

Two years after college, I moved to a small town in Hungary called Paszto, about a half hour from the Slovakian border. One of the first friends I made that year was an American who was working for the same organization as I was, the Central European Teaching Program, which places American teachers in public schools around Hungary. One of the key moments in our early friendship was a conversation we had standing at an open window on a train moving through the countryside between Gyor and Budapest. As we talked about our goals for the year, David and I realized that we had both come to Hungary for the same basic reason: we wanted to learn to savor.

Savoring has become something of a life goal for me, and it's intimately connected to the role Pasquaney has played in my life for the past 25 years. Over the course of this tree talk, I'd like to share with you some of the things I've learned about savoring, and explain why it matters so much to me.

First, however, I should clarify what I mean by "savoring."

To savor – as I understand the term – is to taste fully and with an open mind, to appreciate and celebrate the goodness in our lives, and to soak it in; to savor is to be present and to be sensitive to the details and the quirks in the things and people we love: to strike a balance between focus and affection.

I would distinguish carefully, however, between savoring and gluttony – and here is where Pasquaney comes in. Pasquaney taught me as a thirteen-year old, and continues to teach me, the great value in treasuring the good things we have without veering off into self-indulgence. If we truly savor what we have, we don't ignore the work at hand and the high goals we've set for ourselves—goals that require sacrifice and

care. We don't rest on our laurels, complimenting ourselves endlessly for the good work we do and the positive spirit we generate. And we certainly don't look with a smug superiority at the achievements of others, however humble they might seem.

Savoring what we have is a great way to motivate positivity. On the other hand, in my opinion, it isn't sugarcoating: to savor something doesn't mean that we ignore what doesn't go well, what still needs work, and what causes us pain.

Finally, if we do it right, savoring doesn't lead to bitterness or despair when the things we treasure most seem to pass out of our lives.

Here I should acknowledge that I'm not always very good at savoring. In weak moments, I mutter imprecations under my breath about the things that don't go well in the world outside Pasquaney: "at camp," I think, "we'd all be unanimous about the important stuff." "At camp, we put the group first, we learn from our mistakes, we force each other to speak the truth even when it's inconvenient, and our leaders are humble and down-to-earth."

In these moments, however, I try to remind myself that taking Pasquaney with us into the part of the calendar between September and May is not only a struggle worth maintaining in the face of long odds and skepticism, but it's a struggle that Pasquaney has prepared us to face.

Pasquaney taught me to savor not because things are always easy here, but because they often aren't. It's a challenge to live the way we do.

Think of the last verse of the camp song, which begins, “We struggle on lake or on diamond.” It’s not “if we struggle on lake or on diamond”: luck is conditional, but the struggle is a given.

No other institution I’ve ever been a part of matches word and action as well as Pasquaney does. I’ve always loved that Pasquaney isn’t so much a “think tank” for values—a place where we compose philosophy about living right—as a way of doing, a way of struggling and succeeding with other people, a way of taking stock of our shortcomings, and trying again. If it were all easy and seamless and carefree, we wouldn’t learn very much from it. We have to find ways to make it work, and savoring—treasuring and absorbing and being genuinely and purposefully grateful for what we have—is one of those ways.

Outside of camp, I can think of no better model for the art of savoring than the Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti, whose work I discovered through a Hungarian friend later the same year that my friend David and I committed ourselves to getting better at savoring.

Radnoti was Jewish, and he was born in early twentieth-century Budapest. During World War II, over half a million Hungarian Jews were murdered—most of them in concentration camps. Able-bodied and in his thirties, Radnoti was sent, instead, to “labor camps” throughout the 1940s, where he worked under austere and sometimes brutal conditions in mine fields, sugar plants, and ammunition factories. His third and final assignment was to a German road-building crew in present-day Serbia in 1944.

In September of that year, German forces withdrew from the Balkans, and Radnoti was marched back toward Hungary, along with 3,600 other labor camp prisoners, three quarters of whom died in the early phases of the journey. Although he was one of the fewer than 800 prisoners to survive as far as the Hungarian border, Radnoti was shot and buried in a mass grave with twenty-one other men in early November, 1944.

