

Wendy Woollven – Headmaster’s Chapel, October 2, 2007

I want to begin this morning with a question. I don’t need your answer, but really think about your response for a second. What is the most difficult thing you have ever done? It’s a pretty big question, and I can see that a few of you want me to be more specific.

Does she mean it was physically difficult? Can I use the time I pushed myself during a challenging run or workout, or when I played so hard during a game or competition that I reached a point of exhaustion and muscle strain?

Or does she mean mentally difficult? After all she is a teacher, maybe I’m suppose to answer that it was the test I took last week, or problem I had to solve? Or maybe when my beliefs were put to the test.

She could be asking for an “emotionally hard time in my life” kind of moment, when I was emotionally drained, pushed to my breaking point and brought to tears....

Well, I’m not going to say that it has to be any one of these or all of these, I just want you to think about that situation and what you were feeling leading up to it, during it, and after it was over.

Mr. Robertson asked us at the beginning of the year to be ready with 5 things about ourselves that no one really knew, so we could get to know each other better. You’re going to learn a bit more about me today through some stories I’d like to tell. I am a pretty private person, so this is tough, but is it the most difficult thing I have ever done? No way!

If I had to describe one of the toughest things I have ever done physically, I am taken back to the summer of 1993. That was a memorable summer for me, as I began July in a great deal of pain when I was struck by lightning... But, that’s a story for another day. I’m not talking about you feeling pain, but more of a physical challenge. At the end of the summer my best friend and I led a 13-day canoe trip with 9 teenage girls from Northern Ontario to Quebec, beginning on Lake Temagami and ending in Kipawa. We canoed with all of our food, tents, and supplies – everything we needed to survive in the woods, cut off from civilization, for 13 days. In total, we covered 203 km, 10 of which were portages – where we needed to carry all our gear on our heads and backs from one lake to another over land. One day, we actually did a 4km portage – two trips each. Throughout that trip, we pushed ourselves to do more, go farther, and we ended each day with a level of exhaustion that was much greater than many of us had ever felt. In the end, we were all better for the experience in so many ways, but physically, we had all accomplished much more than we, and others, thought we could. The rush we felt when looking back on our accomplishments was amazing.

In terms of an emotionally and mentally difficult experience, there are lots I could choose, but I will tell you about one which many of you can relate to – moving away from home. I had gone to university for 5 years to 2 schools that were between 2 and 4 hours from home, and I went to a camp 7 hours away, so leaving home for periods of time and feeling homesick was nothing new. But, moving from Eastern Ontario to Shawnigan Lake, BC was soooooo different. I had just wrapped up my summer job, at the camp I was mentioning, where I had spent my 12th summer surrounded by friends, routines and experiences that I loved, and I got in my car with all my stuff and began a 6-day trip across Canada to move to my first real job, at this distant private school, where I had been hired to teach some classes, in a place that I had only seen in a grainy video and some still photos in a brochure.

I was actually fine all the way through Ontario and the Prairies, and most of BC, it kind of felt like a holiday. When I got on the ferry I was in awe – what a beautiful view. This was good, I was keeping it together, and I actually made it to the School. I drove in the front gates and up to the Main Building and quickly discovered that no one was around. I got in my car and drove right back out again – that’s when it hit me. Oh my gosh, my parents and friends and everything I know are over 4700km away. WHAT HAVE I DONE! I nearly headed back to the Nanaimo ferry. But I stopped, pulled myself together and decided to stick with it. That September was

pretty hard, and I cried myself to sleep a few nights. But, I learned to persevere through the uneasiness, and I am all the better for sticking with my decision to be independent and move to BC to teach.

I think I'll end by talking about the single event that is the most difficult thing I have ever done. If I just list the facts about it, it seems pretty trivial. The hardest thing I have ever done was to spend two days walking through the streets of Vancouver, for a total of 60km. Doesn't seem too bad, but if I tell you about the situation that led to this endeavour, my 2-day experience and the days that followed, you will understand why it is the one experience in my life that was most difficult physically, emotionally and mentally.

