

# GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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## The March of Folly

What do the Trojan horse, six renaissance popes in the Catholic Church, the loss of the American colonies by the British, and the Vietnam War have in common? They are all examples, according to historian Barbara Tuchman, of the triumph of folly over reason. In painstaking detail, Tuchman's work, *The March of Folly* (Ballantine Books, 1984), unpacks how, in each of these four cases, the truth of eventual disaster was known in its time, but discarded for baser ends, and as a result of more crude but imminently more powerful pressures. This book caught my attention because, as you might recall, I devoted two issues of *GUYdelines* in 2013 to "Stupidity Explored." The parallels are remarkable. In this work, Tuchman explores stupidity (folly) in institutional and political realms. Reading her work, I kept being reminded of what we have learned about positive leadership in the outdoor adventure world. So for this issue, I propose to share some of Tuchman's insights about folly as the negative side of the ledger, and then offer some commentary and counter points about proactive and mindful leadership for us in the outdoor adventure leadership world.

Tuchman: "*Wooden-headedness (folly) is the refusal to benefit from experience ... It is epitomized in a historian's statement about Phillip II of Spain, the surpassing wooden-head of all sovereigns: 'No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence.'*" (p. 7)

Commentary and Personal Application: John Dewey famously said, "*Learning is thinking about experience.*" We are not learned simply because we have had an experience. We are learned when we reflect on it, draw applications from it, extract principles of truth from it, and ultimately, change our behavior based upon what we have learned. Perhaps the wisest words spoken by Solomon were, "*I applied my heart to what I observed, and learned a lesson from what I saw...*" (Prov. 24:32). And George Santayana, American historian, quipped, "*Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*" Can you identify a mistake you have made in a leadership role? Are you willing to move into that mistake and analyze it? What pressures led you to make a bad decision (desire to be liked, hurry or time-pressure, unwillingness to acknowledge your own limitations)? Take a few minutes to create a new scene in your mind in which you retroactively go back and relive that situation, but oppose the toxic forces and make a better decision?

Tuchman: "*Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception ... consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.*" (p. 7) "*Insistence on a rooted notion regardless of contrary evidence is the source of the self-deception that characterizes folly.*" (p. 209)

Commentary and Personal Application: Al Seibert, author of *The Survivor Personality* (Penguin Putnam, 1996), describes a survivor as one who "*does not impose pre-existing patterns on new information, but rather allows new information to reshape his mental models.*" We might be more eager to receive advice if it did not continually interfere

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Lester R. Zook, **WILD GUYde Adventures**

1047 Stuart St., Harrisonburg, VA 22802

(540) 433-1637, [lester@wildguyde.com](mailto:lester@wildguyde.com), [www.wildguyde.com](http://www.wildguyde.com)

with our plans (desires, expectations). Steven Covey (*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), said, “*That which we desire most earnestly, we believe most easily.*” Are there particular personal soft spots that you cave in for – where you sacrifice objectivity in order to have what you want? Here is a courageous question to pose to your assistant leader or partner sometime when you are feeling reflective and receptive: When have you seen me allow my desires to compromise my principles?

Tuchman: “*A principle that emerges in the cases so far mentioned is that folly is a child of power. We all know, from unending repetitions of Lord Acton's dictum, that power corrupts. We are less aware that it breeds folly; that the power to command frequently causes failure to think.*” (p. 32)

Commentary and Personal Application: One of the *Instructor Traps* shared by Alan Ewert, Amy Shellman, and Lewis Glenn at the 2006 Wilderness Risk Management Conference was “the Super Instructor Syndrome.” These presenters identified how this image can tempt instructors to neglect their own physical needs, and thus impair judgment. Leaders also see the gap between their clients’ abilities and their own, and can wrongly deduce that they can handle the demands without much trouble -- objectivity and situation-specific judgment are correspondingly diminished. I would offer one additional explanation. In the athletic world, we know that the factor that causes the quality of performance and execution to plummet is *self-consciousness*. This is as true among world-class athletes as it is in a college speech class: when we start thinking more about how we look to others than what we are really trying to do, performance drops into the basement. So when leaders become self-conscious about their role and status, and how they appear to be doing in front of others, objectivity suffers, decisions are made for the wrong reasons, and overall leading quality is sacrificed. “*The power to command frequently causes failure to think.*”

Tuchman: Of the popes: “*Their three outstanding attitudes -- obliviousness to the growing disaffection of constituents, primacy of self-aggrandizement, illusion of invulnerable status -- are persistent aspects of folly.*” (p. 126)

