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Lost in the Woods ©

by Spencer H. Silverglate, Esq.

When my cell phone rang that afternoon, something told me my vacation was about to take an abrupt turn.

I was a thousand miles from my Miami law practice and a case that for weeks had fired my blood pressure to 8 on the Richter scale. It had been three days into my family vacation in the verdant North Carolina mountains in a little cabin on Lake Toxaway. Things were getting close to perfect with just my wife, my son, my dog... and my shiny new, bright-red Specialized Stump Jumper mountain bike with dual shocks and knobby, mountain-eating tires.

My wife Kathy would be the first to tell you that I have a hard time relaxing. It's an occupational hazard for trial lawyers. So to relieve stress, I tend to be a bit of an exercise fanatic. The problem with most work-outs, however, is that they don't really take your mind off work. That's probably why Kathy supported my desire to get into mountain biking. If you think about anything but the trail in front of you, you'll end up wrapped around a tree like one of those cartoon characters. Of course, there is another, more primal reason to mountain bike. Inside every man, regardless of his age or position, is a little boy indelibly imprinted with the memory of his first bike and the



rush of freedom he felt when he first ventured beyond his neighborhood into the great unknown. Mountain biking awakens that dormant explorer inside us.

On the other hand, I wasn't completely kidding myself with all this adventure stuff. My mountain biking career was barely three months old, I had just turned 39, and my skills were meager at best. Plus, we're domesticated city folk, Kathy and I, with no discernible outdoor skills. We drive a minivan for goodness sake, and the closest we get to the wilderness is my son's soccer practice field. So you can see how the North Carolina mountains offered a shot at personal glory that I could not get in South Florida, where the nearest thing to a hill is the local trash dump. Yes, I would conquer a mountain on this vacation and maybe, if I was lucky, a little stress.

Unfortunately, during the first few days at Lake Toxaway, biking didn't fit in with the family water-skiing, fishing and hiking adventures. Then, during what seemed like another innocent day of family fun, my cell phone rang. It was my office, of course. The court date for my case unexpectedly was set on the last day of the vacation. Our trip would be cut short. I quickly decided I wasn't going back without one shot at redemption on my trusty bike.

Besides, I needed the bike ride real bad. That phone call sent me into a frenzy of concern about the 14-hour ride back to Miami and getting ready for court. Thoughts were crashing through my head like bumper cars as I considered all the things I had to do. I desperately needed some mental release. So at 6 p.m., I pointed the van, with my bike fastened proudly to the roof, toward the top of the mountain and drove off, determined to salvage at least an hour of my vacation.

Within a few minutes, I was at the trail head in an area known as Panther Town, which is part of a national park. The dense forest was impressive and expansive. Just what I needed. I pulled out a trail map, plotted a course and stepped down on the bike pedals in the hopes of finding a little salvation

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from the problems of everyday life. I soon realized, however, that even though my body was biking in the crisp North Carolina evening, my mind was 1,000 miles away in a stuffy Miami court room.

I was, to be honest, surprised when I found School House Falls, and with a clearer mind would have appreciated the breathtaking waterfall cascading into a mountain pool. In any event, it was right there, just as the trail map indicated. Pretty good, I thought, for a city slicker. I just wished I could get my mind off the work channel.

Emboldened by my success in finding the falls, I hit the trail again. Up hills, around bends, down drops. Kicking up dirt and rocks. Only the sound of my chain working the gears and my own labored breathing disturbed the solitude of the forest. Then I started to get tired. This was not flat South Florida. When I came to the next steep climb, I checked the trail map for a shortcut.

At this point, I probably should mention that I have the world's worst sense of direction.

I took what I thought looked like a shortcut, which led to another and still another. Pretty soon, I was hopelessly lost, without another soul in sight. And to make matters worse, the sun was going down.

Panicked, I peddled harder. Sure, I studied the trail map, but it made no sense. I even tried retracing my tire tracks, but that was equally futile. The increasing darkness made it harder to distinguish between up and down. I imagined myself going farther and farther away from the van.

I had two things going for me though. I had a backpack with plenty of water, and I always ride with my cell phone – the same phone that only hours ago had been my nemesis. So I stopped my bike, took several gulps of water and telephoned our cabin to let Kathy know I might be a little late for dinner. No one answered. After leaving a message, I returned the phone to my backpack, but not before noticing that the battery was registering low – very low.

I again consulted the trail map, which did absolutely no good, but at least made me feel for a moment like I was doing something productive. Then I got back in the saddle and peddled. I still held out hope that I would luck into finding the trail head. Of course, that never happens, and this occasion would be no different.

