

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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What national anniversaries can show us

This year marks 25 years since Al Qaeda flew planes into the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in northern Virginia. The attack was motivated by a violent sectarian interpretation of Islam espoused by Osama bin Laden, which departed from most Muslims' "peaceful and inclusive version" of their faith, according to the 9/11 Commission Report. Still, the attack prompted a 17-fold spike in hate crimes against Muslim Americans.



BY STEPHANIE HANES
PRINT EDITOR

Nobody then would have imagined that New York would have a Muslim mayor, she says. Today, Ms. Janini is part of the transition team for Zohran Mamdani, a Muslim American elected mayor of the nation's largest city.

He didn't win in a landslide. Nearly half of New York City voters cast their ballots against Mr. Mamdani. Many critics decried his democratic socialist economic politics, while others objected to his positions on Israel.

Nevertheless, his victory would have seemed culturally and politically impossible 25 years ago, according to Audrey's reporting.

His faith was not an insurmountable barrier, reflecting an evolution of thought among New Yorkers. This, perhaps, is a different way to look at national anniversaries. They are not just events that changed history. Often, they are milestones that help us recognize the ways communities have evolved over time, and the changing ways people think. ■

NEW YORK

Mamdani's rise reflected in Muslim neighborhood that was targeted after 9/11

By Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Marwa Janini was 10 years old and growing up in Brooklyn on Sept. 11, 2001.

In the fallout of the Al Qaeda attack that killed almost 3,000 people and destroyed the World Trade Center's twin towers 25 years ago this year, she remembers intense surveillance and fear in the Muslim and Arab community. And she remembers thinking that the people targeted in the wake of the attack needed a way for their voices to be heard.

Now, she leads an organization providing that representation – the Arab American Association of New York – and she is at the center of something that might have felt unthinkable to her and others 25 years ago: She's part of the transition team for New York's first Muslim mayor, Zohran Mamdani, who was set to be sworn in when this story went to press.

Mr. Mamdani got nearly 51% of the vote in a mayoral election that saw the highest turnout since 1969, winning a diverse mix of voters. In Bay Ridge, a neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn with the largest Arab community in New York City and a significant Muslim population, Mr. Mamdani netted the majority of the votes.

Over decades, the Bay Ridge neighborhood has transformed from a hot spot of European immigrants to a place now known informally as Little Palestine or Little Yemen, especially around Fifth Avenue between 67th and 75th streets. There, storefront signs are often in Arabic; recordings of the Quran play on TVs and radios in neighborhood shops; and the call to prayer, or Adhan, rings out from the local mosque.

Many Muslim New Yorkers see Mr. Mamdani as willing to take on the city's affordability crisis. His victory has also prompted reflection on their community's journey from political marginalization to one of their own becoming New York's top elected official.

"The story of Muslim New Yorkers and Arab New Yorkers isn't one of linear progress," says Ms. Janini. "There are a lot of complexities. It's a community that has to continuously fight to feel safe and supported and seen."

Mr. Mamdani, while vowing to be a mayor for all New Yorkers, made a direct promise to Muslims in his victory speech. He said that the over 1 million Muslims in the city will now know that they belong, "not just in the five boroughs of this city, but in the halls of power."

"The most ... salient moment"

After 9/11, a covert counterterrorism program by the New York Police Department targeted Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent across Bay Ridge and other neighborhoods. The Arab American Association of New York, mosques, student groups, and businesses were police targets.

A 2013 lawsuit accused the NYPD of civil rights violations, arguing that it surveilled Muslims without cause. The settlement led to major reforms within the department, including a prohibition on

investigations based on race, religion, or ethnicity.

Asad Dandia, one of the plaintiffs, had discovered that the NYPD infiltrated a charity he co-founded. The case pushed him into community organizing. "It was probably the most visible and salient moment in our history where we actually took a stand against discrimination and injustice perpetrated by city government," Mr. Dandia says.

In 2013, organizers launched the Muslim Democratic Club of New York to mobilize voters. Mr. Mamdani's chief counsel on his transition team helped found the group. Four years later, Mr. Mamdani served as canvassing director for Khader El-Yateem, a Palestinian American and Lutheran pastor who ran for City Council in Bay Ridge. Despite Mr. El-Yateem's loss, the campaign helped activate people there, and Mr. Mamdani's political career can trace its roots to the work he did in Bay Ridge.

Culturally, the community continues to evolve. Just three years ago, a woman named Basma, who asked that only her first name be used for privacy reasons, arrived here from Algeria.

"I heard people speaking Arabic, and there was a store that had Algerian music," she says. "It's all the same [as Algeria]."

"At least hear us"

Amir Ali, a Yemeni business owner in Bay Ridge, says he is glad to have Mr. Mamdani representing Muslims in public life.

"It does matter to me to have a nice picture of Islam other than what the media shows," Mr. Ali says. "That's what we care about. He is showing the American Muslim as we want him to."

But what matters most to Mr. Ali and others interviewed is affordability. A poll in early 2025 found that 61% of New Yorkers said meeting basic needs is increasingly difficult, and almost half of respondents had considered leaving the city. Mr. Ali has personal experience with that: He says monthly rent for his shop has increased by around \$2,000 in the past few years.

"A lot of people voted for [Mr. Mamdani], not just Muslims, not just Middle Easterners, because all these people are struggling," Mr. Ali says. "They need somebody to at least – even if he's not going to fix it – look at it, and at least hear us."

A democratic socialist, Mr. Mamdani has an agenda that includes things such as city-owned grocery stores and rent freezes. His political opponents have seized on that. "Yes, he says he's a socialist," said Republican U.S. Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, whose district includes most of Bay Ridge. "But guess what, my friends, those are policies straight out of the communist playbook of Karl Marx."

Mr. Mamdani also faces headwinds among other constituencies in the city, which is home to the largest Jewish population outside Israel. Some of his public statements related to the war in Gaza have been criticized by Jewish organizations and leaders, including when he apparently declined to condemn the phrase "globalize the intifada" – a saying they believe condones violence against Jews. Mr. Mamdani has said it is not language he uses. In an October debate, he said he recognizes Israel's right to exist, but would not "recognize any state's right to exist with a system of hierarchy on the basis of race or religion."

Still, about one-third of New York Jews voted for Mr. Mamdani, and he has said he will be a mayor "that protects Jewish New Yorkers." His pro-Palestinian stance, meanwhile, has earned him support. About 44% of registered voters in the city sympathized more with Palestinians, compared with 26% who sympathized more with Israel, according to a New York Times and Siena University poll from September.

Ms. Janini, a Palestinian American, says it was once unimaginable to her that elected officials in a country that aligns so closely with Israel would publicly express support for Palestinians.

Mr. Dandia, an urban history tour guide in New York who is on Mr. Mamdani's informal advisory team, says the new mayor's stance attracted many voters who had felt politically invisible on the issue.

Zareena Grewal, an associate professor of religious studies at

Yale University, says that the post-9/11 period has been a politically transformative time for Muslims in New York City.

"It was the social welfare issues of poverty, surveillance, racism, unequal access, discrimination in schools, and health care that really got Muslim New Yorkers to come together despite their political differences," Professor Grewal says. ■

MAHROUNA, LEBANON

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's true believers are battered, yes, but unbowed

By Scott Peterson / Staff writer

The Hezbollah martyrs' cemetery is perched high on the edge of the hilltop hamlet of Mahrouna. It has commanding views across the hills and ravines of southern Lebanon toward the border with Hezbollah's perennial enemy, Israel.

There is no sadness in the voice of Yehya Naameh Khalil, only pride, as he speaks about his son who is buried here – a Hezbollah unit commander called Hassan, with chiseled features and a steely-eyed look, who died in an Israeli strike in May 2024.

The Monitor observed that exact Israeli strike, and the funeral the next day, when the Hezbollah officer was buried with full military honors.

"You only have to look at his face, to know what kind of person he was," says Mr. Khalil, who says his son was respected in the village as a problem-solver to all.

Echoing his funeral eulogy, the father – a lean man with short gray hair and three traditional silver Shiite rings, one set with turquoise – says he is "honored" by his son's status as a martyr, killed on what this family considers to be a divine path.

"I thank God for that gift," he says.

The experience and beliefs of this family of Hezbollah supporters offer rare insight into what continues to drive the Shiite militia's true believers, and why they are certain that – despite repeated and deep Israeli blows – Hezbollah's war against Israel will not end.

There is also pride here that Mahrouna is known as the "Mother of Martyrs," for producing more killed Hezbollah fighters per capita than any other community in Lebanon.

"We used to have one martyr every three or four years, but now they come in batches of five or six at a time," says Mr. Khalil, referring to the two dozen graves festooned with portraits, banners, and devotional ribbons. "This village belongs to the [Hezbollah] Resistance."

Continued pressure from Israel

In solidarity with its ally Hamas, Iran-backed Hezbollah began firing rockets into northern Israel in October 2023. The Hezbollah-Israel exchanges escalated until Israel launched a determined offensive in the fall of 2024 that wiped out Hezbollah's top leadership, killed or wounded thousands of fighters, and targeted the group's vast missile arsenal with thousands of airstrikes.

Despite a ceasefire since November 2024, Israel has continued near-daily strikes against Hezbollah targets, which Israel says is self-defense to prevent Hezbollah – long the most potent arm of

Iran's regional "Axis of Resistance" alliance – from rebuilding its fighting capacity.

A drone attack in Beirut in late November, for example, killed Hezbollah's top military commander, Haytham Ali Tabatabai. And days after the Monitor's recent visit to Mahrouna, Israel issued a warning that it would strike a specific building in the hamlet, told residents to keep 300 meters away, and destroyed it.

The Israel Defense Forces' Arabic-language spokesperson, Col. Avichay Adraee, posted video of the Mahrouna strike with the words, "This is how the terrorist Hezbollah operates in your villages and stores its futile rockets in your homes and puts you in danger."

The U.S.-mediated ceasefire requires Hezbollah to give up its weapons and the Lebanese army to deploy throughout the country, even in Shiite areas of southern and eastern Lebanon, which Hezbollah has ruled for decades.

That disarmament has largely been achieved south of the Litani River to the border with Israel. But Hezbollah says it will not disarm further until Israel stops its strikes; until Israel withdraws from five outposts it still occupies inside Lebanon – also a ceasefire requirement; and until after Lebanese engage in a "strategic dialogue" about the future.

Hezbollah has "been weakened for sure ... and their deterrence posture is gone," says Nicholas Blanford, a Beirut-based expert with the Atlantic Council. "But they remain powerful domestically, as an organization, so they can stand up to the government and say, 'We are not disarming.' More importantly, they still pose a threat to Israel."

"The Israelis talk about 70% to 75% of Hezbollah's missile arsenal having been destroyed ... but I think Hezbollah retains the capability to inflict a lot of damage on Israel," says Mr. Blanford, author of "Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel."

Among Hezbollah's rank and file, expectations are high of imminent revenge for Israel's ceasefire strikes, at least. But, so far, Hezbollah has not struck back.

Dependence on Iran

"Their strategic patience is deeper than I would have thought six months ago. But in a way it makes sense, because their options are not great," says Mr. Blanford. "They are able to rebuild, reorganize, and rearm, despite the blows they're taking. That's evident. And the problem they face is that, if they do retaliate ... the Israelis are just going to come back massively."

"It sounds easy to say, 'Why don't you just put down your weapons and become a political party?'" adds Mr. Blanford. "But for Hezbollah, the weapons are the party. The 'resistance priority,' as they call it, is the beating heart of Hezbollah. And if you take away the weapons, the rest will collapse."

