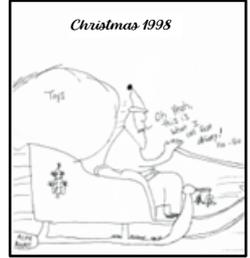


AN ACORN'S LIFE

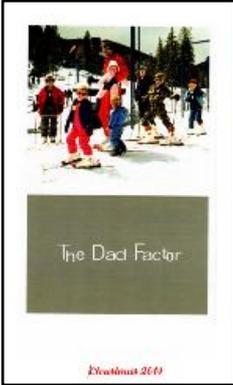
DENNIS FAMILY CHRISTMAS 2022

An Acorn's Life

Sometime around October of 1985, I came up with the “idea” to write a short Christmas note to family and friends. Our early family Christmas cards were the size of a folded page of typing paper. The card consisted of a cover proudly presenting a work of art hand-drawn by one of our young children, a short story I wrote on the next half page and a 4x6 photo of our growing family taped on the back page of the card. The purpose was simply to remind us that as Christmas approached, we should slow down and focus on important things like family, friends and faith.



The first few stories were only about a half page in length and intentionally avoided the familiar family Christmas letter that related life incidents like little Johnny had broken his arm, sister Susie had done a piano recital and mom and dad had taken the family to Six Flags on vacation. If you write such highly informative and personal letters, please don't take offense if I don't read them. To be fair, my wife loves family newsletters and devours the contents of each one we get AND if it were up to her, our cards would mirror those who-dun-it family newsletters.



As time passed, our cards began changing and growing along with our family size. While the early cards used excerpts from stories I borrowed from authors like Chuck Swindoll or James Dobson (giving the authors full credit, of course), I began tailoring my new stories to reflect and highlight changes and challenges we (and apparently many of our friends) were facing with a growing family in a changing world. The mailing list changed along with the cards, moving from close family friends to church friends and expanding to my banker client friends across the country. As life got more complicated, the stories became longer, going from one folded page to as many as four folded pages.

Gone were stories copied from others, replaced with our own larger than life adventures and lessons learned. Some stories I cried as I wrote, reminiscing about my dad's simple life and his passing in 1987. Sometimes I laughed so hard I almost cried writing about our trials and tribulations on a vacation to Europe when Ashley turned 16. To cut to the chase, yes, it's true that we lost Rachel (who was 4 at the time) at the border between Italy and Austria but there is absolutely no truth to the rumor that Chevy Chase's European Vacation was based on our vacation in Europe. Don't worry, we found Rachel.

Now, as the temperatures begin to fall along with the leaves, we are approaching the 37th year of my idea. The times have certainly changed even as COVID fades into the background, the world and our economy struggle with inflation that refuses to be tamed alongside partisan politics which have evolved into nothing less than blood feuds. With such a depressing backdrop, perhaps now, more than ever, the purpose of this letter remains the same as Christmas nears. We should take a deep breath, let go of our anxieties and slow down to focus on our family, friends and faith.



Over the years I have written about hurricanes, tornadoes, elections, vacations, a chance meeting of my future wife in a chicken plant and even losing (and finding) multiple kids. Last year, I wrote about an American icon, Route 66. I summarized the story by comparing us to the travelers on the highway. Between the beginning and ending of our trip through life, intentionally or unintentionally, we are writing constantly changing stories with our lives. This year, I want to consider another dimension of our road trip through life and focus on the gap between the beginning and ending of the trip.

As I worked on the leaves in my yard recently, I noticed that I seemed to be raking an equal mixture of leaves and acorns. There were just so many acorns! And then it came to me, in the words of the famous baseball player, Yogi Berra, “it’s *déjà vu* all over again.” I had seen this before - back in 2002, exactly 20 years ago. As fate would have it, I remember the time well, and I even wrote the 2002 Christmas Card about acorns, oaks and kids and titled it *When Acorns Fall*.



In fact, every five to ten years oak trees will shed a larger than normal crop of acorns, in what botanist’s call a “masting.” No one seems to know why overzealous oak trees drop so many acorns except my grandmother. She used to say that it was a sign of a cold winter ahead. Others say that trees will periodically overfeed the mice, squirrel and deer population so that the oak will have a better chance of producing new trees, and then still others blame it on El Niño–Southern Oscillation, a common weather suspect. Who really knows?

