As rows of campers fill the wooden chapel, I sit with my unlit candle and watch.  We are surrounded by nature; the stars and moon peek through the tree line, watching as we begin a custom I know by heart.  On this last night of summer camp our Director Jody begins the candlelight ceremony and I reflect on the experiences that have brought me to this exact moment….

Most mornings at Camp Huckins, the eerie yet soothing sound of loons flows through the cool air, just before the bugle blows. As I open my eyes and peer out the window, I see a thin layer of fog enveloping the ground, hugging trees and cabins.  As the bugle blows, it seems as if the entire world has awakened. Campers and counselors jump, fall, and roll out of bed, eagerly greeting the day.  As we pile into the dining hall, the clatter of plates and chatter of campers is a familiar symphony. After filling our stomachs, we ‘stack and pass’ our tableware, and start my favorite camp tradition.  We climb up and stand tall on the dining hall tables, belting out camp songs, often very much out of tune. Later that day we might challenge ourselves on the ropes course, perfect our strokes in swim class or jump from ‘the tower’ into Lake Ossipee.  By dinnertime, we have more stories to tell than there is time for. We eat our fill, ‘stack and pass’, sing on tables, and then retreat back to our cabins. Our counselors gleefully announce the evening activity they have planned for us.  It might be “Tonight…. WE’RE MAKING BANANA BOATS!!” Faces light up as if we have just heard the most incredible news of our lives. We travel down to the campfire to tell more stories as we savor our sweet dessert.  Soon I sink into my warm bed, listening to the sound of loons drift through the night like a lullaby.

Eight years have passed since I first arrived as camper. Now I am a counselor. I look across the row of my own campers who have just finished their first summer. They sit quietly in the chapel grasping their unlit candles, joining a tradition they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. As Jody lights her candle she explains how one flame can illuminate a whole room. She tips her flame toward the Assistant Director’s candle, who then lights a counselor’s candle, and so on. I watch as that one flame is shared, creating a sea of light that connects us all. We begin to sing quietly as we shuffle back to our cabins one last time. Just before retreating to bed, we sing the final line one last time. “Camp Huckins love has come to me. I want to pass it on.”

Camp is about discovering what makes you happy and acting upon that through Camp Huckins’ core values: Respect, Responsibility, Honesty, and Caring. In a world dominated by technology and material wants, camp is a reminder of the importance of living a life of meaning with joy and new challenges and trusting relationships. The enthusiasm with which we meet the promise of an ice cream sundae is about the importance of relishing everyday pleasures.  Our rituals - the songs and ceremonies and shared silliness – bind us to one another.  Camp is real place of contentment but it is also a utopia. The true gift of camp is the opportunity it has given me to figure out how to ‘bring camp home’ for the rest of my life.