

Survival

**A Reprint Of Doug Leland's Monday Message from June 20, 2005.
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Do you know where to uncover tinder within a wet forest and how to use it to start a fire with one match or no matches? Can you create a compass from your watch face or navigate from the shadow of a post? Did you know that sphagnum moss packed onto a wound expedites healing and prevents infection or that the tannic acid extracted from boiled acorns will cure poison ivy? Do you know the Rule of 4's regarding survival?

Gathering in a small field covered with rudimentary remnants of previous wilderness skill projects, eight of us began an orientation that would answer these questions and many more. We were an eclectic group: young aspiring actor, immigration agent, construction engineer and small business owner, a June college graduate preparing for a 15 month around-the-world adventure, and a couple of middle-aged men from New York City. But for perhaps one, none sported a mountain man survivalist mentality and there was little indication of any motivation to move in that direction. There was, however, an unspoken shared aspiration to connect more closely with Nature in a safe, appreciative and respectful manner. For each there was an unstated and perhaps unconscious desire to redefine modern civilization to include the natural environment that surrounds and sustains us all . . . a desire to reconnect without risk of not returning.

I recently read a story about two experienced canoeists forced to confront death when their canoe overturned in the rough waters of a desolate northeast Canadian lake. But for a combination of skill and luck and the willingness of a brother in another canoe to risk his life all would have quickly succumbed to hypothermia. While still shivering and recovering, one canoeist concluded with a combination of shock, surprise and confusion that Nature doesn't really care if I live or die.

It's not that Nature is out to get anyone; it's just that Nature is what it is. If you want to get along with Nature, get to know Nature. If you want to survive in any environment, get to know that environment. That is why we had gathered. That is why we looked to a Master Maine Guide and recently retired Canadian Commando to reorient us to an environment that once, not long ago, was as natural to daily living as surviving in the suburbs is today.

Turning in early the first evening, we each retired to accommodations suiting our personal preferences. Lying in my tent at the edge of the demonstration field and attempting to fall asleep in still stifling heat and high humidity, raucous activities and fireworks echoed from a nearby lakeside camp, extending my evening and delaying my slumber. I found myself on the fringe of one world while a toe remained in the waters of this world a world I once appreciated more and now desired to understand better.

While completing a compass exercise in the middle of a dirt road late the following morning, our group momentarily parted to let pass an approaching luxury SUV. Based on the direction it was heading, its New Jersey plates, and an interior filled to capacity with occupants who looked to be in late adolescence, it seemed our partiers from the night before were returning from an almost noon hour breakfast. As their vehicle rumbled

into the distance and the dust it kicked-up considered where to settle next, it struck me that they too were preparing for wilderness survival, just a different kind of wilderness.

I have been to their wilderness, and currently make a career guiding others through it. It is a wilderness of contradictions, as permanent and as vulnerable as our forests—one of beauty and bounty, inspiration, mystery, and magnificence. It is also a wilderness with misery, death, destruction, disappointment, and a seemingly endless flow of unexplainable and sometimes unfortunate events. Some survive, yet know not why. Others thrive and do so through a learned or innate understanding that the rules of Nature apply as equally to the wilderness primeval as they do to the one of pavement that continually erodes its borders.

Representative of other partiers on camp lined lakes throughout this region, it is likely this group had the run of Mom and Dad's second home for the weekend. Perhaps this was a last chance to cut loose before summer jobs kicked in, or perhaps they didn't need to work at all and this was the kick-off to a summer season of lakeside parties. Maybe they had just graduated from college and were unwinding before entering their chosen wilderness of corporate careers, committed relationships, and children of their own. Perhaps they do not know where they are headed and weekends away are an ill-fated attempt to delay a journey already begun despite their attempts at denial. Whatever their story, it is probably similar to those of their peers stepping somewhat blindly onto trails blazed into our modern civilization by enthusiastic, if not idealistic, adventurers from preceding generations.

They enter this wilderness with the knowledge and skills acquired through two decades of formal education, observation, and the lessons of experience. They enter with credentials from the best schools grades could penetrate or money could buy. They are armed with a keen understanding of brands, blogs, capitalism, and a rainbow of opportunities crafted from electrons and communicated upon screens. Influenced by the observations of parents, the behavior of public figures, and pressure from peers, they gather themselves for the journey. Unable to separate their swirl of excitement, optimism, naivete, and uncertainty, they brush aside insecurity with bristles of brashness, boldness and arrogance. Each will begin constructing their uniquely engineered ladder. Some will reach the highest rungs, others none at all; many will find their ladder resting against the wrong wall, and the fortunate will learn to adapt and ascend no matter what the apparatus or edifice. The observant will learn that much of the knowledge needed to survive in the wilderness of human nature can be found in the universe of Mother Nature.

