

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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A newspaper based on unshakable ideals

At a time when shifting corporate interests, market forces, and demographic trends are buffeting many news organizations, The Christian Science Monitor is different. We are published by a church. And that means our work is based on unshakable ideals that aren't swayed by the latest algorithm.

As we begin our 118th year of publication, our new leadership team is working to both articulate these ideals and enable the sort of journalism that best encapsulates our mission in today's news ecosystem. To do this, we've been going back to our founding documents from 1908, when Mary Baker Eddy established The Christian Science Monitor.

Our founder wrote that she established The Christian Science Monitor "to spread undivided the Science that operates unspent." What does that mean? Many of us over the years have grappled with this.

We know that she used that term, "Science," to refer to the operation of divine law in human thought and action. The rest of the phrasing – "spread undivided" and "operates unspent" – echoes the 18th-century British poet Alexander Pope, who used those words in his masterwork "An Essay on Man: Epistle I" to say that God's creative and benevolent force is everywhere at once, neither diminishing nor separated.

So, what does this have to do with journalism? Prior editors have interpreted this as a charge to focus on "the good that men do, and not the evil," as Archibald McLellan wrote in 1908; to raise the standard of thought among readers; to focus on progress rather than problems; to investigate the deep values underlying news events.

Here are our five new operational guidelines that we've drawn from this history. We have committed to:

- **Bring a healing, purifying thought to many homes.** We counteract cynicism about news and humanity by upholding a higher standard of both.
- **Get above the fray.** We are free from corporate and political interests – and our journalism will reflect this.
- **Cover the day's vital global news.** We provide a trustworthy and concise compilation for our thoughtful, busy readers.
- **Investigate ideals and endeavors, not just events.** We keep abreast of the times by recognizing key currents of thought and their impact.
- **Be clean, family-friendly, and nonsensational.** We are "a newspaper for the home."

In this season of gratitude and rejoicing, and indeed throughout the year, we see our mission as our daily charge. We see it as our founder's gift to all of humanity.

– **Christa Case Bryant**, Editor
Kurt Shillinger, Managing Editor
Kenny D'Evelyn, Managing Publisher
Casey Fedde, Product Manager

90 years ago, the Supreme Court limited whom presidents can fire. Trump wants to reverse that.

By **Henry Gass** / Staff writer

Long before he entered politics, Donald Trump became a household name with two words: "You're fired." Having carried him to television stardom, the phrase is also defining his second term as president, and his latest high-stakes trip to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Mr. Trump has dismissed dozens of executive branch officials, including leaders of a half dozen agencies who, by law, can only be fired "for cause," which is defined as "inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance." The lawfulness of one of these firings was argued on Dec. 8, before a court with a six-justice conservative supermajority that has already expressed tacit support for Mr. Trump's claims.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

For 90 years, the Supreme Court has restricted the president's ability to fire heads of independent federal agencies. The court, which took up the case on the subject this month, has hinted it might agree with President Donald Trump's argument to overturn that precedent.

The case, *Trump v. Slaughter*, could have major implications for presidential power and the American public more broadly. If the court rules in the president's favor, the White House would have direct control of the leadership of agencies created by Congress to be independent or quasi-independent from the presidency, insulated from shifting political tides and regulating everything from car seats to the country's financial system.

"What's at stake in this case is whether you can have independent thinking within the executive branch," says Lauren McFerran, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank, and a former chair of the National Labor Relations Board.

Trump supporters view the stakes as the president's inherent authority to run the executive branch as he sees fit, an authority he says flows directly from language in Article II of the Constitution, which says "the executive power shall be vested in" the president.

The *Slaughter* case "is an opportunity for the Supreme Court to restore the proper constitutional role of the president as being head of the executive branch," says Hans von Spakovsky, a fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation and a former commissioner at the Federal Election Commission.

Oral argument suggested that a majority of the court appears willing to expand the president's authority to remove executive agency leaders without cause.

A 1935 precedent

Five years ago, the high court laid the groundwork for this separation-of-powers dispute. In *Seila Law v. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau*, the court in 2020 held – in a 5-4 ruling along ideological lines – that the structure of the consumer watchdog agency violated the Constitution.

Because the agency was headed by a single person whom the president could only fire "for cause," its structure was "incompatible" with the Constitution, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the majority opinion. The structure vests "significant governmental power in the hands of a single individual ... [who] is neither elected

by the people nor meaningfully controlled (through the threat of removal) by someone who is,” he added.

That decision upheld a 1935 precedent established in *Humphrey’s Executor v. United States*. In that case, which involved the Federal Trade Commission, the court ruled that board members who don’t exercise “any executive function” can only be removed “for cause.”

“Rightly or wrongly,” Chief Justice Roberts wrote in the *Seila* opinion, in *Humphrey’s* “the Court viewed the FTC (as it existed in 1935) as exercising ‘no part of the executive power.’” Rather, the court at the time saw the FTC, which was created in 1914 to combat monopolies, as a legislative and judicial agency because it provided reports to Congress and gave recommendations to the courts.

With the *Slaughter* case, that “rightly or wrongly” question has returned to the justices.

A slow but sweeping change

The *Slaughter* case also concerns the FTC. Rebecca Slaughter, a former trade commissioner, sued Mr. Trump after he fired her without cause in March. The symmetry is central to Mr. Trump’s argument that, while the justices said the president couldn’t fire an FTC commissioner in 1935, the president should be able to do so now.

“The modern-day FTC exercises core executive power, and its heads must be fully accountable to the President,” Mr. Trump argued in a court filing. The filing cited, for example, the FTC’s ability to “file civil suits seeking monetary penalties.”

The Supreme Court has made similar arguments in upholding, on an emergency basis, Mr. Trump’s firings of agency leaders, seemingly in defiance of *Humphrey’s*. Some justices reiterated those views during the argument in *Slaughter* earlier this month.

“Maybe these independent agencies have become something Congress didn’t intend or anticipate?” asked Justice Amy Coney Barrett. Later, she said that of the independent agencies that exist now, “there’s nothing that looks like the FTC at the time of *Humphrey’s*, or certainly not today.”

Appearing to be divided along ideological lines, all the justices warned of a potential separation-of-powers slippery slope should they rule for or against Mr. Trump. If Congress can create executive branch agencies with leaders fireable only for cause, some justices hypothesized, why could they not decide to run Cabinet-level agencies with multimember commissions whom the president could only fire for cause?

Justice Elena Kagan called the status quo under *Humphrey’s* a delicate “bargain” that checks “uncontrolled, unchecked” presidential power. “If there’s one thing we know about the founders, it’s that they wanted powers separated. ... [Congress has] given all of that power to these agencies largely with it in mind that the agencies are not under the control of a single person. ...”

None of the high court’s actions or arguments to date guarantee *Humphrey’s* demise. But they are signals that the *Slaughter* decision will likely favor Mr. Trump, legal scholars say. Such a ruling would have a slow but sweeping effect across the federal government.

“If the Supreme Court comes out and says, ‘We’re overruling *Humphrey’s Executor*’ ... that will apply to every agency in Washington,” says Mr. von Spakovsky.

The consequences might not be felt immediately, but they could be significant, says Nicholas Bagley, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School. “The day after the opinion comes down, nothing much changes. The officers in these agencies remain in these agencies. But they’re subject to removal by the president, and that gives him leverage over how they make their decisions.” Hypothetically, it means the president could tell the Securities and Exchange Commission – an independent agency that monitors and regulates the financial sector – how to go about its investigations, Professor Bagley continues.

“Will it matter for a single [investigatory] decision? It’s hard to say,” he says. But “instead of going it alone, they’ll have to look to

the White House to pursue whatever policy [they] want to pursue.”

Allies of Mr. Trump have argued that the president is more accountable to the public than unelected civil servants – and courts should uphold the president’s ability to remove agency heads and staff. A president who “uses his or her office to reimpose constitutional authority over federal policymaking can begin to correct decades of corruption and remove thousands of bureaucrats from the positions of public trust they have so long abused,” wrote the authors of Project 2025, the conservative blueprint for Mr. Trump’s second term.

The Fed exception

While the conservative justices might have already signaled the end of *Humphrey’s*, they have also already carved out an exception for the Federal Reserve in this new legal landscape. It is not surprising, experts say. America’s financial stability has long been considered a consequence of the Fed’s independence from the executive branch. If political leaders can influence the central bank, the logic goes, the bank will favor short-term political gain over long-term economic benefits.

In a separate case about Mr. Trump’s firing of Gwynne Wilcox, a former chair of the National Labor Relations Board, the court held (again 6-3) that the president could fire Ms. Wilcox without cause. The two-page emergency order specified that this conclusion did not apply to the Fed’s leadership because the central bank “is a uniquely structured, quasi-private entity.” With those sentences, “the Supreme Court was sending a pretty clear signal that they’re concerned about the Fed,” says Ms. McFerran.

The emergency order has no precedential force, however, so the court would have to formalize this exception for the Fed in an opinion this term. It could be the *Slaughter* case, or it could be a separate case about Mr. Trump’s firing of a Fed governor, Lisa Cook.

Mr. Trump says he fired her for cause – specifically over allegations that she committed mortgage fraud. (She has yet to be formally charged, and Ms. Cook says there is no basis for the allegation.) The case is scheduled for oral argument in late January.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court’s conservative supermajority appears poised to greatly expand the president’s ability to fire leaders of important executive branch agencies. But it also appears there will be legal hurdles to navigate in that process.

“The conservative justices on the court are pretty committed to [that] idea,” says Professor Bagley. “The thing that has slowed them from putting that into operation has been the Fed.” Now, he adds, “they appear willing to create an exception for the Fed, even while they eliminate the independence of every other agency.” ■

PEORIA, ARIZ.

In Arizona, a Democrat and a Republican fight to free an ICE detainee

By Sarah Matusek / Staff writer

Brent Peak and Lisa Everett typically fall on different sides of political issues. He leads a local chapter of a progressive advocacy group. She’s a GOP district chair. Yet when the two met this past spring on the sidelines of dueling protests, their willingness to talk with one another led to finding some common ground – on the white-hot topic of immigration.

That day, Mr. Peak’s group gathered outside the local offices of the U.S. representative for Arizona’s 8th Congressional District. Several carried signs protesting cuts by the Department of Gov-

ernment Efficiency. Ms. Everett joined a counterprotest, sporting a Trump T-shirt. The two met through a conversation about keeping their demonstrations peaceful. They kept up the discussion over breakfast.

The Democrat and Republican have since aimed their activism in the same direction, agreeing about one community member's immigration case. They've both called for the release of Kelly Yu, a Chinese unauthorized immigrant, business owner, and family member to U.S. citizens, and who has lived in Arizona for more than two decades. The activists and other supportive community members say Ms. Yu isn't one of what the Trump administration calls the "worst of the worst," needing priority deportation.

The pair visited Ms. Yu in detention during the summer. "She's everything we want in an American," says Ms. Everett. "She's the exact opposite of a drain on our system. She is employing Americans."

Mr. Peak points out that the family-supported business owner, who fled communist China, "checks a lot of boxes that you would think more Republicans would be in favor of."

The rare bipartisan support has surprised Ms. Yu, who says in a phone call from Arizona's Eloy Detention Center that she feels "lots of love." But that solidarity hasn't yet won her release, after more than half a year detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Meanwhile, her U.S. citizen husband, Aldo Urquiza, misses his outgoing wife, who likes her restaurant's pot stickers.

"You can hear her laugh from miles away," he says.

"Playing release and catch"

Ms. Yu's experience in the United States has spanned four presidents and their varying immigration policies, though no significant congressional reform of immigration laws has occurred during her time here. Her journey highlights how the U.S. immigration system can result in yearslong adjudication, and underscores that having U.S. family members doesn't necessarily lead to easy pathways to citizenship.

In 2004, the Border Patrol arrested Ms. Yu, also known as Lai Kuen Yu, as she illegally crossed from Mexico into Arizona, according to the Department of Homeland Security. The government says that the George W. Bush administration released her two days later. Ms. Yu, who was pregnant at the time of her entry, says she left China to give her daughter "a better life and education, more freedom."

Ms. Yu applied for asylum, which the government denied. An immigration judge gave her a deportation order in 2005.

Her attempts to appeal that order ultimately failed, and she was later detained during the Biden administration. She and Mr. Urquiza, who met through a dating app, married in January while she was in ICE detention in Texas. She was later released, then arrested again this past May.

"They're playing release and catch, release and catch," says Mr. Urquiza. He recalls telling his wife: "You're not an animal."

According to DHS, the Board of Immigration Appeals in June granted Ms. Yu a temporary stay of removal while the appellate board considered her motion to reopen her case. Yet Ms. Yu has not yet been released.

"For operational security and to ensure the safety of our personnel, ICE does not publicize when an alien will be removed," says a DHS spokesperson. ICE has not responded to additional questions about Ms. Yu, including her detention history.

Several aspects of Ms. Yu's case remain unclear, such as why she was released then detained again. The Monitor wasn't able to speak

WHY WE WROTE THIS

For political opponents to find common ground on immigration matters seems rare. Yet, in Arizona, a progressive activist and a Republican district party chair are uniting around a detained woman who has been a positive force in her community.

with a lawyer representing her. Generally, though, it is possible for unauthorized immigrants to adjust their legal status through their U.S. citizen spouse or U.S. citizen child who's at least 21 years old.

But there's a major catch. If the immigrant entered illegally, they must first leave the country to pursue their status change through a consular process abroad. And that exit, whether voluntary or through a deportation order, triggers a 10-year reentry ban that requires other paperwork to seek lawful status. The bottom line: For people like Ms. Yu, it can be extraordinarily hard to gain a lawful status from within the United States.

Embedded in the community

Living here without authorization didn't stop Ms. Yu from launching two Asian eateries in Maricopa County. She had planned to open a third. Through Kawaii Sushi and Asian Cuisine, Ms. Yu became a community fixture, donating to local causes such as baseball teams and helping fundraise for a police department's K-9 unit. (Opening a business in Arizona does not hinge on immigration status.)

