

Saturday August 18, 2007

Ryan S.
2007 ADVL Survival Simulation (9 Days)
Laurentian University, Sudbury ON

This past week has been the most revealing, revolutionary week of my life. My perceptions of the wilderness, my classmates and myself have changed significantly. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Jennifer Khan for her perception and insight, and I marvel at her ability to look past the facades we create for ourselves, deep into the core of who we are. This is a leadership skill I will work to refine as I mature as a leader. I am awestruck at Jennifer's ability to see my true self when it had been so well hidden from me, as well as the world. I will never be able to express my gratitude for how this week will change my life, but it should be made known that the wilderness survival program exceeded every expectation I had, and totally blew me away with everything I didn't and couldn't have possibly expected. I now feel more like myself than I ever have.

The opportunity to watch each of the members of the ADVL in a leadership role gave me 13 different leadership styles to study, and countless qualities to emulate. I can take something away from each leader to widen my base and grow as a leader. Lauren had a youthful innocence and enthusiasm that was utterly contagious; Kielyn's natural leadership qualities and ability to shoulder the responsibility of leadership with ease and poise was noteworthy; Andrew's quiet, soulful leadership and its calming force is an incredible useful trait to possess. Mike's ability to captivate an audience and always view things from a perspective other than the norm is a valuable asset to the leader; the organization and persistence Denise showed when leading was really able to motivate the group to a common goal when energy was low; and Jeff's ability to incorporate fun into the most mundane activity is an invaluable skill to possess. Ali demonstrated the effectiveness of investing a personal interest in each of the group members; Jesse was able to tackle an entirely new experience when equipped with a working knowledge of each of the group members' individual strengths and skills, quite a feat for a self-described 'loner'. The preparation and micro-managing Normand established during his time as leader is a template for any leader; the zeal with which Hillary seized her leadership was as unexpected as it was refreshing. Spencer's unflappable composition starkly showed the amount of energy that can be saved when not wasted on stress; and Tasha's

uncanny group awareness led to the group working smoothly and informed on how each part was working together as a whole.

Lesson's I learned this week extend beyond fire starting, weaving cordage and shelter construction, not to detract from those invaluable lessons. I learned that showing yourself to another individual can lead to you learning more about yourself, as ironic as that may seem. I learned that group members are an invaluable resource, and to never underestimate one's interest in another. I appreciate Jennifer's decision to focus more on the leadership aspect of wilderness survival, as it has had an immediate drastic impact on

my confidence level as a leader, and she has also whetted my appetite for wilderness survival and search and rescue, so you will probably see me later on for further education on those subjects. I felt there was a drastic change between my initial leadership and the short time I led the group on the last day. The most significant changes were attention to timelines and using the group efficiently, my confidence level while leading the group, the extent to which I delegated and the ability to make decisions concisely. I felt the second time around I really opened up to the group, and I could feel them respond to that genuinely.

Jennifer also reminded me that our vocabulary and the manner in which we speak are often the way we present ourselves to the world, and the quantity of words we use simply as filler when we speak. During debriefs I tried to take that extra effort to look deeper into the situation, and express myself with eloquence, rather than simply reiterate general observations made by the group. I noticed during the debrief of my initial leadership role, I was given the same constructive criticism by nearly every member of the group, which really conveyed the importance of keeping everyone's attention, but I know there was an infinite number of constructive criticisms that could have been pointed out for me to improve on. I even broke the rules during one debrief to speak directly to a past leader in an attempt to raise her confidence levels the same way many other had done for me, knowing that the statement would have a much larger impact on the individual when said in front of the entire group, and affirmed by the nodding heads of the group. I wanted that individual to know how I felt was more important than just a passing comment between the two of us, and that the rest of the group also had confidence in her.

One of the most rewarding experiences of the trip was rising early each morning, which for one who slept through nearly all of his classes

last year and was hospitalized with mono this summer was quite a feat. My motivations for jumping out of a warm blanket to welcome the cold morning were threefold: my first objective was to refine the fire starting techniques we learned, then secondly I enjoyed the ritual of starting off the day with the success of using jasper and steel to light a fire, and seeing each member of the group begin to congregate around the fire I had started. I was also eager to observe the morning calm; watch the mist across the water, listen to the sounds around me, and try to spot as much wildlife as possible before the calamity of breakfast scared it away. This time was incredibly soothing, especially during a week that was bursting with activities and crammed full of information to process. I have heard of people practicing yoga at this time, but since I have all the flexibility of a rock, I was satisfied to simply observe, and drink in the wonder around me.

To extend that rewarding experience even further, when I noticed Hillary was having trouble getting her fires started I offered to share this experience, thinking that lighting the group fire in the morning would convey a more meaningful experience than lighting a tinder bundle and then stomping it out. I prepared a tinder bundle and brought my charred cloth out, set everything up, and then went to Hillary's shelter to wake her up. I have to admit I was expecting her to dismiss the idea when it meant getting out of bed,

but to her credit she hopped up and headed to the fire with sleep drenched enthusiasm. I showed her the technique I used to get a spark and encouraged her as she struck steel to jasper. Her enthusiasm when successfully catching a spark on the charred cloth was topped only by my own. It just happened to be rainy that morning so lighting the tinder bundle wasn't as straightforward as other mornings. I tried to coax Hillary to slow down and blow with long steady breaths, as I couldn't tell if she was simply trying to ignite the tinder bundle or hyperventilating from the excitement. My point was further reinforced by Ali who had joined us at that point and then furthermore when a portion of the ignited charred cloth blew right out of the tinder bundle and came to rest on Hillary's eyelash. I was impressed with ability to deal with that potentially dangerous situation and return to the task at hand, finally igniting the tinder bundle and starting the fire. I was ecstatic with Hillary's improvement, although her enthusiasm was understandably diminished by the feeling of her now slightly uneven eyelashes. I don't think she appreciated the calm of the morning, but she definitely appreciated my efforts, and I very moved when she openly credited me with helping her succeed this week. Going into this week I had unfairly taken a stereotypical view of

Hillary, and I am thankful that during this week I was moved to reassess my view of Hillary. I now have a much greater respect for her, and understand what an exceptional, dedicated, focused person she is. I think I took more away from that exchange than anyone in the group knew.

