

The Bear

Mark Motley, 11/22/2021

Backpacking in New Mexico in 2010, I woke early one morning to a bear eating one of nine young men in my care. The bear had bitten a fourteen-year-old young man named Aaron through his tent and would not let go. I was out of my tent and at Aaron's in seconds. I was unarmed (and not by choice - I'm an avid shooter). I was barefoot in the woods wearing just gym shorts and a T-shirt. Per local rules, we had no bear spray. Near the road on the last morning of our ten-day backpacking trip, I knew we'd soon have help enough, but not soon enough. This had to be fixed quickly and by us - no one else could help in time. Every second rescue was delayed surely increased odds of a really bad outcome. My mind raced for a solution, jolted by this understanding: either we would rescue Aaron quickly or he would likely not survive.

Several months earlier, my son, Josh learned his Boy Scout⁽¹⁾ troop's wait-listed application for Philmont Scout Ranch the following summer was approved. He wanted to go and surprised me by asking if I would come as an adult leader. I readily agreed. Besides, Philmont was an unfilled goal from my own youth. I volunteered and was accepted. The troop's scoutmaster had been committed for Summer Camp at Camp Friedlander with the younger boys for the assigned dates, and the Committee Chairman who had organized the application had just gotten a cancer diagnosis, so I was appointed the adult leader in charge of our Philmont crew of twelve: two other adults and nine boys, ages 14 to 17.

Philmont is the world's largest youth camp. Located in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of Northern New Mexico, Philmont covers 220 square miles – that's about ten times larger than the island of Manhattan ⁽²⁾. Its summer staff exceeds 1,300, and more than 24,000 Scouts and leaders trek there each summer, mostly on 7- to

12-day backpacking trips. Dozens of hiking routes over nearly 400 miles of trails are offered ranging from 50 to 120 miles in length.

The boys appreciate that most days at Philmont don't consist entirely of hiking. There is hiking most mornings with an activity most afternoons at a staffed camp such as instruction in rock-climbing, fly fishing, skeet shooting, .30-06 rifle, black powder musket, Indian lore, or pioneer life, working on conservation projects or trail-building, and more. One afternoon of our route included a search & rescue class with a timed competition which our boys aced, achieving the best score by a good margin of any crew so far that summer. That class included instruction and field practice in stabilizing and transporting an injured person. They couldn't know then that less than two days later they would be using those same skills to evacuate one of their own for real.

Philmont's bear population was estimated at about 150⁽³⁾ – nearly one bear for every one and a half square miles. If you hiked 50 miles through such country and if the bears were randomly distributed *and* didn't move to avoid you, you would likely pass within 100 yards, on average, of 4 different bears, and within 500 yards, on average, of 15 more. But bears do move, and in fact you wouldn't necessarily see any. Most Philmont crews never see a bear in ten days. But they are there. To co-exist with so many bears, Philmont developed an extensive set of bear procedures⁽⁴⁾.

Philmont's bear rules are mostly about food and sleeping spaces. Food may only be prepared and eaten in a certain area of a campsite, called the "fire pit". Tents are only pitched in a different area. Food and other "smellables", as they call them, are stored in yet another area 15 feet up in the air in bear bags hanging from cables stretched between trees. Each of these three areas must be at least 50 yards from the other two. A "smellable" is any item with an odor that may be interesting to a bear, including all food, all trash, toothpaste, band-aids, and everything else in a first aid kit.

(Deodorant, by the way, is not allowed on the trail as its scents tend to pique the curiosity of bears.) No food or other "smellable" is ever allowed inside a tent. No clothing that has been worn during the day nor in which one has eaten is allowed in a tent either, so separate clothing for sleeping is required. There were other rules, but you get the gist.

