



Look Back, Find a Tree and Focus Forward

November 8, 2021

As I was traveling this weekend down I-35 to Waco, I noticed a farmer who had just mounted a tracker in preparation to bush hog what looked like about 100 acres of flat farmland. As you are driving along I-35 coming through Alvarado and Itasca, you can see pastures for miles. This site brought me back to my childhood days of working with my Uncle Verget Jr. and Mr. Buck on their farm many years ago.

During the late fall, we would have to bush hog the field. Bush hogging or brush hogging was what we called the clearing of the field of overgrown grass, weeds and other undesirable things so that we could grow whatever crop we were planting that year. Bush hogging was a necessary evil of farming the land. Of all the jobs we had to do, bush hogging appealed the least to us because it was mundane and took days to complete. In most cases, we would start on a Monday and complete it sometime Friday or Saturday morning, depending on weather.



I remember watching Uncle Verget Jr. as he would drive his tractor with the big blades behind and think, “Man, I can’t wait till I am able to do that.” He had recently bought a John Deere tractor and would not let anyone close to it. I could wash it and start it up, but he would let me drive it until I was around the age of 13. I remember the first day he trained me and let me drive. It was an exciting feeling. My aunt had a small piece of land behind her house and she wanted it cleared, and so he took me with him and I got a chance to drive it. It was about an acre of land, and I took my time enjoying the job and completed it in no time.

Uncle Verget Jr. then told me the next week he would allow me to bush hog the big pasture. It was about 60 acres and would normally take about three days to complete – a small fact that I was unaware of, but was about to learn.

I was excited about the opportunity to drive the tractor in the big pasture and gave little thought about how long it would take to complete the job. For the first three hours, I had a blast. It was not until I stopped for refueling though that I realized I was nowhere near complete. I refueled, stretched my legs, remounted the tractor and continued to drive, but I found myself trying to figure out how much longer it would take to finish.

In front of me, I only saw acres and acres of field to be cut. One thing that did catch my eye was that there were about three trees spread out through the pasture, and they were big, old trees that obviously were left there when the land was initially cleared for farming.

When I stopped the second time, I asked Uncle Verget Jr. about the trees. I told him it felt like I was not making any progress, and that’s when I asked him, “How long does it take to clear the field?”

He replied, “Country boy, the first thing you have to realize is that you can’t bush hog this whole field in a day. Regardless of what you do, there will still be stuff to cut tomorrow and, if you focus only on getting finished, you won’t appreciate the progress you already made.”

“You have been so busy looking forward that you haven’t looked back from where you started,” he said.

At that point, I remember looking back and being proud of what I had done up to that point. He then asked me, “Did you see those trees ahead and the one you passed?”

I replied, “Yes, I was going to ask you about those.”

“Well, the one you passed an hour ago was the marker that Grandpa Douglas planted to signify his progress, and he used it to know when it was break time,” Uncle Verget Jr said.

He then pointed out several other trees and told me what each one of them indicated. He explained, “In order to complete this task, you have to look back to see where you have come from, find a tree to understand where you are, then focus forward and the job will be done.”

In essence, my Great Grandpa Douglas who purchased this land understood that he needed to create a way to monitor progress toward completion, stop to reflect and celebrate progress in order to ensure the right energy to complete the job.

As I thought about this experience, I also found myself reflecting on where we are as an organization. We all understand that we have an immense challenge before of ensuring that students are learning at high levels and that the learning is accelerated due to what we all have been through and are going through.

At times, I know you feel like I felt on that tractor. You are working hard and you are tired, and all you can see is how far there is left to go. I get it and I feel it, but I’m reminded that now would be a good time to look back from where you started, look at the metrics that show where we are, and then focus forward on what is in front of you.

I challenge each of you for just a second to press pause and look back from where we have come and what we have come



A MESSAGE FROM DR. MCFARLAND



through. The fact that we are here and that things are as they are is simply a blessing and a testament to our perseverance. We have the largest student enrollment ever, we have learned how to support students' social and emotional needs, and we are continuing to design innovative programs so they can have choices and opportunities after graduation.

Students who entered in August not being able to hold a pencil can now write their names. Others who didn't know their alphabets now know how to read. Students who a short while ago had no clue about their future pursuits are now serving as pharmacy techs at Walgreens, and students who love model planes are now learning about aerospace engineering and drones. Elementary students who have never been to Dallas are learning about Machu Picchu. We are using technology today like we never dreamed we would in the future. Yes, we still have a long way to go, but I encourage you to realize we have already come a long way.

I am convinced that we are engaged in the right work based on our student achievement progress metrics. Students are learning and growing. We are focused on the right things and we are making progress by all indicators. I challenge you to remain focused on your daily efforts, but also take time to reflect on where you started.

We are on our way. We have made a lot of ground in student learning. Yes, there is still more to do, but we are closer to the goal than we were a short time ago.

Look back, find a tree and focus forward,

Mike McFarland, Ed.D.
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