

The Heart of Camping

There have been articles about the spirit of camping, the physical element, and the mental benefits, but there hasn't been one specifically on the nature and importance of a camp that focuses on the heart, as well as how to find such a camp. I hope this begins to fill that void.

What is heart? Mind, body, heart, and spirit are all interrelated, but for the sake of exposition, they are taken separately.

- ✚ Mind – the realm of thoughts. Descriptions, often in a matter-of-fact sort of way. Plus and minus lists.
- ✚ Body – activities, food, physicality.
- ✚ Heart – this is more known than described and defined. When you watch a movie and you are moved to tears, it isn't your mind that is being tugged. Beloved pets. Funerals. Weddings. Births. Gratitude. Gazing, lovingly into the eyes of another. Poetry. Listening to music and having a visceral reaction. Belonging. Truly empathizing with the story of another. A bed and breakfast versus a hotel chain. The depth of a friendship can largely be gauged by the degree of its heart connection. Compassion. Receiving a wholehearted massage. Your heart is what longs to give and receive love. Through your heart you often find passion, love, and something to strive for. At the end of this article, there are quotes that also speak of heart.
- ✚ Spirit – your spirit is what keeps you alive inside and creates your individuality. A person's essence. Beliefs in this realm can answer the questions about the meaning of life, and what might happen afterwards. Experiencing the transcendent nature of something. The spirit is the heart of love. Meditation and/or prayer. It can also be thought of in the realms of kindness, love, joy, peace, vision, wisdom, and generosity. If a person can become closer to those things, they will become more spiritual. I might add a sense of wonder, which I think in its more true form is a wonder of the spirit instead of the mind.

Why should you care?

- ✚ One of the important qualities of a place that encourages and teaches character is that it *be* a place of character. Research from various sources has, unsurprisingly, born this out. If you want a child to learn about honesty, caring, and responsibility, they should be able to absorb it osmosis-like from home, at school, with peers, and in other social contexts, like camp. For instance, the more of such attributes as caring or responsibility these places have, the more likely the child is to become a caring and responsible person. By the same token, if we are interested in having children be more in touch with their heart, exposing them to places that model that is important.
- ✚ Schools are places of the mind, and sometimes also of the body. For a pretty clear sense of their attention to the body, check out a school's menu, dress code (in reality), and physical activity philosophy and execution. Rarely do they emphasize the heart connection, especially with the focus on academic standards, tests, and a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:25 or so. At camps, the ratio is often ¼ of that, or less. There are certainly many storied connections between teacher and pupil, but after spending time in schools these days, I see and hear a little less of that than I used to.
- ✚ Places that pay attention to the heart make you feel their warmth on many levels. You aren't a number, and you aren't quoted a policy. You are a person, and feel like you are treated as one. At camp, there shouldn't be (and likely isn't) a disconnect between how parents and campers are treated.
- ✚ Media portrayals of heart connections are often superficial, or attempts to show extreme heart connections. These are rarely healthy examples (especially the precursors to the eventual plot resolution). It is also interesting to note that children cannot learn language by being exposed solely to television, and I would argue the same is true for learning to be in touch with and express their humanity through their hearts.
- ✚ In the last two weeks, how many really genuine connections have you made with people outside of your partner/spouse? How many have you made with children? If you have children, ask them how many times they remember making that kind of connection in the last two weeks.
- ✚ Here are a few points about the benefits of having heartfelt connections. People in such relationships are less likely to be depressed, have higher degrees of social skills, are less aggressive, are less deviant in general, are more academically successful, recover more quickly from medical ailments, and have less stress and anxiety. Mere social contacts and superficial friendships do not accord one such benefits; it must be a heartfelt connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).
- ✚ Although this kind of research has not been specifically done in the camp context, I believe that a camp reaching beyond mind and body to that real human connection will do a better job of imbuing children with a great many other positive characteristics.

- ✚ See the quotes at the end of this article

How do you find a camp that is a place of heart?

