Hope

a Tree Talk by Teddy Winstead
delivered on August 1, 1988

As a camper, I never knew Vinnie very well. When I came to camp in 1979 as the youngest camper with the biggest buck teeth, I was a “Wonderful Wilsonite” with Howie. It wasn't until four summers later that I was big enough to step into a crew shell, and then I wasn't good enough to have Vinnie as my coach. You may ask, well, what about all the time you spent at table 7? To be honest, I tried to spend as little time at table 7 as possible, although the reason for that was not so much Vinnie as it was his proximity to table 8. In 1980, however, Vinnie gave a Tree Talk, parts of which I have never forgotten. I should preface my next few statements by saying that although I did not know Vinnie well, I like most of you thought and still think of Vinnie as the paragon of camp counsellors. So, you can imagine the indelible scar left upon my memory as I heard “Father Vincent” stand before me on Tree Talk ridge and quote the Grateful Dead. In 1980 I was 13 years old. When I heard the words “Grateful Dead,” I thought Vinnie was quoting a bunch of heavy metal head bangers who regularly bite the heads off live chickens. Today, with the popularity of the group's latest album, chances are that many of you are familiar with or even fans of the Grateful Dead. But for me, it wasn't until college that I realized the Grateful Dead, like Vinnie, are really just a bunch of 60's leftovers trying to make a fast buck by influencing the impressionable youth of America. The point here is two-fold: first, one cannot judge Vinnie by the names of his favorite rock groups, and, second, quoting musicians is a good way to immortalize a Tree Talk. You may remember Brent tried the same thing a few weeks ago.

OK, you may be asking yourself, What is Vinnie doing trying to monopolize Teddy's Tree Talk? Actually, Vin's talk is a good launching pad for my thoughts today. Eight years ago, Vinnie spoke about overcoming challenges. The song he used “Uncle John's Band” goes something like this: “Well the first days are the hardest days, don't you worry any more,/Cause when life looks like easy street, there is danger at your door. " To paraphrase a bit, life is full of challenges to be met, and if we are not working hard at life then we are not really living. If our path in life is easy street then we are headed down the wrong one.

What does it mean to accept challenges and live life to its fullest? To use the analogy of a pull-up bar, how can we max out? These questions have been addressed all season here on Tree Talk, in the chapel, and in the dorms. My thoughts today will focus on hope, which is essential if we are to face the obstacles and emerge with newfound character and knowledge. I am convinced that facing life’s challenges with hope and aspirations can improve the quality of our world. To begin, I will focus on concrete examples, and later I will explore the less tangible side of hope.

What is hope?
Perhaps I should begin by exposing what seems to be a conspiracy to give hope a bad name. Let me be more specific. 1988 is an election year. Were it not for the focus of Pasquaney, we too, along with the rest of the country would be bombarded by messages of hope from such messiahs as George Bush and Mike Dukakis, not to mention Jesse Jackson. Please forgive my lapse into cynicism in the middle of a talk on hope, but I recently consulted with the Baetjer Group, which is a non-profit, for-sailing organization that monitors politicians and bureaucrats. Their study revealed that an overwhelming amount of political so-called promises of hope are made with the subsequent election in mind. If that example was confusing, let me simply say that political rhetoric is not the hope about which I am thinking. And I know from whence I speak, since I now hail from the great city of Chicago. Chicago got its nickname, “The Windy City,” not for Lake Michigan's frequent gear-busting sailing conditions but rather for its windbag politicians.

Ah, getting back to what real hope is. Hope is a lot like honesty in that effectiveness requires a genuine commitment. We must be 100%. If we make empty promises, our word will also be empty. In the same vein, if we claim to be hopeful yet make no motions in that direction then we are only kidding ourselves just as some politicians try to kid us. So how can we develop ourselves into hopeful people? The answer is a stalwart one: Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny. Sow like Mrs. Speath, and you'll reap a lot of torn clothes from Dave Ryder.

