

From the HEAD OF SCHOOL



We are entering the season of Thanksgiving, one of my favorite times of the year. And yet our community and the communities around us seem to have suffered from a series of sad events that have shaken us at our core. Events like these have left me thinking and wondering about the

nature of happiness, especially as it relates to our children.

As many of you know, I was struck by the importance and elevation of joy and happiness at Menlo the first moment I set foot on this campus as a visitor five years ago. My amazement was due in part to how pronounced these goals are here and in part to how unusual they are for a school, especially for a school of Menlo's seriousness and academic caliber. Determined at the time to get to the bottom of where this happiness came from, I quizzed the students I met on the sincerity of their sentiment (surely I was just set up with the happiest students?). But I eventually came to understand that this was an authentic sentiment at Menlo. Since joining the community last



year I have come to understand better the elements of happiness here.

The Happiness Club in the Upper School, a club I have not encountered or heard of at other schools, routinely decorates the walkways with positive, inspiring messages. Last week I went to observe a class only to find lollipops on each table, a project carried out by the club "just because." This fall they brought an expert on happiness, Dr. Fred Luskin, to speak to the Upper School student body. One piece of his message was how important membership in community is to the experience of happiness.

"Gratitude leads to happiness as much as or more than just about any other attitude we can adopt in our lives."

And I see this daily at Menlo. The connections between students, teachers and parents make this so much more than just a place to go to school. In the formative years of developing one's individual identity, years that are often the most difficult for many of us, having a community like ours to find safety and support is powerful. I witness this in the way students thank their teachers at the end of class: as John Schafer points out, that doesn't happen at every school. I see it in the star athlete who credits his success in a game to his teammates rather than falling for the temptation to accept the accolades offered to him by the press.



My thinking then returns to the giving of thanks. Is it the happy people who are grateful? Or the grateful people who are happy? Science now gives us an answer, and it is definitive: gratitude leads to happiness as much as or more than just about any other attitude we can adopt in our lives. But why is this?

Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast notes that when we are grateful, we are not fearful and we operate out of a sense of having enough. When we are grateful, we defy the self-serving bias that is human nature and that leads us to believe that we are who and where we are through our own efforts alone. In this way, I appreciate and admire the connection between gratitude and humility and know both to be elusive but essential during the adolescent years.

How can we help our children do this? Brother David suggests a simple three-step formula for finding more gratitude in our lives. The secret? He maintains you learned it as early as the first time you were taught to cross the street: “stop, look, go.” In his conception, we first need to find stop signs in our lives that help us to slow down. These stop signs are all too often found in tragedy or sadness, but they don’t have to be. Part two of the formula has to do with using those stop sign opportunities to look for things we are grateful for. Sometimes these items are profound, sometimes as simple as the first time a new friend calls you by your nickname. Finding the things we can be grateful for is not hard, but it does require discipline. The third step is, I think, the hardest for adolescents, because it can be seen as countercultural: acting on one’s sense of gratitude. Saying something, thanking someone, jotting a quick note to express

appreciation—these are all acts that take just seconds yet improve the day of the receiver and, according to the studies, vastly improve the sense of happiness in the person delivering the message.

I find that I am able to complete the first two steps—stop, look—almost every day at Menlo without even trying. Watching sixth graders at play, observing the teaching in a class, passing the daycare munchkins on their daily parade back from lunch, discussing a big idea with



brilliant minds on the administrative team or Board...I realize I am surrounded by things I am grateful for, and yet I rarely act on that sense of gratitude in the way that I might. And so I’ve set that as a personal goal.

There is so much to be grateful for at Menlo School. I encourage you to stop, look (it won’t be hard to find things for which you are grateful) and then go act on what you find this season!

Than

KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website each month, with an email alert including a link sent to all parents. For questions, please contact Alex Perez, Director of Communications, via email at alex.perez@menloschool.org or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

