

Originally published in Canada Camps' *Vantage Point* (9/16/10)

What's Really Scary about *The Wizard of Oz*

I reacted the way most little kids do when they see *The Wizard of Oz* for the first time. I almost peed my pants. I feared for Dorothy's life, I cowered at the sight of Wicked Witch of the West, and the flying monkeys were such a terrifying chimera that I had nightmares for months. These days, flying monkeys and long-nailed witches seem rather tame beside the horror and gore in mainstream children's movies like the *Harry Potter* series (let alone the *Saw* series). But put yourself back in my six-year-old footsy pajamas, circa 1974. Yeah, I was scared.

As a test of mettle, I forced myself to watch the annual network television broadcast of *The Wizard of Oz* until I was about 11. The irony that I unwittingly used exposure therapy on myself decades before becoming a clinical psychologist was not lost on my mother—herself a mental health professional—who pointed this out to me several years ago. Sorry, I won't let this article derail into a discussion of *why* she chose to let me keep watching a movie that so clearly frightened and fascinated me. I'll reserve that conversation for the Thanksgiving table.

Then an odd thing happened when I turned 12. That year, I had become so habituated to the cackles, fireballs, and other trauma-inducing components of *The Wizard of Oz*, that I was no longer scared. I had triumphed over my fears. Heck, I was almost ready for William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, which coincidentally debuted in 1973 but came out in video (remember VCRs?) in 1980, when I turned 12. What happened was that I viewed *The Wizard of Oz* in a new light, through pre-teen eyes. And never have I felt so indignant. Remember this exchange after The Wizard floats away in his hot-air balloon without Dorothy? Suddenly, the Good Witch of the North, Glinda, appears to save the day. Kinda.

Dorothy: *Oh, will you help me? Can you help me?*
Glinda: *You don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back to Kansas.*
Dorothy: *I have?*
Scarecrow: *Then why didn't you tell her before?*
Glinda: *Because she wouldn't have believed me. She had to learn it for herself.*

I sympathized with Scarecrow. I was furious and Glinda. I thought, *You exposed Dorothy to this perilous journey, full of new characters, life-threatening situations, and traumatic ultimatums in order to teach her a lesson?! I hated Glinda for her saccharine temperament and pedantic tendencies. Most of all, I was frightened—deep down—that Glinda might be right. Maybe grown-ups withhold certain conclusions from kids because some conclusions can only be learned through experiences, especially the challenging kind. With a surge of anxiety smoldering in my belly, I wanted to ask every adult I knew, What are the secrets? What are the big lessons in life? Tell me now and spare me the ordeal of experience!* Predictably, I never actually asked those questions. Who does?

Now, as an adult, as a father, as a youth development professional, I have fresh insight into my childhood anxiety. Of course Glinda was right. Some lessons can only be learned through experience. And sometimes those experiences are unplanned and difficult. To spare children discomfort, many a well-intentioned grow-up has tried to instill values and wisdom didactically, through mini lectures peppered with furrowed brows and finger-wagging. (Yup, I'm guilty with my own boys from time to

time.) But virtues such as kindness, courage, and care for others are permanently integrated into a young person's nature only through experience.

Sadly, the lesson Dorothy purports to have learned isn't the one I'd wish for her, or any young person. To quote Dorothy: "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with!" In my estimation, this is her impulsive reaction, as an orphan, to suddenly learning she can return home. She's promising not to stray. But I think Dorothy actually learned something different in her quest. She learned that journeys teach. And that's why, despite homesickness, conflict, bumps, and bruises, we offer young people the experience of camp.



Dr. Christopher Thurber is the author of *The Summer Camp Handbook* and the co-founder of *Expert Online Training*, which hosts video training modules for camp staff. He serves as school psychologist at Phillips Exeter Academy and waterfront director at Camp Belknap. Visit CampSpirit.com to learn more.