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'Adversity'
Tree Talk 07/01/2011
Camp Pasquaney

This year I had the opportunity to work as a one-on-one aide with a few different special needs students in the local school district. The last boy that I worked with was a third grader named Michael. Michael has Autism, which as some of you may know is part of a spectrum of disorders that affect communication, sensory inputs, and social interaction. I spent three months working tirelessly to build a relationship with Michael. I came to understand not only his needs and wants, but also the complex way in which he relates to the world. Despite the fact that Michael only speaks in short words or phrases, by the end of our time together I could have a complete, complicated social interaction with him. I had become an expert on Michael. Mission accomplished, right? I had worked hard to connect with this boy and I had figured it out. Yeah right. Two days before the end of the year I was proven painfully wrong. We'd had a great day together. We had done some good work. We'd played in the gym. By all accounts Michael and I were in a great place. We were just settling in to the classroom for our last activity of the day when Michael started throwing a tantrum worse than I had ever seen before. I had no idea what he wanted; he couldn't express to me what he needed. I was at a total loss as to what to do. All of those feelings of success and accomplishment had been dashed. I left school that day completely discouraged. The reality of working with Autism is that every day something different and complicated gets thrown at you. There is no way to define ultimate success when you are working with a disorder that changes the ground rules so quickly. I went back to school the next day with a renewed urge to do better, to forge a deeper connection with this boy. While I can't say that I succeeded, I know that our relationship is now deeper and more profound because of those last two days of school.

The reality of the world is that every day you are confronted with something different, complicated, and challenging. Sometimes it is easy to surmount the challenge and continue on trying to do your best. Every once in a while, though, you are confronted with adversity that is truly life shattering. Some of you have already experienced this. I wasn't confronted with such a huge challenge until my third year of college. I lived an extremely privileged childhood, not only in a financial sense, but also in the sense that I was successful at pretty much anything that I put a concerted effort into. I graduated from high school second in my class and one of the better actor/singers in the school. I earned my Eagle Scout and became the Senior Patrol Leader in my Boy Scout Troop. I finished my camper career as a COI and headed back to the hillside as a counsellor. After a banner summer I went Yale University to embark on my next major adventure. I arrived at Yale and within the first month had joined my top choice a cappella group. I even joined the varsity crew team as a walk-on. With a lot of work, some luck, and a huge amount of support I had built myself, seemingly, the perfect life: a pristine alabaster tower unadulterated by true adversity or major imperfection. Little did I know that in three years that perfect life would be smashed to pieces by a wrecking ball swinging through my life.

I spent my time at Yale trying to bring the values of community I learned here to the a cappella group I had chosen at school. In many ways I was very successful at helping to build a closeness and a fraternity amongst my friends, but as we approached the end of Junior year the prospect of

selection into two exclusive senior groups loomed ahead. I had spent three years wanting to graduate from my so-called underclassmen a cappella group to the more exclusive all senior group, the Yale Whiffenpoofs. I also had hopes of being asked to join one of Yale's infamous secret senior societies. Both groups rejected me. I can vividly recall the moment I found out that I had not been selected. Exclusion: this was something that I had never really experienced on a large scale. Sure, I had had many of those little experiences in middle and high school where people left me out of activities, but I had never experienced such profound neglect, especially from a community to which I had devoted myself so fully. I became paralyzed, unable to make that choice to continue trying. I had learned at camp that when you fail at something it is just another step in the process of success; that if you pick up and try again with renewed vigor and ingenuity eventually you would find success. But the disappointment in myself, the hurt caused by that exclusion, and the absence of a second chance at my dream were all too overwhelming. My self-esteem plummeted, my friendships and indeed my ability to connect with others atrophied. That perfect shiny skyscraper of a life I had built for myself lay in soot-stained piles of rubble, unrecognizable, and I didn't even have the tools to consider starting to rebuild.

After an agonizing senior year spent mostly in self-imposed solitude I graduated and retreated to the only place I could find comfort: New Hampshire and Pasquaney. It was six months before I was even able to start rebuilding my life, and then another year before I was truly able to let go of the failed future that I had been mourning for so long. I learned that feeling your emotions fully is the only way to actually address them. I learned that there can be a fundamental difference between how you feel and how you believe you should feel. While your choices and actions can be controlled to conform to your set of values, you cannot force yourself to feel the 'right' emotion. You have to give credence to whatever emotions you have and then choose to move on.

The message of this tree talk is not that life is hard, though certainly it is. It is not even a story of triumphant resilience in the face of life-shattering adversity. No matter what happens in your life positive or negative, it isn't over. There is no single end goal, no definitive metric for success. You have to decide what type of person you want to be and work toward that character in every moment. It is important to have a plan, it's important to set tangible goals and work to reach them, but those goals and those plans must be subject to change. Opportunities will be given to you and they will also disappear in front of your very eyes. When that happens, let your self mourn that loss. Let yourself get angry, sad, afraid even, but then remember what your real goals are. Alongside that set of tangible achievements you have planned for your self, you also must have a set of goals that define the type of person you want to be. These goals are not subject to the whim and injustice of the 'real world', but rather stand firm in the face of adversity. Choose to be a kind person, an understanding person, an honest one. Informed, creative, flexible, organized, motivated, cheerful, devoted, forgiving, hardworking, reliable, sincere, trusting. The list can be whatever you want it to be. This summer use your time here to define some character traits that you want to embody. Look to your peers for guidance and inspiration. Take a few moments out of everyday to think about the people you interacted with that day. What made the positive interactions so good? What made the negative ones challenging? What ideals do you want your character to embody? Consider your choice and then use that set of ideals to guide every decision you make. Evaluate every act you do according to who you want to be. Those acts will grow into habits and those habits into a

character. It is these ideals and not the tangible plans you have for yourself that will determine your destiny. Undoubtedly you will face setbacks and challenges in your life, but if you have set out who you want to be, the sometimes overwhelming peaks and troughs of the logistics of your life become less important. You will be able to persevere, knowing that whatever the future has in store, you will become the person you set out to be. The key aspect is to choose to sow that next act in every moment of your life.

Two years ago, surrounded by the destruction of my former life, the only thing I could do was sow small acts to slowly and painfully move towards the person I want to be. I am nowhere near finished and I expect I never will be. As I rebuild my life it may be less shiny, less ornate than the seeming perfection I had when I graduated high school, but there is one thing that I am sure of: its my life and its gonna be awesome. Thank you.