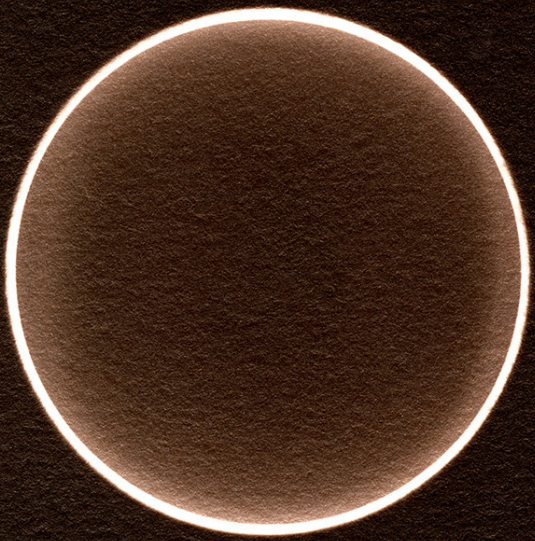

HUMANITY, REVIEWED

Anthology

UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA
DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL EDUCATION

VOLUME 1

HUMANITY, REVIEWED

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HUMANITY, REVIEWED ANTHOLOGY

"I think by far we are the most interesting thing that ever happened on Earth."
- John Green

In the style of John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, our *Humanity, Reviewed* is a collection of essays written by and for UWG students. Like John Green, we want to provide an honest view of the human experience on the planet so far. In doing so, we hope the "Mars colonies" proposed at the *Mars Expo* will preserve what is best about humanity while leaving behind what no longer serves us.

These essays were written by students from different sections of first-year writing courses at the Carrollton and Newnan campuses. They demonstrate the sharp, witty, critical, and careful attention students in these courses are cultivating through focused instruction in writing. Writing is a process by which we can transform and be transformed through the power of observation and deep questioning, and these essays are evidence of that work.

In the introduction to *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, John Green mentions that his friend and mentor, Amy Krouse Rosenthal, encouraged him as a writer to "pay attention to what you pay attention to." Green received more writing advice from his wife, Sara, who emphasized the focus on audience and community that is part of writing. John Green says, "Even separated, we are bound up in each other. As Sara told me, there are no observers, only participants."

Reading and writing are mutual acts that bring people closer together, closing gaps of difference and perspective, and in writing these essays, our students have demonstrated a willingness to be part of a much larger conversation. Through writing, students are learning to pay attention, to look closely, and to express critique when necessary, all in an effort to be more thoughtful about how to treat the world and the people in it.

LATE NIGHT DRIVING

Kellin A.

Night driving is seen as one of the most dangerous things a person can do. More than half of all fatal crashes happen in that dark, whether it's because of driver fatigue, wildlife, or drunk drivers you are more likely to die on the road at night. I remember being in drivers ed in high school and them telling us about this, they told us we shouldn't drive at night because it's dangerous. But I think there's something worth it in those dangers. There's something in the night air, in the tight corners, and in you the driver. Night driving in my practice has 3 key parts: you, your car, and your music. You because you are with yourself and it's your own thoughts you are with, your car because your car is badass even if it's a pt cruiser, and your music because that sets the tone for the drive and what it becomes. Night driving is a time to be vulnerable with yourself, or others if you chose, and think about everything and be open.

Night driving is something I do almost every night despite my astigmatism. My girlfriend usually works closing shifts at Arby's and I'm usually the one to go get her. I do it so I can see her but also because Arby's has some great sweet tea and she'll get me a free one. The drive home is 30 minutes because I take back roads and drive slow and it feels like our 30 minutes. We talk about whatever, her shift, our ex-friends, gossip, sex, movies, money, video games, the

current political climate, literally whatever. We scream the lyrics to the music we listen to, usually post-hardcore "emo" music. Something about it makes us vulnerable, I cry about how I'm scared everyone hates me and none of my friends are really my friends. She tells me she regrets not talking to people and how she wants to reach back out. I don't think any of that would be said if we weren't driving at night. In John Green's essay "Academic Decathlon" he writes "We were not afraid to say "I love you" to each other." (89) and that is not any less true In the case of a late night drive. We wouldn't laugh together as much, we wouldn't be as close as we are, and we wouldn't say "I love you" as much if we didn't have those late night drive conversations and be as vulnerable as we are those nights.

I feel like there's a lot of music about that, music I happen to like a lot, music that happens to play on these late night drives I take by myself or with Maddie. It's easy to get caught up in how much you can love a person in a moment. Pierce The Veil sang in the song Yeah Boy Doll Face "I only need one hand to drive / when you're with me / you are my getaway" and this is a really good lyric if not cliche for an essay where I talk about late night driving with my girlfriend. Driving and talking and letting my brains spill out onto the road makes me think I could drive off the edge of the earth and not notice. Driving and clearing my head with Maddie really is my getaway. I can get away from the monotony and feel like a person again after the day. Another good lyric is from Uneasy Hearts Weigh The Most by Dance Gavin Dance, "I suggest a drive, let's take the back road / let's get lost, let's lose our minds". I am the type of person to take back roads and I really do lose my mind on them, I think we both do. I think the night road is for losing your mind and just letting it all drool out like a rabid werewolf. It's bands like Pierce The Veil, Dance Gavin Dance, Sleeping With Siren, Attack Attack, and so many others that fuel these drives and my mind. If it weren't for these bands I wouldn't take backroads to listen longer, I wouldn't talk so much about love and the complexities of life, and I wouldn't have the way of thinking that I do. John Green wrote in his essay "The Internet", "What does it mean to have my way of thinking, and my way of *being*, so profoundly shaped by machine logic?" (88) And while I'm not talking about the internet I don't think it's a bad thing. I think having something that shapes you in that way is important, we all need a crutch for personhood. Mine is late night drives and good music.

One of my biggest regrets is waiting so long to get my license. I took drivers ed my senior year of high school and didn't get my license until February. I never realized how free I'd be, how I would be able to escape from my own life and body in the form of speed and winding roads. As much as I enjoy being open

with others I need to be more open with myself. It's like I'm scared of being myself, I'm scared of being open and perceived by the world. When I'm driving I realize it could all end in a moment and I think that fragility makes me feel the need to be myself. In a way it makes me all feel alive. John Green feels a similar way and he talks about it in his essay "Sunsets", "I think I'm just scared that if I show the world my belly it will devour me." (99). I don't think there is a more perfect quote to sum up how I feel, how we all feel. We're all scared to show ourselves to the world especially in a digital age where everything we do is caught on camera and possibly out on social media. "But I want to be earnest even if it's embarrassing." (99) and that's how we all feel. We are all scared but we want to be seen, we want someone to hear us sing along with the radio, we want someone to know our deepest thoughts, we all want to be human, and that's a scary thing to be. I guess what I'm saying about night driving is it's a scary and dangerous thing to do but it makes you feel good, it makes you feel human. For that I give night driving 5 stars.

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BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

Nadia Abrams

Talking about this topic is opening a door that I personally thought I would keep shut forever. It's one of those topics where you feel as if everyone goes through the same emotions, uncertainties, and insecurities, but with myself I felt different. I felt as being uncomfortable was something I needed to avoid rather than something that everyone should experience. Being placed in situations where you don't have all the answers, expectations are unfamiliar, and where you must confront parts of yourself that you didn't know you had taken on a weird feeling. Adjusting to being uncomfortable is a change nobody seems to be prepared for, which makes personal growth difficult but necessary to adjust to.

My first encounter of being uncomfortable was when I had been introduced into a leader role in my junior year of high school whereas I had to lead a club called "FCCLA". FCCLA is a club that's settled around Family and Consumer science, but the school I attended we were more focused on the culinary aspect of things. I was the secretary at the time, but wasn't doing secretarial things? I found myself leading meetings, being a mentor, giving constructive feedback, encouraging my team members...you could almost call me the president of the club! It got to a point where I would find myself doing things left and right that I usually wouldn't, until one day my advisor called me out on something,

and I took it deeply to heart and never understood why. Was it because I'm a perfectionist? Was it because he had high expectations of me and I never understood why? Or was it because I was being a leader and didn't even realize it? As college students, we are put into many positions we aren't always prepared for and are expected to do it correctly once it's taught to us, but what people don't realize is that somehow, we all lead ourselves in our own ways without even realizing it. As we're put into those positions, we fail to realize that we trap ourselves in an uncomfortable way that blocks us from exposing all the potential within us. From the chapter "Academic Decathlon" in John Greene's book, he opens up about his struggle academically growing up and how he never really seemed to fit into reality, portraying those thoughts. Greene says," I never excelled academically, and took some pride in, "not fulfilling my potential", in part because I was terrified that if I tried my hardest, the world would learn I didn't actually have that much potential." Greene's personal experience reflects how avoiding an uncomfortable insecurity, not having potential, reflects how we as people avoid things that make us feel discomfort to frame out that were really only "protecting ourselves". According to WorkLifePhsyc, "Avoidance of discomfort means we can miss out on opportunists to speak up, speak out, to put ourselves forward and expose ourselves to situations that can really contribute to out development." Not only does this highlight the effects on avoidance, it proves that we prevent ourselves from discovering abilities we never knew we contained. Both prove that sometimes we allow fear of failure, criticism, or even expectations to determine how much effort we actually are willing to put forward as shown, feeling uncomfortable forces you to have growth rather than avoiding them.

In my last year of high school, I eventually ended become the President of FCCLA. It felt amazing! Adrenaline was constantly rushing through my body every time I would see "president" listed below my name, or even when a member approached me and addressed me as "Ms. President", it was a classic joke that ran throughout the club because everyone knew how much I took leading into account. I *needed* everything to be perfect, I *needed* every event I led to be better than the last, I *needed* people from the outside to be eager to join the club next year, I *needed* to be the best leader I could be. *With thoughts like this, I thought being a leader would go by in a breeze with this type of mindset.* I remember this one event, where we had been selling food from the concessions stands and one of the members came up to me and told me that their colleague had been stealing items from a drawer. The information through me on a loop since I knew they depended on me to address and fix

the situation at hand because that's what I was *expected* to do, but for some reason I couldn't find it within myself to take control of the situation. I told my advisor about what was going on and he responded with "Okay? Why are you telling me this? You're the President, it's your job to fix it." In that moment, I soon realized being a leader was way more than a title attached to my name! It required me to make a decision that I've never been in, nor was I comfortable with addressing it. I was so drawn to being a "perfect leader" I failed to acknowledge that leadership required me to face difficult situations and learn through experiences I'm not always able to control. In a chapter called "Whispering" in the Anthropocene by John Greene he says," I believe that punctuality is a virtue, but there is nothing virtuous about my particular punctuality. It is driven by dear, and enforced by harries shouting." Reading that quote really took me on a bit of a loop. I had to realize that Greene was trying to introduce an idea that our greatest strengths are influenced by our fears. Although me and Greene were in different situations, he recognized his own actions are motivated by fear rather than discipline. I notice I often view my perfectionism as a leadership quality, but I didn't realize how much it was influenced by one of my GREATEST fears. Disappointing others. Although I wanted the event to go perfect, especially with me in leadership, it made me realize that leadership isn't always going to be perfect. According to Adapting to Change, "Dispositionally flexible leaders see change as an opportunity rather than as a threat or danger." This statement highlighted the importance of what it means to accept situations that won't always be in our favor. Being uncomfortable in this situation helped me understand that I didn't prepare myself for something like that to happen, which is okay given that it had acted as a learning situation that helped me grow as a person and eventually helped me get used to preparing for the worse in anything.

As human beings, there will always be situations in which we have no control over. We won't always be able to predict our emotions, our thoughts, or even how we handle unfamiliar situations. As John Greene says in "The Yips", "How can you regain confidence when you know that confidence is just a varnish painted atop human frailty?". Even if we think we're able to handle the uncertanites of life, there will always be a time in our lives where we won't always have the answers. Sometimes, being uncomfortable means you must accept that we won't always have the answers and we won't always like being uncomfortable. I'd rate being uncomfortable 2.5 stars.

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HAPPY CHRISTMAS?

Dorothy Andre

Christmas has a strange way of making everything feel bigger. Joy feels more joyful, traditions feel more meaningful, and memories seem to carry more weight. At the same time, loneliness can feel lonelier, grief can feel heavier, and the pressure to create the perfect holiday can become difficult to ignore. In *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, John Green takes familiar parts of everyday life and looks beneath the surface to examine their history, meaning, and effect on human behavior. In "Piggly Wiggly," Green uses the history of an ordinary grocery store and the development of self-service shopping to reflect on convenience, consumer culture, and the way people's habits changed over time. His essay evolves into much more than groceries. By combining historical facts, personal reflection, and social commentary, Green demonstrates how something ordinary can reveal something much larger about who we are (Green). Christmas deserves the same kind of examination. It is a holiday full of contradictions. It can strengthen family bonds, preserve traditions, and create joyful memories while also magnifying consumerism, financial pressure, grief, loneliness, and depression. Despite those contradictions, I believe Christmas remains meaningful because of its ability to bring people together, preserve memories, and remind us that even when life changes, there is still room to

create something worth looking forward to.

Christmas did not begin with decorated trees, wrapped presents, Santa Claus, or even matching pajamas. Long before many of the traditions we now associate with Christmas existed, people were already gathering during the winter season to eat, celebrate, decorate, and exchange gifts. The ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, for example, honored Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture. What began as a single-day celebration eventually expanded into several days of feasting, social gatherings, gift-giving, candles, greenery, and merrymaking beginning on December 17 (HISTORY.com Editors). Christmas should not simply be described as a continuation of Saturnalia, but it is interesting that some of the things people value about Christmas existed long before the modern holiday took shape. Human beings have apparently been looking for reasons to gather together and brighten the darkest part of the year for a very long time.

Centuries later, the Victorian era helped shape the Christmas that feels more familiar to us today. Christmas trees were already part of German traditions, but their popularity in Britain increased significantly after an illustration of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their children gathered around a decorated Christmas tree appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1848. The Victoria and Albert Museum explains that the popularity of decorated trees quickly grew after the royal family's Christmas celebration was shown to the public (Victoria and Albert Museum). Christmas decorations, greeting cards, family-centered celebrations, and the idea of creating a warm and festive home became increasingly important during this period. Even the evergreen itself carries symbolism that I find beautiful. Holly and evergreen branches remained green when much of nature appeared dead. How ironic. In a season when much of nature appears dead, the evergreen refuses to surrender its color and quietly becomes a symbol of hope, renewal, and life during the darkest time of the year.

The traditions have changed, but the desire behind many of them has remained surprisingly similar. People gather. They prepare food. They decorate their homes. They exchange gifts. They create rituals that tell the people around them, in one way or another, "you belong here." In my own life, that is what makes Christmas feel like Christmas. The decorations and presents matter, but not just because of what they are. They matter because they become attached to family, anticipation, laughter, familiar foods, and memories that return every December. Growing up, I had an aunt who hosted fabulous Christmas parties. She made sure each and every person had a gift underneath the tree. It did not matter whether the gift was big or small. Everyone had something. In my mind,

that became the picture of the perfect Christmas. We may inherit traditions from history, but families are the ones who give those traditions meaning.

But somewhere between creating memories and trying to recreate the "perfect" Christmas, meaning can become expensive. For me, Christmas spending has a lot to do with keeping up with expectations I developed growing up. Now that I am an adult and occasionally the person hosting Christmas, I find myself trying to recreate the feeling I experienced at my aunt's house. My family rotates homes, so I host approximately every three years. We coordinate outfits, eat, laugh, dance, and exchange gifts. We even started doing gift exchanges so that one person would not feel responsible for purchasing something for everyone. Yet when Christmas is at my house, I still personally purchase gifts for everyone anyway. Apparently, developing a system to spend less money does not necessarily stop me from spending it.

Some of that pressure comes from family traditions, but some of it also comes from movies, commercials, and now social media. Christmas is constantly presented as something that should look perfect. The tree should be perfect. The decorations should match. The food should be good. Everyone should look happy, and now the whole thing should somehow be worthy of posting online. I love hosting, so much of the pressure I experience is self-imposed. I want people to walk into my home and feel what I felt walking into my aunt's Christmas celebrations as a child. The problem is that recreating a feeling can slowly turn into trying to recreate an image.

Green's discussion of Piggly Wiggly and self-service shopping explores the changing relationship between people and consumer culture as shopping became more convenient and consumers gained more control over what they selected for themselves (Green). Christmas adds emotion to that relationship. We are no longer simply buying objects. We buy gifts because we want someone to feel loved, decorations because we want our homes to feel festive, and sometimes things we cannot comfortably afford because we do not want anyone to feel disappointed. Research from the American Psychological Association demonstrates how real that pressure can become. In a 2023 survey, 89 percent of U.S. adults reported experiencing some source of stress during the holiday season. Financial concerns were the most commonly reported source, with 58 percent saying that spending too much or not having enough money to spend caused them stress. Another 36 percent said the holidays could feel like a competition (American Psychological Association). The numbers make sense to me because generosity can become complicated when giving stops feeling voluntary.

I enjoy giving gifts, but generosity stops feeling generous when it becomes an obligation or when kindness is met with ungratefulness. Around Christmas, people can sometimes begin treating other people like genies. Suddenly, the expensive item someone cannot or will not purchase for themselves becomes somebody else's responsibility simply because it is Christmas. I have even been guilty of participating in this way of thinking. Every year when my best friend asks what I want for Christmas, I say I want a Louis Vuitton purse. I know perfectly well that is a big request. My defense is that once you ask someone, "What do you want for Christmas?" you have placed yourself dangerously close to the genie lane. Still, I would actually prefer an intentional gift from someone who knows me over an expensive gift I requested. There is something more meaningful about receiving something that says, "I know you," instead of simply receiving something that says, "I could afford this." In fact, ungratefulness and the pressure of buying for everyone eventually became part of the reason my family started doing gift exchanges. We found a way to keep gift-giving in Christmas without allowing it to overpower the purpose of being together.

Unfortunately, money and consumerism are not the ugliest parts of Christmas. Christmas also has a strange ability to magnify whatever a person is already feeling. Happiness can feel happier, but loneliness can also feel lonelier. I remember one Christmas when I felt completely alone. I had recently moved out of my parents' house because, quite frankly, I was being a brat and did not want them telling me what to do anymore. I rented a room with my cousin, which meant two girls sharing one room, and we barely had anything. I felt isolated, depressed, suicidal, and as though I had failed at life. I remember hearing John Lennon's "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," and its reflection on another year ending made me think about what I had accomplished. In my mind, the answer was nothing. Instead of making me hopeful about the beginning of a new year, the song felt like an accusation. I constantly compared myself to relatives who seemed to be doing better than me. Everyone else appeared to be celebrating while I felt as if I had nothing worth celebrating. That remains the worst Christmas I can remember.

Years later, I learned that sadness and Christmas joy do not necessarily cancel each other out. In 2016, I lost my grandfather. His birthday was Christmas Eve, and Christmas Eve was also the day we laid him to rest. I was heartbroken, and I still miss him. Yet that Christmas did not become only a memory of grief. My cousins and I were in New York with our children, and somehow we still found joy. We went to Rockefeller Center, saw the Christmas tree and skating rink, rode a ferry around the city, and created positive memories for our

children during an incredibly painful time. Somewhere along the way, my family had already learned that Christmas may not always come with the means or circumstances worthy of a Hallmark movie. As long as we have one another, we recognize that we are blessed.

That experience changed the way I understand the emotional side of Christmas. I do not believe Christmas creates grief, loneliness, depression, or insecurity. I believe it turns up the volume on feelings that may already be there. The American Psychological Association's holiday survey found that 38 percent of adults identified missing family or loved ones as a source of holiday stress, while 72 percent agreed that the holiday season can feel bittersweet (American Psychological Association). Christmas is commercialized as a season of family, love, togetherness, and celebration. When someone is grieving, going through a breakup, separated from family, away for work, struggling financially, or simply does not have the relationships they wish they had, all of that advertised togetherness can make the absence feel even larger. It can feel as though everyone else has been invited into some great celebration of life while you are standing outside looking in.

Even people who insist they would rather be alone may find themselves challenged by the season. People are everywhere. They are shopping, filling restaurants, gathering with family, exchanging gifts, decorating homes, and appearing overly cheerful. For someone who has been disappointed or hurt repeatedly, isolation can become a defense mechanism. Sometimes saying "I do not want to be around people" feels safer than admitting, "I do not want people to hurt or disappoint me again." Then Christmas arrives, spreading cheer everywhere, and quietly challenges that protection. Another year is ending. A new one is beginning. Questions about love, friendship, success, belonging, and whether anything will be different next year suddenly become louder. Christmas itself did not create those questions. It simply gave them a microphone.

Christmas may have been rooted in good intentions, but somewhere along the way, we developed the bad and learned how easily the season can heighten the ugly. What amazes me most, however, is that Christmas still gives us an opportunity for reflection, balance, and growth. It gives us a moment at the end of each year to look at what we have, what we have lost, who is still beside us, and what truly matters. For all of its beauty, pressure, grief, generosity, consumerism, joy, and contradiction, I give Christmas four and a half out of five stars. It loses half a star because somewhere between celebration and expectation, we sometimes make the season harder than it has to be. Still, I would not trade

the meaning behind it.

The responsibility now belongs to us to make sure the generations after us do not inherit traditions without understanding why those traditions mattered. The generations after us do not need to inherit the decorations while losing the reason we decorated in the first place. The part of Christmas worth protecting is togetherness. It is knowing that you belong somewhere, or having the hope that even if you have not found your circle yet, you can still create one. Family does not always have to mean the people we were born to. Sometimes it becomes the friends we choose, the children we raise, the traditions we create, and the people who continue showing up. Christmas does not need to be perfect to be meaningful. Maybe we just have to be careful not to become so busy creating the appearance of Christmas that we forget to actually experience it.

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COLORS OF THE WIND

Trinity Bastian

One of my favorite Disney songs is a song called Colors of the Wind by Judy Kuhn. I love this song so much and every time I listen to it, I am reminded that we as people are all one and we are all connected. All of our lives are intertwined with each other and with nature. We are one with the world and the earth. It reminds me that we all belong here and deserve to live life to the fullest. A specific lyric that I love from this song is, "And we are all connected to each other, in a circle, in a loop that never ends." In the song she is trying to explain to a man called John that he does not own the earth, and the earth belongs to itself, and we are just witnesses of it. She explains that we are all connected through nature and experiences.

Even though we have our own lives and things going on we are people first. We are here to experience the earth and live life to its fullest. Another one of my favorite lyrics is "...or whether we are white or copper skinned." This is one of my favorite lyrics because I love the symbolism of it. Even though we are all different skin colors and come from different places we are all people so we should treat each other as such. Why is there so much hate and racism in the world if we are all people? We should all be able to co-exist as one. One of my other favorite lyrics is "You can own the earth and still all you'll own is

earth until you can paint with all the colors of the wind." I feel like in this one she is trying to explain to a character named John because he came to take over that, even if you "own the earth" he still won't be able to own it completely because he doesn't understand it and love it for what it is instead of trying to take advantage of it.

When I first started writing this essay, I was going to write about the word "sonder." The feeling and realization that everyone has a different experience with life and how all of those experiences intertwine with each other. Then, I realized every time I wrote about it I always came back to this song. I never understood it when I listened to it as a child, but hearing it at this age I understand why it was written and the meaning behind it. To some people it's just a Disney song and it doesn't mean anything but to me I feel like I truly connect with this song on a deeper level than other people. Two quotes that match what I'm talking about is a quote from the introduction to The Anthropocene Reviewed. John Green says, "For me anyway to fall in love with the world is to look up at the night sky and feel your mind swim before the beauty and the distance of the stars. It is to hold your children while they cry, to watch as the sycamore trees leaf out in June." Later, he says, "Live your life, Live your life, Live your life." These two quotes really connect to what I'm saying because I feel like John Green is talking about what it feels like to fall in love with the earth and what it has to offer.

This song really represents what it feels like to fall in love with the world and the earth regardless of all of its flaws. To love it no matter how many times it's hurt you. This world may have a lot of problems but there's also a lot of beauty in the world along with it. I feel like that's what makes living so much more exciting. Everyday might not be your best but you always get another chance the next day. There's always another chance to try again and this song explains that. This is why I give Colors of the Wind five stars.

HOZIER'S *UNREAL UNEARTH*

A Masterclass in Historical Music

Logan Bradd

Music is a collection of thoughts and feelings put in a structural way. It's a way of interacting with a thought so profound it's impossible to put into words, but you can put it into a production choice, melody, or voice inflection. I was listening to *Unreal Unearth* by Hozier with my roommate not that long ago, and we were both able to experience those feelings at the same time. We both love music, and every now and then we listen to an album of our choosing, usually one that one of us has listened to but the other hasn't. It's sort of become a tradition to listen to an album occasionally, and it will surely be a collection of memories in my life that I will miss after college. But that's okay because as Hozier once said, "All Things End."

We turned off the air conditioning to make sure the narrow room was dead silent. All we could hear was the white noise from the air conditioners outside the relatively dirty windows. We put our headphones on hastily and listened to the music, keen to hear the lyrics and soundscape from the noise waves that bounced off our headphones and gently hit our ear. And while I had listened to the album over and over again prior to us listening, I still felt many of the same feelings that my roommate felt while listening to the sound waves coming from the beautiful soundscape. These include feelings of anguish, heartbreak,

intense love (many of which surround a divorce Hozier recently went through), and a profound connection to one's ancient or more recent and intimate past. Music is interesting in that it's able to be replayed over and over again. There's a sort of history to music. The first time you listen to a particular piece of music is a historical moment in your life. One might also realize that lyrics are a part of history. It's like putting something on the internet knowing very well it's going to stay forever, but instead of this being your digital footprint, it's your historical footprint. It truly is *Unreal Unearth*.

Since Hozier created this concept album around the book *Dante's Inferno*, it's important to learn what the epic poem is about. Around 1314, Dante Alighieri wrote *Dante's Inferno* as part of his epic poem *The Divine Comedy.* Dante's Inferno is a poem in which the main character goes through all of the nine circles of hell in a journey to get to heaven. The nine circles of hell from first to last are: Limbo, which houses people who never knew God; Lust, which houses the lustful; Gluttony, which houses people who have overindulged; Avarice, which houses people who are greedy; Wrath, which houses souls who were excessively angry; Heresy, which houses those who were against God; Violence, which houses people who were violent; Fraud, in which deceivers are punished; and finally Betrayers, where the worst sinners are buried in frozen ice. The last circle is also where Satan lies. Dante had to go through all the circles of hell in the first installment of the book to get into heaven. After going through all these circles of hell, he ascended into purgatory and felt immense relief after finally seeing the light after so much time. That is the story of *Dante's Inferno*. Another thing that is incredibly important to Hozier's project is his Irish background.

Irish oppression is a main topic he sings about, and learning about it gives a little more background on his culture as well as things he might be referencing in the album. Ireland in the 1600s was controlled and ruled by the British monarchy. During this time, they would start suppressing the Irish language, Gaelic, as "the use of Irish was discouraged and suppressed, ... The English government implemented policies to "anglicize" the Irish population, including banning the Irish language in schools and government and imposing heavy fines on those who spoke Irish in public" (Irish Central). Later, in the late 1700s, Ireland was controlled by the British monarchy and many problems including clashing between Catholics and Protestants were persisting. Because of this, a group of radical republicans attempted "an insurrection launched by the United Irishmen, an underground republican society, aimed at overthrowing the Kingdom of Ireland, severing the connection with Great Britain and establishing an Irish Republic based on the principles of the French Revolution"

(Dorney). This would fail, and as a result, the British monarchy used "methods including burning of houses and Catholic churches, summary executions and the practice of 'pitch-capping' whereby lit tar was placed on a victim's scalp" (Dorney). This is especially important to the album as Hozier later references the act of pitch-capping and the erasing of Gaelic. Not only is Hozier's Irish history important, but so is his personal history.

Hozier's personal background is important to learn to get a good sense of who Hozier is, and how that translates into how he created this album. According to last.fm, "Hozier was born in Bray, County Wicklow, Ireland... He began a degree in music at Trinity College, Dublin, but dropped out midway through his first year to record demos for Universal Music." He was born on March 17th, 1990. His latest album, *Unreal Unearth*, came out August 18th of 2023. The album is a concept album in which the themes of the songs come in order of the circles of hell in *Dante's Inferno*. The songs themselves are not necessarily about *Dante's Inferno*, but he uses that story to tell his own personal story through a song-by-song structure that follows the 9 circles of hell. Partly because of this, Hozier has gotten a lot of critical acclaim.

For example, according to Sartorial Magazine's "Unreal Unearth: A Dissection of Hozier's Latest Album" written by Madeleine Brady, "Hozier takes us through a world that has been interpreted numerous times, but in an eye-opening way that speaks to people through mediums that other renditions of Inferno haven't." And I personally agree, whether it be the ascension in the "De Selby Part 1" and "De Selby Part 2," the story of love with the folk instrumentation in "First Time", the grim lyrics about government corruption with "Eat Your Young", or the heartbreaking metaphor of comparing dying in a relationship to an animal roadkill he saw as a little boy in "Abstract (Psychopomp)," Hozier knows how to develop provocative lyrics that capture the audience's attention, while simultaneously creating great instrumentation, melodies, and an incredible voice to sell it. I specifically remember listening to the album with my roommate, eyes closed and headphones in, explaining to him that in the outro of the first song he sings in Gaelic, something he has never done before in an album. I also remember explaining to him what a pitch cap is when in "Butchered Tongue", Hozier, singing with a beautiful vibrato sang, "the ears were chopped from young men, if the pitch cap didn't kill them, they are buried without scalp in the shattered bedrock of our home." I also remember trying to figure out which song belonged to which circle of hell, as it isn't always obvious. And in my personal opinion, he doesn't pull off the concept part of the concept album perfectly, which would be my main critique of the album.

But to wrap it up, Hozier is singing about history, whether it be a reference to *Dante's Inferno*, the Irish revolution or simply his own divorce. It's all a part of history, and he is using that to make his own personal history. *Unreal Unearth* documents that as a part of his historical footprint. Think of it as putting different past events into a chocolate chip cookie. The Irish revolution, *Dante's Inferno*, and Hozier's divorce are the dough; the instrumentation, Hozier's voice, and the erudite lyrics are the chocolate chips; and the act of putting all of that together into a cohesive album would be the baking of the cookies. The smell you get from the cookies after taking it out of the oven would be the smell of the album after listening to it for the first time. And while you listen to the album over and over again, you can't replicate that first time listening to it. Just like in Hozier's song "First Time" where he compares the first time someone called him baby to the very last time someone called him baby, and how a different part of him comes alive depending on whether it was the first or the last. If listening to one of my favorite albums with my roommate isn't inclusive to our history, then honestly, I don't know what is. And while it may appear insignificant when compared to the more world-related history he pulled from, perhaps Hozier isn't creating world history; he's creating his history. Or, perhaps most importantly, he's creating a part of my history. I give *Unreal Unearth* a solid 9 out of 10.

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THE REMOTE MEANING OF LIFE AND OUR CONNECTION TO SPACE AND TIME

Mya Calvert

This morning I woke up, got dressed, and ate oatmeal for breakfast. I drove to class, completed what needed to be, and will continue the same weekly routine I have done for the past ten months. Some might compare a life of repetition to "going down the rabbit hole," a metaphor originating from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It refers to a situation where someone becomes increasingly engrossed in something, sometimes to the point of getting lost or distracted. When faced with black holes in regards to space and time, I tend to fall down Lewis Carroll's metaphorical rabbit hole. These compact and astronomical objects have caused me to overthink, spiral, and obsess over the minimal details hidden within the research. Their mysterious existence and lack of reasoning have led me to compare them to the most unknown hole of them all: life. The question that constantly haunts your head of where you will go can tie you in like a gravitational pull, and eventually, you get lost in space.

On April 10th in 2019, I and the rest of the world were given the first physical evidence of a supermassive black hole. Centered at the giant elliptical galaxy of "Messier 87," the picture depicts a ring of fire circling what appears to be an everlasting shadow in the center. Most of society might perceive this photo as nothing more than a smudge, but I saw a cosmic monster overfilling with

questions. “What’s inside?” “How did it begin?” And, “Where is it going?” Ever since I was a child, I demanded answers for everything. If an idea or a topic had no reasoning, it would create a domino effect of confusion. 2+2=4, 16 ounces make up one pound, and 24 hours take up one full day on Earth. We can prove these rationales, and rely on them to complete our day-to-day activities. Before I was faced with the research regarding black holes, my view of them was simple. They are an ominous and everlasting void bigger than all of us leading to an unknown. After the research, and after the writing, these past perceived “cosmic monsters” changed into “vast opportunities.” When I came to the realization that black holes aren’t much different than the life I live every day, I could start to see the bigger picture. Just like a cliffhanger in a TV show and an upcoming sequel to a movie, our lives should be approached with excitement and the hope for possibility.

In 1905, a German theoretical physicist created the world’s “most famous equation.” E=mc^2, developed by Albert Einstein, will forever be impactful because “it provides the key to understanding the most basic natural processes of the universe.” In simple terms, this equation proves that mass and energy are interchangeable, and black holes are essentially the most efficient way to convert the beginning mass into energy. I am in no way a physicist like Einstein, or a philosopher like Socrates, but I believe this scientific equation to also give the answer to the equation of life. I’ll call my take Mya Calvert’s not-so-special theory of life, and hopefully this peek inside of my brain will win me the Nobel Peace Prize. In this equation, destiny and fate equals you and me, multiplied by our actions brought upon by our free will. Although I believe in what’s meant to be will eventually be, I do not believe that all of our stories are prewritten. If we aren’t given the means, I believe we can hold the will to fulfill our dreams. Black holes hold various possibilities including time travel and parallel universes. With just a little change in perception concerning black holes and life, you can paint over their canvases of mystery with a new shade of hope.

Regardless of this new outlook, I was desperate to discover the potential result of coming in contact with a black hole. Did you get sucked in, eternally erased from our universe, and cease to exist? Or did you discover your very own DeLorean Time Machine in order to save Doc Brown? These are all hypothetical theories of a purely fictional mind, but the truth comes with one word: Spaghettification. According to Chelsea Gohd and her NASA article, “This effect essentially stretches out the object more and more as the object

gets closer to the black hole, creating a long, thin shape." We can choose to use the word stretched, or maybe even elongated, but essentially whatever comes close is destroyed to the point of no return. We don't have the means currently to travel to supermassive black holes, but we have the possibility to study the surface. Similar to my adolescence, I have yet to know what the future brings. There is a risk of me eventually coming too close to the wrong path and turning into spaghetti, but rejection is simply redirection. As proposed in John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, "I am on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend."

Just like black holes, I reject reasoning and consistency. Unlike my choice of breakfast, I demand a life filled with twists and turns. The research and time put into this paper has led me to now know that in the end, my biggest fear is inevitably fitting into the box society has deemed me to fill. In my life, supermassive black holes no longer evoke a sense of panic and confusion because I represent them. These cosmic objects grow by essentially absorbing mass from their surroundings. As time passes, we all grow by absorption. I've grown from scraped knees, moving boxes, and divorce papers. All unfortunate events that just happened, but absorption doesn't mean you become. You just harbor it and continue on.

As I get older, I no longer demand answers for every equation. I can see the beauty in the unknown, and that truly allows me to focus on the present. If a journey wasn't required, everyone would willingly skip to the end of the book, but I know the chapters leading up are the most important part. In the wise words of Walt Whitman, "I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured. I tramp on a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)" "Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, You must travel it for yourself." In the end, I am eternally grateful for what I do know about black holes, and for what I know about my life. The rest is foggy and an unfinished puzzle, but I know as I get older I'll keep collecting pieces. I give supermassive black holes 4 out of 5 stars.

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TOUCAN OCARINA

Carter Cates

I first encountered the toucan ocarina sometime in the summer around 6 years ago. I was sitting in my room with the summer sun making its way through my blinds, eyes glued to the screen where I played video games almost all day. It was here that I heard my parents return from their two-week trip to Costa Rica that I was forced to miss due to me being a burdensome preteen. I ran to greet them, running into the kitchen to find that my two dogs, a goldendoodle and a cavalier spaniel, were seemingly much more excited than I was. I hugged both of my parents, whose faces carried a particular notion that was a mixture of excitement to be home and regret that they had left paradise. They immediately began telling me all about their trip, from the delicious chifrijo they ate that made me think of sizzling pork, to the beautiful sandy beaches that made me crave some time in the hot sun. Upon telling me all of this, they mentioned that they got me and my sister a gift. They got my sister a beautiful Tico dress, and I was given a bird whistle in the shape of a toucan. At first, I thought that's all it was, but I was intrigued by how similar the whistle sounded to an actual bird call, leading me to play it until my parents regretted getting it for me. I still remember the volatile smell of the paint when I blew on it for the first time, one of the small imperfections that made me so fascinated by the instrument. I believe

that this little instrument reflects how tourism can be used to spread awareness about different cultures, as well as make issues within smaller countries known.

The specific sound that instruments create can convey emotion, and this serves as a medium for cultures to communicate without the use of words. The ocarina carries a very solemn tune, which makes it a valuable tool in expressing sadness without the need for language (Kim). This form of cross-cultural communication has been examined by researchers: “Cultural diversity is recognized across nations with regional distinctions in values and virtues, which makes it difficult for people to truly empathize with another’s culture, therein being an obstacle in gaining accurate understanding of the other. Noting this undeniable barrier, music is of great significance in that it is an artistic channel for us to put ourselves into others’ shoes” (Hale). This idea is important because it serves as the primary way for culture to be spread without the use of words, which can be ineffective when communicating with a language barrier. Like Christine Hale mentioned, there can also exist cultural barriers between us, but music transcends this barrier by invoking universal thoughts and feelings that serve as the glue that holds us together. The use of music as a medium to spread ideas has been used since the dawn of time, which is proven with the existence of traditional instruments like the ocarina. Without music, I think humans would have a difficult time evolving across various cultures, and the human race would not be as united as it is today.

Understanding the similarities that different cultures share can help us understand and connect with other cultures on a deeper level. The ocarina itself has been found on almost every continent, revealing that it was a common concept for humans to come up with independently (Warner). By recognizing that the same instrument plays a role in various, seemingly distant, cultures, we are able to understand that we share very similar traits regardless of cultural origins. It’s not even just the sound and design of the instrument that many cultures share; the ocarina plays a similar spiritual role in these many different cultures. For example, according to the article by Mexicolore, ocarinas were “[used] in groups as part of fertility, rain and other rituals, or possibly in funeral processions, and - beyond - to call upon the dead, often to help the living” (Mursell). This common significance across cultures points to more similarities in how different cultures approach the concept of death, allowing us to form more connections between our culture and others. Because spiritualism and the afterlife is something that all cultures place importance in, looking at it from a cross-cultural standpoint unlocks new connections in the context of cross-cultural understanding. This is important to recognize as it can help me

understand new cultures and be more open-minded to a different way of life. After all, we are all humans, but absorbing yourself in a different way of life can lead you to be more understanding and connected with those around you.

The Costa Rican toucan serves as a crucial symbol for the required revision of animal abuse laws around the world. The article by Carrie Kahn sums this up by saying, "[s]o when the case of Grecia happened and it went so viral around the world, Grecia became this icon for this changing in the law," says Heredia. The use of symbols to spread ideas is also a critical one. This is true now more than ever, with the decline in the tourism industry in Costa Rica, which has led to many other problems as well (Font). When the toucan becomes a symbol of conservation, it gives people something to follow, as well as something to fight for. The beauty of the toucan represents the beauty of the Costa Rican rainforests that we should fight to protect, and it is important that this beauty be a part of the symbol to attract attention to the movement. The use of symbols can help spread movements across cultures, which is what makes them so important. As tragic as the story of Grecia is, their struggle was able to spark a wave of support for a positive change in the laws that protect other animals just like it. The toucan, like the instrument that portrays it, acts as a medium for communication and connection between cultures, which is truly invaluable in a time where open-mindedness and cross-cultural connection are so important.

I think that we could all benefit from looking at items like my ocarina not as simple souvenirs, but as cultural artifacts that reflect entire movements and ideas. When we look at things with a lens of open-mindedness, we are able to enjoy them much more because we begin to absorb the ideas that led to their creation, making us more educated and understanding individuals. From now on, whenever I travel to a foreign country, I won't think of my trip as simply a vacation, but an experience in which I contribute to the spread of a culture by bringing back what I learned to my family and friends at home. I give the toucan ocarina 5 out of 5 stars.

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THE PARADOX OF PEPPER SPRAY

Emma Caylor

If I am going to be honest with you, I do not recall when I first learned about pepper spray, and I am quite certain that for the majority of my life, my thoughts around pepper spray did not go deeper than noticing its mere existence when it was in sight. However, the majority is not all, as I have exactly two distinct memories regarding pepper spray. My earliest memory takes place in a classroom of an old church building that was certainly overdue for some remodels. My Sunday School teacher, a retired police officer, loved to gear the conversations away from whatever God-filled discussion we were having to recount old police stories that were totally inappropriate for the class of seven- and eight-year-olds. One Sunday, he decided that what his drab lesson was missing was a video of him in police training, getting pepper sprayed for the first time. The other bored children and I watched his small iPad in horror while simultaneously deciding that we would never be police officers.

The second of the two memories that I have surrounding pepper spray takes place almost exactly ten years later. My boss and I stood in the parking lot after work one day making small talk before leaving. In the midst of our discussion, a reflection of something shiny hit my eye. I glanced down to see a blue bedazzled canister of pepper spray that resided on my boss's keychain. Once I asked

her about why she felt the need to have her self-defense tool bedazzled, she responded that if she was going to die, she was going to die in style.

Although my desire to stay far, far away from the field of policing has withstood the test of time, the latter memory has provoked more thought in me. Pepper spray has transformed over the years, from a tool of law enforcement to a widely accessible personal defense item, yet its marketing, history, and everyday use display so much about how we try to protect ourselves in a scary world. The image of that bedazzled pepper spray can has lived in my head ever since I laid eyes on it. Not because I am particularly interested in plastic blue gems, but because of what they represent. Pepper spray is designed to be something that the United States Department of Defense describes as "so damaging that it can extinguish a threat in a matter of seconds." Pepper spray is a nonlethal weapon, but there is no doubt about the strength it upholds.

One of the best examples of the effect that pepper spray can have on people is exemplified in a viral video from the Denver Police Department, where they captured the police recruits taking part in their mandatory experience of being pepper sprayed. One recruit described being pepper sprayed as "a searing pain that causes an extreme involuntary reaction to your body." The key word here is involuntary: no matter how determined an aggressor may be, the strength of pepper spray does not give that person a chance to continue with their attack.

Despite the widely known strength of pepper spray, bedazzled pepper spray seems to have a different goal rather than defense. The most reputable seller of bedazzled pepper spray, *Guard Dog Security*, markets the weapon as "dangerously cute," pointing out that the main goal of the product is to conceal the danger with a cute design. In my boss's case, if you were not already aware of the shape of a pepper spray keychain, you would never think that the sparkly canister contained something that was so powerful, blinding, or dangerous.

However, in order to truly understand the paradox that pepper spray represents, it is imperative to first know the complex history that is still changing with new advancements in the field. Robert Bowling's article, "History of Mace/Pepper Spray," explains how this tool transitioned from being used primarily on animals to being approved for use on humans by the FBI in 1989. The history of pepper spray is important to note because it exemplifies the longevity of its dangerous impact.

It is so interesting that over thirty-six years of literally painful history are being condensed into a three-inch can that is covered in cheap rhinestones. The whole concept is deceptive, so much so that in the weeks after the encoun-

ter with my boss, I began questioning everything. For now it seemed that the things that were especially designed to be pretty were likely the things that were most likely to be deceptive.

In my parents' house lies a beautiful four-foot painting of water buffalo overlooking a pond where lush scenery is brushed all around them. Not once had I ever before given the painting much thought, as it had been there as long as we had moved into the house. As I sat staring at it at dinner one night, I thought hard about why we may have placed such a large, beautiful painting in the back of the house where most people would not see it. As I thought, a faint memory resurfaced of my mother insisting that we place the picture there to cover up a large electrical panel that she deemed ugly, as durable steel did not fit with the vibe of her house. Though I stood by my mother's choice, the moment unfolded as another quiet lesson in beauty's deceit—where something outwardly radiant concealed a harsher, less beautiful reality beneath.

Deception can be intimidating, confusing, and even frustrating, but the fact is that deception is simply a part of being human. Tony Lambert's TED Talk on how humans process the world around them shows that our judgments are often based on context and pre-existing beliefs. Given that every person in the world has lived completely different lives, the context in which one person views a situation is likely to be different from others, meaning that almost every person sees a situation slightly differently from reality.

Realizing that the world is certainly not how it seems can be intimidating, and can make you want to do everything that you can do to reveal reality. However, perception being different from reality can sort of act as a social grease. In the article "Self-deception as affective coping: An empirical perspective on philosophical issues" by Greve and Wentura, the authors explain that self-deception is a coping mechanism that "shields individuals from emotional stress." Similar to how the rhinestones on a can of pepper spray conceal the dangerous nature of the product, it is okay to not see the reality in every situation.

