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Alexander Vaughs, 64, traveled for two days from Kyiv to Medyka, Poland, with his daughter and grandchildren; photo by Lucy Young/Evening Standard/eyevine/Redux

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—Jenny Lind Schmitt, whose story begins on page 30

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN
FEB. 26, P. 24: May God continue to bless Janie B. Cheaney and her husband on their “highways to Zion” in the days ahead. Please don’t consider retiring yet, you have much more to say!


I absolutely loved Janie B. Cheaney’s column. I wonder how many sublime events we will experience at our destination that we can now metaphorically and comparatively just barely enjoy?

Todd Swanson/Chaska, Minn.

Janie B. Cheaney captured I-79 through West Virginia exactly right! In 2013, my wife and I drove the road southwest from Morgantown to Charleston. I have been all over the country, but I have never seen anything like it. Charleston was like an oasis!

John Rafferty/Denver, Colo.

GRAVE WORDS
FEB. 26, P. 36: Kim Henderson’s column on epitaph fascination was … well … fascinating. I recently added my own epitaph to my will. I want to provoke everyone who reads my tombstone to pause, scratch their heads, and then look to Scripture to decipher its meaning: “Karen Davis / 1958- / Buried alive (John 11:25-26).”

Karen Davis/Exton, Pa.

THE LAST LEAF
FEB. 26, P. 70: Andrée Seu Peterson writes real things about real people. Her column about her father made a deep impression on me and brought tears to my eyes as I remembered my own father, who also felt lonely and “deserted.” It touched my heart.

Brenda Oquist/Osceola, Neb.

NEW SERIES, FAMILIAR STORY
FEB. 26, P. 27: WORLD’s review of The Gilded Age states that so far “the first episodes have been pretty tame” regarding racy or mature content. My husband and I watched part of a later episode on HBO that your reviewer likely did not see. There was a scene with female nudity that lasted 30 seconds or so.

Becky Rubio/Oak Park, Ill.

FANTASY FAIL
FEB. 26, P. 29: There was one critical ingredient missing from the disaster of Moonfall: Tom Hanks.

Casey Stark/Savannah, Ga.

THE WORLD, THE HOUSE, AND THE DEVIL
FEB. 26, P. 33: All four book reviews on the page ended with the warning, “Caution: obscenities.” Why would a Biblically based publication recommend four books in one issue that require such a notice?

Carole Hutchings/Rathdrum, Idaho

CULTURAL CONSUMPTION: WE NEED LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS
A hefty portion of your magazine is devoted to the culture of consuming ungodly media. How many years do you plan to have your reviewers dredge through fields of garbage looking for a diamond in the rough? The world needs light. We don’t need more windows into darkness.

Gil Soucy/Saint John Plantation, Maine

Thank you for your honest critiques of movies. As a 15-year-old, I enjoy movies, but it can be difficult to know which movies are worth my time because of all of the over-the-top language, sex, and violence. I also appreciate your commentaries regarding the worldly philosophies found within these films.

Silas Dobson/Galien, Mich.

CORRECTION
The gold standard is actually green.

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NOTES FROM THE CEO

WJI IS THE FUTURE OF WORLD MAGAZINE
World Journalism Institute extends Biblical journalism training to Europe for the first time

IT’S SPRING, AND HERE AT WORLD our imagination turns to thoughts of the World Journalism Institute (WJI). As I write, we’re making final preparations for our WJI mid-career course here in Asheville. We’ve just closed applications for our main college-level course which, as always, will be held at Dordt College in May. We’ll begin accepting students for that course shortly.

For the many WORLD staff who invest time and effort working with the students, WJI is as rewarding as it is exhausting. It’s easily the most anticipated time of the year and, in all seriousness, it’s just plain fun. Also in all seriousness, it’s an opportunity to help aspiring Christian journalists understand how to produce Biblically sound journalism for the benefit of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Over WJI’s 23 years, the program has staffed WORLD and dozens of other journalism outlets. WJI’s hundreds of alumni now work in almost too many newsrooms to track, and almost all of WORLD’s reporters and contributors have received WJI training.

This year we launch what we’ve planned to be a dramatic expansion of the programs of WJI. A key word there is “planned,” because we may make our plans, but it’s God who establishes our steps. With that in mind, our planned first step is our first-ever European course in Krakow, Poland, later this summer.

Understandably, we’re waiting to see what God will establish regarding that course, but we’re moving forward unless He shuts the door. Equally understandably, we are feeling a special urgency to train more Christian journalists in Europe. When we began planning, we had no idea what a hot spot Poland would become. All we knew was we needed more reporters bringing Biblical objectivity to bear in Europe.

Our goal everywhere is to produce more thoughtful Christian journalists for WORLD and the many other organizations that employ WJI-trained journalists.

WJI already has expanded its programs to include serious training beyond journalism for magazines, newspapers, and websites to journalism for podcasts, radio, and video. Lord willing, that expansion will continue.

WORLD readers have been the primary supporters of WJI since Joel Belz and Bob Case launched it in 1999. It’s true that the magazine you’re holding in your hands would be a lot thinner were it not for WJI alumni. But the whole world—not just WORLD—has benefited from the work of WJI. With your help, the world will see more of that work this year and in the future.
Ukraine is in a crisis which is changing day by day. Only God knows what the solution will be. But we praise Him that He has given us channels to send help to our Christian brothers and sisters there. They are in desperate need of food, clothing, and other basic humanitarian aid as they are forced to flee their homes. And most of Ukraine is still facing winter cold, with freezing temperatures. We are committed to helping Ukrainian Christians for as long as it takes. Will you help our Christian brothers and sisters?
Covering the frog story

It’s easy to miss the power behind human events

I dreamed a few weeks back that I found myself working away almost 4,000 years ago as editor-in-chief of the mainstream daily newspaper in Cairo, Egypt. I dream a lot—but rarely this far back into history. But if you’re even a casual student of history or of the Bible, you might appreciate what was going on.

My wife Carol and I had been reading through the Old Testament book of Exodus as a devotional study every morning. We’d also been thinking a lot about the gifted people who have so regularly and faithfully come to our various publications, broadcasts, etc., being “journalized” by World News Group. Maybe it was the combination that is important to you readers and listeners. Maybe it was that combination that had launched my dreams.

A good “dream machine” includes some generalists and some specialists. And sometimes, in God’s providence, it even takes a combination of combinations. Fairly often, here at World News Group, we do our work in teams of both specialists and generalists. Some times, both. So it intrigues me to think how we might have covered an event like the Egyptian plagues.

Suppose, for the time being, that we’re sitting at the desk of the editor-in-chief in Cairo at the time of the Exodus plagues. How do we begin building our staff? We should probably start with the big story—with what everywhere in Egypt is being called the “frog story.” Who knows the world’s top expert on frogs? Has this happened in other countries? Have so many calamities happened simultaneously in just one culture? Do we have to send our staff there to be briefed, or can we bring them here?

I’ll tell you, though, what really bothers me. There are enough facets to this one story—that’s the story of the frogs—that it could take our whole staff to do it well. It’s a big deal—a very big deal. Yet at the very same time there are a dozen other equally important stories. The Bible, of course, lists 10 distinct plagues.

There are similar things happening with atmosphere-related issues like the Nile River turning to blood or daylight turning to pitch dark. There are also big but unpredictable things happening to animals as different as insects and livestock.

Every one of these developments calls on a reporting team 10 times as big as the one I’ve got. Who is more important to our assignment—a generalist who is both smart and wise about everything in all these various fields of expertise, or a series of specialists?

But we may ultimately find that the most glaringly missing piece from this human puzzle is not just one more story or picture, but is instead the infallible explanation of everything that is already there by the One who created it all in the first place. The whole purpose of the plagues in Egypt was to drive at least two nations to God—each in its own way. For the Egyptians, it was to be a first-time face-to-face acquaintance. For the people of Israel, it was to be a humbling return.

It’s still tempting to try to explain all the details of human events as they unfold. Too often, though, our sophisticated efforts simply make the problem harder. The only thing that glues these various plagues together is the power that is behind them, and the more I hear about them, the more I am reminded that that power is actually a Superpower—whose judgments are just and whose mercies are more—who wants us to know and love Him personally and to worship Him.
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N MARCH 11, A TEXAS JUDGE temporarily blocked a state agency from investigating parents who helped their children obtain hormonal and surgical transgender interventions. The same day, state Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican, appealed the ruling and said the investigations would proceed.

“This fight will continue up to the Supreme Court,” Paxton tweeted that night.

The legal and political battle in Texas will test the state’s controversial attempt to protect vulnerable children from transgender medical interventions and from parents or other adults who play an active role in helping them obtain treatments with harmful and irreversible effects.

A TEXAS-SIZED FIGHT

The state will defend its new law on transgender interventions

by Mary Jackson
The state has been a hot spot in the gender wars since Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, issued an unprecedented directive on Feb. 22 classifying so-called “sex change” procedures—including puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and invasive surgeries—as child abuse. Abbott’s broadly worded directive instructs the state Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to “conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of any reported instances of these abusive procedures.” That includes parents of a child “who is subjected to these abusive gender-transitioning procedures” and licensed facilities that provide them.

Abbott said Texas law imposes reporting requirements on licensed professionals “who have direct contact with children who may be subject to abuse, including doctors, nurses and teachers, and provides criminal penalties for failure to report such child abuse.”

Investigations across the state were temporarily halted after Judge Amy Clark Meachum in Travis County ruled Abbott’s directive exceeded his authority and violated the state constitution. Parents who were being investigated for helping their 16-year-old son obtain puberty-blocking drugs had challenged the mandate.

Marissa Gonzales, a spokesperson for the state DFPS, declined to answer my questions about how many investigations are underway or whether the agency resumed its inquiries after the state appealed Judge Meachum’s injunction. “The best way to describe our posture toward the investigations is that we will continue to follow the law,” Gonzales said.

In response to Abbott’s directive, the Texas Children’s Hospital of Houston halted its “gender affirming services” to “safeguard our health care professionals and impacted families from potential criminal legal ramifications,” it said.

Four days prior to Abbott’s directive, Paxton released a 13-page nonbinding opinion addressing why hormonal and surgical interventions should legally constitute child abuse. Paxton noted Texas family code broadly defines child abuse as any action that may cause a child to suffer a physical, mental, or emotional injury resulting in an observable and material impairment in the child’s growth, development, or psychological functioning. The opinion lists harmful and irreversible effects of puberty-suppressing drugs, cross-sex hormones, and invasive surgeries. Many interventions impair fertility or permanently sterilize children, which Paxton said violates their “constitutional right to procreate.”

Paxton also cited the lack of scientific evidence that hormonal or surgical interventions improve long-term mental health outcomes or reduce rates of suicide among children with gender dysphoria.

While suicide risk is higher among children who identify as transgender, recent studies have not proven it lowers after transition procedures. Transgender youth are more likely to suffer from other conditions such as depression and autism that increase suicide risk. One recent study found no difference in suicide rates among adolescents on the waitlist at the United Kingdom’s Gender Identity Development Service and those undergoing treatment.

Most childhood onset of gender dysphoria resolves naturally, with 61 percent to 98 percent of children growing comfortable with their biological sex during puberty, according to the Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine.

Aaron Reitz, Texas deputy attorney general for legal strategy, said an evidence-based approach is being “lost in the political furor that has come out in the wake of General Paxton’s opinion and Gov. Abbott’s directive.”

Greg Abbott and Ken Paxton confer during a March 10 conference in Weslaco, Texas.
FUEL TO THE FIRE

Over 150,000 people will die today without Christ.

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Disney employees throughout the United States threatened to walk out in March, claiming CEO Bob Chapek did not respond quickly enough against a recent Florida bill that bans sexual orientation instruction for kindergarten students up to third grade. But the demonstrations were mostly limited to a few hundred workers at Disney offices in Burbank, Calif., and Hollywood stars who shared support on social media. Opponents have labeled the Parental Rights in Education bill the “Don’t Say Gay” bill (although the bill doesn’t contain the word) and said it demonizes LGBTQ people. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is expected to sign the bill soon, criticized Chapek for bending to cancel culture by pulling political contributions in the state. Employees said Chapek should have acted earlier against the bill. He apologized for not publicly condemning it before it passed the state legislature.

Genocide
Secretary of State Antony Blinken made the long-anticipated declaration of genocide in Myanmar on March 21 at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The museum features an exhibit on the Rohingya minority, who faced a deadly military operation that sent about 730,000 refugees into neighboring Bangladesh. The military now controls Myanmar, also known as Burma, after a coup last year. The move could potentially heighten international pressure to bring the ruling junta to justice. The junta has killed more than 1,600 people and detained nearly 10,000 others since its coup began in February 2021.

Sexual Harassment
Eight female employees of Christianity Today have alleged that former editor-in-chief Mark Galli touched them inappropriately or made inappropriate comments to them, according to a story published in March by Christianity Today. The report said that former advertising director Olatokunbo Olawoye had also been accused of sexual harassment. Reporters discovered a dozen firsthand accounts of harassment in Human Resources records spanning more than a decade. Olawoye was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to three years in prison for traveling to have sex with a minor. Galli retired in 2019.

