

Appalachia

Volume 63
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2012: The Great
Eastern Alpine Zone*

Article 2

2012

The Long Way Home: Emergency Preparedness

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Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2012) "The Long Way Home: Emergency Preparedness," *Appalachia*: Vol. 63: No. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol63/iss1/2>

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Emergency Preparedness

FROM THE TIME ELIZABETH AND ANNIE WERE LITTLE, MY HUSBAND Nat and I had taken them into the mountains, from Tennessee to New Hampshire. They trudged miles carrying loads. We taught them how to light a stove, collect water, wait out thunderstorms, and walk through wet and cold. The best part, I thought, was that they would come to know discomfort and even danger. Courage could become second nature.

Ten years ago, I was a newspaper reporter, sent out late at night to write about fires, fatal truck accidents, murders, and motel evacuations. I watched people cry because they'd never had to run down a stairwell in the dark, even at a false alarm. I listened to the screams of a woman who had fallen asleep with a lit cigarette and set a fire that killed two of her housemates. I believed that some of these people got into trouble because they were too soft.

Each spring I led a girls-only backpacking trip. Each summer the four of us, with various friends, went out again. I bragged that girls needed a nudge to be strong.

Six hours after terrorists drove airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, I walked down our street to meet Annie, who would be walking home from fifth grade. Although she made the half-mile trip by herself by then, I wanted to meet her this time.

Elizabeth, who attended a middle school twenty miles away, had already arrived home. After the attacks, the school had announced it would close early. She couldn't reach us; even when she got through to Nat's school, a distracted staffer heard a child's voice and would not put the call through. In the chaos, no adult consulted the carefully filed "emergency plans" we parents had filled out. Ours said Elizabeth, age 12, could not ride home with student drivers. A boy we'd never heard of piled her into his car; with no help from us, she was smart to catch that ride.

Elizabeth knew about the planes and burning buildings. Friends' parents worked in New York, and she was mute with horror. I turned on the television and said I thought we all ought to know what was going on.

I did not know what Annie, who was 10, knew about the attacks, but I hoped to reassure her on the sidewalk that we were fine, and that she would be fine. She saw me from about a tenth of a mile away striding toward her and looked quizzically at me.

It was a gorgeous day, and she looked so sweet and innocent in her blue-jean jumper. I told her as simply as I could, as we stood in the bright sun, that terrorists had attacked two tall buildings in New York City that morning because they did not like us. I asked her what the teachers had told her; she said something about an accident with buildings and planes in New York. I asked if any other parents had picked up her classmates early; she said yes. I said I had not done that because there was nothing to worry about here in Deep River, Connecticut. "We are safe here," I told her.

Her stare pierced as she replied, "But you came out to meet me."

In the coming days, after planes started flying again, she'd recoil and cry out, "A plane!" and I would say, "It's OK," even though I had no way of knowing that.

Yet I did not stop believing that who we were, because of all our experiences both in the backcountry and frontcountry, would get us through that time. I showed my daughters television footage of 9/11. In the face of horror, I chose to look. I worried later that this was a mistake, but the alternative, shielding them from the reality of Al Qaeda, offered no solace. Tertullian wrote in the third century, "Fear is the foundation of safety." The terrorist attacks trumped anything I'd covered on the reporting beat, but I saw in those terrible days that we must try to face fear. In a true emergency, the school administrators don't consult emergency plans designed to keep children safe. So we hope that we have taught them good judgment. I have never had to fight a war or fight off an attacker. After 9/11, my instincts to fight weather and weakness in the mountains were all I had. They weren't enough. But they helped. Evil will lash out. The thunderclaps could hit even after we learn how to avoid them. We must stumble over the rocks anyway and try to go in the right direction.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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