There is no changing the fact that deception lives in every corner of the world. As much as we may feel compelled to expose the deception to others in an attempt to eradicate it, the fact is that there is nothing that we can do to make the world less misleading. The world exists as it is, and it is up to us to uncover reality, though it has proven difficult to do so when our minds and the world as it really is seem to be playing a game of Battleship: taking turns going back and forth, usually missing what is really there. The paradox of pepper spray comes with a heightened sense of awareness that helps us decipher the world for what it truly is. I give pepper spray 5 stars.

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JAPANESE MAPLE

Daniel Chandler

I've lived in the same house my entire life, and one thing has never changed: the Japanese maple in the front yard. More specifically, it is a dwarf Japanese maple; this name doesn't refer to its stature, as it can still grow to 8 to 10 feet, but rather to the fact that it is slow-growing compared to other Japanese maples. The Japanese maple in my front yard is a weeping dwarf laceleaf Japanese maple. This variety has an orange-crimson color in the summer and a green color in the winter. Its botanical name is Acer palmatum var. Dissectum, which means "palm-shaped maple, variety with deeply cut leaves"(1). The translation sounds less sophisticated than its aculeate botanical name. When people see trees, they might only think of it as a yard decoration or a plant that has withstood the test of time; for me and many others, it can stand as a piece of history, something that stands the test of time, and a way to show that even in beauty we see our own vulnerability.

The following poem shows the admiration that Japanese maples have seen, as far back as the 800s, exhibiting that even 1200 years ago people still had emotional ties to trees.

貞信公	Teishin Kō	Fujiwara no Tadahira
小倉山	Ogurayama	If the maple leaves

峰のもみじ葉	Mine no momijiba	On Ogura mountain
心あらば	Kokoro araba	Could only have hearts,
今ひとたびの	Ima hitotabi no	They would longingly await
みゆきまたなむ	Miyuki matanan	The emperor's pilgrimage. (2)

This is the 26th poem of the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (100 poems by 100 poets); the poem is about the emperor of Japan and his journey after he abdicated the throne of Japan. Emperor Uda abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Emperor Daigo. In ancient Japan, it was common for emperors to abdicate the throne so that their son could take the throne and so the former emperor could keep his influence in the Japanese imperial court. After his abdication, Emperor Uda went to Mount Ogura and saw the Japanese maples. According to tradition, Emperor Uda was so deeply impressed by the trees that he ordered his son also to go see the trees atop Mount Ogura. The evidence that even 1,200 years ago people formed emotional bonds with trees. John Green also conveys the same emotional bond in *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, writing an emotionally heavy chapter about his mental health struggles, but by the end he comes full circle with the beauty and vastness of the chapter *Sycamore Trees*. He talks about when Herodotus was marching through a grove of sycamore trees and wrote, "such a beauty that he was moved to decorate it with golden ornaments and to leave behind one of his soldiers to guard it"(255 Green). My main theme of this essay is about Japanese maples, but what if I broaden it? The history of trees has shown to be one of beauty, and even in times of hardship, war, or instability, people still find grace and grandeur.

Then, in the nineteenth century, the introduction of Japanese plants had a major impact on gardening in America, including landscape design. This started with the end of isolationist policies in Japan, when trade opened in the 1850's to the Americans. Collectors started to bring Japanese trees to the United States, including the most popular tree, the Japanese maple. This introduction helped shape American cultivation of the Japanese maple and increased the tree's value as an ornamental plant in America. But what is the bigger purpose of having a specific plant in your yard? John Green talks about this in his book in a unique way, asking, "There is a green god that you keep in front of and behind your house, and we see how devoted to care of this ornamental plant god" (Green 165). This quote conveys how we focus too much on plants to keep up our appearance. For my family, our garden is cosmetic and shows we worked hard on something, and the lasting popularity of the Japanese maples validates the appreciation of these trees in modern American landscape design (3).

Beauty is subjective to everyone, as beauty is in the eye of the beholder. For John Green, something that shows true beauty is the sunset. In the chapter Sunsets, when he says, "It can sometimes feel like loving the beauty that surrounds us is somehow disrespectful to the many horrors that also surround us" (Green 99). The sheer vulnerability that John Green has in his chapters is something not to critique as most readers do to any other book, but to just sit and listen to what he has to say about the shared human experiences in life and in the small moments every day, like seeing a sunset. For me, it's Japanese maples; for him, it's the perfection of a sunset.

The Japanese maples in Japan are known for their beauty, rich history, and cultural significance. In America, they are known for the revolutionary approach to horticulture and are used as common yard decoration. To me, I see Japanese maples as a constant in my life, representing stability. I miss seeing its color every night, as when I lived at home, I would see it and feel at ease knowing I was in a safe space. The beauty of the tree still moves me as it moved Emperor Uda. It shows its color all year even though it has had to endure many years of the southern heat, cold snaps, droughts, and floods.

This constant symbol has made me want a Japanese maple when I own a house. For this reason, I give Japanese maples 4 out of 5 stars.

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ENEWTON BRACELETS

Kalli Cleland

I wear bracelets every day: specifically, eNewton bracelets. They are gold and beaded, sometimes highlighted with pearls, and come in all different shapes and sizes. You will never catch me without them on because I honestly feel naked without them. What started as a simple high school trend has become a permanent staple on my wrist. Although eNewton bracelets are sold as a simple fashion trend, they ultimately serve as daily comfort objects that keep precious memories alive.

When I was a sophomore in high school, all of the girls started getting these bracelets, and at first, I was shocked by the price. They were everywhere. Beautiful gold beaded strands that caught the light, sometimes highlighted with pearls or small pops of color. At the time, it was crazy to me that people would own so many of them. It seemed absurd to have an entire stack of elastic strands of beads just because everyone else was wearing them. However, when my birthday came around that year, my mom and all my friends gifted them to me. That is when I finally understood that they were not just jewelry; they were a wrist staple. I then wanted more and more because I thought they were so adorable, and before long, I was building my own collection. There is a powerful social pull in wanting what those around you have, a collective desire

to participate in a shared aesthetic. In *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, John Green reflects on a similar phenomenon while discussing lawn maintenance in "Kentucky Bluegrass," writing, "Over time, the quality of lawns in a neighborhood began to be seen as a proxy for the quality of the neighborhood itself" (Green 167). Just as a lush green lawn becomes a proxy for community alignment and belonging, wearing an eNewton stack became an unspoken standard among high school girls. We conform to these visual benchmarks because humans naturally seek connections through shared social codes. However, the brand behind the trend was built on a foundation designed to appeal to genuine sentiment rather than fleeting vanity. According to the brand's official story on enewtondesign.com, "Everyone was inspired by her mission, to create beautiful and meaningful pieces that touch both the gift giver and receiver." The founder's path was rooted in personal life changes: "The mother of four, triplet daughters and a son, she found that her priorities changed after motherhood and sought to prioritize her family and her career." This philosophy resonated on social media, where the brand exploded in popularity. As journalist Matilda Hunsicker notes in her article *The Origins and Rise of E. Newton Design: A TikTok Sensation*, "The platform, known for its ability to catapult brands into viral fame, became a major driver of E. Newton design's success." I realized it is fine to follow a trend if you truly like the items, and although buying a whole stack at once felt crazy expensive compared to just one bracelet, getting that first one made me want them all.

Yet viral hype alone does not explain why these bracelets stay on people's wrists long after a trend passes. Hunsicker points out that "E. Newton Design quickly distinguished itself by offering classic, affordable pieces that were made to last." Individually, the bracelets are affordable. More importantly, she highlights their core functional appeal: "The most popular thing which placed them on the map was their marketing of the fact that these are true elemental pieces and they can be worn 24/7 in water, in sweat, in all activity, and even in sleep." Because you never have to take them off, these bracelets quietly blend into the background of your daily life, absorbing every moment and routine you experience while wearing them. That durability is what allowed my own stack to become tied to a deeply personal memory. One afternoon while I was taking a bath, I set my bracelets on the edge of the bathtub. My dog reached up to the side of the bathtub and grabbed a few with her mouth. She ended up eating a few, but she was fine in the end. It was a chaotic, silly moment that we laughed off once we knew she was okay. Now, every time I look down at my wrist to the bracelets I wear every day, I think about my sweet baby Zoe.

In his essay on "Auld Lang Syne," John Green describes how a simple, quiet moment like watching a sunset can unexpectedly bring back the memory of his former dog, Willy. He uses that moment to explore human vulnerability, writing, "There's something deep within me, something intensely fragile, that is terrified of turning itself to the world" (Green 99). We often shield that inner fragility from the outside world, but everyday objects like a song, a sunset, or a stack of gold beads can break through our defenses and connect us directly to love and grief.

eNewton bracelets are not just a choice of fashion for me, but they are a daily source of comfort. I never thought I would look down at my wrist and think of my precious puppy that passed, but it turns out to be a happy feeling to think of all those memories, not a sad one. The bracelets transformed from a viral high school trend into a lasting physical tie to something I loved dearly.

Therefore, I give eNewton bracelets a 4.5-star rating.

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BUBBLEGUM MACHINE

Grace Cowell

Bubblegum started for me in 2013 after a day of grocery shopping with my mother. From a distance, I saw this giant spiral machine with a big clear top filled with multicolored balls. I started what some might call nagging, trying to convince my mother as to why she should give up a quarter so I could get one. This habit slowly started following us everywhere outside the grocery store. It would show up after we were done with our laundry at the laundromat, or at the mall after a long day of shopping. I always wondered why I was so fascinated with this machine, but the more I think about it, the same conclusion comes back. It was the fact that it was simple, and I could do everything myself; all I needed was a quarter, and then I'd be able to go to the machine, put it in, and boom, I'd have gum. However, to me, it was never about the gum; it was just one quarter to watch the color I hoped to spiral down. That feeling of guessing to see which color I'd get. I would often compete with my brothers to see who could guess the color we would get, and if you guessed correctly, you won. This behavior isn't new, as bubblegum machines have taken over the lives of children for decades. During the Great Depression, 1-cent gum became an affordable luxury for the kids to experience some sort of joy during that era.

Most kids thought, "For a penny I couldn't lose,"[1] allowing them to get this rush not from eating the gum, but from the process of winning the one they wanted. "The thrill of winning is irrepressible. Some people handle it very nicely. It's a matter of stride. Often, winning is imagined to be worth a gamble,"[2] and even if you don't get what you wanted, you still got what you paid for: a piece of gum.

Although my fascination with bubblegum machines started in my childhood, the story behind it stretches back centuries. Bubblegum originated and was popularized in Philadelphia and New York in the 19th and 20th centuries. But gum was invented as far back as the time of the Ancient Greeks, when they would use materials such as tree resin, mastic tree bark, and sapodilla tree sap to chew on. In 1869, William Finely Semple received the 1st US patent for chewing gum, but his gum was used mainly as a tool to clean teeth; not long after, in 1871, Thomas Adams patented a machine to widen the spread of gum made with chicle. Like the methods of the Ancient Greeks, this milky latex was also harvested from the sapodilla tree, as well as other Mesoamerican trees. However, the first "true" bubblegum machine wasn't invented until 1907, which dispensed round gumballs instead of flat sticks. This machine soon took over the lives of many kids, giving them the first look into adulthood and allowing them to manage and complete a whole transaction by themselves to receive a prize, which made it a permanent fixture in America. The motivation to take risks stems from the experience itself, which offers a sense of truly being alive rather than any rewards given.

This feeling of excitement about taking risks is seen in every aspect of life outside of the gum. The process of telling someone you like them provokes the same feeling as when a rollercoaster is about to drop. The adrenaline we get from taking those risks sends a signal to our brain to release dopamine, and with that mix of chemicals, "it triggers a powerful mix of stress hormones and pleasure chemicals in the brain that makes you feel intensely alive, focused, and rewarded."[3] The amygdala is located deep in the medial temporal lobes and is about the size of an almond- which, funny enough, is what it means in the original Greek wording. This almond-sized item is what triggers an entire process, activating our sympathetic nervous system, which then releases adrenaline from our adrenal glands, causing those "butterflies" in your stomach or causing your heart to speed up. As our body reacts to this stress, it floods our bodies with dopamine and endorphins from an area of the brain called the Ventral Tegmental Area (VTA). The VTA then sends a signal to the Nucleus

1 https://ushistory.org/historic-places/germantown/tompkins/story21
2 https://ushistory.org/historic-places/germantown/tompkins/story21
3 https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/22581-dopamine

Accumbens, which is in the basal forebrain (bottom front), still within the ventral tegmental area. The nucleus accumbens then deciphers the signal sent and creates the "wanting feeling that makes you chase an experience."[4]

The time wasted chasing that feeling is not truly wasted for those who seek it all the time. People reward their time and energy in places that are designed to create that feeling, such as casinos and arcades. Casinos and arcades actually have a lot of things in common; the main one being that they are designed for you to stay. Most people don't actually notice this about casinos or arcades, but they have no windows, no clocks, and provide no perception of time. Places like these use the perfect amount of sensory overload, ensuring that you won't get tired of playing or, in the case of the business, that you won't stop spending money. "The chance to walk away richer is an undeniably compelling reason to take financial risks. And if that wasn't enough, the pleasure of indulging in bright games of chance causes the release of the hormone dopamine in the human brain."[5] That word, chance, that very word, is what causes people to chase that exhilarating feeling over and over again. Chance is seen over and over again, and many people have a reason for acting so recklessly. It's all about the chance, not actually the outcome, but the process of doing it.

Doing is what keeps society in motion, and a chance is what we take every day and the very reason we are living. The gumball machine may have seemed like a small part of my childhood, but the excitement it gave me is the same feeling people continue to chase into adulthood. The uncertainty of taking risks and what might happen next is just as exciting as the outcome itself. After all, as John Green once said, "There is always risks: something is good and good and good and good, then all at once it gets awkward." Comfortability is one of the greatest risks of all, and what is truly worth living for is the art of doing while unsure. I give bubblegum 4 stars.

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FAMILY REUNIONS

Jasmine Dantzler

Every year my family would travel to a different state to meet up with family we don't usually get to see. This would typically take place in the summertime. Family from all over would come together, most of the time we would all stay at the same hotel. It was a joy as a small kid to see all my cousins and running through the hotel hallways racing each other. We couldn't wait to see what color our shirts would be each year. At a family reunion, the color of the shirt typically represents a specific family branch and decedents of the original ancestor's line.

During slavery in the United States, families were sold and auctioned off forcing them to be separated. Sometimes this meant mothers, fathers, and children being moved to different states and loosing connection with each other. When slavery ended in 1865 there were many people in search of their loved ones. University of North Texas Libraries, portal to Texas History shared an Ad in the Tennessee Newspaper in 1865 Sam L. Dave stated, "Dave wishes to know of the where abouts of his mother, Areno, his sister Maria, Neziah, and Peggy, and his brothers Edmond, who where owned by Geo Dave of Rockingham County, Shenandoah Vally, VA. He wrote, " laves names where typically selected by the slave owner. Although the name may have represented pain

the now free slaves would adopt the name because this was an easy way they could find and identify their loved ones. Once families were found and reconnected they began to hold celebratory events now known to the African American community as family reunions.

As a kid, my brothers and I would always laugh at my grandmother because she would get on to my parents about making sure they attend the family reunion and bring the family. She stressed every year to her children the importance of being there. She would say things like your family is all you have, or your children need to know who their family is, so they won't grow up and marry a distant cousin. Could imagine moving to another state and marrying someone you didn't even know was your family. She also talked about the importance of them and their children knowing their linage and where they come from. The elders of the family would shar stores of their struggles and how they over came these struggles. She would always say, "You have to know your History." These are just a couple reasons she would fuss about all of the family attending and might I add she just wanted all her kids and grandkids in attendance.

Many cultures have family gatherings / reunions where they come together as a family to show unity love in support suck as weddings, birthday, and holidays. The Chinese come together during Lunar New Year. Filipinos have large family gathering including multiple generations, food Karaoke, and games, but there is nothing like a African American family reunion. I was talking with a friend from another culture, and she had no clue what a family reunion was. She a had a million questions and was very carouse of what where some of the things we do at a family reunion. So let me break it down to you. An African American family reunion can take place for a whole weekend with each day having a theme.

Friday is normally the day the family reunion kicks off. This is called the meet and greet. Families from all over will start to filter in. The night is set up with spades for the adults and games for the kids, and talent shows. Black people do not play about their spades card games; man they will play and talk junk all night. Fish and Fries was on the menu for this night. This is a very light night usually structured for families to chill from coming off the road traveling, laugh, eat and enjoy each other's company.

Saturday is the big picnic. All the family attending should be in town by now. Everybody comes to a park with their custom family reunion shirts on. Every food item you could imagine is at the picnic. BBQ, Soul food, Party Food, pastas, Salads, and a wide variety of desserts. This is when the woman matriarch of the family pulls out their best dishes and shows off their skills. Lots of

competitive filed games are set up for each family to participate and win prizes. Seeing my uncle and dad compete in a potato sack race against each other is pure comedy. The picnic is an all-day event from sunup to sundown. Lots of pictures are taking to capture such precious memorable moments. There is a special moment in the day where the family gathers and history and origin of the family is discussed and all the elders still living is recognized. The fun usually last throughout the entirety of the day until everyone gets tired.

Sunday are church and brunch day. As families get ready to depart and go back to their homes one last gathering will take place at the church, honoring God for all he has done and brought the family through. After church a light brunch is served, and families will love on each other and say there until we meet again. Because it's never "Goodbye" in my family.

Over the years, many of our family elders have passed away and unfortunately family reunions have become fewer and farther between. I wonder if this is because the younger generation does not fully understand the importance of these gatherings or if the tradition of planning and organizing them has simply faded away. As I get older and reflect on the family reunions I attended throughout my childhood and adulthood, I realize that those gatherings created some of the best memories of my life. They were more than just cookouts, music, and laughter. They were way to connect with loved ones, learn about our family history, and create memories that would last a lifetime. If I had to rate family reunions, I would give them Five starts without hesitation. My only hope is that one day I can play a part in bringing this beautiful tradition back, allowing future generations to experience the same love, joy, and sense of belonging that I was fortunate enough to experience.

THE BELL RINGS AND I'M FIVE AGAIN

Jose De Santiago

In "Super Mario Kart," John Green takes a video game that many people consider nothing more than entertainment and uses it to explore much larger ideas about life. He combines facts about the game with his own experiences and reflections, showing that something as simple as a video game can hold meaning beyond what it was originally designed to do. I decided to take Green's approach to review something that has been a big part of my life for as long as I can remember, the Rocky Balboa movies. I have been watching Rocky since I was five years old. Whenever I visited my grandparents', watching Rocky was something we'd do together. I also watched the movies with my parents, so that really led to Rocky being connected to the people that have helped shape my life. As time passed, I realized that I wasn't just watching boxing movies. I was watching stories about perseverance, faith, sacrifice, and family. Rocky has had a big impact because his story taught me to trust the path God has put me on.

Rocky was released in 1976. Rocky's whole mindset is to "not be another bum from the neighborhood" (1:38:00-1:39:15). The story centers around his chance to fight the Heavyweight Champion of the World, Apollo Creed. The movie became a major cultural success. It won 3 Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Film Editing. It led to the series expanding into several

sequels and *Creed* films. The interesting thing about the history of Rocky is that the story was created many years before I was born, yet it eventually became a part of my childhood. It dawned on me that the memories I had created while watching these movies were just as important as the movies themselves. I didn't understand this at the time, but I just knew we enjoyed watching Rocky when we visited my grandparents. As I have gotten older, I began to understand what his strongest opponent really was. It wasn't a man or feeling. It was the thing we call life. When I was five, I watched Rocky. Now when I watch Rocky, I remember being five.

One of the scenes that means more to me now than it did when I was younger occurs in the sixth movie of the franchise, *Rocky Balboa*. Rocky is lost for most of the movie. He is dealing with the loss of his wife, Adrian. He is also struggling with his relationship with his son and just trying to figure out what is next for him. Rocky tells his son about how life can knock anyone down and explains the importance of getting back up: "It ain't about how hard you hit; it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!" (1:03:23-1:04:40). This scene motivated his son, the audience, even Rocky himself to get back up and keep going. It reminded me that setbacks are a part of life and that strength isn't avoiding it. Having strength means getting back up and continuing forward. This is what I think Green is doing in "Super Mario Kart." He isn't really interested in telling readers how good of a video game it is. He used the game as a starting point for describing how unfair life is. Similarly, I am not reviewing whether the Rocky movies are good. I am reviewing what they meant to me. Green writes, "In that respect, at least in my experience, real life is the precise opposite of Mario Kart. In real life, when you are ahead, you are given lots of power-ups to get further ahead." (Green 183). Green explains that life is not always equal because people who start ahead may have an easier time extending that lead. Using the game, Green proves that having an advantage can lead to more opportunities, which can lead to a successful life. Then, to the ones that are not ahead, the pursuit of happiness would be a more difficult journey. In the beginning Rocky was in last place at the end of lap one, but ended up coming back to win it.

Maybe this is why stories matter so much to people. A fictional character can sometimes teach us something that a lecture can't. Rocky is not a real person, and I know that his fights are scripted. However, the feelings his story creates are real. The fear of failing is real. The desire to make your family proud is real. The experience of being knocked down and trying to get back up is real.

And for me, trusting God through those experiences is real. I believe that all of my talents and gifts come from God. Like Mario Kart, those are our power-ups. It is up to us to see how we use them. Will we throw the banana peel at the right target, or will we just run into it later in our race? Growing up has also changed what *Rocky* means to me. When I was five, I didn't know that I was creating memories that I would carry for years. I didn't think about how different they would feel as I got older. I certainly didn't think about how watching them with my grandparents would become something I would treasure. One of the biggest reasons why I admire Rocky is his faith. No matter what was going on, he never lost faith. His willingness to always get back up reminds me that trusting God does not necessarily mean knowing what will happen next. I've learned that we don't always recognize an important moment while we are living it. Now, when I watch *Rocky*, I don't just see Rocky Balboa. I see my parents. I see my grandparents. I see myself at five years old. I see the person I was and the person I am becoming.

I give the *Rocky* series five stars, although I don't think five stars can measure what these movies actually mean to me. I am not giving them five stars because every fight is realistic or because every movie is perfect. I give them five stars because they have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. They remind me of the importance of perseverance and sacrifice. I have failed at so many things in my life. I wasn't good enough to continue playing baseball. I am not the biggest, smartest, or the fastest. All of that, however, led to me strengthening my Christian faith and trusting that my best days are ahead of me. When I was five, I thought I was watching a boxing movie. Now every time the bell rings, part of me is five years old again, sitting with my family and watching Rocky fall and get back up again.

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RECOLLECTION OF MY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

MD Didarul Chowdhury

Childhood memories are so sweet that they can never be forgotten. As time passes, these memories seem to become even more vivid and deeply etched in our minds. For each of us, childhood represents a golden era—a time we remember for the rest of our lives. Indeed, life remains beautiful today precisely because of those golden moments experienced during that brief period. There are very few people in this world who do not miss their childhood. I am one of those people who deeply misses that golden time—filled with all the playful antics and mischievousness of youth.

The place where I grew up—and where I spent a large part of my life—was a village nestled within a wetland; it was a tranquil, serene, and shaded haven, teeming with birds and as beautiful as a fairy-tale setting—much like an island. Everywhere one looked, there was only water. Gentle breezes would stir the waters, creating ripples across the entire wetland. So many unique and vivid sensations, so many spirited escapades, and countless other memories keep surfacing, time and again, in the mirror of my mind. Childhood memories and wetlands are inextricably linked, evoking a sense of nostalgia. It couldn't be forgotten.

Professor Harlene Hayne (currently Vice-Chancellor) of the University of

Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand—who conducts research on how the capacity for memory changes or evolves during childhood and early adolescence—states: "The conclusion we have reached for now is that several preconditions or factors combine to collectively govern our ability to retain memories." One factor is the anatomy of our brain—its size, shape, and structure. The two primary regions of the brain involved in the creation and storage of our autobiographical memories are the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. It is believed that the hippocampus stores and preserves the intricate details of events or experiences from our lives as long-term memories. However, in those childhood days, wetlands were not merely reservoirs of water; they were an endless source of joy and adventure.

During the monsoon, when the canals and wetlands would fill with water, there would be a great frenzy for catching fish like Puti, Tengra, Koi, or Shing (local name of some favorite fish). There was a unique joy in sitting by the water's edge for hours, equipped with a "polio" (a traditional conical fishing trap), a "dula" (a woven basket trap), or a simple fishing rod. It was a thrilling experience to craft a raft out of banana tree trunks—or use a small boat—to navigate across the tranquil wetlands, gathering the red and white water lilies or lotus flowers that bloomed there. Even today, I fondly recall those times spent with friends, diving together into the clear waters of the wetlands under the intense midday sun, and competing to see who could hold their breath underwater the longest. In winter, when migratory birds from far and wide would flock to the wetlands, the entire area would come alive with their chirping. But those migratory birds no longer come. Due to a severe shortage of food and an environment that is no longer favorable to them, many birds are dying, and others simply do not return. With each passing day, it seems that more and more birds are disappearing—just as various species have vanished in the past and continue to disappear today. Destruction of forest resources and the uncontrolled and excessive use of pesticides is causing severe pollution of soil, water, air, and biodiversity. Because of this, many animals and various forms of wildlife are now on the verge of extinction. Pesticides are chemical or natural substances used to control, prevent, or destroy harmful insects, weeds, fungi, rodents, or microorganisms that cause damage to agricultural crops, plants, or humans. In simple terms, any substance used to combat 'pests'—organisms that harm crops—is a pesticide. Such as – diazinon, chlorpyrifos, permethrin, imidacloprid, and carbofuran etc. These toxic chemicals in pesticides kill beneficial microorganisms in the soil, such as helpful bacteria, fungi, and earthworms. The natural processes of decomposing organic matter in

the soil and maintaining nutrient cycles are disrupted, which leads to a loss of soil fertility. Many pesticides remain active in the soil for years as persistent organic pollutants. Excess pesticides from agricultural land are washed away by rainwater or irrigation water into nearby canals, wetlands, rivers, ponds, and other water bodies. These pesticides contaminate the water, becoming toxic to fish, phytoplankton, and aquatic plants. This leads to the death of aquatic organisms and disrupts the reproduction of fish. Furthermore, pesticides can leach into deeper soil layers, contaminating underground water sources. When pesticides are sprayed on crops or in orchards, fine particles or dust become suspended in the air, causing air pollution. Carried by the wind, these toxic particles can spread over long distances, damaging the surrounding environment and healthy plants. Pesticides do not just kill harmful pests; they also destroy bees, butterflies, and other beneficial pollinating insects. As a result, natural pollination is disrupted. In the bio magnification Pesticide toxins present in small organisms or fish enter the bodies of larger animals, birds, and humans through the food chain, posing long-term health risks. Pesticides also make effects in the biodiversity system. An ecosystem refers to the interrelationships and interactions that develop between a community of living organisms (plants, animals, and microorganisms) inhabiting a specific environment and the non-living (abiotic) components surrounding them (such as soil, water, air, and light). In simpler terms, an ecosystem is the overall system encompassing this close relationship between living and non-living elements.

The relationship between an ecosystem and a food chain is profound and inseparable. Simply put, a food chain represents the flow of energy within an ecosystem and serves as the fundamental basis for the survival of living organisms. Multiple food chains combine to form a food web within an ecosystem. No organism can survive alone in an ecosystem; all living things are interconnected through this web of food chains. For the pollution of biodiversity, the food chain is being severely damaged. As a result, all of the creation of earth is moving forward to destruction.

Anyway, another memory keeps surfacing in my mind—the experience of walking to school. I would walk along rural paths, shaded by trees and alive with the chirping of birds. On the way, the scent of crops from the farmers' fields would drift toward us—a fragrance so gentle and sweet that it feels as if it still lingers in my senses. A soft, light breeze would blow throughout the day, leaving the body, mind, and soul feeling wonderfully refreshed. But perhaps that gentle and soft breeze no longer exists; the air is becoming increasingly polluted with each passing day. The levels of carbon dioxide, Sulphur dioxide, and

CFCs in the air are continuously increasing. These are greenhouse gases. The greenhouse effect is a natural process through which the Earth's atmosphere traps heat from the sun, keeping the Earth's surface warm. Greenhouses work in many ways such as- Light and heat energy from the sun pass through the atmosphere to reach the Earth's surface, warming it. Subsequently, the warmed surface attempts to release this heat back into the atmosphere in the form of infrared radiation (or thermal energy). Certain gases present in the atmosphere trap a portion of this heat and disperse it, thereby maintaining a temperature on Earth that is suitable for life (with an average temperature of approximately 15 degrees Celsius).

Industrialization and the excessive burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) have increased the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This leads to the trapping of excess heat, causing global warming—the primary driver of rising sea levels and climate change. The primary reason for the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is human activity. Transportation also produces large quantities of carbon dioxide (CO_2) and nitrous oxide (N_2O) gases. Plants absorb CO_2 from the air through the process of photosynthesis. Widespread deforestation and the felling of trees are destroying this natural absorption capacity, and the carbon previously stored in the trees is being released back into the atmosphere. Methane (CH_4) gas is emitted from rice paddies and decomposing organic waste. The melting of polar ice will cause sea levels to rise. As a result, low-lying coastal areas and major cities—in Bangladesh and many other countries—could become submerged. Extreme weather conditions will severely disrupt crop production and lead to an acute shortage of potable water. The continuous rise in global temperatures poses a major threat to our planet's environment. Moreover, it is believed that if the current rate of greenhouse gas emissions continues, it will have a severely detrimental impact on ecosystems, biodiversity, various animal species, and humans by the year 2047. Therefore, to preserve our beautiful and vibrant planet, we must take necessary measures now to prevent greenhouse gas emissions.

Another memory I remember is that there were so many fresh, ripe fruits on the trees and plants. Numerous numbers of different fruits we have picked from the trees such as –mango, Jackfruits, black berry, palm etc. But nowadays, all kinds of food—including all fruits—are contaminated with toxins. Unscrupulous traders add excessive amounts of formaldehyde for preservation purposes. The use of formalin in food is extremely harmful to the human body because it is a toxic chemical substance primarily used for preserving dead bodies or

preventing decomposition. Regular consumption of formalin places severe stress on the liver and kidneys. This can lead to conditions such as liver cirrhosis, liver damage, and renal failure. Formaldehyde is internationally classified as a human carcinogen—a substance that causes cancer. It increases the risk of developing cancers of the stomach, lungs, respiratory tract, and liver. Consuming food containing formalin may initially cause symptoms such as nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhea, a burning sensation in the throat, and vomiting. It reduces the functionality of brain cells and can lead to memory loss. Formalin poses a significant risk to pregnant women. It hinders the physical and mental development of the fetus and can, in some cases, lead to miscarriage or the birth of a child with disabilities. It affects the bone marrow, which impairs blood production and can result in anemia and various other blood-related disorders. Moreover, we should raise our voice against these poisonous elements.

Back when I used to walk to school, I would rarely see a car or two. Today, however, thousands of vehicles travel hundreds of kilometers—often for no real reason at all. Although the necessities of life have led me away from the idyllic, fairytale-like world of my childhood to one of the busiest cities on Earth, I often find myself wondering about the sheer number of vehicles traversing roads across the globe, day and night. If we fail to regulate these polluting vehicles, human civilization will eventually face destruction. The continuous, uncontrolled increase in the production and use of automobiles will have significant impacts—both positive and negative—on human civilization. However, from the perspectives of the environment and sustainability, it will pose a major challenge or crisis for human civilization. Carbon dioxide (CO_2) and other greenhouse gases emitted by vehicles will significantly accelerate climate change. This will lead to the melting of polar ice, causing sea levels to rise and putting coastal cities at risk of being submerged. The levels of harmful particulate matter and toxic gases in the air will increase. Consequently, cities will become uninhabitable, and people will face serious health risks, such as respiratory difficulties, lung cancer, and heart disease. If these are vehicles powered by conventional fuels (petrol/diesel), the world's oil reserves will be depleted very rapidly. This would lead to an acute fuel crisis and geopolitical instability. Another problem is, if the vehicles produced are entirely eco-friendly or electric (Electric Vehicles), some problems will still remain such as, Charging billions of electric vehicles will require a massive amount of electricity. If this electricity is generated by burning coal or gas, it will indirectly lead to an increase in pollution. If the billions of lithium batteries that reach the end of their lifespan are not recycled, they will create a crisis of highly toxic waste, posing a severe threat

to soil and water. Thus, our green universe will one day face a serious disaster.

Scientist Stephen Hawking, perfectly said about annihilation of human civilizations – "I think a major catastrophe will occur on Earth within the next 1,000 or 10,000 years due to nuclear war, global warming, or a genetically engineered virus." Indeed, humans created a civilization that is entirely dependent on science and technology, though we don't know almost nothing about science and technology. This volatile mixture will one day lead to our destruction.

For the prevention of environment pollution- Greta Thunberg and the 'Fridays for Future' movement she initiated have sparked an unprecedented youth awakening within the global climate movement. Alongside Greta Thunberg, young local leaders have emerged in various parts of the world—such as Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, Licypriya Kangujam from India, and Helena Gualinga, an Indigenous environmental activist from the Amazon. They are bringing the environmental crises of their respective regions to the global stage. The scope and leadership of Greta Thunberg's movement has spread far and wide. Across the world, millions of school and college students are now taking to the streets to speak out against climate change. Young people are not limiting themselves merely to planting trees or raising awareness. They are demanding concrete, legally binding commitments from world leaders and major corporate entities to end the use of fossil fuels and reduce carbon emissions. The youth are strongly advocating for climate justice. This means addressing the disparity where poorer nations—which are the least responsible for global warming—are the ones suffering the most from its impacts. Young people are using social media platforms (such as Instagram, X, and TikTok) to rapidly spread climate awareness and build a global movement. In many countries, young people are even filing lawsuits in court against government inaction regarding climate change. Climate change is no longer a distant future; it is a harsh, present-day reality. Faced with this reality, the global youth have demonstrated that, despite their young age, they possess the capacity to guide the world onto the right path. Therefore, I give them 5 stars for their strong efforts for climate movement.

Under the influence of modern lifestyles and development, my fairy-tale island may have lost some of its former luster. Yet, my heart yearns to return to it time and again. The memories of my childhood and adolescence—left behind in the past—still beckon to me, and I find myself repeatedly overcome by a wave of nostalgia. Perhaps, thanks to the movements and advocacy of environmentalists, our natural world—along with all its birds and wildlife—will no longer be in peril. Perhaps that fairy-tale island, to which I long to return, will remain untouched. It is with this hope that my heart finds courage once more.

SPORTS

Dobbs

As of June 2026, roughly 81% of Americans ages 6 and above have played some form of sport. Sports are a nearly universal American experience, from Friday night football, a youth softball game, or playing soccer at recess with you friends. But sports are more than the games themselves, they are the memories that you hold with you, your first victory and your greatest loss, that one teammate or coach that changed the way you see the sport or changed the course of your life. Sometimes it's not just the sport that keeps you coming back but the people and the memories associated with it. The feeling of being a part of something bigger than yourself, or the hope that maybe this year you'd win it all. Sports have a way of turning normal moments into lifelong memories, whether it's your team winning a big game, or a seemingly ordinary moment that you will yearn to experience again for the rest of your life. Of course, not every experience is a good one. Just like you have teams and coaches that get more into said sport, others make you question why you even tried in the first place. At the end of the day though each one has something to teach or at least a story worth telling. So, in the spirit of reviewing the human experience I will go over my two favorite sports I've played that have helped shape my life, rate them on a scale of 1-5 then at the end I will give sports and overall rating.

Soccer or as most of the world calls it football. Ironically the name is of British origin despite the UK not using the name anymore. The original name is Association Football, then in the late 19th century groups of Oxford and Cambridge students who loved shortening names and adding and *–er* suffix, life turning Rugby into Rugger. They shortened association into soc and added the *–er* suffix creating the name Soccer. While the name eventually faded into nonexistence in the UK in the 1970's-80's, the name stuck in the U.S due to the already established Gridiron Football. In fact, part of the reason Soccer isn't as popular in the UK is because in the 80's when the U.S started marketing the sport as "Soccer" many British citizens saw it as foreign "Americanism". I joined this sport when I was very little, around the age of 4. After seeing my siblings play it I was hooked. Infact soccer is the sport I played the longest from 4-14. 10 years of playing spring and fall soccer, with a break to play another sport here and there. Soccer is a sport where I have a large amount of experience and a small number of memories but the ones I do have, I will remember for the rest of my life. What I could remember from my early years of playing was how liberating it felt. It was one of the few places where I felt free, I could lose myself in the moment, run as fast as I could, and kick the ball as hard as I wanted. For those 50-60 minutes, the world didn't matter, just me and the ground on my feet. By the time I reached age 9-10 I started playing on travel ball teams and my position had shifted from strict offence to a more of a midfield to defense role. Ironically, I ended up scoring more goals in these positions than I ever did on offence. My speed was my greatest advantage, while others had fancy footwork or high endurance, I could catch up and take the ball by any means. Since I was on more of a defensive position, I also ran a lot less allowing me to save energy, so while other people of the same speed would eventually get tired from running up and down the field, I could stay on my side and send you right back. Or if I saw the opportunity, I could sprint it back and score a goal. By the time I was 11 my strategy had shifted away from travel ball onto more local recreational leagues, where I found more success, having some games where I'd score multiple goals in a game. For roughly 2 years (4 competition seasons) our team was a force to be reconned with, winning the league championship one year and finishing as runner up a couple of other times. But all good things come to an end. As I aged out of that league I found a new team. The success I had found in my previous years wouldn't come with me. Despite our team being filled with talented players, we struggled due to inexperienced coaches, although we still managed to achieve a winning season. Hoping to take my skills to the next level like my sister, but unlike my sister I wouldn't make the

team. I was left disappointed by what felt like clear favoritism towards older students and lack of attention to newcomers. So, after nearly a decade I decided to not continue playing and find a new sport to play for a while. At the time of joining soccer for the first time I had no idea how I'd look at those years or what would come after. As John Green wrote in *The Anthropocene Reviewed,* "You can't see the future coming—not the terrors, for sure, but you also can't see the wonders that are coming." (Pg 106). Looking back, while soccer definitely had its horrors it also had great wonders that I'm truly grateful for getting to experience and have help shape who I am.

My final rating: Soccer 4/5 stars.

JROTC Raider Challenge, or just Raiders is and team style athletic event that members outside the JROTC community have probably never heard of. Unlike more traditional sports, Raiders combines physical fitness, endurance, teamwork, and military style problem solving scenarios into a series of demanding competitions. Inspired by collegiate Army ROTC Ranger style events, teams began developing informally at individual high schools in the 1970's and 80's, although there's no official record as to which high school was the first to establish one. As more programs started forming and local competitions helped the sport grow during the 90's, leading to more state level competitions and championships in the 2000's, eventually leading to the first documented All-Service National Raider Championship in Athens Georgia, in 2007.

Raider teams compete in three main divisions Male, Mixed, and Female teams, each made up of ten cadets. Teams earn placements in different events by getting 1st, 2nd, or 3rd etc. With points awarded based on placement, adding up to and overall placement in the competitions. In Georgia teams compete in a series of competition meets with two of them being qualifiers to state for their area (similar to regionals), although the qualification process varies from state to state. Today, teams compete in events like the 5K Team Run, Rope Bridge, Cross Country Rescue, Raider Fitness Challenge, Tire Flip, and Obstacle courses.

I joined my high schools JROTC Raider team at the start of my sophomore year (Fall 2023) even though I had been a part of the program since my freshman year. This was no ordinary raider team either, the Alexander raider mixed team was a 4 time state champion, 2011, 2018, 2019, and 2021, with the mixed team placing top 3 overall at state from 2016-2021 and the male team raking 2nd overall in 2022. I was joining a team with a long history of success and tradition

to uphold. Like the t-shirt competition where cadets form the entire program, not just the raider team design and vote on a team jersey for the year. At Alexander raider season starts during the first week of August and runs till November. The first 2 weeks are the worst, it's mainly just conditioning and fittingly has the nickname "Hell Week". These two weeks consisted of countless rounds of calisthenics, 5k's and other physically demanding exercises, sometimes we would get smoked run Ridge Line then come back and get smoked again for an entire practice. Ridge Line is a half mile course through the woods with half of it being up hill, for anyone who doesn't know what being smoked is when you get put through a series of demanding physical exercises in rapid succession until you mind and body gives up, then you keep going.

At the end of Hell Week came Bill Arp hill, a steep hill with a roughly 30 degree incline over the course of 60 feet, which may not sound bad until your running it for 2 hours on top of doing other exercises. I remember being so sore after practice that I couldn't even walk up the stairs to my classes on Monday. One of the few moments that we were allowed to walk back to the room after practice without having to march in formation, I remember getting halfway back to the room when I heard someone yell "FIRST SERGEANTS COMING!" Me and my friends turned around to see our coach, a man over six feet tall, and in his sixties running after us saying that if he beat you to the room, you owe pushups. Out of the 35 people on the team, only 8 didn't have to do pushups. If you were lucky enough to survive Hell Week without quitting then congratulations you made the team, no tryouts, no cuts, just anyone who remained. Out of the 50 people that first came out only 32 would remain by the first meet, but just because you made the team doesn't mean anything got easier the only thing that changed was instead of conditioning you would be working with 150lbs stretchers, 45lbs rucksacks, 100-600lbs tires and, and the RFC course if you were lucky you got to spend some time on rope bridge. The first meet of the 2023 season was at North Paulding. We woke up at 5 am and headed to Alexander for our pre-meet brief, attendance, and final pack up. Those early mornings with friends would become one of my favorite parts of raiders. There was just something about being in the school when it's almost completely empty except for you and your friends. After completing all the tasks we needed to do we left for the meet in the pouring rain. It was a decent meet, but we struggled to earn any placements, it wasn't the start we had hoped for but was still better than not placing at all. Things started to look up though at the Osborne meet where our mixed team would finish 3rd overall taking second in team run and third in rope bridge, our male team would take 2nd overall with second in the

raider fitness challenge (RFC), second in cross country rescue (CCR), and third in rope bridge. We also took top three in the best male and the best female competition that meet. At the next meet the decision was made to swap the teams around so all the males on the mixed team were put on the male team and vice versa for the next two meets. First was South Paulding, the decision was also made for us to wear shorts for the team run event at 9 a.m. in the freezing cold, which was a wonderful experience in the type of weather where you'd rather be anywhere else. The mixed team continued to earn placements while the male team didn't. Next meet was Camp Sidney Dew where the mixed team would finish 5th in the meet and 4th overall at regions and would qualify for state automatically, while the male team would qualify later before forfeiting our qualifying spot. I still attended state as a backup for the mixed team, we would end up finishing 7th overall with a first place in CCR. Unfortunately, we didn't get championship rings. Our program had an "all or nothing" mentality so if we weren't the overall best then we lost. At the time I was frustrated because we won state for CCR we were the best at it, other programs got ring for things like these, but as I got older I understood why we didn't do it, one was because Alexander was an elite raider program and many elite raider programs hold themselves to the same standard. When your always competing at the state level, celebrating every first place with a ring gets expensive and takes away from the specialty of taking home the overall trophy. More than that the all or nothing mentality pushes us to strive for more, that there's always room to improve, that there's nothing like being the best of the best.

The 2024 Raider season was by far the worst experience I had with the raider team. Our long-time coach First Sergeant retired after nineteen years with the program and in his spot, Master Sergeant came in. The transition was difficult. Our raider commanders traditionally ran practices with limited instructor oversight although First Sergeant had been involved in running practices he understood the sport, and the raider commanders mostly agreed, Master Sergeant on the other hand wanted success, but in my opinion didn't want the hard work associated with it. He wanted to run practices his way which led to frequent disagreements between him and the commanders. The results reflected the problems we were having the male team placed a couple times and the mixed only placed once. For the first time since 2006, we failed to qualify even one team for the state championship. This was a major fall for the program. It wasn't just about losing competitions, it felt like we were watching our traditions disappear.

