

Star Gazing from the Gutter by Trey Colvin

It seems like a long time ago now. I'm sitting in my office. There is a lot of work to do, places to be, and people to manage. As I spin around in my desk chair, my eye catches a panoramic photograph that sits behind my desk. I love this photo. More than that, I love the way I felt at the moment it was taken. In the picture, I am sitting, barefoot, on a large boulder somewhere on Mt. Baker on a NOLS mountaineering course in 2004. Mt. Shuksan is just visible in the periphery. That course was so much fun, but it had its share of trials.

It's hard to believe that the weather in the Cascades can be bad enough to keep you from summiting Mt. Baker for fourteen days, but it can. That was the first time I had ever spent five days in a tent listening to rain. That course, taken just after finishing law school but before having any news as to whether I had passed the bar exam, was the last of my three NOLS courses. I thought at the time that it was the culmination of all I had learned with NOLS about leadership. As I sit here now, a recently made partner in a law practice I've wanted to lead since I started working here three months after my course in 2004, I realize it was only the beginning.

Much has been written and said about leadership. I get the sense that a lot of people think that it's something they are going to be able to read their way into doing well. It is not. It is something you practice. Your NOLS signature style is something that takes years of experience, trial and error to develop and hone. And it never ends. You never stop growing or learning. The truth is, you're either growing or you're shrinking. Growth requires being intentional about pushing to the next level.

My NOLS journey began right after finishing my first year at a military boarding school. It was the summer after my eighth-grade year. My life had changed a lot that year. I had taken some leadership classes at school but I did not yet recognize opportunities to practice. My first NOLS course, a Bighorn Mountains wilderness course out of Lander, Wyoming, was full of opportunities to lead.

The year was 1992 and the Noble Hotel was amazing to me. So many different people of different ages from different places. Everyone either excited to have just gotten back from a course or nervous about to start one. I remember a poster of Scott Fischer on the wall which I took to be the indelible likeness of a NOLS instructor. There were people lounging in large chairs, going through packs and bins of gear, and eating from bowls of I knew not what. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. There were so many different aromas, a breath of fresh mountain air coming through an open

bay door, smells of spice kits intermittently mixed with dimensions of body odor previously unexperienced.

I have since come to expect this kind of thing, but for whatever reason, my first thirty-day wilderness course had some of the coldest and wettest weather any of our four instructors could remember. I ran into the youngest of those instructors on an island in Baja, Mexico ten years later. He was still working with NOLS. He was sipping maté from a traditional Argentinian gourd next to a large camp fire. We were sitting on a stretch of coastline on the Sea of Cortez. I asked him about the weather on that wilderness course, and he told me that it was still the worst weather he had ever had on at NOLS. I am amazingly lucky like that.

Of all the opportunities for daily leadership practice on a NOLS course, none surpasses the solo with a small tarp group. A few days without instructors shines a spotlight on the group's weaknesses but it especially tests the designated group leader. My group's solo was no different. After just a couple days, we were thoroughly lost. My friend Pete and I were traveling down a steep ridge line on a foggy morning trying to put our solo expedition back on the right track.

Without a word, Pete slipped and fell off the ridge. I ran to the edge where he had fallen, but I could not see him through the fog. Once I was with him, I realized his leg was in bad shape and he was in significant pain. He was lying at the bottom of a drainage only six to eight feet across flanked by rocky walls on both sides. After getting the rest of our group together we put the tarp up over where Pete lay, and I travelled down a river in the fog to find the instructor team. I could not find them before dark and so returned to Pete and my small group. Pete was in real pain and the group struggled to make him comfortable and to keep him warm as the sun set. It was a night I won't soon forget.

The drainage had made a convenient camp and moving Pete seemed impossible. That night, it rained without ceasing. I'm sure this will seem obvious to you reading this, but it had not occurred to this group of thirteen-year-olds that drainages are thusly named because water drains down them in a downpour. Our small band of already frayed and stressed nerves woke from a light slumber to a river running through the tent. Our sleeping bags were soaked. And it was cold. I remember being up on my knees on my sleeping pad completely overwhelmed by the seriousness of our predicament. Expedition behavior went from theory to application. Twenty-six years later, that night is still one of the longest of my life. We huddled in a small group holding each other's feet to our stomachs trying to share body heat. When dawn broke, we were cold, wet and were all fighting the thousand-yard stare of

hopelessness. Fortunately, the light brought new hope and energy, and peer leadership took over, with each group member seeing what needed to be done and doing it. One made hot breakfast without being asked. Another began laying out sleeping bags to dry and comforting Pete, and I headed back down the river to find the instructor camp. I can barely describe the relief of seeing the instructor team's signature green tarp in the early morning light.

