

Two Minutes and Forty Seconds

Elisabeth Dion

University of Michigan Biological Station
English 317 Environmental Literature and Great Lakes Writing
August 19, 2010
Professor Keith Taylor

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Signed,

One year ago I watched one of my coworkers completely fail during her CPR practical. Our instructor, Matt, looked on and said, “No, that’s fine. She doesn’t know what to do now, but in an emergency situation she’d be totally fine.”

I was astounded. That made zero sense. No matter how many times I could practice, in the heat of the moment, in an actual emergency situation I’m sure that my mind would go blank. Where do I put my hands? How many chest compressions? Breaths? I crossed my fingers and hoped I’d never have to perform CPR on anyone...ever.

Three weeks ago, as I was about to practice rescuing a climber from the high ropes course for the first time, our High Adventure Certifying Instructor looked up at me and said, “You have seven minutes before they lose feeling in their legs. You have three minutes to get from where you are to get them on the ground. But watch yourself, don’t make two victims.”

I was terrified during my first simulated rescue. I was still getting over my fear of heights and I wasn’t comfortable in the air. But I took a deep breath, looked down at our instructor and nodded. Even though I felt like I was about to throw up, and told my partner that I was rescuing how un-confident I was feeling, which I’m sure made her feel anything but safe, I completed the rescue in just under two minutes. Not too bad, and the rescue gave me an intense adrenaline boost, but it was something I’d never want to have to do for real. And we were told it was something we would probably never have to do anyway.

But just in case of emergency Brian, our camp’s High Adventure Director, made us practice rescues at least once a week on a camper of our choice. I’d always pick one of

the girls who had been going to camp year after year, knew the course and knew me. It made me, and them, feel a little more comfortable about twirling in circles as they descended from some random part of the ropes course.

Each week Brian made us take the designated “kid-to-be-rescued” down from a different element of the course. The course consists of four different obstacles, called elements that are connected by platforms. The entry point to the course is a 30-foot telephone pole that is also attached to the exit, a 200-foot zipline. One counselor is at the top of the pole helping the campers get down the zip and watching the campers on the course in case they need to be rescued. The second counselor is on the bottom of the entry pole manning the ropes that allow the campers to climb up the pole and enter the course safely.

Every element has its own kitschy name that describes what it looks like as well as how to get across. The first element is called the Spaghetti Strings. This one is a single foot cable with a second cable above where the climber’s head would be. Along the top cable there are ropes that hang down like spaghetti strings, or Tarzan ropes, that the climber uses to swing himself to the next platform. Next the camper clips himself in, after asking permission from a staff member to transfer elements, on to the next one. The second element is the Chuck Wagon. It has a single foot-cable that has a block half way through the middle that is only attached in the middle, so it spins when you step on it. To help guide the climber there are two ropes to hang on to on either side of the climber’s body that look a little bit like the reins of a horse. After the Chuck Wagon is another transfer on to the Pirate’s Crossing. The Pirate’s Crossing has a foot-cable on the bottom and then two ropes that make an X (like crossing swords) to use as guide ropes. The final

element, and the hardest, is the Swings. The Swings are six rope and wood swings that come off of the top guide wire. There is no foot cable so the climbers have to sit in their harness and trust that the system will hold.

The Swings scare me the most and the Chuck Wagon is the hardest element to rescue climbers from. Of course, these are the two elements that Brian always chooses for me to do on my practice rescues.

And here I am now on top of the entry pole watching a wasp circling Luis's head. Shit. As subtly as I can I open up the rescue bag and double check to see if his epi-pens are in the front pocket. They each will buy us 15 minutes, just enough time for an ambulance to get from the hospital up to camp. At least today we remembered to get them from his counselor before we headed up to the ropes course. We've lucked out way too many times this summer and I have a distinct feeling that luck is about to run out.

"Bee, I think... I think I was just stung," Luis calls out to me.

Shit.

I take three deep breaths and shout over to Luis to do the same thing. I grab the radio off of the rescue bag and say into it as calmly as I can, "Broken Arrow. Broken Arrow. High Ropes Specialty. L.G. Pine. Broken Arrow, High Ropes."

Broken Arrow being code for "Seriously injured camper, ambulance needed." The initials and tree gives the nurse the name of the camper, Luis Gonzales, and his cabin, Pine, so that she can look up his health card. And High Ropes, that's where whoever is waiting at the gate will guide the ambulance when it finally gets there.

I unclip the rescue bag from the top of the pole and throw the straps over my shoulder. I think I dropped the radio. In the grand scheme of things, one radio falling 30 feet to the ground is insignificant compared to the camper's life that's in jeopardy.

