

Hard Things

(Given by Townley Chisolm on August 7th, 2022)

At the end of the first week Zaffy Whitlock asked me why I have chosen to spend 37 summers at this camp. That is a good question! My first response was that this is a beautiful place. Pause for a moment and think about all the ways this place – and this community - are beautiful. What comes to mind?

For me, I think of the beauty of the view from Tree Talk on a summer evening or the silence of the night and the sweep of the Milky Way across the sky on a star walk. Somehow that night sky, which is really always the same, is even more beautiful when shared with campers and the occasional counsellor who comes along. I think of the glow of the lanterns beside the dorms late at night when you get up to go to the mines and you experience the feeling of total safety and peace that covers those dorms like a tent. And I think of the delight that camp audiences take in performances of skits and game nights and music nights and plays such as “Face the Music”. That community is beautiful... and we re-create it every summer. Part of what keeps me coming back is the suspense: HOW will we re-build our camp community this time, this unique summer full of possibility that is unlike any other season that has ever been or ever will be.

I have been able to come to camp for all those summers because I have been a teacher at all kinds of schools: St. Christopher’s School in Richmond, VA, and a school in England, and a school in Massachusetts and now one in New Hampshire. I have known and served schools that were healthy communities where students thrived and desperately sick schools where students and staff just got through the year. I care a great deal about education, and Pasquaney is the most powerful educational institution I have ever known. So that is the other power that draws me back: the chance to watch this camp work its magic in the lives of young men.

I want to explore that magic and that power with you this morning. A large part of the magic is the creation of fun, fun at tables, at Rich’s Game Night, in games all over the hillside or down in the lake, from water basketball to diving send trains to the endless joys of capsized canoes. Think of wall ball and chess and Santorini and Birch Roof (not played much this year!) and Birch Porch and basketball and on and on. And the organized games of baseball and tennis and canoe tag and sailing tag. Plenty of camps stop there and are stable, successful, happy places that young people love.

But Pasquaney **also** asks each one of us to do hard things, really hard things. Think for a long moment. What are those hard things and why are they hard?

Hikes – and why are hikes hard? Does camp ask you to do hikes that are beyond your physical capacity to do? No. Then why are hikes hard? Because to enjoy hikes you must adjust your attitude.

Long Walk – true to the nth degree... but still an attitude adjustment, really.

Scary dives – you must take the risk of following James’ directions and go for it.

Crew – such a complex stroke cycle and so many things that can and do go wrong – and then all the mistakes that your teammates can and will make. And add in wakes and wind. Total

nightmare until your team clicks and makes the rowing fun. Unless you are really tired and not into crew that morning, as sometimes happens.

Why does this camp create all these physical challenges for you? To let you experience the satisfaction, the huge satisfaction, of meeting those challenges and overcoming them.

But let's think harder. These are just physical examples. What about the really hard things, the social things? What hard things does Pasquaney ask of you in your social life?

Kindness – but why should kindness be hard? Explain. We all want to be treated with kindness so how hard can kindness to others be? Exactly. When meanness to others is fun for my group of friends, then being kind is a huge social disaster. And that meanness takes a million forms, all of them now on view in social media.

Respect – the same problems that kindness has.

Care for your community. Think about all the ways that this care plays out. Pasquaney asks you not to smash ping pong balls and paddles, not even when no counsellors are in the theater. We ask you not to throw toilet paper in the urinals or on the floor of the mines. We ask you not to read letters from girls in a way that fosters disrespect for women. We ask you not to exclude or be cruel to anyone, not even to boys who irritate you. In every one of these situations, the challenge is the group. I don't think these are usually the actions of a single boy acting alone. No, they are funny because they are done in a group with the power of the group. How hard is it to stand up for the right choice in each of these situations against the power of the group? You know how hard.

Circles. Circle discussions ask you to be honest and vulnerable as you talk about things that are important to you with your dormmates. Talking about yourself with that openness is a huge risk; no wonder many of you refuse to take it. But twice a week, your dorm counsellors still ask you to sit down and talk about a topic, even if you make fun of it.

Rest and after taps. When no counsellor is present, how do you behave? Do you accept the challenge of keeping quiet and staying in your bunk? If so, good, but what about the larger challenge of asking your dormmates to quit hacking around and show respect for the camp and its rules and to let campers in your dorm and in nearby dorms get the rest they want and need? How many “COI wannabee” comments will you receive for calling out your dormmates?

Let me suggest to you that the real risk for you lies NOT in speaking out against groups of your friends in these situations; the real risk lies in doing nothing. If you go along with the group, you learn a powerful lesson in social cohesion, and going along grows more seductive every time. You will be less and less able to try to change the choices of that group. You will make their choices your choices. And then you have lost yourself. And then you have lost yourself.

Pasquaney doesn't paint these choices in relative terms. We're not telling you that we understand the social pressures you face and that you are a victim of the social and environmental pressures of your time and therefore not to blame. No. In the clearest possible terms, we lay out in front of you the choices you face and then ask you to choose. Will you float

through your summer with the least possible exertion, or do you want to set goals for yourself and work hard to achieve them? What challenges do you choose? Do you care about the impact of your choices and your comments on your dorm in inspections, in quiet times, in circle discussions, in the quality of friendships built this summer? Do you choose honesty and integrity or do you get away with what you can? Do you choose to act in a way that inspires trust in others or is popularity plenty good enough? We ask you these questions in chapel talks and tree talks and then we ask you again as advisors talk with their advisees individually. There really isn't much way to escape. But the overall effect of all these questions, hard though they are, is to nudge and prod you toward being the person that you actually want to be, not the group follower but the person who chooses kindness and honesty and the hard right over the easy wrong. Of course, you still have your free will. You can choose to reject all these ideals. But watch out! You know perfectly well the choices you are making and you know where they lead.

I have painted these topics in stark "either – or" terms. There are other camps that ask young people to follow high ideals, not just Pasquaney. And not a single one of us succeeds in following our ideals, certainly not completely and certainly not all the time. The point, the great challenge, is to try, to see how close we can come. If you look back over the past 6 weeks and think to yourself "I could have done better!", then do better as we move forward into 7th week and in the year ahead. You are so lucky; you have time, so much time. And if you think that all this talk about kindness and community is a waste of time, that opinion is alright. Even if you reject that Pasquaney package now, you have at least heard the argument here and seen people trying to fulfill the project. What project? What are we trying to do here? We are trying to create as perfect a community as possible, a group of people that – even if it lasts only 7 weeks – comes close to Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom so beautifully described by the Bible reading for today: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." If Pasquaney were NOT asking these hard things of us, our trustees would not be as interested in serving this community and Pip would not have crossed the Atlantic to see it in action. When this camp succeeds in persuading most or all of its members to follow kindness and to act for the good of the whole community, then the season that follows warms us for as long as we remember anything.

At this time of the season, we start talking about how to make the hard adjustment from life at camp to life in the real world. Such a funny topic! It says right out that, in fact, you have changed your behavior and your choices here to fit these values, at least to some extent. Life is short. Quit lollygagging. Go ahead and make the full commitment to the values so carefully, persuasively laid out at Pasquaney. You don't need to follow them perfectly, but follow them as well as you can. We are persuaded that following these values leads both to maximum happiness for each of us as individuals and to the great good of our communities, no matter where we find ourselves. And whether you can make that commitment or not, then may God speed you on your way nonetheless. As the Navajo say when they say good-bye, "May you walk in beauty."