I learned last weekend that the Rule of 4's is a wonderful tool for establishing priorities when in a survival situation. Simply and approximately stated, humans can live 4 minutes without air, 4 days without water, 4 weeks without food, and 4 months without companionship. When is the last time you gave serious consideration to any of these? Regardless of your chosen wilderness, each must be satisfied to survive. Take them for granted and you take a risk.

It seems so much of preparation for the wilderness of modern civilization focuses on hammering out suits of armor with multiple layers of ego protection. It is a suit of armor familiar to us all, and perhaps in our first fragile years as independent adults it is a necessary one to have. The weight of added layers along the way, however, seems to

contradict the desire of many to move with swiftness and surety, to contradict the wisdom gained with time and experience to travel simply and lightly.

There is no place for ego in the wilderness. Her requirements are quite clear: either maintain a normal body temperature, breathe and drink water or your life will be measured in minutes or days. It does not make any difference where you went to school, the car you drive, or the status you enjoy. The GPS on your wrist, high-tech sleeping bag in your pack, and the latest gadgets from adventure outfitters mean little absent an understanding of and appreciation for Her laws. You cannot negotiate with Nature or attempt to deceive Her. And, as the canoeist discovered, She doesn't really care whether we live or die, regardless of the wilderness in which we wander.

I stood on the side of the road sweating profusely in a long sleeved shirt, long-legged backpacker pants, and hiking boots while the temperature continued its climb into the mid eighties in lockstep with the humidity. Mosquitoes swarmed about the little exposed skin I made available to them, and the newly stirred dust settled into my nostrils and onto the moist stubble of my two day beard. As the sounds of the SUV disappeared down the dirt road, it seemed clear that these young people were being provided all of the skills necessary to construct a suit of armor and perhaps too few lessons in how to take it off.

I have traveled their road and kicked-up my own dust. Too often I looked for solutions in the accelerator only to find them waiting in the brakes. I have traveled in artificial environments with windows up, air conditioning and music on, and everything else around me being ignored. I have used the horn to fault others when the real issue was me. There have been times when the dangers of dusk and dawn could have been mitigated by merely turning on the headlights to illuminate my path. I have been in too many vehicles with too many unnecessary gadgets, each slowing the journey and stealing energy. Some vehicles have had maps and some did not; some were the right maps and some were not; some I read and others could not be seen through the suit of armor.

One member of our group never fully engaged in the weekend. He arrived in a luxury SUV better suited for a safari than the streets of his north Jersey jungle. Arriving late, staying at a nearby hotel, and skipping the last day, it seems he was unable to resolve an inner conflict—a truth yet revealed. There was an image associated with wilderness survival that lured him to New Hampshire . . . and a suburban suit of armor that kept him from connecting. Survival skills in our civilized wilderness oft times encourage hiding from the truth. Conversely, Mother Nature demands you confront it. In reality, Her rules for survival control both environments. Whether lost in the North Woods or at a loss in your career, truth honesty with self and others is the survival skill that will serve best.

Do you know how to make a whistle from an aluminum can? Sadly, as pointed out by our Maine Guide, you can be lost just about anywhere in the world and still find aluminum cans to fashion a whistle for signaling help.

What tool do you use for signaling assistance? What tools do you use to determine your location or to establish a new course? How do you gain perspective? What are your survival priorities, regardless of the wilderness in which you roam? Do you have a sufficient supply of truth in your survival kit?

On the second night I lay again in my tent, this time anticipating the fireworks and adolescent antics of the lakeside partiers. I too have traveled their road. Perhaps one day they will travel my road and find themselves lying in a sweltering tent at the edge of a forest considering the journey thus far, content with how most of the dust has settled, accepting of it all, and with curiosity and wonder, returning to nature for clues as to which fork to take next in order to kick-up some more.

PS: If you are interested in developing wilderness survival skills, take a look at www.jackmtn.com and give Tim Smith or Jeff Butler a call.

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Mailing Address:
Doug Leland
SOAR Worldwide, Inc.
420 C Avenue
Coronado, CA 92118

Web Site: www.DougLeland.com