



I had been in scouting since I was eight. I loved it. It's where all my friends were. We had a scoutmaster who was inspiring and adventurous. He was young, not married, and seemed to me like an older brother. I had no siblings, so my scouting buddies were like family. These were my junior high school years and every summer we had two major outings. One was a weeklong, fifty-mile hike in the High Sierra's and the other was a week at Camp Emerald Bay on Catalina Island. Camp Emerald Bay was my favorite.

The camp, as its name implied, was a gem of a spot. The bay itself was cut deeply into the shore with tall headlands on either side. A reef with a large rock shaped like an Indian head blocked the middle of the bay. The water was cold and exceptionally clear. Golden garibaldi drifted through the kelp like Spanish doubloons. Gray and red sheep's head cruised around the trunks of the underwater forest while the perfectly camouflaged rock cod skirted from one hiding place to another.

We got to camp on low-slung water taxis that were open sided with a hard top over the passengers. The helm was up front behind a raked windshield, and the boat was powered by two V-8 engines with their throaty exhausts that made choking sounds when water got into the pipes. A taxi would carry two troops, about 70 boys, and sped across the channel in a couple of hours sending huge amounts of spray off its knife edge bow. We all sat on rows of benches down each side. I liked to sit by the rail and hang my arm over the side during the crossing. Sometimes I could touch the top of the swells with my fingers as the boat rock and rolled over the sea. Once we encounter a pod of gray whales and drifted amongst them for a time.

Our water taxi from San Pedro that August motored into the bay keeping Indian Head Rock to its starboard and didn't slow down until it reached the pier. Seven Scout troops, housed in a collection of tent barracks, shared the camp that week. We would hike and swim and paddle canoes; learn camping skills, Indian lore, and arts and crafts. There would be competitions with other troops, and campfires at night.

After dinner on Wednesday night, the whole camp sat on the beach around a massive bonfire. The Order of the Arrow scouts were to induct new members into their society

that night. Two boys from each troop, who showed exceptional leadership and camping skills, were to be inducted and no one knew in advance who they would be. The initiation ritual into the order was secret and rumored to be exceptionally tough.

Before it got completely dark, a fleet of Indian war canoes appeared around the headland. Braves, in full war dress, paddled past Indian Head rock, through the shallow channel and landed on the beach in front of us. The Arrowmen came ashore whooping and shouting, forcing us to get up and stand in a large circle around the fire. They danced between the fire and the boys, pulling unsuspecting scouts from the circle and hauling them away.

I was in the front row that summer. The drums were so loud they made my stomach vibrate. The dancers looked larger and fiercer than I expected. They were sweating and grunting. Dust swirled up from their pounding feet. Then one "Indian" stopped in front of me, his painted face and piercing gray eyes sending waves of fear up and down my spine. I could hardly breathe. At that moment the drums suddenly stopped, and I was yanked up to my tiptoes, pulled from the circle and dragged before the high chief.

"I, Alawatsakima, impose upon you an order of silence!" the Indian wearing a beaded breast plate and full feather head-dress said. His face was black with warpaint. He put a wreath of twigs and vines around my neck, none to gently, then pulled off my neckerchief and blindfolded me with it. "This silence will not be broken until I say!"

From the moment I was blindfolded my life changed. I was no longer a twelve-year-old boy scout, but a young brave having to face a rite of passage. I was led away from the rest of my friends in silence. I could feel their eyes on me, and it filled me with pride. I was aware of their envy and relief; envy because we all want to be recognized for our accomplishments, even if it's just being a congenial person and a pleasant camper, relief because they did not have to enter the unknown like me.

We were led to our tents and ordered to get a sleeping bag, a canteen for water, and a knife. An Arrowman would escort one person at a time to get his gear and then return him to the group. No one had any idea who was in our group. This procedure was repeated a number of times as we stopped at the various tents where the boys were camped. Finally we formed a single line, each scout holding on to the belt of the boy in front of him and we were marched out of the camp. We stopped by a water faucet where an Arrowman filled each of our canteens, and then we were led into the mountains.

The trail was winding and steep. Some kids stumbled on the loose rocks, and it was necessary for the scouts in front and back to keep the boy upright and in line. After what seemed like an hour of hiking blindfolded, the scout holding on to my belt was

pulled away and I heard a gruff voice order him to sleep where he fell. A few of minutes later I was shoved off the trail and fell into a field of dry grass.

“Sleep here. Take off your blindfold, but don’t leave this spot. We will be back for you in the morning,” said the same gruff voice. “And remember, you are bound by silence.”