For those of you unfamiliar with the fruit of my favorite hardwood, I’ll make it simple. Acorns only come from mature oak trees (around 20 to 25 years old). Fortunately, we have a lot of oak trees in America, over 90 species. These 90 species are more simply divided into two groups, white oaks and red oaks. Stay with me now. We can learn a lot from these two branches (pun intended) of the oak family. Crafty deer hunters understand the importance of white oak versus red oak very well. For example, deer have a strong preference for white oak acorns because they are sweeter with less tannin than red acorns which are full of tannin which leaves a bitter aftertaste.

Acorns are like us. They only have one seed hidden in its shell with one mission. We only get one life to find and live out our mission. For an acorn to fulfill its mission of creating a new tree, the seed actually has to survive deer, squirrel and other wildlife dinner tables just to have the right to die and complete its destiny. We have to run our own obstacle courses and survive long enough to fulfill our destiny, assuming we have figured out what that is.



This brings us to another difference between red and white oak acorns. White oak acorns, in addition to appealing to a deer’s sweet tooth, are softer shelled than red oaks, more easily cracked by animals and typically die more quickly, assuming it survives the critters. Red oak acorns are harder shelled and take an entire winter, lying dormant in the cold, to die. Plus, a larger number of red acorns usually survive because they are literally a bitter pill to swallow.

While the acorn’s mission and career path are simple, we spend years living, experimenting and figuring out who we are so we can identify our mission in life. Comparing us to acorns, I realize that while some of us are sweet, sensitive and willing



to die to self like the white oak, others don't pass this test. In fact, sometimes, it seems like many of us tend to be more like the red oak - thick skinned, not too sensitive to people (especially spouses or kids), and maybe even bitter pills to swallow for our friends and family.



Since many of us are already identifying with either the red or white acorns, let's talk about the real crucible where these oak-ish characteristics meet face to face and generation to generation - families. As I reflected back to my family and the days that had passed since my 2002 card, I had several thoughts about growing up. First, I was struck by how quickly the 20 years passed. My college Latin teacher, Professor Pietro Bruno Bragadin, was always teaching us great truths in Latin like *nihil novum sub sole* (nothing new under the sun) or more appropriately, *tempus fugit* (time flies). Even though Dr. Bragadin threatened me with an “*effa for the day*” (in broken

English) when I didn't do my homework, his *time flies* Latin quote turned out to be right on target.

20 years ago, I was a young 49 and had been married 27 years. Of course, during that time, Donna and I had produced a houseful of children ranging from Rachel (13 in the seventh grade) to Ashley (25 and married). Our five boys were spread out in between: Jeremiah (15 in the ninth grade), Michael (17 and a senior in high school), Zach (19 and having way too much fun as a Razorback freshman), Josh (21 and a third-year kicker for the Razorbacks), and Chad (23 and in graduate school). Donna was riding high as the head of the CAC Athletic Booster Club with three kids still in school and no concern about an empty nest. Life was good, change seemed to come slowly, and we were living the proverbial dream as a family of nine, with all of the acorns located in Arkansas, amazingly close to the tree and generally free from the hard knocks of life or predator wounds.

Fast forward 20 years. The acorns were starting to reproduce. Five kids had gotten married, with my youngest, Jeremiah and Rachel still single. The married couples expanded our family with 26 grand children aged 2 to 16. More acorns were hitting the ground every year. Our immediate family now totals 40, but the acorns have been carried and spread out all over the world. Rachel is a missionary in France, Jeremiah is a pastor in Gilbert, Arizona, Ashley and her family are in Chicago and Michael and his wife took five of my grandkids and ran off to be missionaries in Cali, Colombia. For you SEC fans, that's not Columbia, SC, the home of the University of South Carolina football team. It was the South American home of the Cali drug cartel. It's hard to believe it all started with Ashley and Kyle deciding to get married.

Speaking of marriages, one of my favorite movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. In one particularly well-known scene, Tevye, the father, has a conversation with his wife, Golde, about their daughter getting married.

Is this the little girl I carried?
Is this the little boy at play?
I don't remember growing older, when did they?
When did she get to be a beauty?



