

Clayton "Ducky" Curtis

The day I was born, I was officially declared a male child (no sonogram spoiler alerts in those days). My admission tickets to a New England boarding school and an Ivy League college were punched. With a slap on my bottom I was set on a track that ran far into the future. The only unscheduled stop on that trip would be summer camp and it was that sidetrack that has made all the difference in my adult life.

The call came on one of the final days of a usually dreadful winter here in southern Connecticut. On the phone was Brenda Marsian from Becket-Chimney Corners YMCA, a camp I had attended from 1947 to 1955. She was calling alumni to talk about the distant past as they developed a blueprint for the future of the camp. She wanted to come from the Hartford area to meet at my house so she could excavate my memories. I have to admit that I kind of blew her off, pleading something or other. But as the days went by I realized that this might be an opportunity for some self discovery. But why should she come to my home when I could join her at the camp itself?

We arranged to meet in early May, a day that turned out to be more like summer than spring, although very few of the trees were in bloom. My first surprise was an administration building that served Camp Becket, Chimney Corners Camp (which was an independent camp so many years ago), the Travel and Service Programs (established in 1966) and the Berkshire Outdoor Center (established in 1991).

Brenda began our tour in the vey spot where it had all begun for me so many years ago, the village that housed (or should I say cabined) the youngest boys. I spent three summers in Ojibway, a cabin that had since been replaced with very slightly more commodious, but sturdier quarters. We made our way down to the edge of Lake Rudd where I had learned to swim.

As we looked out over the pond we were joined by the camp director. If you could take the natural elements that make for the Becket experience, the lake, the trees, the air, and could mold them into one person, that man would be Chris Burke. Never a Becket camper, he is everything you would want in a Becket Director. His energy and visionary presence are galvanizing. As the three of us walked through the camp world I talked about a camp that existed 65 years ago and he talked about the camp he saw existing in the many years to come. Every good memory I had of my experience he would enhance in his vision of the future.

From the pond we found our way to the Paul Dudley White Dining Hall that had replaced the building where I had consumed so many meals. The hall was empty and deserted as it has been abandoned for an even newer dining hall that was at that moment nearing its completion. More about that later.. Chris and Brenda steered me to what had been the kitchen. Always alert to an opportunity, the camp was going to make a new use of the facility when the dining hall would become an indoors activities center. Starting now, as part of their activity period, boys could opt for food preparation. Wait. What? And it struck me that as a man who has lost his wife, I would have hoped that if I had the chance when I was a camper, I would have dived into that opportunity. I know I would be leading a much healthier life than the one I am living.

Our next stop was the library, a building that is exactly, and I mean exactly, the same as when we once sat on the porch and looked out over the lake, where as Aides we had danced with the girls from Chimney Corners and where we had browsed the books that lined the walls.

Brenda had taken lunch orders and it was delivered to us there. Having lunch with the two of them is a memory that will stay with me for all the days I have left to me. Chris talked about the truly twisting and convoluted path that his life had taken to lead him to this place and this moment. Listening to him I truly believed there is a fate that brought him here and to all the boys who will benefit from his guidance in the years to come.

The Chapel By the Lake was next but before we got there I was in for another staggering moment. As a sidelight I pointed out to them the places where Mrs. Davis had devised a pitch and putt golf course and where I had retired the Davis Cup after winning the tournament three years in a row. Near the course was a cabin that looked surprisingly new, especially compared to the weathered wood of the cabins around it. Chris pointed it out and explained that it had been built the previous summer. By the campers themselves! Wait. What? Yes another new activity a boy could choose to be part of. And there was a waiting list to part of the building crew. As a boy the closest I came to carpentry was putting my father's tools back in their designated places. Now here at my camp a team of boys was building an actual house. Much smaller than a real house, but still a building that would house ten people and their belongings. Every summer a retired cabin is replaced not just as a home but as an experience in teamwork and camaraderie.

The Chapel, Gibson Hall and the infirmary, still called Kenjockity where I spent the night for two weeks the summer Bill Smith broke my nose with a high inside fastball, completed our tour of what I guess you could call the past.

Chris and Brenda had saved the best for last. Coming down from the hill where we once had memorable bonfires we came upon the former site of the tennis courts and now the gem that will be the new anchor of the camp: the new, new dining hall. There are no words I can write that would capture this truly awe-inspiring camp center. Perhaps I should say nothing about the specifics of the space, the light, the stonework, the tables, the kitchen, the fireplace and just hope that each of you who reads this will experience for yourself this magical space.

