

Survival Skills

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"River banks!"

Mounds of kids followed this command, forming two parallel lines facing each other.

The adult was wearing a strange tan shirt and she seemed to be an odd combination of commanding and friendly. I was bashful and confused but I had a friend who knew the routine and just did what he did. I joined a line, near the end of the gymnasium.

"Build a dam." My engineering skills and general knowledge of aquatics were both lacking, but this was simply an instruction to form a circle and begin the meeting. And I spent the rest of my Tuesday evening in games, activities, and storytelling with these kids.

My parents signed me up for Scouts Canada when I was five years old. I became a Beaver, the youngest subdivision in Scouts. I wore a brown vest with a soft blue hat with a brown brim and a brown felt tail in the back. I went to camps and ceremonies. Over the next couple years, I graduated ("swam up") to a blue tail, then a white tail, then a lightning bolt tail.

Around this time of my childhood, my dad would bring me to hardware store or outdoors sporting goods store when he had to get something. I don't recall anything he bought on those trips. I would sneak off to check out the pocketknives kept behind the glass cases. Time passed more slowly in those days. I knew I was years from being allowed to have one, but that didn't make me any less interested.

I can't speak for all young boys, but I know that my friends and I were fascinated by all the taboo subjects: guns, tanks, war, and of course knives. On library days, we'd sign the same books out, books like Airplanes of World War 2 and Medieval Weapons. We knew exactly where they were in the library. They had plenty of photographs and frail sign-out cards from repeated stampings with the same three or four names in long list of impossible-to-decipher permutations. One day at recess, we even compiled a complete list of knives and swords, from best to worst. It looked something like this, but in shaky letters printed in pencil on the back of a Halloween-themed orange word search:

Magic Sword
Knight Sword
Samurai Sword
Machete
Dagger
Switchblade
Swiss Army Knife
Steak Knife
Butter Knife

I believe our ideas were a little more extensive but we agreed to categorize flaming swords and ice swords into a general category, even if the name was less cool. It didn't matter, because the list was taken from one of us in class, and we were promptly sent to the principal's office to explain our "shopping list" in more detail.

I finally got my first knife at the age of eight.

My dad sat me down in the living room one evening. "Son," as he always started when he felt like sharing his wisdom, "I think you're ready for a pocketknife." This was convenient, because there was a weekend camp coming up, all the other kids had one, and I couldn't think of anything I'd rather own. He drilled the rules into me. "Don't ever point the knife at anyone else. Never hand a knife to someone blade-first. Don't walk with an open knife in your hand. Don't embed the blade in poles or logs, it'll snap off. Don't cut yourself. Don't let anyone use it. Don't bring it to school. Don't lose it." There were more, but I was grinning and dizzy and couldn't concentrate.

He handed me the knife. The two-blade Victorinox Swiss Army Knife, moderate in size and function. It gleamed in the lamplight. Like a trophy.

The knife. I fit my bitten fingernail into the side indentation and the blade folds out. It's dull, scuffed with circles from unskilled sharpening sessions. Brown discolourations and soft splinters rest in the joint at the end. The smaller blade looks new, shiny and immaculate. But the yellow light above me makes it seem like I'm looking back a decade, as I sit on my carpeted bedroom floor. The other functions of the multi-tool are hard to force out, aged and stuck from lack of frequent use. One by one, I wrench out the screwdriver, mini scissors, can opener, nail file, and corkscrew. I feel the chips in the side of the red plastic. An empty notch reminds me

of the plastic toothpick that used to slide in. The other side is metal and blemished, missing the plastic cover that was originally glued onto it. This pocketknife is a far from perfect tool, but it served me well. Primitive man became man by creating stone tools. I have my knife.