For the 2025 season, my friend Mason and I were selected to be the raider

commanders. We were given more freedom than last year's commanders, and we tried our best to run the team close to how First Sergeant would. We wanted to build discipline, improve conditioning, and prepare cadets for the meets. However, we still had our limits, when we attempted to run a 5k like we used to, we ended up getting in trouble for making it "too hard". It was frustrating that we were expected to produce championship results while being discouraged from doing the conditioning we thought was necessary. This year also marked the year where I finally won the t-shirt design competition to have my design on the team jersey, although I wanted the black jersey that we usually wore Master Sergeant wanted to try tan. The season began with a competition at Adairsville, one of the best teams in the nation and our rivals, sadly the meet was canceled halfway through due to weather. Before the meet we were supposed to meet in the room for our pre-meet checks, but cadets who didn't need rides were allowed to go straight to the meet. That created problems with accountability, including knowing who had arrived and if they had the necessary equipment. Raiders is a team sport and these little details matter. I attended the initial commanders meeting but it was really boring, the most interesting part was looking around their trophy rooms and seeing how good they used to be compared to today, so for the rest of the season I wouldn't go to any meetings. The next meet, Osbone would turn out a lot better than the last, although getting there was a hassle. My car had broken down so I had to hitch a ride with Master Sergeant, on the way we talked and I realized something, even though we disagreed with how he ran things I didn't dislike him as a person but just how he ran things as an instructor. When we arrived, we found that despite me sending out a message about where to set up at a week prior, a parent took it upon themself to set things up somewhere else and try to make everyone stay there. Normally I would just bite my tongue as it's not a big deal, but the fact I set this location, told everyone, and that the spot we were at was packed compared to where I told people to set up at really got on my nerves. So, I went around and told everyone to pack everything back up and move it to where I told them to set up the first time. She tried to protest by saying that we had already set up here, and I responded that she was more than welcome to stay here, but very cadet was moving over to where I told them to and would not be coming over here till the end of the meet. She got mad and tried to report me to Master Sergeant, but he just told her the same thing and told her to be quiet. Despite everything Osborne was a successful meet, our mixed team finished 3rd overall with second place in RFC and third place in rope bridge.

North Paulding followed a similar pattern, we finished 2nd overall in the

mixed division with a second place in rope bridge and CCR, we also had team run, our Male team had caught up to North Paulding's male team run team even though they started 4 minute before, so they should have placed but the judges failed to record their time so they put our Osborne team run time which was really bad. Throughout the season, I spoke with many of the parents that had been here before Master Sergeant took over. One complaint kept coming up, how much the programs discipline had declined in such a short time. They told me that Mason and I were often the ones correcting cadets on things that would not have been tolerated 2 two years earlier. They also talked about how Master Sergeant would talk about the program's previous success as if he was a part of it, with one parent saying, "He's living in a past he didn't create". It was getting to a point other instructors were making fun of him. After he finished a rant about our 2021 state team, one of the other instructors commented about always living in the past. Many parents felt that the discipline had been all but wiped from everyone except the senior cadets, hearing that helped me realize that my frustration wasn't just held by me but many others.

The following meet was the region qualifier at Paulding, this meet was where our season started to shine. I was actually the reason why we attended this meet. Our instructors didn't know what meets were the qualifier meets this year so I emailed the area coordinator and he told me it was this meet and Hiram, but we didn't have Paulding on the schedule so I told my instructors and got it put on the schedule, but at the cost of the S. Paulding meet for some reason. We decided not to bring the male team to this meet. The mixed team finished 2nd overall with first place in CCR, second in rope bridge, second in RFC, second in tire flip and third in sandbag relay, we lost rope bridge by a second to N.Paulding and a penalty cost us 1st in RFC. It felt like all our hard work was finally paying off and we were finally competing at a high level again and a state championship seemed in reach. Then things began to fall apart, although the male team was ineligible to qualify for state Master Sergeant still let them practice, taking away from the mixed teams time. Before the final meet of the regular season at Hiram, we had a school break, I argued that we should keep practicing like other teams, but Master Sergeant and many others said they deserved a break after their performance at Paulding. Fast forward to the Hiram meet. Safe to say we got our buts handed to us, finishing 9th overall for mixed with a second place CCR, after that everyone suddenly wanted to practice that week.

The week leading up to state was no better, you'd expect the team to be working harder than ever but instead Master Sergeant would let out practice

early. Sometimes around 4:30 compared to the regular 5:30, when First Sergeant was here, we would practice till 6:00, so these time constrains weren't helping our limited window to fix errors. With state arriving we were projected to finish either 1st or 2nd overall, we had earned that prediction, and I believed we would finally take home the trophy after four years. During the meet however, I repeatedly heard Master Sergeant talk about how he was glad the season was over and he couldn't wait to go home. It was difficult hearing that during a state championship, my final state championship at that. I wanted the same determination from him as he expected from us. RFC was the second to last event and the first event I was on that day. We moved quickly giving everything we had, but on the return, I hit a sled with my friend jack. As we pushed it the sled broke apart. It took us ten seconds to fix it and continue the course. After we finished, I asked Master Sergeant to see if they adjust our score to which he said he already tried and they said no. I later found out that he didn't ask, that situation was really frustrating because those ten seconds mattered and I felt that we at least deserved to have our situation heard. Our final event was rope bridge, I told our farside (the cadet responsible to tie the rope on the far side pole and offloading cadets) get people off at the white line not the ridge, but he didn't and it cost us about two seconds per cadet and eight cadets went across. When the awards ceremony came around, we placed 4th overall with a third place in rope bridge and CCR. Just 0.22 points off of a third place, if we were five seconds faster in either RFC or the kettle bell relay, we would have gotten the overall.

Looking back, I found myself relating to John Greens quote "It has taken me all my life up to now to fall in love with the world, but I've started to feel it the last couple of years." (pg. 09). I loved Raiders while playing it, but I never realized how much it meant to me until it was over. That car ride home after the last meet and the realization hits that this was it you will never play this sport again for the rest of your life, there no next level like other sports you get 4 chances if you're lucky and that's it. If I were to rank this sport soley off my first season with First Sergeant then if would easily be five stars, but my frustrations with later season and how they were ran took away from that rating. Despite writing mainly about the disappointments, disagreements, shortcomings, and frustrations. I have nothing but love for this sport. I love the feeling of running, the adrenaline rush from competing, the feel of the uniform, the excitement when I got to go collect an award, the friends I made some of which I still talk to today. Raiders gave me some of my best memories in high school, helped me pursue my future in the Army and ROTC. It also inspired me to get involved in coaching and become

a JROTC instructor in the future. For all the frustration Raiders gave me, the good far out ways that.

My final ranking: JROTC Raiders 4 ½ /5 stars.

Looking back at both sports, neither one was perfect, they both had there ups and there downs. Soccer gave me my earliest memories with sports, soccer thought me to enjoy the freedom of playing and to strive to be the best. Raiders gave me some of my best high school memories and helped me be the leader and aspiring coach I am today. Both sports had disappointments whether it came from a coach, a teammate, or myself. These stories are just as important as the success ones. I cant just measure a sport based off what I won, or how long I played it but by what I took with me when I walked away. So with all of this presented I give sports a final ranking of 5/5 stars. Not because every experience I had was great but because everyone gave me something to learn and made me who I am today.

My final ranking: SPORTS 5/5 stars.

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AMERICAN TEENAGER

Gabriela Galvez

FREEDOM

The book landed in my possession simply due to my aunt offering to buy me one while the family was at Barnes and Noble. Initially, I had declined, knowing my well-loved bookshelves at home were overflowing with piles of unread literature, caused by my bad habit of collecting more books than I read. Despite my aversion, my mother insisted I accept her offer and pick out a book.

So, I searched all over the massive selections to find the Social Science section of the store. It had been somewhere hidden behind an excessively large variety of bibles and the colorful, flashy children's area.

The book was tucked in beside the U.S. History and Non-Fiction books. Unlike the broad genre that is Social Science, it didn't take me long to find my book of choice: *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* by Angela Davis. The title had been in my TBR (to be read) list for a minute, and the cover design with bright red background beneath capitalized white font was recognized instantly. My aunt had praised my choice, adding that she did a part of her dissertation on the book. That locked in my choice. *Freedom* was then added to a pile of books seated next to my bookshelf.

The work itself is about abolition–specifically on police and prison abolition. It perfectly describes how incarceration and policing are not flawed–but *purposefully* designed to harm black and brown people. Davis affirms that these systems, both carceral and psychiatric, do not address the root cause of as to why these individuals are being held in these institutions in the first place.

Maybe half a year later, when I had wiped off the cobwebs and *actually* begun to read Davis's most popular work, I–ironically–was being held in a mental health facility.

The book had finally landed back in my hands because of a request I made to my mom for entertainment for my stay. Without distraction of the outside world, the book was bound to be quickly consumed.

What had landed me in the hospital was, to keep it short and simple, hopelessness. I had lost hope in everyday life, and most staggeringly, our world.

Freedom helped me cope through the hopelessness that came up when I felt little, when I felt as if I couldn't do anything–like my actions didn't matter. Davis's interviews, speeches, and essays helped me to see activism through a collectivist lens, rather than an individualist one.

The funny thing is, it didn't necessarily help during my stay at the hospital. (Though saying it did on my honors college essay was certainly more convenient). It was after, when those dreaded feelings of hopelessness came back, that I remembered and utilized the text.

I remembered how to approach feelings like hopelessness and I often go back to this particular quote: "It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism." (49).

I rate my reading *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, under all the circumstances, three point five out of five stars (3.5/5). I loved the book, but–I think it's fair to say–I loved less of the process.

REMEMBERING

A couple days after my twelfth birthday, My mom took me to a showing for Transgender Day of Remembrance. The day, celebrated on November 20th, is an annual observance to memorialize those who had been murdered the past year in acts of transphobia.

This particular showing was set in a dark auditorium and included a picture of the person, their name, and a statement going over how they were killed. As slides were clicked through, only silence followed.

I remember seeing an image of a woman followed by a sentence going over the method of murder. I vividly remember how she'd been killed, yet I do not remember her name, or what she looked like. I think about this a lot.

I think about how I remember how she'd died, but not who she was. Not her face, but only the image that I conjured up of the state in which she was left.

The blunt and uncomplicated, yet graphic description led me to having to be excused. My stomach churned and my eyes watered as I was hunched over a public toilet outside of the auditorium. My mother and I made the decision to leave shortly after.

We talked about it as we walked to the car. I don't remember our conversation.

This moment sticks with me, but, over the years, the memory has slowly turned into a sort of shame. Shame for not remembering her, for not sitting through the entire showing. My shame stained what the experience truly meant.

I *do* wish I could remember her name, and not what had happened to her, I *do* wish that we didn't have to remember these people, and instead they could still be here with us.

Now, no longer do I feel that shame. It's not about me. Now, I try to use that energy to advocate for transgender lives who are discriminated against. The memory comes up whenever I hear about those who are murdered in violent acts of discrimination and it helps me to remember- remember-their names and who they were–not what happened to them.

I'm not perfect. I cry and my hope wanes. However, I use this moment to remind myself of the bigger picture: I no longer let myself be consumed with grief or shame as it hinders my hope for a better future, and without hope and activism–progress will not move forward.

I rate that Transgender Day of Remembrance two point five out of five stars. (2.5/5).

THE ARTS

I've never known for *a fact* that I wanted to go to college. The concept of being in a more elevated version of high school, without assholes and draining seven hour days, seemed very enticing, and I had little to no idea of what I should major in. If I was going to go through the investment that is college, I needed to know *why*. The vast amount of options overwhelmed me. When I finally decided on majoring in political science in junior year, I was very interested in–well, policy!

When I told my mom about it, I was informed of the job opportunities, such as being a lawyer, possibly with a concentration in environmental law or immigration law. I wanted to use the major to write policies that would positively impact my community. My mom swiftly planned college tours with great poli-sci programs in various states.

When I told my father, he had no opinion. Only that I needed to be one-hundred percent sure that this was what I wanted. He told me that there were always jobs in accounting and other guaranteeable jobs in the market. This is what he always said, and I considered it, as always.

I was really excited and had started to believe that this was going to be my future. However, after looking at colleges in the D.C./Virginia area with great routes for poli-sci, all of a sudden, I felt as if it wasn't for me. I remember crying with my mom in our shared hotel room. In this moment, instantly I felt even more lost and felt as if I was right back where I started.

One day of my senior year, my art teacher came up to me and asked what I wanted to go to school for. I was honest with her, and told her that I wasn't sure. She asked me why I hadn't considered majoring in art.

When I looked at her face, it was filled with genuine curiosity. It made me actually think about it, and brought me back to moments where my father had told me to never, *ever* major in the arts, that if you were to go to college *at all*, you should go through with a route that you know will pay. My father wanted to help me. He was told the same by his parents, and taught it to me. It was instilled in me. But his warnings didn't teach me—they scared me.

My teacher's question was so simple, yet it completely re-wired my brain. I told her that I wasn't sure about majoring in the arts, and tried to laugh it off. She didn't join in my awkward laughter. She told me she herself was an art education major and an alumni of a nearby college and that *I* could also be. She ended by giving me a pamphlet going over the art programs that they provided and walking away, giving me the space to decide.

I had never even considered art as an option until I was asked that question on that particular day by my art teacher.

Later that year, I decided I wanted to go into the arts. My mom began to tell me about all the jobs I could have in the field– and signed us up for a campus tour of the University of West Georgia.

I rate my art teacher's question five out of five stars. (5/5). Without it, I don't think I would be here, studying what I love.

HAMILTON

Corbin Garner

Hamilton is a hit biographical musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda that tells the story of American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton through hip-hop and rap. Beyond its explosive impact on pop culture and theatre, its nontraditional structure and themes have earned the work multiple Tony, Grammy, and Olivier Awards, as well as a Pulitzer Prize.

What makes this musical so groundbreaking is, amongst many other things, the author's take on the character of our founding fathers. Within the musical, Miranda portrays Hamilton as a quirky, determined underdog with an unmatched thirst for knowledge and success. He embraces these qualities instead of minimizing them in favor of what the audience may prefer, making Hamilton objectively unlikeable throughout the storyline. As a result of his naivety, the character makes many unintelligent decisions that can feel exasperating to the viewer. I've seen this musical more than three times (not including the many others I've listened to the full soundtrack), and I still find myself thinking, "What was this guy doing?" during scenes where he made an unnecessary fuss over some small discrepancy (ie, the Reynolds Pamphlet). And while I can understand how these things will likely steer viewers away from any admiration they may have for his character, I appreciate these peculiarities

because they depict his true, raw humanity.

Ever since I first learned of *Hamilton* at a theatre camp the summer before my first year of middle school, I've adored it. Of course, the music is all beautifully written and artistically composed, but my deep affinity for the work stems from my relationship to its characters throughout the years. Of course, Hamilton, but also a character named "Aaron Burr", Hamilton's first friend, nemesis, and later the culprit of his demise. Burr is a relatively complicated man with trauma stemming from the loss of his highly favored parents at an early age, producing a crippling need to please everyone around him. While it is clear during the production that he is an intelligent and capable character, his craving to please others often hindered his ability to relate to others, which would prevent him from succeeding in many areas. This was something Hamilton predicted within minutes of meeting him in the musical, stating in just the show's second song, "If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?" This question will continue to taunt him as the story progresses, with this issue consuming every aspect of his life. His fear of being himself and, consequently, not pleasing everyone around him would bleed into romantic relationships, friendships, and, of course, his work within the American government. When he noticed something was holding him back from reaching his true potential in all of these situations, he blamed Hamilton for his faults. This misplaced blame would develop into a fixation that would take over Burr's mind. He simply could not reckon with how effortlessly Hamilton seemed to prosper over him or the possibility that he, himself, may have been the problem all along. This fixation quickly bled into envy, prompting Burr's dynamic ballad, "Wait for It". In this number, he expresses his willingness to "wait" for success to come to him instead of chasing it, all while completely ignoring the root cause of his failures. And interestingly, even in one of the only songs written completely about his internal monologue, he mentions his perception of Hamilton's experience for a considerable amount of time. He ponders what it would be like to be "in his shoes" while also portraying a deep jealousy, claiming Hamilton "takes and takes and takes" but "keeps winning anyway". Eventually, his immense envy is what leads to Hamilton's untimely death.

As I write through his storyline, I see even more how deeply flawed a character Aaron Burr truly is, but I also realize that these flaws were quite necessary to accurately reflect this personality. They were all, like I mentioned earlier, very raw and human characteristics. To a freshly middle school-aged girl with much to learn about herself, they were profoundly relatable. At the time, I was both growing into myself and expanding my "world" through meeting new

people. My class sizes had expanded by at least ten children per class, and the chance to make new friends felt exciting and adventurous. With this influx of people entering my daily life, I met many different types of kids. There were smart kids, kids who just wanted to have fun, determined and academically accomplished kids, and many in between. I'd say I would've placed myself somewhere between the "just want to have fun" and "smart" categories. I was placed in advanced classes due to my natural aptitude, but had very little internal motivation when it came to academics. At the time, I'd tell myself this lack of motivation was simply due to a lack of care for "nerdy things" like homework and tests, but I'd always known the true cause was a fear of failure. I'd always thought that if I didn't try, I couldn't ever fail. Not putting in my full effort meant never having to come to terms with the possibility that my full effort may not have been enough to get grades like my "lame" peers. However, with all of these new people in my advanced classes pushing themselves, I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy when it came to end-of-year award ceremonies or Student of the Month announcements. I'd always wanted to be the one recognized for being "academically exceptional" or "a joy to teach", as teachers would proclaim on stage while awarding my peers. During these times, I'd continue to remind myself, "I could do that too, if I tried." For these reasons, seeing a character like Burr was very eye-opening to me.

As I progressed through the rest of middle school, I'd hold on to his song, "Wait For It," like a mantra. I'd tell myself, "Just wait till I feel like trying my best," or "Just wait till the time is right and it's my turn to succeed." His words and these sentiments would echo throughout my head every time I watched a classmate receive a higher score than mine. I'd felt so seen by the portrayal of his character and even more so by his fixation on his colleague. I understood all too well what it felt like to envy someone able to put their all into something they wanted, without fear, and to watch them receive it consequently. They all made it seem so easy from the outside looking in. No one ever talked about the late-night study sessions they'd had to persevere through to earn their perfect GMAS scores. All I ever saw were results, so I convinced myself academics came naturally to my peers. I told myself I'd never reach their level of success, which meant I shouldn't even try. I decided to "lie in wait" until conditions were favorable and my own natural aptitude would finally be enough to surpass them. I lived in that dismissal for years, envious of the various "Hamiltons" in my life.

If you know me today, this part of my life may seem a bit surprising, seeing as I am now what some would consider an "academic weapon" of sorts (not

to toot my own horn). Currently, I am a junior in high school with a 4.0 GPA, a number one spot within my school's academic top ten students, and a goal to change the world. These things reflect a drastic change from my middle school self that no one really saw coming. Truth be told, the work didn't get easier, and I didn't get drastically smarter; I simply began to view things from a different perspective.

This shift began when I realized I wouldn't be attending high school with my middle school peers. Knowing that I'd be leaving my mediocre reputation behind me gave me hope for the person I could become. That summer, I remember doing everything I could to instill the values I'd envied in my peers into myself. I told myself I could work hard, I was capable, and I would become better than the people who'd been the subject of my jealousy for so many years.

I pushed myself academically to places I never thought I'd go and watched as my aspirations changed. While I'd developed a new goal and a new mindset, my love for *Hamilton* was still going strong. However, I began to relate more to a different character. While I still understood Aaron Burr's point of view, Alexander Hamilton's began to feel more accessible. In the past, I'd always looked at Hamilton as a representation of all that I would never achieve. His tenacity and grit seemed unattainable. He was every perfect score and "Student of the Year" award I would never receive, until I started to see the way my peers looked at me.

The moment I noticed just how big of a change I had cultivated within myself was when I became the "smart girl" in class. When my friends started to come to me for help with assignments or questions about "nerdy things", I realized that I had achieved my goal. I had become what I once envied, and it felt amazing. While I noticed some of my new peers viewed the pride I'd had in my accomplishments as annoying, I was too busy basking in my newfound "success" to care. From this point on, I no longer viewed Hamilton as "unattainable". To me, he was utterly and painstakingly relatable.

Within the musical, there are many phrases associated with Hamilton, most of which have some negative connotation when you look deeper into them, but appear praiseworthy at first listen. Phrases like "He will never be satisfied" and "How do you write like you're running out of time?" are some of the most notable. The characteristics they describe were the root cause of Burr's jealousy of Hamilton. Hamilton's tenacity made him seem superhuman through Burr's eyes, and Hamilton always seemed to reap the benefits of his impossibly hard-working tendencies. Nevertheless, Burr would never have the chance to

understand what it was like in Hamilton's shoes. He would never see the toll it took on Hamilton's life because he was so blinded by his success. I, on the other hand, was forced to experience what had seemed so easy to ignore from Burr's point of view.

You see, what I had yet to realize within the bliss of my new identity as "the nerdy girl" was that very little had actually changed internally. I still had a crippling fear of failure; it just presented itself differently now. Instead of hiding behind a facade of disinterest to prevent the possibility of failure, I was now utilizing that fear to push myself harder and harder under the notion that failure was simply not an option. I had been so terrified of failing that I would eliminate it as a possibility in my mind instead of feeling the defeat that came with it. With this, I also pushed what I considered to be "failure" further and further from its true definition. First, anything under 97% was unacceptable. Then, anything lower than 100% was a problem. And after that, any grades in advanced classes below 103% were considered a complete and utter failure. What was worse was that reaching these "fail-points" was not commendable to me anymore. It was simply what I was supposed to do. It was a necessity in order to keep appearing perfect to my peers, parents, and anyone else observing me. Much like Hamilton, I began to understand what it meant to "never be satisfied".

This endless pursuit of perfection began to take a detrimental toll on my life, much like the downward spiral Hamilton experiences within the second act of the musical. Like him, I began to focus only on how I was perceived by other people, and academics became my metric for my success and, consequently, my happiness. I could not rest until my grades were perfect, and my peers could only associate me with "valedictorian" and "teacher's pet". Funny enough, even then I was still looking for something to add to my plate to further the illusion of "little miss perfect".

Unraveling that perfectionism required an internal reckoning that neither Hamilton nor Burr ever achieved. I had to redefine failure. I was forced to look internally at the problem instead of the achievements it was producing. I had to understand that failure was what I made it, and with that, I took its power away. When I understood that I could control what I considered to be failure, I realized the only thing left to do was to change my metric. As of now, I am enforcing within myself the belief that the only way I can truly fail is if I do not give my best effort.

Now, I will not act like I don't still struggle with perfectionism or public perception. The journey of truly overcoming perfectionism is one I think could last a lifetime. However, I will say that this "character arc" of sorts has taught me that

both of those are a part of life. It's also helped me to understand the true genius behind the way Lin-Manuel Miranda designed both of my favorite characters.

Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton each represent different ways humanity utilizes its demand for a "goal" to make life rewarding. Goals give us something to live for. Whether that goal is something like making an impact on the world, or simply to be happy, we make all of our decisions with an end goal in mind. Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr perfectly exemplify how the goals you choose to pursue can determine the trajectory of your life. If you choose to fixate on another person's success and constantly compare it to your own, like Burr, you are making them your goal and will likely experience a similar fate to his. You may not end up murdering the subject of your jealousy (hopefully), but you will live a life tortured by someone else's achievements. If you choose to spend your life chasing perfection, like Hamilton, you have chosen an equally pointless goal because it is also unattainable. Like him, you will learn that humanity is incapable of perfection, and you will spend your life in pursuit of something unreachable. Both of these will result in a life never fully lived, and you will lie on your deathbed having never been satisfied.

With this, because of its flawless representation of this key aspect of humanity, as well as its outstanding composition and music, I rate *Hamilton* five stars.

SUPERSTITIONS

Not Just Luck, but a Fight Against Anxiety

Conor Goltermann

On September 1, 1996, an unknown, skinny, 6'0, 190-pound shortstop out of California walked up to the plate in his first career Major League start for the Boston Red Sox against the Oakland Athletics. In the top of the 4th inning, before stepping into the batter's box, he adjusts his batting gloves. Then his wristband. Taps the bat on his shoulder. Adjusts his helmet before stepping into the box. Now in the box, he taps his toes back and forth like a tap dance, while twirling his bat around before getting into his stance.

Now, if you've never seen a baseball game before, this is not your average routine at the plate. Most guys just take a deep breath, maybe look at the bat, step into the box, tap home plate, and are ready to go. Nobody has ever seen a routine like this before, especially from a rookie. That rookie was Nomar Garciaparra.

A superstition is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation." Many people have said that batters in baseball have one of the toughest tasks in all of sports. Baseball Hall of Famer and legendary Red Sox hitter Ted Williams once said, "The toughest thing to do in baseball is to hit a round baseball with a round bat, squarely."

Attempting to do the hardest thing in all of sports takes a lot out of one's mental health. Baseball superstitions can be understood as coping mechanisms that arise from the frequent failures existing in the sport, which can negatively affect players' self-esteem and confidence. Former Washington State University pitcher Dylan Orlando says, "'It's the only game where most of the time you are going to get out or fail. In this case, superstition is present because we have to find ways to ensure continued success.'" Nobody wants to fail, but failing is a way of life. The only way to learn is to fail. I have played baseball since I was six years old, and I have done my own routines to try and be the best player I can be. I put my gear on the same way before every at-bat. Elbow guard. Left batting glove. Right batting glove. Helmet. I swing the bat in my left hand twice around, then my right twice around. I walk up and draw a cross in the dirt before stepping in and tapping the plate. You have all these thoughts and situations running through your head, and sometimes all you need is a routine to make you comfortable. Losing that comfortability provides a chance for superstitions to bring back that sense and allow someone to become themselves again. Superstitions provide someone with an identity, and without that identity, athletes struggle.

I grew up as a very anxious kid, and in fact, I am a very anxious person to begin with. I remember the first time I ever went to a baseball practice. I hopped in my mom's old GMC Acadia, and we drove to the field. We parked and she said in the sweetest voice, "You ready?" Was I ready? My stomach felt like there was a volcanic eruption. Well, it sure erupted alright.

Uncertainty is such a mysterious word. It perks your ears up when the word is said. All your mind can think about is all of the possibilities and how everything can go wrong. Now you are in the head of an anxious person. Superstitions help people cope with uncertainty by providing a sense of order and control, thus improving performance under stress. Dr. Xygalatas from Psychology Today explains, "Research shows that rituals and superstitions spike during times of uncertainty, and performing them can help reduce anxiety and allow us to function better." Making it to the Major Leagues is something that many athletes work their entire lives for. These athletes get paid millions of dollars to play a game. These games can be decided from one play or moment in the game, and when you come up in that moment, you look for something to ease the pressure, and finding that certainty can help an athlete perform better. Garciaparra has a career .321 batting average with seven home runs and twenty-one Runs Batted In (RBIs) in the playoffs, meaning he performed with confidence when the lights shined the brightest.

There is a difference between helpful rituals and harmful obsessions, which is crucial for athletes, as it impacts both their performance and well-being. A University of Wisconsin professor and student combined in a research article detailing, "Rituals and superstitions are common in athletics and can help athletes perform better by helping them gain the confidence they need before competition. However, if an athlete (or anyone) has rigid rituals or other repetitive behaviors that are affecting their ability to function and causing emotional distress, talking with a doctor or mental health professional may be helpful" (Reardon and Tran). There is a difference between comfortability and obsession. There is a line between doing something to release anxiety and doing something because you have anxiety. Athletes must understand the line that sheds the light on the psychological aspects of athletic performance and the potential downfalls of relying too heavily on these rituals and superstitions. I personally become obsessed with my good performances and try to repeat everything that I did that day. I go back and watch videos of my home runs and look at before and after the at-bat. I feel as though athletes get trapped in that feeling of wanting to be perfect. But nobody can be perfect. Nobody.

Having a strong mental aspect to your game is almost just as important as the physical aspect. Three medically established authors of a research article about the human mind and control report, "Belief in one's ability to exert control over the environment and to produce desired results is essential for an individual's well being." Self-confidence in an athlete provides many positive effects: improvements in performance, increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and more. Anxiety affects an athlete, especially in such a mentally tough game such as baseball. Most of the greatest professional athletes to live on this planet have some of the toughest mental aspects and play the game with no fear. Having such a strong mindset allows an athlete to bounce back and learn from their mistakes instead of being trampled by their obstacles.

Have you ever asked yourself, "Wow, how does that guy [or girl] stay so calm?" I watch YouTube constantly. One of the major things I watch all the time are sports highlights. Whether it be a regular season game at 1:00 PM on a Tuesday or Game 7 of the World Series, I love watching highlights. I play varsity baseball for my high school, and I face on average eighty miles per hour. I have empathy for these Major Leaguers when they play this game. They face ninety miles per hour regularly. They seem so nonchalant. It almost looks too easy. I also see their lowlights. The strikeouts where some players just boil over, some even snapping the bat over their knees like a twig. The errors in the field where they chuck the ball into the stands. My dad always told me that to play

this game of baseball, you must be even-keeled. You can't play this game like a roller coaster because if you get too high or too low, the coaster will crash. I think roller coasters are a great analogy for the game of baseball. When you are on your way up, you get nervous but mostly excited about what's to come. As you reach the top and on your way down, you start to regret and contemplate your life before you come crashing down in fright. I, for one, like small roller coasters.

Garciaparra's superstition displays the desire for control and certainty as a fundamental human need that influences behavior and performance. PhD Stuart Vyse, the author of *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, illustrates, "'Superstitions provide people with the sense that they've done one more thing to try to ensure the outcome they are looking for.'" Athletes want to perform to the best of their ability every moment of every game. Having that sense of control and confidence brings people to their comfort zone and brings a purpose to the games they love to play. Everybody wants to stay young forever because that is where they were most comfortable and life was less stressful. This new sense of security is essential for optimal performance and well-being. As a teenager at the moment, being an adult is scary to me. I want to savor these moments as a kid, especially as an athlete. Watching these clips of younger kids throwing ninety miles per hour makes you not think that you are enough. Superstitions are all about staying in a routine. Everybody has a certain rhythm. Breaking that rhythm is tough to recover from.

Garciaparra's superstition and its impact on his mental health contributed to the decline of his baseball career. Baseball has far and away the longest season out of all of the major sports in the world. A 162-game season takes a toll on the human body mentally and physically. Nomar Garciaparra had 41.3 Wins Above Replacement (WAR) in his first eight seasons, but he totaled only three WAR in his last six. The unpredictability of a baseball career provides many factors that contribute to the decline of a career. On July 31, 2004, Garciaparra was traded from a city that he loved and a city who loved him back. A city accustomed to his routine and unique style of play. The change in scenery and the possible anxiety of having to perform for the team that traded assets away for his success caused a spiral in his play. The importance of relaxation and relationships in a team goes a long way in an athlete's mind. Imagine for a second that you live and provide for a community for almost a decade and that city repays you by trading you away to another city. Could you imagine the thoughts running through his mind as he gets the call informing him? All of these anxious thoughts bring us back to the state of ease. Fixing the arm band.

Fixing your helmet. Tightening the gloves. Tapping the feet.

Stevie Wonder wrote a song called "Superstition." This song was written about quite the opposite. He wrote this song for his guitarist about how much he did not believe in superstitions. Wonder sings, "When you believe in things that you don't understand/ Then you suffer/ Superstition ain't the way." I think that there is good and bad in everything that we do as humans. There are always consequences. Superstitions can allow someone to feel like themselves when playing the sport they love, especially when times are rough for them. They can also become an obsession that they must need in order to succeed in life. This double-edged sword has been in many people's arsenal that sometimes comes back to cut themselves.

The end of Garciaparra's career was riddled with injuries. After spending seasons with the Cubs, Dodgers, and Athletics, he signed a one-day contract to finally retire as a Red Sock, the place where it all started. When it all started on that fateful top of the 4th inning on September 1, 1996. He adjusted the batting gloves, fixed the arm band, tapped the shoulder, grabbed the helmet, twirled the bat, tapped the feet. Pitcher wound up and fired. Fastball. Crushed over the fence. Garciaparra launched his first career hit for a home run. Maybe it was luck. I think it was superstition. I rate superstitions a 3.5/5.

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BLANKET

Makenzie Gregory

Blankets have been around for thousands of years; some scholars believe they date back to the Paleolithic age. Originally, blankets were made from animal hides; over time, they evolved into many different types, from lush tapestries and quilts to many more options. Originally used as thermal insulators and shields against harsh weather, blankets matter to most people for more than warmth; they also have a psychological side. An article from Revibe Mental Health called Adult Comfort Blanket: Your Guide to Soothing Anxiety states, "It can help your nervous system settle when stress, anxiety, sadness, or trauma leaves you feeling keyed up or emotionally raw." This helps show that blankets can influence so much more than they were ever intended for; as we have evolved, the attachments we form to them have changed as well.

Many people have blankets they have had since they were babies, kids, or even something that has been passed down from a family member that they have an emotional attachment to. For instance, I have a blanket that I have had since I was three; my mom got it on a trip to "Myrtle Beach" that my Pawpaw had taken us on. The blanket was originally for my mom, but I took it over. I still have the blanket to this day; the words Myrtle Beach are now long gone, but it is still the same pink checkered blanket I have slept with every night since. I

have a collection of blankets, but none of them replace that one. A few years ago, I lost my Pawpaw, and that only intensified the importance of the blanket.

Using a blanket is now normalized as being used for psychological needs and is no longer limited to being used for survival against harsh conditions. Dr. Adam Perlman, Director of Integrative Health and Wellbeing at Mayo Clinic Florida gave a talk on how research offers insight on how blankets may lift anxiety; in this he states, "...Blankets may cause the same response in your body that happens when you get a hug. You get a surge of feel-good hormones, such as oxytocin. A decrease in cortisol, which is sort of our stress hormone, and an increase in serotonin and dopamine-two neurotransmitters that really affect our mood." Looking at it, this way shows how blankets help boost our hormones and affect our mood. This helps explain why using my blanket after a long day, or most days in general gives me such a sense of comfort.

Blankets can provide a sense of security to people. A good way to notice this is in babies, and kids; this is because they will become attached to a blanket and refuse to sleep without it or even go anywhere without it. For kids, blankets act as transitional objects that provide emotional security, sensory comfort, and help manage stress or separation. Transitional objects are items that a child uses to substitute a parent's soothing presence, helping bridge the emotional gap from complete dependence to independent self-soothing. They can be something a child takes to pre-K to help with the transition to being away from their parents. My sister Lorelai is a perfect example of a kid being attached to a blanket. Like me, she has a blanket and she refuses to sleep without it; she takes it everywhere with her. She has had this blanket for about a year and there's nothing special about it. My Mom and I bought it on a random day because we thought it was cute. We almost didn't get it. We ended up going back to the store to get it because I couldn't stop thinking about it. It's a simple pink blanket that has rainbows and the Sesame Street character Elmo on it. Lorelai loves blankets; I mean any and every blanket in the house she stakes her claim on, but none of them replace her Elmo blanket. She can't sleep without it, and she doesn't like anyone using it. If she spends the night away from home with our aunt, or even when we go on vacation, she freaks out if her blanket isn't nearby. I imagine she's so attached to this blanket, because it provides a sense of security to her. There is so much constantly going on, and kids need some sense of calm, stability, or even a constant. So, for some kids like my sister, the blanket is her constant, because it never changes.

Some people may not use a regular blanket or a blanket with sentimental value; some may use a weighted blanket. Weighted blankets can help mimic

deep pressure stimulation, which is what helps decrease anxiety symptoms. An article written by Rachel Grice called How Do Weighted Blankets Work states, “Weighted blankets work by applying gentle, even pressure across the body—a technique known as deep pressure stimulation. This pressure helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which can lower heart rate, reduce stress, and promote a sense of calm.” This shows that weighted blankets can create a physical feeling of comfort that helps the body relax. The comfort I get from my blanket comes from my memories and the familiarity that’s attached to it where the comfort that some find in weighted blankets come more from pressure and weight that’s provided by weighted blankets.

Even though there are now many different types of blankets, they all have a purpose they can provide that is so much more than keeping someone warm or protecting them against harsh weather. Everyone has a way they cope and relax at the end of the day, and for some it’s a simple item like a blanket. I give Blankets 5 stars.

COFFEE

JP Groat

The story of coffee begins in the 9th century in Ethiopia and continues in Yemen during the 12th century, where it was first roasted and brewed. According to legend, a goat herder named Kaldi was the first person who discovered coffee beans (History of Coffee n.d.). Kaldi noticed that after his goats ate the cherries of a particular tree in the ancient coffee forests of the Ethiopian plateau, they were so full of energy that they didn't want to sleep at night. People in Ethiopia and Yemen initially consumed coffee by chewing the raw leaves or by eating the whole sweet cherry.

Around the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire transformed coffee into a hot beverage, as roasting became the standard. To determine the perfect roast, they relied on their senses, and the beverage helped them stay awake during long hours of night prayer, spiritual devotions, or intense military training. In the 17th century, merchants first brought coffee to Europe through the Venetian gateway. However, its introduction into western culture initially faced suspicion from the Catholic clergy, who dubbed it the "bitter of Satan," at least until Pope Clement VII tried it and fell in love (history of coffee N.D.). After gaining popularity in Europe, industrialization soon followed, and the 17th century also saw the invention of the cylindrical drum roaster. This helped achieve an even

roast for the beans, as one could crank and spin them over a fire, making them more producible.

Yet, it was not until 1652 that coffee became available to the masses, which only happened because a man named Pasqua Rosee opened London's first coffee stall. Within a few decades, thousands of coffeehouses opened across England. They were nicknamed "Penny Universities" because citizens could buy a cup of coffee for only one penny. Coffee continued to grow around the world.

Today, coffee is a popular drink enjoyed in many ways, and it has almost become a trend for people to drink it. However, most people don't drink coffee the way it's intended; instead, they take it with cream and sugar or iced. Coffee shops have become more popular as hangouts rather than just places to grab a coffee. People will go to meet friends, study, or have meetings. What started as a way for people to get caffeine has now become an industrialized drink that millions of people drink every day. Many companies, such as Starbucks and Dunkin', have made millions of dollars from their drinks, attracting long lines of customers who pay a premium for coffee that could be made at home for less.

One thing I have noticed is the dependence on the drink for people to start their days. I have talked to many people that say they cannot function without it. Coffee has become more than just a drink; it has become a part of people's routines or the thing that gets them up each morning. My first love for coffee was in high school. I began to drink it every morning before class and almost became attached to it, and this is what sparked my love for it. Although the amount I've spent on my espresso machine is staggering, I find it oddly satisfying to make my perfect cup of coffee every day, and I'm confident that it's better than what I'd get at a coffee shop. It's a small part of my day, but I enjoy waking up to it every morning, and I know it's the one constant before the day's chaos. Everyone has routines such as listening to music, eating the same thing, or drinking coffee before heading out the door, and that is mine. I have also begun to love the taste of new coffee beans. I'm always on the lookout for something different or a place that's distinct from their origin. Currently, I have some beans from Charleston, SC, which taste sweeter than the ones I had from Missouri. I've also purchased some basic ones from the store, and I think it's crazy how much of a difference it really makes. The smell of coffee gives me a sense of comfort and nostalgia for when my mom used to brew a fresh batch every morning before taking me to school.

It is something to which I have a deep connection and that allows me to have peace on tough days. Somewhere along the way, coffee has been set

apart from just caffeine, it is a part of my routine and somehow finds a way into my life. Whether it's a quick regular cup before class to the elaborate espresso that takes time to make. Maybe it is the taste, or the caffeine, or the constant on a tough day.

Coffee may just seem like an ordinary beverage, but I believe it can have a deeper connection to many that drink it, and is a convenient part of people's daily routines worldwide. The reason so many people chose the coffee shop I believe is the feeling of being important or having something to look forward to. We value the experience rather than the coffee itself. Maybe the most simple things can make the biggest difference in someone's life. Coffee is now not as accessible to everyone, big businesses due to capitalism are starting to gauge their consumers for more money. When a drink costs them one dollar to make and costs us eight to consume, the margins are very wide and that is why I took off half a star. I rate coffee 4.5 stars.

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POLAROIDS

Louie Griggs

I started using a Polaroid Camera in 2024. Because the film is expensive, I usually save it for special moments. For the memories. I hear a lot about people's memories in this class; that's why I love the discussions, because we get a glimpse of others' past. When I use my Polaroid camera, I always get the feeling as if I'm digging into the past and using something old to celebrate something new. I see it happen in real time in class when someone suddenly reaches into their past and talks about a random memory they haven't thought about in a long time. That can be triggered by discussion, and sometimes that can be triggered by objects, pictures, places, etc. In "Scratch 'N' Sniff Stickers," John Green says, "I continued to surreptitiously collect stickers, especially scratch 'n' sniff ones, because they took me back to a time and place that felt safer"(43). It's no surprise that things that were once mainstream become niche and then mainstream again; they let us reminisce on what once was. If John Green has scratch 'n' sniff stickers, then I have Polaroid pictures. I often think about how something first released well before my time can be held in such esteem by me. I think it's because it gives me something physical that I can trap memories in and hopefully always keep. Sometimes the physical holds more weight than the digital. Simply put, it just hits different because it's real.

When I think about Polaroid cameras, I sometimes think of this quote I like from *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* (2014), said by Effie Trinket: "You know, everything old can be made new again... like democracy". Although the plot, story, and meaning of The Hunger Games are wildly more important than what I talk about in the paper, and I encourage everyone to give it a read and watch, I do believe this quote fits the life and legacy of Polaroids. Polaroids were first released in 1948 and sold out within hours. At the time, it was seen as a "modern miracle" being able to print a photo in less than 60 seconds. In the digital age, where technology like the internet and cloud where nothing seems to ever truly go away or get lost, and smartphones that can take pictures in less than ten seconds, polaroids are considered "old tech". But recently, polaroids and Polaroid-like tech, as well as "old school" and "Y2K" aesthetics, are coming back into the mainstream. People who were alive when it first became mainstream, and people just finding out about it now, are enjoying it as if it were new. In "Auld Lang Syne," John Green says, "I find it fascinating that in a world where so much is new, we welcome a new year by singing "Auld Lang Syne," which is a very old song" (145). Some people think old aesthetics coming back are a recession indicator or a way of coping when life gets hard, like how the rise of the Y2K aesthetic happened right after COVID. Sometimes the reason we gravitate so much to things made in the past is simply that it's not the now. Sometimes the best way to find a quick source of joy is to look at the past with rose colored lenses, where responsibility doesn't exist, and all you remember is the joy of the moments. I think we try to reach back into that and pull back that feeling by wearing, talking, and using things that represent a different place. A place where we lived the times instead of watching them pass us by on a screen.

John Green said in "The Internet," "What does it say that I can't imagine my life or my work without the internet?" What does it mean to have my way of thinking, and my way of being, so profoundly shaped by machine logic? (88) He also says in "Scratch 'N' Sniff Stickers," "When I open that ancient sticker book - what I smell most is not pizza or chocolate, but my childhood." (45) I chose the ranking I did because the truth is, like John Green, I can't imagine my life without the internet. It's kinda scary. I miss the physicality of life from when I was a kid. I remember the physical hugs, not the digital ones, the kisses, the physical gifts of childhood that seemingly got taken away piece by piece as I got older and the digital world got bigger. Polaroid pictures are that for me. A piece of physical history that I can keep and hold on to for as long as my heart desires. A specific Polaroid that causes me such yearning for the past is one I

took during my last summer before college. The photo shows four of my cousins at my aunt's pool in her backyard. No one is posing because they didn't know I was taking the photo. I like to think I took it at the perfect moment, right when one of my older cousins placed a kiss on the forehead of our youngest cousin. In the photo, everyone is acting truly as they are, and I like that I don't have to scroll through the photos app to find it cause I keep it above my bed in my dorm, attached to fake vines bought off of Amazon with twinkle lights all the way around them. Like most things that are considered "nostalgic," they remind us of a piece of the old days. And this picture always allows me a way to go back.

Maybe for some, the reason we rush to the past to feel content in the now is that we're scared. I'm scared. I'm scared all the time. I'm scared writing this paper in my dorm, thinking the good days are over, thinking, "What am I doing here?" "Is this the right place for me?" "Did I make the right decision?" I've bought a minimum of three new Polaroid packs since I've moved in here. That's at least 24 photos taken. Memories that I'll hopefully one day get to look back on and say, "aw, I remember how sad I was" or "aww, I remember how scared I was," and hopefully after I get to say, "look at me now, I'm nowhere near that feeling". For me, Polaroids are a reminder of the past and a beacon of hope at the same time. I give Polaroids 4 stars.

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WIRED HEADPHONES

Kaia Hall

Before today's modernized age of lightweight, Bluetooth wireless headphones, wired headphones were how most humans listened to their choice of audio. Although, wired headphones were, for me personally, the first pair of headphones I ever owned in the early 2000's, the origin of headphones dates all the way back to the 1880's (8 things you probably didn't know about headphones by Colin Toh). Since then, technology has greatly improved, making headphones more of a personal necessity. In today's world, wires are increasingly criticized, and wireless headphones have gained a lot of popularity, but it's important to remember where it all began to help us understand how the way we listen to audio has evolved. As headphones have transformed over the years, we can see that wired headphones have strengths that wireless do not and the way people benefit from using headphones has completely changed since their early history.

