

Camp – Is it Really Magic?

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Listen to any camp program director and they talk about the “magic” of their camp. Summer camp for youth has been around since 1861. How could anything continue to be popular for so long, with such passionate proponents in every generation? *Magic?*

Or are camps just businesses that rely on good leadership? Most of my previous *Camp Business* articles have dealt with that leadership dimension: making wise choices based on listening, caring, and measuring; creatively borrowing ideas that have proven successful (in camping, and elsewhere), and taking *action*.

But is there something more *elemental* than that? Could much of the success of youth camping be attributed to an original formula – a secret recipe that’s been duplicated, altered, and often unwittingly ignored? I’m eager to hear what you think about this thesis-in-progress, and what it might mean for your camp.

Walt Whitman Was Right (and So Was Your Mother)

It was 150 years ago when Whitman said, “Now I see the secret of making the best person: It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.” Your mom paraphrased him every time you sat in front of the TV during the day: “Go outside and play!” Richard Louve in his now famous book “Last Child in the Woods” laid out the consequences of moms today being too fearful to repeat their own mother’s words. (Signs that the pendulum may be swinging back are the many grass-roots “No Child Left Inside” initiatives.) Louve used anthropological and biological research to



(YMCA Camp Dudley, WA)

strengthen his message. Seventy years earlier Anne Frank said it from her heart: “God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature.”

So our first ingredient of Camp is “*A beautiful outdoor setting.*”

It’s obvious that most traditional summer camps have always been built in places of great natural beauty. It was an integral part of the missions of early camps: to help kids find “the regenerative properties of nature away from a stressful world full of bad influences.” (Yes, they printed that in their brochures even before 1900).

The rich have always been able to afford this “re-creative” time in beautiful surroundings. Thomas Jefferson built Monticello on the side of a mountain as his retreat. The first of the rustic “Great Camps,” private summer estates in the Adirondacks, was built in 1896. But the youth camping movement brought it to everyone. The colorful testimony of those early leaders who experienced it first-hand easily attracted money and volunteers for “the good of the kids,” and camps spread quickly from coast to coast by 1910.

Today, some camps have forgotten that a primary reason our campers, parents, and guests chose us to spend time surrounded by natural beauty. Too many camp staff focus

more on what's convenient, like conducting activities indoors; or they *lose* focus on how their un-maintained buildings destroy their camp's original beauty. Then of course there are the "camps" held on college campuses that can miss out on all of the benefits of "#1."

Excitement and challenge isn't the number one force at work in camping. "Come to the woods, for here is rest. There is no repose like that of the green deep woods," said John Muir, father of Yosemite National Park.

Letting the Scorecard of "Cause and Effect" Teach Responsibility

"Another possible source of guidance for teenagers is television, but television's message has always been that the need for truth, wisdom and world peace pales by comparison with the need for a toothpaste that offers whiter teeth *and* fresher breath."-- Dave Barry, from *"Kids Today: They Don't Know Dum Diddly Do"*

If you were to read Thoreau's "Walden" today you'd swear much of it was an article from a current healthy-living magazine, instead of from 1845. Famously he wrote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

The allure of a "simplified lifestyle" has been at the core of groups wanting self-improvement for hundreds (if not thousands) of years. The nineteenth century utopian communities in America, and even the scouting movement (Boys, Girls, Campfire, Woodcrafters, etc) of the first decades of the 20th century had as cornerstones that living closer to the land brought people more in touch with the effects of their own actions, and amplified the dependency they have on each other. This spiritual message of "Do unto others," and our interconnectedness is

the foundation for all the lessons of character needed to support a society. Thus our next ingredient is "*A separation from home that makes responsibilities for daily living very real.*"

From its very beginnings through today, camping has used the simple skills of supporting each other in a separate community, (or "A Manufactured Wilderness" as Abigail Van Slyck has called it), as a way to let children and young adults practice providing for themselves and each other. It might be building shelter (or at least keeping it clean), cooking meals (or sharing in serving each other), or just dealing with bugs in the sink and the sounds of the night. The consequences of social interactions are especially amplified when there's no place to hide, and no parent to "save" you.



(Bruce Spoelman -- Camp Pentalouan, MI)

At camp, it's much easier for campers and young staff to see the direct effects of their actions, enjoy the rewards for success, and learn immediately from failed attempts, when their self-dependent community is isolated by wilderness and distance. In this small community the tasks usually claimed by adults are opened up to the young. Kids (and their college-age counselors) need to try and fail and try and succeed to know they are growing in competence and confidence. These are lessons too dangerous to leave until adulthood. "Failure

is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently,” said Henry Ford. “Success is underrated,” quips Seth Godin.

Blood-Brothers and Sisters

Wanting to belong is one of our most basic needs. Research done by Dartmouth Medical Center (“Hardwired to Connect” co-sponsored by the YMCA) shows that not just children, but people of all ages require human interaction in order to grow and thrive.

Think of the first day at a new school for any child. “Will I fit in? Will I even have anybody that will let me eat lunch with them?” Childhood is full of stress that can be balanced by a caring family that provides comfort and encouragement, and most importantly, a sense of belonging. But kids grow up and out of the house; many families are dysfunctional; some broken altogether. Stress builds, and kids coping strategies can be self destructive. Obesity, bullies, mean-girls, alcohol, drugs, gangs.

Now think of the first hour at your camp. Each camper is introduced to his new “club” and shown they are *expected* and *welcome*. The club leader (counselor) is “way cool” and has their own “clubhouse” (cabin or campsite or picnic table). This tribe has a name; a proud name! There’s a code of conduct toward each other. There’s a “secret handshake” (maybe not literally) that includes chants, cheers, and songs. Not the same songs that are on the radio, *different* songs that only members know. You can sing these songs away from camp with your camp friends and *everyone* will know you belong.

