Taylor Forest Bent

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My Second Home: Horton Center

I didn’t always love camp at Horton Center. In fact I hated it the first time I ever attended. The location is wonderful, this beautiful little notch between the two peaks of Pine Mountain, just north of Mount Madison in the presidential range of New Hampshire. Surrounded by a tight knit forest and riddled with well worn trails it’s a cozy enough place. We weren’t allowed to drive up the winding narrow dirt path that led into camp, so we loaded into the camp van that waited for us in the lower parking lot in the valley between our camp on Pine Mountain and Mount Madison. Already I felt nervous, I had gone to summer camp before but never here and we had always been able to drive right up to the cabin and have my parents say one final goodbye. This time we didn’t have the chance. No longer was summer camp a familiar and welcoming experience, it was utterly terrifying. Over the years something changed as now it’s my favorite place and sort of a second home to me.

My first year was a teaser week. They did a little bit of everything and we were welcome to any and all activities, or so that’s what we were to believe. After arriving I packed away my bag of clothes and sleeping bag into my cabin alone. Our cabin was called Masithi and was up a hill and around a corner from the rest of the cabins. Immediately I felt distanced from everyone. We must have just barely had enough people to use this extra cabin because there were four of us in the cabin and one counselor. There is a bell in the center of camp that they ring to gather everyone for our activities and we couldn’t even hear it from our cabin. It was as if they didn’t want us to be a part of their camp.

There were some friendly faces, but most were not. For the most part it seemed as if none of the adults were interested in their job at all, they were bored, tired, didn’t make eye contact with you or welcome you in to camp. One of the other boys in my cabin was named Freddy. Freddy was about a year younger than I making him 9, his head was covered with very dark brown hair and was short even for his age. I felt Freddy was my only friend the whole time I was at this week of camp. We played tetherball together during compound time and cards during cabin time, sat together at meals, and just generally did everything together. If there was ever a time that we were really separated during this week I don’t recall.

During this week I was able to go hiking, caving, rock climbing, and even sleep on a ledge. This sounds like a lot but unfortunately thats about two days of activity out of a full week. The rest was pretty much spent either down on the sports field, my least favorite place, or in the Old Lodge, a larger cabin that was previously the kitchen and dining hall and now emptied out. It was a boring and dreary week that seemed to stretch on forever. The staff told us what activities we could or couldn’t participate in and didn’t offer much leeway. The weather was overcast and often we were hit with heavy rains, which only served to reflect how sad I was and my disappointment with what had looked to be such a promising week.

When time came to leave I couldn’t be more eager. We were told to start packing the night before we were set to leave for which I was thankful. Most other kids dilly-dallied in the morning still putting their clothes away into their bags and delaying their parents from taking them away. As time went on more and more of the campers around me disappeared until I realized I was alone, I was the last camper. Everything had gone exactly wrong, I had wanted to leave and be done with this place, yet here I was still trapped and miserable - I started to cry. I felt abandoned until my parents finally showed up, another whole hour later. Visibly upset and moody I was finally able to leave this place of horrors, I didn’t ever want to come back.

It may surprise you that about two years later I returned to Horton Center. My youth group leader invited me to a canoe trip he was doing through the camp. His name is Jon Gray and he is one of the kindest men I’ve ever known, so if someone like him would work there it couldn’t be all bad. He and his wife were the leaders, partnered with a lifeguard and counselor named Dave and a handful of other kids we set out from Horton Center in the van and towing our canoes. When we reached our destination which was Lake Umbagog we loaded up our canoes and were divided into canoe groups.

Canoeing for up to 3 hours a day just to move from camp site to camp site is quite tasking and, without callous on your hands, quite painful. I had been paired up with a girl two years older than I, and I was smitten at first sight. I was a nervous kid, especially around girls I liked and this was no exception. This was not a good because I quickly found myself unable to function around her in the very cliché way of sweaty palms, tied tongue, butterflies in stomach kind of nervousness that shows romanticize but honestly just makes you feel sick to your stomach. We canoed in relative silence, only the sounds of our paddles breaking the water in an even beat and the occasional bird cawing as it flew across the sky. After arriving at our first site we set up the food area quickly and gathered in to eat, everyone was exhausted and hungry so our meal was quiet.

