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The Scholars Newsletter

St. Thomas Aquinas Scholars Honors Program



EDITOR:

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Congratulations Seniors!

Thank you for your hard work and dedication to the program! We wish you best of luck with all your future plans.

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SMITH, MEGAN A.
TJOKROSETIO, OLIVIA C.
TORRES, EMMA L.
VAN HOUT, ADRIANA M.
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WOZNICZKA, SYDNEY R.
ZAIC, MITCHELL N.
ZHANAY, EDWIN I.
ZIEMANN, SARAH J.
ZIEMER, CHAD E.

Pizza with a Prof

Academic Chairs

Dr. Fort spoke as part of the Pizza with a Prof series on going “inside the Matrix” by seeing the chemical makeup in everything around us. He demonstrated with a Tommie purple reaction and an interactive virtual reality display of his own office! It was a great opportunity for scholars to see Dr. Fort’s area of expertise outside of being Program Director.



DIY Self-Care Kits

Social Chairs

The Scholars enjoyed putting together their DIY self-care packages. The essential oils and lotion were an instant hit. These self-care kits were a great stress reliever once studying was over and the final tests, papers, and presentations began.

What Do You Want to Be Remembered For?

by Chad Ziemer

What do you want to be remembered for? I found myself asking this question as I reflected over this past semester. The more I thought about it, I realized there is only one thing that really matters when all the work is said and done. That one thing is your character.

Character is the way you carry yourself. Character is the attitude you have when things go wrong. Character is having the moral courage to do the right thing when no one else will. Character is owning up to your wrongdoing when your integrity is compromised by a bad decision made in a moment of weakness. Character is embracing correction when you got it wrong.

But most importantly, character is about the way you treat other people. Do you care about others? Are you generous with your time when others ask it of you? Do you respond to others with kindness? Do you look for ways to help your team? Do you encourage others when you see them doing a good job?

If you find yourself questioning the quality of your character, the worst thing you can do right now is retreat into complacency. You are the architect of your own character. Good character cannot be formed in a week or in a month. Good character must be forged moment by moment, decision by decision. That's why character is a mindset. It's an attitude, and it comes with one decision at a time.

So, as you reflect over this past semester, ask yourself this one question: What do you want to be remembered for?

(Inspired by quotes from Heraclitus, George Boardman, Marcus Aurelius, and Dennis Prager)

Sapien

by Makayla Quinn

Occasionally you sneak to the back porch late at night and stare at the sky. There exists melancholy in the song of frogs. The crickets and cicadas cry in tune, in harmony. All are conducted by the chill of wind shaking the knobbed branch.

You wish so desperately to be a part of their ensemble. The tragedy is that you are merely a man. See, the chorus sings without thought, without fear of dissonance. Like your ancestors, you can't help but flinch from the rhythm of thunder.

You are the
caveman before he knew dinner
was best served hot.



Has Nietzsche's Claim, "*Gott ist Tot*," Been Vindicated by American Universities?

by Liam Selden

Ask an Aquinas Scholar's philosophy classroom a question: Is American democracy valuable? Does it promote conditions for human flourishing? Even in a philosophy classroom, this question borders on offensive because of its hesitation to swear fealty to American dogma – in short, why even ask? You have now ignominiously opened the door for a response of, "No." There is resounding agreement: of course American democracy is worthwhile! Ask them a different question: Is there such a thing as truth and can it be known by humans? What might be the reply?

Perhaps you envision a reply bearing some Socratic meekness about not knowing anything. Perhaps there would be some admission of personal ignorance accompanied by hopeful longing to one day encounter truth. Maybe, just maybe, you naïvely think there would be a confident reply of, "Yes, and here is an example!" I have rarely encountered these responses from my fellow students at St. Thomas, and I am confident in saying that they do not occupy majority status. Some might think it so obvious that truth exists that it is not worth asking the question, though that does not seem to be the case.

Rather than expressing uncertainty about truth's existence, I have commonly encountered an entirely opposite assertion. Instead of *not knowing* about truth, many students intransigently declare that there are overriding principles: subjective truth, the absence of a universal perspective, bias – all are unconquerable features of existence that eradicate the possibility of any human encountering truth beyond mere illusion. Why not push the issue and ask if it is true that two plus two makes four? This question has an obvious answer, does it not? You will not find yourself being asked to define "two" or "four", or even what "makes" means; rather, you are likely to be greeted with diffident statements that it is ultimately unknown whether or not two exists, so we cannot really know if two plus two makes four. Or that mathematics is a special case and while humans might occasionally (perhaps, accidentally) stumble upon truth, it's impossible for anyone to ever *actually know* truth.