Philmont's bear procedures revolve around smell and food because bears have among the best senses of smell of any animal: estimated at 21 times stronger than that of the average dog, 7 times more acute than that of a bloodhound, and an estimated 2,100 times more keen than yours.⁽⁵⁾

We prepared for our trip for months, mostly with physical conditioning, largely consisting of climbing and re-climbing the stairs at the Sycamore Jr. High football stadium with 40 lb. backpacks for an hour or more at a time two or three times a week. Finally, the day arrived: preparations were over, and our trek began. The guys did well, were well prepared, and quickly became comfortable with the routine. We hiked in beautiful mountains and enjoyed good weather and a great time.

On the afternoon of day nine of our ten-day trip, we were pleased and proud to walk into our last camp, a staffed camp named Zastrow. Everyone was well and in good spirits. We had all but completed our 54-mile trek. A paved road was half a mile away and we were to meet a bus the next morning for a ride back to the tent city of Philmont base camp. A brief bear sighting near the staff cabin early that evening, the third of our trip to that point, kept us focused on carefully following the bear procedures for one last night.

I woke early, maybe 5:30 or so, Wednesday morning, July 7, 2010 to my son Josh saying from inside his tent close to and in front of mine, "What was that?!" immediately followed by his declaring "That's a bear! I think that's a bear out there." Without

seeing it, Josh identified the presence as a bear when it huffed. Those comments were made with muted volume – he wanted to be loud enough to be heard by the rest of us but not so loud as to startle the nearby camp intruder. How near? The bear had poked one of the tents with its snout, then it poked the next tent, occupied by Aaron’s older brother, Collin and my son, Josh. My transition from half-awake to hyper-attentive was remarkably rapid, and I didn’t even know until much later that when the bear poked the second tent, it nosed Josh’s side, with its snout getting within about six inches of my son’s face.

We had heard it suggested along the trail that pitching our six tents close together would appear more like one large object to the poorly sighted bears and so might make a bear hesitate more than scattered individual tents. I had doubts that would dissuade ursine curiosity, but downside seemed slim, so we did. All our tents were in a tight cluster with the back of Josh’s and Colin’s less than three feet from the door of my own.

As we had been trained, someone – possibly I, but I’m not sure – instructed all to start talking calmly to make sure the bear understood the tents were occupied. All who were awake immediately complied in a general mild cacophony for four or five seconds until things took a very different turn.

I had started moving on Josh’s “What’s that?!”, and when he confirmed it was a bear, I had already started to exit my tent but was still on my knees clearing the low door and couldn’t see it, blocked by Collin’s and Josh’s tent. As I cleared the door and rose, Hugh, another young man in our crew, cried out, “The bear’s on Aaron’s tent!”, overlapped by Aaron plaintively yelling “It’s on the tent!”, and then “Ahhhh! It’s biting me!”, or something similar. I don’t recall exactly. My son recollects it differently: that Aaron didn’t say “it’s biting me!” There was naturally some confusion about exactly what went down the moment this all fell apart.

The bear had stepped on Aaron's tent and knocked it down. Aaron and his tentmate that night had apparently slept through the previous commotion but awoke when their tent collapsed. Startled awake, Aaron jolted up to exit. When his head jerked up, it collided with the bear's snout, only separated by the tent fabric. That's when Aaron was bitten the first time.

Our fourth bear encounter had suddenly become a bear attack. I was first out and ran barefoot the 7 or 8 yards to Aaron's tent, at the other end of our tent cluster, yelling like a banshee while thinking "How can this be happening?! And on the *last* morning of our trip?!" Self-pity is, of course, unbecoming, and the more so here because I wasn't even the victim. Yet I confess those were my first thoughts – quickly crowded out by a cascade of others.

I skirted the side of Josh's and Collin's tent, passing the young man who had shared Aaron's tent that night, moving the other way. Aaron's tent was down, flat. The bear was standing beside the tent, its mouth clamped on something inside. I stopped across the width of the small pup tent, toes on the fabric with Aaron and the bear's head less than five feet away. In low light, I could see the form created by Aaron in the collapsed tent and the body part in the grip of the bear's jaws appeared to be Aaron's head.

