

## Better Than Good Enough

As a kid, I thought the world was my stage. Super-8 movies and VHS tapes record a boy *constantly* hamming it up for the camera, singing songs, dancing, imitating the Swedish chef from the muppets or John Travolta in Grease.

But, at age ten, I lost my best friend to Reye's syndrome--a rapid swelling of the brain associated with taking aspirin while recovering from a viral infection. One day he left school with the Chicken Pox. A week later, I stood in the rain and watched a small casket get lowered into the ground.

Shortly after that, I became aware of issues in my parent's marriage. Their relationship imploded in slow-motion. My senior year of high school, my mother asked my father to leave.

During these darkening years, the playful spirit I had as a child was consumed by feelings of vulnerability and doubt. Instead of playing the goofball, I protected myself from harm with pessimism and cynicism. I became shy and withdrawn. My world shrank.

And then I discovered alcohol, and through it, a fleeting way to feel joy again. It didn't bring happiness back into my life, but the feeling it gave me was good enough--at least while the buzz lasted.

After high school, I left my hometown to attend the University of Alabama, and didn't look back. I returned to see my parents as little as I could get away with. I lost myself in whomever I happened to be dating at the time, and put too much responsibility for my happiness in their hands--with predictable results.

The semester before I graduated, the first of two three-year relationships came crashing to an end. This brought a fleeting glimpse of what life could look like if I took responsibility for my own happiness. But after six months alone, I started dating someone new and, again, ceded responsibility for my emotional well-being to another.

By now, the idea of life outside of Tuscaloosa, Alabama frightened me. Though I did well in school, I had little confidence in my abilities. After a few months of delivering pizza and waiting tables, I went back to school, a place where I thought I knew the rules and how to succeed.

Instead of facing the challenge of life after college, I went back to what felt safe, to what felt good enough.

But two years in, I realized the rules of graduate school were different. You had to know what you wanted, and you had to work hard for it. I just wanted a place to avoid stepping out into the larger world of choices and responsibilities beyond the university. I dropped out of school, found a job managing a small café, and withdrew into my latest relationship. It was a life that was narrow in its margins, and seemingly under my control. It wasn't exactly exciting or fulfilling, but I decided that it was good enough for me.

As it turned out, it wasn't good enough for her. She left me unexpectedly one day, and I began a downward spiral. I went out drinking almost every night. If I couldn't depend on other people to make me feel secure, I figured I might as well not feel much of anything at all. I decided that I would ride this slide all the way to the bottom, whatever *that* meant.

Late one night I found myself at The Chukker, the same bar I'd been hanging out in since I first arrived in Tuscaloosa at age 19. I was now 26.

I looked around the room at the faces I had seen there since the first time I walked through those doors. Some of them had been going there for decades before I ever arrived. When I left, I saw that the sun had already risen, and I realized that--there is no bottom. A person could just keep falling forever. I had to face the fact that if things were going to get better, it would be up to me to make it happen.

I decided I needed to do something radical to shake me out of my life avoidance stupor. On the recommendation of a friend's older sister, I signed up for a semester-long course at the North Carolina Outward Bound School. The program would take me from the Appalachians to the Everglades, and all the way to Costa Rica.

In other words, a long way from Alabama and the life that I lived there.

I began my Outward Bound course on a beautiful September morning in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The granite monolith of Table Rock towered above the surrounding forest. By the end of that month, I would complete my first multi-pitch climb to reach its summit, and experience a level of presence and focus I did not know existed. But before we could climb, our instructors decided that first we needed to run: a mile down a forest service road, and a mile back up.

I had attempted running on the previous New Year's day in a premature attempt to get a fresh start--after yet another night of trying to get away from myself. On that first day of 1996, I made it exactly one block before I found myself doubled over gasping for oxygen in the frigid winter air. I had tried running a few times since, with only slightly more success.

As we crested the hill to complete the run, one of my crew mates started puking. I felt like doing the same. Later that day, I put on a fully loaded backpack for the first time since I had made a half-hearted attempt at being a Boy Scout at age 13. As we walked up the hill from the gear issue room to begin our first hiking expedition, I worried I didn't have the strength--physical or mental--to get through the next 82 days.

During that month in North Carolina, it rained more days than not. But the discomfort of putting on wet socks first thing in the morning gradually began to occupy less of my mental landscape than the growing sense of wonder I found immersed in those southern hardwood forests.

In the middle of the month, we began our solo. This consisted of three days of camping by ourselves, with no other human contact, limited food, and a limited amount of space we could wander around in. There was no place I could get away from myself.

Near the end of the second day of solo, I watched the light and shadows dance on the jagged rock walls of the Linville Gorge. For no apparent reason, I broke down and wept.

As September came to a close, we returned to the starting line of that first morning's run, this time to do a half-marathon. On a downhill piece of single track, I felt light and nimble as I darted through an obstacle course of root, rock, and tree branch. Somehow, I managed to run the entire distance, and finish just behind one of my instructors. I felt successful at something for the first time in years, and I had found something I loved to do.

After the rain of the North Carolina mountains, we traveled south to the Everglades. It was October, a time of the year when most people know better than to venture into this part of the country. Hurricane watches and swarms of mosquitoes greeted us. The little beasts had us running for the van whenever we could.

Once the threat of severe weather subsided, we set off to paddle the length of Everglades National Park--roughly 100 miles of tidal rivers, back bays, mangrove creeks, and ragged beaches that clung to the submerged land at the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. It was the most remote place I had ever traveled. Days would pass without encountering any other human beings. I found myself hypnotized by this half-drowned land and the myriad of creatures both above and below the surface of the water that made it their home.

The bugs liked to come out at night, but preferred to stay close to shore. To avoid them, we would start to paddle just before sunset and go through the night. We spent our days sleeping and watching the rise and fall of the tide. The rhythm and simplicity of gliding over that still, black water under the light of the moon and the stars, and spending my days napping and beach combing, began to soothe the pain and restlessness I had tried so hard to avoid back home.

The final phase of the course took place in Costa Rica. We backpacked through the rainforest, paddled dugout canoes to help with sea turtle conservation on the Caribbean coast, and did homestays with coffee farmers who lived two-days walk from the nearest village. My eyes opened to how much about the world I didn't know. But now, instead of hiding from it, I wanted to experience it.

Near the end of the course, on a mountain top overlooking the lights of a town in a valley far below, my fellow crewmates slept peacefully. I remained wide awake, entranced by the scene that surrounded me. The stars of the Milky Way made their slow turn over my head, and the backpack that contained all I had needed to thrive for the past three months rested beside me.

I felt an overwhelming sense of possibility and freedom. I knew that whatever joy or sorrow I felt was mine, and mine alone. No one else was responsible for my happiness, and no one was to blame for any ill-feeling within me. Once again, the world felt like my stage, and I knew that good enough, would never again be good enough.

I completed the semester course just before Thanksgiving in 1996. Since then, Outward Bound has defined much of my life. I began a 20-year career at North Carolina Outward Bound. The people and experiences I come into contact with there continue to inspire and motivate me. Each time I dip a paddle into the waters of the Everglades, or help a new staff member deal with the uncertainties of life as a seasonal outdoor educator, I am reminded that each of us is capable of so much more than we give ourselves credit for--and that we can choose to create a life that is better than good enough.