

# Planting Christmas Trees

Jeff Gould

I'm standing in the middle of my life on the side of a hill in Minnesota. Because it is on the small farm I grew up on, I can easily see back through the years to my childhood- and I find myself puzzling over the sensation- the empty fields to the North are now packed with luxury condos and fancy houses. The barbed wire fences I helped stretch on hot summer days now sag next to asphalt walking paths.

This surreal feeling is heightened because I am helping my Dad plant trees- another task from my youth.

The pecking order of childhood is still there, I am a 16-year old boy doing what my father is telling me to do, but instead of a man in full strength, my father has diminished to a 76-year old with a staggering shuffle. I'm doing the math as I'm helping him. He is thirty years older than me. The last time I did any meaningful work on this hill was 30 years ago and I have become the father I remember.

Planting Christmas trees.

The process has changed but not in any sort of efficient or practical way. I take a planting shovel- a heavy T-handled tool that cuts a wedge in the soft ground. I stand on the shovel with both feet balancing myself as I rock back and forth, slowly sinking the shovel up to its hilt. Then I heave the shovel out. The ground makes a small sucking sound.

Dad is next to me; he has taken the job that involves less strength but more pain. He has a five-gallon bucket full of little trees about the size of a pencil. He sticks in two trees, one in each side of the 6-inch slot in the ground. He gives me a nod and then I sink the shovel into the ground, making another slot a few inches away and parallel to the first. Once it's sunk to the hilt, I rock it back towards the little trees, squeezing the flap of dirt against the trees. A painted stake is planted so no one mows over the trees, and the exercise is complete. Now using the bucket as a crutch, Dad painfully lifts himself to his feet, picks up the bucket and limps to the next tree.

It is an exercise in futility. If he wasn't my Dad, I might even tell him it was stupid. I have committed to planting 400 trees this afternoon. I learn that only about 10 will survive the 15 years needed before some person from the condo next door cuts it down for Christmas. "That why I plant two per hole." He explains. It doubles the odds from astronomical to merely pathetic. "It's all about rain. If it rains they might live, if it doesn't they will be dead

in two weeks." The ones that survive might get eaten by a lawn mower or a deer, or some unexplainable event. I find one hole that has beaten all odds and both trees that have survived- they look to be about 4 years old. But they are too close and will strangle each other. He shrugs, takes a loppers and clips one of them off. I look at him. He shrugs again.

Oh well.

Mom has just come out with lunch. Lunch is a farm term that means something to eat brought out to the workers in between times that they go *inside* to eat. In this case lunch was a thermos of coffee and a plate of apple pie bars.

Forgive this tangent: I cannot just mention apple pie bars in passing. Apple pie bars are a delicacy from my youth that I completely took for granted and have since forgotten. Made in a shallow rectangular pan, they featured lard crusts that my mom had rendered herself, about a peck of apples from the orchard and sweetened with honey from the bees they kept. Tart, sweet, crumbly- a portable version of apple pie- they were drizzled with just enough glaze to make you wipe your hands on the cold fall grass.

My mom smiles at me: "Your hair is so gray!"

I smile back, "At least I still have a little."

She smiles and nods. Then looks at me again: "Your hair is so gray!"

My smile is sadder this time. Her personality is as bright as ever, but the Alzheimer's is stealing her beautiful mind one cell at a time - and it makes me realize just how rare and fleeting this day and moment is. I stretch my back and think how good a nap in the grass would feel right now, but today is not for resting, it is for working.

Dad had his hip replaced two years ago, and both his knees are shot. He also has neuropathy (or loss of feeling) in his feet, so the man I remember with the long legs and the 4-foot stride now shuffles painfully along from hole to hole. If we push it, we will plant 400 trees today, leaving Dad to plant 800 himself.

And why? They will have to leave this place when Mom can no longer function. The tax laws which made such laborious work worthwhile have been changed. Now the trees must pay for themselves, and planting, pruning and upkeep no longer make it worthwhile.

Yet he does it. And the obedient son that is in me helps and tries to understand why. I suppose some of it is stubbornness, Dad refusing to change in the face of a changing world, because he doesn't have to—yet. Fear too. If my math is correct they have lived there together 44 years. Certainly, any other place they would live would be drastically different. Better to live today than face tomorrow

But positive emotions are at work that fine day as well. Like optimism— a tree is belief that tomorrow will come— and although they don't live forever, they can outlive us, unspoken proof to the world that we were here— that we made some sort of difference. Maybe that's

why of all the work on the farm, planting trees has the most satisfaction.

But I also think there's wisdom. The apple pie bars help me remember — all things will come to pass, and when they are gone, they are gone — the bad and the good. My rush to leave adolescence also left behind the apple pie bars that I had completely forgotten about.

I do not know if I will ever do this again. Work side-by-side with my Dad, on a glorious fall afternoon, so I stand on the side of a hill in the middle of my life and help him plant Christmas trees.

And I am content.