Most U.S. adults support offering unauthorized immigrants a path to citizenship, polling suggests. But there are nuances to Americans' views on immigration, which include support for border security.

Roughly a quarter of the foreign-born population in the U.S. lives in the country without legal permission. An estimated 13.7 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the U.S. as of mid-2023, according to the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, whose estimate includes a few million foreigners with temporary permission to stay. Those researchers found that 45% of the unauthorized population resemble Ms. Yu: residing here for 20 years or more.

Ms. Yu felt like a bird flying through the sky without a nest.

That's how she described the past 21 years living in the United States without authorization, on a call with the Monitor from Eloy Detention Center. Inside, "life here is just waiting and waiting," she says.

Ms. Yu believes that once immigration authorities secure her travel documents, they will probably deport her to China. She could face a yearslong bar on reentering the U.S., and says she's anxious about returning to Asia after so long. "Everything is going to be new to me."

About 90 miles northwest of the ICE facility where she's held, a row of red lanterns hangs in her Peoria, Arizona, restaurant. When Mr. Peak and Ms. Everett met there this fall, the Republican displayed a pink pin on her shirt. It noted the date of Ms. Everett's censure this September by her local party for supporting Ms. Yu and working with a Democrat.

"Literal badge of honor," chuckles Mr. Peak, who is co-chair of Northwest Valley Indivisible. Ms. Everett says she doesn't care about the politics of what she says amounts to a "slap on the wrist."

Anticipating his wife's deportation, Mr. Urquiza says, at this point, it's something only the president could stop. Like the majority of Maricopa County voters, he says he cast his ballot for Mr. Trump last year.

The future for unlikely allies

Six months have passed since Ms. Yu entered the detention center. Her daughter attends college and helps out at the family business alongside Mr. Urquiza.

Customers ask about his wife and what they can do to help. Local news has followed her story for months. Mr. Urquiza knows the questions come from kindness, but the outreach can be "overwhelming," he says. At the Peoria eatery, reminders of her are everywhere. A photo of Ms. Yu, smiling wide, greets guests at the door.

"She started this, and I'm not going to let it die," Mr. Urquiza says.

Smoked salmon sushi has become Mr. Peak's regular order. "We are thrilled to have motivated other people to lend their voices to this issue," says Mr. Peak. "But it is depressing to see just how ineffective our voices really seem to be."

The Republican and Democrat are advocating for Ms. Yu “individually, but also systemically,” says Mr. Peak. “We want to see a strong border policy with a compassionate immigration policy.”

The unlikely allies plan to collaborate on other issues for which they share common ground, such as funding for local school districts. “We want to work together any time we can,” says Ms. Everett.

If and when the government deports Ms. Yu, her husband says, the couple hopes to reunite eventually in Mexico. Maybe open a sushi joint there. From detention, though, Ms. Yu says she’s unsure how much freedom of mobility she’ll receive from whichever country receives her first.

The wait has drained the family, and Mr. Urquiza has come to accept her departure.

“I’ll celebrate as soon as she doesn’t call me,” from detention, he says. “Because I know she’s going to be free.” ■

Many divisive X accounts are foreign-based. What does that tell us?

By Simon Montlake / Staff writer

On X, they post as The General. The account, which comes with a blue check mark and describes itself as “Constitutionalist, Patriot, Ethnically American,” has been sharing a steady stream of pro-Trump, U.S.-centric content since March of 2016.

But The General may not be what their followers envision: The account is actually based in Turkey.

It’s just one of many highly active and relentlessly partisan accounts on X, the social media platform owned by Elon Musk, that have been affected by a new feature allowing users to see posters’ country of origin. This geolocation data has unmasked scores of accounts that generate millions of impressions posting about U.S. politics and other hot-button issues despite being located outside the U.S. The transparency feature, released on Nov. 21, has itself become a viral topic on X and other platforms.

While the geolocation data is incomplete and, in some cases, disputed by account holders, users have seized on revelations that some prominent X accounts appear to be frauds. Pro-Trump posters who extol the virtues of America First have turned out to be based in Nigeria and Bangladesh. Progressive content has been amplified by foreign posters who purport to be U.S. voters.

Who is behind these accounts isn’t always clear. Foreign governments have been known to use social media to spread disinformation and influence U.S. elections. Among the best documented of these efforts was Russia’s attempt to stoke tensions over police shootings and Black Lives Matter protests in 2016, using fake personas on both sides.

But researchers who study misinformation say much of the divisive content is motivated by something more basic: money. Posters on X can profit from clicks. And what reliably engages many U.S. users is outrage-inducing political content that can be wildly inaccurate and still deemed credible by partisans.

Still, as more and more Americans derive their news from social media rather than mainstream journalism sources, the impact of that rift can be far-reaching.

“The core issue here is the inherent unreliability of the information ecosystem,” says Mor Naaman, a professor of information science at Cornell Tech in New York City. “Our information ecosystem is built on incentives that very much invite anyone to post divisive or other engagement-based content, because sometimes they make money.”

In the Middle East, X’s geolocation data shows some pro-Palestinian posters who purport to be in Gaza are located elsewhere, raising doubts about their authenticity. Some accounts that relay images of life under duress in Gaza and ask for donations have been exposed as potential scams. In the United Kingdom, some accounts that advocate for Scotland’s independence appear to originate in Iran and the Netherlands.

In the U.S., this “great unmasking” has shone a spotlight on a slew of “patriotic” MAGA accounts that are located in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Many of these accounts feature AI-generated images of blond-haired American women and of President Donald Trump and his family. Surprising locations have also turned up for left-leaning accounts – such as one called Republicans Against Trump, with nearly half a million followers, which was shown to be based in Austria before changing its location to the U.S.

Incentives in the business model

Analysts say incentives for “rage baiters” are baked into X’s business model under Mr. Musk’s ownership. Take the blue check mark, which was originally meant to signal that an account holder was who they claimed to be. It has become a pay-to-play badge that helps content makers build audiences that can be monetized via revenue sharing with the platform.

“That makes it easier, not harder, for fake or proxy accounts to appear credible,” says Emilio Ferrara, a professor of computer science at the University of Southern California, via email.

At the same time, X has cut its moderation and trust-and-safety teams and instead asked users to provide context for misleading posts in the form of community notes. Crowd-sourced tools can be helpful, but it’s hard to assess what X’s features mean for fake and manipulative content since X no longer allows independent researchers to access its data, says Professor Ferrara.

Some accounts have responded to X’s geolocation data by claiming to be Americans living abroad. The General, for example, posted a video of a U.S. passport and claimed to be in Turkey on a business trip.

When announcing X’s new geolocation feature, Nikita Bier, the company’s head of product, called it “an important first step” and promised to introduce more ways for users to verify the authenticity of content. In a later post, he said it still had “a few rough edges” to be resolved. Some account owners have complained about inaccuracies and said the use of VPNs and other proxy connections could lead to mislabeling of legitimate accounts.

There are technical challenges in identifying an authentic “grassroots” voice in online debates, since foreign actors can be sophisticated at hiding their tracks, says Professor Ferrara, who studies inauthentic behavior on digital platforms. “People may put too much trust in a signal that is still inaccurate,” he says of X’s new feature.

How to enhance transparency

In a recent Washington Post op-ed, Zach Schapira, a former X executive, and Sean Rad, founder of the dating app Tinder, call for X and other platforms to “expand geographical transparency” by showing users where viral posts are being generated and spread, and giving them options to filter from specific regions. They also recommend that algorithms prioritize authentic domestic content. “Americans debating issues that affect their communities deserve a feed that reflects real local voices and the real local popularity of those voices,” they write.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

A new feature on the social media platform X is revealing that many popular accounts featuring inflammatory content about U.S. politics are located in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. While it’s hard to know who is behind them, experts say many are just trying to profit from outrage.

Still, some worry that any whack-a-mole approach will fail, as duplicitous posters rely on VPNs and other tools to mask their origin while continuing to use AI tools to pump out content.

Targeting with provocative and divisive political content is, in part, a reflection of U.S. consumers' spending power. Popular MAGA content frequently attracts ads for gold and male health supplements, among other products. "It could be that there are just more immediate products to sell to a right-leaning" X user, says Professor Naaman. (The platform also skews right; Bluesky, another social media platform, has become a liberal hub.)

Mr. Musk, who has 229 million followers on X with whom he shares a daily diet of right-wing political content, hasn't yet commented on the geolocation revelations. It's a double-edged sword for his stewardship of a platform that he frames as the world's best news source, says Renée DiResta, an associate research professor at Georgetown University. The added transparency "helps people be more aware that these kinds of rage baiters exist in their information ecosystem," she says. At the same time, it's highlighted "that the platform does have these perverse incentives" for inauthentic posters to make money.

Even if account holders aren't disguising their country of origin, "being confrontational and provocative and divisive" reaps rewards, says Professor DiResta. "Everybody in tech knows this is happening." ■

BEIRUT

To project power, and disarm Hezbollah, Lebanese state needs guns and butter

By Scott Peterson / Staff writer

The military checkpoint south of Sidon is flanked by armored vehicles mounted with machine guns and concrete blocks painted in the colors of the red and white Lebanese flag, with a green cedar tree.

That's like any other Lebanese army checkpoint in southern Lebanon.

But, here, the soldiers are working on the optics of their expanded mission: to ensure the disarmament of Hezbollah – the powerful Iran-backed Shiite militia battered by a 14-month war with Israel – and establish a state monopoly on arms.

One smiling soldier, a rifle slung over his shoulder, walks from car to car, handing out window stickers with the crossed-bayonet insignia of the Lebanese army. Leaflets with the words "Follow Us" include a QR code that links to army social media accounts.

The Lebanese army has long been the most respected institution in Lebanon. But it has not been the most powerful military force in the country for decades – a fact that an unprecedented Cabinet decision to disarm Hezbollah last August, based on an American proposal, is meant to change.

On one hand, the army's fresh deployment of 10,000 soldiers and the creation of 200 checkpoints between the Litani River and the Israeli border to the south – territory previously controlled by Hezbollah – points to progress, and completes the first phase of the disarmament plan.

On the other hand, disarmament is just part of a broader set of government reforms necessary to reverse years of financial malaise, attract critical foreign-donor and International Monetary Fund (IMF) support, and quell the pervasive power of corrupt and sectarian elites. The scale of the crisis was clear during widespread anti-corruption street protests that erupted in October 2019.

The measures seek to transform governance in Lebanon, where warlords and their armed militias have ruled along sectarian lines, dividing the nation for half a century, and where corrupt elites have eroded state and financial institutions from the inside.

The state's window of opportunity

The government in Beirut is now working to stand itself up. First by taking advantage of a rare window it sees to rein in the arms of the last – and most powerful – of those militias, at a time Hezbollah is weakened and its Shiite support base has been devastated by war. And no less important, by taking the difficult steps to finally emerge from years of financial failure.

"There is the issue of government legitimacy, in terms of having enough money to win over the population," says Mark Daou, a member of the 13-seat reformist bloc in Parliament. "Reconstruction, supporting people, actually taking charge – not only of the military, but of the entire rebuilding, so that people will be betting on the state."

Basic services such as water and electricity, as well as roads, schools, and hospitals need to be provided "so it will be worthwhile for people to rebuild their homes," Mr. Daou says. "Hezbollah and the state both promise their ability to rebuild, but nothing is happening yet – so we need to make sure the state wins."

The World Bank estimates that the Hezbollah-Israel war caused \$11.1 billion in damage and losses in Beirut and across southern and eastern Lebanon. That follows six years of debilitating economic crisis.

"I don't think Hezbollah has sustainable supply lines, whether to rebuild militarily, or to provide enough financial support to compete with the state," says Mr. Daou. "This is where military supplies and financial supplies to the state will outpace Hezbollah. If the state is fulfilling its responsibilities, Hezbollah will be outpaced and basically done, because the need is now."

A public ready to support the government

Indeed, polling shows that the Lebanese people are hungry for change, and for real governance.

A new Gallup survey found that 79% of all Lebanese supported weapons being held exclusively by the army. But among the country's large Shiite population, that figure is just 27%.

Still, despite "perceived state weakness," Gallup found that 94% of all Lebanese "have confidence" in the army, including 98% of Lebanese Shiites.

"Following its war with Israel, Hezbollah finds itself in a difficult strategic position and its interests at odds with Lebanese public opinion," Gallup reports. "The main pillars of Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon that once insulated its arsenal are under strain," it concludes, such as lost military strength and weak or lost foreign backers in Iran and Syria, on top of "significant challenges" to Hezbollah's local legitimacy.

On Dec. 5, a United Nations Security Council delegation toured southern Lebanon, and heard from President Joseph Aoun that U.S. and Western pressure was required on Israel to withdraw and stop its attacks. Mr. Aoun – himself a former commander of the army – has stressed that Hezbollah disarmament should be by negotiation, not by force.

A tense ceasefire has prevailed for about a year. It requires Hezbollah's complete disarmament and Israel's full withdrawal. But analysts say Israel's continued strikes at suspected Hezbollah sites across the country have complicated an already difficult situation

WHY WE WROTE THIS

The government in Beirut has committed itself to disarming Hezbollah and exercising a monopoly over the use of force in Lebanon. But political and economic reforms that curtail the power of corrupt, sectarian elites are no less vital to its success.

for the government. The strikes, which also have targeted construction equipment, have prevented rebuilding while giving weight to Hezbollah arguments that it must keep its weapons to defend Lebanon when the army cannot.

The United States has pressed the government to speed up both army deployments and economic reforms, and to complete Hezbollah disarmament by the end of the year. Last month, it showed its frustration at what it deemed slow progress by canceling a day of meetings in Washington scheduled with Lebanese army commander Rodolphe Haykal.

