

Falling in Love with Camp

Susie Baskin

I came to the summer camp experience late in life.

I was never a camper as a child. While some of my friends went to camp, I found their long and exciting conversations about their summers in Maine and upstate New York (I grew up in the Boston area) hard to follow. I could tell that something special had happened for them, but I just did not "get it".

I was never a summer camp counselor. I worked with children, but my experiences were with at-risk teens (at a psych ward) and children with cancer (at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute).

I had graduated from the University of Michigan, worked for 3 years and entered Kellogg Business School before I set foot on my first camp property.

I married into camp. A former investment banker, Steve and his brother were building a new summer camp on a beautiful lake in Texas near the town of Marble Falls. And after graduating from Harvard Business School, he planned to make "summer camping" his career. We started dating while he was in Boston. I knew early on that I was not just dating a guy, but also a Texan and a camp-nut. As I started to think about our being together permanently, I knew that camp was part of the deal.

At the time, it was odd. I saw the excitement and passion of all the full time camp team, but did not understand. I worked with the camp, but primarily in the back office as a bookkeeper/administrator. With my graduate degree specializing in health care management, I assumed that I would end up working in hospital administration or consulting. My time as a camp person was surely nothing more than a short-term stint. Occasionally, a camper would ask me what I did at camp. "Think of me as a pancreas - you are not quite sure what I do, but you are glad you have one."

Each year, however, I found myself understanding it a bit more. I would get a chance to talk with a camper at a meal and see her eyes light up as she talked about camp: "I can be MYSELF at camp and I LOVE that. I wish I could be like this ALL THE TIME!" (For those of you who speak often to teen-age girls, you understand the need to capitalize the key words.) I would watch as campers hugged their parents at closing, as if they never wanted to be parted again only to exclaim "I'm coming back next year"!

As time passed, I started to see and feel the magic of camp. I attended 2-3 national and regional conferences annually on camp. I would listen to Steve passionately espouse the power of the away-from-home, community experience. And I kept seeing the campers grow. After hours of conversation and observation, I found myself enthusiastically buying into our Mission Statement: "to help every camper grow into the Champion God intends him or her to be."

My education was coming along nicely.

The summer of 2005 was the final watershed. Our three oldest children (twin boys daughter who were 8 and 7 at the time) went to camp for the first time. Sending them had been harder than I had suspected it would be. I was reminded of my mother (a former Lamaze instructor) being shocked at the pain of childbirth. Despite my understanding of camp, letting go had been hard, but worth it as they returned home so happy and with so many new skills that I was awed. Their newly acquired talents are more than an improved tennis backhand and an ability to water-ski, but extend to making their own beds, being responsible for their belongings, and, best of all, having the confidence to meet new people and prosper in whatever situation might arise.

I should have seen the effect of camp three years earlier. The evidence was there. When the boys were only 5, they befriended a large number of campers during our first session of camp. The session ended on a Saturday and the following session began the following Sunday. That morning, Liam shot out our door like a cannon. "Where are you going?" we asked.

"I am going to see my friends."

"But Liam, your friends left yesterday, these are new campers."

"I know Mommy. I am going to see the friends I haven't met yet!"

Camp continues to be a huge part of our parenting strategy. Each of our children will attending Champions (including our youngest - 8 year old girl - who is in her third summer), while the older three will also attend another camp. We want them to have an experience that is truly away from home. One of the boys (now 12) will spend 5 weeks in New Hampshire while the other will go 4 weeks to the all-boys camp Steve attended. The older daughter will spend a month in North Carolina.

I know see my role at camp as crystal clear. I am here to share my lessons with other parents. I want them to understand the unique growth opportunities of

camp. I also want to help them deal with the challenges of separating from their children.

As I think over my decade-plus in summer camping, I am reminded of George Bailey, Jimmy Stewart's character in It's a Wonderful Life. In this classic film, George Bailey finds himself longing for a life more exciting than that offered running a savings and loan in small Bedford Falls, but soon learns that he is exactly where he can make the greatest difference in the world. He is only able to see this truth with the help of a child-like angel.

Just as George never left Bedford Falls, I never left Marble Falls. Unlike him, I had more than one child-like angel to help me see the significance and importance of my work here.

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