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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CONTENTS

What matters most in disaster reporting

Reporting about natural disasters can be tricky. At its worst, this sort of journalism can feel voyeuristic, or even exploitative. (We all have that cringeworthy image of the tricked-out correspondent interviewing people about their trauma before filing a quick report and jetting home.)

At its best, though, our work during and after these moments can reveal some big truths about what it is to be human.

This week, our West Coast Bureau Chief Francine Kiefer writes not just about evacuating her home as the Los Angeles fires loomed orange over nearby hills, but also about the care locals showed one another as the blazes grew larger. This meant everything from recommending fire-tracking apps and finding lodging for those fleeing their homes to giving hugs and handmade notes to firefighters.

BY STEPHANIE HANES
ENVIRONMENT WRITER

These stories of generosity and kindness, Francine expects, will continue alongside the devastation. It is a "yes, and" perspective that the Monitor values deeply, a nuance in storytelling that pushes us to keep attention on people and places and policies even after the first flurry of disaster reporting is over.

This is also why I visited and wrote about Englewood, Florida, for this week's Science and Nature story.

The dominant media storyline is that Florida escaped the worst damage when hurricanes in the fall of 2024 failed to make a direct hit on heavily populated Tampa Bay. But in Englewood, I saw a different reality. The people there, some of whom are still recovering from the devastation caused by Hurricane Ian in 2022, are dealing with extensive property damage from Hurricane Milton. They are also trying – despite a slew of economic and policy forces working against them – to come together in the dire aftermath of the storm.

It might seem glib to use words like "hope" and "resilience" when there is footage of terrifying wildfires or wind-shattered homes. Our job in covering disasters, though, is to make those qualities as real to readers as the heartbreak. Because they are. The hopefulness and resilience of a Gene Jeffers or a Pam Brobst – just two of the people I interviewed – take my breath away. And in a changing environment, those are the qualities that society will need most. ▪

DEIR AL-BALAH, GAZA STRIP

'Cold is death.' For Gazans in flimsy tents, a winter of sorrow and loss.

By Ghada Abdulfattah / Contributor

December began as a month of joy for Yahya al-Batran and his wife, Nora, when they welcomed twin sons into the world: Jomaa and Ali.

"They were small, sweet, and beautiful," Mr. Batran recalls.

The month ended in tragedy. Three weeks later, they buried Jomaa, who died from hypothermia Dec. 29 in their makeshift tent on the Deir al-Balah coast, in central Gaza. His twin, Ali, is fighting for his life in the intensive care unit.

"I saw them dying. I cried; I wept. I felt helpless and hopeless," Ms. Batran says while waiting for Ali to recover at the ICU at Al Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah. "I am so tired."

After escaping an Israeli siege and shelling in northern Gaza, the family was felled by an unexpected danger: the cold.

"Imagine watching your child die in front of you and feeling utterly powerless," says Mr. Batran from his tent in western Deir al-Balah. "What can I do? Cold is death."

For tens of thousands of displaced Gaza Palestinians living in flimsy, temporary shelters, it has been a winter of sorrow and hardship.

Their deteriorating makeshift tents – patchworks of blankets, clothes, cardboard, and whatever materials displaced families can find – are woefully inadequate to confront the winter's rains and temperatures below 46 degrees Fahrenheit at night.

Water seeps in from above and below. Strong winds have uprooted hundreds of tents on the coast, while surging waves and rain have flooded coastline camps, leaving families huddling under the open sky.

A fight for survival

With the vast majority of Gaza's 2.3 million people displaced multiple times by 15 months of Hamas' war with Israel, families have inadequate clothing and illness is spreading.

Humanitarian groups warn they are struggling to bring winter clothes and shelters into the Gaza Strip due to Israeli restrictions.

Winter here has become a fight for survival, and death, residents say, is stalking tent camps.

Gaza's Health Ministry has reported the death of seven infants and one adult from hypothermia recently. Doctors Without Borders warns it expects more infants to be affected by hypothermia in the days ahead.

WHY WE WROTE THIS
RESILIENCE

For tens of thousands of Palestinian families forced from their homes by 15 months of war, the temporary shelters they have constructed are no match for Gaza's winter winds and rain. Supplies are expensive. Infants are especially vulnerable.

In a January statement, UNRWA, the United Nations' relief agency for Palestinians, said, "Babies and newborns in the Gaza Strip are dying from hypothermia because of the cold winter weather and lack of shelter, as supplies which would protect them have been stuck in the region for months waiting for approval from the Israeli authorities to get into Gaza."

"These deaths were preventable, had the items required to protect these children been accessible to their families," the

U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said Jan. 6.

Widespread malnutrition after a year of dwindling food supplies is another factor making this winter deadly.

"Being malnourished and exposed to the cold for extended periods increases the risk of various health conditions, particularly in children and other vulnerable communities," says Dr. Abdulaziz Nahhal, a pediatrician at Nasser Hospital, in Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza.

"Hypothermia and malnutrition can severely impact mental health, as well as the functioning of the heart, lungs, and digestive system," he adds.

Half the population in Gaza is under the age of 18.

"Will the rain not enter the tent?"

Facing the pounding winter waves of Deir al-Balah beach, Hadeel al-Kafarna and her husband, Nidal, work to fortify their leaking tent for their five children, ages 6 weeks to 9 years.

Mr. Kafarna grabs a secondhand gray blanket, its edges frayed, and an empty flour sack, to patch the roof.

"It is pointless," he mutters in frustration, pointing to the water dripping inside, like icy needles. "Will the rain not enter the tent? It will."

Ms. Kafarna digs through their belongings and hands her husband some clothes to stuff into the gaps between the tent's wooden supports. "Here," she says. "It is better than nothing."

Despite their efforts, the couple can still feel the chill clinging to their children.

"Most of the time, we huddle together," Ms. Kafarna says. "I am still afraid for my infant son, Yousuf. He is just 43 days old."

In the most recent rain, days before, it was too cold to lie down.

"My husband and I stayed up all night standing," she recalls. "We could not sleep. It was too cold to stay in the tent. I kept holding Yousuf all night."

An exorbitant cost for a used undershirt

The war economy is also compounding the winter crisis. Amid the continuing Israeli siege, the prices for basic necessities like winter clothing and food have skyrocketed, sometimes tenfold.

The cost of a 24-square-meter tarpaulin has risen to between $110 and $170, while nylon sheets sell for $2.70 to $8.30 per square meter depending on the type.

"Even secondhand clothes are really expensive. A man asked me for 30 shekels [$8.30] for an undershirt, which is too expensive. I decided not to buy anything," Ms. Kafarna says.

Their children have persistent coughs and other symptoms, but all the parents can do is huddle for warmth.

"We cannot light a fire at night," Ms. Kafarna explains, her breath visible in the frigid tent. "There is no firewood, and the tent is made of wood and nylon; it could burn easily. A fire might ignite everything."

Nearby, Fathiyya al-Banna rails against the cold in her own makeshift tent. Beside her is her husband, Hasan Mahmoud al-Banna. The older couple's hardships are compounded by a lack of resources and Ms. Banna's battle with an aggressive illness.

"My husband and I shake a lot during the night," she says. "We've been through rough days, but we have never seen something like this before."

In yet another flimsy tent, Niveen, who withholds her last name, lives with a son and four daughters – the youngest is 11 – and a grandson. Their trek throughout the war has taken them from northern Gaza to Rafah, in the south, and finally to Deir al-Balah.

As the winter chill envelops them, Niveen and her 18-year-old son sew and patch their tent.

The family has placed seashells on the ground, an attempt to create a dry layer above the porous sand.

The coldest days of Gaza's winter are expected to last until Jan. 31. Until then, without a heating source or winter clothes, Niveen encourages her children to rub their feet together to stay warm.

▪ *Taylor Luck contributed to this report from Amman, Jordan.*

PASADENA, CALIF.

What I saw in LA-area fire evacuations: Caring for people and their safety

By Francine Kiefer / Staff writer

Living in California, I've read a lot about disaster preparedness, seen it covered on TV, and even reported on it as the Monitor's West Coast correspondent. But I've never had to evacuate – until the devastating wildfires in Greater Los Angeles.

The glow of the Eaton Fire in the Pasadena area lit up our backyard on Jan. 7 as my husband and I pulled out of our driveway, our ancient Toyota loaded with documents, electronics, overnight bags, and last-minute items we thought might come in handy.

Driving into the smoky, angst-filled night, little did I know that we were also heading straight into the kindness of strangers and friends – and a new normal in which a wildfire app would make a big difference.

I would describe myself as organized, but not as prepared as the preparedness checklists advise. I have a go bag in my closet with a week's worth of clothing and toiletries, but my list of other must-take items is in my head. I've given up rotating extra food supplies and just make sure we're well stocked and have lots of snack bars around. I have extra drinking water and an emergency kit in my car – but not a blanket or food. Flashlights are in our nightstands, slip-on shoes by our bedside.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Reporters often cover difficult news. And in some cases, it's about people who have had to flee their homes. For our reporter near Los Angeles, the current wildfire story got even more personal.

Local news had well telegraphed the potential for fierce winds and fires. We had time to up our preparedness game – bringing items from our patio inside and buying a backup battery pack. Where we fell flat, friends, neighbors, and professionals made up for our deficit, as often happens when communities pull together in a disaster.

So, thank you, Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, for recommending the Watch Duty fire app in your webinar.

I had signed up for government emergency alerts after the Bobcat Fire of 2020 cloaked our neighborhood in smoke. But those alerts never seem to notify my phone when momentous things happen. Instead, I relied on Watch Duty, an app run by the Santa Rosa-based nonprofit Sherwood Forestry Service that sends fire alerts and updates on conditions and evacuation orders.

It was the Watch Duty app that first alerted me to the Pacific Palisades Fire in western Los Angeles. That's when we decided that it would be a good idea to buy some bankers boxes and put our mental checklist down on paper – just in case.

That moment arrived after dinner at 6:23 p.m. when Watch Duty first sounded the alarm on the Eaton Fire. Eaton Canyon is a popular hiking destination a short distance from our house in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, in Pasadena. Even though we were only under an evacuation warning, we could see the glow of a rapidly progressing fire. Winds were howling in the night. A neighbor

knocked on our door to tell us about the fire. But where to evacuate?

Well, thanks be to friends we consulted who have lived here longer than we have. They offered to let us shelter with them. But we all reside in the same general area, so that seemed unwise. Then we talked about hotels and decided that if we left early enough, we could probably find a room and avoid the clogged roads of evacuation.

The neighborhood just up the hill quickly came under a mandatory evacuation order, and soon our immediate neighbors were calling and texting with questions and shared information. We left, taping a sign to our door, telling firefighters that we had evacuated and providing our phone number.

Hotel staff a model of calm

We settled on a hotel only as we were heading out, and I made the reservation as my husband, Mark, slowly drove past branches and other debris on the road, through dark neighborhoods where the power was out. When we arrived at the Courtyard Marriott in Monrovia, the notorious Santa Ana winds, the same ones pushing the flames, were so bad they nearly knocked me over in the parking lot.

God bless the staff at that Marriott. Within 10 minutes of our arrival, the power went out. Anxious evacuees stood in the lobby lit by dim emergency power – their pets, bags, and children in tow. But not once did I hear an exasperated word from the staff – quite the opposite.

Kristi Griffith, who works for the hotel's management company, was a fountain of good cheer and patience. She handed out bottled water and encouraged folks to relax at the restaurant or in the comfy lobby furniture. She gave out numbers so no one would lose their place in line to register when the computer system came back up.

It never did, but eventually, the staff found a work-around, and before I knew it, hotel manager Joseph Valencia had called our number and we were being escorted by another worker, the ever-helpful Erica Perez, and a bellhop onto an elevator powered by the hotel's emergency backup. Ms. Perez let us into a room with no lights, air, or heat, but that's exactly why we had headlamps and our backup cellphone charger. She suggested we crack our door open to help with the ventilation.

We managed a few hours' sleep and awoke early to my phone pinging that the Eaton Fire had advanced to Monrovia, where a mandatory evacuation was underway. But without Wi-Fi, the alert wouldn't fully load. We went downstairs for a visual check of the fire – and breakfast. It was still dark out. The staff had just arrived in the dining room, which was not open yet. All of us were astonished by the scene outside the window: Flames from the not-too-distant mountains had climbed down almost to the valley floor.

Should we evacuate again? If so, where? Mark and I discussed it over bowls of dried cereal and a cup of milk, which a worker had kindly brought us. We thought of a few more distant, guaranteed safe destinations, but the worker mentioned that the highways on her commute in were clogged, and there were widespread power outages. We also wanted to stay close to home to keep an eye on the house. It's a mentally wearing effort, this business of trying to find a safe evacuation place in a near information blackout.

In the end, we decided to leave the Marriott and head to a friend who lived farther south in the San Gabriel Valley, away from the flames. We had raised this possibility through texts late into the night, but now my texts were not going through. We would just have to take her at her word and show up!

As a rosy dawn broke, the wind had lessened, but the flames and smoke looked and smelled ominous. Yet soon we were received at our friend's home with open arms, hot tea, and tangerines from her backyard tree. No smoke here. Literally blue skies – though monster winds had toppled several trees in the neighborhood.

Essential grapevine

Later, a neighbor texted to say he had returned to our street. "The neighborhood is spared and the power is still on! Hallelujah." I truly had not expected our house to survive. Sadly, many homes in our area did not.

After we got home, Mark and I drove just up the hill to inquire about the Baghdadlian residence. I had written in December about its spectacular holiday lights and others in the Upper Hastings Ranch neighborhood.

