Alone Together: A Reflection on Our Current Reality

By Maddie Fecio

I think it’s fair to say that when we first returned to school in September, no one had any idea how this year was going to turn out. Even looking back on what ended up being our last day in March, it’s hard to believe that the year is really over. There’s an empty space where our final memories should be, our last-day excitement and hugs, the slam of our lockers and shouted goodbyes, and above all, the finality of knowing that something has ended.

Instead, our last memories of this school year at Mercy aren’t at Mercy at all. They are confined within the walls of our bedrooms or the ends of our couches, illuminated by the glow of our computer screens and the “turn in” button on Google Classroom; they are frequented by our parents and siblings instead of our friends and teachers. Above all, they are strikingly different from what we imagined for ourselves.

Beyond that key commonality, though, every student’s experience within the pandemic has been different. Everyone is dealing with its effects in their own way, and the way it has affected us has varied immensely. From the effectiveness of distance learning to the toll the pandemic has taken on our mental health, students are processing and reacting to our new reality in a variety of ways.

When school ended in March, there was a lot of doubt about how well distance learning would work, if at all. The prospect of spending the rest of the year learning through a screen was not a promising one, and it was daunting for many students, including myself. Ultimately, the response was mixed. While some students thrived on managing their own schedules and taking breaks when necessary, others struggled with learning without an in-person teacher, as well as with motivation; many found it difficult to work to their full potential when the circumstances had changed so drastically. In general, distance learning was reasonably successful, and most students were able to push through to the end of the year.

With our altered schedules and lack of other activities, all of us found ourselves with a great deal of new time on our hands. Although some still found their schedules to be busy with schoolwork and others used their time to catch up on much-needed sleep, many students found new and creative ways to occupy themselves in quarantine. According to my student survey, the most common activities included reading, watching Netflix, working on DIY or artistic projects, exercising, and spending time with family, as well as keeping in contact with friends via text, FaceTime, or social media. Though it can be difficult to find many positives in a situation like this, many students noted that they have been able to spend more time with family members and pets, as well as having more time for self-care and improving themselves.

However, the stress of the current reality has taken a toll on most of us. In anonymous responses to my survey, many students confided that their mental health has been on a downward trend in recent months, and honestly? I think it’s been hard and lonely for everyone, at least at times. The survey responses reflected what I know my friends and I have felt: we miss our normal lives. We miss seeing our friends and family, finding joy in our activities and hobbies, and the everyday routines of being in school. We miss the conversations overheard in the hallways, the assemblies, dashing out of a classroom at the sound of the bell and the smile of a friend across the room. We miss the ridiculous answer choices on Mr. McCracken’s tests and Mr. McCrea’s endless cups of coffee, the rush for extra spicy fries during third lunch and Mr. Hallinan’s daily greetings at the door. We miss the things we never even thought about until they were gone.

So much has changed in the past few months, and I know we are all painfully aware of it. Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors: I hope that if there is something you take away from this, it’s not to take your time for granted. I hope that the rest of your time at Mercy, however long that is and however it may look, is filled with the kind of memories that we would all give anything to have right now. And to my fellow seniors, I hope that when I graduate alongside you in only a few days, you look back on your time at Mercy with as much love as I do. None of us wanted things to end this way, and I know at least for me, it’s still hard to accept. It might be for a while. But in the end, I hope that we all grow from this. And I can’t wait to see who you all become.
Annual Spirit Week is an Entertaining Success
By Paige Angle

This year, Mount Mercy Academy held its annual spirit week from February 10th to February 14th, which included a variety of different games, activities and dress-down themes. The themes for these days were pajama day, USA day, meme day, twin day, and color day. Various games were spread out throughout the week.

Monday, February 10th was pajama day. Students and teachers arrived at school in pajamas and very comfortable clothing. At the end of the day, the school gathered in the gymnasium for fun games planned by the student council. One of the games was a musical chairs competition, made to fit the pajama theme by using sleeping bags instead of chairs.

Tuesday, February 11th was USA day. Everyone dressed in red, white, and blue or other American-themed items. After school, students had the opportunity to stay and decorate a wall with their classmates. Each grade level was assigned a different game as a theme for their wall. Freshmen were given Chutes and Ladders, sophomores Candy Land, juniors Mario Kart, and seniors Monopoly. The winner of the wall decorating competition was the juniors, but everyone had fun creatively decorating the walls and spending time with their class.

