VISION (NOUN) — THE ACT OR POWER OF SEEING;
ALSO, THE ACT OR POWER OF IMAGINATION
THE EXPLOSION OF HORIZONS

Once upon a time in a former life, I was in a movement class at drama school in London. Almost as soon as we arrived, our instructor had us warming up by (among other things) taking a run at the wall, placing one foot on it, leaping up and jumping back to land on our feet again. A strange warm-up, but simple enough. We all did this several times.

As class went on, he developed the exercise. Get higher up the wall by placing two feet. Then, from that new height, fall backwards, trusting classmates to catch us. Finally, instead of the trust fall, he had us go into a tuck, the physics of which whipped our bodies around faster than our fears could stop us, and we landed on our feet having just done a backflip off the wall.

If walking into that class anyone had said we’d be doing backflips in 30 minutes, we’d have laughed them out of the room. Yet there we were, with a new skill and a clear lesson—one that had nothing to do with backflips. You didn’t know you could do that. What else don’t you know you can do?

I love that explosion of horizons, when presumed limitations are detonated by experience, and we suddenly find ourselves in a much larger world.

The kids at Bassick High School in Bridgeport are going to build that, it’s a notion so big, so incontrovertible, it feels almost like a taunt. And then, with the mentorship of some students from SHU’s School of Engineering, they do it. Whether or not those kids grow up to work in aviation or even become engineers, the lesson remains: There is a larger world waiting, wanting you to set sail.

Indeed, that call to shake off the shackles of what-is-known for the possibilities of what-might-be is exactly what distinguishes us as humans ("Is This Art?" page 36).

Of course, horizons aren’t only about the future. It can be convenient to stand on a new shore in time and ignore a history we can no longer see, especially if it’s an uncomfortable one. Still, we must not be afraid to acknowledge the present’s ties to a selectively remembered—or oft willfully forgotten—past ("A More Whole Truth," page 9).

There have always been those who insist the world is flat, figuratively or otherwise. But humanity moves forward under the sail of those who know it is not, who feel the call of more in their bones, who know horizons are not the edge of what is, but rather the beginning of what might be. We hope you’ll enjoy some of their stories in this spring issue, and, what’s more, that you’ll take inspiration, perhaps choosing a horizon of your own to explore—and set sail.

Bon voyage!

TIMOTHY DEENIHAN, EDITOR
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DIFFERENT COASTLINES. DIFFERENT CULTURES. DIFFERENT METHODS OF CARE. SHU NURSING IN DINGLE, IRELAND. STORY, PAGE 12.
From nostalgia-steeped novelty to fully functioning, nationally competitive performing arts center, the SHU Community Theatre is the little theatre that could.

SINGER-SONGWRITER Cliff Eberhardt glanced around the green room after another powerhouse performance in the cross-country On a Winter’s Night tour with fellow folk luminaries Lucy Kaplansky, John Gorka and Patty Larkin.

“This place knocks it out of the park,” he announced. “The crew’s fantastic. The food’s fantastic. The dressing rooms are fantastic. The sound was amazing.

“Better than any other place we’ve been on the road.”
The SHU Community Theatre opened its doors September 3, 2021— itself a leap of faith as the country was still in the midst of a pandemic. Now, already halfway through its second full season, the theatre proves its tagline, “Entertainment & Education in Concert,” with every event—hosting household-name artists, building loyalty for signature series and classic films and offering enrichment programs for kids and lifetime learners.

“It’s dizzying,” says Director Matt Oestreicher. “We’ve gone from zero to 100 very quickly, and we’re happy with the results.”

The roster of artists who’ve stopped by the SHU Community Theatre is impressive. Folk icon Judy Collins, Grammy winners Los Lobos, comedian Paul Reiser and centerfielder-turned-musician Bernie Williams have all graced the stage. SHU’s own film guru, Susan Gaar, and others have introduced everything from Hitchcock and Christmas classics to timely documentaries about the late Anthony Bourdain and the national culture wars in schools.

In fall 2022 alone, the 400-seat theatre logged eight sellout crowds with talks by award-winning writer Fran Lebowitz, a sold-out evening with SHU and SNL alum Kevin Nealon’73 and returning favorites The Doo Wop Project.

New endeavors include theater memberships, a Christmas show with the New York City Opera, Fairfield’s One Book One Town author talk and new play development and production through the Bridge to Broadway series. A live food-centric podcast with actor Chris Sarandon, the most recent of which featured a sold-out show with beloved Chef Jacques Pépin, is developing a following.

“So many people are coming to us with ideas,” Oestreicher says. Beverly Balan, president of the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, says the theatre is “bringing new vitality to downtown” with the glow of its iconic art deco marquee and its ambitious schedule.

“People often dine before or after a performance, walk up and down the streets to shop or discover new and exciting places in Fairfield,” she says. Much of the credit goes to the theatre’s team of seasoned professionals. During a four-decade career in theatre, Front Office Manager Gazi Lindemann has performed on Broadway in Phantom of the Opera and Anything Goes. Production Manager Joseph Gray served as head of stage at the world-famous Apollo Theater in New York City for nearly 30 years. Technical Director Tim Wallis is a musician who has toured Europe, Australia and Indonesia. Manager Maureen Lucier, a former house manager of the historic Italian Hall Center for the Performing Arts in North Carolina, worked at Bridgewater’s Bijou and Downtown Cabaret theaters. The newest addition to the team is Development Director Laurel Lee who has worked at both Ridgefield Playhouse and Wall Street Theater.

And Oestreicher is no slouch. In addition to leading the SHU team, he’s a longtime member of the musical team at the Apollo Theater, he records all the music for the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and he’s toured with Lady Gaga.

SHU students, such as graduate assistants Madeleine Robbins and Tomas Keocek, get in on the act. Robbins, a theater graduate assistant since August 2021, has programmed and licensed films, worked the box office and sound and light booth, created promotional videos and filmed and edited several of her director of photography reel, as being a professional DP is one of my goals after graduation.”

Grad assistantships are just one way SHU’s Horizons National, a nonprofit program that promotes equity in education. This summer, they’ll debut Movie Maker Workshop, a summer filmmaking intensive for teens. And they’re not done yet. A highlight of 2023 will be the debut of the new high-tech projection that allows the theatre to screen first-run films and provide top-caliber equipment for student premiers.

“We’re becoming a successful entity. We’re competitive,” Oestreicher says with a contented, if work-weary smile. “It feels like we’re on the right track.”

Sarandon’s live episodes. “Working at the theatre has definitely helped me make industry contacts,” she says. “The filming specifically has given me content to add to my director of photography reel, as being a professional DP is one of my goals after graduation.”

Grad assistantships are just one way the theatre connects to SHU. The stage has provided performance space for student music ensembles and dance fundraisers, as well as faculty recitals, a ballerina-focused collaboration with WSHU-FM, talks with SHU film scholars and an upcoming environmental series with Catholic Studies.

In summer 2022, it welcomed 150 children in SHU’s Horizons National, a nonprofit program that promotes equity in education. This summer, they’ll debut Movie Maker Workshop, a summer filmmaking intensive for teens.

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“We’re becoming a successful entity. We’re competitive,” Oestreicher says with a contented, if work-weary smile. “It feels like we’re on the right track.”
SHU’s Tribal Land Acknowledgment raises the bar on facing the past.

She dove into the research, not only exploring the history of Fairfield (itself a translation of the Unquowa name for the area) and Bridgeport, its indigenous peoples and their interaction with early colonizers, but also taking a look at the statements released by other universities and institutions in the region. One thing she noticed in those statements was a glaring, nearly uniform omission. Everyone recognized the indigenous people as the original inhabitants of the land, and most expressed varying themes of appreciation and inspiration to those people. But none of the statements seemed ready to admit that anything bad had ever happened to those original tribes. It was as if the genocide, forced removal and cultural erasure of those tribes had never happened—as if they had simply never been here, and now they weren’t, and that was that. The omission made the statements seem incomplete and hollow. It was as if the genocide, forced removal and cultural erasure of those tribes had never happened—

For her part, Senior had recently been speaking with her mother on a break from school, explaining how she was considering what was left of her time at Sacred Heart and how she hoped to leave a mark as a student. “It would seem that spiritual power is something they share,” she wrote in the draft version of her acknowledgment. But none of the statements seemed ready to admit that anything bad had ever happened to those original tribes. It was as if the genocide, forced removal and cultural erasure of those tribes had never happened—as if they had simply never been here, and now they weren’t, and that was that. The omission made the statements seem incomplete and hollow. It was as if the genocide, forced removal and cultural erasure of those tribes had never happened—as if they had simply never been here, and now they weren’t, and that was that. The omission made the statements seem incomplete and hollow. It was as if the genocide, forced removal and cultural erasure of those tribes had never happened—as if they had simply never been here, and now they weren’t, and that was that. The omission made the statements seem incomplete and hollow.

