

4. GROWING INSIDE OUTSIDE

The previous chapter introduced a wide range of Camp Cooinda activities. Even then, the stories cover only part of the camp program. There was little there about sailing or initiative games, and nothing about fishing, archery, hiking, or the ropes course. A full story of the activities would be a big book.

Another part of the story is the understanding of personal growth that has guided the choice of activities and how they were actually used as part of the Camp Cooinda program.

The inside story

I first read the description of camping as "growing inside outside" in a Canadian Camping Association publication. Ever since, it has been for me the best summary in a few words of what I think camping can be about.

I doubt if there are any leaders who have been part of a Cooinda program who have not heard me enthuse about "the inside story" as the clue to what any activity can contribute to or take away from a camper.

Sailing, for example, is a marvellous recreational activity. Many of the teenagers we have introduced to sailing have gone on to own their own sailing boat and to join sailing clubs. Sailing can be a life long interest as people graduate from sailing dinghies carried on car roof racks to trailer sailers shared with their partners and sometimes with their children.

We also knew that learning to sail could be a wonderful introduction to a new activity, bringing great personal satisfaction, or it could be a series of failure experiences that drove even lower the vulnerable self esteem that so many kids brought to camp.

So sailing at Camp Cooinda was not just about sailing skills; it was also about the inside story of those learning to sail.

One sailing instructor could give lots of instructions and send out a novice sailor to have a go, then yell at him when he capsized. You knew that for some kids, their self-esteem meters would be reading zero. How is the world a better place if we teach sailing skills and enlarge the dark holes that too many of us carry inside us?

Another sailing instructor would show a group how to sail and send out the boats with more experienced people as skippers, and the novice sailors starting as crew. Then, picking a good combination of low waves and light wind, she would ask a novice sailor to try being a skipper. When the kid did that successfully, she would say something like, "Hey, Joel, you did that really well! I think you are going to be a sailor!" And you could sometimes tell from the kid's face that his/her self-esteem meter was reading an unfamiliar high.

There are times when kids who boast are a pain in the backside. There are other times when hearing a kid boast would be your best wish for her or him.

One such boy had a standard and well worn response to any invitation to join in an activity: "I wouldn't be any good at that".

"Tom, the group's going fishing. Would you like to come along?"

"I wouldn't be any good at that".

"There's a volleyball game about to start. Tom, how about we play on this team?"

"I wouldn't be any good at that".

When you think of how many negative and discouraging experiences it would have taken to learn that view of himself so well, it could cause you to despair of the people who had taught him.

I remember that particular boy because the team of leaders at that camp set out to give him every possible experience of success in every activity he could be coaxed to try. With great excitement, they told me that after a sailing session in a Mirror sailing boat on his own, with the wind roaring in at 3 or 4 knots, he had completed the triangular course without tipping over. He walked up the beach with his chest stuck out, boasting that he'd done it all on his own! It was music to the ears of those who knew about the inside story.

One of the yarns I use with camp groups is about the invention of a "Feelings Meter" that you attach to the outside of your t-shirt. It shows other people how you are feeling inside. So when someone puts you down, or calls you "pigface", or leaves you out of a game, what that does to you inside shows on the feelings meter. If anyone invents it, there will be a big market for it. But until then, it is interesting that some people seem to be pretty good at working out the inside story even without a feelings meter. I wish I was better at it.

Some of the young people who have come to Camp Coinda have been recommended by counsellors or social workers who think our style of camp will be specially helpful. It has been both a surprise and a delight to hear later what it is from so many experiences in an eight day camp that has had a special impact.

"James"

"James" came to camp because his psychotherapist recommended to his mother that it would be a good experience for him. He was 12 or 13, a bit of a loner, and not good at making friends. One night after dinner, as I went to the beach to take the launch around the end of the peninsula to the mooring at our jetty, he was standing on his own at the edge of the lake. I asked him if he would help me with the launch.

