

THE EPOCH TIMES LIFE & TRADITION

Megna had a rough childhood. He was relentlessly bullied. But every day, his mother told him he would be a great football player.

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Project Appreciation: A Different Approach to New Year's Resolutions

JEFF MINICK

It's that time when many of us, after ringing in the New Year by partying, wearing funny hats, blowing on various noisemakers, and staying up until midnight to watch the ball drop in Times Square, are making resolutions.

If we Google "common New Year's resolutions," we find that nearly all these lists have the following items in common: lose weight, exercise more, save money or spend less money, quit smoking, get organized, and learn a new skill.

If we search a bit more, we discover that well over half the people making resolutions fail to keep them. Some of us, including me, often break our resolutions in less than a week's time.

Some Helpful Suggestions

In "Top 10 New Year's Resolutions (and How to Follow Through on Them)," Brad Zomick offers readers some excellent tips on sticking to their pledges. He recommends such tactics as selecting a resolution you feel passionate about, writing it down, telling others about it—this sharing helps strengthen your commitment—and jumping back on that wagon of resolution if you fall off. Particularly helpful is Zomick's reminder to be as specific as possible in your intention. Instead of resolving to "lose weight," we write down a specific, doable number of pounds we want to shed. Instead of resolving to "exercise more," we write down the days and hours we will spend at the gym.

Good advice.

Now let's look at that list of common resolutions again.

Every one of those resolutions is directed at the self. Certainly self-improvement is a worthy and noble aspiration, one to be commended. By bettering ourselves, we better the world.

Yet what if we aimed our resolutions not at ourselves, but at others?

A Different Approach

In an email from a young woman I know, she wondered what might happen if we made small acts of kindness a New Year's resolution. Her passing remark started me thinking. We've all heard—and some of us have been recipients—of "random acts of kindness." What might happen if we set ourselves the goal of deliberate acts of kindness? What might happen if instead of making self-improvement our goal, we aimed to make those around us feel appreciated or to bring cheer into their days?

These questions brought forth a mental list of what I could do for others in the new year.

Bring flowers or cookies on the first of every month to the staff at Samuels Public Library here in Front Royal, Virginia. These men and women have helped me enormously over the last three years, and the library itself has provided a fine sanctuary for reading and writing.

Bring flowers or fruit once a month to the baristas and other workers at the Happy Creek Coffee Shop. Every couple of months, I could also slip a twenty into the tip jar instead of my usual dollar. Happy Creek is my second home.

Bring flowers or treats every two months to the 619 Market near my



GAUDILAB/SHUTTERSTOCK

What if we aimed our resolutions not at ourselves, but at others?

daughter's home. I shop here frequently because I want them to remain open.

Call a relative or a friend once every week on Sunday afternoon. Some of my siblings and I rarely communicate, not because we dislike each other but because we're either too busy or too negligent to do so. Time to rectify that situation.

Write a letter—a real honest-to-goodness letter—to some of my grandchildren every week. Kids love to receive mail, and we're talking a little time, an envelope, and a stamp.

Should I decide to adopt it, I thought, this "Project Appreciation" might bring more satisfaction than a rebuilding project aimed at myself. Or perhaps I could do both. (Heaven knows several areas in my personal life could use repairs.)

Project Appreciation

First, Project Appreciation (PA) might help someone besides myself: the discouraged, the sad, the young, and the worn. We live in a world in which children receive much encouragement and are often showered with praise.

Not so true for adults. All too often, the boss forgets to thank his secretary for her splendid efforts. Spouses forget to praise husbands or wives for all their work and their devotion. Paying attention to the people around us is an act of much-needed recognition.

Project Appreciation would also take me out of myself. Like many people, I can become so wrapped up in my everyday affairs—work, shopping, house-keeping—that I neglect those around me, including family members and friends I love. This PA would force me to stop, abandon myself for a bit, and think of someone else.

Finally, PA just sounds like a boatload of fun to me. Changing old personal habits by way of a resolution can be necessary and beneficial, but pondering such a transition puts me into a grim mood. Giving to others is much more appealing. It's easy, relatively inexpensive, and might bring some spark of joy into another's day. (And yes, I recognize the dangers of ego behind these acts; delivering small kindnesses would make me feel better about myself. So be it.) Sooooo ...

Committed (and Terrified of Failure When This Is Published)

I'm going to give PA a shot in 2020. So here's the schedule I've devised:

First week of every month: Some kind of treat or gift to the public library.

First week of every month: Some flowers or fruit to the Happy Creek crew. No pastries; they already sell baked goods. Occasional alternative to gifts: Slip a twenty into the tip jar.

First week every two months: Flowers or treats to the market near my house. Every Sunday afternoon: Call one relative or friend.

Every Sunday afternoon: Write a letter to at least two grandchildren age 3 and up. These can be duplicates. That way, each one will hear from me at least every six weeks. (I have a platoon of grandchildren.)

I picked a specific week of commitment rather than a day because both the library and café personnel work different shifts. If I delivered on the same day every month, some would be left out. And no one wants to miss cookies.

Budget: \$40 per month maximum. (A little more than the price of a gym membership here.)

Reminders: Copies of this schedule will be taped on the refrigerator, the window above the desk where I write, and the dashboard of my car.

We'll see how PA goes.

And if you decide to come along for the ride, hop aboard. This train always has room for one more.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooled students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

THE NEUTRAL CORNER

How to Succeed at New Year's Resolutions

CON CHAPMAN

Of making many resolutions, there is no end. So it is with a sense of weary skepticism that I listen to people tell me how they are going to be better in the coming year.

Yeah, right.

I can see, ironically, with 20-20 clarity, that you will not have lived up to your rosy vision of yourself come December 31, 2020, because you're doing it all wrong.

Take it from me, someone who has never broken a New Year's resolution in his life.

I'm going to reveal my secret methods for making resolutions you can keep gratis, in writing, so you don't have to take notes.

Step 1 in my "Keep Your Resolutions Guide" is—be realistic. I don't mean by the sort of "one weird trick" solution you see on the internet after you click through 12 pages of ads, like—



FLYSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK

I resolved, after a great deal of reflection, to give up water-skiing in 2019. Let's face it; water-skiing is an expensive sport that consumes disposable income better spent on food, clothing, and shelter.

"Don't make any resolutions—you're welcome!"

No, I mean that you should take the measure of yourself and your limits before committing yourself to a program of eating only flaxseed and wheat germ to lose 30 pounds. I resolved, after a great deal of reflection, to give up water-skiing in 2019. Let's face it;

water-skiing is an expensive sport that consumes disposable income better spent on food, clothing, and shelter. You need skis (two), a tow rope, a boat, an engine, a trailer to lug the stuff around, and a body of water, none of which—particularly the last—comes cheap.



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Associate yourself with other people who already engage in your new desired behavior consistently.

See Yourself Anew in the New Year

How you can overcome the odds and fulfill your New Year's pledge to yourself

MICHAEL COURTER

If you are like 45 percent of the population, you are earnestly preparing for an upcoming New Year's resolution. You may also already know that only 8 percent of people achieve the resolutions they make for themselves, according to a study from the University of Scranton. What exactly does this 8 percent do differently? Do they set easier goals? Is it just willpower?

In his best-selling book, "Atomic Habits," James Clear lays out the science for developing and keeping better habits and how consistent, incremental changes multiply like compound interest over time. By following the right strategies, you can be among the 8 percent of people who successfully complete their pledges, and in the process, see yourself become the kind of person you want to be.

Instead of Setting Goals, Change Habits

A few key points, which stood out to me from Clear's work, coincide exactly with what I see in my clients as they work to change their behavior. First, focus on changing habits, not setting goals. Goals can set you in a direction, but they don't include the gradual and consistent changes you will need to make to get there. These changes are habits. Goals make us less happy to the extent that we are unsatisfied until we achieve them, while a habit is a success every time we do it.

In addition, goals are finite. When we achieve them, we are done. Positive habits can continue and build on each other. For example, if you have a goal to master a piece of music, you may master it. If you create a habit of effectively practicing an instrument for one hour each day, you will eventually master that instrument.

Reward Yourself Along the Way

Clear describes the importance of pairing rewards with the new habits you are creating. Most people don't use this strategy and instead rely on self-criticism to motivate themselves. Many positive habits take months or even years for their positive effects to become apparent; most people won't continue something that provides no positive feedback for the length of time it takes to experience the rewards they are after. Therefore, when the self-criticism doesn't work, they also feel like a failure.

Instead, Clear suggests pairing the positive habits you aspire to acquire with ones you already enjoy. For example, you could ride an exercise bicycle while you are watching your favorite shows or only get on Facebook after you have done 30 minutes of homework.

The key is to pair the habits together or insert the one you are working toward first, because then you will associate the habit you aspire to with something you already enjoy. After some repetition, they will be associated together and you will begin to anticipate the "reward" with the new good habit. Anticipating a reward is the key to keeping a new habit.

First, focus on changing habits, not setting goals.

Changing How You See Yourself

What I found to be the most powerful idea in Clear's book is the power of identity when it comes to our habits. Clear describes three levels of change with varying orders of magnitude. You can change outcomes, systems, or identity. Changes in identity—how you see yourself and your worldview—are the most powerful type of change. Over time, people tend to act in alignment with how they see themselves. You might see this principle reflected in yourself and the people around you.

If we want to create a significant change in habits, we have to see ourselves in line with the new behaviors we want to create. We have to envision ourselves as the kind of person who would act this way and then start to provide evidence to ourselves that we are indeed that person.

It can also help to spend time with people who share this view of themselves and of us. This makes it easier to associate ourselves with the new behavior by being part of a group of people who do this behavior.

As we continue to act in alignment with how we want to see ourselves, our viewpoint gradually shifts into becoming this person. And once we become this person, it is easier to stay that way than it is to change back.

How to Stay on Track With Your New Year's Resolutions

1. Focus on developing better habits, not setting goals.
2. Use the power of anticipation to pair your new behavior with something you already find rewarding until you associate the new behavior with the reward.
3. Engage yourself as a person who envisions in your new desired behavior. Associate yourself with other people who already do this consistently.
4. Envision yourself as a life-long learner, and read or listen to James Clear's book, "Atomic Habits." He will provide you with a cornucopia of resources and ideas to make you more likely to achieve your resolution.

Michael Courter is a therapist and counselor who believes in the power of personal growth, repairing relationships, and following your dreams. His website is CourterCounsel.com

Do you have questions about relationships or personal growth that you would like Michael to address? Send them to mc@CourterCounsel.com

A CASE STUDY

Jeffrey comes into my office. He has had depression on and off since he was a teenager. While we were investigating what causes Jeffrey's depression and what his life looks like without it, Jeffrey says that he is able to maintain good eating, sleeping, and exercise habits when he isn't depressed. In fact, his first depression occurred in high school when he sprained his ankle and had to take six weeks off from his track and field team, and he couldn't exercise.

We surmised that exercise was the key starting point for Jeffrey to undo his cycle of depression, and it would be easier to return to a positive cycle with his sleep and eating if he could develop regular exercise habits.

Regular exercise is as effective as antidepressant medication in the short term and even more effective in the long term for relieving depression. After leaving my office, Jeffrey felt hopeful and motivated. He just needed to start running again, something he always loved to do anyway, to improve his depression.

The next week, he flops down on my couch with his head buried in his hands. He ran the first two days after our session, and he was feeling really positive about himself. Starting on the third day he felt depressed and he hasn't gone running since then, and he has been binge eating junk food and mindlessly surfing the internet for hours each day—just what he committed not to do. Why does Jeffrey end up back here, despite knowing that exercise is the key to getting himself back on track?

1. First I analyzed what got Jeffrey off track last week. I had a series of questions to ask Jeffrey to find out what happened; the essence of the problem was that he was expecting to feel better right away after he exercised. He became disappointed and hopeless when the results were not immediate, as predicted by James Clear's model of outcome-based thinking.
2. I normalized Jeffrey's feelings of disappointment in himself to deactivate the power of the shame that was weighing on him and stopping him from moving forward.
3. Jeffrey recommitted to taking the action that will help him break his downward spiral.
4. I spent some time talking to Jeffrey about the times in his life when he was exercising regularly and in good shape. I got him to remember the positive aspects of those times as vividly as possible, and then I linked those memories with Jeffrey's present self by pointing out the traits and characteristics he shares with that earlier version of himself. This is how I worked on the identity aspect of the habits. The same Jeffrey that is here today, was an athlete in the past so he still knows how to be one now.
5. We discussed ways to pair rewarding behavior with exercise. Jeffrey always likes to talk on the phone with his brother and niece so he committed to arranging a time to talk with his brother after each workout.