The thirty-pound bag I'm wearing on my back feels way lighter now than it did when I was climbing up just twenty minutes earlier. I was the one who packed the bag, so in my head I'm going over a list of everything that's in it and what I'll need.

Rope? It's neatly coiled inside with a perfectly dressed super-eight knot at the end. The orange rope can handle the weight of an eighteen-wheeler and we keep it in perfect condition, just in case we need to bring someone down from on top of the course. Carabineers? Yes, three. One at the end of the rope to attach to Luis's harness, one hanging on the top loop of the backpack and the other attached to the Rescue Eight. Rescue Eight? That's there too, the shiny steel figure eight with ears on it for extra grip looped through the rope and with a carabineer at the top ready to be clipped in to the course. It will serve as one of the friction points that will control Luis's descent. In the front pocket is a jumble of extras. The epi-pens, a knife for cutting Luis down from his sling-line (but only if need be) and an etrier, a simple webbing ladder that Luis can climb up—if he's still conscious enough to—that'll give me the slack I need to unhook him from the rope that attaches him to the course and transfer him to the rope that will get him to the ground.

I finish the list in my head. Everything is there; it has to be. And if it isn't, well it's too late now. Between calling the emergency in and going over my mental list I've spent 25 seconds. I have to get to Luis as soon as possible.

I'm clipped into the course by a pair of moveable crab claws that attach in to my harness. They're a two-clipped system that consists of two metal clips attached to two separate sling-lines that converge into one rope that is hooked on to the front of my harness. This Y-shaped piece of equipment always allows me one point of contact to the course, just in case of an emergency. Two points cut down on the numbers of "oops" and "uh-ohs" we hear while up in the air. Ropes staff has a theory that "uh-oh" is an indication that something is about to go wrong, but it can still be fixed. "Oops" means that whatever was going to go wrong already did. When you're dangling 30 feet in the air, there is no room for "oops" and "uh oh."

I move one clip on to the first element, The Spaghetti Strings, then the second clip. Brian, who is working the course from the bottom, is staring at me so fixedly I can feel his gaze between my shoulder blades. Two sets of eyes are better for catching mistakes and missed hookups. I take a running jump on to the first wire.

I am immediately reminded that I'm not wearing the right shoes. Closed toed shoes only on the high ropes course. Unless you're Bee—then it's sandals, and not sport sandals but flimsy rubber ones. They're perfectly fine shoes when all I expect to do is hang from the entry pole and send kids down the zipline. As soon as I leap on the wires I can feel them digging into the arch of my foot. But what's a little discomfort for me when Luis is 40 feet away going into anaphylactic shock.

Usually when I'm on the course, I rely completely on the guide ropes for balance. But today I'm relying solely on my crab claws. I'm running across the wire using only the rope in front of me for guidance, scooting and swinging across the first twenty feet of wire.

Another thirty seconds have passed and I'm on the second platform. I shout down to Brian, "Preparing to transfer!"

I see him nod. I yell, "Transfer one to Chuck Wagon." He nods. I slam the clip on to the top guide wire and slide the clip back and forth, "Slide one, check." I assume he nods, so I clip my second line on and as I'm sliding it back and forth I yell, "Transfer two, slide two check!" Brian yells back, "Proceed."

Now it's time to attach the rescue kit on to the top cable. I grab the epi-pens and shove them underneath the elastic of my tank top strap. I clip the etrier and knife to my harness and pull the knotted end of the rope out of the bag. Next, I stretch up to reach the guide wire and attach the caribeener with the rescue eight dangling from it, making sure it's clipped in front of my crab claw connections. I slide it back and forth to make sure it will move without being snagged. Any snag in the system will add seconds on the time that it takes to get Luis down. Everything is set on my end.

"Bag," I yell.

"Clear!"

After confirmation that there's no one underneath me I fling the bag to the ground. Brian is there to throw it further, extending the rope as far as it will go snag free. Things couldn't be going better.

As Brian is getting his act together on the ground, threading the rope through the safety eight—a smaller version of the rescue eight I have on top—and preparing to control Luis's descent from the ground, I continue on. I go a little slower now. I don't want to jostle Luis too much. He needs to stay as calm as possible.

So far he's been doing well. His cousin is on the ground trying to talk him through it. Reminding him that this has happened before and he didn't die then either. Reminding him to breathe and that it'll be okay because, "Bee and Brian promised that nothing bad will happen, and now they'll owe us all ice cream or something." These kids are awesome; we definitely got a good group this week.

