THEY DIDN'T TEACH US IN SEMINARY HOW TO LEAD THROUGH A CHURCH FIRE. 

― MONTGOMERY, ALA., PASTOR MARK BETHEA, P. 44

THE CLIMATE CHANGE

DEBATE CHANGES P.50
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What reporting skills were important for your arson story?

“The DA told me which fire station responded, so I decided to give it a shot. At first the crew wouldn’t comment, but I noticed a pelt stretched out on the parking lot. By talking beavers, I made some headway.”

—WORLD Correspondent Kim Henderson, whose story appears on p. 44
MAILBAG

FILM FOLLIES
JAN. 29, P. 30: Leah Savas’ scathing but helpful and edifying discussion with Barbara Nicolosi Harrington on the state of Christian cinema included points that were hard to read but necessary for the proper growth of this promising industry.

Steve Futch/Peachtree City, Ga.

An older movie my daughter and I love watching is Father of the Bride Part II. While it doesn’t purport to be pro-life, its unmistakable message is that the unplanned little life coming on the scene of two aging parents was celebrated and welcomed.

Natalie Weber/Derby, Kan.

GOODBYE
JAN. 29, P. 64: It won’t be the same without Marvin Olasky’s back page thoughts, admonitions, warnings, and encouragement. I’m so thankful to our gracious God for bringing him to faith and using him in such a profound way with the bride of Christ and the world.

Don Luckert/Godfrey, Ill.

I am so very sorry to know that Marvin Olasky has written his last WORLD column. It was always the first thing I read in each issue.

John E. Owen/Bryant, Ark.

EVERYWHERE SPOKEN AGAINST
JAN. 29, P. 18: Writing books and calling yourself a Christian like Anne Rice did has never been the answer. Surrendering our lives and being guided by the Holy Spirit is the only way to comprehend the love of Christ.

Ron Tarlton/Marietta, Ga.

A DISASTROUS SATIRE
JAN. 29, P. 21: My wife and I took the comet in Don’t Look Up to represent anything and everything that is serious reality for which our culture shrugs its shoulders and deems unimportant—it could even be the gospel.

Peter Irvine/Syracuse, N.Y.

ABORTION BATTLE LINES
JAN. 29, P. 38: Roe v. Wade turned 49. Therefore, we are in the 50th year—the year of jubilee, when in the Old Testament everything that has been taken from God’s people is returned to its original owners. Surely, He can do it with Roe.

Nancy Scheer/West Lafayette, Ind.

LICORICE PIZZA TASTES BAD
JAN. 29, P. 24: Reviewer Jim Hill unduly attacked the age of the film’s two main characters without a firm basis. Licorice Pizza excellently demonstrates a truth that maturity can be on a sliding scale and is—observably, and as the book of Proverbs could attest—no respecter of age.

Shelby Guizar/Fresno, Calif.

1883
JAN. 29, P. 25: I love Sam Elliott’s acting and tuned in to 1883 but tuned out after 20 minutes of gratuitous profanity. I don’t need that coarseness coming into my home, so I will not be watching this series no matter how well-acted it is.

Austin Abercrombie/Fort Mill, S.C.

QUITTING
JAN. 29, P. 14: Either WORLD or the Labor Department forgot to factor in that many people did not just quit their jobs but were forced into taking a leave of absence without pay (in reality fired) due to COVID vaccine and testing mandates.

Lorena Saruwatari/Camarillo, Calif.

QUOTABLES
JAN. 29, P. 15: Vice President Kamala Harris’ inclusion of Jan. 6, 2021, with Dec. 7, 1941, and Sept. 11, 2001, had less to do with the number of people killed than her phrase “when our democracy came under assault.”

Michael Loftin/Chattanooga, Tenn.

CORRECTIONS
The Crown School of Trades and Technology at the Crown College is in Powell, Tenn. (“Setting sights on skilled trades,” Feb. 12, p. 68).


Read more letters at wng.org/mailbag
I WROTE FREQUENTLY LAST YEAR—our 40th anniversary year—about WORLD’s history. Here’s a fact I didn’t mention: Last year, technically, was our 79th year, making this year the 80th anniversary of, well, something.

Specifically, on June 11, 1942, three Asheville, N.C.–area men established the Southern Presbyterian Journal Company. And, according to the North Carolina Secretary of State, that company still exists, albeit with a modified mission and a different name. In about four months, WORLD News Group will be 80 years old.

The three men were the Rev. T.A. Painter, D.D. (that’s how his name is listed on the corporate charter), the Rev. Henry B. Dendy, D.D., and the only non-Rev. among them, L. Nelson Bell, M.D. Painter was the chairman of the board of directors, Dendy is listed as the editor of the very first issue of the Journal, and Bell wrote the opening editorial in that issue.

I reread that initial editorial recently, and it surprised me by its timeliness. Here’s an excerpt:

“The civilization of which we are a part is perched precariously on the edge of an abyss. This is obvious to all, whether in or outside of the Church. The tragedy is that, in part, the Christian Church is to blame.”

The original readers of that paragraph (living, as they were, in the middle of a great global war) wouldn’t have had too much trouble thinking of civilization perched on the edge of an abyss. It’s not all that hard for us to think of civilization that way today.

Bell’s editorial introduced that first issue—2½ pages of small-type, black-and-white, illustration-free content. He ended that first editorial, and many that came later, with a plea that the readers “pray for us.”

Timely, as I said. The magazine you hold in your hands (or view on your computer or phone or tablet) looks a lot different than that first one, but we need your prayers today, as surely as we did almost 80 years ago.

A PRECARIOUS PERCH

WORLD’s predecessor publication, The Southern Presbyterian Journal, published its first editorial 80 years ago this spring
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Kids’ dollars

Are we teaching our children responsibility with money?

The good news here at WORLD and its related media forms is that the year 2021 ended with a higher level of gift support from our readers and listeners than we’d ever known before.

The bad news is that in the midst of all that generosity we gave far too little attention to the task of insuring that such support will continue into the future—and I’m referring specifically to financial support from our children. Those children are in what will be almost certainly the wealthiest generation in the history of the world. Those children will, over the next few years, be inheriting much of that wealth. The manner in which they do that will radically affect the well-being of thousands of Christian ministries.

How many times will your favorite charity be able to report, “We just had our best year ever!”?

The challenge comes back to me: What am I doing to see that my children and grandchildren will have been exposed to the Biblical principles of stewardship? Here are several facets I think are pertinent.

(1) We need to teach them that all wealth is God’s wealth. The millions of folks who call themselves billionnaires, as much as the homeless man going through garbage cans in the alley, has what he has, only on loan from his Creator. That realization changes everything.

(2) There’s no limit to the amount of wealth just waiting to be developed. There’s no pie in the sky waiting to be distributed fairly to millions of participants like us. Instead, our Creator stands watching us pursue our stewardship assignments of nurturing new contexts in which God’s creation is displayed in ever-expanding dimensions.

(3) The tithe has always been, and will continue to be, a teaching tool used by God to coach his children as they adventure into creatively exciting wealth-building assignments. “Just see,” God says in Malachi 3, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven—and pour you out a blessing so big that you will not have room to receive it.”

(4) Our children need to know that apart from God’s intervention, they will not live in as wealthy a nation and culture as we have. We have already begun squandering the wealth we’ve inherited, and we have begun feeling the contractions. Our children will have to exercise more discipline than we did. We need to be gently relentless in passing that assignment on to them.

(5) Paying interest (some call it “carrying charges”) on a loan of almost any type is simply a not-so-clever dodge for paying a significantly higher price for some goods or service than you first agreed to. Realistically, agreeing to an interest charge is to say that you were too impatient to wait until you could afford to pay cash for what you were buying. This is largely true even if you’re buying something urgent like a hospital charge. The Bible doesn’t seem to frown on all debt; but it does warn us of the dangers involved. Our children will be well served if they hear those warnings from us.

(6) All of these concepts will be manageable by your children only if they are also versed in at least a rudimentary form of bookkeeping and accounting.

My sense is (and this is a totally nonscientific survey!) that all this suggests a teaching assignment that has been effectively ignored by our nation’s parents. More ominously, it’s an assignment that has been ignored even by Christian parents—or, at best, deferred as if unimportant.

My point here is that the support base enjoyed by thousands of Christian organizations may be in serious jeopardy. Our local churches—not to mention our missions organizations, our Christian educational institutions, our relief agencies, and many others—could all be in financial jeopardy because our present generation didn’t bother to educate the parents of tomorrow on this very important matter.
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PUTIN REHASHES EXCUSES FOR INVASION

Russia sends troops into eastern Ukraine for “peacekeeping”

by Esther Eaton
AFTER MONTHS SPENT AMASSING almost 200,000 troops on the borders of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech by turns sullen and furious on Feb. 21, warping history to justify aggression toward Ukraine. That same day, Russia officially declared parts of eastern Ukraine independent nations and sent in troops—for “peacekeeping,” Putin said, but by Feb. 22 U.S. officials called it an invasion.

That day President Joe Biden announced sanctions on some Russian banks and oligarchs and Germany agreed not to move forward with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would allow Russia to sell oil to Germany without relying on transit through Ukraine.

Putin’s pretexts for attack rest on twisted histories he’s been telling for years, particularly his assertions that Ukraine is not a real country. He claimed in his speech that Russia and Ukraine shared a national and cultural identity until Bolshevik communists foolishly carved out Ukraine as a separate region. But Ukraine had a history of sovereignty long before then, although it had been conquered several times, including by Lithuania, Poland, and Russia’s Catherine the Great. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Ukrainians created a central governing body that declared independence in 1918, though the Bolsheviks took control in 1919.

When the Soviet Union dissolved, 92 percent of Ukrainian voters supported independence. Larger and a nuclear power, Russia has continued trying to exert dominance over Ukraine. Putin claimed in his speech that the West staged a coup when Ukrainian protesters ousted their pro-Moscow president in February 2014. The replacement government strengthened Ukraine’s ties to the European Union. The next month, Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula.

Also since 2014, Russia has supported separatists in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, providing money, intelligence, and other military aid. An estimated 14,000 people have died in the fighting. Declaring Donetsk and Luhansk, separatist regions of Donbas, independent nations gave Putin the pretext to switch from proxy war to openly moving in Russian troops under the guise of protecting their sovereignty from what he claims is Ukrainian aggression.

Putin also regularly complains that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a military alliance formed in 1949 for defense against the Soviet Union, promised not to expand eastward and that its expansion threatens Russia. But in 2014, Mikhail Gorbachev, head of the Soviet Union when it dissolved, said U.S. commitments about NATO expansion applied only to new armed forces and military structures in eastern Germany. Historian Markian Dobczansky said research hasn’t uncovered evidence of a commitment to nonexpansion from NATO.

Dobczansky also cautioned against focusing on the accuracy of Putin’s historical claims in assessing the current conflict. “The most important thing is implications for the international order, for peace in Europe, and for nuclear non-proliferation, all of which are severely strained by current Russian aggression against Ukraine,” Dobczansky said. “We need to be cognizant of that, rather than engaging in historical debates with a person for whom history is clearly a justification of aggression rather than an academic exercise.”

Bradley Bowman, Senior Director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ Center on Military and Political Power, emphasized understanding Putin as an aggressor unconcerned with agreements not to remake European borders by force. “Putin is doing what he wants because he can, because he’s more powerful [than Ukraine]. Putin may not want peace, he may just want more territory,” Bowman argued. “I’m calling for a strong response to prevent war. We better be strong, or we’re going to regret it.”
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TO GIVE
In six simple points, without assuming any prior knowledge or understanding of biblical concepts, it conveys the key information the average person needs to understand in order to become a Christian. This is the handy pocket-sized 2021 version. Visit matthiasmedia.com to purchase. Quantity discounts available.

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Learn the Gospel launches April 2022 and is available for pre-order. Our entire Two Ways to Live resource series is available now at matthiasmedia.com
OST VACCINATED CALIFORNIANS no longer need to wear masks indoors. But officials are keeping mask mandates in place for at least a few more weeks in Los Angeles County. California’s new rules do not apply to teachers and students, who must continue to wear masks in classrooms, at least until the end of February. Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser ended proof-of-vaccination requirements for indoor venues. Mask mandates in the nation’s capital will end on March 1, though face coverings will still be required in schools and on public transportation. Workers at Amazon and Walmart, two of the largest private employers in the country, no longer need to mask up on the job. About half of the states that still had mask mandates have ended them in the last few weeks.

HEALED
Identified only as the “New York patient,” the woman was diagnosed with HIV in 2013 and leukemia in 2017. A team of U.S. scientists presented research results Feb. 15 indicating a new stem cell transplant treatment has eradicated the virus in the woman for more than 14 months. If she continues to be in remission for a few years, they will consider her fully cured, making her the world’s first woman and only the third patient to be cured. The team at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center used umbilical cord blood rather than bone marrow. Most experts maintain HIV cures from risky stem cell treatments are unethical and should only be considered for patients who also face life-threatening conditions.

FREE AT LAST!
Hugs, tears, and flowers filled the arrival hall as international arrivals touched down at the Sydney International Airport on Feb. 21. Australian well-wishers handed out toy koalas and cookies to the travelers. Fifty-six flights landed Monday in Australia, more than half of them in Sydney. Australia imposed some of the world’s strictest travel restrictions since March 2020 and only began allowing in its citizens and some visitors late last year. Authorities said fully vaccinated visitors would not need to isolate. Unvaccinated travelers must quarantine for 14 days at a hotel at their expense.

DEBTS FORGIVEN
The U.S. Education Department announced Feb. 16 that for-profit DeVry University lied about its graduate employment rate to entice new students. The college is headquartered in Naperville, Ill., but largely offers online learning and has several campuses across the country. The administration will forgive roughly $71 million of student loan debt from at least 1,800 former DeVry students, bringing relief for such loans up to $415 million for nearly 16,000 alumni of for-profit schools. The department alleges school officials knowingly doctored success rate numbers between 2008 and 2015, reporting 90 percent of graduates found jobs within six months of graduation when the actual rate was closer to 58 percent.
THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE who have served as justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. With Associate Justice Stephen Breyer’s retirement announcement on Jan. 27 after 28 years of service, President Joe Biden will have the privilege of selecting just the 116th justice. Biden has pledged to pick an African-American woman to cure a historical underrepresentation. But there are other underrepresented groups: No graduate of a public law school has been selected since 1957. And the court’s only Protestant, Neil Gorsuch, was raised Roman Catholic prior to joining an Episcopal church in Colorado.