Once the motor was started and the anchor up, I asked him to steer while I coiled the ropes on the bow. I showed him how to push or pull on the tiller to turn the boat. "Just

keep it about this far from the shore. Is that okay?" He was not very sure, but I left him to it and deliberately took a long time up at the front of the boat slowly coiling the anchor rope and the bow line. James steered the boat for about half a kilometre.

I heard from the psychotherapist after the camp. He thought it had been a very good experience for James. He talked about lots of things that had happened at the camp but the big thing for James had been the time he "was trusted with steering the boat for a long way on his own".

Give and take in groups

Camp Cooina is what the camping literature calls a partly decentralised small group camp. The basic unit of the camp is a patrol, consisting of two tent groups - usually five girls with a female leader and five boys with a male leader. We do a great deal to help each patrol develop quickly as a group.

Patrol groupings are of young people of approximately the same age. Their expressed requests to be in the same group as a friend are given high priority. We want to strengthen friendships in new circumstances not weaken them.

When the bus arrives at the camp property, campers are introduced to the others in their tent and patrol groups. From that point, most of their experiences will be in that group.

To speed up the process of group formation, we keep the dining hall closed on the first day - 60 to 70 people in a hall does nothing for group development. Each patrol has a picnic lunch on the beach or under a shady tree. The evening meal on arrival day is a patrol cookout in a different part of the property for each patrol. Even the kind of meal at the cookout is designed to help the group process. Kebabs on long steel skewers require each person to make up their own kebab from the meat, pineapple, cheese, capsicum, etc. available. Then each looks after and turns his or her own kebab. They have to group around the BBQ unit to cook their meal. A pot of stew could be left as the responsibility of no-one in particular and people could wander away; kebabs encourage them to be all together. When they are together they talk and tease and try out these new friends.

After a couple of days of training and experience in canoes and kayaks, if their level of competence is sufficient for safety, patrol groups are invited to decide what expeditions they would like to undertake. They decide their preference for boats (canoes or kayaks) or launch to the start of a hike, where they want to get to, and how long they would like to be away.

This is an intensive group experience of considering options, dealing with conflicting ideas, and negotiating compromise agreements.

Expeditions

The experience of an actual expedition can have an extraordinary effect on relationships within a group. The members of the patrol depend very much on their own resources (although we now have a sophisticated system of UHF radio contacts

24 hours a day and efficient car and boat safety back up always ready). The isolation contributes to a stronger sense of group identity. In these groups, with understanding and affirming adult leaders, many young people discover a lot about the give and take of living with other people - discoveries which may be specially valuable as families grow smaller.

Expeditions also offer a sense of venturing into the unknown. They literally head for the horizon. When they set out, each person knows that the weather will probably change during the two or three days they are away and that they will have to cope with the cold, heat, wind, or rain that the weather system delivers to them. The element of challenge that is in every expedition can sometimes become substantial.

There is a sense in which an expedition group is a microcosm of society. From the first years of Camp Cooinda, expeditions have been at the heart of the experiences offered to young people. Because there are so many fabulous destinations around the Gippsland Lakes, campers come back year after year and choose new places to go to with new groups of friends.

What we are good at

It is a somewhat scary thing that what we are good at influences what we think we are good for. Too many of the young people we have seen in Cooinda programs have learned they are not good at anything much. If they have mainly failure experiences at school and with the people who matter to them, they can come to expect that things and people will not turn out well for them. It is an attitude to themselves and to other people that contributes to their poor experiences.

There are few things as important at any stage of life as feeling good about yourself in an appropriate way. Positive self-esteem is the gift I would most wish for children and young people. For this reason we select leaders who are able to lead alongside people rather than by pushing them around or standing over them. I have seen many Cooinda leaders who have encouraged and affirmed young people while having fun in boats and the bush and also while maintaining non-negotiable safety requirements.