Although wired headphones aren't common to come around as wireless popularity rises, there are so many features to wired headphones that are missed in the wireless age. For example, unlike Bluetooth headphones, wired headphones do not need to be charged throughout the week. As someone who always forgets to charge their devices, I hate having to plug in my wireless

headphones. When I use wired headphones, I never have to worry about them dying halfway through a long road trip because I forgot to charge them the night before. Seeing or using a pair of wired headphones brings back so many memories and gives me a nostalgic feeling. A sentence I found in "Scratch 'N' Sniff Stickers" from John Green's book The Anthropocene Reviewed, states "One of the things that makes smell so powerful, of course, is its connection to memory." (41). I believe this quote also refers to the way I feel about wired headphones. When I think of wired headphones, it immediately brings me back to riding the bus in middle school and spending that 10 minutes staring out the window, replaying my favorite songs. Growing up with them, I have grown a deeply rooted connection and trust in the wired headphones. No worrying about if my Bluetooth headphones actually connected to my phone, I know when I hear that click when I plug those wires in, I'm good to go. Despite this, wired headphones also have their flaws, like comfortability. I will say that my Bluetooth earbuds are a lot more comfortable in my ears than the old and hard, wired headphones. The more modernized headphones have cushions to make wearing them more comfortable. Another flaw is, of course, the wires. These wires frequently tangle when placed in places meant to keep them from getting lost, like bags and pockets, requiring time spent untangling them before using them. Being basically attached to a device by cords restricts the things you are able to do. If you aren't careful, things like exercise, standing up, looking in the opposite direction, and running errands can lead to the headphones getting plucked from your ears.

The first pair of headphones were created with one earpiece in 1880. These headphones were made for telephone operators and weighed between 6-11 pounds, having to be rested on the operators' shoulder. (8 things you probably didn't know about headphones by Colin Toh). These headphones were specifically created to make jobs easier and more efficient. As humans, we are known to further develop objects, especially technology, as time moves forward. In John Green's book, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, one of his chapters, The Qwerty Keyboard says, "In both cases, Edison worked with collaborators to build upon existing inventions, which is one of the human superpowers." (239-240). As technology progressed, headphones became a lot more enjoyable to wear and shifted from something used mainly in the working industry to a device used for personal entertainment. Now that the production and consumption of headphones have increased, more people are able to enjoy them. Headphones have transformed into a place to get away from reality and silence the outside voices.

Wired headphones have been a staple in my life for a very long time but eventually got overshadowed by the new and improved technology of the modern day. Wireless headphones have their perks, but so do wired headphones. The trust and memories I have gained throughout my many years of using wired headphones will forever overpower the amenities Bluetooth headphones have to offer. As headphones have improved and gained popularity, the way people benefit from them is completely different and has expanded greatly than their very early history. Because of these reasons, I give wired headphones a 4-star rating.

CONVENIENCE

Dallyn Harcrow

The advancement of technology has made possible many great things in our lives. The creation of smart phones, for example, has given every person that owns one a vast amount of information at their fingertips. The creation of automobiles, and heavy equipment has made it possible to travel long distances in a short amount of time, transport goods for trade, and move ridiculous amounts of weight in the process of construction. Air conditioning has made it possible to not only live in comfort, but also the ability to store food for much longer than it would last naturally. These are all necessary advancements in technology and, at face value, seem to have no negative aspect to them but I would argue the contrary. The advancement of technology has also allowed people to get lazy and comfortable. I suppose that is what people want naturally, to find comfort in such a difficult world to live in. I, myself am guilty of this desire for comfort. That desire for comfort however, drives us to create things that make life more convenient. This is where things become dangerous for us as individuals and as a society. As we move more and more towards convenience as a society, we also move more and more towards isolation and the degradation of community. Without community, we lose empathy and become more self-centered. As you can see this is a spiral that grows exponentially uncontrollable.

When we as people lose sight of something bigger than ourselves, it becomes harder and harder to pull ourselves back out of that selfish mindset. We simply just don't have the capacity to care for more than ourselves at that point. For example, I've recently noticed a few things within myself pertaining to this. In the grocery store there are more registers that are self-checkout than there are not. I find myself using the self-checkout register most of the time due to not wanting to inconvenience myself. Sometimes that means not wanting to talk to someone, other times it means not wanting to wait for someone with a cart full of groceries to get finished. I find myself getting annoyed when someone has "too many" groceries or when the person running the register wants to converse with the customer. Why? Well because I suppose I have better things to do or at least that's what I tell myself. The truth may be one I wouldn't want to admit, but it is that I have relied so much on the small conveniences such as a self-checkout register for example, that I have disconnected from the people around me. When in this mindset I begin to see people as obstacles in my way instead of a potential connection, someone that may be in need, or maybe just another human being going through similar struggles in life as myself. Another example is when I get fast food or go out to eat in general. I will have very little empathy for anyone on the other side of the window; in fact, they don't even cross my mind until something about my order is incorrect. God forbid someone made a mistake. I use these examples to express how convenience affects us in ways we don't even really think about. Don't get me wrong here, I love convenience as much as the next person. I simply just think we should take a closer look at what it does to our society. When people live a life of luxury, because that is what convenience is, they stop living life intentionally and stop connecting with other people in society due to not wanting to inconvenience themselves. How can someone care for another human when they stop caring for themselves? Except for their most basic needs for survival of course. In *The Dangerous Psychology of Convenience*, Jean Kim M.D. states "The psychology of convenience has lulled us into complacency, but we are now asleep at the wheel, heading for a cliff. We need to wake up and save ourselves." I think this statement is important because when we prioritize convenience, we put on blinders and forget about things bigger than ourselves that we can live for intentionally.

One must have a reason to live for more. I believe this is the purpose of family, community, and even religion. The whole point is to get outside of yourself. But how do you step outside of yourself when you are already so caught up. I am still in search of the answer to this question. However, I do think there

are some things that could potentially help to pull us out. In almost every, if not all addiction recovery programs, they follow a very specific set of rules called The Twelve Steps and they follow them in order. I think this order is important. Of those rules, the first four are very adamant on getting outside of oneself. But again, how do they do it? Well, they start with acknowledging that they are unable to do it themselves, because if they were, then they would've already done it. This is where some sort of community comes into play. The next two are acknowledging that there are things greater than themselves and then seeking after those things. This usually means a higher power, whether that be the God you choose to worship, the universe, or maybe just your sponsor in your addiction recovery group. Then they take personal inventory. This is the step where the magic starts to happen. But why? Well, it's simple, I think. You have to slow down and really come to terms with what it is that's truly going on in your life. You specifically write it down. This part I believe is important also. You have to be intentional. When you write, you slow down drastically compared to how fast you can think. This forces intentionality. I want to be clear in that I am not saying that everyone should go run to their local addiction recovery program, I mention it only to bring light to the many advantages of the set rules that they follow to overcome addiction. Those rules aren't only good for recovery; they are good for life in general. I believe we as a society need to slow down and relearn how to be comfortable with boredom and sacrifice. To relearn how to live intentionally. One thing is for sure, it is not convenient in any way to travel to a place full of strangers where you then proceed to share all the intimate details of the activities that enslave you and send you into a spiraling doom that destroys your life and that of others around you, in hopes that you will one day be able to recover and make amends with those you have hurt. You have to intentionally do something so seemingly insane. But what does this have to do with the topic of convenience? I believe this could probably be one of the most personally painful sacrifices someone could make; And sacrifices are as far from convenient as you can get. Again, I want to be clear in that, I am not claiming to know the solution, but I think that these are ways we could start living more intentionally. If we as a society began to live more intentionally on a personal and a communal level, I believe the change would be exponentially positive.

In society it can be difficult to abstain from the many conveniences available to us. For example, if you have two people who are studying for the same exam; One of them uses AI in their studies or even on the exam and the other one uses their own mental capabilities. If the person who used the AI manages to make

the same or even possibly a better grade as the person who studied on their own, it would be difficult for the person who did it themselves to justify abstaining from this convenience AI provides. AI can be a great tool; However, if it isn't used properly then you are only cheating yourself of actually learning and retaining the information. This is yet another slippery slope that will cause not only the individual to suffer the consequences, but all of society as well. Shortcuts, convenience, automations, etc. All of these would be something anyone would desire, but ultimately, we were not designed to do things the easy way. We humans do not learn and grow when we are comfortable. We need to be under a certain level of stress to get smarter, stronger, and ironically to even find joy. We find joy in having purpose and having a purpose is somewhat stressful.

Overall, it's easy to understand why anyone would seek after the more convenient things in life. They make our life easier of course. However, convenience is the last thing we need to set our minds on. I believe setting our minds on convenience is missing the target, but it seems to be the focal point of society in our current day. I believe that if we instead focus our sights on serving our fellow humans and building connections with the people around us, we can achieve the same level of greatness if not even greater. For these reasons, I give convenience 1 star.

APPLE AIRPODS

Evan Harris

When Apple released the first version of the AirPods back in 2016, it was a benchmark moment of invention in the wireless headphone market. Although Apple's AirPods were introduced to the market in 2016, the idea and design was conceived in 2011. According to the company website: "Steve Jobs one of the three co-founders of Apple was opposed the idea because he was not interested in his earbuds requiring Bluetooth connectivity and had doubts about quality issues and what customers would think of having to recharge earbuds just to use them" (Cyrus).

However, Jobs was not the only person working on this new kind of headphone in 2011; the company Beats was also developing and testing the idea of wireless earbuds. Something that many people do not know is that according to a direct press release from Apple, "Apple has agreed to acquire the critically acclaimed subscription streaming music service Beats Music, and Beats Electronics. Apple is acquiring the two companies for a total of $3 billion." (Apple) Apple bought the company in May of 2014, along with its products came research and the first well known prototype of Bluetooth headphones created by Beats. As soon as Apple acquired this technology, their goal was to innovate and create their own version. Between the time Apple bought Beats (2014)

and released the first version of the AirPod (2016), they created what is known as the W1 wireless chip. The W1 wireless chip was a piece of technology that revolutionized all Apple's audio products. This chip allows devices to connect automatically, so users no longer need to manually connect devices through the iPhone settings every time they want to use their headphones. Furthermore, the chip improved the lag and audio delay issues of previous headphones while also enhanced the power management dramatically, increasing the overall battery life.

Apple released the original AirPods in December of 2016; becoming the first well-recognized wireless earbuds that were wildly adopted into people's lives. Uncoincidentally, Apple released their first version of the AirPods the same year they decided to remove the headphone jack from all their new devices. According to an Apple Insider article, "Apple pulled the plug on the iPhone headphone jack with the launch of the iPhone 7 on September 7, 2016." (Gallagher) The original purpose of AirPods was to create the first affordable and reliable wireless earbud and to fix the known weak points of Bluetooth and wireless connection. When they first released AirPods, they were extremely controversial and considered "weird tech." However, when people started to see mainstream celebrities and artists wear them out in public, the idea and trend of AirPods began to transition into more of a status symbol.

Over the years , Apple has continued to improve their design of the AirPods. In 2019, they dropped two new versions: the AirPod and the AirPod Pro. The AirPod Pros had unique new features and modes that allowed people to cancel the noise of their surroundings. This includes their latest model, the AirPods 5, which were released in September 2026 and have something called active noise canceling and adaptive audio, also known as "ANC". Active noise cancellation is where the AirPod will actively drown out and block unwanted sounds like airplanes or traffic, but pick up on an amplify important audio, like people's voices in conversation.

My AirPods are something I didn't necessarily realize that I used every single day, however, when I took a second to think about it, I realized they are one of the three things that I always have with me, along with my phone and wallet. I use my AirPods for numerous things, including studying. My pair of AirPods are one of my favorite tools to study with; they allow for endless opportunities. Anyone who has ever tried to study in a public area where there's lots of background noise knows how frustrating it is to be constantly losing your train a thought. With my AirPods, I can turn on the noise-canceling mode, which blocks out all the unnecessary noise around me, thus allowing me to kind of

enter my own little bubble and enhance my level of focus. My AirPods also allow me to listen to study videos, audiobooks, or any other material while I do other things such as running, driving, or even doing chores around the house.

Another thing my AirPods allow me to do is listen to music anytime and anywhere. Music is a large part of my everyday life; I listen to music while driving, walking around campus, and sometimes while I study. Looking beyond the surface level, listening to music is more than something I just enjoy. The music I'm listening to also heavily influences my mood and attitude. For example, while I'm at the gym, I listen to music that's louder and upbeat because it gets me up and going. Meanwhile, if I'm trying to relax or study, I'm going to listen to something that is much slower and has an overall more mellow tone to it. To summarize, the point I am making in this paragraph is that my AirPods allow me to conveniently and effectively regulate my mood at any time throughout my day.

Communicating with others is undoubtedly a major part of everyone's life; this may be face-to-face conversations, phone calls, text messages, and even emails. In which our phones already make this an extremely convenient and easily accessible thing to do, AirPods take it to the next tier. My AirPods allow me to answer and make phone calls without even having to touch my phone. This is extremely handy for me when I'm at work, especially considering that I work at a zipline park. It's not always possible for me to be able to take my phone out and reply to someone. I may not be able to access my phone at all or just be in a very inconvenient position. When someone calls and announces to me through my headphones, all I have to do is accept or decline. The AirPods have their own built-in microphone, so even if your phone is in a different room, you can still talk through your headphones. The same exact concept applies to text messages as well; the headphones announce whenever you get a text, you can choose whether you'd like to reply or not, and if you choose to reply, you can reply with whatever you'd like to say completely hands-free.

It can be extremely frustrating when I wake up in the morning and realize I forgot to charge my AirPods. Luckily, almost all AirPods can charge from 0 to 100% in 20 to 60 minutes. Also, it's not the biggest issue for me: but it's something well known AirPods have most definitely contributed to people's lack of situational awareness, so many people will just put them in and completely tune out everything that's going on around. In situations where there may be traffic, other people, or just hazards in general around you, AirPods can play a role in you not noticing. However, AirPods do have a "transparency" mode for whenever you're in situations where you need to hear your surroundings, but it

is still up to you to turn it on. Lastly, as amazing as it is to put my AirPods in and completely tune out of reality, AirPods make it extremely easy to lose track of time while scrolling away on social media.

For numerous reasons, AirPods are a very important aspect of my life. They are one thing I use on an everyday basis whether I'm communicating, trying to study, working out, need a place to escape to, or just want to enjoy some music. My AirPods make all of this possible and extremely convenient. So many people may see AirPods is just another piece of modern-day technology however, to me there is a deeper relationship between me and AirPods. Although AirPods may be a little pricey and most definitely easy to misplace, I still rate them four stars out of five. There is a level of irony in me wearing the exact pair of AirPods that I talked about in this essay while I wrote this paper. I give Apple's AirPods four out of five stars because they play a very significant role in and have had a tremendous impact on my life, but all things considered they still have a few flaws like anything else.

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MEDIA PIRACY REVIEW

William Hart

In 2004, a Public Service Announcement warned against media piracy with the slogan "You Wouldn't Steal a Car." Established by the Motion Picture Association of America (now the MPA), seven major film studios, and the National Association of Theatre Owners (now Cinema United), the announcement depicted different forms of theft, including stealing a car, while flashing to a girl downloading a file off a media piracy website with the words "You Wouldn't Steal a (fill in the blank)." The ad, broadcasted to homes and theaters across the U.S.A. and even the world, ended with "Piracy. It's a Crime."

For many of those viewing this PSA, it was the first time they had ever heard of media piracy—the unauthorized copying, sharing, downloading, or distribution of copyrighted media. Copyright holders can sue anyone who pirates their productions to up to $150,000 per infringed work, even if the infringer didn't make any money. Misdemeanor offenses carry up to one year in prison and a $100,000 fine, and once the felony threshold of $1,000 in profit over 180 days is crossed, you can face up to five years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

Yet, interestingly, perform a quick Google search of "best media piracy sites" and even Google's AI *Gemini* will hand you a curated list of at least twenty different sites for a multitude of pirating purposes. The same AI that refuses to

tell you how to make a gun, bomb, or any type of illegal drug, or how to steal or counterfeit, is perfectly content to disclose methods of what some have compared to Grand Theft Auto, evidence that piracy is not heavily enforced. In fact, it's encouraged.

You see, the vast majority of pirates have no qualms about paying for whatever they are watching or listening to. In fact, pirates are likely to pay twice as much for television than the average person. So, it stands to reason that the more who pirate, the more people who will pay for regular services, right? Well, who knows, but producers are certainly not as concerned with deterring media piracy as they were in 2004. More recent piracy studies took place between 2011 and 2014, around the same time "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" was discontinued.

Also, "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" was an absolute failure. Like I mentioned earlier, this was the first time many people had even heard of media piracy, and the message clearly conveyed that downloading the wrong file is as bad as stealing a car. I don't know about you, but I'm struggling to see the correlation. As such, this campaign actually downplayed piracy as a crime in the minds of viewers and mostly made them curious. What's more, the advert was preaching to the choir; the people watching were already paying to watch television in theatre or on DVD. And the ultimate irony? The ad's extra-gritty fonts were pirated!

I think I first heard of media piracy when I was around eleven or twelve, but considering I was born in 2009, "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" was a little before my time. I only learned about it through my sisters, who were talking about what site they used to use to watch movies in the other room. I don't remember exactly what they said, but I did overhear them describe *123Movies*, which became my go to site for at least the next three years. Finally, I could watch whatever I wanted, not just whatever was on *Disney+* or *Netflix*, and in complete privacy on my Chromebook instead of on the living room TV.

At the time, I don't think I even knew about the term "Media Piracy," and I certainly didn't question it morally. In fact, I have gotten so used to it, I didn't question it until I started writing this review. Because of that, it's almost hard to care. Even if I came to the conclusion that watching pirated media is morally wrong, I can go ahead and say it's far too convenient for me to just give up, which, at the heart of media piracy, is the problem. It's just so *convenient*.

Billionaire Gabe Newell, founder of the most popular digital video game distribution platform *Steam* says, "We think there is a fundamental misconception about piracy. Piracy is almost always a service problem and not a pricing problem." If I could pay fifty bucks a month for every movie and TV show on a

single site, I would. Piracy sites are always super sketchy, and they are constantly in the process of being taken down. But without them, I could search *Hulu*, *Disney+*, *Netflix*, *HBO Max*, and *Amazon Prime Video*, and I guarantee there are niche shows I've watched that I would never be able to see this way. And think about how expensive it would be to have no-ad subscriptions to all of those; I'm like seventeen and really can't afford that.

I don't pirate music because *Spotify* has all the music any artist has ever published for twelve bucks a month. I don't pirate games because *Steam* is just as convenient. But I still pirate movies because, well, *Netflix* sucks. And maybe pirating is a bad thing, but to be honest, I don't care. To be realistic, I don't have a choice. I give Media Piracy 2 stars.

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TEARING YOUR ACL

Kiley Hawarah

Getting injured is every athlete's biggest fear. For female soccer players, you must watch out for your ACL. Stats from the National Library of Medicine show that women are eight times more likely to tear their ACLs than men. That is a very scary statistic to hear as a high-level female athlete. I can speak from experience when saying, tearing your ACL is nothing easy. It can be very physically and mentally taxing. I would say that the key to dealing with this injury and recovering quickly is making good of the situation. I have learned that tearing your ACL comes with a very scary future but also brings much unexpected goodness in forms of mental growth and toughness into your life.

Most successful athletes base their trainings and lifts around not just getting better at their sport but also around staying safe from injury. Growing up playing soccer my whole life, I have integrated exercises into my routine to strengthen my ACL. The ACL is a ligament found in the knee that works to stabilize your body while it runs, jumps, and moves laterally. When I stepped onto the field for my first college game, tearing my ACL was not what I was thinking about. I was so excited to be making true a reality that I have dreamed of since I was a little girl. The National Library of Medicine states, "You are six times more likely to have a second ACL injury once you've had one ACL injury." After hearing that

stat my mind starts racing with questions like, “What happens if I tear it again?” or “Will I ever be the same athlete that I was before?” It’s hard to play your best when you are focused on things that you cannot control. I wonder if I will ever get back to as fast and technical as I once was, and I question how I will ever be able to play with that statistic in the back of my mind. In John Greene’s chapter about the yips, a serious mental block in sports, he speaks a lot on the mental side of injuries. He states, “How can you regain confidence when you know that confidence is just a varnish painted atop human fragility?” This question makes my mind race. It makes me wonder if I will ever have full confidence in my hurt knee. Can I ever come to trust that it won’t buckle again? In the same chapter he also states this about the yips, “Once you’ve known the yips personally, you can’t unknow them.” The yips reminds me that almost all injuries come with a mental block that can be more challenging than the actual physical pain of an injury. But slowly and surely this recovery has taught me that there is so much out of my control. If I choose to focus on the uncontrollable in any area of my life, I will never excel.

I have found it important to not dwell in the sadness of the situation, but to dwell in the things that I can control. In Greene’s essay titled *Harvey*, he speaks about when was in a severe depressive state. He mentions this quote from William Styron that states, “What makes the condition intolerable is the foreknowledge that no remedy will come-not in a day, an hour, a month, or a minute. If there is mild relief, one knows that it is only temporary; more pain will follow.” I think this quote shows exactly why staying positive has allowed my recovery thus far to be so smooth. If I had sat in the cycle of sadness, I would have never been able to learn anything from this experience. I learned that there are two things I can control, my attitude and my effort. I can wake up and be grateful that I am out of my brace walking, because there was a point where I could not walk without relying on crutches. I can wake up and decide to put full effort into small things like my squats and my calf raises. With a positive mindset, I am able to focus on the good of the situation and make the most of my circumstances. I am thankful that I got the reminder that I am so much more than an athlete. Because of my injury, I get the chance to grow. I get nine whole months to work at becoming a better person rather than a better player. I get to work hard for something other than playing time. My focus isn’t on being the best player I can be, but now the best version of myself without the sport I’ve built my life around.

Although tearing your ACL should be a negative experience, after my two months of rehab I would not view it as such. I do not think I could say that

something painful and stressful could be positive, but it is not negative. It's neutral. The good and bad are equal, so I would rate tearing your ACL three out of five stars.

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THE PETIT LE MANS

A Human Race

Hannah Henderson

I was 17 when I first encountered the Petit Le Mans; I was not even old enough to work the corners (more on that later). I would like to give a shout out to one of my dad's best friends, Gary, who already worked at the track and got me involved in all this chaos. I rolled up to the Corner Marshal building dressed in the uniform of a flagger: all white from head to toe. Now what is a corner marshal, you ask? Well, we stand trackside with flags; we then use those flags to communicate track conditions or other orders to the drivers. We also notify race control if anything gets a bit squirrely, if there is debris, a wreck, etc. We are the first to arrive and some of the last to leave.

It was a bit before eight in the morning; the cars were already out on track for a practice session. The cars were so. ****. loud. I could feel the rumble in my chest; it's one of my favorite feelings. It's a very similar feeling to one you get at a concert when you are close to the sound system, another one of my favorite feelings[1]. The smell of burning rubber and exhaust filled my nose, burning in a fantastic way. Because I was a wee little 17-year-old, I could only help out with running supplies (food, water, radios and comms, track sheets, you name it) to

1 "BRING BACK AFFORDABLE LIVE MUSIC!" we cry in unison. Why was Lady Gaga $425 for *NOSEBLEEDS?* Now I will not get to see her live in the year 2025.

the corners instead of being on one trackside. Joe, one of the two flag chiefs at Road Atlanta (who I love), decided to take me with him on his routine check-ins with the corners. I hopped into the passenger seat of his golf cart, holding on for dear life as we peeled out of the red clay lot (real smart to have us wear all white by the way). Little did I know I would have him and every other person over the age of 50 there (nearly all of the marshals are retirement age) making sure I kept coming back to "liven up" the group. We rode through the infield, stopping at corners as we went; Joe was also giving me a free history lesson on our journey. After an impressive set of massive hills, we emerged from the wooded area of the infield by turn five.

Turn five is overlooked by "Spectator Hill"; it was sparsely covered with fans at the time. Turn five is one in a series of turns known as the "Esses", you know, because it makes an "S" shape. Who would have thunk? Right as we stopped to watch for a bit, a Porsche car took the turn way, way too quick, caught on the curb and flipped onto its roof. The car spun like a top for a bit, sparks flying, before stopping. It was insane to witness right in front of me. The driver crawled out, the only injury to him being a bruised ego. He was pissed, head down, ignoring every wave and shout that came his way. I cannot really blame him; he just wrecked a multi-million-dollar car that he gets paid millions of dollars to drive. And there is always another person waiting to take your seat; it's the name of the game. Racing is cutthroat. All of this went on during my first hour at the track. It was a lot to take in: the sights, the smells, how excited I was to be there. I felt like a little kid again. I was buzzing like a bee. The whole day I went wherever I wanted with my credentials; I just had to make sure I was around the Marshal building around mealtimes to run food to the corners. I had a car pass, but the roads inside the track are gridlocked all of that day and all three days of the event. I walked almost 13 miles that day, just finding different places to watch the cars go around. I was hooked. It was such an amazing day to start an amazing, life-changing weekend.

The Petit Le Mans was brought to life in 1998 by Road Atlanta's owner Don Panoz and is considered a "crown jewel" of the endurance racing world (Porsche.com). This ten-hour endurance race brings IMSA's (International Motor Sport Association) WeatherTech Sportscar Championship to a close and continues to be a title decider year after year. Unlike other races, the Petit Le Mans features five different classes of cars and four different types of cars overall. GT Daytona Pro and GT Daytona are Corvettes, Mustangs, Porsche GT3s (all with insane engines). These body types may be seen on the street—these cars are somewhat familiar to anyone that has seen a car. The Pro class is

all professional drivers, while GTD is a mix of professional and amateur drivers. LMP2, or Le Mans Prototype, is one of the other classes; these cars are so, so loud; they look like racing boats if you have ever seen those.

My favorite class, which was added in 2023, is the GTP class or Grand Touring Prototypes. THEY LOOK LIKE SPACESHIPS. So do LMP2s, but GTPs just look cooler (pull up Google right now and tell me I am wrong). GTPs are also hybrid cars—bonus points for somewhat lessening pollution in a very pollutive industry[2]. The past two races I have worked, I have been at turn one, right by the pitlane exit. As the GTPs come out of the pit, their engines switch from electric power to their internal combustion engines and make this loud, abrupt roaring sound as they gun it back onto the track.

In fact, part of the reason someone would go to a race in person is because of the sights, smells, and sounds. Racing fans and car lovers in general love a loud car. The racing community is full of strong opinions. Fans are passionate. The volume of the cars is a part of the experience; it is a part of my experience. There are new regulations on the mufflers of cars partaking in the race. The source of this is "The Drive," a car community blog and news site. The volume of the GT cars is now required to be lowered by 12-14 decibels. Is that a lot? No. Do people hate it? Duh. Especially considering how sexy the Corvette Z06 GT3 sounds (I am personally affected by this; it is one of my favorite-sounding cars). Sports are always full of opinion; it is something that cannot be avoided. The unwanted ones always seem to find me. "Women shouldn't be competing," says the old man that raced a beat-up, crappy Miata for two years in an amateur club 30 years ago (if anyone is selling one let me know). *Women shouldn't be competing?* People and their opinions exist in any space, even the wrong ones, even the bigoted ones. We just need to step back and let *those* with those opinions be loud. Let them be loud, and let them be wrong.

The Iron Dames are an all-female racing team, pushing boundaries in motorsport, a male-dominated field. These women are absolutely badass. As a woman, it is very important to me to share the stories of women and lift them up. There is more than enough space on stage for all of us to share the spotlight. It does not need to be a competition. Racing is so heavily dominated by men. Even as a fan, it feels intimidating going to races to watch and to work. I always get met with unsavory comments; it seems unavoidable. Seeing the Iron Dames

2 The topic of how pollutive motorsport is could be a whole other essay—oh, the conflict of interests I have.

win races is so inspiring not only to me but to so many other minorities all over the globe. They compete in the Petit Le Mans and many other series and do so well. In 2023, the driver lineup of Sarah Bovy, Michelle Gatting, and Rachel Frey made history by becoming the first female lineup to win a race in the World Endurance Championship (another racing series). This was and is a massive deal in the racing community. This is one of their many fantastic finishes, and it is hard, solid proof that women can do anything a man can, and wear pink while doing it. Their racing suits, helmets, and cars are bright, hot pink. That alone, in my eyes, is a massive "**** You" to anyone daring to challenge their credibility. Motor sport is something everyone should be able to enjoy, and part of me is extremely saddened by how much some people crave to take that away from others. It can often feel like a "boys' club." For some reason, *in my personal experience*, men cannot fathom that a woman's point of view on "their" space matters. But what makes any space "theirs"? Entitlement. Speaking in generalities, men are taught to take up space and to take what is "theirs." Women are taught to be polite and kind, as to not ruffle the metaphoric feathers of a man. Because they cannot be uncomfortable, no, no, they must be accommodated. It took me nearly twenty years to realize a woman could and should take up just as much space and demand just as much respect as anyone else. The Iron Dames may be a girl's first example of women taking up space. They are breaking decades-old "rules". Women were not put here on this planet to accommodate those that do not see us in our entirety. We were put here to be loud for ourselves, to be loud for *true* equality. The Iron Dames are loud, I am loud, and so are you. Ruffle every. single. feather.

Competition is human nature. It was once for survival and now is used to entertain (*Survivor*, the show, literally exists). Organized sport is not new to humans; the Greeks created the Olympics around 3000 years ago (Ashmolean Museum). This is one of the earliest forms of organized competition. It could be argued that this form of organized sport led to the conception of all organized sport today, including the Petit Le Mans. Being good at or knowledgeable with anything requires a lot of time and energy. Anything that requires time and energy requires emotion. Good or bad, the emotions are always there. Humans share certain characteristics that drive us to do what we do. Purpose and community are two of these characteristics (Psychology Today). Everything humans do is of our own thoughts. The Petit Le Mans was born through human thought. The racing community is a safe space for so many. It brings connection. How cool is it that I could walk up to a random guy in a Cadillac hat and start talking about how slow their car is? Everything humans do is to foster community.

Racing just happens to be something that scratches that itch for some of us. Belonging, love, memory; humans need these things (Psychology Today). I have met people from all over: the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Brazil. I get the occasional email from Lynn, the man that taught me to flag, asking what races I am planning to work this year. He and his wife are retired and live a mile or two away from Road Atlanta. Racing is so much more than cars, even though they are so incredibly cool. People are the reason I keep going back. There is something so beautiful about watching a more than grown man's eyes light up with the same excitement as yours when the cars start up their engines. You can feel the connection. Everyone feels like they are five again. It reminds me of just how similar we all are.

I would like to share a quote with you all: "Love. Our strongest and chemically induced emotion is nature's trick for us to perpetuate the species" (Samuel). I love the Petit Le Mans. I love the cars, the smells, the potential hearing loss, all of it. Everyone has that kind of love for something. When I think of my time at the race, I think of having dinner at the campgrounds in Axel's trailer with him and Gary. I think of the guy that uses his yacht as a camper at turn 9 and the double-decker makeshift party buses bumping house music set up at the straight after turn seven. I remember the many times Lynn and I sat in our lawn chairs munching on Paydays — that man always has candy on race days. I remember being slung around in the golf cart by Joe and Jeff and their excited comments that they did not scare off another "young one." The love we all share for racing made those memories possible. Humans are so connected. We must remember to recognize it, remember to acknowledge it. The Petit Le Mans is a car race. A car race made by humans, with humans in mind. It has brought so much connection to thousands worldwide. It reminds me to be loud. It reminds me not to shy away from a conversation with a stranger. It reminds me to love something and to do it without shame, even if I am not the most knowledgeable person on the subject. It reminds me that we are all on the same team. Yes, it is a car race, but it is also a human race.

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INTERNET

Kamila Herrera

Scrolling through a Tik Tok comment section, it's easy to see just how inconsiderate people can be behind a screen. Not to mention people type and post things without thinking twice about it. The way the internet is used now makes you realize how society affects one another. We use it to degrade others, say hurtful things, and everything people post is undeniably ignorant that was posted with no prior research on the topic. The internet was invented by a group of computer scientists, researchers, and engineers over several decades. J.C.R. Lickider popularized the vision of an "intergalactical network" of computers in the early 1960s. Leonard Kleinrock, Paul Baron, and Donald Dowies, developed the theory of "packet switching" that further advanced the studies of the internet. ARPANET (1969) created the first working network. Finally, Vint Cerf and Bob Khan invented the transmission control and internet protocol in the 1970s, which landed on January 1, 1983, allowing different computer networks to communicate globally. The invention of the internet was primarily invented to build a communication network that could survive a military attack. It evolved into a way for peopple to communicate and share ideas online. It might have seemed like it could cause a positive outcome, but now we use this "advantage" that was created for us negatively. We let the internet control our

minds by believing in everything we see, not considering how much misinformation and biased sources exist online.

Social media algorithms show people content that matches their interests, so if you "heart", favorite, or watch something for a certain amount of time, it will automatically be put into the data. According to Melonyacadamey.com that data will "analyze user behavior and preferences to generate personalized content to feed millions of users at any moment". Although that might be seen as a good thing to have when trying to entertain ourselves, there's also this idea that it causes "phycological and societal issues, and political polarization", which isn't too far off from what's really happening.

I might sound nerdy saying this, but i often get history edits on my "For You Page" on social media. In this moment I was watching a George Washington edit that was covering the topic of how he led the 13 colonies through a revolution against the British. Upon watching said video, I opened the comment section and saw someone had posted a comment saying, "we revolted over 1-7% tax now we're content with 40% #unlivableeconomy." This comment screams uneducated for numerous reasons. Back when the 13 colonies first started getting taxed in 1764 and 1765, their whole justified reason for being upset was because they had taxation without representation. This meant that the British parliament had no right to tax because they (the 13 colonies) had no elected representatives in the British government. Now that we do have that representation in our own government, our taxes go towards things that help our community grow such as, the funding of public schools, major healthcare programs, social security, etc. Seeing that this comment had a whopping 277 likes is disappointing. It shows that we lack the capability to research a certain topic we are discussing. We say things without thinking and how it can spread false information to people who don't care to research over it either. It's things like this that put witless information into people's content feeds.

Seeing tragic events daily can naturally make us become desensitized the more we continue to see it. It can "lead to mental health impacts," says Psychiatry.org. Normalizing violent occurrences around the internet for people of all ages to see can cause a toll on their mental health. I had a friend one time – while talking to me about his mental problems – telling me how much it affects him when he sees depressing videos every time he scrolls on the internet. Circling back to the idea of algorithms, there's a lot of people who suffer from mental illnesses, they try not to feel alone, so they put all their thoughts and emotions on the internet. The more likes and comments it accumulates over time, the more people it reaches. It enables all these feelings, and people can

continue to see posts that are if not the same, then very similar ideas that trigger even more mental issues to emerge. As pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov says “Instagram, being predominantly a visual medium, exacerbates body dissatisfaction and increases the likelihood of eating disorders”, Another major issue with the internet is that it creates this image of how women and men are supposed to be. People who don’t fit that criteria see themselves poorly and continue to compare themselves with people they don’t know online. There’s this specific thing on the internet that has been coming up recently called Black pill (BP) it refers to a fatalistic belief system about physical appearance and dating. Basically meaning “If you don’t meet today’s beauty standards then no one will ever love you.” It’s this group of people that would do anything to look better. No matter if it’s injecting yourself with peptides or doing things called “bone smashing” that consists of “hitting or tapping your face with a hammer to shape your bone structure.”, (gq.com). It’s honestly concerning how many teenagers and young adults participate in these things, and it’s because the internet allows things like this to trigger it.

When seeing a serious situation, we should treat it like one. Instead, we try to dumb it down and make it “funny” by using stickers or creating jokes about it. The term “memeification” is what happens to serious situations now a days. Gunnoracle.com says “Today, memeification or the act of turning people, events or concepts into memes, desensitizes users to topics. - such as politics, war and perspectives on controversial issues – that are frequently circulated in media and among online communities.”, I couldn’t have said it better myself. One example of this is: on Tik Tok, when talking about immigration and how I.C.E is affecting undocumented and documented immigrants and their families, it’s disappointing to see people use stickers to talk about such a harsh and ongoing situation we have in the world today. A streamer called “Ishowspeed” is known for his goofy and funny personality. His stickers are usually used to express laughter and silliness. Seeing someone react to an I.C.E awareness post on the internet with one of his stickers is very concerning. We shouldn’t use stickers like those to react to such sensitive topics.

People act differently online because they don’t have to face the person they are degrading. Behind a screen, it can be easier to forget there is an actual person with feelings just like yours on the other side. We go to the internet to entertain ourselves, but while doing so, we don’t realize howe much we affect each other negatively. These things cause people to become emotionally numb about their own feelings and others as well.

How the internet is used today 2/5

THE CONTRADICTORY NATURE OF HUMANITY AND WHY IT'S VALUABLE

Kaylie Holland

The human experience is hard to describe. Existence is unique to every individual, but there are some certainties. One truth being that we will all die. Another truth, that we are all complex. Human nature is contradictory, so it makes sense that our experiences would reflect that. We have the capacity to do good, as well as evil. We can be kind, yet we can be cruel. There are many aspects of humanity that we should take pride in, and many of which we should not. As I contemplate humanity's contradictory nature, I find myself feeling appreciative of life and its twists and turns. It makes me wonder, if we were to erase our negative qualities, what would become of us? There can be no good without bad, and I wouldn't dare risk sounding cliché without a reputable source to back me up. In the words of Dolly Parton, "The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you have to put up with the rain."

The complexities of human nature allow us the ability to experience a wide range of emotions. We feel happiness and sadness, but also more intricate emotions like love and grief. Grief is something we experience for several reasons. Most commonly death, but also for any kind of loss. Grief is no walk in the park, but if not for losing, how else could we persist? I believe that loss allows us to overcome, and that there is something about finding light in the darkness

that is very human. Overall, I give the contradictory human experience of perseverance five stars. We love despite losing. It is one of humanity's greatest complexities, and one of our greatest qualities.

Individuality is what makes us, us. While it is true that our unique journeys through life will lead to disagreements, possibly violence and might even cause wars, without our identities we are nothing. There is no good, and no bad. The push and pull, the rise and fall, that is what life is about. The only fairness is that nothing is fair, and because of that inevitable suffering, self-expression and art are born. I admire how we can capture the perplexity of our existence. In a speech at the 2013 Oxford Union, actor Sir Patrick Stewart said this about art and humanity: "Art must somehow be essential to life. Art is a part of survival; art is part of the human spirit. An unquestionable expression of who we are." Without individuality there can be no art, because of this, I rate our distinctiveness five stars. Is peace worth the loss of autonomy? I don't think so. I believe all of our differences are what makes us beautiful, even if it has the ability to harm us.

Kendrick Lamar's song "Pride" states that, "A perfect world is never perfect, only filled with lies." As much as we wish to rid ourselves of our negative traits, it remains a part of us. If we cannot accept the darkest parts of ourselves, then we cannot shine a light on it. Acceptance does not mean surrender. It simply means that we can't start anew unless we acknowledge our contradictory nature and the nuance of existence. In an excerpt from Maya Angelo's poem, *A Brave and Startling Truth*, she tells us that the world can only be better once we come to it, once we accept that we hold the power to shape the human experience:

> We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
> Created on this earth, of this earth
> Have the power to fashion for this earth
> A climate where every man and every woman
> Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
> Without crippling fear
> When we come to it
> We must confess that we are the possible
> We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
> That is when, and only when
> We come to it. (Angelou 67-78)

Instead of daydreaming about what we shouldn't be, I believe that we should

accept what we are. I rate our ability to accept four out of five stars. Acceptance is a hard lesson learned, but it will keep us humble and can allow for great change, once we come to it.

Humans are complicated individuals, and the world we create is even more complicated. Our complexity, our individuality, our contradictory nature, all of these things shape our experiences. In this world there are horrors beyond imagination, but there are wonders too. With so many truths to hold at once, it is important to remember that without the bad, the sweet reprieve of the good wouldn't exist. To feel pleasure you must feel pain, to do better you have to have done worse. As I end my rambling, I find that my writing has taken me somewhere I didn't expect. A place where I can acknowledge the bad is required to find the good. I wouldn't change too much about humanity, for I am forever captivated by our current existence, and the hope that we can choose to be something better.

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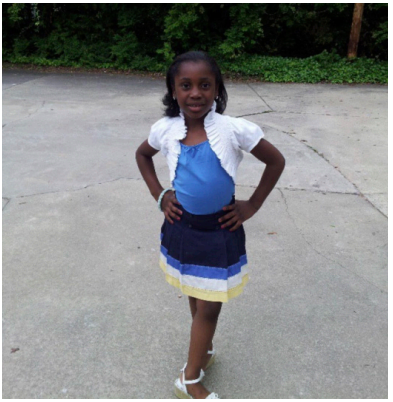
GRACIAS POR TODO

Haleigh Horsley

Starting off, I never had a care in the world. If I had to describe myself in two words, it would be young and naive. As a child, the world was my playground. My mom provided everything; I simply brought joy. Being an only child at the time gave me the freedom to explore it all. Aside from my toys, I was also musically gifted. My mom enrolled me in every activity you could imagine. I did soccer, gymnastics, dance, and played instruments like the flute, guitar, piano, and bass guitar. Out of all those activities, music was what stuck with me. I was great at both dancing and playing instruments, but I eventually narrowed my focus to dance. For over 14 years, I have lived on the dance floor and kept my head in the clouds. Dancing became my escape for good reason. It helped me regulate my emotions, stay active, and truly feel. Music was no longer just sound; it became an extension of my mind, body, and soul. I don't think I've ever had a deeper connection with anything.

That kind of connection was like an out-of-body experience. Most people find their strongest ties in the family. I wasn't close to my father; he was hardly ever around. And though my mom was always working, she is still my best friend to this day. But even then, the connection I had with music was deeper than deep. When my favorite song plays, the dance floor turns into outer space.

The lights become stars, and the dancers around me are just planets. Sometimes, I float with them. Other times, I float alone. Maybe I'm the main character in a music video: all eyes on me, my name written across the sky.



The more I think about that connection, the more I realize it goes beyond just me. Music and dance have long been tools for people to feel, to express, and to resist. One artist who embodied that was Joe Arroyo.

Álvaro José Arroyo González, known by his stage name Joe Arroyo, was a legendary singer from Cartagena, Colombia. We even share a birth month; he was born on November 1st, and I was born on the 7th. (Granted, he was born in 1955.) His childhood was difficult, with much of it spent working and performing in brothels. But his talent didn't go unnoticed, as he was discovered and joined the band Fruko y sus Tesos. Eventually, he made his own name with hits like *Te Quiero Más*, *Lupita*, and his most famous song, *Rebelión*.

Rebelión wasn't just a song; it's a message. It carried the pain, pride, and power of Afro-Latin identity. In it, Arroyo told the story of two enslaved Africans in 1600s Cartagena. They were punished for celebrating their love, but instead of accepting the abuse, their community rose up in defiance. The chorus, "No le pegue a la Negra," isn't just a lyric. It's a cry for justice. A protection. A promise.

That song hit me in a way few things ever have. Even though I'm a dancer and he was a singer, we were connected through our escapes. Music gave us both a space to breathe, to feel, to be free.

Rebelión is popular for many reasons. It expresses love for Colombia, pride in Black identity, and passion for salsa. The song didn't just make his career; it made his mark. His Blackness made him unique, and his voice made him unforgettable.

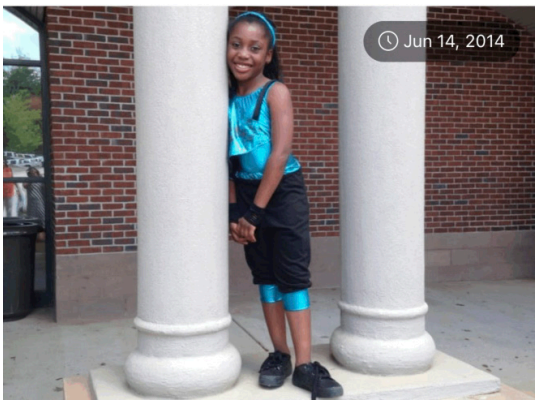
Salsa, too, has deep and meaningful roots. Traditionally influenced by cultures from West Africa, the Caribbean, and even Muslim Spain, salsa is born of the resilience of enslaved people who were stripped of their homeland but not of their rhythm. There's often debate about whether salsa is just a version of mambo, but salsa knows how to hold its own. It's been called a dance of

freedom, of rebellion. Even today, it's fun and celebratory. Many kids grow up learning it. I didn't—I picked it up from videos or from watching older people dance. It's exciting, expressive, breath-stealing, laugh-out-loud fun—and yet still classy.

Arroyo did something powerful with *Rebelión*. He turned resistance into rhythm. His voice rose against the history of slavery and violence, but also told a story of love. That chorus is like a bell. When struck, it echoes through people. Even those who don't understand Spanish can feel it. It moves you. It's beautiful. And yes, it's also a song people play just to dance and enjoy. That's the magic of it.

Just like Arroyo, music was my escape. While he sang, I danced. That's how I told my story. Over time, I became well-versed in other dance genres like bachata, merengue, huapangos, and salsa. Dancing became a beautiful way to connect: to my emotions, to my body, and to others around me. But somehow, I still felt disconnected from myself. I was always told to focus on myself, but how could I, if I didn't fully understand who I was?

