

Alex Kent
'The Benefits of Thinking Small'
Tree Talk 07/15/10
Camp Pasquaney

I've never been one to think small. Mike can tell you that was true of my shop projects. Others can tell you I've always had a global focus. Yet at every point, I find myself returning to small things: I live in a small town, went to a small school, go to a small college and believe in mastering the basics before making things complicated. I mean, there isn't much for a kid to do growing up in a town in which the average age is over 50. Is this lack of complexity a bad thing? Is a smaller focus compatible with larger goals? Can a better, more fruitful whole be created by synthesizing individual parts?

This past year I read Nina Eliasoph's ethnography *Avoiding Politics*. She argued that Americans had become apathetic in their approach to the public sphere by choosing "small politics" over a broader approach. In other words, Eliasoph was *concerned* that people were volunteering in their local communities because they weren't volunteering at a national level. In 400 dense pages she systematically sapped the life out of my approach to politics by discrediting the "close to home" volunteerism we practice at camp because it just wasn't how things had happened in our country's recent past. In an evoked response I argued that the breadth of knowledge at American's fingertips in this era of globalization intimidates them. Suddenly, technology has shrunk a sphere 8000 miles in diameter to fit in our palm. This can be daunting. And indeed it was daunting as I struggled to find support for my long-standing belief of engagement. The crux of my argument revolved around three little Latin words prominently etched by the US treasury on all our coins: E Pluribus Unum. Out of many, one. What better to argue in favor of small politics than a phrase that, in many respects, has inspired the structure of our political system? I thought that by narrowing my vision and focusing on smaller areas that a better whole could be created. Apparently I was the only one who held this belief as my paper was heavily criticized for being shallow, narrow minded and crude.

It seemed my entire set of beliefs about how to engage with the public sphere specifically and life more broadly had been undermined. Then I thought about Pasquaney. We're a pretty small community with some fairly large aims. We are also from many backgrounds and come together to form a special, tight knit community over the course of seven weeks. Indeed it's our small size that allows us to foster those intimate, life long friendships and develop other intangibles that would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop in a larger setting. Perhaps thinking small isn't so bad after all.

In economics we use models to illustrate, albeit simply, how the real world works. Here too our focus is narrowed and as we keep all other things constant, we can better understand the larger whole. So what does that mean about camp? Can Pasquaney be a model to understand something bigger? At camp we strip ourselves down to the essentials and make it easier to focus our efforts elsewhere. It is nearly plausible that camp was founded on the Confucian truth that "life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

It's true. Think of all the possessions you thought you could never live without: your phone, computer, facebook, twitter, xbox; all characteristics of our so-called "modern age." Now think where they are right now. None of them are here. In their stead we learn to communicate, both orally and in writing. We learn of sportsmanship and competition, how to be a leader and a listener, how to stay organized and do things thoroughly. That's a formidable list for such a small place.

As things become even more difficult when we're not at camp, we must ask, what happens during the other 45 weeks of the year? Our scope expands. We're expected to contend in a larger place where routines are less predictable and the number of people to whom you can look for a good example dwindles. At camp, we know what to expect and can plan to act accordingly because camp is the same every year, with slight revisions. But when the safety net of camp dissolves as we leave, we are asked to bring to the fore the same behavior we exhibit at camp. The outside world makes us question the convictions Pasquaney has imbued in us. Our only protection against being intimidated out of our true selves and encouraged to conform to others' dictates is the practice of modeling our values everyday, both here and away from camp: trust, honesty, teamwork, hard work, leadership, to name a few.

In everything we do at camp, we practice these values in tangible ways. We do this by simplifying and limiting our scope to focus our attention on those aspects of ourselves that are easily overlooked, subdued or silenced. The regularity of camp's schedule allows us to practice these skills. The size of camp gives us the confidence they will work. Whether you believe it or not, the act of bringing Pasquaney home with us starts on opening day. With each day we gain more confidence in the life Pasquaney teaches us to live. We gain confidence every time we help refine someone else's tennis stroke, volunteer for kitchen duty or turn a bowl. Every time we personify the Pasquaney spirit, it is reinforced in us. Reinforcement then portends habit, and, well, we all know what happens when we sow one of those.