So it was that when Reid asked for a few minutes of Senior’s time after class one day, wondrous if she’d be interested in helping craft a land acknowledgment for the University, Senior, a descendant of the Kanien’kehà:ka tribe whose father still lives on the Kahnawà:ke reserve, jumped at the chance.

Orenda Senior ’23 was a junior when Prof. Gerald Reid spotted her name in the roll call on the first day of his North American Indians class. An anthropologist who’d been working and doing research with and among the people living on the Kahnawà:ke reserve located on Mohawk territory in southern Quebec, he immediately recognized the indigenous reference as Mohawk in origin (“Mohawk” being the nonindigenous name for the Kanien’kehà:ka people) but didn’t want to single out the student on the very first day. Still, he hoped an idea that had long been lying in wait might finally have its moment.

There is a growing impetus among institutions in the public eye to acknowledge our country’s complicated history when it comes to the land on which those institutions reside. But authoring and crafting those acknowledgments is not without its own complications. In addition to the potential legal implications is the simple question of authenticity—is the statement being made in response to a momentary fad or is there a genuine desire to recognize the impacts of colonization throughout history and into the present time? And if the latter, how do you prove you mean it?

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There’s a new breed of student on campus …

STUDY HOUNDS. THE MOST POPULAR STUDENTS ON CAMPUS ARE THE ONES NAMED AFTER FOOD. MEATBALL (LEFT) AND GNOCCHI (ABOVE), HARD AT WORK.

Dolce, Meatball, Mozzarella, Gnocci and Cannoli all sound like delicious dinner fare. Actually, they are the ooey-gooey names of five puppies being raised and trained as service dogs by Sacred Heart students.

Victoria Vaillancourt ’23 casually strolled into SHU’s annual research festival last fall, with no idea that her world was about to be upended—in a great way. She had seen the emails asking for volunteers to raise service puppies and had made a mental note of it, but it was the display at the festival that spurred her to action.

Now she has Meatball. Coming from a family with four dogs, Vaillancourt thought she was prepared. Now she laughs at that assumption. “Raising a service dog is different from raising a pet,” she says. Even a simple ‘no!’ must be reconsidered. “If he’s doing something that he shouldn’t be, we can’t just give him a negative command. We need to give him the opportunity to do something better,” she explains. “So I tell him, ‘ Meatball look, ’ which means he and I maintain eye contact and it distracts him from what he was doing wrong.”

Growing up, Megan Haggerty ’24 had seen college students training Seeing-eye dogs on the campus of the University of Delaware, where her father worked. “It was always something I wanted to do,” she says. As a dog lover and psychology major learning the benefits service dogs offer psychiatric patients, the opportunity was perfect. “There are challenging days and easy days,” says Haggerty of working with Gnocci (intentionally spelled without the ‘h’). “You have to be stricter with a service puppy.” For instance, she notes, if you drop a piece of food on the floor, it’s important that the puppy learns to ignore it. “You can’t have a service dog in a restaurant begging for food.”

Gnocci attended class a couple of times with Haggerty last semester. “At first, it took her the entire class period to settle down. Now she settles in five to 10 minutes. She’s still, of course, an 8-month-old puppy. We play a lot, but she also has learned when it’s time for her to work and train,” says Haggerty.

Maggie Gillespie ’24 is a part-time raiser. Her responsibilities include going to all the training sessions attended by Meatball and Gnocci as well as Mozarella (aka Mutz), handled by Jordyn DeFalco ’23; Cannoli, handled by Gillian Cunningham ’24; and Dolce, handled by Raquel Tranchina ’26. She also cares for the puppies when needed. “Many of the trainers are Division I athletes,” she explains. “When
they need to go out of town, I take care of the dog."
Currently, the puppies are working on some basic obedience training. "Meatball stared for a full minute, I was so proud," gushes Vaillancourt. They need to walk on a loose leash without pulling, practice the proper way to go through doors and learn to ignore excess stimuli.

But it’s not all puppies and rainbows. The students started when the puppies were between 8 and 12 weeks old. Housebreaking and other training means getting up in the middle of the night, no matter what the weather, as well as surviving the phase when you are their favorite chew toy (along with your shoes, clothes, furniture and homework).

Partnering with Abby Hill, founder and director of The Exceptional Sidekick Service Dogs in Newtown, the Canine Cognition Lab, run by Dawn Melzer and Deidre Yeater, offers three credits for each semester a student works with a puppy. The dogs then go on to their forever homes as psychiatric service dogs for adolescents and young adults, performing specific tasks such as retrieving medicine or placing a calming paw on the lap of someone having an anxiety attack.

"It’s hard to tell kids who want to pet her that they can’t," says Haggerty. "But then you get to explain to them that she’s learning to help someone."

"The first couple of weeks are the hardest," says Vaillancourt. "But it’s the most rewarding experience I’ve ever had."

"RAISING A SERVICE DOG IS DIFFERENT FROM RAISING A PET."

There are an estimated 500,000 service dogs in the United States.

Source: zebra.com

"THERE IS NOTHING NOBLE IN BEING SUPERIOR TO YOUR FELLOW MAN; TRUE NOBILITY IS BEING SUPERIOR TO YOUR FORMER SELF."
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

MORE THAN THE LUCK OF THE IRISH

SHU in Dingle may be student nursing’s gold at the end of the rainbow.
“To go abroad for an entire semester is very rare in nursing; because we have to meet the requirements of our accreditation, we don’t even let our students take classes at other universities in the U.S.,” says Heather Ferrillo, Ph.D., MSN, APRN, FNP-BC, CN, undergraduate nursing chair at Sacred Heart. And yet that’s exactly what’s happening in a one-of-a-kind program that allows SHU’s Davis & Henley College of Nursing students the opportunity of a full semester abroad at the University’s campus in Dingle.

To achieve this, the Dingle program has been structured as a “mirror image” of the one back home. “The two nursing courses offered, Health Assessment and Pathophysiology, were taught using the same information in the same style as that used for the rest of the students who were completing the courses in the U.S.,” says Ryan Powers ’24, who is a global ambassador, classroom learning assistant (CLA) and vice president of the Men Entering Nursing Club at SHU. “This meant that as far as our academic schedule went, we were still on track to graduate as normal, even being gone from campus for a whole semester.”

What’s more, the nursing students in Ireland do their clinical placements while abroad, which means not only do they keep pace academically with their counterparts back home, but as far as requirements for graduation are concerned, they actually return to campus ahead. The program started as a two-week Nursing Leadership course, but quickly grew to also include the current full-semester program accommodating 40-42 students in upcoming terms. And it’s competitive. With a 100% recommendation rate from graduates, it’s an attractive option for nursing students for more than the obvious reason of travel while studying abroad. Doing those clinical placements in Ireland means the student nurses have the unheard-of opportunity to not only study nursing, but to study an entirely different philosophy of nursing.

As Ireland has a primarily socialized medical system, and preventive medicine is vastly more cost-effective than treating an established illness, Irish nurses are known for delivering unparalleled preventative care. If a primary care patient is on the path to developing diabetes, rather than run dozens of diagnostic tests or begin prescribing medication, an Irish nurse is more likely to prescribe an exercise and nutritional program and then follow it up with a trip out to their patient’s farm to ensure they’re taking care and eating right (yes, house calls are still a thing in Ireland). The goal is to stop disease in its tracks, either before it starts or in its early stages, through the power of preventive care. Even in private hospitals in Ireland, like Bon Secours Hospital in nearby Tralee where Sydney Barone ’24 did her clinicals, that difference in care is evident. “I observed the differences between a nurse’s routine, the use of equipment, medication administration and preferred nursing interventions compared to those I have experienced,” Barone says. Their first concern? Actively listening to what the patient has to say. How a patient’s lifestyle habits, home life and stressors might be influencing them physically are all examined, along with the labs and scans. It’s not just symptom management; it’s looking for the root cause—a practice that fits the “holistic view that Sacred Heart talks about of mind, body and spirit,” Barone says.

The result is care that contributes to fewer preventable deaths and a longer life expectancy in Ireland—at a fraction of the cost of health care in the U.S. And it’s care that SHU nursing students now get to not only read about, but practice firsthand. “It’s an instinct,” Barone says of the way her clinical experience in Ireland informed her practice of delivering patient-centered care—a bedside practice that, as she says, can be “shared among peers, professors and professionals to advance best practices in health care overall.”
Sr. Pat Daly ’76 was a friend of the Earth … and everyone on it.

LUM SR. PAT DALY ’76 didn’t want to believe she was dying. For over a year, the Dominican nun was in and out of the hospital and even hospice, determined—continued—she would overcome her latest setback. The Queens, NY, native had bile duct cancer, among other ailments, but that didn’t stop her from taking Zoom calls from the ICU and continuing to make dinner plans with relatives and friends.

