Scottish Schools' Young Writer of the Year 2025/26

Results

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The results

Winner:

Olivia Burgess, Belmont Academy
Thorough investigation of the potential over-diagnosis of neurodivergence in schools

Joint runners-up:

Aila Azam, Shawlands Academy
A sincere tribute to a loved grandfather and public figure in Scottish life

Olivia Watson, Douglas Academy
An expressive examination of the inevitable end of childhood

Highly Commended:

Amina Akhtar, Hyndland Secondary School
A heartfelt exploration of the need for human connection in all of our lives

Aryan Bains, The Glasgow Academy
A brave confession of enduring and dealing with a personal challenge

Eva Garland, Forfar Academy
A meticulous study of the idea that performance is woven into modern identity

Sihan He, Hutchesons' Grammar School
A fascinating philosophical insight into what it means to be an introvert

Catriona Leaf, Banchory Academy
Intriguing inspection of how traditional stereotypes of marriage have changed

Emily McNeill, St Andrew's RC High School
Bold piece questioning whether feminism is still relevant in modern times

Zach Martens, Stewart's Melville College
Atmospheric account of an unexpected trip to see Linkin Park play in concert

Hannah Shanks, St Maurice's High School
Personal account of the pride and sense of community felt by being part of the Clyde FC family

Commended:

Mela Bialecka, St Andrew's RC High School
A colourful and imaginative leap into the symbol of hope that is the rainbow

Amber Fenelon, Viewforth High School
Staunch defence of rom coms and their positive effect on our mental health

Morven Kennedy, Drummond Community High School
Original paper on the significance of jewellery, from ancient necklaces to modern-day friendship bracelets

Tianyi Luo, The Glasgow Academy
Enlightening paper on the damage caused to the environment and lives by luxury brands

Liam McCarthy, Strathaven Academy
Sophisticated essay on the enduring power and influence of literature

Genesis Osula, Drummond Community High School
Lively and entertaining paper on the hidden biology behind our addiction to trends

Marcus Smith, Stewart's Melville College
Thought-provoking piece investigating the impact of AI and Spotify on modern music

Sadie Stamp, George Watson's College
An inquiring paper debating whether to prioritise classic or contemporary literature in school

Amy Valentine, St Peter the Apostle High School
Educational and brave account of the challenges involved with living with a stoma

Evanthe Watson, The Mary Erskine School
Thought-provoking paper on the source of Glasgow's current housing crisis

Background

The brief

The competition – now in its eleventh year – was organised by the Young Programme (YP) charity. It was open to pupils in Scottish schools who were between the ages of 15 and 18 on 4 December 2025.

It was a condition of entry that work should be that of the author alone, unedited by a teacher (or anyone else), and that it should be a work of non-fiction. Pupils were asked to imagine that they were writing a feature or column for an intelligent magazine or serious newspaper. Examples given in the briefing were: a commentary about something in the news; thoughts about a cultural experience; an account of a personal experience of some kind; a piece about a sports event; or a profile of, or an interview with, an individual. The articles were required to be between 900 and 1,300 words in length. No entries outside of these margins were considered.

The adjudication

A short-list of 11 papers was sent out to a panel of seven judges, with no identification of author, age or school included. Members of the panel were asked to vote for their winner and two runners-up, and also append comments on their selection.

The awards

The winner receives £600 and each of the two runners-up £300. Eight highly commended and 10 commended writers receive a certificate of recognition and book token. Our congratulations to all 21 long-listed pupils for their outstanding work and to the many other promising young writers who entered the competition. All pupils who took part in the competition, whether awarded or not, should be extremely proud of taking up this challenge. Their hard work and dedication is greatly appreciated.

The judges

Keith Aitken, journalist and broadcaster
Fiona MacDonald, trustee, YP
Alan McIntyre, management consultant and trustee, YP
Islay McLeod, director and trustee, YP
Sally Magnusson, broadcaster and writer
Josh Moir, artist and trustee, YP
Mairi Clare Rodgers, communications professional and trustee, YP

General comments

There was much praise for the short-listed entries.

Sally Magnusson: 'A difficult choice this year, with some fine writing overall and a good spread of different types of writing.'

Keith Aitken: 'An extremely high standard throughout that made the selection process very difficult. I don't mind admitting that I had more than half the papers marked down on initial reading as potential winners. There is excellence in every one of them, and in particular a trend towards cool, patient, well-moderated prose that is a pleasure to read. All writers should be proud of their work.'

Mairi Clare Rodgers: 'I was struck by the strength and variety of the shortlist. What stood out was not only the quality of the writing itself, but the ambition: these were pieces written with confidence and curiosity. Across the entries was a strong sense of young writers thinking seriously about the world, while also showing flair, personality and emotional intelligence.'

Fiona MacDonald: 'Another crop of fine entries this year.'

Alan McIntyre: 'The standard of entries seems to improve every year as does the maturity and insight of the writers. The submissions this year covered a wide range of topics and were a joy to read. The ability of these young writers to wrestle with complex topics and express themselves in such memorable and lucid prose is very impressive.'

Islay McLeod: 'The judges were spoiled with a spectacular mixture of topics and writing styles. From reportage on local and international issues, to the sharing of personal testimony and experiences, all aspects of humanity were covered this year. It was a challenge to decide upon a winner!'

Josh Moir: 'I am always impressed by the standard of writers and thinkers in our schools, and this year was no exception. The shortlist was an exciting look at some of the strongest school writing talent and while the variety in approaches, styles and topics was amazing, the skill united them all into an incredibly strong batch of papers. It was incredibly difficult to rank some papers above others, so all the shortlisted authors should be incredibly proud of themselves.'

Winning paper:

Olivia Burgess
Belmont Academy

Over the past few years, schools across the UK have seen a dramatic rise in the number of pupils being diagnosed as neurodivergent. ADHD, autism and dyslexia figures have soared, with reports now claiming that one in five children carry a label. At first glance, this looks like progress. It suggests that children who were once ignored or misunderstood are finally getting the support and recognition they deserve. But if we look more closely, a worrying question appears: have we lost our balance? In a society increasingly quick to diagnose itself online and increasingly eager to give behaviour a medical explanation, we risk turning normal childhood differences into conditions. And that may be harming young people more than helping them.

Schools today are more pressured than at any other time. Pupils face constant assessments from the very start of their education. Teachers are monitored and inspected endlessly, expected to justify every decision, every grade and every lesson. Data, targets and league tables dominate the system. In the middle of all this, diagnosis begins to feel like a solution – or at least a loophole. A label acts like a shield. It comes with extra arrangements, extra time, laptops, notes and adjustments. Suddenly, both teachers and parents feel they have something concrete to explain a child's struggles. And in a struggling system, that starts to look very appealing.

But this is where danger begins. When a pupil daydreams or struggles to focus, they become 'suspected ADHD'. When a child seems shy or sensitive, the first suggestion becomes autism. Behaviours that were once recognised as personality, emotion or simply childhood are now viewed through a medical lens. And the truth is simple: every single child has learning difficulties at some point. Every child experiences frustration, distraction, sensitivity or stress. That does not mean every child has a diagnosis.

Another major force driving this rise is the sheer pressure placed upon the school system itself. Modern classrooms move quickly, teachers juggle overflowing to-do lists, and support services are stretched beyond capacity. When teachers lack time or resources to give personalised support, a label becomes a shortcut – a way to unlock help that should never have required a diagnosis in the first place. Parents, desperate to see their child succeed, push for assessments, hoping that an official label will secure extra support or give their child a better chance in exams. None of this makes parents unreasonable. It makes them human. But it does reveal something uncomfortable: our education system requires children to be

diagnosed in order to receive help. That is not a healthy or fair system.

The statistics alone are alarming. The number of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has risen sharply, and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) have increased by more than 80% since 2015. Has childhood suddenly become more impaired? Of course not. What has changed is how we define 'need'. We have begun interpreting normal developmental behaviour as something requiring professional intervention. And the more we rely on these labels, the more ordinary behaviour is medicalised.

