

Recovering from Mistakes
by Henry Anderson

When you're a first-year camper and you're hearing about the Long Walk for the first time, the first thing that you're likely to learn is that the youngest camper on the Long Walk has one job: he must protect the Pasquaney Flag and ensure that it reaches the summit of every mountain the Long Walk hikes.

There is a tremendous amount of pomp and circumstance surrounding this tradition. Mr. Vinnie distinguishes the flag bearer on the very night that the Long Walkers are declared. And on the morning of the Walk's departure, we have the Long Walk ceremony, where Mr. Vinnie beckons the flagbearer forward, presents him the flag, and asks him, "Will you make sure this flag reaches every single peak?"

Well in 2013, I was the youngest camper on the Long Walk. I was the flagbearer. I promised Mr. Vinnie and the whole camp that I would ensure the flag reaches every single peak, and I took my one job seriously. I kept it in a little ziplock baggie to keep it dry, only taking it out for the railroads on every peak. But then on Friday—the very last day of the Walk—I did the unthinkable: I forgot the flag.

You see, the day before, it had rained so I had hung the flag in my tent to let it dry. But then Friday morning, I neglected to put it back in my bag before boarding the bus. When I realized my mistake, I was devastated. That year, I had been elected a fifteen-year-old COI. I was growing into my role as a leader around camp. And I felt like I had squandered all my accomplishments with that one mistake.

I had one simple job that would tie a pretty bow on a rewarding summer, and I couldn't do it. I fouled it up.

I still remember how horrible I felt when, in the middle of our hike, I had to pull aside and confess what I had done to Jim MacDougall, our Long Walk leader. I still remember begging Ian Munsick to let me run up Garfield and Galehead alone after we returned to the campsite so I could rectify my mistake. I remember sheepishly telling Mr. Vinnie before the Duck Dinner, that I was the first flag bearer in camp memory who didn't carry the flag to every peak.

The author of this year's Theater Play, Oscar Wilde, said, "Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes." Well, by that logic, I must have accrued far more than my fair share of experience, considering all the mistakes I've made. I recovered from my blunder with the flag eventually, but that very next year, my 16-year-old summer, I wrote and starred in the 2014 Hawks skit. Sure enough, I missed a cue and wasn't on stage during my biggest scene. I

fouled up in spectacular fashion. It was one of the worst on-stage calamities I've ever seen in the Watson Theater.

But while those mistakes were pretty embarrassing because they were so foolish and public, in hindsight they were pretty harmless, more a consequence of absentmindedness than a fundamental character flaw. The worst mistakes you can make are the ones that cause people to ask, *What on Earth were they thinking? What kind of person would do something like that?* ...And then you realize that person is you.

Jordan Peterson is a professor of psychology who has recently developed quite a following online recently. In one of his lectures, he talks about how the most horrifying but essential lesson you can learn is that you, just like everyone else are capable of the very worst kind of evil. Let me emphasize that, everyone—from Mr. Vinnie to Forrest Phelps—is capable of the very worst kind of evil.

To illustrate his point, Peterson evokes the German men who were drafted into the Nazi army in World War II and served as prison guards at Auschwitz. They were young and impressionable just like us, and they were forced into an environment where they were expected to carry out heinous war crimes every single day. But that's not all they did. For pure entertainment, some of the guards would force prisoners at gunpoint to carry bulky and wet 100-pound sacks of salt from one side of the concentration camp to the other. The prisoners were already pale, exhausted and emaciated from living in the camps with terrible living conditions and nutrition. It was pure, cruel evil, what these soldiers did, and yet not one of them stepped up and told the others to stop. And, again, make no mistake, these were young men just like you and me. If I were raised under their circumstances, entrenched in their twisted system of values, I have no reason to believe that I'd be an exception. I'd probably let it happen, too. And that is a terrifying prospect.

Peterson also heavily researched PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a psychological affliction most associated with soldiers who experienced tremendous violence on the battlefield, who saw the unseeable. But in his research, Peterson found that the most scarring and widespread examples of PTSD occurred not when the traumatized soldier was a victim or a witness of an atrocity, but when he was the perpetrator. In other words, soldiers are more likely to be traumatized by their own violent actions that are sanctioned by their home countries than the actions of their sworn enemies. Unlike a witness or victim, a soldier who has killed needlessly has to accept not only that humanity is capable of monstrous wrongdoing, but that there is also some repressed and visceral monster lurking deep down in his own psyche.

The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who wrote extensively on the horrors of the Soviet Union, said it better than I ever could: "...the line separating good and evil passes not through

states, nor between classes, nor between political parties – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts.”

The line separating good and evil passes through every human heart.

Now obviously, I don't think any of you are ever going to do the sort of things that haunted those soldiers. But as Mr. Vinnie discussed in his first Chapel Talk, I do know that all of you will make mistakes in your lives. I know that many of you will even make mistakes that force you to stare in the mirror in a state of disbelief and ask yourself, “What kind of person would do a thing like this?”

Compared with the examples I've discussed, the mistakes that make me stare in the mirror are dull and unsexy, but they still haunt me. My major mistake occurred this past semester. I've always had serious problems with procrastination and organizing my work that have kept me from being as successful as I could be. And this past spring, after firmly resolving to put those problems behind me, my bad habits devolved into a deep writer's anxiety. I would spend many fruitless hours staring at blank screens, researching aimlessly, making unnecessary outlines, thinking out loud, and pacing, but getting nothing done. I'd develop sky-high expectations for the essays I had to write and then would grow paralyzed when I realized I could never achieve those expectations. I felt like the more I became aware of this procrastination and anxiety, the worse they got. I would plan my work weeks in advance in anticipation of my assignments, but I would still shut down when the deadlines loomed. So then I started to eliminate all distractions. I deleted my Netflix account, stopped charging my phone, I told myself I wouldn't meet with friends until all my work was finished. The result was a self-enforced house arrest where I would spend all my time agonizing over my mistakes and working myself into a deeper and deeper depression.

Every single day I knew I was throwing my life away. Every single day I knew I only had myself to blame.

So now this summer I stand at a crossroads: How will I respond next year? How can I reconcile the person I want to be, the person I know I can be, with the person who just messed up so horribly?

I don't have a perfect answer to this question. But I found a strange solace in the hymn that we sang yesterday at chapel.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.”

Please keep in mind that I am not religious at all, but it strikes me as somewhat miraculous that 2.3 billion people all worship a man who died and took responsibility for the mistakes of all

mankind. It seems to me that we mere mortals have to do the same. We have to be honest about the gravity of our actions. We have to own our mistakes. Our mistakes are our crosses to bear. And that is an enormous responsibility. It very well should cause us to tremble. But it is only by owning our mistakes that we can transcend them and rise to the next big thing. So when you make mistakes this summer, own them. Don't make excuses. Don't feel ashamed. Own them, and we can all move on together.