

SPIRITUAL/INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"Camp Castaway"

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As the wheels slowly round the corner, entering the towering white iron gates, the excitement and enthusiasm is bursting through our bodies. I look around and see Ashly crazily running around in circles, Brett and Eric together screaming as girly and giddily as they possibly can, and Anne Grace in her own world behind those Nike shades and visor but nonetheless expressing such joy. I feel my own face hurting from smiling so much, my throat beginning to feel sore from too much screaming, and my body jumping up and down repeatedly. And all this for a charter bus driving up towards us??? This bus, and the many more to follow, is what Ashly, Brett, Eric, Anne Grace and the rest of our group of thirty-some yellow t-shirt clad high schoolers has been anxiously awaiting for months. Cheering and jumping up and down, I was part of a group called the "Work Crew" at a Young Life camp, named Castaway, in northern Minnesota. We were all volunteering our month of July in the summer of 2001 to staff the camp.

I remember vividly the hour each week of welcoming the new buses full of tired, hungry and expectant campers, because it truly embodied the emotions and enthusiasm we all felt. We had made a large time commitment, given up a month's worth of summer income to serve these campers—and we were thrilled to be doing so! We all shared the same goal: to do our best to insure that the campers' week

was the “best week of their lives.” My role in achieving this goal was to serve the campers their meals as a waitress in the dining hall. Of the few jobs I have had up to this point in my life, this was, without a doubt, the most memorable, beneficial and rewarding. It has led me to think further about what I want to do for the rest of my life. It has also shaped my future, giving me lasting friendships that I deeply cherish, and it has given me memories for a lifetime as well. The greatest individual and spiritual growth I have experienced thus far was during those short four weeks I spent being a waitress at Castaway. I learned that my attitude has a significant impact on how I view not only serving others, but also on life in general. One’s attitude coincides with actions and words, and I worked on bettering all of those during my month at Castaway.

I found that my job as a waitress had more highlights and rewarding aspects than I could have imagined. I will never forget the first meal (out of sixty) I served that month. I had butterflies in my stomach, and as far as I could gather from the facial expressions around me, many of my fellow waiters and waitresses did as well. For some, it was the first time carrying a big oval tray full of steaming food. Others considered themselves “pros,” but the nerves were there regardless. As our camp speaker finished praying over the first meal, we knew our “big moment” was only seconds away. “And now, I am proud to present to you the two-thousand and one Work Crewwww!!!” As Wayne yelled this introduction into the microphone, the campers all went nuts cheering for us while we filed

out of the kitchen doors whooping and hollering. With giddy grins, we arrived at our tables and returned to the kitchen spill and mess free! (This is not to imply we were spill and mess free the other fifty-nine meals we served!)

One of the many things I gained from my work experience was the realization of the phenomenal power a group possesses to establish an ideal work ethic and lift morale. I had never worked with so many people at one time who desired such a positive and uplifting work environment and made it much more than that. Even though we all helped one another clear and reset assigned tables, there were a few individuals in particular that went above and beyond during our remaining days. Our last week at camp was a mixture of varying emotions and moods. We were hanging on to the excitement of the previous three weeks, even though we were exhausted from the combination of lack of sleep and continuous long hours of hard work. A group of about eight, both from the dining hall work crew and a few of the housekeeping crew, decided they would stay up late into the night setting up the dining hall for the Hawaiian luau the following day. This process of transforming the dining hall was one that the entire camp staff usually participated in because it was such an enormous job. Eight determined and truly servant-like individuals took on the task of removing all the chairs and storing them in the basement, lowering the tables onto small horse saddles and putting up the buckets and buckets of decorations, all so the rest of us could catch up on sleep. The next morning, along with the rest of the dining hall staff, I sleepily stumbled

down the stairs and into the dining hall, prepared to tackle the time-consuming luau setup. My jaw dropped and I heard the words, "No way," come out of my mouth. I could not thank my friends enough for such an incredible act of service. It was moments like these that exemplified the passion of those I worked with as they expressed a Christ-like attitude toward one another and toward the campers. It was our job to serve the campers daily, but it was so easy to want to serve those who worked so hard alongside of us as well.

