

Sarah B,

I told you that you would receive this missive from me during intercession. Upon reflection, however, I thought it better to place significant distance between me and my time at Camp in order to determine whether simply offering a critique of my experience there was really my final objective. It is not.

Upon my leave, among the heaviest questions that came to weigh on me was, “Have I just burnt a nearly decade-long bridge?” The answer to that question, I decided, would be largely contingent on the structure, purpose, and tone of this writing. I don’t want a bridge to be burnt, neither with you nor with Seeds of Peace writ large, both of whom have been important characters in my formative development. I don’t wish to spend the rest of my life speaking fondly of my time as a camper while suppressing a dull, ambient bitterness born of only a few days near the end of my tenure as a counselor. Worse, I don’t wish to be blocked from commenting on the entire chapter of my life entitled “Seeds of Peace” by a dark cloud overhead that deters authentic affection.

The most important objective I have, then, is to continue a relationship with an organization and friend whose presence in the world I count as necessary and highly valuable. This objective, though, can’t be accomplished without accommodation of several ancillary ones, which will concern the majority of the content contained herein:

1. To provide a brief introduction to my concerns
2. To conduct a post-mortem on **The Block Heist**
3. To conduct a post-mortem on my conversations with campers
4. To offer several overdue concessions
5. To conclude in a productive way

Hopefully, if successful, I will be able to provide information previously withheld, sharpened arguments previously sheathed, and a perspective I know some significant minority of counselors and campers share but dare not voice. This will require of me an uncomfortable frankness and will require of you a trying receptiveness.

Onward, then!

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I: Introduction

When I applied to be a counselor, I indicated a number of motivations for my candidacy. Among them, the most prominent was my desire to express gratitude to Seeds of Peace for the impact it made on my life by giving back in whatever small way I could. To me, the highest form such gratitude could take was helping create for future campers the opportunities for introspection, self-doubt, self-fulfillment, long-lasting friendship, adventure, frustration, and mentorship that had allowed me and my peers to develop so much in so little time. My success in fulfilling this commitment, however, and its subsidiary parts, would be largely contingent on the type of culture that Camp had adopted since I had been there.

Here began my first reservation about being a counselor. I sensed, even before arriving, having been exposed in university to the political zeitgeist that has corrupted the humanities in the past decade and knowing that Seeds of Peace attracts hyper-political candidates sourced from private universities, that Camp would likely be a hostile environment. I wasn't apprehensive on account of myself, although I did wind up being predictably maligned in the end. Rather, I was apprehensive about a Camp culture in which the canonical behavioral restrictions associated with "radical compassion" and its ideological outgrowths had taken hold (officially or not) with the seemingly benign justifications of "reducing harm" – speech codes, oppressive safety regimes, intolerance for divergent viewpoints, and so on. Such a culture, I imagined, would simultaneously infantilize campers, supposedly selected for their preternatural maturity and insight, and metamorphose counselors from the spiritual, intellectual, and moral guides they were meant to be into thought-police-lite, monitoring both campers and each other. I hoped that I would be wrong. I hoped that nothing had changed, that Seeds of Peace had resisted the winds of regressive identity politics posturing as finely calibrated morality.

That hope, however, was ill-founded. My intuitions were validated on the first day of orientation, when you disclaimed to the entire staff that you were a "white woman" – as if it weren't self-evident – just to make clear that, even if we didn't know it, you did, and would act accordingly, with the appropriate level of "awareness". The rest of orientation was nearly a parody of itself, "identity" featuring as seemingly the only topic of discussion. Not, notably, the identity of the campers who would soon be trusted in our charge, but our own. The point of culmination, when I was finally forced to resign myself to the political culture of camp was when I watched, aghast, as Orlando physically separated the staff by race and sex – "Brown men over here. Black women over there. White men over here." The implied purpose, of course, was to make plain to us the hierarchy of intersectional oppression that exists in the world and then to discuss amongst ourselves how our position in that hierarchy affects our lives. White men, the inarguable oppressor whose "presence" as Greg put it to me "is inherently violent", were left to an orgy of self-flagellation while I, a brown man, was meant to accept the premise that my sex and color are central to who I am and how I am viewed by the world. Leaving aside the annoying reductionism of a one size fits all explanation for the ills of the world and the moral gag reflex that asserts itself upon witnessing a room being segregated by color, I'll try and sharpen my main concern with the same story I told during that very activity:

The generation of German politicians that came of age during post-WWII reconstruction had only a single goal: to avoid, at all costs, becoming like their parents. One of the most prominent figures of this generation, who cut his chops in the left-wing German Student Movement inspired by Theodor Adorno and Oskar

Negt among others, was named Joschka Fischer. Fischer, in pursuit of his negatively defined goal, receded deeper and deeper into left-wing revolutionary radicalism. Eventually, in the course of his evolution, he found himself standing beside comrades that had, along with two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – External Operations, hijacked a France Airbus A300 from Tel Aviv, carrying 248 passengers, and diverted it, via Benghazi, from its original destination of Paris to the Entebbe airport in Uganda. They were personally welcomed by Idi Amin upon arrival. There, in the disused airport building where the passengers had been funneled, the German hijackers segregated Jews from non-Jews.

Operation Entebbe marked an inflection point for Joschka Fischer. He realized, once news of the events reached him, that in his attempt to perry the follies of Nazism and anti-Semitism, he had recapitulated the basic impulses that led to the Holocaust. Subsequently, Fischer disassociated himself with the revolutionary movement that defined his youth.

The parallels, I felt and still feel, are all too clear. As they were, by the way, to at least two Israeli staff who confessed to me in hushed tones that during that exercise they fought quite hard to hold back tears. After all, they are the inheritors of a history in which such physical segregation of peoples does not hold positive connotations. Why, one might ask, did they think it necessary to make such admissions in closed settings, only to individuals they knew would listen non-judgmentally? I would disrespect the question by answering it for you. Suffice it to say that the same culture that makes Orlando feel comfortable describing border detention centers publicly as “concentration camps” is the one that makes people uncomfortable staking reasonable, factual claims.

Interestingly, there were a few topics missing from Orientation that you later admonished me for not having the correct intuitions about. Here are just three: the educational philosophy of Seeds of Peace, guidelines for conversations with campers, disciplinary best practices. Instead, orientation opted to focus, assuming consensus in advance, on a very specific radical American ideological perspective that places primacy on one’s identity, defined in terms of his immutable characteristics, and the myriad ways, no matter how contrived, in which that identity can be offended. The floor was so densely littered with eggshells that several would inevitably crack. In the end, it seemed only that I was the clumsiest.

There are many more episodes I could cite just from Orientation that buttress these initial remarks – for example, a meeting about sports devolving into a discussion about pronouns in which Omar was put in his place for suggesting it not be made a rule that bunks be referred to in a gender-neutral way as 1-11 and 12-18 instead of as boys bunks and girls bunks. But, for the sake of not provoking brevity more than I already am and will be, I’ll leave it here:

Orientation read as ideological propaganda; the experience of camp has accordingly become increasingly framed by that same ideology, a unique American political export, that at least for the international session has nearly no relevance whatsoever for participants; and, finally, the cultural manifestation of that ideology seems antithetical to the mission of Seeds of Peace to create a space for open dialogue where all voices are welcome and equal. It is this last consequence that is of most concern to me – the tribal mentality that has set in, evidenced by those who admitted explicitly to me that “they can’t separate someone’s political opinions from their character.” In other words, “If you disagree with the beliefs of my tribe, it can’t be

because you have a different thought process or have information that I don't; it must be because you are a bad person."

The implications of this are catastrophic – in microcosm at Camp, but more importantly, in the public square. "Bad people" are a corrupting influence. They are harmful and impure. They must be reported. They must be expelled from the community. Soon, once this reality sets in, the ambient fear of being tagged with a license-to-kill epithet that requires no explanation or second opinion – homophobic, transphobic, sexist, racist, conservative, and so on till the end of the expanding Universe – bears down on would-be dissenters. Any divergence is pushed into invisibility by the degrading practice of survivalist self-censorship and the illusion of consensus emerges. Eventually, as those would-be dissenters extricate themselves – because why would they subject themselves to an environment where they cannot say what they think? – divergence really does disappear, and the formerly false consensus assumes a position of truth. The culture at Camp is somewhere past the midpoint on this dangerous path. If anything can be taken from this, it is a warning. I am the canary in the coal mine, the first of Alfred Hitchcock's birds. If Camp continues this way, I fear it will turn on itself and its mission.

II: *The Block Heist*

After careful reflection, and much oscillation, I have come to the conclusion that I don't regret the Block Heist. I've been over every inch of the game tape more times than you can imagine, and I can't find anything ethically objectionable by my lights. My goal in this section is to explain my interpretation of the event, my motivation for making the decisions I made, and how I think the response by leadership was misguided.

The Legend

The Block Heist was first conceived in the Dining Hall. Ethan, Charlie, and I made a habit of comedic scheming. Eventually, stealing all the blocks was proposed. I told them, though, that merely stealing the blocks wasn't very interesting. What would the point be? Further, anything involving the blocks would have to end in the blocks being returned to the Dining Hall. But, how could the blocks be returned without immediately revealing your identity as the prank's architect? Ethan's ingenious solution was to make campers themselves retrieve the blocks. A scavenger hunt! Hide the blocks around Camp and leave riddles leading each table to its block. Ethan was, I could tell, fixated. That evening, I told Jeremy of Ethan's idea. Jeremy responded by encouraging me to help him.

For the next five days, Ethan was consumed by preparation for the Block Heist. He began by recruiting Ilay, Amnon, and Charlie. He scouted all 23 block locations; tested the doors to bunks 16, 14, and 13; wrote 23 riddles, many in iambic pentameter; and produced over 30 pages of notes. He was also forced to invent cover stories to neutralize certain campers such as Ori who had become suspicious, demanded answers, and wanted in. It was impressive. All the while, he updated me with each new development. My contributions were substantial but not pivotal. I wrote several of the riddles, told him how to stay out of sight, and worked with him on the Manifesto. We also discussed the aftermath. After all, we had not made efforts to be overly secretive. It was only essential that leadership and the majority of campers not be aware. We wrote riddles openly in the bunk, discussed loudly and at length during mealtimes, gathered in plain sight at the Sea Dogs

game, all under the correct assumption that nobody was really paying enough attention to care. I told him that the worst-case scenario was a stern talking to, that he wouldn't be sent home so near to the end. But, more likely, I continued, it would be an exciting morning that energized Camp. So, being caught didn't concern either of us very much.

After roughly a week of planning, the last possible day to act was upon him. Ethan decided to pull the trigger. It was then that I briefed both Samatar and Muzammil. Both were excited, expressing no apprehension whatsoever. Each of my co-counselors had now been read the Manifesto in its entirety and knew exactly how the prank would be executed.

