

“Thirteen Summers”

Peter Grumbacher

If “camping” means staying at a Holiday Inn, then I enjoy camping. If it means “roughing it,” then I don’t. On the other hand, from the age of 7 through 20 I spent those thirteen summers in traditional summer camps, though some weren’t exactly traditional as we know them.

Parents wanted their children to leave the city for fear of polio, and in the summer of 1954 I spent seven weeks at Camp Meadowbrook in the Catskill mountains. Let me tell you, a little kid spending that much time from home creates an interesting phenomenon....when I got home I did not recognize my street nor the apartment building.

I spent four summers there and then went on to Camp Merrimac in New Hampshire. It was more of a sports camp, for me a true oxymoron. There was no choice. I had to play softball, basketball and everything else that had a ball. I hated it, but spent four summers there as well. In my household I didn’t have veto power.

Aha! The next summer took me to Putney, Vermont. The Putney School is an exclusive institution – beautiful, too, I might add – and in the summer months they use the school to house the Putney Work Camp. When people heard that I, a nice Jewish boy, was sent by my parents, Holocaust survivors, to a WORK camp, they couldn’t believe it. But the work entailed planting and sowing, painting and scraping, paving and anything else one could do to make the place look good enough (if not better) for the new semester.

Now what drew me to this place – and here I did have a say – was its “come on” as an interfaith, interracial, intercultural camp. Already being sensitive to such matters I noticed immediately that this advertisement was a bit misleading. Let’s say there are one hundred boys and girls who are campers. There were two Blacks, three Hispanics, about 25 Christians and the rest were Jewish. OK, I could deal with that; from an early age I was involved in interfaith programs and continued throughout my rabbinate.

The problem was Sunday morning. They had a weekly “meeting,” a Quaker-like hour. One hymn I recall was “The Mansion He BuilDED,” a nice song but surely not one I’d hear in my synagogue, nor would the 70 or so other Jewish kids if, in fact, they ever went to synagogue. It was then I realized this place wasn’t for me. I already had the “rabbi seed” growing inside me and when I asked if I could lead a

Friday evening or Saturday morning Sabbath service, I was knocked down with a solid, "NO!"

A fruitful aside...one of the highlights of Putney was their weekend camping (not Holiday Inn camping) trips. Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine (a drop-dead gorgeous state) were the venues; the mountains and lakes were waiting for us. There were no "meetings" on those Sundays but believe me, the scenery was in and of itself a "meeting," and for me far more meaningful than "The Mansion He Builided."

With my eye on the future I spent the next five summers at the Berkshire Mountains camp of my Reform movement. It was life-changing. It was there I knew what I wanted to do profession-wise (though my mom knew I wanted to be a rabbi before I did).

In another snippet I'll write about camp "stuff," more specific than this snippet.