Reflecting on suppressed memories jarred forth by a newspaper article…

Of an Exceptionally Unhappy Camper:

It was an article googled forth from the archives of the *Daily Gleaner* of Fredericton, New Brunswick, that set the neck hairs tingling… Titled *'Fifty Years of Fun'* (published in July 2002), the piece commemorated the golden anniversary of a local summer camp for disabled children…

The article described how Camp Rotary grew from the "vision" of A.L., an Acadian New Brunswicker, who was moved by the plight of handicapped children in Germany at the end of World War Two. Soon after taking up a position as an instructor of physical education at the provincial university, he enlisted the support of the Rotary Club to fund the first camp session at a site near Grand Lake, New Brunswick, in the summer of 1952.

The first group of campers were children crippled by polio, endemic in the early 1950s. Through the following years, the camps were expanded to include a full spectrum of handicapped (the term in use before 'disabled') children. The camp aimed to provide little handicappers the experience of 'normal' summer-camp activities like swimming, volleyball and handicrafts.

The current director interviewed for the article, noted that the opportunity to participate in activities from which they commonly feel excluded was "transformative" for the disabled child: "You can see the pride and accomplishment on their faces," he claims.

Even more transformative, in his view, is the opportunity the camp provides disabled children to socialize—possibly for the first time—without intimidation. On this point he states: "By coming to camp, disabled children meet other people with the same and other disabilities, and it *normalizes* the process of having a disability…"

A former camper interviewed for the article says that attending Camp Rotary was "one of the best experiences of my life." Along with having barrels of fun, she made many friends— among them other kids who also had cerebral palsy.

The article notes that many campers who attended throughout their childhood, eagerly come back for the adult camp sessions, offered in more recent years. "For many of the people who have been through it, the director claims, "Camp Rotary is a powerful place."

So why should I be jarred by such a feel-good piece?

A more pointed question could be: why had I dug up the article in the first place? The truth is— I once attended Camp Rotary and it scared the hell out of me.

It was before a display of artificial limbs at the Fredericton Exhibition around 1961 that I was introduced to the possibility of wearing an artificial arm. Up to that age (I was about nine), the absence of most of a right arm had not significantly hindered me. In the Darwinian sense, I was well enough adapted to my environment. I first thought that wearing a hook would be creepy—but felt that a cosmetic hand could improve my appearance…

It was in the course of one of the fittings at the prosthetics clinic in Fredericton, New Brunswick, that the affable prosthetist who was a Rotarian himself— told my father that I would be a good candidate for Rotary Camp. It was three weeks long at a nearby lakeside— all expenses paid.

I knew my father felt awkward about the Rotary Club's contribution to the funding of my artificial limb. On one of the drives from Fredericton back to the home village, I had overheard his conversation with my mother in the passenger seat.

"I don't want to have to write down my salary on any form," he had said.

Having a government job, he worried about the consequences of being discovered to have accepted "charity." Hence, he took the prosthetist's suggestion that I attend the camp as an obligation.

It was largely left to my mother and sisters to convince me to attend Rotary Camp the following summer. They said that kids like me were needed there "to help the less fortunate."

My parents could just as well have announced that I was being sent (albeit on a trial basis) to an orphanage. I had no interest in meeting kids like Timmy, the tousled blonde boy on crutches in the March of Dimes posters. Tearfully, I protested. After much cajoling—including the promise of a bicycle— I submitted in the bargain that I was not committing to the entire three weeks.

So it was that on a cloudy morning in July 1963, I stood in a grassy area amid a cluster of cabins near Grand Lake, New Brunswick, watching the dust rise as my family's Ford

Fairlane pulled away. Across the field, a lone boy with a leg brace smacked at a tetherball. There was no Bruegelian procession lurching forward to embrace me, as fearfully imagined.

Minutes thereafter, a smiling counsellor presented me with the camp uniform of blue shorts and blue tee shirt with the Rotary wheel insignia. I was then led to cabin #3 assigned to boys of my age group.

Thus began the most disturbing intrusion on the little world as then known:

From outward appearances, Rotary Camp looked like any 'normal' summer camp: the rustic cabins, a rec hall, mess hall and a barrack style toilet block in a forest clearing…. The mowed area in front was set up for badminton, volleyball and croquet. Across the gravel road was the private beach with a semi-circle of bobbing floats stretching from the shore to demarcate the area for swimming…

Yet the Rotary campers, as expected, all looked 'different'. All were boys (girls had a later session) ranging in age from eight to about eighteen. Coming from across the entire province and even from neighbouring Maine— there were as many boys who spoke French— or were bilingual—as there were sole English-speakers, like me.

