

GUYdelines

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

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Warm-up and Engage: Before beginning this article, do a “radar sweep” of your internal and external environments. What’s going on in your heart? What issues are you turning around in your mind, and how are you feeling? What’s going on around where you are currently sitting? Welcome to *Leadership Radar*!

It is better to be aware than smart

It is early spring and cold in West Virginia, and there is only the slightest hint of foliage beginning in the forest. This matters, because right now, two college students and I are huddled under a bush thicket with a cold thunderstorm pummeling rain down upon us, and thunder and lightning occasionally lashing across the ridge above. Twenty yards away, the rest of our group members are similarly trying to make themselves as small as they can under their ponchos and some scant vegetation, rain dripping off their hoods and noses, and looking exceedingly grim. And now, Eugene’s words* are coming back to me, as I shift my weight to try to funnel the gutter spout that is my rain jacket, so the water drains somewhere other than down into my left boot. I see his subtle smile and his slim and knowing eyes, as he gently exhorts, “*Be aware of what is happening around you.*”

Ten minutes before, I had not been thinking of Eugene. Who knows what I was thinking about, but it was definitely something other than paying attention to tell-tale signs like leaves turning up, wind direction shifting, and darkening in the southwest sky. It was a cloudy day as we traversed across Tamarack Ridge late in the afternoon, confident now that our route-finding through the day had gotten us 75% of the way and looking forward to a small but comfortable campsite down on the Laurel Fork in the valley below. Looking back now, those moments had all the hallmarks of “headin’ for the barn,” – that common phenomenon of backpacking groups relaxing their vigilance late in the day because “*the rest looks easy.*” Though overcast, the clouds seemed flat and stable, and I remember enjoying the beauty as we strolled across the exposed ridgeline meadow. By the time the first lightning hit the ridge behind us, it was much too close, and we were sent scrambling to get off the high point to find some semblance of shelter. Every related idiom could apply: caught with our pants down, caught flat-footed, caught napping – we were guilty as charged of being oblivious!

Leadership Radar

“*It is better to be aware than smart,*” legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson would tell his team at courtside.

(*The late Eugene Wingert, long-time Executive Director at Kenbrook Bible Camp, and my primary outdoor leadership mentor)

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Actually, awareness is a certain kind of smart -- it invites you to pay attention to details that may end up mattering in your future. And so, I remember numerous times during my informal apprenticeship with Eugene that he would say to us, "*Be aware of what is happening around you.*" Like the over-confident 19-year-old's that we camp counselors were, we would figuratively huff and say among ourselves, "*Of course we are aware of what is happening around us.*" And then, 15 minutes later, we would get surprised by some burst of new weather, or a trail traveler coming down toward us with a large dog and a firearm, or some other event that had caught us distracted, preoccupied, or just too lazy to really attend. Was Eugene omniscient? No, he had simply picked up on something – some clue, pattern, sound, or change that the rest of us had equal access to, but had neglected to detect.

I have come to call this awareness *Leadership Radar*. Like the endlessly sweeping display on a plan position indicator or radar screen, searching 360° around you, you are watching listening, smelling, sensing, and thinking. Think of it like maintaining an internal early warning system. What's going on? What is developing? And, what does it mean? Here are some examples:

- Personnel: Who is drinking water today, and who is not? Who didn't eat breakfast? What might this mean later? 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 be predicting?
- Group tenor: Are we becoming casual about safety, overly competitive, unnecessarily hurried, or low in our energy level? What's the mood? 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. When training my climbing wall staff, I would tell them, "*It's okay to stand around looking like you aren't doing anything at times, because I still expect you to be seeing everything (How is that guy tying his knot? What about that person's belay technique? Some mild horseplay starting over here – have to watch that...).*"

"*'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). 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*. "*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. Almost 3,000 people are injured each year in boating accidents, and over 50% of those incidents are alcohol related.

