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Authority

In 1974, I drove George Connor's Toyota Land Cruiser north to Alaska to talk with Harold Fuller of Cooper Landing, and to see a town named Homer. My intention wasn't to stay, but after I spent a day with Fuller, who told me he turned down building a gun a week, all a gunmaker can build by hand, I knew I would leave Oregon Coast, leave the rain and the mild winters, and relocate to Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. So, upon leaving Fuller's shop, I turned the Land Cruiser's radio on to get the news of the Kenai: State Manpower was advertising for loggers, specifically for choker setters.

I had once set chokers on a high-lead show for six days as fill-in for my neighbor when he injured his back. I drew pay for those six days, but I didn't work long enough as a chokersetter to consider myself one. The few hundred trees I had fallen over a decade, most alders and maples, didn't qualify me to call myself a faller. The few weeks I had operated a D-6 as I pushed walnut blow-downs into piles to be burned after the Columbus Day storm didn't qualify me to call myself a catskinner. I had never operated a heelboom or a shovel or a jammer or a yarder. I had never really worked as a logger although I did have a pair of caulk boots. I built rifles for real loggers. All of my neighbors were loggers. Some of the fellows I hunted with were loggers. And I wouldn't have want any of them to hear me identifying myself as a logger. But I was in Alaska broke or nearly so—and now that I was determined to stay, I needed a job, and logging was something I knew about. Setting chokers isn't rocket science, and I wore hickory shirts and a pair of red suspenders; I had stagged pants. I could talk the jargon: Oregon loggers *fall* timber, not *fell* it. Manpower gave me a card to take to a certain address -- wearing suspenders reading *Loggers World* down their front when I walked in, I gave the card to a woman at a front counter. A fellow behind the counter and across the room looked at me and hollered, "Can you fall?"

I glanced out the window and didn't see any spruce larger in diameter or taller than an alder: "Sure."

"Go to work in the morning."

"I didn't bring a saw up with me."

"You can use one of mine until payday."

I haven't applied for many jobs in my life, and I certainly hadn't expect to get hired so easily. I didn't even know what I would be paid. But I had a job, a foothold in Alaska, and I figured everything else would take care of itself in time.

The gypo paid fifty cents a tree: fall, limb and top. No measuring. No worrying about scale. No measuring stumps. Every tree the same price. And there were a lot more six and eight inch trees than twenty inch in North Kenai.

Within a week, I was making a hundred dollars a day and getting out of the woods by two p.m.

Spruce on the Kenai Peninsula look like they have been stuck in a pencil sharpener. It's a rare tree that's more than one log tall. All have lots of taper. And even on short log scale, they don't fare well: Denny Bell, a Peninsula sawmill owner, once told me that, "There's more scale in the first twelve feet than there is in the whole tree," when I asked how he wanted me to buck logs for him. He wasn't telling me what length of logs he wanted; he was telling me how to make the most money from the timber I was selling him.

For fellows unfamiliar with the terminology, *scale* is the theoretical number of footboard that can be sawn from the square of the small end of a log. Scale tables were established for full dimensioned lumber and for saw kerfs far wider than cut by modern bandsaw blades. So mills get to steal a little lumber. Nobody complains too much. It's a game everyone plays. It's only when a mill begins to cut, say, a 170% of scale that questions are asked. And what that mill owner told me is best illustrated by the example of a typical Kenai white spruce: a 12 foot long log with a 12 inch top has 210 boardfeet in it, but if that tree wasn't bucked at 12 feet but bucked

at 34 feet (what Louisiana-Pacific wanted for export logs), that 34 foot log would have an 8 inch top and would have 130 boardfeet in it, with another 10 boardfeet in the eight foot long top log. In other words, there is 70 more boardfeet in the first 12 feet than there is in the whole tree. When a fellow contracts to fall and deck for $35./M, where he makes his cuts can either cost or make him a lot of money, unless getting paid by the tree.

Logging was, when I accepted that job for the gypo, the means for remaining in Alaska until I could return to gunmaking. I was a gunmaker, not a logger, but I never returned to building rifles although that remained my intention for years. Instead, I fell timber for the gypo until fall feast, then accepted a job with L-P to cut better timber on the south end of the Peninsula for $12/hour. The gypo was experiencing money troubles. On a couple of occasions I had to go by his apartment at midnight to get my paycheck signed—unsigned checks had been conveniently distributed on a Friday payday. His crews were told that the gypo was out of town for the weekend, but he was home in bed when I knocked on his door in the middle of the night. I was living hand-to-mouth enough that to feed a wife and three daughters during the weekend, I needed paid.

Would I have washed that gypo's feet if he had been a brother in Christ? That is a question I used to ask myself. At the time, it was a question I couldn't answer definitely.