As we knew to do, I stood tall waiving arms and yelling as loudly as possible. I was pretty loud. I later learned people heard me half a mile away. The bear had not responded to my yelling before I got to that spot, but I thought surely it would react differently with me so close, directly in front of it. I yelled again as loudly and fiercely as I could and was again ignored by the bear. It just focused on the lump in the tent in its mouth. The fabric near was visibly blood stained, looking more black than red in the low light. We later learned the bear by that point had bitten Aaron's head twice,

then his hand, then his head again and held on. What I saw was the bear's mouth clamped on something through the tent. What I heard were occasional groans from Aaron, which were a welcome sound – proof of life. But I was pretty sure that couldn't last long. I was consumed with urgency. When the bear shifted a little for a different bite as it eventually would - perhaps to the neck - this could go south quickly. Disastrously.

Zastrow's staff of six young men mostly in their early twenties, were in their cabin less than 250 yards away. Two other trekking crews were at other sites in the same camp. We were on a dirt road near a paved road. When the staff understood, they would come running and also radio for lots of help. This camp was not isolated like our unstaffed backwoods campsites. But it doesn't matter that help is only minutes away when seconds can make all the difference.

Collin and Josh were out of their tent right after I was and yelling maybe eight feet behind me. All the others were out soon after that and forming a line as well. I'm sure all were barefoot. Given prior experience of repeatedly running a very large bear away from our camp on our second night on the trail at Philmont– multiple times through the whole night – we all knew to yell and waive arms to scare the bear away. But try as we might, this bear was entirely unimpressed with theatrics. I began to grasp it was not going to be frightened away. I had to come up with something else ... quickly. There was no time to organize our group to act together. I didn't know what, I but I *had* to do something.

Within seconds of arriving at Aaron's tent, I suddenly realized with every fiber I had no other choice but to become explosively violent. There was no debate within. None. But I also knew bringing empty hands to a claw fight had no chance for success. I had to arm quickly but primitively, as modern arms were unavailable. My mind raced through options. I had a small pocketknife in my tent, but I considered and rejected

that in milliseconds – its short blade couldn't reach a vital organ in the best circumstance (even if I could find one). I looked around and then I saw, to my left and a step back, a nice rock. It turned out to be about the weight of a couple of concrete blocks but much more compact - too heavy to throw far. It was flattish: 18 or 20 inches long, maybe 12 or 14 inches at the widest, perhaps 6 or 7 inches tall. It had nice edges and some good corners. A much better rock for the need could not be found had the hand of Providence placed it there itself. It would do. It would have to do.

In that adrenaline-charged state, I picked it up, stepped left for a better angle at the bear's right side, raised the rock over and then behind my head, lunged forward and hurled the stone maybe four feet to the bear, caveman style, as we suppose. As I started the lunge, I sorted out aim point options, first, planning to aim for the bear's head. Then I shuddered and quickly ruled that out, realizing that could easily harm Aaron more than the bear. With the bear's right flank presented, I adjusted and aimed for the middle of its side. I threw it as hard as I could. The trajectory was downward. Serendipitously, as I pivoted left to change aim mid-throw from the bear's head to its mid-flank, I over-rotated, and hit instead its right back haunches.

We all know the aphorism "Don't poke the bear!" I held no illusion that platitude was limited to "poking" just because it didn't also proscribe other things like throwing small boulders. I understood this would agitate the beast but doing so was not bravado. Let me be clear - this was not bravery. It was desperation. Pure back-against-the-wall desperation. And I knew it was a bad option, but I was fully convinced every other option was materially worse.

