
What Would Peter Do?

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I judged his age to be about twenty-eight or nine as he entered the room and approached me at the conclusion of one of my seminars in Portland, Oregon some years ago. The attendees had left the room and I thought it a bit odd that someone would come in after all of the seminars were over for the day. "Can I help you?" I asked. "No" he answered, "You already have!" It turns out that, the previous hunting season he had driven up into the Cascade Mountains east of Portland, Oregon to spend the afternoon hunting elk. Or in his own words *"I was just going out to see if I could shoot an elk!"* And in that short statement is the nucleus of what could have become a disaster.

Finding a likely place to begin the hunt he parked his truck on a forest service road, grabbed his rifle (and little else after all he was *"just"* going out for a short afternoon hunt) and started up the hill. The higher up the hill he climbed the deeper the snow became until he found himself walking in the ankle-deep snow. Cresting the ridge he found fresh elk tracks in the snow. Excited now at the possibility of actually killing an elk he overlooked the trap that was being set:

1. The weather as he left Portland on the drive into the Cascades was mild – he wouldn't need much clothing. Since it was only going to be a short hunt and he would be home that night he didn't need to take a lot of gear.
2. No one was available to go with him
3. He didn't tell anyone where he was going.
4. He'd been in the area many times before.
5. The vision of a freezer full of fresh elk meat overshadowed any thoughts he might have had of a looming crisis.

He followed the tracks as they wandered through the timber ever watchful for a glimpse of an elk ahead. The snow deepened and before long he wading through knee-deep snow. At one point, paying more attention to the tracks than his footing, he tripped over a log buried in the snow and did a spectacular face-plant! Uninjured he got up, brushed himself off, cleaned his rifle scope, checked the barrel for any blockage and continued on. It was shortly after the tripping incident that it began to snow again. He continued on a bit longer but soon realized that he wasn't dressed for the conditions he now faced. It was time to get back to the truck. It was at this moment that he first also realized that he didn't know where he was! Or more accurately, he didn't know which direction to go to get back to his truck! Reaching into his pocket for one of the few pieces of equipment that he did bring he was horrified to find that his GPS receiver was gone! It must have fallen out when he tripped over the log. His immediate thought was to retrace his steps to the log but soon found the now heavily falling snow had

covered his tracks. With rising apprehension he turned in the direction his instincts told him was the way to his truck and began the walk. It wasn't long before "walking" turned into "walking faster." And then "walking fast" turned into "running." And then "running" turned into "running faster" in his attempt to get back to the safety of his truck. Terrified panic! Panic brought on by the recognition that he wasn't prepared to spend the night out; no one knew here he was; he didn't know how to get back to his truck. Panic brought on by the knowledge that he might die!

His mad dash through the falling snow was suddenly interrupted with a flashback to a meeting that had taken place earlier that year when he had sat and listened to a speaker talk about *"Being lost and what to do about it."* Stopping his panic-stricken run he asked himself *"What would Peter do now?"* He thought back on the advice he'd been given. *"Get off of your feet and sit down. You can't walk when you're sitting on your butt—and that's good!"* He found a log and sat down. *"OK. What's next? Have a drink of water. It will calm you down!"* He had a canteen of water with him and drank deeply. *"Stay there for at least thirty minutes! It takes at least thirty minutes, for the adrenaline and cortisone that put into a flight or fight mode, to flush out of your system. During this time you are just reacting—not thinking! Once your fears have subsided and your head clears you'll be able to make better decisions regarding your situation."* He sat for thirty minutes drinking periodically from his water bottle. Thirty minutes later his head had cleared and he began to reconstruct what had happened. How far had he actually traveled? What could he remember about the terrain features he had encountered as he tracked the elk? What other landmarks did he remember? It slowly came back to him and he drew a map in the snow based on his recollections and realized, in his flight through the forest, he had been running away from his truck not towards it! Having reoriented himself he headed off in the direction of the road knowing that it was unlikely that he would actually find the truck but he would find the road it was parked on.