The next week, Jeffrey went running three times and went to the gym twice. He also developed a closer relationship with his brother. Within seven weeks, Jeffrey was exercising and sleeping regularly again, and depression began to lift. You can break out of your ruts and create new positive habits for yourself in 2020 by employing the right strategies.



Con Chapman is the author of "Rabbit's Blues: The Life and Music of Johnny Hodges."



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Three of the main things men want in a relationship are respect, care and companionship, and freedom to be themselves.

Want Some Magic in Your Marriage? Try Appreciating Your Husband

JUNE FAKKERT

This past year, I've really come to believe in magic. Not the magic that makes rabbits appear out of hats, but rather the innate kind we all have—the kind that when you change your mind for the better, elements outside of yourself transform in beautiful and unexpected ways.

Earlier I wrote about how good homemaking can work magic on your life. (And I can still attest that when Marie Kondo said there is life-changing magic in tidying up, it's not hyperbole.)

Now I'd like to share how appreciating your husband can bring a profound joy to your marriage. I tried it and it really does work. First, though, it's important to understand a key male characteristic that most women are not taught about.

Key Character Trait

Recently, while reading Grimm's fairy tales to my son, I was reminded about a very fundamental characteristic of men: They will move mountains for the woman they love. And they will do this at great cost and detriment to themselves.

Rapunzel's father risks his life to go into the

Men will move mountains for the woman they love. And they will do this at great cost and detriment to themselves.

witch's garden to get rampion (for salad) for his wife, and Hansel and Gretel's father allows his wife, the stepmother of his children, to convince him to leave them in the forest. Then, of course, there are the princes who slay fierce dragons and risk their lives in all sorts of ways to save a princess or woman in distress.

And this isn't just the stuff of fairy tales; I have observed this same chivalric tendency in the men I know, including both my husband and father.

A recent example: We are redoing our kitchen, and shortly after my husband hauled home cases of beautiful and very heavy marble tile (and nearly put out his back doing so), I realized it was really cold to the touch and I didn't want it on our floor. To make matters worse, I then said I really wanted this certain clay tile that he had been keen on for a year but had given up because I hadn't been enthusiastic and it was hard to find in our area.

His response to all this was something like: "Whatever makes you happy, dear."

Suzanne Venker, author of several books including "The Alpha Female's Guide to Men & Marriage," explains this characteristic in a Fox News piece adapted from her book:

"All a good man wants is for his wife to be happy, and he will go to great lengths to make it happen. He'll even support his wife's ideas, plans or opinions if he doesn't agree with

them. That's because a husband's number one goal is to please his wife. If he determines his wife cannot be pleased, that's when the marriage is in trouble."

Perhaps you may be thinking that your husband doesn't have this particular characteristic, because he goes out of his way to be contrary toward you. But I assure you he does, so please keep reading.

The next area to understand is his desires, because these are different than yours and from what you might expect.

Three of the main things men want in a relationship are respect, care and companionship, and freedom to be themselves.

If you dig into the literature, there are of course more fascinating aspects to be learned about masculine nature and the male-female dynamic, but for the purposes of this article, we'll leave it here.

Third, as a wife, it's important to understand a woman's influence on her husband. Venker writes:

"Men tend to follow women's lead. Your husband's actions are more often than not reactions. He's reacting to something you said or did, or to something you didn't say or didn't do. He's reacting to your moods, your gestures, your inflections, and your tone. That's how men are. Your husband

wants you to be happy, and when he sees it isn't working, he thinks he's failed. That's when he acts out."

Now this doesn't mean that men are weak or dumb—just a lot simpler and more straightforward than women. It also means that a woman who owns her femininity will have a more charming husband, be loved and adored, and, dare I say, empowered by it.

At least this has been my experience, and the experience of several of my friends in the past year who've been consciously working on their marriages along these lines.

When I've taken the time to be truly appreciative of the ways in which my husband sacrifices for myself and our children, and told or shown him my appreciation, I have received back tenfold what I put in.

I took a lot of inspiration for this from the book "Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man's Deepest Love and Tenderness." Authored by a Christian woman, Helen Andelin, and published in the 60s, the book contains many scriptural quotes, but I'd recommend it for anyone because the principles are timeless and universal. Andelin offers an in-depth how-to guide to marriage that does require a lot of sacrifice on the woman's part—but the results, as I said, in my experience, are well worth it.

The book also has great testimonies from women with ailing marriages who revived them into extraordinarily happy ones following their advice.

I'd like to include a cautionary note here: It's very important to remember that the power we wield over our husbands' affections should always be used with good intentions. And you must be sincere in your appreciation, because he will sense it if you're not.

How to Appreciate Him

Below are a few ways to appreciate him. However, the first step is to really take the time to reflect on and admire the man he is: his intelligence, skills, character, strength, or whatever manly qualities he has that make you love him. If he's not currently manifesting much in the way of admirable qualities, then reflect on ones from the past (and in this case, I'd highly recommend Andelin's book because she addresses in detail what to do if the marriage is in a sour place or if the husband has slid into immoral, harmful behavior).

Once you've filled your heart with his wonderful attributes, let him know. Either find a time to tell him face to face or compose a letter, preferably by hand, then mail it, put it in a stocking, or hide it where only he will be sure to find it. You can also do a series of smaller notes, perhaps leading to a big one.

A third thing to do is treat him: Do some special things for him, cook his favorite meals, or clean up that part of the house that bugs him. Some men will even feel very cared for if the house is clean.

Lastly, give him the space and freedom to be himself and pursue some of his hobbies and dreams. It will allow him to come home refreshed.

My best advice for allowing him to be himself is to let him relax at home. This will mean forbearing some mundane annoyances. If you have been nagging, then stop and find a different way to handle the matter. This is easier said than done, I know, but it is key for the magic to take place, and in all likelihood, he will start doing what you want and more once he feels the warmth of your respect and appreciation.

Good luck and I wish you the joy of real magic!

Confronting the 'Big, Bad Bully'

A conversation with authors Miriam Laundry and Jack Canfield

BARBARA DANZA

In her powerful TED Talk, Miriam Laundry makes the case that, though bullying can be an issue for many kids, an often overlooked issue is that the biggest bully of all may be the one in the mirror. With depression and anxiety on the rise among young people, Laundry is on a mission to help kids and teens recognize the power of the words they say to themselves and face the "big, bad bully" in their mind.

Laundry teamed up with self-esteem expert and best-selling author of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series, Jack Canfield, in the new children's book, "The Big, Bad Bully."

I corresponded with Laundry and Canfield via email to learn what parents can do to help their kids face their own big, bad bully. Here's what they told me.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What inspired you to write "The Big, Bad Bully"?

MIRIAM LAUNDRY: I was inspired to write this story after an experience I had with my daughter. She was about 12 years old, when one evening she was standing in front of a full-length mirror and she was criticizing herself as she was talking to me. "Mommy, why do I have such frizzy hair? Why am I so short? Why do I have so many pimples?" None of my responses to her were helping until out of frustration I finally said, "Stop it! You're bullying yourself!"

At that point, my daughter stopped talking and I could see in her eyes that she understood. She was quietly processing it.

We all know how bad bullying is, the thought that she was bullying herself was enough to make her stop and understand what she was doing to herself.



MPH PHOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK

If my daughter was going through this, surely there would be other children and teens suffering from an internal bully.

THE EPOCH TIMES: Negative self-talk seems to come naturally to many people. Why do you think that is?

JACK CANFIELD: We are used to hearing criticism from others. Either others are criticizing themselves or we hear them criticizing other people or even criticizing us. We internalize all of this. Maybe we hear our sibling say, "You're ugly," or our parents say, "You're so messy—your bedroom is always a mess," and the more we hear little things like this, the more we believe it.

We're also always comparing ourselves to others. Social media has made this worse. We see other people's perfect photo-

graphs, but we fail to remember that those photos could have been photoshopped or that they took a hundred photos and chose the best one, with the best angle. We compare ourselves to those photos and always come up short.

We see kids on TV in family shows that are attractive and dress well, and we compare ourselves to them. If we didn't compare ourselves to others, then we wouldn't have negative self-talk.

We internalize all the negative things we hear, and this is why negative self-talk comes naturally.

THE EPOCH TIMES: How can parents recognize if their child has an issue with negative self-talk?

MS. LAUNDRY: Notice how your child talks about himself. Is he or she telling you good things about themselves or are they always being critical when talking about themselves? This is probably the best indicator.

Another thing to watch for is your child's involvement in activities at school and outside of school. Are they trying out for teams or joining different clubs? If they're not, I would start asking about it. Their answer will reveal a lot. A lot of times, children who have issues with negative self-talk

don't want to go for something new because their negative self-talk is telling them they're not good enough for it.

Make sure you're talking to your child. You'll know.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What are some ways kids and teens can overcome their "big, bad bully"?

MS. LAUNDRY: There is an exercise I taught my daughter to do that evening when I discovered she was bullying herself. It's an exercise I learned from Jack at one of his seminars. It's called the mirror exercise, which we have included in the book for children to do.

It's a powerful little exercise that helps change the negative self-talk into a kinder self-talk and has to do with standing in front of a mirror and talking to yourself about all the good things that happened during the day.

The instructions for The Mirror Exercise and a printable download can be found at: MiriamLaundry.com/my-daughters-bully/. The great thing about printing it out is, it's a great reminder if you type it to your mirror. Then you see it every day!

We have several other self-esteem building exercises at the back of the book for

parents and teachers to do with children. I believe these exercises can help children to be kinder to themselves and change the inner bully into an inner friend.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What can parents do to model positive self-esteem for their kids?
MS. LAUNDRY: Children learn from what we as parents do more than what we tell them to do. Our children need to see us talking to ourselves positively. They need to see us being kind to ourselves and not being judgmental. They need to see us being kind to others in what we say to others when they're around and when they're not. They need to see us looking in the mirror and smiling instead of criticizing our bodies. They need to see us going for our goals and failing, too. They need to see how we learn from our mistakes.

It's important that we model these things because, although we think they don't notice, they notice everything and then emulate it.

THE EPOCH TIMES: What can teachers do to help their students overcome self-esteem issues in their classrooms?

MR. CANFIELD: There's so much teachers can do to help their students increase their self-

esteem. The first thing I would teach them is to do the Mirror Exercise.

The second activity I would suggest teachers do with their students is something called a "Heart Talk." The idea behind a Heart Talk is that students share their feelings and that they feel heard.

Have students sit in groups (max. 8). Pass around an object, and whoever is holding the object is allowed to speak. No one can interrupt and all must listen. Give them a topic and ask them to speak about how they feel about that topic. When they are finished, they pass the object to the person to their left.

Topics can be:

- The thing I am most concerned about is ...
- My biggest fear is ...
- What I want in my life is ...
- What I have trouble asking for is ...
- I am proud of ...
- A success I have had is ...

I would suggest doing this at least once a week. Most children don't talk about their feelings and they feel alone in the world. They think no one else is going through what they're going through. Kids have a lot of feelings with regards to so many things,

Life Lessons With Bellamy Young

NEW YORK—The United States may not have had a woman president quite yet, but on TV, it certainly has. One of those was Mellie Grant, the character played by Bellamy Young on the Shonda Rhimes hit "Scandal" before it ended last year.

Now one of the stars of the Fox show "Prodigal Son," Young spoke with Reuters about making it in Hollywood.

Q: People might not know this, but you are a big numbers person who studied physics at Yale?

A: I grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, and my dad was actually a tax man, an auditor for the state. I vividly remember him with his adding machines, writing stuff down, and my happy place was beside him. I got my love of numbers from him, from a very early age. He was always very clear about what comes in, and what goes out, and how to stay in the black.

