

From the
HEAD OF SCHOOL
Than Healy



A Year of Joy and Connection

This weekend, our students, families, and alumni will converge for a Homecoming and Reunion gathering for the first time since the fall of 2019. Our athletes have trained; Upper Schoolers have worked hard to build their floats for the parade; and across the school, students are arriving in festive costumes every morning for Spirit Week, from their class colors to their finest disco gear. I'm deeply proud of the adaptability and resilience our community has shown in the past two years, finding ways to connect and build relationships safely during the toughest of circumstances—but this week, I feel relief and joy on a whole new level, watching our community celebrate together in person.

At the beginning of the school year, I spoke to students about where we're going this year and my goals for our community—aside from, of course, the continuing and ever-present need to protect the health and safety of every member of our community. In this Knightline, I'd like to share with you some of what I said to them.

Prioritizing Connection

The benefit of hardships is clarity. We rarely learn much about ourselves when things are easy and comfortable, though it is natural and normal to seek ease and comfort. What became clear over these last 20 months is that connection is core to what we need as human beings and as members

of a community we care about. The adults in this school are focusing on creating and sustaining connections—not just sports and plays, retreats and dances, traditions and reunions—but also the intangibles that have always made Menlo School a place that runs on relationships, on being known and seen. Connection sounds easy, but it is much more than simply being around each other. It needs to be intentional, and my hope is that every teacher, student, family member, and alumnus will help us to put connection at the front of what we do this year.

I've been thinking about how to prioritize connection on a daily basis, and how the tyranny of the urgent can prevent this. For me, this means stepping away from my inbox and my task list more often, no matter how critical those things may feel as they battle for my attention and my time. When I step away from those tasks, which will always be urgent, I make space to be out on the Quad with our students, enjoying their company, checking in with my colleagues, feeling the spirit of the day. We have to choose to prioritize connection even when it's easy not to.

Nurturing Joy

The second theme I'm centering this year is joy. Now, I feel I need to explain this one a little, because, in my view, our culture has some misconceptions around joy. Our society tends to use the concepts of happiness and joy interchangeably, and this conflation certainly benefits



anyone who's trying to sell you something. Don't get me wrong—I'm a big supporter of happiness, and I welcome it into my life every chance I get. But these two ideas are different.

Happiness is sensory: it's a taste, a smell, a touch, a sound, something we see. It's also transitory—it fades when the external stimulus is gone. Because of this, it's tempting to chase endlessly after superficial happiness, even to our own detriment.

But joy is different. It is harder to attain sometimes, but it is also more enduring. Joy comes from within. Joy exists despite the circumstances. If you are a joyful person or have a joyful person in your life, you know that even when things are dark or hard, their joy persists.

Unlike happiness, which resides in ease and comfort, joy can emerge from adversity and challenge. Think of a grueling task: a hard project you are working on, a difficult concept that isn't coming easily, a physical challenge that seems endless, an opponent that is your match or perhaps your superior. Happiness is about comfort, and if that is the most important thing, then you should stop the grueling task. But joy comes from persisting: seeing the task through to completion and then looking back on what you have accomplished.

What we went through, collectively, over the last 20 months did not create many happy memories for me. But the profound sense of community I have with the people who have walked this path with me brings me a tremendous sense of joy.

As many of you know, I like to start each school year by telling students about a teacher I've had in my life. This year I shared the story of Jack Kornfield. Jack grew up, one of four boys, in a Jewish household in St. Louis. His father was a scientist. After graduating from Dartmouth College, he joined the Peace Corps and served in the

Mekong River Valley in 1967. It was there that he met the first of what would become a series of Buddhist teachers he learned from in Thailand, Burma, and India. And it was there that he would begin his journey to becoming a Buddhist monk, and now one of the premier teachers of Buddhist practice in the United States. Jack founded and runs a center for meditation north of here called Spirit Rock, and he happens to be an old friend of my family—he married my wife Deborah and me and remains an author I find myself drawn to regularly.



*"If happiness comes
from pleasure, joy
comes from purpose."*

Jack says that joy often arises for no apparent external reason, but arises from the right preconditions. In Jack's words, "When love meets happiness, it becomes joy"... but the love has to pre-exist. The Dalai Lama and

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book together a few years ago titled, appropriately, *The Book of Joy*. In it they articulate the preconditions for joy:

Perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, generosity.

The common theme in this list is putting others first. It's committing to a purpose, even a purpose that is difficult to achieve. You can set your personal stage for joy by focusing less on yourself.

If happiness comes from pleasure, joy comes from purpose.

The society our children are growing up in values happiness and gives lip service to joy, but doesn't much practice it. But what if we did? What if we welcomed happiness but actively pursued joy? What would this community be? What might this world look like? And what kind of life would that mean for our students?

That is my wish for all of us this school year. That we work to put together the preconditions that, regardless of the struggles we may face, allow us to put others first, to commit to a purpose, and to set the stage for joy. That we spend some time discerning the difference between happiness and joy,

and maybe thinking a little more deeply about where we want to spend our time, energy, and effort. There has never been a better moment for this re-thinking because crisis allows for connection with a deeper purpose in a way that comfort, familiarity, and routine do not. There has never been a better moment for deep, transformative change. And I can think of no better, more important time to be in my line of work. I am deeply grateful. I hope to see many of you at one or more of our homecoming festivities and that we'll have the chance to say hello, connect, and enjoy the time together. Go Menlo!

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KnightLine is published 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 or call 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

