

# THE FUTURE MAY BE BLEAK. PLANT THE TREE AND HAVE THE CHILD ANYWAY.

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An essay on hope

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*“All we can do is breathe the air of the period we live in, carry with us the special burdens of the time, and grow up within those confines. That’s just how things are.”*

—Haruki Murakami, *Abandoning a Cat*



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I’d been stuck up in the ash tree for probably half an hour, looking down and trying to decide how best to get myself out of the situation, before my dad came out. I was six, and I’d dragged our ladder from the garage, leaned it against the tree trunk, and climbed up, not realizing I wouldn’t be able to reverse my climbing moves to get back down. So there I was, half-squatting in the crotch of the tree where its big trunk split in two before splitting into more and more branches, finally topping out 35 feet above our grassy backyard in the town of Red Oak, Iowa.

For whatever reason, I had really gotten into tree climbing that summer of 1987, pulling myself up into every one in our yard, a few in the neighbors' yards, some at friends' houses, and any that were on public property and had a low branch within reach of my little arms. Occasionally, I'd grab a rope or two that my grandpa had "borrowed" from the Emmetsburg Fire Department and use them to hoist myself up higher. At some point, I must have complained of pain in my arm or leg, because my mom took me to the doctor, and the doctor took a look and prescribed a few days off from climbing trees. For a couple years, there was always a kid at school who'd broken their arm falling out of a tree, but I had somehow avoided catastrophic injury. Thus far, anyway. I imagine my dad had been sent out back that day by my mom, who was trying to finish cooking dinner. You know, *Please go get your son out of the tree or we'll have to start eating the lasagna without him.*

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So, there we were, him on the ground, me up in the tree, too scared to jump all the way into the grass, too heavy to jump into my dad's arms (which honestly probably would have broken something and put him out of work for several weeks), and unable to get back onto the top of the ladder. We threw ideas back and forth for a while, him moving the ladder out of the way, then putting it back, but I was frozen. My feet were maybe seven feet above the ground, maybe slightly higher, but from my vantage, it looked like 20.

Finally, Dad just calmly said, "Bud, I can't do anything for you—I think you're just going to have to jump." I said OK, and then he turned and walked into the house.

A few days after finishing grad school at the University of Montana in 2004, I headed south out of Missoula and eventually landed at the base of Colorado's Front Range. Missoula was beautiful, but I was more interested in Colorado's sunshine, accessible rock climbing, and hundreds of high-altitude summits close to my new home in Denver. For

almost a decade and a half, I lived for the times I could spend above tree line: technical-climbing routes hundreds of feet high, where I tied into anchors and watched birds ride thermals directly across from me or above my head as I belayed my partner; ambling ridge traverses that looked over ocean waves of mountains that seemed to go on forever; and sitting on hundreds of summits, where I'd pause for just a few minutes before hiking, rappelling, or skiing down.

I wrote stories, always focusing on the adventure, action, or big picture—what it all meant—instead of on the details of the scenery around me. After thousands of hours of romping around the mountains and the desert, I can probably confidently name only about a dozen plants and a handful of birds. In the proofreading process for a guidebook I wrote on Rocky Mountain National Park, I scrolled through dozens of wildflower websites, trying to name the flowers on all the trails I'd covered. When an editor asked me to specify what types of evergreen trees were on a certain trail, looking back at my photos, I had to admit that I couldn't 100 percent say whether they were lodgepole pines or Douglas firs. I'm just not much of a plants guy, I told myself.

In August of 2020, 18 years after I'd left my childhood home to live out west, Iowans learned a new weather term when something called a derecho ripped through the central part of the state, causing \$7.5 billion in damage. *The Washington Post*, in an effort to explain this fast-moving beeline of severe thunderstorms, [cited](#) a definition of a derecho that said it “must produce ‘continuous or intermittent’ damage along a path at least 60 miles wide and 400 miles long, with frequent gusts of at least 58 mph and several well-separated gusts of at least 75 mph.”

My parents' hometown of Marshalltown, Iowa, still recovering from a 2018 tornado that brought 99-mile-per-hour winds and took down the county courthouse's dome and spire, was hammered by the derecho. One of the big trees in their backyard was felled, fortunately missing the house and their bedroom window, 20 feet away, though the wind ripped a section of siding clean off the south side. I talked to Mom and Dad on

the phone, listening as they recounted their stories of the event and its aftermath—tree-removal crews were slowly making their way across the state, neighbors were helping cut up fallen branches and haul them to the curb, insurance companies couldn't send someone to assess damages for weeks because they were so backed up. As the derecho was hitting the edge of town, Dad had decided to drive home from the golf course; he stopped at the end of the block to get out and walk up to the house, but then thought better of it and opted to wait out the violent winds that were toppling trees left and right back in the truck.

After the storm, Dad sounded down. Five months into having their retirement interrupted by a pandemic that kept them isolated at home, my parents lost half of the trees in their backyard. I suggested planting new ones in their place. Dad, not usually one to get philosophical or talk much about mortality, matter-of-factly pointed out that, at 69, he probably wouldn't have time left to see a newly planted tree grow to maturity.

