

Charles Platt V
“Communing With Nature”
Tree Talk – 08/05/11
Camp Pasquaney

On an early September day in 1894, Mr. Ned began a fateful walk up this hill below us. He was accompanied by his cousin Charlie and Dr. Winthrop Talbot, founder of Camp Asquam, the camp which served as the main inspiration and blueprint for Pasquaney. Mr. Ned had just spent the past summer on Asquam’s council, working under Talbot.

The following is an excerpt from Barksdale Maynard’s *Nineteenth-Century Pasquaney*:

Talbot and the two Wilson cousins walked uphill, in the direction of the maple sugar grove. Downhill from the grove was a fairly level hayfield, below which the land dropped off steeply. The three men strolled through this open, grassy plateau, dotted with shrubby birch and poplar sapling and interrupted here and there by a few big boulders and glacier-smoothed granite outcrops. The view was magnificent; four hundred feet below them was spread the vast expanse of Newfound Lake. Here we will site the camp, Dr. Talbot declared.

Dr. Talbot later remarked that, “A beautiful view exerts a potent influence on the morale of the camp. Boys behave better when they have beautiful views to look at. The more dominant the view... the better will be the moral and mental tone of the campers.”

From its inception, a core component of the Pasquaney experience has been an appreciation for natural beauty and the positive feelings that it generates in us as individuals.

As the trees have crept skyward over the decades, we’ve made the effort to preserve views of the lake, such as the one out here on Tree Talk.

Drawing a connection between the beauty of nature and the health of the individual is a central tenant of transcendentalism. In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau writes, to quote, “I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright.”

Nature, its beauty—its subtle magnetism—will direct us aright.

What does this mean? And why is this important?

I’ll preface where I’m going with my Talk with the caveat understanding the ins and outs of the transcendental movement is not a prerequisite to understanding my Tree Talk.

I want to talk about natural beauty and its positive effects on the individual because this dynamic, whether you know it or not, is something that we all experience every day at camp.

Here at Pasquaney we have myriad opportunities to, as I will phrase it repeatedly in this talk, commune with nature. Over a Pasquaney day we struggle on lake, diamond and everywhere in

between. All of this we do ‘mid the mountains of rugged New Hampshire. For seven weeks, this beautiful space, with its stunning mountains and its granite, screened by the pine – for seven weeks this is our home.

Thoreau felt the power of communing with nature on Walden Pond, but I’d argue that we feel these same emotions even stronger, here on our hillside community along Newfound Lake.

While Pasquaney’s beautiful setting is not unique, but, to varying degrees, our camp lifestyle is. Do yourself a favor and take advantage of the times, indeed, the scheduled moments during which nature can be savored and the soul can be nourished.

In a little while, as we’re on Mem Hall Porch, waiting for second call, gaze down the hill toward the navy blue of the lake and watch the shadows edge across the face of Bear Mountain. Glance upward after campfire tonight, as the day’s light fades to evening. A short while later, look out from Dana Porch as you wait to say goodnight to Mr. Vinnie and Eric.

That time is one of my favorite “nature appreciation” moments in all of camp. Amid the familiar routine of the prayers is the evolving change of this Dana Porch view as the summer progresses. The days grow ever slightly shorter as summer presses on and we distance ourselves from the solstice. The dusky hues of late June give way to the stars-capes and moonlight of mid-August.

Beyond the Hillside, we venture all over the lake and hike all over this state. A wonderful feeling that each of us has enjoyed this summer is the pure satisfaction and general good feeling of a tremendous view atop a summit after a demanding hike.

Someway and somehow, each of us feels good about this aesthetic, this concept of natural beauty. It makes us feel better about ourselves, what we do, what we’ve done and what we’ve yet to do. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, writes the following in his book *The Yosemite*:

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.

That statement leads off a main page on the Sierra Club’s Web site, but it may as well be etched on to some plaque or carved into some rock here at Pasquaney.

Places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul. If that’s not Pasquaney, I don’t know what is.

Okay. So far I’ve discussed the power of nature. I’ve discussed how I hope you all learn to draw goodness from appreciating natural beauty. I’ve discussed how we have countless opportunities to seek out and find natural beauty here at camp.

What many of you might be wondering, justly so, is how do I find natural beauty when I’m home? What do I do *outside* of camp?

Indeed, we are very spoiled here at Pasquaney. We commune with nature, and beautiful nature at that, all of the time. We wake up at seven and go to sleep at nine, and, all day long, we are surrounded by towering pine trees, panoramic vistas of a pristine lake, views of mountains, both near and far, as well as an ever-changing sky above us, with the pastel hues of the setting sun, the dwarfing spectacle of a clear night sky, the deep, radiant luminance of a full moon and the raw wrath of a charging storm front.

Finding happiness through nature in a fine setting such as this is also, ostensibly, a simple task, without skills to learn, steps to memorize, nuance to master. You simply do whatever you want to do, in this beautiful place, and the power of Pasquaney's natural beauty will shape you. You will simply yield to it, subconsciously, to refer back to Thoreau.

On top of this, Pasquaney fosters a community that values nature and spending time meditating on it. Indeed, it takes far more effort for us to *avoid* communing with nature and its beauty here at camp than it takes for us to find it. In many ways, natural beauty at camp simply finds *us*.

The biggest difference between experiencing nature at camp and experiencing nature outside of camp is that, here at Pasquaney, we always have the time of day and the patience to appreciate natural beauty.

Outside of camp, I imagine that even the most scholarly of you seldom sit down in an Adirondack chair on a porch and read, uninterrupted, for a solid hour. Especially without your parents prodding you to do so.

Outside of camp, finding nature can be more difficult, but it's not impossible. A good number of us live in cities or in dense suburbs. While city parks can be hard to access and unsafe, even something as mundane as a walk down a tree-lined sidewalk or the quiet vistas of a train ride can offer some form of communion with nature.

In his book *Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson, nestled amid his one-liners and satirical rants, comments on nature's ability to afford us what he calls "low-level ecstasy" – a feeling which he says we all need more of in our typical day-to-day lives, in which finding the time to patiently sit and watch a beautiful place can be difficult to come by.

In a week we all will be whisked away from here by plane, train and automobile, returning to our various homes across this wild and varied planet. As you return to your lives away from the Hillside, remember the patience to appreciate nature that we've all learned here. It's much easier to find the time to find nature if you have the patience to do so.

I hope that each of you also leaves Pasquaney this summer having realized the importance of finding beautiful places that captivate our souls. Continue to seek out such places and commune with them, regularly. This is often more difficult outside of camp, however trust the worthiness of the endeavor. Outside of camp, just like here *at* camp, finding nature and spending time amid it will bring you pleasure, and, in doing so, help you along toward being your best self. It will direct you aright, to refer back to Thoreau.

You have lived here for six weeks now. You have one week to go. Soak up your final week of lake and hill. Then go home and find the beauty of your own homes. Thank you.