Wednesday, February 12th was meme day. Students and staff dressed up as their favorite meme or Vine. Freshmen Kayla Pietrkiewicz described her experience by saying, “I really liked meme day because we got to see everyone’s funny side and their creativity.”

Thursday, February 13th was twin day. Students and even some of the staff got to twin-up with their friends and dress the same. It was very fun and exciting to see people matching in the hallways.

Finally, Friday, February 14th was color day. Each class wore their designated class color, so freshmen dressed in purple, sophomores in pink, juniors in red, and seniors in blue. At the end of the day, everyone went to the gym for a lip sync battle and teachers revealed the winners of the games. The freshmen had the most spirit week points and took the ultimate first place.

Mount Mercy Talent Show Highlights Student Abilities
By Jenna Angle

Mount Mercy Academy held its first talent show on February 25, 2020. Held in the Mercy Center auditorium, the talent show included performances by the ensembles Charmed, Enchantment, Pure Magic, Magic Belles, and the two dance classes, as well as solo and small group acts.

All performers worked hard preparing for the show. The Charmed and Enchantment choirs stepped out of their comfort zones for the performance and not only sang, but also danced. Student choreographers created and taught the dances for each choir; with Ali Eve Reid and Ellie Godsoe leading Charmed’s performance of “Accidently In Love,” and Maddie Fecio and Casey Ball leading Enchantment’s “I’m In Love With A Monster.” Both choirs spent many weeks of hard work preparing for the performance, and it paid off.

Magic Belles also rehearsed and worked hard preparing for the show. The ensemble performed two Disney songs, “Let it Go” from Frozen and “Colors of the Wind” from Pocahontas, and the junior Magic Belles also performed “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from The Wizard of Oz. In addition, the dance groups spent numerous classes rehearsing for their performance. One dance group performed a modern dance to “Into the Unknown” from Frozen 2, while the other performed a hip hop dance to “We Ridin’” from The Lego Batman Movie. Both performances were very successful, and everyone was satisfied with the results.

Between the ensembles, there were a number of performances from talented soloists and small groups. Senior soloists Evelyn Nowak, Amanda Songin, Bella Watkins, Maddie Fecio, and Ally Pajek sang a variety of songs from movies such as Mulan, The Greatest Showman, Breakfast At Tiffany’s, and Aladdin. Junior Emily Rhoads and senior Melanie Bekah performed piano solos of “Da-Doo” from Little Shop of Horrors and a Legend of Zelda medley, respectively; sophomore Adrianna Awald sang her rendition of “When You Believe” from The Prince of Egypt and senior Mia Mahar painted an impressive portrait of Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe in under four minutes. Finally, the seniors from Pure Magic performed their own arrangement of “Never Enough” from The Greatest Showman, complete with four-part harmony and solos by Ally Pajek, Maddie Fecio, and Casey Ball.

Pure Magic closed out the talent show with an enthusiastic performance of “Neverending Story” from The Neverending Story, dressed in colorful ‘80s costumes. The show was absolutely a success, and everyone’s efforts clearly paid off in their performances.
Growing Up in a Bilingual Household

By Dominique Khoury

Approximately 1 in 5 American households is bilingual. My household is one of them. My entire family speaks fluent Arabic and English. My parents’ first language was Arabic since they grew up in Lebanon; they both moved to Buffalo at a young age and were able to learn to speak English fluently. My siblings and I were born in America, so we learned English and Arabic at the same time. Our parents mainly speak English to us. However, when our other family members come to visit, we listen to our parents’ conversations with them, and in this way we eventually picked up Arabic.

Being bilingual has come with benefits. One upside growing up was that it was easier for me to learn a third language in school. For example, I have learned how to speak Spanish in school more easily than some of my peers, and the pronunciation has come easier to me than others. There have been many studies that suggest that learning a third language is easier when you already know a second language.

Another upside was that I am able to communicate with other Arabic speakers without someone who is a non-Arabic speaker knowing what you are saying. I know it sounds like we are trying to hide something, but sometimes I just do not want everyone knowing what I’m saying. It is like we have a secret language.

