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Everything I Learned in Life, I Learned From Camp

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I've done the math. So far, over the course of my life I have spent 3,150 days in a classroom learning. I've dissected frogs, read Shakespeare, memorized the first five lines in the constitution, and studied my times tables. But if you ask me what I've really learned from my twenty years of life so far, I'd answer you with the following: ketchup could be classified as its own food group, Kings is as competitive a sport as football, and "rock-paper-scissors" is the greatest form of diplomatic resolution.

This coming summer will be my eighteenth "camp" summer. While most of my friends will be working at the mall, taking stubs at the local movie theater, or selling hot dogs at the beach, I will find myself working eleven, twelve, or sometimes thirteen-hour days making sure that "Carnival Day" is run without a glitch, "Color-War" is as memorable for the winning team as it is for the team that comes in last, and that the "Bus Decorating" contest is judged fairly.

The only thing more amazing than how much of an impact camp has had on my life, is that it took me eighteen years to figure that out! It was not until my second summer as a counselor that my director made me realize that I wanted to turn my thirty-nine-day summer experiences into a life long career. But why would I want it any other way? I've been in and seen Broadway comparable productions of Grease and Peter Pan, learned how to hit homeruns like Babe Ruth, and soared through the woods like Tarzan. I've performed as many songs as the Beatles in front of hundreds of people, learned to build a fire in the pouring rain, and made enough lanyard key-chains to get myself into the Guinness Book of World Records. Not too many people I know have accomplished as much in their lifetimes as I have in eighteen summers.

As marvelous as I consider my accomplishments to be, there's one problem with it all. Trying to explain your camp life to an "outsider" is harder than trying to reason with a two-year-old. The truth is people who never went to summer camp simply cannot appreciate how grand it really is. There are some people for whom camp becomes a life-line. It gets into their blood, seeps into their cells, and refuses to leave. These people get misty-eyed whenever they smell campfire smoke in the air. They take a certain pride in their voices being hoarse and in not having showered for four days. Ketchup stains on T-shirts are considered battle scars, instead of just

dirt.

Camp people know that being able to drink bug juice without getting a bright red mustache is a right of passage. No matter how many years have passed, a camp person can still remember the exact words the camp director said to them when they were chosen to lead a Color War team. Camp people love construction paper and puff paint, lanyard, and scrap books. To a camp person, Homerun Derby, Four Square, and Kings are not games, they're a way of life. Camp people get hungry, not for lavish meals, but for under-cooked hamburgers and burnt hotdogs cooked over a ten-year-old charcoal grill in the pouring rain. In the winter, they dream not of a sunny beach and the scent of coconut oil, but of chilly July mornings with dew drained grass. Camp people know all the words to "The Littlest Worm" and know that the worm will always wind up in the same person's bed. Camp people have back-up plans for rainy days, even though it never rains. Camp people are comforted by the sound of a child running the bases, the sight of a child climbing the rock-wall, and the smell of the locker rooms.

Camp people understand that school is ten months out of the year in order to make the two months spent at camp more special. Camp people know that hitting a bull's-eye in archery is properly done in silence but must be while surrounded with a group of friends. Camp people usually can't remember what they're laughing about anymore by the time they finally stop. Camp people know that life is just easier when you shout, "YES!!! I made a mistake!" Camp people know the contentment of everyone in sight wearing the same staff shirt. Camp people find comfort in knowing that throughout the whole year, no matter what goes wrong, everything will be ok once you get to camp. Camp people know that when you look your worst, it means you've done your best. But above all, camp people know that regardless if you've spent one summer at camp or fifty, a part of you will be changed forever.

Eighteen months stand between me graduating and hopefully working at a camp full time. Who knows how many more term papers, finals, and presentations I have ahead of me. I can't tell you how many more "all-nighters" I'll have to pull or how many more cups of coffee I'll buy at the library. But, I know this: twenty years from now when I am a camp director, my recollection of Freud's impact on psychopathology will be minimal to say the least, and I probably won't be able to recite the first five lines of the constitution, but if you ask me why I return to camp, summer after summer, year after year, I'll simply smile and say, "Everything I learned in life, I learned from camp!"

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