A PLACE APART: THE ROLE OF NOSTALGIA IN A DETACHED COMMUNITY

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This work investigated the power of nostalgia in perpetuating rituals and folkways in detached communities. The focus of this study was Camp Luther, a family camp operated under the auspices of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries. Over the summer of 2010, approximately sixty interviews were conducted at the camp, and qualitative data from these interviews was used to formulate ideas and theoretical underpinnings for a concept the author calls “the nostalgic reflex.” These interviews were transcribed and then coded to indicate the manner in which nostalgia was driving the thought processes of the interview subjects. Quotations from the interviews were used throughout the document to support the theory of the nostalgic reflex.

The interview data was rich with language and notions that indicated the level to which adherents of the camp were “under the influence” of the nostalgic reflex insofar as their devotion to the ethos of the camp’s character was concerned. One of the most interesting data points was people’s willingness to raise a large sum of money to preserve the lakefront of the camp, giving credence to the theory of “solastalgia” as coined by Glenn Albrecht. The language of the interview subjects also dovetailed neatly into Diane Barthel’s tenets of the Staged Symbolic Community. Also, the work borrowed from Edwin Friedman’s study of homeostasis and emotional triangles in his germinal work Generation to Generation. The study also parsed the differences between Svetlana Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgia, especially in maintenance of the hetero-normative male dominated status quo at the camp.

The work concludes that the academy has a somewhat overt bias against nostalgia. It noted with irony how it is ultimately nostalgia that undergirds the structure of the academy itself.
in the postmodern era. Further studies were discussed in the conclusion, inviting more discourse on the topic, especially in gender and ethnic studies. Ultimately, the work added to the ongoing influences of Harper, Davis, Lowenthal, Boym, and Wilson on the power of nostalgia.

From the conclusion:

So the nostalgic reflex is there to remind us in times of joy and adversity of those things which matter most. Like any faculty, it can be used for good or ill, depending on the motives of one who wields it. It remains within all of us. It is triggered on a daily basis, and its presence in our cognitive processes is often unseen, yet influential. I know, on a purely cognitive level, that Camp Luther is a collection of mildewed cabins, bland food, with a panoramic vista that only hints at the greater grandeur of an ocean view. This is what the photographs show and the palate recalls. The narrative of camp as polished through the lens of nostalgia, however, breathes magic into my cognition, and my desire for its luminosity trumps my rationalism every time. I only hope that others feel this quickening as I do, not necessarily for camp per se, but for something that adds value to their existence—a sense of Harper’s “presence,” even if that translates into a temporary escape from ennui and malaise.

Key words & terms: Nostalgia; Solastalgia; Nostalgic Reflex; Homeostasis; Staged Symbolic Community; Fear; Anxiety
In memory of my stepfather, Pastor Bill Zimmann, 1933-2011. He spent many afternoons beachcombing the shores of Lake Erie for rainbow glass and other bits of translucence.

“Everything is something else.”
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I am grateful to my spouse, Angela, for her unwavering support of my decision to return to the halls of academia for one last go-round. I owe much to my children, Seth, Chelsea, and Amadiya for their patience with me when I was absent from their lives in order to pursue this work. Hopefully this will serve to make your lives more meaningful and richer for the effort.

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CHAPTER ONE
HOMESICK FOR THE HAPPY SENSE

The end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time

Through the unknown remembered gate.

-- T.S. Eliot

To Start Where We Arrive

“Nostalgia” is an amorphous term, yet it defines a force that shapes identity and forms perspective within all of us. It was originally coined by a sixteenth century Swiss physician, Johannes Holfer, as a physical malady experienced by soldiers who were stationed far from home (Hutcheon). Svetlana Boym describes Holfer’s diagnosis of the afflicted thusly: “[they have] lost touch with the present” and possessed the “ability to hear voices or see ghosts” (7). Today nostalgia is mostly associated with sentimentality toward so-called simpler times or vintage commodities. The voices and ghosts may still remain, but are difficult to see in a world of postmodern consumption. What follows in this dissertation is a systematic examination of nostalgia’s complexities, as well a description of a place where I have found abundant examples of nostalgia in praxis—a veritable vortex of nostalgia at a Lutheran church camp in Ashtabula County, Ohio. Using this site for observation purposes, I introduce theories of those who have written about nostalgia from both a sociological and theoretical perspective, including the four functions of nostalgia as identified by Janelle Wilson, a framework which I use as a basis for my inquiry. A brief overview of literature follows as I construct a working definition of how nostalgia functions and how I believe this research will contribute to the conversation in the
sociology of religion and the field of cultural studies and identity formation (both individual and collective).

This project introduces the reader to a locale in which the theoretical functions of nostalgia come to life. For this study, I have chosen a Lutheran Church family camp out of the Finnish Lutheran tradition of the former Suomi Synod\(^1\) of Ohio. Camp Luther is located west of Conneaut, Ohio on the Lake Erie shoreline in Ashtabula County, about an hour west of Erie, Pennsylvania. Under the auspices of the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries in Ohio (LOMO), this camp has functioned as a family vacation resort for over seventy-five years. It belies the typical assumptions that people make about church camp in that it contains a fairly unique inter-generational aspect to its programming. Similar to the family resorts in the Catskills or the Chautauqua resorts, families come to Camp Luther for recreation and personal renewal. It is not uncommon for three or four generations of relatives to camp for a week together on an annual basis at this facility. Within Lutheranism, this kind of outdoor ministry is very unique—Camp Luther is one of only three outdoor facilities solely dedicated to family programming in the United States. Furthermore, unlike other Summer camping programs, both secular and church-affiliated, Luther has a relatively small yet dedicated base of “returning clientele,” and it is doing remarkably well at a time when other facilities of similar size are being dismantled and the properties sold for development. To wit: understanding the nuances of Camp Luther life is a concrete way to comprehend the power of nostalgia at work.

This chapter maps out the methodology used in this project; a combination of collected ethnographies and an amalgamated narrative of a typical week at camp as a tool for grounding

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\(^1\)A “synod” is a particular grouping within Lutheranism. It can be used to describe both geographical designations (like a diocese) or doctrinal/ethnic groups.
the various theories of nostalgia and what I am calling the *nostalgic reflex*. This term refers to my own theory of nostalgia, which is the notion that nostalgia’s primary function comes to us unbidden and acts as a buffer between the self and the world. These methods hopefully envelope the reader in the camp environment as well as provide a critical analysis of nostalgia working itself out in real time. This chapter also includes references to literature that I have used in framing research questions for the sake of giving flesh to the concepts of nostalgia I am seeking to develop here.

**Why Nostalgia? A Thesis Statement and Project Conceptualization**

The purpose of this dissertation is to show that nostalgia is an omnipresent and highly underrated motivating factor in the discourse of human life. This project seeks to add to the corpus of literature regarding the sociology of religion and the field of cultural studies. My observations suggest that nostalgia, in its various permutations, is an autonomous response to all forms of stimuli in one’s environment. I have chosen to study nostalgia’s functions at Camp Luther because of its unique cultural environment that invites nostalgic discourse by virtue of the traditions and folklore associated with the program and place.

I believe nostalgia is very relevant, yet often discounted in postmodern academic discourse, especially in the fields of cultural theory and sociology. Some would think that a more salient topic might be a focus on the intersection of class and ethnic identity or even cultural elitism as experienced by mostly white middle-aged folks in an exclusive setting. Others would focus on an examination of the cultic aspects that these camp rituals and folklore represent. What does a focus on nostalgia bring to the ongoing conversation in circles of cultural theory, history, folklore, and sociology? This work does not exhaust itself on these other concepts, but I trust it shows how nostalgia influences them and in some cases is the primary basis for their existence.
Furthermore, it carefully parses out the differences between nostalgia and other concepts: sentimentality, desire, and historical memory.

In addition, this project wrestles with theoretical issues such as:

- What role is nostalgia playing in the continuity of individual and collective identities in small detached religious communities like Camp Luther?
- Do the functions of nostalgia ultimately help or hinder the overall mission of the camp program?
- How can the resulting research from this project inform the ongoing discourse regarding systemic behavior the ontology of religious groupings or cults?

Most importantly, this project develops a grounded theory of the nostalgic reflex and its influences (Strauss, Corbin 14).

Defining Nostalgia and Identifying Salient Literature

Since the 1950’s, academics from various fields have contributed to the conversation about nostalgia. Among them, Ralph Harper, Fred Davis, David Lowenthal, Svetlana Boym, and Janelle Wilson are foremost in this discourse. This dissertation draws from these and other sources, though Janelle Wilson’s 2005 text neatly summarizes the prevailing theories and functions as the lens through which I will add to the conversation.

Called the “Father of American Existentialism,” Ralph Harper is the first American thinker in postmodernity to invoke nostalgia as a means of shaping and perpetuating identity. In his germinal work *Nostalgia*, published in 1966, Harper is often given to metaphor and poetics to describe nostalgia:
Nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence. The past which is over and gone, from which we have been or are being removed, but some magic becomes present again for a short while. But its realness seems even more familiar, because renewed, than it ever was, more enchanting and more lovely. *Magic-like it comes unasked, unanticipated,* in the middle of sterility and defeat, in the middle of a waste which is impregnated with longing. And what is longed for is what we do not usually have, a sense of the intimate, immediate presentation of the whole to our consciousness (my emphasis, 120).

In reading Harper, I have come to appreciate the reflexive quality of nostalgia. It is not easily captured in words or in quantifiable data. It is at best something we experience like a lucid dream, or at worst a painful reminder of failure and disappointment. Whatever the case, we don’t have to summon it—before we can take a breath, nostalgia rushes in to envelope our experience.

To define nostalgia, one must think in terms of metaphor, as Harper does. One must take certain risks to appear foolish or even child-like. We must admit that we hold certain items dear to us, even when in the cold light of analysis it seems counterproductive to do so. As Harper states, “We care for what lasts or should last. What we would give up last comes first in our caring” (120). That is to say, most of what we accumulate in this lifetime is utterly expendable, but there are a few things, tangible or not, to which we cling tenaciously. These items shape our identity, give our lives meaning and purpose. These are the things for which we are nostalgic.

Some might try to define these experiences in the realm of religion, but they cannot be pigeon-holed or limited to that particular realm. They are part of a larger meta-narrative involving the self, the system in which the self functions, and the world surrounding and influencing the system (intersecting systems). Defining nostalgia is difficult without resorting to
the use of poetry and metaphor, but the tangible results of its presence in our psyche are much easier to categorize by understanding its functions.

Janelle Wilson identifies four primary functions of nostalgia:

- Nostalgia is an intra-personal expression of self which subjectively provides one with a sense of continuity.
- Nostalgia is an interpersonal form of conversational play, serving the purpose of bonding.
- Nostalgia is a form of ideologizing or mystifying the past.
- Nostalgia can be used as a cultural commodity derived from the experience of a particular age-cohort and transformed into a market segment (19).

The ethnographic data collected from camp is used here to affirm the efficacy of these four functions. Some might find reason to argue for the primacy of one definition over the other. For example, neo-Marxists might make the case that nostalgia is indeed a cultural commodity used to shape the cultural identities of individuals while reifying the dominant ideology. While these debates are meritorious in their own right, taking part in them might distract from the main thesis in this dissertation. For our purposes of discussion, it is more beneficial to look for commonalities in the various aspects defined by Wilson to help understand the nostalgic reflex not only in the realm of a church camp, but in society as a whole. How do these various functions intersect in the day-to-day lives of people? What do the accounts of people who make a yearly pilgrimage to camp show us about the manner in which nostalgia shapes our identity?

A common theme found in Harper, Davis, Boym, and Wilson is the nostalgia as a means of restoring or shaping self-identity. Wilson writes:

For nostalgia to restore identity, the individual engages in selective memory and actively constructs former selves, while reconceptualizing and perhaps reevaluating both past and
present selves. Thus, memory, the actual recall of the past, and nostalgia, the emotional component of remembering and longing, are instrumental in one’s quest to know who one is (35).

Camp exists because campers continue to shape their identities through the camp folkways and rituals. Their memories of camp, and a willingness to repeat those memories, shapes not only the camp’s physical and programmatic existence but individual identity as well. People shape their identities through all sorts of cultural niches, vocations, hobbies, religions, etc. A multi-generational camp such as Luther provides an excellent cultural climate for Wilson’s four functions of nostalgia for people pre-disposed to this environment. This is not to say that Camp Luther campers are overly sentimental, but rather that at camp they have found a means of self-expression that best-fulfills their emotional needs. These functions of nostalgia fall within the rubric of the nostalgic reflex working itself out in real time. By understanding the functions of nostalgia, the nostalgic reflex exposes its theoretical underpinnings.

The first function, which defines nostalgia as a means of perpetuating self-continuity, helps us to be aware of the way in which nostalgia helps individuals cope with anxiety and change. Fred Davis states that it lends a sense of equilibrium and sameness to an otherwise chaotic universe. In Yearning for Yesterday: a Sociology of Nostalgia, he states: “In the clash of continuities and discontinuities with which life confronts us, nostalgia clearly attends more to the pleas for continuity, to the comforts of sameness and the consolations of piety” (51). When faced with the complexities of change, people often long for the simplicity of their childhoods. Like talismans, these longings (which more often than not offer kinder renditions of the actual history) provide emotional protection against the new challenges we face each day. Wilson reiterates the idea that the memories evoked by nostalgia are effectively selective. By using these “kinder,
gentler” memories, we are able to reconstruct the past self and in turn construct an identity for the present. This process helps us decide whether to embrace or reject the opportunity to evolve, as life proves to be a process of gaining and losing. And, paradoxically, identity can be both static and dynamic at the same time. Wilson further states,

…we create and recreate our identity throughout the life course. Even in our iterations, though, there are probably some elements of identity that remain quite consistent across time. Nostalgic recollection gives us the opportunity to observe and juxtapose past and present identity. What are the changes in identity over time? Do images of former selves indicate ideals that we feel we should try to recapture? Those images can guide us in our ongoing construction of identity (35).

For the purposes of this dissertation, both individual and collective identities will be taken into account. Does nostalgia behave differently in the realm of one generation in contradistinction to another? Does “Generation X” interpret their longings through an alternate paradigm to the one employed by the “Baby Boomers” or “The Greatest Generation?” Further, are the individual identities influenced by the collective, or is it the other way around? Since nostalgia overlaps the generational influences, it is not uncommon to see Gen X longing for the idealized version of the 1950’s as portrayed in pop culture productions like *Happy Days* or *Grease*. If nostalgia can draw connections between seemingly discordant parties, then it can continue unabated in a postmodern society though it is ostensibly the support structure for a metanarrative defined by modernism. Thus, identity uses nostalgia as a catalyst to maintain congruency in the increasingly incongruent discourses and practices of postmodern life. Because of its ability to trigger the nostalgic reflex, Camp Luther is indeed a nostalgic enclave. People return to camp year after year because of its sameness and security. In an increasingly complex world where individuals are forced to
constantly re-negotiate their notions of “family,” “vocation,” and “purpose,” camp offers a welcome respite where these concepts (for better or worse) hearken back to a “simpler” time and space.

Nostalgia also functions to influence our interpersonal communications with each other—the manner in which we bond (or do not bond) with one another through play. Nostalgia is a handbook which teaches us how to converse in various emotional realms. Most importantly, nostalgia evokes a playful sense of curiosity within our sense of longing. Through nostalgia, we are encouraged to sniff out the potentialities of relationships. It gives us a prescient quality, the ability to comprehend whether or not our encounters will be beneficial or hurtful. Nostalgia sets up a framework for play, an arena complete with boundaries and goals to which we adhere and for which we strive.

I suggest that if life is play, then nostalgia provides the most secure playground. Sometimes the playground can be linked to a place, a time, or both. To quote Johan Huizinga, “Inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order” (10). Being in the playground of nostalgia provides us with the security we need to risk interaction one with another. We feel safe enough to make ourselves vulnerable creatures—we gain the capacity for love and compassion. Another goal of this research is to observe how nostalgia makes a playground of Camp Luther—a veritable retreat in the wilderness were people can become “play-full” in ways they would otherwise not in the “real world.”

If nostalgia is the playground through which we construct intercommunication, then it must follow that most, if not all people continuously exist in a state of nostalgia, albeit to varying

2 This is a phrase I hear campers use to describe their lives outside of camp.
degrees. While this sort of blanket statement might raise flags and invite criticism, I would ask
the reader to understand that nostalgia is both strident and ambient—it strikes our consciousness
sharply during times of heightened emotions, but does not disappear after emotional equilibrium
is regained. If anything, the nostalgic reflex provides our minds with the option of blanking out
the desultory moments of quotidian existence (the daily commute to the office) while supplying
pleasant moments to savor in place thereof (recollections of love, loss, anger, happiness, etc.).
This kindness of memory gilds the past, in some cases making it more desirable than the present.
My observations as a life-long camper and more recently as an ethnographic researcher suggests
that Camp Luther provides its adherents with a pleasant form of strident nostalgia—a place
where it is seemingly safe for people to gather with like-minded folk and become somewhat
transparent about their faith and values. Davis recognizes the potency of nostalgia as a vehicle
for social interaction:

…sometimes friends but more often about-to-become friends inasmuch as this kind of
sharing, this cautious mutual discovery of unexpected likenesses, is in and of itself the
very elixir of friend-making. What we witness in this kind of nostalgic memory exchange
is, of course, the wonderment of the revelation of how much more alike than different our
“secret” pasts are…. At one and the same time, then, our nostalgia for those aspects of
our past selves that were “odd and different” becomes the basis for deepening our
sentimental ties to others and for reassuring us that we are not that strange after all.
Others, it turns out, were equally “strange.” Moreover, this assurance is conveyed in the
context of an exchange that, by virtue of its intimacy, stops short of depriving us of that
sense of uniqueness which initially clothes the nostalgic impulse (44).
We need nostalgia in order to establish the boundaries and vulnerabilities of our interactions with others, especially where full transparency is expected of us. Of course, nostalgia also reveals much about our inner fears and longings, even though we might try to conceal them—anytime we speak of the past or prognosticate a future, we are inviting people to understand our identity.

Wilson defines the third function of nostalgia as its ability to ideologize or mystify the past (also to define the present and predict the future). According to Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia*, reflective and restorative forms of nostalgia are relevant to the ideologization and mystification of the past. Restorative nostalgia does the work of those who wish to recreate the world according to a subjective ideal that is archaic, if it ever existed in the first place. Restorative nostalgia evokes the “Things were fine around here until they started showing up” type of mentality (Boym 43). It tends to operate on a collective level. At its worst, restorative nostalgia can be a rationale for violence and ostracism. It provides the rationale for Jim Crow laws and racial profiling. The wistful rhetoric of the Tea Party movement also suggests the influence of restorative nostalgia at work.

By contrast, reflective nostalgia functions at a more personal level. It has everything to do with one’s comprehension of personal history set within the larger context of communal history. It recognizes its own limitations, but seeks to develop potential for the shaping identity and coping with the current challenges of one’s life. To quote Boym: “…the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development. We don’t need a computer to get access to the virtualities of our imagination: reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness” (50). It is within the realm of reflective nostalgia that we are most kind to our memories of others and the self, while also paying heed to the underlying objective realities of the world past and present. Through the interpretive lens of
nostalgia, the ordinary events in linear time take on significance beyond their proportions. In the context of Camp Luther, both reflective and restorative forms of nostalgia are at work, fostering new camp legends and offering an idealized haven from the ostensible threats of shifting societal norms.

Stephanie Coontz is an oft-quoted author for this particular function of nostalgia. Her work *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* is useful for discovering the quantifiable sameness of the so-called “Golden Era” of the 1950’s and the last decade of the twentieth century, exposing our collective nostalgia for the past as wishful thinking. While I enjoy reading her work, I am not sure that the data is as relevant to this discussion as other sources. For the purposes of this dissertation, the theories of Harper, Boym, and Wilson are more applicable in understanding the standing traditions of the camp setting.

The third function of nostalgia nuances the nature of ritual and tradition at Camp Luther. Why is it that every Thursday without fail there is hot oatmeal for breakfast? Why do people linger at the bluff during sunsets? How else does one explain the Durkheimian social current that is generated during the Friday night candle-lit worship service? Nostalgia perpetuates and guides the formation of myriad realities in this place. In a sense the mythology of camp, known and guarded by the campers themselves, renders it a heterodox cultural expression within a larger culture. The ethnographies indicate that the traditional campers constitute a “uncontacted people” of the “northeast Ohio wilderness,” even if only for eight weeks of summer. Of course, maintaining this idyllic setting results in significant overhead, which leads us to the shrewd aspect of nostalgia: cultural commodities.

The fourth and most quantifiable function of nostalgia is in its commodification. Capital increases when items are precious to people. Feelings of religious devotion, patriotism, or
allegiance to a particular ideal or object cause people to make material investments in these avocations. David Lowenthal’s book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* speaks eloquently to this matter:

Demand for heritage goods and events is insatiable. The most pious commemorations spawn souvenir kitsch. Any allusion to the bicentennial opened American purses in 1976: Dolly Madison’s stars ‘n’ stripes cupcakes, red-white-and-blue coffins, haircuts with sprayed on coonskin hats, Uncle Samwiches, and Revolutionary cherry pie made a ‘buy-centennial’ bonanza. D-Day veterans in 1995 stormed Normandy beaches strewn with cheap souvenirs. Heritage tourism became travel’s fastest growing sector in 1992; tourists may be targeted as victims from Tallahassee to Trebizond, yet they keep on coming (98).

If there is a “dark side to the force” of nostalgia, perhaps this is it. Not only does nostalgia render its user open to interaction and playful bonding, it also makes room for exploitation. In times of heightened emotions and fervor, we are more likely to let the nostalgic reflex shape our spending. Lowenthal’s examples speak to a macro level of commodification and exploitation, but this function performs on a micro level as well. Consider, for example, the willingness of young couples to fork over thousands of dollars in order to have a “dream wedding.” Months later when the pictures are gathering dust and the honeymoon is literally over, many couples probably look back at their expenditures with a tinge of regret.
This dissertation examines nostalgia’s fourth function as a plausible explanation for the $1.2 million being generated toward a bluff erosion abatement project to save the camp property (see figure 1). It serves as a lens for interpreting the “camp kitsch” being sold in the lodge—hats, t-shirts, sweatshirts, playing cards, et cetera. Finally, it explores why a significant number of people who could be spending comparable amounts of money on more modern, luxurious resorts are instead choosing to spend a week in musty cabins, eating their food in an un-air-conditioned dining hall, and swatting mosquitoes around evening campfires. How does nostalgia motivate them to choose camp instead of the nearby Cedar Point or Kalahari resorts? How does nostalgia factor into the way in which campers return to Camp Luther annually while the ostensibly more appealing places of equal or lesser cost rate much lower in their vacation preferences?

I posit that these four functions are the foundations of the nostalgic reflex—the moment at which stimulus triggers in us a response that is shaped by one of these functions. The nostalgic

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3 A typical week at Camp Luther for a family of four costs $1600.00.
reflex regulates the shape of our continuity—our perception of the world around us. Every chapter in this dissertation examines how continuity plays itself out in the camp setting.

Examples of the nostalgic reflex include:

- The ability to recall memories of past successes and/or failures during a personal crisis in order to soothe anxieties about the future.
- The use of personal stories as a means of developing social intercourse with other people—discovering commonalities and differences through comparing and contrasting.
- The use of familiar icons or imagery to evoke feelings of warmth and well-being.
- The recognition of familiar imagery to compel one to consume a certain product or commodity.

These mental exercises come to us by virtue of our honed skills over years of learning how to cope with the society in which we find ourselves. One could seek to master them, perhaps, but these responses are so instantaneous that one would probably have to be in a meditative state to will them away, as Harper so eloquently states: “Homesickness or nostalgia is an involuntary conscience, a moral conscience, positive rather than prohibitory. It reminds a person, by way of giving him the experience, of the good he has known and lost. Nostalgia is neither illusion nor repetition; it is a return to something we never had” (26, my emphasis).

Camp Luther: Illustrating the Functions of Nostalgia

Like most recreational camps, Luther has its share of folkways and rituals—the very structure of each day has changed very little since the current program’s inception in the 1960’s. There are traditions involving mealtime and the announcements that follow, religious practices, leisure activities and tournaments, and even how one is supposed to “take a sauna.” Luther has a
daily tradition of raising and lowering the American flag which stands in contradistinction to the standard theology and practice of the Lutheran Church, yet hearkens back to the Boy Scout camps that were its historical antecedents. Unlike other camps and resorts of a similar nature, the attendance at this facility has remained constant since the 1970’s. In the face of rapidly shifting leisure paradigms, Camp Luther retains a remarkable sameness from year to year.

The driving passion of this research is in showing how the four functions of nostalgia at the bottom of the nostalgic reflex are alive and well at Camp Luther, helping to maintain and perpetuate these folkways and rituals. The research indicates broader ramifications for nostalgia at work in “the real world.” This project provides a narrative, introducing the reader to this unique camp experience while also developing a new understanding of nostalgia in conjunction with humanity’s longing for the real, the double-edged sublime, or “presence” as described by Ralph Harper in his various works. Despite its lack of flair compared to concurrent vacations being offered in nearby locales, a small but devoted group of people return to Luther year after year for the purposes of identity and spiritual formation. At camp, people claim to experience life “as it was meant to be.” Camp provides them with a numinous encounter beyond the mundane routines of their typical experience. Something ineffable drives them to make this annual pilgrimage. Many have a difficult time expressing it in words.

In theoretical terms, this encounter at Camp Luther is not unlike Catherine Belsey’s definition of “the real”:

Though the gods also belong to the real, it has nothing whatever to do with the supernatural, a realm devised to comfort or scare us, and variously explained or mystified by theologians and visionaries. Obstinately, brutally there, the real is not a content, nevertheless. What we don’t know, individually or culturally, might be anything, or not
much. Though it exists as a difference, there is no meaning in the real. Indifferent to
description, it exceeds representation and brings language to an impasse. If we experience
it, we do so as a gap, or alternatively as a limit, the point at which culture fails us. The
real is what our knowledge, individually or collectively, must and cannot accommodate
(14).

Or perhaps it is more succinctly contained in the poetry of Franz Werfel where he writes: “For
those who believe, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe, no explanation is
possible.” None of us “believe” as we ought, because we cannot quantify the ineffable in our
midst, though Belsey claims we must make the attempt in spite of the fact that our failure is
guaranteed. My claim here is that nostalgia arbitrates between what we perceive to be real and
what is objectively the real itself.

When people from various walks of life decide to make an annual pilgrimage to this
remote place in Northeast Ohio each summer, they are in fact mirroring cultural antecedents
dating back thousands of years: seeking understanding through removing one’s self from the
common living environment and retreating to a sacred time and space; an immersion in “time out
of time,” as it were. Nostalgia is a key mitigating factor in this pilgrimage. Nostalgia is a primary
motivator for people to suspend their disbelief and enter the whimsical practice of camp ritual
and lore. Men and women abandon themselves and become children again while their children
stand amazed at the transformation of moms and dads from tired adults into energized playmates.

In the realm of cultural studies and other fields, nostalgia exists as an ambient noise in the
background—ever present, yet unnoticed until someone in the field is jarred awake enough to
understand that it is at once fundamental as a basis for existential conversation as well as an
paradoxically perfectly imperfect lens through which we seek to interpret the historical narrative
and shape collective and individual identities and histories. Multiple examples of nostalgia at work can be gleaned from a cursory examination of the camp’s physical plant and program. Among the more whimsical illustrations are the following:

- A morning exercise routine called “Chicken Fat” which does not actually provide campers with much more than five minutes of running and jumping in place while listening to a quaint ditty the likes of which could be found at boys’ and girls’ camps in the 1950’s.

- Heckling the staff program director while he makes announcements after each meal, including efforts to cajole him into eating pats of margarine or doing somersaults in order to stop the ruckus.\footnote{Camp staff directors have always, with one notable exception, been male. This gender issue is addressed in Chapter 5.}

- Coercing campers and staff members do the “Truffle Shuffle” (from The Goonies) or sing solos during group activities.

- Running intimate items of apparel up the flagpole during the night to be discovered during flag-raising in the morning.

- Filling the dining hall bell with water and balancing it in such a manner as to soak the hapless kitchen worker assigned to ring it each morning.

- The thoroughly distasteful tradition of the “leech bed broad jump” where participants compete in the camp’s septic field (see Figure Two).