My object was to hurt or shock the bear enough to convince it to leave. But on being hit, it stayed. It did, however release Aaron and turn its head to its right, first to me, then all the way back to its right hip where the boulder had hit. And that opened an

unexpected opportunity. The follow-through from the throw left me less than four feet from Aaron and where the bear's head had been, but the bear's head was temporarily turned back to its hip. So, I temporized on my improvised plan. Concluding my best opportunity had just opened up, I immediately decided to take the one remaining step and pull Aaron away, ideally while the bear's head remained turned. I don't have a good excuse for that – I guess my Irish was up. But I knew in snatching away the bear's breakfast, speed was my only chance - there could be no time to analyze or hesitate.

There was also no time to pull Aaron out of the tent in that move. Aaron was inside the collapsed tent had no arm or leg sticking out to grab. I could only reach around him, between the boy and the bear, grab Aaron and the tent together, and pull both away. In doing so, my left shoulder entered space recently occupied by the bear's neck and part of my head entered space recently occupied by the bear's head, and presumably soon to be again. I couldn't be much closer. Assuming milliseconds could divide success from failure, I specifically recall willing myself to not glance over my left shoulder at the bear as I reached in but rather to keep my eyes solely fixed on Aaron. I wanted to keep an eye on the bear as the side of my face got within inches of its left shoulder while its head was turned back on its right side to watch for the head's expected return, but I knew looking could only slow me down and assumed speed was the thing I needed most of all. So, I didn't. I was all in. Taking a shot.

For that second or two as I reached in to pull Aaron away from the bear seeking to be as fast as humanly possible, time seemed to almost stand still. My focus was intense. Attempting to pull Aaron and the tent away together, providentially, was *not* the result. The tent stake at that corner held and I only slid Aaron within the tent to the other side, leaving the tent itself in place. Aaron, nearly tall as I, slid as easily as if the tent floor had been greased. With Aaron on my side of the tent, I allowed myself to look back at the bear. Its head was still turned back to its right hip! It was no near-miss of a thing

with its head whipping back to nearly collide with mine - it wasn't even close. The bear remained that way checking out its hip another few seconds after I looked at it. I allow myself to imagine I had done some damage back there.

Aaron began to stir which was clearly a good thing. The brown color bear stood up on its hind legs, which I took to be a bad thing, a threat. If so, it worked: I did feel threatened, it was nearly in reach! With Aaron moving and the bear standing, I figured one of us had better focus on the bear. I stood tall again bluffing a threat back and bellowing at the bear as Aaron began to exit the collapsed tent and said his hand hurt. He seemed to be getting out OK, so I didn't help, I just tried to dissuade the bear's advance as I suddenly realized, to dismay, we had a big problem previously unappreciated.

An improvised plan is by definition, not a well-thought-out plan. The suddenly appreciated flaw with this plan was when the bear came back down from standing, as it would, its next move would almost certainly be to simply take the one or two steps to us and with or without my help, Aaron would not have exited the tent in time. My mind raced to improvise a response, some defense, a new plan. But I came up with nothing good. All I had was to lunge toward the bear to try to get its attention, then move to the side and try to draw it after me to buy time for Aaron to exit the tent and move to the others (that is, if he were able, I wasn't sure then). What a lame plan! And the previous few seconds had gone so well! Now it was all fixing to unravel. In no time, the bear would be upon either Aaron or me, and likely do more damage than before. And with no good counter to that, we were in a tight spot.

During this brief time, I recall uttering no question, direction, or encouragement to Aaron. Focus on the bear consumed all my processing capacity, I simply couldn't spare the bandwidth to speak. I had to calculate, process.