Hezbollah's dependence on Iranian support and logistics explains the group's position, he says.

"If Hezbollah were to voluntarily say, 'Here are our weapons; we're going into politics,' the Iranians would say, 'OK, then we're going to stop sending millions of dollars to you, because you are of no use to us anymore.'

"Hezbollah has some of its own revenue, but it's not going to be enough to sustain the massive social welfare apparatus they have," Mr. Blanford adds. "Maybe they can keep a hospital here, a school there, a few guys in Parliament and a few seats in government. That could end in the next election," he adds, if the Lebanese people conclude that a disarmed and defunded Hezbollah is of little use.

"It's existential for them, and they won't disarm," he says, short of a direct order from Iran.

Hezbollah's leadership compares its fight against Israel to the seventh-century Shiite legend of Imam Hussein, who chose to perish in battle in Karbala, in present-day Iraq, rather than surrender.

"We will not allow the disarmament of the Resistance, and we will wage a Karbala-style confrontation," Hezbollah Secretary-General

Naim Qassem said in late September, describing a "jihadist recovery" that meant Hezbollah was "ready to defend against the Israeli enemy at any time."

"Victory is coming"

One veteran Hezbollah operative in Beirut, who fought in Syria and gives the name Ali, offers a sober view of Hezbollah's current standing, but remains unbowed.

"The Israelis feel they are winning. Are they going to keep bombing? Yes. And we have to admit we did lose a lot, too," he says.

"Israel has high tech of all kinds, and sadly we have a lot of traitors among us," says the gray-bearded technician, who carries a Hezbollah radio and wears a dog tag around his neck. "We are sifting [people] right now. There are a lot who stole money and ran away."

Yet retaliation against Israel, he says, is just a matter of time.

"If we shoot back now, our main concern is, Where are our people going to go, for safety?" Ali explains. "It's going to take a little time to prepare ourselves, to find a safe haven for our people, [but] patience has a limit with us."

"Everything has an end," he says, of Israel's current dominance. "Victory is coming."

Similar confidence radiates in Mahrouna, where the mosque and at least 1 in 10 houses have been destroyed by Israeli strikes.

"The south suffered a lot from the Israelis and their occupation," says Mr. Khalil, the slain commander's father. "Almost every house in the south has wounded or martyrs. How can we give up our arms, and let these criminals come and kill us?"

"If you walk through this village now, you will not see anything but resistance fighters," agrees Mohammed Yehya Naameh, the younger brother of commander Hassan. "Someone just killed my brother; do you think I will give him my neck?"

"Israel says 'Hezbollah is finished,' but we're still here. We're still strong," adds Mr. Khalil. "If it is true what they claim, that we are done, then why do they keep hitting us every day?" ■

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

Discovering God in Hamas tunnels, hostages led a national trend

By Dina Kraft / Special correspondent

Or Levy was an Israeli hostage deep underground in a Gaza tunnel looking at a crack in the ceiling, when it suddenly occurred to him it might not just be a crack, but something divine, and he started talking to God.

"Before Oct. 7, I was not a big believer," he said, but that changed when he was plunged into a living nightmare.

"Whenever it became too hard, I'd ask Him [God] to save us." Mr. Levy interpreted extra provisions of pita or a hot cup of tea, moments that helped blunt the suffering, as signs his prayers were heard.

At the same time, another hostage, Liri Albag, a soldier who was captured during the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel, was also becoming a believer. Sixteen of her fellow female soldiers were killed near her on the day of the attack. They were among the 1,200 people killed, mostly civilians, along Israel's southern border with Gaza.

"Before then, I was an innocent 18-year-old who did not think about religion too much," she says in an interview.

But after surviving what she witnessed that day, "I thought, there is no chance I could come out alive from Oct. 7 without someone looking over me." She spent hours speaking to God, telling herself,

"God will always listen. He does not get tired."

In captivity, she and fellow hostages began marking Shabbat, reciting the ritual blessing for wine over a cup of water. When her captors passed on a siddur, a Jewish prayer book they found in Gaza, they took turns reading and praying from it.

Trend extends beyond hostages

The experiences of Mr. Levy and Ms. Albag turning to religion amid extreme crisis were echoed by several returning hostages. Their experiences speak to a broader trend of Jewish Israelis feeling more connected to Judaism and spirituality in the wake of Oct. 7 and the multifront war that followed.

There are the outer manifestations observable in daily Israeli life:

- The prevalence of religious sayings sprinkled in everyday conversation.
- More religiously inflected songs getting airtime on the radio.
- The wearing of the Star of David.
- Young men wearing ritual tzitzit fringes worn by the devout.
- Teens with no prior connection to religious observance attending lessons on Torah teachings – some made popular by rabbis promoting such gatherings on TikTok.

Then there are the more interior ones, of feeling a deep personal connection to faith.

The shift speaks to how profoundly Hamas' attack – and, some argue, Israel's growing international isolation and the spike in antisemitic attacks abroad – have profoundly impacted all Israelis, no matter how closely events touched them directly. In such a small country, a sense of national trauma looms large.

"The trauma of Oct. 7 was, of course, frightening and scarring. But it's also a very Jewish kind of trauma, because what we saw on Oct. 7 is something familiar, something we have learned about it, seen at museums – a pogrom, a Holocaust, a hunting down of Jews, hiding in houses," says Tomer Persico, a senior fellow at Shalom Hartman, a Jerusalem-based research and educational center.

"The murdering, raping, all of this is familiar for Israelis and Jews – a sort of return to Jewish history, although something we thought [until recently] was part of Jewish history of a long time ago."

The turn to religion is also interpreted as a response to a crisis in Zionism, as the Oct. 7 massacre was precisely the kind of mass violence that the movement for Jewish self-determination was supposed to prevent.

"Israel was supposed to be a safe shelter, a solution for the 'Jewish problem' of persecution," says Rabbi David Stav, chairman of Tzohar, a modern Orthodox organization that works to make Judaism more accessible to the secular public. "Here we realize all of a sudden, after 75 years of statehood, that we are still not accepted, and the enemy does not distinguish between left- and right-wing Israelis."

"One of the responses to this crisis is to say that we are Jewish, and that Jewishness has to have a meaning."

No longer is it enough to be Hebrew speakers living in the biblical homeland of the Jews as part of a sovereign nation, says Mr. Persico. "It has to be something else, because that [model] is broken."

The fracture, he says, has sparked "a reconnection and strengthening of this premodern, pre-Zionist Jewish identity, which many people are translating as a return to tradition."

Poll data shows an uptick

Recent studies in Israel back up anecdotal evidence of an uptick in religious connection after Oct. 7.

In a poll by Hiddush, an organization that advocates for the separation of religion and state, 25% of respondents said those seminal

events strengthened their faith in God. Fifty-five percent said they had not impacted their faith, and 7% said they had weakened it.

Researchers at the Hebrew University found in a survey of students that one-third experienced an increase in spirituality, while 9% said it decreased.

Yaakov Greenwald, a doctoral student in psychology and co-author of a paper recently published in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, says the research speaks to the comfort that can be found in religion and by being part of a community during times of war.

"Religion offers specific benefits, specifically that God is there for you in your time of need and for the community," he says, adding that it also appears to boost resilience.

A main function of an embrace of religion or spirituality, he says, is that it "may serve as a powerful meaning-making framework for understanding and coping with much of life and death."

Rabbi Stav says his organization has seen a surge in requests to officiate bar mitzvahs, as well as religious wedding ceremonies, including for couples who were previously married in civil ceremonies but now want their union to be bound by religious law.

"We are seeing a huge resurgence of Judaism in Israel. It does not mean that we are seeing more people necessarily observing religious obligations: You are seeing people with tattoos, wearing tzitzit, and driving cars on Shabbat. But it does mean that more and more Israelis are proud to say, 'We are Jewish,'" says Rabbi Stav. Driving on the Sabbath is forbidden according to Jewish law, as are tattoos.

Ms. Albag, who was released from Hamas captivity last January after almost 500 days as a hostage, reflects on her own approach.

"Today, I consider myself to be more of a believer, but I do it in my own way," she says. "I don't think God is mad at me if I eat pork. What's more important is that I am a good person." ■

Quitting 'on my own terms': Why more women are exiting the workforce

By Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Vases of flowers and notes scribbled with messages of support are scattered throughout Hana Kim's home in Goodyear, Arizona. Her friends and family sent them after she announced her decision to leave her job.

Ms. Kim left her role as a marketing executive at an insurance carrier on Dec. 1, after months of stricter in-person work requirements and a long commute to Phoenix made it difficult for her to maintain the care she provides to her mother at home.

"I felt like it was a decision that could have been avoided if the company were more about flexibility and met different kinds of employees' needs," says Ms. Kim, who was originally hired to work remotely.

Ms. Kim is part of a movement of women who are leaving their jobs. More than 330,000 women ages 20 or older have left the U.S. workforce this year, according to an analysis by the National Women's Law Center. In the first half of 2025, the employment rate for mothers of children under age 5 declined by its steepest drop in four decades, according to research by Misty Heggeness, an associate professor at the University of Kansas who studies gender economics.

"The past year brought unusual pressures for employees and the highest levels of discontent in five years," noted a recent report on women in the U.S. workforce by Lean In, a women's advocacy group, and McKinsey & Company consultants.

Return-to-work mandates; a federal rollback under the Trump administration of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, including some geared toward women; and a shortage of affordable care for dependents are all affecting whether women stay on the job, says Jasmine Tucker, vice president of research at the National Women's Law Center in Washington.

"The trends over time are not looking good," says Ms. Tucker. "We say 'leaving the labor force,' and it sounds like it's an option, but I think the reality is that they are being shoved out."

Not everyone views a pullback of women from the paid labor force negatively. Popular right-wing podcasters like Allie Beth Stuckey and Alex Clark talk about the benefit of mothers prioritizing time with their children and say societal norms put too much pressure on women to put their careers first.

Facing the "flexibility stigma"

During the pandemic, remote or flexible work helped usher some women into the workplace. In 2023, the percentage of prime-age working women (in the 25-to-54 age range), reached an all-time high of 75.3%, driven largely by an increase of college-educated women with young children.

Many employers this year retreated from the remote and hybrid work that was infused into certain professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government required employees to return to five days in office, as did Amazon for its corporate staff. One study found that more than half of Fortune 100 workers this year had fully in-person policies for the first time since the pandemic.

The Lean In and McKinsey report published in December found that one-quarter of 124 companies surveyed scaled back or discontinuing remote or hybrid work this year. A flexibility stigma is one of the "biggest factors holding women back from work," according to the report's authors, who found that employees who use flexible work arrangements are seen as less committed and are less likely to receive promotions.

At the same time, costs of both child care and elder care are rising faster than inflation, which puts pressure on individuals to decide whether they can afford to remain in the workforce.

"In two-parent households, when we can't afford the cost of child care, we usually send the person who is the lower-income earner home to take care of the kids," says Jessica Kriegel, chief strategy officer at Culture Partners, a consultancy group. "That affects women," she adds, since the pay gap between genders has grown for the past two years. In addition, she notes, about 80% of single parent households are headed by women.

Looking for solutions

Views on how to help women – and men – balance professional work with caregiving responsibilities range from greater child care support to more tax credits for parents.

In November, New Mexico became the first state to provide universal, government-funded child care for all families, using funding from state oil and gas reserves. New York's Zohran Mamdani, who was scheduled to take office as mayor when this article went to press, campaigned on a promise of universal child care.

