

Camper's Choice

Michael Brandwein

It's 10:05 p.m. As we stand outside the car, none of us is aware that at 10:26 p.m. the car will be involved in a serious collision and that one of us will die.

The group hanging around the car tells me to get in. I don't want to. I know that all of them have been drinking at the party. I've been drinking myself. A little. But as usual I've pretended to have more than I really did, because I've really only been drinking to fit in. To not stick out. Nothing is as painful to me as sticking out.

They're shouting at me from the car.

I don't understand why, but my brain suddenly flashes on when I was a kid. I'm at summer camp, in the dining hall. Someone has just dropped their food. Every one of the campers at our table laughs loudly. Some point at the person who dropped the food. I feel myself laughing a little, too. It's not a real laugh. It's a fake one that I've learned to do, to laugh when I don't really think something's funny, but just to fit in. To do what the others do.

I notice that my counselor is not laughing. My counselor gets up and we're all getting ready for a lecture. But instead the counselor walks right by all of us and goes to the one camper at the far corner of our table who didn't laugh. The counselor kneels next to that camper. I can't remember the counselor's name. I can't remember very much of what the counselor looks like. But I can hear the counselor say something to the camper who didn't laugh. It's in a low voice, but just loud enough for everyone to hear.

The counselor says, "I've been at this camp for four years. I just wanted you to know that what you just did is one of the strongest, smartest, and most important things I've ever seen here. Nice work."

One of the campers who has laughed the loudest makes a face and says that the camper "didn't do anything."

The counselor stands. Smiles. "That's exactly right. And I hope you remember that." Then the counselor walks off to help clean up the spill.

They're in the car now. They're calling me names through the open window. I stand on the curb. The car engine starts. One of my friends asks if they should drive by my house first "to get a permission slip from my mommy." I want to go with them. I don't want to lose my friends. I just want to fit in. But I'm worried about going with them right now in this car.

I'm at camp again. I'm asking my counselor if I can do something that's kind of stupid on the climbing wall. I suppose I could break my neck doing it, but no doubt about it, I'd look really cool. I ask if it's OK. My counselor doesn't answer. Doesn't lecture. Instead, my counselor asks, "What does your stomach tell you?" I pause. It's a weird question. But I think I get what it means. I say that I guess that it might not be a good idea. My counselor smiles and puts a hand on my shoulder. My counselor says, "Always listen to your stomach...."

They call from the car. “So make up your mind. Are you with us or not?”

Some groups are going to play a game together. Our counselor says we can't. We're supposed to be someplace else right now. These other groups shouldn't be going either because the schedule says they should be at other activities. Someone in our group says “Why can't we go? The other groups are doing it.” Another camper says, “Oh, great, we've got Counselor Goody.” Our counselor stops. Says nothing. Sits down at our feet. Asks us to sit down. We do, wondering what will be said.

“You're right,” says our counselor. “They are doing it. But they're not us. This is our group. It's our choice. We have to decide who we are and what we do. We can do what everyone else is doing. Or we can do what we're supposed to do. Which choice is strongest? Which one is the hardest to do? We have to decide who we are. Are we strong? Can we do tough things?”

None of us speaks. Our counselor says, “And by the way, friends don't call friends names. People who respect each other don't put each other down. And they don't make them uncomfortable. I don't like being called names. Please don't do it again.” Our counselor gets up, smiles, and says brightly, “OK, let's go.”

I approach the car. I put my fingers around the door handle. My stomach tells me not to get into the car. It's really hard for me not to go with them. I release the door handle. Someone from inside the car says loudly, “Leave the chicken here.” I hear the engine rev up. The car spins out onto the street. I can hear the tires squeal. I hear the laughter through the windows. I know that they are laughing at me.

I stand by myself on the curb. I'm worried about what my friends are going to say. I'm worried about who they are going to tell.

But for the first time, I wonder if they're my friends.

In a way, I don't like what I've decided, but I know it had to come out this way—that I've made the best possible choice.

I begin to walk home. I think of the camp counselor. I still can't remember the name. But now I can remember what the voice sounded like.

It's 10:26 p.m.

My memory is clearer now. I can see the counselor's face.

It's you.

From *Training Terrific Staff Volume Two* by Michael Brandwein (2008), Chapter 42

© 2001 by Michael Brandwein / All Rights Reserved / 847-940-9820 / mail@michaelbrandwein.com

Individual camps may copy and distribute this handout to their staff for educational purposes if this entire five line notice is included on the copy. Any other use, reproduction, storage, distribution, or transmission, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, Internet, or otherwise) is prohibited by law without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. Thank you!