Q: What was your first job when you were a young actress starting out?
A: My first office job, after I moved to New York City, wasn't so successful. It was on Pearl Street, near Wall Street; they moved me around different parts of the office for a week, and I had no discernible skills at all, so they sent me on my way.

Q: What did you learn about money during those lean early years of acting?

A: I was lucky enough to be booking enough jobs, so the main challenge was to keep the net low and to have a long-term view. If you are determined and pragmatic, you can get by. Of course I couldn't afford much of anything at the time. I remember I lived with a bunch of people, and I had a bike lock on the door to my room.

Q: Once you got your big break, how did you handle financial success?

A: I was a wonderful business manager, whom I love talking with, and learning from, and making decisions under her tutelage. But I have always been a girl who loves to balance her checkbook. I love to know what's coming in and what's going out; that still lives inside of me.

As an actor, I have had intermittent employment for my whole life, so you have to

be very aware that now is not forever. As I get older, there are financial things to consider, so you have to have a macro plan in place, hopefully without sacrificing joy.

Q: What philanthropic causes do you help support?

A: Back in the day, I was a big scholarship kid because of financial need. So when I was graduating from college, I got a note from the school's bursar, saying: "Here's the name of the person who put you through college—maybe write him a thank-you note."

His name was Richard Light. I got to meet him at the age of 93, before he passed away.

I got to thinking, "What must that feel like, to put people through college?" So now I have established a scholarship at Yale.

Q: Looking down the road, have you thought about what your own retirement is going to look like?

A: For an actor, not having a job is the most stressful thing of all. So work is my vacation. When I get a job, my shoulders drop three inches and I'm ready to go; I don't get tired. I can't imagine life without work.

Q: What life lessons do you want to pass along to the next generation?

A: Love is the most important thing. Be kind. Be wise. And don't believe all the noise out there—truth comes from your heart.



By Chris Taylor
From Reuters

Actor Bellamy Young in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif., on Feb. 8, 2017.

EMMA KONTRETT/GETTY IMAGES FOR A&P

Marc Megna

On Chasing His NFL Dreams and Never Quitting

ANDREW THOMAS

Marc Megna was working as a graduate assistant football coach at the University of Richmond, and was living in a storage closet that had been converted into his room. There was a mattress on the floor, a small television, and a telephone. It was the 1999 NFL draft, and Megna waited eagerly in anticipation next to the telephone.

Megna was watching the draft on his television, but had to turn it off because he was too nervous. The next thing he knew, the phone rang and he picked it up.

It was Bill Parcells, the head coach of the New York Jets.

"We're thinking about taking you with this next pick," Parcells told him.

"That's incredible," Megna responded. "I have to ask you a few questions. Marc. Can you rush the passer for me?"

"Yeah."

"Can you play linebacker for me?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you play special teams?"

"Yes, sir."

"Welcome to the New York Jets."

Megna had worked arduously toward becoming a professional football player in the NFL, and he was finally realizing his dream. Not only had he overcome the adversity he faced as a child, but he had also proved all the naysayers wrong.

A Rough Childhood

Megna, 43, lives in Miami. He grew up in Fall River, Massachusetts, with his brother, and both were raised by their mother. His father had left the family when Megna was just 6 years old. He grew up as an awkward, shy, and overweight child. As a result, he became self-conscious and experienced low self-esteem.

"I didn't want to socialize. I didn't want to leave the house. I even faked illness because I just got brutalized by the other kids," Megna said. "It really made me feel like I was an outcast."

The bullying started at age 9. Not only was Megna bullied for his physical appearance, he was also ridiculed for being from low-income housing. Like a lot of kids, he started to believe what the bullies were saying was true. He didn't think he was supposed to be playing sports or hanging out with the other kids.

But Megna had a strong mother. She was a single mother who worked two or three jobs to provide for her sons.

"If it wasn't for having a solid mother, and strong leader in my mother, and great heart in her, who knows what would have happened," Megna said.

And his grandfather, who saw Megna struggling, took him to the gym in an effort to make him feel better about himself and increase his self-confidence. Megna hated exercising at first, but then he started liking the fact that he had accomplished something.

"I never knew what feeling proud of myself was like until I started to actually move and feel like an athlete," Megna recalled.

Transformation

Megna set small goals for himself, and once he accomplished them, he made new ones. Twenty pushups became 100 pushups. Bench pressing 95 pounds became 135 pounds, and so on. Every time he met a goal, his confidence grew. Before he started training, all he had heard from people was that he couldn't do.

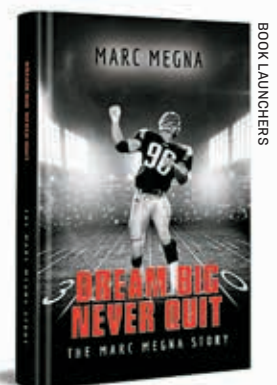
However, there were people who encouraged him. When he was a young boy, his doctor told him and his mother that he would play for the New England Patriots one day. His mother would tell him every



Marc Megna was a professional football player and is the author of "Dream Big, Never Quit."

“I never knew what feeling proud of myself was like until I started to actually move and feel like an athlete.”

Marc Megna



"Dream Big, Never Quit" by Marc Megna.

day he would be a great football player as well.

"When someone plants that seed in your head and they tell you enough times you almost start to believe it," Megna said.

Megna played football and hockey in high school. Beginning as a freshman, he became obsessed with watching highlight footage of all of the NFL greats and tried to emulate their technique. He would go out onto the field in the middle of winter and practice. He and the other kids saw what Megna had become, they realized he wasn't going to tolerate their abuse anymore.

Megna learned many valuable lessons while playing in high school, too. Even if he was running slowly, he learned to never stop. He also discovered that he could always be a better player, and improve himself.

Never Quit

After a successful high school career, the University of Richmond offered him an athletic scholarship to play football. Initially, being from the Northeast, he felt uncomfortable at a Southern school and struggled academically. He called his mother, and expressed his doubts.

"You can come home at any time, but if you come home, you will regret it every day for the rest of your life," she told him. "You can't quit because it's not about staying in school, Marc, it's about building a habit of quitting. If you quit once you'll quit all the time."

A few days later, she wrote a letter to Megna, with a sticker that read "Dream Big Never Quit." He took the sticker and put it on his bedroom wall so he could see it when he woke up and when he went to sleep.

Megna started every game each season and set a school record for sacks in a season and for a career. He was also a two-time All American. His dream of playing in the NFL would soon become a reality.

After Megna was drafted by the New York Jets in 1999, he also played for the New England Patriots and the Cincinnati Bengals. He was the only person from his hometown to be drafted into the NFL.

Pain and Depression

Unfortunately, Megna tore three discs in

his back while playing for the Bengals in 2001 and then re-injured his back while playing in the Canadian Football League in 2005. While he was passionate about the sport, he had suffered nerve damage and was in excruciating pain. Megna would have to figure out what his next step in life would be.

"I was in a lot of pain, and all I cared about was getting out of pain. It really felt terrible," he said.

Megna sank into depression because he thought he had failed. However, starting to move his body again helped him pull himself out of his depression. Even simple pool exercises were highly effective.

"Movement helped me tremendously, and I just threw myself into as much movement as possible," Megna explained. "It wasn't like a snap your fingers thing. It was that I focused on the small but impactful micro-progressions that I was doing to heal my body, and that was the most important part."

Over time, he made greater and greater steps to heal his back. His mother also played a large role during this time. He would call her every day, and she would continuously encourage him.

"My mother would always say, you can get tired, you can slow down, you can even rest, just don't give up because giving up is a totally different thing," Megna said. "Once he was out of pain, he realized he could help other people who were struggling with low self-esteem, build their confidence, and help them become their best selves."

"What motivated me before, during, and after this time is feeling it, and knowing that there are a lot of people out there like me who have poor health, have poor physical health, have poor mental health, and need just a friendly hand," Megna explained.

Megna opened his first gym in 2014 in Miami. Not only did he want to help people with fitness, but he also wanted to create a community. Now, he has a franchise of three gyms. He's also written a book about his journey entitled "Dream Big Never Quit," as a therapeutic outlet, and to share his story with kids and people who are chasing their dreams.

"If you put in the work, you get way farther than you think you can," Megna said.

Virginia Walden Ford: A Lifelong Education Advocate

CATHERINE YANG

Our failing public schools weigh heavily on many Americans' minds, but Virginia Walden Ford is an optimist. After 21 years of school-choice advocacy, she's seen what a difference even just one voice can make.

"I'm hearing from parents from all over the country who are saying 'If you can do it, I can do it,' and is that not what we want? We want parents to know they can be successful," Walden Ford said.

Walden Ford founded D.C. Parents for School Choice, the group that fought for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which has given more than 11,000 children scholarships to attend a private or parochial school of the families' choice since its inception in 2004. Today, Walden Ford lives in Arkansas, where she runs an after-school food program and is still in constant contact with parents fighting for school choice across the country.

Her story has recently become the subject of a movie, "Miss Virginia," and is told in-depth in her book, "School Choice: A Legacy to Keep."

School Choice Saves Lives

Walden Ford was a single mother of three in Washington. Her two older children had done well with school, but when it came to her youngest son, William, she felt he just needed a little more. School administrators had dismissed her son as someone who just wasn't very smart, but she knew that he was.

"He felt nobody cared whether he learned or not, that was his mantra. 'They don't care, Mama, nobody cares,'" Walden Ford said. William had decided that since no one cared, he wasn't going to school.

She could see clearly that rather than focus his energy on academics, he was drawn in by the life of crime on the next street over in their neighborhood, where drug dealers drew kids in with gifts to recruit them to work for them. Kids, like her William, mistakenly thought that these drug dealers would protect them, and they looked up to these pseudo-community leaders.

William ended up suspended when he was 11, and Walden Ford sat on her front porch crying. Her story took a fortunate turn when a neighbor listened to her story and offered to help her with a scholarship to send William to a private school.

The changes were near immediate.

Walden Ford and her son visited several schools the first day she realized she now had a choice of where to send her son to school. She saw his reaction immediately, when they set foot in the school they ultimately picked.

"There were no metal detectors, kids looked happy and engaged, and I watched his attitude change. He smiled and looked around, and he said, 'This is cool!'" Walden Ford said. "It was that whole environment of kids learning and excited, and having a good time at school that up until that point that he felt he was not experiencing. Just seeing what it could be like in an environment that welcomed him was an amazing moment."

"I remember looking at his face and thinking, you know, maybe this is something that will save my child. And it did."

Within a couple of weeks, her son was getting up early and ready to go to school, she stopped getting calls about her son cutting school, and he was doing all his homework.

"I asked, 'What's different, honey?'" and he said, "These people care," Walden Ford said. "It was dramatic, actually, because he was young and not always willing to articulate what he was feeling, but he felt welcomed. He felt that he could accomplish anything." "He and I recently talked about that field, walking into a school where people have higher expectations of what you could do. And he felt it."

Fighting for Her Community

It might have been simple to just breathe easy now that her son was in a safe and stable learning environment, but Walden Ford couldn't do that. She looked around her neighborhood and saw child after child in the exact same place her son William was in not long ago.

"It ignited something in me," Walden Ford said. "I had to fight for my son, but I had to fight for other kids, too. That was kind of my 'aha' moment, was you can speak out for your son, but someone has to speak out on behalf of other children."

Walden Ford spoke to other parents in her community, and she heard stories similar to hers. She heard desperation and an urgent wish to find al-



Virginia Walden Ford at the New York premiere of "Miss Virginia" in October 2019.

“These children in this neighborhood, if nobody stands up for them, we lose them.”

Virginia Walden Ford



Virginia Walden Ford with Niles Fitch, who played her son James in "Miss Virginia" at the movie's DC premiere.

Virginia Walden Ford with President George W. Bush as he talks about parental options and school choice at Archbishop Carroll High School in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 13, 2004.



ternatives for their kids.

"Hearing the despair in their voices because they felt like they had no right to speak out for their children became a really big issue for me," Walden Ford said. "They're our kids."

"These children in this neighborhood, if nobody stands up for them, we lose them," she said. "We lived in a community where we saw kids make decisions and go in ways that were terribly frightening for us as parents."