By the time I got my blindfold off all I could see was the “Indian” who pulled me from the line running over a small rise. It suddenly hit me how alone I was. I didn’t know if I had a friend close by or if I cried out for help it would be heard. My imagination started spooking me. I couldn’t cry out for fear of breaking my vow and disgracing myself. I had no idea where I was or how to get back to camp if I had to. Fear is a funny thing. It’s really all mental. Joel Goldsmith tells the classic Hindu story of a person walking into a room and thinking they see a snake only to realize when the lights go on that it was a potted plant. So, it’s not only the mind but our reaction to what our mind presents to us. In my current situation I was alone on an island forced to sleep under the stars in a wilderness. I assumed that there were other kids nearby, but because of our vow of silence, I wasn’t sure.

After a while I stood up and got my bearings. It seemed like I was atop a large, sloping headland. I could see the dim lights of the camp off to one side below and a glow to the east where Los Angeles should be. Overhead the stars were bright but looking horizontally everything was misty. I kept my imagination in check. The rustling of the wind in the grass wasn’t a deadly snake. The noisy crickets weren’t ferocious beasts that would spit tobacco juice into your eyes and blind you. I spread out my sleeping bag on what seemed like the thickest and softest part of the nearby grass and crawled in, waiting for sleep.

I wondered if my friend Donny had been chosen along with me. He was my best friend. I started thinking of the stuff we would get into, like the time I’d seen a puma in a cave near our house in the hills. He didn’t believe me and hounded our gang until we went on a quest to find the lion and its den. But that’s another story.

I don’t know why that episode filled my mind. It certainly wasn’t comforting. I walked over to the edge of the cliff and heard the surf lapping at the rocks below. I was getting a little more comfortable with my surroundings when I saw a strange light appeared on the ocean coming towards me. Then another light appeared, and then a third. They were rounding the point below, just beyond the surf. In the quiet I could hear voices. As the lights moved past, I realized that they were the “Indians” from tonight’s ceremony taking their canoes to another cove. “Indians.” How innocent we were. I liked the concept. I liked being part of a camping society that used Indian lore for its motivation. If anything, we learned to greatly respect the natives who had lived on this land for eons, but the fact was, there were no Indians. All those guys dancing around that night and scaring

the daylights out of us were white, middle-class teenagers from the west side of Los Angeles. That spooked me more than anything.

The fog was thick the next morning and my sleeping bag was wet. I took my morning pee just as an Arrowman came down the trail with the group of initiates behind him.

“Grab your stuff and follow us,” he said. “And no talking.” He then looked me over and shouted, “Where’s your wreath of silence?”

I felt around my neck and then searched around my camp site for my twig necklace.

“Never take it off!”

I finally found it and felt duly embarrassed and chastised. I wondered, is the absence of talk really silence? I had spent my time before sleep mentally reliving another scary adventure. There was no silence in that. But even then, there were moments that came where the lack of thought gave me an insight into the omnipresence of creation, a connection in oneness to the source of what I was experiencing.

We were marched down the hill to the camp and assembled behind the kitchen. I suddenly realized how hungry I was. We were each handed a slice of white bread and a leather necklace with a medallion hanging on it that replaced the twig wreath of silence. The slice of bread was all the food we got. We were then divided into three gangs and sent off with picks and shovels to work on the trails around the camp. One kid, a little overweight, meekly asked if we were going to have breakfast and the Arrowman jerked his medallion of silence and told him one more word would send him back to the other scouts.

We worked all morning widening a trail up to the highest peak on the western tip of the island. It got hot. We were told to ration the water in our canteens. We would get no more water until noon.

Midday we were led back to the camp and told to rest under a tree. My stomach was growling. We were given two slices of white bread and told to fill our canteens. We were then taken to the water taxi depot and given cans of white paint and cheap brushes. Our afternoon job was to paint the rocks lining the road to the camp. For every drip of paint that fell onto the dirt road, we’d have to add five more rocks to our assignment. Everyone painted very slowly and carefully. It seemed the day would never end.

The silence became weird. Normally given a task like painting rocks would be done with lots of complaining and joking. I could almost hear what the scouts were thinking;

probably the same thing I was thinking. What was the point of it all? When that track of thought ran out, my mind would wander. I started thinking about what I'd rather be doing. And then that track ran out. I found myself trying to instigate some sort of dialogue in my mind, anything to keep myself entertained. I thought I might pray, recite the Scientific Statement of Being, but I got frustrated when I couldn't remember all of the words. After a while I gave up. It was then I realized how profound the silence was. Time disappeared. There was nothing to fear. I was surprised when I was tapped on the shoulder and told to quit. The last hour of work seemed to have vanished into a moment.

We cleaned up, were told to put on our uniforms – still under the order of silence – and directed to form up outside the dining hall before the dinner bell rang. As the camp waited to enter the hall, the order of silence was removed, and we were given the white sashes with the red arrow marking us as elite campers. We entered the mess hall before the others and filled our plates with all we could eat.