Hunter’s Laptop
The New York Times has finally admitted Hunter Biden’s laptop is real—more than a year after DailyMail.com and other media outlets authenticated its contents with top experts. When The New York Post published files from the laptop before the 2020 presidential election, the Times cast doubt on its provenance, linked it to Russian disinformation, and made no public attempt to obtain and verify it. But buried 1,200 words into a story this week about a federal probe into the president’s son, the Times finally acknowledged the emails were legitimate. Reporters referenced emails “obtained from a cache of files that appears to have come from a laptop abandoned by Mr. Biden in a Delaware repair shop,” adding that they “were authenticated by people familiar with them and with the investigation.”
THE NUMBER OF NATIONS ON EARTH that still permit commercial whale fishing. But comments from an Icelandic minister to a local newspaper indicate the North Atlantic nation is ready to end the practice, leaving just Japan and Norway as the only commercial whaling nations in the world. The fisheries minister wrote in the Morgunbladid newspaper on March 4 that the practice no longer makes sense. “Why should Iceland take the risk of keeping up whaling, which has not brought any economic gain, in order to sell a product for which there is hardly any demand?” he asked. Once abundant throughout the world’s oceans, many whale species were hunted to the precipice of extinction in the 19th and 20th centuries. With whaling banned since 1986, the ocean’s megafauna are now making a comeback.

2,300
The number of Southern Hemisphere blue whales estimated by the International Whaling Commission in 1998—a fraction of previous numbers, but now a growing population.

661
The heft (in tons) brought in by Norwegian whalers in 2021, according to Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

40,000
The number of humpback whales in Australian waters today, according to the nation’s environment minister. At one point, only 1,500 remained.

360,000
The number of tourists who traveled to Iceland’s North Atlantic waters to whale watch in 2019, according to the AFP, before pandemic restrictions curtailed the tourism industry.
“My soul belongs to the Lord and my body and my honor to my country.”

Heavyweight champion OLEKSANDR USYK, after joining a Ukrainian defense battalion.

“She said more Ukrainians wanted to join us but they now have guns in their hands instead of violins.”

KERENZA PEACOCK, quoting Ukrainian violinist Mariia Klymenko, who said her brothers were fighting while she was recording. Peacock is a British violinist who put together the video of 94 violinists from 29 countries playing a Ukrainian folk song.

“This wasn’t a protest. This was physical intimidation and bullying that took place in the presence of Yale administration.”

KRISTEN WAGGONER, general counsel at the Alliance Defending Freedom, who was an invited guest on a bipartisan panel at Yale Law School in March when more than 100 protesting students stormed in and disrupted it.

“The TV industry and the movie industry are hurting us ... because they often show pictures of robots that are weaponized, and people think that’s how all robots are.”

Capt. MICHAEL LEO about the New York City Fire Department’s plans to use robotic dogs.

“To be the leader of the world is to be the leader of peace.”

President VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY of Ukraine in a virtual address to the U.S. Congress.
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!

Italian judge confiscates church bells for tolling too often, then returns them

by John Dawson

An Italian judge has given a church its bells back after confiscating them following complaints from locals that they rang too loudly. Italian locals in Dolina, a town with a substantial Slovenian minority, began complaining about the bells from the Slovenian congregation at Sant’Ulderico after pandemic restrictions went into effect. “It was bam-bam, bam-bam all day long,” protest organizer Mauro Zerial told The Guardian. Zerial said he counted 4,650 chimes in a single week, including 70 bell chimes to the tune of “Ave Maria” at 6 a.m. on Sundays. Eventually an Italian judge took the bells, then returned them in January with a warning not to play them. Lawmakers from Slovenia have appealed to the European Commission to force Italian authorities to allow the bells to ring freely.
MOOSE ON THE LOOSE
Police in a Boston suburb needed a pair of tranquilizer darts to down a loose moose wandering the town on Feb. 22. Citizens phoned police after spotting the 600-pound juvenile plodding through Marlboro, Mass. Environmental Police responded, firing two tranquilizer darts to bring the adult female down. State wildlife officials say moose are drawn to neighborhoods because of the ornamental vegetation. Once abundant in Massachusetts until the 1700s, the animal’s population has climbed to about 1,000 statewide.

CALLING OUT CALLERS
A heroic Texas man says he’s earned $75,000 by suing telemarketers. Dan Graham of Austin, Texas, said he placed his cell phone number on the National Do Not Call registry after receiving sometimes up to 24 robocalls a day for auto warranties, insurance, and credit card services. But rather than hang up like most people, Graham stayed on the phone, eventually learning the name of the companies who were pester him. Filing complaints with the Better Business Bureau and the Federal Trade Commission got him nowhere. So last April Graham began taking the companies to court for violating the federal Telephone Consumer Protection Act. As of March, 11 months later, Graham said he’d settled about 50 small claims cases against companies employing robocalls, netting him a nice pile of money in settlements.

WELL DONE
A horse that fell down a 15-foot well on a Washington farm has been dragged back to the surface and appears no worse for wear. Karl Lang, a farmer in the Puget Sound region, said his daughter noticed their horse Blaze missing on March 2. After a short search, the horse was spotted at the bottom of a concrete well. “Luckily he went down heinie-first,” Lang told KING-TV. “If he had gone down any other way, he wouldn’t be alive.” Local firefighters, including some from Whidbey Island Naval Air Station, formulated a plan for rescuing the horse. Rescuers sedated the animal, affixed a harness, and used an excavator to lift the beast to safety. A veterinarian called out by Lang said the animal suffered only minor injuries.

DEPUTY BILLY GOAT
Henry County, Va., Sheriff’s deputies got an assist from a helpful goat while pursuing a suspect on Feb. 13. As soon as Deputy David Parnell told a man he was under arrest, the unnamed suspect fled on foot, racing through a field toward a nearby woods. Parnell and his partner gave chase, and then they were joined by an unlikely helper. “A goat from the property joined Deputy Parnell,” a sheriff’s spokesman told the Martinsville Bulletin. When the suspect entered the woods, Parnell held back, but the goat continued the pursuit, eventually flushing the suspect from the tree line and into the custody of Parnell’s partner.
Mind over matter

C.S. Lewis foresaw the corruption of the university

JUST AS LEVITICUS is the graveyard of many a Bible reading plan, That Hideous Strength is the Waterloo of many a C.S. Lewis fan. “I can’t get through it!” they say. I get it; the last volume of Lewis’ space trilogy can be perplexing and frustrating. The trilogy began with a straightforward sci-fi tale of a university professor kidnapped and transported to Mars (Out of the Silent Planet). In Perelandra, the same professor is conveyed—voluntarily this time—to Venus, where he participates in a replay of the original temptation story.

But That Hideous Strength begins with a dissatisfied graduate student and her social-climbing husband in a stuffy academic world resembling Oxford. Professor Ransom is nowhere in sight; petty professorial politics consume the opening chapters. What gives?

Even though the story takes longer than it needs to connect the dots and start building tension, in my opinion it’s worth the effort. Lewis foresaw the corruption of the university, the rise of the expert class, and the marriage of science and politics.

But some of his narrative devices seemed far-fetched in the early 1980s when I attempted a second reading. The university becomes host to the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE), whose ultimate goal is to eradicate organic life processes. This amounts to eradicating organic life itself and replacing it with something cleaner, leaner, and more manageable.

If anything, American culture in the ‘80s revealed in organic life, especially where blood and guts and sex were concerned. But subtle forces were at work even then that are oozing out of the many cracks in our social order now.

SUPERCOMPUTERS WILL KNOW MORE ABOUT US THAN WE KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES—WHAT WE THINK, HOW WE FEEL.

Mind over matter might serve as shorthand for the anti-humanist aims of the NICE. It’s represented by a literal “mind,” which they have reanimated in the head of an executed criminal. The scientists believe they have created a functioning brain that thinks and speaks: their first step toward “taking charge of our destiny.” The real facilitators of the project know that the Head is the unthinking host to a supernatural entity. They aim to unite science and magic to produce unprecedented power.

Not so far-fetched after all, when “science” foresees unprecedented power around the nearest corner. “History began when humans invented gods and will end when humans become gods.” So says Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who has made a name for himself as a philosopher and futurist. He predicts that within 200 years what we call “human” will be unrecognizable as our species. Humans will become the product of intelligent design—not God’s, but ours.

He builds that disturbing prospect on neuroscience, which he believes will master the human brain in a few decades, reaping an unimaginable wealth of data. With this information, supercomputers will know more about us than we know about ourselves, predicting—and eventually controlling—what we think, how we feel, and what we do.

Harari calls this “hacking humans,” and admits it makes him uneasy. Who will own the data? So far, big tech companies do, and that’s not ideal. Big government would be no better, and the scientific community is too fractured and disorganized to take charge. When pressed to give an answer at the 2018 World Economic Forum, Harari had to say, “I don’t know.” Which may be the only response to the problem as he posed it.

Harari, and the fictional scientists of the NICE, make one huge assumption: that matter in motion explains everything. Things that seem immaterial, such as human consciousness, are in their view the invisible products of physical processes in the brain. But there is no direct evidence for this. It’s a prior assumption of the sort that makes thought possible (for every thought begins with an assumption). Given humanity’s spotty record, no thinking materialist could be sanguine about its power to hack the human psyche.

But here’s more prior knowledge: that the materialistic, deterministic future predicted by Harari is in the hands of One who laughs at its presumptions. And has the final say.
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Kyle and Colleen, members since 2011
PIXAR’S LATEST ANIMATED FILM, *Turning Red*, is the kind of kids’ movie adult critics will love, but many parents will be less than thrilled with it. Maybe that’s why Disney opted to skip *Turning Red*’s theatrical release, sending it straight to Disney+. Disney knows what sells, and many parents won’t be buying what this movie offers.

*Turning Red* tells the story of Meilin Lee (Rosalie Chiang), a middle-school girl living in Toronto. Meilin belongs to a Chinese Canadian family that owns a small temple dedicated to ancestor worship, a religious practice based on the belief that the spirits of deceased ancestors will look after the family. After school Meilin helps her mother...
Ming (Sandra Oh) clean the temple and give tours, but teenage Meilin is torn between honoring her parents and having fun with her friends.

One morning, things get weird for Meilin. After an emotionally charged night involving her overprotective mother, Meilin wakes up to find she’s been transformed into a giant red panda. It turns out Meilin’s parents have been hiding a family curse from her. Being a giant red panda in middle school leads to high jinks as well as embarrassing situations, and Meilin’s relationship with Ming suffers as she leans into her panda reality.

For more than 25 years, Pixar has been the gold standard for animated films in both storytelling and technical execution. Turning Red continues this tradition, in some ways, but ultimately the film abandons what made Pixar special.

The animation and world-building are superb, and director Domee Shi—who is Chinese Canadian—includes many authentic, yet subtle details of Chinese culture. The temple isn’t just a place of worship—it’s also a gathering place for the community and a gift shop for tourists. Chinese dads know how to cook, toilet paper is a multipurpose commodity, and no one likes the number four.

Also, millennials will feel nostalgia for their middle-school years while watching this film set in 2002. There are no smartphones. Instead, kids carry Tamagotchi digital pets. And true to the era, Meilin and her friends are obsessed with a boy band called 4*Town. (Billie Eilish and her brother Finneas O’Connell wrote the songs, and they nailed the sound of the music industry at the height of the boy-band craze.)

But for all the things Turning Red gets right, it contains other things that will make many parents cringe. The PG film contains some instances of edgy, though not particularly strong, language, and not every family enjoys jokes about menstruation, though one could argue they make sense in a movie about a teenage girl undergoing bodily changes.

In Turning Red, the panda serves as a double metaphor. The panda symbolizes puberty: Meilin is growing up, and both she and her mother struggle to cope with her movement toward adulthood. The panda and Meilin’s relationship with Ming also symbolize how immigrants must navigate two cultures, both of which claim to be their home culture. These could have been fruitful metaphors, but Domee Shi buries them beneath themes of self-actualization and personal autonomy.

At the end of the movie, we’re expected to applaud Meilin when she tells her mother, “My panda, my body”—an allusion to the popular abortion slogan. It’s the kind of vapid modernist soundbite that Pixar used to challenge rather than endorse.

With Turning Red, Pixar abandons decades of nuanced storytelling and warms over Disney’s clichéd advice to follow your heart. The studio challenged this messaging 10 years ago with Brave. Both Brave and Turning Red feature strong-willed mothers and daughters who don’t meet each other’s expectations. And both movies feature family members who transform into bears. But Brave is a more truthful movie. The heroine tries to follow her heart but brings devastation, and in the end, she says she’s sorry. Meilin lets the panda loose, destroying Toronto, but in the end, everyone decides Meilin was right all along.

The message of Turning Red: You can do whatever you want as long as you stay true to who you are. And the good news—according to Pixar—is you’re free to decide who that’s going to be. The rest of us? It’s our job to affirm you and your decisions.

**NOT SO GIANT** Full-grown red pandas typically weigh between 8 and 17 pounds. That’s about the size of a house cat.
“RAW FOOD! RAW DEAL!” chanted the employees of upscale Manhattan vegan eatery and celebrity hot spot Pure Food and Wine in 2015 when its owner, Sarma Melngailis, failed to pay them and went on the run with her husband, Anthony Strangis. Netflix has served up its own meatless entrée in Bad Vegan: Fame. Fraud. Fugitives.

Billed as a “true crime documentary,” the limited series plays more like a soap opera with the most foolish and odd characters. Strangis, for example, claims he will make Melngailis’ dog immortal.

In short: After Strangis meets Melngailis, he attributes his frequent absences to his “black ops” duties and involvement with “mysterious ethereal forces.” Strangis assures Melngailis and her dog a prosperous future and eternity. Meanwhile, he repeatedly cajoles her into wiring him cash to prove her loyalty. They marry, and the otherwise savvy entrepreneur drains her restaurant of $1.7 million to pass his “tests.”