The "Merry Christmas" sign hung cockeyed from the front gate, and the giant Santa looked sooty. But the house was still standing. Unfortunately, the house next door had burned to the ground, leaving behind a chimney, collapsed garage, and battered wreath. A broken gas line spewed flames.

In all, we counted at least 30 houses in the neighborhood that were utterly consumed by the fire. So very heartbreaking. Such staggering loss. As we talked with a Baghdadlian neighbor, a car pulled up. A woman leaned out the window and said she was a family friend. Were they safe? Yes, everyone had safely evacuated.

The woman said she was glad and drove off. Safety, which includes people looking out for each other, is the main thing. In the end, it's really the only thing. ▪

Why Indian Americans are shifting right – and poised to serve in top Trump roles

By Simon Montlake / Staff writer

For decades, Democrats could count on votes from Indian Americans, a fast-growing immigrant population with high turnout rates at elections. More educated and more affluent on average than other immigrant groups, Americans of Indian descent seemed a natural fit for a progressive party that likes to tout its multiracial, multifaith coalition.

Now, that political alignment may be in flux. As the United States moved right in November's election amid discontent over the economy and immigration, cracks have appeared in what was a bedrock of support. In districts in California and New York where many Indian American and other Asian immigrants live, Donald Trump and other Republican candidates far outperformed expectations, in part by running against Democratic policies in those states.

Since the election, in which Mr. Trump defeated Vice President Kamala Harris, who is Black and of Indian descent, he has named Indian Americans to prominent positions in his administration. These include Jay Bhattacharya as nominee for director of the National Institutes of Health, Harmeet Dhillon to run the Civil Rights Division at the Department of Justice, Kash Patel as his nominee to lead the FBI, Sriram Krishnan as senior White House policy adviser for artificial intelligence, and Vivek Ramaswamy as co-chair of the new Department of Government Efficiency. JD Vance's wife, Usha Vance, will also make history as the first Indian American second lady.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Donald Trump's nomination of several Indian Americans to high-profile posts is emblematic of a rightward shift among this highly educated, affluent voting group.

These high-profile roles, and the partisan swing in 2024, raise the question of whether Republicans can build on a growing popularity among Indian Americans. Roughly 70% of Indian immigrants to the U.S. have arrived since 2000 and are known as the IT Generation because many moved to study and find jobs in the U.S. technology

industry.

This generation may be less tethered to the Democratic Party than its predecessors who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s. Republicans hope to win them over, in part by taking on affirmative action and other Democratic policies pushed by the party's left that are seen as counter to the meritocratic promise held out to new immigrants.

"I hope President Trump will deliver on the promises that he put [forward], because those are Indian American values. Focus on meritocracy, focus on education, focus on national security, focus on family and faith," says Srilekha Palle, a health care administrator and political consultant in Virginia who chairs Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin's Asian Advisory Board.

Analysts are waiting for more data to see exactly how Indian Americans and other Asian minorities voted in 2024. But preelection polls and precinct voting patterns point to a small but significant shift among Indian Americans, one that adds to Democratic concerns about sagging support from Latinos and other demographic groups that make up a growing share of the electorate. Indian Americans, who number 4.8 million, are now the second-largest immigrant group in the U.S. after Mexican Americans.

A preelection survey of Indian Americans by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that nearly 1 in 3 respondents planned to vote for Mr. Trump, up from 22% in a similar poll in 2020. Another survey, the American Electorate Voter Poll, found a similar level of support (33%) for Mr. Trump among Indian Americans, with 66% of voters favoring Ms. Harris. (In the same survey, Chinese American support for the Democratic nominee fell by 19 points compared with 2020.)

Still, those numbers signal change: In 2016, according to an analysis of election data by the University of California, Riverside, only 16% of Indian Americans voted for Mr. Trump.

"The door has cracked open a bit," says Milan Vaishnav, the director of Carnegie's South Asia program. "While we didn't see much of a shift [toward Trump] in 2020, we certainly saw one in 2024 ... so this could be a turning point."

The gains for Republicans in the Carnegie poll were led by Indian American men under age 40, most of them born in the U.S., who were more pro-Trump than both men and women over 40.

One unknown, says Mr. Vaishnav, is the draw of Mr. Trump's personality and whether the attraction fades after he leaves the stage. But he also notes that two Indian American candidates, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and Mr. Ramaswamy, a biotech investor, ran in the GOP presidential primary.

Indian Americans in Congress

Six members of Congress, all Democrats, are of Indian descent. The newest is Suhas Subramanyam, who was elected to an open seat in northern Virginia, an increasingly diverse district in which Asian Americans make up around 15% of residents. Mr. Subramanyam, a state senator, won with a smaller margin than his Democratic predecessor, which he attributes in part to his unfamiliarity with voters and tailwinds from the presidential race.

But he also spoke to Democrats who had soured on the party. "We heard from a lot of South Asians especially that they had voted for Democrats most of their adult lives, and this was going to be one of the first times [that] they consider Republicans, or outright vote for Republicans," he says.

"Colleges are not accepting our children"

One issue that came up was education. Virginia has been roiled by partisan battles over school choice and control of public school boards. Mr. Subramanyam heard from voters unhappy over admissions to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a prestigious magnet school in Alexandria. Parents sued the school district over a 2020 decision to promote greater diversity that led to a sharp fall in Asian American enrollment. The policies remain in place after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case in February.

Ms. Palle, the Republican consultant, says this issue was a boon for her party's candidates in Virginia and resonates strongly with Indian Americans. "Each family has a story to tell us how the schools and colleges have not been accepting our children," she says.

Mr. Subramanyam says he understands the frustration of parents in his district and supports merit-based admissions to elite schools. "A rising tide lifts all boats. We should make sure public education is strong in all communities," he says.

But like other Democrats, he argues that the party is a better fit for Indian Americans and other Asian communities than the GOP. Polls show Democratic policies on abortion access and gun control, among others, are popular with Indian Americans.

Chintan Patel, executive director of Indian American Impact, a progressive group that works to elect South Asian candidates, says Democrats need to stay focused on these issues. "We're focused on science and education and a fair, just immigration system. We're focused on climate action. We're focused on gun violence prevention," he says.

Other issues that favor Democrats include religious diversity and tolerance. Republican ties to evangelical Christianity and its social agenda are viewed negatively by Indian Americans, according to the Carnegie survey. Indian Americans who have risen in the party have mostly been Christians, including Ms. Haley and Bobby Jindal, the Republican former governor of Louisiana. Both were Christian converts. Most Indian Americans are Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims.

After Ms. Dhillon, Mr. Trump's nominee to serve in the Justice Department, delivered a Sikh prayer onstage at the Republican National Convention held in Milwaukee in August, she received a blast of online criticism from Trump supporters who decried worship of a "foreign god." Ms. Dhillon, who has represented Mr. Trump in some of his legal cases, has also litigated religious freedom cases.

Joe Biden's administration had several prominent Indian Americans, including Neera Tanden, a domestic policy adviser, and Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general.

And as more members of the IT Generation of Indian Americans enter politics, this visibility could become a trend in both parties, says Mr. Vaishnav.

"This is something that I think spans partisanship. It's a generational story," he says. ■

LAGOS, NIGERIA; AND KAMPALA, UGANDA

War shut down Sudan's universities. But its students refused to give up.

By Kate Okorie / Contributor

The GoFundMe page was Braah Alrashid and Hibatallah Suleiman's last chance.

It was the end of July 2024, and the two best friends from Sudan had a month to come up with $15,000 to continue medical school in Egypt.

Once, they would have simply asked their families. Ms. Alrashid's parents, for instance, made a good living as landlords for several rental properties. When she started medical school in Sudan in 2017, her father gave her a car to drive to classes.

But the civil war that broke out in April 2023 turned that easy life upside down. Both Ms. Alrashid's family and Ms. Suleiman's had to flee to Egypt. "We lost everything – our homes, our land, our loved ones, and most sorrowfully, our dreams," the women wrote

on their fundraiser page.

More generally, the war has dealt Sudan's higher education system a catastrophic blow. Universities have been regularly attacked, looted, and even converted into military bases. This has forced many Sudanese university students to abandon their education. But some, like Ms. Alrashid and Ms. Suleiman, have found ways to continue it abroad.

Today, thousands of uprooted Sudanese students are enrolled in universities from neighboring Egypt to as far away as Malaysia. But for many, the experience has been bittersweet. These young people welcome the chance to continue studying, but it also often comes at a high price, both financially and emotionally.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

RESILIENCE

Civil war has uprooted millions of Sudanese from their homes. The experiences of the country's displaced university students point to the sorrow and hope of creating a new life far from home.

Sitting in a Cairo dorm room, Ms. Alrashid and Ms. Suleiman were out of choices. Ms. Alrashid hit the publish button on the GoFundMe page, and then immediately began tapping restlessly on the reload button, waiting for a donation to appear.

Even before the civil war, Sudan's universities were overcrowded and underfunded. But the war between two factions of Sudan's military has made things vastly worse. In the first four months of fighting alone, around 100 universities and research centers were damaged or vandalized, according to Sudan's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In the capital, Khartoum, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group, hijacked one university campus and turned it into barracks for its soldiers.

Hussam Ibrahim was six months from finishing his degree in accounting at the University of Science and Applied Studies in Khartoum when the war began. Because other schools in the city were being attacked, the university decided to close its doors.

Blackouts as a weapon of war

A few months later, it tried to pick back up by offering classes online. By then, however, both sides in the conflict were using internet blackouts and power outages as weapons of war. So Mr. Ibrahim and his classmates often couldn't even log on to attend their lectures.

That led him to a painful decision.

"I didn't think I had a future in Sudan," says Mr. Ibrahim, who decided instead to enroll at a private university in Kampala, Uganda, called Cavendish.

He arranged that transfer on his own, persuading the university to take him on the basis of a few grainy cellphone photos of his exam results, since his shuttered Sudanese university couldn't provide a transcript.

But many Sudanese students who have gone abroad have done so through partnerships between their universities and institutions in other countries. For instance, in 2023, the Khartoum-based University of Medical Sciences and Technology (UMST) sent about 300 medical students to the University of Rwanda.

"We chose Rwanda because it has shown the world how to heal their wounds, and this is important for people who are now wounded and in a war, like people from Sudan," says Mamoun Homeida, chairman of the board of trustees at UMST, in an interview with The New Times Rwanda.

Still, the transitions have not always been easy. "Back in Sudan, we had lectures in English, but if you didn't understand something, you could ask the lecturers to explain in Arabic," says Fatima Abdulrahman, a fourth-year dental student from UMST now studying in Rwanda. "Here, you're on your own," she says.

Ms. Abdulrahman has also struggled outside the classroom. She didn't know which local dishes contained pork, which she is forbidden to eat under Islamic law. And at Rwandan markets, she was shocked when male vendors grabbed her hands to get her attention. "In Sudan, males and females had boundaries, but it's not like that here," she says. While she finds the people easygoing and loves the rainy weather, she plans to return home after the conflict ends. "This war has tested me, but I'll go back without a doubt."

In Saudi Arabia, Sara Amir lived with friends from school but often felt homesick. "I was happy to continue studying, but thinking about my father in Khartoum made me very sad," says Ms. Amir, who graduated from medical school last year.

After she finished her degree, she planned to return home and practice as a doctor in Sudan. Then, RSF fighters killed her uncle, and she realized she would have to stay in Saudi Arabia. "We can't afford to lose anyone again," she says.

With so many doctors leaving the country, "The health sector will suffer, too," says Elwaleed Elamin, former director at Sudan's Alzaiem Alazhari University. That will exacerbate the country's already massive medical brain drain – since the 1960s, nearly 60% of its physicians have left the country.

"Sudan is not stable. ... That's why people are leaving," says Rawan Khalid, a first-year pharmacy student at Zagazig University in Egypt. She was close to finishing her degree in Sudan when the war broke out. "Now I'm 22 and starting afresh," she says.

Tuition 50 times higher than at home

Meanwhile, many students have faced increased costs studying abroad.

In Sudan, for instance, Ms. Alrashid and Ms. Suleiman paid about $100 a semester at Ahfad University for Women. The university helped them transfer to the Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport in Egypt, but tuition there was 50 times as high.

So they put together the GoFundMe page, which they called "Help Two Sudanese Students Finish Medical School."

And soon, the donations poured in. "Caribbeans, Germans, Serbians ... they saw our posts and offered to help," Ms. Alrashid recalls.

Eventually, she and Ms. Suleiman raised enough to pay their tuition bill and rent an apartment with three Sudanese classmates. Classes began in mid-December.

Ms. Alrashid says she is overjoyed to return to the simple routines of being a student, like preparing her morning cup of coffee and taking notes in lecture halls.

"No one realizes how much these things matter until you lose them," she says. "I lost it, so I know."

▪ *Hiba Ishag contributed reporting from Kampala, Uganda.*

2

Black women sworn in to the United States Senate, the first time two Black female senators have served together. Sens. Angela Alsobrooks of Maryland and Lisa Blunt Rochester of Delaware were voted in last November.

55

Percentage increase in felony assaults on the New York City subway system since 2019. A similar trend is echoed aboveground, where citywide felony attacks have increased 40% in the same time period. The increase in violent crime in America's largest city runs counter to a broader decline seen nationally.

80

Percentage of the world's poorest people made up of Africans by 2030. Though the continent is undergoing profound social, technological, and political change, economic growth has remained relatively stagnant. In the 1990s, Africans represented only 14% of the world's poorest people.

15

Percentage of the global population that lives within 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) of the coast. More people are settling in coastal areas, even as the threat of flooding and storms increases from rising sea levels.

