

OPINION

ALEX BEAM

No ghost stories at camp? Now, that's scary

I HAVE BUCOLIC memories of my four summers at Camp Champlain in Nova Scotia. Perched atop a broad, curved bluff above the frigid Bay of Fundy, the camp long ago morphed into a trailer park, and later into an investment property.

On many an evening campout, counselors pointed to a lonely house nestled among the evergreens about a mile across the water. That was where Dr. Magnuson lived. Overzealous Mounties murdered his young son William, but the doctor managed to salvage the boy's corpse and . . . Little Willie came to life.

I well remember the werewolf-meets-Frankenstein tale of Little Willie, and my three sons have all heard the sad and grisly story of Dr. Magnuson's rejuvenation experiment gone horribly wrong.

They are the lucky ones. I learn, with some dismay, that summer camps across North America have been phasing out scary, nighttime storytelling, a longtime staple of goose-bumped campers everywhere.

"Nobody comes to summer camp to have nightmares," explains Christopher Thurber, a Phillips Exeter Academy psychologist who spends his summers working at Camp Belknap in Tuftonboro, N.H. "We want kids to sleep well at night

and enjoy the next day."

"Stories around the campfire are definitely part of the camp experience," he says. "People have been telling stories around the fire for millennia, it's part of our humanity." But that doesn't mean that a scary story tailored for a 14-year-old audience won't have a traumatic effect on a lonely 8-year-old away for home for the first time.

So some vintage tales have been quietly pulled from circulation. Out of repertory, but not out of mind. "Kids are excited to know that some stories, like 'Three Fingered Willie' and 'The Watermelon Baby,' are banned," Thurber reports.

Camp director and consultant Scott Arizala traces some of the spooky skittishness to the 1990s push for "intentional programming" at summer camps. "Everyone got on the bandwagon," he says, "so activities got turned into 'youth development modules,' and the buzzword was 'outcomes.' So where is the positive outcome in a ghost story?

"People were having a hard time answering that question. You can't make the argument that it does anything good other than it scares the kid," Arizala says. "Sure, it's fun for some kids, but maybe not so fun for others."

Arizala does allow ghost stories at his Dragonfly Forest camp in Val-

ley Forge, Penn., "but we tell them as part of our creation mythology. There are a lot of summer camps over 100 years old now, so sometimes they tell ghost stories because they are part of the continuity and culture of the camp."

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CHRISTOPHER THURBER
Phillips Exeter Academy
psychologist

But isn't conquering fear an integral part of growing up? Or as Captain Hook sings in a rollicking production number in the musical, "Finding Neverland": "Children like to be scared, they just don't know it yet." Little Willie frightened the heck out of me, and it's obvious that I grew up to be enviably well-adjusted. (Insert "wink" emoticon here.)

Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim included a chapter on "Fear of Fantasy" in "The Uses of Enchantment," his famous analysis of the

Brothers Grimm and other fairy tales. The German folklorists were grim indeed; in their "Cinderella," pigeons peck out the eyes of the evil step-sisters, who "were punished with blindness as long as they lived." That detail didn't make it into the Disney cartoon.

Bettelheim wrote that "a particular story may indeed make some children anxious, but once they become better acquainted with fairy stories, the fearsome aspects seem to disappear . . . The original displeasure of anxiety then turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered."

Thurber agrees, in part: "There is something that is developmentally normative about the mastery of fear," he allows. "Many people are thrilled to be scared, whether by going to a horror movie or stepping onto a roller coaster. We need to acknowledge that some people enjoy this behavior, but we don't want to advocate a culture of fear."

I am available to visit camps and share the spine-chilling story of Dr. Magnuson and his wayward son, William. It's an important, edifying — and super-spooky — tale. You might want to keep the flashlight on that night.

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