

Alex Kent  
“On Confidence”  
Tree Talk 07/30/12  
Camp Pasquaney

My first day of high school is still very vivid in my mind. I was a shy, timid fourteen-year old who, rather than exploring my new school or looking to make friends, sat on a couch quietly reading a book titled Unknown Quantity: A History of Algebra. Needless to say, I didn't make very many friends that day. It wasn't until I left the security of the couch and ventured around that I began to meet people – and even then, I waited to be approached rather than being proactive. If it were not by chance that I introduced myself to a freshman girl who looked only slightly less lost than I was, I may never have met my closest high school friend.

But this tree talk is not about making friends. Even in my reclusiveness, I knew I'd eventually do that. Nor is it about how to withstand and manage the innumerable pressures our world throws at us. Surely, high school teaches you how to manage your time, how to write, think and speak, how to work in groups and study. But every time you walk into a room or other new place, none of that matters. What matters is how you comport yourself – how your head is held, shoulders angled and if your steps are taken with purpose. In short, what matters is confidence; something I have always lacked.

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. This is an important distinction because it attends to a critical tension, that between confidence and arrogance.

Preventing the slide towards arrogance is predicated on a simple difference: intent. Eleanor Roosevelt illustrates what I mean better than I ever could. She writes, “a good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader. A great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves.” If people perceive you to be impressing upon them how great you are, they may well regard you with a certain awe, but what does that gain you? What good is another's admiration if it is attained by making others feel inferior?

Having true self-confidence is exhibited through empowerment. It is reflective both of a faith in your own abilities as well as in those of others. For nearly all of my time at camp I struggled, and to some extent continue to struggle with having faith in my own abilities. This fall I will be interning for the Treasury Department's Office of Economic Policy and I am terrified – terrified that I'm not prepared well enough, that my work won't be good enough, that I generally will not be competent enough. At camp finding self-confidence is easy because the spirit to serve is so pervasive and therefore empowering people to serve with you becomes almost second nature.

After my 16-year old summer, I remember walking into the first day of my junior year feeling like the man – my own confidence had skyrocketed and I had seen during that previous summer how intoxicating a group can be when everyone is working together; when people lead as a part of the group rather than as an outsider.

In large part, I owe that confidence to a conversation I had with Mike after soak on July 14th 2008. Yes, I remember the day, and for reasons other than the fact that Mike looked about a decade younger than he does now. While the topic of our conversation was leadership, the tacit undertone sang of confidence. By Mike's diagnosis, I had reached the point of inspiring confidence in others; I had become Eleanor Roosevelt's "great" leader. But, as the summer wore on, I realized I had no way of inspiring confidence in myself. As a result, that poised, intrepid high school junior who felt like the man very quickly reverted to his reserved, bookish self.

At one point in the conversation Mike told me I had to recalibrate by 'leadership barometer.' He said that the times when I thought I was being overbearing, I was beginning to move into the area in which effective leadership blossomed. All I had to do was make that move. All I had to do was take the risk that my friends age twelve to sixteen wanted me to take. All I needed to do was have confidence in myself.

As I listened to taps fade away that night, I stayed awake for a time trying to wrestle with what Mike had told me. Would I, in my stubbornness, remain committed to the way I had been living? Would I continue to do that with which I was comfortable? Or would I take an apprehensive step towards being a more outspoken leader?

As I lay there, it felt as though Mike had asked me to jump over a skyscraper, when, in actuality, the step I had to take was no bigger than the blades of grass I'm standing on now. Lacking confidence in myself, my mind had inflated the step I needed to take and presented it to me as a daunting, impassable leviathan, hell-bent on relegating me to my comfort zone forever.

I used to think confidence and comfort were synonymous; that confidence was only derived from being comfortable in given situations; that the only way one could gain confidence was through the admiration of others. Confidence rooted in anything else was arrogance in its purest form. Or so I thought

I stand here now to tell you that the minute you look to others to invite confidence in yourself is the minute you perch yourself precariously upon a bubble of adulation just waiting to be pricked. My confidence may have been riding high after my 16-year old summer, but that confidence quickly evaporated as the confines of our intimate community dissolved and I realized I had no way of sparking confidence in myself.

When confidence in yourself is derived from others, you lose the freedom to make mistakes and an understanding of how to cope with failure because it feels as though your world has collapsed and you have no way of propping it back up again.

E.E. Cummings said it best in one of his notoriously poorly punctuated sentences: "Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity wonder spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit."

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Here, more than any place I am aware of, we are pressed to be our best selves and to recognize that failure is not a step backwards, but rather a lesson that teaches us how not to move forwards.

High school was a great experience for me, both socially and academically, but that environment could not instill in me the kind of confidence Pasquaney gave to me. College was different. Without any ties to my quiet high school self, I was able to let loose and make closer friends in four months than I made in four years of high school.

I was able to reap so many rewards by having the confidence to step outside my comfort zone and accept the pangs of nerves trying to suffocate me. Now when I find myself needing to make the leap over the blades of grass again, I remember what a great coach once told me: “Nerves keep you sharp: they tell you what’s worth doing and what isn’t, and having the confidence to make that distinction in yourself is more valuable than anything I could ever teach you.” As with so many other things, he was right.