Growing up nowadays is weird. Our society doesn't have the same rites of reaching manhood that other cultures do. Joseph Campbell saw the rite of passage as universal in all mythology. I was never forced to cover myself in paint and survive alone in the wild until it disappeared. Instead, I hit age milestones, went through middle school and high school, enrolled in University, moved into a house with my best friend, and got an office job. None of these journeys seemed difficult. I don't even think I wanted to get through them as strongly as I wanted my first knife.

Manhood is a peculiar concept. I don't connect with all the ideals of a modern man. I don't know how to fix anything. I don't enjoy watching sports. I don't aspire to find a career path or make a lot of money. I don't have a core group of "the bros" to spend my time with. I like to talk about my feelings. I'm not a leader. I'm not muscular. These are stereotypes and generalizations, but I wonder if I'm an outsider to a brotherhood I qualified for at birth.

I handled and admired my knife a lot, but the main thing I actually used it for was whittling. Whittling is about as fun and as pointless as the word indicates. To whittle, you

scrape the edge of a knife blade along a branch or narrow tree trunk to remove the bark, then even further to shape the staff into something smooth and comfortable. By definition, whittling is the act of carving into wood with a knife. But to us, those of us who were now Cubs instead of Beavers, we were working on our staves, spending quality time with our knives. My knife wasn't big, didn't remain particularly sharp, but it was mine, and that's all that mattered.

We whittled a lot at Camp Barnard, the 251 acres of land owned by Scouts Canada, near Sooke on Vancouver Island. At Camp Barnard, along Young Lake Road when the road begins to turn to gravel and dirt, there is a wide patch of long grass. The field is just at the foot of Mount Bluff, a mountain 505 metres in height that kids dread climbing. Leaders would let everyone rest and gather their energy before the enormous trek.

I can't recall a trip to that field that didn't end with the same tragedy. We'd take our field break, bust out the trail mix, sit on logs, and whittle away at our staves while the leaders yammered on about how to identify a Western Red Cedar tree or how an ecosystem works or something. Some of us would feign interest and some of us would whittle away in pure bliss. A kid would put down his knife to grab a grimy handful of peanuts and raisins.

This time it was Leif Klonstadt. He took a trip to the outhouse, came back, and the group was mounting their great expedition up the mountain. He grabbed his staff with pride and thumped it along the long grass, as though he were scaring snakes and critters away from

his righteous journey. As soon as the group started moving up the path, a panic contorted his face. His eyes got teary.

“I... lost... my... knife,” he forced out, clenching his jaw so nobody would think he was a baby. His faced the ground and closed his eyes into pulled wrinkles, like the folds under finger joints. His dad was going to kill him. Maybe. Or maybe he just really loved that knife. The leaders checked the knee-high grass.

Someone always lost a knife in that field. The next morning, a leader declared “I found it!” at breakfast, only for it to be a completely different knife. But good enough. Now, I think that they were maybe just pulling one out of the bottom of the kitchen's lost and found rather than hunting at the first sign of light. But then, we gave that field magical properties. Sometimes we'd go for walks to the field, claiming to be interested in walking for the sake of walking, but really trying to find a new knife.

I didn't always follow the rules set out by my dad. Outside of adult eyes, some of us would try our sword fighting moves out. Or throw the knife at poles. Or stab at the handful of ants crawling over weathered logs.

I wonder if my fascination with violent symbols was because of some inborn desire to be manly. My friends and I loved violence. We were entertained by it and surrounded by it. Or was I just curious about the forbidden? We watched Power Rangers, a television show that

showed the forces of good clashing against the monstrous, then ended with a public service announcement against fighting. Throughout most of human history, society has depended on young adult males to maintain the social order with violence. It could be in my genetic structure to want to cause harm.

I never attacked anyone with my knife. I was enthralled with the feeling of power that comes with owning a knife. I could cut into a living thing. I could protect myself. I wasn't allowed to, but I could. Perhaps it's the same thrill gun enthusiasts get with owning assault rifles.

The originator of Scouts, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, wrote that boys should be willing to risk their lives in gunfire to deliver important messages. It's omitted from the modern Scout handbooks of most countries, but present in his original version of *Scouting for Boys*. I don't have this willingness to die. I never did.

