

SPIRITUAL STUMP REMOVAL

by Mike Finley

In Minnesota where I live, every small town has a guy whose job is stump removal. He's usually not a holder of a postgraduate degree. But he has a pickup, and a winch, and sometimes some dynamite. Sometimes he works with a tree surgeon. Sometimes he is a lone eagle, removing stumps on his own time and in his own way, like Palladin in that old show *Have Gun Will Travel*.

He's what you want to be: a knight (that's what palladin means) of stump removal. Let me explain.

After a tree comes down, in somebody's yard, or in the town park, and is sawn up for firewood, the stump usually remains behind. This is a problem because people trip over stumps. And they will trip over it, even if it is the only thing in a field of green grass. Especially if it is left field.

There isn't anything much harder to do than pull a stump out of the ground, because the entire premise of a stump is to be anchored where it is, to keep the tree in place.

So the job of the stump removal guy is to get that thing out of there, in whatever way he can. You can chop at the roots. You can mount coals around it and burn it for several days. You can drizzle acid into the stump itself, and wait till it weakens the structure, then yank it away with a chain. Or you can rent a stump grinder, a huge dental drill that takes the stump down to ground level.

It's gruesome work, any way you do it.

Spiritual stump removal is a metaphor, so you scriptural literalists can put away your chains and chipping machines.

The premise here is that people have an idea about a higher power, but certain habits of mind prevent them from getting a clearer picture.

These habits are like tree stumps in your yard. At one time they were the proud trees of self-celebration. They were tall and confident and wonderful, and you had no need of or interest in a higher power.

The trees were many things. They were your youthful exuberance. They were your sense of self-sufficiency. They were all your defense mechanisms and denial. They were the lies you told yourself about your capabilities. They were your vanity.

But something happened. You had some kind of spiritual comeuppance. You got sick, or you got old, or you got depressed, or you got drunk, or you drove into a bridge abutment. Or someone who cared about you got through to you with the truth.

Something happened. Something caused you to see that your stand of personal timber, with their lovely waving branches, was getting in your way.

So those proud trees had a rendezvous with the chainsaw. Sad? Extremely. But necessary.

So here you are, blinking in the sudden sunshine, trying to get a grip on life in broad daylight.

You know something new is happening, and you feel good about chopping down the trees. But you didn't uproot them entirely. All across your yard you see the stumps sticking up. They are things like anger, and grief, and guilt, and doubt. And though you foreswore them with the chainsaw, there are the ugly remnants. Man, are they ugly.

And you can't mow near to them, without breaking a blade. And you can trip over them if you're not looking, and break a nose. And every now and then, the tree you thought was dead sends up a new green shoot. And it's so pretty, and so promising, and so scary.

What are you gonna do?

You're gonna have to do something about those stumps.