Aaron continued to exit the collapsed tent, rapidly relative to his condition, but too slowly given the need. With Aaron's head out of the tent, I ventured a quick glance down. The dawn was too gray to fully see what a bloody, shredded mess the back of his head was, which was good. He was moving on his own and speaking – that was very good. It could have been so much worse. But no matter, he couldn't make it in time! The bear was too close! The bear dropped down to all fours, looked at us, huffed, took a step forward and then began to focus on a lump under the collapsed roof on the other side of the tent where Aaron's head had been. It was not more than four feet from Aaron and me. The lump was Aaron's camp pillow, soaked in blood, mercifully dripping in blood and it had providentially stayed when I slid everything else in the tent to the other side - Aaron, his sleeping bag, his sleeping pad, the other boy's bedding. But the blood-soaked pillow stayed in place with the same odor and taste as that new treat the bear had recently discovered and latched on to for a while. A tender mercy in the dim first light. With a bear's keen sense of smell, it focused on the bloody pillow while Aaron exited the tent right in front of it, stumbled to the others and was led to the fire pit by his father, one of the other two adults in our crew and my tent-mate that night. I stayed in place yelling and waving, still trying to convince that bear to yield, as if I could awe the beast into fleeing by the force of a terrible voice, blasting rock and causing creatures to tremble. Right.

Adrenaline is the common name for the hormone epinephrine, the same liquid in the infamous Epi-pen. It has powerful effects on the body. Adrenaline allows muscles to rapidly access great amounts of stored high energy sugar. Another effect is a significant increase in concentration with a nearly tunnel-vision focus.

In hindsight, I realize now how much I was then under the influence of that powerful chemical. Strength, quickness, concentration, and rapid mental processing were each beneficial, but the tunnel-vision thing was not. The moment Aaron was away from the bear, the situation changed materially, and I should have adjusted my objective. I was

unable to see that then, but that's when I should have had the crew abandon the tents to the bear. In the heat of that moment, my blood was up, as they say, and I could not adapt. Rather, tactically inflexible, I stubbornly stuck with my original battle plan of trying to force the enemy from the field. Fortunately, no harm came of that mistake.

Everyone continued to yell at the bear. My son grabbed aluminum tent poles to clang together. Hugh got our big cook pot and lid to bang, greatly amplifying the ruckus. We made as much noise as possible for what must have been two minutes or more while the bear completely ignored us. It just focused on that blood-soaked lump in the tent with no apparent fear of all those humans so near making so much racket. Eventually, the bear pulled the pillow through a rip in the tent and lumbered off into the woods at an unhurried pace, pillow in mouth. Imagine its pending disappointment.

Only then did we all remove to the fire pit to join Aaron and his father there. Judging the primary danger past and Aaron's injuries serious but not life-threatening, my adrenaline level crashed, and I was exhausted. Feeling I had completed my part - other than maintaining watch for the bear's return - I turned things over to James, the youth who had been appointed crew leader for our trip. Before we arrived there, Aaron's father had already grabbed a camp towel hanging out to dry overnight and pressed it to the back of Aaron's head.

My son Josh, and his tent-mate Collin were the crew medics, each having received 22 hours of wilderness first aid training from the Red Cross before the trip. Collin stayed with the patient as Josh took another youth in the crew, Brian and ran, still barefoot, through the woods to retrieve our first aid kit from the bear bags up in trees. Those bags were about 60 yards away in nearly the same direction we had last seen the bear travel. As they ran out of our sight into the shadows of the still gray woods, they were unsure if they would encounter the bear behind the next tree. They didn't. Returning, they administered first aid. Aaron had begun to shake. The scalp on the

back of his head was a shredded, hanging mess and he had lost some blood. One hand had puncture wounds and I assumed then was broken, but later learned it wasn't.

As Josh and Brian ran for the med kit, James and Hugh ran to alert the Staff at their cabin. Already up and scrambling to dress, the staff rushed to assist on confirmation of what they had already guessed. One stayed to work the radio. A medical team was dispatched from Philmont's Health Lodge - its trauma center and small hospital. Philmont's director was alerted. The supervisor of the camp staffs was notified. Shooters were requested from the cowboys at Philmont's working cattle ranch.

