

Esprit du Nord – April 18, 2009

Presentation by David L. Palmer

Thank you to everyone who is here tonight. I am honored, humbled and deeply touched by your attendance.

I have had tremendous experiences in camping. I have tried a few other occupations, but I have always been drawn back to camping. Back to the wilderness. Back to the woods. For me, and I am sure for many people, there are great mysteries in life. And when one goes to the woods, sometimes, solutions to those great mysteries can be discovered. But not always.

My first experience with camping was at Menogyn. My first trip was in 1969. But it was on my second trip, in 1970 that mysteries of the universe really opened up for me.

Our group was traveling east from Menogyn through Clearwater, West Pike, East Pike, the Fowell Lakes, then back west through Moose and Mountain Lakes. On Mountain Lake we encountered strong winds, and ran out of daylight. So we made camp on a shelf of rock on the Canadian shore. (Which was legal to do in those days). We had dinner and then sat around the campfire looking south over the far shore of Mountain Lake. At some point Doug Wallace drifted away from the fire and then exclaimed with anguish and surprise, look over there. Pointing he gestured toward six lights in the sky. The lights hovered above the horizon in a perfect symmetrical pattern. Two by two by two. We were amazed by the site, and as the lights continued to hover we developed several theories as to what may have caused this phenomenon. At long last we all decided that we were seeing the reflection of the lights from the street lamps in beautiful downtown Grand Marais. We were all very comfortable with that conclusion. Until the lights “took off” in separate directions. Two lights went east, two lights went west, and two lights went north directly over our heads.

There are great mysteries in life. Great mysteries in the universe.

There have often been great mysteries in how to run a camp. Camps always seem to run long on ideas, and short on resources. And the business of leading a camp as an entrepreneur was fun. But I never could have done it alone. Nor did I. I have always been blessed by the support of a terrific staff both at camp and in the administration. I always have felt the best solutions to any problem can be resolved when I worked with the staff that were on the front line, in the trenches. As a team we would examine a problem, and work out the solution using the skills, wisdom, and expertise of those folks who serve the camps so well. These folks in the front office are the glue that holds the camp together. Without the close the working relationship we enjoyed, surely running the camp would have been much more difficult. I would like to acknowledge the terrific administrative folks that have worked with me over these many terrific years.

Menogyn – Nancy Wielder

And at Camp du Nord –

- Shirley Kopp
- Laura Swain
- Linda Ramacier
- Heidi Freisinger

- Andrea Lewis
- Jane Peterson
- Juanita Lagos-Benson
- Jennifer Weinzirl
- Tim Gravelle
- Melody Hanks - Melody's ability to pre-think the needs of the Board and the camp is exemplary.

Another great mystery for me is the role of biting black flies in the grand scheme of things. I mean, really, what is the purpose of these insidious little blood suckers. When I have the opportunity, I am going to ask God, "What's up with the black flies?"

Every Saturday afternoon, every week of the summer, I would be at the entrance to the Pine Pointe Road to greet campers who arrived between five and seven. Last summer my cohort was Dan Goselin. We did battle with flies the likes of which I had never seen before. In all my years of working in the woods, last summer was the worst for bugs. Dan and I would hide out in the camp Suburban and when we saw a car coming we would jump out of the car, run to the vehicle to be greeted, dance around swatting at black flies and assure the arriving campers that they were going to have a fine time at du Nord.

One particular weekend, Dan ran around with a cedar bough swatting at flies, cursing, and he quit a dozen times that afternoon. But I wouldn't accept his resignation, and I wouldn't give him the keys to the suburban either.

The flies kept getting worse. After greeting one surprised family who took in our disheveled looks and blood smeared arms and faces, I bolted over to my backpack and dug out the Deet. I was frantic. I liberally splashed Deet over my hands, arms, legs, and face. That was the mistake. Deet on the lips. My lips went numb almost immediately. From then on I would greet each car with, "becumb ta dumorb. Oooh bill av a bumberfull bime." Dan resigned again.

That same evening we opened the Trading Post for the Pop and Pizza party. Although I could speak a little better, my lips still didn't work quite right. Trying to eat pizza was roughly the same experience of trying to eat or drink after going to the dentist and having Novocain. I am sure by this time, campers were really wondering what their week ahead at du Nord looked like!

Speaking of sharing great times with staff... I want to acknowledge the wonderful folks who have served on the summer staff over the years. I especially want to thank those who are here tonight, Joe, Andy, Dan, Nick Anderson "store boy", and Beka.

And from the Menogyn years, Mark Heiden, Nick Schneider, Jeremy and Ruth, Cheri and Chauncey. Also, our favorite volunteer and pseudo staff, our medical director during those years, Malcolm Clark.

I have worked with some of the best summer staff one could hope to work with.

- The best staff have always been those that do what is best for the campers and lose themselves in the shadow of the camper's success.
- Harry Maghakian, Clearwater Forest Chair and mentor, "the best leadership is felt, not heard."

For those of you who have served as leaders for summer camp staff, you know that at times one can hire some real dramatic staff members. And sometimes, staff can over react.

