

What I Did During Summer Vacation

Address to Tri-State Camping Conference March 8, 2001

Given By Michael Eisner
Chairman and CEO, The Walt Disney Company

Let me explain my philosophy about speaking in public. Public speaking is not something that I thought would be part of my life, not something that in grade school was as high up as being Mickey Mantle's replacement, not something I enjoyed or looked forward to ever since standing in front of my third-grade class for the spelling bee.

But public speaking seemed to be inevitable from the time. I signed up for a college course in public speaking that was offered as part of my English and Theatre major and was historically considered an automatic "A" with equally semi-automatic no work. This had special appeal in my senior year after having diligently worked for honorable grades during my first three years.

Well, after getting a semi-automatic "C," I decided to retire from oratory as I had retired from bowling – another "C" in college – and theatre make-up – which earned me a "D" grade because I used 20 Mule Team Borax to take off the make-up from my face and ended up in the hospital.

Nevertheless, speaking became a necessary tool as I advanced in the entertainment business. But I did adopt a rule about public speaking. I would only speak at a college while there was a possibility that one of my children would apply, or in business situations where I could find no acceptable excuse to escape.

This rule has stood firm for thirty years. Now my children are out of college so I've amended my philosophy slightly. Soon I may speak to the New York Home for the Aged. I'm always planning for the future. But other than that slight adjustment, my rules have been hard and fast.

That is, until last march, when George Stein came up to me at a New York Knicks-Indiana Pacer basketball game and asked me to speak here today. I found myself saying "yes" immediately. This instant acceptance was proof of how complex one's brain is and how embedded childhood experiences are in one's adult life. Marcel Proust called this "involuntary memory."

I was at the game with John Angelo, a friend since birth. Here's what raced through my mind during the first second after George invited me. First, I recalled a lunch fifty years earlier at the St. George Hotel at a Camp Keewaydin winter get-together. I had gone to Keewaydin the summer before and I was bringing John to the lunch to meet my friends and

counselors (we called them staffmen) since he was going to attend there the next summer.

We are now a half-second into my thoughts.

At the lunch, John and I sat down. We said hello to all. We stood for the camp song before the lunch began. I sang right along showing off to John who, of course, didn't know the song. I was maybe a beat behind because the song sounded different than I remembered it, but then again, we were now in Manhattan and everything seemed different. Then came a prayer in unison. I said "amen."

We sat back down...and we ate...and then a man tapped me on the back. It was Waboos...Alfred Hare to people who knew he was not a Native American – Keewaydin's camp director, and a camper with my father eons ago. On that day, he tapped me on the back to inform me that this was not the Keewaydin lunch but the lunch for another camp.

I was devastated. Waboos led the nine-year-old John and me out of that room to the right room where I noticed that everyone looked much more familiar. John was not impressed. He is nine months older than I and was quite aggravated. Some jokes were made by various friends at my expense. John is still making jokes at my expense.

The second half of that first second brought me back to the basketball game, as Alan Houston scored a three-pointer.

The full second passed and I heard myself responding to George, "Yes, I'll speak." John asked me what I just committed myself to. I said I didn't exactly know, something about camp, but I assured him I would find the correct hotel banquet room this time.

To be really fair to my complex brain, there was a second second of thought as George stood by – dunk shot by Marcus Camby going on in the background – and it was the sudden realization of how much I loved camp. I loved Keewaydin... every moment of it... every year of being there... every baseball game and canoe trip and wilderness experience and being a staffman and driving a truck and just being a team player. I loved the six years as a camper and three years as a counselor between 1950 and 1964. As much as I loved it, my father must have loved it more. He went to Princeton undergraduate and Harvard Law but never went to a reunion. However, he never missed a Keewaydin reunion.

And, over the next few years, when I joined NBC as a page followed by CBS and finally ABC, I hoped that when I got fired (something very common in athletic coaching and television), it would be in May so I could go back to camp. Fortunately it only happened once, but unfortunately it happened in the Fall. So I told George, "Yes." If I couldn't go back to camp, at least I could get this close.

So it is, that after those two fateful second of brain synapses, here I am.