The majority had been afflicted by polio and wore leg braces. Since wheelchairs were not well designed as they are today, even the boys with thigh-high braces used crutches. A few had only slight limps. Apart from the polio boys, there were a few deaf kids, one who was blind and a couple of others badly scarred by burns. There were several campers with non-physical handicaps— some with speech defects and a couple with Downs syndrome—labelled at that time as 'retarded'. There were no dwarves or kids with foreshortened hands or feet. In 1963, thalidomide victims were still babies or yet to be born…

The critical mass of handicappers soon formed itself into a 'natural' hierarchy. The ranking was determined by the severity of the affliction as perceived by the pack. The boys with polio were at the top while at the bottom were the mentally handicapped...

Of course, no different from any *'Lord of the Flies'* grouping— the hierarchy of the handicapped was equally based on brute intimidation. There were older boys at Rotary Camp who lorded over the younger ones. Boys from poorer backgrounds (and a few from orphanages) — identifiable by bad teeth— had their first opportunity to dish out some of the teasing they probably knew too well…

There was one bully from Bathurst, New Brunswick, with a lower leg brace. Because he was bilingual, he was used as a translator for Acadian boys who spoke only French. Always threatening to report some supposed offence to the camp director, he functioned as a '*capo*' for the counselors in whose presence he was always obsequious.

When the half-bag of marshmallows I had secretly brought from home disappeared from the suitcase under my bunk, I suspected him or his sidekick— another Acadian boy with yellowish teeth. The following afternoon, marshmallows were found smeared on the blankets of several bunks. Naturally, the perpetrator was assumed to be me…

Of course, bullying never occurred in the presence of counselors. The counselor in my cabin was a mild-mannered college student with horn-rimmed glasses called Al. He usually slept at the front of the cabin but was otherwise not around. In that era, children placed together were not so closely supervised as in the norm today. There were afternoon rest periods, especially on rainy days, when campers were alone in their cabins.

There was one boy with a club foot in my cabin from Fort Fairfield, Maine, who boasted of his carnal knowledge—no doubt pretended. One afternoon, he held down in the middle of the cabin floor a mentally disabled boy. Laughing, he pulled down the helpless boy's shorts and exposed his genitals. Not yet twelve, I was too innocent to even imagine acts that might be occurring in the unsupervised cabins of the older boys— only that any involvement of the privates had to be sordid…

In that July of 1963 there were only two boys at Rotary Camp with missing arms. One boy's arm was gone from the left shoulder— and the other had a stump that extended a little below the right sleeve of his tee-shirt. The latter was me…

An obvious disadvantage in two-armed team sports ranked me among the "worse off" at the camp. The fact that I had no interest to begin with in softball, archery or volleyball make no difference. My appearance (I did not wear a prosthetic arm at the camp) and disadvantage in activities that suited the majority— naturally placed me at the lower end of the hierarchy… It was the rudest of awakening from the assurance that I was at Rotary Camp "to help the less fortunate."

As much as my skin crawled in my inferior status, I did not challenge it. The other boy with a missing arm was even younger than me. He was a burn victim with disfigurement over the left side of his body where even his shoulder was only a lump of scar tissue. We never spoke. Yet once in a soccer kick-off one rainy afternoon in the rec hall, we found ourselves pitted against one another. With the counselors clearly cheering for the younger boy (who presumably needed the boost), I let him kick the ball into my net. Amid whistles and clapping, I scurried away sneering— hand over the right shoulder of my dreaded Rotary tee shirt.

Even in childhood I wore long sleeve shirts in all seasons. Yet at Rotary Camp, I had to wear the camp uniform: navy-blue shorts and matching tee-shirt. The tee-shirt bore the Rotary international wheel over the letters of '*Rotary Camp'*—also emblazoned in bright yellow. Lest I overdramatize, the Rotary Wheel was no yellow star— but it seemed to similarly proclaim my status. I cannot over-estimate my loathing for that tee-shirt.

Of course, there was certainly nothing sinister in the insistence upon the wearing of the camp uniform. I have no doubt that even forty-three years ago, it was sincerely believed that "covering up" was unhealthy while exposing a handicap was—to use the current parlance—"normalizing." Yet for a certain pre-adolescent in 1963— nothing could have been further from the truth...

