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# What a difference a year at Swat makes

by Samantha Herron · September 3, 2015



This past summer marks my eighth and last at the same Jewish sleepaway camp tucked in the Catoclin mountains of Pennsylvania. When I left for home at the end of two exhausting months as a counselor, I wasn't sad to go. For the first time in the history of my attendance, I did not ugly cry during final goodbyes. I didn't even regular cry. I stood stony-faced on the edge of a sobbing mass of 130 staff members and only felt sad that I wasn't sadder. I had, in one year's time, come

to feel completely alienated from a community by which I had long felt embraced. I don't think it's a coincidence that this summer followed my first year at Swarthmore.

I do not want to portray Swarthmore as some utopian wonderland of unconditional acceptance and love, but I don't think it would be a complete inaccuracy to say that the College more closely reflects (or attempts to reflect) that ideal than many other spaces I've encountered. Ironically, for many years I would've said the same about my summer camp. I did, no less: I wrote about imagined parallels between Swarthmore and Capital Camps in the 'Why Swarthmore?' application essay that brought me here, about a sense of community, of belonging, of silliness, of meaning, of teamwork. Unfortunately, after this summer, I don't believe my own words.

Unlike when I was choosing Swarthmore, I did not spend endless hours sifting through options and information to find The Right Camp for Me. I was ten years old, a family friend had had a fun time at Capital Camps and that was all I needed to know for me to happily follow her to my first year of sleepaway camp. I fit in easily enough. I sang Hebrew songs, I cheered during color war, I ziplined, I ate ice pops, I canoed. I loved every single second of it for seven summers.

That being said, I definitely was not “cool” at camp (or elsewhere, for that matter). For most of my summers there, I was acne-ridden, brace-faced, socially awkward, and actively nerdy. I liked weird books and Rubik’s cubes and the Internet. In the unofficial but salient Weird Cabin/Cool Cabin dichotomy, I was easily a member of the former. The Cool Cabin girls weren’t malicious; they were just those who boys thought were cute and who were blessed early on with the interpersonal skills I’ve only recently learned myself. Even so, as I saw it, everyone at camp coexisted so joyfully and peacefully as one big community that the social dynamics were of little importance.

Like it has for many a dorky tween, maturity transformed my dweebiness into quiriness. By tenth grade I had emerged mostly victorious from the trials of awkward adolescence, with little but a hipster wardrobe and a ukulele to evidence my distance from the mainstream. When I graduated high school, I returned to camp as a staff member after a two year hiatus. I had a great summer: I helped campers battling homesickness, bandaged scraped knees, smiled through exhaustion and sticky situations. The company of my small handful of camp best friends (Hi Emma and Ilana!) and the good-natured small talk

with the rest of the staff kept me afloat. Still, I felt that I had not met my full potential as a counselor. I knew that I could have done more for the kids, that I could have put more effort into my own friendships with the staff. I planned to come back the next summer to right those wrongs.

In the meantime, I began my life at Swarthmore. From the moment I stepped on campus, I loved it. I had a really amazing first year. As is often advertised about the first year of college, I learned a lot about myself. I also learned about other things: about racism, sexism, and classism; about friendship and support; about kindness and the warmth of relative strangers waving hello on the Beach. Thanks to the wonderfully open-armed and actively lovely students and faculty that populate Swarthmore's campus, I ended my freshman year feeling incredible. I have never felt more capable, intelligent, or socially adept than I did at the tail end of that spring. I couldn't wait to go back to camp for my second summer on staff, armed with both the lessons learned from the summer prior and with my newfound self-confidence.

But when I got to camp, I stumbled. Relative to how I'd remembered them, the people who I'd gone to camp alongside all these years seemed standoffish and cliquy. Our passing

pleasantries felt less pleasant. In group conversations I felt like an intruder. I thought for a while that I was projecting my own leftover social anxieties onto my co-staff members, imagining a hierarchy where there was none, until a counselor had the gall to say in my presence that my best friend on staff was “irrelevant.” Counselors hosted parties that I wasn’t invited to, and talked about the guest list in front of me. They would intentionally exclude me from programming. Was I so oblivious to this dynamic the year before? How had I managed to mistake this exclusivity for camaraderie? For community? I’d never been actively bothered by my social standing, but this summer I found myself hyperaware. I felt embarrassed by my unshaven armpits, uncomfortable with my own sense of humor, nervous about whether my co-counselors were interested in what I had to say.

For many campers and counselors, both new and returning, camp still feels idyllic. Most everyone there feels welcomed and included, but I think I understand now that that’s because the Weird Kids stop coming back, or don’t come at all. Because Capital Camps self-selects for a demographic of white, Jewish, upper middle-class kids from the DC area, talk of difference and how to encourage, accommodate, and celebrate a diversity

of interests and identities arises infrequently, if at all. Somehow I had missed it before, but it is very hard to be weird at Capital Camps.

I realize that a year into my Swat career I'm supposed to be jaded with the administration and frustrated with Sharples and very stressed out, but (mostly) I'm not. After a summer of disillusionment with a place I once called home, I am just grateful for the incredibly smart, thoughtful, and receptive community that populates my newest residence. I know that this school is nowhere near perfect when it comes to inclusivity, but I feel blessed to be a member of a student body that recognizes this deficiency and challenges one another to do better. Happily, I am part of the Weird Kid Cabin that is Swarthmore College. Here, for what it's worth, I'm not ashamed of my Rubik's cubes and armpit hair.

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