The U.S. has supported the army with arms and training, and has invested more than \$3 billion in Lebanon's armed forces since 2006, according to the State Department.

What Hezbollah wants

But how much further the army can disarm Hezbollah unopposed remains untested. Hezbollah says it will keep its weapons, as long as Israel continues to occupy border areas and conducts near-daily strikes against Hezbollah operatives and suspected sites – and until there is a Lebanese “national defense strategy.”

“We cooperate with everyone to build the state and liberate the land, and our record of actions prove it,” Hezbollah leader Sheikh Naim Qassem said in a speech Dec. 5.

“America has nothing to do with [our] weapons, nor with the defense strategy, nor with Lebanese disagreements,” he said. “They want to eliminate our existence entirely. ... Are we supposed to believe that the issue is simply removing the weapons, and then Lebanon's problems will be solved?”

The Lebanese army public relations efforts extend beyond receiving car stickers or QR codes at checkpoints. Billboards in southern Beirut show a soldier saluting a Lebanese flag, with the words in Arabic: “We are all with you.”

Not far away, a large Hezbollah banner lionizes its fighters, portrayed as among the underground roots of a tree. Yet, in a subtle nod to the evolving relationship between Hezbollah and the state, the tree root fighters hoist a Lebanese flag, not a yellow Hezbollah one.

When Hezbollah's military chief was assassinated on Nov. 23 by Israeli drones flying over Hezbollah's stronghold in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanese army troops were allowed to secure the area, with little friction.

The price of financial assistance

But in parallel with the army expanding state power, legal steps that signify changes in governance also are required.

“What's undeniable is that the new government has accelerated the progress of making the economic reforms that the IMF has been demanding. ... But there are still clear tools available to derail the process,” says David Wood, the Beirut-based senior Lebanon analyst for the International Crisis Group.

“There are clearly still outstanding bones of contention and outstanding pockets of resistance to those sweeping structural changes, which would change the face of how Lebanon works,” he says.

“While it's a hopelessly broken system, it has worked perfectly well for select political and financial elites for decades,” he adds, noting that only effective reforms will enable cash-strapped Lebanon to receive critical outside help.

“This is the situation Lebanon finds itself in. It needs a lot of help, and it's not going to get that help for free.” ■

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

8.83
MILLION

Square miles, the maximum size this year of the ozone hole over the Antarctic. It's the fifth smallest since 1992, indicating that control of ozone-depleting compounds is aiding recovery of the atmospheric layer that helps shield Earth from ultraviolet rays.

45

Dollar fee to travel by air without a REAL ID or other approved identification, starting Feb. 1. The REAL ID Act was passed by Congress 20 years ago to create federal standards for IDs like state driver's licenses.

38.9
MILLION

Dollar settlement reached between Starbucks and New York City. The company will pay \$35.5 million to workers and \$3.4 million in civil penalties for violating the city's Fair Workweek Law.

94

Percent collection rate, achieved in some months by Romania in beverage container recycling. In two years, residents have widely adopted the new deposit-return system.

3,000

Farms in five provinces of Italy, and about 295 dairies, that are officially allowed to make cheese labeled Parmigiano-Reggiano. The cheese now has representation in Hollywood to promote entertainment product placements.

12

Conchs from 6,000-year-old settlements in Spain that were tested and played like trumpets by researchers. The shells may have been used as long-distance communication devices and musical instruments.

– Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, Hollywood Reporter, Archaeology News

The history of snowmen isn't all 'jolly happy.' Here are the Frosty facts.

By Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Kids, and kids at heart, race out to make a snowman after a winter storm blankets the ground. Just as every snowflake is unique, each snowman's size and accessories are limited only by its creator's imagination.

Indeed, snowmen of all sorts have dotted front yards and public spaces for centuries. Yet they were not always the "jolly happy" figures immortalized in the song and animated television special "Frosty the Snowman." From political statements to forms of resistance, snowmen have played unexpected roles in history.

To help round out the backstory on our frozen friends, we interviewed a snowman scholar (a jovial fellow with a sparkle in his voice) and even dug up a formula for building the best-looking, three-tiered winter icon.

Q: Where did snowmen come from?

Although many people assume that snowmen have been around as long as we have, American snowman expert Bob Eckstein set out to learn who, in fact, made the first snowman. Of course, direct physical evidence of all previous snowmen "is long melted," Mr. Eckstein quips. So he scoured museums, libraries, and other archives, and interviewed historians from all over the globe. His seven-year quest is described in his book "The History of the Snowman."

Mr. Eckstein says that researchers and historians have told him that Taoist texts exist from seventh-century China that show Buddha's followers were given the "blessing" to make snow figures of the religious teacher. But Mr. Eckstein found the first known depiction of a snowman – a satirical cartoon figure, drawn in the margins, that he says mocks Judaism and Christianity – in "The Book of Hours." This volume of prayers dates to 1380 and is held at the Royal Library in The Hague.

Nearly 200 years later, in a winter festival known as the Miracle of 1511, people in Brussels lined the streets with more than 100 lewd and satirical snow figures to protest against the Holy Roman Empire. Mr. Eckstein describes it as "an early form of political commentary," a Woodstock-like event held by illiterate residents who felt otherwise powerless against their rulers.

"At that point, you couldn't read and you had no voice or platform in the sense of a newspaper or anything," he says. "But you can make something on your street corner."

Snowmen also have played a cameo in violent events. Mr. Eckstein confirms accounts from folklore that say, in 1690, two Dutch guards assigned to the gates of Fort Schenectady in eastern New York decided they wanted to take a break to go to the local pub in their Dutch settlement. They made replicas of themselves out of snow and left their post. While they were away, Native Americans and French troops attacked the fort, killing 60 people, according to a 2010 Schenectady County Historical Society newsletter.

The French used snow figures as a symbol of resistance in the Franco-Prussian War. During the frigid Siege of Paris in 1870, artist Alexandre Falguière crafted a 9-foot-tall snow sculpture of a naked woman on top of a cannon – a creation that became a beacon of

hope during the conflict.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Mr. Eckstein's research found, snowmen started to appear on trading cards in the United States. Starting in the 1920s and '30s, they also were used in ads for everything from Cadillacs to Mobil oil.

Q: How did snowmen become popular figures for the holiday season?

In 1950, songwriter Steve Nelson and lyricist Walter "Jack" Rolins created a tune about "a jolly happy soul / With a corn-cob pipe and a button nose / And two eyes made out of coal." In 1969, Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass based their animated Christmas TV special, "Frosty the Snowman," on the song.

The popularity of snowmen has only snowballed from there, and Frosty has been a beloved symbol of the season ever since. As the song cheerily says, "Thumpety thump thump / Thumpety thump thump / Look at Frosty go!"

Q: What's the best way to build a snowman?

In 2016, James Hind, a British mathematician from Nottingham Trent University, created a formula for building the perfect classic snowman, formed from three giant balls of snow decreasing in size from the bottom up. His complex equation, which attracted a flurry of media coverage, including in USA Today and the Daily Mail in London, breaks down the sizes that make the most aesthetically pleasing figure with a strong foundation.

First, build the three balls from freshly fallen snow, aiming for a total height of about 5 feet, 3 inches. In line with the golden ratio, the snowman's bottom ball should be 31.4 inches in diameter, followed by the middle section at 19.6 inches, and the head at 11.8 inches.

Next, gather three rocks or other round objects for buttons. Place each one an equal distance apart on the middle ball. Then find two sticks to form a pair of spindly arms. On the face, the carrot nose should be 1.6 inches long, and the objects forming the eyes should be no more than 1.9 inches apart.

Finally, open your closet and have fun accessorizing. Bundle up your snow creation with a hat, scarf, and gloves.

Of course, be mindful that Old Man Winter – and every snowman – is ephemeral. We suggest snapping a selfie so that your new snow-packed pal is frozen in time forever. ■

WHY WE WROTE THIS

From political statements to forms of resistance, snowmen have played unexpected roles in history. We round out the record on the rotund icons.

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

FARAH, INDIA

Wildlife SOS turns tour operators' revenue model away from cruelty

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

Travel executive Sanjay Arora recalls a work trip to the historic Amer Fort in India's northwestern Rajasthan state, where he saw tourists riding an elephant. "It was swaying under their weight," he says. "Its eyes were tired."

Although Mr. Arora left Rajasthan feeling sad for the gentle giant, he was not fully cognizant, at the time, of the issues surrounding the welfare of captive elephants. A few years later, in 2023, Mr. Arora co-founded QXP India Travel, a luxury tour business. He acknowledges that in the beginning, the company occasionally included elephant rides at Amer Fort in their guest itineraries. Some Indian travel firms promote such rides as a quintessential tourist experience.

Then he learned about the Refuse to Ride campaign launched

by Wildlife SOS, an animal welfare and conservation organization headquartered in New Delhi.

The campaign's website describes the abuse that elephants endure during training, and later, in their lives as riding elephants. "The more we understood the hidden suffering," Mr. Arora says, "the clearer it became that we could not continue to support" elephant riding.

QXP, whose clients are predominantly from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, has since removed elephant rides from all itineraries it offers. "For us, it was not just about removing an unethical tourist attraction," Mr. Arora says, speaking to the Monitor via Zoom. "It was about replacing it with something more powerful: compassion."

"Their spirit is broken"

The International Union for Conservation of Nature lists the Indian elephant subspecies (*Elephas maximus indicus*) as endangered in the wild. Yet the country has an estimated 2,700 to 3,000 captive elephants. "[Practically] every captive elephant we see was once a wild one," says Kartick Satyanarayan, the CEO and co-founder of Wildlife SOS. "They can never be put back in the wild."

Snatched from their herd at a young age, elephant calves are starved and beaten into submission. "Their spirit is broken so people can ride them," he says. "No wild elephant will let a human get on its back."

The animals are then used for begging or for providing rides to tourists. A mahout, or handler, controls elephants' movements using a sharp, pointed tool known as an *ankush*, resulting in tattered ears and other injuries. The animals also are often restrained by spiked metal chains that cause immense trauma to their legs. Captive elephants can experience a range of health issues caused by abuse and neglect.

Since its first elephant rescue in 2009, Wildlife SOS has provided care for more than 300 captive elephants, either at its facilities or the animals' location. Currently, Wildlife SOS is rehabilitating and housing 37 rescued elephants. Most of the animals are at the Elephant Conservation and Care Centre (ECCC) and the state-of-the-art Elephant Hospital, both in the town of Farah in northern Uttar Pradesh state, while four elephants are at a facility in northwestern Haryana state. The hospital is the first of its kind in India.

This year, Wildlife SOS launched a mobile veterinary unit called Haathi Sewa in Hindi, which translates to "in service of elephants." The vehicle, staffed by experienced veterinarians, has diagnostic tools, including X-ray and ultrasound machines. The nonprofit also has a hotline for reporting an elephant in distress.

Ethical options

In addition to creating awareness through its Refuse to Ride campaign, Wildlife SOS works to educate tour operators like QXP. Mr. Arora acknowledges the nonprofit's critical role in shaping his company's understanding of the problematic issues around elephant rides. "They offered us research-backed guidance; powerful rescue stories; and practical, ethical alternatives," he says. "When travelers ask about elephant rides, we use it as an opportunity to share the reality behind the experience."

Wildlife SOS has also partnered with the Responsible Tourism Society of India, which has thousands of local tour operators under its umbrella. "Once people understand the abuse, they change their mind very quickly," Mr. Satyanarayan says. "The same revenue, or more, can be generated without subjecting elephants to abuse."

While some tourists coming to India forgo elephant rides in favor of jeep rides and walking tours, Mr. Satyanarayan urges travelers

who nonetheless seek an interactive experience with elephants to do their due diligence and investigate. "Does [the facility] ensure the welfare of the animals in its care, or is it just exploiting them?" he asks. "Any place where there is riding, painting of the elephant, touching, and bathing of elephants by tourists is a big no-no."

As part of Wildlife SOS' volunteer program, tourists can help care for rescued elephants in a meaningful yet hands-off manner. The ECCC is open to receiving both short-term volunteers for a few hours as well as longer-term ones, in exchange for a donation to support the organization's work.

Volunteers get to join elephants on their daily walk, help clean the enclosures while elephants are out walking, and assist with meal preparation.

Leena Walia-Thomas, a Mumbai-based finance professional, has volunteered with Wildlife SOS for more than a decade. She appreciates how detail-oriented her volunteer tasks have been, especially those related to preparing the elephants' snacks. She washes the fruits thoroughly, chops them down to the right size, and weighs them to meet dietary requirements.

"Everyone should visit to see the care and compassion with which Wildlife SOS looks after these elephants," Ms. Walia-Thomas says. "And to understand how not to aid animal cruelty."

Wildlife SOS also retrains the mahouts of the rescued elephants and employs them as caretakers at its centers. "We provide decent wages, medical insurance, on-site meals, and other benefits," Mr. Satyanarayan says. "We help them unlearn their bad training habits and relearn kind techniques that use positive reinforcement."

The nonprofit's latest campaign focuses on eliminating the centuries-old practice of using elephants for begging. These elephants are forced to walk in the hot sun on scorching tar roads, often while in poor health. Mr. Satyanarayan estimates the country has 270 begging elephants.

"Our goal is to provide every begging elephant a life of safety, dignity, and good health," he says. ■

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Riding elephants has been promoted as a quintessential tourist experience in India. A New Delhi-headquartered nonprofit helps travel firms embrace compassionate alternatives.

COVER STORY

Memories wrapped in the glow of tradition

Glad tidings from Dad each Christmas Eve

Like many families, we LaFranchis have our unshakable Christmas traditions, the activities and artifacts without which the holiday would not be ours.

There's the review of the Nativity sets we've collected from around the world – to be augmented this year by new entries from Kenya and El Salvador. There's the baking and decorating of the *bûche de Noël* – using a Texas recipe we've remained faithful to since first trying it out in our diminutive Paris kitchen in 1992.