Walden Ford started organizing parents, having meetings in people's homes, and then they started to use their voices. They went to board of education meetings, talked to legislators, and this led to joining up with people who wanted to bring the scholarship program to Washington.

"You know, in most low-income communities, parents don't think they have any right to speak out about their children, they do that and put up with whatever we're given. And we realized that we didn't have to do that there," Walden Ford said.

"Until I started speaking at meetings and people started listening to me, I felt pretty hopeless, too." It wasn't until she started using her voice that she realized how important it was. If she spoke, people would listen. And other parents could do the same.

"Everybody cares about what happens to their kids. And when you start talking to people and telling people how you feel, you do get a response," Walden Ford said.

"Their kids were going to schools full of violence, with a near 50 percent dropout rate, and it was clear for both parents and children that their school environment was doing far more harm than good.

Speaking out created momentum. Parents saw they could have an impact, and that inspired them to do more, passing it on. Once the scholarship initiative was underway, parents continued to advocate for their community, and took to the streets to help other families sign their children up for the program.

But it wasn't without challenges. Walden Ford laughed and said perhaps she was naive when she started, but she didn't realize there would be opposition, let alone so much of it every step of the way, or that it would be so vicious.

There were politicians who didn't want to support school choice, and teachers unions that didn't want money to go to other schools, and other people whose interests aligned with those against school choice who would say false or hurtful things. Walden Ford said perhaps the worst the opposition accomplished was convincing parents that they didn't have a voice, and weren't allowed to speak out.

"So we took pictures of our children, and we put them in our purses and our pockets, and when it got tough, we took those pictures out and looked at our kids. Those small faces would smile back at us and to tell us to continue," Walden Ford said.

"For all these years of advocacy, and all the pain and sacrifice that parents went through, the reward is seeing kids do well."

"What I saw in the children was willingness to reach whatever expectations were set in the schools for them," Walden Ford said. "I've followed some of the kids over the years, and they've gone to college and graduated and got really good jobs, and they'll tell you in a heartbeat, they don't think that would have happened had they not been given the opportunity to go to a school that better served them."

And children are absolutely aware that what they need is a better environment for education.

"I talk to a lot of parents, a lot of kids, and not one time, not one time was a child unable to talk to me about wanting to be in a place where people accepted them and wanted them to learn," she said.

A Responsibility

Walden Ford remembers being 14 years old, standing on the steps of Central High School in Little Rock with her twin sister, Harrietta. She, along with 133 other black students, would be going to a newly desegregated high school just a decade after the "Little Rock 10" made history.

She didn't want to go.

But her father told her and her sister they had a responsibility to attend that school and do well.

"Because we had younger siblings that would follow us, and how would the world look at us if we didn't do well?" she remembered. "I think that shaped my advocacy, even right at that time. At 14, I believed I could change the world. It sounds cliché, but it's a fact."

Her father was the first black assistant superintendent in the school district. Her mother was one of the first black teachers to join a previously all-white school in Little Rock. They imparted in their children the responsibility to serve.

"Not to be a part of the problem but a part of the solution. All of us have heard that, but my parents were strict about telling us, 'Make a difference.' My dad always told me, 'Make a difference in the world, Ginny. Don't just sit around chitchatting about something, really make a difference. Do something special, do it in your neighborhood, do it in your community,'" Walden Ford said. They taught by example, and were pillars of their community. Neighbors always came to the Waldens' home, because that was the community center.

"I thought about making a difference and wanting to do something that was positive in the world. So, years later when I had a family and I saw something that needed to be changed, it was not a foreign idea for me," Walden Ford said. "My parents were so wise, and they taught us—I have four sisters, so five girls—to make a difference in the world. That's what I've passed on to my kids. That's what I pass on to the parents I work with: Do something to serve your communities."

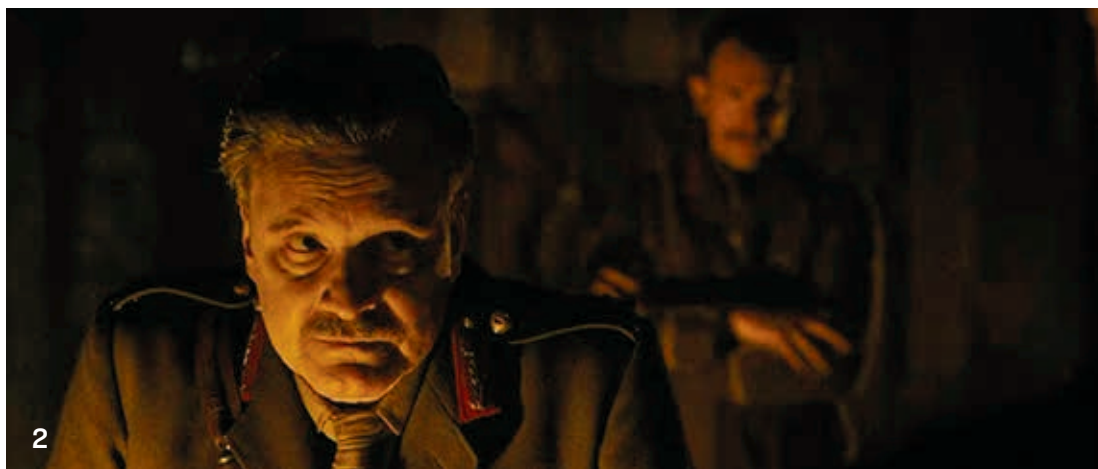
"Even if it's just your little world, make a difference. Even if it's in your apartment building," she said. "I'm leaving a legacy to my children of service."

Walden Ford thought a lot about her family as she finished her autobiography. The portion about their legislative fight was easy to recount, but the personal stuff had her really digging in.

"This started with a great-grandfather that bought his family out of slavery and passed all of that on to us," Walden Ford said. "I hope it will give [readers] energy and inspiration."

Walden Ford's mission has been to empower parents to use their voices. "They have a right to speak. They are their children's first teachers," she said. She remembers that as the fight went on, they drew more supporters from higher levels, up to Congress. "It became empowering—I like that word. I like that parents were empowered."

ALL PHOTOS BY UNIVERSAL PICTURES



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

FILM REVIEW: '1917'

A Brilliant, Muddy Meditation on a Miserable WWI Mordor Mission

MARK JACKSON

"Lord of the Rings" fans: Ever wonder what Gollum meant when, in describing Mordor, he says that everywhere are "Pits, pits, pits"? Go see the World War I movie "1917," and you'll see.

Author J.R.R. Tolkien was describing the battlefield bomb craters he'd experienced, filled with megalithic rats and rotting corpses—almost like ponds half-filled with unholy water—and some such pits brimming with blood. Truly hell on earth.

Good artists borrow; great artists steal. Director Sam Mendes, telling a tale based on stories that he heard in his youth from his grandfather (who at age 19 had been a messenger for the British Army during WWI) has here combined elements of "Dunkirk" and "Saving Private Ryan," among others, and used Alejandro González Iñárritu's single-shot storytelling method (used for "Birdman" and "The Revenant") to create some impressive, innovative world-building. You are there.

It's very visceral storytelling all around, but the immediate takeaway is the mud. It is all-encompassing. It becomes apparent that when it comes right down to it, human beings are basically, physically made of mud: We live in the mud, we roll

1. Dean-Charles Chapman (L) in the film "1917."

2. Gen. Erinmore (Colin Firth) divulges some disturbing info to his troops.

3. Dean-Charles Chapman (L) co-stars as Blake, whose older brother is in imminent danger, in the Universal Pictures film "1917."

4. Benedict Cumberbatch plays a WWI British army officer in the Universal Pictures film "1917."

around in the mud, and when killed, we return to the mud—and sometimes that return is expedited via rat excrement. Lovely. Such is human existence.

The Story

It's springtime, 1917, in northern France, and two young lance corporals, Schofield (George MacKay) and Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman), are summoned to a meeting with Gen. Erinmore (Colin Firth).

Erinmore's got a mission for them. As he explains, at a point beyond No Man's Land, the Germans have strategically withdrawn; two British battalions led by Col. MacKenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch) are poised to smash the retreating Germans. However, all is not as it appears.

Since there are no phone lines, the two young soldiers are tasked with crossing No Man's Land and locating said battalions on the front lines, in order to deliver the message that the Germans have laid a trap and the Brits are about to walk into an ambush. If this message doesn't arrive in time, approximately 1,600 men will be wiped out, including Blake's older, officer brother (Richard Madden).

Which is why Blake is chosen. He'll have more motivation to brave the horrors and not turn tail and flee. His friend

Schofield just happened to be in the vicinity, and since Blake needs a mission buddy, Schofield, to his great unhappiness, is by default the man for the job. And there you have it. The general goes on to offer something about fewer men being able to travel faster, but it's really just to set up the use of the continuous shot.

Why? The use of a camera seamlessly following two men through the trenches, barbed wire, and the various and sundry horrors of No Man's Land is a sight we've never seen. It's something we didn't know we needed to see. But we need to see it. Because it adds to the heap of things about war that we should never forget.

Mendes may or may not have used this single-shot approach to speak directly to the younger millennials, because it makes "1917" feel more than a little bit like a role-playing video game. It also allows it to function more in a thriller capacity; it's got thousands of lives—not to mention a brother's life—hanging in the balance, and a ticking clock spurring the long-shot mission.

Performances

The two principal actors are mostly unknown to American audiences, but it's a nice touch, as their presence is juxta-

posed with a who's who of well-known mature British actors. Mark Strong and Colin Firth are officers functioning in warrior/elder capacity, Cumberbatch plays an ambition-added officer who needs his cage rattled in order to get some human perspective on the young men he's all too eager to send into harm's way, and Andrew Scott plays a seen-it-all, fed-up officer who injects a bit of exasperated humor into the proceedings.

In a sense, this is a coming-of-age film because this is a literal hero's journey, a staggering ordeal that challenges these boys on the verge of becoming men.

They will either return from the war as true men or die trying—that was traditionally the dichotomous option built in to all tribal male rites of passage. Chapman and MacKay's best-friend chemistry is palpable.

Ultimately, though, it's the nonstop claustrophobic, musophobic odyssey through the muddy, bloody trenches. The German sniper-overwatched hamlets and the here-a-hand, there-a-blown-off-foot, pits, pits, pits of real-life Mordor that will remain with you as a meditation on the human condition. There has always been war, and there will always be war; war is hell. We never, ever learn from our mistakes, and history repeats itself.

(Above) Dean-Charles Chapman (L) and George MacKay star in a race to save 1,600 men, in "1917."

'1917'

Director Sam Mendes

Starring George MacKay, Dean-Charles Chapman, Mark Strong, Andrew Scott, Richard Madden, Colin Firth, Benedict Cumberbatch

Running Time 1 hour, 59 minutes

Rated R

Release Date Dec. 25

★★★★☆

SHEN YUN PERFORMING ARTS

A Shen Yun Dancer's Journey: From Fear to Compassion

CATHERINE YANG

MIDDLETOWN, N.Y.—Angela Xiao is what you'd call gifted. Difficult dance moves and elaborate new sequences come easily to her, often on the first try.

For a long time, she didn't give this much thought, she said; she's a go-with-the-flow type of person. But in recent years, she discovered that beneath the casual veneer lay various fears. And in order to rise to the next level artistically, she needed to face them.

"You have to try your best," Xiao said. "The better way to approach things is, during the process, you try your best, and then whatever the result, you look at it lightly."

"Often times, it's pretty easy to do the opposite—you think of the results, but you don't consider the process as much," Xiao said.

Xiao has performed many years with Shen Yun Performing Arts, the premier classical Chinese dance company that's taken the world by storm in the past



decade. Dancing came easily and naturally for her, so she didn't give it much thought.

"Actually, when I was much younger, I loved piano. But one day, the piano in our house was gone, and my parents asked, 'Do you want to dance?' So I started taking Chinese dance," Xiao said. She took to it almost effortlessly, so pursuing dance professionally became an easy decision as well. Not many can say that about this rarefied field.

