

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Nancy VanDusen
Camp Hemome

I've forever held a fascination with religion: mankind's universal need for ritual and liaison. As a child, I'd watch as my teenage babysitter labored over her Catholic school home-work; illustrations in the textbook open on her lap beckoning feelings of wonder, envy.

What might it be like to learn about Jesus? Everyday?

Little did I know... I was soon to find out.

"Camp Hemome" (pronounced with all long vowels) conveys an experience I endured at the innocuous age of thirteen. I was young, yes, but details remain all too clear.



A middle-school friend I'll call Sara spent a week each summer at a Lutheran Bible camp and suggested I tag along. Six days in the mountains—swimming, hiking, horseback riding, burnt marshmallows and Hersey's chocolate smashed between graham cracker squares...

What's a bored, early-teen not to like?

"Okay," I told Sara. "I'll ask my mom."

My mother went along with the idea, wrote out a check for forty-five dollars, and several weeks later Sara and I found ourselves standing in Camp Hemome's massive, rustic dining hall with its log-beamed ceiling, rounded-stone fireplace, and row after row of elongated, shellacked wooden benches and tables.

Venturing outside, joining the check-in line, we could hear a disgruntled father's rants. "This is wrong!" he insisted. "Our children live in different neighborhoods and go to different schools! They only see one another on Sundays. They came here to be with their church friends, for... for goodness sake!"

Two male youth counselors, clad in khaki shorts and light-blue Camp Hemome polo shirts, calmly and politely explained to this unhappy father that campers from the same church were purposely assigned to different cabins so they could become acquainted with "new people" and make "new friends."

Unfortunately for everyone involved, after much discussion, the camp counselors won and twenty-five minutes later Sara (assigned to Cabin 2) chatted happily with campers she'd known from previous summers, while yours truly (assigned to Cabin 7) trudged up a semi-steep winding trail. Shaded by towering pines, inhaling fresh Christmas-tree scent, I passed two community shower/bathrooms and four cabins before reaching the splintery structure in which I was to spend the next six nights. I shoved my stuff on a top bunk while Counselor Teri, friendly but seemingly rushed, introduced herself and handed me a close proximity to the following daily schedule:

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6:45 A.M. – 7:45 A.M.	Morning Worship Services (Optional)
7:55 A.M. – 8:30 A.M.	Breakfast
9:00 A.M. – 10:30 A.M.	Bible Study
10:45 A.M. – 11:45 A.M.	Meditation and Prayer
11:55 A.M. – 12:30 P.M.	Lunch
1:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.	Scheduled Recreational Activities
4:30 P.M. – 5:30 P.M.	Afternoon Worship Service
5:55 P.M. – 6:30 P.M.	Dinner
7:00 P.M. – 8:00 P.M.	Campfire Activities
8:30 P.M. – 9:15 P.M.	Cabin Group Discussion
9:30 P.M.	Lights Out

That first night—due to the thin mountain air, or nerves, or whatever—my body decided to menstruate. Early. An inconvenience that at age thirteen I'd dealt with for barely a year, and *never* on a top bunk with community bathrooms a healthy-hiking distance away.

So far Camp Hemome left much to be desired.

Day two dawned and after a hearty breakfast of crispy bacon, scrambled eggs and toast—served up with Christian fellowship and corny song: "Larry, Larry, strong and able take your elbows off the table..."—campers were enthusiastically, randomly, assigned to Bible study groups.

And from this moment on we were immunized, indoctrinized and guilterized.

We read and discussed stories from our Bibles; memorized meaningful verses; interpreted popular passages; kept spiritual journals; listened to testimonials; meditated and prayed...

And prayed... and prayed some more.

Clustered in groups surrounded by rocky trails, towering pines, and scampering critters, Camp Hemome counselors—not yet adults themselves—molded young, primed, guaranteed-of-His-love minds. (Reflecting back, I suspect my tender age, limited church background, and inherent infatuation with all that was ethereal made me an easy target.) Wide-open to seduction and surrender, my attention became acutely focused on becoming worthy—that would be believing, remaining prayerful, and unswervingly in-sync with the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Developing friendships, socializing, enjoying scheduled recreational activities proved secondary. Naturally, I went through the motions but inwardly I was a loner. How was it possible that up to this point I'd lead such a shameless, Jesus-void life? Unfortunately, this guilt-ridden, pain-filled tunnel-vision dragged on for six days and five nights. It wasn't until the grand finale, Camp Hemome's closing ceremonies, that my sleeping-spirit broke free and emerged from its previously-precarious pious cocoon.

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Directly above the cabins sat a pavilion-like circle large enough to hold the entire camp population. An eerie stillness surrounded the popping heat, burning scent and reddish-orange tongues of its central blaze. Sunburned and tired, anticipating the following day's departure (and the bathtubs and box springs of home) one hundred and twenty, give or take a few, adolescent Christian campers sat in a circle on bleacher-tiered, log-split benches.

Waiting.

Waiting for an amplified female voice—destined to invade our smoke-filled, crackling airwaves—to make the following unsettling announcement: "Campers, I need your attention. Thank you. I have here... a letter. A letter from a teenager in hell."

Really? Which Commandment did he or she break? Thou shall not kill? I was literally on the edge of my log-split bench.

As it turned out the ill-fated teenager, putting pen to paper in the fiery depths of hell, had slayed nary a soul. No, her sin proved less severe. She'd daydreamed in church, allowed her mind to wander during prayer. She'd flirted with a boy in Sunday School, even passed him a note. Neglected to read her Bible...

And so on, and so forth.

For one fleeting moment, I cared what my fellow campers were thinking. And then, suddenly, my own inner voice emerged. *Teenagers did not either go to hell for doing those things, I silently asserted. This isn't God... it's brainwashing!*

And with that—that quick—my rescued thirteen-year-old psyche bid our silenced camp circle farewell. Fantasizing escape. Which came the following morning in the crowded backseat of Sara's parents' station wagon, snaking down the rocky tree-covered mountain, towards a lower, more amiable terrain. My house and my family room, with my mom in her favorite chair. Smiling. Reading. Happy to have me home.

Hallelujah and Amen.