92%

The percentage of the previous nominees to the court since 1986, 12 of 13, who have affiliations with law schools at Harvard or Yale.

$286,700

The salary of the Chief Justice of the United States in 2022, a figure dwarfed by an average compensation of more than $1 million per year for big law firm partners, according to a survey by Major, Lindsey & Africa.

6

The number of times the Supreme Court changed its number of justices prior to settling on nine in 1869.

17

The average length of term (in years) for Supreme Court justices over the past century, according to an analysis done by the Harvard Business Review.

115

SUPREMES WEAR THE RAREST OF ROBES

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE
“Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys.”

P.J. O’ROURKE, one of America’s greatest libertarian political satirists and journalists, who died on Feb. 15 at 74.

“Tooting a horn is not an expression of any great thought I’m aware of.”

Ottawa Justice HUGH MCLEAN, while granting an interim injunction seeking to silence the honking truck horns that have plagued residents of downtown Ottawa and denying it was a free speech issue.

“There’s a lot of paranoia out there, that’s for sure.”

DEAN CRYER, regarding the surge in violence in Los Angeles. Cryer is vice president of operations for the L.A.-based firm Panic Room Builders, which builds custom safe rooms equipped with emergency phone lines and independent water supplies that can cost from the low six figures to millions of dollars. Demand for its safe rooms has increased dramatically.

“Everyone has a gold medal, everyone, but not me. I hate skating. I hate it. I hate this sport. I will never skate again. Never.”

Seventeen-year-old ROC silver medalist ALEXANDRA TRUSOVA, upset that her free skate, which earned the top score of the night and featured attempts at five quadruple jumps, had not won her the gold.

“This is the most difficult situation we’ve seen since 1989. Europe has not seen these kinds of troop movements since World War II.”

Polish President ANDRZEJ DUDA, on the rising tensions in Ukraine. While Russia pledged to draw down its troop deployments near the Ukrainian border, it has actually increased the number of front-line troops from 100,000 to more than 170,000.
Obnoxious peafowl
Big birds upset upscale communities during their noisy mating season
by John Dawson

There’s a light at the end of the tunnel for Miami residents victimized by roving ostentations of peacocks. For 20 years, a Miami-Dade commission law made the peafowl throughout the county virtually untouchable. Since the county stepped in to protect the birds, the peacocks abused residents’ cars and set entire neighborhoods on edge under the cacophony of yearly mating seasons. But on Feb. 1, county commissioners voted to allow cities in Miami-Dade to make plans to remove the birds provided they do it humanely. The vote was a victory for Commissioner Raquel Regalado whose district includes parts of Coral Gables and Miami where the large birds roam freely. “They get very aggressive,” Regalado told the Miami Herald. “They lay their eggs, they build their nests, they peck the cars.”

BLUE BOX BANDITS
After a series of brazen attacks on the mail, officials in Jefferson Parish, La., say the blue U.S. Postal Service mailboxes are no longer safe to use. According to a sheriff’s office spokesman, thieves have targeted the ubiquitous blue boxes to steal checks and money orders. In one recent arrest, deputies confiscated nearly $200,000 worth of checks and money orders from a suspect they say operated with a stolen key. With the possibility of several groups still operating theft rings, the sheriff’s office advised residents to walk their letters into the post office rather than use the blue collection boxes.

CHUMP CHANGE
A Dutch company putting the finishing touches on Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’ new mega-yacht has run into a problem getting the 417-foot vessel out to sea. Officials in Rotterdam will need to deconstruct the city’s iconic Koningshaven Bridge, despite its 130-foot clearance, for the boat to reach open water. Bezos has pledged to pay for the extra work, adding to the roughly $500 million price tag. Shipbuilder Oceanco expects to turn the vessel over to Bezos this year.
**APOLOGETIC BURGLAR**
A pair of New Mexico homeowners were shocked to find an armed burglar in their home after returning to the house in late January. According to a Santa Fe County Sheriff’s report, the homeowners said the man was armed with a scoped AR-15 and had slept, bathed, dined, and swilled a few beers before they arrived on the scene. But rather than create a confrontation, the couple said, the intruder began apologizing for the disturbance, offered them $200 to fix the window he broke, and told them he was on the run from someone. The couple told police nothing besides food and beer had been taken, and by the time authorities had arrived the man had disappeared.

**SPECIAL DELIVERY**
After arresting a DoorDash driver with outstanding warrants on Jan. 25 in the middle of a food run, police in Sioux Falls, S.D., felt obliged to complete his order. After officers made the arrest, Officer Sam Clemens made certain to drive the Arby’s order to customer Anastasia Elsinger, apologizing for the delay. “This isn’t normal by any stretch,” he said. “It’s not like we have officers that are out delivering food but the little things like this, going above and beyond, helping people out.”

**A REAL RECORD-SETTER**
David Rush had a big year in 2021. The Idaho man claimed 52 Guinness World Records during the year, averaging one new world record per week. In an interview with NPR, Rush said he strives to set records in order to inspire students to endeavor difficult things, especially related to science and technology. Between his gigs as a guest speaker and author, the serial world record setter has broken over 200 Guinness records in his life. Rush started 2021 by claiming the record for most wet bars of soap stacked before moving on to other feats like slicing kiwis with a samurai sword while standing on a Swiss exercise ball.

**DEAD LETTER**
A letter delivered to Lithuanian Genovefa Klonovska in January felt old. It looked old too. And then there was the Polish postmark on the face of the letter. “I thought that someone was pranking me,” Klonovska told Reuters. Instead, the Lithuanian woman had finally received a letter a childhood pen pal had sent a half century before. According to officials at the post office in Vilnius, the letter was found with 17 others inside a wall as workers demolished the old post office building.

“I thought that someone was pranking me.”

---

**I THOUGHT THAT SOMEONE WAS PRANKING ME.**
Home base

Do you think about your home as walls or as doors?

ID THE LOCKDOWNS WORK? Two years after they went into effect, it’s reasonable to expect an informed answer, and new meta-analysis from Johns Hopkins University provides one. It’s long and detailed, but boils down to a No. That is, close examination of data from 34 reliable studies could find no clear correlation between strict lockdowns and COVID-19 infection rates. The benefits of shutting down small businesses and large gatherings were questionable. The harms were beyond question. Here’s one story: Early in the pandemic, a 99-year-old friend of mine died of natural causes, but his wife of 67 years was only allowed to be with him during the last few hours. “I kept telling him I loved him, but don’t know if he heard me,” she said through tears. His sons and grandchildren could only wave through the window. Countless other nursing home residents died absolutely alone. I remember thinking at the time that there might be factors to consider beyond choking off a virus. And if so, couldn’t people make their own decisions?

There were other factors: loneliness; joblessness; broken communities; canceled counseling sessions, elective surgeries, and church services. Things that make people more than just physical bodies. Diseases beyond data. The good news was that relatively stable families enjoyed the extra togetherness and even deepened their relationships. Home became a fortress of security fighting off outside threats with board games and baked goods.

But homes that were not nests of harmony could become petri dishes of pathology. Robbed of any release valve, pressure built up, small problems ballooned to big ones, and big problems led to abuse, violence, overdose, and general despair. “Stay home” could mean a pleasant vacation or a jail term. “Home” itself meant a refuge or a sentence, a dichotomy that may have changed how most Americans think of their personal space.

Sanctuary or prison? What if “home” is intended to be neither?

Considering how large a concept home is for most of us, the Bible has little to say about it. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lacked a permanent residence, and their descendants suffered 430 years as outsiders in Egypt. Forty years of wandering followed the exodus, after which Moses promised them “houses full of all good things that you did not fill” (Deuteronomy 6:11).

They forfeited their home when they forgot the Lord who provided those good things, but while they languished in far-away Babylon, Jeremiah passed on God’s command to build houses, make families, and seek the city’s welfare. Some would return to their promised land, but others would create communities and seek the welfare of cities even farther from Babylon.

The most notable figures of the New Testament had no home: Jesus and Paul depended on hospitality. The Bethany sisters, Simon the Tanner, Lydia, and a multitude of others provided meals and rest. John Mark’s mother Mary, Nympha, Philemon, and many more hosted churches. Aquila and Priscilla tutored evangelists. Tabitha sat near her window and sewed garments for the poor. That was home: a launchpad for the gospel.

But private homes, even while housing the church, were never the church. Personal dwellings are both less and more than we tend to make them: neither castles nor showplaces, but gifts from a heavenly Father who fills them with good things and expects us to remember Him in how we use them.

I’ve written about how the pandemic forced me to rethink where I lived—how I had considered our five acres and century-old house a burden to get out from under as soon as possible. When circumstances made moving impractical (in other words, I was stuck), my attitude changed. I started to take responsibility, while giving up ownership. This place is ours to enhance and improve, but not just for the two of us. It’s home base for ministry, to my own family first, then to the church, and then to neighbors and even strangers, as the Lord leads.

Do we think of our homes as walls, or as doors? It matters.
FUEL TO THE FIRE

Over 150,000 people will die today without Christ.

Over 90,000 of them live in what is known as the the unreached world — the places that are hostile and less open to the Gospel, the places where it is difficult, if not impossible, to send an outsider.

Traditional methods are not getting us to these places quickly enough.

Today is a new day in world missions. Local leaders training others to disciple people in their communities and plant churches where they already live, work, study, and shop is the most sustainable and impactful way to reach the unreached.

Are you ready to add fuel to the fire and learn a new way to get the Gospel to every people and every place? Scan a QR code to learn more.

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ENNETH BRANAGH RETURNS as Agatha Christie’s most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, in *Death on the Nile*, currently in theaters. As with its predecessor, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Branagh plays the title character and directs this lavish adaptation of Agatha Christie’s 1930s novel. But this time, Branagh’s vision conflicts with the source material, creating a visually stunning movie that struggles to resolve its plot.

Linnet Ridgeway (Gal Gadot) is the richest and most glamorous young woman in England who steals her best friend’s penniless fiancé Simon Doyle (Armie Hammer). To celebrate her recent marriage to Simon, Linnet charters a riverboat called the...
Karnak to take her and her new husband on a honeymoon excursion down the Nile, and in a show of opulence, the couple invites numerous friends and family along for the ride. Hercule Poirot improbably finds himself swept up in the festivities.

But Linnet’s marriage to Simon hasn’t made everyone happy—especially his former fiancée—and some of those friends and family aren’t on friendly terms. In case you haven’t read the book, I won’t spoil it, but someone will die on the Karnak, and it will be up to Poirot, the world’s greatest detective, to bring the killer to justice.

Agatha Christie was known for her invisible prose style, but Death on the Nile is anything but invisible. Branagh fills the movie with exquisite scenes of exotic locales and lavish Depression-era sets and costumes. The cinematography is equally extravagant. In shot after shot, the audience is exposed to so much artistry that it threatens to overwhelm the storyline. Death on the Nile is a beautiful movie, perhaps to the point of being self-indulgent.

The movie is rated PG-13 because there’s a murder, but the movie also contains a few suggestive scenes. There’s no nudity, but this adaptation is much racier than anything in a Christie novel. Christie was so good at what she did it seems unwise to tamper with it too much, but tamper is exactly what Branagh has done, leaving us with a curious case of style over substance.

Death on the Nile suffers from an unfocused script, and most of its problems stem from Branagh’s attempt to transform Christie’s detective story into a meditation on the meaning of love. Golden-age detective fiction doesn’t usually contain a love interest, especially for the detective. The plot should focus on the murder, not romance, but in this movie, everyone, even Poirot, seems to get a love interest.

These romantic subplots steal too much time and attention from the interviewing and detecting scenes. Some of Branagh’s additions address contemporary issues of race and same-sex attraction, and these attempts at social relevancy muddy the waters. They distract from the mystery, and many of the changes don’t make sense. An Agatha Christie story, though often complicated, should always make sense.

Branagh even invents a tragic backstory for Poirot that robs the quirky Belgian of some of his peculiarity. Branagh’s Poirot can still solve any mystery, but the film tries to humanize Poirot too much. Christie’s Poirot is a fussy, vain man with an insatiable curiosity who solves crimes to prove his superior intelligence.

In Branagh’s version, some of the fussiness remains, but Poirot becomes a damaged romantic who hides behind his mustache to hide his pain and solves crimes to absolve himself of guilt for things he’s not guilty of. The real crime in this film is Branagh’s abandonment of the characteristics that made Christie’s Hercule Poirot so great.

CRIME PROLIFERATES Agatha Christie wrote 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections.
**Dog limps to a decent ending**

by Sharon Dierberger

I was looking forward to the new movie, *Dog*, in theaters Feb. 18. But despite the plausible plot and some positive features, the film, rated PG-13, falls short.

Army Ranger Briggs (Channing Tatum) agrees to drive his late Ranger buddy Riley's military service dog on a 1,500-mile trip from Washington to Arizona to ensure the canine gets to Riley's funeral. Both Briggs and the Belgian Malinois—Lulu—exhibit combat PTSD, a cause of many misadventures en route and why both need healing.

The movie draws commendable attention to soldier-and-dog commitment to mission, regardless of obstacles. And the gravity of traumatic brain injuries with their serious repercussions—including lost careers, destroyed relationships, even suicide—comes through loud and clear. But that’s not enough to save the film from a weak script, with its inability to get viewers invested in characters.

Most moments designed to be funny aren’t—like when Briggs stops at a bar looking for a hook-up. Lulu inadvertently saves him from doing something even Briggs recognizes as disgusting.

The movie’s beginning—focused on Riley and Lulu—and its predictable but nice ending are its best features. The middle plods along, often crassly.

**MURDERVILLE HAS MORE COMEDY THAN MYSTERY**

Police procedural meets improv comedy

by Juliana Chan Erikson

A MAGICIAN IS SOBBING after he literally sawed his partner in half. Some bad guy switched in a real saw, but who?

Guest star Conan O’Brien is on the case in the premiere episode of this goofy whodunnit, in which crime procedural meets improv comedy. Which means O’Brien and each subsequent guest have no idea who committed the crime, no character to play, and no script.

“Did you think at any point when there was all that blood,” O’Brien ad-libs to the magician, “that maybe you should stop sawing?”

O’Brien has so much comedy in his blood, he’s oozing jokes as he leaves even the scripted actors in stitches. Unfortunately not every guest shares his improvisational gift. When that happens, Will Arnett reliably fills in the dead air as the cocky and clueless detective Terry Seattle.