If the UK wants a warning sign, it only needs to look across the Atlantic. In the United States, the medicalisation of childhood behaviour has been happening for years. Around 11% of American children are diagnosed with ADHD – compared to roughly 3% in the UK. Many of these children perform well in school and show only mild traits. Some even receive special rewards and allowances for a diagnosis that barely applies to them. Once a 'diagnosis culture' takes hold, it becomes incredibly difficult to reverse. The UK must pay attention before it follows the same path.

This is not to say diagnosis and awareness are negative. For decades, children with genuine neurological differences were misunderstood, punished or completely overlooked. Greater understanding of neurodivergence has undeniably improved lives. But awareness taken too far becomes something else entirely. When every mood, reaction or difficulty is treated as a disorder, we send young people a damaging message: that being human is not enough. A tired child is labelled inattentive. A sensitive child becomes 'socially impaired'. A quiet child becomes 'anxious'. Personality should not become pathology.

We must also consider how diagnosis affects a child's view of themselves. Imagine being 10 years old and being told that your brain is different – that it 'affects how you learn' and behave. For some, this brings relief. But for others, it plants doubt. It separates them from their classmates. It whispers to them that they are fragile, limited, or incapable. A label meant to support them becomes something that quietly restricts them. Over-diagnosis does not simply affect the education system – it shapes self-esteem, identity and future confidence.

Teachers, too, feel the consequences. Many report feeling hesitant to challenge behaviour in case it conflicts with a diagnosis. Others struggle under the weight of constant paperwork, referrals and evidence-gathering. Instead of spending time teaching creatively or building relationships with pupils, teachers spend hours filling forms, chasing assessments and navigating categories. When labels multiply, the real child becomes harder to see. The art of teaching – seeing pupils as individuals – is replaced by fear of getting something wrong.

Financially, the consequences are significant. The rapid rise in SEND plans has led to billions

in additional educational costs. A 2024 report stated that SEND spending may exceed £11 billion by 2025. When every small difference is treated as a special need, resources inevitably spread too thin. Those who genuinely need urgent support risk being lost among mild or questionable cases. This defeats the purpose of inclusion entirely.

All of this brings us back to the central issue: balance. Diagnosis is not the enemy. Misdiagnosis – or over-diagnosis – is. There is a fine line between recognising difference and celebrating it so intensely that every behaviour becomes a medical condition. Schools should be environments where all children can thrive without needing a label to receive understanding. If teachers were given more time, more staff, fewer pressures and fewer demands for constant data, far fewer children would need a diagnosis to be seen.

Ultimately, the rise in over-diagnosis reflects something deeper in our society: a discomfort with imperfection. We crave certainty, labels, immediate answers. But children are not puzzles to be solved. A daydreaming pupil might not have ADHD; they might need sleep or structure. A quiet child might not be anxious; they might simply be thoughtful. Not every difficulty requires a diagnosis. Sometimes, what a child needs most is patience, guidance and space to grow.

The future of education depends on how we respond. Let's continue supporting pupils who genuinely need help, but let's also remind ourselves that struggle is not sickness. Difference is not disorder. And childhood is not a condition to be diagnosed.

Comments from adjudicators:

Sally Magnusson: 'A crisply written opinion piece about the medicalising of children's behaviour. It shows an assured ability to navigate a balanced argument, deploying facts with a calm authority that is never strident.'

Josh Moir: 'A mature piece of writing that examines the increase in diagnosis of autism and ADHD in young people in the UK. The writing was snappy and outlined its position confidently from the outset. It contained good relevant research and covered many aspects of the issue.'

Mairi Clare Rodgers: 'This entry stood out for its confidence and argumentative force. It tackles a contentious contemporary subject with structure and a strong sense of purpose and read like serious newspaper comment piece. The writer's willingness to take on a difficult debate is admirable, and the piece has real rhetorical energy and authority.'

Fiona MacDonald: 'A mature paper, confidently written. Well researched. Impressive.'

Keith Aitken: 'An important contemporary topic, vigorously addressed. One does not have to agree unreservedly with the writer about behavioural 'over-diagnosis' of children to accept that practice has changed radically, with profound implications for attitudes and methodologies. These wide-ranging consequences are explored with imagination and conviction. Powerful stuff.'

Islay McLeod: 'What an impressive piece of investigative reportage. This was a well-researched piece on a current issue affecting many children and young people today. The author thoroughly analysed the potential over-diagnosis of neurodivergence with style and consideration.'

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Joint runner-up paper:

Aila Azam
Shawlands Academy

History remembers Councillor Bashir Maan as Scotland's first Muslim elected official. I remember him as the man who always had a sweet tucked into his pocket for me and my little sister. My great grandfather was one of the most strong-minded people I've ever known. But behind that determination was the warmest, most generous heart. He was a pioneer, a justice of the peace, a councillor, and a leader remembered as a legend. To me, he was simply my great grandfather – the man who raised my mum and lived with us for six years.

He was born in 1926 in Punjab, then part of British India, and lived through the 1947 Partition – a time of turmoil that tore apart communities and lifelong friendships. He lost his best friend, Bhagwan Singh, who was 'like a brother'. In one interview he said: 'The present generation don't understand what happened during the Partition. They haven't suffered the trauma of separation, division, and disharmony. If they could feel what I and others felt at that time, they would cherish unity'. Those words stayed with me. The trauma he witnessed shaped his lifelong belief in justice, compassion and unity. They also fuelled his dedication to education. Years later, he built a girls' school in his hometown back in Punjab, determined that young women should have the opportunities he wished every child could access.

In 1953, he arrived in Scotland and began working as a labourer. From those humble beginnings, he built an extraordinary life of public service. In 1970, he made history as the

first Muslim in the UK to be elected to public office, becoming a councillor in Glasgow. Later, as a justice of the peace and chairman of Strathclyde Police Board, he worked tirelessly to build bridges between communities, promote understanding between faiths, and help shape a Scotland that welcomed everyone.

His contributions went far beyond politics. He helped establish Glasgow Central Mosque, Scotland's first and largest mosque, which became a home for worship, support and community for thousands of people. He wrote extensively about Islam and integration in his three books: 'The New Scots: The Story of Asians in Scotland', 'Muslims in Scotland' and 'The Thistle and the Crescent'. His dedication was recognised at the highest level when he was awarded a CBE by the Queen for his services to the community. He attended royal ceremonies, state occasions and advised political leaders. Yet despite all the recognition, he remained humble – always more interested in helping people than in being honoured for it.

Behind all those achievements was the man I knew: my great grandfather, my hero. My dad called him a hero too, and I understand why. Life with him was full of small but meaningful moments – from watching him do headstands at 90, to playing Scrabble together almost every day, and he never let me win easily. When I had homework, I'd sit in his library surrounded by his books and quiet wisdom. Those ordinary evenings shaped me as much as his public life shaped Scotland. He was the first person I ever lost, and I was heartbroken. But he wasn't just a loss to me or to our family – his passing was felt across the country. The day he died, we came home from the funeral and my mum turned on the news, and there he was. His death was being reported everywhere. Scotland lost a voice of reason, a bridge between communities and a man who showed what real leadership looks like. Tributes came from politicians, faith leaders, and ordinary people whose lives he had quietly shaped. That was when I understood that while we had lost him as our family relative, the public had lost a legend. His impact belonged to all of us.

I knew he was famous – I told my friends proudly that our family portrait was displayed in the Edinburgh Museum (and I still do). But I didn't understand the scale of his impact until recently. At the Scottish Muslim Awards this year, I listened as Humza Yousaf, John Swinney and others called him a 'trailblazer', a 'role model' and a 'legend'. Sitting there, I felt a mix of pride and grief. Later, I received an award for a book I wrote about him and his friend during Partition – now distributed to schools so children can learn about the effects of that history: displacement, violence, and the loss of loved ones. Holding that award, I realised just how extraordinary he truly was.

When he was in hospital, we visited every day. My mum would pick me up from school with dinner and clothes packed, ready to stay late. I'd talk to him about my day, even though he couldn't open his mouth or eyes. I knew he could still hear me. I remember standing beside

my mum as she cried quietly next to his bed. I didn't fully understand then, but I do now. He had raised her, supported her, and made her who she is. Even in his final days, his strength never left him. When my dad asked if he was afraid of dying, he simply said he wasn't.