One particular day, Andy and I were working on some project at Northland Village. The wind was very strong. Screaming out of the southwest. Both sailboats were out on the lake with staff as crew. But the wind was too much for one of the boats. This particular sailboat was skittering sideways toward Siam Point. From as short distance, we watched as one of our summer staff team members, let's call him "Sunshine" scooted to the rescue boat, jumped in and sought to depart to perform a rescue. He throttled up the motor. And it was then apparent that several steps had been missed by "Sunshine" in his exuberance to leave the dock. First, he neglected to lower the motor prop all the way into the water. Second, he forgot to untie the front mooring line. Gunning the engine, he thoroughly wet everyone near the boat and succeeded in carving a unique arch in the water as the spun on the front mooring line. Andy and I began our sprint to help, but by the time of our arrival all difficulties were overcome, and the rescue boat departed. By the time "Sunshine" had arrived at the sailboat it had capsized and all crew were overboard. However, by then they were all in shallow water and could stand and hold on to the boat. Every thing turned out fine.

When our rescuer returned to the rescue boat dock at Northland Village I approached said staff member and suggested that we debrief his emergency response technique. His response was, of course, "why, did I do something wrong?"

Of course at times, as the Camp Director, one stands alone in the leadership role. Another great mystery in life... where do some of these people come from? Or what were they thinking?

While I was the Director at Menogyn, I hired a guy from Warren Mitchell College in North Carolina. Let's call him "Rob". Rob was an okay guy. A bit eccentric. But okay. Rob struggled to thoroughly understand what it meant to be a wilderness guide. He also struggled with how things were run at a camp. At one of our staff meetings Rob spoke up and asked the group of staff, "Let's talk about what type of government we have here". Several of the staff were a bit startled. A few snickered. The Program Director, Mike Heiden, tried to keep from laughing out loud. I answered Rob by saying, "Well, Rob, I can tell you what form of government we have here. It's called a dictatorship. And I'm the dictator. I may be a benevolent dictator, but still the same, I am in charge." Rob went home to North Carolina about one week later.

Other folks come to mind that challenge one to think of what were they thinking? Or, where do these people come from?

Toward the end of the summer of 2006, I was informed by some of the campers that they suspected that the folks staying in Thor's Lodge had a dog with them. Of course, this is an infraction of the camp policies. I went to investigate. My mental preparation was to stay calm. Gently explain the reasons no dogs are allowed (i.e. allergies of folks who may come to camp after them, etc). I knocked on the door of Thor's and was greeted by a friendly fellow. I began to explain the purpose of my visit when a small white dog came running out of one of the back bedrooms. The dog was barking all the way. It hesitated at the kitchen entrance for two nano-seconds, then ran up and bit me on the knee. Drew blood. Wrecked my jeans. And the friendly fellow asked, "Is everything okay?" It took me two minutes to explain the rules of the camp, "get the dog out of here by the time I come back in ten minutes", and "no, I don't care if the boarding kennel bill in Ely was not what you had planned on!" The dog was off the site within the ten minutes, as "requested."

I've always loved the work weekends at camp. Du Nord is blessed with a cadre of dedicated volunteers, and every work weekend has been fun and rewarding. Even if Al drove the truck off the road, or Bill blew every fuse in the shower house, or Barry dropped a radio down the outhouse hole.

Volunteers have always been a key success to the camp. Volunteers actively engaged in the overall vision, policies and financial integrity of the camp insure the camp will be successful. At du Nord we have a fantastic support group of volunteers. I want to especially acknowledge Ben Pawlak who serves diligently as the coordinator and volunteer recruiter for the wood cutting weekends. I also wish to acknowledge Tim Nelson for all of his dedicated work in recruiting and organizing the volunteers for the work weekends held over Memorial Day weekend and the middle weekend in September. Volunteers at du Nord are the backbone of the camp. And so I wish to acknowledge every person who at some time has volunteered their time in service to du Nord.

Because of the volunteers at du Nord, and great leadership from folks such as Doug Nelson, we have had a blast with the Capital Campaign and because of the success of that campaign, a truly great opportunity to rearrange the site at du Nord and build a lot of cool buildings. It really has been a building decade at du Nord.

Speaking of construction, I have always thought that the folks who work on the maintenance staff at a camp have the best job in the YMCA. Special shout out to "da boys up north" who work endless hours keeping the camp looking good and running good.

- Scott Olson
- Barry Bissonett
- Andy Gibbons

Throughout my YMCA years I have worked with great colleagues such as Tom Brinsko and Tom Kranz. Thanks guys for your ongoing support and insight.

The mysteries of nature have always been a particular interest to me. It seems that at almost every job I have had there has been some animal that adopts me.

As the Director of the Appalachia Service Project, I was visited by a praying mantas that would perch on my desk lamp and keep watch on everything I would do during the day. I could gaze up at the Mantas and see clear into its eyes. Mysteries of the universe lay on the retina of those eyes. In some ways the visiting insect was unnerving, but in many ways, calming. Assuring. Even, encouraging.

