

# GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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## Becoming Unstupid

In the last issue, we explored the concept of stupidity. Our conclusion, after looking at several dimensions, was that stupidity has little to do with IQ. It is, rather, *an unwillingness to learn*. This tentative definition has some predictive value. When we experience someone who shows a failure to observe and attend, incapacity or unwillingness to reflect, resistance to changing course or modifying constructs, or a refusal to grow, we can be reasonably assured that some form of stupid behavior is shortly to follow. In this issue, we will delve a little more deeply into this topic, looking at situations that tempt to us to act stupidly, and then at how we might rise above stupidity.

So if stupidity is linked to an unwillingness to learn, then, contrary to conventional wisdom, the opposite of stupidity is not intelligence. The opposite of stupidity is *curiosity* – an inquiring mind, and a desire to learn and know. Astro Teller, director of New Projects at Google, says: “*I see something, I hear about something, and it doesn’t fit with the model I have for the world, and occasionally, the data was mistaken, but usually, the right answer is that I need to adjust my models. That’s the learning moment.*”

Listen to Arno Ilgner, author of *The Rock Warrior’s Way* (2006): “*Learning and growing is a process*

## Zook Family notes

Last May, we were delighted to add Elijah James to our family. He is the first “*Grand Guy*” in our brood – firstborn of our firstborn, Ethan, and his delightful wife Melissa. Here he is with his ambulance driving dad. By now, he is crawling around, pulling himself up, and generally wreaking terror on bookshelves and pets. Only time will tell if he gets into climbing, caving, paddling, or playing the piano..!



*of modifying your beliefs. If you’re too attached to your beliefs, you won’t be willing to modify them (stupidity). When you identify yourself with your beliefs, you become attached to them. Without realizing it, you become defensive when they are threatened.*

(cont. on p. 2 →)

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*Efficient learning requires an open mind. To be open-minded means you don't cast out new information before evaluating it, and if it's useful, making an honest attempt to incorporate it into your present way of thinking. But beware! Few people actually admit to being or feeling close-minded. The Ego doesn't allow that. We trick ourselves into thinking we are objective and open, when in fact we may be judgmental and closed. Once again, the mind is full of subtle tricks."* (p. 35).

When do people do stupid things? Joel Stein attempted to understand why a brilliant man like CIA Director David Petraeus destroyed his career over an extra-marital affair. His analysis: *"Because Petraeus had extensive army training to withstand torture, sleeplessness, and contemporary hairstyles, he probably thought he could also steel himself against temptations he hadn't trained for. People who pride themselves on being superrational and superdisciplined are uniquely at risk for this hot state/cold state problem. This is how hubris works... [George Lowenstein explained how Petraeus could make so many hot-state mistakes in the middle of the day, over email], 'Someone as upright as Petraeus was particularly vulnerable since he had little practice in dealing with sexual temptations. So he kept getting excited and doing stupid things, like writing inappropriate emails despite all that wasted time learning Morse code.'" (TIME, 11-28-12, p. 62)*

Here, we see two hints of situations that can drive us to stupidity: **intense emotions**, and **hubris**. Of the former, Lawrence Gonzales relates that his father, a World War II Flying Fortress pilot, would say, *"When you walk across that ramp to your airplane, you leave half your brain behind."* (Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why, 2003) Of the latter, Ilgner calls it Ego, and Stein refers to hubris -- both suggest pride. This is why unbridled ego is such a reliable predictor of human suffering and misfortune in the outdoors (and probably, in human relationships in general). *My self-perceived superiority renders any input, feedback, or perspectives from others as unworthy of me; I have already decided that I have it all figured out. In short, why learn?*

One additional condition that seems to predispose people toward stupid actions is **isolation** – a lack of outside scrutiny of decisions and conclusions. Greg Lukianoff observes, *"Those with the highest levels of education [tend to] have the lowest exposure to people with conflicting points of view."* (Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of the American Debate, 2012) The result, he suggests, is a stifling form of thought conformity. This has been called "group-think" – conclusions arrived at in cloistered isolation, where group identity and cohesiveness are made to depend upon uniformity of thought (Janis, 1972). Group-think decisions can be quite stupid.

So a remedy? What about questions – questions of every kind?! Here are a few practical applications:

1. Leaders should foster an atmosphere in the group that allows any member to raise a question, about procedure, decisions already made or about to be. Anyone should be allowed to voice a concern or an observation (*"That emperor has no clothes."*) If leaders are threatened with this and become autocratic, they might stifle the very voices that could be their or their group's salvation. That would be very stupid! Leaders modeling their own inquisitive processes is also very powerful teaching.
2. We can also cultivate a personal posture of curiosity, about our own thought processes, the validity of our conclusions and decisions, and our own capabilities. John Powell (Fully Human, Fully Alive, 1976) suggests a posture toward each day of "letting life question you." *"A very different person from a background very dissimilar to mine asks me if I am capable of empathy and understanding. Success and failure ask me to define my ideas of success and failure. Suffering asks me if I really believe I can grow through adversity."* (p. 92) Pausing long enough to let life question us gives us a meta-perspective on ourselves – a bird's eye view or level of objectivity that just might keep us from engaging in something stupid. It also introduces a pause in the action – time enough to insert, in Steven Covey's words, a proactive choice of action between stimulus and response.
3. What questions might prevent the multitude of falls, explosions, projectile face shots, and groin-plants on pointed objects that we witness on YouTube? What about: *"Do I really have the skills to pull off this stunt? What factors of physics am I not taking into account (angle of incidence equals angle of reflection, force equals mass times acceleration, friction coefficient and viscosity, gravity,*

combustibility)? Or maybe, *what are the various ways that this could go terribly wrong?* Any one of these would do if it serves to stall the individual long enough to be curious.

4. Finally, when we encounter someone who demonstrates an unwillingness to participate in inquiry, we should give them plenty of space, because we can be fairly certain that we are about to see stupid!

**Send me your comments, creative stories and insights about this topic. 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)

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)