And then there is what is referred to as Dad's Story. That's when we all stop whatever we're doing as Dad (that would be me) reads a seasonal story on Christmas Eve. The repertoire is limited, with works by an exclusive group of writers who have earned their way into our festive hearts: O. Henry, Capote, Singer, and a lesser-known Sylvia Seymour Akin of Memphis, Tennessee.

To understand how Dad's Story became a family tradition,

let's go back to Christmas Eve 1974, to my childhood home in Northern California. I was a college student questioning our Western culture of mass consumption, and as Christmas approached, I thought of our family's previous Christmas Eve – which I recalled as a whirlwind of untied ribbons and bows, torn wrapping paper, and collapsed gift boxes.

Then as now, I like opening a gift as much as anyone. But I also thought there had to be a way to remember what the day and the season are about. Something like grace.

So I announced to our family – my parents, my siblings, their spouses and children – that this Christmas, we would begin with something different. I opened our old black-leather-bound LaFranchi family Bible, and read from Matthew the story of the first Christmas.

Now many decades later, I often think back to that Christmas Eve, and the transformation I sensed the reading of a story produced, as I hunt for my copy of “The Gift of the Magi,” “A Christmas Memory,” or “Zlateh the Goat.” I know my family will be expecting a story that is an indelible part of our Christmas.

– Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

Comfort and joy across the continents

The memory that lingers most from my childhood winters in northern India is the way my mother transformed the chilliest time of year into a season of comfort and warmth.

A country emerging from colonialism did not have a week-long holiday, but as the year came to an end and temperatures dropped, our evenings centered around my mother's cooking and the angeethi, a traditional coal brazier.

My mother made foods meant to warm the body from the inside out. She made crunchy bars of sesame seeds and ground peanuts; slow-roasted sweet potatoes nestled in charcoal until the embers faded; and laddoos, a sweet with fried nuts and warming spices, whose fragrance filled the air. We sat in a circle, warming our hands, as rounds of chai simmered with fresh ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom.

Even with limited resources, we knew it was also the season to spread warmth. We had an unspoken family tradition of sharing with those less fortunate and regularly donated blankets to homeless people.

Moving to the United States reshaped these rituals but didn't erase them. Now, I keep my family's spirit alive in smaller ways. Once a year, I make the traditional North Indian dessert – Gajar ka halwa – letting grated carrots simmer for hours in milk before adding sugar, nuts, and cardamom.

I invite friends over, and we exchange our own seasonal treats. Sometimes that means Indian delicacies, sometimes Middle Eastern, with the flaky sweetness of baklava. And there is regularly a quintessential American dessert – the pie that we have come to love, in all the different flavors. Chai with warming spices remains the anchor, a reminder of childhood memories as we share stories of our lives.

But the moment that feels most heartwarming is outside my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts: my Diwali lights, usually kept up until the new year, mingling with my neighbors' Christmas displays. Their soft glow reminds me that I now live in a world where cultures can sit side by side – each holding its own warmth, together illuminating the dark of winter.

– Kalpana Jain / Contributor

Alone or together, take time to rest and recover

I remember the first time hearing The Emotions' cold yet compelling classic, “What Do the Lonely Do at Christmas?” I was a kid riding in my parents' blue Chevrolet Astro van, and I didn't understand why the lady singing was so sad during the holidays.

Originally released in the 1970s as a song about heartbreak, the song has been used over the years as a standard to describe the feelings of people who find themselves isolated during late November and the month of December.

This is unfortunate, because there is a simple answer to what people do by themselves on Christmas: whatever they want.

When it comes to the holidays, aloneness should not always be seen as a cry for help. For some, it can be quite the intentional effort. Don't get me wrong; as an extrovert, I love holiday gatherings. Spending time with family and friends at the end of the year feels essential, especially with folks having similar off days from work.

But something equally important is having time off to rest and recover, and time to reflect and plan for the upcoming year. It can be easier to clear your mind in isolation, away from the holiday hustle and bustle. While some people bemoan “holiday depression,” I'm proposing that we also consider holiday decompression.

What does that look like for me? It looks like reading a good book and unplugging from the phone and the constant demands of family life for a few fleeting moments. Sometimes, it looks like doing absolutely nothing. And that's OK!

Nurturing both sides of holiday time – the quiet and the crowd – can create the sort of balance that's helpful all year long.

After all, there are times when some people need a hug, or a warm meal. And there are times when others just want the room to grow. Or grieve.

We can be there for others – and ourselves – regardless of the season.

– Ken Makin / Cultural commentator

We are the original wrap stars

As a kid, I spent every Christmas with my family at my grandparents' expansive farm outside Wheeling, West Virginia. Because their small town was unincorporated, without garbage pickup, all trash was either composted or burned. My grandmother, a thrifty New Englander, and my grandfather, a prudent politician, believed that wrapping gifts, only to burn the wrapping paper, was an extravagant waste of time and money.

So our family would “wrap” our gifts in the most deceptive bag possible. Think of receiving a new sweater in a grocery store bag. A teddy bear in a restaurant takeout bag. As my siblings and I entered our teens, finding gift-wrapping bags from upscale stores became a year-round game. At a friend's house, my sister saw a bag from a high-end clothing retailer heading for the trash. “Wait! Can I have that bag?” she asked, much to the surprise of her host. That bag found new life on Christmas morning, concealing a skillet for Mom.

The farm has long since been sold, and my siblings and I have started our own families in towns with reliable garbage service. But we have carried on the Christmas no-wrap wrapping tradition. At least a few times during the year, I'll find myself admiring a bag that housed a recent purchase, thinking, “This

will be perfect for Christmas.”

– Lauren Crandall / Contributor

Savoring a night of no cooking

The comforts of home and tradition don't always involve a ladle and a pot. In our family, Christmas Eve is when we create space for gratitude and togetherness – and it begins with a simple decision: We don't cook.

Instead, we order out, giving the kitchen the night off until Christmas morning.

What began decades ago, when my parents were newlyweds who couldn't afford plane tickets home, has become one of our most cherished holiday traditions. That first Christmas Eve, alone and far from family, they called in an order for a simple comfort meal: Chinese takeout.

At a time when to-do lists can unfurl like long satin ribbons and the sequence of holiday events often weaves together like a tightly spun cable-knit sweater, there's quiet relief in doing nothing more ambitious than deciding whether to get an extra order of sweet-and-sour chicken. (The answer is yes.) It's like swapping that wool cardigan for your favorite cotton hoodie.

Now, each year, we gather with chopsticks around cartons of crispy spring rolls, crab rangoon, little bowls of egg-drop soup, and dishes piled high with fried rice and chow mein to savor not just the food, but a brief pause.

After dinner, we sit in a circle – on the floor or curled up on couches – and take turns sharing a meaningful Christmas tidbit: a poem, song, short story, or a belly laugh that's been waiting for the right moment. There's no pressure or performance – just a casual night that belongs to everyone, friends and neighbors welcome.

What started with a call for comfort food to a family-run restaurant down the road has sparked a ritual that celebrates the simple joy of being together. The best part: No one has to wash the dishes.

– Stephanie Cook Broadhurst / Contributor

The gift of no gift

It's this year's hottest holiday item, but I'm afraid you won't be able to find it in stores or online, and even if you could somehow manage to track it down, you wouldn't be able to wrap your arms around it. That's because it's nothing. I mean that literally. It's the gift of no gift.

A few Christmases ago, my wife's side of the family realized that we all wanted the same thing: to slow things down and find some time to actually enjoy the holidays again. We decided to remove one of the season's biggest time sucks and stressors: finding the “right gift” for adults who either don't want anything; know exactly what they want and there's no chance it's what you have in mind; or tell you exactly what to give them so they might as well be looking over your shoulder while you hit “place your order” on Amazon. So meaningful.

Hence, the gift of no gift.

There are two caveats.

Caveat No. 1: Gifts for kids are still in play.

Caveat No. 2: Although gifts for adults are generally frowned upon, if you stumble across – stumble across, not hunt for – something really special and reasonably priced, you can go ahead and get it. Thanks to the conditions established by the gift of no gift (e.g., no gifts), your find becomes a true gift because

there's no expectation of reciprocity.

This approach isn't about throwing a wet blanket on the festivities of the season. It's about getting the right kind of holiday cheer to the right people. And in my experience, this mutual pact to inaction has cut down significantly on holiday stress – if you want a number, I'd say about 30%-40%.

So this holiday season, give your loved ones something really special: Give them nothing. And in doing so, give them time, peace, and presence.

– Zach Przysup / Contributor

Instead of another necktie, try Dad Dates

After my daughter and son grew up and moved away, I asked them to stop buying me presents for Christmas. My wife and I are empty nesters who want our home to be even emptier, with more space and less clutter. For us, limiting new stuff makes lots of sense. We also want our children to invest in their futures rather than splurging on yet another necktie for Dad or sweater for Mom.

Still, gift-giving is one of the world's great pleasures, so I let my children lavish me with generosity. But instead of presenting me with a bright new thing, they give me the gift of time.

Dad Dates are our holiday tradition. The concept is simple. During their trips home for the holidays, each of my children plans an hour or two of focused, one-on-one time with me.

One evening, at my request, my daughter sat with me near the tree, opened her laptop, and slowly walked me through the ideas she'd brainstormed as part of her interior design job. We'd had many phone conversations about her work, but while wandering around in her blueprints, I could both see her professional world and dwell within it. It was a marvel to discover the person she'd become.

I had a similar experience when my son, a roboticist, let me look over his shoulder one Yuletide afternoon as he wrote computer code. His universe is markedly different from the one I inhabit as a journalist, and our time together helped me see that as a cause for celebration. It reminded me that for all our family ties, he's become his own distinct person, and a wonderful one at that.

Not all of our holiday Dad Dates are about career catch-ups. I sometimes ask my daughter to show me her funniest online humor, and we laugh ourselves silly watching cat videos and TV bloopers. My son and I have had some of our best Dad Dates screening vintage James Bond movies.

Anticipating my Christmas Dad Dates makes me smile. I know I'll be getting time with two people I love, the best gift of all.

– Danny Heitman / Contributor

Two cultures, twice the delight

If you were to ask my children about holiday traditions here in Mexico, they'd probably mention the colorful, starlike piñatas tied atop cars making their way to *posadas*, or Christmas parties, around the city. They might point out that a lot of their friends receive their extra-special gifts on Three Kings' Day, in January. And, without fail, they would tell you about Samichlaus.

Samichlaus is not actually a Mexican tradition, but a Swiss one that my children have taken part in since they were babies, thanks to Swiss-Mexican neighbors who host an annual party.

But to my Mexican-born children, the story of Samichlaus is all theirs.

My eldest spends the morning of the party helping make fluffy white bread shaped like a man and decorated with nuts and raisins. The rest of us arrive in the late afternoon to devour a magnificent barley stew and munch on sausages sourced from a German butcher especially for the event. We socialize in Spanish, but our host calls out to her kids in the Swiss-German dialect, and I ask my children in English if they've eaten enough.

Just as the sun sets, we hear the silvery-sweet ringing of a handbell: "Samichlaus" has arrived.

According to folklore, the figure of Samichlaus travels across a vast forest, talking with the birds, squirrels, deer, and other animals that have been keeping an eye on the children over the course of the year. Each child is called to the front of the room to give the person representing Samichlaus a gift – perhaps a drawing, a written poem, or a singing performance. Then, Samichlaus gives each child a spirited compliment sandwich: Here's what you did well this year, and here is what you should work on next year.

The precision of his feedback is so spot on, one of my daughters correctly predicted last year he'd be encouraging her to work on her table manners.

I leave this party each year so warmed by the community my family has built here in Mexico. But it also makes me think about bigger questions around identity and belonging: When my babies are adults, looking back at their childhood, how will it make them feel? Will they feel Mexican because they were born and raised here? Will they feel American, because that's the culture those raising them know best? Or will it be some kind of mix? Perhaps my kids will even grow up feeling something akin to the folkloric figure of Samichlaus, with acceptance and kindness for this vast, ever-changing world.

– Whitney Eulich / Special correspondent

How we upped our holiday game

A few years ago, my husband and I started hosting Christmas at our home for extended family and friends. After the annual feast and exchange of gifts, I watched as everyone drifted apart by generation – the younger kids ran upstairs, the grandmas began to tidy up, and everyone else settled around the TV to watch "Elf."

I felt like our time together was becoming a blur of wrapping paper and abandoned Solo cups. So, one year, I asked each group to bring their favorite board game.

Games have always played a big role in our lives. When my kids were in school, they would meet up with friends online, in Fortnite or Minecraft. Their holiday wish lists reflected that: gaming chairs, headsets, light-up keyboards.

As a child, I loved to play dominoes with my grandparents. It was the only time I had their undivided attention, and my Papa – always my teammate – would wink and kick me under the table if he had a good hand.

There's something about playing a game that makes it easy for people to be together. It doesn't require eye contact or conversation. Just a willingness to sit together and connect.

The first year that everyone brought a board game, not everyone wanted to play. There was plenty of room as we pushed two tables together and dragged a couple of chairs in from the kitchen.

We had a stack of games to choose from – Catch Phrase, Taboo, Guesstures, Family Feud – and we split up into teams, with blue or yellow Post-it notes stuck to our shirts so we could tell

who was on which side.

After years of listening to our offspring yell into headsets, we were now the rowdy ones, cheering our teammates on. The kids, curious about the commotion, drifted in and out, smiling at the adult revelry.

Over the years, the table grew. The younger generation joins us now as we all crowd onto benches. Some reserve their seats early with a dessert plate or drink, and my mother-in-law parks her wheelchair on the periphery to watch.

Game time is now a highlight of our annual gathering. Being part of something, whether it's two people or 20, is what makes the holidays meaningful.

