

Home & Contact

Curriculum Vitae

Research

Computer arithmetic

Parallel processing

Fault tolerance

Broader research

Research history

List of publications

Teaching

ECE1 Freshman sem

ECE154 Comp arch

ECE252B Comp arith

ECE252C Adv dig des

ECE254B Par proc

ECE257A Fault toler

Student supervision

Math + Fun!

Textbooks

Computer arithmetic

Parallel processing

Dependable comp

Comp architecture

Other books

Service

Professional activities

Academic service

Community service

Industrial consulting

Files & Documents

Useful Links

Personal

Blog & books

Behrooz Parhami's Blog & Books Page

This page was created in March 2009 as an outgrowth of the section entitled "Books Read or Heard" in Professor Parhami's personal page. The rapid expansion of the list of books warranted devoting a separate page to it. Because the book entries constituted a form of personal blog, it was decided to title this page "Blog & Books," to also allow discussion of interesting topics unrelated to books from time to time.

Entries appear in reverse chronological order in each of the following sections.

[Blog entries for 2011](#)

[Blog entries for 2010](#)

[Blog entries for 2009, April to December](#)

[Books Read or Heard Until March 2009](#)



Blog Entries for 2011

2011/12/31 (Sat.): Happy new year to everyone! May the year 2012 bring you more of everything that you desire: love, joy, health, and prosperity. Here are four year-end items of potential interest.

(1) Best books of 2011: *Publishers Weekly* has chosen [the top 10 books](#) of the year for you.

(2) Viral videos of 2011: Time Video has picked the [top 10 viral videos](#) of the past year for you.

(3) Popular songs of 2011: Here are the [top 10 songs](#) of the year according to Billboard.com. LMFAO and Adele each have two songs on the list.

(4) Movies of 2011: MTV News has picked the [top 10 movies](#) of the year for you. Here is a [second opinion](#) from *The Seattle Times*.

2011/12/30 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Science is at no moment quite right, but it is seldom quite wrong, and has, as a rule, a better chance of being right than the theories of the unscientific." Bertrand Russell

(2) Time for a new calendar? According to a [CNN report](#), Richard Conn Henry and Steve Hanke of Johns Hopkins University have developed a new calendar where every date always falls on the same day of the week. They also propose doing away with time zones and adopting a universal time around the world to streamline international business. Every third month on the new calendar would have 31 days, with the rest of the months having 30, for a total of 364 days. They would replace existing 366-day leap years with an extra week at the end of December every five or six years

(3) The Iranian regime's cinema problem: Something very interesting is going on in Iranian cinema these days. Iranian films are gaining even more recognition than before at international film festivals and its directors and actors/actresses are being invited to these festivals as judges and honored guests. This turn of events does not sit well with the Islamic regime, which sees it as a Zionist conspiracy. Accordingly, the regime has [unleashed its attack dogs](#) to badmouth directors, actors, and particularly actresses.

(4) On the closure of the Strait of Hormuz: In a [blog post on Iranian.com](#), Ari Siletz introduces a paper, written by an MIT PhD candidate in 2008, now an assistant professor of political science at George Washington University. In the paper (the post provides a link to the [full text](#)), Caitlin Talmadge analyzes the consequences the closing the Strait of Hormuz by Iran, estimating that its reopening may take anywhere from 37-112 days (roughly 1-4 months), depending on a number of assumptions about unknown parameters. One conclusion from the emergence of this paper is that the West has rigorously analyzed the possibility of such a closure and is likely quite ready for the various scenarios.

2011/12/29 (Thu.): Sokal, Alan and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, translated from the French original, Picador, 1998.

This book (which I learned about through an e-mail message sent to me by someone I do not know, who

Favorite quotations

Poetry

Pet peeve

Virtual retirement

CE Program

ECE Department

UCSB Engineering

UC Santa Barbara

thought I might find it interesting, given my book reviews and other writings) resonated with me, for reasons that I will outline first, before writing about the book itself.

In science and engineering fields, the current Holy Grail is "interdisciplinary research," which draws upon knowledge and methods from two or more disciplines to create useful new ideas, understandings, processes, or products. Examples of interdisciplinary fields that have led to exciting new results include biomedical engineering, computational linguistics, and human-machine interaction. There is, however, a serious danger in any interdisciplinary field: that of abuse and deceit. It is very rare nowadays for anyone to be highly skilled and knowledgeable in two or more different disciplines. So, interdisciplinary researchers typically are people from one discipline who have picked up some information from the other discipline(s) through informal studies. For example, an engineer might pore over the biomedical literature, or pick the brains of biomed specialists, in order to understand problems in the latter field and then work on engineering solutions to those problems. Here comes the rub: it is very easy to impress medical people with engineering concepts and jargon, and vice versa, so one sees many half-baked ideas presented in the scientific/technical forums of these fields in which shallow knowledge in one or another field is imminently visible. So-called hot or trendy fields are particularly prone to abuse and deceit, given financial and status motives.

Fortunately, within the fields of science and engineering, there is a built-in safeguard against impostors lurking in the shadows between disciplines, while trying to impress specialists from each area with concepts and jargon from the other areas, without contributing anything useful. Scientific ideas are subject to experimental verification by other scientist, and processes or products can be simulated, prototyped, and assessed via testing and performance evaluation. So, charlatans do not last long in these fields, although by the time they are exposed, they may have achieved their immediate goals, be they academic promotion, award of large research grants, or fame. The same cannot be said about disciplines in humanities and the social sciences, which are the focus of the book under review. The authors thus set out "to draw attention to a relatively little-known aspect [of postmodernism in such fields], namely the repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming from mathematics and physics ... exploiting the prestige of the natural sciences in order to give their own discourse a veneer of rigor" [pp. 4-5].

The book has an interesting genesis. In the mid-1990s, the book's first author wrote a parody "paper," entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," in which nonsensical ideas and connection were discussed, with ample citations to real sources, including the works of authors he wanted to criticize (the paper had 200+ references). He submitted the paper to the Duke University Press journal *Social Text*, which accepted and published the work in its spring/summer 1996 issue (pp. 217-252). This kind of parody has appeared in other disciplines as well (including a computer-generated paper in computer science), but the usual motivation in these other cases is to expose weak refereeing systems, incompetent referees, and journals' profit motives in publishing as many papers as possible. Sokal's parody paper is reproduced as Appendix A of the book under review, with extensive footnotes added to explain some of the "funny" parts. Appendix B provides additional comments on the parody, while Appendix C contains a follow-up paper, which contains an explanation of the parody and the author's motives in publishing it. This paper appeared in the journal *Dissent* (Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 93-99, Fall 1996), after being rejected by *Social Text* "on the grounds that it did not meet their intellectual standards" [p. 268].

So, the book under review expands on Sokal's parody-paper experiment by citing many other authors from different disciplines and commenting on the parts of their published bodies of work that can be viewed as abusing science. The authors focus on certain intellectual aspects of postmodernism that have had an impact on humanities and the social sciences. These aspects are characterized with a fascination with obscure discourses and an emphasis on discourse and language, as opposed to the facts referenced by the discourses [pp. 182-183]. "What we are criticizing is the pretension of some celebrated intellectuals to offer profound thoughts on complicated subjects that they understand, at best, at the level of popularizations" [p. 6]. It comes as no surprise that this book has been attacked from many sides. The authors defend their work against some such critics in the preface to this English edition: "According to Robert Maggiori in *Liberation*, we are humorless scientific pedants who correct grammatical errors in love letters" [p. ix].

In what follows, I provide four examples of the abuses that resonated with me and which I could understand, given my knowledge of mathematics and physics at the level of a nonspecialist.

1. This is an example of abuse of mathematics by Julia Kristeva, who appeals to set theory to explain political philosophy: "If each individual or each social organism represents a set, the set of all sets that the State should be does not exist. The State as set of all sets is a fiction, it cannot exist, just as there does not exist a set of all sets in set theory" [p. 47].
2. One of the most widespread abuses of mathematical terms is that of linear vs. nonlinear. For reasons not explained by any of the quoted postmodernists, "linear" is often equated with rational or scientific thinking and "nonlinear" with intuition or subjective perception [p. 143].
3. Another abused concept from mathematics is chaos theory, in the sense of mixing the mathematical theory of

chaos with the popular wisdom that small causes can have large effects, exemplified by imagined chain reactions "if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter" and "the missing nail that led to the collapse of an empire" [pp. 145-146].

4. This is an example of abuse of mathematics (Euclidean vs. non-Euclidean space) by Jean Baudrillard: "In the Euclidean space of history, the shortest path between two points is the straight line, the line of Progress and Democracy. But this is only true of the linear space of the Enlightenment. In our non-Euclidean *fin de siècle* space, a baleful curvature unfailingly deflects all trajectories. This is doubtless linked to the sphericity of time ... or the subtle distortion of the gravitational field ..." [p. 148].

According to the authors, the problem lies not only in inaccuracies and misrepresentation of notions in mathematics and physics, but also in a complete lack of justification or explanation for the claimed correspondences or empirical verification of the conclusions drawn based on these correspondences. Additionally, distaste for science, and its rigorous methods, permeates many of these narratives. In response, the authors invoke Bertrand Russell: "Science is at no moment quite right, but it is seldom quite wrong, and has, as a rule, a better chance of being right than the theories of the unscientific" [p. 55].

That many of the authors quoted in this book do not know what they are talking about is evident from very basic scientific errors, such as confusing the notions of speed and acceleration: "Recent MEGALOPOLITAN hyperconcentration (Mexico City, Tokyo ...) being itself the result of the increased speed of economic exchanges, it seems necessary to reconsider the importance of the notions of ACCELERATION and DECELERATION (what physicists call positive and negative velocities ...)" [pp. 169-170]. Some authors have gone so far as to rename fundamental scientific results by adding the names of authors of nonsensical treatise to theorems. A striking example is Michel Serres' reference to the "Godel-Debray principle" [p. 179].

The book's authors theorize that what has gotten us to this sad state is a combination of neglect of the empirical, trying to benefit from the prestige of scientific field in humanities and the social sciences, a natural tendency to relativism in the social sciences, and overreliance on words in philosophical and literary training [pp. 190-197]. The latter point refers to the fact that a student of science can learn physics or biology, without ever reading Einstein or Darwin. The facts and theoretical arguments can be understood when presented in any reasonable form. In fact, modern and updated/corrected presentations are often preferable. The influence of politics is also discussed [pp. 197-205].

The authors conclude their presentation by discussing in detail why they consider exposure of these abuses important (they waste time, teach students to embellish discourses via obscure ideas and language, and weaken the political left) and what are the logical next steps.

The authors' style is engaging and humorous throughout. For example, after quoting a particularly absurd passage from Jacques Lacan that equates "the erectile organ" with the square-root of -1 , the authors quip: "This reminds us of Woody Allen, who, in *Sleeper*, objects to the reprogramming of his brain: 'You can't touch my brain, it's my second-favorite organ!'" [p. 27]. The only place where the reader's attention might slack is when long multiparagraph or even multipage quotes are provided, but the authors deem this a necessary evil to ensure that they are not accused of quoting their targets out of context.

2011/12/28 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The day will come when, by study pursued through several ages, the things now concealed will appear with evidence; and posterity will be astonished that truths so clear had escaped us." Seneca, on the motion of comets, cited by Laplace, 1825

(2) Humorous Christmas song for non-Christian Iranians: A talented Iranian couple has put Persian words to the holiday song "**Let It Snow.**"

(3) Visualizing the distribution of Iranian languages: This [map of Iran](#) is color-coded to show the regions where each of the many Iranian languages is spoken.

2011/12/27 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The Christmas Day massacre in Grapevine, Texas: The [murderous Santa Clause](#), who killed 6 family members on Christmas morning as they were opening their presents, and then turned the gun on himself, has been identified as Iranian-American Aziz Yazdanpanah, who was estranged from his wife.

(2) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: This [Persian translation](#) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is due to Mohammad-Ja'far Pouyandeh, one of the victims of Iran's notorious chain murders.

(3) A new credit/debit card scam: The following is from an e-mail distributed by the homeowners' association of a housing complex on behalf of a resident who fell victim to the scam. [This video](#) shows a similar scam, but uses a card reader mounted on the outside, rather than inserted inside, the real reader.

Last spring I purchased gas at the World station on the corner of Fairview and Calle Real with my Santa Barbara Bank and Trust (SBB&T) credit/debit card. Within a few days SBB&T called me to inquire if I had purchased \$500 worth of gas on Interstate 5. Of course the answer was "no", so the bank encouraged me to come over and cancel my card, which I did immediately. I was a victim of a scam that operates like this: a special reader

card is inserted into the gas station credit/debit machine by the scammers. The next day they reinsert that same reader card. Their advanced technology allows them to retrieve all credit card numbers that used that machine during the time between the two insertions. With a special machine purchased on line for \$200, the scammers reproduce the credit cards. Ten illegal credit cards are made for each number they retrieve. Then they sell these cards for \$50 each—usually in the LA area. Truckers are the main purchasers of the cards. ... Needless to say, I only purchase gas with cash now and encourage you to do the same! [Name withheld]

2011/12/26 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The only index by which to judge a government or a way of life is by the quality of the people it acts upon. No matter how noble the objectives of a government, if it blurs decency and kindness, cheapens human life, and breeds ill will and suspicion—it is an evil government." Eric Hoffer

(2) On human intelligence: A few days ago, I got involved in a conversation about intelligence and recalled reading somewhere that intelligence has little to do with skills for solving math and logic problems, but is fundamentally the ability to survive. At one point in human history, survival simply meant staying alive, but nowadays, it also requires being able to prosper, so as to live a dignified and satisfying life. Motivated by this discussion, I did some searches and came up with [this Web site](#) that briefly discusses the various theories of intelligence, culminating in the modern one that breaks down intelligence into three components: analytic, creative, and practical. According to Dr. Howard Gardner, one of the interviewees: "While your IQ, which is sort of language logic, will get you behind the desk, if you don't know how to deal with people, if you don't know how to read yourself, you're going to end up just staying at that desk forever or eventually being asked to make room for somebody who does have social or emotional intelligence."

(3) Why Russia has not emulated the Arab Spring: "The Russian state has at its disposal the greatest natural resources of any country in the world [giving] the government the ability to both repress and bribe its population. Consider this fact. Despite the sweep and force of the Arab Spring, it has not produced political change in a single oil-rich country. [Not even in Iran, where the dissent movement began in 2009.]" Fareed Zakari, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of January 2, 2012, p. 44.

[By the way, *Time* magazine's Person of the Year is "The Protester" (from Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow).]

(4) On Margaret Thatcher: "She was canny about the fact that in order to be taken seriously, she wasn't able to show certain emotions because she was a woman. Churchill could cry over everything, but if she cried it meant something else; it meant she wasn't fit to be a leader." Meryl Streep, who plays Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*, quoted in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of December 26, 2011, and January 2, 2012.

2011/12/25 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "You know you are getting old when most of the names in your little black book are doctors." Anonymous

(2) Teddy [Roosevelt] awards for political courage: Joe Klein, *Time* magazine columnist, bestows his Teddy awards for 2011 to a number of people, including President Obama, for going against the military brass on a number of occasions and being right each time, VP Joe Biden, for being the voice of reason on Afghanistan, and presidential candidate Jon Huntsman, for standing up against a number of the Republican Party's silly postures. [Issue of January 2, 2012]

(3) Epic wins and fails in 2011: [Newsweek magazine's picks](#) for epic wins include Angela Merkel, the Occupy movement, China, Seal Team 6, and Apple's Siri. Epic fails include the 1%, Greece, US Congress, NBA, Gaddafi, and D. Strauss-Khan (issue of December 26, 2011, and January 2, 2012).

(4) The biography of a classic American film: For some four decades, each Christmas Eve, Americans have been treated to "[It's a Wonderful Life](#)" on TV. This now-classic film, which made less money than it cost to make upon its initial release in December 1946 (65 years ago), has a long history. Its genesis is a 4000-word 1943 short story, "The Greatest Gift," which Philip Van Doren sent with a Christmas card to his friends. RKO bought the film rights for \$10K in 1944, which it later sold to director Frank Capra. In 1974, copyright owner Republic Pictures failed to renew its rights, turning the film into low-cost holiday fare for local TV stations. In 2010, Seneca Falls, New York, that claims to be the real-life Bedford Falls of the film, opened a museum with a walking tour featuring 13 stops based on scenes from the movie. I have seen parts of this film on TV, but never actually sat down to watch it from beginning to end. Perhaps next Christmas I'll do that.

Note: Unfortunately, Frank Capra, the talented director of this film, became an informant for the House Un-American Activities Committee in the late 1940s, leading to the blacklisting of 7 of the film's other 8 writers.

2011/12/24 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Opera is when a guy is stabbed in the back and instead of bleeding he sings." Ed Gardner

(2) Christmas piano music: As I sit outside in sunny Goleta (63 F; don't mean to make you jealous, LOL), catching up with some work, I am listening in the background to Fariborz Lachini's solo piano performance of 12 Christmas songs, which he has assembled in [this page](#). You can make a playlist by clicking on the small arrows next to the song titles and then play your list. Wonderful!

(3) Sunrise in Bangkok: Shahrdad Rohani [conducting and playing the piano](#) in Bangkok.

(4) Publish AND perish: A new debate is raging in the US research community with regards to open scientific communication versus national security threats. In science, ideas are communicated openly in conferences and journals, allowing other scientists to confirm/refute various findings and to build upon them in their own research. Now this open model faces challenges in the age of sophisticated terror groups. This dilemma has come to the forefront in view of recent request from the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity that the prestigious journal *Nature* refrain from publishing some details of influenza research for fear that those details might allow terror groups to manufacture deadly viruses. However, the details might also allow other scientists to develop vaccines for those same viruses: hence the quandary. This [New Yorker article](#) argues for openness.

2011/12/23 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Here are some interesting quotes that I have posted before, but they are worth remembering.

(a) "The rule is perfect: in all matters of opinion our adversaries are insane." Mark Twain

(b) "However many people a tyrant slaughters, he cannot kill his successor." Seneca

(c) "To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved." George Macdonald

(d) "There was no respect for youth when I was young, and now that I am old, there is no respect for age—I missed it coming and going." J. B. Priestly

(2) Joke of the day (how to start a fight): My wife was hinting about what she wanted for our upcoming anniversary. She said, "I want something shiny that goes from 0 to 150 in about 3 seconds." I bought her a bathroom scale. And then the fight started ...

(3) Immigrants and start-ups: Nearly half of the top 50 start-up companies in the US have had at least one foreign-born founder and about 2/3 have at least one immigrant in a major management position, according to a report cited by the [Los Angeles Times](#).

(4) Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plants: According to the [New York Times](#), Japanese authorities have indicated that decommissioning the Fukushima reactors, destroyed during this year's earthquake/tsunami, will take 40 years and require the use of robots to remove melted fuel that appears to be stuck to the bottom of the reactors' containment vessels. No country has ever had to clean up 3 destroyed reactors at the same time, but Japan is poised to complete this project, despite numerous challenges.

2011/12/22 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Old age is when you know all the answers but nobody asks you the questions."

Anonymous

(2) MIT's new on-line initiative: MIT is giving on-line learning a boost via its [MITx program](#), which will offer certificates of achievement to those who work through freely available on-line course material. The school pioneered its Open Courseware program a decade ago. This move, following Stanford University's experimentation with open on-line courses, announced earlier this year, signals a bright future for bringing elite education to the masses.

(3) How we are killing innovation: According to Katrina Trinko, writing in [USA Today](#), "when children are praised readily and frequently, regardless of their efforts' outcomes, there is no incentive for them to strive for genuine excellence—or even recognize that it can exist. It also encourages self-centeredness: Narcissism has been on the uptick for years." According to Trinko, "The relationship between self-esteem and narcissism is troubling—and suggests a reason our innovation rates are so stagnant. ... Ultimately, this is all a balancing act. Children, of course, need encouragement and support. But they also need to be pushed beyond the very human inclination toward self-centeredness and impatience, and be given a chance to experience both the discouragement and, finally, the joy in spending time and effort in making a thing well or in pursuing an interest doggedly, just because it's worth doing—not for the sake of praise."

(4) A smart jury: A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement, the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch.

"Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened.

Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I, therefore, put it to you that you have a reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed, and I

insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty.

"But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door."

The jury foreman replied, "Yes, we did look, but your client didn't."

2011/12/21 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Some people think they have an open mind when it is really their mouth." Anonymous

(2) The 12 days of Christmas in the virtual world: "On the 12th Day of Christmas my Facebook gave to me, 12 dudes I'm blocking, 11 friends just watching, 10 corny topics, 9 busted barbies, 8 friends complaining, 7 stalkers stalking, 6 party invites, Fiiiiiiiiiiiiive Drama Queeeenssssss, 4 game requests, 3 photo tags, 2 friends-a-pokin and a creep who won't stop inboxing meeee!" Anonymous

(3) The Korean peninsula at night: This [satellite image](#) shows North Korea to be pitch dark, while South Korea is brightly lit. Kim Jong-il's legacy?

(4) Passwords will be passe in a few years: According to the [New York Times](#) "Bits" blog, IBM predicts the demise of the hated passwords with the advent of mind-reading machines. Technology to get rid of passwords is one of 5 technologies that IBM believes will have deep impact in the next 5 years (the so-called "5 in 5" prediction).

2011/12/20 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I think we can agree racial prejudice is stupid. Because if you spend time with someone from another race and really get to know them, you can find other reasons to hate them." Bernadette Lockett

(2) Second quote of the day: "All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt, with different holidays." Cathy Ladman

(3) Third quote of the day: "Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution yet." Mae West

(4) New engineering graduate school in NYC: The [New York Times](#) and [Bloomberg News](#) report that the competition for the privilege of building a new graduate-level school of engineering and applied sciences in New York City, with heavy support from the city, is over and Cornell University, with cooperation from Technion (Israel Institute of Technology), will be given the go-ahead to set up its proposed 186,000 square-meter campus on Roosevelt Island. New York hopes the new school will do for the city and state what Stanford has done for Silicon Valley and MIT for Boston. The aim is to spearhead entrepreneurship and the development of high-tech industries in the area.

2011/12/19 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "My mother told me, 'Judy, you'll never amount to anything because you always procrastinate.' I said, 'Oh yeah? Just wait!'" Judy Tenuta

(2) Jazzed up Christmas song: Here is a simple jazzy rendition of "[White Christmas](#)," my favorite Christmas song. I heard a very soothing jazz version of this song at Starbucks today, which made me search for it on YouTube. I could not find that particular version, but this one's not bad.

(3) Solo piano music: Shirin (ahang1001) plays Rogers and Hammerstein's "[The Sound of Music](#)" on the piano.

(4) Hering optical illusions: These illusions consist of geometric figures in which straight lines appear bent, squares appear to be tilted or askew, and, more generally, geometric features appear distorted. [This site](#) is interactive, in that it allows you to place your mouse on a figure and have the distracting elements disappear, so as to reveal the true form of the distorted geometric elements.

2011/12/18 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When I was very young, I was disgracefully intolerant, but when I passed the thirty mark, I prided myself on having learned the beautiful lesson that all things were good, and equally good. That, however, was really laziness. Now, thank goodness, I've sorted out what matters and what doesn't. And I'm beginning to be intolerant again." Gladys B. Stern

(2) Christopher Hitchens on Iran and Iranians: You may disagree with Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) on many issues, but his views on Iran, expressed in this [11-minute video clip](#), are quite enlightened and informed.

(3) Book lovers' Christmas tree: Paper used in books comes from trees, so why not reverse the process and use books to make a tree? [[Image1](#); [Image2](#); [Image3](#)]

(4) The fight against cancer: Hoped-for miracle cancer treatments have gone nowhere, but vaccines may hold the key: So begins Sharon Begley in her [Newsweek magazine article](#) (issue of December 19, 2011, pp. 36-39). For example, a vaccine under study contains fragments of her2/neu, a molecule that fuels the growth and proliferation of some cancers. When the cancer patient's body detects a flood of injected her2/neu, it mounts a

counterattack that could destroy the tumor cells wherever they are. It seems, however, that reliance on the body's immune system works for those who are otherwise healthy and in good shape.

2011/12/17 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Attempts to incorporate democracy into religion are more futile than trying to install Windows on an abacus." Anonymous

(2) Humorous Persian music and dance: A group of students at the University of Cincinnati have fun with rhythmic **Persian dance music**. I wasn't sure whether to share this, as the words are a tad sexist. This type of Persian music is known as "roo-howzi." Howz is a small pond which existed in the courtyards of old Iranian houses; it was sometimes covered with boards, allowing musicians and dancers to use it as a kind of stage. In much of roo-howzi music, women are depicted as weak, somewhat dumb, and thinking of nothing except finding husbands. Of course, these students appear to be quite modern and are just having fun with the music.

(3) What recession? "Between 2009 and 2010, Americans spent 3.8 percent less on food, 2 percent less on housing, 1.4 percent less on clothes, and 7 percent less on entertainment. At the same time, we spent 1.3 percent more on breast augmentation, 5.1 percent more on lipo, 8.1 percent more on eyelid surgery, and a whopping 24.4 percent more on butt lifts." And it's not just the super-rich, or the proverbial top 1%, who occupy the offices of cosmetic surgeons. "Nearly one third of cosmetic-surgery patients make less than \$30,000 a year, and about 70 percent make less than \$60,000." [[Newsweek magazine article](#).]

(4) Christopher Hitchens dead at 62: The author of the best-selling 2007 book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and a host of other books died of complications from cancer on Thursday. See, this is what happens to you when you question God's existence! Come to think of it, this is what happens to you regardless. [[New York Times eulogy](#).]

2011/12/16 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) A new kind of scam: I read this story about a new kind of scam in an e-mail newsletter. When you shop with a debit card, the cashier may enter a cash-back amount, without your knowledge. If you do not check your receipt, s/he will pocket the money. If you do detect it, s/he will apologize and blame it on an error or cash-register malfunction. With a lot of temporary workers in stores during this holiday season, a bit more vigilance in checking your receipts is a good idea.

(2) People are awesome: This **5-minute video** shows daring feats performed by paragons of athleticism and agility. Definitely not for the faint-hearted.

(3) Kurdish cleric blasts Khamenei: In this **4-minute video clip**, a brave Sunni cleric cites a long list of grievances about how followers of Khamenei have mistreated the Iranian Kurds, going as far as saying that Israel's treatment of Palestinians is significantly better.

(4) An unusual musical instrument: Listen to "**Sugar Plum Fairy**" from Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker," played on glass harp.

(5) The Nutcracker, all jazzed up: Prompted by an NPR program this morning, I learned that there are quite a few jazzy renditions of the Nutcracker on YouTube. In this **6-minute video clip**, the Russian Chizhik Jazz Quartet performs its version of the Nutcracker overture, in St. Petersburg. A welcome change, after many years of listening to Tchaikovsky's original version.

Here is the Ellington/Strayhorn arrangement of "**Waltz of the Flowers**."

2011/12/14 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When elephants fight it is the grass that suffers." African proverb

(2) The Islamic Republic emulates the Taliban: **These photos** depict the destruction of a monument in Tehran's Enghelab Square, purportedly because its design included several instances of a six-pointed star ("Star of David"). These historically challenged goons don't know that the six-pointed star is a special mathematical object, with interesting uses in tessellations, and that it has been used extensively in geometric tile patterns and other designs by Islamic artists. Here is **an image** of the destroyed monument.

(3) Ponzi scheme: Radio host on Iranian station in Los Angeles is accused of running a ponzi scheme to finance his lavish lifestyle. According to the **news story**, the guy can get up to 717 years jail time. Seems a bit harsh, when compared to Madoff and the like. But apparently he and his lawyer forged some documents to make it appear that they had disclosed the risks involved to their clients.

(4) An unusual circus: Cirque du Soleil, which already has two well-received shows in Las Vegas based on music by the Beatles and Elvis, will be adding a **third show** based on Michael Jackson's music. "Using elements of Cirque's now-signature style, the show explores Jackson's huge music catalog through both large and small dance numbers and acrobatic acts all set to a mish-mash of songs, videos, and voice-overs from the singer. In two quick hours, the dance-heavy show presents dozens of songs in standard arrangements, remixes, and mash-ups, largely backed by a live band on stage." This show will be coming to Los Angeles' Staples Center on January 27, 2012.

2011/12/13 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Rudyard Kipling's 1895 poem "If—": According to Wikipedia, [this poem](#) is often voted Britain's favorite poem and its line "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same" appears on a wall at the British site for the Wimbledon tennis tournament.

(2) A Washington Post word contest, NOT: E-mails have been circulating for years about the *Washington Post* Mensa Invitational contest, where an entrant forms a new word by adding, deleting, or changing one letter in a dictionary word and provides a humorous meaning for the invented word. In a variation of this theme, one provides a new (funny) meaning for an existing dictionary word. Let me provide a pair of examples, one of each version.

Hipatitis: Terminal coolness.

Balderdash: A rapidly receding hairline.

Scroll down [this page](#) to see more examples.

(3) Spanish/Kurdish music fusion: Hamed Nikpay performs "[Cordoba to Kurdistan](#)" (lyrics by Sohrab Sepehri) in a 2009 concert.

(4) Movie theme music: This [haunting theme](#) is from a 1974 film, "The Conversation," made by Francis Ford Coppola, in which an audio surveillance expert, played by Gene Hackman, faces a moral dilemma caused by his learning intimate details about a couple whose conversation he tapes.

2011/12/12 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "According to Robert Maggiori in *Liberation*, we are humorless scientific pedants who correct grammatical errors in love letters." Authors of *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, defending their book in the preface to its English edition. [I have just started reading the book and will write about it when done.]

(2) We the People: Those who insist that [the US Constitution](#) must be interpreted only as the framers intended should remember that the first three words in the document were intended to mean "We the white, landowning, taxpaying, male citizens of the United States of America."

(3) Beautiful autumn foliage, competing with Vermont: A [scenic section](#) of the road from Tehran to Chaloos (near the Caspian Sea) in Iran.

(4) On liking Facebook pages: Please be very careful about which pages you like (join as a fan) on Facebook. Quite a few people create fake pages in the name of celebrities, with the aim of abusing the information they gather from the fans. Each such page has an administrator (usually the person who created the page) whose identity is often not mentioned on the page. So, such a person may take advantage of your love for, or trust in, the celebrity in question. Here are a couple of examples.

(a) The three pages "Forough Farrokhzad," "Forough Farrokhzad (with the Persian-script name also included)," and "Forough Farokhzad" all claim to be devoted to the beloved Persian poetess. However, the first of these has almost no information of value, whereas the second one appears to be authentic.

(b) There are at least four pages for Hila Sedighi, the young contemporary Iranian poetess. The authentic one is named "Hila Sedighi: Artist." She has been trying to make Facebook remove the fake pages, but with no success thus far.

This is pretty complicated, because sometimes the fake pages post claims that the other pages are fakes! Here is a piece of practical advice. If you find a person's fan page of interest, do a Facebook search for the name of the person to see if there are other pages with the same or similar names. Look through the pages; join only if you are sure of the page's authenticity.

2011/12/11 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "You might think that the [credit-rating] agencies that were the enablers of the subprime calamity and were capable of making a trillion-dollar error in calculating American debt reduction over the next decade would have the decency to go into hiding for just a while before presuming to decree the viability of hard-pressed states to meet their bond obligations." Simon Schama, writing in *Newsweek* magazine (issue of December 12, 2011) on why America should care about Europe.

(2) The Bosnian war, a love story: The December 12, 2011, issue of [Newsweek magazine](#) contains a report by Janine de Giovanni about the movie "In the Land of Blood and Honey," directed by Angelina Jolie. The film is about the Bosnian war, during which unspeakable atrocities were committed by both sides, including the setting up of rape camps in which Muslim women were held and raped up to 10 times per day. They were also purposely impregnated to "weaken the Muslim gene pool." Yet, during much of the war, most families went on living their lives (in fear) and were mostly concerned with feeding and protecting their children. Ordinary people are often caught in the crossfire between small groups that have profit motives (warlords) or misguided faith. Why don't these decent people speak up or do something about it? Fear is the main reason, as it was for a

majority of Germans decades ago.

(3) Modern Persian music: Faramarz Aslani sings "**Ghadim**" ("Old Times"), a song from his 2010 album "The Third Line."

(4) Tonight, I attended a concert by "Straight No Chaser" (a capella group) at Santa Barbara's Granada Theater. This was a fun night of music and, surprisingly, humor. If you have not seen this group, check them out on YouTube (examples below) or on PBS, where a concert of theirs is being shown this month.

Mixture of "I'm Yours" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" (**Watch on YouTube**).

A funny song, "The Christmas Can-Can" (**Watch on YouTube**).

After watching the concert, I was wondering how the group's name originated. This is from Wikipedia: "Their name was inspired by the title track of Thelonious Monk's 1967 album, Straight, No Chaser, and is a conscious evocation of the popular American slang phrase often employed in the requesting of a drink."

2011/12/10 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Dictators ride to and fro on tigers from which they dare not dismount." Indian proverb

(2) Why America should care about Europe: "Whether we like it or not, we are all—across the oceans and continents—entangled in a common destiny, perhaps more than ever in the entirety of the world's history. We share the same predicament of a physically degraded planet; we are bound together—the Chinese bondholder and the American debtor; the Greek insolvent and the German banker—in the troubles of a common human home. Turning one's back is not an option; it will merely guarantee that one day it will be stabbed by the mischief of history." [From an article by Simon Schama in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of December 12, 2011]

(3) On a united Europe: The article cited in item (2) contains this interesting comment from Victor Hugo, made at a peace conference but now sounding too optimistic: "A day will come when war will seem absurd ... when the only fields of battle will be markets opening to trade and minds opening to ideas ... [A] day will come when ... all the nations of this continent, without losing your distinctive qualities and your glorious individuality, will be merged closely within a superior unit and you will form one European brotherhood."

(4) Internet speed bumps: A Facebook friend shared someone's wall post relating to the deliberate slowing of Internet access on the part of the Iranian authorities. Here is a rough translation of the post from Persian: We are survivors of the age of dial-up Internet access. We used to sit for hours, falling in love twice, as we dialed and redialed, listening to click, beep, and static sounds on the line and the eventual disconnection blip ... Now, what makes you think that we'd give up, just because the data flows at snail's pace?

(5) Faith-based discrimination: Despite repeated denials from Iranian authorities, the number of Baha'is who are denied admission to, or are expelled from, Iranian universities keeps rising. The latest example is Shima Ranjbar, who was recently expelled from the Agriculture and Natural Resources University of Gorgan. [Read the **news story in Persian**]

2011/12/09 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A man has reached middle age when he is warned to slow down by his doctor, instead of the police." Anonymous

(2) Understanding women: "When a woman says 'what?' it's not because she didn't hear you; it's her way of giving you a chance to rethink what you said." Anonymous

(3) Not a joke, but pretty funny: The Islamic Republic of Iran is apparently concerned about abuses of Iranians' human rights in Canada, of all places. Evidence cited for violations of human rights include a report prepared by IRI's Foreign Ministry, unemployment figures for Iranians living in Canada, and imprisonment of a man for illegal trade with Iran. It also cites Amnesty International (referred to as a "tool of Zionism" when it criticizes Iran) on a number of issues related to minorities in Canada. No need to read the nonsense in **this article**: I included the link, just so you don't think I made up this story!

(4) Discrimination against Asians: *USA Today* reports on the results of a new study that shows discrimination against Asians in US college admissions. The fact that some top colleges with race-blind admissions have twice the fraction of Asians as Ivy League schools strongly suggests that the latter schools have discriminatory admission policies. Asian applicants to colleges are countering by leaving their race unspecified. [This strategy is of course ineffective for those with obviously Asian names.]

(5) A potentially grim future for Iraq: With the American presence in Iraq scheduled to be reduced substantially next month, sectarian violence on the rise after a lull of several years, Iran cementing its influence on the Iraqi government and rogue Shiite forces, Saudi Arabia secretly funding anti-government Sunni leaders, Turkey increasingly nervous about its Kurdish population on the Iraqi border, and Syria in disarray, it is difficult to remain optimistic about the future of Iraq and, more generally, stability in the Middle East.

2011/12/08 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Nothing can be loved or hated unless it is first known." Leonardo da Vinci

(2) Qatar to host the 2012 UN climate-change summit: The irony is that Qatar's annual per capita carbon emissions of 55 tons is the worst in the world. [Info from *Time* magazine, issue of December 12, 2011.]

(3) Burn risks of some instant soups: Prompted by a story I heard on NPR, I looked into the very real risk of getting **bad burns from "cup of noodles"** (not a brand name, but general name from soups in disposable cups that can be heated in a microwave oven, after adding water). The risk of the tall, fairly light, and thus unstable cups of soup tipping over and burning children's chests, laps, hands, or legs has been known for quite some time. The simple and inexpensive remedy of using shorter and wider containers has been implemented by only a small number of manufacturers. The NPR report cited several hospitals that had reported multiple burn victims per week from these soups. It turns out that the mere presence of noodles in these soups makes the resulting burns much worse than burns from coffee or other hot beverages, because the noodles keep heat for longer periods and tend to stick to skin, causing lasting disfigurement at times.

(4) Facebook IPO to create several new billionaires: A group of Facebook founders and early officers, led by current CEO/President Mark Zuckerberg, will become (multi)billionaires when the company goes public in 2012. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/12/04/facebook-s-100-billion-ipo.item-4.html>

2011/12/07 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Honoring an Iranian lyricist: This **14-minute video clip** reviews some of the familiar Persian tunes of the prominent Iranian lyricist Ardalan Sarfarz.

(2) Iranian cinema: **An apt response** (in Persian) by Rakhshan Bani Etemad to film director Farajollah Salahshoor, a confidant of Iran's Supreme Leader, who called Iranian cinema a "brothel run by Zionist companies" and characterized Iranian actresses as whores.

(3) An extraordinary film director: Steven Spielberg has done it all. He has to his credit successful action movies (the 4 "Indiana Jones" films, and a 5th in planning), heart-wrenching war films ("Saving Private Ryan," "Schindler's List," and the forthcoming "War Horse"), and sci-fi/thrillers ("Jaws," "E.T." and "Jurassic Park"). In an in-depth interview, spanning pp. 34-44 of the December 9, 2011, issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, Spielberg talks about his 43-year filmmaking career and stories behind the blockbusters that changed Hollywood and shaped our lives.

(4) A charming ambassador for social robotics: Through a CNN program, I learned about Heather Knight, a charming young woman whose passion is the field of social robotics (making robots that can interact with humans). Here is a **teaser for the program**.

(5) Pakistan's military is the problem: In a column entitled "Friends without Benefits" (*Time* magazine, issue of December 12, 2011), Fareed Zakaria indicates that the Pakistani military's self-preservation (it spends a quarter of the country's budget) is at the root of the US problems in the region. Pakistani generals benefit from a weak Afghanistan (hence their support for militants and terrorists in that country) and troubled relations with India (explaining their support of groups that increase tensions between the two countries and opposition to normalized trade relations). The nominally civilian government in Pakistan cannot do anything without the military's approval, hence the firing and sidelining of several politicians and diplomats in that country who dared suggest a true empowerment of the civilian government and peace with India.

[Addendum from Zakaria's CNN program, GPS: Even though Pakistan is considered a US ally, its population has a very unfavorable view of the US. A recent survey found that the percentage of Pakistanis who consider the US a friend was in the low teens; and this was before the recent incident in which two dozen Pakistani soldiers were killed by "friendly fire" from US forces. The favorable rating of the US may well be in single digits now. This reminds me of the saying: "With friends like this, who needs enemies?"]

2011/12/06 (Tue.): Brooks, David, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*, unabridged audiobook (on 13 CDs) read by Arthur Morey, Random House Audio, 2011.

This is a fiction-assisted nonfiction book. Brooks creates a fictitious couple, Harold and Erica, and follows them through their lives, beginning with the first meeting between Harold's well-off but aloof parents, who nurture him and see to it that he gets the best education, and Erica's single mom, who struggles to make ends meet, forcing Erica to lift herself up the social ladder through sheer determination. With this imaginative framework, and using various personal and career events, Brooks describes our modern-day understanding of human motivations and actions by reviewing scientific research in psychology and sociology.

Harold and Erica have quite different interests, dispositions, and drives, providing Brooks with ample opportunities for comparing and contrasting his two main characters and reviewing research results from brain science and human behavior that explain their differences. For example, the infant Harold's relationship with his mother jump-starts a discussion of mental development. As another example, Erica's single act of adultery provides an excuse for jumping into theories of shame and moral psychology.

The couple lives a long and reasonably happy life, though career demands and mutual expectations do take them to the verge of divorce at one point. The book ends with Harold taking his last breaths, while sitting on

the porch, fast-forwarding through his long, satisfying life, which he characterizes as that of a successful observer, in contrast to Erica's doer-and-shaker. In his final reflections, "Harold saw life as a never-ending interpenetration of souls."

This is a very well-constructed book, in which the lives of the fictitious characters mesh very well with the nuggets of science that are interspersed throughout (Arthur Morey's reading performance is also quite enjoyable). For example, Brooks reflects on the distinction between brain and mind: brain is the organ that's inside a human skull; mind only manifests itself when that human interacts with others. This is a recurring theme in the book: many human qualities are affected by, and exhibit themselves, in our dealings and interactions with other people. A particular focus of Brooks is establishing the distinction between unconscious and conscious mind (which reminded me of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* and its subtitle "The Power of Thinking without Thinking"). We have very little control over the former, but it is vastly important for our well-being and survival. The reflective mind organizes our thoughts and memories, but it is more error-prone and less influential than we tend to think. I learned a great deal from this book, which reinforced my view of the author as a very reasonable conservative commentator. It seems that reading and learning about the complexities of human nature tends to make us humbler and more resigned.

2011/12/05 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Catchy cabaret tune in French: Patricia Kaas sings "[Mon Mec a Moi](#)" ("That Guy of Mine").
- (2) What kind of twisted justice is this? [Afghan woman, [imprisoned for adultery](#) after reporting that she had been raped, is freed on the condition that she marry her attacker!]
- (3) The upside of anxiety: The subject matter of this story, that anxiety (up to a limit) might be good for you, is not new. However, the detailed exposition in *Time* magazine's feature story for December 5, 2011 (pp. 54-65), is quite impressive. "In the right amounts, the hormones that drive anxiety can be powerful stimulants, arousing the senses to function at their sharpest." If we accept this thesis, then anxiety isn't necessarily a disease that needs to be treated, but a condition to be understood. In the words of Sally Winston, Co-Director of the Anxiety & Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland, "Anxiety itself is neither helpful nor hurtful. It's your response to anxiety that is helpful or hurtful."
- (4) The great American internship swindle: Internships are good mechanisms for college students to get work experience. Until recently, they were also sources of income during summer to help pay for the students' academic-year tuition or to provide some pocket money. Of the 2011 graduates, however, nearly half were not paid for their internships. Businesses have wised up to the free labor available to them, given the positive effects of internships on students' resumes. Herein lies a big problem. Nonprofit organizations are allowed to benefit from free labor, but for-profit ones have to satisfy a number of requirements to make this arrangement legal. The most important of these requirements is that the internship must have educational or training value. Firms and universities sometimes get around this requirement by having the students sign up for academic credit for their internships. In many cases, the students have to pay for the credits, given that internships usually occur during summer months. So, struggling students end up paying for academic units, appropriate clothing, transportation, and sometimes even housing, just to be able to work for free. [adapted from a story by Jean Chatzky in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 28, 2011]

2011/12/04 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Even moderation ought not to be practiced to excess." Anonymous
- (2) Oscar-winning screenwriter on answering questions about how she creates film characters: "I'm often tempted to reply in the style of a parent being questioned about sex: 'Well, when a writer loves her MacBook very, very much, she sometimes applies her fingers to the keys and creates pretend people. And after a lengthy development process—plus adequate financial backing—these people sometimes come to life!' Actually, it's not such a silly metaphor. Just as humans are created from elaborate matrices of ancestral traits, fictional characters, too, resemble the people who create them. Even stock romantic-comedy heroines (who are written and rewritten in Hollywood boardrooms for maximum 'likability') carry traces of DNA from the hands that craft them. Even at our most inventive, we are what we write." Diablo Cody, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of December 5, 2011.
- (3) Open letter from a grown man to an 11-year-old: "I don't know your name, but I know your face. I don't know your journey, but I know where you are. I am your brother! ... I was a very poor young black boy in New Orleans, just a face without a name, swimming in a sea of poverty trying to survive. Forget about living, I was just trying to exist. I was enduring a lot of the same things that you've come forward and said happened to you, and it was awful. I felt so powerless. I knew what was happening to me, but unlike you, I couldn't speak about it because no one saw me. I was invisible and my voice was inaudible. ... Your 11-year-old self was no match for wicked, evil tactics of this kind. You were hunted like prey. A pedophile looks for the young boys he thinks he can manipulate. The ones who have daddy or mommy issues, the ones who are broken, and the ones who are in need. But this wasn't you. ... You may have to go through with that trial, and you may feel all alone

when you're on that witness stand, but just know that there are millions of young boys and grown men who are standing with you. ... Now fight on, my young friend, fight on! We are all with you." Tyler Perry, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of December 5, 2011.

(4) Obituary of Mr. Common Sense: Yesterday, I received from a friend an obituary, jokingly identified as having appeared in the *London Times*. I was able to trace the piece to its original creator, [Ms. Lori Borgman](#), who wrote it on March 15, 1998. It seems that over the years, many bloggers have taken the liberty of modifying the piece, and either claiming credit for it or attributing it to Ms. Anonymous.

2011/12/03 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The really frightening thing about middle age is the knowledge that you'll grow out of it." Doris Day

(2) Photos of damage to the British Embassy: This [BBC Persian pictorial report](#) shows the handiwork of the mob that ransacked the British Embassy in Tehran. The Islamic regime appears to be between a rock and a hard place. Either they have to confess to unleashing the mob or they have to condemn the act and prosecute the raiders (which included prominent members of IRGC, according to photos circulating on the Internet). Neither option is very attractive. Khomeini himself calculated that he had to side with the students who occupied the US embassy more than three decades ago.

(3) Three engineering stories from *Prism*: The November 2011 issue of ASEE's *Prism* magazine contains the following interesting stories in its ["First Look" section](#).

(a) Monumental thrill: Engineers, hanging from ropes, inspected the marble facade of the 127-year-old Washington monument after the recent 5.8-magnitude quake. They found some damage, particularly near the top, which is being repaired.

(b) Water balloons: An innovation that allows ordinary cargo planes to precision-drop specially constructed biodegradable packages of water for fire control. Previously, only special air tankers, of which the US owns only 21, could do the job.

(c) Ultimate vindication: Dan Shechtman singly won the 2011 Nobel Prize in chemistry for his discovery of quasi crystals. But back in 1982, his findings were dismissed by the US National Bureau of Standards (now NIST) and fellow scientists.

(4) China's superpower status: "What's worrisome is that China seems content to act narrowly and exclusively in its own interests, unconcerned about helping maintain global rules. It is happy to consume peace, stability and free trade while doing little to produce any of these public goods. When it does try to project values, its actions seem even more worrying. Consider the awarding of the Confucius Peace Prize, China's version of the Nobel Peace Prize, to Vladimir Putin on Nov. 13. Does Beijing seriously think this will help its image?" Fareed Zakaria, in *Time* magazine, issue of November 28, 2011.

(5) Maiden, to mother, to crone: [Short on eloquence, but full of wisdom nonetheless.] "I am more of a badger. The sex drive is that dark continent that I see now receding in the distance, behind me and the ship that has sailed with me at its helm—and I am no longer feeling mixed about seeing it go; I am actually relieved. It produced so much pain, really. So much wear, tear, and worry, not to mention the work, and sweat of raising the kids that come from it, who roll their eyes at you when you say things like these things I am saying in this article. ... And what do I do with some of the time I don't spend being shipped around by the desperate process of staving off the appearance of aging and all the rest of the crap we're sold 24/7? For one thing, I meditate, and for another, I think. ... You don't need a young athletic body or piles of money to read some of the world's great books; or to soak up brilliant music and art." Roseanne Barr, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of November 28, 2011), about women getting old.

2011/12/02 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." William James

(2) South Korea realizes that children need sleep: "In South Korea it has come to this. To reduce the country's addiction to private, after-hours tutoring academies, called hagwons, the authorities have begun enforcing a curfew—even paying citizens bounties to turn in violators." Amanda Ripley, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of December 5, 2011, on the Korean government's change of heart in pressuring children to achieve world-beating test scores.

(3) "Life in a Day": This awe-inspiring [Kevin MacDonald documentary](#) condenses more than 4500 hours of footage and 80,000 clips from thousands of participants into a 95-minute film that chronicles life on Earth on July 24, 2010. The assembled clips include people performing mundane chores (brushing teeth, making breakfast, getting a haircut) to more exciting and unique activities from many countries around the world. The clips were submitted via YouTube and the full movie is available there for free viewing.

(4) Artificial human sensory organs: In this [16-minute TED talk](#), Charles Limb discusses how artificial sensory organs are long ways from mimicking natural human senses. An artificial ear allows one to hear reasonably well,

but not well enough to distinguish subtle differences in tones required for maximum enjoyment of music.

(5) The "most beautiful" actress and prolific inventor: In our popular culture, Hedy Lamarr (1914-2000) is known for her beauty and glamorous film roles. Most actresses dream of becoming film directors someday, but Ms. Lamarr, who didn't have much schooling, spent her free time inventing gadgets and sophisticated control systems. Examples of her contributions include a radio-controlled submarine missile-guidance system during WWII, when she was 26, and a "frequency hopping" scheme that was later repurposed to create cellphones, GPS, and Wi-Fi. "Any girl can be glamorous," Lamarr famously said. "All you have to do is to stand still and look stupid." Schillinger adds: "But it's not every girl who can be glamorous, stand still, and take the future in a new direction." [From Liesl Schillinger's *Newsweek* magazine (issue of November 28) review of the book *Hedy's Folly: The Life and Breakthrough Inventions of Hedy Lamarr, the Most Beautiful Woman in the World*, by Richard Rhodes, Doubleday, 2011.]

2011/12/01 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "This is huge. The fact that complete strangers are willing to pay me to rent my belongings—the fact that I can make money from stuff I wasn't using anyway—is a breakthrough discovery on par with penicillin, the second law of thermodynamics, or the snuggie." Rob Baedeker, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of November 28, 2011, on the new trend of renting things you need (a bed for a night or two, a bicycle, a car, a sander, a costume) from private offerings on-line, rather than from corporations. [Read [the full article](#): it is witty and teaches you a lot about our new economic landscape.]

(2) Uplifting story from an undercover FBI agent: Ever since a 2009 report predicted a rise in domestic terrorism incidents in the US owing to the electronic revolution (access to bomb-making info and ease of recruitment through social networks), the FBI has stepped up its efforts to stop domestic terrorism plots in their tracks. The November 28, 2011, issue of *Newsweek* magazine carries the story of an undercover FBI agent who sacrificed his family life in the 1990s (way before the recent expansion of FBI efforts) to infiltrate and live among a number of violent right-wing groups. Usually, such undercover agents are not identified, even after their mission has been completed, for fear of reprisals from the said heavily-armed groups. In this case, the agent, John Matthews, who suffers from a fatal lung condition and a drastically weakened heart, wanted his family to know his real identity before it was too late. [View [annotated photo gallery](#).]

(3) To infinity and beyond: In August and September 1977, the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft set out to explore the furthest reaches of the Solar System. The two spacecraft are now more than twice further from Earth than Pluto, and at distances of 9 and 11 billion miles, are approaching the edge of the Solar System, beyond which they will enter interstellar space. Isn't it amazing that these systems, designed and built 34 years ago, are still working? The two spacecraft are still transmitting data to NASA's command center, but signals from them take about half a day to reach the Earth. The two missions have succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of their designers and will continue to provide valuable data for our understanding of the Solar System and beyond. [Based on *Time* magazine article by Jeffrey Kluger, issue of December 5, 2011.]

(4) Differences between the raids at US and British embassies in Tehran: In this [humorous piece](#) (Persian), Ebrahim Nabavi enumerates eight differences between the occupations of the US and British embassies in Tehran, more than three decades apart. Here is a sample: "Occupation of the American embassy was supported by many groups, but not by the government [of Mehdi Bazargan], which promptly fell. Occupation of the British embassy was endorsed by many regime elements, but opposed by most pro- and anti-government political groups."

2011/11/30 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Interaction and diversity are keys to life: In this [18-minute TEDx Bratislava talk](#), Bijan Khadem-Missagh uses his violin skills and musical analogies to stress the importance of interpersonal relationships and variations (resonance and diversity) in human fulfillment.

(2) There's no limit to the size of human ego: "On a [sandy island in Abu Dhabi](#) Sheikh Hamad bin Hamdan Al Nahyan has inscribed what is in effect the biggest graffiti tag the world has ever seen. Hamad, 63, a scion of the billionaire Abu Dhabi royal family, has gouged his name in capital letters two miles across and half a mile wide. His moniker is so big it can be seen from space (as this Google Earth pic demonstrates). The tip of the 'H' reaches into the strait that leads to the [Persian] Gulf, allowing Hamad to fill the first two letters of his name with water. The 'M' looks partially filled as well." [*Forbes* story]

(3) The invention issue of *Time*: The cover feature in the November 28, 2011, issue of *Time* magazine reviews the 50 best inventions of 2011. I have posted descriptions of some of these (artificial leaf, light-field camera, digital assistant, surveillance hummingbird, roll-up solar panels, IBM's Watson Jeopardy player, and 10,000-year clock) before. What caught my attention most of all was Lev Grossman's essay introducing the feature, where he writes: "Inventors used to be cool. They used to be towering, romantic figures, rogue geniuses like Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin and Nikola Tesla ... these men would have been played by Taylor Lautner. But all that has changed. Now they're not even played by George Clooney. What happened? How did inventors lose

their divine aura? When did scientific innovation stop being sexy?"

(4) British embassy in Tehran raided: The Iranian regime has committed another suicidal act by unleashing a group of "students" to [raid and occupy the British embassy](#) in central Tehran and a compound in a northern suburb. The general consensus is that the mob was authorized at the highest level. Video clips of the incident show the riot police standing by as the rioters scale the embassy walls. Though the scope of this raid is much smaller than the US embassy occupation and hostage crisis more than three decades ago, the ramifications are likely to be more serious for the Islamic regime.

2011/11/29 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day (on the Penn State scandal): "The reports out of State College, Pa., of fans mourning the fall of the coach rather than the fate of the alleged victims of sexual abuse by a longtime Paterno assistant strike me as bizarre." Jon Meacham, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of November 28, 2011.

(2) The importance of gratitude: The Thanksgiving weekend is behind us, but being grateful is a year-round need. Louie Schwartzberg's time-lapse photography is featured in his [10-minute TEDx talk](#) on gratitude.

(3) Multiple panoramic views of the Eastern Alps: When you view this [panoramic image](#), look for question marks (click on them for info on the point marked) and hovering helicopters (to change the viewpoint).

(4) Your life in 500 words or less: Andrew Ferguson's article in [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of November 28, 2011) on the subject of the college essay resonated with me, given that my daughter is in the thick of her college and scholarship applications. Ferguson maintains that the dreaded essays are not as important as they are made out to be. "The application essay, along with its mythical importance, is a recent invention. In the 1930s, ... an admission committee was content to ask for a sample of applicants' school papers to assess their writing ability." Today, multiple essays are required and even though Common Application, which is accepted by more than 400 schools, cuts down on the amount of work, such schools typically require essays of their own, in addition to the one attached to the Common App.

2011/11/28 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The bright side of social networking: A psychiatrist friend of mine on Facebook writes about the plight of immigrants and refugees in Europe and the hard times suffered by them and their children. One of these children was a patient of his, who under his care, and with due diligence, eventually recovered from her depressed state, caused, in part, by her Turkish family's loss of their homeland, a now-submerged island within Romania. As part of this recovery, she found many of her relatives and acquaintances via Facebook and has set up a FB page for her birthplace, Ada Kaleh (meaning Island Fortress; see the [Wikipedia article](#) on it, if interested) in an attempt to gather everyone in a reunion. About a week ago, I warned my friends about the dark side of social networking. This story shows us the bright side of the new media.

(2) Mars Curiosity Rover: This [11-minute animated film](#) shows the landing of the Curiosity Rover on Mars and its exploration of the planet, once it is on the Martian ground in mid-August 2012.

(3) Fighting injustice with comedy: The Islamic Republic of Iran brands anyone who opposes the clerical regime, or does not toe the official line, as a spy (usually working for the US or Israel). No group, not even the Jewish minority, has been as consistently persecuted by being accused of spying for Israel as the Baha'is. This comedy show, ["Ma Jasoos Neesteem"](#) ("We Are Not Spies") pokes fun at the spy labeling technique. The play is coming to Irvine, CA, on Saturday December 10, 2011.

(4) Persian violin maestro: Bijan Mortazavi is an Iranian violinist/singer/songwriter with many popular tunes to his credit. This [4-minute video](#) shows him playing his own composition "Raghs-e Atash" ("Dance of Fire") in a 1994 concert at Los Angeles' Greek Theater. Also check out his performance of ["Majnoon"](#) (I am not sure of the title of this latter song, given that a different song is also listed under this title on YouTube).

2011/11/27 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Persian solo piano: [Tara Kamangar plays](#) a composition by Aminollah (Andre) Hossein. Some info about the composer is provided with the video.

(2) Land of freedom is now trying to become land of honesty: This [cleric counselor tells](#) viewers on Iranian TV that there is no need to tell your wife anything that might cause trouble. I seriously doubt, however, that he would be okay with a woman hiding things from her husband. These guys are totally oblivious to the reach of electronic media and how they are digging their own graves with their words.

(3) The 2008 Mark Twain Prize: The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor was awarded posthumously to George Carlin in 2008. Carlin died shortly after learning about his selection. In an amazing ceremony, Carlin was honored by his peers. The departed Carlin participated digitally to deliver ["Modern Man,"](#) one of the most cerebral comedy routines ever. Here is a snippet: "I am a high-tech low-life ... I am new-wave, but old-school ... I have a love child who sends me hate mail." You may have to replay several times to get everything. Carlin's favorite song is included at the end of the video. [[PBS page](#) for the 2008 prize]

2011/11/26 (Sat.): Here are five musical items of potential interest.

- (1) Amazing music from a very young band: [Preteen siblings VazquezSounds](#) (featuring 10-year-old vocalist Angie Vazquez) perform "Rolling in the Deep."
- (2) Modern Persian music: Eendo performs its latest single, "[Sahm-e Man](#)" ("My Share"), from its debut album "Bord o Baakht" ("Winning and Losing").
- (3) The Afghani rock band Kabul Dreams performs "[Chill Morghak](#)."
- (4) Catchy French dance tune: Stromae performs "[Alors on Danse](#)" ("When We Dance").
- (5) Persian solo piano: [Tara Kamangar plays](#) a composition by Aminollah (Andre) Hossein. Some info about the composer is provided with the video.

2011/11/25 (Fri.): Bryson, Bill, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, unabridged audiobook (on 13 CDs) read by the author, Random House Audio, 2010.

Bill Bryson has written on many topics: nature, science, and even *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. The inspiration for this, his most recent, book came from taking a look around himself and wondering how things came to be the way they are in the universe we call home. For example, in the Middle Ages, a home consisted of a single room (the great hall), perhaps with a separate kitchen and additional rooms annexed. All family members slept in the great hall and they had to literally "make" their "beds" anew each night out of straw or cloth pallets. There were no chimneys, so houses were heated by an open hearth in the great hall. The notion of privacy, distinguishing rooms of various kinds, having an upstairs (formerly impossible due to all the smoke gathering in the upper parts of a house), and stairs to take us up, are relatively new. The words "upstairs" and "downstairs" were not used before the 19th century, so it appears people did have a downstairs and an upstairs for some 3 centuries, before coining words to refer to them!

Providing light was just as challenging as heating a house. "We forget just how painfully dim the world was before electricity. ... Open your refrigerator door, and you summon forth more light than the total amount enjoyed by most households in the 18th century." The contents of the house also receive much attention from the author. He wonders, for example, why we have salt and pepper on our dining table, and not salt and cinnamon, say. Why do forks have 4 tines, not 3 or 5? Names of most rooms are self-explanatory, but what is a "drawing room"? From this book, we learn that it is a shortened form of "withdrawing room," where the family withdrew at the end of the day.

There is a wealth of information in this book, mostly related to the main subject, that is, home, and a great deal of fascinating sidetracks on agriculture (expanding on the home lawn), STDs and bugs (branching off from the bedroom), food and nutrition (related to the kitchen), and so on. For example, we learn that for much of history, salt was a valuable commodity for which precious metals were offered and wars waged. Now we consume on average 40-60 times the amount of salt that our bodies need. The narrative is engaging throughout, as we have come to expect from Bryson.

This is a fascinating book that anyone, with any background, can enjoy.

2011/11/24 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day (Jon Stewart): "I celebrated Thanksgiving in an old-fashioned way. I invited everyone in my neighborhood to my house, we had an enormous feast, and then I killed them and took their land."
- (2) Joke of the day: Host, at a wedding anniversary: My wife and I have lived in absolute bliss for 25 years.
A guest: Haven't you been married for 30 years?
Host: Yes, but I was talking about the years before we got married.
- (3) Before they were stars (and in some cases, after): We often remember actors and actresses by their best roles: the ones that won them acclaim or lots of money. Nearly every one of them, however, also has at least one film that s/he would rather forget (wipe them off the resume, in the words of one famous actor). Here is a sample of the list, compiled by [Entertainment Weekly](#) and presented in the issue of December 2, 2011. Ben Affleck, "The Third Wheel," 2004; Jennifer Aniston, "Leprechaun," 1993; Alec Baldwin, "Suburban Girl," 2008; Sandra Bullock, "Fires on the Amazon," 1993; George Clooney, "Red Surf," 1990; Johnny Depp, "Private Resort," 1985; Leonardo DiCaprio, "Don's Plum," 2001; Jake Gyllenhaal, "Highway," 2002; Angelina Jolie, "Cyborg 2," 1993; Gwyneth Paltrow, "Hush," 1998; Brad Pitt, "Cutting Class," 1989; Meg Ryan, "My Mom's New Boyfriend," 2008; Reese Witherspoon, "Overnight Delivery," 1998.
- (4) People have become indifferent to social issues: Today, a teenager stood in front of a couple of supermarkets and asked passersby if they could help her with a school assignment by filling out a simple questionnaire about issues affecting our city. The bulk of those passersby simply continued on their way, pretending not to hear. Several walked away, saying they were in a hurry and could not spare the time. One store manager told the teenager to stand across a driveway from the store instead of in front of it. In the end, zero questionnaires were filled out and the teenager returned home in tears.

2011/11/23 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When you feel dog-tired at night, it may be because you've growled all day long."

Anonymous

(2) Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art: The museum, with [its magnificent architecture](#) (by Moshe Safdie) and prized collections, recently opened its doors in the small town of Northwest Arkansas. *Time* magazine calls it "the most impressive [museum] to appear in the U.S. since the Getty Center opened its doors 14 years ago."

(3) Reaction to elitism: "A 2009 analysis by the *Harvard Law Record* found that nearly a quarter of President Obama's appointees had a Harvard degree. There are 2,474 four-year colleges and universities in America. And one—a great one, to be sure, but still just one out of 2,474—produced one in every four Obamabots? No wonder my party often appears intellectually arrogant." Democratic analyst Paul Begala (writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of November 21, 2011), wondering whether the public's embracing of a number of know-nothing candidates isn't a reaction to elitism in Washington.

(4) Iran's human rights head talks to Charlie Rose: [Video of 53-minute interview](#) in which Head of the Human Rights Council within Iran's judiciary and a close advisor to the country's Supreme Leader talks to Charlie Rose on a variety of issues, including Iran's nuclear program, its support for the Syrian government, the Arab Spring, and, surprisingly, only a tiny bit (perhaps by prior agreement with Rose) on the state of human rights in Iran.

(5) Job creating gifts for the holiday season: Most forwarded or bulk e-mails are of the junk variety that I delete immediately, without careful reading. Today, I received one that made a great deal of sense. The sender suggested that instead of imported material gifts, we try to give gift certificates for services that can help boost the local economy in our neighborhoods and hometowns. Examples include gift certificates from local hair salons, gyms, restaurants, coffee joints, car washes, car-detailing shops, and dry cleaners. You can probably think of many more.

2011/11/22 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Pictorial report: [Japan's progress in its recovery](#) from the earthquake/tsunami double-blow is nothing short of miraculous.

(2) Quote of the day: "The right to be heard does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously."

Hubert Humphrey

(3) Police violence at UC campuses: The University of California Academic Senate (a body consisting of faculty representatives from each campus) has issued [a statement](#), asking the University President, Mark Yudof, to take steps to ensure that police missteps of the kind recently reported at the Berkeley and Davis campuses do not occur in future.

(4) The dark side of social networking: Two things motivated me to post this item. The first incentive came from a column by John Cloud, entitled "When Secrets Go Viral" (*Time* magazine, issue of November 21, 2011), which deals with voyeurism. An innocent teenage boy/girl dimwittedly posts something embarrassing to him/her, which goes viral. Sometimes the embarrassing post is by a third party (ex-boyfriend, say). Celebrities can also be victims of such embarrassing posts. In the case of celebrities, they have financial resources and assistants to take legal action or to manage the consequences, but the poor teenager is helpless. Multiple suicides have been attributed to such posts (typically videos), which may be offered to us with enticing titles, appealing to our voyeuristic side. Studies have shown that many who would not read stories in supermarket tabloids, do click on their on-line equivalents. We need to tackle this problem from both sides: teaching our children about the dangers lurking on-line, while behaving as responsible adults by resisting voyeurism. The latter isn't just a moral dictum, but has practical benefits as well: viruses and other malware are spread through infected Web sites that lure their victims through such videos. The second incentive came from an e-mail message I received (for the 10th time, perhaps) stating that the UN is considering whether to recognize Norooz as a national festival of Iran or Afghanistan, based on an on-line poll, urging the recipient to click on a link to vote for Iran. Posts on Facebook have also advocated this action. The issue of Persian vs. Arabian Gulf has been similarly exploited. In the best case, this is a useless activity, with the poll set up by someone as a practical joke. In the worst case, the purported polling site will infect your computer. Use your judgment: Would the UN make decisions such as these based on an on-line poll with no control whatsoever on who casts a vote?

2011/11/21 (Mon.): Book Report: Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*, The Easton Press, 1991 (original copyright 1925).

I have titled my post "Book Report" rather than "Book Review" for the following reasons. First and foremost, so much has been written about this book by literary critics, scholars of English, and book authors that it would have been pretentious on my part to try to add to the learned discussions. For me, writing this report makes up for the high school English assignment I never had. High school students in the US get exposed to great works of literature as a matter of course. Having done my secondary and undergraduate studies in Iran, I took English

as a second language, which did not entail reading fiction or other literary works. Persian literature was, of course, part of our curriculum, but even there, anything that was remotely connectable to politics, or involved critical social commentary, was out of bounds. So, as my daughter began reading this book for her English class, I decided to follow along, an opportunity I had been looking forward to ever since I read Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which features *The Great Gatsby* prominently.

The story is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Yale-educated Minnesotan who goes to New York, settles in a nouveau-riche neighborhood on Long Island, and through a cousin of his (the main female character, Daisy, who is married to Tom Buchanan) meets a number of rich people who throw extravagant parties. Jay Gatsby, a mysterious next-door neighbor, is one of these rich people whose background and motivations for moving to the area are gradually revealed to Nick, who develops some affection for him. It turns out that Jay and Daisy were in love a few years ago, but when Nick had to move away, Daisy decided that she could not wait and married Tom. Gatsby, a rather insecure person despite his material success, had returned to claim the love of his life. These rich people live rather empty lives, which further deteriorates when tragedy strikes. First, Tom learns of Daisy's involvement with Jay. Then, Tom's mistress, a married woman, is struck and killed by Jay's car, with Daisy as the driver. The grieving husband of Tom's mistress kills Jay, on the belief that he was his wife's lover and killer, and then commits suicide. Jay Gatsby's funeral is a rather empty event, with many of the people who enjoyed his parties deciding not to attend, given the circumstances of his death. At the end, Nick returns to his hometown, leaving behind the cold, pretentious, and materialistic world of the East Coast. The rise of the title character, Gatsby, from poverty to extreme wealth is supposed to represent the American dream, and his unceremonious death stands for the demise of the said dream.

The version of the book that I borrowed from our town's library is designated as "Collector's Edition": it is leather-bound and carries a few illustrations (abstract art pieces). The paper used for printing the book was so thick that I kept thinking I might have skipped a few pages when I turned the pages. As a side note, let me mention that at least five movies have been made from this story: a 1926 silent film; a 1949 movie starring Alan Ladd, Betty Field, and Shelly Winters; a lavish 1974 version with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow; a 2000 TV version, starring Toby Stevens, Mira Sorvino, and Paul Rudd; and a forthcoming release, featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, Toby Maguire, and Isla Fisher.

2011/11/20 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "If you want to see God cry, show him the current field of Republican presidential candidates." Anonymous retort to candidate Rick Perry's statement that to see God laugh, one can show him one's plans.
- (2) A century of Iranian film posters: This [3-minute video](#) goes through a century's worth of advertising posters for Iranian movies, with classical Persian music in the background.
- (3) Problem-solving ingenuity at age 1: [Baby gate is no obstacle](#) for smart baby.
- (4) Differential salaries for teachers: Governor Chris Christie has suggested that math and science teachers should be paid more than physical education teachers, according to [New Jersey Star-Ledger](#). He believes that there is no good reason for not using market forces, as is done in virtually all other professions, to encourage more individuals to pursue careers in areas of greatest needs.
- (5) College and Major League soccer games: Beginning with a heavy downpour in the early morning hours, it had been raining all day in Santa Barbara up until about 5:00 PM, when a second-round NCAA soccer match between UCSB and Providence was to begin. I took a chance and attended the game. Fortunately, it did not rain during the game and I was treated to an exciting match, which UCSB won 3-2 (halftime score was 2-0 in favor of UCSB). The number-15-seeded UCSB will face the number-2-seeded Creighton next Sunday for a chance to advance into the quarterfinals. Returning home, I caught the tail end of the MLS championship match between LA Galaxy and Houston Dynamo on ESPN. LA Galaxy won 1-0 on a beautiful goal by Landon Donovan, assisted by Robbie Keane.

2011/11/19 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Tehran, the beautiful capital city of Iran: Enjoy these [photos of Tehran](#), forgetting for the moment about the Iranian government and the ruling class residing there. Of course, you also need to forget about the homeless and the slums not shown in these photos.
- (2) Quotes of the day on aging: "I must be getting absent-minded. Whenever I complain that things aren't what they used to be, I always forget to include myself." George Burns
"They tell you that you'll lose your mind when you grow older. What they don't tell you is that you won't miss it very much." Malcolm Cowley
- (3) The world's lightest material: It is reported in the prestigious journal *Science* that UC Irvine and Caltech researchers have synthesized a single-crystal nanowire that is so light that one can put a good chuck of it atop a dandelion, without crushing the delicate seeds. If you drop a piece of the new material from shoulder height,

it will take 10 seconds to fall to the ground, much like a feather. The inventors are eyeing some applications already, but a myriad of other applications will no doubt emerge in future. [[LA Times story](#)]

(4) A Violinist in the Metro: When I first read this fascinating story, I was suspicious of its veracity. So, I checked Snopes.com, and was amazed to find out that it is true. I had read before about the importance of context in human cognition—humans are exceptionally good at face recognition, for example, but we may not recognize the faces of friends or relatives, if we encounter them in unfamiliar settings. But this story teaches us even more (please read the description that begins below the video and continues on a page whose link is provided there). [The 3-minute video](#) shows violinist Joshua Bell, who sells out many concerts with ticket prices averaging more than \$100, using a \$3.5M instrument to play fabulous classical music in a Washington DC Metro station for free, with hardly anyone paying attention. This performance was part of a study, sponsored by the *Washington Post*, which makes us wonder: "If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world playing fabulous music, how many other things are we missing?"

2011/11/18 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quotes of the day on superstition: "Depend on the rabbit's foot if you will, but remember it didn't work for the rabbit." R. E. Shay

"Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom." Bertrand Russell

(2) Three humorous quotes on television: "TV has made dull conversationalists of us all—it even has people to talk about the weather for us." Anonymous

"A good TV mystery is one where it's hard to detect the sponsor." Anonymous

"Television is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living room by people you wouldn't have in your home." David Frost

(3) Location info, without GPS: STMicroelectronics, a Swiss technology company, has devised a system for getting location information where GPS or wi-fi are unavailable. According to a report in the November 2011 issue of *IEEE Computer* magazine, the system uses three microelectromechanical (MEM) microchips, with a gyroscope, a compass-like magnetic field sensor, and a pressure sensor, to estimate geographic location and altitude in mountainous regions or heavily forested areas. The system is energy-efficient and well-suited for use in mobile phones.

(4) FBI, here I am: An entertaining and informative [15-minute TED talk](#) in which Hasan Elahi, an artist of Iranian origins, relates how, following an airport interrogation incident, he turned the tables on FBI by deluging them with information about his life.

2011/11/17 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Not new, but nice: [Nine-minute video](#) of the 25th-anniversary performance of "We Are the World" (written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie) to benefit the Haiti 2010 earthquake victims.

(2) College soccer: The 48 teams that will play in the NCAA 2011 soccer tournament have been chosen. Seeded 15th, UCSB gets a first-round bye and a second-round home game on November 20 (5:00 PM) against Providence, which defeated Dartmouth in the first round. UCSB's third-round game (November 27) will be at home if the second-seeded Creighton does not advance. Quarterfinals will be played on December 2-4. The final four teams will meet in Hoover, Alabama, to play in the College Cup: semifinals (December 9) and the final match (December 11). Here is a [PDF file](#) containing the brackets.

(3) Artificial blood is on the way: [Popular Science](#) reports that artificial blood has been pumped into a human's veins. Mass production and wide-scale application may not happen any time soon, but this generates the hope of someday making blood shortages (especially for the less common blood types) a thing of the past.

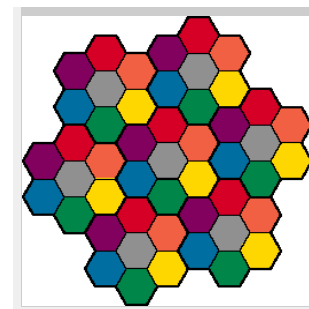
(4) Blast at an IRGC ammunition depot near Tehran: The November 12, 2011, explosion, reported to have killed a high-ranking commander and 16 other guardsmen, has led to conflicting reports. Usually, Iran blames such incidents on Israel or some Western power, with the accused vehemently denying any involvement. This time, Iran insists that the blast was an accident, but Israel is taking credit for it in semi-official news reports. The fact that the head of technology for IRGC was among those killed lends some credence to the latter reports, because routine ammunition movement does not require the presence of a top-level Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander.

(5) Go for launch: [Four-minute time-lapse film](#) shows a Space Shuttle's journey, from preparation to lift-off.

2011/11/16 (Wed.): Here are an interesting math puzzle and two items on hacking.

(1) Mathematical puzzle: The image shows a tiling of the plane with regular hexagons of seven different colors, so that no two hexagons of the same color are adjacent to each other. This puzzle has three parts.

Easy: Show that if the hexagon sides are just a tad under 1/2 cm (i.e., $1/2 - \epsilon$), then we will not have two points of the same color that are exactly 1 cm apart.



Hard: What is the exact range of values for the hexagon's side length if the property given in the easy part were to hold?

Unsolved: What is the minimum number of colors required for covering a plane to ensure the property given in the easy part? [Clearly, 7 is an upper bound. The lower bound of 4 is also known. But no one knows the exact answer.]

(2) Facebook is again combatting hackers: A hack that exploited some Web browsers was responsible for a flood of porn, violent images, and other graphic content that spread across the site over the past couple of days, [according to CNN](#). Spokesperson Frederic Wolens said Facebook's security team had been working to identify the cause of the spam and that, by Tuesday afternoon, most of the spam caused by this attack had been removed.

(3) Hacking cars: We could certainly do without one more possession that can be hacked, but no such luck. The myriad computers that control various subsystems in a modern car provide ample opportunities for hackers to steal the car, take control of it, or do other harm. Writing in *Communications of the ACM* (issue of November 2011, pp. 18-19), Alex Wright warns that because the on-board computers in cars come from different vendors and can interact in unpredictable ways, it is quite possible to build in vulnerabilities or take advantage of them (this has been practically demonstrated). In fact, not even the company manufacturing a car fully knows what exactly is in each of these computers.

2011/11/15 (Tue.): A recipe for education in the US: Fareed Zakaria has provided another insightful analysis in his latest *Time* magazine article (issue of November 14, 2011, pp. 42-44). "We've been talking about America's education decline for three decades now, so much so that we are numbed by the discussion. But the consequences of that crisis are only just becoming fully apparent. As American education has collapsed, the median wages of the American worker have stagnated, and social mobility—the beating heart of the American dream—has slowed to a standstill." Zakaria argues that the solution is not to emulate Asian countries, where students spend more hours in school and the curricula focus on science and math. Instead, we should aim for hiring the best teachers. "One study estimates that if black students had a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row, that would be enough to close the black-white test-score gap." An interesting observation offered by Zakaria is the success of the Khan Academy YouTube videos, that have been adopted by the Los Altos school district in California as part of its curriculum. Sal Khan, an MIT graduate who was trying to help his cousin with her math homework, hit upon the idea of making YouTube videos to allow long-distance communication. Five years later, the 3000 or so YouTube videos created by Khan have amassed 80 million views. Here is a [20-minute TED talk](#) by Salman Khan introducing his academy.

2011/11/14 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi plays "[Shabgard](#)" ("Night Prowler"), a composition by Jahanbakhsh Pazouki.

(2) A manifesto for life: This interesting video contains [The Holstee Manifesto](#), "a call to action to live a life full of intention, creativity, passion, and community."

(3) The demise of upward mobility in the US: A lot has been written about what ails America today, but the various causes can all be compacted under the banner "lack of upward mobility." So says Rana Foroohar (one of my favorite economics analysts) in her *Time* magazine article published in the issue of November 14, 2011, pp. 24-34. You may be happy at the bottom of the economic ladder, as long as you can see an unobstructed path to the top, requiring only effort. Conversely, you may be unhappy near or past the midway rung if you see no way of getting to the top. Both the "Tea Party" and "Occupy Wall Street" movements are caused by this lack of upward mobility. Upward mobility has been used in at least two different senses. Conservatives "would be inclined to focus on absolute mobility, which means the extent to which people are better off than their parents were at the same age. ... Behavioral economics tells us that our sense of well-being is tied not to the past but to how we are doing compared with our peers. Relative mobility matters." Currently, the US lags many European countries and Canada in terms of upward mobility. "While 42% of American men with fathers in the bottom fifth of the earning curve remain there, only a quarter of Danes and Swedes and only 30% of Britons do. ... Europe does more to encourage equality. That's a key point because high inequality—meaning a large gap between the richest and poorest in society—has a strong correlation to lower mobility. ... Indeed, in order to understand why social mobility in the U.S. is falling, it's important to understand why inequality is rising, now reaching levels not seen since the Gilded Age."

(4) The new generation gap: Michael Crowley, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of November 14, 2011, pp. 36-

40) observes that of the gaps in the US, the generation gap has the greatest impact on our political sphere. "For the past several years, our political conversation has focused on great divides in our national life: red and blue, the coasts vs. the heartland, the 1% vs. the 99%. But the deepest split is the one that cuts across all these and turns not on income or geography but on age. ... Indeed, Pew's *Generational Politics* poll shows a yawning generation gap in a hypothetical matchup between Obama and Republican Mitt Romney. Voters 30 or younger favor Obama 61% to 37%. Seniors over 65 choose Romney 54% to 41%. With Americans born from 1946 to 1980 (baby boomers and Gen Xers) almost evenly divided, the youngest and oldest voters stand in even starker contrast."

2011/11/13 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) US Republican presidential candidates on Iran: An [interesting exchange about Iran](#) between Ron Paul and Rick Santorum during an August 2011 debate in Iowa.
- (2) Interview with Golshifteh Farahani: What a beautiful actress, inside and out! She speaks about her career, life in Europe, and feelings toward her motherland ([8-minute video clip](#)).
- (3) Photos of Iran from above, and more: This [photo essay](#), by Younes Kolahtouz, features 87 images of Iran, beginning with some showing its historical sites and nature from above and a number of regular photographs near the end.
- (4) A call for open scientific refereeing: One of the common practices of peer evaluation for publishing scientific research findings is to have "blind reviews," whereby a referee's identity is not revealed to the authors. The reason, it is argued, is to allow referees to express their honest opinions, without a fear of retribution. Occasionally, the reviews are "double blind," meaning that the authors' identities are not revealed to the referees either. The argument in favor of this approach is that it allows the referees to focus on the contents of a manuscript without being influenced by the authors' fame or lack thereof. The latter is more difficult to accomplish, given the telltale signs of the authors' identities in the opinions they express, their style of writing, and references they cite (including self-citations).

Writing on a blog published in *Communications of the ACM* (Vol. 54, No. 11, November 2011, pp. 12-13), Bertrand Meyer, a well-known software design authority, advocates open refereeing in computer science and engineering. He argues that anonymity reduces the quality of referee reports, because the referee does not see a need to explain him/herself or to defend his/her assessment. Over the years, I have worked on evaluating research papers for conferences and journals, both as a referee and as program committee member or editor. I believe Meyer has a point that merits further discussion.