- Putting the kids to bed and sneaking off to Breezy’s, a local dive with great chicken wings and local (colorful) clientele.
I have been involved in various aspects of Camp Luther for most of my life. As a child, I camped with my family of origin. As a college student, I spent three life-shaping summers working on the camp staff. As a young adult, I naively proposed marriage to one of my former campers and was subsequently divorced less than two years later. Camp was the primary mitigating factor in my decision to pursue a Master of Divinity degree and subsequent work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (which stands in stark contrast to my work experience at Camp Luther).\(^5\)

Currently, I donate a week of my summer vacation to lead the adult bible study (with a calculatingly progressive and open-ended exegesis). Lastly, but perhaps more importantly, I reap the benefit of spending the week in this environment with my own family. I am admittedly nostalgic about seeing my children enjoy the same experiences I had in my youth. I enjoy

\(^5\) The ELCA is the largest and arguably the most progressive of the three main Lutheran denominations in the United States. It has over 11,000 congregations and approximately 4.5 million members.
spending quality time with my wife. Camp continues to shape my identity and provides a forum for discernment as my life’s trajectory unfolds.

So how does one who has seemingly “drunk the Kool-aid” of this quasi-cultic environment hope to create a credible academic account of nostalgia at work at a place in which they are inextricably involved? No serious academic believes that he or she is completely objective in their writing. I recognize that in the realm of historiography, our perspectives are shaped by societal factors beyond our immediate reckoning. I can only state in the simplest terms possible that I have done my utmost to reside in two worlds simultaneously: the world of the father/camper and the world of the dispassionate observor. As Boym articulates so well about the self-transforming work on nostalgia:

The study of nostalgia inevitably slows us down. There is, after all, something pleasantly outmoded about the very idea of longing. We long to prolong our time, to make it free, to daydream, against all odds resisting external pressures and flickering computer screens. A blazing leaf whirls in the twilight outside my unwashed window…. Nostalgic time is that time-out-of-time of daydreaming and longing that jeopardizes one’s timetables and work ethic, even when one is working on nostalgia (xix).

It is my hope that the revelations I experience in exploring nostalgia at camp are also experienced in part by those who read this work. I am not attempting to convert the reader to the “cult of Camp Luther,” but I invite you to use this work as a framework for recognizing how nostalgia permeates and functions in your life, albeit within the gravitas of academic writing. Writing this dissertation is a nostalgic act for me, which is nothing new. Perhaps it is different than the other nostalgic functions in my life by virtue of my awareness of it in analytical terms, but it is mostly an exercise in nostalgia.
Methodology

This study not only seeks to re-evaluate nostalgia in light of the uncertainty that postmodern narratives have produced regarding the blurring between simulation and reality, but also to preserve the unique narrative of the camp experience. Is it possible, under the scrutiny of postmodern thinking, to speak of an “authentic” experience in which individuals feel themselves under the influence of a social current giving way to actual transcendence? Could the collective longing for that which never was be a means by which people discover identity and overcome anxiety? Despite the declining numbers of adherents to mainline Protestant denominations, can nostalgia empower people to “keep the faith” in isolated sites such as a little church camp on the shores of Lake Erie?

What I am proposing here is that this camp experience is more than the sum of its parts. The evidence signifies that in this “place apart,” people find a ways and means beyond the tired practices of religion to reconnect with their families, themselves, and a transcendant other. This occurs in spite of relatively bucolic amenities, programming in the hands of inexperienced college students, and spiritual leadership that is limited to a cadre of tired volunteer chaplains who are willing to spend a week of their vacation in service to the camp. Though most participants at camp readily attest to God’s presence in the experience, giving God the credit is probably a vast oversimplification of the human encounter with longing and luminosity. Even if one could prove/disprove God’s existence, it wouldn’t negate the human agency involved in the Durkheimian emotional current felt by those who annually eschew other leisure choices for a week in a rustic setting.6 The campers come to camp because they find themselves interacting

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6 While I realize that “God-talk” is not necessarily the most academic approach to a topic, it would take an inordinate amount of editing and verbal tap-dancing to do otherwise when writing about nostalgic influences in a
with something ineffable. Wrestling with this “ineffable something” is a contribution to the corpus of work in cultural studies.

In order to further enhance the narrative of the camp experience and provide qualitative data for additional deconstruction, interviews were conducted during each week of the 2010 summer session to record camper ethnographies by using a USB microphone and laptop computer. Interviewees signed a consent form (Appendix A). The data is stored on both a computer hard drive and an external hard drive. The interviews are transcribed and coded accordingly and the data results are discussed in the appropriate chapters.

The interview questions are designed for two different groups in order to compare and contrast the type of nostalgic reactions to the camp environs based on the number of years people have been involved with the program (see Appendix B). While I realize these interview questions are by no means exhaustive, my intention is to give the campers being interviewed multiple opportunities to articulate their particular attachment to the camp and their rationale for being so deeply involved. For the sake of interview subjects, I use pseudonyms when I quote from the ethnographies.

In order to provide a phenomenological approach to interpreting the data, I quote the interviewees verbatim. I also create segments of what folklorist Jay Mechling calls an “amalgative narrative.” In writing On My Honor, a study of the Boy Scouts of America, Mechling chose to research the summer campsite for Troop 49 in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California to examine the intersections of Boy Scout orthodoxy, local culture, and definitions of masculinity under the auspices of “Pete,” the troop leader. Rather than providing an account of
an actual two-week encampment, Mechling creates an amalgamation of twenty-five years worth of observing various campers as they matriculate their way through the scouting program in order to build his theory of masculinity in the Scouting subculture. What results is an amazingly enhanced narrative, walking with the reader through the daily schedule of the camp’s routines and activities while summarizing the various forms of culture at work in the camping experience.

In a deliberate attempt to preserve the narrative flow, Mechling does not pepper his story with academic jargon or critical analysis. He accomplishes this through writing what he calls “excursives” which are inserted between chapters whose titles are simply the day of that particular week at camp. The concept of excursives was not original with Mechling himself, but rather borrowed from sociologist Peter L. Berger (xxiii). The people in his book are not actual individuals, but rather his own creation: “The boys and men in this book are, in most cases, composites, with the important exception of Pete, who was the Scoutmaster through this quarter century of my fieldwork with them.” (xxii).

Building on Mechling’s concept of amalgamative narrative and Berger’s use of excursives, I will attempt to be faithful to the *sui generis* atmosphere of Camp Luther, with one small caveat. Since this work is grounded in theories of nostalgia, the amalgative narratives will function as the excursives—examples of nostalgia in praxis. Each chapter will begin with an excursive describing an aspect of the camping week and using the collected data, seek to understand how nostalgia functions in the perpetuation of this facet. In order to build a grounded theory of the nostalgic reflex, relating a narrative of this aspect may be employed in excursive, not so much for entertainment purposes, but rather to represent the nuances of the qualitative data. In this way, if a reader wanted to, he or she could read the academic work by itself, or read the excursives in the chapters, or read them both in tandem.
In Chapter Two, the research focuses on the effects of the nostalgic reflex with regards to our physical environments. In the case of camp, we will look at the corporeal layout of the buildings and what we can understand about their juxtaposition to each other and the natural features of the area. We will also examine the curious effect of lakeshore erosion and memory—in the case of Camp Luther, not only is the camp growing smaller in a memory sense as people travel through time, but also in a literal sense as the shoreline seeks to undo what the glaciers did some 12,000 years ago. As the shoreline has receded deeper into the property, several buildings have been moved to accommodate the changing landscape. What does this say about people’s nostalgia? How does the emerging layout of the camp affect their overall experience?

Chapter Three investigates the daily retinue of life at the camp through the lens of Diane Barthel’s description of “Staged Symbolic Communities.” Combined with the bucolic setting, the activities offered by the camp staff are at once unique and similar to camps all over the northeastern United States. The same schedule and type of activities have evolved, certainly, but the ethnographies indicate that people look forward to camp because of the predictable nature of daily life. Part of what triggers the nostalgic reflex in participants is the continuity of the hours, the nuanced humor in the dining hall, coupled with the daily devotional aspects of the program (not unlike that of a monastic community). Part of what draws people back to camp from year to year is nostalgia’s ability to shape security in a detached environment—the continuity of camp life is something people count on.

In Chapter Four, we examine the collective nostalgia of camp, how it is a complex *bricolage* of Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgia. In particular, the chapter discusses the continued homogeneity of race/class at camp (which reflects the ELCA’s constituency). The research reveals how nostalgia and melancholia of the racial and religious varieties combine to
produce a Mayberry-esque environment that paradoxically gives way to expressions of Renato Rosaldo’s concept of “imperialist nostalgia,” the celebrative grieving of that which has been destroyed by the dominant culture. This chapter focuses largely on a Wednesday late-evening activity called “The Underground Railroad” which took place in the summer of 1989 and has subsequently spawned a series of weighty dramatic programs in the years following. These late-evening dramas (whether by accident or design) provoke a nostalgia-based thought process in participants. How do campers function in society? What are the societal norms that aid and abet the continuity of personal identity and privilege? How does the Christian faith inform our comprehension of the world’s intersecting systems?

Chapter Five studies the unique religious atmosphere of the camp environment, in particular the cultic aspects of the programming. Furthermore, it examines the homeostasis of totemic ideals that perpetuate camp qua camp. Can collective nostalgia generate a palpable social current in a group setting that is replicated year after year? What are the larger ramifications of nostalgia in religious communities? Does the nostalgic reflex help or hinder authentic spiritual growth?

In Chapter Six, the research concludes by combining various permutations of nostalgia in the previous chapters to create a grounded theory of nostalgia in relation to pre-existing literature and the working definition(s) posited in this dissertation. Most importantly, the conclusion shows the all-encompassing aspects of the nostalgic reflex, and how awareness of this continuity-shaping device plays out in daily life. Perhaps the nostalgic reflex is the coping mechanism by which we unwittingly acquiesce to the demands of society in order to further our own interests and preservation. We use the nostalgic reflex as a means of addressing that inner longing for that which makes “happy sense” to us.
Homesick for the Happy Sense

Ralph Harper writes:

Love and nostalgia cannot be separated. One does not love that which one has not already known. One is nostalgic for that which one would have return. In both love and nostalgia, a wave of presence swirls around with a wave of loss. Which will subside first depends on the intelligence of our belief. We are not nostalgic for mud or evil, for what has hurt us, for suffering. We are not nostalgic for the absurd, for tragedy, for comedy, or for whatever is unfriendly. We are homesick only for what makes happy sense to us (105).

Nostalgia is homesickness. The trick to understanding nostalgia is through understanding the paradigm, real or imaginary, to which we are attempting to return.

I propose that each of us is motivated by an inner longing to return home, to encounter the real, to live the authentic life. Each is motivated by nostalgia to wrestle with non-corporeal beings and concepts in order to hold out against our encroaching mortality. In the end, we accept with grace that our longing to return home is coupled with a dread of our finitude, and yet a fortunate few are content to revel in the sublime moment of that paradox. This is the nostalgic reflex at work. For a particular group of people in a little patch of grass by Lake Erie, nostalgia is played out in traditions and rituals which they experience annually during a one week respite away from the “real world.” Through examining aspects of the camp experience, I am attempting to illuminate further that which “makes happy sense to us.” Using the nostalgic reflex and its multifaceted functions as an interpretative lens, I am making my small but hopefully meaningful contribution to this oft misunderstood yet potent force in time and space.
CHAPTER TWO

A PLACE APART: NOSTALGIA AND SACRED SPACE

My point is... to note that the location of desire, or, more particularly, the direction of force in the desiring narrative, is always a future/past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus eschaton, the point where narrative begins/ends, both engendering and transcending the relation between materiality and meaning.

– Susan Stewart in On Longing

Memory Cache

In the course of my ethnographical work for this dissertation, many interview subjects have described a peculiar euphoria as the time draws near for them to make their annual trek to camp. This exhilaration is heightened as they approach the destination and culminates in an immense feeling of relief as they pull into the camp drive—a feeling of having accomplished the task of navigating another year without permanent debilitation so that they might once again spend exacting time in this particular space which holds tremendous meaning for them. For them, the confines of this space exist as a milestone in Stewart’s “desiring narrative.” By being in this locale, their identity is secured for another year.

Nostalgia plays an important role in this narrative through linking the past to the present, creating yet more desire for an ongoing future that is fraught with uncertainties. This chapter describes the physical space of camp Luther as it existed in the past and in the present in juxtaposition to people’s responses to the place itself—how they themselves are shaped by it, and how in turn they seek to give it continuity. The following excursive seeks to give a sense of the geography of the place to the reader, as well as an inkling of the emotions involved when a veteran camper returns to the camp home from the outside. Further in, the work delves into the
sensory memories of the campers themselves, and how the signifier becomes the signified in an ongoing cyclic narrative. Since the chief physical characteristic of the camp locale is the ninety foot bluff overlooking Lake Erie, the work then speculates as to the nature of its role in shaping both camp memories as well as enhancing the value of the cultural production therein.

Excursive

Camp Luther is located at the north end of Poore Road in North Kingsville, Ohio. Even with the completion of I-80, the camp seems like the most remote location in the state of Ohio. Children habitually look for gratifying landmarks that indicate the dwindling distance between the car and its destination. Usually by the time a family takes the North Kingsville exit off the interstate on a Sunday afternoon, children are singing camp songs, straining at their seatbelts to see the next bend in the road. When you pull into camp, there is a long driveway that ends in a loop adjacent to the dining hall. Stately cottonwood trees line the drive on either side as you pass by familiar buildings—the caretaker’s house, the camp office, the nursery, the chapel, and finally the staff lounge. This is where you pull up to receive your cabin assignment. The kids, as they are able, catapult themselves from the vehicle and into the arms of the counselors.

You then drive to either Pine or Maple Grove, depending on your cabin assignment. The cabins are named for biblical characters. Some of them were moved from the original camp, which was located several miles to the west at the end of LaBounty Road prior to 1955 (Heritage Center Dedication Pamphlet). Other smaller units were purchased from a former roadside motel. The cabin interiors are replete with bare rafters, musty smells, and utilitarian mattresses on the beds. All the cabins have toilets and cold water sinks. Shower facilities are located within walking distance. The sound of slamming screen doors is synonymous with the feel of camp. Years ago, they had wood siding which was painted a peculiar mint green color, which the
hardware store dubbed “Camp Luther Green” since no one else ever ordered that particular shade. Now the cabins have an innocuous vinyl siding. The camp director jokes that the siding is the only thing holding some of them up.

And of course, at the north end of the property stands the ninety foot bluff, offering a panoramic view of Lake Erie. Free-standing porch swings line the width of it. Cliff swallows make their home in it and are omnipresent, wheeling about in this vertical space between the land and the lake. At the extreme west end of the camp property bluff, you can pause at the Xander Memorial Outdoor Chapel, named for one of the pillars of the camp’s early years. You try to remember if the chapel has been moved since last year, as this is one area of camp where the groundwater is particularly effective at eroding the bluff. If you sit on one of the chapel benches, as campers are wont to do during private devotional moments, the lake provides a stunning backdrop to the wooden altar in the front of the worship space. Depending on the ambient weather, the lake itself ranges from sapphire blue and emerald green to dishwater gray.

On Sunday afternoons, the pool is open. You hear the sound of children swimming. You see people pulling their emptied vehicles into the parking lot at the southern end of the campground. Many people purposely leave their cell phones and Blackberries in their vehicles. The signals have improved over the past five years, but folks seldom feel the need to contact the outside world. Even the teens are reluctant to bring their hand-held games, i-pods, or texting devices to camp—they might miss something otherwise.

The American flag is centered in the quad to the south of the dining hall, between the dorms, a curious throwback to the predecessor camp that occupied this space. People are reminiscing in a nearby gazebo, built on the site of the original “Singing Tree” that was destroyed by lightning in 2000. To the north of the gazebo is an entrance to the lodge where
there are ping pong tables, the camp store, staff photos on the southern wall, and shelves of dilapidated board games northeast corner. Most people play euchre here, so the presence of the games is a little superfluous. The wraparound screened porch has comfortable deck chairs and a place to rest and read, though you are more than likely to be approached for a game of cards or a conversation by sitting there. The lodge is connected to the kitchen and the aroma of the Sunday evening meal is already permeating the building in competition with the pungent smell of the “leech bed,” the camp’s antiquated and grandfathered septic field located behind a privacy fence on the eastern edge of the camp property.

Because memory is kind, the weather on Sunday afternoons is always beautiful—seventy-five degrees and sunny with a breeze blowing in off the lake. All of these mitigating features assail the veteran camper’s senses and the reaction is one of relief tinged with anticipation. It is a sense of having come home. It is a feeling of having never left although you are cognizant of the passage of another year since the last time you felt this way. Some people compare it to the same euphoria experienced by the faithful at a Christmas Eve candlelight service. Others relate how they feel a weight being lifted off their shoulders. Whatever the case, it is a moment in time to be savored, and the space surrounding you seems to nod in agreement as if to say, “Welcome back—it hasn’t been the same without you.”
Nostalgia and the Affective Landscape

For the veteran camper, the act of pulling into the lane at Camp Luther represents a disconnect from the “real world” and an entry into a model community where the juxtaposition of buildings to natural features is etched into the brain in what Jay Mechling calls an “affective landscape” (17). Many Luther campers could draw a map from memory, if not to scale. Objectively speaking, the campground is not unlike the hundreds of similar camps dotting the American landscape—there is nothing here to suggest a sui generis experience or engender a strident sense of devotion. Yet for a select group of people who return here on an annual basis, the tangible assets of the campground trigger a response that borders on exhilaration. Having left here before, one loses paradise. Now, in a sense, paradise is regained as the car pulls into the drive. As former staff member Helen Emerson puts it,
[The camp] is a living breathing thing to me. And I mean it’s weird because we’re talking about nostalgia but the way I feel about this place is almost like the way I would feel about a family member. And I think that’s why it was so exciting to hear that people wanted to save the bluff. It was like other people care about something that means so much to me. If we were to open a camp…like for some reason if the bluff [project] didn’t happen and we had to move and establish a family camp somewhere else like on the Ohio River, in western Ohio, or on a pond, it would not be the same place to me.

For Helen, the camp is a living entity whose characteristics are irreplaceable. Her acknowledgment of nostalgia as a mitigating factor in this process is endemic of Fred Davis’ reflexive nostalgia, wherein a person is cognizant of the influence of nostalgia in their thought progression (21). Through memories conjured by her nostalgic reflex, Helen is experiencing in her display of affection for the campground. Mulling over the place in her mind brings about an autonomous display of emotion connected to her sense of self. Her willingness to personify the camp is in actuality a projection of her own identity—the signifier becoming the signified—as exemplified in another quote where she states that

> I don’t remember having a fight with my family while I was here other than, “Why do I have to actually come inside at midnight?” I mean that was like the extent of the [arguing, even though] I was sixteen. My favorite thing to do was tell off my parents. So I think [the camping ministry] is so important and families are so much more functional here, believe it or not, than in the outside world so I do think it’s really important that this ministry continues.

From Helen’s perspective, the place itself is responsible for improving (albeit temporarily) her relationship to her parents in the midst of her adolescence. Her memories of familial harmony are
imprinted on the affective landscape of the camp. Jennifer Foster’s study of human interaction with nature and affectivity furthers this concept: “There is a palpable emphasis on the affective imprint of landscape interactions emanating from everyday activities and surroundings, and the formative relationships within nature forged during youth are considered by many to be their richest life experiences...” (102). For Helen, being at camp enables her to become a better person—the person she aspires to be—by virtue of her emotional connection to the land fueled by her sense of nostalgia.

Gertie Dean has been camping at Luther every summer of her life. Her parents were on the staff in the mid 1970’s and were married at camp. She herself was on staff for four summers. In her interview, she describes recognizing a panoply of sounds and smells endemic to camp:

Some of the things I was talking to people about were the slamming of screen doors, the tinging of a chain against a flag pole; things that you don’t think about, but as soon as you realize that sound, it only happens here, and even though it’s miniscule in the scheme of things, when you hear that, it’s only here and it brings back that kind of sensory thing. The smell of cabins and wood, even though it doesn’t smell very good, it’s a camp specific smell that you kind of take with you, and then it, every year reminds you. I really think that those sensory things play a really significant part in the nostalgia of it, even though we don’t even realize it. But every year those things come flooding back, and it’s important.

For Gertie, not only does the landscape provide a sense of camp, but also the various sounds and scents that make the authentic camp experience possible. In this way, the mind is imprinted with these signals of what camp is, and then in turn the signals provide a person with not only memories, but a sense of identity and continuity. As Gertie explains, one takes the smell of a
cabin with them, then upon their return, the sense-memory is reinforced through repetition. As Dennis Waskul, et. al. write: “…the embodied self is the material basis as well as the reflexive and interactional outcome of perceived sensations and active-sense-making practices” (6). In the recollection of slamming doors or the “tinging” of the chain on the flagpole, Gertie is subconsciously testing her nostalgic feelings for the place and by having recurring sensory experiences from year to year, is reassured that the camp remains, as does her own sense of self moving through time.

Constance Classen calls this process of recalling specific memorable stimuli as a “sense-making ritual:”

At the individual level a sense-making ritual provides the material for sensing the continuity of self and establishing identity by expressing the meaningfulness of that sensation. At the collective level a sense-making ritual affirms and supports the social relationships that underlie the bond among individuals by evoking agreed-upon norms typical of a cultural ‘sensory model’ (722).

The nostalgic reflex in both its singular and collective manifestations brings a sense of rightness within people, whether they experience it through recurring stimuli at a place like Camp Luther, in a synagogue, a forest, the streets of an urban center, or the smells generated from one’s own kitchen. Having these sense-making rituals brings about a sense of equilibrium, a rootedness in contradistinction to our innate anxieties born of life’s unanswered and unfathomable questions.

Classen notes that sense-making rituals occur individually and collectively. Multiple interview subjects in this study referred to the sound of trains at night (there is a rail line that runs adjacent to the campground), the slamming of screen doors, the sound of the dining hall bell, and the smell of pine disinfectant as reminders of camp and the sense of security and
warmth felt through those various stimuli (Carter, Dean, Fisk, Carson, et. al.). Nostalgia distills these elements of the camp, making the response to their signal an almost Pavlovian response. Recalling, re-experiencing, and recounting these experiences by one’s self or with like-minded people creates individual and collective well-being—a sense of bonhomie. Of course, it should be noted that not all sense-making rituals bring about this desired effect. War veterans who suffer the effects of PTSD are a prime example of stimuli causing negative and harmful reactions. By definition, these are not in the realm of nostalgia, but rather traumatic recollection.

Positive recollections are not objectively perfect, but shaped by nostalgia. Waskul et. al. reiterate this idea: “From our pragmatist perspective, that which is fondly recalled may or may not really have been the way it is remembered. There is clearly a great deal of selective perception and even fantasy involved in our nostalgic longings” (15). Part of the beauty of nostalgia is that in its distillation of memory and through its unbidden yet omnipresent reminder, the objects of longing are given more desirable features and contours. Nostalgic memory is kind. It tends to overlook the mundane, the laborious, and sometimes even the painful moments of the places and people we hold dear to us. The physical features of Camp Luther are, objectively speaking, not the most remarkable in the aesthetic sense (save perhaps the panoramic sunsets over the lake). For the adherents of this place, with all its various stimuli, the features become more than the sum of their parts, and people associate feelings of warmth and sense of self through their presence. Under critical analysis, nostalgia is dismissed as whimsy, yet ironically it is reified through the process of critical thinking, as those who analyze are using this trope as a familiar means of comprehension—another sense-making ritual.

Marilyn Geer is a former staff member, who has been camping at Luther for twenty-six years. She and her husband, John, met while on staff—they are one of the celebrated “Luther
couples” that make up much of the camp lore. She speaks of a sense-memory reminder:

“Occasionally when I am by water I think of the times… because when I was on staff… I used to sneak out during rest hour, go down the path-- there was a path right behind the cabin that I was [living in] at that time-- and I used to go down by the water a lot during that time. It was good quiet personal time.” Rather than recalling a more mundane task, such as washing dishes in the kitchen or mopping the lodge on the weekend, the architecture of the place is conducive to guiding her into this memory. Later in the interview, she talks even more vividly about how the landscape affects and shapes her identity:

For me the nature part of it is very big. The idea that I’m going to be outside a lot for the week is big, and my faith formation… is nurtured by the outdoors so for me the woods are important, the water’s important, just being out and doing some physical things that I normally don’t do, whether [it’s] my one game of volleyball for the year, which is getting worse or getting in the pool even one time.

Marilyn’s sense of spirituality connects with the natural environs and outdoor activities. Her connection to the outdoors is emblematic of Lowenthal’s accounting of the new appreciation for nature: “Once aesthetically subordinate, scenic views have come to occupy premier rank. Conforming with today’s environmentalism, admiration has shifted from intensely humanized prospects to ‘natural’ vistas, landscapes least altered by human agency” (141). Coming from the outer suburbs of the Detroit metro area, Marilyn finds at camp a lack of development which places her in a contemplative mood. Nostalgia forges a connection between her past moments and the present longings.
Of course, the camp itself is subject to many physical changes made by people over the years. When the property was purchased in 1955 from an Akron youth organization, the SUOMI (Finnish) Synod Lutherans made several changes, including planting two thousand spruce and one thousand white pine trees on the western edge of the property (see Figure Four). Over the years, the camp board brought in city water, built a chapel, added plumbing to many of the cabins, paved the lane from the entrance to the office, and moved a number of cabins from the bluff area to what is now called “Pine Grove” in 1993. As bluff erosion and lake pollution made it increasingly difficult for campers to access Lake Erie, a swimming pool was built near the bluff in the early 1970’s then abandoned in 1989 when a new swimming pool and shower house/sauna facility were constructed near the property manager’s house on the southern end of the campground, as can be seen in Figure Five (Maki et. al.). Most recently, the Lutheran
Outdoor Ministries of Ohio Board (LOMO) contracted to have the bluff erosion addressed through a massive reconstruction of the lakefront (see Chapter One, Figure 1), and it is this development which exemplifies Wilson’s fourth function of nostalgia—the commodification of memory.
The Bluff and Nostalgia as Cultural Commodity

Nostalgic expressions for summer camp are not limited to this particular location. Mechling, Van Slyck, Boym, and others have written at length about the emotional attachment one feels to a place that is instrumental in shaping collective and individual identities. What makes a location such as Luther important to this discussion is its unique lakeshore geography. I contend that by virtue of its continuously receding shoreline, the campground acts as a catalyst in increasing the nostalgic reflex in its adherents. Familiar landscapes revive memories. Similar to people whose geography changes by virtue of war or some other natural disaster, the campers at Luther emotionally cling to what remains as a reminder of what has been and with hope for what shall be in the future. Consider this statement from a current staff member, Pam Heath:

I have so many memories here it’s a second home to me in a way because I have so many memories of important events, um milestones and benchmarks of, well, growing up as a child, you know? I remember going through um…the transition between when it was okay for me to hang out with my boy cousins through, “Oh you’re a girl now so you’re not allowed to play with us anymore.” I mean things like that I can distinctly tie back to this place just because I have so many memories here and I just can’t even begin to sort through half of them really. It just starts to blend together and it’s just…it’s become such an integral part of my life-- it’s weird!

The recording of this statement contains nuances not seen in the transcription. In her effort to articulate her connection to the camp, Pam’s syntax becomes increasingly strident until she concludes emphatically with the “it’s weird” statement as if to say, “This is beyond explanation.”

Later, she shares her unconditional support of the current bluff project when she says “I’ve seen how camp has affected so many lives and since I can you know personally can vouch
that it has affected my life positively and in a multitude of ways I would just like to see this place preserved in itself” (Heath). The place contains the memories that bind Pam to her sense of self, ergo she sees values in the preservation of it. The fact that after years of watching it erode, people are making an effort to “save” the bluff is tantamount to the preservation not only of land, but memory and identity.

