

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR WEEKLY

*"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man,
but to bless all mankind."*

– MARY BAKER EDDY

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When a holiday chore becomes a treasure

Our essayists in this week's cover story reminisce about a meaningful gift they received – or gave – at the holidays. I have warm memories of Christmas, but no single toy or gift stands out. Instead, I recall the holiday family portraits my dad took each year, which I tolerated as an impatient child and resisted as a self-conscious teenager.

My dad, who is 97 years old, spent his career as a professional photographer. He shot everything from coffins to clothes to CEOs. Work and family didn't generally mix, except for one time, when I was in high school. I was pressed into service as a hand model, when the woman they hired failed to show up. (In the ad, my hand is holding a kitchen sponge.) He treated every photo shoot with care and precision.

Dad was equally meticulous with the family holiday portrait.

More to the point, he used a lot of film, snapping away as if he were a paparazzo and we were celebrities. Let me emphasize: These were not candid shots. He posed us this way and that, constantly exhorting us to "smile naturally." As an adolescent, I felt wooden and stilted, a half smile frozen on my lips, only partially hiding the braces on my teeth. I hated my glasses. My hair never cooperated. The whole experience was agony, and I couldn't wait for it to be over.

Today, when I look through the family albums, gratitude and delight outweigh

my earlier embarrassment. I can see the changes in each family member over the years: my dad's receding hairline, my mom's lovely smile, my brother's goofy grin. I also see the trajectory of who I was and who I became: the little girl who felt at home in her world; the shy, book-loving preadolescent; the awkward teenager; the confident 20-something. They're all there in the photos.

Like Nicholas Nixon's famous portrait series of the Brown sisters taken over 40 years, or Michael Apted's "Up" documentary film series, my dad's annual holiday photos became more than a time capsule. More than just "Look at those bad '70s outfits." They were a record of our lives, a reflection of our personalities. Markers of how we had changed.

I don't know if Dad had anything so lofty in mind when he took the photos, but he definitely wanted to preserve our likenesses for posterity. By subjecting us to this yearly torment and ignoring our grumbling, he gave us the perfect gift: ourselves, as the years went by. ■



BY APRIL AUSTIN
DEPUTY WEEKLY
EDITION EDITOR

PARIS

Five years after fire, a shining Notre Dame reopens

By Colette Davidson / Special correspondent

Restoring the Notre Dame cathedral has been profound for people like archaeologist Dorothée Chaoui-Derieux.

Since the 2019 fire that saw Notre Dame's famous spire burn to ash, Ms. Chaoui-Derieux and her team of 20 have unearthed an abundance of medieval treasures. They include forgotten tombs, headless sculptures, and the fragmented remains of a vibrantly colored 13th-century rood screen – the partition that separates the choir from the nave – buried beneath the cathedral floor.

"We've literally had our hands in 2,000 years of history, excavating and digging up the past," says Ms. Chaoui-Derieux, chief curator of heritage at the

Regional Archaeological Service of cultural affairs for the Paris region. "Our goal is to make sure this medieval cathedral, and all its history, comes back to life."

People like Ms. Chaoui-Derieux who have worked tirelessly on Notre Dame's restoration say the public is in for more than a few surprises.

"The cathedral was very dark; it had accumulated centuries' worth of dust," says Ms. Chaoui-Derieux. "Now, people will find bright-colored stone and clean stained-glass windows. We're going to rediscover a cathedral bursting with light."

In the aftermath of the fire, when French President Emmanuel Macron promised to restore Notre Dame in five years, many said it couldn't be done. But hundreds of millions of euros in donations poured in from around the world, and over 1,000 restorers, artisans, and craftspeople have risen to the challenge of Mr. Macron's steep timeline. These workers say a revitalized cathedral incorporates old and new, respecting tradition while also breathing new life into the icon.

"Everyone involved – from City Hall and the Catholic diocese to artisans and academics – has put everything they have into this project," says Sylvie Sagnes, an anthropologist at the French National Centre for Scientific Research and member of a multidisciplinary research team on the Notre Dame restoration. "We all wanted to respect this national monument that generates so much emotion for people."

A loss widely felt

The world watched in disbelief as the Notre Dame cathedral caught fire April 15, 2019. By the following day, the cathedral's wooden spire had collapsed, its upper walls were damaged, and most of its wooden roof was destroyed. The fire caused an outpouring of generosity, with individuals and businesses donating upward of \$1 billion toward restoration efforts within two years.

Notre Dame "is both a religious and a cultural monument, and has universal value to people," says Nathalie Heinich, a French sociologist and author. "To see a building that had remained identical since its construction be destroyed, it created a rare emotional reaction. There was a sense that both authenticity and antiquity – two fundamental heritage values – had been affected."

WHY WE WROTE THIS

JOY

After a fire ravaged the Notre Dame cathedral in 2019, few believed the Parisian icon could be quickly restored to its former glory. But only five years later, it is open – lighter, brighter, and better protected from disaster than ever.

Though the fire was traumatic, it provided an opportunity to look at Notre Dame through a new lens. Early on, some called to restore the cathedral using contemporary design. But those ideas were eventually scrapped as heritage experts pushed for a restoration that respected the vision of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, one of the architects who oversaw a major restoration of the cathedral in the mid-19th century.

Debates over stained glass and the spire

In August, the National Commission on Heritage and Architecture unanimously opposed President Macron's plans to replace stained glass windows in six chapels in the cathedral's nave with more modern versions.

And despite an international competition to reimagine the rebuild of the cathedral's famous spire, Mr. Macron ultimately opted to restore it to Viollet-le-Duc's conception. Forty carpenters from French building company Le Bras Frères meticulously studied the 19th-century sketches to re-create the medieval wooden spire.

"We used the same methods as in that era, except that this time we used electric machines to cut the pieces of wood," says carpenter Patrick Jouenne, who quit his job to become the lead carpenter on the spire rebuild. "It was a challenge but also an honor to work for Notre Dame. You realize, wow, you can't dream of anything better."

As the restoration moved forward, there was one thing that was not up for debate: the need for a fire alarm system. At the time of the fire in 2019, the centuries-old Notre Dame did not have any type of detection apparatus in place.

"We had to envision all the possible scenarios and necessary measures, keeping in mind the sheer size of Notre Dame, and the interaction between fire and ventilation," says Benjamin Truchot, project manager of the fire unit at the French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks, which relied on digital and scale physical models to create an innovative fire detection system. "That was the big challenge: to offer a modern security system within such an ancient structure."

Tradition – but new vestments

While architects were keen to respect traditional methods structurally, there has been more leeway when it comes to garb and artifacts within the church.

Fashion designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, who has dressed Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Pope John Paul II, says he was given free rein to design the liturgical garments for Notre Dame. The robes he came up with, made of off-white Scottish wool gabardine, feature sprays of red, blue, and yellow fragments surrounding a gold cross.

"The color represents all of us, humanity, the young and old coming together," said Mr. Castelbajac, from his Paris studio. "We need a universal language."

In November, the Paris 2024 Organizing Committee gave Notre Dame the official Olympic bell, which will join two smaller bells – named Chiara and Carlos – to be rung during Mass. Among the special events following the first ceremonies, Notre Dame's traditional choir was to step aside for a special concert by an amateur choir made up of nearly 100 craftspeople and artisans who took part in the restoration.

But part of Notre Dame is still indelibly rooted in tradition. Days before the reopening, as a statue of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus that was saved during the fire made its way back to the cathedral in a public procession, there was a sense of Notre Dame's resilience, its strength to pull itself up out of the ashes.

"Notre Dame has continued to provide us with hope and renaissance," says Parisian Marie-Aline Girod, who took part in the procession. "It's the heart of Paris." ■

KIBBUTZ DAFNA, ISRAEL

Time to go home? Hezbollah ceasefire offers northern Israelis hope.

By Dina Kraft / Special correspondent

Orit Praag is so delighted by the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah that she's almost bouncing as she walks along the lavender and rosemary bushes in the garden of her son's home.

His family has not lived here on this kibbutz near Lebanon for the past 14 months.

Along with some 60,000 other residents in villages and towns along Israel's northern border, they left the day the community was awoken by evacuation orders. The region became a second war front a day after the Oct. 7, 2023, assault on Israel's southern border from Gaza, when Hezbollah opened fire in solidarity with Hamas.

Since then, a Hezbollah missile landed on the sidewalk next door, shattering windows and leaving the walls of all the nearby houses riddled with shrapnel. Kibbutz Dafna's avocado grove was destroyed by a fire, the roof of its school struck, and thousands of missiles and drones were shot toward the community and points deeper in Israel.

But residents say they hope the ceasefire means they will return to this communal farm that is nestled in the Hula Valley, about a mile away from the Lebanese border.

Ms. Praag's family, like so many of the other evacuees from kibbutzim and towns along the northern border, remains torn, awaiting clarity to the question they've debated every day since their abrupt departure: Will it be safe enough to return?

"I admit I'm feeling optimistic right now," she says. "The ceasefire has created positive feelings and hope. I could see that this past weekend, seeing so many young families arrive to visit their homes and sleep over. My grandson even made a video about the kibbutz for his classmates, declaring, 'This is my home.'"

Syria's impact

According to the ceasefire brokered by the United States and France in late November, Hezbollah forces must retreat 18 miles north of the border within 60 days while Israeli troops withdraw from southern Lebanon, to be replaced by Lebanese and United Nations troops. Then tens of thousands of Lebanese and Israeli civilians from both sides of the border are allowed to return home.

Buoying hopes, the early December fall of the autocratic Assad regime in Syria increases the likelihood the truce holds, some Israeli military officials say. The regime's abandonment by its longtime sponsor Iran signals Tehran's diminished power and ability to easily resupply Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Dafna and other northern communities historically were seen as among the most threatened in Israel. In the Jewish state's earlier years, the kibbutz was targeted by Syria and later by militant groups in Lebanon. But the communities had never been evacuated, even amid the fierce Lebanon wars in 1982 and 2006. The question of returning is also symbolic, a test of the Zionist ethos of defending borders through settlement.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

PEACE

Northern Israel offered residents a relaxed, pastoral refuge away from the country's crowded center. Now a ceasefire with Hezbollah, bolstered perhaps by the fall of Syria's government, offers hope that northerners displaced by war can return home.

Ms. Praag's parents' generation founded Kibbutz Dafna as young refugees from Nazi Europe. The northern Galilee, ringed by Syrian and Lebanese hills and under the gaze of towering Mount Hermon in the northern Golan Heights, is beloved for its fresh air, pastoral views, and relaxed pace.

"I was born here, and this is home to me, with these views and the sound of nearby rivers," says Ms. Praag. "Since I was in nursery school I heard the Syrians around me, threatening us in those days, but I knew that Israel would save me."

Now, referencing the 100 Israelis still held hostage in Gaza, and an Israeli government that she and others criticize for not acting more urgently to negotiate their release, she wonders what would happen if Hezbollah captured her or her neighbors.

Hamas' mass hostage-taking is a plan reportedly modeled on one by Hezbollah.

"We were used to having security incidents, but nothing prepared us for what happened on Oct. 7, and what happened that day could have happened here," says Ravit Rosental, principal of the kibbutz middle school and high school. "I won't feel safe until the hostages return."

A fractured sense of security

Arik Yaacovi, the kibbutz manager, says the trauma is so deep, "It will take a generation for a sense of security to return."

Especially dangerous to border communities is the firing of anti-tank missiles directly onto homes. That threat has been curbed, as has the risk of infiltrations, he says, thanks to the massive Israeli offensive that began in September and included the first ground invasion of southern Lebanon since 2006.

Israeli forces uprooted Hezbollah tunnels and lookouts, and airstrikes killed much of Hezbollah's top leadership, including its storied leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Yet the threat of ballistic missiles remains.

"I've lived in this area almost 50 years and have experienced how we go from round of fighting to round of fighting. ... It's a crazy reality. No one wants to raise their children like this," Mr. Yaacovi says.

"What will make the difference in people feeling safe is the beefing up of security arrangements, including the kibbutz fence, and how extensively the army will be deployed along the border," he continues. "But we have no other country, and woe to us if we surrender. It's an essential part of the country."

When the kibbutz, whose main income is from tourism and avocado and citrus groves, evacuated its 1,050 residents, they scattered across the country and even abroad. Many are staying at hotels and apartments paid for by the government near the Sea of Galilee.

Often in the same families, partners disagree over where they should cast their future. Ms. Rosental, the school principal, reports a spike in anxiety and other emotional problems among students, with parents too emotionally spent to address them.

As the fighting ramped up in September, with daily missile barages, people were terrified of driving, fearing they'd be caught on the roads without shelter.

Yet if the ceasefire holds, Mr. Yaacovi says, and a new sense of normalcy replaces the dread, he has an optimistic assessment: "By this summer, I hope we will see most people moved back."

"My heart definitely wants to come back"

Five miles west of Dafna, the working-class city of Kiryat Shmona feels like a ghost town. On the second floor of a building where three generations of Achi Natan's family live, a children's room lies in tatters from a missile.

Mr. Natan, a musician doing his military reserve duty in the local security force, says he will never leave this place that his family has called home for decades. He was named for his father's brother, who was killed fighting in the 1982 war. Regardless of what this ceasefire brings, he expects his sons and grandsons will also have

to fight in Lebanon.

At the site of a direct missile hit that lit an adjacent apartment block ablaze, the smell of smoke still lingers four months later. Yotam Degani, Kiryat Shmona's director of resource development, looks beyond the damage, motioning to the surrounding nature. "I'm biased, but this is the most beautiful place in Israel," he says. "When you live here, you are living as a family."

"My heart definitely wants to come back," he adds, pausing. He says his wife is hesitant about bringing their baby daughter and toddler son here. "There has not been a day we have not talked about it, cried about it – it's complicated."

The night before, though, he slept in his own bed for the first time in six months. "It feels like home; it's magical – the place I want to come back to." ■

OTIS AND SANDISFIELD, MASS.