There are small moments I'll never forget: his love for honey and how he always asked me to open the jar because, to him, I was 'a strong girl'. Our daily Scrabble games – and the one time I finally beat him, in hospital. I didn't know it would be our last game, but that memory means everything now.

His impact on Scotland was enormous. He paved the way for generations of Muslims and other minorities to take part in politics and public life. He stood for unity and dialogue when those values weren't easy to defend. I often wonder what he would think if he saw Scotland today – the rise in racism, Islamophobia, and division. I think he would be saddened, but he'd also remind us that change takes courage and that hope must never be lost.

For my generation, it's easy to feel powerless in the face of the world's problems. But my great grandfather showed me that lasting change starts with small acts – listening before judging, kindness before pride, fairness before fear. That's the legacy I want to carry forward. I may not follow the same path, but I want to live by his principles: kindness, courage, intelligence and integrity. Whether it's standing up for what's right, helping my community, or simply treating others with respect, I want to make him proud.

When I think about him now, I don't just remember the awards or titles. I remember the warmth of his voice, the smell of his library, and the pride in his eyes when he looked at me. To Scotland, he was Councillor Bashir Maan CBE – a pioneer, a leader, a legend. To me, he will always be my great grandfather, my hero, and the man who taught me that one life, lived with courage and compassion, can change not just a community – but a country.

Comments from adjudicators:

Keith Aitken: 'A most accomplished piece of journalism, vividly recalling an interesting and important man. I was impressed by the deft way the writer interwove warm private recollections of Bashir Maan with a measured account of his private achievements.'

Fiona MacDonald: 'A heartfelt profile of a much-loved family member and public figure. Brings the man to life and sets his story in an historical context.'

Mairi Clare Rodgers: 'This piece managed to combine a deeply personal portrait with a wider sense of history and public life, and do so with real grace and authority. I admired the

warmth of the writing, the clarity of the voice, and the way it moved so naturally between intimate family memory and the remarkable public legacy of its subject. A beautiful elegy to both councillor and great grandfather, Bashir Maan.'

Sally Magnusson: 'An affectionate portrait of a beloved great-grandfather, the legendary Glasgow councillor, Bashir Maan. Full of warmth and insight, it weaves the achievements of a political trailblazer with the domestic evenings of Scrabble and quiet wisdom which "shaped me as much as his public life shaped Scotland".'

Josh Moir: 'A powerful and personal piece that fondly remembers the author's grandfather. The writing was a good mix between reflective and informative, and gave a good background, as well as some personal insights. The language was intelligent and emotive.'

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Joint runner-up paper

Olivia Watson
Douglas Academy

The street always gleamed with a warm, orange hue on late summer evenings, as if the sun had decided to linger a little longer to watch us play. The shouts of friends riding bikes and throwing balls became muffled; even the dust in the air seemed quiet, drifting as if it had no other place to be. Time stood still on those evenings. On other evenings, the weather was a little more unsettled. I can still smell the heat, rising slowly off the pavements after being smacked by the bitter rain. The tang of the tar titivated my nostrils. Often, I try to recall what we said, what we did, and every time the details slip away like that heat evaporating from the pavement. Still, even as the details fade, I cling to the feeling of freedom we had then, a feeling that seems so out of reach today. I only wish we had known to cherish the moments while we still lived inside of them. Nights like those are now a vague memory, swept aside by the melodrama of my adolescence.

How did it all disappear so quickly? Why does childhood seem so appealing, when I'm on the verge of an exciting adulthood? Aren't we supposed to leave childish things behind at a certain point? Perhaps childhood shines so brightly in my mind because adulthood is looming ahead of me like a daunting mountain – vast, exciting, scary – and I'm not ready to loosen my grip on the people and places that built me.

In my youth, freedom tasted simple, sweet even. It was the first bite of a chocolate selection

box at Christmas, when my living room gleamed in red and gold, and nothing existed beyond the warmth of the lights on the tree and the soft murmur of family. Back then, responsibility felt a lifetime away; my world was measured in the sunsets of summer, the buzz of laughing with friends and the comforting feeling of knowing that someone else kept life stitched together for me. I remember the character of those days – the silky ease of waking up with nowhere to be, the smell of bacon and cartoons on Sunday mornings, the quiet hum of a world that asked nothing of me. That was its own kind of freedom, bright and effortless.

Now, as adulthood folds itself around me and university lies ahead, with its unfamiliar classrooms and new faces, I feel my life is becoming oddly unfamiliar as well. The freedom in front of me is different, sharper, like stepping into a room full of fresh air after a long time of breathing the same familiar warmth. It's a freedom threaded with responsibility, with choices that are finally mine to make. The difference is that this new freedom isn't handed to me the way it once was; I must work for it now, shape it myself, earn the space to breathe. And somehow, that's appealing too: it's a chance to build something of my own, look after my own life, even if the weight feels heavier than anything childhood ever placed in my hands. But if freedom must be worked for, if it comes with pressure, expectation and the risk of failing, then I can't help but wonder, is that really freedom?

Though I now step into a world of choice and consequence, my childhood memories come back in flashes; bright, fragrant, shiny, and gone almost as soon as they disappear. The orangey fizz of bonfire night fires lingers in my mind along with the whizz and crackle the fireworks make as they shoot off into the abyss: glimmers of pink and purple sweep across the sky, the sharp scent of sulphur mixing with the sweet aroma of toasted marshmallows. The fireworks painted the night sky with a kind of magic I could feel in my bones, tiny explosions that sparked my imagination and seeded my passion for literature, for noticing the real wonder in the world.

Birthdays gleamed in golden light: waking up to the sounds of my parents' off-key harmonies, the rustle of wrapping paper as I fervently tore open my presents, and the glimmer of anticipation I felt each year. I held my party at the same soft play each time, a place that became its own little world for me. I can still feel the coldness of the rainbow slides on my hands, how going down would hurt my back, yet I couldn't help but climb back up; it gave me such a rush, tumbling down them with friends, laughing until my stomach hurt. The scent of chicken nuggets and hot dogs mingled with the sickly sweetness of cake, while the sticky warmth of icing smeared across my fingers grounded me in those moments of pure delight. Still, I hear the hum of excited chatter, the shrill squeak of trainers on the floor, even the faint echo of musical chairs in the distance.

And though the memories blur at the edges, my childhood remains vivid, each scent, sound and colour refusing to fade completely, they're like coloured smoke slipping through my fingers – bright, intoxicating and fleeting. I remember blowing out my princess candles on those birthdays, wishing to grow up, to be 17, to gain the freedoms I now have, and now, standing on the edge of adulthood, all I can wish for is to be seven again, with no responsibilities and no worries. I yearn for the effortless freedom of those days, when life demanded nothing but joy, and the world seemed vast, yet at the same time inviting and safe.

Now, as adulthood surrounds me with its sharp-edged possibilities, I find myself haunted by the laughter, the colours and the warmth of a childhood that feels more alive in memory than it did in reality.

Comments from adjudicators:

Alan McIntyre: 'I thought the writing was outstanding. Just in the first paragraph there were multiple sentences that I thought were perfectly crafted, from the alliteration of 'the tang of the tar titivated my nostrils' to the sound of 'smacked by bitter rain'. The piece covers lots of common emotions and memories but they are evoked with language that is surprising and memorable. This piece really stood out for me.'

Sally Magnusson: 'A writer on the cusp of adulthood, surveying the wide horizons and new responsibilities ahead, reflects on the childhood that has passed and "the quiet hum of a world that asked nothing of me". Some beautifully controlled writing lures us inside a thoughtful mind asking searching questions about freedom.'

Keith Aitken: 'This is a mature meditation on the end of childhood, enlivened by elegant writing and imaginative metaphors. The writer seems to find the transition to adulthood generally positive. Some of us remember greater apprehension, remorse and anxiety, but the piece rings true.'

Fiona MacDonald: 'A beautifully written and evocative coming of age paper.'

Josh Moir: 'This paper used great imagery and really engaged each of the senses while it led us back through a corridor of memories of our own. The writing was stylish and employed lots of really descriptive language, which really brought the paper to life.'