2011/11/12 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Origins of a Persian song: The song "Shaaneh" ("Comb"), [performed by Pooran](#) alone and later in a [duet with Vigen](#) decades ago, originally comes from Lebanon. In this video, [Googoosh sings](#) the Arabic version, entitled "Al Bint El Chalabiya" in a concert in, of all places, Baghdad. Here is the [original Arabic](#) version by Fairuz. [Information from a post by Payam Mim at [Iranian.com](#)]
- (2) Classical Persian music: The Simorq orchestra (featuring Ferdowsi's poems, a composition by Hamid Motabassem, a choral ensemble, and vocals by Homayoon Shajarian) [performs in Holland](#) for the first time. Here is [Simorq's Web page](#).
- (3) Susan Boyle sings "[Autumn Leaves](#)" (video includes lyrics).
- (4) Cultural differences: Reactions of the Canadian, American, French, and Italian leaders (from left to right) are quite telling in this [Flickr photo](#), taken at the recent G20 meeting in Toronto. When will the French and Italian women kick these clowns out? Iranians are lucky they had no leader present; no telling what his reaction might have been!
- (5) Quote of the day: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Albert Einstein

2011/11/11 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) What's so special about 11/11/11? Today's date has been tied to a number of doomsday scenarios. The introductory paragraph of [MSNBC's explanation](#) reads: In medieval times, numerologists ... believed all numbers had both positive and negative aspects ... except for 11. In the words of the 16th century scholar Petrus Bungus, 11 "has no connection with divine things, no ladder reaching up to things above, nor any merit." Stuck between the divine numbers 10 and 12, 11 was pure evil, and represented sinners. The horror movie "[11/11/11](#)" is opening today.
- (2) The virus hunter: The November 7, 2011, of *Time* magazine contains a fascinating story on Nathan Wolfe (credits include technical advising for the film "Contagion"), who travels to far-away places in search of new viruses. "Pandemics and outbreaks of new infectious diseases usually begin when a novel microbe in an animal mutates and passes to a human being who lacks immunity to it. HIV, SARS, swine flu—they all began in

animals. But instead of waiting for viruses to appear in humans, Wolfe is going on the offensive ... to gather blood from animals that Wolfe and his colleagues can screen for unknown pathogens. ... This is a revolution in epidemiology—working to predict and prevent rather than simply respond to pandemics."

(3) What JFK could teach BHO: In his *Time* magazine article (issue of November 7, 2011), Chris Matthews suggests five things that President Obama can learn from John F. Kennedy.

- "You've Got to Ask: ... There are certain basics to becoming a leader. The first is asking people to follow you. Kennedy asked. Obama used people to get him elected ... to give him the job and then fade back into the obscurity from which they cheered him and saw him as their deliverance."

- "Create a Political Band of Brothers and Sisters: ... When is he going to bolster his political forces? ... What's the story with the people in his cabinet? Where are they? Do they campaign for him? Do they stand up on the Sunday shows with passion and stick it to his critics? I've never seen such a band of political neutrals."

- "Take Responsibility: ... Nobody is going to believe second Obama term is going to be better than the first unless Obama lets it be known that he's learned from his mistakes."

- "Believe!: ... American leaders can still tap into something powerful—the astonishing optimism, the can-do resilience of the American people."

- "Show the Vision: ... He needs to give us purpose. We know what Kennedy wanted to do, where he was going. ... He showed us his dreams right there in his programs: the Peace Corps, the space program, nuclear arms control. He wanted to win the Cold War without war. ... What are Obama's dreams?"

2011/11/10 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Al-Jazeera English: According to an article by Sam Gustin in *Time* magazine (issue of November 7, 2011), the Al-Jazeera English network is gaining broader reach in the US, thanks to the Arab Spring events and its new-found credibility as a result of the Mubarak government revoking its license, ransacking its Cairo bureau, and, ultimately, yanking it off the air. The network's status is also helped by a number of US politicians contrasting its "real news" style to American networks' focus on "arguments between talking heads."

(2) How we are manipulated by supermarkets: The November 7, 2011, issue of *Time* magazine contains a [must-read piece](#) by Martin Lindstrom on how supermarkets turn shoppers into hoarders. The author visited a consumer-goods manufacturer's "research center," a huge NASA-like outfit where investigators monitor shoppers' movements in a test supermarket to study their responses to different marketing strategies. It was determined, for example, that use of tiled floors, that make cart movements bumpier than on smooth linoleum, cause an elderly shopper move more slowly, thus spending 45 seconds longer in a particular section, which translates into as much as 73% in extra spending. Similarly, a sign on a soup display that read "MAXIMUM 3 CANS PER CUSTOMER" led to many shoppers picking up 3 cans. It was noted that a price sign "\$1.95" leads to lower sales than one reading "1.95" (without the dollar sign). Very eye-opening, indeed!

(3) The clock that will tick for 10,000 years: Danny Hillis, computer scientist and entrepreneur, has attracted funding from Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com, to build a monument-size mechanical clock that will tick for ten millennia with no electricity or other external power source. The clock is to be housed in a western Texas cave dug in limestone, away from major population centers that would be targets if a war were to break out during the long lifetime of the clock. The mechanisms of the clock, and the excavation of its home inside a mountain, are marvels of engineering that are described in an [IEEE Spectrum article](#).

2011/11/09 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) College soccer: Tonight, I watched UCSB defeat UC Davis 2-1 in a Big West Conference semifinal soccer game at Harder Stadium. UCSB will head south on Saturday to play in the final match against UC Irvine (which beat UC Riverside 2-0 in the other semifinal match), with the winner getting an automatic berth in the NCAA playoffs as the Big West representative.

(2) Yet another moral victory for the Islamic Republic: Women have been barred from entering Iranian ski resorts, if not accompanied by a husband or legal guardian. As we say in Persian, "Har dam az in baagh bari miresad" ("This orchard bears new fruit all the time"). Here is the [news story in Persian](#).

(3) *Steve Jobs*, Book Review by Lev Grossman: The recently released authorized biography of Steve Jobs is reviewed by Lev Grossman in the November 7, 2011, issue of *Time* magazine. "Everybody knows Jobs was a genius. [Walter] Isaacson's biography shows us his fallible side. ... The story of Jobs' last days is positively revelatory. Jobs pursued alternative cancer cures, including visits to a psychic, while delaying conventional treatments that might have saved his life. Even sedated, he ripped off an oxygen mask because he hated the design ... We cannot understand the world around us without understanding this strange man who did so much to shape it."

2011/11/08 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Student attrition in engineering: According to the [New York Times](#), "Studies have found that roughly 40 percent of students planning engineering and science majors end up switching to other subjects or failing to get

any degree. ... The bulk of attrition comes in engineering and among pre-med majors, who typically leave STEM fields if their hopes for medical school fade. ... [Other deterrents are the demanding] freshman classes, typically followed by two years of fairly abstract courses leading to a senior research or design project. ... [Some] of the best-prepared students find engineering education too narrow and lacking the passion of other fields."

(2) On abusing freedoms: I hate it when people are distrusted and are placed under surveillance to ensure that they do not do anything unlawful. However, when faced with monsters, such as the recently disgraced assistant football coach at Penn State, who is charged with sexually abusing numerous young boys, I begin to wonder whether there is too much trust and freedom in this country. A more troubling aspect of this case is that two school officials had been notified of the misconducts and did nothing about them for nearly a decade, presumably because sports teams make a lot of money for Penn State and other high-ranking football schools (both of these officials have resigned). In my own small community on California's south coast, several similar events, involving gymnastics, volleyball, and other coaches, and young girls, have surfaced over the past few years. Can we continue to let our children "coached" by such monsters, without stricter controls?

(3) Breaking up is hard to do: In a short "Personal Finance" column in [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of November 7 & 14, 2011, p. 24), Jean Chatzky writes that customers are running away from banks that have imposed new fees on them, but at much smaller numbers than expected. One reason is that on-line banking has made switching to a new financial institution more difficult. Customers cringe at the prospects of having to re-enter all the data about payees and accounts. Ironically, banks sold the idea of on-line banking as a convenience to their customers. However, it is the banks that benefit most from on-line banking (an average of about \$167 per customer per year). And now, the stickiness of on-line banking allows them to keep most of their disgruntled customers. Chatzky then offers some advice on how to make the switch less painful.

2011/11/07 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Origins of Cain's 9-9-9 economics plan: As you may know, the Republican US presidential candidate Herman Cain has been accused of sexual harassment. Comedian Conan O'Brien recently quipped that Cain got the idea for his 9-9-9 economics plan from a German woman who kept telling him "Nein, Nein, Nein!"

(2) US Major League Soccer playoffs: Los Angeles Galaxy beat Real Salt Lake 3-1 last night to advance to the MLS championship game against Houston Dynamo. The final game will be played at the Home Depot Center in Carson, CA, on November 20, 2011, beginning at 6:00 PM PST (to be televised on ESPN).

(3) The Conrad Murray trial verdict: [I would like to share here the following comment I made on a discussion thread concerning the jury's guilty verdict in the trial of Michael Jackson's doctor.] I am uncomfortable with anyone who was not in the courtroom (and, thus, was not exposed to the same evidence and arguments as the jury) to second-guess them. I am also against turning trials into media circuses. We should let the process take place in the courtroom, like any other trial involving unknown people. The media presents a skewed picture of the proceedings, with the more sensational elements receiving greater coverage. So, a person following a trial through the media will not get the same picture as the jury. In the end, a jury trial, like any other process involving humans (including building bridges and designing computer hardware and software) is error-prone, and we should learn to live with this.

2011/11/06 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Bond plays "Shine": [Beautiful violin music](#), with Bollywood-style dancing.

(2) Good example of a brain study: If you can read the following, you have a strong mind.

7H15 M3554G3 53RV35 7O PROV3 H0W OUR M1ND5 C4N D0 4M4Z1NG 7H1NG5! 1MPR3551V3 7H1NG5! 1N 7H3 B3G1NN1NG 17 WA5 H4RD BU7 NOW, ON 7H15 LIN3 YOUR M1ND 1S R34D1NG 17 4U70M471C4LLY W17H OU7 3V3N 7H1NK1NG 4B0U7 17, B3 PROUD! ONLY C3R741N P30PL3 C4N R3AD 7H15.

(3) Joke of the day: A wife asked her husband to describe her.

He said, "You're A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K."

She said, "What does that mean?"

He said, "Adorable, Beautiful, Cute, Delightful, Elegant, Foxy, Gorgeous, Hot."

She said, "Oh that's so lovely. What about I, J, K?"

He said, "I'm Just Kidding!"

2011/11/05 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Math puzzle: Various versions of this simple puzzle surface from time to time. You saw a digital camera selling for \$97, but since you didn't have money, you borrowed \$50 from your mother and \$50 from your father. After buying the camera, you have \$3 left. You return \$1 to your mother and \$1 to your father and are left with \$1 for yourself. The amount you owe your parents, $\$49 + \$49 = \$98$, plus the \$1 you have left equals \$99. Where did the other dollar go?

(2) Computer-generated drawings: Open [this link](#) and use your cursor to move the five little squares to

different locations to see a virtually unlimited set of beautiful patterns.

(3) Interesting facts about the English language: To this [list of "did you know" questions](#), I must add this one: "Did you know that in English, a question should end with a question mark?" To be fair, the person who made the list may have intended "Did you know," which appears in a different color, as a label, rather than as part of the sentence. Of course, then the sentence should have begun with a capital letter and ended with a period.

2011/11/04 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) College drop-out to go on hiring trip: [Mark Zuckerberg](#), who dropped out of Harvard College to start Facebook, will travel to the US East Coast to talk to, and try to hire, computer science graduates from Harvard, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon.

(2) Modern Persian music: Hooman Tabrizi's solo piano performance of "[Khabam ya Bidaram?](#)" ("Am I Asleep or Awake?"), a song written by Varoujan (1936-1977) and made famous by Googoosh. Fariborz Lachini provides [sheet music and lyrics](#) (by Iraj Janati Ataie).

(3) College soccer: Tonight, I was among the season-high 13,822 spectators who watched the UCSB men's soccer team (14th-ranked, nationally) defeat Cal Poly 2-0 in the teams' last regular-season game. The stadium atmosphere was highly charged, given a long tradition of soccer rivalry between the two schools, that have had a goal difference of at most 1 in their last 10 matches going into tonight's game. UCSB is headed into Big West playoffs, along with UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UC Riverside, with its opponent to be determined by the result of tomorrow's Davis-Riverside game. Before the game, the UCSB side's 5 graduating seniors were honored and, at halftime, many members of the school's 2006 national championship team participated in special ceremonies on the field.

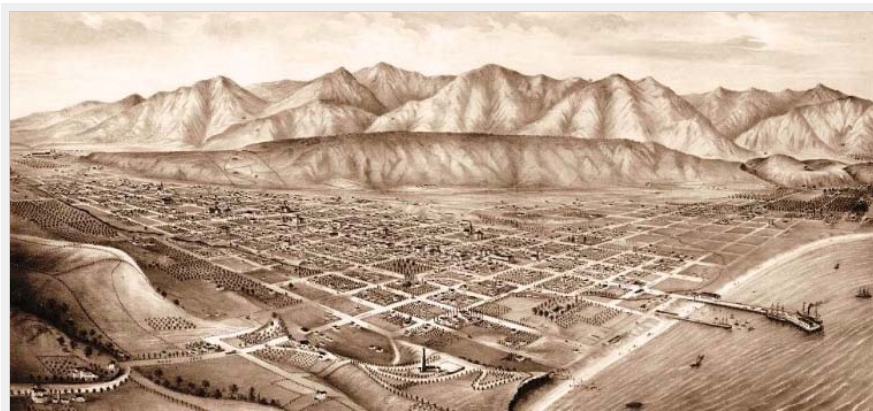
2011/11/02 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) More on world population reaching 7B: On the day I was born, I was the 2,450,452,432th person on earth. This means that nearly twice as many people have been born after me than were living when I arrived. I was also the 75,374,991,922th human being to ever live on this planet. How do I know? I used a special [calculator provided by BBC](#), that churns out these estimates when you enter your date of birth.

(2) New tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Iranian terror plot (against a Saudi ambassador), alleged by the US, and the deportation of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims accused of having fake visas from Riyadh has worsened the already choppy relations between [Iran and Saudi Arabia](#), with Qatar trying to intervene to bring the two sides into direct negotiations to reduce the tension. The second photo you see after clicking on the link above is Ramin Mehmanparast, spokesperson for Iran's foreign ministry (the Iranian version of Donald Trump?).

2011/10/31 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The power of exposure: A company in my local area (maps.com, headquartered in Goleta, CA) experienced twice the normal Web traffic after its products were featured on [ABC's Good Morning America](#) on October 27, 2011. Among the wide array of electronic and hard-copy maps that the company offers is this historic 1877 map of the City of Santa Barbara, California.



(2) World population reaches 7 billion: There are now officially 7,000,000,000 of us on planet Earth! There will be 200,000 more by tomorrow (350K births, minus 150K deaths, in round figures). During the time it took you to read this blog entry, the world population grew by 30.

(3) Robotic Venus Flytrap feeds itself: Mohsen Shahinpoor, a University of Maine mechanical engineering professor, has designed and built a robot that catches bugs in its metallic jaws, in a manner similar to a Venus Flytrap. The trapped bugs can form a source of energy for the robot, which uses a novel ionic polymeric metal composite material, invented by Shahinpoor himself, to mimic muscle function. When a bug touches strips of the composite material, a small voltage is generated, which is then passed on to the jaws so that they bend in towards each other to trap the prey. [[Story in Popular Science](#)]

(4) Traditional Persian music: The Shams Ensemble performs "[Saaghi](#)" ("Cupbearer"), featuring a poem by Mowlavi (Rumi).

2011/10/30 (Sun.): Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, 2007.

This is one of the most fascinating nonfiction books that I have ever read. My impressions of the author's ideas and arguments are mostly positive, although I do have some criticisms that I will reveal at the end of my review. Overall, I recommend the book highly to anyone who wants to make sense of complexities in the world around us, in general, and in human sociopolitical systems, in particular. I have come to know of the existence of a revised 2010 edition of the book, but my review is based on the original 2007 edition.

The book's main theme is that extremely rare events (black swans) cannot be predicted with common tools of probability and statistics, at least not as these subjects are taught to us at present. Now, if a rare event is high-impact, inaccuracy in its prediction will lead to severe underestimation or overestimation of risks. Adding to the problems are two human flaws: the tendency to theorize, which leads us to after-the-fact explanations for black-swan events that are by and large unpredictable, and our preference for ignoring inconvenient occurrences that do not fit neatly into our elegant, Platonic models.

We humans like stability and linear dependencies, because they make predictions simple. We abhor rapid or unpredictable changes. Consider, for example, three ways of earning \$1M over a period of 10 years [p. 91]. Earning \$100K per year is the best option. Earning nothing over 9 years and then making \$1M in the 10th year (or the opposite of making all the money in the first year and nothing after that) is not as pleasant. Even worse is earning \$10M in one year and losing \$1M in each of the other nine years. Human societies, stock markets, weather patterns, and pretty much all interesting systems are highly complex and chaotic, making any attempted prediction quite hazardous.

The book starts with the autobiographical Chapter 1, written elegantly and with wry humor, that details how the author's upbringing and early schooling in Lebanon (just before the eruption of a totally unforeseen war that followed centuries of peaceful coexistence among people of different ethnicities and faiths) and subsequent economics training and career as a "quant," all the time dreaming of becoming a philosopher, shaped his views. He ends the chapter by relating how he finds it easier to tell everyone who asks that he is a limo driver, rather than try to explain what he does for a living. We learn in Chapter 1 that wars, and virtually all consequential historical events, are essentially unpredictable. For example, in the early stages of WWII, people had no inkling that something momentous was taking place [p. 14]. The reason is referred to as retrospective distortion.

"Consider the nature of information: of the millions, maybe even trillions, of small facts that prevail before an event occurs, only a few will turn out to be relevant later to your understanding of what happened. Because your memory is limited and filtered, you will be inclined to remember those data that subsequently match the facts ..." [p. 12]. In other words, the real cause of an event may be buried among the pile of information that was removed from your consciousness as being irrelevant in the retrospective analyses.

Similarly, what led to the events of 9/11 may seem obvious in retrospect, but predicting the event was next to impossible. Furthermore, we sometimes avert disastrous events, without actually knowing what we have done. Here is a sobering thought experiment [p. xxiii]. Imagine that a group of lawmakers had sponsored a bill that would mandate stronger cockpit doors on airplanes, with a mandatory implementation deadline of September 10, 2011. Then, the 9/11 tragedy would have been averted with high probability. The absence of this catastrophe would not lead to the lawmakers getting recognition for their efforts. In fact, the law would likely have been quite unpopular for introducing complications and costs in the airline industry. We can likewise ask with respect to armed conflicts [p. xxiv]: "Who is more valuable, the politician who avoids a war or the one who starts a new one (and is lucky enough to win)?" We really do not give enough recognition to those who prevent unpleasant events.

In a similar vein, we remember and honor the victims who perished on 9/11, but forget about an entire category of silent victims. Here is a little-known fact: During the remaining 3 months of 2001 after 9/11, close to 1000 silent victims were added to the thousands who died from the terrorist attacks. "How? Those who were afraid of flying and switched to driving ran an increased risk of death. There was evidence of an increase of casualties on the road during that period; the road is considerably more lethal than the skies" [p. 112]. The families of these silent victims got no support; they were not even aware that their loved ones were victims of terrorism! Neglect of silent evidence leads to many deaths. Doctors are not motivated to prescribe drugs that cure deadly ailments, but kill a few people due to side effects. Such drugs have a net benefit to society, but whereas those saved by the drug remain silent, lawyers of the few persons hurt by the drug will go after the doctor vehemently [p. 112].

Part of the problem is that we humans are wired to theorize. "It takes considerable effort to see facts (and remember them) while withholding judgment and resisting explanations" [p. 64]. Experiments on split-brain patients (whose two sides of the brain are disconnected) have provided biological evidence of the human instinct for interpretation. The more you summarize, the more order you put in, the less randomness. Hence the same condition that makes us simplify pushes us to think that the world is less random than it actually is.

Here is another idea. We always look up to, and try to learn from, successful people; hence, the proliferation of

how-to books and celebrity biographies which purport to reveal the secrets of their accomplishments. In fact, failure is a much better teacher than success. "The best noncharlatanic finance book I know is called *What I Learned Losing a Million Dollars*, by D. Paul and B. Moynihan" [p. 105]. Due to a lack of interest in their ideas, the authors had to self-publish their book. A very interesting superstition is the notion of "beginner's luck" in gambling. Beginner's luck is actually true and has a rather simple explanation. Of the many people who start gambling casually, those who emerge as winners are much more likely to become chronic gamblers. Most beginning losers abandon gambling, either due to coming to their senses or running out of money. So, current habitual gamblers probably did have better luck as beginners than they do now.

Another strand of thought that runs throughout the book is that of too much information being bad for good decision-making. These ideas overlap with those in the book *Blink*, which I reviewed a couple of weeks ago (see my blog entry for October 17, 2011). "I propose that if you want a simple step to a higher form of life, as distant from the animal as you can get, then you may have to denarrate, that is, shut down the television set, minimize time reading the newspapers, ignore the blogs. Train your reasoning abilities to control your decisions" [p. 133]. A few pages later, we read: "True, our knowledge does grow, but it is threatened by greater increases in confidence, which makes our increase in knowledge at the same time an increase in confusion, ignorance, and conceit" [p. 138]. In other words, in the domain of uncertainty, we can do more harm when we place too much reliance on our imperfect knowledge. The author offers the interesting observation [p. 196] that making sense of the past is sometimes harder than predicting the future. Given an ice cube, you can use models to predict how it will melt and what size and shape puddle it will create. An observed puddle, however, might have been created by infinitely many possible ice cubes (if, in fact, there was an ice cube there at all).

The author argues for greater effort toward understanding uncertainty. There always exist significant future events for which we have no evidence in historical data. "There is an invisible bestseller out there, one that is absent from the past data but that you need to account for. [The black swan phenomenon] makes investment in a book or a drug better than statistics on past data might suggest. But it can make stock market losses worse than what the past shows" [p. 271]. The French have two words for randomness, suggesting that the notion of scalable randomness is not new. French makes a clear-cut distinction between "hasard" and "fortuit." "Hasard, from the Arabic *az-zahr*, implies—like *alea*, dice—tractable randomness; fortuit is my black swan—the purely accidental and unforeseen" [pp. 272-273]. There are quite a few references to Yogi Berra in this book, with the author interpreting Berra's seemingly nonsensical statements as deep philosophical observations. Berra is touted (apparently not in tongue-in-cheek manner) as "the great philosopher of uncertainty" [p. 210].

The author also argues for treating the world, the global economy, and many other entities as complex systems that do not lend themselves to elegant theories. "Elegance in the theories is often indicative of Platonicy and weakness ... A theory is like medicine (or government): often useless, sometimes necessary, always self-serving, and on occasion lethal" [p. 285]. When banks were small, or prior to that, when economies were localized, failure of a bank or a merchant had a negligible effect on the world, making the Gaussian model of randomness applicable and quite accurate. Now, however, banks and trading companies are interrelated. There is a real danger of one failure bringing down the entire financial system. "The increased concentration among banks seems to have the effect of making financial crisis less likely, but when they happen they are more global in scale and hit us very hard. ... We would be far better off if there were a different ecology, in which financial institutions went bust on occasion and were rapidly replaced by new ones, thus mirroring the diversity of Internet businesses and the resilience of the Internet economy" [pp. 225-227].

Throughout the book, the author vents against academic research and the scientific establishment. "If you are a researcher, you will have to publish inconsequential articles in 'prestigious' publications so that others say hello to you once in a while when you run into them at conferences" [p. 87]. Even respected pioneers of the scientific method do not escape the author's wrath. Take this statement of Galileo, for example: "The great book of nature lies ever open before our eyes ... But we cannot read it unless we have first learned the language and the characters in which it is written ... It is written in mathematical language and the characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures." The author has this to say about the passage just quoted: "Was Galileo legally blind? ... he should have known that triangles are not easily found in nature" [p. 257]. Nobel Prizes and Nobel Laureates also get a raw treatment from the author, who reserves his strongest condemnation for the Nobel Prize in economics. "An activist [Nobel] family member calls the prize a public relations coup by economists aiming to put their field on a higher footing than it deserves."

The foregoing are the parts of the book that I can endorse only partially. Yes, a lot of things are wrong with academia and the ways in which we conduct and sponsor research. Self-promoters and charlatans do get bigger shares of the research funding pie and larger numbers of publications. But, we also have excellent research results, and capable researchers, coming out of our institutions of higher learning. We should strive to work within this imperfect system, while doing our very best to improve it, rather than be destructive and confrontational.

The author ends his treatment thus: "Imagine a speck of dust next to a planet a billion times the size of the

earth. The speck of dust represents the odds in favor of your being born; the huge planet would be the odds against it. So stop sweating the small stuff. ... Stop looking the gift horse in the mouth—remember that you are a black swan" [p. 298].

2011/10/29 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Thank you President Obama for introducing a jobs plan with the slogan 'We Can't Wait'; and thank you Congress for responding to it with President Obama's original slogan 'Yes We Can'." Jimmy Fallon, in his Late Night program's 'Thank-You Notes' segment.

(2) Who speaks for the 1%? This is the title chosen by *Time* magazine columnist Joel Stein for a tongue-in-cheek response to the "Occupy Wall Street" protests (issue of October 31, 2011, p. 90). "I've met some of the top 1%, and on average, they're interesting, generous and charming. You know who is in the top 1%? Tom Hanks. ... The 1% started Time Inc., creating my job. They founded Stanford, where I went to college. They funded Facebook and my mortgage. They created the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation ... [and] genius grants. No one has ever woken up early to gather around a TV to watch a wedding of two 99 percenters." Later in the column, after quoting a statement from Mark Cuban (the billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks) that the Wall Street stereotypes who add no value and give everyone a bad name constitute 1% of the 1%, Stein quips that Cuban is going with the slogan "We are the 99.99%."

(3) The Chinese space station: With the launch of Tiangong-1 in September, China has begun its ambitious space station program that will lead to a fully functional station, with a core module and two lab modules, by 2022. [From *Engineering & Technology* magazine, issue of November 2011, p. 10; news story not yet on-line.]

(4) Inventing is a hazardous occupation: The November 2011 issue of *Engineering & Technology magazine* lists 10 inventors who perished while trying to implement or use their inventions. The fatal inventions include hang-gliders, rocket-powered vehicles, submarines, and radioactive elements.

(5) Humorous Persian poetry: **Mr. Haloo recites his new poem** entitled "Tarsoohaa" ("The Fearful"). Here is **another poem of Mr. Haloo**, entitled "Khar-e Mash Rajab" ("Mr. Rajab's Donkey"), about the recent \$3B bank embezzlement in Iran.

2011/10/28 (Fri.): *NPR—The First Forty Years*, unabridged audiobook on 4 CDs, HighBridge Audio, 2010. The 4 CDs of this audiobook contain selected programs (fun samples, as well as coverage of historical events) from 4 decades of NPR's existence, beginning with the 1970s. The programs represented include "All Things Considered," "Morning Edition," "Weekend Edition," and "Fresh Air." The 1970s highlights include President Nixon's resignation, aftermath of Three Mile Island, the US Bicentennial Celebrations, and life at the South Pole. From the 1980s, we hear about the revolution in Prague, the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, and remembrance of the fall of Saigon. Programs from the 1990s include the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the Harlem renaissance, and the Rwanda carnage. From the 2000s, the listener is treated to the coverage of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 US presidential elections. A highlight of the fourth CD, covering the 2000s decade, is the story of maple trees in New England exploding, because of a downturn in the maple syrup business and pressure build-up from the trees going untapped for long periods of time. You can learn about this very surprising development by listening to an **8-minute audio segment** of the program "All Things Considered" (broadcast on April 1, 2005).

It was a treat for me to go back in time and listen to some of my favorite programs in years past.

2011/10/27 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Multiplying digits between 6 and 9: Some readers of this blog may know that one of my research areas in computer engineering is computer arithmetic. So, I found this video, which shows an old man explaining, in Persian, a **simple rule for multiplication**, quite interesting. Here is an explanation of the rule, which the man illustrates via examples. The number of closed fingers on the two hands are $x - 5$ and $y - 5$. The number of open fingers are $10 - x$ and $10 - y$. What he says is that for $5 < x, y < 10$, we have: $xy = 10(x - 5 + y - 5) + (10 - x)(10 - y)$. The rule actually works for 5 and 10 as well, not just for numbers between 6 and 9.

(2) Equality for women requires more than laws: An *IEEE Spectrum* Tech Alert e-mail contained a story headlined "With Arduino, Now Even Your Mom Can Program." If a prestigious technical publication, which happens to have a woman as its editor-in-chief, can't detect and avoid sexism, what can we expect of other media? Of course, the EIC was quick to issue an apology via e-mail: "I'm an IEEE member, and a mom, and the headline was inexcusable, a lazy, sexist cliché that should have never seen the light of day. Today we are instituting an additional headline review process that will apply to all future Tech Alerts so that such insipid and offensive headlines never find their way into your in-box."

(3) Iran vs. USA: In 2009, Jon Stewart's "**The Daily Show**" interviewed Iranians and Americans about each other's countries, with interesting results. Here is a **Voice of America video** about the making of the "The Daily Show" program segment.

2011/10/26 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Earth's overcrowding: The world population was 1 billion in 1804. It took 123 years for the population to reach 2 billion in 1927, 32 years for the third billion (1959), 15 years for the fourth billion (1974), 13 years for the fifth billion (1987), and 11 years to reach 6 billion (1998). Even though the growth rate is expected to slow down (13 years to reach 7 billion, estimated to occur on October 31, 2011; 14 years to 8 billion in 2025; 18 years to 9 billion in 2043), the forecast for feeding the growing population is grim. A woman in several of the poorest African countries, and in Afghanistan, bears 6+ children on average. The corresponding US number is 2.1 and in much of Europe less than 1.5. Therefore, population growth will occur mostly in the poorest regions, where people are already on the verge of starvation. On the other hand, to put things in perspective, the entire current population of our planet would fit in the state of Texas, if packed at the same density as in New York City. Here is one more interesting fact: An estimated 108 billion humans have lived since the beginning of time, 6.5% of whom are now alive. [From *Time* magazine, issue of October 31, 2011, pp. 22-23.]

(2) John McCarthy of AI fame dies at 84: This seems to be the month for losing pioneering figures in computing. The latest to leave this world is John McCarthy, often credited as being the father of artificial intelligence. According to [Wired magazine](#), "In organizing the Dartmouth Summer Research Conference on Artificial Intelligence in 1956, McCarthy not only added a term to the popular lexicon, he founded an entirely new area of research alongside fellow pioneers Marvin Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Shannon. In the years to come, he would go on invent LISP—one of the world's most influential programming languages—and he played a major role in the development of time-sharing systems."

(3) Modern Persian music: Vocalists at Gogooosh Music Academy perform "[Yek Harfhaa-ee](#)" ("Some Talk").

(4) Modern Persian music: Farzad Arjmand performs "[Gham Makhor](#)" ("Don't Be Sad"), based on a poem by Hafez.

2011/10/25 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Photographer makes sociopolitical statement: In a [series of photos](#) featuring herself as two different characters, Nazeer Abbasi contrasts the experiences and opportunities of veiled versus liberated women. The veiled version of her in each photo isn't necessarily unhappy, but rather passive and reflective. In fact, in one of the photos showing the veiled woman during prayers, she looks glowing and satisfied, whereas the unveiled version appears troubled. In most photos, such as the first one, however, the unveiled woman is shown as being active and in charge, while the veiled version is watching passively. In several of the photos, the two versions seem to be friends who totally understand and appreciate each other.

(2) Quote of the day: "I've had a chance to embrace more people with one arm than I ever could with two." Bethany Hamilton, a girl who returned to competitive surfing despite losing one arm in a shark attack. [Her life is portrayed in the rather cheesy, but still inspiring, 2011 movie "Soul Surfer."]

(3) Quantum levitation: Here is a [2-minute demonstration](#) of levitation caused by the interaction of superconducting material and magnetic fields. Briefly, superconducting material tend to expel magnetic fields from inside them, but when a magnetic field is forcefully introduced, its flux lines go through the weak spots (e.g., grain boundaries). This is what keeps the object in levitation state. For those interested, the YouTube video accompanies some notes, with links to more detailed explanations.

(4) Iranian TV criticizes CNN's Zakaria: This [2-minute video clip](#), in Persian, is part of an Iranian TV program that attacks Fareed Zakaria, for making critical comments about Iran in his CNN program, and government officials for allowing him in the country to interview the Iranian president.

(5) Landing safely without nose gear: Captain Hooshang Shahbazi [safely lands a crippled Iran Air plane](#) (whose nose gear would not open) at Tehran Airport.

2011/10/24 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Iranian Azeri music: Performance of the Azeri opera "[Arshin Mal Alan](#)" in Tabriz, Iran.

(2) Breakthrough in dealing with autism: Last night's "[60 Minutes](#)" program had a segment about autism in which an autistic young man was shown to communicate quite easily with help from an iPad tablet computer and a special language app.

(3) Zakaria's interview with Ahmadinejad: Yesterday, I watched Fareed Zakaria GPS on CNN, which focused on his recent interview with Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad began the interview confidently, looking sharp, serious (no sign of his trademark smirk), and to the point. However, his answers deteriorated into the usual ramblings by the end of the hourlong program. For example, when asked whether Zakaria could meet with Mr. Mirhossein Mousavi, who is under house arrest, Ahmadinejad reiterated his usual line that there are no political prisoners in Iran. According to him, Mr. Mousavi is not a political prisoner because his house arrest was not ordered by the government, but by an independent judiciary. Apparently, he considers "government" in Iran composed of him and his cabinet, putting the Supreme Leader, who controls the judiciary, above and outside the government. However, even this view is not credible, given that Mousavi's opposition is

mostly to Ahmadinejad and his clan, rather than to the structure of the Islamic Republic.

(4) Computers in every classroom (Not!): Silicon Valley techies try to sell each one of us, and every school in the world, as many computers and other electronic devices as they can, extolling on the virtues of computer-assisted Instruction. But when it comes to educating their own kids, they choose a school with no computers in sight! This [New York Times article](#) focuses on the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, which is the school of choice for the children of Silicon Valley execs and other techies. The century-old Waldorf method is based on a teaching philosophy focused on physical activity and learning through creative, hands-on tasks. The school considers computers harmful to proper education and even frowns on their use at home.

2011/10/23 (Sun.): Here are a couple of technology-related items of potential interest.

(1) President Obama at tech dinner: On February 17, 2011, President Obama had dinner with some of the most powerful tech executives in the US. See how many of these people you can identify. Here is a link to a [labeled version of the photo](#) to check your answers.



(2) Search engine ABCs: When you start typing a query, modern search engines try to guess your intended term and suggest possible completions, in an effort to save your time. The guessing is done by secret algorithms based on a number of criteria, such as other searches performed in your geographic area. For example, the top completion suggestion for "mad" might be "Madonna Inn" if you live in Santa Barbara, or "Madison Square Garden" if you are in New York. Google and Bing, the top two search engines, begin guessing as soon as you enter the first letter. The two engines have identical guesses for the following letters: B, Bank of America; C, Craigslist; F, Facebook; G, Google; L, Lowe's; N, Netflix; P, Pandora; S, Southwest (Airlines); T, Target; X, Xbox; Y, Yahoo; Z, Zillow. For other letters, Google/Bing have different top suggestions, such as: A, Amazon/AOL; D, DMV/dictionary; H, Hulu/Hotmail; I, iPad/iTunes; M, Mapquest/mySpace; U, United/USPS. For more information, see: [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#).

2011/10/22 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On the goodness of human beings: "The people I encountered were a diverse group ... but there was a common, contemplative thread, as if Americans had been coming to terms with the scope of the economic disaster and trying to figure out what sort of expectations were reasonable for themselves, their children, and the country. It seemed a quiet revival of the Great Silent Majority, grappling with drastic new circumstances. Their commentary was far more reasoned and thoughtful than the breathless tide of sensationalism and vitriol that passes for discourse on talk radio and the cable news networks. ... The Americans I spoke with were not rutted in ideology; they were open to new ideas." Joe Klein, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of October 24, 2011, pp. 26-34), about his travels through the US heartland.

(2) Hard to believe, but true: Take a look at [this photograph](#) of a bathing beach policeman measuring the distance between a woman's knee and her bathing suit. In 1922, a law was in effect that required bathing suits at the Washington bathing beach to be less than 6 inches above the knee.

(3) Quote of the day: "The 'earth' without 'art' is just 'eh'." Anonymous

2011/10/21 (Fri.): Allison, Jay, and Dan Gediman (eds.), *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, unabridged audiobook (on 5 CDs) with the contributors reading their essays, Audio Renaissance, 2006.

This audiobook is based on the NPR series "This I Believe," which is described on [its Web site](#) as "A public dialogue about belief—one essay at a time." The essayists featured in the audiobook range from the famous (Isabel Allende, William F. Buckley Jr., Bill Gates, Helen Keller, Edward R. Murrow, Colin Powell, and John Updike) to the unknown (a Brooklyn lawyer, a part-time hospital clerk, a Yellow-Pages ad salesperson, and a state parole board member).

A complete list of the essays on this audiobook is available from [Barnes & Noble](#). At [another Web site](#), you can read and listen to 127 of the "This I Believe" essays featured on "The Bob Edwards Show." The essay guidelines state that they should be between 350 and 500 words, or around 3 minutes when read aloud. Expressing your life's philosophy in so few words is a challenge that everyone should take up at least once. This reminds me of something I once read, whose source unfortunately escapes me. When faced with a 700-word limit on a piece of writing, someone exclaimed, "Hey, I'm Italian; I can't say hello in 700 words!" The 80 essays included in the audiobook range from old ones, taken from the original 1950s radio series, to

fairly recent contributions. I liked quite a few of the essays, but my absolute favorite is "[Happy Talk](#)," by Oscar Hammerstein II, famed lyricist and Broadway producer. His essay is not the most eloquent, but I find it closest to my personal philosophy. The link just cited takes you to the essay page, where you can read its text and listen to an audio file of Mr. Hammerstein reading it.

I end my review with a quote from the foregoing essay: "I have an unusual statement to make. I am a man who believes he is happy. What makes it unusual is that a man who is happy seldom tells anyone. The unhappy man is more communicative. He is eager to recite what is wrong with the world, and he seems to have a talent for gathering a large audience. It is a modern tragedy that despair has so many spokesmen, and hope so few. ... [From all that is wrong with our world and all my disappointments] could I not build up a strong case to prove why I am not happy at all? I could, but it would be a false picture, as false as if I were to describe a tree only as it looks in winter."

2011/10/20 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "[From all that is wrong with our world and all my disappointments] could I not build up a strong case to prove why I am not happy at all? I could, but it would be a false picture, as false as if I were to describe a tree only as it looks in winter." Oscar Hammerstein II, famed lyricist and Broadway producer, writing in a personal essay entitled "[Happy Talk](#)."

(2) Futsal (arena soccer) Grand Prix: Iran had an impressive showing in its [futsal match](#) against the US team, winning 8-0.

(3) New space port dedicated: "Las Cruces, N.M., officially joined the list of the nation's major space centers Monday when a newly completed terminal and hangar facility was turned over to British billionaire Richard Branson and his commercial space tourism venture, Virgin Galactic. The company aims to launch paying customers beyond Earth's confines from the new \$209-million futuristic-looking facility, named Spaceport America." In a related story, the [Los Angeles Times](#) reports that NASA has signed a deal with Virgin Galactic to hitch rides on its space flights.

(4) US politicians need to take China 101: In an insightful *Time* magazine column (October 24, 2011, p. 17), Rana Foroohar criticizes US politicians for their naivete in dealing with China. She begins her column thus: "I wish there were a class called China 101 that every member of Congress had to attend. This would be the first lesson: If you really want the Chinese to do something, never pressure them about it in public. Loss of face is anathema in the Middle Kingdom. Which is why when the U.S. Senate passed a bill hinting at tariffs on Chinese goods if Beijing doesn't let the value of its currency rise, the People's Bank of China promptly and defiantly responded by pushing the value of the renminbi lower. It's ironic, because Beijing had been doing just the opposite until politicians like Chuck Schumer decided to start posturing and make China's currency a proxy for a highly politicized discussion about globalization and unemployment in the U.S."

2011/10/19 (Wed.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest on politics and society.

(1) Quote of the day: "I thought it was a price of a pizza." Jon Huntsman, attacking the "9-9-9" economic plan of his Republican fellow candidate Herman Cain, the former CEO of Godfather Pizza.

(2) An optimistic portrait of the 21st century: In his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker "makes the counterintuitive claim that the 21st century—the century of terrorism in the Middle East, genocide in Darfur, civil war in Somalia—is the least violent era in human history. Not only homicide, but all forms of violence, are less common now than ever before, including torture, slavery, domestic abuse, hate crimes—even barroom brawling and cruelty to animals." I bet this quote from *Newsweek* magazine's issue of October 10 & 17, 2011, will provoke you to read Pinker's book. The article by Robin Marantz Henig goes on to explain that our being bombarded, via TV, the Internet, and other sources with news of murder, rape, tribal warfare, and suicide bombings causes us to think that incidence of such acts is on the rise, because we estimate probabilities by how well we can remember examples. Also, "We think the problem has gotten worse, but that's because our sensibilities have gotten more refined." For example, capital punishment, domestic abuse, and bullying would not have raised an eyebrow a few decades ago.

(3) Descendants of Iranian Jews in China: According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), thousands of descendants of Iranian Jewish traders, who traveled along the Silk Road to China in the 9th century, live in Kaifeng in central China. Over time, especially after their last rabbi died in 1809, the group lost contact with religious practices and only kept certain traditions such as a communal meal on Passover. A few years ago, financial support from a conservative religious organization, which targets descendants of Jews who have lost their link to the religion, funded a small group of these Chinese Jews to live and work in Israel and thus to establish a link between the group and their ancient faith.

(4) Women's rights linked to home ownership: "In Reimagining Equality, Brandeis University law professor Anita Hill examines the historical role that race and gender have played in finding a secure home—an issue that's more timely than ever in the wake of the subprime-mortgage crisis. Twenty years after her testimony

against Clarence Thomas in his Supreme Court nomination hearings, Hill finds that women are still on unequal footing." Introduction to an interview with Anita Hill, entitled "Home Fires: Women and the Housing Crisis," in *Time* magazine (issue of October 17, 2011, p. 67).

(5) Iran to change its constitution: It's now official! Iran's Supreme Leader has given his blessings to a proposed **change in constitution** that would do away with an elected president, instituting instead a parliamentary system. Of course, the system will be parliamentary only in name. As the current composition of the Majlis indicates, only those who follow the Leader's every whim would be allowed to run in elections. Of course, the name "Islamic Republic of Iran" cannot stand once the change is made. It is interesting to speculate on what the new name might be.

(6) Shohreh Aghdashloo, on Craig Ferguson's show: A very funny **11-minute video clip**, in which Ms. Aghdashloo talks about her work, writing of her memoirs, and the 31-day drive from Tehran to London, when she left her homeland virtually penniless. She had to sell her beloved car in London.

2011/10/18 (Tue.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest on technology and economics.

(1) The teen philanthropist: At age 11, Cameron Cohen used a hospital stay for removing a bone tumor, and the subsequent recovery period, to teach himself programming and to develop iSketch, an iPhone app for drawing pictures. The \$0.99 app has sold tens of thousands of copies, with Cameron donating much of the proceeds to the UCLA Children's Hospital. Currently 13, Cameron is slowly returning to normal activities, which now includes learning more about programming. [From *IEEE Spectrum*, October 2011, p. 26.]

(2) "Steve Jobs: 1955-2011," along with a picture of him holding an Apple Macintosh computer, appears on the cover of the October 17, 2011, issue of *Time magazine* that contains a lengthy tribute to him. The articles inside the issue include "American Icon," by Walter Isaacson, "The Inventor of the Future," by Lev Grossman and Harry McCracken, and "In a Private Light," photoessay by Diana Walker.

(3) Walking to charge your batteries: Soon, we won't have to worry about our cell phones and other portable devices running out of battery. *IEEE Spectrum magazine* (issue of October 2011) reports on advances in harnessing energy from our steps by placing a special cushion inside our shoe soles to capture some of the 40 watts or so of power generated when our feet hit the ground. The harnessed energy, stored in a special battery, can be used to extend the battery life in our portable devices or to light a room at night using low-energy LEDs. Imagine trying to get on a plane, when wearing such a shoe!

(4) Top ten programming languages: It is very difficult to rank programming languages with respect to their popularity and impact. *IEEE Spectrum* magazine (issue of October 2011, p. 84) has done this ranking based on four criteria. Java appears at the top with regard to the TIOBE index (a composite measure based on a number of technical factors) and "most book titles." Python is the most discussed, while PHP appears most in job posts. Both C and C++ are close to the top in all four categories. The only other languages that appear in all four top-10 lists are Javascript and PERL.

(5) Trading at the speed of light: The part of the stock market that is visible to us mere mortals is vanishingly small, much like the proverbial tip of an iceberg. More than 70% of trades in the US are the so-called "high-frequency" trades, whereby a computerized system takes advantage of a fraction of a second between price change in one stock and changes in other stocks, with correlated prices, to make a significant profit. So, for example, if stocks A and B usually move in the same direction and the price of stock A goes up, buying stock B in the fraction of a second before the price of stock B is updated leads to profits. A related abnormality occurs when a stock trading company has access to a faster data network than the stock market itself, thus being able to take advantage of price differentials in various cities whose data files have not yet been updated following a stock price change. In recent years, stock traders have tried to take full advantage of high-frequency trading by investing in superhigh-speed networks or installing their high-performance computer systems very close to stock-market computers. This abomination is easy to fix. East Asian countries do not have the problem because the presence of a trading fee makes it impossible to benefit from small price changes. [From *IEEE Spectrum*, October 2011, pp. 11-12.]

(6) The Icelandic model: "[Imagine that] you have a dog, and I have a cat ... You sell me the dog for a billion, and I sell you the cat for a billion. Now we are no longer pet owners but Icelandic banks, with a billion dollar in new assets." *Time* magazine (issue of October 17, 2011, p. 64), describing how assets of Icelandic banks grew from \$18B to \$140B between 2003 and 2007.

2011/10/17 (Mon.): Gladwell, Malcolm, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, unabridged audiobook (7 CDs) read by the author, Time Warner Audiobooks, 2005.

Citing many examples from the fields of science, medicine, music, advertising, and sales, the author builds a convincing case for the theory that snap judgments can, in many instances, be as good as, or even better than, decisions reached via extensive data gathering and analysis. Too much analysis can lead to paralysis!

The key notion in this regard is "thin slicing," the human ability to gauge what is truly important, and what can be safely ignored, from very limited experiences and observations. In an age of information overload, knowing

that we can make good decisions based on very limited data is quite reassuring.

Speed dating is a case in point. One can determine with fairly high confidence whether s/he would like to see a potential mate again, on the basis of a 5-minute interaction just as well as can be done in the course of a date spanning a full evening. When quick decision-making is a must (as in a medical emergency or on the battlefield), simplicity and frugality of information used is of utmost importance; in such cases, the adage "the more data, the better" is not only false, but utterly dangerous.

The ability to make high-quality snap judgments isn't innate, but requires conscious nurturing and practice. In fact, given that bias and prejudice operate at the unconscious level, there is a real danger that they may affect our snap judgments much more than we are prepared to admit.

Gladwell's assertions are not universally accepted. For example, a counterpoint is provided by Michael R. LeGault in *Think! : Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye* (Threshold Editions, 2006). If bestselling books tell us not to think, LeGault asks, is it any wonder that thoughtful reasoning has become a lost art in societies everywhere?

It is my understanding, however, that Gladwell advocates snap judgments only in cases where timeliness of the decision is of the essence and analysis paralysis has dire consequences.

I conclude this review by quoting a paragraph from the [author's Web site](#) for the book.

"One of the stories I tell in *Blink* is about the Emergency Room doctors at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. That's the big public hospital in Chicago, and a few years ago they changed the way they diagnosed heart attacks. They instructed their doctors to gather less information on their patients: they encouraged them to zero in on just a few critical pieces of information about patients suffering from chest pain—like blood pressure and the ECG—ignoring everything else, like the patient's age and weight and medical history. And what happened? Cook County is now one of the best places in the United States at diagnosing chest pain."

2011/10/16 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) RIP, Dennis Ritchie: One of the two Bell Labs researchers who were responsible for creating the C programming language and the Unix operating system, died earlier this week at age 70. Ritchie's death did not generate the Web hysteria that accompanied Steve Jobs' passing, but his impact on the IT world was perhaps greater than that of Jobs. This [CNN obituary](#) is headlined: "Dennis Ritchie: The Shoulders Steve Jobs Stood on."

(2) No more award-winning Iranian films: [Jafar Panahi](#), the famed Iranian director, has been sentenced to 6 years in prison and a 20-year travel and filmmaking ban. At the rate writers, directors, and actors are being imprisoned in Iran, we should not expect any Iranian film to win awards at international film festivals for a decade or more.

(3) Hugh Laurie's humorous song: "House" actor sings a protest song entitled "[All We've Gotta Do Is ...](#)" A commenter on an on-line forum wrote that the song is from "A Bit of Fry & Laurie," the sketch show that Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry did for the BBC in the early 1990s. Most weeks featured one of Mr. Laurie's original songs.

(4) Iranian political cartoon: The Persian caption to [this political cartoon](#), which is drawn by Mana Neyestani as a response to a mural in the city of Ghom, reads: "They should've chosen a bigger frame to show the entire scene."

2011/10/15 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest on human psychology and two items on engineering and technology.

(1) Admitting our mistakes: Why is admitting that we are wrong so difficult? In an [18-minute TED talk](#), Kathryn Schulz describes our three strategies for justifying why other people disagree with us when we are sure we are right: they are ignorant (they don't have all the facts), idiotic, or evil (they know I am right but have some schemes against me)!

(2) Our inner prejudices: Many of us consider ourselves enlightened and not prejudiced against different races and faiths. However, prejudices in our unconscious minds may be quite different from our conscious behavior. Listening to the audiobook *Blink* (by Malcolm Gladwell), which I will review shortly, I learned about Project Implicit, a research endeavor that provides tools for studying human unconscious behavior and decision-making. If you go to the [project's Web site](#), you can select "Demonstration" to see examples of studies performed. By choosing "Research," you can participate in the study as a subject and also get feedback about how you did. This is quite fascinating!

(3) Playing favorites: Among all the lies parents tell children, the most blatant one is the statement that "we do not have a favorite child." Thus begins an article about parents with multiple children favoring one over the others, perhaps a different one for the mother and father. Mothers tend to favor first-born boys, whereas fathers become more attached to last-born daughters. Study after study has shown that parents do have favorite children, even if they aren't consciously aware of their bias. When parents admit that they view their

children differently, they often justify their bias by saying that they have different kinds of love for them. Of course, children aren't quite defenseless in the face of such a bias. According to Frank Sulloway, a UC Berkeley researcher, "Siblings are devilishly clever, much smarter than psychologists. They are constantly trying to fine-tune their niche to squeeze the maximum benefits out of their parents." [The full [Time article](#) is available only to subscribers, but there is a short video that you can watch.]

(4) Tech joke of the day: Priest at wedding ceremony: "I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may update your Facebook status!" [Caption of a cartoon by unknown artist.]

(5) Stanford proposes NYC campus: "Seeking greater access to an urban world rich in art, finance, drama, music, high-end media, deep-pocketed philanthropy, tweedy East Coast faculty and diverse students, Stanford is putting the finishing touches on a 500-page application for a second campus in New York City, due to land on Mayor Michael Bloomberg's desk in two weeks. At Thursday's meeting of Stanford's academic senate, the university unveiled its most detailed-yet description of the proposed 'Stanford NYC' campus that by 2045 could be home to as many as 350 professors and more than 2,000 graduate students studying science, engineering and entrepreneurship." [From: [San Jose Mercury News](#)]

2011/10/14 (Fri.): Here are three tech-related items and two other stories of potential interest.

(1) Tech joke of the day: A scene in Heaven, with God speaking: "Moses, meet Steve. He's going to upgrade your tablets for you."

(2) The tech sector without Steve Jobs: According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), Steve Jobs and his successes have defined the story of personal technology. John R. White, CEO of the Association for Computing Machinery, believes that Apple and its devices have been "the standard to which everyone compared themselves ... Will there be a central force, whether a company or a new technology, that defines where we all head next? I fear that there won't be." John Danner, from UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, said, "Undoubtedly people are now hunkering down in labs and studios all over the world trying to figure out how to occupy what they expect to be a vacuum, and establish themselves as the new pacesetter."

(3) Walking creatures: Inventor Theo Jansen has spent years perfecting his "kinetic sculptures" made from plastic tubing. These [self-propelled robots](#) harness the wind's energy to walk gracefully on the beach.

(4) Movie role leads to jail term and lashes: It is very hard to believe, but Iranian actress Marziye Vafamehr has been sentenced to a one-year prison term and 90 lashes for her role in the movie "My Tehran for Sale" ("Tehran-e Man, Haraaj"). According to IMDB, this 2009 movie is the story of an Iranian actress whose theater work is banned by the authorities, thus forcing her to lead a secret life and to seek asylum from Australia. Granaz Moussavi wrote and directed the [97-minute movie](#), which was made in Australia and has mostly Persian dialogue with English subtitles.

(5) Tips for tough budget times: According to *Time* magazine (issue of October 10, 2011), the average family can cut 5 expense items, with virtually no ill effect on its well-being: Flu remedies (there is no scientific evidence that they work); unlimited cell phone minutes (a typical family uses a little over 700 minutes); bottled water; lottery tickets; credit-card payment insurance (they typically come with so many restrictions, that you will likely not see a dime in the event of job loss or disability).

2011/10/13 (Thu.): Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, abridged audiobook (3 CDs) read by the author, Time Warner Audiobooks, 2005.

Have you ever wondered why some communicable diseases, fashion trends, or books achieve exponential popularity, while others sputter and fade? Answering this question is of immense interest to public health officials, corporate marketers, and publishers, among others. The author identifies 3 key factors that dictate whether a product, idea, or concept (a "trend," for short) will reach the "tipping point" and achieve large-scale popularity. Surprisingly, these factors are applicable across a broad domain, from introducing new sneaker models to the spread of illnesses.

(a) The law of the few: a few kinds of people (connectors, mavens, salespeople) must champion the trend.

(b) Stickiness: the trend must possess a quality that compels people to pay close, sustained attention to it.

(c) The power of context: even small shifts in social conditions and communities can cause a new trend to tip.

The author illustrates the applicability of these factors through a large number of fascinating case studies.

Interestingly, social networking and e-mail, which might seem to help the spread of trends, may have a muted impact due to the "immunity" phenomenon. We used to get excited to receive a few e-mail messages per day and paid close attention to every one of them. Now, our in-boxes are saturated and each message merits a much smaller attention span from us.

I am now reading a related book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, which makes some of the same points (for example, a book that becomes a best-seller against expectations is a black swan). I will write a more detailed review of the latter book within the next few days.

2011/10/12 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) CDs/DVDs going the way of VHS tapes: Software, movies, music, audiobooks, and many other things used to come on CDs or DVDs. But high-speed communication is quickly making these discs obsolete. Unlike VHS tapes that cannot be used for anything (except, perhaps, as bricks for building houses), CDs/DVDs lend themselves to creating works of art. [This image shows "WasteLandscape,"](#) a work of art installed by artist Elise Morin and architect Clemence Eliard.

(2) Quote of the day: "Quitting Facebook is the new, adult version of running away from home. We all know you're doing it for attention and we all know that you'll be back." Facebook status by Shut-Up-I'm-Talking.

(3) Persian music: Zoya Sabet sings "[Amad No Bahar](#)" ("Spring Has Arrived"). This song by Mehdi Khaledi, with lyrics by Navab Safa, was made famous by Delkash.

(4) Bizarre Iranian terror plot: By now everyone has heard the story that the US Department of Justice has accused Iran of sponsoring a [terror plot](#) to kill the Saudi ambassador to the US. As it does for every single terrorism incident, Iran's government has denied the allegations. On various discussion forums, certain Iranians have characterized this as a fictional story made up by the US administration to sell a future military attack on Iran to the public. They justify this claim by stating that Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps are too smart to devise such a sloppy plot by using a known drug dealer as a conduit, given that suspects of this kind are often under surveillance. Ironically, these commentators do not carry the implications of the claimed "smartness" a step further. A drug dealer is in fact the perfect vehicle for such a plot, because of deniability. The sponsors can always say, "hey this is a guy who would kill dozens of people for \$1.5M, so he would lie for a much smaller sum." And, of course, the Iranian government can invoke the "smartness" argument itself. I am not saying that this is what happened. I am just saying that in the world of (counter)intelligence, things are never as they seem, and normal logic may not work.

2011/10/11 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on unusual music-making and a sports story.

(1) An unusual way of playing the guitar: The [theme from "Pulp Fiction"](#) (composed by Michalis Patrino in 1927; originally named "Misirlou"), played on a guitar with two players, one of them using two pencils!

(2) Weird and hybrid instruments: Josef Claude plays [the Beatles' "Yesterday"](#) on harp guitar. Once you have watched the video on YouTube, look on the right-hand sidebar for a host of other unusual instruments.

(3) Weird instrument edition, continued: [Yet another unusual instrument](#), with fantastic sound.

(4) Robomusic: And now, the ultimate in weird instruments! I had posted this [music video](#), featuring an animated musical instrument, before. I rediscovered it today, when looking at some unusual instruments.

(5) College soccer: On a perfect moonlit night at Harder Stadium, UCSB defeated Big West rival Cal State Fullerton 6-0 (2-0 was the halftime score). After losing its first two Big West games to UC Riverside and UC Irvine, UCSB is now 2-2-0 in conference play. Next up are a game at Cal Poly on Friday 10/14, and a home game against UC Riverside on Saturday 10/22. ([1-minute video](#))

2011/10/10 (Mon.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest on movies and music.

(1) Middle Eastern actors: The October 14/21, 2001, issue of *Entertainment Weekly* features an article, entitled "Don't Tell Anyone Your Real Name or You'll Never Work Again," that focuses on challenges faced by Middle Eastern actors over the past 10 years. "Some have changed their names to land roles; many more have gotten used to auditioning for 'Terrorist No. 4'." The feature opens with a photo showing Iranian-American actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, Egyptian-born comic Ahmed Ahmed, and Palestinian-American actor Thom Bishara (Tarek Bishara).

(2) A mean guitar jam: Guitar legends collaborate in performing "[While My Guitar Gently Weeps](#)" by George Harrison.

(3) Classical music: Shirin and Jonas play a piano version of the [waltz from Faust Opera](#).

(4) Musical talent, grace, and beauty: Anna Vidovic plays Isaac Albeniz's "[Asturias](#)."

(5) Iranian Guilaki music: Accompanied by the Sarv Ensemble, [Naser Masoudi sings](#) in a Toronto concert on September 4, 2011.

(6) Kurdish dance music: [Parviz Rahman Panah on the tar](#), and a techno beat.

2011/10/09 (Sun.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) Public libraries in trouble: California public libraries have received substantial cuts to their book-buying and operating budgets. Many have been forced to close 1-2 days per week and/or to offer shorter hours. These budget cuts are extremely shortsighted. As an avid borrower of books and audiobooks from our town's public library, I am quite dismayed. Barney Brantingham, a local newspaper columnist, put it best when he wrote: "Who needs libraries? Every day, more than a million Californians visit a library, and that's more than [the number of visits to Disneyland in a month]."

(2) Cities of smog: When we think of air pollution, we visualize images of big, industrial cities with lots of cars and factories. Surprisingly, however, some of the most polluted air is found in smaller cities. According to *Time*

magazine (issue of October 10, 2011, p. 13), the world's worst five cities in this regard are Ahwaz (Iran), Ulan Bator (Mongolia), Sanandaj (Iran), Ludhiana (India), and Quetta (Pakistan). The air in both New York and Los Angeles is less than 1/10 as polluted as in Sanandaj, while Mexico City is more than 10 times better than Ahwaz. The city with the cleanest air is Whithorse (Canada).

(3) Inspirational quote of the day: "Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn't matter to me ... Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful ... that's what matters to me." Steve Jobs

(4) Brainy quote of the day: "God gives us people to love and things to use, not things to love and people to use." Anonymous

(5) Humorous quote of the day: "Ten years ago, we had Steve Jobs, Johnny Cash, and Bob Hope. Now we have no Jobs, no Cash, and no Hope." Anonymous

(6) Wiley's dictionary: "Unfriend: What generations have been wanting to do, but didn't have the right verb." [From the B.C. comic strip]

2011/10/08 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest on film music.

(1) Music from James Bond films: A series of musical events, dubbed "Proms," are held by the BBC Concert Orchestra in different venues and with various themes. You will see quite a few more clips from this fantastic series after watching this 12-minute medley of [James Bond theme songs](#), composed and arranged by the late John Barry and David Arnold, and performed at the Royal Albert Hall. Look, in particular, for classics such as "Theme from Schindler's List," "Star Wars, Main Theme," and "Hedwig's Theme from Harry Potter" (all three composed by John Williams).

(2) Incomparable music, master musician: Itzhak Perlman, accompanied by the City of Praga Philharmonic Orchestra, plays the Oscar-winning theme music from ["Schindler's List,"](#) composed by John Williams. Ann Fontanella also plays the theme, while offering an engaging commentary on [her arrangement](#).

(3) A French horn tribute to film music: Now that we are on the subject of film music, listen to Marc Papeghin's rendition of some [classic film songs](#), using a French horn.

2011/10/07 (Fri.): Patchett, Ann, *What Now?* unabridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2008. This book is based on the author's lauded commencement address at Sarah Lawrence College, her alma mater. The book's title represents the uncertainties one faces at various stages of life and after each milestone passed, from applying for college admission to choosing a career, a life partner, and so on. The author's prose is engaging and her advice sound. She counsels modesty and humility, complaining that these old-fashioned virtues are no longer taught in the current educational system that is obsessed with "leadership" and "specialness."

2011/10/06 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to [three US-born scientists](#) "for the discovery of the accelerating expansion of the Universe through observations of distant supernovae," with one half to the first named person below and the other half jointly to the other two.

Saul Perlmutter, Supernova Cosmology Project, Lawrence Berkeley Nat'l Lab. & Univ. of California, Berkeley
Brian P. Schmidt, High-z Supernova Search Team, Australian Nat'l Univ., Weston Creek

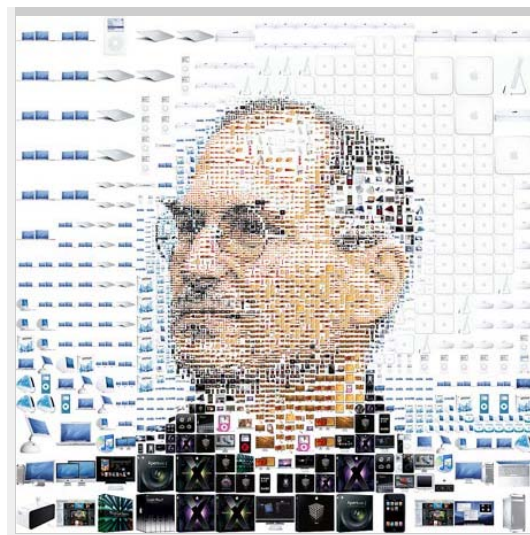
Adam G. Riess, High-z Supernova Search Team, Johns Hopkins Univ. & Space Telescope Sci. Inst., Baltimore

(2) The 2011 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to Professor [Daniel Shechtman](#) of Technion (Israel Institute of Technology) for the discovery of quasicrystals. It is noteworthy that his discovery was inspired, in part, by the mathematically intriguing patterns of Persian mosaics adorning historical monuments in Iran.

(3) Compact History of the World: I am looking forward to the History Channel's "History of the World in Two Hours," subtitled "From the Big Bang to Today: Just the Highlights, Please" (tonight at 10:00). Here's a quote from *New York Times'* review of the program: "No analysis of troop movements in century-old battles here. No who cut off which wife's head in what European monarchy. Just the very-big-picture stuff: creation of complex elements; continental drift; fire; human migration; industrialization [and] how they all fit together."

2011/10/05 (Wed.): RIP Mr. Jobs, and a couple of other items of potential interest.

(1) Steve Jobs dead at 56: Steve Jobs' death from cancer, though expected, came too early (just over a month after he stepped down from his post as Apple Computer's CEO). This makes one wonder whether he chose to end his life before further miseries from cancer. Diehard fans of Apple products are joined by technology enthusiasts everywhere in mourning his death. It remains to be seen whether Apple can maintain its stellar record of innovation without Jobs. His family (wife and three children, including one from a former relationship)



will establish a Web site for those who wish to offer tributes and memories.

(2) College soccer: In an exciting match, the UCSB men's soccer team prevailed over Akron, last year's national college champions and currently ranked 3rd in the nation. Akron scored in the 15th minute, to lead 1-0 at halftime. UCSB scored two goals by the middle of the second half to take the lead. Akron then scored in the 69th minute to tie the game at 2-2. UCSB scored the winning "golden goal" only 33 seconds into the first overtime period.

(3) Gamers crack AIDS puzzle: In less than 10 days, gamers with no background in biochemistry solved a molecular mystery that had baffled AIDS experts for more than a decade. The "Foldit" game allowed on-line players to work out the intricately folded structure of a key enzyme responsible for the proliferation of an HIV-like virus. With the shape of the enzyme known, drug treatments can be developed. [From *Time* magazine, issue of October 3, 2011, p. 16]

2011/10/04 (Tue.): Here are two quotations of potential interest on finance and politics.

(1) The new sandwich generation: "The two biggest pay raises you'll ever get happen the day your youngest child finishes college and moves out of the house and the day you pay off your mortgage. ... At least that's how it used to be. These days, a growing number of Americans are supporting struggling adult children while carrying mortgages deep into their 60s." [From: *Time* magazine, issue of October 3, 2011]

(2) Science must lead the way: "When Rick Perry, who defends teaching creationism in schools, says evolution is merely 'a theory that's out there, it's got some gaps in it,' he's demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of scientific theory. ... What we are seeing in the current presidential race is not so much a clash between religion and science as a fundamental disregard for rational and scientific thinking." Commentary by Lisa Randall, Harvard Univ. Professor of Physics, *Time* magazine, issue of October 3, 2011.

2011/10/03 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest on women's rights.

(1) Mistreatment of women: "Dignity and depravity" is the title of Toni Morrison's touching essay on mistreatment of women (*Newsweek* magazine, issue of September 26, 2011, pp. 42-43). Morrison was inspired by images of a Sudanese women being flogged in a 2010 video: "You fell, but you kept rising. After each cut of the lash into your flesh, you tried to stand; you raised your body up like a counter-whip. It so moved me to see your reactions; I interpreted them as glimmers of hope, of principled defiance."

(2) Best and worst countries for women: In a 4-page pictorial, *Newsweek* magazine (issue of September 26, 2011) lists the 20 best/worst places to be a woman. Topping the best list are Iceland, Sweden, Canada, Denmark, and Finland, with the US appearing in 8th place. The list of worst places begins thus: Chad, Afghanistan, Yemen, Congo, and Mali (Pakistan and Saudi Arabia aren't far behind, at 8th and 19th).

2011/10/02 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Internet censorship: Multiple independent reports from Iran, via Facebook and other channels, indicate that access to the Internet has been almost completely cut off. Many anti-filter schemes have been disabled or have stopped working. It may take a while for Iranian citizens to discover effective ways of getting through, so be patient if you don't hear from family and friends for a while. Already, some tech savvy friends have posted messages to Facebook that show circumvention is feasible.

(2) Modern Kurdish music: Abbas Weisi performs his own song, "Beri Menal." Rap segments and Bollywood-style production set this 8-minute humorous [Kurdish music video](#) apart from others.

(3) Art from human bodies: Cecelia Webber juxtaposes a large number of human bodies to form astonishing images of [flowers and butterflies](#).

2011/10/01 (Sat.): An eerie photo, along with bad news and good news in higher education.

(1) I don't fancy holding this job:
Fixing an antenna atop NYC's Empire

State Building.

(2) The attack of the \$200 textbook: As part of a nationwide movement in the US, students at UCSB protested the **rising cost of textbooks** earlier this week. Though relatively small compared with tuition hikes in recent years, the rise in textbooks prices is stressing student finances in public universities. Students particularly detest the publishers' practice of issuing new editions of textbook with minimal changes, making it impossible for them to take advantage of the used-book market.



(3) Towards free higher education: The preceding story exposes only a small part of the problems with higher education in the US. In fact, all cost components for higher education are rising at alarming rates. But there is some good news as well. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports on a number of developments that might eventually make cheap, maybe even free, higher education feasible. Among entities mentioned in the report is **The Saylor Foundation**, which has embarked on an ambitious program of providing on-line college courses (video lectures) and textbooks. The Saylor Foundation is using some of my class material, with permission, for its CS 301 course on computer architecture.

2011/09/30 (Fri.): Bartlett, Allison Hoover, *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession*, unabridged audiobook (on 5 CDs) read by Judith Brackley, Tantor Audio, 2009.

Theft of rare books, though quite widespread, is generally unknown to those outside the world of rare-book collecting. This is the true story of John Charles Gilkey, who stole rare books (usually via writing bad checks or fraudulently using credit-card numbers that he wrote down when he was a store employee, rather than by snatching) because he loved books and fancied the lifestyle of the rich and famous with their sprawling private libraries.

The author befriended Gilkey and Ken Sanders (book dealer and self-appointed detective, who was as fixated on catching Gilkey as Gilkey was on rare books) to write this intriguing tale: a cat-and-mouse story within the world of literary obsession. Near the end of the author's research, Gilkey seemed as if he was trying to influence the way the story of his life would appear on the printed page. So, the author was no longer simply recording Gilkey's life, but influencing it as well.

The author's descriptions of her visits to bookstores and book fairs are vivid and gripping. Gilkey was ultimately caught, but remained unrepentant. The author informs us that an obsession with book collecting is not the same as the love for reading books. Many collectors don't actually read the books they collect. Rather, they are enthralled by viewing and physically holding first-editions and other rare books or manuscripts. The look, feel, and smell of old books or originals are what they cherish.

If you are a book enthusiast, you will love this detective story, which also delves into the history of book collecting and its allure since the onset of the printing press.

2011/09/29 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest on architecture, entertainment, and sports.

(1) Bold architecture for a bold venture: Spaceport America, commissioned and funded by the state of New Mexico and designed by British architects Foster and Partners, will house the operations center of the commercial space-flight company Virgin Galactic. The iconic structure's design is aimed at achieving the US Green Building Council's Gold Standard. Given its size and the absence of other landmarks in its vicinity, the building will be readily visible from space. [Source: *Engineering & Technology* magazine, issue of October 2011, pp. 32-38]



(2) London's tallest building: The 72-story glass-covered tower, known as **the Shard**, is London's (and Europe's) tallest building. Its design represents architect Renzo Piano's idea to create "a shard of glass, a spire tower of angled planes of glass that will reflect light and the changing patterns of the sky so that it will change according to the weather and seasons." [From: *Engineering and Technology* magazine, October 2011, pp. 66-

68.]

(3) Persian humor: **Mr. Haloo pokes fun** at Iranian authorities' directive to news media to use "sarataan-e sineh" in lieu of "sarataan-e pestaan" to refer to "breast cancer."

(4) Ukraine beats Iran 2-1 in women's futsal: **Seven-minute video highlights** of a friendly women's futsal (arena soccer) match between Ukraine and Iran. The Iranian goalie makes some nice saves.

2011/09/28 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Jewish New Year! As we observe Rosh Hashana ("head of the year") tonight to mark the beginning of the year 5772 on the Jewish calendar, I offer my best wishes for peace and harmony among peoples of all races and spiritual leanings.

(2) Three scientists of Iranian origins honored: According to the White House, "President Obama today named 94 researchers as recipients of the Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor bestowed by the United States government on science and engineering professionals in the early stages of their independent research careers." Among those honored are three scientists of Iranian origins: Amir Avestimehr (Cornell U.), Ali Khademhosseini (Harvard Medical School), Yasamin Mostofi (U. New Mexico).

Iranian.com carries a story on these scientists with their photos.

(3) A classic by George and Ira Gershwin: Hindi Zahra, Moroccan-born singer based in Paris, does a fantastic job covering the classic song "**The Man I Love**," with some Arabic lyrics.

(4) Hidden camera prank: Witnessing the **crash of a NASA satellite**.

2011/09/27 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on engineering and technology.

(1) Facebook bugs: "I found a bug, but did not report him, because he asked to be my friend." Caption of a British cartoon, in the wake of Facebook's offer of cash rewards to hackers in a "Bugs Bounty" scheme.

(2) Coverage of the 2012 Olympics games: According to *Engineering & Technology* magazine (issue of October 2011, p. 8), BBC is planning to showcase Super Hi-Vision technology in covering selected 2012 Olympics events. Even though the technology (which is claimed to be 16 times better than HDTV) won't be available to consumers by next summer, BBC will use specially set up 15m-high screens in London to display the events to people who couldn't obtain tickets to see them up close. Additionally, certain Olympics events will be broadcast in 3D.

(3) Japan's new green energy program: According to *Engineering & Technology* magazine (issue of October 2011, p. 6), Japan has approved a program to improve investment in green energy, as part of its efforts to recover from the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Besides plants directly affected by the quake/tsunami, other nuclear power plants were idled, and their restart delayed, owing to severe erosion of public confidence. As a result, costly oil and gas imports soared, worsening the economic impact of the disaster.

(4) Japan's super-sized display company: Toshiba, Hitachi, and Sony will merge their operations in small and medium-size displays, in an effort to create the world's largest display company that can compete with South Korea and Taiwan. A government-backed investment fund will pitch in more than \$2.6 B for 70% interest in the new venture, with each of the named companies holding a 10% interest. [From: *Engineering & Technology*, October 2011, p. 16]

2011/09/26 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest about Persian music.

(1) Modern Persian music: Maryam Jalali performs her hit song "Dar Aan Nafas" ("In That Breath") in this concert **video clip** from 2004.

(2) Modern Persian music: Israeli singer Rita performs "**Shah Doomad**," an old Persian song made famous by Vigen. Also check out her rendition of "**Shaneh**," originally performed by Pouran.

2011/09/25 (Sun.): Here are two items of potential interest about science and education.

(1) Faster than light? Not quite yet: The recent announcement by CERN scientists that they have clocked neutrinos traveling faster than the speed of light is **meeting skepticism** from the scientific community. Hints of neutrinos travelling faster than light first emerged in 2007, but so far the evidence is not considered convincing. The CERN scientists know that their results are surprising and unlikely to be correct. However, their own efforts over four years have failed to reveal any errors in the experimental data or subsequent analysis. So, they have opened up their data and conclusions to the scientific community and have humbly asked for help in confirming or refuting their findings.

(2) E-textbooks in South Korea: According to *Prism*, the magazine of the American Society for Engineering Education (issue of September 2011, p. 20), South Korean elementary schools will go completely book-free by 2014, when all their textbooks will be digitized and made available on a variety of devices, from smart phones and TV sets to tablets and computers. Middle and high schools will follow suit a year later. Korea's "Smart Education Plan" also envisions digitizing supplementary material associated with textbooks and holding all

nationwide academic exams on-line. Other than saving forests and money, a lot of back problems can be avoided for our children if the US followed suit.

2011/09/24 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest about international affairs.

(1) The right woman for an important job: Michelle Bachelet, Chile's former president with the highest approval rating in that country's history, has been **tapped by the UN** to head its Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known simply as "UN Women." She is determined to use the limited resources of the UN entity to give a stronger voice to women worldwide, while simultaneously raising the entity's profile and its funding.

(2) Brazil's plan for taking a quantum leap: By awarding 75,000 scholarships to native students who enroll in world's top universities and study subjects of strategic national importance, Brazil is trying to rapidly expand the number of its science and technology experts, according to **Time magazine**. Currently, more than a third of the world's R&D takes place in Asia, in part because 127K Chinese, 100K Indian, and 72K South Korean students are enrolled at US universities (Brazil has only 9K).

2011/09/23 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Persian poetry: This beautiful Persian poem from Sheikh Baha'i, entitled "**True Worship**," suggests that to open a door for a destitute person is a nobler form of worship than praying, fasting, pilgrimage, and all other religious observances.

(2) Modern Persian music: Farzad Arjmand performs "**Koocheh**" ("Alley"), a song that he wrote based on a poem by the same name by Fereidoon Moshiri.

(3) The most expensive one-byte mistake: The "Year-2000" or Y2K problem was created early in the course of computer history, when the high cost of storage led to the regrettable decision of using the date format yy/mm/dd, instead of yyyy/mm/dd, in computer files and databases. The saving of about one byte per date was, in retrospect, not worth all the subsequent problems. In the 1970s, the C language designers committed a similar faux pas, with perhaps even greater consequences, when they decided to identify a string of characters with its starting address in memory and not with an address/length pair. Omitting the length information saves about one byte (use of a special "null" terminator character to designate the end of the string, instead of a 2-byte length field). Unfortunately, this innocent-looking optimization has led to performance loss and security headaches in modern digital systems that no longer do byte-by-byte operations and data transfers. Quoting a **Communications of the ACM article** (Vol. 59, No. 4, pp. 42-44, September 2011), whose title matches that of my post: "Despite 15 years of attention, over- and underrunning string buffers is still a preferred attack vector for criminals, and far too often it pays off."

2011/09/22 (Thu.): White, Betty, *If You Ask Me (and of Course You Won't)*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Books on Tape, 2011.

This is Betty White's fifth book. Why did she write it? Because "*Everybody Else Has Got a Book*," as Dick Van Dyke cynically titles his 2011 memoir (a title, he says, that was rejected by his publisher due to a lack of a sense of humor). Given that the book under review isn't Ms. White's first, a more appropriate answer would be "because books by celebrity authors are guaranteed brisk sales, regardless of the contents." It is a shame that well-meaning celebrities are exploited by their agents and by publishers when they are encouraged to write mundane, inconsequential books. This is a fairly thin book that contains a number of short, superficial essays, most on topics or events that would be of interest only to the most ardent Betty White worshipper. A few of the observations are funny or insightful. For example, I loved it when she made the statement that she is no "cougar," preferring men who are at least a few years older than her, continuing with the punch line that at age 89, this preference does not leave her a lot of choices! I love Betty White and watched her in awe as she recently hosted "Saturday Night Live," following a campaign on Facebook to have her do the gig. But this is definitely a book that exploits Ms. White and her admirers.

2011/09/21 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) BBC Persian under attack: Iran retaliates against BBC Persian for its airing of a documentary on Khamenei. This is a **very revealing program**, not about BBC but about IRI, for the following reasons. (a) The producer is afraid to even show a small segment of an actual BBC program; you hear single words and very short phrases, or the sound is muffled. (b) The most negative thing that they have to say about BBC Persian is that it is run by Baha'is or that it hires Baha'i hosts. Presumably the same Baha'is broadcast all the programs in favor of Khomeini in 1978 and 1979. (c) They don't ask themselves whether any British citizens will be arrested after the airing of this program, as was done to six Iranian citizens by IRI following the airing of the Khamenei documentary.

(2) Persian music: Faramrz Assef performs a disco version of the classic song "**Raftam ke Raftam**" ("I've Left Forever") made famous by Marzieh (music by Ali Tajvidi, lyrics by Moeini Kermanshahi). This is actually not a

cover of the old Tajvidi/Kermanshahi song, but a new song based on it.

(3) Amazing Photoshop feat: This is **one of the most amazing photos** that I have ever seen.

(4) For lovers of the Persian culture: While searching for the lyrics to a particular Persian song, I chanced upon a wonderful Web site set up in honor of **Kiana Vahdati**, a talented Iranian student who passed away at age 19 about four years ago. The site contains the lyrics to a large number of Persian songs, each with complete credit to the songwriter and lyricist. This impressive site also contains bios of Iranian musicians, book reviews, and a wide array of other information.

2011/09/20 (Tue.): Here are two items about Iran's rulers and two math humor pieces.

(1) Put your lash away: **This essay**, written in Persian, features three prominent female political prisoners in Iran (Nasrin Setoodeh, Faranak Farid, and Somayeh Tohidloo), each one treated inhumanely by the Islamic Republic of Iran's justice system. As I write this note, I am watching Irshad Manji, author of *Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom*, argue for the universality of human dignity and the unacceptability of closing our eyes to human mistreatment under the guise of tolerance and multiculturalism.

(2) Six arrested in connection with Khamenei documentary: After BBC Persian aired a 60-minute documentary **film on Ali Khamenei**, depicting his path to becoming Iran's Supreme Leader and his methods of neutralizing political rivals, six unnamed Iranian **filmmakers have been arrested** and charged with working for BBC Persian service, which is banned in Iran.

(3) Math humor: Creative excuses for not turning in math homework:

My calculator is solar-powered and it was cloudy.

A four-dimensional dog ate it.

Someone already published it, so there was no sense in me writing it up.

I had too much pi and got sick.

I could only get arbitrarily close to my textbook.

(4) Math humor: This problem was posed by mathematician Franz Rellich (1906-1955) after his students at Gottingen University complained that his calculus course had no practical applications.

A male student is walking behind a girl with shapely legs. What distance should he maintain from the girl in order to maximize his viewing angle of her legs? The girl's skirt hem is 0.6 m above the ground and the student's eyes are at the height of 1.78 m. (Answer for checking your work: about 1.45 m)

2011/09/19 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Importance of rare earth elements: Rare earths are the silent heroes of modern technology, and unlike elements such as silicon and lithium, which are constantly in the news, seldom appear in our mass media headlines. The 17 elements, dubbed "rare earths" when they were first isolated from actually rare minerals, are neither "earth" nor "rare." Rather, they are mixed in small concentrations into rocks nearly everywhere, but they are more abundant in China. In this **May 2010 article**, *Popular Mechanics* reviews 4 rare earth elements and why they will become even more important as time goes by.

Lanthanum: About 10 lbs of this element is present in every Prius hybrid car (in its battery).

Europium: LED-based lights use it, as do a number of other energy-efficient light sources.

Erbium: A bit of this element helps optical fibers and surgical lasers operate more efficiently.

Neodymium: Allows us to build strong magnets in tiny sizes, for hard drives, headphones, etc.

(2) The 2011-12 academic year: UCSB's fall quarter officially began yesterday, with classes starting on 9/22.

New and returning students flowed into town over the weekend and our streets, stores, and restaurants are bustling with activity. Here we go again with another academic year!

(3) Charlie Sheen roast: Comedy Central will air it tonight at 10:00 PM. Quips *Entertainment Weekly*: "If only they meant 'roast' literally."

(4) Jazz music: This **Jazzy performance** of Eden Ahbez's classic song "Nature Boy," made famous by Nat King Cole, is beautiful and peaceful. Jackie Jazz Smith sings, accompanied by Walt Scott on the piano. It tells the story of a boy who wondered very far, only to learn that: "The greatest thing, you will ever learn, is just to love, and be loved in return."

2011/09/18 (Sun.): Handler, Chelsea, *Are You There Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2008.