Millions in rural America lack reliable internet. How Massachusetts towns got online.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

Otis, Massachusetts, isn't the sort of place you expect to spend a lot of time online. A few two-lane mountain roads snake through dense woods and around placid ponds. Quaint houses peek out from the thickets. Main Road is dotted by a few small businesses, a modest town hall, and a diner or two. It's the sort of place you might go to escape the hustle and bustle.

For Kirsten Paulson, who lives part time in Otis, that's all a selling point. Another major one: Her internet service is better here than at her home outside Washington, D.C.

That's because the town of 1,500 people built its own network to fill in the gaps left by private providers, which don't offer high-speed internet in Otis. Now, after decades of slow and unreliable service, nearly every house in town is connected to a state-of-the-art fiber-optic network.

Versions of that story repeat themselves across western Massachusetts, where dozens of rural communities have used state, federal, and municipal funds to get their residents online. Some, like Otis, built their own networks, treating internet access like a public utility. Others, like neighboring Sandisfield, formed public-private partnerships to entice companies to provide service.

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), a state agency tasked with making affordable internet widely available, says that 99% of the commonwealth now has high-speed internet.

It's a success story that points a way forward for rural municipalities across the United States. In October, Maine said it would offer free Starlink dishes to about 9,000 residents in the most remote areas with no access to reliable broadband. The technology from SpaceX delivers internet service via satellites rather than ground-based cables or cell towers, making it well suited for rural and remote areas.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

EQUALITY

In today's world, access to fast, reliable broadband internet can be key to education and employment.

Communities – especially rural ones – are finding innovative ways to use state, federal, and municipal funds to connect.

The Federal Communications Commission estimated that in 2019, some 17% of Americans living in rural areas lacked high-speed internet, compared with 1% in urban areas. Other studies estimate that as much as 50% of rural America doesn't have access.

Reliable broadband, or high-speed internet that's always on, brings benefits beyond streaming a Netflix hit or conveniently filing taxes. It can generate economic growth, boost school performance, and improve emergency services.

"It touches upon all of these elements," says Christopher Ali, a professor of telecommunications at Penn State.

Why so much of rural America lacks internet

Americans pay more on average for broadband than residents in other developed nations. Dr. Ali also points to the country's dependence on the private market: In areas with low population density, it can be hard for a private company to turn a profit.

Before fiber was widely available, residents of both towns were limited to using internet transmitted via copper telephone wires – commonly known as digital subscriber lines, or DSL – and satellites. Neither option offers much speed or reliability, residents say.

When the pandemic shuttered schools and moved learning online, Sandisfield parents parked outside the public library so children could use the building's Wi-Fi to do schoolwork from the car. "It was a little bit of a heartbreak to watch what was going on with kids that were trying to work remotely," says Craig Storms, a Sandisfield resident.

But there's no one-size-fits-all solution to such a complex problem, says Michael Baldino, director of the MBI. Different communities have different needs.

Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in Otis and Sandisfield. Though local grassroots efforts drove both projects, they took vastly different approaches to solving connectivity problems.

Otis opted to build and operate its own network. That model lets the community decide how the network runs. Because the town doesn't seek to profit, municipal networks can often set lower prices than private providers and excess money can be funneled back into the community.

The idea wasn't new. Glasgow, Kentucky, became the first municipality in the U.S. to build a network in 1989. In Massachusetts, the city of Westfield had already taken the plunge.

That precedent proved invaluable. Eventually, Whip City Fiber, the subsidiary Westfield created to operate its network, built Otis's system. While Otis owns the network, Whip City Fiber provides the internet access and maintains the infrastructure.

For Tom Flaherty, general manager of Whip City Fiber, the partnership was about more than just good business. "We were looking at it from the point of view of really helping one of our neighbors," he says. "For a municipal utility, that's what we do, right? We strive to help our community."

Connectivity to each other

In Otis, residents' enthusiasm underscores broadband's impact on rural communities. "It's been one of the best things that's ever happened," says Larry Gould, who worked on the project.

The new network has attracted homebuyers like Hilary Harley, who says she moved to Otis partly because of its strong internet. It has also meant existing residents have an easier time building community and feeling more connected to the broader world.

"It lets us be connected here, where really before you were kind of remote," Mrs. Paulson says, emphasizing the benefits for school-age children and their parents as well. "It's made community-organizing things better."

But it wasn't a cheap undertaking. Otis financed the plan with a nearly \$4 million municipal bond and a \$1.8 million state grant. Such grant funding is a major driver of broadband expansion in the Bay State. An influx of federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act

and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has also been instrumental.

Sandisfield wasn't able to finance its own network, says Jeff Bye, a retired rocket scientist who chaired the town's broadband committee. Instead, the town partnered with Charter Communications, one of the nation's biggest broadband providers. State funding helped offset construction costs.

Unlike Otis, Sandisfield doesn't reap the benefits of owning its internet infrastructure. But Charter has "the people who know how to design something like that, how to build something like that, how to operate it, maintain it," says Mr. Bye.

Since the network was installed, Sandisfield has seen more people applying to build and buy homes, says Steven Seddon Sr., chair of the town's Select Board. It also recently installed CodeRED, an internet-based public safety program.

For Stewart Goossens, who works from Sandisfield when he visits his parents, the new network means he spends less time struggling to get a stable connection – and more time in the community he cherishes. "It allows me to really live my life and be with the people I want to be with," he says.

The projects haven't been entirely successful, however. In Otis, Mr. Gould says there are still pockets where people aren't serviced. A few houses in Sandisfield can't access the new network because of contractual issues, according to one resident. In both towns, prices are lower than many private market rates, but some residents say the cost is still steep.

Still, the fiber networks have been a boon for both communities, who no longer lack what many consider to be a service as essential as running water or electricity. "[Broadband] is not a luxury," Mr. Bye says. "It's a necessity." ■

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

6,000

Centrifuges Iran proposed adding to its nuclear program, reports the International Atomic Energy Agency. The centrifuges would allow Iran to produce more uranium, and possibly at a higher enrichment grade. Either way, that would increase the country's capacity to build nuclear weapons, though Iran has denied this as its intent.

99

Countries scheduled to present in front of the top United Nations court as it decides how much and what kind of responsibility individual nations have under international law to combat climate change.

85

Percentage of Iceland's houses heated by geothermal energy, a virtually inexhaustible and worldwide green energy source. Iceland relies on abundant reservoirs of hot water close to the surface. Other countries must drill deeper for heat sources, making geothermal a less attractive energy option.

4,000

Years, age of a canal network found in Belize by archaeologists using Google Earth imagery and drones. The ancient pre-Maya canals were used to channel and catch fish.

26

Coffee farms in China that feed part of the Starbucks and Nestlé supply chains, identified by human rights group China Labor Watch for child labor and poor

safety standards. The companies have been flagged before by rights groups for buying from global suppliers that do not protect workers.

5

Days the Grand Sumo Tournament will be held in London in 2025 for the first time in 34 years. Over 40 elite wrestlers will attend.

— **Brooke Holder and Sophie Ungerleider** / Staff writers

Sources: Al Jazeera, NPR, BBC, The Associated Press, The Washington Post, The New York Times

THE EXPLAINER

Chillax! Here's your guide to conversing through the winter holidays.

Stephen A. Smith glazed the GOAT LeBron. Timothée Chalamet rizzed Kylie Jenner with his dope smile and curls. Chappell Roan locked in at that concert and absolutely ate!

'Tis the time of year when members of multiple generations gather with their families and catch up on what's happening in their lives and the world. But if the sentences above don't make much sense, you might need some help ahead of your holiday get-together.

Herewith, a guide to what you might hear from millennials and Generation Zers while you eat dinner, binge holiday movies, and laze around the fireplace. (Note: Some of this slang crosses generational lines or has been borrowed from bygone eras or modern cultures. Just know that "groovy" won't ever come back in style.)

GEN Z GLOSSARY

fire, gas (adjectives): excellent; delicious. *This ham is fire. And these peas are gas!*

lock in (verb): to focus. *Nothing ickier than yanking out turkey giblets, but I gotta lock in and take one for the team!*

ate (verb): did something extremely well. *I absolutely ate at the office's winter yodeling contest!*

in one's bag: used to describe someone who pulls off something impressive. *Gramps was in his bag with this gift idea. I've wanted heated underwear since forever!*

cap (verb): to lie. **That's cap!** (interjection): used to say something is false. *Does this Santa suit make me look fat? Don't cap!*

high-key (adverb): used to emphasize strong feelings. *We high-key despised the Grinch for stealing little Cindy Lou Who's Christmas.*

rizz (verb): to charm or woo someone (short for "charisma"). *Dad rizzed Mom with one of his seasonal jokes:*

*Knock, knock!
Who's there?
Freeze!
Freeze who?
Freeze, a jolly good fellow!*

glaze (verb): to praise excessively. *Cousin Chester's gravy was goopy, but we glazed it anyway.*

tea (noun): juicy gossip. *I wanted the tea about Uncle Rupert's messy breakup. He spilled it all in his holiday newsletter.*

MILLENNIAL GLOSSARY

slay (verb): to do something very well. *Granny, you really slayed this turducken!*

ghost (verb): to abruptly end all communication with someone without warning; to stand up someone. *We were supposed to meet under the mistletoe, but Greta ghosted me.*

GOAT (noun): greatest of all time. *Mom macraméd an 8-foot-tall Mrs. Claus to hang on our front door. She's the GOAT of Christmas decorators.*

salty (adjective): bitter, annoyed, disgruntled. *Year after year Milo loses the ugly Christmas sweater contest. No wonder he's salty.*

glow-up (noun): a positive physical transformation. *Aunt Myrtle made everyone get a glow-up for her holiday photos. No more at-home haircuts!*

chillax (verb): to relax. *Turkey with all the fixin's put us in a food coma. Now it's time to chillax in our stretchy pants and watch QVC.*

dope (adjective): cool, awesome. *You built a gingerbread Great Wall of China? That's dope!*

flex (verb): to show off. *Whenever he has a captive audience, Felix loves to flex his collection of exotic snow globes.*

extra (adjective): over the top. *My family's tradition of dressing up in matching pajamas, singing Mariah Carey songs, and watching "Home Alone" is sooo extra. But I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Happy holidays!

— **Nate Iglehart** / Staff writer

SCIENCE AND NATURE

GREAT BARRINGTON AND SHEFFIELD, MASS.

Record drought and blazes? The US Northeast awakens to new wildfire risks.

By **Mackenzie Farkus, Brooke Holder, Nate Iglehart, Jacob Posner, and Sophie Ungerleider** / Staff writers

The trail at Thomas & Palmer Brook in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, winds through mature pasture, wetlands, and forest.

Residents love this trail for its wet coolness in the summer; its orange sugar maples in autumn, the green pines and white snow in the winter. But one Monday, wildfire haze from the Butternut Fire obscured the ridgeline of nearby East Mountain, where days before Black Hawk helicopters dumped water collected from local ponds.

Doug Brown, director of stewardship at the Berkshire Natural Resources Council, a nonprofit that maintains nearly 14,000 acres of wild land and over 60 miles of trails in this western Massachusetts county, stares into the distant haze.

"Climate vulnerabilities show up in a lot of different ways in our community," he says. "But we weren't thinking a lot about fire."

The Butternut Fire that broke out Nov. 18 consumed portions

of the Appalachian Trail, plus over 1,400 acres in East Mountain State Forest, here in Great Barrington and nearby Sheffield. The fire quickly became Massachusetts' largest wildfire this year after months of record drought in the Northeast. It took nearly a week for a crew of local volunteer firefighters, state emergency services, and wildfire fighting crews from as far as Wyoming to contain the blaze.

"It's not something I've seen out here before," says Mr. Brown. "I've been through areas under wildfire in the western U.S., and I've been in those smoky contexts, but I've never seen a plume of fire come over the hillside" in Massachusetts.

The Butternut Fire finally fizzled out Dec. 1. No lives or structures were lost in the blaze. Firefighters and local police are currently investigating the cause of the fire, but suspect that humans were the source.

In October alone, wildfires in Massachusetts increased 1,200% over the state's annual October average of 15 wildland fires.

"We can tell you that we've had no thunderstorm development in the month of October and November, which means there's been no natural-caused fires," says Massachusetts State Fire Supervisor David Celino. "So all of the fire activity we've seen is human-caused in some form or fashion."

And that, he and other forestry professionals and firefighters say, is a new challenge for this forested region.

The Northeast is also dealing with unusually high levels of dead wood in its forests, experts say, caused by decreasing winter snowpack that leaves tree roots vulnerable to cold, plus a wave of pests migrating with warmer temperatures. Combined with drought – this year's fall is the driest in at least 120 years in parts of the region – and the risk of wildfire shoots up.

But the people who live in and around the trees here are not used to thinking about forest fires. Now Mr. Celino, along with other forestry professionals and firefighters across New England, are trying to change that.

Lessons for the Northeast

The Northeast is one of the most densely forested regions in the United States, with 170 million acres of forestland cover and tree canopy and other green spaces covering 35% of urban areas in the region. The region isn't yet facing wildfires on the scale of those on the West Coast, where burns can engulf entire towns. But wildfire preparedness is generally lacking, most experts here agree.

In Connecticut, for instance, there were 200 fires this fall.

"Those oak trees ... were lighting up like matchsticks," says Andy Bicking, executive director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association.

In a recent research paper for the National Fire Academy, Christopher Renshaw, interim fire chief at the University of Connecticut, found that overall wildfire preparedness in Connecticut – from fire policy to public education – is behind the rapid changes the state's forests are facing.

Yet there are models elsewhere in the country for Northeastern firefighters to study, Mr. Renshaw says. In his paper, he highlighted the 2023 wildfires on Maui as a preview of potential threats to Connecticut's forests.

"A large, vast percentage of our country [is] already dealing with this problem," he says. "So we don't have to go far for lessons learned."

Innovative ideas

Unique wildfire management efforts are already taking shape

in the Northeast.

