

Character and . . .

Connection

Volume 11 / 2025

LIZA D. JOHNSON,
MARY K. BRYANT,
& ANNE E. FUNKE

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Message About College, Character, and
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The faculty and student essays presented here emerge from an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership or the University of Dubuque.

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A Letter from the Heart

An Honest Message About College, Character, and Who You're Becoming

Liza D. Johnson
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Dear Students,

We want to talk to you, not in academic lingo or institutional jargon, but honestly.

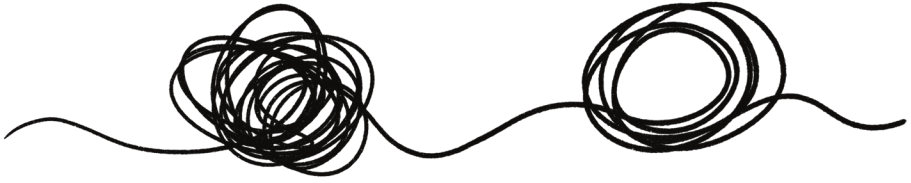
Heart to heart.

This isn't a policy memo or a slick brochure.

This is a letter. A love letter, really. To you. To your experience. To what college could and should be.

So let's begin.

You've probably felt it. That low-key ache that maybe something's missing in college. Sure, there are classes to pass, clubs to join, internships to land. You're doing all the "right" things. But deep down, do you ever wonder: *What's the point of all this?* Where's the part that helps you feel whole? Confident? Rooted? Like you're actually becoming the person you want to be, not just building a resume?



You're not imagining things. Something is missing. Yes, you get degrees. Yes, you learn how to cite sources and solve equations. And yes, you pack your schedules with studying, work, class, practice . . . But what about belonging? Purpose? Wellbeing? What about taking time to pay attention to how you're actually doing, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and just . . . as a human trying to be human? We hear you. We've heard you in classrooms, in Sylvia's cafe, in the colorful chairs on the quad, in late-night campus chats, in quiet moments of exhaustion and hope.

Also, if you've ever felt like college is just a really long, expensive escape room where everyone's pretending to know the clues, you're not the only one. (Hint: the key is often friendship. And snacks.)

That's why we're writing.

Because something important—something foundational—has been missing. Forgotten, even. And it's time to bring it back. We want to introduce what often gets overlooked but is at the core of who you're becoming: **character.**



We know. When you hear that word, you might think of a dusty bulletin board, or someone telling you to “be a good or excellent person” in the most vague and unhelpful way possible. But real character? It's not boring. It's not cheesy. And it's not extra.

It's actually the thing that makes life worth living.

It's your habits when no one's watching. It shapes your daily choices.

It's the courage to speak up. The patience to keep going. The empathy that shifts a conversation.

It's how you show up, for others and for yourself.

So why should you care? Because character is your superpower in a world that often forgets the value of being human. In a world full of quick clicks, hustle, and highlight reels, being kind is radical.

Showing up when it's inconvenient? Brave.

Listening deeply when you could scroll mindlessly? Heroic.

Telling the truth when it would be easier to ghost or gloss over? That's character, and it makes all the difference.



And unlike your GPA, prestigious internship, or follower count, character follows you *everywhere*.

Into your relationships. Into your future job. Into the moments when no one is watching and the moments when everyone is.

The truth is, college has too often become transactional. But that's not what it was meant to be. College should be relational, a space where you're seen, heard, known, challenged, supported, and celebrated.

And sure, it's easy for us to say there's more to life than a strong resume, but we also get it: that fancy resume is your ticket to paying off student loans, putting food on the table, having a comfortable home, and providing for your family ten years from now. When you're worried about survival, it's hard to focus on the intangibles, like cultivating your character and your vocation or calling in this world.

So here's a little secret: employers love to see good character and those so-called "soft skills" (though there is nothing soft about them) on your resume.¹ In fact, the World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report now refers to skills such as empathy, resilience, flexibility, self-awareness, an inclination toward service, and abilities that create community as *core* skills, ranking them among the top attributes employers seek, higher than many technical, cognitive, or physical skills.²

We don't tend to lead with the resume benefits of good character because, well, let's be honest. Things like humility, integrity, and empathy don't exactly scream self-promotion. But if it gets you in the door to building a

life that serves the common good, one that you ultimately find fulfilling and meaningful, we'll take it!

It's not about being perfect. It doesn't mean never making mistakes.

It's about being *real*—honest, grounded, and good.

And let's be clear. That doesn't mean being a doormat or pretending everything's fine.

It means having the strength to stay soft in a world that can feel sharp.

It means cultivating the courage to take a stand and the heart to care deeply.

In short?

Character won't just help you get ahead. It'll help you become someone worth following, someone you can be proud of.



You may not know this, but for more than two decades, the Wendt Center has been at the heart of the University of Dubuque's mission to encourage students to live lives of purpose, grounded in developing good character on campus and in our communities.

We're not sharing this to brag (okay, maybe just humble whisper). We're sharing this because we want you to know what's already in motion and what's coming next.

For years, we've worked to cultivate lives of purpose and encouraged service that matters. It's all grounded in what we believe: character counts. You may have heard of our Wendt Character Scholars. These students are part of a program that asks them to intensively reflect on, talk about, and act with good character and how they want to serve our community and the world.

As our most visible initiative, a lot of people think it's all we do. But we do so much more. We offer mini grants to help faculty and staff bring character conversations inside and outside of the classroom. We host inspiring guest speakers every semester. We lead World View and Personal Empowerment, courses designed to help you wrestle with big questions and strengthen the skills to grow not just as a student, but as a human.

We also quietly celebrate those who lead with integrity, courage, and kindness through our Character Awards at Honors Convocation, not to put them on pedestals, but to show that everyday character is worth noticing (and worth building).

And we're just getting started. Right now, we're developing Pathways to Purpose, a new experience for every UD student who wants college to offer more than just a polished resume. We are growing, evolving, reimagining what it means to develop character and what it means to do that with you, for you, and alongside you.

We're not here to fix you. You're not broken. We're here to walk with you, to learn with you and from you. To offer a roadmap for what it looks like to become not just a knowledgeable graduate, but a whole human with good character. Someone who feels a sense of purpose or calling to create good in the world.

And yeah, we get it. Some of this might sound like fluff. Like a motivational poster wrapped in a TED Talk, dipped in rainbow sprinkles. But here's the thing: it's not fluff. It's foundational. This is about becoming the kind of person who is present for others. The kind of person you have the potential to be.

Let us share, with a little heart and humor, why we are still talking about character.



Character is not a buzzword. Not a box to check. Character is how you act when there's nothing to gain. It's how you treat people who can't do anything for you. It's the internal compass you rely on when the GPS fails.

An example comes to mind. A couple years back, a caring faculty member started up UD's Peer Support Program to train a group of students who weren't chasing credit or spotlight. They simply wanted to be ready when a classmate needed a listening ear or a helping hand. It was character in action, plain and simple. Students doing the right thing—a good thing—simply because it was right and good.

This kind of genuine care can't be forced or faked. While AI might craft a heart-warming essay (we know, ironic), it can't have empathy. It can't make moral choices or sit with a friend having a rough day. That's on you. That's human. And that's what we're here to grow. That's the whole point of UD's emphasis on the Student Success Commitment you signed at Spartan Start (Yes, that moment when the UD president sat down with *you*, in the middle of his probably-back-to-back meetings, to talk about *your* future. It wasn't just a photo op. He meant it). That's why, on the back of that commitment, you were asked about who you are and who you want to become. Because it matters.

Remember looking at UD's mission statement in your World View class freshman year? It's all laid out right there. Sure, we obviously value knowledge and degrees (kind of a given for a university, right?). But *right alongside* scholarship is the call to live lives of worth and purpose. What matters most goes beyond academics, and we're committed to forming the whole person, not just the intellect. That includes moral development, a commitment to service, and all the things that make us deeply human.

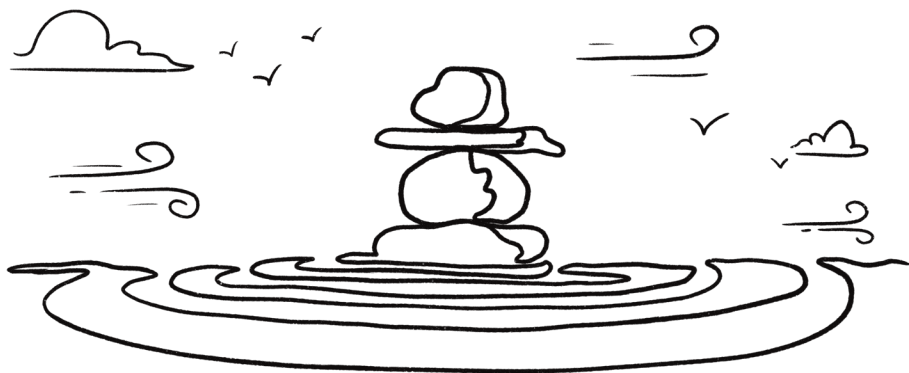
Today, in a world full of machine-learning and lightning-fast AI solutions to technical problems, those human qualities matter more than ever. As you head out into the world, build your career, and make your mark, that's what will set you apart and help you find meaning in what you do.

Going into the medical field? A machine can generate a list of medications, suggest a diagnosis, maybe even simulate a compassionate conversation



with a patient. But it takes a real human being to think outside the realm of known medical procedures and patterns or to see what's *beyond* the symptoms, to understand the emotional weight, the personal context, and the messy, complicated feelings people face when they're making life-changing decisions about their health. That's not something you can automate. That's character in action.

And that brings us back to the Wendt Center. Since 2004, we've been working to build a culture of character and purpose at UD. Over the years, we've heard all kinds of feedback. Some students have said the program changed their lives, while others have been more critical. We've tried out a lot of different approaches in response—some that stuck around, and others that ran their course or shifted in new directions.



And now, here we are in a new moment. With a new director at the Center and a new president at UD, we took some time to pause, reflect, and ask ourselves: where have we been, and where do we need to go next?

One answer stood out. Something vital was missing from the traditional approaches: engaging the heart. For years, the Wendt Center emphasized character development through head and hands: thinking critically about moral decisions and acting through service to others. And that work matters. It's made an impact. But we've realized it's not enough. It's not the whole picture of character.

We need the heart.

Emotions aren't fluff. They're not there for us to suppress or hide. They're powerful tools for insight, compassion, and courage! They are data from us

to us. And we can use that data to make good choices and build healthier relationships. Emotional intelligence, knowing how to name, navigate, and use our feelings well, isn't just about feeling better. It's about living better. Leading better. Loving better. Being a better, more kind human in a sometimes unkind world.

Also, we're just going to say it: character without emotional depth is like a smoothie without fruit. You can blend all you want, but you're still just drinking ice. So, we're adding heart back into the mix. We're shifting from character development that assumes emotions will tag along, to one that intentionally acknowledges, honors, and engages them.



Let us tell you a quick story. There was a student—let's call her Riley—who made an appointment with the Vocation, Career Services, and Community Engagement Center to discuss options for serving the community. They helped her identify her interpersonal strengths and pointed her in the direction of mentorship. She enjoyed the experience, but something happened when she mentored a younger student struggling with loneliness. Riley realized she was good at listening—really listening. She started intentionally checking in more, reflecting on her interactions with others, and making sure the people around her felt seen and heard. She was becoming the person others came to when they needed support. That shift wasn't about grades or accolades. It was heart work. And it changed everything.

Stories like Riley's remind us of what's possible.

College isn't just about cramming for midterms or perfecting your coffee-to-sleep ratio . . . right? Like we said, it can all feel a bit transactional. But whether you're in it just for the degree or really trying to experience something special, there's a big question waiting:

Who are you becoming while doing all this?

You might be thinking, *Alright already—you've made your point. Character and purpose matter.* So what now? What do you actually do about it?

That's where our new character framework comes in. It offers a practical approach to align your intentions, feelings, and actions, it outlines pursuits to guide your goals, and it suggests strategies to help you move toward these goals, day by day, choice by choice.

And we're keeping our approach simple: Head. Heart. Hands.



Head—For thinking big thoughts, asking better questions, spotting red flags (in research and relationships), and figuring out what's actually right (not just what's due at midnight).



Heart—For feeling deeply, caring honestly, and not ghosting emotions. This is where empathy, awareness, and some legit emotional intelligence live. This is where “*I should*” becomes “*I want to*,” and where connection, not perfection, starts.



Hands—For getting out there, doing the work, showing up, and making things better, even if it's just holding the door or helping change the world. But real talk: if your heart's not in it, your hands are just checking boxes. When the heart leads, the hands follow, and that's when things get real.

Think of it this way: if character were a musical trio, the head is the composer, the heart is the singer, and the hands are the drummer keeping rhythm. Take one out, and your band sounds like a mess. But together? Magic.

And we've seen the magic. There was Theo, who never thought much about emotional intelligence until his roommate lost a parent. Suddenly, it wasn't about roommate agreements or who took the trash out. It was about showing up. Theo learned how to sit in silence, to offer compassion, to just be present. That, friends, is heart-level character.

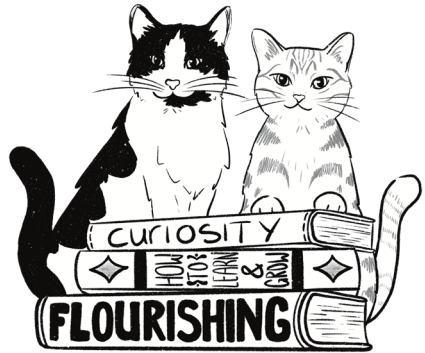
That's where the four pursuits come in. (Yeah, we know "pursuits" sounds like a medieval quest, but stick with us for a minute.) These are the big themes that help you live out that head-heart-hands combo in real ways, every day.

They're not some abstract idea. They're about becoming someone who makes a real difference: in your friendships, your future career, your community, and in how you treat people.

So let's break them down:

Seeking Knowledge and Insight

Because having a worldview beats just having a Wi-Fi password. This is about asking bold questions, staying curious (even when it's hard), and letting your values—not just your GPA—guide your thinking. Here, you'll grow character strengths like curiosity to explore ideas, perseverance when things get tough, humility to keep learning, truthfulness in your thinking, and integrity in how you live it out.

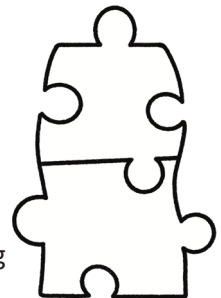


Supporting Wellbeing

Because burnout isn't a personality trait. This means caring for your mental, emotional, and spiritual health, and showing up with hope even when life feels messy. This is about building a life (not just a resume). You'll build strengths like compassion for yourself and others, patience in the waiting, gratitude in the grind, hope when things feel uncertain, and resilience when they fall apart.

Strengthening Community

Because no one thrives in a vacuum (unless you're a Roomba). None of us does this alone. This is about creating meaningful relationships, celebrating differences, and



building spaces where everyone can belong and thrive. It helps you strengthen things like compassion to understand others, respect to share space, honesty to build trust, accountability to follow through, and inclusivity to make sure everyone's in the conversation (and in the room).

Serving Others

Because leadership isn't just being in charge, it's being *of service*. This is the kind of action that doesn't just check a box, but actually changes lives (yours included). You'll grow strengths like courage to take the first step, purpose to stay grounded, justice to do what's right, stewardship to care for what matters, and practical wisdom to know how to help in a way that actually helps.



So where will you actually see this character stuff show up? Let's start with academics—because that's kind of what you're here for.



We're embedding this approach in academic life, but not in a "let's add a sentence to the syllabus and call it a day" kind of way. We mean it.

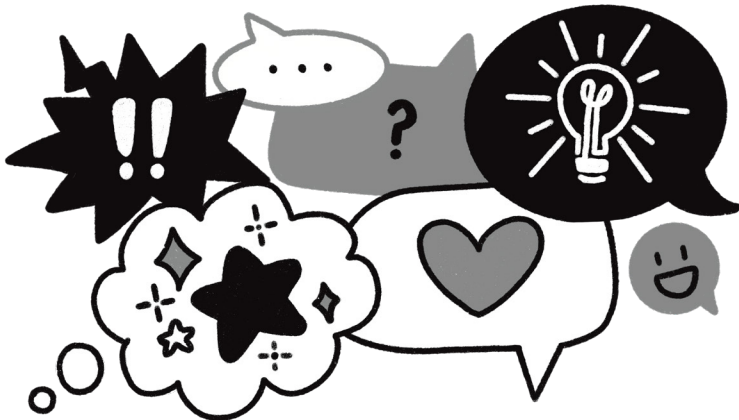
Every academic department has character learning outcomes. These aren't just about what you're majoring in, they're about who you're becoming. They're designed to help you learn how to think deeply, lead with integrity, and stick to your values (even when things get tough).

But here's the thing: based on honest feedback from faculty, we've learned that these outcomes aren't being used consistently or in ways that really matter to students. That's a problem. And we're not here to ignore it or gloss over it with a fancy spreadsheet. We're here to fix it. Our goal? To make character learning meaningful, relevant, and actually woven into your academic life, not just a dusty line in a syllabus or a checkmark in a curriculum plan from 2012.