Even when the show’s not funny, watching celebrities struggle for clever comebacks is part of *Murderville*’s reality-show charm. Without a scripted back story, guests fall back on the one person they know well—themselves. We learn that Ken Jeong naturally laughs a lot, and Sharon Stone is a bit of a diva.

Sadly, comedy’s rarely clean these days, and that applies in spades in this case. *Murderville* doesn’t kill it, but if you’re dying for a quick hit of humor—and you can stand foul language, vulgar jokes, sexual innuendo, and fake blood—you can give this a stab.

**IMDB’S BEST MURDER MYSTERY MOVIES**

3. *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)
ORE BOOKS HAVE reportedly been written about Abraham Lincoln than any historical figure other than Jesus. *Lincoln’s Dilemma*, a new four-part docuseries based on a recent Lincoln tome, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, by David S. Reynolds, began Feb. 18 on Apple TV+.

This is one of those times where the book really is better than the film, though the film provides several positive features. Chiefly, the plethora of restored archival Civil War–era photos shows the rawness and division of the times unlike words alone can—like those of corpses strewn across battlefields, regiments of weary soldiers separated by race, close-ups of slaves’ backs scarred by whippings, and glimpses into Lincoln’s soulful, sad eyes.

The documentary commendably describes in his own words how Lincoln’s moral repugnance of slavery grew to not just halting its spread, but to abolishing it everywhere. Using the illustration popular at the time of tightrope walker Charles Blondin crossing the 1,100-foot Niagara Gorge, the film exemplifies Lincoln’s dilemma. His balancing act was between performing as a Republican president trying to preserve the Union—his initial impetus for war—and wanting emancipation for slaves—his ultimate motivation for victory. We learn how Lincoln struggled to figure out how to do both and how his thoughts evolved as he had more contact with former slaves.

Through primary sources, the film provides insights into Lincoln’s relationship with Frederick Douglass, African American abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. It expounds on how Douglass greatly influenced Lincoln, as well as his admiration for all the president accomplished in four short years.

After Lincoln’s assassination, President Andrew Johnson impeded plans for genuine reconstruction, allowing the South to continue racist policies and paving the way for Jim Crow laws of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Seeing this may help viewers better understand today’s pushback against Confederate symbolism and statues.

But the film grossly overreaches when opening scenes show the Jan. 6, 2020, breach of the U.S. Capitol, as if to put that incident on the same level as Civil War-era divisions. And during one episode, a historian condescendingly says, “Let me remind you that the Republican Party then (during the Civil War) is not the Republican Party today, and the Democratic Party then is not the Democratic Party today. They have switched.” The random statement goes unchallenged, unsupported by evidence, and hinders the series’ focus on Lincoln and his times.

I wish Reynolds himself was on-screen more—he, after all, wrote the book—rather than so many other liberal historians. That also might have alleviated some of the occasionally preachy tones and ponderous narration. Still, I learned more about Lincoln, making me thankful again that God preserved him long enough to preserve our United States and abolish slavery.
**WELL WORN PATHS**

*Uncharted* is a moderately enjoyable adventure without many surprises

by Collin Garbarino

*Uncharted*, currently in theaters, is an action-adventure film based on a popular video game series in which fortune hunters race each other to track down a 500-year-old treasure. The action takes place all over the world, but ironically, considering the name, the film doesn’t take the genre in any new directions.

Tom Holland (who most recently played Spider-Man) stars as Nathan Drake, a young pickpocket who believes himself to be descended from the English explorer Sir Francis Drake. Because of the Drake ancestry, Nate’s family has dreamed of finding the world’s greatest treasure, Magellan’s lost gold. Mark Wahlberg plays Sully, another adventurer hunting for the gold who recruits Nate to help him steal the final key needed to discover the treasure’s location.

But Nate and Sully aren’t the only ones after Magellan’s treasure. Antonio Banderas plays Santiago Moncada, a wealthy Spanish businessman who believes he’s the rightful owner of the treasure because his family financed Magellan’s expedition 500 years earlier. The stakes are high. Five billion dollars tempts everyone to steal, betray, and murder, and Nate never knows if he’s safe even among his friends.

*Uncharted*, rated PG-13 for action and language, is a pleasant enough film in the vein of *Indiana Jones* or *National Treasure*. It has a few humorous moments, but the movie doesn’t contain many surprises. The story plods along, settling for types and tropes we’ve seen before in better movies. Our adventurers solve intricate puzzles laid out in ancient journals making use of priceless relics. They travel to European and Asian locales and run around in crypts and in caves, dodging booby traps and bad guys. The lack of originality is too bad because the *Uncharted* video game series gained acclaim for its inventive storytelling and engaging characters.

Holland is as likable as ever in this film, and Banderas offers a solid performance. But Wahlberg’s performance suffers from his attempt to play Sully with detached irony. Sully and Nate’s dialogue was meant to sound like witty banter, but Wahlberg’s delivery deprives his lines of detached irony. Sully and Nate’s dialogue was meant to sound like witty banter, but Wahlberg’s delivery deprives his lines of detached irony. Sully and Nate’s dialogue was meant to sound like witty banter, but Wahlberg’s delivery deprives his lines of detached irony. Sully and Nate’s dialogue was meant to sound like witty banter, but Wahlberg’s delivery deprives his lines of detached irony.

In this movie, Holland isn’t playing Spider-Man, but he flips and twists and jumps as much as he does when wearing the blue-and-red tights. To distract viewers from the lack of plot, Holland moves through scenes in parkour style, spending almost as much time bouncing off walls as he does with his feet on the floor.

Many of the film’s flaws are forgivable because it doesn’t take itself too seriously. These modern-day pirates engage in the most absurd aerial chase scenes I’ve ever seen. If you’re looking for an action adventure unburdened by a coherent story, *Uncharted* might tide you over until the next superhero installment.

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**BOX OFFICE**

**TOP 10**

Weekend of Feb. 18-20, according to Box Office Mojo. Quantity of sexual (S), violent (V), and foul-language (L) content on a 0-10 scale, with 10 high. From Kids-in-Mind.com.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Studio</th>
<th>PG-13</th>
<th>Rated</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>L</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Uncharted</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures Entertainment; Uncharted: Clay Enos/CTMG, Inc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>not rated</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td><em>Dog</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures</td>
<td></td>
<td>not rated</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td><em>Spider-Man: No Way Home</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures Entertainment; Uncharted: Clay Enos/CTMG, Inc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>not rated</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Death on the Nile</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures</td>
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<td>not rated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Jackass Forever</em></td>
<td>Columbia Pictures</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td><em>Marry Me</em></td>
<td>Columbia Pictures</td>
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<td>PG-13</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td><em>Sing 2</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td><em>Scream</em></td>
<td>Universal Pictures</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td><em>The Cursed</em></td>
<td>Sony Pictures</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td><em>Blacklight</em></td>
<td>Columbia Pictures</td>
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*REVIEWED BY WORLD*
DON’T KNOW MUCH ABOUT the Lend-Lease bill,” quipped Gracie Allen in 1941, “but if we owe it we should pay it.”

The joke played into Allen’s ditzy routine because the Lend-Lease program, of course, involved the United States providing military aid to the nations fighting Germany and Italy, not taking on a debt. Lend-Lease at the time was controversial in Congress but of grave importance for British and Soviet efforts to stave off the Nazi onslaught.

One event in late 1941 threatened that lifeline: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Hitler’s American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and Germany’s March to Global War, by Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, gives an almost hour-by-hour account of the world stage in the days between the Pearl Harbor attack and the German declaration of war on the United States on Dec. 11, 1941, and what emerges is how much Lend-Lease was at the forefront of the minds of leaders on both sides.

Winston Churchill, relieved that he wouldn’t be facing a Japanese enemy alone, was still much more concerned in the days following Pearl Harbor than he later let on. His great worry was that the damage done at Pearl Harbor would force the United States to deploy resources meant for Lend-Lease to the Pacific theater. He wanted to make an immediate trip to Washington to plead his case to Roosevelt face-to-face.

Franklin Roosevelt still saw Germany as the main threat in the world. He wanted to keep Lend-Lease alive but was worried about domestic politics. If Churchill visited Washington and Lend-Lease continued, it might look like he was bowing to British pressure at a time when the country was focused on Japan. His isolationist opponents, such as Sen. Burton Wheeler, were making the case for the United States to shift resources from the European war to the fight in the Pacific.

Joseph Stalin was also worried about the implications of Pearl Harbor for Lend-Lease, and about American pressure to declare war on Japan. The last thing he needed was a two-front war while his army was fighting for its life (but starting to make gains) against the Germans.

Adolf Hitler also had American war production in the front of his mind. He had hoped for a Japanese attack on the United States as a way to divert U.S. resources away from Europe and North Africa, and he had promised to declare war on the United States if the Japanese did attack. He was overjoyed by Pearl Harbor.

Simms and Laderman skillfully weave together a narrative that shows the logic behind these leaders’ actions. As Simms and Laderman detail, Hitler was a gambler who knew full well the importance of American industrial power. He, providentially, made a bad bet.

IN THE YEARS BEFORE World War II, a group of officers in the U.S. Army Air Corps (the independent Air Force was still years away) began developing a doctrine of high-altitude daylight precision bombing at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Ala. Malcolm Gladwell argues in The Bomber Mafia that bombing doctrine was a matter of morality to these men.

The book’s subtitle is A Dream, A Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War, and the “dream” was that by using a new bombsight and emerging bombing methods they could attack an enemy’s key industrial and transportation “choke points.” This, they believed, would so hamper the enemy’s ability to fight that the United States could win a war while avoiding the hellish trench warfare of World War I. The area bombing (or “morale” bombing) tactics of the Germans and the British were anathema to them.

With a conversational writing style, Gladwell shows how the challenges, and temptations, of World War II led to this doctrine’s demise, to the sacking of one of its true believers, Gen. Haywood Hansell, and to the firebombing of Japanese cities under Gen. Curtis LeMay.
Beguiling women in history and one modern heroine

Christian romances offer light entertainment

by Sandy Barwick

THE LADY'S MINE Francine Rivers

When Boston-bred Kathryn Walsh arrives in 1875 in the wild mining town of Calvada to claim an inheritance left by her late uncle, she causes quite a stir. The young woman is determined to resurrect her uncle's newspaper office and retain ownership of his worthless mine. Most folks are aghast at her bold venture into men's business. Matthias Beck, owner of a hotel and saloon, feels a keen responsibility for Kathryn. For one, she's his dead friend's niece, and two, she's bound to get herself in trouble and possibly murdered like her uncle. A mutual attraction grows, but Kathryn has no interest in losing her independence to marriage. Her headstrong influence leads Matthias to renew his faith in God.

THE DEBUTANTE'S CODE Erica Vetsch

Returning to 1816 London after years of schooling in Switzerland, Lady Juliette Thorndike is excited to make her debut in society. But disappointment overshadows her enthusiasm when her parents aren't home to greet her. Soon she learns her parents are living secret lives as agents for the Crown. With her uncle's training, she joins the family trade as a spy while maintaining her debutante façade. But how can she sustain her Christian faith when she lies to everyone she knows? Meanwhile a string of burglaries and a murder have detective Daniel Swann running all over London. As Lady Juliette seems to have ties to each crime, he suspects she's not an innocent debutante. First book in a series.

March 12, 2022

THE PARIS DRESSMAKER Kristy Cambron

*The Paris Dressmaker* follows two women during the Nazi occupation of Paris during WWII. One is Lila de Laurent, a couture dressmaker who caters to the “kept” women involved in relationships with Nazi officers. The other is Sandrine Paquet, a wife and mother whose job is to catalog works of art stolen from Jewish families before they are shipped off to Berlin. Both find ways to join La Resistance, the underground network secretly sabotaging the German war effort. The story highlights important contributions Parisian women made during the war and how their faith got them through four very tough years. A compelling read slightly hampered by confusing dual narratives and an abundance of unfamiliar foreign words.

HUSBAND AUDITIONS Angela Ruth Strong

Meri Newberg is the last single lady in her friend group. When someone gives her a magazine article from the 1950s—a silly list of ways to attract a husband—she decides to try some of them. Her brother’s roommate, Kai Kamaka, convinces her to let him film her attempts to find a man for his YouTube channel, hoping his editing skills will advance his career as a cameraman for a popular television show. They attract a large audience, but sometime during the project Kai realizes he doesn’t want Meri to find a husband, as he’s fallen for her himself. However, it will take some convincing for Meri to see lazy, unmotivated Kai as husband material. A solidly Christian, modern rom-com with an unconventional ending.
CULTURE | Children’s Books

Spreading their wings
Four recent picture books
by Mary Jackson

AND I PAINT IT Beth Kephart
Henriette was the oldest of five children and an aspiring young artist seeking to follow in the footsteps of her father, illustrator N.C. Wyeth. The story, told in lyrical prose, follows Henriette as she steals away from four busy siblings and goes with her father, who teaches her to observe and paint the nature and landscapes of the family’s Chadds Ford, Pa., property. Illustrator Amy June Bates’ stunning watercolor spreads and pencil sketches are worth lingering over. Kephart’s afterword recounts Henriette’s artistic career, leaving readers wanting to know more. (Ages 5-8)

TEN LITTLE DUMPLINGS Larissa Fan
Villagers consider a family fortunate to have 10 sons, whom the parents call little dumplings. The boys do everything together, earning praise for their successes. In a surprising twist, readers learn of a little sister, hidden amid Cindy Wume’s illustrations on previous pages. Alongside her brothers, she studies and discovers her unique talent. She marries and has her own little dumpling, a daughter. In the author’s note, Fan writes that the story derived from her father’s Taiwanese family. In cultures that prized sons, she wonders, “who is left out of the stories we are told and why?” (Ages 4-8)

NATHAN’S SONG Leda Schubert
In a small Jewish village in Russia, Nathan is always singing. Illustrator Maya Ish-Shalom’s bold hues depict Nathan’s family scraping together money for him to study opera in Italy. Nathan boards the wrong ship, landing in New York, where he attracts attention as a street singer and earns a spot on Broadway. He marries and earns enough to bring his family to America. Schubert’s grandfather inspired the story. In the author’s note, she describes how anti-Semitism in Russia during the Pale of Settlement prompted many Jews to immigrate to America, and in Nathan’s case, to realize a dream. (Ages 4-8)

OUT INTO THE BIG WIDE LAKE Paul Harbridge
Harbridge bases the story’s protagonist, Kate, on his sister, who has Down syndrome. When Kate spends the summer at her grandparents’ lakeside home, Grandma teaches her to operate the boat. She joins Grandpa, a storekeeper, on his daily boat trips to deliver groceries to the neighbors’ docks. Grandpa’s sudden illness prompts Kate to put her new skills to the test. Young readers will resonate with Josée Bisaillon’s delicate illustrations and the book’s gentle message about a child stepping out of her comfort zone. (Ages 4-8)

How Much Is a Little Boy Worth? (Tyndale, 2022) is a follow-up to a 2019 children’s book written for young girls by Rachael Denhollander, a child sexual abuse survivor, attorney, and advocate. Denhollander authored this new title (which releases March 8) with her husband, Jacob. “The titular question of this book is one that every boy and every man will answer,” they write in an opening letter to readers. The Denhollanders, who have four children, convey a life-giving message to young boys about their inherent worth as image bearers. Soft illustrations from Marcin Piwowarski portray boys accompanied by parents or friends in various settings—scoring a goal, climbing a tree, scooping sand at the beach, or stargazing over the campfire. Its simple text reassures little boys that their value does not come from winning, achievements, status, or power. It also reminds them to speak up when something is wrong. Parents reading this book aloud may find the truths in it speak to their souls, too. —M.J.
She needs to hear about Jesus' love for her...