Elia Del Molino says he could see the Butternut Fire and smell its smoke from April Hill, the home of Greenagers, a nonprofit where he works as conservation director. The organization employs youth to maintain and clear trails alongside local environmental groups like the Berkshire Natural Resources Council. Not long ago, they didn't even have wildfires on their radar. Now, Greenagers is creating training programs for members to get certification for fighting blazes in their forests.

"When we build trails, pretty much the first step is you dig the fire line," says Mr. Del Molino.

Young people are also addressing the strains put on local fire departments. Despite declining numbers in recent decades, some volunteer firefighter departments have seen an uptick in younger people hoping to help save their forests.

The Williamstown Fire Department, for instance, located in northern Berkshire County, has seen an increase of eager part-time volunteers over the past few years among students attending Williams College.

Further south, on a 600-acre plot in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, one of the largest wilderness areas on the East Coast, forestry professionals study prescribed fire, wildfire effects, and fire tools at the Silas Little Experimental Forest. According to Michael Gallagher, a research ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station and the lead scientist at the experimental forest, his team has received more questions recently from forestry management professionals and firefighters about monitoring and managing wildfires.

"We ... participate in prescribed burning or wildfire operations to support local agencies," Dr. Gallagher says. The technicians at the experimental forest are "red carded," meaning they're all qualified wildland firefighters. "Through those experiences, we also get a very good sense of what managers need and how to respond to them."

The team at Silas Little Experimental Forest has focused a lot on terrestrial laser scanning, or terrestrial lidar. The device is a laser range finder built so that it can pivot on a tripod and scan the whole forest. "We use that to collect very rich structural data about the forest," Dr. Gallagher explains. "That data can help describe the state of the forest, whether there's a major fuel hazard there or the hazard's been mitigated through some type of management, maybe prescribed fire or mechanical thinning."

He describes it as a device that is easy to learn to use because it has one button, does the work itself, and only takes about 30 seconds to collect the scan. Lidar can also track forestry changes over time, even in the midst of multiple wildfires. "If you do a treatment where a wildfire comes through, you can continue to go back and use this monitoring tool through time as the forest changes after that," Dr. Gallagher says.

Forests in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, and even the majority of the East Coast, are fire-adapted and even fire-dependent. Prescribed burning, Dr. Gallagher says, is a proactive approach to reducing wildfires. Maintaining the forests with these burns can help them grow and flourish. "Fire is a natural process and a necessary process to keep these assemblages of species going."

As for East Mountain State Forest, Mr. Brown says, it will be fine.

"The trees that remain – the oak trees in particular – they're going to do really well," he says. "They're resilient against fire, and hopefully this clears the way for better forest regeneration and less invasive species coming in." ■

WHY WE WROTE THIS

RESPONSIBILITY

Forests make up a high percentage of the U.S. Northeast. After a record drought this fall, and increased wildfires, people in this region are recognizing the need to prepare for threats to forests.

LAS VEGAS

‘Paw partners’ step in to aid overwhelmed shelters

By Jackie Valley / Staff writer

A teary-eyed woman guides a dog with sad brown eyes into a crate as the woofs of other canines fill the room.

“Mommy loves you,” the woman reassures the dog.

This isn’t what the woman wants. It doesn’t seem to be what the dog, Vino, wants either. But the woman recently lost her home and has to move into a camper – without Vino. A Path 4 Paws, a rescue organization in Las Vegas, has offered to help find him a new family.

Minutes earlier, Marleen Szalay, a volunteer, had coached the woman through filling out intake paperwork with Vino’s best interests in mind. With enough information, “We’ll be able to get him in the right home,” she says.

As the Sunday morning progresses, a van full of dogs coming from the organization’s sanctuary arrives. Volunteers lead the animals into the adoption center and prepare them to meet prospective new owners. This is the scene every Saturday and Sunday, and on a good weekend, A Path 4 Paws will find “loving homes” for 20 dogs, Ms. Szalay says.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

COOPERATION

Shelters across the United States are struggling to care for vulnerable animals. A constellation of animal welfare groups is supplementing their work.

A Path 4 Paws is just one in a constellation of animal welfare organizations that exists in communities across the United States. Some organizations play a behind-the-scenes role, providing extra capacity, foster homes, and a pathway to adoption for animals of all shapes and sizes. Others address a root cause of overpopulation by spaying and neutering animals. Many organizations are run by people like Ms. Szalay – dedicated volunteers whose passion for animals’ well-being motivates their unpaid work.

Here in Las Vegas, The Animal Foundation – a high-volume shelter that receives about a third of its funding from local governments – regularly works with dozens of animal rescue organizations. Betsy Laakso, the shelter’s director of community engagement, says they are “paw partners” who help save the lives of vulnerable animals.

“Our relationship with them is pretty vital,” she says. “It helps us with the population of animals coming in here and is one more positive pathway that we can give the animals.”

And that population is booming. Through the end of October, The Animal Foundation alone had taken in 21,899 animals – more than two-thirds of whom were deemed to be strays – and transferred 2,323 to other rescue organizations this year. Large dogs are sitting at the shelter the longest, waiting an average of two weeks to get adopted, according to Animal Foundation data.

A Path 4 Paws, which relies entirely on donations, regularly picks up dogs from the shelter and independently tries to secure new homes for them. That’s where the volunteers come into play, fostering the dogs, ushering them to veterinary appointments, running the adoption center on weekends, and, of course, providing frequent cuddles. One person even donates carpet squares to be used in the crates.

The organization routinely has 150 dogs at its sanctuary in a rural area outside Las Vegas. Owners surrender them for reasons such as moves, financial difficulties, or health conditions affecting their ability to care for the animals. Other dogs wind up at shelters,

which reach out to rescue organizations when they’re overflowing.

An adoption fee covers the cost of ensuring the dogs are spayed or neutered, dewormed, microchipped, and up to date on their shots, Ms. Szalay says, adding that the organization’s veterinary bills still end up being thousands of dollars each month.

“So many people help us in so many weird, different ways,” says Ms. Szalay, a former hotel executive who decided helping dogs would be her retirement purpose. She calls the work “rewarding” but also “heartbreaking.”

The volunteers running Bunnies Matter, another animal rescue organization in Las Vegas, feel much the same. On a Saturday morning, they’re arguably doing more hopping than the domesticated rabbits in their care as they facilitate adoptions, clean pens, provide snacks, and give attention.

Dave Schweiger, president of Bunnies Matter, says the rescue group started with six bunnies that had been dumped in his neighborhood. The six quickly turned into 24 bunnies. When Mr. Schweiger sought help, he couldn’t find any.

Eventually, the donation-funded group moved into space provided by the city at a park. The small building with wall-mounted air conditioners has 23 pens housing roughly 40 bunnies total – all of whom had been dumped or injured. The group’s volunteers have even more bunnies at their homes.

Mr. Schweiger says the goal is to find them homes but not before educating potential adopters about all that pet ownership entails. Last year, the group adopted out 119 rabbits.

“The biggest problem is people not thinking they’re forever pets,” he says.

Rescue groups can provide an additional “pressure valve release” by providing more homes for animals in their communities, says Stephanie Filer, executive director of Shelter Animals Count, a national database. But success hinges on cooperation among various entities.

“We are best as an industry when we are all collaborating and working well together for the benefit of the animals,” she says.

In Las Vegas, cooperation is also occurring on the population-control front. It’s on display in late July at the Heaven Can Wait Animal Society, a nonprofit focusing on spay and neuter services. Cats under anesthesia, slated for the minor surgical procedure, sleep soundly in a row.

On its highest-volume days, the clinic can spay or neuter 100 community cats brought in by volunteer trappers, partner nonprofit groups, foster programs, local residents, or the animal shelter, says Kelly Sheehan, the organization’s communications and development manager.

“We can’t do what we do without them,” she says.

The Community Cat Coalition of Clark County is one of the volunteer organizations routinely bringing cats to the nonprofit clinic. C5, as it’s known, traps community cats that are part of street colonies and returns them after they have been spayed or neutered.

Keith Williams, president of C5, performed system and data analysis for the aerospace industry before retiring. He approaches his nonprofit’s work with the same numbers-oriented mindset. “If we can go upstream and deal with the root problem, which is vastly too many being born, then the burden on the rescue world will be diminished,” he says.

For volunteers, success also means saying goodbye. Jill Jones, a volunteer at A Path 4 Paws, gives a cattle dog named Art ample belly rubs on a patch of artificial turf. He squirms in delight. Will this be their final interaction? For Art’s sake, she hopes so.

“You get attached to them, but then it’s nice when you don’t see them because they got a home,” she says.

Within weeks, Art and Vino had both found homes. They posed for photos, tongues hanging out in canine smiles, with their new families. ■

1. United States

Families shared more meals during the pandemic – with lasting effects. A study conducted in 2021 found that 60% of 517 families surveyed ate dinner together more often compared with before the pandemic. Many used video calls to include extended-family members in meals, which may foster family bonding, and “children’s feeling a sense of belonging to a larger unit, which we know is protective for their well-being,” said Anne Fishel, a co-author of the study.

Two-thirds reported laughing more together, 59% said they felt more connected to each other around the dinner table, and 60% said they expressed more gratitude. These benefits were visible across income level, education, age, gender, and race. Regular family dinners are linked to better health and success in school among kids and teenagers, and lower rates of disordered eating, substance use, and depression.

SCIENCEDAILY, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

2. Mexico

A lost Maya city was discovered under a jungle canopy. While only a 15-minute walk from a busy roadway, the ancient metropolis was spotted not on foot but by sifting through aerial scans taken years before for use by ecologists studying trees.

New analysis of lidar scans revealed a dense network of thousands of structures, including temple pyramids, a palace complex, public plazas, reservoirs, and a court for playing ball sports. Lidar emits laser pulses from an aircraft, allowing for images that penetrate vegetation and reveal the contours beneath.

Valeriana, located in the modern-day state of Campeche, was home to an estimated 50,000 people, likely between A.D. 750 and 850. Researchers say local farmers probably knew about the ruins, which suggest a more complex and widespread Maya civilization than is sometimes described.

“In the era of Lidar,” said Luke Auld-Thomas, the Ph.D. student who discovered the scans, “there are more [hidden cities] than we can ever hope to study.”

BBC, THE NEW YORK TIMES

3. Poland

Road deaths in Warsaw have dropped by over half in the past decade. The streets of the Polish capital were once known as some of the deadliest in Europe. Fatalities hit a peak of 314 deaths in 1991. By 2023, that number had fallen to 29.

To turn things around, the city pinpointed 400 particularly dangerous crosswalks, improved lighting, and raised medians. It built roundabouts and new speed bumps to slow down vehicles. A 2021 law gave pedestrians priority at crosswalks and raised fines for drivers who break traffic laws.

While speeding and drunken driving remain issues in Warsaw, the city is committed to the Vision Zero framework, which seeks to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries. “Not a single death, even in traffic collisions, is acceptable,” says Tomasz Tosza, deputy director of Warsaw’s Department of Road Management. Nationally, road deaths have fallen by 40% since 2014.

BLOOMBERG CITYLAB

4. Kenya

Businesses and farmers are working together to clean up Kenya’s water supply. The Upper Tana River Basin provides 95% of Nairobi’s drinking water and half the country’s hydropower. But deforestation and farming have polluted the water with sediment and chemicals.

An innovative fund launched by The Nature Conservancy in 2015 connects downstream water companies and breweries with upstream small-scale farmers. The businesses offer tools for farmers to conserve and harvest water, from roof gutters to rainwater storage tanks. The farmers agree to use organic fertilizers and diversify their crops to reduce erosion.

The national government is devoting more resources to water management, but individual farmers play an important role. With 300,000 participating, the fund is estimated to add 27 million liters (7.1 million gallons) of water by the end of the year and save the government \$850,000 annually. Forty-three water funds operate worldwide.

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL, MONGABAY

5. Sri Lanka

Colombo is restoring wetlands, helping to prevent floods. The capital of Sri Lanka is built on a massive network of marshes and waterways. But as the city has expanded since the 1980s, some 60% of these wetlands have been drained and filled in to make room for construction. Remaining wetlands have been used as dumps.

Wetlands act as natural flood buffers, absorbing waters and regulating the environment. Following destructive flooding in 2010, the government realized it needed to do more to protect what one administrator calls the “lungs and kidneys” of the city.

It began building cycling and jogging paths and recreational areas, pulling up invasive species, and introducing plants that would attract birds and animals back to the wetlands. Neighbors have also gotten together to form associations that collect trash regularly and sort items for recycling. Today, the city is home to four wetland parks that look nothing like the wastelands there before.

BBC, BULLETIN OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS

– Erika Page / Staff writer

COVER STORY

Gifts that last a lifetime

Our writers recall some of their most memorable gifts – and the people who gave them.

“The fastest, coolest kid in the schoolyard”

I remember one of the best gifts that my grandmother ever gave me for Christmas. It was a 1987 Huff, a BMX-style bike with a curved seat post and hard plastic seat with perforated holes.

She bought it for me because for a whole year I had no interest in the 1970s-era Schwinn that one of my neighbors gave me after I learned how to ride a bike. I rode that Schwinn with my older sister and two cousins in the neighborhood. Then older

kids laughed at me, and I began to hate it.

My new Huffy was everything. It didn't even matter that it wasn't the Huffy Sigma, with plastic white discs covering the spokes, or the BMX model with five-spoke alloy wheels.

While riding it, I felt like I was the fastest, coolest kid in the schoolyard. I could pop a wheelie or do a sliding stop on the back brake, like a scene out of "The Goonies."

I still have that bike. It's in my grandma's house – which may be about to be torn down. I keep it not simply because it's always hard for me to say goodbye, but also because it reminds me of her.

I always made a list of big brand-name popular toys, not really knowing they asked too much of my grandmother's budget. Huffys were cheaper versions of better BMX bikes she couldn't afford. But she wanted to see me smile. That's how Christmas worked in our house.

That Huffy was the surprise of my childhood. It brought me such joy. So I keep the bike to remember a feeling long lost to me, and the gift giver, who is no longer here.