83

Terawatt-hours of electricity generated by wind in Great Britain in 2024 – a new record for the country as it tries to reach 95% clean energy production for electricity by 2030.

166
MILLION

Years, the age of 200 dinosaur tracks unearthed during a quarry excavation in England. This "dinosaur highway" offers new insight into the lives of these extinct animals.

– Jacob Posner / Staff writer

Sources: NPR, The New York Times, The Economist, The Conversation, BBC, The Associated Press

Fries for $1 extra? McDonald's value menu marks how chains are adapting or closing.

McDonald's rolled out its McValue menu in early January, the fast-food chain's biggest attempt in years to win back customers put off by high menu prices that have soared 40% since the pandemic.

It's the latest sign of how American restaurants, large and small, are trying to cope with the inflationary shock and a changing consumer base that have hit the industry hard. Last year, several high-profile eateries declared bankruptcy, including national chains Red Lobster and TGI Fridays.

Through October, that was the fastest rate of failures since the 2020 pandemic year, Bloomberg News reported. Analysts expect more bankruptcies this year.

Despite the news of bankruptcies and other struggles, this volatile industry isn't shrinking; it's transitioning.

Restaurants are experimenting with smaller menus and leaner staff to trim costs as they cope with higher costs and a new generation of diners with different tastes and spending habits than their parents, including less alcohol consumption.

Others are paring menu prices with value offerings. McDonald's, for example, now offers customers buying a sandwich, fries, or a breakfast item to buy a second one for $1 and is allowing franchisees to come up with their own value deals.

"It's definitely a winners and losers market," says Andrew Sharpee, partner and managing director at AlixPartners, an international consulting firm.

Q: What separates strugglers from successes?

Among the successes are up-and-comers like Cava, a fast-casual Mediterranean chain based in Washington, D.C., and more established chains like Chipotle Mexican Grill and Texas Roadhouse, a steakhouse chain.

"Texas Roadhouse is a lesson in how to make it work," says Stephen Zagor, a restaurant consultant and professor at Columbia Business School. "They're listening to the customer, and the customer is saying, 'Give us a good time. Give us really good value. Give us some fun, but give us a little bit of different.'" (Besides its hand-cut steaks, the chain is famous for its freewheeling atmosphere, free peanuts, and rolls with cinnamon butter.)

The tumult has triggered plenty of experimentation.

At the high end, some chefs are opening new restaurants within restaurants – and personally serving several-course meals to groups as small as four at the back of the kitchen and under another name.

At the low end, eateries are paring costs every way they can, incorporating automation while cutting hours of service and menu items, and maintaining bare-bones staff. Denny's, once known for its 24/7 service, has reduced the hours of many of its restaurants. This past fall, a Wendy's outlet in Rochester, New York, began closing its dining room after the breakfast rush, serving only drive-thru customers for lunch while would-be sit-down diners rattled locked doors.

Even Starbucks, the world's most valuable restaurant brand, is struggling. Traffic plunged 10% year over year, the coffee chain reported in October. At the same time, employee dissatisfaction caused thousands to stage a pre-Christmas strike that, at its peak, shut down 300 Starbucks locations, according to the workers' union.

Q: How have consumers responded to higher prices?

The fallout from the pandemic has forced restaurants to focus on value.

As they began to reopen, restaurants had to cope with a shortage of cooks and waiters, causing them to raise pay and menu prices. A surge of inflation in everything from food to rent pushed up menu prices even more.

As the pandemic eased, consumers didn't care at first. Newly liberated from their homes and flush with stimulus cash, they flooded back to restaurants. But as prices kept rising and stimulus money dwindled, they balked. When a picture of a $17.59 Big Mac meal in Connecticut went viral on the social platform X in 2023, it sparked a social media debate about high fast-food prices.

Keeping diners coming through the doors and placing online orders means restaurants are having to shift to more creative, compelling, and streamlined food service.

Eventually, the economic shock will prove temporary as restaurants figure out how to lower costs without compromising value, analysts say. Already this past November, more restaurants reported increased customer traffic than decreased traffic, according to the National Restaurant Association. That's the first time that had happened in 20 months. And 3 in 5 restaurants reported a net increase in same-store sales year over year, the highest proportion in 16 months.

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

SCIENCE AND NATURE

ENGLEWOOD, FLA.

Florida town's climate reckoning: Storms so costly, homeowners may be forced out

Story by Stephanie Hanes / Staff writer

Hurricanes, people here say, are like unicorns. Each has its own personality, its own legacy.

Ian, which barreled onto shore in September 2022, was about wind – ferocious gusts that blew apart houses and snapped the tops off oak trees and prompted residents of this working-class town to rally around a new slogan: #EnglewoodStrong.

Last fall, Helene brought flooding rains as it traveled up the coast, pushing ocean water into St. Petersburg, about an hour's drive north of this former fishing village.

But it was the next storm, Milton, with its surge that spilled over roads and houses, carrying away belongings and leaving soggy joists and ruined drywall, that many here worry could change their community for good.

This is not because repeated storms make people want to leave Englewood, population around 20,000. Even with the water damage and the recognition that the wealthiest part of town is on a barrier island that should never be expected to stay put, many in Englewood still see their city as a gem – an old Florida holdout in one of the fastest-growing regions in the United States.

But the finances of insurance and disaster recovery after Milton are making it hard for many to imagine how they will keep their homes or continue to stave off the developers that have bought, built, and sold much of the Gulf of Mexico coastline.

It is a moment that researchers worry will be repeated across the country, as flooding and other natural disasters increase with a warming climate. A slew of studies shows that these events tend to amplify housing disparity and income inequality, including significant rent increases, according to a 2023 Brookings Institution report.

Last year, researchers from the University of San Diego in California and the nonprofit group Resources for the Future published an article in the Journal of Environmental Economics and Management that detailed how wealthier homeowners tended to buy up property in Florida communities recovering from hurricanes, creating lasting demographic changes.

Housing advocates say that federal disaster relief is slow to arrive, when it trickles down to homeowners at all. And policies created in the name of long-term resilience – flood zone building requirements, for instance – encourage a bifurcated system. On the one hand are people – or private equity firms – with the cash to pay for expensive home upgrades, such as rebuilding on stilts, or who can afford to self-insure and repair their properties. On the other are people like Gene Jeffers, sitting in a lawn chair on his driveway, his ruined house to his right, a vacation camper on loan from Habitat for Humanity South Sarasota County to his left.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

As a warming climate fuels more intense storms, repair and prevention bring overwhelming costs. If people are forced to move, the character of communities could change forever.

"I lost my roof with Ian, my furniture with Helene," Mr. Jeffers says, still giving the easy smile that has endeared him to his neighbors for decades. "Milton took the house."

Homeowners face "impossible" situation

Much of the national discourse about climate resilience on the U.S. coastlines revolves around how and whether insurance companies or governments should support wealthy homeowners who chose – despite predictions of stronger storms and higher sea levels – to buy on the water. But cities like Englewood highlight a different reality. It is home to retirees and service-industry workers, living in generational houses and small rental units, on fixed incomes and often paycheck to paycheck. They are tightly bound to their neighbors and the waterways that form the veins of this community.

Mr. Jeffers' in-laws bought his low-slung home across from Lemon Bay in 1972. He moved in in 1997, after retiring from a factory job. Back then, Englewood was still mostly a town of mullet fishers and service workers employed by the resort communities to the north and south.

He expects he'll be gone within two years. By then, Mr. Jeffers imagines, cash buyers will have scooped up the ruined homes across the street, and his lot is going to be too valuable – and too vulnerable to storms – to keep.

"I love this house, but it don't love me no more," he says, and shrugs.

He ticks off the reasons.

He expects the ferocious storms to continue, rebuilding is expensive, and he can't afford homeowners insurance, which would cost nearly $1,000 a month. Taxes have gone up. And even if he could afford the thousands each year that flood insurance would cost, he couldn't bring his home up to code in the way the National Flood Insurance Program requires.

Indeed, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a "50% rule" that is the talk of the town here. The rule prohibits repairs or improvements to a structure costing more than 50% of its market value – just the structure, not the property – unless it is brought into compliance with flood regulations. In other words, if the damage to a small ranch house worth about $100,000 is more than $50,000, homeowners are not covered unless they pay to bring the home into flood plain building compliance. In this part of coastal Florida, that often requires raising the house onto stilts, costing as much as hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The idea behind the policy was to keep federal money from being wasted. But in reality, the rule "places people in an impossible position," says Zoe Middleton, associate director for Just Climate Resilience at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "They're forcing change without funding adaptation."

Mr. Jeffers doesn't know when he will be able to finish enough repairs to move back inside. The local Habitat for Humanity secured him a trailer after CEO Christina McCauley called up friends at a local business, SWFL Camping Rentals. Now, she's helping him find construction materials. He needs everything: wood, cabinets, drywall.

Supporting people through disaster recovery is not directly her organization's mission, Ms. McCauley acknowledges, but it is what neighbors do.

In the meantime, Mr. Jeffers put up the Christmas decorations that his neighbors expect, stringing some 5,000 lights around inflatable snowmen and reindeer. Another 10,000 lights were ruined by the storm.

"I've got to spread the joy," he says.

Storms usher in stark questions

In the days and weeks after Milton, the #EnglewoodStrong hashtag started populating again online. The Chamber of Commerce fundraised for local businesses. Neighbors reached out to help clear debris from homes. Restaurants that weren't destroyed held benefits to support other restaurants' workers.

Pam Brobst has lived in Englewood for 45 years, ever since she moved here with her late husband, whose father was a mullet fisher. She loves this community – the way people gather at beach establishments to listen to live music, even when it isn't very good, and that neighbors know each other's names.

When Milton came, she piled everything in her home on cabinets and tables, put plastic coverings on her bed and sandbags by the door, evacuated, and prayed for the best. When she returned, the debris still left over from Helene was covering her yard – but her home was spared. She was relieved, but teared up thinking about neighbors not as fortunate, still living in hotels on FEMA emergency money.

"I don't know what they'll do," she says. "I just don't know."

The answer, says Bill Dunson, walking past piles of rubble along Beach Road, where he has been spending half the year for decades, is that people will be forced to leave and the community will change.

The median property value in Englewood, $340,000, is about 20% less than Florida's average, according to Bankrate.com. But that's still more than what many people here can afford.

Statistics about cash buyers – the ones Mr. Jeffers believes will buy ruined houses on his street – are hard to pin down for Englewood. The National Association of Realtors says that nearby Fort Myers and Naples have some of the highest percentages of cash buyers in the country – at 58.9% and 52.2%, respectively.

"If you come back in five or 10 years, there will be condos here," Dr. Dunson says, pointing to a trailer park perched with a view of the glimmering Gulf of Mexico. The homes there were shredded by the storm surge.

For years, he says, the community has protected itself against development, keeping height restrictions in place, voting down offers to buy out modest homes.

"People who are here have jealously guarded their property," he says. "They haven't wanted to sell out. Because if you sell out, what are you going to do with the money? Where can you go? They got such a good thing here, right? But now they're going to be forced to."

This sliver of a neighborhood is on a barrier island called Manasota Key, where Milton's storm surge was so powerful that it cut a new inlet. Older condo structures are crumpled; trash cans and even dumpsters lie where they were swept. In early December, signs planted along the street offered cleaning services, demolition services, and repairs. Some said, "We buy houses for cash."

On Dr. Dunson's lot, across the street from the Gulf and on the mangrove-thick banks of Lemon Bay, many of his plants were killed by the salt water that flushed over his yard. He isn't bitter, though. It may be that only plants that can tolerate saltwater incursion will survive here, he says.

He spent years as a biology professor at Pennsylvania State University. He knows he lives on a barrier island. Nature changes and adapts. And humans must as well.

"If you allow people to live out here, you need to have them build structures that are not damaged so easily," he says. "Because if the government is going to stand behind and pay for at least some of the damage, it's got to say that."

He points out a Norfolk Island pine nearby, a tree that is from the western Pacific but is unusually resistant to hurricanes. It may lose limbs during a storm, but rarely topples.

People used to argue over whether this tree was invasive, he says, and whether it should be here. Some people cut them down to keep space for native Florida species. But because of its resilience during storms, it has provided needed habitat for osprey and eagles, which are now competing over its nesting space.

"Decisions in ecology," he says, "as in politics and religion and everything else, are very rarely black and white." ▪

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

JOS, NIGERIA

Victor Bello leads children off the streets and into the classroom

By Ogar Monday / Contributor

Safiyanu Mati stands at the blackboard, pointing a cane at letters of the alphabet scrawled in chalk. As he reads each letter aloud, the 25 other students in the room repeat after him in unison. When Safiyanu reaches "z," teacher Mohammed Yahaya smiles approvingly and gestures for him to return to his seat.

"Next is parts of the body," Mr. Yahaya announces. Immediately, the children leap to their feet, and their voices again fill the small, yellow-walled classroom.

WHY WE WROTE THIS
HOPE

Students of the *almajiri* system often lack access to formal schooling. One intervention program instills a love of learning and fosters self-esteem.

"My head, my shoulders, my knees, my toes," they say together in English, touching those body parts as they eagerly follow along.

But this class in the northern Nigerian city of Jos is no ordinary one.

The students are children who have been sent away by their parents or guardians to study at Quranic boarding schools in what's known as the *almajiri* system. Inspired by the prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina, the system was originally designed as a means of broadening Islamic education in precolonial Nigeria. Children traveled many kilometers from home to live under the tutelage of religious scholars, or *mallams*.

