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Reflections . . .

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Turning Leaves

by Jerry Horton

My friend Daniel asked if we could use some leaves from his lawn service. Sure, I said, imagining a pickup load or two. But Daniel sent several flatbeds of leaves to the Ranch, enough to make a small mountain.

So on a cool spring day, I crawled into the seat of the tractor, fired it up, and attacked the Everest of leaves. As I turned over the piles, the sweet smell of oak leaf compost came my way. In some spots steam curled out from hot spots of decay. So many leaves, thousands of leaves, from scores and scores of trees.

As I worked I became mindful of the unending cycle of life and of death, which has been a frequent visitor in our lives of late. I believe we have attended more funerals in the past four months than in the previous four years.

It began a few months ago with the death of our dear friend Dewey. He was much younger than I, and an irreplaceable friend. We sigh at the loss. Then my cousin called to say that our Uncle M.T. had died. M.T. was the last of my mother's generation—11 surviving children of 13 borne by Grandma Stuckey, all now gone. And then George and Carol e-mailed to report that our mutual friend Wes had died March 12. I went to grade school, high school and college with Wes. We sang in choir together.

Uncle M.T. was near 80. But Dewey was a young man, and Wes my age exactly. There were other deaths, too—Grandma Lois, Dale, Norman—and as we attended funeral after funeral, I came to think about my own life, and my own time left on earth. As usual, the Psalmist had beat me to the punch, considering what it all meant thousands of years ago: *You turn us back to dust, ... a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday ... only a watch in the night.* Yes, I watch the cycle, aware of my own growing older, and the brevity of my time left on earth.

Places have lives, too, just like people, and I think of Down Home Ranch as a rambunctious kid right now. After ten years of arduous work, it has far to go to reach maturity. It still has a mission to fulfill. This land waits for those who will call it home—people with disabilities and their co-worker friends. It's healthy, strong, growing in all directions, and the future is bright. The Pavilion is currently under construction. Cabins to follow.

Yet *so* much remains to be done. At the end of this year, God willing, we will have the first residence well underway or built. But after that there's housing for another 30 or so residents, more enterprise buildings, and our swim center. Ponds, the retreat cabins and motel. A cottage for a retired priest.

I plan to continue working for another ten to fifteen years. And if I am granted this time, and continued good health, it will be my great joy to see the Ranch built to completion. It is my life work, which Judy and I share. In the next three to five years the building construction should be complete. Then we can focus on building an endowment to provide a measure of financial security for the Ranch, especially our residents.

But if I don't have those years, then I must trust others to do it. And I am confident that the job will get done. We have always said, Judy and I, that the Ranch is God's doing. If He wills it to be, it will be. Perhaps, because of our best efforts, or perhaps despite them!

Unlike the brief life of an oak leaf, we hope that Down Home Ranch will endure—certainly beyond our short lives. And we hope that those who follow are able to keep the mission clear and strong. Our brothers and sisters with mental disabilities depend upon us, so we must labor wisely and diligently!

We daily remind ourselves that we do not build so that some people with handicaps can have a home, worthy goal that it is. We build so that people with handicaps can have a community, a beautiful community, built to the glory of God. "Be faithful," said Mother Theresa, "and make something beautiful for God."

This is our prayer.