– Ira Porter / Staff writer

Lyrical legacies from the Mesozoic: my stuffed poet Gronk, and his transcriber

My first stuffed animal was a handsome green dinosaur I named Federal, and we were inseparable. His neck plush and fuzzy outer shell, however, were not. So when Federal developed a rip from too much affection, Mom sent him to a farm upstate to play with the other dinosaurs.

That was a mistake, it turned out. I wasn't really an indulged child, but you'd better believe that I demanded all subsequent critters get the full benefit of surgery.

The next Christmas there was a new dinosaur under the tree. Gronk came with a straw hat and a poem. Gronk had written the poem, of course, though Daddy typed it up. I can still remember Gronk's opening lines:

*A hundred million years before the
first of rabbits rabbitted
And long before the earliest bison
bisoned on the plain,
The world was warm and squoggy,
and was generally inhabited
By dinosaurs that grew and grew but
never had much brain.*

All my stuffed animals had jobs. Frisby was a grocer. Bugle ran a messenger service. But it wasn't until Gronk came along that it occurred to me that you could also be a writer.

Gronk wrote me a poem every Christmas for years. I still have them all, on onion-skin paper. I grew up to be someone who dashed off verses for friends and family on special occasions.

The urge to rhyme runs strong in me, and I even wrote a book of dinosaur poetry myself. I called it "The Gronk Chronicles."

I would never have learned about the rich lyrical legacy of the Mesozoic era were it not for Gronk, and his transcriber, my dad.

But that dinosaur surely had a way with words, and his

legacy now is mine. You'd better believe I still have Gronk, too.

– Murr Brewster / Special contributor

Tearing open the gift of giving

United States troops coming home after World War II were so grateful to be alive and so happy to be reunited with their families, who were equally joyful to see them return.

The eagerness to move past the darkness and chaos of war found expression in parents' showering their children with gifts at Christmas. Commercial interests, of course, were eager to help.

The mail-order behemoth Sears, Roebuck and Co. issued a holiday toy catalog of 600-plus pages. My siblings and I took turns poring over it and making copious wish lists. We never got everything we wanted, but we were grateful for what we got.

Something was missing, though.

We kids had always dutifully given gifts to each other, in addition to the bubble bath for Mom and soap-on-a-rope for Dad. But then one year it changed for me. I suddenly got a great idea for something to give my younger brother. I was excited.

He was a nascent gearhead, and he'd joked about a name for a fictitious town car club. I knew a store at the mall had some new gizmo that could stamp a custom message on an article of clothing using heat-transferred letters.

I bought a blue cotton work shirt. Then I went to that store and had my custom message emblazoned across the back. I wrapped it up and put it under the tree. I couldn't wait.

I don't recall any of the gifts I got that year, but I remember every detail of the one I gave my brother. He thought it was so cool. Dad thought it was hilarious. Mom was impressed that I'd gone to such lengths. I glowed when my brother held up the shirt, which proclaimed, "Libertyville Street Freaks."

That gift marked a major shift in my childhood. I'd felt a little of what our parents must have felt in celebrating their children with presents. I'd finally torn open the gift of giving.

– Owen Thomas / Special contributor

A special friend and a timeless gift, 50 years later

When Valerie moved in across the street, I was delighted to have another little girl to play with. Not only was she petite and cute as a button, but her family was unlike any neighbors I'd ever seen.

Her father, muscular and tattooed, surprisingly hit it off with my conservative dad. Her mother was young and pretty, and Mimi, the grandmother, lived with them, too.

Valerie had her ears pierced. I repeatedly pointed this out to my mom, only to be told I was too young. Eventually, she relented. I almost passed out in the store after the piercing. Valerie's mom offered to help me twirl my stud earrings twice daily and showed me how to clean my tender earlobes.

One year at Christmas, Valerie and her mom came to our door with a shoebox. Thinking it was probably cookies or fudge, I was surprised to see lots of smaller tissue-wrapped gifts inside. As my mom and I began to unwrap them, we found several hand-painted ceramic ornaments in the little box. I had never

seen anything so beautiful.

We laid them all out on the table and fawned. There was Santa Claus, a gingerbread house, a boy with a snowball. Others included a candy cane, Santa's boot, and a Christmas wreath. But best of all, there was a stocking with my name, spelled correctly, which is no small feat.

It was such a lovely gift. Now married with grown children, I've moved several times and had many Christmas trees. And while Valerie's family didn't live there long, these little treasures have traveled through time with me.

Each year as I unpack our holiday decorations, I feel the same wonder I did nearly 50 years ago. When I open these ornaments, a sweet childhood memory evokes the joy of a special friend, and the delight of a timeless gift.

— **Courtenay Rudzinski** / Special contributor

A globe for Christmas — and a lifetime of curiosity about the world

In 1964, my big gift under the Christmas tree was a globe with robin's-egg-blue oceans, countries in a broad spectrum of primary colors, and mountain ranges in bas-relief.

I was 10 years old.

I've occasionally thought about that globe, wondering why a young boy would place that atop his wish list. What did that say about a little version of me?

Here's the chicken-and-egg question I've sometimes asked myself: Did that gift from my parents reflect their observations that I was showing signs of interest in the world? Or was it a gift I had requested, a manifestation of my growing curiosity and the desire to know more about the world?

I loved to accompany my parents to screenings of international travelogues — the YouTube travel documentaries of those days. They were presented on a big screen in the auditorium of the high school in my Northern California town.

I recall filling out a postage-paid postcard from a waiting room magazine. It promised a "free" book called something like "The People of the World." Instead, it summoned an Encyclopaedia Britannica salesman to our door. My parents purchased an expensive set, it turned out. But I never received that free book.

The mountain ranges on my globe — the Sierra Nevada, closest to me; the Himalayas, so exotic! — were eventually rubbed flat.

But not my curiosity about the world. In high school, I was a foreign exchange student, living with a family in France for a year. Later I would return to attend a university.

It was a dream come true when I was named a foreign correspondent for this newspaper. Later, I was a State Department correspondent, and now I cover international diplomacy, with occasional overseas reporting thrown in. (Which explains why this tale was penned in Ukraine.)

Occasionally I wonder — did it all start with that Christmas globe?

— **Howard LaFranchi** / Staff writer

A gift in my parents' closet, and a child's rite of passage

I was around 8 years old when I discovered my parents' secret hiding place for Christmas presents.

It was the back of my mom's closet, a labyrinthlike cave that was deeper than it was wide. It was crammed with eccentric scarves, secondhand cotton tops, and her wedding dress in a plastic dry cleaner bag.

A few nights before Christmas that year, I got curious and went exploring. Back behind her sewing box was the gift I'd been begging for: Samantha. The American Girl doll had two long braids, an elegant plaid dress, and black patent-leather shoes. She was perfect.

On Christmas morning, as I tore open the presents addressed "from Santa Claus," whom should I find within a large rectangular package? Samantha!

It took me a few minutes to understand. Santa was my parents. My parents were Santa. At that moment, the magic of Christmas came crashing down.

Like all kids, I managed to recover from that inevitable rite of passage. And Samantha remained one of my favorite toys for years. Still, she, too, was eventually packed away, forgotten somewhere in some closet.

A few years ago, when I had my own children, Samantha came back into my mind. During a trip to my childhood home, I searched for her in desperation. There she was, in my bedroom closet. Her hair was ratty, her tights had lost their elastic, but she still had her same cute smile. My daughters were smitten.

This year, we'll spend our first Christmas as a family in Minnesota. My oldest is about to turn 8 years old, and, just as I did at that age, she still believes in Old Saint Nick. She told me she wanted a boy doll for Christmas, to be a companion to Samantha.

It's unlikely my kids will rummage through my mom's closet, digging for Christmas gold. But the power of a child's curiosity knows no bounds. Maybe, this holiday season, history will repeat itself.

— **Colette Davidson** / Special correspondent

Teenage angst meets "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe"

On Christmas Eve 2005, I was crammed into the living room with my siblings and large extended family. My parents saved most of our gifts for Christmas morning, but my mom always picked a few for us to open the evening before. Part of the reason was to give my older relatives a chance to witness the fleeting wonder of Christmas that only a child can have.

Like any typical teenager, I was quite certain my parents couldn't possibly understand what a mature human I had become. I expected my gifts to be as disappointing as my teenage angst.

As the paper fell to the floor from one particularly heavy gift to me, I discovered I held in my hands "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Original Novels" by C.S. Lewis.

I knew little about the series but was curious. Disney had just brought "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" to the big screen a few weeks prior. I guess it would be nice to read the

book before I saw the movie, I thought to myself. “Thanks,” I told my parents with a polite smile.

The first time I read it, I was immediately swept up into the wonders of Narnia. The whimsical characters made me laugh and cry, sometimes on the same page. Aslan, Narnia’s creator and protector, struck me with his fierce devotion, powerful presence, and tender love. His compassion felt so pure it made my heart ache, and I found myself wanting to be completely immersed in his world – a world where other imperfect young people were also trying to discover who they were, and the value they had.

As I reflect on how this gift changed my perspectives of love and life, I think about how excited I am to share it someday with my 3-year-old son and his soon-to-arrive sibling. Even as it becomes more frayed, tattered, and weathered from use, I hope they, too, will delight in this journey through a wardrobe, and to a world of self-discovery.

– **Samantha Laine Perfas** / Special contributor

Snow monsters, turtles in a half shell, and the greatest gifts of all

When I was young, as sure as flurries shimmy through snow globe winter wonderlands, my family and I would travel to my maternal grandparents’ house for their annual Christmas party.

My favorite Christmas gift as a boy was a game wrapped in a frozen moment in time. I was either 7 or 8 years old when I received the Nintendo version of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: The Arcade Game. The opening cutscene took our heroes into a burning building, and the bottom of the screen looked like a yuletide fire.

One of my most tangible memories is my older cousin and I fighting our way past endless streams of bad guys, only to succumb to an anthropomorphic mix of a polar bear and arctic wolf named Tora.

For some folks, deep cuts happen when our fingertips are sliced by wrapping paper. For others, deep cuts are remembering the names of random Ninja Turtle villains.

But the deepest cut from that time slices through my foggy memory. The North American release date of the game, Dec. 14, 1990, was only 10 days before my maternal grandfather passed on Christmas Eve that year.

Nothing was the same after that. We continued to meet as a family year after year. But after that Christmas of 1990, I had changed.

As it turned out, the most indomitable obstacle in life was not a digital snow monster, nor the greatest gift a video game. There were other gifts, other toys, other losses as I grew up. But since that Christmas morning, I discovered my grandfather and my family were the greatest gifts of all.

– **Ken Makin** / Special correspondent

When my father gave me a radio – and a part of who he was

Christmas 1984 was the best summer ever. I grew up in South Africa, and seasonal celebrations in the Southern Hemisphere included invites to outdoor barbecues or a swim at the beach after we’d opened presents. Definitely no caroling renditions of “Let It Snow.”

What made that Christmas so memorable was that my father gifted me a radio. A portable Sony, only slightly bigger than my hand, with an extendable aerial. I was 11 years old, and this was the gift that introduced me to my greatest love in life: music.

My father and I were very different people. We often struggled to communicate. He was a connoisseur of classical music, and he’d amassed a formidable record collection. He didn’t get the appeal of the rock music I discovered via the airwaves.

I carried that radio with me everywhere. I even smuggled it into school. Every night, I’d listen to a DJ named Chris Prior, aka “The Rock Professor.” It was a music education. When I first heard Robert Plant’s song “Little by Little,” I didn’t know a singer could express such emotional depth.

Less than 10 years after that Christmas, my father passed away. The radio fell into disrepair. I wish my father were still here so I could tell him about the deep meaning of that gift on my life.

I’d tell him I got to interview Robert Plant, my all-time favorite artist. I’d tell him I still listen to Chris Prior’s show, just as I did when I was 11, and that I listen to it halfway around the world, via the internet, and that I regularly correspond with the DJ I’ve been listening to for 40 years.

Most importantly, I’d tell him how much I appreciate that he wanted to share the gift of music with me. Our tastes differed, but the passion was the same. That connection I now feel with my father is as invisible as the airwaves that came crackling through that radio decades ago, with an impact just as powerful. Thank you, Dad.

– **Stephen Humphries** / Staff writer

Decades later, “She still makes me smile”

You know how people sometimes ask, “What would you grab in a fire?” My answer is always the same – my Raggedy Ann.

I don’t remember how old I was when I got her one Christmas, but I was pretty young. She was made by Larkie, my mom’s best friend, a gifted seamstress, an artist.

Larkie handmade all her gifts – including stylish outfits for my Barbie doll, outfits I still wish came in my size.

Her Raggedy Ann became my constant companion. She came with me on sleepovers and vacations. She has deep-red hair, black button eyes, a lazy smile, and a red triangle for a nose. She wore a delicate, blue-flowered dress with a white pinafore and pantaloons. But on her muslin chest is the best part: a red heart that says, “I love you.”

Both my mom and Larkie passed on decades ago. Raggedy Ann comforted me then, as well as the times when I was scared or sad. Mostly, she made me smile.

She’s a bit bedraggled now. But she hasn’t lost any of her charm, or the magical innocence of childhood. I put some of my

socks over her black cloth feet to reinforce them. My friend Ali, another wonderful seamstress, sewed a new dress for her. It's almost an exact duplicate of the original, now threadbare with age.

She sits in a place of honor on a shelf in my bedroom where I see her every day. She's a connection to Larkie, my mom's bestie and my second mother. She's the embodiment of joy, and she still makes me smile.

– **Melanie Stetson Freeman** / Staff photographer

In a world of words, a gift that's hard to define

When my Aunt Eunice gave our family a deluxe dictionary for Christmas in 1972, I didn't jump for joy. For an 8-year-old, it seemed as exciting as a new pair of socks.

Even so, I knew Aunt Eunice meant well. She was a lively character – a longtime librarian who enjoyed travel, savored a good meal or a great story, and was thrilled by words, especially when she could arrange them for winning points during her frequent Scrabble marathons.

Language was an endless pleasure for Aunt Eunice. The dictionary she gave us, wrapped with a bright-red ribbon, was an invitation to join the fun. Before long, I was embracing our snazzy new reference volume with pride.