As I said, I loved camp. But, I've long been fascinated by why this is so. After all, camp takes children and separates them from their families, from their televisions, telephones, VCR's, playstations and computers for weeks at a time to take them to what? The woods, to live ten to a cabin without air conditioning or their Mom or Dad's cooking, bed making/driving and one-day laundry service... unable to watch ABC One Saturday Morning, or sleep in 'til noon or visit a mall. And, yes, they love it! When it's over, they don't want to leave. And, when they grow up, they want to go back.

I've spent nearly as much time trying to understand the strange appeal of summer camp as I have the appeal of a talking mouse who favors red shorts. Quite frankly, I'm still stumped about the mouse. But, I think I've figured out the amazing allure of summer camp to kids across the country.

First of all, reality always beats virtual reality.

Our Kids have incredible toys at their command that allow them to experience everything but the real thing. I have nothing against most of these toys. My company makes a lot of them. But, at the end of the day, reality is what kids prefer. Really, this is nothing new. When I was a kid, "virtually reality" came in the form of TV, movies, comics, and books. These are all great forms of entertainment, but they invariably put kids in a world of someone else's creation. Camp puts them in a world of their own creation. What could be more exciting? What could be more empowering?

Consider my experience at Camp Keewaydin. What did we do there? We hiked. We canoed. We cooked. We put up tents. We took down tents.

Doesn't sound all that exciting.

It was fantastic.

No video game could compare. We were literally building our own world, then taking it down and moving it somewhere else.

It was all an adventure. Where else would a boy from the city learn how to walk slowly backwards from a bear? Where else would a boy from the city box in the ring with another boy from the city who was his friend not his enemy? Where else would a boy learn to swim 150 yards? Where else would a boy learn to lead other boys, but more importantly to follow other boys? Where else would a boy learn how to carry a wanagon over a portage, to wallop a pot, and to honor elephant bumwad...elephant bumwad is paper towels. You can imagine what Bumwad is!

Every day there were more variables than any computer programmer could ever pack into an arcade game. And we did it all ourselves...or, at least, we felt we did.

Which brings me to the second reason city kids want to go to rustic camps – because they get to be grownups...sort of.

It's a strange truism that, as much as adults want to be kids again, kids want to be adults. All kids...kids from affluence and kids from the inner city.

At home, kids may secretly want to be grown-ups, but they're perfectly willing to have someone else cook for them and wash their clothes and get them ready in the morning and drive them around. At camp, they have to shoulder a lot of these responsibilities. They get to be little grown-ups. And, in the process, they actually do some growing up.

The third reason camp has so much appeal is because it's liberating. Sure, kids have lots of wonderful toys today. But, toys – like all possessions – are a mixed blessing. They open up possibilities, but they also constrain us. They limit us to what they can do.

When kids go to camp, they leave their toys behind. They might bring a ball or a frisbee. And, I suppose, nowadays they may pack their Gameboy, God forbid! But, most often, I bet the Gameboy stays back in the cabin. There's too many other things to do. And, somehow, at camp, punching buttons on a handheld computer becomes geeky rather than cool.

Okay okay, I know there are computer camps, and all sorts of specialty camps from tennis to space, from hockey to weight loss to theatre camps. But I'm an advocate of general all-purpose liberal arts education and general all-purpose camps. Specialization can come later. My sons had a liberal arts education as did I, and then they specialized in graduate school. Two of my sons went to Keewaydin and then hockey camp. Yes my non-hockey son Breck, went to Keewaydin too. I advise people who want to become film makers, such as Breck, to go to camp and to get a liberal arts education. In other words, learn about life first. Learning to point a camera is like learning to drive. Anybody can do that. What's important is knowing where to go.

At general purpose camps like Keewaydin, we get to free our minds and look to the horizon. And, in doing so, it is tremendously liberating to realize that we don't need contraptions to enjoy ourselves. To be sure, the contraptions still have their place...it's just not at camp.

The fourth and final reason that explains the remarkable appeal of summer camp is that it makes memories. At camp, the days come alive with their own identities. Each day makes its own mark. Everything is more vivid because everything is so different from the normal urban routine. The entire pace of life changes and we form wonderful recollections that don't just stay with us until we get home or until the next year...they stay with us our entire lives.

So. As I see it, these are some of the reasons that kids are drawn out of their homes to spend summer months roughing it in the great outdoors.

