A familiar place, a different me

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SUNDAY MORNINGS WITH ...

Kenny Lapins' column runs every four weeks as part of Sunday Mornings With ...

For two months each summer, from age 8 to 14, I went to summer camp. To me, the 80 water-edged acres of Camp Waupaca are the most beautiful on Earth. So when I received an email that some of my former counselors were hosting a reunion and I was invited to bring my daughters, I jumped at the chance: the chance to show my daughters the place that made me who I am, the chance to relive my fondest memories, the chance to hug some of the people I love most.

So, on Aug. 12, 2011, my girls and I packed the car with the essentials: clothes, flashlights, fishing poles, and bug spray. The moment I pulled the car into the familiar surroundings of the camp, situated on Lake Stratton in Waupaca, Wis., I was back in its grasp. Now, the paths are worn down to the tree roots, daddy longlegs are the sovereigns of every square inch, and the wooden walls of the cabins still bear campers' names scrawled with permanent marker, some dating back to the 1950s. But even in its advanced age, the camp still holds a power over me.

I felt different there. Not because I didn't have to worry about work for the weekend. Not because I was away from the sirens, honking, and El trains of the bustling city, but because in that space, in that particular place on Earth, I *was* different.

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I spent so much time there as a boy that I can remember every tree, every corner, every hiding place whenever I close my eyes. In fact, when I returned to camp as a counselor for two years, the campers under my care could never get away with anything. I already knew all the tricks. For instance, if you were to receive illicit soda pop in a care package from home without declaring it at the office, you might try to find a good hiding place for the cans, preferably somewhere that will keep them cool. But in my cabin, if you lifted the back of the toilet up and placed the cans in the tank, I would bust you. If you wanted to skip out on swimming class and try to hide in the forest just to the left of the tennis courts, I would find you.

So I had a pleasant time reacquainting myself with the tranquility of Camp Waupaca: the crystal mirror of Lake Stratton at dusk, the particular wooden smack sound of the Mess Hall door as it slams shut, the taste of the bug juice, the smell of a campfire at The Horseshoe, the semi-circle of benches that serves as the center of activity.

But what made this experience different than any summer I had spent as a boy was having my girls there to experience it as well. Rachel, 5, and Abigail, her big sister double her age, experienced the sights, sounds, tastes, and scents of this place with me. They sang the songs at meal times. They fished off the pier. They squealed with delight as they skimmed the water on a huge inner tube pulled by a speed boat. They made s'mores.

What is part of me is now part of them. And if they have to wait 30 years for the power of that place to reach them deeply as it did me, so be it. But I know that one day, they are going to look back on the summer that Daddy took them to his camp and remember it fondly, and feel the pull that Camp Waupaca exerts to bring them back to the sandy shore of The Waterfront. They will remember as I always will the sound Rachel made when the excitement of having caught a fish turned instantly to the terror of having a real live fish wriggling at the end of her line.

And finally, in the last hour of the last day of the reunion, one of my former counselors, a man I've looked up to all my life — my mentor and friend, Paul Warshauer — told me he's proud of the man I've become. He said he had been watching me over the weekend and how I interacted with my children and how they clearly love and trust me. So if I hadn't been transformed by the experience before that, he put me over the edge. It was all I could do to not cry. Instead, we shared an embrace and off I went to repack the car and head back to civilization.

Every place has an energy. The energy at Camp Waupaca is full of the spirit of the boys who spent their best years there. A caring, gentle place where good sportsmanship and mutual trust was the most important thing. "Forever and forever Waupaca!"