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## Seeking Direction in Your Life? Outdoor Education May Point the Way

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## Seeking Direction in Your Life? Outdoor Education May Point the Way

**By Nathan Vink**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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The wallpaper on my computer is of a remote and beautiful place in the Utah desert. The different shades of red and orange seem endless when I stare at the picture's detail.

It's a special place to me, and while I didn't take the picture, I've stood at the same exact point numerous times.

Most of those visits blend together, but two times – separated by seven years – stand out as pinnacle moments in my life.

During the summer of 2002 I felt lost. I had toiled in numerous jobs, finding little direction or purpose. I was in dire need of a challenge that would push me beyond my limits and help me to better understand what I was about.

My sister suggested taking a course with an outdoor-education school. Both my sister and brother-in-law had taken courses when they were younger and had transformative experiences. I remember seeing my sister following her course and thinking something had changed in her. It wasn't anything that would be apparent to every person, but to me it was a subtle feeling that she had evolved into a stronger and more confident individual during those two and a half months she was away.

A few months later I embarked on a 90-day course with a nonprofit outdoor-education school that focuses on teaching technical outdoor skills, risk management and leadership through expedition-based courses. My course, a fall Rocky Mountain semester, was broken up into five sections: backpacking and backcountry travel, wilderness first aid, rock climbing, canyoneering, and backcountry skiing and winter travel.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

I struggled during the first section, as the altitude of the Rockies sapped my appetite and left me sleepless. With the support of my instructors, I pushed through the pain and the doubt and completed the section.

The rest of the course was filled with memorable moments too numerous to recount. The triumphs were there, like the six-day desert backpacking expedition I led using a map and compass or the rock-climbing route I led. And the adventures were there, like the blizzard above 10,000 feet that left me hypothermic or the time we lost our instructors.

As I stood at the top of the Sundance Trail looking down into confluence of Dark, Lean-To and Lost canyons, I couldn't help but feel the weight of the moment; we were about to traverse a desolate landscape for the next two weeks with 65-pound backpacks, and I was content. I had learned the skills, pushed far beyond my comfort zone, and taken the moments as they came.

I now longed for the next challenge, as old challenges became second nature. I wanted to explore each moment rather than hurry from Point A to Point B. I looked into the deep canyons below and saw possibility over agony.

It gave me the confidence in who I was, and the humility to admit mistakes and learn from them.

Seven years later I stood at the same spot following in the shoes of my instructors, leading a group of students through their own personal sea change. I continued on in pursuit of becoming an outdoor education instructor because of my belief and understanding of what outdoor education can provide others through engaging and challenging outdoor expeditions. They have the ability to help unleash human potential, to teach students to harness their strengths, to break through their own limitations and those placed on them.

Learning to guide a raft through Class IV whitewater might not be a skill everyone takes back into their daily lives, but so much else can be taken away: learning a difficult skill to mastery through failures, feedback and experience; taking an active role in creating a supportive learning community; building trust amongst peers; and all the while pushing personal comfort zones each and every day. Many students leave with the idea, put simply, that if they can do that, they can do anything.

Outdoor education continues to play an active role in my life 15 years later, and that picture on my computer acts as a reminder of countless lessons, struggles and inspirations that continue to drive me to do what I do at UCF, where we offer a taste of these experiences through our Adventure Trips Program. The program gives students the opportunity to learn new skills while interacting with peers in an outdoor setting. I spent my time in mountains and desert, but schools offer experiences in different landscapes around the world.

I'm always happy to share a story or two about my experiences and if the opportunity is right, suggest that someone take a course.

If the call of the wild beckons, listen to it.

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