

Summer Camp

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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I went to summer camp once as a child when I was 11. It was the summer of 1979. I left my family for two weeks and made my way to Camp Overlook, a 4H camp in the Adirondack Mountains. I never did remember the 4H's. I remember feeling anxious about going. They would expect me to hike long trails, battle all kinds of snakes (one of my greatest fears), do a polar bear swim each morning (if you're not familiar with a polar bear swim it is basically being forced to jump in the icy waters at 6:30 in the morning), and they gave you work to do. I had to clean up the great hall after lunches. I had planned on sleeping the summer away doing what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. I thought my parents were monsters for making me go. As a smart-mouthed kid I told them they were offering me as free labor and gave them the list of tortures I would endure like swimming in ice, never ending walks through snake infested forests, and likely a bedwetter in my cabin. My mother smiled and said, "if you're lucky" and "you're going." I think my going to camp was more about her than me. She definitely had had enough of my antics and was looking forward to the break.

The next summer, in 1980, when the camp director suggested I take a few summers off from camp. I didn't realize I was such a problem the summer before. I simply stood up for myself and recruited others to demand more relaxation versus cleaning and refuse to leave our bunks at 6:30 am for the icy swim. Five of us lasted while the rest of the cabin caved. Yes, at 11 I was quite the organizer and leader. Camp Overlook administration was clearly threatened by me and asked I not return. I know now that this experience prepared me for the UU ministry.

I eventually did return to summer camp, but as an adult. Each summer I return to the Adirondack Mountains where I grew up. I have a close relationship with cousins and friends that never left the area. Whether you live in a shack or on a grand estate in the Adirondacks you are at summer camp. The Great Camp tradition began in the late 19th century soon after the publication of William H. Murray's *Adventures in the Wilderness* in 1869. This highly popular book was an account of Murray's various camping, hunting, and fishing trips in the Adirondack wilderness. Murray's book put the Adirondack Mountains on the map as a tourist destination; grand hotels were built and the rich and famous from around the world were soon spending their summers there.

The wealthiest among these visitors, such as the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, soon began building their own wilderness retreats, known today as the Adirondack Great Camps. These camps were built so that wealthy families could continue to live in luxury, even in the remote wilderness of New York. More than a summer home, these camps were small compounds of rustic cabins that had everything from dining halls to guest cabins, and included such amenities as game rooms, tea rooms, and servant's cabins.

I've just returned from summer camp a few days ago. Not from a Great Camp but from four properties my family owns in the Adirondacks. I was kept quite comfortable, never rose early to

swim, had neither expectation nor responsibility. Regina asked me a couple of days ago if had done anything interesting while away. I thought about it and replied that I hadn't. I noticed I felt content when I answered her. I realized that I hadn't done anything interesting and I didn't regret it. I quite enjoyed my slow pace, my reflective time, and my time to just observe.

I recently read the book *The Art of Patience: Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet* by Sylvain Tesson. Tesson chronicles his journey in search of one of the most elusive creatures on the planet, the snow leopard. An expedition to the mountains of Tibet for the chance to glimpse this near-mythical beast, Tesson and his companions must wait for hours without making a sound or a movement enduring the thin air and the brutal cold. Their vigil becomes an act of faith—many have pursued the snow leopard for years without ever seeing it. As they keep their watch, Tesson comes to embrace the virtues of patience and silence. His faith is rewarded when the snow leopard shows itself and he realizes that the simple act of waiting proves to be the antidote to the frenzy of our times. Tesson writes, “I thought of stillness as a dress rehearsal for death.” He came away from this experience with the art of patience.

I completely relate to the idea that I always needed to be chasing something and that excitement doesn't come to you. You need to go out and search for it. Though I have moved toward simplicity over the past decade, slowing down, patience, and waiting is not usually my first instinct. Like Tesson, I thought boredom moves more swiftly than a man in a hurry and that movement enhances inspiration. It took me a couple of days to relax and get into the beautifully slow pace of camp.

After thinking about it, I guess I did do some interesting things while away. I did a lot of observing and sitting beneath the pines listening and reflecting. I felt the sun and wind, I mean really felt them because I took notice. In this book Tesson talks about his fascination with the invisibility of wild animals. I get that. While sitting alone and in silence birds, chipmunks squirrels, skunks, porcupines, possums, the fox, raccoons, deer, and others were invisible to me. It was in the waiting, my patience, that they revealed themselves to me. Yesterday Richard and I were at the botanical gardens in Naples. It was quite hot so we chose a quiet and shaded spot to sit awhile. I mentioned to Richard the idea that so much was invisible to us and that if we were patient, we would see so much. And we did. Squirrels, butterflies, and birds moved in around us.

I wonder if that which we think is invisible to us is truly invisible or do we simply not see it in our haste. We are reluctant to do the waiting. It's a bit funny to me that I arrive back to this pulpit sharing my experiences of waiting and patience. I struggle with being patient. I'm terrible at waiting. But after summer camp I realize the beauty and wisdom of patience and waiting, and that it is a practice. That is, I don't think you can wake up one day and tell ourselves we are going to be patient from now on. It will require a transformation, one that asks us to try and try again and to practice. To wait and watch keeps the soul in suspense. Over the past three weeks I have experienced a trembling of my senses like never before. I taught myself to look at the world with all my strength. I learned that waiting and watching is a way of life. In doing so, life does not pass by unnoticed. I did it by a pond, on the riverbank, under huge pine trees, from the steps of a family cabin, and even while driving country roads noticing all the wildflowers and how it seemed they were gathered in bouquets and set down to line both sides of the road. The blues, yellows, purples, whites, orange and reds popping because I was noticing.

Like Tusson, I learned that patience is a supreme virtue, the most elegant, the most neglected. Patience made it easier to love the world. It urges one to sit, to exult in the spectacle, be it only the quivering of a leaf. Patience is humankind's reverence for what is bestowed. To wait is to pray. Something is coming. And if nothing comes it is because we do not know how to look. Patience is a virtue that many of us seek to behold and one that can be viewed from a philosophical perspective as well as from a scientific approach. Philosophically, the art of patience teaches us intelligent waiting. We learn to hold out for the right relationships, jobs or to watch our investments grow. We can hone in on this craft by learning to trust in the universe and allow life to reveal itself to us by releasing our need to control the outcome of events. Patience calls on us to believe that something better awaits us without having concrete evidence, just like our belief in something greater than ourselves, with plans greater than we could ever know. There comes a point where, rather than obsessing intensely over the outcome of a situation, the best advice is to ease back in your Adirondack chair under the pines and exercise some patience - and some faith. These are lessons hard learned, and I know it more than anyone.

May it be so.