I came to know the author from a few of her appearances on "The Tonight Show." I have also watched her late-night show "Chelsea Lately" a handful of times. This R-rated (perhaps even NC-17) author offers a unique brand of humor, which can be very engaging at times, but can also become boring and predictable due to striking the same chord too many times. This book, which is marketed as "a collection of personal essays," covers some of Handler's dealings with a boyfriend, her very colorful dad, a few friends, and household help, embellishing some of the stories for maximum comic effect. The title is a parody of Judy Blume's novel, *Are You There God? It's*

Me, Margaret. Some parts of the narrative are hilarious, with examples including her use of the greeting "Hi, I'm Yelsea," when calling a Spanish-speaking maid of hers, and her prison experience after being arrested for drunken driving. Listener fatigue sets in, however, by the sixth and final CD, which contains an account of Handler's vacationing with her dad in Costa Rica, pretending to be a couple on their honeymoon to get a free flight upgrade to first class.

2011/09/17 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) A century's worth of styles: This interesting and well-made [dance video](#) reviews 100 years of East London style in 100 seconds.
- (2) Just do it: An amusing [short film](#), with the message that you shouldn't wait for your dream mate to bump into you. But please don't take the advice too literally!
- (3) Lake Urmia in its glory days: Lake Urmia (formerly Rezaiyeh) has been in the news over the past few weeks, owing to Azeri Iranians protesting against government inaction, as the lake slowly dries up. This 1975 ["Wild Kingdom" documentary](#) is about colorful flamingos that used to return to the lake every spring, without anyone knowing here they came from.
- (4) Today's language faux pas: In a book review that I chanced upon today, the (obviously nonprofessional) writer enthused that the author's style "closely matches my wife and I's sense of humor." No one would doubt that "I's sense of humor" is grammatically incorrect. But the statement above somehow does not appear as wrong. Would you accept my daughter and I's invitation to comment on this issue?
- (5) NBC turns into ANBC: In a program entitled "A Day in the Life of Iran's President," Ann Curry Shadowed Ahmadinejad to chronicle his daily activities, beginning at 5:00 AM. Critics have charged that Iran's government could not have produced a better propaganda piece itself. Here is a [5-minute sample](#).

2011/09/16 (Fri.): Here are three news stories of potential interest about Iran.

- (1) Flogging of a student in Iran: Somayeh Tohidloo, doctoral student of sociology at Tehran University and political activist, received 50 lashes at Tehran's Evin Prison as part of her sentence, which also included a suspended (with posting of bail) one-year prison term. After the flogging, she posted a touching blog entry and a Facebook status, both of which appear in this [news story](#) (in Persian). I must add that the flogging was apparently "symbolic," and Ms. Tohidloo has indicated that she suffered no pain. Yet the humiliation and psychological abuse is no less in a symbolic flogging, as evident from the victim's blog and Facebook posts.
- (2) Sheepecote schoolhouse: [This video](#) shows a one-room school near the Iranian city of Masjed Soleiman. The classroom, formerly a sheepecote, is dark and cold. I am sure some IRI government official will look at this video and criticize the fact that boys and girls are sitting on the same bench.
- (3) Human rights in Iran: Abdol-Karim Lahiji, lawyer and human rights activist, speaks at the 2011 Friends of Persian Culture Conference in Chicago. In this [26-minute video](#), Lahiji stresses the plight of Baha'is and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iran. His talk starts 4 minutes into the video.

2011/09/15 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Promoting math phobia: Retailer Forever 21, which has done brisk business in selling a T-shirt with the insignia ["Allergic to Algebra,"](#) has pulled the shirt from its Web site under pressure from various groups. Previously, JCPenny suffered a fiasco for its T-shirt message "I'm too pretty to do homework so my brother has to do it for me."
- (2) Iranian-American actress: Robin Roberts of ABC News interviews [Shohreh Aghdashloo](#) on her "Flash Forward" role and other career accomplishments.
- (3) President Obama and Islam (continued): [This video](#) is being posted and reposted on Facebook and elsewhere to convey the message that Obama is a closet Muslim, as if being a Muslim is an unforgivable sin in itself. It is extremely unfortunate that Obama's statements of tolerance, peace, and respect, notions that have been lacking in the US presidential politics in the recent past, are being used (mostly out of context) to spread hatred and bigotry.
- (4) Virtual tours of world cities: On [this Web site](#), you can get a virtual tour of many of the world's cities. Please be aware that content and quality is quite variable. For example, Tehran is represented by a rather poorly made 6-minute video tour.
- (5) The siblings effect: Listening to an NPR program segment while driving this morning, I heard about an experiment in which men and women were asked to participate in brief conversations, much as in speed dating, and were then asked to rate the other side with regard to desirability as a mate. The study established that men with sisters, and women with brothers, were consistently judged more desirable as mates than those with no siblings of the opposite sex.

2011/09/14 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) The big business of dietary supplements: According to John Cloud, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of

September 12, 2011) Americans spend an estimated \$28 billion a year on vitamins and other dietary supplements. The products are totally unregulated and, in most cases, their benefits are dubious. As part of his research for the article, the author used a company that, based on a questionnaire you fill out about your eating habits and medical history, tailors a supplement regimen for you. In the case of the author, this regimen entailed some 22 pills per day.

(2) US state colleges/universities in deep trouble: According to an [Associated Press report](#), the downward spiral of available funding and unprecedented tuition hikes, temporarily slowed down in 2009 and 2010 by the infusion of stimulus money, is putting state colleges and universities at a point of no return with regard to maintaining quality.

(3) Preschool is the new college: Writing in [Time magazine](#) (issue of September 12, 2011), Joel Stein describes the rigors of placing your 2-year-old in a fashionable preschool. His wife went on guided tours of 18 preschools, more than the number of colleges visited by most high-schoolers. They had to fill out long application forms (containing questions such as "What's your word use for bowel movement and urination?") and submit to interviews. They were eventually rejected by some of their top choices and settled for a preschool at a synagogue near their house that had plenty of space.

2011/09/13 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Teasing the piano: [Saman Ehteshami](#) mixes classical music with Persian dance tunes, transitioning between them effortlessly (reminds me of the famous [Swan Lake parody](#) by Parviz Sayyad and Mary Apick).

(2) Cows love jazz: Iranians use the word "gaav" (cow) to refer to an utterly stupid being. Well, [this video](#) shows that cows are more refined than certain humans, at least when it comes to their taste in music.

(3) News of the weird: According to [Time magazine](#) (issue of September 12, 2011), there were 4 candidates in the recent presidential election in Singapore, all with the surname "Tan." Tony Tan won the 4-man race.

(4) Train going through a vegetable market: It seems like the merchants in Thailand's Mae Klong vegetable market have a bet going on to see who can set up his/her fare closer to the train track without getting run over. Evidently, they have to perform this [dodging exercise](#) 8 times per day, so they have become quite efficient at it.

(5) Dick Cheney's memoir: "The narrative is revisionist at heart, aspiring to win back a political class that turned against Cheney ... Yet Cheney is reluctant to open the book on what he knows. In that sense his memoir becomes a war on history, rewriting the public record with lawyerly arguments that rest on truncated facts and dubious evidence." Barton Gellman, writing in [Time magazine](#), issue of September 12, 2011.

2011/09/12 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Freedom of speech, and decency: Paul Krugman has started a firestorm by [his blog post](#) entitled "The Years of Shame" on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. I like Krugman's ideas on economics, endorse his right to speak his mind on any topic, do not fault him for disabling comments on his blog post (as others have done), and happen to agree with his posted criticism of US foreign policy over the past decade. However, his posting of the critical comments on 9/11 does not pass the decency test. I do not fast for religious reasons and do not have a high opinion of people who think that they can please God with their fasting. However, I would not take a bite out of my sandwich in public when I am surrounded by people who do fast during Ramadan or Yom Kippur.

(2) The Oz Diet: Actually, Dr. Oz does not offer a specific diet in this [Time magazine article](#), but some general guidelines on what we should eat, and why. He begins with the observation that "our triumph of nutritional ingenuity has had an unfortunate inverse effect. A dietary free-for-all, in the U.S. and elsewhere, is producing not the healthiest generation in history but one in steady decline, with epidemics of obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetics."

(3) Dick Cheney's memoir: "The narrative is revisionist at heart, aspiring to win back a political class that turned against Cheney ... Yet Cheney is reluctant to open the book on what he knows. In that sense his memoir becomes a war on history, rewriting the public record with lawyerly arguments that rest on truncated facts and dubious evidence." Barton Gellman, writing in [Time magazine](#), issue of September 12, 2011.

(4) Grandparents' answering machine message: [There are so many posted versions of this grandparents' answering machine greeting message, both in English and Persian, that I don't know where credit should go. So, I attribute it to "anonymous."] Even though I am not a grandparent yet, I can already identify with this. Here we go!

Thank you so much for your call. We are not available to answer the phone now, but please leave a message after the beep.

If you are one of our children, press 1 and then select the option from 1 to 5 in order of your arrival, so we know who is calling.

If you need us to stay with your children, press 2.

If you want to borrow the car, press 3.

If you want us to wash your clothes and do ironing, press 4.

If you want your children to sleep here tonight, press 5.

If you want us to pick up the kids from school, press 6.

If you want us to prepare a meal for the weekend and deliver it to your home, press 7

If you want to come to eat here, press 8.

If you need money, press 9.

If you want to invite us to dinner, or take us to the theater, start talking; we are listening!

2011/09/11 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day, for 9/11's 10th anniversary: "What did people learn from the 9/11 episode? Did they learn that some events, owing to their dynamics, stand largely outside the realm of the predictable? No. Did they learn the built-in defect of conventional wisdom? No. What did they figure out? They learned precise rules for avoiding Islamic prototerrorists and tall buildings." Nassim N. Taleb, on p. xxi of *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, expounding on the human inability to make sense of rare events (a review of the book, which I am reading now, will be forthcoming).

(2) Imagining an alternate world: If the 9/11 attacks had not happened (i.e., they had been botched or prevented), the world might have looked quite different today, but not necessarily in the way that most people might think. In an interesting column published in the special 9/11 issue of *Newsweek magazine* (dated 2011/09/12), Niall Ferguson examines this hypothetical "what-if" scenario and imagines some possibilities that are significantly worse than today's situation.

(3) Facebook to be a target of hackers on Nov. 5: According to a [YouTube video](#) posted by "Anonymous" (a hacking group), on November 5, 2011, unspecified harm will come to Facebook because of alleged sins, including the selling of users' private information, regardless of the privacy settings (that provide only an illusion of privacy). The audio is difficult to understand, but the script is provided under the video.

(4) College soccer: In a double-overtime soccer game played at UCSB's Harder Stadium this afternoon, UCSB tied Villanova 0-0 to keep its undefeated record for the season (4-0-1). Both teams had good scoring opportunities, including a missed penalty kick by UCSB. Lack of scoring was disappointing, because UCSB has scored in all previous games (a total of 9 goals in 4 games, conceding only 3 goals).

(5) Persian music: Pari Zangeneh sings "[Iran-e Maa](#)" ("Our Iran") in operatic style.

(6) Classical music: Nice performance of "[Danse Macabre](#)" by ahang101, aka Shirin.

2011/09/09 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) President Obama's jobs program: Both *Inside Higher Ed* and *Chronicle of Higher Education* comment on Obama's proposed jobs program. *IHE* reports: "The \$450 billion plan that President Obama unveiled Thursday night to try to stimulate job growth and the economy would provide \$5 billion in funds to build and renovate facilities and other infrastructure at community colleges and tribal colleges." This \$5B renovation plan was not mentioned directly in the President's speech but has been confirmed by the White House. *CHE* reports that the proposed spending on community colleges meshes well with Obama's priorities: "The president made community colleges a centerpiece of his higher-education agenda shortly after he was inaugurated, proposing a \$12-billion program that would rebuild crumbling community-college facilities, increase the number of two-year students who graduate and transfer to four-year colleges, improve remedial education, and forge stronger ties between colleges and employers."

(2) Persian poetry recitation contest: Seven-year-old girl does a great job of [reciting poems](#) from memory, when prompted with specific words.

(3) College soccer: In an exciting soccer game played at UCSB's Harder Stadium tonight, UCSB defeated West Virginia 2-0 to keep its perfect record for the season (4-0-0) and to earn a chance for improving its national ranking from the current 6th position.

2011/09/08 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Flash mob, Iranian style: Azeri Iranians risk arrest and humiliation by [dancing](#) in an outdoor public event in Tehran. Isn't it amazing how a simple act of defiance, an act that would not even be noticeable in a free society, brings such comfort and joy?

(2) Music for lazy summer days: To celebrate the end of summer, *Newsweek* magazine presents a capsule review of "The Songs of Summer" for the past five decades in its September 5, 2011, issue. Here are the most popular summer songs. [[Part 1, 1960s-1980s](#)] [[Part 2, 1990s-2000s](#)]

1960s: Tossin' and Turnin', Bobby Lewis.

1970s: Shadow Dancing, Andy Gibb.

1980s: Endless Love, Diana Ross.

1990s: Macarena (Bayside Boys Mix), Los Del Rio.

2000s: I Gotta Feeling, The Black Eyed Peas.

Try to guess which of the 5 songs above was the most popular overall.

(3) On Steve Jobs and Apple: "Who's going to preside over whatever comes after the iPhone and iPad ... ? And if the next iThing fails, will that leader come right back and introduce the iThingAfter?" Alan Deutsschman, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of September 5, 2011, on the leadership transition at Apple Computer.

2011/09/07 (Wed.): Chatterjee, Kingshuk, *'Ali Shari'ati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran*, 274 pp., Palgrave/Macmillan, 2011.

[Note 1: This review is available on Iranian.com, with reader comments and a clarification from me.]

[Note 2: I have used the same spelling for names as the book's author, mainly to reduce confusion when passages from the book are quoted.]

Many books have been published about Iran and Islam over the past three decades. I have studied a dozen or so such books, and have written reviews for some of them, including *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance*, by Shabnam J. Holliday, which I reviewed a little over a month ago (see blog entry for 2011/07/22).

This one, written by an assistant professor of history at Calcutta University, is quite enlightening. The book consists of an introduction, seven numbered chapters, and a conclusion, and it ends with two appendices, on the history of Shi'ism and Shari'ati's writings/lectures, and a glossary of Arabic and Persian terms. The book has an index, but it is rather incomplete. For example, neither "Safavid (Shi'i)" nor "Women (in Islam)" has an index entry.

Part of the book's charm, compared with those by Iranian writers, is the author's detachment from the various political groups that stand to gain from one or another interpretation of sociopolitical events leading to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The down side of a non-Iranian author is the inevitable inaccuracies in translation and transliteration. For example, constitutionalists are called "mashruteh-khwahis" rather than "mashruteh-khwahs" [p. 31] and Shari'ati's lecture series "What is Islam?" is referred to as "Islam che ast?" [p. 86]. There are also problems in the book's editing and proofreading, as there are numerous instances of redundant or repeated terms/phrases throughout the text. Setting these criticisms aside, I did learn a great deal from this book.

Throughout the Pahlavi era (the reign of Reza Shah, who came to power by overthrowing the Qajars, and his son Mohammad Reza, who took over in 1941 when World War II allies forced his father to abdicate, and was kept in power via a CIA-led coup against the popular government of Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953), the West had abundant influence in Iran. For example, Reza Shah's abdication followed a BBC propaganda blitz, whose success took even the British by surprise [p. 34].

Tensions between religious fundamentalists, who believe in the primacy of Islam, and secular forces, that focus on Iranianism, while also allowing a role (though not a primary one) for Islam, has been part of the political scene in Iran for at least a century. To this date, the relative virtues of pre-Islamic vs. post-Islamic Iran are being hotly debated. Even Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was ambivalent about secularization. While his father pursued harsh policies aimed at removing the outward symbols of religiosity from society, MRP rolled back some components of the secularization agenda, in an effort to gain popularity [p. 40]. In this approach, he was driven, in part, by his fear of communism [p. 48].

Opposition to the Shah fell under three general groups or coalitions: Constitutionalists, led by Mohammad Mossadegh, Marxists who had Jalal Al-e Ahmad as a key spokesperson, and Islamists personified by Ruhollah Khomeini [p. 49]. The author elaborates on these three opposing forces during the Pahlavi era in Chapter 2. Even Mossadegh and his followers, the first of the three opposition groups just mentioned, acknowledged Islam as a force to be reckoned with and developed a narrative in this regard. Mossadegh argued that after the initial "epoch of revelation and inspiration," during which divine and infallible interpretation of God's guidance prevailed, the clergy kept themselves within the restraints of the laws made by legislators, rather than discovered or interpreted by fuqaha [p. 50]. He is quoted as saying: "I am an Iranian and a Muslim, and I shall fight as long as I am alive, against anything that threatens Islam and Iran" [p. 53]. Mossadegh's downfall started when the common agenda that held secular and religious forces together fell apart. In this separation, Shari'ati took the side of Mossadegh, not Kashani, who represented the religious front [p. 76].

The second opposition group, exemplified by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, was more accommodating of the clergy, allowing them some influence, if not participation. Al-e Ahmad is often characterized as a communist-turned-Islamist, but some still doubt his sincerity in embracing Islam, rather than simply using it as a tool for mobilizing the masses [p. 62]. In fact, his praise of Israel made him quite suspect in this regard: "For me as an easterner, Israel is a model, better than any other, of how to deal with the West. How to extract from its industries ... how to take ammunition from it and spend the capital thus obtained to advance the country" [p. 63]. In his magnum opus, *Gharbzadegi (Westoxification)*, Al-e Ahmad writes: "We have failed to preserve our own historical and cultural character in the face of the onslaught of the machine. Indeed, we have been defeated. We have failed to take a resolute stand against this contemporary monster. Until we comprehend the essence, basis and philosophy of the western civilization, by only emulating the west outwardly and formally (embracing its

machines) we shall be like the ass going about in a lion's skin" [p. 60]. Admitting that we need to take certain things, but not everything, from the West, Al-e Ahmad continues: "From the west ... we are looking for technology. Technology we have to import. We will also learn the science that goes with it. That in itself is not western; it is universal."

The influence of the third opposition group, led by Khomeini and other clerics in his camp, is more recent. "The theory of a relentless struggle by the 'ulema for 'ten decades' is mostly a myth." It was Khomeini "who replaced this quietist orthodoxy [that prevailed till then] with a dynamic one, enunciating a doctrine of activist Islam" [p. 64].

Unlike Al-e Ahmad, "Shari'ati issued almost a blanket denunciation of the 'ulema ... for having successfully robbed Islam of its dynamism by confining it to a deadening legalist system" [p. 2]. Beginning with Chapter 3, the author transitions from the three opposition groups just discussed to the role played by 'Ali Shari'ati in the formation of the school of thought that brought about the current Islamic regime in Iran. By combining his views, shaped at Sorbonne, with Islamic concepts and terminology, Shari'ati bridged the social divide between the traditional and modern segments of Iran's youth, appealing to a broader spectrum of the society than anyone else [p. 117]. The fact that Shari'ati's thoughts were influenced by Western thinkers was held against him by various opponents. "Subsequent claims by Shari'ati's adherents of his familiarity with people like Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre seem more to be exaggerations of casual acquaintances than facts, but the impact that the intellectual ambience of Paris in the 1960s had on Shari'ati was undeniable" [p. 77].

In time, Shari'ati's reputation spread and his lectures and writings became highly popular, leading SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, to intensify its monitoring efforts that had begun immediately following his return to Iran and imprisonment for his involvement in anti-Shah demonstrations in Europe. For much of his career, Shari'ati avoided direct criticism of the regime, opting instead for an emphasis on the human element [p. 100]. When Shari'ati began to criticize the religious leadership in his lectures, SAVAK seized upon the chance of using him "as a stick with which to beat the 'ulema." This perhaps explains why Shari'ati was allowed to take on a teaching position at Mashhad University, despite his opposition and imprisonment. The Shah later came to regret this leniency and completely banned Shari'ati's lectures in the early 1970s [p. 101]. Following the Shah's intensified crackdown on all opposition groups in the early to mid 1970s, Shari'ati was imprisoned again in 1973, put under house arrest in 1975, and eventually left Iran in secret in 1977, dying of natural causes the same year.

At various points during his life, Shari'ati was distrusted by the Shi'i clergy for his unorthodox religious views. For example, in response to a question in 1969, "[Shari'ati] argued that in the early days of Islam, when the meaning of Islam was not clear to most Muslims, they needed guidance from those entrusted with preserving the faith and its values—hence, the Shi'i concept of *visayat*. However, once Muslims became more aware of their faith and its values, the trusteeship of the faith devolves upon the community as a whole. The ummah then has the responsibility to elect its own leaders to execute that trust—hence, the Sunni principle of *showra*" [p. 103]. "I as an individual human being must choose whether to move forward with history and accelerate its determined course with the force of knowledge and science, or to stand with ignorance, egoism and opportunism in the face of history and be crushed" [p. 94].

Another example that infuriated the clergy was Shari'ati's statement that "Islam is not a new religion because, in fact, throughout history, there has only been one religion. ... The Prophet of Islam was appointed to complete the movement which has existed throughout history in opposition to deception, falsehood, polytheism, discord, hypocrisy, aristocracy and class differences" [p. 107].

In a third and final example, Shari'ati's criticism of the clergy is stern and direct: "Under the guise of observing and honoring religious rites, in the name of glorifying great religious personalities, and behind the facade of seeking blessings and sanctification from the Holy Qur'an, these actors hide the true essence of the Qur'an and the true teachings of the leaders of Islam by preventing the people from understanding them" [p. 115].

Interestingly, two versions of Shari'ati's writings are in circulation. "Those who support the status quo in favor of the state choose to highlight Shari'ati's role as an ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, and expunge much of Shari'ati's critiques of the clergy; those who seek to reform the establishment in a more liberal direction highlight his opposition to authoritarianism and clerical predominance in Islamic society" [p. 79]. Whereas Al-e Ahmad criticized pseudo-Westerners for promoting a false image of the West that did not exist even in the West itself, Shari'ati went a step further by pointing to the clergy as willing participants in this deception [p. 115].

Shari'ati formulated his thoughts in terms of the trilogies *istibdad/istismar/istihmar* (despotism/exploitation/duping) or *zar/zoor/tazvir* (gold, representing bazaar's merchant class, force, exerted by those holding political power, and deception, wielded by the clergy) [p. 93].

In a letter to Khomeini, Morteza Motahhari, who had taken on the role of attacking Shari'ati on behalf of the clergy, wrote: "[It] is not deniable that the only issue that the different groups—from the regime's supporters to the communists, the *Munafiqin-i Khalq* ... and some seemingly religious groups who are pro Shari'ati—all share this same desire, that is to damage fundamentally the 'alim and to remove this obstacle from the scene ... As a

consequence of his [Shari'ati's] teachings, a cleric is, in the eyes of today's youth, worse than a security officer" [p. 149]. Motahhari was conflicted about non-clerical Islamists: He liked the fact that some such people, including those educated in the West, were representing Islam with a modern style that appealed to the youth, but he had misgivings about marginalization of the clergy by those who had an inadequate training in Islamic sciences [pp. 150-151].

Shari'ati was equally disliked by the communist Tudeh party and its sympathizers, who branded him as "an agent of the US, the CIA and the Pahlavi regime" [p. 117] and by the clergy, who considered him as "both ignorant and irreligious" [p. 118]. One of Shari'ati's barbs against the clergy was the distinction he made between Alavid (associated with Imam 'Ali) and Safavid Shi'isms. He maintained that the latter version, which was introduced to counter the power of the Ottoman Empire by making the Iranian Islam different and unique, was what the clergy practiced. According to him, the Safavid clergy invented a hadith about the marriage between Imam Hossein and the daughter of the last Sassanid king, Yazdegard, "to fuse the concept of monarchy with Imamate. ... Instead of becoming involved in politics, Safavid fuqaha focused on writing about menstruation, ejaculation, the rituals of going to the toilet, ordinances concerning slavery and the responsibilities of the slave to the slave owner" [pp. 137-138]. And they invented the notions of taqiyeh (dissimulation), taqlid (emulation), and inteazar (waiting for the hidden imam to reemerge) to justify their inaction [p. 138].

One of the more serious criticisms leveled at Shari'ati by the educated elites arose from his nearly total lack of attention to the roles of women in society. Of the 37 volumes of his collected works, only one was devoted to women (titled "Zan"), and he gave one lecture, "Fatima is Fatima," on the topic, in which he focused on Fatima as the dutiful daughter and the silently suffering wife, something that did not please women's rights advocates [p. 164]. Shari'ati's friends and other supporters have claimed that his lack of emphasis on women's issues was due to his not wanting to offend the wide spectrum of people, including many traditional families, who attended his lectures, and that he treated men and women equally in his private life [p. 164].

In the end, even though Shari'ati's efforts were instrumental in mobilizing the masses of youth against the Shah, and whereas some of his ideas found their way into the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the supremacy of the clergy, as reflected in the office of Rahbar (the Supreme Leader) and various other powerful councils and oversight organs, make the current Islamic regime in Iran as foreign to Shari'ati's way of thinking as it was to the vast majority of top-level mujtaheds who were against the clergy's direct involvement in the machinery of government. Shari'ati's rhetoric differed from those of Khomeini, Bazargan, and other Islamists, who advocated some sort of state apparatus that was constituted according to Islamic laws, in that he spoke of the personal responsibilities of a Muslim, rather than a centralized authority that operated in an Islamic fashion [p. 153].

In the Islamic Republic, which was established following Shari'ati's death, the responsibility for carrying his banner fell to a younger generation that had been influenced by his lectures and writings. One of these was Abdolkarim Soroush, who rose rather quickly from a bureaucratic university post to the head of the Council for Cultural Revolution in charge of purging and reforming Iranian universities. Soroush later fell into the regime's disfavor, leading to a ban on his teaching, writing, and public speaking in Iran [p. 182]. The language of Islamic politics was also used by the former president Khatami, but by then, much of Shari'ati's fiery rhetoric had been neutralized and the younger generation was looking to other models, not to political Islam, for personal fulfillment and social engagement.

In his final paragraph [p. 201], the author opines that "it is perhaps premature to assume that political Islam has failed, as Olivier Roy had done [in his 1996 book, *The Failure of Political Islam*]. The jury is still out."

In this article, I have provided an extensive sample of the ideas and analyses presented in the book under review, but there is much more. I recommend the book to anyone who is curious about the roots of the Islamic Revolution and the relationships among various Islamic groups in and out of power in Iran.

2011/09/06 (Tue.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) For Neda: Shohreh Aghdashloo narrates both the [Persian version](#) and [English version](#) of this 68-minute HBO documentary, directed by Anthony Thomas, about the life of Neda Aghasoltan and political discontent in Iran.

(2) Attacking Golshifteh: When a country uses its immense propaganda machine to attack a young actress for her choice of movie roles, it shows only its level of insecurity and immaturity. In [this \(low-quality\) video](#), Hasan Abbasi blasts Golshifteh Farahani for playing in a film opposite the "homosexual" Leonardo DiCaprio and a variety of other sins. For an Islamist who hates the West and its cultural decadence, the guy is very well-informed about Hollywood, its films, and movie/TV stars.

(3) Leisure time in different countries: With an average of only 13 paid vacation days per year, Americans are near the bottom of the scale worldwide. Worse still, only 57% of US workers take all their vacation days. Most Europeans get 28 days or more of paid vacation annually, and a larger percentage of them actually use their vacation days (89% in France, 75% in Germany). [Source: Fareed Zakaria, on CNN's GPS, Sunday 9/4.]

When I posted the information above on Facebook, a couple of friends complained that more vacation days and leisure time do not necessarily imply greater happiness. The definition of happiness differs from culture to culture. For North Americans, career success and productivity show high correlation with happiness, whereas for many Europeans, more leisure time implies a happier life. The [Happy Planet Index \(HPI\)](#) combines personal satisfaction, longevity, and efficient use of Earth's resources into a single measure that shows Mexicans (and many South Americans) to be leading more sustainable and happier than both Europeans and North Americans.

(4) The five pillars of American success: Thomas Friedman was on "Meet the Press" on Sunday 9/4, arguing for the US government to start paying attention to the five pillars of American success in the past, all of which have been in decline over the past decade: education, immigration, infrastructure, encouraging/regulating investment, and supporting research & development. Friedman's new book, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, is out and I look forward to reading it. He said that someone asked him if his book had a happy ending. He joked that he knew for sure about its happy ending but not about whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

(5) Philosophical debate: In this [52-minute BBC Persian video](#), panelists [Soroush Dabbagh](#) (son of Abdolkarim Soroush) and [Ata Hoodashtian](#) debate whether the term "religious intellectual" is an oxymoron.

(6) A wonderful love song: I am no big fan of Rod Stewart, but he and Amy Belle do a wonderful job in this [live performance](#) of "I Don't Want to Talk About It," a song written by Danny Whitten in 1971 and made famous by Rod Stewart, when he recorded it in 1975.

2011/09/05 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Iranian women's movement: In this [28-minute documentary film](#), Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh chronicles the Iranian women's movement, from around 2004, when protestors were chanting "We did not rise to go backwards" (with typical banners reading "Women's rights = Human rights") to the 2009 protests and their aftermaths during 2010, where chants and banners dealt more generally with freedom, rather than women's rights per se ("Against the election coup, woman = man," reading a typical banner).

(2) Soccer match, Iran vs. Indonesia: Playing in Tehran, [Iran beats Indonesia 3-0](#) as part of the qualifying process for the 2014 World Cup. Next for Iran will be a game against Qatar, a tougher opponent.

(3) The dangers of space junk: According to [USA Today](#), a new report released by the US National Academy of Sciences indicates that dealing with space junk has become even more urgent, following the destruction of a Chinese satellite and the crash of two other satellites in space. These two events have virtually wiped out all progress that had been made in dealing with the space debris problem, which is a rising threat to all space missions, including satellites already in orbit and the International Space Station.

(4) A baby step in making quantum computing feasible: According to [The New Scientist](#), a team of UC Santa Barbara researchers has managed to combine a quantum processor with memory for storing instructions and data. The new findings increase the number of options available for the eventual construction of practical quantum computers.

(5) Quote of the day: "The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong it usually turns out to be impossible to get at and repair." Douglas Adams, English humorist and sci-fi novelist (1952-2001)

2011/09/04 (Sun.): Van Dyke, Dick, *My Lucky Life In and Out of Show Business: A Memoir*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Books on Tape, 2011.

In this book, the author, who has announced his retirement multiple times over the past decades, but is still quite active at age 85, mixes accounts of his personal and professional lives. On the personal side, we learn about his life with wife Margie, four children, many grand- and great-grandchildren, and lover Michelle Triola, who, like Margie, died from cancer not long ago. The fact that Van Dyke had a lover while still married was quite surprising to me, because it goes against his image as a wholesome family man. Also prominently featured in the book is his struggle with alcoholism, a habit he eventually kicked after several unsuccessful attempts. Professionally, he tried to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Stan Laurel. The lucky breaks that led to "The Dick Van Dyke Show" (created/written by Carl Reiner and run on CBS, 1961-1966) and "Mary Poppins" (Disney, 1964), and the fun he had during these projects, are discussed in detail. However, the author never completely explains why after phenomenal successes in the now-classic 1960s TV series, with the adorable Mary Tyler Moore, and movie, with the equally adorable Julie Andrews, his career fizzled, as he chose one bad project after another. He did eventually have some success with the medical/mystery series "Diagnosis Murder" (CBS, 1993-2001), in which he played a medical doctor who solved crimes with the help of his detective son (played by real-life son Barry). There is nothing very exciting in this book: just a decent man, writing a decent memoir. A nice review of this book was published by [USA Today](#), where Van Dyke is quoted as joking that his alternate title for the book, *Everybody Else Has Got a Book*, was rejected due to the lack of a sense of humor on the part of the publisher. He is also said to be quite satisfied with his current life that includes the 39-year-old girlfriend

Arlene Silver.

2011/09/03 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Modern Persian music: Ebi pays tribute to Googoosh by singing songs made famous by her. This one is named "**Talaagh**" ("Divorce"), but you will get a few more as continuation on YouTube.
- (2) Modern Persian music: Swedish woman sings a duet in Persian, with all the right moves (copied from Googoosh?); very cute! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVH51g5T3Fc>
- (3) Modern Persian music: The old Persian song "Ageh Yeh Rooz" ("If Someday"), written and performed by Farmarz Aslani, is one of my favorites. **This video** is a new duet version by Dariush and Aslani.
- (4) Smart use of notation: On a technical mailing list, a colleague specializing in interval methods described an interesting use of notation at some airports in Europe. A sign saying "Gates 8-15" indicates that if you walk in that direction you will get to Gate 8 first, then Gate 9, and so on, until Gate 15, whereas the notation "Gates 15-8" designates the opposite order. This is known as "directed interval notation" in technical jargon.
- (5) The US jobs outlook: Yesterday's PBS Newshour attributed the dismal state of jobs in the US to a mismatch between skills and needs. While the overall jobless rate of more than 9% is alarming, the rate is less than half that for college graduates, approximately matches the overall figure for high-school graduates, and is 60% higher (14+%) for those without a high-school degree. Given that many low-skill jobs may never return owing to automation and other productivity enhancement tools, short-term injection of money to create jobs will not solve the long-term problem.

2011/09/02 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Washington is Hollywood with ugly faces." Kevin Spacey, playing Jack Abramoff in the movie "Casino Jack," responding to his wife who reminds him he is now in Washington, not Hollywood.
- (2) The Twin Towers in movies: "From 1969 to 2001, the Twin Towers made countless cameos in Hollywood films. Sometimes featured prominently in the foreground, sometimes lurking in the distance. **This montage** celebrates the towers' all-too-short film career with songs that capture the passing decades." For those who would like to delve deeper into the movie career of the Twin Towers, here is an **extensive filmography**. Near the end of the list, you see clips from the 2010 movie "Remember Me," with a scene supposedly happening on September 11, 2001.
- (3) Snooping on Iranian Google users: This **BBC report** shows how an intermediary, such as Internet service provider (ISP), can intercept and read even securely encoded private communications.
- (4) For computer history buffs: In a **74-minute interview**, sponsored by the Computer History Museum and recorded on May 11, 2011, David Hartley talks about "Maurice Wilkes—The Man and His Machine." Hartley was an associate of Maurice Wilkes, a computer pioneer who passed away last November at age 97.
- (5) Modern Persian music: Ebi pays tribute to Googoosh by covering songs made famous by her. This one is "**Talaagh**" ("Divorce"), but you will get a few more as continuation on YouTube.

2011/09/01 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "If a new country is born and no one sees it online, does it really exist?" Alan Boswell, noting that one month after South Sudan became a country, major search engines can't locate it on a map.
- (2) World's oldest fossil: A fossil, claimed to be 3.4B years old, has been discovered in Western Australia, according to the **New York Times**. In those days, our Earth was quite different from today, with huge tides resulting from the moon orbiting far closer to the Earth and no plants around to supply oxygen.
- (3) Protest music: Recorded in 2009 following street protests against irregularities in Iran's presidential elections and the ensuing violent crackdowns, this song, entitled "**United for Neda**," was written and produced by Mams Taylor and features many Iranian actors and other celebrities.
- (4) Modern Persian music: Dariush Eghbali's live concert performance of "**Dasthaa-ye To**" ("Your Hands").
- (5) Dangers of liking Facebook pages: This is a piece of advice I gave to my Facebook friends. Please be very careful about liking Facebook pages or even choosing FB friends. Anyone can make a FB page under any name and with any profile photo, so the name/avatar of the page does not tell you anything about the identity of the owner(s). For example, the page "Iranian People around the World" may be just a well-intentioned mechanism for connecting Iranians together (although, it is hard to see that millions of Iranians around the world have a lot in common, or that they won't be overwhelmed by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of posts on this page if even a small fraction of all Iranians join) or it may have been set up by an opportunist with ill motives of the types discussed shortly. When you befriend a person, or like a page, you are giving that person or group access to your posts, friends, and other information. I know of several famous Iranians who have been trying hard to have FB remove pages that other people have established, using their names. For example, the names of Shohreh Aghdashloo and Hila Sedighi have been used in fake pages to lure FB users, with varying motives. Such questionable pages either have no named administrator or use a fake name. People or groups doing this may

be: (a) Spammers and criminals who want to harvest info from FB; (b) Agents who want to monitor the activities of Iranians on FB; (c) Various political groups that want to dole out their propaganda. What makes it even more difficult for us is the use of real-sounding or popular names and attractive pictures to lure us into accepting friendships or joining fan pages. Assume any new page you encounter to be such a fake, unless you see evidence to the contrary. Sorry to alarm you, but I thought this is very important for your safety and well-being.

P.S.: Unfortunately, knowing the person that sent you or recommended a link may not be helpful, because that person may have been fooled too. I generally avoid pages that do not list an administrator or that are administered by people I don't know personally. I remember when a well-known Iranian was trying to warn her friends that they should leave a fake page bearing her name, one person commented: "How do we know you are not the fake one?" Makes you think!

2011/08/31 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so." Douglas Adams, English humorist and sci-fi novelist (1952-2001)

(2) Persian music: This [Voice of America](#) program segment features singer/songwriter Ziba Shirazi's "Night of Stories and Song."

(3) Charms of live TV: [Live interview](#) with an Afghan political analyst is cut short on Iranian TV when he accuses Iran of meddling in the internal affairs of its neighbors. I guess there will be no live interviews on Iranian TV from now on.

(4) Explorations in Iranian science history: Exaggeration is a part of the Iranian culture. There is this joke that if you talk to Iranians in other countries, they will invariably tell you they were "sarteeps" (if they were in fact sergeants), "modeer-e kolls" (if they had clerical jobs), or famous movie stars (if they had bit parts in obscure films). The fields of science and technology are no exceptions.

First and foremost, is the use of the title "Professor," as opposed to "Dr." or the Persian "Ostaad," with the former usually meaning that at one point in time, the bearer of the title had a teaching job somewhere in the West, as opposed to mere mortals who are faculty members at Iranian institutions of higher learning. Second, is the case of young "geniuses" or "inventors" who are promoted by the Islamic Republic authorities, mostly to berate, and counteract criticisms by, real researchers in Iranian colleges and universities. Third, is the preponderance of resumes or Wikipedia biographical entries for scientific figures that are padded or inflated to make them look like superheroes, who played key roles in virtually all positive developments in their respective fields. There is an ongoing discussion in the third category, which is my main point in this post.

Dr. Reza Mansouri, a Professor of Physics at Sharif University of Technology, has posted a [Persian article](#) on his personal Web site, which is also reproduced on the ["Professors Against Plagiarism"](#) weblog, complaining about how Iranian authorities and others have made Mahmoud Hessaby, a Senator during the Shah's reign and a founder of science programs at Tehran University, into a scientific superhero, comparable in status to Newton and Einstein.

When a former colleague posted this info on Facebook, a flood of pro and con comments resulted. Like a few other commenters on the post, I did some research by consulting the Web pages of the [Hessaby Museum](#) and the [Wikipedia article](#) on him. I agree with many of the points made in Reza Mansouri's post, but am disappointed in two things, which are common themes in our sociopolitical interactions.

First, one expects of a scientist to present a precise and properly documented case. Beginning with the first sentence, where the author refers to "Dr. Hessaby" instead of "Dr. Mahmoud Hessaby," the account is incomplete and not at all what one would expect of a well-known scientist. Other than Mahmoud Hessaby, his son Iraj, Dr. (I assume Gholamali) Haddad-Adel, and Mohammad Reza Shah, no other Iranians are named. So, how is the reader supposed to know which lies and fabrications the author is alluding to? Why isn't there a reference (on-line or otherwise) to some of these stories or improper attributions? The presence of Einstein's sister at a party is questioned based on the fact that she was at Princeton only during 1940-46 (presumably, when she was a student, researcher, or faculty), as if she could not have been visiting her brother there at other times. I am not saying that Mansouri's claim is incorrect, I am just saying that the claim is not well-supported. Similarly, the claim that a paper of Hessaby was rejected by a referee because it had a rather silly error is not properly supported. How did Mansouri come to know of this fact, given that referee reports are confidential? My own research revealed that Hessaby's published papers received very small numbers of citations (0 in some cases), which is evidence of lack of validity or importance, but Mansouri's account does not do a good job of clarifying these issues.

Second, it seems that Mansouri is trying to kill two birds with one stone, which leaves a rather bitter taste in the reader's mouth. He is simultaneously attacking unnamed individuals for using Hessaby as a stepping stone for their own benefit (financial, scientific, or otherwise) and belittling Hessaby himself. The former part would

have been welcome if the individuals had been named and their motives analyzed. The second part is in my view rather petty. The fact that a paper was rejected or contained a simple error should in no way be used to berate a scientist. It is the overall body of published work that should be judged (granted that in this case, the overall work seems insignificant).

2011/08/30 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Massive subterranean river under the Amazon: Rio Hamza, a subterranean river named after the Brazilian scientist who led its discovery, flows about 4 km under the Amazon River (in the same direction, but at a significantly slower speed). The Hamza River is just about as long, but wider, than the Amazon. It begins under the Andes Mountains and discharges into the Atlantic Ocean via the Amazon itself and two other rivers. Work continues on verifying the existence and properties of Rio Hamza, but it has already helped in resolving the mystery of low salinity at the mouth of Amazon. [[The Guardian](#)]

(2) My favorite Iranian actresses: (a) Shohreh Aghdashloo, who after a distinguished theatrical career in Iran, has successfully reinvented herself in the US and is highly sought after for a variety of roles on TV and in movies. (b) Golshifteh Farahani, who began turning heads at a very young age and, though still young, has established herself as a successful actress, musician, and political activist, based in Paris. Both actresses have been awarded multiple honors at film festivals, on behalf of the motion picture industry, and by their peers. [[Shohreh Aghdashloo's fan page](#) on Facebook] [[Golshifteh Farahani's fan page](#) on Facebook]

(3) July-August 2011 hacking news in Institute of Engineering & Technology's newsmagazine:

7/12. Al Qaeda has explicitly called for 'cyber-jihad,' and it has already been involved in multiple attempts to invade Facebook.

7/15. A foreign intelligence service stole 24,000 files from a US defense contractor involved in developing weapons systems.

7/19. LulzSec attacked News International's websites, posting made-up stories and perhaps compromising users' personal info.

8/03. McAfee uncovered the biggest series of cyber attacks to date, involving networks of UN and several countries worldwide.

8/04. Per the S. Korean police, a crime ring there has hired 30+ N. Korean hackers to steal personal data from S. Korea's gamers.

(4) Monumental artwork at Versailles: A major project is underway to restore the Versailles palace to its former glory, and to make it safer for visitors, by 2020. [Monumental artwork](#) conceals sections of the palace that undergo renovation.

(5) Choir with 1M+ kids: On Saturday, December 11, 2010, more than 1 million children gathered in a temple in Thailand to sing "[Change the World](#)" with Howard McCrary and to take a pledge to be virtuous leaders.

2011/08/29 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "He hoped and prayed that there wasn't an afterlife. Then he realized there was a contradiction involved here and merely hoped that there wasn't an afterlife." Douglas Adams, English humorist and sci-fi novelist (1952-2001)

(2) Pimp my password: Joel Stein writes a hilarious [column in Time magazine](#), issue of August 29, 2011, about how the IT nerds expect us mere mortals to remember many random strings of characters that constitute properly strong passwords in their view and also to change them (and remember the new ones) every few weeks or so. "I'm not coming up with a new password," he declares. "It will not contain a mix of letters, numbers and symbols. My password will be the same one I've always used—with, if you demand it, a number after it. And that number will be zero. ... I use the same password for every website, and when I typed it into Gibson Research Corp.'s website to test its strength, I was informed that in a 'massive cracking array scenario' my password could be decoded in 37.61 seconds, though probably significantly less time now that I've told Gibson Research my password."

(3) Teaching math and science together: A [New York Times editorial](#) argues for the teaching of math and science together in a sequence of three high-school courses on finance, data, and basic engineering (to replace algebra, geometry, and calculus). "In the finance course, students would learn the exponential function, use formulas in spreadsheets and study the budgets of people, companies and governments. In the data course, students would gather their own data sets and learn how, in fields as diverse as sports and medicine, larger samples give better estimates of averages. In the basic engineering course, students would learn the workings of engines, sound waves, TV signals and computers. Science and math were originally discovered together, and they are best learned together now." In other words, instead of teaching abstractions and then introducing applications, the editorial argues for going in the reverse direction.

(4) Iranians, Israel, and anti-Semitism: This [long article \(in Persian\)](#) analyzes the history and root causes of anti-Semitism, as practiced by the Iranian regime and other Middle Eastern despots. Even though some facts have been stretched to fit the author's predispositions and world view, the article is eye-opening.

2011/08/28 (Sun.): Jaeger, Lydia, *Einstein, Polanyi, and the Laws of Nature*, Templeton, 2010 (translated from the original 2009 French edition).

This book tackles the age-old science-versus-faith dilemma, without making any significant contribution toward resolving the key questions that have baffled scientists and philosophers for centuries. The vehicles used are Michael Polanyi and Albert Einstein, whose bodies of work are reviewed in Part 1 (pp. 1-46) and Part 2 (pp. 47-132), respectively.

Polanyi considered knowledge personal and internal, in which the knower plays a key role, and argued vehemently against positivism, the view that scientific experimentation is the only authentic path to knowledge. Einstein was not quite the antithesis of Polanyi: while making many statements that seem to support positivism, he did in fact explicitly acknowledge that good scientific theories cannot be developed by mere experimentation. In the words of Philipp G. Frank, quoted in Robert Neidorf's "**Discussion: Is Einstein a Positivist?**" (*Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 173-188, April 1963): "Each of the [metaphysical and positivistic philosophies] regards Einstein as its chief advocate and most distinguished witness. If there were a legal case to be decided, it would be possible to produce satisfactory evidence on behalf of either position by quoting Einstein."

Polanyi's philosophy of science is reflected in his 1958 magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge*, with his later books on the subject being merely elaborations on this key work [p. 6]. His philosophy is rooted in his belief that "All knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge." [p. 9] He argues for his position primarily by means of examples, such as the observation that a highly skilled cyclist or pianist is often unaware of the physics behind his/her actions [p. 17].

Einstein was fundamentally nonreligious. He famously formulated his religious views in this short statement, sent in response to a telegram from Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, who was alarmed by accusations that the theory of relativity was atheistic: "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals Himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns Himself with fates and actions of human beings." [p. 86] On another occasion, Einstein criticized quantum mechanics, a discipline he helped found via his seminal work, by saying "God does not play dice." [p. 68] Einstein lectured, and wrote several articles, on the theme "religion and science," emphasizing the same points.

Part 3 of the book, entitled "The Concept of the Law of Nature in the Bible and in Science," elaborates on biblical texts that mention nature and its laws, followed by chapters on the historical and philosophical records. Putting vague, poetic statements from the Bible, such as "He fixed a weight for the wind, and a measure for the waters, when he laid down a law for the rain, and set a path for lightning and thunder" [p. 148], next to precise scientific formulations, like "The movements of the plantes are governed by the gravitational force" [p. 193], and saying that they are both expressions of laws of nature, is utterly misleading in my view. The author has no choice but to admit to this disparity [p. 206]: "The Bible makes extensive use of everyday language, which ... must be distinguished from technical language. Consequently, the biblical concept of law of nature is prescientific and does not agree with the scientific concept. ... The aim of special revelation is not to teach a particular theory of the structure of nature but to help human beings recover their lost relationship with their Creator."

In her concluding paragraph, the author presents a cliché that seems divorced from the "evidence" contained in the preceding chapters: "Faith and knowledge ... are not separate domains, but ... can and should be brought into fruitful interaction ... for all that we do must contribute to [the Lord's] glory, up to and including our scientific practice. And what better way to do this than to think of that practice as the discovery of God's work?" Going from Polanyi's and Einstein's views to this conclusion requires a leap of faith that not everyone would be comfortable taking.

The book ends with a 13-page afterword, entitled "Open Letter to Lydia Jaeger," written by the French evangelical theologian Henri Blocher, who praises and confirms Jaeger's formulations.

2011/08/27 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Quote of the day: "I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by." Douglas Adams, English humorist and sci-fi novelist (1952-2001)

(2) Two interesting math puzzles: These puzzles were posed in the August 2011 issue of *Communications of the ACM*, with answers provided in the September issue. Show that any given number n divides: (a) Some decimal number whose digits are only 0s and 1s; (b) Some Fibonacci number. For example, 7 divides 1001 and it also divides 21, the 8th Fibonacci number. As a second example, 9 divides 111,111,111 and it also divides 144, the 12th Fibonacci number. [Note that puzzle (b) is much harder than puzzle (a).]

(3) The living fossil: **An eel species**, that "swam at dawn of the dinosaur age," has been discovered in the Pacific Ocean's undersea caves, off the coast of Palau (near Indonesia). "Not only there is nothing like it alive, there's nothing like it in the fossil record." This "living fossil," thought to have split from other fishes about 100

million years ago, is the sole occupant of an entire branch in a computer-generated family tree of all eels. Scientists are studying the secrets of longevity for the species.

(4) Unabomber copycats strike: Today, our department's faculty and staff were asked to be on the lookout for any suspicious letters or packages, alluding to [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) story that reported two professors in a Mexican university injured by a package bomb, the latest in a worldwide string of attacks attributed to a new terror group inspired by the Unabomber. "The [group's] online rants credit the Unabomber as an inspiration. The Unabomber, a former professor of mathematics at the University of California at Berkeley named Theodore Kaczynski, spread fear in academe for nearly 20 years with his mail-bombing campaign, which killed three professors and wounded 23 others until he was arrested, in 1996. Today he sits in a federal prison in Colorado with no chance of parole, but he continues to write articles calling for a revolution to achieve his dream of an end of technology and a return to hunter-gatherer societies."

P.S.: Isn't it ironic that a group in favor of a hunting/gathering lifestyle posts its manifesto on the Web?

2011/08/26 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Mount Etna's smoke rings: Mount Etna, the tallest active volcano in Europe has been erupting off and on for a long time, and it has already erupted a record number of times in 2011. Back in 2000, when [this video](#) was made, it was more peaceful, lazily emitting smoke rings to amuse the onlookers. Such smoke rings are extremely rare and have been documented only three times in history.

(2) Emotional robots: This was bound to happen, because emotions are triggered by known causes that can be detected automatically. If you are slapped or crossed, you feel angry. If you are given a gift or a compliment, you feel happy. Material science has now advanced to a point that an artificial face capable of supporting micromovements can be built. Even though the vast majority of emotional cues come from our faces, it would be nice if robots can be perfected to also use body language. That will no doubt be the next target. In this [5-minute TED talk](#), David Hanson describes his emotion-capable robots.

(3) History of computer science/engineering: The year 2011 marks two important anniversaries in computer science and engineering. It is the 60th anniversary of the publication of the very first book on computer programming, *The Preparation of Programs for an Electronic Digital Computer*, by Maurice Wilkes, David Wheeler, and Stanley Gill, that brought the knowledge of programming methods (until then restricted to those directly involved with hardware projects) to the general public. It is also the 30th anniversary of the introduction of IBM PC, which extended the idea of owning a microcomputer to regular people (before then, kits existed that allowed highly motivated nerds to build their own machines).

(4) Technical conferences going downhill: The quality and usefulness of computer science and engineering conferences have been declining for many years, so much so that they are no longer foci of learning and networking, but places to boast about acceptance and presentation of papers, regardless of whether the audience understands or learns anything from the talks. Moshe Vardi, editor-in-chief of *Communication of the ACM*, asks in his September 2011 editorial: "Why is it ... that we put so much attention on ensuring the quality of the papers, and so little attention on ensuring the quality of the talks?"

2011/08/25 (Thu.): Here are a trio of hidden-camera pranks and two other items of potential interest.

(1) Hidden camera prank: Variation on the [prank involving an instant camera](#) with a preloaded photo.

(2) Hidden camera prank: [Hypnotizing woman](#).

(3) Hidden camera prank: [1 km/hr over the speed limit](#).

(4) How saying "no" can save your life: In a [Newsweek magazine article](#) (issue of August 22 & 29, 2011), Sharon Begley writes about the ill and side effects of many medical treatments currently prevalent in the US medical establishment: "a remarkable number and variety of tests and treatments are now proving either harmful or only as helpful as a placebo. ... [For example] the big blockages that show up on CT scans and other imaging, and that were long assumed to cause heart attacks, usually don't—but treating them can. ... Fully 46 percent [of Medicare patients have] a screening colonoscopy fewer than seven years after a negative one. Making matters worse, many of them were over 80." It is rather unfortunate that the publication of these long-running medical studies coincides with the discussion, in the US, of cost-cutting measures for certain medical benefits, raising the suspicion that somehow the government's hand is behind these conclusions.

(5) Jane Fonda's third act: I realize that Jane Fonda is not a model woman or citizen, but that does not stop me from liking her. I read an earlier book of hers, *My Life So Far*, and am looking forward to an opportunity to read her latest book, *Prime Time*, which is about what she calls her third and final act in life. The following quotes from her appear in a *Newsweek* magazine article, issue of August 22 & 29, 2011: "I've been accused of being too flexible, too willing to mold myself to men ... That transitional stage of the late 40s and early 50s, that was really hard, but now I finally feel like I'm really becoming myself. ... It's hard for women at my age in Hollywood, but I'm not discouraged ... I know what I want from my third act ... I've already done a lot of what I want to do, and finally, after all this time, I know where I'm headed."

2011/08/24 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Earthquake in eastern US: Yesterday's magnitude 5.9 quake, centered in Virginia, was felt in New York and even in Toronto. As far back as 2008, NY was said to be **overdue for a large quake**, and this was reiterated in multiple news stories in early 2011.

(2) Modern Persian music: **Seven-minute medley** of some of Googoosh's most memorable songs.

(3) Modern Persian music: Googoosh sings "**Man o Gonjeshka**" ("Me and the Sparrows") in a concert performance in Turkey.

(4) Country songs by famous actors: If you enjoy country music, check out these fairly decent songs performed by Hollywood stars (recommendations by *Newsweek* magazine, issue of August 22 & 29, 2011).

Clint Eastwood's "**Tumbling Tumbleweeds**"

Kevin Costner's "**90 Miles an Hour**"

Gwyneth Paltrow's "**Shake That Thing**"

Jeff Bridges' "**Slow Boat**" (preview; will update when I find a full version)

2011/08/23 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on math, computing, physics, and society.

(1) A simple math puzzle: Many people know about magic squares, such as the one with 16 boxes in 4 rows and 4 columns into which the numbers 1-16 are inserted, without repetition, in such a way that the sum of values in each row, column, or diagonal is the same. Other geometric shapes can also be used in this "magic" arrangement. See if you can complete the missing entries in this magic sphere. Dashed lines are continuations of circles on the back side of the sphere.

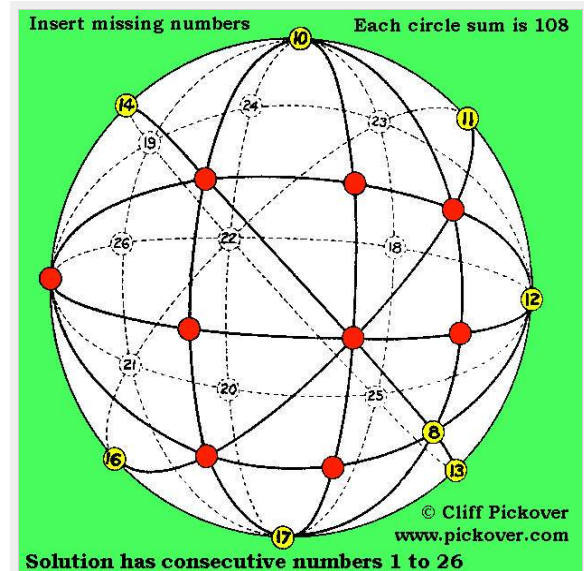
(2) IBM chips mimic human brain: The **Associated Press** and many other sources report that IBM researchers have built two prototype neurosynaptic chips based on reverse engineering of the human brain. Built on 45 nm semiconductor platform, each massively parallel chip, that integrates processing and memory functions, has 256 neurons. The chips have 262,144 programmable synapses and 65,536 learning synapses, respectively, components that can remember and learn.

(3) Visualizing the scale of our universe: This **interactive image** allows you to explore features of our universe (by moving the square block all the way to the left and tapping the keyboard's "right arrow"), from the smallest possible distance of 10^{-35} m (Planck length) to 10^{27} m (size of the universe). An old 1970s film, "**Powers of Ten**," though less technical and covering a smaller range, is based on the same idea: it zooms out from a 1-meter human-size scene to 10^{24} m (100 million light years) and then zooms in from the 1-meter scene to 10^{-16} m (one millionth of angstrom).

(4) Former MP writes about the UK riots: In a candid and heartfelt piece, appearing in **Newsweek magazine** (issue of August 22 & 29, 2011), former member of parliament Sion Simon writes about the recent UK riots and their root causes. "According to the Metropolitan Police, just under two thirds of those arrested on the second day of London disturbances were teenagers. Many were 13, 14, 15 years of age. ... Nobody knows why this happened. Neither of the main schools of thought [that the rioters were scum, or this was a sort of Intifada] is convincing. ... these riots were not about tension but boredom; not driven by anger but by a teenage nihilism that is the gray malaise of modern democracies."

2011/08/22 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Technical publications at bookstores: A pet peeve of mine is the dumbing down of technical books available at general-interest bookstores. Books on scientific and technical concepts have made way for how-to manuals and, even worse, the "for dummies" category. College bookstores used to be better, but, as evident from this photo of the computer books section at the UC San Diego bookstore, taken a couple of days ago, they too are succumbing to the pressure for profitability. In fact, on most college campuses, the bookstore (more





accurately called "gift shop") is operated under contract by an external for-profit entity, which doesn't much care about the college's educational mission.

- (2) A classic Bob Dylan song: Norah Jones does a fine job covering Bob Dylan's "[Just Like a Woman.](#)"
- (3) On advantages of being multilingual: "Bilingualism, of course, can be a leg up for college admission and a resume burnisher. But a growing body of research now offers a further rationale: the regular, high-level use of more than one language may actually improve early brain development. According to several different studies, command of two or more languages bolsters the ability to focus in the face of distraction, decide between competing alternatives, and disregard irrelevant information." There is just one down side: "On average, the more languages spoken, the smaller the vocabulary in each one. ... Vocabulary tests, SATs, GREs—those are tests that probe the absolute limits of your ability, and that's where we find that bilinguals have the disadvantage, where you know the word but you just can't get it out." (from [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of August 15, 2011.

2011/08/21 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Engineering education in India: [This 13-minute segment](#) on CBS's "60 Minutes" chronicles the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), the seven-campus university whose graduates are highly coveted worldwide, particularly in the US, where they form a significant fraction of high-tech executives and entrepreneurs.
- (2) FAO 2010 world hunger map: [This map](#) shows the distribution of hungry populations across the globe. Not surprisingly, Africa has the bulk of world's hungry people.
- (3) A piece of Iran's history in the late 19th Century: Informative [34-minute lecture](#) (in English) by Professor Firuz Kazemzadeh on "Russia, Britain and Baha'is," delivered on July 2, 2011, in Toronto.
- (4) Robotic air swimmers: These remote-controlled sea creatures swim through the air to tease and amuse. Look under the "Air Swimmers Videos" tab on the [Air Swimmers Web site](#).

2011/08/20 (Sat.): Livio, Mario, *Is God a Mathematician?* Simon & Schuster, 2009.

The title of this fascinating book refers to the omnipotence of mathematics to describe our world, what the Nobel Laureate physicist Eugene Wigner famously described as its "unreasonable effectiveness." Everything, from the laws of nature to variations in the stock market can be described in the language of mathematics. Mathematicians and philosophers, from ancient Greece to the present day, have wondered about the mysterious ability of mathematics to shape and guide the universe [p. 2]. Renowned Oxford mathematical physicist Roger Penrose expands the mystery of how mathematics can so accurately describe or predict the world into three mysteries involving (A) the world of our perceptions and emotions, or our mind, (B) the physical world, or the nature, and (C) the Platonic world of abstract and perfect forms, or mathematics. The three circular mysteries are: How well C describes B, how B created A, that is, how our mind was born out of matter, and how A discovered, created, or articulated C.

Sometimes, mathematical models that would end up describing a perplexing phenomenon were developed decades or even centuries before the phenomenon itself became known, and at times, a theory developed to explain one thing, successfully explained another, having failed in its original purpose (e.g., knot theory). A fundamental question about mathematics is whether it has an existence independent of human mind, with parts of it discovered by humans, or whether it is just a convenient and useful human invention. The question of whether math exists independently of humans and is being discovered by them in bits and pieces is essentially the same as whether it was inevitable for math to look the way it does today. In other words, would arithmetic and geometry, which were foundations on which all mathematics is built, be also discovered by a different civilization on another planet, or is it possible for their "math" to be completely different from ours? To cite an analogy, would computer operating systems look totally different from today's Windows had windows not achieved near monopoly status early on? [p. 241] The 19th-Century crisis in mathematics, arising from the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries, shifted the balance in favor of mathematics as invention rather than

absolute truth. Martin Gardner, the famous puzzlemaster, takes the side of math as a discovery, and provides this example: "If two dinosaurs joined two other dinosaurs in a clearing, there would be four there, even though no humans were around to observe it, and the beasts were too stupid to know it." [p. 10]

After a couple of introductory chapters pondering questions such as the ones above, the author devotes Chapters 3 and 4 to the "magicians," mathematicians who made such significant contributions to the advancement of our knowledge that they have somehow reinforced the notion of God as a mathematician. These are Archimedes (c. 287-212 BC, who developed theories that were centuries ahead of his time), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642, one of the founders of the scientific revolution, which led to today's notion of modern science), Rene Descartes (1596-1650, a prolific scientist who unified algebra and geometry, and in whose honor the Cartesian coordinate system is named), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727, author of *Principia*, one of the most important scientific books ever written). An amazing part of the story is how we came to learn of the works of Archimedes, despite much of his writings having been lost or destroyed, including one manuscript that was unbound and washed, so that its parchment leaves could be reused for a Christian prayer book. Fortunately, by sheer luck, and some magic from modern technology, the latter book was discovered and its original contents are being reconstructed as of this writing [pp. 54-56].

The rest of the book elaborates on statisticians, probabilists, and the science of uncertainty (Ch. 5), the shock produced by the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries in the 19th Century (Ch. 6), logic and how we think about reasoning (Ch. 7), and revisiting the notion of the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in describing or modeling the physical universe (Ch. 8). Each of these chapters contains many interesting examples and some surprising revelations. I won't disclose Livio's final thoughts (Ch. 9) on the question posed in the book's title, in case you are interested in reading the book for yourself.

2011/08/19 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Hidden-camera prank: [Nonchalant dad](#) keeps bumping his baby's head.
- (2) Kettle calling the teapot black: "Syria should think wisely before it is too late ... and enact reforms that are not merely promises." King Abdullah, admonishing the Syrian government's brutality against protesters.
- (3) The beauty advantage quantified: In a new book *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful*, economist Daniel Hamermesh asserts that in the US, a good-looking man or woman earns an average of \$230K more in a lifetime than a plain or homely person. Somewhat surprisingly, the looks advantage is greater for men, compared with women. Before thinking of plastic surgery, however consider that a Korean study shows it to be a losing proposition: less than \$1 return on each dollar invested. [From *Time* magazine, issue of August 22, 2011, p. 15.]

2011/08/18 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest on education and US politics.

- (1) Web-based education gathers steam: The [New York Times](#) reports that a free on-line course on artificial intelligence, one of three being offered on an experimental basis by Stanford University, has garnered an enrollment of 58,000 (from high school students to retirees). This level of participation from 175 countries is nearly four times Stanford's entire student body. No doubt, the course will involve automatic assessment of student work: as a teacher, I shudder at the thought of grading 58,000 exams.
- (2) "Obama is a centrist and a pragmatist who understands that in a country divided over core issues, you cannot make the best the enemy of the good. ... that with a budget deficit of 10% of GDP, the second highest in the industrialized world, and a debt that will rise to almost 100% of GDP in a few years, we cannot cavalierly spend another few trillion dollars hoping that will jump-start the economy." Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of August 22, 2011.

2011/08/16 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Kurt Vonnegut's faux 1997 commencement address at MIT: There are numerous posts, reposts, and translations of a speech beginning with "Wear sunscreen. If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience." This clever and humorous "speech" has been attributed to the enigmatic Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., but it was actually a [column by Mary Schmich](#) of the Chicago Tribune.
- (2) Liar, liar, ... : A site belonging to [Iranians living in England](#) has exposed a manufactured story by Iran's Fars News, which used old photos from earlier years (e.g., street unrests after soccer games) to depict "police brutality" during the recent UK riots. Isn't the Internet great?

2011/08/15 (Mon.): Today's items are interesting quotations from two politicians and an author.

- (1) From a conservative politician: "I say clearly abortion is a terrible, terrible thing, but it's a deeply intimate and personal decision, and I don't think men legislators should even vote on it. Now, that takes you

immediately from a conservative to a commie. Now I also think that we all have someone we love who's gay or lesbian. There should be no special prejudices, no special penalties, no special privileges. And so that'll knock you into the commie box, too." Former senator Alan Simpson, quoted in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of August 15, 2011.

(2) From a female politician: "Politicians should pay a price for being shrilly partisan. The rewards have to go to the people who compromise and make good policy. Right now the system punishes those in the center." Former congresswoman Jane Harman, President and CEO of the Woodrow Wilson Int'l Center for Scholars.

(3) From an author of urban fiction: "Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater. If you give her sperm, she'll give you a baby. If you give her a house, she'll give you a home. If you give her groceries, she'll give you a meal. If you give her a smile, she'll give you her heart. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her. So, if you give her any crap, be ready to receive a ton of shit." Erick S. Gray.

2011/08/14 (Sun.): Today's posts consist of a probability problem and a recited Persian poem.

(1) An interesting probability problem: Suppose you are playing a game of chance with a friend, each betting \$10. You pick the number 2 and he picks 5, say. You roll a die repeatedly, and each time one of the numbers 2 or 5 shows up, the player who picked the number earns a point. The first player to earn 3 points wins the \$20 sum. Now, suppose you have to abandon the game when your friend has 2 points and you have 1 point. What would be a fair way to divide the \$20?

Challenge: Present a general solution for the case of abandoning a game requiring z points to win the pot, when you have x points ($x < z$) and your friend has y points ($y < z$).

(2) Persian poetry: Twentieth-Century Iranian poet Siavash Kasraei recites his poem "Aarash-e Kamaan-guir" in this [20-minute recording](#). Read the [complete text of the poem](#).

2011/08/13 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Faezeh sings "[Divanegi](#)" (from the album "Yadesh Bekheyr too Tehroon"). The video shows scenes from Abbas Kiarostami's 2008 film "Shirin," which depicts 114 Iranian actresses silently watching a theatrical production of "Khosro and Shirin" (a famous Persian love story, told in verse by the revered poet Nezami Ganjavi).

(2) Iranian singer, Italian song: Maryam Moein sings "[Tango del Mare](#)." Nice song and vocals. However, looking at the performer's face, I can't help but think of collagen and/or Botox.

(3) MIT may not be that special: Writing in [IEEE Spectrum](#), issue of August 2011, Prachi Patel discusses the decline of some big-name schools, and the rise of lesser known programs, in the new, more objective ranking of doctoral programs produced by the National Research Council. For example, MIT which enjoys a stellar reputation, has appeared as the top-ranked electrical engineering program in the *US News and World Report* rankings, year in and year out. The NRC ranking places it in the 7-18 range, with the uncertainty being due to the different ways in which various attributes are factored in. The only school that appears near the top in both *USN&WR* and NRC rankings is Stanford. NRC ranks Princeton and UC Santa Barbara in the top 5, ahead of MIT and Berkeley.

(4) Smart meters generate resistance: Smart meters are networked measuring devices that help us monitor usage more effectively, leading to efficiencies and less waste. They also transmit usage data directly to utility companies, thus obviating the need for a human meter-reader and the associated costs. A surprising resistance has developed against the use of such smart meters on the bases of the health hazards of radio transmissions, possible inaccuracies in reading, and loss of privacy. Writing in [IEEE Spectrum](#), issue of August 2011, G. Pascal Zachary responds to these unreasonable fears. For example, he wonders why people who place cell phones mere inches from their brains worry about electromagnetic emissions from a meter that is typically located outside our house. Based on such protests, fanned by a Web-induced phobia, PG&E has backed away from blanket replacement of meters, giving its customers a chance to opt out. However, it is using the economic disincentive of charging such customers a one-time fee for turning the antenna off and a monthly fee for meter reading.

2011/08/12 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) One disappointment after another from Facebook: "All the numbers in your phone are now on Facebook. Go to the top right of the screen, click on ACCOUNT, click on EDIT FRIENDS, left side of screen and click CONTACTS. You will see all phone numbers stored in your mobile phone (FB friends or not) are published. To remove, go to the right column, click on 'this page' and then 'remove'."

I found the just-quoted text on a friend's Facebook wall and, after verifying that the phone numbers actually do appear on FB, as described, reposted the statement for others to see. At this point, I don't know if these phone numbers are visible to persons other than me. Regardless, it's safer to simply remove them from FB.

(2) Facebook is filtered to protect the privacy of Iranians: In a [taped interview](#), an Iranian judiciary official explains why certain Web sites are filtered in Iran. In the case of Facebook and other social networks, he says

that filtering has been done to protect the privacy of Iranian citizens, because such networks criminally abuse users' private info.

(3) Real politician vs. foot-in-the-mouth version: In a master political move, the British embassy in Iran has issued a statement, characterizing Ahmadinejad's comments on police brutality against London rioters as a welcome opening for a dialog on human rights.

(4) Iran further isolating itself: The foreign ministry of Azarbayejan has **condemned nonsensical comments** by Iran's joint armed forces chief, Hassan Firoozabadi, who had criticized the former Soviet republic for its ties to Israel and banning of hijab at schools via the introduction of uniforms. Now, why a military commander would concern himself with politics, and thereby put his foot in his mouth, is not clear to me.

(5) The world, from the eyes of an optimist "fool": Stewart Brand, who describes himself as an "optimist fool" and is best known for his 30-year stint as editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, talks about life, the environment, the universe, and politics in this May 2011 *European* magazine interview. Here is a quote from **the interview**: "I put this challenge to anyone who desires the apocalypse: Go to an island and pretend that civilization has destroyed itself. And then build something that is better than the world we know today."

2011/08/11 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Attacking graduate programs: An article entitled "**The Disposable Academic**," published in *The Economist*, offers some valid criticisms about doctoral degrees and the complaints of graduate students. However, the bulk of its arguments are highly misleading and inflammatory. For example, it contrasts the \$20,000 salary of a graduate student to the \$109,000 average salary of full professors. Full professor is the highest academic rank, so a full professor has anywhere from 10 to 40 years of work experience (25 years on average, say). You would probably get the same spread if you compare the salary of a plumber's apprentice to the earnings of a plumber with 25 years of experience under his belt. The contrast is even greater than suggested by this analogy. Not all graduate students succeed in earning a PhD. Post-PhD, only a select group are hired by universities, and even smaller groups merit advancement to associate professor, and, eventually, to full professor. So, in addition to 25 years of experience separating a grad student from a typical full professor, the selectivity factor (what in academia is known as merit-based salary increase) must be considered. In fact, the salary spread in academia between the lowest and highest ranks is probably smaller than in any comparable profession.

(2) Increased focus on STEM: Yesterday, I posted a news story about the children's program "Sesame Street" focusing on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) topics in its forthcoming 42nd season. A couple of days ago, Intel's chief executive, Paul Otellini, wrote an opinion piece in Maine's *Bangor Daily News*, lamenting the dearth of engineering talent and educational programs in the US, particularly in view of the fact that some 40% of college students in STEM fields leave their respective program after the first year. Seems like everyone is getting involved in finding a solution to this problem. According to CBS News, Will.i.am, a member of the Black Eyed Peas, has used his own money to buy air time from ABC to feature a live back-to-school special on Sunday 8/14 about the kids who competed at the 20th Annual FIRST (for Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics Competition, an event that aims to inspire young people to become science and technology leaders.

(3) Photo of Khatami in a torture museum: In one of Tehran's prisons, a museum has been set up to depict the kinds of torture that went on under SAVAK, the Shah's secret police. A photo is circulating in cyberspace that shows former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami viewing what appears to be the corpse of a tortured prisoner hanging by his feet from the ceiling. Two things are interesting about this photo. First, in some postings of it, commenters (who either were not told, or did not read the caption carefully) slammed Khatami for coldheartedly viewing this horrible scene, not realizing that it was a museum exhibit. Second, it seems that following the downfall of the Islamic regime, the exhibits in this museum have to be updated to reflect the more brutal, and also more varied, interrogation and torture methods that have been going on in the regime's overt and covert prisons for several years now.

2011/08/10 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Sesame Street's new STEM focus: According to PBS, Sesame Street will increase its focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (the so-called STEM fields) by working experimentation and investigation into the episode themes. The new 42nd season's theme will be "let's find out."

(2) Why did Tehran residents cross the road? Each time you use a crosswalk in the US or similar countries, count your blessings. Here is how people of Tehran have to negotiate a crosswalk. It's amazing how cool and unconcerned the street crossers are in **this video**.

(3) Protecting our beautiful mother Earth: "She is alive, beautiful, finite, hurting, worth dying for" is the title of this highly effective **5-minute video** that shows how we are destroying the earth and how a number of people have died for trying to protect it.

(4) Puzzle based on a true story: Augustus De Morgan, a famous mathematician who lived in the 19th Century, was once asked about his age. He replied: "I was x years old in the year x^2 ." When was he born?

2011/08/09 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest from the world of politics.

(1) London riots and their aftermath: [Photos of buildings ablaze and skirmishes](#) are plentiful, but there is a dearth of explanations and analyses about the root causes of the riots, which are attributed to the death of a young man, as a gunfight erupted during his arrest by the police.

(2) Look who's talking: The Iranian government has asked the London police to [show restraint](#) against the demonstrators.

(3) On anti-immigrant sentiments in the US: "Dear anti-immigration politicians: We'd be glad to help you pack. Sincerely, Native Americans."

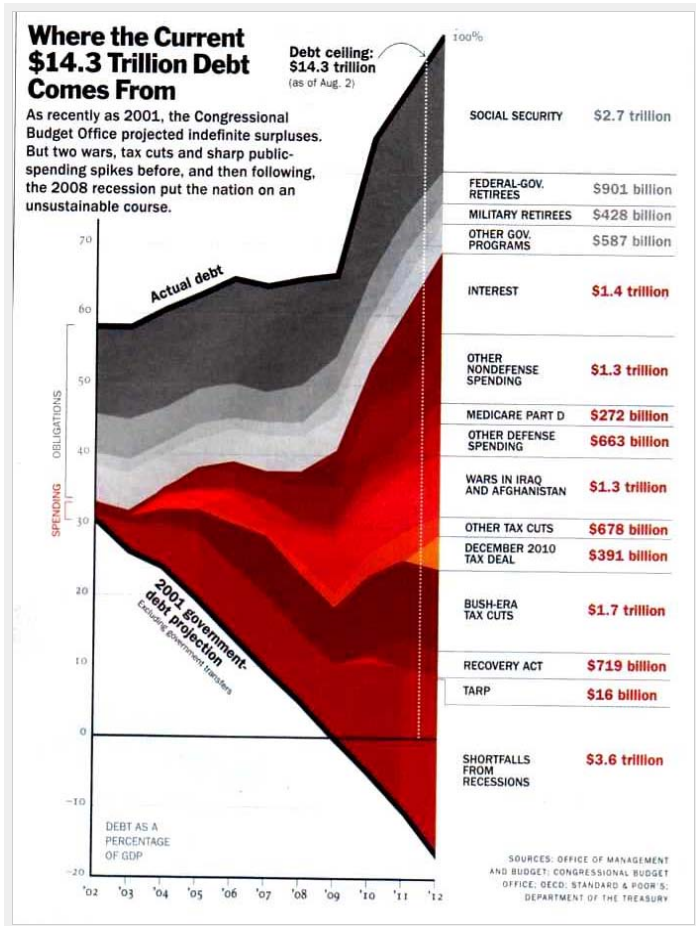
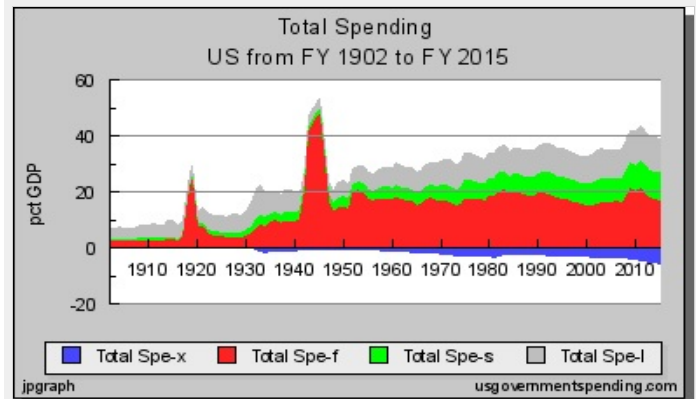
2011/08/08 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest on the state of US economy.

(1) Runaway spending: Spending recklessly is often associated with Democrats, but it is in fact a byproduct of the American system of government, where the powerful influence legislation. The chart on the right shows a nearly constant upward slope for total spending (the gray area) since the 1950s, regardless of the party holding the presidency. The only exception is the dip during Bill Clinton's two terms. Total federal direct spending (f), state spending (s) and federal transfer to states (x) are also shown.

(2) Runaway debt: Never trust a plan devised by politicians that purports to cut spending by x dollars over y years. The second chart shows the US national debt projections in 2001 versus what actually happened. [Source: article by M. Crowley in *Time* magazine, issue of August 15, 2011.]

(3) On the US debt/credit crisis: In a brilliant column in *Time* magazine, issue of August 15, 2011, Rana Foroohar proposes that the growing income gap is the cause, and Tea Party politics a symptom, of the current economic troubles in the US, not the other way around. She maintains that the current crisis has more in common with the Great Depression than generally accepted: "inequality itself—and the political pressure not to reverse it but to hide it—was a crucial factor in the meltdown. The shrinking middle isn't a symptom of the downturn. It's the source of it." Foroohar is increasingly being recognized as an insightful and level-headed economist. [Unfortunately, *Time* has made only [a snippet of the column](#) available on-line to nonsubscribers.]

(4) Insight on the US debt ceiling deal: Fareed Zakaria begins his *Time* magazine article (issue of August 15, 2011) thus: "In narrow economic terms, the debt deal is actually not a big deal, neither as good as its advocates claim nor as terrifying as its opponents fear. ... What the deal does is kick tough choices down the road." The jist of Zakaria's article comes at the very end: "We have taken our most precious resource and gambled with it. If as a result of these congressional antics, interest rates on America's debt rise by 1% ... the budget deficit will rise by \$1.3 trillion over 10 years. That would more than wipe out the entire 10 years of cuts proposed in the debt deal. That's the American system at work these days."



2011/08/07 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Art from nature scraps: The team implementing this project (for a commercial that never aired, but won three prizes at the Cannes) used waste wood to create an amazing xylophone, shown in [this video](#), with nature's beauty as the backdrop. At the end of the video, you can see two of the Docomo cell phones which also use waste wood.

(2) War declared on the social sciences in Iran: This [BBC news video](#) reports that 13 of the 19 social sciences majors at Tehran's Allameh Tabatabaei University will not admit new students next year. Part of the video shows Khamenei stating that Iran does not need so many students in these fields, because of the dearth of jobs and lack of proper "Islamic" textbooks and professors. So, referring to social sciences, the Supreme Leader said "bring me its hat" and they brought him its head.

(3) Violin virtuosos: [Live performance](#) of "Victory" by Bond Girls and Andre Rieu.

(4) A fun game to [play on-line](#): The computer suggests a four-letter word to start the game. You change one, and only one, of the letters to make a new valid word and type it in. The computer then takes its turn. The moves continue, until one side cannot offer a valid word and loses the game. I just won a game with 152 moves, when the computer suggested "lama," I changed it to "mama," and the computer surrendered.

2011/08/06 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest from the worlds of science and engineering.

(1) The magic of Fibonacci numbers: This [4-minute video](#) highlights some of the features in nature that (seemingly) inexplicably follow the sequence of Fibonacci numbers; I say "seemingly," because most of these have in fact been explained. Here is [another interesting example](#), not mentioned in the video clip. A male bee has a mother only, while a female bee has both a male parent and a female parent. Start with a male bee (1), and his only parent (1) and continue to 2 grandparents (parents of the mother), 3 greatgrandparents, 5 greatgreatgrandparents, 8 greatgreatgreatgrandparents, and so on up the bee's family tree, according to the Fibonacci sequence.

(2) A robot that flies like a bird: Flying like a bird has been an obsession of humans for centuries. With advances in materials and robotics, this goal appears to be within reach. This [6-minute TED talk](#) explains the design of a lightweight birdlike robot and demonstrates its flight within an auditorium.

2011/08/05 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest from the worlds of music and film.

(1) Persian music: I had shared this melodic song, entitled "[Ma'loomeh](#)" (performed by Ali Morshedi) a while back, but I think it's worth sharing again.

(2) Persian music: A spirited old man performs "[Naz Banoo.](#)"

(3) Persian violin dance: Wonderful music and performance by [Jihad Akl](#). Here is a second piece, "[Shiraz,](#)" from the same performer.

(4) Two tar players, one tar: Sahba Motallebi and Padideh Ahrar-Nejad, distinguished students of Hossein Alizadeh, show [amazing coordination in playing the tar](#), one strumming and the other fingering the chords.

(5) A world record in animation: The stop-motion [animated short film "Gulp"](#) was produced with a minimum of resources: sand on the beach as the background, Nokia smart phones as cameras, and a few simple props. This [6-minute video](#) describes how the film, which boasts a world record for having the largest stop-motion animation set, was made.

2011/08/03 (Wed.): Here are a half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) Model roller coaster contest: Student builds an award-winning (and yummy) [roller coaster model](#) out of pretzels. One thing's for sure: this engineer-in-the-making won't starve if he is ever locked up in his lab.

(2) Iranians seem to be always marching: I wonder if face recognition technology will ever advance to a point that would allow automatic comparison of faces in [this video](#) with those in crowds marching in favor of Khomeini a year or two later.

(3) BBC documentary on Khamenei: This [22-minute documentary film](#), produced by BBC, chronicles the life of Ali Khamenei, Iran's current Supreme Leader.

(4) An engineer's take: Faced with a need to solve a complex n -variable system of equations (unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, weakening currency, energy dependency, global warming, and so on), US politicians have just solved a linear equation in one variable and are congratulating each other for this bipartisan solution to a nonproblem.

(5) Impersonations: Kevin Spacey is one of my favorite actors. He is versatile, down to earth, and multitalented (has also tried directing, screenwriting, producing, and singing). A side of him that I had not seen before is featured in this [interview segment](#) from the TV program "Inside the Actors Studio." Enjoy!

