2022 Camp Article

The Camp article is later than usual this year. Maybe it comes at a good time even though summer 2022 is a distant memory. It comes at a time when we begin to look toward the coming summer, when we start getting excited all over again about our summer camping week(s). Truth be told, this was the most difficult article to write about Camp for me personally. It was the most emotionally and spiritually challenging summer I’ve experienced at Camp thus far, for lots of different reasons, and so writing the article was challenging in its own way. Writing is re-visiting, after a fashion, so along with re-visiting the emotional and spiritual challenges, it also enables us to re-see things. Some might call it perspective. Others might call it glossing over. I think re-visiting through writing allows a clarity of vision in our hearts in which God’s many blessings stand out all the more clearly to us. Let’s re-visit and re-see Camp 2022 together...

Sometimes I feel like the articles about Camp become simply a high light reel rather than something that gives the complete picture of Camp. The articles, to me anyway, always fall short of giving you all the God-given goodness experienced at Camp. Those God-given good things about Camp take time to express and so often there isn’t enough room in an article to express all of them. However, I’ll do my best by giving you a glimpse of things I see right now that were Camp 2022.

So, let’s not listen to Julie Andrews’ wise counsel when she sings as Faulein Maria in The Sound of Music, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start…” Let’s do the opposite. “Let’s start at the very end, a very good place to start…”

Departure from Camp is awful! It’s awful because by Saturday everyone knows just how good they have it at Camp...and then they have to leave. It’s good at Camp because we’re together with each other. It’s good because we’re all singing together. It’s good because we all celebrate each other’s successes together. It’s good because God is good and we spend a lot of time (more than we’re used to maybe) cultivating a relationship with Him, trying to get and stay close to Him. He responds, touches our hearts, inspires us, transforms and transfigures us. Leaving Camp is awful because we’re leaving all that and simply because we will no longer be together, with each other. We won’t have some of these things again until Camp happens next year. So, campers cry, they want to linger and not leave from the Pavilion. They’ve had it good, and they know it. We’ve had it good, and we know it.

One of those good things is the program on Friday Night. Friday Night always recaps the week. An end of the week slideshow takes place in the Pavilion. There’s usually a snack to go along with the “movie”. Campers sit with their cabins and all eagerly watch hoping to see themselves, their cabins and special highlights of the week’s activities. We ALL want to see ourselves “captured” on the “Silver Screen”. But two parts of the slideshow are real crowd-pleasers and my personal favorite parts of the week’s recap.

The first crowd-pleaser is the cabin pictures taken on Friday right after Liturgy. I love seeing our counselors with their campers in those cabin pics! Everyone is dressed up. They look great! They’ve had a great week (which still isn’t done)! They’re all proud...and they should be! The light of the Divine Liturgy is still shining in them and on them! That’s why I wait for this particular moment of the slideshow. I wish that moment could last forever. It’s beautiful. To me it’s perfect! It’s that moment when we all see each other through the light of the Liturgy. I think we see each other as close to the way God sees us as we can.
But my other favorite part comes right after those cabin pictures. It’s the pictures of our Seniors, the campers who are graduating. This is the way the Camp has done it for a long time now. Our Tech Crew fishes through lots of old digital pictures (that’s a big understatement) to find pictures of our Seniors from when they were first at Camp. That earliest picture of them is used in the slideshow first, and when it’s shown on that “Silver Screen”, the whole camp of course is trying to guess in that instant which Senior it is. Some are unmistakable. We can see in the child, the Senior they will eventually become. Some, however, leave the rest of us “scratching our heads”…they stump us…we can’t believe the child they were is the Senior they have become (in a good way!). It’s a fun moment, albeit maybe slightly embarrassing for the Senior (but every camper eventually gets there). That moment of fun with younger versions of the Seniors captured in the slideshow for all to see, is followed individually by current (professional) pictures of them at the Camp - pictures of them after Liturgy when they’re all dressed up, pictures of them in casual (but still nice) attire at some chosen location around the Camp, and a picture of the group of Seniors with the Metropolitan after Liturgy. I say professional pictures because they are; we have been blessed with a Tech Crew who, among other things, are professional photographers.

That moment of the slideshow is a celebration of the Seniors. The whole Camp celebrating its “own”, so to speak. The campers and Staff are cheering, clapping, celebrating. It’s fun. It’s heart-warming. It’s reassuring. It’s celebrating our success as a Camp. Camp has, after all, after as long as 11 years, raised a camper again. We get to see the transformation of the camper over time each summer, but the slideshow provides the snapshot of the complete transformation: from the youngest version of the Senior as a camper, immediately to the oldest version of the Senior at Camp. Again, it’s fun, it’s reassuring, it’s awesome!

