

Will Elting  
'Awareness'  
Tree Talk 07/20/07  
Camp Pasquaney

Look around you. Take in this view. What you see now will never be exactly the same again. Every leaf, every blade of grass. All bursting with life. All in constant motion. Every second of every day a hundred million tiny things are going on all around us that make life possible on this planet. In the words of John Muir, "This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapor is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls." Ponder that for a moment.-- At Pasquaney, we are extremely lucky to live in a place of such natural beauty. We are surrounded by life in its most primal state, the living, breathing earth. Every day in this modern age people, knowingly or not, insulate themselves more and more from the earth. Right now, as we gather on this ancient ridge, untold millions sit on their couches, pacified by the warm glow of their televisions, more concerned with the lives of fictional people on a screen than with their own.

But this is not about those people. It is about us. We who choose a simple life, unburdened by useless gadgets and conspicuous consumerism. For these seven weeks, we cast off our iPods and CD players, cell phones and computers. Instead we choose to listen to real music and have real conversations. All the while living close to nature; lulled to sleep by the call of the loon and awoken by the dawn chorus of songbirds. Every week we hike through the White Mountains, one of the last great wildernesses on the east coast of this continent. It is important we not take these things for granted, for the future is uncertain. Every day, humanity pumps more and more chemicals into the air we breathe and the water we drink. Landfills grow ever larger as the wilderness shrinks and the government sits back, unwilling to believe that anything is wrong.

As some of you may know, I spent last semester with the National Outdoor Leadership School; hiking, sailing, and sea kayaking down the Baja Peninsula in Mexico. Baja is a jagged, intimidating place. It is a desert peninsula, with one of the driest climates in the world. There is little life in the desert, save the cacti that abound and the multitude of goats, the main source of income and food for the rancheros who live there. We stayed with several rancho families on the hiking section of the course, and they are some of the most hearty, rugged, and happiest people I have ever met. They live in what we would consider complete poverty, in clapboard houses and with virtually no electricity or running water. The first thing that struck me at these ranches was seeing solar panels on all the roofs. They supply electricity to a small pump that moved water from the well to a tank outside their house. They also use them in some cases to power small lights at night. I was amazed by the shrewdness of these people, and the way they work with their surroundings to live a contented life. They produce almost all their own food, between the goats, cattle and small gardens and orchards they kept. They work hard all day and at night gather around to tell stories, sing songs and play their guitars. They are, like us here, living a life that is very much hearty and true, in unison with their natural surroundings.

My experience in Mexico challenged me physically, mentally and philosophically. We lived outdoors for three consecutive months, with the same 11 people, with naught but tarps to protect

us from the weather. All we had for entertainment was each other, not unlike what we have here. I gained an appreciation and awareness of nature unlike I ever had before, and I also felt its pain more sharply than ever before. The Sea of Cortez is heavily over fished, and the numbers of all species of fish and other life are dwindling rapidly. The main problem is shrimp trawlers. They deploy a huge net that is weighted at the bottom and scrape the sea floor, effectively destroying the habitat of anything living on the bottom while catching hundreds of tons of “by-catch,” what the shrimpers call anything that is not shrimp that turns up in their net. This includes dolphins, sharks, octopi, and pretty much anything else that happens to be swimming by. Legislation has been put into place to stop this practice, but without proper funding and man power it has done very little to stop anything. Hearing this, and then later seeing these shrimp vessels in action saddened me greatly. It is a great travesty and one that is not limited to the sea of Cortez, in fact it happens all over the world. It just doesn’t make sense to me. How can you destroy the very thing that is supplying you with a way of life? There is an old Native American proverb that says “the frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives.” If we as a society would take that advice, it would be the first step to changing a lot of things.

But this isn’t about all that. It is about us, and what we can do and are doing to help this planet survive. -- The word ‘sustainable’ is being thrown around a lot these days in the media. Everyone claims to have sustainable this and sustainable that, but what does it even mean? The answer lies all around us.

Webster’s defines sustainability as “conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources.” Pasquaney is arguably the most sustainable place on Earth. While we are here, we produce very little waste, use essentially no electricity, and very little water. Take a moment and think about the amount of stuff you throw away every day at home. Now compare that to the amount of stuff you throw away each day here at camp. The difference should be obvious.

Here at Pasquaney we have a unique opportunity to live a life that is not only hearty and true but also environmentally sound. This is extremely important. The world needs leaders who understand what it means to live sustainably and who are willing to make drastic changes. I cannot urge you enough to keep this in mind throughout the rest of the summer as well as back home. Reduce. Reuse. Recycle. Stop and think before you buy that next pair of over-priced, over-marketed, over-packaged, custom Nike’s or the latest gadget promising to make your life easier for only five easy payments of \$29.99. And for god’s sake get outside. Enjoy the beauty that nature has given us. Drag yourself away from the television, that great cultural pacifier, and expand your horizons. Have real conversations, with real people. I will leave you with one final paragraph of advice from one of my favorite writers, Edward Abbey:

“Do not burn yourself out. Be as I am – a reluctant enthusiast... a part time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it is still there. So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, encounter the grizz, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely, mysterious and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your

brain in your head and your head firmly attached to your body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much: I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those deskbound people with their hearts in a safe deposit box and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this: you will outlive them”

Thank You.