(6) Sane leaders may be ineffective in crazy times: In an intriguing [Newsweek magazine column](#) (issue of August 1 & 8, 2011), Tony Dokoupil writes about *A First-Rate Madness*, a new book of psychiatric case studies by Nassir Ghaemi, director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts Medical Center. Ghaemi's controversial thesis

is that the most effective world leaders have been more or less nuts: "normal" people tend to take tame paths in the face of major crises, leading to mediocre solutions. "Depression in all its forms ... brings suffering, which makes one more clear-eyed, fit to recognize the world's problems ... Mania in all its forms ... brings resilience, which helps one learn from failure, often with enough creativity to make a new start."



2011/08/02 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Satellite images: I am a fan of satellite and aerial photos, because they provide perspectives on geography not available from other forms of imagery. The satellite image on the right above shows Alborz Mountains in the vicinity of Iran's Guilan province. You can see Sefid Rood extending from the Sefid Rood Dam reservoir to the Caspian Sea, and the city of Rasht just below the river, near the center of the lush greenery that is characteristic of the Caspian coast. Note the contrast between the two sides of the mountain range. On the left is another example of how satellite images help us understand geography, by seeing the relationships between different geographic features. In this image, the Ghafghaz (Caucasus) mountain range is shown just to the north of Iran's Azarbaijan province, extending from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea.

(2) Leading double lives: It is well-known that most people in Iran lead double lives, presenting a pious front in public, while doing as they please in private. An [embarrassing incident](#), reported in Persian, exemplifies the consequences. [Sorry for all the annoying images and ads on the page.]

(3) Remembering Mohammad Nouri: A year after his passing, beloved Persian singer Mohammad Nouri is commemorated by one of his signature songs, "[Safar Baray-e Vatan](#)" (music by Feridoon Shahbazian, lyrics by Nader Ebrahimi). The page includes lyrics.

2011/08/01 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest from the worlds of music and poetry.

(1) Instrumental Persian music: The classic song "[Omid-e Jaanam](#)," played with tar and piano.

(2) A story attributed to Mowlavi (Rumi): A mouse notices a mousetrap in the house and alerts his friends: the chicken, the lamb, and the cow. All three say that a mousetrap is his problem, not theirs. Later, the woman of the house is bitten by a snake that sets off the trap. She is treated and fed soup made from the chicken. The lamb is slaughtered to feed the large group of visitors and well-wishers. The woman does not survive and the cow is slaughtered to feed the guests at her memorial service. The mouse observes all these events from his hole in the wall, while sobbing uncontrollably.

(3) A Persian poetry page: [Anvari's "ghazals,"](#) organized alphabetically by the ending of the verses. I particularly recommend the ghazal ending in "berafti."

(4) Disco music from the 1970s: An old disco tune, "[Rasputin](#)" by [Boney M](#), refreshed in my memory by my daughter, who heard it on a dance video game at a friend's.

2011/07/31 (Sun.): Here are four music-related items and one news report of potential interest.

(1) Fusion music: The jazz standard "[Take Five](#)," performed by a Pakistani orchestra featuring violins, guitar, and a few Indian instruments.

(2) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi plays the old favorite "[Komakam Kon](#)" ("Help Me"), a song made famous by Googoosh.

(3) Musical concerts in Tehran: [An interview with Shardad Rohani](#), whose six nights of conducting the Tehran Symphony Orchestra playing memorable movie theme songs at the Milad Tower Auditorium has already sold out. Video links are at the bottom of the page.

(4) Iranian music: [Lively Kurdish song](#) (title unknown) by Jamshid Ten'nek.

(5) Water fight in Tehran: According to this [pictorial report](#), hundreds of people participated in a water-guns festival in Ab-o Atash (Water & Fire) Park in Tehran. It was reported elsewhere that security forces had to cut off the park's water supply to end the event. Expect Zionists and the Great Satan to be blamed in next week's Friday prayers.

Reader comments on the pictorial report are quite interesting. A few suspect that the Iranian government has loosened up on its enforcement activities in view of the forthcoming elections and that it will resume its crackdown by the decency police once the elections are over (i.e., the Basiji mobs have been sent on vacation for a while). Others ask why everything has to be linked to politics, claiming that the social event, planned spontaneously by fun-loving youth, should not be tainted with politics.

2011/07/30 (Sat.): Here are three science- and technology-related items of potential interest.

(1) Scientists indicted for wrong prediction: In an unprecedented action, seven senior scientists and technologists have been charged with manslaughter in Italy in the aftermath of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake that killed over 300 people and left 65,000 homeless. According to [Popular Science](#), these individuals constituted a committee that had urged residents to return to their homes following a significant number of smaller quakes a few days before the major one of magnitude 6.3. Thousands of researchers from around the world have urged the Italian government not to hold the scientists responsible, given the current state of earthquake prediction techniques.

(2) Functional and aesthetic design: Finally, something is being done about the ugly high-voltage transmission lines spoiling the beauty of rural landscapes everywhere. In a set of designs, dubbed "Land of Giants," submitted to a competition sponsored by Iceland, Choi & Shine Architects envisage humanlike electrical transmission towers that can be adjusted to match the landscape. This [webecoist.com page](#) also contains a few of the other innovative entries in the contest.

(3) Special effects are no longer so special: It used to be that only certain sequences in action or sci-fi films made use of special effects or computer-generated imagery (CGI). These days, you just can't trust any movie scene to be the real thing. This [4-minute video clip](#) contains some interesting examples.

2011/07/29 (Fri.): Here are two science and technology items of potential interest.

(1) Another materials science advance: According to [Popular Science](#), newly realized "acoustic diodes" can provide highly effective soundproofing in future. Like an electrical diode that conducts electrical current in only one direction and acts as a near-perfect insulator in the other, an acoustic diode lets sound waves through in only one direction. The new acoustic diodes can be tuned to affect only certain frequencies, and they can be used to harvest energy from noisy environments.

(2) The next Turing Lecturer: Donald E. Knuth, Professor Emeritus of Stanford University, well known for his many contributions to computer science and engineering, particularly a series of influential books, identified by different subtitles to the common title *The Art of Computer Programming* (what he would have named *Analysis of Algorithms*, if he had it his way), has won numerous honors during his distinguished career. Particularly noteworthy among his former honors are winning of ACM's A. M. Turing award (sometimes referred to as "the Nobel Prize of computing") in 1974 and his aforementioned book series being included by *American Scientist* among the best twelve physical science monographs of the Century in 1999.

Knuth has now added one more to his list of honors due to being named the next Turing Lecturer by the British Computer Society. In an interview, published in BCS's *IT Now* magazine (issue of July 2011), Knuth talks about how he decided to write the aforementioned book series, what attracted him to computer science in the first place, and why he no longer uses e-mail.

On his Web site, Knuth explains his decision to forego e-mail communication, which is quite ironic for someone that has exerted such a great influence on the development of modern computing, thus: "I have been a happy man ever since January 1, 1990, when I no longer had an email address. I'd used email since about 1975, and it seems to me that 15 years of email is plenty for one lifetime. Email is a wonderful thing for people whose role in life is to be on top of things. But not for me; my role is to be on the bottom of things. What I do takes long hours of studying and uninterrupted concentration. I try to learn certain areas of computer science exhaustively; then I try to digest that knowledge into a form that is accessible to people who don't have time for such study."

In the interview he elaborates further: "Someone has to not be tweeting all the time, someone has to be thinking about things which need a long attention span and trying to organize material and build up strong foundations instead of rushing off across the frontier. ... And I was being treated like an oracle, lots of people from around the world were asking my opinion about whatever, so after 15 years of e-mail I decided that was a life time's worth."

[Visiting Donald Knuth's Web site as background research for this blog post, I came across his interesting catalog of [diamond-shaped traffic signs](#). If you check out the page, note that near the bottom, he has included a link to a Google Maps page that shows where the signs were photographed.]

2011/07/28 (Thu.): Today's theme is Persian music. Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Iranian band, Spanish song: Homay and the Mastan Group perform "[Besame Mucho](#)" ("Love Me Much"),

with Persian instruments and some Persian lyrics.

(2) Persian piano music: Anoushirvan Rohani and his son Reza play [a medley of a few of his songs](#) at a UCLA concert (2008). At a different venue, they play his composition "[Del-e Koochooloo](#)" ("Little Heart").

(3) Persian solo Piano: Hooman Tabrizi plays an old Iranian folk song "[Dokhtar-e Boyer-Ahmadi](#)" ("Girl from the Boyer-Ahmadi Tribe").

(4) Traditional Persian music: Bijan Bijani performs "[Bi Gharaar](#)" ("Restless").

2011/07/27 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Terror in Norway: [Stephen Colbert](#) pokes fun at US newspeople who jumped to conclusions about the Norwegian terrorism incident before the facts became known.

(2) Behavioral research: [Video clip](#) showing the importance of facial expression and body language in making emotional connection with infants. Fascinating!

(3) The world of numbers: I am reading the book *Is God a Mathematician?* and will write a review of it soon.

For now, here is an interesting fact about the number of days in a year: $365 = 10^2 + 11^2 + 12^2 = 13^2 + 14^2$

Here is another unrelated fun fact: $100 = 1^3 + 2^3 + 3^3 + 4^3$

(4) Witty quote of the day (anonymous): "A person's real appearance is somewhere between the photo on his/her driver's license and his/her profile picture."

2011/07/26 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Adaptable soft keyboard: People's hands are anatomically different, as the lengths, thicknesses, spacings, and movements of their fingers vary. According to a July 22 [New Scientist report](#), three IBM engineers have filed a patent application for a keyboard that undergoes a calibration stage by asking the user to carry out a series of exercises on a touch-screen. The positions, shapes, and sizes of the keys are then adapted to the user's anatomy.

(2) Do not watch if you dislike gruesome scenes: One minute a large group of people are enjoying themselves on an Indian river with a very light flow, near a waterfall; the next minute [surging floodwaters](#) trap five members of a family and eventually wash them away (2 of the 5 survived).

(3) Iranian band, Spanish song: Homay and the Mastan Group's performance of "[Besame Mucho](#)," with Persian instruments and some Persian lyrics.

(4) Persian piano music: Anoushirvan Rohani and his son Reza play [a medley of a few of his songs](#) at a UCLA concert (2008) and the song "[Del-e Koochooloo](#)" (also his composition) at another concert.

2011/07/25 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest from the worlds of human-behavior and alternative-energy research.

(1) New study on men's attitude toward porn and prostitution: *Newsweek* magazine, issue of July 25, 2011, reports on a [groundbreaking study](#) about men's attitude toward porn and prostitution, and how the widespread availability of both in the digital age "is warping personal relationships and endangering women and girls." Besides the fact that the study group had a hard time finding enough "nonusers" to form its control group, there are a number of disturbing findings. Here is a sample: "... sex buyers often voiced aggression toward women, and were nearly eight times as likely as nonbuyers to say they would rape a woman if they could get away with it. ... Prostitution has always been dangerous for women; the average age of death is 34 ... [and] prostitutes suffer a 'workplace homicide rate' 51 times higher than that of the next most dangerous occupation, working in a liquor store. ... for every john arrested for attempting to buy sex, there are up to 50 women in prostitution arrested." This is an eye-opening report for both sexes.

(2) Windows used to harvest solar energy: Rooftop solar panels are commonplace now. There is a lot of roof area in a big city, which can lead to a lot of solar energy, if the roofs are used efficiently. Now, we can hope to add windows to the solar energy harvesting area in the very near future. Already, semitransparent panels as large as 4m by 5m are being built that can double as window glass and solar panels. [Adapted from [Engineering & Technology magazine](#), issue of August 2011, pp. 80-82.]

2011/07/23 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Italian treasures in disrepair: After Greece, the European financial crisis is about to claim Italy as its next victim. According to [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of July 25, 2011), Italy's economic conditions are so grim that the government finds itself unable to preserve its cultural heritage. Walls are literally crumbling in some historical monuments, and private donations may not suffice for repairs and upkeep. This state of affairs is not unique to Italy. "What differentiates the situation in Italy is that the list of endangered national treasures is so long and the present situation so dire." For now, Italians hope they can save icons of their cultural heritage with their usual good taste, that is, without introducing obnoxious sponsor ads or turning them into theme parks.

(2) The party of the rich: US Democrats and Republicans consider the other group the party of the rich, and

both are partially right. At the state level, the richest states tend to vote Democratic (so, on average, Democrats are richer than Republicans). At the individual voter level, richer people are more likely to vote Republican. This apparent contradiction is partially explained in a [2007 article](#), based on research findings of four statisticians. The evasive ultimate explanation may be related to the fact that in poorer states, rich people are more religious and overwhelmingly vote Republican, whereas in richer states, rich people are almost equally divided between the two parties.

(3) Real-looking fake pool: Here is an amazing [fake pool in Japan](#), shown from below and from above.

2011/07/22 (Fri.): Holliday, Shabnam J., *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance*, Ashgate, 2011.

I almost stopped reading this book after a few pages. Like most academic treatments of sociopolitical issues, the author begins with a dizzying array of definitions and terminology, sometimes weaving seemingly simple concepts into undecipherable webs of words. Witness the following passage:

"The dynamic of the Iranian national identity being constructed in relation to both an internal 'other' and an external 'other' and the politics of resistance embedded in these complex relationships can be understood in terms of a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dynamic of discourses and counter-discourses of Iranian national identity. Some of these are or have been dominant or top-down. The ultimate aim is to illustrate that indeed Iranian national identity in the Khatami period is contested and that this is evident in the multiple discourses and counter-discourses. Analysing the articulation of national identity in terms of discourses allows the concurrent constructions of national identity to be examined in terms of a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic relationship." [p. 4]