Another example of this servanthood we all strove towards was an act of one of my closest friends from that month, Megan Conrad. She was one of five other girls with whom I lived in a room. We were girls who were used to having our own bed, our own closet, but most importantly, our own bathroom! Living in such tight quarters made for some interesting, but usually quite humorous, conflicts. Throughout the course of the month, we all gradually began to care a little bit less about the condition of our room, and we appropriately and fondly nicknamed it "the sty." It was a very rare find to see one of the bunk beds made or even to see most of the floor. I came back up to the room one mid-morning and thought I had walked into the wrong room. Each one of the six beds was made (in the proper "hospital bed" style), the floor was spotless, our clothes were folded neatly in their places, and there was candy and a slip of paper with a verse on it on each of our pillows. I was overjoyed by the sheer shock of the cleanliness of our room and touched so deeply by this act of love. I discovered that it was Megan who had been behind the whole

thing, and that did not surprise me one bit. She is a girl of amazing character and strength, and one who, obviously, was willing to go out of her way to serve others. Along with the other girls of the Cutty Sark room, I was humbled by her willingness to serve us so abundantly. In my life, I feel that I am called to “Humble [myself], therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift [me] up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6). Megan showed us girls a very concrete example of how this can be done.

My dining hall work crew boss, Mary, also demonstrated an incredible degree of humility to “her crew.” A hilarious and somewhat quirky lady in her early fifties, Mary imprinted on our hearts the joy of laughter and the love of reaching out to others. She started our month with a high-pitched laugh, hot pink and tiger striped acrylic nails and a personality you loved to be around. Although she spent a great deal of time entertaining us with her crazy leopard or zebra print outfits, funky fake hair pieces, and silly comments, we all recognized and adored her for the qualities that truly made her a godly woman. She was willing at any time to spend the time she had to show us her love, to encourage us, and to advise us on the direction of life we all longed to follow. Mary led our dining staff devotionals each day and also spent many hours one-on-one with us. One of the most meaningful conversations I had during the month was one with Mary. She could tell that something had been on my heart for a few days one week, and she came and found me to talk about it. She gave me a whole new perspective on the situation I was dealing with as we sat in the cool

summer breeze that afternoon. I deeply admired her charisma and her spirit, her experience-backed advice, and the way she had raised and continued to care for her own family. I learned so much throughout the month not only from Mary but also from other amazing individuals, each endowed with qualities of great character I strove to implement in my own life.

During my month spent volunteering at Castaway, I saw an amazing transformation in myself. My heart was touched on a daily basis by random campers, or by those with whom I worked. I learned so much about my faith through my own thoughts and actions and through my interactions with others. My heart was humbled and broken (meaning becoming aware of a change that needs to happen in my heart) more times than I would have imagined, and it brought such amazing growth for me. Being given an incredible opportunity, I thrived on taking away as much as I possibly could from this work experience.

My love for serving others and God flourished throughout the month, and I feel as though it is my vocation, or calling, to be part of some form of service later in my life. God calls me to “Through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13), and I feel like I spent a month really finding out what that means. I loved the campers whom I barely knew but served wholeheartedly, and I loved those with whom I worked. I have an incredible bond with those people because we all spent our month serving campers, one another, and our God.

I could not have been blessed with a better experience, one

with so much to be gained on the level of personal growth. I learned that experience, love, and friendship take precedence over money no matter what. The view I had of money and the potential loss of it from volunteering was completely reversed. By the end of the month; I would not have taken any money for the job I did. I felt I was blessed to have had such a remarkable opportunity. I also learned the importance of having the right attitude. It was easy on some days to forget the reason I was working and just get frustrated and aggravated by little things. However, life is so much more beneficial and enjoyable if we appreciate the opportunities we are given and the people we have in our lives. Whatever situation we come across in life, it is all a matter of attitude. I hope, later in my life, to be so lucky as to find another "job" like the one I had this past summer at Castaway. I would then be able to bring my experience and the principles I learned into my future, serving others while continuing to become a better-developed person, both personally and spiritually.