"John"

John came to a work party weekend and discovered people and a place where he felt he was accepted. He was asked to help repair a water pump and received genuine praise when he fixed it. He flourished in the relaxed atmosphere of Cooinda groups. He became a regular work party participant. All his friends heard about his enthusiasm for Camp Cooinda. Then just two weeks before his 18th birthday, he crashed his motorcycle into the back of a parked truck and was killed. His friends from his church youth group asked if they could do something for Camp Cooinda as a memorial for John instead of sending flowers. They donated packs and sleeping bags that were made available over many years to disadvantaged kids coming to the camp. That, and a small plaque on the wall of the dining hall, helped us to remember a young man for whom camp was a place where he made discoveries about himself.

A little later, John's parents asked if I would sprinkle his ashes at Cooinda, as that was the place he most loved. We talked about a property where there were no fenced off

sacred places and where many people would walk and run. I suggested sprinkling his ashes on the lake. But they wanted his final place to be the actual place that had become special for him. So early one clear and sunny Sunday morning, before others were awake, so that no-one else would know the particular place on the property, I sprinkled John's ashes on the grass among the bracken, and said a prayer for John and the others like John who would pass through this place, that they also would create a strong inside story to shape a life.

Twenty four years later, two of John's nieces he never knew were impressive campers in the Cooinda program.

Rules, freedom and respect for others

Rules can be a tricky subject with young people. If you push too hard the reaction can be the opposite of what you want. On the other hand, rules provide a framework for a social group. In the case of water activities, they are essential for the protection of life.

From the beginning we tried to make safety rules sensible, clear and applicable to everyone, leaders as well as campers. Of course, the rules also evolved over time as we became more aware of risks inherent in the program and the limitations appropriate to young people and volunteer leaders. If you get in a small boat you always wear a life jacket. No life jacket, no boating. We do not swim on an unpatrolled surf beach because of the risks from undertow, rips and sharks. This applies on days of big waves and days of apparently smooth water. It applies to leaders and to campers. We keep our canoes and kayaks within 100 metres of the shore except when a program director approves a lake crossing because that reduces the risks from sudden wind changes and capsizes.

All of these rules involve restrictions on what any person can do. But they make possible safe enjoyment of the lakes within the boundaries they set. And they make it tolerable for a volunteer leader to accept the responsibility of leading a group in a setting that could become dangerous.

The vast majority of campers and leaders accept the safety rules. With the few who do not, we first try further explanations and negotiating an agreement. If that fails, as it has occasionally, the camper can stay at the main camp site while others go on a canoe expedition. Occasionally it has been necessary to send a camper home if his/her behaviour has been seen as a danger to others or an unacceptable responsibility for a volunteer leader.

It is a condition of being a leader in the Cooinda program that a person signs an agreement to support Camp Cooinda Incorporated's program policies by what they say and what they do while a leader in the program. This provides clear expectations about some leadership responsibilities. It also gives all leaders and campers safety boundaries within which fun and challenges are possible at acceptable levels of risk.

A more challenging problem has been how to deal with campers who show little or no respect for other people - campers or leaders. An insensitive, cruel or vindictive person can do a great deal of damage to other people. We have seen a few campers who have deliberately spoiled the enjoyment of the rest of their group or set out to

push volunteer leaders to the point of breakdown. Occasionally aggressive behaviour has threatened serious physical harm to other people.

After seeing attempts to negotiate used manipulatively by such campers, we adopted a clear set of guidelines that involve a warning and then removal from their group as a step to removal from the camp.

The Camper's Code, which a camper and a parent or guardian sign as part of an application to come to a camp, seems to have made it possible to increase the enjoyment of camp for the vast majority of young people. It has been hard but necessary to accept that there are limits to the complex behaviour and the amount of pressure with which leaders and campers can cope in a creative way.

THE CAMPER'S CODE

I, (print name) want to be a camper at Cooinda this summer.

I understand that

- * the camp is organised in groups with everyone sharing in activities and jobs that need to be done,
- * the leaders give their time to help campers enjoy the outdoor activities and they also look forward to enjoying the experiences themselves.

I promise that during camp I will

- * respect other campers
- * respect and co-operate with leaders in a friendly way
- * do a fair share of the jobs that keep the camp running smoothly
- * follow the directions of leaders about safety matters including boating, swimming and fires.