That said, we've already got some real wins to build on:

Take Adam Hoffman, for example, who led science students on a study abroad trip to Sweden to study the country's sustainability efforts. The course included a visit to IKEA and discussions about finding balance between the demands of a business and its impacts on environmental, economic, and social impact in order to both make people's lives better and respect what our planet needs to remain healthy.

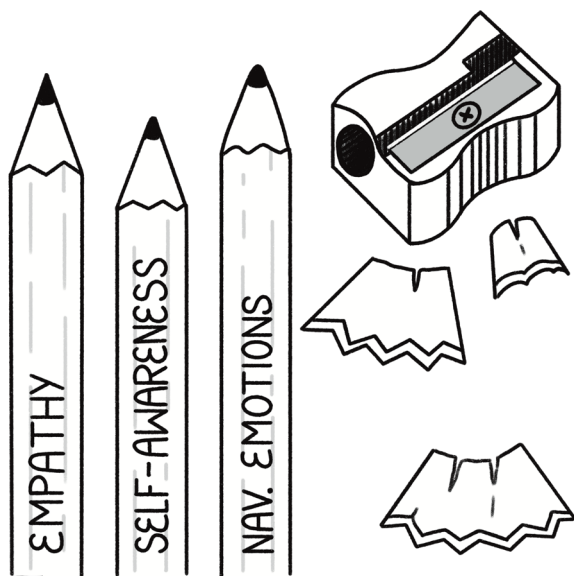
Or Amy Baus, who is supporting psychology students' character growth by using special lab kits that challenge students to intentionally develop virtues such as curiosity, perseverance, humility, and integrity as part of their exploration of the content.



And then there's the World View Seminar series. In your first year, you'll take World View Seminars I and II, classes designed to help you explore what a life of purpose means to you, and to begin figuring out what you truly value and want your life to be about. Later on, you'll take a Senior Capstone course in your major, where you'll pull together everything you've learned and reflect on how your character has grown since the day you came to campus.

World View classes are a little different from most others you'll take here. They're not about mastering a specific subject or memorizing a bunch of facts. Instead, they're all about you. They're about figuring out who you are, what you care about, and how you might use your gifts to make a difference. You'll reflect, explore big issues shaping the world, and wrestle with one BIG question: What's my vocation or purpose?

Another example is the Personal Empowerment course. Yes, that's the name of a class—and yes, it's for credit (3 of 'em!). But it's also a low-key superpower bootcamp. This course is about shaping, strengthening, and sharpening the stuff that *really* matters—empathy, self-awareness, navigating emotions—helping you handle life's curveballs, not just classroom quizzes. You'll reflect, wrestle, grow and even learn how to name your feelings (without breaking into a cold sweat!). Beyond personal growth, it's about connecting your strengths to something bigger: how your vocation can serve the common good. This course helps you start asking, "How do I show up in the world in a way that matters?"



And before you say, *Hey, I've already thought about all this. I know myself and my purpose!*—well, let's be real: Can anyone ever master knowing themselves? Or have all the answers? There's always more to learn or discover, and these courses give you the space to do just that.

But character development isn't just happening in the classroom.

Let's talk about Student Life, coaches, RAs, library, Bridge, and the ASC staff. They are helping you build character in ways you might not even notice (but definitely feel).

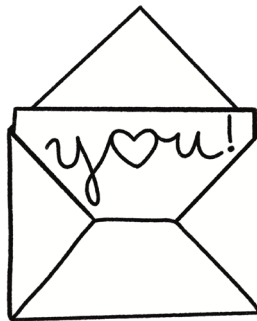
And real talk: character isn't limited to classes or clubs. It's alive every day, in the people who keep our campus running smoothly behind the scenes.

These folks aren't part of some curricular activity, they're staff who make our campus feel like *home*. From facilities to housekeeping to food service, they live out character in quiet, everyday ways, without needing applause. If you want to see character in action, look no further than the folks who are too humble to toot their own horns. We're tooting for them.

Bridget (Housekeeping)—She doesn't just clean. She *connects*. Bridget builds community one conversation at a time. She'll stop, chat, listen, and leave you feeling seen.

Dean (Groundskeeping)—Tables, chairs, setups, teardowns . . . he's the wizard behind the scenes of many UD events you never thought about twice. But it's his quiet commitment and care that builds a community more solid than any folding table ever could.

And of course, we're not even scratching the surface. There are so many people across this campus showing character in the ways that matter most. So to all the quiet rockstars, the behind-the-scenes UD Spartans who are doing the right thing when no one's watching: we see you, we appreciate you, and we cheer you on.



In fact, want to help us keep the celebration going? If you see a faculty or staff member modeling character in their work, their teaching, their leadership, their kindness, let us know! We want to recognize them for infusing character into their corners of campus and showing the rest of us how it's done.

Because here's the thing. We're all in this together.



And just to be clear: this isn't only for Wendt Character Scholars. As much as we cherish them, we're here for all students—across majors, interests, and life experiences.

We're not saying you'll walk away from every experience radically transformed (though we wouldn't hate that). But you might leave with a new friend, a better question, or—at the very least—a cookie. That's a pretty good start.



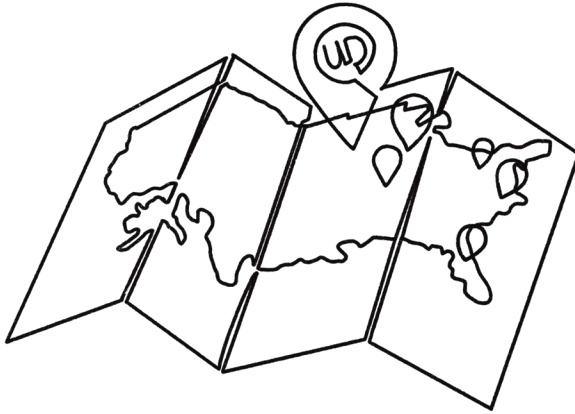
How will we know this is working? We believe in assessing what we care about. Not to impress anyone, but because you matter. Your growth matters. Your story matters.

Have you heard the saying, “you have to measure it to treasure it”? It's a classic, and for good reason. In higher education, feedback from students is one of the best tools we have to discover what's working and how to meet your needs. But here's the part that really matters: we're not just collecting your input. We're learning from it and using it to make things better.

So, yes. You might see surveys from us or get the occasional “tell us what you think!” message. We promise not to overdo it. Survey burnout is real! But know that it's all in an effort to hear your perspective—what's going well, what could be better, and how we can make this experience more meaningful for you.

We're not keeping this to ourselves. (Breaking News: People *like* seeing and hearing about good character. Who knew?) Other colleges are asking the same questions we are. They're searching for ways to educate the whole person. By sharing our story, we hope to spark something larger—a movement of heart-led, whole-person education across higher ed.

This isn't just a “UD thing.” It's part of a bigger conversation. What's the *real* purpose of higher education? Is it just job prep or is it also about becoming the kind of person who can handle hard things, lead with empathy, and live with purpose? (By now you can probably guess where we stand on all of this.)



Over the past year, we've taken part in these conversations all over the country. We've been to conferences and seminars in North Carolina, Indiana, Florida, Washington, D.C., Tennessee, and more locally, at the University of Northern Iowa and Loras College—literally down the street. (Shoutout to the grants that helped us make it happen.) We've met with educators, students, and changemakers who all care deeply about this work and who believe that character and purpose should be baked into the college experience, not just sprinkled on top.

We want UD to be known not just for the work, but for the goodness. For leadership that is as kind as it is bold. For people who don't just graduate, but grow.

Think of us as a ripple, not a rock.

Let's talk about building character, without turning into a walking cliché. This isn't about perfection. It's about intention. Right here. Right now. In your 8 a.m. class, your awkward group project, your late-night walk, your big decisions (and yep, your "oops" moments too).

We're not here for theories that only live in textbooks. This is real-life, human stuff, the kind that helps you grow into who you actually want to be.

We call it ***Character in Motion: Becoming You, One Move at a Time***. Here's how to make that happen, not just on paper, but in practice.

Wait—you might be thinking—what's the difference? How do these strategies connect to the pursuits for growing character?

Think of it this way: the pursuits are the big picture—the four areas that we believe are essential to developing good character, a sense of purpose, and a life that serves the common good.

On the other hand, the strategies below are day-to-day tools and habits that will help you grow in any of the pursuits. They're practical, doable, and are most effective when used regularly, like reps at the gym for your character muscles.

Or, to expand the training metaphor, imagine you're preparing for a marathon. To run your best, you would want to make sure you've built up your endurance, strength, focus, and recovery. Those are like your pursuits, the capacities you're trying to strengthen. To build them up, you would use strategies like preparing training schedules, rest days, nutrition plans, research on best practices, and music and podcasts for inspiration.

The same goes here. These strategies are tools that support your character growth and can be used across all four pursuits. Whether you're learning about compassion from a mentor or taking time to reflect on a recent service experience, each strategy helps you build character in meaningful, lasting ways.

Ever heard of Aristotle? Yep, the Greek philosopher. His advice is over 2,000 years old, but it's surprisingly timeless. The human condition hasn't changed all that much, even if our tech has.

The strategies we use are rooted in his ideas, condensed and reformulated by Michael Lamb,³ one of today's leading thinkers on character. We've added our own spin⁴ to make them practical, relatable, and ready for you to apply right now.



Practice on Purpose—Character doesn't grow on autopilot. It takes small, intentional actions over time, whether it's starting a gratitude journal or setting a regular schedule to volunteer at a small non-profit in your community. And remember, it's called practice, not performance! That means having good character is a process, not an outcome. You won't always get it right, but you can always strive to learn from your attempts! As you consistently practice these actions, they will eventually become habits, ingrained into how you live and what you do.

Reflect and Reset—Life moves fast. If you never pause, you never process. Reflection helps you recognize what matters, what's working, and what needs to shift. Reset when you need to. You're allowed to grow and recalibrate.

Pick Your People—You don't have to do this alone. Surround yourself with humans who lift you up, call you in (not just out), and help you stay grounded in your values. Character is contagious. Choose good company.

Learn from Legends—There are some impressive people out there, with brilliant minds and incredible stories we can model ourselves after. But mentors matter, too, and they don't all need titles. Watch how your roommate navigates conflict, how your professor owns their mistakes, how your coworker treats others with quiet dignity. Everyone has something to teach. Stay curious. Learn from lives, not just lectures.

Spot What Shapes You—Your past, your culture, your habits—these shape you, but they don't define you. You can't always control what life throws at you, but you *can* control how you respond. And that response? It shapes everything. Seriously there's a legit formula for this: $E + R = O$ (Look it up! Okay, okay, who wants to do *more* research? We dropped it in the endnote).⁵

Cue Your Character—Once you know what you're striving for, make it easier for yourself by creating prompts that remind you of the person you want to be. What you see, you become. So set your sights well. Write that sticky note. Hang the quote. Post your purpose on your mirror or phone screen. Give your future self a moral reminder. A little visual cue can go a long way.

Converse and Connect—We don't talk to walls—we talk to *people*. Because character doesn't grow in isolation. It grows in conversations that challenge you, encourage you, and open you up. Ask better questions and connect the dots to take it to the next level. Really listen. That's where the growth happens.

Where does that leave you?

Hopefully with some inspiration. Maybe even a nudge. You're not here just to collect credit hours. You're here to become someone who knows how to think deeply, feel honestly, and act with purpose.

Let's build that together. We'll bring the snacks. You bring the curiosity.



The essays that follow in this journal issue are meant to provide insights and ideas to help you on your way to growing your own character. You'll hear from our own Anne E. Funke, who shares work she did with UD's Volleyball Team to help them transform their team culture to one of care and connection through character development. Maybe it will spark some ideas for building bonds within your own social groups.

Joe Klinebriel brings us the world of live theater and the many ways it fosters character development in both the people creating it and the people watching it. You may never look at attending a play the same way again.

Nicholas A. Elder looks deep into the past and compares it to some of today's social media behaviors that can help or harm relationships. You'll find that humans haven't changed very much over the past 2,000 years.

And finally, your fellow undergraduate student Anna Haverland provides a response that is intended to help you, her peers, pick out the essential takeaways from each essay. Think of her insights and the connections she makes as a starting place for you as you determine what is helpful for you and your life.

As we move forward, our hope is simple: that you feel more seen. That you feel more supported. That you feel like your time at UD is forming you not just as a professional, but as a person with purpose, meaning, and goodness to share with the world.

Not just with a head full of ideas.

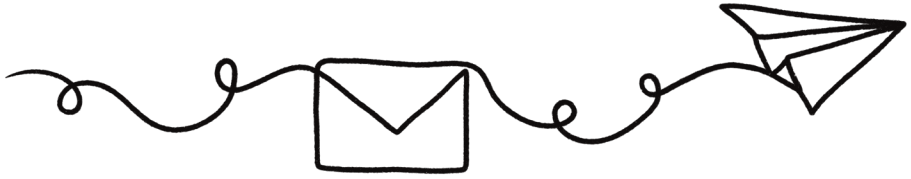
Not just with hands trained to act.

But with a heart that's ready to lead to genuinely serve others.

With gratitude and great hope (and maybe a high-five or two),

The Wendt Center

P.S. This isn't the end of the conversation. It's an invitation. Let's keep growing together. Please stop by the Wendt Center (above Admission Office) and say *Hi!* We have a cozy space to sit, chat, and grab a cold or hot drink. Cheers!



Liza D. Johnson, EdD, is the Director of the Wendt Center for Character and Leadership at the University of Dubuque, a center at the heart of the university's mission to educate and form the whole person. She leads and directs initiatives that foster character development, vocation, and a sense of purpose, supporting meaningful growth for students, faculty, and staff. Her approach emphasizes community engagement and creating intentional experiences that support the university's culture and mission.

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Image Credits

Illustrations by Evelin Ortiz

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Notes

1. It's not really a secret. There are plenty of surveys and interviews that back this up. See Colvin, Gardiner, Gray and Koncz, O'Connor, Zimmerman, Ivy Exec. (Also, please forgive us for the formality of citing sources. We want to show you we've done our homework and aren't just tossing around platitudes and feel-good advice.)
2. "The Future of Jobs Report 2025."
3. If you're the kind of person who enjoys a good philosophical deep dive, start

with Michael Lamb's chapter on the Seven Strategies. But if you're ready to go full-on ancient-Greek-nerd, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the original source—straight from the horse's mouth (or at least, as close as we can get after a couple thousand years and a few translations).

4. If you haven't noticed yet, we are huge fans of alliteration.

5. That little formula, $E + R = O$, comes from Robert Resnick, made famous by Jack Canfield (p. 6). It stands for "Event + Response = Outcome." It's simple, but kind of genius. And yes, it's a real thing.

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A Culture of C.A.R.E.

Building Character and Connection with the Women’s Volleyball Team at the University of Dubuque

Anne E. Funke

Abstract

*“A Culture of C.A.R.E.” focuses on the creation of a character-based wellbeing initiative with the University of Dubuque women’s volleyball team. Rooted in the virtues of **Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence**, the C.A.R.E. program integrates emotional intelligence practices to strengthen relationships, trust, and team culture. Through collaboration, reflective dialogue, and vulnerability exercises, athletes redefined excellence beyond performance, emphasizing growth, integrity, and connection. The program has shown measurable cultural shifts—greater cohesion, empathy, and mutual support—and inspired interest across other teams. The article concludes that cultivating character through connection can transform not only athletics but a broader campus culture.*

Introduction: The Power of Connection in a High-Pressure Context

I identify as an educator at heart, and the value of relationships and connection are central to how I do my work and view my vocation. This article offers a story of serendipitous timing and profound connections—connections that have been a tool for transformation for one athletic team at the University of Dubuque.

Here at UD, over 60% of our current student body identify as athletes. For those students reading this article, this will come as no shock to you. These student-athletes are highly visible and deeply embedded in the life of our campus. They are no



*Student-athletes
are no strangers
to pressure.*

strangers to pressure and demands on their time as they balance academics, practices, competitions, lifting schedules, social obligations, and family responsibilities. They embody excellence in motion, often praised and admired for their drive and discipline. And yet, beneath the surface of achievement and success, many of these students are wrestling with deeper fears and worries: self-doubt, anxiety, burnout, and disconnection.

For the past two years, I have had the privilege of working alongside and learning from one such group—the UD women’s volleyball team. Together we have embarked on a mission to build something deep, real, and transformative: a culture of wellbeing and connection rooted in character. Through the development of a character-based program grounded in the values of Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence (C.A.R.E.), we set out to not only improve team dynamics but to also foster the kind of relationships that sustain wellbeing, trust, growth, and success on and off the court.



This is the story of how it all began—with a conversation in the bleachers—and how it evolved into a transformed team culture grounded in emotional insight, shared vulnerability, and the bold belief that connection is the most powerful catalyst of all.

The Problem: Unseen Struggles Beneath the Surface

While research shows that student-athletes often outperform their non-athlete peers in key areas such as motivation, time management, and even graduation rates,¹ those same studies also point to the unique pressures they face, the significant physical, mental, and emotional strain they endure. Being a student-athlete isn’t just about playing a sport—it’s a lifestyle that demands emotional resilience, consistent performance, and constant time juggling. They are praised for strength but rarely given space to express vulnerability.