However, being bilingual has also come with downsides. One downside is that growing up I did not know the words for certain things in English. It was not an uncommonly used words, but if I had to communicate some words with a non-Arabic speaker, I could not. Eventually, I found out what the words in Arabic were in English through my friends in school. I think that most children from bilingual households expand their vocabularies this way.

Also, I speak both languages in most of my sentences when I am home. So, sometimes I speak both languages when I am talking to my classmates, and then I realize what I just said when I see their confused looks on their faces and get embarrassed. But my classmates understand, and they often ask what it means and want to learn more from the Arabic language.

Some bilingual students have mentioned that growing up, they had a hard time grasping the difference between the two languages. I have not had a hard time grasping the difference for the most part as a child. When I was at school, I spoke strictly English, and when I was home I spoke both. I think that I had a little easier than others since my parents also spoke English.

I feel that knowing two or more languages is a definite advantage. It gives you the ability to communicate with more people, and it can eventually help you get a job. I also feel that my knowledge of Arabic has given me a connection to Lebanon and my family’s culture.

A Thank You to My Parents

By Amanda Songin

My mom has always said that “what beats you down makes you stronger,” but I didn’t realize until the middle of high school how much both of my parents were beaten down. As I’m sure we all know, Ms. Luhr tells the freshmen every year that “someone is sacrificing” for us to be at Mercy. And someone is. When I think about it, I realize all the things that my parents gave up for me. My parents worked endless hours to keep my dreams alive - from volleyball to music to the best doctors in the city. They made the choice to send their kids to private, Catholic school, though there was no obligation. Both my parents have worked more than one job at a time, and as a kid I wouldn't see my dad for days because he was always signing his name for overtime.

My dad went back into corrections because money was tight. While he was away, my mom would make bottle runs to Walmart so there was enough money for gas to get him home. When my dad wasn’t able to be home, my mom did everything a man could do around our property on top of a job and taking care of three kids. She is one of the toughest women I know. Although my parents were struggling, I still grew up with a great childhood in the country.

Other kids were spending time at each other's houses, but at home my siblings and I were building shelves and forts in our own corner of Dad’s shop and riding the four wheeler, then breaking something that required Dad to fix it.

My parents came out the other end stronger. You don’t go through everything they did and not grow. They are true role models to me.

They have done everything in their power to give my siblings and me the best life possible, and they have. They never wanted to hold us back.

The last four years have shined a light on everything that my parents have done and given up for me. There's a lot my parents could have had, but they always put us first. So I am asking you to thank the person (or people) sacrificing for you, because they are trying to give you the universe. Hug them, say “I love you,” write a card, something, because everything that they gave up can never be repaid. They sacrificed for you.

Spotlight:
Mrs. Collins

By Paige Angle

Mrs. Collins is the school nurse at Mount Mercy. She wants the students to know that “students can always come to” her with their problems or questions, and she is a very passionate person. Mrs. Collins is also a vegan and animal rights activist, as a result of seeing all the cruel things animals get put through to be turned into food.

Mrs. Collins has many hobbies and interests. She has two dogs and likes to hike. She enjoys running and has run three marathons so far. She also uses meditation and yoga to manage her stress, as she believes that meditation and yoga help with reducing stress and building strength. She has a psychology degree as well as a wellness and health certification, and she attended Trocaire College.

When Mrs. Collins saw a job opening at Mount Mercy, she was quick to go for the position. She is a graduate of MMA herself, and she knew it would be a great place to work because “the people are very welcoming.” Now, she loves working at Mercy because of the many relationships she has developed with both the students and the staff.

Mrs. Collins’ greatest passion is animal rights. She became a vegan “because of animal cruelty,” which she witnessed early in her life: as a child, she was exposed to the harsh treatment that many animals are subjected to, and it made her angry.

Consequently, in her adult life, Mrs. Collins has become a fierce animal rights activist. A few times each year, she travels to Canada to feed and take care of pigs that are being raised for food. She tries to end animal speciesism, which is the belief that humans are superior to animals.

