

From the  
HEAD OF SCHOOL  
*Than Healy*



## Resilience in Uncertain Times

During check-ins this Monday in my junior Advocacy group, one of our amazing students admitted what I think a lot of us have experienced: that when we first closed campus she clung to the notion that we would be back after Spring Break, but now that this will clearly not be possible, she's been quite down about things and feeling a bit numb. I think this student's experience is normal for many, perhaps most, of us: give us a goal to shoot for and we will strap on our resilience and gut it out until it is over. In fact, this is a very reasonable and successful coping mechanism in our normal lives.

These are not, however, our normal lives. Circumstances have shifted and suddenly include a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity.

When we can't control our situation, when there is a high degree of ambiguity as there is now, I think our raw optimism can actually get in our way. We're facing a challenging new circumstance without a clear end-date, in which the variables of everything from "Am I safe?" to "Will the item I am hoping to find at the store be there?" are beyond our control and our normal capacity to plan is severely undermined. Under these circumstances, I fear that our normal optimism and grit turn against us and leave us feeling sad and adrift, as expressed so eloquently by the student in advocacy.

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And while I see ample evidence that our students' creativity and interconnectedness are thriving in many ways right now, I am hearing from advocates and parents alike that a lot of our children are struggling in this way. Of course, I remain especially worried about our seniors, many of whose whole lives may justifiably feel fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. They're grappling with the results of college decisions that have come out in the last two weeks, as well as a lack of clarity about graduation, senior spring, and whether they will be able to be together again as a class. I am holding these children close to my heart during these times.

This may be why I've been thinking a lot about one of my heroes of late. Admiral James Stockdale, distinguished naval aviator most known for being the leader of a group of prisoners of war in Hanoi, Vietnam, was one of the great practitioners of lived ethics. An actual Stoic who trained in the Stanford philosophy department before heading off to the Vietnam War, Admiral Stockdale provides us with a remarkable legacy to live up to as humans. Perhaps I am drawn to Admiral Stockdale because three of his four sons became independent school teachers, two of whom I had the good fortune of beginning my teaching career with in Monterey and one of whom is currently a fellow School Head in Southern California. More likely, I have been enamored with the approach he demonstrated to extreme adversity as it maps to our own, admittedly significantly more modest, adversity today.



Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam in September of 1965. Having suffered a shattered leg in the crash, he went on to endure a beating from those who found him and torture at the hands of his prison captors that would add a broken shoulder and a broken bone in his back, injuries that would stay with him for the rest of his life. From that start, Stockdale would go on to endure seven and a half years of imprisonment and torture, four of which were in solitary confinement and two of which were in leg irons. All of this puts my own current “safe at home” and “physical distancing” restrictions in their proper perspective. But as extreme as the conditions were that he endured, the lessons that Admiral Stockdale imparts to us have less to do with withstanding torture than with the nuances of handling, and ultimately defeating, the isolation and uncertainty of his condition—lessons that may be more true for us now than at any other point in our lifetimes.

While I highly recommend learning more about Stockdale’s approach to leadership in prison (he was the commanding officer and among other things developed both a code of conduct and a secret communication method using wall taps to buoy his fellow prisoners) or about the ways in which his wife, Sybil,

saved his life from a distance by bringing attention to the treatment of POWs in the international press, or about how he kept his mind fresh in isolation by reciting, from memory, the works of Marcus Aurelius (a fellow Stoic and hero of Stockdale’s), I would like to focus here on a couple of central lessons that Admiral Stockdale provides us as we collectively face the challenges of the present moment.

One of the lessons that Admiral Stockdale leaves us, made famous by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, relates to who survived the POW camps and who didn’t. Predictably, those who entered the prison with no hope of survival didn’t last long and were typically the first to pass on. Interestingly, those who were blindly optimistic (“We’ll be home by Christmas for sure”) were typically the second

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wave to die because, in Admiral Stockdale’s eyes, Christmas would come and go and it became “we’ll be home by Easter” and then “we’ll be home by Thanksgiving” and then it was Christmas again and his fellow prisoners would perish from broken hearts. Collins refers to this dynamic as The Stockdale Paradox: true resilience comes from a combination of a real discipline to confront the brutal facts, whatever they are, and an absolute and unwavering faith that one will prevail despite those constraints.





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The other lesson has to do with Admiral Stockdale’s incessant focus on building and maintaining his community of fellow prisoners at all costs. Coming out of a brutal experience in the Korean War in which American prisoners often turned on each other in times of adversity, Stockdale was determined to create a sense that each man depended on and was responsible to the others. By focusing on each other’s health and safety, the men were better able to endure their own hardships. After the war, in a study of prisoners considering whether torture or solitary confinement was worse, the clear conclusion was that solitary confinement was the bigger threat to a person’s health and safety.



Collectively, we face an uncertain future bringing ambiguous challenges. We hear in the news that the weeks ahead may be even more difficult for our country than they have been already. We are forced to come to terms with the truth that few of us have any sense of control over the situation. As we confront the brutal facts that this school year will likely end in ways that none of us would have hoped for, we must simultaneously hold an unwavering faith that we will prevail, both as a society and as a school. Further, we *must* understand that “prevailing” means we look after the needs of others not only for their survival, but also our own.

As we head off to a very different spring break than we usually look forward to, my heart compels me to share my extreme gratitude to all of you—faculty, staff, students, parents and alumni—for bonding together and bringing your best selves to these trying days. It is my great good fortune to be associated with this incredible community, especially during these heartbreaking and uncertain times.

We will prevail together,

*Thao Healy*



KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website several times each year, 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](mailto:alex.perez@menloschool.org) or call 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

