

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 2010)

©Lester R. Zook, 2010

Invincibility

“If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans. If you want to hear danger laugh, tell her you’re invincible.”

“Pride goes before destruction; a haughty spirit before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18, NIV)

“After 17 years of rock climbing, bad judgment finally caught up with me. ... Climbing near Durango (CO), I was on a route well within my ability and moved about eight feet above a piece of protection, which I knew was probably less than ideal. Thinking, ‘There’s no way I’ll fall on this,’ I continued up. No sooner had I moved up and my left hand greased, followed by my left foot. I slid down the rock (it was just slightly less than vertical), the piece popped, and I fell approx. 25 feet. I hit a ledge, snapping my left foot. My mistakes? All amount to BAD judgment: overconfidence, inadequate (poor) protection, and a feeling of ‘It won’t happen to me.’” (Joel C., in ANAM, 2008, 49)

How many times have we heard or read, *“It won’t happen to me”*? Maybe those words stir some story in your past, or something that you read in an accident account. If the words weren’t spoken, they were likely thought. And it is true that they are often only identified in retrospect – after an incident has occurred, we recognize/acknowledge, *“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking...”* As leaders, we can often observe this trait in our clients, and we wonder, *“How can they be so reckless? Don’t they realize that those statistics come from somewhere?”* The focus of this article, however, is to shine the light into our own souls, for we may, if we are honest, find the same culprit there.

Someone once said, *“We all know we are mortal, but we don’t always live like we know it.”* At the 2006 Wilderness Risk Management Conference, Alan Ewert and his colleagues shared several “instructor traps” for us as leaders to be aware of. Consider what follows to be several faces of invincibility that we might encounter

GUYdelines is a quarterly newsletter, published by *WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC*. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this work or portions thereof in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the author at:

Lester R. Zook, *WILD GUYde Adventures*
1047 Stuart St.
Harrisonburg, VA 22802
(540) 433-1637 lester@wildguyde.com

in ourselves in the outdoors. (Ewert, Shellman, and Glenn, 2006).

1. *One Size Fits All thinking*: what has worked in the past will work again. Familiarity with terrain or a particular activity becomes casualness, the loss of vigilance over details, changes in weather, attitude, or client readiness set the stage for a disaster. Operationally, we are behaving like we think we are invincible.
2. *Believing something that isn't true*. Force-fitting information to the situation, rationalizing, and then bolstering decisions (to reduce anxiety). “*That which you desire most earnestly, you believe most easily.*” (Stephen Covey) When we do this, we are projecting that we are bigger than objective facts, and therefore, that we believe we are invincible.
3. *Ignoring red flags*: We don't pay attention to the small ones, and then we suddenly see them cascade into the big one. Near-miss and High Potential for Harm incidents are often predictors of future accidents. Ignoring them, we are saying that we are bigger than the chain. In 1992, Bird and Germain analyzed industrial accidents and discovered that for every one serious or major injury, there were approximately 10 minor injuries, 30 property damage accidents, and 600 incidents with no visible injury or damage, but with a “high potential for harm” (“near misses”).
4. *Super Instructor syndrome*: Pride becomes hubris, expertise becomes invincibility, and [we think] expressing personal need appears as weakness.
5. *Meeting the Train/Headin' for the Barn*: undue attachment to a schedule creates a false sense of urgency that then tempts us to bypass safeties and minimize important issues. Or, heading home (final day/final phase), we let our guard down, get casual, and then something happens.

Laurence Gonzales was a stunt plane flier, and has since written extensively on the topic of why accidents happen, and who survives them. He offers these three stages of enlightenment (2004):

1. It CAN'T happen to me (denial, ignorance)
2. It CAN happen to me (awareness)
3. It can happen to me and IT PROBABLY WILL unless I change my approach (honesty, personal application, change)

Gonzales suggests that anyone still residing at stages 1 or 2 probably shouldn't be leading others in hazardous environments.

So what to do? How do we mitigate some of these influences inside ourselves? Here are a few simple ideas.

1. Debrief your own (or your organization's history). Can you identify any of these elements in incidents of which you have been a part? Walk through them, writing out key elements/ingredients. The most beneficial thing we can do as leaders is to shed our veneer of perfection and ego, and make ourselves transparent about past failures and mistakes, so we and others can learn from them.
2. Cathye Haddock (1999) tells us that the epic stories we tell are often actually HIPO events (near misses, incidents with a High Potential for Harm) that we have camouflaged with glory and heroics. Are you courageous enough to unearth your epic stories; is there some truth-telling that needs to happen? What can you learn from looking honestly and deeply into your past experiences? What is the humor hiding? “*On the occasion of every accident that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use.*” (Epictetus)
3. Creating mechanisms so we can learn from our history: does your incident report format invite and accommodate documentation/interpretation of the human elements as a causative or contributing factor? By modifying the document, might you start to gather information about incidents that can subsequently be used for reflection, organizational learning, and leadership training?

I would welcome your feedback, reflections, and maybe related stories about this quarter's theme. Read on about *WILD GUYde Adventures* trip options in 2010!

References and further reading

- American Alpine Club, *Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2008*. (2008). Golden CO: American Alpine Club.
- Bird, F.E. Jr., and Germain, G.R. (1992). Practical loss control leadership. The conservation of people, property, process and profits. Loganville, GA: Institute Publishing
- Ewert, A., Shelman, A., Glenn, L. (2006). Instructor traps: What they are and how they impact our decision-making and judgment. Killington, VT: Wilderness Risk Management Conference.
- Gonzales, L. (2004). *Deep Survival*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Haddock, C. (1999). Epics, lies, and hero stories: the folklore of near misses in the outdoors. Sierra Vista, AZ: Wilderness Risk Management Conference.

Are you coming to Virginia for a family vacation, church group trip, boys' club event, or escape weekend? Why not experience Virginia adventure with *WILD GUYde Adventures?* WGA offers guided beginner level outdoor adventures and competent instruction in activity fundamentals. We can take you *hiking, rock climbing and rappelling, caving, or canoeing*. We use various activity areas in the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, and along Virginia's Blue Ridge. Check out the 2010 trip options below, or call to talk about your own creative adventure idea!

(540) 433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com - You may also visit www.wildguyde.com

How was your trip with the WILD GUYde?!

"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)

"What a great experience we had! The girls learned so much, and were so impressed with your gentle manner. When you talked to them before they began rappelling, they were absolutely riveted. You made concepts so easy to understand with your calm and kind way of explaining things. The rappelling itself was fantastic! There were several girls that were so scared to begin with, but you were able to talk them through the experience and they said they were so glad they did it. I'm so glad someone referred us to you. We had a wonderful time!" (Girls group leader, 2007)