– Courtenay Rudzinski / Contributor

Showing love through thoughtful gestures

My childhood Christmases were idyllic. We sat on Santa's lap at the mall, sang Christmas carols at church on Advent Sundays, gathered with extended family on Christmas Eve, and raced down the stairs on Christmas morning to discover what treasures had appeared by the fireplace. My older brother and I stayed in our pajamas half the day playing with our new toys. For years, I lived inside the blissful naivete of a happy holiday movie.

Almost a decade ago, my brother passed away. In the years since, I have lost friends, and my best friend lost her son.

Grief has a way of reshaping the holidays. Christmas cards with smiling families flood mailboxes and the repetitive rotation of holiday songs preaches jolly, happy times. What once felt effortlessly joyful now carries both memory and longing. The absence of loved ones during the holidays is especially sharp.

With a more grounded understanding of life's complexities, I have altered how I approach the season – and how I reach out to others. I no longer assume the holidays feel merry for everyone. For those coping with grief and loss, I write cards offering support, remembrance, and understanding. Last year, after I sent one to a friend who had lost her sister, she contacted me, grateful for the reminder that she wasn't alone. I've realized that small gestures of empathy can ripple outward, creating connections that matter far more than the perfect gift or festive decoration.

As I continue through middle age, I find steadiness in a more nuanced celebration. I lean into my faith as I reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. I offer hope by reminding others they are not alone in what they're facing. I show love through thoughtful gestures – a handwritten note or an invitation to spend time together. And, I still embrace joy as I watch my own children race to their stockings on Christmas morning.

– Caroline Lubbers / Contributor

Impossible to cook without love

I had been looking forward to hosting a holiday meal for my extended family ever since moving back to California, after spending my adulthood in other parts of the United States. I decided to make our version of the traditional turkey dinner, the same one my mother and grandmother cooked, the same one I've prepared since I started my own family.

My uncle came into the kitchen, stopping to dip a spoon into one of the pots. "It's my mother's mashed potatoes," he said. It

had been years since he'd tasted them. We both teared up a little and then laughed at our sentimentality.

Somewhere along the way, I had become the keeper of my family's recipes. The dishes that taste like anticipation, joy, and comfort – I am their protector and purveyor.

But this year, that bedrock has teetered on burdensome.

Our small family has undergone big changes in the last year, with divorce, relocation, and a child off to college. Although I have continued to cook as relationships changed – a way to weather transitions with love and care – I wasn't sure I had tradition in me this year.

I wanted to spend my precious little downtime enjoying my daughters, in quiet gratitude for the unstoppable good that carried us through 2025.

I tried to cancel the big meal. "But you're still cooking, right?" asked my younger one. Canceling was inconceivable, I realized, and I was surprised by my relief. The assurance of a holiday touchstone, the traditions that give meaning to time – they carry extra weight this year.

Dinner will be small; just my ex, our two girls, and my niece. With our changing dynamics, I am grateful for the stability of shared expectations, the flavors that snap us back to our best moments together.

When I was very young, I asked my grandma how she learned to cook so well. "It's how I show my family I love them," she told me. She could say a lot without answering the question.

I think of that nearly every time I turn on the stove. It is impossible to cook without love. I feel it when I pass boiled Yukon Gold potatoes through a ricer so they're fluffy, not smashed; as I stir in the butter, in cold chunks so that it mixes evenly as it melts; when I alternate that with the milk, steaming hot so the potatoes stay warm and get creamy. Perfect mashed potatoes are just so, and anything else isn't a celebration.

My scaled-back holiday meal may not offer many leftovers. But I will see my uncle soon after. And I will save a bowl of mashed potatoes to connect us all.

– Ali Martin / Staff writer

Four words for a more purposeful season

As our children grew older, I came to dread the holiday season's bombardment of advertising. Black Friday and the rise of Cyber Monday. The incessant and tiring thought: Do we have enough?

When we became empty nesters, Christmas was quieter. It was a relief to put away all the old last-minute rushing around. Still, the need for something remained.

Then, my wife, Jeanne, came across a suggestion on social media: Limit gifting to four straightforward categories.

Something they want, something they need, something to wear, something to read.

It has become, for us, something akin to the four elements: earth, water, air, fire. Four gifts. Fundamental. Plain and simple.

It has been a revelation, in some ways even a revolution, in our thinking.

"Simplify, simplify, simplify," Thoreau shouted across Walden Pond.

The simplification of "what" to give has opened a broader universe of "why," a redirection of focus into the more satisfying realms of quality and usefulness, joy and love, memory and hope. In other words, it's a way that delivers the rest of Thoreau's call: "Simplicity of life and elevation of purpose."

Four words – want, need, wear, read – to simplify, simplify,

simplify, and to allow this time of celebration and reflection to have meaning again.

– Jim Meddleton / Contributor

Here we come a-caroling

This might be a controversial position, but I have mixed emotions about Christmas. I have nothing against the spiritual message of the holiday. I just find the commercialism and the inevitable drop of mediocre Christmas albums annoying.

But after spending a few years in Saudi Arabia, we found ourselves craving a little Christmas spirit in our home. It's natural to pine for what you don't have. Saudi shopping malls, until recently, were quiet, austere places, filled with happy families and squealing children, but nary a Bing Crosby tune or Christmas tree to be found. In our case, we craved items that seemed unavoidable back home in the United States. The scent of pine trees and mulled apple cider. The familiar sound of Christmas songs we had been humming since childhood. We also felt the urge to share these things with the friends we had been making in Saudi Arabia: workmates and neighbors, devout and non-religious, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and folks who simply loved a good song.

Over the years, our carol sings were occasionally boisterous (with bodhrán drummers drumming and children shaking tambourines and kazoo-ing). In times of war or economic instability, we had quieter, more intimate gatherings, grateful for each other's company. One year, a teacher from New Hampshire taught us her childhood favorite, "Dominick the Donkey," who reportedly helped Santa deliver presents when the reindeer couldn't handle the steep hills of Italy. Another year, we heard a rousing version of Elvis' hit song, "Blue Christmas," followed by "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer." And one year, we just completed singing the exhausting "Twelve Days of Christmas," and when a late-arriving family requested the same song, we sang it again.

Every year, we found ourselves ending with "Silent Night." There is something about that simple tune that captures the mood of the season, as one year nears its end and another one offers the hope and promise of renewal.

– Scott Baldauf / Staff writer

Holly-jolly days can happen anywhere, any way

Growing up in Minnesota, my Christmases were just as good as any Hallmark movie classic.

There were snowballs to throw, hills to sled down, and plenty of hot cocoa to warm you up afterward. But after spending my first Christmas with my Spanish now-husband at his mother's home in Tenerife, I reluctantly threw my long-held notions of the holidays out the window.

The window, as the stories go, was how Santa got inside on the Canary Islands, I soon learned, given that there was nary a chimney in sight. And forget about woolly sweaters. Instead of curling up in front of a fireplace on Christmas Eve, my husband and his friends spent the 24th swimming at the beach.

On Christmas Day, the whole family gathered as his mother sliced thin shavings of the watermelon-sized *Ibérico jamón* shoulder that sat proudly – hoof and all – in her kitchen, while cooking up creamy *croquetas*, quail's eggs, and flan. Meals

lasted days, not hours, and where food was mere background music in Minnesota, it took center stage here.

But something was missing, and it wasn't just the snow.

The stockings lay unceremoniously empty, the floor under the (fake) Christmas tree was bare. As it turns out, Spaniards do not exchange gifts at Christmas at all. Rather, the real celebration is two weeks later, when the Three Kings – not Santa – are said to put gifts in shoes, not stockings, that children leave out for them.

All of this was fun and funny until our own children came along. Then, the existential questions burst forth. Whose holiday tradition would we celebrate, how, and, more importantly, where?

At first, it seemed important to choose: below-zero windchill or palm trees? Green bean casserole or *turrón*? Gifts on Christmas or Three Kings' Day? Whose version of Christmas would win out?

The answer, to my children's delight, is this: everyone's.

Now, presents go under the tree a week before Christmas, to my mother-in-law's utter dismay. Two weeks later, we put out milk and cookies for Los Reyes Magos, and a bowl of water for their camels.

Some years, you'll find us chowing down on cured pork loin and manchego cheese in front of a glorious sunset. Others, it's cranberry sauce and candied yams on a snowy night.

Whether we're building a snowman in Minnesota or lounging at a Tenerife beach, our family knows that the holidays can happen anywhere, any way – our way – as long as we're in it together.

– Colette Davidson / Special correspondent

PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

In Haiti, soccer joy – and a spark of unity

It's been nearly 10 years since the people of Haiti have voted in an election – and more than 50 since this soccer-loving nation has fielded a team in the World Cup.

In 2026, they'll get to do both.

In mid-November, Haiti won its qualifying matches for the tournament. A few weeks later, its transitional government announced election plans. Meanwhile, the United States called on countries to support a new multinational mission to quell gang violence in the Caribbean island nation.

Neither the World Cup berth nor the proposed international Gang Suppression Force promises easy wins for Haitians. But they hint at a possibility of parlaying the unity and persistent effort demonstrated on the soccer pitch to the arena of politics.

"This victory brings a moment of joy," Pierre Jean-Jacques, a young mechanic, told The Associated Press. "It means more than just a win. It is hope, it is unity ... when the country faces so many challenges."

Several soccer players have pushed a social media campaign calling on gang leaders to end the brutality that has killed thousands and displaced more than 1.4 million Haitians. Gangs frequently shut down the country's main seaport and airport; carry out extortion, rape, and murder; and are linked to international drug trafficking.

The international suppression force, if fully constituted and funded, could help restore calm, which a recent U.N. effort was unable to do. And more economic and humanitarian aid are also essential in the Western Hemisphere's poorest country.

But enduring freedom from political dysfunction and violence is built on more than tough security or repaired roads. It requires a thought-shift and stronger human connections, an "infrastructure" of collective worth and individual dignity not susceptible to physical destruction or political division.

"Take the [soccer] team's unity as an example," star striker Duckens Nazon urged fellow Haitians. "*L'Union fait la force*' isn't just a slogan but a mentality, a way to live," he said, referring to the national motto, "Unity creates strength."

Or, as community activist Louis-Henri Mars told the Monitor in October, "We must build relationships." That's why he founded Lakou Lapè ("Courtyard of Peace") – to bring together business leaders and gang members to share meals and life stories. In his work, Mr. Mars says he holds to simple principles: See individuals for their humanity, not only their violent actions, and be open and truthful.

These are tenets that Haiti's leaders – and its international security partners – can well apply. Haitians deserve no less. ■

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

The eternal gift of Christmas

It's that season again – when Christmas gift shopping goes into overdrive.

To Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of this publication and of The Church of Christ, Scientist, the occasion transcends material gifts. "Christmas, in Christian Science, stands for the real, the absolute and eternal, – for the things of Spirit, not of matter," she wrote in December 1905.

As theology professor Dion Forster wrote in *The Conversation* a few years ago, "The focus has turned from the sacred to the secular and from God to the human self."

But concern over commercialization is growing. And this year, over 50% of Americans said they would cut back gift spending.

Together, these shifts can help individuals rediscover the spiritual import of what a popular carol calls the "tidings of comfort and joy" that heralded the birth of Christ Jesus. They might find that small acts and smaller gifts resonate with greater meaning.

In the war trenches of Ukraine, "comfort and joy" glimmered at the start of its holiday season in early December. An online initiative helped transmit heartfelt greetings from civilians to soldiers. In turn, troops carried good cheer to young students displaced by the fighting.

"Visiting the children and talking with them is what motivates us," a representative told the Mezha news outlet. "In this way we ... thank them for all the support they provide us."

A recent survey shows Americans are placing greater value on the joy of sharing attention and presence, rather than presents: Sixty percent of respondents said gifting is "out of hand," and 44% said they preferred "the gift of time" instead of things.

These evolving views track with reports of an increased interest in Christianity in the West. A study on the United Kingdom's "quiet revival" estimates that church attendance has risen by 50% since 2018. In France, the number of baptisms among 18-to-25-year-olds soared between 2020 and 2024. And in the United States, the decline in churchgoing appears to be reversing, in the search for spiritual connection and comfort.

"Don't Be a Cynic About Today's Religious Revival," urged an article in *The Dispatch* earlier this month, noting "a marked change" in college students' curiosity about religion.

Together, the trends toward more faith and fewer rituals can help us better appreciate the eternal gift of Christmas. ■

A fair, revelatory interview

Immigration and Immigration and Customs Enforcement are currently hot-button topics with the American public. The interview with Todd Lyons, acting director of ICE, from the Sept. 22 Monitor Weekly, was very balanced, especially fair, and highly informative.

The staff writer posed some very direct questions to Mr. Lyons about the agency's goals, endgame, and humanitarian concerns surrounding its actions. Mr. Lyons, in turn, was given the opportunity to inform the public of ICE's mission and to relate his personal experiences as an agent without any insertions of opposing arguments or criticisms.

This article gave the reader essential and firsthand insight into an agency whose work evokes strong opinions from both sides of the aisle.

CHARLOTTE BUSHNELL
Tigard, Oregon

Pets well cared for

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the recent cover story, "Can homeless people care for their pets?" from the Dec. 1 issue of the Weekly. I've had my 4-year-old dog, Lucy, for just four months now. Prior to settling into her spoiled and cushy life with me, Lucy was "Lil Girl" and spent the first chapter of her life at a homeless encampment. I'll never know what those years were like, but what I do know, without any doubt, is that she was loved, cared for, and kept safe by whoever had her before me. This is obvious in her mellow and trusting temperament and her genuine interest in offering affection to literally anyone she meets. Every day, I think about the people who took care of her before me, and I am so grateful to them for instilling a foundation of trust and love in my sweet Lucy.

ROBIN KERBER
Bowdoinham, Maine

Healing poetry

Poet laureate Ada Limón, as covered in the author Q&A from the Oct. 27 issue of the Weekly, has been encircling my life recently. She presented at our Trinity Church in Menlo Park, California. Since her visit, we have been meeting weekly to share poetry.