I love that moment. It’s just a moment, but Camp is full of moments like this, where if you look around, you would wish it to freeze, to stop, so you could enjoy that moment just a little longer. It’s that moment when the Seniors are proud, the whole Camp is celebrating them, some are crying because it’s emotional, it’s hitting home, and the Camp is elevating that moment, becoming what Camp is absolutely meant to be…a place that raises campers, a place that celebrates the camper’s individual achievement knowing we all had a hand in raising this Senior, a place that a Senior can have their moment (taking nothing away from other camper’s moments) and in that moment the Camp can see itself again and the reason for its work: here’s the result again, a graduating Senior whom the entire Camp is “behind”, hoping and praying for the best for us. We’ve raised up a camper together. There they are on the screen – the child they were, the Senior they are. In that moment, they are celebrated for their achievement, and simply for WHO THEY ARE: the best of US - a Senior of Camp Nazareth who has dedicated themselves to returning to Camp year after year to make it and us better. It is simply a moment in which the entire Camp basks, if only for the briefest amount of time.

I love that moment. I get to look around the Pavilion at that moment and hear and see the Camp at its best. It’s extremely fulfilling (and truth be told extremely emotionally challenging...parents know what I mean...before the next beginning there is the end of something). Again, I wish we could put that moment on pause, like we do with our TVs, but the moment moves on, so must our Seniors (hopefully to Staff), and so must this article.

Earlier I said we’d write this article in reverse, starting at the end of the week and moving toward the beginning. At this point in the article, I realize, I’ll never reach the beginning, but we’ll give you what we can.
The Slideshow and all that happens in it is a late Friday Night experience, but before that comes the Friday dinner, a catered affair. An affair catered by the Camp’s Kitchen Crew as all meals are at Camp. I call it a “catered affair” because it may as well be. The “spread” the kitchen puts on would pass the test of any bride, any discerning pallet. The Camp’s meals are all “catered” by the Kitchen Crew, and the Crew has always been “as big as the moment”, providing the meal to match each unique experience at Camp.

The experience of the Friday dinner has in recent years been mixed with a celebration of our Seniors. At times they’ve had a separate table, at times they sit with their cabin, but the pavilion (which is where this dinner takes place) gets decorated a certain way for this part of the Senior Program (which has been going on all week long). A picnic style dinner is a fun, albeit challenging, way to round out the dinners for the week. Any time you have to serve a meal from somewhere other than your kitchen, it presents a logistical challenge, but again, the Crew always rises to the occasion. And for this part of the Program, so do the Seniors.

After this Friday dinner concludes, the Seniors give their Senior Speeches to the entire Camp gathered there in the Pavilion. Theoretically, they’ve been crafting their speeches all week long, but more often than not, they’re not crafted. It’s not really their fault. The schedule is “packed” all week long, especially because the Seniors have their Senior Program elements each day along with the all-Camp Program elements. Whether crafted speech or not, the Senior stands in front of the entire Camp, and in 3 minutes time, they are asked to express what Camp has been like for them, what it means to them, what piece of advice they’d give to the rest of the campers (especially the youngest ones), and to offer any “shout-outs”/thank yous they want to give.

This is not a moment to pass by quickly and it’s often a moment our Seniors finally realize they’re camper “career” is over. Some of our Seniors are able to get through their speeches without pausing. Many, however, begin crying at their first word (or even before their first word as they listen to their fellow Seniors’ speeches). Again, this is not a moment to pass by quickly, without listening, without hearing what our Seniors are feeling, without grasping what Camp has meant to them and what they feel Camp has done for them.

This is a unique and important moment for the Senior. It’s the peak of a long “career” at Camp and they try to put into words what it has meant to them. It’s a unique moment for the campers too. They get to listen to one of their own express for everyone what Camp is all about. It’s also a unique moment for the Staff because we hear again the answer to the unspoken question, “Is all our work worth it?”

The answer is a resounding YES! The reader might be tempted to ask, “Doesn’t the Staff know their work is worth it?” Like any other job, sometimes we can clearly see that our work is worth all the struggle and difficulty; we can clearly see our work matters. At other times, we need to be reminded; we need someone to tell us our work matters, but really what we need is to SEE that our work matters. Believe me, if the Staff don’t realize their work matters, if they don’t realize they make a difference in the lives of our campers, they will when the Senior Speeches are given.

