

Townley W. Chisholm
"Playing the Hand Life Has Dealt You"
Chapel Talk – 07/08/12
Camp Pasquaney

Good morning. As many of you know, I lived for about 15 years with a blue-headed Pionus parrot named Mugsy. She was a lovely little thing with bright green plumage everywhere except for her blue head and brilliant red tail coverts, and, since she was hatched in this country in the pet trade, she never knew the freedom to bomb through the skies of the Amazonian jungle or to socialize with members of her own species. Parrots are highly intelligent, extremely social and very, very vocal; when they fly they do so at top speed and they are very difficult to watch or, presumably, to catch. Mugsy never had a chance to practice flying normally, so though she could fly, she couldn't take off from the ground and her landings were pretty ugly. I inherited the bird and her name from a boy who went off to college and whose mom couldn't take the noise anymore, and I took the best care of her I could, keeping her in my classroom, where she loved the noise and activity of the students, and bringing her to camp each summer.

In the summer of 2007, I lived in Northern Porches with Mugsy, the parrot, and Louis, the wolfhound, and with campers you know like Scott Crevoiserat, Josh Potash and Martin Millsbaugh. In the bunk next to me slept Luke Donovan, Kyle's brother, who loves animals and who put up with the parrot cage and with being licked in the face by the dog in the middle of the night. When Karen Gowen came to photograph the dorm, Luke wanted to hold Mugsy in the photo. So I gave him Mugsy to hold on his finger and we headed to Central Porches to sit on the bunks there and wait for Karen. As she entered the dorm, everybody stood up and Mugsy freaked out and flew.... but since Central Porches is so high off the ground she went a long way. The last I saw of her was a little green streak heading down the power line into the huge field of ferns below Mem Hall.

I looked for her for 2 hours, but she was tiny and exactly the same color as the ferns and she couldn't get off the ground to fly to me. I finally gave up and was walking back up the path to Porches when I heard "Hello! Hello!" from the side of the path and there came Mugsy, walking at top parrot speed toward me, talking as she came. She gave every sign of being just as glad to see me as I was to see her.

Last Labor Day, I had fed, watered and petted Mugsy and was working in my study next to her cage when my wife, Laura, came in and asked what Mugsy was doing on the floor of her cage. Well, she wasn't doing anything because she had died... of old age, I think. My youngest daughter, Sarah, tried to cheer me up by telling me that after all, Mugsy had had such a terrible life being cooped up with humans that she was better off dead, but I still missed her and I still do. She was such a perky, cheerful, indomitable presence in my life.

About 3 weeks ago I visited the historic dockyards in Portsmouth, England where HMS Victory is drydocked. The Victory was Admiral Horatio Nelson's flagship at the great battle of Trafalgar between the British fleet and the Combined French-Spanish fleet. The date was October 21st, 1805, Napoleon had massed his Grande Armee at Boulogne beside the English channel, and he

had ordered the Combined French-Spanish fleet to clear the channel of English ships so that his troop carriers could ferry his army across to invade England. But his Combined Fleet was here at Cadiz in Spain and that was where Nelson attacked once the Combined Fleet had left the safety of the harbor. Nelson had 26 ships-of-the-line which were massive sailing gun batteries with up to 100 cannons firing round iron cannonballs weighing 32 pounds apiece on the top two gundecks– or 42 pounds for the largest cannons on the third, lowest gundeck. The French admiral Villeneuve had 33 ships-of-the-line, including a Spanish monster that carried 144 cannons and was the largest warship of her day. Traditional naval battles had consisted of the opposing fleets sailing past each other in long lines and blasting away. Nelson chose to split his fleet into two lines and then to attack the Combined French-Spanish fleet perpendicularly, splitting it into 3 groups, a vanguard that would not be able to turn and join the battle very quickly at all and two smaller portions that would be destroyed before the front third of the fleet could join the battle.

Walking around the decks of the Victory gives you an excellent idea of what these battles were like. The ships-of-the-line were so massive that they rarely sank in battle – they could burn, blow up if fire reached the magazine or sink in a storm after the battle – but cannonballs didn't sink them. The Victory's hull was a layer of oak 2 feet thick at the water line but thinner at the higher decks and cannonballs fired at typical ranges of 25-50 yards went right through the hull, sending showers of lethal oak splinters flying in all directions. Gunners fired their cannons as a good target came to bear in front of their individual guns and they aimed for the cannons and especially the masts of opposing ships. The part of lower gundeck closest to the main mast was known as the "slaughterhouse" because it was the main target for enemy gunners trying to dismast and cripple the ship and to disable the big cannons of the lower gundeck. When you walk the lower gundeck of the Victory you can still see the repairs where the massive oak planks of the deck were gouged and battered by the cannonballs. What those cannonballs and splinters did to human flesh is hard to think about. By the way, 20 boys between the ages of 12 and 18 served on the Victory, including a midshipman named Richard Bulkeley.