With one on the radio, the other five Zastrow staff raced to us. When they arrived, one who was EMT trained took over from our medics after they gave him a quick report. The other two adults in our crew were asked to stay, and I was directed to take our eight uninjured boys to the safety of the staff cabin. They needed no encouragement to run. Thinking straggling ill-advised, I struggled to not sink too far behind, stepping into pants and boots on the move.

Two of the staffers ran to remove the other two crews camped at Zastrow that night to the safety of the staff cabin. A third staffer was sent back to the cabin to retrieve a litter stored there – that's a wire mountain rescue stretcher shaped as a shallow basket. After he left, they were down to just two Philmont staff, our two other adults, and Aaron at the campsite. And that's when the bear returned. It approached. Both staffers, including the one administering first aid, quickly moved toward the bear to form a screen. They threw rocks and yelled. The bear charged one, then pulled up short. That staffer dodged to the side and kicked the bear in the ribs with his boot hard (a gutsy move I wish I'd witnessed, but I wasn't there). The bear withdrew again.

The staff member who went back to the cabin requested four volunteers to carry the litter. In a room packed with over thirty youth and leaders, four of our guys immediately stepped forward and ran back to our campsite with the litter. Soon, Aaron, wrapped in a sleeping bag was evacuated to the porch of the Staff Cabin in the litter carried by James, Collin, Hugh, and my son Josh, just as they had learned and practiced not two days earlier.

A large SUV fitted as an ambulance quickly arrived from the Health Lodge with two of its staff. The driver was a med student somewhere. They arrived very quickly – within minutes of Aaron arriving at the cabin. Six of us shifted Aaron from the litter to their stretcher. Aaron's father, the two Health Lodge staff, and I loaded that stretcher with Aaron into their SUV. I asked if Aaron's father could go with them. They rushed to the Health Lodge, where Aaron was cleaned up and patched with 22 staples in the back of his head. That afternoon, I saw the driver and congratulated him on their quick arrival that morning. He admitted they “made the 22-minute trip in 11 minutes. Shhhh!”

At Philmont, they trap, sedate, and relocate bears for all manner of lesser crimes, but tasting human blood is a capital offense with no recourse. Three shooters from the cowboys at Philmont's cattle ranch were urgently dispatched to Zastrow to dispatch the bear. First to arrive was a Japanese American named Ken. His pickup bounced in hot, spinning up dust off the dirt road and skidding to a halt. He jumped out with his dog, one hand holding a lever-action .30-30 rifle, the other stuffing a big .44 Magnum revolver in the waistband of his jeans - literally loaded for bear. With a staff member as guide, he ran to our vacated campsite to find the bear had returned a third time. Back at the staff cabin, we heard excited barking and then a single shot rang out. I rushed outside to hear better. The first shot was followed by a second, a third, a fourth. Then silence for maybe twenty-five or thirty seconds. Anxiety built at the cabin - we knew the cowboy was having a battle on his hands but couldn't tell how it was

going. I strained to hear. Then, finally, came the punctuation of two thunderous booms in quick succession. We soon learned it took four shots from the .30-30 rifle, a running chase of more than a hundred yards that crossed a knee-deep creek, then two shots from the big .44 to drop our bear. All shots were close range. None missed. Two lessons here: first, requiring six shots to take it down, our bear, while not especially large, as bears go, was a pretty tough nut to crack, and second, the .44 Magnum is a powerful round!

Soon after, Philmont's director arrived. He was being briefed, asking questions, taking calls, and well before 6:30 a.m. Mountain Daylight Time, was on his cell phone working media spin, seeking to get ahead of what he knew would be a minor national human-interest news story that day, one that could not be good for business. He also gave us an update on Aaron - he was doing fine and would soon be transferred to a hospital in Santa Fe for tests.

A little later, a warden from the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish arrived for interviews and a scene investigation. He took photos, gathered evidence, searched the tents and determined no food, candy wrappers, or the like was in any of them. The kill was classified justified.