For non-outdoor leaders, maybe the application is in awareness of your staff, your client, or your audience. When speaking up front, for example, what are the various body languages of your listeners telling you about receptiveness to your ideas, buy-in, resistance? Is there one person that you are not winning over, and what are you going to do about it? Another application might be in the area of strategic planning; falling in love with an elegant plan while not attending to changing environmental or industry realities would definitely constitute a lack of awareness and leadership radar.

Let's go a step further. Once a change or a mounting and grave situation has been detected, 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 outdoor groups working through a navigational challenge, and see the stunning 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 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 protection placements that wouldn’t hold the weight of a falling carabiner, placed as “psychological pro” because the leader was running it out and needed to think that he wasn’t in danger. Wanting something to be true, we often engage in contorted arguments and even self-deception in order to create a façade of certainty – *pseudo-security*. Stephen Covey says, “*That which we desire most earnestly, we believe most easily.*” Jim Burnett’s definition of the word *assume* is **Actions Seldom Supported Under Meticulous Examination**. 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.

The broad solution is to continually press toward greater awareness outdoors and elsewhere. Some practical suggestions 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.
- I have also become convinced that curiosity is integral to maintaining awareness. Eugene was consummately curious: Where does this trail go? What is on the other side of that ridge? Why is this particular group member acting that way, and what does it mean? When I began to lead alongside him, I knew that after any incident, when we retired to the leaders’ tent together, I was going to face his gentle but insistent barrage of questions about how I perceived the situation, what my options were, and why I did what I did. The guy was annoyingly inquisitive, but he knew that false assumptions and confirmation bias cannot coexist in the same atmosphere as inexorable curiosity.
- Let me bring in a perspective from my other life – teaching and coaching in the world of competitive table tennis. I would endlessly admonish my players to “*React – don’t anticipate!*” If you continually set yourself up for the shot you want, you will end up getting surprised by the opponent’s placement or spin, it won’t be what you are ready for, and you will yield many points on unforced errors. Be attentive (aware) and let your quick reflexes, the ability to adapt and then effectively execute your return (response) win you the point, instead of anticipating and assuming. In competitive table tennis, anticipators and wishful thinkers are losers.

Awareness and attentiveness give us an early warning system for emerging issues, so we can fashion a response. In behaviorist terms, think of inserting a pause between Stimulus and Response, that allows us to creatively fashion an appropriate intervention. We will revisit this theme more in depth in an upcoming **GUYdelines** article, **The Mindlessness Trap**.

Finally, if we are going to practice Eugene’s sage advice about awareness, do not expect comfort. This is active and endless mental engagement. Robert Greenleaf coaches us in [Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness](#) (1977):

The cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and see oneself in perspective, in the context of one's own experience, amidst the ever present dangers, threats, and alarms ... Awareness is not a giver of solace – it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity.⁴

Stay aware out there! LRZ

Are you coming to Virginia for a family vacation, church group trip, troop 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, along Virginia's Blue Ridge, and in the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia. Check out the 2022 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

CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: 2022 Daytrips with WILD GUYde Adventures, Harrisonburg, VA

Top-Roping at Hidden Rocks, Virginia: This is the rock climbing trip for the adventurous beginner – you don't have much experience, but you want a great outdoor day with your family or special friends. Thirty minutes west of Harrisonburg, we'll park just inside George Washington National Forest, gear up, and hike a scenic 20 minutes through rhododendron and hemlocks and across some mountain streams to a secluded sandstone cliff. There will be pink and white mountain laurel in June, and wild huckleberries in August. You'll be introduced to harnesses, knots, helmets, and the *belay system*; then we'll try some easy warm-up climbs to remind you that the kid inside you still likes to clamber on things. We can go on to some harder climbing that invites you to try new skills and movements. And we'll finish the day with a rappel – backing over the edge, with nothing between you and the ground below but 60 feet of air and a great view! Closer to Luray or Northern Virginia? We'll visit **Waterfall Mountain** in the Massanutten Range, or **Little Stony Man** on the Blue Ridge for TALL climbing and spectacular Shenandoah Valley panoramas! Closer to Lexington or Roanoke? We'll visit **Goshen Pass** and climb above the gorgeous Maury River!