Like much of the Lake Erie coastline in northeast Ohio, Camp Luther is situated at the top of a sixty-foot bluff overlooking the lake. As a result of various dynamics, including “wave energy (shoreline orientation, wind speed, fetch, and bathymetry), currents, surface and subsurface run-off, lake level, lake ice erosion, geologic materials, shoreline protection structures, and [other] minor factors,” Luther loses on average .5 meters of shoreline in any given year (Dawson & Evans 1). Camp Luther’s bluff is comprised (from bottom to top) of shale (bedrock), till, glaciolacustrine clay mixed with silt, and sand. Unlike much of the rest of the twenty-seven mile length of Ashtabula County’s shoreline, Luther’s clay/silt mixture is approximately twenty feet thick. (Carter & Guy 11). Although wave and ice action have contributed greatly over the years to the erosion process, the primary cause of erosion at Luther occurs where underground streams form between the sand and the clay/silt. Research conducted by Dawson & Evans at nearby Painesville-on-the-Lake supports this statement. Even at lower lake levels, the erosion continues unabated because of groundwater undermining the bluff structure (Dawson & Evans, 8). Casual observation shows that there is at least one major aquifer located near the outdoor chapel at the western edge of the property and several smaller aquifers spanning the camp property to the east. These underground streams undermine the strata, causing it to crumble into the lake below.
Over the years, camp governing bodies have deliberated at length as how to best deal with the receding shoreline. In 1993, several of the camp’s cabins were moved from their lakefront position to a wooded area near the newly-built swimming pool and shower house complex (replacing the old pool which had fallen over the bluff in 1990). The Ohio Department of Natural Resources published a comprehensive guide to the shore erosion in Ashtabula County in 1983, which gave an estimation of how much land would be lost by the year 2010 (see Figure Six). Based on my observations (shown by the superimposed red dotted line), the amount of erosion was severely underestimated.

Figure Six: The changing topography of the camp shoreline. Adapted from this Ohio DNR erosion study. The blue line indicates where geologists predicted the shoreline would exist in 2010. The red line is a more accurate reflection of the shoreline conditions today. As can be seen, much has changed at the site.
Conversations about the bluff issue have been part of the social fabric of camp since its inception. The Lutheran Outdoor Ministries website acknowledges the ubiquity by stating

For the more than 65 years that Camp Luther has been in existence, there has been an ongoing question of: “When are we going to fix the bluff?” And for 65 years, we have always said: “At this time it doesn't seem to be feasible.” That dialogue has officially been addressed; and we are proud to announce that through the work of several dedicated campers, the Camp Luther and LOMO staffs, and the LOMO Board, we have come to the conclusion that it is feasible to save our bluff! Fundraising efforts began in the summer of 2008 and we currently have pledges and gifts totaling more than $450,000!

This enthusiastic approach to the project downplays the years of sometimes heated conversations regarding the use of camp resources, the question of responsible stewardship, and the overarching narrative of whether or not this particular location was necessary for one to “experience” the camp.

The decision of the LOMO Board to start a capital campaign was pragmatic—any casual observation of the erosion revealed that both the lodge/dining hall facility and the “leech bed” septic field at the northeast end of the camp were in danger of falling over the edge. Replacing them would cost the same if not more than the approximately $1.7 million needed to complete an erosion abatement project. Paul Fisk was on the LOMO Board when it made the decision to proceed with the project. His thoughts mirror the consensus of the board:

Well you have a choice. Do you want to keep the camp here or do the bluff project? Because in the next five years you would have taken enough land off the bluff that you would have had to replace both the septic tank and the lodge. And the price of the lodge
and the septic system is about a million and a half so the cost of the bluff is the same.
Because you can’t replace this lodge like it is because it’s grandfathered and it doesn’t have a single piece of code in it …and also the uh leech bed is no longer code…. So you spend a million and a half bucks keeping the only thing that has any value here which is the land, or you spend a million and a half picking this up and moving it across the road.

While this seems like a completely logical discourse regarding the financial decisions made by the board, the subtext is all about how this particular location warrants the expenditure because it is an integral part of what people have come to cherish about themselves and the community. As such, Wilson’s fourth function of nostalgia is at work, using the nostalgic reflex in order to create a viable commodity that is worth more than the actual real estate value (19).

Let us not be fooled into thinking that commodification is the simple replication of durable goods for the sake of profiteering. The commodification of a place that is meaningful to individuals is what gives them a sense of ownership of all that the physical plant represents. The affectivity of their collective memory serves to create a viable commodity that goes beyond the Branson souvenir variety; this connection to the land is integral to the production of heritage, which Lowenthal emphatically states

…reverts to tribal rules that make each past an exclusive, secret possession. Created to generate and protect group interests, it benefits us only if withheld from others. Sharing or even showing a legacy to outsiders vitiates its virtue and power…. White Australian adoption of Aboriginal “dreamtime” bonds with land deprives them of the exclusivity that lent that legacy worth. Being clannish is essential to group survival and well-being (128).
The heritage of the place creates the desire for its preservation. The preservation of heritage by a “tribal” group or “clan” ensures the continuity of individual and collective identity in contradistinction to the “outside” world. Thus, the preservation of the bluff is inextricably linked to collective identity, which is in fact the very commodity being marketed in this case by a camp. Preserving the bluff maintains heritage. Heritage helps this group mark themselves as outside the dominant paradigm, even if in name and appearance only.

Furthermore, the land that has already been lost to the campers serves to heighten their proprietary sense toward the remaining structures due to an heightened sense of what Glenn Albrecht calls “solastalgia,” a term used to describe the acute sense of loss or distress that occurs when one’s connection to a particular landscape is irrevocably truncated by its destruction or alteration (34). In extreme cases, such as Katrina or the Southeast Asian tsunami disasters, people experienced solastalgia “well after the acute phase of post-traumatic distress” (36). Solastalgia is a unremitting condition—Albrecht contends that unless those who suffer from it find a positive means of channeling their distress, suicide may be the only way to escape it. Certainly in the case of Camp Luther, the loss of land is not directly connected to one’s livelihood or survival, but because the campers place so much stock in the events that have occurred on this lakefront property as they relate to their identities, the effects of solastalgia can be seen in their comments and commitment toward ceasing the shoreline recession. The chronic effects of a sixty-year history of landscape destruction only compound the feelings of attachment to the land.

Of the sixty-four interviews conducted, only two respondents voiced ambivalence toward the bluff capital campaign, maintaining that the “feeling of camp” could exist irrespective of its location. Judy Werner, who has been camping at Luther for approximately forty years, is
enthusiastic about what the camp has to offer, but she is equally convinced that this camp-like affectivity could exist anywhere: “…even though we are financially supporting, I struggle with the whole idea that we are spending that kind of money. I’m not convinced that it’s truly the place as much as it is the people and the program. I mean if you have to weight those, people and program win over place for me.” Her husband Mark adds, “You know, I think it’s great to be on the water. It’s very serene. But I don’t think the camp really uses the water very much and I don’t know that most people would miss it all that much. I think it’s the people not really the place.” (Werner, Mark & Judy). Many interview subjects also placed the people and programming higher in importance than the place, but they quickly added that leaving this particular place would irrevocably change their camp experience.

By contrast, a sampling of comments regarding the bluff show the vast majority of campers’ vested interest in the physicality of camp as an integral commodity within the camp experience:

So, to me [the camp] provides that ongoing spiritual location, which is hard to transfer to some place physically. I think the lake provides some very important symbolism (Carl Norris).

One of the things in our American culture that I don’t like is the throw away part of our culture. We throw away buildings. We throw away office buildings. We rip down the coliseum so we can put a new thing in Cleveland. We tear all of those things down, but at camp, we try not to do that. It’s very different… (Don Green).

Um, there’s some kind of nostalgic connection with this particular site. Um, you know they associate with driving in that road and seeing the lake to everything’s going to be
great this week. And to have a scary situation when we’re driving into somewhere that we’re not familiar with really kind of put people off (Kevin Carter).

Using the Albrechtian definition of solastalgia as a lens for observing these statements, it is evident that the combination of experience over time factored in with the loss of the land has created a powerful connection between people and the land, even though they only inhabit this space for a few days each year. Albrecht would say that people’s distress over the possibility of losing the camp is a form of psychoterratic illness, which in layman’s terms would be understood as nostalgia or homesickness (Albrecht, et. al. 96).

In her study of the Wheatley Hill Centenary Festival, Katy Bennett places the basis of psychoterratic illnesses in one’s need for continuity. For Bennett, the celebration in this northern England mining town which has experienced tremendous socio-economic upheaval in the latter half of the Twentieth Century exemplifies the manner in which people use nostalgia to mediate their conflicted emotions regarding dynamism and change. For her, the nostalgic celebration of the Wheatley Hill residents is emblematic of an emotional geography expressing itself through their actions. The altering landscape is a source of stress and discontinuity. Delving into individual and collective connections to the land over time helps people maintain continuity in the face of uncertainty (189).

One could argue that solastalgia and its various permutations are the result of a resistance to change or even a fear of the dynamic forces that shape society. When we see familiar geographic landscapes being changed over time, we might be forced to reckon with finitude, much like the feelings one has when children pass certain milestones in life. Because the people who attend camp have witnessed a recession of the shoreline over time, one might argue that their willingness to fund a bluff restoration project is linked more to their own issues of anxiety
than their nostalgic reflex (which is somewhat of a false dichotomy in my estimation). The hyperbole contained in a statement such as “How could we ever let money be the reason that we are not going to save Camp Luther?” could be chalked up to a naïveté leavened with sentimental overtones.

Yet I maintain that the nostalgic reflex at work in connecting people’s sense of identity and continuity to the sense of urgency in saving the bluff is more than simple sentimentality or a response to anxiety. While these are undoubtedly contributing factors, for those whose history resides there, Camp Luther is not simply a panoramic setting for sunsets, but rather the locus of meaning for individuals who have formed a relationship with the land over time. Cultural myths are forged on the site—the land evokes memories, the memories provide self-definition. To wit: the continued existence of the camp is necessary in order for people to make sense of their heritage, their universe. For campers, the “place apart” is where people encounter truth as they understand it.

As Boym articulates: “Cultural myths, then, are not lies but rather share assumptions that help to naturalize history and make it livable, providing the daily glue of common intelligibility” (54). The land of Camp Luther is the arena in which cultural myths are made, and as such, it is indispensible. The land is the physical realization of the collective memory. Boym further resonates: “Collective memory can be seen as a playground, not a graveyard of individual recollections” (54). This is why, even in this economy, the LOMO Board was able to raise $450,000 in one year from a relatively small marketing demographic. Individual recollections are kept safe (collectively) in the mental playground that is superimposed on the physical space of the campground.
To better understand this nostalgic connection people have to the land, let us conceive of a “person without a country”—one who has no such connection to a place or concept. It is difficult, for even the most disciplined mind cannot help but respond in some evocative manner when presented with the beauty grandeur of an ocean vista or the horrors represented in Auschwitz. In order for a person to become totally detached from any locus, a form of cognitive dissonance must be exercised—a willful divorcing of comprehension from emotion. Though I hesitate to agree completely, Ralph Harper opines that this mind bereft of nostalgia is that of the nihilist. The nihilist is characterized by a distinguishable lack of value recognition for any person, place, or concept: “they were nihilists, self-confessed, and victims born for a sacrifice in a time that knew no sacraments. Born out of time, before even their time, they now remind us of the fullness of time” (71). Harper is saying that the nihilist is the necessary contrast by which we find ourselves defining sacramentality. He further states: “A man can wait without longing, like Heidigger; he can long without expecting, like Proust. But unless he does one or the other, he is ‘condemned to his freedom,’ Sartre’s and Nietzsche’s empty freedom” (92).

Thus the “empty freedom,” or lack of connection to any locus of personal or collective value helps us better understand the raison d’être that the adherents of the Camp Luther cultic experience. People gain insight and a sense of meaning precisely because they are willing to disavow the calculated science of reason and logic in order to access the simultaneously unsettling yet soothing encounter with the sublime. In doing so, the tangible things (in this case, the campground itself) that we once considered containment vehicles become instead the very things which we hold sacred. Davis contends:

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7 I ask that the reader withhold judgment of my use of the word “cultic” in this context, as it will be further defined in a Chapter Five.
Much as in the familiar gestalt silhouette of the vase that suddenly is seen as two faces in profile, the nostalgic reaction similarly inverts that which is figure and that which is ground in our lives. …the warmly textured past of memory that was merely backdrop suddenly emerges as *figure* while the harshly etched silhouette of current concerns fades into *ground* (emphasis original, 58).

Thus a piece of real estate in a remote corner of Ohio becomes more than the sum of its parts. Trees hold memories. The warp and woof of cabin wood is etched with story. This type of value beggars quantification. Nostalgia is the catalyst that compels people to make a substantial investment in preserving the playground of memory.

Figure Seven: Campers enjoy a Lake Erie sunset. Photo by author.
Could this nostalgic connection to place be forged in any location, or is it engineered into the landscape? By definition, any place or thing that contains the memory of meaning and the possibility of future relevance for a group or individual can become the locus of the nostalgic reflex. Linda Hutcheon writes:

Likewise, nostalgia is not something you ‘perceive’ in an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response-- of active participation, both intellectual and affective--that makes for the power [of nostalgia] (Hutcheon).

So the land by itself is bereft of a nostalgic reflex trigger. The combination of memory, desire, and setting give nostalgia for one’s heritage a potency.

As a caveat, one must understand that even the most virulent feelings of attachment can be disrupted through trauma or a simple waning of one’s regard. The systems that affect us and in turn are affected by us are not static. There is a dynamism that pervades our values and shifts our focus over time. In citing sociologists Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger, Janelle Wilson writes “I endorse Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) dialectical vision: Each person is born into an existing social system. But each person also can influence and act upon this system. Such a view would suggest that a people may edit this collective memory differentially. And, indeed, people may even choose a “new” collective memory altogether (48).” Inasmuch as the nostalgic reflex binds us to times and places that hold meaning as a locus of personal and collective identity, the fickle nature of our allegiance must allow for the possibility of newer or other relevancies as life presents us with new challenges.
Quiet Pines, Gentle Breeze

The “Camp Luther Hymn” was written by two camp counselors in the summer of 1982. One of the verses (sung to the tune of “Edelweiss”) intones: *There’s a place on the shore where God’s people are gathered/Quiet pines, gentle breeze—sunsets glowing and peaceful* (Geer, John). These amateur poets are trying to capture the essence of how the physical space of camp is emblematic of the sacred experience. These words are sentimental and simple. Yet there are literally thousands of people who know this song by heart, and under the right circumstances, they will start to tear up while singing it, because it symbolizes for them a sacred time and place outside of their quotidian existence.

This chapter has looked in depth at the feelings of nostalgia/solastalgia evoked by the physical dynamics of the camp. This space becomes a playground where a culture of meaning is constructed piecemeal, individually and collectively. Contributors to this writing have shown that projections of the self into the space of camp create a means of furthering one’s identity. They have shared how the space of camp is necessary for them to gain the mindset of camp. Moreover, campers have shown the ability of a supple nostalgic reflex to overlook the character flaws of old buildings and a receding bluffline.

For this cultural enclave, a sixty-six acre campground in northeast Ohio where they spend one week per summer is more than a vacation—it is a place where they shape their identity and in turn, perpetuate the camp’s identity as well. The traditions and folkways being practiced at Camp Luther haven’t changed all that much since the 1960’s. In the face of changing leisure paradigms in American culture, I find the perpetuation of these traditions and rituals a fascinating topic for further investigation.
Chapter Three examines the daily retinue of life at the camp. Combined with the bucolic setting, the activities offered by the camp staff take on aspects of a *sui generis* culture. The same schedule and type of activities have evolved, certainly, but the ethnographies indicate that people look forward to camp because of the predictable nature of daily life. Part of what triggers the nostalgic reflex in participants is the continuity of the hours, the nuanced humor in the dining hall, the predictable menus, coupled with the daily devotional aspects of the program (not unlike that of a monastic community). All of these factors play into what Diane Barthel calls a “symbolic staged community.” Part of what draws people back to camp from year to year is nostalgia’s ability to shape security in a detached environment—the continuity of camp life is something people desire as a touchpoint of identity and security, even within the framework of performativity.
In this sense, if camps reoriented the social order, they did not turn it upside down. Campers arrived at camp already conscious of their own difference from one another. Camps’ rituals of incorporation did not make all campers equal but provided them a variety of ways successfully to integrate themselves into the community.

-- Leslie Paris in *Children’s Nature*

Evocative Nuggets in the Nostalgic Mind

Like much of what we carry with us in the manner of quotidian habits, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact source of so many rituals and folkways at Camp Luther. Certainly, nostalgia is instrumental in perpetuating these activities. It also is an agent of selection in sorting out the events of camp, so that the overall process is one of distillation. Certain elements of the Camp Luther life will live on in perpetuity in the minds of campers, even if the camp itself were to close someday.

The quantified history of the camp does not evoke feelings of warmth or well-being for anyone. It is a list of simple names, places, and dates that when viewed with a clinical eye, look like nothing more than a business transaction between groups, the development of real estate, and the budgeting of resources for a leisure resort. By contrast, the living memories of the camp that reside in the conversations of people who participate annually are lively anecdotes punctuated with moments of poignancy and personal growth. These are the evocative nuggets mined by the nostalgic reflex in times of stress or uncertainty, in harmony with Wilson’s first function of nostalgia, the intra-personal narrative that ensures continuity (19).
Historians would consider these oral histories irrelevant to the broad sweep of incidents that have greater impact on world events, but for those involved, the memories of camp linger into a heritage of identity. As David Lowenthal articulates, “Heritage is sometimes equated with reliving the past; more often, it improves the past to suit present needs…. We dwell on mythic fables rather than specifics, consolidate history into a generalized past, and revamp a legacy in line with what we think the present is or want it to be” (143).

This chapter examines the power of nostalgia at work in the continuity of camp performances. It examines various aspects of the programming for the benefit of the campers and the aura of surrealism that pervades the detached time. It observes the various aspects of the camp community through the framework of the “Staged Symbolic Community” as defined by Diane Barthel. Nostalgia becomes the means by which culture is fabricated through cultural production based on collective memory for the purposes of perpetuation.

Excursive

It is hot in the dining hall today. The breeze is confined to a patch of grass out on the bluff and the humidity comesling with the heat of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches as the noise of the dining hall builds to a crescendo in anticipation of the afternoon activities. Brad Green, a lanky youth who is the program director walks to the center of the room and raises his hand like an orchestral director. Suddenly the air is full of a resounding *aaahhhhh* as people wait for him to bring his arm down, which he does, and the announcements song is underway:

*Announcements, announcements, annow-ow-ncements! What a horrible way to die (to die)! What a horrible way to die (to die!). What a horrible way to be talked to death—what a horrible way*
to die! Announcements, announcements, annow-ow-ncementssssss! Then Brad screams “Snakes in the dining hall!” and all the children begin a ritual of chasing imaginary serpents out the door as the adults cheer them on. Once the children have returned to their seats, Brad begins to share news of upcoming activities, but before he can complete a sentence, a camper sings out, “Here’s the Brad and the way he does the hula-hop!” Soon the entire dining hall picks up the chant and then Brad is obliged to perform a hula/Elvis impersonation in order to calm everyone down. No sooner has he finished a couple of news items (rest hour and choir rehearsal) when one of the other counselors cries out, “It’s time to haggle (clap), a chicken! (clap) Haggle a chicken (clap clap)!” Once again, the dining hall joins in until Brad in his ostensible annoyance holds up his hands like puppets and acts out a dialogue in which one hand argues with the other about the price of some item in the camp store, or perhaps how long it will take for the announcements to finish. He finishes to a round of applause and laughter.

Brad then introduces two other counselors who come forward and lead the gathering in the “sports” song, which is a riff on an old Bible school tune, and they get heckled as well while trying to impart notices on tournament games and afternoon recreational activities. Julie seems to draw the ire/desire of some teen boys who interrupt her schpiel to sing: Sing a song, Julie, sing a song. Sing a song, Julie, sing a song. We won’t shut up ‘til you sing a song—sing a song, Julie sing a song. Julie raises her hand for quiet and then belts out a 70’s monster ballad to the delight of the room and then she quickly ends the sports announcements and sits down.

Brad brings out the folks to do a skit for the craft cabin. From year to year, the staff is expected to perform a variety of skits introducing the crafts based on a theme. This year, with the

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8 Sung to the tune of “The Farmer in the Dell.”
9 Sung to the tune of “If You’re Happy and You Know it.”
recent popularity of the *Sherlock Holmes* film, “Craftlock Holmes” and “Watson” use the various tchotchkes being made in the craft cabin to solve crimes. After the craft cabin skit, the archery instructors, Andy and Patty, come to the front in their renaissance fair outfits and pseudo-Shakespearean shtick to promote the afternoon archery activities. They are almost done when one of the campers shouts out for Andy to eat crackers and then whistle much to the amusement of everyone in the dining hall. Andy attempts to do this, and accidentally (?) spits cracker crumbs on Patty in the process.\(^{10}\)

Brad calls for people to stand for closing grace at the end of the meal. Today we are singing “Keetos Keetos Umulah,” a Finnish table grace giving thanks to the Creator. The words are lovingly sung in three part harmony, and then the crowd shuffles out of the building, leaving the “jumpers” to clear the tables. It is now 12:50 PM. The announcements lasted twenty minutes, almost as long as it took the campers to eat their lunch. Yet rather than appearing annoyed with the process, the campers actually look forward to seeing this kind of ritual occur every day while they are at camp. It is part of the tradition. It is part of the magic.

**Camp and Performativity**

On the surface, a gentle affability exists in the daily life at camp. There are many contributing factors: the layout of the cabins, the flagpole, the little lane that bisects the east and western portions of the campground. People wave to each other as they walk past. They call out greetings in the manner of imagined rural communities. Many interview subjects belabor the lack of civility in the outside world. Given the amount of time spent working and consuming television and internet, they feel isolated from their neighbors and families. People find

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\(^{10}\) I do not believe that this tradition is necessarily masculine in nature. It is markedly different than the catcalls wrought out of sexual tension. This is more a form of verbal play that has little or no association with gender performance.
themselves in the midst of a socially engineered environment that encourages a slowness of pace and a serendipitous attitude in general. By nature of its design, the camp distills this quality in people, giving those who are less predisposed to this environment to opt out in subsequent summer seasons.

This social engineering is based in part on the assumption that the world used to be a better place than it is today. America’s domestic tranquility mythos is inspired by the ugly truths of white flight and xenophobia. It is driven by consumerism and the echoes of manifest destiny. We pine for the mythical days of the yeoman, the frontiersman, the rugged pioneering families who neither needed nor cared for governmental help/interference in their lives. Stephanie Coontz speaks to the underlying truth of the matter:

While some people believe that the gender roles within this traditional family were unfair, and others that they were beneficial, most Americans agree that prior to federal
“interference” in the 1930’s, the self-reliant family was the standard social unit of our society. Dependencies used to be cared for within the “natural family economy” and even today the healthiest families, “stand on their own two feet.” The fact is, however, that depending on support beyond the family has been the rule rather than the exception in American history, despite recurring myths about individual achievement and family enterprise (69).

That people come to camp because of the rustic conditions is no accident. The nostalgic reflex kicks up a powerful yearning for a sense of the simple life, in the classic Garrison Keillor sense of “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” I would hasten to add that all the neighbors are primarily white folk with an ostensibly similar agenda—maintaining the genteel communal performance that is “campy” on multiple levels.

In psychological terms, much of what we desire and fear is born out of our anxiety, not our capacity for nostalgia and compassion. Perhaps this too is a false dichotomy—anxiety could be the cause and nostalgia the effect in our cycle of seeking to escape banality. This being the case, maybe camp is no different than the “real world,” but nostalgia’s ability to don rose-colored glasses convinces us otherwise. The suspension of disbelief occurs both by accident and by design. People arrive at camp with various perceptions of this idyllic community and the communities they leave behind. The issues of the real world are not ameliorated, but for a few days at least, they are subsumed by the camp ethos.

Consider these statements from interview subjects as they attempt to describe what brings them back to camp every summer:
I always go back to [the] people. They’re always going to be the same but different. It’s different people-- the same feeling, the same emotions, the same sharing, the same giving, the same love, the same openness. I mean I don’t care who’s at the week, to me it’s always the same feeling of peace and uh, love and friendship (Bryan Loftis).

I have certain things that I can’t do at any other time in my life. I get here, there’s no watch, there’s no beeper, there’s no cell phone, there’s no wallet, there’s no radio, there’s no computer. I rarely, rarely ever get in the car. My nostalgia and tradition is: I like to park it and get rid of as many of the things that interrupt my life as I can. It allows me to relax to a degree that I’m not able to relax in any other vacation setting (Don Green).

It’s very odd to be like as a twenty-seven year old I’d be thinking, ‘Oh those are the good old days.’ And I mean even thinking [about] coming here as a kid…. I remember leaving on Saturdays and even Friday nights and just in tears because we had to wait a whole year to come back up here. There’s really just such a good feeling and an emotional attachment that I think just about everybody has to this place and, you know, that’s what keeps people coming back-- that attachment to the place and to the people that have sort of been here and have come through and have continued sort of keeping the traditions alive (Charlene Bodi).

For Loftis, the impetus to return lies in the sense of community that exists at camp, regardless of who the campers are; there is a common social current which he finds very appealing. For Green, there is a personal freedom gained in returning to camp—he sheds all the vestiges of his daily life and finds a unique source of relaxation. For Bodi, both the place and the people contribute to
the ongoing traditions and her own sense of nostalgia for what occurs. What I find common about the three is the understated mental calisthenics endemic to their camp experience.

The structure of the camp environment is essentially an opportunity for people to become members of an improvisational performance meant to echo the so-called Golden Era of American society. In this environment, everyone is familiar with her/his place in the order of sequencing, happiness is thematic, and common virtues are highly espoused. Diane Barthel defines such performative settings as “Staged Symbolic Communities” (80). In these communities, there is a preconceived notion of a social and moral order which is demonstrated through the behaviors of the participants, thereby yielding a collective representation of an ideal locality. Performativity in these communities is not seamless. At places such as Luther, there are occasional disappointments—relational disruptions, weather events,\(^\text{11}\) and/or health and wellness issues. The nostalgic reflex tweaks our memories, shapes the marketing, and renders even the bad things good in retrospect.

While Barthel focuses her research on established staged symbolic communities such as Williamsburg or Greenfield village, which are purposely designed as simulacra of an earlier era, I find some striking parallels between her analysis of these communities and the production of culture that occurs in the camp setting. Barthel cites Erving Goffman’s germinal work *Encounters*, which speaks to the manner in which participants tacitly agree to an unwritten set of rules before interacting in artificial environments. Such is the case at Luther, where for the sake of harmony, people avoid difficult topics of conversation (save perhaps for Bible study, which

\(^{11}\) During “Family Week VI” of 2008, what was defined as a “microburst” storm occurred early in the week, uprooting massive trees, knocking down power lines, blowing out the windshield of an RV, and picking up a tent with three occupants, spinning them completely around before dropping them twenty feet away. In typical camp fashion, the community made t-shirts commemorating the event which are proudly worn every summer by the “survivors.”
draws the most outspoken individuals) or flamboyant displays of consumer goods (or the lack thereof). Goffman describes this deal as pre-arranged terms of engagement:

Just as we find that certain social attributes are excluded from significance in wide ranges of encounters, so also we find that participants will hold in check certain psychological states and attitudes, for, after all, the very general rule that one enter into the prevailing mood in the encounter carries the understanding that contradictory feelings will be held in abeyance (23).

As part of their arrival ritual at camp, many subjects talk about a shift in attitude or a relaxation of the normal anxieties associated with their quotidian existence. Robin Cantor stays at camp late in the season along with several families from the parish she serves near Cleveland, Ohio. She describes her shift from the normal to the detached world in this way:

[Camp] gives you an opportunity to just not be so stiff all the time. That you can come out here and just let loose a little bit and drop your…uh not blinders but… it probably takes me about three days anyway of a camp week to just get into the silliness of it because you know things right now are so staid and you know difficult economically.

And you know as pastors we always seem to have opportunity to listen to hard stories. So to come out here and to be absolutely silly is a welcome respite.

Cantor’s description of this paradigm shift from being “stiff” to “absolutely silly” indicates that she too is taking on a new role for a short period of time within the larger framework of the symbolic community unfolding around her. Barthel maintains that those who visit the staged symbolic communities (hereafter referred to as SSCs) take on a role inasmuch as those who work in these communities consciously project themselves into a role (84).
In a historic SSC such as Williamsburg, the tourist interacts with an employee dressed in period garb and speaking in dialectic, whereas at camp the camper interacts with camp counselors through negotiating defined parameters—campers venerate the staff as the staff seeks to entertain and inform the campers. Since so many campers were once counselors (as is my personal experience), the nostalgic reflex is constantly reifying these roles for the sake of continuity in the ongoing production of collective identity. We perform these roles out of respect for the simulated tranquility of the camp environment. At any given time, we could choose to deviate from these roles, but the system would invariably remove us for its own sake, i.e.: a staff member can refuse to do his/her work and would be fired. Likewise, a camper can refuse to participate in the program, but the subtle pressures from both staff and other campers would force one to re-engage or eventually drop out altogether (stop returning in subsequent summers).
For purposes of ethnography, it would be interesting to interview people who have “dropped out” of the camping program over the years for whatever reasons, but for legal reasons the camp office could not supply me with contact data for these individuals. However, I did have an illuminating conversation with Paul and Lydia Fisk regarding one such person. The transcript follows.

