

From the
HEAD OF SCHOOL
Than Healy

Making Empathy Loud

I'm truly grateful for our wonderful start to the year and to be a part of this incredible community. As has become a tradition in my time here, at the beginning of each year I share some thoughts with both our Middle and Upper School students on an impactful teacher I've had in my life to help set the tone for the year. Sometimes I've talked about actual teachers I've had, and other times, I've shared the impact of unconventional "teachers." This year, that teacher is a piece of art.



Great art is the concentrated expression of the human experience—our emotions, loss, triumphs, and the values we hold dear. The Broadway musical *Come From Away* is one such work. It profoundly touched me, and I believe it serves as a great example for who we can be as a community.

If you are unfamiliar with *Come From Away*, it's set in the small town of Gander, on the island of Newfoundland, Canada, and it tells the story of September 11, 2001, in the hours and days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked. When the United States closed its airspace that day, every plane over the Atlantic headed for the US was diverted to this tiny town just off Canada's Atlantic coast.

The planes were redirected to this particular place, in part, because in 1938, when planes heading to and from Europe couldn't make the whole trip on one tank of fuel, the then largest airfield was built in Gander to allow transcontinental planes to refuel. Though the airfield hadn't gotten much use in the decades prior to 9/11 because of advances in

long-distance aviation, it was the logical place to divert the planes due to the size of the field as well as the fact that no one knew whether other planes would be used in an attack and leaders wanted to send the planes to the smallest communities possible.

Thirty-eight planes landed in Gander that day, bringing 7,000 people from 95 different countries to an isolated town that only had 9,000 people in it. By way of scale, the town of Menlo Park has a population of 35,000 and East Palo Alto and San Carlos each have around 30,000. So this is a small community that had the equivalent of almost nine Menlo Schools descend on it in a matter of hours. *Come From Away*, tells the true stories of the residents of the Town of Gander and of some of the "plane people" (as they were referred to) during the five days that they were stranded together.

Personally, this show is a hard one for me to watch because it reminds me of a dark moment in many of our lives. I cry every time I see it because the stories of pain, loss, fear, and uncertainty bring me right back to those horrific moments 21 years ago. But mostly, I am moved by the incredible empathy, compassion, and care that the residents of this tiny town bring forth for their unexpected visitors. *Come From Away* is hopeful to me. It tells the story of the citizens who convert every community building at their disposal into shelters, how store owners open their shelves to ensure everyone has what they need, and how residents look past their own needs to provide for their unexpected guests.

The art of this show goes beyond just the story it tells—it's also how the playwrights choose to tell it. Twelve cast members play multiple roles, constantly shifting characters and voices, and sharing the spotlight. There isn't one lead character—



there are dozens of characters who unify to accomplish something remarkable. And the fact that the actors must bring forth the understanding of multiple perspectives only underscores the empathy at the work's core.

That's why I choose to see this piece of art as a teacher—for the lessons it provides us about empathy. In our world today, where most of what we see and hear about is division and contempt, a story about a community of people rallying together in the most empathic way to support total strangers gives me hope. It makes me want us, as a community, to put a greater focus on empathy in who we are and how we do our work together.

Empathy is when we feel the feelings of someone else. It's different than sympathy, which is also a laudable virtue. Author Brene Brown makes a nice distinction: "sympathy" is coming upon someone stuck in a hole and offering them advice, support, and understanding. "Empathy" is getting in the hole with them.

Empathy requires a curiosity about how someone else is experiencing the world, it requires time to be with that person, it requires vulnerability as you share emotions with someone else. It requires a sense of unity—a notion that there is no "them," there is only us. And for these reasons, empathy can be challenging to bring forth for those closest to us, let alone for someone who is unknown to us.

But empathy is also wildly contagious, and neuroscientists tell us that it stimulates the same part of the brain where joy and happiness live. Empathy not only makes the world better by combatting its opposing forces (intolerance, division, isolation, alienation, and anxiety), it makes us more happy and joyful as individuals. Empathy is like superfood for the soul!

So why did the people of this small town in the middle of nowhere respond to a moment of crisis and fear in the way that they did—in the way that we all hope we would in a similar moment?

Part of the answer may be because they live on an island and islanders understand that they must depend on each other. They are also part of a small community where unity is not a luxury but a necessity. Gander is an incredibly hard place to live—the weather is fierce and many people there have faced

unimaginable loss. As a result, they understand hardship, and rather than allowing it to make them apathetic or callous, they've made a conscious choice for those experiences to make them more compassionate and empathic.

But in the end, the people of Gander are not much different than all of us in the Menlo community. And the story of what happened over those five days, and what has happened in that community since, is a story of hope and one we can take inspiration from.

As we begin our year together, my most fervent wish is for us to prioritize empathy in our work and interactions with

each other. It's to make the time and bring forward the curiosity to understand the battles someone else is waging in their lives and to make ourselves vulnerable enough to share those emotions so that no one is alone in the hole. Imagine what the school and world would be like if we were able to realize that vision.

To this end, one of my goals this year is to make empathy loud, so you'll be hearing more from us on that throughout the year. In January we are excited to be the very first school to launch a project in the Middle School with Jamil Zaki, a professor of psychology at Stanford and the director

of Stanford's Social Neuroscience Laboratory, to focus on teaching empathy in those crucial years of adolescence. As parents, one of the ways you can help is for you and your family to be alert to recognizing moments you observe of empathy and kindness or, even better, to help your students to see where those moments exist in their actions or in the stories they share from school. This will help us emphasize what empathy looks like in action and counter so many of the contrary messages our children are receiving from the world today.

I hope together we can make empathy a foundational value of who we are as a school, and in turn, aid our students in taking this ideal with them out into the world, impacting communities beyond Menlo.

Thank you for being a part of the Menlo community. I'm grateful to be here and wish you all a great year.

Therese Healy

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