I've always been a dancer—from baby photos to my acne-covered teenage years. I was taught to fake it 'til I made it. To cover my feelings with bright eyeshadow and blush. To maintain a perfect bun, even when I never thought I looked perfect. On stage, I learned to smile when I was sad and to fake a cry when I was angry. The tones of my body didn't always match the tones of my heart.



after a recital

So I turned to music. Songs helped me create feelings I couldn't otherwise express. Music still does that for me. A happy song during a rough day could lift

me up. A sad song could give me space to cry when I needed it most. *Rebelión* was the first song to make me feel *everything* at once. The music video helped, too, as it was filled with tears and joy, rebellion and celebration. It was euphoric. It was like nothing I'd seen before. For those who don't speak Spanish, they may never understand the full emotion, but I felt it. And when I danced to it, I was in space again—this time, truly by myself.

Salsa was difficult at first, but once I closed my eyes and let the rhythm lead, it became second nature. I cried and smiled at the same time. I became aware of every part of myself. I was Haleigh Nicole.

Joe Arroyo gave me and many others a song to connect to. For me, it meant I was like *La Negra* in the story. And the army that came to protect her? That was my own consciousness, rising to defend me. I had always been whole, but I had never embraced myself that way. For others, *Rebelión* might be just a classic song about slavery. But for me, it's deeper. It connects me to my dance form, to my enslaved ancestors, and to my truest self. *La Negra* is me and others like me. The ones who forget to take care of themselves. The ones who ignore their emotions until something strikes them down. *La Rebelión* changed me. It wasn't just another song to dance to; it was a revelation. I wasn't raised speaking Spanish, but learning it has opened a new world for me. It's given me a new perspective, new understanding. I've learned to love my Blackness, my personality, and my sensitivity. Who knew that an artist from another country would help me finally see *me*? *Rebelión* es cinco de cinco estrellas.



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THE HIGH ROAD

Sonya Howard

"Leave a man with his dignity?" is a common line delivered in movies in multiple variations. In action movies, the villain will request their life's end to preserve dignity. In comedy movies, the comic relief will ask for the bare minimum item (like their wig or a pair of underwear) to also preserve their dignity. Ironically, as much as I hear dignity mentioned in the media- I can't think of one time that phrase was used. I don't even think I've heard the word "dignity" aloud. Maybe it's one of those words that doesn't sound right out loud. One of those words where it should be shown and not told. Vanna Bonta says, "Humility is the ability to give up your pride and still retain your dignity," which makes the concept sound better. However, is giving up your pride as easy as it sounds? What holds more value? Dignity or Pride?

Dignity by definition is the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect. Rick Bragg writes, "Every life deserves a certain amount of dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it." so it's evident that dignity even holds more weight than capital to the average person. However, even without dignity being a physical object I'd argue that it has incredible physical importance and impact. If everyone in politics had an equivalent amount of dignity, we would have world peace. It's a uniquely humane possession that only

we as people value. Humankind fears the judgement of others so we scrutinize each other to compensate. People who care the most about people's scrutiny are the ones with the least amount of respect for themselves.

I grew to hate the musical *Hamilton* (2020) after my most recent rewatch. The musical portrays the founding father, Alexander Hamilton, as a determined, arrogant and confident snob during the American revolution. His vice, adversary, and associate Aaron Burr, is portrayed as a patient, spiteful and significantly less confident character. The musical is a dramatized version of the historical figures doing an almost cat-and-mouse chase against each other to save America, gain power and gain the approval of American citizens. Spoiler alert: in the end Hamilton is killed by his arch nemesis Aaron Burr. It's a stupid death. Hamilton believes that the most dignified and admirable way to absolve a duel is when you point to the sky to show that you're above the fight. This is the main contradiction of Hamilton's character because as stated, he's immensely arrogant throughout the entire musical. He dies in a duel acting as if he's above it all- putting a positive stain on his legacy and showing he took the high road. Burr on the other hand, suffered throughout the musical as a casualty to Hamilton's success' while never doing him wrong. Still, Burr is villainized in not only the musical, but also in history as the person who wasn't mature enough to take the high road. He spends his final song in contempt and regret for the murder, in despair and low self respect– despite his multiple justifications for the murder.

Another grievance I have with the musical I have is with his spouse, Elizabeth Schuyler's (Hamilton) treatment. She's someone else that could be described with low self respect. Although it wasn't taboo at the time, Hamilton not only had an emotional affair with her sister, but with another woman while she was away. If that already wasn't enough to leave him– Hamilton needlessly escalates the situation by publicly exposing the affair with absolutely no provocation. To make matters worse, it's top three on Hamilton's apple music playlist so even in her death people sing about her husband's affair. You would think with all this humiliation and torture Elizabeth goes through- the divorce papers would be in the next song. Instead, she takes the high road. She makes no public statement to embarrass him like he did her, she doesn't divorce him, and has a whole song about forgiveness not even four songs later. Only a person who has no dignity; no respect for themself, would stay with Hamilton. Although, even now, I don't blame Eliza. She lived in a time period where women weren't supposed to have respect for themselves. Perhaps, if she didn't take the high road, history would remember her as the cold-hearted

woman of the story instead of the victim of his affair. The musical leaves her reaction ambiguous and open ended. So I'd like to think in reality- she was more than just a woman who was a foolish victim that stayed with her abuser. In reality, maybe she was a force to be reckoned with and wasn't the standard of "lady-like" about it that the musical pins her to be. Despite this, in the musical he's thematically represented as the most mature person in the musical for not taking accountability of his actions. That's why I hate Hamilton.

The origin of the idiom, the high road, is from a Scot-Brit folk song by a widowed woman. Her family was being attacked by the British army and they set out to flee to Britain. Even if it meant a betrayal to their people. Stubbornly, her lover refused and took "ye' old high road" to fight against the British army while the family fled. In the end, he dies. It's quite ironic that even the song's origin advises against the high road. However, her lover had something to prove, and took the high road to prove his commitment to his belief. Maybe, if more people had more pride in themselves they'd see that road isn't necessary to begin with. You can't prove anything to anyone if you're dead. We as people matter. Our appearances can be altered within a second and our dignity is as flexible as the term and doesn't even matter. If all our actions were based on the validation of others at the expense of ourselves, I think we'd lose something with even more value.

"The High Road" was popularized during the 1948 presidential campaign by Thomas E. Dewey. He states "I chose the high road. I'll let voters decide what road Truman takes" throughout the peak of his campaign. His committee was on a roll with several polls in his favor and the media backing him. With all his popularity you may be confused to not know who he is. That's because he lost the election. Regardless of his promising campaign at the start and dignified approach to the election, he still lost to the more familiar and known name: Harry Truman. Truman was bold and led his campaign with determination to put a stop to WW2 and strong strategical choices between other countries which won him both his elections. It's a wonder how the most straightforward and morally superior high road-er somehow lost against the commonly referred to "nihilistic" and "war criminal" candidate. The high road approach isn't beneficial to an America that honestly doesn't care about a morally superior figure (despite acting like they do.) Dewey also was against the entire high road concept entirely and said he'd rather campaign himself as more aggressive. This may have won him the election considering initially he had the popular vote and advantage. What halted him from this choice was his committee. His committee urged him to keep up with the high-road schtick and persona and said that

the aggressive attitude wasn't the right attitude to have during a war. Ultimately, he's remembered as a nazi-enabler and communist (which is the equivalent to satanism at the time.) His lack of assertiveness, self-respect, and confidence cost him the election. If he didn't listen to the committee that allowed him to be called a nazi, he'd be remembered in history as someone completely different.

I think I'm a self-respecting person. My tongue is never scared to say what's on my mind and my mind isn't strayed away from thinking what my tongue "shouldn't" say. As a student in an honors high school this mindset wasn't supported. Most of my peers talk boldly amongst themselves. Although in front of our teachers, the wrong bold words could get you sent back to your home school. There's an unspoken precedent or status quo- to never speak out of line with your teacher if you care about your grade. To take whatever disrespect they dish out just to pass the class then complain about it during lunch time. This system doesn't sit right with me even now as I sit here and type this. We're all people, nobody is more important than someone else, and a person shouldn't be silenced out of fear of some divine punishment (which in high school is the equivalent of a phone call home.)

My sophomore year geometry class had a strict, spiteful lady that was infamous for hating multiple students in her class and picking on her. Regularly, she would target specific students for a week and basically bully them. If you would answer a question wrong she would ask "Are you a moron?" Ask to go to the bathroom: "You have 30 seconds and if you're not back it's a write-up." Ask a question: "Why do you always ask stupid questions?" Or my personal favorite: "You're not a good student." just straight-up like that. Her disrespect went unchecked for several years since my older sister took her three years prior. I asked her why she let her disrespect her like that and her response was, "I'd take her disrespect over a failing grade." It's funny how the people who take the high road always lose their self respect in exchange.

When it was my turn for her weekly targeting it started with the average taunting when I would answer a math question. Even if I was correct she would find a way to say something insulting like "That's rare for you." Anything to get under my skin. She could continuously disrespect me– but in turn if we say anything back we'd be penalized. I told my parents about this and they know my personality as confrontational and blunt. If I wanted to say something in turn, I would, and it'd get me sent to the office. In response they told me the same as everyone else, but I only heard one thing, "Take the disrespect and just take the high road." Those words burnt my ears like a blowtorch was pressed against it. Why can't she take the high road? Why is it always the one who gets wronged

who has to take it? So in the end: I couldn't do it. We got into an argument.

When I was sent to the office, I told them all what she said, I said to ask my peers. I told them I wasn't apologizing. The high road was impossible for me. Thankfully, that led to her being reprimanded instead of me. I remember the frown on her face as I exited the office with a write up on my record, but a blemish on hers. She was later fired a month later for a similar situation with another kid that couldn't do it. Another kid who respected themself too much to suffer from verbal abuse.

The high road is hard work for little reward. Its general overview is highly respected and dignified to other people's perspective. I've come across multiple occasions where in turn it would probably serve me best and I'd be a liar if I said I've never taken it. I think taking it only serves you right if you're willing to put your dignity aside for the satisfaction of other people. Which for me more times than not- is a price too high. So for that; I give the high road half a star.

A PAW TO LEAN ON

LaToia Jackson

In May 2020, my life changed for the better. I was tasked with raising a kitten from birth. It was incredibly difficult for me, a very dependent teenager, to teach a kitten how to function as a cat. Being that I did not know my cat, Genevieve, was pregnant, I was going to surrender the mystery kitten, with a distinct blonde streak on its face, as soon as I could. As the first weeks passed, Gigi was not adjusting to motherhood very well. She would hide the kitten and ignore it completely until I found it and forced her to care for it. Eventually, I had to step up and care for the kitten until it was old enough to be surrendered.

With all the bottle feeding, slow introductions to solids, bladder stimulation, and litter box training, we developed a deeper bond. Through all the trial and error, we developed a mother-daughter relationship. I decided to keep her and named her Alexandria Clawdeen. We became each other's emotional support companions. She helps with my anxiety and insomnia, and I am simply here for her comfort. Caring for a kitten with separation anxiety while dealing with my own severe anxiety can be challenging. We help each other in ways I cannot physically describe. Alex is the best thing that could have happened to seventeen-year-old me. She was quite literally destined for me. Alex is my sole reason for becoming a semi-responsible young adult.

Throughout history, pets have been used for therapy, teaching empathy, and disability assistance. The use of pets for therapeutic purposes can be dated back to ninth-century Belgium. Farm animals such as cattle, oxen, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, and chickens were incorporated into the care for people with disabilities. As one source explains, "Disability wasn't necessarily perceived as an obstacle to community life, although inclusion within society did vary" ("Disability in the Middle Ages"). This perspective highlights the importance of considering how people with disabilities took part in their communities and the roles they were able to fulfill. The farm animals are not a way to allow everyone to have active roles within the community, but it offered an opportunity to develop and practice their practical skills. The dogs and cats helped to provide companionship, while the responsibilities of caring for them encouraged physical activity and independence. Although these animals were not seen as average household pets, they provided the same benefits as pets.

Beyond providing companionship, animals have historically taught individuals the importance of responsibility through the daily care and attention they need. Caring for an animal involves meeting its basic needs, such as providing food, water, shelter, and exercise. These responsibilities encourage individuals to develop patience, consistency, and an understanding of how their actions affect another living being. For people with disabilities, caring for farm animals and household pets provided opportunities to practice practical skills and develop greater independence. Rather than focusing solely on what animals could provide for humans, these relationships also show how humans could take responsibility for another living creature. Learning to care for an animal can change a person's perspective by teaching them that responsibility extends beyond their own needs and includes the well-being of others.

During World War II, animals had jobs such as assisting in medical rescue, carrying supplies, and delivering messages between soldiers. Horses and mules were used for transportation, pulling artillery, and medical evacuation across different ground. Due to the risk of messages being intercepted, carrier pigeons were used to deliver messages between military bases. Dogs were trained to track hidden enemies and messengers during active combat, as well as assisting in the comfort of wounded soldiers during recovery. Animals offered companionship, emotional support, and a sense of purpose during times of war. Amidst the fear and stress of combat, playing with or caring for animals offered soldiers a chance to relax and experience affection and connection. As the source *Buddies* explains, "For the adopted dog, cat, or bird, being in a soldier's care meant survival; for the soldier, a pet meant comfort

and companionship on war's brutal battlefields. 'Buddies' commemorates the heartfelt, enduring relationships between soldiers and animals during World War II" (Auel). This highlights how the relationships soldiers formed with animals provided companionship and emotional support during wartime. Caring for and spending time with these animals helped reduce feelings of loneliness and provided temporary relief from the pressures of war.

In addition to providing emotional support, the relationships soldiers developed with animals during World War II encouraged empathy and compassion. Caring for animals during wartime required soldiers to recognize that these creatures also experienced fear, stress, and vulnerability. By tending to their needs, protecting them, and forming emotional connections, soldiers learned to look beyond their own circumstances and consider the well-being of another living being. These interactions show that empathy could develop through relationships that did not depend on verbal communication. Even during the uncertainty of war, soldiers formed meaningful bonds with animals that depended on them for care and protection. These experiences helped show how animals can influence human behavior by encouraging individuals to become more compassionate, patient, and understanding toward others.

In the present day, an animal that offers comfort, affection, and companionship to an individual can be considered an emotional support animal. There are several types of service animals, including guide animals, service animals, and emotional support animals. Individuals who are blind may have a guide animal. I have seen miniature horses and dogs be used as guide animals. You can have a service animal if you have a disability; there are certain criteria you must meet to get one. Service animals and guide animals are federally recognized for support and can go anywhere with you, as they are trained to perform specific tasks for people with a disability. Unlike service animals, emotional support animals do not need specialized task training to provide support. Emotional support animals only provide comfort, companionship, and emotional support to someone who may be experiencing emotional or mental health challenges.

The emotional support animals provide is not simply based on companionship but also has biological explanations. Interactions between humans and animals can influence hormones associated with stress and emotional bonding. For example, oxytocin, which is associated with affection and social connection, may increase during positive interactions with animals. Additionally, cortisol, a hormone associated with the body's stress response, may decrease during certain interactions. These biological responses help explain why animals can provide comfort and emotional reassurance. The connection between

humans and animals shows how pets can influence emotional well-being and change the way individuals view companionship.

In my case, Alex does not have any professional training, so she is not a service animal; she just notices when I am in distress. The first time I noticed her trying to help in a stressful situation, I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown, trying to perfect a final assignment in my senior year of high school. I tried to calm down by biting my nails; however, Alex noticed it was not helping. As I began to hyperventilate because my writing was not flowing coherently, Alex began moving my laptop out of the way. Once I realized she was trying to get me to take a break, I obliged. She proceeded to lie on me making biscuits, a calming childlike technique kittens use, and purring loudly until I was calm. Afterwards, she stayed with me, keeping me calm until I finished my final. I suffer from insomnia, and on nights when I am unable to sleep, Alex comes and lies with me as she understands. I find comfort in her presence.

Alex has helped me in so many ways. These are just a few examples. I am incredibly grateful I did not surrender my precious angel. I do not know what I would do without her. I did not realize the effect pets could have on a person, but Alex has taught me that there are other ways to cope. Sometimes, you just need to find the perfect pet for you. Or, in my case, you might have a kitten randomly born on your bed at seventeen during a global pandemic. Changing perspective does not require a major life event; it can begin with the simple bond we share with an animal.

Emotional support and service animals both play important roles in improving people's lives, but they provide several types of assistance. Although their roles differ, both types of animals show the meaningful connection between humans and animals and how animals can support human well-being. I give human-animal bonds five stars.

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MONSTER ENERGY

The Cycle of Depletion and Replenishment Long

Nicole Jacobs

Before the invention of modern energy drinks, people consumed stimulant-containing beverages to combat fatigue and sustain alertness. The creation of Vin Mariani, a mixture of cocoa leaves and wine, attracted the attention of notable figures in Europe and the United States, including Queen Victoria and Thomas Edison. The first modern energy drink launched in Japan in 1962 when Taisho Pharmaceuticals released Lipovitan-D. It was marketed towards truck drivers and factory workers who needed to fight serious fatigue, and unlike earlier beverages that were primarily for refreshment, Lipovitan-D marked a significant shift by focusing on boosting performance and endurance. It was around this same period that an Austrian businessman infatuated with the Thai energy drink called Krating Daeng, partnered with its creator to develop Red Bull; a carbonated version tailored for Western markets. Red Bull launched in the Austrian market and eventually became a hit within America, amongst young adults and college students.

Red Bull was a pioneer and initially responsible for the popularity of energy drinks, and as a result, it created the category that was supposed to embody what it meant to be young: the raw and unfiltered impulsivity to be adventurous and the passion it takes to face challenges head on despite the setbacks. Its

success as a drink allowed the brand to transition from beverages to events that promote a lifestyle centered on freedom and extraordinary achievements, such as racing, skydiving, and freestyle motocross. Red Bull faced what would become its competition for decades to come: Monster Energy.

The roots of Monster energy trace back to the Hansen family's juice company, a family who produced both fruit and vegetable juice with the absence of any additives; this policy garnered the family a lot of fondness in the local beverage market in California and gave them a reputation that was built upon the high quality and naturalness of their products. It wasn't until the quaint company was bought out by the California Co-Packers Corporation that its audience grew, and it was eventually introduced it into the soft drinks market. However, in 1992, the company went bankrupt and was subsequently acquired by Rodney Sachs and Hilton Schlossberg.

The two new leaders of the organization opened it up to a new phase, by taking advantage of the company's existing brand and market base to break into the energy drink market. This leads to the birth of today's Monster Energy, leading to a complete renovation on the company's policies as the company began to develop its business with a sole focus on energy drinks. In comparison to their rivals, Red Bull, Monster built its roots in a grittier, louder, and more extreme scene that Red Bull had yet to fully claim. While Red Bull is marketed towards advertising a lifestyle and the idea of humans pushing their limit, Monster's philosophy reflects that humans don't need a sense of inspiration to achieve what they want, because the power already lies within them. A belief that is reflected through the designs on their cans, bold, eye-catching, often colorful ever since their brand has expanded; complimented by little slogans and paragraphs that embodies energy, rebellion, and excess. When you look at a Monster Energy can, it's almost as if it is trying to tell you that weakness can be overcome, and that there isn't anything out there that can limit you, except for you.

If you were to run a poll asking what a can of Monster tastes like to the general audience, you will find that the general audience describes it as tasteless sugar, or the statement I love to refute, battery acid. The chemical compound is the main perpetrator of its taste, with acidity being the main one to blame. Each drink is formulated with citric acid, taurine, and high amounts of caffeine to compliment. These key ingredients together make the base of what makes Monster an energy drink, and what makes people often frown upon it. It's highly chemicalized components are precisely why my friends would jokingly, but undoubtedly concerned, tell me I'm going to have a heart attack if I don't lessen

my usage. But if you were to ask me, Monster Energy tastes like first semester junior year, and the isolation that came with being quarantined six years ago. Where caffeine wasn't just a source of energy, but the glow of a computer screen in a warmly lit room, an afternoon spent with friends after a club, or the replenishment of my body despite the fact I was constantly depriving it of the fuel that it needed. But the irony of my caffeine usage isn't just the fact that I'm dependent on it, but the fact I was consistently depriving myself to the point of exhaustion and using energy drinks as a sense of fuel to convince myself I still had more to give.

I have come to recognize a tendency I have of prioritizing personal satisfaction over my own well-being, even when the two contradict one another. This raises a distinction between what I want and what I believe I need, a distinction that becomes difficult to recognize when the urgency of desire makes it feel necessary. Sometimes, the things I turn to for satisfaction become so ingrained within my routine that i begin to justify their presence in my life, regardless of the consequences.

I would classify my old habit of smoking as a want, but the person I was when I was using it as a crutch would argue that it is a need. To those on the outside, it would come across as addiction, someone who's "lost within their path," or even "crying out for help, as commented by friends who knew me before the self-destruction worsened. But in my time of reflecting on who I was, it is hard to look past the complexities underneath the person everyone was beginning to define me as. What most would deem as a loss of restraint, and giving into "worldly" pleasures, I would depict as maintaining a sense of control over my emotional anatomy. The focus was not on the dependency itself, but why I felt the need to be dependent. My dependency on Monster has become a mechanism to avoid the reality of my feelings; that would be a statement I would find myself unable to refute. I always viewed my emotions as a dripping faucet you just cannot quite get to turn off; they are overwhelming, and they come intensely. Exhaustion, sadness, pain, hunger—I never once experienced in a way that is mellow and easy to handle and smoking just gave me the ability to turn that faucet off, and quiet the noise, and Monster became one of the avenues to allow me to do the same.

But escape can only be fleeting, in my life, it took form in a multitude of things. There is an irony in seeking solace in temporary comforts that deprive us of our potential. Perhaps this contradiction is unique to the Anthropocene: humanity's ability to conceal its self-awareness through ignorance of a problem. Yet, I am no exception to the human tendency to choose immediate grat-

ification over the discomfort of reality.

My act of self-preservation was, matter of factly, the source of my deprecation, a negotiation I wired my brain into believing was a need, something that was essential. Yet, this tendency wasn't exclusive to smoking; it just shed light on the overarching pattern of my character: the seeking of external solutions to solve the problems that exist internally. I find that there is a contradiction that lies between the two, and I also come to the realization that it stems from the want to deal with the problem with a hands-off approach, when in reality separating ourselves from the root leads to depersonalization. I had grown to become used to the effects of the discomfort my body withheld, without ever stopping to address what it is that is causing me to feel so uncomfortable, so eventually the temporary relief acted as a guard that I blinded myself from believing was the perpetrator itself.

I long stopped recognizing when energy drinks no longer was a crutch, but a habit that I wired myself into believing was a need. Its significance lies not entirely in what the drink provides me now, but within the meaning it holds in preserving my past and defining what it means to overcome exhaustion. I often find myself in periods of my life, where rest seems like a gift. No longer a grant in life, but something you must earn to keep. I took joy in overworking myself, because applying myself meant that I have meaning as a human being. It means that I am sewing my seeds into society early on and making myself a place in which I can belong. Because to go about my time aimlessly, without a sense of what to do, would mean that I am not doing my due diligence to the potential that I possibly have.

And I lose myself within that, as the lack of rest becomes less of definition of what it means to work hard, and more of a pointed dagger that I am wielding towards myself. As the energy drink that I pick from my fridge and crack open before my first class becomes less of something that I need to boost my energy, but a lamentation of my inability to distinguish between the discipline I pride myself on, and the self-neglect I have learned to disguise as ambition. Which gives me such an ironic sense of comfort within this chemicalized liquid, because my consumption will always serve as a daily reminder of my unwillingness to grant myself rest.

I've always had this restless exhaustion somewhere down within me, and energy drinks only act as one of the spectacles that mirror the contradiction of who I am as a person, the desire to keep going without having the energy to give. I have trapped myself within a cycle of depletion and replenishment, borrowing energy from a source that has run dry. And that irony in relying on an

energy drink as a source to keep going, only keeps me tied down to the person I was when I first began drinking it. Perhaps my relationship with energy drinks is not solely centered around the drink itself, but the persistence in my attempts to overcome exhaustion without addressing where it comes from. And for this reason, I will rate Monster Energy three and a half stars.

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COLD PLUNGING IN THE CREEK

Dax Kilby

My first experience with a cold plunge was at my mountain house when I was eight years old. We were on winter break, and my family decided to go to our mountain house to get away for the weekend. It was a super cold winter day, probably around forty degrees. We were basically stuck inside due to the cold weather. Brooks, my little brother, and I were ready to do something. We kept bothering our parents, telling them, "We are so bored." My dad responded to us, "Go jump in the creek or something." We both replied, "No," with a disgusted look on our face. We continued to sit around the house with nothing to do.

We hit maximum boredom sitting around the house, when we finally decided to go jump into the creek. We told our parents we were going to jump in the creek, and they laughed at us in disbelief. Brooks and I went back to the bedrooms to put on our bathing suits and came walking into the living room, ready to go plunge. My parents had a very shocked look on their face. They got up and went back to the bedroom to get their coats and shoes to follow us to watch us plunge.

We began the walk to the creek. It was so cold, we could see our breath coming out of our mouths. We reached the bank of the creek, where we could hear the water gently flowing down over the rocks. The smell of fresh mountain

air filled our noses. It is such a magnificent smell. Brooks and I put our hand in the water to see what we were dealing with. “No way,” said Brooks. He had changed his mind, and I had to do it all alone. I took off my shirt and shoes and dipped my toe in the water, and it sent a shiver up my body. I had chill bumps all over my body, and I was contemplating not doing it. After a few minutes of thinking, I built up the courage to go step into the freezing cold water. I stepped out onto the rocks, and the water was up to my knees. My parents and little brother were laughing at me, and I just decided to commit and dunk my head. I waded out to a spot that was about waist deep and dove in. Once I was fully submerged, the water almost seemed to heat up. I was no longer quivering and miserable. I was actually refreshed and comfortable. I stood up and waded back to the bank of the creek feeling good. The air felt extra cold, but my body felt great. My parents and my brother were amazed I actually did it and thought I was miserable. Little did they know, I felt great.

Since this past fall, I have really made an effort to try and do ice baths every single morning. One of our super close family friends has an expensive tub for ice baths. When I was a rookie cold plunger, I had no control over the temperature of the ice bath because I would go to Mr. Ron’s house to use his cold plunge. The ideal temperature for a beginner cold plunger is “50 to 59 F (10 to 15 C).” This is where I should have started when I began taking ice baths. The ideal water temperature for an advanced cold plunger is “39 to 50 F (4 to 10 C).” When I started polar plunging, the water temperature was 39 degrees, which was very cold and very miserable for a beginner. Despite making it harder to want to go plunge every day, the colder water has provided more benefits in a shorter amount of time.

Although I try to take an ice bath every day, that is not always possible. In a normal week, I try to go four to five days per week. I learned that the ideal amount of time I should spend polar plunging per week is “11 minutes per week TOTAL. NOT per session, but rather, 2-4 sessions lasting 1-5 mins each distributed across the week.” Eleven minutes is the ideal amount of time I should spend in an ice bath every week. I normally stay in for two to three minutes per day, meaning I am hitting this eleven minutes. This means that I am getting all of the positive benefits of ice baths because I am plunging for the ideal eleven minutes every week.

These ice baths have helped my body feel so much more recovered and healthy. I am a very active person, especially this spring. I work out every day and have four to five baseball games every week. This causes a lot of physical stress on my body and fatigue in my muscles. Ice baths have been found to

have a “positive effect on recovery after exercise by reducing inflammation and soreness.” Ice baths are a great way to recover after putting physical stress in your body. I can feel the difference in my muscle soreness after polar plunging. My muscles feel refreshed and ready to conquer any workout or game.

Ice baths have also helped clear my mind and improve my mood. I choose to do my ice baths in the morning. Every day at around eight, I go and do my ice bath. When I start my day with an ice bath, I feel amazing the rest of the day. My mind is always clear and all of my stress disappears. After doing the ice bath in the morning, I “experienced a shift in mood, noting a significant decrease in negative emotions like tension, anger, depression, fatigue, and confusion. Moreover, they experienced boosts in positive emotions such as vigor and self-esteem.” Ice baths provide multiple mental benefits and are a great reason why I polar plunge. It helps me keep a clear mind and puts me in a happy mood.

I have seen ice baths popping up all over social media on all of the most popular apps: TikTok, Instagram, Twitter. Ice baths pop up on my page all of the time. One thing in particular has stuck out to me: elite athletes from all over the world are starting to do and promote ice baths. The elite athletes include “ice bath aficionados like Phelps, Paula Radcliffe, Kelly Slater and Ronaldinho.” These are some of the world’s best and most famous athletes in the world. People look up to them as inspiration. If these athletes participate in ice baths and promote ice baths, then this will grow the popularity of ice baths. If these elite athletes use ice baths to help them with their sport, then why shouldn’t I?

The primary reason I take ice baths is to build discipline. Discipline is a key characteristic of successful people. One of my biggest goals in life is to be successful. I have created a morning routine and a nightly routine in an attempt to become as successful as I can. Ice baths are included in my morning routine almost every morning. Ice baths are one of the best ways to build a high level of discipline: “Taking cold showers is uncomfortable, so training yourself (and let’s be honest, it is training) to face your fears and embrace discomfort is going to make you a stronger, tougher, and happier person.” Getting into freezing cold water every morning right after you wake up sucks, but that is how discipline is formed. Doing something that is hard and not wanting to do it, but still doing it anyways.

Ice baths have become a staple to my everyday life and have had a significant impact on not only my physical health, but my mental health too. They have helped me become very disciplined, and I feel that ice baths have benefited me in almost every aspect of my life. I rate ice baths five out of five stars.

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THE HISTORY OF BOOKS

Karra Koch

Exploring the history of books would mean going into the long journey, from stories being written on wet clay tablets, to the bound books we use today. While stories seem to go back to the Neolithic era, where they were passed down orally, the modern format of books are surprisingly a newer invention. In fact, it would be impossible for me to mention every single written work ever created. As many different cultures had their own way to write down stories that where specific to their region. The article "What is the History of Books," explains that, "Each individual book is, in some way, made unique by its state of physical preservation, censorship, evidence of its use, ownership over time, and so on." (Symonds, Matthew and Havens, Earle). This quote highlights how modern books are the result of a process that began thousands of years ago.

Historians believe that humanity transitioned from oral tradition into books that we know today originated in 3000 BCE in Ancient Mesopotamia. According to the article "The Evolution of Books," "the Sumerians are believed to be the first people to ever use cuneiform script." (SFBook Reviews). Inversely, scribes in Ancient Egypt started to write on papyrus. Meanwhile on the opposite side of the world in China people used bamboo wood and tied them together before writing on them. To sum up the ancient cultures that contributed to the devel-

opment of books are the Ancient Romans with the codex. Which was created by binding individual pieces of parchment together on a spine, with protective covers on either side, creating the first officially documented bound book.

However, what I find fascinating is that the creation of books was not always seen as a good thing, the author of the same article explains, “The dissolution of the western Roman Empire during the 5th century, and the consequent dominance of marauding barbarians, threatened the existence of books.” (SFBook Reviews). Fortunately, many where hidden in monasteries where they were preserved and copied down. During the medieval period, the process of making books would typically take anywhere from six months to a year. In this time, the book makers would prepare animal skin parchment, hand copied text letter by letter, and adding illustrations. This would be the way books were made until the mid 1400s.

When the printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440 everything changed. Due to this latest breakthrough, books could now be made cheaper and faster than ever before. The 19th century brought steam powered presses and the typewriter. By 1935, the company Penguin launched the paperback revolution, making books even more accessible.

Naturally, as new ways of creating books were invented, new laws were put in place to protect them. According to Brittanica, “Publishing as it is known today depends on a series of 3 major inventions, writing, paper and printing, as well as the spread of literacy” (Brittanica Editors). Once books were created and became more modern, so did the concept of publishing, which helped literacy rates to increase as well.

Almost as soon as publishing became the way authors shared their stories to the public, laws were soon put in place to protect the authors from having their works stolen. Early copyright laws were put in place as early as 1710, these laws were not only used to protect authors, but to also help regulate the printing process. Now thanks to desk top publishing as well as audiobooks, books have become a universal art that many people use to share stories of their own. Something that is unique about books is their ability to make impacts on the people that read them, almost showing people new perspectives, for me that book is *Sunrise on the Reaping* by Suzanne Collins.

Suzanne Collins is the author of *The Hunger Games*, which is a series that consists of 3 main books plus 2 prequals. *Sunrise on the Reaping* is the newest book in the *Hunger Games* series and follows the character, Haymitch, throughout his own games as well as the horrors he endured after. Announced by scholastic press in June of 2024 and released in March of 2025, it became an

instant classic. In fact, this book sold 1.2 million copies in its first week alone. What I think made *Sunrise on the Reaping* so popular was the connection that many people could make to events that are currently happening today

The evolution of books highlights our own sense of wonder. For me, this love of books originated in elementary school, and the book was a copy of *Harry Potter*, which was so old its pages turned yellow and the writing was faded in some parts. Oddly enough, I never read the book, our mom would read it to me and my sister every night before bed. I would always get so excited to crawl into bed and listen to the shenanigans that the characters would get into that night. When I look back on those nights, it's no wonder that books became so special to me.

Eventually as I got older, I started exploring with different types of books, to see if there was any specific genre that I identified with. As I continued to read, I became more in love, almost as if I was turning books into an idol in my head. Of course, this love of books only solidified when *Sunrise on the Reaping* hit shelves last year. I managed to get it a week after it came out, and as soon as I got my hands on it, I began reading. I managed to finish *Sunrise on the Reaping* within a week after buying it. Throughout the book I noticed how easily I could identify with Haymitch, while his circumstances are vastly different from my own, I couldn't help but find parallels to our own world. On page 377 of Sunrise on the Reaping the character Plutarch asks Haymitch, "You were capable of imagining a different future. And maybe it won't be realized today, maybe not in our lifetime. Maybe it will take generations. We are all part of a continuum. Does that make it pointless?"

After reading this interaction I realized that no matter how bad the world is, we can have the power to change it, and every small change may lead to something big. This quote allowed me to understand just how potent books and stories can be. They have the power to spread messages that bring like-minded people together.

Overall, I would rate both *Sunrise on the Reaping* and books 4.5 stars. Stories are something that are so uniquely human, and books helped our own messages spread. I gave both a 4.5 because while they are one of the better things humanity has invented, they aren't perfect. With the addition of modern technology, people are reading less, with many people finding them boring or too slow. But I believe they are an incredible way to try to invoke social change and share humanities stories. Books helped me realize that I matter and that the things that I care about are something that people also care about as well.

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JEANS

Grace Kunkel

The term “jeans” comes from the city of Geno. The fabric used to make jeans, denim originated in Nimes, France, in the 17th century. According to “History of Denim & the Origin of Jeans” the color of Demin comes from “A natural dye extracted from the leaves of certain plants, this process was important economically because blue dyes were once rare. Originally made from the plant called indigofera tinctoria, it became a highly prized commodity leading to Persian, Levantine, and Greek exporters imposing heavy tax duties. As such, this classic blue hue became a rare luxury in Europe.” (Hawthorn) In 1883, a chemist in Germany, Adolf von Baeyer, found a way to make indigo cheaper. As a result, the first mass production of synthetic indigo was in 1887. Synthetic indigo was a lot cheaper and more reliable because of its longer lasting color. Demin, the fabric that jeans are made of, is very strong, which makes it harder to tear. Since jeans were durable and cheap they had become the preferred work wear for cowboys, miners, and farmer in the U.S. Jeans meet the requirements of the demanding tasks of these jobs. It protects from sunburn, cuts, insects, saddle friction, and barbed wire. Which are some of the risks for cowboy and blue-collar workers.

Levi’s, the United States’ most famous brand of jeans, was created by a

German immigrant named Levi Strauss. Who came over to the U.S. in the 19th century and found a business opportunity. This quote from "Denim and Jeans" explains the business opportunity Levi Strauss saw "Gold miners needed strong pants to work in the gold fields following the discovery of gold in 1849. His denim jeans were developed with bar tacks and rivets at key stress points to keep pockets from tearing off the pants" (NC State University). As jeans became more popular, they changed from work wear into fashion wear in the mid-twentieth century. A big reason for this shift was because stars from Hollywood such as James Dean and Marlon Brando had made the films "The Wild One" and "Rebel Without a Cause". Both movies were about rebellion which had also caused jeans to become a symbol of youth rebellion around the time. Jeans have become so popular that statistics say that the average American has 7 pairs of jeans. They even have so many kinds of cut such as boot cut, straight leg, bell bottoms, skinny, relax fit, mom jeans, etc. There are all kinds of colors too, like dark wash, light wash, black, white, distressed, acid wash, etc.

I wear jeans for two reasons: fashion and function. Not only do I like the way they look, but they are also great for working on a farm and outdoors. Working with cows you get dirty and smelly; jeans protect my legs from getting poop and dirt all on them. Lots of deodorant and perfume are really the only way to help the smelly part. One time I got so dirty that the mud and poop soaked through my boots and made my socks all brown; they are still brown to this day. Walking through the woods in jeans is nice because my legs aren't getting all cut up. Aside from jeans helping me when I am working, I like wearing them. I have built my style on wearing jeans. If you pay attention to what I wear, you will find that I normally wear jeans. I just like the way they feel and fit me. I prefer name brand jeans like Kimes, Wrangler, Ariat, etc. but thankfully Facebook marketplace and Depop exist; I get a lot of my jeans from there because I would rather not pay full price for those jeans. I have more than the average American; I have close to 20 pairs. I also keep adding to my collection, there is a pair of Ariat jeans I want pretty bad. The one issue I have about jeans is that the sizing is not always the same. I can wear one pair in a size they have to get a different size for another pair.

A good quality pair of jeans will last a long time and have many different uses. Jeans are a part of my everyday life, and I would say I have an addiction to buying them. If you were to look at my marketplace or any receipt, it would definitely have jeans on there. I probably could've bought a decent truck with the amount of money I have spent on jeans. I'm just being a little dramatic about that, but it's probably close to that. I will say that the jeans protecting you from

insects is mostly true, but I stepped on a yellow jacket nest, I had one or two of them get into my pants and string me all over, so I'll have to deduct some points off for that. I'll also have to deduct points for how terrible women's jeans sizing is. Needless to say, Jeans are probably one of my favorite things in the world, so I give them 4.5 stars.

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TIPTOEING, TRADITIONALLY

The Cultural Implications of High Heels

Alana Lee

As is always the case, Georgia summer has a way of choking you with its warmth. In a small antique store like Feathers and Twigs, where the air conditioning system is as old as the store's contents, there is no reprieve from the stifling heat. The air feels thick with the store's distinct smell: old books, old wood, and hints of lingering cigarette smoke. It was on one such day that my mother and I ventured in to browse. I've always had a particular affinity for vintage shopping, and Feathers and Twigs is a sacred space for me. One of my prized thrifting possessions, a pair of John Fluevog bowling-style shoes from the 80s, inspired me to research vintage footwear and iconic brands, beginning my collection of them. So, as I perused the dusty shelves in the deep corners of Feathers and Twigs, the faint sheen of sweat clinging to my forehead after trying on clothes in the cramped bathroom stall, something shiny caught my eye: a black stiletto Scotch Magic Tape dispenser. I was very familiar with the history behind this item: a hot commodity after being introduced in the 2010s to a female audience that was notorious for stilettos and clubbing heels. During their commercial run, they came in a wide variety of colors and styles, even including rhinestones to bedazzle and personalize them. Mom looked at me warily as I gasped and took it down from the shelf, my arms already full of treasures.

It was in great condition. Aside from the annoying 5.99 price sticker that was impossible to get off, the plastic supported no scratches, and the plastic base had not yellowed. You'd think I'd found a luxury heel from the same decade. I felt, and still feel, incredibly cool for owning this tape dispenser. It serves as a portal to a different time, when heels were taller, sexier, and worn casually. The cultural influence of heels has a powerful hold on identity and femininity, creating debates about their oppression against women. This category of footwear continues to impact the way women present themselves.

Unlike in modern society, where heels promise confidence and attractiveness, they weren't always a popular choice for women. Heeled shoes find their origins, pre-17th century, in Western Asia. Resulting from their adoption by the Persians, the shoes made their way westward through Europe as tensions with the Ottoman Empire rose. They were worn by men, either as riding shoes or as heeled boots. Tall heels with signifiers, like Louis XIV's red heel, indicated powerful, wealthy men. Contrastingly, a woman wearing heels in the early 17th century was considered unladylike. Women's usage eventually became more normalized, but women's heels were decidedly narrower (Bata Shoe Museum). From this point, heels lost their place as a marker of masculinity and were reformed into the symbol of femininity we know them to be. High heels have become a pinnacle of commercialization and a controversial piece of fashion, one that promises benefits while also providing significant physical and societal drawbacks.

Today, heels provide women an opportunity to increase their perceived attractiveness and confidence, but can negatively affect the body, particularly the musculoskeletal (MSK) system. High heels can improve confidence and attract positive attention; they enhance self-perception while simultaneously improving how women are viewed socially (Barnish et al.). However, known health risks make heels a restrictive form of fashion. According to Max Barnish, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, UK, "wearing high heels causes substantial kinetic and kinematic alterations in the MSK system, ranging from the spine to the toes" (Barnish et al. 10). Heels alter posturing, creating an unnatural movement style as women walk. Up until my junior year of high school, the challenges of wearing heels for an extended period of time were unknown to me. For the weeks leading up to prom, I practiced walking in my pink high heels simply to build up my tolerance for them. While they were adorable, the pain they caused in my calves and lower back was considerable. High heel usage results in MSK conditions and pain throughout the entire body. Yet despite the physical drawbacks, high heels continue to be

seen as a symbol of power in professional spaces, like a man's tie, increasing a woman's confidence in the workforce (Brennan). Summer Brennan, a former UN worker and current writer at The Guardian, examines the debate about whether high heels are good for feminism or not. Both points carry weight. She explains sexualization and control, bringing up shoe designer Christian Louboutin's views about making women easier to observe. Ultimately, though, shoes are not what oppress women, and Brennan brings attention to that. She writes, "What confines, impoverishes, exploits, enslaves, oppresses, sickens, bloodies, rapes and kills [sic] women are not generally clothes or shoes, but rather laws and societal norms" (Brennan). Heels allow women access to social power while also restricting them to societal expectations, ones that negatively impact their bodies.

While high heels carry social symbolism for women, their significance extends beyond personal identity into the world of fashion commerce. Christian Louboutin's shoes are an example of how heels were established as a glamorous, high-fashion commodity. In her article, "Sole Mate," which serves as a personal piece on Louboutin, Lauren Collins writes, "Like Louis XIV's red heels, they signal a sort of sumptuary code, promising a world of glamour and privilege." The iconic red sole made Louboutin a landmark designer in the early 2000s fashion industry. Such distinctive design elements can shape brand identity and competition within the fashion industry. This is evident in the Louboutin vs. Yves Saint Laurent case, where trademarking the red sole demonstrated how distinctive design elements can shape both brand identity and competition in the industry. In "Color War: The Louboutin Decision and Single-Color Marks in the Fashion Industry," Claire Guehenno documents that after establishing a trademark on the sole in 2008, Louboutin sued YSL over their monochromatic red shoe, released in 2011. Because the YSL shoe was monochromatic, it did not infringe. Through discussion of the case, Guehenno argues that trademarks on specific colors encourage competition and limit creativity in the fashion industry. However, she also notes the genius of Louboutin's designs. Even before I understood the branding strategies in this sense, I recognized what those red soles meant. Seeing them online and in magazines felt like peeking at something unattainable and overly glamorous. To me, they didn't feel like a physical item so much as an untouchable entity. I purchased a pair of Louboutins earlier this year. My first-ever designer heel. When I finally encountered a pair up close, the appeal wasn't just aesthetic; it was emotional. Owning something like that felt like participating in desirability. Indeed, the red sole makes his shoes stand out, a signifier of wealth. Guehenno explains, "to be

successful on the commercial market, a designer must both establish himself as creative enough to distinguish his products from those of his competitors and still embrace a certain level of copying to fit into the season's trends" (238). This competition reveals a flaw in the commercialization of heels, as it stems from a societal expectation that women should wear them.

The decline of high heel wear in favor of more practical footwear points to a positive shift in women's societal standings; however, new cultural values have begun to reshape how high heels are worn. Despite their cultural and aesthetic appeal, recent research shows that high heel usage is declining, especially in the workplace, as people prioritize comfort and practicality. This research, conducted by Jacek Lorkowski and Mieczysław Pokorski in "Harmful Female Footwear: A Public Health Perspective," points to women opting for kitten heels in work environments rather than taller heels that are known to create MSK issues. Results showed that stiletto heels were more popular in wealthy, westernized countries but that their usage was declining, trending toward practical footwear. However, even as their everyday use shifts, the societal status of high heels continues to evolve rather than disappear. As Jiaqi Shen describes, heels are becoming more gender-inclusive in modern society. She notes the glam-rock culture of the 20th century as stars like David Bowie popularized high heels, introducing the idea of androgyny to the shoe. I've noticed, though, that heels persist as a sexualized piece of fashion, no matter the gender wearing them. As shorter heels become more popular in the workplace, higher heels are viewed as a sex symbol. Traditional associations blur with the increased gender inclusivity, allowing the market for them to expand across a wider consumer base.