Martin: So, what kind of person would not be a Camp Luther person? How would you define the “anti-Luther” person?
Lydia: You want to describe him?
Paul: You can describe him. He’s our brother-in-law.
Lydia: Yeah. He came here for part of a week.
Martin: And that was it?
Lydia: Yeah.
Martin: What was his rationale for saying, ‘this just isn’t for me?’
Paul: Uh he wants to do things that he wants to do and…
Lydia: When he wants to do it.
Paul: He doesn’t want to conform. You know he wants to be more of a…
Lydia: We’re having to eat at a certain time and… programs running at a certain time-- wasn’t his cup of tea.
Paul: Doesn’t like to go with the flow.
Martin: But for the typical Luther camper you think that there’s a comfort in the routine?
Paul: Oh Lutherans are extremely routine…come on now!

Paul Fisk’s tongue-in-cheek comment reveals his deeper understanding of how the fabrication of cultural production is meaningful to the adherents of the system undergirded by the nostalgic
reflex. As for the brother-in-law who chose to reject this mode of production, predilections within human discourse will aid and abet his search for a nostalgic system wherein he will feel fulfilled. In other words, nostalgia guides us to the niche in which we craft our identity.

The roles people play at camp are defined in various ways by the physical and social boundaries that have been established over time. For the uninitiated and for returning campers, counselors provide an information packet at the beginning of the week that contains, among other things, a camp map and the program schedule (see Figure Ten). The grounds and schedule are tailored to promote the aura that people desire from year to year. Barthel defines five characteristics of SSCs which neatly provide a framework for deconstructing the programmatic aspects of the camp and the underlying work of nostalgia therein. Using these characteristics, we can then understand further how the nostalgic reflex is at work in the system.
Figure Ten. Camp Luther schedule. It has hardly evolved since the program's inception in the early 60's. Courtesy of the camp office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
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<td>9:00</td>
<td>Morning Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>Afternoon Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:00</td>
<td>Evening Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Bedtime</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Bedtime</td>
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**REST HOURS:** The camp operates with strict rest hours.

**Camp Luther Family Week Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Family Night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Family Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Family Night</td>
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<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Family Program</td>
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<td>Friday</td>
<td>Family Night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Family Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Family Night</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Good Community is the Genteel Community (Barthel 89)

When asked what he missed most about camp during the other fifty-one weeks of the year, Ted Breitner responded

The songs. The music. The… just the overall acceptance. I think that is what’s key here. Um…most of the superficial uh concerns, appearances, you know-- who is a part of a club or fraternity is not so much an important part of the role here. And it’s integrated subconsciously into how we do things. The [seating arrangements in the dining hall] are mixed up every day and I don’t want to say it’s a forced socialization but you’ve got a small community here. You’ve got a very small environment and it’s a shared experience.

Breitner’s insights into the design of the program are emblematic of how it fits within the parameters of Barthel’s “genteel community.” Like other SSCs, the camp environment provides roles for participants and as Breitner indicates, these roles are lack the usual trappings of societal stratification. This is not to say that cliques or family groupings do not occur within the camp environs, but that the perceived notion of how to “do” camp is by living in a state of harmony and equanimity with others. The fabric of the campground indicates this as well—all of the buildings are the same color and share the same (very) basic amenities. Automobiles are relegated to the parking lot near the entrance of the camp, behind a stand of trees, so as to reduce clutter and also encourage pedestrian traffic around the grounds (those with physical challenges are offered the use of the camp’s golf cart).

The genteel quality of camp life has been carefully engineered over many years and is nostalgia-driven. The atmosphere of camp is decidedly pre-industrial, providing people with a sense of a more humane environment that may or may not have existed in the past. Harper sees
this yearning manifested through nostalgia: “Only where a community is small or where one
narrows one’s outlook so the environment seems small, can presence of mind flourish without
looking comic. Only in a world which is assured of the material world turning out as right as
right as the world of the spirit—an eighteenth century world, let us say—does presence of mind
have a place that can be admired” (68).

This “presence of mind” of which Harper speaks is the ability to live organically in the
moment. It is a mind freed from all but the ambient noise of our anxiety. Those who yearn for
their performative role at camp are instinctually longing for a sense of serenity and plenitude
among like-minded individuals. Harper continues: “The best we can hope for is for the
underlying sadness to be tempered by occasions of presence. This means we must look for a
paradise that will make lasting the under-layer of all our apprehended presences, that feeling of
nearness, of closeness, intimacy, to something unique and other that attends our awareness of
loss as well as attention” (124). Could this “underlying sadness” of which he speaks be our sense
of finitude in the face of a increasingly complicated world? The role of the camper allows a
temporary respite from distraction, so that one is able to have a sense of being and an encounter
with presence, as Harper calls it.

The bucolic setting of the camp lends itself to ushering people into their roles as members
of the genteel community. At any given time of the day, campers can be seen imbibing the
ambiance of the lake on a series of swings that dot the bluff. The vista over the lake provides one
with a sense of place, and the seemingly omnipresent breeze and radiant sunshine resonate with
many campers, as Bryan Loftis recounts:

I could sit and listen to the wind off the lake for hours. And it’s different than the ocean
but it’s similar. But there’s something unique about it that I like. I love to hear the wind
through the trees and I like the trees just in general. Um, you can be in the sunlight at home and it not be as peaceful or not be as quiet or calm when you’re under the sun and under the trees here. It’s just, it’s a different feeling.

The atmosphere of place is similar to that of the Chautauqua resorts, named for the first of many gated communities developed by the United Methodist Church circa 1873 to provide a “secure” place for Protestants to enjoy leisurely pursuits in a relaxed Christian atmosphere (Moore 150). R. Laurence Moore writes that these detached communities are designed in such a way so that religion is conflated with daily activities, thereby making the religiosity of the place less overt, more understated (155). The same can be said of Camp Luther—while there are chapel services in the evenings and an optional Bible study in the mornings, the subtle nature of this SSC’s religious programming makes for what Barthel calls a “clean and harmonious” environment of “refined tastes” (89). The intentional continuity of the place and program that is Luther is indicative of the nostalgic reflex at work.

*The Good Community is the Protected Community* (90).

Much has been said by those interviewed for this work regarding the feeling of security in the camp environment, which is a hallmark of the Staged Symbolic Community, “for such ideal communities could not exist in the middle of suburban sprawl without some form of symbolic divide” (90). Luther is called a “place apart” because it is both physically and spiritually removed from society. Located at the north end of Poore Road in North Kingsville, Ohio, most people would not even be aware of its existence save for the sign located at the entrance. The property fronting the road is thick with trees and bracken, which completely screens the grounds from the public eye. While the camp does not have a gatehouse per se, the on-campus home of the year-round caretaker is located adjacent to the main entrance on the west
side of the main thoroughfare, marking a symbolic divide between the normative world and the world of camp.

The combining factors of remoteness and homogeneity in participants (largely white, middle-class Protestants) result in comments such as these:

…it’s just like an easy place to let your guard down and kind of open up to other people because people consider this kind of a safe place where you might not have uh the same type of freedoms or be able to let your hair down quite as much in…a cathedral setting or you know your own church where things are maybe more by the book or um…yea (Stefanie Connor).

I’ve noticed it’s a place where parents feel comfortable with their kids just being able to run around. And the parents, like they still have to watch out for their kids, but they know that somebody’s always there looking out for their kids, like counselors are there. And there are times where husbands and wives can go off together and not worry that their kids are going to get kidnapped because they’re in this safe environment, this safe, trusted environment, and I get that every year at camp, I feel that. (Julie Van Dorn).

Camp Luther is heaven on earth. [laughs] That’s what it is. It’s just…my family has always called it the ‘camp bubble’ ever since we’ve camped here because when you’re here you don’t think about anything else that’s happening in the world. Even when you’re just here for the week camping. You’re just in this little bubble. I mean you don’t think about it you don’t worry about it you’re just in this bubble and that’s… it’s just peaceful there (Shelly Harms).

These statements illustrate the strong theme of security in the minds of the camp’s adherents. The “bubble” of which Harms speaks is alarming, comforting, and generated by nostalgia. Like
other SSCs, the camp offers a detached setting that is virtually unknown, thus stoking the perception of security, and the strength of the nostalgic reflex. That this feeling of assuredness is only temporary by design (one week of the year) makes it more valued in the eyes of those who seek it out.

This coveted feeling also begs the question, what protection is the camp providing? What is it that troubles people on a daily basis and yet is seemingly absent from camp? Davis finds that nostalgia provides respite from the anxiety produced by change:

To the extent that constant change, at all levels and in all realms of social life, seems to be endemic to modern civilization, some such “outlet” or “safety valve” may be required. As suggested earlier, this allowed time for needed change to be assimilated while giving the appearance, as nostalgia does, of meaningful links to the past (110).

Perhaps then, this feeling of safety and assuredness is nothing more than a particular manifestation of nostalgia guarding like-minded individuals who find comfort in each other and the camp. The time spent at camp is spent to assimilate “needed change” while not losing their sense of self. The “bubble” of camp is a place of respite from the outside system. Svetlana Boym cites Weber to elaborate on the point:

Max Weber dwelled on the tragic ambivalence of the modern “rationalisation and bureaucratic subjugation of individual and social relations to the utilitarian ethics that resulted in the “disenchantment of the world,” the loss of charisma and withdrawal from public life. The retreat into a newly found religion or reinvented communal tradition wasn’t the answer to modernity, but an escape from it (emphasis mine, 24).

Conceivably what differentiates Camp Luther from other vacations is the combination of rustic setting with a decidedly low-key consumption practice. Understand, it is not a monastic retreat,
but more of a “spiritual spa” which does not appeal to all types, but creates a dedicated following spanning four generations of like-minded individuals and families. Like Paul and Lydia Fisk’s brother-in-law, nostalgic solace may be found in a variety of other venues—Branson, the Grand Canyon, or Las Vegas, but understand, the nostalgic reflex is at work in these locales as well.

In this particular context, however, a “certain type” of people are attracted to the camp by virtue of its pastoral setting and seeming pragmatism. There is ample precedent for this magnetism dating back to urban growth in the face of industry. People’s sense of self was dangerously close to being summed up in their vocations instead of their fundamental existence, which produced existential anxiety and a need for authentic encounters with nature, albeit in a mediated way so as not to trigger other anxieties of the unknown. Leslie Paris recognizes distinct patterns of rural nostalgia:

Two different but equally nostalgic forms of rural appreciation attracted visitors. The first was an agrarian impulse. During the latter half of the [19th] century, thousands of tourists paid to board on working farms in order to experience first-hand the benefits of farm-fresh food and country air to and to witness (but not join in) hardy, virtuous labor. The second was a pre-agricultural wilderness ideal, which valued the spiritual and aesthetic possibilities of “uncivilized” nature over any utilitarian importance…. Although many urban Americans were attracted to the idea of wilderness vacations, in practice most preferred a more mediated encounter with nature (23).

Abigail Van Slyck also recognizes the role of camps in restoring a sense of the wilds: “In manufacturing a new type of wilderness out what—in many cases—had been farmland, summer camps (and to some extent, other rural resorts) seemed to turn back the clock, reversing the
westward motion of the advancing frontier and (particularly at eastern camps) returning the landscape to something that evoked its pristine natural form” (4).

Since modern agriculture has evolved to the point of becoming industrial in its own right, contemporary wilderness vacations are by default, camping vacations, whether at government subsidized parks or privately-owned campgrounds. Camp Luther is borne out of this ideal of the “mediated encounter” with nature. The camp atmosphere provides both the sense of wilderness and yet familiarity, security from industry’s ability to reduce the self to the sum of its productivity—escaping the sense of being a mere cog in a vast industrial machine.

*The Good Community is Conflict-Free (Barthel 90)*

The power of the program that governs the daily activities at the camp ensures the continuity of rituals and folkways that provide cultural meaning to the camp’s adherents. The structure of the hours implies a hierarchy from the camp director through the camp staff to the campers. People come to camp expecting certain events to take place at designated times. They expect certain meals to be served on particular days. They expect to have an experience that is paradoxically reminiscent of their past experiences with new experiences fitted in the parameters of the existing system. To the extent that there are actual rules regarding the campground (i.e.: no bicycles or pets are allowed), there are also a tacit set of expectations placed on both the staff and the campers which are learned over time, including the following:

- Counselors are expected to have romantic relationships and possibly marry, but they are to keep their relationships clandestine.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) Experience shows that when this and other boundaries are breached in a manner that disturbs the collective will, the camper evaluations reflect disappointment and the issue is subsequently addressed by the camp director.
• Counselors are considered paradigms for Christian living, so their (offsite) consumption of alcohol and tobacco products must never be revealed to campers, unless they are of legal age and expressly under the invitation of said campers.

• Counselors must present a united front of congeniality to the campers, even if on a personal level cliques and preferential relationships exist.

• Campers may consume alcohol, but the preferable locale for this activity is at Breezy’s, a local bar located near the southern terminus of Poore Rd. If alcohol is consumed at the camp, it is to be done in a discreet manner.

• Campers are expected to heckle counselors while they make announcements in the dining hall, and counselors are expected to endure this ritual with good humor.

• Campers are generally expected to participate in the evening activities, though participation is (of course) not mandated.

• Similar to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” people in “unorthodox” relationships (unmarried adults, GLBTQI persons, etc.) are expected to keep their activities concealed from the general populace, especially the children. The normative relationship at camp is heteronormative, preferably within the bonds of marriage.13

• Every camper is expected to be present and reverent for the Friday night candle-light service which is the de facto culmination of the week’s experience.

• Campers are supposed to be happy and are encouraged to add to the general current of whimsicality that is commonly practiced at the camp.

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13 This is not to say that these relationships and heterodox orientations don’t exist within the framework of the camp population, but like the frequent experience of GLBTQI people in rural communities, individuals are often acknowledged, loved, and accepted, but never publicly outed. I could give concrete examples, but I too am part of this system and would not want to risk harming persons whom I care about.
Both campers and counselors are expected to swallow their pride and be non-confrontational, thereby creating an atmosphere ripe for passive-aggressive behaviors (this may not hold true in the adult Bible study, where opinions regarding doctrine run the gamut from conservative to progressive and debate is an expected part of the experience). 14

These subtleties are a sampling of the underlying expectations that are maintained through the traditions of camp. As Eric Hobsawm writes in *The Invention of Tradition*:

“‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (132).

14 Passive aggressive behaviors are an indication of people wishing to maintain the civility masquerading as “Christian behavior” while working out their own anxieties over inevitable changes within the system. This concept of homeostasis is addressed in Chapter Five.
Hobsawm further indicates that these traditions are inculcated through what he terms “quasi-obligatory repetition,” meaning that through redundancy, patterns of behavior are established and expected (2). Nostalgia for these patterns (be they “real” or “imagined”) is the basis for their continued existence.

These patterns of the behavior are responsible for the “conflict-free” environment of Barthel’s SSC theory. People at camp, by virtue of their nostalgia, have abdicated their agency to the extent that they desire participation within the patterns of the camp tradition. It is as if camp is a game to be played, and one benefits most when one plays by the rules. “Game play” is further nuanced by Johan Huizinga as follows:

…play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted by absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’ Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call ‘play’ in… exhibitions and performances of all kinds (28).

Barthel echoes this sentiment by her description of what behavior constitutes the conflict-free environment: “Residents themselves can be expected to play their social roles within these strictures more consciously and conscientiously…. Their expressed values and behavior must conform to an ever more tightly drawn, class-specific set of rules and norms…” (90). At Camp Luther, this is no more evident than the meal-time rituals of the dining hall where the various facets of camp programming intersect in a sui generis cultural production. Let us then look closer at this meal-time production to analyze the presence of nostalgia therein.

The Luther dining hall is a cacophonous space containing cafeteria-style tables that seat approximately ten people. Families are assigned to a table by the counselor on kitchen duty. The
likelihood of sitting with total strangers at any given point of the week is high. Fifteen minutes prior to each meal, the dining hall bell is rung and the “jumpers” come and set the tables. Jumpers are campers who are assigned to this duty for three or four meals a week.

Once the tables are set, the bell is again rung and the campers gather in the hall. A volunteer says grace and the meal is served by “hoppers,” who are usually picked by some arbitrary defining mark picked by the program director (people wearing blue shirts, or the person standing closest to the salt shaker, etc.). At most meals, the salad bars are present, and people are constantly going to and fro with plates from these stations.

Toward the end of the meal (breakfast and lunch), counselors are expected to lead the campers in songs related to the food served. For example, if bacon and eggs are served for breakfast, the “Bacon and Eggs” song is sung with accompanying hand motions:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Bacon and eggs, bacon and eggs.} \\
&\text{Some like theirs fried upside down.} \\
&\text{Bacon and eggs, bacon and eggs.} \\
&\text{Flip ‘em! Flop ‘em! Flop ‘em! Flip ‘em!} \\
&\text{Bacon and eggs!}
\end{align*}
\]

I mention this song in particular because it is the origin of a particular camp tradition wherein campers can shout out “Flip ‘em!” at any time during announcements and the person who is speaking at that moment is expected to tumble across the floor.

After one or two songs, the program director steps to the center of the dining hall to give the announcements, which begins with the announcements song (as described in the excursive).\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} In the evenings, the camp songbook is passed out and songs are sung from it. I include this footnote for the sake of any camper reading this who would undoubtedly want this nuance included in the description.
Much like a church environment, people with crying infants are expected to discreetly exit the room. Unlike church worship of the Lutheran variety, heckling is the norm, though I was surprised to witness little or none of this during one specific week of camp, where the tradition was such that the group consensus was to dispense with the verbal exchanges in order to quickly transition to other activities.\footnote{I think in fact what I witnessed during this week (Family Week III) was a “tradition within a tradition,” a natural outgrowth of a peculiar performativity where the majority craved the camp experience save for this one particular aspect. This group of people have been camping together since the early 1980’s, and their evolved practices were puzzling to the staff, yet catered to nonetheless.} After the announcements, a prayer is sung, and people leave the hall so the jumpers can clear the tables.

The food served at camp is typical camp fare. It caters to children and therefore is high in starch and salts and sugars. The salad bars were introduced in the mid-eighties to offer a healthier option for conscientious consumers. Over the years, various foodways have established themselves at Luther. The oldest and most beloved being Thursday lunch; always vegetable soup and freshly-baked oatmeal bread made from a camp recipe. Another favorite is the Friday breakfast featuring “McLuther’s,” a camp version of the McDonald’s Egg McMuffin sandwich. Following the Friday evening chapel service, pizza and wings from a local vendor are served in the dining hall, usually around 9:30 PM. I have never understood nor relished this particular tradition, but perhaps it adds to a sense of closure for the week—“outside” food being brought into camp.

Alice Martin has been the camp’s head cook since 1998. She is as one might imagine—a strong-willed, loving taskmaster of the camp kitchen. She recognizes the need for diplomacy in the planning of meals, as campers have come to expect certain foods at certain times of the week. Her job is difficult in that unlike youth camps, she prepares meals for people of all ages and
predilections. In recent years, she has faced a phalanx of specialty dietary requests from a variety of sources, which have at times cause conflicts between campers and the kitchen staff:

We’ve…let’s see, we had a lady here that was in her 90’s. We had a two-week-old baby here one week. So the range on campers at Camp Luther since I’ve been here has been two weeks to 90-some years-old. And everybody eats differently. Um, we try to do the best we can and serve what everybody wants. Sometimes that’s difficult, um, but they need to remember that this is a camp, this is not home and we can’t cater to everyone’s diets. Um, the Atkins diet, or whatever it’s called. The year that that came into camp I exploded. Sorry. I couldn’t cook eggs the way that they had to be cooked for every meal and I couldn’t cook that diet every meal. I had maybe four or five people on that diet and 145 other people to cook for. So if you’re on a diet, you bring your own stuff and do your own thing. I don’t mind people bringing stuff in and um…asking it to be cooked. It is done after the campers’ food is prepared. I can’t cater to anybody before that because my main thing as cook here at Camp Luther is to cook for the campers (Martin).

Martin’s no-nonsense approach to her vocation is emblematic of the food that comes from her kitchen—often cooked from scratch, seldom if ever esoteric in nature, and highlighted mainly with salt and pepper. Ethnically speaking, the cuisine is what I would call “American Cafeteria.” In part this cuisine is created out of necessity; such a broad variety of palates results in limited resources trying to please tastes coming out of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

As a result, those culinary decisions that meet with the most positive feedback become staples of the Camp Luther menu, then they become a cultural product of the camp dining hall ritual. This quasi-liturgical production is a multi-sensory experience which give the campers a further sense of identity as campers per se—perhaps even a cultic group standing in
contradistinction to the culture they left at home. Participating in the dining hall ritual and receiving the same meals year after year helps the campers mark time and satisfy the demands of the nostalgic reflex which calls for and reifies these experiences.

The following excerpts from the interviews support this idea:

I love how goofy it can get in the dining hall. I love the goofiness and how…like to me when the campers are making us sing songs or they’re making us do these goofy things it is completely out of like love for us. It’s not like they don’t like us and they’re like, “We’re going to torture them because we don’t like them.” I just feel like it’s… they respect us, they think we’re fun, they think we’re funny… and you just get a different type of joy from being able to do that and having everybody kind of laugh with you and at you (Michelle Rankin).

I expect to have one lunch that lasts through rest hour. I expect all of those jokes, like in the dining hall: “sing a song” and “haggle a chicken,” and I expect the staff to just be so energetic and so lively, and the programs to be funny, and also some to be serious (Julie Van Dorn).

There’s stuff that I would change just because… I can only take so much of, you know, thirty minutes of dining hall antics. But I know that’s part of the campers’ experience, so I wouldn’t dare mess with that. I would love to be able to try some new things in that kind of early evening and late evening things but there’s such a… resistance whenever you try to do something outside the box of it that it never quite goes well (Kevin Carter).

I find Carter’s use of the word “resistance” especially pertinent in this context, because it implies that the folkways (and foodways) at the camp are part of a cultural production that defines the experience and the people who take part in it. Resistance to established paradigms reinforces
Barthel’s axiom that the staged symbolic community is conflict-free. A camper like Carter might prefer to eat his meal without all the singing and fanfare, but he recognizes that in order for the cultural production to authentically occur, he has to abdicate some of his social agency in order to be part of the greater experience. Thus, the nostalgia for ritual provides the impetus for people to resist implementing change.

Susan Kalčík contends that these behaviors and food choices are in fact a “social process in which the relationship of individuals and groups and the communication of identity are significant” (44). While this concept is meant primarily to understand the definition of ethnic subgroups in the greater social structure of America, I find them no less relevant for the grouping of individuals that make up the social collective that is Camp Luther. The campers become a social enclave of sorts, with the means to create a hybrid ethnic identity. Kalčík furthers her argument by citing anthropologist Abner Cohen who identifies the “dialectical relations between symbolic action and power relationships” (45). Cohen stresses that ethnic identity (and in this study, camp identity) is an expression of patterns evidenced through actions “like ceremonial, ritual, gift exchange, prescribed forms of joking, taking an oath, eating and drinking together” (qtd. in Kalčík 45). This definition encompasses all the activities in a typical dining hall production. The nostalgic reflex preserves and is preserved by the reiterations of these foods and rituals as a means of producing meaning and identity. Not all resistance to change is rooted in nostalgia, but the nostalgic reflex is a powerful catalyst in the process of identity preservation and continuity.

Rituals influence the overall behavior of people in a given setting in order to further the mission or primary objective of the collective. In order for camp to maintain the patina of a conflict-free and harmonious zone, people are expected to accept and promote these rituals in
their daily living while there. Mark Galanter channels the thinking of Max Weber in how charismatic leaders (in this case, the camp staff) are able to coalesce the divergent attitudes of campers into a more or less harmonious co-existence. He states

The transcendent mission of a routinized charismatic group is expressed in its rites and rituals. Using these behavioral prescriptions, the group establishes standards of how its members should conduct themselves in their own lives and in their joint activities, in conformity with the group’s mission (178).

This means that even when staff and/or campers aren’t “happy,” they act happy out of consideration for the demands made by nostalgia in perpetuating the camp experience.

Even in the midst of the conflict-free SSC, social issues emerge, but they do so within a predetermined pattern of behavior. In consideration of this subject’s privacy, the names and dates in the following statement are obfuscated, but the qualitative data remains the same:

In 200* when we were having some family issues and some interpersonal crisis issues, um, we actually decided we were going to put on our ‘game faces,’ we were going to come to camp and we were going to be happy. And people really didn’t know anything that was going on so we came to camp. So being here pretty much just put us at peace enough to know that we really needed to open up and stop pretending that we had everything together.... We needed to stop pretending that we didn’t have everything held together and open up to these people who we camped with who have been our lifelong friends who deserve to know what was going on with us. So that week my parents did open up and they told our friends that were here and… it was also a very good healing process because I was very angry internally. I was very angry. I was very hurt and I didn’t really want to talk to anybody (source withheld).
While on the surface this kind of admission seems to fly in the face of my argument for the persistence of “happy” behavior patterns, it in fact reifies the very nature of nostalgic expectation. This ethnographic subject’s family came to camp under considerable duress and attempted to put on their “game faces” out of consideration for the purpose of the collective and to receive a measure of healing from the programming.

When they finally put aside the charade and shared their pain with friends, the real catharsis occurred. Paradoxically, by dropping the “game faces,” this family reinforced the notion that camp life is authentic and normative. Of course they should be able to reveal their pain. Of course their friends would offer comfort and healing. This is the nostalgic notion of the spiritual collective as defined by the underlying patterns of life at camp. It would be “non-camp-like” for this situation to develop in any other way. So while people might introduce personal issues and conflicts into the matrix of the camp life, the camp life has a pre-programmed (yet still effective) response for those who operate within its paradigms. By contrast, I posit that delving into the context of larger social issues which are potentially divisive (except perhaps in the context of the Bible Study) is considered bad form and not serving the overall purpose of camp.

_Personal and Social History can be Re-Written (Barthel 90)._ 

Barthel argues that at historical attractions like Williamsburg or perhaps even Disney’s Main Street USA, the history data is re-assembled according to whatever narrative is necessary to fit the predisposed notions of those who participate in it. She posits “…modern social actors simply dismantle [history] and reassemble it in whatever piece of _bricolage_ they fancy” (90). There is a juncture at which the personal, collective, organizational (in this study’s case, the church), and natural histories intersect to make the objective reality of what the camp represents
possible. Because of the nostalgic reflex working individually and collectively, this sometimes unpleasant reality is attenuated and made more palatable.

From my experience on staff many years ago, I can personally attest to the interpersonal conflicts and tensions that occurred in the sanctum of our staff lounge during meetings. In the summer of 1989, oppositional cliques formed that eventually led to the dismissal of three counselors toward the end of the season ostensibly because beer was discovered in one of their cabins. Because the camp world is small, the repercussions from this fallout seemed to affect relationships on a global scale, though in retrospect it was merely a personality conflict among staff members working itself out with unfortunate consequences for everyone involved.

Now, two decades after the fact, nostalgia has done sufficient work in this area so that the players involved are reconciled to one another and the former conflict has become a quaint part of the camp folklore, thus reifying Wilson’s third function of nostalgia—the ideologization and mystification of the past (19). Or as Barthel puts it (by recalling Marx), “…history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (91). Perhaps Davis describes this attenuation best when he writes:

Some will, to be sure, allow that their nostalgia is tinged frequently with a certain sadness or even melancholy but are then inclined to describe it as ‘a nice sort of sadness’ – ‘bittersweet’ is an apt word occasionally used. The implication is that the component of sadness serves only to heighten the quality of recaptured joy or contentment…. Indeed, the nostalgic mood is one whose active tendency is to envelop all that may have been painful or unattractive about the past in a kind of fuzzy, redeemingly benign aura. The hurts, the annoyances, disappointments, and irritations, if they are permitted to intrude at
all, are flustered forgivingly through an ‘it-was-all-for-the-best’ attitude or, at the very least, are patronized under some “great human comedy” metaphor (14). Indeed, the memories of past staff conflicts and other strange occurrences (camper infidelities, public drunkenness, or public acts of belligerence by campers or staff) mellow with time so that it is all part of ‘the camp experience.’ The nostalgic reflex makes it possible for people to redeem the past through historicizing history.