Strangis never appears live in Bad Vegan (rated TV-MA for language); viewers hear and see his voice messages, texts, and emails—all expletive-laden.

Melngailis’ former employees spill the tofu beans on their boss. And the photogenic Melngailis tells her side of the story in what feels like a post-prison PR push for sympathy.

In the third episode, the interviewer finally asks Melngailis some tough questions. Then you recognize two peas in the pod: The manipulative tactics Strangis used on Melngailis sound like the ones she used to string along her employees—and Netflix viewers.

**BEST PICTURE WINNERS BY YEAR**

- **2021:** Nomadland
- **2020:** Parasite
- **2019:** Green Book
- **2018:** The Shape of Water
- **2017:** Moonlight
- **2016:** Spotlight
- **2015:** Birdman
- **2014:** 12 Years a Slave
- **2013:** Argo
- **2012:** The Artist

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**Rom-com romp**

by Collin Garbarino

Middle-aged movie fans will find The Lost City pleasantly familiar. This romantic action adventure, in theaters, pulls its inspiration from Romancing the Stone (1984), but it injects enough originality to make the implausible film a treat for audiences weary of Hollywood’s sequel-reboot cycle.

Loretta Sage (Sandra Bullock) writes romance novels inspired by the work she did with her archaeologist husband, but after his death she becomes reclusive and struggles to bring her series to a satisfying conclusion. To promote her flailing franchise, Loretta goes on a book tour with Alan (Channing Tatum), the Fabio-like model who appears on her covers. But her novels contain too much archaeological reality, and a nefarious collector (Daniel Radcliffe) kidnaps Loretta to help him find a lost treasure. Alan takes it upon himself to rescue the woman he secretly loves.

The Lost City is rated PG-13 for violence, language, and partial nudity. The plot deals with romance novels, so expect a bit of innuendo, but the movie is free of sex. The raciest scene features a male backside with only a few leeches to cover it. The movie is a silly romp, and fans of Bullock’s rom-coms will enjoy seeing her back in the genre. She proves she’s still the queen of the smart-beautiful-yet-somewhat-awkward-love-interest role.
In the lead-up to the Oscars on March 27, the question was not whether the Japanese film *Drive My Car* would win, but which category. This adaptation of a short story by the renowned Japanese author Haruki Murakami is nominated for not only best picture, but also best director, best adapted screenplay, and best international feature film.

This meditative movie, running one minute short of three hours, takes viewers on a ride that navigates pain with the help of human connections and the arts. It has already accumulated accolades that include Cannes’ best screenplay and best non-English language film of the Golden Globes and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

Behind the wheel of his red Saab 900 Aero coupe is where Yûsuke Kafuku (Hidetoshi Nishijima) feels at home. The middle-aged actor has a habit of practicing his lines while driving and listening to a cassette his wife made. In the tape, she reads out all the parts of Anton Chekhov’s play *Uncle Vanya*, but leaves out the title character’s lines. Yûsuke fills in those pauses.

Two years after his wife’s sudden death, Yûsuke drives from Tokyo to Hiroshima to serve as a stage director of *Uncle Vanya*. The theater festival organizers assign him a chauffeur: Misaki Watari (Tôko Miura), a hardened 23-year-old woman who dresses more like a middle-aged male cabbie in her loose jacket and trousers.

As Misaki shuttles Yûsuke around in his vintage car, they embark on a journey of helping each other process the family traumas they’ve buried deep inside.

*Uncle Vanya* is an indispensable part of *Drive My Car*, which affirms the arts as a vehicle for truth and inclusion. Chekhov’s play echoes back truths to Yûsuke about his life that he needs to wrestle with. This film also depicts a multilingual staging of the play as the actors perform their roles in Japanese, Mandarin, and Korean Sign Language.

Not rated, this movie is available on HBO Max, Amazon Prime Video rental, and in select theaters. Although subtle in portraying Yûsuke and Misaki’s guilt and despair, it is not shy about sex. It opens with a bed scene, one among a few graphic takes, and contains some nudity.

There’s a common saying about the Japanese’s syncretic approach to religion: They are born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist. *Drive My Car* includes a Buddhist memorial service, along with a gripping part of *Uncle Vanya* that references God: It is a plea to endure suffering to arrive at God’s eternal joy and rest.

While this film is not Christian, it mentions the God of Christianity who understands human misery and pities those who suffer. This is remarkable, especially for a country where only 1 percent of the population is Christian, and whose pop culture rarely includes Christianity.

*Drive My Car*, Japan’s first Oscar nominee for best picture, is an artistic grappling with grief

by Joyce Wu
The Bombardment imagines a God who loses control and “drops pencils” by Marty VanDriel

PICTURES, STORIES, and video of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have reminded us that war exacts a terrible price, and not just from armed combatants, but often from civilians in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Bombardment, a Danish film just released on Netflix, looks at the human toll that left over 100 children and teachers dead, when their school was mistakenly targeted in a raid by the British Royal Air Force. (The film is in Danish with English subtitles and is rated TV-MA.) Regrettably, one of the film’s “answers” to the problem of human suffering is less than satisfying for believers.

It is March of 1945, and the Nazis in Denmark are closing a tighter and tighter ring on the Danish resistance movement. The Danes have signaled to the British that now is the time to take out the Gestapo headquarters building in Copenhagen—even if it means the deaths of the resistance prisoners being held as a human shield on the top floor, just under the eaves. Ironically, one of the Danish resistors who participated in the decision to sacrifice his comrades for the greater good is himself captured, beaten, and imprisoned at this location.

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A few blocks from the Gestapo building, life continues relatively normally at the French language Jeanne d’Arc Catholic school. Sister Teresa, a young nun popular with the children, struggles with her faith and seeks a sign from God that He is real. (The sign is given when a statue of Christ “bleeds” as she touches it.) When the children wonder how the Lord can allow atrocities to happen, Sister Teresa says that, while God does not slumber or sleep, sometimes he may “drop a pencil”—that is to say, He may take His eye off His creation and allow terrible things to happen.

Director Ole Bornedal weaves the stories of students, parents, teachers, and even traitorous Danes into the drama. Young Henry has been mute for months after witnessing atrocities in rural Denmark and is now living with his cousin Rigmor in what is supposed to be a safer place. Frederik, who has been working with the Nazis, strikes up a friendship with Sister Teresa as he repents from his treason.

Who survives the errant bombing raid, and who perishes? While Bornedal may believe it is random and chaotic and that God has “dropped a pencil,” Christian viewers know that our all-knowing God is always in control of everything that happens on this earth, even when terrible tragedies occur. He always has His children’s best interests at heart, even when we can’t understand the reasons why. This knowledge does not diminish the sorrow and suffering of so many, but it helps put tragedies in perspective. The Bombardment is a worthwhile remembrance of a real-world tragedy, especially if it can be watched and discussed with a Christian worldview.

We see Batman in detective mode throughout this film, looking for clues and interviewing suspects, relying on his brain as much as his brawn. The Batman transcends the superhero genre, becoming an homage to film noir and the hard-boiled detectives of the 1930s and ’40s. —from Collin Garbarino’s review of The Batman.

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ITALI PERKINS WRITES BOOKS for young readers. And reads them. Further, she believes you should read them too. Steeped in Stories, a brief book with unexpected depths, explains how classic children’s literature can not only shape young minds but enrich adult sensibilities, especially as we reread the books we loved as a child.

Perkins was only seven when her parents emigrated from Bengal to Queens. Anxious and homesick, she connected with American culture first through the public library. Stacks of books on the fire escape beguiled her through many an afternoon. Imperceptibly, strands of 19th-century Boston and turn-of-the-century Prince Edward Island entwined with her Bengali roots as Jo March and Anne Shirley entered her world. Later, as a university student in California, Perkins began asking big questions and found that the classic literature of her childhood had much to say.

Adults may disdain children’s books partly because “grown-up literati are suspicious of stories with happy endings.” But that, according to Perkins, is one of their greatest benefits: “Why is building hope considered less of a literary accomplishment than crushing it?”

Classic stories endure because they tell us something about ourselves and what we value—or should value. Morality is essential: “Stories are by nature didactic,” writes Perkins. They all, in some way, teach or reinforce a concept of the good, true, and beautiful. To illustrate her point, she explores seven classic tales, from Heidi to The Hobbit, in the light of the cardinal virtues: faith, hope, love, courage, temperance, justice, and prudence.

Perkins acknowledges that children’s classics have come under fire for white-centeredness and insensitive depictions of other races and ethnic groups. She became more aware of these as an adult than she was as a child, but that only illustrates how impressionable children are and how careful writers should be to portray other groups fairly.

Universal literacy is a Eurocentric phenomenon, so perhaps it’s not surprising that “whiteness” has dominated publishing. Praiseworthy efforts are underway to include the stories of other cultures. Rick Riordan, whose bestselling Percy Jackson books spin Greek and Roman mythology into a contemporary setting, lends his name to Rick Riordan Presents: a series of novels by diverse authors based on Asian, Indian, and Meso-American myths.

Children should expand their views beyond their own cultural circle—that’s one reason for literature. Recently, however, story itself has become something of a talisman among literary types as more novels, particularly children’s novels, are about story. This year’s Newbery Medal—the world’s oldest award for children’s literature—went to The Last Cuentista, a science-fiction novel about a band of space refugees fleeing Earth before a comet demolishes it. Their journey to a new planet takes centuries, during which the caretakers, who were assigned to watch over the specialists sleeping in hyper-suspension, evolve into a collective. They are ruled by a soulless “director” who has outlawed all pursuits that serve no practical purpose—storytelling in particular. The protagonist, awakened from her long sleep into this grim reality, discovers that the stories (cuentos) instilled in her by her beloved grandmother serve a purpose not practical, but vital.

Last year’s Newbery winner, When You Trap a Tiger, explored a similar theme in a magical-realist setting. In her acceptance speech, author Tae Keller affirmed, “We tell stories because they connect us to the world and guide us back to ourselves. Stories show us who we are.” She stopped short of saying that stories save us, but other authors have claimed just that. “I think all stories have value,” says a character in The Last Cuentista. “Readers and listeners should decide whether stories speak to them or not.”

But there’s the rub. In The Story Paradox: How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears Them Down, literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall describes how “we’re forever swimming through a turbulent sea of narrative, with rival stories churning against each other and buffeting us around.” Elevating story as story is dangerous, as false narratives (such as, Jews control the world) have inspired some of history’s worst crimes.

Stories matter, but not for themselves. They serve a greater purpose: to illuminate the good, as Mitali Perkins says, but also to point us to the greatest story of all.
He who walks with the wise grows wise

Collections of Christian leaders’ biographies

by Russell Pulliam

First Wives’ Club

One way to cover more biographical territory is to read short life stories. From London a pastor’s wife, Clare Heath-Whyte, tells of wives of influential Christian men. First Wives’ Club reviews Mrs. Luther and Mrs. Calvin and others in the 16th century. Old Wives’ Tales for the 18th century covers Wesley women, along with Sarah Edwards. In For Richer, For Poorer, the 19th century, she shows how William Wilberforce’s wife Barbara was not popular with his friends but a huge help to him in the abolition of slavery. The author also reveals their spiritual journeys, such as Minny Shaftesbury’s. “God transformed Minny from a selfish socialite to a servant-hearted and socially aware supporter of her famous husband and his campaign,” she writes. The author shows God arranged these marriages for purposes larger than they could fully see in their lifetimes.

Five Pioneer Missionaries

Five Pioneer Missionaries was first offered by Banner of Truth in 1965, with republication several times. Five authors cover the lives of some well-known missionaries such as David Brainerd and lesser known ones like John Eliot. Eliot was one of the first Puritans to come to New England in 1631. As a pastor to British settlers, he started visiting Algonquin Indians near present-day Roxbury, Mass. As many came to salvation and spiritual transformation, they built schools and developed praying town settlements. Eliot translated the Bible into the Algonquin language. Back in England, the better-known Richard Baxter noted of Eliot: “There was no man on earth whom I honoured above him.”

A Fistful of Heroes

The late John Pollock was a prolific British biographer, giving concise life summaries in A Fistful of Heroes, first published in 1988. He offers 14 biographies, about 10 pages each, in categories of liberators from slavery, social justice reformers, and evangelists. Some are well known, such as William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Others are less famous, such as Elizabeth Fry and her pioneer work in prison reform in England. Pollock also wrote longer biographies of some of these subjects, for readers who want more detail.

Men of Destiny / Men of Purpose

London pastor Peter Masters introduces readers to lesser-known role models in two books, Men of Destiny, first published in 1968, and Men of Purpose, 1973. Like Pollock, Masters majors in British stories but also includes Americans and the Russian Czar Alexander Pavlovich. He also includes some Christian scientists such as Lord Kelvin and Michael Faraday, as well as Henry Heinz of ketchup fame. His entry on Daniel Defoe is fascinating, as Defoe was a prodigal son from a Puritan family. Defoe’s return to Christ included his famous Robinson Crusoe novel. “Many have regarded him not only as the father of modern journalism, but also as the true father of the modern novel,” suggests Masters. He is pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle where Charles Spurgeon preached more than 100 years ago.