Classical Chinese dance is an art form with roots 5,000 years deep, with a complete set of movements and its own cultural aesthetic and methodology. It's on par with ballet in terms of being a comprehensive system of dance.

Xiao grew up with stories about ancient Chinese history and myth, and being a part of Shen Yun meant that she was immersed in them. She loves the endlessly beautiful scenes she brings to life through dance. Stately courtyards, grand imperial palaces—they call to her like a second home. But it took a step of

courage to be able to express this world through her art.

Xiao recalls her early moments as a dancer with a brief moment of embarrassment that is soon swept away by honest humility. She remembers being embarrassed when she learned that she would have to act. Alone on stage, she was portraying the Bodhisattva Guanyin, known as the goddess of mercy. The instructor critiqued her for not exuding that ethereal compassion associated with the deity, while she thought to herself, what did a dancer like her know about heavenly mercy?

"I just thought that I was so awkward," Xiao said. "Over time, I realized acting is easy. ... You're always thinking of how to be the character more."

It was the first of her fears that she would face. In a way, being self-absorbed stemmed from fear too, Xiao said. It's easy when you're self-centered to feel like you can't do something, or let your worries about what others will think of you get in the way. Realizing this, she also

had to face the fact that because most moves came easily, she would just brush aside the ones that didn't. She had to face self-defeating thoughts head-on, accept herself, and then push through to make fundamental changes.

"That was the reason for not being able to improve some things," she said. She's since found that "you learn more when you think of yourself as a blank piece of paper."

For Xiao, empathy and imagination are key to bringing the otherworldly, mythical, ancient figures to life.

From the Heart

Being in a community of peers who are also pursuing excellence in their craft, with supportive instructors and staff, changed the way Xiao thought about everything.

"When you're really absorbed into what

you're thinking of all the time, you don't really realize what other people have done for you, all the help and support we give to each other," she said.

When she felt awkward and embarrassed the first time she had to act, it was because she felt like she was alone. "But even if you're doing something by yourself, there's always people supporting you, behind you. You won't exactly be alone. And—it's not about you."

Recognizing the community around her, Xiao began to empathize not only with those around her but also with the characters in her craft.

It's been a fulfilling part of her growth. For Xiao, empathy and imagination are key to bringing the otherworldly, mythical, ancient figures to life.

"You have to put into consideration what character you're portraying and what each move actually means," she said. The same stock gesture when performed by a Taoist sage will not even look to be the same move when it is performed by a lady. "Being able to understand what you're trying to say and what you want to portray is really important. Your imagination is important. You have to think of how it should feel."

But the most important thing for her as an artist is "to dance from your heart," she said.

By this, Xiao means that she puts her whole heart into everything because to be able to present something uplifting and beautiful onstage, one needs to embody that somehow. There's an element of purity to it, she said, and she tries to keep that in her heart.

"Classical Chinese dance is about bringing to life the inner world of the characters," Xiao said. It's the most unique aspect of the art, and the one that takes the longest to grasp. Nothing can be faked.

"Dancing is something in which you can't hide," she said. "Each person, your personality shows onstage no matter how you try to hide it."

"I feel like there's a lot to learn. There's always something to discover," Xiao said.



Angela Xiao performing at the 7th NTD International Classical Chinese Dance Competition in Oct. 2016.

ALL PHOTOS BY DAIJING

The Skin Care Routine Your Face Needs During Winter

MANY NGOM

The holidays are over, and boy, did we have fun! Now it's time for New Year's resolutions. Plenty of resolutions are given up after a month, but there is one we should

take seriously: taking care of our faces. That's especially true during the winter when we constantly face the harsh contrast between the indoor heat and the outside cold.

Your face is the first thing people see and so you need to pamper it. With so many products out

there, it can be overwhelming to choose one that is suitable for your routine. To not complicate things, let's do it "à la Française." French women are well-known for keeping everything simple.

Your winter skincare routine can be as simple as it can be, with only a few essential products.

1. Cleanse

During the winter, opt for an oil cleanser like the Pre Cleanse Oil by True Botanicals. It helps moisturize the skin while gently cleaning it. The combination of apricot kernel, jojoba, and sesame oils removes impurities and makeup without damaging the skin. Massage gently into the skin and rinse or simply wipe away using a wet washcloth. (\$48)



COURTESY OF TRUE BOTANICALS



COURTESY OF MAY LINDSTROM

3. Hydrate

This step cannot be missed, as our skin needs water several times during the day. The Youth Dew by May Lindstrom provide balance and healing for those prone to acne, then protect and hydrate sensitive and mature complexions. Massage two to three pumps into fully wet skin day and night right after cleansing. Gently rub your fingertips on the areas with developing lines and dryness. (\$140)



COURTESY OF KYPRIS

5. Protect

Now that the skin routine is finished, now let's turn to skin protection. This multifunctional translucent veil offers a broad spectrum SPF30 and moisturizes skin for everyday radiance. The Pot Of Shade: Heliotropic Sunscreen by Kypris is made of botanical oils and natural minerals that will protect your skin all day long. You can apply it by itself as well during the morning and afternoon. (\$75)

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. Exfoliate

You may wonder why you need to exfoliate your skin during the winter. Dealing with bad weather for several months creates dead cells that need to be removed, so the new skin can be properly nourished. The Stem Cellular Exfoliating Peel Spray by Juice Beauty will instantly do the work after one use. Spray each section of your face and allow the product to absorb for a few seconds, then use your fingertips to rub the product using a circular motion to loosen old skin cells. (\$52)



COURTESY OF JUICE BEAUTY



COURTESY OF MAY LINDSTROM

4. Moisturize

This is la crème de la crème! This ultimate face balm acts like a serum, eye treatment, and lip balm. The Blue Cocoon by May Lindstrom is essentially the most exquisite and powerful facial oil you've ever experienced, in a

unique waterless and waxless balm form. Anti-inflammatory, it soothes the skin, providing the perfect level of hydration and healing for redness and irritation. Melt a pea-sized amount onto a fully wet cleaned face morning and night. (\$180)



COURTESY OF JUICE BEAUTY

6. Spritz

During the day at the office or at home when you feel that your skin is getting dry because of the heat, spritz the Hydrating Mist by Juice Beauty. This refreshing blend of essential oils, antioxidant, and organic botanical juices, will keep your face hydrated and radiant. (\$25)

SHEN YUN PERFORMING ARTS

Shen Yun Inspires, Touches Hearts on 3 Continents

CATHERINE YANG

New York-based Shen Yun Performing Arts's 2020 tour is now under way, receiving rave reviews and standing ovations on three continents.

On Christmas Day, the classical Chinese dance company opened in Japan at the Aichi Prefectural Art Theater in Nagoya, where professor of psychiatry Hirose Yukio attended with his wife, and said his view of traditional Chinese culture had completely changed.

"As Japanese culture originated from Chinese traditional culture, [Shen Yun] acts as a bridge [between the two cultures] through an artistic form," he added. He also hopes to convey his perception to the Japanese younger generation, so that they are able to learn more about the link between these two traditional cultures. He wishes younger generations to "create new values

together, and coordinate with others together."

In Florence, Italy, on Dec. 27, renowned choreographer Davide Bombana said he gleaned artistic inspiration from seeing Shen Yun's dancers, and he knew many other well-known choreographers who had done the same.

"I won't mention names, but [Shen Yun] has already been inspirational for a lot of people," Bombana said with a laugh. "Also in the audience was psychoanalyst Maria Paola Ingo, who likened the experience of watching Shen Yun to a religious experience, or taking a big breath of air after having been winded. "I felt myself expanding, an expansion toward the divine," Paola Ingo said. "I rarely feel anything like that."

"It was like when you're underwater, then you get out and you're awash with light and love," Paola Ingo said.



NTDV

In San Jose, California, on Dec. 28, photographer Jahaziel Magana said Shen Yun was his "first time seeing such beauty." "I feel like the energy really draws you into it. I actually found myself crying a couple times. It's very emotional for me," Magana said. In Ottawa, vascular surgeon Graeme Barber attended Shen Yun for the first time on Dec. 28, as a guest of human rights activist David Kilgour. "It was a very enjoyable ex-



THE EPOCH TIMES

(Above) Shen Yun Performing Arts New York Company's curtain call at Nagoya's Aichi Prefectural Art Theater in Japan on Dec. 25, 2019.

(Left) Graeme Barber attended Shen Yun at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa on Dec. 28, 2019.

perience and as I say on a cultural and artistic level, it was absolutely gorgeous, absolutely beautiful," said Barber, who felt Shen Yun has accomplished two sets of important things. One was to display the beauty of this lost traditional culture, and the other was bringing awareness to an issue he has been involved with for the past few years himself, which is bringing to light the human rights abuses by the Chinese communist regime. "I think it's very important the

world knows what's going on," he said.

For more information and tickets, see ShenYunPerformingArts.org

The Epoch Times considers Shen Yun Performing Arts the significant cultural event of our time and has covered audience reactions since the company's inception in 2006. The Epoch Times is a media sponsor of Shen Yun Performing Arts.



FOR KIDS ONLY

THE EPOCH TIMES

Week 2, 2020



Picture-Books in Winter

by Robert Louis Stevenson

Summer fading, winter comes—Frosty mornings, tingling thumbs, Window robins, winter nooks, And the picture story-books.

Water now is turned to stone Nurse and I can walk upon; Still we find the flowing brooks In the picture story-books.

All the pretty things put by, Wait upon the children's eye, Sheep and shepherds, trees and crooks, In the picture story-books. We may see how all things are, Seas and cities, near and far, And the flying fairies' looks, In the picture story-books.

How am I to sing your praise, Happy chimney-corner days, Sitting safe in nursery nooks, Reading picture story-books?

WHAT'S THE BEST BREAKFAST TO HAVE IN THE WINTER?

S. PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK



“One kind word can warm three winter months.”

JAPANESE PROVERB

ALL PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

GPOINTSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE BATTLE OF PRINCETON

“Washington Rallying the Americans at the Battle of Princeton,” by William Ranney.



On Jan. 3, 1777, near Princeton, New Jersey, Gen. George Washington led his troops to one of the first victories of the American Revolution. The other victory a few days earlier, was a much needed success at the Battle of Trenton. The two victories boosted morale significantly for the patriots and marked a major turning point in the war.

By Aidan Danza, age 13

ALL PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

WINTERING GULLS OF THE EAST

Around coasts, garbage dumps, restaurants, and amusement parks, you'll find those familiar gray-and-white birds commonly known as seagulls. Gulls are notoriously hard to identify, but here in the Eastern United States, we have it easier than people out West, since they have more species of gulls. Here, we have four resident species, three of which winter here.



GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

This gull is extremely large, and can be 30-inches long. They are almost pure white for the whole year, with the exception of their slate-gray to black wings and yellow bill. Whereas ring-bills are small, stocky, and cute, and herring gulls are muscular and sort of angry-looking. Both the head and bill are large relative to the size of its body.

RING-BILLED GULL

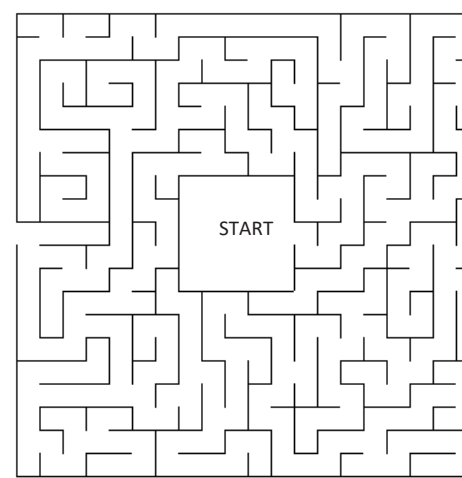
Around the New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island coasts, the ring-billed gull winters. Adults are small and stocky, ranging anywhere from 16–21 inches long. In winter, the wings are gray with black tips, and the body, head, and tail are white. In winter, flecks of gray adorn the head, and the bill is yellow with a black band near the tip. Their legs and feet are a pale shade of gray-pink.