I loved the thumb index on the side – little tabs, arranged like stair steps, with the gold-printed alphabet descending from A to Z. There were nearly 1,500 pages in all, with entries ranging from Aachen, “a city of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany,” to zyzzyva, “any of various tropical American weevils.”

Any language with arms wide enough to touch both German cities and American weevils was something I could dwell in for a lifetime.

This year, I'll celebrate my 60th Christmas. The toys I got on yuletides past have long since vanished beneath the snowdrifts of time. Aunt Eunice has left us, too.

But the dictionary, its binding now faded and bandaged with tape, still rests on my shelf, a constant companion through my decades as a reader and writer.

Now that online tools can quickly summon a word and its meaning, Eunice's gift might seem outdated. But I cherish it, relishing the chance to see a vast world compressed within an intimate space.

This world of words, an infinitude of wonder, is what Aunt Eunice gave me all those Christmases ago. Even with this treasured dictionary, the gratitude I feel is hard to define.

– **Danny Heitman** / Special contributor

From teen embarrassment to the warmth of Dad's gift, wrapped in love

When my family moved from Wisconsin to New Hampshire, I learned what it felt like to be new. New Hampshire was as cold and snowy as Wisconsin, but the hills were higher. Many classmates had skied since they were 3 years old, bombing down the icy slopes. As a fifth grader, I was practically a middle-aged “flatlander” when I first peered down the ski hill, gripping my poles in terror.

The next few years, I skied by myself through the shadows of the pines to minimize the embarrassment of wiping out. By eighth grade, I was good enough to ski the most difficult trails.

There was one last thing I wanted: an L.L. Bean ski cap with earflaps and two yarn braids. All the cool ski kids had one.

On Christmas Day, my dad handed me a gift exactly the right size. I held my breath. As I pulled out a dark-blue-and-green knit cap, he said, “I had it specially made.” I paused. His eyebrows danced over his blue eyes. A self-pleased smile played across his lips.

There in my hands was indeed a ski cap with two yarn braids. Large light-blue letters marched across the forehead: KENDRA. My heart sank.

Dad eagerly searched my face for my reaction. Dad didn't ski. Money was tight. He had tried to make something I wanted even more special. A wave of compassion washed over me, and looking back, I think I grew up a little. “Thank you,” I said quietly.

Instead of shoving it to the back of a drawer, I wore my KENDRA cap for years. I covered my name with my ski goggles under the chairlift to avoid being teased. As I flew down the hills, the cold wind streaked my cheeks in tears. But inside I was warm, wrapped in the love from my dad's gift.

– **Kendra Nordin Beato** / Staff writer

PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Longings for home in Syria's liberation

Since Dec. 8, when a long dictatorship in Damascus fell quickly to a rebel group, many of the more than 12 million people displaced by Syria's conflicts have probably told their loved ones, “We are going home.”

“I feel like I've been born again,” Maysaara, a refugee in Belgium, told *The New Yorker*, packing his bags. “I prayed to live long enough to see this day.”

That longing for home was always a strong sentiment among the more than half of Syria's population that was displaced by 13 years of war and lived either inside Syria or as refugees from Turkey to Europe to Canada. It may also have been a strong reason the Assad regime crumbled so quickly.

“To the displaced all over the world, free Syria awaits you,” one commander, Hassan Abdul Ghani, posted on the social platform X after the regime's collapse.

Home as more than a place

The desire for home – as a sanctuary, a place of safety, a reflection of dignity, and an expression of family affection – often can influence a conflict in subtle ways. Nearly 120 million people – not quite half of the global migrant population – have been displaced by conflict, violence, or natural disasters. Less noticed are the streams of people returning home. In 2023 alone, 6.1 million displaced people returned to their areas or countries of origin, according to the International Catholic Migration Commission. Many do so voluntarily, to rebuild and restore.

The desire to return home underscores that home is not just a place. For Syrians, home before the war started was seen “as enriching multigenerational relationships with family and friends, intertwined with culture, faith, a love of place,” according to a 2023 study published in *Wellbeing, Space and Society*.

“Beyond the family,” the study found, “Syrian men and women described social networks where faith was central and included close friendships with neighbors and community members and which reflected values and a way of life where others could be depended upon for support and care.”

Hospitality in the home

In Arab societies, Muslim and Christian alike, home is also vital to a spiritual obligation of hospitality – “generosity of spirit ... which defines humanity itself,” observed Mona Siddiqui, professor of Islamic and interreligious studies at the University of Edinburgh.

The rebel forces that have toppled the regime of Bashar al-Assad have struck chords of reconciliation. The new leadership has granted a general amnesty for “crimes” committed before Dec. 8, signaling the release of an estimated 150,000 people detained by the fallen regime – many on the pretense of criticizing the state. The rebels have also vowed to protect the rights of religious minorities.

But for countless Syrians preparing to return to their communities, the journey is a path not just to a place, but to spiritual renewal. As a very diverse nation now tries to find national unity, it may find it in that special desire for belonging that defines the Syrian people. ■

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

A peek into ‘boundless’ generosity

One measure of a person’s generosity is in everyday donations of time or treasure to others. Helping a neighbor. Rescuing a distant relative from ruin. Sending money to strangers in need. Or, after Hurricane Helene flooded western North Carolina, volunteers from across the United States fixing up entire communities for weeks.

Perhaps the best metric of these “bonds of affection,” to use Abraham Lincoln’s term, is the results tallied up after each GivingTuesday. This year’s day of generosity in the U.S. – now in its 13th year – provides a broad snapshot of American selflessness.

The event Dec. 3 saw an increased percentage in donations from last year that was higher than the increase in consumer spending on Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Goodwill beat out goodies, an outcome that befits the spiritual meaning of the Christmas season.

Yet hidden in the data was a 4% increase in volunteering. This was a hopeful sign after years of hand-wringing by nonprofits that Americans, in an age of social isolation and declining trust in institutions, are increasingly avoiding unpaid activities in service to others. “In a world that can feel increasingly divided, we’re seeing people unite through simple acts of kindness that have profound ripple effects,” said Asha Curran, GivingTuesday’s chief executive officer.

A report released in September by The Generosity Commission acknowledges that Americans “are reimagining giving, volunteering, and community before our eyes.” The pandemic lockdown, for example, “gave rise to spontaneously formed mutual aid networks of volunteers helping neighbors and strangers.” While givers say their resources of time and money may be limited, they “describe generosity as boundless.” ■

ANALYSIS

LONDON

Why 2024 was not a good year for incumbents

It will be cold comfort for Kamala Harris. But her loss in the U.S. presidential election in November is typical of a major mood swing globally.

Voters worldwide have reined in or booted out ruling parties. What had been dubbed “the year of the election,” with voting in some 70 countries, has become “the bonfire of the incumbents.”

In South Africa, the ruling African National Congress lost its majority for the first time since the end of apartheid. Botswana has a new ruling party for the first time since its independence. In India, Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party was unexpectedly stopped short of an outright parliamentary majority.

With voters’ mood showing no signs of brightening in the new year, the anti-incumbent surge is being felt not only by the politicians who have been sent packing. There are signs – which the incoming Trump administration might well want to monitor – that the election winners are now finding themselves on the clock.

They face two daunting challenges.

The first is political: restoring democracy’s fundamental bond between governments and the governed. They know that if they fail, they, too, might find themselves on the bonfire. The second is potentially even tougher. It’s about addressing voters’ anger.

While the mix of issues has varied from country to country, voters’ main grievances in nearly all the elections that punished sitting candidates were economic: stagnant or declining incomes, a lack of good jobs, and, above all, inflation.

The issues stem from a battered world economy still struggling after the 2008 financial crisis and the inflationary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war.

Politicians are having to keep voters onside while addressing weaknesses in their economies.

French President Emmanuel Macron’s party took a battering in parliamentary elections this year, which left him relying on the support of the far-right party of Marine Le Pen. On Dec. 5, she and her supporters in Parliament joined left-wing legislators and brought the government down in a no-confidence vote for the first time in 60 years.

In Britain, Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer should be on much stronger ground. His party was handed a huge parliamentary majority when voters there called time on 14 years of Conservative Party rule in July.

Yet ever since his government unveiled tax rises and spending cuts to reinvigorate a stagnant economy, his poll numbers



GLOBAL PATTERNS
BY NED TEMKO

Connecting key themes
in the world’s news.

have nose-dived.

Appointing a new head of the civil service in early December, he sounded a note of urgency, aware of the need to achieve real change before long: “nothing less,” he declared, “than the complete rewiring of the British state to deliver bold and ambitious long-term reform.”

He may be casting an eye toward another beneficiary of voters’ growing anger on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

Argentine President Javier Milei, a flamboyantly outspoken libertarian, won power late last year in a landslide victory on the promise of a root-and-branch remaking of government to rescue the country’s crisis-ridden economy. He, like Mr. Starmer, has sensed the need to move quickly and show results.

He has already managed a three-quarters reduction in inflation, which had been raging at a rate of 13% a month, in part by eliminating half of the government’s ministerial departments and slashing public spending by one-third.

Some of the spending cuts have reduced state subsidies on basic goods and services, vital for a large number of Argentines. Poverty is on the rise.

The key question will be whether the voters will stick with him, even in the face of economic pain, at least in the short term.

Yet so far at least, not only has he avoided a Starmer-like collapse in his poll numbers. His popularity is on the rise. ■

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

JAMAICA OBSERVER / KINGSTON, JAMAICA

The presidential pardon has lost its true purpose

“Anyone who thought that the uncharted waters into which Americans had waded would have receded with the election now over has been proven wrong with [a Dec. 1] ... statement from President Joseph Biden that he had pardoned his son, the embattled Mr Hunter Biden,” states an editorial. “... President Biden may well have been emboldened by the fact that he is leaving office and may have no consequences to face. However, Mr Trump will feel he can wield the pardon power as he sees fit, without [constraint]. ... The presidential pardon power has lost its noble purpose – for granting grace to people who have paid for their misdeeds – and may never regain it.”

WINNIPEG FREE PRESS / WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

With Trump back, Canada needs Mexico more than ever

“There’s lots of chatter in Ottawa these days that the governing Liberals are going to ditch the Mexicans and spark up a diplomatic romance with the Americans,” writes Peter McKenna, professor of political science at the University of Prince Edward Island. “... [U.S. President-elect Donald] Trump has ... called for a renegotiation ... of the United States-Mexico-Canada agreement. ... Some Canadian ... leaders want Canada to cut a bilateral deal with the U.S. and, in effect, leave the Mexicans to fend for themselves. ... This is not the time. ... Mexico is, by far, Canada’s largest trade partner in Latin America and the Caribbean. ... More significantly, when you’re a small to middling power like Canada, it is best to have a Mexican friend around the table to neutralize the preponderance of U.S. negotiating power. ... Let’s not ... [let] Trump utilize his divide and conquer approach by deep-sixing a critical Canada-Mexico alliance.”

THE STANDARD / NAIROBI, KENYA

China is a better partner for Africa than the US

“China ... has shown Africa a path to ... modernisation without imposing stringent conditions, unlike many Western countries,” writes columnist Onyango K’Onyango. “... For years, Western countries have portrayed Africa as an insecure region plagued by power-hungry leaders and poverty. This perception has deterred large-scale investments. ... In contrast, Beijing took the risk and invested heavily. ... Western nations ... are playing catch-up, with [U.S. President Joe] Biden’s [December] visit [to Angola] ... proof of their growing concern over China’s increasing influence. ... If China were to pull out today, it’s unclear whether the West would continue its engagement, suggesting they are ... [not interested in] fostering genuine development in Africa.”

AHRAM ONLINE / CAIRO

Reforms in Iran are stunted by internal policy

“Iran’s relationship with its neighbours and the West is, to put it mildly, complicated,” writes Huda Raouf, an assistant professor at New Giza University and researcher at the think tank Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies. “... The list of challenges is long: escalating tensions with Israel, backing militias ... the harsh suppression of protests ... and its ever-advancing nuclear program. These issues have made Tehran a persistent challenge for the West. ... The election of reformist President Masoud Bazshkian in July 2024 brought a glimmer of hope. His victory has been seen ... as a potential opening for better dialogue with the West. But ... Iran’s internal policies and regional strategies continue to be major obstacles.”

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS

Democratic backsliding isn’t business as usual

“As the year draws to a close, it feels like history is accelerating towards a hard-to-define point,” writes Michael Meyer-Resende, executive director of Berlin-based Democracy Reporting International. “... What we took for granted – democracy, human rights, the rule of law, a certain basic respect for international law – is under attack. ... The next few years will be a test. We will see a lot of opportunism. Explanations as to why what Trump is doing is all perfectly normal. Why it is ok that Russia grabbed a huge landmass from a neighbouring country. Why Palestinians only have themselves to blame for their fate. ... Defending the rules of democracy and human rights will be harder. Let’s avoid ... normalising the norm violation.”

– Compiled by Nate Iglehart and Jacob Posner / Staff writers

Sing with me: 3 plungers plunging, 2 pterodactyls flying, and 1 bird hat monstrosity!

Lords a-leaping have nothing on the original gifts I make each year.

Christmas can be tougher on the grown-ups. That childhood joy we still long for gets submerged under the burden of obligation and the demands of marketers. Things can get frantic, and expensive, too. Too often, we end up tired and broke.

Not me! I make my gifts. I have fun.

It's possible that no one in my family had "sculpture of pterodactyls hanging batlike from the ceiling" on their Christmas wish list. Or even "5-foot-long fabric salamander." I don't care. I operate on the sunny assumption that my family members don't know what they want until they unwrap it.

It can get complicated. For every hand-painted sweatshirt of a cicada wearing ear protection that takes 10 hours to complete, there might be a quilt with 80 hours in it. I'm usually just polishing up the last gift on Christmas Eve after a hectic three months of creativity, but know this: I am joyful and triumphant. You could call it the Twelve Weeks of Christmas, but those lords a-leaping have nothing on my stuff.

