

From the Head of School  
*Than Healy*

## Lessons from a Canoe Culture

In what has become somewhat of a tradition during my time here at Menlo, I like to kick off the school year by sharing a story with our students about an impactful teacher I've had in my life. From educators and family members to memorable moments and works of art, a teacher can come in many forms. This year, I took inspiration from Hawaiian canoe culture.

Over the summer, I spent a lot of time thinking about Hawaii—where I was lucky enough to grow up—and the Hawaiian people. Of course, the devastating fires in Maui last month have the island on many people's minds.

Our society has sometimes been quick to idealize indigenous communities, and I don't intend to do that here, but I do think that there are lessons from our ancestors worth reflecting on. Hawaiian culture and people have been significant teachers in my life, forming the origins of who I am, how I view the world, and many of the values and assumptions I hold dear.

Hawaii is a canoe culture. Canoes were the vessels that brought the humans who would eventually come to be known as Hawaiians to these tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific, one of the most remote land masses on Earth. Canoes were vital to existence: for fishing, trade, war, and travel.

When our ancestors set out into the ocean, likely bound for an unknown place with a very distinct possibility that they would not make it, the canoe became inextricably linked with survival. More than a physical object, it was a metaphorical object as well.

There is a proverb in the Hawaiian language that translates: "The canoe is an island, the island is a canoe."

The sense of connection is paramount: on a long journey, an individual has no choice but to work with the other people in the canoe to stay alive. For us to survive, our crew too must be healthy and strong, so we share resources, look out for each other, solve issues between each other, and together take care of our vessel.

Part of this mentality comes from the acute and obvious realization, when you are sitting in a tiny boat in the middle of an unimaginably giant ocean, that there is no backup plan. There isn't another canoe you can hop into if you're having a bad day, or decide that you dislike one of your fellow paddlers, or if your canoe springs a leak. When you have no other options, you get very focused on making the one you have work.



I think one of the blessings and curses of the era we live in is that we have been given so many “other options.” We no longer depend on each other in the same way—or at least we don’t think we do—because we believe that there is always another person, or place, or plan B we can rely on.

For Hawaiians, moving somewhere else meant a canoe journey of 2,000+ miles, so they had no choice but to make their islands work for them.

Here, on the other hand, rather than having to resolve the conflicts that naturally occur among humans, we’ve convinced ourselves that we can simply find other people to interact with. And in this era of social media, our options extend beyond school, or neighborhood, or sports teams into infinity. This expanse only increases the tendency to throw away a relationship that isn’t perfect for a new one that could be. And while this optionality may be perceived as a good thing, I would argue that it has mostly set our society back.

Our society is prone to dismiss, ignore, cancel, or cast someone out, just for making mistakes, saying the wrong thing, or generally being a flawed human being. In doing so, we send the message that you may get dismissed by those you care about if you veer away from what’s “accepted.” This mentality creates fear, undermines trust, and discourages upstander behavior, ultimately destroying our greatest asset as a species: community.

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I think back to Maui immediately after the fires, where in the throes of devastation and before any official aid and support was offered, Hawaiian culture came through. People living on other islands loaded up their boats with water, gas, and goods and headed to the beaches in Lahaina to deliver much-needed help. People depended on each other and the community came together. The canoe cared for itself.

So as we start this new school year, I want to explicitly invite the entire Menlo community to climb into the canoe. Sure, we could turn our back when conflict arises and seek relationships elsewhere, but what if we committed to making these relationships work? To working through the hard times together? To increasing our trust in each other and investing in this shared place? What if we took ownership of our canoe and saw it for what it is: a vessel that may make all the difference in our lives?

I am proud of this canoe, grateful to be here, and glad to be in it with you. Here’s to the journey! We’re off to a great start, Menlo.

Sincerely,

**Than Healy**  
Head of School