At the time of his death, Radnoti had produced an impressive body of work: beautiful lyric poems, many of them addressed to his wife, Fanni; translations from a dozen languages; and meditations in classical meter that are a joy to read. Eighteen months after his execution, however, when the remains in the mass grave were exhumed for reinternment, a small notebook was found in the front pocket of Radnoti's overcoat. In it, he had inscribed ten poems that no survivors knew about. Most of them were about his captivity in Serbia, the terrible fate of his comrades, and the agony of not knowing what was happening to the people he loved. I've read one of these poems, called "Forced March," to some of you, but I'd like to share it with the whole community today, and talk about what it can teach us about savoring.

Crazy, who gets up when he's fallen	and steps again,
Like pain itself wandering around,	moving ankle and knee,
But takes off on the road	like someone lifted by wings,
and the ditch calls in vain,	he wouldn't dare stay,
and if you asked him, why not?	He might still answer
that his wife,	and a wiser and beautiful death is waiting for him.
But he is crazy,	because back at home, above the houses
for a long time now, there's only	scorched wind turning;

the walls of the house lie flat, and nights	the plum tree is splintered, are furred with fear.
Oh, if I could only believe: all that is still worth something, if only!	that I don't just carry around in my heart and that there's a home to return to: and like before on the old, cool porch
peace were buzzing and late-summer quiet would sunbathe fruit would rock bare	while plum jam cooled, in drowsy gardens, in the branches
Fanni would wait, and the slow late morning but all of this could still be!	blond hair against the red hedge, would write slow shadows— the moon is so round tonight!
Don't go on ahead, my friend,	shout to me! And I rise!

Bor, September 15, 1944

As with any other poem, there are many ways to read this one, but here's what I make of it: the speaker in the poem is on a forced march, and he's utterly exhausted, and the penalty for stopping is death. More particularly, the speaker has fallen, and he's weighing the pros and cons of staggering back to his feet. In the first ten lines of the poem, he calls himself "Crazy" for wanting to continue. He justifies this diagnosis by talking about the destruction he's seen and heard about in his native country and in the Balkans (Hungary, as Radnoti knew all too well, and especially his native Budapest, was bombed heavily during World War II). In the middle section, he explains this craziness by remembering and savoring some of the simple, beautiful things he loves: the sound of the bees and the slow movement of sun and shadow in a garden, and the very Hungarian detail of the plum jam—szilvalekvar, a beautiful word—and most movingly, the sight of his wife Fanni resting.

What I love, however, is that Radnoti doesn't strand himself here—he doesn't allow himself to plunge into these memories and accept the logic that says: getting up

and moving my tired limbs any further is madness. Nor does he ignore his pain—his physical and psychological pain: instead, he acknowledges it, and describes it in harrowing detail.

And yet, he doesn't just give in to what he believes is his fate. Instead, he looks up at the moon and he chooses to see it as a sign of his own recovery. Perhaps most important of all, he looks outside himself to the people suffering alongside him, and he calls out to one. He brings himself back to the present, and he grounds himself here: not pretending that his predicament has gone away, but instead throwing himself into it with new energy and commitment.

Now, there is a world of difference between the struggles we have on lake, diamond, and elsewhere on the hillside, and Radnoti's struggle. The last thing I'd want to do is to suggest that they are comparable. Nor is my intent, in telling his story, to shame us into being more like Radnoti ("Hey, look what happened to him, and he's still so much better than us at being grateful for what he has!") This may be true—I know it's true of me!—but it's not my message. I only want to suggest that we can learn a ton from this poem about savoring.

Over our last few precious days together this summer, let's savor what we have: the sound of a friend's laughter (who can forget Kirk's, or Hunter's, or Precious's laugh?), the color of the sky over Bear Mountain after prayers, the smile that steals across an actor's face when the crowd laughs at his scene, the wind in the pines, Adam's taps, and the sound of a railroad reverberating across the hillside with gusto and sincerity.

Just like Radnoti, though, let's not get stranded on these details, even in our darkest and coldest moments this winter: let's carry these memories forward into the present, lift ourselves up, call out to one another, continue our struggle, and savor the goodness right in front of us, wherever we are.