The system has since deteriorated, however. Today, with little government support – which was cut off during British colonial rule in favor of formal schools – many of the children don't receive formal education beyond learning to recite from the Quran and are left to survive by begging or working menial jobs. All over northern

Nigeria, these children roam the streets instead of attending classes. According to estimates cited by UNICEF, there are 10 million children in the country who are in the *almajiri* system, mostly boys.

"It's not easy for them," says Mr. Yahaya, who volunteers with the Almajiri Scholar Scheme, an education program. "This classroom is probably their only escape from how tough things are for them."

"A fighting chance"

Growing up in the city of Kaduna, Victor Bello was disturbed by the sight of young boys in dirty clothes begging on the streets during school hours. "Sometimes I gave them my lunch money," he recalls.

In 2022, while attending college in Jos, Mr. Bello encountered the same problem. He approached a local *mallam*, who allowed Mr. Bello to begin teaching the children. The program began with 30 boys per year and has since expanded to 90 boys annually.

The students, ages 4 to 18, receive lessons in reading, writing, grammar, and basic arithmetic; some also learn shoemaking and tailoring. "The goal is to give these kids a fighting chance," Mr. Bello says. "I hope this opens doors for them."

Bridging divides

For Mr. Bello, who is Christian, starting an educational intervention for *almajiri* in Angwan Rogo, a predominantly Muslim area in Jos, was no small accomplishment. Since 2001, land disputes between Christians and Muslims have led to as many as 7,000 deaths in Jos, fostering distrust and further segregation between both religious groups.

Mr. Bello explains that he first gained the community's trust by solving a pressing issue in Angwan Rogo: access to drinking water. With the help of friends, Mr. Bello raised money for the construction of a borehole for the neighborhood. "They now know me in the community as the *almajiri* teacher," says Mr. Bello, an undergraduate studying for a degree in peace and conflict resolution at National Open University of Nigeria.

He made sure that the educational program respected the boys' Quranic studies. "I try to ensure a balance between the time we spend with them and their Quranic learning," Mr. Bello says. Classes are held on Thursdays, and sometimes on Friday, leaving the remaining days for Quranic studies.

The Almajiri Scholar Scheme also incorporates psychosocial support as a core part of its approach, aiming to instill confidence in the children and nurture their self-esteem. One key exercise involves summoning the students to the front of the class to share their experiences from the past week. This simple activity allows them to practice public speaking in a supportive environment while reflecting on their lives.

"Many of these children have spent years on the streets, where their voices are often ignored or dismissed," Mr. Bello says. "This exercise helps them reclaim their sense of self-worth."

By encouraging the students to open up in front of their peers, the program fosters a sense of community and trust. It also provides an opportunity for the teachers to identify any emotional challenges the children might be facing. "For some of them, this is the first time anyone has asked how their week went, or even showed interest in their lives outside of begging," Mr. Bello says.

Nura Abba, a teenager sent to Jos from Kano, remembers a particularly humiliating experience. Outside a restaurant where he stood begging for food, one of the people who had been eating inside the restaurant threw him a bone instead. Nura picked it up, stared at it in silence, and walked away.

When he shared the experience with Mr. Bello, the latter organized an excursion for Nura and the other boys to a fancy restaurant in town the following week.

"They said it was the first time in their lives they had eaten like governors and presidents," says Mr. Bello, who has also taken the boys on trips to the zoo, amusement parks, and the cinema.

"The aim of this is to let them see life from the other side of the table," he adds. "They should feel loved, cared for, and not neglected."

"Building relationships"

The Almajiri Scholar Scheme is a praiseworthy initiative that "hits two birds with one stone," says Jemimah Pam, founder of Gem'inate Kids Foundationhere, which provides education to children in underserved communities.

"We [in northern Nigeria] have some of the worst education statistics in Nigeria, and this program tackles one of the root causes," Ms. Pam says. Only half of all school-age children in the region attend school.

Ms. Pam adds that Mr. Bello's program is promoting trust across religious lines. "It's not just about education; it's about building relationships," she says. "It ensures that these children aren't left behind and can one day become productive members of society."

That's something Safiyanu and his peers in the program hope to achieve. "I want to become a teacher and help other children learn to read and count," Safiyanu says with a shy smile. ▪

POINTS OF PROGRESS

1. Canada

First Nations rescuers have become a critical component of the Canadian coast guard, earning recognition for their expertise and historical role in marine rescues.

When a whale-watching boat sank off British Columbia in 2015, people from the First Nation village of Ahousaht were first on the scene. Their quick action accelerated the formalization of the coast guard's program to engage with First Nations.

In the years since, eight First Nations and dozens of their coastal communities have participated in the search-and-rescue auxiliary. The coast guard provides support and training, as well as equipment and infrastructure. Longtime First Nations participants note the necessary building of trust with the government and the mutual benefits. And rescue specialist Tom Stere said, "They're a critical component of our [search and rescue] response, without question."

HAKAI MAGAZINE, COASTAL NATIONS COAST GUARD AUXILIARY

2. Colombia

Colombian women are choosing fish farming where coca plantations once thrived, through an aquaculture initiative challenging environmental damage and gender roles.

In southern Colombia, the district of Putumayo has long been dependent on coca cultivation for cocaine, resulting in an economy with high levels of violence and human rights abuses. But a women's collective established by former coca workers in 2013 focuses on a legal alternative – aimed at a stable income and reduced reliance on coca.

The small group operates four fish farms, producing nearly 4 metric tons of tilapia and other fish every six months for domestic distribution.

Graciela Castillo, who works at the co-op, says the effort isn't just about financial gain – it's about creating agency for themselves and their children. "Now it's our strength, and each of us has gotten empowered," she said.

MONGABAY

3. Belgium

The Brussels Court of Appeal ruled that colonial abductions of multiracial children from Congo constituted a crime against humanity, and it ordered the government to compensate five victims born to Congolese mothers.

Belgium ruled what are now the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda from 1908 to 1960. Between 1959 and 1962, some 20,000 children born to Belgian fathers and African mothers were, without their mothers' consent, taken from Africa and placed in church-run orphanages in Belgium, where they endured poverty and abuse.

In its ruling, the court rejected the argument that the state was not responsible because the kidnappings were not crimes at the time. Each plaintiff won €50,000 ($52,000).

The Belgian government first acknowledged the policy in 2019, when then-Prime Minister Charles Michel apologized for the kidnappings. "It's a very large part of our lives that was taken away from us," said plaintiff Lea Tavares Mujinga. "But at least it's a gesture of some relief."

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

4. Africa

Average incomes have more than doubled in nine African countries since 1990. Though most African countries saw economic growth after gaining independence, extreme poverty remains high across the continent. In 2019, almost 60% of people living below the international poverty line, defined by the United Nations as $2.15 a day, resided in sub-Saharan Africa.

Where incomes rose, standards of living improved as well: Extreme poverty rates and child mortality declined in Ghana, Cape Verde, and seven other countries.

Not all of the continent has seen such gains. Incomes decreased in Madagascar, Burundi, and Zimbabwe. Yet globally, extreme poverty rates fell precipitously between 1918 and 2018, from 60% to 10%.

OUR WORLD IN DATA, WORLD BANK

5. Pakistan

Solar power is picking up steam in Pakistan, creating what some experts are calling the world's fastest solar transition. At least 17 gigawatts of low-cost photovoltaics were imported from China before the end of 2024, and the country was one of the world's biggest solar installers last year.

The surge is supplementing an unreliable grid beset by aging infrastructure and a fuel shortage. Islamabad resident Shafqat Hussain, who was motivated to install solar panels after his mother's hospitalization for heatstroke, said his family has a newfound "sense of safety" and an 80% reduction in its power bill.

The residential and commercial turn toward decentralized power generation is forcing the state-run grid to raise prices and is making it more difficult to predict energy needs. The cost of solar panels has plummeted worldwide by 90% in the last 15 years.

RENEWABLES FIRST, DEUTSCHE WELLE

– Cameron Pugh and Troy Aidan Sambajon / Staff writers

Tracing fentanyl's path into the U.S. starts at this port. It doesn't end there.

A high-stakes sorting game plays out every day at U.S. ports of entry.

By Sarah Matusek / Staff writer

NOGALES, ARIZ.; AND DENVER

Beneath the blaze of the Arizona sun, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official unboxes flour tortillas. He bends them back and forth, and their soft middles give. Proof that the stack hasn't been hollowed out to hide drugs.

Across the border region in this state, powder and pills have been found inside the panels of cars. Stuffed in spare tires. Strapped to a teenager's thighs with tape.

Here at the port of Nogales, on the southern edge of the United States, the deadly drugs hide among the $22 billion in goods that enter annually. A high-stakes sorting game plays out every day: discerning what needs more inspection without grinding global commerce to a halt.

Last fiscal year, the amount of fentanyl that CBP officers seized in Arizona, 12,000 pounds, was more than at the rest of the country's ports and border sectors combined. And within Arizona, the government says, the port of Nogales seized the most.

"I think we're doing a great job, but we can always use more people," says Michael Humphries, the port director. But to conquer the epidemic, he says, "It's going to take more than law enforcement."

WHY WE WROTE THIS

SAFETY

Fentanyl is the "most urgent drug threat" in the United States, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. A variety of people, from port staff to IRS agents, are tracing how the synthetic opioid gets into the country – and tracking it down once it's inside.

He cites "the whole of government, along with the medical community, along with counseling – and really, everybody" as stakeholders. The synthetic opioid is so strong that the port stocks an overdose-reversing spray for its staff, the public, and its drug-detection dogs.

It's true: Arizona port authorities are catching prodigious amounts of fentanyl, making these ports responsible for more than half the seizures across the country by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

It's also true: Fentanyl, and the chemicals that make it, gets in between the ports. Driven up interstates. Flown overhead on cargo flights.

And still: No one knows how much illicit fentanyl enters the U.S. all told. But synthetic opioids are linked to tens of thousands of deaths each year, of people addicted and not. Some fentanyl isn't found at all. Not until it appears in coroner reports.

Fentanyl, up to 50 times more potent than heroin, is what the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) calls the country's "greatest and most urgent drug threat." It's also an issue President-elect Donald Trump says he'll tackle, through tariffs, terrorist designations, and military might. On Truth Social, he's said he'll work on a "large scale United States Advertising Campaign" on the dangers of the drug.

Supporters say imposing new penalties on enablers of the supply is justified, given the unrelenting stakes. Despite recent progress, the U.S. tracks more deaths involving synthetic opioids each year than the country's deaths from the Vietnam War. Critics say it's unfair for Mr. Trump to link illegal migration at the southern border with drug smuggling, given the bulk of seized fentanyl is found at official ports. Plus, they point out, most sentenced fentanyl traffickers are U.S. citizens.

Mr. Trump enters his second term at a time when Border Patrol encounters of unauthorized immigrants along the southern border are hovering around four-year lows, after historic highs under the Biden administration. Deaths involving fentanyl nationally also appear on the decline. Still, the ubiquity and lethality of the human-made drug remain a critical U.S. challenge.

"There is no single solution to this problem," says David Luckey, a Rand senior researcher. He led a team that drafted a 2022 commission report on combating fentanyl trafficking.

What's required, he says, is a "concerted effort across all three dimensions: supply reduction, demand reduction, and harm reduction."

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HOW DID WE GET HERE? Some analysts trace the opioid crisis back decades.

Back to a five-sentence note.

The New England Journal of Medicine published a brief letter to the editor in January 1980. The authors wrote that, based on data they examined on painkiller use in hospitals, "The development of addiction is rare in medical patients with no history of addiction."

Experience taught Americans that isn't true.

Researchers have found that the letter, a single paragraph, was "widely invoked" and "uncritically cited" as evidence that minimized risk of opioid addiction. An oversupply of prescription opioid pain medication followed in the mid-1990s, exposing millions of Americans to the drugs. Strong synthetic opioids, mostly illicit fentanyl, began to flood U.S. drug markets by around 2014, notes the commission report from Mr. Luckey's team.

As American demand for opioids spread, international actors cashed in. Fentanyl used to come primarily from China, authorities say, but a 2019 crackdown there led producers to pivot. Now, they say, precursor chemicals shipped from China are used to make fentanyl in Mexico, which is then brought into the U.S. The DEA says two Mexican criminal networks are largely responsible for funneling in fentanyl – the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels.

Part of the problem: Production is cheap. Fentanyl, which is synthetic, doesn't require growing seasons like poppy-based heroin does. And its potency allows small quantities to yield high returns for criminal groups.

Drug overdose deaths peaked in the U.S. in 2022 with over 111,000, a figure higher than the deaths that year from car crashes and guns combined.

Modest progress was announced last year. The federal government reports that there were 105,007 drug overdose deaths in 2023 – a 3% decline from the year prior. About 7 in 10 of those deaths still involved synthetic opioids, but the 2023 decrease in overdose deaths was the first since 2018. Data gathered through part of 2024 seems to support this downward trend.

Expanded access to naloxone, an opioid overdose-reversing drug, is credited with helping lower deaths. The DEA has touted arrests of Mexican criminal leaders and a dip in the potency of fentanyl-laced pills.

Despite growing social awareness of fentanyl's risks, stigma persists. Some people who've lost loved ones prefer the term "poisoning" to "overdose," to shift blame off victims who may have assumed a pill was safe.

That was the case for Weston, the son of Anne Fundner. In 2022, the California mother lost her high schooler son to a drug poisoning involving fentanyl, she says, following what she says was peer pressure.

Ms. Fundner repurposed her grief to speak at the Republican National Convention in support of Mr. Trump. She has amplified his call for heightened border security and urged families to be on alert. Without sufficient action from officials, she says, it's fallen on parents to do what they can.

