

Primitive Survival Skills in a Modern Age

by Michael Gambino

Some people may wonder what value there is in learning primitive or wilderness survival skills in this day and age. Such skills may be seen as practical for military personnel, rescue teams and the like, or for civilians to know what to do in the event of storm emergencies. For the rest of us, though, the true value of learning primitive skills in a modern world might be difficult to discern.

Today, the world is awash in a sea of computerized gadgets, conveniences and other modern technology that

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have provided a margin of safety and protection against the forces of the natural world.

However, most of us do not realize how thin that margin really is, nor the hidden price we pay for it.

Take for instance such an essential survival need as the ability to make a fire. Almost anyone can flick a cigarette lighter or strike a match and get a campfire going. Very convenient indeed. However, that kind of “simple” convenience can, over time, dull our awareness and whittle away at our ability to be self-reliant. This does not seem so significant – a harmless little match – but add up all those simple conveniences in life and the big picture comes into focus.

Also, consider the impact on the environment for us to have this simple match? Factories are built to mass-produce a match or a lighter, and a factory requires acres of land cleared for construction. Trees are needed to make wooden match sticks. Roads, trucks, fuel, manufacturing chemicals, plastics, and many other things are ultimately needed so we may have the convenience of striking that match

and having fire. Just something to think about.

All Your Eggs in One Basket

As a population, we are not nearly so self-sufficient and self-reliant as our frontier ancestors were. Modern tools and technology make things happen faster, but moving faster than the rhythm and speed of the natural world can often hold higher risks than we might recognize at first. Automobiles, for example, can get us places faster, but the mishaps can be more costly. Certainly we can drive farther into the wilderness in half an hour than we can safely hike back out of in a day. The production, distribution, and use of automobiles takes an alarming toll on our environment and threatens the well-being of future generations.

Relying completely on technology and machines to make our world safe is like placing all your eggs in one basket. When the electricity gets knocked out by a storm, for example, we immediately feel how thin the margin of security is. Usually, the electricity is restored within a few hours and we sigh with relief and

resume our normal routine. But what if the lights, electric stove, microwave oven, phone lines, water pump, hot water heater, refrigerator, television, computers, traffic signals in town, railroads, etc. stopped for an extended period of time? Patience wears thin for some people quicker than others, and without our familiar conveniences and routines, the situation could become extremely stressful. Having experience with survival skills, there would be something to fall back on if need be, and a new perspective on life. Your patience could be extended longer, your mental attitude would be better, and you could improvise solutions based on the principles of these survival essentials: shelter, water, fire and food. You might even find an appealing sense of adventure surface!

A Primitive Education Model

Superficially, though not insignificantly, wilderness survival skills can increase your odds of surviving mishaps in the Great Outdoors. This is good, of course, yet deeper gifts await the practitioner of these ancient skills. One important gift



“Look Ma, no matches!”
The author demonstrating the bow drill firemaking method.

Once learned, it really is like riding a bicycle – you never forget. Also, you never forget how many subtle aspects of nature are involved in this bit of magic.

is what I call the “holistic learning” contained in such primitive skills and earth-living philosophy. Studying the skills of wilderness survival for ten years, I have personally experienced this unique learning process, and found that my problem solving ability has greatly improved.

The effectiveness of several million years of “primitive” education has been largely ignored by the “formal” or modern educational process. The primitive education process includes and values such aspects as mentoring, skillful observation, wonder, investigation, experience, and self-correction, thereby producing wisdom and knowledge. It teaches the practitioner an important skill: *how to ask questions*. Contrast this with the formal education process that skips many of the initial stages of the primitive model, focusing exclusively on knowledge and facts, and was born during the time of the Industrial Revolution in order to produce a workforce capable of operating factory assembly lines and other mass-production machinery. People were trained *not to think!* Education itself became one more factory “product”. At their core, primitive survival skills *teach us the simplicity of how to find answers in life*, and can offer us pathways toward a unique, organic, and potent relationship with nature, with spirit and with ourselves.

The learning that occurs as you develop wilderness survival skills takes place on many levels. It requires that you be informed by and about such things as trees, plants, weather, rocks, sunlight, wildlife, as well as your own body, mind, spirit, and emotions.

More than learning mere facts, when you learn to make a fire without matches using the bow-drill method, you also learn something about animal behavior, the transfer of energy, plants, trees, the seasons, weather patterns,

soil types, water and insects.

I can trace the origin of the flames in my campfire back to the various elements in nature that combined to give birth to the flames. A brief look at this reveals that the energy of sunlight was converted by the growing seedling for years on its way to maturity, and is stored in the wood of the bow-drill apparatus I have shaped from the now dead tree branch. Nutrients from the soil that fed the tree while growing were made available by countless microbes, plants, fungi, and animals, and dissolved in rainwater to be absorbed by the roots. Since some tree species offer better wood than others for making this fire-by-friction apparatus, I will naturally learn something about the type of environment or habitat that support these species of trees (and there are many other plant, animal, mineral and climate associations to be found in each habitat type that I will discover as well). Along with the tree growing and storing energy from the sun, I too have grown strong and stored Sun-energy in my body via the food chain. Now, when I apply the *technique* of starting a fire this way, I release my own stored energy in exertion upon the bow-drill and consequently the wood releases its stored sunlight in the form of heat: a glowing coal. I must then feed this newborn coal oxygen and tinder, until it bursts into flame, igniting the firewood.

The ensuing flames are thus more to me than simply a means to boil water or cook

food. They contain information about nature, which of course, includes me. Also, as a result of learning this firemaking skill and producing fire, my ability to discern subtle qualities and understand obscure relationships has grown. Furthermore, I now have a *personal* relationship with the countless aspects of nature that contributed in some way to my warm campfire.

I have gained wisdom through holistic learning, rather than simply obtaining how-to knowledge in a linear fashion. Thus, my relationship to nature becomes multi-dimensional. The web of life becomes tangible and real. Perhaps this makes it a little easier to understand the deep respect and spirituality that the Native Americans and other indigenous peoples possess towards the Earth and all things. This same powerful relationship is available to all of us. It is our birthright.

The practice of primitive survival skills offers us a doorway to the deep spirituality so many of us are longing for. This aspect alone makes it a valid, practical and invaluable aid for people living in this modern age. ❖

Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

The primitive education model allows for an holistic vision of nature. The student of wilderness survival quickly learns that this plant will indeed “sting” if not handled with respect. Also, this plant offers a tremendous (and tasty) food value to the hungry survivalist. Another important gift of the stinging nettle plant is the fiber, which is one of the strongest in the plant kingdom and is ideal for turning into the durable cordage needed for the bow drill method of firemaking.