(Full day \$250 for 1-3 people; \$60 for each additional. ½ day \$175 for 1-3, and \$45 for each additional)



Beginner Climbing at Seneca Rocks, WV: After 90 minutes of curving mountain highway (okay, *country two-lane*), you'll gasp to see a spectacular blade of Tuscarora Sandstone, whose summit sits almost 1000 feet above its North Fork Valley floor. Seneca Rocks is a scenic place for the beginner or family to learn the rock climbing basics, top-roping and rappelling to an awesome West Virginia backdrop. Easy routes guarantee early success, but more challenging climbs also wait to test your skills. Seneca Rocks is an awesome place to climb, just beyond the sign: "*Here ends the realm of the hiker!*"

(Full day \$275 for 1-3 people; \$65 for each additional. ½ day \$200 for 1-3; \$50 each additional)

Multi-Pitch at Seneca Rocks: A little more experienced in climbing? Maybe you tried it at camp or the local rock gym? Ready for the next step? Join me for the multi-pitch experience, seconding the route as we

lead-climb to the top of the fabled South Summit! This is the only technical summit in the U.S. east of the Mississippi. Seneca has routes at all ranges of difficulty, from starters like *Old Ladies Route* (5.2) to mid-range classics (*West Pole* 5.7) to old school hardman routes like *Crack of Dawn* and *Madmen Only* (5.10). Every one of them will give you a new appreciation for the expression “*high and vertical*.” Register your accomplishment and ruminations in the summit journal, wave to tourists way down in the valley, and then head down to *terra firma* via the three-pitch rappel. Finish the day with a splash in the North Fork River swimming hole at “Gravel Beach”; then pick up a cold drink and a West Virginia memento at Harpers General Store before sleeping the ride back to Virginia and “the Burg.”

(Full-day: \$225 1st person; \$150 each addl.)

Instructional Climbing: This is a tutorial for those who have a little exposure to climbing, and want to gain eventual autonomy. Lots of instruction in current best-practice and hands-on trying it for you in rigging top anchors, belaying skills and equipment alternatives, movement coaching, and rappel setup and protection. There will be individualized attention and repetitive practice, as well as some exploration of the historical evolution of climbing equipment and protocol. You will finish the day with a lot more confidence in your basic skills. Bring a partner so you’ll have someone to climb with later.

(\$175 1st person; \$125 each for 2nd and 3rd)

WILD GUYde Adventures offers two other rock climbing options: a **Boy Scout Rock Climbing Merit Badge** tutorial for troops and leaders. We send a booklet to get troops started on their knots and First Aid requirements ahead of time, and then spend two days going through all the climbing, gear spec., and rappelling activity requirements (\$90 each). We also offer the **PCIA (Professional Climbing Instructor Association) Top Rope Climbing Instructor Certification** course and exam. This 3-day course (\$450) and 1 day exam (\$150) is for recreational climbers who want to add an instructor certification on their resume. It’s also very useful for individuals guiding with club, camp, or university outing programs.

Peaceful Paddling: Canoe a ½ day stretch of the **South Fork River**. This Class I and II water is ideal for families with elementary school children – just long enough to be engaging without getting boring. As we wind through pastures in the Shenandoah Valley, you’ll learn basic canoe strokes and maneuvering. Dangle your feet or plunk your head to cool off. And keep watching for blue herons, turtles on logs, and cows in the water!

(Half-Day: \$140 1-3 people; \$35 each additional. Full-Day: \$175 1-3 people; \$45 each additional)



Pick-up-the-Pace Paddling: a fuller day of canoeing awaits further down the **South Fork**. This provides a little more excitement for teenagers, adventurous parents, & other paddle pilgrims! A casual start allows a review of canoe strokes and partner teamwork.