"I was very angry for a while," she says. Now, through her activism, she points to a feeling of peace. "My son's life is saving other lives."

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AT THE PORT OF NOGALES, the search for the hidden drugs churns on. Mr. Humphries watches trucks heave to a halt at checkpoints, and then growl past. He ambles by towers of avocado crates pulled aside for more inspection – if not for drugs, then for pests and disease. At the port of Nogales, tens of millions of pounds of produce enter every day.

Customs and Border Protection employs what it calls "layered enforcement," a series of possible points of inspection. That includes license plate scans, X-rays, sniffing canines, and undercarriage mirrors. The agency, along with the wider Department of Homeland Security, has also explored uses of artificial intelligence, including a pilot of face-scan technology at the port of Nogales. A government watchdog has raised potential privacy concerns around the agency's use of tech.

Still, old-school observation plays a role. Mr. Humphries' staff looks for drivers who appear nervous or maintain a "death grip" on the steering wheel.

Court records detailing cases of alleged drug "mules" – people who transport drugs through the border – underscore the signs officials seek. One American "would not make eye contact" with a CBP officer at inspection, reads a criminal complaint.

U.S. citizens like her make up the vast majority of people sentenced for fentanyl trafficking – 86.4% in fiscal year 2023, reports the U.S. Sentencing Commission. Traffickers take advantage of low-income, struggling Americans whose passports might help them pass through a port easier, experts say.

But some contraband is coming through the air. A Reuters investigation found that fentanyl precursor chemicals – the substances used to make the drug – often arrive to the U.S. as air cargo in packages small enough to evade a certain threshold of inspection. From the U.S., the precursor chemicals are often sent into Mexico, and then reenter the U.S. ready for consumption.

When fentanyl first came on the radar of the federal postal service, a decade ago, it was mostly seized in international mail. That trend shifted in 2019, when China banned production of the drug. As of fiscal year 2024, nearly all of the 3,844 pounds of suspected synthetic opioids seized by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service came in domestic mail.

Postal inspectors partner with other federal agencies in southwest border states to stave off the drug's journey into the interior.

"We don't want to be the unwitting accomplice to narcotics being delivered to anywhere in this country," says Daniel Adame, inspector in charge at the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

State and local law enforcement are another line of defense. In Cochise County, Arizona, Sheriff Mark Dannels says his team finds fentanyl two ways.

The first is through "proactive policing," such as at traffic stops, says the sheriff. "The second part is when we respond to a death."

The head of the Border Patrol, which operates between official ports of entry, said in December that fentanyl is a top priority – that, along with the southern border arrival of a Venezuelan gang, Tren de Aragua, which officials across the country say is committing violent crime.

Jim Chilton tracks a fraction of all border crossers evading the Border Patrol. The Arizona rancher has seen a surge under the Biden administration – at least 3,700 people, by his count – through his motion-activated trail cameras. They enter through a gap in the border wall, often in matching camouflage, and pass through saguaros and mesquite trees on his land. He says he's learned from the Border Patrol that some pack drugs; an agency spokesperson says they can't confirm.

"You really don't know who all's coming across the border, including the possibility of terrorists," says Mr. Chilton. Along with the installation of more patrols and surveillance, he says, "I hope that Trump finishes the wall."

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BEYOND MORE BORDER WALL, Mr. Trump has signaled what else may come. He's called for designating major drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. He's also threatened new tariffs against China (10%) along with Mexico and Canada (25% each) unless those countries do more to stop outflows of fentanyl – and migrants, from the latter two.

Faced with claims of enabling fentanyl supply, officials from both China and Mexico have reprimanded the U.S. for enabling the drug's demand.

"No one will win a trade war or a tariff war," said a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington. In an emailed statement, they pointed to resumed communication between the countries' counternarcotics authorities since a presidential summit in 2023.

Addressing fentanyl trafficking requires bilateral cooperation that is "respectful of the sovereignties of Mexico and the United States," a spokesperson for the Mexican Embassy in Washington said in an emailed statement. They also noted the creation of a new national intelligence system in Mexico to enhance targeting of clandestine labs and supervision at ports.

Mr. Trump's supporters endorsed his approach ahead of the inauguration and say it's already having an effect. Before he announced that he would resign, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau flew to Mar-a-Lago, and then his country announced a border-security plan that increases resources for disrupting the fentanyl trade. A Trump call with Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo was followed by what Mexican officials said was the largest fentanyl seizure in their history. The Mexican Embassy spokesperson, however, says the operation was not a direct response to the tariff threat, but rather part of a domestic security effort.

At The Heritage Foundation, Steve Yates, a senior research fellow, says funds from tariffs could be put toward expanded interdiction or families who've lost loved ones to the drug. The epidemic is personal for him; in 2023, his daughter died from a drug poisoning involving fentanyl.

Regarding China, "The surest way to fail is to fall short of taking heavy action against what we know they're doing now, without stopping," says Mr. Yates, an informal adviser to the Trump campaign and transition team. He points to a bipartisan report released in April from the House of Representatives' select committee on China. The report concludes that, by subsidizing fentanyl chemical exports, China is fueling the fentanyl crisis in the U.S.

Such claims run "completely counter to facts and reality," said the Chinese Embassy spokesperson.

Mr. Yates says domestic drug demand needs attention, too. But he says the U.S. is playing defense "unless you can do something significant about the supply chain."

Trump critics, including several economists, argue retaliatory tariffs could harm U.S. consumers. Peter Andreas, a political scientist at Brown University, chalks Mr. Trump's tariff talk up to "recklessly irresponsible diplomacy," especially regarding Mexico, whose economy is dependent on the U.S.

"Nothing would actually put more pressure on the border and stimulate migration more than if Mexico's economy went south," says Professor Andreas, author of "Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America."

At various points in history, U.S. administrations have alternately prioritized drug enforcement or migration control, says Professor Andreas. That may soon change, as the next president signals both are front-burner issues, he adds.

The catch: The prior Trump and Biden administrations put drug trafficking "on the back burner," he says, "because they needed Mexican cooperation on stopping migration." Analysts credit Mexico's increased immigration enforcement with helping lower illegal border crossings over the past year.

At his office, Mr. Humphries displays a symbol of one of Mexico's challenges: ammunition for a .50-caliber gun. His officers regularly seize the military-grade weaponry heading south, for presumed use by cartels. Mexico has sued U.S. gun companies with accusations that they've fueled illegal arms trafficking to violent criminal groups. It's a case the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear.

Mr. Humphries holds up a round, half the length of his face.

"If we're tasked with going after the cartels, we have to work both inbound and outbound," he says.

Beyond shifts in diplomacy, though, the military may come into play.

Mr. Trump's campaign website says he "will impose a total naval embargo on cartels." The Republican Party platform, meanwhile, calls for "the U.S. Navy to impose a full Fentanyl Blockade on the waters of our Region – boarding and inspecting ships to look for fentanyl and fentanyl precursors."

The Trump transition team did not directly address clarifying questions about his fentanyl plans, including the use of the Navy. In response to an interview request, the Navy referred the Monitor to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Essentially, the Coast Guard – not the Navy – has law enforcement authority for drug interdiction at sea, like apprehensions of suspects or vessels, says Comdr. Cory Riesterer at the Coast Guard's Maritime Law Enforcement program. (The Navy, as part of the Defense Department, can support the law enforcement activities of the Coast Guard, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security.)

However, says the commander, "We don't see fentanyl or precursors being smuggled much in the maritime environment."

In fact, Coast Guard data reviewed by the Monitor shows zero fentanyl seizures in fiscal year 2024. And only one seizure of fentanyl – roughly a quarter of a pound – was reported since fiscal year 2017. Throughout that span of years, the agency says, it administered naloxone during its operations six times.

Though the numbers are small, that means the Coast Guard responds to suspected opioid overdoses more often than it seizes fentanyl.

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WHEN BATCHES OF FENTANYL manage to get past the port of Nogales – or come through other routes – the enforcement efforts shift into interior states.

Some corners of the country have not yet seen a reduction in overdose deaths involving fentanyl. That includes Colorado, whose health department reports a record 1,097 such overdose deaths in 2023, though initial 2024 data shows signs of a downward trend.

As of early December, Denver police say they've seized more than 170 pounds of fentanyl in 2024. At the state level, meanwhile, the Colorado State Patrol reports seizing more than 300 pounds of fentanyl – largely along two interstates that crisscross the state.

Regionally, the DEA Rocky Mountain Field Division, which covers Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado, says it seized a record of around 2.7 million fentanyl pills in 2024. Put another way, that's more than three per every Denver resident.

Again, the profit margins are steep. The regional DEA office says fentanyl pills produced for 2 cents to 4 cents in Mexico can sell for $1 to $5 in Colorado. In northern Montana, the price can ratchet up to $60 a pill.

Dealers have even sold to minors, sometimes through social media apps, after marketing pills cut with fentanyl as legitimate prescription drugs.

Cartels "don't care," says Jonathan Pullen, special agent in charge. "It's about greed."

Some in the state are trying to chase criminal drug money.

In a high-rise office in downtown Denver, a poster above the printer reads as a morale boost. "Only an Accountant Could Catch Al Capone."

This is the Internal Revenue Service unit focused on investigating crimes. And officials here see themselves as on the front lines of deterring illicit drug flows. They are keen to tout how the IRS brought down the Chicago gangster on tax evasion nearly a century ago. Their work today has direct parallels, as they investigate activity such as money laundering by drug criminals.

The idea is to target what they care about most.

"There is no one peddling fentanyl without the motivation of money," says Johnathan Towle, assistant special agent in charge for the IRS Criminal Investigation Denver Field Office.

The agency has partnered here with the DEA on an outreach campaign to money-services businesses for help investigating drug proceeds. The IRS is part of a broader initiative with the Treasury Department to educate regional and local banks on the digital fingerprints that fentanyl trafficking can leave on accounts.

Another complication comes from the use of common phone apps and crypto-currency to buy and sell drugs like fentanyl. That said, the IRS has special expertise to "decode the funding," says Mr. Towle.

The belief that cryptocurrency is anonymous – and can't be tracked by the government?

"That's wrong," he says. "We can." ▪

EDITOR'S NOTE: A cover story about policing protests in Columbus, Ohio (Jan. 13, page 22), misspelled the last name of Deputy Chief Robert Sagle.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Stories to unite Bangladesh

Since the fall of a brutal dictator in Bangladesh last summer, the interim government set in place has insisted that the task of reinventing society belongs to the people. One way it is putting that ideal to work is through art.

On Jan. 7, officials dispatched eight venerated local movie directors throughout the South Asian country to mentor a new generation of filmmakers. Remembering Monsoon Revolution – a reference to the student-led movement that ousted Sheikh Hasina after 15 years of hard reign – is the first of seven initiatives meant to forge a new sense of nationhood through art and archiving.

The focus on cultural production underscores that rebuilding nations involves more than organizing elections or fixing broken economies. One of the most effective tools for stitching societies back together is storytelling.

"The establishment of a cultural bridge is crucial after the revolution," said Mostofa Sarwar Farooki when placed in charge of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs last November. "We want to ensure that Bangladesh represents everyone – many people, many religions, many languages, and all cultures will be at the center of our policy."

The goal of the film initiative is to produce two documentaries and six fiction stories by the end of May. The other initiatives will engage musicians, cartoonists, writers, painters, and stage actors, resulting in concerts, exhibitions, and collaborative albums. A digital oral history project will gather the individual stories of ordinary citizens.

Stirring public dialogue with art has helped other societies restore trust and empathy by encouraging independent thinking and listening across divided communities. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, storytelling enabled "people to explore different ways to deal with difficult wartime memories, to challenge dominant historical narratives, and to question conventional concepts of identity," wrote Nerkez Opačin, a research fellow at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia, in 2015.

In Somalia, poets are peacemakers. "Poetry has the power to connect people on a deep, emotional level," one young performance poet, Zahra Abdihagi, told the United Nations last July. "It provides a safe and expressive outlet for people to process their trauma, share their stories, and work towards forgiveness and understanding."

The launch of the film project in Bangladesh coincided with a vibrant public debate among students, teachers, and others over the drafting of a proclamation on the meaning of the July revolution and the kind of society that should emerge from it. "The July revolution presented us an opportunity to rebuild," Mr. Farooki, a filmmaker himself, told Variety magazine in January, to "move towards a beautiful, democratic society where there is freedom of expression, fair justice for all and no corruption." ▪

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Sunlight on hidden fees

Residents in Minnesota may have noticed a change on the menus in their favorite restaurants lately. That's because on Jan. 1, the state enacted a law requiring businesses to include all mandatory fees and surcharges in the prices they display. So if a diner adds 5% to every bill for "wages and benefits," for example, it must build that increase into the cost shown for every item it offers.

Minnesota's Uniform Deceptive Trade Practices Act is the latest confirmation in a legal trend to protect consumers by bringing sunlight to pricing. The new law addresses what is variously called drip pricing or partition pricing, a common practice across industries ranging from ticketing to travel that stacks hidden fees at the end of transactions. In December, the Federal Trade Commission finalized a similar rule. So did California last July.

In recent years, several states have sought to crack down on a range of opaque practices, from price gouging to inconsistencies in what retailers charge for the same good online versus in person.

The new laws hold a mirror to what may matter even more to consumers than rising costs, such as transparency and respect.

The Federal Trade Commission's Trade Regulation on Unfair or Deceptive Fees encourages more states to build on the laws enacted recently by Minnesota and California. The rule, scheduled to go into effect in April, followed two years of public hearings and reflected written input from 72,000 citizens. The commission estimates it will save people up to 53 million hours per year in time searching for the actual cost of goods or services online.

