

# When We've Been Shown, We Can Shine

## A Note to Camp Staff

Michael Brandwein



This is a letter that I wrote to my father many years ago. My wife Donna had just manufactured our second son. I was working on a new training presentation about how to work with young people and thinking about the different ways we can teach them the most essential qualities for life. I recalled an event that occurred when I was in elementary school. It's interesting the things we remember...

**Dear Dad,**

I remember being so embarrassed and angry at you.

We were moving south on Sheridan Road during the 5:00 rush hour. (Remember back then, when rush hour used to be only an hour?) We were heading to Nana's and Papa's apartment for dinner during the holidays—you, mom, Scott, and me. It was a very gray day of chills and high winds that seemed at times to threaten to lift our car off the road.

And we were very, very late. You had taken side streets and back alleys to slice through traffic. I remember mom saying that everyone who owned a car seemed to have decided to pull out into the street at the same moment that night. There were no such things as car phones back then, unless your last name was Bond, and mom was worried that no one would know where we were or why we were late. Tension traveled with us as if it were an additional passenger.

And then, finally, we were only three blocks from the apartment building and you suddenly pulled off the road into the long driveway of another apartment building. Mom said, "What are you doing?!" You didn't answer. You threw the car into "park" and jumped out, shouting, "Just a second!" with the most urgent look on your face.

At the same moment, a car pulled up behind us trying to get up the driveway, but we were blocking a lane of traffic as it tried to turn in. The driver honked loudly and then the other drivers behind him hit their horns as if they could shove us forward by the force of their sound.

I was so embarrassed. My most specific memory of this whole event—the one of which I have the clearest mental snapshot—is how I scrunched down in the back seat so my head would not be visible to any of the drivers of the cars behind us. I wanted to be invisible. I remember thinking in horror, what if some of these people behind us end up going to our building and *recognize* us? I wanted no one to know I knew you.

As you jumped into the wind, Mom shouted, "Al, your asthma!" I looked up, and I saw you trying, with effort, to get to the front of this unfamiliar apartment building. It was tough going. The powerful wind off the lake kept shoving you sideways. Suddenly, I saw at the front of the building where you were heading, a small, elderly man in a dark, thin coat, holding an aluminum cane. He was trying to get into the revolving door. The man couldn't move ahead; he kept taking little steps, unable to go forward, like on some treadmill. He was almost knocked over. And you swooped up to him,

your overcoat billowing up and around behind you just like a cape. You grabbed the man's arm, forced the door open, and practically lifted him inside.

I didn't see you as you ran back to the car. I had slipped into the corner of my seat, hearing only those angry horns. You jumped in and pulled around the driveway to signal your way back into traffic. I remember none of us saying anything and I remember that it took several minutes just to get into the street, because no one would let you back in.

And that's all I remember. I can't remember the dinner, except that I'm sure that everyone was fine about our being late, and that Nana had probably served 11 main courses and five vegetables and four desserts, just in case the entire population of Toledo, Ohio dropped in by accident.

And now it's many years later, and I have my own two beautiful children, and my beautiful wife, and I remember you, and the old man, and the wind again, still embarrassed—but this time for a very different reason. I'm embarrassed now that I did not understand the significance of that event when it happened.

But I know now that the impact all of us have on each other—on our children, our families, our friends, our entire community—depends not on what we say, but instead on what we do. That we teach not by lecturing, but by acting. That we lead not by moralizing, but by modeling.

Thanks for the example. I will never forget what it meant.

Love,  
Michael

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### **Dear Staff,**

I've made up two statements about the power of teaching by modeling:

- What young people see is what they'll be
- What we show is how they'll grow

Everything we do sends a message. I'd appreciate it if you would think for a moment about some specific things we can say or do at camp that will teach by example the following things:

1. Respect
2. Responsibility
3. Kindness
4. Professionalism as a staff person

Please remember: Being a model for young people doesn't mean we're expected to be perfect. If we could be, we would rob young people of the opportunity to see how people should act to correct their mistakes. So, here's one more thing to think about, please: What are good things for us to do and say to model responsible and smart ways to handle mistakes?

Thank you in advance for showing our campers how to be the kind of people who will be the leaders of an even better world.