
Etiquette Can Be Murder

Anybody who's unlucky enough to experience the type of weather that knocks down large trees has probably heard the unsettling snap, snap, snap of limbs breaking. Those who've survived a tree falling on their home describe it in horrifying detail, often using the same phrase: "It sounded like a bomb went off."

Jan Wesner Childs, [Falling Trees: An Underreported, Deadly Danger During Severe Weather](#) | [Weather.com](#), 2024

Storms

I used to enjoy storms.

When I was young, I would rush outside as the wind picked up and lightning flitted across the sky, waiting for it to be followed by echoing growls of thunder. The breeze would carry the unmistakable scent of impending rain, and I would enjoy the crackle of excitement in the air as tree limbs swayed in the blustery conditions and brown leaves fluttered across the ground. I often stayed outdoors until my worried mother called me in, with no fear that I was going to be injured by a falling tree or swept away by flooding from a sudden downpour. I don't think those ideas ever even occurred to me.



My enjoyment of storms grew even stronger when I worked at Opryland as a kiddie-ride attendant during college breaks. Having a thunderstorm meant the employees could shut down the attractions for a brief time, for everyone's safety, and the lines of waiting tourists would scatter as they sought shelter indoors in the theaters or restaurants.

Storms gave the amusement park workers a brief break from removing crying children from rollercoasters, trying to convince angry parents that height restrictions must be followed for their youngsters' own good, and cleaning up vomit from people who rotated too fast in the spinning teacup ride. So, all of us celebrated when an announcement of upcoming ill weather was broadcast on the park's public announcement system.





I even continued to like thunderstorms when I was older and had moved to Colorado, since rain was rare in the desert-like climate and tornadoes never occurred in the foothills where we lived. Our home's lot had plenty of pines, but due to wildfire mitigation none of them were close to the building. And although we sometimes had winds strong enough to topple eighteen-wheelers, I don't remember a single tree ever falling on our property.

But then we moved back to Tennessee and bought a home with a generously wooded lot—in an area that's been nicknamed the new tornado alley.

Now, don't get me wrong. I love our new house (and being closer to family in the state). And my husband and I deliberately chose our current location for the abundant number of trees along with the wealth of flowering bushes the former owners had planted. But we didn't realize that storms here are a lot fiercer and more frequent than I remembered.

Maybe it is because I'm older now, or maybe it is because technology has improved, so that weather stations can track upcoming storms many days ahead of time and then give storm warnings 24-hour coverage on the daily news. But my new life here seems to be filled with forecasts of damaging winds and the potential for flash flooding. We are sent to the basement to wait out tornado warnings on a regular basis, and the TV channels are filled with stories of people either hit by falling trees or swept away in their cars by rampaging flood waters. Windstorms regularly rip off people's rooftops or flatten entire towns, and we seem to be in the path of danger much more often than I would like.

Fortunately, we haven't had a direct tornadic hit on our town yet. But so far we've lost 12 huge trees on our property due to micro-blasts of wind. One especially tall oak hit the garage with a minor strike and required us to replace some siding. Another recently struck a glancing blow at our towering wooden carport (which was evidently built to shelter a full-sized travel trailer). And although our car was saved by the lofty building, we now have to replace some shingles and bolster the rather flimsy structure, which has developed an alarming sway. We've been lucky enough, however, not to have any unrecoverable damage, except for the loss of my much-loved trees.



On the other hand, the sound of falling timber is unforgettable. And I've spent far too much time sitting in our small, unfinished basement in a camp chair during gales, anticipating hearing a loud crack and then the devastating crash as one of the closer trees finally takes out the roof of our home. So, I will have to say that waiting out the storms is a lot scarier than I would like it to be, and far different from my youthful enjoyment of the events.

Now, if you're familiar with my newsletters, you are probably wondering what all of this has to



do with etiquette. (For those of you who are new to the newsletter, I write mystery novels with an etiquette teacher as the amateur sleuth, and I usually provide some interesting tidbits from my collection of antique and modern etiquette books.) And I have to admit that I was wondering that myself, since I checked through several massive tomes looking for information on etiquette for sharing storm shelters or advice on dealing with the aftermath of nearby tornadoes, and I didn't find any guidelines. The books tell you what to say and not say to people who are bereaved, but they have no mention of how to talk to people who've just lost everything they own.

In fact, bad weather was not even mentioned in my collection until I checked the most recent etiquette book I've purchased: *Emily Post's Etiquette: The Centennial Edition*, by Post and Senning. The manual was published in 2022 to celebrate 100 years of Emily's manners guides, and the authors wrapped it up by discussing changes in etiquette over her lifetime. Then they pondered about what the next 100 years will bring in the way of adjustments to social norms. And one of the things they contemplated was climate change.

Some thoughts they considered: "Droughts, storms, flooding, fires, shortages, and even disease are stretching our social systems in new ways. What are the areas of etiquette that could see change in response to a changing climate? Will it impact our host and guest roles when we visit those who live in climates very different from our own? Could disaster preparedness and response become a more regular consideration in our social expectations of each other?"

I found their concern that evolving weather conditions might change the rules for how we treat each other surprising. And in fact, the idea that our climate might get so much worse that society itself could be altered may be a bit extreme.

But of course, we don't know how climate change will play out, or what other weather crises will occur in the future. So, for now I will just be glad that my husband and I have our cold, cobwebby, concrete-block basement, to keep us safe from whatever Mother Nature throws at us.



What are your best tips for riding out a severe storm? Do you enjoy them, or do they make you anxious? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

Latest News

First off, I bought a few more etiquette books this month—although if you look at the website pictures of the collection on my bookshelves, you may not think that is advisable or necessary. But I couldn't resist the newest Emily Post mentioned above, or the latest *Modern Etiquette for Dummies*, which contains up-to-date guidelines for everything from social media posts to how to properly eat spaghetti. (And yes, cutting the noodles instead of twirling them is considered an insult to the chef.) I also purchased *Don't Slurp Your Soup*, which was written as a first etiquette primer for children several years ago, and *Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That? A Modern Guide to Manners*, which covers Japanese toilet-seat etiquette among other things.

I actually enjoy reading etiquette books for fun, since they give an entertaining look at the social customs of different time periods, and I can't wait to dip into my new books. So, if you have any questions about current or old-fashioned etiquette, drop me a note and I'll do my best to look up an answer. And you might even make it into my next newsletter!

Secondly, for those of you who are following my writing career, one of the agents considering my manuscript has asked for more time to look at it, indicating it might take up to another ninety days. This is a slow-moving business, so I hope none of you are—like me—holding your breath while hoping for a positive response.

And finally, as always, if you know anyone who might be interested in signing up for my email list, please pass along my opt-in information at: [Newsletter - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I would love for my readers to get in touch! You can drop me a note anytime on my contact page at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I hope everyone has a good month. And for my usual animal photo, here is a picture of Zach relaxing.

