

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 2013)

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Stupidity Explored

We have all seen the YouTube videos or America's Funniest of the stupid in action:

- The racquetball player who hard-serves the ball 10 feet away from the wall, only to get his clock cleaned by the rebound,
- The box truck driver who piles up his rig against the low overpass,
- The bozo who rides his bike off the roof and face-plants in the front garden.

Needless to say, there are numerous examples in the outdoor adventure realm as well. People rappel off the ends of ropes, failing to check for length, or they fall to injury attempting to scramble and raid rappel stations for free gear. Then there is my personal favorite: “[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.” (*Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., 2005)

Now we laugh, and then we pronounce them *stupid*. But here are a few troubling thoughts and questions I have been having recently:

They didn't think they were stupid. In fact, Zachary Ernst writes: “*Stupid people think they are being very smart. They would characterize themselves as unusually intelligent and insightful. They believe they have special knowledge of the way the world is. They often think others are naïve.*” (*Inklings*, 6-16-12)

How do we know when we see stupid happening? Carlo Cipolla divides humans into four classes (*The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, 1986):

- The Helpless (suffering a loss while producing a gain for the other)
- The Intelligent (making a gain while yielding a gain to the other as well)
- The Bandit (making a gain while imparting a loss to the other)
- The Stupid (causing a loss to others while himself deriving no gain, and possibly even incurring loss) →

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So when everyone is losing (including in particular the one who caused the incident), stupidity is happening.

It's only the result afterward that shows them to be stupid. A Shin'a'in saying goes: "*If it is stupid but it works, it isn't stupid.*" And so Forrest Gump's mom is right – "*Stupid is as stupid does.*" But this only allows us to describe stupid after we see it happen – it doesn't help us to predict or prevent stupid.

So, if they didn't think they were being stupid beforehand but they actually were, what *were* they thinking? And if we can figure out what stupid looks like before it becomes painfully apparent, could we occasionally identify and prevent stupid behavior?

(Also, if they didn't think they were being stupid, are there times that I might be doing something that is going to turn out stupid, but don't know it? Might I be stupid too? This is the most troubling thought...)

I would like to offer three different ways that stupidity might express itself, and then finish with a tentative conclusion.

1. Sometimes, it seems that stupid is clinging to an idea in the face of opposing reason and evidence. In fact, Zachary Ernst suggests that this is the defining characteristic of stupid people: "*They apply double-standards with regard to evidence. They may apply the highest standards of intellectual rigor to some questions, while endorsing the most asinine answers to others, with either no justification or with transparently ridiculous justification.*" (***Inklings***, 6-16-12) Obvious facts do not require justification, and highly intelligent people that they are, they are gifted at discerning what is obvious.

The wife of Kelly James, lost mountaineer on Mt. Hood in December of 2006, told reporters that she was certain that her husband would survive because, "*We got engaged on that mountain, and he promised me that we would enjoy our next anniversary up there!*" Apparently the mountain did not get the memo, because Kelly James' body was found three days later, dead in a snow cave. The logical flaws and shaky justification for her convictions are clear. This is why, incidentally, prejudice, racial or otherwise, and superstition are always stupid.

2. Sometimes it appears that stupid is the one who decides that statistically, he is always the exception (when in fact, statistically, this makes no sense). Cross, in polling faculty in American higher education about their own effectiveness, reported, "*an amazing 94% rate themselves as above average teachers, and 68% rank themselves in the top quarter on teaching performance.*" (***Not Can, but Will College Teaching be Improved?*** 1980). In my mind, this would qualify...

Someone observed that the lottery is a tax on the mathematically challenged. Regularly playing the lottery ignores the statistics. Or you could say it is stupid.

A corollary cohort here might be those folks who fail to draw the obvious conclusions, or who draw faulty conclusions about cause and effect. Often, this is done to protect the fragile ego from recrimination or inadequacy (redirect blame, etc.). Todd Schimelpfenig and Gates Richards, in presenting on ***Decision-Making and Judgement*** (WRMC, 10-6-11), refer to "illusory causation" – that illusion that a decision made was the cause of the positive outcome – in short, a false feedback loop. Sometimes, even our supposed rational choice model (gathering information and considering alternatives) is limited by biases in selection and observation, and by the illusion of thoroughness. We go through the motions of cherry-picking data to confirm our pre-ordained decisions. The degree to which we are aware of these denial games while we are practicing them could be called our stupidity index.

3. Sometimes, stupid is the one who refuses to make changes based upon his own history or the experience of others. Albert Einstein's definition of insanity could apply here – "*trying the same approach over and over, hoping for a different result.*" (Incidentally, Einstein, the gold standard for genius in the

human race, was at times thought quite stupid, so he actually had some fairly poignant observations about stupidity. He said, for example, “*Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not sure about the universe.*”) Perhaps the wisest words uttered by Solomon were these, spoken after walking past the field of a man who lacked judgment: “*I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw...*” (Prov. 24:32) Earlier, Solomon observed that “*Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path, and he who hates correction will die.*” (Prov. 15:10). America’s Funniest Home Videos now takes this “stern discipline” and regularly turns it into entertainment for the masses.

So may I boil these down to my conclusion, and one that is at least a little bit operational in recognizing stupidity before the fact? I would offer that stupidity is *someone who refuses to learn*. If we define learning as behavior change growing out of observations and reflective thought, then a person breaking down at any of these points (failure to observe and attend, incapacity or unwillingness to reflect, resistance to changing course or modifying constructs, refusal to grow) is stupid.

John Dewey said, “*Learning is thinking about experience.*” We are not learned if we have merely had an experience – we are learned if we have experienced something and then reflected on it, extracted meaning from it, and applied it. George Santayana, the American historian, observed, “*Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*” Learning is the corrective that we apply to past failure. So when we see someone repeating a destructive cycle for themselves or others, ignoring statistics, experience, and evidence, we can say, in tones more observational than derogatory (and hopefully, **before** it all hits the fan): “*I think we are about to see stupid!*”

As always, I welcome your additions to the article, your thoughtful reflections, intriguing stories, and contributions! Topics for future issues will be: “*Is Stupidity a Behavior or a Trait?*” and, “*Turning it Around – Becoming Un-Stupid.*” Have some adventure, and don’t be stupid out there!

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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)