After that, we returned to our campsite to gather gear. Half of our tents were flattened - one littered with some one- and two-inch chunks of bright red flesh with brown fur on one side - exit wound debris from the bear. I snapped a photo of that. We opted to eat breakfast by the staff cabin rather than at our campsite that morning. Instant oatmeal was the morning fare. We had learned from another crew back on the trail that if you're in a hurry, or too lazy to cook or clean much, instant oats can be made with cold water, uncooked. We had done it before - it was alright. That morning, by unanimous consent we opted for that preparation again as none had energy to cook.

After breakfast, ten of us hiked to the trailhead to catch our bus – on time and as scheduled, carrying Aaron’s gear and that of his father along with our own. As we left Zastrow, all its staff lined up and we filed by shaking each one's hand. I don’t know where that came from – it was spontaneous. They remained in that dressed line to watch us disappear over the ridge little more than a hundred yards away. At the crest, I had our crew stop, turn back, and give the Zastrow staff a cheer. They cheered us in return, and we went on. Each group was expressing its respect and gratitude for what the other had done that morning. Other recognition would follow, none more meaningful.

At Philmont base camp, we were glad to see Aaron when he returned late that afternoon. He was in good spirits with a large bandage on one hand and his head wrapped like a big white turban. With my old Blackberry phone, my son snapped a picture of Aaron grinning broadly with two thumbs up sitting cross-legged on a bed in the Health Lodge. I sent that photo to Aaron's mother in Cincinnati attached to a text - the first time I had managed such a high-tech maneuver with a cell phone! I knew that picture would be more comforting to her than any number of words. She called the paper, and the next morning, the Cincinnati Enquirer ran a front-page article about our little adventure with that photo inside. That morning, someone in Cincinnati send us a text with a link to that article and photo, which we viewed at base camp on a phone as I marveled at the circularity.

Before we left Philmont, our crew saw some newly arrived Scouts sporting T-shirts with the inscription, "Scars are tattoos with better stories." Our guys grinned but passed on seeking any of those - feeling no need to wear bravado as it were, on their sleeves. The four that had evacuated Aaron did, however, buy T-shirts at the camp store that said "Philmont Search + Rescue", feeling they’d earned the right to those and I couldn't disagree. Besides, I could barely speak then above a hoarse whisper, my voice having been temporarily shot from yelling.

A thoughtful young man in our crew, Hugh, shared with me then an unexpected observation: "Bears are so stupid", he said, "they don't stand a chance against humans." I confess, that insight was not one I had considered that morning.

The Associated Press picked up our story from a New Mexico Department of Game and Fish press release and a few inches of copy found their way into several newspapers the next day. Nearly all contained the typical newspaper mix of fact and fiction: "14-year-old", "Philmont", and "Bitten on the hand", were each correct. "The bear jumped on the tent", was not as far as I know. "A deep scratch in the head", no, Aaron was neither clawed nor scratched⁽⁶⁾. This bear was not fighting, it was feeding. Moreover, "A deep scratch" sounds so much more palatable than any more accurate description – I wondered if that had come from the Camp Director's media spin, but I don't know.

Since Philmont is a Boy Scout facility, that some awards and medals followed will be no surprise. Two years later, after several interviews and a lengthy review, I received something called the Honor Medal which is awarded only by Scouting's National Court of Honor. I'll leave further discussion of that to a footnote⁽⁷⁾, except to mention it was presented by the director of the Dan Beard Council in a joint ceremony in which three young men from our trip received their Eagle Scout awards: Aaron's brother, Colin, our Philmont crew leader, James, and my son, Josh. Those three also each received what was then called the Heroism Medal (now the Merit Award) for their actions that morning. Afterward, Aaron quipped, "I don't know why they got medals - I was the one bitten by the bear!"

I wish there were a happy ending to this story, but there isn't. Aaron physically recovered. The back of his scalp was heavily scarred but covered by hair. Other than that, he had puncture wound scars on one hand and no permanent physical injury.