That night, I equipped Ethan with extra headlights and instructed him to wake me up before he left, as planned, at 2 AM. This did not happen, though. I woke naturally at 3 AM, wondering whether he had left without telling me. When I checked his bed, he was still there. So, I shook him awake, intending to ask him if he had changed his mind. But, as soon as he saw the time, he sprung into action, admonishing himself for oversleeping and answering my question before I had an opportunity to ask it. I walked him outside the bunk to watch him retrieve Ilay, Amnon, and Charlie. Ethan heard voices in Ilay's bunk and footsteps in Amnon's, so he opted not to risk going inside. Charlie, he determined, was too risky a prospect, being in the same bunk as Ori, who would surely notice, join, and become a liability of poor decision-making. He returned to me and said, "I'll just do it myself, then. I've come too far." I told him that I was going back to the bunk, but that, no matter what happens, he was to be back by 5 AM. Otherwise, I would come looking for him. At approximately 4 AM, Ethan came to ask me if he could use my backpack for more efficient block transportation and told me that he had succeeded in extracting Ilay but not Amnon. Apparently, the voice he heard was nothing more than Itay talking in his sleep. He left. Then, at exactly 4:56 AM, Ethan returned, this time with the words, "It's done. We were victorious." For the next hour, he detailed his adventure – his encounter with a loon; how in the Dining Hall, Ilay had turned to him, smiling fiendishly, declared, "It's time to take names," and then taken off into the darkness; the swiftness with which they moved as 5 AM drew nearer and nearer. "Mischievous Managed."

The Aftermath:

After the plan had been executed, there was nothing more to do but wait and watch. We were briefly put off by your reprimand to the boys about the Magic House, assuming the absence of the blocks had been discovered. It is true that we were relieved the Heist hadn't been foiled. However, we also realized that because of this incident you and the rest of leadership were not primed to receive the prank with lightheartedness.

We entered the Dining Hall for breakfast with anticipation. The scene was truly beautiful. Campers were buzzing, working together to solve their riddles. The atmosphere was electric mystery. The P.S. boys spontaneously rose, declaring that it wasn't them, while others embarked upon futile handwriting analysis. What we were really waiting for, though, was discovery of the Manifesto, which Ethan had placed on Ari's table – the only table without a missing block – in order to frame her. The self-ridiculing title, "Army of Righteous Individuals," indeed shrinks to the acronym, A.R.I. Although I'm open in not liking her, this played no part in my decision to approve Ethan's decision. I approved mostly because I thought the

additional complexity made the prank's construction more artful. Any counselor could have arbitrarily been chosen as far as I was concerned. Ari never realized that she was being framed as a "righteous individual", and instead turned to us with a long-winded examination of the Manifesto's syntax and diction that ended with the proclamation, "I love a good revolution." The campers at her table were not so naïve, though. Watching them read the document was a treat. Then, Nour arrived. As he read, his face dropped. A combination of anger, panic, and determination set in.

After roughly ten minutes of watching the drama unfold, Nour commanded the attention of the room. He then issued a collective punishment. "Raise your hand if you have a block at your table." Only Ari's table, of course, raised its hands. "Ok, someone has decided to disrupt our breakfast and take all the blocks. But the rules aren't going to change. Nobody can go look for their blocks. If you don't have a block, you aren't allowed to go get food. The rules haven't changed." Counselors were, from that moment, forced to maneuver to and from their tables, many balancing three cereal bowls on each arm. I went to retrieve my table's block. On my return, a female counselor (whose exact identity I cannot recall) asked for my riddle, which I readily surrendered to her.

Between ten and fifteen minutes after resettling at my table, you appeared. I accompanied you outside and cooperated. You were, in your words, "fucking livid." But, you said, it wasn't the hiding of the blocks that disappointed you, it was the Manifesto. You were shocked that I had approved such a message. We then went back inside the Dining Hall, where you addressed the entire Camp.

Over the course of the next two days, you interviewed several counselors. You then interviewed me and, finally, Ethan.

An Ill-conceived Reaction:

Leadership's reaction to the Block Heist can be partitioned into three segments, each of which I referenced.

1. Nour's Collective Punishment

One of the main criticisms of the Block Heist was that it resulted in campers not being able to eat breakfast. Disrupting mealtime, which is already a source of anxiety for campers, was insensitive and harmful. This criticism, though, is one without basis. The Block Heist was constructed to be a victimless prank that minimally disrupted breakfast. The riddles were intentionally easy to solve. Most were so obvious that they were solved within a minute of being read. Instead of allowing campers to do this, however, or finding an easy solution such as using condiments in lieu of blocks, Nour decided to explicitly deny campers the ability to eat breakfast without being served by counselors. He turned 50 counselors into a wait-staff for 200 campers. The resulting bottleneck left both counselors and campers unfed. The power to avoid this outcome was in his hands. If the health of campers was really in mind, or at least were prioritized in that moment over punitive measures, this decision wouldn't have been taken. It wasn't, though. So, he punished the many for the actions of a few. To blame me, Ethan, and Ilay for campers' inability to eat is to shift the responsibility in a rather unprincipled way.

In our second conversation, you disputed how well-received the Block Heist was by campers. The principle piece of evidence you cited was the number of campers you had seen crying following breakfast. I

sarcastically responded by asking, “Why? Because they didn’t have their blocks?” My disbelief, I think was warranted. Is it more likely that the campers you claimed to see crying because wooden cubes had temporarily gone missing, or because they were unable to eat and were hungry? If the latter is more likely, are their tears the fault of the Block Heist, or Nour’s reaction to it?

2. The Dining Hall Address

When I told you that you had missed the joke entirely, I was basing my remark on the speech you delivered. Much of it, as harsh as this is, was received as incoherent and hysterical, and those parts that weren’t seemed to duck the Block Heist’s satirical points. The most glaring example of this was your statement that, “systems are in place to oppress some people and keep others in power.” Leaving aside the editorial nature of a claim like this, it seemed, unless I am missing the mark here, that you forgot that what the Heist disrupted was the Block “System”. Indeed, the Manifesto’s argument by absurd analogy to regimes of true oppression was that not all systems exist to preserve abhorrent status quos. Some are necessary for order and to counteract the destructive, unarresting force of entropy. The Dining Hall blocks constitute one such system. No matter our distaste and complaints, without the Block System, the Dining Hall would devolve into chaos. But, unlike any of the campers or counselors that read the Manifesto, you interpreted it literally.

It is this literal interpretation that led you to paint the Block Heist as something of a terrorist event instead of the harmless, victimless prank that it was. Correspondingly, Ethan and Ilay were namelessly vilified. To the campers, though, the Block Heist had been exciting, fun, and benign. To them, your reaction was an overreaction. Ethan and Ilay were being maligned for what they perceived as a gift and were thus, because of you, elevated to the status of hero. Leadership proved that it couldn’t take a joke, and that it was so obsessed with control that even the slightest ridicule would induce draconian measures. Behind the sugary smiles, talk of unity, and emphasis on compassion, was a dystopian underbelly. The giveaway? Humorlessness. Egyptian campers were reminded of their beloved Bassem Yousef, expelled from their country because his jokes undermined dictatorial power, and Americans were reminded of President Trump’s absence from the annual White House Correspondents Dinner.

I want to pause and plant a flag where you can see it. Am I really able to speak generally like this on behalf of campers? It is true that I can’t account for every last camper, but I can account for many. In the days after the Block Heist, I informally polled roughly 60 campers about their thoughts on what happened. I asked two questions. Firstly, “What did you think of the prank?” And secondly, “What did you think of Sarah’s speech?” All, except for one, responded that they thought the prank was not just smart, but the best thing that had happened at Camp so far, and that they thought you had overreacted. A significant subset, roughly one third, elaborated on its answer to the second question with analogies to how authoritarian leaders “handle” jesters – that is, declaring them subversive menaces and threatening to eliminate them, which is what you did. I came upon additional evidence after Camp ended that campers felt this way in the form of videos from that morning and screenshots of comment threads in camper forums.

Did I take your speech this way? To some extent, yes. I’m not so willing, though, to make full blown comparisons between you and Erdogan. There are, you’ll be happy to know, significant differences. I could

be wrong about all of this, but I think you were already on edge because of what had happened at the Magic House and were in no mood to be “punk’d”. I think you already felt as though Camp wasn’t under control and were tipped over the edge by the blatant insubordination of “We realize you have no power to punish. Send us all home if you must. Your bluff has been called.” I think you felt personally disrespected and perhaps even humiliated, the authority of your position successfully challenged in public. But I also think what made those words, which you singled out to me at one point, so triggering was that they were true. Indeed, they were proved as much in the end. After all, what were Ethan’s consequences? He received nothing but congratulations from campers and counselors alike. He won the Green Team comedy performance by mocking your reaction to the Block Heist, having fake Farid respond how you hadn’t. And, if that weren’t enough, when news of his expedition spread to Andover, even more kudos were issued in his name. Ethan’s only regret was that a Manifesto hadn’t been placed on every table. (There is something here about the utility of consequences short of expulsion, but I am not drafting disciplinary policy.)

Your speech undoubtedly backfired. It made leadership look bad – “low-IQ”, in the words of one camper – and made the pranksters almost-martyrs. That’s the hard truth.

3. The Intelligence Campaign

Your and Nour’s reactions the day of were shocking. But they were not beyond my calculation. Punishing the whole class with a second exam because a few students cheated on the first one is common, and I thought it possible that the Manifesto would be read literally instead of ironically. What I wasn’t prepared for though, was a full-blown investigation. Pitting counselors against one another, forcing them to state their loyalties, is not a good way to build staff comradery. But I suppose you thought the circumstances were extraordinary. *How had counselors gone rogue under your very nose without you knowing? Why had they betrayed you?* I can’t know if it was exactly as personal as that, but I can see how it could have been. I also see how, given your perception of my actions, you thought I was capable of lying to your face and so deemed it necessary to gather information about my involvement from others before asking me directly.

I suppose what I’m getting at is that in the context of your emotional/intellectual reaction to the Block Heist, these choices made complete sense. What I don’t think you considered, though, was the optics of it all. Is this what happens in response to a prank? A witch-hunt is mobilized to root out the pranksters, counselors are interrogated, and prisoner’s dilemmas introduced? If I were an impartial observer, this is what I would see. Indeed, this is what many campers in my bunk saw as you rolled in on your golf care to “chat” with one counselor or another. You were turning their bunk counselors against each other, why, because of a joke?

I didn’t think this way. I felt that I had brought the conflict with my bunk counselors upon myself by giving you their names. I hated myself for that. Everything was resolved by heart-felt apology for my disloyalty, the most disgusting of crimes. But my thoughts don’t matter here because they don’t determine the optics.

