

PRIORITIES

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

What do you tell someone who is about to go and make a life in the woods?¹

[Laughs] Don't cut your lifeline. You can go out and give it a try, and you'll do a lot of learning, but you'd better have something to come back to.

Can you give me an example?

I could give you several of them. There were a lot of people that tried to make it out there but had to give up. Dennis and Jill would have failed if I hadn't been there to kind of guide them a little bit. The Oses² and I were the only ones who really made it.

What would you say to people who really wanted to do it right?

You know and I know that a person who's had a little experience can live all winter in a tent, but that's not for somebody who's never done anything like that before. I hate to mention names, but X and Y were that way.

There were a couple of young people that the government had sent up there to help the old folks with their paperwork –VISTA² volunteers. Really, it was like they were sent there for the old people to babysit.

When X and Y first came up there, they were visiting with the Vista volunteers and telling them how they should settle down there. X was supposed to go back to go to the army, but decided he wasn't going to. I don't know what all went on there.

Anyway, there was that house pit between Dan and Joyce's⁴, toward the village. Gary and Lorene⁵ were leaving and I asked Gary if he wanted me to sell his tools if I got a chance. He did, so I sold them his axe and bow saw. I also gave them a few things—an old tent and a fish net—but they didn't know enough. They lost a lot of the fish they got because they didn't know how to work with it.

But they did get the house to where they could live in it, and they built a cache. The cache was not set firmly in the ground. It was leaning too much. They tied a rope to it to brace it, and the mice and squirrels were running up the rope.

I went over there one day and X wanted to make tea to offer me, but there was no wood cut for the fire, and it had been raining. They had some wood in the yard and needed to be cut. He went out and started whacking away.

I realized that axe had become more of a hammer than an axe. I asked if he wanted to borrow a file.

“What for?” he said.

“To touch up the blade.”

“Oh. I thought I had to buy a new one.”

Of course, that's the culture he came out of. They were both intelligent people. They were just in a new situation that was too different. So where do you start with somebody

like that when you want to talk about what to do? They probably won't understand you, whatever you say.

I remember a college student who checked the oil by looking periodically at the oil pressure gauge on the dashboard, instead of using the dipstick. Another young fellow started looking for a new car when the engine became hard to start, not realizing that it was simply time for a routine tune-up. The startling ignorance in both cases was due to a simple lack of experience.

I feel very thankful I grew up the way I did, at the time I did. The things I learned were things that other people didn't learn and should have, in order to succeed at what they were trying to do.

Anything else to add?

The same thing I've said before. There is no hard and fast news. Just make it work out the way you want it to. Don't be afraid to experiment.

We were free to do that.

Almost. You weren't tied to the clock, but you were still tied to the calendar. I guess you understand that.

That's one of the biggest problems that people have to deal with when they're used to going by the clock. It can seem that you've got lots of time, but it takes a lot of time to get your wood in and get all ready for winter. If you don't, why, it's going to take a lot more time when you get around to doing it.

One of the best things of having neighbors in the area that you're moving into is that they have an idea of what you have to do and don't have to do in the summer time.

People tend to take some time to explore and decide what they want to build and where they want to build. Meanwhile they get wrapped up in the idea of going swimming or exploring or just visiting. The days are long, but amazingly soon they're short again. You'd better get your house finished, some wood cut ahead, and so on.

There was a fellow who had a place back of the village somewhere. He was just piddling along. While he was trying to fix that place up, I let him stay in Gary's house. That was the original house I had built, back behind Pete's⁶ place.

He was very busy writing love letters to his girlfriend and fixing up an old net that I had salvaged from the river and given to him. It was usable, but he was very particular about mending it until it was just like new. He liked to do things like that, sort of piddling, and didn't realize that the summer was getting on and that the net didn't need any fixing. Meanwhile he was using firewood that I had stacked up at the place.

I told him that the net would still catch all the fish he would need even if it did have a few holes in it, but he wasn't satisfied. I don't remember how he was getting his fish. I gave him fish sometimes, and he might have been fishing with a pole.

One day I went over there and he was showing me the neat job he did on that net. I got disgusted with him and kind of blew my top a little bit. I told him, "The time is almost past to use the net. You'd better get your act together. The caribou are going to come pretty quick, and you're going to be fiddling around here. You haven't got your place

ready that you're going to need, and you've used the firewood wood that I had gotten and stacked here."

That was something of a shock to him, I guess. It got to him, and he finally got going. He got the net in the water, and started picking up wood along the river. I don't know what he used for a boat—maybe he borrowed mine.

Shortly after that the caribou came. He didn't know what to do, so I took him out. I had already gotten all the meat I wanted, and we got him two or three.

All in all, that was a case of now knowing anything about priorities. I think that's a very important thing to mention right now, because in our culture there are a lot of people who don't have to set priorities for themselves. It's done for them by their job or their school. They can piddle away a lot of their time doing whatever they want to do, especially in a money economy where they buy everything. When you come from a culture that does too much for you, that's the way you grow up.

And that's a good way to fail when you go out into the woods.

What I'm trying to say is this: You need to make your plans in such a way that they give you the best break you can get. Don't expect too much when you get out there.

It's best if you can arrange to get out there shortly after the snow is off the ground and the lakes are open, so that you'll have all summer to work. A person with some experience could go out there and get by even if it's all frozen and there are two feet of snow on the ground.

I had hoped to be out to the lake much earlier, but shortly before I was ready to move out I had to go in the hospital. That took some time, and I was not in the best of health when I got out there.

I figured that if I didn't get there by the middle of August or so, I wouldn't have much time. It was a little past the middle of August when I finally got there. I wasn't at all sure that I could make it, but I did. I was fortunate that Dennis⁷ was out there and I could hire a little help.

Obviously it's important to know how to set priorities, especially if you're limited on time and so forth.

Take Dan and Joyce for instance. Dan once asked me how I seemed to know whenever he and Joyce might need help. It was because they hadn't been up there long enough to know what was coming, and how soon. They were spending some time just exploring and fishing with a rod and reel and so forth. When I could see they weren't going to get everything done they needed to do, I'd go over and help them a little bit.

I think that Dan was exaggerating to some extent—I didn't always know when they needed help. But quite often I did, just because I'd been there long enough to see that they weren't using their time very wisely.

His statement got me to thinking a lot. I didn't realize that I had that relationship with them at all, but he thought so.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Duane and Rena Ose.

3) From Wiki: President John F. Kennedy originated the idea for VISTA, which was founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 and incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteers_In_Service_To_America)

4) Dan and Joyce Denslow.

5) Oliver's youngest son and wife.

6) Pete MacManus

7) Dennis Hannan