

THE FIRECIRCLE

Letters & Reflections from BYM Camps



Opening the Way

BY BRIAN MASSEY, PROGRAM MANAGER, BYM CAMPS

At our camps – Catoctin, Opequon, Shiloh, and Teen Adventure – we talk often about “Camp Magic”. An ineffable thing that seems to float in the air, an indescribable phenomenon that can permeate otherwise mundane spaces, “Camp Magic” makes camp feel, well, magical. Campers describe feeling happier and more free at camp than anywhere else in their lives. Parents marvel at their campers coming home happy to help with the dishes and to sing songs while doing it. Campers and staff alike find that the friendships they make at camp are deeper and more genuine than those they make elsewhere. Joy and laughter are everywhere, and memories last the whole year, if not a whole lifetime.

“Camp Magic” isn’t magical, of course. It doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. No, the magic at camp is created and built, over many hours and days and weeks and even years, by talented and dedicated staff, by wise and visionary Directors. It is built in staff meetings and workshops, it is created through logic models and interview questions and capital campaigns, it is cultivated through modeling and teaching and planning, its seeds lie in constant reflection and refinement and improvement. The magic is the work, imbued with love and joy and purpose.

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Courage, My Friend

BY DYRESHA HARRIS, DIRECTOR, CATOCTIN

What do you do when it rains on your parade? Camp provides us many opportunities to joyfully explore this question. One in particular involved the end of one of our sessions.

When campers go home, we have often sent them off by having folks line the walkway to the fire-circle and wave or high-fiving each person goodbye as they pass through this living tunnel. But this particular send-off day a last minute rain storm had come upon us. In fact, as climate change impacts the world around us, this summer had the soggiest drop-off and pick-up days anyone could remember. Living in and with the woods, rivers, and creeks, we were getting a front row seat and gaining a new appreciation for these variations in the natural world.

In the past, we might have tried to recreate the goodbye tunnel experience indoors through our dining hall, but this summer we'd also been contending with a global pandemic. To keep campers healthy and safe while continuing to benefit from our family style dining and gathering, we'd taken to using an outdoor tent for meals and rainy day gatherings. And there wasn't much room under the "food court pavilion" to do the farewell line.

So as we prepared for our send off a group of staff gathered quickly. We had to come up with something and fast. It had been a hard year for many of our campers and families, so we knew that more than ever we had to make sure campers still got sent off with love. How could we help them close their camp experience, feeling seen, appreciated, and carried forward back into their daily lives? "What about singing Courage, My Friend!?" someone suggested.

Courage, My Friend is a South African protest song that I introduced to Catoctin last year after learning it at a non-violent protest against an oil refinery causing cancer in my home town of West Philadelphia. The lyrics are: "Courage, My Friend. You do not walk alone. We will walk with you and sing your spirit home." It is written so that a person's name can also be substituted for "My Friend". So: "Courage, Jamal or Sara or Sung Li. You do not walk alone..."

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SUMMER 2023 DATES

CATOCTIN, OPEQUON, & SHILOH

SESSION ONE: JULY 1 - JULY 15

- (KINDLING A: JULY 1 - JULY 8)

SESSION TWO: JULY 16 - JULY 29

SESSION THREE: JULY 30 - AUGUST 13

- (KINDLING B: JULY 30 - AUGUST 6)