Daly believed she had more work to accomplish. For 40 years, she had been an unflinching, passionate activist, advocating for the environment, and there were more CEOs for her to take on, more wildlife to protect.

“She thought she could hear this because she wasn’t done yet,” says Sr. Deborah Lynch. Lynch was Daly’s sponsor when she joined the Sisters of Saint Dominic in Caldwell, NJ. “She spoke up for the sake of the Earth, for our future. She was doing what she could to take care of His creation.”

To be a nun in the Dominican Order, or the Order of Preachers as it is officially titled, means individuals follow their founder, Saint Dominic. They preach the word of the Gospel and commit their lives to prayer, community, study and ministry. Daly upheld these values until she died in December 2022 at the age of 66.

Born in 1956, Daly was the oldest of five siblings and 21 cousins. Her family always went to church, and Daly went to Catholic primary and secondary schools. In seventh and eighth grades, Daly befriended her teachers, a group of young nuns. Her sister, Jean Ranazzo, remembers that the nuns didn’t wear habits, a distinction that made an impression on Daly. “You could see their faces. “She found her pack,” Randazzo says.

After the family moved to Connecticut and Daly graduated from Newtown High School, going to Sacred Heart was an easy decision: she received a full scholarship to major in religious studies. Randazzo remembers her sister leaving the house early in the morning in her red Volkswagen Beetle and returning late in the evening. “Those were some pivotal years of her life,” Randazzo says. “She loved it.”

The overachiever graduated from SHU in three years and moved to New Jersey to get involved in the sisterhood, which was no surprise to Randazzo. She says the family “just knew.”

Many Dominican nuns work as teachers and although she enjoyed teaching in the New Jersey Catholic schools and universities, Daly felt limited by the classroom. “We encouraged her to get involved in social justice,” Lynch says.

Daly learned the sisterhood had stock in many major companies—companies with often questionable environmental practices.

This led Daly to serve on the Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment, a nonprofit organization for investors with faith-based values to leverage their investments to advance human rights, racial equity and the common good, as well as combat climate change.

Like any good educator, she challenged people to see more than just what’s in front of them. The petite Daly, with her short bob haircut and colorful blazer, traveled around the country, attending shareholders’ meetings and speaking passionately and persuasively on behalf of the environment as our shared primary investment. She called out board members on questionable policies, often going head-to-head with titans of industry—executives from companies like ExxonMobil, Ford Motor Company, J.P. Stevens Company and even former General Electric CEO Jack Welch. She was certain the poly-chlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, from GE’s factories were harming the wildlife in the nearby Hudson River. A decade after that meeting, the company had to dredge a portion of the Hudson. “She knew change didn’t happen overnight, but she wanted to start the conversation and plant the seeds of change into anyone who would listen,” Lynch says.

For Daly, her faith and her activism were inseparable, and she was relentless. “This was her vocation,” her cousin, Edward Conlon, a retired New York City police officer, said in the eulogy at her funeral.

Conlon remembers Daly speaking loudly and proudly about everything. Coming from a big family, everyone had their own political views, “But she had a way of discussing things,” Conlon says. Disagreements were opportunities for both parties to learn, a quality that made even dissenters value her time. “You never left mad after talking with Pat.”

“Pat never said she had a best friend,” says her sister, Ellen Daly. “But everyone said Pat was theirs.”

Though Daly is gone, her legacy lives on. And if she felt that her work was not done, she can rest assured that her story has already called countless people to follow in her path, fighting for the voiceless. Her life isn’t just a memory. It’s an inspiration to reach out and to look after each other and the planet that supports us all.
SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE  |  SPRING 2023

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FREEWILL, VISIT HTTPS://WWW.FREEWILL.COM/SACREDHEART.

PROTECTING WHAT’S YOURS

SHU provides a free estate planning service to alumni.

“We don’t want our alumni and friends to be a part of the two-thirds of Americans without wills,” says Stephen Auger, assistant vice president of major and planned giving. “We want to give them a way to be prepared.”

Depending upon a person’s estate and assets, it may take as little as 30 minutes to set up a will through the FreeWill program. If someone’s estate is a little more complex, the program will advise that person to seek additional assistance from an attorney.

Paul J. Sutera, senior vice president of University advancement, says that the pandemic really opened people’s eyes. “They lost friends and family members. They realized life is not forever,” he says, noting that during the pandemic, Google searches for estate planning were the highest since Google’s founding in 1998.

Sutera says FreeWill allows alumni the opportunity to get their life affairs in order. “We want our alumni to feel secure.”

The software allows people to assign beneficiaries. And while family and friends are obvious choices, a growing trend is to make a legacy gift to the nonprofits people care most about. Such a gift is a great way to ensure your favorite charities are looked after and honored without impacting your own security in the moment. And, in the interest of full disclosure, while it is certainly possible to leave a gift to Sacred Heart, doing so is not a requirement of using the service.

“We are helping to make sure your wishes are realized,” Auger says. “And that’s what’s most important.” Since Sacred Heart started offering the service less than a year ago, more than 800 alumni and friends have visited the website.
Social media is US...

...and that’s the problem.

by Bill Yousman, Ph.D.
One of Musk's first acts was to fire many of Twitter's executives. He also immediately loosened content restrictions on the platform and restored thousands of accounts previously banned due to the danger they posed to the public wellbeing—accounts such as those of avowed white supremacists or others actively spreading disinformation. Purveyors of online hate and disinformation celebrated Musk's changes. Almost as soon as there was enough data to analyze, researchers were reporting that hate speech and misinformation were surging on Twitter, with a sharp rise in racist, antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ slurs and provocations, as well as an increase in wild, unsubstantiated claims about vaccines, the results of the 2020 election, climate change and other contentious issues.

None of this is surprising. It was already known that social media is marred by conspiracy theories, anger, misogyny and divisiveness—and, of course, false beliefs, misconceptions, deliberate lies and propaganda have long preexisted social media. What was newly highlighted, however, is the extent to which the social media industries actually rely on these social ills and, as such, actively feed them. Facebook's own internal report on extremism, hate and disinformation made note of "compelling evidence that our core product mechanics, such as virality, recommendations and optimizing for engagement, are a significant part of why these types of speech flourish on the platform" (emphasis added). Thus, though social media is perhaps best understood as an amplifier or accelerator rather than a first cause, what is worrying and should not be overlooked is that this is intentional. If our culture is on fire—and it increasingly does seem to be ablaze—social media is not the flames. Nor is it the match. But it very well may be the gasoline.

Thus, for Musk to self-identify as a "free-speech absolutist" in justifying his actions as owner of one of the world's most influential social media platforms (if not the largest—that distinction goes to Facebook, which currently reports almost three billion monthly users) is effectively to claim "fire will burn where fire will burn" while selling said gasoline to arsonists.

Yet, despite the virutol, we keep coming back to partake in social media and its offerings, leaving us to wonder: why does it captivate us so? To put it plainly (while liberally borrowing from one of my favorite science fiction films of the 1970s—), because social media is us! In Soylent Green, Charlton Heston's character discovers that the titular substance manufactured to feed an overpopulated world is actually made out of humans themselves. Like Soylent Green, social media is made from human thought, human communication. Indeed, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are only the delivery systems. The content is built from what we post and upload. Billions of us spend innumerable hours gorging ourselves on an endless stream of memes, video clips taken out of context, doctored photos and misleading statements created and shared by people hungry for attention. People, in other words, like us. Because they are us. The Elon Musks and Mark Zuckerberg's of the world play crucial roles because the algorithmic constructs of the platforms are designed to ensure the emotionally charged and often inflammatory content we consume to please rises like cream to the top. If social media is filled with hate, anger, bigotry and lies, it is because we are avid diners. It is feeding something in us.

Furthermore, one doesn't even have to pay attention to social media at all to be affected by it. In Soylent Green, the starving masses don't have much choice, even as they discover the truth of what they are eating. It is either consume each other or perish. Our own choices are not quite as stark as literal cannibalism, but at the same time we don't really have the choice to opt out of cultures that are increasingly shaped by social media. It is the integral space between the twenty-first century, playing an outsized role in public discourse as it becomes fodder for coverage even in legacy media like newspapers, radio and television. As the historian Jill Lepore writes about journalism, it's a mistake to underestimate "the degree to which so many of them appear to have so wholly given themselves over to Twitter—knowing the world through it, reporting from it, being ruled by it."

Take, for example, cable television's most popular host, Fox News' Tucker Carlson. Carlson is an undeniably divisive figure, but let's consider Carlson's and his employer's own definition of his role in media. In their own words, Carlson is "not 'stating actual facts' about the topics he discusses and is instead engaging in 'exaggeration' and 'non-literal commentary.'" Such was the argument of Fox News's lawyers and the decision of Judge Mary Kay Vyskocil in response to a 2020 slander lawsuit, even though the very name of the network on which he appears seems to imply at least a degree of journalistic integrity. But this just isn't the case. Stated directly—and their defense really can't be read any other way—Fox News purposefully pays Tucker Carlson to lie to and mislead his audience.