Mrs. Collins is involved in many animal rights organizations and helps to educate people on the reality of animal abuse, as many people do not know or understand where their food comes from. She would like students to know that if they have any questions about either nursing or animal justice, they should notify her.
Movie: Just Mercy
Film review by Chloe McHugh-Freedenberg

The film Just Mercy, directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, made its theatre debut on January 10th, 2020. This is a moving and compelling film that sheds light on a true story, as well as on a topic that is often swept away from public attention. Just Mercy shares the journey of Harvard graduate and lawyer Bryan Stevenson, played by Michael B. Jordan. Bryan Stevenson took the high road when it came to choosing a job. Stevenson moved to Alabama in the late 1980s in order to defend those who were wrongly convicted as well as those who did not have the resources to secure proper repeat action. In the film, one of the first cases Stevenson becomes familiar with is the case of Walter McMillian, played by Jamie Foxx. McMillian was sentenced to death in 1987 for the murder of an 18-year-old girl, despite reliable evidence that proved his innocence. Bryan Stevenson becomes emotionally invested in the lives and stories of his clients and their families, making his work much more meaningful as execution remains a constant threat. With the help of a fellow advocate, Eva Ansley, played by Brie Larson, Stevenson is able to defy the odds against him and overcome the ruthless prejudices within the courtroom as well as the public.

A group of Mount Mercy students had the opportunity to view Just Mercy in theatres, joining fellow high school students from around the area. After the movie, the Mount Mercy group joined together to discuss the valuable messages that were developed throughout the film. Just Mercy allowed us to reflect on the issue of wrongful conviction cases, in which racial stereotypes are often a factor, as well as the matter of capital punishment. Although these topics are often left undiscussed, this guided conversation allowed us to think critically about the relevant issues that come along with the miscarriages of justice that may lead to incarceration or the death penalty. Just Mercy is a film that provokes the viewer to become emotionally invested in the outcomes of the characters’ lives and the difficult situations that are represented.

Just Mercy is a moving and thought-provoking film that emulates the raw emotion of such a significant story that remains relevant today. Senior Jill Kotwica stated, “It really opened my eyes to a story that I didn’t happen that long ago.” I highly recommend Just Mercy as it conveys the importance of an issue that continues to hold relevance today. Senior Natalie Redmond stated, “I thought Just Mercy was a very powerful and impactful movie and I think it’s a movie everyone should watch regardless of their opinion on the death penalty.” This film captivates the viewer’s attention and emotions as it allows for a more intimate understanding of the sorrowful consequences of injustice and prejudices.

Music: Manic
Album review by Maddie Fecio

From the first lines of her self-titled opening track “Ashley,” it’s clear that Halsey plans to hold nothing back in her latest album, Manic. The album opens with Halsey’s voice rising from a heavily edited, technosounding introduction, reflecting on the persona she has created for herself as she sings, “Standing now in a mirror that I built myself, and I can’t remember why the decision wasn’t mine.” It’s a fitting beginning to an album that exposes the 25-year-old singer’s true self for the first time, taking its listener on a sixteen-song journey through the depths of Halsey’s mind.

Manic (titled with regard to Halsey’s struggle with bipolar disorder) begins with “Ashley,” a hard-hitting introduction to Halsey’s perception of herself and her career. She wrestles with self-doubt and the gravity of her decisions, wondering “Is it really that strange if I always want to change?” and worrying that her heart is “still not strong enough to carry the weight of the choices I’ve made.” The honest lyrics of “Ashley” are a perfect lead-in to the rest of the album, showing that Halsey is comfortable sharing her true identity and feelings.

The next three tracks on the album range from stripped-down acoustic to pop to somewhat country, all conveying Halsey’s (often self-destructive) tendencies within her relationships. The sparse and poetic “clementine” describes the difficulty of being vulnerable and the ever-changing nature of Halsey’s emotions. In it, she plaintively sings, “I don’t need anyone - I just need everyone and then some.” Pop-oriented and radio-friendly “Graveyard” provides a portrait of a toxic relationship and the struggle of being in love with someone who hurts you; disarmingly honest for a pop song, it reflects, “It’s funny how the warning signs can feel like they’re butterflies.” Finally, catchy and country-inspired “You Should Be Sad” considers the end of a relationship like the one in “Graveyard,” commenting on Halsey’s tendency to stay with someone because she believes she can help them: “I really meant well from the start - take a broken man right in my hands and then put back all his parts.”

