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I Rise to New Heights, but Not Like the Eagle

I rode the ranch's small motorcycle to within thirty feet of the dead ponderosa pine tree and stopped, a little surprised the bald eagle standing on a branch about twenty-five feet off the ground tolerated my approach and didn't fly away. The eagle looked at me but stayed where it was, less interested in me than in everything else around us. I said, "Hey Eagle. How's it going for you this morning?" I started again and passed closer to the tree and on up the rough, narrow dirt road so I could repair fence along Trout Creek.

Either the eagle didn't like the motorcycle coming closer, or it didn't care for conversation, because it flew from the tree up Trout Creek Valley. I rode on to my morning's work.

The next time I went up the narrow dirt road, I discovered the tree had blown down. It had been dead long enough, roots rotted underground, and when Whitney Valley's strong winds encouraged it enough, it broke its roots and fell, crossing Trout Creek and smashing the barbed wire fence the other side of Trout Creek. When the tree fell, it brought a large piece of the earth, still surrounding the roots above where they had broken off, with it.

Had I looked carefully at the pulled-up chunk of earth and the roots and the tree, I might have figured force vectors and angles and weights and foreseen what was going to happen, but I just figured when a tree is down, it's down. I had to cut the tree, because it was on my fence; I had to get it off and repair the fence to keep cattle where they were supposed to be. I might as well add the tree to my firewood.

In any case, the tree probably would have behaved as unpredictably and dangerously however I approached it and wherever I started cutting. Dead trees are like that. Operating a chain saw in the wild is like that, unpredictable and sometimes very dangerous.

I rode the motorcycle home, got my pickup and my chain saw and associated tools and drove back to the fallen tree. I climbed up onto the tree, walked up the tree to the top, started my saw and started cutting off

limbs and cutting the main trunk into firewood lengths, working my way down the tree. Some of what I cut fell into Trout Creek, but the pieces would stop in shallows downstream, and I could fish them out when I finished cutting.

I was halfway down the tree when it started to move, and I also started to move as fast as I could, because I understood what was happening as soon as I felt motion. The dirt surrounding the roots and the roots were tilted slightly back toward the ground from where they had come, but the weight of the tree was enough to keep gravity from pulling them back down. But I had blithely kept cutting branches and firewood lengths from the tree until it lost enough weight that the root was outweighed what was left of the tree and began moving toward its original oneness with the earth, and the remaining twenty-five feet of the tree began to move toward standing straight toward the sky again, with me on it, as far up the tree as the eagle had perched.

The tree moved slowly at first. I long ago decided chain saws mean less than life or limb, if I can be forgiven the implied pun, and I cast the still-running machine hard away from me. I had no feathers or wings and could not simply launch into the air as the eagle had flown. I ran down the rapidly-accelerating tree and leaped clear of the root just as it rejoined the earth. I stumbled, caught my balance, caught my breath, voiced gratitude that I was not injured, and turned to look at the partially cut, upright tree.

“Try harder to foresee everything that could happen and avoid doing stupid things that seem so simple, in hindsight, to foresee, and that could lead to serious problems,” I told myself.

I walked over, picked up my saw, and went back to work on the tree, this time from the bottom. The sun still shone and all was still right with the world, even for the eagle, who was resourceful enough to find many more good perches from which to watch over Trout Creek Valley as small, potential prey moved across the ground.