



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Thayer Raines”**

**by Jack Cohen
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The person I have chosen as my role model is Thayer Raines. He and his wife, Candice, are the directors of Roaring Brook Camp in Bradford, Vermont.

To tell you about Thayer, I have to tell you about Roaring Brook Camp, where I have spent the last four summers. In some ways, the camp is the way it was when Thayer and Candice began running it 25 years ago. But Thayer, who is also a professor at Vermont’s Green Mountain College specializing in outdoor adventure youth programs, has changed it in important ways.

Roaring Brook Camp is not like most camps. It is a hardcore survival-skills and sports camp for boys located deep in the woods of east-central Vermont. It lacks amenities such as rooms with four walls, plumbing, and electricity. The sessions are small – no more than about 30 boys at one time.

Also we drink from a stream (the roaring brook) and cook over campfires. There’s an hour of physical training every day -- mostly calisthenics and running. The forest location means it gets so dark at night that you can’t see your hand when it’s right in front of your face. It also has a lot of fun things that other camps don’t have, like blacksmithing, rock climbing, and a ropes course.

The way the camp teaches is also unlike anything I know from school or home. Thayer, Candice and the counselors don’t lecture us. They give us the information we need to be safe, familiarize us with the way the camp works and then let us learn for ourselves and from each other. I’ll tell you more about that later.

I got to know Thayer a lot better during my third summer at Roaring Brook. There were nine boys, including me, in camp for that session and it included five trips outside of camp which Thayer led. On those trips Thayer and I talked more than we ever had before.

I learned that he is a serious athlete; he does triathlons, orienteering, and other competitions involving skiing. Thayer also volunteers as an emergency outdoor medical care technician for the American Red Cross and on ski patrols in Vermont. He knows the name of just about every kind of tree on the camp property and nurtures the grounds there by balancing the number of campers and counselors with the natural resources available. This means, for example, preparing and consuming only as much food as is needed and limiting disposable trash as much as possible.

I was surprised to learn that he and Candice don’t pay themselves for running the camp. All of the tuition campers pay to Roaring Brook goes to campers’ needs, paying the counselors, and maintaining the camp grounds. When I asked him why he runs the camp, he said that he lives for the moments that only the campers can give him. I think that he takes satisfaction from seeing his campers progress and become better versions of themselves.

When I was picking a role model I was looking for someone who inspired me and demonstrated my values. That's true of Thayer.

A hero is someone whose work you admire but don't necessarily see yourself contributing to, like President Barack Obama. To me, a hero is a well-known public figure, either in my own lifetime or from history.

A role model is someone in whose footsteps you would like to follow and whose work you believe in. That person's work inspires you to contribute to it in your own way.

Thayer is my role model because he challenges campers' thinking by putting them in problem-solving situations and letting them discover whether their approaches work or not. Thayer's method inspired me to step out of myself and attempt conflict resolution between two kids in my shelter whose disagreements affected everything we did.

Thayer is also selfless, he never brags about himself and he is adventurous. He also wants to help campers become more adventurous because he believes it will help them embrace and overcome challenges they encounter later in life rather than withdrawing from them.

These qualities resonate with me because he personifies some of my most cherished values -- respect, open-mindedness and independence. For example, every eight-camper group prepares two of three daily meals for itself over a campfire. The camp provides simple recipes and a bin of ingredients for each meal, but we do all the cooking and clean-up. The counselors ensure that we're cooking safely and make suggestions but otherwise they let us prepare the meal on our own.

I interviewed Thayer over the phone to find out what he was like as a kid and how he came to be a teacher and camp director.

Growing up mostly in the Midwest and in Pennsylvania, he liked sports and put a lot of time into getting better at them. For example, after falling in love with golf, he built a golf course in his backyard and spent hours putting.

Being small for his age, Thayer often didn't make the cut for organized team sports. However, as a determined and competitive kid those rejections only made him work harder. He was also a good student and went to college to become a teacher, studying physical education. During the summers of his college years, he worked as a camp counselor.

His first teaching job was at a boys' school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He taught physical education, which included teaching in outdoor settings. During the summer he worked at Roaring Brook Camp, which was then called Wilderness Challenge. He heard about the camp through Candice, who was a friend from college. After four years in Harrisburg, he realized that he wasn't satisfied teaching the school curriculum and that he wanted to do all of his teaching outdoors.

He and Candice went to graduate school to develop their ideas about outdoor education, which eventually became a whole new field of study called adventure recreation. They attended Penn State and Indiana University. While in school, they made the decision to buy and operate a camp and bought Wilderness Challenge in 1985.

For the first nine years of the camp, Thayer taught at Cleveland State University in Ohio during the school year and ran the camp during the summer. In 1996, he and Candice moved to Vermont to teach at Green Mountain College.

According to Thayer, he didn't change much about the camp when he took it over. However, he gradually modified its physical-challenge focus (based on the Outward Bound model) to include confronting and overcoming emotional challenges such as homesickness and interpersonal conflict.

Thayer's mission at Roaring Brook is for every kid to learn what schools can't or don't teach, to challenge the thinking of the typically suburban kid. Most kids going to Roaring Brook think they know how to chop wood and build a fire from movies they've seen or books they've read.

But Thayer's way of teaching is to immerse them in a wilderness setting and give them the opportunity to do new things – more guiding them rather than instructing them. In this way, kids become more capable and self-reliant. Kids find and take away with them, as Thayer puts it, “the inner strength of knowledge you've discovered on your own.”

When I asked Thayer to tell me about a camper who had personified for him what the camp tries to do, he said I was that camper.

I was 10 years old when I first went to Roaring Brook. I missed my family a lot and the darkness of the forest scared me. Thayer helped me get through those early challenges not so much because of what he said but in the way he said it. He was always calm and very clear in what he said. Watching him always push himself as hard as he could made me want to do the same thing.

In my second summer, I pushed myself harder physically, experimenting with going full-out instead of pacing myself -- in running, for example. But I also got my first taste of leadership during those two weeks. Thayer let the first-year kids know they could turn to me and a few other returning campers if they were homesick because we had all successfully dealt with those emotions. I was also the “skillet man” in my group because of my ability to cook food well without burning it or losing it in the fire.

In my third year, in addition to the trips out of camp, I did the Survival Solo. This consists of staying 17 hours in the woods alone with only a canvas tarp, a flint and steel (for fire-building), two layers of clothing, two hot dogs and two potatoes. In some ways, my survival solo wasn't successful. I wasn't able to start a campfire and I didn't set up my shelter as well as I could have. But in other ways, it was successful. I found berries to go along with the hotdogs and potatoes that I ate raw.

I also found that there was nothing to fear from the loneliness and boredom of being alone. Since completing the Survival Solo I find more satisfaction in solitary pursuits such as reading and I am more focused in my schoolwork and when I'm practicing hockey.

Thayer, through the camp, has given me more independence, and confidence, which has made me stronger. The camp has also made me a hard worker and has taught me to be open-minded. In the wilderness there is often more than one way to do something and sometimes you have to improvise. One really important thing that the camp has taught me is how to teach and how to observe.

I have learned that everybody, at least once in their life, has taught and has learned from others and this is to be respected.

Lastly, and this hadn't occurred to me until Rabbi Peter suggested it, Thayer and Roaring Brook Camp prepared me well for the City Congregation bar mitzvah program. The two programs are similar because both make you push yourself. They challenge your thinking (especially your assumptions), and they teach you independence and self-reliance.