- ✚ Website and materials – statements of activities, their quality, and general program are ubiquitous. Look for camps that focus on the heart dimension by including a very specific statement of their vision, mission, and values. Their publicity should not seem like generic boilerplate and should not leave you nonplussed. If they speak to the heart, you should feel it there. Camps with a heart focus will talk about how they impart their values, and quite specifically how they go about fostering their mission. They will often speak to the importance of their mission for children, perhaps in the context of wider society. You'll find messages from the heart, as opposed to just from the perspective of mind or body.
- ✚ Whenever you speak to someone at the camp, you should feel that you are treated as a person, and not as a record number or someone with a check book. Good customer service can, on the surface, make it difficult to discern this. But when problems occur, or when unusual requests are made, it will become clearer. If you are cited a policy, it is less likely to be a camp of heart. If your issue is dealt with by listening, sharing perspectives, and a discussion centered around the values and mission, then you are much more likely to be talking to a camp of heart.
- ✚ Examine the camp's statements about refunds in such cases as illness, or simply an unexpected change in the family's plans. Camps of heart usually offer either a full refund in the case of illness, or 50% to share the burden of such an event. They may also offer a later session, if it is available. If something comes up and the family must change their plans, a heartfelt stance would be to allow a full refund as long as the camp isn't actually losing money. Even if the cancellation occurs just a few days ahead of time, if the parent or camp can make a substitution, then why not offer a full refund?
- ✚ What do people say about the camp, other than that it's "fun?" They speak of that heartfelt connection. It is the difference between "He had a good time, learned a lot of skills, made some friends, and just really enjoyed it," and "my husband and I are just thrilled with the power of a fortnight spent in the company of people who care . . . he speaks of his feelings more readily, he's more affectionate, and he has continued the journal he started at camp." Your heart will be the best judge of these statements, but nonetheless take quotes offered by the camp with a boulder-sized grain of salt, as noted in the "10 Questions" article.
- ✚ Staff applications – what does the camp want to know about the person? Is a good part of it stuff you'd find on a standard resume? Surely, the camp should ask about the applicant's interests, skills, and background with children as well. Are there questions that really aim to learn about the applicant as a person . . . as an individual? How well would you really know a person if you used the camp's process? Ask to see their interview questions. Camps of heart find knowing the applicant as a human being, and really making that heartfelt understanding, a critical element of their process.
- ✚ Behavior management with campers / discipline with staff – ask the camp how they handle these issues with specific examples from the past few summers. Also, ask them to send you their printed disciplinary methods. Punishment, inducing guilt, and "buddying" campers and staff are hallmarks of camps that are not strong in the heart dimension.
- ✚ In the "10 Questions" article on this website, there are several sensitive questions you might choose to ask a camp director. Judge that person's response – does it come from the heart, or is it matter-of-fact responses, policy quotations, and/or defensiveness? Are they trying to get you off the phone? Do they sense core needs behind your questions and address them?
- ✚ Camps that seem boastful, offer extensive hype, or exhibit a level of pride that crosses the threshold of good taste and humility are probably not places of heart.
- ✚ Camps with heart usually have some purposeful gatherings that are centered on interpersonal connection. These gatherings will include more than campfire stories or awards ceremonies, but if they do have those elements, the story invokes the heart space, and the award marks a triumph over the self. One example of a heartfelt gathering time would be "evening embers," where small groups of campers gather to share their thoughts and feelings around an issue of consequence, or they share an experience that brings them closer together. Ask the camp about their specific gatherings and how those foster heart connections.
- ✚ As a general guide, camps of heart will have higher staff and camper return rates than the average 50% and 55% respectively. Generally, when people happily return to something – a relationship, work, a town, a friend's house, or a camp, it is because there is a meaningful connection. Camps with tons of activities and toys can skew this rule, as campers often want to return just to play. There are also camps where the connection amongst the staff, or the familiar community, is the reason people return, as opposed to that element combined with the purposeful and successful development of people. Nonetheless, the percentages are interesting to note in the whole picture.

A couple of caveats

Sometimes places can delve deeply into the heart space and not maintain a balance with other areas, such as the mind. For example, it is important for restitution to take place when a transgression has occurred (e.g., graffiti on the wall being sanded off), and not just an understanding. Another example is an organization/camp that is very heart focused, without the direction, process, clarity, and organization (mind) to effectively move the mission forward, or forward prudently. Mind, body, heart, and spirit need to be maintained in healthy interdependence.

People can have sincere and passionate beliefs that propel them to base their actions on power and hatred, or on community, compassion, and benevolence. From Star Wars to the Chronicles of Narnia to the modern news, humanity struggles between the light and dark side of the force.

After spending 21 summers at a number of camps, and having scores of jobs outside of camping, the places I remember most fondly and powerfully are the places that made a heart connection with myself and others. They were also places that allowed me to grow in mind, body, and spirit. Camps can be such a place, and if you find one of them, in or outside of camping, hold on to it like a cherished love.

Campingly yours,
Randy

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And now here is my secret, a very simple secret; it is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.

~~Antoine De Saint-Exupery (author of "The Little Prince")

Some people think only intellect counts: knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship, compassion and empathy.

~~Dean Koontz

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.

~~Leo Buscaglia

The happiest moments my heart knows are those in which it is pouring forth its affections to a few esteemed characters.

~~Thomas Jefferson

Words from the heart speak to the heart.

~~The Talmud

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart.

~~Helen Keller

To measure the man, measure his heart.

~~Malcolm Stevenson Forbes

Without a rich heart, wealth is an ugly beggar.

~~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.

~~Carl Gustav Jung

We only learn from those we love.

~~Goethe

The heart of a fool is in his mouth, but the mouth of a wise man is in his heart.

~~Benjamin Franklin

The holiest of all holidays are those kept by ourselves in silence and apart; the secret anniversaries of the heart.

~~Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

It is good to tell one's heart.

~~American Indian Proverb, Chippewa

Dance like there's nobody watching

Love like you'll never get hurt

Sing like there's nobody listening

Live like it's heaven on earth

And speak from the heart to be heard.

~~William W. Purkey