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Tale of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team Inspires Hope for Healing Personal Wounds and Relationships



Even though we are worshipping apart, we hope these adapted lessons from "The Wired Word" will provide opportunity for you to continue in personal study.

IN THE NEWS

The recent release of the documentary, *A Most Beautiful Thing*, narrated by rapper Common, has caught the attention of the rowing community. The film is based on the award-winning autobiographical book, *Suga Water: A Memoir*, soon to be re-released under the title, *A Most Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team*, by chef Arshay Cooper. He was captain of that crew when it launched in 1997 at Manley Career Academy High School on the West Side of Chicago. Decades later, Cooper would use lessons learned on the water to build relationships with unexpected partners in the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

One of Cooper's instructors, Ken Alpart, a former collegiate rower, and one of Alpart's employees at his trading company, Michael O'Gorman, a medal-winning coxswain for the U.S. national team, hatched the idea for the first all-black high school rowing team in the Windy City. Recruiting students to try out a sport that was unfamiliar wasn't easy. Those who did sign up, lured by pizza and the promise of new shoes, hailed from violent neighborhoods, ruled by different gangs.

At the time, one out of three kids in Chicago knew someone who had been murdered, and one in three would die before their 18th birthday. Without assurance of basic safety, they battled depression, anxiety, hopelessness, anger and PTSD at higher rates than those of combat veterans. The original Manley crew members also experienced trauma. Several had relatives who were suicidal, doing and/or dealing drugs, addicted to alcohol, neglectful, abusive, incarcerated or absent for extended periods of time. One was nine months old when his mother was murdered. Some members of the team also struggled with their own poor decisions and hardships.

Cooper's mother had been raped by her father from age 8 to 21. She came to Christ while in a recovery program. Cooper said he didn't believe in change or in God, but when he saw his mother change, he came to faith in Christ as well. The students faced other obstacles as they thought about trying out the sport of rowing. They didn't swim. They were afraid of water. They were all from different gangs or different neighborhoods. There was no way they could row together. If they tried, by the end of the day, they thought someone would be dead.

Rowing was also seen as an overwhelmingly white sport for rich kids. Those who signed up for rowing were ridiculed and unsupported by schoolmates and relatives at first. But eventually, people cheered them because they had never seen black boys rowing a boat before. His high school teachers told Cooper he was "a walking storm." But rowing "was able to calm the storm in a lot of us," he said. "It was beautiful."

In the neighborhood where the Manley rowers grew up, they heard the noise of police sirens, gunshots and people screaming. They didn't hear that on the water. "When you're outside just runnin' with the guys you run with, looking for trouble every day, you're never at peace," remarked crew member Alvin Ross. "Out there on the water, that's where everything changed," he added. "Hearing the oars in the waves, the cars driving by and

blowing the horns at us, cheering us on -- being out there on the water, you know, feeling at peace -- that changed a lot about us, especially about me."

Two decades later, five of the original Manley crew members decided to re-enter the Chicago Sprints, to give hope to a new generation of at-risk youth. As they worked out together, the seed of an idea began to sprout in Cooper's mind. Although he had "never committed a crime or broken a law or was ever even suspended from school," Cooper said he had his "face pressed down on a police car dozens of times." He wondered what would happen if police officers actually knew their names and got to know them as people, not as potential threats. So Cooper suggested that they invite a group of Chicago police officers to train with them.

Cooper's proposal took some getting used to. Crew members had had their own negative experiences with law enforcement officers, and were not initially in favor of the idea. But they reasoned that if they could get together from different gangs, maybe they could do the same with the police. Maybe they could find a way to work together to serve and protect their communities. So they agreed to give it a try.

Four white Chicago police officers volunteered to join the Manley crew members. One of the Manley rowers said of them, "Once they came out of their uniforms, they was regular human beings. They was no different than anyone else on the street. We were able to relate to them ... crack jokes, have a ball. At the end of the day, they go home to a family and kids, mothers and wives, too, we just don't get the chance to see them in their element or in that light sometimes. It was cool to see that."