HERRING GULL

Herring gulls are the archetypal bird everyone thinks of when they hear the word "seagull." Whereas ring-bills are small and stocky, herring gulls are medium-sized and muscular. They are a year-round resident of the area. They also have a gray back and white body, but herring gulls are a few inches larger than ring-bills, and they have a different manner about them. The way ring-bills are built, with a small body, short neck, large eye and head, and slender bill, they look "cuter" than herring gulls' muscular, larger body and relatively small head with its stocky bill. In winter, herring gulls have gray-and-tan streaks on the head, and a pale yellow bill with a brown spot near the tip.



AMAZING ESCAPES!

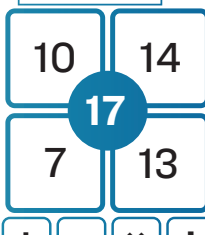


Easy puzzle 1



Solution For Easy 1
3 × (2 - 2 + 4)
2 × 7 = (2 - 2)

Medium puzzle 1

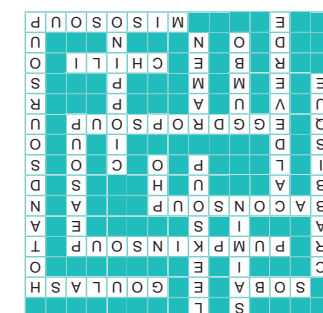
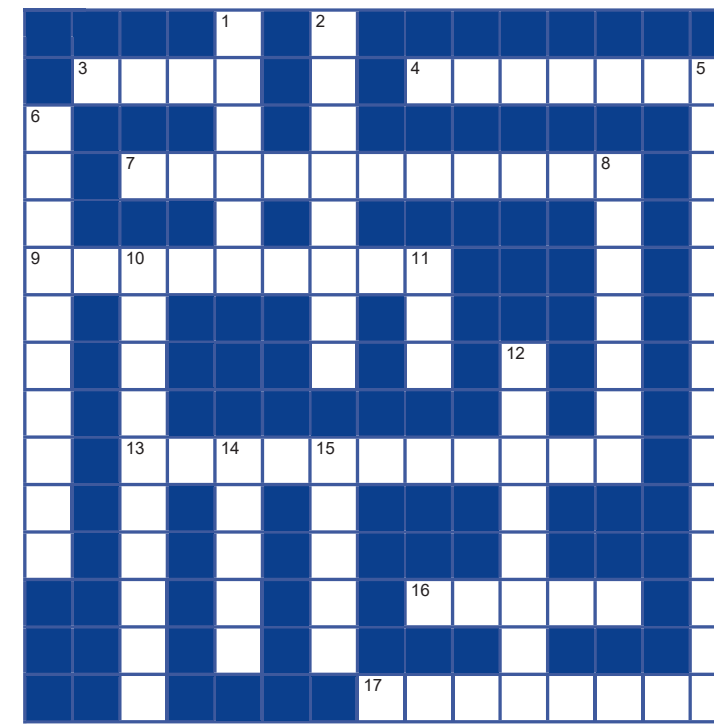


Solution for Medium 1
(81 - 91) × (4 + 01)

Hard puzzle 1



Solution for Hard 1
92 + 92 × (26 - 26)



Across

- 3 Japanese noodles (4)
- 4 Mishmash (7)
- 7 Orange and creamy (11)
- 9 It's not just for breakfast anymore (9)

Down

- 1 Hawaiian noodle soup (6)
- 2 Green, and sans potato (8)
- 5 Chinese winter warmer (14)
- 6 Rich cajun bowlful (10)
- 8 Dense fog or culinary treat (7)
- 10 Portuguese green soup (10)
- 11 Vietnamese soup (3)
- 12 Italian seafood (8)
- 14 Cajun concoction (5)
- 15 Japanese noodle dish (5)

- 13 Cantonese course (11)
- 16 Some like it hot (5)
- 17 Japanese, with tofu and seaweed (8)



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Bookbinder Edward Stansell in his workshop on Dec. 26, 2019.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Elegance Restored: The Bookbinder's Craft



JEFF MINICK

There it sits on a bookshelf in the den, that 150-year-old King James Bible once owned by your great-great-grandmother, the family genealogy duly recorded in the front pages. The binding is frayed, the once rich red cover now turned nearly black from usage. You look at that book every once in a

Edward Stansell, now 78, is mostly self-taught in the art of book restoration.

while and tell yourself you'd like to have it restored.

Or maybe you want to give your husband, who loves all things medieval, a journal with the appearance of a ledger book from the late Middle Ages. Where do you find such a thing?

You might try Clifton, Tennessee, home of Edward Stansell, bookbinder and book restorer.

A Self-Taught Master of His Craft
Stansell's father, Arnold, whom friends called A.D., was working for city hall in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1952 when a fellow employee asked him to take up binding country record books. At an early age, Stansell began working with his father in this trade, and he took over the business after his dad's untimely death in 1959. *Continued on Page 16*

Retinting the spine of a Bible.



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Explainer: The Story of Demeter and Persephone

CHRIS MACKIE

The student of Greek mythology is often struck by the fact that some gods and goddesses have extensive roles in the mythical narratives, and others have very limited parts to play. The goddess Demeter is an interesting case of this. As an Olympian goddess and fertility figure, she is very important in ancient Greek religion and life, but she has a rather small role in its literature and mythology. She is mentioned a little bit in Homeric epic, especially the "Iliad," but has no actual part to play in either the "Iliad" or the "Odyssey." Nor does she feature at all as a character in extant Greek drama.

There is, however, a rather beautiful poem called the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" in which Demeter and her daughter Persephone are the central focus of attention. It probably dates to the first half of the sixth century B.C. It is 495 lines long and composed in hexameters, the same poetic meter as the "Iliad" and "Odyssey." Despite its connections to epic poetry, however, and the title "Homeric," the "Hymn" is of uncertain authorship.

A Mother's Love

The focus of the poem is one of the most renowned narratives from Greek mythology—the rape of Persephone by Hades, the god of the Underworld, and the response of Demeter to her loss. It is a remarkable narrative, built fundamentally on the power of a mother's love for her only child.

The ancient Greek word for "mother" [meter] is actually embedded in Demeter's name. The "Hymn" describes the primordial maternal power brought to bear upon the male sky-god Zeus, who had secretly (that is, without Demeter's knowledge) given over his daughter Persephone to a marriage with his brother Hades.

Demeter is one of the "older" generation of Olympian gods. Her siblings are Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades on the male side, and Hera and Hestia on the female side. Zeus, the sky god, has sexual relations with two of his sisters—Hera, who is a kind of long-suffering queen of heaven; and Demeter, who is more earth-focused. In a famous passage in the "Iliad" Book 14, Zeus recounts to Hera herself some of his sexual ex-

ploits, and he names Demeter in his long list of amours.

Persephone is not mentioned in the passage as the product of this particular sexual encounter, but that is definitely the idea. Demeter and Persephone are often thought of together as "The Two Goddesses." This name helps to emphasize the power of their bond, and the gravity of Zeus's action in violently separating them.

The "Hymn" tells the story of Persephone and other young girls gathering flowers in a meadow. As she bends down to pick a beautiful flower, the earth opens up and Hades emerges on his horse-drawn chariot. She gives out a scream, but he carries her off into the depths of the earth.

A Blight on the Land

Her mother hears her cry and begins a search for her throughout the whole world. While Persephone is missing, Demeter creates a blight on the land in which nothing germinates and nothing grows. She would have destroyed humanity altogether if Zeus hadn't taken notice and acted accordingly.

A human genocide is clearly not in the gods' interest. It would deprive them of the honors that they receive from mortals. Their existence without honors from humans would be intolerable, and Zeus, as ruler of the world, can't allow it to happen. But Demeter will not let go of her fury at the loss of her daughter. She won't go to Olympus, the home of the gods, and she won't let the fruit grow on earth until she sees Persephone again.

Zeus is forced to relent and sends the messenger Hermes to the Underworld to get the girl back. But just as she is going, Hades prevails on her to eat the seed of a pomegranate to prevent her from staying with her mother above the earth all her days. Persephone is therefore forced to spend one-third of each year under the earth with Hades, and two-thirds with her mother and the community of gods on Mount Olympus.

Persephone's transition from the feminized world of a flowery meadow to the unrelenting male world of Hades could scarcely be more fundamental.

The male gods who perpetrate the deed, Zeus and Hades, have no redeeming features whatever in the "Hymn," and they are really undone



by the sheer force of Demeter's love for her daughter. The main narrative of the "Hymn" has some similarities to Achilles's response to the loss of Patroclus in the "Iliad," but Demeter's wrath is universal with a kind of cosmic maternal power to it.

A New Cycle of Life and Death

Persephone's eating of the pomegranate seed means that a compromise is set up, in which the world changes forever. Whereas she might have expected an immortal existence with her mother on Olympus, Persephone becomes the central figure in a new cycle of life and death.

She is both queen of the Underworld, as wife of Hades, and associated with the new life that rises with the spring. Death and life are no longer mutually exclusive, but co-exist in both the upper and lower worlds. There is life in death, and death in life.

The "Hymn to Demeter" contains the foundation myth of the Eleusinian Mysteries—renowned religious rites that took place at Eleusis, near Athens. Initiation into the mysteries held out the prospect of making death less threatening.

The establishment of Persephone as a feminine presence in the Underworld, as described in the "Hymn," corresponds to the notion that death is not as terrifying as it could have been had Hades alone been present as ruler in the world of the dead.

Like many Greek myths, the story of

Persephone's descent into the realm of Hades, and her emergence from it, has resonances in contemporary arts, most especially the notion of death and rebirth.

One parallel worth noting is "The Phantom of the Opera" in the version by Andrew Lloyd Webber (et al.), in which Erik leads Christine down into the cellars of the opera house onto a boat and across a subterranean lake.

Erik then sings to Christine of the attractions of his isolated world of darkness and night:

Slowly, gently night unfurls its splendor
Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender
Turn your face away from the garish light of day
Turn your thoughts away from cold, unfeeling light
And listen to the music of the night

The plea of Hades to Persephone is quite different in the "Hymn," but the desperate loneliness of the two males in their dark realms is something that they have in common.

It is worth noting, finally, that phrases like being "carried off by Hades" or "marrying Hades" were used as metaphors more broadly to describe the deaths of young girls. This again shows how significant the myth of Demeter and Persephone was in the lives of women and girls in Greek antiquity.

Chris Mackie is a professor of classics at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. This article was originally published on *The Conversation*.

1. "The Return of Persephone," 1891, by Sir Frederic Leighton.

2. Hades abducting Persephone depicted on a fresco in the small royal tomb in Vergina, in Macedonia, Greece, circa 340 B.C.

3. "Demeter Mourning for Persephone," 1906, by Evelyn de Morgan.

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CRAFTSMANSHIP

Elegance Restored: The Bookbinder's Craft

Continued from Page 13

The quality of his work spread by word of mouth, and soon people were bringing him books in need of repair.

Eventually, Stansell was making his living binding books for individuals and for such outfits as the library of Longwood Gardens. Other than what he learned from his father, Stansell, now 78, is self-taught in the art of book restoration. As his reputation grew over the years, customers came to him from across the United States, France, Australia, and other countries, including Mongolia.

His customers have even included the famous. Stansell's most satisfying job, he said via email, was to leather-bind the scripts for Robin Williams's movies. "He gave them as 'wrap gifts' to the cast and crew and auctioned the extras for charity," he said. Stansell made about 250 for each movie, worked with Williams for 11 years, and even got to meet him while Williams filmed "Dead Poets Society" in New Castle, Delaware.

Located in a workshop on Stansell's property, the Craft Bookbinding Company is very much a family operation. Stansell's wife of over 50 years, Sandy, is "my most valuable asset" and "my quality control manager," he said. Of their eight children, five of whom were homeschooled, several have helped in the business. Their youngest daughter, Sarah, currently assists part-time with the binding.

Bookbinder's Craft

Book restoration often requires the eye of a jeweler, the fingers of a surgeon, and the patience of a saint. With regard to difficult restoration jobs, Stansell explains, "There are from time to time books from hell. When I get one of those, I wonder what on God's green earth ever made me think I wanted to be a bookbinder."

In these cases, he tries to save as much of the original binding as possible. This often means lifting or removing for reuse "a weak and brittle leather spine that is glued directly to the back of the book." He likens this process to removing a coat of paint—intact.