Federally, the tax and spending bill passed by Congress last summer included several provisions to support working families. Those include a permanent extension of the child tax credit, increased tax credits for employers who provide child care assistance, and tax-advantaged savings accounts for children known as "Trump Accounts." Policymakers can offer support by investing in parental leave and high-quality, affordable child care, subsidized by the

government, says Professor Heggeness at the University of Kansas. "Mothers and unpaid family caregivers, that group of individuals in our society, are too big for us to fail them."

Critics of universal child care raise concerns about funding, quality, and the impact on children. Vice President JD Vance, while running for Senate in 2021, wrote an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal criticizing a Biden administration proposal to spend \$225 billion on child care as harmful to children. (Studies show high-quality early childhood benefiting children academically and socially.)

"Young children from average, healthy homes can be harmed by spending long hours in child care," Mr. Vance wrote. "Our democracy might be comfortable with the trade-offs here – higher gross domestic product and more parents (especially women) in the workforce on one hand, and unhappier, unhealthier children on the other. But we ought to be honest and acknowledge that these trade-offs exist."

Dr. Heggeness expects the labor participation rate for women to rebound. "Women, and mothers in particular, tend to be very resilient," she says. "Women will look for other ways to get back into work."

"It feels really gratifying"

Ms. Kim in Arizona believes she made the best decision she could for herself and for her family, despite initially feeling as if she was giving up on a career that she "worked so hard to get."

Shortly after leaving her corporate job, she launched her own marketing consultancy, fending off her self-doubt about leaving a steady paycheck and focusing on the control she'd gain over her schedule.

When she decided it was time to pack up her office, Ms. Kim posted about her decision online. Her post gathered more than 2,000 likes and 250 comments. Her private messages filled up with other women who left their jobs to provide care for loved ones, telling her she wouldn't regret her decision.

"There was a second that I was thinking ... maybe this is crazy," she says. "I'm just trying to do what I know how to do and do it on my own terms. It feels really gratifying." ■

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

23

States that will increase their minimum wage this year, reaching at least \$15 per hour in 14 of these states. Federal minimum wage has remained at \$7.25 per hour since 2009.

200

Dollars now paid quarterly to each resident citizen of the Marshall Islands – about 42,000 people. The universal basic income effort is financed by a \$1.3 billion trust fund set up by the United States to compensate the island nation for nuclear testing carried out there in the 1940s and '50s.

110

Tons of humanitarian relief that was flown to Sudan on Dec. 12 by the European Union. While paramilitary forces allowed a small amount of supplies into the capital of North Darfur last month, aid groups are negotiating for more access amid civil war and a humanitarian crisis.

10

Percentage of Congress members leaving their seats for good after the 2026 midterms. Many of the departing 10 senators and 44 House members will retire or run for other offices; redistricting is also a factor.

1 MILLION

Tickets, at least, to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics to be priced at \$28, say organizers. Meanwhile another historic tournament, the 2026 World Cup, is facing criticism for its high ticket prices.

1

Polar bear cub recently adopted by a wild female polar bear in Manitoba. Only 13 polar bears in Northern Canada are known to have adopted cubs – a tiny number of the 4,600 bears observed there over nearly 50 years.

— Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Sources: AL.com, The Guardian, The New York Times, NPR, CNN, BBC

THE EXPLAINER

Rent control is popular. Can it help a housing crisis?

Introductory economics classes often teach that rent control is bad policy. Artificially capping prices, the argument goes, discourages production – in this case, the creation and maintenance of apartments. That leads to housing shortages and higher rents marketwide.

Yet the idea continues to gain traction and is garnering new attention across the United States.

Zohran Mamdani, who was scheduled to take office as New York City mayor in January, as this article went to press, is insisting on freezing rents for some 2 million New Yorkers.

Nationwide, jurisdictions are seeking to enact rent regulations as housing costs have continued to rise, particularly in large cities. City councilors in Los Angeles, for example, voted in November to reduce the annual rent increase limit for most of the city's apartments from 8% to 4%. Washington state capped annual rent increases at up to 10% last spring. Washington, D.C., which already restricts rent increases, is considering a ballot initiative that would freeze rents entirely for two years. And later this year, Massachusetts residents will likely vote on a ballot question that would cap rent increases at the rate of inflation, up to a maximum of 5%.

Many cities have regulated rents for decades. But the recent surge in new initiatives has reignited debate about the government's role in the free market. Supporters pitch rent regulation as a necessary measure to redress an affordability crisis. Many economists remain skeptical, arguing that such tactics raise costs over the long term, exacerbate shortages, and lower housing quality.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Across the United States, jurisdictions are seeking to enact rent regulations as housing costs have continued to rise. But finding long-term solutions – like building millions more homes – won't be easy.

Manuel Pastor, an economist and a sociology professor at the University of Southern California, reflects a different, more measured viewpoint among some housing policy experts. "This is one of those debates where the ideological heat does not really match the empirical fire," he says. "Rent stabilization is one tool. ... Why would you put that tool away?"

Q: Why are supporters pushing for rent control now?

Those who advocate rent control argue that housing costs for working families have reached a level at which the government must intervene to reduce them.

"Something has got to give," says Tara Raghuvir, who heads the Tenant Union Federation, a national organization that supports federal rent control. "The only urgent solution that makes sense at scale is rent control."

In 2023, half of renters in the United States qualified as "cost-burdened" – meaning they spent more than 30% of their income on housing and utilities. (Some 27% spent half their income on housing and utilities.) Most of those "burdened" renters lived in one of the nation's 50 biggest cities.

Rent regulation is also popular with voters, and that may be driving political action. In a 2024 Redfin survey, 82% of respondents supported limits on rent increases.

Researchers say such regulation historically has emerged amid housing market duress – starting amid World War I as building materials were siphoned off to support the war, and housing construction declined. Congress also froze rents on 80% of the nation's rental stock during World War II.

By the mid-1970s, such strict freezes and ceilings had given way to "stabilization" policies, which allow rents to change, but with limits. Rent-stabilized cities include Washington, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, as well as New York, where about 1 million apartments are rent-stabilized, and 69% of residents lease their homes.

Q: Who opposes rent control and why?

Opponents argue that rent control is not a viable long-term solution, exacerbates shortages, and increases housing costs. They say it's not just a coincidence that cities with rent control rank high on lists of places with large housing shortages.

"It only worsens the housing crisis," says Tamara Small, CEO of the Massachusetts branch of the Commercial Real Estate Development Association. "It reduces the total number of units and reduces the quality of those units."

Economists have long argued the same.

In a 2012 poll of economists by the University of Chicago, more than 80% opposed rent control. Only 2% supported it. In 2024, after Montgomery County, Maryland, implemented a rent stabilization program, investment in multifamily rental homes fell by 13%, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Part of the pushback concerns housing quality: With lower rents, landlords have less revenue to allocate to repairs, which can increase undesirable housing stock in New York and elsewhere. To be put on the market again, units may need hundreds of thousands of dollars in repairs – repairs that owners are unwilling to make, because they worry rent revenue won't cover costs.

Q: What does the research say?

Researchers generally agree that regulations are effective in reducing rents for tenants in affected units. A 2014 study estimated that rents in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where rent control was in effect from 1970 to 1994, were 44% lower in regulated units than in nonregulated units. In 2022, a review of 31 rent control studies found that 25 documented lower rents in rent-controlled units.

Those cost savings also tend to lead to more extended residences, and that stability can have social benefits for families.

But longer tenancies can lead to a mismatch between tenants'

needs and the housing they receive, some economists argue. A family may choose to stay in a rent-controlled unit even as they outgrow it, for example.

Rent control can also lead to a net loss of rental units. A 2019 study of San Francisco found that an expansion of rent control reduced the number of multifamily rental homes by 15%, as some landlords tried to recoup lost returns by converting their units into condominiums. The reduction in rental housing supply "likely increased rents in the long run," the study concluded.

Carefully crafting new rent regulations may be the key to preventing marketplace harm, Professor Pastor says. Unlike more rigid rent control measures, many modern rent stabilization policies permit some rent increases (helping landlords to cover repair costs). And they exempt newly built units to mitigate the risk of reduced construction.

Q: What are other ways to stabilize or lower housing prices?

Advocates on all sides of the debate agree that to lower rents in the long run, the U.S. must build more housing.

The price of any good tends to rise when demand outpaces supply, and housing construction has struggled to keep pace with population growth since the 2008 recession. A recent Goldman Sachs Research report found that the U.S. needs to build between 3 million and 4 million homes to close the gap.

Changing zoning laws to streamline regulations and eliminate parking minimums could make it easier to build apartment buildings, as current requirements often add tens of thousands of dollars in construction costs. But building millions of new homes will take time. It's also likely to run into NIMBYism – the idea that building certain types of additional housing degrades communities. Some advocates have also argued that rent control policies increase support for new housing.

A 2022 study found that residents of rent-controlled apartments were 37 percentage points more likely to support new housing construction in their neighborhoods – perhaps because it makes occupants less worried about gentrification and displacement.

– Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

HANLE, INDIA

In the Himalayas, 'astro-ambassadors' help protect India's first dark-sky reserve

By Aakash Hassan / Contributor

As a child, Splazer Angmo often gazed at the dome structure perched atop a hill in her village and wondered what it was. Her parents, part-time herders, were equally puzzled. The scientists who work in the village use it to look at stars, they told her.

Years later, sitting in a school classroom, she finally learned its name: telescope. Now, she has her own – a maroon, mobile instrument she sets up every evening as the village of Hanle transitions from golden dusk to a star-filled night. She is one of 25 villagers – two-thirds women – trained as "astro-ambassadors," guiding tourists through the cosmos.

What began as an effort to preserve dark skies for the nearby Indian Astronomical Observatory has become something more: sustainable livelihoods for families who once depended entirely on herding pashmina goats and yaks. It is also helping revive interest

in Hanle's cultural heritage.

"The astro-ambassadors help us protect what makes this place irreplaceable," says Dorje Angchuk, engineer-in-charge of the observatory. "They ensure visiting tourists understand why dark sky preservation matters, and they enforce the norms essential to maintaining the reserve. This is an extraordinary story of coexistence where science and culture strengthen each other."

Stargazing transforms a village

Nestled between rusty-hued mountains in the cold Himalayan desert of Ladakh, close to China's contested border, Hanle valley consists of six hamlets sitting at an altitude of nearly 15,000 feet. As night descends and villagers extinguish their lights, the Milky Way arcs starkly overhead, its stars burning against the darkness.

In 1993, Indian scientists identified this as one of Earth's clearest observatory sites, with the valley's skies ranking Bortle 1, the darkest classification possible. The Indian Astronomical Observatory installed the Himalayan Chandra Telescope – the dome that puzzled Ms. Angmo as a child – and several other research facilities to study the cosmos.

For years, tourists visiting Ladakh would drive to the observatory in hopes of getting to peek into the skies through these telescopes, disturbing the researchers, says Mr. Angchuk. So, in 2022, when Hanle became India's first dark-sky reserve – a designation that would impose stricter measures on both tourists and locals to preserve the night skies – scientists saw a dual opportunity.

To help secure community buy-in for the reserve while also satisfying tourists, authorities and the observatory equipped locals with telescopes and trained them as stargazing guides.

"It was a conscious decision to train the local community so they could benefit from these skies through astro-tourism, while we continued our research," explains Mr. Angchuk, a native of Ladakh who played a crucial role in securing community support for the project.

Locals embraced the opportunity.

"It was an amazing experience to learn about the cosmos, to understand which planets are closer to Earth and more visible," says Ms. Angmo, who has since guided hundreds of clients through the night sky, charging about 200 rupees (roughly \$2.25) a head.

