

The First Law of the Wilderness

My cousins, the Larkins, had a cabin a little ways up a dirt road from our cabin. One evening I was up playing with Janie Larkin while my dad and other family members were down at our end of the property working on projects and getting ready to go for a horseback ride.

As it got later in the evening the Larkins were ready to go. On their way home they drove me down the road to our cabin, where I hopped out of the car, and then they continued on their way.

But when I looked around I couldn't find anyone! I went to the barn and I could tell that Dad and the others had gone on the horses. My seven years of life hadn't prepared me to be alone in the mountains and I was scared to death! I took off running down the road screaming and bawling like a wild child. I thought maybe my dad had gone to George Handy's, his friend who had a cabin not too far away. When I got to his property I charged down his dirt road howling hysterically for my Dad.

Lucky for my sake, Dad was there. He immediately got off his horse and hugged me while I cried and cried. Once I settled down he got back on his horse and put me in front of him, straddling the saddle's biscuit. Then he proceeded to tell me that the first law of the wilderness is *don't panic*.

We rode all the way home with him saying, "What is the first law of the wilderness?" and me replying back, between deep, shaky, post-hysteria breaths, "Don't panic." This exchange happened at least ten times as I sat on the back of a horse in the safety of my dad's arms. I learned my lesson well and it has served me ever since. There have been many times (for example a major earthquake, losing my six-year-old at a water park, our Christmas tree falling over a few hours before a party, and a mountain bike accident that put my husband in the hospital for seven days) when most people around me were freaking out while I was calm and collected. I was prepared to do what needed to be done with a clear mind. I instinctively knew that adding more frenzy to an already tumultuous situation wouldn't help anyone.

I attribute the quality I possess of composure amidst turbulence directly to this experience with my dad. I am so fortunate to have been schooled in the laws of the wilderness, on the back of a horse, by Jack Shaw.

It just doesn't get better than that!

Anita Wiggins

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