Gulp! As an engineer, I crave simplicity in oral and written communications and prefer the use of more-readily absorbed charts and tables in lieu of long, unstructured textual passages. If I were to write this book, I would start with the following diagram that shows the two components of the Iranian national identity according to the author: Iranianism (Iraniyat) and Islamism (Islamiyat). Different political personalities and groups can be placed on this coordinate system according to the relative weights they attach to Iranianism and Islamism in defining the national identity. I probably would have added a third dimension to the diagram that corresponds to democracy, with its value being higher near the middle of the diagram and virtually zero at both endpoints of Pahlavi and Khomeini. The democracy dimension is self-explanatory. What remains, then, is to define Iranianism and Islamism, with their various tints and interpretations.

```

----- Iranianism
| * Pahlavi
|
|
| * Mousavi/Karoubi
| * Khatami
| * Rafsanjani
|
| * Khomeini/Khamenei
|
Islamism

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Iranianism does not have a single interpretation. Pahlavi's version was based on the ancient Achaemenid era, with its grand civilization, often symbolized by Cyrus and Darius and given the geographic moniker "Persia." Competing with the interpretation above is the Sassanid era "Iranshar" or "Iransamin" (empire/land of the Aryans, roots of the modern name "Iran"), just prior to the Arab invasion. The latter interpretation represents a less grandiose, and more historically accessible, picture of an era when Iranians were already monotheistic under Zoroastrianism. To complicate the matter, some Islamists do appeal to Iranianism, but their notion of Iranianism is nothing but Islamism. For example, Khamenei is quoted as saying, "Today, the Iranian nation is proud of the fact that after the passage of fourteen centuries its culture, language and customs and practices are part of our culture and in this regard, being national is tantamount to being Islamic." [p. 78]

Symmetrically, Islamism also has two flavors (at least): the strict conservative interpretation and the modern interpretation, as exemplified by Al-e Ahmad's resistance to Westoxification (gharb-zadegi) and Shariati's return-to-our-roots paradigm. Islamists with the two views agree on external enemies (West, Zionism/Israel, East) and one internal enemy (the former Shah and his current royalist followers), but each group views the other as the second internal enemy ("deviants" and "stone-ageists," respectively). This is, of course, a highly simplified view, but bear with me a bit longer. Al-e Ahmad talked about urban Islam and dismissed the early tribal version. This is evident from his claim that Islam "became Islam when it reached the settled lands between the Tigris and the Euphrates." Conservative clerics, on the other hand, emphasize the Islam practiced in Prophet Mohammad's days.

From the discussion above, and despite all the simplifications made, we see the complexities inherent in coming to an agreement on an Iranian national identity that would be acceptable to all the arguing parties. We have the Iranianism/Islamism spectrum, represented in the diagram above, along with at least two interpretations each of Iranianism and Islamism, combined with various shades of democracy and Iran's place in the world order.

I learned quite a bit from this book, and its references, perhaps because I went in with a rather limited knowledge of Iranianism and Islamism. I hope that my engineering-oriented summary above contributes to the understanding of the ongoing dialog about social and political issues of our motherland

[Note added on 2011/07/24: This review was posted on Iranian.com, where it brought forth comments and discussions of possible interest to readers.]

2011/07/21 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Bridge over troubled waters: A major engineering project, contemplated for many years, seems to be moving toward realization. Egypt and Saudi Arabia plan to connect their lands in the area of the strait of Tiran in [northern Red Sea](#). The bridge will be 20 miles long, and though it won't be the longest in the world (depending on how you classify bridges, that honor belongs to the 102-mile Danyang-Kunshan Grand Bridge for high-speed railway or the 26-mile, 8-lane Jiaozhou Bay crossing, both in China), it will be one of the most difficult to build. Challenges relate to technical considerations (such as the area being prone to earthquakes) and the sociopolitical situation in the region. Countries close to the site may be hesitant to approve it; a key Israeli port and Jordan's only port connect to the Red Sea via Strait of Tiran. However, both Moses and Mohammad would have approved of this project: the first for obvious reasons, and the second because of the facilitation of Hajj for Egyptians.

(2) Entertainment in China: This post is based on two different stories in the July 25, 2011, issue of *Time* Magazine. On p. 26, Farid Zakaria relates that the Chinese government will not allow any foreign movie into the country until its propaganda film "Beginning of the Great Revival" has grossed the equivalent of \$124M. On p. 53, we read about the first Chinese staging, entirely in Mandarin, of a Western musical ("Mamma Mia!"), which is touring that country.

(3) Islamists coming to their senses? "We can no longer be the party that says 'down with this' and 'down with that.' The thing we stood against is gone, so we have to re-examine what we stand for." Essam el-Erian, a top leader of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, quoted in *Time* magazine, issue of July 25, 2011 (p. 46).

2011/07/20 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The small town of Persia, Iowa (population 363), is featured in an Iranian.com [photo essay](#).

(2) Girls sweep Google Science Fair awards: Girls have come a long way from the days when they were apprehensive about participating in science and technology projects to last week's winning in all three age groups of [Google's Science Fair](#), which featured more than 10,000 contestants from 91 countries.

(3) Wonderful guitar melodies: This is an old 2007 live performance of "[Heart of Life](#)" by John Mayer. Other songs from this particular concert at Los Angeles' Nokia Theater are also available on YouTube.

(4) Hanging for apostasy: The [death sentence by hanging](#) of Yosef Naderkhani, an Iranian pastor who abandoned Islam to become a Christian, has been upheld by Iran's Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Naderkhani's attorney has been sentenced to a 9-year prison term and banned from practicing law for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime."



2011/07/19 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) A newly published bio of President Obama's father: *Newsweek* magazine contains a review of the newly published book, *The Other Barack: The Bold and Reckless Life of President Obama's Father*, by Sally H. Jacobs (Public Affairs, 2011). The book and *Newsweek's* article portray Barack Obama Sr. as highly intelligent, but hot-tempered and lacking in self-confidence. He was a heavy drinker and had several auto accidents as a result, losing his life to one in 1982. He left his first two wives, took the third to Kenya, and both abused her and was unfaithful to her. Barack Obama Jr., while inheriting his father's intelligence, seems to fall in the exact opposite corner on every other attribute.

(2) An engineering approach to weigh loss: In its July 2011 issue (p. 28), *IEEE Spectrum* reports on a breakthrough in weight loss technology. When aspiring electrical engineer, turned plastic surgeon, Gary Horndeski noticed that his tummy tuck patients continued to lose weight after surgery, he set out to discover why. Eventually, he traced the reason to a synthetic mesh that he used to reinforce the abdominal fascia, an

elastic tissue that weakens with pregnancy and age. Insertion of this mesh was Horndeski's own innovation. He determined that the mesh puts external pressure on the stomach, and this pressure is apparently indistinguishable to the brain from pressure due to fullness of the stomach. Horndeski's patients felt too full to eat for several days, and restarted eating only after the loss of some intra-abdominal fat to relieve the pressure somewhat. The inventor is quick to point out that a girdle cannot serve the same end, "because it doesn't provide nearly the same pressure as a mesh." Horndeski has patented the process and is awaiting its approval by the two hospitals where he works.

2011/07/17 (Sun.): Three items of potential interest from the worlds of sports and entertainment.

(1) Women's World Cup: Japan emerged as the champion by defeating USA 2-2 after overtime, and 3-1 in penalty kicks, in the thrilling final match of the women's World Cup soccer. In the third-place match, held yesterday, Sweden prevailed over France 2-1.

(2) Irish performance: Tonight, I attended the premiere of "Ireland: The Show" at Santa Barbara's historic Granada Theater. This intimate and simple show (with no sets or elaborate lighting) was enjoyable, but with only 13 performers (6 musicians, 6 dancers, and a singer), it lacked variety. Somehow, I can't watch Irish dancing without remembering the [comedy video clip](#) attributing its origins to a group of peasants having to wait for a long time in front of a portable toilet.

(3) Iranian folk music: Darya Dadvar sings "[Maah Pishanoo](#)," an Iranian folk song. Here is [another video](#) for the song, with lyrics.

2011/07/16 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Product placement ads: According to Entertainment Weekly, issue of July 22, 2011, old sitcoms are being retrofitted with product placement ads in the form of signs, posters on walls, and anything else that can be added in. So, don't be surprised to see an ad for a 2011 movie hanging on an office wall in a 1980s sitcom!

(2) Discussion on absolute morality: There is no spokesperson for atheism who is more articulate than Richard Dawkins. Listen to him dig himself out of an apparent hole, when asked how atheism can be reconciled with moral right/wrong choices. The 3-minute video clip comes with Persian subtitles.

2011/07/15 (Fri.):

(1) Universities must adapt to digitally immersed students: so argues Don Tapscott, co-author with Anthony D. Williams, of the new book, *Macrowikinomics: Rebooting Business and the World*. [According to the authors](#), universities are woefully behind the times, still favoring the traditional lecture model, which is ill-suited to a generation that has grown up making, changing, and learning from digital communities.

(2) An impressive author: Tonight, I learned about Mahshid Amirshahi via this [BBC Persian interview](#). Ms. Amirshahi has been writing for decades, with sincerity, courage, and extraordinary skill. It is a shame that Iranians have to learn about their literary treasures from BBC, while Iranian radio and TV continue broadcasting religious trash and superstition. Here is the [author's Web site](#).

(3) Cranes used for executions: A Japanese heavy machinery manufacturer has reportedly cut business ties with the Iranian government because of the use of its cranes for public executions. The company's announcement came several days after United Against Nuclear Iran President Mark D. Wallace named the Japanese Tadano company as one of the exporters of cranes to Iran in a *Los Angeles Times* [op-ed piece](#) (see the op-ed's last paragraph).

2011/07/14 (Thu.): Today is "witty quotations" day for me, so here we go with three posts.

(1) A few witty quotes about education.

Robert Frost: "Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence."

L. L. Hendren: "Fathers send their sons to college either because they went to college, or because they didn't."

Derek Bok: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Anonymous: "A Self-taught man usually has a poor teacher and a worse student."

(2) A few witty quotes about childhood and youth.

Fred Astaire: "The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any."

James Baldwin: "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."

Anna Jameson: "Childhood sometimes does pay a second visit to man; youth never."

Cesare Pavese: "One stops being a child when one realizes that telling one's trouble does not make it better."

(3) The great actor, Laurence Olivier, has said something that should help anyone going through a difficult phase in his/her life: "Living is strife and torment, disappointment and love and sacrifice, golden sunsets and black storms. I said that some time ago, and today I do not think I would add one word."

2011/07/13 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) The team that wouldn't die: After scoring a goal in minute 9, conceding the equalizer in minute 55, and being entirely dominated by the technical play and relentless attack of France for much of the second half, the US women's soccer team came up with two goals in the last 11 minutes of play to win its World Cup semifinal match 3-1 [[game highlights](#)]. US will play Japan (which defeated Sweden 3-1) in the championship match on Sunday 7/17, 11:00 AM PDT. The third-place match will be between France and Sweden on Saturday 7/16, 8:00 AM PDT.

(2) Persian music: Rumi's last sonnet, "On the Deathbed," is set to music and accompanies an interesting [slide show](#) with English translation.

2011/07/12 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest about international soccer.

(1) Women's soccer: This image of the US goalie, Hope Solo, [saving a penalty kick](#) to spur a US victory shows why she was chosen as the most valuable player of yesterday's women's World Cup quarterfinals match between USA and Brazil.

(2) World Cup of soccer for robots: The women's World Cup is not the only international soccer event this July. A large number of robotic teams have just finished a tournament in Istanbul, Turkey, to win RoboCupSoccer championships in various categories. A stated goal of the tournament is to be able to field a complete team of robots to play the world's top human team by 2050.

The level of play in humanlike categories (robots on legs, not wheels) is primitive. Here is a [sample match](#), in which US defeats Japan 8-1.

However, the small, mid-size, and large boxlike robots on wheels play pretty good games of soccer. Iran fielded 4 teams (Immortals, Omid, MRL, Parsian) in the small, boxlike category. According to news stories from Iran, the teams did well, but I have been unable to find the complete results.

RoboCup's [official Web site](#) does not yet have videos from this year's matches, but there are plenty from the 2010 tournament in Thailand.

Alongside RoboCupSoccer, parallel competitions were held for rescue robots (RoboCupRescue), home assistance robots (RoboCupHome), and primary/secondary school enrichment programs (RoboCupJunior).

2011/07/11 (Mon.): Jarvis, Jeff, *What Would Google Do?* unabridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2009.

The title of this eye-opening and highly informative book is a play on the words of a notorious bumper sticker, "What Would Jesus Do?" Jarvis presents a set of rules, or "dos and don'ts," for businesses to succeed in the Internet age. The overarching theme is that customers/users are now in charge and businesses should go out of their way to meet them on their turfs, rather than expect the customers to come to their stores, publications, or Web sites. In the author's view, Google epitomizes this strategy. When one goes to Google's main page, one sees only a minimalist search tool: no fancy graphics, no busy page look, and no ads. Instead, Google has established a presence in other places where its users are found (through search bars, embedded videos, and other mechanisms). Most users are directed to a particular newspaper article or merchandise specs page via a Google search, rather than through visiting the provider's Web page and navigating there. Thus, it is utterly important that each page include complete information on the topic/item and clearly indicate the Web site hosting the information, contact points, and customer service. Users yearn for simplicity and would navigate away from a Web page if overwhelmed with too much info or perturbed by blinking or otherwise intrusive content. In the end, successful businesses in the Internet age are the ones that take advantage of interactions to develop trust and to empower customers to participate in evaluating and improving their products. A secondary theme of the book is that "free" is now a valid business model, again as epitomized by Google's method of supporting free services via efficient distribution of advertising. If Google did not officially sponsor this book, it is getting a great deal of free publicity from it!

2011/07/10 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) US advances to semifinals in women's World Cup soccer: After conceding an own goal in the first few minutes of the match, Brazil bounced back, and got some help from the referees, to take a 2-1 lead in a quarterfinal match of the Women's World Cup. Magically, US scored the equalizer in minute 122 (2 minutes into the 3-minute injury time, following overtime). Then, US goalie, Hope Solo, made a save to allow a US victory on penalty kicks [[official game highlights video](#)]. The US team will face France (which upset England on penalty kicks as well) on Wednesday, July 13, 8:30 AM PDT. In the other semifinal match, Sweden will play Japan, perhaps setting up a rematch between US and Sweden, which won 2-1 earlier in the tournament.

(2) Persian/Flamenco fusion music: Shahab Tolouie plays "[Tango Perso.](#)"

(3) World's largest photo: This [111 gigapixel photo of Seville](#) is awe-inspiring. Using the hand tool, you can move left, right, up, and down on it, and with the "+" button, you can zoom in to see a great deal of detail. Included are "about" and "making of" pages with a wealth of information. Enjoy!

(4) More on 3D printing: Here is another [video demonstration](#) of Z Corporation's 3D printer, that I had written about in my June 22, 2011, blog post.

(5) Iran's waterfalls: I was delighted to discover a photo gallery depicting Iran's nature on a travel agency's Web site. Particularly breathtaking are images of Iran's waterfalls, including 5 photos from Shooshtar. Enjoy! <http://www.dalahoo.us/PhotoGallery/>

2011/07/09 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The average US adult obtains 580 calories (25% of his/her daily intake) from snacks. Beverages account for half of these outside-of-meals calories. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of July 11, 2011, p. 19.]

(2) Blog recommendation: Yesterday, I chanced upon the [personal blog of Ozra Mojibi](#), which contains an excellent selection of Persian poetry.

(3) Tahereh Ghor'ratol-eyn: One of the gems I uncovered, when browsing for Persian poetry tonight, is a [beautiful poem](#) by Tahereh Ghor'ratol-eyn, who lived from 1814 (1817?) to 1852. I have been a fan of Tahereh's poems ever since I learned about her last year (see my blog entry for 2010/05/04). Tonight, I chanced upon a [tribute to Tahereh](#) (published circa 1950; digital edition, 2000) on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of her passing, apparently via execution due to her religious beliefs (she had converted to Baha'ism). Here is [another poem of Taherh](#), which I have posted before.

(4) Iranian/Jewish music: [Galeet Dardashti](#), an Israeli singer and academic of Iranian descent, is looking for Persian poems on themes of renewal, starting over, or turning one's life around. I could think only of Spring/Norooz poems, which often focus on renewal. Does anyone know of other such poems? Dardashti's "Monajat" US tour will bring her to Los Angeles on Sunday, September 25, 2011, 8:00 PM (venue?).

2011/07/08 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Gooz is related to shaghigheh, after all: According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), scientists have advanced a theory that damming projects over the Colorado River have led to both the recent floods and the dearth of major earthquakes in southern California. Researchers at UCSD's Scripps Institution of Oceanography suggest that earthquakes are more likely to be triggered when floodwaters periodically flow through faults. The research seems to provide an answer to a question seismologists have been asking for decades: "Why has the southern end of the San Andreas fault gone for so long without a major earthquake?" The new research suggests that changes in water flow, due to damming and creation of artificial lakes, has made California overdue for a major quake, with potentially dire consequences when a bigger one is eventually triggered. [For readers who don't understand Persian, the title of this post is a play on a Persian saying, invoked when someone suggests a cause-effect relationship between seemingly unrelated events.]

(2) A call for 3-year college degrees: With all the talk of cuts (spending, staffing, benefits, taxes) these days, one should not be surprised that cuts in the length of educational programs are being proposed once again. Bachelor's degree programs have been standardized at 4 years around the globe, but there have been many suggestions for lengthening the programs (particularly in engineering, where knowledge of fundamental scientific ideas and hands-on practical work must be combined) or for shortening them. The latest proposal for the latter action comes from a [Washington Post editorial](#) that argues, on economic grounds, for 3-year BS/BA programs, so that students need less borrowing and have an extra year of work to defray the cost of their college education. Successful 3-year BS/BA programs do exist in some countries, but such an action would be disastrous in the US, because of the already watered-down high school curricula. Perhaps cutting a year or two from the high school program could serve the same end, without compromising the learning process in higher education.

(3) Discouraging copper thieves: The sharp rise in the price of copper has emboldened thieves who steal copper wires from electric distribution networks. So, the next time you experience a blackout, consider that the wires in the network bringing electricity to your home or business might have been stolen. Electric utilities and other owners of the electric grid have started using [several countermeasures](#), including laser-etched unique codes (akin to fingerprints) that help identify the source of even small pieces of copper wire.

2011/07/07 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Will offshoring reverse direction soon? As the Chinese economy grows and the size of its middle class expands by millions annually, the cost of labor in that country continues its double-digit climb. Manufacturing wages in China have grown by 12% annually over the past decade and are projected to amount to 70% of US wages by 2015, when adjusted for productivity. Already, some manufacturing jobs are being sent from China to Cambodia, Vietnam, and India. In fact, a number of US companies have begun the process of bringing parts of their manufacturing operations back home from China. The positive side of this development is that the phenomenal economic growth in China will benefit many of its poorer neighbors, while also reversing job losses in the developed world. The down side for China is a possible slowdown in the rate of economic growth, as more

industries shift focus from the export market to satisfying domestic needs. [From *Time* magazine's special business report, issue of June 27, 2011.]

(2) The biggest military computer hack of all time: Gary McKinnon, using the pseudonym "Solo," managed to gain unimpeded access to thousands of US government computers for nearly a year surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At one point, he took down the US Army's entire Washington, DC, network. According to a US attorney, this was "the biggest military computer hack of all time." Eventually, Solo was tracked down and charged with offenses that may cost him life imprisonment. The unmasked hacker, however, suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism whose indications often include extremely high intelligence and total inability to grasp the impact of one's behavior. Several rock stars, actors, and members of Parliament have rallied to prevent McKinnon's extradition to the United States. This all raises the question: Can autism be considered a valid defense against cybercrime charges? [From *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of July 2011.]

2011/07/06 (Wed.): Dumas, Firoozeh, *Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of an Iranian American, at Home and Abroad*, Villard, 2008.

This book, from the author of the previously successful *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (for which I wrote a mini-review in 2005), is a collection of 28 essays (3-12 pages each) on the author's life as the daughter of Iranian immigrants, touching upon some colorful characters in her extended family and her own trials and tribulations as the working mother of two girls. The author's trademark humor is featured in nearly all the essays, save a couple of serious ones. In my opinion, the author's writing style is much better and more engaging in this second book.

The opening essay, "Funny in Persian," alludes to a criticism of the use of "Farsi" instead of "Persian" in the title of the author's first book. Interestingly, the first book, when translated into Persian, was given the title *Atr-e Sombol, Atr-e Kaaj* (*Scent of Hyacinths, Scent of Pine*), alluding to the contrasting smells of Norooz and Christmas. On the difference between holiday traditions in the two countries, we read: "[In Iran,] The idea of going to bed so a bearded man, Khomeini perhaps, can come down the chimney would not cause visions of sugarplums dancing in anyone's head" [p. 7]. In this same essay, the author also writes of her brush with government censors in Iran, forcing her to remove an entire chapter, "The Ham Amendment," recounting her father's ethos that what is important isn't what one eats, but how one treats fellow human beings [p. 9]. In one of the funniest essays, "His and Hers" [pp. 58-67], the author recounts how her father's fondness for clearance sales led to the purchase of two large desks and other items from a nearby engineering firm which was selling its old furniture. By the time all the costs were factored in (difficulty in transportation, including a couple of traffic tickets for carrying unsafe loads, damages to their stairwell and apartment walls resulting from moving the items in, and having to pay to dispose of them a few years later, because no one would accept them for free), the purchase proved to be no bargain at all.

Among serious discussions in the book is the story of how the author and her French husband decided to get rid of their TV set, making their children much more active and creative, but bearing the undesirable side effect of making folding the laundry even more boring. The entire last essay, "444 Days," also has a serious tone, as the author reflects on her trip to Iowa to spend some time with Kathryn Koob, one of the US hostages in post-revolutionary Iran, explaining how Koob's warmth and lack of bitterness about her ordeal affected the author. More information about the book is available on the [author's Web site](#) and from this [6-minute video clip](#) of an interview with the author in 2008.

2011/07/05 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) The Casey Anthony trial saga: I have seen many people express disappointment over today's "not guilty" verdict for Casey Anthony, a woman whose trial on charges of murdering her 2-year-old daughter received extensive media coverage in the US. We must bear in mind that a court trial is a lengthy process during which a lot of information is presented by both sides. Our justice system is not perfect and errors are entirely possible. However, people should not be tried in the media. This is wrong on many different levels, including the fact that there is no way all relevant information can be covered by TV/newspapers or for a typical viewer/reader to have the time to absorb even the parts that are presented. Additionally, jurors may react to overzealous prosecutors or to their ineptitude in professionally presenting a case without grandstanding. For all the imperfections in the US legal system, it is the envy of many countries. Finally, it is better for a guilty person to go free once in a while than for innocent people to be wrongfully convicted.

(2) Turkey as a model Islamic country? Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, recently elected to a third term in a landslide, is surprisingly popular among both the urban middle class, who vote with their pocketbooks, and heartland masses, who are religious and, like their counterparts in the US, "often feel condescended by the coastal, secular elite." Turkey is doing well economically and is ahead of most European countries in its economic recovery following worldwide financial troubles. During Erdogan's tenure, inflation in Turkey has dropped from the obscene 37% to a manageable 5-8%. With a population of about 80M, Turkey has the world's 17th largest economy, and is experiencing one of the world's fastest growth rates, behind China and

India. [Adapted from the *Time* magazine article "Turkey's Man of the People," issue of June 27, 2011.]

2011/07/04 (Mon.): Silverman, Sarah, *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2010.

This hilarious memoir by the foul-mouthed comedian bears her trademark shocking style, but, somewhat surprisingly, is tender and winningly serious at times. In the foreword, which she wrote herself to defy tradition, the author explains: "I'm not writing this book to share wisdom or to inspire people. I'm writing this book because I am a famous comedian, which is how it works now. If you're famous, you get to write a book, and not the other way around." Halfway through the book, she introduces a novel concept: a middleword (a short section, summarizing what she has said so far and reiterating what the book is all about). I am not a big fan of Silverman, but I enjoyed listening to this audiobook.

2011/07/03 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) California higher education in trouble: According to the *Los Angeles Times*, University of California and Cal State University students are sure to face a second round of 10-15% tuition hike in response to deeper state funding cuts. The new increases are on top of the recent hikes of 8-10% already approved for the coming fall. The two university systems are continuing to make spending cuts as well. Previously, *LAT had reported* that faculty are leaving the UC system in view of the bleak state budget outlook and academic salaries falling behind comparable institutions.

(2) Persian music: An **instrumental piece**, performed with piano and daf.

(3) Try this mathematical "trick": Take your age in years. Multiply by 73. Now, multiply the result of the first multiplication by 13837 and observe the result. Can you explain the outcome?

2011/07/01 (Fri.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) The Web's secret cash: About 6.5M Bitcoins, a new Internet currency, are in circulation now, each equivalent to about \$18 (the worth of a Bitcoin has fluctuated from about \$1 to \$30+). Many merchants already accept Bitcoins. Some consider it illegal, a form of money laundering, because it can be used virtually anonymously and is totally unreliable: your Bitcoins can evaporate overnight. Others are lining up to get in on this newest Internet craze. [From *Newsweek magazine*, issue of June 27, 2011, p. 32]

(2) Floating palaces—yachts of the mega-rich: List from *Newsweek* (issue of June 27, 2011, pp. 26-27), ordered by the length of the yacht in feet. Note that most of these yachts belong to rich people in backward and/or bankrupt countries.

557 Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich

531 UAE Prime Minister Sheik Mohammad

478 Egypt's former presidential yacht

457 Saudi Crown Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz

436 Qatar's Sheik Hamed bin Khalifa al-Thani

414 US Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen

397 Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos

315 US Limited Brands CEO Les Wexner

224 British publishing magnate Aidan Barclay

(3) US History Quiz: Which of the following best represents the average number of years a US president holds office? (a) 5.0 (b) 5.5 (c) 6.0 (d) 6.5.

Answer: George Washington became the first US president in 1789. Barack Obama is the 44th. If he leaves office in 2017, the average is $(2017 - 1789)/44 = 5.18$. If you don't count Obama, the average comes to $(2009 - 1789)/43 = 5.12$. Clearly, there have been many more one-term presidents than two-termers.

[For both the past 10 and 20 presidents (34-43 and 24-43) the average length of term equals 5.6 years.]

(4) Bachman would beat Jefferson today: "He may have written the Declaration of Independence, but were he around today Thomas Jefferson wouldn't have a prayer of winning the Republican nomination, much less the presidency. It wouldn't be his liaison with the teenage daughter of one of his slaves nor the love children she bore him that would be the stumbling block. Nor would it be Jefferson's suspicious possession of an English translation of the Quran that might doom him to fail the Newt Gingrich loyalty test. No, it would be the Jesus problem that would do him in. For Thomas Jefferson denied that Jesus was the son of God. Worse, he refused to believe that Jesus ever made any claim that he was. While he was at it, Jefferson also rejected as self-evidently absurd the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the Resurrection. ... We do the authors of American independence no favors by embalming them in infallibility, by treating the Constitution like a quasi-biblical revelation instead of the product of contention and cobbled-together compromise that it actually was."

[Quoted from Simon Schama's article, "The Founding Fathers, Unzipped," *Newsweek magazine*, issue of July 4 & 11, 2011, pp. 4-5.]

(5) Splitscreen—A Love Story: An intriguing **low-budget video**, by J. W. Griffiths, shot entirely on a Nokia N8 mobile phone.

(6) Iranian regime's distaste for pre-Islamic history: Statues of Persian warriors, with horses and chariots, **destroyed and trashed** in the northern city of Sari. This reminds me of the destruction of Buddha statues by the Taliban in 2001. What a shame!

2011/06/30 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) "All I Ask of You": One of several hauntingly beautiful love songs from Andrew Lloyd Webber's brilliant musical, "The Phantom of the Opera," **performed masterfully** by Sarah Brightman and Michael Ball.

(2) The future of food shopping: A **virtual store** in South Korea allows people to buy groceries while waiting for their trains, with their purchases delivered to them shortly after they get home.

(3) Moving pictures: Bodies of water are featured in these **beautiful images**. However, there is much more to them. Move your mouse over the water and see the image come alive with realistic water motion.

(4) The Web's secret cash: About 6.5M Bitcoins, a new Internet currency, are in circulation now, each equivalent to about \$18 (the worth of a Bitcoin has fluctuated from about \$1 to \$30+). Many merchants already accept Bitcoins. Some consider it illegal, a form of money laundering, because it can be used virtually anonymously and is totally unreliable: your Bitcoins can evaporate overnight. Others are lining up to get in on this newest Internet craze. [From **Newsweek magazine**, issue of June 27, 2011, p. 32]

2011/06/29 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Thousands of lanterns fill the sky: "Poznan, Poland was the scene of [an estimated 8000] paper lanterns filling the night sky. The event, held on June 21st, is part of the festival surrounding Midsummer Night, or St. John's Night, the shortest night of the year." [**CBS News story and video**]

(2) How to revise a constitution: Joel Stein writes a funny column in *Time* magazine (issue of July 4, 2011) on the amicable and civilized manner in which Iceland is rewriting its constitution. Everyone can contribute to the process through the Internet and members of the Constitutional Assembly cheerily respond to all suggestions via e-mail. "If Americans were allowed to revise our Constitution, we'd be taking to the streets to fight over gay marriage, gun control, abortion, and ... [but] the Icelanders seem to agree on everything."

(3) The US Constitution—a document under siege: Richard Stengel, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of July 4, 2011, pp. 30-45), maintains that the current squabbles in the US over the Constitution lack substance and serve mostly as cable-TV fodder. He maintains that the framers would say: "The Constitution does not protect our spirit of liberty; our spirit of liberty protects the Constitution. The Constitution serves the nation; the nation does not serve the Constitution." On the four major debates raging today, he makes the following points.

(a) Libya: The Constitution does say "The Congress shall have power ... To declare war." But the Congress has authorized only five wars throughout the US history, the last one being WW II. There have been dozens of conflicts since then, including the Korean War. Presidents from both parties have interpreted their Commander-in-Chief role and powers nearly identically.

(b) The debt ceiling: The Constitution is quite clear on this. "The Congress shall have power ... To borrow money on the credit of the United States." The current debate isn't over principles. The party out of power is always against raising the debt ceiling. When Bush wanted to raise the limit in 2006, Senators Obama and Biden opposed it, because it was "a sign of leadership failure."

(c) Health care: The Constitution maintains that "Congress shall have power ... To regulate commerce with foreign Nations and among the several States." Health care certainly qualifies as an interstate activity. You may reside in California and fall ill in Utah, requiring surgery there. Even if the health care reform act were a bad law, it would not bring about a constitutional crisis. There are remedies for bad laws, of which there have been quite a few over the course of US history.

(d) Immigration: The Constitution, and its 14th Amendment (clarifying the issue in 1868, in the wake of slaves and their children becoming free), are crystal clear on birthright citizenship. US and Canada are the only advanced industrial countries offering birthright citizenship; no European country does, nor does China or Japan. Birthright citizenship has withstood legal challenge, when in 1898, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a son of illegal Chinese immigrants, who was denied re-entry into the US.

2011/06/28 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Official statement on human rights in Iran: Sadeqh Larijani, who heads the Department of Human Rights within Iran's Ministry of Justice, claims that Iran is the only democracy in the Middle East and that it grants more than equal rights to members of religious minorities. According to him, even Baha'is, which he characterized as a "cult" rather than a faith or a sect, have citizens' rights, although they are not allowed to promote their "false" beliefs. This guy, whose brothers head the judiciary and the Majlis, **makes his claims** with a straight face, after decades of imprisonment and even execution of Baha'i leaders in Iran.

(2) The world isn't so flat: All the talk of a flat world and global village does not square with reality on the

Internet. Less than 20% of Internet traffic crosses national borders. This is because both politics and economics are local, and they may become more so as the world gets richer. [Adapted from a *Time* magazine column by Rana Foroohar, issue of June 27, 2011.]

(3) World's largest wooden structure: The impressive Metropole Parasole recently opened to the public in Seville, Spain. The massive honeycomb design contains an archaeological museum, a farmers' market, and rooftop walkways with panoramic views. This short [slide show](#) depicts the structure from different viewpoints.

(4) Underage children on Facebook: According to a new *Consumer Reports* survey, 7.5M Facebook users are younger than 13 (the official minimum age for joining) and 5M are 10 or younger. Mark Zuckerberg created a firestorm when he recently suggested that parental permission should not be required for young children to join Facebook. [Time magazine, issue of June 17, 2011.]

2011/06/27 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Women's World Cup: The US women's soccer team will play its first match of the 2011 Women's World Cup against N. Korea on Tuesday, 6/28. This should lead to a US win, but the Koreans are tough, disciplined, and full of surprises. ESPN (channel 34 in my area) will carry all three group matches for the US team: Tue. 6/28, 8:30 AM, vs. N. Korea; Sat. 7/2, 8:30 AM, vs. Colombia; Wed. 7/6, 11:30 AM, vs. Sweden. TV coverage starts half-hour before game time.

(2) Mexico defeats USA 4-2 in the Gold Cup final: After building up a 2-0 lead in the first half of the Gold Cup championship match on Sat. 6/25, the US team fell apart defensively, conceding 2 goals in the first half and 2 more in the second. The Mexicans did get some lucky breaks, but at least 2 of the 4 goals were due to gross defensive mistakes. Technically, this was a home game for the US side, but as usual, [Mexico had more fans](#) cheering them on, and booing the US team, at the Rose Bowl.

(3) Persian music: Instrumental version of "[Bahar-e Delneshin](#)" ("Pleasant Spring"), featuring guitar and taar. Here is the [original version](#), sung by Banan.

2011/06/26 (Sun.): Carr, Nicholas, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2008.

The computing grid, recently renamed "the cloud," is purported to do for our dealings with information what electricity did for our energy needs: provide ample computing power, where and when required, without the need for individual investment in infrastructure. Not too long ago, factories ran their own on-site steam engines, and used elaborate, expensive, and rather unsightly system of pulleys and belts to distribute the resulting mechanical energy throughout the factory floor.

Now, electrical outlets, installed on factory walls and floors, serve the same purpose in a much cleaner and more efficient manner. This state of affairs is in no small part due to the technical and economic genius of Samuel Insull, an Edison protege, who could see the future much more clearly than Edison did (Insull was instrumental in the formation and success of GE). He argued passionately for the use of alternating current, in lieu of the then prevalent direct current, to achieve more efficient power transmission. "What the fiber-optic Internet does for computing is exactly what the alternating-current network did for electricity: It makes the location of the equipment unimportant to the user" (p. 60). But the similarity of the electrical and computing grids does not extend far beyond this point.

The widespread availability of electric power had significant social and economic consequences. A good example is the rather swift extinction of the ice distribution industry, which during the 1800s was transformed into a thriving business, with companies developing methods and infrastructure for shipping sheets of ice from northern lakes and rivers in the United States to points as far away as India and Singapore. Electricity essentially annihilated this business, as it allowed the on-demand production of ice anywhere (p. 90). However, these changes pale by comparison with what the cloud will bring.

The information economy, and the grid or cloud in particular, will affect the wealth distribution, helping to concentrate financial resources in the hands of a small number of individuals and firms. This is a continuation of the US trend that began after 1980. The share of the overall income going to the wealthiest 10% remained steady at around 32% between WW II and 1980. In subsequent 5-year intervals, it reached 34%, 39%, 41%, and 43%. After a brief retreat following the dot.com bust, it returned to 43% in 2004 (p. 143). "In the YouTube economy, everyone is free to play, but only a few reap the rewards" (p. 147).

Take the news media as another example. Unbundling of newspapers, into a set of independently framed stories, rather than a packaged whole, has created an unpleasant side effect. Classified ads, which are quickly being undermined by on-line sites such as Craigslist, can no longer help underwrite the salaries of investigative journalist or expenses of overseas offices. Each article or news story must be justified separately. In such a context, news stories covered are those that are likely to generate more ad revenues: "a long investigative article on government corruption or the resurgence of malaria in Africa would be much less likely to produce substantial ad revenues [as] it doesn't cover a subject that advertisers want to be associated with or that would

produce a lot of valuable clickthroughs" (p. 155).

Another potential side effect is increased conflicts and social isolation. Studies have confirmed that "the more that people converse or otherwise share information with other people who hold similar views, the more extreme their views become. ... When like-minded people cluster, they often aggravate their biases, spreading falsehoods. [They] end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began" (p. 165). Consequently, "two of the hopes most dear to the Internet optimists—that the Web will create a more bountiful culture and that it will promote greater harmony and understanding—should be treated with skepticism. Cultural impoverishment and social fragmentation seem equally likely outcomes" (p. 167).

Horror stories about surveillance and loss of privacy abound. A supposedly anonymous woman, whose AOL profile was one of many provided to researchers, was quickly identified by the group as part of an experiment to determine how much information can be gleaned from Internet searches and other on-line activities (pp. 186-189). In another study, the analysis of publicly available data from two sources, a movie ratings site and a movie discussion forum, led to the discovery that an algorithm could fully identify 60% of the people who mentioned 8 or more films.

In other words, the empowering property of the Internet is grossly misjudged. While the Internet puts great power into the hands of individuals, it empowers governments and other controlling institutions even more. "It should come as no surprise, then, that most of the major advances in computing and networking ... have been spurred not by a desire to liberate the masses but by a need for greater control on the part of commercial and governmental bureaucrats, often ones associated with military operations and national defense" (pp. 191-195). This intriguing and informative book ends with these sentences: "As the older generations die, they take with them their knowledge of what was lost when the new technology arrived, and only the sense of what was gained remains. It's in this way that progress covers its tracks, perpetually refreshing the illusion that where we are is where we were meant to be" (p. 232).

2011/06/25 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest about entertainment and sports.

(1) Performance review: Seinfeld, Jerry, "I Am Telling You for the Last Time," audio recording of a live performance at New York City's Broadhurst Theater on August 6-9, 1998, Universal Records.

Jerry Seinfeld can take the most mundane daily event and turn it into a very funny story. In this stand-up routine, he talks about a variety of topics with his characteristic laid-back style. The stories touch upon NYC cab drivers, air travel, Florida (its state flag should show a steering wheel, with a hat and a couple of knuckles), Halloween (taking candy from strangers, without anyone objecting), supermarkets, drugstores, doctors (wouldn't it be nice to tell the doctor when he comes into the exam room, after making us wait butt-naked for a long time, that it isn't a good time; he should go into his office and wait, until we call upon him), men & women, McDonalds (okay, we get it, you sold a lot of burgers!), Chinese people, Olympics, scuba diving, #1 fear, sky diving & the idiotic helmet, clothing, late TV, crooks, horses (would they try as hard in a race if they knew that breaking a leg would mean a shot in the head?), and bathroom.

(2) Peter Falk dies at 83: The detective series "Columbo" was quite special and the role fit Peter Falk like a glove. **RIP Mr. Falk**, and thanks for many hours of entertainment.

Ah ... I have just one more question: who prepared Mr. Falk's last meal?

(3) Iran's soccer team exits the 2012 Olympics race: Iran, which had beaten Iraq 1-0 a few days ago, **lost the return game 0-2** at Tehran's Azadi Stadium, thereby extending its absence in the Olympics to 40 years. It turns out that Iranian officials were notified hours before the game that the score for the first game had been changed to 3-0 in favor of Iraq, due to Iran's use of an ineligible player. So the Iranian team, that, unbeknownst to the spectators, was aware of the need to beat Iraq by 4 goals in order to advance, was playing under extreme duress. This is just one more example of ineptitude among high-level officials in Iran.

2011/06/24 (Fri.): Sexual segregation of higher education in Iran: Plans for segregating the sexes in Iranian universities seem to be going full-speed ahead (primary and secondary schools are already segregated). Preference for segregation by sex isn't unique to Islam and exists in both Judaism and Christianity, for instance. While there is some evidence for more effective learning in unisex classrooms/schools, living in our modern world does not entail only technical knowledge and professional skills. Today, social skills and the ability to navigate in an increasingly complex and diverse world overshadow the importance of academic performance. The development of such social skills will be one of the casualties of segregated higher education. This general observation aside, a larger danger looms if classrooms or university campuses are segregated by sex. Given that, due to systematic discrimination in both private and public sectors, employment opportunities for women are very limited, it is quite likely that resources will not be made available to women's classes or universities on par with men's programs or institutions. There is already talk of certain majors being inaccessible to women, depriving Iran of many future scientists, engineers, and judges, to cite a few examples. Furthermore, it is not difficult to envision a next step in which professors are also segregated. There are already some very capable female faculty members in Iran, but their numbers, particularly at higher academic ranks, is relatively small.

This latter segregation, if implemented, will compound the ill effects of decades of discrimination against Iranian women in education and employment. The entire exercise presents a no-win situation that is appealing only to the sensibilities of certain stone-age religious authorities. Iranian women, and men, will certainly not take restrictions of this kind lightly, given that they will be even more damaging to the society than forced dress codes.

2011/06/23 (Thu.): Here are two items about Facebook and status/blog posts.

(1) Google and others are bent on dethroning Facebook: Diaspora, the start-up company some predict will take down Facebook, won't do so by building a better social networking Web site. The company's vision is to build a framework for social networking that ties together a large set of independent, distributed social subnetworks. What FB has going for it is a huge, centralized, fully searchable data bank, providing convenience to users, who want to search for old acquaintances and discover new friends, and allowing FB to mine the data to maximize its advertising income. FB's drawback is that it is totally blind to all the individuals and relationships available outside the FB universe. A distributed system, built on an open-source software model, will allow more people to connect, but currently faces the challenge of a rather inefficient search mechanism. [Based on the article "The Anti-Facebook," *IEEE Spectrum*, June 2011, pp. 54-59 & 82.]

(2) Facebook status and blog posting ethics: Let me vent a bit about a tendency among many Facebook friends, and some people on other Internet sites, Iranians in particular, to use poems and clever words from others, without citing the source. In effect, they are trying to look smart by claiming credit for something that someone wrote after spending significant time in formulating his/her thoughts and polishing the words into something beautiful and/or clever. Please be kind to poets and other creative souls by giving them credit. When you write something, please attach your name to the end of it. And if you take other people's words, please be clear that they are not yours, even if only by stating "author unknown." Better yet, make an effort to identify the original author (this can usually be done by a quick Google search) and credit him/her.

2011/06/22 (Wed.): Here are three technology news items of potential interest.

(1) Adjusting the focus after taking a photo: According to the [New York Times](#), a new camera, headed for the consumer market later this year, allows the user to adjust the focus after taking a photo. The camera, which can also take 3D photos (formerly requiring two separate cameras), is a product of the startup company Lytro, whose founder and CEO, Ren Ng, is commercializing ideas from his 2006 PhD thesis at Stanford University.

(2) 3D printers are coming of age: Expensive 3D printers have had a niche market for years. New developments are promising to make this technology much more affordable, allowing each person to have a factory in his/her home, in the same way that we are each running a private photo lab and printing press (computer + printer) at home. This year-old [10-minute video](#) shows one such 3D printer, the EMS Z450, making an object with a moving internal part. Here is the [5-minute Part 2](#) of the demo, showing the finished product after removing excess powder. This [8-minute promotional video](#) shows Bath University's RepRap, a 3D printer that is said to be able to produce its own parts.

(3) On-line ads aren't all they are claimed to be: "Globally, print publications fetched \$1 per hour of reader attention. TV got a quarter for a viewer hour. Online fetched 'less than a dime'. ... The click-through rate, industry-wide, is less than 1 percent ... Some advertisers deal with this problem by popping ads into your face, blaring audio, or subjecting you to a 'preroll' video message before the video you actually wish to see. ... that was an acceptable quid pro quo in the days of passive TV viewing. Online, though, users are active and in control. 'If you take control away from them ... they will hate you.' Or, put another way: Online, all advertising is spam." [From: "The Revolution Will Not Be Monetized," *IEEE Spectrum*, June 2011, pp. 35-39.]

2011/06/21 (Tue.): Happy summer to everyone!

(1) Google is honoring the summer solstice with a special doodle. The following *Time* magazine [photo essay](#) tells the story of Google's ten most popular doodles over time.

(2) Subterranean structures built by ants: A group of researchers poured tons of concrete into an abandoned ant colony to discover its design. Take a look at [what they found](#) after they removed the earth surrounding the concrete.

(3) Islamist picks his favorite king, disses others: According to Hossein Ravazadeh in this [video clip](#), Cyrus and Darius never ruled as kings: they are made up by Zionists, who elevated them to the status of great kings in history books because of services they rendered to Jews. We should, instead, honor Jamshid.

(4) Persian music: Lively [Persian dance tune](#), composed and performed by Bijan Mortazavi (lyrics by Iraj Jannati-Ataie), with a nicely done animated orchestra.

(5) Carving a watermelon: I had previously seen, admired, and shared a slide show of artistically carved watermelons in a contest, but [this video](#) shows how to actually do the carving. Quite amazing!

2011/06/20 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Japan has the world's most powerful supercomputer: A Japanese supercomputer has surpassed the performance of a Chinese machine that held the title of world's fastest. According to the [New York Times](#), the 8-petaflops "K Computer," where "K" is short for the Japanese word "Kei" (meaning 10 quadrillion), was built by Fujitsu.

(2) Solid-state (phononic) cooling is coming to your computer, and perhaps even your refrigerator: According to [IEEE Spectrum](#) (issue of June 2011, p. 16), technology is being developed to cool electronic circuits without any moving parts or substances that are harmful to the environment. "To create a cooling effect, voltage is applied to a compound semiconductor chip, which moves electrons from one surface toward the other. When an electron moves, it drags a phonon of heat to one side of the chip, where it can be dissipated by a heat sink." The technology isn't quite practical yet: "today's thermoelectric devices often consume more than a watt of power per watt of heat moved." [The article is not available to nonsubscribers on-line.]

(3) Quotable: "Socializing is something that people used to do on the Web; gradually it is *becoming* the Web." From "The Social Era of the Web Starts Now," [IEEE Spectrum](#), issue of June 2011, pp. 31-33.

(4) Persian music: Hassan Golnaraghi performs his famous song, "[Maraa Beboos](#)" ("Kiss Me [for the Last Time]"), perhaps for the last time, in 1992. The song was written by Majid Vafaadaar, with lyrics by "Haleh" (a pseudonym). Is that Anoushirvan Rohani on the piano? Here are the [original performance](#) of the song and Hooman Tabrizi's [solo piano version](#). Nostalgia buffs will find the following undated [Ettela'at Haftegui news story](#) about the then unknown singer of this song interesting.

(5) Insults for the new age of social media is the topic of a June 2011 [IEEE Spectrum column](#) that begins with a Samuel Jackson quote, "It is surly better a man should be abused than forgotten." You can probably guess the meanings of these terms: luser, meh-sayer, ROM-brain, fauxtographer, freshmore, and adorkable. If not, then read the column.

2011/06/19 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Asian soccer: In a 2012 Olympics qualifying match, Iran beat Iraq 1-0 in a [match played in Arbil](#), northern Iraq. The two teams will play again in Tehran for the return leg.

(2) Iran must be torn to pieces: A [1-minute video clip](#) in which ayatollah Nouri Hamedani quotes Prophet Mohammad as having said, "Khosro Parviz [the Iranian king at the time] tore my letter to pieces, so his country must be torn to pieces."

(3) The new conservatism: Fareed Zakaria is one of the most level-headed political analysts around. In his GPS program that is running on CNN as I write this note, he is arguing that whereas conservatives used to be realists, they are now advocating policies that have no basis in any actual working economy in the world. The most successful and prosperous countries in the world today are not low-tax countries.

(4) Jon Stewart on Fox News: This [14-minute interview](#) with Jon Stewart, by Chris Wallace of Fox News, is an informative and fun-to-watch exchange of barbs.

2011/06/18 (Sat.): Buying versus renting your home: A key factor that tells you whether to buy or rent a home is the price-to-rent ratio, defined as the price of a residential unit divided by its annual rent. A ratio of less than 20 generally means that you should buy, whereas a ratio of more than 20 tells you that renting is more cost-effective. In some sources, the threshold is specified as 17 or 18, rather than 20. The ratio varies from city to city, and often even in different neighborhoods within the same city. A [New York Times feature](#) provides the price-to-rent ratio for major US cities. The [New York Times](#) also has an [interactive tool](#) that lets you assess the benefits of buying versus renting by entering a few numbers that characterize your region of interest and its current economic indicators.

When I posted this info on Facebook, a friend commented that in markets with low price-to-rent ratio, the housing price decline has not been as bad. This makes sense: the price-to-rent ratio for housing is essentially the same as the price-to-earning ratio for stocks. Inflation of the latter is what caused the bursting of the tech bubble.

Another friend wondered about the role of interest rates. I responded that the ratio already has interest rates built in, as both price and rent vary with interest rate. In a sane market (not the one we have now), low interest rates mean higher prices and lower rents. The Times story actually shows variations in the ratio over time. The sharp rises in the ratio observed for most markets over 2002-2006 were fueled in part by low interest rates (not as low as now, but quite low in historical terms). See [mortgage rate variation](#) over time.

2011/06/17 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A worldwide distributed telescope: I found out today, through [The Independent weekly](#) (issue of June 16, 2011) that a local 50-person company in our little town of Goleta (population 55K) is doing some exciting work with telescopes on a global scale. The company builds and installs identical 1-meter telescopes anywhere it can, with the units networked and made available to scientists and science teachers alike. The telescopes are robotic

and each is managed by at most one person. The entire operation is controlled via programming from Goleta, and all the collected data flows here as well. The Las Cumbres Observatory Global Telescope (lco.gt.net) network is supported by a foundation and some grant money; each installation costs around \$10M. The brains behind this project is Wayne Rosing, a Google alumnus.

(2) Recent gang rape incidents in Iran: Not succeeding with other hejab enforcement strategies, it seems that the Islamic regime is using rape, or the threat of rape, as a mechanism to enforce its dress code. What some official have said in connection with the gang rape incident near Esfahan is akin to a green light for raping any woman who does not follow the strict dress code. Blaming the victim used to be the norm here in the US as well, not too long ago. It takes decades to change such a mindset. Meanwhile, women living in Iran have my deepest sympathy for being objectified in the worst possible way.

(3) Google's PageRank algorithm isn't as original as once thought: In an article entitled "PageRank: Standing on Shoulders of Giants" (*Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 54, No. 6, pp. 92-101, June 2011), Massimo Franceschet argues that Google's search algorithm, often cited as the main reason for the company's phenomenal success, was not invented out of the blue. The theoretical underpinnings of PageRank were provided by Markov (1906), Perron (1907), and Frobenius (1912), among others. Similar algorithms had been previously exploited in fields such as Web information retrieval, bibliometrics, sociometry, and econometrics. For example, in bibliometrics, ranking of scholarly journals via their "impact factor" is essentially the same problem: A journal gets a high rank if articles in other journals tend to cite papers in that journal heavily. [CACM access requires subscription, but a [free prepublication version](#) of the article is available.]

2011/06/16 (Thu.):

(1) Middle East Idol? Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey, tries his [singing talent](#).

(2) Persian piano music: Hooman Tabrizi plays "[Khaterkhah](#)" ("Fond"), composed by Anoushirvan Rohani.

(3) Balancing act: A beautiful routine of [balancing bamboo sticks](#) based on the notion of "center of gravity" (aka, "center of mass," though the two notions can be different in a nonuniform gravitational field).

(4) US engineering unemployment is low: I had suspected this, but had never seen the official numbers. Citing severe shortage of engineering talent and a relatively low unemployment rate (4.5%) for engineers, President Obama revealed an initiative to help [train more engineers](#) with help from the private sector, which will provide financial support and internships.

(5) Fathers' Day in Iran: The selection of Imam Ali as the symbol of Fathers' Day in Iran (which coincides with his birthday, 13 Rajab = June 15 in 2011), with an accompanying [Fathers' Day song](#), has touched some raw nerves. Many Iranians ponder the nonexistence of any Iranian male who could have been chosen as a symbol in lieu of an Arab one. Others criticize the morbid nature of the song, which is more suitable for a funeral than a festive occasion.

2011/06/15 (Wed.): Rosenblatt, Roger, *Making Toast: A Family Story*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Blackstone Audio, 2010.

I came to know Roger Rosenblatt through his insightful and poetic essays, which he read on the PBS Newshour. So, when I saw this audiobook on the library shelf, I had to check it out. Rosenblatt and his wife, Ginny, suddenly find themselves occupying a position between grandparents and parents, when their daughter, Amy, dies unexpectedly from a heart condition at age 38. The grandparents leave their own home and move in with their son-in-law and three young grandchildren. Rosenblatt writes with tenderness and humor about child care, helping with school work, reading stories, and other mundane daily activities. One of the rewards for the author and his wife was discovering how very special their physician daughter had been and how she was universally loved by her friends and acquaintances. The title of the book refers to a kitchen skill of the author, of which he is particularly proud.

2011/06/14 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Energy from photosynthesis: A gallon of water and a leaf are all we need to produce enough electricity for an average home in a developing country. The catch: the leaf is an artificial one that is 10 times as efficient as a natural leaf in converting sunlight to energy. The idea is not new, but previous systems of this kind were costly and unstable. [Based on a report in *Prism*, the magazine of American Society for Engineering Education, summer 2011 issue, p. 18.]

(2) Cooling soccer stadiums: To overcome objections from FIFPro (pro soccer players' union) to 120-plus degrees Fahrenheit temperatures which may be experienced at Qatar stadiums during the 2022 World Cup matches, the officials of that country have taken steps to assure everyone that they have plans to harvest solar energy to cool the stadiums. Engineers at Qatar University have further plans to deploy an artificial robotic "cloud" that is made of lightweight carbon material, floats above a stadium, tracks the direction of sunlight, and positions itself for maximum effect. [Based on a report in *Prism*, the magazine of American Society for

Engineering Education, summer 2011 issue, p. 19.]

(3) Iranian politics: A **silent flashmob** in Paris marks the 2-year anniversary of the disputed 2009 presidential elections in Iran. The message conveyed is: "Even a silent demonstration could lead to imprisonment, torture and execution in Iran."

(4) Green graduations: Universities are **going green** in their graduation events. Increasingly, effort is made to use biodegradable plates and utensils and to minimize printed material. A few universities, including Caltech, have caps and gowns made of recycled plastic bottles.

2011/06/12 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest on music and sports.

(1) Modern Persian music: Pooran sings "**Shab Bood Biabaan Bood**" ("It Was Night in the Desert") an old favorite of mine, which has some similarities with "Bei Mir Bist du Schoen," aka "My Dear Mr. Shane," composed by Sholom Secunda, with a jazzed up version performed by the **Andrews Sisters** in 1937. Here are two nice instrumental versions by **Otto Hamborg and the Viertakter** (incomplete) and **Havana Swing**.

(2) Classical music: Shahraddad Rohani conducts the Tehran Symphony Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, featuring Amir Mahyar Moradi on Piano. This 2011 performance was held at Tehran's Vahdat Hall. [**Part 1**, 11 min] [**Part 2**, 10 min] [**Part 3**, 2 min]

(3) On women's sports in Iran: The banning of the **Iranian women's soccer team** by FIFA has created two different sets of reactions. On one side, FIFA has been criticized for playing politics and for denying Iranian women even the small set of opportunities that they have fought tooth and nail to obtain. On the other side, FIFA's decision, officially attributing the ban to safety issues related to the restrictive clothing, has been praised as principled. While I have some sympathy for the first viewpoint, I think the ban might be productive in initiating protests and dialog about women's sports in Iran. Either women are allowed full participation in sports, with their strength, grace, and skills on display to be enjoyed and praised, or else they are being treated as second-class citizens. Restrictions on what they can wear, where they can play, and who can watch them play should not be tolerated. As we say in Persian, "shotor savaari dolla dolla nemisheh."

2011/06/11 (Sat.): Beyond real and complex numbers: [This post would be of interest to readers with mathematical minds and is related to my earlier post on Mathematician John Baez's favorite numbers 5, 8, and 24.] Real numbers and complex numbers, with their 1D and 2D geometric interpretations, are among the basic ingredients of today's mathematics. In 1835, at the age of 30, mathematician William Rowan Hamilton discovered how to treat complex numbers as pairs of reals. Inspired by the usefulness of numbers written as $a + bi$ to describe geometric transformations such as expansion/shrinkage and rotation in a 2D plane, Hamilton set out to study numbers of the form $a + bi + cj$, which could prove helpful for dealing with transformations in 3D space. He spent a good chunk his life struggling with this problem, not realizing that such a 3D number system does not exist.

It was discovered later that a 4D number $a + bi + cj + dk$ is required for this purpose: a comprises the scalar part, and b, c, d form the vector part. In an article entitled "Curious Quaternions" (*Plus Magazine*, Issue 32, November 2004), Helen Joyce writes about these numbers, which are really 4-tuples of real numbers (just as complex numbers are pairs of reals), with rules for multiplying and dividing.

Numbers that are 5-, 6-, or 7-tuples are also impossible, as was the case for triplets. The next possibility is a number system composed of 8-tuples, called "The Octonions" (title of an article by John C. Baez in *Bull. AMS*, Vol. 39, pp. 145-205, 2002). There are also a *Scientific American* Web exclusive on the topic (May 2011) and an article by Helen Joyce, entitled "Ubiquitous Octonions" (*Plus Magazine*, Issue 33, January 2005). Octonions were just curiosities that received little attention until string theorists made use of them to describe a 10D model of the universe.

In 1958, three mathematicians proved an amazing fact that had been suspected for decades: Any division algebra must have dimension 1 (reals), 2 (complex numbers, 2D rotations), 4 (quaternions, describe rotations in 3D; in this system, multiplication is noncommutative, although it remains associative), or 8 (octonions, also known as Cayley numbers, although Hamilton's friend John Graves discovered them first; in this system, multiplication is both noncommutative and nonassociative).

For an overview of all these numbers, and more, see "The Strangest Numbers in String Theory," (John C. Baez and John Huerta, *Scientific American*, Vol. 304, No. 5, pp. 60-65, May 2011).

2011/06/10 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Two new elements added to the periodic table: According to the *New York Times*, the new elements 114 and 116, which are as yet unnamed and have no symbols, were approved for addition to the periodic table after review by an international committee of chemists and physicists. Neither element is found in nature: they were made in labs by smashing atoms of other elements together. This is hard work, as the experiments last for many weeks, with an atom produced every week or so.

(2) The Mississippi river floods are causing a problem of an entirely different kind: deposit of large amounts of

silt at the mouth of the river, making it difficult for ships to reach ports upriver. At the Southwest Pass, which has narrowed from 750 to less than 200 feet, the Army Corps of Engineers is operating 5 dredges, which can't keep up with all the silt being dumped there by the fast-flowing river. [Source: [USA Today](#)]

(3) The numbers 5, 8, and 24: John Baez is a mathematician with a knack for describing difficult topics using simple language and fun examples. In a series of three lectures on his favorite numbers (5, 8, and 24) he presents some very interesting facts and mathematical results. His [lecture on "5"](#) covers Islamic tilings that include certain symmetries discovered in mathematics only a few years ago.

(4) Quotable: "A man's age can be measured by the degree of pain he feels as he comes in contact with a new idea." Anonymous

2011/06/09 (Thu.): How Many "Friends" Can You Really Have? This question, the title of an article in the July 2011 issue of [IEEE Spectrum](#), got me thinking. The first thing I remembered was the quote from Henry Brooks Adams: "One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible. Friendship needs a certain parallelism of life, a community of thought, a rivalry of aim." The second was the following quote, variously attributed to Ali ibn Abi-Talib, Omar Khayyam, or Ralph Waldo Emerson in the sources that I consulted: "He who has a thousand friends has not a friend to spare; And he who has one enemy will meet him everywhere." I looked at my own circle of friends on Facebook and elsewhere. Nearly all with hundreds of friends are teenagers or are adults running businesses (non- or for-profit), offering mostly one-way communication; some have gone as far as disabling comments on their posts.

In the IEEE Spectrum article, Robin Dunbar writes: "Across the primate order as a whole, there is a general relationship between the size of the brain's neocortex and the size of the average social group, and this relationship predicts a group size for humans of 150. This value is now known as Dunbar's Number, because I was the first to point it out, in 1992. ... Of course, you know many more people—you can put names to the faces of around 1500 individuals. But you have a very different kind of relationship with those who come between the 150 and the 1500: You know who these people are, but they don't necessarily know who you are. The list includes folks like President Obama, the anchor of your favorite TV news channel, the woman you see at the bus stop every morning. ... Of course, sublevels exist even within that select circle. At the top of your social pyramid are the five people closest to you, most of them probably relatives. They are nestled inside the top 15, with whom you generally have weekly interchanges. Then come the top 50, with whom you keep up every month or so. Finally, there are all the others with whom you correspond in any meaningful sense. All the relationships require tending, although relatives retain their place in the hierarchy more tenaciously than nonrelatives do. ... Facebook's one great contribution has been to slow down that rate of relationship decay by allowing us to keep in touch with friends over long distances. How long it will prevent relationships from fading altogether remains to be seen—social networking sites haven't been around long enough for us to tell yet."

2011/06/08 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Congressman Anthony Weiner definitely does not deserve such a good-looking, intelligent, and highly successful wife. Here is CNN's profile of [Huma Abedin](#).

(2) Korea's Got Talent: This [vocal performance](#) is truly moving. The video is 8 minutes long, but you can skip the first 2.5 minutes, where the boy talks about his life as an orphan, and the last 3 minutes, where the judges praise the contestant and shed obligatory tears.

(3) Under the hood at Google and Facebook: Google and Facebook are giants of the cyberspace. So, the infrastructure used by these companies and their expansion/innovation strategies are intensely scrutinized. An article, entitled "Under the Hood at Google and Facebook" ([IEEE Spectrum](#), July 2011, pp. 62-67) examines and compares the two companies and ponders the question of whether either company's infrastructure might crack under ever-increasing loads (the short answer is "no").

(4) If you donate money to cancer charities, you may want to closely check the organizations you choose. In a [Time magazine article](#) (issue of June 13, 2011), Greg Simon of FasterCures is quoted as saying about lightweight nonprofits many of which spend little or no money on actual research: "I shudder when I look at how many groups have 'cancer research' in their names. ... The general public is throwing its money away."

2011/06/07 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) A truly magical magic square: Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), a German Renaissance artist, was justifiably very proud of his magic square, shown in the accompanying image. An n -by- n magic square contains the numbers 1 through n -squared in a way that the n numbers in each row, column, and diagonal sum to the same value. Durer's magic square, however, had much more going for it. In addition to its rows, columns, and two diagonals summing to 34, the following sets of 4 numbers sum to 34 as well: (a) Each of the four quadrants. (b) The four corners. (c) The squares containing 3, 8, 14, 9. (d) The squares containing 2, 12, 15, 5.

16	3	2	13
5	10	11	8
9	6	7	12
4	15	14	1

(e) The middle four squares. (f) The squares containing 5, 9, 8, 12. (g) The squares containing 3, 2, 15, 14. (h) The squares containing 5, 3, 12, 14. (i) The squares containing 2, 8, 15, 9. Now look at the bottom row. Durer created this square in 1514, which appears in the middle two squares. The row begins with 4 and ends with 1, Albrecht Durer's initials: D is the fourth letter of the alphabet and A is the first.

(2) Bringing inventions to market: Inventing is very hard work these days. Gone are the days when a bright idea could make you tons of money: you simply sold the rights to your invention, and then simply waited for royalty checks to arrive after sales of the product took off. James Dyson, the inventor of a bagless vacuum cleaner, had a different experience. "I started with an idea: a vacuum with no bag. The bag was a problem. The bag clogs with dust, the machine wheezes, losing its puff. ... After five years of testing, tweaking, fist banging, cursing, and more than 5000 mistakes—or prototypes, as engineers call them—it was there. ... For nearly three years I schlepped from one vacuum manufacturer to another. But no interest. Zero. They had a business model that made them bags of money (literally). ... I finally understood that if I wanted to make the machine, I'd have to do it myself. ... Believing that big companies would choose good technology—progress—over short-term profit was a big mistake." [Based on a story in *Newsweek*, issue of June 6, 2011, p. 64.]

2011/06/06 (Mon.): Truss, Lynne, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Cutting a Dash—The Radio Series that Inspired the Hit Book*, unabridged audiobook read by the author and others, Penguin Audio, 2002.

From the cover blurb: "Through sloppy usage and low standards on the Internet, in e-mail and now 'txt msgs,' we have made proper punctuation an endangered species. In *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, former editor Lynne Truss dares to say, in her delightfully urbane, witty and very English way, that it is time to look at our commas and semicolons and see them as the wonderful and necessary things they are."

Listening to these series of radio programs served to refresh my memory of the utter delight I felt when I read Truss' wonderful book several years ago. The title of the book (presumably, describing the eating preferences of panda bears) serves as a clever reminder of how a lowly comma can change the meaning of a phrase or sentence.

2011/06/05 (Sun.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Unnamed artists perform this lively song, entitled "**Doost Daashtan**" ("To Love"), with lyrics based on a Forough Farrokhzad poem.

(2) Quotable: "When you betray someone, you also betray yourself." Isaac B. Singer, Nobel Laureate, Polish-born American author (1904-1991).

(3) Quotable: "I like to read the bible in public places so people are watching me read it, and I like to just murmur out to myself, 'Oh, bullshit!'" Zach Galifianakis, American stand-up comic and actor.

(4) Shahnameh in audio format: This [Web site](#) allows you to listen to, or download, audio files comprising the entire Shahnameh. Each audio file covers 10 of the 1370 total pages.

(5) Emergency toilet for disaster relief: Not a pleasant [video](#) to watch, but you can't deny the usefulness of the invention!

(6) According to the *New York Times*, China plans to use three artificial channels spanning hundreds of miles to divert six trillion gallons of water each year from the Yangtze River to satisfy the thirst of the north China plain and its 440M people. The \$62 billion South-North Water Diversion Project can be compared to having the Mississippi River provide water for residents in eastern United States. As part of this ambitious and controversial project, 0.35M residents will have to be resettled.

2011/06/04 (Sat.): Gladwell, Malcolm, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Hachette Audio, 2008.

Success resulting from extreme intelligence and stories of self-made men and women are prevalent myths in the American culture. The author contends that success is a product of hard work and opportunities that present themselves to some individuals and not to others. Examples of chance factors include getting a scholarship or being at the right age when some economic/technical event presents new opportunities. Two of the most successful computer gurus, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, were born in 1955, while Sun Microsystems founders, Bill Joy and Scott McNealy, were born in 1954. When the PC revolution hit, these four people (who certainly had talent and ambition) were at the right age to get involved and make a difference. The author discusses a requirement for success: the 10,000 hours rule. To be great at anything, be it music, programming, sports, etc. one needs to put in about 10,000 hours of hard work (3-4 hours per day, every day, for 10 years). There are factors beyond one's control that influence whether the opportunity for such an intensive practice regimen presents itself. The Beatles got this opportunity when they landed a gig for playing music for 8 hours a day, every day, in Hamburg. Bill Gates got a chance to put in his 10,000 hours by being at a private school that provided him access to a computer terminal at age 13, at a time when even computer science professors did not have this privilege. Stats show that an unusually high proportion of professional ice hockey players were born in January. It turns out that such stars begin skating very early in their lives and a cut-off date of January 1 used

by junior leagues means that those who are born in January have nearly a full year of age difference with the youngest players in their group. At 6-7 years of age, a one-year age difference means a great deal of advantage in size and maturity. So, those born in January are more likely to be picked for elite leagues and thus given an opportunity for further development of their skills through training and personalized attention. The effects of background and culture are also quite pronounced. East Asians excel in math, not because they are more intelligent, but because they come from the rice-paddy culture: a culture that teaches, values, and rewards hard work under extreme conditions. "The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all."

2011/06/03 (Fri.): Here are two news items about Iranian politics.

(1) Iran's defense minister was seated with three female government officials at one function during his visit to Bolivia. Interestingly, the [photo of him](#) with the headscarfless women was completely censored in Iran.

(2) Tehran's [Friday Prayers Leader](#), Ayatollah Sadighi, refers to the Supreme Leader as "Imam Khamenei," claims that other countries in the region are following in Iran's footsteps, and relates the "Imam's" prophesy that Europe's awakening is not far off!

2011/06/02 (Thu.): Lindbergh, Anne Morrow, *Gift from the Sea*, unabridged audiobook read by Claudette Colbert, 50th anniversary edition, with a new introduction by Reeve Lindbergh, the author's daughter, Random House Audio, 2005.

In writing this gem of a book, Lindbergh took inspiration from sea shells she found on the beach while on vacation in Florida. Reflecting on life in the 1950s United States, the author addresses women's issues, relationships, and the importance of solitude in rejuvenating the body and the mind. In my book reviews, I try to quote representative passages that capture the spirit of the work. This timeless book, which has sold millions of copies in dozens of different languages, is a vast collection of quotable sentences, strung one after another. An anonymous reviewer on Amazon.com sums it up best: "Although written from a woman's perspective, [this book] is for all of us who hunger for the slower pace, the garden path, the sanctity in God's every creation down to the intricate sea shell in Anne's hand as she coddles it, examines its artistic swirls and ridges and colors, and listens to the lessons—the homilies—within its delicate curves." The author, born Anne Spencer Morrow, was an American author and pioneering aviator who married fellow aviator Charles Lindbergh. Claudette Colbert's reading is magical.

2011/06/01 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest in politics and science.

(1) French women wake up: I wrote in late April about how the approval rating of Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, among women dropped from 48% a year ago to 27% (an all-time low), given his growing record of comments and behavior demeaning to women. It seems that in the aftermath of sexual assault allegations against the IMF Managing Director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn (interestingly, his wife is reported to have said that she is proud of her husband's "hot rabbit" reputation), and the surfacing of a long history of groping and fondling, French women have finally reached a turning point. Many activists in France are quick to point out that it is not DSK's behavior, which is as yet an unproven allegation, that ticks them off but the manner in which many French intellectuals and political elite have rushed to protect him. A petition that has gathered tens of thousands of signatures begins: "We don't know what happened in New York last Saturday, but we do know what happened in France in the last week." For example, a prominent journalist had written that the incident was just a matter of "lifting a maid's skirt" (he has since apologized for his insensitivity) and a former government minister had said "It's not like anybody died." Read Judith Warner's [Time magazine](#) article (issue of June 6, 2011), entitled "Cherchez les Femmes," for the full story.

(2) The Middle East: Hossein Borujerdi's [insightful analysis](#) of Iran's reaction to, and benefits/worries from, recent uprisings in the Arab world.

(3) Human beings are wired for optimism: "We like to think of ourselves as rational creatures. We watch our backs, weigh the odds, pack an umbrella. But both neuroscience and social science suggest that we are more optimistic than realistic." Thus begins an excellent article by Tali Sharot in [Time magazine](#), issue of June 6, 2011. There are some very good evolutionary reasons for our optimism: "Hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health. ... It allows us to plan ahead, to save food and resources for times of scarcity and to endure hard work in anticipation of a future reward." Here are some interesting stats that confirm the article's thesis: (a) 10% of Americans expect to live to 100; the reality is 0.02%. (b) 93% of Americans believe that they are in the top 50th percentile with respect to driving ability.

2011/05/31 (Tue.): US home prices hit rock bottom: If you own a home in the US, or are contemplating buying one, check out this [New York Times](#) article with an interactive chart that shows home price trends for 20 cities. You can click on the name of a major city to see the price variations and how they compare with the US average. S&P's Case-Shiller index used here is more accurate than median prices, because it is based on

price variations for the same set of homes over time.

2011/05/30 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Science: See if you can explain the fascinating pendulum waves observed in this [2-minute video](#).

(2) Women's rights in Iran: The mullahs' plans to segregate the sexes in Iranian universities moved a step forward when women were banned from pursuing advanced degrees in certain fields. On a friend's post of this story, I commented that the Iranian minister of sciences and higher education (Kamran Daneshjoo) should change his last name to "Daneshseteez."

(3) Human rights in Iran: In a widely published heart-wrenching photo, Nasrin Sotoodeh, an imprisoned lawyer, is depicted embracing her husband by putting her handcuffed arms over his head, as she is being taken to a courtroom where she would be stripped of her right to practice law. The [Los Angeles Times](#) story on this event provides more detail.

(4) Guess who was disappointed by Osama Bin Laden's demise? As a hint, let me tell you that the number of security cameras in the US is estimated to be around 30M. According to [Time magazine](#), several firms, both established and newly formed, have been doing brisk business since 9/11, selling technology such as body scanners, surveillance gear, and UAVs. Since the death of OBL, analysts have downgraded the stocks of several such companies.

2011/05/29 (Sun.): Parhami Family Reunion 2011: Today was a momentous occasion for the Parhami family. Some 100 members of the family had a day-long gathering in the Los Angeles area to celebrate their heritage and to get to meet a few members coming from far away places. Thanks to everyone who worked hard to make this gathering possible. I realize that many Iranian families are scattered around the world as a result of the political situation in Iran over the past 30+ years. This realization makes me even more thankful for this opportunity to see a majority of my family members in one place.

The accompanying poem, which I wrote for this occasion, has the following literal translation:

A family that took roots in Saghez / Settled fruitfully in the new world // It gradually instilled in its youth / The cultures of the Kurds and Persians // It sensed beautiful images and sounds / In every place and each gathering // Hand in hand, and with love in the air / It brought hope to hearts and minds // [Memories of] Ebrahim, Rouben, and Younes persist / As does the love of Benyamin and Salem // Some of our beloved are absent here, Long live the memories of Behjat, Zohreh and Guity!

به مناسبت همایش خاندان پرهامی

(۲۹ مه ۲۰۱۱، برابر با ۸ خرداد ۱۳۹۰)

خ	خاندانی کو به سقز شد پدید
پ	پُر ثمر آمد به دنیای جدید
ا	از قضا فرهنگ کُرد و فارس را
ر	رفته رفته در جوانهایش نمید
ن	نقش زیبایی ز تصویر و صدا
ه	هر کجا دید و به هر محفل شنید
د	دست در دست و محبت در فضا
ا	اینچنین آورد بر دلها نوید
ا	اِبْرَهیم و رُوبن و یُونس به جا
م	میهر بنیامین و سالم بُد مزید
ن	نیستند اینجا عزیزانی ز ما
ی	یاد بهجت، زهره، و گیتی مدید

2011/05/28 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Instrumental music: A [very lively dance tune](#) performed by Yanni and his orchestra.

(2) The royal wedding's technical back story: When Prince William and Catherine Middleton reached Buckingham Palace on April 29, 2011, and the live TV coverage of their wedding was handed back to the studios, Britain's power grid experienced a demand surge of 2.4 GW. Britain's National Grid had prepared a forecast of likely changes in demand based on previous royal weddings, bank holiday patterns and other factors, but the peak jump exceeded both the predicted 1.2-1.6 GW and the 1.8 GW that was the largest surge during Charles' wedding to Diana. [*Engineering & Technology*, Vol. 6, No. 5, p. 14, June 2011.]

(3) Air crash investigation: On May 1-2, 2011, nearly two years after the June 1, 2009, crash of Air France flight 447 that killed 228 passengers en route from Rio de Janeiro to Paris, the doomed plane's cockpit and flight data recorders were discovered and lifted from the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. The search took this long because the floating debris of the plane were not found until 5 days after the crash, and the unpredictable ocean currents in that particular region made it impossible to pinpoint the exact site of the crash. Finally, some answers about what caused the crash may be forthcoming.

2011/05/27 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Iranian politics: The Iranian parliament is [investigating Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) for financial irregularities and election fraud. This is quite amusing, given that opposition leaders who have been saying the same things are under house arrest and thousands of people who protested after the 2009 presidential election were thrown in jail and tortured. Where is this highly unpredictable government going? Meanwhile, on his official

Web site, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani calls the conservative clergy "stone-age people."

(2) Engineers in the US: Did you know that 47% of all engineers, and more than 53% of all electrical and computer engineers, in the US were not born here? [From OECD data, as reported by Luke Collins in *Engineering & Technology*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp. 34-36, June 2011.]

(3) LED lighting: By 2014, usage of LEDs for lighting will surpass their use in TV and computer display units. The increasing efficiency of LEDs, combined with falling prices, make them more attractive for general illumination, a trend that will be immensely boosted by government incentives in China. [Research results by DisplaySearch, as reported in *Engineering & Technology*, Vol. 6, No. 5, p. 14, June 2011.]

(4) Presidential professions: [Wikipedia](#) lists the 44 US presidents by occupation. As expected, lawyers dominate the list. One was an engineer (Herbert Hoover), three were school teachers (James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Lyndon Johnson), and one was a tailor (Andrew Johnson).

2011/05/26 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Hooman Tabrizi plays Marzieh's classic song "[Sang-e Khaaraa](#)" on piano.

(2) Omar Khayyam, still fresh and inspiring after 900 years: Prompted by this 51-minute [BBC documentary](#) about the Persian poet/scientist Omar Khayyam, I did a search and found a [Web site](#) that has some of Khayyam's rubaiyat, each with several different translations, including a literal translation and Fitzgerald's version. <http://www.okonlife.com/poems/> You can also download Fitzgerald's 1905 book, in a variety of formats, including PDF and Kindle, from the [Internet Archive](#).

(3) Space exploration: In a prelude to the White House plans to support a manned space flight landing on an asteroid by 2025, NASA is going ahead with [an unmanned mission](#) to the near-Earth asteroid 1999 RQ36 in 2016. The mission is aimed at collecting samples that will be returned in 2023. Once the primary mission is completed, the spacecraft will be redirected into a new solar orbit, with enough fuel left to perform another mission in the future.

2011/05/24 (Tue.):

(1) Persian music: Gissoo Shakeri sings "[Taa Beh Kay Khamooshi](#)," an anthem against forced hejaab, inhumane treatment of women, and other gender-based discriminations.

(2) Persian music: Sepideh Raissadat and her music are profiled in this 9-minute [BBC Persian video](#) clip.

(3) Science education in the US: According to [San Jose Mercury News](#), a majority of America's top high school science competitors are children of new immigrants. A National Foundation for American Policy study found that about 2/3 of the finalists at Intel's Science Talent Search were born to immigrant parents from China or India.

(4) One-way trip to Mars: The [Washington Post](#) reports that following the publication of an article in *Journal of Cosmology* proposing a one-way trip to Mars, hundreds of people have shown genuine interest to participate in such a mission. The technical challenges and inherent dangers of a Mars trip, along with dwindling NASA budgets, have brought such extreme proposals to the forefront as a way of bringing about scientific progress and contributing to long-term human survival.

2011/05/22 (Sun.):

(1) Pop music: Michael Jackson's "Thriller," [performed a cappella](#). Search for Duwende on YouTube to get their other songs, including several MJ song covers.

(2) Late night comedy: The following quote from Craig Ferguson is not verbatim, because I could not find the exact quote on-line: "Infidelity is not unique to male politicians but is a problem for both sexes. For example, ... um ... uh ... ur ... Okay, men are pigs!"

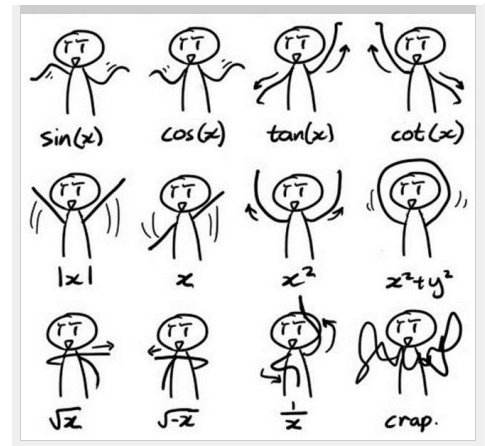
(3) Current flood disasters nothing new: "Ten thousand river commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, 'Go here,' or 'Go there,' and make it obey." Mark Twain, writing about the Mississippi River in 1883.

(4) US presidential politics: "By depriving the Republicans of the birth-certificate and tough-on-terrorism issues in a single week, Obama may ultimately force them to spend most of their time discussing the weakest point of his presidency: the economy. ... Carter had brought Israel and Egypt together. George H. W. Bush had beaten Saddam Hussein and retaken Kuwait; his popularity rating stood at 90%. But both Carter and Bush were beaten by a bum economy." Joe Klein, on why Obama's not a lock, [Time magazine](#), issue of May 23, 2011.

2011/05/21 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Dance moves appropriate for math and engineering majors.

(2) On the fragmenting effect of the new media: "When like-minded people cluster, they often aggravate their biases, spreading falsehoods. [They] end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began." Chicago law professor



Cass Sunstein, quoted on p. 165 of *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google*, by Nicholas Carr (I will write a review of the latter book in the next few days).

(3) Arterial turbines: According to *IEEE Spectrum* (issue of May 2011), Swiss researchers have developed tiny turbines that can be placed in blood vessels to generate power for implanted medical devices. If successful, such turbines would allow more favorable placement of such devices and would obviate the need for periodic surgeries to replace batteries. A possible problem, which is being addressed, is the increased risk of blockage due to blood clots.

2011/05/20 (Fri.): Here are two news stories about Iran.

(1) Political feud: Attack dog for the conservative clergy describes Ahmadinejad and his cabinet as "political midgets" ("kootoleh-haa") in this [15-minute talk](#) recorded at a private gathering. I must admit that the guy (Hassan Abbasi) is well-spoken and much of what he says makes sense.

(2) Flower show: Reading all the sociopolitical news about Iran, and endless stories about the disarray within its government, one forgets about certain more pleasant aspects of life in my mother country. The Tehran International Flowers and Plants Show, featured in this Iranian.com [photo essay](#), is a case in point.

2011/05/19 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Bio-inspired architecture (17-minute TED talk): "Architect Thomas Heatherwick shows five recent projects featuring ingenious [bio-inspired designs](#). Some are remakes of the ordinary: a bus, a bridge, a power station ... And one is an extraordinary pavilion, the Seed Cathedral, a celebration of growth and light."

(2) Real or fake? [Persian-speaking parrot](#) delivers a lengthy speech, uttering common phrases, counting in Persian and English, and reciting poetry.

(3) Structural engineering breakthrough: Providing shelter for those affected by natural disasters is one of the key challenges for relief agencies. Shelters should be sturdy, safe, and quickly deployable. The tents that are typically used do not satisfy the first two requirements. According to *Popular Science*, two British engineering students have come up with an ingenious solution: concrete canvas. The proposed shelters are made of fabric impregnated with concrete. At a disaster site, the shelters are inflated by a standard pump and then sprayed with water, which activates the concrete in the fabric. Within 24 hours, a permanent structure is at hand that has all the good features of concrete and few of the bad ones. For example, the walls of the shelter can easily be drilled for installing lights and other fixtures. Here is a [video](#) elaborating upon the structure's material and deployment.

(4) Positive spin: I usually get conference announcement from multiple sources, each one preceded by an apology for posting to different groups so as to reach all potentially interested researchers. Today, I got a more creative variant of the statement that puts a positive spin on multiple postings, instead of considering it an annoyance: "If you get more than one copy of this announcement, consider it an acknowledgement of your being highly connected in this field!"

2011/05/18 (Wed.): Here are three musical items of potential interest.

(1) This two-decades-old song by Kenny Rogers, "[What I Did for Love](#)," still sounds pretty good.

(2) The Razbar Ensemble, based in Bonn, Germany, performs a [percussion medley](#) on daf.

(3) Beautiful piece of [instrumental music](#), entitled "Michael Meets Mozart." From the YouTube description: "On the recording, Steven Sharp Nelson laid down over 100 tracks including cello textures never known possible. Every single sound on the video was made using only the instruments shown: piano, cello, mouth percussion and kick drum. We utilized some cool effects on lots of stuff ... for example the U2-style delay on Steve's pizzicato at the beginning."

2011/05/17 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On wife-beating in Islamic societies: I had seen sermons in which Islamic clerics discuss why wife-beating is justified in Islam. They usually try to finesse the issue by claiming that the beatings the Koran talks about are symbolic or of the "soft" variety, the kind that allows the man to assert control without hurting the woman! This [Qatari cleric](#), however, is adamant that three kinds of women cannot be managed without beatings: Woman

who were beaten as children, are condescending and ignore their husbands, or do not obey their husbands. And this is an Islamic "scholar" talking! Here is **an example** of the earlier variety I mentioned: "... the beatings must be light and must not make her face ugly." Thanks for the clarification!

(2) This is with reference to former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami's suggestion that the people of Iran and the Supreme Leader apologize to each other for their cruel actions and hurtful words. As the humorous newspaper Towfigh would put it: "Hamshahri, shab-e jome'h do cheez yaadet nareh, ... dov'vom, ozr-khaahi az rahbar."

(3) Tonight I feel quite old, because I became a historical figure: I was interviewed by my daughter for a project in her history class.

2011/05/16 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Trapped in a filter bubble: Interesting **10-minute TED talk** by Eli Pariser on how commercially motivated tailoring of the Web to the user (to the extent that we even get different results for the very same Google search) is isolating each of us in a "filter bubble," thus preventing us from being challenged via exposure to important, uncomfortable, or diverse stories.

(2) The Rustock botnet: About two months ago, Microsoft's digital crimes unit successfully shut down the Rustock botnet, a network of compromised machines thought to have contained hundreds of thousands of computers, collectively sending some 30 billion spam messages per day. Following the **botnet's shutdown**, network monitoring agencies reported a significant downturn in junk e-mail volume.

(3) Movies about Bin Laden: A lot of people rejoiced over Osama Bin Laden's demise, among them a group of Hollywood producers. Multiple biopics on Bin Laden's life, which had been making slow progress, are placed on fast track, now that a new audience-pleasing ending (the firefight at Abbottabad) is available. Here is a set of "Essential Terror Books" that might provide scriptwriters with the needed material (from *Newsweek* magazine's issue of May 16, 2011): *The Looming Tower*, by Lawrence Wright; *The Bin Ladens*, by Steve Coll; *Ghost Wars*, by Steve Coll; *Osama Bin Laden*, by Michael Scheuer; *Bush at War*, by Bob Woodward; *Against All Enemies*, by Richard A. Clark; *The 9/11 Commission Report*; *The Forever War*, by Dexter Filkins; *The Longest War*, by Peter L. Bergen.

(4) OBL's disinformation campaign: Here is a theory, advanced by Christopher Dickey, Ron Moreau, and Sami Yousafzai in their *Newsweek* magazine article (issue of May 16, 2011), on why it took 10 years to find Osama Bin Laden: "[He] may have deployed small groups of decoy bodyguards all along the [Afghanistan/Pakistan] frontier, each with the same 'signature': small security detail, secretive, saying little to the local villagers, always moving on. That's a perfect disinformation campaign ... The nearby locals start whispering that bin Laden must be nearby ... U.S. Navy SEALs and other American Special Operations teams mounted repeated missions into Kunar's rugged mountains, only to come up empty-handed."

2011/05/15 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Funny quote of the week: "Thank you, smoke detector, for always letting me know when there is smoke or when I'm making toast." Jimmy Fallon.

(2) Funny on the tennis court: Do you remember Victor Borge and his screwball piano performances? Well, tennis pro **Mansour Bahrami** does a similar thing on the court. And, in both cases, you have to be pretty good at it to make it funny.

(3) Eurovision 2011: The song contest has just ended in Dusseldorf, with the entry from Azerbaijan winning the top award for its performance of "Running Scared" (why Azerbaijan is considered part of Europe is another story). **Eurovision's home page**, where you can watch the winning entry and many other videos, contains a nice history of the 54-year-old contest.

(4) US 2012 elections: Newt Gingrich is on "Meet the Press" this morning (talking as I write this note), making some very good points, and he is making them much better than he has done in the past. I think he has learned to be a political candidate rather than a professor/analyst, to use his own words. The Democrats would be amiss if they do not take him as a serious candidate.

2011/05/14 (Sat.): Here are three musical items of potential interest.

(1) An amazing **audiovisual experience**: The YouTube Symphony Orchestra (yes, this is news to me as well!) performs "Ascending Bird" (the story of a mythic bird that tried to reach the sun), composed by Siamak Aghaei and Colin Jacobsen, while the magic of Ukrainian sand artist Kseniya Simonova is projected on screen. I had posted Simonova's heartwrenching **performance in a talent show** a long time ago.

(2) Paris street dancer puts on some amazing moves in this **2-minute video**.

(3) Persian music: Talented, old street musician sings a couple of **lively Persian songs** at Sabzevar's Jom'eh Baazaar (Friday market), while playing the guitar.

2011/05/13 (Fri.): Superstition, Mathematics, and Economics: Friday the 13th isn't just a harmless

superstition; it has led to some interesting mathematical problems and to serious economic losses. Please read on ([Wikipedia article](#)).

(1) The number 13 is considered unlucky, in part because 12 is deemed a lucky or complete number: 12 is the number of months in a year, zodiac signs, hours on the clock face, Apostles, gods of Olympus, tribes of Israel, and so on.

(2) According to mathematical analysis by B. H. Brown, the 13th of the month is slightly more likely to fall on a Friday than on any other day. Sunday and Wednesday are also a bit more likely to be the 13th than other days of the week.

(3) Friday the 13th occurs at least once (like this year) and at most 3 times (as in 2012) a year. Any month that begins on a Sunday has a Friday the 13th.

(4) On average, there is a Friday the 13th once every 212.35 days, which amounts to about 1.72 occurrences per year.

(5) Fear of Friday the 13th is known as friggatriskaidekaphobia, Frigga being the Norse goddess after whom "Friday" is named. Nearly 20 million people in the US are affected by this fear, which leads to about \$1 billion in lost business.

2011/05/12 (Thu.): Radziwill, Carole, *What Remains: A Memoir of Fate, Friendship, and Love*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2005.

A woman, who grew up in a working-class town, landed her dream reporting job with ABC News, and married a Kennedy-related Polish prince (Anthony Radziwill), writes about the complexities of marriage, the importance of friendship in getting through bad times, and the challenges of self-invention. She tells her story in the context of her husband's deteriorating condition and eventual death from incurable cancer and the deadly plane crash of close friends, John Kennedy Jr. and his wife Carolyn Bessette, within weeks of each other. Almost their entire married life was consumed by efforts to manage the cancer, which involved numerous hospital trips and a number of experimental treatments. At one point, the author had grown so tired of her daily dealings with cancer that she flirted with infidelity. Carole Radziwill's life story is compelling, given that she is the lone survivor of a group of four close friends (two Kennedy cousins and their wives). However, the writing style is uneven: at times gripping and at other times rather mundane (e.g., when the author's childhood or medical details of cancer treatments are discussed). Overall, the book is an okay read, but comes across as yet another Kennedy-Clan book, even though it was not marketed as such.

2011/05/11 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Compelling reading: A scathing *Rolling Stone* [investigative piece](#) (based on the report of a Senate subcommittee chaired by Democrat Carl Levin and Republican Tom Coburn) spells out in detail how Goldman Sachs defrauded investors to the tune of many billions of dollars and then lied about it when questioned by congress in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown it helped create.

(2) Harvard's Got Talent: The winning act in Harvard Kennedy School of Government's talent competition, held on April 15, 2011. An [instrumental piece](#) entitled "Gratitude," composed and played by Amin Toofani.

2011/05/10 (Tue.): An empty offer from the super-rich: I have written about this topic before, but because I keep seeing that raising the top-bracket tax rate continues to be trumpeted by the left and right alike, I thought that providing more detail might be in order. I am basing this post (and its title) on a column by Gary Rivlin, published in the May 9, 2011 issue of [Newsweek magazine](#).

When Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg joined Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Ted Turner—to name a few of the super-rich already on board—in announcing that he is in favor of raising the top income tax rate (currently at 35%), economist Bruce Bartlett went crazy. Bartlett, a conservative, is not against raising taxes, but he considers these endorsements "hollow gestures," because all the individuals named above would pay little more in taxes if the rate were to go up. Additional tax income generated from a rate hike would come mostly from the upper-middle class, not from the super-rich. The latter's income is predominantly through capital gains, which are taxed at the ridiculously low 15% maximum rate.

When Bill Clinton reduced the capital gains tax rate from 28% to 20%, the effective tax rate paid by the 400 richest Americans fell by exactly 8%. George W. Bush reduced the rate further to 15%, and, sure enough, the effective tax rate for the rich fell by another 5.5%. Economists disagree whether increasing the capital gains tax rate (say, to 20%, as advocated by President Obama) is a good idea. This issue needs to be discussed in appropriate forums. Meanwhile, the super-rich should stop their misleading statements. Warren Buffet has been quoted as saying that his secretary's effective tax rate is more than his. Buffet paid 17.7% in taxes on his 2006 income of \$46M (mostly through capital gains); his secretary lost 30% of her \$60K salary to the government. This abomination will not go away by increasing the top tax rate.

(1) Note added to the original post, in view of a friend's comment that he too benefits from capital gains, not

just the super-rich: I qualified my conclusion by saying that the issue "needs to be discussed in appropriate forums." I am familiar with the argument that the low capital gains tax rate encourages investment, thus leading to job creation. However, bear in mind that even a 25% rate for capital gains would not lead to people not investing: what else can the rich do with their money but invest it? I am not saying that the top tax rate should not be raised, but simply that it will not lead to the rich paying a larger share than they do now. The entire tax code, including the part on capital gains, should be open to discussion.

(2) Note added to the original post, in view of a friend's comment that his experience with (risky) venture capital investments indicates that a higher capital gains tax rate may hamper risk-taking and thus future tax revenues: Sorry, but I don't buy this argument. The maximum **capital gains tax rate** was at 25% during 1954-1967, went as high as about 40% in the late 1970s, fluctuated in the range 20-30% until 2003, and now stands at 15%. I don't think that the US is better off today than it has been over the past few decades, when the maximum capital gains tax rate was higher. If anything, one may even argue that the financial meltdown was caused, in part, by the attractiveness of investments: when too much money chases a limited set of investment opportunities, fraud proliferates. Taking the Warren Buffet example with \$46M income in 2006, and assuming that \$40M of the income was from capital gains, he got to keep \$34M of the latter figure at 15% tax rate and would have kept \$32M or \$30M at 20% or 25%, respectively. Sitting on his money would have earned him \$0, even optimistically assuming that bank interest rates match the inflation. So, I very much doubt that a higher capital gains tax rate would reduce investments. Note that not everyone pays the maximum tax rate on all capital gains. So those who are not super-rich will be even less affected by a rate hike.

(3) Note added to the original post, in view of a friend's comment that I am using one equation with too many unknowns, that the interactions are more complicated, and that my suggestion constitutes a slippery slope that may lead to socialism/communism: My comparison was not with socialist/communist countries but with US's own recent past. American auto manufacturers, General Electric, IBM, and many other innovation-oriented companies have thrived under tax codes much less favorable to investors than today's. Some global factors have changed, but there is absolutely no reason to make the US economy a hostage to China's future development plans. [See item (3) in my May 8, 2011, blog entry.]

2011/05/09 (Mon.): Miller, Arthur, *The Crucible*, unabridged play performed by the Los Angeles Theater Works (starring several well-known actors, such as Richard Dreyfuss, Stacy Keach, and Michael York), Books on Tape, 1994.

This is a classic play that uses the 17th-Century witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, to portray community problems created by hysteria. The play was written in 1952 (it was published, was performed, and earned a Tony Award a year later), at the height of the anti-communist hysteria in the US and is generally deemed to be an allegorical criticism of the McCarthy hearings. A few years later, Miller himself was questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and, owing to his refusal to name other people present at meetings he had attended, was convicted of contempt of Congress.

Note: This play is on high-school reading lists in the US. Having been raised and schooled in Iran, I have a lot of catching up to do in order to bring myself up to the high-school level in terms of history and social studies. What we were taught in "taarikh" and "ooloom-e ejtemaa'ee" was so biased, twisted, censored, and incomplete as to be useless.

2011/05/08 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) For Mother's Day: Hooman Tabrizi's **solo piano performance** of Anoushirvan Rohani's beautiful song, "Maadar" ("Mother"). Posted here, with love and gratitude to my nurturing mother, and best wishes for all wonderful mothers among my friends.

(2) Don't be quick to judge: I always advise those around me not to rush to judgment about people who fall short of their expectations. The grumpy server at your favorite restaurant may have had a bitter fight with her spouse just before coming to work, she may be a single mother with a sick child and no health insurance, or she may have just received notice that her rent is going up by 20% next month. Be kind, and give everyone the benefit of doubt. **This video** says the same thing.

(3) Why controlling the US deficit and is important: If China decides to sell its \$1.2 trillion worth of US Treasuries, the US will face a financial crisis significantly more severe than the one in 2008. Some experts dismiss this possibility by suggesting that China would not shoot itself in the foot, but over the course of human history, countries have done stranger things than this. So the current bickering between parties and interest groups, rejecting all tax increases on one side and resisting all spending cuts on the other, is extremely childish. Read Sebastian Mallaby's excellent article in **Time magazine**, issue of May 9, 2011.

