

Aging in Place Salt Spring Style: Do You Know the Name of Your Pod Leader

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“I was stuck in my house with two feet of snow outside,” said an eighty-five-year-old woman living alone in the middle of nowhere. “I didn’t get cleared out for four days. At least I had a wood stove.” Somebody grumbled about eight trees that fell across his long, winding driveway. With all the snow, he was stuck even longer.

Yet another said, “I just about had a nervous breakdown. My mother lives at the top of a mountain. She didn’t answer the phone and I didn’t know what to do.” She later discovered neighbours had tromped through the snow to check on her mother. All was well.

Did I worry? Not on your Nellie. Living on the hospital grid had lulled me into thinking “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” is actually a plan.

How could I be so smug? A few years ago, a huge, half-dead maple tree out on the road allowance fell over in a windstorm. It managed to land with such force across my hydro intake line it uprooted the mast. There I was with my late loved one to care for and no power.

“Oh well,” I thought, “I’ll phone for help.” No dice. That’s when I discovered the futility of relying on portable phones. They don’t work when there’s no power. I needed either a cell phone or an old-fashioned phone that plugs into a telephone outlet.

I couldn’t leave my loved one alone, so together we headed out in the storm to find a neighbour whose telephone worked. Hydro said they’d turn off the power to our house, but then I was on my own. I’d have to hire a tree faller to clear out the tree and then I’d have to find an electrician to reinstall the mast. After that, they’d hook us up but maybe not for a long time. The windstorm was still ongoing.

Gordon Lee, The Tree Guy, lives around the corner and came to our rescue in fairly short order. It was a major job to retrieve the power lines from the branches, but he did it. Late in the afternoon, Pete Schure made sure my mast was replaced. At nightfall, we dined on cold tuna fish by candle light and then went to bed. Around midnight, Hydro reconnected us.

We were lucky. It could have been worse. After our February storm, a friend told me her power went out Sunday morning and she had neither heat nor water for the next two days. “It was so cold in my place,” she told me, “I could see my breath.” She had two feet of snow outside with no place to go and no way to get there except on foot. She toughed it out at home, alone, and prolonged exposure led to a breakdown in her health requiring two new medications.

So what do we do when we need help in a storm? Some of us were trading stories a week or two ago and pod leaders became a topic of conversation. “Pod leader?” I asked. “What’s a pod leader?”

I was told Salt Spring Island is divided into fifty-two pods organized out of the Salt Spring Island Emergency Operations Centre (250-537-1220). We’re supposed to check in with our leader and report our status. Our leader’s supposed to check on us if we don’t. If we need help, our leader can help arrange for this to happen. So who’s my pod leader?

Duh!

To prove I’m not the only ignoramus on this island, I conducted an unscientific survey. Whenever a group of friends started discussing how they fared during the recent snowfall, I’d ask, “Who’s your pod leader?”

About forty percent knew. I was impressed.

What about the rest of us? About 30 pods are fully functioning while 12 pods are in some form of organization and ten pods don’t have leaders yet. My neighbourhood is in that category. I was asked to volunteer, but I’d be no good. I’m wearing a wide variety of hats already.

Maybe *you* have some free time and can lend a helpful hand. If you’d like to volunteer, send an e-mail to the Salt Spring Island Emergency Program - ssiepc@crd.bc.ca.

Meanwhile, Public Safety Canada has produced some helpful pamphlets on how to prepare for earthquakes, severe storms, and power outages. You can get tips at www.GetPrepared.ca. The CRD also has great local information at www.prepareyourself.ca website.

Spring is in the air. Before we let our thoughts turn elsewhere, let's do this right. Let's get all our neighbourhood pods up and running, so when the next emergency comes along we can all be as safe as possible. And if you don't have the time or talent to be a pod leader, at least have a buddy system. Make a pact with several friends that you'll each check on each other from time to time.

John Donne said it best: "No man is an island entire of itself." We're all a piece of this island and none of us should feel alone or helpless.