

College Essay 2008
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The first night I spent at camp I huddled in a fetal position, freezing cold and sobbing with no sleeping bag, listening to what I swore were wolves (they were loons). It was my first time away from home and I was marooned in the Canadian wilderness for three and a half weeks.

I only had one friend at camp when I arrived, and I expected to find the standard amenities I had become used to during my nine years of life—like flushing toilets. Instead, I had ended up at a rustic camp, without electricity, on Pathfinder Island, Source Lake, in Algonquin Provincial Park.

But for some unknown reason, the next year I came back. I was ten years old and when my parents asked, “should we sign you up again?” I must have momentarily forgotten that awful first night.

Many weeks of the next six summers of my life were spent on the Island. The camp focuses on the skills of wilderness canoe tripping across thousands of square kilometers of forests, potable lakes, and *voyageur* rivers in Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba. Each time I returned, the canoe trips I took got longer, more adventurous, more difficult. I learned every unexpected twist and turn of the rivers: the Spanish, Barron, Winneway and Dumoine. We ventured into areas which were virtually uninhabited except for a few natives, loggers, and hunters.

Unfortunately, I didn't like tripping when I first arrived at Pathfinder. It was hard, sometimes boring, and there seemed a permanent lack of food. I only enjoyed getting back to camp to satisfy my raging teenage appetite. One day changed this for me.

It was our only rest day of the trip and was planned in a beautifully isolated place, Greenleaf Lake, located in one of the many “nature reserve” zones, protected from loggers and developers, in Algonquin Park. We woke up to half-cooked, scrumptious pancakes, followed by a jump off the nearby 15-foot cliff. These two activities did not mix well, but they were thrilling. All nine of us paddled over to the other side of the lake towards the sound of a small waterfall pouring down the steep incline of a forested hill that rose around the lake. We hiked up the side of the fall to the top of a 300 foot ridge. An amazing panorama unfolded below of tree-smothered hills, serrated granite cliffs, the elongated lake, and our campsite far below on the other shore. After the hot and arduous six-kilometer portage we had struggled through the day before, it seemed like we could overcome anything.

That moment made me decide to return to Pathfinder when I was invited by the Director last summer to make the transition from camper to counselor-in-training (CIT). During part of June, July, and August I struggled over portages short and long with a beautifully fragile seventeen foot, eighty pound, cedar-canvas canoe on my shoulders, just as I had struggled as a camper with a much lighter pack. What I began to glimpse were the responsibilities of the staff I had never imagined as a camper — and the challenge of being confronted with the homesickness of a camper like me.

On one four-day trip, in my new role as counselor, nine of us were venturing through an area of the Park seldom visited by the hordes of tourists that clog the lakes on weekends and holidays. All of the six campers were under the age of 11, and new to the camp. It was their first day of tripping and one particular camper, overweight, with sandy-blond hair and a plump face, was struggling on the first portage of the trip. As soon as we arrived at the campsite he began to walk away from the others into the woods,

a dejected look on his face. I noticed the other two counselors shy away and quickly appear busy. After following the camper down a trail, I caught up and asked what was wrong. Between gasps he revealed that he was homesick, worried about the safety of his parents, and scared of the food he might have to eat. I tried to point out all the fun things we were doing on the trip. When that didn't seem to help, I explained how I used to deal with feelings of homesickness by focusing on the moment and spending time with all my close friends at camp. But seeing the situation from a staff perspective for the first time, I realized that for first-year campers who had no friends at camp, the staff was required to play that role, to try and give the camper a sense of belonging. It takes a tremendous amount of effort, I discovered, to befriend and encourage an anxious, tearful, and dependent ten-year-old whom you have never met before.

Three days before camp ended, on the last night off, all 18 CITs floated out to the middle of Source Lake, huddled in the bow and stern compartments of each boat, stuffing our hands into bags of junk food, guzzling the sodas that each of us brought in the same backpacks we had tripped with all summer. We lay back and watched meteors sparkle overhead, the glow-sticks we had brought whiz from one boat to another by way of slingshot, and later, a red-orange moon rise from the trees. We landed on a peninsula called Loon Point halfway across the lake from camp, made a huge fire, and talked the night away.

I looked around at the seventeen friends I had made that summer and realized the decision I had made to come back was one of the best of my life.