

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 2)

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.

The first attitude we considered (see **Guidelines**, Winter 2007) was *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 this issue, we turn our attention to:

Human attitude no.2 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

A desire to impress; overweening arrogance or ego, and its accompanying competitiveness

*“A faint cry echoed from below, followed by the unmistakable sound of a body tumbling into the nearby vertical gully. Ricocheting 600 feet, the young man probably died instantly . . . Wanting to enter the record books as the youngest to conquer the Arrow, the high school junior from Fresno instead became the first modern-era climber to be killed in Yosemite.”**

A desire to impress tempts us to overlook or downplay important safety steps and checks; we also disregard subtle instincts about danger. Jim Burnett defines the **DARES** that people take as “*Disregarding All Reasonable Expert Suggestions*”, or, as appropriately illustrated in the preceding story about 17-year old Irving Smith, “*Dangers Adolescents Really Expect to Survive.*”** But any of us can allow our egos and image in front of others to tempt us to **TOSS** (“*Testosterone Overrides Sensible Schemes*”**) caution to the back seat,

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and then regret shortly where we find ourselves. Competing to get to the crag before that other group, we hurry one of our clients into tripping and falling off the trail. Distracted by how we appear to onlookers, we neglect to do a final check of our anchors or tie-ins, or we ignore advice that we really should listen to. Refusing to appear inadequate or to ask for help, we stumble on lost, and a day-hike becomes a late night navigational epic. One West Virginia river guide says that the words most often spoken before an outdoor accident are: “*Here, hold my beer – WATCH THIS!*” (implying both an attempt to impress, and some inebriation).

Dan Acland’s 60 foot ground fall off the Daff Dome resulted in a sprained ankle, cracked ribs, and a simple pneumothorax. His personal reflections are repeated at length here because of his transparent acknowledgement of the role that *ego* played in his mishap:

*“At the time of the accident, I was co-instructing with two people who both tacitly and explicitly questioned my capabilities and my judgment, and I was trying to convince them, and more importantly myself, that I knew what I was doing. I had become very attached to the idea of myself as an experienced climber. In truth, I had spent more time teaching climbing than climbing. So two things were happening at the time of the accident. One thing was that I was up a cliff doing something I was inadequately trained to do. The other was that my ego was in an uproar because of the threat to my identity as a good climber and instructor caused by the doubts of my co-instructors. My fervent desire to cling to my own self-definition, my unwillingness in the preceding years to allow myself to be a beginner (and receive appropriate instruction), and my unwillingness that morning to accept my right size -- these things caused the accident.”****

So what is the immediate lesson for us? Make it a habit to be brutally honest with yourself about your motives, laugh out loud at your adolescent tendency to compare yourself to others, and then reassert your commitment to humble safety instead of hubris. It also doesn’t hurt to have someone else along who will speak the truth to you about yourself when you need it, even if you are the group leader!

**Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 243.

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

**** Accidents in North American Mountaineering, 1995*, American Alpine Club, p. 41.

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