

I know where the fountain of eternal youth lies. And it's not in St. Augustine, Florida or that magical forest in Tuck Everlasting. It's in Ottsville, Pennsylvania on Geigel Hill Road. A land of canvas and blacktop. Grassy hills and gravel. A place so filled with energy, you feel younger the moment you enter. The fountain of youth lives at Camp Onas.

I'm a camp kid. A product of summers spent in the woods of Pennsylvania. Of bonfires and tent cleanups and swim tests and camp songs and brief but passionate friendships. A sweaty season of sweetness nestled within the long year.

I counted down the days till I could be a Camp Onas resident and my first year as a camper was 2005. That was the same year my mother, brother and I moved to New Jersey from Brooklyn. My year of change. I was 8 years old and had just started discovering social anxiety. But camp was a new setting—unknown possibilities and an opportunity to rewrite myself. But more than that, it was a rite of passage.

I've spoken with people who say they did not enjoy camp, they missed their friends from home or their parents. They were well-liked in school and camp made them feel isolated. But I didn't understand that—camp was where I thrived. I had friends. Deep and trustworthy friends. In school, I had issues speaking up. Making conversation with the other kids was hard and put me in a near constant state of fear. But at camp? Something about the open bunks and open fields, it made me brave.

To get to Camp Onas was a bit of a ritual in itself. Driving from Princeton, we'd pass through this town on the New Jersey/Pennsylvania border called Frenchtown. Every year, we'd stop into the town and get pizza before dropping me off at camp. My final meal in society for a month. Then we'd pack back into the car and set off into the middle of nowhere. We'd whip our way through winding roads lined by bright green trees and eventually, we'd reach a sign. A sign so small you may miss it. A sign gleaming with the bright light of the summer to come. Unassuming and plain, it reads "Camp Onas" but for campers and counselors, the sign truly reads "home."

At Camp, we sang all day long. At breakfast, lunch and dinner, we sang while waiting for everyone to get their food, we sang around the campfire, we sang as we were leaving camp, we sang when we entered camp. We sang out "boom-chikka-boom" and "lemon tree" and "bumblebee tuna." We even sung the theme song to the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. It was a camp deeply rooted in its Pennsylvania pride, after all. We sang together for the blue and the gold, our camp colors. During the evening bonfire on the night before the last day of camp, Peter, Paul and Mary's "If I had a hammer" could be heard from the woods of Camp Onas. Younger campers feeling the end coming, already excited for what next summer will bring. Older campers weeping at the end of their final year, and in turn, the end of their youth. The song would bring us together one last time. Hammering out the summer with a soft bang.

Since we were a Quaker camp, we sang songs about George Fox, the religion's founder, and "the light." I wasn't raised a Quaker so, in my head, I always imagined George Fox as a real fox man à la *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. There's a verse in the George Fox song that goes:

*"Will you swear on the Bible?*

*I will not, said he, For the truth is as holy as the Book to me.*

*If we give you a pistol, will you fight for the Lord?*

*But you can't kill the devil with a gun or a sword."*

I feel as though this verse perfectly encapsulates what it was like to go to a Quaker camp. They did not attempt to indoctrinate kids or force anyone into prayer but merely supported the goodness and kindness in every single person through song. Words were more effective than violence or aggression and any issue could be solved through discussion.

Along with the songs, we also had weekly Meetings for Worship, the Quaker tradition of silent meditation. In these meetings, everyone at the camp sits together silently and is encouraged to listen inward. If someone is compelled to do so, they can stand up and speak. I never said anything during my 11 years at camp but I always appreciated these moments of stillness. Sometimes they'd be held in the old barn, sometimes in the "upper fields" or behind the dining hall. I would pluck out the grass around me, dissecting the blades and reflect on my time at camp so far. These meetings gave me time to process my words and actions, ruminate over my crush. And above all, they allowed me the passage to move forward a slightly more meditative person. One who could sit and silence and look inward towards my own light, searching for her future.

Above all, Quaker camp was about the people. It was about learning to connect with anyone and discovering the spark of humankind, the light within us all. I met a lot of amazing people at camp, each destined to their own path but connected through this camp in the woods. Fun fact: Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys went to Camp Onas in the 70s! RIP legend. I'll never forget the connections I made at camp because they shaped me in irreversible ways. It's there I learned that I loved to make people laugh, to change their mood for the better. Identities were exchanged and shifted. We shed parts of ourselves and left them behind in the hills of Pennsylvania, waiting for one day to be picked up by a younger version of ourselves.

Camp's schedule is entirely reliant on the "bell system." Perched on the hill near the dining hall, next to the swimming pool and blacktop, proudly stands the Camp Onas bell. In my memory, the bell is ancient, rusted and all-knowing. The Quaker symbol of time. But it was probably just a normal bell. When rung three times, everyone at camp was cued to assume the next item in the daily schedule. The bell eclipsed the sun and moon and time became unimportant. When I woke up in my bunk in the morning, it wasn't 7:30 am, it was the first bell of the day. Daily free time wasn't two hours, it existed between two planes of existence designated by two bells. Time was a bell, sounding through acres of land. The bell was freedom from structure, despite being structure itself.

At camp, we had one pig and two donkeys. The pig's name was Puddy, he was a dark and rotund potbelly pig. I loved him deeply but whenever the campers got too close to him, he would snort angrily, so I would watch him from afar. There was lore surrounding Puddy. People would

talk about him trampling campers, biting them. His aura was unmatched but I knew deep down, he contained a sweetness that just could not be reached by sticky, sweaty children. The donkeys were named Paco and Pepita. I never really paid any attention to them as my love was directed elsewhere but sometimes, in the middle of the day, you'd hear a high pitched bray and just know the donkeys were being fed.

Camp allowed me to explore my inner gatherer. Something all women have inside of them. Four periods of activities a day meant counselors had to get creative. An activity I always enjoyed was berry picking. Camp Onas was teeming with wild berry bushes and during certain points in the summer, the berries were extra ripe and juicy. These were times of great abundance. During free time my bunkmates and I would traverse the camp in search of flowers and rocks and leaves and sticks and anything beautiful with which we could adorn our bunk. We'd travel great lengths and hold our findings in the crooks of our clothes or our pockets. We'd make flower crowns and wear them at dinner. We'd gather materials for leprechaun houses. And the camp would give to us what we needed, restoring itself throughout the night.

It was technically "against the rules" to write on a bunk but we all knew that was a rule that could be ignored. It was your duty as a camper to carve your name in the storied wood of your bunk. To make the camp remember you before you aged out. To have it speak your name. Kids got clever with it, too. They'd write their name in any nook or cranny they could find. As long as one day, they could look back on it and remember who they once were. I wrote mine on a semi-hidden rafter above my top bunk. I can still picture the bright blue Sharpie signature reading "Bonnie was here" with a 2005 underneath where the two '00's were drawn like pigs.

Years later as a counselor, I remember checking the youngest girl bunk and feeling deep nostalgia at seeing my younger self's signature. Who knows if it still exists now. That was 20 years ago, after all. But I know camp still exists and every year a new batch of campers have the same summer of magic that I had when I was their age, drinking from the fountain of eternal youth until their stomachs are filled. And when I think about the laughter and songs they'll share, the friends they'll make and forget, the scrapes they'll collect through reckless abandon, I feel a deep comfort in the great cycle of time with its canvas bunks and timeless days.