A three-song sequence follows, made up of “Forever… (is a long time),” “Dominic’s Interlude” (feat. Dominic Fike), and “I HATE EVERYBODY.” Taken together, these songs are the portrait of self-sabotage, showing how Halsey’s own insecurities and doubts allow her to ruin a relationship for herself before it can be taken away from her. Featuring brutally honest lyrics like “I could never hold a perfect thing and not demolish it” and “I could fall in love with anybody who don’t want me,” these songs show Halsey’s reflection on her own behaviors and how much her self-worth relies on others. The next track, “3am,” builds off of this theme: in an Avril Lavigne-esque punk-rock song, Halsey confesses her tendency to seek out meaningless relationships as a distraction, constantly attempting to get out of her own mind and avoid getting hurt. She relates her need for “digital, cause baby when it’s physical, I end up alone” and realizes that she is “the worst of my enemies, and I don’t really know what to do with me.”

The rest of the album reaches unflinchingly into the topics that are most personal to Halsey and what goes on in her mind, using a variety of songs and styles. “Finaly/beautiful stranger” provides a soft and genuine love song about finding safety and comfort in someone you love, proclaiming, “I think it’s finally, finally, finally…safe for me to fall” in what Halsey calls a “first-dance song.” “SUGA’s Interlude,” featuring rapper Min Yoongi from BTS, takes the price of seeing your dreams come true, stating simply and poetically that “it may be different to what you were hoping for - how you live on and how you love change…I wonder what’s in store if I don’t love it anymore.” But it is the final three tracks of Manic that hit the hardest.

In what she describes as one of the most “special” and meaningful songs she’s ever written, Halsey pens a heartbreaking love letter to her future child in “More.” She reflects on the pain and hopelessness she has been through because of her miscarriages, singing, “They told me it’s useless, there’s no hope in store.” However, the key message of the song is promising: it may not be easy, but “some things don’t change...I’m still learning to love myself.”

Closing out the album is “929,” a stream-of-consciousness glimpse into the most brutal and honest parts of Halsey’s mind. She describes feeling like an impostor and a liar, feeling like her life (and her self) has been through because of her miscarriages, singing, “I should be living the dream, but I go home and I’ve got no self-esteem,” illuminating the gap between her celebrity status and her own self-perception. She describes feeling alone even with everything she has achieved, stating simply, “No one around me knows who I am.” However, the key message of the song is promising: it may not be easy, but “some things don’t change, I’m still learning to love myself.”

Manic is an incredibly candid, remarkably original, and extraordinarily heartfelt album. Whether you’re already a Halsey fan or you’ve only heard her name, it’s more than worth a listen.
Novel: Scythe
Book review by Ms. Kaufman

I picked up Scythe by Neal Shusterman with some hesitation since I’m normally not a big fan of dystopian fiction. However, I was captivated by the bold cover image, complete with its silver ALA Michael L. Printz Honor Award insignia emblazoned next to a red-hooded grim reaper. I had just finished rereading Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (a favorite of mine) and was hoping to follow with a novel that also raised important ethical questions. Something that made me think but wasn’t so cerebral that it lost its “reading for pleasure” appeal. Scythe absolutely delivered. It is a fast-paced and thoughtful examination of a seemingly-perfect world, one devoid of hunger, crime, and tragedy.

Scythe is set in a future society that appears utopian. People are guided and effectively policed by the Thunderhead, a disembodied artificial intelligence evolved from what we call “the cloud.” The Thunderhead is all-knowing and incorruptible and a power that people all over the world welcome. On top of the technological advances made in this society, people have conquered death and are, in essence, immortal. This fictional world is pretty similar to our own except that without the threat of death, people become stagnant. To prevent overpopulation, the Scythedom was formed as a power separate from the Thunderhead. Members are called Scythes, and their job is to select those who will be killed and carry out the killing. Not anyone can become a Scythe. You must be chosen and trained by first becoming a Scythe’s apprentice. Even then, not all apprentices are selected to join the Scythedom.

The plot follows two teenagers—Rowan and Citra—who have been recruited as apprentices underHonorable Scythe Michael Faraday. Though Scythes are respected members of society and everyone acknowledges that their duties are essential, their undertakings are so macabre that neither he nor she initially wants to accept the offer to become an apprentice. The perks, however, eventually sway both Rowan and Citra to learn the art and ethics of “gleaning” (the term used by Scythes to refer to their necessary killings) from Scythe Faraday. But, not all Scythes share Faraday’s old-school values or even approve of him taking on two apprentices at once. This leads to the book’s main conflict: only one can become a Scythe, but this comes with a heavy consequence. How will Rowan and Citra quell their natural attraction to each other in order to compete for this bittersweet honor, and who, in the end, will be the next ordained Scythe?