This process of reaping a destiny may seem a bit overwhelming. Yet, just as one pint of Cherry Garcia can be broken down into many spoonfuls and still be consumed in one sitting, so can we live our lives on a day to day basis and not lose focus of the big picture. In past talks Bubbles has shown us the virtue of living one day at a time. Hope can similarly be broken down from a general wish or goal into specific challenges. When the small goals have all been met, our hopes will be realities, or at least we will feel sick from eating all that ice cream.

Pasquaney is the ultimate weight room for building character. Just as the hillside fosters life-long friendships, camp teaches us the self-discipline about which Mr. Gem-John spoke. Self-discipline is at the heart of setting and following through on goals. This process was exemplified by the Long Walkers who said, “I hope I can make 105 miles,” and subsequently ran loops to get in shape.

I have discussed setting small goals to help us achieve our hopes. This process works just as well on larger, long-term goals. We can now shift from the specific to the General. Dave Ryder told me that when he planned to build an addition to the shops, many builders said it would be impossible. They said he could never create such a building with inexperienced 12-year old campers. So, what did the General do? With hard work and discipline, he created a master plan. He then laid out specific tasks and worked until they were achieved. If you’ve ever done shop construction, then you know this is how Dave operates: he assigns a job to be done and makes sure that it is done right, and with a lot more humor and fun than most generals. The result of all these job assignments and quality workmanship is slowly creeping its way up the hill toward the
museum. What was once Dave Ryder’s hope will soon be one of camp’s treasures, just as the process of creating it has been.

My thoughts thus far have focused on turning hopes into reality. I would now like to consider hope from a different angle.

The council got together before camp to brainstorm about goals for our community. One goal mentioned was happiness – happiness not in terms of fleeting sugar highs, or even the exhilaration of broad reaching during the first day of the front, but happiness in terms at the contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction that result from giving one's best. I am thinking of the happiness that comes from being our best selves. We all know the thrill of being atop a 4,000-footer in the Franconias. I don't think anyone would deny the rush of conquering such a mountain. Where Nordy and about three-quarters of the fourth walk halfway up the Liberty Springs Trail might beg to differ is whether the pain is worth the gain. Most of us would say yes although I'm not necessarily counting Wes. Life works pretty much the same way as the hike: the greater the sacrifice often means the greater the reward. The difference in happiness generated from a true friendship and that generated from an association is the difference between hiking Mt. Washington and taking the cog. The issue then becomes: Do we strive to overcome the obstacles in our paths? Do we work our hardest to live by the values that help us establish our best selves? Or do we take the easy street and let laziness determine our direction? This is our choice.

To me the choice is obvious. That's not the hard part. The satisfaction of a job well done or a good day at Pasquaney is an intense feeling. It can’t be beat. Yet, while I know what I want to do, I am still susceptible to the rationalizations that tear at our best selves. “That’s good enough for table duty. It really doesn't matter anyway.” Or, “I don't care. It's no big deal. Nobody's going to notice if the sailing books are not put away.” When we fall into this trap of rationalizing our laziness in order to avoid the challenge to do our best, we are hurting ourselves and our community.

When we walk past Lamb wrappers on the path we are saying to ourselves and to visitors that we don't care about Pasquaney. Our actions show that we fail to appreciate the beautiful hillside. We are also cheating ourselves out of developing feelings of pride, appreciation, and happiness.

Each day we face challenges as basic as policing the grounds and as complicated as tough moral decisions. If we throw in the towel and run from challenges for fear of failure, then we can never know happiness or growth. We all know how difficult it is to always be our best selves. That is the reason why I think hope is so important. We need to have hope to remind us of the happiness that comes from being our best selves. Let us use Martin Luther King, Jr., as a role model. It is no easy task to stand up and risk your life to fight hatred, as Dr. King did. It's much easier to sit idly by and let racism persist. Dr. King had a vision of hope to see a better world. And he worked hard to achieve his dreams so that we may benefit from his labors.
I am sure that some of you will be famous one day. But whether your good work is known by many or appreciated in a small community such as Pasquaney, we must each practice hope. Just as charity starts at home, we need to practice daily acts which will improve our community. Then, maybe one of us will be able to solve the problems of a place like South Africa, thanks to our training here at Pasquaney.