April 9, 2022

WORLD

31
Our blessed hope
Books for pondering and preparing for Easter
by Kristin Chapman

SOMETHING BETTER COMING Megan Saben
In lyrical verse, Saben highlights the miraculous resurrections of the widow’s son, Jairus’ daughter, and beloved Lazarus. With each example of Jesus’ power over death, Saben’s gentle words remind readers “There’s something better coming.” The book culminates with Jesus’ triumph over the grave and the hope all followers of Christ can have about a future “free from death for all eternity.” Ryan Flanders’ soft sketches harmonize with the story, including the subtle inclusion of an Easter lily that flourishes as hope grows. (Ages 3-8)

DARKEST NIGHT, BRIGHTEST DAY Marty Machowski
Machowski designed this unique 14-day devotional in two parts. Families can begin reading the first portion, Darkest Night, during the week before Easter Sunday. Those entries trace the final week of Jesus’ earthly life leading up to “the darkest night in history.” Readers then flip the book over to continue with Part 2, Brightest Day, during Easter week. This section opens with Jesus’ resurrection and spotlights “stories of people changed by Christ’s resurrection power.” All of the readings feature Phil Schorr’s colorful illustrations and questions to guide family discussion. (Ages 5-10)

A JESUS EASTER Barbara Reaoch
To help children understand the scope of Easter and God’s epic rescue plan, Reaoch begins her devotional study in the Old Testament. She then moves through key events of the Easter story while highlighting the roles various people (including Pilate, Barabbas, and Joseph of Arimathea) had in God’s unfolding story. Reaoch frames each of the 30 lessons around three themes: God’s plan for Easter, the serpent’s lies, and Jesus’ truth. The readings offer discussion questions targeted for younger and older children, as well as family coloring pages and journaling space. (Ages 5-12)

JOURNEY TO THE CROSS Paul David Tripp
Older tweens and teens could read with their parents this 40-day Lenten devotional. Tripp writes that the season of Lent “is not about what you are doing or are committing yourself to do for God, but about what He has done and is now doing for you.” Although Lent will already be underway when this issue reaches mailboxes, families picking up the book in the final weeks before Easter can still reap benefit from the many stand-alone chapters encouraging readers to mourn their sin while finding deep joy in Christ. (Ages 12 and up)

In The Story of God With Us, authors Kenneth Padgett and Shay Gregorie seek to show children how throughout history God has orchestrated everything “So He could dwell with us, and we with Him.” Aedan Peterson’s illustrations beautifully capture the ways God has dwelt with His people—from the Garden of Eden to the wilderness tabernacle—culminating with Immanuel’s birth and resurrection. The book’s conclusion reminds children that this epic story is still unfolding, and one day all of God’s people will be united with Him in the new creation, “Always and forever, world without end.”

For families daunted by the goal of daily using a Lenten devotional in the weeks leading up to Easter, Scott James offers another option in The Risen One. This small book features 12 brief devotions with Scripture and questions to “connect with kids.” Although James suggests families begin reading the devotions 10 Sundays before Easter, families could also choose to read them over a shorter period of time. —K.C.
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Chamber-pop with a bit of Brit-pop flair

Is Neil Hannon too good or too British for American tastes?

by Arsenio Orteza

KNOW I’M GOOD AT WHAT I DO,” says Neil Hannon in the 2021 BBC One documentary Neil Hannon: 30 Years of the Divine Comedy. “I know I’m bad at most other things.”

What does Hannon do? Under the name the Divine Comedy, he crafts impeccable chamber-pop with a distinctly Brit-pop flair, 35 prime examples of which are gathered in the three-disc edition of his new best-of-and-then-some Charmed Life: The Best of the Divine Comedy. How good is he at what he does? So good that Charmed Life’s 11 new recordings easily hold their own against the 23 previously released highlights, only eight of which were anthologized on his first (and now 23-year-old) best-of-and-then-some, A Secret History.

Over half of those highlights, by the way, hit the UK Top 40. And the British Phonographic Industry has certified a third of his 12 studio albums either gold or silver. Not bad for a fellow who grew up as the shy, sensitive, and bookish son of a Northern Irish Anglican cleric.

But if Hannon is so good at what he does, why after all these years hasn’t he developed a significant U.S. following? Could it be that he’s actually too good? Or might his “Brit-pop” simply be too “Brit”?

Possibly both.

Americans, for instance, haven’t known what to do with a songwriter who chooses his words with the wit and precision of a Cole Porter since Cole Porter.

Furthermore, Americans haven’t fetishized public transportation in song since Arlo Guthrie rode “City of New Orleans” onto the charts 50 years ago. Yet beating the blues with a bus ride is the subject of Hannon’s biggest hit, “National Express.”

Or perhaps he’s too subtle. Consider “Generation Sex.” What sounds at first like a celebration of pornography turns out to be a fairly conservative indictment of the objectification of women, with Hannon concluding that “we really should know better.” And “Those Pesky Kids,” one of Charmed Life’s new songs, could easily be mistaken by anyone not wearing his thinking cap for a paean to Scooby-Doo instead of the paean to defiantly idealistic youth that it is.

The most profound of the new batch is “The Best Mistakes,” a kind of “My Way” unburdened by hubris and melodrama. The funniest (and the most Cole Porter–like) is “Te Amo España,” in which Hannon rhymes random Spanish expressions while imagining a post-lockdown time when he’ll “drive down to Spain to say hola again.”

The funniest and most profound: “Who Do You Think You Are,” in which Hannon employs Auto-Tune to convince the hominids in 2001: A Space Odyssey that evolution really isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.
Playful, and serious, sounds

Noteworthy new or recent releases

by Arsenio Orteza

LANMOU LANMOU Dowdelin
Led by David Kiledjian (keyboards, bass, sax, guitar, percussion) and Olivya Victorin (vocals, songwriting), this France-based quartet sets (mostly) Haitian-Creole lyrics to tightly wound R&B melodies and rhythms that wouldn’t sound out of place as recess chants on an Afro-Caribbean playground. Typically, the songs begin with a few measures of electronica glazed with percussion, whereupon the bass kicks the sound into three dimensions, followed by the singing of Haitian Creole lyrics that, plugged into a translator, yield approximate English such as “The walls are tapping into our time to fall” and “When one loves oneself, one prefers to be silent / and stay the same.” There’s nothing approximate about the hooks.

UNTIDY SOUL Samm Henshaw
Seven years after his first EP, this 28-year-old son of a South London Nigerian preacher man finally releases his first full-length album, and it’s a doozy. Between playfully identifying chicken wings as a prerequisite for a good date (“Chicken Wings”) and seriously identifying his “source of joy” as “being in His presence” (“Joy”), Henshaw covers an impressive amount of soul-music ground. Programmed as it is without interruption, the songs play like 42 ad-free minutes of high-quality urban radio. Not every cut deserves heavy rotation, but two that do, the love songs “8.16” and “Loved by You,” would’ve given Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes and the Commodores a run for their respective money back in the day.

THE HIGHEST IN THE LAND
Jazz Butcher
The most salient characteristics of Pat Fish’s swan song: forebodings of his fatal heart attack (“My time ain’t long,” he sings in “Time”), uncharacteristically subdued tempos, two Dylan references (the marrying-Isis line in “Never Give Up,” the “Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts” melody rechristened “Running on Fumes”), uncharacteristic profanity (three songs), a pledge to read the Bible and the Koran (the title cut), a curious equating of Brexit with “political correctness gone mad” (“Sebastian’s Medication”), and, finally, the whispered “Goodnight” that brings the last song on the last album that Fish will ever record to a close.

SILVER SASH Wovenhand
The music gallops and drones like the soundtrack to a Spaghetti Western in which the cowboys have been replaced by medieval Crusaders. The lyrics fly like sparks struck from an anvil by a hammer-wielding evangelist—the opening song actually begins with David Eugene Edwards intoning “Every head bowed / Every eye closed / See that hand I / Raise that hand.” And probably thanks to Edwards’ new collaborator Chuck French, at least two songs (“Dead Dead Beat” and “Omaha”) will delight fans of the Stooges.

Encore

Shortly after the death of Pat Fish last October, the UK’s Fire Records released Dr Cholmondley Repents: A-Sides, B-Sides and Seasides, a four-disc overview of Fish’s longtime band and alter ego, the Jazz Butcher. Not quite comprehensive (it omits the recordings that he made for the Shock and Sky labels), the box nevertheless demonstrates simultaneously what made Fish and Co. one of the alternative-era’s most popular cult acts and what kept them from breaking through to the mainstream.

Clever, sarcastic, hilarious, and—occasionally—infuriating, Fish brought a manic sense of fun to a 1980s (and later a 1990s) indie-rock scene susceptible to becoming too self-important or too esoteric for its own good. He often seemed to write and sing about subjects simply because they afforded him as good a reason as any to go on a whimsical jag. But he could swerve into profundity. In the otherwise silly “The Devil Is My Friend,” the approach of Easter is all that’s needed to send Satan packing.

—A.O.
ELIZABETH NEUMANN is a former Department of Homeland Security official who has also worked in cyber security and threat assessment. She opposed former President Donald Trump’s reelection effort, arguing his rhetoric and inaction on domestic terrorism contributed to attacks. She’s on the board of the National Immigration Forum. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**What security vetting did Afghan evacuees receive?** Looking at their faces, irises, fingerprints, and running it through all of the U.S. gov-
ernment’s holdings. Also biographical information—name, date of birth, place of birth, and so on. There were reports that if they had any sort of documentation on them that the Taliban would kill them. To flee, they probably had to leave everything behind, including any proof about who they were and their work with the United States. This is true for most refugees. Most don’t have identity papers, a birth certificate, or a passport, because they fled for their lives.

So we’re doing other things to validate. You might be asking family members to validate each other’s stories, you might be asking associates. You’re looking for: Is anybody bobbling? Is anybody saying the wrong thing? It’s very similar to establishing witnesses for a court case or a criminal investigation. When you’ve done security vetting for 20 years as a national security community, we’re really good at understanding when to press something that doesn’t line up.

Anything easier about security vetting in Afghanistan? In Afghanistan we’ve been collecting fingerprints off of explosive material, bombs, or cars that exploded, for well over a decade. The Department of Defense has this massive database of fingerprints of people that we know are bad guys because they’re the bomb makers or they’re the ones that outfitted the car. It doesn’t matter if they lied about their name. If their fingerprint was on that bomb, we’re going to find them and make sure that they don’t come to the United States. And many of these people worked for the U.S. government, so we have data on them, and then some portion are their family members.

Didn’t a few people get into the U.S. that shouldn’t have? This isn’t something to be fearful of. But it was a lot of people in a short period of time, and human beings do make mistakes. At the very beginning, there were a few individuals that came in before the full system was up, and derogatory information was detected after they had arrived.

But the vetting community figured out how to take a process that often takes months and shrunk it to a matter of a day or two per person. They had brought all these separate databases into a more efficient search process. They put analysts together that are usually located all across Washington, D.C. They were running shifts 24/7 to process what we now know is about a hundred thousand people. And they didn’t cut corners.

What are the remaining risks? We don’t know what we don’t know. You could be a bad guy, but if we’ve never collected intelligence that says you’re a bad guy, there is no reason not to let you into our country. Bottom line, there is a limit to the U.S. government’s knowledge. But in Afghanistan, we have a whole lot of knowledge after 20 years of being there.

What about some crimes we’ve already seen? We have seen some culturally repulsive and outright criminal behavior. I think it’s important we put those into context. We’re talking about a very small percentage. If you compare it to the U.S. population—we’ve done studies on this, when you resettle refugees and you do it well, refugees and immigrants as a whole commit less crime than the U.S. general population. I’m sure that somebody will be a bad apple among a hundred thousand, but that’s true of all of us living here in the United States.

And when you see headlines, remember the trauma they’ve gone through and remember that they’re human. The Afghans arriving have gone through tremendous trauma. They’re losing the life that they knew, they’re losing the hope that they had for their country, many lost family members.

And we have a very politicized culture where there are people actively suggesting that somehow a refugee is dangerous, and creating an us versus them. I’m not worried about the refugees as much as I am about domestic violent extremists deciding that this is the reason why they’re going to do something, to speak out against foreigners coming into their country. That concerns me.

Let’s talk about domestic extremism. How has it changed since you started in the field? Radicalization has started happening much faster because of the internet.

It used to take years and usually happened in person. In the transition from the late aughts to the early teens, the time frame from being introduced to radicalized material to actually committing an attack shortened significantly, which means law enforcement doesn’t have time to run investigations, infiltrate, or recruit a source who can tell you what the plot is. And when it’s happening online, when it’s one person on their own, who’s going to be the source there?

What puts someone at risk of becoming a violent extremist? First, there’s a
difference between being vulnerable, being radicalized, and being mobilized to violence. Having these risk factors doesn’t mean you’re going to go commit an attack.

Some of those factors are loss of significance, loss of job, loss of a loved one, loss of a relationship, financial stress, other major life stressors. Usually there’s one or two life stresses that have occurred fairly recently in an attacker’s life.

They tend to not have a lot of strongly held relationships. They tend to be struggling with a lack of belonging or can’t find the reason for why life matters.

Which is why it’s not hard to understand why, historically, the types of people that tend to get recruited into extremism are adolescents, early twenties. We’re all trying to figure ourselves out at that age, and that search for significance, if it’s stunted in some way, can lead to a lot of anger and angst. And that makes them very vulnerable to being recruited into a gang or a terrorist group that gives them a sense of belonging, gives them a sense of purpose.

So it’s not about extreme ideology? It turns out ideology is pretty loosely affiliated with violence. It’s not that the ideology can’t motivate or justify, but it’s usually not the core driver.

