

Exercise and Trees In New Subdivisions: A Cautionary Tale



I guess the longer I live on this earth the more I become aware of interesting analogies. So much in our lives and experience is focused on finding connections and the 'discovery' of those connections can be all at once fascinating, instructive, and *sometimes* even inspiring.

As I have gotten older it has become very obvious to me that good diet and exercise *both* are really increasingly and profoundly essential not only to maintain my health, strength and appearance, but indeed to prevent – or at least *post-pone* – diabolical decrepitude. These days when I am no longer personally climbing a lot of trees, my wife reminds me regularly that I need to make a habit of working out with those abominable weights to prevent the onset of unsightly and degenerative regressions. Okay, I have to agree.

So now *here's* the analogy. In the world of trees, which has been for more than three decades now my chosen 'profession', the same is true. Of course, when we start to think along these lines one part of it becomes instantly obvious. We quickly can see and can legitimately compare good microbial organic soil composition, availability of necessary mineral catalysts (natural fertilizers), proper water application and so on as *all* being analogous to a healthy diet. But where does the *exercise* part come in? Follow me here.

At least until recently when the housing market has seemed to tank, new subdivisions *had been* popping up all over the place and land values were at a premium. Conse-

quently, almost all of us have been observers of poorly planned and wrongly motivated development that too often can only euphemistically be termed 'progress'. It has been common to see wholesale "*falling-and-hauling*" of entire stands of old trees in order to open more ground for 'development'.



But on the other hand it seems almost ironic that any old tree will sell. So entire new neighborhoods of houses now snuggle up tightly against little narrow token rows of towering pole-like *survivor trees*, standing like forlorn bedraggled derelicts along the property lines of tiny lots or towering above the rooflines only two feet off a foundation. These survivors usually have no lateral branching and may have been retained only grudgingly, yet in the process betraying their retainers as grotesque and almost cruel reminders that a natural wooded area once *actually did* exist on that spot. How-

ever these scrawny skeletons are, initially at least, still useful as good marketers, for they conveniently provide a flimsy excuse to advertise a recently raped parcel of dirt as a "treed lot" and by some weird extension of that same

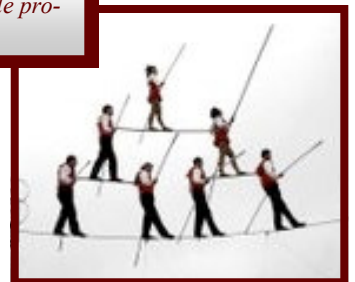
reasoning provide a perverted rational for ludicrous street and/or development namings like 'Forest Lane', 'Shady Glade' or maybe 'Shadow Woods.' (see footnote)

But there's more. These frequently pathetic and solitary 'designated survivors' were once upon a time happily and successfully existing in the middle of some natural and undisturbed wooded area. There

they grew up protected from the forces of wind by their formerly-surrounding-but-now-gone-brothers. Also because they had to grow up tall and straight to compete with those brothers for light, they neither had room to develop *nor needed to develop* a typical system of lateral branching that provides not only natural characteristic beauty but important stability in the same way a circus high wire walker's balance pole provides stability. There

in the middle these weaker ones had no need of such . . . until . . .

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So it is then legitimate, by analogy, to say that those inside the historic protective circle, whose once singular role was only as a part of a larger whole, never exercised. They never did because they never had to. But there is a term you may have heard: "Use it or lose it." These survivors were never on the outside, flexing and waving their arms to withstand the storms and unforgiving winds of their early days. Instead they lived an easier life inside and 'lost it'. But now . . . now their outside protectors are gone and they are, for the first time, all alone and crammed up against the back or the side of some unsuspecting new residence in a too-small and non-viable artificial space. And for the first time in their lives they are now exposed to those winds and forces of nature never before an issue for them. Further, they are exposed to these new forces entirely without their "balance poles", and entirely without the over-time development of cellular *tension and compression wood* (a product of "exercise") that would have made them strong and resilient, and typically and largely without very much of their former anchoring and nurturing root systems.

Well, I doubt that I need to continue belaboring this little cautionary tale? I think the point is made. Yet several conclusions might be drawn, one of which could be that it may be even better – and safer – just to knock everything down . . . *everything*, and scrape the ground clean rather than leave these ridiculous, damaged, and risk-prone token stragglers that have hardly enough canopy to even provide a little worthwhile shade. And I suppose that when operating under a maximum lot count and maximum profit philosophy, that may very well, again ironically, be the least damaging and most enticing way to go.

However, although it is unfortunately far less palatable to many profit-fixated developers and builders (*and there are good exceptions to that group because I know a few*), there is *another better option* when mature trees are present. It requires thoughtful and strategic subdividing that mandates fewer and larger lots for a given overall tract size. It requires more strategically located greenbelt

spaces. It requires interest in looking at innovative options for installing infrastructure and an insistence on adequate and enforceable tree protection zones. Taken together, the net effect of all of this will be long term improved tree survival rates, enhanced property appearance and values, far more precious summertime shady living space, and an elevated pride of ownership and quality of life.

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My father used to tell me that *'there's a right way and a wrong way to do anything'*. Frequently the quickest way and

maybe the most immediately profitable way is not the right way in the long view. And there is almost always an additional price to pay for doing it wrong, a price that in cases like this the new homeowner and the entire community is often left to pay.

Footnote: Street names offered above are fabricated for illustrative purposes only. Any correspondence to actual geographic locations is accidental and unintended. . . does that let me off?)



From My Journal: Avoiding "Forever Regretful"

These last few months of what we can probably refer to historically now as the Fall of 2007, have been for me a time of exciting and unique opportunities. I've mentioned the fact before in this space that for both my wife and I travel has always been, and still is for us, like *Christmas to a twelve-year-old*. And in that regard my unusually jammed itinerary since about the end of this past summer has been both full and very exceptional.

In fact, it's been so full that I was only *half-joking* when the other day I said to my secretary . . . my right arm . . . that I had recently been waking at night fighting off the notion that I might be sliding into old age irresponsibility. My father had always been one who believed in "keeping your nose to the wheel and staying with a job. While I surely agree with that in principle, I have simultaneously seemed to have and I think still do have a bit of trouble with it, in particular when it

comes in conflict with our love of travel and the perennially special thrill of packing a bag.

But in addition to "full", I also used the word "exceptional" a minute ago. I now have framed on my office wall a formal invitation that came to me almost serendipitously, simply by virtue of the happenstance of being in the right place at the right time about forty-three years ago. And it turned out to be a very special invitation for far more folks than just me. Forty-three years ago I was a plebe in the Brigade of Midshipmen at the U. S. Naval Academy, class of 1968. There I was placed in a military company with another new young Midshipman Fourth class by the name of Michael G. Mullen. So the invitation now on my office wall is one that when first received, my wife very sagely remarked that I had to accept and go or I'd be "forever regretful." It was from the Office of the Secretary of De-

fense, inviting me to attend the Change of Command ceremonies for General Peter Pace, the outgoing Chairman, and Admiral Michael Mullen as he (Mike) took over the duties as the new seventeenth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I did go. And as you might expect, it was indeed a uniquely wonderful experience in at least a dozen ways, not the least of which was the opportunity to reunite with old friends and classmates. Some whom I had not seen for four decades.

My wife is a gifted speaker and teacher. Fast on the heels of my return from Washington, she was herself scheduled to leave on a speaking tour in Kenya with a small group of women from our church. At the same time our youngest daughter Rebekah has moved with her husband to Johannesburg, South Africa. Neither Becky nor I had ever previously

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