Because my stuff is not normal. Even the silk kimono I painted commemorated the day a swan grabbed my sister and hauled her into a lake. My husband, Dave, still wears the shirt with his workplace nickname – The Spam King – printed in the iconic Spam lettering, nestled in the yellow goo from the can. These things don't always come out the way I envision them. But, as they say, it's the thought that counts.

Although the postage adds up, too.

It took me a few years to recognize that even though I thought an odd-sized painting would be novel – say, something tall and narrow – there was something to be said for sticking with standard-sized paintings and sliding them into frames from the store. Paintings that could then be mailed in a snap without tripping over the postal regulations.

And although each gift was created with the individual recipient lovingly in mind, none of them was especially practical.

So one year I decided to give everyone toilet plungers. Toilet plungers are practical. And they did have the advantage of fitting into more or less standard packaging. That is, they did until I topped them with papier-mâché bird heads, and decided to throw in smaller sink plungers with matching baby birds on them. I was pleased with the results and anticipated they would go over well. But by the time they were finished, I needed to whack up appliance-sized boxes to send them in. And cross my fingers while the postal clerk frowned and brought out her tape measure.

Still, I thought I was on solid ground the year I realized what my sister Margaret really needed was a bird hat. She loved to sit on her back deck in Maine, overlooking 5 wooded acres, and watch the birds. But if she had a hat with birdseed on it, they could land on her head! They could whiz adorably by her ears! They could spray seed chaff all over her sweater! Once that idea

flitted into my mind, it was all over but the making of it.

It would have to be sturdy. I bought a hard hat shaped like a Stetson for the base. I attached a bowl for sunflower seeds on the top, and – Why not? – a thistle sock feeder rising up to the crown. It was quite practical, from my point of view, but not attractive. So it grew. A long brim sailed out both fore and aft until it looked like God's own sou'wester and was covered in individually stitched, quilted fabric leaves in autumn colors. A few graceful twigs were anchored in the assemblage for perching convenience. I had to admit, it turned out great.

Yes, it weighed 12 pounds and had to be shipped in a box the size of an ottoman, but it was sure to be a hit.

And it was. I hadn't quite thought it all the way through, though. Margaret could only aspire to being 4-foot-8 on her best day, and that hat put her entire person in complete eclipse. A mushroom of the same proportions would tip over in an instant. Worse, her various challenges had already made it hard for her to hold herself upright in a chair. *Without* a gigantic bird hat on. It was not to be. There would be, for her, no thrilling thunk of a landing jay, no chickadee wings fanning her ears.

So she filled it with seed, perched it on the deck railing, sat a few feet away, and watched the birds land.

And there, in that space between her chair and the bird hat, that's where The Thought lived: a splendid ether, where love and gratitude resonated. Shimmered. Rang like bells.

Because they're right: It really is the thought that counts, one powerful enough to pull sisters together, even when they're a continent apart.

I haven't given any thought to next year's gifts. Except I think they will fit in a flat-rate box.

– Murr Brewster

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Discovering the Christ light at Christmas

On Christmas Eve I usually attend a midnight service at a cathedral in the West of England. Upon entering, everyone is given a candle. During the service, all other lights are dimmed and the glow of hundreds of candles illuminates the darkness. Quiet prayer follows before the service continues.

The Christmas season celebrates the birth and life of Christ Jesus, who brought spiritual light and healing to multitudes during his ministry. The Christ, Jesus' spiritual and eternal nature, is continuously illumining human consciousness with its uplifting message. A New Testament author writes, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition). Christ's redemptive power is undimmed and immutable.

Jesus perceived everyone's true identity as the reflection of God – whole, and free from sickness. The light of this spiritual understanding brought healing.

The Christ reveals to us man's unbreakable unity with God, divine Life, and enables us to demonstrate this unity in our own lives. In John's Gospel, Jesus states, "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness" (12:46).

Jesus' disciples followed his teachings and continued his healing work, demonstrating the power of Christ, God's divine message, to heal and transform. In their healing practice, the

disciples saw again and again, as Jesus revealed so fully, that man's true being is whole and spiritual, and therefore harmonious and healthy.

Our own receptivity to the light of Christ leads to moral and spiritual progress today. As we strive to live in obedience to Jesus' teachings, we are able to appreciate – and actively express – the Christly qualities that are inherent in us, such as purity, gentleness, and humility, which open the door to the healing truth.

If we are separated from family or friends, the Christ light brings comfort and assures us of God's love. Christ can awaken us to moral courage and clarity when we are confronted with tough decisions. If sickness appears to assail us, Christ can reveal that our true identity as the expression of divine Life is intact.

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of The Christian Science Monitor, writes of Christmas, "It represents the eternal informing Soul recognized only in harmony, in the beauty and bounty of Life everlasting, – in the truth that is Life, the Life that heals and saves mankind" – Soul being another name for God ("The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany," pp. 259-260).

One year at Christmas I experienced food poisoning. I prayed to know that the Christ is present and active, revealing soundness and harmony to all. Our connection to God, divine Life and Love, is indestructible. As the manifestation of Life, man expresses freedom, and each of us is that spiritual idea, man, whom God creates. I was soon restored and well.

Through this quick healing, I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Christ and how it operates in our lives, showing us our completeness.

The light and majesty of the Christ are with us throughout this holiday season and beyond. The eternal Christ brings comfort, spiritual strength, and joy to all. Like candles ablaze in a darkened cathedral, each of us has the ability to experience and share the light of Christ.

– Alistair Budd

ARTS AND CULTURE

VISBY, SWEDEN

Swedish knitters, a lost ship, and Christmas joy

By Maggie Lewis Thomas / Contributor

History is unavoidable on the Swedish island of Gotland, where the medieval walls of its capital, Visby, still stand. So it made sense that on Nov. 9, Allmänna Sångens Visby, a local choir, celebrated a daunting sea voyage launched on that very day 200 years ago. "Samma Ull" ("We Are All Made of the Same Wool") is a choir drama about knitters who sailed across the Baltic Sea to Stockholm, and how their courage and seaworthiness were tested. That's right, knitters.

Gotland was known for its abundant wool and talented craftswomen. Two hundred years ago, there was no fast fashion. Knitters were as important as wool. They even had a name: *tröjkällingar*, or "sweater dears." In fall, they sailed to Stockholm to sell their wares, bringing home cash and supplies in time for Christmas.

But in 1824, some sweater dears were lost at sea. Eva Sjöstrand wrote "Samma Ull" about them. She first found their story on two pages of a commemorative 1924 book by Nils Lithberg, a professor in Stockholm's Nordic Museum. She was captivated.

After further research and writing, and plenty of rehearsals, she

now sings the part of Briten Granquist, who knitted 777 sweaters, hired a boat, and gathered sweater dears to join her.

As Ms. Sjöstrand began the project, Mats Hallberg, the conductor of the choir, said, "Are you crazy? Shall we sing about some old ladies going to Stockholm selling cardigans? What is this for a story?"

But Ms. Sjöstrand says, "It's a fantastic story. You can place everything in it": the doughty Gotlandic community; knitters who made more money than their husbands; the spirit that sent them onto the Baltic in cold winds and scant daylight. Most of all, it's a fantastic story because they survived. Their boat was blown off course to Estonia, where they waited for wind. Families rejoiced on Christmas Eve, when mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and a fiancée they had mourned as lost sailed home.

In 75 minutes – in fluting, soaring voices, to music by Jan Ekedahl – 35 singers carry us to Stockholm and back. This choir doesn't stand on risers. Under direction by Karin Kickan Holmberg, they sing about herding sheep, and then become them – circling, bent over, soprano voices suddenly baaing. In storms, everyone leans dramatically to one side – or over the rail. Also, they knit. They knit while singing, selling sweaters, or lurching onboard. "Most of us knit" anyway, one singer comments after the show. Two women singing the parts of Anna and Magdalena Norrby knit both ends of the same scarf. It brings out Ms. Sjöstrand's theme for the choir drama. "I say it in my songs: We exist for each other."

The song "Samma Ull," declares, "Regardless whom I meet in life, we are of the same wool – we are all the same." So many hands knitting create a sense of calm, steady progress. Clicking needles even serve as percussion. Is it difficult for the actors to knit and sing at the same time? "It calms you down when you're waiting behind the curtains," says Eva Flemming, who by day works for a Swedish partnership with Tanzania.

Choir members have been preparing for "Samma Ull" for months. "You go to rehearsal on Monday so tired, but afterwards, you're dancing down the street to your car," says Bengt-Olaf Grahn, an environmental engineer. Anna Jutehammar agrees. "It gives as much energy as it takes." She treasures "being warm together and the equality in these dark times." She is a journalist with Swedish Radio. "It's a small island and everyone knows who you are but as a choir member it doesn't matter what you do."

"Choir singing is the most peaceful thing you can do," Ms. Sjöstrand says. "You have to cooperate. If you are angry and having a fight, you can't do anything good. You have to accept that people are different." She has been a choir member since 1980. There are 11 choirs in Visby, and 30 choirs in all on Gotland, according to Camilla Ahlberg, vice chair of the island's choir association, Gotlands Körförbund. One member remarks, "I want to live in the choir."

Professor Lithberg's two-page account noted only a few passengers on the ship, named The Three Brothers. "I don't want to tell fantasy stories, so I had to find characters to fill the boat," who would have lived at that time, Ms. Sjöstrand says.

Having written 23 books about Gotland, she was no stranger to historical research. And 34 years working at Swedish Radio gave her a reporter's investigative chops. She found likely passengers in small-town parish records. Two formidable women – Briten and Cajsen, played by actor Lena Bogegård – in 19th-century garb and headscarves, with knitting needles clicking, welcome the audience. Both were real people. Briten was the champion knitter. Cajsen was the strongest woman on Gotland. She could carry four buckets of water, two yoked on her shoulders and one in each hand.

Parish records noted a young woman named Maria who donated

WHY WE WROTE THIS

COMMUNITY

What better way to tell a true holiday story than with singing – and knitting? In Sweden, an island choir comes together to celebrate community.

24 shillings to the church in Ojä, also on Gotland, after a trip to Stockholm. “And then I got it!” Ms. Sjöstrand snaps her fingers. “I got a bride.” In “Samma Ull,” Maria misses her Nov. 25 wedding date when The Three Brothers is becalmed in Estonia. She sings, “When I close my eyes, I can see my home, paths on the moor, the beach, stones, water, waves, and wind. I can see my longing.” Meanwhile, passengers ponder how to get the wind to blow. Maria vows to offer her shillings at church. Others pony up a silver coin for Visby Cathedral and a carved boat. The wind picks up.

Ms. Sjöstrand also researched handwritten notes by historian Pehr Säve, who interviewed Briten and another *tröjkälling* in 1860. An account of a grieving mother whose daughter arrived on Christmas Eve to say “I’m alive” became a scene.

When the choir drama was first coming together in 2019, she saw a problem. One character, Maria’s fiancé, Olof, stayed in Gotland. “But we can’t afford having a good tenor sitting idle, so the singer had to play another role.” Ms. Sjöstrand explains.

She searched for a family with a second son. A first son wouldn’t go to sea; he needed to survive to inherit the farm. She found Peter Jacob Jönsson. She told the Olof of the 2019 cast that Peter was his other, onboard character. He replied, “Well, that’s good; he is my grandfather’s grandfather’s brother.”

She found a distant relative of her own who was a seaman at the time. He’s played by Mr. Grahn, the environmental engineer. The singers who now play Maria and Olof had seen the earlier version in 2019 on their first date. Commenting on all the coincidences, she says, “Someone out there is knitting for us.”

In the end, the ship returns. Maria and Olof are reunited. There’s Christmas rejoicing. The choir sings “Samma Ull,” walking forward to surround the audience members, who are tearing up. After applause and encores, it seems like every singer is being hugged. They are the audience’s neighbors, children, and co-workers. It’s a community affair, and it’s a community that also includes those who, 200 years ago, set out on the Baltic Sea with a lot of sweaters to sell. ■

The 10 best films of 2024

Our reviewer’s top films include an animated must-see and dramas set in India and Brazil.

By Peter Rainer / Contributor

This year was supposed to be a transitional year for movies. The aftermath of the pandemic, and the Hollywood labor strikes in 2023 that shut down production for months, promised a thin crop. And yet, as someone who sat through upward of 200 movies, I can attest that the year was anything but skimpy. Which is not to say there was a plethora of masterpieces, especially from the studios. But if you knew where to look – often in the independent, animation, documentary, and foreign-language realms – there were bounties to be had.

First, to answer the obvious question: No, there was no “Barbenheimer” phenomenon this year. The closest box office equivalent was the simultaneous release of “Wicked” and “Gladiator II” – dubbed “Glicked.” The good news is that, overall, theatrical movie attendance, though still lagging from prepandemic levels, ticked slightly upward. But it will take more than “event” movies to bring big-screen audiences back in droves. Right now the thinking in Hollywood – flush from the success of films like “Wicked,” “Inside Out 2,” “The Wild Robot,” and “Moana 2” – is that family-friendly entertainments are the way to go. Expect more of that next year.

Also expect more sequels. In 2024, we witnessed the further exploits of apes, Jokers, bad boys, Beverly Hills cops, Beetlejuices,

pandas, road warriors, transformers, and minions – not to mention twisters, dunes, and quiet places. I have nothing against sequels per se – “The Godfather Part II” and “Toy Story 3,” to cite two, are masterpieces. But the pile-on here underscores Hollywood’s pervasive lack of risk-taking.

Risk-taking often showed up, quite literally, with such on-the-ground documentaries as “No Other Land,” made by a Palestinian-Israeli collective, about the forced expulsion of Palestinians in the West Bank, and “Porcelain War,” one of many documentaries filmed inside war-torn Ukraine. Mohammad Rasoulof’s intense family drama “The Seed of the Sacred Fig,” not a documentary, centers on Iranian judicial corruption. It was shot in secret, and the director is now escaping prison in exile.

