

## Laurence Gonzales, "The 12 Rules of Survival"

### "The 12 Rules of Survival"

by Laurence Gonzales

From "Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why"



"As a journalist, I've been writing about accidents for more than thirty years. In the last 15 or so years, I've concentrated on accidents in outdoor recreation, in an effort to understand who lives, who dies, and why. To my surprise, I found an eerie uniformity in the way people survive seemingly impossible circumstances.

Decades and sometimes centuries apart, separated by culture, geography, race, language, and tradition, the most successful survivors—those who practice what I call “deep survival”—go through the same patterns of thought and behavior, the same transformation and spiritual discovery, in the course of keeping themselves alive. Not only that but it doesn't seem to matter whether they are surviving being lost in the wilderness or battling cancer, whether they're struggling through divorce or facing a business catastrophe— the strategies remain the same. Survival should be thought of as a journey, a vision quest of the sort that Native Americans have had as a rite of passage for thousands of years. Once you're past the precipitating event— you're cast away at sea or told you have cancer— you have been enrolled in one of the oldest schools in history. Here are a few things I've learned that can help you pass the final exam.

**1. Perceive and Believe:** Don't fall into the deadly trap of denial or of immobilizing fear. Admit it: You're really in trouble and you're going to have to get yourself out. Many people who in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, died simply because they told themselves that everything was going to be all right. Others panicked. Panic doesn't necessarily mean screaming and running around. Often it means simply doing nothing. Survivors don't candy-coat the truth, but they also don't give in to hopelessness in the face of it. Survivors see opportunity, even good, in their situation, however grim. After the ordeal is over, people may be surprised to hear them say it was the best thing that ever happened to them. Viktor Frankl, who spent three years in Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps, describes comforting a woman who was dying. She told him, “I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard. In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously.” The phases of the survival journey roughly parallel the five stages of death once described by Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In dire circumstances, a survivor moves through those stages rapidly to acceptance of his situation, then resolves to do something to save himself. Survival depends on telling yourself, “Okay, I'm here. This is really happening. Now I'm going to do the next right thing to get myself out.” Whether you succeed or not ultimately becomes irrelevant. It is in acting well— even suffering well— that you give meaning to whatever life you have to live.

**2. Stay Calm – Use Your Anger:** In the initial crisis, survivors are not ruled by fear; instead, they make use of it. Their fear often feels like (and turns into) anger, which motivates them and makes them feel sharper. Aron Ralston, the hiker who had to cut off his hand to free himself from a stone that had

trapped him in a slot canyon in Utah, initially panicked and began slamming himself over and over against the boulder that had caught his hand. But very quickly, he stopped himself, did some deep breathing, and began thinking about his options. He eventually spent five days progressing through the stages necessary to convince him of what decisive action he had to take to save his own life. When Lance Armstrong, six-time winner of the Tour de France, awoke from brain surgery for his cancer, he first felt gratitude. “But then I felt a second wave, of anger... I was alive, and I was mad.” When friends asked him how he was doing, he responded, “I’m doing great... I like it like this. I like the odds stacked against me... I don’t know any other way.” That’s survivor thinking. Survivors also manage pain well. As a bike racer, Armstrong had had long training in enduring pain, even learning to love it. James Stockdale, a fighter pilot who was shot down in Vietnam and spent eight years in the Hanoi Hilton, as his prison camp was known, advised those who would learn to survive: “One should include a course of familiarization with pain. You have to practice hurting. There is no question about it.”

**3. Think, Analyze, and Plan:** Survivors quickly organize, set up routines, and institute discipline. When Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with cancer, he organized his fight against it the way he would organize his training for a race. He read everything he could about it, put himself on a training schedule, and put together a team from among friends, family, and doctors to support his efforts. Such conscious, organized effort in the face of grave danger requires a split between reason and emotion in which reason gives direction and emotion provides the power source. Survivors often report experiencing reason as an audible “voice.” Steve Callahan, a sailor and boat designer, was rammed by a whale and sunk while on a solo voyage in 1982. Adrift in the Atlantic for 76 days in a five-and-a-half-foot raft, he experienced his survival voyage as taking place under the command of a “captain,” who gave him his orders and kept him on his water ration, even as his own mutinous (emotional) spirit complained. His captain routinely lectured “the crew.” Thus under strict control, he was able to push away thoughts that his situation was hopeless and take the necessary first steps of the survival journey: to think clearly, analyze his situation, and formulate a plan.