Recently, on the podcast "The Forum" with Alexis Madrigal, Ms. Limón's voice was calming and clear to listen to as she spoke to my heart for an hour.

Installing picnic tables engraved with poetry at national parks is such a worthy project by Ms. Limón, especially now when turmoil happens daily. Her poetry collection "Startlement" sold out at Kepler's Books and Magazines in Menlo Park, so Ms. Limón's poetry is spreading its quiet missive to take time to notice and wonder at our world every day.

Thank you, Monitor, for relaying her words of healing for each of us.

MARTHA BARKLEY
Menlo Park, California

A new sense of security

We in Russia hope that the miniature nuclear reactor mentioned in the story "In Russia's weapons rollout, a challenge to the global nuclear balance," from the Nov. 13 Daily is real and will gain traction, not just in our armed forces. In other words, we don't think Vladimir Putin's announcement has been created out of whole cloth.

Our media claim that you in the United States, for some reason, let your research in that area slide, turning yourself into a slowpoke. We never do that, as we always succumb to the siren call of military superiority. So each time we hear about our new missile or drone, it makes a splash.

In a way, now we feel as secure as you did when only the U.S. had nuclear weapons.

MERGEN MONGUSH
Moscow

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

THE GUARDIAN / SYDNEY

Have the hard conversation, but with empathy and kindness

"How can we intentionally cultivate our capacity to have difficult conversations?" writes Nadine Levy, senior lecturer at the Nan Tien Institute in Unanderra, Australia. "... We are living through times where speech has become a battleground. ... The line between freedom of expression and our responsibility to prevent harm is more strained and politicised than ever before. ... It is no surprise, then, that difficult conversations challenge most of us. ... In Buddhist thought, speech ... has the potential, if intentional and compassionate, to contribute to ... communal care. ... Wise speech includes difficult truths, but only when [it meets] certain conditions. ... Wise speech should be timely, true, gentle, beneficial and loving."

AL JAZEERA / DOHA, QATAR

Democracy has always been essential to African governments

"For far too long, African youth have been told that democracy is something imported," writes Awale Kullane, former Somali ambassador to China and Sweden. "... But history gives us a very different truth. ... Africa practised [democracy] long before modern states existed. ... In the Somali shir, every man could stand, argue, and vote in open councils. ... The Ashanti used councils of elders to check the power of chiefs and remove them when they broke trust. In Botswana, the Tswana kgotla provided public debate forums. ... These systems did not look identical to modern democracies, but the principle was unmistakable: power must serve the community. ... Africans must reject the narrative that democracy belongs to somebody else. Authoritarianism is not African. ... The continent's heritage is debate, dialogue, consensus, accountability, and community decision-making."

THE NATIONAL / ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Send aid into Sudan – immediately

"Getting more aid to Sudan's beleaguered population is critical," states an editorial. "... In a recorded video address, [paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commander] Mohamed Dagalo said his forces were committed to facilitating humanitarian operations. ... The [United Nations] and other international aid agencies should ... act immediately to get supplies into Sudan. ... This is not only to save lives but to make it harder for the RSF or any of its factions to go back on this commitment."

China-Africa partnership is getting stronger

“The momentum for development in African countries has further strengthened,” writes Yan Yuqing, consul general of China in Lagos, Nigeria. “... [The Group of 20 summit in Johannesburg in November] aligned [China’s international development initiatives] ... and the development strategies of African nations, providing practical measures to advance the modernization of African countries. [The measures include:] First, alleviating the debt distress of African countries. ... Second, leveraging Africa’s key mineral resources. ... Third, boosting Africa’s technological capabilities. ... The trend of China and Africa joining hands ... is becoming increasingly clear.”

THE HINDU / CHENNAI, INDIA

The law should keep pace with space innovation

“The US recently announced plans under its Lunar Fission Surface Power Project to deploy a small nuclear reactor on the moon by the early 2030s,” writes Shrawani Shagun, a researcher focusing on environmental sustainability and space governance. “It could be the first attempt to establish a permanent nuclear power source beyond earth orbit. ... On Mars, reactors ... could ... protect equipment and inhabitants from cosmic radiation while producing large amounts of energy. ... On the moon ... they can help maintain warm habitats for explorers, process ice for water and rocket fuel, and recharge batteries. ... As the human presence in the solar system expands, energy will become critical. ... We need to update the legal framework [in space law] ... to match countries’ technological capabilities. ... A responsible nuclear future needs to begin.”

— Compiled by Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

HOME FORUM

The hunt is on! Concocting Christmas joy.

Find “your people,” and the holiday spirit will soon follow.

The spirit of Christmas is alive and well, and it doesn’t look a day over 5. That’s how old I was when I first caught it, and it hasn’t worn off yet. True, I’ll never again hear “Joy to the World” for the first time. And I can’t match the sparkle of a child’s anticipation: Every day, a new door peels open on the Advent calendar! The vacant lot down the street suddenly bristles with trees! More and more lights appear at the neighbors’ houses!

I always lobbied for more lights. We had just the one string for the porch and a plug-in candle for the window. If that was good, wouldn’t more be even better? At our house, I was given to understand, a child’s college fund was more important than excessive decoration. “Excessive” was not a word that made sense to me at the time, and a college fund was nowhere in my zone of anticipation. But – it takes a while to realize it – not getting everything you want is a gift, too.

Another gift: I was unburdened by specific desires. Our television could barely deliver us a picture, let alone saturate us with images of things we were trained to covet. So maybe it’s not remarkable that the things I carry in my memory are not things. Stuffed animals, yes: They are key members of my Life Advisory Board to this day. But I don’t remember pining for some particular item and being disappointed. What sticks with me is being with my people, all of them, even the much older brother and sister who lived on their own. And all those lights. And the glorious debris field of Christmas. That’s where a lot of the spirit hid out.

Mom was reflexively tidy, so I had to petition her every year to allow the detritus of Christmas to remain for a little longer than she preferred. The living room would be ankle-deep in the crinkly ecstasy of wrapping paper. She’d indulge me for a few hours. (Then she’d smooth out the least damaged bits and fold them for future use, while another penny rolled into my college fund.)

Years later, that college fund had been tapped. In my junior year, I found myself in London with three flatmates. My new people! This was the first Christmas any of us had spent away from home. We didn’t have much money, but we had one another, an 8-inch-tall pine tree in a ceramic pot, and a yearning for Christmas.

So we plotted one up. We were co-conspirators in the pursuit of joy. The idea was, we would give each other as many presents as we could without spending more than 2 pounds sterling – about five bucks at that time. And we would decorate our tiny tree without weighing it down.

The hunt was on! Our eyes were retrained to see the small, the shiny, the lightweight. There was treasure in the second-hand charity shops and even in the rubbish bins. By the time we opened our presents and discovered we’d each independently thought to wrap up a chocolate Mars bar, it was high comedy. Laughter comes easy when you’re with your people, and bent on joy.

We sat around in the happy debris field, admiring our tree – topped by a splendid angel that started out life as a coffee filter. I had more fun scavenging that lean Christmas than I ever had shopping in a mall.

Ten years later, I was married to a man who had my back every day, except holidays. Dave worked “shutdowns.” When a furnace or a limekiln or a boiler shut down for maintenance, his crew was there to chip out the old masonry and install the new.

This was always during holidays, when the employees were off. The facilities never had a chance to cool down, and if Dave and his people didn’t personally burst into flames, they still had to keep at it until their juices ran clear. It was rough work. One Christmas, Dave went off to a shutdown at a paper mill. The crew filled up the only motel in town. Then, there was no room at the inn, and that’s about as festive as it got.

But I knew something about Christmas spirit, and it’s mailable. I bought a 12-inch plastic Christmas tree and wired dozens of tiny hard hats on it. A toy backhoe with a working bucket graced the top, representing the cleanup probably required around the manger.

The hunt was on! I didn’t buy a thing over \$1. A cheesy paperback, a “Bigfoot” action figure, wax lips, windup toys, stick-on tattoos, a butterfly barrette, a fake mustache, a rubber ducky, bacon-strip bandages. Small items only, each neatly wrapped in my own heritage stash of gently used gift paper. I splurged on a string of lights and mailed it all to the motel: crinkly ecstasy in a box, some disassembly required.

I don’t know if the stars were brightly gleaming where they were or not. But for one night, some tired bricklayers far from home were little boys again, drifting to sleep in heavenly peace,

under the steady, warm pulse of a no-vacancy sign.
God rest ye merry, gentlemen.

– Murr Brewster

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

From night to light

Don McLean's song "Vincent" is a tribute to the artist Vincent van Gogh, who, although suffering from dark and oppressive thoughts, painted scenes filled with bright light, including yellows and blues that swirl with joy. To me, the lyrics rejoice in van Gogh's vibrant individuality, shining like a twinkling star in the night sky, that could not be hidden by dark thoughts.

This makes me think of a time when my husband stepped into our backyard several times to witness the aurora borealis that had been predicted in our area. Unfortunately, he didn't see the colorful display. The next day, our neighbor posted online beautiful pictures of vivid blues, greens, pinks, and purples glowing in the sky. He had adjusted his camera so that it could pick up the light show that had not been visible to the naked eye. My husband had actually been surrounded by those same vibrant colors. He just hadn't seen them.

To me, this is a useful metaphor for something I've learned through Christian Science: Night can never truly destroy light. As the Psalmist writes, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you" (Psalms 139:11, New International Version).

We might think of darkness as gloomy states of thought – such as doubt, pain, or fear. But Christian Science reveals that man (a term that includes all of us in our true nature as God's spiritual offspring) is the full representation of God's declaration, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).

Spiritual light – the beauty, joy, and wholeness of God's goodness – is actually filling all space. As God's children we're all capable of breaking through the night and glimpsing the evidences that light and clarity of thought are ever present. Darkness, which has no place in God, good, cannot diminish or destroy them.

The wise men who traveled to find baby Jesus, the newborn "King of the Jews," in order to worship him were well aware of the light that shines, even when there seems to be deep darkness (see Matthew 2:1-12). When King Herod heard their plans, he set out to have the babe murdered, because he was afraid that he would lose his throne. This was night indeed! But by following the eastern star that shone above Jesus, the wise men were led not just to a baby, but to the Christ that Jesus exemplified.

Centuries later, Mary Baker Eddy, who discovered Christian Science, wrote, "The star of Bethlehem is the light of all ages; is the light of Love, to-day christening religion undefiled, divine Science ..." ("Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896," p. 320).

Speaking of the eternal Christ, Christ Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). To have the "light of life" implies that we, as God's image, reflect God's light. As we yield to this Christ message, we naturally express and experience more goodness, kindness, health, and safety. Thus we prove, step by step, the spiritual and practical fact that the light of God, good, never goes out.

Darkness cannot exist in the allness of Love. As we realize that the light of God's love is all that is truly present and real, the night, which is only the seeming absence of light, begins to

dissipate, and the morning dawns, revealing to us inspired and healing views of existence.

– Michele Newport

ARTS AND CULTURE

The 10 best films of 2025

Our reviewer's top films include themes of forgiveness and empathy, wit and wonder.

By Peter Rainer / Contributor

The biggest news coming out of Hollywood in 2025 was less about the movies themselves than about the future of the business. Just this month, the pending purchase of the legacy studio Warner Bros. by the streamer Netflix set the town abuzz. Artificial intelligence continues to cast its long shadow on the film-making process – from acting to screenwriting to everything in between. Boon or blight? Too soon to say.

But the movie business is not monolithic. Hollywood may be relying more than ever on sequels and formulas, but the indie realm is looking particularly good these days. An impressive number of films by young, often first-time, directors came out this past year. The range of performances, even in iffy movies, was equally impressive. If you know where to look, the art of movies, and the deep pleasures they can provide, is alive and well.

Before I roll out my Top 10 – OK, I cheated, it's really 11! – here are a few celebrated films you won't see on that list.

The abundantly gifted Paul Thomas Anderson's knockabout "One Battle After Another," about a frazzled ex-revolutionary played by Leonardo DiCaprio, is being touted as *the* movie for our politically polarized times. Despite some brilliant stretches, it seemed more like a mildewed blast from the past – a mostly contemporary-set movie with a 1960s-era Boomerized mindset. I found Ryan Coogler's "Sinners," set mostly in a juke joint in 1932 Mississippi, flagrantly impressive until the gory vampirism took over. "Hamnet," the high-art tearjerker of the year about the death of Shakespeare's son, left me, if not cold, then lukewarm. I recognize that this movie affects some people on a very deep level. But its most sorrowful moments felt unduly coercive to me, despite wrenching work from Jessie Buckley as Shakespeare's wife. In any case, I don't buy the assumption that any film that moves us to tears is by definition great. If this was true, "Old Yeller" would be the greatest film ever made.

Now that I've gotten that off my chest, here, in alphabetical order, are my best picks of the year.