...yet, unreached people groups are growing faster than we are reaching them. What if the Church's current missions strategy is actually limiting the global spread of the gospel, so many never hear? The Return Mandate is a call to return to the Scriptural method of missions found in the New Testament: "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." (II Timothy 2:2) It's a call for genuine stewardship in missions giving by acknowledging the advantage trustworthy indigenous missionaries have to fulfill the Great Commission.

Follow/learn more at ReturnMandate.org, or use this QR code to request our Giving Guide.
Meat Loaf made his final curtain call

The unlikely rock 'n' roll star left behind a huge impact on music

by Arsenio Orteza

Born Marvin Lee Aday (he later legally changed his first name to Michael), he exploded onto the scene at the height of disco with the Todd Rundgren–produced Bat Out of Hell, a stentorian opus bursting at the seams with melodramatic rock 'n' roll overkill that spawned three distinctly un-disco-like hits (the Top 20 ballad “Two Out of Three Ain't Bad” among them) en route to becoming one of the biggest-selling albums of all time.

Like most “overnight sensations,” he’d spent years paying dues. He was an alumnus of stage (Hair, The Rocky Horror Picture Show) and screen (The Rocky Horror Picture Show). He’d fronted a band called Meat Loaf Soul (later Popcorn Blizzard, later Floating Circus) that, as he put it, “opened for everybody from Dr. John to Sun Ra.” He’d been half of the Motown-based duo Stoney & Meatloaf (which snuck a single onto the R&B charts before word got out that they were white). He’d even sung lead for Ted Nugent.

His biggest break, however, occurred in 1973, when he auditioned for the musical More Than You Deserve and met its composer, Jim Steinman.

Not only did Steinman, who died last April, write every song on Bat Out of Hell and its follow-up, Dead Ringer, but he also wrote every song on Bat Out of Hell II: Back Into Hell, the quintuple-platinum 1993 album whose hits “I’d Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That)” and “Objects in the Rearview Mirror May Appear Closer Than They Are” rescued Meat Loaf’s career from more than a decade of doldrums. The infernal nature of their collaborations’ titles notwithstanding, the Meat Loaf–Steinman partnership was a musical marriage made in heaven.

Understandably, Meat Loaf and the defining characteristics of a Steinman song—extravagant emotions, no-holds-barred production, extended song lengths bordering on the passive-aggressive—became synonymous.

He kept finding ways to go against the grain. When most other celebrities were all-in for anti-COVID restrictions in 2021, he stated that he’d rather die than knuckle under.

“I know that I will never be politically correct,” he’d sung on Bat Out of Hell II. It turned out to be one of the sincerest lines that he’d ever deliver.
Moody music is where it’s at

From hip-hop to folk-pop, Jamaican to Jewish
by Arsenio Orteza

BRIGHTSIDE Lumineers

“Reprise,” this album’s final song, exemplifies the kind of moody, glossily produced, lo-fi folk-pop currently in vogue among programmers of opening-credits music for the average suspense-drama miniseries. It also represents an appropriate conclusion for a record that begins chipper and darkens slowly over the course of the 30 minutes it takes to play out. The reason for this trajectory just might have something to do with Wesley Schulz’s and Jeremiah Fraites’ having reached the ages (39 and 36) at which anniversaries of one’s birth become mixed blessings, hence a song called “Birthday” whose peppy musical gift wrap conceals references to screams that get ignored and a house that burns to the ground.

PSALMS Nathan Salsburg

This 38-minute act of musical devotion contains one venerable Jewish air (“Eli, Eli”), one Medieval poem set to music (an English translation of Judah Halevi’s “O You Who Sleep”), and “fragments” of nine psalms sung in Hebrew. Inspired in part by Jonathan Harkham and David Asher Brook’s Darkcho, Salsburg takes that album’s “mystical Hasidic music” as a starting point and modernizes it ever so slightly, taking special care to preserve the delicacy and beauty. Accompanists include Brook, Joan Shelley, Will Oldham (aka Bonnie “Prince” Billy), and Spencer Tweedy. Leonard Cohen, who could’ve come up with the melody for “Psalm 42,” would’ve loved it.

LIFE BETWEEN ISLANDS—SOUNDSYSTEM CULTURE: BLACK MUSICAL EXPRESSION IN THE UK 1973-2006 various artists

The key term in this compilation’s title is soundsystem, shorthand for the Jamaican DJ culture that spawned ska, reggae, lovers rock, dub, dubstep, breakbeat, jungle, and drum-and-bass, forms of “black musical expression” characterized by throbbing bass and catch-you-off-guard syncopation. Representative tracks from each genre appear chronologically shuffled because stylistic evolution isn’t the point. None tick every box, but Harmony Black’s “Don’t Let It Go to Your Head” tries. Highlight: Asher Senator’s rhythmically clattery “One Bible,” which exhorts anyone within earshot to read the Scriptures daily.

BORN IN THE 60’S Kid Loco

The title refers both to Kid Loco and to 10 of the 11 songs that he has selected for hip-hop reimagining. (The gospel blues “When the Train Comes Along” was born a lot earlier.) Of the six known best to deep divers, Sonny Boy Williamson II’s “Help Me” and the Stooges’ “Little Doll” undergo the biggest facelifts. Of the five that the Kid’s generational cohorts can sing in their sleep, the Grateful Dead’s “Casey Jones” sounds the most like new music. The Turtles’ “Happy Together” is too cute by half, but the misheard lyrics of “My Girl” (“I got amounts of May”) and the misremembered lyrics of “Suspicious Minds” (too many to quote) will, as they used to say in the ’60s, create a disturbance in your mind.

For the last 40 years of his life, Burke Shelley, the leader, main songwriter, and only permanent member of the Welsh hard-rock band Budgie, was a Christian, having converted after coming across a second-hand King James Bible and reading it through. By that time, Budgie as a recording act had pretty much run its course, releasing only one studio album after 1982. But both that record (You’re All Living in Cuckooland, 2006) and its immediate predecessor, Deliver Us From Evil, evinced a worldview rooted in Shelley’s faith, about which he remained vocal until his death in January at 71.

Because Budgie antedated most of the groups whose sounds it could be said to resemble, it’s more accurate to say that Shelley and his frequently shifting birds of a feather influenced them than the other way around. But, for reference’s sake, here’s a roll call: Grand Funk Railroad, AC/DC, Rush, Motörhead, Blue Öyster Cult, and Foreigner. For better or for worse, we will not hear their likes again. —A.O.
MEGHAN COX GURDON is a children's book critic for *The Wall Street Journal* and a former foreign reporter. She is a wife, mother of five, and recently, a grandmother. Gurdon's 2019 book *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction* presents compelling evidence for the emotional, cognitive, and social benefits of oral storytelling.

On a recent Friday afternoon, we met virtually and discussed how the book's message is perhaps more relevant now coming out of pandemic lockdowns and amid heated debate over the content in contem-
porary children’s books. Here is our conversation, edited and shortened.

You were raised an only child in a broken home. Your parents stopped reading aloud to you once you could read independently. What prompted you to read aloud to your kids? I was at a dinner party one night with my husband, who was then my fiancé. We had our drinks, and the hostess, my friend Lisa, excused herself. I thought she was going to stir something in the kitchen. She never came back. We asked her husband where she went. He replied, “Oh, she’s just reading to the boys.” This was my Pauline moment. I thought, If I ever have children, that is what I’m going to do. When we did get married and had a baby, I was drawing on this complete reservoir of ignorance. The one thing I knew I could do was read to this baby. It taught me how to be a mother.

You stuck with it for the next 25 years, reading to your children nightly? To borrow from C.S. Lewis’ phrase, I was surprised by the joy of having a family. I liked reading aloud in the evening because it was a kind of anchor to the day. It held it together. It was a destination we were all moving toward before bed. The joy of it is ... whenever you can get to it, your children love it. I also read to them in the bath. You can do it anywhere, in the car while you’re stuck in traffic, on the subway, over breakfast. Fathers can read, or aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

In The Enchanted Hour, you explore the science behind reading aloud. What surprised you? I had to fend off feelings of regret and sorrow over the things I hadn’t known. I never thought about how quickly their brains were growing. I do think that reading aloud was the best thing I have done as a mother. It made me grateful that I could do this for my children. I wish I had read them more books from C.S. Lewis’ phrase, I was surprised by the joy of having a family. I liked reading aloud in the evening because it was a kind of anchor to the day. It held it together. It was a destination we were all moving toward before bed. The joy of it is ... whenever you can get to it, your children love it. I also read to them in the bath. You can do it anywhere, in the car while you’re stuck in traffic, on the subway, over breakfast. Fathers can read, or aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

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In the tech era, screens increasingly separate family members under the same roof. You argue reading aloud shouldn’t stop when kids become teenagers. It’s incredibly hard. The truth is, it’s up to us as individuals and as parents to carve out some part of life that is not online. I wrote the book and didn’t know the pandemic was coming. One of the central and still-important arguments of The Enchanted Hour is that reading aloud cannot solve the problem of our tech addictions, but it can and does mitigate the ill effects. Teenagers may not want to sit with you necessarily, but they’re still willing to let you read. You can stand at the kitchen bar while they’re eating their porridge and read to them. Not all of them will take it after a certain point.

What about audio books? Audiobooks have gotten much better. When you’re listening, you’re participating in this millenial old human tradition of oral storytelling. You are sharing a story, and it is forming this wonderful triangle where you’re all inside it together. You have that in common. You can pause it and talk about it. It’s wonderful for car journeys. You’re trapped in the car together.

Did you ever see yourself becoming a read-aloud evangelist? I’m honored to be an evangelist for this cause. It develops people’s interior lives. It brings beauty into the minds of children and their parents. It goes the other way too. My mom has been in bad health, so I’ve been reading to her. She wanted me to read Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories. The last time she heard them was when her mother read them to her. I read them to my children.

So, the elderly and ailing need what reading aloud has to offer, too? It pains me to reflect that loneliness was already a cultural phenomenon before the pandemic locked millions of people into solitary confinement. However grievous the toll was before, it’s worse now. I can see the cost of isolation on my own mother’s health and happiness. I think a lot of us have those stories now. When we read aloud to people starved for touch and for culture, we are using our most human assets to replenish them. Time, attention, physical presence, and the voice become gifts, as do language and poetry. It is one of the most healing and regenerative things we can do. My goodness, our culture needs it.

How do you find books worth reading aloud? In my own experience, we mostly read older books. We had a couple of unpleasant surprises when we read more contemporary books ... disappointing story twists and shocking moments of political indoctrination. We tend to read things that have been tested by time and lasted. When it comes to the column, I always look for good writing and beautiful art. There’s this trend in picture books right now to have very few words. That’s less satisfactory as a read-aloud.

You took heat for a 2011 Wall Street Journal column pointing out the lurid content in young adult (YA) books. What about now? I don’t know that I can take credit for this, but afterwards I did notice a sharp drop-off in the flow of really lurid books and in particular those depicting cutting and other kinds of self-harm. Maybe my WSJ piece was a signal to the industry that it had gone too far, but maybe it was just that the trend had run its course. YA literature is a trendy
Any recent young adult books you enjoyed? Daniel Nayeri’s *Everything Sad Is Untrue, Pony* by R.J. Palacio, Frances Hardinge’s *The Lie Tree*, Gary Paulsen’s posthumous *Northwind*. Ruta Sepetys is doing terrific work with historical fiction.

You argue reading aloud at home is a form of resistance against current trends? One of the regrettable things about this current moment is there are teachers, administrators, and people in the book industry who see themselves as presenting children with the correct, enlightened viewpoint. They see parents as possessing retrograde ideas. Parents, teachers, and administrators should have the shared mission of exposing children to what is true and beautiful. Reading aloud at home is a way of defending literature itself. Stories propel themselves from generation to generation because they’re full of goodness. We receive them and pass them on because we received something good. When we read books at home that our children won’t get anywhere else, we’re perpetuating those stories.

When schools and libraries purge literary classics, what do kids miss? You rob children of an understanding of their own past by denying them books that talk about it. In the Little House on the Prairie books, for example, there are things that will offend, by modern standards. People were not living as though the future would judge them. They were just getting on with it, as we do now. The Little House books are a fantastic historical document. There is this rich, messy human story of a settlement out West. At the same time, I think the reader is left in no doubt that it was a very complex situation. The painfulness of it was evident even at the time. If you deny children access to classic literature, you’re denying them an experience that generations of people before you have enjoyed. They’re not classics because some old white men with long beards designated them as classics. They are classics because they are well-loved books with universal messages and universal human points of contact.

What are some positive things you see coming from the book industry? Picture books are going through a kind of golden age. The illustrations are remarkable—exquisite artistry and a stunning range of styles. Bookmaking is also more sophisticated now: Elegant designs, binding, paper, and typeface make many children’s books feel like treasures. The aesthetics have never been better. Modern children are spoiled for beauty.

How did you get your start critiquing children’s books for *The Wall Street Journal*? I was asked to review *The English Roses* [by Madonna] in 2003. It was fun to talk about a book, its author, and the cultural moment in a playful way.

What was it like to go from foreign reporting to reviewing children’s books? The shift was not disruptive because I had stopped foreign reporting after my second child arrived. I didn’t start critiquing children’s books until baby number five was on her way.