An hour or so passed before he climbed up a low hill and there before him was the road. Looking first left and not seeing his vehicle he looked right and there in the distance he saw the vehicle and the safety that it offered. He said, *"You can only image what I felt like!"* My response was *"I don't have to imagine. I've been in similar situations myself!"*

So what can we learn from this adventure? An adventure that is repeated in various forms all across America every year as men and women hunters venture off into the back-country to work or to recreate.

Number One. You have to accept the fact that, as good an outdoors-man or women as you may be, sometimes things happen that precipitate you into a crisis when you least expect it and you'd better be ready to cope with, what will be one of the most difficult challenges to your life that you have ever faced.

Number Two. Never say “*I am just...*” Saying “*I am just going to...*” (You fill in the blank) is a denial of the possibility that anything will go wrong and a denial of the need to carry an emergency kit or protective clothing with you. After all “*what could possibly go wrong?*” A lot can go wrong, it can go wrong quickly and you can die!



Number Three. Always carry the means to shelter yourself, to start a fire and to attract the attention of people who are looking for you and, perhaps more importantly, people who are *not* looking for you but might be in your vicinity. To that end your emergency gear should include a waterproof, windproof shelter that you can crawl into or crawl under. If you expect to be able to construct a shelter from natural materials as advocated by many outdoor writers you will be sadly disappointed. To build such a shelter takes skill, time, resources and an able-bodied person. Save yourself the trouble—carry a [large orange or royal blue plastic bag](#) to crawl into when you need protection.

Carry a [metal match](#) and a supply of cotton balls saturated with Vaseline. This mixture is the most reliable combination of fire starting aids available to you. Practice building a [fire](#).

Carry a [whistle](#) and purposefully made [glass signal mirror](#). You can blow a whistle as long as you can breathe. With a mirror, given that you have sunlight, you can bounce a beam of sunlight to a passing airplane, boat or person on a distant hillside many miles away.

Number Four. Prepare for the five scenarios that commonly result in a person having to spend a night out:

1. Becoming lost
2. Not making it back to camp or vehicle before the sun sets.
3. Becoming stranded when the vehicle that took you into the backcountry malfunctions.
4. Becoming ill or injured to the point that you are unable to make your own way out.
5. When weather makes it dangerous to continue traveling.

In each situation finding the safest campsite possible and then using your emergency equipment and survival skills to defend your body temperature is your best course of action.

Number Five. Don't let the concerns of others and what they might be thinking affect your decision-making. Don't let the promises or the commitments you made to others drive you to continue trying to make it back in the face of darkness, rough terrain or inclement weather. Do what is in your best interest and survive.

Number Six. Always tell someone where you're going and when you plan to be back. Better still leave a trip plan with two people who you have briefed on what to do in the event you do not return. Remember that having left a trip plan you are obligated to stick to the plan. If you fail to leave a trip plan, or don't update the plan, days may pass before an active search begins in your location.

Number Seven. Be ready to deal with fear and the panic that usually results when you are confronted with a crisis. It is ludicrous to say "don't panic!" Everybody is going to panic. Even the most experienced outdoorsman or woman will experience a momentary twinge of discomfort when faced with a potentially life threatening situation. But, unlike the novice, an experienced person will recognize the discomfort for what it is--a warning that things aren't right—a warning to back away and reconsider the situation. Remember the "get off your feet, have drink of water, and stay put for at least thirty minutes" routine described earlier.

Number Eight. Keep faith. In yourself and your ability to survive based on your preparations. Keep faith in the search and rescue system and the ability of the searchers to find you. Keep faith in your family. The strongest catalyst you have to keep you going, when everything appears to be against you, is your desire to be reunited with your family and friends. Carry something to reinforce that desire—a photograph works.

The time is sure to come when you will have to spend an unplanned night out. When that time comes it's not important "What Peter would do?" but what is important is "What you will do?" Your life depends on it!

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