

On Confidence

by Matt Woolverton

Earlier this week we gathered at Mem Hall to welcome back the Long Walk. Hiding from the rain and protecting my camera as best I could, as they returned I couldn't help but look to the boys-turned-men and not be jealous of their new-found confidence. Here they were after a week at metaphorical sea. Everything they had was damp. They were physically drained from a week in the Whites. Yet, as the rain came down once again, like it did many times during their week away, their smiles grew larger. Through the railroad and song, the men stood tall, proud of their achievements, unfazed by Mother Nature's attempts to break them. They were, at that time, unbreakable. Each summer I find myself reminiscent and emotional thinking of the strength and importance of the Long Walk.

In 2013 the Long Walk was as daunting a task for me as any on our hillside. Many times in my camp career, I woke on Wednesday mornings wishing that hikes had been miraculously cancelled only to have my dreams crushed by euphoric "Hikes Today" announcement from the COD. In 2013 I worked my tail off to earn my spot on the Long Walk and barely made it. Hiking has never been my strength. Even as a counsellor, I often find myself lagging behind boys much younger than I. Because of this, my confidence grew smaller and in turn my ability shrunk with it. The pressure I put onto myself with hikes caused my Wednesday morning stress to grow greater week by week. Yet, after a grueling battle in the Whites, my return from the Long Walk left me with an overwhelming sense of confidence. My successful completion of the week helped me return to camp a new man. By overcoming a seemingly impossible task, I found myself stronger than ever. Much like the men who returned a week ago, I was unbreakable.

In his Tree Talk on confidence, former Assistant Director Mike Hanrahan argued that confidence comes from the decisions that you make about yourself – the decision you make about you. The belief you have in yourself leads to the belief that you present outward to others. How many times have you stood up to bat, walked out on stage, or stared up at the mountain you were going to hike and knew you were ready for the challenge? What about the

opposite? How often does the mindset you have going into a challenge impact the result? Personally, I'd argue that a positive mindset is the most essential factor to the success of any task. Last weekend in Mem Hall, David Cromwell shared the quotation, "Self-Confidence comes from the promises that we make to ourselves." What impact does our belief in ourselves have on the obstacles we face on a daily basis? Do we work hard and take pride in a dorm well swept, or do we complain about the amount of dirt and procrastinate until others step in to assist us?

This past spring, just days before my arrival to camp, I was in Atlanta. I earned a trip for a film festival after winning a regional competition in the Boston area. My team and I traveled down for the national competition with hopes of receiving awards or recognition for our work. The festival had guests who had spent their lives dedicated to creating films, and then there was me. Understandably, I felt like a fish out of water. Leading into the event I had high hopes. Family and friends told me the film was great and how interesting of a story they thought it was. I thought that at this rate I could be the next Wes Anderson. My short film didn't receive a single award or even recognition.

During the first two days of the festival I kept my head down, socializing only with my girlfriend and the lead actor who came with us. We walked through the event, sat in on other films, and networked with students from other institutions and professionals in the film field. It was all great. I was grateful to have been given such an incredible opportunity and to experience something I may not ever again. But, I still couldn't shake this feeling that I didn't belong. The pinnacle moment came down to when I was given an opportunity to speak in a Q&A about my film. We screened the film, and I was set to make my way to the front of the audience. As I stood in front of only about 20 people, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. The moderate applause mixed with slight glances to watches and phones proved to me how far I have to go. I stood in front of the group and answered a series of questions that I had felt at the time were directed to me out of courtesy rather than actual interest. I answered as best I could and then inevitably was told that we were out of time. I returned to my group and went on my way. This is a clear scenario where my lack of belief in myself directly correlated with the

confidence I was presenting to others. By assuming that my film was not as important as the work of my peers, I downplayed my success to others. I had sold myself short.

Former counsellor Alex Kent in a Tree Talk years ago said, “Having confidence does not mean that every time you walk into a room you know you’re the best athlete, brightest student, or at the top of some other superlative list. Rather, having confidence means that you know you are not at the top of any special list and still have the courage to walk into that room.” I would add that beyond just having the courage to walk into the room, confidence offers us comfort in knowing that though we may not be at the top of each superlative list, that’s alright, we don’t need to be just yet. Growth is a factor in confidence. Understanding the growth ahead of you is necessary in differentiating confidence from arrogance. While I had enough gumption to walk into the room, my posture, energy, and pride towards the Q&A proved that I was not confident in my work or myself. I was not comfortable in the fact that I wasn’t the smartest, most successful, or most talented filmmaker in the room. My lack of being at the top of a superlative list at the event led to my not taking pride in sharing my work. I looked to everyone else in the room and assumed that they knew something I didn’t – that they had talent and I got lucky. My lack of confidence in myself, with or without being at the top of the list, led to my failure at seeing the big picture.