A lot of the skills that you need to report in the field are surprisingly useful when it comes to reviewing books. Each book is, in a way, a foreign country. It has its own landscape, language, and cultural norms. So coming in with eyes open, looking for ways that a book is similar to things you already know and different from things you know is useful in seeing what a book is in itself.

Your family’s favorite read-aloud books? *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown; *Piper* by Emma Chichester Clark; *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson; *The Long Winter* and *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *The Horse and His Boy* by C.S. Lewis; *Dracula* by Bram Stoker; *My Father’s Dragon* by Ruth Stiles Gannett. We all loved *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O’Dell and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. My youngest daughter adored repeated readings of Gillian Cross’ retelling of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, illustrated by Neil Packer.

You recently became a grandma? I’ve built up a fabulous library. I’d forgotten how babies are these little puddings at the beginning. You’re reading to them, and they’re not paying attention, but it’s a good discipline, you know?
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LESS THAN A MONTH after the 2020 presidential election, Forrest Lehman, director of elections for Lycoming County, Pa., was flooded with angry calls from voters demanding his office check voter rolls. Viral social media posts alleged that ballots were cast under a dead person’s name and that this swayed the election results. Lehman and his staff waded through hundreds of calls for more than a week, checking voter registrations for people who died more than a decade before. They did not find a single current registration.
The short-lived craze was only one instance of the harsh spotlight local election officials now face. One election director found a dead animal in his front yard that he believed was left there as a threat. Another told Lehman irate voters pulled into his driveway demanding answers about 2020 election fraud claims.

Philadelphia City Commissioner Al Schmidt received death threats naming his family and their home address after then-President Donald Trump called him a RINO (Republican in name only) for defending the city’s votes, 81 percent of which went to Joe Biden. In November 2021, Schmidt announced his early resignation after 10 years as a city commissioner.

Schmidt is not the only one leaving a toxic battlefield. A mass exodus of election officials in Pennsylvania has left more open positions than qualified people to fill them as public servants succumb to hostility from voters, controversy from policy changes, and burnout from overwork.

The problems have been building for years, and 2020 isn’t the first presidential election to stir voter anger. Jerry Feaser, who runs the Board of Elections in Dauphin County, recalls furious voters in 2016 who demanded recounts when Hillary Clinton lost her presidential bid. “What we are seeing here as a result of 2020 is the same thing we saw in 2016,” said Feaser. “It’s just that the tables are turned.”

One voter contacted Feaser to insist that scanners should not be used on their ballots. Feaser then launched into explanations of how the machines worked, why hand-counting thousands of ballots on election night is impossible, and the numerous checks to prevent illegal ballots. When the voter kept accusing the county of perpetrating fraud, his solution was to hire her as a poll worker to see the process for herself. After training sessions, Feaser did not hear further accusations from her.

In Lycoming County, Lehman struggles to keep up with the conspiracy theories of the day that bring angry voters to his door. “Social media manages to make people confused and suspicious and paranoid way more efficiently than I can undo it,” Lehman said. “I can’t change minds as fast as social media can make them up. Sometimes even if they believe my explanation, they’ll pivot to ask about other counties and say they have corruption. I even get this from state legislators.”

IN PENNSYLVANIA, the chaos of the 2020 election cycle actually began a year earlier. Election bureaus in Pennsylvania operate under the commonwealth’s election code, which the legislature overhauled for the first
tion code, which the legislature overhauled for the first time in more than 80 years in 2019. While Gov. Tom Wolf lauded Act 77 as a grand, bipartisan compromise to encourage more voting, the demanding changes strained election directors. Act 77 opened the floodgates for mail-in votes and shortened registration times. The law moved the deadline to register from 30 days to only 15 days before the election. At the same time, Act 77 allows no-excuse mail-in voting and the ability to mail a ballot until 8 p.m. on Election Day. Election directors said the law gives them impossible tasks with little relief. The legislature gave election directors the draft of the bill to review only 48 hours before it passed. Lehman had hoped for broader changes to consolidate voting centers and cost-saving measures. “There was none of that kind of forethought,” Lehman said. “It was just horse trading, and election directors were left outside the barn.”

The U.S. Postal System complicates a national push to increase mail-in voting. According to Feaser, Pennsylvania election officials began bringing up mailing issues in 2014 when USPS changed its distribution process to cut costs. One of those changes means the post office is closed on Sundays, which leads to what election directors call “no mail Tuesday.” The deadline to file an application for an absentee or mail-in ballot is on a Tuesday.

Feaser called the 15-day deadline “intellectually dishonest” to voters and taxing on election staff. He has a reputation for being the loudest voice in a room when arguing his point with commissioners. Feaser said he has repeatedly fought for changes to the mail-in deadlines as postal service delays make rapid delivery more difficult: “It is not about disenfranchising voters that I say that we move the deadline back. It is exactly because I’m trying to protect the voters’ right to vote by mail, but don’t expect me a week before the election to move heaven and earth to get you your ballot.”

When the pandemic hit, Feaser immediately searched for a mailing house, correctly anticipating a massive wave of mail-in ballot requests. Other counties still print, stock, post, and mail all ballots in-house. Before 2020, Dauphin County had mailed a maximum of 7,000 absentee ballots in an election. In the presidential election of 2020, Feaser had to issue nearly 70,000, a task he said would have been impossible if they hadn’t moved into a larger building with massive ballot sorters in time.

Why doesn’t the legislature draft bills to address the technical cogs of the election wheel? Part of the problem is partisan fighting. Pennsylvania is a bellwether of the rest of the nation: a purple state, evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. The majority-Republican legislature and the outgoing Democratic governor frequently duel, which leaves election directors with little change. “Once you introduce a bill that opens up the election code, you have the Christmas tree effect,” Feaser said. “Everybody wants to decorate it, and then it just dies under its own weight.”

“We’re talking about inside baseball, granular, unsexy policy areas within the administration of elections. The politicians want to make headlines for having a food fight about voter ID or same-day registration,” Lehman noted. “Meanwhile, we’ve got election directors pulling their hair out because they’re in the worst of both worlds managing both mail-in voting and in-person voting.”

At the first Republican governors debate in Carlisle, Pa., on Jan. 5, nearly all 13 attending candidates mentioned election security as a primary goal. One candidate, current Montgomery County Commissioner Joe Gale, went so far as to say he would refuse to hire anyone on his staff who voted for what he calls “the biggest scam in Pennsylvania political history.”

Act 77 forced election directors like Feaser to overhaul their entire operations, learn how to program new voting machines, and deal with angry and confused voters. He said all the changes might have been easier
and the act itself might have been more useful if legislators could exemplify the civility he wishes to see at the polls.

“I miss the days when I worked downtown in the legislature and saw strong leaders who would battle on issues,” Feaser said. “At the end of the day they go out to dinner and ask how the family was. They were human to each other. I don’t see that at the national level anymore, I don’t see it often enough at the state level.”

On Jan. 28, Pennsylvania’s Commonwealth Court ruled in favor of a Republican challenge that argues Act 77 violates the state constitution. Notably, many of the challengers originally voted to pass the law in 2019. The Wolf administration has appealed the decision, which leaves mail-in voting in effect while the state Supreme Court takes up the issue. The Democratic-majority court is expected to keep Act 77 in place, but legal experts note the plaintiffs might have a strong case in arguing that its passage violated constitutional procedure.

SOME TWO DOZEN election directors and deputies resigned their posts in the months and years following Act 77. At least 30 counties out of Pennsylvania’s 67 have lost a director or assistant director. The resignations are not unique to the Keystone State.

An analysis by the Brennan Center for Justice found, as of 2020, roughly 35 percent of local election officials nationwide were eligible to retire by 2024. Many counties expressed concerns about replacing these officials amid contentious elections, overworked staff, and ram-
Michael Susek started his public service career as an entry-level county election administrator in Colorado in 2004. For 15 years, he moved up the ranks helping three counties administer elections. In December 2021, he moved back to his home state of Pennsylvania to fill Luzerne County’s empty director of elections position. For Susek, the role brings back his project management muscle memory from Colorado, but he also notes the responsibility is heavier this time.

Luzerne County’s Board of Elections has seen its share of controversy. Three different directors passed through in the last three years, with the most recent director resigning just one month before the November 2021 general election. Local headlines reported military ballots accidentally thrown in the trash, miscounted tallies, faulty touch screens on voting machines, and office turnover for the past several years.

Shortly before he moved back to Pennsylvania, Susek watched an HBO documentary on the Jan. 6 riots, when protesters stormed through the U.S. Capitol to disrupt the certification of President Joe Biden’s electoral victory.

“It was the first time I thought, ‘Maybe getting back into elections isn’t such a good idea,’” Susek remembered. “I have a wife and a 4-year-old, and if an election goes south, it might put us in a violent spotlight. It’s a scary thing to have to put into perspective.”

Trump specifically called out the midstate county by name when his campaign sued multiple Pennsylvania counties for suspected election fraud following the 2020 election. Luzerne County was not listed as a defendant in the suit, and Trump won the county by more than 20,000 votes.

Susek said his first priority is to regain trust, and the first step toward that goal is transparency. Within his first three weeks, he answered calls from voters, agreed to local interviews, met with county officials, and set up cybersecurity training sessions for staff. He said the goal is to have progress points he can report to county residents to earn back trust in the electoral process.

“The public should inquire and learn how elections work, but I wish that people understood how heavily regulated and structured and local this professional environment is,” Susek said. “Your ballots aren’t counted in some secret underground room in Virginia. They are probably counted within a couple miles of your house by people you know.”

Back in Dauphin County, Feaser wades through election judge rejection letters and pins handwritten checklists on his basement office wall in preparation for the May primaries. When the Board of Elections moved to a new building, he opted for the quiet office tucked in the recesses of the sorting machines and ballot cages so that when he retires after the 2022 midterms in November, none of the remaining staff have to move offices on the main floor.

“I thought I’d know from one day to the next, what needs to be done,” Feaser said. “I thought, ‘elections never change, because we run them all the same way.’ But since I took over, no two elections have ever been the same.”

But Feaser admits he might have been among the 25 percent of Pennsylvania election officials already retired if he lacked support from the county board of commissioners. Lehman agreed that lack of county support leaves election directors exhausted. Now that so many have left, he is concerned about keeping elections running smoothly without an old guard to train the new: “Not having an experienced election director means that the odds of a mishap occurring go up. And then if that is combined with a feeling that we’re not being listened to by the legislature, by the governor, or by the voters, then what’s the point? Our needs are falling on deaf ears.”

When he retires in February 2023, Jerry Feaser will pass the election director reins along, he hopes to his deputy whom he has been training for over a year. Michael Susek has no predecessor to learn from, so he must wade through distrust and new procedures on his own. And Forrest Lehman will be left as one of the longest-sitting election directors in Pennsylvania, having served in the position for nearly 10 years.

“Someone new asked me who they should talk to, but all of the people I would have recommended are gone,” Lehman sighed. “In what universe is someone like me suddenly one of the old timers?”

March 12, 2022
REFINING FIRE

ARSON MARS A HISTORIC SOUTHERN CHURCH, LEAVING QUESTIONS AMONG THE ASHES

by Kim Henderson
in Montgomery, Ala.
Ark Bethea was tired—a good kind of tired—when he pulled into his driveway last Sept. 29. After a COVID hiatus, Wednesday nights were rolling at First Baptist Church Montgomery, and for the first time since being named senior pastor a year earlier, he was getting used to shaking hands instead of sending Zoom links. Just before lights-out that night, Bethea, 34, remembered to update his phone. He hit “do not disturb,” too. Wouldn’t want to hang up the new iOS 15 install. That’s why the pastor didn’t get notified when hours later alarms sounded inside the church’s complex of buildings. While he slept, firefighters from Montgomery Fire Station No. 2 responded, and the entering point man soon announced he smelled smoke. Firefighters extinguished flames in three buildings on the 10-acre campus, and noting signs of arson, called in criminal investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). By the time Bethea arrived just before sunrise, the scene was buzzing. “I couldn’t process it. At first I thought it wasn’t that bad, and then I walked into the main sanctuary,” he recalls. “The air was this thick, hazy fog. Alarms were still going off, and the speakers were saying, ‘It’s an emergency, get out.’ That’s when alarms started going off in my soul, like what in the world is going on here?” Within hours, Bethea had some answers.
Watching surveillance videos alongside law enforcement officers, he leaned in for a better look at the slight figure darting from the shadows. Incredulous, the pastor told them he knew who she was, just as sure as footage showed her dousing pews and setting them ablaze.

Bethea admits that left him with a lot of why. “We’re not a church steeped in politics. We just love Jesus, and we try to lift up His name,” he says. “When I think of all that’s happened in that sanctuary—all the conversions, missionary commissionings, baptisms, weddings, funerals—why would someone want to destroy it?”

But even as a magistrate issued an arrest warrant for 27-year-old Chinese national Xiaoquin Yan, Bethea knew he couldn’t camp out in the whys. Instead, he’d need to focus on a different question, one that’s kept him up more than a few nights since then. How could he steward this season?

**MONTGOMERY IS A HISTORY HOT SPOT,** whether as the original capital of the Confederacy or the original owner of Rosa Park’s Bus No. 2857. First Baptist has some history of its own, starting with abolitionist, Creek Indian-sympathizing Pastor Lee Compere, who founded the body in 1829. Some 30 years later another of their pastors would deliver the invocation at Jefferson Davis’ inauguration.

These days the church’s most visible historical lean is buildings with stone exteriors modeled after a cathedral in Florence, Italy. On the church’s website, African-American faces smile from the staff listing. Public schools have used the newer, larger sanctuary for graduations.

First Baptist has a big campus—377,000 square feet covering more than a city block—in a location that comes with security challenges. Pastor Bethea calls it the “beautiful difficulty of being a downtown church.” He says some Sundays he’s preaching and a homeless person will wander in and worship alongside the governor. “That’s beautiful.”

The decision to anchor First Baptist in the heart of downtown wasn’t made by members living today, but the decision to remain there was. Scattered among three counties, congregants in 2000 had a big choice to make. They voted to stay put.

Associate Pastor Kenny Hoomes says their community ministries assist some 20,000 people a year, and the fastest-growing arm of those efforts is the international programs. Language classes meet four days a week, and Sunday school teachers teach in Laotian; Thai; and beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels of English. A mentor walks participants through the citizenship process.

Carolyn Bryan is one of 80 church members involved in those ministries, and her circle of friends is wide. “It’s part of the Great Commission, going and reaching all nations, and if you’re going out in the city of Montgomery, then you’re going to see international people,” she said. Maybe that’s because a local branch of Auburn University attracts international students, as does the Air War College at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base.