The initiative has transformed the remote village, stemming the tide of rural migration as tourism businesses proliferate and revitalize the local economy.

Most astro-ambassadors, including Ms. Angmo, operate their own homestays alongside their guiding work.

"Now, my husband doesn't need to leave for work," she says, gesturing toward a group of tourists waiting for their turn at the telescope. "While I guide visitors through the stars, he runs the homestay with me."

Discovering Hanle's history

Beyond income, the initiative anchors Hanle's cultural identity. Observatory officials have encouraged astro-ambassadors to explore the astronomical knowledge embedded in Ladakhi folklore, and to reclaim this heritage.

"Our elders had a profound relationship with the stars," says astro-ambassador Padma Ishey. "They used celestial movements for timekeeping and directions."

Through conversations with village elders, he discovered little-known folk songs about long-forgotten constellations. "We learned by science that these stars indeed appear in the seasons our ancestors relied on them," he says.

Tourists find this history deeply compelling.

"I've never seen such a clear night sky," says Abhishek Dutta, a software engineer from Texas. "This place is extraordinary."

A 17th-century Buddhist monastery, its white walls gleaming above the valley, testifies to Hanle's past as a silk route hub. The monks, known as lamas, say they believe that celestial movements determine auspicious timings for prayers and festivals, but this practice has been displaced by modern calendars and digital tools.

The astro-ambassador initiative has resonated so deeply that the monastery's acting head, Nawang Tsoundu, volunteered to become one.

"During the day, I meditate and teach," says Mr. Tsoundu. "At night, I guide tourists through the stars and share celestial knowledge with the monks. I want them to understand both the science and the tradition." ■

COVER STORY

Seeking opportunities to 'explore outside of yourself'

The benefits of studying abroad can be life-changing. Advocates want more black men to participate.

TOKYO

In the middle of a blistering August day, Tremaine Collins is standing on the platform of the Oku train station in Tokyo, punching a code into an app on his phone to pay for his ticket.

It's a busy central hub in the Kita district, where passengers connect to an array of places in one of the most sprawling metropolises in the world.

Mr. Collins is getting the hang of navigating his new city. Today, he's dressed in blue jeans, comfortable yet stylish silver low tops, and a multihued, brown plaid shirt mixed with maroon. His buttons are open, exposing a white tank top and a gold necklace and pendant.

He's one of only two Black men on the busy platform at the moment – and one of relatively few in Japan. "I'm not here because I'm here on vacation," he says. "I'm here because this is a goal that I always wanted to get here."

Mr. Collins has just begun his first year at Temple University Japan, where about half of its 3,000 students are from the United States and roughly a quarter are from Japan. He is not simply doing a semester abroad program. He's enrolled as a full-time student in a four-year undergraduate program.

This makes Mr. Collins stand out in other ways. Very few U.S. Black men attending a college or university take advantage of opportunities to study abroad. In the 2023-2024 school year, there were almost 300,000 Americans studying in other countries. About two-thirds of these students were white, according to the Institute for International Education, and 6% were Black. While men made up one-third of Americans studying abroad, Black men were only 2% of that total, experts say.

"I mean, this is the \$20 million question, literally. It's been a topic of conferences since forever," says Tonija Hope, who leads the study abroad program at Howard University in Washington, D.C., a historically Black college. She and others want to know why Black males don't study abroad and what can be done to get them to participate.

The benefits can be life-changing. Research indicates that studying abroad strengthens retention and completion rates. It makes

job applicants more attractive to hiring managers, and it increases social and economic capital to further upward mobility.

Mr. Collins says he always wanted to do different things when he was growing up in Lorain, Ohio, a steel town on the shore of Lake Erie. He loved PokéMon and anime – Japanese animation – which his peers often mocked. Later, he wasn't very interested in sports or hip-hop music.

He gets choked up remembering that time. "My dad wasn't really in my life like that. It was really just my mom and my grandma." He says feelings of neglect and loneliness always made him look in the mirror and speak words of affirmations to himself: I'm a good person; I have a good heart.

"I wanted to learn just how to be a better man and to be someone who's brave, who's courageous. Someone who's intelligent and really in tune with themselves," Mr. Collins says.

One thing he did wish to do was to travel. No one in his immediate family had ever traveled outside the U.S. – not himself, his older brother, or his two sisters. He made a radical decision: After he graduated from high school, to his family's disbelief, he enlisted in the Air Force and was stationed in Montana.

"I didn't really have nobody to believe in me until I did certain things that were outside the box," he says, holding back tears.

After three years of military service, the GI Bill helped fund his college plans. The two schools he applied to were both overseas: a university in Rome and the American University of Paris, where he was accepted and attended for a year.

But a chance encounter with French police made him decide to leave. Officers stopped him and aggressively frisked him. The incident replays in his mind like a scene from a movie.

"They pull you over because you're Black and maybe they think you fit a profile. It feels uncomfortable. You're nervous and scared," he recalls.

Between his semesters in France, he traveled. He visited several countries in Europe and then went to Asia, stopping in Tokyo. Before heading back to his Paris dorm, he had one more stop in Austria, but he says he kicked himself for not spending more time in Japan.

That's when he decided to apply to Temple University Japan.

"I think if you have the opportunity to do something where you can explore outside of yourself, and if you want to not do it and blame it on fear, I think you're doing yourself an injustice," he says, wishing more people from where he grew up felt the same.

OVERCOMING THE "4 F'S"

Decades ago, Margery Ganz, a professor at Spelman College in Atlanta, wrote a paper, "The 4 F's: Overcoming Barriers to Study Abroad," an examination of the reasons Black students do not take advantage of overseas programs. The 4 F's she identified are family, finances, fear, and faculty.

Studying abroad is a new experience for families, especially for first-generation or low-income students. But families can also limit opportunities simply because of their lack of familiarity with international travel and the value of such studies. Finances, too, might often be a problem for Black students, who, as a whole, don't always have the resources of their white counterparts.

Fear of racism abroad is a major concern for Black students and their families. Living in foreign countries can heighten experiences of microaggressions and discrimination. There is also the fear of isolation and of being the only Black student within a given program.

Then there is simply the fear of the unknown.

In 2014, then-first lady Michelle Obama spoke about studying abroad during a trip to China, where she told students at Peking University in Beijing that she was afraid – and unaware of the full opportunities available to her when she was an undergraduate at Princeton University in New Jersey.

"The benefits of studying abroad are almost endless," Mrs. Obama said. She spoke about the practice making Americans more appealing in the job market and more compassionate, and how it forces students out of their comfort zones.

Dr. Ganz's final F – faculty – refers to the structural issues in study abroad programs, including insufficient outreach to Black students.

But there are other reasons for lower participation rates, says Dr. Hope at Howard. "There is a lot of speculation, but one to start with is the low enrollment rate in higher ed across the board," Dr. Hope says. "When you already have low numbers, then how do you convince those that are in higher ed to go?" she asks.

But she also mentions a fifth F. "I would add, in the case of, like Howard and many HBCUs and probably universities generally: FOMO.

"At Howard, in the fall, you don't want to miss homecoming," Dr. Hope says. "If you're pledging a fraternity or sorority, you don't want to miss rush. And then, in the spring, you don't want to miss other things. Elections for student government, you miss that. So there's always something that is going to be missed."

In 2025, too, all study abroad programs took a hit. In August, the State Department scrapped \$100 million in cultural exchange programs, calling them "low priority." President Donald Trump has also made it more difficult for foreign students to study in the U.S., which has advocates concerned about opportunities for American students seeking to go overseas.

"It is dire now," says James Ham, director of international affairs at North Carolina Central University, of these cuts. But he believes funding will eventually return, and that schools have to be ready. "We have to find ways to continue to prepare our students going forward," he says.

Dr. Hope says that, a decade ago, Howard students voted to be charged a \$100 globalization fee for study abroad initiatives. She wants more to follow through and go. In 2024, more than 200 Howard students studied abroad – but that's still far from the 10% of students she would like to see.

"The goal for me is the longer term. You need to unpack a suitcase, you need to learn a bus route to get you somewhere, and you have to figure out how to do that on your own," Dr. Hope says.

"IF YOU SAW WHAT I SAW"

Ruby Maddox devoted much of her career to getting more men to travel abroad.

In 2016, she helped found Leaders of the Free World, a nonprofit that works to empower Black men. She facilitated leadership training and international travel for her clients.

Ms. Maddox said studying abroad helped expand her own worldview in a profound way after she decided to visit Ghana in 2010. "I went over there to study urban agriculture for a summer," she told the Monitor, reflecting on how she used a \$5,000 student-aid refund to fund the trip, which she researched and planned herself.

Initially, her plan was, "I'm gonna go over there. I'm going to study urban agriculture and focus on the work that I'm doing."

"And then it hit me," she said during a Zoom interview last year, "there was the whole aspect of how I'm traveling abroad for the first time, in a country where everybody around looked like me."

She saw Black professionals, professors, and government officials. Ms. Maddox says the experience of not being the "other" or the only Black student in a room helped her make a shift in her life when she returned to Springfield, Massachusetts.

"To this day, I have no words. It's like you see that the work is bigger," Ms. Maddox recalled. "I felt like I wanted more young people to have this experience. I settled on a lot of the young men in my family and the young men in my community who had this potential that was off the charts, and I would say to myself, 'If you saw what I saw, you would be unstoppable.'" Weeks after her interview with the Monitor, Ms. Maddox died unexpectedly.

The leadership nonprofit began, in fact, when she and co-founder Lavar Thomas took a group of men on a two-week trip to Ghana. After the first trip was a success, she continued to take groups of 15 or so Black college students from across the country. She partnered with schools including the University of Delaware, Prairie View A&M University in Texas, and New Jersey City University.

Dr. Ham at North Carolina Central is on the board of Leaders of the Free World, and he travels with the group to Ghana. For years, he worked with the Peace Corps, working his way up to country director in Uganda, Cameroon, and South Africa. He then served as deputy country director for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Zambia, Guinea, and Ivory Coast.

When he started at the Peace Corps in 1996, he was the only Black man in his group, which also included one Black woman from Alabama.

"I want to inspire African Americans to really pursue these kinds of career opportunities, especially for our young, because when it comes to participation in international affairs and study abroad opportunities, we are the least to participate – and more so, African American men are least exposed to that," Dr. Ham says. "This has been my mission."

The groups that Leaders of the Free World brings to Africa are hosted by faculty, students, and leaders at the University of Ghana in Accra. The exchange students focus on leadership and service, including political leadership. They do projects, such as building a kitchen for a school whose roof collapsed. They meet new people, try new food, and learn traditional African dance.

This was the vision of the late Ms. Maddox. "That really was the seed that I wanted to plant – that seed of seeing yourself being unstoppable, of seeing yourself beyond what they told you you were, even if for those two weeks you could step outside of those perceived boundaries that you had physically and mentally," she told the Monitor.

"NOT ALL BUTTERFLIES AND RAINBOWS"

When he was a junior at Georgia State University, Timothy Mason studied abroad in Lisbon, Portugal, from August to December in 2024.

He loved it, but it didn't come without obstacles. His family was afraid, but his worried mother eventually relented and let him go. She even flew with him to Portugal to help him settle in.

Though there were students from all over the U.S., Mr. Mason and a friend from Spelman College were the only two Black students. There was only one other person of color in their group of 20.

An environmental science major, Mr. Mason says he's not uncomfortable in such white spaces, but being isolated in Lisbon highlighted differences.

"Our lived experiences are different, and it's hard not to have somebody to relate to, because the white experience is very different from the Black experience when I'm trying to make friends with people," he says.

