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"Self Reliance"
Tree Talk 07/22/11
Camp Pasquaney

No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength.

--Jack Kerouac

The words of Jack Kerouac, which I just read, emphasize the role that the unrelenting solitude of the wilderness can play in the cultivation of inner strength. The wilderness, where life is stripped to its very core, is the ideal place to build strength through the practice of self-reliance. Simply put, self-reliance is the ability to rely on one's own capabilities, judgment, or resources--to live independently.

There are various ways in which self-reliance can manifest itself, from independent physical tasks, to the ability to effectively preside over your thoughts. It took leaving camp for a summer, away from the support of this wonderful community, for me to finally understand camp's greatest contribution to my personal development. I fostered lasting friendships and honed a variety of skills on this hillside, but my finest accomplishment at camp was something intangible. So intangible, in fact, that I did not even realize it until years later. Today I understand what that contribution was. I left camp at sixteen more comfortable in my own skin and more at home with my existence. Not yet fully self-reliant, but well on my way.

When I was seventeen, during my summer away from the hillside, I got a job working on a trail crew in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. My parents had recently purchased a plot of land in the town of Keene Valley located in the heart of the Adirondacks. The only physical structure on the property was a small, unassuming, hunting shack. This humble shack was to be my home for the next two and a half months. The shack, Jim's shack as it became known, is about twelve feet wide and eighteen feet long. To this day, it has no electricity, no running water, no plumbing, and certainly no air conditioning. I had a small cot to sleep on, a pile of books to read, a bin full of clothes, and of course my Pasquaney lantern. That was about it. I knew no one in the town, no one on the trail crew and I had no family to speak of within 300 miles. I was as close to alone as I have ever been and potentially ever will be.

Outside the shack lay a large fire pit surrounded by wicker chairs and a huge pile logs--my most reliable companions for that first week. I remember that first night at the shack in vivid detail. After finishing up a well-balanced meal consisting of three juicy cheeseburgers and absolutely no side dishes. I split some wood and started up a big old fire to christen the pit. I curled up with my current read, a book called Papillion, and was immediately whisked away into the thrilling life of a notorious French convict, turned escape artist. After a couple hours I put down the book and sat there staring into the crackling fire, completely mesmerized. So mesmerized, in fact that I ended up falling asleep in my chair to the fluttering of the leaves, the dependable crackle of burning pine needles and the rustling of unknown wildlife. I do not remember exactly what I thought about sitting there that first night, but I can say with certainty that it was the most

gloriously boring night of my life. I had nothing to do, no one to see, and no technology to distract me. Nothing. I was physically alone, yet my wondering mind provided all the company I could desire.

The coming weeks would bring newfound friends, as a bon fire for one soon became a social gathering place. However, despite the increase in social interaction, most nights remained similar to that first one. Every day I would wake up at seven, work until six in the afternoon, buy some food at the local store, cook it up on my grill, read for an hour or two and be soundly asleep by nine thirty. It was simple life, but I never found myself wanting more. I was content.

Thinking back on that summer with the perspective of a few years, I realize how critical my camp experience was to the success of my summer away from camp. The humble, independent, and simple lifestyle, which came so effortlessly to me that summer, was without question tied to my experience here at Pasquaney. At camp our only belongings reside on hooks and shelves around modest cots. We are not distracted by phones, computers, televisions, or even our wardrobes. And although camp is without a doubt an immensely supportive community, it is the place where, above all else, I learned to rely on myself. At camp it is your responsibility to keep a neat bunk, to do a good duty, to carry your life on your shoulders during expeditions. You are accountable for your actions and expected to tough it out when life gets hard.

Above and beyond physical self-reliance, a fully formed person is one who can practice internal self-reliance. A person who can look within himself and discover someone that he understands, someone he can put a face to, someone that he feels comfortable spending time with. Considering the countless distractions of our modern world, it is increasingly rare that one take the time to visit with himself. If you strip the average citizen down to their bare necessities, their naked self, more times than not you will discover a restless, uncertain, and even helpless soul. Without a healthy internal dialogue, what are we but hollow shells of ourselves? At camp we learn to get by without unnecessary luxury. We learn to live deliberately and take advantage of what each day has to offer. We learn to visit with each other, to have real conversations, and most importantly to learn about ourselves. The real challenge, however, is to strengthen your grasp on self-reliance while at camp, so as to effectively translate it to life away from the hillside.

Both at Pasquaney and up in Keene Valley I find myself in an ideal environment to practice self-reliance. They are both places that demand independence, hard work, and strict accountability. They encourage simple living, while helping to develop complex and essential life skills. For that reason they remain the two most important places in my life. Away from those two places I find it exceedingly more difficult to maintain a deliberate and self-reliant existence. The complexity and utter chaos of day-to-day life encourages various crutches to self-reliance. At college I may live independently, but I am constantly immersed in the social and technological milieu of society. I rarely get time to be truly alone, without distraction. And when I am alone I fall pray to idiotic television shows or pointless facebook surfing. The exhaustion of day-to-day life, the never-ending distractions, often render me too over stimulated to effectively check in with myself.

Ever since that summer in the Adirondacks, I've consistently made an effort to visit with myself, whether over a cup of tea or a walk around campus. However, more often than not I am interrupted or distracted in one way or another, leaving my thoughts hostage to the turbulent quarters my mind. I relish every summer I am lucky enough to come back to Pasquaney because, among countless other things, being here allows me reinforce my self-reliance in a way I often struggle to do away from the hillside. It is a crazy world we live in, but if you can learn to rely on yourself, both physically and emotionally it will never be a lonely one. I continue to work towards becoming more self-reliant, both internally and externally, but it is a no easy task. Accomplishing it could very well take a lifetime, but camp is a perfect place to begin your voyage. So relax, enjoy the beautiful view, and take the opportunity to be alone with your thoughts, if only for a moment.