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similar levels of trust among Democrats. But for our purposes here, let’s look at both social media’s and Tucker Carlson’s roles in distorting and weaponizing even the most seemingly apolitical (and potentially tragic) experiences in recent public consciousness. On January 2, 2023, at 8:55 p.m. EST, on national television, an outwardly typical NFL collision occurred when a wide receiver for the Cincinnati Bengals ran full steam into Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin. After making the tackle, Hamlin briefly rose to his feet before collapsing. Silence pounded the stadium as fans, players and team personnel watched CPR being administered to the fallen athlete. As we might expect, Hamlin’s name instantly began trending on Twitter as viewers expressed their concern, fears and sympathy.

It was later determined that Hamlin had likely experienced commotio cordis, wherein cardiac arrest is instigated by a uniquely ill-timed impact to the patient’s chest. Fortunately, due to the immediate medical care he received on the field, Hamlin survived. But long before his health and safety were assured, something hostile also quickly emerged. Thousands of anti-vaxxers, those who deny the efficacy of vaccines and falsely link them to a wide variety of dangerous health outcomes, took to social media to advance their unfeigned claims that the COVID-19 vaccine was responsible for Hamlin’s heart attack. Sadly, this was as predictable as the expressions of sympathy and concern. Imran Ahmed of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, notes, “We have seen consistently that every time a high-profile death has occurred, very quickly anti-vaxxers have jumped on and said, ‘Yes, that happened because of the vaccine, and here’s the information about it.’”

Then, also predictably, the very next night on his primetime broadcast, Carlson amplified and endorsed conspiratorial thinking about Hamlin’s injury to his millions of viewers, calling medical professionals who disputed that his job—now by legal definition—is to lie to and mislead his verifiably trusting audience, told that audience, with no acknowledgment of the irony, that it is the trained medical professionals who are not to be trusted. These provocations then recirculated on social media, a vicious and self-reinforcing cycle.

Disinformation regarding vaccines is only one of many misleading discourses festering on social media and infecting not only the rest of our media environment, but the fabric of our society. Because it’s not just bizarre rants about the earth being flat. Promulgated lies that the 2020 presidential election was stolen endure on social media in the nature of democracy. Unhinged conspiracy theories about satanic, cannibalistic pedophile rings run by celebrities and politicians led to very real death threats and a terrifying armed invasion (what came to be known as “Pizzagate”). Meanwhile, those of us who live and work in Connecticut know all too well how the unfathomable tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary was wildly dismissed as anti-gun propaganda by Alex Jones’s InfoWars. It would seem that nothing is so believable as a lie, making lies real and reality a hoax.

Of course, with every action there is a reaction so that, as the writer Freddie deBoer notes, “You have conservative anger over an evolving culture, liberal anger over the continued salience of reactionary populism, left wing fury over our inability to make anything happen … You have angry conspiracy theorists and angry fact-checkers and angry gamers and angry Red-dinos … And it’s not that there isn’t plenty to be angry or judiciously fearful about in 2023. But to darken back to Syfy’s Green, we are both feeding and eating each other while social media giants turn our metaphorical cannibalism to cash.

Are we overreacting? Sociologists in the 1960s began writing about moral panics, which Stanley Cohen identified as the tendency to recognize a new trend or phenomenon as “a threat to societal values and interests,” leading to cries that something must be done to fight the menace and preserve the social order we are in danger of losing. This has happened repeatedly in cultural history, with a wide variety of manufactured threats from comic books and rock music to video games and rap … and now social media. So how frightened should we be, really?

First, it must be fully recognized that not only is social media here to stay, but as human society evolves parallel to the technology it creates, it creates the digital environment every time we log on, … and edit volumes. He is a co-editor of the award-winning anthology series Gender, Race and Class in Media.
Bassick High School and SHU are encouraging students to get their heads in the clouds.

BY KELLY DE LA ROCHA

FROM THE GROUND UP: STEVE BLUME (RIGHT), BASSICK HIGH SCHOOL’S TECHNOLOGY TEACHER, AND AVIONICS VOLUNTEER ANDREW GRAHAM GUIDE THEIR STUDENTS IN A PROJECT WITH HIGH AMBITIONS.
Tiany Perez sits in the fuselage of a partially built Vans RV12iS aircraft, securing bundles of multicolored wires. The high school senior works with confidence, hands steady despite the staccato rhythm of rivet guns echoing through Bassick High School’s expansive workshop.

But the rivet guns aren’t the only thing Perez blocks out to focus on the task at hand. Beyond the shop’s brick walls sprawls Bridgeport—Connecticut’s most populous city—where nearly a quarter of residents live in poverty.

The majority of Perez’s classmates are part of that struggling population. Many come from single-parent homes. Some call a local rescue mission home. According to Principal Dr. Joseph Raiola, close to 80% of Bassick’s students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

“They’re very different for these kids,” says Steve Blume, Bassick’s technology teacher, who oversees the shop where Perez is hard at work. “Sometimes they come just to get breakfast and lunch. It’s difficult even for them to get to school,” he adds, noting the school provides only limited busing—an additional barrier to attendance.

All in all, about half of the 1,000-student population leaves during a typical school year, breeding an uncertainty that makes it difficult to connect with students—even the ones who stay—in any meaningful way.

Here in the shop, however, a unique project is underway to change that.

Sacred Heart University electrical engineering major Anthony Matos ‘24 is one of two SHU interns mentoring Bassick students on a project to build a pair of two-seat airplanes from the ground up, taking on everything from interpreting blueprints to assembling the fuselage to wiring cockpit controls. If the planes pass muster with the Federal Aviation Administration, students will have an opportunity to take to the skies in them.

Matos watches Perez as she tightens cable ties around wire bundles in the plane’s cockpit. “Tiany’s always in the fuselage doing some type of work,” he says while consulting a blueprint of the project’s present phase. “She is always the one getting down there and doing the work no one else wants to do.”

The two students, years apart academically, are working in tandem toward a goal that reaches far beyond building a functional aircraft. In conjunction with a cadre of fellow students, teachers and aviation industry professionals, they’re building a runway to the future.

Despite a growing demand for workers with technical skills, a hands-on course of study like this one is rarely offered at a cash-strapped inner-city school like Bassick. Aaron Holland, chairman, CEO and founder of First Aviation Services, led the push to bring the program to the high school. Partnering with Tango Flight, an educational nonprofit corporation that aims to inspire the next generation of engineers, pilots, aviation mechanics and technicians, the project’s aim is not just to help students learn marketable skills, but also to give them a chance to interact with positive role models.

Aviation industry professionals volunteer daily in that capacity.

SHU students were brought on board for that purpose as well, an arrangement orchestrated with the help of Rick Robustelli, executive in residence and an instructor at SHU’s Jack Welch College of Business & Technology.

As mentors, the students provide real-time information about what college is like, helping to demystify an educational path Bassick attendees may not have previously considered.

Bassick’s present graduation rate is just 65%.

Of that already diminished number, only about half go on to any form of continuing education (about 10% to a four-year degree program, roughly 40% to a two-year program) while the rest end any form of formal education right there.

Working on the aviation project with positive role models illuminates other potential pathways.

Under the watchful eyes of their mentors, the students build blueprints and frame an airplane tail. As viable airplanes slowly take shape, they realize they can do what may have once seemed impossible, and that’s empowering.

“These high school kids came here and couldn’t read a ruler. Now they can read blueprints,” Blume says. “They’re very difficult to understand—there are 47 books, at least 10 pages each, and on each page there’s got to be 50 things that have to be checked off, in order, as you do them—and they’re doing it.”

“I’ve got kids who are out there in college because of this,” Blume adds. “They’re going to be employed in the aviation industry somewhere.
It’s a blast talking to them. They’ll ask me questions like, ‘What’s it like to be an engineer in college? What kinds of classes do I have to take?’ One student was even asking me about a particular class he could take next semester before he graduates,” the North Reading, MA, native recounts. “I’m very jealous my high school didn’t have something like this. Just being here puts a smile on my face.”

“I believe that it makes them better engineers when they feel like there is meaning to what they are doing,” he explains. “You can see how excited they are. It’s not just the program itself, but also they feel like they are making a difference in the community.”

The benefit is reciprocal, Matos points out, with a nod to some of his young charges, who are riveting an airplane tailpiece like seasoned pros, the percussion of their rivet guns echoing throughout the shop like the unexpected sound of opportunity.

“I see how I could have been as a high school student—more driven like they are. It definitely drives me,” he says. “They’re four years younger than me, three years younger than me. To see them be driven like this makes me want to be like them.”