But it was a tourist visa that brought Xiaoquin Yan to Montgomery—and through doors at First Baptist—in 2019. Back then, Yan was living with a female friend of Bryan’s, a church member who has since moved out of state. Bryan doesn’t remember many specifics from their few meetings, but she did notice Yan needed some friends: “But who doesn’t, right?”

Bryan hadn’t seen Yan in more than a year when local news stations identified her as the church’s suspected arsonist. She says watching Yan’s mugshot spread across TV screens was hard: “She didn’t look like the same person to me. She’d changed her hair, but that wasn’t it. She had a look of cold callousness.” Bryan admits feeling betrayed, but she’s also concerned about Yan. “With that crime, there’s some kind of hurt behind it. I know she’s hurting, but I don’t know why.”

Asians make up less than 2 percent of the population in Alabama, and Pastor Dawson Zhang believes Montgomery County may have 1,000 Chinese residents at most. Even so, his church plant on the outskirts of town, Montgomery Chinese Christian Church, has about 40 regular attendees and is growing. On a bright Saturday morning in January, four Lexus sedans fill parking spaces near the church’s main entrance. Inside, an exercise class is meeting. Ladies stretch while a recording of hymns—sung in Chinese—plays.

Zhang says Xiaoquin Yan in months past made her way to church members, and others, as she sought help with living expenses and other needs. Some members who got to know her described her as aggressive. “She wanted to achieve something here in the United States,” he says. “Start a business. Maybe marry someone rich.” When the pandemic hit, Yan dropped off the church circuit and went to work trying to extend her tourist visa into a student visa. Authorities denied her application in early September 2021.

That may have started the downward spiral that led to Yan’s arson charges and bail amounts that increased fivefold almost overnight. One judge ordered a mental evaluation for her. Treatment, too, if the mental assessment uncovered a problem.

When news of Yan’s arrest reached Zhang, the pastor grew concerned it would bring trouble to Montgomery’s Chinese community. He contacted Mark

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**Smoke fills the main sanctuary of First Baptist Church, where several pews were set on fire.**
Gloves stand at doorways, answering and said she didn’t want to take too much of the pastor’s time. Looking back, Bethea can’t think of anything that would point to what he now thinks she was doing—casing the facility. “We chatted for about five minutes as we moved downstairs and into a courtyard. Nothing struck me as ‘she’s an arsonist’ or that she hates this church, she hates the Lord, she hates our country.”

Well, maybe one thing did give Bethea pause. He asked Yan if she knew Carolyn Bryan. “Carolyn is very recognizable in our international ministry, and she didn’t know who Carolyn was,” he explains. “I thought that was a little bizarre.”

Surveillance videos from the evening of Sept. 29 show the perpetrator carried two duffel bags through doors on the west side of the church as members exited. Bethea believes she took an elevator to the third floor where she hid out until video picks up her movement around 2 a.m. After starting four fires, she fled the scene.

ATF agents on Oct. 4 searched an apartment where Yan had been living. In addition to Walmart receipts for gas cans and lighters, they found a 9 mm semi-automatic pistol with a loaded magazine. Most arsonists are men, and the less than 20 percent who aren’t are predominantly Caucasian. That makes Yan’s arrest a rarity, but the crime she’s accused of isn’t. The National Fire Protection Association reported that from 2007 to 2011, religious properties averaged 1,600 fires a year, with more than $100 million in direct property damage. The NFPA said 16 percent were arson.

At First Baptist, the Sept. 30 fires destroyed a reception office, but fire-retardant carpeting in the old and new sanctuaries mitigated damage firefighters said “could have been much worse,” especially in Stakely Sanctuary, built in 1905. Still, soot—filmy, noxious, and transported throughout the facilities via the air conditioning system—continues to keep air purifiers and Servpro workers busy four months later. They’ve painted walls, wiped fixtures, removed truckloads of ceiling tiles, and replaced baby bed mattresses. But a dozen massive chande-
liers, lowered to platforms where they wait for their turn to be sanitized, testify to the enormity of the task. Some jobs are so specialized they’re outsourced, like cleanup of two organs with 5,000 pipes between them. It’s extensive, expensive work. The church’s insurance carrier, the Cincinnati Insurance Companies, declined comment for this story.

The aftermath of arson is inconvenient, too. Even though they’ve returned to parts of their campus, First Baptist’s 5,000 members are in flux. On a Sunday morning complete with surprise snow flurries, greeters decked out in coats and gloves stand at doorways, answering questions about who meets where and when. Parents, in search of bathrooms that aren’t cordoned off, maneuver small children between buildings. Bethea preaches three back-to-back services, while some Sunday school classes meet off-site, and one even meets in his office.

Meanwhile, Yan pleaded “not guilty” to second-degree arson in federal court on Dec. 22. Christine Freeman, executive director of attorneys at Alabama Middle District Federal Defenders—Yan’s legal representation—declined to comment on the case.

Doug Howard of the U.S. Attorney’s Office says Yan will remain in U.S. Marshals’ custody until her April 4 trial. If convicted, she’s facing a prison sentence of not less than five years and not more than 20 years. The federal system does not offer parole.

THESE DAYS, SIGNS OF ARSON at First Baptist are disappearing, except in the main sanctuary where fire-retardant carpets are melted and scarred by twisting lines of burning gasoline. They’ll come up when delayed replacements arrive, explains Bethea, skirting around the bases of five stories of scaffolding. He stepped to a spot in a center aisle and made a sentimental revelation: During construction in 2003, he used a Sharpie to write a Bible verse on the concrete beneath him.

Bethea has been at First Baptist since he turned 13, but he’s young in the ministry. “This has been overwhelming,” the father of three preschoolers admits. “They didn’t teach us in seminary how to lead through a church fire.” He says he reached a turning point at Yan’s initial hearing. “I realized I could spin my wheels trying to figure out why, but it won’t do any good, because I know that everybody that had contact with her—from the Chinese church to our church, and everybody in between—showed her love. Showed her Christlikeness.”

He says the question now is where to go from here, how to keep racism from harming important outreach efforts like their conversational English classes. As church members took communion on the Sunday after the fires, Bethea says, they prayed for Yan: “We prayed that maybe one day she could take communion with us, that she would come to know the Lord. And that through us or through somebody, she would know the error of her ways and repent. There are earthly consequences to sin, and we want all that to play out, but eternity—that’s our greatest concern.”

Bethea says he and Pastor Zhang have tried unsuccessfully to get into the prison to see Yan. She’s in a unique situation, with her visa revoked. She’s alone, with no family nearby.

Media attention not only publicized the fires but also the church’s outdoor meetings. Even now, friends and family pepper members with questions about what’s going on at First Baptist. Bethea calls it an “open door for the gospel,” and he says the congregation has a new sense of unity.

“It’s shown us that we can be flexible. I think we will walk away being appreciative of the space we have and what it allows us to do, but we’ll be unified around God’s mission and purpose for us, rather than our buildings.”

For now, the congregation is meeting in the older Stakely Sanctuary, where the baptistry sat in disrepair until December. That’s when some of the most important restoration work was done, allowing Bethea to baptize two new believers from Thailand, fruit of their ministry to internationals.
A growing contingent of conservatives works to unfreeze the climate-change debate

by Esther Eaton

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KRIEG BARRIE

ANDREW EISENMAN IS 24, a recent Liberty University graduate now working on a movie script from a bedroom lined with books about screenwriting and film production. He’s a fan of podcasts and electric cars and a dedicated Christian. Eisenman used to be a Republican, too. That’s changing for a few reasons, but a big one is the party’s position on climate change. Eisenman believes it’s an urgent threat that will increasingly disrupt weather patterns, causing severe storms, crop destruction, and other deadly disasters.
focus on other topics, forcing them to choose between climate and other priorities. But instead of leaving the party, some are working to change it.

A recent University of Washington graduate, Benji Backer has spoken at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), boosted Mitt Romney, and testified at a congressional hearing alongside climate activist Greta Thunberg.

In 2017 he helped found the American Conservation Coalition to organize young people to advocate for "common-sense, market-based, and limited-government" policies to combat climate change. Backer summarized his message on Fox News: "Economics and the environment go hand in hand."

ACC distinguishes itself from liberal environmental groups by calling on Congress to deregulate nuclear energy—"No climate change platform is serious if it doesn’t include nuclear energy," declares the ACC website—and by calling for states to de-monopolize their energy markets to increase competition. It also hosts the Market Environmentalism Academy that teaches the benefits of nuclear power and biotechnology. It supports more pipelines as the least carbon-intensive way to move natural gas, but emphasizes that natural gas produced by fracking should eventually be phased out in favor of cleaner energy sources.

In 2020, ACC published what it calls the American Climate Contract, which calls for the government to invest in development of new energy technologies, modernize infrastructure, build up wetlands and forests that store carbon and absorb storms, and export green technology globally to bring down emissions planetwide.

While ACC focuses on youth, older climate-concerned Republicans are lending their conservative bona fides to the fight. Drew Bond worked in the Department of Energy under former President George W. Bush, as an aide to a Republican senator, and as chief of staff at the conservative Heritage Foundation. While at a Heritage dinner, Bond remembers, he heard a donor recount her attempt to install solar panels on her Texas ranch. "She came up against environmental regulations that were protecting some frogs in that area,” Bond said, and couldn’t install the panels. That struck him as wrong-

"NO CLIMATE CHANGE PLATFORM IS SERIOUS IF IT DOESN’T INCLUDE NUCLEAR ENERGY."

evidence for global warming, and Al Gore’s overblown documentaries provoked Republicans to increasingly entrenched skepticism. Republican lawmakers argued ditching oil and coal would crush the economy.

While Republicans have at times embraced conservation efforts to protect forests and water, they’ve been leery of greenhouse gas doomsday predictions. Over time, while Democrats’ belief in present-day climate change shot up, Republicans’ drifted down. According to Gallup, in 1997, 46 percent of Democrats believed global warming had begun. In 2021, that number reached 82 percent. In the same period, Republicans’ belief sank from 47 percent to 29 percent.

But a small split has opened in the Republican party. A 2020 Pew Research survey suggested that while 33 percent of boomer and older Republicans think climate change is affecting their communities, 43 percent of millennial and Gen Z Republicans thought so. Younger Republicans were also more likely to think human activity “contributes a great deal to climate change” and are about three times as likely to support ditching fossil fuels altogether.

Like Eisenman, young Republicans face a voting catch-22 as their climate concern grows while candidates...
heading. “Not to say, ‘let’s kill all frogs,’ but let’s weigh the risks and rewards,” he said.

In 2019, Bond and his friend John Hart stood on Hart’s farm outside Washington, D.C., discussing where to install solar panels. Hart has also worked for conservative policymakers, and the two got to talking about the dearth of serious Republican climate proposals. Together they launched C3 Solutions, which Bond says aims to develop good policy on climate, communicate it to lawmakers and their staffers, and build coalitions among conservative groups and across partisan lines to get legislation passed.

Bond argues effective solutions to climate change spring from capitalist, free-market principles. C3 Solutions cross-referenced Yale University’s Environmental Performance Index with a Heritage Foundation ranking of countries’ economic freedom and concluded that countries with elements of a free economy, including limited and efficient government and open markets, are twice as environmentally friendly as centrally planned economies. “Are the most serious solutions bigger and bigger government?” Bond asked. “Or is it actually more and more economic freedom?”

In a range of policy papers, C3 argues in favor of everything from hydropower to natural gas to nuclear power, in many cases with an emphasis on reducing regulations and streamlining the permit process. (One paper points out, “Innovation in natural gas made America the world’s largest emissions reducer.”) It argues the government should help incentivize research and development of new, clean energy sources and technology and strip regulations that discourage adopting that technology once it’s tested.

ACC and C3 Solutions aren’t the only conservative groups tackling climate. Some like the Cornwall Alliance reject man-made climate change but embrace conservation. Former Republican Congressman Bob Inglis, who lost his seat partly for embracing belief in man-made climate change, helped found republicEN. Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions focuses on reaching Republican lawmakers. The Western Way, Alliance for Market Solutions, ConservAmerica, ClearPath—all claim conservative principles.

Some of the groups have faced suspicion that they’re Trojan horses for leftist policies. In 2019, after ACC attended CPAC, an opinion piece by Kevin Mooney in the Washington Examiner blasted its possible support for a carbon tax and connections to groups funded by left-wing money. “Should a network that receives funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund ever be described as conservative?” Mooney asked. ACC spokeswoman Karly Matthews said the group has now had more time to prove its dedication to conservatism.

Funding is a common pressure point. Bond aims to recruit 25 large individual donors this year, and said his
Longtime pollution-fighting conservatives have seen setbacks to previous efforts. Allen Johnson co-founded Christians for the Mountains, a West Virginia group opposing mountaintop removal coal mining, which blasts the tops off mountains. The group helped coordinate research that suggested the mining method, in addition to ruining streams, distributes particles that increase the risk of lung cancer and birth defects.

Pitches succeed more often when he focuses less on fighting climate change and more on advancing conservative principles.

“If we don’t engage, we’re going to miss out on the next generation of conservatives,” Bond said. “This isn’t just about the climate. It’s about the future of capitalism and free markets, about the future of the Republican Party.”

“Are the most serious solutions bigger and bigger government? Or is it actually more and more economic freedom?”
Former President Barack Obama authorized more research, but Donald Trump canceled it after taking office. Johnson still opposes the mining practice, but also focuses on community development efforts, since his region of Appalachia relies on coal jobs.

John Murdock is a former Department of the Interior attorney who calls himself a Christian, conservative tree-hugger. As part of his efforts to reach Republican voters, Murdock used to write regularly about climate change for a string of conservative outlets. Misgivings about what he considers their overzealous support for Donald Trump has driven him to quit writing for many. And, he noted, the incentive to fire up voters by pointing out excesses of the left doesn’t motivate Republican lawmakers to collaborate on climate change policies.

Still, there are some signs of Republican support in Congress. Rep. John Curtis, R-Utah, launched the Conservative Climate Caucus last June, and it now lists 72 members. Curtis told Politico the caucus wouldn’t endorse specific legislation, instead focusing on educating lawmakers about the science behind climate change. Caucus members explicitly affirm that climate change is happening, and that humans have a hand in causing it.

Jim Presswood, president of the Earth Stewardship Alliance, says what conservatives need next is groups focused on building coalitions between conservative, liberal, and other advocacy groups, then working on lawmakers to write bipartisan policy. Otherwise, he said, lawmakers will continue in gridlock on climate change efforts.