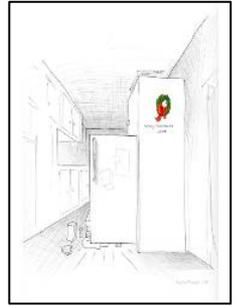
*When did he grow to be so tall?
Wasn't it yesterday when they were small?*

Although it's been 45 years since my first child's delivery, I still remember racing to the hospital on Tuesday night with Donna in serious labor pains, sure that we were going to have an imminent in-transit delivery. We didn't, but when we got to the hospital before midnight, Donna insisted on sitting on the sidewalk outside the entrance until 12:01, pant/blowing with friends, because she didn't want us to pay for another day in the hospital. Ashley, our first acorn, arrived without a problem (for me, anyway) at around 6:09 am on Wednesday morning.

I remember the anxiety I had when I brought them home to our apartment on the same Wednesday and thought "how will I provide for a wife and a child?" I had just finished my MBA and was working at a minimum wage job at Wal-Mart with no future job prospects.

There have been many sunrises and sunsets since then and more than a few crops of acorns have fallen and taken root. Like Tevye's child, my little girl grew up, married and become a wonderful mother with six children. Where was that little girl I carried home 45 years go?

I think of my middle child, Zach. He was a double chinned cherub who at the age of three or four was caught in the middle of the night stealing sandwiches from his brothers' and sisters' lunches. The culprit was caught red-handed, and the mystery of the missing PB&J sandwiches was solved. Now he is 6'6" with a great business and family, and I can't wait to see who the potential sandwich thief is in his family. Never fear, though, I do have a suspect in mind. When did he grow so tall over the past 39 years of sunrises and sunsets?



I'm pretty sure that if I sat down, I could remember similar stories of all our kids. But, there are definitely gaps. In hindsight (no glasses needed there), I failed to appreciate how quickly the years would come and go, missing so many individual moments. It took me time to understand Professor Bragadin's wisdom about how quickly time flies and the things we miss along the way.

At 69, I have raked a lot of leaves and acorns. I know that special opportunities will slip past you if you don't consciously focus on what's important. In fact, the most important times won't demand your attention and you can easily miss them when you're raking leaves or surfing the Internet. I can assure you that you'll never find someone facing death who wishes they had worked more hours or accumulated more money or property or climbed higher on the ladder at work. My professor offered more Latin wisdom on this, *tempus fugit et irreparabile*. Time flies and the good things we miss are irreplaceable, or perhaps conversely, some of our critical words or mean actions are nearly irreparable.

One day last month as I was commuting to work listening to the radio, they played a song by Matthew West titled "*The Beautiful Things We Miss.*" As I listened to the music, the words caught my attention. As much as I want to be a good husband, father and grandfather, the song reminded me of how careful we need to be not to miss things that



are right in front of us, especially with your kids, no matter how old or young they are. Since all my kids are grown, I paid particular attention to the first verse about our wives.

*She puts on her makeup
And the last dress she remembers that turned his head
That time he said, "You look beautiful"*

When I first heard the verse I thought, I was clueless, which is not good. Then I remembered a story I had heard years ago about a wife whose husband was taking her for granted. Pointing across the street, she lectured him and said "When our neighbor's husband gets home, he brings his wife flowers, hugs her and gives her a great big kiss. The husband, looking surprised, stuttered and said, "honey, I couldn't do that to our neighbor, I hardly know the woman?"

One of the things I love most about my wife is that during our years of marriage, she has never had to wear makeup to look beautiful. Furthermore, unlike a lot of our peer's wives, she never cut her hair in one of those cute executive women's haircuts. She didn't have to as I happen to prefer long hair. But I could take her for granted.



*At six, the front door opens
And he doesn't even notice
Kisses her cheek
"Baby, when do we eat?
I'm starving"*

When I walked in from work, I think I kissed her on the cheek (assuming she wasn't busy cleaning or cooking on wrangling kids or grandkids). If there was time, I'd ask how her day went and comment how good supper smelled cooking. Things can get busy in the kitchen, though, and she may have remembered that time differently.

