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Beauty might lurk in the heart of the Beast
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The Beast has haunted me since November. All winter it stayed next to Key Run, down behind the big barn. I knew it was there.

Three weeks ago after the mud dried, we “drug” it uphill into the front lot. I’ve stared it down every morning since.

The Beast waits. It just is.

I’ve had other Beasts in my life. Projects of different types. I would say they’re up, maybe five to two.

This one is nine feet long, weighs 4,500 pounds and is about 200 years old.

Robert Browning, the Victorian poet, wrote that “...a man’s reach should exceed his grasp—or what’s a heaven for?”

His point: It doesn’t hurt to apply, even if you don’t have much chance of getting in. A friend from grade school puts it more bluntly: “If you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

The problem with Browning’s rule is that it guarantees a lot of failure, unless of course, you believe that reaching is more important than grasping.

So the question to Browning has always been: Just how much should your reach exceed your grasp to make grasping what you’re reaching for both a significant goal and conceivably obtainable?

Significant, unobtainable goals lie around my mountain farm like fallen rocks on an Interstate. They cause a lot of damage when I hit them fast and square.

The Beast may be the latest in that line.

It started out as a mutually beneficial arrangement between neighbors.

A huge sugar maple stood on my side of a boundary fence, but it leaned over my neighbor’s workshop and had begun to shed increasingly heavy unwanted parts.

Larry had the tools, experience, motivation and offspring to take it down safely. He took what he wanted for firewood, and I got the butt log. It turned out to be a bigger butt than I’d bargained for.

Somewhere, I'd gotten the idea that Melissa and I needed a new table for the dining room. When such notions bedevil normal people, they drive to a furniture store. I started looking for a tree.

The table I had in mind was simple, but large—undoubtedly a reflection of its originator. A log could be cut lengthwise down the middle, and then its two center-cut slabs could be joined as mirror images. The more gnarly the grain, the better.

My plan -- my "reach," in Browning's terms -- was to book-match two nine-foot-long, 45-inch-wide planks, each three inches thick. I was hopeful that a table like this might support all the tax papers the IRS requires of me each spring and be deductible to boot.

The first problem I faced was that no sawmill around here could handle a log this size. Nonetheless, I knew that if I threw enough money at this inconvenient detail, I could get the Beast milled and planed somewhere, somehow.

The second problem had to do with concept. It dawned on me that a table nine feet long and more than seven feet wide might be more appropriate for a Prussian castle than a Blue Grass farmhouse. I considered acquiring a different attitude and a monocle.

The third problem was weight. Two rough-cut planks this size would weigh more than 2,200 pounds. After milling and drying, the table would still run about 1,800 pounds if you counted legs, which I did begrudgingly.

Even if I could figure a way to get this behemoth into our dining room, it would probably fall through the floor. On the other hand, repair of both table and floor should qualify as self-employment business deductions, don't you think?

I faced the truth: My reach was not only exceeding my grasp, it was orbiting in a different solar system.

Cookie-cutter modernity had triumphed. Stupid ol' 12-inch-wide, one-inch-thick boards ruled. I was also face to face with the physical limits that my own senior citizenship imposed. I had to downsize, both reach and grasp.

I could still book-match two center-cut boards -- two teensy-weensy boards -- maybe 40 inches wide together. But forget nine feet; do six. And no more telephone-book thickness; a conventional one inch. And after all the cuts and trims, it would still weigh close to 300 pounds...counting legs begrudgingly.

Or...I could stick with the original idea, except sell the giant planks for a one-ton table to someone with a giant room and an even larger ego. I know a couple of guys who used to be billionaires. The market's up. I'm sure they would deduct the table's cost, at least once.

Or, I could saw up the Beast and give the boards to woodworker friends.

Or, I could turn the whole idea into firewood.

What keeps me gnawing on this table idea is the hunch that stunning beauty hides within the Beast's twisted heart.

And what better inheritance could I give to my daughter, Molly, than a platform that might be able to bear the weight of her ever-increasing tax burden? And during the few weeks in the future that she will not devote to organizing tax records and filling out forms, she could hop up and practice the Bristol Stomp.

You never know whether your reach has exceeded your grasp unless you stretch out as far as you can...and see. Sometimes, you just have to give it a shot.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com