A Little Prayer – In Angus MacLachlan's immensely touching drama, David Strathairn plays a church-going Vietnam vet and Jane Levy plays his daughter-in-law, with whom he shares a deep emotional bond. Both performers are extraordinary. The final scene between them, about the love one human being can have for another, is the finest moment of any movie I saw this year. (Rated R)

Blue Moon – Richard Linklater is having quite a run. "Nouvelle Vague," about the making of Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless," was an exhilarating ode to moviemaking. "Blue Moon" – set mostly in 1943 in the famous Broadway hangout Sardi's and starring a terrific Ethan Hawke as the legendary, dissolute Broadway lyricist Lorenz Hart – is even better. I don't mind a movie with this much talking if the dialogue (by Robert Kaplow) is this good. In supporting roles, Margaret Qualley, and Andrew Scott, as Richard Rodgers, are standouts. (R)

It Was Just an Accident – Jafar Panahi's mordant black comedy is about a group of former Iranian political prisoners holding hostage

a man they believe was their torturer. Based in part on Panahi's own experiences as a former prisoner, the film deservedly won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, that festival's highest honor. A parallel drama is currently being played out in Panahi's own life, as the Islamic Republic of Iran has sentenced him in absentia to a year in prison for "propaganda activities." (PG-13; with subtitles)

Left-Handed Girl – With her two daughters, a single mother relocates to Taipei to open a food stand in the Taiwanese capital's night market. Their interlocking lives, a portrait of disarray, are beautifully balanced by first-time solo director Shih-Ching Tsou – a longtime associate of Sean Baker ("Anora"), with whom she co-wrote the script. As the older daughter, Shih-Yuan Ma gives one of the year's most vibrant performances. (R; with subtitles)

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain – This first feature from the animators Mailys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han, adapted from an autobiographical novel by Amélie Nothomb, nestles us inside the mindscape of a very young Belgian girl living with her parents in postwar Japan. The bond she shares with her Japanese housekeeper and surrogate mother is a rich testament to the restorative power of loving-kindness. Little Amélie is both astonished by the beauty of the natural world and increasingly aware of its transience. The animation is digital but looks handcrafted. (PG; with subtitles)

Preparation for the Next Life – In his first dramatic feature, the documentarian Bing Liu, and his screenwriter Martyna Majok, have done a smashing job of adapting Atticus Lish's novel about two New York itinerants living on the margins of society. Fred Hechinger movingly plays a troubled, recently discharged vet and the extraordinary Sebiye Behtiyar, who has never acted in a feature film before, is an unauthorized Uyghur immigrant. Their vicissitudes are both timely and for all time. (R)

Sorry, Baby – This first feature from director-writer-star Eva Victor is one of the most honest and authentic portrayals of recovery from trauma I've ever seen. Victor's Agnes is sexually assaulted – we never see the assault – but the film is about restoration, not victimization. As I wrote in my review at the time, the movie is "a diary of personal reclamation." (R)

The Ballad of Wallis Island – The most sheerly enjoyable movie of the year. Tom Basden, who co-wrote the script with Tim Key, plays an over-the-hill rock star who unknowingly is paired with his bitter ex-partner, played by Carey Mulligan, for a private concert on a remote Welsh island. The eccentric millionaire who arranges the pairing is played, most eccentrically, by Key. Directed by James Griffiths, it's a magical charmer. (PG-13)

The Choral – Directed by Nicholas Hytner and written by Alan Bennett – the same dream team that gave us "The Madness of King George" – it's old-fashioned in the best sense. Beautifully structured and acted, it's about a beleaguered choirmaster in a Yorkshire town that's losing all its men to the Great War. Ralph Fiennes plays the choirmaster. That's all ye need to know. (R; in theaters Dec. 25)

The President's Cake – This remarkable debut feature from writer-director Hasan Hadi is set in a remote Iraqi village in the 1990s during Saddam Hussein's brutal reign. Young Lamia, played by the amazing child actor Baneen Ahmed Nayyef, is required to bake a cake for the dictator's mandatory nationwide birthday celebration. Seen through a child's eyes, the film is an allegory that never loses its grounding in stark reality. (PG-13; with subtitles; in theaters February 2026)

Train Dreams – Clint Bentley's adaptation of the Denis Johnson novella looks at a vanishing way of life with such immediacy that we never think of it as a "period" film. Joel Edgerton, in his best performance to date, plays a logger in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the 20th century. Replete with joy and heartbreak, it's a film about what ultimately makes life worth living. (PG-13)

Some other worthies: "Eephus," "The Life of Chuck," "Merrily We Roll Along," "Stillier & Meara: Nothing Is Lost," "The Alabama Solution," "Jane Austen Wrecked My Life," "Kiss of the Spider

Woman," "The Musicians," "Tatami," and "Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery." ■

BOSTON

Writing a new chapter, Boston stacks homes above libraries

By Troy Aidan Sambajon / Staff writer

In Boston, home may be where the books are.

Across three neighborhoods – the West End, Uphams Corner, and Chinatown – the city is moving forward with a plan to build new public libraries topped with affordable housing. The idea is rooted in necessity: Record-high rents, limited land, and aging civic buildings have pushed Boston to rethink how public assets can serve more than one purpose at once.

"Libraries are often the most treasured neighborhood asset," says Joe Backer, senior development officer with the Mayor's Office of Housing. In recent years, he says, "there's been a real push to rethink how city-owned land and buildings can be tools for meeting housing needs." Combining the two, he adds, "is a no-brainer. It's how cities have always grown."

The philosophy reflects a broader revival of mixed-use development. Once common, it faded as zoning rules carved cities into separate residential, commercial, and civic zones. Now, as land grows scarce and communities demand more walkable neighborhoods, cities are again stacking housing over libraries, clustering transit near apartments, and even placing homes above post offices.

Advocates say the benefits go beyond efficiency. Mixed-use buildings can increase density, support sustainability goals, and strengthen neighborhood identity.

"Combining housing and civic hubs like libraries is a real win-win, and it is a return to that historic development pattern," says Katharine Burgess, a vice president at Smart Growth America. Libraries, she adds, "improve a sense of well-being and connectedness and belonging."

Boston Public Library President David Leonard sees the trend as part of a broader shift within the profession. "We're seeing an emergence over the last 10 years ... about valuing the role of our civic spaces more," he said on Boston Public Radio in 2023. Libraries, he noted, increasingly sit "adjacent to different types of civic infrastructure whether it's a community center, a radio station, or now housing."

In the past 25 years, more than 1,800 apartments in the United States have been built in structures that combine new housing and new libraries, according to the Urban Institute. Many of those apartments have been affordable.

Boston began exploring the idea of combining housing and libraries in 2018 through a partnership between the city's Housing Innovation Lab and the Boston Public Library. The initiative identified city-owned parcels that could support both civic space and new homes.

Around the same time, Chicago was developing three library

WHY WE WROTE THIS

For many people, it sounds like a dream: living above a library. A number of major U.S. cities are experimenting with such mixed-use buildings as a way to add affordable housing – and cultivate community.

sites that opened in 2019. Each site combined state-of-the-art library facilities with a mix of affordable housing.

"It's been great. It's putting a little community right there where the library is, and having it in the larger community has been very successful," Chicago Public Library director of government and public affairs Patrick Molloy told the CommonWealth Beacon. "You just have to find the best mixes" – whether that's housing, child care, or even retail.

In Boston, three libraries were ultimately selected through a public request for proposals.

"We noticed there was a lot of new rental housing being proposed in the immediate vicinity, but very few opportunities for homeownership," says Taylor Bearden, a partner at Civico Development, the firm leading the Uphams Corner library redevelopment. "That imbalance really stood out."

Plans call for 33 affordable units – both rental and ownership – built above the historic 1904 library. The homes will include a mix of layouts, including three bedrooms, two bedrooms, and studios, for households earning between 80% and 100% of area median income.

To preserve walkability and the neighborhood's character, the new apartments will rise above and behind the library's historic facade. The goal, Mr. Bearden says, is to maintain the building as a civic landmark that remains "contextual and true to the character of the neighborhood."

Mixed-use developments, he adds, offer a rare opportunity to create a genuine "third space" – one that doesn't require a transaction or paid membership. "A public library is one of the few truly free sanctuaries left," he says. "Imagine how, for residents, the library becomes an extension of home."

Chinatown gets a new library

Nowhere is that shift more profound than in Chinatown, where residents have been waiting nearly seven decades for a permanent library.

It has been a long time coming for residents like Cynthia Yee, who grew up on Hudson Street, where the new Chinatown branch will be. At the groundbreaking this fall, Ms. Yee called the moment "a step towards spatial justice."

Chinatown once had a library on Tyler Street, which closed in 1956 during freeway construction that tore through the neighborhood, erasing homes and civic landmarks. Ms. Yee remembers walking there as a child in the 1950s.

"The playground equipment was worn, the books were well-used, but the space was always alive with neighbors," she recalls. It was "warm and cozy – like school."

After the closure, the neighborhood relied on mobile book clinics and temporary storefront libraries.

That changed in 2013. Some 1,000 Chinatown residents launched a letter-writing campaign to petition then-Mayor Marty Walsh who pledged to bring back the library. The new Hudson Street branch, expected to be completed in 2027, will include 110 affordable apartments.

Is urban planning returning to its roots?

Across the country, cities are rethinking rules that limit density. Experts say it no longer makes sense to reserve large swaths of land for single-family homes. Now, with rents soaring and shortages deepening in recent years, states and municipalities are loosening zoning restrictions and allowing more multifamily housing.

Massachusetts and California are offering incentives to build near transit and public amenities – part of "a rethinking of public assets as platforms for equity," says Solomon Greene, executive director of Land and Communities at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Boston's early tests matured into policy this year. In October, the city council unanimously passed an ordinance requiring that vacant city-owned buildings be evaluated for affordable housing before

any other reuse proposal – an effort officials describe as "leading with public purpose."

Mixed-use development is, in many ways, a return to how cities originally grew.

"The problem is, in many places, mixed-use developments are still illegal," says Mr. Greene. Early zoning laws were designed to shield residents from industrial pollution and noise, but they also blocked innovations that combine civic and residential uses.

Those laws can still create hurdles. In Boston, all three library-housing projects required special state legislation to bypass the competitive bidding process and partner directly with community organizations.

To Ms. Yee, the Chinatown resident, the project represents long-overdue recognition that equality begins with space. The symbolism runs deep: housing and books, family and learning, all sharing the same footprint in a neighborhood once fractured by urban renewal.

"It's about more than convenience," she says. "It's about being seen." ■

BOOKS FOR GLOBAL READERS

Birds, butterflies, botanicals, and coastal wonders

A quartet of astonishing nature and art books encourages wonder and appreciation.

By Heller McAlpin / Contributor

The best art books offer fresh discoveries with each turn of the page, helping readers see the world differently. This year's standouts include four coffee table books that celebrate an aspect of nature's beauty in photographs, paintings, and drawings. They showcase birds, butterflies, common flowers, and coastal habitats as you've never seen them before. All are sure to spark delight and awe. But they also serve as a reminder of the fragility of the natural world.

Bird photography has soared in the 21st century, thanks in part to technological advances, including faster shutter speeds. "Aviary: The Bird in Contemporary Photography" by Danaé Panchaud and William A. Ewing, is neither a book of nature photography nor a handbook for birders organized by species or habitat. Instead, these photographs highlight the complex relationship between birds and humans. Many are carefully lighted, staged studio portraits of individual birds. Set against black or white backgrounds, these arresting portraits evoke fashion photography more than wildlife photography.

The work of several photographers stands out, often in strikingly different images of birds in the same biological family. Łukasz Gwiździel's "Lazy Morning (Cranes)," a wonderful landscape shot of a flock of cranes silhouetted against an exquisite pink and purple sky, creates quite a contrast with Randal Ford's two studio shots of a pink powder puff-plumed African Crane.

New York City Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving was reportedly the first to call rock dove pigeons "rats with wings," a phrase that became popular from Woody Allen's 1980 movie "Stardust Memories." No one would say that about the spectacular pigeon species featured in "Aviary." Tim Flach, whose "Victoria Crowned Pigeon" adorns the book's cover, is a British photographer known for stylized portraits of animals that highlight their personalities and human aspects. In his "Red Splash Jacobin Pigeon," the bird, clearly ready for its close-up, gazes out from its spectacular hooded

“fur” collar like a Park Avenue socialite. Randal Ford’s “Bantam White Polish Hen” looks like she just got out of bed and hasn’t yet brushed her tousled white hair.

But sometimes what shines through a portrait is more color than mien. Leila Jeffreys’ “Nicobar Pigeon” is all about the extraordinary range of iridescent blues and greens she’s captured in the bird’s plumage. In Tim Flach’s “Mandarin Duck and Wood Duck,” it looks like Nature went to town with a huge box of crayons.

■ ■ ■

You’d be hard put to find more magnificent landscapes and seascapes than in Peter and Beverly Pickford’s “Wild Ocean: A Journey to the Earth’s Last Wild Coasts.” The married wildlife photographers spent four years of far-flung travel and intrepid fieldwork to produce this gorgeous record of some of the most remote places on Earth.

The Pickfords set off from their home on the west coast of South Africa to visit marine habitats stretching from South Africa’s Transkei Coast to the icy waters of British Columbia and Alaska, and from the reefs of the South Pacific Coral Triangle to the King Penguin breeding colonies in the subantarctic. Their book eloquently captures what humanity stands to lose if these stunning locales are not protected.

In the Indian Ocean’s Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, the authors encountered swarms of whale sharks attracted by the corals. They also managed some beautiful shots of a juvenile polka-dotted barramundi and dainty lemon damselfish poking contentedly through bountiful cabbage coral.

In the Jardines de la Reina in Cuba, a lilac and gold basslet stands out against a patterned carpet of coral that looks like a William Morris design. The couple’s travels through Alaska took them close – sometimes too close for comfort – to grizzlies, walruses, humpback whales, harbor seals, and wolves. These offered a sharp contrast to the giant tortoises, mockingbirds, iguanas, and flamingos populating Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands that they also captured.

The word “breathtaking” aptly describes both the Pickfords’ often-scary scuba dives and the book in which they have documented their incredible journey.

■ ■ ■

With “Butterfly: Exploring the World of Lepidoptera,” Phaidon editors repeat the winning formula of “Bird” (2021) by chronicling the titular subject through images that span centuries and cultures and run the gamut from ancient relics to fine art, fashion, jewelry, and advertisements.

The appeal of this book lies in the diversity and unexpectedness of its finds, which convey a sense of the butterfly’s broad allure throughout history, often as a symbol of beauty or fragility. Highlights include a remarkably well-preserved fossilized butterfly from about 34 million years ago, a Tiffany inkstand and diamond bracelet, and paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Hokusai, Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, and Faith Ringgold, among others. All feature these cherished but increasingly endangered insects – which evolved from their less-beloved fellow lepidoptera, moths.

