

Alex B. Newell
“Being Yourself”
Tree Talk – 07/20/12
Camp Pasquaney

My brother William Newell was a camper from 2001 to 2005, and a counsellor in 2007 and 2008. He was elected a COI at fifteen, won the Mauran Cup and the Hikes Cup twice, was Most Faithful Boy, and won both the Senior Canoe Race and Senior Canoe Tilt. Many of you know him to be an amazing, selfless guy. And I can confirm this: he is.

As Will’s younger brother, I always felt in his shadow. Everywhere I went, he had been there before and left his mark upon the place. Will and I have always been extremely close, and I idolized him. So as a developing young man, I never really took the time to figure out who I was, or even who I wanted to be. I just tried to be like Will.

When I showed up at camp, it was no different. I tried to do the same things that Will did, pitching myself at Sailing and Rowing, diving into the activities that he had excelled at before me. I tried to paint myself as a good hiker, and I tried to be the same type of camper that he was. The problem was that I was 12 years old, trying to be the same as a 15 year old who was a very different person from me. Where my brother is introspective and contemplative, I tend towards saying whatever comes into my mind and letting everyone else around me know my random thoughts. Those of you who have had the great privilege of living with me in Stanwood know that my morning greetings can be... enthusiastic, to say the least. Obviously Stopping and Thinking was a bit of an uphill battle for me. There are counsellors here who can still vividly recall the troubles I had, especially my first two years. In short, I was plagued by trying to be a copy of a great young man, and I quite failed.

In 2006, my 15-year old summer, I tried to imitate Will yet again. This time, on the surface, it looked like I had succeeded. I ended up winning the Russell H. Johnson Rowing Trophy, the Nordstrom Sailing Cup, and the Senior Canoe Race. I had finally managed to be like my brother and idol. Yet this was my least favorite summer on the hillside; regardless of what I did, I couldn’t find happiness. I had spent the summer chasing after the things I thought would make me like him, and once I had achieved them, I found that they didn’t fulfill me; it was my brother’s life that I was living, not mine.

In 2007, I came back to Pasquaney determined to have a better summer. I wouldn’t allow myself to be distraught about not being elected a COI the summer before, something which had upset me since Will had been elected when he was 15. I spent less time trying to act like the COI that I wasn’t, and more time trying to be a good friend to my peers and a good leader to the younger campers. I spent less time at the Sailing Dock, and more time Canoeing, an activity I had never really tried before, and ended up loving. I won’t claim that I somehow turned into a paragon of Pasquaney, shining forth as a bright beacon of virtue and honor. But instead of focusing on trying to outdo my brother at being Will Newell, I focused on being Noodle. And as it turns out, I’m pretty good at being Noodle. I’m certainly much better at it than I am at being Will.

Now some of you might be thinking that this Tree Talk doesn't really apply to you; maybe you don't have an older brother or sibling who you idolize. Maybe you're perfectly happy with who you are, or you don't think you're trying to be someone you're not. I applaud you. Unfortunately, I am fairly certain that almost every one of you will find yourself in a position where you wish that you could be more like someone else, or find yourself wishing that you could be different from the way you are. This, in my experience, is more or less the way of the world. In my case, a lot of this pressure came from within me, and what I perceived as pressure here at camp. But this is, in large part, why I am standing here before you on a Friday afternoon. Because if there is anywhere in the world where this type of pressure should be absent, it's here, at Pasquaney.

Outside of camp, there are plenty of people who will want to turn you into someone else. Some of these people will have good intentions; others will not. Regardless of the cause, often people are not allowed time to develop and learn more about themselves in the outside world. For many years, you will take classes that are required for a general curriculum in your school; you might do after school programs simply because others told you to do them. Simply put, many people go through their formative years doing the things that others tell them to do, and never take the time to explore their own personality.

Here at camp, we take the opposite approach. We often schedule campers for activities, but just as often the entire period is free for you to do with as you will; most other camp counsellors are shocked to hear this. We have copious amounts of free time and varied options campfires with some frequency. Every day, you are presented with the choice: what do I want to do? What would I enjoy? And it's through exploration of these questions that we uncover more about ourselves and the people that we are. You are permitted to go work on a Shop project for half an activity period, decide you're utterly bored, and go try your luck at the Sailing Dock instead. Or vice versa. No one will say things like, "Oh, you go Sailing? All the cool kids are at baseball. You want to go to games on the tennis court? You can't be my friend." If these statements sound ridiculous, it's because they would be here. Yet similar things are said in the outside world frequently. I've heard similar and worse about people who love the theater, who love their sport, or perhaps who just dress a different way. Here, none of this happens. You're free to do whatever you want.

The counsellors will keep you from doing things that could hurt you, and we try our best to bring out those attributes that are most in line with the Pasquaney Spirit, but within these vastly wide bounds is room for a massive range of personal growth, and every counsellor has your best interests at heart. I look out at the faces staring back at me, and I see people who are as different from me as could possibly be, in one of the greatest examples of diversity in a community I've ever seen. Quiet and Loud, Wise and Boisterous, Kind and Caring. Precocious 12 year olds, youthful 20 year olds, energetic 50 year olds. Ballplayers and Woodworkers, Tennis players and Canoeists, Sailors and Hikers, Rowers and Waterfront Directors. These are the people our community is made of. These are the type of people that Camp Pasquaney has the potential to fashion, if you will only take advantage of the freedom that it offers you.

For my first three years here, I didn't take advantage of that opportunity. I allowed myself to be blinded by the icon of my brother, and couldn't see anything else but the example that he set. I'm more than aware of how easy it can be to get mired down by pressures, whether real or

imagined, and whether they're your own expectations or someone else's. I only wish that I'd been able to realize this earlier, so that I could go back and unspend all the time that I committed to worrying about being elected a COI, or winning a Cup, or being better than my brother. Even if I had been successful at those, it would have made me a mere copy of Will, not the developed adult that Pasquaney seeks to turn us into. I was lucky; I was able to realize my errors my fifteen year old summer, and to devote some time to righting them.

The result is that I'm the person you see standing before you. Mr. Noodle. Not Will Newell, not Robbie Stone, not Brian Young, and not Mike Hanrahan, although each of these people has certainly had a great impact on my development. That's possibly the greatest challenge of camp: how to take in the examples set by some of the amazing individuals here without letting them overwhelm you. But I stand before you this evening to tell you that not only is it possible; it's necessary. I'm not telling you how to act: I'm begging you not to make the same mistakes that I did. Allow yourself to grow. Be you, not someone else, or the person someone else wants you to be.

Will Newell was the Most Faithful Boy and the Mauran Cup winner. He was the Captain of the Harvard Lightweight Rowing team and he is currently in London to race in the Olympics. None of those things is true of me. But now I can be happy for who he is, and be happy to be my own person, without the driving need to be better than him, or to one-up him. And for that, I'm unbelievably thankful.

Thank you.