While the past is restructured, the present is also managed through the performativity of the players. Consider this quote from a Lutheran pastor and former staffer:

I think a lot of people give their best selves to this place and I mean that in the best way. I think a lot of the pastors who come and volunteer want to do a really good job for this place because we love it. And I think we see the best of people in a good way (John Geer).

Geer unwittingly taps into the deeper truth of nostalgic performativity—people tend to display their “best selves” because the very design of camp history calls on campers to portray roles of an idyllic community in a bucolic setting. This behavior is also performed at weekly church services, but the camp experience a more extended and polished performance. Robin Cantor shows how reciprocity plays a part in campers wanting to be their “best selves:”

But this has always been kind of the cruise ship of the camps in that it’s programmed…with all of this theater and singing and um…you don’t have to do anything. You eat five to seven times a day depending on if you choose to…you know it’s like a cruise ship. And all the shenanigans around lunch and breakfast and you know that’s a leftover from a long time ago from the…I think the…what do they call it…camps up in the Catskills and stuff like that where they have major shows and stuff like that. (Robin Cantor)
Cantor recognizes through phrases like “cruise ship of camps” that behavior modification is generally expected in order for the narrative of camp history to continue unimpeded; the camp is self-contained (like a ship) and must contain a particular narrative in order for people to feel satiated. People strive to be happy at camp because camp provides the impetus for happiness (this is a circular arrangement to be sure). Can this function of “historizing history” occur outside the SSC? Certainly, but the parameters of the detached enclave make the process much easier—less variables, less perspectives, and a collective yearning for one social current speed the evolution of memory.

Nostalgia for the world we thought existed in some mythical era or hope exists in some not-so-distant future is compelling people to try on an alternate version of the self in order to construct a cultural product that affirms their identity as kind and caring people. Let me be clear—the “better angels of our nature” perception of campers at camp by other campers is *sine qua non* for the history of camp to be cultivated rightly. It has nothing to do with whether or not people are in essence performing their best selves; they are not hypocrites. They believe camp reveals their best selves through the presence of other people, the programming (both secular and spiritual), and the place. As Davis opines, “But the point is not merely nostalgia’s facility for ‘muting the negative,’ as it were. Rather, it is that in so doing nostalgia furthers the purposes of continuity of identity by reassuring the now self that is as it was then: deserving, qualified, and fully capable of surmounting the fears and uncertainties that lie ahead” (39). Thus, the construction of camp history is paradoxically assembling the camp future in which individual and collective performance continues to weather the storms of life.
The second function of nostalgia, according to Wilson, is an “interpersonal form of play” resulting in stronger bonds between people (19). Most people come to camp making the assumption that the other campers are there for the same or similar reasons: they believe in God, they enjoy being around other people who believe in God, and they enjoy the camp atmosphere. On Sunday evenings the staff facilitates mixers for pre-teens in the chapel, teens in the dining hall, and adults in the lodge. While many campers are already related to or friends with other families at the camp on any given week, this mixer event serves the purpose of easing anxieties about people they don’t know. Often, the staff purposely uses these events to group strangers together for informational exchanges, which is important in cultivating the feel of the community. Here, the nostalgic reflex (in a manner similar to Wilson’s second function of nostalgia: playful bonding cultural production) is particularly active as people find common ground on which to build rapport. Davis elaborates:

…sometimes friends but more often about-to-become friends inasmuch as this kind of sharing, this cautious mutual discovery of unexpected likenesses, is in and of itself the very elixir of friend-making. What we witness in this kind of nostalgic memory exchange is, of course, the wonderment of the revelation of how much more alike than different our “secret” pasts are…. At one and the same time, then, our nostalgia for those aspects of our past selves that were “odd and different” becomes the basis for deepening our sentimental ties to others and for reassuring us that we are not that strange after all. Others, it turns out, were equally “strange.” Moreover, this assurance is conveyed in the
In other words, people find the commonality of their “best selves” in order to reify the overall purpose of being at camp which is the formation of a like-minded collective in pursuit of rejuvenation and ground of being. This process of bonding necessarily includes the presentation of the self’s “best history,” so as not to disrupt the overall sense of bonhomie that one cultivates when at camp. It would be considered awkward or bad form for individuals to divulge too much negative information about themselves during these initial encounters. “Face-to-face situations are, in fact, ideal projective fields that the participant cannot help but structure in a characterizing way, so that conclusions can be drawn about him, correct or incorrect, whether he [sic] wants it or not,” writes Erving Goffman (102). While I have little to hide about my personal life, leading with information about my divorce and its connection to camp is far less playful and proper than sharing my affection for Lake Erie sunsets with others. Initially, it is best to exploit our pleasant common bonds than to unload our less-savory baggage for nostalgia’s sake.

History plays an important role in this process of relationship building—both individual and collectively. Many campers have written themselves into the history of the camp itself through being part of the early years or being part of the camp staff. Others have made memorial gifts to the camp upon losing a loved one, so that the memory of the deceased is forever related to the mutual experiences shared at camp. This enhances the proprietary nostalgia that maintains a social equilibrium. It also gives people the right to offer critiques of the camp environs if they experience changes that are not to their liking. Much of my ethnographic work with older campers resulted in a fair amount of reminiscence and critique of the camp masquerading as
nostalgia, which is understandable, since often these particulars are conflated along with sentimentality and a sense of unrequited longing.

Sometimes I experienced frustration in my research because instead of talking about their nostalgic feelings for camp, people reiterated their experiences at camp in former years, as can be seen in the following example from Ernie and Darlene Walsh, one of the few couples who can honestly say they have been camping at Luther since its inception.

Ernie: Now I was on the committee that was...see the headquarters of the camping business in the Ohio LCA or whatever home was in Mansfield, Camp Mowana and [Luther] was kind of a stepsister. Most people weren’t too interested in doing anything...I’d still see there was some of those guys that...there was a couple of guys on the committee that just wanted to wash their...everything, just get rid of everything up here. And there was others...real hard nose...what was his name um...?

Darlene: I don’t know anything about that. I never went to the committee meetings.

These are charming people, and I spent a long time listening to their stories after turning off the microphone, but I found the bulk of the information to be reminiscent, not nostalgic. This is not to say that their story does not contain important information about the camp narrative, but this is not the stuff of legend or lore which results from nostalgia, but rather data of reminiscence, which results from people trying to account for the quantifiable changes in the camp landscape.

The distinction is important, and the dichotomy is not absolute as nuggets of nostalgia do show up in these types of accounts, but for the most part, those whom you think would be the most nostalgic (i.e., the elderly) are often those who are interesting in relating their version of history—an objective history regarding the details of buildings, meetings, budgets, and so forth.
Wilson posits that nostalgia has a more profound effect on one’s emotions than fleeting sentimentality and factual reminiscence. She cites political theorist Steve Chilton, who states that nostalgia goes well beyond recollection and reminiscence, as the latter are ‘less actively creative.’ While recollection and reminiscence require the ‘selective ordering of facts,’ this is less marked than with nostalgia, which is, ‘more actively (even if unconsciously) myth-making.’ Nostalgia demands an emotion valence. Reminiscence and recollection so not involve comparison to the present or a desire to return to the past, while nostalgia embodies both of these characteristics (25).

Returning to the Barthel’s maxim that “the smart locality is one that either exploits old history, or creates new history,” we can see that the social order of camp is adept at both things, making use of personal histories to create an idyllic shared atmosphere, while banking on the folklore concerning camp to perpetuate the successful “magic” of the past in the present.

By way of parallel example, consider those who travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania because of the horrific battle that occurred in 1863. Members of the Gettysburg community are not afraid to capitalize on the nostalgic reflex to promote continued interest and profitability. The hallowed ground that witnessed death and destruction for three days now is a commodity that ensures the livelihoods of hundreds. Similarly, though on a vastly smaller scale, both campers and staff at Camp Luther capitalize on its peculiar hybrid of church camp cum Great Lakes leisure resort to market a commodity that stands a fair chance of continuing for the foreseeable future. This is in keeping with Wilson’s fourth function of nostalgia, wherein collective nostalgia becomes a cultural commodity (19).
In one particular exchange during my interviews, former staff member Gertie Dean chooses to describe camp in a unique manner so as to belie the somewhat dull stereotype that is associated with religious orthodoxy. I am reprinting it in full so as to capture all the nuances of the exchange:

Martin: So how do you describe camp to people who have never seen it?
Gertie: The way that a lot of counselors describe it, at least the ones I worked with—[they] would describe it as Dirty Dancing. In Dirty Dancing, there is this aspect of each family has their own cabin, and then the counselors’ job is to do activities, and put on shows, and then at 11:00 they are off, and then they can do their own crazy counselor things. For most people outside of camp, that’s the best way to get a vision in their head that this is a family camp, and not an ‘I’m sleeping with twenty kids in a cabin’ camp. And that usually gives them a pretty good perception.

Martin: Minus Patrick Swayze and the botched abortion.
Gertie: Right. Unfortunately, there’s no Patrick Swayze, but you know….

Martin: You can’t have everything.
Gertie: You can’t have everything at camp.

The Dirty Dancing allegory is not what one would initially think when being introduced to a church camp. Yet this is Dean’s way of marketing what is for her the compelling aspects of the Camp Luther experience. In her unique manner, she commodifies the camp history via the Dirty Dancing comparison in order to explain to her non-camp friends her nostalgic connection to it. Like the many individuals who invariably compare camp to Disney World, Dean has chosen a pop cultural reference in which to anchor her nostalgic definition of camp.
Personal recall is not accurate—it is distilled through the lens of nostalgia and often made over with a sound revision. The more desultory moments of my own camp experience (doing laundry, washing dishes) is blotted out with the more evocative encounters with friends and families whom I have come to know and love over the years. My memories of camp are anything but precise, but this is precisely what draws me back year after year. My camp heritage is something I hope to impart to my children as an aspect of our family heritage. As Lowenthal adroitly states in *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*:

Heritage is sometimes equated with reliving the past; more often, it improves the past to suit present needs. For such purposes… we contrive a heritage exclusive to and biased in favor of ourselves. Exclusion and bias are supported by error and by mystification. We dwell on mythic fables rather than specifics, consolidate history into a generalized past, and revamp a legacy in line with what we think the present is or want it to be (142).

In my admittedly biased experience, camp is at once predictable by virtue of the programming and also serendipitous by virtue of the dynamic personalities that are drawn to it, making collective and individual histories comfortably malleable and worth recounting.

Identity is a Work in Progress.

By using Barthel’s five tenets of the staged symbolic community as a lens, it is possible to delve into the various aspects of what makes camp so compelling to its adherents. Nostalgia is a necessary component of shaping individual and collective identities; the work of cultural production at camp is in itself what perpetuates the folkways and rituals found in songs sung at the campfire, antics in the dining hall, or simply in renegotiating one’s own self for the sake of rightly adding to the collective experience. “Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be
negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold” says Kenneth Gergen (qtd. in Wilson, 55). The nostalgic reflex maintains the rituals that maintain the persons who practice them. Chapter One posed the question regarding the role of nostalgia in maintaining individual and collective identities. This chapter shows that nostalgia is arguably serving as the foundation for the cultural production that sums up camp and camper.

We see the various ways and means by which both campers and staff rely on nostalgia to re-shape the camp experience through their belief in its civility, safety, ideal lifestyle, and rambunctious dynamism. Though indeed the “center fails to hold” as a myriad of variables mete out change in the experience, nostalgia allows people to believe in the perpetuity of this quintessential encounter with self and others. They are inclined to perform roles in order to ensure that perpetuity. Camp is far from perfect by any stretch of the imagination, yet many believe it to be the “heaven on earth” that Shelly Harms finds there.

In the next chapter, we look further at what might be understood as the negative impact of a restorative nostalgia. People often demonstrate a yearning for homogeneity, heteronormativity, and patriarchal hierarchies inherent in the social fabric of America. People use nostalgia as a catalyst for acting out their phobias in the face of a rapidly changing social structure, seeking the comfort of a familiar place (camp) that allows them to speculate on broader issues of inequity without having to relinquish their own claim to the camp experience. The nostalgic reflex plays a double-edged role in mediating anxiety and denying the exclusivity of the “camp bubble.” This role entertains one of the framing questions in this work—does nostalgia help or hinder the overall mission of camp. Perhaps the answer is not so simple.
CHAPTER FOUR
RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL MELANCHOLY IN CONVERSATION WITH NOSTALGIA

Humankind has not infrequently responded with a nostalgic defensive retreat into the past when feeling threatened: for example, despite its forward-looking ideology, the late nineteenth-century United States gave great new value to its Colonial past—as an ‘exclusive WASP heritage’—in part to combat the mass immigration that was accompanying industrialization and that felt so new and so un-‘American.’

--Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”

Wednesday Night Theatrics

Since the early 1980’s, Wednesday evening at Camp Luther has been known for its weighty theatrical message. This is a movement on the part of the staff and camp leadership to impart an artistic yet poignant communication to the campers. With each passing year, successive staffs have employed a variety of methods to drive home a moral or religious memorandum. In some years, pantomime was used; in others, progressive dramas. In 1986, a full-blown passion walk, complete with a visceral crucifixion scene on the bluff, took place in front of all ages. In the summer of 2008, a progressive drama wherein campers were compelled to play the role of Jewish refugees in a Holocaust-themed plot was staged. Recently, in 2010, the staff did an adaptation of Archibald McLeash’s JB, which wrestled with the question of theodicy in the modern retelling of the biblical Job. The excursive in this chapter recalls a late night drama from the summer of 2005.

Typically, what begins as a nascent feeling of detachment from the so-called “outside world” reaches an apex during the Wednesday events. People’s internal clocks have adjusted to
the diurnal rhythm of camp life; as they choose to ignore the patterns of outside media and culture, the present reality of camp trumps the mental and spiritual baggage that was brought along. Perhaps this is why the camp staff chooses to use the Wednesday late evening program as a platform for addressing the social issues of past and present. By this time, the staff is well-known to the campers—a trusting relationship has been established and now this mandate is used as a tool to direct people’s attention to some aspect of societal dysfunction, past or present. Some campers (myself included) occasionally opt out if they get wind of a “heavy” topic and don’t feel like being browbeaten. Wednesday evening is an optimal time to vacate the premises and go to the bar. Most campers religiously attend this event as it gives them impetus for self-transformation without the risk of being pushed beyond the pale. After all, the understood goal of a week at camp is for the shaping of one’s identity through a variety of formats in a detached environment that provides fertile ground for such undertakings. At camp, one feels safe to engage in a thought provoking experience like a serious participant drama, because the camp “bubble” provides protection from real harm. Hence, one sees a pattern emerging in the Wednesday evening dramas—in particular an exploration of the other—what I would consider to be a form of minstrelsy, albeit unwittingly performed under the guise of passive racism and white privilege. As Leslie Paris relates,

Recent histories of racial cross-dressing have highlighted its multiple and ambivalent politics. As scholars have noted, minstrelsy reassuringly articulated “real” racial identities beneath white performers’ face paint. At the same time, the intensity of interest in dark bodies suggested not only antagonism to racial minorities but also cross-racial identification and longing. Participants in minstrelsy desired, however temporarily, to
inhabit the body of the Other along with the attributes—excess, joy, authenticity, freedom from the industrial workplace—that they imagined these Others to typify” (198).

In the summer of 1989, my last year on camp staff, we conducted a late-evening program for adults called simply “The Underground Railroad.” In it, the participants were told that they were runaway slaves being guided through a series of vignettes wherein staff members portrayed various characters endemic to the antebellum period running up to the Civil War. Participants were marched through a wooded area where they encountered the staff members in period costume, and they were told to act as if they were a traveling choir in order to fend off the intrusions of those who wanted to capture them and return them to slavery. To a person, all the participants in this program were white, over the age of eighteen, and readily willing to suspend their disbelief in order to fully identify with their roles. By the end of this traveling drama, it was usually after 11 PM; the participants were emotionally and physically spent, and they returned to their cabins without much conversation. Of course, they did not perform in blackface, but they were asked invest in their roles, to attempt identification with the other at a gut level.

I believe what occurred during this activity was a complex *bricolage* of religious and white racial melancholia working itself out Boym’s reflective and restorative definitions of nostalgia. (see Figure Twelve). That relatively middle class white persons displaced from the realities of runaway slaves by 120 years and a
completely different social paradigm were willing to attempt this immersion signifies what I have come to define as a function of racial melancholia within the nostalgic reflex. This chapter theorizes as to how this immersion experience reifies the paradoxical stance of what Eric Lott calls “love and theft.” Through this immersion the participants attempt to take part in a racial/religious melancholia that simultaneously places them in emotional solidarity with and in racial contrast to their Nineteenth Century counterparts. It also offers the illusion where they feel as if they could possibly understand the angst and horror of being a fugitive person of color under an ominous white patriarchal system, thereby assuaging their own feelings of guilt toward an inadequate response to social injustice in their current social context.

While this work will be more auto-ethnographic than previous chapters, it still draws on collective memories and related resources. It might also seem that my methodological approach diverges from that of previous chapters. One might say that I am being overly critical of this Wednesday evening tradition at the camp. This is not my intention. Rather, I am seeking to identify a particular function of nostalgia at work within the larger framework of the nostalgic reflex, and perhaps this scrutiny will at times seem heavy-handed.

Also, my use of Anne Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race* in this context may not be in sync with the original psychoanalytic thrust of her argument. I have come to understand her writing on a cursory level at best, but am moved by its implications and so am using it in this chapter. In order to further illuminate the nuances of Renalto Rosaldo’s imperialist nostalgia, I feel the use of Cheng is warranted in this context, with the caveat that I am using Cheng when speaking about the politics of race, not the psychology thereof. As Peter Keary noted in his book review, Cheng’s parsing the difference between grievance and grief opens up a new vocabulary
for theorizing the notion of how we come to understand the dominant racial group’s struggle to maintain hegemony while attempting identification with the oppressed (Keary). In this chapter, we see the struggle played out in an interactive drama—a performance within the performativity of camp.

There is evidence to suggest that in performing the role of the other, something more than dramatic exercise is occurring, as Paris relates in her study of children’s summer camps: “Gesturing to imagined pasts, [campers] elided the particular histories of colonial and racial oppression. In positioning people of color at a historical remove, cross-racial play allowed white-only camp communities to contain the threat that racial difference represented as a constitutive agent in white children’s subjectivity” (192). I am suggesting that this occurs at Camp Luther, albeit on a more sophisticated level as there are “adults” involved. The following excursion, while not related to the main drama described in the chapter, illuminates the typical mood and gravitas associated with the Wednesday late night staff drama.

Excursive

At supper, Brad makes an announcement that after the pre-teens are sent to bed, all other campers are asked to gather at the gazebo at 9:30 PM. Campers arrive and are greeted by staff members who are atypically dressed in somewhat formal attire. They carry highball glasses and chat with campers using enigmatic phrases like, “Did you get your invitation to the party?” or “I wonder what he’s going to announce this evening? Someone told me it was going to be very political.” It is understood that the staff are in character with whatever evening drama is about to unfold, and campers are divided into smaller groups of about twenty and led to various locations throughout the campground for what turns out to be a re-enactment of the Last Supper from the
Gospels of Matthew and John. In a curious mixture of modern set-dressing and imagined biblical setting, the four locations of the drama are enacted simultaneously, with four different male staffers portraying Jesus while the rest of the staff (including females in cross-gender roles) playing the speaking parts of Peter and Judas.

One of the groups is led into the lodge, where most of the lighting is turned off. A large fire crackles in the fireplace in front of a Da Vinci-esque Last Supper tableau, albeit with less than twelve disciples present since the total number of camp staff is less than the forty-eight it would require to adequately fill each position at the four tables. That each role is played by white persons acting on behalf of ancient peoples of color does not register in the minds of most campers. Instead, they are caught up in the beauty of the biblical scenes brought to life. When the Jesus character moves silently throughout the room with a basin, sprinkling water on their feet (with shoes still on), some are moved to tears at the reference to the foot washing in John’s Gospel.

The familiar scene in which Jesus reveals that Judas will betray him is a paradoxical combination of gravitas and irony as the camp staffer playing Judas is dressed in black jeans and a button-down oxford. He quickly makes his way to the lodge and the screen door slams loudly and anachronistically.

The Jesus character then calmly picks up a loaf of bread and gazing heavenward toward the lodge rafters, solemnly says, “This is my body, given for you.” The camp staff gestures quizzically to one another as they eat portions of the loaf which is then disseminated among the campers, many of whom treat this as a sacramental moment. The staff person playing Jesus then raises a ceramic goblet up in a priestly manner and says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you. I tell you I will not drink of this cup with you again until I drink it anew in
the kingdom my father has created.” While this is not a verbatim repetition of the text from Matthew, the odd variation evokes a feeling of reverence from campers, some of whom drink deeply from the goblet. Some do not drink at all.

After everyone has had a chance to participate in the pseudo-sacrament, one of the staff members picks up a guitar and leads the group softly in a rendition of the Afro-Spiritual “Were You There When they Crucified my Lord?”:

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Ooo-oooh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

Once the song ends, the characters from the drama exit the room and the group leader takes the campers to a spot on the bluff where a wooden cross stands lit by floodlights in stark contrast to the darkened vista of the lake behind it. With no staff members present to instruct them, people gaze at the cross with reverence, trying to gauge how much longer they should stay at this spot so that their exit will not appear to display a lack of proper piety for what has occurred that evening. Some families form small circles and close with the Lord’s Prayer. Others silently return to their cabins. No one considers this event unusual in regards to the highly anglicized portrayal of what was originally men of Palestinian descent, or the fact that the song they so reverently sang was first composed by Black slaves who longed for freedom. The question of racial disparity is seldom, if at all, raised throughout the camping week. As far as the campers are concerned, this detached community contains a homogeneity that is pleasurable, but unspoken.
Theoretical Terminology

For the purposes of our discussion in this chapter, much of the discourse will focus primarily on the first function of nostalgia--the shaping and perpetuation of one’s identity through recall of the self and other (Wilson, 19). This first function contains the subsets of restorative and reflective nostalgia, which bear defining for the sake of better comprehending the paradoxical thought processes of the typical Wednesday evening drama’s participants.

That the church writ large in America is a largely segregated institution is no secret. As social paradigms continue to shift with the changing demographics of society, religious institutions paradoxically preach inclusivity but often those listening in the pews are of the same ethnic variety. Restorative nostalgia is a key factor in perpetuating homogeneity in congregations as evidenced by the number of white, aging congregations in neighborhoods that have long since experienced “white flight.” It is the stuff of conspiracy theories, evoking a “circle the wagons” mentality against what is thought to be an encroaching mixed bag of difference and divergences. Boym writes that “Conspiracy is used pejoratively, to designate a subversive kinship of others, an imagined community based on exclusion more than affection, a union of those who are not with us, but against us” (43). All too often these sentiments are witnessed in church settings and during times of anxiety. Camp Luther campers are susceptible as well.

In contradistinction to the angst of restorative nostalgia stands reflective nostalgia. This is a form of nostalgia more at home with one’s personal narrative within the larger framework of history. It possesses a singular mindset which is relatively cognizant of one’s true place within the grand scheme of things. As Boym explains, “Nostalgics of the second type [reflective] are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization drives them to tell
their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future” (50). This form of nostalgia is for those who practice a differentiated, non-anxious paradigm of living. It opens up possibilities for compassion and conversation beyond the pale of one’s established parameters.

Of the two subsets, participants in 1989’s “The Underground Railroad” would readily identify with nostalgia of the reflective variety while being less likely to own their inclinations toward nostalgia in the restorative sense. My conclusions are that one cannot be had without some form of the other—both hopelessly overlap one another as we work out our place in the world. Further, both varieties of nostalgia are indispensable if one is to develop a sense of compassion toward the self and others within the realm of possibility. As Harper reminds us:

[Nostalgia] …is meant to be prophetic. It can feel and speak truths that it has not yet experienced. In its abstract assurance it is not only uncanny, it is normative. And so it should not be dismissed lightly. Just because it is essentially an intuition of presence, it looks towards the future even more than it summons the past. We live only to catch up with ourselves, and we never do quite (16).

Finding one’s place in the grand scheme of things is a Sisyphean task. Of course, the home we seek is never in the present, but off in the future, shaped by the past. Our level of anxiety dictates the degree to which we are dependent on the reflective or restorative varieties, and thus the trajectory of our course is plotted not so much by our will, but by the forces that shape our sense of place, of presence, and of security.

Remember, the word “nostalgia” is Greek in origin: nostos, meaning “to return home” and algos, meaning “pain.” Nostalgia is homesickness. The trick to understanding nostalgia is through understanding the paradigm/home, real or imaginary, to which we are attempting to
return. Boym furthers Harper’s definition by showing how a modern nostalgic can simultaneously be “homesick and ironically sick of home” (51). It is in this irony that we begin to see the processes of melancholia at work. Nostalgia has been linked to melancholia in since it was first defined. Dr. De Witt C. Peters wrote in 1863 that nostalgia was a “species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home” (qtd. in Wilson, 297). Religious melancholia is a form of nostalgia wherein a believer vacillates between a sense of spiritual euphoria and crestfallen doubt—something very akin to the pendulum which swings us between reflective and restorative nostalgia.

Historically, white America has unwittingly enjoyed the benefits of whiteness while simultaneously wrestling with an underlying sense of guilt. Sociologist Julius Rubin writes regarding the genealogy of religious melancholy, stating that its current manifestations can be traced to the individual pietism that was reinvigorated through the massive evangelism efforts of Billy Graham starting in the so-called Golden Era of the 1950’s. He posits: “Not infrequently, Pietists succumbed to times of desolation—religious melancholy. The inner lives of God’s chosen oscillated between point and counterpoint, between the warmhearted assurance of being God’s child, and the dreaded times of being forsaken by God” (213).

That is to say, modern Christianity as we understand it is usually fraught with doubt and feelings of despondency, based in part by one’s desire to fuse post-enlightenment thinking with a seemingly irrational and archaic belief system. Or, to put it simplistically (and not scientifically), pietists aren’t happy unless they are miserable—eschewing the worldly pleasures in order to become spiritually enlightened—ducking the wrath of a jealous deity as they secretly crave rationality. As a result, the faithful go on retreats, work in the slums, or in this case, infuse a
vacation with an immersion into a historical re-enactment wherein they themselves hopelessly attempt to become racially marginalized.

Viewed through the lens of reflective nostalgia, they are entering into a alternate time and space in order to reify that which they are—that which makes Harper’s “happy sense,” paradoxically produced through attempting to be in solidarity with the subjugated. In this sense, the process of religious melancholy neatly dovetails into racial melancholy, for the actors in this drama were asked to assume the posture of an antebellum God-fearing runaway slave.

This nation’s history is one of colonization and subjugation by white patriarchs dating back to Bacon’s Rebellion. White privilege is the subtle and sometimes not-so subtle remnant of our ongoing legacy of dystopian functioning, othering, and political practices which sought and seek to socially engineer the ethnic and class structure of contemporary society. If we can assume that the white participants of “The Underground Railroad” had at least a middle school understanding of slavery in the antebellum South, then it is safe to assume that their willingness to participate in this drama gave them the impetus to experience racial melancholy vicariously.

Given their popularity and media coverage, it is very likely that campers were familiar with Alex Haley’s Roots and other manifestations of the genre. They understood their roles in the drama, and were willing to identify with the pathos of the terrified souls seeking amnesty in Canada. Cheng posits that this form of racial identification is not necessarily understood as a dialectic by those white people caught in its embrace. She quotes theorist Paul Gilroy in her definition of white racial melancholy: “‘…the consciousness of European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the “Indians” they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in the situations of most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from one another.’ It is this imbricated but denied relationship that forms the basis of white racial melancholia” (12).
In his book *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott demonstrates the theory of white racial melancholia in praxis through the performance of minstrelsy. Lott demonstrates how donning blackface was a performance that was at once restorative and reflective, in the nostalgic sense—homesick and sick of home:

My study documents in early blackface minstrelsy the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling (18).