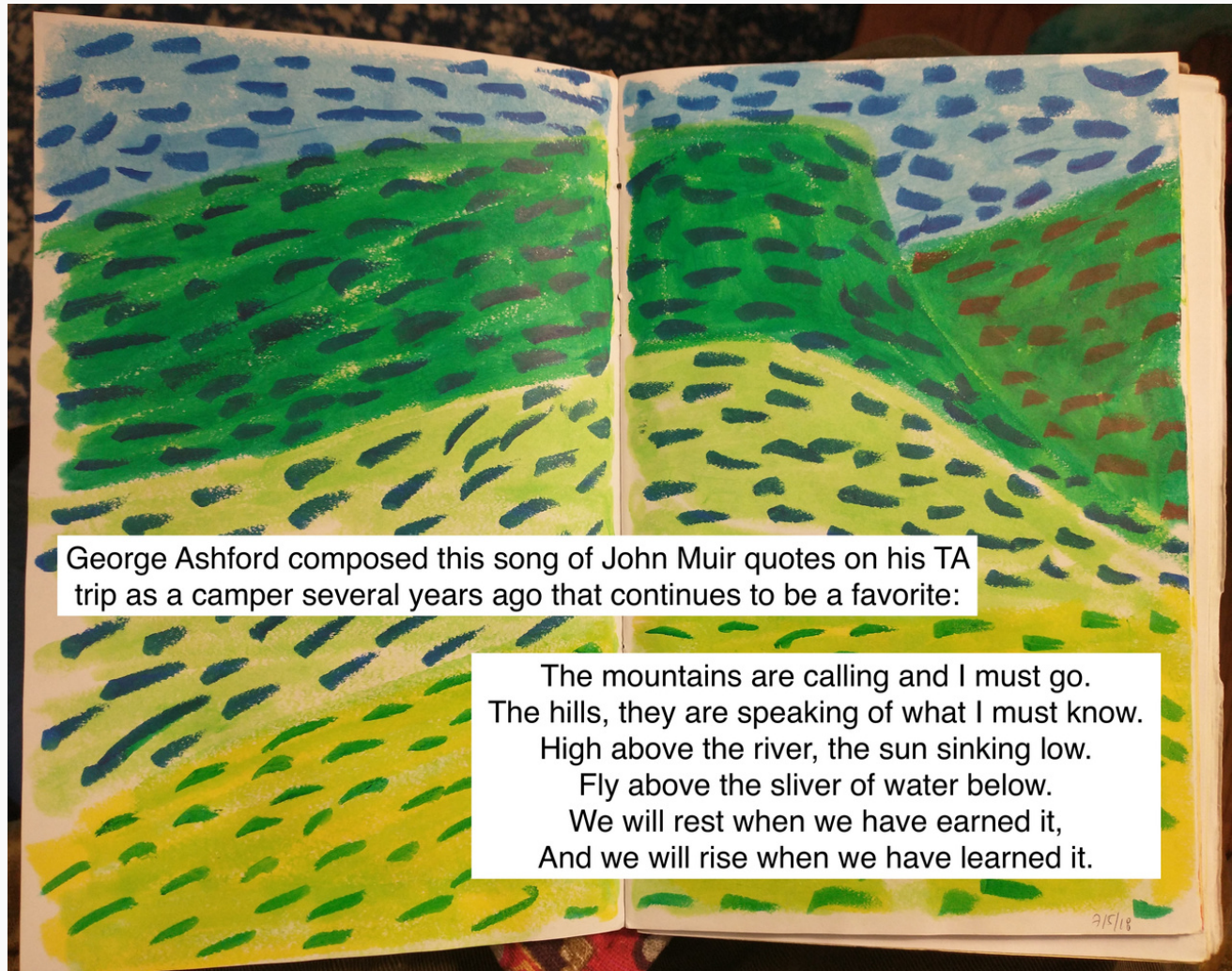
TEEN ADVENTURE

TAP, TALT, & Tafa: JULY 1 - JULY 23



Timeless Images from Teen Adventure, with some Specific Memories Sprinkled In

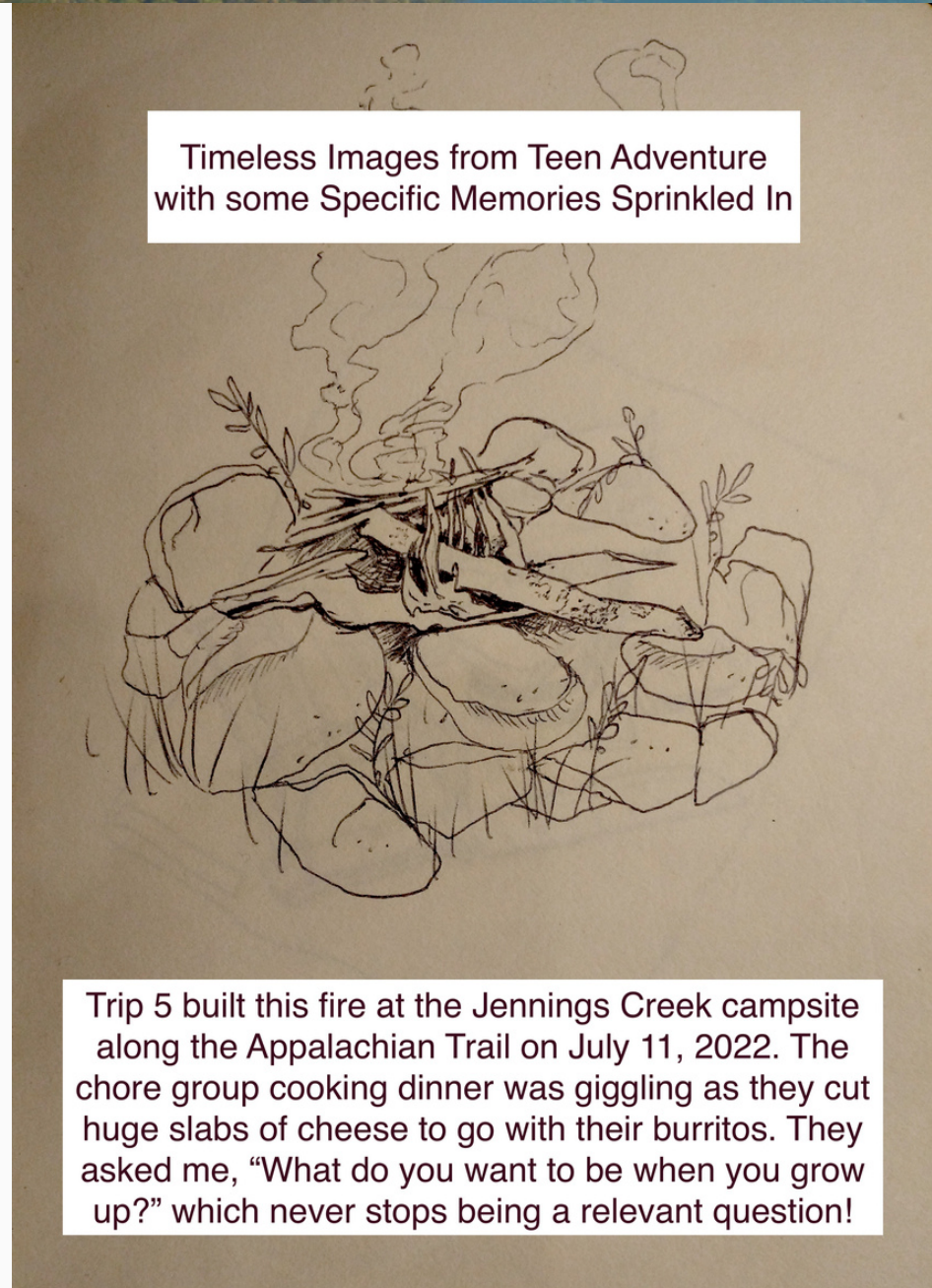
BY ROSIE ECK, DIRECTOR, TEEN ADVENTURE



George Ashford composed this song of John Muir quotes on his TA trip as a camper several years ago that continues to be a favorite:

The mountains are calling and I must go.
The hills, they are speaking of what I must know.
High above the river, the sun sinking low.
Fly above the sliver of water below.
We will rest when we have earned it,
And we will rise when we have learned it.

7/11/22



Timeless Images from Teen Adventure
with some Specific Memories Sprinkled In

Trip 5 built this fire at the Jennings Creek campsite along the Appalachian Trail on July 11, 2022. The chore group cooking dinner was giggling as they cut huge slabs of cheese to go with their burritos. They asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" which never stops being a relevant question!

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Because Every Little Thing is Gonna be Alright

BY HOPE SWANK, DIRECTOR, SHILOH

As a camp director, I can safely say that one of my main jobs is to worry. Is the camper experiencing homesickness able to make some friends? Are we getting everybody to the bath house, back to their cabins and in bed early enough? Is the lifeguard rotation at the pond fair and reasonable for the counselors? I worry so others can do the important work of being at camp, laughing and growing with each other. (Luckily I get to do plenty of that too.)

Every summer, I need a little time to get back into the groove with managing my worries while running camp. This past summer, I felt particularly challenged when it came to weather on trail. Our counselors are well trained. Many are graduates of the Teen Adventure Program and Teen Adventure Leadership Training. They are also certified Wilderness First Responders or trained in Wilderness First Aid, professional lifeguards, and certified canoe instructors. Still, whenever trips were out and it started to rain or I heard a crack of thunder, I would start nervously watching the phone. Would everyone be ok?

During the final week of trips last summer, I was glued to my map, tracking every unit and the local weather reports at their location. It seemed like all of them would get caught in rainstorms. We teach the campers to waterproof their belongings and we double check that they all have synthetic clothes that will keep them warm even when wet. Still, getting dumped on while hiking or canoeing is uncomfortable at best and I was expecting that emergency phone to ring. It stayed quiet.