In Portugal during the 2024 presidential election, for which he filed an absentee ballot, he discussed the results between former Vice President Kamala Harris, a Black and Asian woman, and President Trump. Some members of his group asserted that racism and sexism were not issues in the race.

"I feel like that's something so present for me and I'm not even a woman, but just being Black and knowing that everything is not all butterflies and rainbows and that racism actually happens to

people," he recalls. "It was one of those things where I had to have patience."

NIHONGO NOMI (JAPANESE ONLY)

Days before classes start, Mr. Collins is participating in opening week activities. Today is a day to tour campus buildings, potentially meet faculty, and decide whether he wants to join a student group – everything from jujitsu to the chess club. The day will conclude with a party and live music.

His tour guide, a senior named Kenya Douglas, walks a group of 20 students to the welcome center. Mr. Collins asks questions about navigating the city.

"If you see a sign that says Nihongo nomi (Japanese only) or Gai-kokujin okotowari (No foreigners), don't go in there," Mr. Douglas warns. "Some places are not foreigner-friendly."

Mr. Collins is eager for the first day of classes. All courses at Temple University Japan are taught in English, but the art major wants to learn Japanese.

His first class, in fact, is Japanese Elements I. On the first day, his instructor, Takeda Sota, is going over hiragana and katakana, the writing shapes and characters for the Japanese language.

The first day went really well, Mr. Collins says, and he's confident that he will be happy studying in Tokyo for the next few years. In fact, he can partially see the future, he says, when it comes to his time studying in Japan. "I think my older self is going to be proud of my younger self."

"Sometimes, I feel you've got to step away from the culture to try to find out what you actually like," Mr. Collins says. "That's what we know, but if you don't step outside of America and you're African American ... and that's all you know is hip-hop culture? You don't look outside to find out who you are."

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

A yearning for the sacred in civic life

Many Americans feel buffeted by a cycle of tit-for-tat political rhetoric, whipsaw policymaking, and norms breaking. A recent poll found 82% of voters believe the way people talk about politics contributes to violence. Only one-third say it's possible to lower the temperature on rhetoric.

Yet, more voices are calling for civic civility. The calls are based on a mix of political principles as well as moral and religious values. On Dec. 9, for example, two governors clasped hands after modeling respectful political dialogue at the National Cathedral in Washington.

Democrat Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania and Republican Spencer Cox of Utah often share how their faith imbues their work. "Bridge-building is the hardest thing I've ever done," Mr. Cox told The Washington Post. "It takes ... strong faith and strong courage."

A couple of days later, a bipartisan group of Indiana state senators voted down a bill to redraw an electoral map to give the state's Republicans an advantage in Congress. Several cited an ethical desire to reduce partisanship. "I hope that this is the beginning of the country stepping back from the brink," said one Republican state senator.

Such a stance fits research that shows how the words and ac-

tions of elected officials can cue either positive or negative public sentiment. A Cornell University political scientist who has studied the campaign approach of Mr. Cox – who refuses to demonize opponents – found it "had a significant [positive] effect" on public views.

Americans look to political leaders for moral clarity, says Governor Shapiro. Elected officials in a few states appear to recognize this, as they decide whether to abide by long-standing norms or to push redistricting to lock in wins in 2026. Texas kicked off a redistricting race mid last year, redrawing maps to favor Republican candidates. California responded with a referendum to override an independent commission and draw maps favoring Democrats.

"California's gerrymandering is not fighting back. It's cheating," one California Democrat said about the move that passed in November.

"It's not all just about getting re-elected," Kansas state Rep. Brett Fairchild, a Republican, told The New York Times. It's also about "principle and ... morals and ethics."

Many Americans might now be seeking deeper values to guide civic life. In the dialogue series that hosted Mr. Cox and Mr. Shapiro, for example, the National Cathedral has laid out one approach: "We start with two fundamental ideas," its website notes. "First, every person is a beloved child of God, regardless of who they vote for. And second, Americans yearn for a better way to be in relationship with one another." Perhaps the yearning has found its voice. ▀

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Strength for Ukraine and Taiwan

With calm resolve, the United States and the European Union have each made recent decisions showing a firm watchfulness against big-power aggression. Neither will receive a Nobel Peace Prize, as Alfred Nobel's idea of a secure world did not include military deterrence. Yet together, the U.S. and EU have helped make war a bit more unthinkable.

On Dec. 17, the Trump administration approved the largest-ever U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Congress is expected to approve the \$11.1 billion weapons package, especially after a House Select Committee on China report called for "unambiguous" opposition to Beijing's moves toward an invasion of the self-governing democratic island.

Earlier in December, President Donald Trump issued a National Security Strategy that says "deterring a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving military overmatch, is a priority." In November, Taiwan's government proposed a \$40 billion special budget for military spending, part of an effort to boost its defenses.

"History demonstrates that compromising with aggressors ultimately brings only endless aftermaths of war and subjugation," said President Lai Ching-te.

On Dec. 19, meanwhile, EU leaders agreed to borrow €90 billion (about \$106 billion) to provide critical aid to Ukraine against the Russian military. The money may allow the country to survive into 2027. Ukraine will not need to repay the loan until Russia compensates it with reparations.

"The only way to bring Russia to the negotiating table is to strengthen Ukraine," said European Council President António Costa.

While the aid amount was not as much as many EU states wanted, the final figure is a "decisive message for an end to the war," said Friedrich Merz, the German chancellor. Overall, Europe has spent more money than the U.S. to help Ukraine during the nearly four-year war.

This latest protection for Taiwan and Ukraine – both democracies

threatened by autocratic neighbors – is not a fear-based strategy. It is a recognition that showing strength against evil can dissolve its power. As the German leader said, Russian President Vladimir Putin “will only make concessions once he realizes his war will not pay off.” ■

BEHIND THE SCENES

Petroleum in a state that dreams in green

What does America's intended resurgence as a petrostate look like from California, a green-energy giant?

By Clayton Collins / Director, editorial innovation and Jingnan Peng / Multimedia producer

A reporter could find plenty to learn about energy and the environment at a climate conference or an oil-association meeting. But there are also rich perspectives to tap on the ground in the places where people are living the story.

That's what sent the Monitor's Simon Montlake, with photographer Alfredo Sosa, to Southern California's Kern County to report a cover story for the Monitor's magazine. The state is a leader in the transition to renewable energy. Yes, electric vehicles have taken off there.

“But that still leaves millions of cars, making many, many journeys,” Simon says, “and they need gasoline.” That means the transition needs to be managed, something the state's leadership has acknowledged.

Not everyone is treading a nuanced middle ground. Simon came across oil-country Californians who rejected the need, widely supported by science, to push ahead on decarbonization in the long term.

“We did come across that,” he says. “There were people who just chose to, you know, not engage or talk around the question.” It's a complex system, Simon notes. Lifestyles get built around fossil-fuel extraction. This story assignment reinforced that and more.

“It reminded me that to understand the stakeholders, you have to go to where they live and see how they inhabit the world and what they do,” he says. “And I think it was really valuable for that.” ■

PODCAST

Staff writer Simon Montlake recently joined the Monitor podcast “Why We Wrote This” to discuss California's pivot toward petroleum.



Find the full interview at www.CSMonitor.com/WhyWeWroteThis or launch your smartphone's camera, scan the QR code above, and tap the prompt when it appears.

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

THE GUARDIAN / SYDNEY

After Bondi Beach attack, hope must persist

“It was the first night of [Hanukkah],” writes Nadine Cohen, a Sydney-based writer. “... [As I was walking by Bondi Beach,] I heard a barrage of bangs, and people started running. ... It was the single most terrifying moment of my life. For a few hours, [I] waited [inside a building]. ... [Finally,] my cousin came to get me and we were reunited at my sister's house. ... We lit [Hanukkah] candles and said prayers. We sat around the dinner table ... as news came in about the wounded, the dead, the shooters and the mensches. We watched reels on repeat of Ahmed al-Ahmed ... disarming one of the shooters. ... [We were] lucky to be safe, to be together. ... The story of [Hanukkah] is one of hatred and destruction, but ultimately one of survival and hope. ... I need to believe in hope.”

BANGKOK POST / BANGKOK

News media should encourage peace, not make war

“Border clashes between Thailand and Cambodia [intensified recently],” reads an editorial. “... The media code of conduct is clear. ... It forbids stereotyping, distortion and any content that fuels hatred or violence. ... In-depth analyses [are crucial] to help the public ... understand the roots of the problem, paving the way for peace. ... Newsrooms should be asking basic questions and conducting journalistic investigations: Who started the shelling? ... What are the humanitarian risks? Who gains politically from escalation? These are questions a functioning press must raise. ... Peace begins with words. Those who shape them must take that responsibility seriously.”

THE NASSAU GUARDIAN / NASSAU, BAHAMAS

A new chapter for the US and the Bahamas

“The arrival of ... the new United States ambassador to [the] Bahamas represents a new chapter,” states an editorial. “... After an extended period without a resident ambassador in Nassau, his presence restores an important diplomatic link. ... The United States is redefining its foreign policy posture, particularly within the Western Hemisphere. ... Regional diplomacy remains essential. ... The tensions surrounding Venezuela ... highlight how easily cohesion can fray. ... The United States has sent an ambassador who expresses respect and goodwill. The Bahamas will no doubt continue to be a responsible friend and partner.”

AL JAZEERA / DOHA, QATAR

China can be a model for Delhi in the quest for clean air

“Every winter, air pollution in [New] Delhi spikes around this time when cold air traps smoke and fumes,” writes Azhar Azam, a geopolitical analyst. “... China serves as a model for its neighbouring nation. ... Twenty years ago, Beijing was crowned as the world's

smog capital. China's temporary emission reduction regulations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics set the stage for its war on air pollution. ... The country introduced a raft of measures, including the closure of coal-fired boilers, promoting public transport and new energy vehicles, accelerating technological reform of enterprises and boosting innovation and green energy. ... Blue skies are indeed back in Beijing. ... By adopting elements of China's clean-air playbook ... India could make meaningful progress in securing cleaner air."

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS

Everyone deserves to have a home

"Across the EU, one-in-ten urban households now spends over 40 percent of its income on housing," writes Brigitte van den Berg, a Dutch member of the European Parliament. "Meanwhile, building permits for residential properties have fallen ... and housing and utility costs surged. ... A home is far more than bricks, mortar and paperwork. It is where we grow, rest, dream, and form the foundations of our lives. If housing becomes a privilege rather than a right, Europe loses ... its social anchor. ... Construction today is hampered by administrative delay, high financing costs, and scarce skilled labour. Removing unnecessary red tape does not mean lowering standards. It means deploying digital permits [and] streamlining planning processes. ... Every European deserves the freedom to build a life."

— Compiled by Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

HOME FORUM

The cycles of life

The rhythms of laundry – rocking restless babies to the hum of the dryer, washing the grass stains of growing children – mirror life.

When my wife and I heard a plaintive whinny from our laundry room the other day, we knew that our old dryer had cycled its last load. The dryer had lasted three decades, long enough to tumble my daughter's toddler clothes and her husband's jeans many years later. We had gotten our money's worth from an appliance we'd purchased as newly-weds, and I couldn't complain when its bearings finally gave out.

Waiting for the store van to bring a replacement, I glanced at the old dryer, its top as rusty as an ancient freighter resting in dry dock. Before the kids grew up and left home, we probably averaged four loads a week, a perpetual spin of socks and towels, shirts and blouses, and the occasional dog blanket for a terrier whose bed was plusher than mine.

