

## Coolness and Self-value by Sam Denious

Raise your hand if you think about being cool. Let the recording of this Tree Talk show that I have both my hands raised. And look at all of you with your hands raised, riding in the same boat. So many of us spend countless hours concerned with being cool, concerned with our image, how we appear, how other people see us. What does it mean to be cool? What do we seek in trying to be cool? What are our metrics for measuring coolness? Many of us think it's cool to be funny, or athletic, or to seem like we don't care, or to know more about things than other people. Or maybe we think it's cool to be really strong, or good at tennis, or baseball, or to be a really good singer. Or maybe we think it's cool to have the nicest pair of shoes or a crisp, colorful bandana. Maybe we value all of these things together. It is an age-old practice to measure our value in these ways. When we see others succeed in one or many of these areas, we put them on a pedestal. We flock to them. We try to be friends with them. We praise them and try our hardest to model them. We call them cool. We change what we do to try to mimic what they do because they're cool and who doesn't want people to think that they're cool? What an empowering thing it is to feel the admiration of your peers. It creates an unparalleled endorphin rush, one that is difficult not to chase.

In many cases, this chase is a good thing. It forces us to really think hard about whom we see around us and whom we want to be. Acknowledging who you think is cool helps you to find role models and mentors. It helps you find people around you who you really should try to be like, and it is often these people who become your best friends or your guides. Much of the time, it is a constructive thing to look at what you value in others and try to mimic that. However, as young men, this practice can also be toxic. Our metrics of coolness too often become superficial and cloud our ability to develop intrinsic self-value, and without that we will know nothing of ourselves.

Writer David Foster Wallace, a council favorite this summer, has a short story called "Good Old Neon" in which the protagonist is a horribly depressed young man named Neal. Neal looks back on his own life and feels that he is a fraud because everything he has ever done has been to please or impress others. Neal recognizes that to truly give value to his life, he must find ways to generate action intrinsically rather than doing things only to appear a certain way to others. He tries a variety of different methods to put this into practice, but we cannot escape the feeling that everything he does is image driven. He cannot escape the feeling that his life is worthless because of this fraudulence. He tortures himself as he recalls all of the ways he has been a fraud throughout his life. Festering in his misery until he decides

that there is no way to solve the problem, he commits suicide. It's a really fun read. You guys should all check it out. While this story is highly exaggerated and came from the dark mind of a twisted genius, it echoes some of the very issues we struggle with every day as young men, even here at camp. While it is impossible to truly understand what goes on inside the mind of a fictional character, I can't help but feel that we find ourselves falling into the same trap that Neal did. When we act a certain way around each other, when we brag about our achievements, when we boast of our abilities, when we toil tirelessly to try to be like someone we are not, when we try to seem cool, we are frauds. We are wearing a mask. We are using the opinions of others to define what we value in ourselves. We are saying, "I'm not comfortable being me because people might not like me, so I'm going to try to be someone else and see if they like me then". We are valuing our appearance, the way other people see us, more than our trust in ourselves. Many of us do this day in and day out, and we never even notice because it is a deeply engrained social practice. At times, it may seem like an insignificant offense to act this way, but what we are really doing is taking our individuality, our free will, our intrinsic volition and beating it down into the background of our psyche. This is a profound disservice to us. When you act only to project a certain image, you are denying yourself the opportunity to discover whom you really are and you are denying those around you the opportunity to genuinely know you.

When I was a sixteen-year-old at camp, I often fell into these fraudulent habits. People that I admired surrounded me, and this influenced me to spend most of my time trying to puff up my chest and seem funnier, more clever, and more knowledgeable to try to be like them. My sixteen-year-old group was full of great guys and wild characters, many different people who combined to form a high standard for coolness that I desperately aspired to. I felt motivated to be better, which was a good thing, but I also felt this insurmountable pressure to be as cool as I thought they were. I acted in ways that were unnatural for me. I tried to match or beat my peers in order to gain social capital. As a result, I was never really at home with myself.

This spelled trouble for me as I faced many challenges my sixteen-year-old summer. My peers were mostly elected COIs early in the season, and I expected that I would be elected alongside them. When I was not, I panicked. All of my insecurities were subconsciously triggered and weighed heavily on my mind. I took a hard look in the mirror, which was a good thing, and I made some important changes to my behavior. Much of the reason I made these changes was that I desired greatly to help the Pasquaney community as a COI because I loved camp. However, I also did it because I was obsessed with the title of COI. I needed to feel like I was on the same level as all my friends, who I used as my metric for coolness and therefore wanted to

emulate. Luckily, I was not immediately rewarded for this fraudulent behavior. It got to be week four, and I was still not a COI. Panic mode set in for the second time.

