Linacre Lines

ON THE THIN LINES:
BETWEEN BEING AND BECOMING

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EDITOR’S NOTE
by Friederike Pank

Dear Linacrites!

With spring around the corner, Hilary term 2020 slowly comes to an end. For many of us, the past 8 weeks have been very intense, some might have had the time of their lives, others perhaps struggled to find a balance between all their duties and commitments.

Living life in Oxford is a different experience for every single one of us, and the world of Oxford is made of many worlds. In this issue, themed ‘On the thin lines: Between being and becoming’, we can explore some snapshots of what it means to live and study here, and what it means to find our way in these important years of transition. Life is certainly not a straight line, and sometimes, we have more questions than answers.

Some fellow Linacrites offer windows onto their worlds and share what’s been on their minds this term: We get to relive Matriculation Day once more, we reflect on what it means to care about the environment, we travel back in time with one of our founding members to the opening day of the Abraham building, we attend the finale of the Power of Love festival on Valentine’s Day, we wonder about where home is together, we encounter our fellow Humans of Linacre and read their life stories, and we get a glimpse of the future which awaits us in the bright days of May in the form of our college ball.

There is a lot to look forward to, and I hope many of you find the time to sit down with a cup of tea and take a moment to browse these inspiring pages amidst the end of term stress. It’s those little moments in between where we can breathe and reflect which are important in the endless flow of life which can easily become overwhelming.

I wish you all a joyful end of term and a lovely break spent on the beautiful things in life!

With lots of Linacre love,

Friederike
THEY TOLD ME TO DREAM BIG ...
BUT NO ONE EVER TOLD ME DREAMS ARE EXPENSIVE.

by Awa Ndiaye

We are rushed inside the Sheldonian Theater, in our matching black and white attires. The porter gives me a severe look and kindly asks I take off my mortar board--which cannot be worn indoors. My newly made friends and I glance at each other and giggle, before our eyes are drawn to the breathtaking ceiling fresco. I have to remind myself to take another breath as I stare at “Truth descending upon the Arts and Sciences to expel ignorance from the University.” I haven’t elucidated the mystery about what happens to ignorance next, when silence walks in, accompanied by the Vice Chancellor. I try really hard to make memories of my middle school Latin classes resurface--so I can decipher the incantations formulated in Latin, in vain. But eventually, I get it. I am now officially a student at the University of Oxford.

So, is this what a dream come true looks like?

... 

This could have been a motivational speech about how it always pays off when you work hard and follow your dreams. It could have been one of those quotes that end with "sky is the limit". It could have been an illusion of consecration. The impression that this is the end itself.

But it is not any of those things.

No, this is not another story about a young African woman, who against all odds, climbed her way up to Oxford.

Sure, the path taken was not that of least resistance. But in truth, this is simply another step as part of a long journey itself.
They always told me to dream big ... Unfortunately, for too many of us dreams are just too expensive.

How do you keep dreaming without going bankrupt when they tirelessly snatch your dream from you every single time?
How do you afford dreams when you are trying to save up to purchase the right to be heard, When they have been asking you for overdue rent for staying on this Planet?
How do you dream if dreams don't even chase hunger from your stomach
Or give you a place to sleep?

Why do we expect a young girl to relentlessly lug her dreams around when she is terrified of falling asleep,
When the sound of detonations blew all her dreams into nightmares?

They told me to dream big, but forgot to mention dreams are expensive.

This is not one of those inspirational stories about making a way wherever there is a will.
This is the recognition that I am tremendously fortunate and extremely privileged.
It's an expression of gratitude for an incredible support system.
It's simply a battle against the Imposter Syndrome.
It's the reassurance that being privileged doesn't make you a bad person; it just gives you a chance to do something meaningful--for others--with your privilege.
It's the uncomfortable truth that we are part of the very system we are trying to dismantle.

This is the understanding that it is far too simplistic to merely press people to dream without creating alternatives.