“That would never have happened] without this.”

“I do believe if we say to our kids, ‘You can do it’, and show them how to do it, they will do it. They do do it. There is no question about that,” says Raiola, who notes he’s seen students become more engaged, motivated to come to class, driven to graduate and eager to investigate careers associated with aviation. Peretz is a perfect example of that, although she admits it took her a while to find that drive.

“At first I was lazy with it. I wouldn’t come to class much. I would skip it. And then, I don’t know what happened. I started coming more and actually participating, and I fell in love with it,” she says. “Since I found this, I found my passion. I’m going to keep doing this into the future.”

Jesuit DItt has a similar story.

“Last year I would not have thought I’d end up here, working on wings, engines and windows,” the high school senior recalls. “At first I was iffy about it, but now I’m used to the environment and actually getting my hands dirty and stuff like that. I enjoy it a lot. It’s something I would definitely consider after I graduate.”

“I believe that it makes them better engineers,” says Dr. Tolga Kaya, SHU’s director of engineering, explains Kaya, gives you accountability, reliability, all sorts of engineering perspectives,” explains Kaya, who is instrumental in placing Matos and Bellacini in the internship. “These planes are going to be FAA approved, and they will fly, so it’s not a joke.”

“The aviation industry professionals who work with the students ensure the planes are built to strict standards. In the process, they teach marketable technical skills, as well as effective communication and collaboration techniques.

“The mentors are not just here to tell the kids what to do,” Raiola notes. “They’re working side by side with the students, and as a result they’re having dialogue about life, careers, next steps. They’re serving not only as a mentor to build an airplane, but a mentor for life.”

David Paqua, a licensed aircraft mechanic and owner of Franklin Glass and Aluminum in Stamford, has built a number of airplanes from scratch. He’s been a volunteer for the aviation program since October 2021. Between fielding questions about airplane assembly, he discusses aviation-related job possibilities with the students.

“From mechanical work, you can go up to management. You can do pilot stuff. You can really do whatever you want. You just have to get your feet wet and find out what you like,” he advises.

Paul Zulanka, a Delta Airlines pilot volunteering with the project, has plenty of experience flying planes, but this is his first attempt at building one. He says he tries to stay one step ahead of the students so he can guide them through each phase of the project.

“It’s been great. They’re really eager to learn,” he says. “They like the hands-on parts of building. As the airplane gets built, they can see the progress and what it might eventually be. They get real excited about that.”

SHU interns serve as a bridge between the aviation industry professionals and the Bassick students. The high schoolers find Matos and Bellacini easy to relate to, in part because the college students are close to their age.

Bellacini’s role in the aviation project is to explain tasks to the younger students and oversee their work. But when he talks about the airplane-building process, he’s also quick to highlight the relationship-building that occurs.

“It’s something that has a wow factor. It gives you accountability, reliability, all sorts of engineering perspectives,” explains Kaya, who is instrumental in placing Matos and Bellacini in the internship. “These planes are going to be FAA approved, and they will fly, so it’s not a joke.”

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Matos, a SHU junior from Brooklyn, NY, says he’s seen the younger students grow during their short time together in the program. He singles out senior Amory Beckford, who is busy securing a drainage tube to a plane’s engine mount.

“I was kind of anxious and nervous at first because I did not want to fail or mess up,” Beckford initially had aspirations of becoming a civil engineer or architect. “I believe that it makes them better engineers when they feel like there is meaning to what they are doing,” he explains. “You can see how excited they are. It’s not just the program itself, but also they feel like they are making a difference in the community.”

The benefit is reciprocal, Matos points out, with a nod to some of his young charges, who are riveting an airplane tailpiece like seasoned pros, the percussion of their rivet guns echoing throughout the shop like the unexpected sound of opportunity.

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Increasingly, the very foundation of Catholic faith seems under fire … but from whom?

THE CROSS AND THE CROSSROADS

BY DAN ROBER
Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego made some eye-popping remarks about the Catholic Church and the LGBTQ+ community. According to McElroy, the language used in the Catechism—that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered”—is presently in need to be stricken and replaced with something more pastoral.

Elsewhere, Bishop Robert Barron of Witsona, MN, media impresario and founder of Word on Fire, has launched sustained attacks on what he calls “wokeism”—encompassing a variety of ideas from Black Lives Matter to emerging understandings of gender—as an aggressive and divisive ideology that undermines the Church and its work.

Two prominent bishops; two very different visions of the Church and its pastoral responsibilities.

Cardinals, then, find themselves seemingly at a crossroads of tradition and accommodation. On the one hand, bishops such as Cardinal McElroy and priests such as James Martin, SJ, seek to minister to an ever-growing group of Catholics and understand their needs, and activists work to make the Church a force for racial justice rather than segregation and injustice. If we compare both to the tradition more broadly and its origins in the first Christian preachers despite her checkered past and present, it is clear that Pope Francis has neither opened itself up the Church of Catholicism once again, but in some ways has revived the dormant spirit of Vatican II—that is, the cultivating energy of the Council not always spelled out word for word in its documents. One of the Council’s notable recent chroniclers, John O’Malley, SJ, has commented that for many years it appeared that the Council had passed into historical memory. But since 2013, it has come to life again, bringing back some of the novelty of the Church that seemed to have faded due to the passage of time and different leadership priorities.

One of the major themes of Vatican II was reconnecting Catholics with the biblical origins of the Church and its teachings. And now, after 10 years of his papacy, it is clear that Pope Francis has only shaken up the Church of Catholicism once again, but in some ways has revived the dormant spirit of Vatican II—that is, the cultivating energy of the Council not always spelled out word for word in its documents. One of the Council’s notable recent chroniclers, John O’Malley, SJ, has commented that for many years it appeared that the Council had passed into historical memory. But since 2013, it has come to life again, bringing back some of the novelty of the Church that seemed to have faded due to the passage of time and different leadership priorities.

Francis, in the vein of Saint John XXIII who called the Council, clearly views its renewing energy not as a chaotic threat but an inspiration. As such, he has put forward a vision of Catholicism focused on compassion for the plight of migrants, better relations with members of other religions and both bound to the example set by Christ himself. Ironic, then, that in so doing, the pope appears to have brought Catholics to a crossroads where their loyalties are tested by those who seek to undermine Francis’ teachings, particularly insofar as they seem to depart from those of his immediate predecessors or otherwise rattle the image of an unchanging Church. This tawdry business—which includes, just since the last edition of this magazine, a tell-all memoir published by the late Pope Benedict XVI’s personal secretary and attacks by the late Australian Cardinal George Pell on Francis’事迹—has fostered increasingly open hostility against the pope and planning for the next election to replace him. Francis has commented that this open criticism is preferable to the clandestine, passive-aggressive battles traditionally waged in Rome, but this scarcely makes it more of a Gospel witness. Indeed, for many Catholics, Vatican II—like a “crossroads moment” for the Church in so many ways—went too far in its renewal of the Church and its mission. They tend to blame it (dubiously) for the problems in today’s Church, such as the shortage of priests and disinterest on the part of young people. Some of Francis’ opponents, such as George Weigel, would argue that they are, in fact, defending the Council, but do so in such a narrow, literal way that any sense of energy for change is lost—which is, of course, their point. These thinkers seek a Church that knows exactly what it teaches and presents it confidently to a hostile outside world. Behind this attitude lies fear of further change, as if the Church is not made of humans who live in a changing world. Garry Wills famously commented that the fact that the Church changes was viewed before the Council as a “dirty little secret,” and some would like to return to guarding this secret.

But this tag-of-war, these “culture wars” we witness at this crossroads, misses the point of the cross itself. The cross and Gordon McElroy has launched sustained attacks on what he calls “wokeism”—encompassing a variety of ideas from Black Lives Matter to emerging understandings of gender—as an aggressive and divisive ideology that undermines the Church and its work. Two prominent bishops; two very different visions of the Church and its pastoral responsibilities. Catholics, then, find themselves seemingly at a crossroads of tradition and accommodation. On the one hand, bishops such as Cardinal McElroy and priests such as James Martin, SJ, seek to minister to the needs of young people. Some of Francis’ opponents, such as George Weigel, would argue that they are, in fact, defending the Council, but do so in such a narrow, literal way that any sense of energy for change is lost—which is, of course, their point. These thinkers seek a Church that knows exactly what it teaches and presents it confidently to a hostile outside world. Behind this attitude lies fear of further change, as if the Church is not made of humans who live in a changing world. Garry Wills famously commented that the fact that the Church changes was viewed before the Council as a “dirty little secret,” and some would like to return to guarding this secret.