In the winter of 2000, we sometimes ran the dryer with nothing in it. Our newborn son, restless at midnight, found the gentle hum of the rotating drum a soothing lullaby. I held him near the dryer so often that I put a chair beside it, sometimes dozing off myself as the mechanical murmur put me back to sleep.

In those cold, dark hours, the laundry room seemed like the gently beating heart of our house, and perhaps it was. Juice and milk often spilled over the family dinner table back then, flooding laps large and small like a river cresting its banks. Our youngsters muddied pants and dresses as they scurried around the lawn, their knees and elbows still marked by the yard's wild embrace when they came back inside. Grass stains and blueberry blotches colored their clothing as brightly as a canvas

by Monet. Our washer and dryer, always full, greeted us each day like rumbling horns of plenty, the sweet floral scent of each warm load perfuming our den with a subtle grace note.

Grace, though, isn't what I usually felt as I fed armfuls of boxer shorts and T-shirts into the dryer each week. I came to think of myself as a sailor shoveling coal while our household slowly steamed its way through the seasons, our destination not always clear.

Laundry and other humble routines of parenthood sometimes made me restless, and I'd sigh and hope for a day when I might be able to focus on higher things.

But some wise words from writer Kathleen Norris helped me keep things in perspective. As she deftly noted, to call a household chore "menial" is to evoke a Latin word meaning "to remain" or "to dwell in a household." In this way, Ms. Norris pointed out, the tasks we often regard as domestic drudgery are really "about connections, about family and household ties."

It's something I've reflected on more deeply in my new life as an empty nester, with our daughter and son now grown and living far away. Our washer and dryer are quieter these days, but when our children return for visits, we once again do their laundry in a small gesture of homecoming. The simple chore is a reminder that, in washing their pajamas and folding their slacks, we'll always be ready with a warm welcome.

As the dryer spins, I'm reminded of the circularity of my life, its predictable cycles perhaps seen most ideally as a source of discovery rather than dullness. "The ordinary activities I find most compatible with contemplation," Ms. Norris told readers, "are walking, baking bread and doing laundry."

Which is why there might be nothing nobler than a batch of clean clothes. Or so I told myself as I opened our new dryer and pitched in its first load.

— Danny Heitman

PAUSE FOR POETRY

SEASONS

*winter thaw
in the distance
new moon*

*spring melt
finding the mitten
i lost last year*

*summer days
pouring
another glass*

*autumn evening
one more
page in the novel*

*snow
where the lawn
used to be*

— Peter Joseph Gloviczki

Rejoicing in the discovery of spiritual reality

The nature of reality engages the attention of artists, scientists, and theologians. It's a topic that should engage everyone, in fact, since our ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal has an impact on our lives.

The Scriptures reveal how an understanding of our relationship to God enables us to perceive that which is real. They provide a record of individuals – such as Moses, Elijah, and Elisha – who discovered spiritual reality, which affirms the nearness of God, divine Spirit. Christ Jesus especially understood God as supreme Spirit, and man, including each of us, as His complete and spiritual expression.

As we're open to receiving the gifts of Spirit, a scriptural name for God, we discern the nature of true being. A passage from a letter by the Apostle Paul states, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (I Corinthians 2:12). As we receive this abundant provision of truth – that is, as we are receptive to the fact that Spirit is the reality – we experience evidence of that reality.

The Bible recounts how openness to God restored harmony during a conflict between the herdsmen of Abram, later named Abraham, and those of his nephew Lot. The dispute seemed to concern access to good-quality pasture. Abram, who consistently listened for Spirit's messages, let Lot have first choice of the land. He said to Lot, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren" (Genesis 13:8).

Lot chose the well-watered plain of Jordan. Abram remained in Canaan and received a promise from God that all the land he was able to see would belong to him and his descendants. Human strife gave place to spiritual harmony.

In "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," Mary Baker Eddy, the discoverer of Christian Science, writes, "All that really exists is the divine Mind and its idea, and in this Mind the entire being is found harmonious and eternal" (p. 151).

Some years ago, my younger brother and I had a misunderstanding regarding the terms of monthly repayments for a motorcycle, and this led to a dispute.

I prayed to discern spiritual reality – that God is our Father and Mother and maintains harmony in His spiritual creation. This prayer required a willingness on my part not to outline a particular outcome. I sought to gain a deeper understanding of my relationship to God, the source of all goodness and peace.

I reasoned that harmony is a permanent quality of spiritual reality. The ideas of Mind, God, relate to each other in an orderly and purposeful manner. In the realm of Mind, *all* is harmonious; discord is unreal. Further prayer, followed by discussions between my brother and me, brought to light a solution that was acceptable to both of us. We continue to enjoy a happy and respectful relationship.

Equipped with an understanding of spiritual reality, we can contribute to increased harmony, peace, and unity in our families and in our community.

– Alistair Budd

Civil servant or fascist sympathizer?

Lea Ypi strives to paint a fuller picture of her grandmother, who led a complicated life.

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

Political philosopher Lea Ypi, while visiting Greece, mentioned to a young intellectual that she was there to research in the government archives her late grandmother's life. "Women and archives," he replied. "Good luck with that. You're better off writing a novel."

In a way, Ypi has. "Indignity: A Life Reimagined" charts her attempts to locate information about her grandmother, Leman Ypi, in the declassified records of communist Albania's secret police, among other places. In 1936, at age 18, Leman gave up a privileged existence in Salonica, Greece – where her family was part of an ethnic Albanian minority – to move, alone, to the Albanian capital of Tirana.

To compensate for the many gaps in the archives, Ypi, a professor at the London School of Economics, has created an arresting hybrid work. "Indignity" features nonfiction chapters detailing her investigation into Leman's life, reproductions of historical documents pertaining to her family, and fictionalized sections in which she imagines her grandmother's experiences as she navigated a tumultuous historical era.

A stranger's post on social media prompted Ypi to write the book. The post featured a photograph, unfamiliar to the author, of Ypi's paternal grandparents on their honeymoon in the Italian Alps in 1941. The photo was unsettling to Ypi, as her grandmother, with whom she was close, appears relaxed and smiling even as World War II boiled and Benito Mussolini's Italy was allied with Nazi Germany. (Leman died in 2006, while Ypi's grandfather, Asllan Ypi, died in 1980, when the author was an infant.)

Ypi was further unsettled by reactions to the photo, which was widely shared in Albania because of the author's prominence. (Her first book, 2021's "Free," a memoir in which Ypi recalls growing up in an Albania transitioning from communism to capitalism, was a bestseller that also made her a target of criticism in her native country.) Some of the commenters condemned Ypi, but one zeroed in on Leman, claiming that she was "a communist spy. And before that, a fascist collaborator." Ypi writes, "What if those anonymous users commenting on the photo have uncovered something that has been hidden from me?" "Indignity" represents her effort to answer that question.

The vivid fictional chapters elaborate on family stories told to Ypi by her grandmother years ago – a great-great-grandfather who died after gorging himself on baklava, a great-aunt desperate to escape an arranged marriage. The author creates scenes explaining why the fiercely independent Leman left Greece for Albania, a country she had never seen, suggesting that Leman herself hoped to avoid an unwanted marriage.

In Tirana, Leman found work as a civil servant and met Asllan, son of Xhafer Bey Ypi, who briefly served as Albania's prime minister. Unlike his father, who supported fascist Italy's occupation of Albania during World War II, Asllan was a leftist. He was also old school friends with Enver Hoxha, the communist dictator who went on to rule Albania for four decades beginning in 1944.

Leman was introduced to Hoxha one afternoon with Asllan at a café; she pulled her chair away from him to escape the "unbearable"

combination of the smell of his lavender hair pomade and the raw onion on his breath. "Later," Ypi writes, Leman "would revisit this moment with anxious precision, the sort of precision with which one reconstructs past events in one's life whose significance is not at all obvious at the time, but becomes undeniable in the light of what follows."

What follows, after Hoxha came to power, was a ruthless purge that included Asllan's arrest in 1946 on charges of collaborating with British intelligence officers; he was imprisoned until 1960. Leman, who a government informant claimed might be spying for Greece, was assigned to forced labor while raising their son, Zafo – the author's father – on her own. Reflecting on the fact that she would not have been born had her grandmother not moved to Albania, Ypi writes, "In the end, my life is owed to the harm she endured. I came into being not despite but because of it."

Many of the answers Ypi seeks about Leman remain out of reach. But the book was also inspired by the author's concern that the photograph of her grandmother, picked apart by online trolls, was turning her into "a caricature," somebody "stripped of context, memory, evidence, or even the basic sympathy we extend to strangers when we encounter them in person." In addition to penetrating some of the mysteries of her grandmother's life, Ypi writes of Leman's most painful experiences with compassion and empathy. Above all, she is interested in defending her grandmother's dignity, and in that she has succeeded. ■

The trail grows cold: A crime writer turns her pen to extolling winter

Scottish novelist Val McDermid takes a break from "tartan noir" to reminisce about her childhood and to revel in the frigid season.

By Heller McAlpin / Contributor

Val McDermid, the popular Scottish writer whose intricately plotted "tartan noir" crime novels are awash in gore, took a break from what she calls "my usual gig of murderous fiction" to write "Winter: The Story of a Season."

It's a lovely, gentle little book, a warming meditation on the coldest, darkest time of the year. "Winter" celebrates how local Scottish traditions take the bite out of short, frosty days and long, windblown nights. These include not just holidays and festivals, but excursions to the three iconic bridges of the Firth of Forth in Queensferry (which are usually overrun by tourists in the warmer months), and comforting suppers of homemade soup, which she touts as "central heating for the soul." Philip Harris' beautiful drawings complement the author's resonant blend of personal memories and cultural history.

McDermid notes that on the winter solstice the sun doesn't rise in Edinburgh until 8:43 a.m., and sets at 3:39 in the afternoon, a mere seven hours later. "Nothing says 'Scotland in winter' like walking to school with dawn barely broken, then walking back in the dark," she writes, recalling her childhood in Fife in the 1960s.

It's no wonder, McDermid writes, that Scots love Christmas lights, sparklers, and the fireworks that brighten the sky on Bonfire Night, Nov. 5, a holiday that commemorates Guy Fawkes' failed attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament in England in 1605. Such festivities, she writes, "take our minds off the privations of the season" and serve as reminders that brighter, longer days will return.

Among the celebrations McDermid extols is Hogmanay, "the signature Scottish festival in the eyes of the outside world," which begins on the last day of the year – Auld Year's Day. She says that when she was growing up, Dec. 31 was traditionally a day of house-cleaning, baths, haircuts for the men, and "something tartan-and-shortbread Scottish" on TV – often featuring kilted dancers. After the New Year was rung in, everyone eagerly anticipated the First Foot – the first friend or neighbor to cross one's threshold, bringing good cheer and good fortune.

These homey traditions have ebbed over the past few decades, replaced by large outdoor celebrations such as the annual giant street party that takes over Edinburgh.

More to her liking is Burns Night, Jan. 25, which celebrates the national bard, Robert Burns, at a banquet featuring a dinner of "haggis, neeps and tatties." She helpfully translates the dishes as "sheep's offal cooked in a sheep's stomach with oatmeal and spices, including a lot of white pepper; mashed swede/rutabaga; [and] mashed potatoes." McDermid, an admirer of the poet, has given the ceremonial toast at the event.

"Winter" is spiced with local dialect – some obscure, like *neep*, or *swede* for rutabaga, others needing no translation, such as *dooking* for apples, *jeely* pan, and Loony Dook, a fundraiser for charities that involves a dunk or plunge into the bitterly cold waters of South Queensferry.

