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Tree Talk

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### Asking for Help

On Thursday, June 18th, the same day that I left home to come up to Pasquaney, I attended my friend's funeral. He graduated from my high school two years ahead of me, he was a member of my Boy Scout troop, and he was a junior at the University of Virginia. In high school, he excelled academically and athletically. And as an Eagle Scout, the captain of the school wrestling team, and the president of his fraternity at UVA, he commanded the respect and admiration of his peers. I didn't remain in close contact with him after he graduated from high school, but we would catch up once or twice a year. When I was told that he had killed himself late on a Sunday night, I could not believe what I heard. Suicide simply didn't make sense. How could someone so competent and caring feel the need to take his own life? All of his family and friends were wrestling with the same question: Why? An academic suspension at UVA seemed to have precipitated the act, but academic failure alone feels like a terribly unsatisfactory explanation. I, along with many other people, have thought long and hard about the decision he made... I will never be able to understand or explain it, but his death *has* made me think of ways to deal with and overcome adversity in my own life. One essential skill that stood out in my mind for coping with adversity is the ability to reach out and ask for help. It is a skill that doesn't come naturally to many people, including me, but fortunately I've had ample opportunity to practice it.

I just finished my freshman year at Princeton University. In almost every aspect, college required a huge transition from high school. Academically, I was swimming in far, far deeper water. This fall I decided to take a calculus II course. I had taken a calculus II course in high school, I had enjoyed calculus, and I had done well. I figured I would ease myself into academics at Princeton by taking a course that would cover familiar material. Well, this course I took at Princeton assessed us twice: the midterm and the final. The night before the midterm exam, I felt pretty confident. I had seen this stuff before. I thought I knew it. The exam was out of 100 possible points. The class average was a 48. The exam was not designed for you to walk out of the room feeling good about how you did. The results were curved however, and the next week, the professor gave our exams back and drew up a chart with the letter grades that corresponded to the numerical score. Scores in this range earned

an A, scores in that range earned an A-, and so on... Anything less than a 36 fell into the "C-or below" category. I got a 23. I didn't even make it on to the charts. I was somewhere deep in the "or below" section. I was flustered and confused. I had never been in a situation where I was anywhere close to failing a class. My study habits had always worked for me in the past. I didn't know what it meant to struggle academically... I was at a loss, so I crawled into my academic advisor's office for help. She suggested I work with the professor and go to peer tutoring sessions... tutoring? I am the one who tutors. I'd never been on the other side of the table before, and I did not like the idea, but I swallowed my pride and began meeting with my professor and attending the tutoring sessions weekly. After a good deal of time and effort and with the help from my professor and upperclassman tutors, I managed to squeak by and pass the class.

This summer at Camp and later in your life, all of you will encounter a problem that you will not be able to solve or overcome with your own current knowledge and resources. You will at some point find yourself, like me, out of your depth, and you may not know what to do about it. I strongly encourage you to ask for help in these situations, but before you can ask for help, you will have to admit to yourself that you can not solve the problem. I have always found admitting my insufficiency a very hard thing to do. Oftentimes our pride prevents us from acknowledging our shortcoming. We are embarrassed to admit that we need help. Male culture tells us that reaching out for help looks weak, that real men have all the answers. This is false. No one has all of the answers. The most intelligent people I've met know what they don't know, and they turn to others who can help them figure it out. Asking for help is difficult. Asking for help requires the courage to overcome the fear of looking weak or stupid. Asking for help requires you to put away your pride and open up to another person.

On my Androscoggin Expedition last week, we were paddling to Lake Umbagog when I began to suspect we missed a turn. As the expedition leader, I'm supposed to know where we are and how to get to our destination... I did not. At our next water break, I pulled out the map and asked Jake and our campers to help me figure out where we were. Suddenly, what felt like *my* problem (At the end of the day, I'm the one responsible.) became *our* problem. No one could really answer the question. No one could make much sense of the crude map, but that didn't matter because I was no longer carrying the burden of responsibility alone. We were going to figure out how to get to our campsite together as an

expedition. We decided to turn around and go about two-miles back upriver. We later realized this was not the correct direction and that we just hadn't gone far enough in the first place. At that moment, the heavens opened up, and it began to pour. Here we were sitting in the pouring rain, eating a soggy pita with peanut butter, knowing that we will have to paddle the same two-mile stretch of river for a third time. It was moment that those of us on the expedition will not soon forget. We paddled back down the river and realized that the entrance to the lake was not but 50 yards from where we had stopped and turned around. We just couldn't see it from our vantage point. This double back was the lowest point of a great trip, and we got through by helping each other.

As you spend the next five weeks at Pasquaney, do not fear to ask for help when you need it. Whether you struggling to make a cut on the lathe, or you're struggling to throw a curveball, or you're struggling to repair a friendship, reach out for help. The great thing about our community on the hillside is that it's overflowing with people who are willing and able to help you. Here help will always be given to those who ask for it. Practice this skill. If you grow comfortable asking for help with the small issues, when the big issues arise, you will be able to find the help you need. Sometimes you may think no one will actually be able to help you with your problem, but don't let that doubt stop you from reaching out, because even if he doesn't have the solution, *your* struggle will become *his* struggle too as he searches for an answer with you. Remember, as a member of this community, whether together on the hillside for the summer or gone our separate ways in the winters, you never have to struggle alone. You never have to struggle alone.