To complement the conflict, Shusterman vacillates between Citra and Rowan’s perspectives, balancing the interiority of both characters so that it is very difficult for the reader to predict who will come out the victor. Perhaps one of the most intriguing elements of the book is its structure. Not only are we exposed to both protagonists’ perspectives as they learn what it means to be a Scythe, but each chapter is also punctuated with a Scythe’s journal entry, allowing us to learn about the values of the Scythes that Citra and Rowan encounter. In their journals, the Scythes muse on ethical issues related to human nature, the drawbacks of “immortality,” the most effective and moral ways to “glean,” and the structures of power that dictate their society. These journals illustrate the complexity of the Scythedom and illuminate the problems that threaten its stability.

Shusterman’s YA novel is quite profound and effectively frames an ethical dilemma in an interesting way. Readers who enjoy thought-provoking novels with swift-moving plotlines and sympathetic protagonists will likely enjoy Scythe. Though I am not usually attracted to dystopian stories, I do think that Scythe has broad appeal since Shusterman is really a master storyteller. Luckily, Scythe is the first novel in the Arc of Scythe series. Though it can certainly stand alone as a great read (you aren’t left with a huge cliffhanger that requires you to buy the next book in the series to satiate your curiosity), I am excited to continue the story with Thunderhead and The Toll.

5 out of 5 stars.

Reviews

Documentary: Miss Americana
Film review by Amanda Songin

“I became the person everyone wanted me to be,” Taylor Swift admits in her documentary Miss Americana, a Netflix film directed by Lana Wilson that shows the celebrity’s journey over the past couple years and the struggles she faces both behind closed doors and onstage as an entertainer.

The talented singer has some heartfelt revelations in Miss Americana and reveals a new side of herself as she lets go of a belief system that she instilled in herself from day one as a performer. Her goal was to be a “good girl,” to be honest and kind and never do anything that would cause public havoc. Miss Americana debuts the first look at Swift’s hidden insecurities. She reveals how the media has given her anxiety, even contributing to an eating disorder.

Swift says she was so fulfilled by approval and was trained to be happy at a young age when someone praised her work. However, Swift’s experiences have caused her to look at life in a new light. With her mother being diagnosed with cancer she expresses, “It woke me up from this life where I used to sweat all these things. Like, do you really care if the internet doesn’t like you today if your mom’s sick from her chemo?” Swift opens up on her newfound exhaustion from the public eye.

In the midst of loneliness and time away from the media she says, “I also was falling in love with someone who had a really wonderfully, balanced, grounded life and we decided together that we wanted our relationship to be private.” This was the first time in a while that she had been truly happy, not the kind of happy that she's been trained to feel. She states, “It was happiness without anyone else’s input.”

Swift says there was a period of time where everyone was against her, declaring her “wicked” and “evil” on social media. She tells the viewers that the first thing they ask you is “why didn't you scream or why didn't you react quicker? Why didn't you stand further away from him?” This experience opened Swift up to recognize the true struggle of women and become involved in the fight for feminism, telling her fans, “I’m sorry if no one believed you.” She goes on to talk about how female artists have to reinvent themselves several times because society wants them to be shiny new toys compared to male artists. She says, “Women in entertainment are discarded in an elephant graveyard by the time they are 35.”

Amidst the glitz and glimmer of Hollywood and having a string of difficult times, Taylor Swift rises up with reason, maturity, and new beginnings in her documentary. She depicts her deepest emotions and how her early career path had brought her to the death of a reputation, how feud, whispers in her ear from executives, and personal morals that she refused to let go of brought her to the place she is today. Whether you’re a Swiftie or not, you are bound to shed a tear witnessing her breakdowns or the progress she has made with her political stands. After the release of her album Lover, I think it’s safe to say that she has found her sense of “daylight.” As a powerful, genuine, and influential woman, Taylor Swift proves to be one of the best celebrity role models with her record-breaking albums and down-to-earth personality.

Film review by Amanda Songin
**Reflection by Erin Jackson**

Lent. Every person that has ever gone to a Catholic school knows what that means. We get the ashes on our forehead, go to Church a little more than usual, have people ask “What are you giving up?” and try to be better people.