The Why:

You once asked me, “What in Orientation made [me] think that the [Block Heist] was ok?” I gave the not dishonest answer your question led me to: “Nothing.” I very much wanted to elaborate though. It’s true that Orientation did not insinuate that pranks were legal, but neither did they insinuate that they weren’t. The

only time the word “prank” was mentioned during Orientation was when I proposed “Innocuous Pranks” as a special activity. I had no reason to think pranks had disappeared from Camp and every reason to assume they were still a part of the culture. The counselors in my day, Ron, James, John, and many others not only encouraged prank wars between bunks but served as our fearless leaders. Underwear was pinned to doors, mattresses were set afloat on canoes in the lake, bunks were teepeed, and shaving cream ambushes were followed by dramatic line-up performances. Many of these counselors remained at Camp long after you became director. More suggestive, every single counselor who I told about the Block Heist responded with approval and enthusiasm. What made *them* believe pranks were ok? What was the probability that four counselors were all gravely mistaken? And, finally, pranks are a fixture of the canonical American Summer camp experience. I return the question, “Why wouldn’t I have thought pranks were ok?” While, by principle, I think pranks are an essential part of life, an artform worth perfecting that oughtn’t be banned from Camp, if I had at any point been made aware that they were no longer allowed, the Block Heist would undoubtedly not have evolved beyond the hypothetical. But I wasn’t, so it did.

Your difficulties were deeper than just the fact that the prank took place, though. You were upset that I had let, “campers run around Camp at night unsupervised.” This gave way to the conclusion that I had, “placed the lives of my campers in danger.” “There is a reason,” you said, “that attendance is taken at every activity.” The same criticism was leveled by Luke Neville to Spencer, who, speaking about Ilay, complained that I had “put his camper’s life at risk.”

I believe these charges to be the product of post-hoc reasoning aimed at justifying impulsive aversion to the Block Heist by exaggerating improbable risk. Is it true that I violated protocol? Yes. But pointing out that they could have died is, to me, platitudinous. Anyone can die at any moment in the most banal manner. “Someone could have slipped on the dock and hit their head!” Possible. But as I mentioned, the same could have happened walking up the steps to the Small Hall. Both would have been extremely unlikely for anyone but were even more so for Ethan and Ilay given their profiles. Ethan is a multiple triathlete with more cumulative outdoors experience than most counselors, and Ilay is the equivalent of an Eagle Scout who has already begun pre-training for Israeli special forces. Considered realistically, walking around Camp at night, even on the dock, posed no real mortal threat to either of them.

But, of course, it wasn’t only that I let Ethan out at night, it was that I let him out unsupervised. The safety concern here is that in the unlikely event that something terrible did occur, no adult would be present to help. I take this point seriously but would like to offer the context in which I examine it. Attendance sheets exist so that each camper is accounted for. Being accounted for and being supervised are not synonymous, though. Counselors regularly allow campers to leave activities for all kinds of reasons, real and imaginary, considering them accounted for even in their absence. I am not arguing a technicality, but rather pointing out the low bar, relative to your own standards, counselors meet with respect to supervision – “know where your campers are”. So relaxed is counselor supervision of campers that on one of my nights off, during an evening activity, I found five campers unsupervised in bunks! During the Intercultural Night dance party, I found several wandering Pines! Campers are also known to have had sex in GC Land, again, obviously unsupervised. Almost every night of Camp, Khayyat, Faris, Sari, and others snuck out at 2AM to the Soccer Field and Big Hall. In these cases, counselors didn’t even know that their campers were unaccounted for. In

my case, I made Ethan give me a list of each location a block would be hidden at, who was hiding which blocks, and in what order the blocks would be hidden. I gave them a deadline, stayed awake should I be needed, and meticulously vetted their plan. Without sacrificing the integrity of the prank, every possible measure to minimize risk was taken. I chose not to directly supervise Ethan and Ilay so they could have their moment, but I made sure they were accounted for. I formally recant the capitulation that I abnegated my responsibility as a counselor to keep my campers safe. But, if I did, then so did many others. All the same risks, perhaps even more as I've described, apply to my actions and theirs.

The question remains, though, why did I help Ethan and Co.? I viewed The Block Heist as a uniquely epic Camp experience, not just for the pranksters, but for everyone, the impromptu scavenger hunt it orchestrated facilitating camp-wide bonding. The Manifesto, as far as I was concerned, was a satirical detail to cultivate the image of an anonymous jester and give the prank a fake purpose. That fake purpose, I thought, was quite funny: a camper uprising against the "bureaucracy" on account of painted wooden blocks. How absurd! Summer camps don't have bureaucracies, and wooden blocks aren't oppressing anyone! Hence the ironic chant and now hashtag, "Abolish the Block!" I helped them because I thought Camp would be better with than without the Block Heist.

Historical Contrapositives

How should you have reacted? This is a presumptuous question to ask. I recognize this. I also recognize that everything is easier in retrospect. People make declarations all the time such as, "If I had been ordered by Hitler to murder a Jew, I would have refused!" or "If I had been on that plane during 9/11, I would have fought those hijackers!" I'd like to think the same of myself, but the truth is I don't know how I'd react in those situations. Maybe I'd be a coward. Maybe I'd turn nihilistic or worse, sadistic. Maybe I would be a hero. The same is true here, though. I don't know what decisions I would have made if I had been in your position, negotiating all the responsibility that it entails. I can say, though, what I imagine better decisions to make would have been.

I think you should have let the scavenger hunt play out, simply instructing counselors to take their tables, find their respective blocks, and return to the Dining Hall to eat. Then, the next day, you should have given an address at morning line-up. In that address, you would humorously riff off the prank, acknowledging that it was good fun, but firmly discouraging anyone from deriving inspiration from it. Given that Color Games was just beginning, I don't think there would have been time for any inspiration, but it would be important to say, nonetheless. In private, you should have had a stern talk with everyone involved, not excoriating us with outrageous claims like that campers could have died, but instead making sure that nothing else was in the works and ceremoniously chewing us out for breaking rules. That would be it. Everyone gains an awesome memory, everyone eats, further pranking is nipped in the bud, and those involved get put in their place.

This might seem soft, too lenient. But if it does, then I suggest that you still view us as "criminals that disrupted the order and must be punished." This mentality should be abandoned. Ethan, Ilay, Amnon, Charlie, and Ori were honest and well-meaning, looking to author a bit of humor and intrigue. I daresay that, despite your efforts, they succeeded.

An Apologetic Addendum

I was recently informed that an envelope left by Ethan, containing an account of the Block Heist, was turned in to you. I don't know how many envelopes are left or where they might be, but I feel the need to apologize for this on his behalf. He's one cheeky, cheeky little bastard. He just couldn't help himself, could he? A part of me thinks that he wanted you to find it, a final act of defiance. I can only imagine the horror of realizing that a camper could have found it! That could have been the beginning of the end of your moratorium on prank culture. Inspired to live up to the legacy of their predecessors, who knows what campers are capable of? Another Block Heist? Disappeared line-up benches? Unapproved mural entertainment? I didn't wish for you to start the Domestic Session with that little, unpleasant surprise.

III: Forbidden Conversations

Line Drawing

Line drawing, particularly as it pertains to speech, is a tricky, tricky enterprise. It is much more likely to go wrong than right. The unattractive history of speech codes bears witness. Nonetheless, some lines are necessary. I recognize this. So did the architects of our democracy, who faced the most difficult civilizational problem of all: how to maintain freedom of thought, while still protecting the standard of public discourse necessary for a functioning republic. Ultimately, they realized that short of reputation destruction and calls to violence, which have material consequences either in terms of human capital or lives, they were playing a fool's game. This was for primarily two reasons. Firstly, anyone who sets a precedent for restricting speech immediately holds himself hostage to fortune. Rules change with the person who happens to be setting them, and that person may not be kind to the precedent's author. Secondly, free speech, as much as it is a natural right, is also the mechanism by which relationships are facilitated, good ideas are distinguished from bad ones, and decisions are made. That is, restrictions on speech impede society's ability to function and make forward progress. So, the principle of "minimum necessary regulation" was adopted. They who could have built into the system as much power for themselves as they desired instead chose to wisely suppress the impulse of dictatorship and cede control of the most strategically important territory – speech, and, by extension, thought.

I am reminding you of this rationale because it has been sacrificed at Camp on the altar of extreme sensitivity. This became apparent as early as Orientation. Pod discussion norms were framed in the language of individual "needs," many of which may well have been contradictory. The result was that more time was spent "checking" each other, strangely contorting in meetings to avoid laser beams, and debating norms, than was spent actually communicating. At the same time, the phrase "be raggedy" was thrown about. How can one be unfiltered and authentic, I thought, when so many filters are required? Alarms only sounded, however, when I learned of the moratorium on certain types of humor. You, in fact, justified this restriction to me with the claim that, "for every table of kids joking about the holocaust, there are ten other campers who are crying." I didn't challenge this at the time because to do so wasn't appropriate, but this revealed to me how severely false "catastrophizing" had taken hold. We can conduct a quick and dirty approximation: in my bunk of 16 where, by the second week, Holocaust and Occupation jokes materialized with some frequency, only one camper, Jacob, expressed any offense. Extrapolating outward to the entirety

of Camp, ≈12 campers resemble Jacob in this way. Presumably less would express offense in the acute way of tears. There are no doubt problems with this approximation, namely the sample bias of a male bunk and the inability to account for silent offense. Still though, I believe I have given an upper bound, not a lower one. This is firstly because I allowed such humor in all the activities I led and, in all of them, Jacob remained unique. So, while I used the sample of my bunk for convenience, I could have used a much larger mixed-sex sample which would have yielded a far lower base rate of offense-taking. Secondly, it is precisely the demographic one would suspect to take offense at these jokes that is responsible for making them in the first place; Israelis joke about the Holocaust and Palestinians joke about Occupation. This suggests a youth culture in Israel and Palestine where these jokes are normalized. It seems unlikely, then, that large proportions of kids from each location respectively are conditioned to take offense instead of laugh.

Humor, more than other forms of speech, is very difficult to police. Jokes are inherently democratic and are therefore not amenable to regulation by authority. But even lines anyone with modern moral sensibilities would condone at first blush are less easy to maintain than one might initially assume. Take racism as an example. Racism, for good reason is not tolerated at Camp. This is a self-maintaining rule in many ways. Racism is out of fashion and individuals pay a social price for engaging in it. Still, counselors should step in when they observe it. But, will all counselors intervene equally in the same situations? What if counselors don't agree on what racism is? Perhaps racism simply amounts to prejudging someone on account of his race. Perhaps, alternatively, racism is a system of race-based oppression in which only those who benefit or wield power can commit acts of racism. A counselor subscribing to the first definition will view accusations of white privilege as racist while a counselor subscribing to the second definition will not.

