



Katherine's Summer Camp Woes

Writing prompts, discussion questions, and audio transcript

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

Katherine Center is the author of five novels about love and family, all written for adults. They include *THE HAPPINESS PROJECT* and *THE LOST HUSBAND*. Her pieces have appeared in *Redbook*, *InStyle*, *People*, *USA Today*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic*, and *Real Simple*, as well as other periodicals and anthologies. Read more about Katherine here: www.katherinecenter.com.

Talk it Out

Read the following quote from Katherine Center about the memory shared above:

[S]ometimes when it's a group its easier to not feel empathy. Part of my whole theory about life is I think that empathy is the thing that has the potential to save the human race. The ability to have empathy for others and to put yourself in their shoes and imagine what things would feel like if you were those people is ... our best hope for becoming better.

Now discuss:

In your own words, what is empathy?

Why do you think Katherine Center thinks it is our best hope for becoming better people?

Do you agree that it is easier to not feel empathy if you are in a group? Explain your answer.

Does being in a group make bullies feel more powerful? How?

Imagine you see a someone bullying another kid. What would you do?

Brainstorm a list of ways to build empathy in yourself.

Write it Out

Choose one of the following prompts and write 1-2 pages, double-spaced:

- Imagine that you and a group of friends played a prank on someone. It can be the same prank as the one described in the audio clip or a different one, but the target of the prank is visibly upset by the prank. Write a diary entry about what it felt like to plan the prank, carry out the prank, and see the target's reaction.
- Imagine that you are the target of a prank. It can be the prank described in the audio clip or a different one. Write a diary entry about what was happening just before the prank, during the prank, and afterward. Be sure to include your feelings.
- Consider a time when you treated someone else in a way that you regret. Discuss your feelings before, during, and after the event in either a diary entry or a letter to that person.
- Consider a time when you were treated badly by someone else. Discuss your feelings before, during, and after the event in either a diary entry or a letter to that person.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO MEMORY, Katherine's Summer Camp Woes

I remember that there was a day when I decided that I was going to play a prank on another girl in my cabin, a perfectly nice girl. I did not have an issue with this girl. You know, we were not enemies. We were not frenemies. She was a person I liked perfectly well. There was nothing I would've complained about this girl. And I cannot tell you what put this idea in my head, or why I thought it would be fun; or--I cannot tell you what was motivating me. But I, and I'm very embarrassed to admit that I did this. But I put baby oil in her shampoo. I think I thought it was gonna be funny. But I'm sure that I didn't, I mean I must have known on some very basic level that she was not gonna think it was funny. So I did this and then I was, I must've told other kids in the cabin that I was gonna do it. I must've. Why? What was I thinking?

You know I just, I look back on it, I can't even imagine what my goal was or -- well, actually, when I really think what was my goal, I think my goal was probably, when you've been on the receiving end of a lot of that, you probably would like to not always be on the receiving end. Like there's probably a thrill that comes from perpetrating.

But what happened to me was that after I did this, you know when it became clear to her what had happened and that I had done it--like she's sitting there waiting for her hair to dry and it's not drying kind of thing--I don't know if she cried

or if she was just really unhappy, and I could see it on her face. But the moment when she figured it out, I realized it wasn't any fun. You know like I felt terrible in the moment that she realized what had happened and that I had done it. I must've anticipated on some level that it would feel good to be the victimizer instead of the victim. But she was not happy about it when she figured it out and it didn't feel good. It felt icky, felt really icky and I felt terrible about it afterwards.

Something similar had happened to me at a different summer camp years before. I was like maybe 9 and during nap hour--most of the kids didn't sleep during nap hour at this other camp but I fell asleep during nap hour; and they decided, while I was sleeping, to like spray shaving cream all up and down my arms and legs. And shampoo and, you know, suntan lotion and just any kind of liquid-y, gloppy stuff that they had.

And I remember the bugle blows that nap hour's over and I wake up and I kind of feel that there's like something on my face so I kind of wipe my arm over my face and realize, like I looked down and realize what had happened that there was just – and there were all these like tittering, laughing girls. And I ran out of the cabin and I burst into tears and I remember sort of standing on this hillside. And I remember the counselor coming out and having no empathy at all for what that would feel like for me. And her just being like, "What is your problem? They were just joking."

I wonder if those girls at that camp that year felt bad when I ran out of the cabin crying. I've no idea.

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Illustration by Matthew Cordell