Not all movies that broke away from the pack succeeded. And so, before we get to the Top 10 goodies, a few contrarian cavils. RaMell Ross’ acclaimed “Nickel Boys,” adapted from the Colson Whitehead novel about an abusive reform school for Black youths in Florida, struck me as a powerful subject done in by artsy overkill. Steve McQueen’s “Blitz,” set in London during the World War II bombing, was, especially for him, confoundingly conventional. Brady Corbet’s “The Brutalist,” about a visionary Hungarian architect in post-WWII America, features a powerful performance from Adrien Brody but, at 3 1/2 hours, is at least 45 minutes too long.

As for Francis Ford Coppola’s self-financed passion project “Megalopolis,” I admired the passion more than the project. And except for Ralph Fiennes, the stellar cast of the papal melodrama “Conclave” gorged the scenery.

Then there were the inevitable biopics: James Mangold’s “A Complete Unknown,” starring Timothée Chalamet as Bob Dylan, and Pablo Larrain’s “Maria,” starring Angelina Jolie as opera diva Maria Callas. These films mainly motivated me to watch the real deal.

And now, in alphabetical order, my Top 10 list, taken from movies that first opened, in theaters and/or online, in 2024:

A Real Pain – A road movie about two bickering cousins on a Holocaust history tour in Poland may not sound promising, but writer-director Jesse Eisenberg and his co-star, Kieran Culkin, transform what might have been a jokey jaunt into something resoundingly affecting. (Rated R)

All We Imagine as Light – Three women in Mumbai are observed with extraordinary empathy by writer-director Payal Kapadia. The prohibitions of Indian society are central to the narrative, but the film is so deeply felt that it never comes across like a political tract. Kapadia and her actors, most prominently Kani Kusruti, possess a rare gift for depicting the quotidian dailyness of life with surpassing grace. (Not rated; multiple languages with English subtitles)

Anora – Sean Baker’s sexually explicit, upside-down Cinderella story about an exotic dancer and the scion of a Russian oligarch runs the full emotional gamut from madcap to tragic without skipping a beat. The most sheerly entertaining movie of the year and the winner of the Palme d’Or at Cannes, that festival’s highest honor. (R; multiple languages with English subtitles)

Crossing – A retired schoolteacher, marvelously played by Mzia Arabuli, crosses into Istanbul from her village near the Black Sea in order to track down the transgender niece rejected by her family. Writer-director Levan Akin brings us into the byways of the marginalized without a trace of exploitation. (Not rated; multiple languages with English subtitles)

Flow – No animated movie was more imaginative or immersive than this wonder from Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis. Featuring a disparate crew of birds and animals and set in a wordless, post-apocalyptic world without humans, it should enthrall adults every bit as much as children. (PG)

Green Border – Set in 2021 in the swampy, forested exclusion zone between Belarus and Poland, Agnieszka Holland’s film is charged with both a documentary-style immediacy and the richness of drama. The plight of refugees from the Middle East and Africa seeking

asylum is brought home with unsparing force. (Not rated; multiple languages with English subtitles)

Hard Truths – Marianne Jean-Baptiste is reunited with her “Secrets & Lies” director Mike Leigh, and is both uproarious and lacerating as a deeply sad London housewife looking for succor. Michele Austin, as the consoling sister, matches her performance, in a very different key. It’s Leigh’s best film in years. (R)

I’m Still Here – Set in Brazil during a military dictatorship, Walter Salles’ slow-burn drama is based on the real-life story of a family whose patriarch is “disappeared” by the government in the 1970s. It’s a film about the necessity of challenging corruption, and showcases Fernanda Torres, in one of the year’s finest performances, as the wife who became an icon of resistance. (PG-13; Portuguese with English subtitles)

Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara – The great Italian director Marco Bellochio has been making marvels since the late 1960s, and this film is among his best. It’s based on the true story of a Jewish child in 1850s Italy who was secretly baptized by a chambermaid and then abducted by the papal police and raised Catholic. A transcendent film about belief and identity. (Not rated; Italian and Hebrew with English subtitles)

We Grown Now – Writer-director Minhal Baig, a first-generation Pakistani American, sets her sights on the friendship of two boys living in a dangerous Chicago housing project in 1992. The performances are superlative, and, despite the grimness of the setting, the film is awash with the wonderment of childhood. (PG)

Others very much worth tracking down include “Sugarcane,” “Sing Sing,” “Daughters,” “Dahomey,” “Saturday Night,” “Ernest Cole: Lost and Found,” “Emilia Pérez,” “Daddio,” “Nightbitch,” “Io Capitano,” “Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl,” “The Critic,” “Farewell Mr. Haffmann,” “Bad Faith,” “The Order,” “September 5,” and “Memoir of a Snail.” ■

Q&A with Alice Loxton, author of ‘Eighteen: A History of Britain in 18 Young Lives’

Pop quiz: Napoléon Bonaparte was short – true or false?

Actually, he was taller than average – and taller than his seagoing nemesis, Admiral Nelson.

That’s the sort of nugget that Alice Loxton enjoys teaching people about history. The young millennial doesn’t have a classroom. But she does have a social media following of over 3 million people. (She goes by @history_alice on X, Instagram, Threads, and TikTok.) In her native Britain, Ms. Loxton gets recognized on the streets of London almost daily. She’s the cool history teacher Generation Z students wish they had.

“Often people have this perception that history is about going to university or reading books – about being a kind of academic,” says Ms. Loxton in a video call. “But there are so many different ways of learning and experiencing history, whether that be experiencing things on location or listening to podcasts.”

Ms. Loxton’s 2023 book, “Up roar!,” detailed how Georgian-era cartoonists such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson became politically influential satirists. (Gillray fostered the disinformation that Napoléon was short.) The historian’s second book, “Eighteen: A History of Britain in 18 Young Lives,” is already a bestseller in Britain, having reached No. 1 when it was first published there in August. It chronicles the formative years of famous figures such as Geoffrey Chaucer,

Queen Elizabeth I, and Horace (later Horatio) Nelson. But many of the teenagers featured in “Eighteen” have been almost entirely forgotten. In an interview that’s been edited for length and clarity, Ms. Loxton spoke with the Monitor’s Stephen Humphries about “Eighteen.”

Q: One of the most fascinating stories in your book is of Jacques Francis, who is now finally getting his due. Could you briefly tease readers with a description of what made him so extraordinary?

I wanted to write in this book a mixture of some people who are very famous and shine a new light on them. But also, most of the people we know about in history are such a minority – 0.1% – and living incredibly unusual lives. So I wanted to include some figures who are more ordinary and doing kind of more ordinary things. So there’s a real mix of people in it. One of them is a man called Jacques Francis. We don’t know much about his very early life. We know that he probably came from somewhere on the West African coast. It’s hard to trace, but he’s probably taken forcibly by the Portuguese. He might have ended up in Venice.

We know that when he’s 18, he’s in Southampton on the south coast of England. He is an extraordinary swimmer, and he’s an amazing free diver so he can hold his breath underwater for ages. ... This is a time when most people in England wouldn’t swim at all. Even if you join the Navy, you wouldn’t be taught to swim. Doctors would even give orders, “Don’t immerse yourself in water because it’s dangerous.”

So he was there in Southampton just after King Henry VIII’s favorite ship, the Mary Rose, sank during the Battle of the Solent. Sometimes they’d be able to actually bring the ship up, but if they couldn’t do that, they’d try and retrieve the valuable cannons and guns. Jacques Francis’ job was to go out with a team and retrieve cannons. ... When you think about someone like Jacques Francis, he’s just one example of all of the different kinds of stories within Henry VIII’s story, within that Tudor world.

Q: In that chapter, you describe how Britain was an island of free men. Once enslaved men from Europe set foot on its shores, they were no longer enslaved. And of course, in 1834, Britain abolished slavery in the colonies, which was three decades before America abolished slavery.

His employer, a man called Corsi, who was a Venetian, was in trouble. Jacques Francis has to testify in court. So he’s the first Black man to testify in court in England. His word is taken as truth. [It] demonstrates that he is a kind of respected person in society.

Q: Your chapter on Sarah Biffin is fascinating. In 1784, she was born without arms or legs. She’s an extraordinary, virtuosic painter who held a paintbrush between her teeth. Do you hope it will reframe how people think about those with a disability?

Sarah Biffin’s story is perhaps the most inspiring of all. It’s about overcoming absolutely every potential challenge in life and not succumbing to, giving up, or giving in to that challenge. It’s not just that she’s disabled; it’s that she’s from a very, very poor background. You know, living in some village in the countryside in Somerset and she is a woman. The chances of her becoming [an] independent businesswoman who’s a household name and a respected person, with all of the perceptions of disability at the time, is so low. When I write about her, it’s not actually the disability that’s the striking thing. The extraordinary thing is her spirit. She is so determined ... that if she wants to become a great artist, that’s what she’ll do. ...

There are a set number of famous [artists] that we seem to always talk about: Hogarth, Reynolds, Constable, Turner. Whereas, actually, if you think about that period, there is someone like Sarah Biffin, and then there’s James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson, and other women like Hannah Humphrey, who was the woman who managed the print shop that James Gillray had. There’s all these amazing characters that we still don’t talk about. Sarah Biffin is one

Where ancient legacies find modern refuge

“Custodians of Wonder” is an ode to excellence and the keepers of the world’s oldest traditions.

By Joan Gaylord / Contributor

While we are quick to celebrate the first person to achieve something, Eliot Stein notes that we rarely honor the last. In his book “Custodians of Wonder: Ancient Customs, Profound Traditions, and the Last People Keeping Them Alive,” Stein travels to five continents to tell the stories of 10 artisans practicing ancient crafts. Sharing these cultural treasures, he asks what might we lose if these custodians prove to be the last.

Part travelogue, part memoir, his book unfolds crafts that flourished in an isolation virtually impossible to replicate today. These include the world’s rarest pasta, a bridge woven from grass, and soy sauce brewed following the original 700-year-old recipe. As he writes with the integrity of a journalist and the artfulness of a storyteller, Stein’s accounts express compassion, curiosity, and respect. He shares the experiences of each custodian in a manner that enables readers to appreciate the treasures rapidly disappearing from our world.

“When localism gives way to internationalism, we often lose the distinct vestiges that make our world so wonderfully diverse – and this global homogenization is happening before our eyes,” he observes.

One can be found in Sardinia where Stein meets Paola Abraini, one of only four women in the world who can properly make a pasta dish known as *su filindeu*, “the threads of God.” Composed of 256 individual strands of pasta, the finished dish is said to resemble stitched lace and is considered the rarest pasta in the world.

The recipe has been passed down to the women of one family for more than 300 years. The ingredients are no mystery – semolina flour, water, and salt. But it is the skill and the process that raises the dish to a work of art. Others have tried to replicate the techniques – including representatives of the Barilla company – but none is considered to have succeeded. Abraini has even been accused of altering the recipe to foil imitators. But, as Stein observes, “As with so many handmade wonders, the only ‘secret’ is in the sense of touch, an invisible instinct born from thousands of repetitions until it courses through her veins like memory.”

Process is also key to producing soy sauce faithful to the original 700-year-old recipe. Yasuo Yamamoto, a fifth-generation Japanese soy sauce brewer, has been working to educate people about the authentic taste of soy sauce. In short, the true flavor is nothing like that of the condiment most people know.

Authentic soy sauce must be brewed in a *kioke*, a cedar barrel. More than a vessel, the *kioke* provides the essential ingredient: The porous wood harbors millions of microbes that ferment the sauce, imparting a richer flavor than can be obtained any other way. Today, less than 1% of the world’s soy sauce is produced this way, although 75 years ago, almost all of it was. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the government was driven to rescue the nation’s economy. So officials directed companies to abandon the *kioke* and adopt steel vats, which produce what many consider to be an imitation.

Yamamoto has made it his life’s work to recapture the ancient methods and reintroduce the authentic sauce. His motives extend beyond the culinary. He cherishes the fact that soy sauce, the oldest condiment in the world, is woven into the history and identity

of them. There’s another famous artist called Alison Lapper who has the same condition as Sarah. And she’s alive today making art. She’s very inspired by Sarah as well. ... Hopefully it inspires people of all backgrounds today and reshapes old thinking of what the past might have looked like, and people in the past might look like, but also what it means for disabled and nondisabled people today.

Q: Women have, for much of history, been treated as second-class citizens in patriarchal societies. But many of the female figures you write about were great leaders, pioneers in their fields, and incredibly brave. For example, Mary Anning, a paleontologist in the 1800s that I’d never heard of.

Another one who was hugely celebrated is Elsie Inglis. She was this Scottish lady who was an amazing nurse, an amazing doctor, a medical practitioner, campaigner, all that kind of thing. She was basically like a Florence Nightingale of Scotland. She was so well known and so beloved that there was this enormous funeral for her at St Giles’ Cathedral in Edinburgh. People were lining the streets. Members of the royal family were sending their condolences to her family. Hospitals in Scotland were named after her. ... The question is: Why, when these people were so famous in their day, do we not know about them now?

Q: If you could time travel, which of your subjects would you most have liked to befriend?

I really like [paleontologist] Mary Anning. She is a favorite of mine because she has a remarkable story. She’s kind of quite a quirky, almost Gothic character. There’s all these stories about her when she was younger. She survived a strike of lightning. She found [a] corpse that was washed up on the beach in Lyme Regis. ... And then she goes and finds these fossils or she’s looking at the landscape. By doing so, she’s opening this portal into the origins of the universe and the origins of the world and the origins of humans. ... She would be full of surprises.

Q: When many people turn 18, they’re not sure what they want to do with their lives. So, from researching this book, what would you advise someone who’s just turned 18?

There are a few figures in it – like [fashion designer] Vivienne Westwood, [novelist and poet] Vita Sackville-West – who at the age of 18 are a bit lost. They don’t know where they’re going and they don’t know there’s a great adventure coming and they will be these amazing, successful people.

What’s my piece of advice? Well, the lesson you can take from history when you look at all of these 18-year-olds from history, is that people are capable of immensely impressive things. Eighteen-year-olds in the past were given a huge, massive responsibility. Empress Matilda, who was in charge of Italy, for example. Or they had endured extremely difficult situations – perhaps survived the plague or gone to fight in a battle or had children. ... Another example, of course, is Nelson, who’d been at sea six years already by the time he was 18. But in these extreme situations, people can step up to the mark. It’s amazing what young people can achieve. ■

of Japan.

