

Richard G. P. DeSalvo
'Good News'
Tree Talk 06/27/08
Camp Pasquaney

Have you heard the news? "What news?" you might ask. Our C.O.D. Ed Hill didn't exactly provide us with our morning economic briefing, nor did he mention the latest on climate change or what's happening in the Middle East. I didn't hear any of the local police blotter or even a sound bite about the woman from Kansas who just gave birth to twin komodo dragons. Okay, that didn't actually happen, but you get my point. Here at camp we seem to be isolated from the world around us and out of touch with the latest headlines and gossip.

Still, I try my best to follow the news, especially when I'm away from camp. This past year there's been a lot to pay attention to. The Olympic Games and the Economic Crisis and President Obama's historic election all had me following along more closely than ever before. And because I was living in China, far away from my friends and family, I felt it was important to follow the news as best I could. This wasn't hard to do; in today's day and age, when we're not sleeping, we're usually surrounded by some source of mass media. With the Internet, satellite TVs and radios, text messaging and tweets on our iPhones, the news is always there. We talk about it at school, at the dinner table, with the checkout lady at the grocery store. "Have you heard the news?" is usually one of the first things we'll say when we see someone.

While I realize it is good and important to stay up to date, doesn't it seem like most of the news out there is bad news? Doesn't it seem like the stories we spend the most time thinking about are stories of human conflict and wrongdoing, or messages of suspicion and suffering and things that have gone terribly wrong?

It sounds strange but it's true: it's usually the most negative stories that grab the headlines, sell papers, and increase television ratings. To quote the psychologist Michael Gazziniga, who studies the science behind what makes humans unique, "Material for the evening news is everywhere, and for some reason we want to know about the problems, not the joys of the human condition." As a result, sometimes digesting recent events can be disheartening and downright depressing.

When I was a camper, I didn't pay too much attention to the news. I was roughly one billion times more interested in my friends, my Nintendo 64, my summer vacation and hanging out with my older brother, Andrew. Yet even then I was aware of the bad news. I'd glance at the headlines on my Dad's morning paper, see images while channel surfing, or overhear adults murmuring about the downbeat and scary reports of the day. Always war, crime, scandal, unethical behavior. I picked up on the tone.

With so many of us connected to the news so closely I worry this negative tone takes a toll on us and as Nick Haslett would say, "pulls the wool over our optimism." It can take a toll on our morale and spirit, and our happiness and hope for the future. We are social beings and we like to

talk about the news. Think about the millions of people everyday passing around the gloomy news, only producing more gloominess.

So hey, 7 weeks here at Camp Pasquaney, away from all that negativity and cynicism, what could be better? Well, truth be told, it's not that simple. In the book I mentioned earlier, Gazziniga points out that we humans have a tendency to focus on the negative in all aspects of life. He notes how we'll pick angry faces out of a crowd faster than happy faces. And to quote, "One cockroach or worm will spoil a good plate of food, but a delicious meal sitting on top of a pile of worms will not make the worms edible... one tiny smudge in a rare book will bring down its value."

Even at Pasquaney we can get caught up in our own bad news: flaws, problems, what went wrong. I know all too well how a strikeout at the end of a ballgame can overshadow a few good hits earlier on; during inspections, we're also quick to spot a poorly folded shirt, yet we less often notice and acknowledge a well-organized box or someone who's worked hard on bunk alignment. I'm sure we can all think back to a time here at camp or back home when we chose to put down a friend rather than praise any one of his good qualities. The ultimate example of course comes on hikes days. As a younger boy my Wednesdays seemed pretty sour. I usually spent most of my energy dwelling on the negative: how tired and hungry I was, how very far I was from the top, how pointless an activity it seemed to be in the first place.

It's okay to point out things that are wrong in our lives or with the world. I truly appreciate the fact that in the countries we all come from, the media is allowed to educate us on problems like global warming and violations of human rights. I will always support you when you practice having a seeing eye by pointing out an untucked shirt or calling a friend on a lapse in judgment.

But don't let a seeing eye be a biased eye. To borrow from Thich Naht Hanh, as Mr. Vinnie did last Sunday, instead of always spotting flaws and asking, "What's wrong?" let's start seeking out the good by stopping to ask, "What's not wrong?" So you have to sweep Southern Dana—what's not wrong? You lost your obstacle race—but what's not wrong? Says Thich Naht Hanh, "We would be much happier if we tried to stay in touch with the healthy, joyful seeds inside of us and around us... If we block ourselves, if we stay in the prison of our sorrow, we will not be in touch with these healing elements." On a rainy day a seeing eye can lift spirits by pointing out that we are after all here together, happy and healthy. However, you don't always have to wait for the rain. A job well done, an act of kindness, and an all-in-all good ballgame are all wonderful things we should share with each other on even the most normal of days.

At Pasquaney we have an amazing opportunity to dwell on the positives in our lives and to uncover all that is certainly not wrong. This is the reason I come back here every summer. In my life it has been Pasquaney more than any other place that has taught me how to recognize and acknowledge the good news.

Have you heard the news? What news, you might ask. The good news. What's the good word? Last Sunday we all sat together as a community in the pouring rain for an entire chapel service. We had every reason to gripe and be miserable and yet somehow when Mr. Vinnie asked us about the opportunities we had before us this summer, we were able to reflect on quite a few. Even more amazing, about half of the responses came from our new boys, who at that point I

don't even think knew what sunshine on the Pasquaney hillside looked like. Maybe it had something to do with the 73 older boys who went out of their way to greet them on opening day with a handshake and a warm welcome. I'll never forget my first day as a camper in 1998. The lane had washed out due to torrential rains. I didn't know what to think of Pasquaney until my Wilson counsellor, John Allen, rushed up to me and said, "Man, this dorm is stacked." I doubt he remembers this but right then he set a positive tone for my entire summer. We were stacked; nothing could go wrong. Six of us from that Wilson dorm stayed until our 16 year-old summer and five later became counsellors. It all began on a far rainier day than any we've had so far this summer.

In conclusion, sometimes we think that what we read at home in the papers and see on TV is reality. The language and tone of magazines like Newsweek and websites like newyorkytimes.com is grown up and serious, but don't believe these information sources come close to broadcasting all the news that is truly out there. Our news will never get picked up and spread worldwide and only a few of us will go on to make headlines ourselves. But none of us would be here if what we do on this hillside wasn't necessary. We celebrate small acts and connect with each other in simple, positive ways. Instead of fear and calamity we build a strong community around our successes and our positive outlook. The sky is not always falling. There are so many stories and feelings and thoughts of goodness that occur each moment that are wonderful and refreshing. The good news is everywhere and our communities at home need us to spread the word.

Thanks.