But, I believe that these are just the reasons that they think they're going to camp. To me, the real magic of camp happens beyond the campers' immediate consciousness. The real magic is in life lessons that, once learned, become ingrained and relevant every day of one's life long after you take the last ride home in that big sad bus.

Let me give you a few examples.

First, consider those canoe trips. There were ten of us on them – two staffmen and eight campers. The campers were split up into four teams of two...There were four jobs each day that corresponded to the four teams – pitching the tents, cooking, building the fire, and cleaning the dishes. These four jobs were rotated among the teams, so everyone had to do everything and had to do it working in harmony with another individual. Of course, on the canoe trips themselves, we had to portage frequently, which gave us an intense awareness of what was really needed to keep our little band flourishing, since we literally had to carry all our needs on our shoulders. Along the way, there were magnificent days of indescribable beauty. There were soaking days that chilled us to the bone. And, on occasion, we found we were not alone, but shared our environment with black flies whose only reason for existence was to torment us. One time it got so bad that we all spent the entire night lying in the river with only our faces out of the water in a desperate attempt to defend ourselves from the attacking swarms.

I remember my very first canoe trip. I was terrified. We were venturing out into what seemed to be uncharted territory, perhaps never to be seen again. Every aspect of it was intimidation...but especially the idea that somehow our survival depended on us doing stuff and doing it together and doing it right. Of course, steadily, terror gave way to triumph, and I returned with an indescribable feeling of achievement.

Many years later, I was a counselor helping to lead one of these expeditions. Partly at my urging, the camp let us head down the more challenging Connecticut River and, on one of the rapids, a camper fell out and cut his head pretty badly. It was up to me to carry him three miles for help.

On another occasion, we naively drank water from the river and we all got sick, learning all too vividly that mankind was having some undesired effects on nature.

I can keep telling you tales of my canoe trips and I'm sure that many of you have your own to tell. I share them not to tell you what a rugged outdoorsman I am. I'm not. I'm sure I'd have trouble keeping up with John Muir...and he's been dead for eighty-seven years.

But, oh, the lessons I learned. On these canoe trips, we could never survive the first day if we didn't practice teamwork, show initiative, handle adversity, listen well and, not least important, maintain a sense of humor.

May I repeat that list: practice teamwork, show initiative, handle adversity, listen well and maintain a sense of humor. I'm sure it will surprise no one in this room that these five attributes don't just apply to canoe trips. They represent keys to success in one's career. Indeed, they are keys to success in life. And, you just can't learn them spending your summers playing video games.

Simply consider the lessons I was taught by the campfire.

First and foremost, you must protect your matches. In the middle of Algonquin National Park, there are no 7-11's to run to. Once you've determined your matches are dry and available, you must gather wood, ranging from the smallest twig to sizeable branches. You need to clear out a spot so that the fire is built responsibly. You need to plan a strategy, be it log cabin, teepee, or some other design. Then you light it and your work is immediately subjected to a rigid and unforgiving measure of success – will it light with a single match? Once the fire is going, you must pay close attention to it, keeping it fueled at the right level.

Of course, it is at this point where the real joy of fire building kicks in. Not only is there the welcome warmth, but there is that crackle and that smell. And, there is the tremendous entertainment value. Every night, we could sit and stare at the fire for hours, mesmerized by the ever-changing dance of the flames, which would often prompt some of the most wonderful conversations out under the stars.

But, still our work was not done. When it was time for bed, we had to perform the most important undertaking of all and properly extinguish the fire and bury it so that our efforts would not leave a scar and would not result in horrific unintended consequences. Carelessness is a great sin in the great outdoors.

Every time I was on fire detail, the situation and challenge was different. But, every time the rich reward was the same as we simply sat and enjoyed our consuming creation. And, there was one aspect in particular that never failed to intrigue me, and that was the process of seeing the single small flame of the match spread to the kindling and then the twigs and then the smaller branches and finally the larger logs. It didn't dawn on me until years later, but this was the perfect metaphor for the creative process. In much the same way, the fragile spark of an idea can spread to become a great work of art or a movie or a political movement or an automobile or a Space Shuttle or a new communications technology. But, these blazing achievements can only happen if the initial idea is cared for, protected, and nurtured until it is ready to spread.