**4. Take Correct, Decisive Action:** Survivors are willing to take risks to save themselves and others. But they are simultaneously bold and cautious in what they will do. Lauren Elder was the only survivor of a light plane crash in high sierra. Stranded on a peak above 12,000 feet, one arm broken, she could see the San Joaquin Valley in California below, but a vast wilderness and sheer and icy cliffs separated her from it. Wearing a wrap-around skirt and blouse, with two-inch heeled boots and not even wearing underwear, she crawled “on all fours, doing a kind of sideways spiderwalk,” as she put it later, “balancing myself on the ice crust, punching through it with my hands and feet.” She had 36 hours of climbing ahead of her— a seemingly impossible task. But Elder allowed herself to think only as far as the next big rock. Survivors break down large jobs into small, manageable tasks. They set attainable goals and develop short-term plans to reach them. They are meticulous about doing those tasks well. Elder tested each hold before moving forward and stopped frequently to rest. They make very few mistakes. They handle what is within their power to deal with from moment to moment, hour to hour, day to day.

**5. Celebrate your success:** Survivors take great joy from even their smallest successes. This helps keep motivation high and prevents a lethal plunge into hopelessness. It also provides relief from the unspeakable strain of a life-threatening situation. Elder said that once she had completed her descent of the first pitch, she looked up at the impossibly steep slope and thought, “Look what you've done...Exhilarated, I gave a whoop that echoed down the silent pass.” Even with a broken arm, joy was Elder's constant companion. A good survivor always tells herself: count your blessings– you're alive. Viktor Frankl wrote of how he felt at times in Auschwitz: “How content we were; happy in spite of everything.”

**6. Be a Rescuer, Not a Victim:** Survivors are always doing what they do for someone else, even if that someone is thousands of miles away. There are numerous strategies for doing this. When Antoine Saint-Exupery was stranded in the Lybian desert after his mail plane suffered an engine failure, he thought of how his wife would suffer if he gave up and didn't return. Yossi Ghinsberg, a young Israeli hiker, was lost in the Bolivian jungle for more than two weeks after becoming separated from his friends. He hallucinated a beautiful companion with whom he slept each night as he traveled. Everything he did, he did for her. People cannot survive for themselves alone; their must be a higher motive. Viktor Frankl put it this way: “Don't aim at success– the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it.” He suggests taking it as “the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.”

**7. Enjoy the Survival Journey:** It may seem counterintuitive, but even in the worst circumstances, survivors find something to enjoy, some way to play and laugh. Survival can be tedious, and waiting itself is an art. Elder found herself laughing out loud when she started to worry that someone might see up her skirt as she climbed. Even as Callahan's boat was sinking, he stopped to laugh at himself as he clutched a knife in his teeth like a pirate while trying to get into his life raft. And Viktor Frankl ordered some of his companions in Auschwitz who were threatening to give up hope to force themselves to think of one funny thing each day. Survivors also use the intellect to stimulate, calm, and entertain the mind. While moving across a near-vertical cliff face in Peru, Joe Simpson developed a rhythmic pattern of placing his ax, plunging his other arm into the snow face, and then making a frightening little hop with his good leg. “I meticulously repeated the pattern,” he wrote later. “I began to feel detached from everything around me.” Singing, playing mind games, reciting poetry, counting anything, and doing mathematical problems in your head can make waiting possible and even pleasant, even while heightening perception and quieting fear. Stockdale wrote, “The person who came into this experiment with reams of already memorized poetry was the bearer of great gifts.” When Lance Armstrong was undergoing horrible chemotherapy, his mantra became his blood count: “Those numbers became the highlight of each day; they were my motivation... I would concentrate on that number, as if I could make the counts by mentally willing it.” Lost in the Bolivian jungle, Yossi Ghinsberg reported, “When I found myself feeling hopeless, I whispered my mantra, ‘Man of action, man of action.’ I don't know where I had gotten the phrase... I repeated it over and over: A man of action does whatever he must, isn't afraid, and doesn't worry.” Survivors engage their crisis almost as an athlete engages a sport. They

cling to talismans. They discover the sense of flow of the expert performer, the “zone” in which emotion and thought balance each other in producing fluid action. A playful approach to a critical situation also leads to invention, and invention may lead to a new technique, strategy, or design that could save you.

