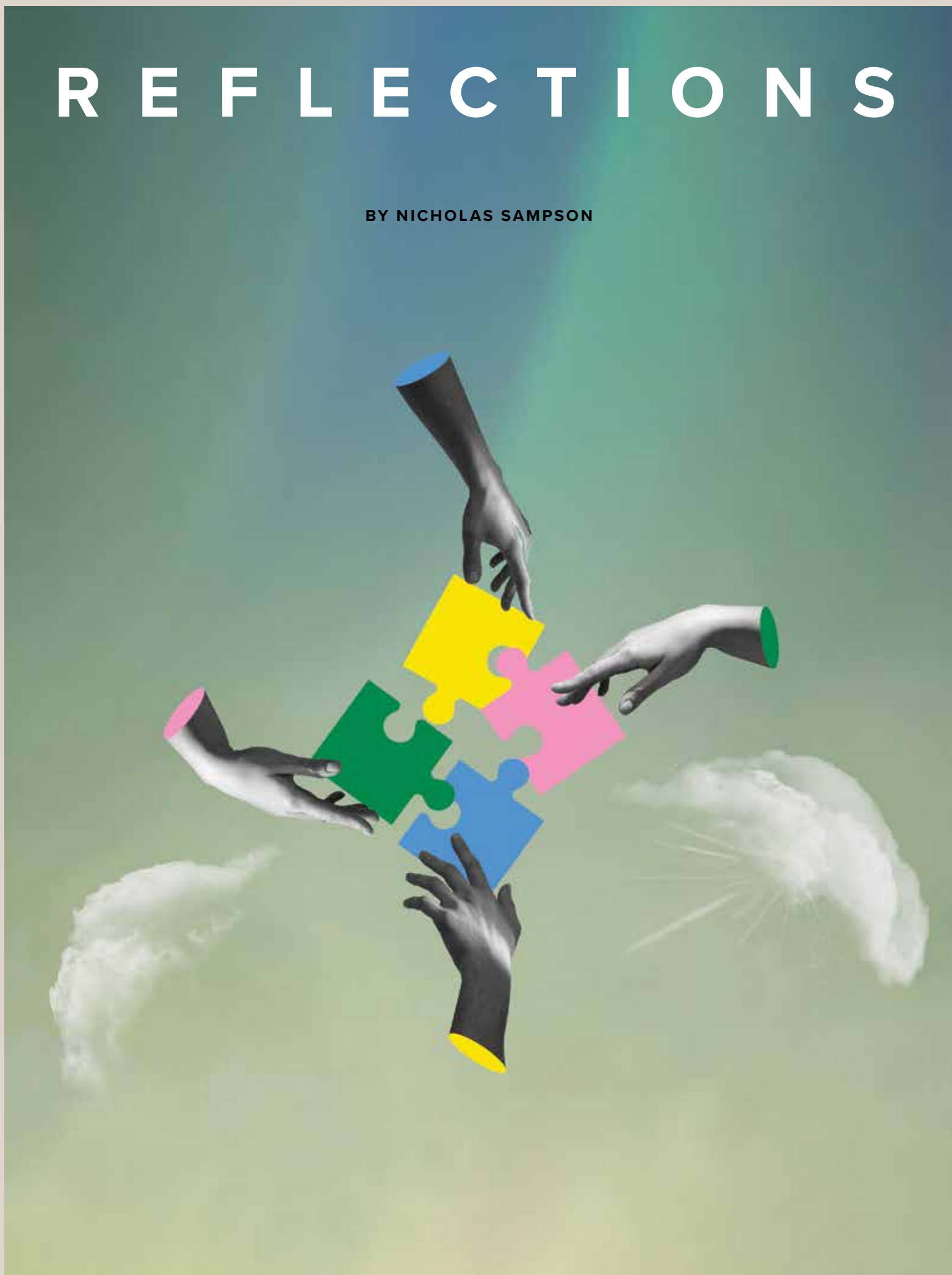


# REFLECTIONS

BY NICHOLAS SAMPSON



## A

**AS I WRITE THIS ARTICLE**, the pandemic has been relegated within the hierarchy of news by other important events: by natural and man-made disasters. The virus is, however, still with us, and, indeed, we and other schools are currently experiencing a surge of cases amongst our student bodies. We need to sustain our vigilance and maintain our readiness to deploy sensible strategies for mitigating risk whilst retaining and enabling as many opportunities and settings for healthy connection for our young people as we can. We appreciate how deeply children and young adults have been deprived of, and have missed, social, cultural, sporting and academic interconnection. The temporary loss of established patterns and programmes has reinforced and restated their value.

Research is revealing a surge of loneliness since the start of the pandemic. People are feeling overshadowed, and, sadly, some have experienced real and deep loss. We need to care for the vulnerable and fragile with renewed, active compassion. We also need to promote a sense of perspective, and not surrender to the contemporary temptations to overdramatise our privations and to seek others to blame. Australia has been spared the worst of the consequences of the pandemic and we must be grateful for this fact. Mistakes may have been made, but no rational person could doubt the dedication, care and sustained hard work of public figures and medical authorities, who have endured huge stresses in order to try to keep our communities safe. The spirit of the age is all too often to deny credit and to rush to harsh criticism. A little gratitude would sweeten the air of public discourse and restore balance.

One benefit of the pandemic has been the restoration of admiration for teachers and the evolution of greater understanding of the complexity and challenge of the work they do: let us hope that this renewed appreciation endures beyond the ever-shrinking timeframe of the contemporary news cycle.

## O

**OUR TEACHERS ARE MAKING** a conscious effort to assess where students are in terms of their academic development and also, through personal engagement, to keep an eye on social and emotional health. Through listening to our students—both in and out of the classroom—teachers come to know them as individuals and monitor their wellbeing.