The plunge McDermid takes each January is of a different sort. After the holidays, she hunkers down to begin writing that year's book. (She has written more than 40 so far.) McDermid extols the satisfactions of burrowing into her work.

But when she needs a break, she hies over to the National Galleries of Scotland to see the annual display of 38 of the 19th-century English painter J.M.W. Turner's finest watercolor sketches, exhibited free of charge during the month. The collection, funded by a man who made his fortune in hatmaking, reminds McDermid – a miner's granddaughter who graduated from Oxford University and became a successful writer – "of the power of dreaming, of holding fast to ambition even when its realisation seems against the odds."

Back at her desk, McDermid spends the winter laboring happily. And as the days grow longer, so does her new book. ■

They were opposed to slavery, but also against a war to end it

An abolitionist movement urged nonviolent activism instead of taking up arms.

By Danny Heitman / Contributor

Mark Kurlansky has written 40 books, but he's best known for "Cod" and "Salt," two works in which he looked at common food items with fresh eyes. He has a signature gift for inviting readers to consider the familiar in new ways, which is why "Cod" and "Salt" became bestsellers.

Kurlansky is up to something similar in "The Boston Way," his new book about how 19th-century pacifists navigated the prospect of an American civil war to end slavery. Hundreds of books have been written about the Civil War, but Kurlansky breathes new life into the subject by taking a more novel slant.

He focuses on a subset of Americans in and around Boston who saw slavery as an unmitigated evil, but were horrified by the thought that their fellow citizens might try to settle the matter by killing

each other.

Readers might wonder if Kurlansky, who's best known for writing about food, is up to the challenge of a Civil War narrative. But in addition to his chronicles of cod and salt, along with lively volumes on oysters, milk, salmon, and onions, he's also churned out books of social history, including "1968: The Year That Rocked the World," and "Nonviolence: The History of a Dangerous Idea."

In an author's bio on the dust jacket of "The Boston Way," Kurlansky makes his own views on nonviolence clear. We learn that he "refused to serve in the Vietnam war, and has opposed every war since."

But wasn't the cause of freeing American slaves worth fighting for? The case for a nonviolent alternative was made most vigorously by William Lloyd Garrison, a Boston abolitionist who rests at the center of Kurlansky's story. Garrison predicted that if emancipation came about through violence, it would create even more hatred, delaying by at least a century the day when African Americans secured their rights. "It has been taking even longer than that," Kurlansky concludes.

"The Boston Way" appears at a time when polarized politics are inviting some social commentators to wonder if Americans might collectively take up arms against each other again. Such a prospect might seem unthinkable to most of us, but as Kurlansky suggests, the thought of civil war seemed unthinkable to many antebellum Americans, too.

Like last year's "The Demon of Unrest," Erik Larson's account of the days just before the attack on Fort Sumter, "The Boston Way" persuasively immerses readers in the national mood shortly before the Civil War. Kurlansky drops us into this long-ago world quickly – so quickly, in fact, that readers might need some time to get their bearings.

John Brown, the militant abolitionist who would eventually be hanged after seizing a federal arsenal, pops up on the first page, and the trouble starts a few sentences later when he and Garrison get together in Boston in 1857 and debate the best way to end slavery.

"The meeting was a disaster – a shouting match, according to some accounts," Kurlansky tells readers. Brown was unswayed by Garrison's calls for nonviolence, using Old Testament passages to invoke notions of vengeance and divine wrath.

Kurlansky seems to smile on the page as he quotes a standard rebuttal to such arguments from abolitionist Lydia Maria Child: "What a convenient book the Old Testament is, when ever there is any fighting to be done."

Child, a bracing and often witty writer, is one of the stars of "The Boston Way," and other leading women thinkers of the day, including Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, show up, too.

Kurlansky positions the cause of nonviolent opposition to slavery within a larger spirit of social experiment that has long defined Boston political culture. But even by Boston standards, Child and her allies were ahead of their time. "Child was one of several women of prominence in the abolitionist movement," Kurlansky writes, "and soon others joined. This in itself was a growing controversy in a society where women were not expected to be involved in politics."

Kurlansky's chapters buzz like a period version of a talk show, with chatty appearances by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Frederick Douglass.

One complication is the book's lack of an index – a vexing omission given its multiplicity of figures and its ambitions as a work of scholarship.

There is, alas, no need for spoiler alerts in discussing "The Boston Way," since readers know that Garrison and like-minded thinkers couldn't steer their fellow citizens away from armed conflict. But Kurlansky argues that the efforts of Garrison's circle, known as the Boston Clique, weren't in vain.

"The great leaders of nonviolence, charismatic figures such as

Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., are often remembered as rarefied geniuses who hatched their ideas from the ether," Kurlansky writes, "but the ideas and tools of nonviolent activism have been pursued by many people many times, and though a small group in nineteenth-century Boston may be little remembered today, what they did, what they learned, and what they taught, have lived on." ■

Words on words: Behind the making of a dictionary

"Unabridged" chronicles the lively history of cataloging the English language.

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

Webster's Third New International Dictionary featured more than 450,000 entries, but one of them received outsize attention when the reference book was published in 1961. The inclusion of *ain't* in Webster's Third scandalized some critics, with overheated reviews calling the updated dictionary "a very great calamity," "disastrous," and "Anarchy in Language."

Stefan Fatsis describes the uproar in "Unabridged: The Thrill of (and Threat to) the Modern Dictionary," his engaging and at times exuberant account of embedding with the dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster. Fatsis – whose previous books include 2001's "Word Freak," a deep dive into the world of competitive Scrabble – is a proud word nerd. He uses his stint as a lexicographer-in-training at Merriam-Webster's headquarters in Springfield, Massachusetts, to illuminate the painstaking process by which words enter the dictionary and to assess the dictionary's evolving role in a digital world.

The book opens with a brisk history of Merriam-Webster, beginning with Noah Webster's two-volume magnum opus, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. Published in 1828, Webster's work had a patriotic agenda: The lexicographer aspired to create a specifically American dialect distinct from British English. He embraced Americanisms like *presidency* and *revolutionize* and created Americanized spellings of words like *color* and *theater*.

The brothers George and Charles Merriam, owners of a printing and publishing business, acquired the rights to Webster's dictionary in 1844. In subsequent editions, they streamlined the research and editing process, condensed the work into one volume, and lowered its price. In Fatsis' admiring view, they burnished Webster's legacy, making Merriam-Webster the definitive American dictionary.

The dustup over *ain't* was representative of a long-standing divide over whether dictionaries should be prescriptive or descriptive: Should they instruct users on how to speak or present the language as it's actually spoken? The latter view has won out, but Fatsis notes that the debate has had many rounds. "A conversation about how to label *irregardless*," he writes, "lasted decades." (The dictionary recognized that in its widespread usage, *irregardless* has the same meaning as *regardless* despite the *ir-* prefix, which would normally suggest the opposite. Merriam-Webster eventually settled on *nonstandard* over *substandard*.)

The author also addresses deliberations over how the dictionary ought to handle profanity and racial and ethnic slurs. On the order of Merriam-Webster's then-president, the Third Edition did not include the f-word. That decision rankled the company's longtime editor-in-chief, Philip Babcock Gove, who argued that an unabridged dictionary "should not omit this common word regardless of its taboo status." More than a decade passed before, in 1973, the curse word made it into a later edition.

In addition to covering these historical episodes, Fatsis describes

his day-to-day work at the office. There, he immersed himself in the dictionary's archives, most notably the file cabinets stuffed with citations, known as cits, that contain examples of how words are used in print. The cabinets contain an astounding 16 million of these slips of paper, which Fatsis calls an "irreplaceable archive of American English."

Today, of course, the process has been digitized. The New Words spreadsheet is a database of potential candidates for the dictionary, and Fatsis eagerly contributed because, as he states, "I was determined to get into the dictionary." He kept his eye on trending terms like *microaggression* and *safe space*, hoping that they had enough staying power to warrant inclusion on Merriam-Webster.com. Eventually he was tasked with crafting their definitions according to the dictionary's strict formula.

Not surprisingly, the internet has transformed the business. In the past, new words had to linger in the files for years between print editions before being introduced to the dictionary. During that time, editors could confirm that they weren't mere flashes in the pan. (The author cites *unbae*, meaning "to break up with," as an example of a recent word that burned out.) Now new words can be added to the online dictionary at any time. That flexibility came in handy in the case of a word that was added only 34 days after first being coined: *COVID-19*. With users searching unfamiliar terms like *social distancing* and *superspreader*, Fatsis observes that the pandemic forced Merriam-Webster to "do something the dictionary had never done: act like a newsroom on deadline."

Fatsis' affectionate account comes at an uncertain time for the dictionary. His stint at the office followed rounds of layoffs ordered by Merriam-Webster's parent company, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. The author estimates that there might be only 30 full-time working lexicographers in the United States, and it's likely that artificial intelligence will further depress those numbers.

Despite that bleak outlook, Fatsis found ways to commune with kindred spirits. In addition to bonding with his colleagues at the company, he toured the Oxford English Dictionary headquarters in England; joined hundreds of language aficionados in voting for the American Dialect Society's 2016 Word of the Year in Austin, Texas (*dumpster fire beat out woke*); and attended a Dictionary Society of North America conference in Bloomington, Indiana. He gushes that thinking and talking about words is "endlessly, enormously, incredibly fun." His delight in the dictionary is irresistible. So, too, is his appreciation for the reference book's significance. ■

ON FILM

In a war-weary English town, singing together inspires hope

"The Choral" doesn't soft-pedal sadness, but it does lift people up.

Set in a fictional mill town in Yorkshire, England, two years into World War I, "The Choral" can be described as old-fashioned in the best sense. The period details are lovingly applied; the script, by the great Alan Bennett, is beautifully crafted; and the performances, led by the marvelous Ralph Fiennes as the town's reluctant choirmaster, are all standouts.

It's the kind of movie that doesn't get made much anymore, and more's the pity.

Because the war is draining the town of its young men, the

local choral society, headed by the mill's owner, Alderman Bernard Duxbury (Roger Allam), is desperate to recruit male voices under the mandatory conscription age of 18. He's also frantic to hire a new choirmaster. The likeliest candidate, Dr. Henry Guthrie (Fiennes), carries some baggage. He once had a conducting stint in Germany. Despite Guthrie's enthusiasm for Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," he's an atheist. And the townspeople are unclear about his sexual orientation. As Duxbury mutters to his colleagues, "Let's just say I'd prefer a family man."

But this is not a movie about a proliferation of prejudices. Duxbury, who lost his only son in the war, truly loves music. He stands up for Guthrie because he recognizes artistry when he sees it. In the context of "The Choral," music-making isn't only an aesthetic experience. Singing together, however amateurish and compromised, is a way to inspire hope. The uplift stirs even Guthrie, whose world-weary exasperation is vastly diminished by the power of song.

The director, Nicholas Hytner – who has helmed three other Bennett screenplays, including "The Madness of King George" – is essentially a man of the theater, not a visual stylist. But with a rock-solid script and a slew of ardent actors, he's right in his element here. The storyline is replete with plots and subplots as we watch the community's inhabitants come alive. Among them is Lofty (Oliver Briscombe), whose job is to deliver the dreaded telegrams from the war department relaying the deaths of loved ones. His best friend, Ellis (Taylor Utley), is a scamp who regards even a new widow's grief as an opportunity to seduce. Mary (Amara Okereke), a Salvation Army trooper, wears her uniform as a badge of honor. By common consent, she also has the voice of an angel.