Double standards are unavoidable. One could look, as I have, at the heavy topic of racism. But music provides equally definitive evidence. Are the recommended music standards respected in the Dining Hall when tables affectionately serenade each other with "I Want it That Way," or at the talent show when an all-male dance group gyrates to "I'm a blond bimbo girl in a fantasy world/dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dolly/ you're my doll, rock'n'roll, feel the glamour in pink/kiss me here, touch me there, hanky panky/you can touch/you can play..."?

There is a deeper problem, though, with line-drawing that I'd like to call attention to. Lines, like safety locks and bumpers are infantilizing. They assume that campers don't have the ability to reason on their own about what is right or wrong, good taste or bad, offensive or not, that they need someone else to think for them. This is in direct contravention of the attitude campers are expected to carry into dialogue, confronting uncomfortable material rather than stipulating it beyond comment. Assuming the default position that campers are sensitive and fragile rather than fair-minded and resilient results in such "catastrophizing" and the erection of endless safety measures to protect them from emotional harm that, in fact, they may not have incurred without such measures.

I am not advocating a no-holds-barred speech culture where vulgarity and edgy humor reign supreme. What I am suggesting is that you trust campers to discover what is and isn't socially acceptable on their own. That's a part of growing up and learning to be a social creature. The lines they draw by themselves may not be the ones you have in mind, and that's ok. They are smart, curious, and hungry for conversation. Don't decide for them in advance what they are or ought to be offended by. Let them explore the world and each

other un-obstructed. Will traffickers in vulgarity learn from moratorium? Or are they more likely to change if they are forced to deal with the social consequences of their words? Is the offense-taker better off sequestered from such language? Or does sheltering only make what otherwise would have been a mild sensitivity into a hypersensitivity that prevents them from functioning in the real world? The developmental psychology literature would suggest that these questions have empirical answers. Those answers do not favor your policies.

The grounds for offense-taking will only grow. If the number of language typologies that are disallowed grows correspondingly, the entire regulatory edifice will collapse under its own weight. I suspect the collapse has already begun.

Counselor-Camper Conversations

Let me begin with a sampling of the conversations I had with campers. I will provide a full-bodied play-by-play of my conversations with Violet Kopp, since these were the conversations most under dispute. For the rest, I will only provide thumbnail descriptions.

Violet Kopp

Transgenderism: My first conversation with Violet took place in the Art Shack during our first Art Walk preparation session. She was already engaged with several campers regarding transgenderism by the time I became involved. I forget precisely how I was drawn into the discussion, but I was. I asked the group explicitly whether it minded if “I placed a couple of questions on the table for them to respond to.” Among the questions I asked was the following: The transgender suicide rate is upwards of 40% pre and post sex-reassignment surgery, similar to the suicide rate for Jews during the Holocaust. Is it the case then that the environment for transgenders in the United States today is as hostile as Nazi Germany was for Jews? Violet and counselor Yuval claimed that the two cases simply aren’t comparable, and that society’s treatment of the transgender community was responsible for its suicidality. I pursued this, prompting both to think through why my analogy was flawed, which it was. If both populations, Jews in Nazi Germany and transgenders in modern America, are psychologically normal, then surely a similarity in the extremity of their environmental conditions should explain their equally absurd suicide rates. Eventually, I stated what I thought their false assumption was – that transgenderism is not a mental illness. Violet winged slightly, as I expected she would, so I produced the necessary distinction between homosexuality, also described at one point as a mental illness, and transgenderism. Homosexuality occurs on average with a 10% frequency in all mammals. In fact, 10% of sheep are in long-term, monogamous, homosexual relationships. And, there are good evolutionary reasons related to caretaking and kin protection for the emergence of homosexuality, particularly male homosexuality. Transgenderism, on the other hand, is far less frequent, doesn’t seem to have any evolutionary impetus, is associated with several other afflictions, and is classified by the DSM-5, American Psychological Association, and American Psychiatric Association as a mental illness. This wasn’t to say I understand transgenderism – not enough research has been done, and that would be presumptuous of me – but rather to prompt Violet to consider whether her perspective on the issue might require re-examination. We moved on in agreement about the need for general de-stigmatization of mental illness.

Following our conversation, I mentioned to Violet that I happened to be reading a book containing two chapters, one on the differences between the sexes and one on behavioral genetics, directly relevant to what we discussed, that she might find interesting and would likely disagree with. She seemed enthusiastic. So, at the next available opportunity, I gave her the book.

Sex Differences: The next time I had Art with her dialogue group, Violet asked me if we could continue our conversation. I told her that I'd be more than happy to. I, however, was preoccupied for most of the session with other campers, and therefore we didn't get a chance to speak. Several days later, however, I had her dialogue group again, this time for basketball. The group, however, didn't want to play basketball and instead opted to sit and talk. Violet mentioned to me that she had begun reading the chapters I had recommended from the book I had given her, *Blank Slate* by Steven Pinker. Further, she told me that she disagreed with many of the points made by Pinker. I told her that was wonderful, the point of me giving her the book, and asked what specifically her disagreements were. Here, the conversation began. I argued Pinker's position that men and women are subject to different evolutionary selection mechanisms and therefore have biological differences, including neurophysiological differences that affect psychological makeup and cognitive ability. I spoke specifically about distributions of cognitive ability relative to particular types of reasoning and memory. On average, men have the advantage in special reasoning (one of the reasons Chess is male-dominant) and women have the advantage in linguistic reasoning and various computation and memorization tasks. I want to note that to the untrained ear, these claims can sound like sexist generalizations. In fact, however, they are empirical truths that have been quantitatively validated using sophisticated psychometric evaluations of tens, and in some cases hundreds, of thousands of individuals. I asked Violet whether instead of Pinker pointing out sex differences as a way to demonstrate male superiority, it was possible that he was pointing out both male and female cognitive advantages to demonstrate the myth of cognitive and psychological sex-sameness. Indeed, that his real point was that some sex-differences are not conditioned by society but rather a natural result of evolution; we are not born *tabula rasas*.

At the mention of social conditioning, the conversation turned to gender, which I asked her to define for me because I was lacking (and still lack) an adequate description. I attempted to pose a series of questions that prompted her to consider rigorously whether there is evidence for the mind-body duality, the existence of a "ghost in the machine" whose gender is uncoupled from or loosely informed by its hardware. Here, when I suggested that all the neurophysiological evidence pointed away from the gender hypothesis, she, reasonably so, said that she didn't have the requisite knowledge (or, alternatively, access to Google) to continue down this path.

Somewhere, if memory serves, an analogy to race was made. She asked me whether I thought Trump was racist. I answered by saying that, if he was, his hiring practices seemed strange as did the record low Black unemployment and his record appropriations to HBCUs. I asked her, though, what made her think that he was. She listed several instances, including the Census controversy, which we found common cause on. She then went on to claim that all White people were inherently racist. Here, I stepped in and said that prejudging people based on their race is wrong and, in fact, racist. We then concluded our conversation. Again, we left amicably, although I could tell that she wasn't used to hearing opposition of this kind.

Charlie McWeeney, Ethan Ellsberg

Psychedelic Drugs: Ethan and Charlie asked me if psychedelic drugs have any lasting negative impact on the brain. I answered their question, explaining that the only long-term effect of psychedelics seems to be an orientation towards trait openness. Such drugs quiet the region of the brain known as the Default Mode Network, which separates, and in fact mediates communication between, the right and left hemispheres. In other words, such drugs cause “the conductor to leave the stage.” When this happens, one experiences “ego death” or dissolution, also described as “oneness with the universe” or “pure consciousness.” Interestingly, I noted, the FMRI scans of individuals on psychedelics are remarkably similar to those taken during intense meditation, sensory deprivation, and starvation. What followed was a discussion on the Pali Canon, which contains many first-person observations of consciousness that have been validated by modern neuroscientific study of the brain when influenced by psychedelics.

Child Trafficking Statistics: There were a few days at Camp where I became quite interested in child trafficking in the United States. I had come across a number of statistics weren’t concordant with one another, namely the number of children supposedly trafficked per year paired with the number of child trafficking arrests made per year. The former was on the order, if I recall, of tens of thousands and the latter less than 30. To check whether my intuitions about this weirdness were misguided, I asked Charlie and Ethan to estimate, only from their prior knowledge, these statistics. What followed was a two-day dissection of the state of child trafficking in the United States – is it plausible that one trafficker is moving ten thousand children a year? What resources would they need to command in order to do so? If not, then are not all traffickers caught per year? If that’s the case, assuming a reasonable children per trafficker per year rate, what percentage of traffickers are not caught? Funnily enough, neither Ethan nor Charlie, nor any other campers at my table had an issue with this subject. The topic was finally dropped because it made Miko uncomfortable. To be fair to him though, his sensitivity stemmed from well-articulated reservations about appropriateness. I readily obliged, not because I agreed with his orientation but because we were co-counselors.

Bees: All speaking about our favorite animals, I mentioned bees. I described how bees coordinate finding and harvesting pollen. Scouting parties are sent out to search for pollen. When these scouting parties return to their hives, individual scouts perform a dance. They assume an upright position and hover in a figure eight. The direction – clockwise or counterclockwise – in which they trace the figure eight along with the frequency at which their wings beat communicates what direction the pollen they discovered is in and how far it is.

Armeen

Child Labor: Armeen accused me of supporting child labor by having purchased Adidas merchandise. I responded by opening a conversation about the validity of her judgments (both of me and child laborers) and the material improvements for the Third World poor as a result of globalization. In short, I took Paul Krugman’s line:

“Workers in those shirt and sneaker factories are, inevitably, paid very little and expected to endure terrible working conditions. I say “inevitably” because their employers are not in business for their (or their

workers) health; they will of course try to pay as little as possible, and that minimum is determined by the other opportunities available to workers. And in many cases these are still extremely poor countries.

“Yet in those countries where the new export industries took root, there has been unmistakable improvements in the lives of ordinary people. Partly this is because a growing industry must offer its workers a somewhat higher wage than they could get elsewhere just in order to get them to move. More important, however, the growth of manufacturing, and of the penumbra of other jobs that the new export sector created, had a ripple effect throughout the economy. The pressure on the land becomes less intense, so rural wages rose; the pool of unemployed urban dwellers always anxious for work shrank, so factories started to compete with one another for workers, and urban wages also began to rise.”

I told her that while child labor is clearly immoral, she was the beneficiary of the efforts of people working in horrible conditions in the West, only a century earlier. Only because of the same processes unfolding in Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia, was she in a position to make moral judgments.

