

Homesickness and "The Letter"

[This is the first in two articles about homesickness at camp.]

Thirty-six summers ago, my mother got a letter in the mail from me on the Thursday after I had come to camp for the first time. Though only 8 years old, I had a flare for the dramatic:

"Dear Mommy,

The stains you see on this page are from tears fallen from my eyes. No one likes me. I am so sad. If you truly loved me, you would come and get me.

Your son, Steve"

Oddly enough, my mother did not immediately jump in the car to save me. Instead, she smiled to herself, placed a quick phone call and then went about her day.

Was she an ice woman or a machine? Neither. Instead, she was the mother of 4 and I was her third. She had received "the letter" before and she recognized it.

"The letter" is a perfectly natural reaction to the early days of camp. You see, home is a pretty special place full of 1) wonderful people you know love you and 2) reassuring routines. Camp, on the other hand, is initially full of people you do not know (strangers?!?) and unfamiliar experiences. When you are unsure of yourself, you long for your parents, your room, your pets and anything that is "normal".

So on the first or second day of camp, during rest hour, you sit on your bunk and long for home. Chances are that two hours ago, you were fine because you were riding behind a boat or on a horse, but now (remember, you are at rest hour) you have nothing to do but think about home. You break out the pen and stationary your parents sent you with, and you write the most powerful prose you can imagine.

Of course, the letter does not arrive home until Thursday. So while the evidence of your misery works its way through the US Postal system, things begin to change. You realize that the others campers in your cabin want to make new friends as much as you do. You discover that your counselor is a very cool guy or gal who can play the guitar or tell great jokes. You become familiar with the schedule of camp and the location of the dining hall, activities and flagpole. Almost without noticing, you realize that you are having a blast.

Then the letter arrives.

After your parents have recovered from their near heart stoppages, they start to make plans to save you from your misery. Then they call the camp to see how the director is dealing with all the pain. What do you hear? "Your child is doing great!" Doubt rushes in. How could you have sent your child to a camp that is so out of touch with human suffering? Shouldn't it be obvious to all that the child is having a tough time? The director (whose credibility is might be suffering given the apparent lack of insight) tries to explain that your camper probably wrote the letter on the first or second day and is now over the initial homesickness. You want to believe it, but you are not sure.

This is one of the main reasons we started "camparent" (this online website). We wanted to be able to show you the smile on your camper's face even as you hold "the letter". We wanted you to share in the magic we experience each day. We wanted you to get a one way mirror into your camper's joys here.

Of course, there are some homesickness cases that are more acute. In these situations, we will reach out to you to discuss the situation - we want to help your camper as much as you do.

By the way, my mother saved my letter and shared it with me when I told her I was going to make camp my career. She has a nice sense of irony!

Steve Baskin