But Aaron was troubled. Six years later, in 2016, his grandfather died after a battle with cancer. Aaron's family stayed at his grandparents' home for the funeral, where twenty-year-old Aaron found his grandfather's pain pills. Self-medicating, he took some, overdid it, fell asleep and didn't wake up.

That's a chapter in this story I'm still processing. I had come to believe, and I still believe the benevolent hand of Providence was evidenced that morning, but for what purpose, I couldn't presume to know. Jeff Talbert, the other adult that saw most if it unfold told me he was convinced then the most likely result of my choices that morning would be two victims requiring help rather than one. I used the word "providentially" more than once to share this tale since so many things could have gone differently that morning. I'm convinced it worked out only because of some tender mercies in the dim first light, but after what later occurred to Aaron, the question loomed: "Why?"

This is not an easy tale to tell, and not solely because of what later happened to Aaron. I debated sharing this story here at all because in relating something like this it's hard to avoid appearing or perhaps being self-promotional. There are a couple of books about Scout Honor Medal recipients and the forward to one was written by Hershel "Woody" Williams, now the last surviving Medal of Honor recipient from WWII. He wrote that in saving another's life, the subjects of the book each changed their own life forever. He also said recognition for that "is not a light burden to bear..."⁽⁸⁾. Part of that burden surely includes doubts about whether it's ever appropriate to share.

I'm not sure. I'm happy I didn't make things worse that morning. I'm grateful we were blessed that so many things worked out that could easily have gone sideways. I wish Aaron had been more careful with the gift of time he was given, and to have used it to contribute in some good way. And I hope sharing this story here myself isn't anything

unseemly. My goal was just to share a unique tale I hope you found worth the listening.

Notes:

- 1) Now, Scouts BSA.
- 2) The island of Manhattan is 22.83 square miles.
- 3) <https://www.philmontscoutranch.org/resources/promotephilmont/quick-facts/>
- 4) http://www.sccovington.com/philmont/trek_info/bearInformation/bears_procedures.htm
- 5) https://sectionhiker.com/bears_sense_of_smell/
<https://www.nps.gov/yose/blogs/bear-series-part-one-a-bears-sense-of-smell.htm>
- 6) <https://www.abqjournal.com/8290/updated-bear-killed-after-attack-at-philmont-scout-ranch.html>
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- 7) Inspired by the Medal of Honor, in 1911 the Boy Scouts of America created a medal called the Honor Medal as its own highest commendation for valor associated with lifesaving by Scouts or leaders. Its citation reads, "Has demonstrated unusual heroism and skill or resourcefulness in saving or attempting to save life at considerable risk to self." Local Scout troops, districts, and councils can't award this medal, only the National Court of Honor can do so, after extensive review.

The Honor Medal may imitate the Medal of Honor in name but there is no equivalence. None. The direst circumstances associated with the Scouting medal don't compare to those faced by Medal of Honor recipients. For example, I couldn't find how many Scout Honor Medals have been awarded posthumously, but by 1932, 250 Honor Medals had then been awarded in its first 21 years and 19 of those were posthumous awards. That's a sobering 8% of that sample. But consider the contrast: since the beginning of WWII, nearly 62% of Medals of Honor have been posthumous awards. The only similarity they share is that neither medal is common. Since its origin during the Civil War, Medals of Honor have been given to 3,508 recipients, and there have been 2,631 Scout Honor Medals awarded over a shorter time frame. On average, about 23 per year of each have been awarded since their respective inceptions.

See: <https://www.cmohs.org/medal/faqs>

Running Toward Danger, Michael S. Malone

Boy Heroes of Today: Boy Scout Gold Honor Medal Awards by Dan Beard, 1932.

<http://www.thedump.scoutscan.com/boyheroes.pdf>

8) *Running Toward Danger*, Michael S. Malone, forward, p. xxii.

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