shade and beauty of which will be enjoyed perhaps a hundred years after the planters are gone.

And I also recalled the story of an old man who planted a carob tree. His neighbors mocked him pointing out that he would not live long enough to enjoy its fruit. "I am planting it for my grandchildren," he told them, "Just as my grandparents planted the trees whose fruit I enjoy."

I realized that the only answer to the question presented by death is life itself. The answer is in the life we sow, the life we plant, and the life we give with our work and acts of loving-kindness. Perhaps, I thought, it is not so important that we understand the death of a tree. What *is* important is that we continue to *plant* trees. In spite of feelings of loss, we must continue to affirm the life that is given us, to rebuild, to plant, and to water the seeds of the future. For though we may never hope to completely fill the hole in our short lifetimes, we can send many saplings soaring toward the sky.

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