But this tag-of-war, these “culture wars” we witness at this crossroads, misses the point of the cross itself. The cross and forward from the crossroads—Francis has called for a “Church which goes forth”—through the cross where Catholics believe that Jesus, in solidarity with human suffering, opened His arms to include human beings in the life of God. Change is exactly what is needed in the Church at this moment. The papacy of Francis has been a shock to a system that needed one, and in many ways does still. Large numbers of Catholics, particularly among the young, have disaffiliated from a Church that has not spoken to or served them—the temporarily “lapsed Catholic” who shifts for a while has given up the way to the “collapsed Catholic” who is completely done with the Church. Women tire of even Pope Francis echoing gendered rhetoric that puts their contributions into a corner. Far too many LGBTQ+ Catholics find themselves marginalized and sometimes dismissed from jobs at Church-sponsored institutions. Even positive and affirming developments such as Cardinal McElroy’s comments do not necessarily reflect the atmosphere of—or trickle down to—the average parish. For too many Catholics, this crossroads presents not an interesting theological argument, but a question of staying or leaving, and they frequently end up leaving.

The answer, I propose, is not to be found in what increasingly feels like a religious culture war being waged in local parishes and the Church at large. If reaction to Pope Francis or renewing the Second Vatican Council (aka Vatican II) forces us to consider our own beliefs as they relate to Church teaching—and vice versa—the way forward requires us to compare both to the tradition more broadly and its origins in the words and example of Jesus Christ. To this point, the very origins of Christianity in the New Testament offer an example that bolsters the claim that Catholics can and should embrace an inclusive vision. The Gospel ministry of Jesus welcomed sinners and those on the margins of society. This welcome comes with a challenge (go and sin no more!), but it is no less inclusive for that, and offers the challenge as encouragement. Welcome and inclusion give way to discipleship—the Samaritan woman at the well whose Gospel we heard this Lent becomes one of the first Christian preachers despite her checkered past and present. The tradition that Jesus points out. This Gospel vision informed the early Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles, and still informs the best aspects of Catholicism today.

One of the major themes of Vatican II was reconnecting Catholics with the biblical origins of the Church and its teachings. And now, after 10 years of his papacy, it is clear that Pope Francis has not only shaken up the Church of Catholicism once again, but in some ways has revived the dormant spirit of Vatican II—that is, the cultivating energy of the Council not always spelled out word for word in its documents. One of the Council’s notable recent chroniclers, John O’Malley, SJ, has commented that for many years it appeared that the Council had passed into historical memory. But since 2013, it has come to life again, bringing back some of the novelty of the Church that seemed to have faded due to the passage of time and different leadership priorities. Francis, in the vein of Saint John XXIII who called the Council, clearly views its renewing energy not as a chaotic threat but an inspiration. As such, he has put forward a vision of Catholicism focused on compassion for the plight of migrants, better relations with members of other religions and both bound to the example set by Christ himself. Ironic, then, that in so doing, the pope appears to have brought Catholics to a crossroads where their loyalties are tested by those who seek to undermine Francis’ teachings, particularly insofar as they seem to depart from those of his immediate predecessors or otherwise rattle the image of an unchanging Church. This tawdry business—which includes, just since the last edition of this magazine, a tell-all memoir published by the late Pope Benedict XVI’s personal secretary and attacks by the late Australian Cardinal George Pell on Francis’ intentions—has fostered increasingly open hostility against the pope and planning for the next election to replace him. Francis has commented that this open criticism is preferable to the clandestine, passive-aggressive battles traditionally waged in Rome, but this scarcely makes it more of a Gospel witness.

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The recent explosion in AI-generated original work points to some larger questions—about art, originality and what it means to be HUMAN.
By Cliff Clive

“We’re five years away from watching movies and TV series written entirely by artificial intelligence.”

That’s not my prediction. This claim came, very confidently, from a former co-worker of mine, a fellow data scientist at Microsoft, eight years ago.

He was off by a bit.

For decades we’ve seen industries taken over by technology and automation, rendering some workers redundant while empowering others to do more with less effort and in safer conditions. In either case, it’s typically the menial tasks that we hand over to robots and computers. Automating creativity—writing, painting, music—has been mostly dismissed as the domain of science fiction.

Now multiple new technologies are forcing us to reconsider that assumption. ChatGPT is generating cocktail recipes and scoring very well on the GMAT. Midjourney AI is printing out stills from a Lovecraftian horror movie staring a cast of Muppets—a movie that was never made, of course.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has racked up an astonishing number of big wins in the past year. Whether or not ChatGPT will ever win a Pulitzer is up for debate, but the point is: it’s up for debate—a debate that many people now take seriously. And while it often seems that the only way to spot AI-generated images is by counting fingers and teeth, that’s likely to be sorted out in another iteration or two of the software—possibly even before this article goes to print.

As the tweaks get tighter and the mistakes are fewer, are we approaching an AI-generated renaissance?

Let’s stop and consider why that’s a terrible idea.

There are some obvious red flags. Generated essays and images are creating headaches for university professors and hiring directors around the world, and plenty of concern has been expressed for the artists whose work was scraped from the internet to build the technology that Silicon Valley will soon use to compete with them. But while the ethics in both instances are questionable at best, it’s only a matter of time before legal and technological solutions are found for these legal and technological problems.

Some say that AI has reached a point where we should lose sleep over the standard sci-fi fear that the rise of AI is the dawn of a robot apocalypse.

That said, in good science fiction, the robot apocalypse is never really about the robots. It’s about us. Their rise is an allegory for our fall. And in that light, if we allow ourselves to think of these AI-generated works as art, we’re already losing touch with what it means to be human.

A Peek Inside the Black Box

For present purposes, though these arguments apply to any artistic medium, let’s focus on the visual arts and ask the question: If AI-generated imagery looks like art, surely isn’t that what it is?

To answer that, we need to begin with how the art is generated.

Higher math aside, the grand design of AI-generated work is surprisingly straightforward. If the algorithms seem harder to understand than the human creative process, it’s only a familiarity bias at play. Sure, the human mind feels like it’s more in your comfort zone—you are one, after all—but remember that AI machines are ones we built and programmed. They aren’t doing anything we haven’t taught them to do. They follow our instructions.

And those instructions, simply put, are these: study pixel arrays (which the humans call “pictures”) to find patterns; associate those patterns with established labels (which the humans call “words”), get good enough at this to make successful word/image associations with samples presented from outside the training set.

A model is shown millions of images. It guesses labels that have been assigned to them. The learning algorithm sharpens the model’s parameters after each correct guess and blurs them after each error. Eventually it collects a library of patterns it can identify and reliably label. For example, these two round shapes often appear above a line, all within a larger oval shape. These are identified and labeled “eyes,” “nose” and “mouth,” and the full construct is labeled “face.” As the algorithm reads data from more and more images, the machine learns that the face pattern possesses slightly different qualities in images labeled “fantasy” from those labeled “renaissance.”

Flipping the calculations around, the pro-
gram becomes a generator model that assembles a portmanteau of patterns to build images for new test prompts. This generator is pitted against a discriminator, a separate program trained to detect machine-generated images in a lineup of photos or art from human artists, forcing the generator to improve its work until the discriminator can no longer tell the difference. Paired together, the generator and discriminator form a generative adversarial network (GAN).

In short, machines look at millions of labeled images to learn how to draw new ones in a similar style—which is how human artists learn too, isn’t it? Well, up to a point.

**MASTERING THE CRAFT**

What all this means is that the images coming out of a GAN see look statistically similar to the ones the model was trained on; otherwise they won’t pass the discriminator’s test. In other words, AI is structurally incapable of innovation. All it can do—by the rules of its own design—is create pastiche.

It’s exceptionally good pastiche—AI creates pastiche virtually impossible to identify as different from the original work from which it learned—but it’s pastiche nonetheless. And that’s a really important distinction. Because, yes, art students take classes on such topics as form, composition, color and shading. They learn to work in a variety of mediums and study the work of a pantheon of great artists. They fill portfolios with practice pieces, training their muscle memory to match what they’ve seen with what they hope to create. This is analogous to the patterns that AI neural nets learn and combine into new images. But as they hone their craft, artists live and engage in the world around them in a way that the computers do not and cannot. Because while computers process data, which is objective, quantitative and structured, the human mind runs on meaning, which is subjective, qualitative, impressionistic. And living makes us subject to limitless impressions that we can plumb for meaning.

What this means in practice is that a piece of music that doesn’t even have words can somehow articulate the rapture of a first kiss for humans, but will never be fully appreciated by a computer. Because art is an abstract language. It doesn’t make literal sense. It doesn’t need to.

That’s the point. So, while AI taps out at representing the correct number of fingers on a hand in the style of Rembrandt, an artist carries on, experimenting with ways to turn heartbreak and triumph and the full spectrum of the human experience into the physical reality of a painting or a sculpture or a script or a dance.