Bella (Emily Fairn) hasn't heard from her soldier beau, Clyde (Jacob Dudman), in over a year and doesn't know whether to grieve or to move on. When he unexpectedly returns, having lost an arm in combat, their reunion is in no way conventionally heartwarming. It's typical of "The Choral" that, despite its air of heightened conviviality, it doesn't soft-pedal the sadness. The young men in the choir, many of them age 17, know they are soon destined for the battlefield. The nationalistic fervor that ran through the town in the early years of the war has given way to an expanding fear.

Clyde, who starred in the choir before the war, doesn't want to rejoin. He's too rattled by what he's seen in the trenches. Recognizing his gifts, Guthrie convinces him otherwise. He tells Clyde that the young man has seen up close what few others have witnessed, and so life has offered him a chance to pour out his soul in song. This scene between them, and Clyde's subsequent recitation of battlefield horrors to the assembled choir, is the film's emotional high point.

Its comic high point comes near the end, with the arrival of the great British composer Sir Edward Elgar (Simon Russell Beale), whose oratorio "The Dream of Gerontius" the choir has adapted for its impending single performance. The oratorio concerns the death of an old man and his journey into paradise. Guthrie, with the war in mind, has revised it so that a soldier – played by Clyde – is Gerontius. At first jovial, Elgar sputters with rage when he finds out how his oratorio has been altered and withdraws his permission to stage the production. You can't blame him exactly, but Beale's Elgar is such a pompous preener that you don't mind seeing him roiled. It's the funniest cameo I saw last year.

But even here, with their dreams apparently dashed, members of the disparate community come together. They recognize what Elgar, in this instance, does not. In troubled times, music-



ON FILM
BY PETER
RAINER

making is no mere luxury. It's spiritual sustenance.

- “The Choral” is rated R for some language and sexual content.

IN PICTURES

The cloistered life in the age of cellphones

Story by Avedis Hadjian / Contributor

VENICE, ITALY

Monasteries and nunneries have long been oases of quiet contemplation in a world overrun by distractions. But these days, many of those who have chosen the cloistered life are almost as tethered to their cellphones as the rest of us. That's what I've found during my visits to monasteries over the past decade, from Italy to Nepal.

Take, for example, a moonless night last year on Maundy Thursday at the monastery of St. Lazarus of the Armenians in Venice. I watched as the Rev. Serop Jamourlian and three visitors tried to put a name to the bright, unblinking dot that sat in the sky atop the island city. I instinctively whipped out my mobile phone and aimed it upward. "It's Jupiter," I called out.

Mr. Jamourlian, who had been initiated into astronomy with 19th-century Bardou telescopes as a seminarian, immediately downloaded the app I was using. An image of the planet, trapped between the horns of the constellation Taurus, displayed on the screen, reawakening his youthful passion.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling. “This made my day.”

Mr. Jamourlian slipped the phone back into his pocket, and then walked back to the monastery to lock it for the night. The lights of Venice flickered in the distance, echoing the stars.

Monasteries worldwide have embraced mobile technology to advance their missions. In addition to using apps to learn new things and keep connected to the wider world, monks and nuns employ social media to get their messages out, attract new followers to their respective faiths, and stoke interest in religious vocations.

During this digital era, however, the numbers of men and women signing up to be monks and nuns are declining, especially in Europe. Some religious leaders put the blame on mobile devices that can lead young people to choose more materialistic pursuits.

Elder Parthenios Agiopavlitis, the abbot of the Monastery of St. Paul on the Greek peninsula of Mount Athos, has lamented the distractions caused by mobile phones among young Greek Orthodox monks. "They would stay up all night on their phones, which disrupts their focus on prayer and distances them from the core purpose in monastic life – communion with God," he said, according to Basilica, the news agency of the Patriarchate of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Bhutan, an isolated Himalayan kingdom, was a relative latecomer to the internet when the king first permitted its use in 1999. For some sisters, nunneries became a gateway to the world through the internet. Ani Sherab Lhamo discovered the internet and cellphones only after becoming a novice. Today, she uses WhatsApp daily.

The approach to technology at Karma Drubdey, a nunnery in Bhutan, is guided by pragmatism. Its head nun, Ani Chophal Palmo, is a regular user of WhatsApp and Facebook, relying on her devices to help manage the sprawling complex, raise money, make announcements, and conduct other outreach to pilgrims.

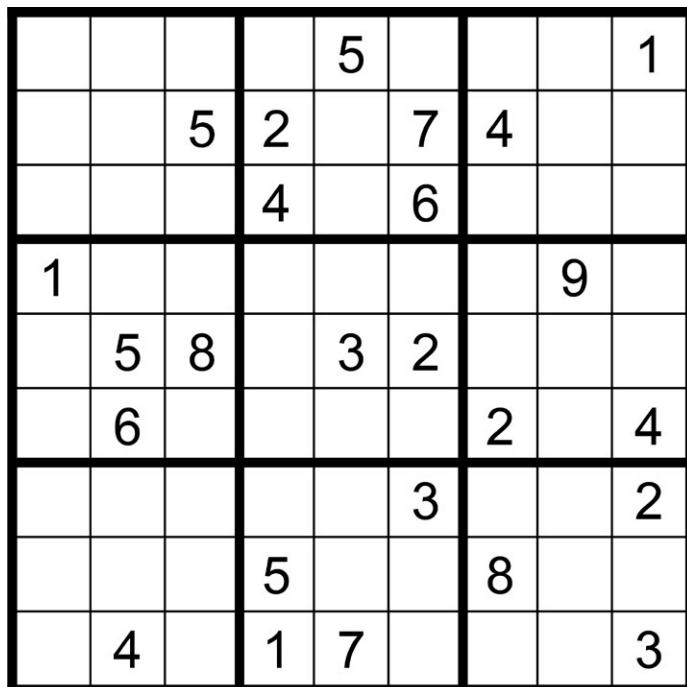
All nuns and novices there above age 18 are allowed to have a cellphone, while those who are younger can use them on weekends.

"The Buddha's teaching started more than 2,500 years ago,"

Ani Chopal told me. "We cannot stay there. We have to move with the times." ■

SUDOKU

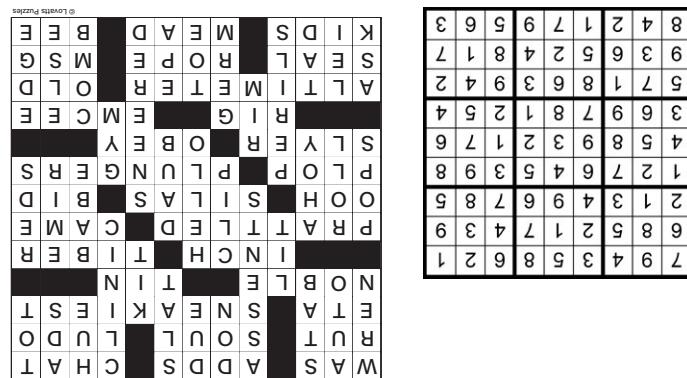
Sudoku difficulty: ★★★★



How to do Sudoku

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

Crossword and Sudoku solutions

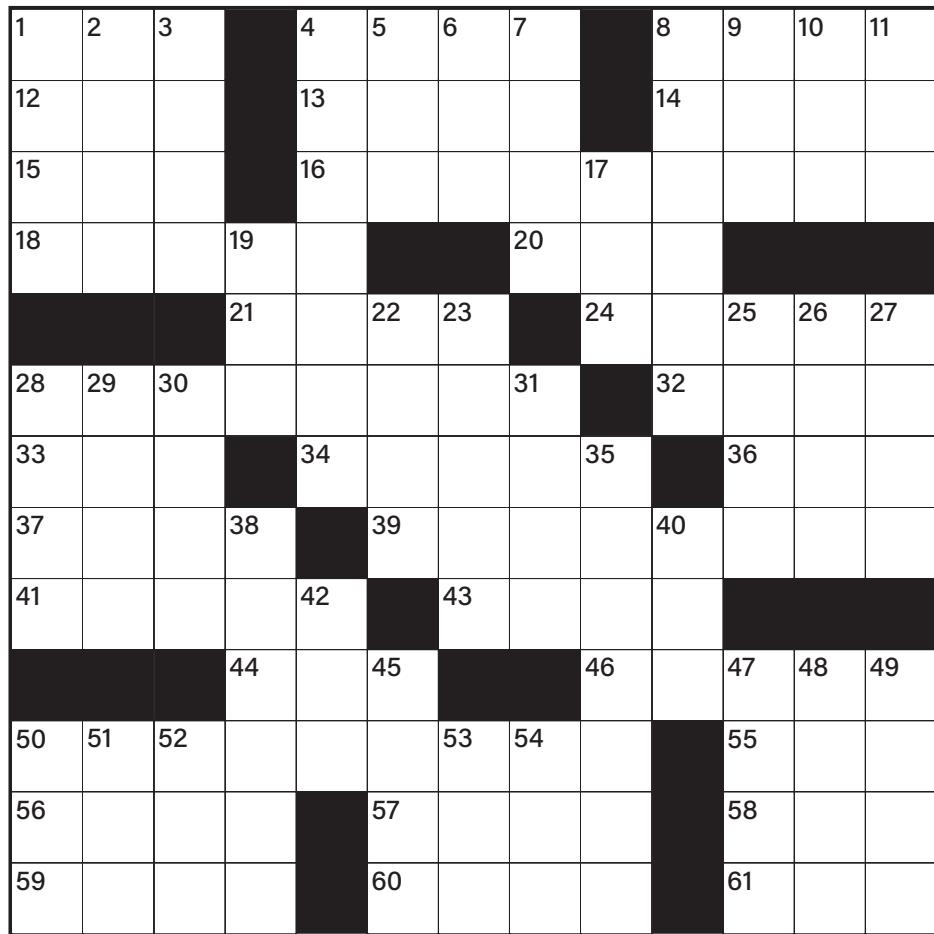


CROSSWORD

CROSSWORD

Across

1. "... and God saw that it ___ good" (Gen. 1:12)
4. Gets sum
8. Talk online
12. Back-road hazard
13. Record store section
14. Form of pachisi
15. When you might come down (abbr.)
16. Least trustworthy
18. Kind of gas
20. ___ Pan Alley
21. Yardstick fraction
24. River through Rome
28. Ran off at the mouth
32. "I ___, I saw, I conquered"
33. ___-la-la
34. Paul's New Testament companion
36. Auction offer
37. Dropping-into-water sound
39. Plumbers' helpers
41. More like a fox
43. Love, honor and ___
44. Oil facility
46. Party leader, maybe
50. Highness guide
55. Glory or guard preceder
56. Close tight
57. Sailor's sheet
58. Flavoring agent
59. Juveniles
60. Lake formed by Hoover Dam
61. Colony member



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Down

1. Tiny triller
2. Manual alternative, briefly
3. Uneducated guess
4. Says yes
5. Put on a pillbox
6. Expected any minute
7. Spline
8. Master class
9. Cry's partner
10. Classified material?
11. Teletubbies fan
17. Do-it-yourselfer's aid
19. Set a match to
22. Film extract
23. Ring response
25. Pig star
26. Titled Turk
27. Carmine and cerise
28. Boston ___ Orchestra
29. Aerobatic maneuver
30. Ship-to-shore call?
31. Plaster
35. Turned up one's nose (at)
38. Risky situations
40. Strenuous class
42. Hoop feature
45. Idea's beginning
47. Currying implement
48. Ultimatum end
49. On ___ (anxious)
50. Be nosy
51. Fragrant necklace
52. Minuscule amount
53. Nether digit
54. Emissions watchdog (abbr.)