Another custodian featured in the book is a Peruvian bridge master named Victoriano Arizapana, who is entrusted with overseeing the annual construction of a rope bridge woven from grass. For 500 years, members of the Inca nation created such bridges, which were strong enough to support a marching army. It's estimated that there used to be 200 of these bridges spanning the Apurimac River in the Peruvian highlands. Today, there is one.

It was a picture of one of these bridges that first opened the ancient Inca civilization to the rest of the world. In the early 20th century, the explorer Hiram Bingham saw the image and set out in search of the bridge. He stumbled upon the abandoned Inca citadel, Machu Picchu, a site that has become far better known to the world. But some might consider the bridge to be the marvel.

Consistent with tradition, the 22-meter structure is rebuilt each year to ensure that it is safe. A three-day process, the construction involves 1,100 people who cut and braid blades of a strawlike plant, *q'oya ichu*, into cables as strong as steel. When the new bridge, pulled into place by teams working on opposite sides of the canyon, is complete, the old one is severed and is simply left to decompose.

Practically speaking, the bridge is not necessary. There are others in the area, made of modern steel and suitable for vehicles and pedestrians. But members of the community told Stein that they prefer to use the traditional bridge, feeling that it connects them to their ancestors and to the ancient culture. He observes how crafting it embodies the Inca peoples' ethos: "fragile by themselves but invincible when they join forces."

What will it take to preserve these treasures and is it even possible? The pasta-maker Abraini wrestles with whether she should teach others how to make the rare dish. She tried for a while. There are even videos on YouTube for anyone who is curious, but the results become imitations, not unlike common soy sauce. In the book, Stein asks whether contemporary culture can even support such processes since cultures are no longer isolated in a manner that fosters such specialization. Modern "conveniences" like cellphones consume attention and time, drawing people away from traditional crafts.

But he also notes that endeavors like constructing the bridge require cooperation – people pulling equally on both sides to connect in a manner that will benefit all. Many would agree that the world needs more of that today. ■

Music is a 'language of the abundant'

By Norman Weinstein / Contributor

In his book "Music & Joy: Lessons on the Good Life," Daniel K.L. Chua leads readers on a tour from Beethoven to the blues in search of life's meaning. He anchors musical appreciation to an imagination-stretching exploration of philosophy and religion, both ancient and modern. It's a complex mix, yet the book is made accessible through Chua's humor, down-to-earth musical examples, and the inclusion of his experiences as a music professor at the University of Hong Kong during that region's politically turbulent recent history.

Chua's opening chapters focus on the meaning of music thousands of years ago in China and Greece. He writes, "In ancient times, music is not something we possess, compose, or define. It is given as an order ... in which everything is related."

This is a theme Chua repeatedly emphasizes throughout his book: Music in its very rhythmic forms and tonal variations reflects the laws of the universe. He moves beyond the commonly held view that music is simply a form of individual expression or beautiful

entertainment.

After illuminating the views of ancient philosophers like Confucius and Pythagoras (whose term "music of the spheres" interconnected mathematics, astronomy, music, and philosophy), Chua introduces a religious perspective on music and joy. He shows how St. Augustine and other Christian theologians and mystics revived the ancient Chinese and Greek ideas that musical forms unlocked secrets about the design of the universe.

Chua shifts smoothly from the ethereal to the terrestrial in his appreciation for the blues. It might seem odd to include the blues in a book about music and joy, but Chua writes, "Music does not need to be about joy to be joyful. ... Music in its purest form ... is already joy. It is a wordless language of the abundant." ■

How Handel brought 'Messiah' to life during dark times

By Bob Blaisdell / Contributor

Time and place affect even the greatest works of art. The serene composition of the music for George Frideric Handel's most famous work has been told many times, but maybe never so engagingly as in "Every Valley: The Desperate Lives and Troubled Times That Made Handel's 'Messiah.'" Charles King masterfully interlocks the stories of the people and events that inspired and influenced the creation of Handel's glorious "Messiah."

The German-born composer first came to London in 1710 at the age of 25 but soon adopted England as his own, living and working there until the end of his long, productive life in 1759. While Handel is the star of "Every Valley" (the title comes from the oratorio's first song, "Every Valley shall be exalted, and every Mountain and Hill made low, the Crooked straight, and the rough Places plain"), the supporting role played by the irascible librettist Charles Jennens, a wealthy political renegade, occasionally upstages him.

King appreciatively recounts the casualness with which Handel took on grand projects, including the libretto by Jennens, which in 1741 Handel had had in his possession for months before deciding, during an engagement in Dublin, to give it a whirl. Jennens, meanwhile, had no idea that Handel had, in a matter of about three weeks, fashioned the entire oratorio in his usual adroit way of recomposing airs from his own trove of Italian operas and bringing to life a bundle of new songs and choruses. Despite the patchwork libretto, Handel ingeniously parlayed Jennens' quotations and paraphrases from the Old and New testaments into unexpected evocations of wonder and awe.

King neatly describes how the composer's peculiar English may have helped him devise emphases in the lyrics that were, and remain, unusually striking: "For the biblical words 'Hallelujah' and 'forever,' he applied rhythms just enough at odds with English to be interesting." Moreover, "For unto us a child is born," clipped by Jennens from the book of Isaiah, Handel "repurposed" from a love duet he had written for an Italian opera, titled "No, I Will Never Trust You."

The Irish audience for its premiere in April 1742, to Handel's surprise and delight, was over the moon for "Messiah" ("The" in its title came later): "It seems to be a Species of Musick different from any other," remarked a Protestant bishop.

As King lays out the contemporary cultural and political history, he corrects any misunderstanding that Handel's Britain was a place of calm and national unity. It resembled, instead, the chaos and dread much of the world seems to be experiencing today, brought on by political upheavals and struggles to forge national identities.

Britain was “defined by some combination of official Protestantism, naval power, a global empire, and most important not being French,” King writes. The government repressed religious dissent (in particular, Catholicism) while unconscionably investing in slavery and colonization.

Disease killed half of the infants born in London during the first half of the 18th century, as the lower classes of the country suffered terrible poverty. The popularity of “Messiah” grew in part because of its function as an annual charity fundraiser – given at Easter rather than at Christmas. Handel, a rich celebrity, seems to have donated his share of the oratorio’s proceeds to hospitals and orphanages.

Another of Handel’s good deeds was rescuing Susannah Cibber from an adultery scandal by casting her in “Messiah” and rewriting the aria “He was despised, rejected of men” in a range that she – not an especially accomplished singer – could perform well due to her extraordinary gifts as an actor. Her wrenching performances in Dublin brought her back to stardom on the London stage.

“Messiah” lay dormant for several years after its less-than-rapturous debut in London. But it was revived and became in Handel’s lifetime his most-performed work.

The pleasure of “Every Valley” may be a result of its veteran author having the theme of “hope” (“an expectation indulged with pleasure,” as Samuel Johnson would describe it in his dictionary in the 1750s,” King notes). Hope, in the fall of 2020, amid the pandemic, was what spurred him to write the book: “Hemmed in, unprepared for what seemed like a dark future – disease, social division, a warming planet, the messed-up state of everything – I wanted desperately to find a way for us to slice through the gloom, to let in a bit of healing light.”

King has opened a dazzling skylight above Handel’s time. ■

10 best books of December

What Monitor reviewers like best this month.

1 Apartment Women

by Gu Byeong-mo, translated by Chi-Young Kim

Four families living in a government-run communal apartment complex in Seoul, South Korea, confront the challenges of, well, communal living. Gu Byeong-mo’s multiple-perspective story offers an affecting look at women’s work both in and out of the home, the division of labor in relationships, and the tensions between individual achievement and the collective good.

2 Gabriel’s Moon

by William Boyd

In 1960s London, successful travel writer Gabriel Dax is hard at work on his next book when a mysterious spy lures him into a series of pickup-and-delivery jobs for MI6. Gabriel’s efforts to determine why he’s been recruited – and untangle his past – move the story beyond James Bond tropes into more surprising and meditative territory.

3 Sweet Vidalia

by Lisa Sandlin

In 1964, recently widowed Eliza Kratke faces a startling reality: Her husband left her nothing but sour surprises and a nearly empty bank account. To save money, the 50-something Eliza moves into a cheap motel on the other side of her Texas town and enrolls at the local community college. Lisa Sandlin’s tale offers a satisfying take on reinvention, courage, and dropping judgment.

4 Rental House

by Weike Wang

Weike Wang’s portrait of a multiracial couple navigating marriage in midlife plays out over two family vacations. Also in the mix: in-laws, unexpected guests, and a large sheepdog. It’s an insightful, thought-provoking, and humorous novel.

5 Songs for the Brokenhearted

by Ayelet Tsabari

When bereaved Zahara returns to Israel from the United States after her mother’s death, she discovers startling secrets about her family’s past. Ayelet Tsabari poetically captures the community of Yemeni Jews living in Israel, who must negotiate political and social tensions to carve out meaningful lives. Tsabari highlights the power of women’s stories, the importance of forgiveness, and the wonders of song.

6 The Champagne Letters

by Kate MacIntosh

“Know your worth and tell your own stories.” So begins Kate MacIntosh’s delightful historical novel that parcels out wit and wisdom from widow Barbe-Nicole Clicquot in 1805. In letters, Madame Clicquot describes building a champagne empire after her husband’s death. In the present day, Natalie, reeling from a divorce, travels to Paris and buys a book of Madame Clicquot’s letters. She gains inspiration from the widow’s words and finds her comeback spirit.

7 The Miraculous From the Material

by Alan Lightman

From the bestselling author of “Einstein’s Dreams” comes a collection of mini essays on 36 of the universe’s most awe-inspiring phenomena. Alongside familiar wonders – glaciers, hummingbirds, auroras, and spiderwebs – sit lesser-known marvels. As Alan Lightman, a scientist, lauds the math, physics, and chemistry underlying his subjects, his appreciation for “the amazement and majesty of the spectacle” comes through.

8 Custodians of Wonder

by Eliot Stein

While we are quick to celebrate the first person to achieve something, author Eliot Stein notes that we rarely honor the last. With an abundance of awe and respect, he travels to five continents to tell the stories of 10 artisans practicing ancient crafts – and asks what we might lose if they prove to be the last.

9 Ingrained

by Callum Robinson

A Scottish writer and fine-furniture craftsman notches a first-rate memoir about understanding his master woodworker father, running a business, and – at the edge of financial disaster – reorienting himself to nature, beauty, and objects that last.

10 Sisters in Science

by Olivia Campbell

Journalist Olivia Campbell’s vivid group biography follows four women physicists in Nazi Germany as they lose their hard-won academic positions after Adolf Hitler comes to power. The compelling account is both a suspenseful story of survival and a recognition of the women’s unheralded contributions to modern physics.

Crossword

Across

- 1. Beat, as cream
- 5. Fad or frenzy
- 9. Drops out of a tree?
- 12. Apply to a whetstone
- 13. Liability
- 14. It may be humble
- 15. Impedes
- 17. Billboard displays
- 18. Crawler
- 19. Bird with white plumes
- 21. Is too syrupy
- 24. Squarish
- 26. Stashed away
- 27. Horned creature
- 29. Contrived
- 33. Curtains, so to speak
- 34. Pearl Buck's prize
- 36. Coffee-to-go sealer

37. Pioneer's direction

39. Margaret Mitchell title start

40. Flavor-intensifying additive

41. Paper nest builder

43. Excessively enthusiastic

45. Peculiar speech form

48. Golfer's norm

49. Wide or away partner

50. Critics' bestowals

56. To and ___

57. Like horses' hooves

58. Balalaika relative

59. Ginza currency

60. Hangs

61. Clique

Down

1. One of the five Ws

2. Fireside shelf

3. Shoo-___

4. Not grand

5. Overwhelming victory

6. Very old (abbr.)

7. Instinctive, as a feeling

8. Elizabeth I's beloved

9. Practice punches

10. Capital employee

11. Thorn

16. Cellist's cube

20. Sweaters' place

21. Enjoy bubble gum

22. Occupation

23. Cross purposes

24. Swing alternative

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8		9	10	11	
12					13					14			
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45	46	47					48						
49					50	51	52				53	54	55
56					57					58			
59					60					61			

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25. Yak and yak and yak?

28. Things near Baskerville Hall

30. Welfare of sorts

31. TV receiver

32. Avant-garde

35. Allowed by law

38. Fourth root of 16

42. Accumulate

44. Asia-Europe border

45. Somewhat dubious

46. Be plucky enough

47. Spinach nutrient

48. Peas' keepers

51. "___-ching!"

52. Tooth that turns

53. Unpaid

54. Last letters on some lists

55. Stiffen

								4
9						8	1	
				6	7		5	
4				9				
							3	2
1	2		4			7		
5				1				
	6			3	9	1		
			8	5		6		

Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆

Crossword and Sudoku solutions

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W	A	P	I	H	R	A	G	E	S	A	P	S
R	A	P	I	H	R	A	G	E	S	A	P	S
E	N	O	H	S	O	F	R	O	S	A	P	S
S	A	R	A	P	O	M	I	D	I	O	M	A
G	A	S	P	A	S	W	A	S	P	A	S	W
D	L	I	D	L	I	D	L	I	D	L	I	D
E	A	D	E	M	A	D	E	M	A	D	E	M
T	R	E	G	E	T	O	T	R	E	G	E	T
S	A	D	S	A	D	S	A	D	S	A	D	S
A	P	S	A	P	S	A	P	S	A	P	S	A

7	6	9	4	6	8	3	1	2
5	1	4	5	9	3	2	8	7
8	3	2	8	6	9	4	7	5
9	6	7	3	8	5	4	8	3
2	5	8	1	4	3	2	8	7
4	3	7	6	9	2	5	8	1
8	4	1	6	9	7	2	5	3
6	7	2	3	4	5	8	1	6
3	5	6	1	2	8	9	7	4

How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.