At UD, our student-athletes are surrounded by adults who care, from coaches, to athletic trainers, to professors and advisors. And yet, it can be all too easy to misread their confidence and composure as a sign that they are

thriving in every way. Particularly for young women, the pressure to have it all together can be stifling.

Before I get ahead of myself, it's important here to share that this volleyball team inspired my dissertation research, where I examined emotional intelligence (EQ) competencies and the concept of wellbeing, based on Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network's framework.² Their EQ framework highlights eight EQ competencies and four success factors that all impact one's overall wellbeing and sense of purpose.³ In addition to deeply inspiring me in their interviews with their strength, resilience, humor, intelligence, and compassion, a few themes appeared in the quantitative and qualitative research grounded in Six Seconds' framework. I'll paraphrase and simplify those themes from the research:

1. The athletes that participated understood that wellbeing is holistic. Yet, when measured quantitatively against factors like health, relationships, and quality of life, their collective wellbeing score was the lowest. Wellbeing in the research was defined as the capacity to maintain optimal energy and functioning.
2. The participants strongly identified as athletes, recognizing how important this identity was to their senses of self. And the higher their EQ, the more they recognized *other* parts of their lives that made them who they were and fueled their self-confidence.
3. The athletes who participated really wanted to strengthen their EQ and see that it mattered as an athlete. They were also willing to put in the work to improve it!
4. Navigating Emotions was the most challenging aspect measured for participants overall (against other competencies like Exercising Empathy, Exercising Optimism, for example). They also recognized that their weakness in navigating emotions negatively impacted their wellbeing and performance as an athlete.
5. Relationships matter a heck of a lot when it comes to their personal wellbeing, *and* they acknowledged this as an area in which they wanted to grow.

Beyond the research, I have had countless conversations with the young women on the volleyball team. The same clear picture emerged: behind the strength they show on the court are students yearning to be well—mentally, emotionally, and relationally. They spoke of feeling stretched thin, of rarely having space to simply *be*, and of wanting more support to grow not just as

athletes, but as human beings. Their coach saw this reality and decided it was time to try something different.

The Origin Story: A Bleacher Conversation and Shared Vision

It started, as meaningful things often do, with a chance conversation.

One cold winter morning, while watching my son play basketball at the YMCA, I struck up a conversation with Annalee Ward, then-director of the Wendt Center for Character Education, watching her grandson play on the same team. I had recently returned to higher education after a hiatus caring for my young children and was seeking work that felt meaningful and relational.

Annalee mentioned that the women's volleyball coach, April, was looking for support for her team—specifically, a way to build character and connection “off the court.” While these student athletes had mentors and role models in their coaches and trainers, April recognized there was still room for more cohesion, community, and care for each other. She knew that working to build stronger relationships with each other and confidence within themselves would translate to a happier, healthier, and more successful team. What they truly needed was the kind of time, reflection, and presence that doesn't always come with athletic training. This opportunity felt like a perfect fit in light of my own search for meaningful work.

What transpired was a connected journey—one rooted in curiosity, conversations, mutual respect, and a shared desire to build something lasting.

That bleacher conversation quickly turned into a formal collaboration between the Wendt Center for Character Education, the volleyball team, and me, serving as the facilitator to pilot a program for the team. What transpired was not a top-down program imposed on the team, but a connected journey—one rooted in curiosity, conversations, mutual respect, and a shared desire to build something lasting.

In only one hour, April, Annalee, and I established a team creed and path forward. April and her coaching staff had decided that, moving forward, they wanted to be “A well team that functioned with C.A.R.E.” The acronym C.A.R.E. here represented their four most deeply held team virtues:

compassion, accountability, respect, and excellence. These virtues, we believed, could be explored, cultivated, developed, and practiced both in and outside of their sport. One could be a compassionate teammate after a tough loss, *and* show self-compassion after failing an exam. One could hold a teammate accountable to show up for lifts and practices on time giving full effort, *and* hold themselves accountable to show up to their work-study job three days a week. One could show respect toward conference rivals in a heated match, *and* toward fellow students holding opposing values in Worldview Seminar. One could demonstrate excellence as an outstanding athlete, performing at her peak game after game, *and* make the Dean's List at the end of term.

The next step was knowing how, when, and where to start. At the time of this collaborative conversation, volleyball was in its off-season, where goals were being set and there were less opportunities to meet as a full team. It was determined that this was the right time to gather a select group of athletes from the volleyball team to get a pulse for the team culture. What was going well? What, perhaps, wasn't? What were their goals (versus Coach's, or even mine)? There was some uncertainty on my end approaching these conversations, and a bit of imposter syndrome. Having never been a student-athlete myself, who was I to be "guiding" these young women? I'm embarrassed to say I had never watched a college volleyball game before meeting these girls, let alone known position names or plays. Would they really see any value in me facilitating these challenging conversations around transforming their team into a more connected, healthy version? All these doubts were present as I stepped into the role of planning the first C.A.R.E. conversation.

I must note: It's not lost on me that it was the power of connections that inspired this conversation turned program in the first place. Through friendships both in and outside of work spaces, Annalee, April, and I had many shared values, interests, and goals that brought this conversation to fruition.

A second, perhaps more important note: I have since learned *all* position names in the sport of volleyball, understand when to cheer or not, and have attended several college games :)

The Program Design: Building with, not for, the Team

We began with humility and intention. Despite my lack of volleyball knowledge, we proceeded planning three spring sessions to essentially lay

the groundwork for what the programming would look like for the full team in the fall. I decided to focus on the importance of authentic relationships and presence, a sense of rapport building that could be carried into the fall.

Ten student leaders representing different years and roles were invited into a pilot program that would help shape our work moving forward. Rather than assume what they needed, I asked.

What's working well on this team?

Where are the breakdowns in trust or connection?

What are your hopes for this team?

What would you need to grow—emotionally, mentally, relationally?

Their answers shaped everything. They wanted depth. They wanted real. They wanted honesty. And above all, they wanted a space that wasn't performative or transactional. They wanted to feel *known*.

My intentional stance was that I was right there learning and growing *with them*. Instead of positioning myself as an expert, I committed to showing up with consistency, respect, and a learning mindset. My position as an outsider to athletics became an asset—I could offer perspective without preconceptions. These young women didn't need me to be another coach. They needed me to be a consistent adult who saw them, believed in them, and held space for growth.



Student-athletes took ownership of the experience.

We even spent time talking about the program logistics together, discussing how many sessions would be helpful, what kind of setting would be effective, and of course, what snacks would be essential. I let students share their input every step of the way, ensuring that they could take as much

ownership of this experience as possible. When I presented their plans and reflections back to Coach, she was supportive of what we had created, and planning began.

We decided that we would meet a total of four times in the fall season after practice. These sessions would be about an hour and a half, and I would lead a variety of activities to not only redefine what it meant to be UD Volleyball,

We began with exploring the team value of compassion by cultivating empathy for self and others. Through journaling, dialogue, and vulnerability exercises, athletes began to share their inner worlds. There was laughter, there were tears, there were even some intimate moments of truly hearing and seeing one another. Trust began to grow, and compassion became the foundation of our work, carrying throughout each of the other team values.



Teammates grew community and built trust.

As we explored accountability, we acknowledged that true connection requires honesty. The volleyball team worked on giving and receiving feedback, owning mistakes, and pausing to hear one another out before making assumptions and reacting. We were able to acknowledge that

perfection wasn't the ideal—it was about responsibility to one another as teammates and humans and toward the shared purpose of the UD volleyball team.

Respect in these sessions showed up as honoring differences—across class years, positions, personalities, and lived experiences. It also meant respecting each other's time, voice, and presence. Even small acts, like learning to actively listen or encourage a quiet teammate, became game-changing moments. I was moved by the team's definition of respect as it encompassed an *admiration for*, not just tolerance of, one another. This choice in language was evident in how they celebrated one another for who they were and how they added unique skills, talents, and gifts to the team environment and culture.

Finally, we redefined excellence as more than winning. Excellence meant growth. It meant effort. It meant bringing one's full self to each interaction, and striving for personal and collective integrity—on and off the court. We interpreted excellence therefore as loving ourselves and each other so radically that it is *worth* having hard conversations, putting in the extra effort, showing vulnerability and courage. These student-athletes were beginning to believe that they were *worth it*.

Helping the team redefine excellence beyond performance—as growth, integrity, and relational strength—helped me reflect on my own definition and beliefs around excellence in both work and life. And in order to facilitate these sessions with the team, I too had to practice and model these team values. I grew in my own ability to express compassion, listening deeply to athletes’ needs and creating safe spaces for vulnerability. I expressed accountability by encouraging honest feedback and ownership within the team while modeling consistency and integrity in my facilitation. I respected their own wisdom and knowledge and learned from them just as they learned from me. This entire experience was transformative for the student-athletes, the team, and for myself.

Outcomes & Reflections: The Shifts I Witnessed

Transformation and change didn’t happen overnight—but it was real.

As the program has evolved, so has the team. I have seen athletes initiating difficult conversations with each other. They are creating space in their busy schedules for check-ins not just about volleyball, but about life. Student-athletes are expressing that they feel like they have built a family within the team, that the C.A.R.E. program has helped them open up and build meaningful relationships with each other.

We have seen tangible shifts in team dynamics—less cliquishness, more support across class years, and a greater sense of shared purpose. But more than that, we have seen young women beginning to believe and express that who they are matters just as much as how they play.

One student recognized the commitment it took to put in the time toward a shift of team character and culture:

I think C.A.R.E. is something I’m glad our team started doing, even when it meant one more thing. We are so much closer than other teams on this campus, and it helped change my mindset and helped me find different ways to help the team and myself.

Another student focused on connections and growth:

You helped us grow so much as people and teammates. I strongly believe that what we’ve accomplished the last two years is because of our connection as a team. . . . I feel better equipped to go out into the world and function with C.A.R.E.!

A third student put simply:

C.A.R.E. has clearly made an impact on the team culture both on and off the court.

And yes, since the inception of the C.A.R.E. programming, the UD women's volleyball team has won back-to-back American Rivers Conference titles. Is that solely because of C.A.R.E.? Of course not. Their skill, leadership, and grit are extraordinary. But a team that trusts each other, that knows how to communicate and support each other—that's a different kind of unstoppable.



The team has faced setbacks and successes together.

I'm not claiming that these thirty-some young women are perfect, and I don't think they would want me to. There have been mistakes made throughout the past two years, hurt feelings, and actions that go against exactly what UD Volleyball claims to be. Developing one's character, quite frankly, isn't about perfection. It's about recognizing when mistakes and setbacks happen, reflecting and learning from those as we move forward, *together*.

This work has transformed me, too. I went in hoping to offer something of value to these students, and have come out having learned more than I could have imagined—about trust, courage, and the power of relationships and presence. I have learned to listen more and speak less. To resist the temptation to “fix” someone's problems, and instead exercise empathy. To stop making assumptions about what a “successful” student looks like, and recognize success comes in so many forms. To believe in the wisdom of students, and acknowledge they have so much to teach those of us who work with them. And to acknowledge that young women more than ever need others to support them, to celebrate them, and to see them.

I have witnessed, again and again, that when young people feel seen and supported, they thrive. I see this in my classes, in workshops, in the Wendt Character Scholar program, and even in the yoga classes I offer on campus. Connection is not a luxury or an “extra.” It's the foundation. Connection is a reciprocal gift that offers an opportunity to grow in character together, to be

fully oneself, and to know that there is someone there for you when you win and when you fail, when you're well and when you're not.

Conclusion: A Model for Character and Wellbeing Beyond Sports

There is every intention to continue offering the C.A.R.E. program to the UD volleyball team, and we have had four other athletic teams on our campus to date express interest in collaborating on similar programs and initiatives to strengthen team culture and character. We recognize that each team has its own unique needs and characteristics, and that C.A.R.E. is not a one-size-fits-all program. That said, it can be adapted and modified to meet the diverse needs of any group of students. The essence of what the C.A.R.E. program provides is an emphasis on connections and a culture of character that transcends context.



I continue to meet with the volleyball team as we carry on the work of cultivating a culture of connection and good character.

What we have begun to build with the women's volleyball team is not just a standalone program—it has become a healthy team culture shift. And while it is happening in the context of athletics, it holds relevance far beyond just the realm of college athletics. The C.A.R.E. model isn't about volleyball—it's about building a culture. It's about re-centering character, wellbeing, and connection in all areas of students' lives.

In classrooms, residence halls, student organizations—anywhere young people gather—there is an opportunity to cultivate a culture of C.A.R.E. A culture where character is not taught in isolation, but grown through relationships. A culture where connection is not a side effect, but the goal. Imagine a college environment where everyone practices wholehearted compassion, radical accountability, limitless respect, and full-throated excellence. To become a campus of C.A.R.E. where not only faculty and staff

but our students recognize the power of these character virtues and value deep connections with one another.

That's the vision. And it's possible. One team, one conversation, one connection at a time.

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pp. 29, 30, 31, 34: Photos by Anne E. Funke

p. 33: Photo by Annalee R. Ward

Notes

1. Gaston Gayles, "The Student Athlete Experience"; Gaston Gayles and Baker, "Opportunities and Challenges."
2. Funke, "Are they Well?"
3. Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network, "What Is Emotional Intelligence?"

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A Community Connection

Building the Virtues of Character through Theater

Joe Klinebriel

Abstract

Theater, as an ephemeral and communal art form, has historically provided a space for connection and reflection, fostering virtues such as empathy, integrity, and resilience. Despite challenges to its relevance, theater continues to play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective character, itself even serving as a model of resilience.

Introduction

“Do we even need live theater anymore?” This is a question that, for years, I loved to pose at the beginning of a new semester to students taking my introductory theater class. I always enjoyed their quizzical faces as I placed the fate of my own livelihood in their hands and watched as they contemplated the question. “If we can go sit in a darkened movie theater,” I would continue, “and have the latest multi-million-dollar blockbuster experience, packed with special effects beyond our wildest dreams, is there really even a reason for us to attend live theater anymore? Or forget about the movie theater experience. If we can now easily afford all of the technological advances of big screen televisions that stretch across our walls and envelop us in their Dolby 7.1 surround sound, never having to leave the comfort of our homes or our pajamas in order to be entertained, why on earth would we ever want to drag ourselves out to sit shoulder to shoulder in a darkened theater with a bunch of strangers to see a play or a musical? In this age of advanced technology, what could the experience of live theater possibly still hold for us?”



*Do we even
need live theater
anymore?*

Admittedly, as a theater educator, my question to the students always seemed to be a bit of a loaded one, because I had invariably been certain of its answer. I confidently tantalized them with my secret: that attending live theater held the potential to bring them invaluable gifts that far surpassed simply being entertained. But I listened to them share their various opinions in answer to the question. Some students would immediately adhere to an assumption that live theater was indeed necessary. Others were, at times, ready to doubt the necessity of it and voiced their skepticism. The question had always proven to be an effective means of launching our semester's journey together, and I had established a pattern of confidently relying on my previous years of teaching experience to assure me that they would soon discover live theater's unquestionable value for themselves.

Then, in August of 2020, after the world had spent the spring and summer months in lockdown and isolation, sorting out the implications and complications that had been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, I, like so many others who led lives and careers in the world of theater, found myself facing a point of reflection, re-evaluation,



Live theater returned, with challenges, once the pandemic eased.

and even doubt. I was preparing myself to emerge from the virtual teaching world I had come to know for a return to traditional face-to-face teaching. Our institution's administration had approved for students to gather in our theater building, a cavernous space that could easily accommodate the mandated 6-feet of lonely social distance needed between each of the twenty or so students with whom I was about to start a new semester.

With cumbersome safety protocols in place, the first day of classes began, and I stepped onto the creaking stage of our beloved old theater building to welcome the masked and shielded faces of my new students. I was nervous but energized to, at last, commune in person again. The students stared back at me through their layers of protection, resembling a patch of lonely islands scattered across the expanse of auditorium seating. Anxious, I stepped toward the edge of the stage and prepared, once more, to launch my

traditional first-day question of theater’s necessity and relevancy. But this time, I was not entirely as certain of its answer as I had always previously been. This time around, having just experienced an intense period of COVID-induced soul searching and questioning, I stood just as vulnerable and uncertain as the students who stared back at me. *Did* we, in fact, still need theater? *Was* this communal art form, which had, for thousands of years, provided a space for connection, reflection, and the development of so many important character virtues, still as essential and vital as I had always thought it to be? What, in fact, *did* it still hold for us?

The Evolution of an Event of Connection

Connecting Through Storytelling

Certainly, having spent the better part of my life devoted to the art of theater, and having walked the stage as an actor, directed scores of productions, and educated emerging young artists about the art form, I had witnessed, time and again, the invaluable gifts that theater could offer. I had watched it instill confidence in those filled with self-doubt. I had been awed by its power to nurture empathy in those on a journey of greater understanding and appreciation of others. I had even seen it unlock a life purpose for those who were floundering in search of one. But, perhaps, above all of these, I had known the art and act of theater to be powerful and life-changing simply by satisfying one of our strongest and deepest human needs: our desire to connect with others.