But it can be even trickier: "Sometimes book owners decide to attempt their own repairs. They use Elmer's Glue or some other nonreversible adhesive, making it near impossible to save the book. I say 'near' impossible because after much stress, tribulation, and grinding of teeth, we are able to deliver a book that looks like it has been well taken care of over the years. Then even the job from hell becomes satisfying."

Let's look more deeply into the art and craft that goes into such restorations.

Beauty and the Book

On his website, Stansell describes the refurbishment of a family Bible that belonged to his customer's aunt. It was found in the attic, under the eaves where the roof leaked. It was so damaged that it didn't even resemble a book. In fact, at first his customer thought it was "a block of wood supporting the rafter." After determining what it was, the customer discovered many familiar names recorded in it and knew that he needed to save it.

Stansell describes its condition and how it was restored:

The embossed boards were delaminated and deformed, which necessitated re-wetting and reforming. The leather was shrunken and extremely brittle. The old leather was chemically treated to produce flexibility. After the text-block was resealed and backed, it was recovered with new leather used where leather was missing. The original leather was then reapplied.

To perform these minor miracles requires diligence and attention to detail. When the pages of a book have stains or foxing (the browning or spotting of paper as it ages), the book restorer must sometimes take the book apart, blot the pages with special chemicals, and then put them



Before and after rebinding a Bible.



A Bible being rebacked.



Pages before and after they've undergone chemical washing.



Ed Stansell with his wife of 50 years, Sandy.



Ed Stansell working on a Bible's backing.



A large family Bible, before and after restoration.

into a press to prevent the paper from curling, a process that can take months.

Stansell worked on a small volume that was rescued from the 1981 fire that consumed President Franklin Pierce's home in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Little of the original binding was left, not enough to merit restoring its leather. And the text had been clearly damaged by fire, smoke, and water.

The restoration was an elaborate process: It "called for disassembling the text-block, then washing and bleaching, followed by deacidifying and resizing of the pages. The pages were put in proper sequence and resealed onto raised linen cords. Silk head and tail bands were hand-woven onto the text-block. The original boards were flattened and reused and covered with calfskin which was marbled employing the ancient method of using various chemical salts sprinkled onto wet leather to form various shades and patterns."

Bookbinders like Ed Stansell and his family are there to restore treasures.

The Trade Continues

Today, the craft of bookbinding and book restoration is alive and well. North Carolina's Penland School; the American Academy of Bookbinding in Telluride, Colorado; the School for Bookbinding Arts in Winchester, Virginia—Google "bookbinding schools," and you'll find that such schools and apprenticeships abound.

Most books are utilitarian objects, made for reading, yet for some people a book acquires a special and deep meaning. That family Bible becomes a treasure in need of repair, and that journal is a dream waiting to be born. Bookbinders like Ed Stansell and his family are there to restore those treasures and to help those dreams come true. By their craftsmanship, they add to the beauty of our homes and our lives.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin in seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

ALL PHOTOS BY SANDY STANSELL UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE

COURTESY OF ED STANSELL

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Adam Sandler Can't Act, Right?

MARK JACKSON

Adam Sandler. We know he can't act. He's the latter-day embodiment of a certain type of late-1970s, New York frat-boy of cultural specimen who tended to be drawn to the toilet-centric early work of Howard Stern, Frank Zappa, Lou Reed, Monty Python, and the Ramones. Goofball Adam—he's always been a kind of uncut gem himself.

He made up that now-famous song years ago on "Saturday Night Live": "Han-Han-Hannukkah is fun-fun-funnukkah..." Adam is not an actual actor.

Oh yeah? Really? Wanna bet? Of course, he's an actor. He's been a household name in American cinema for decades. Someone with that enduring level of celebrity can absolutely act—just like Cher, Joan Rivers, and Lady Gaga. Maybe not Madonna. Sandler just didn't have the right dramatic material yet.

The Material

Now he does. Like a mash-up of both John Turturro and Ed Norton's characters in the poker-gambling film "Rounders," Sandler plays Howard Ratner, a tinted-glasses-wearing, goateed, crazymaking, gambling-addicted, motor-mouthed, charismatic, sleazy, schmoozing sports fan of a Manhattan diamond merchant. He's got sports-betting and money-grubbing street smarts that border on the savant. And his heart is somehow, well, kind. Perfect role for him.

Ratner's shop in the Big Apple's diamond district is a watering hole for a variety of social vermin as well as those looking for a nice rock to go down on one knee with. Ratner specializes in some seriously tacky pieces, like diamond-encrusted Furbies with manually movable eyes. And if Ratner keeps living on the gambling edge, his shop will soon also be attracting bounty hunters.

Ratner's barely holding it together; he's that kind of individual with a particular kind of grit that thrives on the chaos of a myriad shifting deals, of sudden setbacks, a fed-up wife, a too-young mistress, and the

'Uncut Gems'

Director
Benny Safdie,
Josh Safdie

Starring
Adam Sandler, Julia Fox,
Kevin Garnett, Idina Menzel,
LaKeith Stanfield

Rated
R

Running Time
2 hours, 15 minutes

Release Date
Dec. 25

★★★★★

Howard Ratner's life is an elaborate train wreck waiting to happen.



Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler) sells some high-end, tacky merchandise.

ever-present, unsavory gangster fringe of loan sharks and bookies he owes.

One of these would-be debt collectors is Arno (Eric Bogosian), who would seriously hurt Ratner if it weren't for the fact that he's also married to Ratner's wife's sister. So Arno merely locks Ratner, naked, in Ratner's car's trunk as an interim retribution.

So there Howie Ratner is, texting in the trunk from the parking lot, while his wife Dinah (Idina Menzel) watches their daughter in a school play. She comes out, unlocks the trunk with nothing more than an eyeroll, clearly having seen this sort of thing before, and leaves him. After foraging up some clothes, Ratner's back in his seat watching his daughter, like nothing strange just happened. That level of insanity.

Ratner Finds an Uncut Gem

Ratner gets hold of a rare, uncut African opal (through some unsavory connections; it arrives packed in a dead fish). Kevin Garnett (the actual former Boston Celtics star, playing himself) sees it, and, hearing of its origin, wants it for its mother-Africa mojo that might inspire him to play better basketball.

Garnett was brought to Ratner's showroom by Demany (LaKeith Stanfield), who Ratner hired to schmooze the hip-hop crowd and the athletes with tales of rare trinkets and bling, and also brings in occasional high-end watches. From whence they cometh is unclear.

"Uncut Gems" is set in the not-too-distant past, which makes it feel like Garnett, who retired in 2016, is still playing. Garnett must have that uncut opal, and he must have it now, so they work out a deal where he can carry it around for a day in exchange for his giant, white-gold Celtics championship ring (with an inlaid emerald clover) as collateral.

Then, Ratner catches a lucky break (maybe it was Garnett's clover ring?) and gets the inside scoop on a bet with a potential massive

payoff. Being the unrecovered hardcore gambler he is, Ratner immediately pawns Garnett's ring for cash to place the bet. Because what insider info might that be? The Celtics game being played that night, of course.

Reaching the Boiling Point

Eventually, we've got Ratner pacing in his showroom gesticulating wildly about the game, the debt-collecting gangsters watching him through the bulletproof glass of his elevator where he's managed to trap them due to a lucky circuit-breaker malfunction, and Garnett scoring—clearly that uncut gem is making him win.

Ratner's life is an elaborate train wreck waiting to happen, where we see the boulder sitting on the tracks, but he manages last second to shunt the train down an alternate set of tracks we didn't see over there in the underbrush. It's a pressure cooker—a cunning yet hapless clown juggling 15 balls simultaneously, and it'll seriously raise your blood pressure.

The question is, do you feel the need to do that? "Uncut Gems" is like the dark, serious cousin of "Midnight Run," another film about taking gambles, debt-collecting, and juggling a million catastrophes.

What actually ruined this film for me was the bizarre, '80s-inflected, mostly synthesizer score. Had this had a blues background from some Elmore James flick or even a darker version of the comedically bluesy soundtrack of "Midnight Run," it would have been a winner. That is, again, if you want to raise your blood pressure unduly. Then again, those movies are about tough guys, and our Howie is not tough like that. So maybe not. But it needed something.

All performances shine, especially, of course, Sandler's. But Kevin Garnett, like LeBron James before him, could actually have a second career as an actor.

FILM REVIEW

Capable Action Sequences, but Dangerous Socio-Racial Message

IAN KANE

"Ip Man 4: The Finale" marks director Wilson Yip's ("Dragon Tiger Gate," "Flash Point") fourth film about the famous kung fu guru, the titular Ip Man (Donnie Yen). This final flick in the series is an interesting beast, offering a little less action than is usual for these films. Instead, a socio-cultural perspective of race relations between whites and Chinese immigrants is ramped up and plopped front and center.

Ip Man's wife, Cheung Wing-sing (Lynn Xiong), died during 2015's "Ip Man 3" (which showcased a pretty epic pugilistic showdown between Mike Tyson and Donnie Yen). Her death results in the kung fu master traveling to San Francisco so that he can eventually move his son over later. Like many immigrants, he believes that his son will have a better life in the States than back home in Hong Kong.

The film is mostly about Ip Man's students. Bruce Lee (Kwok-Kwan Chan), Ip Man's most famous student, has a presence in the film, albeit a pretty peripheral one, only being showcased during an early alleyway matchup against a cartoonishly diabolical karate champion (Mark Strange). Lee has angered the already established Chinese kung fu grandmasters by teaching the martial art to non-Chinese.



Donnie Yen stars in "Ip Man 4: The Finale," a vehicle to promote racism against whites.

here follows another of Ip Man's students: a young, Chinese U.S. Marine oddly named "Hartman" (Vanness Wu). Staff Sergeant Hartman is trying to introduce kung fu into the official Marine Corps hand-to-hand combat training program.

Hartman's direct superior, Gunnery Sergeant Barton Geddes (Scott Adkins), is a vehement racist and also convinced that Japanese karate is vastly superior to Chinese kung fu. When Hartman arrogantly tows a wooden practice dummy into one of the Marines' training sessions, Geddes has his primary karate instructor, Colin Frater (Chris Collins), face off against the young man. Hartman puts up a decent fight, but since he's only a newbie kung fu practitioner, he ends up getting smashed by Frater. Shortly after the training brawl,

'Ip Man 4: The Finale'

Director
Wilson Yip

Starring
Scott Adkins, Donnie Yen,
Kwok-Kwan Chan

Not Rated

Running Time
1 hour, 45 minutes

Release Date
Dec. 25

★★★★★

Hartman goes directly to their commanding officer with his kung fu program. Hartman manages to convince the officer (apparently the only nonracist white person in the film) to give his kung fu program a shot, thereby bucking several levels of the chain of command.

This, in turn, enrages Geddes to the point to where, during the film's dramatic third act, he pretty much kicks everyone's butt who merely looks at him the wrong way.

You can see the writing on the wall: Ip Man must defend his student. Near the end of the film, Ip Man states that he utilizes kung fu to fight injustice, and since Hartman and other Chinese folks have been abused by Geddes, we are treated to an all-out, balls-to-the-walls showdown between Ip Man and... you know, the evil, racist guy Geddes.

But get this: Ip is shown smoking cigarettes and coughing a lot (he was a heavy smoker in real life), and he discovers that he has throat cancer. Despite his illness and an injury to his left arm, the kung fu hero manages to rise to the occasion, besting a bevy of xenophobic bad boys in hyperkinetic, yet relatively brief, action scenes. The fights themselves are well-constructed and expertly executed.

For the most part, the action also looks natural, with less reliance on the typical Wire-fu antics, where

wires and other stage techniques create the fight effects. Wire-fu is showcased in some of the more over-the-top Chinese martial arts films.

A Bigoted Perspective

However, although the action pieces are fun to watch and well-done, the acting is, at times, hackneyed and overblown—especially the parts of the bigots.

