

Wishing Boats-A Summer Reflection

First Parish in Concord,

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Anybody who has ever attended overnight camp knows how tough it is to say “goodbye.” The last week at Camp Wingfoot was always just downright grueling for me and my campmates. We knew in our hearts and in our guts that the summer was winding down, and soon we would have to pack our medals, our memories and our mosaic trivets into our shiny, black trunks and say our aching farewells. We had come to this Ohio outpost for many summers, pigtailed pilgrims from the comfortable enclaves of Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh, to ride horseback, to practice archery and riflery and tennis, to swim and water-ski and camp out and sing. For eight too-short weeks, we worshiped at a muggy, buggy shrine of competition and camaraderie, complete with its share of glories, betrayals, confessions, and redemptions. But there was more to it than that; we were bound up in an intricate web of genuine friendship and love; and we knew this on a visceral level too deep for a young girl to articulate.

I suppose we knew back then that the journey would end for good someday, when Camp was ultimately stowed away in a Memorabilia box to be hauled from one home to the next throughout our entire adult lives; but during that last week of camp, all we could think about was this imminent parting, and how we would find the resolve to let go. In between packing, signing each others’ yearbooks, and engaging in marathon heart-to-hearts with our bunkmates, the last few days were filled with preparations for the Wishing Boat ceremony, a ritual held at dusk on the very last night of Camp. Each cabin from the wee 8-year-olds in “Cottage” to the seasoned 15-year-olds in “Starhouse” would fashion boats for the event. Down at the beach or in the woods, you could happen upon scores of shipbuilders collecting buoyant pieces of driftwood, bits of bark, errant feathers, acorn caps, twigs, leaves, shells, and the like. In the Craft Barn, competition for the glue, the paint and the glitter was intense, but Helen, the 70ish Angel of the facility would just smile and smooth down the egos and scurry joyfully from one charge to the other. Frankly, the Craft Barn was usually not so bustling, and Helen reveled in the reflective glory of the Wishing Boat preparations.

On the fateful evening, our trunks packed, our eyes stinging from tears, our hearts bursting, we gathered around the pool’s edge, already grieving the loss of the summer’s protected freedom, and draped in a stillness and a quiet of almost sacred proportion. (It was so quiet, in fact, that you could hear Lake Erie, lapping up on the shore, way down the hill, over the bridge, across the athletic field, and through the gap.) One by one, each cabin lit the candles that had been affixed to the deck of its boat, recited the cabin’s “wish” (corny and sweet), and launched its craft towards the center of the glistening turquoise water. By the time the oldest campers had completed this ritual, 13 boats would be gliding, bobbing, and twinkling like fireflies in the twilight, and we would all be wailing. Inevitably, one or more of the boats would tip or capsiz. We’d giggle a bit, but we didn’t gloat over the misfortune...we were comrades above all, and we would never forget this magic; this wishcraft.

Even today, when I spot an odd, orphaned piece of driftwood on the beach, or I’m fortunate enough to encounter a flurry of fireflies, I’m likely to recall our ingenious and fragile Wishing Boats floating together in hopeful harmony across the inky surface of the Camp Wingfoot swimming pool. And I’m also likely to remember the sweetness of our wishes, the corniness, the glorious simplicity and innocent profundity of it all...”We wish for world peace;” intones one cabin;” We wish for happiness,” chants another; “We wish that no one will ever go hungry;” “We wish we will always be friends,” sighs a bug-bitten girl with tear-streaked freckles.

Often, during these wistful revelries, there comes the stinging moment when I’m cut to the quick by a realization that it has been a very long while since I’ve actually made a wish; a four-leaf clover, penny-in-the-fountain, shooting star, rainbow connection, birthday candle wish! Something corny, sweet and simple, with no bottom line, no outline, no strategy, no hubris, and no contingencies. You see, I’m a grown-up now, and grown-ups make plans, they delegate and time manage, and have goals. We ex-children aren’t encouraged to buy in to the Disney wishing-star magic; we’re more likely to invest in the company! Numerous surveys and polls have been conducted asking adults what they would wish for if they had the chance, and it probably won’t surprise you to learn that the majority wish for more time and more money. In many cases, summer’s wishes have become winter’s expectations. “Hopes” and

“dreams” are still acceptable; I can have those. But wishes? They are a bit suspect, I fear.. as lightweight and ephemeral as billowing dandelion seeds blown off a child’s breath into a summer breeze; as fragile and un-seaworthy as driftwood boats. They reside in the province of childhood’s wishbone-faith and tooth-fairy trust.

