

# Five Things I Learned at Reading Camp

by Jessica Miller

On June 17 through 22, nearly twenty 4th and 5th graders descended upon Bellwether Farm. They were here for St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights' Reading Camp. While the campers came to learn reading skills, they also experienced outdoor programs at the Farm that provided context for the things they read throughout the week. I taught some of those programs, but in the end, the 4th and 5th graders taught me a lot. Here are a few things I learned at Reading Camp.



# 1

## 1.) Talk less, play more

On the first day of camp, we took a scavenger hike and went fishing. As an educator, there's always plenty to talk about. So, in outdoor programming, I challenge myself to let the kids do a lot of the talking, interacting, and play. (I guess I'm often concerned that they might not "get it" when I have to explain the concept of biodiversity or how to properly cast a fishing rod.) The campers reminded me that play—and nature—is its own teacher! They picked up on bird and insect sounds I couldn't hear, discovered aquatic life in the river, and every single camper caught at least one fish, even those that had never held a fishing pole before. This day was a success because they had the time and space to make mistakes, explore, and play.

# 3

## 3.) Curiosity trumps fear

Bee stings hurt. Most children know that. Thus my astonishment at how brave every single camper was when we went to the honeybee hives on Pollinator Day. Maybe it was that we had tasted different types of honey beforehand, or that we had talked about the endearing habit bees have of 'dancing' to tell the others where food is, or that they learned how beneficial bees are to pollination and producing foods we need and love. Actually, I think it was because bees and beekeeping are just so cool. Isaac donned a beekeeping suit and the campers touched a real honeycomb. They bent close to observe a worker bee inspecting an empty hexagon and asked question after question. They calmly and curiously walked through the busy swarm to get a close-up look at the buzzing hive and it hit me how powerful, calming, and fear-quenching curiosity can be.

# 5

## 5.) Just jump in!

Although some campers had never been canoeing or swam in a lake before, they were paddling and doggie-paddling as soon as they could! This attitude was carried throughout the week—these campers greeted new and different experiences with open arms. They simply jumped in! This is an attitude, in adult life, in faith-life, in work and in play, that I am glad to be reminded of and to learn.



# 2

## 2.) Differences keep life from being boring

I asked the campers what a "habitat" is. A 5th grade camper's eyes brightened as she connected the daily reading from earlier that morning. "A community!" she replied. What a brilliant connection. For the rest of the week, we used her answer to frame all of our activities in the woods, pond, garden and animal barn. What are the members of the community of farm animals? What about the community of a beehive? The campers kept pointing out how many different colors of eggs there were and how many different types of veggie plants were in the beds. When I asked why diversity, or differences, are important parts of community, a child answered, "Because everyone needs a place in the community." Another answered, "Because otherwise it would be the same and boring". Couldn't have said it better myself.

# 4

## 4.) Believe, try, and you'll hit a bullseye

A 5th grade girl was concentrating very hard on the 12 steps of archery. She lined up her feet and pointed one diagonally from her body. She deliberately nocked her arrow and lifted the bow slowly, trembling from the strain as she pulled back the string. She released and the arrow bounced off the top of the target. Instead of throwing down the bow and giving up, she asked what she did wrong. Was she not strong enough? I told her everything she did right and that next time we could go through the steps together. This time, she built on what she tried before and held her hips straight, her draw hand locked to the side of her face as she pulled the arrow back. "OK, when you can tell your body is in the right place and it feels right, you can..." WHIZ—Thud! She knew she was aiming true and trusted to let go. There was an arrow shaft sticking from the bullseye! She turned to me with a surprised but proud grin as the counselors and other kids cheered.

Throughout the week of games, activities and learning, we'd circle up to check in and I or another leader would offer a prompt. Once, when the question was "what is your favorite thing about summer?" a fifth-grader answered "reading camp!" So ultimately, I learned that Reading Camp—and the campers that taught me so much—are pretty awesome indeed.