An amazing rope-swing breaks the quiet – you won’t believe what comes out of your mouth when you let go (“*Geronimo!*?”) More paddling through runs and pools, always under the shadow of Massanutten Mountain. Lunch on the bank and then back into the boats. Finally, at Milepost 17, *Compton’s Rapid* – a great shoot-through with some higher standing waves! Paddlers call it a “Fat II,” but stay wide of Pillow Rock! Below, there’s a jumping rock for another cool-off before paddling the final mile to the take-out. Load the boats and start the drive home – happy, tired, and maybe a little sun-tanned! West Virginia travelers may want to visit the gorgeous “Trough” on the **South Branch of the Potomac**. High and remote mountain walls on each side of the river, and keep your eyes open for bald eagles!

(Half-Day: \$140 1-3 people, \$35 each additional; Full-Day: \$175 1-3 people; \$45 each additional)

Half-Day Caving: The underground sidewalk and the tourist cave light show are not for you. You want to see it the way it was before the electrician got there! Primitive caves have all the features of the subterranean world – *speleothems* (stalactites, flowstone, soda straws, and columns), *lots of real mud*, and sometimes even *bats* (but most of them are asleep, and all of them are harmless). Pull on your coveralls, clip on your helmet, adjust your headlamp, and



down we go. There are squeezes if you want them, and belly crawls for the adventurous --- but there are also corridor ceilings higher than your house, and large cavern rooms for the claustrophobic. Learn cave travel safety, underground navigation, and some “total body movement.” Find out what the year-round underground temperature is, and then finally emerge back into sunlight with a new appreciation for what happens underneath Virginia when limestone and groundwater meet. The gleam of your smile might be the only thing shining through the mud on your face! Caving trips can be **Beginner Caving** (mostly horizontal movement – walking, stooping, or crawling) or **Intermediate Caving** (for folks fit enough to handle strenuous vertical moves, and more sustained physical effort). Various locations are available in both Virginia (20 minutes from Harrisonburg), and West Virginia (between Franklin and Elkins). *Caving trips are not advised for individuals who might be unfit, excessively overweight, or who live an extremely sedentary lifestyle, or for very young children.*

(\$125 for 1-3 people; \$25 for each additional)



Design Your Own Adventure: Numerous other options exist, including hiking and climbing guiding along **Virginia’s Blue Ridge** or at the **NROCKS (WV)**, group orienteering challenges in the National Forest, a climbing self-rescue clinic, outdoor fitness training, and flatwater paddling instruction for beginners and children. We can customize to meet the interests of your family, scout troop, or youth group. Call to talk about your needs.

Things you oughta know:

- **Lester R. Zook** is the **WILD GUYde**. He is a *Wilderness First Responder*, and is a certified member of the *American Mountain Guides Association (Single Pitch Instructor)*. He has been leading wilderness adventures and training camping leaders for 30 years, and loves to take people outdoors! **Ethan Zook** has been a camp counselor and adventure leader at numerous camps. He is a *Red Cross Lifeguard* and a *Virginia Paramedic*. **Aaron Zook** is a climber, caver, and paddler, a *Red Cross Lifeguard*, and has been through *Wilderness First Aid*. **Mary Tapolyai** is a *WFR*, and a *Leave No Trace Master Educator*. Together, we are a small family business that strives to provide exceptional service, and create value in the lives of our guests.
- More detail on activity possibilities is available by visiting www.wildguyde.com. Call or e-mail to ask questions and to arrange dates, rates, and meeting points:



(540) 433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com

- **WGA’s** guiding season is 7 days a week. Rock climbing is March through October, paddling is best in the spring and summer, and wild caving is year-round. Call early to reserve; weekends in particular can fill quickly.
- **WILD GUYde** will provide all technical equipment (ropes, harnesses, helmets, etc.). A personal *things-to-bring list* (clothing, water, lunch, etc.) will be provided.
- We can also help with **lodging ideas**. We can recommend from *primitive* to *posh* – National Forest campgrounds, drive-up motels, and some delightful Bed and Breakfast inns!
- For groups of 10 or larger, we disregard the starter fee and simply bill the per-person rate.
- Payment is by cash or check, payable to WGA; unfortunately, credit cards cannot be accepted at this time. Gratuities are never expected, and always appreciated!
- Some activities have inherent risks – that’s the meaning of the word *adventure*. Participants will be asked to fill out a *Medical Form*, and sign a *Participant Agreement* acknowledging certain dangers. Some activities are physically strenuous, emotionally demanding, or require sustained cognitive attention to task and detail. We make every effort to create a great day, but **WGA** guides do reserve the

prerogative to deny access/participation if, in our judgment, the client is not likely to be successful, or might pose undue hazard. Clients also may not be “under the influence” or “feeling the effects” of alcohol or recreational drugs at the time of the event.

