

Outward Bound

The summer I graduated from Exeter, I went through the brand-new Colorado Outward Bound School, high in the Rocky Mountains. Outward Bound had originated in England during World War II when celebrated educator Kurt Hahn observed that British sailors whose ships were torpedoed by German U-boats tended to give up hope and drown without struggling hard to survive. To foster strong character, self-reliance and a sense of responsibility toward others, he founded an “outdoor education” program. Outward Bound slowly spread through the Commonwealth and, in the 1950’s, caught the attention of American educator Joshua L. Miner, himself an Exeter graduate then teaching at Andover. Miner recruited allies and financial backers and, in 1962, launched the first U.S. Outward Bound program in ruggedly gorgeous terrain near the hamlet of Marble, Colorado.

Frank Broderick challenged me and a close Exeter friend to take part that first year. For most of the summer, I worked as a counselor at the Dayton YMCA day camp and mowed lawns to accumulate the Outward Bound tuition; then my friend and I crossed the heartland by Greyhound bus from Ohio to Denver. When we reached the mountains, we found ourselves amid a very odd mix of “students”. About a third of us were eastern preppies. Another third were youthful offenders sent by a Denver juvenile judge to expiate their crimes and recalibrate their lives. The final third were newly-recruited Peace Corp volunteers—JFK was still President—preparing for their assignment in Nepal. (Not knowing how best to train them, novice Peace Corps

bureaucrats settled on replicating the topography of their future posting as faithfully as could be done within the continental U.S.)

My tent mate was a young but practiced auto thief. When at the outset of our initial four-day mountaineering expedition, he ate our entire food ration on the first day, I began to appreciate the value of “deferred gratification”. Then he raided an abandoned miner’s cabin for canned goods during the 48-hour “solo survival” while I dutifully plucked watercress from a burbling spring and carefully rationed my secret roll of Life Savers. Mainly, though, for a chubby, bookish type, the Outward Bound experience—more than three straight weeks of it—was a physical challenge at every level: trudging slowly up 14,000 foot peaks (panting at the top of one, I haplessly swigged a mouthful of white gas from the wrong canteen); climbing ropes and walls, with much help from my mates; and jogging breathlessly down miles of stony road on the “marathon”. It was humbling but, as intended, getting through it intact built one’s confidence.

I also began to see that there’s more to education than book learning—and people who are really good at the other kinds deserve respect, too. I was used to being an intellectual leader but those who distinguished themselves at Outward Bound had physical prowess, street smarts, character, stamina and the ability to forge and lead a group. These have societal value, too, of a sort not often tallied by contemporary “school accountability” schemes.