

I grew up in the country. In our back yard was an enormous tree - an oak - planted by some homesick settler some 200 years ago. It was the focus of my childhood, the one that I've been so eager to leave behind.

In my idealistic youth I wanted to take an axe to that tree. It was, as far as I was concerned, unwanted foreign flora, in a landscape that should have been indigenous. The only things that prevented that from happening were that: a) it wasn't my call - I didn't own it, and b) I grudgingly had to admit that it did reduce our carbon imprint. But it did go the way of all childish things, like Sunday School and Church and grace before meals.

I left the country as soon as I could, to go and study at uni in the big city. Then came a career, marriage and children, so the tree and all associated with it faded into a past that, if I was honest, I didn't want to revisit. So I rarely went back home, using all the excuses that a busy life provides. On the rare occasions that I did go back, I went alone, and it was only for a couple of days max.

Then came the call that my father had been diagnosed with an incurable disease, and was dying.

I arranged for a few weeks leave that was owing to me, packed up the car, and drove the family - because I felt I needed their emotional support - back into my childhood, which, for some reason, I dreaded. I told myself that it was because of dad's condition, but I guess I also felt a little guilty.

After we had settled in, dad wanted to sit outside into the warm sunshine. I found two chairs and we went and sat in the shade of the oak tree. He was silent for a long time. I assumed it was because of the exertion, so I didn't break into it. Instead I looked upwards into the branches of the tree. I remembered, as a boy, how inviting they were. Here was a web of strong branches, just begging

me to climb and explore. Looking back, I know I grew healthy and strong doing just that.

As if to read my mind, dad said, "Do you remember the time we built the tree house together?" How could I have forgotten? It was school holidays, and on the weekends, when dad was off work, we chose the wood, measured and sawed it, hoisted it up and nailed it into place. Now, when I think of it, I remember that dad always included me in the project, frequently asking for my opinion, even if it was complete rubbish.

This treehouse (now long gone) had a rope ladder that could be pulled up against any invasion from the world. It became my place of imagination, where my friends and I would turn it into a pirate ship, or a fortress against the indians. It became my place of refuge, my sanctuary, when my parents and the world in general had turned against me. It became my 'man cave', where my sister and her friends weren't allowed, lest they contaminate it with frilly curtains and tea parties.

But my sister wasn't left out. Dad hung a rope swing (also long gone) from a sturdy branch, and that became *her* refuge, *her* place of imagination and dreaming as she swung up to the stars and back down again.

All these memories came flooding back, and I wondered how I could ever have contemplated destroying the central, solid thing that nurtured me, encouraged my imagination and shaped so much of my childhood.

Dad and I talked then, about things I didn't even know I needed to talk about - about the stress of work and keeping a marriage together, but mainly about raising my kids. I had lost touch with what it was like to be one, so I had nothing to draw onto

give to my own children. I did most of the talking, while dad listened.

He didn't give me advice, or lecture me. He simply said, "You know, while you're here, maybe we could rebuild the treehouse and hang a new swing for the kids. What do you say?"

So over the next couple of weeks we did just that. Dad gave advice from ground level, including the importance of asking the children what they would like to see in a treehouse, or where the swing should go, just like he had with me. And then we sat back and watched them enjoy it.

I must confess that I still felt some embarrassment about saying grace before meals, but I went along to church with mum and dad, just to be courteous. But one thing there struck me. The Bible reading one Sunday was about Jesus being the 'Tree of Life'. I can't remember where it came from in the Bible, but I pricked up my ears. I suppose it was all this business about the stuff we were doing in the oak tree, but on reflection, I think it had a lot to do with the substance of my childhood, and I wondered if this 'Tree of Life' could provide such a rich environment for me to grow in. It amused me that I had reverted to seeing myself as a child again, but perhaps that's just what I needed to do - certainly for my own health, but also in order to feed my own children's imaginations and sturdy growth.

Dad died a few weeks back. In the meantime I've done a lot of thinking. My wife and children love the country life, and there is an opening for work for me in the town. So it seems that the old oak tree is set to raise another generation of sturdy, imaginative children.

I'm so glad I didn't cut it out of my life altogether.

The Tree of life



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