

Three Little Pinecones

They are laying on my desk. Three little pinecones, each about the size of a small egg. Garbage. Waste. Snagged from a branch as it went into the chipper. Snagged from a branch of a 25-year old Austrian Pine tree.

Do trees have souls? Do they have any awareness of their environment other than heat and cold, wet and dry? If they do I was part of this tree, and so was my family.

My son and my daughter and I planted that tree 25-years ago. We planted it on a cold January weekend morning. It had been a Christmas tree. I hated paying \$20 or \$30 or more for a cut tree at Christmas, part of the ritual of Christmas for us was to go out on Christmas eve with a bunch of fried chicken, eat our way through the various tree lots, looking for a deal. Not infrequently we could get a nice tree for \$5.

But that wore thin, the family wanted a tree for the season, not just for Santa to use as a spotting pole for the presents. So I decided that I'd spend \$60 or \$80 on a live tree, use it as a Christmas tree and plant it afterwards. I liked the concept much better, but the economics were certainly not in my favor. Sometimes they didn't make it, so my average cost went up a lot. But I still imagined that it was more responsible than a cut tree. Probably not.

This tree was one of them. We planted it just south of the driveway on the east side of the house. It thrived.

This tree was there when my lovely daughter was snowed in in the driveway in an unusual Oklahoma winter blizzard. She was standing by her little Suzuki Samari that she was using at college, beaming. The car was virtually covered with snow.

The tree was there during the regional depression of the early '80's, when oil prices had precipitously dropped. It watched me weld up a neighbors water-well drilling rig. He couldn't afford to get it fixed at a shop, he came by and I welded it up for him. Times were bad for most everybody then.

The tree was there when my son parked his precious '69 Olds Cutlass convertible which he'd bought from the tech school where he was taking classes. It had been a cadaver car for the students, but it had turned out OK after all.

As it got larger it was possible to have a picnic under it's branches. It hosted a number of neighborhood gatherings. It was an excellent host, the floor covered with it's fine, large pinecones, 5-times or more larger than these three laying on my desk. It was a magnificent tree with magnificent cones. The neighbors liked to collect them around holidays for decorations. Who knows where those cones are today, possibly some are still adorning holiday gatherings in far places.

The tree hosted many a raucous bird in it's time. As it grew it's peak was about even with the window in my upstairs office. A sleek and handsome mocking bird frequented the upper branches, making loads of noise. Jays and Cardinals inhabited the middle branches from time to time. It was a living, breathing habitat for the local avians. Its' branches thick and it gleaming needles protective. It was a beautiful tree.

Although I didn't know it at the time Austrians are not native to Oklahoma. And because of that they are more susceptible to disease and parasites than native species. When I noticed that some of the tips of the branches were not as shiny and gleaming as they had been, and when I found gummy bleeds running down the trunk I called the OSU Extension service. "Nematods." All I found out was that nematods were parasites that systemically invaded the Austrians. The condition was fatal, but not immediately. So the tree's mortality was now confirmed. It was glorious, shining in the morning sun. But it was doomed.

Years passed after the diagnosis. The tree saw all sorts of things happen in the driveway. The night a couple of guys were in the process of hooking up to my trailer at about 2 a.m. with the intent of using it as a platform on which to load stolen motorcycles (or so the police later told me), when the neighbor painted one of them with the little red dot from the laser sight on his 44 auto mag. He said they lost interest almost immediately and sped away, the trailer hooked on only with the chains, still dragging the tongue jack. The police found the trailer abandoned about 5-blocks away. It was easy to find, just follow the gouge marks in the street caused by the tongue jack dragging.

It watched in amusement as I struggled 16 and 18 hours a day, 7-days a week, for over 3 weeks, struggling to get the BlueBird school bus that I had purchased from the local school district changed from what my vision of an RV was over to what the City of Tulsa imagined was an RV. My vision of an RV was not welcome in the neighborhood, their vision of an RV was. All this had nothing to do with the outside of the bus, all about running water and flush toilets. All about politics actually.