I have talked about this with a parent or guardian and we both agree that if I do not put this camper's code into practice, the leader in charge may send me home during the camp and that a parent will arrange for my return travel from the camp within 24 hours of being notified by the leader in charge.

Camper's signature

Date

Experience and religion

Throughout most of the twentieth century there has been an energetic debate in education about the appropriate relation of theory to experience. There have been exponents of experience as the essential pathway to appreciation of theory; there have been others who have pointed to the role of theory as the guide to experience. In the

Christian churches, the debate has been about the relative importance in Christian education of teaching doctrines and reflecting on experience.

In my professional work as an educator with the Uniting Church in Australia, the requirements of the denomination and the weight of tradition often meant that encouragement for young people to reflect on personal experience received insufficient attention and teaching doctrines (other people's interpretation of their experience) was regarded as normative. The educational task was challenging and professionally interesting. But the compromises of working in a large organisational education system sometimes left promising aspects of education inadequately explored.

In the Camp Coinda program I was free to focus very strongly on the kinds of experiences that could enrich young people. We deliberately did not include in the program "teaching" about religion or about values, even though almost everything we did was about values. From time to time this meant that leaders who understood Christianity as defined by doctrines dropped out of our programs because they thought we did not do enough to teach young people about Christianity. On the other hand, we attracted both leaders and young people who had found traditional church programs alienating.

While the emphasis was on the experiences campers were having in the camp program, I tried in a series of brief "Thought for the day" stories and reflections to offer ideas they could use to make choices about some important aspects of their lives. I was encouraged by how well they listened and by the feedback I received from some campers.

I understood that what we were trying to do in the Camp Coinda program was embodying what Christianity is about. In recent decades institutional religion has a poor record of communication with young people. The language it commonly uses comes from past eras in thought. Religious ideas as they are commonly expressed do not appear to many contemporary young people to be about anything that matters much for the gutsy stuff of living.

So Camp Coinda took a different approach that complemented the more traditional religious education approach. We were offering experiences that were about what you think of yourself, how you relate to others, and what is important to you. To me, it was at least part of what Jesus was on about in the early first century. After 40 years, it seems a worthwhile and satisfying venture that is both educational and Christian in a very profound sense.

A typical 2 day expedition to Bunga Arm in the 1990s

Members of the patrol: 5 girls and 5 boys aged 15 -16, and 2 leaders, a woman and a man.

Craft: 6 two person fibreglass Canadian canoes

A fly on the wall of a tent would see a scene of great activity as a patrol prepares to leave on an expedition. Immediately after breakfast, personal gear is packed into canoe barrels. In the expedition room, camping equipment and provisions for the menu, negotiated the night before with the expedition supplies leader, are checked item by item as the leaders and a couple of campers pack them into marked barrels. There is probably a bit of last minute trading. "We don't like vegemite. Can we swap for a second jar of peanut butter?" "Could we have pappadams for before dinner and popcorn to make for supper?" The patrol first aid kit and the UHF radio in a waterproof bag are packed to be readily accessible.

The patrol meets with the Program Director for a final briefing on a weather update, their route and their camp site in the National Coastal Park. Then canoes are carried from the racks to the waters' edge, barrels securely tied in, and PFDs (personal flotation devices - what we used to call "life jackets") selected and put on.

Then six red canoes head out along the shore to the Point Turner beacon and across the lake to Sperm Whale Head. Depending on the wind and the waves it can be hard paddling or a sunshine cruise. Either way, there are a lot of paddle strokes in 12 km.

The patrol stops at a sandy beach for a swim and lunch. At a favourite place for expedition breaks, Barton Island, they can jump into 2 metre deep water from a sparkling white sand beach.

After lunch they paddle past Ocean Grange and 3 km further down Bunga Arm to their camp site. Canoes are beached, barrels untied and unpacked, and shelter tarpaulins erected among the trees (most groups choose large tarpaulin shelters rather than small hike tents).

