

# My Daughter Went Away to Camp and Changed

## How do I catch up?

By [John Dickerson](#)



Children in summer camp can be their essential selves, not worrying about how their parents might react.

When I look at my phone, I see my daughter leaving for camp on my home screen. She stands at the bottom of an airport escalator, an orange backpack over her shoulder. She'd cut her long, strawberry blond hair the day before, so the person smiling from under the carrot top doesn't look familiar. But the image of a kid who just needs a backpack and a ticket is one I recognize. Some parents may have to nudge their children to camp. For the last two summers, our daughter has run out the door. "Yukon ho!" she yelled when leaving this year, an expression she learned from [Calvin and Hobbes](#)' main character Calvin, whom she now resembles.

I hadn't been at the National Airport departure gate for her first trip as an Unaccompanied Minor. I was in the stands at my son's baseball tournament. For pickup my wife and I flipped the load-sharing. She did baseball duty, and I flew to Minnesota, driving almost four hours to a packed-dirt road lined with birch trees that ended at the shores of Lake Pokegama: Camp Mishawaka. Thirty-six years earlier, I had been the 9-year-old flying alone from Washington to this place with a new haircut.

When I was at camp, my parents didn't know what was happening to me. We weren't allowed to use the telephone, so even on my birthday I just received word that they'd called to wish me a happy one. All they got on their end was a handful of sentences written in loopy script with scattershot spelling. Technology makes hovering easier now. For the last few weeks, my wife and I ended our days poking around on the camp website, scanning photographs for the flash of red hair among the campers playing capture the flag and canoeing. Now, as I stood on the soft grass at the edge of the compound, I was doing the same scan, watching my daughter fling herself around along with the other campers, passing time before the organizing ring of the dinner bell.

Some of my best encounters with our children are the ones they don't know about. At school pickup, I watch them conspiring with friends. When I drive carpool, I stay quiet so I can hear them making claims and testing theories. I notice that the voice mail messages from my son are different if he's calling in the presence of his friends. Instead of speaking in his usual soft meander, he delivers crisp, informative sentences. One time I expected him to ask if we had ever really considered the benefits of a term life insurance policy.

These hidden glimpses of children in their natural habitat show us their essential version of themselves. What you see is both new and familiar—like the picture of my daughter on the escalator at the airport. The moments don't last long. When the kids sense that you're watching— notified by some fibrillation of the hairs on their arms or inner ear disturbance—they change, even if it's to run to give you a hug. As I watched my daughter on the open field, I put my camera under my jacket. They can sense those at 60 paces.

This disturbance in the Force is what walls us off from watching the truly great moments. But this is an evolutionary necessity. The best moments of childhood—the memories that stay with you into adulthood—are ones where your parents aren't there. They are moments you experienced truly for yourself. In *Homesick and Happy*, Michael Thompson writes about a study where people were asked about their happiest childhood memory; more than 80 percent name a parent-free moment. Thompson explains that kids are better off when they accomplish something without having to think about how their parents would view it. Those memories are also more indelible. The self-confidence that comes from that accomplishment sticks better because it is completely earned.

So, as a parent you should want to push your kids out of your space to where they can rack up these 80 percent experiences—to explore, take risks, and try new identities. We are not invited, which is a paper-cut echo of the truth at the heart of parenting: You're doing it best when you're teaching them to leave you. Camp is an intensive course in how your children can do this successfully. "You step away from the care of your mom and dad into the world of independence. And that's your job in life. Every one of you accomplished steps in that direction," said the Girls Camp director at the final-night campfire. To signify the change they've made, girls throw crystals into the fire, which explode like Floo Powder in flashes of color.

This makes camp sound a little bitter for the parent, but it doesn't need to be. The upside to camp is that it also offers a back door to sneak into their world undetected. The glut of independence dulls their parental defenses. They forget to remember they are oppressed. My kids are at that

sweet age before the teenage years, before they are encased in those headphones that look like hamburger buns. Nursing resentments about the parents is not yet their full-time occupation. So when we picked up our son from a week of surfing camp, he went on a talking spree, explaining where he got his necklace made of shells, describing each room of the World War II defense bunker at the state park, and showing the campground layout with objects on the dinner table.

We had five hours inside his world, until after dinner, as he was scrubbing his utensils thoroughly the way he had each night at the campground, he stopped and looked at us: "What am I doing? Shouldn't *you* be doing this?" Good one, Necklace Boy. We all laughed and then started the slow descent to the old relationship.

By traveling to my daughter's new turf with the cloak of having been a camper there myself, I thought maybe the bubble might last a little longer. Maybe it would be 10 hours before our old routine closed back around us.