Michal Rappaport

The Perfect Murder: A fun thought experiment I posed to multiple campers, one of whom was Michal. I asked her how she would plan her perfect murder: who, when, where, why and how. Her ingenious answer led to a discussion on the ethics of murder. When is it wrong? When should it be punished? Even if the murder is seemingly unprovoked, what if the killer has a tumor on his amygdala causing uncontrollable outbursts of aggression? Should he be punished? Or is he just a victim of his brain?

Truth or Falsity of Religion: After attending the Christian non-denominational service, Michal told me that she found it “adorable” that people believed in God. I asked her why. She told me she thought it was adorable because they were trying to make the evidence of reality conform to their beliefs rather than make their beliefs conform to the evidence of reality. So, they were all playing make-believe -- like little children! I asked her how she knew there was no supernatural dimension. She admitted she couldn’t prove there was none. I then offered an alternative argument for the improbability of religion: every religion makes mutually incompatible claims. At best only one can be true. More likely, though, none of them are. The conversation continued through Field-Time until the next bell.

Chimpanzee Warfare: During Color Games, Michal was assigned to cheer. She didn’t have the energy though, so instead opted to sit and talk with me. She told me how aware she was that “we are all just animals.” “In particular,” I replied, “we are all just primates.” I told her that the moment I realized this was at a concert where everyone was hooting and hollering, like tribes of chimps. I went on to tell her about the findings of Jane Goodall that, occasionally, a group of young male chimps will organize a perimeter sweep of their territory, and upon finding chimps of a neighboring tribe, will tear them limb from limb. In some cases, a tribe will entirely wipe out a neighboring one in kind of proto-genocide. This led to a discussion about the origins of the human instinct for violence and whether we can ever overcome it. Can we override our own software?

The Bandwagon Effect: Following our conversation about chimpanzees, Michal revealed to me that she occasionally felt bad for not crying when everyone else was, that she simply couldn’t bring herself to shed

tears. I told her that she shouldn't feel bad because many kids are crying not necessarily because they themselves are moved, but because they are surrounded by other campers who are crying. That is, they are victims of the "bandwagon effect." I detailed this mathematically for her using the example of a riot. This example, in fact, is why the "bandwagon effect" has alternatively been dubbed the "riot effect." In any population there will be some distribution of excitation thresholds that, once surpassed, will yield action. There will be some number of people who require no excitation in order to begin rioting. There will be some who require seeing 50% of their community to riot before they themselves join in. And, there will be some who will refuse to riot even if everyone else does. In this way, a riot can either escalate or not. The same is true for the action of crying. This led to a discussion about how vulnerable groups are to certain types of stimuli and how individuals may not even be aware of why they exhibit one behavior versus another.

Alex

Predictors of Career Success: Alex and a few other male members of the American delegation were describing to me the woes of the college application process at their schools. I empathized, having been there myself, but then told them that the university they attend has very little to do with their career success. The best predictors of mid-career earnings are IQ and high school grades. This is because career success is dependent most on intelligence and industriousness. So, I told them, since they don't have control over their IQ, the best thing they can do for their life is develop a good work ethic. If which university they attend is important, it only is for the prestige it grants them. But the utility of prestige degrades quite rapidly following graduation if paired with a lack of intelligence and absent work ethic.

Heritability: Alex asked me if Down Syndrome was inheritable. I responded by telling him that between 40 and 60% of personality, defined by the big five traits – openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and extroversion – is inherited. Roughly 50% of the variance in IQ is also explained by genetic inheritance. So, much of who we are, certainly much more than we'd like to admit, is determined by our genes. But Down Syndrome is not like personality or even most physical characteristics, like eye color, that are determined more by inheritance than random mutation. Down Syndrome is caused by a chromosomal abnormality called "trisomy 21", a random event that occurs during the formation usually of egg cells. We are, I told Alex, a culmination of pure genetic factors, environmental factors, and randomness. The question is how much human variance is explained by each.

Olivia Becker

Anti-natalism: Olivia asked me about the viewpoint diversity in NYU's famous philosophy department. I explained how even slight temperamental differences can lead to wildly different philosophical positions. I gave her the example of anti-natalism, a position advocated by David Benatar, the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Capetown. Simplified, the argument states that because life produces more suffering than happiness, it is immoral to bring new life into existence.

Intellectual Diversity: Olivia, although not the only camper with this opinion, spoke to me often about the leftist homogeneity of Camp in particular and elite educational environments in general. I listened, agreed

when I thought her critique was insightful, and disagreed when I thought she veered into insult. I was uncomfortable with the term “lib-tard,” which I heard from more campers than just her.

Systemic Racism: Olivia told me about the recent Lock-In at Fieldston regarding race. Her mother, on Fieldston’s board was placed under a significant amount of fire because of it. Olivia asked me whether I thought the grievances of the students were valid, after making me read the New York Times article on the case. I responded by telling her, without commenting on the specifics of the case, there might be a quick way to test the validity of their underlying assumptions regarding “systemic racism.” I told her to consider West Indian Blacks and American Blacks living in the New York metropolitan area during 1970. These are two populations that are indistinguishable to “the system.” They look the same, were born and educated in the same place, and inherited histories of chattel slavery. And yet, according to the 1970 census, West Indian black families out earned American black families by nearly $\approx 60\%$ and surpassed the national average by $\approx 15\%$. Fast forward to today, and the same is true. Why do two populations, identical in education, color, and location, have such different outcomes if “systemic racism” applies itself equally to both? At the very least, system racism is an incomplete explanation. The missing variable, of course, is culture, which economists agree accounts for nearly all the variance.

The Why

It wasn’t, you said, the content of the conversations that was problematic, but the way in which they were conducted. “Counselors should not be engaging in dialogue with campers,” I believe was the precise statement, with the justification that such dialogue is “not the Seeds of Peace educational philosophy.”

While I don’t doubt that you yourself believed that this was true, I don’t think it was; I do think it was because of the content of my conversations. I made this clear when we talked, suggesting that other counselors were also engaging with campers like this, only offering the “right” thoughts. I gave only the names of a couple of counselors who I knew were egregious offenders and, frankly, whose names I didn’t mind giving up. There were many, however, that I withheld. Here is a fuller list:

Ari: I could choose multiple instances. Ari was known as the “preacher” among many campers, and the worst of the guardians of the woke Camp order. This was why Ethan decided to frame her for the Block Heist – Army of Righteous Individuals (A.R.I). Among the topics that Ari editorialized about in dialogue with campers, individually and in groups, were Quranic scripture and Feminism.

Joy: Olivia was discussing the Fieldston Lock-In drama amongst a group of fellow campers. Joy involved herself to correct Olivia on a point of hers in front of the group. Joy proceeded to editorialize on the subject.

Anna and Deng: Anna told me, frustrated, about a conversation she had at mealtime with Dean and Deng about feminism. Dean confessed that he was not a feminist, as did Deng. Anna then attempted to convince both Dean and Deng that their concerns about feminism were unfounded.

Jeremy: Jeremy and I were with a group of female American campers. Violet and Jeremy were engaged in a conversation about the politics of St. Anne’s, where Jeremy is an alumnus of. Prisons, sex, and race were discussed. The rest of the campers and me were not contributing, only listening.

Billy: During the American Delegation preparation meeting for Intercultural Night, Billy intervened in camper deliberation in order to encourage a performance in which the American Delegation explicitly acknowledged its privilege. The performance, endorsed by her and proposed by Violet, had campers standing in a line and coming forward one by one announcing, for example, “I am a straight white girl who goes to private school.”

Leadership: As I noted earlier, Leadership chose during Orientation to frame the entire Camp experience in terms of a very particular ideological export of American academia. Although not explicitly discussed with campers, this is an editorial decision. I don’t think much hinged on it – the norms encouraged by that export such as sex-neutral referral to bunks, impossible as they were to uphold, quickly dissolved. Your commentary on “systems of power” in the Dining Hall Address constitutes further evidence of this intentional framing.

And yet, I was the one reported. Why me? Why was it that my words were egregious enough to travel through a counselor to you? Why weren’t Anna or Joy or Billy reported? Because what they said, in the context of Camp, was “correct”, i.e., that the type of person liable to report speech would agree with. So, although you may have decided to act based on the way the conversations were conducted, the only reason I and not others were brought to your attention was because of their content.

Here, I must draw a distinction between my speech and that of the other counselors featured in the examples I gave, Jeremy and Deng exempted. You’ll notice that in almost every conversation of mine, I am discussing nothing more than either science or rigorous philosophical positions. The only moment in which this lapsed was when Violet asked me explicitly whether Trump was racist. Here, I was up against the wall. Not answering or deflecting, as you suggested, would have been as much an answer as the one I gave. Even then, I didn’t give my position away, which happens to neither be neither yes nor no, but instead prompted her to think critically about her allegation by placing facts in front of her that may not support it. In any case, there are facts of certain matters – facts for example about the psychological differences between the sexes, the evolutionary origins of violence, the amount of variance in personality explained by genetic inheritance, and so on. These facts are just as true as facts about bee behavior. The equations governing daily hormonal cycles for men and women are simply different equations. Somehow, though, speaking about the first set of facts to campers is unacceptable while, presumably, speaking about the second is not. To put the difference I am trying to describe plainly, I was not theorizing about how the world works, how it “ought” to work, or how others ought to think; I was explaining what we know about how it works, what we have discovered through rigorous experiment.

I was reminded of Bertolt Brecht’s great play, “The Life of Galileo.” Brecht powerfully essentializes the conflict between Science and religion. Galileo, after replicating the telescopic technology he hears about from a prospective student, observes the moons orbiting Jupiter. His observations constituted hard evidence in support of the Copernican heliocentric model of the Solar System, which directly challenged the geocentric model of the Solar System, doctrinally presupposed by the Roman Catholic Church. When Galileo invites senior Cardinals of the Church to look for themselves through his telescope, they refuse. Such knowledge scares them, because it might shatter their entire conception of reality; therefore, they would rather hide, clinging ignorantly to their myths, than change their minds. At the conclusion of his

Inquisition, as the famous tale goes, Galileo recants his claims about the heliocentricity of the Solar System and is placed on house arrest until the end of his days.

My disposition is as distant from proselytization as can be achieved. This is opposite from Ari or Joy or Billy who were described to me by campers as “forcing their views”. I simply discussed the carefully documented evidence of reality and asked those I spoke with to “peer through the telescope” to make up their own minds. In this case, it wasn’t those I spoke with that categorically refused. Rather, certain third parties viewed it as dangerous that I was issuing such invitations, and decided that I must be stopped, or, at the very least, that leadership should “inquire” into the matter. And, as the Galilean prophecy foretold, I was disallowed from speaking about such topics with campers until the end of Camp.