In Virginia, Presswood helped organize several organizations with varying political leanings to put together a bill attacking Dominion Energy’s monopoly on the electric grid, but COVID-19 helped kill its momentum. And like other groups, Presswood struggled to find funding for his climate efforts outside of left-learning organizations. “There’s no funding on the right for this kind of work at this moment,” Presswood said. “So now I’m an attorney doing document review work while I wait for things to change.”

ACC spokeswoman Karly Matthews also noted that other priorities can squeeze out climate. “Empty store shelves or inflation seem like issues that people are more willing to put urgency behind,” Matthews said. “Whereas climate action...for a lot of folks, it doesn’t feel as glaring.”

But with young people like Eisenman increasingly insistent that lawmakers should embrace climate action now, conservatives like Bond and ACC may have a limited window of opportunity.

“The time for a decision is not 30 years from now,” Eisenman said. “It’s now. It’s been now for a while.”

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**BURNING OUT**

The downfall of the carbon tax

More than 3,000 economists have signed a 2019 letter supporting a policy idea hailed as an efficient, easy climate solution: the carbon tax. Companies would pay a fee for each ton of carbon they produce, incentivizing switches to renewable energy, but they would likely pass fees on to consumers through higher prices.

A Columbia University study found an economywide carbon tax would cut America’s carbon output 50 percent by 2030. Lower-income Americans spend more of their paychecks on energy, so higher gas pump and meter prices would hit them the hardest. To soften that blow, the revenue-neutral version of a carbon tax proposes sending the tax revenue straight to consumers through a tax cut or check. The tax is generally popular: A Yale and George Mason University report in 2021 found 69 percent of voters polled supported a revenue-neutral carbon tax.

Opponents, including C3 Solutions, argue companies will simply move carbon-intensive operations overseas, and that workarounds like charging them as their goods enter the United States are too complex to pull off. C3 also argues a carbon tax will siphon money companies might otherwise spend developing new renewable technology.

Though the idea avoids regulation and incentivizes free-market solutions to climate change, it has fallen from GOP favor. In 2018, Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., introduced a symbolic resolution denouncing a carbon tax. It won more than 200 supporting GOP votes. Several bills have foundered in Congress, and Washington state twice failed to pass a referendum instituting a carbon tax. The same Yale/George Mason study reporting broad voter support for a carbon tax found just 32 percent of conservative Republicans in support. —E.E.
AN ENTIRELY AFRICAN OPERATING ROOM IN LIBERIA IS THE FRUIT OF DECADES OF A CHRISTIAN SURGICAL TRAINING PROGRAM AND AFRICAN SURGEONS’ SACRIFICES

BY EMILY BELZ IN MONROVIA, LIBERIA
PHOTOS BY CARIELLE DOE
Dr. Juvenal Musavuli (right) and his colleagues, Dr. Elvis Mbanzabugabo (middle) and Dr. Afidu Dieudonné, are surgeons working at ELWA Hospital.
A high volume of cases. As a teacher, he shows a kindness to adapt to missing supplies or limited diagnostics amid the Sahara, and he knew the value of interns learning to teach an intern how to stitch. While he used the less-than-ideal sutures, residents and interns watched Musavuli as he worked and taught. While he used the less-than-ideal sutures, he taught an intern how to stitch.

In five minutes, he was at the hospital. When Musavuli saw the patient in distress, he decided she didn’t need surgery and put her on other treatment—he doesn’t want to do surgery when it’s unnecessary. In the following 24 hours he had plenty of bloody surgical work: He fixed an amputation on a child so the child could use a prosthesis. He performed a modified radical mastectomy on a woman with breast cancer in a country that has little other cancer treatment. He dug out and removed an apple-sized cyst from deep inside a woman’s neck, closing with the wrong size suture because that’s what he had.

This was late 2019, and Musavuli was one of two general surgeons at Eternal Love Winning Africa (ELWA) Hospital in Monrovia, Liberia. Faith-based hospitals like ELWA, a 57-year-old institution from Serving in Mission, formerly Sudan Interior Mission, have remained reliable places for medical services through crises like Ebola and the coronavirus pandemic.

But something is remarkable about the operating room at ELWA, a hospital that was on the front lines of the Ebola crisis: The surgeons, nurses, and technicians were all African, a feat that took years of training and the Ebola crisis: The surgeons, nurses, and technicians were all African, a feat that took years of training and the coronavirus pandemic.

A 2011 survey of 11 Liberian hospitals serving the majority of the population found only three Liberian surgeons and no anesthesiologists. According to the survey, 21 doctors did most surgical operations.

Musavuli, who is Congolese, spent more than a decade in medical training. After medical school and an internship, he completed a five-year general surgery residency at a remote mission hospital in Niger to become a graduate of a Christian surgical training program, called the Pan-African Academy of Christian Surgeons (PAACS).

PAACS emerged out of the Christian Medical & Dental Associations but is now an independent surgical training program in faith-based hospitals across Africa. For 25 years it has cranked out African surgeons through clinically focused training and accreditation through African surgical colleges. The five-year general surgery residency takes place in remote hospitals, so surgeons know how to work in isolated places with limited resources.

African hospitals seek PAACS graduates because they know their level of experience, not only clinically but also in terms of comfort with working in ORs with flickering electricity. Musavuli also said that PAACS teaches you to know and be responsible for your patients, so you can present their cases every morning to the other staff without notes.

Currently PAACS has 105 residents in surgical training, and it has already trained and graduated 110 surgeons total who work in 21 African countries. One mission hospital in Kenya, AIC Litein, now has a surgery residency program entirely run by PAACS graduates. The graduates commit to serving in an under-resourced hospital for every year of training they received—so typically five years.

Liberia has fewer than 20 fully trained surgeons, according to PAACS, but six are PAACS graduates. Another Liberian, Dr. Aaron Kokulol, is on the verge of completing his surgical training through PAACS. That means this one Christian program has generated at least 30 percent of the surgeons in the country.

Liberia’s limited surgical care is true of the continent. Sub-Saharan Africa has the greatest unmet surgical
need by population in the world, according to a 2015 report from the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery. Global health for the last two decades has focused on “individual diseases,” the Lancet Commission reported, while surgical care in poor nations has been neglected. Lack of surgical care resulted in almost 17 million deaths in 2010, according to the commission, whereas deaths from HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria accounted for about 4 million.

ELWA had a functioning surgery department when other hospitals closed or suspended operations first in the Ebola outbreak. In the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, other Liberian hospitals halted surgical cases, and Musavuli watched ELWA’s surgical cases go up. Fortunately he had another PAACS graduate working alongside him.

**ONE DAY IN 2019.** Musavuli was prepping for a splenectomy. As he searched for the key to the ultrasound room around the hospital campus, staff and patients would stop him every few feet with questions. He consulted about the case with missionary Dr. Rick Sacra, a fixture at ELWA who survived Ebola himself and oversaw a lot of the education efforts at the hospital. After discussing the condition of the patient’s spleen with Sacra, Musavuli said he wanted to make sure both a resident and an intern were in the operation, because it was a good case for them to see.

With the ultrasound room finally unlocked, Musavuli went to the woman awaiting the splenectomy and asked how she was doing. He said he wanted to do one test before the operation to make sure there weren’t any other problems.

“Can you walk?” he asked. He noticed she was struggling. “I will get you a wheelchair, that is much better.” As he crossed the various wards of recovering patients he said, “We have surgical patients everywhere!”

Musavuli completed his PAACS residency at Galmi, a well-respected but remote mission hospital in Niger. Galmi sits on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, and although it is Christian, serves a mostly Muslim population. Musavuli remembered police and military protected the hospital because of sporadic violence nearby.
Demand for surgery was high, which was good experience for a resident like Musavuli. He recalled patients lying on stretchers and in hallways because the ward was always full.

“We couldn't send them so far and say, ‘Go to other places,’” he said. The patients were poor. “When you face that, you have to do your best, with all the risk. It’s not ideal.”

Niger was a difficult post, with hot desert winds and a hostile environment and potentially deadly scorpions. One such scorpion clung to Musavuli’s towel when he was getting out of the shower and stung him, which was extremely painful, but he was thankful the scorpion hadn’t found his 1-year-old child at the time. His family had nowhere to go at the remote post, and there were no schools for his two children, another common problem for surgeons serving with their families in rural areas. He worked long shifts—early morning until 10 p.m. most nights—then would be on call thereafter.

“That is why all my hair is gone!” he said with a laugh.

Musavuli was among the first surgeons to graduate from Galmi. As he finished his residency, he wanted to go somewhere where the need for a surgeon was high, but also where he could teach. That’s a rare spot, because a hospital needs extra staff and infrastructure to support a teaching program. ELWA had a new teaching program and needed a surgeon. So he, his wife Sifa, and their two children moved 2,800 miles from their home in Democratic Republic of Congo.

Being away from extended family in Congo is another challenge for Musavuli, whose name means “savior” and who was the first doctor in his family. His parents never threw birthday parties for him since any extra money went toward school fees. After living through the Ebola crisis, his family in Goma recently had to evacuate when a volcano erupted there, sending lava flowing. He was anxious, but they and their house were spared.

On a more mundane level, flying from country to country in Africa is difficult and expensive, pandemic or no. He can more easily fly to the United States from Liberia than he can to Congo. When I met him in late 2019, he hadn’t been to Congo in four years. He missed his parents’ 50th wedding anniversary.

He would make more money too if he worked in a government hospital as opposed to a mission hospital,
but he would be doing less work. And integrating faith into his work is important to him.

“When you look at money, you easily lose focus,” he said. “If you nourish your heart with those ideas, easily you will be broken.” He thinks mission hospitals could retain more staff by better supporting surgeons to provide education for their families, helping expats like himself travel to their home countries in Africa, and helping them attend medical conferences.

“As a person you want to fulfill your mission or your dream, but as a Christian there is also what God is expecting from you,” he said. “I say, ‘OK, I’m called to help those in need.’ … We received freely so we need to give freely.”

The ELWA surgery department, being entirely African, represents the PAACS dream, but Musavuli still thinks Western missionary doctors are a necessary part of the medical infrastructure. Surgical care is still so limited across the continent, and teaching hospitals especially need specialists to train in areas like orthopedics or pediatric surgery. A recent PAACS newsletter listed needs for surgical training personnel in its network hospitals across Africa.

“In countries with limited resources, there’s a high need for general doctors, but the need for surgeons is even much higher,” said Musavuli as he sat in an office between surgeries. An intern popped into the room to grab his belongings and left. “He will be a good doctor,” Musavuli said after the door closed.

**BACK IN THE OR,** as Musavuli was working on removing the massive spleen, he taught another intern. The surgery was long. He and the surgical technician discussed the differences between the making of Liberian palm wine and Congolese palm wine. After three hours of careful work, the huge spleen came out. The patient recovered over the coming days. Musavuli said they didn’t have the materials they needed for the surgery, but “we try to manage.”

The first few months at ELWA, Musavuli, a French speaker who is fluent in English, struggled to understand Liberian English, a pidgin English with its own phrases and idioms. The Liberian doctors also understand certain cultural concerns with patients more quickly than he does, but he understands Liberian cultural concerns more easily than an American surgeon.

He also knows the shadow of Ebola that has hung over Congo, and the surgical staff at ELWA had that hanging over them too. Many of them worked in the Ebola units at ELWA and still remember the fear that came with it: Ebola killed operating room staff too.

Oretha Paye, a nurse working in the operating room with Musavuli, watched three nurses die from Ebola in the 2014 outbreak. She continued working even though she was “always afraid,” and she knew it put her family at risk. “This is something we have to do, because this is our calling, and we have to save life,” she said.

When the coronavirus pandemic hit, Musavuli felt that ELWA was well prepared to function because of previous crises like Ebola. The hospital had a lot of personal protective equipment (PPE) stocked up at the beginning. After about three months passed, the hospital began running low because personal protection equipment was in demand around the world, and now the hospital is struggling to keep supplies stocked. Musavuli and his staff use the wrong size gloves for operations regularly. For a time they were low on sutures, he said.

Musavuli’s wife Sifa contracted COVID-19 at one point but recovered. Musavuli himself never tested positive. The hospital had to convert its female ward into a respiratory ward, squeezing patients into other wards. Cases recently have been rising despite little testing, straining ELWA’s oxygen supplies. Meanwhile the number of surgical cases has returned to normal, according to Musavuli.

In August, ELWA was able to begin distributing doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine against COVID-19. “It is a battle, but God will provide with time,” Musavuli said over the phone, at the end of a recent day of surgery. The clatter of hospital activity sounded in the background, and staffers threw questions at him as he prepared to return home for the day.

—Emily Belz is a former WORLD senior reporter
The widow’s might

Make time to enjoy the ones you love, while you have the time

The year my friend Lisa turned 46, she had a new box to check on her tax return, the one that reads “qualifying widow(er) with dependent child.”

Through the years we shared mud pies, Maybelline mascara, and maid of honor duties. Two months after the funeral, we shared a plate of Memphis barbecue. That’s when I noticed her eyes looked a little less bright. Watching your husband die can affect your vision that way, I suppose.

As the waitress filled our water glasses, we talked of 401(k)s and how her mother called three times a day.

“I almost forgot the flute payment,” she admitted. Her daughter was second-chair flute at the largest high school in the state. She was also taking AP biology and AP English, but her grades had slipped a bit that year. She had a good excuse, but the new mom/dad combo sitting across from me wasn’t sympathetic. Lisa was thinking about college and college costs, and I could tell she was going to be tough on her daughter. Then she mentioned the boyfriend.

“Boyfriend?” I looked up, confused.

“Her boyfriend,” Lisa clarified, doing that sighing, headshaking thing she does. She twirled a fork through her potato salad, taking time to weigh her words. The mom/dad combo liked the boyfriend well enough, but really, the daughter needed to focus on taking the ACT again ... Because a 30 wasn’t good enough. So, yeah, I could tell she was going to be tough on her daughter. Then she mentioned the boyfriend.

“I saw the empty chair across from me and tried to remember what he looked like when he was eating. I couldn’t conjure up anything.”

She shook her head and asked me—asked herself—a question.

“I mean, did we really rush through 23 years of meals, and I never even took the time to look at him while he ate?”

Her less-bright eyes looked outside at lunch-hour traffic while I scrambled for the right words. We moved on to in-laws. Lisa got it that she and the granddaughter are their only connection to their son. Them and his truck. Her father-in-law couldn’t help himself when she put the “for sale” sign in the window and bought the truck himself.