The patrol may swim in the lake or take the short hike over the sand dunes to the ocean beach for some frisbee games or beach cricket. After dinner, they will almost certainly go back to watch the moonlight on the waters of Bass Strait, and, with a bit of luck, to see dolphins in the waves and the occasional shooting star. Most groups will walk some way along the magnificent stretch of literally ninety miles (about 145 km) of superb ocean beach.

Dinner is cooked over an open fire. It may be diced beef or chicken pieces in a wok with spices and soy sauce served with rice or foil wrapped potatoes baked in the fire. Dessert could be apricot halves with chocolate UHT custard or the perennial favourite – banana boats with chocolate and marshmallows. Any spare internal spaces (and some that aren't spare) will be filled by damper and honey and/or a billy of freshly popped popcorn.

It may be midnight, and sometimes later, before 12 bodies in sleeping bags are quiet under the large tarp shelter. But most of them will sleep well into the morning, unless their expedition schedule requires an early start. There will be time for breakfast and another swim before repacking the barrels and tying them into the canoes. Every item of rubbish will be taken with them, leaving the site clean. Then they are ready for another day of paddling, jokes, and the occasional blister.

Mid afternoon they will arrive back at the base camp There are billies, wok, plates, cups and cutlery to wash, tarps to clean and fold, supplies to return to the store, barrels to wash and drain, sleeping bags to air - and occasionally to dry.

Then comes the bliss of hot showers.

They have canoed about 24 km through some of the most beautiful coastal lake scenery in Australia. They will have faced the challenge of completing a trip under their own power. And they will have enjoyed the zany fun of being with a group of friends cooking food on an open fire and sleeping under the stars. It will be two days most will remember as special.

Behind the scenes

Canoe expeditions are the best loved feature of camp for most campers. They are about exploring new places, having fun with the group, sleeping under the stars, doing something different. To make the fun safe there is a lot of activity behind the scenes.

The Program Director ensures that the route, destination, radio call times, and mobile radio unit number for the patrol are recorded on a wall chart beside the radio base set. All mobile radios are programmed for SELCALL that allows a leader to push one button on the radio to set off a beeper in the camp office and establish immediate radio connection. Someone is within the sound of the beeper for 24 hours a day. At night, the volume of the beeper is turned up so that it will wake the person sleeping in the next room.

There are two required radio calls from the patrol – when they have arrived at their destination and next morning before breakfast. Once the call comes to say the patrol has arrived, the Program Directors know the patrol is not as vulnerable to sudden weather changes and they can deploy the safety boats more freely. The morning radio call will give the leaders of the expedition patrol an updated weather forecast and let them check whether there is a fire ban.

Each crossing of the open lake is at a time agreed between the patrol leaders and the Program Directors either before the start of the expedition or by radio. The weather forecast influences approval for crossings. A Program Director on the beach monitors their progress through binoculars while they are crossing open water. The launch or the Stacer must be on standby.

If the weather blows up on the way back from an expedition, the expedition leaders will radio the camp base and negotiate the next step. It may be that the launch will cross the lake to take on board their gear and escort 2 or 3 canoes at a time across the open water where even mild winds can push up 1/2 metre waves and whitecaps.

At night, a fast boat, fuelled and ready to go for night travel, sits on a trailer at the water's edge just below the camp office and radio base station. An intercom unit, also with a beeper that can be turned up at night, connects the radio room to the Program Director's cabin. If someone in the patrol camped 12 km away wakes at 2.00 am with bad stomach pains, within about 15 minutes the rescue boat with two leaders can be

on the water and the base radio stations for UHF and marine radio staffed. Three quarters of an hour later the camper can be in a car on the way to a doctor at Bairnsdale Hospital, alerted by phone to expect them. It doesn't often happen, but when it does, it happens fast to a clearly formulated plan recorded in the volume of operational procedures sitting on the shelf beside the radio operator and also on the table in the Program Director's cabin.

Expeditions are fun. Safety planning makes them possible.