Let’s say I’ve got a 15-year-old who has never known a dad and has some neo-Nazi guys offering him cigarettes and saying, Hey, you can come join us, and his mom’s working all the time and doesn’t notice that they’re also recruiting him on the video games that he’s playing. It doesn’t have to be neo-Nazis, it could be anything.

But that kid is maybe vulnerable to nefarious individuals coming in and offering him solutions to what is inherently a problem of trying to find meaning and purpose in life. These other suggestions come in and give him a sense of belonging and a way to channel rage, something to blame for whatever he’s mad at.

He might tell you he’s a die-hard believer in whatever the ideology is, but what is actually going on underneath tends to be more about seeking meaning by joining those groups. Moving him off that path is about empathy.

How do you stop the cycle? Turns out it’s easiest to stop it before it starts. That means working with schools and with counselors to be able to detect signs and indicators that somebody might be radicalizing. They’re already trained in some places on how to deal with gang recruitment. This is just adding to it.

Governors need to have a state plan for how they’re going to stitch together the different services needed for identifying individuals who are vulnerable or in the process of radicalizing and then intervening and getting them help.

Most of that help has nothing to do with law enforcement and everything to do with what we would otherwise term counseling, mental health. If we could do that and do a better job of taking care of those that have been identified as vulnerable or on that radicalization path, we would reduce the burden on law enforcement for all of the other things that they have to investigate and hopefully reduce the number of attacks we see in the country.

You worked under former President Donald Trump and came to believe that his rhetoric about Asians, Mexicans, and other groups was harmful. Is there evidence that politicians’ rhetoric has a real impact on extremism? Most people are rational human beings and realize that it doesn’t matter what anybody says, you’re not allowed to commit a crime, you can’t just randomly go beat people up on the street. But it’s almost like reality gets suspended in this political context. And having the president of the United States express something disparaging certain people gave permission for people to perhaps act out on things that they already wanted to do.

Back to Afghan evacuees. They’ve had trauma, stress. Are they at risk of radicalization? The history of refugees coming to the United States, usually escaping trauma, is not that they do something. I don’t fully know why, because the stressors that occur in an attacker’s background sound very similar to the stressors that a refugee might experience. Also, we’ve resettled through groups like World Relief or Catholic Charities or Lutheran Services and they do it well, and that’s maybe helped build resilience.
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AN OPEN SPIRITUAL DOOR
Christians in Poland and Czech Republic open their homes and churches to refugees from war-torn Ukraine

by JENNY LIND SCHMITT

Ukrainian refugees arrive by train from Odessa in Przemysl, Poland.

JEFF J. MITCHELL/GETTY IMAGES
She has a Russian passport, but had lived 20 years in Ukraine and owned a home there. Her nationality made leaving difficult as several refugee organizations wouldn’t assist her. Through Rucin’s connections, she finally boarded a bus of strangers and made the long journey to the border on Ukraine’s western edge. Her journey isn’t over: She plans to travel to her son who lives in Israel, but Rucin’s home in Rzeszow, Poland, is a safe haven along the way.

I greeted Ludmilla when she arrived with Rucin and told her I was glad she was safe. “I’m glad too,” she sighed in heavily accented English. “I’m glad too.” But she didn’t want to shake my hand. “She’s been traveling so long,” explained Rucin. “She doesn’t want to touch anybody because she says she feels so dirty.” Ludmilla made a beeline for the offered shower and then sank into a deep sleep while I talked with Rucin and his wife, Carol Lynn.

The Rucins have been missionaries in Poland for 20 years with the Pioneers, a discipleship missionary ministry that works in partnership with local churches. Through their work, they have connections with mission organizations spread across central Europe. When the Russian invasion began, a friend with Josiah Venture, Dan Hash, called them with an urgent request. The leadership training ministry had staff in Ukraine that were evacuating. Could Craig make the one-hour trip to Medyka and pick them up? Rucin went to pick up those staff, along with some other fleeing Ukrainians, and brought them all to spend the night at his house. Over the weeks since, that scenario has replayed again and again.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that almost 3.5 million refugees have now fled war in Ukraine. (For comparison, the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 brought 1.3 million asylum-seekers to Europe.) Nearly 2 million Ukrainians have gone to Poland, where local churches have taken in hundreds of thousands, and ministries such as Josiah Venture have pivoted to provide refugee care and placement.

UNTIL A FEW WEEKS AGO, Terry English trained youth leaders for the local church in Ostrava, Czech Republic. “Our ministry has completely switched to caring for refugees coming out of Ukraine,” he said. First it moved out their own field workers, then those worker’s relatives, then neighbors and friends. Because of its built-in network across the 14 former communist countries of central and eastern Europe—including 100 partner churches in Ukraine—Josiah Venture was able to quickly redirect its mostly in-country national staff to refugee relocation. It has two youth training centers, one in Poland and one in the Czech Republic that have been transformed into refugee care centers. After the perilous journey across Ukraine and out of the country, refugees can rest and prepare for their next step. From there English has been working to place refugees with churches in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and now further afield as churches in those two countries and Poland fill up.
“Now we’re looking at helping to move people into western European countries,” said English. That’s hard to sell to Ukrainians who don’t want to go even farther from home: Most want to stay in Poland once they cross the border and feel safe. But with Polish churches full to bursting and Polish social infrastructure strained, the reality is that people will have to keep moving.

Three weeks into the war, Josiah Venture moved its hub for refugee processing from Poland into Ukraine. It’s a risky but necessary move, in order to transport people directly from the war zone to welcoming church communities in Western Europe. The goal is to have churches receive people from the same church community in Ukraine. “We don’t just want them to have a roof and a bed,” said English. “They also need a spiritual home.”

He admits it’s a challenge, but it’s also a big open spiritual door. “Those that aren’t Christians know very well that it’s Christians who are helping them.” The organization asks that receiving churches welcome 25-45 people and commit to care for them until the end of the war, though no one knows when that will be. He also asks hosting churches to bring refugees together twice a week to keep their community intact and fight isolation.

Most people fleeing Ukraine are senior citizens and mothers with young children. Men ages 18 to 60 are not allowed to leave Ukraine. Of the men who have stayed behind, many...
have joined the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces to fight. Many others have become the drivers getting women and children out and supplies in.

**UKRAINIAN BAPTIST** Theological Seminary in Lviv was already bracing for refugees in early February. In an interview the day before the invasion, seminary President Yaroslav Pyzh told me about preparations already underway: With money from an emergency fund set up by donors, the school had purchased five tons of fuel, first aid supplies, and food for six months. The plan was to feed and house former students and their families from eastern Ukraine and then move them along via the alumni network into western Ukraine and Poland.

The logic was that if there was an attack it would be in eastern Ukraine and Lviv would remain safe for refugees from that region to stay. Instead, UBTS has turned itself into a logistical hub for people coming to Lviv by car or train and leaving again by bus heading west. Originally prepared to host 80 people, UBTS has now housed more than 4,150 people and helped more than 3,000 relocate.

In video updates since the war began, Pyzh looks weary but determined: “I don’t know how long God will give us time to serve people. Every morning when I take a warm shower, I think that might be my last warm shower. But God did not call us for comfort. I think He called us to love people, so I’m thankful I have that opportunity.”
it myself? Willingly and freely? Probably I would not seek it, but it came to me, so I’d better use it.”

After Russians bombed Lviv on March 18, UBTS made the difficult decision to evacuate their own women and children.

TERRY ENGLISH HAS BEEN hosting refugees at his own home in Ostrava, Czech Republic, since they started coming over the border. At first he and his wife worried that the experience would affect their two young kids adversely, but he’s seen the opposite as his children have grown in serving their guests. It’s not easy. The last group of people he hosted had spent days sheltering in an underground bunker. The first morning, he came downstairs to find all 10 refugees staring at him, eyes wide with fright. He had run down the stairs too quickly, and his footsteps startled them.

“I keep telling people,” said English, “the person you meet is not the person they are.” He added: “The first two days are the most difficult.” Communication is also a challenge. Many Ukrainians don’t speak English or any other European languages. Many who speak some Russian—and even native Russian speakers—now avoid using it.

Back in Poland, even as she cooked for a houseful of guests, Carol Lynn Rucin was thinking about long-term effects on the country. “What effect will this have on our school situation in the fall? Will we need more Ukrainian-speaking teachers to step up? Will Polish as a second language become a thing? How can we provide trauma care?” She is proud of the way her adopted nation has received the overwhelming number of refugees, hundreds of thousands of them in private homes.

A traditional Polish saying goes: “A guest in the house is God in the house.” Now Christians say the crisis is an opportunity to welcome people into God’s home. When the 2014 conflict began in the Donbas, many Ukrainians came to Poland. “One of the blessings was the believers who came to our churches,” says Carol Lynn. “A lot of them have Bible school training, more than we do. There were some inter-cultural communication difficulties at first, and it took humility on both sides, but I feel like Poland has been blessed by Ukrainian spiritually. As tragic as this is, I think we’re going to be blessed further by men and women who will find themselves here.”

In quiet moments she wonders if that’s part of what God is writing on this page of history. “This population is being blown apart like a diaspora,” she said. “But if you read church history and the history of missions, we see these stories in the narrative of God. Sometimes that’s how God moves the truth of His gospel to other nations. I don’t like it, I’m glad I don’t write it, but it is His narrative to write.”
A crowd of protesters in Washington, D.C.
To fight polarization, groups try the simple, painstaking process of talking it out

by Esther Eaton
A socialist, an independent, and a libertarian walked into a bar. ¶ Not a bar, actually—a fluorescent-lit Washington, D.C., conference room in November 2017. And not just the three of them—about a dozen people under age 45, wearing business casual and name tags, with backgrounds ranging from Ohio born to a Turkish immigrant, Christians and Muslims, a Trump campaign volunteer and a progressive who identified as bisexual.

The group pushed the conference room’s swivel chairs into groups of three or four. Over a dinner of wraps and cut fruit plus a few beers and a bottle of wine, they discussed economics, immigration, gun control, abortion, politics.

Ran Liu, an education technology researcher who leans liberal and co-hosted the dinner, came in eager to hear from people with differing views but was still surprised by a basic realization: “These are smart people; they’re educated people. They just believe something really different than me.”

The dinner was one in a series hosted across the country by Make America Dinner Again, a group inspired by the contentious 2016 presidential election to bring diverse people together for a meal and guided conversation about fraught topics.

MADA is just one of several groups trying to tackle America’s growing polarization by helping people talk across differences. They focus on creating opportunities to talk without fighting, to break down barriers of dislike and mistrust, rather than on finding policy compromises. The method takes many volunteer hours and doesn’t always produce clear results, but research suggests these meetings in dining rooms, Zoom rooms, and church sanctuaries can be crucial steps toward fighting politics-driven hatred.

Political polarization is nothing new in the U.S. Members of Republican and Democratic parties have grown more ideologically homogeneous—a 2014 Pew Research study found the share of Americans who express consistently conservative or liberal opinions, instead of a blend, had doubled in the previous two decades.

In 2017, Pew reported the average partisan gap in support for policy statements—“the government should do more to help the needy,” for instance—had increased from a 15 percentage point gap in 1994 to a 36-point gap. Congressional Republicans have moved right and Democrats left for decades, Pew confirmed in March.

Political polarization in the sense of policy and ideology differences isn’t nec-
essarily bad. It reflects genuine disagreement between citizens, contributes to more participation in elections and other aspects of the democratic process, and creates opportunity for real policy change. Instead, it’s a narrower type of polarization that has researchers sounding the alarm: affective polarization, a person’s dislike, fear, and even hatred of members of other political parties.

And affective polarization is also on the rise. Pew in 2017 reported about 45 percent of voters from both parties had very unfavorable opinions of the other party, up from less than 20 percent in 1994. In a 2021 study of growing affective polarization, Brown University researchers theorized that growing racial and religious homogeneity in each party may be playing a role, along with the growth of partisan cable news. Americans have also sorted geographically, red zip codes getting redder and blue zip codes bluer, which makes it easier for voters to never rub shoulders with members of the opposite party.

The internet and social media affect polarization, too. The Brown researchers ruled them out as the sole cause because some countries with widespread internet and social media use have grown less polarized as the U.S. grew more so. But an analysis of more than 50 studies and 40 expert interviews by the Brookings Institution, a centrist think tank, concluded that while Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media don’t cause polarization, their algorithms and echo chambers do exacerbate it.

Churches can also become one-party gatherings, or run into conflict when different political parties share a pew. Rick Barry became a Christian in college and began working for campaigns shortly after. Over time, he realized Christianity could speak to hyperpartisanship.

“Parties and figures and activist movements...are frequently framing themselves or the issues they work on in ways that were designed to get people to freak out,” Barry said. “I’m translating loosely here, but Jesus has repeated commands not to freak out.”

So he co-founded the Center for Christian Civics to help churches battling polarization. During COVID-19, CCC paused its in-person workshops and its plans to bring together different churches—a Pentecostal church from Brooklyn, a Presbyterian church from Iowa—for practice conversations.

But CCC has continued six-week workshops that walk participants through topics like witness in the public square, Biblical analysis of representative government, and the pitfalls of responding to politics with separatism or extremism. Barry hopes graduates leave able to recognize where politics has shaped them and their churches and instead let their faith drive how they respond to politics and people in opposing parties.

Churches have the advantage of shared faith to establish common ground, but even nonreligious groups like MADA emphasize participants should come to dinner ready to listen, with the goal of humanizing political opponents. At one dinner, Liu met a National Rifle Association volunteer.

