

## HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Michael Thompson

I went to Vermont for a week this summer and re-discovered a fantastic lost world of family traditions. A world where people sit down and eat three meals together every day, serving their food from platters and talking with one another throughout the meal. A world where ten-year-olds set the table for dinner and take all the dishes back to the kitchen when the meal is finished, without complaint. A world where thirteen-year-old boys don't play video games every night, nor do they watch t.v. or sit in front of computers. Instead, they lie on their beds and read comic books and graphic novels, sometimes even grown-up novels. In this world I saw eleven-year-old girls walking together and holding hands as they walked back to their cabins. Right out in the open. No girls there send mean instant messages to one another; they don't I.M. at all. Instead, they sing. When they are making their beds (yes, they make their beds every morning) and sweeping out their rooms, they sing together. First one starts to sing a song, and then the others join in, spontaneously. There is no adult leading them.

As amazing as these phenomena are, they aren't the most fantastic things that I witnessed in Vermont. I saw a world where nineteen and twenty-year-old young men spend hours of time swimming and diving and kayaking with eleven-year-old boys, and they all seem to enjoy it equally. When the swimming is over, the boys hang out with the young men and ask them questions. They also walked to dinner together, sometimes with the smaller boys hugging and hanging on the bigger boys, who don't tease them or act annoyed. Even more amazing, at the end of each evening, the young men, the twenty-year-olds, sit with older men in their fifties and sixties and listen to them tell stories about their lives. The young ones aren't sarcastic or dismissive the way that television sitcoms suggest they are supposed to be. They seem eager to learn from their elders, night after night. And at the end of the night, they all sing, boys and young men and old men, all together around a campfire.

But of course, this isn't a fantastic lost world. As the reader has certainly guessed, it is summer camp that I am describing. If we were lucky enough to go to camp ourselves as children, we know that these things are a precious part of the camping life. However, when I visited a camp for a week in Vermont, some forty years since I had last attended one myself, I was struck hard by how rarely I see children engage in these activities anywhere else: not in schools, not in neighborhoods, not in families. It made me wonder if summer camps are one of the last places that kids can learn the so-called "family values" that hard-pressed families no longer have the time to teach.

"We send a questionnaire to the parents," the dedicated and very modern camp director told me. "We know what they're looking for when they send their children here."

I asked the director what the parents say on the survey.

"Fun and friends," he said, "Overwhelming they send their children for fun and friends; they mention values third."

Doubtless, fun and friends are an important part of a camp experience. And though the children I saw were having fun, I didn't think that fun was at the core of the campers' psychological experience. From my viewpoint, three elements dominated the campers' days. They were living in a multi-generational community, they were following hallowed rituals that were universally respected and they had a lot of downtime. The rituals started early, with reveille, morning formation, the raising of the flag and tent inspection. Ritual surrounded every aspect of meal time, from the pre-breakfast song to the post-dinner sing. And everyone, no matter what their age, participated in and respected the camp traditions. The day ended with taps and a lullaby. That's right, a lullaby. At 9:30 p.m., I joined a group of men standing in the dark singing a version of the Brahms lullaby with camp lyrics to a circle of tents in the woods. The children were asleep by 9:45 and virtually all of them slept solidly until 7:30 when the ritual clanging of the bell woke them again.

Is there anywhere else in the United States where children, ages eight to fifteen, have a lullaby sung to them every night? Is there anywhere where fourteen-year-olds reliably get ten hours of sleep at night? Despite what the survey revealed,

**I don't think that families send their children to camp just for fun. They are sending them away to get something more fundamental. It may be too painful for parents to confess that they send their children away to have some family life that they cannot provide at home.**

**After all, there can't be too many family dinners when you are driving your children to the 90-game ice hockey schedule which is required of thirteen-year-olds on the select ice hockey teams of North Andover, Mass. You can't have much of an evening ritual when children are watching t.v. or are on the computer up until the last minute before bedtime. And there isn't much downtime in a family where all the children are in music lessons, tutoring, martial arts, town sports, SAT prep courses, etc., etc. The only place a child from a high-pressure family can enjoy some peace and quiet, and perhaps a good night's sleep (with a lullaby) is away from home...at camp.**

**Children don't develop because they are pushed and prodded and pressured to develop. Children don't develop because of town teams or because their parents prepare them to go to a "good" college. Growing up is what kids do, because development is their biological and psychological imperative. It is the job of adults to create environments where they have the time and freedom and safety to grow up at their own pace.**

**In Vermont I was struck by the fact that a summer camp seems to provide something that is in short supply in our fast-paced worlds: respect for ritual, time for the generations to get to know one another, and of course, the opportunity to take a nap or read a comic book after lunch every day. A number of the counselors at the camp, young men and women in their twenties, told me, "I missed the years when I wasn't at this camp. That's why I came back to work here." Others simply said, "I love this camp." One young man, the graduate of a prestigious university and the product of phenomenally successful parents from New York, stood up on the opening night of camp and told his fellow counselors, "This camp is my home."**

**I hope that camps will be able to maintain their traditions in the face of the frantic, competitive zeitgeist of modern America. I'm suddenly worried that they will all become specialized (and driven) learning camps, teaching Division 1 sports**

skills or computer skills. I hope not. I am planning to go back next summer and do some singing. I don't seem to have the time for it around my own house.

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*Michael Thompson, July 2004*