Yet, I wonder if our laser-printed, four-color, e-mailed, faxed, and filed well-laid plans are any more sturdy? Can we actually depend on these mature and sensible agendas with consistent reliability? Sadly, we can not...even the best laid plans can crumble, and with them, our presumed mastery over the world. So why do so many of us allow ourselves to devalue the wishes of our hearts and our souls; the wishes of the child who lurks within providing us with solace and wonderment? I’m reminded of my daughter, Michaela, running around our yard, one step ahead of David’s lawn mower, zealously plucking up the puffy dandelions...a bouquet of wishes for her; a landscaping nuisance to us. Or one exquisitely clear night in Wellfleet earlier this summer, when this same awestruck little girl looked up at a star-encrusted sky and exclaimed, “Oh my gosh, look at all those wishes!” I had been busy trying to locate Ursa Minor!

Now, I’m not suggesting that we chuck our adult responsibilities or our sensibility and put our full trust in doodlebugs or daisy petals. But what would be so awful if we engaged in a little more spontaneous wishcraft and a little less strategic planning?

Many of you have probably heard of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, a national organization that grants wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses. Notice, if you would, that this group is not called the “Devise A Plan” Foundation! It knows it’s clientele -- that unjaded bunch who still believes in rainbow connections. “A special dream,” they astutely explain in their literature, “a secret hope for a wish, that is the essence and wonder of childhood.” So what do these stricken children wish for? Not surprisingl , according to the Foundation, a large percentage want to visit that magic kingdom, Disney World, where wishing on a star is a near sacrament. In the Foundation’s wish files, one also finds Steve, a 13-year-old with Muscular Dystrophy, who got his wish to swim with dolphins in Hawaii; Nicole, a ninth grader with cystic fibrosis, who met her idol, singer Janet Jackson; and 11-year old Brian, who graduated from Space Camp in Hunstville, Alabama. The highlight of his trip came when an International Registry named a star in the Big Dipper constellation for the bone cancer victim. Perhaps, one day, another stricken child will wish upon Brian’s star. And why does the Foundation grant more than 5,000 wishes per year at around \$3- 4, 000 a pop? As a “respite,” they say, “in time of pain and suffering.”

And herein lies a compromise, I believe, between sensible planning and whimsical wishing. No one suggests that these children abandon their treatment protocols in favor of Tinkerbell. On the contrary, the administering of that one special wish acknowledges not only the child’s very real suffering, but also that magic resides in this world, too; even amidst the most abject misery. Sometimes, we can not problem-solve away the despair, despite our managerial skills; we need to rely on something else for relief; something like faith, something like the “spirit of the child” honored earlier in our responsive prayer; “the child who lives within, the child who trusts, who imagines and wonders,” the child who wishes on a gingersnap in Sweden, on a filbert nut in Russia, on a Christmas pudding in England, on toads under a Welsh full moon, on enchanted evening stars the world over, and on wishing boats in summer camp swimming pools.

I was fortunate to recently discover a beautifully decorated enamel tile on the kitchen wall at a friend’s home. The inscription reads: “If you want your ship to come in, build a dock.” In the background, against a brilliant glazed turquoise sky, is a small bright red dinghy with “HMS Faith” emblazoned across its hull. This “proverb” wisely points out that every hope, dream, and plan requires action. To paraphrase, I’d suggest that “If you want your wishing boat to come in, believe.” Blend your planning and goal-setting with some wishing and dreaming and faith. A well-known Fisherman’s prayer laments, “O God, my boat is so small and the sea is so wide,” and how many times have we each felt this way? Even so, believe in something other than bottom lines and absolutes; sprinkle some fairy dust on your Filofax. A wishing boat is not a “Ship of Fools.” Think about the ailing Make-A-Wish children launching their wee vessels off solid docks of faith despite the vast tumultuous sea swirling around them.

Maybe we should lobby Congress to enact a law requiring every grown-up in America to pack off to overnight camp each summer for two weeks of protected freedom -- Kool-aid and color wars, bonfires and bonding. Can you

imagine the signs posted around town? “Government offices closed, we’re off playing Capture the Flag;” No Shirts laundered till Labor Day, we’re busy tie-dyeing T-shirts;” Disco closed, we’re out dancing with fireflies;” “Please make bank deposits in ATM, we’ve gone to make wishes with our lucky pennies,” and at South Bridge Boat House, Canoe rentals suspended. We’re off paddling wishing boats gently down a summer stream.”

Amen to that