

NovaVerie

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A Cosmic Sense of Belonging

The narrow gravel road that marked the final stretch of our journey would have seemed endless if not for the literal signs of encouragement along the side of it. We had been driving for two hours by the time we reached the parking lot, and I was scrambling to get out of the car to stretch. The purpose of this long drive was to drop me off at the [REDACTED] Science Center for a two-week long summer camp centered around natural sciences. This was not my first time attending summer camp, as I had attended [REDACTED] Ecology Camp four years prior. Although I have fond memories of [REDACTED] Ecology Camp overall, I had trouble making friends there and had felt quite lonely. Loneliness was something that I had grown accustomed to at this point in my life, but I dreaded it nonetheless. Despite all my excitement about camp, I was worried I would spend the two weeks socially isolated. In reality, I not only made friends, but I found the sense of belonging that I had long been yearning for.

On the second day of camp, our first guest speaker, an entomologist from the University of [REDACTED], was there to tell us about his work and teach us how to use our bug catching equipment. Before long, we were all scattered around the outskirts of the pond with our bug nets and magnifying glasses; our bright orange backpacks standing out against the overwhelmingly green surroundings of the lush foliage. It was thrilling getting to catch insects in our bug nets and watch them flutter around in the mesh insect cages! I picked up rocks and

observed the bugs living under them, observed the way they crawled and wriggled. Admiring them filled me with so much joy and wonder at all the life around me. I could not help but marvel at the habitats of such small creatures that often go unnoticed by us in our daily lives.

Our first field trip was to [REDACTED] Creek, where we learned how to catch and observe aquatic animals, such as fish and decapods. These animals were scooped up in a big rectangular net that had to be dragged through the water by multiple people. When a common watersnake got scooped out of the water, a girl I had become friends with gently picked it up with its head clasped between her fingers. She held it carefully, and excitedly asked, “Would you like to pet it?” I was ecstatic as I ran my finger along its smooth scaly skin, wet from the water. It had been so long since I had gotten to pet this creature that I love so dearly. Throughout the rest of camp my friend caught snakes for me to pet whenever she could, including another common watersnake that she got out of a tree! It was wonderful to bond with someone over our shared love of snakes.

On our field trip to [REDACTED] River, we talked about water quality testing and indicator species, such as benthic macro-invertebrates. We were surveying the species present in the river and using our data to determine the quality of the water. As I walked through the shallow water, my feet settled into the pebbles with each step. I stood there staring down into the rippling water, amazed by all the little creatures living in it and how much they can tell us about their home. Knowing about all the life inhabiting the river that I had never notice before, it all seemed so wonderous. I marveled at the small creatures swimming around and clinging to the

rocks, creatures that I have surely encountered hundreds of times before without acknowledging. Some had many legs, some looked more like worms, and some even had shells.

It was so much fun searching for benthic macro-invertebrates as if it was a scavenger hunt, and ever since then I have been fascinated with them! The way that their wellbeing tells us about the health of their ecosystem makes everything feel intrinsically connected. There is something so beautiful about there being complex creatures and habitats that are so small that it is possible to never notice them. It makes the world feel less empty.

Towards the end of our two weeks together, we went camping by the [REDACTED] River. The grand open field of grass at the campsite was sprinkled with little white flowers; the trees were sprinkled with our tents and hammocks. As the sun set, beams of golden sunlight filtered through the leaves. Gathering around the campfire, we roasted hot dogs and s'mores while people laughed with their new-found friends. Once the sky had fully darkened, we all laid on the grass in the cool night air, looking up at the constellations. We talked about the stars and their stories; stories told centuries ago by people looking up at the same constellations as we were now. The vast night sky filled our fields of vision as we shared an experience as old as humanity, feeling a connection to humans just like us that we will never know. We have always looked to the stars, whether for guidance in our travels and just to gaze in awe of the universe. I felt a sort of kinship to every other human that has shared this experience with me. I felt a sense of connection that I had long been searching for. I felt alive.

Before going to this summer camp I was terrified of social alienation, being alone in a room full of people. I feared the potential social rejection I could have faced at camp. What if nobody there liked me? What if they thought I was weird? But I went anyways because I loved and was excited by science and nature. Because of this camp, I found a connection to nature and the world that made me feel less alone. I am forever surrounded by both living things and the memories of them that the world holds. I learned how to cope with loneliness and so I fear it less. When we socialize, we are looking for ourselves in the other, looking to understand and be understood. I learned to look at the world around me and see myself in it; learned how to understand it and feel understood by it. This obviously has not rid me of my need for other people, but when I am alone it does not crush me the way it used to. The connection I feel to the world around me has also made me less scared of branching out socially. Partially because I already feel intrinsically connected to the people around me, but also because if I do experience social rejection my sense of self does not crumble within me. I did make friends at camp, but I think what I really got from it was the connection I felt to the world around me, a cosmic sense of belonging.