

Deriving Order from Chaos

by Conway Staunton

This past spring I took a course called Psychology and The Good Life, a class on how to derive happiness and fulfillment from our everyday routine. I took the course because I felt I needed it. I took it because, for large portions of the academic year, I felt I was constantly falling short, tormented by a deep feeling of dissatisfaction despite achieving my high school goals of rowing and studying at college. My life has been a cakewalk compared to most people in this country and even more so compared to the people of the rest of the world. But rather than lifting me up, reminding myself of this only made me feel worse, more pathetic. It didn't change the fact that even with all of the countless things given to me, some of which I don't even realize, I wasn't happy with myself.

With over a fourth of undergraduates enrolling, Psychology and The Good Life received overwhelming interest from the student body. It was the largest class in Yale's history. During our first class, held in the only lecture hall that could fit all 1,700 of us at once, our professor gave us a number of surveys and found that most of the students were taking the class for the same reason as I: we all had a sense of dissatisfaction with ourselves despite being incredibly privileged.

It didn't make sense to me. These are individuals who have already accomplished a great deal in their lives and have been given opportunities that most people only dream of. Why are thousands of incredibly bright, high powered students waking up in the morning feeling unfulfilled? It wasn't until I returned to the hillside this summer that I regained a sense of fulfillment and meaning from my everyday routine, something that I had lost track of somewhere this past winter. I'm here to tell you what changed in me.

In the past six years, I have made two realizations that fundamentally altered how I live, the second of which I came to just this summer. I came to the first during my sophomore year of high school. I learned how to deal with the sentiment lurking inside me that I am incredibly insignificant and that everything I will do and accomplish won't matter in the grand scheme of things. We've all thought about this before: the fact that

we're on a tiny rock floating through an infinite void of nothingness and chaos. The scariest part about this is that it's true, which only strengthens the argument that there is no point of doing anything! It's an easy out, and an answer that I found comfort in when I was younger. *We are* here. As far as we know, our days are numbered. Instead of reverting to nihilism, the belief that life has no meaning, ask yourself, to quote Jordan Peterson, "How can I make this journey worthwhile?" This realization drove me throughout high school, and, for the first time in my life, I worked towards long-term goals, eyes on the horizon, trying to achieve my dreams with the precious time I had.

This way of thinking motivated me until my sophomore year of college, when I realized that I was still missing something. The question that I led with today, *Why am I still not fulfilled?*, began to consume me. I constantly felt I was falling short. There was a second part to "making the journey worthwhile" that I only came to fully understand this summer: the importance of gaining self-satisfaction from living towards a set of ideals rather than from my own achievements. Achievements in and of themselves are hollow unless they are paired with a sense of purpose and meaning.

This past year, I had fallen into a cycle of constantly comparing myself to others around me in search of meaning or fulfillment in my life. David Foster Wallace articulates this type of self-worship better than I can. He writes, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what we worship... And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God... or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive." It wasn't until this summer that I was reminded of the value in worshipping something bigger than myself. It wasn't until this summer that I felt I was making my journey worthwhile.

Our generation has largely departed from traditional value systems, values and ideals that we practice here at camp on a daily basis. These values are no longer taught or even encouraged at most universities and are considered rather archaic. This leads to an emptiness in the human spirit and led me down a path of self-centered thinking that left me always coming up short. It is in the continual pursuit of living by a set of ideals that fulfillment is achieved. Values like integrity, courage, love, and kindness are

what give order and meaning to the infinite chaos that surrounds us, and, in striving towards these, the very meaning of our lives becomes self-evident.

Why are these values so accessible at Pasquaney but seem so elusive in the real world? I have been exposed to these ideals at camp since my 12-year-old summer in 2010, and I've spent the past three summers attempting to put these ideals into practice as a counsellor. Yet, just this past year, I found myself not embodying these ideals. I don't remember when or even how it happened. It was as if I had unknowingly, just simply wandered away. Life outside of camp is chock-full of temptations and invitations to begin, in seemingly innocuous and incremental ways, the process of turning our backs on all that we hold dear here at Pasquaney—no drama, no big breach or big moment, just a subtle wandering away. Why is it so difficult when we're not here?

First, there are more distractions in the outside world. Schoolwork, sports, social media, parents, and countless other things blur the line between what works and what doesn't, what is good for us and what is not. Cheating on a test when college admissions are on the line, curating your personality on Instagram to paint a fake picture of who you are, or having an unhealthy balance between sports, academics, and social life, all of which may be happening simultaneously, is infinitely more difficult to deal with than the challenges we confront on the hillside.

Second, there is a lack of cohesive communities in the outside world that practice these values. Away from here, my typical day does not include walking up a massive hill while I catch up with a fellow counsellor or camper. It does not include waking up and having no choice but to share my living space with eight boisterous, inspiring, and lovable fourteen-year-olds. It does not include eating every meal with a group of people who are eager to share and reflect on their day. In life away from the hillside, there are no required Circles, Chapel Talks, or Tree Talks (unless your parents force you to go to a weekly religious service), and thus there are less opportunities for us to live the ideals we espouse, to reflect on and share the important things that are happening in our lives, to live out the ideals and values we intellectually describe, to do the things that can help bring order from chaos.

Simply put, "taking Pasquaney home with us," is extremely difficult. But that doesn't mean it can't be done. There are communities that practice the values we teach

here; you just need to look for them. Find a youth group, a cohesive sports team with a wise coach, or a friend who shares the same values as you. Make an effort to put down your phone and have real face-to-face conversations with people. Surround yourself with friends who bring out the best in you, and commit yourself to bringing out the best in your friends. Stay in touch with this community. We can help each other along the way. Finally, and most importantly, commit yourself to the values that make Pasquaney work amidst the chaos of the world.

And there's one thing I know is true: there are many people out there who are hungry for such meaning and purpose in their lives. I know this because I've seen it firsthand. I've seen it in myself and in the faces of my fellow classmates in Psychology and the Good Life, feeling empty and not knowing why. Many of these people don't have a community to ground them and guide them. We do. Let's use it and share our values with a world that has strayed from them.