Camp, in my view, is anti-science not just in the sense that it makes taboo certain scientific facts, but also that it opposes the scientific spirit that facts exist, believing all facts to be biased. Each new “fact” therefore, simply exposes one to an additional dimension of an infinite-sided truth gem, whose complete physical nature is endlessly elusive. When Charlie asked prior to Camp for reading recommendations about the history of the conflicts, he was told not to read anything because all sources are inherently biased. But this is a topic for a long, adjacent conversation that needn’t be fleshed out here.

How did all this end? With a confiscated book. A book! The moment I saw you carrying that book was one of, I must say, the most saddening moments of my life. Is knowledge so dangerous? You mentioned how harmful it might be if a camper was to call home and tell a parent about a book given to her by a counselor that changed her mind on some fundamental issue. Well, is it not harmful, for us to place campers in dialogue situations where the foundations of their worldview might shift so drastically that they consider their own family the problem? “I want to bash my father’s head against the wall,” I recall, was one of the lines screamed from stage during the spoken word variety show performance. Would that not be a disturbing change for a parent to witness in his child on account of her experience at Seeds of Peace?

Leave all this aside, though. I don’t want to complicate the issue with over-analysis. Do you really want Seeds of Peace to be the type of place where books are confiscated? And that too, books about science, of which *Blank Slate* is one? “The way life could be.” That’s what Seeds of Peace is supposed to represent. Yes, the world could be a place where speech codes are enforced, conversation is restricted, and books are taken. In fact, the world has been that type of place. It wasn’t very pretty. People gave their lives for the simple freedom to read what they wanted to read and share whatever they wanted with whomever they wanted. The justification given by authorities for the rules being rebelled against? “The uneducated masses, they are impressionable! They mustn’t be exposed to ideas their weak minds won’t be able to process. We, the wise and powerful must control what information they have access to ... for their own good and the good of the world, of course!” If that sounds familiar, it’s because it’s the same justification you gave me: these “impressionable teenagers” don’t have the wherewithal to judge your arguments or the arguments presented in a book you give them because of the inherent “power dynamic” in your relationship. For their own good, and for the good of the Camp then, you mustn’t talk with them at length or give them anything to read. Can you name a single moment in history when it was the good and not the bad guy confiscating books?

Luckily, I think you might be functionally alone in this mentality. The reason I thought it ok to give Violet *Blank Slate* in the first place was because both Spencer and Ella B had given me indication that it was. Every day for the entire session, I was printing out various articles (carefully avoiding the conflicts) for Charlie to read during mealtimes. He was starved for information, and the Seeds of Peace news stand had been discontinued. I told Spencer about this during SPS and Ella B during Bunk Line Check-In. Spencer responded by saying “It’s really cool that you do that,” and Ella B responded by saying “That’s really nice.” To hammer this home, two key members of leadership knew that I was distributing articles to campers and, instead of discouraging or reprimanding me, they complimented me.

Finally, my recommendation: again, I advocate as much freedom as possible for counselors, so long as they don’t interfere with “The Process” and recognize the most obvious of boundaries – sexual impropriety, unironically abusive language, and so on. That, to me, sets a clear boundary. Discussing the conflicts represented at Camp are off limits for counselors. Why? Because by displaying a bias for or against the nationality of certain Campers, counselors are neglecting their responsibility to equally support all campers. For Israeli and Palestinian counselors, this will be de facto impossible. However, perhaps their role is to specifically support certain campers more than others. Hamzeh, for example, sees it this way. “If you hire a Palestinian counselor, then you get a Palestinian counselor,” is the way he phrased it during the post-Cultural Night discussion. I think he is right. For the rest of us, though, any other lines will be untenable so long as “speaking from experience” is permitted, if only because experience can parlay into one’s thoughts on almost everything. I have a very different idea of what America is than Joy does. She views America as irredeemably racist, born in the original sin of Slavery, a capitalist neo-colonial power that is not a force for good in the world. I view America as a paragon for economic and social liberty, a marketplace for ideas and skill that allowed my family to thrive, the only consistent (albeit imperfect) guardian for democracy, human rights, and global security, and generally a force for good in the world. These conflicting stories about America have been informed by different experiences and exposure to different information. Further, they cannot be avoided if asked the question, “What has your life been like in America as the child of immigrants?” If speaking from experience is ok, then, in principle, speaking about everything is ok.

Trust that counselors have good intuitions. Why was it that I engaged with Violet in particular? Her life is one of political activism – protesting about the issues we discussed, giving interviews to national publications, organizing and speaking at rallies, lobbying her school for reform, and so on. She was in Middle Eastern not South Asian dialogue. Discussing gender/sex from the neuroscientific perspective rather than from the perspective of “systemic oppression” therefore wouldn’t interfere with her process at Camp, but rather prompted her to think more deeply about the activism she has made the focal point of her life.

However, if you must place restrictions, beyond commonsense ones, on how counselors converse with campers, I suggest you do so explicitly. The “educational philosophy of Seeds of Peace” that you pointed out my actions were not aligned with was conspicuously absent from discussion during Orientation. Which topics specifically are out of bounds? When does normal conversation morph into “dialogue”? How many campers must be present in order for a non-personal one-on-one conversation to be deemed inappropriate? If it is the counselor’s job to facilitate interaction and learning between campers, is it ever appropriate for

counselors to have in-depth conversations with campers and, by definition, take time they could otherwise spend with peers? What is the educational philosophy of Seeds of Peace?

The Accusations

Funnily enough, it was precisely the failure to exercise what I expressed as a “need” in my pod – “charitable listening” – that led to my being reported. I fought quite hard for the norm of charitable listening to be adopted at Camp because I had experienced at university what it is like to be the target of unthinking accusations based on the least generous interpretation of a point. The risks at one, I realized, were identical to the risks at the other. I was unsuccessful, though. Perhaps if I hadn’t been, I wouldn’t have been maligned. What, then, were the nature of the accusations?

That I said, “Women are not as logical as men”: These were the words you attributed to me when we spoke. As should be clear from my account, I said and meant no such thing. I did detail the various cognitive tasks on which women display superior performance and, on balance, the various cognitive tasks on which men display superior performance. But no fair minded individual would take what I said to mean what was attributed to me.

That I said, “Women do not belong in the sciences”: These words also never came to my lips, and they never would. This is not only because my sister, a medical researcher; my mother, the founder of a healthcare technology company; my grandmother, the first doctor to offer modern female reproductive care in South India; and my dead great-grandmother, who defied her family and Indian society to become the first female student at her university and the first doctor in her lineage, would all disown me. It is also my answer because I simply don’t believe that women do not belong in the sciences.

This accusation bothered me the most. In particular, it bothered me that the counselor(s) who received these rumors thought so little of me that they tacitly validated this accusation by withholding doubt. I say this not because I was personally offended by it (it takes much more than that!), but because Dhuha, the female Palestinian camper whose scientific aspirations I had been nurturing the entire session, suffered as a consequence. *The fact that the accusation was not dismissed by a counselor must mean that it is true! Is the person who told her that if she persisted, she could be an astrophysicist deceiving her? Are his words empty? Has he betrayed her? Are her dreams a farce just as his encouragement has been?* I did the proper damage control. I told her the story of my favorite math professor, a Lebanese woman who grew up in a religiously oppressive household during the Lebanon War of 2006. Her ticket out was physics. So, she became the best in her year in high school, the best in her year at the American University of Beirut, won a PhD in mathematics at Princeton University, and took up a professorship at one of the world’s great institutes of applied mathematics. She was my favorite professor, I told Dhuha, not because she was my most brilliant professor, but because I knew what she had overcome to get where she was. The beautiful thing about science is that it doesn’t care about where you come from, what color you are, how much money you have, what genitalia you have, or even what language you speak. All it cares about is whether you can make progress on questions of what is true whether or not we know it to be. Reason is the only methodology that reliably scales because everyone can participate.

Do you, Sarah, really think that I am sexist in this way? Anyone who does, while perhaps well-intentioned, is foolishly in pursuit of a false enemy. What was I doing while at Camp for Dhuha, with her permission? I was establishing contact with professors at NYU and MIT who would ensure, should she every apply, her application would get the treatment it deserves. What did I do just after leaving Camp while in Berlin at the conference I presented at? I attended the Women in Science luncheon, found a lady who had worked at NASA's famous Jet Propulsion Lab, told her about Dhuha, and took her information to connect the two.

It's a shame that I even must issue a defense like this. But that's the world we live in, and that's the culture that's been created at camp. Actions don't matter. You are what you're accused of. I, unlike many, think it's worth it to painstakingly scrape off all the slime that's been thrown on me. But I don't enjoy doing it. If I don't, I figure, people will think their characterizations of me correct, their self-righteous judgment mechanism will be reinforced, and their hesitation, if there was any, will be lessened for the next egg-shell-breaker.

That I said "unpleasant" things about black people: This was relayed to me by Bola, who, bless her, was a reliable friend through all this. She was my co-counselor during the conversation with Violet that precipitated charges (1) and (2). The only time I ever touched a subject relating to black people was my conversation with Olivia, which Violet briefly stopped in on. So, by asking whether "systemic racism" is a reasonable hypothesis, I was accused of peddling racism! I didn't think someone with my skin tone could be racist. But nonetheless, even if I were white, reasonable people might sniff dubious logic.

Here, Bola acted the way I think all counselors should if reported to. She came to me at the end of the Session, told me what she had heard, and asked me very directly if it was true. She gave me the benefit of the doubt. When I explained to her what I said and how it was likely misinterpreted, she said she had suspected as much, given who she knew me to be. She understood that the rumors were all smoke and no fire.

How any of these were taken seriously is truly beyond me. How they resulted in many counselors thinking poorly of me is also beyond me. That they were so willing to judge me on pure rumor because those rumors triggered certain moral disgust reflexes that overrode any rational thought on the matter is indicative of the type of political derangement that I think has overrun Camp. The facts are plain enough. These accusations were reported by Ava, who wasn't even present for the original conversations. Ava received her information from Violet, whose misinterpretations are all explicable. One camper's account is all it took. No one thought to consult the only other counselor who was there at the time. No one thought to come talk to me first. So eager were they to have their intuitions about what is wrong with the world vindicated that they were instantly willing to forgo both the presumption of innocence and the usual accompaniment of questions used to vet a rumor's truth. And, true to form, my accusers were kept anonymous.

That I am Conservative: I find it funny that this came in the form of an accusation. As it happens, I am not a Conservative, but it is revealing that I was thought to be. When met with this, I was reminded of Pinker's coinage, "the mythical Left Pole, from which all directions are Right." Pinker was wrong though, the Left Pole isn't mythical; it is very real.

IV: *Overdue Concessions*

It may not be so obvious, but so far I have pulled my punches to whatever extent I can whilst also trying to preserve honest observation and decorum. If there is anywhere I needn't do so however, it is here, when evaluating myself.