As seen in Figure Twelve, the *love* of “love and theft” is tied to reflective nostalgia and its resulting melancholies. We are open to the possibility that our past is irrevocably gone and that the paradigm shifts of the present might in fact be beneficial in the long run. By embracing the prospect of change, we might envision a new and perhaps more intriguing self-identity.

I posit that participants in the 1989 drama were willing to suspend their disbelief because it enabled them to fulfill an obligation in the matrices of their religious practice to stand in solidarity with the suffering and also through acting the part, expiate themselves for their own forms of passive racism (and thus give them a semblance of a “post-racial” identity). While they did not literally don blackface to portray the other, the act of suspending one’s disbelief in order to be part of the drama was a symbolic minstrelsy—a performance within a performance. Part and parcel of the Christian experience is to engage in and with the suffering of the world; doing so within the rubric of the staged symbolic community offers a personal sense of satisfaction. Xenophobia and fear of the other prevent full engagement outside the detached community. To further quote Cheng:
Love must look away in order not to look away. The other that is “unfathomable” is as much subjected to this imaginary and impossible circuit of desire as the devouring “we.” Thus melancholia, both living with the ghost of the alien other within and living as the ghost in the gaze of another, may be the precondition—and the limit—for the act of imagination that enables the political as such (194).

In this performative context, love “looks away.” It does so in order to temporarily disidentify with whiteness in order to superficially yet fully embrace the experience of the racial other (to “not look away”).

Of course, it is an ephemeral displacement, ultimately disappointing in that the satisfaction gained from the experience is mediated through the subconscious understanding that at the end of the evening, the participants will return home from the immersion and continue to benefit from systemic white privilege. If they were to enter into this experience and be unable to resume their whiteness, they probably would not have the wherewithal to go through with it. “The Underground Railroad,” performed in a detached place and time, is a safe environment in which to peruse what it might feel like to be a person of color. This is the theft of “love and theft,” which is indelibly tied to restorative nostalgia. Once again, I reference the lyrical quality of Anne Cheng’s definition:

For one of the curious aspects of melancholia—really, its pathos—is the fact that the incorporation of the lost object offers but a self-punishing pleasure. The recathexis with the lost object achieved through identification yields at best a tenuous, ghostly connection. Hence the bereft’s relationship to the incorporated object is sustained as much by anger and denial as by love (178).
People feel nostalgia toward the experience because they have the liberty of stepping away from it—a guilty pleasure. One might even suggest that the theft is in fact a form of Renato Rosaldo’s “imperialist nostalgia.” The pleasure derived from the ephemeral nature of the experience could also correlate to the camp experience in general—if camp lasted more than a week, the vestiges of nostalgia would diminish and the experience would become mundane.

In a postcolonial context, those who bear the “white man’s burden” long for the pristine environments and cultures that they (or their ancestors) changed or obliterated in the name of progress. To posit that white Lutherans at a summer church resort are “agents of colonialism” might seem like a bit of a theoretical stretch for some, but Rosaldo illustrates how they fit into this realm of possibility: “The peculiarity of their yearning, of course, is that agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed…. When the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses” (69). Anyone who has a sense of sorrow regarding this nation’s history of exploiting and subjugating bodies of color for the good of the white patriarchal ideal is an unwitting adherent of imperialist nostalgia.

We are far enough removed from the events that shaped our nation that we can safely feel sad about having done so. We are free to lament the actions of our ancestors while reifying through our lack of resistance the very paradigms they established. It is, to reference Lott once again “a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling” (18). The participants in “The Underground Railroad” were able to “enjoy” the experience insofar as they could rationalize away any sense of culpability—this was no forced march through a death camp by “ordinary” German citizens, but rather an exercise in collective historical memory. Participants were able to learn much because they were not directly responsible for slavery, and no one on the staff would
address them regarding the social inequities of the current social context. In other words, it would have been too risky to ask participants to perform the roles of poverty-stricken Black people living in nearby inner-city Cleveland, much less spend a day living their experience.

Scott Maggelson writes in the journal *Theater Topics* about a similar historical drama experience called “Follow the North Star,” which is produced annually at Connor Prairie, a living history museum located north of Indianapolis. I mention this program because it is a sister-program to Camp Luther’s “The Underground Railroad,” developed from an idea by Dr. John Haskin who worked at Camp Campbell Guard in Hamilton, Ohio during the 1980’s (Haskin). Maggelson describes how at Connor Prairie, those who become emotionally distraught during the program are given a strip of white cloth to tie around their arm which renders them “invisible” to the park employees in the cast (22). In contradistinction to the layered meanings of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, these “invisible” people are exercising their ethnic/class privilege. Having paid a fee to participate in the Connor Prairie program, they can opt out at any moment by showing the strip of white cloth. In the same manner, participants in “The Underground Railroad” of 1989 were able to opt out as well—not by showing a piece of white cloth, but simply by reminding themselves of the temporality of their situation or not participating at all. In this sense, the program failed in its objective but adequately provided individuals with an opportunity for love and theft.

**The Praxis of Loving and Thieving**

It is relevant to note that in 1989, even before “The Underground Railroad” was performed on Wednesday evenings, people had arrived at camp the previous Sunday with high expectations for positive emotional experiences in a “time out of time” setting that relieves them of their mundane duties and allows for recreation and familial bonding—this is the allure that
brings people back from generation to generation. Needless to say, the “Mayberry-esque” setting, abnormal sleep habits, the lack of mundane obligations (meal preparations, etc.), coupled with levity-enhancing staff programming results in a quasi-dreamtime existence for the campers. The nostalgic reflex is primed by Wednesday evening, and the expectation of the drama heightens the overall effect.

In 1989, the staff members were assigned various roles within vignettes in the drama. These vignettes took place along a looping trail that began in the indoor chapel, following a circuitous route through the wood at the western edge of the camp property. Some staff members were assigned to lead the groups from station to station as guides. Others stayed in place to interact with the groups. On average, the vignettes lasted about ten minutes, and there were usually four to five groups circulating throughout, depending on the size of the camp population during any given week. Sean was assigned the difficult role of being a bounty hunter who harasses the groups—making them sing to validate their claiming to be a choir, detaining one of the participants, threatening bodily harm, and finally shooting a pistol in the air as they retreat into the woods. Other vignettes include an elderly abolitionist, a graveyard with friendly sextons, a former slave (played by a white staff member), and a drunken slave hunter. Typically, in between vignettes, the guides share scripture readings or cups of water at a hidden “cache” on the path to freedom. It should be noted that at no time did the cast of the play use the N-word, opening up the same questions of authenticity being debated in light of the emended edition of *Huckleberry Finn* which substitutes “slave” for the N-word.

My vignette took place in a small room located in the back of the chapel. I was assigned the role of a southern minister whose abolitionist views had forced my family to relocate in northern Ohio. In my vignette, a woman slave hunter detains the group, acting as if she is my
spouse in order to get information about the people involved in the Underground Railroad. When my “real” spouse and I encounter her in front of the group, I grab her by the arms and forcibly lead her outside. Once outside we hit the back of the building with a hammer and make all manner of violent noises so as to make the people inside think we were fighting. After a moment, I return to the group and tell them (with melodramatic urgency) that the slave hunter had escaped and was going for help—their presence in the church had placed them in danger.

Granted, memory is selective and auto-ethnographic work is subjective, but I can say with certainty that the camper-participants in my vignette looked absolutely terrified as their guide led them to the next station with lantern in hand. At the time, I took great pride in causing them anxiety because I thought it made the experience more “authentic.” By the end of the evening, all the groups returned to the chapel where a short debriefing was held (more theological than historical). The evening closed with the singing of “Amazing Grace.” Camper evaluations given at the end of the week were uniformly positive about the experience—how “real” it seemed, how thought-provoking it was.

Our then-camp director, Chuck, adapted this program from Haskin’s notes for a similar program used at Camp Campbell Guard for junior high school students. In an e-mail to the author, Haskin relates three “key dimensions” to a successful program:

- The preparation – some of this was done back at school, but the most important part came immediately before the program.... We taught them a song that they would sing to “prove” that they were a choir. They had papers allowing their free passage through Ohio. Like the costumes that the staff wore, these ‘props’ seemed to help get and keep the students in character.

17 Campers under the age of 12 were not eligible to participate as they had a 9:30 PM curfew.
• In addition to being a historic reenactment, we looked at this as a team building experience. The kids really needed to work together throughout the program. We tried to have obvious good guys (abolitionists) and obvious bad guys (slave hunters looking for a bounty) and several on the fence, who if they could get the kids to break their story might turn them in…. Concentration and improvisation [were paramount] as they had to think and talk their way out of difficult situations.

• The wrap-up – [This] was crucial. Although the kids were mentally and physically exhausted at the end of the program, we felt that spending some time at the end allowing the kids to talk about their feelings – particularly with racially mixed schools – was essential (Haskin).

These aspects accurately describe the preparations our camp staff took that summer to invite participants into this living history, save the wrap-up portion. I highlight them here because I believe they are points of entry wherein we can cast a critical lens to better understand how loving and thieving are played out in this setting.

First in preparing the group for their walk through the vignettes, Haskin highlights the need for “props” that would help the students (and likewise, our adults) to immerse themselves into their roles. In this regard, the experience seeks to imprint history on a body, even a body that is remarkably different from the body it seeks to represent. Magelssen writes “In this manner, the body becomes the implicit contract of authenticity and authority at living history sites” (20). I would hasten to add that this contract would seek to lift the history out of the archive and place it in the repertoire, but only imperfectly so by virtue of nostalgia’s definition. This is to say, no matter how well we prepare to identify with historical black bodies, we cannot accurately imbibe
the abject feelings of terror and agony that slavery and escape entails. At best we can only have a momentary encounter with something akin to the anxiety felt by the original bodies (love), but then resume our daily lives once the experience is over (theft). Nostalgia is always longing for that which never can be realized, not that which is objectively true.

Some would argue that this sort of logic is reductionist and it is better to attempt solidarity via melancholia in its various permutations than simply shrugging off the burden of history and blithely consuming our way through life. I agree with this sentiment, and I recognize a time and place for asking people to stop and grieve the horrors of the past. However, we cannot ask people to identify with historical bodies and not prepare to be disappointed by their own cognitive dissonance. The body cannot possibly replace the archive or become a totally accurate “site of knowledge production” because it cannot know what a slave knows (21).

One could argue that nothing in the archive or repertoire could possibly achieve this sense of gnosis in the site of production. This is a given. Perhaps it is the immersion of one’s self into performativity that suggests more than a reading of W.E.B. DuBois or a viewing of Amistad. When a person injects their body into the place of the subjugated other, certain assumptions are made—this is what it might have felt like. This is how the slaves made their way north. By inviting people to be part of the drama, we are tacitly inviting them to make these erroneous conclusions in ways that other historical documents do not.

If attempts to relive history are to be undertaken, then preparation should likely take place with some fundamental caveats in the orientation, namely by stating that this experience is a shallow facsimile of the horrific reality. We can never hope to achieve the authenticity of what Dwight McBride describes as former slave Mary Prince’s “politics of experience” (89). Our experience as cast members in a living history drama cannot hold currency with the actual
narrative of the *martyria* of one who was there. McBride references Karl Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism in order to further elucidate these contrasting accounts of the living bodies superimposed as the racial other versus the actual accounts of former slaves such as Mary Prince:

> Marx’s remarks are useful in accounting for the ‘value’ of Prince’s real slave experience, represented by the ‘social hieroglyphic’ that is her narrative. Prince’s very awareness of the process of witnessing, with its accompanying issues of mediation, puts her in a position to trade on her experience in a manner that authorizes her as the best person to speak about slavery (91).

No amount of orientation, even with caveats, can elevate a present-day body to the value of Mary Prince’s narrative. Our efforts to comprehend Prince’s experience via our hearing or reading of the text falls short as well. Again, the limits of nostalgia come to the fore, and the overall mission of the camp is weakened by this attempt.

Should we abandon the living history programs that ask participants to identify with the marginalized Other? Do the programs at Connor Prairie or Camp Luther accomplish more harm than good in their attempts to reconnect people to the past? Arguments can be made for both the good and the harm (the love and the theft). One can reasonably assume that Dr. John Haskin, by creating this dramatic format, is simply trying to raise cultural awareness among the participants by placing them into a physicality not unlike that of the fugitive body. Haskin must be aware of the programmatic limitations, hence the need for orientation and wrap-up. His stated goal is for participants to remained focused—“Concentration and improvisation as they had to think and talk their way out of difficult situations” (Haskin). This singular need for focus shows the complexity of the program’s main aspiration.
In context of Camp Luther, participants were expected to perform certain actions in the context of the drama in order for them to move forward to the next station. For example, since the fugitive groups are posing as a traveling choir, they are forced to sing a song for the bounty hunter. At the graveyard, a suspicious neighbor turns up and one of the participants has to jump into an open grave and “play dead” in order to convince the character that this is a bona fide funeral being attended by freed people. In these two cases, the participants are three times removed from their own realities in order to attempt further identification with their subjects—they become dramatic subjects within a drama in a staged symbolic community. But even thrice removed, identification can never fully achieve the status of identity. Cheng writes:

Identification is crucially not the same as identity, although it is what secures for the latter its mythology of integrity. Identification organizes and instantiates identity. It is a fluid and repetitive process that in a sense completely opposes the certitude of identity, providing an origin of identity that identity would just as soon forget in order to maintain its own immediacy and wholeness (177).

The participants in “The Underground Railroad” at Camp Luther could either benefit from or pay disservice to the memory of runaway slaves—it depended on their willingness to seek identification or simply shrug off the experience as another entertaining function of the camp program. Either way, one can only hope for a glimpse of the slave identity—albeit a strangely nostalgic glimpse at that.

One could argue that as people bound by a covenant of faith, the campers have a moral imperative to attempt identification of the racial other, but the problem with this logic is that some would settle for these Wednesday experiences as a means of justifying their continued ambivalence toward the dystopian social context—a means of self-expiation through mental self-
flagellation, as it were. I am not trying to make a definitive statement here, but it is quite possible that participants walked away from that living history experience, feeling as if they had “done their part” in trying to understand the complexities of the racial other; they managed to survive the “historical thrill ride” without completely losing their composure. In reality, this kind of living history experience is only an introduction to a substantive soul-searching experience and educational process whereby people confront their prejudice and compliance within a system of white privilege. In medical parlance, they may have identified some symptoms, but stopped short of seeking out the prognosis and needed treatment.

Haskin emphasizes the need for a wrap-up discussion as being one of the “key dimensions” of a successful participatory theater experience. Granted, he is writing as an educator whose original concept was geared toward junior high school campers, but in the case of Camp Luther, with adult participants, the wrap-up was less about the historicity of the drama and more about highlighting the sense of religious melancholy it incurred among the participants. Being mindful of the fact that by the end of the drama, it was very late in the evening and the toll of the experience caused heightened emotionalism, Chuck kept the wrap-up brief and low-key. There was no question and answer time, and after a brief summary of the evening’s events, the gathering sang “Amazing Grace” and left. One can assume further conversation occurred among family members, or perhaps in the adult/teen Bible study the following morning, but there were no substantive questions asked about how the experience of slavery in American history has contributed to the current social inequities visible along racial lines.

One can speculate that the hour was late or perhaps the idea of a discussion about sociology and race issues in a homogenous setting would contradict the overall mission of Camp Luther (or churches in general), but perhaps in the final analysis, Chuck and the other staff
members (including myself) realized at some gut level that we as white bodies lacked what McBride calls the “racial authority” to invite people to move beyond their racial/religious melancholy into a new and uncomfortable plateau of self-examination and culpability (McBride 88). Frankly stated, people didn’t want to go there and we weren’t worthy of provoking them to take that journey. Religious and racial melancholy produce mournful/wistful longing on the one hand, but they also create a place where the white religious soul might prefer to dwell—it strikes the proper balance of concern and complacency. As Cheng states:

In theatrical contexts, identification is frequently used by reviewers to refer to phenomenological, vernacular notion of spectatorial empathy always raised in discussions of theatrical reception. Audience empathy or ‘audience identification’ implies a cognition, even momentarily, of sameness: ‘I identify with what I see on stage because I feel the same or can imagine feeling the same’ (177).

People not only observed, but participated in this drama, thereby attempting an immersion into sameness through an ironic twist of restorative nostalgia. Again, it is only speculation, but the evidence supports the notion that this whole living history narrative, as placed in the context of Camp Luther under the influence of the nostalgic reflex, was designed to produce the “self-punishing pleasure” of which Cheng speaks. Otherwise, the wrap-up for this experience would have lent itself to offering pragmatic ideas for the participants to implement in their communities regarding the need for social and economic paradigm shifts among peoples.

Nostalgia for a Second Naïveté

Lowenthal shares concerns about dramatic immersion programs and experiences designed to assuage feelings of cognitive dissonance from collective history and community. He believes that an inauthentic delusion is borne out of “…isolation and dislocation of self from
family, family from neighborhood, neighborhood from nation, and even one’s self from former selves” (qtd. in Matt, 497). Nostalgia is a much needed commodity in the face of these absences. Whether by accident or design, Camp Luther provides the setting for a healthy dose of wistful longing. Wednesday evening dramas are often meant to provoke and instill a sense of the other for individuals.

I was part of a production where historical black bodies were superimposed on then-current white bodies in a narrative three times removed from the participants’ quotidian existence. I took my role as a provocateur very seriously, as it would seem the concurrent staff members do. Longtime camper Robin Cantor speaks to this burden of gravitas felt by staff members in developing an evocative late-evening drama in the middle of the camp week:

I think there is something about the dark, doing things in the dark. The evening brings an opportunity for a more pensive encounter, but there is some kind of uh…theatrics involved um…combined with some kind of thought-bringing opportunity. Um… the purpose as I’ve seen them over the years may be to um…to bring something new for somebody to think about but in effect a lot of it is self-aggrandizing for the staff and that’s a matter of maturity. I don’t think the parents or the older people are as affected by the underground railroad… I mean that’s history, or that’s living history. I mean it’s history that happened right here but it is not something that will make us… look differently at African-American neighbors. Or will I have a little more compassion about some of history that they participated in? Or will I take time to be with those who are less fortunate (Cantor)?
Cantor’s insight shows that the art of loving and thieving is a satisfactory experience for participants because they can assert their solidarity with imagined historical figures while conveniently overlooking the racial disparities in their hometowns.

As has been established in previous chapters, the camp/resort setting itself provides a sense of the imagined and longed for neighborhoods of the Golden Era where doors were left unlocked and children had the run of the locality without fear of abduction. The conflation of nationalism and religion (daily flag-raising and lowering ceremonies coupled with worship and Bible study) along with the other amenities create a exhilaration among those who submit to it. The challenge for the staff in the summer of 1989 was to present a late evening program that was provocative yet comforting, allowing people the opportunity to attempt identification with marginalized bodies of the past.

Living History, Living Irony

Lest I sound too negative in my estimation of what occurred (and still occurs) at camp, I hasten to add that since nostalgia is an omnipresent component of both individual and collective life, the camp programming merely enhances what already resides in all of us. Nostalgia is a natural part of self-continuity and the shaping of our identity. Harper affirms this: “Nostalgia is the natural way in adversity that man [sic] has to feel his own permanence and stability, and through himself the delight in reality as a whole. It is artificial, but it is not contrived. It is secondhand, but is nonetheless persuasive” (qtd. in Wilson, 303). Lacking the racial authority to offer a more substantive (and contentious) program, the staff relied upon racial and religious melancholia through a paradoxical combination of restorative and reflective nostalgia (already exacerbated in individuals by virtue of the detached setting) to create a living history drama that would hopefully convey some sense of the pathos contained in the fugitive slave experience.
One hopes that even though there were emotional and cognitive barriers that kept the participants from fully immersing themselves in the black fugitive identity, they might have been moved from a first to second naïveté, where issues of race and class are more than abstract issues occurring in other places, but instead imbricated into the nostalgic reflex, troubling the waters, and forcing individuals to ask more serious questions about the social status quo. As recounted in the excursive when the 2005 staff did a participatory rendering of the Last Supper, one would also hope that nostalgia was at work in unearthing the pathos of the human condition within the participants, urging them to wrestle with the underlying interpretations of the kenosis, the emptying of the Christological figure in their midst.

Chapter Five builds on these themes of identification within the detached staged symbolic communities by examining the role of nostalgia as it pertains to religious practices that have molded societal roles since the times of the Pentateuch. It is probable that quasi-latent longings for the historically male-dominated church continue to shape the hetero-normative and masculine Christianity exhibited throughout the camp week. We also seek an understanding of how nostalgia is instrumental in fomenting personal and collective definitions of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Moreover, we examine the principle of homeostasis as the totem which nostalgia protects and sustains in the cultic setting.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE MORE THINGS CHANGE— THE NOSTALGIC REFLEX IN PERPETUATING HOMEOSTASIS

Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time runs forward. All time, both history and in personal life, is expectation. Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal.

-- Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations

The More Things Stay the Same

In our attempts to reconcile ourselves to finitude and the ineffability of however we understand “the real,” persons develop complex rituals and form attachments to doctrines, totems, or guiding principles that temper our overall level of anxiety, filling in the lacunae that we imagine in our existential dread. Within these systems of attachment, be they families of origin, institutions of belonging, or structures of belief, the nostalgic reflex plays a powerful role in maintaining what Edwin Friedman calls homeostasis, “the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence” (23). This explains in large part why people (and the systems to which they belong) are often resistant to dynamism and change.

The system dynamics at Camp Luther are no different than any other. If anything, homoeostasis is strengthened at camp by virtue of the camp’s enormous capacity to foment feelings of nostalgia resulting in concretized folkways and traditions that stand the test of time. The resulting anxiety of waiting “for that which is eternal” (be it death, heaven, or whatever moniker one uses to label the mysteries of finitude and eternity) compels people to take comfort
in ritual and belief. Camp is the place where religion, culture, folkways, gender expectations, homogeneity, established patriarchies, intergenerational standard bearers, and familial expectations intersect. Camp is where one’s anxieties of finitude are ameliorated because its environment offers campers the ability to project a nostalgic vision of what eternity is like.

Writing this chapter is difficult, because to critically examine these mitigating factors will inevitably lead to the speculation of what comprises the essence of camp culture, creating the effects that I understand on a purely emotional level as my camp “home.” Nevertheless, I offer this imperfect analysis of nostalgia’s ability to support the status quo in the camp system as a willing participant in its sublime and ridiculous moments over the past four decades of my life. This chapter will examine the nature of the camp’s homeostasis in regards to the aforementioned intersecting factors, with particular emphasis on the role of the camp staff as “standard bearers” of the camp tradition and how this responsibility works itself out through their leadership during the camping season. This writing will also look at the underlying religious (separate from spiritual) assumptions that inform decisions and shape the collective identity of campers. By doing this, we can speculate about normativity in its various permutations throughout the social structure of this detached community.

Moreover, the lens of system dynamics will help us to scrutinize the extent to which nostalgic feelings enable individuals and groups to weather the spikes of anxieties associated with change. As Fred Davis aptly states, “But the point is not merely nostalgia’s facility for ‘muting the negative,’ as it were. Rather, it is that in so doing nostalgia furthers the purposes of continuity of identity by reassuring the now self that is ‘as it was then:' deserving, qualified, and fully capable of surmounting the fears and uncertainties that lie ahead” (39). This ability of nostalgia to “reassure” is double-edged. When change is being made for the sake of change,
nostalgia gives one a moment to pause for critical evaluation and asking if the change is truly beneficial. When a person or a system is stuck, however, nostalgia can be the cheap rationalization one needs for maintenance of homeostasis and a lack of social progression. Organized religion, with its doctrines and dogmas, has both helped and hindered the progress of humanity over the millennia—nostalgia is present as a catalyst for both good and ill throughout. How can leaders in the church, mosque, or synagogue recognize nostalgia and respond to it accordingly? How can adherents to any particular faith recognize when nostalgia is preying upon the better angels of their nature in order to maintain harmful social prejudice and practice? Those who adhere to restorative nostalgia cannot answer. Those who appreciate the irony of reflective nostalgia may not either, but at least they can wrestle with the questions.

Excursive

It has been another perfect week at camp. Of course, even the worst weeks at camp are perfect, otherwise it wouldn’t be camp. The mediocrity of the Friday cookout menu is quickly forgotten in the melee of emotions resulting from memories of the previous few days and the anxiety that comes with transitioning back into “the real world.” The sun is filtering through the cottonwood trees on the lane where the picnic tables are located, and families intermingle as if they were all interrelated, which in the camp sense of things, they are.

Your kids are coping with the inevitable return home by exchanging mobile phone numbers and Facebook information with other campers and staff. You haven’t seen or spoken to them much during the week, because for once you feel as if your parenting skills can have a hiatus thanks to the safety afforded by the camp community. You’ve even seen some kids forming tentative camp romances, but it is considered in good form by everyone—part of the quintessential camp experience.
You know your kids will be sitting with you at chapel tonight, because families have a way of reuniting at the end in order to share the moment that everyone simultaneously longs for and dreads—the lighting of the candles, and the quiet exodus from the chapel back to one’s cabin where for a while the whole camp is bathed in candlelight, and families have the rare opportunity for full-blown transparency and “real talk” (whatever that means). This rarely happens at home, but because a week at camp wears down your defenses, it tenderizes everyone’s emotional well-being so that it’s okay to be sensitive with each other for one brief shining moment every year.

The worship service itself carries the same emotional significance for you as a child who has warm and comforting images of Christmas Eve. The chapel’s knotty pine interior and open windows provides the best aromas of camp—pine trees, candle wax, aging dry wood with hints of varnish, and the odd whiff of mildew. The chairs are arranged in an...
ellipse so that the two halves of the assembly are facing each other. You find yourself sitting opposite the family who lives two cabins over. You played euchre with them and quietly nursed an infatuation with the wife, but worship is not the time to dwell on such things, even though she looks tanned and relaxed from a week of lying out by the pool.

The service begins with everyone standing and singing the Marty Haugen hymn “Gather Us In,” which sums up the camp environment in general—people from all walks of life coming together for a week of sacred and stupid moments:

\begin{quote}
\textit{We are the young, our lives are a myst’ry,}
\textit{We are the old who yearn for your face;}
\textit{We have been sung throughout all of hist’ry,}
\textit{Called to be light for the whole human race.}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Gather us in, the rich and the haughty,}
\textit{Gather us in, the proud and the strong;}
\textit{Give us a heart so meek and so lowly,}
\textit{Give us the courage to enter the song.}
\end{quote}

The hymn is followed by a scripture reading, which in Lutheran circles is not usually the focus of the sermon, but rather the jumping off point for pastors. The best Lutheran sermon at camp is not much better than the worst one. You know that the average pastor is a closet tree-hugger anyway who thinks they’re being clever by introducing their social agenda through using the Bible as a roadmap. The nice thing about the Friday night chapel service is that the sermon tends to focus on camp, what this week has meant to everyone and how we are strengthened to move back into the real world with all its possible problems, at which point you think of the mail piled up on the
kitchen table, the dog needing to be picked up at the kennel, and all the catch-up waiting for you at work since you had the temerity to take five days off in a row.

The next part of the service pulls at your frayed emotions a bit—the pastor invites all assembled to “pass the peace” which is a liturgical term describing what turns out to be a prolonged group hug and people reiterating to one another what a fantastic week it has been—it is a sense of sorrow mingled with joy which you will yourself to enter into because this week has indeed been the much needed respite in your life, your marriage, and your relationship with your kids. After all, this is why you come back every summer instead of booking a cruise or going to Disney. It is for this feeling, this moment of clarity and wholeness. People aren’t like this in your home congregation—they certainly don’t hug during the passing of the peace.

Once the *eucharist* is over and the pastor gives the benediction, the real emotions start to well up. The lights are turned off, and the camp staff gathers in the front of the chapel to do the traditional closing of the camp week. They always sing the same three songs—“Pass it On,” “The Candle Song,” and “May the Lord go with You.” And you always surprise yourself by crying in the middle of music. Your kids notice. So does your husband. They don’t say anything, because they are crying too.