That stiletto-shaped tape dispenser is sitting on my desk. Of course, it's not actually a wearable heel. It's a harmless object, and yet it still finds its roots in the cultural ideas I've been researching. The knowledge of my research creates some consequences. Firstly, looking through a public health lens, it's easy to view heels as a trade-off rather than a fashion item. There is a physical cost to wearing shoes that alter posture. Additionally, you, the reader, must form an opinion about heels in terms of their societal standpoint. Will you reward them for being a factor of fashionable empowerment, or will you tear them down for the role they play in traditional expectations? Here's my take: I'm going to wear my four-inch Fanny Love Louboutins. I don't care that they squish my toes or kill the balls of my feet. Maybe I do care that the institution I supported in purchasing them has negative ethical associations, but I'm going to wear them anyway. They're gorgeous, they make my legs look great, and, most importantly, they

give me a confidence boost. Just like the tape dispenser that set off this whole research endeavor, I feel incredibly cool for owning my designer heels. Yes, there is a trade-off, but I'm willing to sacrifice my comfort to bask in the luxury of something money can't buy: empowerment. It's strange how something as small and inconsequential as a tape dispenser can carry the weight of history, societal expectation, and power negotiation.

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MOM'S BOYFRIEND

Drew Lewis

Have you ever felt like someone was taking the place of a person you love? Imagine being a child who loves their mother and father, only to feel like a new person is entering the family and changing everything. This is one of the reasons the poem "Mom's Boyfriend" by Tom Quigley stands out to me. The poem connects to my own experiences and emotions because I understand what it feels like when your mother has a boyfriend and you are still trying to understand your place in the family. Growing up, I experienced different relationships with the men my mother dated, and each one taught me something different about family, love, and respect. Some experiences brought confusion and emotional stress, while others showed me that a healthy family relationship does not have to involve choosing sides. Although some people may see a mother's new relationship as a normal part of life, a child may experience it as heartbreak, jealousy, and a fear of losing the love they once had. Through the poem's emotional impact and its connection to my life, I have come to understand that family relationships can sometimes feel like a competition for love and attention.

One of the reasons I connect with "Mom's Boyfriend" is that it brings back feelings of loneliness I experienced as a child. When I was younger, I did not

want to think about my mother having a boyfriend or another man becoming part of our household. It was difficult trying to understand how someone I did not grow up with could become part of something that already meant so much to me. Research supports the idea that changes in a parent's romantic relationships can influence a child's adjustment, especially when the child's relationship with their parent is affected. In a study titled "Is It OK If Mommy Dates? The Influence of Mother's Post-Divorce Dating Transitions for Children's Behaviors," researchers He Xiao and their colleagues explain that the relationship between a mother and her child can help protect the child's well-being during changes in the mother's dating life. This research helped me understand that the problem is not necessarily a parent finding someone new, but how those changes affect the family and the child's sense of security. For me, it was never simply about my mother dating someone. It was about the emotions that came with feeling like someone else was entering a space that already meant so much to me.

Another important connection to the feelings around my mom's boyfriends comes from page 198 of John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, in the chapter "Whispering." The passage I noted reads, "I didn't know she knew what secrets were. What she said wasn't really about what she said; it was about reminding me that we were okay." This passage connects to the importance of reassurance in relationships. Sometimes, what matters most is not the words someone says but the feeling those words give us. I believe this idea relates to my experiences because children need to know that they are still loved, even when their parents' relationships change. A new person entering a household should not make a child question whether they still have the same place in their parent's life. When I think about my own situation, I realize that reassurance and knowing where I stand with my mother are just as important as anything someone could say to me. I do not want to feel as if I have to compete with someone else to receive the love and attention I need.

My experiences with two different men my mother dated helped me understand this even more. With one of my mother's previous boyfriends, our relationship became difficult because we argued and disagreed frequently. At one point, he would call me his son and talk to me about the problems he was having with my mother. He would also disrespect her, which put me in an uncomfortable position because I did not feel that those conversations were appropriate for me to be involved in. I knew he had emotional issues connected to his past, but that did not make it easier to deal with the way those issues affected our household. It was confusing because someone who called me his son was also putting me in the middle of problems between two adults. Looking back,

I understand that I should not have had to carry the emotional weight of their relationship. This experience helped me recognize how important boundaries, respect, and communication are when a new person becomes part of a family.

The poem expresses some of these complicated emotions through the speaker's feelings toward his mother's boyfriend. One line that stands out to me is, "I smile and shake your hand, dear sir, it's just a part of my profession, but I'd rather pound you down, you worthless cur." This line shows the difference between how someone acts on the outside and how they truly feel inside. A person can smile, shake someone's hand, and pretend everything is fine while hiding anger and sadness. I connect with this because sometimes you may feel like you have to remain respectful even when you are uncomfortable with someone's presence or behavior. The first thought that comes to mind is the feeling that my mother is choosing someone else over me. Instead of welcoming a new person into the family, I may see that person as someone who is taking something away from me. The speaker's words demonstrate how love, jealousy, and resentment can exist at the same time.

Another connection I found in John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed* comes from the chapter "Bonneville Salt Flats," on page 189. Toward the end of the chapter, Green reflects on how frightening it can be to be a child and know that you cannot decide what adults do to you. This statement stood out to me because it reminded me of how I felt growing up when my mother was in relationships that affected our household. As a child, I did not have control over who entered my life, how adults treated one another, or what happened between my mother and her boyfriend. I especially connect this passage to my experience with my mother's previous boyfriend because I sometimes felt caught between their problems without having a say in what was happening. He would talk to me about his issues with my mother, and I was left trying to understand situations that I should not have been responsible for handling. Green's words helped me realize that children are often affected by decisions adults make, even when those decisions are not directly about them. This also connects to Tom Quigley's "Mom's Boyfriend" because the speaker expresses frustration toward someone who has entered a family without considering how that change makes the child feel. Both authors show that children have emotions and perspectives that adults sometimes overlook. For me, the most important part is understanding that although children cannot control every change in their family, they still deserve to feel respected, protected, and included.

However, my experiences have also shown me that not every relationship

with a mother's boyfriend has to be negative. My mother's current boyfriend has a different approach to being part of our family. He keeps things cordial, understands his role, and does not try to involve himself in every disagreement. He helps out when he can, contributes to the household, and tries to remain unbiased when there are disagreements between my mother and me. Rather than automatically taking someone's side, he is willing to tell both of us when we are wrong or when we are being truthful. That makes a difference because I can have a relationship with him without feeling like I have to compete for my mother's attention or defend myself constantly. Comparing these two experiences has taught me that the way someone enters a family matters. Being a positive influence is not about replacing a parent or forcing a relationship. It is about showing respect, understanding boundaries, and making an effort to create a comfortable environment for everyone. This also helped me understand that a new relationship does not automatically have to take something away from the family.

Ultimately, I think the most difficult part of having a mother's boyfriend can be the feeling that you are competing for a place in your own family. I want my mother to be happy, but I also want to feel that my relationship with her is important. Sometimes, it can feel as if a new person is entering familiar territory and changing the relationships that have always mattered to me. However, my experiences with both of my mother's boyfriends have helped me see things from a different perspective. I have learned that someone's past emotional struggles should not become a reason to disrespect others or place a child in the middle of adult problems. I have also learned that respect, honesty, and understanding can make a new family dynamic much healthier. Most importantly, I recognize that my mother's happiness and my place in her life do not have to compete with each other. I rate it 2 stars.

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THE ART OF FILM

Logan Lovvorn

Film as a whole is a relatively new addition to the arts, with the first films being made in the late 1800s, though at the time they were but a fragment of what they would later be developed into. Though it has not been long since its creation, film as an art has developed into something much more vast and complex than any other art form through its ability to convey the full spectrum of the human condition in ways other art forms cannot. A film can be appealing to emotion, while simultaneously being something unique to art itself; a large part of this being the role of the art being mostly defined by the humans who work in it. A film can appeal to every facet of the human condition, with many focusing on the nature of what it is to be a human, the relationships we experience in our lives, and the struggles we experience. A film can be many things but its ability to reflect the experience of life to the full spectrum of humanity is what makes it the greatest art form.

One of the things that makes art special is the different connection each person has to a specific work, whether it be a song, painting novel or any other work; the same is true for film. Almost everyone has a favorite film, and for a lot of people they feel a special connection to their favorite. For me that film is *Yi Yi* by Edward Yang, a Taiwanese film released in 2000. For me the film is special

because of the relatability of the characters, the cinematography and the way it captures the philosophy of life. In each scene it captures a different aspect of life, in a moving picture, with a questioning attitude designed to make you sit with what is being said. The entire framework of the film bends your emotions, it leaves you with something to think, something to do with your life. For others it might be something less complex, like a comedy that makes them laugh the hardest, or a sad story that makes them cry. All of these things are valid reasons to resonate with a film and for me that's what makes the concept of film so interesting. A character in the film might be relatable to one person, it might make them think of their parents, their friend or even themselves. It allows us as humans to see our condition in a way where we are watching, like a fly on the wall for a change, as we get immersed in the lives of others. Film combines many of the art forms that have been around longer than itself, music, photography, acting and many others in a way that makes a love letter to the arts itself. John Green's "Sunsets" is a great comparison to what film can accomplish within a person. We see the beauty of this thing, this almost incomprehensible thing, and we try and describe it, and often in ways that feel small compared to the reality of the thing itself. It is much like that in film, with each film trying its best to capture concepts, ideas, feelings that we have in ways that do not necessarily give us a whole answer but they make us dwell on those things, see it a new light, as if a veil we wore all our lives has been lifted.

In a slightly different manner, films also allow us to see things, things we previously may have previously had no understanding of in a new image, one that allows us to see past preconceptions and allow us to sympathize and relate in ways we never have before. A film like Interstellar may be a good sci-fi space but without even intentional design it also asks questions about the vastness of the universe, the meaning of humanity on a scale as large as the universe. It makes one think about the vast emptiness of where we live and why or how what we do matters. Film does not just ponder philosophical questions however, the effects of film on the perception of others is well documented. Tina Kubrak found that film can change attitudes about other groups of people in any regard, " HIV films contributed to sympathy to people living with HIV, TV series with transgender characters contributed to positive attitudes towards transgender persons; the portrayal of mental disorders in movies had an effect on people's knowledge about and attitudes toward the mentally ill. It is a hopeful thing to see that film has the power to change attitudes and prejudices so effectively. John Green talks a lot about trying to find meaning in the grand vastness of the universe and for me, I think the impact of films on society has

been a great success in opening more people to different lifestyles, ways of thinking and philosophies.

Personally, films are the greatest achievement the arts have produced at this time in human history. The scope of which film can reflect is not like any other form of expression in the language of humanity. Nothing reflects the human condition to the fullest spectrum like film does. Nothing can fully express what it means to be living, to be experiencing the things people do like a film. A good film can change your life, if you let it. I give film 5 stars.

HAND-DRAWN STUDIO GHIBLI FILMS

Hope Marchbanks

I have always been an artist with a love for nature's beauty. As with most kids, many of my first drawings included flowers and the sun. Even now, vines and wooden fences are my most treasured sketches. I think this is why I am also a lover of films, especially ones with stunning visuals, landscapes, and costumes. Rebecca Latham, a professional artist of 34 years, states, "In my own practice, I see each painting as an invitation to pause, reflect, and reconnect—with nature, with creativity, and with our own inner landscapes." I find this to be true, not only when creating art, but also when viewing it.

I discovered my first studio Ghibli film a few years ago when I was scrolling through movies to watch. Having heard many good reviews about them from my friends, and countless references on my Pinterest feed, I decided it was time to see why everyone loved them. Being an extremely indecisive person, I probably spent more time reading descriptions of each movie than actually watching them, but eventually I decided on *The Castle in the Sky*. Throughout the film, the main characters, Sheeta and Pazu, utilize a glowing stone necklace as a map to find the floating castle. Because the island in the sky, called Laputa, had been lost for decades, the castle's stone walls were covered in vines and overgrown trees. I fell in love with the iron giant standing stoic under sunbeams,

and his gentleness toward Sheeta and Pazu. Both me and the children were rendered speechless by the beautiful landscapes. Sadly, Sheeta and Pazu were not the only ones interested in discovering the ancient island. Colonel Muska, a secret government agent, was tasked with uncovering the lost technology of Laputa as an attempt to rule the world. The children make the hard decision to recite the spell of destruction to keep the advanced weapons, later revealed to be a fleet of iron giants, away from Muska, killing him in the process. The movie explores themes of greed and destruction, but also the reviving powers of nature. I had never before experienced such a delicious movie.

Since then, I have been on a mission to watch and appreciate every single Studio Ghibli film. *Howl's Moving Castle*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, and *Porco Rosso* are some of the many praiseworthy movies I have enjoyed. They each have a charm that I cannot find in most modern creations and have contributed to my desire to go into the film industry. I want to make movies that are packed with art and visuals, but I have no way of knowing what the industry will look like once I begin my journey. Even Hayao Miyazaki, one of the primary creators of Studio Ghibli, is aware that this genre will die out: "If [hand-drawn animation] is a dying craft, we can't do anything about it. Civilization moves on. Where are all the fresco painters now? Where are the landscape artists? What are they doing now? The world is changing. I have been very fortunate to be able to do the same job for 40 years. That's rare in any era."

Studio Ghibli was founded in 1985 and has created 23 movies since, not including *Nausica of the Valley of Wind*, which preceded the studio. Miyazaki's son directed Ghibli's only computer animated movie, *Earwig and the Witch*, which sparked a controversy between father and son. It is a bittersweet fact that almost the entire world has moved on to computer-generated animation. Even popular cartoons such as *The Owl House* use specialized 3D animation as an efficient alternative.

So, what makes hand drawn Studio Ghibli films so beautiful? Intentional character designs filled with symbolism, and Mizazaki's appreciation for nature is only part of it. Any good director knows how to apply those tools. I think the true beauty comes from the act of drawing every single frame in the movie. Although being animated, the films are so distinctly *human*. Meticulously planned sketches and outlines all contribute to the organic feel of animation while microscopic changes in each drawing provide a recognizable charm. Even on a visual scale, the work required is evident.

When looking at the background, I can see visible brush stroke techniques and vibrant poster paints used to bring the scenes alive. I remember one partic-

ular frame in my current favorite Ghibli film, *The Secret World of Arietty*. Green leaves featuring clear veins pushed closer to the screen, while the artists depict blurry trees and grass as though in the distance. A little flowing river producing popping bubbles swirled underneath a stone bridge. This breathtaking scene only lasted for a moment. The 'camera' shifts and a new background comes into focus. Because of this complexity, it took roughly 180 artists eleven months to complete *Arietty*. I don't know if the average viewer soaks in all the details, or if my connection to art is the reason I feel so at home with Studio Ghibli.

I give hand-drawn Studio Ghibli films 5 stars.

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WASHINGTON D.C.

Jermel Mathis

Washington, D.C., professionally known as the District of Columbia is regarded as one of – if not the most – important places in the United States. This designation prompted my interest in travelling there for my high school graduation trip. During and after my vacation, I gained clarity of why Washington D.C. holds the significance it does: its pertinence regarding governance in modern American history and the cultural conceptualization of American society.

Washington D.C. holds great significance in the governance of modern American history because most of the laws that we exercise have been passed in the United States Capitol. The constitution is a collection of laws that seeks to provide a framework for governance and acts as a guarantor for individual liberties, and although this collection of laws serves to provide goodness in our society, flawed and unethical belief systems still plague many of the documents. With that being said, the general ideas that were generated from the laws still have produced great things in our society today. For example, the Thirteenth Amendment stressed the fact that, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States" (U.S. Const. amend XIII, sec. 1). Even with the sophisticated language used in this amendment,

the general premise of this law is still coherent. The Fourteenth Amendment grants "equal protection under the laws…[to] all persons born or naturalized in the United States" (U.S. Const. amend XIV, sec. 1). This specific amendment makes sense when referred to in a sequential manner following the thirteenth due to its adherence to the idea of inhumanity regarding enslavement and involuntary servitude; hence, the attempt to reinstate humanity to the individuals that were previously labeled as inhuman. The Fifteenth Amendment made it unlawful for states to disenfranchise voters "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (U.S. Const. amend. XV, sec. 2). These amendments followed a clear sequential order based on ethics as well as the time's sense of "practicality."

It is important to understand that ethics were a widely discussed topic of the time especially when regarding the early establishment of the country's guiding principles and morals. To better understand the ethics of these laws, one can simply refer to the statement and underlying idea of "all men are created equal," in the Declaration of Independence. The Thirteenth Amendment essentially classified enslavement as inhumane – as those that were enslaved were deemed as subhuman – and subsequently abolished this practice to ensure humanity, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments acknowledged this newfound agreed upon humanity by affirming equality through "equal protection" of laws and granting equal opportunity for the participation in the political landscape. Although these amendments were implemented with good intentions, some practical nuances exist due to the simultaneously specific and vague statements in these amendments. During the time of these amendments' creation, some lawmakers still held onto the racist ideas of African Americans being "subhuman" and unfit to fully enter society. Consequently, when lawmakers who opposed those concepts drafted these amendments, vague, inexact, and limited wording was one of the only foreseeable ways to get these amendments passed through Congress; in other words, these amendments were "practical enough" for the lawmakers that held onto dehumanizing ideas.

We might interpret these amendments by also regarding John Green's essay, "Lascaux Cave Paintings." Once people understood the importance of preserving the paintings made by early humans – which are a beautiful aspect of humanity – they joined together to restrict visitation to the caves. Green shows how humans naturally join and create laws or rules to ensure a certain aspect of society remains good. Likewise, my interpretation of the sequential order of these laws is how humans joined together to address what they felt was wrong and attempted to create goodness. Understanding their surrounding society,

they worked together to compose rules to ensure that this goodness manifests. During my trip, one of the places I visited was the Lincoln Memorial. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, but if these three laws had not been passed, Martin Luther King Jr. would not have been able to exercise his rights as a full citizen of the United States and make an impact towards new legislation; hence, the landscape of modern American history would be drastically different. Similarly, as an African American, where I visited would not have held as much significance, if I would have been able to freely visit in the first place.

The cultural conceptualization of American society was very apparent in Washington D.C., perhaps the most discernable I've seen compared to anywhere else. Looking back at my visit, the biggest culture shock I experienced was during my walk through Washington D.C.'s Chinatown. Chinatown was once an area inhabited by many Chinese immigrants prior to the 1968 Washington D.C. riots, which subsequently drew many of these same immigrants to leave the area. During its peak, Chinatown retained a strong community bond tied to heritage and shared cultural values. These shared distinctions are still seen today through Chinatown's twenty-plus Chinese and Asian restaurants. Chinatown ubiquitously displays its vibrance through the traditional Chinese cultural red hue as well as Mandarin signage. My appreciation and curiosity for Chinese and Asian culture were simultaneously amplified during my walk-through of the area. In John Green's essay, "Our Capacity for Wonder," I distinctly remember reading about how wonder is innate to humans, a claim supported by one of Green's specific personal anecdotes. His example features his son only paying attention to a leaf, rather than the landscape he wanted his son to see; but when Green viewed the leaf, his curiosity about it naturally skyrocketed. During my walk through Chinatown, my experience with newfound curiosity was awfully similar to Green's, especially when considering my prior cultural unawareness with Asian cultures and my strong proclivity to learn what I don't know. Furthermore, my own curiosity was characterized by translating Mandarin on my phone, taking pictures to capture the different aesthetics, and continuing to research cultural phenomena of the area.

Overall, my trip to Washington D.C. stimulated my interest in history and human interaction, which ultimately provided me with clarity on how this area is a symbol for the importance of governance in modern American history and American cultural conceptualization. I firmly believe these two factors play a crucial role in the development of our society, both as a whole and individually; for this reason, I give Washington D.C. five stars.

GILMORE GIRLS

The Comfort of a Perfect Life

Emily McGeachy

It was 2017; my mom had just had surgery on her foot and was in bed for many weeks. She was in a lot of pain, so the doctor had her on strong painkillers. She was also extremely bored. I came home one day after school to find my mom with her foot propped up in her bed, crocheting and watching *Gilmore Girls*. I lay down next to her on my parents' bed, which had a dark-colored floral comforter worn so much it had beads of lint starting to form. I lay down on my dad's pillow, which smelled faintly of shampoo, and snuggled up to my mom. I don't remember exactly how the conversation went, but I'm sure she asked me how my day was, and I asked her how she was feeling. I then looked at the TV and started watching the show. I had no idea what was going on because I had never seen the show before, but I sat there and watched with no complaints. Looking back on it, I know my mom doesn't remember this because when we rewatched the show, she had no recollection of seeing it. But I remember lying on my dad's pillow and watching my favorite show for the first time. Now, whenever I hear the theme song or "the la-las,"[1] I feel at home, no matter where

1 Sam Phillips wrote and sang a collection of background music, coined "The La-las" by fans, for use by Amy Sherman-Palladino throughout Gilmore Girls. According to a Buzzfeed article written by Kristie Lee Yandoli, "there are three tiny – yet powerful notes that exist in the Gilmore Girls universe," and, depending on what the characters are experiencing, the songs change just a little bit to reflect it.

I am or who I'm with.

Gilmore Girls is a television series created by Amy Sherman-Palladino. The series originally aired in October of 2000 on "The WB," the Warner Bros. channel. The main cast includes Lauren Graham playing Lorelai, Alexis Bledel playing Rory, Kelly Bishop playing Emily, Melissa McCarthy playing Sookie, and Scott Patterson playing Luke. *Gilmore Girls* consists of seven seasons with a total of 154 episodes. As the main plot line, we see Lorelai Gilmore escape from the control of her parents at the age of 17 to raise her daughter, Rory, in Stars Hollow, a small, fictional town in Connecticut. Emily and Richard Gilmore, Lorelai's parents, are prominent figures of society and pave the way for Rory to attend both Chilton, a private high school in the series, and Yale. As Lorelai grudgingly steps back into her parents' life, the audience experiences her connection to Stars Hollow and how it has changed her.

Stars Hollow[2] is known as a quaint small town where everyone is a little odd, but the community is an unwavering experience for each of the town's residents. I often find myself believing that the audience takes comfort in watching *Gilmore Girls* because comfort radiates off Lorelai during the series. According to Lulu Kesin from the *Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, the audience, including myself, also finds comfort in *Gilmore Girls* because "the power of streaming and the click of a button [can bring] one viewer that much closer to connecting with on-screen romances, friendships, characters and experiences." Part of the small-town charm is that everyone knows each other, they truly care for one another, and they are always helping each other out – we can experience this firsthand through detailed articles and videos on the internet. The town gives the audience a sense of perfection, that nothing will go wrong, and everyone will live happily ever after. Throughout the series, Stars Hollow became more than just a place to live; it became Rory and Lorelai's home, a character in the show, and a comfort to the audience. Between coffee at Luke's Diner, town meetings at Miss Patty's, and events in the town square, I have fallen in love with *Gilmore Girls*.

The definition of comfort, found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is "a feeling of relief or encouragement." For me, comfort is watching *Gilmore Girls*, and according to Ryn Cole from the Catholic University's independent paper,

2 Although fans cannot visit the real "Stars Hollow," there is a town in Connecticut that Amy Sherman-Palladino took inspiration from for "Stars Hollow." According to the New England Wanderlust, a travel blog written by a New York resident named Sam, while brainstorming for the pilot episode of Gilmore Girls, Amy Sherman-Palladino "booked a stay at the Mayflower Inn & Spa in the quaint town of Washington, CT, and it was there that everything fell into place."

The Tower, I am not alone. Cole states that the "concepts and emotions that the show evokes place the audience into a cooler, simpler time, leaving viewers with a comfortable, nostalgic feeling." While watching the show, you can see how much good Stars Hollow has brought to Lorelai and how much comfort she feels in her town. In her time of need, the local inn owner gave her a job and a place to live, opening the door for her to join the community. As time went on, Lorelai grew closer to the town's people and made some amazing friends. Lorelai was eventually a well-known business owner in town because her new community gave her a chance to rebuild her life from the ground up.

While I must admit the entirety of Season Six is not that great, I still must watch the show from start to finish. One of the things I have noticed in one of my many rewatches is that the writers never indicate that the characters are lonely – I find this quite ironic because I am often filled with a sense of loneliness when watching the show, from not having what the characters have and wanting what the characters have. The characters always get what they want. Rory got into her dream school, Lorelai opened her own inn, named "The Dragonfly," Luke got Lorelai, and Emily got, well, everything. I want to be in this town. I want to take comfort in knowing I will get what I want. I want to live the perfect, simple life that the Gilmore girls have. There are times when they are sad, stressed, or angry, and want someone to be with them, but I cannot remember a time when someone was truly lonely.

Because my dad knows I love *Gilmore Girls* so much, he often sits in the living room with me while I watch it. Whenever I watch the show, I watch it on Netflix, but there is one channel we get through our satellite TV that often plays *Gilmore Girls* reruns. One day, when my dad was flipping through channels to find something to watch, he came across *Gilmore Girls*. When he stopped on the show, I was in the kitchen washing dishes, but I remember looking at my sister and saying, "Is he watching *Gilmore Girls*?" At this time, I had probably already seen the show twice, so I could tell what he was watching without even seeing it. My sister and I walked into the living room and caught him red-handed. He looked me in the eyes, had a guilty look on his face, and immediately changed the channel. I started laughing and said, "I knew you liked *Gilmore Girls*, go back!" He reluctantly changed the channel back, and a scene with Jess Mariano, played by Milo Ventimiglia, was playing. I immediately pointed at the TV and asked, "Who is that?" My dad looked at the TV and, in the most "you caught me" tone, he said, "Jess."

Dean, played by Jared Padalecki, Jess, and Logan, played by Matt Czuchry, were Rory's main love interests throughout the show. My favorite is Logan, the college boyfriend. Some people may disagree and say their favorite is Jess, the rebellious, moody bad boy, but one thing all *Gilmore Girls* fans can agree on is that Dean was the worst of Rory's boyfriends. There is an episode in Season Five that was the beginning of my love for Logan. The episode is titled "You Jump, I Jump, Jack,"[3] and it is my favorite episode of the series. During this episode, Rory steps widely out of her comfort zone, and I hope one day that it can be me. I fear that I am Rory, and Rory is me. I have a compulsive need to be good at everything, to always succeed, and I'm just a little spoiled. But I want more than anything to be like Lorelai—the fiercely independent woman with great style and amazing business skills.

As of right now, I know a perfect world doesn't exist. As *The Rolling Stones* said, "You can't always get what you want," and because the writers give us this slow, lively unveiling of what feels like it could be real, it makes me want to live in that perfect world. It makes me want a world without loneliness, a world where everyone gets along—a world like Stars Hollow. But life is full of misconceptions.

Everyone gets at least a few great moments in life. In mine, some come from watching *Gilmore Girls*, and those experiences help make up for all the bad I have endured. I try not to compare my life to those of a fictional character, but sometimes I find myself looking at how the *Gilmore Girls* glide through life with only small speed bumps to slow them down, while I'm climbing mountains and watching *Gilmore Girls* to get me through it. My mind tells me that *Gilmore Girls* is full of so many unreasonable expectations, but my heart is asking: if they can have it, why can't I? I rate *Gilmore Girls* four out of five stars.

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3 The quote "You jump, I jump, Jack" was also in the *Titanic*. According to *Vulture*, the characters in *Gilmore Girls* referenced 284 movies, 168 TV shows, and 339 books. Lorelai and Rory talk so fast, I often do not catch their references, and nine times out of ten, I won't understand them.

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VIDEO GAMES

The Portal to End All Portals

Zachary McRoberts

Video Games are electronic games that have different interfaces like an input device (a joystick vs. controller), mouse and keyboard, or motion sensing equipment (like a Nintendo Wii or a Kinect sensor for an Xbox One). Video games are commonly broadcast on a display device like a TV or computer monitor, and have audiovisual features like modern-day CGI, cinematics with characters, and synchronized voices matching up with the character's mouth, to portray the realism of a game. Video games will also use real-life voice actors to portray certain video game characters at times. The person responsible for the creation of video games was none other than a man named Ralph H. Baer. He had proposed to the television company that employed him that they should build games into their television sets to differentiate them between their competitors. He also coined the first term known as "Gaming" while affirming that it is not a "Toy." He eventually went on to make video games himself.

Baer's first patented video game device was known as a "cathode ray amusement device." This invention helped propel the culmination of future game devices that would follow from this moment to present. In 1966 while he was working at Sanders Associates, Baer devised a system to play a basic tennis ball game on a TV screen. The company checked it off and soon Baer

created a device known as “the brown box.” With the creation of this device, Sanders patented it and licensed it over to Magnavox, making it the first home video game console in history!

Video games have always played a profound role in my life. Since I was a child, video games have been present in my household. You could say it’s always been a staple of sorts. Video games have given me a purpose – a passion I have carried from when I was a kid to my 30-year-old self. As I work through the hardships of life, I see video games not only as the peak artistic form of storytelling, but also as a motivational aspect of life. They are a way to escape the reality of the world, with all its misery and relentless monotony of repetitive labor ticking away at our precious time. For the most part, I see video games as a therapeutic and a motivational incentive for humans open to the concept of escaping the constraints of the world even if it’s a mere façade of a different reality broadcast on a mere digital device.

I come from a Hispanic household, and I can recall my grandpa after a long day of work unwinding with a beer. I unwind with video games, and I think more people should use video games as therapy and a way to unwind. I use my grandpa as an example to compare the two habits in a sense. We all have hobbies that we do outside of work or school, though some are more harmful than others. My goal here is to introduce a hobby than can be therapeutic and motivational to people’s lives. While the world may appear droll at times when all you’re doing is working all the time, it’s a nice consolation to know that you can come home after a long day of work and unwind by starting a favorite game. As I take on more responsibilities in my life like my job at Dollar General and the homework for my degree, I’m reminded of the endless monotony of everyday labor tasks, as is your fellow man. Video Games allow us all a break from that, and who doesn’t love a break? To me, it’s not only a healthy option but also a way to escape reality in a positive manner without using the effects of drugs or alcohol to propel that shattering of reality. In the article “Recovery from work by playing video games” Koçak goes into how video games can regulate stress. In his article he states “Video games are a popular way to spend leisure time. Field research has shown that a sizeable portion of the workforce of all ages engages in playing video games after work hours (ESA, 2022; ISFE, 2020). Yet, gaming has a negative connotation, since concerns have been voiced about its negative effects on wellbeing. Playing video games has been associated with negative outcomes such as bedtime delay, poor sleep quality and low vitality (Liu et al., 2021; Peracchia & Curcio, 2018). However, an increasing number of studies to date have indicated that playing video games may also

have positive outcomes (Granic et al., 2014; Lorentz et al., 2015). For example, gaming can improve gamers' mood (Bowman & Tamborini, 2012; Rieger et al., 2014) and enable unwinding from work, which has been associated with better sleep quality and vitality (Liu et al., 2021). This study aims to increase our understanding of the potential of video gaming as a recovery activity that provides a means of coping with daily work-related stress." This to me is a great example of how video games can be used as a break from reality. The world is filled with so many mind-altering things for humans to consume, it's almost unbearable. Whilst at the same time it is filled with encompassing stories contained in video games from consoles all over the world from past and present waiting to be played. To me this is a positive way to spend your precious time without harming not only you but others. You're simply gaming to have fun!

Another reason video games can be one of the best habits and therapy to have is it can keep your kids out of trouble. Many kids nowadays grow up in bad households and resort to having their family and friends raise them via the streets or other outside influences. Kids playing video games tend to be devoted to them and their time, which would also mean you can keep a closer eye on them and know where they are at. Video games can also be positive for a young adult's cognition. In the article written by Marc Prensky called "What Kids Learn That's POSITIVE From Playing Video Games" he states, "For whenever one plays a game, and whatever game one plays, learning happens constantly, whether the players want it to, and are aware of it, or not. And the players are learning "about life," which is one of the great positive consequences of all game playing. This learning takes place continuously, and simultaneously in every game, every time one plays. One need not even pay much attention." Even in the grand scheme of life, kids are not only able to stay out of trouble with games but also develop cognitive learning skills that they can implement everyday like actions having consequences in role playing games, for example. This relates to me personally because I used to play a lot of role-playing games as a kid and given the option to make the bad choice, I would. I knew as a kid it was a bad choice, but I also knew those choices would stick with me throughout the game play. These consequences may have existed in the game only, but it taught me the moral ambiguity of choice and how important it is to choose wisely when it counts. Now when I play games, I tend to go for the positive action and try to save people, as I don't have the heart to be an inherently evil man, even in the game.

Another important aspect of video games is their role as Therapy, which can play out in various ways. I happened to stumble upon a great example from

this article know from *The New York Times* called "A Virtual Escape For Rikers Inmates" by Nichole Carpenter. She goes into the implementation of a system at Rikers Island where some violent prisoners there were awarded by video game time. Lynelle Maginley-Liddie spent two years as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction and said that Rikers had used video games as a mechanism to reduce violence with programming for good behavior. She says, "Games are not only the tool in our kit but rather something that works alongside a range of educational, vocational and therapeutic programming." The way Rikers Island has implemented video game time as mechanism for therapy for rehabilitated prisoners or prisoners that are there to stay permanently is a great example of how games can be used as therapy. I also think it's an example of how video games can be a great incentive for a lot of people to cope with the world and its struggles by having a hobby to look forward to where they can escape the constraints of reality and immerse themselves in their own worlds. For many of the examples I've used in this paper they all have a commonality within them, which is the role video games play in cognitive wellness. It's been proven that video games can have a positive effect on critical thinking, learning and neuroplasticity. I found a great article to back up my claims called "Video Games Can Enhance Warrior Cognitive Performance" from a man named Bobby Cummings. In this article he goes over the cognition and how video games can positively train it. Here he states "Can a video game actually improve human cognitive performance? Research at various universities has found that the answer is yes—certain video games can indeed improve human cognitive functionality." As a person plays video games, they must utilize brain functions for sight and sound, as well as problem-solving and reward management. Not only is this pastime important for leisure, but it also requires a person to think critically and engage in the game, supporting a healthy and exercised mind.

The U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps have been using simulators, virtual reality and video games to train Sailors and Marines for years. The Office of Naval Research (ONR) is sponsoring research focused on understanding the cognitive effects that video games have on the human brain. Dr. C. Shawn Green, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison — who previously won a Young Investigator of the Year award through ONR — conducts research on human learning and neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the capacity of the brain to develop and change throughout life. "Anyone who is in a position where they would benefit from greater than normal cognitive control, top-down attention, peripheral visual processing would benefit from play-

ing action games, which are primarily first- and third-person shooter games," Green said. "That's obviously a huge set of individuals, from those involved in combat, to people like surgeons or pilots." Here we can see how video games in conjunction with the military connects to a large portion of our current reality and the men and women who serve our country. ONR's Warfighter Performance Department is sponsoring this research among other programs focused on compiling data on how video games and virtual reality can enhance warfighter performance. In fact, we are now at a point in society where the value of video game skill is being acknowledged. "People who play video games are quicker at processing information," said Dr. Ray Perez, a program officer in ONR's Warfighter Performance Department. "Ten hours of video games can change the structure and organization of a person's brain. In the past few years we have gathered data through research that backs that up. The data will eventually be applied for training to enhance warfighter performance." In the current era of warfare, we are seeing the use of drones and more specifically FPV (First person view) drones, which require a skilled operator using a controller. For many militaries, this means a need for skilled video gamers in their branches, as previous methods of technological warfare are becoming outdated by the single use of drones. Video games and reality are now being intertwined by the usage of human operators using controller-based drones to fly and operate them. These drones then are flown into important logistical targets in battle and can make it difficult to counter at this present time in the current era of warfare. Video games were not invented for this purpose, but human ingenuity has expanded the role they can play. How wonderful that this format is so broad that they can be found in times of crisis and peace.

I hope my words can encourage future curious wanderers that look for a semblance of peace through a therapeutic way of one's hobby. Video games in my opinion are the ultimate form of a way to go have fun while escaping the monotony of stress, responsibility and everything that makes us human. On the other hand, video games in our current reality are now being used in military defense to not only save the current soldiers on the frontline but the civilians outside as well. It can be said that we use video games to defend our right to play them. It's still a form of therapy that can be used by most everyone in the world. For the average person that works all the time, it's one of the best incentives to come home and unwind on a good session of one of your favorite video games, regardless of genre. Our world can be stressful, but there's a multitude of worlds to explore and unwind through the lens of great artists that make these video games. I rate video games and the impact it can have on an

individual one billion video game pixels out of infinity.

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INTERSTELLAR

Strides in Science and Cinema

Keir Morykwas

Ever since 5th grade, I'd been writing papers on stellar bodies and figures in the space industry, so it made sense that I was enraptured the first time I'd ever watched Interstellar. My 8th-grade science teacher had played it to keep the class busy for the last few days of the school year. Despite my weirdly sticky table, the arctic room temperature, and the perpetually noisy classroom, the awe-inspiring imagery quickly captured my attention. At the time, I didn't even know the film's name. I was only able to watch the full movie (with audio and uncut) a few years later. Even nearly a decade past the end of its theater run, I was completely immersed. It would seem the public echoed my fascination.

For some context, *Interstellar* is a 2014 science fiction film directed by Christopher Nolan. Growing up, science fiction adventures like *Star Wars* were very close to Nolan's heart. With Interstellar, he wanted to capture that same cosmic wonder, but keep its roots in reality. To do this, he enlisted the help of Nobel laureate and theoretical physicist Kip Thorne. As the film's executive producer and scientific consultant, Thorne maintained scientific credibility by ensuring the plot was theoretically possible. In an interview with Neil deGrasse Tyson on his podcast *StarTalk*, Thorne discusses his role in ensuring "Nothing in the movie would violate well-established physical laws," or that the film was,

at the very least, rooted in reality (Thorne, Tyson).

Interstellar follows Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey) and colleagues' voyage through a wormhole near Jupiter in order to find refuge off-world from a crop blight that plagues humanity in the year 2067. Per Nolan's request, the film only used concepts deemed possible by our current understanding of theoretical physics. Considering the award-winning visuals, I think that makes this movie especially impressive.

Brand, played by Anne Hathaway, is one of Cooper's colleagues in the film. She believes the power of love will guide her into persevering and ultimately making the right decisions. I'm very disappointed in Thorne for letting that one fly. Inner Yelp reviewer aside, though, I think there may have been something to Brand's (however cliché) line of thinking. We as humans definitely have a knack for persevering, and that may very well be one of the most important aspects in our advancement as a species. I still hold that her point is out of place in a movie so focused on theoretical physics, but I digress.

Interstellar grossed $758.5 million in the box office and won a few prestigious awards, including the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects ("Interstellar (2014) - Awards"). Fresh off the Star Wars kick that took the country by storm, it made sense that Nolan's sci-fi did so well. The success of these science fiction films demonstrates the public's fascination with the cosmos and progress into the space age. The particular success of Interstellar shows we don't need magic to make an engaging narrative.

Interstellar's plot isn't all that makes the film notable, though. Its soundtrack and especially its visual effects make it truly stand out as a trailblazer in the film industry. One particular sequence in the film focuses on a black hole, Gargantua. From CERN Courier's article "Building Gargantua," the Interstellar VFX team's setup is described: "rendering times were up to 100 hours compared to the typical 5–6 hours needed for other films," all to maintain the film's authenticity and to follow through with their major goal of "[creating] images that looked like they might really have been filmed" (Charitos). Additionally, in an interview on Space.com, Nolan attests that this sequence is entirely rendered in a program that follows Einstein's theory of relativity (Pyle). The Gargantua model is one the film is renowned for and heavily contributed to winning the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. Combined with Nolan's and Hans Zimmer's unique approach to producing the film's soundtrack, these sequences (among many others) appeal to the viewer's emotion and add depth to *Interstellar* as a

whole. The processes used were groundbreaking in the industry and are only being made better.

Interstellar's subtle theme of increased scientific understanding echoes the huge strides NASA has made in the field of astrophysics in the past century and communicates a tone of optimism for humanity's future. This theme of universal human progress connects to NASA's upcoming projects such as the Nancy Grace Roman telescope6, a huge step forward following the James Webb telescope (NASA, *Astrophysics*). NASA's Roman Telescope promises to expand our knowledge of the cosmos and explore more theoretical concepts that have baffled astrophysicists for decades. *Interstellar*'s portrayal of humanity's perseverance is reflected by these ambitious projects scheduled to expand our understanding ever more. Humanity's knack for progress and technological advancement as seen at NASA is echoed throughout other forms of media aside from *Interstellar*, but few other examples are equally awe-inspiring.

As is the case in most science fiction films, *Interstellar*'s plot clearly is impacted by humanity's advancement into an age of technology – but what makes Interstellar in particular stand out is the unique and progressive work that went into it to turn the film from a simple form of entertainment into a medium for new filmmaking practices, music compositions, and VFX experimentation. *Interstellar* blazed a trail and paved the way for future media and, together with its themes of perseverance, somehow makes the future seem a little less bleak.

Researching *Interstellar* showed me how vastly impactful the film was in a number of industries and the potential other media holds to have a similar impact. This new understanding I developed as I wrote changed my perspective on the impact of filmmaking and ultimately helped me look towards the future in a more positive, optimistic light. I've come to see Interstellar as a symbol of creative ingenuity and human progress. The combination of two juxtaposed concepts, those of scientific accuracy and human emotion, shows that breaking the mold in any discipline has the potential to ignite progress in that field and better society as a whole. Whether seen in the massive group effort that brought Gargantua to life or in Cooper and crew's unwavering spirit, Nolan's film echoes how humanity's dreams can be catalysts for real progress. The perseverance of the production crew during the making of *Interstellar* and of the characters the film follows reflects our constant striving for perfection – and in the words of Vince Lombardi, "... if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

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HUMANITY'S GUIDE TO THE ORION CONSTELLATION

Rowan Morykwas

I think it's safe to say that we've all looked up at the night sky at some point or another in our lives. You might have even been one of the lucky few to experience the Aurora Borealis, a meteor shower, or a comet, but that's not typically what we see once the sun sets. On an average evening, you'll enjoy an inky sky sprinkled with little twinkling lights and a pale moon. I know, right? How is it possible for anyone to look away from something so… mundane?

For most of my childhood, I was one of the many people indifferent to this view. It was ultimately my fifth-grade science class that sparked my love for astronomy. Before school in the winter months, my mom would drive my brother and me to the bus stop and wait with us until our transportation arrived. While we enjoyed the warmth of the car, we used an app on her phone called Star Chart. Put simply, you waved the device around in any direction, and it would tell you what stars, planets, and constellations were visible. On a cold January morning at 7:10 a.m., I was eagerly waving the phone around in the passenger seat. I remember turning to aim the app out of the passenger window when the phone screen was suddenly enveloped by the image of what appeared to be a Greek warrior (I recognized it due to my then obsession with the Percy Jackson book series). The warrior was larger than most of the other constella-

tions, sporting plumaged armor, a massive shield, and a prodigious club. My moment of awe was quickly cut short as the obnoxiously bright yellow school bus arrived, and I reluctantly gave the phone back to my mom. Later that day, I did some investigating and was finally able to put a name to the constellation I had been gaping at: Orion the Hunter.

Before I go any further, I'd like to give a quick synopsis of the Orion constellation. This star pattern is known as an Equatorial constellation–meaning that it can be seen at certain times of the year from both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres ("Orion Constellation," Go Astronomy). According to the Constellation Guide, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) has officially named ten stars in the Orion constellation. However, only seven of these stars are usually visible in a light-polluted sky: Alnilam, Alnitak, Bellatrix, Betelgeuse, Mintaka, Rigel, and Saiph. As noted by Star Chart–a well-regarded app among astronomers–Betelgeuse, a red supergiant, marks Orion's left shoulder. The hunter's other shoulder is indicated by Bellatrix. Orion's two feet are composed of Saiph and Rigel, and they can be distinguished based on Rigel's superior luminosity. The last three of the seven stars comprise what can be considered the crown jewel of the Orion constellation: Orion's belt. Flanked by Alnitak on the left and Mintaka on the right, Alnilam sits at the center of Orion's belt; these stars constitute the most well-known asterism (i.e., a small pattern of stars) in the night sky. With this in mind, it's important to note that Orion's significance stretches much further than its existence in space: The rich culture and mythology surrounding this constellation allow its beauty to go far beyond the field of astronomy. Beginning thousands of years ago, the stories from Greece, Egypt, China, and Aboriginal Australia surrounding this constellation add to its extraordinary nature.

