Be What You Are

By Jake Holton

Be what you are. This is the first step to becoming better than you are. – Julius Hare

I’m standing here today to tell you all about the importance of being yourself. Being yourself? What does this mean? For me, being yourself means freely doing what you want, acting how you want, saying, wearing, singing what you want, or expressing yourself in any way that you feel is right. More importantly, being yourself means being sincere to the values that you hold dearest. In a world full of social pressures, this can be very difficult. It is easy to be tempted to change your behavior or to alter your personality in order to gain the approval of others. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” This is a sentiment that has been expressed in some form by well-respected, famous, and successful people generation after generation, across all cultures. In the 4th Century B.C., ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, “When you are content to be simply yourself and don’t compare or compete, everyone will respect you.” In 2017 and on the opposite end of the spectrum, Lil Uzi Vert said, “If you can stay true to yourself, you're always going to be legendary.”

I know from personal experience, as I’m sure many of you do, how difficult it is to be yourself in this world that is constantly trying to make us something else. Staying true to yourself is much more easily said than done, especially in a world where more and more people’s self-confidence seems to stem from the number of likes they get. No matter how hard it may be for you to see, each and every one of you has incredible value as an individual. In addition to your distinctive set of skills that make you an integral part of any team that you are a part of, each of you has a unique perspective on the world, providing priceless insights that others may have never realized. As we sang in chapel just over a week ago, “For those who think they have nothing to share, who fear in their heart, there is no hero there, know each quiet act of dignity is that which fortifies the soul of a nation that never dies.” Each act of dignity, large or small, makes you a hero.

When I was in the 4th grade, I had little self-doubt or fear in my heart. Thanks to my good academic performance, I was sure that I was on the right track to fulfill my childhood dream of becoming an elementary school gym teacher or a stay-at-home dad. Ambitious stuff, I know. My point is that I was proud of myself, my abilities, and my accomplishments. I was content to simply be myself and not compare or compete. I took particularly great pride in my mental math skills, which, thanks to the incredible invention of the calculator, have significantly diminished since. Every day, just after recess, I had a chance to show off these skills in my favorite activity of the day – a card game that required participants to perform simple addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division as quickly and accurately as possible. I nearly always won.

One day, a new kid moved to town and joined my class. He was better than me at arithmetic, and as a result I was dethroned from my glorious spot atop the math game podium. I’ll admit, these victories may not have been regarded quite so highly by any of my classmates, but nevertheless I was jealous. He was also far better than me at soccer and even caught the attention of the girl I had a crush on. I did not like this new kid one bit. I was no longer proud of my own abilities, no longer content to be myself and not compare myself to others. I wanted nothing more
than to be him, even just for one day. *It's not fair,* I’d think to myself as tears poured down my face, convinced that my being was worth less than his.

Eventually my math skills surpassed this particular boy’s, but that did not curb my jealousy. As we grew up alongside each other, I often found myself wishing to walk a day in his shoes or those of any other boy who was more popular, more athletic, or in some way more talented than I. On the long bus rides home from school, in my bed as I lay waiting to drift to sleep, and in many other moments of what should have been solitary relaxation, my mind was fixated on how much I hated myself, how badly I wanted to be somebody else. I could not see my strengths or appreciate my individuality. This not only brought me great sadness but hurt my growth as well.

Had I been more accepting of myself, seeing others excel in areas that I felt were important or valuable could have been a great motivation for me to improve; rivalries in academics and on athletic fields could have been a form of competition that would have helped me strive for greatness with those around me. To quote Kurt Cobain, “Wanting to be someone else is a waste of who you are.” I wasted who I was for many years of my life, and in doing so I missed valuable chances for growth and hurt others.

In my junior year of high school, I applied for the National Honor Society. I thought for certain that I had a spot locked down. On top of having some of the best grades in my class, I had four summers at Pasquaney under my belt – four summers of Tree Talks, Chapel Talks, expeditions, and many other valuable lessons. I had even heard a Tree Talk from Jack Reigeluth that I still remember to this day about this very topic. Part of the application process involved a survey of my teachers. These are some of the words that they used to describe me: disruptive, disrespectful, brings down the whole classroom. The list went on with few positive remarks in the mix. Initially I was shocked, but after a few moments of thought I realized that they were absolutely correct. As a young Pasquaney man about to enter my final summer as a camper, these descriptions did not align well with the values that I believed to be of the utmost importance. Rather than use what I had learned at camp about leadership and being a good role model, I interrupted class with crude attempts at humor, hoping for laughs from my peers. I acted in a way that interfered with my opportunities for learning as well as those of my classmates and was surely hurtful to the teachers who put so much hard work into educating our young minds. In an attempt to be well liked and popular amongst my peers, blinded by my desire to be something or someone that I was not, I had become a person that even I did not like.

After years of my trying to be someone else, years of me trying to be cool, the message finally got through my skull. I don’t claim to know myself fully yet, and maybe I never will, but after hearing this criticism I started trying to accept who I am. I started trying to guide my decisions with the values I hold dear rather than act in a way that I thought would make me appear cooler to others. In the years since, I have become more comfortable with my quirky, spacey, and awkward but kind, caring, and gumptious self. When I stopped comparing myself to others and started being myself, I began to gain more respect. I received leadership positions such as becoming an RA in college and spending three precious summers on the Pasquaney council, my proudest accomplishment.

“Be what you are. This is the first step to becoming better than you are.” If any of us wishes to grow as a man, a leader, or a friend, and I hope that all of us do, we must first learn to accept and appreciate ourselves for who we are. When we recognize our strengths, we can use them as a foundation to build upon. Reflecting on our weaknesses with a growth mindset can provide
valuable insights on how we can improve. Had I spent those bus rides studying, my down time practicing soccer skills, and those peaceful moments in bed reflecting on how well I was using my own moral compass to navigate the world, I would be a much better man for it.

I certainly do not mean to say that we should not seek role models or borrow ideals from those we look up to. It is important, however, that we allow ourselves to be just that: ourselves. When you look back on your days in prayers and Circles, on bus rides and in bed, I urge you to avoid comparing yourself to others. Instead reflect on how well your choices align with your own goals, your own morals and beliefs, and your own sense of self.

Here at Pasquaney, we have the luxury of living in a community that accepts us as we are. Take advantage of that. Use your time here to try new things and push yourself out of your comfort zone. Find who you truly are and embrace it. When you leave, take yourself with you. “Be what you are. This is the first step to becoming better than you are.” And remember, “If you can stay true to yourself, you’re always going to be legendary.”