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'The Gift of Attention: A Meditation on Listening'

Tree Talk 07/07/08

Camp Pasquaney

I took a class this spring at Amherst called Science, Values, and Spiritual Traditions. This class focused on the rise of a split between science and religion through history, but more memorably, had a meditation portion to it. I do not know if any one of you has ever meditated, and I had not before this class, but I found the silence and practice of deep, extended awareness to be relaxing and rewarding. Meditation offered me a period of reflection and thought during which I could concentrate on listening to and developing a deeper awareness of the world around me.

In class after our weekly meditation sessions, we would have a short conversation about our experiences. Julian, the boy in my class who to my great satisfaction always drank what looked like green sludge from a recycled water bottle labeled "U-Mass spring water," would always end meditation sessions by explaining how his essence had been dancing through a field of wildflowers on a softly lit spring morning. Julian would then explain how his essence had met the wind, which was not actually the wind at all but the essential aspera of all living beings. They usually shook hands or danced.

My meditation never dissolved my soul into a soft rivulet running down the mountain of existence, but it did train me to be more relaxed and open in my approach to life. As I began to practice patience, silence and listening, I began to see how rare these traits have become in a world where action and results are held in such high esteem. I began to notice in class and around school how many people, including me, were so preoccupied with their own ideas and self-importance that they seldom slowed down to listen thoughtfully to others.

I was on Back 40 last week. At one point, I was talking with one of the boys and he said, "Activities at camp are really fun but there is definitely something more to camp. I want to make sure I am not too focused on activities so I spend my summer correctly". I was a little caught off guard by this insightful remark. Many of us sense the extra layer, that which is beyond individual achievement, but aren't sure how to begin to reach for it in a natural way. This camper's declaration made me think how I would advise him to act in order to help him find, as he phrased it, a way to live out the summer correctly. I decided that the best advice that I could give him was: take the time to listen.

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing. Listening is as necessary to every conversation as is language. Yet, it seems that this art is much more elusive than its counterpart. I have met plenty of good talkers: I can think of eight fabulous ones I just spent a week with in the woods, but it is not often that I meet someone who loves to listen. And it must be love, for a good listener is one who treats your conversation with true interest, empathy, and focus. To listen effectively, you do not have to agree with the people who you are listening to, but you do have to respect them, care about what they have to say, and be open to the possibility that they can teach you something.

One of the reasons that I love Pasquaney and feel so comfortable here is because I feel many of the people here value what I have to say. At school my friends are often distracted with another conversation or work or the television. Their lack of focus translates into my reluctance to share my deepest thoughts. At camp, I know that no matter what my comment people will consider it for its merits and will respect me. It is very liberating to feel this way, and I believe it is the main reason camp is a place where one can be one's best self.

Sometime this summer, make sure you talk to Mike Hanrahan. That man listens the hell out of every conversation. Whether you are twelve, twenty, or older than Doug, Mike pays close attention every time you approach him with a problem, idea, question or observation no matter how trivial. His ability to give himself completely to a conversation is one of the ways that Mike has served as a powerful role model for me. He has mastered the art of listening, and he is generous with his gift.

To prize listening may seem to some to contradict camp's teachings of leadership and initiative. Do not be fooled. Listening is as powerful a tool of influence as language. One of the most impressive people that I know is Rick Wagoner, the Chairman and CEO of General Motors. He has been under unbelievable pressure over the last few years as he leads GM through a financial crisis that some speculate will bring the demise of what remains the largest car company in the world. Yet, whenever I see Mr. Wagoner at a lacrosse game or at his house, regardless of the type of day he had at the office, he always is genuinely interested in me and my life. He never fails to ask how school or soccer or lacrosse is going. What impresses me most also defines Mr. Wagoner's leadership style and allows him to lead selflessly and effectively. He is an egoless leader, known for following the path that is the best for the company regardless of who proposed it.