As the Seniors offer their Senior Speeches, the Staff often laugh and cry right along with them. That’s important to me (and whether they realize it or not, it’s important to the Staff) because the Senior is expressing the powerful feelings and moments of a shared experience (Camp) that the Staff had a “hand” in creating, influencing, and providing. To hear, and really to see, how much that shared
experience has meant to the Senior, reaches the Staff, communicates to the Staff that EVERYTHING they’ve worked hard to provide is/was worth it - the long hours of online training and meetings starting 2 months before Camp begins, the long hours of Training Week before the campers arrive, the fun but agonizing process of creating a program element and having to present it to your peers for their feedback, the challenges of having a co-counselor and living in the same room with them for 4 weeks, the emotional roller-coaster that the summer can be, the several summers they left home and family to work at the Camp, etc. Watching and hearing the best of us give their Senior Speeches, seeing for the last time what Camp has meant to them, is a powerful, emotional, and in the end, for the Staff, a reaffirming experience. In a way that is unlike any other way, the Senior Speeches affirm everything that Camp is about - growing up campers, giving campers every opportunity to discover, and re-discover, a deep relationship with Christ, helping campers develop long-lasting friendships. The laughter and tears of the Staff, that go right along with those of the Seniors giving their speeches, are the outward sign of the inward affirmation: Your work is worth it! Your work made a genuine difference in my life!

Again, the Senior Speech segment is just a moment in the entirety of the Camp experience. It doesn’t last long (unless a Senior falls in love with the sound of their own voice, but don’t we all do the same at least once in a while) and it can pass by unnoticed; just a part of the rest of the Program. But to see the Seniors up there talking, crying, laughing, at times simply speechless because of the overwhelming nature of what they are feeling, and to hear what they say about their Camp experience, is not just a moment to celebrate (although that it is), but also to hear and see how worthwhile Camp really is, to see how worthwhile the work is, to see the Camp once again become the Camp it’s supposed to be – the entire Camp “behind” one of its campers, a Camp totally committed to raising campers, raising up campers in Christ as far as we can raise them, i.e. until they are Seniors giving their speeches, a Camp recognizing and celebrating its achievement – another Senior – thanks be to God for everything!

And then the moment is gone, but that moment did its job...among other things it reminded us what we’re working for and towards: a Senior that has not only survived, but a Senior who has thrived at Camp! A Senior who has not only participated in Camp, but by their presence and participation has made the Program, and all of us, better! A Senior who has not only grown up as a camper, but a Senior who has grown up as a camper in Christ! The Camp, its Staff and their work, helped “make” the Senior camper what they have become, but in turn the Senior camper has made Camp and its Staff, become better! That’s how Camp works! If a Senior realizes this, it shows up in their application for Staff the following year. 90% of the Staff applications, in response to the question “Why do you want to work at Camp?”, contain something like the following answer: “I want to work at Camp because I want to help campers have the same amazing experience I had at Camp.” Realizing what God has done for them through Camp, and being inspired by Him to help others have them same experience as they did, is not being self-centered. Actually, it’s the opposite, and it’s what we hope to see in our Seniors.

Starting at the end, leads us to the beginning...last year’s Senior Camper, who had once been a first-year camper, whom the Staff helped “raise” to be a Senior Camper, has now become the potential first-year Staffer, who will help campers have the same amazing experience they had, and raise the next generation of Seniors.

Starting at the end (a very good place to start), led us to the beginning, which is now the end of the article. I met what was for me personally the most emotionally and spiritually challenging summer with what I see as the Camp at its best. In that way, the article can be considered literary therapy, an entry
into a journal where someone is working through things, as they say. But really the article is not a revision of Camp but a re-vision of Camp - seeing clearly the manifold blessings of God in a place dedicated to serving our children.

In that way, Camp isn’t simply the “fun and games”, people think it is. When the Senior campers blow out their candles as part of the Senior Program in front of the entire Camp in the Camp Church on Saturday morning after the final Morning Prayers at the end of their last camping week, and it hits home that this is the very last time they will be in the Camp Church as a camper, the Camp and all that it is about is no longer simply “fun and games” to them. It becomes for them, in that moment, something more, something worth hanging on to. When the entire Camp sings “Many Years” in the Church for the Seniors after they’ve blown out their Senior candles which had been lit by them in the Church 6 days prior at the very beginning of their last Camping Week at that first Evening Prayers together, it hits home in the heart. All that the Camp is and hopes for is represented by those Seniors holding those candles. The support the Camp has given, the Faith that it has helped inspire, the good things it has enabled the Senior to experience, mean something beyond the program elements, beyond the sports, beyond the hikes, beyond the crafts, beyond the evening events and activities, beyond the learning, beyond the Camp’s posted pictures. The Senior camper knows this best. They are, at that moment in time, because they know just how good they had it at Camp, the best of us. And the Camp in response to what God has given them and us and has enabled us to do together, with and for our Seniors, sings and prays simply, “God,…grant them many blessed years...” Better than any movie moment with any Fraulein Maria song, right then and there, with the Seniors in the front of the church holding their blown-out candles which they will take home with them, knowing in that moment what God has given them through Camp and what it has meant to them, with their fellow campers singing and praying simply for them, Camp is at its very best.

I thank the Staff for that. I thank the campers for that. I thank everyone who has and who does support the Camp for that. In the end, thanks be to God for everything.