Today, few Christian congregations include a foot-washing ceremony with their taking of the sacraments, but Christ said His disciples were to follow His example. However, He apparently didn't really mean what He said, or His words were deconstructed so long ago that no element of *thirdness* connects icons and objects. Foot-washing has slipped by the wayside, as has taking the symbolic bread and cup on the night that He was betrayed. Passover isn't to be taken whenever a person wants, but once a year, with foot-washing.

What I didn't know when I had to get my paychecks signed afterhours was that in early September, Louisiana-Pacific quite buying from the gypo, despite the gypo having a valid contract with L-P. The export market for white spruce had collapsed. L-P hoped it would come back, so the corporation didn't bother to tell the gypo until the end of October that they weren't buying any more logs. The corporation strung the gypo along as he strung his crew along for as long as he could. Then, when he was bankrupt, L-P invited him to sue the corporation if he thought his contract was still valid.

L-P quit buying for long enough to break the contractor, along with six other little gypos, most of whom were logging on the Moose Range, or in North Kenai. After the fellow's equipment was repossessed, L-P then opened a company show up the North Fork of the Anchor River, next to the Russian Village, using repossessed equipment. The logs were definitely better than those coming from the north end of the Peninsula; plus, the corporation now directly controlled all of the white spruce logging occurring on the Peninsula. But Del Branson, logging cottonwood and working with his brother and with a paid-for D-7 Cat up Fourth of July Creek out of Seward, was harder to break. After a few months, L-P returned to honoring their contract with Del, whose feet I have washed and who never again trusted the corporation.

My sentiments towards L-P bordered on being uncivil that winter of 1974-75, but I didn't have much choice: I needed to keep working so I started falling for the corporation. In October, L-P actually recruited me, with more flattery than dollars though, to fall for the company show. But right after Thanksgiving, not even a month later, L-P shutdown the operation, because, the woods boss said, the company couldn't keep it supervised. The corporation wanted to contract out the logging of the two sections of timber it controlled, but its reputation preceded it. The corporation had little success finding anyone to log for it.

I still needed a job. So did a commercial fisherman who had a skidder he used to push rocks around on his beach site. We teamed up, and because he owned his skidder and because there were just the two of us, we figured we were immune to the games L-P played with its gypos. We were optimistic, overly so, avoiding the pitfalls that had trapped the other outfits.

What we couldn't know is that L-P really didn't want the logs for which the corporation contracted with us. Mill officials at Seward signed the contract with us in hopes that the U.S. dollar would weaken, that already overpriced export-grade white spruce logs would come down

in price, thereby making Alaskan timber more affordable for Japanese customers who were considering importing additional Philippine mahogany.

Would I wash the feet of Louisiana-Pacific's buyer who stole scale from us, or the feet of mill scalers who eyeballed rather than measured our loads of logs delivered to Seward? Seventy times seven--do I really have a choice?

The fisherman took his skidder back down to the beach in April; we hadn't been paid in full since February. The corporation trickled a few dollars our way, about enough to keep buying fuel for the saws and skidder. We should have walked away from the contract in March, but I kept falling until the middle of June, when it became apparent to even an optimist that we had been scammed.

I had no shop, no resources, no groceries, and a wife and three young daughters living in a tent on the logging site, so we were not even eligible for food stamps (a person then had to have a kitchen to receive any assistance). But I had a valid contract with L-P, and enough logs decked that we were owed many thousands of dollars. A year from now, L-P would haul those decked logs directly to Homer, from where they were shipped to Japan. The company hauled ten to fifteen loads a day from those decks for two months. But our contract called for those logs to be scaled in Seward; they were never scaled before they were shipped. And I received a check for $900, after I complained.

My intention mid-June 1975 was still to build muzzleloading rifles, but I needed a job for which I would be paid. I had purchased a Homelite 650 chainsaw that was in the shop more than it was out. Finally, Ron of Ron's Rental, the Homelite-Stihl dealer in Kenai, said, "If I see you in here one more time, I'll put you to work." I asked if he was serious, and I went to work for him that day.

A month later, I bought an acre of raw ground: $4,500 for the acre at $200 down and $45 per month. I would finally be able to build a shop, but not that winter. With no place to live, I loaded my wife, her sewing machine, and our three daughters into the cab of the decade out pickup I was driving, and we headed down the Highway, bound for Spokane where we would keep the Feast of Tabernacles in 1975.

After the feast, still camping out, I took a cutting job on the Idaho side of the Bitterroot Mountains. The pay was excellent: $2.90/M, a white pine selective cut, each tree more than two thousand boardfeet. A few of the trees six, seven, eight thousand boardfeet, a far cry from the 200 boardfoot trees had I been cutting on the Kenai. For a couple of months, I worked as a real logger. But then came the snow, a foot a day, day after day, and I loaded everything into the pickup and headed for the Oregon Coast. Camping in the snow with small daughters was too difficult. And we spend a couple of months renting a motel room in Newport, Oregon, with a kitchenette while I chased landings for a gypo out of Toledo.