On the last day of the trip, it was pouring at camp. I left early to pick up the canoers and packed extra warm clothes in the truck. I don't know exactly what I expected to find, but I was greeted with soggy, smiling campers and counselors chewing on pita bread and telling me they had gotten "a little wet." They helped me load the canoes and then chuckled that the sun was finally coming out after they had gotten off the river.

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The Making of New Classics

BY JARED WOOD, DIRECTOR, OPEQUON

One of the most rewarding moments of being the Director of Opequon Quaker Camp is each session's Art Walk. This year we brought in incredible visiting artists whose workshops were mesmerizing. We saw Crankies, prints, zines, and all kinds of beautiful work. Watching and listening to the campers communicate their experience is humbling. It's humbling to hear young people define what they create, simultaneously in touch and liberated from their fear.

The workshop that made my hair stand on end was the song workshop at the end of the second session, led by Willow Benson, Max Thobourn, and Tymir Crawford. The performance gave me goosebumps, a set of original songs sure to become camp classics. They ranged from rowdy to rainy day blues. As a director, these moments of beauty, collaboration, and courage keep me coming back for more.



Healing the Land & Spirit

BY DAVID HUNTER, PROPERTY MANAGER, BYM CAMPS

The scope of the charcoal and iron industry on Catoctin Mountain is hard to imagine today. With axes and cross cut saws, laborers clear cut an acre of land every day to make enough charcoal to keep the Catoctin Furnace running. Each year the furnace required 11,500 cords of wood to make 18,000 bushels of charcoal to fuel the furnace and make 1000 tons of crude iron. Over 2500 acres of land was clear cut every 30 to 40 years, for more than a century.

Repeated clear cutting does a great deal of harm to the forest and the effects of repeated clear cutting are still visible in our forests. Repeated clear cutting radically reduces the number of species in the forest community and creates an even-aged forest, susceptible to disease and unable to grow and thrive over time.

Knowing about this period in Catoctin Mountain's history inspires me to redouble our efforts to be good stewards of the forest at the camps. Increasing diversity and resilience in our forests becomes as important as building a diverse and resilient community at our summer camps. Continuing to plant new native species, bring patches of light on to the forest floor and remove non-native, invasive species are all great ways to redress harmful practices of the past in the forests.

But the industry at Catoctin Furnace was not just fueled by environmental exploitation and devastation. It was also fueled by the exploitation of humans and the devastation of families, as the large majority of the workforce was enslaved people, along with a few free black people and indentured servants. Living conditions on the mountain were horrendous, nutrition was poor, and the average life expectancy was 43 years.

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Opening the Way (continued)

At our camps we use the phrase “Way Opens” in a similar way. We talk about a way or a path opening, about something working out, if we trust and allow ourselves to receive wisdom and spirit. There is, of course, a great deal of truth in this idea. But as we prepare for another summer of camp, as we move into the next century of camp, I worry that such a phrase conveys a passive view of our history, and obscures the very real human choices and human agency that have built this institution that we love. Because there is nothing passive about the history of the BYM Camping Program, nothing inevitable about its evolution from the 1920s to the 1960s to the 1990s to the 2020s. It has been made and built by wise and visionary Directors, by passionate staff, by dedicated committee members, by loving volunteers and parents.

Opening the Way into the next hundred years of BYM Camps will require hard choices and hard work, just like the last hundred did. It will require reorganizing and restructuring and rethinking. It will require smart investments and skillful facilitation. It will require visionary and forward-looking designs. It will require evolution and change. It will require real things, done by real people. It will be mundane, and it will not be inevitable.

But therein lies the magic, in the improbability of it all. In the fact that all of us – office staff and camp staff and alumni and committee members and volunteers and parents and campers – are needed. All of us are vital and important. All of our choices and actions matter.

I feel grateful for my wonderful colleagues in the BYM Office, for our incredible Directors, for our phenomenal camp staff, for our boisterous community of volunteers and alumni and supporters. Most of all, I feel grateful for our parents that continue to trust us with their young people, and for those young people who fill up our camps each summer with joy and inspiration.

It's a pretty great team, a community unmatched in my life. We've got everything we need to Open the Way, for 2023 and beyond. Let's make some magic. Let's get to work.