"People deserve to know up-front what they're being asked to pay – without worrying that they'll later be saddled with mysterious fees that they haven't budgeted for and can't avoid," Lina Khan, chair of the commission, said during the rule's announcement.

Economists have long noted that price transparency drives innovation by pushing companies to create better products to remain competitive. For diners in Minnesota, the equation is simpler. The state's new law means that honesty is on the menu. ▪

COMMENTARY

TORONTO

Justin Trudeau is out. For Canada, it's not a shock.

It was essentially because of Justin Trudeau that I was sent to Canada as a foreign correspondent in 2018.

At the time, Mr. Trudeau stood for optimism and hope in a world in which leaders were clinching victories on pessimism and divisive politics.

In those first years, the juxtaposition between Mr. Trudeau and the United States' president, Donald Trump, was stark. Liberal Americans often expressed envy to me, that I lived now in a country that pronounced its aspirations of diversity and democracy, combating climate change and forwarding Indigenous reconciliation. (I also found that conservative Americans loved to point out any faults they could in Mr. Trudeau – and there were plenty of faults to find.)

BY SARA MILLER LLANA
AMERICAS BUREAU CHIEF

His January announcement that he's resigning as leader of the Liberal Party came as a shock for many abroad. "I cannot believe Trudeau is stepping down!" read a text from an American friend.

But it's not shocking to Canadians. And if his resignation is a monumental moment for Canadian politics, it's also a reminder that values cherished from afar don't always guarantee approval at home.

In a Dec. 30 poll, nearly half of Canadians said it was time for Mr. Trudeau to step aside.

While the second-youngest prime minister in Canadian history electrified voters in 2015, missteps in the international arena, corruption scandals, and a controversial carbon tax – and the struggle to balance an environmental ethos in an oil- and gas-producing nation – eroded his popularity. Many Indigenous communities bristled at rhetoric around equality that was much louder than action.

Canadians rallied around him during the pandemic, but vaccine mandates led to angry "trucker" protests in Ottawa, Ontario, and created divisions in Canadian society. And Canada's postpandemic story has been one of inflationary food prices, rising housing costs, and migration cuts.

He's also been in office for nearly 10 years. Canadians expected he wouldn't be in power after upcoming elections, which had been due by October 2025.

He'd been under pressure to quit from lawmakers within his own party. Chrystia Freeland, his deputy prime minister, stepped down Dec. 16, saying she was at odds with his economic policy decisions.

"I don't easily back down faced with a fight, especially a very important one for our party and the country," Mr. Trudeau announced to Canadians outside his official residence. "But I do this job because the interests of Canadians and the well-being of democracy is something that I hold dear."

Parliament will convene March 24, almost certainly leading to a springtime election. "A new prime minister and leader of the Liberal Party will carry its values and ideals into that next election," Mr. Trudeau said.

But not everyone is assured.

The political upheaval comes as Canada faces Mr. Trump's threat to impose a 25% tariff on all Canadian imports if Canada doesn't fortify the border to prevent migrants and drugs from crossing into the U.S. Mr. Trump has goaded Mr. Trudeau, calling him governor of America's "51st state," Canada.

As Mr. Trudeau rose, the world watched Mr. Trump's ascent in the U.S., the United Kingdom leave the European Union, and growing authoritarianism around the world. Since then, the globe has been strained by the COVID-19 pandemic, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the continued fraying of democracy around the world.

"I thought he was the golden boy?" a family member texted me about Mr. Trudeau.

He might be for her. But as with Germany's Angela Merkel, who was lauded globally for welcoming Syrian refugees – which ultimately undermined her support among Germans – the values that leaders espouse don't hold the political weight at home as they do farther afield. ▪

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

THE HINDU / CHENNAI, INDIA

Trudeau's policies ran his Liberal Party into the ground

"Justin Trudeau's rise and fall as a global progressive icon is representative of the crisis of liberalism in general," states an editorial. "... Mr. Trudeau announced his resignation [as prime minister of Canada] on January 6. ... His fiscal policy riled conservatives and moderates, and the generous immigration policy that he approved created a spurt in the population, straining housing, health care, employment opportunities and wages. His cultural liberalism was far off the centre of Canadian politics. ... Mr. Trudeau said he hoped his exit would arrest the decline of the Liberal Party but that sounds overly optimistic. But a post-Trudeau Canada may be able to mend its ties with key partners including the United States and India."

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN / OSAKA, JAPAN

Carter's death a reminder of US swing to isolationism

"Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter ... was met with both praise and criticism in the United States until the end of his life," states an editorial. "... The divided views and opinions about his presidential legacy seem to reflect a U.S. tendency to oscillate between international engagement and isolationism. ... Carter worked tirelessly on global infectious disease prevention, election monitoring and promoting democratization. ... His human rights ideals contributed to the development of later international norms. ... Time has marched on, and the pendulum of U.S. diplomacy is once again swinging toward isolationism. ... Will the ideals of human rights, democracy and equality become buried as relics of a bygone era when the United States had the luxury to pursue them?"

YA LIBNAN / BEIRUT

Iran is not a leader of the Middle East

"Iran's actions over the years have made one thing clear: Tehran's primary concern is not the well-being of Muslims or the liberation of Palestine but the preservation and expansion of its own influence," states an editorial. "... Iran's rhetoric about defending Islam and

standing against global powers falls apart under scrutiny. ... It has not cared for Palestine but has exploited it as a tool in its anti-Israel propaganda. It has not stood with Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, or Iraq but has destabilized these countries to cement its own power. ... Countries in the region must prioritize the well-being of their people. ... The era of Iran's destabilizing influence must come to an end."

THE TIMES / LONDON

Once again, failure to give female victims a voice

"The argument raging on social media and among political parties since Christmas about ['grooming gangs,' cases of sexual exploitation of girls by criminal gangs,] ... has been all about the dangers of mass immigration and multiculturalism," writes journalist Alice Thomson. "Politicians trade insults online with Elon Musk, demand inquiries and blame each other. ... But no one is talking about the thousands of young female victims. Yet again, they appear to be pawns, this time in a toxic argument about race ... and integration. ... These women need support. ... The government should ... consider pardoning the then-underage girls who were coerced into illegal activity and got criminal records while being abused by gangs. ... Instead, we rage indiscriminately against the perpetrators ... and argue."

CARACAS CHRONICLES / CARACAS, VENEZUELA

Maduro's stolen election sends Venezuela spinning

"[Since Nicolás Maduro's swearing-in Jan. 10], the state that will likely (once again) try to bring about the communal state or some other form to ensure that chavismo [Mr. Maduro's party] will never have to organize an election it can lose," states an editorial. "They have continued their campaign of forced disappearances and media control. ... And now they have been posting 'wanted' posters of [Edmundo González, who won the national vote but fled Venezuela to avoid retribution from Mr. Maduro's government]. ... The Trump administration will ... [have] a different foreign policy agenda, and there will be more pressure over the international community to lock a position regarding the Venezuelan presidency. ... It's the year of anything goes."

– Compiled by Nate Iglehart / Staff writer

HOME FORUM

Paradise found

A hunger for one's "happy place" is as old as time. Here's how I discovered mine.

Rounding the corner of my neighborhood park the other morning, I noticed a part of the landscape for the first time, though I'd walked the route for years.

An old oak tree extended a dozen big limbs to the ground, creating a curtain of green that set it apart from the rest of the park. Clever groundskeepers had planted a picnic table and benches within this impromptu alcove, making it seem like an outdoor room. The cool, deep shade and sense of privacy offered a perfect spot to read, talk, or do nothing at all.

I made a mental note of the scene – something to savor for the rest of the morning, or possibly the rest of my life. What I'd encountered, I told myself as I ambled home, was my new happy place.

I cherished the thought, though I avoided sharing it with anyone else. "Take me to my happy place" is such a common expression these days that it's usually uttered with tongue planted firmly in cheek. We sigh a bit at the notion of happy places, which can sound like a trendy preoccupation, underlining our fashionable need to get away from it all. Given the anxieties of the news cycle right now, happy places – those tranquil little patches of paradise where we might retreat for a while – do seem especially inviting.

But the hunger for a happy place, which my dictionary defines as "a memory, situation, or activity that makes you feel happy," is probably as old as our species. An obvious example rests within "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost's famous 1923 poem about a traveler who pauses for a few moments beside a stretch of forest that's "lovely, dark and deep." The visitor wants to stay longer, but he's nudged away by the prospect of "miles to go before I sleep."

This homes in on the essence of happy places – that they draw us precisely because we can't dwell within them indefinitely. Obligation – the odd errand, the office deadline, the pile of last week's laundry – inevitably calls us elsewhere.

But E.B. White, another of my favorite writers, pointed to a consoling truth about the apparent fleetingness of happy places. Even when you can't remain physically within a happy place, memory allows you to take it with you anywhere you go. Mr. White's personal Eden was the Maine coast he enjoyed plying in his sailboats – a length of sea that shimmered in his daydreams.

"I have noticed that most men, when they enter a barber shop and must wait their turn, drop into a chair and pick up a magazine," he wrote. "I simply sit down and pick up the thread of my sea wandering, which began more than fifty years ago and is not quite ended."

What I like about Mr. White's imaginary return to the frothy waves near his coastal farm is its stunning particularity. His fanciful visions affirmed a guiding ideal about happy places – namely, that they are, at their best, real places we have known.

Each time I open my office computer, it greets me with a rotating series of cheerful screen savers: a lovely German castle; an Italian villa; some craggy, misted shore in Scotland. They're all indescribably beautiful, but I wouldn't yet include them in my inventory of happy places.

To truly resonate, a happy place should be a landmark in one's personal biography. I'm thinking now of a window seat in a Cotswolds coffee shop where my wife and I ate cake one day, watching British children file home from school as the shadows lengthened on an autumn afternoon. That happy place still warms my mood because I was part of it once – and hope to be again.

But even if life doesn't bring me back to that little shop in rural England, that bit of bliss can come back to me. Happy places are more than dots on a map. They can become, in the wonder of remembrance, a geography of the heart.

– Danny Heitman

Our secure home

How do you feel about where you live? Knowing that millions of refugees worldwide need a safe place to live gives added importance to how we think about home.

Psalm 23 in the Bible gives this safe dwelling place a simple name: "the house of the Lord" (verse 6). Mary Baker Eddy, who discovered Christian Science and founded this news organization, shows how practical the phrase "the house of the Lord" is when it's interpreted spiritually. Her book "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures" elucidates the full verse this way: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house [the consciousness] of [LOVE] for ever" (p. 578).

This spiritual home or consciousness of God, divine Love, is a holy way of thinking and acting. We find this home within us, and help others find it too, through prayer. Prayer brings to light home as a God-given dwelling place that is present wherever we go. Being conscious of Love gives us the assurance that no one can be separated from divine Love's tender watchfulness over all.

Finding a secure home may appear unpredictable. We can take heart from the life of Christ Jesus. He said to a man who promised to follow him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

Jesus had no settled physical dwelling. But as God's anointed, he lived with a Love-filled consciousness. His awareness of Love's all-presence led him to whatever lodging he needed to help and heal people.

In line with Jesus' example, Christian Science teaches that our true nature is far from being a mortal inhabiting matter. Living in "the consciousness of Love" leads us to recognize ourselves and others as spiritual. As a spiritual idea belonging to God, divine Mind, we can't be separated from home any more than we can be separated from Mind, our creator.

Expressing qualities consistent with our real identity helps us see that in truth we are squarely and forever in the house of the Lord. "Goodness and mercy" are named in the 23rd Psalm as part of that mental home, but we could add hope and faith, flexibility and patience, friendliness and generosity. And certainly love.

A Ukrainian refugee and friend of ours left Kyiv several years ago to find a safe home for his young family. We encouraged him to trust God. Later, he asked if we knew anyone in the small European nation where he had a job offer.

The one person we knew there was just right. This person had recent experience filling out the documents needed by refugees, along with knowing which government agencies to contact. The family successfully traveled across the continent to their new city and started settling in.

The unfolding of events may seem coincidental, but it wasn't. Prayer that affirms that we each live in Love's presence opens our thought to the goodness of God that can be known and felt. We can trust that all are securely at home in the consciousness of Love that is ever available, and actively bear witness to this spiritual reality.

– Susan Stark

KYIV, UKRAINE

Ukrainian chefs rediscover their country's cuisine – after Soviets tried to destroy it

By Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

Celebrity chef Yevhen Klopotenko has a theory as to why the use of cooking spices was banned in Ukraine under Soviet rule.

"If you allow people to use spices, you are allowing them to be creative," says Mr. Klopotenko, whose signature shaved head – save for a riotous top of blond curls – is reminiscent of a legendary Cossack warrior emblazoned on anti-Russia T-shirts here.

"And if you are allowed to be creative," he adds with a grin, "you might also learn to do a revolution."

Mr. Klopotenko offers that anecdote as a way of explaining his passion for Ukrainian cuisine. Like many budding chefs with international educations and ambitions, he focused early in his career on mastering the world's renowned cuisines.

Then came Ukraine's Maidan revolution in 2013, when tens of thousands of Ukrainians filled Kyiv's Maidan square for days before toppling the pro-Russia regime. A year later, Russia occupied Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and launched the first operations aimed at occupying Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

DIGNITY

Food is a key part of culture. Ukrainians are uncovering their country's culinary history – and how its distinctive features were suppressed by the authorities during Soviet rule.

"Something changed inside me" as a result of those events, he says. "I didn't want any part of the old Soviet system; I knew I wanted to be in the real Ukraine."

