

# Growing up: My summer treeplanting

I cringe when I think about my first week of tree planting. It was five months ago and I remember longing to switch places with the dog owned by my foreman. Walt always looked like he was having so much fun — running through swamps, standing on stumps, chasing rocks, eating small animals.

What a life! And there I was, struggling to learn a job that was not only unlike anything I had ever before attempted, but was also tedious and completely unforgiving.

Tree planting consists of seemingly elementary tasks: walking around, slamming the earth with a metal blade every couple of meters, bending over each hole and placing a small tree in the ground, and kicking the hole shut. However, when

performed eight hours a day, mental and physical exhaustion readily set in.

I left home in April looking for an escape from city life and the ever-increasing claustrophobia plaguing me in Halifax. What would be better for my well-being than fresh air, spectacular scenery, clarity of mind, and new people — which were all awaiting me in beautiful British Columbia? My summer tree planting experience was all that I had hoped for and more.

Fresh air and scenery were abundant. There were moments when the mountains in the distance were so breathtaking that I had to sit on the nearest log and soak it all in! On several occasions, I found myself completely alone in the most incredible spot overlooking a

mountain range. The sky above was clear and bright and nothing disturbed me apart from the soft sound of the warm wind blowing past my ears and the birds conversing overhead. As arduous and annoying as tree planting often was, these were the times that made a bad day bearable.

Clarity of mind was a bit harder to find. I assumed that the magnificence of my surroundings would allow me to open my mind and contemplate the great mysteries of the universe. Ha! My thoughts consisted almost entirely of counting down the time left in the day. "Three more hours, only three more hours!"

Often, we had to finish a certain number of trees and were forced to work twelve hours. At the end of one of those days I recall stumbling deliriously from tree to tree in sweltering heat,

and I literally thought that I was going insane. I forced myself to repeat out loud:

"Must. Plant. Tree. (pant pant) Must. Plant Tree."

Singing was another method of decreasing the monotony of the day. The songs floating around my head were most often annoying, though remarkably appropriate, Broadway musicals: "The sun'll come out tomorrow! Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun...". Or top 40 tunes whose lyrics would subconsciously metamorphose into tree planting jargon: "I can see clearly now the slash is gone... I can see all mineral soil in my way..." Besides these thoughts, there were times of deep philosophical reflection, but they were infrequent, and occurred mostly when I was back at the motel or during a break between contracts when I was far, far away from planting.

In the duration of a single day I regularly experienced extreme emotional deviations. My feelings ranged from early morning fatigue and distress, knowing that work was imminent; to great anger, often involving shovel throwing and profanity resulting from my inability to put a single 13 cent tree into rocky terrain; to relief and often elation at the day's end, knowing a hot meal was waiting at home!

My life felt like a massive roller coaster. It was stable only in that, like the ride, I knew each day would come to an end. However, no matter how miserable a day was, when 4:30 rolled around and I was safely in the van, my contempt for the job dissolved almost immediately. Listening to people complain about falling into a swamp or blowing out the sole of their boot was always a comfort! I would not have made it through the summer without the incredible friends I met. It is amazing how close you become with people when you share the same frustrations and fatigue.

Work hard, play hard. It is the only way to live!

Although my first summer away from home was not one of profound self-discovery, I gained something critical from the daily abuse of mind and body: confidence. I do not fear my third-year history seminar with its inevitable oral presentation and fifteen page paper. Nor am I jittery about training for competitive swimming and the first meet of the season. I have tree planted! A simple tree (after tree, after tree) caused pain, anger, confusion, laughter, and change in my life. Today I feel that I can overcome any obstacle I encounter — be it a pile of logs in the open wilds of British Columbia, or the stress of a full course load here at Dalhousie.

KATHARINE DUNN


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