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Admonitions from the Wind

I get along with the wind okay. I have to. We've been working together for years. I work outdoors almost entirely. So does the wind.

I worked on a sheep ranch in northern California. Wind ripped through the low hills of the ranch fiercely a lot of the time. Often, the men I worked with complained about the wind.

The head woman there, she said it was no use to complain about the wind. It blew anyway. She liked it. When her children were small, she hung diapers on the line, and the wind dried them quickly for her. I saw her point. See the good in it. Fighting it will just wear you down.

The sheep gathered on the side of the hill, where we put out feed for them. Sheep's hooves chopped the manure down fine. The wind picked it up, carried it down the hill, and let it drop where a sharp bank had been bladed into the hill to let a dirt road through above the barn.

I built a flower garden for Laura in front of the house we lived in and a vegetable garden in our back yard. I helped build the soil for Laura's mother's garden. I backed my pickup to that sheep manure. It was easy to load, about two feet deep right there, so I didn't have to chase all over the ranch after shovelable manure.

The finely-chopped manure was easy to work into the soil and excellent fertilizer. Laura's zinnias, without exaggeration, were this big around, and they lasted weeks in a vase. Our small garden in the back yard and Laura's mother's garden did really well. The wind had been kind to leave manure like that for me.

When I cut wood along the edge of Whitney Valley, I kept a place in reserve where I had cut the dead trees down for an acre or so. If the wind got too forceful for it to be safe cutting where dead trees were standing, I moved into my reserve area and cut wood.

Sometimes the wind blew fiercely for days on end, and I worked my entire reserve into firewood. That was okay. Ditches and fences needed attention on the open meadow.

The wind sometimes presented me with exciting challenges, as if to say, "Let's see how much you remember about force vectors and let's see how well you can combine that kind of theoretical knowledge with what you've learned from cutting a few-hundred cords of wood."

I got out of the woods in a hurry one afternoon when high wind whistled into my work area. Three days later, when the wind died down, I said, "Thanks. This sure does keep the job from getting boring." The wind had blown down fifteen dead lodgepole pines and eight live ones, all in one tangle. I had to untangle it, because buried somewhere underneath it was about 50 feet of fence I had to find and rebuild.

Blown-down trees are unpredictable and dangerous. They usually haven't fallen as far as they can fall. Everything unbroken might be stressed toward breakage. Green trees especially, when bent, hold a terrific amount of potential energy, like giant springs that will snap toward straight when cut in the bend. They are often shattered through the bend, so they can act like many springs bound together, ready to release in 20 independent motions to strike anything close and to bind saws and wedges. A cut anywhere in the blowdown can affect the whole mass of trees.

What fun. It took me more than two weeks, because every time I got to a place where the next cut was particularly dangerous, I'd go work someplace else for a day or so to let ideas about how to

approach the problem percolate through my mind.

Every time the wind blew in to see how I was doing with the puzzle it had left for me, I'd say, "I'm not going to work with you looking over my shoulder," and I'd go work in the open somewhere until it quit nosing around.

And a day come when I had many neat piles of branches out of the way, several cords of wood ready to load and haul, and a stretch of fence nicely repaired. I didn't say, "Okay, let's see what you can do next." I learned long ago never to issue that kind of challenge.

Wind in Whitney Valley often conspired with rain and snow to see how serious I was about whatever work I was doing. I've had wind, even in June, plaster snow all down my back as I shoveled an irrigation ditch. I've had wind almost blow me off the motorcycle as I traveled across the meadow to irrigate. I took it in good humor. Some friends' sense of humor is more primitive than others'.

I stayed home one day and worked on songs, and the wind came to visit. I hadn't yet put a really good latch on the back door. The wind blew the door open and blew every loose item in forty directions. Juniper was six then. I stationed her at the door between the back room and the center bedroom. "Hold that door shut," I said, and I ran around the house and in the front door, closing doors and windows as I went.

I ran back around the house, blocked the back door shut with a chunk of firewood, and turned around to find the door between rooms wide open and Juniper nowhere in sight. I looked behind the door, where there was just enough room for a six-year-old girl.

Juniper stood in that small space, looking startled and a little afraid. "I couldn't hold it," she said, as if she thought I might admonish her for not doing the job I'd given her. I hugged her and said, "You did fine. That's powerful wind." I knew the wind had been telling me, don't put too much responsibility on a child.

I found songs scattered over more than an acre of sagebrush. I found everything but one page of a two-page song. I looked for a while, but I finally decided the wind was right. That song had serious problems and deserved blowing away.

When we took care of Tomahawk Ranch, my friend the wind often came to visit. Workers gradually put together a new lodge. The contractors blamed the wind for litter when it blew away empty cement sacks, plastic tarps, even sheets of plywood.

I didn't blame the wind. The wind's regular duty included ripping down through that small valley, rearranging everything that had been left loose. I blamed the builders who didn't adequately secure their materials.

The wind blew with such enthusiasm there one night, the big glass windows in the front room bowed in. So did the sliding glass doors in our bedroom. Forty-pound pieces of firewood blew around on the porch. The woodbox cover blew open, ripped loose its hinges, and slammed against the house. I went out to rearrange things so nothing could blow through the windows.

I picked up our improperly discarded Christmas tree, and the wind decided to do that job for me, took it out of my hands, blew it 50 feet into the air and up the hill to a secure place, where it would be safe until morning. I leaned 45 degrees to stay on my feet, shifted to 45 degrees in the other direction as the wind changed, and bit by bit, got all the materials secured.

When I got back inside, we weren't sure about the wind's intentions for the areas of big glass, so Laura and I carried our mattress into Amanda's room, where there was only one small window, and slept there.

Now we manage Magic Sky ranch, and my friend the wind comes to visit. It helps me plan my work. It reminds me the office screen door is loose and needs attention. It calls loose gutters on various

buildings to my attention. It reminds me, never leave any potential litter unsecured. Get the dead trees cut down in a calm time so they aren't an unpredictable force in some strong wind. The wind points out any loose shingles on any of the roofs.

As with just about any friend, there are times when I don't want to be with the wind. If I have heeded its admonitions about keeping the work caught up, I can come inside and leave it to its various peripatetic pursuits, resting confident that, partly because of its earlier reminders, little will be lost when I do go back out.