**8. See the Beauty:** Survivors are attuned to the wonder of their world, especially in the face of mortal danger. The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of awe, opens the senses to the environment. (When you see something beautiful, your pupils actually dilate.) Debbie Kiley and four others were adrift in the Atlantic after their boat sank in a hurricane in 1982. They had no supplies, no water, and would die without rescue. Two of the crew members drank sea water and went mad. When one of them jumped overboard and was being eaten by sharks directly under their dinghy, Kiley felt as if she, too, were going mad, and told herself, “Focus on the sky, on the beauty there.” When Saint-Exupery's plane went down in the Lybian Desert, he was certain that he was doomed, but he carried on in this spirit: “Here we are, condemned to death, and still the certainty of dying cannot compare with the pleasure I am feeling. The joy I take from this half an orange which I am holding in my hand is one of the greatest joys I have ever known.” At no time did he stop to bemoan his fate, or if he did, it was only to laugh at himself.

**9. Believe That You Will Succeed:** It is at this point, following what I call “the vision,” that the survivor's will to live becomes firmly fixed. Fear of dying falls away, and a new strength fills them with the power to go on. “During the final two days of my entrapment,” Ralston recalled, “I felt an increasing reserve of energy, even though I had run out of food and water.” Elder said, “I felt rested and filled with a peculiar energy.” And: “It was as if I had been granted an unlimited supply of energy.”

**10. Surrender:** Yes you might die. In fact, you will die— we all do. But perhaps it doesn't have to be today. Don't let it worry you. Forget about rescue. Everything you need is inside you already. Dougal Robertson, a sailor who was cast away at sea for thirty-eight days after his boat sank, advised thinking of survival this way: “Rescue will come as a welcome interruption of... the survival voyage.” One survival psychologist calls that “resignation without giving up. It is survival by surrender.” Simpson reported, “I would probably die out there amid those boulders. The thought didn't alarm me... the horror of dying no longer affected me.” The Tao Te Ching explains how this surrender leads to survival:

The rhinoceros has no place to jab its horn,  
The tiger has no place to fasten its claws,  
Weapons have no place to admit their blades.  
Now,  
What is the reason for this?  
Because on him there are no mortal spots.

**11. Do Whatever Is Necessary:** Elder down-climbed vertical ice and rock faces with no experience and no equipment. In the black of night, Callahan dove into the flooded saloon of his sinking boat, at

once risking and saving his life. Aron Ralston cut off his own arm to free himself. A cancer patient allows herself to be nearly killed by chemotherapy in order to live. Survivors have a reason to live and are willing to bet everything on themselves. They have what psychologists call meta-knowledge: They know their abilities and do not over- or underestimate them. They believe that anything is possible and act accordingly.

**12. Never Give Up:** When Apollo 13's oxygen tank exploded, apparently dooming the crew, Commander Jim Lovell chose to keep on transmitting whatever data he could back to mission control, even as they burned up on re-entry. Simpson, Elder, Callahan, Kiley, Stockdale, Ghinsberg—were all equally determined and knew this final truth: If you're still alive, there is always one more thing that you can do. Survivors are not easily discouraged by setbacks. They accept that the environment is constantly changing and know that they must adapt. When they fall, they pick themselves up and start the entire process over again, breaking it down into manageable bits. Survivors always have a clear reason for going on. They keep their spirits up by developing an alternate world, created from rich memories, into which they can escape. They see opportunity in adversity. In the aftermath, survivors learn from and are grateful for the experiences that they've had. As Elder told me once, "I wouldn't trade that experience for anything. And sometimes I even miss it. I miss the clarity of knowing exactly what you have to do next." Those who would survive the hazards of our world, whether at play or in business or at war, through illness or financial calamity, will do so through a journey of transformation. But that transcendent state doesn't miraculously appear when it is needed. It wells up from a lifetime of experiences, attitudes, and practices form one's personality, a core from which the necessary strength is drawn. A survival experience is an incomparable gift: It will tell you who you really are."

Laurence Gonzales is the author of "Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why" (W.W. Norton & Co., New York) and contributing editor for "National Geographic Adventure" magazine. The winner of numerous awards, he has written for Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, Conde Nast Traveler, Rolling Stone, among others. He has published a dozen books, including two award-winning collections of essays, three novels, and the book-length essay, "One Zero Charlie" published by Simon & Schuster. For more, go to [www.deepsurvival.com](http://www.deepsurvival.com).