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WOOD GATHERING

It is February in the California Sierras, but all ready the winter sun has some warmth in it. Through clear skies, it casts its southern angled rays over the landscape and gives a crystalline glow to all things.

We're in the front pasture of the ranch to gather firewood. Our son, Cam, and his Dad and Cam's two small boys are the crew. I am keeping track of boys while the men wield chain saws on a fallen tree.

The great oak, probably 200 years old, has just blown over in a wind storm, hitting hard and splitting on the granite rocks near its base. The huge tree lies with its knotted shallow roots exposed above the hollow bowl now scooped in the dark fertile earth where they drew sustenance for so long. The gnarled trunk is a good five feet thick and far off the ground. It is irresistible to climb.

Four-year-old grandson, Nathan, has insisted on wearing his red rubber boots for the expedition, but they are hardly safe for climbing. I have him pull them off and as he scampers onto the tree, he digs his bare toes into the rough crevices and creeps down the trunk a ways. When he starts to come back, he suddenly realizes how far he is above the ground and cries with alarm,

"Grandma, help me, help me." I am close by but reply in a steady voice. "Nathan, sit down." He complies still looking anxiously to me for a rescue. But I urge him the size up his situation.

"Look where you can move now." I tell him.

He assesses the short and safe distance back to his starting point and soon scoots under his own power back to nestle himself into the protective embrace of the twisted roots. He is a strong, open-faced lad with clear gray eyes. In his red plaid shirt and much washed denim overalls he is the picture of a country boy. He settles into a comfortable hollow of the tree roots and grins with achievement, one foot up jauntily resting on the stump of a limb.

I have corralled his-two-year old brother, Jonas, in the back of the pickup where we are loading the firewood. I pick up pieces the men have cut and hand them to the boy. He chucks them in the front of the pick up bed. Many pieces are of substantial weight and I warn him, 'Heavy, Jonas,' as he stretches out his sturdy arms to take the logs. He grabs one and is nearly pulled over by the weight, but wrestles himself back to balance, takes a few tottering steps and heaves it on to the growing pile. Then he struts back to the tail gate with accomplishment shining in his eyes. He is high tempered and exuberant, a child always in constant motion and I figure this is the near perfect activity for him. I watch him experience the rough textured wood on his chubby fingers, the weight to test himself against, and the challenge of heaving the logs into place.

I smile. A two-year-old and I are loading the truck with firewood! With each log the boy hugs life and strength and mastery to his sturdy little chest, pitting himself against solid matter and swaggering into who he is and the joy of it all. One can almost see him grow.

After a bit he wants his shoes off, like big brother, so he can climb the great tree. I comply but keep a hand hooked in his overalls for safety for his enthusiasm to conquer far exceeds his judgment.

When we're ready to go, I put his socks and shoes back on singing "Deedle, Deedle, Dumpling, my son John." Jonas sticks his plump foot out proudly and pipes in a sweet voice, cherub-like in that moment with his blond curls spilling down the back of his neck. "Deedow, Deedow, Dumplin". We all look at him and he grins, an impish grin in an angel countenance.

This is the stuff boys thrive on – sun, open air, big trees, big logs, challenge – big men work – a chance to be strong and say "Yes!, to the world. "and " Hey World, I am here and a part of it all!"

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