Thus began a decadelong search for old Ukrainian recipes, lost food-preparation practices, and ingredients introduced to Ukraine by foreign traders plying Black Sea trade routes but later suppressed by Soviet rulers.

Mr. Klopotenko is at the forefront of a growing movement – a revolution, one might say – to jettison the bland and standardized cooking imposed during the Soviet era and to rediscover the rich, varied – and even sometimes spicy – traditional Ukrainian cuisine.

This food movement is part of a broader quest to uncover and fortify Ukrainian identity – through language, art, literature, music – in the face of a war launched by a foreign leader who claims Ukraine does not exist except as part of Russia. Asserting that food is inseparable from national identity, a variety of chefs, community kitchen organizers, food producers, and researchers are making food a key element in a cultural reawakening.

"The war we are facing now, that seeks to erase Ukrainian culture and raze it, is nothing we haven't faced before, but it is a reminder of how food has been used in the past to suppress the Ukrainian spirit and way of life," says Olena Braichenko, a Ukrainian food researcher and author.

"Food is the real language of love and a basic part of how people show their care towards their loved ones," she says. "When so much of that part of us was taken away, it buried who we are as a people," she adds. "But now as we uncover these food traditions, we are reestablishing who we are."

Food as identity and culture

Ms. Braichenko, author of "Ukraine: Food and History," cites borsch as an example. In the Soviet Union, borsch – the signature Ukrainian soup with beets as a base – was standardized and limited to a few ingredients. "But when we look into past references and recipes," she says, "we find that in Ukraine, it is in fact a dish of tremendous regional variety based on local ingredients and time of year.

"It can be green or red," she adds, "based on the harvesting season, and it can have meat, or no meat, or fish, or mushrooms."

(And in Ukraine, just don't write it or pronounce it as "borscht" with a T, the Moscow spelling.)

When Ms. Braichenko says Ukraine has lived through earlier Russian efforts to "erase" identity, she is referring to laws during the Russian Empire banning the public use of the Ukrainian language. Then came the Holodomor, the human-engineered famine of the early 1930s that killed millions of Ukrainians as Soviet leader Josef Stalin collectivized private farms.

Ukraine's is a village-based culture where survival has long been linked to keeping a productive garden, the noted food author says. That instinct for survival by garden plot explains why so many Ukrainians insist on maintaining their vegetable gardens in the midst of war, she says – and why so many refuse to evacuate their villages despite the dangers they face.

The sense of community engendered in villages where the cuisine was based largely on garden produce and other locally sourced ingredients is the main point of the restaurant Trypichcha (whose name means "three ovens") in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city and a frequent target for Russian bombs.

"We're like a museum of food for people to experience and remember the foods and preparations of the past," says Mykyta Virchenko, Trypichcha's chef and co-owner. "But we're not only about food," he adds. "More important to me is that we are about creating a community based on our identity and our culture."

After responding to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 by setting up a community kitchen serving soldiers and war victims, Mr. Virchenko opened a four-table restaurant that August. His objective: provide a besieged city with a place to gather over a meal inspired by both Ukraine-specific dishes and a rich tradition of absorbing the influences of other cuisines.

Two years later, Trypichcha is five times larger and often packed with diners sampling a traditional beef-and-pepper stew, or a tahini made from the seeds of Ukraine's signature sunflower.

But what matters most to Mr. Virchenko is how his food is the vehicle for creating "connections" and strengthening identity.

"Someone eating here said to me once that we are helping to bring about the birth of a new community, but to me that community was already there," he says. "We are just providing the place for that community to come together and be nurtured."

Rediscovering disregarded recipes

The idea that traditional Ukrainian cooking would one day be part of a movement to assert national identity might have amused many Ukrainians in the postindependence era of the 1990s, Ms. Braichenko says. "As we opened up to the world and craved so many things from the West, we turned our attention to French cuisine and lived in the shade of an inferiority complex about our simple village foods," she says.

Even Mr. Klopotenko, who had earned international cooking honors, admits he thought the idea of "Ukrainian gastronomy" was "a joke" – until that change inside him after the Maidan protests and Crimea's occupation.

He started combing old church libraries for recipes and lists of locally produced foods from before the Russian Empire. He investigated 19th-century food market offerings, discovering that before Soviet rule – which imposed strict limits on which crops farmers could grow – Ukrainians had access to a wide variety of products from around the world. He visited used-book shops looking for cookbooks and food histories.

And he opened his restaurant 100 Rokiv Tomu Vpered (whose name means "100 years back to the future") in Kyiv's Potil district on the site of the ancient castle grounds of the kings who ruled Ukraine more than a millennium ago. The menu celebrates the Ukrainian gastronomy Mr. Klopotenko once thought laughable with dumplings, pickled vegetables, and braised meats.

And of course, it features borsch.

"When I was a boy, my grandmother prepared borsch, and since she was cooking in Soviet times, I thought it was a Soviet dish," he says. "Now I know she was cooking Ukrainian all along."

▪ *Oleksandr Naselenko assisted in reporting this story.*

ON FILM

In 'I'm Still Here,' a compelling search for justice in 1970s Brazil

Fernanda Torres' performance sounds a powerful clarion call.

ON FILM

BY PETER RAINER

The truism "The personal is political" has never seemed more apt than in the new movie "I'm Still Here." Brazil's Oscar submission for best international feature, it centers on the real-life Eunice Paiva (Fernanda Torres), a mother of five. Her husband, Rubens Paiva (Selton Mello), a former congressman exiled for a time, was "disappeared" by the reigning military dictatorship in 1971. The film is both a powerful portrait of a displaced family and, inevitably, a drama of a country under siege.

The director, Walter Salles, who grew up in Rio de Janeiro as a friend of the middle-class Paiva family, has described the movie as "both the story of how to live through loss and a mirror of the wound left on a nation." Because virtually all of the action is filmed from the perspective of Eunice, the result is doubly bracing. We are caught up in a political maelstrom, and yet the effect is startlingly intimate. The Paiva family members may be representative of the many Brazilians who suffered during the two decades of dictatorship, but we are never made to feel that they are merely generic. Their plight and their fortitude are too real for that.

The film opens on a deceptively convivial note. The Paiva children, including Vera (played as a young woman by Valentina Herszage) and Marcelo (played as a boy by Guilherme Silveira), are gamboling on a sunny beach, playing volleyball, and chasing a stray puppy. When they return to the sprawling family home, the festive vibe endures. Eunice clearly enjoys being the harried matriarch. Rubens relishes his role as a put-upon papa. (He grudgingly allows Marcelo to keep the puppy.)

The good times, of course, are fleeting. Vera, who is planning to study in London, is detained at a military roadblock with her partying friends. She is released, but the note of impending doom is sounded. Rubens is soon visited at home by military

authorities and carted off. Eunice and another daughter, Eliana (Marjorie Estiano), are likewise brought in for questioning, and briefly locked up.

Eunice is never told what has happened to her husband. His disappearance frames the remainder of the film, which ultimately spans four decades. She learns that, without her knowledge, he had secretly been aiding dissidents. Despite this revelation, she holds no rancor toward Rubens because it's clear she would expect nothing less from him. In her own way, she is as much a champion of justice as he is. Realizing that he may never be seen again, she nevertheless fights for his return while struggling to keep her family intact.

With everything this film has going for it, it might still not have hit home but for Torres' shattering performance. Salles and his screenwriters, Murilo Hauser and Heitor Lorega, drew on a 2015 memoir by the grown-up Marcelo Paiva. Clearly they see Eunice as a force of nature. But Torres does something quite daring: She humanizes Eunice without once relying on obvious emotional cues. There are no scenes of her sobbing or breaking apart in rage. She knows that the happiness of her brood, which she values above all else, also represents the ultimate rebuke to the dictatorship.

As shown in the film, Eunice Paiva became a lawyer in midlife and a renowned defender of human rights. We see her at the end of that life, her mind clouded, at a joyous family gathering. She is played in this brief scene by Torres' mother, the legendary actor Fernanda Montenegro.

The effect, especially for those who remember Montenegro from her great work in Salles' "Central Station," is emotionally overwhelming. It's as if this real-life mother and daughter are in communion with each other. "I'm Still Here" is a movie about remembrance – of a family and a nation. The necessity to acknowledge injustice is its timeless clarion call.

▪ *"I'm Still Here" is rated PG-13 for thematic content, some strong language, drug use, smoking, and brief nudity. The film is in Portuguese with English subtitles.*

ON TELEVISION

Is this the end for 'Sesame Street'?

This morning, as darkness slowly, but surely, turned into light, I woke up my children with these reassuring words: "Butterfly in the sky, I can go twice as high." In some ways, it's a rite of passage transcending from generation to generation. If I had to craft an imaginary landscape out of childhood staples, I would be standing on Sesame Street in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood with a Reading Rainbow in the distance.

ON TELEVISION

BY KEN MAKIN

That image, sadly, is fading, and not because of the sands of time. Those shows are withering in political and social winds. Each of them, created on PBS and trailblazers in children's educational programming, is without a home. PBS itself, meanwhile, is facing a skeptical political administration and Congress, which have vowed to defund it.

These shows didn't just pioneer ways to teach children their letters and numbers. They created a set of tenets rooted in love – the science of sharing. During the holidays, I smiled when I saw actor Michael B. Jordan's appearance on "Sesame Street," which highlighted Kwanzaa. I was subsequently met with sad news, that Max would not renew its deal with Sesame Workshop for new episodes. The final season started streaming Jan. 16, with an archive of shows available through 2027. According to Variety, Max is pivoting "away from children's content and more toward adult and family programming."

Whether this is the end of Sesame Street has yet to be determined. But for right now, Big Bird, Bert, Ernie, and Oscar don't have a home for the first time in over 50 years. And one thing is for certain – the neighborhood is changing. That famous street is modeled after New York's Harlem, and I remember being awestruck on a recent walking tour of those storied streets, full of famous brownstones and beautiful culture. For all of its majesty, it, too, was a scene under siege, worn down by gentrification and the auspices of capitalism.

I can't escape the familiarity of such erasure, especially when it is tinged with the voices of children. I think about the collective groans of people who complain about playful youth at restaurants, or crying toddlers on airplanes. "Leave them at home" is rarely a viable option, but the more I ponder society's views on kids, I'm left with an unfortunate reality: We are phasing out the fundamental needs of children.

It's not only that we are raising children to grow up at warp speed – we're also raising them to be bullies, or at best, "tough-skinned." Emi Nietfeld, a writer and co-host of "This Alien I Grew," a parenting podcast, recently penned a commentary about "The Parents Who 'Don't Teach Sharing,'" an honestly harrowing bit inquiring about whether guardians should accommodate kids' developmental stages, or cater to their worst impulses. It is beautifully written, and just as heartbreaking, because it talks about the deterioration of our collective moral fiber.

In my estimation, this is where science should enter the fray, marrying with our sense of right and wrong. A few days earlier, I watched the 2018 documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" about Fred Rogers and his iconic show. While I fought off tears and periodically pointed at the TV in agreement, a word came across my screen that was associated with him: "radical." Folks might not see that Mister Rogers was a radical preacher, but that's because we've collectively sullied the term. "Radical" is not synonymous with "extremist." It is akin to far-reaching and impactful change. All of my favorite preachers were radical in some way – whether it be Martin Luther King Jr. and his rebukes of capitalism, or the Rev. James Cone, who had the audacity to teach Black liberation theology.

Mister Rogers, with his sweater-wearing prowess, was a fiery change-maker, as noted in Chantel Tattoli's article about his college days in The Paris Review. "Rogers sure as hell was political – the Neighborhood messaged countercultural values like diplomacy over militancy – and he himself got vocal when the wellbeing of children was at stake," reads one key quote from Michael Long, author of "Peaceful Neighbor."

What shines through, whether via religion or science, is the golden rule. The "Reading Rainbow" documentary, "Butterfly in the Sky," proudly discussed how the show was crafted by educators – for educators. Part of the genius of "Sesame Street," and a large reason for its sense of diversity, is because it was largely influenced by Black psychiatrists, most notably Chester Pierce. The goal of these shows, or rather, the *gold*, is self-worth.

It's why, I sense, that each of these shows has a singular opponent – the politics of fear. Fox News once called Mister Rogers an "evil, evil man" for teaching people they were special, "just the way you are." "Reading Rainbow" was undone by the politics of the No Child Left Behind Act. The current limbo of "Sesame Street" aligns with a political climate that seeks to destroy di-

versity initiatives and questions whether teaching children to be generous and to share will help them.

It's easier to destroy something than to build it. Crafting takes time, and more importantly, it takes love. The politics of empathy aren't just essential to finding "Sesame Street" a home. They are a light out of darkness for a society that's losing its way on childhood. ▪

BOOKS FOR GLOBAL READERS

When blue is more than just a color

In essays, Imani Perry riffs on everything from skin color and "The Bluest Eye" to the blues.

By Ira Porter / Staff writer

It is clear from reading Imani Perry's "Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of My People" why she is adept at chronicling the history of the Black diaspora: She weaves stories like a village griot or a grandparent sitting on the porch recalling the past. Her latest offering is a series of essays that takes readers from coastal western sub-Saharan Africa to the American South to demonstrate why the colors black and blue can't be separated when describing the experience of Black people.

NONFICTION

BLACK IN BLUES:
How a Color Tells the Story of My People
By Imani Perry
Ecco
256 pp.

Perry effortlessly mixes memory with social commentary to unravel blue's significance. The color can describe blue-black skin complexion, indigo fields in Africa where it was cultivated, and the blue-dyed clothing that signaled wealth and style.

