

Will Newell
'Living in the Moment'
Tree Talk 08/01/08
Camp Pasquaney

On August 19, 2005, I stood for the first time on Mt. Zealand, a wooded mountaintop in the White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire, surrounded by my family. Reaching this obscure summit, barely over 4000 feet in height, marked my completion of all of the peaks in New Hampshire over 4000 feet. I expected it to feel like an accomplishment, but frankly it didn't. It was the process, not the completion that was what made that accomplishment such a memorable experience.

I think for many of us, certainly for me, life can often feel like a string of goals and deadlines. We are taught to focus on the future, the completions rather than the processes. Is it the next paper due, or your upcoming test? An important game, exciting plans for the weekend? It is not something we can easily escape, even at camp. A tennis match or watersports competition? Dinner because you're hungry? A treetalk that probably should have been written days before you started it? From the monumental to the mundane, much of life is easily occupied with a focus on future performance or activity.

Until that summer day in 2005, a fair amount of my mental time was given to thoughts of completing that 4000 footers list. Each summit was in many ways, no matter how beautiful, another check on a list. Internally I shied away from hiking mountains I'd already hiked because I just "didn't need them." And yet my summiting of Zealand, if it could even be called that, was unremarkable. I only remember finishing so well because it was so unremarkable. My most indelible memories of hiking aren't of that completion, but of other ascents that were often nothing special at the time. Of summiting Jefferson to the rising sun on Long Walk 2005. Hiking from Galehead to Carrigan Notch on backpacking in 2004. The first time I did Cardigan in 2001. These are the mountains that I remember as if I hiked them yesterday. There is much to be said for concentrating on the ends, the completions of life. It keeps you focused, on task. But what are we missing by living our lives this way? In some ways, everything.

By looking to the future, it is all too easy to miss the world that is right in front of us. In 2006, a crew I rowed on went to the Youth National Championships, and ended up doing quite well. And yet, the parts of the season I remember the best are the pieces we did in training and the boat breakfasts at the local diner on the days we had double practices. This is not to say the trip and race were no fun, but there is so much more to that experience than those final days in Cincinnati. That I was somehow able to allow myself to enjoy those moments, to enjoy practice alongside the stress of preparing for a major race, is what made that experience so special.

The human brain is an eminently capable organism, but even it is only capable of so much. To put too much focus on what lies ahead is to deny ourselves the experiences that lie before our eyes. We lose the small joys and experiences that lend definition to our lives. We lose opportunities by prescribing our lives with goals to a future that cannot be

predicted. This is why we are urged from time to time to “live in the moment.” We are rarely capable of predicting with any degree of accuracy which moments in our lives will be the ones that we will cherish forever. How many times have you acted spontaneously and been gratefully afterwards that you did? There is much to be gained from your crazy schemes and plans, and yet they cannot be planned. How many times have you lost an hour or day or perhaps even a week in worrying about something that’s looming on the horizon? I know this often happens to me. The day flies by in anticipation and becomes nothing but a blur, perhaps even time wasted. Usually whatever it was I was anticipating wasn’t all that bad, but even if it was, we as humans don’t have the luxury to waste time. We are only given so much. We had seven weeks this summer. We’re down to one, plus a weekend. Can you afford to waste a few days, or even hours, between now and water sports? Is that the memory that you really want to create as we finish up our camp season? As some of you finish up your camp career?

Instead, choose to focus on the now, on what you can do in the moment. It’s all that you have to enjoy right now. The best moments in life cannot be planned. They can only be experienced. So take this time at camp to practice. We live here at Pasquaney with many of the normal pressures of life put off for the summer. Relationships are easier, our responsibilities more focused, and we have a hillside full of friends who are here to help us with those responsibilities. Our burdens are lighter and this gives us the opportunity to push ourselves. As we become more adept at balancing the future and the now, at taking things one step at the time and devoting our whole selves to what is at hand, the action itself becomes easier and easier. So affect what you can now, and practice leaving what you have no power over for later. To me, this is what living in the moment is all about. Not only does practicing this kind of living make me less likely to miss out on opportunities or to not experience memories I will regret missing out on later, but I feel it makes me better at what I do.

Devoting more of myself to what I am doing at the moment helps me to find success in what I’m doing. It sounds straight forward enough. It’s no stretch to think that concentrating on a test will make you perform better. But in my experience such levels of concentration can be hard to attain, especially over two or three hours. My high school track coach used to tell us that school was for school and track was for track, and mixing the two would just make us worse at both. It takes practice, but he’s right. So remember. Camp is for camp and baseball is baseball. Don’t worry about what you’ll be eating for dinner the next time you’re at bat or you’ll miss and get a strike, which will do you no good. Unless of course you’re so out of it you forget to swing and it’s a ball. But counting on chance is usually not the wisest of plans.

Our goals and responsibilities are important, but we should not allow them to become so overwhelming that we are unable to function effectively in the present. Take the time to concentrate, to be present in the moment. Let your mind and body share their focus. By denying the now of importance, by putting too much weight on the future, we miss out on the world around us. Have the courage to put your energy on the immediate things. Prepare, but don’t preoccupy. As we are reminded every year in chapel,

Yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today well-lived, makes
every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well therefore to this day.

You have today. Use it. Thank you.