Yet, it's a contradiction. It's an exhortation to dream.
A supplication not to let anyone--not even yourself--tell you you cannot afford to dream.

They told me to dream big. My dream was as big as "Oxford!" Now, I have another dream. I dream of a world where all of us can afford to dream big.
WHY DOES ANYONE CARE?

by Louis Mahon

Linacre College is currently hosting a series of seminars on the philosophy of environmentalism. The topic is the relationship of humans to nature, and the meaning of our attempts to act in nature's interest. There are two talks remaining, by Rupert Sheldrake and Charles Eisenstein, both taking place next term, with more details to be found on the college website. Here, I would like to articulate the reason for putting on such a series.

Anyone who has been involved, even briefly, in the environmental movement is familiar with a certain pattern of thinking: why does no one care? The environmental movement is not unique in this respect, there is a similar feeling in all reformative and world-bettering movements, but here, the discrepancy between the magnitude of the problem and the magnitude of our response is especially striking. The message, coming from a highly respected scientific community, is so strong and so alarming, and yet the space it occupies in our thoughts and the influence it has on our life decisions is so comparatively small. Rather than express this mysterious disparity with the usual question “why does no one care?”, I instead suggest that we consider the inverse question, “why does anyone care?”. 

When asked honestly, this too is a puzzling one. I am not satisfied with the default answer, that we care because environmental action is all that stands between us and global disaster, it does not add up. Essentially no one, not even the so-called environmentally aware, acts as if we are fighting for our lives. For those who do devote time and energy to the cause, it is considered yet another item on a list of problems to solve. I might wake up one morning and think that, today, I need to prepare for a sustainability committee meeting, write a draft of a paper to send to my supervisor, and get to the gym at some point. If I really believe that the environmental movement is humanity’s front against the greatest disaster in our history, then why does it not trump every other motivation I have?

Of course, our motivations do not derive from convincing arguments or evidence, but from what speaks to us emotionally. Somehow, the threat we are considering, the threat of human activity to the well-being of the biosphere, has buckets of the former and very little of the latter. A stark comparison can be made with those causes that are in the inverse situation. Consider, for example, the Guide Dogs for the Blind charity, which made the news last year for
bucking the trend of falling donations to top UK charities, and posted a record gross income of £117m. Many of us know sight-impaired people personally, and for those who don’t, it is easy to cultivate sympathy by imagining how difficult our lives would be if we were blind. This is not to mention the near-universal appeal of cute dogs. In fact, the majority of advertising images are close ups of dogs, not of their blind guidees.

Now I don’t want to perform an analysis of the economics or psychology of charity donations, this has been done elsewhere by far more knowledgeable thinkers. Neither do I want to denigrate the supporting of charity, the impulse to help is always a positive one. The point is that it is easy to see the reasons for this impulse, and they have little to do with an intellectual case for the value of its work.

Some of the same emotional appeal can be garnered by photos of forlorn-looking polar bears on melting ice, or baby seals caught in plastic netting. Maybe this is just what the movement needs, or maybe such images don’t do justice to the problem, maybe they are even a form of appropriation, by forcing nature to appeal to our sensibilities in order to be worthy of care.

Here is as far as my analysis can go, and here is where I hope the coming seminars can shed light. I don’t know how best to move forward, but I do believe that the narrative needs to change. Currently, a conscientious minority try to some small extent, and then waste a great deal of energy lamenting the fact that no one else is doing their share. This will not take us where we need to go. Unless saving the planet can become something we feel compelled to do, rather than something we think we ought to do, the majority will remain apathetic, and the rest will continue to wallow in the question of why no one cares.

PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

“If Nature Is Alive, What Difference Does it Make?”
Thursday 28th May 2020 / Tanner Room

Since the seventeenth century, the mainstream scientific view as been that nature is made up of inanimate matter and is essentially mechanical. But the evolving universe now looks much more like a living organism and so does the earth, Gaia. We are on the threshold of a major paradigm shift. Biologist Rupert Sheldrake will discuss these questions and ask what difference this post-materialist way of thinking may make to our responses to climate change and the ecological crisis.
WHO ARE YOU?

by Dr Eva Wagner

An excerpt from ‘Linacre Legends’. Dr Wagner is a founding member of our college and became part of the Linacre community in 1962. Her book “Bamborough’s Linacre” is a hidden gem of our library, a vivid recollection of the first years at Linacre and a must-read for all those who wonder what being a Linacrite was like in the early days of our college.

I had cycled up to Linacre and realized there was something going on, because there were lots and lots of people lining the imposing outdoor staircase which had been built recently. I had put my bike against the entrance wall and saw old and frail Mr. Abraham who had given money for the new building. He came down carefully in the middle of the steps, all on his own, and I walked up to him saying: “Isn’t anyone looking after you?” And he said: “No, I’m alright”, but I walked down the steps with him anyway and noticed there were lots of people watching. When we got to the bottom, he said: “I’ll be alright now”, and I was about to go back to my bike when someone joined us from behind and whispered: “Well done, well done”. I said: “You’ll have to speak up, he doesn’t hear very well” and turned around and saw it was Prince Charles, who had opened the new Green Building.

We all sort of smiled at each other and Abraham left. I was still standing there trying to go away when down in the middle of the steps came a very striking figure, on his own again, a tall officer in a purple uniform with a big feathered tricorn hat and a big sword, like a character out of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Instinctively, I went up to him and said: “Who are you?”, and he said: “I’m so glad you ask. I am the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire and I wish people would ask me that and talk to me on these occasions.” After again smiling to each other, I turned to go back to my bike when several policemen, including plain clothes officers, came running up to me because of what had just happened: “Who are you? Who are you?” I was still sort of puzzled and amused and reassured them by saying: “Just a member of this college, a founding member”, which seemed to satisfy them. But maybe I was also a person of interest for them, at least for a while?
THINK HUMAN, organised brilliantly by Oxford Brookes University, was a two-week festival of events exploring what it means to be human in 2020. It showcased and celebrated work from their Humanities division and Department of Social Sciences.

Through music, comedy, debate and film during free events held in locations across Oxford in February 2020, the festival encouraged participants to delve into some of the most pressing issues of our time by asking questions such as: What does it mean to be masculine today? How do we face the loss of Arctic sea ice? And what can poetry tell us about refugees?

The Power of Love festival finale on Valentine's Day was a celebration of love, loss, sexuality, exploitation, power and more. What better day for the closing event: “The power of love: songs of love and loss.” Before the event, debate was sparked on twitter with questions posed by the convener, Patrick Alexander: What is the best love song? The best break-up song? What is it about these songs that makes them great? As well as being an anthropologist in education at Oxford Brookes, Patrick was once lead guitarist in the semi-legendary indie band, The Wedding Present: fine purveyors of music for the brokenhearted since 1985. It was therefore fitting that the evening began with local bands performing in the foyer of the John Henry Brookes building. Highlights included a rabble rousing folk version of Cyndi Lauper's “True Colours” followed by Candy Says, an electronic pop trio from Oxford, fronted by the energetic Julia Walker. A respectful, sedate audience were suitably warmed up by her guitar thrashing venture into the crowd and fabulous synth beats delivered by keys player Ben. This ramped up to a spine-tingling acoustic set by David Gedge, song writer and lead singer of The Wedding Present, accompanied by Patrick. As seminal DJ John Peel famously remarked “The boy Gedge has written some of the best love songs of the 'Rock ‘n’ Roll' era. You may dispute this, but I’m right and you’re wrong!” We were treated to heart wrenching classic tunes such as “Rachel,” “Blonde” and “My favourite dress” - a song which describes the end of a relationship when our protagonist cottons on that his girlfriend has been seeing someone else. As Gedge sees his girlfriend out with her new love and delivers the killer final line - “a stranger’s hand on my favourite dress, that was my favourite dress you know”, you feel his pain and see through his eyes the heart break that unfolds in that moment.
And maybe, there’s the power of songs in times of love and loss right there. The ability of lyrics to trigger a moment when something clicks in your mind, goes bang, and you feel “yes, I’ve been there.” In the discussion that followed, we heard views of panel members, including Andrew Scheps, record producer of Adele, Black Sabbath and Red Hot Chilli Peppers and Dr Paul Dibley, Head of Music. Out of this discussion, came, for me, the realisation that the beauty of a great love song or break-up song is that it contains a universe of possibilities, a completed space, a perfect dialogue. In a break-up song, a space is created in which the listener can experience catharsis without needing to re-live it, to re-live it would be traumatic, but to come close can be a therapeutic type of escapism. Songs of loss can describe a lost future, lost hopes and dreams and can be a way of experiencing empathy in times of pain and distress. Albums such as “Take Fountain,” ABBA’s “The Visitors” written after both couples had divorced, or Spiritualized “Ladies and gentleman, we are floating in space” exemplify this.