- **WILD GUYde Adventures** incorporated in Virginia in 2004, and is fully insured. **WGA** is a permittee with the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, and along Virginia’s Blue Ridge. **WGA** is an equal opportunity provider and employer. **WGA** practices environmental stewardship, and is a member of the *Access Fund*, the *National Speleological Society*, the *Virginia Tourism Corp.*, the *Christian Adventure Association*, the *Shenandoah Valley Travel Assoc.*, and the *Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce*.

How was your trip with the *WILD GUYde*?!

Thanks again for guiding us – the trip was awesome! I’m a little sore and bruised today but it makes me happy because it reminds me of everything we did. The info was clear and the location appropriate. I also really enjoyed how you incorporated learning and team building elements into our trip. (Sarah, 2012)

We arrived back in Florida late Thursday night. We had a wonderful time on our adventure with you and we have all been raving to everyone about how great the trip was! Your professionalism and encouragement allowed us to continue on even when some of us were reluctant to try (me, of course)! The boys raved about the caving and the fact that it looked scary, but once you got through it, it wasn’t as difficult or scary as you thought it would be. Todd and I were both thrilled with the learning experience for the kids and feel that we have all grown as a result of facing our fears. Everyone talked about what a great guide you were for us! Overall, our adventure was a wonderful experience and the highlight of our trip to VA! (Christine, 2012)

We had a blast, everything was perfect, and you did an amazing job! The pictures are AWESOME! We would recommend you to any outdoor lover! We agreed that we learned so much from you. (Nina, 2012)

Thank you so very much for a wonderful adventure rock climbing last week. It was wonderful to share the time with my daughter. We both really appreciated your teaching style and the knowledge you imparted. I found a whole bucket-full of sermon illustrations. The location was excellent. We appreciated the fact that we were alone on the climb (except for the beautiful hawk). The photos you took came out well, and we showed them to my wife who appreciated our joy, but was thankful that she chose a more Hobbitish way to spend the day (reading). (Pastor Chris, 2012)

Your customer service was outstanding. Despite my late contact, you found a way to get us in on an adventure. The experience was excellent. The kids had a blast but you were appropriately serious in your approach. Safety was a clear priority as it must be. The experience was well structured and presented a number of great challenges. (Mark, 2012)

Our 3 children (25, 21, 16) went on a rock climbing adventure with Lester. They were beginners and Lester was an excellent guide. He was knowledgeable, safety and detail oriented, and an excellent teacher. They came back smiling and a little sore. Our family isn't the outdoorsy type, but they all said they would definitely do it again! Well worth the drive and the time. (Meredith, 2021)

This was my and my husband's first time rock-climbing. All I can say is that it was an amazing experience. We have done activities from zip-lining and parasailing to sky-

diving and I can say this is right up there with all of those activities. I was a bit nervous to start my repel over the edge but Lester makes sure you are confident that your equipment is holding you. Now that I have experienced it, I want to go back and do it again and again. This was a great learning experience and Lester was full of knowledge about rock climbing, repelling, nature, and just life in general. Would recommend to anyone looking for some adventure! (Krysten, 2021)

Lester, we absolutely loved climbing with you! We will be climbing more – that was so fun and challenging yet doable with an incredible adrenaline rush and boost of confidence. Things we learned: How to tie a strong knot; Small footholds do a lot for you; Look down! The harness is holding me; Screaming helps; The hike is not the hard part; You will get giant leg bruises after rock climbing; Don't give up cuz you can make it; Safety, positivity, and being good to nature; Talking with people makes hikes less exhausting; It is quite thrilling to climb 70 feet without falling knowing that you could've done it without a rope. (Haley and Sam, 2021)