Things were looking pretty grim until a small, hairy saint named Mike Hanrahan came to my aid. While I was walking a loop, Mike checked in with me about what was on my mind. I talked to Mike for a long time about what I was feeling about my summer and the possibility of my becoming a COI. Mike was understanding and empathetic, which helped me to feel better, but the most important thing he did that day was tell me this: *If you let other people decide how you feel about yourself, you will never be happy.*

Hearing that helped me begin to understand that my mentality at camp that summer was totally out of whack. My priorities were in the wrong place completely. Mike and I finished the conversation by talking about areas in which I could develop my leadership and assert myself in the ways a COI does. I left that conversation with those words echoing in my head.

The following week I put what Mike had talked about into practice. Mike's words about letting other people decide how I felt about myself had certainly had an impact on me. But as the days of that week passed, I let them slip into the back of my mind and on Sunday of that week I went up to Mike and asked him if I had had the week that *he* wanted me to have. Mike immediately called me on this and told me that it should not have been about what he wanted but rather what I wanted, which I agreed with, but I didn't fully understand what I had really done by saying that to him. The next day I became a COI. While the rest of that summer was great, it has taken me a long time to fully internalize the lessons I learned from that process. Asking Mike that question expressed to him that I had not heard anything that he told me.

I wish so deeply that I had found a way to be comfortable in my own skin that summer without external validation. Maybe then I would have appreciated my friends for their qualities instead of trying to mimic them to boost my own status. Maybe then I wouldn't have been such a fraud, and I would have learned these lessons in a summer instead of the years it has taken me since to come full circle on this. Hindsight is 20/20, and I have already spent enough time thinking about that. So instead I will focus on the now.

When I look at the group of guys I see before me, I am energized by who each and every one of you are. I can't say enough about how much of a privilege it has been for me to be able to spend so much time with you. However, I see too many of you falling into the same trap that I did. In short, most of you worry too much about being cool. Your friend groups at camp are invaluable, but too many of you let your friends and the people you admire determine how you act and how you see yourself. You let your friends determine who you are by changing your behavior to fit in better with them. When you do this, you are forfeiting your free will, which makes

you you and no one else. You are slipping into the monotony of normalized behavior to avoid the discomfort of potentially harming your image.

It is important that you recognize that I don't mean to discourage having guys who you emulate because they are good people. You should absolutely find role models and mentors everywhere you go in life. Use them as something to strive toward to improve yourself. However, do not let your emulation of those you admire halt your discovery of who you are as an individual. Don't let the aura of coolness that you sense in those you admire cloud your ability to decide what you personally value or love about yourself. Instead, take the time to find out who you are. What do you like doing? How do you like to act? What gets you excited? What do you look for in a friend? Find answers to all of these questions, then let the people around you come to be your friends because they appreciate you for being yourself, don't change the way you act because you need to be validated by others.

At camp we have so many opportunities to look at others in our communities and strive to match their qualities. It is such a privilege to have so many great people here to emulate. However, as significant as the opportunity we have here to emulate others is, the opportunity to find your own individuality is just as great. Let us not admire each other as something to mimic, but rather let us admire each other for our united ability to be our own men. Think about some of the people you admire at camp. I hope you're thinking of the people who seem to be marching to the beat of their own drum, people that seem to be unconcerned with the status quo, or what people think is cool. Those are the people you should admire and emulate, not to mimic their aura for your own benefit, but because they have shown the way for you to find your own self-value. When I think of whom I admire in this way, I think of Bill Talley, who has flourished in the unpopular but vital role of kitchen disciplinarian over three summers on the council. I think of Townley, who will never stop hunting your oatmeal or wearing mem hall shorts to hikes despite years of ridicule. I think of RJ Duron, who last summer constructed a bizarre suit of armor out of birch bark for no other reason than it made him feel like a superhero. These guys don't give a hoot about how funny you look at them, not because they're selfish or egocentric, but because they feel compelled to follow their own paths. They don't really care about what's cool or the status quo. They care about what feels right for them. These are the guys that I admire because they inspire me to be my own man.

In the last week of this summer, I challenge you to figure out what makes you feel like yourself and grasp it tightly. Maybe it will damage the façade of coolness you have built up over the past six weeks, but if it makes you feel like yourself and no one else, do it. For me this summer it's been singing. I'm not a great singer. By most standards I'm not even a good singer, but there's nothing I love more than belting out a catchy tune. Whether I'm lined up with the Long Walkers, alone somewhere deep in the Sandwich Wilderness, or in chapel, singing loud and proud

makes me feel a zest for life that touches my very soul. And if you've ever heard me sing, you know that I'm not doing my image any good. If I had a nickel for every time the boys sitting in front of me in chapel turned around and looked at me horrified during the beginning of the first hymn, I'd be a rich man. Last Sunday, as I gave "Come Labor On" my absolute best, Scott Hellberg turned around and looked at me as if he expected to find a wounded screech owl. I know it's bad, Scott, you don't have to remind me. But singing makes me feel awesome, and that is more valuable than protecting my vocal cord's reputation. While we're on the subject of chapel, I will leave you with an excerpt from one of my favorite hymns, one that fits well with this subject and this talk in particular, "How Can I Keep From Singing".

*No storm can shake my in-most calm,  
while to that rock I'm clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,  
How can I keep from singing?*