

Turning Point

Have you ever had the chance to spend a month in the wild? Surrounded only by nature and my fellow campers, I had this experience. About three summers ago I went on a month long backpacking trip around the Trinity Alps in northern California. I had been to Camp Unalayee the year before, but never had I even dreamed of experiencing an adventure of this caliber. Camp Unalayee is a small summer camp immersed within the beautiful Trinity Alps. To anybody that has been there before, camp Unalayee is in a world of its own. The hike from the highway into the wilderness, up to base camp is almost like a transformation through to another life. After they picked me up, both of my parents were shocked by how much I had changed: physically, mentally, spiritually, and all around as a human. Over that month long period of wandering, I became who I am today, including both the good and the bad.

It was my second year of Camp Unalayee when I decided to apply for the crazy, ambitious, hiking tribe called the Walkabout. To apply I had to write a two page long paper on all the reasons why I wanted to be on the Walkabout, and I was worthy to be on the Walkabout. A few months after submitting my paper I learned that I had indeed been accepted. Not only had I been accepted but I was the first person to even apply. As soon as I heard that I was accepted I wanted to leave for the trip; so the next few months were simply painful for me to endure. Finally the day came. I drove down to Berkeley, California where I was to catch the bus. The whole bus ride up I caught myself cautiously, yet, intently trying to find other people that might just be crazy enough to join me on this adventure. When we reached the base of Camp we all nervously unloaded to the sight of all our counselor's smiling faces greeting us. This sight alone made me

inwardly smile, assuring myself that I made the right decision. Just seeing the counselors embracing their friends and family changed me. Just this sight made me understand what a friendship is. It made me realize that no amount of time or distance can separate true friends.

Once everybody was divided into groups they were sent off on the tiresome seven mile hike to base camp. That is, all groups except for the “Walkabout-ers”; we were taken off separately, where we played a game to get to know each other. Once that was done we started hiking, unlike the rest of the campers we took a section of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) to get to base camp. The PCT in this section was very steep and rocky, which is unlike the normal camp road which is flat and very easy to hike. This was our counselors’ way of telling us that this was not going to be an “ice cream social.” As soon as we reached base camp we had to start cooking our first meal together. By the end of the night, my entire body felt like it was being slowly pulled down by the weight of what had come and what was still left to come. I had been part of the Walkabout for less than one day, and I already knew that my physical limits were going to be tested, and permanently changed.

Spending one month with ten strangers can be slightly intimidating. For me it was revolutionary. Within a few weeks I got especially close to one guy in the tribe named Albin. Albin has lived in Sweden his whole life but spoke remarkably good English. He was also the brother of one of the counselors on our trip. Not only was Albin a kind caring guy, he was also very interesting and entertaining to talk to. Albin and I started a nightly ritual where we would always sleep next to each other, under the stars. As soon as the group walked into that night’s campsite the first thing that we would do is pick our

sleeping areas. Albin and I always made enough room for both of us. To this day, whenever Albin comes to the U.S. we make a point in seeing each other and spending time together to catch up on past times and even times to come. To me the people on the Walkabout made it into a mini family. We had our arguments, and our drama, but more importantly we had our friendship and our great amounts of personal respect for each other.

Above the friendship of Camp Unalayee, above the respect from my fellow campers, my favorite part about the Walkabout was being completely immersed in the wild. In my single month of freedom: I ate more wild plants, ascended more mountains, and felt more at home than any other time in my life. In the whole month of Walkabout we did only one solo. A solo is when the counselors send all the campers out (usually along a river or lake) for twenty-four hours by themselves. For the first half of the day I was nervous and desperately in need of company. By the end of the day I had almost forgotten who was in my tribe or even how to communicate. When our counselors finally came to get us we walked back into our campsite to the sight of an enormous, roaring fire. For a few minutes we all could not help but watch the fire devour the wood that was constantly being fed to the hungry beast. When the fire died down a little bit we noticed that wood was not the only thing that fire had been fed. In the middle of the embers roasted five or six fist sized rocks. These rocks were then taken from the bowels of the beast and transferred to a bucket, which was then placed in the very center of a dome shaped structure, known as a sweat lodge, that had been constructed earlier that day. For the next half an hour we sat in a circle inside the lodge. In the very center of our group sat the rocks glowing with the energy of the still roaring fire. During that half an hour as we

sat we sang, we chanted, we praised the unseen powers of nature, but most importantly we embraced the feeling of being one. When we emerged from the trance of our natural sauna we immediately dove into the nearby lake and soaked. As we soaked we embraced the natural beauty and wonder of this world.

On the Walkabout I changed. I changed from the atmosphere and the exuberance of all my fellow campers, and counselors. I changed from the feeling of being free from the natural beauty of the outside world. I changed from the camaraderie and mutual respect of the Walkabout “family.” I changed from the physical exhaustion of hiking for one month straight. With all of these together a new being was born. Not just a person with a few changed characteristics, but a completely new being. The being created is free, free from the stress of the world, free to see the Earth from its true, natural form.

I was free, but soon after my experience I returned to my old self, I returned to the stress, I returned to the “civilized” world. Once a year I go back, I become a new person, the true me.