How far can we go with this reasoning? (Hint: not very.) If there is no such thing as truth, then America, and any country (*anything!*) founded on any principal whatsoever, is entirely a product of misguided preconceptions. These concerns are not shared by many of my classmates; they seem to begrudgingly cling to democratic principles while insisting “truth” is a chimera of opportunistic fabrications. I agree that humans are fallible, and I believe that questioning, criticizing, and reassessing one’s own worldview can be healthy, but to suggest that that our fallibility inescapably engenders faulty thinking – to the extent that the material structure of the universe is suspect – does not strike me as good philosophical reasoning. At best it is ill-executed and consequentially problematic skepticism.

The inevitable result of this reasoning is to reduce the status of truth to nothing. Truth will only be referenced with disdain as an idea created and maintained by and for philosophical zealots. The society beyond this disconnected and mistrusting worldview is one in which power occupies the sole position of authority – and that should deeply trouble you. What is the value of a democratic society, and on what grounds can you defend the principles of democracy or personal autonomy, if we cannot agree that there is truth?

A Case Study

by Evan Dietry

My number one priority as a parent is the safety and health of my children. As our society’s scientific knowledge develops, new dangers are being discovered in the products of our marketplace. The latest controversy revolves around the use of parabens in cosmetic products and various foods. Parabens are used as a preservative, preventing and reducing the growth of various bacteria and mold on cosmetic products and some foods. Parabens were determined to be safe in the 1970s, but more recent studies suggest that they have some daunting negative health effects. The detection of these dangerous preservatives is already extremely widespread, present in over 92 percent of Americans according to a CDC study (Calafat 2010). Furthermore, the general public is often duped by marketing ploys such as the “All Natural” label on products. Seeing the word “natural” gives consumers some comfort and incentivizes products, but there is a complete lack of regulation around this label. Products with the “All Natural” label could still contain dangerous things such as parabens. For the safety of future generations, parabens should be banned from consumer products. In the meantime, only products labeled “Paraben Free” can be trusted.

Some of the biggest health concerns surrounding the paraben controversy include harm to fertility and reproductive systems, negative birth effects, and a higher risk for cancer. All these concerns have deep implications, especially if our society's children are exposed perpetually starting from birth. Certain parabens mimic estrogen, which disrupts hormone signals (Vo 2010). In turn, this has negative effects on the natural functions of both male and female reproductive systems and fertility. Also, parabens have been found to increase the risk of cancer: more specifically, breast cancer in females (Wróbel 2014). The propylparaben is capable of altering the expression of genes, accelerating the growth of breast cancer cells. Action needs to be taken against parabens even if the risk is low: the protocols of the marketplace should adapt constantly to new information.

Those in opposition to banning parabens might argue that without them, the shelf life of products would decrease, and we would generate more waste. However, there are several alternatives to parabens that act as preservatives that are not associated with health risks. Among these substitutes are benzoic acid, sorbic acid, sodium benzoate, and potassium sorbate. They might also argue that the risk of these negative health effects is small. There is no reason to take any risk at all with ourselves, and more importantly our children, if there are other safer alternatives to parabens. The most prudent choice would be to move on from products with parabens and make safer, healthier choices as consumers.