Camp is Different, Camp is the Same

Out of the sixty plus interviews conducted over the summer of 2010, a few universal themes emerged. Perhaps the most strident and universally acknowledged theme was that of social and spiritual harmony, set apart and superlative from that which is outside the camp community. The apex of this experience occurs on Friday evening during the final chapel service where the culmination of the week’s events triggers a surge of euphoria. As I wrote the excursive for this chapter, I tried to reflect the range of emotions and thought processes that were shared
with me by subjects in regards to camp worship in conjunction with my own memories. Consider the following statements from campers for additional elucidation:

Any emotional baggage that you brought with you to camp— I feel like that is the time of the week that it’s just time to drop it and let it go. You leave it there. You keep it there; you stay away from it from then on. So that’s what it’s always been for me. Any problems that were going on before I came to camp even throughout the week I would slowly let go but candlelight was just the time that you were able to shed any hurt or baggage or scared emotions that you had and then move on into going back home (Michelle Rankin).

This is the ritual, I suppose, that we have at camp, that continues for me to be a very strong presence and even as a staff member the song “Pass it On” where as we sing I wish
for you my friend this happiness that I’ve found—there was no way as a child that I wouldn’t stop bawling. As a teenager I might hold it back but there was still this very strong emotion that said, ‘This is what we want…’ (Andy Carson).

It really just leads you to a time of reflection, a time of… uh… self inspection if you will. Where you’re not just reviewing the week but you’re also sort of reviewing about, you know, how can I take this out tomorrow and what am I going to do for the next fifty-one weeks so that I don’t lose sight of the things that we talked about here this week? Plus, there’s just that sort of great climax of fellowship that can’t be duplicated anywhere else. I’m certainly not going to get together with my co-workers—the Christmas party just doesn’t cut it. (Evan Mack).

Though these subjects differ in a myriad of ways, the nostalgic reflex hones in on this collective energy, a Durkheimian social current that is generated in the ambiance of the setting, the repetition of ritual, and the fusion of the liturgical with the camp folkway. The Friday evening candlelight service becomes for many a nostalgic talisman, anchoring to this particular time and space which when remembered can evoke a seemingly *sui generis* moment of euphoric clarity.

In reality, it is a particular expression of the same kind of psychic exaltation that is known by adherents of various religions the world over. As Emile Durkheim writes:

> …we can be sure that acts of worship, whatever they might be, are not futile or meaningless gestures. By seeming to strengthen the ties between the worshipper and his [sic] god, they really strengthen the ties that *bind the individual to his society*, since god is merely the symbolic expression of society (my emphasis, 171).

Worship at camp taps into the universality of the act of worship. People are connected to one another (and to their deity) by re-enacting the same rituals and rites that have been practiced by
preceding generations in other locales. The fact that campers experience this particular moment once a year places it above and beyond the normal Sunday worship experience, much like the special emotions felt by those who celebrate Christmas Eve, Eid al Fitr, Diwali, or Roshoshana.\textsuperscript{18}

Evidence suggests that worship at Luther has evoked the same feelings of connectedness and euphoria since the camp’s inception. These comments dated August of 1946, taken from an untitled ledger book I (re)discovered while going through the camp archives, speak to the continuity of affect: “I thank the Lord for a camp such as this where we may enjoy Christian fellowship with one another and grow stronger in the Lord.” “As the disciples exclaimed when with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration—It is good to be here! So too I say—it’s good to be here with Christians and the living presence of our Savior!” Though perhaps the language is more formal, the later statements of current campers are remarkably similar in nature more than fifty years later. This “mount of transfiguration” experience is what binds people together through a lengthy narrative arc. One could argue that individuals are constrained by church doctrine to pattern their comments after a certain likeness, but the ethnographies suggest that instead people have sustained a “camp vibe” from generation to generation vis a vis the nostalgic reflex.

Again for the sake of clarity, I am not suggesting that this Friday night experience at Luther is inimitable in any sense of the word, other than the location and linear aspects. This evocative experience is felt by anyone who has ever encountered the numinous, however they choose to define it. One need look no further than American sports icons and their fan base to understand that this fervent level of devotion is evident in other venues. Sociologist Gary

\textsuperscript{18} Some campers have referred to the Friday evening chapel service as kindling emotions “like the ones we feel on Christmas Eve,” which is interesting since Christmas symbolizes a beginning and Friday Candlelight marks an end. Either way, both services mark a moment in time—a desirable one for those who seek to experience them.
Laderman richly deconstructs the ubiquity of religious devotion in American pop culture in his book *Sacred Matters*.

Laderman contends that religion has innumerable permutations in society, but each permutation has four basic tenets in common. These are: expressions of belief in some form of cultural expression that informs both the quotidian and extraordinary moments of life; a series of rituals and folkways that provide explanation and meaning to an otherwise chaotic world; a sense of belonging to the *vox populi* focused in support of a central idea or icon; imagery that inspires the religious imagination enabling encounters with the sacred, whether it be a fervent football fan waving a “terrible towel” or a Branson, Missouri devotee donning a t-shirt (xvii). My main point here is that people will manufacture sacrosanct totems in this life because nostalgia uses these totems to shape identity. In this, the ordinary becomes sacred; meaning is derived from the common items around us—bread and wine take on a higher significance in the construct of a liturgy, just as a baseball jersey gains value when signed by an athlete. Or as Laderman posits:

> God or no God, play can animate religious energies that bind communities of fans, athletes, and teams together around idols that are worshipped in ways that, for some, create shared experiences and memories as impressive and meaningful as any other sacred encounters in this life, but that for others conjure up biblical-based fears of the golden calf (62).

In the case of Camp Luther, there is both an allegiance to a Judeo-Christian God as well as an alarming devotion to the place and program itself. The conflation of these allegiances is not unique to Luther, as innumerable examples from American history show us. Jesus is not merely an ancient sage from Palestine whose words inspire campers, but he becomes the de facto charismatic leader of the camp experience. The ethos of camp needs a savior, but this American
Jesus has less to do with an ancient Eastern religion as he does the perpetuation of identity through camper nostalgia. The ethos of camp is tied to its homeostasis, and this homeostasis places Jesus in a context unlike anything he ever experienced in his lifetime.

This is nothing new. Americans have shaped the meaning of Jesus to give explanation to their life circumstances since before this nation declared its independence. As Stephen Prothero asserts, “In the United States, Jesus is widely hailed as the ‘King of Kings.’ But it is a strange sort of sovereign who is so slavishly responsive to his subjects. …the American Jesus is more a pawn than a king, pushed around in a complex game of cultural (and countercultural) chess, sacrificed here for this cause and there for another” (297).

Similarly, Phil Zuckerman claims “People look at the content of their religious tradition--its teachings, its creeds, its prophet's proclamations-- and they basically pick and choose what suits their own secular outlook. They see in their faith what they want to see as they live their daily lives, and simultaneously ignore the rest” (Zuckerman). So it is with camp—Jesus is more a resident companion in the wilderness or a denizen of the lake. He is both leader and yet one component of a heterodox camp religion maintained through homeostasis.

The Faustian Bargain

Having established the idea that Friday night’s worship service is a pivotal moment in the lives of camp devotees, we can assume that the homeostasis surrounding this experience is of utmost importance. The nostalgic reflex is quick to point out variations on the theme and in many cases is simply self-correcting. Kevin Carter, the camp’s current director, attests to this:

I’m not sure how the programming structure that exists at Luther today was originally formed. But I do know it’s roughly the same programming structure that I experienced as a camper for the first seventeen years of my life. If you’ve been to camp once, you know
what you are going to get the following year. I think that’s a great comfort to families in a day and age when things fly by so quickly and change is so prevalent (Carter).

Nostalgia’s influence on the homeostasis of camp’s spiritual expression is based on the presumption that the outside world is increasingly unpredictable and likely to cause anxiety. The camp experience is defined over and against this dynamism of the “outside world.” In order for camp and its spirituality to remain detached and special, the world must continue to be the source of people’s anxieties and misgivings. The outside world becomes the “identified patient” in the language of systems theory (Friedman 24). This means that in order for campers to retain that special feeling, the world must continue to function dysfunctionally. One could even argue that campers choose to view the world as sordid jetsam and flotsam, the results of a non-redeemable creation, in order to buttress their affinity for the “heaven on earth” that is the camp experience. This jibes well a major Christian doctrine first described by the Apostle Paul, who exhorts followers to be “in” but not “of” this world.

Using systems theory, we can also detect the presence of an emotional triangle between campers, the camp experience, and the outside world (see Figure Fifteen). The presence of this emotional triangle is a necessary component of homeostasis, fueled almost entirely by combining the power of the nostalgic reflex and the collective anxiety of the campers (57). The “Faustian” aspect of this arrangement is in recognizing that the so-called detachment of camp from the

![Figure Fifteen: The emotional triangle]
outside world is actually a false dichotomy. Most campers recognize this at a cerebral level, but at an emotional level they see the camp as “a place apart,” and therefore zealously guarded against change. This level of self-deception comes with the tacit understanding that the nostalgic reflex is not derived from quantitative data, but the qualitative aspects of one’s (imperfect) memory and projected desires.

This understanding defies logic. Case in point: when a federal subsidy was available for the bluff project with the proviso making the developed waterfront accessible to the general public, the common reaction by the camp community was that it would be better to raise the $1.5 million privately rather than compromise the detachment of the “functional” camp from the “dysfunctional” world. Or, hypothetically speaking, if it becomes apparent that a female counselor has the “right stuff” to become a program director at the camp, tradition would dictate that she be passed over in order for the role to be filled by a perhaps less-talented male staff member.19 Does this imply that Luther will never have a female program director? It is impossible to predict, but the change will not come about without a careful examination of the possible side effects of such an action. Objectively speaking, these should be minimal, but because camp exists in a nostalgic vacuum, it might cause a ripple of consternation among the faithful. I posit that the smaller the community, the more change and dynamism will cause disquiet.

Finally, though the camp marketing information espouses cultural and ethnic diversity, the end result is a very homogenous camp population, with less than five percent of the campers being people of color (Kevin Carter). This is the downside of homeostasis in the system. I am not

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19 Actually, the camp did have a female program director in the summer of 2001. I have attempted to make contact with her, but to no avail.
suggesting that all the adherents of the camp are knowingly racist, sexist, or homophobic, but to a degree they acquiesce to a set of circumstances beyond personal convictions in order to maintain the sense of familiarity that is camp—part of the abdication of agency necessary for homeostasis to continue.

Marylin Geer, an interview subject for this project, adopted an African American daughter several years ago. Her unique perspective as the white mother of a Black daughter speaks to the peculiar homogeneity of camp:

I find it interesting that my daughter is now twelve and there has not been a Black counselor yet. We seem a little behind on the integration. On the other hand, camping experiences are passed down. They are like other cultural traditions that are cherished because of who they were with when they experienced it…. At Camp Luther, the time is shared by those closest to you and offspring continue the tradition because of what it meant to them and what they hope it will mean to their children. Therefore, it is only natural that like-minded and like-looking people continue to come to camp. It will eventually integrate but with a lack of emphasis or desire for it to happen, it will take a long time.

The nature of homogeneity at camp is passive in nature. There are no “whites only” signs posted at the entrance. There is no influx of diversity in the parent church organization either. Vestiges of white privilege are evident; the higher median incomes of white people make camp affordable, therefore possible. Yet no one would explicitly call Luther a bastion of whiteness—the whiteness is a byproduct of multigenerational passivity.

Hetero-normativity is also a byproduct of camp culture. Whether by accident or by design, gay and lesbian campers and staff members have rarely, if ever, outed themselves. If
anything, such discussions of orientation remain *sotto voce*. Changing this element of the system would call for a semi-differentiated camp staff, program director, and camp director. They would introduce change in the system (an openly gay/lesbian counselor) which would in effect bridge the supposed gap between the outside world (where GLBTQI concerns are more open and discussed) and the camping experience, thus causing a reaction to this change through the use of restorative nostalgia (and its resultant fear of change) to bring back the previous homeostasis and a cessation of reverberations throughout the larger system (phone calls to the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries board, angry e-mails to pastors in home congregations, etc.). Is it because campers hate gay and lesbian people? I doubt this is the case. Campers are more concerned with whether or not an openly gay staff member would disrupt the social fabric of camp and inadvertently introduce dystopia that is associated with the outside world/identified patient.

I am not making an uninformed assumption about the character of camper reactions to change in the system. The camp narrative and my years of experience as a camp chaplain strongly suggests that those campers whose nostalgic reflex is more reflective than restorative would probably weather the change of this nature. They might have initial reservations, but they will accept it as being paradigmatic of social progress and not threatening to the vital aspects of the camp experience. That being said, I do recall one couple who was interviewed in the summer of 2010 who launched a fairly impressive fusillade against the more liberal policies of the ELCA (the parent church body of Camp Luther) that welcomed openly gay and lesbian persons into congregational life as ordained ministers. Interestingly, they chose to share this opinion after I had turned the microphone off, as they did not wish to “go on record” with their concerns. Conversely, I had wonderful conversations with gay and lesbian campers who enjoy camp even though they are circumspect about outing themselves to fellow campers. Suffice it to say, the
ability of the campers to accept change in the camp experience and its consequential relationship with the outside world is dependent on the nature of their nostalgia—is it reflective or restorative? Perhaps there is no dichotomy here. Levels of anxiety and/or compassion will determine what form nostalgia manifests itself in response to change.

Ralph Harper describes the correlation between change and nostalgia in this manner:

We live in a world where restlessness and worse make us disagreeably conscious of loss and what we may lose. We rarely find, we are rarely given, what we do not lose sooner or later. And yet most men [sic] do not have the courage to long for the fullness of time—for each man a different time and a different fullness—when he can awaken some sleeping presence. They do not have the courage because they are not encouraged to believe that what they need most is within their reach, if not already experienced (112).

Sad to say, nostalgia is more likely to make us long for a past that never existed rather than a future as yet untested. Nostalgia and fear become strange bedfellows under the right circumstances; nostalgia becomes the rationale that is needed for homeostasis. The nostalgic need for equilibrium sets up a pattern of human behavior that is sluggish in its ability to make changes to ritual or doctrine, which is why the church writ large tends to operate in a vacuum by contrast to secular social progression. Therefore, homeostasis is the manifestation of (mostly) restorative nostalgia. The church writ large, however, is not part of the collective camp ethos—instead it is part of the larger “outside world” quandary, an entity to be avoided.

The “Sick” Outside World and the “Healthy” Inner Sanctum

Several interview subjects used comparisons between camp and their home congregations as a means of defining their camp experience. Consider the following interview excerpts:
[Here at camp,] you’re not worried about what’s going on in the outside world. You know at church you’re sitting there thinking, ‘What do I need to do the rest of the day to get ready for work tomorrow? Do we need to go grocery shopping? Do we have to read these awful newspaper headlines?’ (Charlene Bodi).

And it’s just the safest environment so you can feel free to speak your mind and learn about things that you may not have been interested in at home or in the congregation there. It’s just always been easier to just communicate with whoever is sitting across the table from you at camp as opposed to when you’re at home (Steve Nesbit).

I think there is a big difference between what we experience in our normal congregational life, as well as just our normal work day and work week kind of experience. It goes back to the community feeling that you get when you’re here, that people get to know each other in a very religious manner, meanwhile at home, you get to know each other on a not necessarily spiritual level, even in your congregation. And that’s something we’ve found in our church in particular, that we’re less satisfied with… (Carl Norris).

I find these statements ironic, because they are reminiscent of the manner in which the church catholic speaks regarding the spiritual vacuum in the secular world. Now, the campers have in effect seceded from the church, giving it the same problematic label that the church once gave the “outside world.” Now, according to the campers, the church is part and parcel of the outside world, which is “othered” according to the rules of homeostasis and the nostalgic reflex.

There are a host of reasons why campers feel compelled to “other” their home congregations (or lack thereof) in favor of the “camp religion.” They range from disappointment at the all too human behavior of systems in conflict to personal doctrinal disputes or the disappointment associated with one’s naïve assumption about the infallibility of religious
organizations. If there is a unifying theme in camper’s discontent with the church/world dyad, it is perhaps rooted in the malaise associated with post-modernism; a realization that the only absolute is the lack of absolutes. Even the existence of God is up for internal debate, therefore nostalgia provides a solid platform for processing the untenable dynamism that causes so much anxiety and unrest.

In his series of lectures about the secular religions that replaced the authority of the church in the postmodern age, George Steiner proposes that the abhorrence of the vacuum where the church catholic once reigned calls for new myths under which order can be reified. Steiner references the familiar Hasidic tale that explains why God created humanity—in order that we, the created, would tell stories (26). Since the congregational setting in the postmodern world is suspect, camp affords people the opportunity to tell stories, create new myths, and gather round an as yet “un-blemished” talisman. Camp is providing the means by which people resolve their primary inner conflict: “In the inmost of his [sic] being and history, man is a divided composite of biological and socially-culturally acquired elements. It is the interplay between biological constraints on the one hand, and social-cultural variables on the other, which determines our condition” (27).

Theologians would see a parallel in the theology of St. Paul, whereas the “old Adam” of the flesh is subsumed by the “new Adam” of the spirit. For campers, the old humanity resides outside the place of camp. It is in the inner sanctum of the detached community where the new humanity, the new mythical personae is created. Unfortunately, as postmodernism reveals, this is a false binary. At best, we emerge from the old Adam/Eve into Adam/Eve 1.2, Eve/Adam 1.3, ad infinitum. Yet nostalgia provides the comforting illusion that somehow the mitigating factors that define camp qua camp as a perfect community despite its obvious and ultimately incurable
imperfections. Friedman reveals the fallacy of this thinking by reminding us that labeling of any sort is detrimental to those labeled and labeling. He reminds us that in reality, few people can function at better than fifty percent of their capacity for differentiation (56).

Once a person or system is labeled as sick (othered), the potential functioning of that person/system becomes inhibited. Similarly, the ones doing the labeling (in this case, those residing in Camp Luther’s “inner sanctum”) are duped into believing that those things which are not of camp are some sort of symptom of a sickness, i.e.: the camp lacks people of color in its collective makeup, *ergo* the diversity of the “outside world” is a symptom of dis-ease. Or, as Friedman posits:

> The word *sick* (and its various synonyms or euphemisms) has become one of the most pernicious words in the English language. It reeks of authoritarianism and allows labelers to think that they are being objective rather than judgmental. When we judge another person’s form of existence in the disguise of diagnosis, it becomes too easy to consider what we do not like or cannot agree with as a symptom (57).  

The audacity of campers to choose camp over and against the outside world/church limits their capacity for growth and change within the system; hence, the lack of female leadership on staff, of ethnic diversity in the camp population, and the hetero-normative parameters for relationships. Lest I fall into the trap of diagnosing the camp system with a symptom (thereby putting myself in the uncomfortable position of being judge and jury of a collective to which I belong), I find that the root cause of this camp/other binary is in fact the byproduct caused by the nostalgic reflex seeking to strengthen homeostasis. The camp religion must be preserved, concordantly the various cultural trappings associated with that religion are also preserved, not out of preference,

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20 Isn’t this the bane of any collective movement or organization?
but necessity. Change in the system is sacrificed for the sake of security (even though security is an illusion in a postmodern world).

Understand, this is not a cheap rationalization or an attempt to exonerate the camp community, but rather an explication of a very human response to a seemingly inhumane and inhospitable world outside the camp boundaries. People seek refuge in all sorts of ideals and groupings according to the existential threats that are common to our human race. For example, let us once again revisit the tired trope of the withdrawn academic who sits in the ivory tower, delving into tomes of wisdom while the outside world dissolves into chaos. Is this not the nostalgic reflex once again reifying that which gives individuals their identity and sense of belonging to a larger “special” collective that defines itself by diagnosing the other? Moreover, is it not anxiety and fear of the world’s dynamism that provide fuel for our nostalgias and give us the impetus to seek refuge in our ivory towers or summer camps?

Nostalgia in Concert with Fear

Fear, residing at both the collective and individual levels, can be focused on that which is real or imagined. How we as individuals respond or react to change depends on our level of differentiation, which is our ability to maintain a sense of self in the midst of a larger system. As Friedman writes, “[Differentiation] includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being” (27). This jibes well with our understanding of the continuum on which reflective and restorative forms of nostalgia reside. Similarly, Boym reminds us, “Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away
from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii).

The differentiated individual will demonstrate a form of reflective nostalgia—a wistfulness that is paradoxically self-satiating. The anxious person, on the other hand, is quick to diagnose the problems of others and the need for their immediate surroundings to be secured and stowed. Furthermore, the differentiated person focuses on the process of the system, while the anxious person focuses on the content or “symptoms” therein (Friedman 202). Consider Figure Sixteen for correlations.

It would be easy to dismiss fear and anxiety as manifestations of ignorance welling up from the lowest common denominators of humanity. Images of people cowering in caves during an eclipse come to mind as I write this. But in reality, fear is an equal-opportunity influence upon all the various permutations of persons and systems. When we encounter fearful events, the nostalgic reflex is there to provide us with memories of similar experiences that, while perhaps also anxiety-inducing, offer us a totem by which we can withstand the pressures of the current crisis. Our totem is shaped by our experience and outside influences, and can be manifested through a variety of emotional responses—bravado, anger, withdrawal, sad acquiescence, etc. As Robert Wuthnow notes:
A person’s response to fear is shaped by the society in which he or she lives…. In most instances it is also influenced by previous encounters with peril. To help explain a potential flu epidemic, for example, journalists write about a previous one and what scientists did or did not do to prevent it. In the Middle Ages, the meanings of mass death were largely defined by religion. In our time, the meanings of peril are shaped by influential government agencies, scientists, technical experts, and journalists (13).

I would add that “influential government agencies” etc. are the de facto religions of the post-modern age. Or perhaps more correctly, they are some of the many aspects that construct one’s understanding of faith and belief (or lack thereof). They are aspects of intersecting triangles in the mosaic of human systems and relationships. As Russell McCutcheon observes,

[Human beings] …divide themselves… on the basis of race, gender, geography, age, and so on. By overlooking the importance of these additional aspects of human existence, one avoids confronting the relations between material, cultural productions (e.g., a myth one studies) and the concrete political and economic conflicts and inequities of people under study (13).

To say that modern religion is composed of a relationship between a person and its numinous encounter is overly simplistic and denies the agency of nostalgia/cultural production at work. Emotional triangles do not exist in isolation, but are interconnected by intersecting aspects of surrounding figures and organizations of larger systems.

Again, it is important to understand how homeostasis in a religious community contributes to this encounter with anxiety. A system will seek to maintain the status quo in order to quell anxiety. The status quo, a remnant of an earlier age, will contain both healthy and unhealthy elements. There comes a tipping point when the number of non-anxious individuals
within a system is critically less than the anxious persons, so that the focus is placed on the symptoms of others as opposed to the unhealthy elements within. This is how the Camp Luther environment is able to marry quaint customs ("Chicken Fat" and dining hall rituals) to the camp religion and latent forms of sexism, passive racism, and hetero-normativity.

The nostalgia for the experience camp provides can actually make differentiated persons less so, and anxious people even more so. What these people experience through camp is of immense value to them—therefore they are willing to accept the lesser gods of "isms" in order to continue the nuances of what the camp has to offer. They wish to see this system exist into perpetuity so that their children and grandchildren (as is often the case) can come to crave the camp religion as they themselves do. To this end, the camp system takes on the characteristics of a cult—a detached enclave existing in contradistinction to the other "other," larger systems outside and within the camper sphere of reference.

The Cult of Camp Luther and the Doctrine of Eschatological In-Breaking

I posit that by virtue of its detached setting and systemic process, undergirded by the homeostasis of folkway, ritual, myth, and tradition, Camp Luther contains many cultic characteristics. It is not, however, a cult in the classic anthropological definition of the term, unless homeostasis is personified as the charismatic figure that feeds the nostalgic worship of the masses. Understood rightly, however, cultic behavior need not involve the dehumanization or exploitation of the persons involved. People abdicate their agency only to the extent that they choose freely to enter into a systemic process by which certain totems or talismans are recognized and uplifted from generation to generation. Perhaps this is best exemplified by a particularly reflective moment in an interview with a Lutheran pastor who was once a staff member, and more recently a father of three former staff members:
Well, I think [camp] is a cult in, um, in one sociological definition of what a cult would be. There might be people who are children of children and things like that, but this is truly one of the real magical things as a cult is it’s not centered around a charismatic leader of the camp but it is centered around the actual camp itself. This would be, at least for us in Christianity we would say that it is the Holy Spirit that has truly called, gathered, enlightened, sanctified and kept this place within the whole church. So it really is kind of a neat cultic center…. Um, there are there are symbols that make it a cult and the symbols typically are music rituals, uh songs that kind of… keep going and going and going. *Ostinato*—that song I sang in 1974 which is still sung in 2010…. So from that standpoint I think there are cultic symbols. (Bob Dean).

In his ruminations, Pastor Dean has recognized the totemic elements of the camp that are a positive part of the homeostasis in the system. As I have mentioned before, these elements also carry with them a certain rigidity so that an outsider’s impression of the place might be emblematic of a community hearkening back to an earlier time. This thematic element of the camp is again indicative of its status not only bastion of cult-like tradition, but also as a staged symbolic community (cf. Chapter Three). One can argue that all religions are cults by virtue of their origins, and the “Camp Luther version” of Jesus makes this cultic designation possible.
The nostalgic reflex persuades even the most differentiated people to become part of something larger than themselves. Though sometimes unwittingly, most consciously choose to enter into a system that aligns with their values, lifestyles, and predilections. When this involvement in a system becomes a central component of a person’s identity, they experience what Marc Galanter calls “emotional fusion,” where the decision-making capabilities are seamlessly aligned with one’s ongoing identity formation (18). People choose to “belong” to the cult of the camp, and in turn the camp bears an influence on a person’s decisions and self-definition. Galanter continues:

Individuals in highly-structured group situations can be led to make judgments in ways very different from their decisions while on their own. When properly primed by the social setting, they may accept unusual beliefs that the group they have affiliated with
continually reinforces. …these beliefs can be further intensified when an individual’s feelings and state of consciousness have been altered within that group setting (64).

What I am suggesting here is that the programming at camp which culminates at the end of a busy (and simultaneously relaxing and exhausting) week in the highly ritualistic candlelight service bends the will of individuals so that they are likely to return once again to the “place apart.” Pastor Dean exemplifies this through his description of a camper amalgamation he calls “Every Dad:”

Every Dad is the guy that comes to camp with his wife and kids and started coming because somebody either made him or suggested it would be the ‘dad thing to do.’ [I watch] how Every Dad has signed up, you know, for the next year: ‘Yea that wasn’t so bad last year,’ and then again the next year: ‘Oh yeah, I met some guys that are kind of like me.” Then after eight, ten, twelve years of coming to camp and [his] four, six, and eight-year-olds are now fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen let’s say, he might be the first one to come [back to camp] (Dean).

In a chicken or egg style of questioning, one wonders if Dean’s “Every Dad” was predisposed to being drawn into the camp environment, or did the camp environment re-shape his predispositions? Did the campers create the camp religion, or did the camp religion create the campers? The nostalgic reflex would dictate that this is cyclical—one element reinforcing the other, shaping and maintaining the homeostasis of the system.

One should not neglect the need for a more panoramic understanding of the camp’s location in a larger web of systemic triangles; it should be noted that the camp falls under the
auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest organized group of Lutheran congregations in the United States.\textsuperscript{21} The doctrines and social statements of ELCA Lutheranism inform and shape the theology and doctrine of Camp Luther, though many campers do not consider themselves members of a Lutheran church. In this system, the camp exists in relationship to (and in tension with) the larger church and the “outside world.”

At the risk of being overly simplistic, it is self-evident that the ELCA’s theology and doctrines are an intersection of history, culture, sociology and religious thought. Camp culture is saturated with references to the elements of this denomination. Confirmation students learn of the importance of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation in concert with the technological advances of Johannes Gutenberg. Lutheran thought and practice is an interesting combination of word and sacrament, faith and reason, and socio-economic influences that manifest themselves throughout the camp \textit{in situ}.

George Lindbeck offers a cultural-linguistic explanation for the formation of a religious body in his germinal work \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}. Lindbeck recognizes that religion is not the result of an encounter with the divine, but perhaps truths framed by beliefs or attitudes forged in the spoken languages of society. “Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments” (19). If one is to become a Lutheran, one begins to interpret and understand the world through the lens of Christianity and its Lutheran features. Therefore, the

\textsuperscript{21} Rather than go into a description of its history and polity, I ask those who are curious to look at the ELCA website: www.elca.org.
religion informs and shapes one’s attitudes toward the world just as the world shapes and creates the experiences that define the religion (another cyclical pattern).