Highly Commended papers (in alphabetical order):

Amina Akhtar
Hyndland Secondary School

What are the vital things a human being needs to live and thrive? The most common answers are water, food, sleep, air and shelter. The answers are always the same, no matter the order, or how long it takes for someone to answer. But there is always one answer that is almost never stated when it comes to this question. Human connection. Now, many people assume that a human being can live without interaction. But is that really living? Are you truly experiencing life's greatest pleasures and consequences? Human connection isn't a luxury, it's a lifeline, and without it, we begin to unravel ourselves. It's quite literally a survival mechanism. Put away the distractions of modern times, TV shows, endlessly scrolling on your phone, watching compilations of cute cats, and what remains? Us, we need each other, not just for comfort but for meaning, for sanity, for life itself.

A study was brought out, led by Timothy D. Wilson, who conducted an experiment with psychologists at the University of Virginia and Harvard University. They had participants sitting in a non stimulating room, with nothing to do but to sit in said room for 6 to 15 minutes. Alone with their thoughts, having nothing but a button that they could press, which would deliver a mild electric shock. Out of the 18 men in this experiment, 12 of them pressed the button, one man managed to press the button 190 times out of boredom.

Boredom. Although it isn't about boredom, it's about isolation. The brain would rather feel something, even pain, than feel nothing at all. Boredom, isolation and sensory deprivation are so unbearable that even discomfort becomes preferred. That's how deeply we crave stimulation, emotion and connection, because of the loneliness. That void that opens up when we are cut off from others, from connection, from meaning, from humanity. It's a glimpse into what happens when the human mind is left alone with itself.

Many things like depression feed on disconnection. The absence of meaning, the ache of being unseen, unheard and unaccessible. One of the most heartbreaking things you can do to someone is to cut them off, ignore them, to say one of the many normalised phrases that severs a lifeline: 'don't talk to me ever again'. We are wired to seek contact. When that need of connection is denied, cut off, when someone is made to feel invisible, it doesn't just hurt, it destroys them.

Sure, it may not seem deep at all… but the moment we are born, we seek connection. Babies cry not just for food, but for touch. For warmth. For eye contact. Studies have shown that

infants who are held, spoken to and nurtured emotionally develop healthier brains. Those who are neglected, even if their physical needs are met, suffer cognitive and emotional delays. The need doesn't fade with age. Adults are just as dependent on connection, though they hide it behind pride or distractions. Loneliness has been linked to increased risk of heart disease, weakened immune systems and even early death. Oxytocin, often referred to as the 'love hormone', is released during moments of bonding and connections – a hug, a conversation, a shared laugh – it lowers stress, boosts our mood and strengthens trust. Our bodies are literally designed to reward connection.

This is why people cling to toxic relationships. Why they return to places that hurt them. Why they stay in cycles of pain. Because even pain is better than nothing, even chaos is better than silence. The brain craves familiarity, even if it's destructive. It's not a weakness, it's survival. The button in the white room is a metaphor for this. When we're alone, disconnected and desperate, we are inclined to reach for something. Anything. Even if it hurts, because pain is proof we're still alive. Still feeling. Still here. Those people don't enjoy suffering but it's familiar, it's a connection. No matter how toxic that connection is.

We have talked about how bad it is for people to have no source of this lifeline, but not about how it actually feels. It feels unreal, like you're fading. This is why solitary confinement is considered one of the harshest punishments. It's not the lack of freedom, it's the lack of contact. Prisoners in solitary confinement often report hallucinations, paranoia, emotional breakdowns, and are six times more likely to commit self harm. The mind begins to fracture without others to help it. Now compare it to everyday life when it comes to civilians, isolation can be just as damaging.

Think of the elderly people who haven't had any visitors in weeks. The teenager who eats lunch alone every day. The adult who's sat at a cubicle for hours on end. These scenarios are everywhere, and they are silent, just like the people in them. We don't always notice disconnection until it's too late, until someone withdraws, until someone lashes out, until someone disappears. By then, the damage is usually done.

There is hope, people can heal. It doesn't take grand gestures. Sometimes it's a call. A text. A moment of eye contact. A hug. A question asked with genuine interest. These small acts have the biggest outcome in piercing the fog of loneliness and to remind someone that they exist and that they matter.

Reconnection isn't just about fixing relationships, it's about restoring humanity, choosing compassion over convenience. Remembering that behind every face is a story, a struggle, a soul. Why do you think many people talk about their connections when they are begging for their lives? Saying things like: 'I have a family!' as if it'll make a difference, trying to

humanise themselves in any way that they can, and to do that they talk about people who see them as lifelines, as if they'll crumble if they die because they have lost a vital connection, because we as creatures live for one another. We all have the ability to be lifelines. To reach out. To listen. To stay. In doing so, we don't just save others, we save ourselves.

In many ways, we all carry a version of that button from the white room. We all have moments where we feel trapped, alone, desperate for sensation. And we all make choices, some healthy, some harmful to escape that emptiness. Some press that button through addiction, others press it through anger, some press it by self sabotage. Although, beneath it all is the same cry: 'I need to feel something. I need to feel connected'. We need to recognise that cry in ourselves and in others, and respond with empathy, to offer connection instead of judgement, to be present instead of distant, to choose love over indifference. Because in the end, we aren't meant to go through life alone, we aren't meant to suffer in silence. We are meant to reach, to touch, to hold, to heal. We are meant to connect.

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Aryan Bains
The Glasgow Academy

Alert and awake, I lay in my bed, all my muscles coiled like a spring. I listened for the slightest of sounds: the tiniest of creaks, the lightest of footsteps, the faintest of breaths. I was waiting.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Waiting for untouched silence, for everyone to be sleeping. Then, and only then, would I know it was safe to start. Pulling out two chocolate bars from beneath my pillow, I began to eat them. The tsunami of sugar hitting my taste buds washed away all the dark thoughts that were circling around me, like vultures, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Crinkle, crunch, swallow, repeat. I opened the second bar when a flood of light blinded me. The door opened. I froze. I was caught.

I always felt like the stranger in my family, the black sheep amongst the white, that one paint stoke that didn't fit with the painting. Whenever I was with them, I was embarrassed in my own skin, afraid to be who I was due to how I looked, afraid to make one wrong move that would highlight all my flaws. My reflection was my worst enemy. My cousins were the standard, and I was the outlier. Questions kept swimming in my brain.

'Why can't I look like them?'

'Why am I the fat one?'

I always felt the pressure of hundreds of beady eyes staring at me, dissecting every single one of my features. Wrapping itself around me like a python, the shame tightened its coils around me until I was consumed by it. Whenever I felt like this, I started to eat. When I ate, that vice-like grip around me loosened. It felt like control, like escape, like that untouched silence. Until it didn't. I constantly recall a vivid memory of me and my family lined up for a zip-line experience. Packed together like a tin of sardines, we were squeezed up against one another. I hated it. The feeling of walls closing in on you, the idea that you took up too much space. As we got closer to the front, I could see something in the distance. A scale. Cold, harsh and unforgiving. Fear and nerves rushed through my body.

'What if I am too heavy for it?'

'What if my family see how much I weigh?'

What if… what if… what if…

A million thoughts rushed through my head and the only thing I could think of was to run. I pushed through the tight, clammy line of people, pushing mums, dads and kids aside. I kept on running. Running from the line, from the truth, from myself. When I reached the entrance, my vision was blurry, my face, wet and sticky. Slumping on the floor, I felt the cold concrete against my dewy skin. Shouts of my name getting closer and closer until they stopped. My family were standing around me. Shame.

My eating problem worsened at school. The constant pressures of fitting in, getting good grades and having a good social circle overwhelmed me. School uniforms: everyone wore them, everyone looked the same. Not me. I stuck out like a sore thumb. The cotton fabric bunching up and clinging to my every curve, highlighting everything I hated. Shining an unwanted spotlight on my body's embellishments. That same torch projected the shadows of my own self- consciousness onto my peers. That nagging feeling of everyone looking at you differently. My mental health plunged into a dark abyss with no way to escape.

