Chapel Talk
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I climbed a lot of mountains this summer, hiking in the Adirondacks of New York and New Hampshire's White Mountains. I've always loved to climb: in middle school, I walked over 200 miles on trails every summer. I've climbed 14,000 foot peaks in Colorado; I've hiked in California, South Africa, Kenya, Great Britain; as a teenager, I rock climbed, scrambling up 5.8 and 5.9 cliffs with ease – but I don't think I've done this much hiking in a summer for over 15 years. Why? Well, mountains are physically hard, increasingly so on my aging knees: perhaps I'm in denial that the legs which propelled me up steep trails and over multiple summits now require Advil *before* I start and walking sticks to prevent my legs from buckling on the way down. As a child, I loathed going up because it took so long, but I loved racing down the trail, bounding effortlessly over boulders and roots. As an adult, I enjoy ascending because it doesn't hurt, while I dread the descent because I know it will.

Mountains also consume time: making lunch, collecting gear, reading the guide book, driving to the mountain and then the climb itself, which can take one, three, perhaps four hours just to the summit. Maybe I felt I couldn't afford the time to hike, with kids and their baseball camps, with reading, with recovering from a long school year. I could save my knees, I assured myself, by biking through the woods around our home, getting exercise for the dog and me. I was still playing tennis, which was fun, social and occasionally athletic.

But clearly I had fallen victim to our frenetic culture, which demands immediate action and achievement. When I was a child, a long distance phone call was a rare privilege; we wrote letters that we mailed, walking excitedly to the corner mailbox to pull down the big handle, and it was normal to wait a week or ten days for a reply. Now we live in an age of instant connection with almost anyone across the world; we can create or buy a meal in

less than a minute; our own family style dinners are more a sprint than a nourishing gathering.

We are impatient: we are biologically unable to stand in line at the supermarket or a tollbooth for more than 20 seconds without erupting into road rage. We can't let the natural learning process unfold, insisting on tutors and specialized coaches for five and six year olds so that they can get "ahead" – ahead of time, ahead of others, ahead of ordinary growth and developmental stages. Steroids and human growth hormones are another sad example of our inability to wait, our failure to build muscles the old fashioned way.

My own guilt in this world was exposed last Monday during the V Form Orientation in Engelhard. At the end of the morning, Mr. DeSalvo was making a power point presentation, moving between two programs, when suddenly, up on that big screen, his curser metamorphosized into that evil, dreaded pinwheel. I despise that pinwheel: it mocks me with its endless spinning, cruelly hypnotizing me for three, four, perhaps five tortured seconds. Mr. Mason, our new Art teacher, was sitting next to me as that multi-colored circle spun around and around and around, taunting me with its control over my life; and I muttered to him violently, "I *hate* that pinwheel," believing he was a sympathetic soul. Mr. Mason, however, responded enthusiastically: "But it's so pretty!" Humiliated, I realized I'd lost my capacity to wonder, to rejoice in color and movement, to exist with another person and "make of the moment something permanent," as Virginia Woolf writes in *To the Lighthouse*.

This past summer, my extended family went hiking in the Adirondacks for four days. As much as we can separate ourselves from the world, especially in the northeast, we did: after riding a small bus 8 miles into the woods on a private dirt road, we rowed Maine guide boats two miles up a lake, walked another mile, then paddled a quarter of a mile across a second lake to our cabins. There were no more than three other groups on this large lake. The mountains themselves, rising up to 5,000 feet, obliterated cell phone

coverage. We carried in our food, grilled meat over a fire, slept in a lean-to, and played silly card games competitively.

And we hiked: on our second day, we went up Pyramid, over 4,000 feet tall, a four-plus mile hike to the summit which took us three hours. My son Carter kept cursing me because I kept lying to him how close to the summit we were. We walked through beautiful, unspoiled forests without meeting anyone else; as we climbed higher, we gazed at magnificent views through the trees. We talked and listened – on mountains, you can experience complete conversations, conversations where you hear the full story, where you can tell the full story without interruption. On the trail we asked questions to each other we never seem to have the time to do otherwise: "How was your year?" "What are you thinking about doing in college?" "What was college like for you?" "How was the new job?" "Tell me about the trip." "What are you doing this fall?" "What are you reading?" They are gentle questions which lead easily to connections and discoveries – although the key to mountain conversation is to be the "questioner" on the way up, so you can listen and breath at the same time, rather than talk and gasp simultaneously if you are the "answerer."