Nostalgic reflexivity of both reflective and restorative natures filters each individual and collective encounter with religion and the world. When these encounters are brought into the camp setting, they influence and shape the religious practice of the camp. But this is not a simple linear progression as camp is not a terminus, but rather a stop on the journey. Rather, as is the case in systems and their emotional triangles, patterns of influence ricochet from aspect to aspect. A host of converging yet divergent influences shape the camp understanding of spirituality. Consider the following quote from former staff member, Helen Emerson, regarding her earliest camp recollections:

And then I also remember I had the impression somehow—like I don’t know if I heard the walking on water story or what happened—I thought that God had a house that sat on top of the water like out on the lake somewhere. I really thought that [camp was] where Jesus lived. Like…which I mean, I guess it’s not really a memory that happened here…but it’s, I can…very early that was my conception of camp—that this is where Jesus lived. Jesus didn’t live in the mural that was on my church’s altar. Like, that was not Jesus. Jesus lived on the lake. It was like trying to make something very abstract very concrete.

Emerson’s struggle to verbalize this concept is evident in the audio recording of the interview. Her word choice is emblematic of Lindbeck’s cultural linguistic methodology. Camp was the focus of Emerson’s childhood longing. Jesus represented that which was holy and endearing to her (as is the case of most children indoctrinated into a Sunday School program). For her young
mind, it made the most sense that camp was where Jesus resided. Not at the camp per se, but out on the lake, in a house.

Theologians would attest that camp was the closest thing that Emerson understood to be the eschatological in-breaking of God in time and space. Time at camp becomes kairos time. The space of camp is holy because it is adjacent to the house of God (which miraculously sits on the water, like the gospel accounts of Jesus walking on water). The larger church informed her thought process, but “Jesus didn’t live in the mural that was on my church’s altar.” Emerson’s nostalgic reflex places Jesus adjacent to the camp, infuses him into the camp’s atmosphere, therefore making the camp the site of true numinous encounters. For Emerson, the aspect of church in the triangle pings on its relationship with the camp aspect, but Jesus has “left the building” and taken up residence in the locus of the camp.

The collective nostalgia of the campers reifies homeostasis, ensuring that “Jesus” (whatever this word means to individuals) will be there for future generations, just out of sight, but felt by those who conflate his presence with the ecstasy they sense at camp. This is not the ecstasy of R.D. Laing, who believes mystics are madmen, but rather the ecstasy of Raymond Prince and Charles Savage who state “A mystical state is a controlled withdrawal and return; a death and rebirth, often a rebirth into a world with a radical shift in its iconography—a death and transfiguration” (qtd. in Greeley 38). This language dovetails neatly into both Lutheran baptismal theology (a daily death and rebirth) and also the process of going to camp and coming home (withdrawal and return).

Similarly, Harper writes about ecstasy in the longing to be close to paradise: “We reach paradise again by way of a journey from paradise, a paradise whose loss we mourn. But the
bitterness of loss is mixed with the ecstasy of approaching return. The past, the lost paradise, represented as a ‘permanent essence’ is our vision of the ‘one true paradise’” (100). For Helen Emerson, as well as others, the childhood memories of camp and their related affectivities are paradoxically paradise lost and regained through moments of nostalgic ecstasy. The fact that one cannot stay at Luther permanently, but must return to the “real world” for a year before returning is the process of losing and regaining a paradise. For people drawn to Camp Luther, thus it has always been, and ever more shall be, even though it never was nor never can be exactly what they yearn for.

Swollen with Dreams of the Past

Boym writes, “Walter Benjamin thought of past, present and future as superimposing times, reminiscent of contemporary photographic experiments. In his view, every epoch dreams the next one and in doing so revise the one before it. Present ‘awakens’ from the dreams of the past but remains ‘swollen’ by them. Swelling, awakening, constellation—are Benjaminian images of the interrelated times” (28). This is an apt description of the manner in which the camp environs is “swollen” with the camp/Christian religious homeostasis. The nostalgic reflex churns the rituals of religion and the language of the church to further establish a cultic following that preserves the ideals of the past generations through perpetuating the rites and affectivities across generations. The possible side effects of this perpetuation are seen in the lack of ethnic diversity, patriarchy in the staff, and assumptions of hetero-normativity among those who attend and work at the camp. Homeostasis is further buttressed by the camp’s location as an aspect in a series of systemic emotional triangles. Whenever change is introduced to the system, reverberations echo through the mosaic of surrounding triangles, seeking to bring
balance back to the affected system. Wilson relates how homeostasis can sometimes bring
cultural byproducts to bear:

Nostalgic conceptions of the past contribute to a tacit acceptance of the status quo
(privileges associated with whiteness, masculinity, bourgeois backgrounds, and
heterosexuality). In this way, we see how nostalgia can be reinforced by hegemonic
leadership and can facilitate making and re-making meaning, which serves the interests
of the dominant group in society. (45).

Perhaps the greatest sleight of hand movement occurs when the nostalgic reflex urges
people to believe that all is as it was (even though it isn’t, nor was it ever), and provide a sense of
destiny in the presence of our amorphous postmodernity. We gather round our talismans,
comforted by the feelings of euphoria they bring us. We continue to respond to life with a sense
of reflective or restorative nostalgia, depending upon on the given level of differentiation we
have in the moment. The conventions of our language provide the medium upon which we
culturally produce our reality and longing. For some, it is a camp adjacent to a lake where a
Palestinian religious figure lives on the water in a childhood memory. For others, a myriad of
possible incarnations exist.

In the concluding chapter of this work, I observe how knowledge of the nostalgic reflex is
used to interact in systemic processes. The writing examines the larger implications of what the
functions of nostalgia reveal about human behavior and how these can benefit further discourse
within academia. I also attempt (and fail) to determine the degree to which nostalgia guided my
decision to study nostalgia, and the camp where I “feel” nostalgia the most. Conceivably the
most important observation of this next chapter is the simplest of all: the nostalgic reflex, as
Harper aptly surmises, propels us inexorably toward that which “makes happy sense to us” (105).
CHAPTER SIX
THROUGH THE UNKNOWN REMEMBERED GATE—CLOSURE AND CONCLUSION

In an age of an unlimited proliferation of images, discourses, simulacra, the search for the real itself has become utopian, and this search is fundamentally invested in a desire for temporality. In that sense, then the obsessions with memory and history, as we witness them in contemporary literature and art, are not regressive or simply escapist. In cultural politics today, they occupy a utopian position vis-à-vis a chic and cynical postmodern nihilism on the one hand and a neo-conservative world view on the other that desires what cannot be had: stable histories, a stable canon, a stable reality (101).

—Andreas Huyssen in Twilight Memories

Nostalgia and the Academy

Postmodernity has effectively effaced all sense of certitude and objective reality in academic discourse. High theory scoffs at what it considers to be an overly simplistic notion of human desire and longing for the real. People who have the audacity to cling to an emotional valence for their sense of self and other are labeled as uncomplicated, or worse, hegemonic. But outside of the academy, where hearts are broken and wounds need healing, the power of the nostalgic reflex creates a reality that is comforting and secure. This is no opiate for the masses, but a method of grounding one’s self in the presence of that which is sacred, whether it be a summer camp, a yearning for achievement within the academy, or devotion to stamp-collecting.

While the preceding chapters have used Camp Luther as a site of nostalgic significance for its ability to corral a collective identity that contains elements of both reflective and restorative nostalgias, it is precisely the absence of Camp Luther that provides the primary fuel for the nostalgic reflex of its adherents. One can easily speculate that were Camp Luther to be a
part of people’s daily life, it would lose its potential for significance. To wit: absence really does make the heart grow fonder.

When asked whether or not they attend camp for two weeks for the price of one, the response was varied depending on the age of the interview subject. In general, the younger the participant, the more likely they were to give an unqualified yes. The older subjects were more likely to be circumspect about this proposition. They were quick to recognize the inherent quality of the limited exposure to the camp culture as being the nexus of its cultural significance for them. This leads one to conclude that the seasoned nostalgic knows when to walk away from the sublime source in order to maintain the wistful nature of the nostalgic reflex.

This chapter continues with an excursive describing a Saturday morning at camp—the progression of steps people take to disengage themselves from the camp world and move back into their normalized routines. In leaving that which is desired, people experience the fullness of nostalgia’s bittersweet aftertaste. The section following brings closure to the theoretical construct of the nostalgic reflex and implications for its use in the human narrative. Mindful of the limitations placed on one’s calendar and capacity for focus, I also recognize the bitter and sweet of completing this work while leaving so many stones unturned. This too falls under the rubric of the ubiquitous yet often unnoticed nostalgic reflex—I long for that perfect academic environment where the phone never rings, the children do not levy guilt trips, the brain remembers salient quotes and their proper citations, and I discover a methodology that perfectly maintains academic standards yet appeals to a general audience. Quoth the postmodern raven, “Nevermore.”

Excursive
The cumulative effect of playing hard, eating too much, and sleeping on a camp mattress makes Saturday morning a supreme act of will. Friday held the best intentions of organizing and packing for the trip home, but that ambition was distracted by the euchre tournament, last minute craft cabin projects, and children asking for a swim companion.

So the alarm is set for early Saturday, and like other campers, you stumble out of the shower house into the morning sunlight, fishing through your pockets for the car keys. By the time the breakfast bell rings, you have managed to pack a little over half of the cabin, and the prospects of fitting the remaining contents in the mini-van are dubious at best. You head for the dining hall where your kids are already waiting to eat one last meal before remembering you left the camera back at the cabin.

Not having the camera handy during the morning announcements and goodbye song would be a severe social faux pas, so you run back and grab it before your son receives a paper certificate for having attended “Chicken Fat” all week. The camp staff gathers at the end of the dining hall to sing the goodbye song. Brad announces that before the goodbye song, they will sing a silly song to give people the opportunity to “make a Kodak moment.” He then goes on to ask that people refrain from taking pictures during the goodbye song, as it would sully the solemnity of the moment. So during the silly song, you, along with forty other people, jockey for position to get a picture of a group of college students whose names you won’t remember two weeks from now. You find the gravitas of the staff’s rationale slightly inane, yet despite your cynicism, you are once again surprised by the emotional response you feel to the lyrics of the goodbye song:

_May the memory of friends linger in your mind,_
The beauty of the water, the quietness of time.

But most of all we pray, that what has been

And what you see, shows you Jesus.²²

The song ends, the silence lingers, and people exit the dining hall. After that moment, the time leading up to the drive home is filled with pandemonium. Your spouse takes the kids to the camp store to get t-shirts while you cram almost everything into the van. Somehow, the box fan you picked up at the Ashtabula Wal-Mart doesn’t fit, so you abandon it in the cabin, which is still standing despite your family’s best efforts to destroy it. You check the nooks and crannies for forgotten items, and notice that your now-deceased uncle wrote his name on an exposed stud: “Johnny H. Family Week Three, 1967.” At camp, the walls really do speak.

Figure Eighteen: The 2010 staff poses for one last photo on a Saturday morning. Photo by author.

²² From “Peace to You” by Kevin Brown, former staff member and lifelong camper.
You drive the van up to the lane and honk the horn briefly to let the kids know it’s time to go. Of course, they ignore you, and you end up being swept into the arena of goodbyes being said outside Mordecai, the staff lounge. Photos, hugs, e-mail addresses scribbled on pieces of paper are interrupted by the ringing of the bell. In a moment reminiscent of the Von Trapp children going to bed, the staff waves goodbye and goes into the lounge for their end-of-week meeting, which is a polite way of asking the campers to leave so they can begin their litany of chores prior to the arrival of the new campers the following afternoon.

Your kids insist on listening to the camp CD’s on the way home, even though they are asleep before you reach the interstate. Your spouse tries to keep up with your conversation, but then drifts off, leaving you alone with the camp songs to keep you company as you work your way across Ohio and back to your real life. Only fifty-one more weeks, and you will return to the place apart. In the meantime, life happens.

The Nostalgic Reflex Redux

Harper writes:

Through longing man approaches presence. But longing does not touch and longing is not touched in return. Longing bears the hurt of loss and failure; it pleads for a healing that will last. Longing is the corridor to the land of poetic justice, the justice that is final and real but known only in poetry. It takes intelligence and it takes courage to keep on longing in a world which is organized to refute it (108).

A longing for presence is the stuff of nostalgia—hoping for something we aren’t quite sure of, we are reduced to poetry and metaphor to give lucidity to otherwise ethereal longings. The post-industrial, post-colonial world in which we live does not suffer poets lightly. They tend to find
themselves deconstructed before they complete a first stanza of verse, yet even the
deconstruction of poets is fueled by the nostalgic reflex.

All passions, whether seemingly rational or irrational, have at their root individuals
within a collective of like-minded individuals, seeking to bear their totems and complete their
agendas. The very things that motivate us to eschew emotive qualities are ironically fueled by
emotions, i.e., nostalgias. One can even be self-aware and still fall prey to the whims of the
nostalgic reflex. It is how one rationalizes the use of this tool in either a restorative or reflective
vein that determines whether it will be wielded for good or ill.

In the case of Camp Luther campers, the emotional transparency experienced is an
elusive yet coveted quality that hearkens back to simpler times and places which may have never
existed save in the imagination. The fact that on Saturday mornings, people try in vain to capture
this quality with their cameras only reifies its significance in their lives. It also underscores the
premise that this quality is not felt outside camp, no matter how many photographs we post on
the refrigerator or the screensaver. In her work regarding the marketing of the Kodak company
over the past century, Nancy West notes that promotional literature for photography conveys the
notion that photos contain within them a narrative waiting to be told.

Of course, the narrative is only available to the persons who understand the significance
of the photo’s contents—who feel a nostalgic re/cognition of the items recorded by the camera
lens. Anyone who has subjected themselves to sitting through a viewing of someone else’s
vacation slides can attest to the cognitive dissonance, nay tedium, experienced. As West relates:

No wonder then, that no one else shares our interest in our own photographs. Experience
can never simply be passed on to another without some effort to recreate that experience
through a narrative that transcends factual information, solely personal experience, and charged stereotypes (186).

I can show camp pictures spanning three decades that evoke powerful feelings of nostalgia in my being, yet unless the casual viewer had been there with me when the photo was taken, they cannot possibly evoke nearly the same response. And depending on my own level of differentiation, I can either use these nostalgias to reify a hegemonic status quo, or simply reflect on the ironies of life and the dynamism that irrevocably marks the passage of time.

Perhaps the most progressive manner in which the nostalgic reflex can be utilized by individuals is not in the remembering of things past nor naively dreaming of things to come, but rather in the construction of a parallel temporality—a simulacrum of the way things ought to be.

“The way things ought to be” is a blasé statement with problematic implications, so let us look carefully at what this indicates. Just as campers at Luther strive to perform their “best selves” according to what they understand this term to associate, the nostalgic reflex is only asking us to become better stewards of our selves, our time, and our resources. The nostalgic reflex conjures up images of how we could have handled our past foibles better, and posits possibilities of how we could function with more meaning in the present. As Wilson reiterates, “Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space” (37).

We struggle to harness our nostalgic urges in order to transcend the linear finitude and geographical constraints of this life. We daydream because this function makes the unbearable tolerable, and the pleasurable more so. We are nostalgic because it brings us closer to the real, to the realization of Milan Kundera’s litost, or as Finnish Lutherans might have said at camp, the experience of kaiho, a longing for that which completes us through luminosity. This experience
is not limited to summer camp, though it is more readily found there than other times and places. Those who attempt to accurately describe it cannot do so unless it is absent, as Bertha Gruenberg, a former director of Camp Wazityatah wrote in her journal circa 1939: “…we need the distance and time to feel and understand how much this summer is to mean to each of us thru all the days of our years. There’s something mystical to me about the manner of a summer here. It can never be repeated.” (qtd. in Paris, 257).

So the nostalgic reflex is there to remind us in times of joy and adversity of those things which matter most. Like any faculty, it can be used for good or ill, depending on the motives of the one who wields it. It remains within all of us. It is triggered on a daily basis, and its presence in our cognitive processes is often unseen, yet influential. I know, on a purely cognitive level, that Camp Luther is a collection of mildewed cabins, bland food, with a panoramic vista that only hints at the greater grandeur of an ocean view. This is what the photographs show and the palate recalls. The narrative of camp as polished through the lens of nostalgia, however, breathes magic into my cognition, and my desire for its luminosity trumps my rationalism every time. I only hope that others feel this quickening as I do, not necessarily for camp per se, but for something that adds value to their existence—a sense of Harper’s “presence,” even if that translates into a temporary escape from ennui and malaise.

Framing Questions Revisited

The ethnographies collected in this research indicate that nostalgia is the basis for perpetuation of the collective folkways and traditions at places such as Camp Luther. The implications of this study would be useful in the sociology of religion to explain why faith-based institutions only embrace change as a last resort, as the sense of homeostasis is inextricably meshed with the sacrosanct; when one domino tumbles, doctrines and dogmas are placed under a
microscope. To paraphrase Marx, “All that is assumed melts into equivocal statements and pontification.”

The work further indicates that nostalgia both helps and hinders the nature of the detached religious community. As people seek totems that guide them into individual and collective identity, a strong network of support is built for communities where cultural production jibes with one’s personal proclivities. A compendium of likes and dislikes dictate the manner in which the nostalgic reflex will either attract or repel individuals toward any given totem. The repulsion aspect of the nostalgic reflex is what causes collectives to act in a manner contrary to the objective needs of the detached community; in this case, nostalgia will cause institutions to falter and dissolve rather than allow them the necessary paradigm shifts which would enable their perpetuation. Ample examples exist with every vacant church building dotting the American landscape.

Perhaps the most useful application of this data for cultural studies is in realizing the power of nostalgia to reify that which is patently harmful to society. When we see enclaves acting in a manner that is contrary to the betterment of others (race, class, gender, or otherwise), they are responding to their nostalgic reflex which unwittingly directs much in the way of reactions and responses to dynamism in collectives and systems. When anxiety is introduced into a system, it will sometimes act in a reprehensible manner, sacrificing the common good in order to preserve what it perceives to be the essential totems and talismans that give this corporeal existence meaning and worth. The key to helping enclaves move beyond their homeostasis is by providing insight into the mechanisms of nostalgia that hinder social progress.

By contrast, enclaves in danger of losing identity (i.e.: marginalized communities) can harness the power of the nostalgic reflex in order to preserve and protect that which is unique for
the sake of continuity. In the face of cultural genocide, indigenous Americans and those involved in New Indian Studies would do well to allow the nostalgias associated with the oral tradition to flourish so that the remains of the day will belong to the people who occupied this land before the colonists.

The Unturned Stones

There are many unexplored avenues in this writing. First and foremost, I found myself drafting paragraphs that quickly dovetailed into discussions of nostalgia and hegemony. I was tempted in chapter five to write a section on homeostasis as synonymous with Foucauldian governmentality, but refrained from doing so because I thought the discussion would stray beyond the limits of this project’s framing questions. Be that as it may, I would warrant that future research in the field of nostalgia would yield important ideas about the power of the nostalgic reflex in reifying the notion of “other” and the maintenance of white patriarchal dominance in mainstream society. Nostalgia is a powerful motivator in convincing people to maintain a standard of beliefs despite the oppression that those beliefs impose upon the faithful.

While writing chapter three, I was reminded of my clinical pastoral training, where I spent time working in an Alzheimer’s unit whose residents suffered from varying degrees of dementia. I noticed that one particular woman was given to bouts of profanity and violent behavior around the staff, yet she always calmed immediately when anyone would start reciting the Lord’s Prayer. This suggested to me that the power of nostalgia for repetitive meaningful transactions can transcend even dementia to soothe anxiety and invite a sense of identity and security. Because of this experience, I was tempted to delve into a lengthy discussion about camp songs and camp folklore. A comparative analysis between liturgical practice and the traditions in a camp setting would give way to some ground-breaking notions about the strength of repetition
within a repertoire. How is it that nostalgia can harbor these things within us to the point where we become automatons in our rote recitations that simultaneously numb and comfort us? More importantly, are liturgies and folkways a peculiar form of reification resulting from nostalgia? These questions would merit pages outside the main topics of this work and my field of expertise.

While researching chapter two, I found myself drawn to comparisons of Camp Luther to Walt Disney World in the ethnographies. This anomaly was a very large blip on the radar screen—a full third of the interview subjects mention Disney at some point in their responses. For most subjects, this was the baseline by which they chose to compare camp in order to stress to me just how essential the camp experience was to their family’s sense of identity. A sampling of “Disney statements” follows:

We got an offer from my parents to go to Disney World for summer vacation. So I said to the boys, ‘Your grandparents want to go to Disney World.’ And they said, ‘Oh, that’s great!’ I said, ‘But that means we can’t go to camp.’ ‘Oh, no, we don’t want to go to Disney World if it means we don’t get to go to camp.’ And I said, ‘You don’t want to go to Disney World? Are you kidding me?’ But they were absolutely sincere about it (Shirley Green).

Often campers would relate to me how they felt Disney pales in comparison to their experience at Luther in terms of its “authenticity.” Wilson stresses the importance of authenticity in one’s search for identity. We are a people jaded by the hyper-present media’s attempt to coerce our thinking and belief systems. We cannot trust that public data has our best interests at heart, therefore we long for something more bona fide so as to provide an anchor:
The desire for authenticity stems from a process of fragmentation and a feeling of distance or loss. We seek the authentic because we want to regain something lost; we wish to make our own existence more credible. In his writings on postcoloniality and identity, Radhakrishnan (1996) notes that the question of authenticity had to do not just with identity but with a certain attitude to identity. In other words, authentic identity is ‘a matter of choice, relevance, and a feeling of rightness’ (58).

While I believe that both Walt Disney and the Finnish forebears who created Camp Luther sought to cultivate this “feeling of rightness” within, they chose separate avenues to accomplish the same goal. A book should be written exploring Disney, nostalgia, and authenticity. This is not that book.

In the writing of this work, I discovered many other possible avenues of research that did not find discourse at this time. I list some of them here in hopes that perhaps myself or my colleagues in the field of cultural studies will someday find academic sustenance in pursuit of them:

- Postmodernity and the politics of nostalgia
- Nostalgia and gender performance (“the real Betty Crocker behind the apron”)
- Solastalgia and Lake Erie shoreline erosion—an ethnographic study
- Nostalgia and the male gaze/objectification
- Restorative nostalgia and real estate redlining
- Nostalgia as smokescreen to the effects of globalization
- Nostalgia reifying plutocracy

May I be fortunate enough to someday incorporate these topics into future research.
A study of nostalgia is inevitably a series of introspections, speculations, and educated conclusions. It is easy to make assumptions about nostalgia based on one’s experience with it, but these are false gods with clay feet. As one’s life experience changes with each new encounter, so too does our entanglement with nostalgia. People subsumed by bitterness and regret have differing definitions of nostalgia from those who found contentment with their lot in life. If we choose to recognize that nostalgia is neither a “good” nor “bad” resource in our faculties, we might then be more able to appreciate its capacity for shaping kind memories, forging new identities, and propping up the totems which we hold dear. Ten years from now, my educated opinion of nostalgia will not be the same as when I wrote this work. I consider this fortuitous, for it indicates personal growth and a willingness to let my nostalgic reflex entertain new possibilities instead of maintaining archaic truisms. Harper recognizes this pliable quality of nostalgia when he writes:

There is an intelligent and unintelligent way of handling nostalgia, a way of sickening under it and a way of using it. We are likely to be self-enclosed, too conscious of consciousness to get across the fences of our egoism even by means of nostalgia which hits us hard. We need understanding of its role to support any resolution to use it as a means to an end we need (105).

The self-absorbed navel-gazer will never appreciate nostalgia fully. Only one who has moved beyond a first naïveté will be able to recognize the nostalgic reflex when it stirs within. Moreover, a self-aware individual will be able to follow nostalgia’s discourse and discern between that which is deceiving (albeit oft pleasant) or accurate in order to gain perspective and
establish healthy priorities in life. In essence our life narratives become cautionary tales whose ongoing chapters are edited by nostalgia and tempered by our capacity for love.
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A Place Apart: The Role of Nostalgia in the Perpetuation of Folkways and Rituals at Camp Luther

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I am a graduate student in the American Cultural Studies department at Bowling Green State University and I am conducting interviews for my dissertation. I am researching the power of nostalgia in settings such as Camp Luther. I am hoping to interview approximately fifty people in the course of this project.

During this interview, which will be recorded and transcribed, you will be asked to answer some questions as to what makes Camp Luther an important place for you and your family. You will not receive any benefits from this interview other than knowing your contributions will help immensely in my dissertation research. This interview is designed to be approximately twenty minutes in duration. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. All the information will be kept confidential. I will keep the digital audio data and the printed transcripts in a secure place. Only myself and my faculty supervisor (named above) will have access to this information. Upon completion of this project, all data will be archived on a hard drive in a secure location. If I choose to quote you in the dissertation, you will be given a pseudonym (fictional name). Please be aware that if you describe specific events during the interview, a future reader may be able to recognize who you are despite the use of the pseudonym.
Participant's Agreement:

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and only allowable if you are eighteen years or older. The intent and purpose of this research has been explained to you. If, for any reason, at any time, you wish to stop the interview, you may do so without having to give an explanation.

The researcher will review the individual and social benefits and risks of this project with you. The data will be used in a dissertation that will be publicly available at the Jerome Library on the Bowling Green University Campus. A written transcript of the interview will be sent to you. You have the right to review, comment on, and/or withdraw information prior to the dissertation’s submission. The data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to your personal identity unless you specify otherwise. If you say anything that you believe may incriminate yourself, the interviewer will immediately rewind the tape and record over the potentially incriminating information. The interviewer will then ask if you would like to continue the interview.

If you have any questions about this study, you are free to contact me or my faculty advisor (contact information given above). Please remember e-mail is not 100% secure, so any message you send may be intercepted by a third party who will gain knowledge of your participation in this study. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu). You will be offered a copy of this consent form that you may keep for your own reference.

I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview.

___________________     ___________________
Participant's Signature      Date

___________________     ___________________
Interviewer's Signature      Date
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Question Sets for Camp Luther Ethnography Work, Summer 2010

Interview Questions for Campers (4+ yrs.)

a. Could you state your name(s), how many years you have been camping, if you were/are on staff, and how many members of your family usually attend camp during your week?

b. What do you enjoy most about your faith experience at camp as opposed to your regular church experience?

c. What do you miss most about camp when you are not here?

d. Do you feel nostalgic for Camp Luther, and what does that term mean to you?

e. When you are away from camp, what sights, smells, or sounds remind you of this place?

f. What are some of your earliest memories about camp? What kind of feelings do these memories evoke?

g. How do you preserve your memories of camp? How much money do you spend preserving these memories?

h. Do you think the experience here at camp is worth preserving given the amount of money we are attempting to raise for the bluff erosion project?

i. Do you ever visit with “camp people” outside of camp? Do you get the same “camp vibe” or is it different somehow?

j. Over the years, what is it about camp that stays the same and keeps you coming back?

k. Given the cost of camp, why do you come here instead of taking a comparable vacation elsewhere?

l. Where do you go for other vacations? Do these trips affect you in the same way emotionally as a trip to camp? How so?

m. If you could spend two weeks at camp for the same amount of money you are spending for one week, would you do it?

Interview Questions for Campers (3- yrs.)

a. Could you state your name(s), how many years you have been camping, if you were/are on staff, and how many members of your family usually attend camp during your week?
b. How did you learn about the camp? How does the description of camp mesh with the reality you see here?

c. Will you feel nostalgic for Camp Luther, and what does that term mean to you?

d. What kind of things do you think will trigger nostalgia once you leave here?

e. Given the cost of camp, do you think this is money well-spent compared to other vacations having a similar cost?

f. Where do you go for other vacations? Do these trips affect you in the same way emotionally as a trip to camp? How so?

g. If you could spend two weeks at camp for the same amount of money you are spending for one week, would you do it?

h. Do you think the experience here at camp is worth preserving given the amount of money we are attempting to raise for the bluff erosion project?

i. Do you feel at all bewildered or confused by some of the traditions or rituals here at camp?

j. If you could change anything about camp traditions or activities, would you?
December 4, 2009

TO: Martin Otto Zimmann
ACS

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10D154GE7

TITLE: A Place Apart: The Role of Nostalgia in the Perpetuation of Folkways and Rituals at Camp Luther

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of December 3, 2009, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on November 30, 2010. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6806 or email: hsrb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
Stamped original consent document is coming to you via campus mail.

c: Dr. Scott Martin

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7