“This was like the first time in my life that I had been in a room or in a conversation with somebody who was really pro-gun rights,” Liu said. She supports strong gun control. “I had nothing against him as a person, and I remember being very surprised by the cognitive dissonance of that.”

Other anti-polarization organizations go even further, carefully training par-
participants to let go of the idea that they’ll change others’ minds. On a Saturday afternoon in February, a group of conservatives logged on to Zoom for a workshop called “Being Red in a Blue Environment.” They talked about the stress of living in heavily Democratic areas or talking to liberal relatives.

The moderator emphasized that they should abandon expectations that they’ll persuade their relatives and coached them on affirming points of agreement, asking for permission to share conflicting thoughts, and gently removing themselves if they felt uncomfortable with a conversation. They practiced neutral statements—“Washington is really a mess these days”—and positive ways to state their beliefs.

The slideshow featured pictures of eagles and Ronald Reagan. During snack breaks in the three-hour workshop, the moderator played songs featuring banjos and bipartisan lyrics: “It ain’t about right and left; it’s about right and wrong.”

The workshop was just one of the blur of events put on by Braver Angels, which started after the 2016 presidential election with 10 Donald Trump supporters and 11 Hillary Clinton supporters meeting up in Ohio. It now lists 25 leadership members on its website, but many more volunteer or part-time moderators and coordinators help lead workshops and other activities like book and film clubs. Braver Angels focuses first on fighting affective polarization, but does touch on policy common ground.

Workshops offer training on talking to family members, combating internal affective polarization, and finding common ground on topics like climate change or abortion. A recent workshop invited Jewish Braver Angels members from the right and left to collaborate on a shared definition of anti-Semitism and how to counteract it. Braver Angels calls its members “reds” or “blues” to acknowledge political binaries without pinning people to specific party names.

Braver Angels ensures it has equal numbers of leaders from the right and left, but it has more participants from the left. Casey Jorgensen, a Republican from Utah, is a part-time Braver Angels employee but spoke from her experience as a participant. Her husband and mother, also conservatives, are leery of Braver Angels. Jorgensen suggested that more conservatives than liberals hear “find common ground” as a call to compromise their beliefs. For Jorgensen, it means recognizing values like compassion that she shares with liberals even when they disagree on how it should look in policy.

She also theorized that conservatives are reluctant to join because they doubt liberals will listen to them or that it will matter if they do.

“A lot of reds are angry. They feel like they’ve been suppressed, and they’re not even allowed to talk without being canceled. If things don’t go their way politically, they’re at risk of losing their faith, family, and freedom,” Jorgensen said. “And then they hear a blue saying ‘let’s come have a nice chat about it,’ and they’re like—are you kidding me?”

Braver Angels has tried a few tactics to balance its membership, both between conservatives and liberals and among various educational levels and races. It has an internal group called Angels of Color where nonwhite members can support each other and the Red Caucus for conservative participants. A Red Focus
Group tackles recruiting, and Braver Angels has run booths at conservative conventions.

Braver Angels also added debates to its workshop lineup, hoping they would attract conservatives reluctant to attend workshops focused on feelings. At a February Zoom debate about whether teachers should be banned from discussing history and current events through the lens of systemic racism and white privilege, participants one by one made their case for or against a ban and asked questions of other speakers.

The discussion at times slipped to include other topics like fatherlessness, charter schools, and anti-Semitism, and participants argued from different definitions of terms like critical race theory. But attendee Heather Fleming, who runs an equity training business, said it was less confrontational than she expected. Fleming said she would attend another similar event but acknowledged, “I’m not sure if any minds were changed.”

With trained moderators carefully guiding conversations and no expectation that minds will be changed, Braver Angels and similar groups could seem like a lot of work for no results. They tend to attract participants already interested in hearing from the other side. And some research suggests that contact with political opponents, at least on social media, can make people’s political views more extreme, not less.

But there’s also research suggesting that positive personal connection does reduce affective polarization, and so creates space for productive policy discussion. For a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers showed participants a social media profile featuring their common ground with an opponent—a shared favorite sports team, for example—and found that participants shown the profiles were more willing to consider political stances presented by the other person.

Just talking with a political opponent about a nonpolitical topic can have similar positive effects. Stanford and Berkeley researchers paired political opposites for video meeting discussions of randomly assigned topics. Those who discussed nonpolitical topics reversed two decades’ worth of affective polarization. That progress vanished in a follow-up poll, so the researchers noted that a one-off conversation isn’t enough to reduce affective polarization long term.

Still, a conversation can grow into more: Ran Liu recalls bonding at a MADA dinner with a libertarian over their shared love of The Bachelor TV franchise. They became Facebook friends and attended social outings together.

So far, these groups’ efforts haven’t reversed the polarization trend. The 2016 presidential election that inspired several of these groups to form was followed by an even more contentious 2020 election.

Center for Christian Civics founder Rick Barry acknowledged that can be discouraging. “It took a long trip to get here, and I think it’s going to take at least as long to fix it. I frequently wonder—did we start this 10 years too late?” Barry said. He emphasized that it will take widespread effort to reverse polarization and restore a healthy political system.

“I want to be part of a generation that won’t be chastised for dropping the ball. We have to tend to the earth. I want to do it in a way that I won’t be ashamed of at the resurrection.”
A fostering agency’s 2021 Supreme Court win came at a price, but the dividends are accruing

BY KIM HENDERSON IN PHILADELPHIA
ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE

April 9, 2022
HER HEADLINE—the one about foster care in Philly—stirred up a hornet’s nest.

Julia Terruso knows this, but nearly four years to the day since it was published, she tells me she had no idea her story would snowball into a Supreme Court case. “I don’t even remember if it ran on the front page,” she admits.

As a reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer, Terruso was covering the city’s child welfare agencies in 2018 when a woman reached out to her with a tip. Bethany Christian Services, citing religious views on homosexuality, had turned away a lesbian couple who wanted to become foster parents. That got Terruso thinking. What about all the other foster care and adoption agencies contracting with the city of Philadelphia? Did they hold similar beliefs?

Of the 30 adoption agencies in Philadelphia, she only found one other agency that wouldn’t work with LGBTQ foster parents on religious grounds—Catholic Social Services (CSS), operated by the Philadelphia Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, which had served Philly’s needy children for more than a century.

Even with a bio that emphasizes she’s “interested in what unites and separates us,” Terruso downplays the fact she hit pay dirt with that discovery. “The case [Fulton v. City of Philadelphia] simply brought to light a conflict that needed resolution,” she says. “I’m amazed it didn’t come up sooner.”

“Remember, these were foster parents who were willing to go through the tough adjustment periods ... so they’re committed people.”
The ultimate resolution may not have been what Terruso expected, but the path to it certainly proved the power of the press. Just days after her initial story broke, city officials announced Philadelphia was suspending partnerships with CSS and Bethany, and within three months Bethany capitulated. The Philadelphia branch of the Christian agency agreed to work with same-sex couples and partner with the Mayor’s Office of LGBT Affairs for staff training.

In contrast, CSS held its stance with enough tenacity to get through three difficult years of litigation. News outlets reported defeats for the Catholic agency at federal district court and in the U.S. 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals, but they also, on June 17, 2021, announced a victory. The U.S. Supreme Court in a 9-0 judgment said Philadelphia had wrongly violated the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.

The significance of the Fulton v. City of Philadelphia decision is still being realized, and not just at CSS. It’s a win that came with losses, the behind-the-scenes kind that don’t make the headlines. But it also came with gains that are just starting to.

Quaker William Penn called the government he hoped to establish in Pennsylvania his “holy experiment.” He continued to aim high by combining the Greek roots philo (love) and adelphos (brother) in naming its chief municipality, but living up to that title has been difficult for the City of Brotherly Love.

Among the country’s 10 largest cities, Philadelphia has the highest per capita murder rate. It’s also the poorest, with more than 23 percent of its residents living in poverty. Researchers say there’s a close link between poverty and child welfare, and in Philadelphia the link is strong. Their foster care system in late February was serving 4,069 children and youth.

Even so, that’s a 33 percent drop since 2016, when the number enrolled was greater than 6,000. According to Nya Sturrup of Philadelphia’s Department of Human Services, the decline is a testament to new strategies like kinship caregiving, when a relative serves as a foster, or “resource,” parent. In Philadelphia more than half of foster children live with their relatives.

The process of screening and certifying kin is new for Bob Montoro, the man who’s been at the helm of CSS’ foster care program for more than 20 years. The kinship push grew while he and his program were benched. That is, while Philadelphia wouldn’t send them foster children. The three-year freeze.

Montoro is one of more than a thousand employees who serve under Jim Amato, secretary of Catholic Human Services for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Both Montoro and Amato are Philadelphia natives, and they sound like it when they say words like with and coffee. Montoro grew up in a row house. Amato grew up with a passion for Geno’s cheesesteaks in South Philly.

In a third-floor conference room in downtown’s Archdiocesan Pastoral Center, the men detail careers spent helping run programs that benefit Philadelphians. When asked how it felt to have their foster services suspended, Amato sighs, then describes his final meeting with city officials. That’s when Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner Cynthia Figueroa insinuated CSS needed to keep up with the times. In response, Amato referred to Catholic teachings. “Before I even got back to my office, I got a call,” Amato remembers. “They told me our intake was frozen.”

That action had immediate implications for Montoro and his team of social workers. They had 128 foster placements in some 100 homes, and although the city wouldn’t remove the children, the recruiting of new foster parents would stop. The home studies would stop. And without placements funneling into CSS, the need for their services would dry up.

And that’s what happened. By the time the Supreme Court handed down its decision in Fulton, the number of foster children in CSS care had dwindled to 18, and the number of experienced, committed foster parents dropped by 70.

“Remember, these were foster parents who were willing to go through the tough adjustment periods when kids are frightened, when kids resist and have all sorts of issues,” Amato points out. “So they’re committed people. They’re not a dime a dozen.”

Montoro’s staff also decreased as the hiatus forced his employees to secure other positions. He had managed to assemble a stable team, and it hurt to watch it dissolve: “I think everyone had been here for a minimum of three years, which in child welfare is pretty good.”

At least one employee had been at CSS for decades. As the intake freeze wore on, Eileen Mullen decided to take early retirement so other staff members wouldn’t lose their jobs.

“We’re talking about a key person who had done the home studies for all these foster parents. They were attached to her,” Amato explains. “They could call Eileen and talk about anything from child discipline to coping with stress. She embodied what we in social work consider to be solid customer service.”

But both men agree the biggest loss during the freeze is an unknown—missed adoptions. In the past, CSS averaged 25 foster-adopts a year.

“We lost those kids,” Amato acknowledges. “They might have had the opportunity to heal, to reinvent themselves with a forever family.”

Among the Amicus Briefs filed during Fulton proceedings were some written by attorney Andrea Piccotti-Bayer, a mother of 10 who directs the Conscience
Project, a nonprofit focused on conscience rights and religious freedom. One brief profiled Karen Quinn, a foster parent known throughout Philadelphia for receiving newborns. When intake at CSS ceased, people who saw Quinn didn’t recognize her without an infant. “She said the silence in her house was unbearable,” recalls Picciotti-Bayer. “They were used to laughter and crying and the fussing of a child.”

Even Quinn’s own children, some adopted through foster care, saw it as a loss. “They told me her arms were ‘those kinds of arms,’” Picciotti-Bayer smiles. “You know, arms that a baby can just rest in, and find comfort and peace.”

The United States is hardly in a position to reject open arms. Each year more than 400,000 children need foster homes, and Picciotti-Bayer believes spotlighting that need is one good that came from the struggles at CSS. “This isn’t just a problem in Philadelphia. It’s a crisis across the country, and the church must respond in kind.”

The courage of CSS inspired friends within Picciotti-Bayer’s social network to consider fostering or adoption. “They said, ‘You know, maybe we have a little bit more room in our house for somebody who needs a place.’ It’s an impressive thing, the ripple effect.”

Fulton’s ripples have most recently reached Michigan, where the Department of Health and Human Services followed the high court’s ruling and settled two lawsuits that mirrored Philadelphia’s. Lansing-based St. Vincent Catholic Charities, one of the oldest adoption and foster care agencies in the state, sued when in 2019 Michigan refused to contract with agencies that wouldn’t place children with same-sex and unmarried couples. Catholic Charities West Michigan led a similar lawsuit.

Attorney Lori Windham represented both St. Vincent’s in Lansing and CSS in Philadelphia. She’s senior counsel for Becket, a nonprofit law firm focused on religious liberty cases, whether they involve Sikh turbans or contraceptives in health insurance plans. Because of the pandemic, in 2020 she argued Fulton by phone from her Washington, D.C., office as justices listened in and her family watched from the next room. Windham believes the unanimous ruling in that case sent a powerful message—that religious rights could be protected.

“The good thing I see happening as these cases wrap up is that the lawyers can step out of the room and let the people who work at the agencies and their counterparts at the state or the city get back to working together to help kids.” She says the ultimate goal is resolving issues without lawsuits. “I love winning in court, but the ideal is finding a commonsense solution.”

Fulton came too late for faith-based foster agencies in D.C., Boston, and San Francisco. When the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision dialed up debate over same-sex marriage, they decided to close their doors. In Illinois, closures happened even before Obergefell. A 2011 law ended its partnerships with faith-based agencies, and by 2019 the state had lost more than 5,000 foster homes.