As we left the building Chris reminded me of something I guess I had always known but had never acknowledged. The dining hall is the true center of the camp, a place where everyone in the camp gathers three times a day as one camp. The food we consume strengthens our bodies but it is the community that nourishes our souls. In the old dining hall we ate, we sang, we clapped, we cheered and we created a future self for each of us. It is only fitting that the new dining hall should serve to create a new community. It is indeed the place of Gia Wia.

As we had walked I tried to explain to Chris and Brenda why the camp was so important to me. It seemed to me, from my perch 65 years from my last day at camp, that there was a subtle but substantial difference between a kind of formal religiosity and the spirituality that pervaded every aspect of the camp. The connection with the natural world and with my fellow campers have formed my belief system, my amazement at so many wonders of our world.

The sayings on the rafters of the old dining hall subliminally created in me a sense of responsibility, a desire to give back when and where I could. They may account for the 37 years I spent as a teacher of English in a public high school.

The point about camp that was most important for me to express to Chris and Brenda was that camp did not try to make you into something you were not. The camp accepted that each of us was unique with special talents and personalities and it was the role of the camp to make us better than we had been without changing who we were. Chris instantly and clearly heard what I was trying to say and agreed that it was indeed a mission of the camp.

The most telling moment that defines what camp meant to me came at the end of my fifth summer, my second year as a junior. And it doesn't reflect very well on me. I had had a momentous two months, highlighted by Billy Smith's fastball to my face. My nose was broken in seven places and the next day I was taken to a hospital in Pittsfield. The doctor gave me the choice of being put to sleep or not. He suggested sleep but told me that the following day I would not be in very good shape for a visit from my mother and father. I opted to stay awake. I really wanted to see my mother. When I announced my decision he shanghaied four of the largest interns he could find and assigned each to a quadrant of my 80 pound body. My apprehension was immediately fulfilled when he placed his thumbs along my nose, rebroke the already knitting bones, and then set them. Sixty six years later I still feel the pain and hear the sound.

On top of all of that, only my father visited the next day. My mother had thrown out her back. Life is not always fair.

The doctor ordered that I spend my nights in an infirmary bed for two weeks with sand bags on either side of my head so that I could not turn over in my sleep and undo all the reset bones.

With all of this I developed a certain notoriety around the camp.

One of the last nights of the summer featured a final campfire when a special award presentation was made. The highest award a camper could aspire to was the Green Feather. For a rather light substance, it carried incredible weight. The one I was given that night has had more of an influence and importance in my life than diplomas from Deerfield and Yale. I treasure it to this day.

I have a feeling that I was being rewarded that night for the way I had endured the pain and isolation of those weeks. Not a complaint had I voiced about any of it.

I fell from grace two days later, the last day of camp. We were all scrubbed, packed, and waiting for our parents. We were anxious and ready to go home. Four of us decided to walk down the road outside camp to greet our folks. About a mile from camp stood an abandoned house with a few of its many windows broken. One of us eyed the house and picked up a stone. Nothing is quite so intoxicating to young ears as the sound of breaking glass. Within moments that wasn't a pane left intact. In our excitement we didn't hear the sound of a pickup truck bearing down on us but when we did, we ran for our lives. We dove from the road and shrank into a ditch. The truck roared by and we breathed again, believing we had escaped.

Safely back in camp we were confronted by Mr. Emmons, the director, and another man, who pointed at each one of us. He was the owner of the house and had been watching us as we vandalized his property. Mr. Emmons took us individually into his office. I was last. As I waited I realized that my greatest fear was that the director could take from me my most valued possession.

"Duck," he said, "I am not taking your Green Feather. I know you and I know you are a good person who has made a mistake. You earned your Feather and I will not deprive you of it."

My father, when he heard what I had done, was not quite so forgiving. We boys had to pay to replace the windows and since I had no money of my own my father, wisely, made me work off my debt by painting a shed. It was hard work on an especially hot day.

As I look back on this event I realize that Mr. Emmons recognized something in me that not even I suspected. I had the potential to be a good person, the person he saw in me. He knew me and as a result I came to know myself.

