

Who Built the Room? Belonging, Memory, and What Mary Shelley Can Teach Us About Planned Giving and Artificial Intelligence by Quinton Jefferson

Do you remember Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*? Was it a story about a monster? The creature had frightening actions, but was it a "monster?" Shelley did not answer that question. Instead, her focus was on the creator. The novel reflects on belonging. Who decides who belongs? I wanted to explore this question and asked ChatGPT to write a story about planned giving and DEIA. The resulting story was competent and predictable. It featured opposing camps, institutional conflict, donor backlash, and ideological disagreement. In other words, it was cliché.

Artificial intelligence is good at recognizing patterns. If enough articles, posts, books, and conversations describe organizational change as a battle between tradition and progress, AI will reproduce that battle. If enough public discussions frame diversity initiatives as conflict, AI will discover conflict. If enough stories contain polarized characters standing on opposite sides of an issue, AI will generate another pair of polarized characters. Pattern recognition is AI's greatest strength. At the same time, pattern recognition is not understanding. AI does not know what it means to be raised in a single parent household; what it means to move through the foster care system; to be the first person in a family to move into uncharted spaces, or to inherit a set of traditions that never appear in mainstream narratives. AI can describe those experiences because human beings have written about them. It can identify similarities across them because human beings have recorded them. Yet, description is not experience; recognition is not understanding.

Discussions about AI eventually become discussions about people. AI has no childhood, no family, no memories, and no community. What it possesses are the traces of human experience embedded in the data used to train it - traces of humanity. Every model reflects the people who created it, and the information they chose to include. This moves the conversation to DEIA.

Shelley was not writing about diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, per se. She was writing about exclusion, alienation, prejudice, and belonging. The creature's tragedy was not that he was different. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." His tragedy was that no one believed there was a place for him. People decided what he was before they attempted to understand who he was. Similarly, when organizations discuss DEIA, they often focus on representation. They ask whether their audiences, donors, and constituents reflect the communities they serve. Those are important questions, but they are partial. Representation is ultimately a question about power. Who gets to shape the institution? Who defines excellence? Who decides what belongs? Who is invited into the room when decisions are made?

The connection between DEIA and AI becomes visible once those questions are asked. DEIA asks who is in the room; AI asks who built the room. Both questions are concerned with the same issue: whose experiences shaped the system?

Planned giving adds another layer to the conversation. Conversations about diversity in philanthropy often focus on donors while less attention is paid to the profession itself. The planned giving profession is a created system. Someone built the standards, designed the credentialing pathways, established expectations for expertise and leadership, and decided how successful planned giving work looks.

Like any profession, planned giving reflects the perspectives of the people who historically occupied positions of influence within it. For that reason, questions about representation cannot stop with donors. They must also include practitioners. How many planned giving officers come from working-class families? How many are first-generation college graduates? How many are people with disabilities? How many are bilingual or bicultural? How many younger professionals see the field as a place where they can build a future? These questions are not merely demographic. They concern perspective. Different experiences shape how people understand generosity, inheritance, family obligation, trust, and legacy. Moreover, the more important question may not be who enters the profession, but who remains. Professions proudly discuss recruitment while ignoring retention. Inclusion is often measured by who walks through the door rather than who stays long enough to influence the culture. Like the creature in Shelley's novel, people are often defined by the assumptions others make about them before they have an opportunity to define themselves.

This issue appears in professions. It is not enough to ask whether someone can enter the room. We must also ask whether they can build a future there. Who receives mentorship? Who gains access to donor relationships? Who is invited into leadership conversations? Who receives sponsorship instead of well-intentioned advice? How many talented professionals leave because they never find community? How many never enter because they never see someone who resembles them succeeding?

The creature's suffering was rooted in the absence of belonging. "I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel." He did not see a future for himself since no one around him imagined one. Throughout the novel, he watched other people participate in families, communities, and traditions that will outlast them. His greatest fear was erasure. He wanted someone to see him, understand him, and remember him. That desire sits at the heart of *Frankenstein* and planned giving.

Planned giving is concerned with memory. Every planned gift contains a simple request: remember me. Remember what mattered to me. Carry my values forward after I am gone. The financial vehicle is important, but it is not the heart of the transaction. The heart of the transaction is trust. Someone is placing part of their story into the future and hoping it will be cared for. This is why the comparison between AI and planned giving is revelatory. AI identifies donor behavior patterns, generates probability scores, and summarizes giving histories. AI does not understand what it feels like to establish a scholarship in memory of a parent or leave a gift because a teacher changed the course of one's life. The difference is not intelligence; the difference is experience.

Shelley understood that systems become dangerous when they stop seeing the humanity of the people they affect. The creature feared rejection and disappearance. Unfortunately, that is what he encountered – a world where he did not belong. He resigned himself to that fact and said, “I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames.” Shelley challenged us to ask who did the creating. AI asks who built the room. DEIA asks who is welcomed into it. Planned giving asks whose stories will remain after everyone leaves. Ultimately, these are not separate questions. They are all questions about belonging, memory, and what it means to recognize one another’s humanity. Who belongs, and who will be remembered?