HEADLINES LAST NOVEMBER highlighted the $2 million settlement Philadelphia eventually reached with CSS. The majority of the money, $1.95 million, went to Becket for legal fees, leaving $56,000 for CSS. The city also restored CSS to a full contract with referrals, including $350,000 for 2022 foster care services. CSS, for its part, agreed to post on its website that it doesn’t certify same-sex or unmarried cohabiting couples but can provide information on agencies that do.
The agreement also contained another stipulation. The city had to work with the longtime foster parents named in the suit. But that won’t happen with Sharonell Fulton, the face of the case. She’s done.

“Being the front person really took a toll,” Montoro explains. “All the emotional energy it takes to tell your story over and over.”

Still, he didn’t have a clue what was coming last summer when he stood in Fulton’s living room, the one some 45 foster kids have called their own. The June ruling had Montoro out doing foster parent reevaluations, prepping for a restart. But all Fulton wanted to talk about was a possible move to Lancaster County, west of Philadelphia. “This was somebody who had stuck her neck out for some very difficult cases and had hung in there and done amazing things for children, and she just said, ‘You know, I’m moving on.’ It was gut-wrenching,” remembers Montoro.

To move on—to move away—Fulton will have to leave something behind. Each time a child came to live in her home, “Meme” (pronounced Mimi) Fulton planted a tree. Andrea Picciotti-Bayer learned this while conducting interviews for an amicus brief.

“It didn’t matter whether the child would be there for a short period of time or an extended period of time, they got a tree,” she says. When one of Fulton’s foster children told Picciotti-Bayer that he watched a forest grow tall while he grew as well, the image stuck with the attorney. “I kept thinking of this woman who was responsible for a whole grove of vibrant, strong people,” she says. “They’re now able to stand on their own.”

Acknowledging an era of achievement like that underscores what everyone involved with CSS’ gutsy fight against Philadelphia has realized. Standing against behavior the Bible forbids comes with consequences, and Fulton personifies them. The call Jim Amato got from the DHS commissioner that spring day in 2018 didn’t just freeze Fulton’s intake of foster placements. It ended it.

But the work of rebuilding the program at CSS is ramping up. New hires walk the halls, and Montoro’s phone is buzzing with foster referrals. Three come through during our hour-long interview.

“The process changed. Now it’s all email,” he shakes his head, squinting at the screen. He sends a quick reply to all three requests: No, no, and no. They’re for older youth, and right now, CSS doesn’t have a single foster parent willing to take in teens. Thus their new advertising campaign to recruit foster parents for that exploding niche.

“We’re starting from scratch, but we’re getting our name back out there,” Amato says, maybe even with a bit of enthusiasm. “It’s happening slowly. A lot of good things happen slowly.”
SEMINARIANS IN STRIPED PANTS

BIBLE COLLEGES IN PRISONS TURN INMATES INTO MINISTERS AND MISSIONARIES TO OTHER PRISONERS

BY JENNY ROUGH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUZANNE BROOKER
LIFE CAN GO SIDEWAYS FAST.

That’s a lesson Jamie, Kristen, Bridgett, and Rachel learned the hard way. They are inmates at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF), near Jackson. All four had rough childhoods. All four are coming to terms with their crimes, which range from drug offenses to murder. And all four are enrolled in a seminary school that launched in 2021, a four-year accredited bachelor’s degree program taught through the Leavell College of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Last April, the four women sat at a metal table in the prison yard with Beth Masters, the director of the seminary program. (Seminary is a term more often used to refer to a graduate program, but here it refers to the undergraduate prison Bible college.) The women had finished their first semester and were about to start their second. Before they had been accepted into the school, they each had to be interviewed by a panel of four prison administrators. Masters, a member of the panel, says she always asks each woman if she is guilty of the crime for which she was sentenced. “I’m not concerned with the answer,” Masters says. “I’m not trying to listen to the legalities.” Rather, she tries to discern the heart posture. “What is your emotional and verbal tone and inflection?”

Around the table in the yard, Jamie begins to talk about the circumstances that landed her behind bars. “My niece lost her life because I decided to go get high,” she says. Her voice breaks as she recalls the incident, and she’s unable to go on. She had grown up in the foster care system, she says, and didn’t have trustworthy adults to learn from or emulate. She wears a state-issued prison uniform: black-and-white striped pants and a starched white shirt. April is one of the windiest months in Mississippi, and Jamie’s long dark hair blows about as she speaks of a promise she made to herself years ago: “Because of the way I grew up, I swore that if I ever had kids, I would leave the streets.” When she got pregnant, she straightened up and stopped doing drugs—for a while. Then she relapsed.

Early on during her time in prison, she felt angry. “I’d never been confined inside a building and not been able to see outside or go outside,” she says.

Another inmate invited Jamie to a Bible study. Masters convinced her to apply. Jamie found hermeneutics, a course on interpreting Biblical text, particularly hard, but the class also turned out to be one of her favorites in the sense that she gained deeper insight into understanding Scripture.
CMCF’s program isn’t the first prison Bible college in the nation. That one started in 1996 at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a state prison that once held the toughest reputation in the country. Burl Cain was the warden at the time. Cain says some folks from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary offered to run a volunteer program there so that inmates could get a bachelor’s degree. “I said, ‘You’ve lost your mind,’” Cain recalls. When they insisted, Cain said, he looked up to the sky and thanked God.

Cain spent over two decades working at Angola, implementing various rehabilitation programs. In 2020, he became the commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections and now oversees Masters and the women’s seminary at CMCF, as well as a similar program for men at Mississippi State Penitentiary (also known as Parchman Farm).

The pioneer program at Angola held its first graduation in 2000. The prison was known for housing inmates with extra-long sentences, and it had a track record of violence. But Cain says within months of the start of the Bible college, the student-inmates began to turn the prison into a safer, more peaceful place. Incoming inmates now had a better choice, Cain says. The seminary students would greet the inmates and invite them into their care—and into a community that implemented Biblical principles instead of a prison gang that wreaked havoc and violence.

Once they have a degree, inmates can apply their new knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. Some become church planters and establish a church right on prison grounds. Others might become a preacher at one of those churches, or maybe an assistant to a prison chaplain. Still others take on the role of a Bible study leader or counselor to new inmates.

Cain says inmate-pastors are often more effective at ministry in the cell block than those from outside: “They say, ‘He feels my pain, he’s lived my life. I understand you. You understand me.’” Masters agrees. “What I’ve witnessed with my own eyes is that someone wearing striped pants can minister much more effectively to someone wearing striped pants than I ever will,” she says.

That conviction led Cain to another idea—transfer some graduates of the prison Bible college at Angola to another jail or prison, where they can become missionaries.

Ardic Fields became one of those missionaries (today, they’re called field or peer ministers). Fields graduated from the Bible college at Angola in 2010. He says when he first became incarcerated, he prayed that God would put somebody around him who could teach him about the Bible. And he told God that if He answered that prayer, he would serve Him forever. “And that day, it happened,” Fields says. That led him to the Bible college where his classes ranged from preaching and conflict management to Greek.

He also studied an overview of the Old and New Testaments, as well as immersed himself in classes that dug into specific books, such as Psalms. “It covers pretty much everything dealing with Christian ministry,” he says of the education. After graduation, he left Angola and was reassigned to a parish prison, where new inmates often start out. There, he brought the message that incarceration doesn’t mean all hope is lost, and that God values each prisoner and still has a plan for their lives. Then he was transferred to Elayn Hunt Correctional...
when I started this class, and I’m learning as I go,” she says. When she gets out, she wants to mentor youth battling addiction.

Mount Olive Correctional Complex, a male maximum-security prison in rural West Virginia, launched Mount Olive Bible College in 2014. To get its program started, then Corrections Commissioner Jim Rubenstein asked the president of nearby Appalachian Bible College (ABC) if the school would open an additional location at the prison. ABC’s President Dan Anderson said the idea wasn’t even on his radar at the time, but after a visit to Angola to see how things worked there, he quickly got on board.

In January of 2019, 21 students became part of the first graduating class. While every graduation ceremony is precious, Anderson gets especially emotional over the first. As each man walked across the stage, Anderson noticed the dignity in his eyes as he shook each graduate’s hand.

Today, more than a dozen Christian colleges and universities across the United States have started similar programs on prison grounds. Money for these schools most often comes from the private sector, such as funds raised from the sister college or an adoptive church. The qualifications for each program differ.

For example, to qualify for the CMCF’s women’s seminary program, the inmate must have a high-school diploma or equivalency and must not have had any rule violations for at least one year. She’s also required to complete a 13-week Experiencing God class.

According to Masters, that gives the potential student the chance to gauge interest before committing to four years. The inmate must also have 10 years or more remaining on her sentence to attend seminary. That’s because the student-inmate is expected to spend time giving back to the prison by serving as a tutor, leading a Bible study, or visiting and counseling inmates in lockdown.

Kristen is another one of the student-inmates in CMCF’s women’s seminary. She says drugs have been a problem for her from a young age. Even behind bars, she “wasn’t doing right,” either failing drug tests or passing them illegitimately. (According to Cain, people smuggle drugs into prisons in a variety of ways. For example, stuffed into objects dropped by drones over fences, brought in with truck deliveries, applied to the back of stamps, and staff breaches.) Kristen didn’t grow up going to church, and she says she never grasped what the gospel was all about. But in prison, she kept praying for God to deliver her.

She saw other inmates who were Christians and wanted the contentment they had. “God placed it on me that, Kristen, if you want Me to work with you, you got to be willing.”

Two years into serving time, God began to change her desires. The first time she honestly passed a random drug test, she pulled Masters aside to tell her the news, and the two rejoiced together. “I didn’t even know basic Bible stories when I started this class, and I’m learning as I go,” she says. When she gets out, she wants to mentor youth battling addiction.

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Everybody—prisoner or not—is under authority of some sort.
and handed him the diploma. In a gown and a hat with a red tassel, their whole demeanor changed, he says. “Because all of a sudden, they were not khaki-wearing inmates, they were graduating college students.”

Running a Bible college at a prison has its challenges. ABC has been through four directors in seven years. Steve Russell, a former pastor, is the current one. He says the inmates who apply come from a wide cross section of humanity and various spiritual backgrounds. He estimates about half the students grew up with a parent or grandparent taking them to church. “Many of them would tell you, ‘It didn’t stick.’” But many had a wake-up moment after their sentencing, and that’s when their faith took root.

One of the students told Russell that as funny as it sounds, he sees his time in prison as a blessing from God. If he weren’t behind bars, he suspects he’d be dead.

Russell acknowledges some of the inmates apply to the college because it’ll look good on their record, but most of the students genuinely want to be there. “Nobody is forced to be in Mount Olive Bible College, and that gives them a little bit of an initiative that you probably don’t get in some other [mandatory prison] programs,” he says. The bulk of his students are between 40 and 55, but he has had students as old as 70 and as young as 27.

Russell says he tries to give student-inmates tools to live differently when they get out. One of those tools comes from Romans 12 and 13: learning how to accept the authority that’s over you. That leads to some interesting discussions, Russell says, especially when it comes to inmates respecting corrections officers. He teaches that everybody—prisoner or not—is under authority of some sort, from God’s commandments down to obeying traffic laws.

DINO IS ONE OF RUSSELL’S former students that won’t be getting out. He has been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Before his current sentence, he’d been to prison before—and didn’t want to go back. Still, he pursued a life that revolved around a cocaine addiction, which led to armed robberies and other crimes. He decided that when the police caught up with him, he’d shoot himself with his gun. But the night before his arrest, he sold his gun for cocaine, so he used a knife instead.

“Cut myself from my belly button all the way up, broke my breastbone apart,” Dino said. He was 35. At the hospital, he thanked the surgeon for saving his life. “I didn’t really want to die. I just didn’t want to live. I didn’t want to go back to prison for the rest of my life,” he says. The doctor told Dino it was a miracle he was alive—and to thank God.

Dino took those words to heart. In prison, he made a public confession of his faith and was baptized. Now, he says, he acknowledges God before moving forward with actions and decisions. “I stop and pray about it, and ask God to lead, guide, and direct my life in this situation.” A graduate of Mount Olive Bible College, he has plans to transfer to North Central Regional Jail to be a peer mentor.

He says when outsiders come to the prison to learn about Mount Olive Bible College, they tend to ask a common question: Why should a prison have a Bible college? Why not use the resources to support colleges and universities in the free world?

Dino has an answer. He might not be getting out of prison, but many inmates will. He asks questioners to imagine a former inmate renting a house next to their house.

“Would you rather a man come there that just went to Bible college to try to change his life and to praise God, or would you rather a convicted murderer that hates the world move in next door to you?”

April 9, 2022 WORLD 63
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NOTEBOOK

History  Sports  Law

IN THE MOVIE 42, Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey discusses with fellow team executives his plans to sign Jackie Robinson—and, ultimately, integrate baseball.

“Robinson’s a Methodist, I’m a Methodist, God’s a Methodist,” declares Rickey (played by Harrison Ford). “We can’t go wrong.”

The scene underscores an important, if sometimes downplayed, aspect of Robinson’s impact on American history—

“JACKIE THE ROBBER” STOLE FANS’ HEARTS

The faith of Jackie Robinson and others changed baseball, and America

by Ray Hacke
one worth reexamining as the 75th anniversary of Robinson’s debut in Major League Baseball approaches on April 15:

A man of deep religious convictions, Rickey considered it his calling to make the major leagues accessible to black players. He needed a man of exemplary Christian character to help accomplish his goal, one whose on-field excellence would match his unflappable gentility in the face of hate-filled invective—or worse.