This critical camp ingredient is “*A foundation of small groups that invite and reinforce membership through rituals and traditions.*”

A camper may get to keep only a small sense of privacy (adding to the feeling of membership *earned*), but the fellowship and

camaraderie of the group makes it worth the sacrifice. These members gain confidence to take on challenges and try new things that would seem unthinkable without the support of the tribe. It’s much more than “Come on in! Jump!” It’s also “Man that was cool! Look, he made it!” And by the end of the day, they’ve had a chance to talk about things that are important. To *them*.

I wrote a brief article once about a camp I had visited where they sang no traditional camp songs, only current pop songs. “The kids love it!” I was told, but enrollment was dropping. The response to the article was overwhelming; each of 70 responses saying in one way or another, “Without traditional camp songs, you’re not a member of the camp clan; you’re still at school or at home.” Camp songs – our secret password.

The informal and formal rituals that a camp group repeat again and again strengthen the bonds of membership and help store the vivid memories of friendship, accomplishment, and joy. These memories not only last a lifetime, but improve with age.



(Ruth Fox– YMCA Camp Pentalouan, MI)

You’re So Cool

Anyone over thirty who has asked a camper “How old do you think I am?” gets a naïve (and annoying) answer that’s off by ten to twenty years toward the “you’re too old” side. These kids can’t even *imagine* ever

being that old. That's not the case for their college-aged counselors. They have the freedoms that kids can't wait for, and they're close enough in age that kids can *see* themselves getting there, if not soon enough. The best name I've heard used to describe a camp counselor is "Not-a-parent." I love the double meaning.

To a camper, a counselor is awesome. They work outside and get *paid* for it; they have their own cabin, they make their own decisions, have more people coming up and hugging them than anyone they've ever known. They've got the energy to keep up, the courage to lead, and they're *so* cool they don't even care if they *act* cool. How cool! They're the "delivery system" of so much of the character of camp. What's one difference between child care and camp? It's the ingredient of "***Youthful Staff with a Small Group of Their Own.***"



(BJ Murray – Des Moines Y Camp)

I get to see the camp evaluations from thousands of parents every year, and the item that rates number one most often is "We just love your staff." Some camps may have an organizational chart many layers deep, but it's the counselor that lives with the kids every day and has by far the biggest impact.

But "with great power comes great responsibility." When we choose the *wrong* counselors all of their built-in advantages can multiply the damage they can cause.

"For One Brief Shining Moment"— *Camelot*

What's a key ingredient of all of those successful "summer love" movies like "Grease," "Dirty Dancing" and this summer's "Camp Rock?" The young lovers come from different towns, and go back to different towns, so their memories stay more perfect than any in-person relationship could ever maintain. The movie line (and the song) goes like this: "I'll remember you *just the way you are.*" Fishermen have the same phenomenon: *the big one that got away* will always be bigger than any they take home.

Successful camps give kids the opportunities to make new friends. Parents often insist their child is in the same cabin or group as their best friend. Wise camp directors don't argue because they know as soon as they are assimilated into their new group they'll make new friends and often forget their pal until it's time to go home.

But if the group is *nothing* but friends from home? Then they bring all of their baggage with them and none of the excitement of "new friendships." And when they go back home, their "magic" memories aren't tied to each other, because they see each other every day. It's the lucky kid who has at least a few fellow campers from far away, a counselor that's in college, and a camp with places to sit and talk and make photographic memories while they're practicing what it takes to make and keep friends.

Putting it another way, New Yorkers never visit the Empire State Building because *it's always there.* So for now, our last element is "***Rarity of Friends and Place.***"

Family vacations don't provide the same result as summer camp; neither do school outings, even though they might have much in common. "Camp" has a special spice from kids saying good bye (and crying because they know something special is coming to an end); from the anticipation of returning next year and again seeing a

special counselor; of actively keeping in touch with those kids from another town that actually *are* far enough away that texting and e-mailing makes sense! These are the campers that are more likely to cover their bulletin board with camp mementos, or build a shrine to camp in their bedroom. Camp represents a personal accomplishment; a private perfection that they *don't* have to share with everyone else, but *must* be shared with special friends.

So What?

“How come when you mix water and flour together you get glue ... and then you add eggs and sugar you get cake? Where does the glue go?” – *Rita Rudner*

For almost one hundred years resident camps shared every one of these ingredients. Every one. As a result they were successful even when many things weren't perfect. (Talk to any “old timer” and they'll laugh

about all the things they did that “You'd never be able to get away with today!”) But starting in the 1960's some “camps” began to *streamline* or *modernize* to “capture today's kids,” cut down on costs, or just make it easier.

I've got no beef with camps experimenting and trying new things. But here's my warning: when your “change” includes eliminating one or more of these core ingredients, your chance of success immediately drops unless you can compensate with extraordinarily good planning, exceptional staff, and clockwork implementation. Are you *that* good? I'm not.

For people to think you're a great cook, you only need one *great* dish. If you can deliver on that recipe, what kind of plates you serve it on becomes unimportant. And the meal can do what it's supposed to do: open people up to great conversation and friendships that nourish the spirit, the mind, and the body.

Gary Forster has obviously made lots of mistakes in order to know so well what doesn't work! But he's terrific at borrowing other people's ideas and mixing them together in new ways. He's worked with staff and volunteers at over 200 camps across 43 states. Gary was a YMCA camp director for 25 years, but started out with degrees in Architecture and an MBA. You can reach him at www.garyforster.com