

Chapel Talk
Peter Caldwell
April 4, 2003

My dad was born in 1928. Although he was born in Michigan, he has spent most of his life in Vermont where he moved when he was 6. Three weeks ago, he had his second major heart operation. The pig's valve that had been keeping him going for the last 11 years had worn out even though, as he said, it was a "good pig" and a synthetic valve was put in its place. This, he will have for the rest of his life. The operation went well but, nonetheless, it left him pretty wiped out. He was put under, his blood was drained from his body and cooled down, he was cut open and his ribs were pried apart so that the doctor could get at his heart. The pig's valve was taken out and replaced with a synthetic one; then he was jump started again. This left him feeling a bit beat up, but he couldn't wait to get out of the hospital and back to Vermont. You see, he had an important sugaring operation to run.

Sugaring, which is the production of maple syrup, is one of the many outdoor activities around which my dad's life revolves. Sugaring in the spring, gardening in the summer, chopping firewood in the fall and skiing in the winter are all activities in which one can work with the weather, appreciate the changing seasons and have something to look forward to-to provide structure to life. Much like the excitement that we feel when we start up a new sports season, my dad looks forward and plans for each seasonal activity. Growing up, our holidays were punctuated by the changing weather. We celebrated Easter with an outdoor picnic. This, we did, in rain, shine or, more likely in Vermont, snow. Of course the summer solstice was a big celebration and was held on a hilltop where we could watch the longest day of the year fade into twilight. The Thanksgiving tradition involved a hike over the ridge to the next valley. We did not own a television so, rather than watch the traditional Thanksgiving Day football rivalries; we headed outdoors to get us out of the kitchen. The winter solstice included a ski up the mountain, followed by poetry readings and victuals late into the night. And then the opening of presents on Christmas was always taken care of early in the morning so that it would not interrupt a long cross-country ski before the Christmas dinner.

So, two weeks after his heart operation, my dad was back in his beloved sugarhouse, boiling the sap that had been collected from the trees. Sugaring is a grueling activity. It takes, on average, 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup. The sap is collected daily, by trudging through the snow with gathering pails, pouring the sap into a large tank, and driving it back to the sugar house. When I was a kid, that is how I would spend my spring break. Everyone else, it seemed, would head off to warmer climes and bask in the sun while I went home to Vermont to gather sap. Why would sugaring be so important to him? Although he taps over 1,000 trees and produces up to 400 gallons of maple syrup, sugaring is a hobby. It is not something that he does for profit. Wouldn't it be easier, to say nothing of safer for him, given his condition, to sit back and let his body heal?

When my dad put an addition on his sugarhouse two years ago and turned it into the "Mercedes" of sugarhouses, my mom joked that if it would keep him alive another 10-20 years, it was worth every penny. Sugaring is one of the many activities that have allowed my dad to confront, work with, and appreciate the weather rather than protect himself from it. There is a saying in Vermont-"if you don't like the weather, hang around for an hour and it will change".

Today, we tend to protect ourselves from the weather. We have malls, indoor coliseums, tunnels that lead from one college building to the next. We can get tan in a tanning salon; listen to the sounds of nature or the ocean on a CD as we fall asleep. We use products like Herbal Essence Shampoo, our makeup has natural botanicals to stop shine, we paste mud on our face, seaweed on our skin and we ingest ginkgo biloba, all in the name of health and beauty. And all of these products we buy prepackaged-we do not even need to step out of our doors for these natural amenities. We can hear, see, smell, taste nature without ever getting outside. And why should we risk the elements? Everyone here knows how difficult it is to walk all the way across the gully in the morning, especially if there is a little snow on the ground. Lord knows, we may have to change what we were planning to wear and dress for the weather - how inconvenient and unreasonable.

If we think about memorable moments from this year, we must include activities that have forced us outside. Hurricane Isabel is one example. Cleaning up the campus after that horrific storm brought us all together. Some of you engaged in manual labor for the very first time in your lives. Yes, it turned into a long day, but none of you can ignore feeling some wonder at the power of nature. Massive trees were, quite literally, ripped out of the ground. Branches, twigs, leaves were strewn around as though someone had taken all living things and shaken them until there was nothing left to shake off. Meeting on the front lawn, canceling classes, being outdoors, working together, and accomplishing something tangible through hard work-provided an experience that cannot be duplicated in the classroom. All of you were able to separate yourselves, for at least a moment, from the day-today concerns and appreciate the magnificence and wonder and power of nature. We could easily have protected ourselves inside and waited for the maintenance staff to clean up the mess. Instead, we ventured out and participated in a memorable activity.

Over the holidays, Mr. Brown was home alone with his son Malcolm while his wife and son Forest were off rehearsing for the opera, "The Hobbit". The first night Mr. Brown and Malcolm were "bad boys", getting their dinner and sitting in front of the TV, a custom not usually permitted in the Howlett/Brown household. On the second night, Mr. Brown asked Malcolm what he wanted to do after dinner. Malcolm asked whether it might be OK to take a walk outside. The moon was up, the trees were barren, and Mr. Brown and Malcolm wandered through the woods behind their house, out to the walnut grove, to the point across the pond. The mysteries of seeing the woods in the dark, the sounds, smells and sights of the woods on that particular night are imprinted on young Malcolm's brain. Malcolm, at the tender age of 10 has figured out the power and intrigue of nature.

When Mr. Brownlee was a student here, we did not have DVDs, VCRs, Malls, trips to Mikimotos...Students in those days spent a great deal of time in the woods, building forts, exploring the gulleys and glens that surround the pond by canoe or foot. Entire Sunday afternoons could be whiled away exploring the 2,300 acres that surround the

school. How many of you have been out the far reaches of the pond? I know that Brice Howard has.

A highlight of the season for the cross-country running team is the traditional “Rambo Run”. On that day, the boys’ cross country team is known to shed their shirts (putting the athletic shirt rule aside for a moment) paint their bodies with camouflage paint and dirt and run around the entire pond, wading through mud, roots and muck at the far end, and then winding their way back to campus on Money Road and Noxontown Pond Road. They come back wet, muddy and bleeding from the thorns and brambles they encounter while bushwhacking through the woods. They come back exhausted and rejuvenated. They have veered off the traditional, manicured running trails and have explored the woods as nature has created them.

We have, all around us, a magnificent display of nature, but too often, we choose to ignore it. Some of you find solitude in the Chapel. For some, it is playing a musical instrument or sitting alone in a favorite place on campus. Some of you are never alone, even for a moment during the day. We all benefit from time alone, where we can gather our thoughts and concentrate on who we are. We lead hectic lives, sprinting to someone or something throughout the day. We need to slow down and take some time to work on our own thoughts. This is a skill that we are not taught to develop. We are constantly trying to improve our skills - academically, athletically, artistically - and our relationships, that we do not take the time to understand our own thoughts. Start working on this skill now and you will be a healthier person for it. I can think of no better place for this than by sitting or walking outside. The beauty of this campus, in every season, is inspiration enough. You could go to the same special spot outdoors every day for four years and it would never be the same.

My dad figured this out a long time ago. So, when he ventures out to gather sap even though he has been weakened by a massive heart operation my mom can only shake her head. She would never try to stop him because asking him to stay inside and ignore the outdoors and what nature provides for us every day would be like asking him not to breathe.