To help, I decided to download Snapchat: I liked the idea of being able to talk to people through a digital avatar that didn't look like me. But slowly it made me feel even worse. I became lost in the digital dystopia, endlessly scrolling through photos of people having fun and looking normal whilst doing it. It made me feel sick. Comparing myself to influencers made me hate more of myself. My self-hatred stopped me from overeating. Instead, I didn't

eat. I wanted to fit in so badly I decided to starve myself. At first, the hollowness felt like victory. Soon it felt like punishment.

I knew what I was doing and knew it was wrong. I knew it wasn't good for me, but I kept going. It wasn't until my mum noticed full lunch boxes coming back home that she confronted me. I didn't say a word. I couldn't bring myself to do it. Shame. Instead, I shut my mum out and closed myself off from my family and friends, like a caterpillar hiding in its cocoon. I really wanted to ask for help, and I wanted to get better, but I was too afraid, too embarrassed. For months I snuck sweets during the night and didn't eat during the day. Almost a year went by until I started to crack. I could feel my habit getting worse and I could feel the guilt eating away at me. That's when the metamorphosis began. That's when I began to open up.

I told my mum everything, revealing everything I went though, as if I was a Russian doll removing all my layers. She was horrified. What had I done? We sat in that same untouched silence, the one I always wanted and waited, I didn't want it now.

A hug. The warm, welcoming embrace. Relief. She told me everything. Her own childhood battles, so similar to mine and her honesty broke through to me. For the first time, I felt something other than shame. I felt hope.

Over time I realised that my family don't look at me differently. My friends don't make fun of me, and I don't have to be afraid of who I am. The world wasn't against me – I was.

I still struggle with my body but looking back, I learned that it's alright to not feel perfect but to always strive to feel confident in your own skin. If I had known that people were there for me and could support me, I wouldn't have closed myself off and shut everyone out. I could have changed much much sooner.

I walk past my kitchen every day, walking past that one specific drawer. The sweet drawer. Sometimes when I see it, the old me, the person that I once was, the person I worked so hard to lock away, starts to bend the bars of the mental prison I put him in. He is trying to get out, trying to get the relief of that secret sugar. I can't let that happen. Not again. Never again.

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Eva Garland
Forfar Academy

We are all performers, not just on stage, but in our daily lives. In a world of curated identities and constant self-surveillance, performance has become our default mode of being. The real question: is performance the opposite of authenticity, or its path?

I used to be a nervous child: the kind who rehearsed what to say before answering the register, who counted the seconds until birthday parties ended. My stomach twisted when someone made eye contact; my hands trembled as I tried to appear calm. So, I learned to fake it – the smile, the nod, the laugh at the right moment – and people believed it. Eventually, so did I. Now, people call me confident, self-assured, outgoing. That confidence was built through performance; each act a rehearsal for becoming the person I wanted to be.

It isn't just me. Everyone, it seems, is performing now. Online, in classrooms, in friendships, we compose and act our way through the day. I smile when I'm exhausted. I laugh at jokes I don't find funny. My captions, posts, even my voice notes are crafted to appear effortless. My Instagram is 'aesthetic'. Friends compliment it, but is it really a compliment that my life looks flawless? Perhaps beneath all that staging, we're not lying but searching, experimenting with identities until one feels true.

Perfectionism has been my most persistent role. Swimming was the first arena: early mornings, sore shoulders, racing against girls I both admired and feared. Some were friends, most were friendly, but we were always competitors. Even in the bond we had from sharing the same pressure, comparison crept in. That same competitive undercurrent followed me into friendships, where encouragement and comparison coexist. We cheer each other on – 'you've got this!' – but still measure grades, outfits and opportunities. Especially for girls, raised to be both likeable and ambitious, performance becomes a tightrope walk. Balancing friendship and competition mirrors the act of balancing identity itself.

At my school, we don't wear uniform. It sounds freeing, but it also turns every morning into a quiet audition. The clothes you choose become part of the act: subtle costumes for the version of yourself you want to present that day. Even in primary, you could sense it: who had the 'right' trainers, the trendiest jacket, the tote bag with just the right logo. Sometimes I envied the schools with blazers and ties; at least their performance was scripted. Ours is improvisation; a daily rehearsal for belonging. Although, it could be argued improvisation also teaches creativity; the freedom to play with identity until it fits.

In school, I saw it everywhere: the quiet exhaustion behind perfect smiles, the way we all

compared ourselves without meaning to. Lunchtimes were full of laughter, but beneath it sat a low hum of worry: grades, skin, clothes, how we're seen. My friends talk about 'just being ourselves' but none of us were sure what that even meant anymore. Every selfie, every compliment, every silence, they all became part of a performance we didn't know we'd signed up for. Pretending to be confident sometimes felt less like deception, instead, more of us inching closer to becoming it. Practice for becoming the people we hoped to be.

'She takes her competitive streak after you,' my dad would say, laughing, never noticing the nights I cried after falling short, or the quiet relief when I finally quit. The books lined up on my shelves, the spotless room; to my mum, it was discipline. To me, it was survival. Because if my room was messy, then I was messy. Every win, every perfect grade, was proof that I hadn't failed; I could still hold up the image. Over time, I started to realise that image and identity don't have to be enemies; striving for control can sometimes be a way of building courage.

Even my voice, my posture, my mannerisms have been trained for performance. I learned to sound calm during panic, articulate during insecurity, poised even when I was shaking. It works, mostly. But it leaves behind a residue of exhaustion: a quiet question. If I'm always performing, when do I just exist?

Even rest has started to feel like work. I light candles, drink herbal tea, sometimes I catch myself wondering if I'm doing it right. I've turned even calmness into a performance. I take pictures of sunsets I don't really watch or post a 'slow morning' story after racing to make it look serene. Here, my personal rituals blur into cultural commentary: healing itself has become an aesthetic, and I'm not sure where the peace ends and the performance begins.

Even the people we look up to are acting: 'real' posts that somehow still look perfect, tearful confessions that trend for a day and then vanish. It's strange, we crave honesty, but only the kind that photographs well. I scroll past a video of someone crying, voice trembling, mascara running, and the comments are full of 'you're a pretty crier'. Even pain has to be photogenic. I used to think being seen was the same as being known. Now I'm not so sure.

Even after achieving three As at Higher, I couldn't stop obsessing over the two subjects I didn't do as well in. Those results didn't feel like success; they felt like cracks in a carefully constructed image. The label of 'smart' has been plastered upon me since I wasn't old enough to understand what it meant. It's harmless at first, the acknowledgment of your talent, until it becomes so deeply ingrained in your identity that something as small as a grade can ruin your week, and your self-esteem. Despite this, I have started to think that imperfection doesn't erase identity; it deepens it. The cracks let something more human through.

The same instinct that once made me straighten books now compels me to edit posts, rehearse conversations, refine my tone. Perfection is no longer a goal; it's an expectation. Yet with every performance, I'm learning which roles feel right, which feel borrowed, and which might reveal the person I truly want to be.

What does it mean to be real when everyone is performing? Even Shakespeare wrote that 'all the world's a stage'. But what he couldn't have predicted was that the stage would be digital, constant, and everywhere, a pocket-sized theatre we carry in our hands.

Perhaps authenticity isn't the absence of performance, but the conscious selection of the roles that shape us. Maybe 'faking it' isn't dishonesty, but rehearsal; practice for the life we hope to live. In pretending, we experiment. In performing, we grow. In pretending to be brave, I became braver. In performing calm, I learned composure. In aiming for perfection, I found discipline. The mask taught me things the mirror never could.

Maybe there's no such thing as a performance-free self. Perhaps the anxious child I once was still backstage, still learning lines, still listening. The books, the spotless room, the curated Instagram; maybe they were all part of a rehearsal I didn't realise I was staging.

Maybe that's what growing up really is: not dropping the act but learning to choose which parts of it are truly yours. Because in the end, we don't escape the stage; we learn to write our own script.