I was always trying to make sure I contributed as much to the group as I could, whether it be gathering firewood, hanging bear barrels or taking a stab at cooking, I grew up in a house where if one was working, then all were working, and I was satisfied that I gave my best when it came to group contributions, even if it was at the expense of individual projects such as the deadfall or my walking stick. I figured going into this scenario I would not be the most experienced camper or leader, but I could contribute some good old hard work to the group.

Another major lesson Jennifer taught me concerning gender was one I myself didn't know I needed to learn. At first I didn't realize that I was in a group of all girls, and I am certainly not gender biased, knowing my group was composed of four amazing individuals. The discomfort arose with our spooning lesson, and the ensuing pictures. Having a fiancée, I was very uncomfortable sleeping in such close quarters with four women. With the help of these women, I learned to trust them, trust myself and trust Amy, my fiancée. As Kielyn put it, you are not on vacation picking up women, you are trying to survive. All of the girls helped my comfort level when in their presence, and I realized that I had always known, Amy would understand when the situation was explained. From that point I was able to relax and enjoy myself as I would have if I had been with a group of guys. I rationalized that in the event of an actual emergency, spooning with someone of the opposite gender and surviving to come home again would be better than succumbing to the elements because I was uncomfortable, and that if the situation was reversed, I would want Amy to do anything she could to survive. So once again I express my gratitude at Jennifer's perception and interest in all of the lessons I still need to learn, whether I am aware of them or not.

If I was faced with a similar situation again in a real situation, my stress level will be nothing near what it was at the beginning of the exercise. I was also very satisfied with my ability to desensitize myself to the area, I began by brainstorming any excuse possible to keep me out of the leech laden lake, but worked up the confidence to swim on the second and third day, before it was raining and cold for the rest of the week. I also followed a snake for an extended period of

time, working on a personal phobia. I began the week by swatting anything that came near me when sitting on the forest floor for debriefs, and progressed to the point where I only showed a mild initial surprise upon pulling a rather large (the largest I have seen) pine beetle out of the crotch of my shorts during one debrief. Watching Jesse let bugs crawl all over him for fun also helped to desensitize me, realizing that he was obviously not experiencing any ill effects except the occasional funny look. I think Jennifer's exercise of crawling through the forest to view it from an animal's perspective was also very effective, but I was distracted by the pain of old knee injuries protesting this type of activity, so I was more focused on just making it there rather than enjoying the experience. On the whole I feel I am leaps and bounds further than I was when I entered the bush.

The search and rescue scenario was one of my favorite parts of the week. Participating in a line search was very interesting and the energy between all of the searchers was palpable with every step I took. It really piqued my interest in search and rescue, and I definitely plan on getting further instruction on the subject. Outdoor Adventure Leadership can be somewhat ambiguous as far as job opportunities are concerned, but this exercise definitely shed some light on a possible area of study. I also enjoyed carrying the exercise through to the carrying of the victim to the construction of a base camp and erection of distress signals. However the most difficult part was being the second person to fall victim to Jennifer, and could only sit and watch the chaos she worked so diligently to create. I felt the group handled the situation exceptionally well, but there were definitely times where I was begging to be healed and have my boot returned so I could return to my duties and help the group. One of the most important parts of that activity was watching members of our group perform first aid; I am totally satisfied now that in the case of an emergency we will have calm, well trained first aiders on hand in Normand and Ali.

Another aspect of the week I really enjoyed was the one on one times with Jennifer. Her thoughts were refreshing and frighteningly insightful, and on one occasion when she was discussing my progress during the week I was nearly moved to tears, which is not a common occurrence for me. To be coming into this week as my first camping trip equipped with only my work ethic and enthusiasm, and to progress to the point where Jennifer felt I was capable of a solo experience, I was caught by surprise and totally speechless. I decided to work in the group rather than solo, feeling my skill set had not quite

caught up to my enthusiasm. In the end I feel I had an exceedingly rewarding experience.

The only downside to these conferences was that I came away feeling I hadn't been able to properly put these intense feelings into words and sometimes ended up babbling while trying to grasp the words to convey such meaningful thoughts.

One of the things that impressed me the most about Jennifer occurred after we returned from the site. My fiancée happened to be there when the bus pulled up to the school, and rather than dismiss her because she wasn't a part of this course, which would be the logical thing to do, Jennifer made the extra effort to include Amy, and speak with her about the experience and how I had fared. I appreciated this greatly, for one because Amy hadn't seen me in a week, which is a rarity for us, but also to give Amy an opportunity to meet Jennifer and see what an amazing individual she is, which saved me from trying to convey that to her in the following weeks when describing my adventures. Beyond that Jennifer even invited Amy to the graduation breakfast, which I am sure she knew meant the world to me, because in my experience, Jennifer knows everything.

The biggest thing I learned this week is that all of the lessons I have learned, and all of the goals I have met, are applicable to everyday life. Polybius once said, "Those who know how to win are more numerous than those who know how to make proper use of their victories." I will not passively reminisce about this week, but to strive and continue growing in confidence and leadership skills. Thank you to Jennifer for reminding me that while a passive, submissive role is much easier path through life, I will only experience true happiness when seizing the opportunity to lead.

Ryan S.
2007 ADVL Survival Simulation
Laurentian University, Sudbury ON
Saturday August 18, 2007