

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 5)

Not many of the so-called *accidents* in the outdoors are actually “acts of God” – totally unpredictable and capricious acts of harsh Mother Nature. Most of them have *human causes* – namely, particular attitudes of bravado or ignorance that place one in a position to have a disaster. In this series of short essays, we are exploring 10 different “**human attitudes that lead to suffering in the backcountry.**” Think deeply about each one – reflect on your own experiences, and prepare yourself and your group mentally before departing, so you don’t get added to the stories that follow. So far, we have considered four human attitudes that lead to suffering in the backcountry:

- *An unwillingness to change plans, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, and its companion behavior -- an unfounded need to keep to a predetermined schedule*
- *A desire to impress; overweening arrogance or ego, and its accompanying competitiveness*
- *A lack of awareness of or failure to acknowledge some critical change in conditions (group strength, weather), and its near cousin, a reliance on wishful thinking, instead of dispassionate acceptance of objective data*
- *A blind trust in personal invincibility, the benevolence of the universe, and a belief that nature cares about me.*

Human attitude No. 5 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

An unexamined urge to press on through obstacles instead of evaluating their objective dangers

*“Throughout the day on June 17 [on the West Buttress of Mount McKinley], several expeditions passed Horoyaki Hoshino and his companions between 18,000 and 19,700 feet. Everyone who passed Hoshino and was later interviewed said that Hoshino looked exhausted and shaky. A ranger patrol descending from the summit stopped to talk to Hoshino and in no uncertain terms tried to convince him to go down, but was unsuccessful.”**

This story had a tolerable ending only because two aircraft were eventually deployed to manage an emergency evacuation of the stubborn and ailing climber. (continue reading next page →)

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Let's take a few minutes to think about this obstinate insistence on continuing a trip, even when all the objective data suggests that we should be turning back. What might be the psychological dimensions at work here?

Is it **pride** – we don't want to appear as failures in front of those back home if we turn back. Harvey Manning, author of *Backpacking, One Step at a Time*, says, “*Beginners die on the trails because they do not have the guts to be cowards.*”** Have we unwisely linked *stopping, waiting, or turning back* with *weakness, shame, or defeat* instead of correctly tying it to *wisdom and care for our group*?

Is it **denial** – a desire to avoid thinking deeply about unpleasantness – that we might really be lost, “up a creek without a paddle,” or doomed, and so we plod on, hoping things will miraculously get better when all the logic says that they can only get worse. Does pressing on seem to hold the illusory promise that hope is being kept alive?

Is it “**group-think**?” We are unwilling to oppose the prevailing mindset of the group, and so no one is strong enough to stand up and say that things have gone from bad to worse, and that we should consider abandoning ship? Sure, we knew it would be hard, and we expected challenges – but there is no textbook about when it's time to transition: from simply working hard overcoming challenges to recognizing that they might be fatal. And, we tell ourselves, “No one else seems to be worried . . .” Some creative and sobering research has illustrated the absurd notions that an individual will defend in order not to appear different from the group.

Is it **fear**, compounded by *the fear of appearing fearful*? Do we lose objectivity in direct proportion to the mounting emotional experience at work within us? So the more dangerous things become, the less intellectually equipped we are to handle them correctly?

These are all scary thoughts, because they suggest that we might lose rationality when we need it most. Al Siebert, in his study of *The Survivor Personality*, observes: “*The survivor does not impose pre-existing patterns on new information, but rather allows new information to reshape [his mental models]. The person who has the best chance of handling a situation well is usually the one with the best . . . mental pictures or images of what is occurring outside the body.*”*** Notice that the four explanations for irrational perseverance (pride, denial, group-think, and fear) are all *internal* states. Seibert points us outside ourselves, beyond our egocentric preoccupation to *external* conditions. Think of harsh reality as that alarm clock that jars us awake and away from our pleasurable albeit surrealistic dream world.

There are no quick fixes for this dilemma. Leaders-in-training need to be brought through learning experiences in which they have to radically revise plans in order to succeed. They need to have their decisions evaluated and judged by mentors. Training should include stories that affirm flexibility and proactive caution, where the willingness to stop is called *courage* instead of *cowardice*. Current leaders should critically debrief every incident, close call, and near miss with someone who is willing to be objective even about the failures. And we all need to recommit ourselves with every trip to the elegant simplicity of the Hindu proverb: “*No matter how far down the wrong road you have gone, turn around . . .*”

**Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 1998*, American Alpine Club, p. 23.

***Backpacking, One Step at a Time*, Harvey Manning, Random House,

****The Survivor Personality*, Al Seibert, Penguin Putnam, 1996.

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