Interestingly, more time was spent discussing songs of loss than love. Was this a reflection of the mood of the audience on such a romantic day? Or is it that we overall as humans feel more connected to songs of loss? Andrew Scheps made the point that, unless a sociopath, we all have either experienced romantic love, can imagine it or have wanted it from another person. So love songs, in general, have universal appeal. Whether the songwriter “means it” or not, it gives a more authentic experience for the listener compared to manufactured pop by writers such as Stock Aitken and Waterman, for example.

Has the perception of love songs changed in the “Me too” era? I felt this could have been discussed more. For example the changing prevalence of female songwriters and the role of female empowerment. Amy Winehouse’s “Back to black,” Taylor Swift’s “Red” and Alannis Morissette’s “Jagged little pill” surely would have been worthy of a mention here.

Overall though, a great evening of inspiring music and a celebration of the power of songs through what is arguably the very essence of life and what makes us human: relationships.
WHERE IS HOME?
by Patrick Germain Tissot Obrégon

Most of the social conversations after Christmas break involve the question, where did you go? Some would answer that they went on a nice trip. Maybe around Europe, or Africa, or the Middle East. Others would answer that they stayed in Oxford. And others would answer that they went back home. But what does this mean? What do we truly want to express when we say the phrase, I went back home?

In my mind, the idea of home is a physical place; an old six-story building in a small block in the north of Bogota. This block has always represented safeness and comfort for me. Bogota has never really been a safe city, but when I was a child, the moment I put a foot on the block I felt on a different planet. I was still a child walking on a street in the middle of a vast city, but that street, that block, was home.

However, when I think about it deeply, I realise that home involves much more than a physical space. When I was in high school, I woke up every morning during the weekends, and the next thing I always did was having a cup of the coffee that my mum made for everyone in the house. It was actually the smell of the coffee that woke me up from my dreams or, sometimes, from my hangover. When I conceive it like that, home becomes moments, sounds, food and smells. Home is tea, coffee, fish and chips, tamal, bocadillo, pasta; it is singing; it is routine and celebrations; it is birthdays and Christmas; it is that song, that book or that old TV show. Isn’t home not just a physical place that occupies a space in this planet, but also an idea that occupies a space in our sense of self?

Sometimes, however, when we go back to the place we call home, to that six-story building, things feel weird. They are still great, but they just feel different. But a place doesn’t change. We might observe the building to check if something has changed. But it hasn’t. The six-story building still has, indeed, six stories. Things just feel different. Is this a sad feeling? Or maybe it is the breaking point when we realise that a new place, from which we have been missing the six-story building with nostalgia, has offered us new flavours and sounds, which we now also miss. Is this new, strange place home? Is the old six-story building a place in our memory?
We will also leave this new place eventually. Some will do so in one or two years if they are
doing a Masters; others, if they are doing a DPhil, in three, or four … or five, or six or
whatever. And maybe if this place has offered so many new flavours, sounds, and beautiful
people, other places will do as well.

