

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 4)

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).
- Human Attitude No. 3: *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* (in **Guidelines**, Summer 2007).

Now we turn to:

Human attitude no. 4 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

A blind trust in personal invincibility, the benevolence of the universe, and a belief that nature cares about me.

In December of 2006, three climbers were stranded in a surprise winter storm just below the summit of Mt. Hood. The wife of one of the men told the press that she was sure her husband would make it off the

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mountain alive because, “we got engaged up there, and he promised that we would spend our 50th anniversary on the mountain.” Apparently, neither the mountain nor the storm knew this, because Kelly James was found dead in a snow cave after the third day of searching, and the other two climbers have not yet been located.

After a cold rainy day of canoeing on the Greenbrier River in West Virginia, a student member of a Christian college group offered a prayer of blessing for the supper, and concluded with, “*And Lord, please help the river to be nicer to us tomorrow.*” As he said “Amen,” his instructor looked him in the eyes and said: “*The river doesn’t care if you love Jesus! The river is going to be what the river is going to be. Pray instead that you will have the strength, courage, and skill to take the river on its terms...*”

“*The prerequisite for misadventure,*” observed Daryl Miller “*is the belief that you are invincible, or that the wilderness cares about you. The wilderness does not care about your human rights. The unvigilant perish; the prudent survive.*”

One treacherous accompanying myth to the nature-cares-about-me fallacy is that “*Nice people like me don’t get hurt.*” Laurence Gonzales, author of *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why**, offers the three stages of enlightenment for anyone engaged in risk recreation:

1. It *can’t* happen to me.
2. It *can* happen to, but it probably won’t.
3. It *can* happen to me, and it *probably will* unless I make some significant changes in my approach.

Maturing in our personal development requires fully advancing past stages 1 and 2. Gonzales’ “poison of choice” was flying stunt planes, but parallel conclusions should be drawn for any extreme pursuit.

The second perilous corollary accompanying this mindset has to do with our human ability to “conquer nature,” or conquer a mountain. It always gives this author pause when some climber makes this boast at the summit, and then a week later, 3 climbers perish at the very spot. The mountain, if it ever was conquered, didn’t stay subdued for long. More likely is Peter Habeler’s humble and honest conclusion, after summiting Everest without bottled oxygen: “*I have not conquered Everest; it has merely tolerated me for a while.*”

Reinhold Messner, arguably the world’s greatest mountaineer, stated simply: “*Mountains are not fair or unfair – they are just dangerous.*” Anyone who has not yet arrived fully at this conclusion – anyone who still entertains a trace of romance about the kindness of nature or the invincibility of man, has no business setting foot in dangerous environments.

* *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, Laurence Gonzales, W.W, Norton and Co., 2003.

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