

Harrison Hill  
'Loneliness and Community'  
Tree Talk 07/28/08  
Camp Pasquaney

This is a tree talk about you and me. It's about loneliness and community—being isolated and together. It's about us—as individuals and as partners.

It was the perfect job: A personal assistant internship for one Broadway's highest-profile producers. Everything about the way I had landed the position had been so serendipitous; the world seemed to be shouting at me—here! It's your shot! Finally, you get some entry point into the theater business! You see, I had volunteered for an organization associated with this producer, and had randomly come in contact with some of the higher ups in his main office. I sucked in a deep breath and asked the question—"can I work for you this summer?" The answer was "yes," and I was set. "Sure," I thought, "I'll be missing a season at Pasquaney," but this was simply too good of an opportunity to pass up.

And it was quite an opportunity: Working in that Times Square skyscraper I got the dirt on big stars, I helped birth new shows, and I learned how to make a mean chai tea.

But I was alone. I was accustomed to the warm company of my school friends, but that summer had sucked them all out of New York City. Mine was a black hole of solitude that was stifling and surprisingly overpowering. I had 8 million neighbors, but no one to hang out with, no one to talk to, no one to visit.

Don't get me wrong: I've always believed that solitude affords a kind of reflection time and breathing room totally necessary to survival.

But this was a different kind of solitude; this was an emptiness, a totally uncaring and lifeless independence. Sure, I had roommates, but when they weren't doing drugs they sat around staring at the tube—stupidly grunting first-grade level conversations stories. This mindlessness infected the one place in New York City I could lay claim to—my dorm room. Their presence only reminded me of how lonely I was, that I was incapable even of communicating with the guys sleeping only feet away from me.

I remember calling home one night from my fluorescent hallway. (My roommates, you see, were busy swapping increasingly idiotic stories over the din of the TV in our room.) Nothing particularly bad had happened, but the overpowering feeling that I was alone in the world couldn't let go of my chest. It was as if the muscle right below my sternum had been knifed—and not by a quick jab, but by a slow, hard cut. School friends working at the beach; family vacationing in Maryland; the worst thing about this feeling was the knowledge that it wasn't an illusion. I was actually alone in America's biggest city.

Or was I?

I believe in many universal human emotions; this particular loneliness is certainly one of them. It might sound odd: I know now that I wasn't alone in my loneliness. I have found some proof of this in many of the great works of art that chronicle this feeling, often with heartbreaking accuracy and skill.

One of the most perceptive accounts of loneliness I've ever encountered comes from Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. This mind-blowing novel masquerades as fiction, but is actually profoundly real. Tolstoy's grip on what it is to be human is so shockingly accurate and straightforwardly put, you feel as if you the reader are being profiled. When I first encountered the passage I will read in a moment, I identified with Alexey Alexandrovich, a man isolated by the certainty that his wife no longer cares for him:

To him, knowing her, knowing that whenever he went to bed five minutes later than usual, she noticed it, and asked him the reason; to him, knowing that every joy, every pleasure and pain that she felt she communicated to him at once; to him, now, to see that she did not care to notice his state of mind, that she did not care to say a word about herself, meant a great deal. He saw that the inmost recesses of her soul, that had always hitherto lain open before him, were closed against him. More than that, he saw from her tone that she was not even perturbed at that, but as it were said straight to him: "Yes, it's shut up, and so it must be, and will be in future." Now he experienced a feeling such as a man might have, returning home and finding his own house locked up.

Haven't you felt this before? Haven't you gone up to an old friend or someone you love, only to find your key doesn't fit, that you can't access each other the way you once could? Where conversation was once simple and easy, it's now forced and insincere; where you once felt partners, you now feel utterly dispensable. Or maybe, like me last summer, you don't even have a person to try a key in.

I know I have felt this way. I want to access that something of a person I had at one point, but I just can't seem to grab any longer.

Which leaves me—and, I'm sure, you—in a daze: What are we to do? How are we to escape the loneliness that comes with growing up and being with people we just can't seem to "crack?"

The Anna Karenina passage from a moment ago has something of an answer. I'll read the completed end of this passage again: "Now he experienced a feeling such as a man might have, returning home and finding his own house locked up. 'But,' thought Alexey Alexandrovitch, 'Perhaps the key may yet be found.'"

Indeed! Perhaps the key may yet be found. I said several minutes ago that this was a tree talk about loneliness and community, about individuals and partners. I now come to the standard "here at camp" part of this tree talk, where that second half fits in. "Here at camp" I think a kind of "super key" exists. I don't know how it works, but somehow it makes people capable of picking even the most unwelcome or hesitant of locks, swinging open oceans of understanding and friendship.

If the ache of loneliness is universal, then I hope this Pasquaney superkey is universal for you all as well. My first exposure to this “super key” openness my summer here as a new boy was deeply revelatory: I simply had no idea I could have friends that meant so much to me. Tasting the intensity of camp relationships and then getting thrown back into civilian life was jarring. My first dinner back home was quickly interrupted when I started bawling uncontrollably at the understanding that I wouldn’t see “the guys” for another ten months. My parents looked on curiously; perplexed by the magnitude of feeling I had at leaving people I’d known for seven short weeks.

But that moment of panic was just as much a time for celebration as for tears. Those seven weeks were seven weeks of pure community, where I fully expressed my individuality by working as a part of the whole. Sure, it was only a couple weeks, but thank goodness that I had them... that I do have them!

And maybe that’s what this is about—we have seven weeks here to look at the ground and find the key—to pick it up and go to someone else, to approach them free from judgment and peripheral affairs, only with concern for others as individuals... as PARTNERS.

The lowest common denominator at camp is such an open and pleasant and real undertone that, hey, “the key may yet be found.” With so many people working for so much good, those locks are already decently oiled and more receptive and maybe even already fully unlatched. It’s a platform so different from the size and anonymity of New York I felt last summer. It’s a playing field where nothing but the best is expected and grown.

Yes, we are often alone. Yes, we are our own people, we function independently and sometimes feel a wave of isolation washing the pit of our souls and pouring from our eyes.

BUT: We are together now. In this moment here on Tree Talk Ridge, you are not alone. Neither am I. This means—in some cosmic Pasquaney way I can’t hope to explain—that we are never really alone. We exist in a community that is forever open to its people, always pushing for greater connection. This means that my emptiness last summer wasn’t really total, because I had been a part of this community and was, by definition, bound to it for life. Both it and I weren’t going anywhere.

Will Kryder made an interesting comment during council camp. Looking around at a group of councilors sitting in a circle just hanging out, he noted how differently Pasquaney friends and other friends interacted. Free from blaring TVs and telephones, we Pasquaney men were getting to experience uncluttered face to face human contact—the most fundamental base point of any relationship.

What a privilege to escape loneliness for this togetherness. Don’t believe it exists here? Look around. The living proof is sitting next to you.

Thank you.