Our call to express ourselves to others through the ritual of storytelling is primal and seems to have been an essential and intrinsic part of our development as humans for as long as we have existed. Storytelling has helped us to build relationships, bringing us closer to each other as we engage in the questions and conversations that stories can prompt. Telling our stories has taught us how to find confidence in ourselves and how to respect others. Sharing our stories has even helped us identify meaning in our own lives as we play out the situations and the choices made by others.¹

Undoubtedly, storytelling has played a crucial role in how we have learned from and communicated with each other. Storytelling allowed us to cast light on our shared truths and gain a better understanding of ourselves and of each other. And as this important ritual grew,



*Sharing our stories
has helped us identify
meaning in our own lives.*

so, too, did our desire to enhance the storytelling act by adding performative elements. Enhancements such as costumes, masks, scenery and even a designated space for sharing in the stories became part of the experience, and storytelling found itself evolving into what we can now recognize as a fully realized theatrical event.

Storytelling as a Theatrical Event: The Traditions and Rituals Are Born

But when did it all begin? And why? While it is believed that some initial form of theater, in both eastern and western cultures, may have existed for several thousands of years, the most robust evidence of the historic beginnings of theater can be found through studying the abundance of surviving artifacts of Ancient Greece. Dating back to the 6th Century BCE, recovered relics of Greek culture, such as their hand painted vases, have revealed to us that, through festivals in celebration and honor of Dionysus, the god of fertility, wine, and pleasure, the citizens of Greece embraced theater as a valuable means of community connection. They prioritized sharing time and space with each other to tell the stories that helped them



Ancient Greek ruins and artifacts offer evidence of early theater.

better understand their own culture, learn about their own history and contemplate their own morality.² The theater event created and refined by the ancient Greeks was valued by its citizens for fostering community, but would this artform have lasting power?

Remarkably, many of the theatrical practices and rituals that were begun more than 2,500 years ago can still be recognized in the modern theater of the western world. In Ancient Greece, the actors performed in masks. A chorus chanted, sang and danced. And crowds of thousands gathered in a shared space to laugh and cry together, to poke fun at themselves, and to analyze and learn from their kings and mythical gods. They strengthened their own character by studying the flaws and choices of the characters they dramatized on the stage. They reflected on their own human behaviors and complexities through the stories told by their playwrights, and, in doing so, worked at becoming a stronger, more balanced community.

The ancient Greeks may also have been the first to establish the connection of a live audience as an essential ingredient in defining theater’s uniqueness from other arts. The swirl of differing personalities, perspectives and energies of the audience is necessary in completing the “circuit” of the total live experience. The shared space between the audience members and the creative artists invites a reciprocal act of live participation, one that creates a relationship between the viewer and the viewed. It is this interdependence that differentiates the theater experience from other storytelling forms like film, television or social media. And though the content of the performance may be repeatable, the audiences, their reactions and their exchanges of energy can never be duplicated. Each performance event becomes its own unique experience of connection; one that is shared only by those who have come together in the shared space.

Furthering the distinctiveness of theater is its *ephemerality*—another essential characteristic of the theatrical event which reflects its impermanence; all aspects of the event will only exist temporarily. The meticulously constructed sets will be torn down. The elaborate costumes and props will be repurposed for future productions. The audience members will go their separate ways. And the stage will begin to be reset for a new story and a new experience. Poetically paralleling life itself, all that which is vibrantly alive and breathing in the theater today—the ideas, the invested time, the devoted energy—will soon become tomorrow’s memory. It’s an inevitability that challenges us to acknowledge theater’s preciousness, to seize and cherish it in the moment and make ourselves present for it while it lives in and around us before our “revels,” as William Shakespeare once coined, “are ended” and “melted . . . into thin air.”³



Each performance event becomes its own unique experience of connection.

In my own experience, I have participated in striking sets for countless theatrical productions. I have worked side by side with cast and crew members in a unified effort to deconstruct the physical structure that stands symbolizing the devoted time, passion,

and artistry of an ensemble effort. On each occasion, I have experienced a profound mixture of sadness and pride. The ritual of dismantling something that connected us and built community amongst us becomes a final group bonding experience and an opportunity to embrace theater’s unique ephemerality through a collective act of both mourning and celebration of our efforts.

A Space for Reflection and Connection

But what draws us to the theater event in the first place? What are we hoping to find in our experience of connection? Again, we might turn to Shakespeare and his uncanny understanding of humanity and the power of art to provide us with an answer as Shakespeare was able to capture with poetic precision just what theater has the potential to offer us when we invest ourselves in the experience.

In one of his most complex, most studied tragedies, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare brings to life the story of a Danish prince, who is forced to avenge the wrongful death of his father. Just before a group of traveling actors is to perform for the newly crowned king and suspected murderer (Hamlet's own uncle!), young Hamlet schools a troupe of traveling actors about how to effectively perform a truthful depiction of a murderous act in order to prompt his guilty uncle to recognize his own devious actions being played out in front of him and ultimately confess to his own crime.

In offering his advice to the traveling players, the character of Hamlet does more than further the plot, he also conveys to us, the viewing audience, an observation of what the very event of theater can offer us, explaining: "The purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."⁴

In other words, through Hamlet's advice, Shakespeare explains that the purpose of theater might be to let us see our own reflection in the mirror, and, for better or worse, glimpse a representation of the truth of ourselves. We



Hamlet, a character in a play, explains what plays are for.

have the opportunity to witness our shining and proud moments as well as our flaws and vulnerabilities as they are played out in front of us. We can see ourselves and each other. And, through that collective process of reflection and recognition, we can choose to process and learn from our truths.

Theater provides a defined space for such truth-seeking. Existing in a variety of structural forms and environments, these spaces become the sacred places where stories can be shared and connections can be made. Whether built into a mountainside like the majestic open-air amphitheaters of ancient Greece or occurring in unconventional spaces like prisons or churches, all theater spaces share a common goal of creating a designated area to bring together a full circuit of participation. Collaborators offer the gift: a playwright crafts a story, actors bring the characters to life by living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, designers make artistic choices to support the story and its themes, and a director works to ensure that all involved are cohesively telling the story. An audience completes this exchange by receiving the gift. It is in this process of connection where the profound can occur. In our attempts to shine a light on truth, conflicts are explored, humanity is revealed, empathy develops, and the bond of human understanding becomes stronger.



Theater provides a defined space for truth-seeking.

The Rings of Connection

Ring #1: Developing the Character of Me

So, theater can provide a space for us to think, feel and experience, and through this exchange of energy, we are able to, as researcher and storyteller Brené Brown describes, connect with each other in ways that make us “feel seen, heard, and valued.”⁵ And in my years of experience, I have observed this type of meaningful connection occur in widening rings. The first ring revealed itself to me when I entered my first year of high school as an awkward and shy sophomore. I longed to break my habits of introversion and try something bold and new to prove to everyone and to myself that there was more to my identity than the “quiet thinker” that I had thus far been known as. I craved an experience that would bring me out of my shell and allow me to tap into the performance potential that I knew must be buried somewhere inside of me.

A friend suggested that I audition for the winter musical, *Pippin*. Knowing hardly a thing about musicals in general and being completely oblivious about what an audition entailed, I mustered all of my courage and leapt into the unknown. I have no recollection of the quality of my audition (which is probably a good thing!) but somehow the stars aligned, and I was cast to play a bit part in the show. My very first theatrical role! I was ecstatic to

feel accepted, and I excitedly began the journey. I might have been able to predict the intense satisfaction I would feel basking in the applause we received as we took our bows on opening night, but I don't think I could ever have predicted the immeasurable impact of all of the other gifts I ultimately received by choosing to seize this opportunity.

After months of dedication to afternoon rehearsals for my very first role on the stage, the big moment came for our cast to finally shine and share what we had been committed to working on every afternoon after the school day ended. Beyond my contribution to the choral numbers in the musical, my theatrical debut consisted of just two solo lines, and I'll never forget them. The first line assignment that I was to deliver involved turning to the lead character and announcing, "King Pippin!" My other line responsibility came at another point in the show, when I was to leap out from the wings onto the stage and exclaim, "Now?!" to cue the show's finale. A grand total of three words. Granted these may not have been the most profound lines ever to be spoken on stage, but I took great pride in them and knew my duty was to make sure they were heard by everyone in the audience and that my delivery was timed just right.

But as often happens in the theater, a challenge surfaced during the final dress rehearsals. I had become sick and was diagnosed with walking pneumonia. I was distraught that there loomed the very real possibility that I was not going to be able to finish what I had started all those weeks ago. Illness (and smart choices) be damned, I was determined to show up for our production, an endeavor that I had already learned so much from and one that I had grown to care so deeply about. Nothing was going to stop me from reaching the finish line! Feverish, sweating, and having lost almost all of my voice, I croaked out my lines with all of my might. I likely prompted audience members to turn to each other in confusion and disappointment, uncertain of what the raspy whisper that came out of my mouth was truly supposed to represent. But in my heart, I knew that my personal triumph had eclipsed the rough quality of my performance; I had finished what I had begun, and theater revealed to me a character virtue that had become a part of my identity: *resiliency!* I can look back now on the many moments in my life and in my art when adverse circumstances could have caused me to throw my



The gift of resiliency that I received from that first experience on stage has stayed firmly a part of my core.

hands in the air and give up. But the gift of resiliency that I received from that first experience on stage has stayed firmly a part of my core, allowing me to push through almost any challenge to finish what I believed was worth finishing.

My story of getting “bit by the theater bug” most likely resembles that of countless others, and though the gifts that it has brought ultimately developed in widening rings of connection, that first experience was on a very personal level, and it gave me a sense of confidence that I had not previously known. After completing my first musical, I chased every performance experience that I could find. And as I got my chance to bring more characters to life and commit to those characters’ truths, I learned to become vulnerable. I had to let down my guard and make myself emotionally accessible in order to serve the story, if I wanted to make a truthful connection with the audience. Getting my chance to unlock and share my vulnerability meant tapping into a level of bravery and trust in myself and in those around me that I had not yet grasped. And the acceptance I felt from my peers and from the audience was empowering. In making myself vulnerable, I gained their trust and thus began a lifetime process of understanding and claiming another virtue: *integrity*.

Getting the chance to embody characters who faced circumstances, made choices and existed in worlds that differed vastly from my own allowed me to “walk in another person’s shoes” and launched an enduring practice of opening doors of deeper understanding, appreciation and patience for people who differed from me: *empathy*—yet another virtue, another gift!

Through participating in that very first production and the many that followed, I learned what it meant to work, day after day, in rehearsals alongside others who were passionately driven towards achieving a shared goal, and I could visibly see myself growing and thriving. And all I knew was that I wanted more of it. In fact, beyond the gifts of resiliency, integrity and empathy that I had received, I also knew that I had found the answer to the question that my peers and I were all challenged with as we contemplated our futures beyond the bounds of high school: what is it that we needed in our lives to get us out of bed every morning? I had found my purpose. But I also found that there was more to the story.

Ring #2: We’re All In This Together

As my experience in theater grew, so, too, did my awareness of the broader reach of theater’s gifts. Beyond my own personal journey of development, I

began to appreciate how theater could also cultivate virtues in a wider ring of community. Sebastian Junger, American journalist, Academy Award-nominated filmmaker and author of the book *Tribe*, describes how crises such as wars and natural disasters are often events that unite communities, even communities whose members hold opposing ideals, and can offer a sense of purpose to its members.⁶ Junger explains that the “sense of meaning and purpose and belonging to a group [are] absolutely vital in our human evolution because we will literally risk our lives in order to have those feelings.”⁷ While not on the same level of crisis management as a war or natural disaster, theater can offer a similar problem-solving challenge that can satisfy our need to feel purpose in our actions and provide us with a sense of belonging and deep connection.

As a communal activity, whether produced professionally or on an amateur level, the various circles of collaboration that work on the creation of a theatrical performance, from the actors and the designers to the running crews and the ushers, the theater event requires contributing groups to shelve their egos, prioritize the shared goal, and focus their talents and energy on the common good of the project. And this collaborative process strengthens community character, nurturing virtues like teamwork, trust, and respect for others and deepens a sense of social responsibility.



Casts and crews build connection through the communal activity of theater.

To succeed, theater has to rely on a spirit of community in which all of its members (actors, directors, designers, stagehands) focus on a singular, shared goal and must problem solve and adapt to challenges together, despite personality differences, background, or skill level. To succeed in establishing this communal spirit and ensure its success, all members must be able to trust each other, and trust requires that participants can be vulnerable (actors need to be able to share emotions, directors need to be able to take creative risks, stage managers need to be able to lead their scene shift crews). And it is the responsibility of everyone involved

to contribute to building a healthy, supportive, and trusting environment, one that respects and values the diverse perspectives of all team members working on the project and the perspectives represented in the story being told. And when the team can create theater in a space of trust and respect, its members can fully engage in storytelling that embraces a responsibility to explore important moral, political and social questions.

First published in English in 1953, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett brought to the world his absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot*, a play about two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait in vain for an elusive character, Godot, who ultimately never arrives. Thematically, *Waiting for Godot* explores the deep human need for companionship and understanding in the face of isolation. In 1957, director Herbert Blau guided a cast of incarcerated men to perform the play at San Quentin State Prison for its inmates. Given the depiction of the two central characters relying on each other for psychological survival, despite the absurdity of their situation, the play's cyclical nature, repetitive dialogue, and existential focus on waiting without fulfillment, the play paralleled the realities of prison life and strongly resonated with the inmates who knew what it was to wait indefinitely for parole.

Facing extreme isolation, both physically and emotionally, *Waiting for Godot* allowed the inmates the rare opportunity to connect with each other and contemplate deeper questions of existence, identity and meaning. They were reminded that even in confinement, people continue to search for connection. The play spoke to the inmates of their own experience of waiting and challenged them, in an environment of collaboration, trust and respect, to confront the absurdities of their lives and to remain persistent in their search for meaning and hope.⁸

Ring #3: Completing the Circuit

Beyond our own personal gains and the gains made through the teamwork and relationships forged to produce theater, the ring of connection widens to its fullest when the stories that have been brought to the stage reflect (and sometimes even challenge) the values and sensibilities of the time. Whether paying tribute to a god, laughing together at the latest hit comedy, or being incited by a play's controversial ideas, audiences have gone to the theater to be entertained, yes, but also to bond as a community, to experience and to learn. Throughout history, audiences and creative teams have engaged in the broadest ring of connection by sharing in the stories that have prompted dialogue about the human condition. Immersing themselves in the lives and dilemmas of the characters on the stage before

them, audiences throughout all eras of history have responded to the stories told to them and have seized these opportunities to connect with each other and with the issues raised, a practice that has helped them cultivate their own character virtues.

In 1857, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen shocked his audiences with his script, *A Doll's House*, a play that stylistically broke a trend of superficial melodramas that featured two-dimensional characters by introducing the story of Nora Helmer, a woman who ultimately chooses to leave her three children as well as sacrifice her role as a doting, subservient housewife in her desperate attempt to gain independence and find her true self. The play stunned audiences of the time as Ibsen revealed, through his stinging commentary, a reflection of what he saw as the oppressive and false society that surrounded him. As controversial as the play proved to be, the audiences had no choice but to wrestle with this reflection of themselves. Ibsen not only demonstrated bravery and integrity in his central character, Nora, but he also demonstrated these same virtues in himself as the creator of a story that held a decidedly unpopular ending, but one that, for better or for worse, would stir its audiences and prompt them to examine themselves.⁹



RENT challenged social norms and fostered empathy in its audiences.

In 1996, Jonathan Larson brought his fresh reinvention of musical theater to Broadway audiences through his rock opera, *RENT*. Larson, a brilliant young composer, lyricist and playwright, prepared to share his creation, which not

only fostered empathy, but demonstrated resilience as well. By immersing audiences in the lives of characters who explore universal themes of love, loss, fear, and aspiration, but who also struggle with specific hardships of their time—homelessness, poverty, drug addiction, sexual identity, and the societal stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, Larson shined a light on the marginalized. He asked his audience to suspend any judgement or labeling and, instead, find the empathy to see the humanity of each individual character and extend understanding and compassion.

Not only did the story and experience of *Rent* foster empathy, but the events surrounding the project itself demonstrated the resilience that can emerge in a theater community. During the day of the production's final dress rehearsal, its creator, Larson, tragically died at the age of 35 from aortic dissection. His untimely and unexpected death catalyzed a bonding between the cast and crew and a desire to live out the notion that the "show must go on". The production team's mission to bring both the story of *Rent* as well as its creator's story to the public served as an example of the virtue of strength that can be shared by the members of a community, a characteristic that contributes to theater's fortitude.¹⁰

Time and again, theater has helped us develop character virtues by providing the space for connection and exploration of stories and experiences that have helped us to reflect, learn and grow. But the survival of the artform itself has depended on its ability to adapt and persevere. Tested time and again, theater has had to demonstrate its own strength in character, its own virtue of resilience.

A Model of Resiliency

Adapting to a World of Technology

Having survived for thousands of years and weathered an array of adversarial challenges that had accompanied each historical era since the time of Ancient Greece, the art form of theater itself stands as an inspiring and powerful example of adaptability and resiliency. The theater event that began in Ancient Greece gained a momentum that would see it through subsequent hurdles including closures of theater spaces due to fires, plagues and Puritan beliefs. A newly colonized America, the Industrial Revolution and two World Wars all served to influence and challenge theater's ability to adapt and evolve. Retaining its traditions yet embracing its innovations, theater remained resilient for over 2000 years, and its stories continued to bring communities together to share in the human experience. But what about persevering through modern challenges?