The instructor team quickly packed up their gear, and I led them to our makeshift camp. All the solo groups were recalled and relocated to where we were camped with Pete. It was quickly determined that Pete's leg was badly broken. I will always remember an instructor cutting up his Crazy Creek chair to build a splint around Pete's leg. This made a lasting impression on me. It was done with such skill and without any hesitation. I was so glad to finally have the help, but I also felt incredibly tired as the stress and adrenalin of the experience began to wear off.

The following morning, I was returning to camp with a small brown trout I had caught when I heard the '*whap whap whap*' of rotors that were growing louder as the helicopter approached. The team had cleared a landing area which was surreal to witness as I reflected on how much had happened in just a couple of days. I was so sad to see Pete being placed in the back of the chopper. He was my closest friend on the course, and the loss was devastating at the time. He leaned toward me and we shook hands. I never saw him again. The relationship was for a season, but the lessons learned were for a lifetime.

I didn't fully realize it at the time, but the seeds of good expedition behavior, communication, judgment, decision making, tolerance for adversity, and self-awareness were firmly planted during that first course. Years later, they would be tested during an extended period of focused intensity on a NOLS Baja semester course. After a semester in the wilderness, there are so many stories to tell, but one memory stands as a great example of peer and self-leadership roles.

In 2001, the backpacking section of a NOLS semester in Baja took place in a range of mountains and hills at the southern point of the peninsula known as the Sierra de la Laguna. It is not a particularly high mountain range with the highest point touching only 2,090 meters in elevation. It is a contradictory land of desert and sea. The lack of fresh water is juxtaposed against a backdrop of the blue Pacific Ocean to the west and the green Sea of Cortez to the east. It is exceedingly beautiful with some of the most stunning sunsets and night skies overflowing with vibrant stars. Beautiful as it is, it is also treacherous. John Steinbeck wrote that it is the "epicenter for the world's

thorns." It is covered in brushy, thorny vegetation making travel on foot very difficult and time consuming. And it is incredibly hard to navigate.

Throughout our time there, our group joked that it was the land of 59-meter hills (since the minimum height requirement for a hill to appear on a topo map is 60 meters). It literally felt at times like finding your location was simply impossible and route-finding was a major issue throughout the course even for experienced instructors. We jokingly called it the Laguna Triangle. Having learned that current NOLS semesters in Baja now backpack the Sierra de San Pedro Martir instead, I wonder whether this change was not due, at least in part, to the difficult navigation and lack of reliable fresh water sources.

There were many times that we would hike for hours, several times lost, and arrive at a site expected to hold water only to find it bone dry. A backpacking course is hard enough in lands flowing with milk and honey where one need only lower her Nalgene bottle into a nearby icy stream of fresh, cold water. In a thorny desert with the real fear of becoming lost and not finding water, another layer of group stress and tension is added to the dynamic.

On February 12, 2001, after dry camping the night before, I wrote in my journal:

"Definitely the hardest, hottest, most difficult, and most trying day so far...Baja is a hard place to travel. Thick brush, rolling hills, heat, thorns, rocks, pebbles, sand...it goes on and on. I am sitting at our eleventh camp at Rancho El Sauce picking thorns out of my flesh. There is water here and so our fears of dying are over, which is nice. I have never been anywhere else where the lack of water is a real live travel hazard."

And on February 18, I wrote that today was, "[q]uite possibly the longest most difficult day so far...We didn't find water so we had to dry camp again. Starving and not able to make enough food because there is not more than one quart of water per group of four for cooking. We only had that much because two instructors found water 140 meters down a drainage, but they could only carry so much back."

So, the plan was hatched for two student volunteers to accompany one of the instructors back down a very steep, very rocky ridge to the drainage at dawn and carry water back to camp in several MSR dromedaries. The idea was to carry enough water back to camp that everyone would have enough to get through the day safely.

I should underscore at this point that no one, including myself, wanted to climb down to this drainage after a night of dry camping without food or water only to turn around and climb back up loaded with heavy water bags only to begin a day of hiking. The important thing is—two of us did. And while they did, the rest of the group did not sit idly by waiting for a water delivery. Instead, everyone did their part, packing up camp including the two volunteers' sleeping bags and pads. The group had a hot breakfast waiting for the volunteers upon their triumphant return. It's difficult to describe now, but there was a shift in the group that day.

Peer leadership is the team working together to support each other in achieving group goals—each team member sees what needs to be done and does it. Self-leadership requires that each team member show personal initiative and character. This group of individuals from different places had truly become something else—they had become a team. Someone wrote down an Oscar Wilde quote in our group journal that perfectly fit that trip and that team. Wilde wrote that, "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

These days, as I sit in my office looking at old NOLS photographs, the team members have changed and so have the group's goals. I can't remember the last time I was Baja-level thirsty (or even seriously hungry for that matter). The challenges have changed and continue to morph, but over the years and the trips, I realized that your NOLS signature leadership style is and should ever be changing and evolving to meet the situation at hand. Inevitably, adversity will come and you may find yourself in a new gutter. Make sure you are one of the lucky ones looking at the stars.