When I reach Luis he's still conscious and still breathing, though with some difficulty. Through his gasps and wheezes I can hear him talking me through using the epi-pen. This kid is a champion.

Glad to have a reason to laugh, I smile and tell him, "Save your breath, Louie. Don't worry I got this. Alexis will kill me if I don't get you down safe."

Though his face is swollen, I can still see him crack a smile. Alexis is his little sister who is one of the girls in my cabin. Luis may be older but the way Alexis fusses over him you'd never guess.

It's been around a minute and fifteen seconds. I'm making great time, but now I have to stab Luis in the leg with his epi-pen. I hate needles and I'm not allergic to anything, I've never used an epi-pen, but here goes nothing. Taking a deep breath, I try to replay my first aid training in my head as I go through each step in deploying the epi-pen.

Flip open the cap. Slide out the epi-pen. Pull off the safety release. Line up the pen with the outer thigh. Swing back and jam it in perpendicular to the leg. Wait, one-one-thousand, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Remove, throw the spent pen down to the ground. Massage the injected area, one-one-thousand, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Done.

I look at Luis.

“You did it. Good,” Luis says. “Now get me down.”

Now I take the short end of the rope, the one with the carabineer and attach it to Luis’s harness. But before I can unhook him I have to go through commands with Brian.

“On belay?”

This first command is one I yell to Brian. It’s asking if Brian has the rope taught and ready to carry Luis’s weight. Brian slides the rope through the safety eight until it’s full of tension.

“Belay on!” Brian calls back. He’s ready.

“Unhooking,” I yell.

“Check one,” comes the cry from the ground.

I jump up to see if the carabineer on top is locked; it is. “Check!”

“Check two.”

I squeeze check the carabineer attaching Luis to the rope—it’s locked. “Check. Check three?”

Check three is back on Brian, he needs to make sure the bag is out of the way and nothing is in the area where Luis is about to land. “Check. You may unhook.”

After I hear Brian’s command I reach to unhook Luis from the sling-line that is attaching him to the course. Right now he’s attached to the system that will lower him and the guide cable up top. Luckily, Luis can still stand so there is enough slack for me to undo the carabineer without having to cut through the sling-line. I triple check the system to make sure Luis is hooked in. He is.

“Descending,” I yell down to Brian.

“Descend on!”

Once Brian says these words Luis is in his hands now. I only have to guide him around the ropes and wires of the element he's on, making sure he doesn't snag on the foot wire. Luis spins in lazy circles as Brian lowers him slowly and carefully to the ground.

Aida, the camp nurse, rolls up on her bike just before we get Luis to the ground. She sends the rest of our High Ropes Specialty kids, there are ten more of them waiting patiently on the ground, down to the waterfront away from the action. As soon as Luis is on the ground and unhooked she takes him over to the road to wait for the ambulance.

My legs give out and I sit in my harness for a couple seconds. I look at my watch. I started the timer when I called in Broken Arrow over the radio. It was the longest two minutes and forty seconds of my life. I wobble over to the second platform and take apart the belay system that we just used to bring Luis back to the ground. I drop the soft rope down to the ground and clip all the hardware—the rescue-eight and remaining carabineers—to my belt. The extra 15 pounds hanging from my waist felt like a ton.

Much slower this time, I walk across the Spaghetti Lines, using the guide ropes to pull myself toward the entry pole. Usually, when one of the staff members is exiting the ropes course we repel ourselves down Mission Impossible style. It's typically one of my favorite parts of working up top. But after rescuing Luis, I was feeling pretty rough and didn't want to rely on my shaking hands to keep myself safe.

As if he read my mind, Brian made his way back to the entry pole. He has the entry rope attached to his harness with the Gris-Gris, the self-locking and idiot-proof belay device that we prefer, already attached.

“I already sent up the carabinieri. Get yourself hooked in, wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself after a successful rescue,” he says.

I attach myself in and got ready to be lowered down.

“Descending,” I call to Brian.

“Descend on.”

With every foot closer to the ground, I get a little bit more relaxed. My knees buckle as soon as I touch the ground. I throw off my helmet and sit breathing heavily in the woodchips at the base of the pole.

“You did good kid,” Brian says, ruffling my hair as he said so.

I can’t help but laugh as I look up at him. I did do good. As good as could be expected. The rest of the kids were safe at the waterfront, Luis was with Aida on his way to the hospital and I had both feet firmly on the ground. Disaster averted.

Laughing, I ask Brian if he remembers last year’s CPR training. At first he doesn’t know what I’m talking about. But then the light bulb clicks.

“Yeah, Matt’s full of shit. I bet you’re glad I made you run through all of those practices.”

And I am.