Enslaved people brought their knowledge of growing indigo to America, where their labor produced a valuable export product for South Carolina. "Although the market for blue was part of the suffering of the enslaved, the color also remained a source of pleasure for them, and that too is an important detail in this story," Perry writes in the essay "Antigua, South Carolina and Montserrat."

In the West African spiritual tradition of Vodou, one of its deities, Erzulie Dantor, wears blue clothes. In South Carolina, unused blue paint was used by enslaved people on their doors and porches. Perry notes that historians and archaeologists have found that enslaved people in the upper South were not given headstones, but instead their graves were adorned with blue periwinkle flowers.

The book isn't all praise and positive social commentary. The atrocities of slavery and apartheid are present. The brutality of hatred based on the same black-and-blue skin tone that Perry celebrates lies within these pages, but she makes a powerful case for the resilience, triumph, and beauty that those colors represent in Black bodies.

The color blue shows up too many times in history to be a coincidence. True Blue was the name of a slave ship out of Liverpool, England, that took enslaved people from Africa to the Caribbean islands and the United States. Blue is prominent in the flag of Haiti, the first Black independent republic. Blues music is a sound created by Black people to describe the melancholy of lives lived in the margins. Blue was even described, as part of bigoted beliefs, as the color of the gums of deep-brown-complexioned Black people.

Not only is Perry well read in history, but she is also an appreciator of literature, music, and art. Perry gains insight from writers like Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka. She riffs on everything from Toni Morrison's celebrated novels "The Bluest Eye" and "Beloved" to Thelonious Monk's song "In Walked Bud" and Nina Simone's 1959 debut album "Little Girl Blue." Perry touches on the Duke Ellington Orchestra's 1956 Newport Jazz Festival performance in front of a multiracial crowd in Newport, Rhode Island. The saxophonist Paul Gonsalves' extended solo on "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" brought people to their feet, swaying and dancing, and police, fearing a riot, came onstage. Ellington calmed the situation by slowing the tempo.

The cover of her book features a piece of art called "Seeing Through Time," by Titus Kaphar, which shows images of Black women in pose and in supplication, mixed with backgrounds of glorious blues.

The inspiration for this book comes full circle for Perry. She informs readers that the color blue has personal meaning to her, as it relates to her Blackness and her family. Bright sky blue was the color on the walls of a room in her grandmother's Alabama home, where she and her family spent countless hours and where her grandmother made a home during the Jim Crow era. The color blue is significant in Perry's final essay, "God's Will Undone, the Creek Did Rise." She fortifies blue's significance through grief. Her cousin Durrel died while she was completing the book, and her family wore blue, his favorite color, to celebrate his life at the memorial service.

From Africans dressed in blue as if it were ceremonial garb to a tiny house in Alabama and a cloth of remembrance for a loved one, black and blue are brilliant and so is "Black in Blues." Perry delivers on her promise to tell stories about history and about how blue is more than just a color. Its association with Black people is worth thinking about. ▪

A writer finds his words in silence

Pico Iyer's cherished retreats to a hermitage in California feed his engagement with the world.

By Danny Heitman / Contributor

Pico Iyer's readers know him as an inviting paradox, a travel writer who savors standing still. Iyer lives in Japan, where he has a wife and family, and California, where he's a frequent guest at New Camaldoli Hermitage, run by Benedictine monks. Iyer's books chronicle journeys to many parts of the world, including Cuba, Iran, India, North Korea, and Iceland.

In a counterpoint to his busy career, Iyer has for several decades visited New Camaldoli in Big Sur. He's written about the hermitage before, but "Aflame" delves more deeply into his favorite retreat. The book's title draws from a Christian proverb about spiritual transformation: "If you so wish, you can become aflame."

It's surprising imagery for monastic life, which can seem an exercise in cool contemplation. But as Iyer discovers, the monks aren't blithely floating above earthly cares. In quiet hours, life's unresolved issues can bubble to the surface. Here's how one monk puts it: "Some of the guys come here to run away. From something in their past. ... And what they find is that they come right up against that in the silence."

The life that Iyer brings to the hermitage has troubles, too. As "Aflame" unfolds, the author's mother grows old, increasingly dependent on his care. His wife and family in Japan have their own struggles. "Isn't it selfish," a friend asks Iyer, "to leave your loved

ones behind to go and sit still?"

"Not if sitting still is the only way you can learn to be a little less selfish," he replies. "It was only being alone," Iyer writes at another point, "that gave me the courage to get married."

Even so, Iyer's choice involves difficult bargains. He describes a tender conversation with his wife in which they list each other's virtues, which prompts him to also ask about his faults. "Your need to be alone," his wife answers.

His embrace of New Camaldoli brings pluses. When Iyer's wife accompanies him on a visit to the hermitage, the monks greet her warmly. "For thirty years I thought you were an only child," she tells Iyer. "Now I see you have all these brothers!"

NONFICTION

AFLAME:
Learning From Silence
By Pico Iyer
Riverhead Books
240 pp.

Beyond its spiritual significance, the title of "Aflame" reflects another theme, the wildfires that occasionally threaten the hermitage. Iyer first stayed at the hermitage after a fire destroyed his family home, falling in love with its promise of renewal. "It's so wonderful what you do here," a visitor tells a monk. "We don't do anything!" he answers. "We make nothing happen."

For Iyer, the space to put ambition at arm's length is a relief. "The point of being here is not to get anything done; only to see what might be worth doing," he writes.

What Iyer sometimes finds worth doing at New Camaldoli, not surprisingly, is writing – creating, by his estimate, "literally thousands of pages of notes" during his many retreats over more than three decades.

These notes shape a narrative in Iyer's book that sometimes appears to range among years in no particular order, which can complicate our understanding of his growth at New Camaldoli. Like a family scrapbook, "Aflame" assembles vivid memories in which time runs together with no clear boundaries. Readers are immersed in the hermitage's abiding gift, the chance to embrace days where the clock and the calendar seem to dissolve.

"It's as if a lens cap has come off," Iyer writes, "and once the self is gone, the world can come flooding in, in all its wild immediacy." He acknowledges that his life might not be a model for everyone. "I'm lucky indeed to have the time and money to go on retreat, I know, a luxury that most might envy," Iyer concedes. Even so, he nudges his readers to seek out clarity and silence when and where they can. As he suggests, "Such treasure[s] are available to us in many settings, not always monastic."

Iyer claims no particular religion, and though his story is set among Roman Catholic monks, his observations about the value of quiet reflection will appeal to readers regardless of their beliefs. But Iyer doesn't distill the lessons of silence into a fashionable set of lifestyle tips. The inner life that those at New Camaldoli cultivate is touched by mysteries that can't be fully resolved, which is part of its daunting joy.

"There's no such thing as dead time," Iyer writes of his time at New Camaldoli, "when everything is alive with possibility." ▪

IN PICTURES

TLC for aquatic old-timers

Story by Brooke Holder / Staff writer

BOSTON

What does it take to keep a green sea turtle alive for 95 years? How about an Atlantic harbor seal for 39? Or an African penguin for 31?

All finned and flippered residents at the New England Aquarium are monitored closely, and many receive maintenance such as regular toothbrushing, ear cleaning, and feather preening. But the geriatric animals here get an extra dose of TLC. Vitamins with every meal, cataract surgery, and in-house acupuncture are just a few of the perks that staff members provide for their older charges.

The longest-lived resident, beloved by visitors and staff alike, is Myrtle. Aquarist Lindsay Phenix stands along the edge of a 200,000-gallon tank feeding the turtle a "taco" consisting of squid and vitamins wrapped with lettuce. Myrtle's diet keeps her at a healthy 512 pounds.

Ms. Phenix used to visit the aquarium as a child. To grow up to become Myrtle's caretaker has been "really great and really special," she says. Myrtle arrived at the aquarium in 1970 and is now thought to be about 75 to 95 years old.

"We do believe [green sea turtles] could mimic Galapagos tortoises, known to live to [age] 100 to 200. … It gives us a lot of hope that she'll be here for years to come," Ms. Phenix says with a smile. ▪

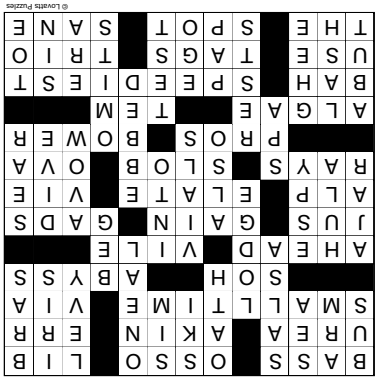
Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆

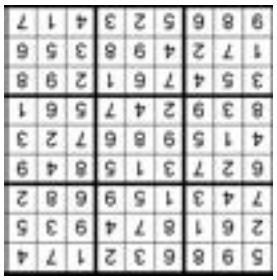
	9						7	
2			8		4			5
	4					6		
	2		3					
		5			6			3
8								1
3			7		1		9	
	7			9				
9				2			1	

How to do Sudoku

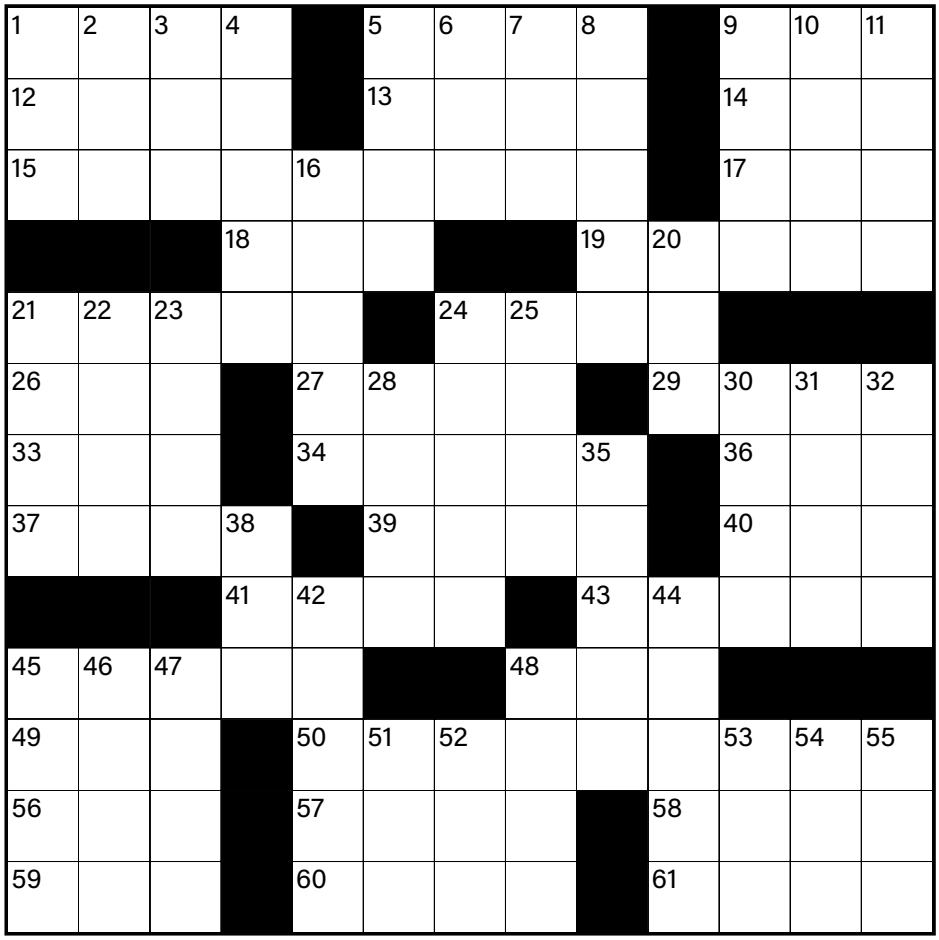
Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once ineach column, row, and three-by-three block.

Crossword and Sudoku solutions





Crossword



© Lovatts Puzzles

Across

1. Type of clef
5. ___ buco: veal meal
9. Freedom, briefly
12. Fertilizer chemical
13. Parallel (to)
14. Be on the side of caution?
15. Having little importance
17. The Italian way?
18. Mi, fah, ___, lah
19. Immeasurable chasm
21. Like the leader of the pack
24. Nefarious
26. Au ___ (in gravy)
27. Pick up
29. Gallivants
33. Climber's challenge
34. Gratify
36. "C'est la ___!"
37. Sunbathers catch them
39. Slovenly person
40. Russian name ending
41. Cons opposites
43. Botanical shelter
45. Pool problem
48. Pro ___ (erstwhile)
49. "Humbug!"
50. First to break the tape
56. Point
57. Auto plates
58. Wedding band, perhaps?
59. End beginning?
60. Jupiter's Great Red ___
61. Mentally stable

Down

1. Airport shuttle
2. Starfish feature
3. Mermaid milieu
4. Nippy dip
5. Courtroom pledge
6. Enjoy a run?
7. Imitation, in gamer lingo
8. Ryan or Patrick
9. Assess
10. Pupil's site
11. Bandeaux
16. Elk group
20. Implore
21. Barely open, as a door
22. Pantomime dance
23. Lay eyes on
24. Perfumery bottles
25. Gaga over
28. Besides that
30. Profess
31. Take the plunge
32. Prepare tuna
35. Diminished
38. Day getaway
42. Cools off, maybe
44. Excepts
45. Touch on
46. Tie securely
47. Yak butter
48. Kind of pattern or pilot
51. Tot's food
52. Deflatable trait
53. Nostalgia elicitor
54. Moral misdeed
55. Ballerina's support