

# Pasquaney *archives*

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Townley Chisholm's P'03 Sermon

Nothing lives forever.

Can you tell what this is?

It's the skull of a greyhound, a dog that belonged to a friend of mine who kept the skeleton after the dog died. I used to think I might do the same with my dog, Walter, who was an Irish wolfhound, but when he died this Memorial Day I found that I loved him too much. I just didn't have the heart.

Old campers and counsellors will remember Walter as a big old dog who smelled bad. I remember him as a puppy, and as a young dog who ran like the overgrown greyhound that he was, with awesome straight-line acceleration. I remember taking him on canoe trips to Umbagog and the time he nearly turned the canoe over barking at a moose. I remember watching Isobel as a baby crawling all over him and putting raisins up his nose; when he couldn't take it anymore he would stand up and walk away. And I remember taking him on the 1995 Short Walk up the steep rocks of the Caps Ridge Trail on Jefferson one day and through the boulder caves of Mahoosuc Notch the next. By the time we got through the Notch, all four of his feet were bleeding, but he never complained as we finished the hike...and he ran with me 2 extra miles to get the van.

Walter died of old age at 10 and 1/2 - that's really old for a wolfhound. They usually don't live more than 6 or 8 years. And the last few weeks weren't great: he had trouble standing up and he had lots of diarrhea - all over the house - lots of times. There was nothing dignified or pleasant about his decline. But he died peacefully on the back porch and Amanda and I were there with him. I guess a dog can't ask for a better way to go.

Ten and a half years seems like a long time. Some of you are not much older than that now.

My wife thought that we should cremate Walter, but the kids wouldn't consider such a thing. They were very happy (and so was I) when Mr. Vinnie agreed to let me bury Walter beside the vegetable garden down by the front drive. As I dug his grave, I worked down through the organic layer of decayed plants and through the layer of loose sand and stones, and about three feet down I hit hardpan, lodgement till, which is an incredibly dense, wet paste of rock and soil that formed as glaciers ground and shaped this hillside 20,000 years ago. It has lain there ever since, trapping moisture, keeping the soil above it rich with mineral nutrients, and now acting as the bed on which Walter rests.

Twenty thousand years ago seems like a really long time ago. We have no historical or even legendary records of that time. Only the oldest cave paintings are as old. But on any clear night, we can go out on a star walk and point to the spot above the trees over Mem Hall where the Andromeda Galaxy rises above the horizon. Andromeda is the most distant celestial object that you can see with the naked eye. It lies 2.4 million light years away. In other words the light that we see coming from it tonight left that galaxy 2.4 million years ago...just as the first members of the genus Homo began making the first stone tools. All the humans who have ever lived have done so since that light left those stars.

What sense do we make of such immense spans of time and space? They cannot help but make us feel that our

lifetimes are brief moments and our existences insignificant. They force us to think about our own mortality and about how we should live to take full advantage of the time we have. The Roman poets Horace and Virgil captured these feelings well. Horace wrote, "The years as they come bring many blessings; many do they take as they go." And somewhere Virgil wrote, "Death plucks me by the sleeve and says, 'Live! I am coming!'"

Camp is all about choosing how we want to live. This question is exactly why we are here. In making that choice we must face 3 fundamental questions: 1. how to treat other people; 2. how to deal with losing the people we love; and 3. how to deal with our own deaths. I think that belief in God helps with all three questions, though not, perhaps, in obvious ways.

How should I treat other people? Well, I can think of that other person as an insignificant nobody of no importance to me and then I can treat him the way Enron executives treated their employees or Saddam treated his people or the militias of Africa treat each other in Congo, Sudan, Liberia and too many other countries. But if I think of another person as a child of God and deserving of my respect and concern, then I cannot hurt him or take advantage of him. I am obliged to do what I can to help him. The central message of Pasquaney is that treating each other this way is not only morally right but also brings immediate, lasting benefits to whatever community adopts this value.

Question 2 is harder: how do we endure losing the people we love. One way or another we will lose everyone and everything and every place that we love. And the more we love that person, the greater our pain will be at his or her departure from us. The death of a pet is a foreshadowing of this feeling of loss. When a pet in our family dies, I try to remind my children to remember the happy times we shared with that pet and to try to pay more attention to the many mice, hamsters, cats and the parrot that remain in our household. What else can we do?

For anyone who has lain awake at night and thought about the terror of his own death, the 3rd question is the hardest one of all. We can accept with some equanimity a world without other people....but not a world without ourselves. How does belief in God help us deal with sorrow over another's death or the terror of our own? I don't know anyone who has escaped sorrow or death by believing in God. Religion would be far more popular if it worked that way.

Belief in God helps because it changes the questions. Instead of asking why these people must die and why I must die, I can wonder at a God who loves me and my loved ones enough to call us into creation. The miracle of existence replaces the despair of death, and I am left with that same sense of urgency that Mr. Vinnie talked about last Sunday: the urgency to make every moment count and to share as much love and laughter and understanding as I can with the people around me.

The sequence "Sow and act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." has always confused me. How do you do all of this sowing and reaping? I've been thinking about that question a lot, and I think that the saying and this camp's values ask us to make a choice: we can focus on our wants, our needs and our egos or we can trust that there is much good and much godliness in every human being; we can look for the good in other people and encourage that goodness; and we can celebrate the joys, the beauties and the sorrows of the days we share together.

And if you choose to look for the good in somebody, in me, for example, and if you are disappointed, I ask you to be patient and to keep looking. I may very well be doing the best that I can within the limits of my nature,

my personality and my past. Very often the behavior and character that you expect to find in someone is what you will find. Expect the best from me and I will do my best to deliver. Expect the worst and you may not be disappointed. As Shakespeare wrote, "It has been taught us from our mother's arms that he which is was wished until he were."

"Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things. Now abideth three things: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." Let us choose love.