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The Day the Maple Tree Died

by Lon Fendall

I like to watch the late news out of mild curiosity about the next day's weather. Sometimes I fall asleep during the news and have no idea what the weather report is. But this time I heard the man say there would be heavy wind gusts on Sunday afternoon. Heavy enough to do some serious damage.

He was right. On Sunday, I was working at our dining room table, which has a panoramic view of our valley – the Cascades on the left and the coast range on the right. Suddenly from the right came some very dark clouds, charging through the valley, not waiting for anything in their path. I remember it getting so dark I needed to turn on the dining room light, even though it wasn't yet four in the afternoon.

Just then one of our granddaughters came upstairs, saw the storm rolling in and said in jest, "There goes the tree!" She had no idea how accurate she was. A huge maple tree about fifteen feet from the house had withstood all sorts of storms in its 90 to 100 years of life. It had survived my four brothers and two sisters climbing in its branches and a house burning down near to it. There had been lots of heavy winds this winter. But this time was different.



Photo courtesy of Lon Fendall.

I heard the roar of the wind before I heard the shattering of glass and breaking of limbs on the house. That meant the gust had come directly from the west, which is not usual for our valley. Our heavy winds are almost always from the southwest and once in a while from the east, but not from straight west.

The breaking of limbs, the crunching of glass, and the snapping of some lumber on a corner of our house combined to make an ugly and fearsome chorus of destruction. But it had to hit the house, I couldn't have arranged a better place for it to fall. It caught the corner of the roof and took out only a small section over our bedroom. It smashed a window, but only one of five potentially

in its pathway. It mashed the metal caps on our chimney, but with a little tugging and pulling, the fireplace inserts were able to keep providing our heat. The upper part of the tree hit the end of the deck, but most of the structure stayed intact. All five of us in the house were shaken, but thankfully we weren't close enough to the falling tree to be hurt.

My afternoon project at the dining room table had been to prepare materials for a meeting at our church that evening; the meeting was for people considering a work trip to Haiti. The purpose of the trip is to begin building a high school, so village kids could resume their education after the destruction of most of the schools in Haiti's capital, Port au Prince. The Haitian earthquake was a disaster infinitely more dangerous and frightening than our maple tree blowing down. And fourteen months after the quake, many of the city's residents are still living under stray pieces of tarp, randomly strewn around the city.

When I began the meeting about Haiti I mentioned the more recent natural disaster of earthquake and tsunami in Japan. It was already apparent by then that Japan's more substantial readiness for a natural disaster was not going to prevent serious suffering. Then I mentioned our miniature scrape with the power of nature. If the tree had gone a few feet to the north and smashed our four bedrooms, we would have felt more like the people of Haiti and Japan that evening.

Our experience the day after the tree fell was also memorable. Within a few hours of our Monday morning call to the insurance company, an adjuster drove up our driveway, looked around and proceeded to assure us that the house would be completely repaired and our part of the cost would be relatively small. Before dark the same day a roofing contractor was walking around the roof, measuring and preparing an estimate to replace it – not just the damaged part, but the whole roof. And as I write, workers are swarming over our roof, getting it replaced.

I didn't turn down the insurance company's generous offers for help that day, but somehow it didn't seem right. I suspect there was almost no insurance coverage for the destruction in Haiti. The coverage in Japan will probably be better, but the country's substantial wealth will be seriously strained before everything gets fixed. And there is no way to fix the deep losses of those whose loved ones were crushed under crumbling buildings or drowned in the huge waves that followed.

Natural disasters are sometimes called "acts of God," to distinguish them from the many ways human stupidity causes suffering. I don't think God enjoys getting blamed for all these events. Jesus wept when he came upon human suffering and I'm sure God is saddened by the suffering in Haiti and Japan. God may identify with our sadness in losing the beautiful tree that furnished shade next to our house, but also knows we didn't really experience suffering. He rejoices with us that we have a means of getting everything fixed in a short time and shares our sorrow that so few in the world have such possibilities. And He reminds us to extend His compassion to those who have lost loved ones, their homes, and their jobs. We can't each do much, but we can each do a little. Like the small group from our church and community going to Haiti in this summer to encourage and help.

May God give us the will to share with those in need.

Lon Fendall, a GOOD NEWS *Associate*, is the retired Director of both the Center for Global Studies and the Center for Peace and Justice at George Fox University. He is the author or co-author of several books including *Practicing Discernment Together*, *Unlocking Horns*, and *To Live Free*, a biography of William Wilberforce. He can be reached at lonf@goodnewsassoc.org.



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