Camper-like Tendencies: If there's one thing, above everything else, that I think was misplaced in my persona as a counselor, it was my camper-like tendencies. By that, I mean I enjoyed hanging out with campers a bit too much. My friendships with campers were, in some cases, more peer-to-peer than they were counselor-camper. This surely contributed to my involvement in the Block Heist. It's also, though, the reason I was the first or one of the first to know about any illicit activity, unfulfilled canoe-stealing plans for instance, and was able to caution against it. So, it cut both ways. In the end I think I could have maintained a more distant, well-defined relationship with campers. I was perhaps too honest with them and encouraged them to be too honest with me.

Shirking Responsibilities: On three occasions, I wasn't where I was meant to be. All of them were for inexcusable reasons and occurred near the end of camp. I missed my last shift on patrol and buddy board because I, for some reason, neglected to check my schedule thoroughly enough to know whether I had those responsibilities. Of all performance related issues, these two blunders are the ones I am most ashamed of. Thirdly, and this is what I was most taken to task for, was being out past midnight with Samatar, Henry, and Omar. That night clean-up help was called for in the Big Hall. I spotted an opportunity to feel as though I was doing something right, and so dragged Samatar with me to offer our assistance. We cleaned the Big Hall. Then, he convinced me to go to the Pines fire pit with him, saying that I needed to talk stuff out, decompress, and take a breather. He was right. Over the course of the past two days, I had been accused of putting in danger the lives of two campers and spouting sexist views to campers, among other things. Most of those days were spent in deep, consuming thought. I only resurfaced when the odd camper approached me to ask what was wrong or when I was scheduled for refereeing. So, I agreed. And it was therapeutic. Very. Henry, Samatar, and Omar gave me exactly what I needed, which was the ability to laugh at the situation. For me, that time was precious and necessary in order for me to maintain positivity in the remaining days of Camp. But that it was necessary for me doesn't justify my not being in the bunk. This is the one decision I made in which I placed my needs above those of my campers. That the bunk was unattended to was inexcusable and, honestly, didn't cross my mind or Samatar's. This wasn't just bad judgment; it was a lack of judgment. While I don't think it was quite the egregious error it was made out to be due to the crescendo leading up to it, I do regret the decision I made and apologize for it.

Open Camp Critique: There were a couple of topics, prank culture being one, about which I simply couldn't stand the phrase, "not if they cause harm," that I should have withheld comment on. One day, during General Swim, a group of campers I was with asked Jackson, after he walked over to us, what he thought of the Block Heist. He indeed used this line. When I asked him for an example of a "harmless prank," he gave the example of a prank he played in school, releasing a number of pigs into the main building. I responded, in front of campers, by saying the following: "But, even there, you cause significant harm. You cost the students and teachers by disrupting class, the administration that will have to organize the removal of the pigs, and the janitors who will likely have to clean up feces. Every prank, at the very least,

costs everyone time by having to endure this ordeal.” I sarcastically ended with, “I think humor in general is the problem,” a pause, and finally a goodbye pat on the back to, “Ha, don’t worry, I’m just joking.” My point was correct, and the campers knew it, but I undermined him as well as the position counselors had been instructed to take, all while taking on a disgusting tone of voice. If I didn’t agree, I should have remained quiet. From there continued a smattering of occasions on which I asked campers whether they thought camp was utopian or dystopian, whether they thought the rebranding of “Color Wars” was ironic or authentic, whether they thought the positivity was natural or put on, and so on. On the one hand, these are possibly useful and rarely formed questions that enable campers to think critically about their experience, on the other, offering my dichotomies (which may well be false ones) to frame the questions may be influencing their thought process in an unprincipled way. I in fact think there is a good argument to make for placing this subject, counselors’ thoughts on Seeds of Peace and the Camp experience, among those that counselors ought to avoid in order to preserve the purity of “The Process.” There may be a range of functionally benign conversations, but even the softest nudge causing the slightest dent results in imperfection. It isn’t, I’d like to emphasize, that they can’t handle our thoughts, but rather that they need to think through their views on this matter alone. That is the intellectual endeavor we require of them.

There are smaller mistakes I made, but these have to do with decisions regarding campers that were thought at the time to be good but, in retrospect, could have been better: *should this camper’s behavior be dealt with sternly or softly? Will this camper be more receptive if the message is delivered one way or the other? Should these two campers be paired together for dyads or these alternative two?* I don’t, though, think these mistakes are indicative of fundamental flaws in judgment. In contrast, it could be argued (though, I think rather arduously) that the three self-criticisms I list above are indicative of fundamental flaws in judgment. If I were to fire myself, these are the reasons I would have given.

However, consistent application of these standards, I’m afraid, would see not a few counselors gone. How many counselors do you think have missed shifts? How many missed curfews more than once? How many, particularly past Seeds, have talked to campers about their experience at Camp? Moving away from my indiscretions, how many do you think have smoked marijuana? How many on Camp grounds? How many have kept marijuana in the bunks with them? This offense alone, a fire-able one as you mentioned during Orientation, would eliminate over a dozen staff.

Perhaps you already know that all these things take place but have a relaxed attitude towards them: “As long as I don’t know, it’s ok”. Perhaps you falsely believe you’re running a tight ship. Both scenarios indicate leadership flaws. The first suggests a lack of transparency regarding what the rules counselors should take seriously really are and a willful ignorance that keeps you out of touch with your staff. The second suggests something even more severe, that you think you know what’s going on but really don’t, that you are easily deceived, again out of touch with your staff.

This doesn’t have to be the case, though. So, how can it be fixed? Clear communication and reasonable expectations. For example, “For legal reasons, I must say that you cannot smoke marijuana. However, I know many of you will anyways. Here is my personal single rule. If you smoke on Camp grounds, you will be fired. The liabilities associated with you smoking on Camp grounds are X, Y, and Z.” Or, “You all have thoughts on what we do here. You might think it great, the only path to peace, or you might be cynical.

Either way, your thoughts should not find their way into conversations with Campers. This is to protect the freedom of Campers to think for themselves on these matters.” In general, Camp suffers from a lack of frankness and specificity in its language that, if changed, would make a world of difference.

V: Concluding Remarks

When I began this, I wanted to offer a comprehensive, detailed, honest, and constructive account of Camp. I think I’ve accomplished my goals. Really, though, my success is up to you. To conclude, I want to consolidate all the recommendations I’ve made throughout this little pamphlet, say some kind words about a few people, and give a final reformulation of my goals.

Recommendations

Orientation:

1. Present a clear vision of what Seeds of Peace attempts to accomplish at Camp and how each component of Camp – dialogue, bunks, meals, activities, etc. – supports this vision. Further, place the role of the counselor in the context of this vision. How do counselors support the realization of this vision? In what ways might they impede it?
2. Present a clear vision for the educational philosophy of Seeds of Peace. What is the purpose of the education Seeds of Peace is attempting to impart? With this purpose in mind, how should campers ideally learn what it is we hope to teach them? What role do counselors play in facilitating this learning? How can a counselor know when he has overstepped his bounds?
3. Present a clear disciplinary philosophy, accompanied by practical examples in which that philosophy might be applied. What disciplinary tools can counselors draw upon? What do they do when Campers are not amenable to reason or direct order? How can counselors collaborate to ensure camper compliance? When is it reasonable to involve leadership? Are there positive incentive structures counselors can put in place for their campers to preempt undesirable behavior? In general, what type of relationship should counselors have to the authority of their position?
4. There are several scenarios that counselors will be in at Camp for which they can be practically prepared. Among these are putting rambunctious campers to bed, motivating campers to do an activity they don’t want to do, dealing with kids wandering off during mealtimes, and getting kids dressed on time for General Swim. Orientation presents a wonderful opportunity, currently not taken advantage of, to show counselors how to effectively operate in these instances. The handouts during Orientation were all but useless. Co-counselors will have conversations about bunk culture whether or not they are told to do so. In any case, handouts are almost always forgotten and present no help in situ. Instructed training, by contrast, is incredibly helpful. What I’m advocating is far deeper than the exercise in which we were given several scenarios and asked how we would respond. This is the job, and almost no time was spent on it during Orientation. At least two days should be dedicated to a practical guide for camper interactions.

5. Drop the identity politics – all of it. Orientation is not a place to advocate extreme wokeness. Identity politics emphasizes our differences and why, simply by dint of birth, we will never be able to understand each other's experiences. You can say as much as you want that "whatever you're welcome in this space," but until you do this, it won't be. Instead, Orientation should emphasize what we have in common. That is, the experience we are about to share. Does this mean we don't discuss identity at all? No, it doesn't. However, we should not be discussing our identities. Rather, we should be discussing the identities of the campers we are about to be responsible for – where they come from, what the social norms of their homes are, what the basics of their cultural traditions might be, how all this could translate into a bunk dynamic. There are very few circumstances as a counselor when your identity actually matters, and these are fairly obvious. Teenagers in general don't care about your race as counselor. They might at times care about what your religion or nationality is. They certainly will care at times what your sex is. But this lesson can be imparted quickly and doesn't require the political/philosophical baggage that dragged it out over multiple days.
6. So much of Orientation was wasted talking about how to have a conversation. We are all adults and know how to talk to one another. Creating space for people to voice their needs gives them license to make unreasonable requests. Good will and charity are the only prerequisites for conversation. Orientation would be far more productive if it were less contrived and more organic. I, along with many others, felt as though I was being treated like a child during Orientation. We will negotiate conversational norms on our own without spending hours parsing our individual needs. I feel the least strongly about this recommendation, though I don't think anyone would miss this element of Orientation if it were removed. I also don't think there would be any negative ramifications of its removal. That is, I think the negative behavior it seeks to preempt is largely imagined.
7. More free time and camp restoration projects! I think there is pressure to schedule packed days during Orientation. But this isn't necessary. What information and training is essential for us to do our job? Beyond this, staff bonding is best facilitated by free time and tangible projects. Cleaning is one project example which was the source of much collaborative experience. This can be expanded though. Perhaps the center circle in the hockey rink needs repainting. Perhaps a new garden bed needs building. Perhaps counselors can help prepare meals for each other in the kitchen. There are so many options! Putting us to work will not only be productive and force us to learn to work with one another before Camp starts, it will also give us a sense of shared ownership over and pride in the physical space of Camp.
8. There should be a clear exposition of what everyone's roles are at Camp and how they are related to one another. This will not only give everyone an understanding of how they are essential but will also give them a useful map for who is responsible for what and reports to whom. Right now, if you asked counselors to describe what Orlando's responsibilities are, for example, they wouldn't be able to tell you. For this to take place, the false pretense of the "horizontal leadership structure" will have to be dissolved. This is for the best, not in the least because campers see right through it. To illustrate exactly

what I mean, I imagine Dani and Farhad holding a session with counselors where they explain what facilitators do, what the facilitation program seeks to accomplish, how it works, what the archetypical camper evolutions are, and how counselors can support campers from outside the dialogue hut. The cute songs we sang about “Storming” were not adequate.