The skills to be mastered may be the same between the artist and the machine, but AI will only ever evaluate the data from an image it is creating through probability distributions it has drawn from similar images. It will only ever create an abstract painting by replicating the work of abstract artists, which by definition means it is not abstract. And neither is it art since the ultimate goal of the artist isn’t to replicate; it’s to create. Those skills are not the ends; they are the means—to make what hasn’t been made before, to say what hasn’t been said before, to show what hasn’t been seen. And that’s only the beginning.

“As a maker of images, I can be looking for clues in the technique of other artists (color, application, design/orchestration, modeling of light, scale). Beyond my specific needs for my own work, I am looking at how well a human puts down what it is like to be alive, what they document, what they explore, what they celebrate. I am seeking to peek into the mind and heart of the artist, their culture, and I’m pondering the possible meanings of the image.” \-- **NATHAN LEWIS**

“You look at things differently as a creative. How do you see that? What are you looking at? I don’t know it at the time, it’s verbally, visually, on TV, in nature. I’m in a problem-solving situation on a painting I’m doing or a logo I’m doing. I’m very aware, when things come in that have nothing to do with the project, and it’s like a lightbulb goes off. … It may be a color or a shape or a sound. It comes in all different ways, so you have to be receptive.” \-- **MARY TRESCHITTA**

**ART LIVES BEFORE THE PROCESS AND BEYOND THE PRODUCT**

To witness a work of art is to absorb a surrogate experience—one that begins in the artist’s mind as an idea, is refined into a vision, then is crafted until embodied in a physical form: ink on paper, soundwaves in the air, a dancer moving across a stage. And as we do, we have real responses to imagined events. We are moved by plays and films we know are only pretend. We apply before and after to singular moments captured on camera or canvas. The experience of art can change the way we see the world and interact with others—maybe for the rest of our lives.

But we can also find ourselves moved by birdsong, rock formations or the face of Jesus on a piece of toast—why don’t we consider them art? Quite simply, it’s because art must clear a higher bar than “thing look nice.” It must have some sort of intention behind it. Even if the art in question is a banana duct-taped to a gallery wall or a cloud, it is not art since the patons a cabal of pretentious fools, there is still meaning attached to the work.

This is the biggest weakness of AI-generated images. There’s no creative vision behind them. No expressive intent. The androids do not show what hasn’t been seen. And what the machines do, the computers do not and cannot. Because, yes, art students take classes on such topics as form, composition, color and shading. They learn to work in a variety of mediums and study the work of a pantheon of great artists.

And that’s only the beginning.
MAKING

Two longtime Park Avenue institutions are finding their way forward together.

A REDISCOVERY

by Elizabeth Koscinski
who moved to the same street just a year apart, Sacred Heart University and the Discovery Science Museum watched each other with fondness and appreciation through the years. They watched their houses change and their families grow. They watched their kids become adults, sometimes heading out into the world, sometimes returning to assume the mantle of inspiring and teaching the next generation. Often, the same kid would end up calling both places home.

Sophia Santos is one of those kids. The Trumbull native made countless field trips to the Discovery Museum (as it was then named) with her schoolmates, taking part in all sorts of experiments and exhibitions over the years—including one of the most popular and enduring exhibits the museum has ever run, an immersive mock space station and mission control simulation experience called Challenger Learning Center.

Then, as an undergraduate earning her degree and qualifications in secondary education from Sacred Heart, Santos jumped at the opportunity to do her clinical field experience at Discovery. Even now, as a student teacher in a nearby middle school working toward her master’s in education and English teaching certification, she continues teaching at Discovery. She’s even run the Challenger Mission for the fifth-grade class she now teaches—the very class in which she experienced the exhibit herself as a child. “Life came full circle that day.”

There’s a lot that’s come full circle in the last 60 years. The Museum of Art, Science and Industry (as Discovery was initially known) opened its doors to the public in 1962. Much like Sacred Heart, a fledgling commuter school that welcomed its first students in 1963 and pulled most of them from the immediate area, the bulk of the museums’ visitors were locals from Fairfield, Bridgeport and other surrounding towns.

In the 1990s, the University began adding residence halls and recruiting students from out of state. At the same time, with a shift toward hands-on science exploration and a name change, the newly rebranded Discovery Science Museum developed into a regional destination. Indeed, beyond its new name, the collaboration between the two institutions to unify their visions and benefit from one another’s strengths. And while the new name is Sacred Heart University’s Discovery Science Center & Planetarium, the focus remains consistent with the original intent. Thus, the symbiotic nature of art and science is experienced throughout Discovery, while the implementation of that mission is helped to fruition through support from SHU’s Isabelle Farrington College of Education and Human Development (FCEHD).

“We are a regional leader in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) and computer science education,” says Michael Alfano, dean of FCEHD and vice provost for strategic partnerships, who also chairs the board at Discovery.

“This ties in naturally with the mission of Discovery.”

Full STEAM Ahead

With the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) being implemented in classrooms, “not everyone has the ability to redesign their labs and put them into practice,” says Erika Eng, executive director of SHU’s Discovery Science Center. “While all the theoretical materials are available, the hands-on experience makes the theoretical tangible and concrete.

“It’s an idea validated by practice. “My favorite part of working with kids at Discovery is giving them a different window into science that’s so hands-on,” says Santos.

The immersive experience allows students to put the abstract theories they’ve learned into motion. “The experience lets kids own not only the outcome, but the process to achieve that outcome,” says Eng. “The new education spectrum is different than it was before. We can’t stick with the old ways. There’s so much new technology. We need to give the kids the tools and then get out of their way. If they fail, they iterate until they achieve a new outcome and succeed.”

“It’s a paradigm shift in pedagogy across the board,” she admits, but easily points to its success. “We’ve taught the basic principles of rocketry to kindergarteners.”

The Learning Is in the Doing ...

for Both Students and Teachers

Undergraduate and graduate students at SHU who are aspiring educators gain community-based education experience through time at Discovery. They amass clinical hours assisting with the educational programs Discovery offers—helping orchestrate hands-on science experiences for field trips as well as assisting in after-school programming.

“For pre-service educators to have access to the popula-
tions that we serve helps build a structural foundation for them,” says Eng. Discovery serves students of all ages from all economic backgrounds. It’s experiential learning at every level, from the students who are the teachers to the students who are being taught.

Indeed, beyond its new name, the collaboration between the University and the center is evident from the moment you open the doors. Members of each College within the University, from the College of Arts & Sciences to the Dr. Susan L. Davis, R.N., & Richard J. Henley College of Nursing (DHCON), from students to deans, have contributed content to Discovery. “One of my goals is to get as many people as possible in the SHU community involved,” says Alfano. “It adds to Discovery’s goals, but also gives our stu-
dents a great sense of community and aligns perfectly with our mission of community service.”

To that end, undergraduates students in the Jack Welch College of Business & Technology (WCBT) intern in the center’s finance department, while Discovery will be working with SHU’s School of Computer Science & Engineering to open Discovery’s makers space and continue to grow its community science department.

One of Santos’ favorite exhibits is the Science in Motion experience. “It has SHU gear all over it. Teaching kids physics through sports and having them make the connection with the teams that are right down the street is something to watch.”

SHU’s nursing and health science students actively contribute to the hands-on exhibits, one of the most popular of which is the Teddy Bear Triage, where younger children apply bandages and other wound care to donated teddy bears. SHU’s nursing students contributed the information
on display describing how to splint a finger, how to wrap a foot, what orthosis is ("a mechanical device applied to the body in order to support the body part, correct anatomical positioning, protect the body part or assist motion to improve body functioning," so you know) and how they work. SHU’s radiology program donated X-rays on display in the Sensational Senses exhibit.

One of the first exhibit spaces patrons see walking into Discovery is The STEAM Gallery. Working with Katherine Carter Curatorial Services (as used by the New York Hall of Science), Discovery is able to showcase rotating artists’ traveling exhibits. One goal resulting from the partnership with Sacred Heart is to add SHU students’ art to the gallery rotation.

Eyes Up

There are so many ways to teach students about physics at Discovery they use the stars. The digital planetarium lets visitors fly anywhere in space and time. Elliot Severn, planetarium and technology director at Discovery, is able to go off-script and follow the interests of the audience during his shows. As well as Discovery’s resident astronomer, Severn is an adjunct physics instructor at SHU who makes class an immersive experience. “We use the planetarium as a classroom. Instead of writing on the board or using PowerPoint, we explore various astronomical datasets on the dome to investigate whatever topics we are learning about,” says Severn. These include things like the stars and constellations, multispectral sky surveys, planetary interiors and terrain models, 3D stellar catalogs, volumetric models of nebulae and galaxies, and cosmology datasets stretching all the way out to the cosmic microwave background. Severn also uses dome visualizations under which students do simple experiments, like measuring parallax and mapping the position of the sun through the seasons and from different geographic locations.

