

Up Front: Conventions are just summer camps for grown-ups

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

Conventions are the adult equivalent of youth summer camp. It's a time to get away to an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people and learn unfamiliar things, some of which might actually be useful later in life.

I remember as a kid we were always a little apprehensive about being sent off to summer camp. Most kids have a deep inner fear that while they're off learning to canoe or weave baskets or whatever at summer camp, their parents are back home planning to secretly move away and not leave a forwarding address.

I do not actually know any kid that this happened to, but the idea remains in the back of our minds, especially after we become parents and send our own children away to summer camp and realize how easy it would be.

Of course, that is not the way we solve problems around here. Most of us, anyway.

Conventions tend to trigger the same unease, even though we are now adults and we have credit cards and know how to get back home on our own. But being at a convention with hundreds of people we've never met who live in parts of the country or the world where we've never been can be a disorienting experience.

Remember the first time your camp counselor sent you out in a canoe with that dorky kid from the Midwest, and he threw up in the boat and you capsized in the middle of the lake?

That's kind of what it's like when you're at a convention with a bunch of people and have to sit at a table with them and work out some problem, like how to market the latest incarnation of the popcorn machine. Everybody's got their own ideas, and most of them are weird. Who would seriously think handing out bags of buttered popcorn at a Weight Watchers convention would be a good idea?

And yet you've got to work with these people, which is really what conventions are all about - learning to create solutions with other folks who are weird. It makes you appreciate the weirdos you work with back home a little better.

Conventions are also a primo time to understand that, despite the differences in people, in many ways we're all the same.

A friend of mine attended a Lutheran convention back East, and one night after the session he and some pals went down to the bar for a drink.

The Lutherans were courteous, as Lutherans are, and toward the end of the night they commented to the bartender that they hoped he didn't mind serving drinks to a bunch of religious people.

"Hey, no problem," the bartender replied. "You guys are just like the Methodists we had in here last week. Only difference is, the Methodists used their Bibles as coasters."

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