As I grew older, the appeal of owning a knife began to diminish. Yeah, I had a knife. All the rules and responsibility killed the fun. I became a Scout at age eleven and even ended up instructing the younger ones on how to handle their knives. My lessons were a little different than the leaders' or my dad's lessons, a combination of those boring repeated rules and things I learned on my own.

“This is how you pull the blade out,” I told a circle of kids as we sat around on wet moss and avoided camp chores. “Wash it if you cut food, otherwise little bits get in and it gets sticky. Don’t lose it or cut anyone. But it’s just a knife. Who wants to learn how to make a fire?”

I lost one side of the cover during this period of slight knife apathy. I bought a Leatherman multi-tool and a locking knife to replace my aging Swiss Army Knife. I mostly used the knife part to cut string or slice apples when I was camping, or to slice off the shrink wrap on new CD cases when I was at home.

Baden-Powell wrote a lot that’s no longer published as Scouting material. “Tommy sees all of them happy but him. They are plunging and diving – but Tommy can’t swim.” So Tommy will never get social acceptance. “It would be simply impossible for a man who drinks to be a Scout.” I suppose Scouting and drinking are mutually exclusive rights of manhood. As is another, “...the reading of trashy books or looking at lwed pictures are very apt to lead a thoughtless boy into the temptation of self-abuse.” Baden-Powell has very strict requirements for good character: loyalty, humility, obedience, cheeriness, fortitude, and more. Some of these are important to me and some aren’t. I don’t think Baden-Powell would have liked me.

As we got even older, only a few of us remained in Scouts. Then in Venturers, the section for teenagers, there were only seven of us. We felt separated from the rest of it all.

What had started as a large pack of confused children had become a small group of the dedicated few. We knew much more about everything Scouting – the wilderness, camping in snow caved, knots, and even knives. But now we were also looking after the little Beavers. We were the adults.

One windy day in October, 10th Juan De Fuca planned a bottle drive for all the sections. Us Venturers, had outgrown the cute innocent door-to-door gimmick. We usually just cooked hot dogs for all the kids at our Colwood City Hall parking lot bottle-sorting headquarters. But this time, we let the Scouts do it, aged between 11 and 14. My CD player pumped lively punk rock through my headphones and I zoned out. My best friend Troy say by me and we watched the kids prepare to cook those hot dogs.

A gust of wind swept up the large umbrella, and attached to it, plastic cooking table. The portable camp stove fell to the ground, still lit. The percolating coffee hit the gravel and stained the tablecloth. The chopped onions were now covered in grit and ruined. We should have cared. We should have helped. Instead, Troy and I just sat there and laughed. These kids needed to learn for themselves. Or maybe we just weren't suited to supervise.

I suppose I grew up in mind and body, but I also grew away from the values and interests I harboured during my time as a Beaver, Cub, Scout, and Venturer. I'd like to say that I grew up and out of Scouts. As if it's some test in life to be completed. But that's not true. I

grew away from Scouts. I cared a lot less than I used to. And, funny enough, I was and still am as confused as ever.

My parents went on a vacation to the east coast of Canada in the recent summer and brought me back a souvenir.

A “Prince Edward Island” engraved pocketknife.

Has my dad confirmed my identity as a man? Do I even need that identity? Is it just a corner store souvenir that reminded him of my old fascination? I fold my old knife and put it away, back in the wooden box under the childhood bed I grew up in. And I put this one with it. They are just knives. Relics of my young life, from when they used to mean something more to me. Like my video games, like my stuffed animals, and even like my prom suit. It’s all just stuff now. I miss feeling like the knife had more than just a tiny spark of significance. I used to feel like it was a symbol of hope in understanding life and the people around me, what my role is in society, and what I’m actually interested in. Now, it’s all been numbed. I guess this is growing up.