How can we be most fit to practice acts of hope? The cornerstone of hope is a positive mental attitude. In trying situations, we must see the glass of bug juice as half-full rather than half-empty. The way that I try to remain positive is by thinking of myself as radioactive. Not hyperactive, like Ian, but radioactive like Chernobyl. I am emitting particles all the time – particles which are either positive or negative. The positive particles are called “positive vibrations.” The more positive vibrations I emit, the more hopeful people are around me, and the more likely we are to be our best selves. Mark’s talk on light-heartedness is a perfect recipe for increasing the positive vibrations, which by nature are highly infectious.

Another key ingredient for hope is a smile. The mouth is the most powerful emitter of either positive or negative vibes. Here again, the Baetjer Group, which also monitors enthusiasm, researched this strange phenomenon of smiling. The Group concluded that smiles open many doors in life, since everyone would rather be around a smiler than a moper. If our goal is happiness, won’t it become a burden rather than a pleasure to have to smile all the time? Well, no one is expected to have the “high-pro glow” 24 hours a day. It’s not human nature. It is especially difficult when we’re tired and worn out, but what a difference just one smile that releases just a few positive vibrations can make. And that smile is just what we need to give us the hope to work all the harder. To get to the top of Mt. Liberty, a smile of hope is the charge that will enable us to go the extra yard. It is the hope of improving our community that will show us the value of doing the little extras in life like sending a birch bark letter from Notchpost back to camp or helping someone with their sit-ups or making sure the food is seasoned just right.

We should remember that we physically can’t go 100% all the time. That is why we have rest periods and quiet time for renewal. There are moments when “rest is best.” Just as the fastest thoroughbreds rest between workouts, we, too, must pace ourselves so that after resting, we can give our best to ourselves and our community.

If we really believe in hope, if we really believe we can make a difference in our community, then we will. And we will know feelings of happiness that cannot be described. As we charge into the final two weeks and face the daily challenges, it will be the hope of another banner season that will give us the strength to do our best job and to be our best selves. As we settle down for prayers each night, I hope we will all feel the positive vibrations throughout Dana, knowing that we’ve given it our best and that we will be happy.

I would like to conclude with two things. The first is the origin for my faith in the positive vibrations. Much hope comes to me throughout the year in the form of letters and phone calls camp friends. But there are times at Northwestern when the mailbox is empty, it’s -20 degrees
with wind chill, the sun hasn't been out in four days, I got a 29 on my statistics midterm, which I did, and, worst of all, I haven't had a date since the freshman mixer in 1985. But there's a song by Bob Marley called “Positive Vibration,” which to paraphrase says: The Rastaman vibration is positive. Live if you want to live because we just could not live in that negative way. And that song wakes me up. I stop feeling sorry for myself and am reminded of the warmth and happiness of my friends. The song can usually even bring out my best self, which is hiding in a snowbank somewhere. And that's when the vibrations really begin to flow.

Finally, this past year I had a course on the great Russian writer Dostoevsky. One of the novels we read was The Brothers Karamazov, the story of a man’s struggle with pride, jealousy, and human weakness. The book portrays the basest of human actions and takes the reader to the lower limits of human dignity. Toward the end of the course, I asked our professor why he loved such a depressing book. He paused as the lecture hall became completely silent. We could feel his concern with the question. He looked out at us and said, “In the end, there is hope. And isn’t that all that we can ask? Isn’t that what life is all about: hope for a better world?”

He was right. He changed my perspective on the book, which I now see as a great message of hope. I’d like to read a passage The Brothers Karamazov that conveys my thoughts today:

And even if we are occupied with most important things, if we attain to honor or fall into great misfortune – still let us remember how good it was once here, when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us better perhaps than we are... You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially the memory of a childhood.

We are making those memories here this summer. Let us have the hope to be our best and to make more memories.