Beyond Orientation:

1. I think a healthy prank culture is necessary for every Summer camp. Practical jokes feed the hunger teenagers have for mischief, danger, and adventure in a controlled, innocuous, and ultimately positive way. Reinstating pranks is a good move. I don’t know anyone from either of my sessions for whom pranks were a negative experience. This being said, Camp has and will survive without pranks. If they continue to be banned, their illegality should be made explicit.
2. The only rules about camper speech that should be enforced by counselors are those restricting discriminatory language, bullying, and non-English. In the case of all three, however, definitions must be put forth. Jokes, ultimately benign, sometimes ironically adopt discriminatory language and teasing is incredibly important for adolescent development. In some cases, as I pointed out when it comes to racism, counselors may have different ideas about what language is discriminatory. The same is true of bullying.
3. Counselors should not discuss their views on the conflicts (unless their being from the conflicts gives them license in certain circumstances) or their views on Camp itself. Everything else, within the bounds of commonsense, is fair game.
4. Don’t confiscate books.
5. Food is the single most neglected piece of Camp, and, arguably, one of the most important. Kids are fed the least nutritious possible diet. There is a severe dearth of fresh vegetables. There are meals in which both the main and side options are fried. The vegan option is repetitive and weak. This must change. Energy levels, mood, ability to focus, and physical health are all directly dependent on nutrition and vital for the success of Camp. Imagine the change if campers and counselors were given meals to optimize their physical and cognitive performance! This, by my lights, is the greatest opportunity for improving Camp.

(There is an endless amount of research on this topic, in case you’re interested in what the observable effects of this change would be. In my view, food science is too advanced for Camp to still be serving what it does. No responsible parent would feed their children what you feed them.)

6. Camp cares a lot about the superficial diversity of race and sexual orientation. It was remarkable to me the amount of pride that was derived from “seeing a staff that *looks* like this.” Under normal circumstances, I would reject such thinking. But, at Camp, I understand why having a staff that looks diverse is important for more than just optics. Just as, if not more important though, is intellectual

diversity. Currently, there is a pretty severe intellectual monoculture at Camp. It is just as important for a black camper to have a black counselor to whom he can relate as it is for a conservative camper to have a conservative counselor to whom she can relate. More importantly, intellectual diversity by default produces a culture of openness and charity. That is, a culture in which no idea is above scrutiny and no person beneath dignity.

I admit, I don't have a proposed solution to this problem. I'd guess fairly confidently that your applicant pool skews towards private Northeastern college-educated and the humanities. By virtue of the work, it also likely skews heavily towards individuals high in trait openness, which positively predicts liberal politics. This deadly combination guarantees a staff predisposed in one ideological direction. In turn, Camp naturally becomes what Jonathan Haidt refers to as a "moral matrix," insulating those inside from alternate moralities and, by extension, alternate politics. Something in this hiring flow should be disrupted.

Funnily enough, the principal skill I took away from Camp was being able to intentionally remove myself from the "moral matrix" and instead observe the moral landscape, in its entirety, from a higher vantage point. In short, Camp showed me how to be fair minded, to see the validity in both sides of the argument and to tease out the truth for myself. It can't be the case that the individuals responsible for teaching this skill to campers haven't mastered it themselves.

7. The safety regime at Camp should be softened by a few decibel levels. Safety is of the utmost importance, I agree. However, all our Campers are over 13 years old, so there's no reason Camp should be PG instead of PG-13. Slide tackling should be allowed during soccer matches. (This would be made easier if kids had proper gear. It should be low energy to invest in a new set of shin guards and to instruct kids via the Camp packing list to bring their soccer boots with them.) During street hockey, sticks should be allowed to come above the knees. Though nothing hinges on this, "The Magic House" should be returned to its rightful moniker, "The Shit House". Keep things reasonable. Safety rules are like speech restrictions in many ways. They will accumulate, eventually to the point where it becomes impossible to move without violation. When I was a camper, we could slide tackle; we could grab pucks in the air; "The Shit House" was indeed "The Shit House"; and on the last night, we were allowed to stay up just in front of the bunks, on the road, as long as we were packed. Why not anymore? Is the marginal gain in safety worth the cost of freedom? I don't think it is. And, although you may not take their input seriously on the topic of safety, I doubt campers do either.

Benjamin Franklin put the principle I'm expressing at its finest: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety. Those who sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither. He who would trade liberty for some temporary security, deserves neither liberty nor security."

In General:

I only have one general recommendation, which is to think about everything at Camp in terms of incentive structures. What kinds of behavior does each rule or combination of rules encourage or discourage? Are the rules really encouraging what is good to encourage and discouraging what is good to discourage? Bad

incentives are so scary because they are the conditions under which otherwise good people reliably make negative choices. There are many opportunities for optimizing the incentives structures at Camp.

Praise

InSpencer: I have nothing but endless gratitude for Spencer. He managed an impressive openness to everything I ever said while also maintaining professional impartiality. He is a master of making you feel heard, and letting you talk yourself into clarity.

Jeremy: Jeremy has precisely the intellectual disposition I think should be selected for in counselors. We disagreed about almost all the deep questions – the importance of prisons, the value of identity politics, the goodness or badness of capitalism. And yet, our working relationship was wonderful. We engaged these differences without ever demeaning each other's character. After all, we both cared so much for our campers and had seen that care in practice.

Ella Neville: Ella, from the beginning, for purely dispositional reasons, was an unlikely candidate to win my affection. However, as suggestive phrasing suggests, she was in fact successful in doing so. A good start was understanding her unsolicited advice as an artifact of her desire for her colleague counselors to realize their potential with unrivaled preparedness. What really forced my hand, though, was the first of many melodramatic SPS episodes of team cephaloPOD. The first period allocated for our meeting had expired with a flash of discomfort produced by obviously contentious criticisms made by me and two others.

Spencer, judicious as always, then gave the group a choice to stay for the free period about to begin and dig in, or to leave. Slowly, as people made their decisions, the group lost volume, until it was only the criticism's three progenitors that remained – us ... and Ella. She stayed and listened to how it was that we came to our conclusions. She listened, despite it being visibly difficult for her. I respected that. At the same time, though, I remember thinking, "It shouldn't be this difficult to listen to ideas different from your own!" For many, it was so hard that they chose to not even listen, to not even look through the telescope and decide for themselves. She courageously did.

Omar: Omar and I found common cause on many foundational items. He is, to many, an impossible person, contradictory in so many ways: he believes, in his words, that "traditional roles for men and women should be preserved," but has two Arab mothers; he was raised Buddhist but recently converted to Catholicism; he was raised in Oakland, CA, but is a reformed anarcho-capitalist. However, Omar is only an impossibility to those who believe that one's belief system is necessarily dependent on one's experiences, that "the personal is the political", as the saying goes. Omar has done the hard but essential work of constructing his conception of reality using bricks of reason and beams of restraint. Omar and Colin are similarly rare in this way. It's the reason I respect them both.

Because, though, many at Camp believed the very proposition Omar gives lie to, and the exposition of his ideas preceded the exposition of his background, the nature of his experiences was often assumed to resemble certain imagined archetypes. In this way, he and I suffered the same fate. He, also like me, masochistically chooses to place himself in environments where such an outcome can be described as predestined instead of as an unfortunate series of improbable events. We both recognize the boredom of

being surrounded by agreement and enjoy the opportunities to refine and expand our thinking presented by being stationed on the frontlines.

Joy: Joy and I had two substantial conversations. In both, I regret the way I engaged. I had become informed of how ubiquitous the negative rumors about me had become and compelled to prove that despite what people might have heard, I was perfectly sober and reasonable. I was guilty of performance. Perhaps if I gave technical explanations, I thought, I could win her over. This backfired. My need for oxygen was greater than hers, and this didn't set me up properly to achieve my objective. The next time I see her, I intend to apologize. The patience she extended, though, was admirable. I have been working towards that type of patience for some time, and will continue to, informed by the quality she displayed.

There are many more people about whom I could dispense personal praise – Samatar, Muzammil, Anour, Eli, Kerry, Robbie, Colin, Yousef, Oliver, Pooja, Zara, Blu, Farid, Phoebe, and so on – but I would be here till the end of time if I were to do them justice! I don't know what any of these people would say about me. But, regardless, I felt this letter, comprehensive as it has become, would be incomplete without making these positive remarks that I may otherwise not have the chance to.

In Sum

Camp is a magical place, one that I care about deeply and want to preserve for as long as possible. I hope this letter communicates that. Camp should be a place where any question can be seriously considered and where we can laugh at ourselves. It should be a place where how you think matters more than what you think, what you think matters more than what you look like or where you come from, and what you do matters more than anything prior. It should be a place where campers feel that no matter what feeling or idea they voice, the best attempt possible will be made to understand and engage instead of judge and silence them. My memory may betray me, but I remember Camp being this way. It isn't anymore though. I believe the evidence for this is overwhelming – from the content of Orientation, to the rules of Camp, to your reactions to the Block Heist and my conversations with campers. I'm not worried that Camp can't find its true self again. I know it can. What I'm worried about is that you don't agree with the vision of openness, freedom, trust, and deep diversity that I've laid out. My real worry, to borrow a phrase from the economist Thomas Sowell, is that we have a "conflict of visions". If that is the case – if it is the case that you view greater restrictions on speech as necessary, an expansion of the safety regime as necessary, further descent into identity politics as necessary, etc., then Camp is doomed to become the very problem it seeks to solve. This, if you'd like, is the most generic variant of the warning I've been issuing all along. You cannot continue down this path. You will alienate allies that are essential for success and eventually find yourself stranded, powerless to affect the change you have dedicated your life to.

It is necessary that you are confronted with these criticisms whether they come from me or not. I am a camper, counselor, and ardent supporter of Seeds of Peace. Ultimately, that is why I have spent so much time and effort expressing these concerns. I want Camp to continue being a beacon of hope and optimism in a world encouraging cynicism and resignation. I want camp to maintain itself as a bastion of free conversation. I want Camp to highlight our common humanity, instill the vision of a united global society working towards maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures, and show kids that the future truly is in

their hands. Camp hasn't yet stopped being and doing all these things. But, it could. Please, don't let it. Allow it to live up to its aspirations.

Abrazos,

Prashanth Ramakrishna

P.S. I told you on our golf cart ride that you didn't have to respond. I knew the document might become pretentiously long and that it would be unreasonable to ask you to respond thoroughly. But I haven't written anything that I wouldn't discuss in person, as your equal rather than employee. I am in New York, after all.