All this time, I knew about how many boardfeet were in those decks, waiting to be hauled, up the Anchor River. I kept thinking that any day, I might receive a check from Alaska. I had sure L-P had my mailing address.

When I returned to the Kenai Peninsula in February, Ron of Ron's Rental had a job waiting for me. I repaired chainsaws for him, while on that acre of now somewhat developed land, I built, initially, a twelve by sixteen foot shed that I sold a year later for six hundred dollars. The fisherman who bought that building picked it up with the forks of a frontend loader after wrapping a chain around it. He then lifted it and drove down the highway as fast as the loader would go without damage to the building, so overbuilt was it.

But in that little shed (while living in a 35-foot trailer parked in back) I opened shop, still intending to build muzzleloading rifles. However, an unexpected development occurred: as I repaired saws for Ron's, I had been unintentionally building a clientele. Within a week of leaving Ron's, I had fellows coming by, wanting me, not Ron, to fix their chainsaws. My need for income warred with the ethics of stealing his customers, and with my desire to build rifles. Perhaps this is why that deacon never saw me as a businessman.

I need to backup and introduce a narrative element. When I attended services in Alaska for the first time with the Soldotna congregation, I have already been falling timber in North Kenai

for nearly a week; I was a logger from Oregon, an identifying label I wouldn't have assigned myself. Nevertheless, the congregational assignment was made: I was a logger, now imbued the stereotypical attributes of a logger. I wasn't a businessman, wasn't a craftsman, an artisan, a skilled chess player; I was a stump jumper, as we called loggers in Lincoln County. My wife received lots of sympathy while I was still making good money falling for that gypo in North Kenai, and my daughters received more used clothing than they could possibly wear out.

About the deacon in the Soldotna congregation who never imagined me as a businessman, I wrote the following:

AUTHORITY--

needed to borrow a cutting torch--
my deacon said, "Any time."
I came by at noon
but his men were already eating
so a little reluctantly
he helped me load bottles & hose.
I wanted to thank him
so I stepped into the camp trailer
that served as job site office & lounge.
There weren't enough chairs
for either of us
but to my surprise
he jerked
the chair from under one of his crew.
The fellow picked himself up, stood,
wanted to hit our deacon
but, I guess,
finally figured he wanted his job more.
He grabbed his lunch
stomped out--
I've not seen him since--
while all this deacon said was
"He just doesn't understand authority
the way we do."

This deacon who jerked the chair out from under his employee and who understood authority differently than I did only knew me as that Oregon logger, and he certainly never realized I didn't read Scripture the way he did. He would have counseled against me, a mere logger, opening a shop if I would have asked his opinion, but I never found the need to ask his opinion about anything.

I would never have been able to write the above poem if Christ's words were even naively believed.

Too many people judge Christianity by the faults of who attended the church of their youth. My dad did. But that's akin to making decisions about human hair based upon looking at one armpit.

Could this contractor/deacon have washed his employee's feet? Or would he only have washed his minister's?

What that deacon couldn't know is that one June morning I had a little car trouble not far from his house that left me afoot. I needed to borrow a few tools. It was bright daylight even though it was only five a.m. when I arrived at his house. Not knowing if he was up and not wanting to awaken anyone if he wasn't, I went around to his backdoor and looked in his kitchen window. There he was, bent over a chair, praying. I backed away, waited a half hour, then knocked on his front door.

I hadn't prayed that morning.

Because of having seen the deacon praying the one morning, I didn't say anything to the deacon when he jerked that chair. I should have, maybe, but I figured he was trying to practice righteousness. If Christ was extending him additional time, so would I.

In twenty-six year old hindsight, I realize I made a mistake: I was on trial when I saw what happened, and I failed the trial by not speaking out. I did understand authority as the deacon used it. I just didn't agree with that understanding, but I was under the same spirit of authority as possessed the deacon. I wasn't ready then to do this job, for which I was spiritually drafted—this job of writing the literature for the Church in Philadelphia. I didn't then love righteousness enough to intervene when a wrong was committed in my presence. I didn't have Philadelphian love, or much of any other kind. Yes, I failed the test.