In February 2004, I got a phone call from my mom. It was one of those moments when you can just tell that the voice on the other end of the phone has something bad to say. She had breast cancer. My world suddenly felt like it was coming to an end. This person who was my rock, the constant in my life, was suddenly going to die. I probably shouldn't have immediately thought that, but that's where my mind went. My mom was going to miss out on so many of the things I had yet to do with my life. I was being a little selfish in my thinking, but my mind quickly swung around to what her needs were. Amazingly, she had suddenly found this inner strength and optimistic approach to everything, and we all supported her through her surgery, chemotherapy, and even the death of her own mother in the middle of it all. Wow! With all that she was going through, this woman was an inspiration.

So what could I do? Other than being a positive voice on the phone from the other side of the country, I was able to be there during part of her recovery. But my sister-in-law, Jen, and I wanted to do more. So, we signed up to participate in the first Vancouver Weekend to End Breast Cancer. It was to be a 2-day walk at the end of August through the city streets (sleeping in tents on the night in between) that would raise money for Cancer research. No matter what the event, raising money for cancer research has a positive impact, but to be part of this, we each needed to raise at least \$1000.

I hate asking people for money, no matter what the cause. I find it difficult. But I needed to put my own insecurities aside, and get out there and raise some funds for this cause that suddenly hit much closer to home. So the money was raised. My family and friends donated \$3,585 towards my efforts.

Walking 60km – how hard could that be? It wouldn't be, except that your body is not used to doing it within a 36-hour period. We did a bit of training, but not enough.

When the walk began, Jen and I were doing well. The introductory pep rally was very emotional as cancer survivors told their stories, and we heard about the statistics of breast cancer and the strides being made with research. 1 in every 9 women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. One of the most moving speeches was actually by a man who had survived breast cancer. Yes a man – they have breast tissue too!

The route was lined with rest stations and food and water every few kilometres, and at lunchtime we had just exited Stanley Park. Then it started to rain, and rain, and rain. I don't think I have EVER felt that drenched in my entire life.

For the next 4 hours we walked along rainy streets, meeting really interesting people and with each soggy step we got closer to our 35km goal of the first day. We may have only been walking, but the rain added a new element, and as time went by, it became more and more mentally difficult to not give in. It was so tempting to just give up and get onto one of the nice warm dry buses that were available to drive us to the end. And to be honest, we actually thought about it – A LOT! But, if mom could get through her surgery and chemo, then we could put ourselves out for a few more hours.

Physically, my body started giving out at the end of the first day. My knees ached, and Jen's hip was almost grinding, it was so sore. There had been reminders all the way to stretch, but we were not very consistent, so on day 2, with dry shoes, many blisters, a bum knee, a sore hip flexor and the sun finally shining, we lathered on some A5-35 and walked the final 25km, stretching every 10 minutes. As I climbed the Cambie Bridge on our way to BC Place, my left shin went and I had shooting pains and did lots of hobbling to make it to the end.

As the physical pain subsided a bit, the emotional impact of what we had just done hit us. The event raised over 7 million dollars from the 2000 walkers and 250 crewmembers. I still get a lump in my throat every time I think about that last hour on the BC Place Stadium turf as we cheered the last of the walkers in and recognized the volunteers. In the closing ceremonies that honoured the many survivors young and old that had walked, I couldn't stop crying and realizing how thankful I was that my mom was okay.

Besides coming away from this experience limping for a good two weeks, I had gained a level of pride that I had been just a small part of something so special. Who would have known if we had given up early? Well, we would have. Would I do it again? Yes I would. It was worth the humbling experience of asking people for money, the aching muscles and spent tears, because I can honestly say that I faced the difficult challenges that were put before me, and gained a greater respect for anyone who has faced anything in their lives that is tough and has the drive to get through it.

So, my message today: Face the difficult things that come up in your life head on. You will be all the better for them.

In the words of Helen Keller,

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

– Thank you.