With the 20th and 21st centuries being defined by an explosion of technological advancements and virtual gathering platforms that have inarguably altered the ways in which we are able to connect with (and disconnect from) each other, social media has emerged as a presence that has indeed affected theater in a number of ways. While it has presented challenges to the nature of the live experience, could theater again

demonstrate its ability to embrace change and remain tenaciously resilient in order to coexist with and even embrace what social media has to offer?

We live in a world where communication technology, especially social media, certainly carries the potential to compete for the audience's attention, distracting them from being fully present for a theatrical event. And, as Craig Lambert observes in his article "The Future of Theatre: In a Digital Era, Is the Play Still the Thing?," "a youthful generation raised amid a digital culture may prove harder to lure to a live theatrical performance."¹¹ Certainly, technology has infiltrated our theater experience as the ritual of reminding audiences to turn off their electronic devices prior to the start of the theater event has now been a part of standard practice for decades. And the need to keep vigilant in offering consistent reminders for audiences to "unplug" does not seem to be waning. However, despite the choices of technology and social media that offer virtual connections, renowned director Tina Packer, confirms theater as an incomparable necessity by acknowledging, "It's only through people gathering together—which is what theaters do—that you can actually feel the humanity. It's a palpable, visceral feeling—a collective feeling," she says. "You can't feel it on Facebook, you can't feel it on television, and you don't get the truth in any of these places, either."¹²

But social media has also been embraced by the theater as a tool for transforming the theater landscape, often in largely positive ways. It has allowed theaters to expand their reach, build communities, and explore new creative possibilities. It has helped reduce marketing costs and helped theaters manage the financial strain of production costs. The impact of social media on society has even served as a backdrop and central focus for numerous theatrical productions, a piece of our social identity under examination in the theater.

In 2016, the Tony Award-Winning Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen* premiered and served as a mainstream connection with audiences of all ages in its reflection of modern topics such as social anxiety and the power of viral messaging to examine loneliness and friendship. Here was an example of how theater, which prides itself on its "in-person" connective dialoguing experience, was once again providing a space for audiences to examine itself, this time shining a light on how we use technological spaces in our desire to connect.

So, through its power of adapting, theater demonstrated its resilience. It embraced and examined a defining societal challenge, and by simply trusting

itself to do what it had always done—bring us together in a shared space to reflect on and better understand a truth of who we are becoming— theater not only survived, it found new ways to thrive. But although it had demonstrated a long history of triumphantly navigating unforeseen shutdowns, crises and interruptions, could theater persevere and survive its most challenging modern test: a worldwide pandemic?

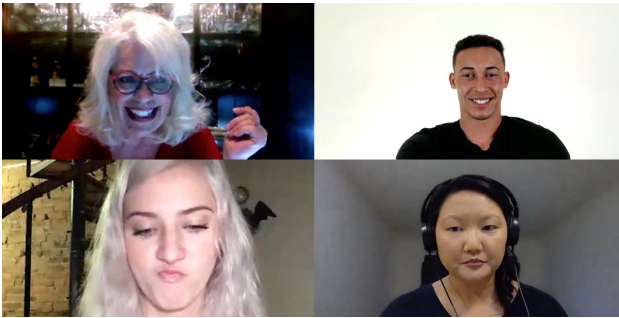
Theater embraced and examined a defining societal challenge and not only survived but found new ways to thrive.

Surviving a Global Crisis: Adapting to New Forms of Theater

The COVID-19 pandemic descended, and as the world became forced to isolate and forego events that included public gathering, the traditional practices of theater became threatened and theater itself seemed, once again, to be facing extinction. Theater spaces of all types, commercial and non-commercial, were shutting their doors. Professional and amateur designers, writers, performers, choreographers, directors, builders, box office staff . . . essentially all members of theater communities were being forced to find new careers and creative paths. Many theater artists, me included, contemplated a question we never thought possible to be posed: Could this 2,500-year-old tradition have finally run its course and reached its conclusion?

During the plague of the Elizabethan era, performers adapted to the theater closures by choosing to travel with their performances. In the 17th century, playwrights dodged censorship issues and other social restrictions by producing closet dramas, scripts meant only to be read but which provided a creative space, if only a cerebral one, for theater to exist. The artform was no stranger to exploring creative solutions to perpetuate its existence. And here again arose an opportunity for the makers and consumers of theater to band together to problem-solve in the midst of a global crisis. The desire to tell stories and commune with others meant exploring new pathways to do so. To keep the spirit of live theater aloft, some theater groups began making their archives of previously recorded productions available for streaming. Additional efforts such as podcasts of plays, interactive web dramas and plays constructed to be performed by audiences in their own homes helped to exercise the muscle of theater.¹³

I vividly remember being asked by a director I had previously worked with if I would fill in at the last moment and perform a role in a public reading of a popular play that he was producing. The performance was to take place virtually through the help of Zoom, one of the cloud-based platforms that we had quickly become all too familiar with in our desperate attempts to find our way to some version of normalcy and keep connected with others. Since “Zoom theater” was quickly becoming one of the only options for producing theater, I jumped at the chance to gain experience with the format.



The show must go on . . . even if that means it goes on virtually.

In our first rehearsal together, as we frustratedly practiced maneuvering through such awkward technicalities as knowing when to turn our cameras and microphones on just before we entered a scene and

where we were supposed to look, the director very bluntly made a sobering observation that stopped us all in our tracks: “Folks, this is how we have to tell our stories now. This is the new theater.” His declaration prompted an emotionally conflicting mix of both sadness and hope. We were mourning our loss of being able to physically create and commune in the same room together, yet here we were telling our stories, combatting our solitude, and reminding ourselves that we were still connected. And as Noah Millman, author of “Theater in the Time of COVID” acknowledged, “A theater that could speak to our moment would have to live in the peculiarity of our moment, a time unmoored from time and a space displaced from space.”¹⁴ And though there existed a sort of lonely ungainliness to the virtual format, we were once again finding a way to look together into our societal mirror to process our human condition.

And theater’s resiliency during COVID extended beyond creating alternative performance opportunities and gathering spaces. The bonds formed between members of the various circles of theater communities became stronger than ever in some cases. Examples of caretaking and support arose in many areas of the entertainment industry. One such effort, the Costume Industry Coalition, an organization founded during the Broadway theater closures that occurred during the spring of 2020, responded to

the challenges brought about by these closures and helped to galvanize the various independent designers and builders in New York by advocating for the American costume industry. The coalition took fundraising actions and established recovery grants, created publications, marketed products and produced public exhibits to help raise money in an effort to protect its artisans and keep its shops open until working conditions were restored and theaters were reopened. Through its goals to raise awareness about the challenges facing the industry and to promote the value of costumes as an integral part of storytelling in the entertainment industry, the coalition forged a new bond amongst theater costume artists and artisans, and the community discovered a new level of fortitude.¹⁵

Having survived the numerous challenges that it has faced over the last 2,500 years, theater continues to redefine itself while simultaneously holding onto its traditional defining characteristics. And it continues to demonstrate its resiliency, shaping our character and deepening the virtues that guide our actions and relationships, providing a powerful medium for moral and ethical growth.

Conclusion

I think back on my first day returning to face-to-face teaching and the doubtful feelings that filled me. Separately, each of us in that room was a private mixture of conflicting emotions, but together I think we were hopeful. Above all, we were together. Did we need theater anymore? I swelled with a regained confidence in my answer: absolutely. While its forms may have changed and continue to change, its role as a communal, reflective, and transformative artform remains necessary. The fundamental human experience that we engage in through live theater is irreplaceable and will always hold relevance for us.

And that day we prepared to take a step together to figure out how to push this resilient tradition of storytelling forward, social distancing challenges and safety protocols be damned. The first action I took was to ask us all to stand, and, because that sacred theater space had not witnessed a communal gathering, let alone the sound of applause, in over six months, I invited us all to give a standing ovation. The students and I stood together, and we clapped, filling the room with the joyful sound of applause and feeling the spirit of connection. We clapped for the empathy to be gained, for the integrity to be developed, and for the resilience we were living. We clapped because we were together. Connecting.

Joe Klinebriel, MFA, excitedly joined the University of Dubuque community in 2023 to serve as director of theatre. Before coming to the University of Dubuque, Joe served as chair of the fine arts department and theatre director at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. Originally from the Detroit, Michigan, area, he earned his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Alabama as part of the Professional Actor Training Program where he was part of the repertory company at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. He has directed, performed, and educated locally and regionally. He lives in Dubuque with his wife, Jill, who accompanies the University of Dubuque choirs, and his son, Sam.

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- p. 51: Screenshot by Joe Klinebriel

Notes

1. Collins and Cooper, *The Power of Story*.
2. Taplin, *Pots & Plays*.
3. Shakespeare, "The Tempest."
4. Shakespeare, "Hamlet," acts 3, scene 2; pp. 1209–1210.
5. Brown, *Gifts of Imperfection*, 19.
6. Junger, *Tribe*.
7. Harbinger, "Sebastian Junger," loc. 20:00.
8. Dembin, "Nothing But Time."
9. Gainor, Garner, and Puchner, *Norton Anthology of Drama*.
10. Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 408–10.
11. Lambert, "Future of Theater."
12. Lambert.
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Ghosting and Graffiti

Character Lessons from Ancient Roman Social Media

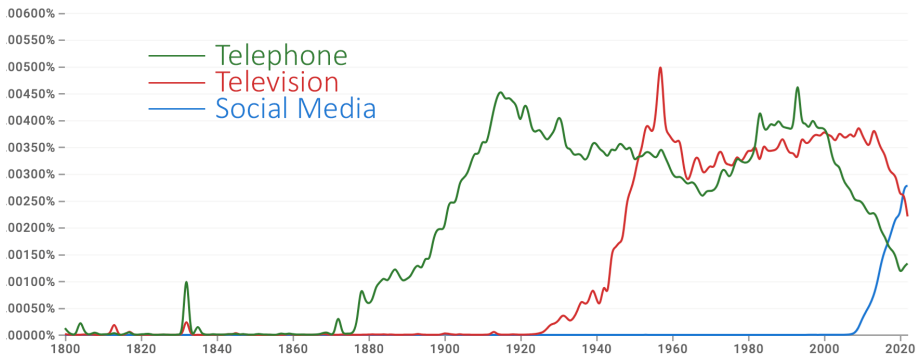
Nicholas A. Elder

Abstract

Social media is not a new phenomenon. It has a long and storied past. This article argues that we can learn character lessons from that past, and particularly from two different kinds of media from the Roman empire: papyrus letters and graffiti. In this ancient context, as in our own modern context, social media can both foster connection and create disconnection between people.

What is Social Media?

The term “social media” first appeared in the English language in 1994.¹ Since 2007, the word has seen a precipitous rise in use and has become a part of everyday English vocabulary.



Relative frequency of the terms telephone, television, and social media in English language books since 1800²

The internet and the world have been revolutionized in the past thirty years by online networks that have globally connected humans to a degree never

seen before in history. But social media is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is quite old.

This article argues that social media has a long history and that we can learn from its use in the ancient past. Social media has always provided opportunities to both establish and strengthen connections between persons, while also creating unique spaces where connections can be severed or weakened. We will turn back the clock 2,000 years to explore two kinds of social media from the Roman Empire: papyrus letters and graffiti. We shall see that there are parallels between how these media fostered opportunities for both connection and disconnection and how social media does the same today. In each case it is not the communication medium itself that fosters connection or foments disconnection, it is how the medium is used. When social media is employed with positive intention and with consideration on its impact, it can foster connection across time and space. On the flip side, the unique communication possibilities that social media affords, including anonymity and the ability to disengage, can lead to behaviors that harm relationships and erode trust.



Social media can foster connection across time and space.

Defining Social Media

Most definitions of “social media” indicate that the term is reserved for internet-based sites, services, and applications that allow users to create their own content, share that content, and consume content created by other users. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines social media as “Websites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.”³ Here, both “websites” and “applications” presume internet connectivity, indicating that social media is a 20th and 21st century phenomenon.⁴

However, an analysis of twenty-one academic definitions of “social media” between the years 1996–2019 found that the two most common terms in the definitions were, first, “social,” and second, “people.”⁵ While the modern connotation of “social media” involves virtual and internet connectivity, at its roots, social media is about connecting persons to one another.

And so Tom Standage in his book, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media – The First 2,000 Years*, locates the origins of social media not in the development of internet-based sites and applications like America Online, Facebook, or

Twitter in the early 2000s, as many others do. Instead, he argues that its roots are in human history and evolutionary biology.⁶ The ways that humans create, consume, share, and manipulate information in the era of social media is a part of our historical and evolutionary fabric.

Three things make modern social media so compelling and tap into this fabric, according to Standage:

1. As primates, humans are inherently social animals that are biologically conditioned to form networks.
2. Exchanging information is one way that humans maintain their position and status within those networks.
3. Technology, especially writing, allows humans to extend the reach of how and where information is exchanged.⁷

At the center of social media, and what unites a variety of different historical forms of social media is “person-to-person sharing of information.”⁸ Modern social media is set apart, thanks to the internet, by the unprecedented speed, distance, and vast reach at which information can be shared. The internet is the enabling infrastructure for our present social-media revolution.⁹

Ancient Roman Social Media

The Roman world also had novel enabling infrastructures that ushered in its own social media revolution: the invention of the phonetic alphabet, papyrus as a writing material, and increased access to travel.

The earliest human writing systems were pictures that represented words and ideas, not sounds. Because there are nearly an infinite number of words and ideas, in this system, there needed to be nearly an enormous number of pictures to represent them. As a result, writing and reading was a specialized task reserved for those who had the time, training, and ability to learn all the pictographs. These specialized writers and readers were called scribes.



The Ivory Comb is thought to contain the oldest example of a sentence written with a phonetic alphabet.

The invention of the phonetic alphabet in approximately 1800 BCE was a monumental shift in human communications that democratized writing and reading. Rather than having spoken words and ideas represented as pictures, the phonetic alphabet represents sounds as individual characters or letters. Any number of spoken words and ideas can be visually presented from the limitless combinations of these letters. Rather than memorizing an ever-increasing set of pictures, all one must do to learn to read and write is learn the letters and sounds of a respective language's alphabet. As a result of the invention of the phonetic alphabet, far more humans could communicate with one another through writing.

But material was needed to write on. Enter the papyrus plant. Papyrus is native to Egypt and grows in abundance on the banks of the Nile River. Ancient Egyptians harvested the plant and manufactured it as a writing material. Strips were cut and laid across one another vertically



The abundant papyrus plant was used to manufacture sheets to write on during the Roman Empire.

and horizontally, forming a sheet roughly the same size as a modern piece of printer paper. These were then glued end to end to make a blank scroll that was unrolled horizontally. The scroll in its entirety could be written on for long documents or it could be cut into individual sheets for shorter ones, like letters.

Thanks to the development of a vast system of Roman roads, papyrus could travel and be used across the Roman Empire. It was a widely available material for writing, like paper is today, from about 200 BCE until 400 CE.¹⁰

Because of this combination of the invention of the phonetic alphabet, the availability of papyrus as a writing material, and the opportunity to write and send documents to people in far-off locations via Roman roads, this period saw an explosion of people writing and connecting with one another across time and distance. It was a phenomenon never seen before in human history.

Sound familiar? The Roman Empire’s communications revolution was similar to the one we are presently experiencing. They did it on papyrus and via roads, we do it on digital devices, sites, and applications via the internet.

And the Romans used their new access to connecting with one another across time and distance in ways that are very similar to how we use social media today. The four most common applications of social media are socialization with friends and family, romance, business, and vocational networking.¹¹ All reasons that the Romans also wrote.

Human Responses to Technological Revolutions

Whether in 25 CE or 2025 CE, humans use media to connect with one another socially, romantically, or for purposes related to work. In both the ancient and the modern world, these connections can be healthy and infused with character, but they can also be unhealthy and lack character.¹²

THE SIMPLE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS THAT GET ASKED ABOUT EVERY NEW TECHNOLOGY:	
WILL ☐ MAKE US ALL GENIUSES?	NO
WILL ☐ MAKE US ALL MORONS?	NO
WILL ☐ DESTROY WHOLE INDUSTRIES?	YES
WILL ☐ MAKE US MORE EMPATHETIC?	NO
WILL ☐ MAKE US LESS CARING?	NO
WILL TEENS USE ☐ FOR SEX?	YES
WERE THEY GOING TO HAVE SEX ANYWAY?	YES
WILL ☐ DESTROY MUSIC?	NO
WILL ☐ DESTROY ART?	NO
BUT CAN'T WE GO BACK TO A TIME WHEN—	NO
WILL ☐ BRING ABOUT WORLD PEACE?	NO
WILL ☐ CAUSE WIDESPREAD ALIENATION BY CREATING A WORLD OF EMPTY EXPERIENCES?	WE WERE ALREADY ALIENATED

We ask the same questions with each new technology.

Because modern, internet-based social media is still a relatively new phenomenon, there are presently very different responses to its use. When humans are in the middle of a technological and communications revolution, there are typically two very different responses. On the one hand, some people claim that the new technology will ruin everything. On the other hand, some people see the new technology as a panacea for all of society's woes. When both radios and televisions became widely available in homes, some thought that each would ruin family life by discouraging interaction with one another. Others thought that each was going to improve family life by bringing everyone together around a shared experience. In reality, the truth is somewhere between the two.