Finally, I have arrived at where I want to begin: a test of character, of belief in right or wrong cannot occur unless a compelling reason exists for not doing what the person knows is right. When I said nothing after a chair was jerked out from under a man eating his lunch by his employer, I needed the use of the deacon's cutting torch and gas bottles so that I could build an outboard test tank, and engine stands that day. I felt I should adhere to the principles of non-competition agreements (even though I hadn't signed one with Ron) as the right thing to do, so rather than servicing chainsaws, I had secured a service agreement with a Mercury outboard dealer to do the dealership's repair. I was wrestling with nagging questions about what was really the right thing to do: for me, *he who doesn't work is worse than an infidel* was pitted against the concept of breaking a trust by going into direct competition with Ron, who had employed me at a time when I had desperately needed employment. I was, however, so focused on my problems that I didn't practice righteousness when the opportunity was before me. I was appalled by what occurred when the chair was jerked out from under the fellow, but how many good Germans were appalled by Hitler rounding up Jews, Slavs, minorities of every kind? Being appalled amounts to nothing without action—faith without works is dead. It isn't enough to believe God is that belief doesn't produce obedience to God.

When a person faces a moral dilemma, especially when opportunity is knocking, the person often finds a legalist way of ignoring the spiritual application of righteousness. I had to work to feed a wife and kids. There were few employment opportunities on the Kenai that didn't require working on the Sabbath. Oil platform jobs were some form of seven-days-on, seven-days-off. Most construction jobs were seven-twelves (seven days a week, twelve hours a day) during the summer. So I reasoned that it wasn't my place to say anything after the chair was jerked, that to say anything would be presumptive.

I left the deacon's job site, and shelved the moral principle of not competing with Ron. A sign was hung alongside Poppy Lane that identified my shop as *Woodcutters' Supply*, and I was in competition with my previous week's employer. I had, a few years earlier, built a rifle for a sales representative of a chainsaw distributor. I contacted this rep and became a house account. Within a year of hanging that sign, I was a dealer for five lines of chainsaws and a line of outboards, but I wasn't building any rifles.

Day by day during those first weeks after hanging that sign, I repaired off-brand saws and many McCulloughs, a brand Ron's wouldn't service. That seemed ethically proper. But first a friend, then that fellow who had bought a Stihl because he previously hadn't been able to get his McCullough tuned up now brought me their Stihls. It wasn't long before I was too busy to consider the ethics of competing with my former employer. And within a couple of months, I began to routinely have a front-person buy out Ron's stock of Homelite XL-12 crankcase gaskets: they were ten cents apiece. Most of the saws that Ron's, a Homelite-Stihl dealership serviced were XL-12s, and the dealership wouldn't, for economic reasons, make a gasket. An XL-12 that needed servicing just had to wait until Ron's received another order of crankcase gaskets. Deliveries to Alaska in the 1970s weren't overnight, or for that matter, even within a week. So by knowing Ron's service practices, his ordering and delivery schedules, I hamstrung the dealership's service program. And all of those unhappy customers who couldn't get their XL-12s serviced at Ron's

Rental came to me. My business grew rapidly, but my character wasn't growing. If that deacon had known what I was doing, he would have thought I was, indeed, a businessman.

If Ron had been called by God and would have entered the fellowship of which I was a part, would Ron have washed my feet that spring of 1977? I take the sacraments because I need what they represent. My feet remain my contact with the world.

When Pipeline construction ended, Kenai's economy dived into the *bust* half of its boom-bust cycle. In addition, by November 1978, the U.S. dollar was so weak against European currencies that I was receiving a five percent a month adjustment of chainsaw retail prices. So with saw prices rising rapidly and with three of every four of my customers drawing unemployment, I began to feel that it was time to go trapping, figuratively of course.

I endured December, January, February. But about the first of March, 1979, I looked around the shop and there wasn't a gun in the building, except for the loaded pistol I kept stuck in the insulation above the front door. I remembered why I moved to Alaska, remembered how easy life had been not having to worry about a hundred thousand dollars of inventory. I also didn't like myself. Lying had started to become easy: "That piston is on order," "They shipped those two outboards last Friday."

The lies were what all of us expect to hear from service oriented businesses. There were the type of lies told when lying is easier than admitting a person is in the wrong. But there is either a moral authority against lying, or lying is just another form of truthtelling, something presidents do with apparent immunity.

An inner authority, a small quiet voice, that would not have let me pull a chair out from anyone also would not remain silent about the practices that had subtly crept into how I conducted my business affairs. By cultural norms, I was operating my business with high moral principles. But nearly a decade earlier I chose to accept as the moral authority for my life the deity of my Dissident and Separatist ancestors. In just three years I either ignored or found ways around the prescribed practices for how I should conduct my business affairs.

We choose what authority we will answer to.

But once we have chosen, we really aren't free to change our minds. We can change, but we have to pay for that change.

I was unwilling to pay the price attached to becoming a businessman like that deacon. I put my business on the market: it sold nine days later. It sold before I had the chance to change my mind.

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