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Summer Nostalgia

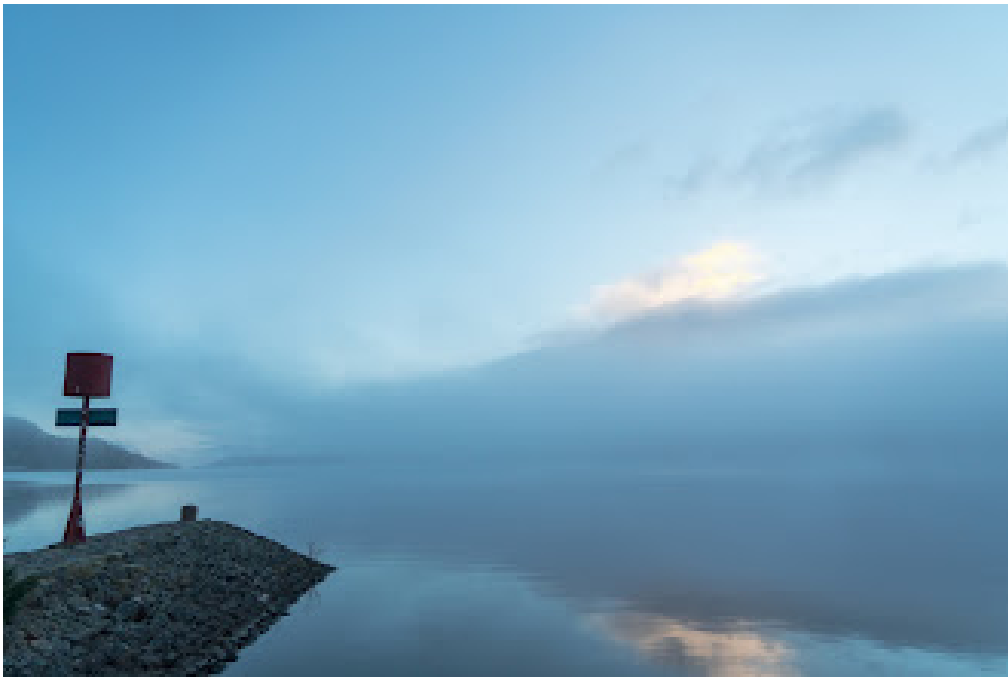
by Cecilia Becicka



This is a photo of my younger sibling just on the cusp of summer. I wanted the picture to capture the warm, rosy feeling of the edges of summer. That time of the year where the concerns of winter and school are near, but foremost on your mind is that summer is close. I also have my younger sibling, just on the edge of teenager and child, because I felt that stage of life is most similar to the edges of summer.

The Loch Ness Monster: Fact or Fiction

by Jack Foss



(Loch Ness at Dawn: Loch Ness, Scotland, UK (Photo Credit: Casey Eakins))

This photo, taken while I was studying abroad in London this spring, shows the infamous Loch Ness as the fog rolls in at dawn. Loch Ness is well known for its famous lake monster, Nessie, or the Loch Ness Monster. But is Nessie real? Stories will tell you different answers.

First reports of the Loch Ness Monster were documented in the late 19th century when locals began to see what they determined to be an unknown animal peeking out of the water. As time went on, these sightings became more and more common, culminating in what many consider to be the most famous photograph of a possible sighting “The Surgeon’s Photograph.” This photo, which shows an unknown animal poking its head from the water, was considered for almost 60 years to be evidence that Nessie was real. Today, we know this photograph to be a hoax, but does that mean that Nessie is a hoax as well?

SCHOLARS ABROAD

There have been many explanations for what people have interpreted to be Nessie. For one, many believe that what has been seen is nothing simpler than driftwood. With the foggy nature of the Scottish Highlands, visibility is very low, as seen in the picture above, leading many to believe that what was seen was simply timber flowing down the loch. Another theory is that many of the sightings were, in fact, giant eels. Scientists have found evidence of eel DNA in Loch Ness and theorize that many of the Nessie sightings may have been eels who made their way up the lochs from the North Sea. Finally, the simplest explanation may just be that people made up what they saw. The Loch Ness Monster fits in very well with Scottish Lore, and with people hearing that, they may have seen an opportunity to play into that folklore with sightings of Nessie. The discovery that “The Surgeon’s Photograph” was a hoax lends credence to the belief that people may have been looking to tell stories, and those stories built a legend.

Is Nessie real? Many people believe so. Many people believe not. But are you willing to dive into the deep, dark waters of Loch Ness to find out? It is up to you.

Study Abroad in Copenhagen

by Amanda Maier



Mount Rigi

During my time studying abroad in Copenhagen, I had the opportunity to go to Switzerland for a few days. This picture was taken at the top of Mount Rigi, which is near Lucerne and home of the Panoramic Trail that famously inspired Mark Twain. We had to hike about 11 miles to reach the top, and the views the entire way were amazing. We had climbed a different mountain the previous day so we were exhausted, but it was so worth it! I think my time in Switzerland will be the most memorable part of my time abroad, and I already want to go back.



Venice Canals

I had the opportunity to spend a week in Italy for spring break and to visit a number of different cities. We only spent about a day in Venice, but it was definitely my favorite. There were no cars in most of the city, only canals and little bridges and walkways. Taking a gondola ride was the best way to see the city, and the gondoliers provided commentary and information about the history of some of the buildings. The streets with shops and restaurants were fun to walk around, but I think my favorite part was walking by the residential streets and seeing a little bit of what daily life is like living in a place like Venice.



Tivoli Gardens

My study abroad program was based in Copenhagen so I spent most of my time abroad there, but I realized that I probably have the fewest photos from there. Copenhagen was a lovely city to live in, and it was so nice to be able to walk and bike everywhere. The climate wasn't much different from Minnesota, though there was a lot more rain and a lot less snow. I was amazed at how many green places were within even the city center and how much more lively the city became as spring approached. This picture is taken at Tivoli Gardens, which is one of the oldest theme parks in the world and is located in central Copenhagen (or Indre By as they call it). The park is only open seasonally and is really popular for both locals and tourists. Tivoli actually inspired Walt Disney in his plans for Disneyland, and the whole park was really beautiful and charming and unlike any American theme park I've ever been to.

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