She tackled me. I'd been spotted. We hugged, though it's more accurate to say I wore her like a koala for a minute. Then we were off into her world. She introduced me to the counselors and campers—two categories: "nice" and "not so nice." All these glowing little people knew her name. I wasn't quite sure how to handle myself. Have you ever seen what happens when parents try too hard in front of their child and their child's new friends? They use the word "man" or "awesome" and children just stare at them with brutal pity. When you transport from Washington—the land of permanent eye circles and insipid arguments—into a close room full of oxygenated children who've had at least 10 hours of sleep, your instincts fail you.

Tent caterpillars joined us for dinner. They dive-bombed our bug juice, formed letters on top of the cornbread and settled in our hair. Dragonflies took readings and droned off. In the family dinner theater production of *Dinner at Our House*, my wife or I will ask: "How was your day?" and our daughter answers, "It was a normal day." Scene. At camp, a place where boredom did not seem to exist, I didn't have many chances to ask questions.

"He's a good leader," she said of the camp director, "because he's willing to do the work himself." Returning from the chow line, she brought me a napkin I needed but hadn't asked for. "That's something I've gotten good at. Noticing when people need something and getting it for them." I wasn't a conversationalist so much as a backboard against which she was pinging thoughts. "Opportunities are like fireflies. You have to catch them or they'll fly away."

When the kids get sick, they become extra-grateful and loving. This is also how they behave when you appear in the camp bubble. Did I have enough carrots, she asked? What did I want to see first? How was the flight? She was afraid she wasn't showing me and telling me enough. She reached over and brushed my hair off my forehead. "I do the same thing too now," she says brushing her short hair off her forehead.

We had reversed roles. She was in command, and I was the one visiting. I'd been there before and little had changed in 40 years, but I let myself be led by the hand—over the exposed roots I'd tripped over and down to the pier where I'd lost my breath jumping in to the frigid water.

If camp is a place where you can create an essential part of yourself, perhaps you can reintroduce yourself to that part of your character by stepping back into its grooves. It's as close as we get to going back in time. The location contains intense memories, and there are triggers everywhere that can pop them out of the subconscious. The split logs where we sat for vespers Sunday at twilight were still there, the open field seemed no smaller than it had when I pedaled my stick legs across it in Jimmy Connors shorts, and the dining hall smelled antique as always.

But my daughter seemed so much more in command and unburdened than the young John Dickerson. When I went to camp, I was the same little person transported to a new place. She goes to camp to be someone different. That's why she's so keen to get there. That's what the short haircut was about. It had its downside, of course. On the first night, counselors doing the quick sort sent her and her bags to the boys' camp.

In the back of the dining room, we found the younger me, [sitting in the front row in the 1977 camp photo](#). I'd never seen the picture, but I look almost identical to the boy in the official picture they had sent home to my parents. My mom never had a cellphone when she was alive, but that photograph—now [my Twitter avatar](#)—had been on her desk for the last 20 years of her life. I'm bright-eyed and happy, smiling like I could win the lottery any day I wanted. It's the face my daughter is wearing.

We became separated briefly, and as I tried to remember details about skits I'd performed and conjure the smell of the canvas tents, counselors came to tell me secrets. My daughter showed other campers how to make their beds. She got up every morning to swim in the freezing lake. She was a top competitor in the ad-hoc potty humor competition on the boat ride to one of the islands. (When you get in the outhouse, you're Russian, when you're going, European, and when you leave, you're Finnish.) At the talent show, she'd sung and played the guitar after being nervous about even stepping onstage. It was an inspiration to the other campers, I was told. She was the kind of kid who was game for anything.

This is a different girl than the one I remember. I wish I had been that way. I wish I were that way now. This was the unexpected wonder of the trip. It was fun to observe the new her, but the surprise was listening to other people describe her. They didn't have my fuzzy lenses mucked up with emotion and memory and duty. She told me that Annie, the counselor who taught her the ukulele, said, "You have great things ahead of you." "Didn't you think that already?" I asked. "Yes," she said, "but it was nice to hear it coming from her too."

The drip of the tent caterpillars sticks with you for a while. You think you feel them crawling even after you've brushed the last one off and you are headed to the airport out of town. It's like nature's phantom BlackBerry vibration. We turned in our rental car at the Minneapolis airport and rolled our bags to the escalators. She got on one. I got on the one next to it. We talked across the black rubber rails, moving in unison, plotting out how much time we'd have before leaving and where we could get a bite. She wanted to get a gift for her brother. As we talked the parallel escalators split. Mine was going to a lower floor. Hers above. She gave me a stage face of mock doom. (Escalator wit.) "I'll meet you up there," I yelled as I glided in the wrong direction. I was delivered to some stupid baggage claim level. My daughter, temporarily returned to the

Unaccompanied Minor status, piloted herself to the ticket counters. I looked for a way to get up. All the escalators were going in the wrong direction.

*John Dickerson is **Slate**'s chief political correspondent and author of [On Her Trail](#). Read his [series on the presidency](#) and his [series on risk](#).*