(4) Distance education: According to **Time magazine**, some private colleges prey on stay-at-home moms and economically disadvantaged individuals who cannot afford to go through traditional college programs. They load such students with debt and pocket the government loans. Lawmakers are finally fighting back, but for many current students, this may be a case of too little, too late.

2011/05/07 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) The problem with princes: "You must make someone President for life. It might as well be Barack Obama, as he's in power now, and all the dynasties start with someone's seizing the throne. His heirs will succeed him, however haughty, deluded, infirm or otherwise unsuited for high office they may be. They will be the official heads of state, and the armed forces will swear loyalty to them rather than to the American Constitution." Nick Cohen's analogy to explain to Americans why he is a republican (*Time* magazine, special Royal Wedding Commemorative Issue).

(2) Political movie: Julianne Moore, one of today's most talented actresses, plays Sarah Palin in the HBO film "The Game Change," based on the recent book by the same name about the 2008 US presidential campaign. Comparisons with Tina Fey's rendition will be inevitable. For a review of the book, see my Blog entry under 2011/04/14.

(3) Auto museum: The National Automobile Museum of Iran, located in Karaj, is featured in this **10-minute video**. One puzzling aspect is that, with very few exceptions, only luxury cars, sports cars, and convertibles are displayed. This may be a sign that the autos were obtained from the garages of the wealthy who fled Iran after the revolution. Or, perhaps, the mullas have developed a taste for such cars!

(4) Images from space: colorful, awe-inspiring, and magnificent! **Take a look**.

(5) College sports: UCSB just lost the NCAA national championship men's volleyball match to Ohio State, 3 sets to 2. Ohio State had never won against UCSB in 7 previous tries. The UCSB Gauchos looked tired and disorganized. I guess defeating the top-ranked team in the country (USC) twice in a span of 6 days took its toll on the team. This was the fifth trip to the final match for UCSB without winning a championship.

2011/05/06 (Fri.): Here are two music videos of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Maryam Moein sings "**Beh Kojaa Chenin Shetaabaan?**" ("Whereto in Such a Hurry?").

(2) And now for something different: **Native American music and dance**.

2011/05/05 (Thu.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) Music video: Similarities between Spanish and Arabic music are on display in this **4-minute video** by the Israeli singer nicknamed "Ishtar" and the band "Alabina."

(2) Ballet performance: The **Georgian National Ballet** performs with "military precision." Great choreography, timing, coordination, and energy!

(3) College sports: The UCSB volleyball team upset top-ranked USC for the 2nd time in a week in a game that was part of NCAA's Final-Four tournament. UCSB will face Ohio State in the championship game on Sat. 5/7, 4:00 PM PDT.

(4) Copper puts gold to shame: In a highly informative column in **Newsweek magazine**, issue of May 2, 2011, Niall Ferguson writes about the rather unglamorous precious metal, copper, which has applications in electrical wiring, plumbing, and many other areas. Much has been made lately of the rise in gold prices, up 75% since two years ago. In the same time span, the price of copper has risen 181%. The bulk of the new demand for copper comes from Asian countries that had not been big consumers so far. In fact, "if the rest of the world were to consume at just half the American per capita rate ... we'd exhaust all known copper reserves within just 38 years."

(5) A few more interesting/weird news items of the week:

2: number of people who speak the indigenous Ayapaneco tongue in Mexico; the two aren't on speaking terms!

17%: largest increase in the US national debt, as a percentage of GDP, during a single president's term

(Reagan).

25%: proportion of children in single-parent homes in the US, the highest of 27 OEC industrialized nations.

247: number of people on the US government's terrorist watch list who bought guns, legally, in 2010.

749: number of sailors still held hostage by the Somali pirates.

(6) Top 25 cities where most of future growth will occur: **The list** is definitely shifting. The 2025 predictions have 3 North American and 4 European cities falling off the top-25 list, all 7 being replaced by cities in China.

2011/05/04 (Wed.): Florey, K. B., *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting*, Melville House, 2009.

I have stashed away, in various drawers and other storage areas of my home, a number of fountain pens and calligraphy implements that have not been used in years. Beautiful handwriting, both as a practical skill and as an art form, was cherished in Iran when I went to

school. I remember a special "handwriting class" in which we used reed pens and inkwells to learn the beautiful Nasta'liq script, so prominent in ancient Persian manuscripts and books, often intermingled with miniature and other art. Ironically, these days, even Nasta'liq is produced with help from the computer; witness the blue script in the accompanying image.

With this background, I was delighted when I chanced upon Kitty Burns Florey's book, *Script and Scribble*. The book contains an enjoyable

history of handwriting and writing implements: "For Puritans and other reformers in England and America, the scripts favored in Europe were too elaborate, too baroque—perhaps too seductively gorgeous—and the plain and easy script known as *copperplate* (or *round-hand*) was devised as an alternative" [p. 41]. During the quill era, P. R. Spencer devised his philosophy of penmanship, which gathered a lot of followers. His book, *The Spencerian Key to Practical Penmanship*, published by his sons after his death, remained highly influential until the 20th Century, when A. N. Palmer and the method bearing his name took over. Spencer's legacy endures today in the Coca-Cola logo.

Interestingly, despite the computer takeover of our writing, many terms from the golden age of pens and paper still pervade our lexicon. Just as we still "dial" a phone number, we "turn over a new leaf," try to avoid a "blot" on our record, "pen" books, and submit "manuscripts." Calligraphy was revived briefly in the 1970s, when broad-nib pens were sold briskly. However, what most people produced with these pens was not calligraphy, but an enhanced form of their regular handwriting. Before it became a nuisance to be prevented through civil ordinances, graffiti was an art form and included some very interesting handwriting styles.

So, is handwriting still relevant in the age of digital computer and the Internet? Not surprisingly, the author is passionate about a positive reply to this question. There are certain things, such as sympathy notes, that almost everyone agrees should be written by hand. The personal touch is important in many other contexts as well. "[Instructional Technology Professor Leigh E. Zeitz] once composed a love letter to his wife on keyboard, revised it to his satisfaction, then carefully copied it by hand onto paper" [p. 181]. Handwriting was significantly more important when phone calls were unavailable or very expensive. "TV didn't kill off radio, air-conditioning didn't destroy electric fans, cars didn't displace bicycles. But cheap long-distance rates and the ubiquity of email have sent letter-writing to the land of the dodo. ... a letter speaks in the writer's voice, and it does it better than a phone call: you can't sit down and reread a phone call" [p. 134].

Furthermore, handwriting legibility and speed are correlated with several learning skills. "For both children and adults, research suggests that greater transcription speed increases automaticity of word production [thereby freeing working memory] for the metacognitive processes needed to create good reader-friendly prose" [p. 155]. In another study, some 80% of students reported that being laptop-free helped them become more engaged in class discussions [p. 161].

Consequences of poor handwriting skills are also discussed. Students with legible handwriting score better on tests, because "By the time a teacher has strained to make out whether it's *book* or *look* or *boob* or *Bob* or *kook* or *boat* or *lob* or *load* ... Well that teacher has become alienated. D-minus" [p. 157]. Physicians, justly criticized for illegible handwriting, are responsible for many medication errors. A jury in Texas fined a cardiologist \$225,000 for his illegible handwriting resulting in the patient, who later died, to be given Plendil, a medication for high blood pressure, instead of the prescribed Isordil for heart pain [p. 172].

Educators disagree about the best method of teaching handwriting to students: "In a study focused on ways to improve writing skills, [researchers] found that cursive and printing had the same degree of readability—but that the speediest writers were those who mixed the two, using a combination of printing and cursive that joins only certain selected letters, usually the easiest ones to link-up" [p. 160].

I highly recommend this informative book to anyone interested in the history of handwriting and its various styles, and to those who miss the thrill of retrieving handwritten letters from their mailboxes. The book contains a bibliography, but no index.



Hear are two interesting links related to the book: [Website](#) of the International Association of Master Penmen, Engrossers and Teachers of Handwriting; [Audiofile](#) of WNYC's 15-minute interview with the author.

2011/05/03 (Tue.): Here are half-dozen items of potential interest.

(1) Osama Bin Laden's demise: I was pleased to learn (from an NPR program interviewing several students) that not all of those celebrating on the streets were doing so because of vengeance and blind patriotism. One student was celebrating a closure to his disturbing childhood memories of 9/11. Another was jubilant owing to a renewed hope for a safer world, where fear is not dominant. The reactions to OBL's death in the USA were quite varied. The *New York Times* provides a [spectrum of views](#) in an interactive format.

(2) Osama Bin Ladin's last Facebook status, according to an anonymous humorist: "BRB, someone's at the door." The status was "liked" by the US Navy Seals!

(3) US political humor: "[Donald Trump's] campaign slogan should be WE SHALL OVERCOMB." Larry N. Lorenzoni, in a letter to *Time* magazine, issue of May 9, 2011.

(4) On Facebook: New FB groups are emerging like cockroaches: name any subject, and you'll likely find several FB pages devoted to it. After liking a few groups immediately after getting a FB account, and being inundated with numerous posts and notifications on various subjects, sometimes totally unrelated to what the group said it was about, I am now avoiding all FB groups.

(5) Quote of the week on Amercian Anglophiles: "The most galling thing about Anglophiles, who worship a class of people that many English people hold in contempt, is that they are oblivious to what makes England great. ... we named [our son] Gordon, after [my wife's uncle, a Royal Air Force commander who lost his legs when he was in his 70s,] the kind of Englishman that made England great. You won't see many of them at the royal wedding." Joe Queenan, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of May 9, 2011, on America's fascination with the wedding of two utterly unaccomplished young people.

(6) Interesting/weird news of the week:

2: former UK prime ministers (Blair, Gordon) not invited to the royal wedding.

\$1000: fine for violating San Francisco's proposed ban on circumcision.

\$5000: fare paid by a pair of New Yorkers to a cabbie who drove them to Los Angeles.

\$225,000: value of banknotes eaten by termites in a bank in India.

1.8 million: applications for tickets to the 2012 Olympics in London.

2011/05/02 (Mon.): Today is teacher's day in Iran (the international version is on October 5). To mark the occasion, two senior members of the Iranian Teacher's Union have been arrested and a number of related Web sites blocked! A former student of mine forwarded this anonymous quote to me: "We learn from two sources: life and teacher. The first instructs you at the cost of your life; the second, at the cost of her life."

2011/05/01 (Sun.): Here are a couple of items of potential interest.

(1) Prerevolutionary Tehran: Khosrow Sinai's [81-minute documentary about Tehran](#) paints a realistic portrait of the city (the good, the bad, and the ugly) in 1977, just before the Islamic revolution.

(2) Hugely popular music video: This is the first time I have encountered a YouTube video clip with more than 28M views. Alexander Rybak, Eurovision 2009 winner, performs "[Fairytale](#)."

2011/04/30 (Sat.): Gleick, James, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, Pantheon, 2011.

Having read a glowing review of this book in the *New York Times*, I approached it with great expectations. At more than 500 pages (426 pages without notes and index), it is not an easy book to read, and I ended up skipping some detailed (and less than exciting) passages, where the author is sidetracked by minutia that are not of interest to most readers.

The book begins by reviewing a history of language and writing systems, the first information-exchange tools that emerged millennia ago. In Chapter 4, under the title "To Throw the Powers of Thought into Wheel-Work," we read about Charles Babbage, his ingenious computing "engines," and other developments of the 17th Century in mechanizing computation and decision-making. Subsequently, a discussion of the invention of telegraph and associated codes is followed by the contributions of Claude Shannon, a true genius, whose master's thesis laid out ideas that later became the foundations of digital logic circuits.

The year 1948 was particularly eventful, as it witnessed the publication of Shannon's mathematical theory of communication and the emergence of two important words in our modern lexicon: "transistor" and "bit"; the first of these was coined by a committee, which voted on a set of proposed terms to describe the new invention, while the second one was the brainchild of Shannon.

Chapter 7 is devoted to Shannon's "Information Theory," which unlike many other theoretical developments that take shape over many years or even decades, emerged almost fully formed, thanks to the genius of Shannon.

The author does not limit his praise to mathematicians and scientists: he also gives due credit to corporate research centers, such as those at Bell Labs and IBM.

A highly transformative idea in the history of information, "information overload," emerged in the 1960s. Up to then, scholars were concerned with information scarcity and loss. In the words of the then president of the American Historical Association, "mankind is faced with nothing short of the loss of its memory, and this memory is history."

Elizabeth Eisenstein, author of the landmark two-volume *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, examined the same evidence and came to the opposite conclusion: "It is not the onset of amnesia that accounts for present difficulties but a more complete recall than any prior generation has ever experienced. Steady recovery, not obliteration, accumulation, rather than loss, have led to the present impasse." She also wrote, "there appears to be little reason to be concerned about 'the loss of mankind's memory.' There are good reasons for being concerned about the overloading of its circuits."

As I scan through my e-mail in-box, friends' postings on Facebook, various news Web sites, blogs, Wikipedia pages, and other daily sources of information, I am impressed that overloading of our memory's circuits was prophesied nearly half-a-century ago.

2011/04/29 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Hating "Love Wins": Evangelical Christians are up in arms against, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In this new book, rogue pastor Rob Bell paints a picture of Christianity as more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation. Bell recalls being appalled by an exhibition visitor's note, reading "Reality check: He's in hell," stuck next to a quotation from Ghandi. He thought to himself: "Really? Ghandi's in hell?" Bell's brand of Christianity draws some 7000 parishoners to his church every Sunday. Read more about this intriguing book in Jon Meacham's excellent article in the April 25, 2011, issue of [Time magazine](#). Meacham writes of Bell: "The history of Evangelism is in part the history of media and methods: Billy Sunday mastered the radio, Billy Graham television; now churches like Bell's are at work in the digital vineyards of downloads and social media. ... [Bell and his followers ask] Why support a supernatural belief system that, for instance, contributed to that minister in Florida's burning of a Koran, which led to the deaths of innocent U.N. workers in Afghanistan?"

(2) Witty Words from Wise Women: Here are a few short quotes that I liked in a little book by B. J. Gallagher, *Witty Words from Wise Women: Quips, Quotes, and Comebacks*, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002.

"Can you imagine a world without men? No crime and lots of happy, fat women." Nicole Hollander

"Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths." Lois Wyse

"If you are never scared, embarrassed, or hurt, it means you never take chances." Julia Soul

"Money does not change men, it only unmasks them." Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni

"Creative minds have always been known to survive any kind of bad training." Anna Freud

"Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth." Shirley Chisholm

"There is so little difference between husbands, you might as well keep the first." Adele Rogers St. Johns

"Husbands are awkward things ... even keeping them in hot water will not make them tender." Mary Buckley

"Never fear shadows. They simply mean there's a light shining somewhere nearby." Ruth E. Renkel

"Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else." Judy Garland

(3) The ultimate reality show, "Kate Plus Mate," is about to film its season-1 finale in London. Among questions to be left for the next season are whether a Camilla-like character will emerge and when the next Fergie will show up.

(4) Persian music: Manoochehr Sakhaii, notable Iranian singer, passed away yesterday in Los Angeles, at age 76. Here is "[Kalaagh-haa](#)" ("The Crows"), one of his better-known songs.

2011/04/28 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) An iconic photograph: This photo of two Iranian women, one leading her life according to personal beliefs and goals, essentially following the "live and let live" philosophy, and the other trying to force her own attire and lifestyle on other women (she is a member of a patrol team that looks for women with "improper" attire on Tehran streets, issues verbal warnings, and, in some cases, takes them in for questioning and punishment) are symptomatic of what is holding back Iran.



(2) On President Obama's political style: "Obama followed two rules. The first was that he would largely allow the legislative process to run its course before stepping in. As political scientist Frances Lee has explained, when a president voices an opinion, the entire issue becomes polarized. To test this, Lee studied how the Senate voted on questions that didn't have neat Democratic and Republican answers. Overall, these debates ended in party-line votes 39 percent of the time. But that number surged to 56 percent whenever the president took a stand." Andrew Romano, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), April 25, 2011.

(3) Saving \$1 trillion in US military spending: The US military spending is very close to that of the rest of the world combined. Over the 1998-2008 decade, per-capita public defense spending in the US nearly doubled,

from \$1500 to \$2700. Mark Thompson, writing in the April 25, 2011, issue of [Time magazine](#), presents some facts and figures about military spending in the US and argues that the military budget can be slashed by \$1T, with negligible ill effects on national security. Decommissioning and updating of antiquated systems, such as some aircraft carriers and fighter jets, and more selective intelligence gathering, to avoid an information deluge, are among the proposed strategies.

(4) Wise women's words to live by:

"You have not lived a perfect day ... unless you have done something for someone who will never be able to repay you." Ruth Smeltzer

"Money is what you'd get on beautifully without if only other people weren't so crazy about it." Margaret Case Harriman

(5) Water crossing by reindeer: A friend sent me this [amazing video clip](#) of a water crossing during reindeer migration in the Arctic. The clip reminds of a documentary film I watched several years ago that depicted Iran's Bakhtiari tribe migrating across the Zagross mountains, between summer and winter pastures. That film also had a water crossing (by sheep) that was quite impressive. I was unable to find an on-line version of the film, and its name escapes me right now.

2011/04/27 (Wed.): Here are four musical items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Ziba Shirazi sings "[Khooneh-ye Eshgh](#)" ("House of Love"). Compared with her more recent work, this old clip is closer to traditional Iranian music.

(2) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi performs "[Khaabam yaa Bidaaram?](#)" ("Am I Dreaming or Awake?").

(3) Introducing an artist: A woman, who goes by the name "Shirin," posts [instrumental piano pieces](#) on Iranian.com and YouTube under the screen name "ahang1001." The pieces are soothing and enjoyable; the music often accompanies a slide show of paintings and other art. Highly recommended!

(4) Kurdish dance: On a few Iranian dance routines previously posted by me, friends had commented on the conspicuous absence of female dancers. Well, leave it to the Kurds to shirk that trend! The singer is the only male in this [Kurdish dance video](#).

2011/04/26 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on technology and politics.

(1) Campus digital-free zones: Some professors are urging colleges to [restrict wireless access](#) on campus "to free students from their tether to technology," thereby reducing possible distraction from lectures and studying. Digital connectivity policies vary at different schools, and the debate regarding advantages and drawbacks of digital-free zones on college campuses is certain to pick up in the coming years.

(2) Tracking and sensing via smartphones: The amount of [data that cell phones can provide](#) (call patterns, locations) is unprecedented. In the wrong hands, such data can create nightmarish scenarios of tracking and stalking, or the less evil "targeted ads." In the right hands, however, the same collection of data is a gold mine that can be exploited to benefit everyone. Already, researchers have used data collected (with the participants' knowledge and approval) to learn much about social interactions and, in one instance, to detect flu symptoms in people by analyzing changes in their communication patterns, before the people themselves realized they were getting sick. In a larger study, using data from cell phone companies that had names and other identifying info stripped, researchers were able to predict someone's whereabouts at any given time with 93.6% accuracy. And this is just what we can do with existing cell phone capabilities. By providing a variety of sensors (such as radiation detectors) in cell phones, other beneficial applications will emerge.

(4) Italian women's revolt: "[Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister] has always been a joker. But Italian women are no longer laughing. ... The rage can be read in the polls. Berlusconi's approval rating among women has dropped from 48 percent a year ago to 27 percent—an all-time low. True to form, Berlusconi has his own statistics. 'Did you hear about the latest poll?' he recently joked. 'They asked women between 20 and 30 years old if they want to make love to Berlusconi. Thirty-three percent said yes, and 67 percent said, 'Again?' ' " Barbie Nadeau, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of April 25, 2011.

Comment: His 27% approval rating among women is a sure sign of a large minority of Italian woman still suffering from the effects of many decades of brainwashing.

(5) On questions surrounding President Obama's birthplace: Here is my response to people who criticize President Obama for not putting to rest, once and for all, the question of his birthplace (although, I personally believe that he has done so): Have you considered that perhaps he is leading these people on, because this is an issue of interest to only a tiny minority? By allowing them to go on for months and months, thus becoming sidetracked from issues that people do consider important, Obama helps them lower their own credibility. Smarter Obama opponents have already distanced themselves from his birthplace issue. Let's look at the other side of the coin: Would the pundits and politicians who question Obama's birthplace be comfortable with a US citizen, born to illegal immigrants in the United States, becoming president? Or is it just xenophobia or racism, veiled by the birthplace technicality?

2011/04/25 (Mon.): The following items were to be posted in early April, but were somehow overlooked in composing this page. Here they are.

- (1) World's largest haft-seen: This homage to the traditional [Persian Norooz celebration](#) was set up next to the Bistoon mountain in western Iran (Kermanshah).
- (2) Irnians in the US: Data about the [density of US residents born in Iran](#) has been published. The top spot goes to Kings Point, NY, with 18.6% of its residents being of Iranian origin. In California, Beverly Hills (15.4%), Glendale (12.4%), and Newport Coast (6.7%) appear among the top 10.
- (3) Women in the workplace: Enlightening [15-minute talk](#) by Sheryl Sandberg about why we have too few women leaders.

2011/04/24 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Persian art auction: A page from a 258-page 16th-Century edition of Shahnameh (Ferdowsi's "The Book of Kings") sold for \$12M at a Sothby's auction to an anonymous phone bidder, setting a new record, previously belonging to a \$10M Kerman carpet, for Persian art. The [BBC Persian Service](#) story reads "a new record for Islamic art," but I don't see why Shahnameh, a book that was written to counter the Arab/Islamic influence, should be identified as Islamic art.
- (2) LOC's National Recording Registry: The National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress has added 25 culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant songs, albums, and sounds to its collection. The 2010 additions include "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" (1908), "The Music from Peter Gunn" (Henry Mancini, 1959), "Stand by Your Man" (Tammy Wynette, 1968), "Songs of the Humpback Whale" (1970), "Let's Stay Together" (Al Green, 1971), and "Aja" (Steely Dan, 1977).
- (3) Iranian/Kurdish music: Mamak Khadem performs "[Bigharaar](#)" ("Restless Yearning"). Here is the performer's [official Web site](#).
- (4) Persian music: Faezeh sings "[Yaarab Maraa Yaari Bedeh](#)" ("Help Me, God").
- (5) Political quote of the day: "There's so much talk about the fact that Donald Trump wants to see Obama's birth certificate—I want to see his hairline first." Robin Williams, in a *Time* magazine interview, April 25, 2011.

2011/04/23 (Sat.): Here are seven items of potential interest.

- (1) Jimmy Fallon quote: "Thank you, people on Facebook whose profile picture is a group photo, for letting us know you felt the need to dilute the impact of your face." [From the "Thank-You Notes" segment of his late-night show.]
- (2) On the US economy: "The 'crisis' we face was visited upon us by the very people now screaming loudest about the budget deficit. [They voted for the Bush tax cuts, which added \$500B per year to the deficit.] ... Ryan has bestowed a remarkable gift upon the President: his radicalism has framed the moderate, financially prudent profile for Obama's coming campaign." Joe Klein, writing in *Time magazine*, issue of April 25, 2011.
- (3) One drug use in the US: "I am telling you today, first as a father and then as a doctor, that the ease of that transaction chilled me. Kids everywhere are in danger from this substance, and the threat is legal, cheap and very deadly." Dr. Mehmet Oz, writing in *Time magazine*, issue of April 25, 2011, on his experiment of buying bath salts, aka plant food, containing stimulant hallucinogens, at a corner store.
- (4) A new voice for the Aflac duck: Joe Stein, *Time magazine* contributor, describes his hilarious experience when he decided to be one of 11,200 applicants who auditioned for voicing the Aflac duck (featured in the insurance company's ads), after Gilbert Gottfried was fired for twitting jokes about the recent quake in Japan, where Aflac does 75% of its business.
- (5) Turkish music: Kirac sings/plays "[Sari Gelin](#)."
- (6) Gang rape victim disappointed at verdict: Mistreatment of women in a number of Islamic countries and other backward societies was brought into the forefront again by a recent Supreme Court decision in Pakistan to acquit five perpetrators in the 2002 gang rape of Mukhtar Mai ([Washington Post story](#)). The gang rape, ordered by a tribal council, was punishment for a romantic affair by the victim's 13-year-old brother. She was paraded naked around the village after the rape, and was expected to commit suicide, as the shame supposedly fell on her. However, she decided to take her plea to court. Rape, so-called honor killings, and other crimes against women are poorly investigated by the Pakistani authorities, and they frequently go unpunished. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded nearly 800 honor killings in 2010 alone; at least 26 of these women were raped or gang-raped before being killed. These figures are alarming, especially in light of the fact that rape and other crimes against women frequently go unreported.
- (7) Thought for today: "The remarkable thing about Shakespeare is that he is really very good—in spite of all the people who say he is very good." Robert Graves, English poet (1895-1985).

2011/04/22 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Candid Camera, with a twist: a very [clever trick](#) played on bystanders.

(2) Joke: A cop stops a drunkard and questions him.

Cop: Where are you headed?

Man: To listen to a lecture on the ill effects of drinking.

Cop: At midnight? Who gives a lecture at midnight?

Man: My wife!

(3) The universe in 1 trillion dazzling pixels: According to "Crunching the Universe," an article by Preston Lerner in the April 2011 issue of *Discover magazine*, a 1-terapixel image covering 1/3 of the night sky has been made available on-line. Astonishing details from galaxies that are millions of light years away can be seen by simply zooming in on the appropriate parts of [this image](#).

(4) On evolution: "There will be a layer in the fossil record where you'll know people were here because of the squashed remains of automobiles. It will be a very thin layer." Lynn Margulis, in an interview published in the April 2011 issue of *Discover magazine*.

Interestingly, Lynn Margulis is a serious scientist who said in this interview that "Natural selection eliminates and maybe maintains, but it doesn't create." Intelligent Design advocates are already running with this story, latching onto the "doesn't create" part!

2011/04/21 (Thu.): Here are eight items of potential interest.

(1) Persian poetry: Today, I came across the following Persian verse, which I remembered from long ago, but had no idea who the poet was.

Haassel-e omram seh sokhan bish nist // Khaam bodam, pokhteh shodam, sookhtam

A couple of Google searches revealed that it is by the Iranian historian, Abdolhossein Navaaee.

(2) Persian music: For fans of the popular Persian singer Sattar, here is a link to his official [music channel](#).

(3) Every moment, this orchard bears a new fruit: After the widening gulf that has started to appear between the clerical and military wings of the ruling Islamists in Iran, we are now witnessing a splintering of the royalists in exile, a fairly small group to begin with. This [Iranian.com post](#) praises both Reza and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as great men, but disses Reza II, the Crown Prince, as being insufficiently brave or knowledgeable about Iranian affairs to be considered a leader by most royalists. Leave it to Iranians to keep knocking each other out, until there is a single person in each splinter group.

[The title of this post is the English translation of the Persian saying "Har dam az een baagh bari miresad," used to mean that oddities or disappointments are piling up.]

(4) Learning science via game-playing: Since 2009, the Informal Science Education Program within the US National Science Foundation has funded an MIT research team for the development of "[Vanished](#)," a computer game designed to teach science. The Program came about when NSF-conducted surveys showed that "A good deal of the public's understanding of science derives from outside of the classroom." The game has a compelling narrative and surprising plot twists. "The premise is that people living in the future have contacted us in the present, to answer a question: What event occurred between our time and theirs that led to the loss of civilization's historical records? Students must decode clues in hidden messages, and in response find and provide information about Earth's current condition, such as temperature and species data, to help people in the future deduce what wound up happening."

(5) Music oldie, but goodie: "Besame Mucho" ("Kiss Me Much"), written in 1940 by Mexican songwriter Consuelo Velazquez, is one of those classic songs that has seen vocal and instrumental performances by many artists. This rhythmic [instrumental version](#), by Arturo Fuente, is one of the nicer ones.

(6) Musical humor: This funny "[romantic song](#)" clip, that I chanced upon today, is less than a minute long, so you busy people have no excuse not to listen.

(7) For physics enthusiasts: This [84-minute lecture](#), the first of five on "The Future of Fundamental Physics" in the Messenger Lecture Series at Cornell University, was delivered in October 2010 by theoretical physicist Nima Arkani-Hamed of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. I had a physicist colleague, Ja'far Arkani-Hamed, at Tehran's Sharif University of Technology in the 1970s and 80s. I don't know if Nima is related to him. Wikipedia states that both of his parents were physicists, but does not name them.

(8) Optical illusion: Creating the [illusion of motion](#) by sliding one stationary pattern over another one.

2011/04/20 (Wed.): Old technology is cool again: Spinning a heavy wheel is an ancient form of storing energy in mechanical form. This form of energy storage has not been in favor since high-capacity batteries were invented. However, with a relative slowdown of improvements in battery technology, and increasing worries about the hazardous waste they create, mechanical energy storage is being reexamined for use with renewable energy sources (such as wind and solar) that tend to be highly variable over time. Hybrid and all-electric vehicles can also benefit from flywheels that can provide momentary energy boosts when needed. New developments that have allowed flywheels to become more efficient include the reduction of friction and air resistance via the use of magnetic bearings and enclosing the wheel in a vacuum chamber. A new design twist is the use of much lighter composite material, as opposed to steel, that allow the wheel to spin considerably

faster, without falling apart. Flywheels are also useful for buses and commuter trains that have frequent starts and stops, allowing kinetic energy to be stored at stopping time and released at start time, thus allowing reduced energy waste. Here is the [Washington Post report](#) that provides more details.

2011/04/19 (Tue.): Here are four items from the worlds of fashion and entertainment.

(1) Fashion icon: Should we judge the wealthy by their charitable donations? I have mixed feelings about this piece in [Iranian.com](#), which criticizes the recently passed designer, Bijan Pakzad, for not using his wealth to help the needy in Iran, or Iranian refugees worldwide living in dire conditions, despite his proclamations that he was proud of his Iranian roots. My mixed feelings arise from the fact that many people give generously to charities, without hyping up their deeds, so we should not be quick in judging. Furthermore, in a free society, personal choices by individuals should be respected, as we may not be aware of all the circumstances in a person's life. Yet, Bijan's exuberant lifestyle, that included several million-dollar cars and many other luxuries, is not a good indicator of charity.

(2) More on fashion: This [6-minute video](#) from 2007 is dizzying, and a bit tiring after the first couple of minutes. However, Haleh Jamali, who is depicted trying out different outfits and hairdos in rapid succession, looks amazing throughout.

(3) Persian music: Kiosk performs "[Agha, Nigah Dar!](#)" ("Stop Here").

(4) Movie recommendation: I watch a lot of movies, but seldom write about them on Facebook or in my blog. The 2009 movie "The Last Station" (Rated R), set during the last year of Leo Tolstoy's life, made a deep impression on me. Christopher Plummer, as the Russian author, and Helen Mirren, as his wife Sofya (spelled also as "Sophia" or "Sofia" in some sources), are magnificent.

2011/04/18 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Economics roundtable: Alan Greenspan was one of the panelists in today's "Meet the Press" on NBC. Why this guy is called back to opine on economic issues, after his miserable track record, is beyond me.

Furthermore, he can barely speak anymore, due to old age; he can't utter a coherent sentence, because of the many qualifiers he puts in to protect his behind!

(2) Political quote of the day: "Let's say that she's 90 percent [recovered] ... Well, we've had congressmen in Arizona who didn't even have a brain. So it's not like you have to be as talented as she is to be good at it." Mike McNulty, Gabrielle Giffords' last campaign chairman, on the prospects of her returning to work. Quoted in the *Newsweek* article "What's Really Going on with Gabby Giffords" (issue of April 18, 2011).

(3) Celebrities: In a blog post on [Iranian.com](#), someone complained about too many underwear models recently chosen as Iranians of the Day, including three in a row. Here is my comment on the post.

"I agree that too much emphasis is placed on fashion models (and don't forget Miss X contestants, where X is the name of a country, continent, or some other geographic entity). This problem is not unique to Iranians and is an unfortunate social trend worldwide. Just ask any American to name a number of important people, and odds are that a vast majority of them will be music/movie/fashion personalities."

2011/04/17 (Sun.): Theory of social networks: One of my research specialties in computer engineering is "interconnection networks" and as part of this, I have studied the so-called "small-world networks" that model social networks and a variety of other natural and human-made interconnection structures. Because of my dual interests in this area (scientific research and personal use of Facebook), I found the following recently published article quite interesting. I am reproducing the citation and abstract of the paper below. To access the full article in PDF format, you need access to Elsevier's Science Direct database, which requires a subscription (I can't post the file due to copyright issues). In nontechnical terms, the results reported in this paper confirm that rumors can spread very quickly in social networks and other similar settings, which is a testament to both their effectiveness and their extreme danger.

Chierichetti, Flavio, Silvio Lattanzi, and Alessandro Panconesi, "Rumor Spreading in Social Networks," *Theoretical Computer Science*, Vol. 412, No. 24, pp. 2602-2610, May 2011.

Abstract: Social networks are an interesting class of graphs likely to become of increasing importance in the future, not only theoretically, but also for probable applications to ad hoc and mobile networking. Rumor spreading is one of the basic mechanisms for information dissemination in networks; its relevance stemming from its simplicity of implementation and effectiveness. In this paper, we study the performance of rumor spreading in the classic preferential attachment model of Bollobas et al. which is considered to be a valuable model for social networks. We prove that, in these networks: (a) The standard PUSH-PULL strategy delivers the message to all nodes within $O((\log n)^2)$ rounds with high probability; (b) by themselves, PUSH and PULL require polynomially many rounds. (These results are under the assumption that m , the number of new links added with each new node is at least 2. If $m = 1$ the graph is disconnected with high probability, so no rumor spreading strategy can work.) Our analysis is based on a careful study of some new properties of preferential

attachment graphs which could be of independent interest.

2011/04/16 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Documentary about Iran: Diego Bunuel's **48-minute National Geographic documentary** about Iran is better than most films of its kind. It contains some interesting scenes, such as a mulla trying on a suit at his tailor's (3 minutes in), an Islamic rap performance (by the son of the said mulla, 7 minutes in), a Qur'an reading competition midway through the film, Iran Museum of Modern Art (31 minutes in), and Jews worshipping in a synagogue (36 minutes in).

(2) Memorable Doris Day song: She sings "**Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps.**" The **Pussycat Dolls version** isn't bad either, but, of course, it does not invoke the same memories for me.

(3) A beautiful photo: This **360-degree image** of the Oia Village, in Greece's Island of Santorini, is fantastic. You can turn the camera angle, as well as zoom in or zoom out.

(4) Shadow photography: A set of **34 images**, posted by "Weekend."

2011/04/15 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest about science and technology.

(1) Science lab accident: A Yale science student is killed weeks from graduation, as her hair gets caught in a lathe while working inside a chem lab's machine shop. The incident and Yale's lab safety procedures are being investigated. To my student friends: Please read this **news story** and follow all lab safety procedures.

(2) Science competition: UK high school student **Aseem Mishra** recently won the national Young Engineer of Great Britain competition with a pair of jeans that let wearers tap out a tune on their thighs by drumming on paper-thin sensors sewn into the fabric. The sensors form a fully functional mobile drum kit with snares, cymbals, and the rest, and produce a surprisingly realistic sound. Mishra will go on to represent the UK at a science and engineering fair in Los Angeles next month. Here is a **video** of the young inventor demonstrating his drum kit.

(3) Greening of skyscrapers: "Skyscrapers look modern, but they are among the worst culprits in urban areas when it comes to energy consumption and carbon emission, with outdated heating, cooling and lighting systems. And there are a lot of them—some 3 million in the [United States] alone." According to **Time magazine**, quiet efforts are underway, in the underground boiler rooms and other areas invisible to the public, to bring these buildings up to date. The Empire State Building alone saved \$4.4M a year on its utility bills through various "greening" projects.

2011/04/14 (Thu.): Heilemann, John, and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*, unabridged audiobook read by Dennis Boutsikaris, Harper Audio, 2010. The US presidential campaign of 2008 was quite fascinating in its historical firsts and the celebrity cult that it produced. Having been in the middle of the 2008 presidential election, and having closely followed the various candidates, I never expected to discover so much that I did not know about events and personalities from this 14-hour tour de force. The book's narrative is riveting and the description of the campaigns, in terms of fundraising efforts, negative ads, and all the other details, leaves one simultaneously appalled and enthralled. The authors expose all the candidates, warts and all, although, not surprisingly, Edwards, McCain, and Palin emerge with more serious bruises. The Clintons, with their squabbling in their own campaign and with the Obama camp, are also painted in rather unflattering light. This is a must book for anyone with serious interest in US presidential politics.

2011/04/13 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Hila Sedighi, the young Iranian poet, whose scathing criticism of the Iranian regime in the form of beautiful, heartfelt poems has attracted a great deal of attention, **defends her decision** to remain silent in the face of pressures, rumors (her reported arrest) and impersonations (unauthorized clone sites on Facebook and elsewhere).

(2) Unhealthy Fixation on Iranians in the News: Today, I came across a post on Facebook that included several photos of a new Mercedes Benz model. The Persian caption read in part: "One of the members of the 80-person design team that created this car is said to be an Iranian." Wow! Come on guys! Please stop posting stories about lingerie models, night-club owners, or 1.25% of a design team, just because they are Iranians. These days, Iranian expats are everywhere, and their accomplishments are far greater than the examples just cited. By aggrandizing every little feat of an Iranian, as if it is totally unexpected, we are short selling ourselves.

(3) Yet another honor killing: An Italian resident slits his daughter's throat 28 times because he felt that she had "shamed" the family, according to this **Feb. 2011 report** (I must have missed the story at the time). The man expresses no remorse during interrogation/interviews.

(4) Final destination for the retired Space Shuttle: NASA's three surviving Space Shuttles will become tourist attractions. Atlantis will go to the Kennedy Space Center; Endeavour will go to Los Angeles; Discovery is heading to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, which will send the Enterprise, which it now has, to New York's

Intrepid Museum.

(5) Today, I learned a new term: "microseismicity." Microseismicity refers to small quakes, usually of magnitude 4 or less, caused by human activities, rather than natural shifts and pressures. These small-scale quakes are benign by themselves, but they can potentially trigger large, deadly quakes. A prime example is the filling of the reservoir behind India's Koyna Dam in 1967 causing a magnitude-6.3 quake that killed 180. Creating large bodies of water, draining of hot-water reservoirs to produce geothermal energy, and drilling of deep wells for high-pressure injection of hazardous waste can trigger the release of accumulated tectonic strain by affecting the rock layers below. Also, the magnitude-7.9 Chinese quake of 2008 that killed 70,000 may be attributable to the Zipingpu Dam, although, in this case, scientific opinion is not unanimous, given that the dam was completed in 2004. For more details, see the article "Earthquakes Hinder Green Energy Plans" in the April 2011 issue of *IEEE Spectrum*.

2011/04/12 (Tue.): Perrow, Charles, *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2007.

Having previously been impressed by the author's 1999 book, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies (with a New Afterword and a Postscript on the Y2K Problem)*, which I used as one of the references for my graduate course on fault-tolerant computing, I approached this book with great anticipation. I was mildly disappointed, but still consider the book a valuable source of ideas and recommend it as required reading for engineering students and tech managers alike. In his clearly written and well-received *Normal Accidents*, Perrow had successfully argued that multiple and unexpected failures are built into our increasingly complex systems.

Industrial accidents have been with us for more than two centuries. We must accept and live with them, as they can never be totally eliminated. The best we can do is to mitigate their impact, so that they do not lead to disasters. Nature's fury is similarly unavoidable, but it need not lead to a disaster in every instance. Ironically, we have spent a great deal of money and effort on the third, and the least important of the trio in the book's title, that is, the terrorism threat. Economy of scale has led to monstrous buildings and industrial facilities, bigger trucks, rail cars, and ships to carry flammables, and larger storage facilities for hazardous material, intensifying the effects of both natural and industrial hazards, and giving terrorists ever larger targets to attack. Larger targets are more difficult to defend and lead to greater fatalities and economic losses when attacked or impacted by various accidents. Perrow advocates "target reduction" as an effective countermeasure in all three areas.

Decentralization is the key to reducing fatalities and economic impacts of all disasters, yet we have tended to do just the opposite: we have increased population densities in flood-prone regions, often by building over wetlands and other natural buffers that mitigate the impact of floods; we have encouraged, and often even subsidized via low-cost insurance, home construction in coastal regions; we have repeatedly rewarded risky behavior by bailing out people and communities who have made unwise decisions that have jeopardized their own well-being, as well as those of others. A community that erects higher and higher levees, in order to gain more land for development near a river, endangers not just itself, but also other communities downstream, who will experience the river's surge as a result of the excess water having nowhere to go but up.

We have spent lavishly on an exaggerated view of the terrorist threat that does not even come close to the severity of the other two dangers: disasters arising from organizational inadequacies and nature's ire. Failing to understand and correct these inverted priorities will doom FEMA's efforts and those of the Department of Homeland Security. Policies advocated in this book constitute good initial steps for putting our priorities in order.

2011/04/11 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Worth quoting: "The first 80 hours a week of my time go to my full-time job at the Department of Energy. But in the wee hours of the morning, on airplane trips, I can go back and forth. It doesn't take much time, and it's a good release." ... "I consider it my equivalent of vegging out in front of the TV." Nobel Laureate and US Secretary of Energy, Dr. Steven Chu, in a *Newsweek* interview (issue of April 11, 2011), discussing his continued scientific research.

(2) US Military's Dirty Secret: "It wasn't until 1992 that the [US] Defense Department even acknowledged such incidents as an offense, and initially only female victims were recognized. But last year more than 110 men made confidential reports of sexual assault by other men, nearly three times as many as in 2007. The real number of victims is surely much higher. ... Like in prisons and other predominantly male environments, male-on-male assault in the military, experts say, is motivated not by homosexuality, but power, intimidation, and domination." Jesse Ellison, *writing in Newsweek* (issue of April 11, 2011), about male-on-male sexual assaults in the military, concluding that a side effect of the repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy will be a reduction of such assaults and facilitation of their reporting.

(3) GE Did Not Pay Any Taxes: So What? GE's not paying any US taxes in 2010 is being hyped as unfair and

disastrous to the economy. The fact is that GE did not owe any taxes because one of its subsidiaries, GE Capital, suffered extensive losses during the recent financial crisis. Writing such losses off is perfectly legal according to current laws, though I am not one to argue that the US tax laws do not need to be revised in terms of their structure and various loopholes. In his [Newsweek column](#) (issue of April 11, 2011), Robert Samuelson argues that corporate taxes must be lowered, rather than raised. The correct reaction, in his view, is to raise capital gain taxes, currently capped at 15%. Every time the latter action is proposed, the fat cats cry out that it would hurt the average-Joe investor. In fact, according to Samuelson, 2/3 of all capital gains and dividends go to the wealthiest 1%. It is ridiculous to tax income gained from employment and business creation at the top rate of 35%, while rewarding passive investment by taxing its income at less than half that rate.

By the way, you might find it instructive to examine a table of the [top marginal tax rate](#) in the US from 1913 to present. Historically, the rate has gone up and down multiple times: It was at its minimum of 7% during 1913-15, reached its peak of 94% during 1944-45, and has stayed at 35% since 2003. It is difficult to discern a direct relationship between US prosperity and the top rate, so the argument that raising the top rate, or any tax rate, for that matter, would irreparably damage the US economy is quite absurd.

2011/04/10 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) This very simple [card trick](#) should amuse you for a few minutes. You pick one of six face cards displayed (you just think of it, not point to it or otherwise identify it) and the computer removes it from the set by reading your mind.

(2) According to Newsweek, "The world's smart-phone giants are suing each other like mad, charging their competitors with stealing their patents." See an informative [graphical representation](#) that shows who is suing whom. Needless to say that the litigation costs will be eventually passed on to us consumers.

(3) The Economic Impact of Social Media: Writing in [Time magazine](#), issue of April 11, 2011, Zachary Karabell asks the question: "Social-media sites are all the rage, but what is the added value to our economy?" After presenting a number of arguments, he concludes by stating: "Like so many things these days, social media contribute to economic bifurcation. Dynamic companies are benefiting from these tools, even if the gains are tough to nail down in specific figures. Many individuals are benefiting too, using LinkedIn to find jobs and Groupon to find deals. But for now, the irony is that social media widen the social divide, making it even harder for the have-nots to navigate. They allow those with jobs to do them more effectively and companies that are profiting to profit more. But so far, they have done little to aid those who are being left behind. They are, in short, business as usual."

(4) Somehow, the World Does Not Feel as Sorry about Japan: [Time magazine](#) reports that in the first week after the quake/tsunami disaster, US donors gave \$105M to Japan, compared with \$275M for last year's Haiti quake and \$500M for Hurricane Katrina. That's the price of being an industrialized country, with an established relief system!

(5) You don't have to be a fan of classical music to enjoy this 6-minute virtuoso [violin performance](#) by a very poised little girl.

(6) Lobbyists for bankers have gone into overdrive trying to prevent legislation that would lower credit-card and debit-card swipe fees, currently averaging 1.14%. The Visa/Mastercard duopoly has for years conspired to keep the fees high and will fight this tooth and nail. Read more about this topic in Bill Saporito's column in [Time magazine](#), issue of April 4, 2011.

2011/04/09 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) This recently appointed [US State Department spokesperson](#) is fluent in Persian (judging from his vocabulary and extensive use of idioms) but has a very hard time with pronunciation. I could not find the English spelling of his name (Alan Ayer?). Quite interesting!

(2) This [wedding invitation](#) (written in Persian, with a good dose of Arabic, such as the wedding day specified as "yom-ol-joma'a") invites men and women to attend separate ceremonies, held in the morning and afternoon, during which food and "halaal" beverages will be served. There will be no music, but applause, "beshkan," and making bird sounds are not prohibited.

2011/04/08 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) If you think traffic is bad in Tehran or Mexico City, watch this [clip from India](#). Warning: Watch only if you do not have any heart problems!

(2) This "Milkshake" [dance routine](#) from "Date Movie" is upbeat and quite funny.

(3) Persian literature: Here is the full text of Sadeqh Hedayat's 66-page book "Toop-e Movaari" ("The Pearl Cannon") in Persian ([PDF file](#)). I have placed the book on my "to read" list and will pursue it once I am done with several partially read books. Take a look at pages 8-9 to get a flavor of his writing in this book. An English [plot summary](#) of this book is available, but, of course, much of the book's attraction is in its style of Persian writing, which is lost in translation.

2011/04/07 (Thu.): Here are two items on Persian music.

- (1) Elaheh sings "[Jaan-e Man Agar Nayaaee](#)": An old song that still sounds fresh.
- (2) Ali Morshedi sings "[Ma'loom-e,](#)" a new Persian song that is reminiscent of old classics.

2011/04/06 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Dangers of nuclear energy are featured in two *New York Times* stories. The massive leak of radioactive waste from Japan's [Fukushima nuclear power plant](#) has been plugged for now, but there are still issues to be addressed with regard to the contamination that did occur. [Another article](#), entitled "At U.S. Nuclear Sites, Preparing for the Unlikely," outlines safety programs at US nuclear power plants, including the one at Diablo Canyon, on California's central coast.
- (2) A [propaganda film](#), produced by a private group and widely distributed on CDs, maintains that Imam Zaman's emergence is eminent, and that Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Nasrallah (the Hezbollah leader) are his deputies, as named in religious text. The film has generated a great deal of controversy and has intensified the discord among the ruling clergy, many of whom disagree with the said characterizations.

2011/04/05 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Earthquake: Watch this [short video clip](#) to find out what happens to pool water during a strong earthquake, like the recent one in Japan. This particular example isn't from Japan but from Mexicali's 7.2 quake, which was much weaker by comparison.
- (2) Ha-ha cities in the US: A study sponsored by [The Daily Beast](#) ranks the funniest places in the US using data about sitcom viewership, visits to comedy clubs, self-assessments, and more. Here are the top 10 cities: Austin, New Orleans, Waco, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Philadelphia, Tallahassee. Notice the absence of any city on the West Coast; none appears in the top 30 either!
- (3) Economic downturn in the US: Rana Foroohar, writing in [Time magazine](#) (issue of April 4, 2011), points to the migration of talent from engineering and business schools to Wall Street as a main cause of economic decline in the US. She observes that the attraction of highly talented individuals to Wall Street not only did not do the financial sector any good, it also deprived manufacturing and high-tech sectors of much needed innovation and the attendant job growth.

2011/04/04 (Mon.): Here are three musical items of potential interest.

- (1) Choreographer-in-training: Baby emulates Beyonce's [dance moves](#) from TV screen.
- (2) Bollywood's new face: If you have not seen a recent Bollywood song-and-dance routine, you may be surprised by this video clip: no trees or lamp posts to hide behind or spin around, some rap segments, and actual kisses (on the cheek, of course, as opposed to the girl pulling away at the last minute, when the boy tries to kiss her). As an added bonus, the beautiful actress, Maryam Zakaria, featured in the [video clip](#) is Iranian-born. Here is the [Iranian.com link](#) that also gives you a photo of the actress.
- (3) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi's [performance of "Romina"](#) by Javad Maroufi.

2011/04/03 (Sun.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Skillful landing or a hoax? Sunbather captures on [video](#) what appears to be a very skillful emergency water landing on the beach. When I posted this on Facebook, a friend suggested that the video may be a hoax. My immediate reaction was that the clip is genuine, given the accuracy of the plane's shadow as it passes over the white building and the realistic water waves generated upon impact. I did a Google search and also looked up Snopes.com to no avail. Finally, I noticed one of the comments posted under the clip in which someone suggested that people look at the full video on YouTube. The full [1:02-minute video](#) has 26 seconds extra showing what happens after the end of the original clip. I don't know what to make of this: it could be a stunt that actually took place, but not due to an in-flight emergency, or just clever video editing. Judge for yourself!
- (2) Quoting Jay Leno (comedian): "Republican Congressman Tom Marino, who is on the Foreign Affairs Committee, said: 'If we go into Libya, where does it stop? Do we go into Africa next?' So, you see why he's not on the Intelligence Committee."

2011/04/02 (Sat.): Today is the 13th day of Farvardian (the first month of spring on the Persian calendar), a day traditionally spent outdoors, admiring nature's beauty and celebrating with music and dance. In honor of "Sizdeh Bedar," here is a lively medley of Iranian [dance music](#), from different regions of the country, and another one, containing modern versions of a number of popular [Persian dance songs](#). When I posted the first of these clips on Facebook, a friend inquired why only men were dancing. I acknowledged her point and stated that it is perhaps a Persian/Islamic cultural thing. I recall a friend posting on Facebook a beautiful street dance routine by a little girl (7-8 years old) which was unfortunately being watched only by adult men. Someone made a similar comment there: why only men among the spectators? Paradoxically, the same men

enjoying the dance routine by the little girl would be enraged if their own daughters were performing.

2011/04/01 (Fri.): The Puzzle of US-Pakistani Relations: Riedel, Bruce, *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad*, Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

The United States has had a difficult relationship with Pakistan, ever since that country, which takes its name from the initials of the areas of Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sindh, and the ending of Baluchistan (the eastern province of Bengal was somehow overlooked in the naming exercise, causing a great deal of the trouble that ensued), was formed in 1947. The British-educated Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, was not religious at all. In fact, he was known to be a bon vivant, enjoying fashionable Western-style suits (of which he owned many dozens) with silk ties. However, because Pakistan was formed as an Islamic country during the two-state partition under British rule, Islamic fundamentalism gradually crept into its culture and afflicted many of its institutions, including its armed forces and security service, which continue to covertly support (and, by some accounts, even train) the Taliban and other extremist groups. Many of Pakistan's actions, including its pursuit of nuclear weapons, are informed by its hatred for, and distrust of, India. The two countries have fought several wars and have gone to the brink of a nuclear confrontation on at least a couple of occasions. Yet polls in that country indicate that Pakistanis deem the US a bigger evil than India. According to the author: "It is one of the many paradoxes of Pakistan's history that the most liberal and enlightened of its leaders, Benazir Bhutto, would be the one to help midwife the Taliban, an action that would ultimately lead to her assassination" [p. 37]. This is a highly informative and eye-opening book about Pakistan and its neighboring countries, written by someone who was intimately involved in shaping US policies in that region of the world. As the second most populous Islamic country, which may become the largest if the current birth rates persist, the future of Pakistan is of utmost importance to the United States. The author presents a number of suggestions for how to deal with Pakistan to prevent that country from becoming the first extremist-controlled Islamic state with nuclear weapons.

In this [10-minute video](#), the author provides a brief introduction to his book.

2011/03/31 (Thu.): Today's five items are about music.

(1) On the occasion of Shahrzad Rohani's first ever London concert, BBC presents a profile of this Iranian musician in a [44-minute video](#). His daughter (and student) Sara sings in minute 21 of the video.

(2) The Eendo group performs "[Eshgh-e Aasemaani](#)," a Persian song from their debut album "Bord o Baakht." Refreshing in its humor and jazzy rendition.

(3) Hooman Tabrizi's solo piano performance of "[Emshab Shab-e Mahtaab-e](#)" ("Tonight is a Moonlit Night"), a very popular Persian oldie.

(4) Dariush and Faramarz Aslani perform "[Ay Eshgh](#)," an old Persian song composed by Davood Behboudi, with lyrics by Ardalan Sarfaraz.

(5) Aaron Wilburn makes fun of country song titles, and follows up by performing the [hilarious song](#) "If My Nose Was Running Money."

2011/03/30 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Documentary Film "Inside Job": I finally got to watch this Oscar winner by Charles Ferguson. The film has an interesting [Web site](#), with a study guide, a press kit, and the following quip: "The film that cost over \$20,000,000,000,000 to make." Matt Damon narrates. Here is an interesting quote from Andrew Sheng (Chinese economist, interviewed in the film): "Why should a financial engineer be paid four times to 100 times more than a real engineer? A real engineer builds bridges. A financial engineer builds dreams. And, you know, when those dreams turn out to be nightmares, other people pay for it."

(2) Video of the Tsunami in Japan: This [new video](#) provides a better view of how the sea walls were inadequate to stop the flow of water inland. Other than cars floating like children's bath toys, as also seen in previous videos, this one shows large buildings crumbling or being washed away.

(3) Employment, Good News and Bad News: According to a report in [USA Today](#), Silicon Valley companies are hiring tech talent at an unprecedented rate, luring candidates with iPads and workplace perks. Around 140,000 new jobs are expected by the end of the year. Meanwhile, ABC World News reported on March 29th that women earn 77 cents for each dollar earned by men in identical jobs, indicating little or no progress on the gender equity front.

2011/03/29 (Tue.): Marton, Kati, *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World*, unabridged audiobook read by Anna Fields, Tantor Media, 2006.

This book tells the story of nine Hungarian Jews, who were considered outsiders in their own country, as well as in the West, where they moved to flee fascism and anti-Semitism. All nine men emerged from the same Hungarian schools, developed within Budapest's thriving and highly nurturing cafe culture, went on to become

world-famous, and contributed significantly to the arts and sciences. The scientists Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner, and Leo Szilard (who later became a passionate anti-bomb advocate), along with mathematician John von Neumann, played important roles in pushing Albert Einstein toward the development of the atomic bomb through convincing President Franklin Roosevelt that any delays in this regard would cause Germany to beat the US to the bomb. John von Neumann also founded the important field known today as "game theory." Robert Capa (well-known for his war photos) and Andre Kertesz thrived as photojournalists. Alexander Korda and Michael Curtiz succeeded in cinema; the former is credited with saving the British film industry and the latter went on to direct the now classic "Casablanca." The ninth member of the group, Arthur Koestler, wrote the influential novel "Darkness at Noon" about the horrors of communism under Stalin. The author, who herself fled Hungary as a child, does an excellent job of exposing the men's struggles, fears, limitations, accomplishments, camaraderie, and competition.

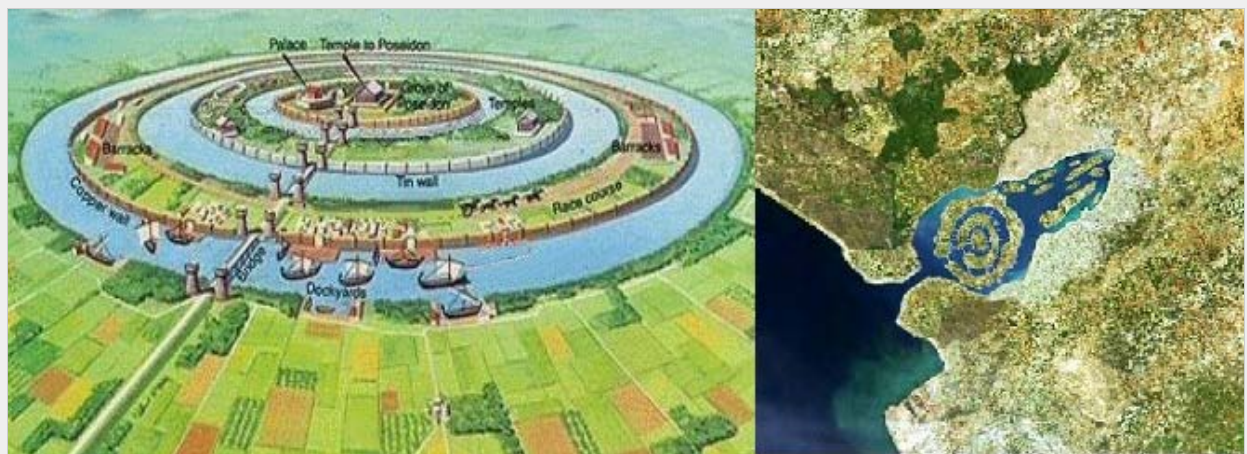
2011/03/28 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest about technology and modern life.

(1) Useful Windows 7 Tips: If you are a Windows 7 user, you will find this [one-page column](#) entitled "Making the Most of Windows" useful. I chanced upon this guide in the April 2011 issue of *The Costco Connection* (I know, you probably toss the issue as junk mail immediately upon receiving it, as I sometimes do).

(2) Academic Cheaters Might Be Fooling Themselves: A new study, published in *Proceedings of the (US) National Academy of Sciences* and described in [USA Today](#), shows that academic cheaters do not just hurt others but also themselves. It turns out that cheaters tend to deceive themselves into believing that their high scores are a sign of superior intelligence, thus setting themselves up for disappointment when the reality of life after school hits them.

(3) Airports as Hubs of Civilization: The magnificent Beijing Airport is featured in the [article](#) "Think of Your Airport as a City—But Nicer," by Pico Iyer (*Time*, issue of March 28, 2011, pp. 58-59). I happen to disagree with the article's thesis that in future, cities will be built around major airports, instead of the other way around. I believe that airports will gradually lose their importance as hubs of activities, such as conferences and other gatherings. With increased quality, leading to highly realistic video (perhaps in 3D) and audio, teleconferencing and other means of electronic communication will overshadow conference centers built in or around airports. I must say, however, that I was highly impressed by the beauty and cheerfulness of the Beijing Airport, depicted in the article.

(4) On Accumulating Possessions: For much of human history, people did not have many possessions. The trend toward accumulating possessions is fairly recent and may again disappear in future. The "green" approaches of sharing, renting, and lending of resources, be they residences, automobiles, or computing units, are expected to become dominant in the near future.



2011/03/27 (Sun.): A Tsunami in Ancient Times: The recent tsunami that devastated Japan has brought this natural disaster into our daily discussions, especially for those of us who live near a coastline and a nuclear power plant. In fact, tsunamis have been around for a very long time. The lost city of Atlantis was likely destroyed by a tsunami some 4000 years ago. Recent archeological findings on the western coast of Spain have shed light on the incident and the fate of its inhabitants who fled inland, where they resettled and were absorbed back into the local culture. The image on the right shows a CGI of concentric circles on the coast of Spain, which matches Plato's description of the city as having such a structure (rendered in the image on the left). The [Newsweek article](#) "Swallowed by the Sea," by Simon Winchester, issue of March 28 & April 4, 2011, contains more detail.

2011/03/26 (Sat.): Here are two technology-related items of potential interest.

(1) What is a Memristor? Laws of electromagnetism, that connect the quantities of current (i), voltage (v), charge (q), and magnetic flux (ϕ), have been around since the 1800s; these pairwise relationships are shown in the unshaded boxes of the accompanying figure. In a visionary paper, published in 1971, Leon Chua hypothesized that symmetry dictates the existence of a relationship between q and ϕ and named the pertinent constant of proportionality "memristance" (see the shaded box in the figure).

i (Current)	v (Voltage)	ϕ (Flux)	
$i = dq/dt$	$q = C v$	$\phi = M q$	q (Charge)
$R = \text{Resistance}$ $C = \text{Capacitance}$ $L = \text{Inductance}$ $M = \text{Memristance}$	$v = R i$	$\phi = L i$	i (Current)
		$v = d\phi/dt$	v (Voltage)

However, unlike resistors, capacitors, and inductors, nobody (including Chua himself) knew how to build a memristor, so the matter lay dormant until 2008, when a research team at HP Labs announced the development of such an element based on a thin film of titanium dioxide. This discovery has opened up entire new areas of investigation, which may lead to faster, smaller, and more energy-efficient digital circuits in future. For details, see the highly readable *American Scientist* [column by Brian Hayes](#) (Vol. 99, No. 2, pp. 106-110, March-April 2011).

(2) Formulatic TV Commercial for Cloud Computing: David A. Grier, writing in his March 2011 column in *IEEE Computer*, makes the following interesting observation about TV commercials: "TV commercials often take the form of a parable. Such stories have three parts. The first section describes a problem that is caused by the lack of wisdom. The second offers moral instruction and asks us to trust the providers of this instruction. The last part offers a vision of heaven, the reward for trusting the instruction." Grier then shows how this formula was used in a recent commercial for cloud computing: first we see a grumpy, stressed-out mother, with too much on her plate; then a visiting neighbor brings in the news of the cloud; finally, the newly organized and cheerful family is shown visiting a theme park!

2011/03/25 (Fri.): Here are four musical items of potential interest.

(1) Music and Lyrics: I was delighted to discover the [lyricstube](#) Web site, which offers many songs with lyrics, an all-time top-100 list, and much more. I have enjoyed it a lot so far and wish someone would create a similar index for Persian music.

(2) Persian music: This [6-minute video](#), featuring Mohsen Namjoo and Golshifteh Farahani, is at the same time nonsensical and engrossing. It is entitled "Hamash Delam Migireh" ("My Heart is Always Heavy").

(3) Persian music: A youth band, from Nejad Music School, performs "[Gol Oomad Bahaar Oomad](#)" ("Flowers and Spring Are Here") and has lots of fun in the process.

(4) Persian solo piano: This [57-minute video](#) shows a solo piano concert by Guiv Ghalamkaripour, a young man born to an Iranian father and a Belgian mother. You may want to skip the first 5 minutes of the video, containing the introductions (especially since they are barely audible).

2011/03/24 (Thu.): Here are three technology-related stories of potential interest.

(1) The Web's Long-Term Memory Problem: Future archeologists will have no tablets to dig up to learn about human civilization in the 21st Century. Much of our culture is now in digital form, information that can perish into thin air if not properly preserved. An article in *IEEE Spectrum*, entitled "A Memory of Webs Past" (Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 30-37, March 2011), overviews the efforts that are underway to preserve snapshots of the Web for future historians. France's National Library, for example, meticulously tracks important content in the ".fr" domain and stores snapshots on storage servers it has built for just this purpose. Many archives such as the above are "dark" (i.e., not publicly accessible), because there are still a lot of copyright issues to be addressed. Newspapers, for instance, charge readers hefty sums to provide access to their archives, and they would not like it at all if their back issues were made available for free. In the US, the nonprofit Internet Archives (which offers the Wayback Machine for taking a peek into the Internet of the year 2005, say) has not run into any serious copyright issues yet. The Archive will remove a site from its record at the owner's request, but it seems that few are asking for such an action.

(2) Everything about You Is Being Tracked: Having your personal data and on-line presence tracked is a fact of life in this digital age, so get over it! This is the theme of a [cover feature](#) in *Time*, issue of March 21, 2011. I strongly suggest that you read this highly informative article that both puts your mind at ease (most of the tracking is commercially motivated and will cause you no harm, beyond exposure to some annoying ads) and suggests practical ways of protecting yourself (against the few who might do the tracking with evil intents). For example, I learned from this article that there is a freely downloadable browser extension, Ghostery, that lets you watch the watchers watching your on-line activities.

(3) California's Nuclear Power Plants: Although no energy technology is completely safe, the following facts about California's two nuclear power plants should help put the minds of our state's residents at ease. The plant at Diablo Canyon sits 85 feet above the ocean level, well beyond the reach of any expected tsunami in that

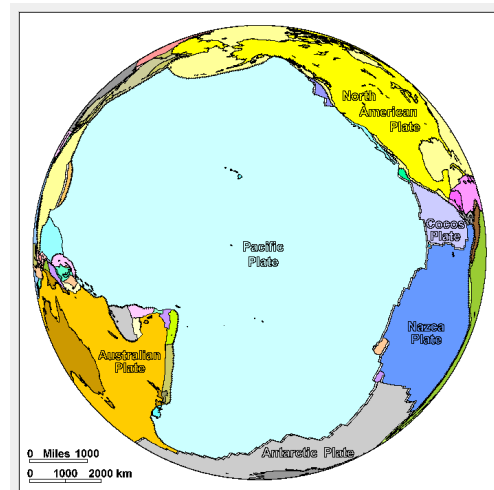
area. The plant at San Onofre is 50 feet above ocean level and is protected by a 30-foot tsunami wall. Both sites have cooling water stored at higher elevation, which would need no power to reach the plants; gravity will take care of that. For details, see the article "How to Save California," by Sharon Begley and Andrew Murr, in [Newsweek](#), issue of March 28 & April 4, 2011.

2011/03/23 (Wed.): Here are stories about two vastly different conservatives in the US political arena.

(1) A Conservative I Like: Before being killed by my liberal friends, let me explain why I like the conservative commentator, David Brooks. Unlike many of his peers, Brooks is calm and collected, never vilifies those who disagree with him, and does not use incendiary language. He believes that what ails the United States today is that people with opposing viewpoints issue statements, rather than talk to each other; that is, we have a series of monologues, where we should have an ongoing dialogue. I am looking forward to the opportunity of reading Brooks' new book, *The Social Animal*, about research from various disciplines confirming that human beings' decision making is primarily emotional, rather than rational.

(2) Enema Man and Snoopy Snoopy Poop Dogg: Conservatives and liberals continue to shout and throw mud at each other, making it increasingly difficult for the US to converge on practical solutions to what appears to be a steady decline in economic and social conditions. The latest in this series of political, ethno-class, and generational insults comes from the former Wyoming Senator, Alan Simpson, during a totally unrelated discussion on Social Security, when he berated our younger generation as those who are "listening to the Enema Man and Snoopy Snoopy Poop Dogg."

2011/03/22 (Tue.): The Scariest Earthquake Is Yet to Come: I don't mean to scare Californians, but the article by Simon Winchester (writing in [Newsweek](#), issue of March 21, 2011), makes a lot of sense. He observes that three major events relating to the Pacific Plate have occurred over the past year. The recent 8.9 quake in Japan, last month's New Zealand quake, and last year's tremor in Chile were at the three corners of the Pacific Plate, which has California's San Andreas Fault at its fourth corner. Stress has been slowly building under this fault since the 1906 San Francisco quake and the three incidents cited above can serve as triggering events for a major quake in California. Triggering events being separated by several years from a resulting quake is not at all unusual. Earthquakes are more like digital signals than analog ones. Trigger events don't necessarily cause immediate movements but help build up pressure, until one day the fault "snaps" (pressure forces overcome friction), and boom, we have an earthquake. This is why there is hope for being able to predict qakes by somehow measuring the built-up pressure. Japanese scientists are already able to issue warnings seconds to tens of seconds before an actual quake.



2011/03/21 (Mon.): Beautiful traditional Persian music ([12-minute video](#)) by the Shams Ensemble, entitled "Liberation—Rumi Songs," featuring music by Sohrab Pournazari, santoor solo by Hamidreza Taghavi, and drum solos by Shahab Parnaj, Robin Vassy, and Hossein Rezaeenia.

2011/03/20 (Sun.): My theme today is Norooz, the celebration of an ancient holiday at the start of the Persian new year (Spring Equinox).

(1) Iran, Norooz: Each year for more than a decade, I have composed a cheerful poem to celebrate Norooz, along with its gifts of renewal and hope. You can read this new poem, as well as most of my previous Norooz poems, on my [poetry page](#). I have also posted this poem as a [blog entry](#) on Iranian.com.

(2) President Obama's [Norooz message](#), in which he recites a poem by Simin Behbahani.

(3) Khamenei's [Norooz messagee](#), in which Iran's Supreme Leader repeats a claim that by now has been fully discredited: that Iran, with 1% of the world's population, had an 11% share in producing science over the past year. This figure is based on publication quantity, rather than any quality metric, such as citations. The count includes plagiarized papers, multiple publications from the same results, and papers in pay-to-publish journals, where Iran and several Arab countries publish heavily. Such grandiose and questionable claims stem from insecurity and are hallmarks of dictatorial regimes. It is also part of the human psyche to want to be the "best." For example, there is this eye doctor in our state whose ads declare him to be the most experienced laser surgeon in California, between Los Angeles and the Bay Area (i.e., among small towns and farmlands).

2011/03/19 (Sat.): Ameriquest commercials with the theme "Don't Judge Too Quickly" are quite funny. This [video](#) puts together five different 30-second spots. There is another version of this video with eight spots, including some that are R-rated.

2011/03/18 (Fri.): Nuclear energy safety concerns: The earthquake/tsunami in Japan, and the ensuing emergency in nuclear power plants, have generated an emotional, fear-based reaction to nuclear power generation in the US. Some have gone as far as urging President Obama to reverse his support of nuclear energy. The safety of nuclear power should be viewed through the entire production cycle. People have died in various accidents (explosions and the like) in coal-burning power plants, but because these occur in many small-scale incidents, they seem benign by comparison. And don't forget that way more people have died in coal mine accidents than from nuclear meltdowns. And this does not yet include the long-term health risks of burning coal for our energy needs. Similarly, petrochemical plants, which no one seems to find objectionable, have been responsible for more deaths than nuclear power plants. An apt analogy is traffic accidents versus airplane crashes. Many, many more people die in single- and multiple-car crashes, but because these deaths involve 1-5 people in most cases, they go unnoticed. The crash of an airliner, in which hundreds of passengers may die, is sensationalized, even though air travel is much safer than driving. One must keep things in perspective. Unfortunately, the entire energy debate has been distorted by big money promoting or knocking particular solutions. Oil companies are elated by the anti-nuclear movement, solar-cell technology companies oppose wind power, and so on. There are unanswered (not unanswerable, but unanswered) questions about all energy forms. Nuclear: waste disposal, safety during natural or man-made disasters. Solar: manufacturing of solar cells is energy intensive and the cells have limited lifetimes, needing periodic replacement; materials for solar cells are also in short supply. Wind: cannot be relied on (due to changing wind conditions), unless large-capacity batteries to store excess energy at times of high wind are also deployed, but battery production is both energy intensive and yields hazardous waste. Fossil fuels: what happens after the current supply, which took millions of years to take shape, is exhausted in a few decades? Hydroelectric: We are already removing previously built dams, because of their adverse environmental impacts; using tides and other ocean movements is still an iffy proposition.

2011/03/17 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Humorous takes on housework — Ann Gibbons: "Nature abhors a vacuum. And so do I." Phyllis Diller: "Cleaning your house while your kids are still growing is like shoveling the walk before it stops snowing." Joan Rivers: "I hate housework. You make the beds, you wash the dishes and six months later you have to start all over again."

(2) A disturbing [48-minute report](#) about Muslim schools in the UK and how their public statements about what they teach (respect, tolerance) have nothing to do with their actual programs. Hateful speeches, physical punishment, and insults at other religions are caught on hidden cameras.

(3) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi plays an [improvised piece](#) for Norooz.

(4) Persian love song for the digital age: [Kiosk performs "Eshgh va Marg dar Donyaa-ye Majaazi"](#) ("Love and Death in the Virtual World").

2011/03/16 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest about recent events in Japan.

(1) Finally some [good news](#) out of Japan: Radiation levels at the damaged nuclear power plants have started going down and a nuclear meltdown is now less likely. While it is too early to celebrate, this is a welcome development after several days of increasingly grim news.

(2) Some quick facts about tsunamis: What makes a tsunami formidable is the volume of water that flows onshore. A mere tall wave can't do as much damage, because its width is a few meters at most. A tsunami wave is mere centimeters in height, but potentially hundreds of kilometers in width (it has a long wavelength), when it is in the middle of the ocean. A tsunami travels at close to airplane speed, but because of the wide wavelength, the crest and the following low point can be separated by tens of minutes, making it impossible for a ship to detect it. As it reaches shallow waters near the beach, the tsunami wave compresses, with its height becoming significant and its width still potentially measured in kilometers. No drainage system can accommodate this amount of water. Sea walls are effective if they are tall enough, but once overrun, they are of little help. Wikipedia has a nice [article on tsunami](#), which includes a couple of animated images showing the concepts above.

2011/03/15 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Interactive before/after [satellite images](#) of Japan provide a very good perspective of the extent of devastation. Images that contain shorelines, show how they have been shifted and reshaped by the tsunami. Dragging the boundary line, initially in the middle, or clicking anywhere on the image, allows you to see more of the before or after image.

(2) The next step for Japan: After rescue efforts and disaster relief, it will be time for engineers to go back to their proverbial drawing boards and consider the implications of the recent quake/tsunami on building codes, effectiveness of sea walls that line 40% of Japan's 22,000-mile coastline, and protection mechanisms for nuclear power plants. The *New York Times* offers a detailed look at sea walls.

(3) New York City's new skyline: With 1 World Trade Center (Freedom Tower) scheduled to open in 2013, New York City's new skyline is slowly taking shape. WSJ.com posts a [video](#) of how the World Trade Center will look like in future.

2011/03/14 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Today is 3/14. Happy Pi Day!

(2) Japan quake/tsunami: Some very interesting [film footage](#) showing how the tsunami devastated large areas of Japan rather quickly. You have likely seen some of these scenes in the news coverage, but many parts were new to me. Here is an interesting collection of [photos](#).

(3) Young poetess harassed: If true, this is a new low point for the Islamic regime in Iran and one that might be the proverbial last nail in its coffin. According to the "[Jahan-e Zan](#)" (Woman's World) Persian Web site, Hila Sedighi, the young poetess with some very sharp and direct words against dictatorship, brutality, and oppression, has been summoned, and her home searched, by Sepah Pasdaran's information agency. Many of Hila's poems are available on [YouTube](#).

(4) Persian music: Hamoon and Ramtin perform a lively [Persian new year song](#). Less than a week left to "saal tahveel" (Sunday, March 20, 16:20:45 PDT). Let the countdown to Norooz begin! Note that some Web sites indicate "saal tahveel" at 3:20:45 LA time, but they likely have not accounted for daylight saving time. *Disclaimer:* I have no idea about the significance of the way the two signers are dressed or why a "Haaji Firooz" (a racist tradition, in my view) is necessary. I just liked the song.

(5) Humor: Browsing a *New Yorker* book of cartoons, two with the following captions caught my attention. Noah's wife to him: "I know we have to cut costs, but is bringing only one of each a good idea?" God, bible in hand, pondering: "Oh shoot—how could I have forgotten to tell them about the dinosaurs?"

2011/03/13 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Fareed Zakaria GPS Special on CNN: I am looking forward to watching Fareed Zakaria's GPS special "Restoring the American Dream: Getting Back to No. 1." Last night's planned showing on CNN was preempted by the continuing coverage of the Japan quake/tsunami. I learned about this program from a [Time magazine](#) article (issue of March 14, 2011) in which Zakaria offers a number of very insightful observations. For example: "American politics is now hyperresponsive to constituents' interests. And all those interests are dedicated to preserving the past rather than investing for the future. There are no lobbying groups for the next generation of industries, only for those companies that are here now with cash to spend. There are no special-interest groups for our children's economic well-being, only for people who get government benefits right now. The whole system is geared to preserve current subsidies, tax breaks and loopholes. That is why the federal government spends \$4 on elderly people for every \$1 it spends on those under 18. And when the time comes to make cuts, guess whose programs are first on the chopping board. That is a terrible sign of a society's priorities and outlook."

Note: Check out Legatum Institute's Prosperity Index on a [map of the world](#) that names the 10 countries currently heading the index and color-codes the rest.

(2) Iranian director: Abbas Kiarostami's European film, "Certified Copy," starring Juliette Binoche, is number 4 among *Entertainment Weekly's* "The MustList" of recommended entertainment in the issue of March 18, 2011.

(3) Monsterous Eel Snatches Poodle: Right! A widely circulated [video](#) shows what appears to be a giant eel, rising out the water and snatching a dog standing next to a woman. I could not find this video listed on Snopes.com, which is the first place I check to identify hoaxes. However, my own Sherlock Holmes curiosity led to the conclusion that it is definitely a hoax. The giant eel appears for only 3 seconds on screen (seconds 11-13 in the clip). During second 11, it looks like a playful dolphin or whale, which may have been present in the original video. The film has been modified during seconds 12-13 (only 2 seconds of video). Dogs are very sensitive to motion and noise, but when I pause the video several times on second 12 and then on 13, I see that this particular dog does not move at all. Even after it has been snatched and is in the eel's mouth, the dog does not struggle, as expected. According to Wikipedia, the largest eels are 4m long (this is for the slender variety; the heavy ones are somewhat shorter): one more indication the video is a hoax.

2011/03/12 (Sat.): Will boycotting some suppliers ease gas prices? Every time the price of gas spikes at the pumps, an e-mail message that has been around in multiple forms for several years, begins making the rounds. The message suggests that boycotting Exxon/Mobil would lead to reduced gas prices, because that company will be left with a lot of unsold gas, forcing it to reduce prices; the other suppliers will then follow suit. I know

people who share this story have good intentions, but unfortunately, this proposal has been around for a while and economists agree that it won't work. Even worse, it will lead to increased prices, because we will be buying the "bad guys" (the ones we bycott) products via intermediaries who buy the surplus production and sell it to the "good guys" (the ones we don't bycott). It is a hallmark of hoaxes that they are quite vague about who said what, so as to avoid fact checking on the Internet. Thus, you find references to "a Coca Cola executive" or "a Halliburton executive" having come up with or endorsed the proposal. I first saw this e-mail a couple of years ago. My first reaction was suspicion, because I thought to myself "what if this is a ploy by Shell or another company to take advantage of the situation and grab some market share from a competitor." So I went to Snopes.com, which has a huge catalog of hoxes, and sure enough I found that the message is a hoax.

2011/03/11 (Fri.): Japan quake/tsunami: I went to the beach, right next to the UCSB campus, around 8:20 this morning to watch the expected waves from Japan's quake-induced tsunami as they arrive here. There was nothing to see, but the water level was a bit higher than normal during low tide. Fortunately, in the UCSB area, we are safe from tsunamis. The bluffs are some 20-30 feet above the ocean level and the largest tsunami waves that can ever come this way are said to be in the 10-15 foot range. The accompanying image shows a residential area in Japan about to be washed away. A collection of [30 images](#) show the



devastation caused by yesterday's quake and tsunami. Upward of 1000 people are feared dead. The same event in any other country would have caused even greater carnage. The Japanese and their country's infrastructure are remarkably well-prepared for earthquakes.

2011/03/10 (Thu.): A major 8.9 offshore earthquake, the strongest to hit Japan in 1200 years, and the ensuing 13-meter tsunami devastated parts of Japan near midnight (afternoon of 3/11 Japan time). CNN's coverage included live video of a huge wave as it moved inland, taking with it everything. Boats, cars, and even houses were floating like a bunch of plastic toys in a bathtub.

2011/03/09 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Real interview, or a joke: This "[radio interview](#)" with an Azeri Iranian about the role of women and characteristics of an ideal wife may have been made up as a joke, but it is not far from the real opinions of many of our countrymen.

(2) India's Got Talent: [Indian dance](#), with a hula hoop.

(3) International Women's Day, revisited: Even though the Interntional Women's Day is behind us, I cant resist posting this clip which I just came across. In an [interview](#) with Barbara Walters, the Western-educated Shah states that while there are exceptions, women are on average less intelligent than men. Go figure! Pay attention to his awkward pauses as he struggles to reconcile his inner beliefs with what would constitute a politically correct response, totally giving up at the end. Also, look at Empress Farah's wry smile right next to him. This is what I meant when I said earlier that the road from patriarchy to true democracy in Iran is a long one. If an empress cannot speak her mind freely next to her husband, then ...

Note: I don't like the slogans at the end of the interview clip, but had to live with them, because I could not find another version of the clip without them. This is by no means the only video where the Shah's lack of belief in women's abilities surfaces. In a [Women's-Day speech](#), the Shah, instead of talking mostly about women and their achievements, sings the praises of his father and himself and disses his enemies.

2011/03/08 (Tue.): Celebrating the International Women's Day, 1911-2011

I post this note on the 100th anniversary of the International Women's Day, having listened to a rousing and eloquent speech by Mina Ahadi, who, unfortunately, slams those, including other women, who have advocated a step-by-step approach to solving Iran's women's rights problems. It is extremely disheartening to see factions of the Iranian opposition attacking each other, despite ample evidence that even complete unity may be inadequate to topple the current regime. A prime example is increased attacks on Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Peace Laureate lawyer and women's/civil rights activist, because of her stand that Islam is not incompatible with women's rights. [See the note at the end of this post.]

As a non-Muslim, I am not one to argue that Islam in fact respects women unconditionally and grants them

equality; this is an issue for Muslims to address. However, I do not see why the seemingly rigid religious edicts cannot be finessed, as has been done for decades in certain Islamic societies that have had female elected political leaders. There are clerics and lay believers who would have no problem with Western-style civil rights and equality of the sexes in Iran.

The roots of patriarchy are deep and it is difficult to envisage their complete removal with a secular constitution or any other document on paper. Moving from patriarchy to true democracy is a worthy goal to pursue. Meanwhile, the undeniable reality is that a great majority of Iranians have deeply rooted religious beliefs, whether we like it or not. It is extremely foolish to alienate the educated and open-minded people in this group, just because we don't completely see eye to eye.

I am familiar with the standard response to the views above: As a man, it is easy for you to take such a position, because you are a beneficiary of the current state of affairs. I have no good response to this criticism, because there is a lot of truth to it. However, again, our women cannot afford to alienate Iranian men, just because they don't agree 100%.

Secular Iranians (a group fragmented into royalists, leftists, humanists, and so on) constitute a minority that cannot lead the country without help from other factions. Much of Iran does not want a return to the days when a small minority of intellectuals, no matter how well-intentioned, decided the fate of the entire country. We should learn to live with one another and exercise tolerance to our fellow Iranians, if we want tolerance to be shown toward us. For example, if we hate capital punishment when our friends are the victims, we cannot call for the heads of our antagonists once the forces of freedom have prevailed.

Addendum: New article by Shirin Ebadi: "The Riskiest Job in Iran," [The Guardian](#), March 7, 2011.

Disclosure: I recently reviewed Shirin Ebadi's book (written with Azadeh Moaveni), *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*, finding it a good read, despite the inescapable self-serving statements one finds in any autobiography. See my blog entry for 2011/02/15.

Note: A version of this note, under the heading "Shirin Ebadi Is Not the Enemy," was posted last night as a blog entry on [Iranian.com](#). Someone commenting on my post was curious about what exactly Mina Ahadi had said about Shirin Ebadi. So, I added the following comment.

I listened to Mina Ahadi's speech from a Facebook post and, not succeeding in locating the video or the text of the speech in a more readily accessible source, decided against posting the link. Here it is for those who are interested and can access it: [Part 1](#); [Part 2](#). Five minutes into part 2, she criticizes Ebadi for saying that women's rights is not a political issue and also that Islam is not incompatible with women's rights.

2011/03/07 (Mon.): Here are a few items of potential interest about Persian music.

(1) Musical concerts in Tehran: Apparently, musical concerts are alive and kicking in Tehran. Today, I visited an on-line [tickets Web site](#) to see what they were offering and saw ads for three concerts within a span of 4 days (March 1-4): The Arian Group, The Shams Group featuring Alireza Ghorbani, and Benyamin. Each had multiple show times. The locations were the Milad Tower Auditorium and the Concert Hall at the International Exhibition Grounds. This was quite surprising to me.

(2) A very old Persian song: "[Vaay Che Entezaar Badeh](#)" by Ravaanbakhsh.

2011/03/06 (Sun.): Overrated Best-Picture Oscar Winners: The March 11, 2011, issue of *Entertainment Weekly* identifies 10 films as the most overrated best-picture Oscar winners. In brackets is the name of a much better film for that same year that did not win or was not even nominated.

1952: The Greatest Show on Earth [High Noon]

1956: Around the World in 80 Days [Giant]

1968: Oliver! [2001: A Space Odyssey]

1980: Ordinary People [Raging Bull]

1981: Chariots of Fire [Reds]

1990: Dances with Wolves [GoodFellas]

1994: Forrest Gump [Pulp Fiction]

1996: The English Patient [Fargo]

1999: American Beauty [Boys Don't Cry]

2005: Crash [Brokeback Mountain]

2011/03/05 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Women's rights, here in the US: A 13-year-old girl was taken into protective custody by child welfare authorities in San Bernardino (Southern California) when, 8 days after her disappearance on February 22, she was found hiding in a motel to escape an arranged marriage in Pakistan. It seems that a lot of work remains to be done on women's rights, even here in a very liberal state in an advanced industrial democracy. Happy International Women's Day on March 8!

(2) The linguistic genius of babies: Fascinating [13-minute TED talk](#) by Patricia Kuhl on children's language acquisition skills.

(3) Cheating in Japan's university entrance exams: According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), four prestigious universities (Kyoto, Waseda, Doshisha, Rikkyo) in Japan recently discovered that some questions in their entrance exams appeared on a Japanese Internet site while the exams were under way. The "smoking cell phone," which was later identified by law enforcement authorities, belonged to a 19-year-old who was promptly apprehended. This episode has led to broad investigations on what methods and devices were used to send out so many questions from the exam locations and how to prevent future occurrences. One might speculate that a team of exam takers was recruited for the universities' entrance exams, with each participant assigned a small number of questions to transmit out of the exam location as a text message.

2011/03/04 (Fri.): Here are two items in the current news about Germany.

(1) German Minister Resigns over Plagiarism Charges: According to [Time magazine](#), the 39-year-old political rising star, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Germany's defense minister, has resigned following charges that he had stolen large parts of his doctoral dissertation from other sources. Ironically, his enormous popularity was due to perceived honesty, honor, and conservative values.

(2) US Should Learn from Germany: According to Michael Schuman, writing in [Time magazine](#) (2011 March 7 issue), the United States can learn a thing or two from Germany, as far as fixing the economy is concerned. In the article entitled "How Germany Became the China of Europe," we learn that less than a decade ago, Germany faced chronic unemployment and dismal growth. Then, German companies poured money into R&D and cut expenses. Unions cooperated in reducing labor costs. Now, Germany has turned into "an export machine," and is the only industrialized country whose unemployment rate has dropped since the 2008 financial crisis. Here is the author's explanation: "While other Europeans were gorging on debt, giving themselves fat pay raises and building too many houses, Germans were fixing their economy."

2011/03/03 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest about philosophy, economics, and politics.

(1) Sage advice from Bertrand Russell in a [1959 BBC interview](#): His only words to future generations are "truth" (in forming opinions, use truth as the sole yardstick) and "tolerance" (do not demonize people who disagree with you).

(2) The Fox Guarding the Henhouse: I am looking forward to watching the Oscar-winning documentary feature "Inside Job," which is scheduled for DVD release on March 8. On a 2/28 NPR program, I heard an interview with the director, Charles Ferguson, who, among other things, described the cozy relationships of famous economists, including several affiliated with the Bush and Obama administrations, with Wall Street firms who paid them exuberant consulting fees and supported their research. No wonder their research results sang the praises of several of the risky "innovations" that were directly responsible for the 2008 financial meltdown. One of these economists, Columbia professor Fredric Mishkin, who had written at length about Iceland's innovative approach to finance (for which he was paid \$124,000 by Iceland's Chamber of Commerce), changed his CV after Iceland's financial collapse by modifying the title of a research report from "Financial Stability in Iceland" to "Financial Instability in Iceland." In an [interview segment](#) with the director, this researcher characterized the change as a typo! Indeed!

(3) Dictator's bribery: [Time magazine](#) reports that Saudi Arabia has allocated \$37B (about \$1500 per citizen) to a package of handouts to stave off the social unrest sweeping other regions of the Middle East.

2011/03/02 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest about music and art.

(1) Azeri music: A [techno-beat medley](#) of "Bari Baakh" and "Sakineh Dai Gizi." On the YouTube post of this video, a debate rages about whether the singer is Turkish or Iranian (Azeri).

(2) Persian music: A nice piece of music (no title listed) from the [Kuband Band](#) (aka the 40-daf group).

(3) Painting and photography: In case any of you received, as I did, a slide show purporting to depict photorealistic paintings by Anna Kostenko, it represents a hoax or a genuine mistake. It turns out that there is a photographer of the same name and the creator of the slide show distributed her work with the painter's bio attached. Anna the painter says that the person has not done either one of the Kostenkos a favor by propagating falsehoods. [Snopes.com](#) describes the mix-up and has the slide show available for viewing. Samples of the [painter's work](#) are also available online.

2011/03/01 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest in science and technology.

(1) An interesting mathematical clock face, in which each of the numbers 1-12 is formed by using precisely three 9s. I don't know where you can buy this particular clock. If interested, I suggest getting an inexpensive clock with a blank face (some craft stores sell them) and making your

own clock face with a felt-tip marker.

(2) Farewell to the Space Shuttle: After the April 19 mission of Endeavor, the Space Shuttle will be retired almost exactly 30 years after Columbia's first mission on April 12, 1981 (37 orbits in 2 days). Other highlights in the history of this NASA creation include:

1983: Sally Ride becomes the first woman in space;

1986: Challenger explodes after lift-off, killing 7 crew;

1990: Discovery launches the Hubble Space Telescope;

2003: Columbia explodes during re-entry, killing 7 crew.

(3) *Time magazine's* Feb. 21, 2011, issue has an interesting cover feature entitled "2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal." Immortality may come in one of two ways, or via a combination of both. One is preserving our bodies through the reversal of cell aging. It is known that "one cause of physical degeneration associated with aging involves telomeres ... Every time a cell divides, its telomeres get shorter, and once a cell runs out of telomeres, it can't reproduce anymore and dies. But there's an enzyme called telomerase that reverses this process. It's one of the reasons cancer cells live so long." Another way is to transfer our "souls" (thoughts, experiences, memories) to a more sturdy vessel, a robot if you will. The accelerating pace of change, when extrapolated, shows that computers will be "smarter" than humans in the near future, thus becoming capable of lifelike behavior, self-reproduction, and self-preservation.

(4) Wallets soon to become things of the past: A war is raging between credit-card and phone companies. "Three of the big four providers (AT&T, T-Mobil and Verizon—i.e., everyone except Sprint) have formed a joint venture ... to lead the U.S. payment industry from cards to mobile phones." Doug Aamoth, writing in *Time magazine*, issue of Feb. 21, 2011.

(5) Are media distractions hurting our kids? A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation report found that on average children ages 8-18 spend more than 7.5 hours per day using entertainment media. In another study, participants who did a lot of media multitasking performed worse than their peers on a test. Read the article "Wired for Distraction" in *Time magazine*.

2011/02/28 (Mon.): Here are six items from the worlds of entertainment and sports.

(1) The Academy Awards: My predictions for the main categories were: Colin Firth (actor), Annette Bening (actress), David Fincher (director), *The Social Network* (film). Only the first prediction came true, which isn't a record to boast about. Natalie Portman won as best actress, Tom Hooper as best director, and "The King's Speech" as best film.

(2) Best-film spoof: Jimmy Kimmel shows the trailer for a forthcoming Tyler Perry movie, "**The President's Speech**," an adaptation of the Oscar-winning "The King's Speech" for American audiences.

(3) What a beautiful smile! According to the Internet Movie Database, Golshifteh Farahani has three movies forthcoming in 2011. They are "Chicken with plum" (co-starring with Isabella Rossellini), "Si tu meurs, je te tue" (French), and "There be dragons" (seems to have a minor role in the last one).

(4) A very funny **hidden-camera prank**: Please do not try this in Iran, because the Basijis may not give you enough time to explain that it is a prank.

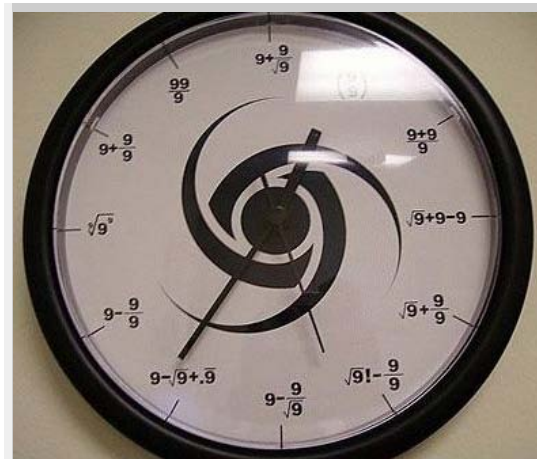
(5) Cheating in soccer: By hitting himself using an opposing player's arm, the player in red shirt takes **cheating in soccer** to a whole new level.

(6) Persian comedy: A **comedy routine** about the strange ways in which we use the Persian language. I have no idea how the picture that accompanies the soundtrack is related to it!

2011/02/27 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest from the worlds of politics and music.

(1) Political humor: Name a revolution with the following distinguishing features: (a) Every member of its Revolutionary Council took orders from the CIA. (b) Two of its prime ministers were American spies. (c) Three of its presidents were immoral and misguided. (d) Four of its parliament speakers were antirevolutionary and/or had ties to Western intelligence services. The answer is the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the characterization of prior regime officials is what those now in power use (like Moussavi and Karrubi being described as US puppets).

(2) A very touching **essay** (in Persian) by Atefeh Eghbal, comparing the current torments of Moussavi's children to what went on under Moussavi's watch during the so-called "Golden Age" of the Islamic Republic.



(3) Iranian singer, English song: Persian-speaking singers have tackled songs in other languages with results that are often lackluster, to say the least. Hooshmand Aghili's version of "Sway" in [this video](#) is, in my opinion, quite good. Both him and the accompanying band do an excellent job. Bravo!

(4) Jack Johnson sings "[From the Clouds.](#)"

(5) Persian music: Faramarz Aslani sings "[Ghadim,](#)" from his 2010 album "The Third Line."

2011/02/26 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Answer to the puzzle posted on Feb. 23: This puzzle is tougher than it looks. Assume that each group of students performs 1 unit of work, regardless of the group size. Also, assume that the work is divided equally among group members, so that a student in a group of size n does $1/n$ unit of work. On Tuesday, we have an extra group, so 1 more unit of work is performed. Hence, at least one student must do more work on Tuesday than on Monday. However, a student switching from a group of size n to a group of size m ($m < n$) performs $1/m - 1/n$ more work, which is always less than 1 unit, regardless of the values of m and n . Therefore, at least two students must do more work on Tuesday, implying that at least two students will be in smaller groups on Tuesday.

(2) Iran politics: [Video clip](#) purporting to show a basij/hezbollahy mob heckling Rafsanjani's daughter and calling her names.

(3) Jimmy Fallon: "There is a store in London that sells ice cream made of breast milk." [Continuing after the audience groans in disgust:] "I know, that's how cows feel about regular ice cream."

2011/02/25 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A beautiful [light show](#), with fantastic 3D effects.

(2) Iran politics: It is interesting that those in power in Iran do not like to hear any criticism, even from those who have been elected to the parliament after passing through multiple screening levels. This [video clip](#) shows Aliakbar Mousavi Khomeini questioning the Supreme Leader's competence in a 2003 Majlis speech.

(3) Persian poetry: Mostafa Badkoubei [recites](#) his poem for which I could find no title. The poem begins "Chandist delam yek-deleh baa fetneh-garaan ast." One of the memorable verses is this: "Didim beh donbaal-e havaa-o havass-e sheikh / Har lahzeh faraamin-e khoda dar navasaan ast."

2011/02/24 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Countdown to Norooz and the Persian new year **1390**: Saal tahveel at 3:20:45 PM (California time), Sunday, March 20, 2011.

(2) Persian music: Hooman Tabrizi's [solo piano](#) rendition of the song "Morgh-e Sahar."

(3) *Los Angeles Times* [headline](#) of Feb. 23: "Ahmadinejad Slams Repression in Libya as Iranian Authorities Confiscate Satellite Dishes." Unbelievable hypocrisy!

2011/02/23 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Puzzle from the Feb. 2011 issue of *Communications of the ACM*: A teacher divides her students into k groups of various sizes to work on different projects on Monday and into $k + 1$ groups on Tuesday. Prove that there are at least two students who belong to smaller groups on Tuesday than on Monday.

(2) Persian music: Parvin Aalipour's very pleasant performance of "[Lor-Bacheh,](#)" a Bakhtiari folk song.

(3) Persian music: A very nice "modern" rendition of the song "[Simin Bari](#)" by Zohreh Jooya, accompanied by acoustic guitars and several other instruments.

2011/02/22 (Tue.): Here are a personal sports story and a memorable quote.

(1) Soccer: Today, I watched Major League Soccer's DC United beat UCSB 1-0 in an exhibition match. The pro team was dominant, but UCSB showed some sparks, as well as great defense. Chris Pontius, a former UCSB player, is a forward on DC United and was probably instrumental in arranging this friendly match.

(2) Libya: "Muammar Gaddafi is the leader of the revolution, I am not a president to step down ... I have nowhere to resign from. ... I have not yet ordered the use of force, not yet ordered one bullet to be fired ... when I do, everything will burn. ... I will not leave the country and will die as a martyr." From today's speech by Gaddafi.

2011/02/21 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Politics: I cannot bring myself to read Donald Rumsfeld's 800-page memoir, *Known and Unknown*. So, I decided to educate myself about it from Lyric Winik's [Time article](#) (issue of Feb. 14, 2011, pp. 35-37) entitled "Rummy's Life in Exile" and a couple of on-line reviews. In his book, Rumsfeld, who takes blame for nothing himself, freely criticizes George W. Bush's distaste for information, Condoleezza Rice's aversion to constructive criticism, John McCain's hair-trigger temper, Colin Powell's pretense that he was misled, and L. Paul Bremer's lack of authority ("too many hands on the steering wheel ... running the truck into a ditch"). He does regret

having said "stuff happens."

(2) Religion: I enjoy reading Lisa Miller's *Newsweek* columns/articles about religion. In the **latest installment** (issue of Feb. 14, 2011, pp. 46-49), entitled "What the Bible Really Says about Sex," she exposes some of the conflicting statements in the Bible and their rather arbitrary interpretations to suit particular agendas. According to her, "In the Bible, 'traditional marriage' doesn't exist. Abraham fathers children with Sarah and his servant Hagar. Jacob marries Rachel and her sister Leah, as well as their servants Bilhah and Zilpah. ... Husbands, in essence, owned their wives, and fathers owned their daughters, too." She also describes how "the bible has, at certain times in history, been read to support slavery, wife-beating, kidnapping, child abuse, racism and polygamy." Finally, there are interesting allusions to codewords used in the Bible to describe intimate acts and body parts.

2011/02/20 (Sun.): A beautiful **Persian poem** by Fereidoon Moshiri, entitled "A Doubt in the Passage of History" ("Shakki dar Gozargaah-e Tarikh"), from his collection "Have Faith in the Spring" ("Bahaar raa Baavar Kon").

2011/02/19 (Sat.): Before I was on Facebook or had a blog, I used to write book reviews in my diary, occasionally e-mailing them to a group of close friends. The following is one such book review, written on August 17, 2005. I found the book as I was browsing the new-books section of UCSB's library and was sufficiently intrigued to read it right away. The book is obviously written pseudonymously, raising the possibility that the author is actually trying to mock Islam through his/her nonsensical "arguments." However, the explanations presented are close enough to what I have heard from leading clerics in Iran (e.g., via clips on YouTube), that I discount this possibility. Here is what I wrote more than five years ago.

Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, New Dawn Press, India, 2nd ed., 2004.

