

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 1)

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 the next several issues of *Guidelines*, we will explore 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 to follow.

Human attitude no. 1 that leads 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

Most of us have, no doubt, sat at the kitchen table with friend and trail map, plotting the perfect trip. And in the flushed anticipation of the event and the excitement of planning, the mileages sound perfect, and the challenges very manageable. The greater test of our wisdom occurs later, however. Out on the trail, the weather turns raw, a team member is not as strong or fit as we expected, or a navigational error introduces a 3-hour delay into the day. What now of the plan – do we flex and change, or do we doggedly believe that, because it was perfect at the kitchen table, it must continue to be adhered to? The data suggests that a remarkable number of us will continue to “push the plan,” sometimes even in the face of overwhelming evidence that we should adapt or abort.

Russell and Brenda Cox’ hike to the summit of Mt. Lafayette in New Hampshire ended in tragedy when the couple ignored advice about deteriorating conditions and continued their trek upward. Whiteout conditions and 75 MPH winds engulfed the pair on their descent. The local Mountain Rescue Service acknowledged that

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this was yet another case of a party pressing on when they should have retreated.*

Sometimes, this error is manifest in *an unfounded need to keep to a predetermined schedule.* “*Headed for the summit (of Mt. Clark, CA), Michael Kalantarian, alone and running way behind schedule on the second of his two days off, knew he was pushing his luck when he encountered a steep icy slab partway up. Unroped and forced to move onto even steeper rock, the 30 year-old soon slipped and tumbled 70 feet to the rocks below.*”**

There are also occasions when we allow other forces to take over our minds. Regarding Tom Ashwood’s evacuation from the Diamond of Longs Peak (CO) in September of 2000, “*contributory causes discovered by investigating park rangers included an obsessive desire of Ashwood in wanting to complete this climb at any cost. Also, there was commercial interest on the part of Ashwood’s partners, amateur guides intending to profit from the publicity they got for hosting the climb (Ashwood had cerebral palsy).*”***

King Solomon was not a mountaineer, but he seems to have understood something about this human tendency to fall in love with a plan, even at the expense of rationality and flexibility: “*The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going, and suffer for it.*” (Proverbs 27:12)

Chinese philosophers also teach the value of adaptability: “*The rigid person is a disciple of death; the soft, supple, and delicate are lovers of life.*” (Tao Te Ching)

A *plan* is simply our best attempt to forecast conditions, and design appropriate strategies. But when the conditions are different than anticipated, the strategies that are dependent upon them must of necessity be reconsidered. And so the most capable outdoorsman is always reevaluating and tinkering with the plan, continuing to fit it to present realities. Rigid unexamined adherence to plans or rules is always dangerous; “*Rules are for fools,*” quipped Paul Petzoldt, founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School. Preserve an open and flexible mind, adapt and change as necessary, don’t attach your ego to “completing the trip as planned,” and you will successfully avoid becoming a *disciple of death* – the deceased adherent of an inflexible plan.

**Accidents in North American Mountaineering, 2005*, American Alpine Club, p. 74

***Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 390

****Accidents in North American Mountaineering, 2000*, American Alpine Club, p. 56

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