Robinson easily met the excellence criterion: In his sole season with the Negro Leagues’ Kansas City Monarchs in 1945, Robinson hit .387 in 47 games. He was also fleet afoot: A track star at UCLA (where he also lettered in football, basketball, and baseball) who might have represented the U.S. in the Olympics had they not been canceled during World War II, he swiped 200 bases and stole home 19 times as a pro.

Still, Rickey had reason to question Robinson’s temperament: Drafted into the Army during WWII and commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant, Robinson encountered racism in the ranks. Unlike many blacks of his era, Robinson wouldn’t shut up and take it. After refusing to move to the back of a bus while on base at Fort Riley, Kan.—and cursing angrily at the bus driver—in 1944, Robinson faced a court-martial. (A nine-judge panel ultimately exonerated him.) Thus, during their three-hour interview in August 1945, Rickey repeatedly tried to provoke Robinson to anger. Eventually, Robinson cracked, albeit ever so slightly: “Mr. Rickey, do you want a player who’s afraid to fight back?” he asked.

“No,” Rickey responded. “I need a player with guts enough not to fight back.”

Essentially, Rickey wanted Robinson to follow Christ’s teaching about “turning the other cheek.” Robinson would face the worst kind of physical and verbal abuse and discrimination on and off the field. No matter what, though, he couldn’t respond in anger lest baseball’s ruling class unfairly brand him and other African Americans as hotheads and use that as an excuse to keep them out of the game.

Ultimately, Robinson fulfilled Rickey’s expectations: No matter what racially motivated wrongs he endured, Robinson refrained from retaliating—that is, except for making opponents pay on the scoreboard. In the process, he won opposing players’ and fans’ respect en route to a 10-year, Hall of Fame career in the majors.

It helped that a fellow Christian rallied to his cause: Pee Wee Reese, the Dodgers’ shortstop and team captain, first refused to sign a petition opposing Rickey’s decision to promote Robinson from the Dodgers’ minor league affiliate in Montreal in 1947. Reese did so even though Robinson, a fellow shortstop, might challenge him for his job.

Reese later draped his arm around Robinson—who broke in with the Dodgers as a first baseman—before a 1948 game in Cincinnati, a stone’s throw from Reese’s native Kentucky. With this simple gesture, Reese showed a largely white crowd that was overwhelmingly hostile to Robinson that if a Southern boy like Reese could accept Robinson’s presence among them, so could they.

By July 1947, three months after Robinson’s major league debut, other major league teams were following the Dodgers’ lead by signing black players. It took at least a couple of years for some teams to follow suit, but eventually more and more did.

Robinson’s actions also provided the template for the nonviolent protests of the civil rights movement that broke down racial barriers and created greater opportunities for blacks outside of baseball. Martin Luther King Jr. even credited Robinson with paving the way: “Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did,” King said shortly before being assassinated in 1968.

Turns out Rickey, as portrayed in 42, was right: By adhering to the Christian principle of turning the other cheek, he, Robinson, and God could not—and did not—go wrong.
Transgender swimmer wins at NCAA women’s championships

by Ray Hacke

THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA’s athletics website hails Lia Thomas as “the first Quaker female swimmer to win an NCAA individual title.”

Truth be told, there still hasn’t been one.

Thomas made history last month as the first biological male to capture a collegiate national women’s swimming title at the NCAA Division I Women’s Swimming and Diving Championships, which concluded March 19.

Thomas won the 500-yard freestyle race, touching the wall with a school-record time of 4 minutes, 33.24 seconds. In the process, the senior defeated three female swimmers who represented the United States at last summer’s Olympic Games in Tokyo: Virginia’s Emma Weyant, Texas’ Erica Sullivan, and Stanford’s Brooke Forde—who placed second, third, and fourth, respectively. Women’s advocates who protested Thomas’ inclusion in the women’s championships say having a male in the pool makes it inherently unfair for female competitors.

Still, to at least one observer who saw the 6-foot-3 Thomas compete during the preliminaries, Thomas seemed to be coasting—perhaps to avoid appearing too dominant, as he had earlier in the season, when he defeated a female teammate by 38 seconds in one race.

Nancy Hogshead-Makar is a lawyer and former Olympic swimmer who won three gold medals and a silver at the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles. She said Thomas’ performance at the NCAA meet is Exhibit A as to why men who identify as women should not be allowed to compete against females: While the NCAA this year required males to undergo a year’s worth of hormone treatments to be able to compete as “women,” no amount of such treatments seems to dull the biological advantages males develop after age 8.

Cynthia Millen stopped serving as a USA Swimming official earlier this year because she believed allowing Thomas to compete against women created an inherent unfairness in the sport.

She believes the only way to preserve fairness in swimming is to keep the sport segregated by biological sex: “We [officials] examine starting blocks, suits, goggles—all of it—to make sure no swimmer has an unfair advantage,” she said. “Letting men compete against women is absolutely not fair to anyone.”

Lia Thomas at the NCAA Division I Women’s Swimming and Diving Championship

LETTING MEN COMPETE AGAINST WOMEN IS ABSOLUTELY NOT FAIR TO ANYONE.
PURSUING JUSTICE QUIETLY

Has arbitration in employment contracts been unfairly maligned in the court of public opinion?

by Carolina Lumetta

In Feb. 10, former Fox News anchor Gretchen Carlson stood with legislators at the Capitol to celebrate the passage of a bipartisan bill to drastically alter federal law surrounding employment contracts. Carlson accused the late network CEO Roger Ailes of sexual harassment in 2016. In the fallout of the scandal and the resurgence of the #MeToo movement, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., introduced the bill with Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., the same year.

The Ending Forced Arbitration of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Act of 2021 targets employee contracts—specifically clauses that, under the Federal Arbitration Act, mandate arbitration in workplace disputes. Carlson frequently testified that arbitration in sexual harassment cases silences survivors of abuse and allows companies to hide their misdeeds. President Biden signed the bill into law on March 3.

The legislation does not ban arbitrations outright, but if they are to be included in a contract from now on, both the employer and the employee must agree on it. “It’s all about freedom of choice,” said Remington Gregg, counsel for civil justice and consumer rights at Public Citizen.

The new law has been lauded as a step forward for the #MeToo movement, but some legal and policy experts say arbitration has been unfairly tarnished in the public mind and may often be a better option for women who have been victims of sexual harassment.

Arbitration comes into play for noncriminal situations such as harassment and misconduct. It became standard at several companies to make an arbitration clause a condition of accepting a position. Dozens of women, including Carlson, testified before Congress in November about ways employers or co-workers took advantage of these clauses, along with confidentiality agreements, to get away with misconduct.

Actress Eliza Dushku said CBS fired her from its prime-time drama Bull after she said a producer harassed her by making rape jokes and lewd comments. She did not know she had a forced arbitration clause and had earlier signed a non-disclosure agreement. The Boston Globe reported in 2018 that CBS paid her a $9.5 million settlement.

But Roger King worries that such high-profile cases and harsh language like “forced” associated with arbitration will discourage employers from even discussing the option under the law. He worked as a law firm partner for 25 years before shifting to become a full-time labor relations attorney at HR Policy Association, a membership organization representing...
cases, Sommerville said many arbitration cases involve compensating and caring for a victim after an abuser has already been fired.

“Often cases ended up with a church and an individual praying for each other and restoring a relationship,” Sommerville said. “That’s not a result you would typically get at the courthouse where sometimes the focus is all about money. Christian arbitration focuses on Biblical principles as well as legal principles.”

This isn’t the end of the road for arbitration legislation. The Forced Arbitration Injustice Repeal (FAIR) Act passed the House in 2019 with nearly unanimous Democratic support and Republican opposition. It would prohibit all pre-dispute arbitration, not just for sexual harassment, rocketing cases directly to the courts. King testified before Congress against the act in November, arguing that cracking down on arbitration based on a few bad actors will instead make justice harder for claimants to achieve.

But Gregg said the bad actors prove the need for the FAIR Act to clean house: “All forms of forcing you into arbitration should be banned in society. The #MeToo movement showed how these clauses are used to not only allow corporate wrongdoers to escape accountability but also make it difficult if not impossible to clean up these issues. Public scrutiny is what forces large industries to make changes.”

King agreed that public attention should be leveraged against corporations to hold them accountable, but he said restricting non-disclosure agreements might be a more effective way to do so rather than eliminating arbitration clauses. Most of the women who testified in Congress reported situations where their alleged abuse was hidden not only by a private arbitration but also by confidentiality agreements.

“Privacy does empower perpetrators,” Broyde said, “but it also empowers victims.”

Privacy holds an important role for Christians, according to Frank Sommerville, formerly an attorney based in Grand Prairie, Texas, and now senior editorial adviser for Church Law & Tax, a division of Christianity Today. Many churches follow a 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 dispute process, which outlines several steps for Christians to pursue private conflict resolution as a first option. So lawyers like Sommerville often arbitrate to determine a settlement for companies, organizations, and churches to keep the matter out of the courts. When it comes to sexual harassment more than 400 human resource officers of Fortune 500 companies.

King said this arbitration option appeals to many plaintiffs who do not want grievances aired in public. “I’ve seen how poorly the courts work, or how they don’t work as the case may be,” King said. “Employees can be treated very unfairly by lawyers and the court system. Correspondingly, I’ve seen arbitration work time and time again. There are seasoned, thoughtful arbitrators who do this for a living.”

Sometimes companies have preferred arbitrators they have used frequently and suggest when a situation arises. Depending on the process, the complainant and the employer might separately cross off options from a list or pick a team of multiple arbitrators. Both parties must agree to the final person, who must disclose any conflicts of interest. The arbitrator’s decision is binding.

Emory University law professor Michael Broyde has sat in on a variety of arbitration proceedings as a member of the Beth Din, the largest Jewish law court in America. In determining the facts of a situation, he could keep the claimant and the accused in separate rooms, ensuring privacy. But in a court of law, both parties must be physically present, which could intimidate an employee coming forward with harassment evidence.

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Understanding your enemy
Try not to underestimate—or overestimate

ONCE TEXTED a history buff I know, “A Senator on TV just said Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country.” My taciturn son replied, “Don’t underestimate your enemy.” It was good advice, and seldom heeded throughout history.

After the Dunkirk evacuation of cornered British forces in a makeshift flotilla across the English Channel during the spring of 1940, Hitler wrongly expected Britain to seek peace, and then wrongly thought his Luftwaffe could make a quick end to the island nuisance so that he could turn his attention to his real interest—Russia. But he underestimated the Royal Air Force and the British “Blitz spirit.”

Turning eastward to a people he dismissed as racially inferior Slavic “Untermensch,” Hitler underestimated the sheer size of Russia, its endless pool of recruits, the heartless determination of Gen. Zhukov, and the Russian winter. His Operation Barbarossa not only proved a failure but is reputed by some historians to be the turning point of the war.

Japan’s own World War II miscalculations included taking on the United States when it already had its hands full on other fronts, and in making enemies of the Eastern peoples (as Hitler did with Ukraine) whom they would have done well to woo as brothers against the “imperialist” West.

At first wildly successful, Hitler’s attack on his erstwhile ally Russia, in the largest land invasion force ever assembled, was doomed when his brutality, plundering, and starving of the Ukrainians—a people whose support he could have gained because Stalin had embittered them by his own brutal collectivization policies—succeeded only in making new enemies.

Stalin underestimated Hitler’s treachery and obsession with Lebensraum, and was so lulled into false security by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Nonaggression Pact that even after three top spies assured him of an imminent German attack—and told him the very date!—he refused to believe them.

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Meanwhile, back in Singapore, hitherto Britain’s stronghold in the far East, Gen. Percival was overseeing his own nation’s great military defeat by erroneously reckoning Singapore to be an impenetrable fortress, and not bothering to prepare for a land invasion through Malaya. Even as the Japanese were methodically plucking their way south down the peninsula, British officers were holding Christmas parties at the Raffles Hotel.

Causes of underestimation, as well as overestimation, may include ignorance, pride, racism, and whatever other failings flesh is heir to. Only the One in heaven sees clearly what for the rest of us is seen through a glass darkly.

God would have us estimate our enemies neither too highly nor too lightly. When “the heart of [King] Ahaz [of Judah] and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” over the menacing Syrian-Israel evil alliance, God was not impressed. “Two smoldering stumps of firebrands” (Isaiah 7:2, 4), He called them: “It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is [only] Damascus, and the head of Damascus is [only] Rezin” (verses 7-8).

In the spiritual realm, most importantly, let us neither over- nor underestimate our historic Enemy. On the one hand, soberness and diligence are called for because he prows with power to devour the unwary (1 Peter 5:8). On the other hand, Satan’s own vast underestimation is coming to light soon, on the day when “the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by the splendor of his coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:8).
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A VISIT TO THE WOUNDED
Ukraine enters a second month of war

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT VOLODIMYR ZELENSKYY shook hands with a wounded soldier during a visit to a Kyiv hospital (above). As the war—which began with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24—entered its second month, Russian forces remained bogged down outside major cities and were concentrating on shelling military and civilian targets. The Russian navy shelled the port city of Mariupol. U.S. intelligence sources told the Associated Press that Russia has lost 10 percent of its combat capacity in terms of troops and war materiel and that Ukrainian forces have launched counteroffensives in parts of the country. But Ukraine still faces a military much larger than its own. Zelenskyy described negotiations with Russia as “step by step, but they are going forward.” In an address to Japan’s parliament, he said thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been killed, including 121 children. “Our people cannot even adequately bury their murdered relatives, friends, and neighbors,” he said. “They have to be buried right in the yards of destroyed buildings, next to the roads.”
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.

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