I was raised in a very Catholic family and taught to turn to my faith, especially during the Lenten and Advent seasons, in times of need and struggle. I am not the most religious person, so I decided to take this time to be more introspective.

This past year has been one of the hardest years of my life. Not only is college and school very stressful, but I had a lot of trouble with personal issues including family, friends, and relationships. I lost a lot, including parts of myself, in the process.

So, a few days before Lent began, I spontaneously decided to give up all social media. I’ve had thoughts and experiences like this previously, giving up Instagram every year for Lent and going on a few short social media cleanses, but I had never given up everything and never for such a long time.

When the idea first came to mind, I laughed it off, but the next day during my AP Psychology meditation I came to the realization that this might be a good idea. This might be the thing that will help me get back on track. In today’s society, there is such a stigma around how many people you are friends with that determines your worth, your popularity, your personality, and essentially, you. So, I did it: I deleted social media off of my phone.

I did not tell many people that I was going to be on a social media hiatus. Right when I hit delete, one of the biggest things that ran through my mind was: “Will anyone even notice?” Getting over that hump was the first step to making this process successful. It should not have mattered if anyone noticed; this is my life, not one that should be controlled by the thoughts of others.

After getting over this first hump, the boredom set in. I often found myself not knowing what to do with my hands or mind without a phone in hand. This was when it really struck me how much of people’s lives are consumed by the fast pace of social media applications on a handheld device. Too many times, I caught myself going to click on nonexistent buttons on my phone for reassurance or comfort when I had nothing else to do.

Instead of sulking in my boredom (as I would have done a few weeks prior) by spending endless hours scrolling through pictures of other people, I decided to make a to-do list of all the things that I wanted to accomplish, both mentally and physically.

Among the common items on this list, like cleaning my room and getting into a healthy regime, I also threw in a few that might be a good idea. This might be the thing that will help me get back on track. In today’s society, there is such a stigma around how many people you are friends with that determines your worth, your popularity, your personality, and essentially, you. So, I did it: I deleted social media off of my phone.

The next hump came when school was cancelled and social distancing became serious. I immediately knew that this would be a challenge for me. At this point in my journey, I was enjoying school. I was not finding reasons to be sad and truly noticed positive differences in my attitude.

Instead of giving up on myself to be with others on social media during this uncertain and scary quarantine, I saw it as a test. It was a test to see for myself what is really important: giving into the temptations of social media, or myself. I chose the latter, and I am happy that I did.

A few major takeaways that I have gotten from this experience are that people are not defined by who they surround themselves with, but this does help to build a person. Always stay positive and surround yourself with good vibes only. Never let the nerves of do

**School Should Be More Focused on Who You Are**

**Opinion by Amanda Songin**

We are too young to know, with certainty, what we want. Yet society gives you eighteen years to figure it all out. For many, college is a guessing game, and if you end up switching your major too late you run the risk of added fees. School doesn’t prepare for life.

It never taught me how to handle stress, depression, anxiety, or even just my heavy workload. It never taught me how to buy a house, how to deal with taxes, or here’s a big one: how to love myself. To this day, even with the number of teen suicides, drinking, and drugs, many schools still do not teach kids self care.

In high school, students are in the space between childhood and adulthood. We need to find a balance between the two, learning to be young adults without losing the important parts of childhood. We should be taught to be capable and advocate for ourselves, but we also shouldn’t be expected to be fully independent adults yet, and many schools struggle to find that balance.

For many students, schoolwork can be stressful and time-consuming, and it is expected to take precedence over other activities. However, we shouldn’t sacrifice the sports that keep us healthy and sane, the clubs where we build social skills, and the hobbies that lift our spirits because those are the parts of school that are enjoyable for most students, not the pressure or exhaustion from work that doesn’t excite the heart and mind.

Additionally, the emphasis on grades and academics in schools can make some students feel inferior if they struggle with exams or standardized tests. It can feel like the thing that matters most is test scores, and some kids just don’t test well; their future should not be deemed successful or a colossal failure based on the SATs, and it should not stop them from going to a school that requires the test.

We don’t give students enough time to indulge in hobbies and explore career paths. We don’t set aside time for kids to do so. If we did, then college debt would diminish because students wouldn’t be going back to school after guessing wrong the first time. They wouldn’t be walking blindly into their major without knowledge of what it entails.