There is also a disturbing preponderance of the Chinese characters using "whites" and other derogatory terms for Caucasians. There must have been at least a dozen times where white people are referred to as arrogant and just plain bad people. Chinese-immigrant victims are plagued by loads and loads of nasty, evil whites. Everywhere they turn, the newly arrived Chinese face severe discrimination—so severe, in fact, that things careen over into the absurd in many cases.

In fact, this ham-fisted message is evident from the outset of the film and carried throughout, always reminding audiences that, well, white men are racist.

Thus the entertaining action in "Ip Man 4: The Finale" is overshadowed by a highly judgmental perspective with little in the way of nuance or complexity.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

'Little Women': A Cozy Tribute to All-American, All-Sister Families

MARK JACKSON

I read Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women," at age 11. It was a girl's book, but me and my little half-jock, half-book-worm, grade-school buddies were surreptitiously captivated. Why? Because we knew a bunch of these all-sister families.

Behold—the very wonderful Van Houten sisters: Johanna, Renate, Barbara, Bridget, Thea, and Francis (not their real last name, all last names here listed are fictitious, to shield the innocent); the magical McGarrigle sisters: Larissa, Bridghe, Helena, and Rosemary; the five lovely Leavitt sisters up on Dennis Court; not to mention the rare Renberg sisters: Sandy and Suki.

The thing was, these girls were, all of them, beauties—like a fairy tale, each one fairer than the next. If you set foot in their homes, it was like getting hit with an infatuation bomb. Develop a crush? Not even close—one got instantaneously crushed with megatons of smitten-ness. No boy could handle the thought of them.

Because it wasn't only the beauty and the popularity. It was the thoroughly besotting, next-level estrogen cozziness; the lying around in front of the TV in hair-stroking kitten heaps, the high-energy frenzy of giggling and squealing; the snarking; the sharp stabs of occasional terrifying meanness; the dolls; the hair-brushing and twirling and flinging and braiding and washing with Herbal Essence shampoo; the cheer-leading; the starring in school plays; the adorable fuzzy socks, the ballet shoes, the lacrosse sticks; the long lashes...

Director Greta Gerwig brings a massive wallop of childhood nostalgia for the all-girl families. Is it any wonder that this is the sixth film adaptation of this story? I think not. I submit that all-American, all-girl families hold a special place in the Americana memories of all Americans. Especially the memories of boys.

The Story

Greta Gerwig's sophomore project, after "Lady Bird," works on two levels: not only as a retelling of "Little Women" but also as a biopic about Alcott. Eldest sister and novelist Jo March was based on Alcott herself. Since the book's a classic and there have been those previous five movie-tellings, most Americans know the story:

It's about Marmee (a fabulous Laura Dern) and her vivacious, artsy daughters, Jo (Saoirse Ronan), the March family's impetuous, resident would-be novelist; Beth (Eliza Scanlen), the talented musician; Meg (Emma Watson), the family's actress; and the youngest, Amy (Florence Pugh) the painter.

'Little Women'

Director
Greta Gerwig

Starring
Saoirse Ronan,
Timothée Chalamet,
Meryl Streep,
Laura Dern,
Emma Watson,
Florence Pugh,
Chris Cooper,
Eliza Scanlen

Rated
PG

Running Time
2 hours, 15 minutes

Release Date
Dec. 25

★★★★★



(Top left) Timothée Chalamet as neighbor "Laurie" and Florence Pugh as Amy. (Top right) Director Greta Gerwig (L) speaks with Meryl Streep on the set of "Little Women." (Above left) Laura Dern as Marmee, mother of the little women. (Above right) (L-R) The talented sisters Meg (Emma Watson), Jo (Saoirse Ronan), and Amy (Florence Pugh) act out a drama.

They all live life at a highly sanguine, breakneck (but ridiculously cozy) pace in one of those classic, all-brown New England houses in Concord, Massachusetts. Their dad (Bob Odenkirk) is off serving as a chaplain in the Civil War.

They're in the midst of learning to deal with life without father when a different sort of male figure enters their lives; that would be the fetching young lad Theodore "Laurie" Laurence (Timothée Chalamet), who moves in across the way with his wealthy granddad (Chris Cooper).

The girls (and boy) play (as they were wont to in the time of no phones) with great verve, staging plays, writing stories, playing the piano with virtuosity, and skating on ponds. They attend debutante balls, have the occasional explosive catfight wherein one or the other's precious works might get vindictively torched, have sob-fests overseen by mom, and forgive each other with extensive hugging.

Mega-snobbish Aunt March (Meryl Streep), a frilly-black-clad, bitter spinster if there ever was one, lords her wrath over their collective heads with a barrage of sniffing, eye-rolling, and generally disparaging remarks. Her criticism, however, is due to her constant worrying that her female relatives have no one to look after them. It was, after all, a time when women generally could not provide for themselves.

Gerwig's "Little Women" has two time frames: the teen years and 10 years into the future when Jo's moved to New York City to attempt a writing career. Jo takes a couple of trips back home to help deal with family illness.

This time-period split allows director-writer Gerwig to show how the March family history is Jo's source of writing material. It also manages to retain the book's classic atmosphere, while at the same time (due to busting up the linear narrative) allowing for a fabulously engaging modern (including fairly modern language) interpretation. It's safe to say, this story has never been told with this degree of vibrancy, passion, and conviction. Gerwig makes "Little Women" a tribute to women.

Why We Like This Movie Today

Of course, it's the modern retelling that makes this classic work: passionate women fighting for what they feel should be theirs. This is largely a feminist retelling, after all. Consider only one indication: Amy's speech concerning marriage wasn't in the original script. Meryl Streep apparently

(L-R) Emma Watson, Florence Pugh, Saoirse Ronan, and Eliza Scanlen in "Little Women."



insisted there be a moment that afforded modern audiences insight into the general powerlessness of women at the time; they couldn't work or vote, and marriage laws were such that they stood to lose ownership of their money, property, and children.

All of the above is true, and the very concept of helpless women grates on and jangles our modern nerves and sensibilities. But why?

Consider that feminism is, at heart, based on envy: You have more than I have; that's not fair. Boys get to play with bats and balls; boys get to climb trees and get dirty; men's ambitions are taken seriously when they draw, write, or achieve their artistic promise. It's not fair. This feeling that life's unfairness needs to be remedied is basically the dynamic at the heart of communist philosophy.

Director Greta Gerwig brings a massive wallop of childhood nostalgia for the all-girl families.

Today, it's hard to stomach that life is not fair. Yet the more we twist and legislate to make it so, the more mess we create. And, ironically, instead of celebrating our differences, which is supposedly at the bottom of progressive thinking, meeting out fairness aims to obliterate differences. Do we want a world of only men-like creatures?

And, if all these seemingly evermore progressive updates and legal tweaks to eliminate unfairness have actually brought about a true evolution of the human spirit—why do we find ourselves in the middle of Armageddon, with the planet on the brink of cardiac arrest?

So... no matter how much this movie satisfies scratching that itch for fairness, its ideology ultimately turns us into people who live to fight. The sister dynamics—considerably heightened in this movie—make this point.

Sister Dynamics

Saoirse Ronan's Jo could almost be a stand-alone story, but Gerwig caught lightning in a bottle by casting Florence Pugh as Amy; together these two elevate the book's classic sibling rivalry to high art. A baser comparison might be that Pugh's Amy plays Daffy Duck to Jo's Bug Bunny, but this sister duo radiates a palpable heat; they both share a boiling desire for a fulfilling, artistic life. In one of the film's subtler but ultimately elucidating scenes, Aunt March explains to Amy exactly why Amy must marry well, in order to inherit her fortune. This lays the groundwork for us to appreciate Amy's courage to follow her heart, and not some suitor's bank account.

It must also be said that Pugh's Amy pines for Timothée Chalamet's Laurie in ways that will be profoundly appreciated by legions of smitten Chalamet fan-girls. Pugh better win best supporting actress.

Emma Watson's Meg and Eliza Scanlen's Beth bolster the Jo-Amy duality with nuance, supporting work, and Chalamet as neighbor Laurie encircles each March sister as a sort of wreath. As a friend, as crush, he functions as a kind of pedestal to showcase each sister's individuality.

"Little Women" is a slam-dunk for Academy Award nominations. Due to Gerwig's fabulous retelling of the March girls' tale, it unpacked many childhood memories. I'd forgotten how much fun the Van Houten, McGarrigle, and Renberg girls were. We didn't know the gorgeous Leavitt sisters; they went to a different school—lived behind a high fence (smart dad). So we boys would climb Mike Finsler's apple tree to have a look at the lovely Leavitt lasses lying around their pool in the summertime. Girls may be little women, but boys will be boys.

THEATER REVIEW

Accepting the Inevitable

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK—Len Cariou gives a virtuoso performance as a man determined to live his life on his own terms, in George Eastman's comedy "Harry Townsend's Last Stand," at New York City Center Stage II.

Soon to celebrate his 85th birthday, Harry Townsend (Cariou) has lived in the same home, which he built in a lakeside community in Vermont, for three and a half decades. A former radio host, Harry was always the go-to guy when any of his neighbors needed help, whether dealing with community issues or repairing a front-porch step.

Garrulous and fiercely independent, even more so since the passing of his wife five years earlier, Harry is looking forward to the arrival of his son Alan (Craig Bierko). Unbeknownst to Harry, Alan, who lives in California, isn't just coming for a visit. Alan has been getting reports from his sister Sarah, who is both Harry's neighbor and primary caregiver, that it's no longer safe for their father to live by himself.

Alan has also arrived with the express purpose of giving Sarah a much-needed few days off. He finds himself shocked at how much things have changed with his dad: Harry sometimes forgets to take his medications, or takes them twice; he has trouble walking and is starting to lose his train of thought during conversations.

Despite Alan's best efforts to broach the subject about moving to an assisted living community, Harry has no intention of being with "a bunch of old farts under the same roof, waiting for bus trips to nowhere."

Never mind that the facility is clearly first-rate in terms of care and comfort, and that some of his former neighbors are already living there. Harry wants to be able to live his life as he wants, and as far as he's concerned, that's all there is to it.

Each man is certain that they know what's best in this situation.

There's a line in the play that goes, "Sometime it's harder to like someone than it is to love them." This is often the case with Harry and Alan. Each man is certain that they know what's best in this situation, if they could only get the other to see it too. The conversation also causes each to bring up old hurts and slights that have festered for years.

It's more than a story about the inevitable changes that come with getting older. The play points out the importance of the younger generation's being able to recognize these changes while not tak-



ing away a parent's dignity in the process.

It falls to Alan to make Harry see that his life isn't over if he leaves the home he loves, but rather that it's a chance to find new things to enjoy and become passionate about. Harry's late wife understood this point: She took up quilting when she could no longer play golf. Harry now must face change as well.

A Production That Works

Cariou plays Harry to absolute perfection. Harry is always ready with an off-color joke or life lesson for his son. Sadly, he is someone who has seen the imprint he once made wiped away by the passage of time. Other than his family, few of those living in the community now know who he is or the contributions he once made.

Bierko is fine as Alan. His character serves as the catalyst who sets events in motion. He is constantly trying to find the middle ground where he and his father can reach an understanding. Alan

understands how doing what's right is not always the easiest for all concerned.

Karen Carpenter does an excellent job directing. She has brought forth a degree of tension lurking just below the story's surface. This is especially true early on as Harry and Alan engage in verbal jousting. In fact, the first act is one long setup before heading into new territory after the intermission: Alan tries to keep on topic while his father does his best to dance around the elephant in the room while reeling off some enjoyable family stories in the process.

Lauren Helpert's set of Harry's house perfectly fits the story. The place has a well-lived-in vibe, with objects scattered about somewhat haphazardly. The sound effects by John Gromada set the mood.

A bittersweet tale, "Harry Townsend's Last Stand" reminds us that change is inevitable, and that recognizing this fact can mean retaining the chance to have a say in the matter. Cariou gives a performance you will not soon forget.

Harry Townsend (Len Cariou, L) and his son Alan (Craig Bierko) don't see eye to eye in "Harry Townsend's Last Stand."

'Harry Townsend's Last Stand'

New York City Center Stage II
131 W. 55th St.
New York

Tickets
NYCityCenter.org

Running Time
2 hours, including one intermission

Closes
March 15, 2020

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle.

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