As the Director at Menogyn I would go up to camp early in the spring to participate in work weekends, and to get the camp ready for summer. One morning I was up early and walked down to the boat house. There was a lot of noise coming from the vicinity of the shore line near the boat house. I observed a mink actively fishing. It caught quite a large fish, and running a long the boardwalk headed directly toward me. When the mink got within three feet of me, it stopped, looked up and seemed to ask, "What are you doing here?" The mink dashed between my legs jumped back into the swamp and made its way to its home to feed the family.

When I was the Director at YMCA Camp Jones Gulch in San Francisco I would have a regular visitor in the form of the Raven. One particular Raven would follow me around camp, harassing me with its mimicking bird calls. When I had lunch outside the dining hall the Raven would be there, talking, jabbering and giving advice on how the camp should be run.

On another occasion at Jones gulch, I was dealing with a particularly difficult situation and consulting by phone with the Vice President of Human Resources. It was about 7:30 p.m. I was a bit stressed out. As I was talking with Andy on the phone I heard a noise at the window. I spun around in my chair and found a Mule Deer, a buck with a full antler, staring in at me. Calming and encouraging.

At du Nord I am constantly visited by the Ravens. I sometimes wonder if they followed me here from San Francisco. Each morning upon leaving the Directors Cabin, Ravens scream their "good morning." Or is it that they are wondering where the dead mice from the mornings trap line are? Every night I set traps for the mice. And every morning I clean out the traps by throwing the dead mice up on the roof of the cabin. And every morning the Ravens swoop in sometime after I am gone, and clean up the dead mice. But here too, the Ravens are my friends. Offering words of blessing and encouragement from the tree tops.

The mysteries of even getting these jobs have always been one of capturing the serendipitous moment. Or perhaps one could say it was yielding to a higher power.

I have never had a career plan. I have always responded to the serendipitous moment. It has been, and still is, a wonderful journey. As an example of the serendipitous moment, my being hire at Menogyn was most interesting. I was doing informational interviewing to try and determine what my next job would be. One friend I was visiting with asked if I had ever considered working for the YMCA. I said that I hadn't and he suggested that I talk with his friend who knew a lot about the Y. I made the appointment. Showed up in a timely manner and, much to my surprise, was ushered into the office of the President of the Y, Jim Gilbert. After twenty minutes of discussion, Jim asked me if I would ever consider getting back into camping. Jim said, "Well, Menogyn is looking for a camp director. Would you be interested in that?" I said, "I would consider it." He said, well we're accepting applications until 5:30. It's now 5:20. I pulled out my application. And through grace, I was hired as the Executive Director for Menogyn for nine years.

In much the same serendipitous way, I became the director for du Nord. I was working for the Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota. An okay job. But not very challenging, nor very fulfilling. One evening I was taking a short cut to the parking lot, using the freight elevator. When I got to the bottom floor, Kristen Iverson-Poppelton was waiting for the elevator. Kristen's family had been long time campers at du Nord, and her husband Matt was working for Widjiwagan as the Program Director. She informed me of the opening at du Nord and the next day gave my card to John Duntley who was then the Vice President for camping in the St. Paul Association. I responded to John's return call, and shortly thereafter I was blessed to become the Executive Director for du Nord.

I learned the values of a simple life at an early age. My childhood family was blessed with a lake cabin to visit, my grandparent's farm, or what was left of it, provided a place to retreat to every weekend. Or our family would go car camping up the north shore of Lake Superior, or in northwestern Wisconsin. My memory is filled with wonderful long walks with the family. My brother Jeff and I remember the wet socks bagging around mom's ankles on a hike at Pattison State Park, or splitting logs with Dad at the end of the Gunflint trail, or watching the waves roll in on the beach at Temperance River State Park.

A highlight of the weekends at the family cabin was our walk down to Oscar's farm. Oscars was a simple farm, from the old days when a small farm could sustain a family. Simple walks, pleasant talks; time away for time together.

I've always been a romantic wreck on the highway of life relishing the people and the emotions around a moment shared, a sunset, a ring of friend's faces around a campfire beaming up telling stories. When I breathe life into the memories of those many campfires, and fan the flames of moments shared, I am reminded of the importance of some basic theological truths.

- Have fun with and celebrate this life given to us as a gift,
- Take care of each other, take care of yourself, and take care of the poor.
- Take care of this earth

I have had a blast working at camp. Challenges, hard work, rewarding friendships. Who could ask for more?

- At du Nord I have enjoyed the trusted friendship and support of Amy Schneider who provides exemplary leadership for staff, gregarious camaraderie with campers and unwavering support for decisions that are made on behalf of the camp.
- Through it all I have had a great friend and colleague in my brother Jeff.
- I have enjoyed the company and entertainment value of two great adventurers and fun spirited vagabonds, my sons Sam and Jon.
- And I have been so lucky and blessed to share this journey with Barb who has made everything so much better. Life is so much better with Barb. Life is light when Barb is around.

I love the concept of the simple life. Many of life's mysteries can be unlocked by going to the woods, slowing things down. Going to the woods allows folks to recalibrate ones time so that relationships are the important element in life.

When you return to the woods, or any time you are on a walk about, remove the ear buds from your ears, take off the headphones, turn off the cell phone, and

Take time to listen to the song that only Mother Earth can sing.

Thank you all so very, very much.