In my insular village, I did not feel in the least disadvantaged. I held my own at school and even in the playground rough and tumble… My tongue seemed to make up for any lack of handiness… Yet in the first few days of Camp Rotary, I was forced to find footing within an odd grouping of boys of all ages whose handicaps seemed as strange to me as mine was to them. I could well have been stripped naked in public. … I reeled in the bitterness of betrayal: how could my parents possibly have thought the camp would be *good* for me?

Another enduring image from July 1963, is of a group of laughing little handicappers flocking around the burly camp director as he dismounted from his lawn mower. A.L., the camp founder (referred to in '*Fifty Years of Fun'*), grinned and jostled with the boys in mock boxing jabs.

When I scurried past him, he seemed to scowl. Was it that I had failed to pay obeisance—or did he sense something else about me? Perhaps he sensed a malcontent more toxic to the camp spirit than any mere bully…

About a decade later at the provincial university, I once saw the camp founder in his role as athletics coach. He was at the side of the college swimming pool, amid of a cluster of Physical Education students. They were swarming around him just like the boys at Rotary Camp had a decade earlier. I cannot be sure that he recognized me. Still, there was something in his glance (he certainly noticed my hook) that reminded me of a night he burst into cabin #3 that was noisy after lights out:

"Quiet down!" he had growled. "Don't you know this is a health camp?"

I remember the ominous sound of the word 'health'. *"Does he mean that I have some incurable disease?"* I shuddered.

In first reading Orwell's long essay *'Such, such were the joys',* about his childhood memories of boarding school, I also thought of Rotary camp. One might not imagine a connection between a boy's experience in an elite English boarding school in the early 1900s and that of another in a summer camp in Canada a half century later. Yet I immediately identified with the torments which Orwell describes. His description of his humiliations over bedwetting are particularly wrenching. Such were my anxieties at Rotary Camp, that I also remember waking a few nights on a patch of wetness. The bunk bed was not changed over three weeks. The yellow stained sheet I kept hidden until the end of camp…

As jarring as the memories of Rotary Camp are— the awareness of being physically 'different' certainly came earlier. That awareness inclined me to favour oddly shaped strawberries or apples over 'perfect' ones. There were only rare moments when the awareness was disturbing.

One such moment came in a social studies lesson in Grade Three, in which the teacher read aloud a passage about ancient Greece. When she came to the detail of how children in Sparta born with any physical defect were left to die on the mountainside, she hesitated. Her pause—along with the glances of a few other kids in my direction—seemed to message: "*A kid like you better be grateful— and be careful!"*

By high school, I knew that the first victims of the Nazis were disabled children deemed "unfit for life." Naturally, that led me to wonder just what might have been my lot had I not been born in *New* Brunswick— but ten years earlier in *old* Braunschweig… Would I have been one of the children surrendered to the state for appropriate 'care'?

The more I learned about the holocaust, the more easily I could imagine my own parents, behaving as good citizens of the German Reich. In receiving their notification from the Interior Ministry, my mother would have bitterly cried, but I was sure that my father would have grimly complied… That a generation before, he had volunteered to fight Nazis, seemed especially ironic…

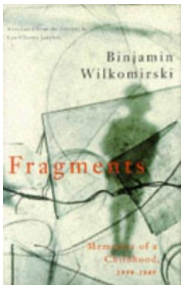
Never a fan of Nietzsche in my undergrad philosophy studies, I was still intrigued by an idea encountered in *'Beyond Good and Evil'*. It made intuitive sense that binary opposites (*love/hate, beauty/ugliness…*) can be understood as dualities that mirror their antitheses in often jarring ways… One of those jarring ways for me was in considering such antitheses in the extremes of social policy towards disabled people…

It seemed that it was the shock of Nazi *inhumanity* that prompted the post-war appeal for *humane* social policies. It was in antithesis to the *mercilessness* of Nazi eugenic policies like *Aktion* T4—authorizing the killing if the disabled in designated treatments centers—that prompted the post-war crafting of *merciful* human rights legislation such as that against euthanasia and forced sterilization. Yet the ethical stances taken in the opposite polarities of *'mercy/merciless'* and *'humane/inhumane'* continua, still seemed to bear root commonalities…

I connected that idea with my experience of Rotary Camp in 1963:

As a project for helping disabled children, it aimed to be the antithesis of a Nazi institution like Hadamer, designed to murder them. Yet there was a root commonality:
Both projects were designed as interventions for addressing the social *problem* of the handicapped. Both designated with one label— a broad group of children with a wide range of impairments (both physical and cognitive) of varying severity. Both projects were based on compliance of parents—however forced or voluntary…