The author tries to interpret the Islamic statements about women in the most favorable light, without worrying about consistency. For example, Quran's explicit statement (p. 74) "if two men are not available, then a man and two women from among such are acceptable to you as witnesses, so that if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind her" is dismissed by citing other situations where two or four male witnesses are required (so, men can be unreliable too). The question as to why at least one male witness is needed at all, except where males cannot be present (such as at childbirth or in a bath), is left unanswered (p. 79). In another place (p. 73), quoting a "feminist theologian," the word "qawwamun" is interpreted as "breadwinner," rather than the more usual "ruler, governor, manager" to claim that Quran talks about dividing breadwinning and childbearing responsibilities, not about a ruler-ruled relationship. More ridiculous interpretations are offered to justify Quran's word for menstruation (adhan, or "slight evil") (p. 52), the statement that "Men are maintainers of women as Allah has made some to excel others ... So the good women are obedient" (p. 54), and "whomever among you cannot afford to marry free believing women (muhsanat), "let him marry such of your believing maidens as your right hand possesses" (p. 124); the last phrase refers to slaves and prisoners of war.

2011/02/18 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Computers as assistants: According to an **AP report**, IBM's Watson supercomputer, that shellacked two former human champions on "Jeopardy!" earlier this week, is on its way to be used in practical applications. Two medical school hospitals (Columbia and Maryland) have signed up to give this kind of software a try in helping physicians sift through large amounts of medical data.

(2) Dancing bird: **Bird loves Egyptian music** and starts dancing to it, after about 15 seconds of listening to find the beat. This is truly fantastic!

(3) Iranian politics: I have no particular love for Khatami, Mousavi, Karroubi, and Rafsanjani, but I feel sorry for them, because they are being betrayed by those they helped put in power. The first three are being called agents of US and Israel, while Rafsanjani is branded as "Iran's Hosni Mubarak," on signs carried by pro-government mobs.

2011/02/17 (Thu.): IBM's Watson supercomputer soundly defeated its two human opponents in "Jeopardy!", after last night's third installement of their competition. As I had written before, the main challenge facing the designers of Watson wasn't finding the answer (or actually an appropriate question for a given answer), but rather understanding what was being conveyed by the convoluted wording typical of clues on the "Jeopardy!" game show. With the debate over whether a computer can analyze natural-language statements as efficiently and as accurately as us humans settled, the next step is to see what real-world applications can benefit from this technology. Already, health care (helping doctors sift through piles of medical information) and tech support centers are being touted as possible applications. Here is the **AP report** with more details.

2011/02/16 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Artificial intelligence: Playing against two former human champions, Watson, an IBM supercomputer, is tied for the lead after last night's "Jeopardy!" game show. The contest will continue tonight and on Wednesday. Regardless of whether Watson wins or loses, history will have been made, given its respectable showing so far.
- (2) US foreign policy: "Our adventures in the world have been accompanied by a never ending tug-of-war between U.S. foreign policy realists and idealists. Through much of the 20th century, the idealists tended to be liberals in the spirit of Woodrow Wilson. ... Since Vietnam, however, liberals have been more pessimistic ... Nowadays, the foreign policy idealists tend to be neoconservatives." Joe Klein, writing in *Time*, issue of Feb. 14, 2011.
- (3) Persian music: This is one of the most beautiful pieces of **santoor music** that I have heard. The Santoor player is Siamak Aghaei, and he is accompanied on tombak by Pedram Khavarzamani. The composer of this beautiful piece is not mentioned anywhere on the video.

2011/02/15 (Tue.): Ebadi, Shirin (with Azadeh Moaveni), *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*, Random House, 2006.

This is a book worth reading, notwithstanding its shortcomings in painting a realistic portrait of the Islamic society and government structure in Iran and the inescapable self-serving statements one finds in any autobiography. Given the mockery that passes for the justice system in today's Iran and the severe blows that the 1979 revolution dealt all women, it is only fitting that a female judge dissect the social backwardness and political repression that ails the Islamic regime and its claims to democracy.

Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Laureate, seems to have undergone several transformations in her eventful life. She became a judge at a very young age, but even then, she had mixed feelings about her accomplishments, as she explains in this passage about events leading to her marriage (p. 24): "... though I came from a good family, was not bad looking, and held a respectable job, my suitors were few. Bottom line: my career struck fear in the hearts of Iranian men." Eventually, Ebadi did find someone who was not threatened by the prospects of "a marital tiff with a judge."

She was 31 when Khomeini instructed his supporters from exile to eject ministers and other high-ranking bureaucrats from their offices. She accompanied her colleagues in storming the office of the minister of justice, who wasn't there at the time. An old judge sitting behind a desk wondered aloud why she was supporting the people who will take her job away once in power. Ebadi dismissed this warning based on assurances from her revolutionary compatriots. But the following year, she was demoted to a clerk, and later to a secretary, in the very courtroom over which she had presided as a judge. Her account of the reasons for not resigning there and then, deciding not to perform the assigned tasks while keeping her job, and her relationship with her superiors over the succeeding years, are unclear and equivocal.

Eventually, she was allowed to appear in court as a defense attorney, but the prospect of serving as a judge was forever gone. Her description of her role in defending a number of political dissidents is also incomplete and ambiguous, though in this case the omissions are understandable, given that many of these clients reside in Iran or may in fact be still in prison.

Ebadi's prose is best when she writes about the predicaments of Iranian women in general, and those in her own family, in particular. On the role of women in Iran, a main incentive for writing this book, she muses (p. 210): "Standing at a crowded intersection of the capital or listening to the sermon at Friday prayers, you would not immediately know that 65 per cent of Iran's university students and 43 per cent of its salaried workers are women. I wanted to write a book that would help correct the Western stereotypes of Islam, especially the image of Muslim women as docile, forlorn creatures."

Ebadi's co-author, Azadeh Moaveni, no doubt deserves much of the credit for the fluid and engaging English prose. On pp. 182-183, pondering her daughter's aspirations to study abroad for a PhD in electrical engineering, and the likelihood that she would then not return to Iran, Ebadi writes: "How seductive it would be ... for her to wake up in the morning, put on a crisp suit, and walk down a bustling street without a veil, feeling herself part of a global culture that was dynamic and full of life. How could she not want that for herself? How could I not want it for her, this daughter who had spent the last decade bent over her homework, who clearly excelled at and loved learning?"

As is typical in the fractured sociopolitical atmosphere in Iran of the past century, Ebadi has taken heat from both sides of the political spectrum with the accusations of being a Westernized intellectual or of not being sufficiently critical of the clerical regime's misdeeds. This is quite unfortunate, given Ebadi's unique position in bridging the divide between religious and secular forces, on the one hand, and between her generation and Iranian youth born after the Islamic revolution, on the other.

2011/02/14 (Mon.): I wish the best for all my friends on this "day of love," and its upcoming Persian counterpart, the Sepandarmazgan Festival. May you stay true to your love, be it love of life, love of humanity, love of family, love of freedom, love of nature, or love of that special someone. You can learn more about Sepandarmaz from a

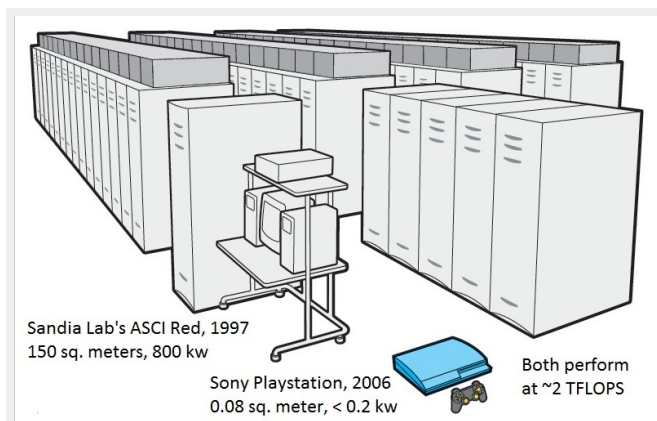


children's book, whose [Web site](#) offers free on-line access. She was the "guardian angel that protected the earth ... was kind to the mountains, to the birds, and to the people and hated war among men ... gave the herds green fields to graze, dug paths for rivers and took care of the earth and its inhabitants."

2011/02/13 (Sun.):

The energy wall in supercomputing —

In designing high-performance computers, the "memory wall" (the relatively slow memory negating much of the performance gain from faster and more powerful processors) has been a fact of life for years. Now we have started to hit the "energy wall." Top-of-the-line supercomputers are already using several Megawatts of power, making them expensive to operate and difficult to cool (imagine the heat from tens of thousands of 100-watt incandescent lightbulbs, all turned on inside one room). So far, advances in low-energy design and packaging/cooling technologies have allowed us to progress from GFLOPS (10^9 floating-point operations per second, or Gigaflops), through TFLOPS (10^{12} , Teraflops), to PFLOPS (10^{15} , Petaflops). So, it is natural to think that achieving EFLOPS (10^{18} , Exaflops) performance is only a matter of time, perhaps coming to pass in the current decade. But this is not likely to happen anytime soon, if ever. Even assuming continued improvements in energy efficiency, an Exaflops-class supercomputer will likely consume on the order of 1 Gigawatt of power, the amount of electric power produced by a large nuclear power plant. We may need a complete change of paradigm for further improvements in peak performance. For more details, see the article by Peter Kogge in the February 2011 issue of [IEEE Spectrum](#), pp. 48-54. The image above shows how supercomputers have been shrinking over the years.



2011/02/12 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest from the worlds of film and music.

- (1) The Berlin International Film Festival publishes an open letter from Iranian director Jafar Panahi, in Persian and English, on its [official Web site](#). Panahi was to serve as one of the distinguished judges in the festival, but due to restrictions on his travel as he awaits the start of a 6-year prison sentence in Iran, he could not attend.
- (2) A [beautiful mixture](#) of flamenco music, featuring Rosario La Tremendita, and classical Persian music, featuring Mohammad Motamedi.
- (3) A medley of Armenian folk songs, performed by Shakila ([7-minute video](#)).

2011/02/11 (Fri.): Here are three interesting items on science and engineering.

- (1) The E-Word: "The word least likely to be spoken by politicians was once a simple one: 'engineer.' . . . President Obama has embraced the E-word, putting engineers on a par with scientists in his vernacular—and giving engineering a public status that the diverse field has never held in relation to science, at least within political discourse." G. P. Zachary, writing in [IEEE Spectrum](#), Feb. 2011, p. 8.
- (2) Research article by 8-to-10-year-old kids: In December 2010, the British Royal Society journal *Biology Letters* published a scientific article entitled "[Blackawton Bees](#)," which is written by a group of 8-to-10-year-old elementary school students (the school's name is listed as the first author), along with their teacher (next to last author) and a researcher who served as their mentor (last author). It reports on findings about intelligent behavior by bees, behavior that is akin to solving logical puzzles. An interesting feature of the article is that its figures and tables were hand-drawn and colored by the kids. Here is the article's concluding paragraph: "Before doing these experiments we did not really think a lot about bees and how they are as smart as us. We also did not think about the fact that without bees we would not survive, because bees keep the flowers going. So it is important to understand bees. We discovered how fun it was to train bees. This is also cool because you do not get to train bees everyday. We like bees. Science is cool and fun because you get to do stuff that no one has ever done before. (Bees—seem to—think!)"
- (3) A visionary teacher: Amir Abo-Shaer, who quit his job as a mechanical engineer to teach high school (he is currently my daughter's physics teacher at DPHS in Goleta, CA, and previously taught both of my sons), is featured in the February 2011 issue of [IEEE Spectrum](#) in a special report entitled "[Dream Jobs 2011](#)." This

wonderful teacher, who won a McArthur Fellowship, known as "the genius award," a few months ago, is also the subject of a forthcoming book, *The New Cool: A Visionary Teacher, His First Robotics Team, and the Ultimate Battle of Smarts*, by Neal Bascomb (Crown).

2011/02/10 (Thu.): Here are three technology-related items of potential interest.

(1) Knowledgeable machine: Last night, I watched a PBS Nova episode entitled "Smartest Machine on Earth," which detailed the work of IBM researchers to create Watson, a supercomputer that will compete on the "Jeopardy!" game show with two former human champions for a \$1M grand prize. The most challenging task in designing Watson was making it understand natural-language statements. For example, the simple statement "I shot an elephant wearing my pajamas" can have at least 4 different meanings, depending on whether a camera or a rifle was used and on whether I or the elephant wore pajamas. Tune in on February 14-16 for the actual men-versus-machine "Jeopardy!" contest.

(2) Human LCD display: Modern printing and display technologies are based on using matrices of small dots (pixels) of different colors and intensities to form desired images. It is common in sports stadiums for hundreds or thousands of people holding up colored panels in a synchronized fashion to display giant images in a similar fashion. The Chinese and Koreans have taken this art form to a new level, as you can see in this [video clip](#), showing South Korean teens supporting their favorite soccer teams.

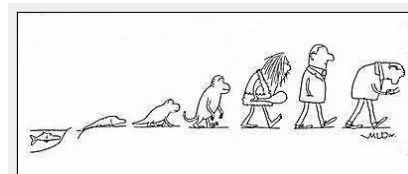
(3) iPhone security: According to my colleagues doing [computer security research at UCSB](#), a majority of iPhone apps "leak" personal data, including your phone's unique ID, which can be as valuable to advertisers and scammers as your Social Security Number. This problem can only get worse as the use of smart phones spreads. By the way, many Facebook apps have the same problem, so I personally do not use any of them and strongly suggest that others not use them either.

2011/02/09 (Wed.): Iranian pop band: Chris de Burgh and the Arian Band perform an English/Persian song entitled "[The Words I Love You](#)" ("Noori Taa Abadiyyat" or "Doostet Daaram"), apparently recorded in Iran during a concert trip by the Irish singer.

Here are a couple more Arian Band songs. "[Gole Hamishe Bahar](#)" "[Man Age Jaye To Boodam](#)"

2011/02/08 (Tue.): Here are three items of interest on technology and architecture.

(1) Connectivity: Is advanced technology taking us back to Stone Age, when humans had turfs to protect and paid no attention to each other, except when their interests collided? We seldom talk to each other anymore when we are sharing a bus/train seat, queuing at the bank, or waiting on the street corner. We all seem captivated by our phones' or PDAs' display screens.



(2) Confessions: The Catholic Church is really embracing the digital age. After Pope Benedict's blessing of social networking a couple of weeks ago, the Church has now sanctioned a [confession app for the iPhone](#). I guess the selling point will be the possibility of atoning for one's sins, without any of the dangers of approaching a priest! A friend's post on Facebook introduced this news story thus: "Were you a little naughty and feel a tad guilty? There's an app for that!"

(3) Architecture: Take a look at the images of more than 80 [strange/interesting buildings](#) from around the world. Among the more interesting ones is a library parking garage that looks like a giant bookshelf.

2011/02/07 (Mon.): Suskind, Ron, *The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism*, unabridged audiobook read by Alan Sklar, Recorded Books, 2008.

This book is full of enlightened observations about the Middle East, the clash of cultures, and other political hot-potato topics of the past decade. It is clear from the narrative that the author has had broad access to top officials, as well as people on the ground in various countries, as sources of his information. In criticizing the Bush Jr. administration, Suskind starts early and strikes often. We hear in the foreword, for example, that Bush failed to understand, even late into his presidency, that "you can't run the world on instinct from inside a bubble." Later in the book, Suskind goes on to elaborate that reason and religion have always been in conflict, beginning as far back as the 9th Century, when the two thinkers Avicenna and Bokhari (authors of their respective influential books) created a clash and a delicate balance between scientific methods and religious faith. This balance was subsequently upset by Ghazali, who accused Avicenna of heresy, thus giving religion the upper hand. The story is told via several intertwined threads. Among the [cast of characters](#) are a Muslim-American, who is accepted and trusted by his coworkers, yet is constantly under suspicion elsewhere, a young Afghan boy, who visits the US as part of an exchange program and then returns home, Benazir Bhutto, who is given the green light by the US to return to Pakistan and then abandoned a few days before her assassination, and several officials and operatives involved in the Iraq war and its missing WMDs. As one of its unique features, this book lays out the most detailed case that I have seen to prove that the claim of WMD as the main

reason for going to war in Iraq was a deliberate deception by the Bush Jr. administration, and not just an "intelligence failure," as conveniently claimed. It appears that long before the war began, the CIA had recruited the Iraqi intelligence chief, Tahir Jalil Habbush, as an informant (this is hard to believe, but bear with me), and he repeatedly assured the US that there were no WMDs and that Saddam was pretending otherwise because of his fear of appearing as a toothless tiger to the Iranians. Yet, when the US extracted TJH from Iraq shortly before the war, the administration fabricated a letter, supposedly handwritten and signed by him in 2001, informing Saddam of Mohammad Atta having trained in Iraq and of continuing efforts to purchase nuclear material. The letter was placed where it would be discovered in the months following the war. This shameless fabrication, which at the time fooled even seasoned journalists, sought to confirm the administration's two claims of WMD and links to Al Qaeda. Interestingly, Habbush was one of the men on the infamous deck of cards (he was the Jack of Diamonds), with a price on his head, even as he was comfortably sheltered outside Iraq under US protection. At 14 CDs (432 pages, in printed form), the book requires some patience, but the effort is well rewarded for the diligent listener/reader.

2011/02/06 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest on this Superbowl XLV Sunday.

(1) Film festival: As the [Santa Barbara International Film Festival](#) comes to a close this weekend, I regret that another year went by without me taking advantage of this wonderful event in my hometown. My resolution this year is to make sure I participate next year.

(2) Cave homes: In this breathtakingly beautiful region of Turkey (Cappadocia), people lived in caves up to the 1970s, when the government evicted them to avoid national embarrassment. It is now a tourist attraction, with museums and all. [[Video](#); [Images](#)]

(3) Political quote of the day: "We have entered the age of civility in American politics. Just last week, for instance, House Speaker John Boehner stopped calling the Democrats' health-care bill 'job killing' and began calling it 'job crushing'." Ezra Klein, in [Newsweek](#) (issue of Jan. 31, 2011).

2011/02/05 (Sat.): Here are three very interesting items about Mother Nature.

(1) Phew! The meter-sized "**2011 CQ1**" **asteroid** passed within 3,400 miles of Earth at 2:40 PM EST on February 4th. This record near-miss occurred hours after the asteroid was discovered by astronomer Richard A. Kowalski, according to Italy's Remanzacco Observatory. This is amazing, because scientists had always assured us that such near-earth objects can be detected months, if not years, in advance. An object this size can only do **local damage** on Earth, but imagine it hitting a population center! It takes a 200-meter or larger asteroid to cause worldwide environmental effects.

(2) Landslide: A massive **landslide in Taiwan** completely blocked a 6-lane freeway in April 2010. In the photo accompanying the report, the shifted earth appears intact, with trees and other vegetation.

(3) Cougar vs. bear cub: a **suspenseful chase scene** from the 1988 French movie "L'Ours." The resourcefulness of these animals is truly amazing.

2011/02/04 (Fri.): The Fermi Paradox is the apparent discrepancy between: (1) Our near certainty that there must be other planets similar to the Earth in the Milky Way galaxy that could support life, and (2) Humans never having observed any definite sign of such parallel civilizations. This isn't such a paradox if you think about it in probabilistic terms. The expectation that we should have seen signs of extraterrestrial life if there were any, is not based on reason. Just as we do not hear or see every frequency, many life forms may be imperceptible to us. Furthermore, assume that there are indeed thousands of civilizations just like ours in the Milky Way. And suppose that each one of these has sent thousands of probes to other parts of our galaxy (overcoming all sorts of physical limits to travel far and wide). These millions of probes would have explored a minuscule fraction of the galaxy, making it not at all surprising that we have not seen them.

2011/02/03 (Thu.): Here are two science/technology news items.

(1) Health and Medicine: "If you follow the news about health research, you risk whiplash. First garlic lowers bad cholesterol, then—after more study—it doesn't. Hormone replacement reduces the risk of heart disease in postmenopausal women, until a huge study finds that it doesn't (and that it raises the risk of breast cancer to boot). Eating a big breakfast cuts your total daily calories, or not ..." Sharon Begley in "Why Almost Everything You Hear about Medicine Is Wrong" ([Newsweek](#), issue of Jan. 31, 2011)

(2) Advances in technology usually take us forward, but there are exceptions. A study conducted at the WPI Fire Protection Engineering Department has found that modern homes burn faster than homes of 30 years ago. According to an [ABC News story](#), this is partly due to the extra belongings we cram into our homes and partly due to the use of cheaper, "energy-efficient" materials in newer buildings. Of course, technology could be used to compensate for these factors, but this has not happened yet.

2011/02/02 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest on Persian music.

- (1) The all-female Mehr ensemble performs "Janam Janam," a traditional piece, in this [9-minute video](#).
- (2) Shohreh Moavenian sings an upbeat and refreshing modern Persian song entitled "[Asheghi](#)," with lyrics by Mowlavi (Rumi). Also check out her "[Roozha](#)" song.
- (3) In this [9-minute song](#), entitled "Khalkhaalak," composed and performed by Siavash Nazeri based on a poem by Mowlavi, it is refreshing to hear Rumi's supreme playfulness with words.

2011/02/01 (Tue.): Thanks to all dear friends who have posted or sent greetings and well wishes on my birthday. For a computer engineer, the 64th birthday is very special, because 64 (as in 64-bit processor, 64-GB flash drive, and so on) is a power of 2. The last time something like this happened to me was 32 years ago, and there will be no next time, even if I live to be 120 ("Hope you live to be 120" is a common Persian birthday wish). A few friends kindly sent me e-cards. I am sorry that I do not open e-cards (nor Facebook applications) due to privacy and security concerns. I thank all these friends as well for their thoughtfulness.

2011/01/31 (Mon.): I pray for the people of Egypt: one thing we Iranians in diaspora know well is the fact that toppling a dictatorial regime, armed only with the hope that something better will take its place, is delusional.

2011/01/30 (Sun.): Some thought-provoking questions are asked, and collectively answered, on edge.org, a Web site with the motto: "To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves." For example, The Edge Question 2011 is: "What scientific concept would improve everybody's cognitive toolkit?" Sharon Begley writes a [1-page column](#) on this question and outlines some possible answers in *Newsweek* (issue of Jan. 24, 2011, p. 42).

2011/01/29 (Sat.): Today's theme is music.

- (1) Jason Mraz, aka Mr. a-z, sings the beautiful song "[Life is Wonderful](#)" in a small live concert (in China?).
- (2) Engineering's new [theme song](#): Will this make engineering cool?
- (3) Ukulele: A beautiful rendition of George Harrison's "[While My Guitar Gently Weeps](#)," by Jake Shimabukuro. I looked for this video when I read in *Time* (Issue of Jan. 31, 2011, p. 64) that ukulele is enjoying a revival owing to its "sweet" sound and because it is simpler to play and cheaper than a guitar. Here is another ukulele performance, "[Hawaii](#)" by Ohta-san. And yet another one, "[Stand by Me](#)."

2011/01/28 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Education: US freshmen (class of 2014) are experiencing [record stress levels](#), caused by the prospects of massive debts and dismal job opportunities upon graduation.
- (2) Assassins: What makes American assassins, from John Wilkes Booth, through Lee Harvey Oswald and James Earl Ray, to Jared Lee Loughner, different from political killers around the world? Jonathan Alter attempts to answer this question in [Newsweek](#) (issue of Jan. 11, 2011, pp. 18-22).

2011/01/26 (Wed.): Here are two items on the Persian language and culture.

- (1) Persian language: An interesting article by Saeed Nafisi on [common spelling and grammatical mistakes](#). I learned several points from the article and hope that other lovers of the Persian language like it too.
- (2) Lying: "My uncle's stories were the best because he never told the same version twice. If it involved money, the amount went up in time, if it had something to do with politics, the era changed from World War to Reza Shah to Mossaddegh, and if my aunt was present, his adventures never involved any ladies. ... We are a nation of top students, we were all 'hot' in our days, our physical features are all natural—and oh, that surgery was to fix a broken nose. We are all younger than our birth certificates indicate, weigh a lot less than the scale shows." Zohreh Ghahremani, in "[Are You Lying?](#)" (an essay on how Iranians manufacture and deal with lies).

2011/01/25 (Tue.): Here are two items about graphics and imagery.

- (1) In this [6-minute TED talk](#), Jonathan Klein (Head of Getty Images) describes how certain images can change the world.
- (2) Picture in picture in picture ... , [zooming in ad infinitum](#): it can make you dizzy (thanks to Khosro for supplying the link).

2011/01/24 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Music: [Arabic/Persian duet](#) by Labenese singer Ragheb Alama and Iranian-Lebanese singer Legha Yusif (dubbed the Mideastern Angelina Jolie).

(2) Health: "A year of exercise can give a 70-year-old the brain connectivity of a 30-year-old, improving memory, planning, dealing with ambiguity, and multitasking." Sharon Begley, in a [Newsweek article](#) entitled "Can You Build a Better Brain?" (issue of January 10 & 17, 2011).

2011/01/23 (Sun.): Two funny quotes from Conan O'Brien.

(1) "Arnold Schwarzenegger said being Governor of California cost him at least 200 million dollars in lost movie roles. Moviegoers everywhere said, 'Totally worth it.'"

(2) "At the state dinner for Chinese President Hu Jintao, Hu opened a fortune cookie that said, 'You will lend us another trillion dollars.'"

2011/01/22 (Sat.): Soccer: After becoming the only country in the 2011 Asian Nations Cup to win all three of its round-robin matches (2-1 against Iraq, 1-0 against North Korea, and 3-0 against UAE), Iran fell to South Korea 1-0 in the quarterfinals today. South Korea now has a 3-game to 2-game edge in its face-offs against Iran in Asian Cups. The game was tied 0-0 after 90 minutes, with South Korea scoring its only goal in minute 15 of overtime. It was a fair win for South Korea, given that it dominated in most areas (shots, corner kicks, crosses; I don't have numbers on ball possession).

2011/01/20 (Thu.): Caricatures: Jason Seiler, illustrator, is a prolific artist, whose career was born when he drew parodies of his history teacher in high school, got in trouble for it, and the school principal hired him to draw caricatures of different faculty members. His works have appeared in, and graced the covers of, many publications, a sample of which can be seen under "portfolio" on his [Web site](#). Here are links to two collections of his cartoons: [85+ Art of Caricatures by Jason Seiler](#); [60 Caricatures by Jason Seiler](#).

2011/01/19 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) *IEEE Transactions on Computers* celebrates its 60th year: The year 2011 coincides with the 60th year of publication for *IEEE TC*, a technical journal for which I have been serving as an Associate or Area Editor since January 2009. I would like to share a congratulatory message that I sent to the IEEE Computer Society for this momentous occasion. My message appeared on the back cover of the January 2011 issue of the journal.

"Since the publication of my first ever technical paper in its April 1972 issue, I have viewed *IEEE TC* as a standard-bearer of excellence in my specialty area. The emergence of more focused IEEE journals has diverted some of my work to those other forums, but I am still honored each time a paper of mine is accepted in this now 60-year-old publication, which owes its excellence to a long line of distinguished editors, editorial board members, support staff, and, of course, authors. It is indeed an honor for me to be associated with *IEEE TC* as an author and as an area editor."

(2) The trouble with college education in the US: An alarming report in [Chicago Tribune](#) discloses that, in their first two years of college, about half of the US undergraduates show almost no gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. The report, which is based on the new book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, by NYU professor Richard Arum and others, goes on to say that students simply do not take enough courses (sometimes none at all) that require extensive critical writing or reading. Today's students spend 50% less time studying compared with students a few decades ago. One study has found that students spend an average of about 4 hours per day on their classes and studies, and many more hours on socializing. If the students aren't learning much, then simply increasing the number of college graduates will not improve US's economic competitiveness. Studying alone, and doing more reading and writing, are suggested as possible remedies for these ills.

2011/01/18 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A thoughtful and touching essay: There are two notions in [this recommended essay](#) that teenagers and young adults can learn from. One is the experiences of an immigrant family, with adults living with their old customs and world views, and youngsters yearning for "normalcy" and blending with their new environs. The second is the daughter writing the essay realizing that her mother's life has surprising layers of complexity; i.e., she is not just someone's mother, but a human being, with her own troubles and aspirations. I remember how I came to a similar realization about my father only after his death, and wrote about how I regretted not looking at him as someone who isn't just my father, but a person.

(2) Quotation on the recent Arizona shooting: "... it is distressing, and vaguely obscene, how quickly she [Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords] almost disappeared in the media lather that was unleashed by her shooting. One of her last public acts was to read the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution aloud. ... But, ironically, it was an argument about the limits and excesses of free speech that preoccupied the cable news bloviators in the days after she was shot." Joe Klein, in *Time* magazine, issue of Jan. 24, 2011.

(3) Persian music: [A nice piece played anonymously](#), with the following YouTube description: Iranian guitar & zarb (traditional Persian drum). This 3-part solo starts with a melody from a typical Persian pop song

(Shohreh, I think), then an oldie from Googoosh (Dokhtar-e Darya), and finally a melody line by Sadegh Nojouki who wrote many beautiful songs for Hayedeh.

2011/01/17 (Mon.): Two quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. [1929-1968], in honor of his day in the US; the first chosen by me, the second by my daughter, Sepideh. Both are from *Strength to Love*, 1963.

(1) "Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."

(2) "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

2011/01/16 (Sun.): Here are three funny videos, showing various pranks.

(1) **Adult "baby"** in carriage scares everyone.

(2) **Mischievous royal guard** has fun with Brits passing by.

(3) **Old lady** fools everyone by acting horrified.

2011/01/15 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) On the recent shooting in Arizona: Just as you thought you had heard every possible weird comment about the recent mass murder at a political gathering in Arizona, comes an "analysis" from conservative commentator **Rush Limbaugh**, who defends Sarah Palin's much criticized "blood libel" allegory and claims that the shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, has the "full support" of Democrats.

(2) Asian Nations Cup soccer: In its second game at the 2011 Asian Cup, **Iran defeated North Korea 1-0**, ensuring its advancement to the quarterfinals. Here is the **official game report** from the Asian Cup Web site.

2011/01/14 (Fri.): The next battle in the war against spammers:

Tonight, I encountered a very interesting post on the **"Bit-Player" blog**.

You have no doubt seen the curly, crossed-out, or severely distorted text that some Web sites present to you, asking that you type the letters in a box.

These CAPTCHAs constitute the latest weapon against spammers, who try to sign up for many different free e-mail accounts, or post ads on blogs, using automated tools. The idea is that automated tools cannot "read" such distorted text, thus rendering them ineffective. Well, spammers and other violators of privacy and security are in a constant fight against the good guys, with each group trying to stay a step ahead of the other. Here is the latest effort on the part of spammers to circumvent the CAPTCHA barrier. They have set up a system for "solving" these puzzles using paid humans in poor countries, typically for a fraction of a cent a pop. When an automated tool encounters a CAPTCHA, it sends it to a dispatch center that supplies its solution for a fee. The dispatch center forwards the CAPTCHA to participating humans who are on-line at the time and asks them to send the solution within a few seconds, for a ridiculously small payment. The answer is then sent back to the automated tool within the typical 30-second time limit provided by Web sites. The blog gives you access to a PDF paper by Stefan Savage and his coworkers at UCSD, who have studied the economics of this wickedly ingenious set-up.



2011/01/13 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Music: Mohammad Nouri sings the **Iranian folk song** "Yaar Mobaarak Baadaa."

(2) Puzzle: A tourist shopping in the bazaar of an exotic country sees an antique musket and decides that he must have it. The musket is straight, up to 10 cm wide, and 1.5 meters in length. He buys the musket, puts it inside a 1.5-meter cardboard tube for shipping, and goes to the post office. There, he is informed that the post office does not accept any package whose longest dimension exceeds 1 meter. The man has to mail the musket, as he cannot carry it with him while continuing his travels and no other shipping method is available to him. What should he do?

2011/01/12 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) For history buffs: The American Presidency Project (americanpresidency.org, built and hosted at UCSB) is a very useful resource. It contains a wealth of information on US presidents, their papers, party platforms, and the like. Part of the Web site is devoted to **presidential popularity** poll data, where you can choose a president (currently from Roosevelt to Obama) and view his poll numbers in graphic and tabular forms.

(2) Soccer: After falling behind by a goal, **Iran defeats Iraq 2-1** in its first match of the Asian Cup 2011, being held in Qatar. Next opponent: North Korea.

(3) Italian music: A new version of the classic Italian song "We No Speak Americano" has generated a lot of interest on YouTube, in multiple postings. One version comes with a **video** that has been edited from an old **original performance** by Renato Carosone.

(4) Persian music: Songs of Aref, and interview segments, are interspersed in this **9-minute video**.

2011/01/11 (Tue.): Here is the [MP3 file](#) of an hour-long lecture by Professor Richard Davis, entitled "Shahnameh and Persian Poetry," delivered on December 9, 2010. He discusses how/why Ferdowsi is different from other great Persian poets, such as Hafez, Mowlavi, Sa'di, and Nezami, making some very interesting points.

2011/01/10 (Mon.): Here are two musical items of potential interest.

(1) Spanish-style [solo guitar music](#) by Armik.

(2) This [8-minute video](#) contains a beautifully performed medley of some Iranian folk songs with violin, piano, and daf.

2011/01/09 (Sun.): Ferguson, Craig, *American on Purpose: The Improbable Adventures of an Unlikely Patriot*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Blackstone Audio, 2009.

Before Craig Ferguson made it through an 8-year run on the Drew Carey show, and, later, as the host of a late-night talk show, he was a drunken, coke-snorting construction worker and small-time comic in Glasgow, Scotland. This book is the story of how, through a sequence of happenstances, and the help of girlfriends/wives and acquaintances, he ended up in the US, became a US citizen, and succeeded in Hollywood. Ferguson's style, made more authentic by his own reading of this audiobook in his trademark Scottish accent, is quite engaging and funny. His destructive habits brought him to the verge of suicide, something he abandoned when he was offered a glass of sherry. He had worked for seven years in the US before he could pay off all his accumulated debts. He soon became a millionaire and celebrated the milestone by bringing his parents over for a US vacation. The book is full of very funny happenings and anecdotes. In one passage, describing his wedding to a Jewish woman, he relates how the Scottish custom of wearing kilt on formal occasions, with no underwear, does not mix well with the Jewish tradition of raising the bride and groom in the air on chairs.

2011/01/08 (Sat.): Comparing bottled-water brands: A post by a Facebook friend about the relative merits of different bottled-water brands made me look up an old [ABC News report](#) that came to my mind. The gist of the report is that the quality of bottled water has absolutely no relationship with its price. Here are some quotes from the report: "Big-selling Dasani and Aquafina are also just reprocessed tap water from cities around the country. One of Aquafina's sources is the Detroit River! At least the popular French water, Evian, does come from France. ... In our test of bottled waters, Kmart's American Fare—the cheapest brand—won. Big-seller Aquafina came in second. Iceland Spring tied the ordinary [New York City] tap water for third place. Fifth place went to Poland Spring, and in last place, by far, with almost half the testers saying it tasted bad, was the most expensive water—the fancy French stuff, Evian."

2011/01/07 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Music: Eva Cassidy, who in my opinion had the sweetest voice among singers (perhaps even sweeter than today's Norah Jones) died in 1996 at age 33. She was unknown and broke when she lived, with fame coming to her posthumously. Cassidy is the blond one in this [duet performance](#) with Katie Melua.

(2) Looking back and ahead: The [Huffington post](#) ran a story on 2010/12/22, about 20 things that became (nearly) obsolete in the past decade. The list includes VCRs, paper maps, newspaper classified ads, dial-up internet, encyclopedias, film and film cameras, catalogs, and fax machines. Here are my predictions about things that may become obsolete by 2020 (at least in the Western world): DVD rentals, checks, postage stamps, paper-based news media (not books, though), travel to attend meetings, and movie theaters.

2011/01/06 (Thu.): Many Iranian Web sites are abuzz with news of the January 4th death, via suicide, of Alireza Pahlavi II, the 44-year-old younger son of the former Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Quite a few people around the world, and among Iranians, who die daily are far more accomplished than this troubled prince. News of death sentences and executions emerge from Iran weekly. It is indeed sad to make much ado about the loss of someone whose only claim to fame was being born into a royal family. I checked various on-line sources, including Wikipedia, for any information on what this man did to deserve such public mourning, but found nothing. I simply don't understand this obsession with royalty, which by the way is not specific to Iranians. Many people left Iran with empty hands and had to start their lives abroad from zero, often accepting jobs outside their areas of specialty and well below their capabilities. Why then are the troubles of the Pahlavi family any more important than those of others? Other people died, and continue to die, for worthy causes, yet one hears little about them. Didn't the Pahlavi family leave Iran with enough money to live comfortably for many decades?

2011/01/05 (Wed.): An interesting quote about educators: "Educators don't always say what they mean. [Here is a sample of what they say about your child (and what they mean):] doesn't always distinguish between fact and imagination (lies); needs improvement with motor skills and coordination (is a klutz); uses physical

means to get attention or make a point (fights); has leadership skills, but needs to use them more constructively (is a bully); lacks maturity (acts like a baby); needs more appreciation of time and punctuality (is always late); needs to develop better social skills (is gross); needs guidance in following practices of good hygiene (is dirty)." Robert D. Ramsey, *How to Say the Right Thing Every Time*

2011/01/04 (Tue.): According to a report in the January 2011 issue of *IEEE Spectrum* (pp. 27-63) the top 11 technologies of the past decade are: smartphones; social networking; voice over IP; LED lighting; multicore CPUs; cloud computing; drone aircraft; planetary rovers; flexible AC transmission; digital photography; class-D audio.

2011/01/03 (Sun.): The *Los Angeles Times* (January 2, 2011) provides a [profile of Marissa Mayer](#), Google's Head of Innovation and Design, who "has had her hand in nearly every product the Internet search giant has rolled out." She is described as "first and foremost a geek," but is also an athlete, world traveler, and arts enthusiast. She says that being an engineer does not mean sacrificing one's sense of femininity, talks about her career philosophy, and provides advice to women and girls about entering the sector.

2011/01/02 (Mon.): UNESCO's [World Digital Library](#) is a useful resource, with the following mission statement: WDL makes available on the Internet, free of charge and in multilingual format, significant primary materials from countries and cultures around the world. The principal objectives of the WDL are to: (1) Promote international and intercultural understanding; (2) Expand the volume and variety of cultural content on the Internet; (3) Provide resources for educators, scholars, and general audiences; (4) Build capacity in partner institutions to narrow the digital divide within and between countries.

2011/01/01 (Sat.): A number of Muslims use the title "Seyed" in front of their names. I was always uncomfortable with this usage, given the explanation that was provided for the title: that it designates someone as being from Prophet Mohammad's bloodline [Wikipedia article "Sayyid" confirms this interpretation]. I view the use of this title as racist, because it indicates that certain Muslims are superior to other Muslims, and of course to non-Muslims, by virtue of their family history rather than personal accomplishments. Today, I encountered an explanation (in Persian) about the title's history in Iran and how it came to designate the Arabs as masters of the conquered Persians, rather than the standard interpretation cited above. I did some Google searches, but could not find an authoritative on-line source that confirms this account. [This posted version](#) attributes the account just mentioned to *Bidaari*, a publication of the Cultural Center for Eradicating Superstition.

Blog Entries for 2010

2010/12/31 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest on this last day of 2010.

(1) With this [ABBA song](#), entitled "Happy New Year," I wish everyone a bright, enjoyable, and prosperous new year, filled with pleasant surprises. I hope to hear more from friends and family in 2011 and to have greater opportunities for strengthening friendship ties.

(2) Random facts of the day: Sorry to spoil your end-of-year celebrations, which likely involve visits to restaurants. According to an [ABC News study](#), reported on yesterday's Good Morning America, of the items you find on a restaurant table, menus are the most, and sugar containers the least, germ-ridden. Ketchup and mustard bottles, often thought to be the most contaminated, fall somewhere in the middle, along with salt shakers. The most surprising revelation is that the pepper shaker is the second most germy, after the menu. Apparently pepper helps germs grow faster.

(3) The future of any culture can be judged by the way it educates its youth. With this in mind, one wonders about the message conveyed by a joke posted on the "Children & Teens" section of [an Iranian Web site](#) (look for the drawing of a plane taking off to locate the joke, which is in Persian). The joke has to do with a group of hijackers demanding that their plane be refueled, or else someone's head will be cut off. When the authorities hesitate, the leader of the group instructs one of his men to select a person and cut his/her head off. The severed head is then tossed out of the plane. Seeing that the hijackers mean business, the airport authorities refuel the plane but are then surprised to see the hijackers exit the plane with raised arms. Faced with the question about why they are surrendering, the leader replies that the stupid man carrying out his order had cut off the pilot's head.

2010/12/30 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

بر روی ما نگاه خدا خنده می زند / هر چند ره به ساحل لطفش نبرده ایم // زیرا چو زاهدان سیه کار خرقه پوش / پنهان ز دیدگان خدا می نخورده ایم
 پیشانی از ز داغ گناهی سیه شود / بهتر ز داغ مهر تماز از سر ریا // نام خدا نبردن از آن به که زیر لب / بهر فریب خلق بگویی خدا خدا
 ما را چه غم که شیخ شبی در میان جمع / بر رویمان بیست به شادی در بهشت // اومی گشاید، او که به لطف و صفای خویش / گویی که خاک طینت ما را ز غم سرشت
 طوفان طعنه خنده ما را ز لب نشست / کوهیم و در میانه دریا نشستیم ایم // چون سینه جای گوهر یکتای راستیست / زین رو به موج حادثه تنها نشستیم ایم
 ما اییم، ما که طعنه زاهد شنیده ایم / ما اییم، ما که جامه تقوا دریده ایم // زیرا هرون جامه به جز پیکر فریب / زین راهیان راه حقیقت ندیده ایم
 آن آتشی که در دل ما شعله می کشد / گر در میان دامن شیخ افتاده بود // دیگر به ما که سوخته ایم از شرار عشق / نام گناهکاره رسوا نداده بود
 بگذار تا به طعنه بگویند مردمان / در گوش هم حکایت عشق مدام ما // «هرگز نمیرد آنکه دلش زنده شد به عشق / ثبت است در جریده عالم دوام ما»

(1) Having just found the poem above by Forough Farrokhzad among my notes, I decided to share it here. The poem is entitled "God's Glimse Smiles at Us."

(2) A beautiful solo piano piece, entitled "**Shab-e Yalda**" (the longest night of the year).

(3) I found this [interview with Gary Sick](#), an old-timer in Iran affairs, quite enlightening. In it, he says that he is underwhelmed with the Wikileaks revelations. He predicts continued gridlock in Washington and criticizes the US's emphasis on sanctions against Iran, even as it pursues talks with IRI officials. He also dismisses the US Navy's use of the name "Arabian Gulf" as a simple practical matter, given US's close military ties with Arab countries, all of which use the latter name ("the Navy is just acknowledging on which side [of the Gulf] their bread is buttered. ... The US Geographic Board of Names, the organization that officially prescribes names of the geographical places all over the world, has not taken this action; for many years they have called it the Persian Gulf and they still do.").

2010/12/29 (Wed.): One Incident, Three Accounts: Hamid Mossadegh wrote a Persian poem, telling the story of a boy who is separated from the girl he loves by an unfortunate incident. Forough Farrokhzad answered by telling the same story from the girl's viewpoint. Javad Noroozi composed a third poem, describing the scene from the viewpoint of an apple that played a key role in both earlier stories. Several blogs post the three poems, but the [Ooldoz blog](#) has the nicest and most legible version.

2010/12/28 (Tue.): Here are two items on the same Persian song.

(1) This [humorous blog post](#) (in Persian) on Iranian.com is worth reading. It presents an interpretation of the Persian song "Emshab Shab-e Mahtaabeh" ("Tonight Is a Moonlit Night"), which was composed by Ali Akbar Sheida over a century ago and continues to be popular, most recently as part of a protest movement (like a lot of pre-IRI and even pre-Pahlavi creations).

(2) Solo piano [variations on the song in item \(1\)](#), and apparently inspired by that post. The performer is identified as "Shirin" on YouTube and as "ahang1001" on Iranian.com.

Note added on 2010/12/30: Another performance by Shirin, entitled "**Va'adeh Kardi**" ("You Promised").

2010/12/27 (Mon.): Rifkin, Jeremy, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Tarcher, 2010.

Publisher's blurb: "Never has the world seemed so completely united—in the form of communication, commerce, and culture—and so savagely torn apart—in the form of war, financial meltdown, global warming, and even the migration of diseases."

Key idea: Humans and certain other primates are endowed with mirror neurons that exhibit the same brain activities when they observe another being become angry, frustrated, happy, ... as when they experience the emotions themselves. So, contrary to old assertions, we are soft-wired, not for aggression, violence, self-interest, and utilitarianism, but for sociability, attachment, affection, and companionship. In other words, our first drive, and what will eventually save our civilization, is empathy.

Free online access to [Rifkin's book](#) for reading; 11-minute [RSA Animate](#) summary in pictures and words.

2010/12/25 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Jokelike real story: Donkeys versus Professors in Iran

A couple of days ago, a Facebook friend posted a news story about the hourly rate of for renting donkeys at Emamzadeh Davood (to ride, rather than hike, to the shrine) being twice the hourly pay for university professors. My first reaction was to try to find the Emamzadeh's Web site to see if they have any job openings. Then I decided that the money probably doesn't go to the beasts, but to their leader, ... I mean, owner. Using this latter observation, I consoled the friend who was feeling down for having left Iran before donkeys commanded such high prices (she thought that she had given too many donkey-rides to various people, without proper compensation). With apologies to my academic friends, I hope this story put a smile on your face on this Christmas morning.

Here is a related thought worth sharing: "A man can't ride your back unless it's bent." Martin Luther King, Jr.

(2) Timberline High School staff (in the US state of Washington) surprise students in a pre-Christmas assembly with a [flashmob](#) to the tune of "Don't Stop Believing." [You can skip the first minute of the video, where not much happens.] I know my daughter is smiling as she imagines her teachers in a similar exercise!

2010/12/22 (Wed.): Mice that tweet like birds: Scientists have known for some time that birds do not sing haphazardly. Rather, their singing is governed by linguistic rules that form strings of sounds, much like human speech. To gain insight into the origins of human language, bioscientists at University of Osaka have used genetically engineered 'evolution' to produce a mouse that tweets like a bird. Here are detailed reports about the research in the [Calgary Herald](#) and [Popular Science](#).

2010/12/21 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) This [animated map of Iran](#), shows how its boundaries have changed over the past 5000 years.
- (2) "How, after the experiences of the Clinton and Bush administrations — the first raised taxes and presided over spectacular job growth; the second cut taxes and presided over anemic growth even before the crisis — did we end up with bipartisan agreement on even more tax cuts?" From an op-ed by Paul Krugman in [the New York Times](#), December 19, 2010.

2010/12/20 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) Foreigner Worship ("Bigaaneh Parasti"): What is it with us Iranians that makes us easily impressed with foreigners' attempts at speaking or singing in what is a very rough approximation of Persian, while at the same time poking fun at our fellow Iranians who speak English or other languages with an accent?

A couple of days ago, I posted the preceding comment on Iranian.com, under the video of [a French girl singing](#) Faramarz Aslani's beautiful song "Ageh Yeh Rooz," which apparently impressed a lot of the viewers. A [somewhat better attempt](#) at the same song by an Italian girl was introduced to me by a friend a couple of years ago. This [Dinah Shore video](#) provides a third example. As Iranians, should we really feel proud at these butcherings of the Persian language and songs?

- (2) Radio program on water conservation aired during heavy downpour: This morning, on the way to work, I was listening to a fascinating program on a local NPR station claiming that a group of scientists' hypothesis of 25 years ago (that water usage in the southwestern region of the US is unsustainable, because we are using twice as much surface water as what is deemed sustainable in the long run), has been confirmed with modern modeling tools and more extensive data that are available today. I thought to myself: "Who is in charge of scheduling these programs? Is this the best time to sell the idea of water conservation to listeners: on the fourth day of what promises to be a 10-day heavy rain period?"

2010/12/19 (Sun.): Here are two commentaries and two musical items of potential interest.

- (1) Facebook scam alert: There are many Facebook scams whose sole goal is to have you click on a link at an infected Web site. I recently got one of these, apparently posted by a cousin but likely using her name was part of the scam too. The post claimed that a girl killed herself after her dad posted something on her wall. I can't give you advice on how to detect such scams, except to use common sense. Interestingly, the post was removed a few minutes after it appeared. Either the Facebook management detected and removed it or this too is part of the scam; if you fall for things like this, you tend to act almost immediately, thus removing the post makes it less likely for others to detect the scam. When in doubt, I use a key phrase from a suspicious e-mail or post (in this case "girl killed herself after dad posted"), plus the word "snopes" in a Google search; Snopes.com is a site that keeps track of all sorts of scams. Almost always, I get some entry on snopes.com among the first few search results that assesses the validity of the claims, while providing a history of how/when the scam was initiated.

(2) Today, I watched the documentary film "The People Speak," based on Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Top performers [Benjamin Bratt, Don Cheadle, Matt Damon, Morgan Freeman, Danny Glover, Sandra Oh, Sean Penn, David Strathairn, Marisa Tomei, and more] recreate the voices of American history's most eloquent dissenters, who are by and large excluded from the traditional history books.

(3) Christine McVie, the other Fleetwood Mac singer: Fleetwood Mac is a favorite band of mine, with so many memorable songs. Stevie Nicks of that band had a very successful solo career after the band fell apart in 1997. Lesser known, but equally talented, is the other female band member, Christine McVie, who is responsible for the "Mac" part in the band's name. Some of her noteworthy performances are:

[Over My Head](#); [Say You Love Me](#); [Songbird](#).

- (4) Persian music: Soheil Nafisi, Tehran-born musician with a very calming voice, whose music was influenced by his 20-year stay in the south-central part of Iran, is introduced in this [Iranian.com post](#), with a video of his song "Yare Aziz" and a link to more music from him.

2010/12/18 (Sat.): Here are two musical items and two commentaries of potential interest.

- (1) Music: Sharzad Sepanlou sings "[Les Feuilles Mortes](#)" ("Autumn Leaves") from her 2009 album "To."
- (2) Music: Fataneh Eghbali covers "[Khabeh Nooshin](#)," a song made famous by the late Marzieh.
- (3) New York City is envious of Boston and San Francisco: New York City has come to the conclusion that its

lack of a prestigious graduate school of engineering is hurting its chances of landing the next Google. Cities like Boston and San Francisco have thrived in high-tech industries because they host or are proximate to prestigious engineering schools. According to [the New York Times](#), this is why NYC is "inviting universities around the world to create an engineering campus on city-owned land." Officials cite the establishment of Cornell University's medical school in Manhattan as a precedent.

(4) Posting of comments: It is amusing to observe how comments on a particular post in a blog (particularly when the posting parties are anonymous, as on Iranian.com, e.g.) take on a life of their own and turn into fighting words between perpetually warring parties, with boilerplate phrases that are reused from one post to another. The comments eventually become completely detached from the subject of the original blog post.

2010/12/17 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) New 3D Displays that are Viewable with Naked Eyes: Special glasses for viewing 3D images are inconvenient and also quite pricey if high quality is desired. To make things worse, different glasses are needed for different 3D display products. In one of the better and more expensive varieties of 3D glasses, small LCD displays in front of each eye alternately open and close the view synchronously with the main display, which flashes right-eye and left-eye images in turn. Now, we are finally seeing the first 3D displays that can be viewed with the naked eye. Several emerging technologies are described in an [IEEE Spectrum article](#). As an example, in 3M's Vikuiti display, the screen alternately flashes right-eye and left-eye images as above, with the difference that tiny bumps on a special film layer on the display direct the light to the right eye or left eye, as appropriate. The technology is still at its infancy and requires that the viewer sit still at an exact distance from the display screen for best results.

(2) Why Do Students Lie on Instructor Evaluation Surveys? This item is of direct relevance to my teacher and student readers only, but it is quite fascinating as a topic in psychology. Over the years, I have wondered about the accuracy of teacher evaluations by current students, rather than by alumni, who, due to the elapsed time and their work experience that tells them whether they learned anything useful from an instructor, tend to be more impartial. Now, as an associate dean in charge of merits and promotions, I have to wade through such evaluations as part of the decision process, making the accuracy of the evaluations even more important to me. According to a [Chicago Tribune story](#), students lie on instructor evaluation surveys in part because they want to flatter them, but mostly to exact revenge on those they dislike. On the other side, "Some instructors dumb down their classes or inflate grades to increase the odds students will like them—a practice widely known among professors and studied by researchers, including at Duke University, where researchers found professors who gave higher grades received better evaluations." The report also presents the arguments of critics of the evaluation process and refers to an interview with a student describing how students approach evaluations.

2010/12/16 (Thu.): Talk about paranoia! Recent news stories indicate that a large Star of David appears on top of the Iran Air headquarters in Tehran, apparently placed there by the Israeli firm that constructed the building prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution. A [Google Earth photo](#) shows the Star in a location on top of the building where it does not seem to serve a functional purpose (although it does blend in with the hexagonal building core connecting three wings), so it is reasonable to assume that it was placed there mischievously. Iranian authorities are livid about this discovery and have ordered the Star's removal. It is amazing that with Tehran's smog and various shortages killing people, this issue becomes a priority project. Earlier this year, Iranian media reported on the discovery of hundreds of similar Stars on a monument at Tehran's Revolution Square. Several Web sites made a big fuss about it and some asked for the resignation of Tehran's mayor, under whose jurisdiction the monument was designed and built. Other sources reported that the "discovery" is a ploy by Ahmadinejad and his gang to sideline some of their likely challengers in the next general election. If you can read Persian, there is a [Web site](#) where photos and other "evidence" of a "Zionist takeover" of Tehran's Revolution Square is presented. Interestingly, Hexagons and other six-sided geometric shapes have appeared in art forms of many different geographic regions and cultures, including Iran's own ancient and post-Islamic architecture, Persian carpets, and many Iranian handicrafts. Check out these [examples](#), or do a Google image search for "khatam" to get many more examples. So, it seems that the Iranian regime is simply looking for issues to trigger demonstrations and to divert the attention of its people from serious economic and social problems.

2010/12/15 (Wed.): The last surviving computer technology pioneer passed away on November 29, 2010, at age 97. [Sir Maurice Wilkes](#) is credited with building EDSAC, the first stored-program electronic computer, and pioneering many important ideas in the computing field, including microprogramming and cache memory. He wrote the first-ever book on computer programming, won Association for Computing Machinery's Turing Award (regarded as the "Nobel Prize" of computing) in 1967, and was honored with numerous other recognitions and awards. I was fortunate enough to act as his host when he visited Iran in the mid 1970s, accompanying



him on his various appearances and a personal trip to Esfahan. During our occasional contacts since then, he always mentioned his fond memories of that trip. May he rest in peace!

2010/12/14 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Persian cuisine: [Four-minute news story](#) aired on a Chicago-area ABC channel, featuring a Persian restaurant and its food.
- (2) Persian poetry: Translation (by Manavaz Alexandrian) of the Persian poem "Skeleton of Happiness" from the 2002 book *Trees of Peace*, by [Narges Elikae](#):
She gave up her soul. / They helped her stand from every side. / One of them fixed her cap, / another bound her shoes, / a third person helped her hold her cane. / I who couldn't make her laugh / arranged her teeth. / Her cheeks bulged as if she was smiling. / Now she looks like a happy skeleton. / You may write a good biography for her, / a delicate poem. / You can say that she was born happy, / lived happy / and this is her skeleton of happiness.
- (3) Quite funny: [Iranian mime](#) interprets a piece of classical Persian music.
- (4) "Iran is a great country." Sean Penn speaks against military attack on Iran in this [2-minute video](#).

2010/12/13 (Mon.): Ben Stiller and Janeane Garofalo, *Feel this Audiobook: Instant Therapy Only a Crazy Person Would Ignore*, audiobook read by the authors, Harper Audio, 1999.

Comic actors Stiller and Garofalo take turns in short chapters, talking about relationships in general, and their own unsuccessful one in particular, plus a variety of other subjects. The "he said, she said" format works quite well. I do not know whether they actually had a relationship in the past or they have made one up for the sake of this book. Either way, the humor is great and the two authors/readers manage to engage the audience in their pretend psychoanalytical ramblings.

2010/12/12 (Sun.): Here are two technology-related items of potential interest.

- (1) The problem of space junk: We have not done a good job of cleaning up the Earth, and now, we are facing a similar problem in space. According to an article in [Technology Review](#), more than 0.5 million objects the size of a marble or larger are circling the earth. This "space junk," composed of natural and man-made objects, endangers spacecraft and can be fatal in the case of manned missions. At extremely high speeds, even a walnut-sized object can destroy a large spacecraft. For example, about twice a year, the International Space Station has to be maneuvered to avoid collision with space junk. President Obama has directed NASA to come up with a plan for cleaning up space.
- (2) Technology and free speech: "Open, free, unfettered speech has usually served to expose the abuses of power ... But it doesn't seem to be working out that way [with the new media]. There is more noise and more opinion—but arguably not in the cause of truth. ... These days a wild rumor in an e-mail from your distant cousin can trump the *New York Times*." Evan Thomas, writing in [Newsweek](#).

2010/12/11 (Sat.): Renewed Furor over Persian/Arabian Gulf: I have been receiving a flood of e-mail messages from various individuals and political groups about a US Navy directive to refer to the Persian Gulf as "Arabian Gulf." This directive is characterized as "a move that threatens to exacerbate tensions in a region already pushed to the brink." Don't get me wrong, I am every bit as upset as the next person about this attempt at changing a historically correct name to a fake name. However, we should bear in mind that politically motivated name changes are in fact quite common. Witness the names of the countries constituting the former Soviet Union. How about countries in Africa? How many streets in Tehran still have their pre-1979 names? How many Iranian cities have been renamed over the past 32 years? I simply don't get the argument that this name change would exacerbate tensions in the region. In fact, if we put our Persian pride aside for a moment, we see that the strategy makes perfect sense from the viewpoint of US interests. Far from exacerbating tensions, the move may have a calming influence, as far as the US is concerned. Arab countries, most of which are US allies, will like the move. Iran will not like it, but it is hard to imagine relations between Iran and US getting any worse over this issue. In fact, the mullahs may protest the action to appease the Iranian people, but deep down, they may actually welcome the name change; it will give them another issue for bringing people to the streets to chant "marg bar America," and it will serve well their efforts at Arabizing the Persian culture.

2010/12/10 (Fri.): I remember my late-1970s visit to Tehran's Museum of Modern Art (Moozeh-ye Honar-haa-ye Moaa'ser), sited at the Laleh Park in northern Tehran (Amirabad). This [43-minute gem of a documentary](#) shows the current state of the Museum and traces its history. After a brief reopening during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, the Museum closed its doors to the public; however, its priceless art collection seems to have been carefully preserved in storage. In minute 27, an interviewee recalls an opening-day incident in which the Shah stuck his finger in an oil pond which was installed as artwork, thinking it was a

mirror, not oil. Several of those present, including his wife, were amused and laughed. This led SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, to confiscate the news reports and films of the opening ceremonies.

2010/12/09 (Thu.): Here are three musical items of potential interest.

- (1) This beautiful [3-minute video](#), entitled "Thought of You," was directed and animated by Ryan Woodward and features the song "World Spins Madly On" by the Weepies. Watch the credits at the end for the names of the dancers and choreographer on whose work the animation is based. After you watch the video on YouTube, you get an option to view a 4-minute "Behind the Scenes" video showing the artists at work.
- (2) Vigen performs "[Forever in Love](#)," a song that he wrote for his wife, Karen. The accompanying slide show provides glimpses of this beloved singer's life off-stage.
- (3) Farid Nikfam sings a catchy Persian tune entitled "[Ghor Ghor](#)" ("Grumbling") in this 3-minute video.

2010/12/08 (Wed.): Kidder, Tracy, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House Audio, 2003.

Kidder, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for his book *The Soul of a New Machine*, a fascinating account that took us behind the scenes of a computer design project, opens this book with an account of the misery and poverty in Haiti, and the efforts of Paul Farmer, a Harvard Professor and renowned infectious-disease specialist, who spent most of his time helping the people of Haiti, returning to Harvard for only four months each year. The narrative then moves to other regions of the world (Peru, Cuba, and Russia), where farmer worked his magic. The book's title alludes to "Beyond mountains there are mountains," a Haitian proverb advising that as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself. The charismatic and inordinately persuasive Dr. Farmer not only devotes his own life to solving the health problems of the world's needy, but succeeds in enlisting the help of the Gates Foundation, George Soros, and UN's WHO to set up treatment centers around the globe. This book is full of descriptions of grief and suffering, yet it is a book of hope that conveys a powerful message: that there is plenty of goodness in the human race and that even the most challenging problems can be solved if we stop complaining and roll up our sleeves to make a dent in them.

2010/12/07 (Tue.): Here are two science/technology items of potential interest.

- (1) The search for new drugs goes underwater: According to an [article in Newsweek](#), "advances in technology are making it easier and increasingly profitable to hunt for drugs in the ocean." A very exciting prospect is the ability of a species of cyanobacteria, called "Symploca," to kill cancer cells, while leaving healthy cells virtually unscathed. It is estimated that this new discovery will lead to practical cancer drugs in a decade.
- (2) Engineering Is Not Science: Writing in the December issue of *IEEE Spectrum*, Henri Petroski complains about the mass media's lumping of science and engineering into a single entity, because doing so "can leave politicians, policymakers, and the general public unable to make informed decisions about the technical challenges facing the world today." In this short article, Petroski calls for greater government support of engineering initiatives to solve real-world problems. While scientific understanding is quite helpful for the engineer, there are many instances where engineering innovations preceded scientific developments. The use of steam engines is a case in point, because the science of thermodynamics lagged the development of useful steam-based technology by many decades.

2010/12/06 (Mon.): Today's theme is music, with the following five items.

- (1) Kayhan Kalhor (on kamancheh), Yo-Yo Ma (on cello), and a number of other superb musicians play a piece from the Silk Road Project, entitled "[The Arabian Waltz](#)."
- (2) The 500+ pound Hawaiian singer, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, who died in 1997 at the age of 38, supplies a beautiful rendition of "[Somewhere over the Rainbow](#)."
- (3) Googoosh sings "[Baaraan](#)" (Music by Farid Zoland; Lyrics by Ardalan Sarfaraz).
- (4) Laura Branigan sings a beautiful ballad, "[Foolish Lullaby](#)" (1985). Celine Dion and Paul Anka sing a duet version of the song, with the title "[It's Hard to Say Goodbye](#)." Here is an [earlier duet version](#) by Regine Velasquez and Paul Anka. Check out a [history of this song](#) and its many versions.
- (5) Sing-along version of the classic song "[Always Look on the Bright Side of Life](#)" (with lyrics) gives you a chance to practice your British accent!

2010/12/05 (Sun.): I don't understand why so many people (across the political spectrum) get riled up about the setting of tax rates. This is a very technical issue on which even economists disagree. Everyone, from all political persuasions agrees on progressive tax rates. Now, what the brackets should be and whether the rates should be 10, 15, 25, ... or 15, 20, 40, ... , or any other set of numbers, is not for the average citizen to judge. We can look at the big picture and say, for example, how come we pay taxes at an average rate of $x\%$ but don't have as many services as country y , with a lower average rate? In other words, we can hold politicians and their economic advisors accountable on the end results of tax collection and spending, but the minute details

should not be a topic for daily discussion. I offer the following example to clarify my standpoint in the ongoing debate in the US over taxes. If you believe that 60% is an appropriate tax rate for high incomes, then someone who pays only 50% on \$10M is getting a \$1M "break" or "cut" from your standpoint. The same person is overtaxed by \$1M from the viewpoint of a proponent of a tax rate of 40%. But this is a virtual cut/increase compared with an arbitrarily set rate. Who said that $p\%$ is an ideal rate but that $(p - 10)\%$ would be disastrous? All the rates should be considered fair game for discussion and for adjustment up or down. These are just numbers and none of them is written in stone. The tax rates are ultimately settled by discussion among experts, based on the total desired revenues and economic/monetary policies. We (try to) elect people whose judgement we trust, and we should let them do what they were elected to do, at least until the next election. Resorting to class warfare is counterproductive.

2010/12/04 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest on Iran.

(1) Mehdi Bazargan, the first post-revolutionary prime minister in Iran, is often blamed (perhaps justifiably) for helping the Islamic Republic take roots and become the ruthless dictatorship that it is today. However, he must also be given some credit for daring to stand firm on certain principles. He was ultimately ineffective, but he did give it a try at the risk of personal harm, as witnessed in this [6-minute video](#) compilation.

(2) This poem of Mr. Haloo, [recited by him](#), pokes fun at a story on Fars News Web site in which news analysts claimed that a Candian scientist's research results, indicating that Arab women are less prone to cancer of the larynx than Arab men, can be attributed to the women's Islamic hejab.

2010/12/02 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Photo: If this isn't a Photoshop-altered photo, then it surely represents some sort of world record in the transportation industry. Imagine how much lighter big-city traffic would become if four autos, each carrying one adult, were replaced with a single motorcycle!

(2) Society: Interesting [5-minute video](#) about the image of women created by advertisers and mass media. The subject matter is not new, but Jean Kilbourne's treatment is quite effective.

(3) Technology: Several sources, including [The New Scientist](#), report on a technical breakthrough by IBM that allows electronic and optical components to be integrated on the same silicon chip, using a standard CMOS manufacturing process, with the optics used to speed up data communication among multiple processing units. Given that existing supercomputers are limited by the latency and high power requirements of data exchanges among the various processing nodes, the new technology should accelerate the development of higher performance machines; IBM estimates that an exaflops supercomputer, which is nearly 1000 times more powerful than today's top-of-the-line systems, will materialize within five years.

(4) Quote: "However many people a tyrant slaughters, he cannot kill his successor." Seneca



2010/12/01 (Wed.): It saddens me to see an increasingly intolerant tone in a number of political posts on Facebook and elsewhere. Typically, a post of this kind characterizes the other side of an argument as stupid, uninformed, heartless, etc. Mark Twain was so right: "The rule is perfect: in all matters of opinion our adversaries are insane."

The following statement, written months ago in response to a friend who blasted me, in connection with a book review that I wrote, for being anti-Iran and suggested that I should stop being an Iranian, is illuminating in this regard:

I can't stop being an Iranian. I was born, and spent more than half of my life, in Iran. Even after being forced to leave Iran, I stayed in touch with friends there and kept abreast of political and scientific developments in my homeland. The piece I wrote was a commentary on a book which contains both complimentary and critical observations on Iran. My own comments, if critical of Iran, were either being quoted from the book or arose out of inaccuracies that I saw in it; I was not writing directly on Iran, but on a book about Iran. At any rate, you do not have to read anything that makes you uncomfortable. Or, you may choose to refute what I wrote in my review by offering your own take on the book I reviewed. Unfortunately, we Iranians, having lived only under dictatorial regimes for many decades before relocating to the West, have not developed a taste for free speech, particularly when the speech goes against our beliefs.

2010/11/30 (Tue.): Audiobook Review: *The Spoken Word: American Writers*, BBC, 2008.

It is an awe-inspiring experience to hear authors, whom we have admired through their written works, speak to us in person. This audiobook contains selections from interviews with, biographical films/programs about, and speeches given by 27 contemporary American authors; a companion volume offers the same experience with 30

British authors. Some of the authors are animated and eloquent oral communicators, while others fumble for words or sound rather boring, perhaps because the audio selections used are from the later stages of their lives. The audiobook comes with an informative booklet containing brief bios and other facts. A number of the authors were born outside the US and later became American citizens. I particularly liked the segment on Arthur Miller, where he sheds some light on Marilyn Monroe's troubled life and his relationship with her, as well as his dealings with US Congress's Un-American Activities Committee. Here is a list of the authors represented: (1) Gertrude Stein, 1874-1946; (2) Sinclair Lewis, 1885-1951; (3) Anita Loos, 1888?-1981; (4) Raymond Chandler, 1888-1959; (5) Eugene O'Neill, 1888-1953; (6) Henry Miller, 1891-1980; (7) Pearl Buck, 1892-1973; (8) James Thurber, 1894-1961; (9) F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896-1940; (10) Thornton Wilder, 1897-1975; (11) Vladimir Nabokov, 1899-1977; (12) John Steinbeck, 1902-1968; (13) Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1904-1991; (14) Lillian Hellman, 1905-1984; (15) James Michener, 1907-1997; (16) Eudora Welty, 1909-2001; (17) Tennessee Williams, 1911-1983; (18) Mary McCarthy, 1912-1989; (19) William S. Burroughs, 1914-1997; (20) Ralph Ellison, 1914-1994; (21) Saul Bellow, 1915-2005; (22) Arthur Miller, 1915-2005; (23) Patricia Highsmith, 1921-1995; (24) James Baldwin, 1924-1987; (25) William Styron, 1925-2006; (26) Gore Vidal, 1925-; (27) Toni Morrison, 1931-

2010/11/29 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Music: Emaad Raam on Flute, accompanied by philharmonic orchestras, plays three of his compositions "[Arvand Rood](#)," "[Talieye Omid](#)," and "[Raghse Parvaneh](#)."

(2) Music: Six-year-old girl shows her mastery of different musical styles on the television show "[Ellen](#)."

(3) Poem: This posting of Simin Behbahani's "[Zani raa Mishenassam Man](#)" ("There is a Woman I Know") is more readable than others in terms of typeface and formatting, but it lists the poet as "Anonymous."

(4) Poem: Hadi Khorsandi recites an interesting poem of his, entitled "Children of Iran," on a [TV program](#).

2010/11/27 (Sat.): Who needs jokes, when there are Sara Palin quotes? Here are a few priceless ones. When I read the first of these, I doubted its authenticity, so did a Google book search. Sure enough, the sentence was in the book, set in italics for emphasis!

(1) From her book, *Going Rogue*: "If God had not intended for us to eat animals, how come He made them out of meat?"

(2) On writing notes on her hand during the Tea Party convention speech: "I didn't really had a good answer, as so often — is me."

(3) In a 2008 interview with Katie Couric: "Our, our next-door neighbors are foreign countries, there in the state that I am the executive of."

(4) In a 2008 interview with Katie Couric: "Nuclear weaponry, of course, would be the be-all, end-all of just too many people in too many parts of our planet."

(5) In a July 18, 2010 tweet: "'Refudiate,' 'misunderestimate,' 'wee-wee'd up.' English is a living language. Shakespeare liked to coin new words too. Got to celebrate it!"

(6) In a 2010 campaign speech: "The perversion over these last years of what the media has done to conservatives, I think it's appalling and it violates our freedom of the press."

(7) At a 2008 fundraiser in SF: "They are also building schools for the Afghan children so that there is hope and opportunity in our neighboring country of Afghanistan."

2010/11/25 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest:

(1) Science: All the physics experts and EEs out there should take a stab at explaining why the coil connected to the top of the battery and a magnet touching the battery's base starts spinning ([video](#)).

(2) Music: Hooman Tabrizi's [solo piano performance](#) of "Armenian Rhapsody," a Javad Ma'roofi composition.

(3) Thanksgiving: On this Thanksgiving day, I am thankful for three healthy, bright children, a loving and supportive family, and many caring friends.

2010/11/24 (Wed.): UCSB's disappointing Exit from the NCAA soccer tournament: Well, UCSB's soccer season is over after being defeated at UC Berkeley 1-2 on Sunday. UCSB led 1-0 until the 89th minute, when a penalty kick awarded to Berkeley (a questionable call, it is claimed by some) allowed them to tie the game. Then, Berkeley scored 2 seconds from the end of the first 10-minute overtime period. UCSB's Luis Silva was ejected in the 25th minute, so the team played shorthanded for the rest of the game. In a [video captured by a UCSB student](#), you see that the ejection was unfair: a Berkeley player in white punches and pushes Silva, following a tackle by him. The Berkeley player (who ended up scoring the winning goal) got a yellow card and Silva got a red card, in a clear violation of NCAA rules. Apparently a few UCSB students and staff members tried to retaliate against the referee at the end of the game, and they are now being investigated by the university for unsportsmanlike conduct.

2010/11/23 (Tue.): Here are five interesting quotes for today.

- (1) "When you feel dog-tired at night, it may be because you've growled all day long." Anonymous
- (2) "To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved." George Macdonald
- (3) "There are as many martyrs for bad causes as for good ones." Anonymous
- (4) "Never try to reason the prejudice out of a man. It was not reasoned into him, and cannot be reasoned out." Sydney Smith
- (5) "A conscience is what hurts when all your other parts feel good." Steven Wright

2010/11/22 (Mon.): Remember and honor the past, but don't let it ruin your present: A common thread in many posts on Facebook and elsewhere by friends in their 40s, 50s, and 60s is a desire to return to a simpler, more romantic, and less "mechanical" past. And this tendency is shared by both my Iranian friends and those from other nationalities. So, rather than comment on these individual posts, I decided to create this blog entry. We all romanticize about the past. The truth is that the past was likely no different from the present. Injustices, cruelties, deceptions, and egotism have existed throughout the human history. The difference is that in our younger years, we were full of enthusiasm and hope. Everything seemed brighter, larger, and more cheerful than it actually was. So, my advice is: do remember and honor the past, but don't let it ruin your present. Put most of your energies into taking full advantage of today. A lot of things that seem to be wrong with the present can be fixed, or at least improved, with our efforts, if only we spend less time fretting over the past.

2010/11/21 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Music: Beautiful performance of "Tell Me Why" by Declan Galbraith ([video, with lyrics](#)). This song was released in 2002, just before Galbraith turned 11.
- (2) Photography: This [80-gigapixel panoramic photo](#) of London (that's 10,000 times the number of pixels in a normal high-res photo) is the largest 360-degree panorama in the world. The resolution is so high that you may be able to recognize people on the streets and through windows when you zoom in. Here is an article in [The Daily Mail](#) about this incredible photo.
- (3) Some interesting quotes on television: "Television is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living room by people you wouldn't have in your home." David Frost
"A good TV mystery is one where it's hard to detect the sponsor." Anon.
"TV has made dull conversationalists of us all—it even has people to talk about the weather for us." Anon.
- (4) Objectification of women in a "civilized" country: When we hear about societies with limited opportunities for women and poor records in protecting their rights, we tend to think only of third-world countries, particularly those in the Middle East. Well, there is an example much closer to us. In Italy, women are routinely objectified and earn much less than their male counterparts. The photo accompanying a [Newsweek article](#) on the subject shows the current Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, checking out the figure of a world champion swimmer who is supposedly being honored. Berlusconi has been at the center of several sex scandals and has been criticized for demeaning statements about women. With a leader like this, what else can one expect?

2010/11/20 (Sat.): Book Review: Understanding Human Motivation

Pink, Daniel H., *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Penguin Audio, 2009.

Human motivation is far more complicated than economists would have us believe. Our greatest accomplishments result from a desire to be creative and to do good (intrinsic motivation), not produced by the carrot-and-stick system of extrinsic rewards prevalent in our businesses, schools, and societies. The author likens our system of motivating people to a computer operating system, with its different releases when we have paradigm shifts and minor modifications when updated versions appear. With this analogy, Motivation 1.0 was the stone-age system based on our survival instinct and primal urges. Motivation 2.0 is the carrot-and-stick system, which has evolved into version 2.1 with minor tweaks. Motivation 3.0, already adopted by some cutting-edge companies, contains the three principal elements of true motivation: autonomy (as opposed to being "managed"), mastery (putting in the hard work needed to become truly skillful at what we do), and purpose (belief that we are working towards something larger than ourselves). The author maintains that science knows way more about human motivation than the current state of practice in our businesses and schools. Listening to this audiobook was an eye-opening (ear-opening?) experience for me.

Here is an [11-minute animated video summary](#) of the author's ideas, as presented in a talk at RSA.

2010/11/19 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote: "There was no respect for youth when I was young, and now that I am old, there is no respect for age—I missed it coming and going." J. B. Priestly
- (2) You may have seen pictures of buses and trucks in India, with people hanging on to the sides, some

appearing to be ready to fall off at any time. Now, the situation is a bit different in the more civilized, and safety conscious Japan. There, people are pushed into trains by what seems to be professional "train pushers," until the doors can be closed. [Watch for yourself.](#)

(3) Music/Comedy: Harpo and Chico Marx (of The Marx Brothers) play "Mama Yo Quiero" in this [3-minute clip](#) from one of their movies, "The Big Store."

(4) Presidential plagiarism? [The Guardian](#), citing *The Huffington Post*, reveals eerie similarities between George W. Bush's writing, in his recently published memoir, and those of other writers.

(5) Science: One more vision from sci-fi movies comes to life. [Robonaut-2 \(R-2\)](#) is a humanoid robot that NASA will deploy to help astronauts, particularly to replace them in performing dangerous tasks, such as spacewalks.

2010/11/18 (Thu.): Antimatter, in the form of antihydrogen atoms, observed for a fraction of a millisecond: *Nature News* reports an important milestone in the epic search for antimatter. Scientists believe that the Big Bang created equal amounts of matter and antimatter, with the latter somehow disappearing and not detected until recently. "Now a research collaboration at CERN, Europe's particle-physics lab near Geneva, Switzerland, has managed, 38 times, to confine single antihydrogen atoms in a magnetic trap for more than 170 milliseconds." (Read the [full article.](#))

2010/11/17 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Music: "Kabouki," a lively Kurdish song by the Kamkars Ensemble ([10-min video](#)).

(2) Dance: These [Azeri dancers](#) put Irish dancers to shame with their extremely fast footwork!

(3) Quote: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." Timothy Keller

2010/11/15 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A new book, *OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word*, reveals how the word "okay" or "OK" was born (abbreviated form of the intentionally misspelled "oll korrekt") and how it became universal, as one of the greatest contributions of America to the world. More details can be found in this [Newsweek article](#).

(2) In her [Newsweek column](#) (issue of November 8, 2010), Sharon Begley argues that instead of stuffing our kids' minds with facts and rules, it would be much more productive to equip them with BS (bad science) detectors. Falling for "bad" science is in her opinion worse than not knowing about "good" scientific facts.

(3) Acquired traits can be inherited just like genetic traits: In a [Newsweek article](#) (issue of November 8, 2010), Sharon Begley writes about some surprising new discoveries in the way certain traits are transmitted from parents to children. Briefly, genes have "switches" that can turn them on or off. Certain behaviors and experiences modify the settings of these switches, leading to abnormalities and diseases such as type-2 diabetes. Until very recently, it was believed that traits are inherited via genes, but that the associated switches are reset in a newborn, giving him or her a blank slate. There is now overwhelming evidence that a not so insignificant fraction of these switch settings are also inherited, causing, for example, lung disease in children whose mothers smoke (and not only if they do it during pregnancy). The transfer can even occur from the father's side, via his sperms. Fascinating stuff!

(4) Last night, I attended Anoushirvan Rohani's concert at UCLA's Royce Hall. He had put together a diverse program, containing his first composition at the age of six, a number of his well-known songs (out of 500 over his 60+ years in the music business; he is 71 years old), and a song composed by his son Reza, who played the piano alongside his dad. Guest singers were Moein, Martik, and Emel Sayin. On some songs, A. Rohani played the accordion. Here is an Anoushirvan Rohani song, entitled "[Maybe I, Maybe You,](#)" which I discovered on a fan page.

2010/11/14 (Sun.): Angelou, Maya, *Letter to My Daughter*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House Audio, 2008.

This fairly short 2-CD audiobook contains a collection of 28 essays (and a few poems) on life, motherhood, and humanity. In the introduction, the author tells us: "I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are black and white, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all." The following passage from one of the essays is particularly relevant to the current troubled times in the US: "How have we come so late and lonely to this place? When did we relinquish our desire for a high moral ground to those who clutter our national landscape with vulgar accusations and gross speculations? ... Politicians must be told if they continue to sink into the mud of obscenity, they will proceed alone." Even though much of the book is addressed specifically to women, I did enjoy listening to it and recommend it to everyone.

2010/11/13 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) I have been following, with some amusement, discussions surrounding the Persian movie "Paayaan-

Naameh" ("Thesis"). Rumors about the movie's depiction of the Iranian folk hero Neda Agha-Soltan in possibly unfavorable light have caused a tidal wave of criticism, forcing the producers to issue a statement that the movie is a fictional police drama, and although it happens shortly after the disputed Iranian elections of 2009, the storyline has no bearing on Neda. The movie is advertised thus: "A number of students who try to deliver their theses to a professor get entangled in a complicated plot." The said professor is apparently a foreign spy. If the producers of this movie never intended to muddle the image of Neda (or perhaps changed their minds after the onslaught of criticism), they at least get to attack another one of IRI's favorite targets, one that does not enjoy as much popular support: the evil-doing professor.

(2) The recently rescued Chilean miners were lucky that they were mining for copper and gold. Had they been trapped in a coal mine, they would not have been able to communicate with their rescuers without the danger of deadly explosions resulting from the highly volatile methane-air mixture present in such mines. New mining regulations now being implemented require the availability of communications equipment that leak far less than 0.5 millijoules of energy, the amount needed to trigger an explosion. Work is also in progress to allow communication signals to be sent through rocks, using a small fraction of energy currently required for this purpose; normal radio communication is ineffective in collapsed areas that are more than a few hundred meters underground. [Summarized from the November issue of *IEEE Spectrum*, p. 20.]

2010/11/12 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Facebook hasn't been around long enough to contain the record of an entire life, but this [3-minute video](#) imagines what a lifetime's record of statuses, likes, friendships, and relationships would look like.

(2) I had seen sneaky plays in baseball (hiding the ball, and so on), but this [quarterback's casual stroll](#) past the defensive players is something else.

(3) Golshifteh Farahani's [interview video clip](#), in which she talks about why Iranians are so good at lying. When posted on Iranian.com, the clip generated a lot of discussion, with some commenters taking offense at her characterization of Iranians as liars and others supporting her views, in the context that she offered them. The interview is in English, with French subtitles.

(4) "It has taken four highly qualified engineers and a bunch of integral equations to figure it out, but we now know how cats drink. The answer is: very elegantly, and not at all the way you might suppose. Cats lap water so fast that the human eye cannot follow what is happening, which is why the trick had apparently escaped attention until now." Read the rest of the story in [the New York Times](#).

(5) Mr. Haloo (Mohammad Reza Ali Payam) strikes again, with a few pieces of [humorous poetry and prose](#).

2010/11/11 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Did you know that four is half of five? Here is the proof: $F(IV)E$.

(2) It is interesting how this [Arabic song](#) performed with guitars and drums helps expose the common roots of Arabic and Spanish musical styles.

(3) "Iran to Defend Women's Rights and Philosophy? No, Unfortunately, it's Not a Joke" is the title of an [article by Bernard-Henri Levy](#), a French philosopher and moralist.

(4) Today, I came across an [Iranian.com Persian post](#) in which it is claimed that Anoushirvan Rohani's famous birthday song ("Tavallodat Mobaarak") was inspired by the Mexican song "La Cucaracha," with a [video of Liberace's rendition](#) offered as evidence. I do see some similarities between the two, but not being musical myself, I refrain from issuing a verdict. This, however, opens a can of worms: Many Iranian songs are based on songs from other nations, with the original songwriter almost never credited. The one that comes to my mind immediately is Googoosh's "Talaagh," which is a direct copy of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Heaven on Their Minds" from "Jesus Christ Superstar." I remember how confused I was when I first heard the latter version, wondering why the original songwriter was never mentioned by Googoosh or others in the Iranian music scene. In universities, we teach students that using other people's work without citing the source, or otherwise crediting the original thinker, is considered theft and has serious consequences if discovered. The group "Professors Against Plagiarism" is quite active in promoting scientific honesty in Iran. I have long wondered why for us Iranians, the same does not apply in other domains.

2010/11/10 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Breathtaking aerial photographs, from Yann Arthus-Bertrand's ["Earth from Above"](#) collection.

(2) I have mixed feelings about [videos like this one](#), a number of which have been posted on Facebook in recent weeks. While I admire the talent exhibited by these children at a very young age, as well as their determination and hard work in learning very complicated dance moves, I can't help but worry about the increasing sexualization of children.

(3) Josh Groban had an unusual concert in Santa Barbara tonight in a relatively small venue (Granada Theater), with only two musicians (guitar and piano/accordion). This "Before We Begin" pretour concert precedes the release of his new album "Illuminations," a free copy of which will be sent to every attendee.

2010/11/08 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) A beautiful song from Martina McBride, entitled "[In My Daughter's Eyes](#)" (includes lyrics). "In my daughter's eyes, I can see the future / A Reflection of who I am, and what will be / And though she'll grow and someday leave, maybe raise a family / When I'm gone I hope you'll see, how happy she made me."
- (2) A fascinating [panoramic view of Paris](#), from the top of the Eiffel Tower. You can control the 360-degree viewing direction, zoom-in/out, and move up and down.
- (3) Breathtaking aerial photographs, from Yann Arthus-Bertrand's "[Earth from Above](#)" collection.

2010/11/07 (Sun.): Today, I give you three sociopolitical commentaries.

- (1) Peggy Noonan, one of my favorite columnists (though I do disagree with her conservative views on occasion) [vents against lightweight Republicans](#) comparing themselves to Ronald Reagan and seeking a free ride on his legacy.
- (2) Listen to this [interview on Iranian TV](#), in which a supposed "scholar" claims, beginning in minute 4 of the video, that all who go to heaven will automatically speak Arabic (even if they did not know the language before), while speaking Arabic is not an option in Hell, where non-Arabic (ajam) languages prevail. The host of the program seems to be having fun with the guy's "araajeef" (nonsense).
- (3) President Obama was on "[60 Minutes](#)" today, brilliantly defending his decision to appear on a number of low-brow TV programs. He said the days are gone when a president could call a news conference, the three major networks would come, and everyone got to hear what the president had to say. Now, one must reach different groups of people via different programs.

2010/11/06 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) The incredibly brave Hila Sedighi reads for the first time a poem she composed last year. Here is the English translation of a powerful verse from the poem, which is entitled "[Sabz Ast Dobaareh](#)" ("It's Green, Once Again"): Heedless that the ax has no home other than the grove / It is of the same essence as the trees, except with no roots.
- (2) A beautifully done [public-service ad](#) for buckling up while driving.

2010/11/05 (Fri.): According to a [Chicago Tribune article](#), children and young adults should be taught that there is a wealth of on-line resources besides Google and Wikipedia. A task force of the American Association of School Librarians has studied the best educational Web sites for kindergarten through 12th grade and posted this year's [top 25 Web sites](#) for Teaching and Learning on the American Library Association's site. The sites were chosen based on credibility, ease of use, interactivity, and affordability. Of the resources I examined, I particularly liked prezi.com (where you can create dynamic presentations), National Endowment for the Humanities' Edsitement (history and social studies), and watchknow.org (organized and indexed videos for learning).

2010/11/04 (Thu.): Here are two musical items.

- (1) Hooman Tabrizi plays Anoushirvan Rohani's "[Eshgh-e Moghaddas](#)" ("Sacred Love").
- (2) Beethoven's Fifth, arranged [with a salsa beat](#). Reminds me of [its disco version](#) from the 1970s, entitled "A Fifth of Beethoven."

2010/11/02 (Tue.): Some interesting banners seen in Saturday's Rally to Restore Sanity in Washington, DC:

- "Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination." Mark Twain
 "Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth." Franklin D. Roosevelt
 "My comedy channel: Fox News. My news channel: Comedy Central."
 "I'm mad as hell, and I am going to take a deep breath and count to 10."
 "When making a sign, make sure to leave enough sp"
 "So many gray areas, so little gray matter."
 "Even if I hate your shitty ideas, I won't crush your skull."
 "Cut spending now, but don't you dare touch my [long list of benefits]."
 "If a Republican speaks in the forest, and no one hears him, is he still wrong?"
 "Yeah, well, you know, that's just like, uh, your opinion man."
 "All I ever needed to know (to govern) I learned in kindergarten: play fair; clean up your own mess."
 "I know the difference between fascism, communism, and socialism, and I don't use them interchangeably."
 "America: Love it, or contact your elected representatives to try to fix the things you don't like."



2010/11/01 (Mon.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Alireza Ghorbani, the Kereshmeh Ensemble, and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra perform "Parto-ye Sham'e" ("Candlelight") in this [8-minute video](#).

(2) Wow! It seems that a large number of people, myself included, were duped by Shahkar Bineshpajoo. I just discovered a blog where the video of the song "Vasat-e Ghalbam" (Persian version of "Sway"), that I posted on 2010/10/19, is exposed as a fake. It is claimed in a Persian blog (and I have no reason to doubt its accuracy) that the performance was taped without an audience in Yerevan, Armenia, and the shots were intermixed with those of an audience in Vienna, who attended a classical music concert. Neither of the venues was in Barcelona, as claimed at the beginning of the video clip. Well, I should have suspected that something was amiss, given the absence of obviously Iranian faces among the audience. I still like his performance. And fakery, be it the use of backup singers to cover an artist's weaknesses, cosmetic surgery, laugh and applause tracks, and the like are all too common in music and cinema. But still, telling an outright lie leaves a bad taste that affects one's view of an artist.

2010/10/31 (Sun.): Here is an interesting puzzle from the November issue of *Communications of the ACM*: Imagine a large rectangle completely covered with (subdivided into) smaller rectangles. Each of these smaller rectangles has the property that at least one of its dimensions, width or height, is an integer. Show that the big rectangle must also have one integer side length. Note that the smaller rectangles must have sides parallel to those of the big one, or else they cannot competely fill it. You can view this as a room being tiled with rectangular tiles of different sizes.

Read the following solution (due to my son, Sepehr) only after you have given the puzzle a try:

Place the big rectangle on a large checkerboard surface of 0.5-by-0.5 cm squares, with two adjacent sides on the grid. Any rectangle with one side length an integer (an even multiple of 0.5) will cover an equal amount of white and black areas on the checkerboard surface. Because all the little rectangles have this property, the big rectangle must also possess it, given that its area is the sum of the areas of the little rectangles. It is easy to prove, by contradiction, that any rectangle that covers an equal amount of white and black areas must have a side length that is an integer.

2010/10/29 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Steve Jobs, who never graduated from college himself, was the keynote speaker at Stanford University's 2005 commencement ceremonies. In his speech, Jobs told three stories about his birth/adoption, getting fired from Apple Computer (a company he had cofounded), and being diagnosed with a usually fatal form of cancer. He talked about the positive impacts of these events on his personal and professional lives. At 15 minutes, [Job's speech](#) is well worth a listen.

(2) China's Powerful Supercomputer: According to a story in yesterday's *New York Times*, "A Chinese scientific research center has built the fastest supercomputer ever made, replacing the United States as maker of the swiftest machine, and giving China bragging rights as a technology superpower." Computationally, the \$88M Tianhe-1A (meaning "Milky Way" in Mandarin) is 40% more powerful than US's Cray XT5 Jaguar, the current top contender, with peak performance of about 2 Petaflops. The list of top 500 supercomputers in the world, compiled every six months, will not be released until early November, so there is a tiny possibility that in the next few days, an even faster computer is announced. Barring that, however, China will hold the top spot among the world's most powerful computers for the first time ever (Japan held it briefly a few years ago).

(3) Question: What is the difference between theory and practice?

Answer: In theory, they are not that different, but in practice, they are quite different.

2010/10/28 (Thu.): "When You Say Motherland" (a Persian poem): Here is a very courageous and heartfelt poem by Mostafa Badkoobei, [as read by him](#) in a poetry session in Iran. The poem, obviously directed at the current rulers in Iran, contrasts their use of the term "motherland," to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of many Iranians, with his own view of the term as representing a country whose ancient traditions and values are in stark contrast to the harsh attitude and joyless demeanor prescribed by the conservative clergy. One verse of the poem reads: "Your Iran, in the name of religion, turns women into prisoners / My Iran deems women worthy of bejeweled crowns."

Disclaimer: The use of the term "taazi" (derived from a Persian word for "rush" or "invasion") to refer to Arabs is viewed as racist by some, although others, citing Ferdowsi's usage in *Shahnameh*, vehemently disagree with this view. Because of this ambiguity and disagreement, in my humble opinion, one should refrain from using the term.

2010/10/27 (Wed.): Here are five musical items of potential interest.

(1) Mohammad Nouri sings "[Iran Iran](#)," a beautiful love song for my motherland.

(2) Hooman Tabrizi plays Anoushirvan Rohani's "Mother" in this [3-minute video](#).

(3) Mohammad Reza Mortazavi's masterful solo tombak performance, "[Seriously Joking](#)," in Berlin. Also listen to his solo tombak rendition of "[Mobaarakbaad](#)" (Persian wedding song).

(4) Words spoken by several scientists and science journalists [put to music](#). Pretty interesting!

(5) "Ebony, ivory, living in perfect harmony," muse Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder in this beautiful [classic song from 1982](#).

2010/10/26 (Tue.): Here are two items about the status of US in the world.

(1) Health care: US's health care system ranks 37th in the world, says the World Health Organization. Here are a [funny song](#) to celebrate this achievement and the [complete rankings](#) for 190 countries.

(2) Education: Yesterday's [New York Times](#) described the sad state of education in the United States. The US national academies have reported that we rank 27th out of 29 wealthy countries in the proportion of college students with degrees in science or engineering. Simultaneously, the World Economic Forum has ranked the US 48th out of 133 nations in the quality of math and science instruction.

2010/10/25 (Mon.): Faith, Trust, Hope: Today, I received an e-mail message from a friend that contained recommendations for living life with faith, trust, and hope, citing an example of each. Previously, others had sent me e-mail messages with the same musings and examples.

Faith: The boy, who was the only one taking an umbrella to a rain prayer ceremony, had faith.

Trust: A baby, who giggles as you toss him up in the air, exhibits trust.

Hope: Anyone, who plans the next day's activities before going to bed, despite lack of absolute certainty that he will wake up tomorrow, is hopeful.

I wrote back to him that even though I agreed life should be lived with faith, trust, and hope, his examples were inappropriate.

(1) Praying for rain represents superstition, not faith. Faith is when I know I will overcome some hardship with determination and divine assistance. Praying for rain is no more enlightened than dancing for rain.

(2) A baby giggling when you toss it in the air is an example of cluelessness: ignorance of laws of physics and the human capacity for error. An enlightened baby would say, "Hey, I know you mean well and want me to have fun, but let's do a safer activity!"

(3) Going to sleep, knowing that you will wake up the next day is an example of routine, near-certain events. The difference between hope and despair shows up when the probability of the unfavorable outcome is non-negligible. Even highly pessimistic people believe that they will wake up tomorrow. Hope is exemplified by expecting to find the mate or job of your dreams.

2010/10/23 (Sat.): So, you thought we live in a 3-D world (4, if you count the time dimension). Well, it turns out that the existence of the third dimension has not been proven (don't ask me why, I am just reporting something that I do not understand yet). According to [Popular Science](#), Fermilab researchers are building a "holometer" which they hope will help "to either prove or disprove the somewhat mind-bending notion that the third dimension doesn't exist at all, and that the 3-D universe we think we live in is nothing more than a hologram." They hope to achieve their goal by magnifying spacetime to see if it is indeed as noisy as the math suggests it might be.

2010/10/22 (Fri.): Here are two science/technology news items of potential interest.

(1) According to [Wired Science](#), "Textbooks designed to be all-digital and interactive from the start ... could bring not only salvation to schools because they're easily updated, but also a revolution in how students learn science. Yet publishers are comfortable with a \$5 billion-per-year college textbook industry that has recently seen price increases outpace inflation by more than 250 percent, and 99 percent of the market is tied to paper." The E. O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation plans to change this picture over the next 2.5 years, hoping "to complete a 59-chapter digital textbook about biology called Life on Earth." As each chapter is completed, it will be made available to the public for free. The first chapter should appear in a few weeks.

(2) Years ago it was the battle of human versus machine in the game of chess, with pundits saying that there is no way a machine can beat a world chess champion. That battle was eventually settled in favor of the machine. Now, [Popular Science](#) reports that a precisely engineered bowling machine was beaten by a human. I wonder how long it will be before machines prevail in this arena as well? Watch the [video of the bowling match](#), which is quite amusing; the human player trash-talks to the robot and attributes his win to the opponent's "lack of TV experience"!

2010/10/20 (Wed.): Advice to avoid Facebook applications and games: At the risk of sounding alarmist, I strongly suggest to my friends to avoid Facebook games and other apps. According to news stories in the past couple of days, a number of developers of such applications have been caught making unauthorized use of the information they collect. Most of these "goodies" are simply not worth the risk of exposing your date of birth, e-

mail address, family relationships, music preferences, political leanings, and other private data to spammers and more serious scammers. If you like roses, for instance, you can get beautiful pictures of them via Google images. You don't need a Facebook application for this. The same goes for horoscopes, IQ tests, or anything else that appeals to you. As someone who makes a living through teaching/research in computer technology, I thought I needed to warn you about these dangers.

2010/10/19 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Shahkar Bineshpajooch sings "**Vasat-e Ghalbam**," the Persian version of the classic song "Sway," in an attempt to brand himself "The Persian Michael Buble" (just kidding about the last part)! The lyrics are a bit "band-e toombooni" (if you pardon the expression), but his playful performance is refreshing. What a magnificent venue in Barcelona!

(2) Surena 2, a humanlike robot under development at University of Tehran's Advanced Vehicles Center, is featured in *IEEE Spectrum's October 2010 issue* as one of the four humanoid robots that are viewed as worthy challengers to the industry leader Sony Asimo. The news story indicates that Surena 2 walks rather slowly, but that it can bow, stand on one leg, and dance (this latter part is rather hard to believe, for obvious reasons; LOL).

2010/10/18 (Mon.): Today's two items come to you from Iran's Kurdistan.

(1) Hassan Zirak, a favorite of my parents' generation in Kurdistan, sings "Kataneh" in this [6-minute video](#).

(2) A very lively Kurdish song. Get up and dance to Naser Rezazi's "**Berzi Berzi**"!

2010/10/16 (Sat.): Gilbert, Elizabeth, *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Penguin Audio, 2010.

This new book, by the author of the best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, contains the story of how the author, who, after a failed marriage had decided never to remarry, is literally "sentenced to wed" when her Brazilian boyfriend, Felipe, faces deportation due to the Homeland Security Department's refusal to let him continue living in the US on a visa-to-visa basis (leaving and returning before each visa's expiration). The book actually has three intertwined threads. One thread is a travelog, which is a somewhat boring compendium of random social, historical, and geographical facts, mostly about southeast Asia, where the author chose to live while awaiting the outcome of her boyfriend's marriage-based visa process. A second thread describes the author's relationship with Felipe. While containing some gems, such as when Felipe opines, "I believe a woman's place is in the kitchen ... sitting in a comfortable chair, with her feet up, drinking a glass of wine and watching her husband cook dinner," this thread contains quite a bit of uninteresting detail for most readers. The book's strength lies in the third thread that covers the history of marriage throughout the human history and the various forms it takes in different cultures. For example, the author maintains that for much of human history, and until very recently, marriage had been merely an socioeconomic contract and that the notion of romantically based marriage, with religious connotations, is fairly new. According to the author, feminists have started to embrace the institution of marriage, with the aim of reforming it from within, perhaps to push it back to its historical form and intent. I enjoyed listening to this audiobook and recommend it to my friends, with the reservations just outlined.

