Talking Openly with Friends

given by Howie Baetjer in 1992

Welcome to the first Tree Talk of 1992. For the new boys, I'd like to say that these talks are called Tree Talks because traditionally they have been given under a big tree on the camp property, most recently here, and at other spots earlier. With Barksdale here, I won't go into the history any further.

Tree Talks are a chance for one counsellor each week to talk with the camp about something that he thinks is important. It is one of camp's best traditions.

My topic today is somewhat similar: the great personal value of talking openly with friends about things we hold important. What kind of things? – things such as our values, the principles we want to live by, the kind of people we would like to be; what we care about; our hopes, fears, angers, frustrations, joys. The topic is the importance of talking openly about these.

This open discussion of what is important to us is an important aspect of friendship, in two ways. First, it is a necessary element of building friendships. Unless we open up ourselves to others, allowing them to see what we really are inside, how can they come to know us well enough to be our friends? And second, it is one of the blessings of friendship – with a true friend, we can unburden ourselves, speak our minds, and avoid the “suffocation of the heart” of which Sir Francis Bacon spoke in his great essay, “Of Friendship,” to which I expect GemJohn will refer in his sermon on the third Sunday. As Bacon puts it, “No recipe openeth the heart, but a true friend; to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it.”

Recall Mr. Charlie's comments at the opening ceremony: he said that at Pasquaney, he made his dearest friends. Certainly this is true for me also; my closest friends I have made at Pasquaney – several of them are right here in this group. And I think the same is true for many who have been to Pasquaney. Why is this? Why do we make such close friends here?

In my own experience, it worked like this: When I came to Pasquaney, I realized it was okay, and even encouraged, for us to talk about the things that we really felt were important. This was a tremendous relief to me after being at school, where I worried about being laughed at if I said what was really on my mind. So we did. I and some of the other boys I liked really talked about our values and thoughts; we gradually came to express our inmost selves to one another. As a result, we really came to know and trust one another. And our friendship has been built on that deep knowledge of and trust in one another's basic values.

There are two areas of what is really important to us that we need to be able to discuss freely with others. The first of these is our values: our ethics, principles to live by. When we discuss these with others, we really make contact; we make it possible for others to know us. In this regard I think of the last night of camp in 1968, Vinny and I lay out on the flat rock by
campfire and somehow we really opened up to one another about what we thought important. I remember thinking, "Wow, this is a really good guy. I like what he stands for." And I date our friendship from that moment.

Another advantage of discussing our values with others is that it helps us grow and develop our values. In this respect I think of a series of discussions one summer among the council regarding cheating. One of us, Chris "Forest" Granger, was at Middlebury College, where each year each student had to sign a paper agreeing not to cheat and to turn in anyone who he or she knew to be cheating. But unfortunately, a certain amount of cheating had come to be accepted at Middlebury, and several of Chris's close friends did cheat from time to time. This presented Chris with a dilemma: What should he do? Some suggested that because he had to sign the paper and the rule was overlooked anyway, he should just let it go, sign the paper, and do nothing. But this was unsatisfying: at Pasquaney we train ourselves in the overriding importance of honesty, and we all knew it was wrong to sign a promise one did not mean to keep.

I probably recommended signing the paper, warning the friends, and turning them in if necessary. After all, I might have reasoned, those who didn't see the importance of honesty might not make very good friends. But Chris couldn't accept this either. To act that way would have astonished and upset his friends, especially because in those years there was such widespread acceptance of "petty" cheating,

Anyhow, we talked over this dilemma a long time over several weeks. In the end, Chris didn't sign the paper; instead he wrote a note to the Dean, saying that he could not turn anyone in for cheating, given how common it was, but that he also did not want to sign a promise he could not keep. This was a brave step! The Dean could have told him that then he was not welcome at Middlebury. In the upshot it worked out very well because it made everyone aware that there was a problem, and Middlebury then worked hard to put right its honor system.