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Sihan He
Hutchesons' Grammar School

People often tell me that I am too quiet, but little do they know – I have a whole universe inside my head. Whether it's the teachers urging me to speak more or the friends who always tell me to go to parties, they don't see the real me. They only see the student sitting at the back of the class, the awkward wallflower who rarely speaks. What they miss is that my silence is filled with thought, imagination and jokes I quietly laugh at alone. While others chat, my mind spins its own stories of worlds I'll never visit and characters who feel just as real as those beside me. It's a warm and private place reminiscent of sunlight spilling through a half-closed curtain. I may not talk much, but inside there are entire galaxies no one will ever get a glimpse of.

As I was growing up, I often felt overwhelmed by the cacophony of sounds made by people around me, thinking 'Why does everyone tell me to talk more, but no one ever tells these people to stop?' as I tried to focus on my work. However, even I grew gradually frustrated by my silence. Sure, I could still come up with witty remarks in my head, but what did that ever amount to? I was the perpetual cog that couldn't fit in with the rest of my peers, the ghost who the teacher would always forget to hand homework out to. I used to feel resentment towards those who made assumptions about me and never tried to find the real me hidden within, but now I've come to terms with how I was at fault too. I hid myself too deeply, I locked myself up within a prison and longed for someone to reach in and let me out, but I was the one who foolishly threw the key away. I learned the hard way that if I don't take the initiative to speak, no one will ever know of the depths within me.

It may come as a disappointment to you, my dear reader, but my change did not come from a grand epiphany, nor was it instantly transformative. It was slow, like flowers blooming after a harsh winter. I gradually learned to love the days spent inside my head, just me and inner self sipping chai while admiring fiery leaves drifting by. Not every amazing story needs a dramatic moment, after all. Sure, my silence may have seen me misunderstood and neglected, but it is also my strength and solace, a home that brings me comfort during harsh storms. Silence is a language on its own; a unique rhythm waiting to resonate with those who are willing to listen. Yet how often does this beautiful, paradoxical language get overlooked? In a society ruled by constant chatter, people often forget to listen, and silence is too easily mistaken for weakness rather than wisdom.

People often assume introverts are socially anxious; however, this is a misconception. Introverts are not defined by a fear of people; we just prefer solitude and draw energy from being away from the large crowd, unlike our extroverted counterparts. Social anxiety, on the other hand, is the racing heartbeat when someone calls your name out of the blue and the endless repeats of embarrassing conversations you had in the past looping inside your head as you try to sleep. Silence and social anxiety have similar exteriors but underneath lies a crucial difference: silence is tranquil whereas social anxiety is turmoil. Realising this difference was what unshackled me: once I learned that my quietness didn't have to be rooted in fear, I began to see it as a friend rather than a foe. Now when people tell me that I'm quiet, I don't awkwardly stare back into their souls, instead I smile and reply with a 'thank you' – because it takes courage to exist peacefully in a world that glorifies noise.

Some of history's most profound innovators like Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt and Emily Dickinson thrived in quiet environments. Likewise, the composer John Cage explored the music within silence in his piece '4'33', where the performers sit without playing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. In Cage's eyes (or ears), the absence of sound is said to become music itself: the rustle of clothing, the creaking of chairs, even an old man's cough.

Einstein himself said that 'The monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind'. Their achievements remind me that silence is fertile soil for thought and not land that needs to be cleared. When the noise of the world retreats, imagination begins to whisper. For those who dwell in their inner worlds, their quietness is not isolation but a medium that allows for creativity and meaning. The thinkers who truly change the world are often the ones who pause, reflect and listen – and when they finally decide to speak, their words often carry the weight of a thousand unspoken thoughts.

When I choose to not speak, I'm not withdrawing back into my cosy shell, I'm just engaging with the world differently. Silence allows me to notice minute details others tend to overlook: the trembling of a leaf before it falls, the soft hum of distant voices, the complex emotions hidden within a pair of eyes and maybe even two cats kissing through a window (if I'm lucky enough). Perhaps the world will never see the galaxies within me, but not all stars are meant to be seen. After all, some shine best alone, illuminating their own corner in the night sky, brilliant and unwavering.

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Catriona Leaf
Banchory Academy

When I think of a wedding, I picture the ending of 'Tangled'. Rapunzel in her beautiful white dress, the train spilling behind her like a river, stretching so far it was nearly out the door. The entire kingdom gathered, faces glowing as the perfect couple shares their perfect kiss at the altar. Pretty perfect, right? It's the kind of moment films teach you to imagine; a girl dreaming of a prince coming to whisk her away for a fairytale finale. I thought that was what love was supposed to look like. A prince. A dress. A story that had already been written for me long before I knew how to read it.

I remember watching scenes like that as a little girl and trying so hard to place myself inside them. Though this fairytale always felt too tight, like I was a character forced into a costume that didn't fit me. I thought the problem was me – that I was ungrateful or dramatic or just plain old confused. Unfortunately, the fairytale I was taught to want was never made with someone like me in mind.

I remember the night vividly; I was scrolling through Instagram in the early hours of the morning. That's when I saw it, this beautiful post – a photo of two brides. Two women, faces bright with an affection so warm it almost hurt to look at. They were surrounded by family, smiles on all their faces. There was nothing staged or forced about it. It was love. This was a

love that felt right to me.

That photo was a key to a door I didn't know existed. Up until that moment, I had already accepted the version of life laid out for me: grow up, find a prince, have children, smile for the camera, call it happiness. I thought that was the path that was set for me. But seeing those two brides, watching them choose each other in a world that had likely told them not to – tilted everything.

Mankind is built upon traditions, that's a fact. A Christening, a special dinner for Easter, a balloon for every birthday. Society is stitched together by traditions; tiny rituals we inherit and repeat for generations because they matter to us. We thrive off traditions; this applies to a wedding too. Tradition 1: The groom gets down on one knee, diamond ring in hand. Tradition 2: The bride takes her husband's surname, becoming a possession over a partner. Tradition 3: The bride walks down the aisle arm in arm with her father until she is passed like property from one man to another.

I looked at these traditions and felt a panic settle into my chest. I don't fit into that mould. Who would propose? Could I keep my last name? What if my fiancé wants to walk down the aisle instead? Thousands of questions flooded through my mind, each lacking an answer.

The photo offered me an answer. Both brides wore rings, catching the light and glinting off each other like tiny disco balls. Their marriage certificate held a hyphenated surname, neither woman erased for the other's convenience. They walked down the aisle together, side by side, equal – they weren't being passed around like slabs of meat, but belonging only to themselves and to each other.

That photo taught me what school never could: that love isn't a performance. It isn't some stupid tradition. It isn't a sacrifice or silence or playing pretend. It's choosing each other, every day, even when the world insists on scripts you don't want to follow.

Growing up, I watched princess after princess fall for a prince, and it never felt quite right. It was like watching life underwater, everything was familiar but distorted, muffled and wrong. I never had crushes on the boys like my friends did. I laughed when they laughed and nodded when they nodded, but I felt hollow – the same guilt I felt when I lied about stealing cookies. I thought something in me was broken, that I wasn't deserving of the fairytale ending everyone else seemed to be born wanting.

I tried so hard to fake it, I really did. To play the part. To make myself desire what society wanted me to want.

Seeing that picture meant that for the first time, I could imagine a wedding I wanted to stand in. I could imagine the ridiculous big white dress, the perfect makeup, the towering cake, and best of all – my very own Princess waiting at the altar, smiling like a dream.

Representation matters; when all kinds of love are visible it soon feels possible for people to imagine their own reality – it allows people to feel normal, free to love who they want without having to hide away and settle for a prince they don't want.

Sometimes I let myself dream of my wedding. The little girl in me still squeals. I picture a chocolate cake dripping in fudge, wildflowers bursting in every colour imaginable, a dress pooling around my feet like royalty. Then I imagine her, my partner. Will she wear a dress? A suit? Something entirely her own? Will she want a ring that matches mine? Will she want to walk down the aisle or wait at the altar?

Usually, the bride makes all the decisions while the groom stocks up on condoms. I have my dream wedding, but she was a little girl once too. She'll also have a scrapbook with magazine cutouts or little love notes she came up with; why should I get to call all the shots when we both have dreams? Why should only one of us get to shape the day? Maybe we'll both wear dresses. Maybe it will be suits. Maybe we'll swap outfits halfway through. Maybe none of it matters as long as we choose each other.

