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“Paying Attention”
Tree Talk – 06/29/12
Camp Pasquaney

Last Sunday in our chapel Mr. Vinnie talked to us about seizing opportunities and living mindfully in the present moment. He quoted a poem by Mary Oliver called The Summer Day, and today I’d like to begin by reading you the poem in full. Seeing as it is a gorgeous day today, it seems appropriate...

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

“What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” It’s an important question. We may only have this one life, and we really each only have this one moment right now... How do we make it count?

When I hear this poem I think of a story my high school Chinese teacher once told me about her son playing in a 3 and 4 year olds soccer game. In the midst of the rushing and the chaos of the game, with shouts coming from parents from every angle of the field, her son stopped abruptly and knelt down to admire a white feather that had caught his eye. The game buzzed on around him for one or two minutes before he snapped back to reality and began to play again. I was surprised when my teacher said that she couldn’t have been more proud of her son at that one moment, for having the courage to slow down and step away from the rules and regulations of the game, to reflect with full concentration on something really extraordinary to him, like a feather.

Thinking back on this story now, I’m inspired by this child because he was able to do something we adults talk about endlessly, but somehow struggle to do in our day to day lives: to be mindful in the present moment, to celebrate the particular, to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds us.

Camp is one place however where we do emphasize the skill of paying attention. We have built into our routine a number of rituals that ask us to sit still and reflect. Our motto is Stop and Think, we begin and end each day with prayers, we enter Mem Hall silently, we listen to Taps each night in our bunks and think back on the day that has passed and what lies ahead.

These practices were really valuable to me in my education. When I was a younger boy I really struggled with concentrating and focusing in school, completing homework assignments, reading more than 10 pages at a time. Listening to speakers here on Tree Talk Ridge was not something that happened my first summer. I would try to at first, but in such a serene setting I would inevitably begin picking grass or staring into the lake, lost in my own thoughts.

The greatest gifts camp gave me as a young boy were those times I had every single day to stop and slow down and reflect for a moment or two. These small daily acts became habits that taught me self-discipline, and as a result I became a more conscientious student, a more thoughtful and diligent worker, and a better listener.

I will always remember a Tree Talk given by Owen Fink my third summer. Owen stood here and asked simply, what do you want to be when you grow up? A doctor, a lawyer, a banker, a baker? As I sat there and contemplated the many options for my future, he told us what he wanted to be, but it wasn't what I was expecting. He said I want to be a good friend. I want to be honest with myself and with others. I want to smile more than I frown. I want to be someone who people turn to when they need help. I want to be someone who stops on a clear night to look at the stars.

After teaching for a year in China and this past year at a boarding school in Massachusetts, both in ultra-competitive environments, I realize now what a rare blessing it is to have caring adults and peers in our lives who aren't stressing us out about grades, placement, achievement scores, and competitions.

We're not only having fun at camp enjoying these summer days, as we should be, but we're also working together towards being our best selves by asking the essential questions Owen asked us that day: Am I honest with myself? Will people turn to me when they need help? Can I afford to stop for a second to look at the stars? I love Pasquaney because there is really nothing more that is being asked of us. There is no one telling you to do anything other than what will prepare you to live a meaningful life.

When I taught in China three years ago, I showed my students the movie Groundhog Day, which you might be surprised to hear, despite being a comedy is considered one of the most spiritual movies of all time, especially in Buddhist communities. For those of you unfamiliar with the plot, it involves an arrogant and selfish guy named Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, who due to some unexplained curse, is forced to live the very same miserable day over and over again. He goes to bed on February 2nd, and the next morning he wakes up and it is February 2nd once again. Everyone else in the town follows the same routine, says the exact same things and goes to the same places at the exact same time each day, and he is the only one conscious of this.

What would you do if you were in this situation? Can you imagine becoming a slave to a certain day, let alone your least favorite day of the year, full of people who annoy or disagree with you, and get in your way?

It sounds like a horrible fate, but it is fantasy, a good hikes conversation, skit idea, or circles topic maybe, but not something that could actually happen in real life, right?

Well, I actually think that it is something that happens to us, and far more regularly than we would like to admit.

You see, if we aren't careful, pressure and anxiety brought on by the outside world can easily corner us into a very self-centered position. **I'm** so stressed out because **I'm** so busy because **my** teachers are giving **me** so much homework, how can **I** ever get it done. **I** need to get an A so that **I** can get ahead of **you**. All of a sudden we become like worker bees mindlessly performing tasks with no feeling or concern for anyone but ourselves.

When we see each other as obstacles, when we see education as just a strategy to get ahead, when we get lost in the pursuit of status, or money, popularity, or power, everyday really becomes the same endless pursuit for more and more. We get caught in the rat race that convinces us that I am the center of the universe, and the days become just as monotonous and indistinguishable as they are for Phil Connors in the movie.

True freedom on the other hand comes from paying attention and having an imagination. Using our power as human beings to stop and think for a moment to imagine the position of someone else: what is it like to be the boy being picked on, or the homesick camper, the COI trying to do his duty, the counsellor struggling to get control of his expedition who needs camper support.

Being mindful of others frees you from the blinders that only allow you to see things your own way. The self-centered response to a disagreement on the ballfield or tennis courts for example, could be something like, Wow **I'm** working so hard, how could the umpire or my opponent call the play that way. **I'm** being cheated.

The imaginative response could be to consider that your opponent may simply have seen a play a different way. By being open to more than one possibility, you are at least free to work with others towards solutions, instead of endless disagreement.

David Foster Wallace said that "The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day."

In his talk on the Pasquaney spirit, Bubbles said, "By losing ourselves in service to others, we find ourselves."

At the end of the movie Groundhog Day, after spending a decades worth of days selfishly

chasing money and cheap thrills, hating everyone in sight, and wallowing in self-pity, something unusual happens to Phil Connors – he begins to pay attention to other people’s lives, he begins to care about and respect others, he saves a boy from falling out of a tree and a homeless man from freezing in the cold, everyday.

He stops thinking about himself and starts spending the day searching for areas where he can serve the community. By losing himself in service to others, he finds himself, and eventually the endless cycle and curse is broken.

What I’m trying to say is this: at camp this summer, if you can be disciplined enough to practice something simple like paying attention to a grasshopper or a feather, sitting still to think for a few minutes during prayers, entering Mem Hall in silence, you will be sowing small acts that will lead you to a life full of contemplation and freedom, the freedom to choose to not let the pressures from school or society or peers coerce you into thinking solely about yourself and your status and your struggle. Most importantly, you will be aware enough to see beyond yourself and to look at each other and consider each other, to see one another not as obstacles but as people worthy of compassion, forgiveness, and love. This will draw people to you and enrich your life. It starts here with small acts.

So now I look out and I see a few of you picking grass... and many more of you staring into the lake or the woods, and I’m so happy you’re here right now. There is nothing else you should be doing.

Thank you.