

A FALL “INTO” GRACE – update on Blake Sanden’s accident by Blake Sanden

Many, if not most of you on this Kern Soil/Water e-letter list were notified in various ways when I had a tree pruning accident on June 15, 2013, the day after returning from a business and vacation trip to Spain. I had put the offending tree on my radar before going to Spain, as it is an old pepper tree in our backyard that topped out at about 70 to 75 feet and had already broken a couple scaffold branches that were just hanging in the canopy. So the tree needed to be cleaned up and 30 or so feet taken out of the top before it cracked again.

Wait a minute! Now I may be reasonably fit, but this is a big and potentially dangerous job so why not hire a professional? Many of you out there know why I did this myself – and I am paying the consequences as I will describe in a minute. I always take care of my own stuff and do the work needed. That’s just how I’m wired. And, since I’ll be 60 next year, I am not wanting to admit that I’m getting old and unable to do the ‘macho’ jobs.

So up the tree I go. No problem cleaning up the old broken scaffolds and dropping the trash on the ground. My miscalculation was the energy that would be released when I topped off 30 or so feet of that overly tall central leader and not being sufficiently strapped in--I could not hang on tight enough and was thrown from my 30 to 35 foot perch. Of course I don’t remember this part, so I will let my wife’s narrative take over. She heard the big snap of the tall branch once the chain saw had cut deep enough to do the job. She found me prone, lying mostly on my left side about 6 feet from the base of the tree, face buried and bleeding in the grass – but at least breathing.

For 3 days I was heavily sedated and then rejoined the world. Miraculously, the only broken bones were in my face and jaw, but most of my left side was one giant bruise. So my jaws were wired together and I am on a liquid diet. The wires come out next week and I can resume normal food. When I could focus enough we realized I had lost the sight in my left eye. The eye is not damaged so it appears that the optic nerve sustained some kind of trauma which means that I may still regain sight in the eye.

So why do you need to know any of this? Mostly, because I count you first as friends and then business associates. And as friends and associates I wanted you to know why I’ve kind of disappeared. I have received emails, beautiful cards and flowers from many of you. I am astounded at your show of concern. At this point I relish your prayers sent this way most of all.

Of course there are multiple field trials out there with many cooperators from farmers, vendors, industry/commodity groups, field techs, and UCD students and faculty that need attention. And I want to thank all of you for picking up my slack and want to update you on my physical condition and possible timeline of recovery. Finally, I have a broader responsibility to Kern County and the University of CA to address soil/water concerns that come up. So what does the future look like?

PROGNOSIS: It has been 3 weeks since the fall and I still have very little energy. I have lost a lot of weight. A 2 hour trip to the office this last Monday 7/8/13 to do some necessary business wiped me out for almost 2 days. Doing just a few emails is a huge effort in terms of energy and thinking, therefore I only answer a few urgent ones. I spend most of my time lying still to just “heal”. Best guess at this time is that I will be working limited hours on a regular basis in another 2 to 3 weeks but no guarantees. Several agencies have already been told they will have to wait on reports and other “due” items. If you want my honest opinion, I would say that I will NOT have enough energy in August and September to bring in all my harvests and will have to depend more on my field staff and cooperators than in the past. But we’ll just wait and see.

So what is this “*fall into grace*” nonsense about? Sounds really like I’m just a stubborn old guy that made his life worse by a stupid decision! Various religious traditions and scriptures talk about a fall “*from*” grace but not “*into*” it. First we need a definition of grace (taken from Webster’s Dictionary, 1913):

Grace (noun) [F. *grâce*, L. *gratia*, from *gratus* beloved, dear, agreeable; perh. akin to Gr. to rejoice, favor, grace, Skr. *hary* to desire, and E. *yearn*. Cf. **Grateful**, **Gratis**.]

1. The exercise of love, kindness, mercy, favor; disposition to benefit or serve another; favor bestowed or privilege conferred. To bow and sue for grace with suppliant knee. Milton.
2. (Theol.) The divine favor toward man; the mercy of God, as distinguished from His justice; also, any benefits His mercy imparts; divine love or pardon; a state of acceptance with God; enjoyment of the divine favor.
 1. And if by **grace**, then is it no more of works. *Rom. xi. 6*.
 2. My **grace** is sufficient for thee. *2 Cor. xii. 9*.
 3. By whom also we have access by faith into this **grace** wherein we stand. *Rom. v.2*
3. Fortune; luck; -- used commonly with *hard* or *sorry* when it means misfortune. [Obs.]
Chaucer.

Obviously, the first mark of Grace in all this is that it is a gift I am still alive. I was consumed with work before this happened and was losing perspective on what gives life its value--the people in it, family and friends woven into a marvelous carpet of love and life spreading out before us. We were designed to roll around in this carpet with our hands digging into it and the people and bugs that inhabit it. “Take time for those you love.” I have gotten to do that in a more visceral way than I had ever planned over the last 3 weeks and have been reminded by physical frailty that I am completely dependent on the love and care of those around me. All of our kids found the time and resources to come spend time helping to care for me--even the daughter that lives in New York City. And my sister came up from San Diego for 3 days. But most of all I have been given love and care by my wife that is beyond words and measure. All marks of the great GRACE that has poured into my life. The great challenge will be weaving this new understanding of GRACE into work schedules when I have completely recovered.

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