That summer of 2020, I returned to Missoula. And just weeks after the derecho, my wife and I closed on a house there. A listing real estate agent might have called it funky, but it might have more objectively been described as a tad neglected for a decade or two. A Florida developer had bought it previously, hoping to scrape it and build a fourplex, but then abandoned the idea, so we were able to snatch it up, to the relief of many neighbors on the block. The house itself was a bit ramshackle—the shop roof leaked, the house roof sagged a little, and the front door had been walled over, though the concrete front stoop remained, accented with moss. However, the property had five huge, mature oak trees, the kind only rich neighborhoods boasted in the city we'd left.

And also: one jack pine tree stood growing toward the southern sun, pushing the ancient back fence over since probably the late 1990s. My dad's heartbreak over his lost trees fresh in my mind, I decided to save the pine instead of the fence, and ran a reciprocating saw sideways, halving the fence panel to allow the tree more room to grow. It wasn't a

classy move. But it felt like an opportunity to save a piece of nature rather than a piece of man-made architecture, so I righteously hacked away.

It took a few months of being back in Missoula for me to stop seeing everything as it related to a memory of when I was in grad school—*Oh, that used to be this place, or I knew someone who lived there, or I used to go there when it was a coffee shop.* I was no longer an excited young man trying to climb every peak within a four-hour radius; I was now 41 and enamored with the trail systems that seemed to begin on every side of town and provide hours of wandering through evergreen forests. I still didn't know the names of most of the trees, but I was happy to learn that we now lived among western larch trees, deciduous conifers whose needles turn gold and drop to the ground in the fall.

That September, I discovered a trail system in a canyon just a 15-minute drive from our house, with gentle trail grades perfect for our senior dog, Rowlf. In the spring, it became our regular destination for evening off-leash walks, cool, quiet, and calming when the sun streaked through the pines and painted everything in glowing hues. Slowing to the pace of my ten-year-old dog, I finally took the time to look around and take it all in. Every time I slid my hand into my pocket to grab my phone for yet another photo of the trees in the fading light, that small section of evergreens scored another point to secure its spot as my favorite forest. Which is to say, I guess, that I was finally old enough and calm enough to notice the trees and have a favorite forest.

The 2020 wildfire season was the worst in California's history and the second worst in Oregon's. Smoke from the fires moved east into Missoula in mid-September, giving us several consecutive days of unhealthy air quality. A few hours south of Missoula, a Labor Day storm ripped down hundreds of trees in Wyoming's Wind River Range. A thousand miles away in Iowa, my parents' street was lined with branches

and entire trees dragged out of backyards following the derecho, where they awaited pickup and transport to the county compost facility. The signs of climate change have appeared more and more strikingly over my lifetime, first a murmur of “global warming,” then more stern warnings of “climate change.” I listened to Al Gore’s message in an *Inconvenient Truth*, and I heard people talk shit about him flying on planes or having a big house. I was pretty sure the former vice president wasn’t jerking our chain for fun. Climate change always seemed like a thing we should be dealing with, but of course weren’t—so the real havoc would come later in my lifetime. I’d read news stories that started, “By 2100, the world will...” or “By 2050...,” which felt like a long time away. If a doctor tells you that you have six months to live, you wake up right there. If a doctor tells you that you have 40 years to live, you shrug and go about your life as usual, probably changing nothing.

The summer of 2021 could not have been more different than my carefree tree-climbing summer of 1987 in Iowa. In Missoula, we experienced record heat all that July, with only one day in five weeks with a high temperature below 90 degrees. My parents, with the shade of their big backyard tree gone after the derecho, had to run the air conditioner more. In our weekly phone calls, I reported to my mother that I’d only been able to exercise outside when our air-quality index went down to moderate, and she’d tell me that she didn’t go for a walk in their Iowa neighborhood that day because the smoke was there, too. I’d read the news and find out that smoke from western wildfires was making it all the way to New York, that it was even visible from space. Our trees from the West travel now, blasted into bits by fire, turning into ash, and frequently blowing all the way to the Atlantic Ocean.

A few months after I cut our back fence in half to accommodate the sprawling jack pine, I realized my error in judgment. The tree, given a few inches of leeway, had taken several feet and was back to pushing on the remaining fence, which was now bent into the alley. Every time I took out the trash, I looked at the pine and realized its upper branches had also grown into the alley, to the point where the garbage truck would probably soon start running into them as it passed on Monday mornings. Begrudgingly, and feeling like a complete traitor, I sawed down

branches, destroying a third of the tree. For several weeks, it bled sap where I'd cut it, a visceral reminder of my betrayal. I couldn't do anything but water it and hope it survived.

My wife, Hilary, and I talked about trees, about how even if you could afford to buy a brand-new house somewhere, you couldn't just buy and plant mature trees around it. I don't know who planted the maples in our yard, or how big they got before that person or family moved out, or died, or whatever. I'm just grateful that they planted trees, maybe not entirely for themselves but also for future residents of the house who would live there long after they were gone, people they would never know. Us.