People form more-balanced and nuanced opinions about technologies as they become "domesticated." As Nancy K. Baym, Senior Researcher at Microsoft, puts it, "As technology are integrated into everyday life, they come to be seen as offering a nuanced mix of both positive and negative implications."¹³ Writing itself was viewed suspiciously by none other than the philosopher Socrates.¹⁴



In both the ancient and the modern world, connections can be healthy and infused with character, but they can also be unhealthy and lack character.

In what follows, we will look at two specific phenomena of social media: ghosting and anonymous posting. While we consider these modern phenomena, we shall see that they both were features of Roman social media as well. Because the Roman social media that we will engage have been domesticated for over 2,000 years, it allows us to see the ways that

their use is and is not infused with character. Observing how these parallel our own technologies and media, we are better equipped to consider carefully our own use of social media in ways that are and are not infused with character.

Modern Ghosting

Leah LeFebvre defines ghosting as "unilaterally ceasing communication (temporarily or permanently) in an effort to withdraw access to individual(s), prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s)."¹⁵ Usually the ghosted partner does not immediately recognize that they are being ghosted. "The

absence of interaction, irregularity in communication patterns, and sometimes abruptly ending communication causes non-initiators to then realize that they and their partner are no longer in a relationship.”¹⁶ Ghosting happens in both romantic and non-romantic relationships and both committed and casual relationships.



The digital age has facilitated an increase in ghosting as a strategy for ending a relationship.

Ghosting comes in many forms and degrees. Its strongest form is what Wendy Walsh in an interview with *The New York Times* calls “heavyweight ghosting.”¹⁷ This is completely cutting off communication after either being engaged in a committed or sexual relationship. On the other end of the spectrum is “lightweight ghosting,”

and might involve ignoring a handful of messages from a friend or cutting off communication with someone after one or two interactions. Between heavyweight and lightweight ghosting is midweight ghosting, which involves meeting several times and then demonstrating strong avoidance behaviors.

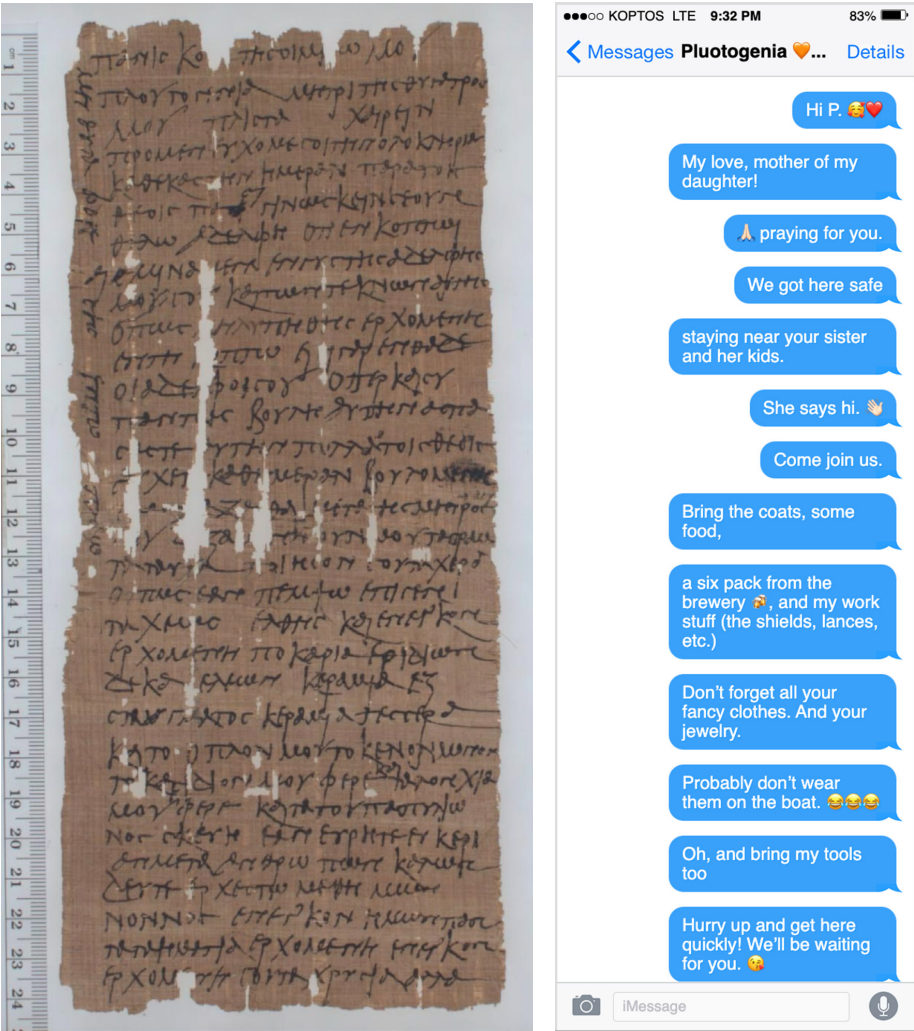
And ghosting is not a new phenomenon. Gili Freedman, Darcey Powell, Benjamin Le, and Kipling Williams write in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, “The idea of ending a relationship by cutting off contact has likely been around for a very long time, current forms of technology are making ghosting a more prominent relationship dissolution strategy.”¹⁸ We have a very good example of it from Roman Egypt from about 300 CE.

Ghosting is not a new phenomenon.

Ploutogenia Ghosts Paniskos around 400 CE

Over the course of three papyrus letters, we find a man named Paniskos being ghosted by his wife, named Ploutogenia. He writes her three letters, to which she gives no written response. At first Paniskos does not know he is being ghosted, and his realization of what is happening unfolds before our eyes as we read the three letters.

Paniskos writes his wife this first letter, labeled P. Mich. 3.214.¹⁹ I have translated the letter from Greek into English and from the ancient communication technology of the papyrus letter to the modern communication technology of the text message.



First letter from Paniskos to Ploutogenia: Original papyrus letter alongside my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

In the letter, Paniskos greets Ploutogenia, tells her that he prays daily for her health, and then informs her that he is staying at a place called Koptos, which is in upper Egypt. Presumably Paniskos is on extended business there, either as a soldier or a merchant engaged in the armory trade.²⁰ He

has found a place to rent near his sister-in-law and her children. Paniskos requests that Ploutogenia come join him in Koptos and bring along some very specific things: food, some of his weapons, tent poles, his clothes, and her clothes and nice jewelry, which he advises she should not wear on the boat.

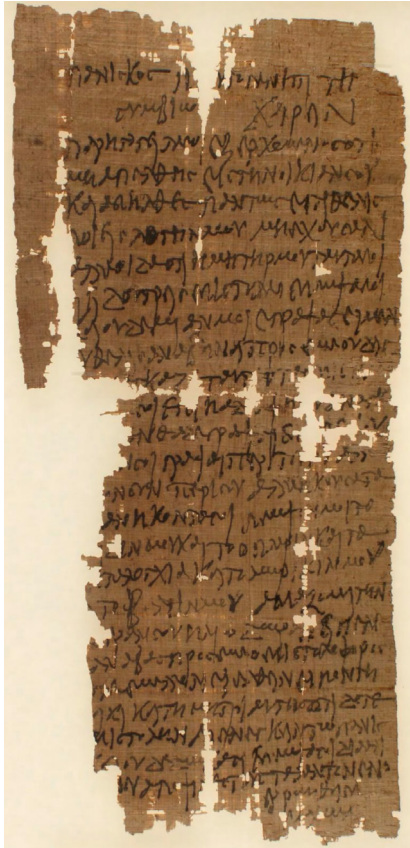
Ploutogenia never came to Koptos. Apparently she never told her husband that she wasn't going to either. At least that is what he indicates in a second letter written to her, labeled P. Mich. 3.216, that follows up on the first one.²¹



Second letter from Paniskos to Ploutogenia: Original papyrus letter alongside my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

Once again Paniskos greets Ploutogenia and tells her that he prays for her. Then he jumps right into a screed about her not joining him at Koptos. “Already I have written you a second letter that you might come to me and you have not come.” He then tells her that if she doesn’t want to come, she should reply and let him know. Paniskos repeats the very same request from the first letter about Ploutogenia bringing his weapons and other things with her.

After not receiving any reply to this second letter, Paniskos loses his patience. He writes Ploutogenia a third letter.²²



Third letter from Paniskos to Ploutegenia: Original papyrus letter alongside my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.



Again, husband greets wife, but this time he does not say that he prays for her, as he did in the previous two letters. He insults his wife, saying she is just like his mother, doing whatever she wants to without thinking about him. Having given up hope that she will come to Koptos, he asks her to respond to his letter so that he might know how she is doing and to *send* him his weapons and tools, not *bring* him his weapons and tools, as requested in the previous two letters. Finally, he ends the letter informing Ploutogenia that he knows she is refusing to write him a letter: “The letter carrier said to me when he came to me: ‘When I was on the point of departing I said to your wife and her mother: ‘Give me a letter to take to Paniskos,’ and they did not give it.”

In letter #1, Paniskos is hopeful that Ploutogenia will join him in Koptos. In letter #2, he starts to get a bit annoyed, but still holds out hope that she will come join him. By letter #3, however, Paniskos realizes what has happened: Ploutogenia is not joining him and not responding to his requests. Paniskos receives a report from the letter carrier that Ploutogenia is midweight ghosting him.

Learning from Ploutogenia and Paniskos

What might we learn from Ploutogenia ghosting Paniskos and his response?

It is important to recognize that we only have one side of the conversation. There are no letters from Ploutogenia to Paniskos. Perhaps she had a very good reason not to come to Koptos. There may also be a perfectly good explanation for why she has not written him back. There are occasions when abruptly cutting off contact with a person is appropriate. For instance, it is not a negative mark on one's character to ghost an abuser. If we imagine such a situation with Paniskos and Ploutogenia, then the husband's repeated messages might be overbearing and controlling.

However, if we imagine the relationship to be functional, the situation is different and we can learn from Ploutogenia's intentional lack of communication with her husband.

In a recent study, only 5% percent of people surveyed indicated that they thought ghosting was acceptable in a long-term relationship.²³ Put another way, 95% of people disapprove of heavyweight ghosting. If you read Panisko's letters and were irked by his wife's lack of response, you might be among that 95%. When it comes to ghosting in any form, lightweight, midweight, or heavyweight, about 70% of people indicated that they would think poorly of a ghoster.

Notably, in this study, persons who possessed a strong "growth mindset" were less likely to think that ghosting was an acceptable way to end either a long-term or short-term relationship. A growth mindset is the belief and attitude that the intelligence, abilities, and qualities of a person can develop or grow.²⁴ A growth mindset is the opposite of a fixed mindset, which is the attitude that intelligence, abilities, and qualities are static and unchanging. Persons adopting a growth mindset tend to embrace challenges and see them as opportunities for development, whereas persons with a fixed mindset avoid challenges.

Persons with a fixed mindset are more likely to view ghosting as an acceptable way to end a relationship, to have reported ghosting romantic partners in the past, and to consider using ghosting as a dissolution strategy in the future.²⁵ This makes good sense: if you hold a fixed mindset, you are more likely to believe a relationship is simply not meant to be and ghosting is an easy way to avoid the difficult conversation of ending the relationship. However, if you hold a strong growth mindset, believing that people can change and grow, you are more open to working through or communicating about whatever issues might arise in a relationship, no matter how new it is.

LeFebvre identifies six steps in a “relational dissolution process:”²⁶

1. Gradual or sudden onset of relationship problems
2. Unilateral or bilateral desire to exit the relationship
3. Use of direct or indirect actions to accomplish the dissolution
4. Rapid or protracted nature of disengagement negotiation
5. Presence or absence of relationship repair attempts
6. Outcome of relationship termination or continuation

If one holds a growth mindset, they are more likely to see the relationship problems (#1) as opportunities, extend the disengagement negotiations (#3) and are more likely to attempt to repair the relationship (#4-5). If one holds a fixed mindset, however, they are more likely to take indirect action to end the relationship (i.e. ghost; #3) and are less likely to attempt to repair the relationship (#4-5).

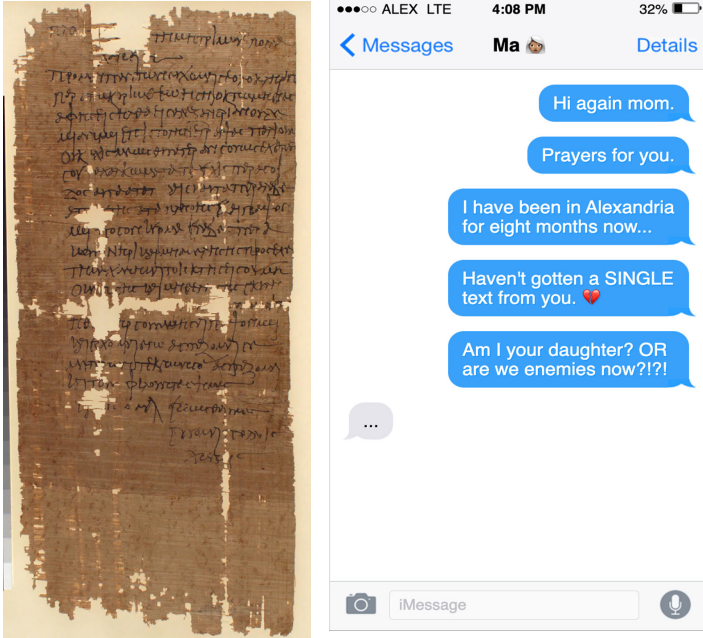
Let us presume that Ploutogenia is not attempting to end her relationship with her husband by ignoring his letters but is ignoring them because she does not want to move to Koptos. What advice might we give her? We might advise her not to ignore the conflict. Lack of communication very often leads to more problems. Ghosting is not the most effective or ethical way to handle disagreement. We might also point her to the tried-and-true Golden Rule: treat others as you want to be treated.

The advice would be fitting, because there just so happens to be a letter written from Ploutogenia to her mother in which she, Ploutogenia, is upset about her mother’s lack of communication.²⁷



*Lack of communication
very often leads to more
problems.*

The letter continues beyond what I have translated and Ploutogenia addresses several practical matters. But the first thing that she brings up after her obligatory greeting and prayer is that she hasn't heard from her mother.



Letter from Ploutogenia to her mother: Original papyrus letter with my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

Communication technologies, whether it be ancient papyrus letters or modern messaging, connect us to one another. Ghosting, at its core, severs connection. As noted earlier, there are rare and select occasions when cutting off communication is healthy, appropriate, and even ethical. Generally, however, ghosting, and especially heavyweight ghosting, is an unhealthy, inappropriate, and unethical communication strategy. Victims of ghosting question themselves, and often their self-worth and self-esteem are sabotaged. Psychologist Jennice Valhauer states that, like other forms of social rejection, ghosting is akin to emotional cruelty. In addition to emotional pain, it causes physical pain that several studies show can be treated with Tylenol.²⁸

In short: we would do better not to ghost. Looking at you, Ploutogenia.

Anonymity and Pseudonymity



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

CartoonStock.com

Peter Steiner, The New Yorker (1993)

In 1993, as the internet was becoming a popular commodity and not the exclusive domain of academics and the government, Peter Steiner published his "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" cartoon in *The New Yorker*. The cartoon captures one facet of internet privacy that has been a staple of online connectivity from its early years until today: content on the internet can be created, maintained, shared, and consumed anonymously.

Anonymity describes a situation when the author of content is not named. Pseudonymity is different but closely related. This occurs when content is created under a name that is not the author's own. Debates rage, and will continue to rage, about whether anonymity and pseudonymity are positive or negative features of the internet in the age of social media.

A balanced take is that they are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. There are both positive and negative aspects to anonymity and pseudonymity, and much depends on the varied purposes of creating and consuming content anonymously or pseudonymously. Social-media anonymity has been compared to a weapon: it can be used for self-defense or for injury to others.²⁹

Positive and Negative Functions of Social Media Anonymity

Social media anonymity and pseudonymity can have a positive function for historically marginalized groups. For instance, online anonymity has been shown to play a positive role for LGBTQ+ youth with respect to identity development, access to resources, and coming out.³⁰ Anonymity and pseudonymity can be a protective device, shielding individuals and groups from harm or abuse, both online and off.

It can also foster moral courage.³¹ This is because anonymity reduces the risk of consequences for taking courageous moral action. This is the same reason why “tip hotlines” for crime are very often anonymous. In and of itself, anonymity in communication is not a bad thing.

However, just as anonymity and pseudonymity provide a cloak for positive action, they can also provide a cloak for negative action. Anonymity is a major contributing factor to online aggression and cyberbullying, which is now considered an international public health concern.³²

Anonymous digital aggression is more humiliating and threatening than both anonymous in-person bullying and non-anonymous online and in-person bullying.³³ Because victims of online, anonymous or pseudonymous aggression do not know its source, they are unable to contextualize the aggression and make sense of it. Anyone could be their bully, even their closest friends. There is a significant imbalance when it comes to online, anonymous cyberbullying: 84% of cyberbullies know their victim, but only 31% of victims know their perpetrator.³⁴

Anonymity fuels aggressors for three reasons. First, it offers a sense of power over victims. This is because, second, anonymous aggressors are less likely to be detected and retaliated against. Even if there is retaliation, it is not a personal affront, but one against an anonymous “user.” Third, and most profoundly, anonymous aggressors do not see the pain they cause their victims. Social cues, such as eye contact, which are essential elements of interpersonal communication are absent.