There are two points to this story. First, because we were able to discuss this moral problem freely among ourselves, we all grew a tremendous amount in our understanding of our values, of the meaning of honor, and in the options we have in dealing with a dilemma. Second, as a result of the discussion, in which we heard our friends grappling with this problem, we came to know and trust one another more deeply. And think about our attitude toward Chris: how could one not trust and value a person who would put his own college career on the line, rather than sign himself to a lie or injure his friends? All of us who know Chris have total confidence in his values, and that is the foundation of our friendship.

Another area of what is important to us, about which it is important to be able to talk, is our feelings. In recent years I have come to realize more and more how important this is. Again, the value of talking about our feelings with trusted friends is that it allows us to make contact with them, by letting them know us; it is a way for us to get the support we need; and it helps
us to grow. I have heard intimacy defined as “into-me-see:” we become intimate with another person by letting that person see into us as we really are, with our hopes and fears and sadnesses and angers and so on.

Let me give some examples of this expression of our feelings. About five years ago I was hiking in the high Rockies outside Aspen, Colorado, with Chris Granger and Kirk. We were on Pyramid Peak, scrambling along an icy ledge, and I got scared. Kirk and Chris had had no trouble and were going on ahead. As I felt the panic rise in me I called out to them. I knew them well enough that I was not hesitant to tell them exactly how I felt. “Kirk, Forest! Stop, please! Come back! I'm scared!” They came back, and Kirk even helped me place my boots on toeholds. In a few moments, I was past the ledge and okay. But if I had not been willing to tell them how I felt, it would have been much tougher.

Another example: about three years ago, I was sailing on a puffy day with Brad Cragin, and I wanted him to take both the mainsheet and tiller. I knew he could do it, but he was hesitating, and I thought it was because he thought he didn't know how. So I was pushing him. But he said, “Howie, I don’t want to; I'm scared!” – “Oh, I thought; so that's it.” Then because I understood the situation, I went slowly, told him I wouldn't ask him to do anything he didn’t want to do, and stepped him through it. A half hour later, he was handling both the mainsheet and tiller in very challenging conditions, and the look on his face was saying, “I can do this!” The point is that because he was willing to tell me how he felt, I was able to react to him helpfully. He let me understand. By the way, I also admired him for being willing to say it. A lot of guys are afraid to admit it when they are scared.

For another example, I imagine that especially after today, some of you are apprehensive, and maybe even afraid, about your upcoming expeditions. If so, find someone you can trust to talk to about it: a friend, a counsellor. Don't keep it bottled up inside. That's not good for us.

A few days ago I was talking to a new camper about how his brother felt to have him leaving for camp. “He doesn't say much about that kind of thing,” came the reply. “When you see something is wrong, and you ask him what is the matter, he says, ‘Oh, nothing.’”

We all know how this is; we have all done it. But if we let ourselves talk about what is on our minds, we feel better. Don't keep things bottled up inside. When there is something on your mind, whether you are worried about going to a new school, or your dog died, or a counsellor yelled at you for something you didn’t do; talk about it. Tell a friend how you feel. You will feel better, and you will have allowed another person to know you better, building the basis for a strong friendship.

I hope we will all take the opportunities we have this summer to develop this skill of talking openly about what is important to us. It is not easy. We hesitate to open ourselves up for good reason: some people are not trustworthy. Some may laugh at us, or worse, agree to our faces and then ridicule us to others behind our backs. Also, sometimes in an effort to
become closer to people, we push them away by speaking with them seriously. Some people unfortunately just can't deal with this kind of closeness and openness. So choose your friends carefully, and develop your friendships slowly.

At Pasquaney, we have wonderful opportunities to talk freely. We have the Tree Talks and sermons to get discussions going; we have Circles and talks with counsellors and friends; we have small groups on camping trips and hikes. I hope we will all make the most of them.

To summarize: for me the great blessing of Pasquaney has been that it is a place where I could express and discuss the things that matter most to me and thereby develop my ideas and values. It is a place where I could really be me, openly and honestly. I didn't need to hide what was really me. Others listened, accepted, and respected what I said, and told me what was on their minds and hearts in their turn. In that process, we grew into friendship together. And truly, there is nothing sweeter in my life than those friendships. I hope that all of us, this summer, will work to develop the skills of being open with friends, so that we can all begin to enjoy the blessings of those friendships.