And it watched in awe a couple of years later as my son and I converted the City of Tulsa vision of an RV into a solar powered rolling resort complete with forced air heating, gourmet kitchen, running water and on-demand hot water.

The upper branches of the tree went first. The needles became sparse and dull, and a few dead branches were visible from the ground. The lower branches' needles were not as shiny as they had been, but they were still reasonably healthy looking and the spring pollen cones were still robust. But time was taking its toll, the diagnosis was happening.

The tree still had plenty of substance to shade the boat parked in the driveway, as well as to keep the interior of the automobiles parked there cool in summer. It was still doing its' job.

But finally age and disease began to accelerate its' decline. Most, but not all, of its' needles were dull. The upper reaches of the now 30-foot plus tree were sparse or dead. Grape vines were invading the upper reaches. It was time.

I put it off for a long time. Inspecting the needles, thinking maybe it was looking a little better, but then realizing it was wishful thinking. I needed to get it taken care of, taken down, it was potentially a danger to property in the driveway. But I put it off. I needed to rope it up so that if I failed to produce a good cut and the tree fell unpredictably that it would at least be somewhat deflected from causing major mayhem. And I needed help managing the ropes and the drop. Finally my son drove back from Alaska in the bus. It was time.

I went out early, on a Saturday, and started cutting the branches off, from bottom to top. To my horror some of them looked very healthy, I don't know why. Bright, shiny needles bunched on the ends of strong limbs. I don't know where they came from, I was sick at my stomach for a while. Maybe I was being hasty. But I continued on. First a small ladder, cut where I could reach. Then a taller one. Then a taller one. Then nothing left but the very top.

My son showed up and it was time for the final touches. I went up with the chain saw to finish the top limbs, but it was pretty high and I decided it was no problem - the top had died out and everything up there was dead and dry, it would be no problem. Better to leave it than to tumble 25-feet or so to the ground.

We roped up the tree as backup for a bad cut and I started in on it. I eyed the natural lean, surveyed the vehicles, boats, etc. in the vicinity and decided to drop it into the street, almost perpendicular to the curb. By this time the sadness of the end was replaced by manly joking and ribbing about cutting prowess, drop location accuracy, and such. The weight of the occasion had produced levity instead of tears. But neither of us was really happy to see the once regal tree dropped - we just had to do it.

It was big at the base, about 20-inches diameter. The saw was a good one, but it labored. The directional wedge cut was put into place and then onto the other side to finish the job. It was quite a while. Finally it dropped, without ceremony, almost exactly where we had intended it. The top was so dry and brittle that it shattered. The tree was down. Now to the hard part, cleaning up.

Greg cut the top half of the tree into short pieces. They were all bad wood inside. But further down the wood was good and strong. We didn't cut that part up. We got the chipper running, beers were flowing nicely - the saw work was done, we could have a beer now without much fear of losing a hand or leg from a chainsaw run-a-muck. Down went the branches into the chipper. Mostly dried and dead, but sometimes not, sometimes still carrying gleaming, shining needles in bunches.

And as one of those bunches passed into the top of the chipper, there was a little cone - seeds already dropped, about the size of a small chicken egg. And then another and then another. For some inexplicable reason I grabbed them before they disappeared in the hopper and put them in my pocket. And they lie now on my desk in front of me. About all that remains of the lovely tree that we planted, that watched as we lived our lives, that grew strong and tall, that harbored birds of all kinds, and that finally succumbed to death and decay. As everything does.

This is not a sad tale, this is a tale of a grand life lived. Of a life that brought joy to those around it. This is a tale of a regal tree, loved by those who planted it, a tree that gave much more back than it demanded. An example for a life that we all should envy.

And these three little pinecones are all that's left - except the memories. And in the end, just a tree. Just a tree.

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