Simply put, if one has to see the pain they cause a person, they are less likely to cause that pain in the first place. Detachment or disconnection from a person makes it easier to cause them harm. One study suggests that digital aggression is less common when cyberbullies must engage their victims in real time, even if the bully is anonymous.³⁵ The fact of knowing that there is another person on the other end of the message changes people’s actions.

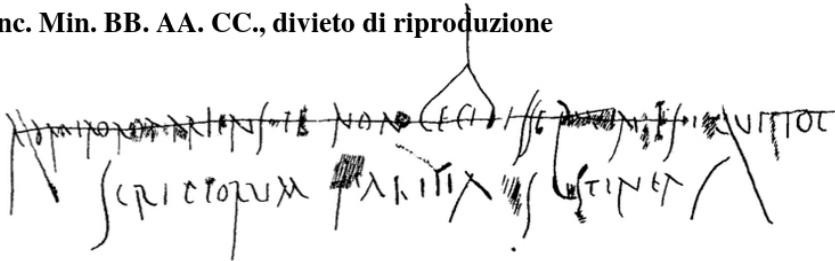
In summary, anonymity and pseudonymity in online interactions are not inherently bad or unethical. They produce both positive and negative outcomes. The negative outcomes stem from the disconnection between the perpetrator and the victim. By not having to connect directly with the person they are bullying, digital aggressors are emboldened to do harm.

Roman Graffiti

Just as there was ghosting in the ancient world, so also was there anonymous posting. And just as anonymity in modern communication has a positive and negative side, so also does anonymous posting in the ancient world.

In Roman antiquity, people wrote on each other's "walls," just as in the early days of Facebook before user's "walls" were replaced by a "timeline" in 2011. In the Roman world this posting was not electronic, but physical. There are remains of thousands of graffiti—the singular of this word is graffito—from the period. Graffiti were so common that one writer wrote, "I'm amazed, oh wall, that you haven't fallen into ruins since you hold the boring scribbles of so many writers."³⁶

Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione



Ancient graffiti about . . . too much ancient graffiti

Most of the Roman graffiti that still exist today come from the ancient cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii in southern Italy. These were tragically destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. The pumice and volcanic ash covering the city has served as a time capsule, allowing archaeologists to unearth elements of everyday life in the Roman empire a few decades after the death of Jesus.

And it turns out that these Romans were humans who were just like us. This is reflected in the kinds of graffiti that they scrawled on the walls and other surfaces of the city. The increased literacy that we talked about earlier is on full display in Pompeii and Herculaneum, as persons wrote and drew on all kinds of surfaces. What they wrote and drew is no different than what you

might find in a gas-station bathroom today: comments about defecation, phallic and erotic images, “so-and-so was here,” boasts about sexual exploits, vulgar words, love notes, doodles of people (including the sports stars of the day: gladiators), animals, plants, jokes, and reviews of politicians and local establishments, to name a few. History nerds like me and normal people alike can lose hours or days exploring these graffiti at the Ancient Graffiti Project, which has digitized thousands of them.³⁷



EDR - Epigraphic Database Roma



Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

DAVID

Ancient graffiti cover the gamut of possible topics

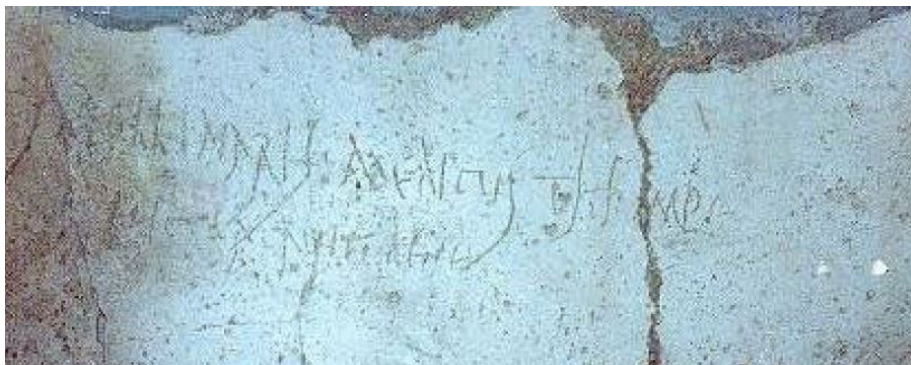
While we largely associate modern graffiti with anonymity, this was not the case in the Roman world. The writers and drawers of graffiti very frequently named themselves next to their writing and images, though of course not always. There are many examples of both anonymous and non-anonymous graffiti from this world. In this way Roman graffiti has much in common with modern social media posts. Many are anonymous; many are not.

The two also share in common the fact that anonymity can function both positively and negatively. While the Romans were more likely to append

their names to their graffiti, even the most crude and vulgar graffiti, there is, as we shall see, a tendency for direct insults of other people to be anonymous.

That Romans were not shy about appending their names to vulgar content, or about bodily acts and functions generally, is on display with this inscription, written by a man name Apollinaris, on the outside wall of a house.

“Apollinaris, the physician for the emperor Titus, shat well here.” This is Roman shitposting at its finest.



An imperial physician's expression of relief

There are any number of other vulgar graffiti that boast of sexual exploits, mock other people, or negatively review some kind of service provider to which the writer of the graffiti attached their name. Many of these are too crude to be reproduced here.

One that is not too crude is a back-and-forth conflict between two men named Successus and Severus. They are sparring over a woman named Iris on whom they both have a crush. Their conflict unfolds over the course of three graffiti.³⁸ You can imagine it existing in the comments section of an online social media thread. The personal dispute spills into a public space, as the two engage in a kind of performance to an unseen audience, each seeking to outdo the other with wit and insult.

First graffiti, written by Severus

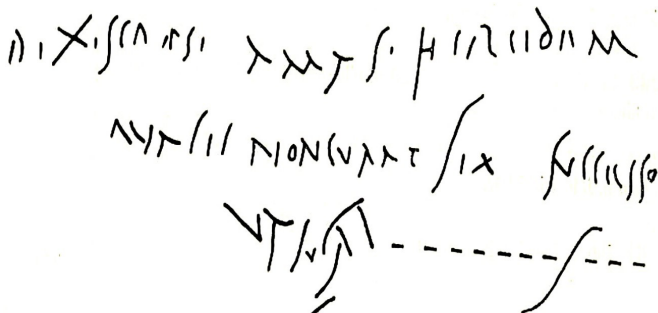
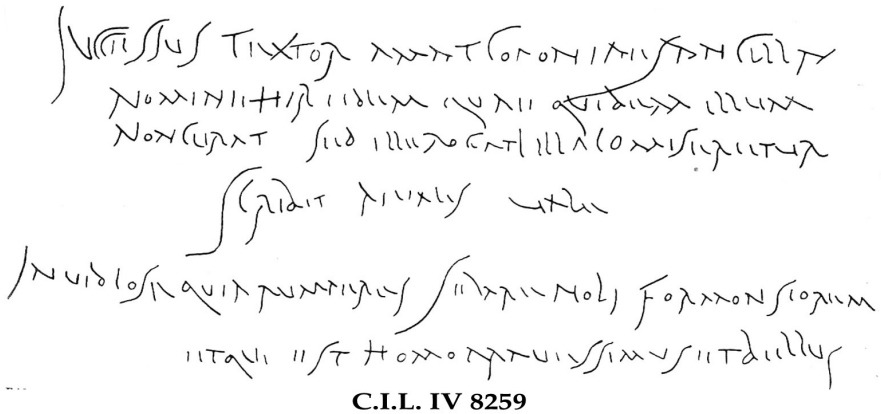
“Successus the weaver loves the barmaid of the inn, called Iris, who doesn’t care for him, but he asks and she feels sorry for him. A rival wrote this. Farewell.”

Second graffito, a response written by Successus

"You're jealous, bursting out with that. Don't try to muscle in on someone who's better looking and is a wicked and charming man."

Third graffito, a response written by Severus

"I have written and spoken. You love Iris, who doesn't care for you. Severus to Successus."



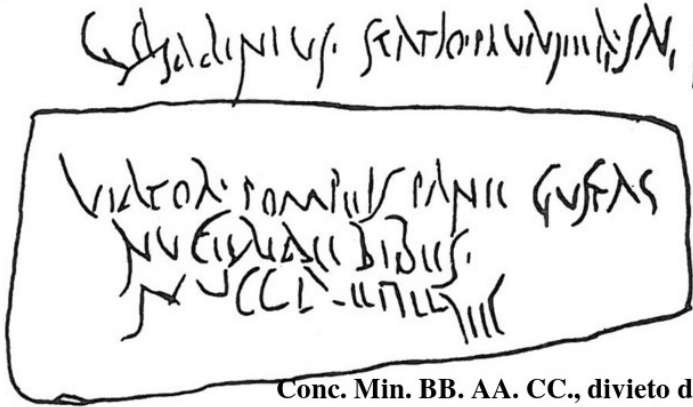
DIXI SCRIPSI AMAS HIREDEM
QVA TE NON CVRAT SIX SVCCESO
[...]
SEVERVS

A love triangle unfolds for all to see among Successus, Severus, and Iris

Apollinaris, Successus, and Severus, like many of their Roman contemporaries, created scatological or contentious messages, but they had the gumption to own up to their words by appending their names to them.

Other graffiti writers created what we would likely characterize as positive messages and also appended their names to them. Gaius Sabinius greets his friend heartily, while also offering a review of the fare in both Pompeii and the nearby city of Nuceria.

“Gaius Sabinius gives lots and lots of greetings to Statius. Traveler, at Pompeii you eat bread. But at Nuceria, you will drink!”³⁹



Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

The ancient Romans' version of Yelp

By appending his name to the message, Gaius Sabinius stands by his review. This is not to say that there is no value in anonymous reviews, both ancient and modern. Anonymous feedback is valuable and can give a reviewer the freedom to communicate honestly.

Perhaps this is why the writer of this next graffito opted not to include their name with their one-star review of a bar and inn: “What a lot of tricks you use to deceive, innkeeper. You sell water but drink unmixed wine!”⁴⁰ The complaint is about the quality of wine. In the Roman world, wine was normally cut with water so that it would last longer. The graffito is complaining that the wine at the bar of the inn is so diluted that it is just water. It implies that the innkeeper is cutting costs to increase profits while keeping the better, unmixed wine to himself. It is both a complaint and a warning to future patrons.

Anonymous graffiti could also be just plain abusive. This is where modern anonymity with respect to online aggression and Roman anonymity link up. When it comes to one-off insults in graffiti, there is a notable pattern of anonymity. In all of the following messages the recipient of the insult is named but the writer is not:⁴¹

- “Epaphra, you are bald!”
- “Epaphra is not good at ball games.”
- “Chie, I hope your hemorrhoids rub together so much that they hurt worse than they ever have before!”
- “Samius to Cornelius: go hang yourself!”
- “Phileros is a eunuch!”
- “Lucius Statius Philadelphus, freedman of a woman, is a thief!”
- “Erotaria, you jealous old hag!”

Like cyberbullies, these graffiti-bullies do not have to take responsibility for their words because their name is not attached to them. They also do not have to see the pain their words cause their victims, because they are not bullying them live and in person. Like the victims of cyberbullying, Chie, Epaphra, Samius, Phileros, Philadelphus, and Erotaria do not know who is writing about them. It could be anyone, even their closest friends.

But let’s end on a positive note. Anonymity can also be productive and even beautiful in ancient graffiti. Earlier I indicated that online anonymity can offer safety and space for LGBTQ identity expression, often for coming out. Perhaps anonymous graffiti played a similar role in the Roman world.

There are at least three instances of individuals expressing their same-sex desire and acts anonymously via graffiti. The first, which I will not reproduce here because it vulgarly describes sex acts, is labeled *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)* IV 3932 (you can look it up). The anonymous writer tells women to weep because he will no longer have sex with them, but with men instead. He writes “farewell to femininity!”

Two other graffiti, *CIL* IV 4523 and IV 2110, are simple confessions. The first indicates that the male writer has had sex with other men. The second expresses a writer’s desire to have sex with men. It might be psychologizing to suggest that these three graffiti are anonymous confessions that serve as a sexual-identity release valve, but it is certainly plausible. If anonymity in modern social media has “enhanced the ease of coming out anonymously or testing one’s tentative identities,” then anonymously doing the same in the older media of graffiti might function similarly.⁴²

Anonymity also functions in words of wisdom, as well as in confessions of love in Roman graffiti.

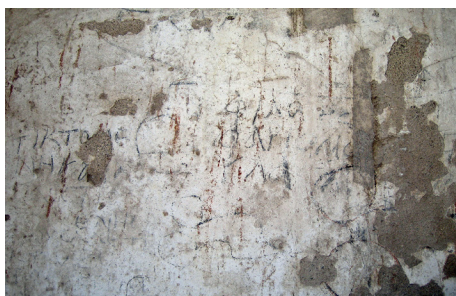
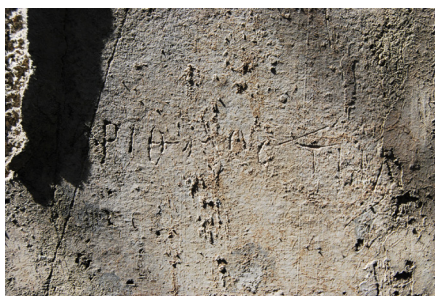
Words of Wisdom:

- A small problem gets bigger if you ignore it. . . . *CIL IV 1811*
- Once you are dead, you are nothing *CIL IV 5279*
- Now, when anger is still fresh, it is time to leave. When grief has departed love shall return. Trust me! *CIL IV 4491*

Confessions of Love:

- I don't want to sell my husband, not for all the gold in the world! *CIL IV 3061*
- If anyone does not believe in Venus, they should take a look at my girlfriend! *CIL IV 6842*
- Greetings to Primigenia of Nuceria. I would wish to become a signet ring for no more than an hour, so that I might give you kisses dispatched with your signature. . . . *CIL IV 10241*

One of the cleverest ways to confess love in the ancient world was via a phenomenon called gematria, in which the letters of the alphabet are assigned numerical values. Names, then, have a number which is the total value of all their letters. So, for example, the name David in simple English gematria, in which the letter is associated with its number in the alphabet, is 40: D (4) + A (1) + V (22) + I (9) + D (4). Gematria was common in the ancient world and most people knew the number associated with their name. However, it is very difficult to work backwards from only a number to a name, because a number could be the result of any variety of combination of letters.



Cryptic confessions of love through gematria

"I love a man whose number is 351."⁴³ "I love a woman whose number is 751."⁴⁴

Thus, when these two writers anonymously confessed their love, they did so cryptically. The persons whose number was 351 and 751 would have

known that the note was about them, but it would have been very difficult for a random person to determine who 351 or 751 were. This was an ancient form of “someone has a crush on you.”

Polly Lohmann writes that ancient Roman graffiti and modern social media are forms of self-display and self-commemoration.⁴⁵ I would add that they are also spaces to exert and form one’s identity and connect with other humans in networked relationship. In the processes of self-display, self-commemoration, identity- and social-formation, anonymity can play a role.

There is a time and place for anonymity in communication technologies. It can provide a safe space for identity formation. Anonymity can allow for a greater deal of honesty and the free flow of information. On the other side of the coin, it can be used against others abusively as a weapon and buffer for being held accountable for one’s actions and words.

Lessons Learned from Anonymity in Social Media

So, what lessons might we take from these anonymous and not-anonymous ancient graffiti?

First, there is power to accountability. Even in the cases of some of the most crude, vulgar, and provocative messages, people frequently attached their names. This is different from our modern social norms, but there is something to owning one’s words that fosters accountability and responsibility that we could use in online spaces today.



There is a time and place for anonymity in communication technologies.

Second, anonymity can be a tool for courage, support, and identity formation. Anonymity and pseudonymity are not in and of themselves bad things. They are tools that can be used positively.

Third, there is a danger to disconnection. Both ancient and modern examples show that anonymity can uniquely fuel harmful behavior. Anonymity and pseudonymity are tools that can be used negatively.

Fourth, anonymity should be used intentionally and with purpose. If there is a time and place for anonymity and pseudonymity in communication and media, then we ought to carefully consider what those times and places are and think through the effects, whether positive or negative, anonymous communication might have on other persons.

Conclusion

Communication technologies have always offered both opportunities and challenges. Modern social media, still in its infancy within the grand timeline of human communication, is no exception. As its influence continues to expand alongside technological advancements, it carries profound potential to foster either connection or disconnection, much like earlier forms of communication such as letters and graffiti.

The outcomes of the use of social media hinge on the intentions and mindfulness of individual users. While no one will employ any medium perfectly, reflecting on both the positive uses and harmful misuses of ancient communication tools can inspire a more thoughtful approach. By learning from history, we can intentionally utilize modern social media for meaningful connection while mitigating its potential for harm.

Ancient letters enabled long-distance, thoughtful communication, akin to today's emails or direct messages. However, they could also cause pain. From the ancient ghoster Ploutogenia we learn of the harmful impact of ignoring or ceasing communication. Acknowledging messages whenever possible helps to maintain trust and respect in relationships.