So, Hilary and I bought and planted a pine tree in the backyard. Like Dad, I don't know if I'll still be here when it gets big enough to provide a significant amount of shade. I'm still not a plant guy, but lately, I'm starting to be a guy who appreciates a good, mature tree when he sees one.

In the late 1980s, right around the time I was climbing trees all summer in Iowa, R.E.M. recorded a song called "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)," and Billy Joel recorded "We Didn't Start the Fire." Both are songs with rapid-fire stream-of-consciousness lyrics that include name-checking events and historical figures, capturing the frantic anxiety of the speeding up of the news cycle and the creeping dread of the then four-decades-long Cold War. Both songs used to give me a specific feeling—that the world moved fast, and was going to move even faster, and not necessarily in a good direction, and all we could do was try to keep up. I haven't pressed play on either one of those in a long, long time, because I get that same feeling nowadays every time I check news feeds or social media on my phone or laptop. It's been a challenging time to hang on to hope, let alone make art, or feel justified in dreaming about going on a bike tour or skiing.

Plenty of days, when daily life has to include considerations of wildfire smoke, record heat, a pandemic, a drought, and continued violence, I

have to remind myself that people have gone through hard shit before and that, in other parts of the world, people are going through hard shit that's different than mine, and likely way harder. The flu pandemic happened during a five-year World War. I read psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's memoir [Man's Search for Meaning](#), and other books on the Holocaust, and imagine what it must have been like to survive Auschwitz, not knowing how long it would go on for—months or years—knowing that any day a Nazi soldier could take your life on a whim, and that even if you survived the camp, Nazis might rule the world. I know you're not supposed to minimize your problems by comparing them to someone else's, but some days, remembering that perspective helps me a bit.

I used to wonder how people could have kids at a time like this, and then I would wonder how long people had been saying things like “How could people have kids at a time like this?” It seems like society, essentially, has always been Going Through Some Shit. Maybe in the past, when news traveled at a much slower pace, it was easier to blissfully forget about everything for a while and focus on what was right in front of you. For a couple years, I had my favorite forest near town, where I didn't get a cell signal and my dog slowed my pace and lowered my blood pressure when I watched his tail wag, nose shoved into a bush, sniffing hard. When we [lost Rowlf in late June](#), it took a few weeks for me to go back to my favorite forest without him, and even longer to not be sad as I walked the paths there. But it still beat the shit out of scrolling through Twitter.

When Hilary started talking about maybe having a child, or at least “trying,” as people say, and seeing what would happen, sort of putting it in the hands of the universe, or biology, or whatever, I had lots of thoughts about it: how it would change my daily life, how I would manage the balance of being a dad along with everything else I was doing, how I could mess it up pretty much every hour of every day for the rest of my life, the fact that I didn't exactly gravitate toward kids (or ever even really try to hold babies). It was the boldest thing I could imagine doing, and I felt underqualified for the job and maybe unjustified in



applying for it. But if I turned off the worrying part of my brain, the idea of assembling a library of kids' books, introducing a tiny person to the music I love, and walking around in the woods at less than a mile per hour with a dawdling kid sounded like a kind of fun I didn't necessarily want to miss out on.

Lately, I'd been feeling like I might be starting [the descent of the U-curve](#) many people experience in their forties, whether that was from two-plus years of a pandemic, midlife, a feeling of *Is this all there is?* or something else. I wondered if my parents, in the late 1970s, had worried about having kids at *A Time Like This*. I wondered if, after you have a child, you just wring your hands about it less because you're too busy trying to keep a kid alive—or maybe you become less pessimistic about the future, because you have some not-so-metaphorical skin in the game and you have no choice but to hope for the best. The kid has no choice about coming into the world, after all. I wonder how in, say, 2045, a hypothetical child of mine and Hilary's would feel about our decision to create them. What would the forests look like when the kid was my age? Would there be any trees left? Or was I thinking about it the wrong way and the kid would be a metaphorical tree we planted, in hopes that it would make the world a little bit better?

When I emailed my friend Devin that Hilary and I were expecting a baby boy in mid-2022, he replied with enthusiastic congratulations and wrote, "I think having a child is the most optimistic thing a person can do—at least it was for me."

Thirty-some years later, all of my tree-climbing memories from that summer in Red Oak are limited to a couple flashes of visuals—a pattern of branches, looking down at the ground from high up in the canopy, my grandpa's rough rope wrapped around a limb. But I do clearly remember how my dad walked into the house that day, leaving me to figure it out on my own. I've long been aware of the obvious metaphor about parenting in this memory. I'm also aware of the fact that my dad knew

all of our neighbors, and he probably knew which neighbors had a tall ladder that he could have walked over and borrowed to get me out of the tree. But the lasagna was a few minutes from coming out of the oven, and he likely looked at the distance between me and the ground and figured I had a pretty low chance of getting injured.

I don't remember how I landed—maybe with a tuck and roll, or on my feet and then staggering a few running steps before sliding to a stop, or like a cat. But after my dad walked into the house, I took another minute or two, or five, and I jumped, limbs flailing, hoping for the best.

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