The variation in the Greek myth of Orion elicits many feelings towards the constellation, ultimately providing more opportunity for personal connection. The Greeks were known for their use of astronomy, and they often connected their mythology to each constellation to explain their existence. After I discovered the not-so-hidden gem that was Orion, it didn't take long for me to realize that the constellation was derived from the Greek myth of Orion the Hunter. However, what I didn't know was that there are many versions of this story. In an article written by Josephine Campbell and published by Salem Press Encyclopedia of Science, many of the myths surrounding Orion describe him as being dispatched by a giant scorpion. Others portray him chasing after the seven daughters of the Titan known as Atlas. Personally, I never liked those stories. They either paint him as arrogant or (for lack of a better word) a stalker. For

this reason, my favorite Greek myth depicts Orion as Artemis's hunting partner and lover. Apollo–the goddess's brother–tricked her into shooting Orion with an arrow, ultimately killing him (Campbell). Heartbroken over his death, Artemis placed Orion among the stars. While these stories allowed the Greeks to unravel the mystery of constellations, they also created emotional ties to these unique star patterns. Instead of only seeing a remarkable stellar arrangement, many are reminded of the mighty hunter Orion and the fantastical nature of Greek mythology, adding to the constellation's appeal.

The Orion Correlation Theory illustrates the importance of the Orion constellation in ancient Egyptian culture, displaying the connection between celestial bodies and the divines. The ancient Egyptians had their own myths surrounding the Orion constellation. James Miller, an author from the acclaimed Astronomy Trek, states that "Orion was originally regarded as the god Sah (Sahu), the 'father of the gods,' with Orion's Belt imagined as a crown upon his head, while the star Sirius was his wife Sopdet (Sothis), a fertility goddess…" These divines were later merged with the deities Osiris, the god of death and the afterlife, and Isis, the goddess of fertility and healing (Miller). As you can imagine, death is a significant topic across numerous cultures, especially when concerning rulers. The pharaoh of ancient Egypt–said to have been divine–was no exception. Because of the Orion constellation's correlation to Osiris, the belt symbolized the journey of the pharaoh to the afterlife. This ultimately sparked the Orion Correlation Theory, which claims that the Pyramids of Giza mirror the orientation of Orion's belt. It's fascinating to think one of the great wonders of the world was shaped by distant twinkling lights. These beliefs made Orion into something more than just a stellar pattern in the night sky; Orion instead represented a hope for a life beyond the inevitability of death.

The story of Shichen (or Shen) the Hunter also adds to the significance of the Orion constellation, forging a tale of heroism that both inspires and heightens its grandeur. As you've probably guessed, I'm going to tell you about the Chinese mythology surrounding the Orion constellation. The Hong Kong Space Museum, an institution that has published scholarly work for almost fifty years, recounts the story of Shichen and his duty to Daxia, a mythical realm in the heavens. Shichen, son of Emperor Gaoxinshi, often fought with his older brother Ebo. Finally, their constant fighting became so vicious (as is the nature of sibling conflict!) that the emperor sent both men away to separate heavenly realms ("Chinese Starlore," Hong Kong Space Museum). After much struggle, Shichen eventually became a part of the cosmos (the Orion constellation), forever protecting humanity from evil with his bow. His duty is noble, and Shichen

ultimately serves as a symbol of strength and protection. Even now, some Chinese cultures look to Shichen for safety. Personally, while I was not raised with the legend of Shichen, I still love this myth. Despite all the many difficulties in his life, Shichen chose to be virtuous, protecting humanity from threats unknown. It may be just a story, but it inspires hope all the same.

In Aboriginal Australian culture, the unique perception of the Orion constellation plays many roles, bonding people through cultural identity. From Cambridge University Press, Duane W. Hamacher, a renowned researcher, and Leesha Eatts, an Aboriginal elder, write that, in the Southern deserts of Australia, Orion–or Nyeeruna–chased the Seven Sisters before being dismembered by a dingo. However, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara in the Western desert refer to Orion as Nyiru, an older man who had the ability to shapeshift (Hamacher and Eatts). This constellation is used for many cultural practices, including male initiation ceremonies, making it an integral part of Aboriginal identity. At the same time, the variation in these legends unveils how diverse these peoples are. The rituals surrounding the Orion constellation deepen family ties and enable these timeless stories to continue for generations. While I don't connect with these myths, I'm astonished that something hundreds of light-years away can form individual ties and influence cultures.

I was eleven years old when I discovered the Orion constellation. Now, at eighteen, I still gaze up at Orion during the chilly winter months. When I look at the Orion constellation today, I observe something beyond the stars: I see Orion the Hunter, forever prepared to strike. I see Shichen and his virtue, prepared to defend humanity with his bow. I see my family, staring up at the night sky in wonder and pointing out each star. To me, Orion is much more than a constellation: Orion is a symbol of my growth, my hopes, and my family. To other cultures, whether thousands of years ago or now, Orion is a tie to their distinct culture and religion. When you look towards the sky in the winter months and see Orion, you might notice the unique stellar pattern or the asterism that is his belt. However, it is our stories and our memories that truly make Orion beautiful. As Helen Keller once wrote, "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart." So, the next time you stare up at the night sky, I encourage you to feel with your heart. You never know what you may discover.

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HALLOWEEN HORROR NIGHTS

Brecken Paynter

Ten years ago, I came across a Halloween event that was taking place in Orlando, Florida. I had opened the video on YouTube and began watching a walkthrough of said event. That's when I fell in love with it and knew I had to experience Universal's Halloween Horror Nights for myself. Only when I was seventeen did I get to live through it, not just by myself but with my dad. For those that don't know, Halloween Horror Nights is an event that Universal puts on every Halloween season where they fill the park with haunted houses and spooky scare zones. A time to come together and celebrate this lively month. Many people flock to this event every year, it's the one time where screams and jump scares are comforting, getting to feel the spike of adrenaline while walking through their childhood horror movies with no risk is truly the whole reward.

Halloween horror nights holds a special place in my heart, it's an event I've been deeply invested in for years. HHN first made its way into my life when I was at my dad's house. We had just visited universal and they were starting to put up ads for their horror event they hold every year. Of course I was too young to go so I sat and watched from behind a screen. Until I finally got to go in 2025. As I was walking around it just astonished me how many people went to this event, but of course that made the lines long. I only recently found out

from a Forbes article that Halloween Horror Nights had swept the golden ticket award's best Halloween event for eleven consecutive years so now the award is no longer offered. Puts into perspective how many people enjoy this event, so much so that they left the golden ticket award in dust. All those people collectively go to that event because they have a love for the same thing- horror and fun. In the chapter, "The world's largest ball of paint" from John Green's book the Anthropocene reviewed he remarks, "I'm not sure why I find it beautiful to devote oneself obsessively to the creation of something that doesn't matter, but I do" (247). It's true, a lot of people go to HHN every year, they obsess over this one event, and I admire it. To be so into something that you can name every single character or new easter egg they have out is truly astonishing. It's not just one small group that goes to this event but thousands of people. Then again I am one of those people so I understand to a certain degree. This year was HHN's 35th anniversary, which means they brought back their original characters from the first time they hosted this event. An article from discover universal puts it best, "For the uninitiated, Jack the clown was HHN's first original icon: a murderer masquerading as a circus clown who traveled the country with Dr. Oddfellow's carnival of Thrills." They have to be one of my favorite horror icons that Universal has, including Chance the clown and her companion Eddie which are found in downtown clown town, if you want to know more about those two, go look it up!

Now, getting to experience this big event with my dad meant more to me then I could say. My mom and dad have been divorced for awhile and during this he found a new family which meant a lot of his time was taken by them, as they lived in Tennessee. As I got older he eventually came around more and taking trips to Universal became our thing. When I asked him if we could go to HHN last year and he agreed I felt another 'us' thing that will hold still for our moments together. In the chapter "Whispering" from John Green he says, "But I have no idea what to say or how to say it. All I can do is shut up and listen. Otherwise, you miss all the good stuff" (197). This has been one of my favorite quotes, it can be applied to anyone in your life. Sometimes the best moments are shared when you actually sit down and listen to what another has to say. It may seem a little out of place, but I added it because it is true for me and my dad. We may not always know what to say or how to say it, but when we go out to events like this and laugh and smile together it's all the 'good stuff' we might have missed if we didn't choose to do it.

Halloween Horror Nights may not be for everyone, but I will always recommend getting to experience it once in your life. One doesn't just enjoy it from

walking through these haunted houses but the memories you make with the people you bring along. Whether eating at the scary diner or walking through a themed scare zone, what you hold onto the most is the laughing-scream your friend or family member has while asking for you to go first. I give Halloween Horror Nights five stars.

ADRENALINE

Sasha-Grace Person

Humanity spends much of our time seeking safety and stability; We find solace in things familiar to us. Yet, we also often seek out experiences that make us feel the opposite. One of my favorite feelings is right before I am about to step on stage, and my heart is beating out of my chest. I have always found excitement in the rush of performing in front of a huge audience and stepping out of my comfort zone. Whether someone is on a rollercoaster, going to a haunted house, or performing in front of a crowd like me, many people crave that feeling of unpredictability. This is caused by adrenaline. Adrenaline is a hormone released through the body's adrenal glands to prepare the brain for stressful, frightening, or even exciting situations. This hormone increases your heart rate, makes you more energized, as well as more focused. But its importance to me goes far beyond its mere biological function. To me, the experience of adrenaline reveals the complex relationship humans have with fear; Adrenaline does this by displaying humanities' natural instincts to survive, as well as why some people crave the feeling of adrenaline like me, while others avoid it.

The most important and interesting function of adrenaline is that it naturally protects us from danger, therefore helping us survive. According to Clevelandclinic.org, "During the fight-or-flight response, you (your brain) perceive

danger. Next, nerves in an area of your brain called the hypothalamus send a signal down your spinal cord, then out to your body“ When our body perceives a threat, we naturally will go into this “fight-or-flight” mode which is caused by adrenaline. This is why when we are filled with these feelings, we often have an increased heartbeat, energy, and focus. While this reaction is useful when facing real danger, the same physical response can occur in situations that are non-life-threatening. During a performance, even though I am enjoying myself, my body still has this reaction as if I am in danger. This contradiction reminds me of John Green's essay “The Yips” from his book *The Anthropocene Reviewed*. He states, “This complicated interplay between the so-called physical and the so called psychological reminds us that the mind/body dichotomy isn't overly simplistic; it's complete bullshit. The body is always deciding what the brain will think about, and the brain is all the time deciding what the body will feel and do.” (145) This essay connects to the experience of adrenaline as our physical responses do not always align with how we truly feel, just like how Rick Ankiel was physically able to throw a great pitch, but the psychological pressures made him unable to do so. While humans have the biological trait of adrenal glands that allow us to sense danger, our senses are not always completely accurate of showing how we mentally feel, which shows the complexity humanity has with their own minds and bodies.

We know that our mind and body do not always align during situations that can be perceived as stressful, but there are specific reasons as to why these “stressful” situations can also be exciting. In the article “Why Danger is Exciting – but only to some people“ by the University of Cambridge it states, “ A study on anticipating risk showed that expecting a win is associated with an increase in brain activity in dopamine regions, whereas expecting a loss is associated with a decrease in such activity. Both drive us to take risks. Wingsuit flying or roller coaster riding are motivated by our expectation of reward – a thrill“ Many people enjoy these activities with high stakes as it makes them feel rewarded and psychologically, they get dopamine from it. I personally relate to this as I enjoy rollercoasters and feel a sense of satisfaction after riding one, therefore processing dopamine. While this is my personal experience, this is not the case for everyone. While I am a high-sensation seeker, people who do not enjoy these activities biologically process them differently. In a study about the connection between sensation seeking and anxiety by the National Library of Medicine, it explains, “This indicates that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety tend to exhibit lower levels of sensation-seeking behaviour. Although the strength of the correlation is weak, it supports the hypothesis that these two

constructs are inversely related." This relation exhibits why those who dislike sensation seeking activities have those reactions compared to those who enjoy them. This fact reminds me of John Green himself and how he expressed his personal experiences with anxiety within *The Anthropocene Reviewed*. Specifically, in the essay "Whispering" where he shares, "I cannot stop worrying that the kids might be late for school, that the restaurant might cancel our reservation, that my psychiatrist will fire me for tardiness, and so on." (195) This essay is related to this concept as he goes on to contrast how his 3-year-old daughter never really worries about anything while he seems to worry about everything. It emphasizes how humanity's spectrum of emotions is extremely vast; Every person has their own perceptions and experiences that influence the way they act and react to the world around them. I believe this is what makes adrenaline so interesting as it shows the different responses to uncertainty.

Ultimately, adrenaline represents the complexities and contradictions of human nature. Even though we are biologically designed to be wary of dangerous and stressful situations, it's common for people to still seek our high-risk scenarios. It is truly fascinating to me how one person's nightmare could be another person's fun night out. I personally love the rush of performing; I also get deathly afraid whenever I have to talk in front of my classroom. My own body feels this same contradiction between excitement and dopamine as well as anxiety and fear because humanity's range of emotions and feelings is a very large spectrum. Due to this, I choose to give adrenaline 3 stars.

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CHAMPAGNE TOAST

Adisyn Phillips

There are some things that you can recognize without even thinking about them. You could smell a perfume or cologne for a split second, and suddenly you're reminded of a person, place, or a moment in life from many years ago, making scent one of the strongest, yet most interesting concepts about our memories. Perfume seems like such a small and even non-crucial part of everyday life, but we may not realize it can hold a lot more meaning than we think.

For me, specific perfumes bring me back to monumental times and people in my life—good and bad. "Champagne Toast," by Bath and Bodyworks, transports me back to one of the hardest times in my life. In the fifth grade, I moved to a new school in a new town. Being the new kid is always hard, but being the new kid at *this* school was even harder. I had never met kids and teachers as disrespectful and unkind. Every day until I started seventh grade, I struggled to crawl out of bed and get ready for another dreadful day of school. The last step of my routine was to drench my clothes and body in the harsh mist of Champagne Toast. Now, each time I shop at Bath and Bodyworks, or just catch a whiff of the infamous "Champagne Toast" while I'm out and about, I think about being bullied by kids and even by the adults who were supposed to be the ones I could "trust."

After Christmas in seventh grade, I transferred from my horrifying old school and began to wear a new perfume, perhaps as a symbol of new beginnings. With top notes of pistachio and almond, middle notes of florals, and base notes of vanilla, salted caramel, and sandal wood, this was my new perfume named "Sol de Janeiro 62." This specific scent brings me back to a time I finally felt free and healed. The "Champagne Toast Era" was long gone. "Sol de Janeiro 62" always reminds me of a time of love, life, laughter, and all things good. I made many new friends (which I didn't have many of before), I was on an amazing softball team, and I had almost every girl's dream: a tall boyfriend. "Sol de Janeiro 62" is my reminder that things do get better, wildly unlike Champagne Toast.

After freshman year, I felt as if I were maturing. I started to do my hair and makeup more, ultimately dressing up more. Although I absolutely loved my "Sol de Janeiro 62," and I still do, I thought it was time for a change. Around Christmastime is when my family starts to blow up my phone, saying, "Send me your Christmas list" or asking, "What would you like for Christmas this year?". If I'm being 100% honest, as I get older, I want less and less. Though I had no clue what I wanted, I realized I needed a new perfume that would be long lasting, physically and psychologically. I wanted something that had zero relation to "Champagne Toast" with similarities to "Sol de Janeiro 62." I researched until finally my dear friend, "TikTok", introduced me to one of Ariana Grande's best perfumes, "Mod Vanilla."

Of course, I'm not sure if it *really* is her best one, I'm just biased. The base notes include vanilla and cacao butter and my goodness, if it isn't the best thing I have ever smelled, I don't know what is. So, to answer all of my family members' nagging, everyday questions of "What do you want for Christmas?", I would copy and paste the link of the perfume and press send. Fast forward to Christmas morning, I noticed a small box about six inches wide and 4 inches tall. I thought maybe it was a Bluetooth speaker, but when I opened it and saw the white box with Ariana Grande's flawless face right in the middle of it, I jumped up with excitement. It was the kind of excitement I might feel over getting a four-week-old puppy. From that day on, I spritzed my clothes and body multiple times a day. I received endless compliments from people asking, "What perfume do you wear?". I proudly answered, "Ariana Grande's Mod Vanilla," not "Bath and Bodyworks' 'Champagne Toast'". This new perfume will always remind me of a time of maturity and perhaps a time where I felt like the "IT Girl."

Now, I could go on and on for days talking about which perfumes smell great

or which colognes smell like a lying, manipulative, immature boy. Each and every scent will remind me, and probably you, of a certain time and place in life. Perhaps, it would even remind the Mesopotamians who started the perfume trend about 4000 years ago. I would like to thank them for their contribution. And I would like to thank "Sol de Janeiro 62" for healing me and "Mod Vanilla" for maturing me. And "Champagne Toast," although you were around for my traumatizing years, you remind me every day of how I shouldn't be treated. So for that, instead of a 0/10, I give you a 2/10.

BUCKEYES

What We Keep in Our Pockets

Dejah Phillips

Ah, yes, the ripe old age of seven: where my conscious develops, and my fear of hickories[1] gains a toll on me. My memories back then are way past in the back of my mind, now puddled in schoolwork and gross responsibilities. Of those golden years, my father would frequently visit the woods every weekend. I would be so curious about where he would go, and I would always wonder why my grandpa was always in the mix.

I ran up to my mom, sticky hands and all, and inquired, "Mama, where did Daddy go?" and, sure enough, I ended up with a ton of clothes to go hunting in. I could barely move and struggled to put the pants on every time because my arms were stuck in place. I would ride on the four-wheeler with my grandpa most of the time, feeling the wind whipped on my face. I didn't know the specifics of hunting; Dad would always just tell me to be quiet and put these massive headphones on for the sound of the gun. I never really liked loud noises, so it was a good gesture when my mom bought them. Before we hit the stand, my grandpa would bend over to pick up something. I was too busy playing in the leaves to notice; all I knew was the crunch. He snapped at me with his hands

1 My great-great-grandma would use whittled down sticks, not enough to leave a mark but enough to hurt like H, E, double hockey sticks, as punishment on all my cousins; however, me being the perfect child, I never got in trouble. Take that, Jaythan.

and outstretched them, revealing a brown, smooth nut as big as a quarter. I took it from his hand, eager to play with it. I was so distracted by it I could barely hear what my dad was waffling about; all I can remember was something "lucky" and "bring bucks all around." Sure, he probably said something important, but I was really distracted by the smoothness of the buckeye. It wouldn't stay like that for long because right now, as I stare at it, it has gotten all wrinkly and disheveled, which, in a way, I think shows how I've grown over the years.

The thing about pride is that it doesn't always roar; sometimes, it wears 47 sized sneakers and has a huge fiberglass nut for a head. Brutus Buckeye, the infamous mascot for the Ohio State University football[2] team, wasn't ever born a legend – he was sculpted with student ambition, community spirit and a deep love for a peculiar nut. The year was around 1965 when Brutus was born, and there was a need for a mascot. There were a couple of students who, well, as the Ohio State's Athletic Department states, "took matters into their own hands and launched an effort to create one." Ray Bourhis and Sally Huber were the original people to create Brutus out of papier-mâché; however, "papier-mâché Brutus was not durable for Ohio weather conditions" (Ohio State). So, Brutus got an upgrade – and a new identity. The name "Brutus Buckeye" was chosen across campus with a little contest, because of course he needed a name. You can't exactly cheer for something called "That Giant Nut Guy"; that would just be ridiculous. But the construction wasn't what mattered to Ohio – it was what he came to mean. In another website under the Ohio State Athletics Department, it talks about how the buckeye "has been the official Ohio State nickname since 1950," so it is safe to say it has been a symbol for over seventy-five years! Brutus became more than a mascot; he became "a symbol of the undying spirit of Ohio State," strutting across stadiums, dancing in parades, and somehow managing to look both ridiculous and inspirational at once. And I'd call that magical. When a community rallies around a literal walking nut, it's not all about logic – it's about that sense of belonging. It's about pride. And pride, turns out, is sometimes made from fiberglass and heart.

But the buckeye's roots go deeper than the bleachers of Ohio Stadium. Way longer before Brutus, and way before scarlet and grey became a battle cry, Native Americans understood the power of the buckeyes – not really as a mascot, but as a tool for survival and connection. UC Master Gardeners talks

2 Now, you're probably thinking to yourself, "Dejah, you're not the type of person to be into football." Why, yes, dear viewer, I am not; however, I have dwelled in some of the football games for Newnan High School. I only went for the band, but can you blame me?

about how they use them for fish: “Native California tribes, including the Pomo, Yokut, and Luiseño, cleverly used the ground-up powder of buckeye seeds to stupefy schools of fish in small streams, making them easier to catch.” It turned a simple nut into something huge for hunting. Because the nut is poisonous unless it’s prepared properly, it required careful knowledge and patience – or, better yet, knowledge passed down by your family, from the source, I’d say. Now, the Nature Center of Latodami goes a little more in depth with a connection point of view: “[They] were used as a food source by Native Americans who boiled and leached them to remove their toxins.” It connected them over a meal, and it was never just a seed – it was a story. A symbol. A bond. Which makes our favorite mascot Brutus less of an oddball and more of a legacy. Knowing the history adds that weight to the whimsy – it turns that school spirit into cultural awareness. Because pride doesn’t begin at kickoff; it begins with understanding where we come from, who came before us, and what it really means to carry the name “Buckeye.”

And yet, the story isn’t just museums and football stadiums – it lives in glove compartments, sock drawers, hunting bags and the palms of people who believe, deeply or even superstitiously, in its quiet power. Almost everyone in the South, or mostly the people I know on my dad’s side, has *that* memory: someone – a grandfather or a family member – pressing that shiny brown nut into their hand and saying, *Keep it with you. It’s lucky*. According to the *ABOUT The River Valley* magazine, many people carried a buckeye back in the day mostly “aimed at the womenfolk. The shape of the buckeye is similar to… well…you can look at the picture” (Sain). I liked this quote because it got a laugh out of me while reading it. I never knew that women would put the buckeye in a boy’s pocket to court them! That is such a strange but intriguing way to tell someone that they’re cute. Plus, the folklore runs so deep even Alabama writer Lee Peacock notes how he learned buckeyes “will make you rich or help you win card games and drawings,” and how it would cure “minor ailments like arthritis, asthma, headaches and rheumatism.” It doesn’t really matter if this magic is real; what matters is that belief is real. That tradition is real. It’s passed from hand to hand, generation to generation, making the simple nut into more of a talisman than a nut. It’s a small reminder that we are part of something older than ourselves. Pride doesn’t always look like a marching band or a packed stadium. Sometimes, it jingles in your coat pocket, warm from your hand and heavy with meaning.

But the thing about childhood is that you don't know you're in it until it's already slipping away. One day I'm at the deer stand waiting for the words of wisdom of my Paw Paw about the lucky nature of the buckeye, and I'd believe him – not because the world has proven it, but because he said it in the voice that made anything possible. Even now, I still own the same old buckeye he gave me, tucked in my purse, dried and wrinkled from the years of me keeping it close. Paw Paw[3] is still here – thank God – but he's a little slower now. Quieter. He would tell me stories I've already heard before, and I'd laugh like it was the first time. A part of me knows…one day it really would be the last with him. I don't know how I'm going to prepare for that; I don't think anyone knows how. But I know when the day comes, it'll be the little things I cling to – his voice and how comforting it was to listen to his stories and little rambles, especially about that dumb little buckeye in his pocket. Maybe that is what the buckeye has always been: a symbol of pride, luck, and even our history. But it was also the fleeting, sacred moments that shaped who I am today. Moments like that pass way too quickly, so much so that I wish I could just freeze in place, just for a little longer. That tiny nut – surely odd and even silly – is a reminder. A reminder to pay attention. A reminder to hold things close while we still can. Because pride isn't just a football game or our culture – it's about what we refuse to forget, and what we love about our inner child. I love you, Paw Paw. I give buckeyes five stars.

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3 I didn't mention before, but Paw Paw is my grandpa, my dad's dad. My cousins and I would always argue what we'd call him because I called him "Paw Paw" and they would call him "Pops."

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ADAPTION

Notes on Being Human

Nikolai E. Sanford

To understand humanity, you really have to set aside the idea that we're built with a fixed design. Being human isn't about staying the same, carved in stone and locked in place. It's about living in a constant state of adaptation. A fluid process where every challenge demands a shift in perspective or a bold leap forward.

We aren't static creatures stuck within strict boundaries. Instead, we are constantly being shaped, challenged, and reshaped by the stormy weather inside our own heads and the changing world around us. Life brings unexpected turns and spaces to evolve. In response, we pivot and re-emerge.

Look closely at how we live, and this ability to adapt pops up everywhere. In the stories we tell, the struggles we overcome, and the communities we build. Our different paths and shared moments are what keep us moving forward together. Through five central themes, we can trace the remarkable ways we adapt and transform:

- Diversity: Honoring the never ending spectrum of backgrounds, identities, and voices that define the human condition.
- Resilience: Finding the strength to bend without breaking when life attempts to limit us.

- Expression: Giving form to our internal experiences through art, language, story, and song.
- Connection & Isolation: Navigating the space between feeling tethered to others and feeling alone while finding ways to adapt through both.
- Drive for Change: Fueling the fire within us to push boundaries, break cycles, and build something better for tomorrow.

Together, these lenses reveal some of the ways humans transform, adjust, and grow to make it through life side by side.

DIVERSITY: ADAPTING INTO INFINITE FORMS



(Pictured Left to Right: Henry McKrow, Theodosa Fripp, Nikolai Sanford)

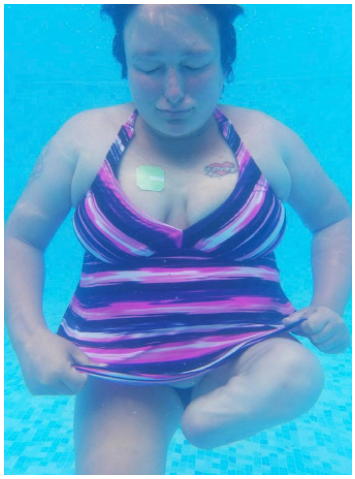
As a species, humans are fundamentally the same. Yet, when you delve a bit deeper, no two are identical. There's something quite poetic, almost comforting, about that. The picture I chose highlights this truth, bringing into focus three vastly different people. On the far left is a man wearing a duck-billed hat, sunglasses, and a full beard. In the middle sits an older Black woman adorned in a blue flannel shirt. On the far right is a person (myself) with dyed hair, a sleeveless shirt, and multiple piercings. We appear stark in contrast to one another, yet somehow we share something profound: we share each other. Diversity in physical appearance, interests, and experiences makes every single one of us unique. But as we navigate life, our paths cross in distinct chapters that bring us together through shared experiences. Within society, these differences are essential. Where one person has a weakness, another's strength complements it, keeping our collective world moving forward. This photo captures that exact concept for me, as it is a picture I took of my friends and chosen family.

The saying goes, “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb,” meaning that while we are born into a biological family, the circle of people we choose to hold close can be just as important, if not more so. Though the weight of chosen family varies from person to person, humans are naturally social creatures who thrive on connection. We may drift from biological families due to trauma, shifting life paths, or personal growth. Along the way, we find people who share no blood relation, yet form bonds that are unmistakably familial. Despite our obvious differences, we are all part of the exact same chapter. That connection is more than enough.

In fact, science confirms what we feel: our differences are what keep us safe. Just as our chosen families create a safety net of emotional strengths, our biological diversity creates a living defense system against extinction. Biologically, if every human immune system responded to threats in the exact same way, a single pathogen could kill us all.

Through natural selection and genetics, our species has evolved with immense immune diversity, specifically within the molecules that recognize and combat disease. When an epidemic strikes a population, genetic variation ensures that certain individuals carry natural resistance, allowing the collective group to endure, adapt, and pass down those evolutionary advantages. Diversity is nature’s secret weapon against vulnerability. It is proof that our differences are not barriers to unity, but the very reason we continue to exist side by side.

RESILIENCE: ADAPTING THROUGH INJURY/RECOVERY AND EXTERNAL NEGATIVITY



(Pictured: Amber Gunthel, car accident survivor, mother, grandmother, and retired teacher)

Humanity’s resilience shines brightest in our remarkable capacity to adapt.

At our core, to be human is not to be perfect, but to possess an unshakeable ability to bend without breaking. Life inherently presents trauma, loss, and physical limits, yet resilience is the silent drive that transforms mere survival into deep purpose, allowing us to reconstruct our lives when the original blueprint is shattered. Those born with physical or mental disabilities navigate a world that was simply not built to cater to them, yet in the face of constant adversity, they continue to find ways to persevere, build meaningful lives, and bring themselves deep happiness and success. Equally inspiring is the strength shown by those who acquire life-altering conditions later in life. Forced to adapt to a sudden new reality, these individuals demonstrate extraordinary dedication as they relearn how to walk, talk, or navigate daily tasks, often in ways vastly different from what was once normal for them.

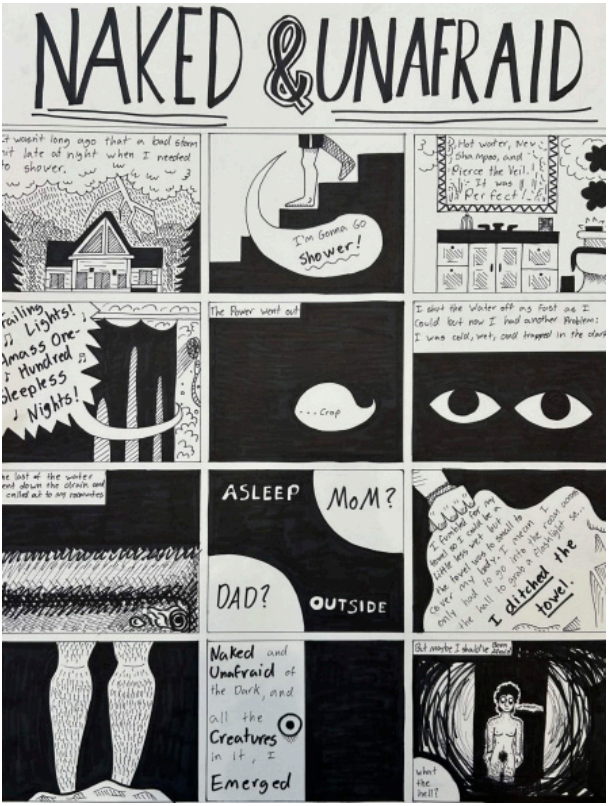
The accompanying photo beautifully captures this enduring spirit, showing a middle-aged woman underwater in a pink, white and black striped bathing suit. Her disability is prominently visible: a below-the-knee leg amputation, yet she moves through the water with effortless grace and tranquility. This image holds deep personal significance for me, as it is a photo of my stepmother, Amber. Amber was the sole survivor of a devastating car accident in her youth. She suffered brain damage and ultimately lost her leg when a skin graft failed. Yet, when doctors, peers, and advisors told her to abandon her educational dreams and accept a limited future, Amber refused to let their negativity and disbelief set her boundaries. Instead of surrendering, she used their doubt as fuel to drive her recovery. Facing a multitude of odds, she taught herself to walk again using a prosthesis while six months pregnant. She went on to earn her degree in early childhood development and spent many fulfilling years as a teacher, using her own life journey to show countless young children that being different isn't a limitation. It's what makes you truly special. Amber's journey speaks not only to physical recovery, but to the invisible, quiet battles fought inside the mind. Beyond her physical amputation, her traumatic brain injury meant she had to rebuild her cognitive abilities from the ground up. In a world that so quickly writes off those with brain injuries or mental health conditions, Amber faced a double-layered stigma: the visible judgment of her prosthetic leg and the hidden assumptions about her mental capacity.

Society often treats neurological differences, whether from trauma or conditions like autism spectrum disorder, as boundaries that permanently cap a person's potential. But Amber's refusal to accept those boundaries echoes the resilience seen across the entire disability community. Autistic individuals and those navigating neurological differences routinely push back against a culture

that equates “different” with “lesser.” They demonstrate that progress is not about conforming to a neurotypical standard, but about carving out paths that honor individual expression and self-determination.

Resilience is important to humanity because it fuels our progress and preserves our hope, showing that through challenges, we continuously evolve and find strength together.

EXPRESSION: ADAPTING INTERNAL EMOTIONS INTO EXTERNAL ART



(Art Piece Entitled “Naked and Unafraid” created by UWG student Kellin Amoroso)

Expression is one of the major ways we share our inner worlds with the people around us. Naturally driven to communicate who we are, humans have always sought out creative outlets like art, music, dance, and writing to tell our stories and process our emotions. Beyond traditional mediums, self-expression is just as present in the choices we make every single day. The aesthetics and personal styles we create, the permanent artwork of our tattoos, and the subtle or bold statements of our piercings all serve as visual reflections of our identities.

Equally important are the intricate parts of sexuality and gender identity labels, which allow us to define and articulate ourselves on our own terms. Through all these different forms of creation and presentation, expression becomes more than just an artistic vision. It is the bridge that connects our individuality to the shared human experience.

At its core, expression allows us to adapt and bridge the gaps between different lived experiences. When words alone fail to express the depth of what we feel, artistic forms provide a common ground where we can empathize and learn to understand one another. Music, in particular, illustrates this capacity for connection. As the popular saying goes, "Music is a universal language." A person can sit down, listen to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, and instantly feel its heavy, rolling minor chords and quiet, mournful tempo carry a profound sense of longing and sadness, all without ever needing to understand a single word of German. The weight bypasses language entirely, speaking straight to our emotional instincts.

In the exact same token, visual art operates through its own universal language. We do not need a written manual to instantly "feel" the foreignness or discomfort that a visual piece attempts to evoke simply by looking at the art style used. Expressing body image and gender identity in this way is a brave act. A way of opening a door to invite others into our daily struggles and vulnerabilities, as well as victories, creating room for empathy in a world that is still learning to understand and accept differences.

The piece, titled "NAKED & UNAFRAID," is a bold black-and-white comic panel that captures an intimate and vulnerable tale. Through each piece of text and illustrations depicting a power outage during a late-night shower, the artwork moves from everyday moments into a reflection on self-perception and exposure. I am grateful to my friend, Kellin, who allowed me to take a photo of their artwork. In this piece, Kellin channels their personal feelings of disconnect between their physical form and their internal sense of self.

Just as *Moonlight Sonata* uses minor keys to convey grief, Kellin's art style uses stark, high-contrast black-and-white ink and heavy shadows as visual minor chords. The sharp linework and stark framing physically communicate the jarring, uncanny experience of being disoriented and uncomfortable within one's own skin. By transforming these intensely personal struggles into a felt visual atmosphere, Kellin successfully brings their innermost thoughts and emotions to the masses, inviting viewers to step into their perspective, understand their journey, and build a meaningful connection with their experience.



(Pictured from left to right: Henry McKrow, Niko Shick)

As inherently social creatures, humans possess a deep, innate need for relationship and community. From our earliest ancestors to modern society, our survival and emotional well-being have relied on building meaningful bonds with others. We naturally seek out connection by gathering with those who share our values, interests, beliefs, or cultural backgrounds, finding safety and comfort in mutual understanding. These relationships fulfill a psychological drive to be seen, heard, and valued, forming the very foundation of our personal identity.

However, in our current age of modern technology and social media, an ironic shift has taken place: while we are more digitally connected than ever, we are increasingly isolated. The convenience of virtual interactions has gradually replaced the depth of face-to-face engagement. It is genuinely saddening to walk into a room or restaurant and see a group of friends sitting together at the same table, completely silent, with their noses buried in their phone screens. In pursuing constant online stimulation, we often trade true intimacy for surface-level engagement, leaving many feeling detached even while surrounded by others.

Yet, dismissing technology entirely ignores the incredible ways it can foster real-world human connection when used intentionally. Far from being a barrier, technology acts as a lifeline for bridge-building and community empowerment. It grants us access to nearly the entirety of human knowledge at our fingertips, lowering barriers to education and self-advocacy that once felt impossible.

Moreover, digital platforms allow like-minded individuals, especially those in

smaller or rural spaces, to find one another and create safe havens. Local organizations like Carrollton Rainbow show this power perfectly: by using social media and digital networks, they connect LGBTQ+ community members and allies across local boundaries, turning virtual outreach into real-world support, inclusive events, and lasting local relationships. Beyond grass-roots organizing, when used in moderation, the internet can serve as a tool for professional networking, allowing people to discover mentors and share career opportunities across vast geographic distances. Technology itself is neither pure isolation nor pure connection. It is a powerful tool whose impact depends entirely on how we choose to wield it.

This photo captures this tension between our natural drive for human connection and the digital barriers that disrupt it. In the image, a young man (friend A) is actively speaking to another person with vibrant purple-dyed hair (friend B), clearly eager to share his thoughts. Yet the interaction remains entirely unreciprocated: Friend B is wearing headphones, looking visibly annoyed and hyper-focused on their computer screen. This striking moment serves as a powerful visual metaphor for our modern condition, illustrating both our desire to reach out to one another and the disconnection caused when technology gets in the way.

DRIVE FOR CHANGE: ADAPTING TO FORCE A NEW FUTURE



(Pictures from Left to Right: Amon Philpot, Michael Conger, Kyra Stout, Niko Sanford, Reggie Holloway, Deven Rudy-Johnson)

Throughout the history of humanity, progress has never been passive. It has been driven by those willing to stand up, adapt, and fight for the future. The

ongoing fight for change is how our world continues to evolve into a more accepting and inclusive society. Major historical milestones, from the Civil Rights movements that fought to dismantle racial segregation, to women's rights and the suffrage movement demanding equal representation, to the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement fighting for love and bodily autonomy, demonstrate our drive to tear down old structures and rebuild a better world.

Yet, this path is not linear, as social progress often faces painful setbacks and regressions. In recent years, we have witnessed significant rollbacks that threaten basic freedoms, such as the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the rapid surge in anti-trans laws and bans, and the most recent Title IX rollbacks. These challenges serve as a stark reminder that rights, once gained, are never permanently guaranteed. They must be actively defended and continuously fought for by every generation.

This photo perfectly shines light on this unrelenting spirit of change and advocacy. It captures a panel presentation at the Georgia Conference for Child Abuse Prevention, where a diverse group of individuals varying in gender, body type, ethnicity, and age stands side-by-side, united by a singular purpose. Every person on this stage is an advocate speaking directly to adult supporters, caseworkers, foster parents, and systemic leaders, delivering needed training on how to properly support transitional-age foster youth as they navigate the shift into independent adulthood.

What makes this moment so powerful is that every panelist shares one identical connection: each of them once navigated the foster care system themselves. They are not presenting abstract theories from a textbook. They are drawing directly upon their own lived experiences, hurdles, and personal trauma. They step onto that stage with a clear mission. To ensure that the system does significantly better for the next generation than it did for them.

Instead of letting their past define them or accepting the system's flaws, these individuals use their voices as tools of transformation. By educating professionals and policymakers on what true support looks like, they are forcing a new future into existence and actively reshaping the Georgia foster care system from the inside out. They prove that when we transform our individual struggles into collective advocacy, we build a legacy of safety and hope for generations to come.

When we look at all these different parts of life, one simple truth stands out: there's no single way to be human. We aren't born into a cookie-cutter mold, and we don't stay the exact same forever. What really makes us human is our incredible ability to adapt. We learn to adjust, grow, and make the best of things

no matter what life throws our way.

You see this adaptability everywhere you look. We see it when we build chosen families with people who make us feel safe and understood, even if we aren't related by blood. We see it in the incredible strength of people like Amber, who took a terrible accident and turned all the doubt around her into motivation to build a full, happy life. We see it in artists like Kellin, who put their personal struggles out there so the rest of us can understand what it feels like to walk in their shoes. We see it when we try to put our phones down and actually talk to each other face-to-face. And we see it in the brave people fighting for foster kids, who are using their own hard experiences to make the system better for the next generation.

At the end of the day, our differences in appearance, background, neurodivergence, or personal history are never barriers to unity. Instead, they make us stronger together. They are the very mechanisms that keep us safe, creative, and moving forward. Where one person struggles, someone else can lend a hand. This leaves us with a deeper question to ponder: *If humanity is a fluid, ever-evolving story written day by day, what chapter are you choosing to author?* Ultimately, being human is a shared journey where everyone's unique struggle and triumph makes the whole picture a little brighter. My overall rating on what it means to be human? A resounding 5 out of 5 stars. Not because the road is easy, but because of our extraordinary, enduring power to walk it together.

THE BLISSFUL MIND OF A POST-MOVIE IMAX THEATER EXPERIENCE

Lucas Silva

On August 8th, 2026, I watched *Spiderman: Brand New Day* in an IMAX theater. IMAX theaters are built with high resolution, large format, and surround sound speakers. The anticipation of seeing this movie, especially in this magnitude of sound and screen, really put this experience on another level. Walking down the long hallway of the NCG theater to this exclusive room with luxurious seating for a theater experience made it all worth the price. After the movie was done, my senses were in overdrive! Hearing and seeing all of these immersive features that you cannot get anywhere else. Almost in a blissful state of mind, where you can really feel, hear, and pay attention to all of your surroundings. This feeling has always been consistent for me after watching a movie in a theater, but it is especially significant after an IMAX experience.

I have been curious as to why these senses are heightened. Could it be the visual and audible senses being pushed to give the best film experience to the viewer? Or could it also be the amount of information, like characters, plot, and theme of the story, in the short amount of time you get from watching the movie?

Audible and visual senses are always the best senses we have as humans; it gives the most information for our brains to understand our surroundings and

helps us expand our perspective of the world. IMAX theaters process increased image resolution by using a frame three times larger than a regular horizontal thirty-five millimeter. By 2011, IMAX announced a 4k 3D digital camera. In 2015, IMAX announced a 2D digital camera that was developed by the same company that made "Alexa 65" technology. The first production to use this camera was the filming of big Marvel films. The camera's resolution in IMAX theaters have only increased from cameras like RED Ranger Monstro, Panavision Millennium DXL2, etc, which are all 8K (8192 x 4320) resolution. Audio wise, IMAX uses a system that has a separate 6-channel thirty-five millimeter magnetic film that locks the sound to the film. In the late 1990s, they switched their system to a hard drive that carries an uncompressed audio file, processed through a method called DTS, creating better sound quality. The Dolby surround sound system is positioned on the left, right, and center behind the screen, the additional center speaker gives an effect of the sound coming from above you for the best immersion. The different techniques, taken from previous inventions, contributed to IMAX's success in making immersive and high quality theaters in cinema history. My experience watching with these features was astonishing; I could see about every pore in every actor's faces and the details in the VFX. The sound quality was so crisp, with every explosion making it feel like I was directly in each scene and experiencing these emotions with all of these characters.

Every movie has characters, backstories, plot, and themes; but IMAX theaters are usually for longer movies that have deep character backstory and plot. Things such as flashbacks require the viewer to recall back to a point in the film; starting at any point whether it be in the beginning, the climax, or towards the end of the film. This tells the viewer to remember this moment for a deeper meaning in the film that makes a scene more impactful for the viewer. During a study using an FMRI machine, researchers asked participants to watch thirty minutes of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. The order of events that was strongly associated with brain activity was shown that these were connected to cinematic pans, cuts, and close-ups. Tightly edited films showed more control on brain activity and eye-movement on open-ended films. These participants showed that the more information received, the more they understood what the story was trying to tell and felt invested.

My experience with this theater made the movie such a different perspective of watching. After I left that theater and movie, I felt the emotions of these characters and understood what the director was telling to the audience and felt that connection to all of the people in this movie. Overall, my first experience with IMAX theaters has gotten me wanting to see more movies in this format. It

was genuinely one of the best movie theater experiences I have ever had. Even with all of my senses heightened and overloaded, it is the best way to watch some of the biggest and action packed movies of the year. I loved every bit of this immersive experience and will absolutely do this again. I would give the post-movie IMAX theater experience 5/5 stars.

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A GLIMPSE INTO HUMANITY

Toni Slan

Humans are weird-shaped animals that have evolved to walk on two legs, yet somehow we have developed consciousness and the ability to question our own existence. Being human is more than simply existing, though. It is about the choices we make, the experiences we seek, and the relationships we form along the way. Humans are naturally curious about the universe we live in, constantly pushing ourselves to explore, learn, and discover new things. We challenge ourselves to see what we are capable of, collect objects to preserve memories, and create traditions and small moments with the people we love. These experiences are just a glimpse of what makes us human. The photographs in this project capture these different parts of humanity through moments from my own life. Although each photograph shows something different, together they reveal what humanity looks like.