At about 8:30 p.m., with the sun now low on the horizon, I dismounted. I removed my helmet and gloves, took off my backpack and pulled out my cell phone. I stared at the phone for what seemed like an

eternity. Then, I did something that I had never done before or since. The ultimate act of emasculation and embarrassment for a man. I pushed the number "9".....then "1".....and "1" again. I had to admit that I was lost and needed help.

It took quite some time for the 911 operator to understand my predicament. "Would you spell your name please" she said with a Southern twang. When she finally finished asking me to repeat my home address for the third time, she suggested sending someone in for me. But the woods were too thick; you couldn't get a truck in there. Plus, how would I describe my location? By the tree? I told the operator that there was still some dim light left. If she could just find someone knowledgeable about the trail, perhaps I could be talked out to the trail head. She said she would call me back. But by now, my cell phone – my only link to the outside world – was beeping its warning that the battery was about to die.

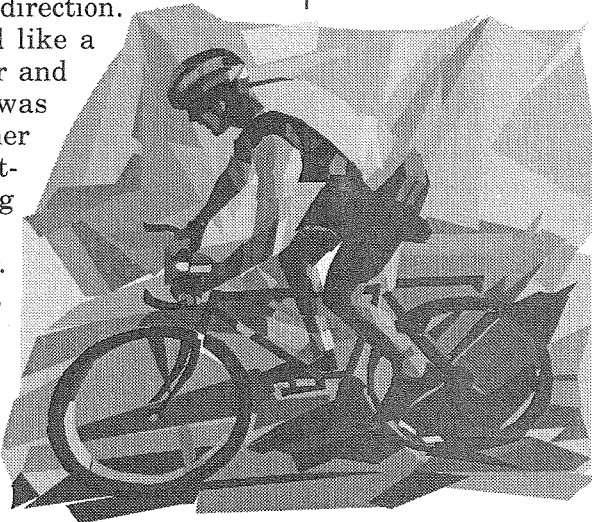
Minutes later, I got a call. "Mr. Spencer," the Park Ranger said in a strong Southern accent. "Yes, yes," I replied, "Can you get me out of here?" "Well," he said, "tell me what you're near." I explained that I was sitting on a huge boulder overlooking a sweeping valley. "Ah, ha," he exclaimed, "that's Buck's Knob!" "You're not far from the trail head." He told me to head back to the trail and peddle up hill for about 10 minutes. Then I would surely see the trail head.

I dutifully complied with the Ranger's instructions. But alas, there was no trail head and

nothing remotely familiar. I was lost, and it was dark. My fourth message on the house answering machine took on a new tone from "don't worry, sweetheart." It was, "Where the Hell are you and why aren't you worried about me?!" When you're panicked, rationality is the first casualty.

Defeated, I got back on my bike and peddled aimlessly in the dark. I called out, but no one could hear me. But then, by the grace of God, I found what would become my beacon of hope – a power tower. It was not one of those puny little utility poles; it was a cross-country, sky scraping tower, erected, no doubt, by the Duke Power Company. Even better, it had a number on it – 75.

In the moonlight, with my cell phone battery on life support, I called 911 again (it gets easier the more you do it). The operator didn't seem too impressed with my discovery. She alerted the rescue team, but no one knew where this tower 75 was. Still, I knew the tower was my best hope, so I respectfully told the operator that I was going to go hug that tower until



I was rescued.

By now, my cell phone was cutting in and out, so I decided to conserve whatever battery I had left. Just then, of course, it rang. It was Kathy. Before she could say a word, I blurted out in disbelief, "Did you just realize I wasn't home?!" She said she had been occupied with all the activity down by the lake and just figured I was on a long ride. After I calmed down, I told her about tower 75 and that no one seemed to know where it was. I suggested that someone call Duke Power. Surely, they would know where their tower was. Kathy assured me that she would have the National Guard out in no time.

About 20 minutes later, my cell phone rang again. This time it was my new best friend, the 911 operator. She triumphantly announced that there was a police officer at the trail head who was sounding his siren. She told me to walk toward the sound. So I listened intently for the siren. Hearing nothing, I listened harder. It was so quiet, I could hear my own heart beating. But I could not hear a siren. I must have been in deeper than I thought. And with this disturbing realization, my phone went dead. I now was cut off completely from the outside world.

So there I was. Lost in the woods, pitch black, totally alone. The realist in me said I would be spending the night in the woods. Just as I had finished telling myself that I could handle it, I remembered the inside cover of the trail map. The part that talked about this being the natural habitat of the Brown Bear. I had a brief thought of climbing the tower to get out of the "habitat" and perhaps get a better view of my surroundings. But as I walked closer to the tower and heard the electricity hissing and popping through the lines, I decided I'd take my chances on the ground with Mr. Bear.