As I listened to the song, my greatest concern is that even now I get accustomed to the routine and stop appreciating her as a gift from God. Maybe I'm also afraid she will fall into the same trap and forget how much I love her even if I don't always pack the dishwasher up to her specifications or even set the cat's food bowls on the mats the way she did. These things are bound to happen when a white oak kind of guy marries a red oak kind of gal (without the bitter aftertaste, of course).

Setting aside the challenges to being a good husband, I still face father and grandfather struggles which I was reminded of in the song. No matter how careful I try to be, I still miss things especially with adult kids and teenage grandkids. The busier or more distracted we are, the easier it is to blow it because we are too busy to see them when they are stressed or lonely.

*She hides out in her headphones
Texting on her cell phone
Daddy's girl built a world behind her bedroom door
While he was working hard and providing
Bigger houses still get divided
Just yesterday she was on his shoulders, but today she's older
Why do we get older?*



I remember a sign in a dental office: “If you ignore your teeth, they will go away.” Kids are a lot like that. When they’re young, they really want and need your attention. As they get older, life changes and they get lost in headphones and texts to friends who always seem to have time for them.

Our current teenage generation has the loneliest and most depressed kids in memory. You may think a bigger house is important, but to your kids, your time with them is more important. Don’t leave them alone in their room to text or social network with their equally lonely and depressed friends. If your kids are older with jobs or businesses, we have to be available to talk with them when they need us. We don’t have to have a perfect record to be able to help them get through work or family issues.

*I don't want to look back someday and find
Everything that really mattered
Was right in front of me this whole time.*

*Open up my eyes, Lord.
Keep me in the moment just like this
Before the beautiful things we love
Become the beautiful things we miss.*



We don’t have to work overtime to save for extravagant vacations to go away to see beautiful things or experience special moments. Many, if not most of the things that matter, are before us every night and every day. Let me warn you though, the best and most meaningful times with your family are usually the most inconvenient, like when your child should be in bed asleep. For some reason, that’s when they are most likely to open up to you. Almost every time it happens to me, I have been dead tired so be prepared. When “someone” wants to talk, spouse or children, wake up, talk and don’t miss those critical moments.

It’s no coincidence that some of these amazing times also come at equally troubling times during the daylight hours of your life. I have found on days when I’m busiest at work, a call from a child or wife demands my attention. When that happens, I take a deep breath, calm my anxiety and relax lest I miss something important or make them think I don’t have time for them. Be patient, great things take time so a willingness to say yes and to die to self is critical.

Over 2000 years ago, the infinite God who created the world, its oak trees, people and time, looked down on His broken creation and felt compassion. Even though in Heaven, He was completely unrestrained by time, He fully understood its limitations and chose to enter the world and submit to the restrictions of time and a physical body for about 33 years. He knew better than anyone how short of a time period that really was and how broken His people were, but for Him to accomplish His purpose, it was just the right amount of time. You may complain about being too busy with no time to slow down for Christmas, but like God, you already have just the right amount.

Arriving quietly during a census sometime between 5 and 1 BC in a village named Bethlehem, God took the form of a baby child, and as directed by the angel Gabriel, His parents named Him Jesus. His arrival was announced to local shepherds by a host of angels befitting the God of the universe.



From his humble beginnings, Jesus never missed a moment to see, help and heal the hurting, the sick or the dying. He was never too busy and never turned anyone away who sought help, and He never failed to point to His heavenly Father by living a sinless life.

Somewhere around 29 to 33 AD, Jesus was wrongly arrested, tried and crucified by the religious leaders of His day and the Roman government. Like the humble red oak acorns, He knew that His mission on Earth was drawing to a close and that His death was the only sacrifice possible to fix the broken people of the world. As an acorn is buried to fulfill its purpose, Jesus was buried for three days to fulfill His purpose, yet He arose from the grave defying death and giving us an opportunity to fulfill His mission through us.



This Christmas may the Lord give you ears to hear the truth and eyes to see your life honestly and objectively. No matter where you are, how old you are, or who you are with in life, our hope for all who read this card is that you will be given an understanding of how short our time on earth is. In Psalm 90:12, Moses asked God *to teach us to number our days so that we will realize how few they are and live wisely.* May all your remaining days be wisely spent.

Merry Christmas from all of the Dennis and Floyd Families to all of you!

