

***I want to be strong, to be strong as the land around me
I want a heart that's as wide as the sky
I want a spirit like a moving mountain stream
I want to look people straight in the eye***

I have sung this song nearly everyday for the last twenty years. It is a camp song, and it has become a powerful anthem for how I would like to live my life.

I want to be strong, to be strong as the land around me

I first came to know my own physical strength, to develop a self-reliance during those summers at Ajawah. Swimming, boating, hiking, canoeing all primed me for what was the pinnacle of my physical feats - raising canoes overhead to load onto the three tiered camp canoe trailer and climbing up and down to strap them securely in place with bungee cords. Since then I have drawn on that sweaty experience, and the confidence I gained in my own physical strength over and over; while spending years commuting in Los Angeles on a bicycle, while practicing and teaching yoga, while birthing two babies at home without medication.

I want a heart that's as wide as the sky

I learned to be open, to have a wide open heart, to live with and love people who were not like me - who had different backgrounds. Camp was the first place I was exposed to people from other cultures and different economic backgrounds. I remember especially my fellow campers and counselors from Mexico and Laos. This was the first place I learned to be patient with friends who spoke English as a second language - a skill that has allowed me to make friends in all the places I have lived or traveled. It is a skill that has been essential in making a strong and loving marriage to a man who was born and raised in India, whose family has accepted me into their community because I learned during those tradition-filled summers to be open and adaptable.

I want a spirit like a moving mountain stream

I learned to feel my spirit dance at Ajawah, especially at night. I remember learning to walk through the flats without a flashlight and without fear by following the light of the moon through the swath in the trees that the path cut. I remember paying homage to the beauty of the stars reflected in the lake, feeling utterly joyful in the cathedral of towering trees that rustled in the wind above our tents on the long line. I learned that the profoundly spiritual was available in quiet, in fellowship with friends, regardless of our creeds. That familiar sense of the divine has struck me in wild and foreign places I have traveled since. That practice of tolerance has brought me close to friends and colleagues of radically different faiths and beliefs, enriching my life in ways I could not have imagined while singing 'pass it on' around the campfire.

I want to look people straight in the eye

I learned to look people straight in the eye, to know my value as a female, to have respect for myself and for others and their many and varied talents. Those summers spent in the company of other girls and young women allowed us all to shine in ways we would not have in a co-ed setting. We were free to be silly, to be tough, to be emotional, but most of all we were free to be our very best selves without pretense.

We were not escaping the co-ed world; we were graciously allowed a few weeks retreat and challenged in ways that fostered our independence and our confidence.

Perhaps just as importantly, at Ajawah I learned to sing. Every day. for nearly every occasion. I sing this and many other songs to my boys every day. I hope they will learn some of the lessons I learned at Ajawah.

Anne Marie Ruff Grewal was a camper at Ajawah for three years and a counselor for three years, beginning in 1983. She served as camp bugler and once won an honored camper award - with her name inked onto a lovely piece of birch bark. Since then she has worked as a journalist, living and traveling throughout the Middle East and Asia. She now lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two young sons, and counts fellow campers among her closest friends.