

Public speaking needs a coach

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—A couple of years ago, a large, double-stemmed elm blew down over a boundary fence that belonged to my 80-year-old neighbor.

The wind usually blows South to North across this ridge. But after a hard fall rain, a rogue North-to-South gust took it out from the root ball up. Trees grow strong into the prevailing wind, but they're pushovers for anything that hits them from behind.

This weathered elm was just on my side of the line, but it flopped into Goog's pasture and mashed about 10 feet of his fence. Since it was my tree, it was my responsibility to clean it up.

This was an unappealing chore made more so because it needed to be done sooner rather than later. Any distasteful task that can't be put off for at least a year is best totally forgotten.

Elm is not designed for firewood. It has a tight, swirly grain that's cursedly hard to split by hand. On a bustability continuum, red oak is an eight or nine while elm is a two or three and sometimes it's just impossible. You end up using the chainsaw to rip the rounds lengthwise, which takes forever, strains your back and brings out your meanness.

Elm is also branchy in its crown. I would be spending many afternoons gathering very small branches into very large piles. This is less fun than it sounds.

The elm's two large, butt logs and trunks might be milled into lumber, but that was not a sure thing.

It's often the case with a "boundary tree" that a farmer once tacked his wire fence to it rather than put in a post even though he knew better. Trees used as posts will swallow steel fencing over time and lodge it deeply in their woody stomachs. This evens the score with the farmer, because he can no longer use it for lumber. Sawmills are rumored to do unmentionable things to landowners who bring them steel-loaded logs.

No one had any memory of a fence being nailed to that tree. This covered the last 60 years, but not the preceding 40. I hoped that its sole use had been to provide shade for loafing cattle, a highly regarded inactivity in clubs that deny me admittance.

I considered just pushing the whole mess back onto my side of the line and letting it rot, but I knew it would snag my eye every day. My agricultural ethics would be compromised. Fingers would wag. Tongues would point.

So I rigged up a temporary electric fence to keep Goog's cattle on Goog's side of the damaged fence and our cattle on our side.

After fooling with the firewood and applying my pile-building skills to the branches, I was left with two nine-foot-long butt logs and more than a dozen other lengths that could be milled into lumber.

I used the frontend loader on my old tractor to lift the smaller logs onto my flatbed wagon. I hauled several loads up the road to a small, one-man, part-time, on-demand sawmill run by another neighbor. He's almost 80. I was the kid at 64.

The biggest butt log was, however, more than my tractor's hydraulics could handle. I got the forks under it and lifted enough to back up for a run at the wagon. But I couldn't turn the front wheels because of the weight. I felt the rear left tire lift and the tractor start to tip to the right.

All of this took place while my daughter and a visiting weekend audience of her friends were watching and offering to help.

If I rolled the tractor, Molly's friends would take pictures and post them on social media. I assumed that Achilles would turn up and drag me around the pasture like Hector in front of Troy.

Saner heads prevailed, one of which happened to me mine. I declared the logging party over. Two days later Goog's big tractor loaded the log on the wagon.

I had the elm milled to 5/4 thickness (1¼ inches), because I anticipated a lot of trimming and planing to get the unruly wood square and flat.

The green boards were heavy. I stacked them in our barn with stickers between each level and let them air-dry for 18 months. I could see grain patterns in the rough-sawn lumber, but you never really know how things will finish. This applies to things other than my projects out here in the American yonder.

My wife has wanted a blanket chest for many years. She has also indicated by not doing so that she wouldn't turn up her nose at a \$1 million emerald ring, which, I agree, would be of immense help in cleaning out her horse stables. I figured that scratching one obligation off this list of two would cut my marital duties in half regardless of which I did first. Right?

And so it happens that the grandfather-in-law of our local genius welder, Steve Good, is still making cedar-lined blanket chests at 90. While

he generally works in walnut, I figured Frank Rohrer was the man to find plain-spoken beauty in my scrubby old elm.

I hauled 70 board feet over to Dayton, Va., in late February, and the chest was ready last Friday. To get Melissa to take a day off, I told her that I needed her to help me take a tour of the local Cargill turkey-processing plant. It's fair to report that she thought my story was contrived even by my standards, but being a good sport she came along for a surprise. Dayton, I should add, is known for its poultry plants, less so for one-of-a-kind emerald rings.

I pulled into Frank's driveway, claiming that I needed to ask directions from a stranger. I parked next to his workshop.

I found him, and we went into the darkened building. He turned on the lights. An old blanket covered the chest. Frank flashed it off with a bullfighter's flourish.

I was stunned. The chest was gorgeous. The grain had expressed itself with boldness and clarity. It had finished lighter than the rough stock. The wood spoke for itself, but it had needed Frank to find its public voice.

Unlike a hope chest, a blanket chest typically was not decorated with inlay or carving. Frank doesn't use external hardware or handles. There are no bottom drawers, although he does include a sliding cedar tray. His only concession to style is ogee bracket feet in their simplest form.

Frank connects his four corners with hand-cut, open dovetails. This joinery method locks together trapezoidal pins from one board with matching tails from another. Dovetails have to be accurate, otherwise the joints will slop around.

Frank's dovetails are tight, like fingers knitted in a kind of permanent prayer.

I roused Melissa from the truck, and we surprised her. I don't think she would have refused riding home inside her new blanket chest. Erring on the side of not pressing my luck, I did not suggest this as an alternative to the front seat.

My elm had tested Frank's Mennonite patience. He told me that it took him 35 to 40 strokes to cut one dovetail into this hard elm compared with only 10 on walnut or cherry.

We settled on a little higher price to square things for his extra time and trouble.

He could have used a machine to cut the dovetails. But that would not have been the same. He would not have liked it. A machine would have lowered his standards.

Our chest is number 225. It's the only one that uses elm. He promises me that there will never be another—of elm.

And now it has found a home in our guest bedroom. Melissa goes in every once in a while to run her hand over it. And so do I.

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