In the classroom, great teachers promote vibrant conversation, which gives young people the chance to explore their own ideas and to contribute to the formation of collective wisdom. Conversations within the class represent a personal humane connection which builds confidence and character. In an age where so many young people rely upon secondary engagement, through technology rather than through first-hand experiences, schools such as Cranbrook look to provide, promote and expand primary interaction. Our co-curricular programmes are all designed to offer opportunities to create, rehearse, train, prepare and explore alongside others – and thus to come to know peers well and to strengthen invaluable soft skills. Our pastoral systems reinforce these vital aspects of community life. We ask our mentors to enjoy getting to know the young people in their care. And, of course, omnipresent secondary experiences can promote passivity, superficiality and the seductive myth of easy, instant reward whereas primary involvement requires personal investment. We ask our students to learn to give their best.

## W

**WHILE THE PANDEMIC HAS** certainly brought unprecedented digital acceleration—something we have benefitted from as a school— we need to keep asking ourselves: what can we get from connecting in person that we can't get from a screen? It is vital that we continue to place emphasis on, and continue to build, humane connection. Not only do we need to counter a sense of loneliness and disconnection, at the heart of a liberal education is the desire to develop character, to have the necessary civilising messages and conversations which stress, particularly in the young, the need to work hard and to see the world through the eyes of others. "The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him, 'What are you going through?'" wrote writer and philosopher Simone Weil, who considered at length the necessity of paying ethical attention to the other. We want to show our students how to pay attention in an era not only rife with attention-deficits, but where it is too easy to reach for the keyboard to attack opponents who are not in the room with us. We watch the shrinking of civility within public discourse, both in Australia and overseas, with horror: a lack of decency can fuel the rise of lazy, self-centred and hurtful thinking and thoughtless, harmful speech.

Cranbrook seeks to elevate the appreciation of the integrity of differences: to concentrate on the quality of the human beings in our care, to call our students to work hard to hear what others say. As we find our way out of the pandemic, we will work hard to achieve this important aim. ■

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