

On possibility

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Earlier this month, I drove out to the mountains to pick up my son from a 12-day wilderness/ adventure/education camp. As the sun set over a gorgeous summer evening in the Rockies, we were treated to a closing program that gave us a glimpse into what the 12 days had looked like. Rock climbing, white-water canoeing down the North Saskatchewan River, a 12 km ascent to the top of a mountain, not to mention daily jogging, yoga, team-building exercises, leadership training, coaching on integrity and character development, personal reflection, and journaling—it was quite the itinerary! It sound like the kind of camp that no small number of adults (like, roughly 100 percent of us) would profit immensely from, never mind 15–16 year olds.

It also sounded like the kind of camp that I wouldn't have *obviously* thought my son would enjoy. It was physically demanding, for one thing. Some of the days sounded downright grueling. And it thrust him into a social context filled with many unfamiliar people. These have not typically been the kinds of spaces and places that he naturally gravitates toward or finds appealing. And yet, he went. And he had an incredible time. On the final night he was one of the speakers chosen to reflect on his time at the camp. He sounded confident, assured, articulate. Staff members spoke in glowing, even *emotional* terms of his compassion and helpfulness.

It was one of those moments as a parent where you're reminded that the kid you see during the inspiring peaks and obstinate valleys of everyday existence isn't always the kid who is making their way in the world beyond the scope of your observation and awareness. And, of course, one of those moments where you feel your heart might just about burst with pride and gratitude.

As I was reflecting on the experience during the drive home, two things stood out to me. The first was the importance of growing conditions. One of the things that stood out was the *relentless* positivity. Everything and everyone and every experience were “amazing” and “incredible” and “awesome.” The kids wildly cheered their peers' every contribution to the program. There was an exuberance to the affair that

at times approached the limits of even what a dewy-eyed optimist such as myself could countenance.

But while I'm often critical of the casual and unreflective use of superlatives or the breezy "be true to yourself" language that permeates so much of our discourse, and while I'm convinced that we need to name reality honestly and unflinchingly, as I watched these kids share their experiences it was patently obvious that they had thrived over the 12 days because they were endlessly encouraged, constantly told they could do it, repeatedly reminded of their general awesomeness. They had, quite simply, marinated for nearly two weeks in encouragement and positivity and the result was that each of them had done things that they never thought they could do.

Human beings, like plants, require the right conditions to grow into their potential. Each one of us—whether we are 15 or 95—has a desperate need to be told that we have value, that we matter, that there is goodness in us that the world needs. This is how we best grow into what we were made to be.

The second thing I was reminded of is that making decisions about what someone is capable of based exclusively on what you have seen in the past is a dangerous business. These kids were frequently put in new situations that required something of them—often something quite challenging that they had never done before or even thought possible. I would not, for example, have envisioned 6:30 a.m. daily jogging and yoga or dragging a fellow student out of a somewhat precarious situation in the North Saskatchewan rapids as within the expected realm of possibilities for my son. But he not only did these things (and others), but he *enjoyed* them! Kids and human beings more broadly often rise to the level of what is demanded of or opened up to them. And it is a beautiful thing to behold.

What is true of people is true more broadly in life and in faith. If what we consider possible is based mainly on what *has been* rather than what is *yet to be*, then the world of our experience and expectation will inevitably shrink down to the confines of the old, the predictable, the seen-before. Past failures will loom larger than they ought to. Tired habits will come to assume the status of inflexible laws of nature. Genuine *newness* will be off the table. Life becomes less about growth and hope and optimism than about stasis, maintenance, even regression. But if we are open to surprise, if we eagerly anticipate goodness meeting us along the way as we step into newness? Well, then all kinds of things become possible.

None of this should probably come as news to—of all things!—a Christian pastor. We who daily live in and proclaim this narrative of newness, of an expansive future that incorporates, yes, but gloriously transcends and transforms the past ought to be at the front of the queue when it comes to the conviction that more is possible than what has been before. Alas, even Christian pastors can slide into small and stifling ways of viewing the world and other human beings. Thank God for beautiful nights in the mountains drenched in breathless positivity and wild encouragement to offer reminders of the kinds of things that are possible in and among us, the things that are possible in and for the world.

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