Put Others First
By Robert C. Harvey

On a particularly cold, rainy night this past spring, exhausted from two full days of training in the field, my fellow recruits and I stood in a U-formation around our drill instructors. Sleep-deprived and bone-weary, our heads nodded up and down as we nearly slept while standing at attention. It was two o'clock in the morning. We had been awake for over 48 hours, and we had been training intensively for eight weeks. Every muscle in my body ached and quivered from overuse. As the pouring rain seeped through my increasingly heavy canvas uniform, all I could think about was climbing into my sleeping bag to escape the relentless training. Expecting the day would soon end, we blankly strained to keep focus on our drill instructors’ eyes, waiting for an anticipated dismissal so we could finally go to sleep. To our mounting despair and in a thick Bernese Swiss German “akzent,” our lieutenant ordered us to suit up with all our gear and proceed to form two rows behind an open-top, door-less, camouflage jeep that was parked in the middle of a gravel switchback that led up the Tiglio, the highest mountain in the region that could be summited by a vehicle. Distraught, I grabbed my bulletproof vest, my rifle, my pack, suited up, and lined up behind the jeep. Our lieutenant boarded the 4x4 and started blasting hard rock music from a loudspeaker. And what, you might ask, was our training mission? We were simply told to run behind the vehicle until it stopped. With 110 pounds on our backs and no idea how long our switchback torture would last, minutes became hours.

We Grenadiers knew that if one man was left behind, we would all fail the training mission, but the jeep set an unforgiving pace. Romano was running directly beside me. Packing 220 lbs. of muscle on a husky, Italian frame, Romano’s self-confidence, relentless drive, and hardened tenacity made him physically and mentally one of our most impressive Grenadiers. In between breaths, he would yell at the top of his lungs, motivating the group to keep on fighting, step after step. He was the only one in our group who still had the fortitude to lead. Then Gerber – who was the strong, silent type – started to falter as his legs quivered and he stumbled. Romano immediately summoned the strength he had left to push the struggling Gerber up the hill. Eventually, Gerber’s muscles stopped functioning completely due to his exhaustion, and he collapsed in the middle of one of the straightaways. Müller, a sinewy and resolute recruit, was right behind us. Romano and I immediately set up a stretcher. Without a word, Müller relieved
Gerber of his backpack and hoisted it horizontally on top of his own. We slid Gerber onto the stretcher, lifted it off the ground and hoisted it onto our shoulders, each bearing the weight at the four ends of its poles. After a few minutes of running, my own legs started giving way, and another buddy had to relieve me of my part of the stretcher. I then drifted to the back of the pack. I remember looking up the steep hill to see each recruit struggling, many of them vomiting at one point or another on the side of the road. We eventually had six guys on stretchers, and the more able-bodied recruits rotated to relieve the ones who were no longer capable of bearing the stretcher’s weight.

As I struggled at the back of the group, I had the feeling drift into my consciousness that if I wanted to complete the run, I could only look out for myself. I felt absolutely helpless. I felt like giving up, and I started slowing down. As surrender began to take hold of my mind, I felt a sudden force on my backpack, pushing me up the hill. Müller, who was already carrying two packs, was using all of the energy he had left to thrust me forward. “Come on Harvey. Keep moving,” he said. Through my delirious exhaustion, Müller’s command helped me find renewed resources. Upon later reflection, I realized that only two things kept me going. First was the guys on the stretchers, who had worked just as hard as I had throughout our training. We all had the same goal of becoming Grenadiers. I knew that if I gave up, I would not only let myself down, but I would let my buddies down at the very moment they were helpless and needed whatever strength I still had to give. Second was my duty to Müller, who was simply a guy who was wired to persevere. His selflessness was grounded in his personal excellence, and his determination to see everyone make it through was steadfast. He ended up pushing me on to the summit and then collapsed at the top, himself.

That wasn’t the end of the training exercise. The suffering continued, but the message of this story clear: none of us could have made it through that night alone. Ultimately, we persisted because of each other. Each individual put his own needs and sense of desperation aside for the success of the group. Situations like this frequently came up during my time in the Swiss military. We were taught the saying, “Jede Kette ist nur so stark wie das schwächste Glied.” or “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” In other words, if one person fails, everyone fails. We trained to become a strong chain that would not break under strain. Success and constant improvement required selflessness. By putting my collapsed friends before myself, I grew stronger. I learned to put aside my temptation to give up in order to serve my fellow Grenadiers. The sacrifices
we made for each other created a brotherhood that I will always hold dear. I will be thankful to Müller for the rest of my life. When I was unable to have faith in myself, he had faith in me. The form of selflessness that he demonstrated during that night was the lesson we all internalized so we would grow, learn, and reach much greater heights.