I was a nervous kid, especially around girls I liked and this was no exception. This was not a good because I quickly found myself unable to function around her or speak to her, the very cliché hands sweaty, tongue tied, butterflies in stomach kind of nervousness that shows romanticize but honestly just makes you feel sick to your stomach.

We had our fair share of fun and games on this trip though. Our first activity was petrifying and the most nerve-wracking activity of my life, a game called “Honey, will you marry me?” To provide some insight into this game, it’s where you get down on one knee and have to “propose” to someone in a way to make them laugh, you were allowed to make faces and do most anything you thought might make them laugh, but you had to stay on script - with the allowance of a slight change such as adding please; oh and you only had 1 chance to ask someone, if they didn’t laugh you had to move on to someone else. Luckily I was excellent at not laughing, and so I was almost never the one proposing. Though on one very specific occasion I was the one proposing and absolutely bombing with everyone, nobody would laugh. It got to a point where I had to propose to Julia and I couldn’t, I couldn’t even speak. I sat there on my knee, holding her hand for a good two to three minutes before anything came out of my throat. When something did finally come out of my throat it wasn’t words, it wasn’t even a noise but a steady stream of vomit. That was pretty quickly the end of that activity, and the end of any privacy in the fact that I was crushing hard for Julia.

Before the week was up we had a day where we didn’t have to change sites for the day so we took a leisurely canoe ride around the lake. After a while of canoeing around aimlessly we came to the northern portion of the lake. Looking up into the sky we saw some bald eagles and decided to follow them. These large birds returned to their nest perched atop a dead tree amongst the swamp, so old it had turned almost pure white. It was one of the most beautiful views I’ve ever seen, like something out of a dream. What a dream it was because the next thing I knew Julia and I had passed around a bit of swamp reeds and she kissed me without the others noticing. Very stricken by the whole event I didn’t know how to react, in fact I didn’t even react for what seemed like hours, but was likely minutes as she told me to snap out of it and we had to return to the group.

We had one more night of the canoe trip and things had really shaped up positively for me. After canoeing to our final site and setting up our camping area we had a serious discussion, or so I thought. Jon told us that there had been bears spotted near our camp site a week before and that we ought to be extra careful with storing our food. Later that night us boys were in our tent and playing Egyptian Rat Trap, when suddenly we heard something outside the tents. Of course our first thoughts were bear after the earlier conversation and we almost freaked out, but managed to maintain our cool until our tent was pushed on and knocked into. Our resolves finally broke and we screamed, suddenly we heard Jon laughing and our tent was back right side up. We all had a good laugh after that and went to sleep in good spirits.

With such a complicated history with Horton Center I wasn’t sure what to make of this invitation to be a counselor for Jon Gray the summer after I turned 18. Should I do it, would I enjoy it more than the other camp I’d already been working at? Without knowing all the answers I decided that my heart knew best and I followed it, right into Horton Center. I was excited to work with Jon again, I hadn’t seen him in a few years at this point and he had been a mentor and father figure to me. I left mid-summer from Mi-Te-Na to do a volunteer week at Horton Center as a counselor. When arriving I learned that I already knew almost everyone I would be working with and was extremely excited and convinced nothing could go wrong.

The next year I came back for another summer. A wonderful time filled with many good stories and interesting people. I haven’t seen Freddy or Julia since, but thats okay - some stories are best left unfinished. Sometimes you just have to move on and accept the change, but I believe that if you are dedicated and see things through to the end you will find that it was good change. Horton Center started out as a horrid place filled with bad memories. Of course over the years something changed as now it’s my favorite place and sort of a second home to me.