CPD Officer Louis "Big Lou" Green said he thought rowing together with men from the neighborhood would be a way "to help the community feel good and ... bring people together. These guys were in gangs," Green said, adding, "It doesn't matter where they were. It matters where they're going. Literally, we're all in the same boat."

At first, the officers were uncomfortable being on the water, but eventually developed a rhythm and chemistry with the West Side rowers. Eventually, they formed a men's eight crew together. CPD officer Matt Roben said, "These guys are my brothers. I don't look at them as teammates any more. I look at them as family."

He called rowing together "an obvious sign, a physical sign, that police and guys from the neighborhood are physically working together. You can't miss it." Before racing in the 2019 Chicago Sprints, they held hands in a prayer circle. In the race, they placed second. But more important than winning a medal, they all agreed, was that they were able to model "what might be possible when unlikely rivals manage to come together."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pulling Together: Lessons From First All-Black High School Rowing Team.](#) *The Christian Science Monitor*
[The Time Is Now.](#) *arshaycooper.com*

[Q&A: Arshay Cooper Talks About America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team.](#) *The National Book Review*

[Arshay Cooper: A Most Beautiful Thing \[OC\] \(Video 1:04:42\).](#) *Chicago Humanities Festival*
[A Most Beautiful Thing \(Video rated TV-MA\).](#) *peacocktv.com*

- When, if ever, have you joined a group or team whose members do not look like you or share similar cultural background or views? What motivated you to do so? What was the experience like for you?
- What factors are needed for a group to become a team, capable of moving forward together, whether as a crew in the sport of rowing, in a congregation or denomination, or in a nation?
- What is the most difficult obstacle you have ever had to overcome? What resources, within the Christian community, in your faith, or elsewhere, helped or hindered you in overcoming that obstacle?
- How can we best build a sense of teamwork in our own faith communities, and in the general population?

ENGAGING THE WORD

John 6:19-21

When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. (For context, read 6:16-21.)

After Jesus fed 5,000 men and their families with five barley loaves and two fish, he withdrew from the crowd and went up the mountain by himself to pray. Meanwhile, the disciples went down to the sea to make their way to Capernaum by boat. By this time, the sun had set and it was dark. Even though the disciples rowed together as a team, they could not prevent or stop the storm. The boat was battered by the choppy waves because the strong wind was against them.

Matthew tells us in Matthew 14:22-33 that the disciples were far from the land when Jesus came walking toward them in the wee hours of the morning. Thinking they saw a ghost, they cried out in fear. But Jesus calmed their fears, proving that he was with them in the storm and on the sea. He was able to calm the storms within the disciples as well as literal wind and waves.

The Manley High School students initially faced many obstacles before they became the crew of a boat. They grew up in a neighborhood rife with violence, poverty, limited resources and opportunities, little support, and few positive role models. They knew nothing about the sport, except that it seemed to be reserved for rich white kids. They had never been on the water. And they worried about interacting with members of law enforcement, with whom they had had problematic relationships in the past.

The Chicago Police Department officers didn't have all the same obstacles, but, like the Manley athletes, they had little to no experience in rowing when they joined the crew. They also had to conquer their own fears and prejudices. As the crew members all accepted the challenges and moved off the shore into the deep, they found a kind of peace in their team endeavor. Some of them said that God was the source of their peace.

- Why might people initially react in fear when God "shows up" during a crisis they are experiencing?
- What is the greatest storm you have faced this year? In life? Have you felt Jesus' presence with you in the storm, and if so, how has his presence manifested itself?

Ephesians 2:14-18

For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jew and non-Jew] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (For context, read 2:11-22.)

Much of Paul's writing addresses how God's plan of salvation includes Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews. The book of Ephesians is Exhibit #1 of that theme. Speaking to Gentiles, Paul states that they were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," not part of the people of God, until they were "brought near" in Christ Jesus (vv. 12-13). But now they are "no longer strangers and aliens, but ... citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (v. 19).