Years later, I found myself running a network television division and then a movie studio and now an entire entertainment company. But, much of the success I've achieved can be traced to the direct and metaphorical lessons I learned in building those campfires.

I can hardly think of an aspect of my life that wasn't positively affected by my camping experience.

Environmentalism? Long before I had even heard the word "ecology," I was immersed in its significance. My environmental consciousness didn't come so much from hearing talks about the delicate balance of nature. It came from such things as only peeling bark from a dead tree, or burying the garbage after burning the cans...or leaving the campsite just as it was found.

Charity? Every Sunday, we joined in a service during which we were expected to make a donation out of our precious canteen money.

Responsibility? At eighteen, I was driving trucks that held nine other kids and towed six canoes.

Crisis management? I once led a hike and got thoroughly lost on the mountain in a rainstorm. After considering all the options, I led my band bushwhacking down the trail-less mountainside to civilization.

Healthy skepticism? Since I attended a boys camp, there were no women around to do those "Mom things." This was a time when sexual roles were quite ordained in society. Women cooked and cleaned. Men worked and watched football. But, it didn't take many cooking assignments before my eighteen year-old brain started to appreciate (a) that cooking wasn't so easy; (b) that there was nothing "feminine" about it; (c) that washing pots and pans was boring for both men and women; and (d) that baking a cake correctly could be satisfying. This led me to learn that things shouldn't be accepted just because that's the way they've always been done.

Language? It was at camp that I learned my first foreign language, since it was there that we were taught the Native American words for most of the things around us. This taught me that language isn't just about words, it is about the history and subtext behind those words. Whether we talked about the gentle east wind Wabun or the mercurial nature of Shawendasee from the south, the words took on a completely different context and meaning. I still dream and fear Mudjekeewis from the West.

Theater? Friday night was show night at Keewaydin. At least once a summer you were in an original play or musical. Every Sunday night, there was a satirical or comedic written review of the previous week's events, called The Kicker, read by Waboos to the entire camp as part of the all-camp fire. For years it was written by John McPhee who later went on to be one of America's great writers. For a year or two as a staff member, I wrote The Kicker. It wasn't up to McPhee's standards to be sure. But it was fun and educating for me. Luckily the audience was a wonderfully sympathetic and receptive one.

Respect for education? Most of the senior staff at camp were teachers the rest of the year. These were extraordinary individuals who made a lasting impression on me. And, I couldn't help thinking, "Wow, these are teachers! And I'm not even getting in trouble." It

gave me a whole new understanding for education and the people who dedicate their lives to enriching the next generation. And, years later, it was to some extent to pay honor to the Keewaydin staff that I initiated Disney's annual American Teacher Awards ceremony.

Recognition? I may never win an Oscar, but it doesn't matter. I have my coups. At the end of every session, we would get a certificate filled with the coups we had earned for hiking, archery, canoeing, or whatever. Sure, it was just a piece of paper. But, so is a diploma. My wife Jane, who sits before you, throws out almost everything. But she dare not throw out my coup certificates. These certificates meant an incredible amount to me. And, it helped me to remember in later life to acknowledge excellence whenever and wherever I came across it.

The imperfections of life? Lest I paint too rosy a picture, during my many years at Keewaydin, there were a few staffmen and experiences that weren't so great. Losing the tennis trophy to John Angelo was one. Losing the canoeing trophy to Brad Morgan was another. Losing...what a pain! But, this all contributed to the value of the experience as well. Camp isn't about artificiality. It is about life. And life is never perfect. But, in part because it incorporates the fullness of life, warts and all, camp comes pretty darned close.

In saying all this, let me make clear that, although I've specifically referenced my experiences as a boy attending an overnight camp, just about everything I'm saying applies equally well to girls and to day camps. No matter what the background of a child, camp opens doors, exposing children to possibilities and opportunities they might never know could be theirs.

And so it is that camp transports kids with everything to a place where they have close to nothing. In so doing, it takes kids away from things they value to teach them the things of real value.

When all is said and done, people of all ages want to be a part of something bigger and more important than themselves. More than anything else, this is the value that camp teaches kids. It offers them a sense of perspective and provides them with a headstart on the road to becoming truly human.

What a gift camp gives to kids. What a gift you give to kids.

And this is why all of you should be so proud of what you do.

Thank you very much.