

Fighting Cocks

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We pulled into the dirt driveway; grass was about door handle high in the front yard. Where the grass wasn't high, it was covered with trash, broken glass and toys. In the center of the front yard stood a cage and a dog house adjacent to it. A docile dog was chained to the dog house and in the cage was a fighting cock! Cock fighting is illegal in Arkansas. It was a majestic bird ablaze with the colors of a beautiful sunset. I also noticed under the dog house, new born kittens. Why a mother cat thought the best and safest place to bear her litter was under a dog house is beyond me. My stomach was queasy and my face flushed. I found nothing familiar or comfortable in our first moments. I could not drive away.

It was my second day at my first Ozark Mission Project summer camp, where I had volunteered to be a driver at my teenage son's request. While I had plenty of years behind me in youth ministry, and I was ready to pull out the power tools and begin helping others, the first day had nearly done me in. My good friend Mark and the rest of the camp staff were clad in hayseed type outfits, adorned with incessantly obnoxious smiles, and had that dreaded "happy clappy" religious attitude. They led us through pointless games to place four high school youth with an adult driver to form a "family". Somehow I made it through the night and had awoken ready for the biggest of construction projects. As I got dressed, I made sure that my batteries were charged on my brand new Dewalt cordless drill and skill saw. Then I got my job assignment of the day: yard work. I grumbled under my breath as we loaded up our lawn mower, weed eater and other instruments foreign to me and headed to the job site.

We weren't told much about our neighbor family except the father was disabled and they had kids. As we stepped out of the truck, three precious children, all bare footed, bounded out of the house to see us. I do not know how they avoided cutting the soles of their feet to shreds on the shards of glass. An older, possibly high school aged daughter also greeted us. I think I was in shock by then. I had no understanding of what I was witnessing and no clue as to how to proceed.

My mental plan had prepared me for a greeting with an elderly black fixed income couple born of an era where it was expected to have separate worlds, black and white. This was the south and I was in south Arkansas. All poverty is black in south Arkansas, isn't it? I was well suited and yet again prepared for such a meeting. My arrogance at that time had convinced myself that I didn't have a prejudice bone in my body. This family was white and the parents were younger than I was. He did his best to support his family with small engine repair jobs. He was crippled from his disease to the point that he couldn't walk. I was trying to process what I was seeing and the emotions associated with this event. In the span of about five minutes, every preconceived notion I had of what and why I was at that moment in time had been blown away.

My OMP family just seemed to take it all in stride. Evidently, the Sunday game playing process has a purpose of ascertaining the proper skills and temperament of all the campers so as to put them into families that won't kill each other before the week is gone. I saw this first hand on my first project. Blair, Jack and Justin were very experienced. Justin was gifted with leadership skills suited for such an

occasion. Ashley had the perfect caring personality for the kids. They never blinked and immediately started the sincere task of developing a meaningful and respectful relationship with our new neighbors. They also seemed to sense my ineptitude and came to my rescue. They picked me up and delivered me into the experience of a life time.

We grabbed the trash bags and picked up trash for hours before we tried to mow and trim. The work was disheartening. It didn't seem to make a difference and I knew in one week it would be back to the way it was before we arrived. However, the lunch we shared with the children was special. We shared our devotional with them. As with everything that day, I did not take the lead. I was the most immature of the family at that point. Emotionally and spiritually, I was just a baby in this family.

It was early afternoon and I approached the father to tell him that I couldn't see how we could do anymore. The trash piles and glass were just too much. He thanked me but said he had hoped we could clear the tree off his shed. This was news to me. I had not seen a shed in the back yard. It was covered by a huge oak that had fallen. I told him that I wasn't comfortable with a chainsaw and the children couldn't operate something that dangerous. He said he would do it.

He crawled back into the house, grabbed a chainsaw, and crawled through the broken glass to the fallen oak in the back yard. I mustered my family into an assembly line of sorts next to our kneeling neighbor to prepare for what was next. He cranked the saw and started taking manageable bites out of the huge oak. For an hour, we would carry or roll the pieces to a pile in an open field to be burned later. I'm glad it was a hot day. My tears were covered by my sweat and dirt; concealed from my other family members. I was totally broken and humbled.

We packed, hugged our neighbors, and said our goodbyes; all transformed and so thankful for the day. As we pulled out of the driveway, I once again saw that fighting cock, proud but confined to his cage. And I realized, for the first time, that for most of my adult life, I had been strutting around. My goals were clear in my mind and I was marching straight into the daily battle. I was taking my "A" game to the fight every day. And as the house got smaller and smaller behind us down that country road, I vowed to allow myself to continue to be defeated and freed by God's will in the simplest of moments.