Young children are given the freedom to play, create, and explore. However, as teenagers, they are often restricted to the learning environment of a computer, where they experience the material through screens that can be damaging to their health. Of course we are older now, but we can still learn from our childhood. We need to gain back what we lost: our imaginations. School shouldn’t be just about how well you score; it should be teaching you life skills while allowing you to discover who you really are, letting you explore your interests and allowing your imagination to flourish.

For more information on this topic, please watch the video “What is School For?” by Prince Ea on YouTube.
Creative Section

When Danger Calls
Short story by Dominique Khoury

The loud ring of her cell phone woke Sarah. Sarah had never received a call so late, so she jumped up to answer the call, worried that it could be a call about one of her family members being hurt.

When she picked it up, she heard the most chilling voice that she had ever heard. The voice whispered, “Don’t open the cabinet.” Sarah’s heart dropped to her stomach, and her lips quivered. She thought about leaving the house, but her curiosity forced her to find out who called her. She went over to the sink and grabbed a knife. As she slowly walked up to the cabinet, she could hear someone breathing, but it was coming from behind her. As she felt two cold leather gloves touch her neck, she knew her end was near and let out a scream.

Kyle Shoku was watching the news one day when he saw that his girlfriend and neighbor, Sarah Casden, was found dead the previous night. Another neighbor had called the police due to a very loud scream that he heard coming from Sarah’s house. He watched the newscast anxiously, seeing that the police had found no leads on the identity of the murderer. Kyle went outside of his house, where he saw all of his other neighbors who were in shock at the thought of Sarah being gone. He shed a tear or two with them.

A man came up to Kyle and said, “Hey man, I know you loved her, but it will all be okay, you will love again.” Kyle smiled at the man before bursting into tears.

As Kyle walked back into the safety of his own home, he began to panic. He thought to himself, the police are going to question me first because we were dating. His thoughts started to overwhelm him. Once inside, he heard a knock at his door.

As Kyle walked over to the door, he could hear both his heartbeat and his breathing getting heavier, and he could hear his ex-girlfriend’s scream replaying louder and louder in his head. As the door cracked open he saw a metal badge that had a shine that nearly blinded him. It was the detective who was working on Sarah’s case. He took a deep breath and said, “Hello detective,” sounding as if he was one of the most innocent people on this earth. Kyle did not want to go to prison. So, when the detective was about to start asking Kyle questions, Kyle asked if he could be excused so that he could go to the restroom. The detective let him go since he was in his own house, and Kyle went to the kitchen and quickly wrote a note. Then, he grabbed a knife and killed himself.

The detective heard a loud thud like that of a body going to the cabinet, she could hear someone breathing, but it was coming from behind her. As she felt two cold leather gloves touch her neck, she knew her end was near and let out a scream.

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Recipe: Homemade Peanut Butter Cups
By Maddy DiGiore

Ingredients
10 graham crackers
1 ½ cups peanut butter
1 cup powdered sugar
1 bag (at least) of chocolate chips or melt-able chocolate, any kind
Cupcake/muffin pan and liners

Instructions
1) Blend graham crackers in a blender or food processor until they are crumbs and transfer into a bowl.
2) Add the peanut butter and powdered sugar and combine.
3) Melt the chocolate.
4) Spread the chocolate into the bottom of cupcake liners, form the peanut butter mixture into a small disk and place in the cupcake liner, and top with more melted chocolate.
5) Place in the fridge until the chocolate hardens.
6) Enjoy!

Notes
-You can store these in the fridge, but it is not necessary.
-If you have leftover peanut butter mixture but not enough chocolate to melt, you can mix chocolate chips with the peanut butter mixture and form into balls.
These you should store in the fridge.

Review
“The homemade Reese’s cups that Maddy made were silky smooth with a nice hint of peanut butter in the middle to top it all off. I would definitely recommend trying out this fine recipe.”
-Chloé McHugh-Freedenberg

Book Recommendations From Ms. Kaufman

If you like Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds, read The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo
If you like The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky, read Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson
If you like Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, read 1984 by George Orwell or Scythe by Neal Shusterman
If you like The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, read Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison
If you like The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas, read On The Come Up by Angie Thomas (Thomas also revealed that her third book, Concrete Rose, will delve deeper into the world she created in THUG by telling the story of Starr’s father, Maverick)