While Goodbye is Never Enough for Me, It’s Perfect for Him

*By Jessica Lahey*

I spent a lot of time in a foggy, hormone-soaked haze when I was pregnant with my first son. I was in law school at the time, and it was much more entertaining to ponder the future contents of his nursery bookshelf or the tears I'd shed on his first day of kindergarten than the details of civil procedure and contracts. Before I'd even begun to show, I'd stocked his bookshelves with my own childhood favorites, and the list of possible boy and girl names had already been affixed to the refrigerator door.

My husband managed to stay rooted in the everyday reality of graduate school, grocery shopping, and bill-paying, and found my mental meanderings entertaining, if a little odd.

Oddest of all, he felt, was my nostalgic and emotional attachment to camp — specifically to Chimney Corners Camp in Becket, Massachusetts — and my inexplicable excitement about sending our own child away for the summer, a child we'd yet to lay eyes on, let alone consider abandoning to the care of others in the wilds of the Berkshire mountains.

This lack of imagination is not his fault; I have found that people who did not attend camp as a child often don't get it, and not for my lack of trying to explain it. I've described, in great detail, the experience of living in a cabin, tightly packed in with nine other girls and a counselor, idolizing the teenage, cool-kid junior counselors, the anxiety and pride of surviving an overnight, and the angst of the session's final night. My husband stares blankly as I describe the end-of-day songs, complete with crossed arms and hand-holding, and the weepy, late-night soul-baring that shaped my summer relationships.

My friend K.J. doesn't get it either. She tolerates such talk, but barely. Once, when we attended a party in New York City to celebrate the first anniversary of the Huffington Post's parenting vertical, I discovered that Lori Leibovich, then a Huffington Post editor, attended Chimney Corners Camp as well. We'd never met before, but no matter. Ten minutes later we were reminiscing and singing the traditional closing circle song ("The sun is in the west, across the way / A Chimney Corners day has passed away.") by the fireplace in the bar of the Midtown Hilton.

K.J. just rolled her eyes.

Fast-forward a number of years and I now had two sons. When it came time to sign them up for camp, I was torn. Becket, the brother camp to my beloved Chimney Corners, was an obvious first choice, but my sons had other ideas. Where we live, the camp of choice is Camp Coniston, in Croydon, New Hampshire. All of my older son's friends were going there, and while I put up a respectable fight fueled by a sense of duty and nostalgia, they won in the end.

My older son, Ben, inherited my husband's practicality, and established ground rules for our conduct at camp drop-off well before we were due to leave him at Coniston. I wrote about these rules for The Atlantic, in the essay "A Summer Camp Lesson: Good-bye and Go Away, Thank You Very Much (Lahey, 2013)." His rules were outlined in the opening paragraph of that piece:

Three years ago, when he was eleven, my son Ben set down a very specific parental code of conduct we'd be expected to follow at summer camp drop-off. We could say our goodbyes at home, but once we arrived at camp, any displays of affection, attempts to make his bed, arrange his things, or force premature familiarity with his cabin mates would be strictly prohibited. We could hang around during registration, watch while they check him for lice, help him lug his bags to his cabin, and shake hands with his counselor, but after that, our parental duties were complete. We were expected to say goodbye, and go away, thank you very much.

Drop-off went according to his strict instructions. I took him to his cabin while his little brother played outside. While the other parents fussed over the details of bed making and laundry sorting, I kept my mouth shut. I'd promised to stay out of his stuff, away from his sheets, and save for greeting the counselor, refrain from excess chitchat. He dumped his stuff on the first empty bed he saw, he hugged me, and that was that. Thanks, mom; it's time to go.

Ben had a fantastic first summer at Coniston, followed by three more fantastic years after that. As I write this essay, he is waiting to hear about whether or not he's been accepted into the counselor-in-training program, and while he doesn't talk about it much, I can tell he's on tenterhooks.

His younger brother, Finnegan, is five years younger, and he's watched Ben come and go from camp with great interest and more than a little trepidation. "A Summer Camp Lesson: Good-bye and Go Away, Thank You Very Much" concludes with the beginning of Finn's camping journey:

On the way back to the car, my younger son slipped his hand into mine, something he hardly ever does anymore.

"I think I'd like to come to camp next year," he said.

"Really?" I said, picturing him running around among these hulking adolescents.

"Yep," he nodded. "I think I'll be big enough next year." And with that, he let go of my hand and ran ahead to gather up a pile of pine needles he'd spotted just off the path. As I watched him attempt to stuff two handfuls of the needles into his pockets, I realized that next year, he'd be almost as old as his brother was the first year he went to camp. So just maybe, if I do my job right, he will be big enough next year. Big enough to want me to say goodbye, and go away, thank you very much.