More than once she insisted there was nothing to complain about. She should be able to keep the house. Friends were keeping her busy. Her rock-solid faith in the truth of Romans 8:28—that because she is His, God is working all things together for good—was keeping her sane.

She had plenty to do, too, settling into the new normal. They’d already had a roof leak to deal with, and an AC problem. It took forever to get the death certificate. Locking up at night—he always took care of that.

“Having his phone turned off was the hardest thing so far,” she said, staring past me. “I tortured myself by listening to his voicemail greeting.”

We sat silent for a while. The waitress returned—again—so we left a tip and a few bites of barbecue behind. I watched Lisa drive away in the car she was learning to monitor for oil changes. Mine, with gauges I never notice, cranked as always.

Home was still 200 miles away, but I let my husband know I had something important to do when I got there. I wanted to watch him eat.
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LYING NEAR A CREEK BANK in Vietnam, Pfc. David Harker, 22, thought he was about to die.

In 1968, while patrolling in the Hiep Duc Valley of Quang Nam province just south of Da Nang, Harker and about 15 other U.S. infantrymen volunteered to search for North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers who had fired at their unit’s supply helicopter. While crossing a river, Harker heard a mortar shell slide down its tube and realized they were under...
attack. Mortar fire drove the patrol into an ambush. Harker and five others made it to cover behind the creek bank, but a rice paddy devoid of cover separated them from their unit.

Watching NVA soldiers advance, Harker remembered a verse that calmed him: “To live is Christ; to die is gain.”

Born in Lynchburg, Va., to Christian parents, Harker played football and baseball growing up and attended Virginia Tech. During a semester off from college, he came home from work at a paper mill to a draft notice. Harker had no strong feelings about the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War but soon boarded a plane to Vietnam. He had been in country for a few months before the ambush with D company, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment of the 196th Infantry Brigade.

Over several hours, the NVA troops closed in and killed or captured all six men except one who played dead and escaped (the NVA were more interested in taking his watch than his pulse, he told Harker later). Harker tried to bury his M16 rifle in the creek to keep the enemy from using it, and while NVA soldiers searched the battlefield for unused ammunition, he attacked his guard. The officer stabbed Harker with his bayonet, but Harker grabbed the man’s pistol and fired it—only to find there wasn’t a round in the chamber. “When I looked up, it looked like the whole North Vietnamese Army was standing there,” Harker said.

They marched Harker and the others to a prison camp in the jungle, surrounded by sharpened bamboo spikes to prevent escape. Harker sang hymns on the march to keep his spirits up—“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.” In the camp, guards counted the prisoners every 30 minutes. Healthy prisoners marched under guard to gather manioc root to supplement their rice rations.

Shortly before Christmas, the Vietnamese interpreter the captives called Mr. Home brought a little green Gideon New Testament the NVA had taken from a captured or killed American soldier. He told the men they could choose some words from the book to celebrate their holiday. He forgot to retrieve the New Testament, so Harker hid it in the thatch roof and read it often. “There were no distractions, no telephone, no taxes to pay or family to take care of,” Harker said. He looked up the reference of the verse that had calmed him before his capture: Philippians 1:21.

With little medical care, malaria, and infected wounds, many prisoners died. Denny Hammond, a formerly vibrant young man Harker called a “Marine’s Marine,” was sick and hardly able to leave his bamboo bed when he asked Harker to tell him about his Christian faith. They went down near the latrine where the guards wouldn’t come, and Harker walked him through the plan of salvation included at the back of every Gideon Testament: God loves you, all are sinners, God’s remedy for sin. “He said, ‘David, I believe what you’re telling me,’ and so I prayed with him,” Harker said. Hammond died three days later.

After five years and two months in POW camps, including the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” in North Vietnam, Harker was released in 1973 when the war ended. He returned to Virginia, finished college, married his high-school sweetheart, worked as a parole officer, and raised two children.

About 14 years ago, he joined the Gideons International, a group of Christian men who distribute Bibles like the testament Harker had in Vietnam. He has distributed Bibles and New Testaments on college campuses and at fairgrounds and placed them in the nightstands of a Lynchburg hotel. Four years ago, he met in Florida with six men he’d been with in the jungle POW camps and gave each a Gideon Bible.

“My love for [God] has grown so much over the years, and that experience in Vietnam tempered it,” Harker said. “God’s blessed me, and I continue serving.”
WHITE TIC TAC SHAPE whizzing over the ocean. A hovering, green-tinted pyramid. A black dot, sliding back and forth above the horizon before diving into the sea. Navy pilots laughing, cursing, and trying to make sense of the images on their tracking screens.

This UFO footage filmed by the military, including two videos leaked in 2017 and officially acknowledged by the Pentagon in 2019, hasn’t proved the existence of little green men from outer space. But they have helped renew interest in UFOs, and in 2021 a Pentagon report confirmed the military can’t identify all the flying objects it detects.

The Pentagon says the unknown, unpredictable objects could pose security and safety threats, especially if they are technology developed by potentially hostile countries.

So late last year Congress established an office to study what the Pentagon calls Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, or UAPs. Some UFO enthusiasts doubt the office will be transparent with its findings, but it is another step toward the mainstream for UFOs. Whether aliens exist or not, some Christian researchers say Christians should pay attention.

The Pentagon’s report in June included 143 unexplained reports. Eighteen of those were objects that appeared to be moving without visible propulsion or much faster than the capability of any technology the United States knows about. The Pentagon announced a task force for more →
study, but spokesman John Kirby cautioned reporters at a press conference not to expect frequent updates.

“We will certainly continue to be as transparent as we can,” Kirby said. “But I don’t want to leave you with the impression that there’ll be sort of a regular drumbeat of some kind of report that gets posted on a website every couple months.”

But Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and other lawmakers introduced an amendment to the annual defense spending bill that requires the Pentagon, along with the Director of National Intelligence, to establish an office with clearer responsibilities. It will collect and analyze reports, look for connections to other nations, evaluate any threat, and report to Congress yearly.

UFO researchers and enthusiasts praised Congress for establishing the office, but some are wary any findings will stay classified. Ron James is a spokesman for the Mutual UFO Network, which collects reports of UFO sightings. “It’s nice that we are having this discussion in the mainstream,” James said. But he lamented that the final defense bill left out a civilian panel originally included in the new office, which might have added transparency.

Others criticized the office’s limited scope. Christopher Mellon, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, wrote that Congress should empower the office to adapt equipment to detect UAPs, rather than waiting for accidental sightings. Without authority and funding for thorough research, Mellon wrote, “the mere establishment of a small … UAP office is unlikely to accomplish much.”

The Pentagon’s new office is unlikely to declare evidence of alien intelligence anytime soon. But Lucas Mix, an astrobiologist with the Equipping Christian Leadership in an Age of Science project, argues studying unknown objects and even searching for alien life doesn’t need to rattle Christians.

“Our encounter with that which is not about us is fundamentally always an opportunity to think about God,” Mix said. “I have no idea what’s out there, which is why I think it’s worth looking. But whatever it is, I think it’s God at work.”

N 2021, THE NATIONAL CENTER for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) processed 29.3 million reports of child sexual abuse material, including videos and images. The group now fields an average 80,000 daily reports on its cyber tip line. The majority of the reports are filed by a handful of tech companies—including Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat.

Advocates who fight online pornography, also known as child sex abuse material, say that too many tech com-
panies are failing to detect, report, or remove such content. Lawmakers in February advanced a bill, the EARN IT Act, to hold tech companies accountable to report abusive material. But opponents worry the bill would erode civil liberties.

Despite efforts to curb abusive material posted online, it has proliferated. In 1998, the cyber tip line run by NCMEC, a federally funded nonprofit, collected about 4,500 reports of child sexual exploitation. By 2014, the number of reports reached 1 million. That growth has intensified the debate over how best to safeguard young victims without eroding user privacy and free speech.

First introduced in 2020, the EARN IT Act—short for Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies—cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee on Feb. 10 with unanimous bipartisan support and backing from law enforcement, child welfare, and anti-trafficking groups.

At a Feb. 8 congressional briefing, NCMEC senior vice president and general counsel Yiota Souras said many tech companies are nonresponsive when victims or advocates request they remove exploitative content from their platforms. Meanwhile, online predators find loopholes or use encryption and anonymization to create digital hiding places, as a 2019 *New York Times* report found. (Tech companies are not legally required to look for child sexual abuse material, but if it is discovered, they must report it.)

The EARN IT Act would put tech companies at greater risk for lawsuits over posts containing child sexual abuse material. It would also establish a national 16-member commission including abuse survivors, law enforcement, and tech industry experts to determine best practices to confront the problem.

“The modern internet is infested with stomach-churning images of children who have been brutally assaulted and exploited, and who are haunted by a lifetime of pain after these photographs and videos are circulated online,” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., the bill’s co-sponsor. “Millions of these horrifying images go unidentified and unreported...because there are so few consequences when those companies look the other way.”

Critics of the EARN IT Act, ranging from LGBT activists to libertarian groups, argue that scanning for abusive material could compromise user rights to privacy and encryption. Joe Mullin, a policy analyst for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said the bill would “pave the way for a massive new surveillance system, run by private companies.”

One petition opposing the EARN IT Act has garnered nearly 600,000 signatures.

Apple faced similar backlash when it announced in August 2021 a feature to detect and report known child sexual abuse material to law enforcement. The company delayed the feature and subsequently removed mention of it from its child safety webpage in December, according to MacRumors. Apple’s newest update to its software includes a setting that warns U.S. users under age 18 before they send or receive a nude photo, a feature intended to combat online child sexual exploitation.

Jake Roberson, vice president and communications director at the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), said the EARN IT Act encourages tech companies to take a proactive role in curbing exploitative content. He said many companies claim ignorance or immunity under Section 230, part of the Communications Decency Act that protects tech companies from liability for content posted by website and app users.

The NCOSE Law Center filed a federal lawsuit against Twitter in January on behalf of a teenager who learned at age 16 that sexually graphic videos of himself, obtained by an online predator using fraud and coercion when the boy was 13, had been posted on the social media platform. Twitter denied the teen’s and his mother’s requests to remove the videos, stating the content did not violate its policies. The videos accumulated 167,000 views before law enforcement officers convinced Twitter to take them down.

“We have a much bigger problem on our hands,” Roberson said. “The reality is the steps that have been implemented have not been done at a commensurate rate to the problem.”

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Hard rocks of reality
The emperor has no clothes: illustrated

For the younger generation, who have heard the expression but not the story, here is the story:

Once there was an emperor who loved clothes; he was obsessed. A couple of swindlers saw an opportunity and told him they could create for him the most magnificent suit ever—finery so magical, in fact, that it would be invisible to any of his officials or subjects who were not fit for their posts, or who were very stupid.

The swindlers went to great lengths, burning the midnight oil while working at looms with thread that did not really exist, to weave fabric that did not really exist. The emperor personally came to check on their progress, and of course saw nothing on the looms (because there was nothing there). But greatly alarmed to think that his failure to see the cloth might mean he was unfit or stupid, he pretended to be delighted.

His officials, one after another, also praised the clothes they could not see, some going into great detail about its wonderful fabric, colors, and design. Soon the whole court was exclaiming over the emperor’s wardrobe.

The swindlers urged the emperor to show off his completed raiment in a parade, persuading him to take off his regular clothing and helping him on with his new trousers, coat, and mantle. The officials following behind him in the procession pretended to pick up his train and carry it. The citizens along the road pretended to exult in the spectacular display.

Then suddenly a child in the crowd said, “But the emperor has nothing on!”

Everyone was dumbfounded, and a great division broke out among the citizenry. (Here is where I take liberties.) One third of the people continued to say the emperor had clothes on, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, for they feared to fall afoul of the official narrative. One third had never believed the lie to begin with and were now emboldened to say so. Another third had actually come to believe the story they had so often retold.

There are many applications of this parable in our day. One close to home concerns “transfemale” Lia Thomas on the University of Pennsylvania female swim team who is cleaning the clocks of rival school teams—and of his own teammates. (I will say “his” because this is in accordance with reality.) A middling athlete while on the Ivy League school’s male team for two years before realizing he was a woman, Thomas is now a superstar when competing with girls. In Ohio he finished the 1,650-yard race 38 seconds before the second-place finisher.

Eyeing a photo of the towering, broad-shouldered, square-jawed Thomas posing with his teammates in his girl’s spandex dive skins, I was reminded of something but couldn’t put my finger on it. Then it hit me: Feathers McGraw! The evil penguin in “The Wrong Trousers,” a 1993 Wallace and Gromit claymation episode in which eccentric inventor Wallace and his dog are taken in by a criminal mastermind penguin posing as a chicken. The penguin’s disguise? A red rubber glove worn on his head. It is apparently enough to fool Wallace.

Ghent University (Belgium) professor Mattias Desmet describes a phenomenon he calls “mass formation psychosis” that occurs in societies under certain specific conditions, in which “the individual disappears, and a collective becomes predominant.” It doesn’t make a difference whether the individuals are very intelligent or not intelligent ... “everybody becomes equally stupid.”

The Bible just calls it a “strong delusion” (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12) or “debased mind” (Romans 1:28), and says this confusion is the end state of those who refuse the truth.

Sixteen members of Penn’s swim and dive team penned an anonymous letter complaining of Thomas’ presence on the team. The signatories are probably as woke a group of people as your typical Ivy Leaguer, and it is interesting that none go so far afield of the required narrative as to deny that Thomas is a woman.

But sometimes, thank God, ideology runs up against the hard rocks of reality.
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A CALM BEFORE THE STORM
Canadian police shut down the trucker protest

TWO DEMONSTRATORS (pictured above) embraced outside the Parliament building in Ottawa, Canada, on Feb. 17 as police massed in the Canadian capital. The next day authorities began arresting Canadians taking part in the weeks-long protest led by Canadian truckers against COVID rules and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The move against the truck protest was one of the biggest police enforcement actions in Canada’s history. Authorities arrested at least 170 people on Feb. 18 and Feb. 19 and towed nearly two dozen vehicles. They were acting under the Emergencies Act of 1988. The Canadian government invoked the law for the first time in order to deal with trucker protests that had blocked bridges and roads and disrupted the day-to-day lives of people in Ottawa. Truckers began leaving in large numbers on Feb. 19 as the protest wound down. With the protest disbursed, the Canadian Parliament voted on Feb. 21 to extend emergency powers in case the trucker protest restarts.
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