

## **A Tribute to Art Herrick**

Several weeks ago the Reverend Paul Ashby, our minister at the Kent United Church of Christ, asked us to think about some of the people we know in their 80s and 90s who have made an impact on our lives. I only had to look around our congregation to find several folks fitting that description who have impacted my life in a very positive way. In this column, I want to tell you about one of them.

Dr. Art Herrick, 94, has taught me a lot about trees, but more about growing older gracefully. I met Art a few years ago at church and started talking to him about gardening and trees. I learned from others that he is a nationally known tree expert and an Emeritus Professor of Biology at Kent State University. He mentioned to me that he still pruned trees and wanted to do so for exercise, and to earn money for his special charitable projects. I arranged a time for him to prune some of my trees. The trees were at the bottom of a steep hill about one hundred yards behind our house, so when he arrived on the exact minute he had promised to commence work, I had my ATV ready to take him and his equipment to the site. He eschewed the ride and said he preferred to walk.

After a half-hour of work, his chain saw need gasoline and he started up the hill to retrieve the gas can we had forgotten to take with us. I said, "I'll go up and get it on my ATV." Art just looked at me and said, "You just don't get it...I do this to keep fit. If you don't keep working, you get old." I consider myself physically fit, but getting chewed out by an 89 year old man for taking the easy way out helped put this fitness

thing into perspective. After we had generated a huge pile of limbs, Art offered to haul them to his “truck” (an old car with a homemade roof rack) and take them to the compost pile in his back yard. I refused, explaining that I would be using them for our annual hot dog and smores night, which our grandchildren look forward to as a special December occasion.

When we again walked to the top of the hill, I offered him a check for his two hours of work. He made me rewrite the modest check for a smaller amount. I said, “But you’re going to give it away!” Art said, “I know, but if I charge too much, people won’t hire an old man to prune their trees! The smaller amount will be just fine.” I winced, knowing that most 13 year-olds expected a higher rate for mowing yards.

Art invited me to visit his back yard and said he wanted to give me some small trees (as this Art Appleseed has done for so many others). His back yard is a trip! At first glimpse, you see an area that looks to have been reclaimed by nature...trees, shrubs, flowers...all seeming to have a mind of their own. But, walking through this maze, you soon learn that Art knows every plant and tree by common name, botanical name and year he planted them...from memory.

At one time he had every tree that grows in Ohio growing there, for his students to identify. He calls this area “my paradise” and each plant “a treasure.” I teased him about the huge pile of pruned limbs and he said it was “just a compost pile that just takes a little longer to break down than most compost piles.”

Several weeks ago, Art came back for another scheduled pruning session. He promised his wife, Margaret, that he would not go higher than “stepladder height”, since a nasty fall a few years ago, but is still full of knowledge and constantly imparting his favorite adage, “save the knife, spoil the tree.” His limp is more noticeable, and the walking stick he used as a cane was about worn out.

I went into the house and got an Eddie Bauer, adjustable, aluminum, walnut-handled walking stick and offered it as a gift to replace his soon to be non-functional stick. He declined, and as I was cutting a limb he had directed me to cut, whittled a walking stick out of a limb from a locust tree, while giving me a lecture about how farmers use to plant locust trees close together so they would grow strait, and then use these tree trunks for fence posts. I learn something new every time I’m around him!

When the job was finished, Art handed me a letter he had typed for me. In the letter, he explained the he was starting to get old, that he had given his house to Kent State, and that they planned to move to the Laurel Lakes retirement community next February. He said that the next occupant of his home might not value his “paradise” and that he wanted to give me some of his “treasures”, if I would come over “After the first big frost.” The offer made me teary-eyed, but I had to laugh at the last paragraph, where he explained that he would be keeping his “truck” and tools, and wanted work for next summer. As he drove out of my driveway, he handed me his new walking stick as a gift. Inexpensive

labor, tree knowledge, life lessons, free trees and hand made gifts too. What a guy!

I realized once again why Ruth and I love this area so much. We have been to all fifty states, but wouldn't trade Ohio for any of them. It isn't the distinctly different four seasons, it isn't the beautifully rolling farmland...it is people like Art Herrick. The Portage County area has only one Professor Herrick, but hundreds of folks with his hard working, altruistic, love of life attitude. And, we can learn important lessons from each of them.

Art has taught me so much more than how to prune a tree. He has refocused my attitudes about the importance of work and treating retirement as an adventure, not a sentence. Those of us in Portage County are blessed to be surrounded by great learning institutions, but we are more fortunate to have so many wonderful teachers (Moms, Dads, Family, Friends) around to teach us each day, if we will only let ourselves be their students.

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