In an act of desperation, I decided I'd better find something with which to defend myself, so I began rooting around for a club. In the dim moonlight, however, all I could find was a twelve-inch stick. I grabbed it. It seemed if there was going to be a tussle with a wild animal, it would be hand to hand combat.

I removed my gear and sat down next to my bike. And I began to pray. It really is an awesome experience to be out in the wilderness completely alone in the dead of night. While I was praying, I realized something quite remarkable. I hadn't thought about work for several hours. What seemed overwhelming and all encompassing at the start of the ride now seemed irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was survival.

So there I sat, with my legs crossed, just looking up at the stars. I began to laugh out loud at the ran-

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The ABA Criminal Justice Section
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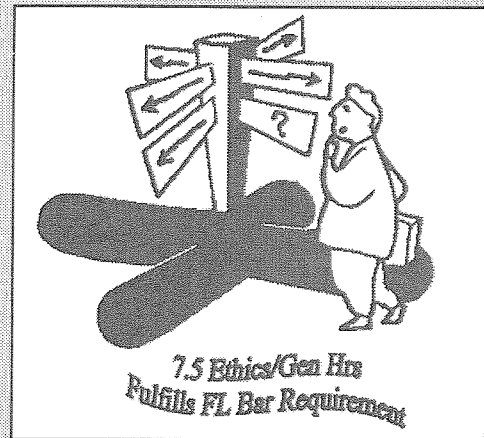
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dom thoughts flashing through my mind. How long can you survive on just water, forty days, isn't it? How on earth did Lewis and Clarke live in the wilderness for so long? And do you tip a rescue worker who saves your life?

Then, inexplicably, a calmness swept over me, and my mind became amazingly clear. I realized that there was nothing more I could do to save myself. My fate was out of my hands. I was no longer in control (as if I ever really was). If this was it for me, there were far worse ways to die, like sitting in an old age home babbling incoherently about how things used to be. I saw my grandfather go out that way, and frankly, I'd rather be ripped apart by the bear. At least I would go out fighting.

It occurred to me just then that there are some things you can never find out about yourself sitting behind a desk, or on a couch watching TV or staring at a computer screen. The truth is, we all want to know if we have what it takes. And the only way to find out is to take some risks. To find our passion and pursue it as if your life depended on it. Because at a soul level, it does. We spend most of our lives worrying about things that really don't matter, and precious little time focusing on what's important. Too often, we trade our passion for comfort, our hearts for safety and convenience. We learn too late that there's no such thing as security in life. As Mel Gibson's character in Braveheart said, "All men die, but few men ever really live."

Then, I heard it. The distant hum of motors. I stood and yelled. I squinted into two beautiful headlight beams. A voice called my name; I was saved.

There were three guys on two ATVs. All wore jeans and chewed tobacco. The friendliest of the group, a young man in his twenties, came up and shook my

hand. He said I was lucky he was called. He went on to explain that he was a competitive mountain bike racer and knew every tree in that forest. When he heard tower 75, he knew exactly where I was.

When I finished hugging my rescuers (which didn't seem awkward at the time, even in my Spandex biking clothes), I inquired how we would get my bike out. With that, the young man looked at my bike and then back at me. He spit some tobacco juice and said, "Hell, this is the best part of the course." "What do you mean?" I asked politely, pointing out that it was now around midnight. Unflinching, he replied, "Get back on your bike and ride." That was all the encouragement I needed. "All right then," I replied giddily as I jumped back on the bike. "Let's bust it!" With one ATV lighting the way in front of me and the other from behind, I rode out of those woods. It was three miles to the trail head through rough terrain, but I made it out on my own steam.

Kathy was waiting at the trail head with a cadre of police and rescue workers. She had coordinated the rescue effort. We hugged and kissed and said we loved each other. But the one thing she didn't do was criticize me. And God knows, she would have been justified. She could have said how stupid it was to go out in the woods alone, in unfamiliar territory, when it was late, with a low cell phone battery, and so on. But she didn't say any of those things. You see, in her eyes, my little adventure was not a failure, but a great success. I guess she already knew that sometimes you have to get lost to find yourself.

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On the Calendar:

April 8 & 9

Practicing with Professionalism (PWP)
Center for Professional Development,
Tallahassee

April 22

Spring Retreat
Barry University Law School, Orlando

May 29

Practicing with Professionalism (PWP)
Downtown Hyatt, Miami

June 13 & 14

CLE for Florida Board of Bar Examiners 2003
Longboat Key Club, Longboat Key

June 26

Masters Seminar on Professionalism
Orlando World Center Marriott, Orlando

June 27

Standing Committee on Professionalism
Orlando World Center Marriott, Orlando