Commentary and Personal Application: The topic of invincibility has received a lot of attention in the outdoor leadership world. The word itself is rarely used, but the attitudes are clearly displayed every time someone looks backward at an incident with the phrase, “*I didn't think it could happen to me.*” Steve Baker, after a preventable fall on Orchard Rock at Peshastin Peak in Washington: “*I have been climbing for over 20 years, taught as a paid instructor, put up many new routes, climbed many of the hard routes in the States. It is embarrassing to think that I could become so careless.*” (*Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, 1993, p. 72). Every outdoor instructor needs a compelling story of the perils of invincibility to share with his or her students or clients; take a few minutes right now to recollect or find one, and spend some time constructing it and framing it up for frequent telling.

Tuchman: “*The attitude was a sense of superiority so dense as to be impenetrable. A feeling of this kind leads to ignorance of the world and of others because it suppresses curiosity.*” (p. 229)

Commentary and Personal Application: If you read *GUYdelines* in 2013, you will remember my definition of stupidity – *one who refuses to learn* (not open to advice or coaching; one who thinks they already know). Therefore, the opposite of stupidity is not intelligence, but *curiosity* – a desire to learn and know, and openness to input, coaching, and direction. So according to Tuchman, superiority accompanies folly (stupidity), and is often followed by disaster; humility precedes (or provides the seedbed for) curiosity, learning, and growth.

Tuchman: “*In its first stage, mental standstill fixes the principles and boundaries governing a political problem. In the second stage, when dissonances and ailing function begin to appear, the initial principles rigidify. This is the period when, if wisdom were operative, re-examination and rethinking and change of course are possible, but they are rare as rubies in a backyard. Rigidifying leads to increase of investment and the need to protect egos; policy founded upon error multiplies, never retreats. The greater the investment and the more involved in it the sponsor's ego, the more unacceptable is disengagement. In the third stage, pursuit of failure enlarges the damages until it causes the fall of Troy, the defection from the Papacy, the loss of a trans-Atlantic empire, and the classic humiliation in Vietnam.*” (p. 383)

Commentary and Personal Application: Christopher Keyes calls this “*destructive goal pursuit*” in his analysis of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster. He observes that, the more inextricably tied to our self identity or group esteem our goal is, the harder it becomes to extract ourselves from it. Picture that friend of yours driving you somewhere on a two-lane country highway. Starting to pass a slower motorist, you both observe a car approaching you in the opposite direction. Instead of backing down and slowing back into his lane, your driver friend tromps the gas, now accelerating even faster toward the

oncoming vehicle. This is "*an escalating investment of resources toward a failing course of action*" (Straw) The more committed you get, the more difficult it is to withdraw, and catastrophe can ensue. Can you think of any personal examples?

We can learn from history – our own and others'. Put some quality reading and thinking time into your leadership preparation. And as always, I would welcome your comments, personal sharing and reflecting, and interaction around this theme. Be a mindful leader out there! **LRZ**

**Summer 2014 is here!** We are already taking adventure trip bookings, so don't wait too long to call, if you want to get wild on a rock, in a cave, or on the river with us this season! Also, we are (modest) sponsors of the Red Wing Roots Festival coming up in July. Hope your summer is filled with amazing times, beautiful outdoor places, great food, precious people, and lots of folk music!



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

Please know that I enjoyed the trip as much as the students. That was a terrific adventure concluding our trip. As for you, your pre-trip, guiding us, giving us knowledge about the environment, and helping us to understand it through questions and answers was intentional, terrific, and exemplified a true outdoor professional. Thank you! (Mike, 2014)

Thank you so much for taking us on this unforgettable adventure. I cannot stop thinking about how much fun we had and when we can do it all over again! You were an excellent guide. I appreciate the fun facts you gave us, as well as caring to teach us navigational and safety skills that we could take with us into future excursions. I like to take on challenges, rather than having someone do the hard work for me, so I am glad you gave us all the opportunity to learn something new. It was clear you put safety first as well, and I think I can speak for everyone is saying that we felt as safe as we could in a cave. The location was great and easy to get to. I think you hit everything on the mark! (Deesha, 2014)

I would like to thank you for the terrific caving trip yesterday. The kids could not stop talking about it, and Gary would like to do the lower part of the cave. You are an excellent instructor, and run a quality program. (Larry, 2014)