I was born in 1939. I came of age in the conformist 50's. Cool was in. It was hip to be cool. I was and had never been cool and never would be. I was too filled with energy and enthusiasm to ever look out at the world through sunglass covered eyes. Whenever I embraced anything I did it with my whole being. I simply couldn't get enough of my life. Books, movies, music, baseball. I wanted it all and to be free to express my joy.

A camp moment embodies all of this for me. For the talent show one of my first summers I volunteered to be part of it. I had no talent but I could imitate a duck's quack like nobody else. My performance one Saturday night at Gibson Hall tells it all. My "talent" was to prance around the stage "singing" the hit song of the summer, Rosemary Clooney's "Come Ona My House" punctuating the end of each lyric with a loud duck noise. Was I embarrassed? Today I kind of am but then I wasn't. In fact I was newly baptized that night. For all my remaining days at camp I was Ducky.

As a footnote, on my 50th birthday Rosemary herself called me and sang Happy Birthday over the phone, arranged by one of my students.

The other two forces in my life, Deerfield and Yale, were very much into the idea of making me into the kind of person that they, and I suspect my parents, wanted me to be. The Deerfield boy and the Yale man were far from the person I was and who wanted to stay. Maybe that is why camp was so important to me.

I ended up teaching. I have discovered lately that I wasn't much of a teacher but I was a vibrant presence in every class I entered. I made a difference in the lives of at least some of my students simply because I was so energetic and passionate about what I was supposedly teaching.

Becket recognized who and what I was and did nothing to curtail or contain me.

The irony that caps all of this is that in my final years at camp I was an Aide and I was the camp bugler. I didn't know it but I ran the camp. I controlled the daily life of the campers in a way that even the director, Mr. Emmons, couldn't. I woke up the camp, I called it to meals. I raised and lowered the flag. And at the end of the day, I put the campers to sleep.

So camp allowed me to be the contradiction that I am. As the bugler I had to be absolutely responsible, organized, and always on time. At the same time I could express the extremes of emotion that have shaped my life.

We live in a world that is far removed from the one in which I grew up, but the mission of the camp remains the same. The natural world is the very same one as where I lived for nine summers. The mottos on the dining hall rafters are still there, transplanted to a beautiful new environment, and as true as the first day I read them so long ago. The quiet of the Chapel by The Lake nourishes the soul as it did then. Daily cabin life continues to teach us how to live with others who may not be like us. Singing in the dining hall and in chapel may not make us better singers but it does cement our companionship.

One final story to relate. I mentioned "Gia Wia" before. At the end of breakfast each morning a leader would speak briefly with a kind of lesson for the day. I have forgotten what the phrase meant but it was probably something like "Good words." Near the end of my final year at Becket I was asked if I would give the talk. I imagine it was because they had run through all the leaders of camp. It was an honor and I accepted it.

My talk was about a race between Roger Bannister, the man who broke the 4-minute mile, and John Landy who had later broken Bannister's record. I told the story of the head-to-head event with all the color and energy of a radio announcer. I described how Landy had led all the way until the final turn for home. Hearing footsteps, he looked over his left shoulder, thinking his rival would pass him on the inside. The wily Bannister surged by him on the right, starting his kick while Landry looked back. He burst forward to win the race.

What were we to learn from this in the waning days of our Becket summer? The end was in sight. What mattered now was how we finished the race, that we give it our very best. It was a simple lesson but one that I think resonated with the boys because of my energy and heart-felt enthusiasm.

After breakfast, one of the counselors came to me. He had never had much respect for me, thinking I was too immature to set an example for the campers. His message was simple. He congratulated me on my talk and then said, "I didn't think you had it in you."

Mr. Emmons so many years before told me I was a good person and here was someone else telling me I had it in me.

Now as I near the end of my race I have come to heed my own words. My recent life has been marked with loss. My older brothers left us far sooner than they or we deserved. In the span of three months I lost my wonderful daughter and my beloved wife of forty years to cancer. I may be nearing my own end, but my work is far from over. I spend my year training for a fund raising bicycle ride for cancer research. I have strong friendships with former students who need my help. As Frost observed, "I have miles to go before my sleep and promises to keep."

Do today's campers still hear the "good words" after breakfast? Do they still stand up and sit down when they sing "Four Miles Up"? I don't know. Chris and Brenda have invited me back this summer to see the camp in its daily operation. I'm seriously thinking of going, if only to see if they still hear those words? When they do, I will know that the camp that shaped me so many years ago still lives, and a new generation of boys thrives.