Collaboration Continuation

“The research we put into our grant work and our exhibits can be done in collaboration with a professor in that field of study,” says Eng. “It’s brought a new, elevated quality to what we’re able to produce.” While Sacred Heart has helped take care of some infrastructure issues and general upkeep to the property, Discovery is financially independent from SHU. “Sacred Heart taking over facilities operations was a salvation,” says Eng. That allows Discovery to allocate its finances into programming, where it is needed most. “This is a great partnership,” says Eng. “We’re getting more entangled with each other each semester, and it benefits not only Discovery and Sacred Heart, but the whole community.”

“Our sixth-year STEAM program pushes forward ‘what’s possible’ in STEAM education in grades K-12,” says Darcy Ronan, FCEHD program director for STEAM and computer science education programs. “As our projects develop, our partnership with Discovery will give us an incredible opportunity to share those projects with the wider community.”

“Great River is itself a mark of distinction, providing the University tremendous outreach and branding opportunities within the golfing community. But this recognition by Golfweek does more than simply put another great Connecticut venue on the map. It’s an accolade that puts Sacred Heart in the same conversation as the likes of Yale, Notre Dame, the University of Michigan and Stanford.”
Designed by Tommy Fazio, Great River, aptly named for its scenic views along the Housatonic River, opened in 2001 but, like many semi-private courses, struggled to earn a profit. Sacred Heart’s men’s and women’s D1 golf teams trained at the course for a time before the University purchased it in 2015.

“It’s 150 acres on the water and the land is a commodity,” says Marc Izzo, vice president of construction and facilities management. “It was a great investment for us for many reasons. It gives our student-athletes a top-notch place to work on their game, while also providing another way for the outside community to connect with the University community. Many alumni are also club members.”

To help make that investment offer up its returns, Jason Loomis was hired to assist the University in enhancing the course’s reputation. The golf pro returned to his home state from Florida in 2019, intent on capitalizing on the wow factor of the course winding along the river. Just as Loomis was getting his feet wet, however, COVID-19 rolled through in March 2020, putting those plans on hold.

“Everything went right out the window,” Loomis recalls. Ironically, though the pandemic was a struggle for people and businesses worldwide, it proved a boon for golf in Connecticut. With courses closed in Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island, duffers and handicappers made the pilgrimage to Milford. “There was no playbook,” Loomis says. “We just adjusted to whatever the State of Connecticut was allowing us to do.”

His perseverance and determination paid off. Not only does the once-struggling course now average around 23,000 rounds of golf every year, but the course and clubhouse are home to another 40-50 events per year, hosting everything from alumni weddings to past PGA qualifiers to this year’s Hartford HealthCare Women’s Championship in July, an official qualifier for the LPGA. For his efforts, Loomis was named Merchandiser of the Year in 2021 by the Connecticut Professional Golfers’ Association.

Of course, to be a true college course, Great River must first and foremost have the students at its heart—and it does. Not only do the greens, fairways and rough provide an exceptional training ground for SHU’s championship teams but Great River offers significantly reduced course fees for students during the week and for later tee times on weekends. And the 32,000-square-foot clubhouse is ripe with opportunity for student events, student employment and internship positions.

As for the links themselves, Loomis suggests that the toughest hole could be any one from the third to the eighth. “When we host the big events,” he says, “it’s always the fourth, seventh and eighth holes that give the most problems.”

That’s fair warning, though in truth it could be any hole that trips you up. After all, as Mark Twain famously noted, golf is “a good walk, spoiled.” With its lush green fairways and waterfall views, Great River is certainly a good walk. It’s navigating the spoilers that’s the challenge.

MARK TWAIN ONCE CALLED GOLF “A GOOD WALK, SPOILED.” BUT THEN AGAIN, HE NEVER HAD THE CHANCE TO WALK GREAT RIVER.

In a world of pithy, mic-drop comebacks and snarky soundbites, there’s one team at SHU dedicated to finding a more ethical approach to discourse.
Meet Sacred Heart University’s Ethics Bowl Team. Each team member is recommended to the squad by professors with a keen eye for star students—indeed, it’s the only way to join. Jenna Bangs ’24, a speech pathology and communications disorders major, remembers the day she learned her name had been put forward. “When I first got the email, I was torn. I wasn’t sure if I was smart enough and asked why I had been chosen,” she admits. “Once I found out that one of my professors had nominated me, it changed my whole perspective. It felt so fulfilling to be noticed in that way.”

But it’s not just the recruiting process that makes this team unique. Unlike traditional debate tournaments, where competitors prepare arguments for and against a proposition and only find out which side they’re arguing in competition at the time of the event, preparation for the Ethics Bowl involves choosing the side in an argument that resonates with the competitor.

“We take the time and read over all the cases months in advance and ask ourselves what side is morally correct,” says Kendall Decker ’23, a pre-med and molecular biology major. With 15 cases to prepare ranging from hazardous environmental practices and dangerous forms of scientific study to fatal nursing malpractice and the Black Lives Matter movement, each student involved in the Ethics Bowl Debate Team must compose a clear and concise argument and be willing to fight for it.

Coach of the team, Professor Omoniode Ekeh, sees the positive ways in which their diversity empowers the group. “It’s always so fun to see the students draw from their own expertise,” he says. “They draw from what they’ve learned in class or from outside experience and bring it into their arguments.”

Given that diversity, it’s safe to say not every member of the team will agree—which, of course, is part of the point. In choosing and developing their own positions on the cases for debate, teammates must listen to and consider all points of view as well as present their own argument for what they believe to be the ethical solution in each of the cases. Not only does this allow for a deeper connection to each case, but it gives the team an opportunity to practice civil discussion of differing ideas among themselves.

Furthermore, it proves you can disagree with someone without losing respect for them—a point to remember for success both in competition and in life. Because it’s not so much about weighing the pros and cons, it’s recognizing that the pros and cons have different weights for different people.

“Both parties to an argument are just fighting for what they believe is best,” says Delphia. “W
Olympics,” notes the new head coach of men’s and women’s fencing at Sacred Heart. “Only a bullet travels faster.”

And while White has never claimed to be more powerful than a locomotive, his fencing career did begin on a train, even if in a rather roundabout way. The East Orange, NJ, native wasn’t really that into sports as kid. But White’s mother was eager to get her son involved in some extracurricular activity. During her daily commute, she had been speaking with a train conductor whose son was into fencing thanks to a nonprofit run by Peter Westbrook, the first African-American to win an Olympic medal in the sport. Though fencing is typically perceived as the reserve of the socially elite, the Peter Westbrook Foundation is aimed at bringing the sport to less privileged communities in the Greater New York City area.

Soon, Saturdays were all about fencing for the then-sixth-grader White. Flash forward to 2011 and, thanks once again to that train conductor’s son who became part of Sacred Heart’s first conference title-winning fencing squad, White found SHU and began fencing for the Pioneers. The next four years—of White’s undergraduate career—Sacred Heart would go on to win conference titles in fencing. In that same time, White would twice earn All-Conference honors and, in 2015, qualify for the NCAA championships. SHU fencing hasn’t seen anything like that level of success since White’s graduation. “We’ve all seen his All-American plaque in the training room,” says Jeff Palma ’25, a sophomore psychology major on the current fencing squad. “We all knew his name.”

Now, with his return to campus assuming the helm as men’s and women’s fencing head coach, Khristopher White is more than a note of former glory. He’s very real and very present. And very determined to bring that glory back.

As for the move from competitor to coach, the role is nothing new to White. “There was a lot of community coaching at the foundation,” he says of the place his passion and talent were born and raised. Teammates would often look after teammates, offering advice and cues—a practice cultivating not only the fencer’s athletic skill, but the coach’s ability to observe and direct. Plus, since his graduation from SHU in 2015, White has been head coach of fencing at Grace Church High School in Manhattan as well as remaining active in coaching and guiding the young athletes at the foundation that gave him his start.

The result, Palma says, is an approachability that never diminishes the respect the coach has earned and is due. “Still, White admits, “it can be stressful, sitting on the bench, watching,” when there are points to be scored and championships to be won. Especially since sitting and watching are just not part of his nature.

Plus, there are other contests to be won. “I want to see more people that look like me in this sport and doing well,” he says. Conference titles as well as cultural transformations? No problem. If you can see it, you can do it—and Khristopher White has X-ray vision when it comes to what it takes to win. Proof, it would seem, that not all heroes wear capes.
It's one thing to read a magazine. It's another to walk the campus, visit the chapel, take in a game or a show, maybe catch up with a former professor or an old friend. Or just marvel at how we've grown.

Come back to SHU. We'd love to see you.

Plan your visit to campus by contacting Todd Gibbs, executive director of development & alumni engagement, at 203.365.4526 or emailing gibbst@sacredheart.edu.

We are Pioneers.

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