In any case, these dark connections between memories of three weeks in a summer camp in 1963 and my reading of Nietzsche in my early twenties were almost forgotten until I came across *'Fifty Years of Fun.'*



An article that appeared a few years ago in the *Granta* literary magazine also bears some relevance here:

Titled *'The Man with Two Heads'* (1999), it was an expose of Binjamin Wilkomerski, the Swiss author of '*Fragments'*. First published as an authentic childhood memoir of interment in Nazi concentration camp, later investigation showed that Wilkomerski could

not have possibly had the direct experience described in his book. It was proven that his account was fabricated from memories of a childhood in a Swiss orphanage.

Yet even after the expose and withdrawal of holocaust history awards, Wilkomerski insisted that his story was true. As the author of the expose notes— it was undeniable that Wilkomerski's childhood memories *were* traumatic. Therefore, even if '*Fragments'* is only based on 'figments'—his work can still be said to have "emotional authenticity"...

Like all emotional memories encoded in a narrative, mine of Rotary Camp are somewhat selective. Yet they are certainly not fabricated. In any case, a brief attendance at a summer camp for the handicapped can hardly be compared with years in an orphanage, such as Wilkomerski experienced. Still, I would also contend that neither his nor my dark memories come anywhere near the terrors of countless children who endure war, poverty or the myriad forms of soul-killing abuse…

I have no doubt that over the years Camp Rotary has evolved and improved from what was once Rotary Camp. According to the *Daily Gleaner* article, the camp sessions are now shorter and the disabled kids are no longer lumped into one heterogenous group.

I also would not challenge the article's claim that most of the kids who attended Camp Rotary over the decades reaped the benefits intended. Similar summer camps help poor kids or kids disfigured by burns. Only the heartless could deny their value…

Still, I would make a case that one can support such charities while recognizing certain ambiguities in their causes. Undeniably, the camaraderie among kids who share a condition for which each has suffered shame in isolation must be positively life-altering. Yes, such experiences can help to "normalize" a kid's disability— presuming that to be a positive outcome. Yet the ultimate normalization will not come through acceptance within a labelled group of kids in a segregated environment— but through integration within the greater sphere of heterogenous humanity…

To his credit, the current director of Camp Rotary interviewed for the article seemed to acknowledge the challenge of integration. His quote: "We are becoming an inclusive society, but we're not there yet."

In attempting to offset the skew of dark memory, I can conjure a few happier moments of July 1963:

There was a swimming session in the lake several times a week— a luxury never had in summers at home where the nearest beach was six miles away. I also looked forward to the Saturday night movies in the camp rec room. There I saw *'The Time Machine'*—the most thrilling movie ever watched up to that time.

Then there was the plentiful food dished out thrice daily in the mess hall. The poor boys needed no encouragement to ravenously indulge. In the medical check-up and 'weigh-out' on the last day of camp, they boasted great gains over their 'weigh-in' three weeks earlier. I did not move the scales a single ounce…

Of course, unhappy campers are hardly rare. Every little tale of summer camp unhappiness is different— just as every unhappy family is different… Yet if Rotary Camp has been a camp for 'normal' kids, one could take a tear-stained letter from camp in the spirit of *'A Letter from Camp Granada*'. In the refrain of that comedy song popular around that same time, the homesick kid pleads: *"Take me home, oh Muddah, Fadduh— take me home!'*

My letter begging to go home was uncharacteristically replied to by my father. He repeated the promise of the bicycle—conditional upon my sticking it out…

When the Fairlane did reappear to pick me up, it seemed more like six months— rather than just a few weeks— has passed. Still, anxieties evaporated in the excitement of going home. On the first night back, never had my bed felt so comfortable…

Yet I was not the same boy I had been three weeks earlier. I had glimpsed a savage little world governed by harsh rules. Pulling a pillow over my head would not make the harsh places disappear. I knew that whatever comfort I felt in my own room and own bed— even in my village— had to be deceptive… I realized that to live beyond the village, I would have to depend on my wits.

If that dawning awareness was a benefit of the Rotary Camp— then by the glory of unintended outcomes— perhaps it was "a powerful place."