Courage, My Friend (continued)

It was perfect! With raindrops keeping time on the canvas above us we began to sing. Each person who was leaving stood up and the group took up their name in song. Campers beamed as the whole circle spoke their name in harmony, called them “Friend”, and assured them that they had this community journeying with them. It was so powerful that even when the sun returned and we had subsequent send-off days in our traditional style, we continued to include the song as a new tradition.

This moment spoke to me as an example of how we work to stay both nimble in a changing world and also rooted in our value of being there for each other in community. Over and over last summer, I watched staff and campers elegantly adjust to new realities with care and thoughtfulness. Sometimes that meant reimagining a graduation trip to address the new water patterns of the river. Other times, it meant making space for someone to change cabins as they discerned what worked for them in their gender identity, or inventing a new game to help sooth a fellow camper who has never gone without digital screens before, or setting up a tent village so that people in their COVID quarantine window could still be part of the community.

We recognize that our task in these shifting times is not to find the one perfect place to stand in times of tumult. Rather we work to build those core muscles that allow us to be flexible amidst the storm. And we learn how to lean on each other to keep our balance. Indeed, a lot is changing in the world. Some of those changes bring beautiful new opportunities and others significant new challenges. But what hasn’t changed at camp, what continues to deepen and evolve, is that we do not walk alone. And, that, friends, is something to take courage in.



Because Every Little Thing is Gonna be Alright (continued)

As I drove the boats back to camp, I felt relief until I remembered that Unit 4 was hiking back to camp. I decided to drop off the truck and take the van in their direction. I found them right as they got off the trail and onto Middle River road. They were shocked to see me and wanted to tell me all about their trip rather than complaining about the rain or the fact that they were wearing trash bags. I offered to drive them back to camp and they negated, wanting to finish the hike they had started as a group.

That night, as we had a raucous story and thank you circle around the campfire, I made fun of myself silently for how much I had worried. The campers and counselors had returned to camp more bonded than ever, and simultaneously exhausted yet energized. They told stories of heroic efforts and hilarious fails as they took care of each other on their adventures. They had certainly been uncomfortable and probably even done a fair amount of complaining. But it was clear they had had a blast and would not soon forget their experiences. I slept well that night, especially knowing that everyone was “home” safe and sound.



Timeless Images from Teen Adventure (continued)

This little peach tree at Common Ground gets less little every year.

This drawing from 2018 shows it propped up with a stilt. Now its trunk is strong enough to hold the weight of its leaves and fruits.



Three cheers and one million songs for the busdrivers!
I believe this is the bus we nicknamed Biggie,



but our busdrivers - deeply acquainted with their vehicles - could identify it for sure!

Healing the Land & Spirit (continued)

How to heal the injuries inflicted onto the land feels hard but clear. How to heal the injuries caused by exploitation of enslaved people and other workers seems more challenging. This year I have been a little adrift as to where to begin. Reflection and quiet prayer have opened to me a simple place to begin: gratitude. I have cultivated gratitude for all of the labor that has been given on the mountain. We can still travel across the bridges made of Catoclin iron and many of the tools forged from it are still serving a purpose. The battle of Yorktown was won with cannonballs forged at the Catoclin Furnace. Much of that labor was not given willingly, but we must acknowledge that without the many who labored and fought this country would not be what it is today.

Gratitude is only a place to begin the real work of healing, and we know that struggle is long and hard and complicated. The work of healing will be accomplished through deep listening, loving discussion and faithful action. Our camps offer a great place for this work to happen. Over the years we have learned to forge camp communities where we can strive and struggle together, accomplishing great things, while still leaving plenty of time for laughter, joy, and celebration. I feel profound hope knowing that our camps offer such rich possibilities for change and healing.

Among the many other things that I feel deep gratitude for are the people who recognized the potential in our camps and for those who continue to support them today. I am grateful for the staff, counselors, parents, and campers willing to engage in the often difficult and painful process of laboring together and building a blessed community each summer. Our camps provide a unique space in which we can begin to face these challenges. Together, we are creating places for spiritual growth and healing to happen.



For More Information about BYM Camps...

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Mission & Values: <https://bymcamps.org/about-bym-camps/>

Admissions & Registration: <https://bymcamps.org/admissions/>

Family Resource Center: <https://bymcamps.org/family-resource-center/>

Working at Camp: <https://bymcamps.org/work-at-bym-camps/>

Donate to the BYM Campership Fund: <https://secure.myvanco.com/L-Z23A/home>

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