And if home is not just a place but an idea in our head then, as any idea, it is in continuous
change; it is a word full of different colours that vary all the time. And maybe, if we agree with
this, we can then take our backpacks and express, full of nostalgia and melancholy but, at the
same time excitement and hope, that home is not only the place from which we come but also
the place to which we go.
What has made me who I am today?

I started out as a librarian working in a Children's library which, like most libraries, had a fine system for those who failed to return books on time. I remember that there was this one family, a mother and her children, who would come regularly, and the children would always be fined for not returning the books on time. In the end, the mother stopped bringing her children to the library. It struck me as unfair, and it was the first time that I thought such a strict system would limit people's enthusiasm for reading. A library should foster a love of books and learning.

What role has Oxford/Linacre played in shaping you as a person?

Rather than having a significant impact, I think that Linacre is already a good fit for the person that I am. I enjoy working somewhere that is not as bureaucratic as it can be in some of the main university libraries. In general, I like Linacre’s friendly, informal environment.
What has made me who I am today?

Riyam Mistry

There are several life experiences that have shaped me to become who I am. On a professional level, I chose medicine and have an interest in plastic surgery. I wanted a job where I could help people get the quality of life back, such as facial reconstruction after a car accident. I've had a lot of hardships and failures throughout my life. My list of failures is 10 times longer than my list of successes; my upbringing reinforced a very strong work ethic which I continue today. Once upon a time I was a fat, unfit child and today I'm often seen doing some form of horrific exercise. I love motorbikes and always have since I can remember, you'll probably see me on my red superbike!

What role has Oxford/Linacre played in shaping you as a person?

Sadly my time in Oxford has been plagued with tragedy. I've almost died four times, had a cancer scare and got badly injured in a motorbike crash. My research has fallen through several times and multiple funding applications have been rejected. I know that I am not alone in this kind of situation. Everyone here is so intelligent and so capable but often life can be difficult and cruel. I truly value supporting one another and promote kindness and understanding. Oxford has taught me the brightest people are often the most stressed and troubled. It is our responsibility at Linacre to be loving and caring to one another as you never know how bad the people around you may be feeling.
What has made me who I am today?

A major factor in my early life was being sent to boarding school at the age of 11 while my parents were working in Hong Kong. In those days it took 20 hours to fly there, we were allowed to write home once a week and it took about two weeks for the letter to reach them so we wouldn’t get a reply for a month. Phone calls were not allowed except in an emergency and in any case you could only phone Hong Kong by pre-booking a slot with the Operator. As a consequence, my school-friends became my family and we all just HAD to get along. We have grown up very independent and (I think) tolerant of others.

What role has Oxford/Linacre played in shaping you as a person?

My first permanent job was at Ruskin College where I stayed for 25 years. Ruskin took students with no educational qualifications to first year undergraduate in two years and every student’s background was completely different from any I had encountered before. This was my new family – incredibly diverse and at times challenging. Whatever skills I had acquired in order to survive boarding school were stretched and enhanced at Ruskin. I joined Linacre as I could see it shared the same values – a supportive family of adult individuals who treat each other with respect. My time in both colleges has taught me to look for the commonality with others rather than our inevitable differences.
“WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”

Interview with Simon Hill (Maintenance Manager) conducted by Friederike Pank

How did you become a member of the Linacre community?

I've only been here for 18 months. I come from a construction background, I used to play around on construction sites, because that's what my father did in the weekends to make some extra money.

