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Lessons from the Ant and the Grasshopper

Along the west boundary of the ranch I took care of in northeastern Oregon, Jim and I dropped beetle-killed trees, cut the limbs off, and bucked the logs into 16 or 18 or 20 inch lengths. We sold firewood to people who loaded their own wood and hauled it away, so we didn't have to maintain a truck or deliver wood.

I sharpened my chain in the shade at 1:30. Jim came down the hill to fuel up.

"You know something, Jim? If we hit it hard for another hour and a half, we'll be tired and right into the heat of the day, and we'll want to quit. We could go get Laura and the girls now and go swim in the Powder River. We could eat dinner in town and get back here about 6:30 and work a couple of hours before it gets dark."

"Sounds good to me. It'd be cooler then."

We swam in the Powder River, three miles below Sumpter. I tried to help Juniper and Amanda learn to swim, but they decided they weren't gaining much by having me hold them up while they kicked and paddled. They wanted to play and learn whatever they learned in the process, so I left them to that.

We skipped rocks down the river. I sent one flat rock through twelve skips, and it was still skipping as it disappeared around the bend. I couldn't get anywhere near that number of skips again, though I tried for a while.

We got home after seven. We loaded tools. I looked at Jim, and he looked at me, and we walked over and sat down on the front porch. I said, "By the time we crossed the meadow and got set up to work, we wouldn't get much done before dark."

"Nope."

"We might neither one of us ever own anything much in this world."

"My treasure's in here." He tapped his forehead. "We seen them cranes dancing and them hawks, and we've been seeing elk almost every day. I've been living up here in this valley where I always wanted to live, and I've got my pickup paid for. I've been having some fun. Being a partner makes it just right, cause I sure do like working for myself."

Later in the week, we cut wood until mid afternoon, picked up my family, and drove in Jim's pickup to Pogue Point lookout. It wasn't manned anymore. That method of looking for fires, from a tower on a peak, gave way in a lot of places to using spotter planes.

We walked the catwalk around the building on the tower and looked down on northeastern Oregon forest and sagebrush and meadows. Nuthatches landed on the guy wires of the tower. Oregon Juncos came to see if we had anything for them to eat. Cold wind blew across the mountain after the sun set.

Juniper looked down on the world for a long time. She didn't want to come down from the tower. Amanda sat on the steps about halfway up. I sat down beside her and said, "Are you afraid to go higher?"

"I'm not afraid to go this high, but I think I would be afraid to go higher."

"I'll hold your hand and walk up with you if you want me to."

"I think I can see just about everything from here that I could see if I went all the way up."

"Yes. I think you're right about that."

We went to Earmuff Spring one afternoon, down a steep, rough dirt road in Jim's pickup. Laura said, "My goodness. Are we going to tip over?"

Jim said, "Well, I never have before. But maybe we'd all better lean uphill." We did. Amanda and Juniper were small then, but five of us in the cab was tight. None of us minded. We got down the hill and left the pickup.

Two mountain bluebirds flew from bush to bush in the sage, following each other. Two bald eagles flew up from the edge of timber and away from us, up the mountain. We wandered together, then spread out, each following interest wherever it led.

We gathered together again after a while and ate bread and cheese and fruit and headed home when it got dark.

We sold all the firewood we could cut almost as fast as we could cut it. Sometimes, I talked about hauling two cords across the meadow every day and stacking it in the barn. We could sell it in winter, when it would bring twenty-five or thirty dollars more per cord. We did haul wood across the meadow some days, but some days we didn't, because there was rambling and looking and playing to do.

Winter hit us with heavy snow, until we couldn't get across the meadow to cut wood anymore. Jim and I played chess and

started teaching Juniper and Amanda to play chess.

We sold the last of the wood we had stacked in the barn. Jim took off for adventures in Montana and other places.

During our vacation last summer, about a dozen years later, I stopped by the shop where Jim works now. He took the afternoon off, and we talked for several hours. Jim said, "We cut a lot of firewood that summer and fall."

I said, "Yes, we did."

He said, "I guess we could have cut more. I think I wanted to play too much."

I said, "I did a lot of swimming and looking at the country around us I wouldn't have done otherwise. I had more time with my family, and they got to see more of the country and have some good times exploring and seeing wild animals and swimming. I thought about that old story of the ant and the grasshopper some that summer. The ant worked all the time and the grasshopper just jumped around and had a good time. The way that story is usually told, the ant is morally superior to the grasshopper, and we're supposed to follow the way of the ant and work all the time. But I don't think that's right. I think we need to have some of what we can learn from the ant, work, and some of what we can learn from the grasshopper, jump around and have a good time."

The sun dropped toward the peaks west of us. Before I climbed back into the car and headed south through eastern Oregon, we agreed that the money we made that year cutting firewood was essential, but the real treasure for both of us and for Laura and Amanda and Juniper was strong in our memories long after the money was spent.

When we explored the country around us and saw wildlife that lived there and all played together, we gathered treasures that we still carry with us and will for the rest of our lives.