Nelson's challenge at Trafalgar was that the larger French-Spanish fleet could have 2 or even 3 ships firing at one time at one of his warships. His great advantage was that the English gun crews were far more experienced, had better aim and could reload their cannons in about half the time required by the French and Spanish crews. Nelson's battle plan was to run his fleet in among the Combined fleet and to batter it to pieces. The English crews followed him into battle because he always led from the front; instead of observing the battle from the safety of a fast frigate, he spent the battle walking slowly around the unprotected quarterdeck of the Victory (this ship in the front of his line) and wearing his colorful new admiral's uniform with 4 large, shiny medals. After the Victory collided with the French ship Redoubtable, the two ships were tangled together, still blasting away at each other, while French sharpshooters in the mastheads fired down on the Victory's deck. One of their bullets hit Nelson in the left shoulder, passed through a lung and lodged in his spine, mortally wounding him.

As he was carried belowdecks, the light wind slowly died away leaving the ships of the two fleets scattered side by side, firing until the French-Spanish ships surrendered or caught enough wind to sail away. The front third of the Combined fleet finally returned and most of their ships sailed past to safety, though the Intrepide sailed into the thick of the battle and fought bravely

against multiple English ships until being captured. Courage was abundant on both sides: the French ship Redoubtable lost 522 dead or wounded out of a total crew of 670. The French ship Achille had lost every officer except for one midshipman before blowing up and sinking. By the time Nelson died, 3 hours after being shot, he knew that his fleet had sunk or captured 17 enemy ships; his reply was "I had hoped for 20". No English ships were sunk or captured, but the Victory lost all three of her masts and was a floating hulk that had to be towed to Gibraltar for repairs. Some historians argue that because this naval defeat prevented Napoleon from invading England, he chose to invade Russia instead, an invasion that did not go well at all for the French. Had Nelson lost at Trafalgar and Napoleon been able to invade England, who knows how long his European empire might have lasted.

Some years ago a fellow teacher at Exeter let me read her father's journal from World War II. John Green served in Europe in the US Army as a major in charge of a rifle company of 200 men. He didn't land at Normandy on D-Day but came ashore soon afterward and with his company fought his way through France, across the Rhine and into Germany. Every day he and his men got up and fought, knowing that the war would end for each of them when he was killed or wounded. After 9 months Major Green and a corporal were the only two original members of their company; everyone else had been killed or wounded and replaced. The war ended for Major Green in a little house in a clearing in a German forest where he had held a staff meeting with his officers. He turned to leave the meeting and opened the door just as a German Panzer shell blew the house apart, killing everyone else, blasting him through the doorway and giving him severe back injuries that took years to heal and that left him crippled for life.

This chapel talk is not really about battles; it is about happiness. I don't believe that US infantrymen or British sailors thought of themselves as happy. The sailors had long periods of boredom while they blockaded the French ports and then battles that were indescribably violent and dangerous. The infantrymen fought from house to house in towns and villages and from pillbox to pillbox or ambush to ambush in the countryside, never knowing when their bullet would arrive. But these men took the cards that they were dealt and played them as well as ever they could, and there is great wisdom, great nobility, and perhaps great satisfaction in knowing that, as Nelson said with his last words, "Thank God I have done my duty".

What kind of cards have you been dealt? Many people worry that they are not as tall or as athletic or as intelligent or as good-looking or as socially comfortable or as rich as they want to be and they build from these preoccupations cages every bit as confining as poor Mugsy's. When I look out at your faces here in chapel or yesterday at soak or in Mem Hall, I think we must all be holding aces. There is so much youth, vigorous health, positive energy, good humor and genuine affection for each other to celebrate in this community. We have this beautiful place with superb facilities. We have an endless succession of great 3-course meals like the Sunday dinner we are about to enjoy. And we have the supreme luxury of the time and opportunity to get to know each other in meaningful ways and to build real friendships. Instead of complaining about the idiosyncracies of another person we should value each other as unique individuals who make unique contributions to this camp. Think carefully about how you will play your hand of cards this summer. You may be holding cards that I know nothing about that prevent you from leaping into the life of this community, and I should always give you the benefit of the doubt since I

cannot know what burdens you carry. But so far as you are able, I hope you will bid boldly and play the cards with confidence.

A great part of happiness is feeling connected, as an important, integral part, to your community. Each of us can achieve this connection, from the youngest first-year boy to the most veteran counsellor. The pressure to build this feeling of connectedness is greatest for the older boys who tend naturally to measure their success by elections to COI or camp officer positions or by winning plaquage or one of the cups. Yes, these external signs of success and approval from the Council are powerful symbols of acceptance for the chosen recipients, but what about the boys who don't win? Have they failed? Have their summers here been a waste of time? Has the love that they have given to camp been thrown away? No, not at all. Not at all. The very best camp seasons are built by campers young and old who work together to take care of camp by caring for the people who make it up. Think of all the acts of kindness that you saw on your expeditions last week and that you continue to see on a daily basis here at camp. That culture of kindness spreads and grows best when it has strong support from all members of the camp, and especially from all the older boys who set the tone for the rest. You can be an important, an essential part of the best camp season ever without winning anything more than the respect and affection of the camp community. But I hope that we will tell each other early and often how much we appreciate the contributions small and large that each camper makes and the discipline and dedication required by the older campers who give so much of themselves to camp.