I've always loved to take things apart and understand how it works, I still do. When there's a broken door handle, I'll buy a new one, but I'll take the old one apart and try to find out what's wrong, so that next time I don't have to replace it, but I know how to fix it. It's about fixing the little things and working on constant improvement, making sure it goes better next time.

I've always wanted to help people, for me it was never about the big money but more about job satisfaction. It doesn't matter if I do something small well or something big. I always walk down the corridor looking for a job. I don't have the academic intelligence, I could never do a PhD in philosophy, but I do want to understand how things work.

How would you describe your role at Linacre?

I'm like a custodian of the college. What I love most about my job is that it's so much more than maintenance. You never know what you'll get in a day. There's this moment in the morning when I park my car and walk to Linacre, I just think about the day, and then when I get there, the work starts. It's never the same, and the best days are when we can just get the job done, but most of the time things do come in, things happen and we'll get to it right away.

We're here to get you through your degree. What most students don't realize is that we're here 12 months a year, always working in the background to make sure we keep the college running. Every day I hear on the radio about what this or that Oxford professor has done, this place has so much significance. But it's also all the students, staff, administration, everyone here contributes to the success.

All the staff, we're also a community, and we work together, we help each other. I can't spot everything, so I'm happy if someone from housekeeping tells me if something needs to be
fixed, or if a student tells me that a door handle is loose so I don’t have to go there at 2am at some point because someone can’t get into their room. It’s a symbiotic relationship, really. We’re all in this together.

What’s your story of living and working in Oxford?

It’s such a beautiful place, there is a reason why I’ve never left Oxfordshire. It’s such a rich place in so many different ways, rich in history, rich in culture, rich in music, rich in diversity … This diversity is really what Oxford is about.

But many locals don’t even know that, for example, they have a right to go into Christ Church without paying a wedge of money, that they can just go on one of the tours if they have an Oxford postcode. It’s not advertised. Last year was the first time I got to see the boat houses; before, I was always on the other side of the river. And here I am now, I get to be in the university and in the college every day, although I never got a degree! I’m kind of in between town and gown.

The history of the town and gown divide goes back 200, 300 years when some students complained about the wine in a pub one night and a few days later, 300 students got killed by a raging mob. Nowadays, the animosities come mostly from the housing situation: locals simply can’t afford living in Oxford, because students are driving the rent prices up.

What piece of advice would you like to give Linacre students?

If there’s a message I would want to get across, it would be: enjoy your time as much as you can, explore the area, go to all the places, Oxfordshire is so beautiful! And look up! There’s so much to see! Have you seen the iron statue on top of Blackwell’s poster shop? Have you been to the bar on top of Varsity Club in the covered market? Explore the city and the region! I’m trying my best to understand how the university works, it would be nice if that went also the other way. And it would be nice to know more about each other, I would really like to understand what you guys think, what you do, where you’re coming from.
[Picture ID: Artwork for the Linacre College Ball 2020 displaying the Linacre Crest on a book cover with two magical creatures underneath.]
JOIN THE GREATEST BALL IN OXFORD THIS YEAR

A great while ago, when the world was full of wonders and magical creatures, a group of diligient sprites decided to organise a banquet for its kingdom, so great and wonderful that the kingdom’s inhabitants would still rave about it for years to come.

The hard-working sprites put tremendous amounts of effort into organizing this fabulous occasion and are happy to announce to the rest of the glorious Linacre kingdom that ball tickets for Linacre Members are on Sale until 15th March!

Help us make this year’s Linacre College ball a great night & join us for the ball on May 23rd by a few easy clicks in this Google Doc:


**Current Ticket prizes until 15th March:** £65 for Linacre Members & £80 for their guests.

**Prizes from 15th March onwards:** £70 for Linacre Members and £90 for their guests.

We are really excited to celebrate this ball with all of Linacre’s great community, share experiences and have a good time together, so get your tickets before they are gone & get excited for loads of fun on May 23rd!

All the best from the diligent fairies a.k.a. the ball committee!