"BEYOND THE SHORE"

Two small humans are standing at the edge of a vast ocean. The water stretches beyond what they can see, rushing toward their feet and then pulling back again. The intense waves in the distance show how powerful it is, powerful enough to knock a person down, yet the two boys do not seem afraid. They stand

in the shallows, watching the waves and deciding whether to venture farther in. This moment at El Porto Beach in California, reflects something I believe is fundamental to being human: the desire to explore what we do not completely understand. Humans have a strange relationship with fear; we can recognize that something is dangerous without letting that danger stop us. The ocean is larger, stronger, and less predictable than either of these children, but their curiosity seems to outweigh their fear. That same impulse appears behind them, where a surfboard is visible and, on closer look, a surfer riding the waves. Humans cannot breathe underwater, float for long stretches, or easily fight the pull of the waves. Instead of accepting those limits, we invented the surfboard, which lets us stand on the water and move with it. In this photograph, the board is more than an object. It represents human creativity and our habit of turning obstacles into opportunities. We play, explore, are curious, and seek experiences simply because they make us feel alive, and the beach gives these children and the surfer a space where they can temporarily forget about everything beyond the shoreline. Humans discovered the world by moving toward the things they do not yet understand. This photograph captures humanity in a quiet moment: free enough to play, curious enough to explore, and brave enough to step into the unknown.



"GETTING READY"

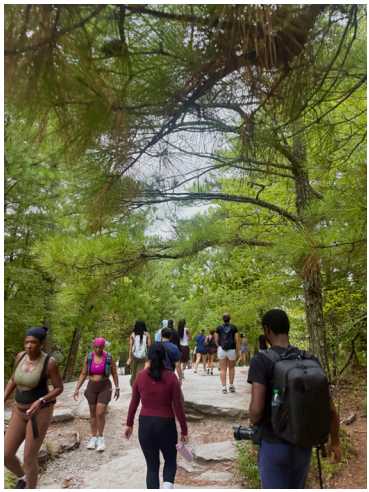
This photo shows two of my friends at camp getting ready for our staff dinner, as we were camp counselors at an overnight summer camp. For my fellow visitors, it is a place where parents send their children to learn new skills and experience independence. Naturally, we became close throughout those ten weeks. We slept in the same cabin only a few feet away from



each other, spent nearly every day together, and shared both the responsibilities and the little moments that came with camp life. In this photo, both of my friends are using the same mirror and helping each other get ready, which represents a small but meaningful part of humanity and specifically girlhood: caring for one another through ordinary moments. Getting ready together, doing each other's hair, sharing makeup, laughing, and helping each other feel confident may seem insignificant, but these are the moments where friendships are built. There is something unique about girlhood in the way these simple acts can bring girls together. We learn how to do our hair from each other, borrow each other's clothes, share makeup, compliment one another, and help each other feel beautiful when we might not feel that way on our own. These moments may seem superficial, but they create a sense of comfort and belonging that can last long after the moment is over. Humans have always depended on relationships, but girlhood shows how much of that connection can be built through the smallest acts of care. What makes this photo meaningful to me is that nothing extraordinary is happening. We are simply getting ready for dinner, yet years from now, these ordinary moments may be the memories we remember most. Maybe that is part of what makes girlhood so meaningful; growing up is not only about the big moments, but also about the countless small moments when we learn who we are alongside other women.

"THE NEED TO REACH THE TOP"

Humans walking on rocks in a forest of trees. This photo shows a group of people walking the trail of Stone Mountain on an early Saturday morning. For my fellow visitors, Stone Mountain is a massive quartz monzonite dome located near Atlanta, Georgia. I chose this photo because it shows an intriguing aspect of humanity; our desire to push our own limits. We humans willingly choose to make ourselves uncomfortable by walking up a huge mountain, sometimes in complete darkness at 5 a.m., even though we could easily stay home and be comfortable. Why do we do this? Part of being human is wanting to accomplish things that are difficult so that we can prove something to ourselves and, sometimes, to other people. Finishing the



hike gives us a sense of achievement because we can look back and say, “I did that,” even though there was no requirement for us to do so. This desire to challenge ourselves can also relate back to our human competition, as people compare how fast they finished, how far they went, or how difficult the trail was. While I was walking this trail, I realized that I was doing some of the same things. I wanted to be able to say that I had hiked Stone Mountain, but I also cared about how fast I could do it and what that accomplishment might say about me. This reveals something interesting about humanity; we often create challenges for ourselves simply so we can overcome them. Maybe this also shows how closely humans are connected to the rest of the animal world. Although we often separate ourselves from other species, humans are still competitive creatures. Like many animals, we enjoy testing our abilities, competing with others, and proving that we are capable of more than we thought.

“TRINKETS”



A collection of simple knickknacks I got while traveling - keychains, photos, mugs, and other souvenirs. This photo is a collection of things I bought on my trip to Las Vegas this past September. While these objects might look like simple souvenirs, I think they reveal something much greater about humanity. This brings up the question, why do humans collect seemingly useless objects while traveling? It is not like I am going to use the mug every day, and the rest of my souvenirs will probably sit on a shelf collecting dust. So why did I buy them? The meaning is actually in the word itself: souvenir. I bought them for the experience and, more importantly, to remember it. Humans seem to be afraid

that our memories, experiences, and moments will eventually disappear, so we attach them to physical objects. It is almost as if we do not completely trust our own minds to preserve the past. Instead, we create physical reminders that we can look at years later and immediately connect to a specific place and time in our lives. When I bought these souvenirs, I told myself that I was buying them so I would remember that I went to Las Vegas. In reality, my brain will probably remember the trip without them, but I still wanted something I could hold onto. This reveals how much humans value their experiences and how strongly we want to preserve the parts of our lives that we are afraid we might someday forget. In a way, souvenirs are not really about the objects themselves; they are physical evidence that a moment in our lives happened and that it mattered to us.

"A SUMMER WE'LL REMEMBER"



Three girls are standing on a hill looking at the pink sunset. This photo was taken on the last day of camp, and to me, it perfectly encapsulates the end of our ten-week summer. In front of us is the same field where we spent countless days working, training, and watching the campers grow, but this time we were standing there knowing that we had made it through. Camp was not always easy; there were long days, late nights, stressful situations, and moments when we were exhausted and questioned how much longer we could keep going. But through all of it, we had each other. We had people to laugh with when things got stressful, people to complain to when we were tired, and people who understood exactly what we were going through because they were going through it too. I think that is one of the most interesting things about humans; we are able to get through difficult experiences because of the relationships we build along the way.

This photo represents more than just the end of a summer job. It represents the friendships that made the hard days easier and gave us something to look

forward to. Looking at this photo reminds me that sometimes getting through something difficult is not just about how strong you are on your own. Sometimes, it is about having people beside you who make you want to keep going.

Looking at these five photographs together, I realize that humanity is not found only in the extraordinary moments of our lives; it is also found in the small moments that we might otherwise overlook. Each photograph captures a different part of what makes us human, but they are all connected by our desire to experience, remember, connect, and grow. We explore because we are curious, challenge ourselves because we want to know what we are capable of, preserve objects because we do not want our experiences to disappear, and build relationships because we were never meant to experience life completely alone. Being human is not about reaching some final definition of who we are. Maybe it is about constantly creating those moments, stepping into the unknown, climbing toward the top, holding onto memories, laughing with friends, and finding people who help us keep going. Humans are flawed, curious, emotional, and deeply connected and perhaps that complexity is what makes us human. An outside observer might find humanity far too complicated to deserve either five stars or no stars at all, I would imagine they give it 3 stars.

“WE HAVE FOOD AT HOME”

Isabella Soza

White Castle stands as the first fast food hamburger chain. Billy Ingran, not only founded this chain, but also started an era that would cause America’s health decline, becoming one of the world’s unhealthiest nations on earth.

White Castle’s original menu aligned with the American dream of fast, consistent, and affordable food. Customers fell in love with the chain’s greasy, salty, deliciousness. Later on though, the moderation at which Americans consumed fast food expanded excessively. In an article studying this epidemic, Yaling Zhao says that fast food “has been associated with obesity, central opacity, metabolic disturbances, cardiovascular disease, systemic inflammation, and oxidative stress.” This long list of negative fast-food effects describes what America is becoming. Instead of making home-cooked meals, Americans have shifted to buying cheap, fast food on the go. While this has become a symbol of convenience, is it really convenient for the body?

As a child, I watched all my favorite Youtubers eating fast food obnoxiously. The greasy crunch of the fries and the juicy bites of the chicken nuggets looked amazing, but the most appealing part was seeing people who I thought were cool eating it. After I watched the videos, I would go ask my mom for fast food and always get the same predictable response: “ We have food at home.”

At age ten, I felt devastated to hear that response. Like yes, we have food at home filling the pantry, but why can't we just go buy something fast, convenient, and delicious. My mom's answer really made me wonder why my immigrant parents were so different from the average American ones. While, at that time, I would be mad for not having fast food. I never knew the phrase "we have food at home" would shape my values and make me grateful for how I was raised. On the rare occasion we did eat fast food, the experience felt like a reward. I remember absorbing all the details of what felt like Heaven: The greasy smell of the food, the posters of food on the wall, the playground with the little crumbs on it, and even a menu filled with all unhealthy food options. I never paid that much attention, but I also took in my mom's daily home-cooked meals: the smell of Latino seasonings in the air, the sound of the rice cooking, the sizzle from the lightly oiled meat and the sound of joyful salsa music playing in the back. I didn't know at the time, but my parents were not just protecting my health. They were also preserving my heritage and the flavors of where I came from.

My mother has always made home cooked meals; even today I come home to a home-cooked meal. My younger self didn't take it into account that much, but myself today could not be more grateful. As I have grown to see the sad reality of the world, I now realize that not everybody's parents really care or understand about the importance of their body's nourishment. I guess for me it was very normal because in my Latino culture, parents normally make balanced home cooked meals every day. Growing up I've seen how not everybody's parents have this culture. Sadly, not everyone gets home cooked meals as soon as they get home.

Thinking about my life today instead of just when I was a child makes me feel an even greater sense of thankfulness. Now that people my age are starting to drive and get cars, they are more free to choose what they want to do. That freedom means that they are able to go buy fast food without their parents nagging in their ears that it is bad for their health. Now, when I walk into school, all I see is people with food from Chick-Fil-A, Dunkin Donuts, or McDonald's in their hands. And while the smell of this food in the middle of class tempts me to go buy some the next morning, I think about how eating this every day is damaging their bodies.

I've grown into the person that would 100% choose eating a home-cooked meal over any fast food. While doing it partly for my health, I also love it because I can preserve my culture so my children and many future generations will know and love it. And for the health part, who doesn't like feeling their best? Person-

ally, I will always feel my best when eating home-cooked meals. "We have food at home" was never meant to make me feel denied love, but to make me feel the most love possible by protecting my health.

I rate "We have food at home" 5 stars.

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MATTE BLACK FRAMES

Cedric Stewart

My thick lensed matte black boxy glasses have watched me go through a lot over the past several months. They've watched me change, grow and find where I belong. I'm not just talking about the changes you go through during adolescence; I'm also talking about the kind of changes that come with growing up and becoming an adult in today's reality.

My Matte Black Frames were with me when I was done with my senior year of high school. The transition period from high school to a four-year university was one that I wasn't totally prepared for. I didn't know what I wanted to do, sure I had an idea of what profession I wanted to grow into, but forensics is mostly hyped up in movies and tv shows, and it isn't really ever that thrilling, at least not positively. In high school the aimless drives, parties and late nights out with my boys enjoying our newfound freedom was nice, but I didn't want to waste four years of college doing that. My glasses watched me realize something: I wanted to run. I wanted to be an athlete. I couldn't go to school and waste my talent reminiscing on high school sports. So, during the summer, I worked, and I worked, and I worked. Months spent perfecting my craft and working on my body so that I am in the best physical condition I can achieve. I fought for that spot on the roster; I made sure the coach knew of my presence

first day on campus.

My glasses were with me when I arrived at Tusculum University. Tusculum was a small campus of about a thousand people (mostly all being athletes or Graduate Assistants) in sweet ole' East Tennessee. Greenville, TN, I thought man this place is filled with so much life and love. I thought to myself that I finally did it, I achieved my dream of becoming a college athlete.

My frames were with me during the best month of my life, October 2025. I had everything going for me, fresh off a great summer, collegiate athlete, and Freshman in college. It only got better as I surrounded myself with amazing people. Tusculum had something that no other schools that I visited had; we had community and a strong sense of it too. I mean there was hospitality everywhere, from thrift stores to local businesses all the way to major corporations; That "southern hospitality" ain't no joke.

My glasses saw the beginning of a promising season, my ability in the weight room was unmatched, my presence on the track was known, and I was doing great academically. My downfall was the expenses; our school raised tuition about $9,000, and I just couldn't afford school without going into debt. I had a good year all around, but it wasn't enough for my conference, so I couldn't get any money from the athletics department. My glasses were with me when i was begging Financial Aid and Student Support Services for possible grants or scholarships. In the end, we just couldn't afford an out-of-state university. I packed my things.

My glasses were with me as I witnessed my first college graduation, seeing my favorite seniors and masters' students earn what they worked so hard for. My glasses were there as I tried to make a broken relationship work. Long distance plus poor communication just wasn't ideal. Our characters were too different for me to want to force things. These memories are sharp and clear from when I attended Tusculum, to coming to UWG and reading John Green's writing, the Lascaux Cave paintings. Green says, "This is a memory that you cannot return to," I interpreted this as how my own memories' are now in the past, unable to return, but also just to reminisce and look back on. For a while, I thought that these memories would all be things of the past trapped in sorrow. The reality of it is that they are, but there's so much good to look at. I just needed to open my eyes.

My glasses were with me when I realized that leaving Tennessee wasn't me giving up or losing the life I'd imagined for myself. The truth is you can't always understand what you're seeing as you're living it. My glasses were with me when I accomplished my dream. My glasses were with me when I experienced

the best months of my life, when I met and laid eyes on the most beautiful people I now call family. My glasses were with me when I tried to mend a broken relationship. My glasses were with me when I found love again in the most unexpected places. My glasses have always been with me. They witnessed the distance grow between who I was and who I am becoming.

I've owned my glasses long enough now that they are less of an accessory and more of a witness. They've watched me fall in love, start college, lose direction and eventually find it again. I give my Matte Black Frames 5 stars for durability, 5 stars for surviving my poor decisions and 5 stars for reminding me that seeing clearly has nothing to do with eyesight.

OREOS

Ollieya Teamer

Growing up, Oreos were my favorite type of cookies, and I felt that every time I ate Oreos, I needed a cup of milk to dip them in until they became soggy. I know it's strange, but Oreos are kind of like tomatoes. Tomatoes are technically fruits, but most people wouldn't associate them with fruits at first thought. Tomatoes are often paired with other vegetables or used as a vegetable on its own. And even though most people may know that it is a fruit, most wouldn't go out of their way to put it into a fruit salad, which is how I used to think about Oreos. I knew Oreos were cookies, but when compared to chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, or a sugar cookie, it just didn't seem the same to me. And I wouldn't put it in a cookie platter. There's something about Oreos that stood out to me from other cookies, and that thing was the structure.

Oreos are three-layer sandwich cookies that consist of two chocolate cookie disks with a sweet creme filling in the middle holding the sandwich together. I enjoy being able to take apart Oreos if I want to eat each layer individually, and I also like that I can taste each layer of the cookie if I decide to eat it all together as a sandwich. With other cookies, you may not be able to taste each component throughout the entire cookie because the mix-ins, like chocolate chips or raisins may not be evenly distributed throughout the cookie.

I also know that Oreo isn't the only brand to have sandwich-structure cookies, and it surely isn't the original.

Oreos were first released in 1912 by the company, Nabisco, as a "new and original cookie." However, four years earlier a company by the name of Sunshine Biscuits released this kind of cookie with the name Hydrox. Hydrox cookies include two chocolate cookie disks held together by a white creme filling, just like Oreos. It was never confirmed whether or not Nabisco based the Oreo after the Hydrox cookies. But, despite the suspicions of the origin of Oreos, they were able to surpass Hydrox cookies in both popularity and sales.

And even though we may know the brand as "Oreo" today, the cookies went through a couple name changes throughout its existence. At the release in 1912, the cookie was named Oreo Biscuit, then nine years later, in 1921, the name changed to Oreo Sandwich. After another sixteen years, in 1937 the cookies became Oreo Creme Sandwich. Finally in 1974, Oreo Chocolate Sandwich Cookie was decided on as the name. Nowadays, as we know, most people just refer to the cookies as Oreos.

Over the years, Oreos have become one of my favorite snacks to enjoy, especially since they're not only a sweet treat on their own, but they can also enhance other desserts as well. You can find Oreo cakes, cupcakes, ice cream, cheesecake, and more. My favorite way to enjoy Oreos is with ice cream. When I'm at home, I get a bowl of vanilla, add in a few Oreos, then crush and mix everything together in the bowl. Or sometimes, I'll go to Dairy Queen and get an Oreo blizzard. I love the crunchiness and the flavor of the Oreos mixed with vanilla ice cream because the Oreos make it ten times better.

People continue to find more ways to expand and use Oreos, and so does the company.

Oreo has collaborated with brands such as Reese's, Coca-Cola, Sour-Patch Kids, Swedish

Fish, Star Wars, and more, to create new Oreo flavors. In the collaborations with these brands, Oreo created a new creme flavor in place of the usual white creme. In the Reese's collab, the creme was made of peanut butter with Oreo crumbs mixed into the filling. The Coca-Cola collab Oreos include one red Oreo disk with one classic Oreo disk, and a Coca-Cola flavored filling.

Oreo also has created variations of the cookie without collaborating with other brands. Some of the flavors Oreo created includes Golden Oreos, which has the usual white creme filling, but instead of chocolate flavored disks, the disks are vanilla flavored. There's also Chocolate with a chocolate creme filling and the usual chocolate cookie disks. Oreo's variations go beyond flavors as

well, like the double stuff and Oreo Thins. The double stuff Oreos are just like the original Oreos, except there is double the creme filling. And the Oreo Thins features thinner cookie disks and less creme in the center.

In my life, I've had different feelings towards Oreos. There were times when I wouldn't eat them unless I had milk because I thought that they were too dry, then I shifted to not liking Oreos at all, and lastly, in the past five years, I've came to love Oreos in a multitude of ways. Knowing the history of the Oreo does make me question why the creators never confirmed whether or not they took inspiration from Hydrox. Despite this, I still enjoy Oreos and want to continue experiencing the many variations the brand has to offer. I rate Oreos 4 out of five stars.

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LAUGHING

Katie Thomas

I have this friend, Ella, who I met this semester. She's very kind-spirited, sweet, and smart. A wonderful girl to be around! Always a party when I'm with her. One thing that really stood out about her as we started to hang out more and got to know each other was that the girl had a humor about her. I mean, jokes are better than mine are sometimes. At times I thought she was funnier than me. We sometimes go head-to-head with jokes to see who would burst out laughing and give up because the other person's joke or comment was the funniest. But besides all her jokes or comments that were better than mine or our friends, I noticed one main thing. I have not laughed so much in my life till I came to college.

Laughing can really be a reaction to anything. Not only can a laugh be used in a funny conversation, but it can be introduced in a moment of seriousness, exaggeration, sadness, and anger. Once, my Stepdad was ranting on and on to me and my mom about the crazy and ignorant things his best friend did and spoke. I would listen to him the whole time and just laugh and he would say "I'm serious". Robert Provine, a psychologist from the University of Maryland, found that we as humans laugh the most when talking to our friends. In fact, we're 30 times more likely to laugh at something when we are with other people.

So, what does this mean to us? Laughter is a universal way we connect with our family and friends. We use this gesture to communicate with each other and make the memories we share memorable. No matter where we may be or where we are from, we all use laughing to connect with each other and strengthen our bonds. Among me and my close friends, laughing is one of the main things we do when we hang out or talk on the phone. Most of the time we aren't even telling each other jokes or being comedians. We could be having the most serious conversation in the world and start laughing and swinging our bodies around for the way someone said something. This is what I feel makes up friendships. This is what builds our relationship together. Moments like these make me think of the mighty power a laugh or simple laughter can have. It reminds me and my friends that through it all, thick or thin, we can always laugh together, and everything will be fine.

Laughter. I mean, everybody should know what it is. We all do it! We might even laugh at the same time as others in another part of the world. But the thing about laughing is that even though it happens often, it doesn't always last forever. When you laugh at a joke, you and whoever hears this hilarious joke laugh till they can't anymore. After that moment is over, it's mostly back to usual. But, Like French Actor and Film Director, Gerard Jugnot said, "Laughter is like a windshield wiper, it doesn't stop the rain, but it allows us to keep going". When things get blurry or busy in life for me, I tend to long for or turn towards things that will make me laugh or give me a sense of happiness. When I have that chance to laugh. I try my best to cling to it and enjoy it while I can. I try my best to enjoy the moment as if it will heal every piece of stress, sadness, or anxiety I feel. It's what I use to keep me going. It's what I use to remind me that there's hope and that everything will turn out on the other side. It pushes me to keep trying my best. To keep smiling. In John Green's book *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, John Green states in his essay 'Whispering' that "It was about reminding me that we were okay, that I didn't need to be Airport Alex." This quote calms me because it gives me this sense of stillness and hope that we don't have to let the things we endure or go through consume us and flip us every which way. In the middle of the chaos, we all need or have something that reminds us that we will be okay. For me, in my life, laughing is one of them.

Laughter is more than just a reaction to the things around us and our world. It's a way we, as humanity can and are interlocked with each other. Doesn't matter what we're laughing at, serious, funny, or sad; it all connects deeper than we think. As the goofy and funny friend in all my friend groups, laughing is definitely deeper than a reaction to me. Laughing for me currently is like a

lifestyle. It gives my body this stream of adrenaline where I just let my giggles out. As if I'm letting out my current worries and fears from my body. When you've had a bad day, what do you turn to, to make it better? What cheers you up when a family or friend can't? What makes you feel like you're eating your favorite ice cream flavor or eating your all-time favorite dish? When things get rocky, what helps you back up? When it's rainy, what makes your side sunny? For me, it's laughing. I rate laughing five stars.

GLASSES

Maya Thompson

Helplessness is a feeling all humans will experience during their time on earth. It's a feeling we as people get anxious about experiencing, to the point where some rely on medication simply to not feel that way. Although, sometimes I question if it's actually helplessness that we're feeling, or if we would rather drown in our sorrows instead of calling for help to be pulled out of the water? I was diagnosed with myopia at age 7. At 18, I have so many pairs.

Everyone has their own "glasses". Something they need, or keep with them 24/7. Each and every person also has their own "myopia", maybe not something as severe, but it's something you're able to put those glasses on top of, and see the world clearly. Regardless on what it is, we rely on it. We instinctively help ourselves when it comes to whatever our "myopia" could be, so why is it that we freeze, duck, and hide when we're expected to advocate for ourselves in new situations? The only solution is to refine, and build upon what we've done to help ourselves in the past. When we rely only on our glasses, and not the ability to use them, things get messy. "Lawn maintenance doesn't involve much physical contact with nature. You're mostly touching the machines that mow or edge the grass, not the plant matter itself" (Green 168.) instead of spending our lives in peril because we lost the one thing that allowed us to see,

reshape our mindset. What did we learn from our glasses? Even if we don't have them, what can context clues provide us?

If glasses didn't exist in this day and age, you would go through life without the ability to read people's facial expressions, watch movies, read, cook, clean, and notice important details inn every-day life .Myopia is a visual condition that causes nearsightedness and blindness, but has the capability of increasing close-up vision. Prior to the invention of glasses, people who were visually impaired often had that side-affect of myopia. General survival was still hard without glasses, but many took the increase in close-up vision as an opportunity to better their difficult lives. They took on jobs that required small, detailed artistry. "Ibn al-Heitam was the first to suggest that smoothed glass might assist those suffering from visual impairment" (ZEISS). In the action of bettering his life, Ibn was able to find a small, short-term solution to a lot of visual issues millions suffered with.

In the act of advocating and bettering ourselves, change is incredibly intimidating. We might have a knee-jerk reaction to putting on our glasses in the morning, but what happens when squinting doesn't change the fact that the prescription needs to be updated. "For many people, nearsightedness progresses during childhood and the teen years" (Flores). During your core developmental and impactful years, with myopia, your vision only gets worse. At what point do we book the appointment to get our glasses changed? Recently I lost my glasses. I struggle with myopia, so I had to resort to using an expired prescription. It felt weird to have to squint, bend forward, and hunch over my textbooks to read things I could just glide over if I had my normal glasses on. But I knew what I actually had to do. "I don't just need the light of that star to survive, I am in many ways a product of its light" (Green 96.)" Although John Green wasn't exactly referring to the same thing, the point still stands. We're aware of what we need to do, and we use our glasses even when we don't have them. Instead of reliance, maybe it's time to start thinking of our glasses as a map, or a guide rather than something we base our survival on.

My inability to read normally has been stressed, and during stressful times I tend to clean to clear my head. While cleaning, I ended up finding my glasses. A lot of people view advocacy as a cry for help. Something for the weak and fragile, when in reality it's quite the opposite. I chose glasses because, really, what else can clear up foggy vision? I think I would give "Glasses" four out of five stars.

WIKIPEDIA

Laila Thigpen

In 2001, Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger founded Wikipedia. They intended it to be a community drafting space for their polished, peer-reviewed site known as "Nupedia." However, as more and more people contributed, it quickly outgrew its more structured predecessor. Within a year, over 20,000 articles were submitted by people worldwide. Wikipedia succeeded because everyone could contribute freely and easily. Nupedia failed because of its lack of collaborators. This unexpected triumph proves that a diverse community can help things grow.

When I was about eleven years old, I used Wikipedia to learn more about the books I loved. I often researched these books more than I actually read them. I have a fuzzy memory of skimming a Warrior Cats article and then pausing at References. I saw more links than my little mind could fathom. I spent hours clicking and clicking at the blue letters. I was whisked away by detailed essays and sprawling articles. I experienced wonder in its geekiest form. Before I knew it, it was 12 AM. I never completed my homework that night, but come on. I had fun.

I found it again this morning. Reading the Warrior Cats article on my Mac instead of my cruddy old phone felt so different. After scrolling through some of

my favorite sections, I clicked "View History" and saw something unbelievable. This niche page had over 500 contributions. As a teen with a math fluency disorder, I find that number hard to fathom. Nevertheless, it delights me. It makes me think of how much people cared. They weren't required to do this. They weren't paid to summarize the lore of Firestar. They just did.

However, the thing that moves me most about Wikipedian culture isn't that many people do contribute. It's that many people can. Wikipedia is the community park of online encyclopedias. Nupedia, on the other hand, is the pristine country club that nobody visits anymore. If you wanted to write a Nupedia page, you'd have to collaborate with experts and copyeditors through a detailed, seven-step peer-reviewing process. If you wanted to write a Wikipedia page, you'd just click a button and start typing. Your editors and fact-checkers could be anyone from a man with a PhD to a very passionate nerd.

While the diversity of contributors is the very thing that makes Wikipedia unique, it causes many to doubt the validity of its info. Sites like this can be a potluck of the world's biases and misconceptions. Many advise against using Wikipedia because you never know if you'll learn the truth or someone's confident lie. One of my old elementary schools banned it outright. If you tried to access one of its articles, your screen would be bombarded with a big red X. I remember finding it mind-boggling that an educational site would be banned from an educational facility. Many teachers see any and all usage of this source as an unforgivable sin. They believe its biases make it irredeemable. However, an Oxford study claims that Wikipedia is less biased than Britannica. Author and Professor Amy Bruckman even calls this site "the most reliable form of information ever created." But Harvard University rightly emphasizes that many bad actors still submit untrue information on purpose. This kind of contradiction leads us to an even more nuanced question: Can we believe anything on the web? Probably not, but that's the price of trusting media. You can't believe everything you read in a book either, as books are also products of imperfect people. There is no truly unbiased source.

And yet we use Wikipedia to refine our knowledge, advance our projects, and quench our curiosity. A diverse community is not perfect or unbiased. But a diverse community can help things grow. I give Wikipedia four and a half stars.

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THE CHAMPIONSHIP RINGS

Madilyn Veatch

A bold gold ring with black jewels on top and ruby red accents. The edges write national champion, the middle lays a bull. The 2nd ring is a thin, delicate gold band matching the statement ring. Around it are red and black jewels with state champions written. This championship ring is more than just a piece of jewels. Championship rings became an official, standard part of the high school cheer nationals culture during the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA) established the first National High School Cheerleading Championship (NHSCC) in 1980, there was no single "first day" for rings. Instead, the tradition evolved through different stages across college, school, and all-star programs(Champ Trove). The important thing about being a part of history is how we are persisting. In these highly competitive environments, an unexpected outcome is the result of a team's ability to preserve.

Freshman and sophomore year I had a coach that had a really negative effect on me and my love for cheer. I ended up having to get knee surgery because I tore my meniscus causing another step back. I wasn't sure if I could cheer again. I sat out months of games, practices and comps, in agony as I watched my peers do what I love. Our coach was eventually fired, and I was at cross roads on what to do. Having to sit out for so long made me realize

my journey with cheerleading was not done. I decided to transfer school and start new. In the Anthropocene Reviewed by John Green his chapter Jerzy Dudek's Performance on May 25, 2005 he talks about Dudek's changing how he approaches things and it gets his team the win. " There are times in your life when you do things precisely as you have practiced and prepared for them. And then there are times when you listen to Jamie Carragher. So in the most important movement of Jerezy Dudek's professional life, he decided to try something new." (The Anthropocene Reviewed, pg.105) Jerezy Dudek could've done what everyone expected him to do, but would that have won him the game? I did a Dudek too and didn't go with the easy and safe way out. If I let these setbacks get to me I probably wouldn't be a National and State champion.

It's every cheerleader's dream to even step out on those mats and to win both is crazy. The statistics of winning states are around 5 to 15% chance as said in GPBs sports article. The odds of winning nationals are even lower at 1 to 5% (Flo cheer). My team the prior year won too making it even more competitive and challenging. My senior year we had practices 5 days a week and were doing the hardest routine I've ever done and the work paid off. Getting handed those gold medals and rings not once but twice was really exciting. To falling our first day and not even expecting to get a second chance, to placing silver in gameday and running to compete traditional, minds all over the place. Then competing the best routine we've done of the season and to come out with 1st place. And getting the opportunity to help design the rings made it even more special. In the Osprey Observer written by Nick Nanas he writes about my team's nationals journey. My coach stated "they have practiced 5 times a week since June". The author also goes on to state that "The NHSCC is regarded as one of the largest and most competitive cheer events in the country." This shows how impressive it truly was. In the Anthropocene Reviewed by John Green his chapter The yipes talked about failing. "Rick Ankiel sank all the way down to the lowest minor leagues of professional baseball. He missed the 2022 season with an injury, then blew up his arm completely in 2003" (The Anthropocene Reviewed, pg.141) Rick Ankiel decided he wouldn't pitch anymore and switched to outfield. He thrived there and won many championships. If my team let our failures from the 1st day of competing or from those tough practices where we were barely hitting the routine because of how challenging it was get to us, we wouldn't have gained these accomplishments.

To me these rings mean more than just winning a competition. Every time I look at it, it reminds me of all the dedication and memories that went to earning it. The gold, red and black details make it one of a kind. I'm proud of what I

accomplished and these rings remind me of all the effort I put into cheerleading, and how worth it, it was. I rate my rings 5 out of 5 stars.

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FAVORITE ITEM

My iPhone

Morgan White

Launched in the summer of 2007, the iPhone was a new mobile creation that merged the original design and concept of the widescreen iPad (Goldstein) and internet communicator into one small and efficient device. This invention was made by Steve Jobs, and its original intention was to make communication quicker, easier, and more efficient. Apple even predicted it would sell ten million phones in six months and quickly surpassed that goal within only four months (Phillips). Fast forward ten years, over 1.3 billion of these have been glued to people's hands all over the world (Phillips).

However, this phone became more than just a communicator; it slowly began to intertwine itself within people's lives, making it an essential need for them throughout the years. This product, with all its competitors and apps inside, has changed society in big and small ways- especially how we communicate, work, travel, and even play (Phillips). It has catapulted us and our interactions with the world around us, and in doing so, has connected and intertwined everyone (Phillips). More than that, it has become a necessity for our species and has captivated us so much that we often forget how to function without it.

Because of my parents' divorce, I was given my first iPhone when I was

seven so my mom could contact me without talking to my dad. I thought the phone was the coolest thing, despite having no iCloud account or SD card in it. All I could do was play one or two games and text my parents, but to me, it made me feel automatically more grownup. Yet, I did not need it to have a good time, I still enjoyed drawing, playing, and running around outside. The phone was simply and merely something I used when I needed to, not something I felt like I couldn't go without. Unfortunately, as I grew older and began to rely on it more, that mindset and attitude towards my phone began to change, and I started to slowly form an attachment and reliability to it. More than that, it started to affect how I viewed myself, whether it was positive or negative.

Throughout my teens, my phone was and still is the main way I communicate with people and stay up to date with current events. Don't get me wrong, I am a chatterbox and love to talk to any and every one; but I often experienced waves of uncertainty about myself and instinctively hid behind my screen. I always felt like I could be more myself that way because it did not require me to have a face-to-face conversation with someone, and I could be my true self without fearing the physical reactions or rejections of others. This fearful mindset most likely stemmed from the period of quarantine throughout the Covid era and the constant isolation from others that came with it. Because of this, basic conversations and human interactions were cut off and negatively plummeted mine and my generation's social skills in a time where they were so necessary for our development. As a result, we became heavily reliable to our phones and simple technology quickly became indispensable to our society. Some would even say they need their phone more than their wallet (Phillips). Even deeper than that, many critics even went as far as to say, "This reliance on our phones has also prompted an explosion of data on where we are, what we buy and everything we do online. [That] is likely to be the biggest concern for iPhone users in the future" (Phillips). This concern is because of the issue of not only companies having users' private information but also our attachment to these devices makes us willing to give any and all information up because we cannot function without them.

Not only do phones bring separation anxiety, but also feelings of insecurity that are frequently more intensified with the additional aspect of social media. These platforms are apps that connect users across the globe while also welcoming many different opinions and social pressures to be formed. In response, this can easily influence and negatively impact young people, as it did for me. Constantly, I would scroll and see someone prettier, skinnier, or funnier than me, which caused me to believe I would never achieve this normalized standard of

perfection. But in doing that, I realized that being perfect is something no one can reach and only leaves you utterly disappointed. Additionally, the constant negative comments and opinions from peers can be overwhelming at times, especially if it is directed towards a situation involving you or remarks being made towards you. These posts and criticisms can get into people's heads, causing them to overthink and begin to become unsure of themselves and their importance. So, while phones connect people with others, and are a vital part of our society, they also bring elements of hostility and bad habits that can cause significant harm to young minds.

However, despite all these negative side effects of this technology, there are also many positive elements to it that make it my favorite item I own. Especially now that I am in college, staying in contact and having constant communication with my friends and family are very vital to me and helping me stay grounded during such a huge shift in my life. Even though I am so far away from people, my phone makes it so easy to continuously nurture my relationships and further grow them. It allows me to stay in contact with others no matter the distance and makes me feel close to them even when I am not. Also, it has been a huge life saver in helping me stay organized and on top of my calendar throughout very busy and hectic times. My phone reminds me of when to do things, when assignments are due, and what I have come up during the week. As someone who is very easily distracted, this helps me remain focused and on top of things during chaotic weeks when I become overwhelmed.

Along with those benefits, the familiar element of social media has also brought me some evident positives despite the negatives. These multiple outlets have helped me connect with new friends, make creative posts, watch entertaining videos, and even stay informed as to what is going on in the world around me. These platforms, while having a hurtful effect sometimes, have in a weird way helped to also grow my confidence, even though it does not always appear that way to me. It has taught me to take all the negatives circulating online and change them into something positive and understand that while there are tons of cruelness online, there will always be more people supporting me than hurting me. My phone has proven that to me through sweet messages I receive, uplifting comments, and lengthy phone calls that always make me feel better than when I answered it. Oftentimes the negative aspect of the iPhone is always heightened, and the positives tend to be overlooked. While I catch myself doing that exact thing at times, I believe how you use your phone is a huge denominator in the way it makes you feel. That is why I usually do my best to scroll past all the harsh news and try to keep my feed as positive and

uplifting as I can.

Altogether, the relationship between me and my phone is definitely a complicated one and is not a linear thing. The ups and downs that come with it make it my favorite thing because of what all it has taught me and showed me about myself. What started out as something used for pictures, videos, and quicker communications has turned into a key element in mine and others' everyday lives and routines. They are implemented in our jobs, relationships, politics, and headlines, which not only makes them relevant and very important to society, but they are a key thing in our world, especially mine. Yes, that atmosphere of the iPhone can be positive and negative, but that is what makes it interesting and continually relevant and vital in our society. With that in mind, I would rate this favorite item of mine four stars, because the many uses and perks it brings to everyone's lives will always outweigh the bad side effects.

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A SNOOPY FIGURINE

From Collectible to Connection and Memory

Christie Wooten

When my father passed away, I went through his possessions to divide among my siblings. His most prized possessions were squirrelled away in drawers and cigar boxes scattered throughout the house. Most of what I found were assorted knickknacks that did not hold much meaning for me, so I set those aside for my siblings to sort through. What I kept were the things I knew he treasured most: his collection of pocketknives, Vietnam War memorabilia and campaign medals, and canisters and books filled with photographs that traced the course of his life.

While riffling through an old Army-issued plastic medicine box, I came across a photograph of my father beside another man, both in their Army dress uniforms, arms slung across each other's shoulders. The man looked familiar, one of my father's closest friends, though younger here than I remembered him from the last time I saw him at my father's funeral. When I flipped the photograph over, an inscription read, "Snoopy and Red Dog – 1972." For most of my childhood, I had only known his friend by his nickname, Red Dog. My father, though, was known by many names: Doc, Tex, Sonny, to name a few. But the one tied to the happiest memories of my childhood was Snoopy.

My father was my first best friend. I was his youngest daughter, the apple

of his eye, and he was my hero. We shared many interests, but holidays were always special to us. Of them all, Christmas meant the most. Every year, we would set up a ceramic Christmas tree together, carefully placing each tiny colored bulb into place. When we finished, we would make hot cocoa and sit down to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. If you asked me to name a favorite Christmas memory with my father, I could list so many my voice would go hoarse. But I cannot tell you a single thing about that first Christmas after he passed.

A few months after that first Christmas without my father, I came across a Snoopy figurine in a retail store. When I saw it, I could hear a familiar voice in my head, Red Dog's, calling out, "Hey, Snoopy," followed by my father's response, just as natural as it had always been. When I reached for it, I was immediately pulled back in time. I could see the glow of the television, hear the soft music from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and feel myself sitting beside my father again. In that moment, the figurine stopped being a simple collectible. It became a connection between memory, identity, and the version of my father that still exists within those moments. After purchasing that first figurine, I found myself returning to that feeling, and, over time, began collecting more Snoopy figurines. The collection grew quickly, eventually reaching more than 30 pieces, each one carrying a piece of that same connection. What first appeared to be a simple collectible revealed itself as something more. Although a Snoopy figurine may appear to be an ordinary object, it functions as a symbolic one, demonstrating how everyday possessions carry memory, shape identity, and preserve personal relationships over time.

The meaning of the Snoopy figurine becomes clearer when I consider how people connect identity to the objects they hold onto. Russell W. Belk, a leading scholar in consumer behavior, known for his research on how people form relationships with material objects, argues that people do not simply own objects but instead come to see them as extensions of themselves, noting that "people regard possessions as parts of themselves" (Belk 139). At first, this idea seems abstract, but in the context of my experience, it becomes immediate and concrete. The figurine did not feel new when I picked it up. It felt familiar, as if it already had a place in my life before that moment. Because Snoopy was my father's nickname, a name that carried his personality and the way others knew him, the figurine was already tied to him, and because of that, to me. Snoopy was no longer just a character, but a reminder of my father and the relationship that continues to shape how I remember him. The figurine does more than prompt memory; it becomes part of how I understand that connection, shaping not just what I remember, but how I see myself within those memories. Belk

further suggests that "our attachment to memory-evoking possessions grows as we accumulate experiences from our past and reduce the stock of pleasurable experiences likely to occur in our futures" (Belk 149), a claim that feels especially meaningful in the context of loss. The figurine does not replace my father, but it gives form to something I can still hold onto. What once seemed like a small decorative object now carries more than I ever expected. It holds memory, but more than that, it holds connection.

If objects quietly hold memory, they also shape how that memory is experienced in the present, which helps explain why the Snoopy figurine does more than remind me of my father; it brings me back to him. Gary Cross, a historian who studies consumer culture and the relationship between memory and material goods, supports this idea when he argues that "we need objects to evoke memory" (Cross 233). Memory is not something we reach only through thought, but something activated through experience. The moment I picked up the figurine, it felt less like recalling a memory and more like stepping back into it, where the familiar details, the glow of the television, the sound of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and the presence of my father did not need to be recreated because they were already there. Cross explains that these kinds of memories are "context-dependent and highly sensory" (Cross 233), which helps explain why they feel so immediate and real. He also points to the role of nostalgia, suggesting that memories like these do more than remind us of the past (Cross 11). They connect it to the present and create a sense of belonging, which is what gives the figurine its significance. It is not only tied to memory but also to the sense that the connection is still present, shaped long before I ever picked it up. Watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* together was part of that connection, a tradition shared far beyond our own home. The special, which first aired in December 1965, became one of the most widely recognized holiday programs (Schulz 31), reinforcing Peanuts and Snoopy's place in American culture and in traditions like the ones my father and I shared. This shared cultural context deepens the figurine's meaning, allowing it to carry both personal and collective memory at once. At the same time, Cross explains that collecting "has become a way for the many to recover personal remembrances of childhood and youth" (Cross 234), which helps explain why one figurine was never enough for me. What begins as a single object grows into something more, not from a desire to collect but from a need to preserve those moments. Each figurine becomes another way of returning to them and holding them in place. The Snoopy figurine does more than represent memory. It allows me to step back into those moments and experience them again, giving them shape and permanence and

showing how objects do not simply preserve memory, but actively shape how it is experienced and understood over time.

My connection to the Snoopy figurine may seem personal, but it extends beyond my own experience into a broader cultural and historical context. It becomes meaningful not only because of what it represents to me, but because it carries the weight of a shared cultural history. By the time my father was coming of age, Snoopy had already become a widespread cultural presence. Sarah Boxer, a journalist for *The New York Times*, notes in her obituary for Charles Schulz that Peanuts appeared in "more than 2,600 newspapers in 75 countries" (Boxer), demonstrating the comic strip's global reach. During this period, Snoopy himself evolved from an ordinary domestic dog into something more recognizable, even described as the "cuddliest dog on the planet" (Michaelis 387). This transformation was intentional. Charles Schulz continued to develop Snoopy's personality and imagination, drawing in part from his son Monte, whose model airplanes helped inspire Snoopy's imagined battles with the Red Baron, complete with a pilot's helmet and his perch atop the doghouse (Schulz 62). By the mid-1960s, Snoopy's identity as a World War I flying ace placed him within a narrative that blended imagination with the imagery of war (Beecroft 104). Over time, those imagined battles became widely recognized, even influencing real fighter squadrons during the Vietnam War (Beecroft 106). During that same period, my father was serving two tours in Vietnam, a time marked by uncertainty, conflict, and emotional strain. By the mid-1970s, as U.S. involvement in Vietnam came to an end, the comic strip was being read by more than 100 million people each day, reflecting how embedded it had become in everyday life (Ball 112). This overlap connects Snoopy's imagined battles to the lived realities of soldiers like my father, giving the character a resonance that extends beyond humor or entertainment. Blake Scott Ball, a historian who studies American culture, media, and politics, explains that *Peanuts* "did not focus on the strategy or politics of war but instead captured its emotional and psychological weight on American society" (Ball 94). In this way, the comic strip functioned not just as entertainment, but as a cultural space where emotional realities could be expressed indirectly. It gave shape to feelings that many, especially veterans like my father, struggled to articulate (Ball 114). The contrast between Snoopy's imagined battles and Charlie Brown's everyday life highlights the gulf between the soldier's experience and the civilian perspective at home (Ball 100). That tension helps explain why Snoopy mattered during that time, not just as a character, but as a cultural language for expression. Because of this, the figurine no longer feels like a simple keepsake, but a layered symbol

shaped by the same historical moment my father lived through, carrying both personal and collective history, and showing how objects can hold meaning that extends beyond the individual into a shared cultural experience.

When I picked up the Snoopy figurine in that store, I did not realize I was holding something that already belonged to my past. What I saw at first was a familiar character, but what I recognized, even if I could not yet explain it, was my father. "Snoopy" was never just a comic character to me. It was the name my father answered to, the voice I still hear, and the presence tied to the moments that shaped my childhood. The figurine did not create that connection, but it made it visible. It gave form to something I had always felt but could not hold. In that way, it does more than preserve memory. It shapes how I understand my past, my identity, and the relationship that continues beyond it. What once seemed like a small, ordinary object now carries something larger, not because it has changed, but because I have come to see it differently, a reminder that the things we hold onto are never just objects, but places where memory and connection continue to live, even as we keep changing alongside them.

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GENERAL EDUCATION