Many of the book’s selections are amusing. The editors have juxtaposed Rea Irvin’s famous 1925 New Yorker cover of a dandy peering through his monocle at a butterfly with a whimsical butterfly-strewn parasol designed by Elsa Schiaparelli in 1937 on the facing page. In Frida Kahlo’s self-portrait from 1940, two gossamer lepidoptera have alighted on her head. A Jean Dubuffet collage from 1955 incorporates a mosaic constructed from various types of butterfly wings.

A detailed anatomical drawing of a butterfly wing by Vladimir Nabokov, 20th century novelist and lepidopterist, along with trays of pinned specimens for study remind us of the serious business

of classification. A contender for the book’s most peculiar entry is a photograph taken in Botswana in 2007 by Hermann Brehm that features a gathering of lovely green, black, and white butterflies all flutter over what we learn is a fresh mound of elephant dung, which is completely obscured by the feasting insects.

“Butterfly” offers a different kind of feast.

■ ■ ■

“Hilma af Klint: What Stands Behind the Flowers,” edited by Jodi Hauptman, was published by The Museum of Modern Art as the catalog for its recent exhibit of the Swedish artist’s botanical drawings. These exquisitely detailed watercolors reward even casual browsers, though art lovers who have rediscovered af Klint’s intriguing works will find them especially interesting.

In 1919-1920, after years spent creating the colorful abstract paintings filled with geometric and organic forms for which she is best known, af Klint, then in her 50s, produced a portfolio of nature studies in her native Sweden. What distinguishes them from traditional botanical drawings are the marginal abstract diagrams – colorful spirals, nested squares and graphs – that represent the spiritual qualities she assigns to each blossoming plant. The show’s curators have studied the artist’s notebooks and translated her obscure symbolic diagrams in order to reveal the traits she associates with each plant. Orange calendula, for example, is said to reflect a love of truth, while hairy violet and sweet violet convey willpower and humility, respectively.

These assessments may strike many as baffling, and more indicative of af Klint’s personality than the flowers’. For those who want to dive further, this thorough book includes excerpts from her notebooks along with explanatory essays. But the watercolors alone – like the other images in these four outstanding art books, provide plenty to marvel at. ■

What does the worst stock market crash in history have to tell us today?

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

During the Roaring ’20s, with the stock market continuing its seemingly unstoppable climb and more and more ordinary Americans investing in Wall Street, financiers became household names. In addition to movie stars like Charlie Chaplin and athletes like Babe Ruth, bankers like Charles Mitchell, president of National City Bank, were among the well-known personalities of the age.

In “1929: Inside the Greatest Crash in Wall Street History – and How It Shattered a Nation,” Andrew Ross Sorkin describes a summer morning when throngs of tourists gathered at National City’s entrance to catch a glimpse of Mitchell, nicknamed “Sunshine Charlie” by the press. The New York Stock Exchange’s superintendent, William Crawford, noted that “the whole world for some reason wanted to be here,” and, in Sorkin’s words, “it made him uneasy.”

Crawford, of course, was correct. The stock market was soon to crash spectacularly, wiping out billions of dollars and helping to trigger the Great Depression. Sorkin’s immersive history of the crash and its aftermath focuses on what Mitchell and other power players – bankers, business leaders, politicians, and speculators – were doing in real time as the catastrophe unfolded.

The book benefits from the author’s meticulous archival research and his access to a number of documents that hadn’t been avail-

able to researchers before: letters, diaries, an insider's unpublished memoir, and the minutes of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's board meetings.

Buying on credit was increasingly common in the early 20th-century consumer economy, which boasted exciting new products such as radios and cars. Stocks had long been purchased on margin – that is, financed with credit – by the business class. But the practice had recently spread to the public, helped along by bankers including Mitchell. (National City was the forerunner to Citigroup.) The heavy borrowing artificially inflated the market, creating a bubble. “The almost singular through line behind every major financial crisis is one thing: debt,” writes Sorkin, a New York Times journalist and author of 2009's “Too Big to Fail,” a gripping account of the 2008 financial crisis.

The government had yet to assume any significant regulatory role over Wall Street, and the author describes unsavory insider-trading practices that contributed to the turbulence. For instance, powerful investors would create pools and simultaneously buy stock in a given company to inflate its value, luring ordinary investors who weren't in on the scheme. Then, at an appointed time, the pool members would dump their shares. The conspirators netted substantial profits before the price dropped, while members of the public suffered considerable losses.

Still, even after the crash, President Herbert Hoover and Andrew Mellon, the industrialist who served as treasury secretary under three presidents, resisted calls for reform. But as banks failed and unemployment soared, the pressure for government intervention mounted. It wouldn't come until Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term, which saw the passage of 1933's Glass-Steagall Act, which separated commercial and investment banking, and the creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission the following year.

Meanwhile, the nation's financial titans, so admired during the boom years, were recast as villains and scoundrels. “The only difference between a bank burglar and a bank president is that one works at night,” sniped one newspaper commentator. Mitchell was summoned to Washington to testify before a Senate committee, and in 1933, not long after he resigned as president of National City Bank, he was arrested for tax evasion. He was acquitted, but Sorkin finds symbolism for the entire period in his stunning fall from grace.

“1929” is a dramatic read, and Sorkin's you-are-there writing style leads to vivid scene-setting. Describing the stock exchange on Black Tuesday, Oct. 29, 1929, Sorkin captures the chaos: “The haze grew thicker in the poorly ventilated room. Tickers were running an hour or more behind, and telephone lines were jammed. The pneumatic tube system that whisked stock orders, quotations, and messages across the trading floor was congested. ... Brokers, telephone operators, clerks and messenger boys had by now taken to sleeping on cots or in crowded hotel rooms. They hadn't been home in days.”

While conveying the high drama of the crash, Sorkin notes that its significance wasn't fully grasped until later. He mentions that The New York Times didn't even select the stock market crash as the most important news story of 1929. Richard Byrd's pioneering round-trip flight to the South Pole was granted that honor.

Now, the crash looms large in the public imagination as a cautionary tale. Sorkin writes that “lengthy, uninterrupted booms, like the one in the 1920s, produce a collective delusion. ... [P]eople lose their ability to calculate risk and distinguish between good ideas and bad ones.” He further points out “the remarkable parallels between that era and today's political and economic climate.”

One wishes that Sorkin had more to say about the disquieting similarities between that time and our own, but the warning comes through nonetheless. ■

10 best books of December

What Monitor reviewers like best this month.

1 When the Fireflies Dance

by Aisha Hassan

Aisha Hassan's novel follows Laloo, a kindhearted 20-year-old scraping by in Lahore, Pakistan, as a driver for a wealthy clan. His goal is simple and, readers soon learn, nigh impossible: to save enough money to free his family from their indentured labor as brickmakers. The fast-moving story rebukes an unjust system, with heart to spare.

2 The Living and the Dead

by Christoffer Carlsson

Set in Sweden, Christoffer Carlsson's absorbing tale of a teenage boy's murder after a late-night party investigates not merely a crime, but the ecosystem of missteps – sloppy professionals, buried secrets, compromised decisions, and vengeful acts – that dogs the community and its young men in the years that follow. There's much to ponder about class, guilt, and obfuscation.

3 The List of Suspicious Things

by Jennie Godfrey

When 12-year-old Miv sets out to identify the Yorkshire Ripper, the serial killer who haunted England in the 1970s, her investigation uncovers the secrets that adults conceal every day, including racism and infidelity. The coming-of-age novel unwinds a tale not only of lost innocence but also the sustaining power of friendship and family bonds.

4 Yours for the Season

by Uzma Jalaluddin

When lawyer Sameera Malik meets chef Tom Cooke at a holiday party, they later make an impromptu cooking video that goes viral, and a romance rumor grows. A *faux-mance* could benefit both their careers. When their families maneuver them to Alaska at Christmas, the antics multiply. Uzma Jalaluddin's warmth and wit make this a delightful intercultural rom-com.

5 The Italian Secret

by Tara Moss

When private investigator Billie Walker discovers a box harboring family secrets, she sails on a luxury liner from Sydney with her mother to postwar Naples to learn more. This noirish historical mystery delivers intrigue, glamour, and romance, as Billie's professional work becomes dangerously personal.

6 The Heir Apparent

by Rebecca Armitage

Having rejected royal life in favor of pursuing a medical career, Lexi loves her life in Australia. She's discovered that she's falling in love with her best friend, Jack. Suddenly called to London, she learns her father and brother have died, leaving her next in line to the British throne. Rebecca Armitage's royal expertise infuses this modern fairy tale with emotional honesty and rich storytelling.

7 Family of Spies

by Christine Kuehn

In this work of nonfiction, former journalist Christine Kuehn investigates her family's murky past. She unveils eye-popping truths about her German grandparents' slide into Nazi ideology and their work as Japan-financed spies on Oahu, Hawaii, in the run-up to the Pearl Harbor attack. Famous – and infamous – figures dot the

Martha Ackmann's engaging biography of Dolly Parton begins with the country musician's impoverished childhood in Tennessee and traces her achievements as a singer, songwriter, actor, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. The author chronicles bumps along the way but focuses on the talent and ambition that propelled Parton to lasting fame.

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

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

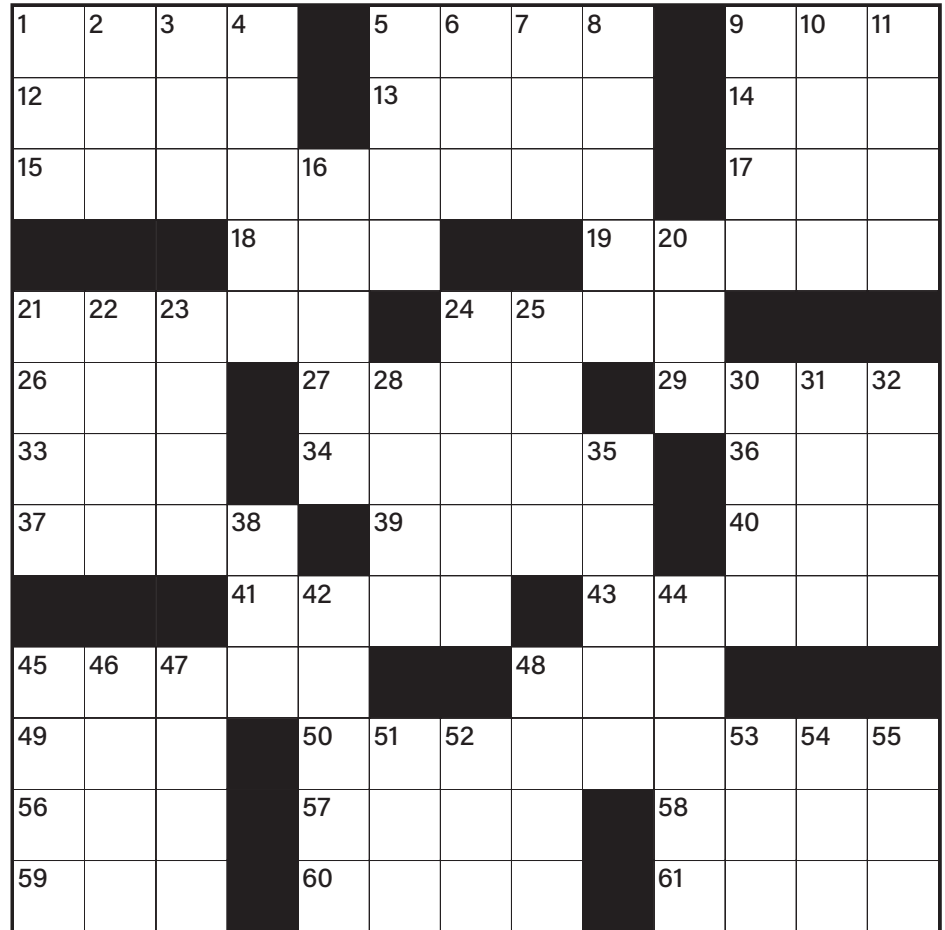
Crossword

Across

1. Umbrella spokes
5. ___ out: distribute
9. Gave birth to
12. Syllabus section
13. Word after break or get
14. Calais confidant
15. College asset
17. Impertinent talk
18. Sci-fi's Doctor ___
19. Oboes, clarinets, etc.
21. 'Vice' follow-up
24. Versatile vehicle
26. Keats' work
27. Wearing clothes
29. Not just ready and willing
33. Fulfill one's troth
34. Little buddy
36. Shell adjunct
37. Highfalutin' type
39. Legends
40. It may be Persian
41. Tic-tac-toe symbols
43. Paid-for flat
45. More inadequate
48. Dance with metal-tipped shoes
49. Miracle response
50. Followers
56. Pit stuff
57. Not their
58. Castle
59. Size up
60. Pretend to be
61. Freeze preceder?

Down

1. Herb with bitter leaves
2. "The ___ of the Sixth Happiness" (1958 Ingrid Bergman film)
3. Offer



© Lovatts Puzzles

4. Stores
5. Reminder
6. Wall-E's love interest in "Wall-E"
7. Top number?
8. ___ nous (just between us)
9. Frail's rhyming antonym
10. Enveloped by
11. Salsa and guacamole
16. Portion
20. Gov't air checker
21. Contracts
22. ___ Prairie, Minnesota
23. Scrap and start over
24. Green gemstones
25. Mary Baker or Duane
28. Appreciate
30. Conceived, as an idea
31. Compliment lavishly
32. Hence, in logic
35. Hollywood's holy grail
38. Quilting klatsch
42. Stares from Superman?
44. Pavarotti milieu
45. One way of running?
46. On holiday
47. Little more than
48. Incumbency
51. Forest prancer
52. Tint
53. Stick or stop starter
54. Crib sheet user
55. Snowmobile steerer