Later that evening a peer of mine told me he thought the film was worthy of Sundance, one of the largest independent film festivals in the U.S. While I don’t necessarily agree with his claim, the simple act of him saying it proved to me one of the most important lessons I learned while in Atlanta. My problem wasn’t the film I made, the talent I thought I lacked, or how much better I thought everyone else was. My problem was that I was lacking confidence.

To be blunt, during my time on the council, I have doubted myself the entire way. As a fourth-year counsellor, I still feel as though I need to fit into the shoes of those who came before me – men who defined who I am as a leader and as a man. Each summer I arrive back at camp and find myself concerned that the goofy, boisterous, hairy counsellor I am won’t be able to give back to camp what was at one point given to me.

Throughout my time on the council, I have talked to mentors for hours on end about my fear of not making an impact. I’ve always wished I had immediately received respect like

Stewart Denious or that I had the ability to organize a group like Tim Jenkins, and how would I ever be taken seriously as a baseball counsellor if I couldn't hit as many home-runs as counsellors like Jim MacDougal and David Cromwell? As ridiculous as that last claim is, it is a real doubt that I have had. However, just recently I learned that my problem was not that I did not live up to the strength of others. My problem was that I didn't see the strength in myself.

This past year was my junior season of college soccer. During the prior two seasons, I had never won a game. You heard that right, I had never won a game. In fact my college men's soccer team had never won a game. After nine years since its creation, the team went through years and years of losing.

When I first joined the team as a freshman walk on, I was eager and ready to share with everyone that I was a college soccer player. I would tell them about the challenges of two-a-day workout plans and about the hours spent in the weight room because the school's trainer thought I wasn't built for college soccer; however, I wouldn't tell them about our record. I would often direct the conversation elsewhere or say, "We're progressing, but it's been a slow start." Anything to avoid the topic of wins and losses. I watched as Jake Matthai win a D1 national championship and saw Sam Denious play in playoff lacrosse in Boston. After never playing soccer in years, I had joined a college soccer team, and I felt like I didn't belong.

This past fall on October 15th, 2017, after starting my college career 0-42, after breaking into the top five most minutes played in team history, after overcoming teammates dropping out, and after our coaching staff leaving, I had finally won a game. My team won 2-0 and cemented the first win ever in program history. To win one game is almost trivial in the big scheme of most college athletics teams. Yet, after winning that first game I was overcome with emotion. I took a knee on the field where I had lost so many times, and I couldn't help but feel as though I had done all I could do. For the first time on a collegiate field, I was confident in myself. After scoring our first goal of the game, our morale immediately picked up. I played the best game I had ever played. I chased after loose balls. I didn't shy away from contact. I felt ready. On that day I wasn't the best athlete, the brightest student, or at the top of any superlative list. On that day I was simply confident. I trusted in myself and the teammates around me, and at the end of the day we were rewarded for it with a win.

I anticipate that each of us sitting here have done something this summer that we never imagined that we could do: hiking a mountain, hitting a Hobbs Field homerun, swimming a half-mile. Each of these tasks can at one point appear daunting, so far out of reach it almost isn't worth even trying. But, that's the problem. I firmly believe that nothing great comes easy. It will take work, dedication, commitment, and time. Had I never trusted in myself or my growth I never would've been able to finish the Long Walk, win a soccer game, or contend for the homerun title on Hobbs. When we leave the hillside away from this incredible support system, how will we handle challenges? Will the confidence that this hillside instills in us fade, or will "we grit our teeth and fight all the harder." While each of my situations shows a lack of confidence in myself, it's important to recognize the deeper message. We will all have similar times in our lives. We will all find doubt. We will all face challenges. However, what separates the strong from the weak is the ability to use that doubt towards growth. Had I been an exceptional hiker, had I won a game or two each soccer season, had I won every award in Atlanta my growth would not have been nearly as impactful. I'm grateful for each of these experiences. I am a better man because of each of them. The lessons each situation taught me will not be forgotten. I continue to come back to the quote Mr. Vinnie references by Mary Oliver at the beginning of each summer, "So what will you do with your one wild and precious life?" Each of us has the ability to decide. Will you chase that crazy goal that appears out of reach? Will you sit back doubting yourself, claiming that you aren't capable of what is in front of you? Or will you have the confidence to go all in and make it happen? The choice is yours.