

## Summer Camp, Life Lessons

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor  
June 2016

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### Fun and games are just the icing on the cake



My darling eight-year-old will soon board a plane for his first sleepaway camp. Two weeks in the misty mountains of North Carolina. His first encounters with fireflies, red clay, and color war. Beyond an acquaintance from school, he'll know no one.

Still, he's counting the days. When I asked what he's most excited about, he exclaimed through a missing front tooth, "Riflery and archery." Not surprising from a Minecraft, X-Box devotee. My excitement lies in blueberry bushes and skipping stones replacing technology.

I'm also excited about singing. Singing, especially with others, is a gift I owe to my own summer camp days, where we sang with reckless abandon, with and at one another. At every meal. And most camp-wide gatherings. Lovely songs and silly songs. Songs about riding forever 'neath the streets of Boston. No one knew what it meant. No one really cared how you sounded. All that mattered was that you added your voice, were part of the ensemble.

Why don't we sing like that as adults? This simple act transforms us from our doctor/broker/administrator shell into something far more regal and infinite -- harmony. Looking up into the tall pines at a camp reunion in the scrappy hills of Georgia a few years ago, I sang my heart out. I sang and I cried, my arms draped around the same shoulders they adorned in the 1970s.

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The people make the party. And there they were. The girls I was too nervous to talk to. The counselors I worshipped. The kids who were kids when I was a kid. Each belting out the hallowed soundtrack of our youth, "You've Got a Friend," "House at Pooh Corner," "Fire and Rain" -- each transported me back to the boy I was and still am. Standing beneath those soaring trees, I pondered that boy...and the man he is now.

I was scrawny, with braces, tube socks, and a Michael Jackson fro. But my dreams were huge. Did I honor those dreams? Did I turn into what I wanted to be when I grew up? Did this life thing work out the way I so fervently hoped it would when I gazed into those same pines in 1975? I'm profoundly relieved to say that, for the most part, it did.

Camp changed my life, as I hope it changes my son's. Eight may seem young, but I went at his age. I felt homesick briefly, but by the end of the first week, I begged my parents to let me stay both sessions.

Being utterly removed from my folks brought me to a never-before-felt level of independence and adventure. Bunking and recreating with a large and disparate group of my peers immersed me in a constant camaraderie I'd not known. And having to make my bed and do my job on the chore wheel each day crystallized my emerging notion of personal responsibility.

My wife and I struggle to keep our children grounded amid a life a plenty. To instill in them a sense of fairness. Not just a willingness, but an eagerness to do their share of the work needed in our family and society.

Almost daily, I tell my kids to be kind to one another (often with limited success). To share. To hustle on the soccer field. To be good losers and winners. They are works in progress, and I believe summer camp is a wholesome platform that strengthens and manifests their personal growth.

Our six-year-old will attend Morningside Park day camp (305-795-1834). At \$90 per week, including lunch, it's a great bargain relative to other Upper Eastside day camps. Activities range from all the regular field games to water sports and field trips. His older brother attended the

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past two summers and loved it.

Unlike the more regulated sleepaway camp environment, Morningside Park camp tends to be a bit more on the wild side; at least that's what it felt like when I picked my son up each day. But the counselors are kind-hearted, and my boy typically came home delighted. He even had his first crush, though I don't think the 13-year-old shared my then six-year-old's feelings.

Looking around the campfire at my reunion, I saw the players from my youth, now radiologists and writers and "Best Lawyers in America." At least, that is what they present to the world outside. To me, they're the boys in the next cabin. The counselors I wrote my mom about. The hooligans who streaked with me to the girls' side. And made me laugh till I peed my pants.

The ones who knew me when. The deep water. Even after 40 years, that water tastes sweet. In fact, I realized just how thirsty I was when we started to sing.

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