

February 20, 2011

## Letter from Lost Prairie

### Gaining a Footing

In Montana February may be the bleakest month. It is easy to feel that one might be enshrouded in winter for ever. The color palate is monochrome; enlivened only by the flight of black ravens or long tailed magpies. Those of you who are familiar with Montana's arguably most famous painter, Russell Chatham, will understand when I say that many winter days are "Chatham days." Chatham captures the essence of winter in Montana – soft grey on grey green and brown, the landscape barely visible as muted mountains are dimly viewed through a mist of falling snow or flat planes of low light illuminate the foreground. Chatham came from a line of Swiss-Italian painters. His grandfather, Gottardo Piazzoni, immigrated to California to work on a dairy farm in the Carmel valley. He painted subtle landscape panels for the city library in San Francisco in the 1930s and these now hang in the first floor ballroom at the new de Young museum. Grandson and grandfather share a recognizable artistic style.

Last weekend the Lake McGregor ice fishing derby was in full sway. There were lights twinkling on the lake as early as 5.00 a.m. as people set up their fishing equipment in the dark. Daylight revealed small groups of people and equipment dotted randomly over the surface of the lake, looking for all the world like a nomad encampment in the Libyan desert except that the sand is snow and the people are clothed in snow suits and seated in chairs, staring down into holes augured into the ice beneath their feet. Smells of barbequing meat wafted over the air and every few minutes a four wheeler raced across the ice pulling a sled or an ice house to some new location where the fish might be biting. The crowd on the lake numbered hundreds of people. This annual event rivals the numbers of parents who will arrive next month for the spring workshop. The record catch was an 18 lb lake trout – a not inconsiderable fish to pull out of a hole roughly 8" in diameter cut into the ice. The purse is quite handsome also. All the \$20 entry fees are pooled and result in a winner's purse of \$2,000 or more. Not bad for a couple of days of fishing!

Yak tracks attached to the soles of boots are the best help that there is for trying to stay upright on ice. I can walk without hesitation when I know that I can trust them for traction. One winter day I set out for a bracing walk feeling relatively secure until I suddenly noticed that one of my yak tracks had disappeared. I had likely walked a mile without it, stepping forward confidently, and suddenly I was scared to move! Like a child learning to walk or at a later age to ice skate I needed comforting support and was suddenly unsettled when I became aware that it had been withdrawn. So, too, our children move forwards with confidence knowing that we are there to pick them up if they stumble and are startled when they find that the support has been withdrawn.

At Montana Academy students come to rely on the support that their treatment team provides day in and day out when they are upset or worried. They are also encouraged to rely on each other, particularly their intimate relationships with teammates, to trust them with their worries and struggles. They learn to strip off their various masks of false confidence, bravado or joking distance and to show the true self in honest struggles or human failings and to take ownership of mistakes that may have caused mistrust or damaged relationships. This is the path to understanding one's own part in the breakdown of trust: taking responsibility, making an honest effort to acknowledge hurting others and making a sincere attempt to change these old patterns. These daily exercises in building trust do indeed create strong bonds and, where parents can also be honest about their own struggles and failings, there is good reason to think that strained relationships with their children are likely to improve. The first steps may be shaky and fraught with lack of confidence. Sometimes feet simply slide out from underneath to deposit the body unceremoniously on the ice. But gradually each side builds on its successes and comes to know that simply listening is the foundation for all later work. Listening without judgment and with validation of feelings goes a long way in the healing process. It is at the heart of the "I feel" statements that our students have begun to master in the wilderness experience. We return to this foundation again and again in our work to build trust before it is time to confront and challenge and push for greater responsibility and a demonstration of active change. It is the launching pad for the treacherous walk across the ice.

Eventually footsteps become steadier and only when the footing of trust is in question do they waiver again. We reminded our Sky House parents recently of the fact that a move into town 40 miles away and a change of

context readily threaten the confidence of all our students. I was at Sky House last week to run a group for girls and some of them talked about how comfortable they felt in their last months on campus and missed it. They had experienced the pleasure of being in the “flow,” skating along comfortable with their actions and living in harmony with their good intentions. Now this pleasurable “flow” had been disrupted and they had to stop and think about how to recreate this feeling of confidence. They needed to be reminded of all that they had learned, how much they have indeed changed and urged to move forwards through the inevitable slippery regressions so that they regain a sense of agency and positive control. Both we and you are still walking alongside them and are there to support them in the long journey to responsible adulthood.

Warm regards,

Rosemary