As it turns out, he was not big enough that next year, nor the year after that. Finally, in his tenth year, he agreed it was time, and we prepared to drop him off for his first day of camp.

Finn and Ben are very different kids, so it was appropriate that Finn had come up with his own set of expectations for that first day. Where Ben is practical, Finn is sentimental. Where Ben's hugs are cordial, Finn's are visceral. Accordingly, I sensed that where Ben's good-bye was cursory, Finn's would unfold in stages, in his own (very) sweet time.

Finn's first year of camp coincided with Ben's last. We loaded Ben, Finn, and Ben's friend Charley into the back seat, and managed to cram their luggage into the trunk for the drive to Coniston. During the cramped car ride, Charley and Ben filled Finn in on all the details he'd need to know — how mealtime duties worked, which showers kept their pressure the longest, how to use the wooden box under the bunk to its best storage advantage, and which activities were the most awesome.

We accompanied the boys to their lice check (and heaved a subtle sigh of relief when they cleared inspection) and headed over to the boys' cabins, while sneaking looks at Finn to make sure he was holding up under what we knew was pretty significant nervousness. Charley and Ben dropped their stuff off and then escorted Finn to his cabin. They helped him pick out the "best" bunk, showed him his storage box, and explained where he could put all of his stuff while we met Finn's counselor.

Finn glanced at the strangers — his cabin mates — milling about and looking a little lost as their parents chattered away about towel rotations and fitted sheet folding. He inched back out toward the door, not quite ready to deal with all the introductions and new acquaintances.

As we stood on the cabin's porch considering what to do next, I asked, "Do you want us to walk around with you, or would you like Ben and Charley to show you around?"

There was only one correct answer, of course, and we all knew it.

"Ben and Charley," he said, and moved closer to his brother.

As we departed the boys' camp across a narrow path through the wetland that feeds into Lake Coniston, Ben suddenly jumped to his right, nearly falling over in an attempt to avoid a tan-colored something that streaked past us before we could process what we'd seen.

It was a fawn, barely two or three days old, coat still matted in spots from its recent birth. It trotted down the single-track path, heading away from main camp toward the boys' village. It was the size of a large puppy, so close I could have slipped my hand under its belly and lifted into my arms.

"What just happened?" Ben said, as he spun around and watched the fawn's delicate rear legs disappear into the woods.

Everyone paused and instinctively stepped off the path, expecting its mother to come thundering along, close behind its vulnerable newborn. When she failed to materialize after a moment or two, we fell back into single-file on the path, muttering to ourselves in disbelief.

As the boys regained their composure and wondered aloud why a doe might leave such a young fawn alone to fend for himself, I watched my own offspring prepare himself for our impending departure. He stuck close to Ben and Charley, observing them for cues about how to behave, clearly basking in the reflected glory of their senior-ness. He listened as they explained the rules of Gaga, the ball game played in a pit near the entrance to camp, and the subtle details of Coniston social hierarchy as it relates to shower times.

I eyed the counselors and camp staff as they went about their first-day duties, praying that they understood that Finn may look confident, but he may well need extra help, maybe even repeated directions to the waterfront or the arts and crafts building. I wanted to go back and remind his counselor to keep an eye out for homesickness and signs of worry, but I restrained myself. I reassured myself that counselors and staff get a hundred daily reminders that they are responsible for other people's children, and they hardly needed a hundred and one, no matter how well-meant.

They knew. They knew when my parents dropped me off at Chimney Corners, they knew when I entrusted them with Ben five years ago, and they continue to know.

As we neared the camp entrance, I looked to Finn for cues to my own behavior. Ben had been so explicit about his own wishes for "goodbye, and go away, thank you very much," but I was unsure about what Finn wanted from me. As we milled about, making conversation, Finn suddenly and awkwardly lurched over to hug me goodbye. I'd expected a lingering, tight grip, but he opted for his brother's casual approach — a squeeze, "Bye," and release.

As I'd expected, our goodbye was less than enough for me, but exactly enough for him.

I watched them walk away, Finnegan following a few steps behind his big brother and his big brother's even bigger friend. Somewhere along the way, he had grown up and was finally big enough to say goodbye, and go away, thank you very much.

**Reference**  
Lahey, J. (2013, June 25). A summer camp lesson: Good-bye and go away, thank you very much. The Atlantic. Retrieved from [www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/) a-summer-camp-lesson-good-bye-and-go-awaythank- you-very-much/277145/

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