Graffiti allowed writers to make their thoughts permanent. Digital graffiti does the same. Roman graffiti writers were more likely than modern writers to append their name to their writing or drawing. However, when they directly insulted another person, they were far more likely to hide behind a mask of anonymity. While anonymous communication has positive functions, we ought to consider why we are communicating without our named attached: is it to protect ourselves or to harm someone else? With anonymity, motive makes all the difference.

Nicholas A. Elder researches and teaches how Scripture has been experienced across media, from ancient scrolls and codices to apps and film, showing how the medium shapes the message. Before joining the University of Dubuque, he taught at Marquette University, where he earned his PhD. He is the author of The Media Matrix of Early Jewish and Christian Narrative (Bloomsbury, 2019) and Gospel Media: Reading, Writing, and Circulating Jesus Traditions (Eerdmans, 2024), and is currently writing The Bible is Not a Book. His work also appears in journals such as Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Journal for the Study of Judaism, and Journal of Biblical Literature. Outside the office and classroom, he's usually running, restoring his preposterously old house, or wrangling his four kids and oafish dog.

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Notes

1. Aichner et al., “Twenty-Five Years of Social Media,” 215. There is, however, some debate about who coined the buzzword, with Tina Sharkey and Ted Leonsis, who were executives at America Online (AOL) in the mid-to-late 1990s, and Darrell

Berry, who developed an online media environment in the mid 1990s called Matisse, being the main contenders. See Bercovici, "Who Coined 'Social Media'?"

2. Google Book Ngram Viewer: "social media, television, telephone" (Accessed October 17th, 2024)

3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "social media (n.)," September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5718206998>.

4. Other definitions of social media assume the same. See Kaplan and Heanlein, "Users of the World, Unite!," 6.

5. Aichner et al., "Twenty-Five Years of Social Media," 217.

6. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*.

7. Standage, 7–20.

8. Standage, 3.

9. This is what is referred to as "Web 2.0" in definitions of social media. The early days of the internet were characterized by users consuming content, not creating it themselves. Web 2.0 is a term for the internet as we know it today: a space for human interaction and participation with one another.

10. It was overtaken in popularity by a different material, parchment, which is made from animal skin. Eventually this led to a decrease in the number of people writing in the population simply because parchment was not as widely available as papyrus because it was a more expensive product.

11. Aichner et al., "Twenty-Five Years of Social Media," 216–17.

12. Throughout this essay, I use "character" to refer to positive moral character, rather than to morally neutral or negative dispositions.

13. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 53.

14. As recorded by Plato in *Phaedrus* 275d–e. Socrates's concern is that writing will erode people's memory and degrade communication since writing cannot physically speak for itself.

15. LeFebvre, "Phantom Lovers," 220.

16. LeFebvre, 220.

17. Popescu, "Why People Ghost."

18. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 908.

19. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.214 can be found at <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.mich;3;214>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1409>.

20. Winter, "The Family Letters of Paniskos."

21. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.216 can be found at <https://papyri.info/apis/michigan.apis.1406>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1406>.

22. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.217 can be found at <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.mich;3;217>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1405>.

23. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 911.

24. Dweck, *Mindset*.
25. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 911–13.
26. LeFebvre, "Phantom Lovers," 222.
27. The letter is P. Mich. 3.221. The Greek text and an English translation of it can be found at <https://papyri.info/apis/michigan.apis.1403>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1403/1362v_a.tif.
28. Popescu, "Why People Ghost."
29. Sardá et al., "Understanding Online Anonymity."
30. Craig and McInroy, "You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online."
31. Pan, Hou, and Wang, "Are We Braver in Cyberspace?"
32. Nixon, "Current Perspectives."
33. Sticca and Perren, "Is Cyberbullying Worse than Traditional Bullying?"
34. Ybarra and Mitchell, "Youth Engaging in Online Harassment."
35. Wang and Sek-yum Ngai, "The Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, Asynchrony, and Moral Disengagement."
36. AGP-EDR158840, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR158840> [accessed: 12 Nov 2024]
37. Ancient Graffiti Project.
38. Translation from Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook*. Images from della Corte, *Case ed abitanti di Pompei*, 292.
39. AGP-EDR147519, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR147519> [accessed: 12 Nov 2024]
40. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* IV 3498.
41. These are taken from a list compiled at <https://tourguidegirl.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/graffiti-of-pompeii/>. The *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* number for each is as follows: IV 1810; IV 1926; IV 1820; IV 1864; IV 1826; IV 3990; IV 9945.
42. Sahoo, Venkatesan, and Chakravarty, "'Coming out'; Craig and McInroy, "You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online," 95–109.
43. AGP-SMYT00422, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-SMYT00422> [accessed: 14 Nov 2024]
44. AGP-SMYT00242, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-SMYT00242> [accessed: 14 Nov 2024]
45. Lohmann, "What the Graffiti of Ancient Pompeii Teach Us."

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Mirrors of Meaning

Character and Connection through Theater, Mentorship, and Social Media

Anna Haverland

Connection is not optional; it is how the self unfolds. On a college campus filled with hundreds of people all in some stage of becoming, the way you treat others becomes a reflection of the kind of person you're choosing to be. It does not take long to realize that college is about more than acquiring knowledge. It is also about the continual process of becoming yourself—developing, growing into yourself—and you do that through other people. A college campus is full of mirrors. Not literal ones—not the kind you pass in dorm bathrooms or classroom windows, but human mirrors—reflective moments, conversations, acts of kindness, opportunities that show you who you are and who you might become. Every interaction, whether chosen or accidental, becomes a reflection of yourself and what you still have to learn.



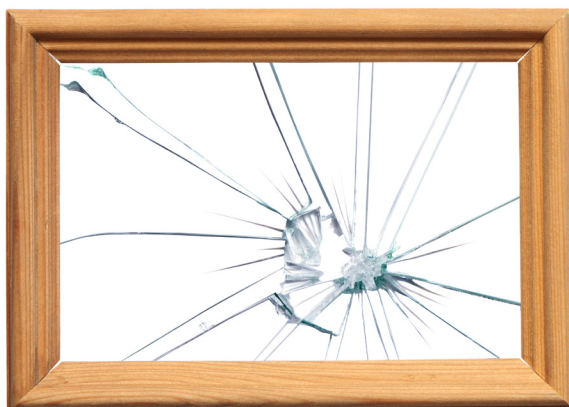
*Every interaction
becomes a reflection
of yourself.*

Connection is the quiet force that shapes character. At first, it is subtle. You may be in a classroom and hear someone speak on a thought you have never quite considered, but it resonates with your values. Sometimes it is found in deep friendships that offer inspiration, accountability, and honesty.

Other times, it's through tension and difficult relationships that stretch your capacity for patience and forgiveness. Or you might have a conflict with a teammate or friend on a group project and discover how quickly you become defensive. These are mirrors. Each of these interactions reveals something about you: a strength, a value, a wound, and sometimes a blind spot in your perspective. In these mirrored moments, you begin to see yourself through the eyes of others and slowly learn how to respond instead of reacting or retreating, with an intention to connect meaningfully.

In this microcosm of society that is a college campus, the people around you become your informal teachers. The classmate who challenges your assumptions without shaming you. The roommate who calls you out when you're being inconsiderate, not to hurt you but to help you grow. The teammate who trusts you with their vulnerability and, just by being honest, teaches you how to be more human. These relationships may not always feel like lessons in the moment, but they are. They teach responsibility, empathy, and humility. Character is more than something you declare. It is something that gets tested, revealed, and refined through the mirror of connection.

This process is not always comfortable. Sometimes what the mirror reflects back is hard to look at. It could be a moment of selfishness, a tendency to withdraw, a habit of speaking before thinking, and hurting those you care for. But growth begins the moment you decide to look anyway; stay present with what you see and let



Reflection is not always comfortable.

it change you. College gives you countless chances to do this not because it is designed that way, but because you are surrounded by others who are also discovering and refining their character. The shared messiness, the overlapping stories, late-night talks, and awkward silences all create the ideal conditions for character formation.

Over time, you come to understand that the version of yourself you leave college with will not be defined just by your degree or your GPA, but by how you treat others, how you handle the uncomfortable moments, and how willing you are to grow when it is easier to shrink. Connection is the thread running through all these interactions. Without connection, character development will stall, but *with* it, you have the potential to be more than when you first arrived on campus. A campus full of these metaphorical mirrors may sound intimidating, but it is a gift, ensuring you are never entirely alone in becoming who you are, who you will be.

More Than a Team: The Power of Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence

In Anne Funke's article on building a culture of C.A.R.E. with the UD volleyball team, the mirror metaphor shows up in a powerful way, but not in the way you might expect. Instead of holding the mirror up to herself, Funke held it out for the team, steady and intentional, giving them the chance to take an honest look at who



Everyone holds mirrors. Sometimes it's for ourselves, sometimes it's for others.

they were in that moment. And just as importantly, who they were working to become. Funke acknowledged "These young women didn't need me to be another coach. They needed me to be a consistent adult who saw them, believed in them, and held space for growth."¹

She saw a future for the team culture that they could not yet see—not just more competitive, but more united. More self-aware. Stronger in ways that don't show up on stat sheets. Funke was not there to give them all the answers, she was there to ask better questions. To hold space for growth. To help them see that the real win was not just about what happened on the court, but how they showed up for each other when no one was watching.

What she introduced was not some complicated program. It started with a simple idea: C.A.R.E. It stands for Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence. The idea first came up in a conversation with a few staff members who noticed something was off with the team. The talent was there. The work ethic was there. But something deeper was missing. The relationships were not clicking. The culture felt disconnected. So, Funke offered something different: let's build trust first. Let's build a team that knows each other, not just plays next to each other.

Funke describes mentorship as something more than guidance; it's about modeling. It's about being willing to grow right alongside the people you are trying to help. Funke writes that the more she challenged the team to reflect, the more it pushed her to reflect, too. Her observation captures the

thought that when you are truly invested in helping others grow, you cannot help but grow yourself. And that is the heart of C.A.R.E. It is not about a checklist or a slogan on a locker room wall. It is about doing small things consistently. Listening more intentionally. Owning your mistakes. Being kind even when it feels hard. And showing up for your people in the quiet moments.

This is not just a story about volleyball; it is about what it means to be part of something bigger than yourself. To be seen, challenged, supported, and ultimately transformed by the people around you. That's what happens when a team learns to C.A.R.E. not just about the game, but about each other. Some of the athletes she worked with reflected on the program and said “. . . I strongly believe that what we've accomplished the last two years is because of our connection as a team. . . . I feel better equipped to go out into the world and function with C.A.R.E.!”² This remark shows that when time, effort, and community are reinforced in athletics it can change the entire dynamic of a program.

What's powerful about the C.A.R.E. model is that it's not just for athletes; it's for anyone who is part of a group, a workplace, a family, or even just trying to grow as a person. You don't need to be on a volleyball court to practice compassion, accountability, respect, and excellence. These values are reflected in everyday life through our interactions with coworkers, our presence with friends, our approach to conflict, and our leadership style. At its core, C.A.R.E. is about choosing to invest in people, being honest, and continually growing. Whether you are part of a team or not, everyone holds mirrors, sometimes for ourselves, sometimes for others. In every space you step into, there is a chance to reflect on who you are and who you are trying to become. The culture you create starts with how you C.A.R.E.

Beyond the Script: Finding Ourselves in the Roles We Play

In Joe Klinebriel's article on connection in theatre, he shows how the stage is not just a place to perform but a space where real, meaningful connection happens—not just between characters, but between people. He adds, “I had known the art and act of theater to be powerful and life-changing simply by satisfying one of our strongest and deepest human needs: our desire to connect with others.”³ That is what this journal captures so well—theatre creates a mirror, not just to reflect ourselves, but to connect us to each other. When actors step on stage, they are not just delivering lines, they are offering pieces of themselves. And what is powerful is that the audience

often sees something of themselves in those performances, too. Within that shared recognition of joy, fear, grief, hope is where we connect with each other. It is real, and it is raw. And it doesn't require perfection. It just requires presence.

Even outside the theatre, you are stepping into roles every day as students, coworkers, friends, and partners. You are constantly showing different parts of yourself, depending on where you are and who you are with. Those roles are not masks—they are the ways you try to understand yourself and connect more deeply with the people around you. Theatre just makes that process more visible. It shows us how connection is built through listening, reacting, showing vulnerability. The trust between actors, the tension between silence and speech, the shared breath between a cast and their audience—these are all reminders that we are, at our core, wired for connection. And that connection takes effort. It requires being seen and seeing others, not just for the roles they play, but for the humanity they bring to those roles.



Theater helps us reflect on our connections, too.

That is what makes the mirror of theatre so special. It does not just reflect who you are. It reflects how deeply you are capable of relating to another. Klinebriel seconds these thoughts by saying “the purpose of theater might be to let us see our own reflection in the mirror, and, for better or worse, glimpse a representation of the truth of ourselves.”⁴ In those fleeting moments onstage, you get glimpses of what it means to truly understand someone else.

And offstage? Those lessons stay with us. Whether you are rehearsing lines or just navigating life, the same questions arise: Am I showing up as myself? Am I open to others? Am I really seeing the people in front of me?

Theatre teaches us that connection is not always loud or obvious. It can exist subtly, quietly, even awkwardly. But it all matters. And if you are willing to stay present, to lean in instead of look away, you just might find that the roles you play can lead you back to something real.

The Distorted Mirror: Ghosting, Social Media, and the Illusion of Connection

In contrast, Nick Elder’s article on ghosting and social media holds up a much more unsettling kind of mirror. It is not the clean, reflective kind. It is distorted, like one of those funhouse mirrors at a carnival. But instead of stretching your body, it bends the way in which you connect with others. Elder does an exceptional job of portraying the prevalence of ghosting throughout history. He presents the idea that ghosting refers not just to avoiding someone, but pretending the connection never existed at all.

What we avoid reveals us.

Ghosting might feel like control or self-protection in the moment, but what it often reveals is fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of conflict. Fear of having to see yourself reflected in the other person’s hurt. Real connection is not always easy. Sometimes it’s messy, awkward, and even painful. But when you ghost someone or vanish from a



Sometimes our reflections can be distorted.

relationship without a word, you do not just end the connection; you erase the space where healing could have happened. And the silence on both sides of the story speaks volumes.

Social media, too, creates this strange illusion of closeness. We are constantly posting, liking, watching each other’s lives unfold in carefully edited pieces. It feels like we are connected, but more often, we are performing the act of connection instead of actually living it. We scroll past people we once cared about. We send heart emojis instead of checking in. We watch someone’s story and convince ourselves we know how they are doing. But real presence, real connection takes so much more than that.

What makes this kind of mirror so tricky is that it does not show us lies, it shows us pieces of the truth. A highlight reel here, a funny tweet there, a thoughtful caption that might have taken hours to write. It is not fake, but it is incomplete. And when we forget that, we start to believe the image is the whole story. You see yourself, but only in the light you choose. And worse, you see others through that same limited lens.

Elder makes an exceptional point: “There is power to accountability.”⁵ When do we choose not to respond? When do we disappear? Our character is shaped in what we leave unsaid, in who we stop showing up for. It is morally right for us to own our actions, but how often do we take real accountability? That is a hard truth, especially in a world that makes it so easy to walk away without a word. But here is the thing: the mirror of social media may be distorted but that doesn’t mean we can’t find clarity. We just have to lean in closer, look at the details. Ask ourselves who we are really connecting with. Who are we avoiding? Who deserves more than a silent exit? Even though it is far easier to hide behind a screen, the kind of connection that shapes character and integrity cannot be built on silence.

And maybe that is the challenge this journal leaves us with: Be more intentional. Choose presence over performance. Face the hard conversations instead of ghosting them. Because even in a digital world, what we choose to engage with and what we walk away from says more about our character than anything else.

Conclusion

These mirrors—court, stage, screen—offer a profound reflection on character and connection. Emotional truth takes center stage through performance. The teammate-to-teammate relationship exemplifies moral growth through how we demonstrate care and our responsibility to others. Social media and the act of ghosting reflect our character and how we choose to communicate (or not) behind our screens. Genuine connection provides the best reflection of ourselves throughout our lifetime, when, in both good and bad moments we can choose to be vulnerable and accountable for how we communicate, behave towards others, and show up for ourselves. In each of the articles, connection is what illuminates the mirror, allowing us to see clearly. It may be uncomfortable to look at but it is necessary for our growth.

Throughout our lives, character is not something we possess on its own. Rather, it is revealed over time during experiences. When we are on a stage, on a team of any kind, or staring at our screen, we are always standing in front of a mirror. Some are clear, others cracked, others distorted by what we haven’t taken the time to repair. Through these mirrors our reflections tell a story about who we are and how we have grown to engage with the world. Every connection we make with others is an opportunity to reveal ourselves holistically, to act with integrity, and to choose compassion. The

challenge is to choose the mirror that reflects goodness and to stand in front of it long enough to recognize ourselves.

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Notes

1. Funke, "A Culture of C.A.R.E.," 29
2. Funke, 32
3. Klinebriel, "A Community Connection," 38
4. Klinebriel, 42
5. Elder, "Ghosting and Graffiti," 77

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