Because in the end, it won't be my wedding. Nor would it be hers. It would be ours.

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Emily McNeil
St Andrew's RC High School

The year is 2050, The Age of Woman. Freed from the yoke of patriarchy and the negative consequences of sexual or financial exploitation and violence, women everywhere are achieving their potential. The whole of society has become so amenable to women's advancement that half of the world's leaders are now female. Women may freely choose to fulfil their potential to become mothers, or not, without judgement or career penalty. They are brokering power and legislating in equal numbers to men, dusting the legal chandeliers and plumping the political velvet cushions of this near-gynocracy; this feminist utopia...

Back in current-day 2025, this rose-tinged imagining of a female-centric future is merely fantasy. Oh, there are assertions made that the pendulum has swung that way, and further, already, but that is simply not a reflection of reality. Those who posit the world has become

such a utopia for women that no further protections or special accommodations are required to advance their sex have either not done their research or allow their prejudices against women or progress to make ostriches of them; heads in the sand avoiding the evident truth. Feminism; that is activism which seeks to empower and advance women to fulfilment of their rights, is still as relevant and necessary today as it's ever been.

Feminism is so commonly or deliberately misrepresented or misconstrued so as to blur all connection to the strides made by women of the past as they seared themselves into history through vital, bold campaigns of mobilisation, marches and manifestos across the globe. But those trailblazing women were merely kicking off an epic programme of works. Undoing millennia of negative and unequal treatment takes time. Like Rome wasn't built in a day, neither are feminist utopias.

Europe, and the West in general is often cited when making the claim that feminism has achieved what it needed to, and that the battle for women's rights is won. Poppycock. In the UK, which is not a European outlier in this respect, statistics repeat like a broken record: every three days a woman in murdered by a man. Twenty years of monitoring has identified no decline. Police reports pile up like dog-ends in a never-emptied ashtray. It is estimated at least 1 in 12 women will be victims of VAWG (violence against women and girls) every year. Too often, women are not taken seriously when they report violence within family relationships, often leading to tragic outcomes.

The UK also has significant ground to cover in terms of the pay gap, with Home Office statistics reporting women earn roughly 87 pence for every pound men earn. True, they are more concentrated in lower-paid sectors, but this is partly explained by historical undervaluing of female-dominated sectors when compared to male-dominated jobs of equivalent skill levels. They are also more likely than men to work part-time hours, reflecting that they still carry disproportionate responsibility for unpaid work in the home and looking after children.

So much for having it all... Even in terms of how society expects women to comport and adorn themselves, the beauty standards women are expected to meet are growing increasingly financially unattainable and physically traumatic. Every inch should be toned, tweaked, plucked and perfected, with expensive and painful surgeries accessible to those with cash and a desperation to perpetuate a youthful appearance. Older women are not valued as they were when young, their opinions often deemed irrelevant, in contrast to older men, who do not suffer loss of value to the same extent. Buoyed by female insecurities, a beauty industry worth billions flogs make up and potions promising faux youth and continued influence – a pretence of empowerment reeking in Chanel No.5.

The global picture of the state of women's rights is even darker, giving further support for the view that feminism is still needed, while rendering claims to the contrary as laughable if the statistics were not so bleak. Terrifyingly, UN Women reports around 50,000 women were murdered globally by a partner or family member in 2024. They further report 1 in 3 women have been subjected to physical or sexual violence at least once in their lives. The victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are also overwhelmingly female.

Women and girls are far more likely to experience sex-based violence for religious or cultural reasons. According to UNICEF, over 230 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with investigation suggesting the practice is spreading with human migratory patterns. They are also far more likely to be undergo the abuse of child-marriage, or be forced into marriage against their will. Not exactly screaming female utopia, is it?

Women and girls face unequal access to healthcare, education, political power and economic opportunities around the globe, but nowhere currently illustrates women's lack of status more brutally than Afghanistan. Since the Taliban took over the running of the country, Afghan women have faced ever more restrictive and inhuman treatment. They are currently unable to pursue more than a basic education, cannot work in more than a handful of jobs, and cannot travel without a male guardian. Any deviation from the rules imposed will result in harsh, often violent punishment. The aim has been to erase women from the public sphere – from work, from recreational spaces, from the streets... Tell any of these women that patriarchy is a spent force and feminism is redundant – she would laugh in your face – if she could.

The freedoms lost are illustrated by the disappearance of the women themselves, each swathed head to toe in wrappings which preclude her ability to see the world, feel the sun on her skin or the warm breath of the wind in her hair. She cannot recognise her friends on those brief times she can go out, because they all wear the same anonymous apparel. And even if she could, women's voices are forbidden in public.

It is stated by many that feminism has over-achieved itself out of needfulness. Yet the picture in the West and even more starkly elsewhere suggests this is not the case and much still has to be done. A world that is good for women is a world that is good for everyone. When women thrive, so do their families, their communities and wider society.

Despite much progress, outstanding issues of sexual equality in the UK and throughout the West demonstrate that work is still required, while the hardships and extreme abuses faced by women globally highlight the urgent need for continued activism. Feminism is the

searchlight for abuses being meted out to women and children, the call to action against sex-based violence and injustice, and a means to elevate human rights so everyone can flourish.

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Zach Martens
Stewart's Melville College

Linkin Park, among other older rap-rock and nu-metal bands, has been forgotten by modern day pop culture, and is now just a group of people who changed lives and empowered a generation. Many people do not even like the sound of their music anymore, and many who loved it thought they would never hear it again after the tragic suicide of frontman Chester Bennington. After it seemed that all hope was gone in the loss of the piece that made the jigsaw whole, the members found a new singer in Emily Armstrong, proceeding to record a new studio album, 'From Zero'.

I had started listening to Linkin Park a year earlier, and they very quickly became one of my favourite artists and were the band that introduced me to my favourite genres of music. You can imagine, then, my excitement when I found out that they were touring their new album, including a performance at London Wembley on the 28th June. Conveniently, two weeks after my birthday. I introduced my dad to their music, and in the process got my brother and sister hooked to some of their songs too. My dad would play them through the loudspeakers, and the house was filled with the sound of Linkin Park every evening. I had high hopes and was half-expecting tickets for my birthday. Unfortunately, I didn't get them. Fortunately, I got a drum-kit, which I spend hours playing each week. Besides that, no tickets, and I was slightly upset, but I was very grateful for the drum-kit I got, so oh well, maybe next time.

The weeks passed and the Linkin Park concert had fallen to the back of my mind. I had planned to meet up with my friends when I was woken up by my dad at 6am. Disoriented, I sat up and was rudely met with a t-shirt being flung in my face. His words were: 'Put this on, pack stuff for a night, we're going to London'. It took a second to process properly. It almost didn't seem real. So, I did what I was told. Put on my 'Hybrid Theory' t-shirt, the one he had given me, packed a set of clothes and toiletries, and drove with my dad to the airport, with newfound knowledge on what great parenting looks like.

It was a very hot day. Scorching. By my standards, anyway. The part that made it worse was the complete lack of cloud cover, the sun baring down on you at all times. I visibly remember sitting outside a restaurant eating burgers and drinking beer (or, in my case, ginger beer) with my dad, taking turns wearing the singular sunhat we had brought to give some

shelter from the sun. The whole street outside the stadium was packed, and it took us a while to find a space anywhere, but I feel like we scored gold with our table. I recall watching all the people going to the concert, a steady stream, a river of Linkin Park fans, my family. It felt amazing to see the amount of people attending the concert, as metal as a whole is something I never really get to talk about with my friends and it really warmed my heart to feel like I was at home, even in the south of England. It felt like a piece of my own personal jigsaw, that made it whole.

I can't remember a time when I've been more excited to do something. I'm not the type of person to be bouncing all over the place, but I remember smiling and anticipating, not being able to sit still, and I just couldn't wait for it to start. Walking into the stadium was something I don't think I'll forget any time soon either; the amount of seating just blew me away. There's a real difference between having a number in your head versus having it visualised. I had never been in a place that big before, and it was filled to the brim, completely sold out. This was my second concert, and so I had in my head a key piece of knowledge: when taking videos, don't sing. Somehow it picks up you more than the band. Usually, the band's singing is better than your own. Not worth it.

