

# GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from  
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## Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 3)

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 to follow.

So far, we have considered:

- Human Attitude No. 1: *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* ( in **Guidelines**, Winter 2007), and,
- Human Attitude No. 2: *a desire to impress; overweening arrogance or ego, and its accompanying competitiveness* (in **Guidelines**, Spring 2007).

Now we turn to:

### Human attitude no. 3 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

*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.*

“*It is better to be aware than smart,*” stated one basketball coach, and the applications of this concept reach far beyond the playing court. Cultivating awareness throughout the day and the experience is like maintaining an internal early warning system. Outdoor guides call this “*leadership radar,*” and it should be

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continuously and meticulously applied to personnel, climate and environmental conditions, and even group tenor. Here is what leadership radar might look like in these various areas:

Personnel: Who is drinking water today, and who is not? Who didn't eat breakfast? Who is not living out their "typical" personality, and why might this be?

Climate: Is something sneaking up on us (thunderheads, winds picking up), and what might this mean?

Group tenor: Are we becoming casual about safety, overly competitive, unnecessarily hurried, or low in our energy level? What's going on?

The leader must continue to stay bigger than the situation, and avoid getting so swallowed into any one task or social milieu that he/she loses overall situational awareness.

“*‘It’s such an easy walk,’ Brian’s mother had said. ‘It looked so safe. It’s fantastic -- to think that he could have gotten lost with so many people around.’ Only 15 minutes after starting what was to have been a carefree hike on Mount Rainier, 14-year old Brian Cornelius was dead*” (he slid down a “safe-looking” snow slope, and fell into a freezing waterfall).<sup>\*</sup> Might the casualness of the parents about the terrain that they were traversing have played into their family’s behaviors on the glacier?

Sometimes lack of awareness is about concrete conditions like terrain, weather, or group behavior. Other times, it is a lack of the awareness of accident *potential*. “[*At Mesa Verde National Park*], while playing a joke on their students, one instructor pretended to be pushed off a cliff by another instructor. The teacher jumped on to a ledge, but then actually fell 35 feet into the canyon. He suffered a fractured hip and arm, two broken shoulders, and closed head injuries.”<sup>\*</sup> “Fooling around” can decrease our situational awareness, as can various other factors. It goes without saying that any chemical substance that decreases our rate and acuity of neural processing should be avoided while engaging in high risk activities. Do we need to make it any more clear . . . (what **is** the fascination between alcohol and boating . . . ?)

Finally, when faced with a mounting and grave situation, do we accept our observations and conclusions with dispassionate realism, or do we take the next dangerous mental step, and engage in *wishful thinking*. It is remarkable to watch groups working through a navigational challenge, and see the amazing rationalizations that they construct, as they undertake to create a “known” out of an unknown. I have seen young men argue convincingly that north is west, and that “the mountain over there really has two summits – we just can’t see the other one,” just so that their wished-for map interpretation will make sense. And I have looked at climbing nut placements that wouldn’t hold the weight of a falling stuffed teddy bear, placed as “psychological protection” because the leader was running it out and needed to think that he wasn’t in danger. When we want something to be true, we will often engage in contorted arguments and even self-deception in order to create a façade of certainty – *pseudo-security*. Jim Burnett says that the word *assume* means **A**ctions **S**eldom **S**upported **U**nder **M**eticulous **E**xamination. The dangerous irony is that, when we engage in self-deception, we have positioned ourselves in greater actual physical peril, because we have relaxed our guard, and placed our faith in something that ultimately will not protect us. *Alibis* become the excuses we offer for our own letdowns of awareness or honesty; you would be surprised if Burnett didn’t have a interpretation for this concept also, wouldn’t you:

**A Lively Imagination Begets Incredible Stories!\*\*\***

The broad solution here is to continually challenge ourselves to greater awareness in the outdoors. A few practical suggestions also might include:

- Even on the best of days, entertain in your own mind (and in occasional group discussions over lunch) a couple of “what if” scenarios.

- Teach your entire group the basic skills, like navigation, anchor setting, etc., so everyone becomes a friendly critic of how things are getting done. Anyone is free to offer a suggestion or ask for an explanation of why we are doing it this way.
- Create an atmosphere of interpersonal respect for every team member, so that no one's comments are overlooked or minimized. It might be the littlest person who pipes up that "*the emperor has no clothes,*" "*I think those clouds are moving awfully quickly,*" or "*Didn't we pass this spot once before?*" That heightened awareness and candid interpretation may be just what the group (and the leader) needs to hear.

\**Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 250-1, 441.

\*\* *Hey Ranger: True Tales of Humor and Misadventure from America's National Parks*, Jim Burnett, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2005.

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"My son in particular and the whole family in general, are still talking about our spectacular day on Sunday. This was a homerun beyond my wildest dreams, and it will remain a highlight for our kids for many years!" (Dad, and family, 2005)

"Thanks again for a great time! You had the perfect mix of patience, intimidation, challenge, and expertise to make it a great experience!" ("Young" couple, 2006)

"Really my only comment was that it was wonderful. I enjoyed having you as a guide, and will certainly recommend you. I appreciated (later even more) that once we were on the rocks you were willing to give us pointers but at the same time, you let us figure it out for ourselves. Thank you for an amaZing experience!" (Climber, 2006)