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GUEST ESSAY

# 'Campsickness' Is Real and a Sign of Something Special

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I have only two memories of my first summer at sleep-away camp when I was 9: one from the first day and one from the last. On the first night, I cried from homesickness as an Israeli counselor consoled me until I fell asleep. On the last day, I cried as my father walked toward me — not because I’d missed him (sorry, Dad) but because I knew that his arrival represented the return to real life.

I went on to spend 14 summers at camp, first as a camper and then as a staff member, and I learned that within circles of passionate camp kids, my emotional response to camp’s conclusion that first year was not unusual or extreme. What happened that summer between my two memories might be a blur, but I know I was happy the whole time in a way I rarely was at home. I was bullied at school and had a mom debilitated by multiple sclerosis, and my parents had just gotten divorced. At camp, I made friends easily, found meaning in my Jewishness and happily ignored the problems that awaited me come late August.

I was not alone in finding sleep-away camp to be an escape, an opportunity for self-reinvention and an invitation to be messier, weirder and just more myself. It’s no surprise that coming home is, for many kids, such a painful transition that experts even have a name for it: campsickness. There’s plenty of advice available for parents on how to cope with this often messy end-of-summer transition, such as doing camp activities at home and exercising an abundance of patience as your child resumes routines. But this advice, however useful, misses the point. Camp is supposed to feel different from — and, frankly, better than — home. That’s what gives camp its life-changing power.

Shortly after I left my camp summers behind, I began to research the camp experience as an academic. The best description I’ve come across for how camp affects kids comes from Fritz Redl, an Austrian Jewish child psychoanalyst and educator who fled Nazi Europe for the United States in the 1930s. After working with children at a camp in Michigan in the 1940s, he described the immersive nature of sleep-away camp as a “powerful drug” that could offer several potential benefits, including character training and “supportive mental hygiene.”

Contemporary camps often sell themselves to affluent parents on just this kind of claim: that camp provides utilitarian advantages like acquiring skills and fostering independence. But early camp leaders understood that what camps really do best is

induce a kind of extended period of euphoria in kids by cultivating a series of climactic highs with very few, if any, lows.

Camp's power, Dr. Redl wrote, also means it shares "the properties of all other powerful drugs on the market. It is risky, if the wrong person swallows it or if the right one swallows too much of it or at the wrong time." Part of this risk comes from camp's transitory nature. Whatever is restorative about camp is not replicable at home. So if camp works like a drug, then coming home means experiencing withdrawal. That crash is not something that can be avoided. In fact, it's a sign that camp worked in exactly the way it's meant to.

Immersive sleep-away camps of the kind Dr. Redl studied had their roots in a progressive effort to counter the downsides of modern urban life by incubating cultural connections and cultivating interests like theater and scouting. Jewish summer camps, which can run for up to two months, were born of the fresh-air movement in the early 20th century, and they provided getaways for Jewish children who were excluded from many Christian-run summer camps.

At first, these philanthropic camps were designed to aid in assimilation, helping immigrant children leave crowded urban neighborhoods and experience the great American outdoors. After World War II, the goals of the Jewish camping movement changed, as camps focused more on instruction in Jewish traditions for a generation of kids who were assimilating all too well. Rabbis and educators believed that sleep-away camp would solve this assimilation problem, given its intensive nature and the fact that camp, as one Jewish education scholar put it in 1966, "controls the child's environment for 24 hours a day, eight weeks a year." Camp was intended as a powerful drug, one that American Jews hoped would cure a number of specific cultural ills.

Millennials like me experienced Jewish camps in ways similar to our boomer parents. For 14 years, camp was my idyllic getaway not only because of the lifelong friendships, summer flings and sense of joy I found there but also because the cultural agenda of my camp gave me a sense of purpose. My camp's focus on Zionism turned my friends and me into fanatics for the cause — and gave us the intoxicating feeling that what we learned and did over those eight weeks was what really mattered in life. As I entered my 20s, my life experiences and education made me challenge the ideologies I'd been exposed to. But I knew firsthand how camp can create a two-month bubble for children that feels transformative, like a trip to Neverland.

There's a maxim about the passage of time at camp: A day feels like a week, a week feels like a month, and a month feels like a year — which is testament to the emotional intensity of the experience. A three-week friendship can feel deeper than a three-year one at home; a weeklong fling can feel like the romance of the century. Yet this two-month escape inevitably ends, and as with Neverland, you have to grow up, or at least pack your sleeping bag and go home.

No return from camp was quite as painful for me as that first summer, but each year my friends and I still wailed as we hugged goodbye. One summer, around age 12, I came

home inspired to continue the camp experience by doing the entirety of my camp's sing-songy prayer service — all 45 minutes of it — alone every morning in my bedroom. I quickly learned what every camp kid comes to understand: You can't replicate camp at home.

Camp kids also learn that the experience bends your sense of time during noncamp months as well. The countdowns to next summer always went faster than we thought they would, and as camp kids say, I learned to live my year 10 for two.

If your kids come home campsick, don't worry about curing them. Let them know that camp was always meant to provide a bubble away from reality that's intense and ephemeral by design. They can't bring it home with them, nor should they want to. You can remind them, though, once they're back in the real world, that opening day is only 10 short months away.

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