That evening supper lasted well into the night not because there was a lot to eat, but because we enjoyed listening and laughing and mythologizing the trip without the crutch and distraction of cell phones, computers, TV, cars, X-Boxes, email. By taking our time, there was, paradoxically, more time: more time to listen to stories, birds and the lake; more time to eat, taste and laugh; more time to see shadows, sunlight and smiles; more time to hear, consider and reflect. During this trip, I felt in sync with time, not trying to outrace it, not being overwhelmed or swamped by it, but in communion with it naturally, wholly, purely.

I had a second experience this summer that equally challenged my conception of time. Almost two years ago, my father, a retired minister, a month shy of his 80th birthday, realized he was an alcoholic. Just before returning to St. Andrew's, I drove him to one of

his weekly Twelve Step meetings, and was invited to join the eight other adults for their discussion.

Alcoholism is a vicious disease, and as a society we are not very tolerant towards those with a drinking problem. It's hard to admit to alcoholism, and because of the public shame frequently involved, alcoholics tend to be anonymous – thus the name, "Alcoholics Anonymous." My hunch is a few of you listening to these words tonight know an alcoholic, are related to one, are trying to figure out how to help one. I am sure some of you who are children of alcoholics know a lot about this world. I am still trying to understand what it means to be a child of an alcoholic.

With some emotional trepidation, I followed my dad into a common room at a church in a nearby town. Looking around the room, I saw people greeting each other warmly, chatting happily; not that I was looking for them, but I didn't see the stereotypical drunk or bum. At these meetings, there are no last names: people are known by first names only, in part to protect the individual, in part to keep everyone equal. As the meeting began, we read aloud a chapter of one of the Twelve Steps towards recovery, this step asking forgiveness in person from all the people you've hurt in the past.

That evening I witnessed courageous and heroic men and women who were patient with their recovery. Some had been coming to these meetings for 20 years, some for five, some like my father for 18 months; one person had been sober for only a few weeks. Having been so low, so broken, so ruined by alcohol and their powerlessness over it, these men and women knew that meaningful and life-saving transformations could only occur gradually. One man admitted that he tried to rush through some of the Twelve Steps, only to recognize he couldn't – he needed to take the time to remember whom he'd hurt, and then intentionally see all of them to apologize for his alcohol-spurred actions. During his story, no one spoke critically or passed judgment; they heard him out. When he finished, everyone exclaimed, "Thank you, Jim." Ironically, these people were in sync with time because they had accepted that they would never be *recovered* alcoholics: rather, they would always be *recovering* alcoholics, always in the process, moving

towards a place but never fully moving past it. And that was OK. The magic, I recognized, was that those who were most vulnerable, those who acknowledged their weaknesses, were actually able to save and affirm and uplift their fellow sufferers. For my father, this salvation, this empowerment, has come not from medical or professional experts, but from expert sinners, failures, bozos, humans. Driving home, I was strangely envious of the raw strength within that community.

These two experiences remind us at the start of this school year that anything truly good, worthy and lasting requires time to develop. New grass, friends, buildings, courses, families, novels, roommates, teams, relationships, skills all necessitate time. Artistry and wisdom insist on time; love demands time; dying, surprisingly, can gift us sacred time and eternal connections. Learning to exist with time, especially in our culture, is arduous, but patience breeds resilience.

By embracing time, we become open to the people around us, those we see, those we haven't yet recognized who, like us, are also "tumbling mud balls trying to show their shine" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*). The mystery of time is that by surrendering to it, we live freely within it. The paradox of our humanity is that while we can't possess power over time, we can exert power over our direction, power over how we respond to the experiences time gives us, and power to celebrate and sanctify our stumbling souls, hearts and beauty.