

Rage against age

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The giant silver maple that shaded our farmhouse kitchen for almost a century was taken down Saturday.

We lost three notable -- even historic -- limbs that afternoon.

One supported the end our double hammock. A one-hook hammock doesn't do much rocking. We've lost both the hammock and the shade that made it wonderful.

A big antique school bell hung from another limb. It was rung to summon me home from out on the farm. A bell that isn't hung doesn't ring much.

A third held up a tire swing that I made for Molly when she toddled. I ran chain from three points on the horizontal truck tire to a single swivel that hung from an old logging chain. This design, according to users of different configurations, was better than a tire hung vertically, because mine could spin as many as three teenagers simultaneously. A swing on the ground doesn't spin much.

I first noticed bark separating from the trunk three years ago. Vines were growing beneath the bark. Then I saw mushrooms emerging at the base of the stump. Mushrooms indicate decay; I kicked them off twice this summer.

I saw that the maple could no longer support leaves on one side. Its still healthy half was ready to dump its load of autumn leaves into our second-story gutters above the electrical weatherhead where I can't get to them.

Even so, I liked this tree.

It's been part of our lives for almost 30 years. Age weighed on it. Disease was killing it. We feared that it would fall on the house or us.

At the end, it had lost some of its skin and was living on half its normal life support. Distress was visible, but silent.

In the woods, this maple would have deteriorated at a quickening pace. Limbs would have broken; bugs would have attacked; creatures would have gouged holes. The top would have broken at the crotch, leaving a ten-foot-high, 36-inch-wide snag. Eventually, it would have rotted out, leaving no sign that it had been a functioning member of its community for 100 years.

As it was only 12 feet from the house, we had to intervene. We were the volunteer death panel.

Getting older is inexorable, except when it stops. Each day adds to the count against you. This is cause for concern.

At 66, I sometimes feel like I'm a yellow duck going around and around in a carnival shooting gallery, waiting for the inevitable fatal plink. The guy with the gun is getting closer, and he's zeroing in.

Getting older means dragging around with an increasing amount of discomfort and pain as the new normal. Just like our maple, I'm losing some of my leaves.

I've been gimping around with what I think is a stress fracture in my right foot for a couple of months. To prevent flexing, the podiatrist cobbled me with a Frankenstein boot that must be surplus from the last lunar landing. I've also been nursing a bad muscle tear in my upper left arm. And I suppose honorable mention should go to the routine aches in my knees.

It occurred to me just before daylight yesterday -- at a moment when insight floats into view disguised as half-consciousness -- that I'm never going to get back to a pain-free normal.

This woke me up PDQ.

I know that I'm not alone with getting older and feeling it more and more. I'm fortunate to not currently be battling anything dreadful. My only terminal condition so far is life itself.

Most of my annoyances seem to be temporary and solvable, though "temporary" stretches into the future more than when I was younger. They don't bother me enough to take pain medication. But like small, fully embedded splinters, they declare their presence whenever they're rubbed the wrong way.

Older people I know don't talk much about this resetting of their biological normal. They focus on the specific misery of the day or the chronic whatever that's weighing them down. The background biology is just an assumed burden of age like my maple trying to keep on with fewer leaves.

I've wondered whether periods of respite occur. Are there windows of before? I don't think a month of 20 is in my cards, but I wouldn't turn down a week or two of 50.

I don't use the argument with myself that I should feel fortunate because I currently have fewer complaints than others who have more. It doesn't make me feel better to know that lots of people hurt more than I do.

I assume my time will come.

Discomfort, now, is a constant carry. As I've gotten older and passed through several hard life experiences, I find that I deal with background discomfort by trying to concede to it as little purchase on my life as possible. I don't waste big funks on little annoyances. I store my big funks for big disasters.

I try to appreciate whatever is pleasurable in whatever each day brings.

Small plusses don't multiply, but they do add up.

Over the years, I'd say I've acquired a slightly cynical sunny outlook toward each day. I'm not a Pollyanna. Rather, I value the comedy that's embedded in much of what we do seriously. What balance I achieve comes from a gyroscope that adjusts for the absurd, the irrational and the unintentionally funny—one property “boarders” another; the prisoner was said to be “fleaing” to Canada.

All of this may change when my next dreadful life experience arrives. You never know when a big dose of numbing depression is good medicine.

I feel a brotherhood with the old maple that's now cut into rounds and ready to be split into firewood.

Our limbs have supported a few worthwhile activities over the years. Its leaves clogged my gutters and caused me trouble; I'm sure I've caused a little of that along the way as well. The maple got to the bottom of life's hill first, but I'm on the down slope.

While it's true that death always wins the game of life, it's never the only game in our towns.

I'm watching for mushrooms sprouting around my roots. If I see any, I'll kick them away. But I'll know something that I didn't know just the day before.

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