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Still a role model after thirty years

“We loved Layne Longfellow’s rock and roll”

by Bob Greene

These things run in cycles. A while back I wrote a column about a woman named Michele Slung. I met her as a 13-year-old when I was a summer camper at Camp Golden Eagle in Woodruff, Wis.; now she is a successful author, and the column talked about how strange it felt to rediscover her after all these years.

A few days after that column ran, the mail brought a videotape. Featured on the videotape was a lecturer named Layne Longfellow. Longfellow, it seemed, made his living going around the country giving speeches to large groups.

I played the videotape. Layne Longfellow, it must be said, is quite a speaker. He is full of energy, his anecdotes crackle, and he has complete control of his audiences. I had planned on simply sampling the videotape, but I watched the whole thing. I was impressed.

There was something else about the videotape that intrigued me, too. Call it the Michele Slung Syndrome, if you will. Before I went to Camp Golden Eagle in Wisconsin, I went to another summer camp—Camp Arrowhead, in Jackson, Ohio. It was the late '50s; I must have been 10 or 11. And one of the counsellors—a counsellor whom we all idolized—was a college student named Layne Longfellow.

Camp Arrowhead was run by an older man named D. Merrill Davis. D. Merrill Davis loved to sing. After every meal, he would lead the campers in song—always traditional camp songs, sometimes religious songs.

But Layne Longfellow was a subversive element at Camp Arrowhead. We were sort of bored singing along with D. Merrill Davis. Layne Longfellow, though, played the piano, and late every afternoon a bunch of us campers would gather in a little anteroom in the dining hall. In that room Layne Longfellow would pound out

rollicking rock and roll on the piano, and he would sing. He would sing Everly Brothers songs like Wake Up Little Susie and Bye Bye Love; he would sing Jerry Lee Lewis songs like Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On; he would sing Elvis Presley songs like Jailhouse Rock and Don't Be Cruel. If we didn't appreciate D. Merrill Davis' camp songs, we loved Layne Longfellow's rock and roll.

When you're a little kid, you know everything about your idols. I still remember that Layne Longfellow and another counsellor, Tom Payne, were Beta Theta Pi's at Ohio University.

Anyway...here is this videotape, and here is Layne Longfellow, still looking like a Beta, captivating an audience. I tracked him down, and we spoke twice. First I found him at the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Fla., and then, a few days later, I found him again at the Hotel Intercontinental in Hilton Head, S.C. He was delivering speeches at both resorts. Not bad duty.

He was, indeed, the same Layne Longfellow. He told me he owns a company called Lecture Theatre Inc., based in Prescott, Ariz., and that he travels constantly giving his speeches. He rejects the label “motivational speaker”—he doesn't like it, and he thinks it's inaccurate—but whatever he does, it works. He told me he brings in \$5,000 or more per engagement.

I asked him what had happened to him after Camp Arrowhead. He said—you couldn't make this up—he married D. Merrill Davis' daughter, Nina, but that they were divorced after three years. I told him I was struck by the course his life had taken. It seems he is doing the same thing he used to do when he played and sang for us in the dining hall anteroom—but now he does it on a much grander scale, and is paid for it.

“I hadn't thought of it that way, but I guess you're right,” he said. “My whole life has been like that. I'm told that when I was 18 months old, I could recite 30-some nursery rhymes from memory. My mom would take me down to Murphy's 5-and-dime in downtown Jackson, and I would stand on the candy counter and do my nursery rhymes for the customers. I have no memory of that, but my family says it's true.

“And at Camp Arrowhead, I loved singing those rock and roll songs. And now here I am, on the road, still performing. I travel for two-thirds of the year. I live on airplanes and in hotel rooms.”

We talked about a lot of things. At Camp Arrowhead there had been a constant rumor about a camper a few years earlier who had been killed by lightning while taking refuge in a cave during a thunderstorm. When we campers would ask about it, we would get vague answers. It had been clear the counselors had been instructed not to go into it. Now, all these years later, Layne Longfellow confirmed it for me, and told me the details. It gave me the chills.

Some of the things we discussed were silly. I asked Layne why the punch we drank with our meals at Camp Arrowhead had been called “bug juice,” and he said he didn't know, he thought all camps served bug juice.

“I'm going to turn 50 this October,” he said. He didn't say it for any special reason, and I don't think he meant for it to carry any special symbolism. But it made me think, anyway. Layne Longfellow—50. I doubt if they serve bug juice at the Breakers.