Listening is not a new idea, I believe that it was invented around the time of the grunt and somewhere between the hand gesture and the simple machine, but I can not be sure. Like so many old, fading things, like the bugle, humor, manners, and values, camp has given us an opportunity to keep listening alive. Whether it is in the silence of prayers, gatherings around the table in Mem Hall while listening to a story from a fellow camper's day before giving an account of your own, being with your dorm mates during circles or just around camp, we have the opportunity here, removed from technological distractions, to take a real interest in the people we are with. You may be surprised if an old dorm mate who you thought was nothing like you fascinates you with his opinions. You learn as you get older that the most interesting people are those who are not just like you. Listen for those people. Take a moment also on the way down to soak to listen to the birds or hear the wind through the trees. We are nestled in a paradise here. Do not miss its beauty.

It is not easy to stop and listen. It means subordinating your own interests or thoughts to those of another. We all want to be the next to tell a great story, give the best advice or make people laugh. It is hard to control our own urge for recognition.

I want to read a story that was sent to me from the Wall Street Journal written by J. Bottum that captures the power and importance of taking the time to listen.

Late afternoon on Christmas Eve, the year I was 11, my father took me with him across the river. I can't remember what the urgency was, but he needed some papers signed by a rancher who lived over on the other side of the Missouri from Pierre. So off we headed, west across the bridge and north through the river hills.

From the moment she'd spotted us turning off the highway, Mrs. Harmon must have been piling the table. I remember eating cinnamon buns crusted with sugar, while Mr. Harmon and his two tall sons told us about the coyote tracks they'd found that morning. It was the cold that made the coyotes risk it, scenting the trash cans, probably, and the livestock had been skittish all day. But then Mrs. Harmon began to yell, "Jim, Jim, the horses are out." And in a tangle of arms and jackets, we poured out to herd back the frightened animals.

By the time we were done, however, four expensive quarter-horses were loose on the prairie. Cursing, Mr. Harmon climbed into his pickup and headed north along the highway while my father drove off to the south. Mrs. Harmon took it more calmly. She went inside to telephone the neighbors, and the boys began to saddle three horses to ride out and look.

I can't have ridden far through the Christmas hills—maybe three or four miles—when I came over a rise and spotted one of the horses, skittering in front of a worn farmhouse. Standing in the yard was a woman, a rope in one hand while her other hand was help up, cautiously, toward the horse. She was hatless and tiny, hardly bigger than I was, with a heavy riding coat hanging down below her knees.

She seemed very old to me. Yellow light streamed out on the cold ground from the one lit window of the house. As I rode down, she waved me back, talking to the horse in the gentlest, lightest patter, as though nothing much had ever really been wrong and, anyway, everything was all right, now. He bobbed back and forth, nearer and nearer, until he touched her open hand with his steaming nose and she eased the rope over his neck.

"Bea Harmon called," she said, handing me the rope. "She told me you were all out looking for this boy. They often come to me, you know. He'll go along quietly now."

Her eyes were quick and black. "I don't see many people, here about," she chirruped, like a winter bird. "Come in and get warm. I'll make some coffee. No, you're a little young for coffee. I'll put some water on for tea, and there are the cookies I made in case someone came by."

But I was proud of bringing back one of the strays and wouldn't wait. I shied away from her outstretched hand and galloped back.

Sometimes you catch sight of a turn leading off into the distance, a dirt track or a country road at right angles to the highway you're on, as you drive along in the straight, miles-long line you see only in the West. And you know you'll never go up it, never come back to find where it leads, and always there remains a sense, as you roll past, that maybe this time you should have turned and followed that line up into the distant hills.

Her hair was the same thin shade of gray as the weather-beaten pickets of the fence around her frozen garden. She had a way with horses, and she was alone on Christmas Eve.

There is little in my life I regret as much as that I would not stay for just one cookie, just one cup of tea.

I hope that you all take the time this summer to pause on the highway to individual achievement. Have the courage to take a selfless interest in the world. You may be surprised by how your willingness to listen can strengthen your connection to the world around you, bring joy to the community you live in and give you the happiness of friendship.

While I still have you all captive, I would like to say, play more tennis. Also, thank you all for listening.