

Hi Samantha  
February 14, 2013

Happy Valentine's day! I hope you have a Valentine (real or imagined) to share it with. At your age, most of my Valentines were imagined – but I wouldn't use my experience as a model for anyone! That's a story for another day (or letter, perhaps).

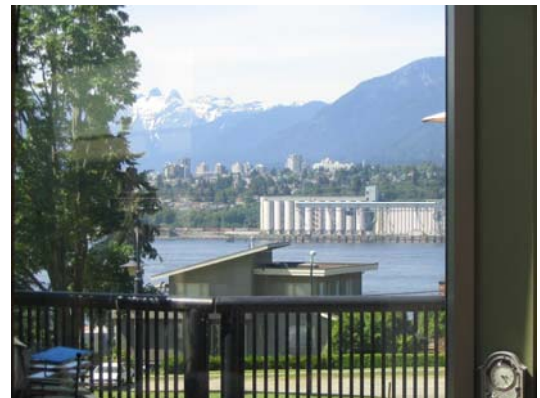
The story today is inspired by the comment in your letter: "When you're snow camping, if something gets wet, it never dries." On my experience, this is true for any camping – especially on the west coast.

One memorable experience for me occurred in the summer of 1964 when I was at a SCM Work Camp in Vancouver. This was a camp where about 15 university students lived together, worked in inner city jobs, and studied the various challenges that these jobs created for the workers and their families. During that summer I worked mostly at the Kraft Foods warehouse in the eastern part of Vancouver – unloading boxcars of cheese and marshmallows, and loading delivery trucks as they came and went from the warehouse. For a week, I also worked in a 7-up bottling plant – stacking empty bottles on the assembly line so they could be washed and refilled.

Both of these jobs were hard labour in demanding conditions – so when one of the other students at the camp suggested we get away from the noise and pressure of our work by taking an overnight camping trip, I was quick to agree.

I was so eager to get away that I dismissed two of the warning signs that any camper should pay attention to: the lateness of the day and the weather report. We still had plenty of time, I thought, since we got off early from work that Friday – and although the weather report was for rain, the sun was shining and there were few signs of clouds in the sky.

We decided that we would head out to climb "The Lions" peaks in the north-shore mountains of Vancouver. You may have noticed them since they are very close to Vancouver. They look like two sea lions poking their heads up to see what the land dwellers and seabirds are up to. I have included a photo of them that I took from the Hospice where Dad died.



The best way to get to The Lions is not straight north from Vancouver (over Grouse mountain, for example), but to hike up a trail on the back side of Hollyburn mountain (the westernmost of the mountains overlooking the city). The trail starts at Lions Bay – slightly past Horseshoe Bay on the road to Whistler. I expect that you could have seen Lions Bay when you took the water taxi to Camp Potlach.

So, after throwing our sleeping bags, tent, and some food into our packs, we headed off to hitchhike our way to Lions Bay. It only took us a couple of rides to reach the start of the trail so we were feeling pretty good about the time. It was about 5:00 PM – not a good time to start off – but it was summer and we felt that we could make it up the first part of the climb, find a nice spot to camp near the trail, then head on to the Lions in the morning.

Neither of us had been on this trail before, but it seemed well marked and maintained – and a perfect antidote to the noise and stress of our warehouse jobs.

It only took me about 30 minutes of climbing to realize that this was no easy walk in the park. The trail headed almost straight up the mountain with few breaks in the angle of ascent – each step was higher than the last. The lighthearted mood of our initial hike soon turned into gloominess as we struggled with packs that seemed heavier with each step, muscles that complained with each stretch, and lungs that demanded more and more air. We were now stopping every ten or so steps to get our wind back – often just leaning against a tree for lack of something to sit on.

After an hour or so of struggling, we started to feel the first raindrops. It was hard to get our bearings in the dense forest cover, but we knew we were still climbing up a long ridge of the mountain with steep drops on both sides and no places to rest. To make matters worse, the clouds bringing in the rain also cut out much of the light, so we were in danger of losing daylight before we got to a suitable camping area.

There was nothing to do but keep moving. The rain remained a drizzle so our major concern now became the problem of light.

Walking through a west coast rain forest is dark at the best of times – but with a cloud cover, late in the evening, and with no immediate end in sight, the prospects become more and more ominous. We were no longer stopping, but our pace had slowed to that of a snail. Our only pause was to get my flashlight out of pack as the dark descended in earnest and the rain picked up a notch.

Finally, we could go no farther. The rain was upon us, the flashlight was no longer reliable for keeping on the path, and we were totally exhausted. We decided that we would search beside the path for the most level place we could find, pitch our tent if we could, and settle in for the night.

I turned off the path toward a patch of brush and grass that looked like it might be big enough for a tent. I moved a bit beyond it, but the terrain was unclear and there didn't seem to be any sign of an improvement. The area was not level by any stretch of the imagination but it might serve as an inclined plane on which we could rest. It would be like sleeping on a ramp – full of brambles.

We were so tired, that we didn't bother with cooking our meal – we just pitched our tent as best we could and climbed into our sleeping bags fully clothed to escape the rain which was now pelting down on us.

I don't remember many details of the night – but I do know I didn't sleep much – in spite of my exhaustion. The steep angle of our beds, the rain on the tent, and mostly, the damp feeling of my sleeping bag as the runoff water pooled up in our hastily-setup camp – all conspired to punish me for my violation of the two basic camping rules: give yourself plenty of time and don't get wet!

I must have dozed off at some time during the night because I remember waking up to the morning light. The rain had stopped and the Jays were up screeching for breakfast. They would be very disappointed with us, however, since breakfast was not on our minds. Neither was our original plan to continue up the mountain to The Lions. As we struggled our way out of the tent we were both only thinking about how quickly we could get down the mountain!

When I crawled out of the tent into the early morning light, I saw for the first time, our good fortune. We had perched the tent on the edge of a cliff! Had I decided to push on a little further in my search for a flat spot, I would have ended up many metres down the mountain, propped up in a tree, or jammed behind a boulder. Much too high a price to pay for our foolishness!

We set about reassembling our packs, but this time it included wringing out our sleeping bags and wiping the water off the tent as best we could. When we were finally ready to trudge down the mountain we realized our packs were twice the weight of the climb up since they included water as well as equipment.

There are three things I remember about the return trip: the pain of walking downhill with legs that were already sore from the uphill climb, the feeling of elation as we stood by the side of the Lions Bay road with our thumbs out, and the other-worldly feeling of the sunshine that peeked out from the clouds as we hitch-hiked our way back to warm baths.

After that experience “Don’t get wet” has become one of my camping mantras. That is why my camping trips always include plenty of plastic bags, an extra change of clothes neatly packed in those bags, and compulsive checkups that the rain fly works, the tent is pitched on well-drained ground, and the sleeping bags are only opened under protected conditions. Of course – this can only occur when you give yourself plenty of time!

Love,  
Bill

PS. Fran suggested I attach this other photo. It was taken on Hollyburn Mountain many years after the events above, but she thought you might enjoy making fun of your crazy grandparents. Hollyburn is the mountain just next to The Lions.