Paul stresses that Jesus doesn't only make peace between people and God, but also among people who previously were hostile to one another. Since Christ is the way to peace with God for both the Jew and the Gentile, neither is superior or inferior to the other. As someone has said, the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Paul picked up the theme of unity when he appealed to the believers in Corinth to "be in agreement" and to have "no divisions," but to "be united in the same mind and the same purpose," not to quarrel as though they were all from different tribes with different leaders, but to remember that there is only one undivided Christ, only one person who died for us all (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Instead of accepting the idea that relationships between police officers and people who had not had the best experiences with law enforcement in the past must inherently be adversarial, Cooper acknowledged that people in the community need cops to work alongside them, and he was committed to do what he could to make that happen. Asking police officers to join a team with men from the neighborhoods they serve was a step toward creating peace that comes from seeing ourselves as part of one humanity rather than as aliens and strangers to each other.

- Where do you see barriers, dividing walls and hostility between people today? What produces such hostility?
- Why do we sometimes see division and bitter conflict among people who claim to be followers of Jesus? What should we do about that? How can we "maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3)?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (No context needed.)

At the first recruitment meeting at Manley High in 1997, organizer Ken Alpart told the students, "Michael Jordan wouldn't be the MVP for rowing, because in a boat of four or eight you will not notice one person, but a team. One unit. Everyone works as one." The rowers could accomplish far more by working together than they ever could alone. That is the point the writer of our text is making as well.

Hours before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed that those who believe in him would all be completely one, as he is one with God, so that the world might know and believe that God had sent him and had loved them even as God loved Jesus (John 17:20-23). Knowing the suffering that awaited him, Jesus could have focused on his own need, but he prayed for unity among his followers. He knew that they would need each other in the days to come.

- **Questions:** How might rowing serve as a metaphor for pulling together as a nation, as a church, as friends and families? How do we "row together" when we have differences of opinion?
- What can we do to strengthen the ties that bind us together in our community of faith? In our nation? In our relationships with family members, friends, coworkers?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

OPTION 1:

Discuss this, from an op-ed by Mark Wingfield, executive director of *Baptist News Global*, entitled, "[Five Challenges for the Church After This Election](#)": "Too often, the church has portrayed 'community' as a kind of forced uniformity or assumed uniformity or even homogeneity. We go to church and assume everyone else there thinks like we do, and we tend to cluster with others who look like we do. We foster community that is as shallow and superficial as a Sunday morning hello at a coffee station. True community places us in the same boat together with everyone given an oar. We've got to figure out how to row the boat without capsizing. This is a lesson the church should model. We should be handing out oars, not complaining because the boat is taking on water."

OPTION 2:

The poem, "And Still I Rise," by Maya Angelou, serves as a backdrop for the documentary, *A Most Beautiful Thing*. Take a moment to review and discuss the poem ([Video 2:52](#) or [print version](#)). How might the thoughts expressed in the poem relate to your own life experience and faith journey? What allusions to the Christian gospel, if any, do you see in the words of the text? How does the poem apply specifically to the experience of the African-American, and how does the poem speak more broadly to human experience in general?

OPTION 3:

"Leave the boathouse better than you found it, which to me means, how do you leave your school, your work, your company better than you found it?" Cooper said. "How do you leave the world better than you found it?" Perhaps this can serve as a metaphor for how we should live in every aspect of our lives. Brainstorm how the idea of leaving the world better than we found it ties in to the mission of your church and into your personal goals as a follower of Jesus. Be specific.

GO IN PEACE

Unite us, O God, in perfect harmony of spirit, sympathy and love for one another. Give us tender hearts and humble minds. Help us to choose to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness and patience. As you have forgiven us, give us grace to forgive each other. May the peace of Christ, to which we were called in one body, rule in our relationships, as we glorify you with one voice. Amen.

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