Selflessness like Müller’s is not only what’s best for the group, it's also something that gives our lives a sense of meaning. If you only serve yourself, which is often the easiest and most basic thing to do, what are you living for? Serving others and serving something greater than yourself provides purpose, meaning, and fulfilment. If you simply focus on yourself and your own concerns, you’ll never really find happiness, and you’ll never realize what you and your neighbours are capable of doing. Personal happiness lies at the end of the rainbow, and if you focus on it and walk toward it, it will never get any closer. Fulfilment, and, ultimately, our greatest potentials are found only by indirection: focus on others, instead.

At Pasquaney, we have countless opportunities to serve and to have a positive impact on others. It can be in the smallest of ways in which we do this. Mr. Vinnie often talks about being a good listener. "True listening requires a setting aside of oneself." I remember, as a new boy on the Hillside, being astonished by everyone’s concern for the person next to him, whether it was counsellors asking about my day during handshakes after taps or Martin Millspaugh, my not-joe counsellor, asking me earnestly about how my summer was going. These guys certainly had other things they could have been doing or thinking about in these moments, but they chose to put their own concerns aside to listen to a 12-year-old boy talk about how he was doing.

Truly listening is a selfless act that should not be taken for granted. It’s even harder in a world filled with text messages, buzzing phone notifications, Instagram pictures, group chats, FaceTime calls, and the latest “breaking news” crossing the screen. People seem very busy yet spend less time with and for each other. In contrast, Pasquaney is an institution whose foundation preceded this digital era and whose daily experience gives us a chance to learn and internalize timeless lessons.

At Pasquaney, we offer others food before serving ourselves. When we finish a duty, we seek to help out a new boy who doesn’t yet know how to sweep a dorm. We volunteer to carry the Sunbutter during expeditions. We pick up little pieces of trash on the Hillside, and we clean the Mines until it's thoroughly finished. We decide to be the last one to leave the kitchen when mopping and cleaning, and we seek to be the first to volunteer, even when we don’t know what will be asked of us. Doing these things
requires selflessness, and Pasquaney’s structure and daily rhythm help us develop these small habits that reveal a greater truth. And that truth is that these things, done by free choice, create joy that spreads from person to person.

Former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis once said the following: “We are masters of our own character, choosing what we stand for in this life. It's often in the service to others that we are able to have the biggest and most positive impact.” In a speech he gave at VMI where my brother William was sitting in the audience, he left them with the following words: “Just remember three words here. Put others first. [...] If you’re always putting others first, you’re going to be in for the most wonderfully satisfying life you could imagine.”

Jim Mattis spoke to a contemporary audience, but he was simply passing down ancient wisdom. The Old Testament “Proverbs 11: 24-25”, attributed to Israel’s King Solomon and respected by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, contains the following piece of wisdom from 3,000 years ago:

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer;
Another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.
Whoever brings blessing will be enriched,
And one who waters will himself be watered.

This passage communicates a principle that is sewn into the fabric of the world. Unfortunately, each successive generation needs to learn these principles on its own and in its own context. The more you grasp and hoard, the more you need. The more you focus on yourself, the more you will preoccupy yourself. But those who give freely and generously find that they’re happier, healthier, and experience more blessings in life. And communities that do this together reach heights they could never reach as mere individuals in assembly. The selfless whole is truly greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Everything I’ve experienced, in my 20 years of life, has taught me that this is true. But believe me, putting others first remains difficult to do on a regular basis. So I challenge all of us, myself included, to strive to do exactly this for the remaining four weeks of camp and again when we rejoin our communities in the outside world. Having a sense of service before self will affect us at many intangible levels. Our empathy for each
other will grow, friendships we form with each other will become strong, and the community will thrive.

In the world outside of Pasquaney, being courteous to an older person on the bus and giving up your seat, help out the school janitor, hold a door open for a stranger, do the dishes at a friend’s house, or do “more than your fair share” of household chores, and have an awareness of the people around you, knowing that serving them is worth striving for. While it may be hard to see what you gain from doing such acts of kindness, have faith. Do them anyway, and do them every day. What you give, you will receive, and you will be able to achieve things as part of a community that you could never accomplish on your own. Let’s wake up tomorrow and challenge ourselves to serve others to the best of our ability. To have a true friend, be one. Show the person next to you that you love them.