After supporting acts, there was a wait until Linkin Park came out. It might just have been the longest 15 minutes of my life, but followed by the best two hours of my life, so I think it paid off. Although in many cases a studio album may sound better than a live version, there's something that just makes it more special seeing it live. I feel like there's such an amazing atmosphere created by the other people who love the band as much as you do. All of that on top of seeing the band that changed your life? I couldn't think of anything better.

It was so incredible to really be there in person and hear them, feel them. It was a dive into a sea of emotion and fun. It was like a trance, I was so lost in the moment. In hindsight, too, I loved how they managed to honour the late Chester Bennington while still keeping it a great experience and have everyone walk away uplifted. In the choruses of many songs, Emily would retire her vocals and let the crowd sing the hooks that Chester once sang, and it was great to see the contrast. It also seemed a very cunning ploy to undermine my no-singing policy. That rule certainly went out the window in not much time.

They say there is beauty in chaos, and after that concert I finally understood what it meant. I loved every minute of it. And to think I would have met up with my friends that day; absolutely no regrets for abandoning them.

That night we slept in a hotel a minute's walk from the stadium before returning home. To my amusement, my brother and sister hadn't caught on to me and my dad's absence. I spent the rest of the summer with friends and family, and I had an amazing two months, possibly what

I would say was the best time of my life thus far.

And getting to see Linkin Park, the band that changed me, helped me, motivated me, live?

It was the piece that made my jigsaw whole.

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Hannah Shanks
St Maurice's High School

I love my second family.

And no, I don't mean I have a secret family that I hide from my blood relatives... I mean the family that's been accidentally created through football. A happy accident, and one that I cannot imagine my life without. But I don't mean the big two, Hamilton Accies and East Kilbride. I'm talking about Clyde Football Club.

I've been a football fan practically since birth. My parents and I like to joke that I came out of the womb wearing a Clyde FC bonnet and tie, and with a set of lungs that could put Céline Dion to shame. I was at every single game, from cup ties to relegation playoffs (more often than I'd like to admit) and everyone knew me through my parents because they were so involved behind the scenes at the club. So, it was no surprise when I myself became a volunteer at the club in 2022.

Being involved at Clyde has been passed down through the generations of my family like a sacred relic. It's almost a rite of passage at this point: once you're of age, you must become a volunteer at the club. I am a 3rd generation Clyde FC fan and volunteer in my family, and (hopefully) this number will just keep going.

From the minute I put on that volunteer lanyard, I felt like I was part of something much bigger than just a football team. With the club being such a small community, I knew everything about everyone, and they knew everything about me. I got to a first name basis with all involved at the club within weeks, including the managers (too many to count), and even became friends with a large majority of the first team. No one is alienated at Clyde FC: if you wear red, black and white, you're part of the family.

Despite Clyde having a somewhat nomadic existence these last few years with lots of to-ing and fro-ing regarding the club's home, the supporters have remained unwaveringly loyal.

From Rutherglen to Cumbernauld to Hamilton, the fans have never failed to turn up on a matchday to support the team, no matter how they've been performing. The atmosphere in the stands is unmatched in my opinion: we may be a small fan base, but we know how to make noise. But not in the overwhelming sense that you would maybe feel at a bigger team, no, it may be due to our smaller numbers that it feels like there is meaning behind what we're singing. And true passion: 'The Bully Wee, Clyde. The name often thrills me and fills me with pride'.

Despite this, I personally believe the best part of my Saturdays is the few hours in the build-up to the game, because during this time I get to spend time with my coworkers and the fans. From 'How was your week?' conversations, to joking around whilst we probably should be working, they never fail to put a smile on my face. These people have got me through the good times and the bad, losses in both football and family, exams and results, and not once have they ever let me down. I could not ask for a better bunch of people to spend my weekends with.

Through my position at the club, my younger brother found that he wanted to get involved around 2024, which then wound up with him joining the Clyde 2011s Community Foundation team. All 17 of the boys are extremely close and work inspiringly well together as a team. This was amazing for me to watch as an older sister, as my brother was diagnosed with autism at a young age, so seeing him with such a great and accepting group of boys was incredibly special. He has also gained a second family. They have been nothing short of incredible with him as he has navigated his journey with autism and have brought him completely out of his shell. He is a completely new person and is fully thriving in this wonderful community.

They've all come together from across the country, from varying backgrounds, all with their own individual challenges and stories, so watching them unite as a collective force and improve each other not only as footballers, but as young men, every week is downright joyous to see. They joke that I'm their older sister – tease me like one, too – and I genuinely could not imagine my life without these boys.

There's a level of community and familiarity between the fans and the team at Clyde that I personally believe could never be recreated at the big, multimillionaire clubs in the top-flights throughout the UK. This close involvement has a fundamental impact on what is expected from the team during matches – and it isn't a win-at-all-costs expectation but a realistic expectation of what the players are doing for the fans and the community. It is essentially, I would argue, more understanding and tolerant of human endeavour and the pitfalls of sporting aspiration. Whilst the team might not grab sporting headlines, we should appreciate just what clubs like Clyde can do for people and communities – their importance

in Scottish life and society should not be overlooked.

If you take a look at top-flight teams throughout the UK, there is a hideous second face to football that is revealed: fans become vain and expect consistent results from their teams at the detriment of their players' and management's mental or physical health, and occasionally, job; harmful propaganda and violence are promoted through the anti-social behaviour that sparks in the face of loss. But if all football fans were to just experience victories and came to expect them on a weekly basis... What kind of people would we become? What kind of families would we become?

Smaller teams like Clyde teach fans and players alike that being second-best is sometimes, believe it or not, okay. The collaboration with the community and younger generations of supporters helps plant the seed, if you will, that balance in life is important and that having a sense of belonging is something that enriches us as people.

Yes, we may not have the best games gone unbeaten streak, or a big, flashy striker... But I love my football team. Despite the limited budget, loyalty and compassion from the fan base is unlimited. Week in, week out, win or lose, we're all there and ready to cheer on our football team. I know that no matter how bad a week I've had, I will always have my second family waiting for me on a Saturday afternoon with warm smiles and the red, white, and black scarves ready to go.

Sometimes, the family we find helps us embrace the lows and the losses of life, often with 90 minutes of football to follow. I'm proud to be a fan of The Bully Wee.

Last year's results

Winner 2024/25:
Chisangalo Makiyi, The Waid Academy, for a powerful personal testimony of the challenges involved with growing up in Scotland as a black girl.

Joint runners-up:
Daniel Gunn, Banchory Academy, for an evocative account of a character-building experience and the importance of teamwork; Sihan He, Hutchesons' Grammar School for an entertaining investigation of procrastination and how we can all overcome it.

Highly Commended:
Katie Clempson, Dumbarton Academy; Michael Crump, Portobello High School; Lewis Fitzpatrick, Douglas Academy; Sam Gardner, Portobello High School; Ella Kalkman, The Glasgow Academy; Emma Kelly, Our Lady's High School, Cumbernauld; Vesper Murray, Glenalmond College; Greg Wardlaw, Stewart's Melville College.

Commended:
Lily Bolam, Dalbeattie High School; Ganna Gebely, Douglas Academy; Blair Henderson, Stewart's Melville College; Rory McClounan, Strathaven Academy; Syd Mackintosh, The Mary Erskine School; Connie Macleod, Hutchesons' Grammar School; Mary Morrison, Nicolson Institute; Isla Rippiner, Banchory Academy; Fraser Saville, Belmont Academy; Holly Stewart, Beeslack Community High School,

Previous winners

2023/24: Izzy Clark, High School of Dundee
2022/23: May Bruce, Tynecastle High School
2021/22: Holly Helbert, Douglas Academy
2020/21: Amy Campbell, Hutchesons' Grammar School
2019/20: Changshi Tang, High School of Dundee
2018/19: Harriet Sweatman, The Royal High School
2017/18: Shannon Henderson, St Maurice's High School
2016/17: Jonathan Tevendale, Mallaig High School
2015/16: Gemma Grier, Our Lady's High School

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