2004, August

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Postscript:

The foregoing excerpt from my 2004 journal came to mind last evening while I watched a documentary on *Netflix* titled: '*Crip Camp: a Disability Revolution'.*

'Crip Camp' documents the impact of a summer camp in upstate New York in 1970 on the lives of some of the disabled kids who attended it. Run by "hippie" counselors, the boys and girls at Camp Jened were encouraged to celebrate something of the spirit of Woodstock, that happened not far away or long before. Documentary footage from Camp Jened shows campers with a range of disabilities playing softball and frolicking in the camp pool— all in apparent joyful unity.

In voiceover commentary of more recent days, one former camper tells how disabled kids who had known only their parents' help in such intimacies as dressing— experienced for the first time the help of peers. There is also talk and laughter about first experiences in "making out" with fellow campers. Lengthier segments show rap sessions at the camp in which the disabled teens talk about their challenges. Everyone gets equal time. Even the kids who struggle to vocalize are given opportunity to speak and be heard…

The latter half of the documentary focuses on the adult lives of some of the former Jened campers. Several meet up in Berkeley, California, where they reestablish old friendships and become politically active in the fight for the civil rights of the disabled. Featured among them is Judith Heumann, shown in her wheelchair, leading demonstrations and sit-ins. She speaks of the key victory of the passing of the Americans with Disability Act in 1990.

Other former campers like Denise Jacobson, a writer with cerebral palsy, and James LeBrecht, the filmmaker who co-directed the *Crip Camp* documentary itself, underscored what was already plain to the viewer: The campers at Camp Jened had formed a community and taken their new-found self-confidence into the wider world. Their camp experience as teens had been "liberating and empowering…"

Camp Jened in 1970 could well have been in a different galaxy than Rotary Camp in 1963. One was inspired by the Age of Aquarius and the other conceived in the spirit of Lord Baden Powell.

No less fundamentally different was the integration of boys and girls at Camp Jened. The "hippies" who ran the camp, obviously understood just how disabled teens of both sexes could benefit from a common experience. By contrast, the Rotarians of 1963, would have considered the commingling of handicapped boy and girls even more perverse than a mixed camp of 'normal' boy scouts and girl guides.

Chat sessions such as are shown in the '*Crip Camp'* documentary were certainly not part of Rotary Camp in 1963. Even if there had been— topics like relations with parents, frustrations, body image and sexuality—would certainly have been taboo…

Another salient contrast was in the degree of disability of the campers. Some of the more severely disabled kids shown in Camp Jened, would not have been able to attend Rotary Camp in 1963. The idea of campers helping one another in personal maintenance would have been contrary to the more grimly individualistic ethos of fostering 'independence' in the handicapped— even in isolation…

I took note that the co-producers of the *'Crip Camp'* documentary were Barack and Michele Obama. It is heartening in the age of Trump to see an ex-president engaged in non-monetizing projects. At the same time, it is no coincidence that the Obamas would co-sponsor a documentary with a message like that of *'Crip Camp.*' The story of the nurturing of 'community' among the disabled teens of Camp Jened that led to civil rights activism perfectly renders a core tenet of the American left.

From that background, a question emerged: to what extent can one cheer the accomplishments of the former Jened campers while having reservations about their identity politics?

The same reservations arise in observation that in America there are *black* conservatives but never *white* conservatives… Similarly, there is a distinction to be drawn between *disabled* activists, writers and teachers— and those who desire to transcend the hyphenation… One might consider the example of astrophysicist (not the *disabled* astrophysicist), Stephen Hawking.

Why should diverse individuals be grouped by commonalities that ought to be no more significant than their blood-types? The paradox is that the embrace of a 'marginalized' group identity also imposes an inescapable label. Of course, some are keen to wear the label with pride— given the conferring of a special community membership. For many, the choice is a largely a matter of self-interest— limitations as opposed to benefits… Yet the question must be asked: is that group identity true to one's essential being?

Finally, in watching the documentary, I could not help imagining how I would have felt as a teen in Camp Jened:

In the ‘rap sessions’ I would have squirmed. I would have been mortified by adults trying to get inside my head. I would have bristled in the obligatory group hugs…

Yet I can also imagine verbal scorching for such standoffishness. The hippie counselors would probably have called me out as a disabled equivalent of an Uncle Tom (an Uncle Tim?). Like the black person of the 1950s trying to pass white by virtue of straighter hair or slightly lighter skin— few are more despised by ‘their own kind’ than those who attempt to hide their ‘true’ identity...

Indeed, Camp Jened in 1970 would likely have been more traumatic for me than Camp Rotary in 1963 …

-*2020, May*

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