2010/10/15 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) The longest tunnel in the world is inching toward its completion in 2015: According to the Associated Press, the breakthrough moment, when excavations from the two ends finally connect, will occur today. This is an important milestone in the process of building the 57-kilometer (35.4-mile) Gotthard Base Tunnel, connecting Germany and Italy via high-speed rail. The \$10-billion tunnel will ease the road traffic through the Swiss Alps, thereby reducing erosion and other adverse environmental effects in this pristine environment.

(2) A musical performance, entitled "To Bemaan," in memory of Mohammad Nouri. Beautiful arrangement and performance! Here is the [5-minute video](#).

(3) Marzieh, in her later years (shortly before passing away), accompanied by a large orchestra, sings her memorable song "**Ashk-e Man Hoveydaa Shod**" ("My Tears Appeared").

(4) A new Middle Eastern take on the classic 1964 Nina Simone song "**Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood**," which The Animals popularized in 1965.

(5) Classic Persian song "**Golnaar**," performed by Kouros Sarhangzadeh.

2010/10/14 (Thu.): People all around the world are euphoric after the last (33rd) of the trapped Chilean miners and the 6 rescue workers, who descended to help with what has been called a "flawless rescue effort," were extracted from their shelter located half a mile underground. [The rescue capsule](#) used had barely enough space for a skinny person. Reportedly, some of the trapped miners had been advised to lose weight to enable their rescue. Some interesting side stories are being reported: (1) A miner proposed to his long-time

girlfriend while trapped underground; the reverse also happened, with a girlfriend proposing to her trapped sweetheart. I guess you can use the Persian saying "az chaaleh beh chaah" here! (2) The wife of one of the miners, while happy that he survived, wants nothing to do with him, because after the collapse of the mine, she learned about him having a girlfriend.

2010/10/13 (Wed.): Marzieh, one of the most popular and prolific Iranian singers passed away in Paris today, at the age of 85. May she rest in peace! One of her memorable songs is this [duet with Banan](#), entitled "Boo-ye Joo-ye Mooliaan."

2010/10/12 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Killing three birds with one stone: Driverless cars will reduce traffic delays, improve safety, and conserve energy. According to the [New York Times](#), "Google Inc. is road-testing cars that steer, stop and start without a human driver." So far, according to a Google blog, "the cars have traveled a total of 140,000 miles on major California roads without much human intervention." Traffic delays will be reduced because such cars can travel safely with much less separation between them, increasing highway capacities. Safety will improve because the cars will have access to a wealth of information, from location and traffic conditions to the movements of nearby cars, detected by various sensors and cameras. Energy efficiency will improve by a reduction of stop-and-go road conditions, travel at optimal speeds, and facilitation of carpooling.

(2) A few days ago, I came across a YouTube video of a speech by Hassan Abbasi, a political analyst and strategist closely linked to the Islamic regime in Iran. In the [15-minute video clip](#) (which is in Persian), he relates a question asked of him earlier by a university student, who wondered why, with all the poor and needy in Iran, the Islamic regime provides financial support to groups in Lebanon and Gaza. His answer, which he describes in detail, is very telling and surprisingly candid, so much so that I won't be surprised if he is forced out because of it. Here is the gist of his answer (not verbatim, but summarized and reworded): There are several ministries and other organizations in Iran expressly charged with attending to the poor and needy. If they are not doing their jobs well, you have to address those entities and hold them accountable. The aid to Hezbollah and Hamas comes from IRI's defense budget, because it has been determined to be the most cost-effective way of fighting Iran's enemies. The very expensive and highly advanced Sahand frigate was hit by two missiles from a distance of 150 km, right after leaving port. Similarly, any advanced submarine or aircraft will cost a lot of money, will be hard to maintain for dearth of spare parts, and will be destroyed swiftly in any conflict. A fraction of the money needed for such advanced systems spent on groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas produces much better results with regard to Iran's security [end of his comments]. I am amazed that he acknowledged this strategy of using proxies to fight and die on behalf of IRI, not to mention openly admitting financial support for militant groups. He is essentially saying that Arab lives are less valuable and more cheaply bought than those of IRI's Sepah. This assessment may be quite correct, but not something IRI would want the Arab street to hear, hence my prediction of the guy being forced out shortly.

The analysis above was posted as a [blog entry on Iranian.com](#), which allows reader comments.

2010/10/11 (Mon.): The recent lending of the Cyrus cylinder to Iran by the British Museum reignited the debate about the interpretation of its contents. My research based on several online sources has revealed that many accounts of the contents and significance of the cylinder are incorrect and are attributable to propaganda initiated by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and, more recently, by certain Zoroastrian groups. Scholarly accounts view the cylinder variously as a charter of reforms, "declaration of good kingship," or a "building tablet" that commemorates the restoration of Babylon following Cyrus's conquest. The official translations, in English and Persian, by the British Museum contain allusions to people's religious beliefs and to returning the said people to their settlements. These are significant statements coming from a conqueror, but do not constitute "a charter of human rights," as is claimed by some interpretations. Note that Cyrus makes multiple references to Marduk, the god of Babylon (not to Ahuramazda, as claimed elsewhere). Read the translations and judge for yourself.

[[English](#)] [[Persian](#) (PDF)]

Note added on 10/12: Posting of the item above as a [blog entry on Iranian.com](#) has generated several comments already, including a suggestion that I am an agent of the Islamic Republic of Iran and some mentions of a Daaee-Jaan-Napoleon-type conspiracy theory. This is the response I posted after seeing several such comments:

It seems that my blog post has touched a nerve, with several anonymous commentators finding fault with my statement, which only said that the cylinder isn't what it is sometimes claimed to be: not that Cyrus wasn't a great king; not that he did not advocate and practice tolerance; not that he didn't do great things in Babylon; not that his Persia wasn't a center for art and culture in the ancient world. It seems that my response to the very first comment, by Mr.



Darius Kadivar (the only person commenting under a real name), has gone unnoticed. Please read that response. I also find the conspiracy theory full of holes (like most conspiracy theories). Yes, there are people who are hostile towards Iran for various reasons, but for every such person, there are probably many who love and respect our people and the rich traditions of Iran. In the long run, the negative views of the former group will be more than offset by the opinions of the latter. There is no need for alarm.

2010/10/10 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Much has been made of today's date, October 10, 2010, which is shortened to 10/10/10. This type of pattern has of course occurred nine times in recent years (01/01/01 to 09/09/09) and will occur again in the next two years, 11/11/11 and 12/12/12. After that, however, it will be 88 years before we get to 01/01/01 in the year 2101. There are more occurrences if you count dates such as 11/1/1 (or 1/1/11, depending on format) and 22/2/2 (2/2/22).

(2) Music: The Sanam Group (traditional Persian music ensemble) performs "**Shab-e Khastegaan**" ("The Night of the Weary").

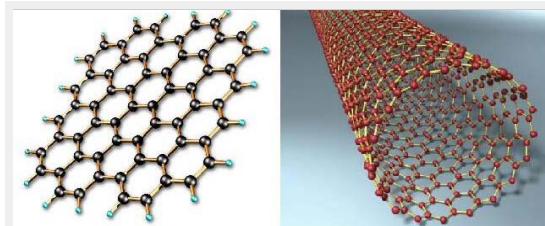
(3) Music: Mohsen Namjoo sings "**Toranj**" ("Citron") a song that combines traditional Persian vocals, based on a poem of Khaajoo-ye Kermaani, with new-age music.

2010/10/09 (Sat.): Fanaticism exists in many religions. Take a look at this **7-minute video clip** which contains some of the reactions to John Lennon's saying in an interview that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Although no one publicly called for Lennon's assassination, this is exactly what happened on December 8, 1980; he would have turned 70 today. **YouTube** is said to be streaming his songs all day today. Check it out!

2010/10/08 (Fri.): Tonight, I attended a concert by Jason Mraz at the Santa Barbara Bowl with a couple of family members. We were treated to an awesome musical performance by a very talented, pleasant, and down-to-earth artist. The show started right on time by Christina Perri, a pretty good artist in her own right. There was a surprise appearance by Colbie Caillat for one duet performance with Mraz. Overall, this was one of the best concerts I have attended, spoiled only by a few loud, drunken ladies right next to us and a supersize guy in front of me who blocked two-thirds of the stage.

2010/10/07 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) The 2010 Nobel Prize in physics went to two Russian-born scientists, Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov, for pioneering work on graphene, a sheet of carbon that has a thickness of just one atom. The Swedish Academy of Sciences praised this year's recipients for showing "that carbon in such a flat form has exceptional properties that originate from the remarkable world of quantum physics." The **New York Times** notes: "Among its other properties,



graphene is able to conduct electricity as well as copper does and to conduct heat better than any other known material, and it is practically transparent. Physicists say that it could eventually rival silicon as a basis for computer chips, serve as a sensitive pollution-monitoring material, improve flat-screen televisions, and enable the creation of new materials and novel tests of quantum weirdness." The accompanying photo shows graphene in its sheet form and rolled into what is known as a carbon nanotube, a superstrong nanoscale structure that is being considered for everything, from conducting wires on a microchip to cables used for building structures.

(2) Take a listen to **Barbra Streisand's 2009 version** of "If You Go Away," a song that has a long history. The original, by Jaques Brel, was in French and since then, both the French and English versions have been covered by numerous artists, including Madonna, who, though not comparable to Streisand, does a pretty good job on it.

2010/10/06 (Wed.): Degeneres, Ellen, *The Funny Thing Is ...*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2003.

In this book, Ms. Degeneres offers many observations about everyday life, using her trademark kooky style and deadpan delivery. For example, here is her take on exercise: "My favorite exercise is walking a block and a half to the corner store to buy fudge. Then I call a cab to get back home. There's never a need to overdo anything." Discussing the frantic pace of her tour, which did not leave much time for anything, she declares: "I wanted to see the Andy Warhol Museum ... but didn't have time, so I just popped into a local supermarket and contemplated the Campbell's Soup section. It was the best I could do." And, she has this to say about product packaging: "Batteries are packaged as though the manufacturers never want you to get to them. On the other hand, take a good look at a package of light bulbs. Thin, thin, thin cardboard that's open on both ends." Whether advising the listener on how to cover social embarrassments or musing about distracted driving, Ms.

Degeneres is a delight.

2010/10/05 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Music: This Texas-based "rock band" **plays and sings classical Persian songs**. I learned about this band called "Tehranosaurus" (led by Fared Shafinury) from a student-made documentary film posted on Iranian.com. The band is said to be close to releasing its first full-length album, "Behind the Seas."

(2) Music: Hundreds of students from various New York City neighborhoods **sing along with Yo Yo Ma** and the Silk Road Ensemble at the American Museum of Natural History.

(3) Music: A song entitled "Shape of My Heart," performed by **Sting and Josh Groban**, singing together for the first time at a Chris Botti concert in Boston.

2010/10/04 (Mon.): Sedaris, David, *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Time Warner Audiobooks, 2004.

This humorous book, composed of autobiographical essays about the author's upbringing in North Carolina, his familial relationships, and his work and life in New York City and France, is a delightful read/listen. Upon reflection, many of the characters and incidents described in the book are not funny in the usual sense of the term, although in a few of the pieces, performed in front of an audience, one hears laughter after every line, as one would at a stand-up comedy performance. The humor comes from the juxtaposition of quite ordinary events and the author's self-deprecating style of telling his life stories, particularly his experiences as a gay man. You can listen to, or read, a few story samples on [NPR's Web site](#).

2010/10/03 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Yesterday on Facebook, Googoosh Atashin came up as a suggested friend. As an admirer of her work, I would certainly like to take Googoosh on as a Facebook friend, but then it dawned on me (seeing that she had 1099 friends and that her city was listed as Los Angeles): How can I be sure that the page was set up by Googoosh or an authorized agent of hers? Anyone can set up a Facebook page with any name, and post any profile photo from the public domain. Apparently, it is not even required that the name used be unique (there are multiple pages named simply "Googoosh," two named "Googoosh Fan," and many others with minor variations in spelling or different ways of combining her name in English and Persian). If an impostor set up the page, then s/he can get access to personal information for a lot of people through their Facebook profiles, which are accessible only to their friends. I decided to test my theory by setting up a Facebook page under the name "Albert Einstein," but with a slightly misspelled name. To my horror, I discovered that there are a large number of such pages on Facebook already, with a variety of spellings such as "Albert einstein" (lowercase e), "Albert Einstine," "Albert Einstin," and so on. The bottom line is this: Be vigilant about accepting friends or "liking" pages on Facebook. Scammers may be masquerading as your favorite scientist, actor, or musician.

(2) The Web site of [The Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies](#) (IICHS) contains a wealth of information on Iran's recent history and people who played important parts in it. I am a bit leery about the accuracy of the record and the choice of personalities to cover. However, I do not know of alternative sites at this time. Under "Photo Gallery," you will find a number of images that are clickable and lead to descriptions of various events or people.

(3) Music: A well-coordinated couple play drums on a table to a lively tune in this [2-minute Facebook video](#).

(4) Music: Hooman Tabrizi plays **"Del-e Koochooloo"** ("Little Heart"), a composition by Anoushiravan Rohani, on solo piano.

2010/10/02 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Watch an [interesting animation](#) in which a "stick man," created in a drawing program, fights the intentions of his animator. I had to watch it several times to get all the details. Enjoy!

(2) In the new 2010 [US National Research Council rankings](#) of doctoral programs in the US, UCSB's ECE Department is placed 4th, behind Stanford, Princeton, and Harvard, but ahead of Caltech, Illinois, MIT, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. The other four engineering departments at UCSB did quite well too. Materials and Chemical Engineering were both ranked 1st (ChemE was tied with Caltech), Computer Science was ranked 4th (behind 7 other programs, due to ties), and Mechanical Engineering was ranked 5th (behind 7 others). NRC rankings appear infrequently: the previous one was in the mid 1990s.

2010/10/01 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Beloved Iranian theater and film actress Fakhri Khorvash is honored by a special screening of one of her movies at the [3rd Annual Iranian Film Festival](#) held in San Francisco.

(2) According to the [Chicago Tribune](#), the US Department of the Interior has issued rules to protect scientific integrity. Interior agencies are now required to document the science behind their decision-making, thus preventing career employees and political appointees from suppressing or distorting scientific findings. The new

rules also protect whistleblowers who report violations of that policy. There is some hope that this initial effort will lead to a national policy.

2010/09/30 (Thu.): Burnett, Carol, *This Time Together: Laughter and Reflection*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House Audio, 2010.

Carol Burnett, a beloved and revered American performer (actress, comedienne), concluded an 11-year run of her vastly popular TV variety show more than three decades ago. In this book, Ms. Burnett tells a number of memorable personal stories and anecdotes. Notable among these stories are Ms. Burnett's friendships with stars such as Julie Andrews, Lucille Ball, Cary Grant, and James Stewart. She also relates the background behind famous scenes, such as the prank with Julie Andrews that went wrong in front of the First Lady, her famous Tarzan Yell that saved her during a mugging, and her faking a wooden leg to get served in a famous ice cream joint. You can sample the book's hard-copy version at Amazon.com.

2010/09/29 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Music: [A beautiful Persian song](#) entitled "Shahzaadeh-ye Royaa-ye Man" ("The Prince of My Dreams"), performed by Golshifteh Farahani and Shahab Hosseini.

(2) A British team is designing [Bloodhound SSC](#), the first land vehicle to travel at speeds in excess of 1000 miles per hour (mph) or 1610 km/hr. The completed car will be tested in the Hakskeen Pan in the Northern Cape Province region of South Africa in 2012. As a point of comparison, most commercial jet aircraft today travel at 550-600 mph and the speed of sound is 761 mph (Mach 1). The force behind this design is Richard Noble, a man who broke the world land speed record in his car Thrust2, when it reached 651 mph in 1983, and then topped his own record in 1997 when his follow-up car, Thrust SSC, broke the sound barrier to reach 763 mph. Optimizing the shape of the car and its suspension required calculations that could be performed only by the most powerful supercomputers available today. Finding the best parameters in a very large design space requires a computational approach, because one cannot use designer's intuition: no one has ever built anything like this before.

(3) With natural resources on land diminishing, it was only a matter of time before people started thinking seriously about exploiting minerals and other resources available on the ocean floor. Interest in mining under the ocean goes back more than a century, but technology has now reached a point where metals, such as copper and gold, that are deposited on the ocean floor when magma heats the undersea water circulating through rocks, can be extracted profitably. China is set to be a big player in this area, eyeing an underwater ridge in the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar. The trouble is that the same natural processes that lead to these mineral deposits also support numerous unique or extremely rare life forms that hold the key to future advances in a variety of fields, including biomedical engineering. For more detail, read Sharon Begley's informative and eye-opening [Newsweek article](#) about the opportunities and environmental dangers of underwater mining (issue of Sep. 27, 2010, pp. 50-52).

(4) [USA Today](#) reports that, based on new US census data, the gender gap among previously male-dominated college majors is narrowing, and younger generations of women account for nearly half of science and business graduates. "In 2009, about 47% of science and engineering degree holders ages 25 to 39 were women, compared with 21% among those 65 and older." According to Betty Shanahan, executive director of the Society of Women Engineers, "disparities persist among strictly engineering majors, where more than four in five are men."

2010/09/28 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The list of [2010 MacArthur Fellows](#) was released at 12:01 AM EST today and high school science educator and Dos Pueblos Engineering Academy Director [Amir Abo-Shaeer](#) is among the 23 recipients. This prestigious award comes with a \$0.5M no-strings-attached research stipend that can be spent at the awardee's discretion on whatever project that interests him/her. Mr. Abo-Shaeer is my daughter's AP Physics teacher this year. Congratulations to Mr. Abo-Shaeer and to Dos Pueblos High School for this great honor.

(2) MIT's [Open Course Ware](#), that allows free access to lectures and other educational material for a variety of courses, may become a paid service, reports the [New York Times](#). This is just another instance of struggling US universities looking everywhere for new revenue sources.

(3) The Hoover Dam bypass bridge replaces the narrow winding road, that used to connect the states of Nevada and Arizona via the the top of the dam, with a modern thoroughfare. It is a marvel of engineering. This [YouTube animation](#) shows how the bridge was built. See [a series of actual photos](#) of this impressive construction project.

2010/09/27 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The [New York Times](#) reported yesterday that a computer worm designed specifically for industrial control equipment manufactured by Germany's Siemens has affected a number of sites in Iran. Iranian computer

experts are trying to protect their facilities against this sophisticated malware attack. The extent of penetration and any possible damage done are unknown at this time. There is some speculation that Israel may have launched this attack, with an eye toward affecting Iran's nuclear facilities.

(2) Soraya, the second wife of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, tried to develop an acting career after her divorce and resettlement in Europe. Here is [a sample of her work](#), which has become available in the public domain for the first time. This sample is from Michelangelo Antonioni's "Three Faces of a Woman," a three-episode film, one of which is featured in the sample.

(3) A challenging math puzzle: The numbers 1, 2, 3, ... , 101 are written down in an arbitrary order. Prove that one can always remove 90 of the numbers from the list in such a way that the remaining 11 numbers form a monotone (i.e., increasing or decreasing) sequence.

After you have given the puzzle a try, see these [three different solutions](#).

2010/09/26 (Sun.): Holsti, Ole R., *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View the United States after 9/11*, University of Michigan Press, 2008.

In the days and weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States gained the world's sympathy and received offers of help for fighting terrorism from many countries, particularly its NATO allies. The US made the grave mistake of refusing these offers and deciding to act alone. An anonymous George W. Bush administration official is quoted in the book as explaining the decision thus: "The fewer people you have to rely on, the fewer permissions you gave to get" (p. 199). It was perhaps this misguided desire to have an open hand in its actions, that doomed the US efforts in the fight against international terrorism. Table after table in this book confirms that the world opinion of the US has suffered immensely in the years since 9/11. To be sure, comparing public opinions across different polls that span many years is quite difficult. It is well-known that slight variations in wording of a question may have a significant effect on the response outcome. However, in the case of the world publics view of the US, the unmistakable downward trend cannot be explained by differences in wording or sample selection alone. The overt ridicule of European countries and their leaders by the US State and Defense Departments officials played a key role in the sharp decline of US's favorable ratings in these countries. Public opinion in the Muslim world, that, with very few exceptions, was quite grim to begin with, has nose-dived to single-digit approval percentages in some cases, even in certain countries that are recipients of generous US aid. The US invasion of Iraq played a particularly significant role in this downturn, although the war in Afghanistan was scarcely more popular on the proverbial Muslim street. American foreign policy is identified as the single most important factor in the unfavorable view of the US by the world publics, particularly since 9/11. This view is supported by a number of the surveys which showed quite favorable ratings for the American people and their film and TV programs, and unfavorable ratings for the US's foreign policy and its systems of government and justice (see, e.g., Table 3.3 on p. 70). America's science and technology was admired nearly everywhere, with Russia, and recently Turkey, being the only exceptions (p. 77). America is no longer universally viewed as "a beacon of hope and opportunity" or "a force for good in the world." For example, the net agree-vs-disagree opinion for the second statement ranged from 79% to -79% (see Table 3.2 on p. 68).

2010/09/25 (Sat.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) American universities have begun to globalize in two different ways: (a) Admitting more international students at the undergraduate level, because the nonresident tuition paid by such students helps ease their budgetary shortfalls. (b) Establishing satellite campuses overseas as a way of expanding and being seen as exotic and hip. While the second global expansion is often done with substantial monetary contributions from the host countries, it still diverts money and effort from the institution and its students. In a [Newsweek article](#) entitled "The Trouble with Going Global" (issue of September 20, 2010, pp. 54-57), Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus argue that both trends are shortchanging US's domestic undergraduate students who are being deprived of educational opportunities in these institutions at the time of enrollment, and of sufficient faculty attention once enrolled.

(2) On the last page of its September 20, 2010, issue, *Newsweek* published an interesting "[Back Story](#)": On a piece of paper, draw a circle of diameter 8 cm (3.2 in). Three tubes of this size are all that connects 33 Chilean miners, trapped 680 meters underground, to the outside world. All their necessities must be passed to them through these tubes: food, bottled water, lightweight clothing, reading material, vitamin D supplement (needed due to the lack of sunshine), vaccines, and so on. The high-tech arrangements for the above and other items passed through the tubes (including an iPod and a mini projector to allow the miners to watch television and sports programs on the wall of their shelter) are truly amazing.

2010/09/24 (Fri.): UCSB classes started on Thursday, the first day of fall. I have now moved from my summer schedule to the much busier fall routine. Happy Mehregan, the Persian festival of autumn, celebrating

the divinity of interpersonal relationships such as friendship, affection, and love! In celebration, let me offer a music video in which Kurdish musician Yadollah Nasiri performs **the song "Sarij"** along with a sign-language choir composed of hearing- and speech-impaired men and women.

2010/09/21 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Childish uses of Photoshop: The Egyptian state-run paper *Al-Ahram* **Photoshopped a picture** to make it look as if Hosni Mubarak is walking ahead of other leaders who attended the recent Middle East peace talks, whereas, in reality, Barack Obama was leading the pack. This very childish act, not only in its intent but in the naivete to think that the photo doctoring won't be detected, results from an inferiority complex that ails many dictatorial regimes. In Iran, newspapers routinely alter photos to render sparse crowds denser (e.g., make a half-empty stadium look full). Here is **a widely publicized example**. Egypt and Iran are of course not the only ones caught red-handed in this regard. The Bush administration got caught doing something similar, when a group of soldiers providing a backdrop for one of Bush's campaign ads turned out to have multiple blocks of the same few people.

(2) Today, I chanced upon **an opinion piece** (a blog post) on Iranian.com that urged civility in expressing opinions. It read in part: "Always remember that here is a public place. The same way that you are behaving as a normal person when you go to an office, a university, a park ... etc etc, you should keep a minimum of decency and respect to other persons who are there." I posted the following comment on this blog: "Well said Souri. I have no patience for people who demand freedom and respect, but are not willing to offer the same to others who disagree with them. For example, someone who wants to dress freely as she pleases should not make fun of another person's headscarf or chador, no matter how misguided that other person's choice appears to her."

2010/09/20 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

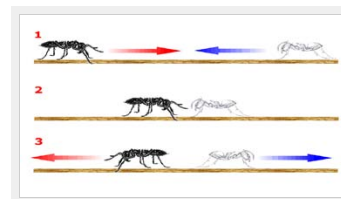
(1) Music: Fariborz Lachini **plays "Asmar Asmar"** and samples of his other solo piano arrangements of old Persian pop/folk songs.

(2) On 2010/08/18, I posted an item about how Haystack, an anonymizing tool, had helped dissidents in Iran and other repressive countries overcome Internet censorship. Well, it turns out that Haystack was not all that it was advertised to be. In an **article in slate.com**, Evgeny Morozov outlines the problems with Haystack that led to its withdrawal. Haystack's purported capabilities were indeed too good to be true!

(3) Correlation of divorce rates with occupations: *The Washington Post* reports on a new study exploring the **correlation of various occupations and separation/divorce rates**. Originally interested in data on the divorce rates of law enforcement officers, the authors succeeded in getting divorce/separation data for Americans working in 449 jobs from census officials. Their findings: Dancers and choreographers had the highest divorce rates (43%), followed by bartenders (38 %). Three engineering careers (agricultural, sales, and nuclear) were among the 10 occupations with the lowest divorce rates. This preliminary study does not allow us to know for sure whether it is the nature of the jobs that leads to divorce, or if people prone to unstable relationships are drawn to certain professions.

2010/09/19 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A math puzzle that looks tough, but is in fact easily solved by using the appropriate insight: Suppose 100 ants, each of which walks at the speed of 1 cm/s, are to be placed on a one-meter narrow strip and set walking in a given set of directions. Imagine that the strip is in front of us, extending from left to right, so that each ant walks leftward or rightward. If an ant reaches the end of the strip, it will fall off and if two ants meet, they both immediately turn around and continue walking (see illustration). Note that eventually all the ants will fall off the ends of the strip. You are handed these 100 ants and are required to distribute them along the one-meter strip (you are free to set each ant's position and its initial walking direction) so that it takes as long as possible before the last ant has fallen off an end. How do you do this and how long is the maximum time?



(2) A bride's father, husband-to-be, and a number of close family and friends surprise her big time with an interesting **song and dance routine**.

(3) Sometimes, a comedy film is really funny, but not in the way the filmmaker intended! Watch this **6-minute video clip** from the Persian film "Aroos Farangui" ("European Bride") to see what I mean.

(4) A touching musical performance by Mahyar Fazeli, a blind Persian singer/pianist, in a **3-minute video**.

در این خاک زرخیز ایران زمین / نبودند جز مردمی پاک دین // همه دینشان مردی و داد بود / وز آن کشور آزاد و آباد بود // جو مهر و وفا بود خود کیششان / گنه بود آزار کس پیششان // همه بنده ناب یزدان پاک / همه دل پر از مهر این آب و خاک // پدر در پدر آریایی نژاد / ز پشت فریدون نیکو نهاد // بزرگی به مردی و فرهنگ بود / گدایی در این بوم و بر ننگ بود // کجا رفت آن دانش و هوش ما / چه شد مهر میهن فراموش ما // که انداخت آتش در این بوستان / کز آن سوخت جان و دل دوستان // چه کردیم کین گونه گشتیم خوار؟ / خرد را فکندیم این سان ز کار // نبود این چنین کشور و دین ما / کجا رفت آیین دیرین ما؟ // به یزدان که این کشور آباد بود / همه جای مردان آزاد بود // در این کشور آزادی ارز داشت / کشاورز خود خانه و مرز داشت // گرانمایه بود آنکه بودی دبیر / گرامی بد آنکس که بودی دلیر // نه دشمن در این بوم و بر لانه داشت / نه بیگانه جایی در این خانه داشت // از آنروز دشمن بما چیره گشت / که ما را روان و خرد تیره گشت // از آنروز این خانه ویرانه شد / که نان آورش مرد بیگانه شد // چون ناکس به ده کنخدایی کند / کشاورز باید گدایی کند // به یزدان که گر ما خرد داشتیم / کجا این سر انجام بد داشتیم // بسوزد در آتش گرت جان و تن / به از زندگی کردن و زیستن // اگر مایه زندگی است / دو صد بار مردن به از زندگی است // بیا تا بکوشیم و جنگ آوریم / برویم سر از این بار ننگ آوریم

2010/09/18 (Sat.): The Mostafa Sarkhosh poem above (incorrectly attributed to Ferdowsi in some postings) is very descriptive of the current conditions in Iran. You can hear it read aloud in this [5-minute YouTube video](#), but the slide show that accompanies the audio is apparently made by royalists who believe Iran was "behesht-e barin" under the Shah. Someone commenting on the YouTube video above indicated that the poem is from about 60 years ago. If so, then the poet is actually criticizing the situation prevailing during the early years of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule.

2010/09/17 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) As an engineer myself, I always try to present engineers and engineering in a positive light. Now comes a 2010/09/15 [posting by IEEE Spectrum](#): "Of the hundreds of individuals involved in political violence, nearly half of those with degrees have been engineers. This finding, [first published in 2008](#), has been substantiated by two years of additional research by Oxford sociologist Diego Gambetta and political scientist Steffen Hertog, of the London School of Economics."

(2) What's in a name? There are a lot of organizations with grandiose or utterly misleading names that hide their true agendas. I am sure that somebody has already compiled a list of names of this kind, but I have been unable to locate such a list. So, let me give you three examples from my own recent experience. (a) National academies are prestigious organizations whose membership is deemed a significant honor. So, it is natural for "World Scientific and Engineering Academy and Society" (WSEAS) to conjure a transnational body of even greater prestige. Nothing can be further from the truth! WSEAS is a for-profit organization that makes money from a number of pay-to-publish conferences and journals. (b) California's "Renewable Energy Generation Initiative Statute" tried to ride the public's enthusiasm for green and renewable energy. The title suggests that the statute should be supported by environmental groups, whereas it is in fact opposed by most of them. (c) The World Encounter Institute (WEI), like many other organizations with grandiose names, is identified by only a P. O. Box address in its Web site. It recently published a video, framed as an interview, in which President Obama and his administration were criticized for their policies. However, the person allegedly being interviewed is listed as one of the directors of WEI. So, the video was actually a propaganda film masquerading as a news story. The moral of this story is: Don't be fooled by names and do your own research to find out what a group or organization stands for.

2010/09/16 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Music: Audio file of an old Persian song "[Emshab Shab-e Mahtab-e](#)". The [Sima Mafiha version](#) is also nice, as is this [techno version by Leila Forouhar](#).

(2) It's official: Engineering students study harder than others (dah!). As if everyone did not already know, [Design News](#) reports on the results published in the 2011 edition of *Princeton Review*, showing that 4 out of the 5 top US colleges in which students spend most time studying are engineering schools: MIT, Harvey Mudd College, Cal Tech, and Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering. The non-engineering Reed College (Portland) ranked 4th with regard to study time.

(3) Yesterday (9/14), the CBS Evening News quoted President Obama as saying that "we have plenty of homework to do if we want American schools to compete with others all around the world." Of 30 comparable countries, we rank near the bottom in most areas. In math, for example, Finland is 1st, followed by South Korea, with the US showing up at 25th. In science, Finland is 1st again and the US is 21st. We don't always appear near the bottom, however: we spend just over \$129,000 per K-12 student; the others average \$95,000.

(4) A Facebook friend's posting of a complaint for having paid \$200 for her daughter's textbook, and a few comments by other friends, prompted me to comment as follows:

Let me add my 2-cents' worth, because I can bring three distinct viewpoints to this discussion: as a parent of college students who has paid the outrageous prices, as a professor who assigns textbooks to students, and as an author who collects royalties from textbook sales. Contrary to popular belief, publishers and authors do not make much money from textbooks. I once calculated that, given the number of hours I put into writing a particular book, I made way less than minimum wage for the effort. It is used booksellers and international smuggling rings, who take advantage of differential pricing around the world by smuggling books into the US (e.g., textbook prices are much lower in India and most other Asian countries). Once a new textbook appears in

print, assuming that it is of high quality and positively reviewed, it enjoys brisk sales during the first year. Then, the used copies sold back by students, the complimentary examination copies sold by professors, and smuggled copies from overseas saturate the market and sales typically dry out. The problem has become worse in the past 2-3 years, given the ease with which textbooks can be scanned and offered for sale or free download on the Internet. This is a very complicated problem that has been analyzed for years (see this [5-year-old article](#), for example). To make a long story short, the only reasonable solution is to do to textbooks what iTunes did to CDs: sell e-textbooks at reasonable prices (say, less than \$20). Publishers will recover their investments because they will sell 10 or more times as many copies. Author royalties will not change either, because the lower per-book return is made up for by higher sales. Students will, of course, win big time. The only losers will be used book dealers and smugglers, who currently make more money than both the authors and the publishers.

2010/09/15 (Wed.): Is this the English translation of a Mowlavi (Rumi) poem?: "I hold to no religion or creed, / am neither Eastern nor Western, / Muslim or infidel, / Zoroastrian, Christian, Jew or Gentile. / I come from neither the land nor sea, / am not related to those above or below, / was not born nearby or far away, / do not live either in Paradise or on this earth, / claim descent not from Adam and Eve or the Angels above. / I transcend body and soul. / My home is beyond place and name. / It is with the beloved, in a space beyond space. / I embrace all and am part of all."

This poem is quoted on many Web sites and at least two books: Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Wiley, 2008) and John P. Dwortzky's *The Illusion of Death* (Hearthfire, 2008). It is beautiful, so I decided to share it here. However, I have been unable to locate the original Persian poem. I will keep trying and would appreciate hearing from anyone who knows about it.

Note added on 2010/09/26: I have located the original Persian poem, which appears below in transliterated form and in Persian.

che tadbir ey mosalmaanaan, ke man khod raa nemidaanam / na tarsaa-o yahoodi-yam, na gabram na mosalmaanam // na sharghi-yam na gharbi-yam, na bar'ri-yam na bahri-yam / na az kaan-e tabi'ee-yam, na az aflaak-e gardaanam // na az khaakam, na az baadam, na az aabam, na az aatash / na az arsham, na az farsham, na az konam, na az kaanam // na az donyaa, na az oghbaa, na az jan'nat, na az doozakh / na az aadam, na az hav'vaa, na az ferdows-e rezvaanam // makaanam laa-makaan baashad, neshaanam bi-neshaan baashad / na tan baashad, na jaan baashad, ke man az jaan-e jaanaanam // do-ee az khod boroon kardam, yeki didam do aalam raa / yeki jooyam, yeki gooyam, yeki daanam, yeki khaanam // ze jaam-e eshgh sarmastam, do aalam raft az dastam / bejooz rendi-o ghal'laashi, nabaashad hich saamaanam // agar dar omr-e khod roozi, dami bi oo bar-aavardam / az aan vaght-o az aan saa'at, ze omr-e khod pashimaanam

چه تدبیرای مسلماتان که من خود را نمی دانم / نه ترسا و یهودیدیم نه گبرم نه مسلماتم // نه شرقیدیم نه غربیدیم نه بریدیم نه بحریم / نه از کان طبیعیم نه از افلاک گردانم // نه از خلکم نه از بادم نه از آید نه از آتش / نه از عرشدم نه از فرشم نه از کوندم نه از کاتم // نه از دنیبی نه از عقبی نه از جنتی نه از دوزخ / نه از آدم نه از حوا نه از فردوس رضوانم // مکاتم لامکان باشد نشانم بر نشان باشد / نه تن باشد نه جان باشد که من از جان جانانم // دونی از خود برون کردم یکی دیدم دو عالم را / یکی جویدم یکی گویدم یکی دانم یکی خوانم // ز جام عشق سر مستم دو عالم رفت از دستم / بجز رندی و قلاشی نباشد هیچ سامانم // اگر در عمر خود روزی دمی بیاوردم / از آن وقت و از آن ساعت ز عمر خود پشیمانم

2010/09/14 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Scam alert for Facebook users: Over the past few weeks, multiple friends have indicated that they have joined a group "See who viewed your Facebook profile." There are also other groups, all scams, that promise such a capability. As far as I know, there is no way to find out who viewed your Facebook profile. Because a lot of people are interested in such a capability, scammers are taking advantage to collect information about Facebook users. Please do not join such a group, or leave it immediately if you have already joined. Facebook administration terminates such groups upon discovering them, but new ones keep springing up.

(2) [Inside Higher Ed](#) reported today that based on newly released data for the academic year 2008-09, for the first time ever, women earned a majority (50.4%) of all doctoral degrees awarded in the United States. Female enrollments overtook male enrollments in associate, bachelor's and master's programs years ago. So, the only reason that women did not become a majority of doctoral recipients earlier is that a greater share of doctoral degrees are awarded in fields like engineering, that remain disproportionately male.

(3) Music: "[Fragile Silence](#)" is the name of this New-Age-style Persian music piece, composed by Reza Rohani and played by his band "Beyond the Moon." Also, listen to another song of his, entitled "[Shadow](#)".

(4) In a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "[Are Rich Donors Ruining Higher Education?](#)", Robert Frank scrutinizes a recent book, *The Trouble with Billionaires*, by *Toronto Star* columnist Linda McQuaig and tax law professor Neil Brooks. Using concrete examples, the book's authors argue that increased dependence on wealthy benefactors has made some universities "a showcase for the wealthy," after whom buildings are being named, squeezing out scientists, influential academic administrators, and even national heroes. According to Paul Hamel, a University of Toronto biologist, "the priorities of the university have been skewed towards areas that interest the elites, rather than towards the priorities of faculty, staff and students who are engaged in critical analysis,

research and teaching." Frank is of course skeptical about the book's conclusions, but what else would you expect from a *WSJ* writer?

2010/09/13 (Mon.): Here is my solution to the "100 prisoners" math puzzle posted on 2010/09/09. The initial assignment of numbered slips to boxes is a permutation, that can be characterized by its cycle structure. Let's take a smaller example with six prisoners, numbered 1 2 3 4 5 6. The permutation 3 1 2 4 6 5 (number 3 placed in box 1, number 1 in box 2, and so on) has the cycle structure (1 2 3)(4)(5 6), with the three cycles indicating which elements have switched places among themselves. As a second example, the permutation 2 3 4 5 6 1 has the cycle structure (1 2 3 4 5 6), that is, there is only one cycle. If the permutation of the 100 numbers in the boxes has no cycle of length greater than 50, then the following strategy will lead to the prisoners being freed. Each prisoner begins by choosing the box with his/her own number on it. Once a box has been opened, if the prisoner's number is not inside, then the box with the number found inside is opened next. So, each prisoner stays within the cycle that contains his/her own number and is bound to find that number if every cycle is of length 50 or less.

Now, two things must be proven:

(a) The probability of a random permutation of 100 items having no cycle of length greater than 50 is at least 30%; it is in fact 0.30685.

(b) Using this strategy is the best that the prisoners can do.

Both of these claims are proven in [a blog entry by Oliver Nash](#). The first of the proofs is a straightforward combinatorial or counting argument, while the second one requires a deeper analysis.

There is an interesting variation of this puzzle that goes like this:

You are an observer who is told about this scheme (including a complete specification of the permutation that is being used) and given the opportunity to switch the numbers in two of the boxes. Suppose you know that all of the prisoners are political detainees and want them to be freed. Can you make a difference and, if so, how would you use the opportunity?

2010/09/12 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, has added the exhibit "[Weapons of Mass Disruption](#)" to address the increasing spying threats and opportunities offered by the Internet. A good example of widespread disruption is the very recent "Here You Have" e-mail virus that hit a number of US organizations, including NASA, Comcast, AIG, Disney/ABC, Proctor & Gamble, and Wells Fargo on Thursday, September 9, 2010. ABC News provides [an account of the incident](#). Apparently, given its extreme popularity, hackers are increasingly targeting Facebook to spread their viruses and other malware.

(2) This [blog post](#) on Iranian.com contains two very interesting items. (a) A description of the memoirs of Taj-ol-Molouk, Reza Shah's wife (1896-1982), recently published in book form by the Islamic Republic of Iran, apparently with some distortions. A 16MB PDF file of this book is said to be available for downloading, although I have been unable to download it on my computer. (b) A 50-minute video of an Iranian state TV's live forum on the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran, that turns into a lively discussion on Reza Shah's rule, with one of the panelists praising Reza Shah (I don't know if that panelist is still alive!).

(3) A couple of days ago, I watched "The Warning," a 2009 PBS Frontline film about the economic crash of 2008 and a woman, Brooksley Born, who prewarned us about it, arguing for increased oversight of derivatives sales. The film shows how in meeting after meeting, and hearing after hearing, her plea for regulating the derivatives market was brushed aside by supposedly "smart" economists and by politicians who had very cozy relationships with the financial sector. You can learn more about this remarkable woman from [Wikipedia](#) or by watching the said [55-minute Frontline program](#) on-line.

(4) Watch Hooman Tabrizi's masterful solo piano performance of "Winter's Kiss" (composed by Bijan Mortazavi) in this [4-minute YouTube video](#).

2010/09/11 (Sat.): Today is the 9th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the US by 19 terrorists, mostly Saudis. This documentary, viewable on [Google videos](#), captures the horror experienced by the World Trade Center "twin towers" occupants, as well as the rest of the country, as events unfolded on that Tuesday. Also, [a thoughtful and prophetic essay](#), by Ms. Setareh Sabety, published in Iranian.com on 2001/09/11, is worth (re)reading to get a sense of the fear and uncertainty we all felt on that fateful day.

2010/09/10 (Fri.): Crowther, Yasmin, *The Saffron Kitchen*, unabridged audiobook read by Ariana Fraval and Mehr Mansuri, Penguin Audio, 2006.

Yasmin Crowther's debut novel contains a story told from two viewpoints: those of Maryam (voiced by Mehr Mansuri), a first-generation Iranian immigrant to the UK, and Sara (voiced by Ariana Fraval), the daughter born to Maryam and her British husband, Edward. Sara feels perplexed and resentful when Maryam's dark past, involving her relationship with her domineering father and memories of her first love, Ali (whom she abandoned

when she left Iran), begins to overwhelm her. Maryam's visit to her birthplace near Mashhad intensifies her inner conflicts and further strains the mother-daughter relationship. Eventually, Maryam convinces Sara to travel to Iran with her and it is during this trip that the two come to understand each other. The book and its author have enjoyed many positive reviews. For example, *Sunday Telegraph* characterizes Crowther as "a novelist of exceptional honesty and grace." Goodreads.com opines that "Crowther writes with great insight about attempting to cast off one's past—and the impossibility of doing so." Finally, Zohreh Khazai Ghahremani, writing in *Iranian.com* (Feb. 9, 2007), ends her review with the hope that "the new generation of Iranian writers will continue to be the voice of those who have crossed far too many borders, climbed invisible mountains, and survived devastating storms." The author's description of Maryam's personal ordeals and her familial relationships is very engaging, but her account of Iran's history, political figures, and social conventions comes across as naive. Listening to the audiobook provides a richer experience than reading the book, especially in view of Mansuri's authentic pronunciation of Persian names. A longer snapshot and information about the author are available from [the Penguin Group](#).

[Note added on 2010/09/13: This review can be read on [Iranian.com](#).]

2010/09/09 (Thu.): Here is a tough math puzzle: A prison contains 100 prisoners, numbered 1 to 100. In a special room are 100 boxes, also numbered 1 to 100. Numbers 1 to 100 are written on 100 slips of paper and randomly distributed to the boxes, with one number placed in each box. Tomorrow, each prisoner will be compelled to enter the room and select and open up to 50 boxes, one at a time, hoping to find the box with his or her number in it. If every prisoner succeeds, they are all set free. If even one prisoner fails to find his or her number, they are all executed. The prisoners may not communicate tomorrow, but they may communicate today, that is, they may discuss and decide upon a selection strategy. Find a strategy to maximize the prisoners' chance of being freed.

[*Comment:* At first, it appears that the prisoners are doomed. If they choose randomly, each has a probability $1/2$ of finding his/her number, making the overall probability of being freed a dismal $(1/2)^{100}$. However, there is a strategy that can raise the success probability to around 30%. This is a significant improvement, though far from being very comforting to the prisoners!]

[*Hint:* The phrase "select and open . . . boxes, one at a time" holds the key.]

[*Note:* See the solution posted under Monday, 2010/09/13.]

2010/09/08 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

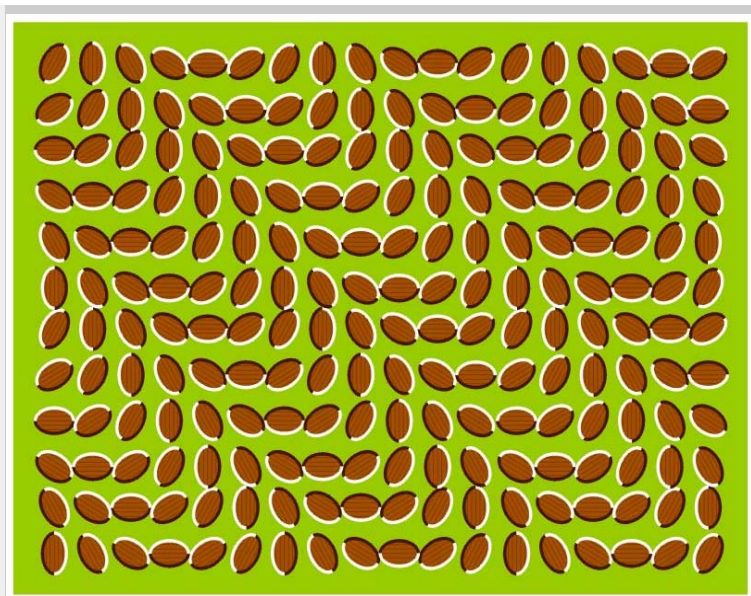
(1) According to a [New York Times report](#), NFL, NSF, and NBC are collaborating to teach science to middle- and high-school students using notions of (American) football. The report quotes Soraya Gage, the executive producer of NBC Learn as saying: "We know that kids respond much more to compelling content. . . . That's really their life outside of school, watching video, digital media—and that's the pathway to their brain." The first 3 of 10 planned parts (entitled "Vectors," "Projectile Motion," and "Nutrition") are already available at the following two sites: [NBCLearn.com/nfl](#); [science360.gov](#).

(2) The old song "Besame Mucho" brings back a lot of memories. This 2006 [Andrea Bocelli rendition](#) is one of the best versions. Enjoy! Bocelli also sings a beautiful version of the exquisite "[Music of the Night](#)" from Phantom of the Opera, a captivating duet, "[The Prayer](#)" with Heather Headley, and with his fiancée, Veronica Berti, "[Les Feuilles Mortes](#)" (the French version of "The Autumn Leaves").

2010/09/07 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) There are many optical illusions in which a stationary image appears to have moving parts. The image I am sharing here is the best one I have seen, in the sense of exhibiting significant movement to the human eye, despite being completely stationary.

(2) In the US, the [Bellagio fountains](#) of Las Vegas are famous for their graceful and colorful movements to music. Now, [Dubai fountains](#) offer what appears to be an even more entertaining display. Whether this is a wise choice of how to spend hoards of money, in a region of the world that has many social and economic



problems, is a different story.

2010/09/06 (Mon.): A week ago, I posted on Facebook the following quote from a speech by an American politician, challenging my friends to try to identify the speaker:

"And I should like to assure you, my Islamic friends, that under the American Constitution, under American tradition, and in American hearts, this Center, this place of worship, is just as welcome as could be a similar edifice of any other religion. Indeed, America would fight with her whole strength for your right to have here your own church and worship according to your own conscience. This concept is indeed a part of America, and without that concept we would be something else than what we are."

The quote had appeared in a [Newsweek magazine article](#), where interested friends could find that it was from a 1957 speech by President Dwight Eisenhower at the opening of an Islamic center in Washington, DC. I also included a quote from Zabihullah, a Taliban operative:

"I expect we will soon be receiving more American Muslims ... who are looking for help in how to express their rage. ... The more mosques you stop, the more jihadis we will get."

A week earlier, I had posted a passionate [video monologue by Keith Olbermann](#), who taking the side of religious freedom and tolerance, argued that labeling a proposed Islamic cultural center a few blocks from the attacked World Trade Center twin towers as "ground-zero mosque" was highly misleading.

As expected, these posts generated comments from several friends (primarily my cousins), who, with one exception, took the opposite position that allowing such a religious center to be built in lower Manhattan would be tantamount to handing Islamic terrorists a victory. In one of my comments, I had stated that "one cannot build [anything] without obtaining the required permits. However, this is a local issue that is discussed and resolved between permit applicants and city/county authorities. ... Those who turned the so-called "ground-zero mosque" into a national debate, and a threat for the US government to neutralize, are to blame for the enmity created among otherwise rational and free-thinking Americans."

Finally, just a few days ago, I closed the discussion thread with these final thoughts:

"I hope no one dismisses arguments from the other side without giving them a fair hearing. According to the American way of life, everyone is innocent until proven guilty. And the said guilt should be proven in a court of law; it cannot be inferred from personal statements or newspaper stories. In particular, I cannot be presumed guilty by association, that is, by something that a friend or acquaintance of mine has done. Bear in mind that the situation is quite complex and should not be approached with simplistic generalizations. If a bunch of cousins with the same ethnic background, same religion, and pretty much the same family upbringing cannot agree on an issue, then you can imagine how much more disagreement there will be at the national or global level. Just keep your eyes, ears, hearts, and minds open."

2010/09/04 (Sat.): US senator John McCain does not find research on joke-telling software funny:

Once in a while, a research project irritates politicians and taxpayers, who think public funds should not be spent on projects that they dislike or don't understand. Usually, this happens in the arts or social sciences, but the latest episode involves computer engineering. A computer science professor at Northwestern University recently received a \$0.7M grant to study search programs capable of creating "structured queries that lead to interesting factual juxtapositions of ideas that lead to humorous outcome ... sometimes." As a researcher, I know that it is exactly this type of inquiry that tends to produce the next big idea or technological breakthrough, just as chess-playing programs led to algorithmic and architectural advances many years ago. I don't know if this work will ever achieve the status of an iPhone application, but I do see some potential here for users

running out of jokes to tell at parties! Here is a [Chicago Sun Times](#) article on the controversy:

2010/09/03 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Interesting [videos about Beheshtieh](#), Tehran's Jewish cemetery. My paternal grandfather and grandmother are buried there. May they rest in peace.
- (2) An interesting [self-referential aptitude test](#). You don't need any knowledge for taking this test, because the questions are about the questions themselves! For example, Question 3 is: The number of questions whose answer is E is: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4.
- (3) Fereidoon Farrokhzad sings an adaptation of a Kurdish song in this [6-minute video](#). You may also like his 1987 Norooz concert in London's Royal Albert Hall (Here is [Part 1](#); there are seven 10-minute parts in all). One of the things I disliked about Fereidoon Farrokhzad (1936-92) is the fact that he tended to talk too much and was at times nonsensical. However, I find that now I appreciate his music and comedy a bit more than when I was half as old. Fereshteh, Fattaneh, Mahasti, and Moein also appear in this concert.

منتخبی از اشعار زیبای فرخی یزدی

- (1) آن زمان که بنهادم سر به پای آزادی / دست خود زجان شستم از برای آزادی // تا مگر به دست آرم دامن وصالش را / می دوم به پای سر در قفای آزادی // یا عوامل تکفیر صنف ارتجاعی باز / حمله می کند دامن بر بنای آزادی // در محیط طوفان زما ، ماهرانه در جنگ است / ناخدای استبداد با خدای آزادی // شیخ از آن کند اصرار بر خرابی احرار / چون بقای خود ببندد در فتنای آزادی // دامن محبت را گر کنی ز خون رنگین / می توان تو را گفتن پیشوای آزادی // مست خود سری ظالم ، گشته در به در عالم / فتنه میدود دامن ، در قفای آزادی // فرخی ز جان و دل ، می کند در این محفل / دل نثار استقلال ، جان فدای آزادی
- (2) خطاب به تاریخ: راستی نبود به جز افسانه و غیر از دروغ / آنچه ای تاریخ وجدان کش حکایت میکنی // بی جهت بر خادم مغلوب گویی ناسزا / بی سبب از خاندن غالب حمایت میکنی // پیش چشم مردمان چون شب بود رویت سیاه / زانکه در هر روز ، ای جانی جنایت میکنی // از رضا جز نارضایی حکمفرما گرچه نیست / بعد از این از او هم اظهار رضایت میکنی
- (3) اگر مرد خردمندی ، تو را فرزاندگی باید / وگر همدرد مجنون ، غم دیوانگی باید // رفیقی بایدم همدم ، به شادی یار و در غم هم / وزین خویشان نامحرم ، مرا بیگانگی باید // من و گنج سخن سنجی ، که کنجی خواهد و رنجی / چو من گر اهل این گنجی ، تو را ویرانگی باید // چو زد دهقان زحمتکش ، به کشت عمر خود آتش / تو را ای مالک سرکش ، جونی مردانگی باید // فناعت داده دنیا را ، گروه بی سر و پا را / چرا با این غنا ما را ، غم بی خانگی باید // در این بی انتها وادی ، چو پا از عشق بنهادی / به گرد شمع آزادی ، تو را پروانگی باید

2010/09/02 (Thu.): Today, I am posting a few beautiful poems from *Divaan-e Farrokhi Yazdi* (foreword and editing by Hossein Maki). Farrokhi was a left-leaning poet/publisher/politician who lived during the reign of Reza Pahlavi. Poem (1), from p. 177, has appeared on numerous Web sites and blogs, except that a few of the verses (can you guess which ones?) are removed in some postings. Poem (2), from p. 185, is addressed to history and features the name of Reza (Pahlavi) in its last verse. Poem (3) is from p. 125.

2010/09/01 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Read Maya Angelou's "[Phenomenal Woman](#)," a poem with a powerful statement.
- (2) This [4-minute video](#) shows a woman with an amazing ability to communicate with wild animals.
- (3) A group of musicians, from street performers to classically trained artists, coming from many different countries, cooperate in a [recording of "Stand by Me."](#)
- (4) In this video, Sade sings "[Bring Me Home](#)" (lyrics included) from her new "Soldier of Love" album.

2010/08/30 (Mon.): Edwards, Elizabeth, *Saving Graces: Finding Solace and Strength from Friends and Strangers*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Random House Audio, 2006.

Elizabeth Edwards writes beautifully about her childhood in a military family, about the pains of losing a teenage son to an auto accident, and the uncertainties resulting from being diagnosed with breast cancer near the end of the hectic 2004 vice presidential campaign of her husband, Senator John Edwards. Her narrative comes across as simple, eloquent, and heartfelt. This is in part due to her having been a PhD candidate in English before deciding to pursue law. Edwards describes how friends, acquaintances, campaign staff, and perfect strangers in on-line communities helped her cope with the loss of a child, a serious illness, and the pressures of national politics. I am looking forward to reading or listening to the author's more recent book, *Resilience*, in which she also discusses her husband's presidential campaign of 2008 and how she dealt with his infidelity.

2010/08/29 (Sun.): The Myth of quick aging of computer science and engineering (CSE) research results is being increasingly challenged. In recent years, quite a few people have argued that research results in CSE age more quickly than in other science/technology disciplines. A byproduct of this belief is a preference for publishing research results in conferences, rather than in archival journals. Such a preference would make sense if the useful life of a research article in our field were 4-5 years, say: A publication delay of 2 years or longer, which is common for the best journals in the field, would take away nearly half of the article's useful life,

whereas the 6-month turnaround time of a typical conference does not cut into the useful life as deeply. An article in the September 2010 issue of *Communications of the ACM* (Vol. 53, No. 9, pp. 62-67) challenges the quick aging premise. Table 1 in the article shows that with respect to mean half life (median age of references to or in an article), cited half life (number of years one needs to go back to reach a year that separates the newer half from the older half of all citations in a particular journal), and citing half-life (median age of all cited work in a particular collection of articles for a given year), CSE falls smack in the middle, ranking 12th among the disciplines studied: at rank 1, immunology research becomes obsolete fastest, and at 22, mathematics results age most slowly.

2010/08/28 (Sat.): I have seen this claim posted on Facebook and elsewhere by multiple people that August 2010 is very special, because it has 5 Sundays, 5 Mondays, and 5 Tuesdays. This happens once every 800 or so years, according to the claim. I don't know what type of person puts these nonsensical claims on the cyberspace. Let me explain. For starters, any 31-day month has its first three weekdays repeated at the end. This is because 31 days equal 4 full weeks plus 3 days. So, any 31-day month will contain five each of three consecutive weekdays. If the 31-day month starts on a Sunday, then it will have 5 Sundays, 5 Mondays, and 5 Tuesdays. Because a year has seven 31-day months, on average every year will contain one such month (with 5 of the said days). Now, even if we take the statement to mean that this happens every 800 or so years for August, rather than for any month, it is still incorrect. On average, we expect to see this pattern in August once every 7 years. In fact, August 2004 started on a Sunday, as did August 1999 (leap years affect the spacing of the years in which this occurs).

2010/08/26 (Thu.): Last night, I watched "The Wronged Man," the true story of a black man, Calvin Willis, who was jailed for 22 years on rape charges before being set free on DNA evidence, mostly due to the selfless efforts of paralegal Janet "Prissy" Gregory (played masterfully by Julia Ormond) who spent half her life overcoming obstacle after obstacle in her herculean effort, including the final fundraising for an expensive DNA test, jeopardizing her personal life and career in the process. The state of Louisiana never apologized for this wrongful conviction. The movie can be characterized as a cross between "Erin Brokovich" and "To Kill a Mockingbird." In the US, the Lifetime TV channel will air this movie, followed by a public-service announcement about "The Innocence Project," an organization that works to exonerate wrongfully convicted people, on Thu. 9/9 at 8:00 PM and Fri. 9/10 at 12:00 AM.

2010/08/25 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Nature never ceases to amaze! According to an article just published in the prestigious journal *Science*, previously unknown petroleum-eating bacteria, which had dined for eons on naturally seeping oil, proliferated in the Gulf of Mexico following the BP accident in April. The microbes seem to have ramped up their internal metabolic machinery to digest the oil as efficiently as possible. Here is the [Washington Post account](#) of the new findings.

(2) This 4-minute BBC [video history](#) of the 238-year-old capital city of Iran, includes rare film footage from the Qajar-era Tehran.

(3) Here is an amazing high-resolution [map of the world](#) that allows you to zoom in all the way to the street level, exploring many points of interest.

2010/08/24 (Tue.): Wilson, Valerie Plame, *Fair Game: My Life as a Spy, My Betrayal by the White House*, Simon & Schuster, 2007.

This is really two books in one. The main book, ending on page 306, is the one advertised on the cover and written by Valerie Plame Wilson, a former CIA operative who was "outed" as part of dirty political games played by the George W. Bush Whitehouse, presumably to punish or discredit the author's husband, Ambassador Joe Wilson, for criticizing the shaky justifications for the Iraq war. An 83-page minibook by Laura Rozen, presented as "afterword" to the main book, fills in some of the details that Wilson was not allowed to present due to objections by the CIA. It turns out that the CIA redacted certain information from Plame Wilson's book that she claims to be readily available in the public domain. It is this category of information that Rozen uses to construct the big picture missing from the main part of the book. It is best to read this minibook first to provide the context needed for understanding Plame Wilson's heavily redacted narrative. According to the Internet Movie Database, a film based on this book, and starring Naomi Watts and Sean Penn, will be released in the United States on November 5, 2010.

2010/08/23 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Once in a while, Keith Olbermann describes or analyzes a situation so eloquently that he leaves nothing more for others to say on his particular side of the argument. This [12-minute monologue](#) on the so-called "ground-zero mosque" in lower Manhattan is a good example. For those of you who are not familiar with

Olbermann, he is on the side of religious freedom and tolerance.

- (2) Some people would write "wash me" on the windows of a car that is covered with a thick layer of dust. Scott Wade, who lives close to a dirt road in San Marcos, Texas, is a bit more creative than that. He produces art by carefully removing portions of the dirt. Check out his [collection of dirty-car art!](#)
- (3) Raamesh, in her trademark afro hairstyle, sings the Kurdish song "Asmar Yaaram" in this [5-minute video](#) from a live performance, with a surprise guest.
- (4) Here is a wonderful Persian song "[Kesi Ashegh Nemimireh](#)" by the young singer Gelareh, accompanied by Hooman on acoustic guitar.

2010/08/22 (Sun.): Today, I would like to share a few interesting and diverse Persian music videos.

- (1) A nice solo piano performance by Hooman Tabrizi of "[Sari Glin](#)" (arranged by: Bijan Mortazavi).
- (2) A beautiful song, "[Mosafer](#)" (by Afshin Moghaddam). The video features scenery from Iran.
- (3) Sheila Nahrvar sings "[Jom'eh Baazaar](#)": a favorite song of mine from long ago.
- (4) Hayedeh's debut song, entitled "[Selseleh Moo](#)" (from the 1967 Iranian movie "Dalahoo").
- (5) Farimah Shahraz sings "[Booseh bar Khaak](#)" (music and lyrics by Parvaz Homay).
- (6) Mehrpouya sings "[To Kojaa'ee](#)" (adapted from the 1958 Italian song "Marinai Donne E Guai").

2010/08/21 (Sat.): Gombrich, E. H., *A Little History of the World*, unabridged audiobook read by Ralph Cosham, Blackstone Audio, 1985.

This is a remarkable book, originally published in German in 1936, when the author was only 26 years old. Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001) subsequently became famous as an art historian and wrote *The Story of Art* in 1950, which became the best-selling art book of all time (now in its 16th edition). Gombrich wrote "little history" in six weeks with young readers in mind, so it has a storylike tone that makes it an easy read; or, in my case, an easy listen. Near the end of the last century, the book that originally ended with WWI, was updated to include WWII as well, and its English version eventually appeared in 2005. Gombrich did much of the translation work and revisions himself, but the English version was completed after his death. Like most world histories, this book is Christianity-heavy and Eurocentric. There are mentions of happenings in the Orient and South America, but even these descriptions tend to be about the interactions of people in these areas of the world with Europeans. The book was banned in the Nazi Germany for its pacifistic tone, but the fact that the author was a Jew may have played a part in this banning as well. Because historical events are presented in chronological order, and with explanations on how they were related, one gets a better picture of human history than from a book in which the presentation is keyed to geography. This book is living proof that good children's books are interesting to adults as well.

منتخبی از اشعار زیبایی رهی معیری (کتاب "سایه عمر")

- (1) مایه‌ی رفعت: اگر ز هر خس و خاری فرا کشی دامن / بهار عیش تو را آفت خزان نرسد // شکوه گنبد نیلوفری از آن سبب است / که دست خلق به دامن آسمان نرسد
- (2) سایه‌ی اندوه: هر چه کمتر شود فروغ حیات / رنج را جانگداز تر بینی // سوی مغرب چو رو کند خورشید / سایه‌ها را دراز تر بینی
- (3) مادر: مهربان مادر، چون شاخ گل مرا / در سرای آب و گل پرورده است // میفشام خون دل در پای او / کو مرا با خون دل پرورده است
- (4) جدایی: ای بی‌خبر از محنت روز افزونم / دانم که ندانی از جدایی چونم // باز آی که سر گشته‌تر از فراهم / دریاب که دیوانه‌تر از مجنونم
- (5) کالای بی‌بها: سراینده‌ای پیش داننده‌ای / فغان کرد از جور خون خواره دزد // که از نظم و نثرم دو گنجینه بود / ریود از سرایم ستمکاره دزد // پنائید مسکین: که بیچاره من / یخندید دانا: که بیچاره دزد!
- (6) غباری در بیابانی: نه دل مقتون دلیندی نه جان مدهوش دلخواهی / نه بر مژگان من اشکی نه بر لبهای من آهی // نه جان بی‌نصیبم را پیمای از دلارامی / نه شام بی‌فروغم را نشانی از سحرگاہی // نیاید محققم گرمی نه از شمعی نه از جمعی / ندارد خاطرهم الفت نه با مهری نه با ماهی // بدیدار اجل باشد اگر شادی کنم روزی / به بخت وازگون باشد اگر خندان شوم گاهی // کیم من؟ آرزو گم کرده‌ای تنها و سرگردان / نه آرامی نه امیدي نه همدردی نه همراهی // گهی افتان و خیزان، چون غباری در بیابانی / گهی خاموش و حیران چون نگاهی بر نظرگاہی // رهی تا چند سوزم در دل شب‌ها چو کوکب‌ها / به اقبال شرر تازم که دارد عمر کوتاهی
- (7) تایننا و ستمگر: فقیر کوری با گیتی آفرین می گفت / که‌ای ز وصف تو الکن زبان تحسینم // به نعمتی که مرا داده‌ای هزاران شکر / که من نه در خور لطف و عطای چندینم // خسی گرفت گریبان کور و با وی گفت / که تا جواب نگوئی ز پای نشینم // من ار سپاس جهان آفرین کنم نه شلگفت / که تیز بین و قوی پنجه‌تر ز شاهینم // ولی تو کوری و نا تندرست و حاجتمند / نه چون منی که خداوند جاه و تمکینم // چه نعمتی است ترا تا به شکر آن کوشی؟ / به حیرت اندر از کار چون تو مسکینم // یگفت کور کزین به چه نعمتی خواهی؟ / که روی چون تو فرومایه‌ای نمی بینم

2010/08/20 (Fri.): I have just finished reading "Life's Shadow" ("Saayah-ye Omr"), a diverse collection of poems by Rahi Moayeri (1909-1968). The book ends with a poem in the poet's own handwriting that he composed for his tombstone. The accompanying image shows a few wonderful poems from this book. I also urge you to view [a 6-minute video clip](#) containing a recited poem of Rahi Moayeri over an instrumental piano piece by Morteza Mahjoobi. Poem (2) states that pain and suffering become less tolerable as the life's light dwindles, just as shadows are elongated at sunset. Poem (5) is a playful one entitled "Worthless Goods," where

a knowing person feels sorry for a thief who has stolen a poet's treasured works. Poem (7) is an apt final selection, because it combines the best in irony, purposefulness, and beauty. It tells the tale of a blind man who praised God for all his blessings. A passerby ridicules the blind man for thanking god who has not given him any material goods or even the gift of sight, whereupon the blind man retorts: What gift is more valuable than not being able to see the face of a scoundrel such as you?

2010/08/19 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) According to a [USA Today travel-section article](#), engineers are upset that the favorable outcome of a recent crash of an AIREIS airline Boeing 737-700, while trying to land in Colombia, is characterized by the media as a miracle. These engineers point to decades of unglamorous, incremental safety enhancements that account for this outcome (no one died on impact, with one passenger suffering a fatal heart attack later) and a number of similar ones over the past 5 years. Two decades ago, "a crash severe enough to break a jet into pieces was almost certain to kill passengers," asserts the author.

(2) An excellent article, entitled "[The Limits of Reason](#)," by *Newsweek's* Sharon Begley (issue of August 16, 2010, p. 24) explains why evolution may favor irrational behavior. The survival of humans hinges on an ability to win arguments, and irrational, dogmatic people, who do not see anything but their own side of the story, argue more passionately. As Begley puts it, "Arguing, after all, is less about seeking truth than about overcoming opposing views."

(3) A [Pars Times Web page](#) contains links to sites that provide information on Persian cuisine, including recipes, historical/review articles, a directory of Persian restaurants in California, and some videos.

2010/08/18 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) One of my favorite courses in 12th grade was "analytic arithmetic" or "hesaab-e estedlaali" (now defunct). A simple example of the problems posed in that course is proving that the number 10101 is not a prime, regardless of what radix it is taken to be in. With this warm-up problem, try to prove that for every integer x , there exists an integer y such that $(y^2 - 2)/(x^4 + 1)$ is an integer.

(2) A bunch of nerdy computer hackers are at the forefront of people's struggle for freedom in Iran and other countries, reports William J. Dobson in a [Newsweek article](#) (issue of August 16, 2010, pp. 38-40). Austin Heap, a twenty-something computer programmer, has put much effort into overcoming filtering software in Iran via proxy servers and other common methods. He was helped in this process by "a disaffected Iranian official [who supplied] a copy of the internal operating procedures for Iran's filtering software."

(3) As a university professor, I have learned to take academic rankings with a grain of salt, unless, of course, when my own university is ranked high on a particular list! In its issue of August 23 & 30, 2010, *Newsweek* offers a ranking of countries as desirable places to live (article by Rana Foroohar). Seven of the top 10 are in Europe, with Finland (Europe's most sparsely populated country) topping the list. Australia (4), Canada (7), and Japan (9) are also in the top 10. United States (11), Kuwait (40), China (59), and Saudi Arabia (64) are some of the other countries on the list. Iran (79) fares a bit better than Bangladesh (88) and Yemen (92). [An interactive feature](#) is included that lets you explore the various indicators used in the study.

2010/08/17 (Tue.): An interesting Voice-of-America interview with Iranian-American singer/songwriter Ziba Shirazi, presented in two 10-min parts on YouTube: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#). In this interview, Shirazi talks about her work, the difficulties faced by immigrants from Iran in getting settled in the US, and women's rights.

2010/08/16 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) In this awe-inspiring [3-minute video](#), a little North Korean girl plays a guitar that appears to be larger than her!

(2) This kid can recite [memorable lines](#) from several US presidents, from George Washington's "I cannot tell a lie" to Barack Obama's "Yes, we can!"

(3) Here is a [kaleidoscope pattern](#) that moves as you view it and can also be further modified by moving your cursor.

2010/08/14 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) An interesting math puzzle: On a circular road there are n gas stations, located at arbitrary points (not equidistant). The total amount of gas in the gas stations is just enough to go once around the circle. You have a car with no gas. Prove that there exists a gas station which you can start at, and successfully go all the way around the circle in clockwise direction.

Note: A version of this problem, in which an algorithm for finding the starting gas station is sought, constitutes a popular interview question in computing, the interviewer's goal being to see if the applicant can come up with anything better than the obvious quadratic-time algorithm. In this math puzzle, only the existence of a starting point, and not its identity, is in question.

Solution: Posted on Tue. 2010/08/17 ([PDF file](#)).

(2) A nice [instrumental Persian music piece](#) (piano, ney, and daf, played by uncredited musicians), entitled "Bahaar-e Delneshin."

(3) A beautiful song and video entitled ["Jaam-e Eshgh" by Miras](#). Here is the [artist's official Web site](#).

2010/08/13 (Fri.): A *Newsweek* article, entitled ["The Star Students of the Islamic Republic"](#) showers lavish praise on Iran's Sharif University of Technology and its students.

Here is a quote from the article: "Sharif's reputation highlights how while Iran makes headlines for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's incendiary remarks and its nuclear showdown with the United States, Iranian students are developing an international reputation as science superstars."

The article paints a picture of why, despite economic and political hardships in Iran, students of Sharif and a few other elite universities thrive and are highly sought-after by American, Canadian, and Australian universities. It also accurately portrays the serious problem of brain drain caused by universities and tech companies in the West aggressively recruiting top Iranian students.

Science/technology education and research are intimately related, as I had pointed out in my comment on a different post of mine. One key point in my earlier comment was that if scientists are not allowed to publish freely and to participate in international scientific forums, they may take all their current and future ideas with them to a different country. Now we see that the problem starts much earlier and Iranian scholars are targeted for recruitment even before they have become productive researchers.

Note: you can read this post, along with reader comments, on [Iranian.com](#).

2010/08/12 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) In this [3-minute video](#), "Manzoomeh-ye Symphony-e Mowlana," Alireza Ghorbani sings verses from Mowlavi, accompanied by music composed by Hooshang Kamkar. Ernst von Marschall conducts a German symphony orchestra.

(2) Tonight, I encountered a very nice [illustrated guide to a PhD](#). Its thesis is that while working toward a PhD, you make a small outward dent in the circle that encompasses all of human knowledge. That dent looks very important to you and will be the focus of your professional life for many years after earning your doctorate. However, you should try not to lose sight of the big picture.

(3) [A magnificent dance routine](#) by a one-armed woman and a one-legged man.

2010/08/10 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) A company is building apartments for the apocalypse: a place where for a mere \$50K per adult and \$25K per child, you can survive the aftermath of an extinction-level event, such as nuclear or biological warfare. The Vivos group is building 20 [underground self-contained survival shelters](#) across the US, each designed to house 200 people for a year. Power generation, water supply, and sewer disposal are included, as are medical, library, gym, and even jail facilities.

(2) Here are some interesting facts from *IEEE Spectrum's* "The Data" (p. 60 of the August 2010 issue) about countries and cities with the fastest Internet connections.

Top 5 countries: South Korea; Hong Kong; Japan; Romania; Latvia (US is 22nd).

Top 5 cities: Berkeley, CA; Chapel Hill, NC; Stanford, CA; Masan, S. Korea; Oxford, England.

2010/08/09 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) I am reading "Life's Shadow" ("Saayeh-ye Omr"), a diverse collection of poems by Rahi Moayeri (1909-1968), which ends with a poem in the poet's own handwriting that he composed for his tombstone. I will post a few wonderful poems from this book later. For now, let me share this [6-minute video](#) that contains a recited poem of Rahi Moayeri over an instrumental piano piece by Morteza Mahjoobi. Enjoy!

(2) ["Who Needs a Publisher?"](#) is the title of an article by Isia Jasiewicz in the August 9, 2010, issue of *Newsweek* (p. 47). It begins with the story of an author, who after having three of his novels rejected by publishers, decided to upload them as e-books on Amazon's Kindle store and became so successful that publishers came knocking! Today, it is easier than ever to self-publish books, either as e-books or in standard hard copy format using on-demand printing services such as Lulu.com. The author argues that such self-publishing ventures do not compete directly with traditional publishers, which thrive on high-volume titles, but fill a niche for specialized books. [The Back Story](#) in the same issue of *Newsweek* (p. 56) contrasts traditional print books with e-books in terms of average production costs, author royalties, total sales, and carbon footprint.

(3) "I recently participated in a chilling documentary that's in theaters now, *Countdown to Zero*, ... [which] explains why living in a world with nuclear weapons and materials is simply not a viable option. ... The United States and Russia—which together possess 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons—must reduce their Cold War stockpiles. Then, along with other major powers, including China, they must lead an international effort to

reduce arsenals worldwide and make the elimination of nuclear weapons a global imperative, allowing no exceptions, whether Iran or Israel." Valerie Plame Wilson (former CIA operations officer), in a [Newsweek article](#) entitled "The Power of Zero" (issue of August 9, 2010, pp. 30-31).

2010/08/08 (Sun.): Iran's Minister of Industries and Mines, Aliakbar Mehrabian, has said recently that Iranian scientists are committing a grave mistake to publish their findings in international scientific journals, because this is tantamount to providing free information to world powers, who then turn around and use that information against countries such as Iran. This statement has caused an uproar in the Iranian research community. Professor Reza Mansouri, Iran's Deputy Science Minister during 2001-05, has written a [very thoughtful response](#) (or, as we say in Persian, a "tooth-shattering" response) to this statement, and his response, which is in Persian, was posted on the ["Professors Against Plagiarism" weblog](#) on August 7, 2010. The essence of his rebuttal is that Iranian researchers publish fewer than 1% of all technical articles in the world. So, he asks, what have we done with the remaining 99% of the articles that other countries provide to us free of charge, including 18% by the United States alone? Why doesn't the Ministry of Industries and Mines focus on finding strategies for making the best use of this free information to build up Iran's technological infrastructure, instead of crying wolf over free exchange of information?

Note: This blog entry appeared on [Iranian.com](#) on August 10, 2010.

Comment I posted on Iranian.com, August 12, 2010: I thank all those who took time to comment on my post. Scientists in each discipline form an international community and their activities make sense only in the context of that community. Modern scientific findings are too complicated to be evaluated with regard to their importance, let alone made use of, in a small, closed society. Scientists who erect artificial barriers doom themselves to failure.

Research for practical applications, such as to ensure national security, is a different story and many countries have covert research programs for spying and weapons development. In those cases, scientists voluntarily sign confidentiality agreements for the "privilege" of working on those programs, either out of personal conviction or for handsome monetary rewards. Mr. Mehrabian was not referring to such top-secret research programs but to ordinary research performed at universities and research centers.

Scientists always face a dilemma: publish too early, and you give away important ideas that would reduce your own ability to produce additional publications in that area; publish too late, and you do not get credit for the work, given that most important problems are being looked at by dozens, if not hundreds, of scientists worldwide. Again, this is not the sense in which Iran's Minister of Industries and Mines was speaking.

Mr. Mehrabian simply thinks that ideas are flowing in one direction (from Iran to the West), totally ignoring the much more substantial flow in the opposite direction. He also says nothing about the impact of restricting scientific activities, which often leads to the scientists (not just their ideas) leaving the country, thereby taking with them their current and all future ideas.

By the way, I should have mentioned that the photo I used with my post is that of Professor Reza Mansouri, who wrote the rebuttal, and not of Mr. Mehrabian.

2010/08/07 (Sat.): Are you ready to tackle an interesting math problem?

We repeatedly flip a coin until we see the pattern HTT. For example, if the coin flips start off as TTHTHHTT..., then we see HTT for the first time after the 8th flip. On average, how many flips does it take before we see the pattern HTT? Is the average number of flips before we see the pattern HTH different from that of HTT?

Here is [a general solution](#), with a possibly unfair coin and for any sought pattern. I focus only on patterns of length 3 and a fair coin. Let E_i ($i = 0, 1, 2$) be the expected number of additional flips when we have just seen the first i letters of the desired pattern. E_0 is the quantity we are after. For the pattern HTT, we can write the following three equations: $E_0 = 1 + 0.5 E_0 + 0.5 E_1$ (after one flip, with probability 0.5 it is T, in which case we need E_0 additional flips on average, and with probability 0.5 it is H, in which case we need E_1 additional flips on average); $E_1 = 1 + 0.5 E_1 + 0.5 E_2$; $E_2 = 1 + 0.5 E_1$. These equations yield $E_0 = 8$. For the pattern HTH, the third equation changes to $E_2 = 1 + 0.5 E_0$, resulting in $E_0 = 10$.

Challenge 1: See if you can verify that the expected number of flips before seeing the pattern HHH is 14.

Challenge 2: What is the expected number of coin flips before we see three in a row (HHH or TTT)?

2010/08/06 (Fri.): The poems of Abu-Mohammad Musleh-al-Din ben Abdollah Shirazi (1184-1283+), better known as Sa'adi, particularly his masterpieces *Golestan* and *Boustan*, are among the treasures of Persian literature. Poems from both books were part of the Persian literature curriculum in Iranian schools when I was a child, and they continue to hold a special place to

منتخبی از اشعار زیبای بوستان سعدی (باب چهارم، "در تواضع")

(1) بزرگان نکردند در خود نگاه / خدا بینی از خویشتن بین مخواه
بزرگی به ناموس و گفتار نیست / بلندی به دعوی و پندار نیست
تواضع سر رفعت افزادیت / تکبر به خاک اندر اندازدیت
چو استاده‌ای در مقام بلند / بر افتاده گر هوشمندی مخند

(2) یکی قطره باران ز ابری چکید / خجل شد چو پهنای دریا بدید
که جایی که دریاست من چیستم / گر او هست، حقا که من نیستم
بلندی از آن یافت کو پست شد / در نیستی کوفت تا هست شد
تواضع کند هوشمند گزین / نهد شاخ پر میوه سر بر زمین

(3) اگر مردی از مردی خود مگوی / نه هر شهسواری بدر برد گوی
پیاز آمد آن بی هنرجمله پوست / که پنداشت چون بسته مغزی در پوست
نخورد از عبادت بر آن بی خرد / که با حق نکو بود و با خلق بد
گنجهکار اندیشناک از خدای / به از پارسای عبادت نمای

this date. A number of verses from the great poems of Sa'adi have assumed the status of adages. Selected verses from *Boustan's* fourth section, entitled "On Humility," appear in the image to the right. The last verse states that a sinner who reflects on God is more noble than a pious man who feigns prayers.

2010/08/01 (Sun.): Computing with Secret Data — One of the challenges of cloud computing (delegating computational tasks to external machines in "the cloud") is maintaining data privacy. Let's take a simple example: I would like to be able to ask the cloud to compute the sum of two numbers for me, without revealing the numbers to anyone. At first glance, this seems like an impossible task: how can any machine process numbers, without knowing the numbers? To show that this is not impossible, just imagine that I encode each number by multiplying it by 31, a number that is known only to me. So, the numbers 5 and 7 are represented as 155 and 217, respectively. The cloud can add these two numbers, obtaining $155 + 217 = 372$, which is the encoded representation of 12, the correct sum ($12 \times 31 = 372$). So, I have my sum, albeit in encoded form, without revealing the original numbers 5 and 7 (my data) to anyone. Of course, the encoding I used in this simple example does not provide much privacy, because it is very easy to break. Furthermore, this scheme only works with addition and not with other arithmetic and nonarithmetic functions. Is the same type of delegation of computation, while keeping the original data secret, possible in general and with more sophisticated (hence, more secure) encryption? Until very recently, we did not know the answer to the latter question. Now we know that the answer is positive: computation can be delegated to external untrusted agents, while the data remains encrypted with any desired degree of privacy (see the March 2010 *Communications of the ACM* paper by C. Gentry, "Computing Arbitrary Functions of Encrypted Data," pp. 97-105). For now, the methods are in their infancy and entail a great deal of overhead, but there is hope that efficiency will improve over time.

منتخبی از رباعیات زیبای ابو سعید ابوالخیر

- (01) گفتم: چشمم ، گفت: براهش میدار / گفتم: جگرم ، گفت: پر آهش میدار // گفتم که: دلم ، گفت: چه داری در دل / گفتم: غم تو، گفت: نگاهش میدار
(02) سرمایه عمر آدمی یک نفس است / آن یک نفس از برای یک هم نفس است // یا هم نفسی گر نفسی بنشینی / مجموع حیات عمر آن یک نفس است
(03) گر در طلب گوهر کاتی / و در زنده بیوی وصل جاتی جاتی // القصه حدیث مطلق از من بشنو / هر چیز که در جستن آنی
(04) گر قرب خدا می طلبي دلجو باش / و ندر پس و پیش خلق نیکوگو باش // خواهی که چو صبح صادق القول شوی / خورشید صفت با همه کس یک رو باش
(05) عشق آمد و شد چو خوند اندر رگ و پوست / تا کرد مرا تهی و پرکرد زدوست // اجزای وجودم همگی دوست گرفت/نامیست ز من بر من و باقی همه اوست
(06) اسرار ازل را نه تو دانی و نه من / وین حرف معما نه تو خوانی و نه من // هست از پس پرده گفتگوی من و تو / چون پرده درافتد نه تو مانی و نه من
(07) شاهی طلبي برو گدای همه باش / بیگانه ز خویش و آشنای همه باش // خواهی که ترا چو تاج بر سر دارند / دست همه گیر و خاک پای همه باش
(08) از درد نشان مده که در جان تو نیست / بگذر ز ولایتی که آن زان تو نیست // از بر خردی بود که با جوهریان / لاف از گهبری زنی که در کن تو نیست
(09) اندر طلب یار چو مردانه شدم / اول قدم از وجود بیگانه شدم // او علم نمی شنید لب بر بستم / او عقل نمی خرید دیوانه شدم
(10) با علم اگر عمل برابر گردد / کام تو جهان ترا میسر گردد // مغرور مشو به خود که خواندی و رقی / زان روز حذر کن که و رقی بر گرد
(11) کارم همه ناله و خروش است امشب / نی صبری دید است و نه هوش است امشب // دوشم خورش بود ساعتی پنداری / کفاره خوشدلی دوش است امشب
(12) من از تو جدا نبوده‌ام تا بودم / این است دلیل طالع مسعودم // در ذات تو ناپدیدم از معدومم / و ز نور تو ظاهرم اگر موجودم

2010/07/31 (Sat.): Abou-Saeid Abolkheir has a number of very beautiful couplets, some highly philosophical and some rather playful. I have chosen a dozen of them, which appear in the image above. Translation of (02): All of one's material belongings is worth but one breath / And that single breath belongs to one's soulmate // If you spend a fleeting moment with your beloved / That moment will form the essence of your life. Couplet (03)'s overall message is: "You are what you seek"; beyond this correspondence, however, I found it very difficult to translate into English. Translation of (04): If you yearn to be close to God, be caring / Speak well of people, in front of them and behind their backs // If you want to be trusted like the sunrise / Be sunlike and show a single face to everyone. Just for the fun of it, I decided to use Google translator to obtain an English version of couplet (09). Here is what I got: Seeking male friend got into Chu / The first step was the existence of alien / her on the lips closed Nmyshnyd science / reason she got mad Nmykhryd. Translation of (10): If you put into practice everything that you know / You'll be oh so blissful, wherever you may go // Do not show arrogance because you've learned a fact or two / Be wary of the day, when fortune might turn on you.

2010/07/30 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) I recommend the 2009 documentary "Collapse," an 82-minute Chris Smith film, to everyone who is

interested in exploring the link between finite resources on earth and the collapse of the world financial system. This film is basically a monologue by investigative journalist Michael Ruppert, who presents his ideas about how the world operates and how the depletion of oil supplies might mean the end of human civilization. Ruppert's ideas have been classified as a type of conspiracy theory, but in my view, they contain some elements of truth and are not as far-fetched as some believe.

(2) Turner Classic Movies (TCM) will devote the 31 days of August 2010 to films of 31 different stars. Check [the cable channel's Web site](#) for schedules. Among the stars represented are: (2) Julie Christie; (3) Steve McQueen; (6) Ingrid Bergman; (8) Bob Hope; (9) Warren Beatty; (17) Maureen O'Hara; (20) Katharine Hepburn; (21) Paul Newman; (23) Elizabeth Taylor; (25) Lauren Bacall; (28) Peter O'Toole; (29) Henry Fonda; (31) Clint Eastwood.

2010/07/29 (Thu.): "Scientists have long known that American minds differ from East Asian minds," maintains Sharon Begley in her column "What's Really Human" (August 2, 2010, issue of *Newsweek*, p. 30). Yet two-thirds of all subjects in US psych studies are undergraduate students, who may not even represent the typical American mind, let alone the minds of the world population. Many US researchers claim that the results of their studies reveal fundamental truths about the human nature, including not only East Asians, but the tribes in Africa and Amazonia, for example. Well, it's about time someone challenged the prevailing assumptions and research methodologies. New research has shown that a lot of previous findings in psychology are specific to WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies. For examples of the new studies and more detail, see [Sharon Begley's article](#).

2010/07/28 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) "Exactly How Much Are the Times A-Changin'?" is the title of an interesting backstory in *Newsweek's* July 26, 2010, issue (p. 56). Pairs of numbers are provided to paint a picture of drastic and surprising changes in the United States, from 2000 to 2010 (some of the numbers are in millions, M, or billions, B): Active blogs, 0.01M vs. 141M; Daily Google searches, 0.1B vs. 2B; Reality TV shows, 4 vs. 320; Books published, 0.28M vs. 1.05M; Daily letters mailed, 208B vs. 176B; Daily e-mails, 12B vs. 247B; Daily text messages, 0.4M vs. 4500M; Hard disk drive cost in dollars per gigabyte, 10 vs. 0.06; Average person's on-line hours per week, 2.7 vs. 18; Daily newspapers, 1480 vs. 1302; Revenues from CD sales, 943M vs. 428 M; iTunes downloads, 0 vs. 10,000.

(2) Everyone in the US is up in arms over the oil spill from British Petroleum's drilling operations in the Gulf of Mexico and is calling for oversight, punishment, and restitution. Yet, oil accidents are weekly facts of life in certain African countries, where BP and other oil companies have been operating with impunity. And no one seems to get upset over the health and economic effects of such accidents over there. For details, read [Julia Baird's column](#) "Oil's Shame in Africa" in *Newsweek's* July 26, 2010, issue (p. 27).

2010/07/25 (Sun.): Gheissari, Ali (ed.), *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

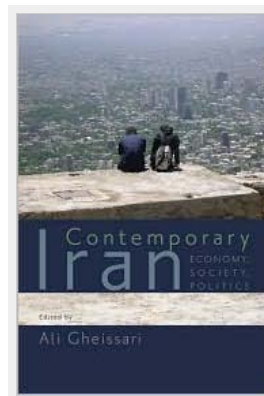
[This book review was published in [iranian.com](#) on July 31, 2010.]

According to the back cover blurb, this book collects in one place the results of field work and insights of "both internationally renowned Iranian scholars and rising young Iranian academics ... on the nature and evolution of Iran's economy, significant aspects of Iran's changing society, and the dynamics of its domestic and international politics since the 1979 revolution, focusing particularly on the post-Khomeini period. Some of the chapters in this work are updated/expanded versions of papers presented at the conference "Iran: Domestic Change and Regional Challenges," held in San Diego during September 2005.

The book is structured in three parts. Part 1, "Economy," has three chapters focusing on oil, provincial realities, and women's employment. Part 2, "Society," consists of four chapters on women's activism, health care, addiction, and scientific research. Part 3, "Politics," is composed of five chapters on political discourse, new conservatism, ethnic/religious minorities, regional issues, and the Persian Gulf policy.

I tend to view published facts and figures about Iran with great suspicion, as data tend to be misreported at the source and subject to distortions at every stop along their journey to the public domain, due to a fundamental lack of openness on sociopolitical issues. To see if this book's snapshot of modern Iran is any more accurate than the typical broad-brush, unsubstantial treatment one finds elsewhere, I turned my focus to the topics discussed in Chapters 7 and 10, about which I have greater knowledge and experience.

Chapter 7, "Iran's New Scientific Community," pp. 211-244, is authored by Farhad Khosrokhavar, a professor of sociology at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and an affiliate of the National Research Institute for Science Policy in Iran. Chapter 10, "Ethnicity and Religious Minority Politics in Iran," pp. 299-323, is the work of Nayereh Tohidi, professor and chair of the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at California



State University, Northridge, and a research associate at the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA. Nearly all the facts and figures in Chapter 7 are of questionable validity or come from interviews with a small number of researchers. The author begins by citing the number of research articles published, based on Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) reports. Table 7.1 shows that the number of ISI-recognized scientific publications in Iran rose from around 300-400 per year in the late 1970s to the 4000-5000 range in the mid 2000s, after dipping to below 200 per year in the 1980s. The rise in the production of scientific papers in recent years is correctly attributed to the establishment of doctoral programs at various universities in Iran.

What is completely missing from the analysis in Chapter 7 is the extent to which the order-of-magnitude numerical increase in productivity corresponds to greater production of science in Iran, rather than to the incentive to win in the race for monetary compensation that comes with ISI-recognized publications and the production of PhD graduates. In fact, it is well-known within the Iranian scientific community that once plagiarized papers, publication of the same set of results in multiple venues, and ISI-recognized pay-to-publish journals and conferences have been accounted for, much of the perceived increase in productivity is wiped out. The ["Professors Against Plagiarism" blog](#), maintained and moderated by Professor Mohammad Ghodsi of Sharif University of Technology, documents some of the abhorrent practices in this domain, which include submission of the same doctoral thesis to two different universities, buying and selling of research reports, listing the names of well-known or influential individuals as authors, despite their total noninvolvement in the reported research, and data fabrication/copying.

It is also quite simplistic to believe that greater production of research publications is at the service of domestic science and technology in Iran, rather than a benefit to Western companies and universities where many of these elite researchers end up. In fact, the number of researchers who work hard in building up their publications lists in order to make themselves more marketable abroad is quite significant. The author makes a transitory reference to the latter trend when he notes that "Many young, bright scientists finish their studies in the elite universities of Sharif, Tehran, or Amir-Kabir and then find positions in Western universities, sometimes via Internet connections, and leave Iran" (p. 223).

We learn from Chapter 7 that there is very little collaboration among scientists in Iran, or between researchers and the industry. Even scientists working within the framework of national research centers tend to be isolated and suspicious of others in their disciplines. While this modus operandi may be acceptable in certain theoretical fields, it is highly restrictive when it comes to engineering and other applied disciplines. Researchers in applied areas cite the lack of laboratory facilities and adequate ties to the outside world as being major problems (p. 230). Nonetheless, many Iranian scientist view themselves as members of the international scientific community, though one hears occasional complaints about being ignored or not cited by foreign researchers due to a lack of respect for Iranian scientists or an "Israeli bias" in certain world institutions (p. 231).

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Iranian community of researchers is a fundamental lack of trust between them and the officials who hold the purse strings for research funding. While "the separation of religion and scientific activity seems to be a given" (p. 239), even among scientists who are practicing Muslims, the same cannot be said about political appointees who oversee institutions of higher learning and who tend to be deeply suspicious of the former group.

The author concludes Chapter 7 by this upbeat statement: "The creativity of Iranian society, not only in the scientific field but also in the arts, literature, and philosophy, are testimony to the vitality of a society inventing new forms of pluralism amid political stalemate" (p. 241). At the end, the reader is left with an uneasy feeling about the accuracy of assertions and conclusions about the current state of scientific research in Iran.

Chapter 10 begins by supplying stats on the religious and ethnic composition of Iran's population. In religious terms, Iran is fairly homogeneous: 98% Muslim, with Shiites outnumbering Sunnis roughly 9 to 1. Zoroastrians, various Christian sects, and Jews account for a less than 2% of the population. Ethnically, however, the population is much more diverse: roughly half Persians, a quarter Azeris, less than 1/10 each of Kurds and Guilakis/Mazandranis, with the rest nearly equally divided among the Arab, Lur, Baluch, and Turkmen minorities (pp. 301-302).

Chapter 10 focuses primarily on the state institutions and their roles in designing and implementing minority policies. The equally important questions of interreligious and interethnic relations are deemed beyond the scope of the work. We learn early on that discrimination and segmentation has been institutionalized in the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution, whose Article 19 declares that the people of Iran enjoy equal rights, regardless of their ethnic and tribal origins and that "Color, race, language and the like will not be cause for privilege," pointedly omitting religion and sex from the list. In fact, all important leadership positions, including supreme leader, president, vice presidents, members of various top councils and assemblies, and head of the state TV and radio "all have been either by legal requirement or tacit agreement strictly male Shi'i" (p. 303). Religious minorities have token representation in the 290-member parliament. In fact, the five representatives of these groups (two for Armenians, and one each for Zoroastrians, Jews, and Assyrian/Chaldean Christians) constitute more than their fair share in numerical terms. However, these representatives are practically

constrained to pursue only issues of religious practices and do not carry much weight or prestige among their peers. Even though the Islamic regime corrected one serious error of the Shah's, who used to downplay religious and ethnic differences in his attempt to promote "Iranianness," the current recognition of differences is nullified by the "outsider" status given to such minorities, whose slightest expression of discontent is quickly branded as being caused by foreign powers or their agents.

Such alienating rhetoric continues to be the norm, despite the regime's apparent awareness of its dangers. For example, the minister of intelligence is quoted as having said in 2004 that "the nature of future crises in Iran will not necessarily be political but, rather, they will be ethnic and social," perhaps using "social" as a codeword for the escalating discontent among women. Despite the awareness just cited, Ahmad Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council, used two Friday sermons in early 2005 to scold certain presidential candidates for provoking ethnic sensitivities (p. 306), when all they had done was to promise greater participation to Kurdish and Arab minorities.

The author ends this highly informative chapter with the recommendation that nationhood and "Iranianness" should be redefined "by emphasizing on citizenship and rights rather than ethno-linguistic criteria grounded on race, blood, and cultural or religious variables" (p. 319).

As evident from the two chapters discussed in depth, the chapters in this volume vary greatly in their objectivity, completeness, and relevance. Nevertheless, this book is head and shoulders above similar volumes published in recent years about the sociopolitical landscape in the twenty-first-century Iran. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in learning about social and political issues in today's Iran.

2010/07/23 (Fri.): Gardner, Martin, *Sphere Packing, Lewis Carroll, and Reversi, Martin Gardner's New Mathematical Diversions*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

This is the third in a series of 15 planned volumes devoted to the works of puzzlemaster Martin Gardner, who was in charge of a mathematical games and recreations column in *Scientific American* for 25 years. The mathematics behind the 20 chapters (covering Gardner's columns for 1959-61) is quite diverse, and it includes number theory, geometry, group theory, combinatorics, graph theory, and probability. The columns have been augmented with new developments since they were written and with comments sent to the author by his many readers worldwide. Chapters 3, 12, and 19 contain a number of unrelated problems of varying complexities, whereas each of the remaining 17 chapters has a theme. All 20 chapters are full of interesting problems and observations, but I particularly liked the following three chapters: (4) The Games and Puzzles of Lewis Carroll; (6) Board Games; (17) H. S. M. Coxeter. Previously, on 2010/07/17, I wrote about some Chapter 4 topics having to do with Lewis Carroll's Doublet, a game/puzzle in which the player must change one n -letter word to another n -letter word using steps in which a single letter changes and all intermediate steps produce valid words (e.g., OLDER, ELDER, EIDER, WIDER, WISER). In Chapter 6, we learn about a number of variants of the game of chess, as played in countries around the world. These variants may differ in board size, number and arrangement of pieces, and so on, but they are all descendants of an ancient game thought to have been developed in India circa the sixth century A.D. One interesting variant, the Maharajah, is played between two sides, one with conventional chess pieces and the other with only one piece that can move both as a queen and as a knight. It is now known that the Maharajah can always be captured by the player with conventional pieces, perhaps in as little as 25 moves in the worst case. The interesting game of Reversi, mentioned in the book's title, is described in this chapter. Finally, Chapter 17 focuses on Coxeter's remarkable book, *Introduction to Geometry*, which is a serious and dense mathematical treatise, with numerous puzzle-like end-of-chapter exercises. An example problem/puzzle is the following: If three circles are drawn so that each one touches the other two, it is always possible to draw a fourth circle that touches the original three. This chapter also includes a discussion of tessellations, which lead naturally to the remarkable designs of Maurits Escher. This is not the type of book one reads from cover to cover in one sitting. Rather, it is a book one revisits from time to time, for new challenges and insights.

2010/07/22 (Thu.): A friend's posting of a news story about Syria banning niqab and burka (extreme forms of hijab) at its universities triggered some discussion. One of the people commenting on the story agreed with my assertion that forcing women to not wear certain types of clothing not only does not solve any problem, but it may worsen the state of women's rights. For example, if women are not allowed to wear their preferred type of hijab at universities, they may voluntarily not attend, or not be allowed to attend by their husbands/fathers, thus actually losing parts of their rights rather than gaining a benefit. The solution is not burdening women with additional restrictions (wear this, don't wear that), but educating men about the need for equality and fairness. The person commenting posted a link to a [scholarly article](#) [Carvalho, J.-P., "Veiling," University of Oxford Discussion Paper Series, No. 491, June 2010] that, among other things, models the effects of forced unveiling of women (as previously done in Iran and Turkey, and now being implemented in Syria), reaching the conclusion that it engenders greater isolation, rather than assimilation, of religious groups and may thus lead to additional radicalism. The paper uses heavy math in its modeling, but the abstract and introduction are quite accessible.

2010/07/20 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) An interesting math puzzle: A triangular number is the sum of consecutive integers, beginning with 1. For example, $6 = 1 + 2 + 3$ is a triangular number, as are 15 and 28. A square number is one that is the square of an integer (9 and 64 are examples). Some numbers, such as 1 and 36, are both triangular and square. What is the next number that is both triangular and square? By deriving a formula for the k th number that is both triangular and square, show that there are infinitely many such numbers. *Hint:* The formula will be a recurrence that relates $x(k + 1)$ to $x(k)$ and $x(k - 1)$.

(2) According to the [San Jose Mercury News](#), scientists have embarked on producing a highly detailed map of the entire 1200-mile California coastline, to become available on the Web next summer (2011). I had previously come across a very interesting site containing a navigable set of [aerial photographs](#) that allows virtual travel along the California coastline through a simple, intuitive interface. I had a great deal of fun exploring the latter site, visiting familiar locations such as the Golden Gate bridge, Monterey's 17-mile drive, and the UCSB campus. I look forward to playing with the more detailed on-line map next year.

(3) I remember reading Khaghani's edifying poem "Porch of Madaa'en" (in Persian: "Eivaan-e Madaa'en") as a kid. The opening verse, loosely translated as "Oh observant soul, use your mind's eye to see / and to learn from the ruins of the Porch of Madaa'en," has taken the status of an adage or "massal" in Persian. So, I was thrilled to see the poem posted in full on an [Iranian.com blog](#).

2010/07/19 (Mon.): McClellan, Scott, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Blackstone Audio, 2008.

Like nearly all political memoirs, this book, written and read by President George W. Bush's Press Secretary during 2003-06, is for the most part self-serving, with the author trying to blame various other Bush aides for his misleading the press, and hence the public, during press conferences and briefings at the White House. In some respects, this book is somewhat better than many tell-all or tell-most books, in that it contains a great deal of detail from a man who was one of President Bush's closest advisors. The famous "16 words" in the President's 2003 State of the Union Address is analyzed to death, as is the leaking of the name of Valerie Plame as a CIA agent. Politicians and political operatives lecturing us on the virtues of forthrightness and accountability, after leaving office, remind me of certain celebrities in the film and music worlds, who after decades of promiscuity and drug abuse, become cheerleaders of morality in their old age. Both groups are motivated by repairing their tarnished images and improving their earning potentials. Unfortunately, however, warring politicians and aides airing their dirty laundry seems to be the only way the public can catch a glimpse of the truth, which becomes all but invisible in real-time due to obfuscation and spin tactics. In this sense, such books serve a very useful purpose and should be read by ordinary citizens, if only to reinforce the notion that whatever is being said today is a sanitized version of the truth.

2010/07/17 (Sat.): I am reading the fascinating book *Sphere Packing, Lewis Carroll, and Reversi: Martin Gardner's New Mathematical Diversions*. This is volume 3 in a 15-volume planned series devoted to the works of puzzlemaster Martin Gardner, who was in charge of a mathematical games and recreations column in *Scientific American* for 25 years.

I will write a full review of the book when I am finished, but for now I would like to share with you an interesting game/puzzle due to Lewis Carroll (of "Alice in Wonderland" fame). Carroll was apparently an excellent mathematician and is responsible for a good deal of very interesting recreational math. He was also a master wordsmith. Carroll's game of Doublet was very popular in his day and is still being used in the diversions section of some newspapers and magazines.

The goal of Doublet is to transform one word into another in steps that involve changing only one letter, with each intermediate step yielding a valid word. Obviously, the starting and ending words must have the same number of letters.

Here is an example: to place PIG into STY, the intermediate words may be chosen to be WIG, WAG, WAY, and SAY. One tries to minimize the number of steps. When the starting and ending n -letter words have no common letter in the same position, a minimum of n steps are required. In cases where there is an n -step solution, the Doublet is called "ideal."

Here are some puzzles you can try (be warned that some are pretty hard): turn COLD to WARM; show GRASS to be GREEN; evolve MAN from APE; raise ONE to TWO; change BLUE to PINK; make WINTER SUMMER; put ROUGE on CHEEK; take TRAM to MART; replace SWORD with PEACE.

The first of the examples above is an ideal Doublet. The last example is said to have been used by the famous computer scientist, Donald Knuth, in his 1992 Christmas card. Knuth developed a 5757-node undirected graph that linked all 5-letter English words together, with an edge between two words if they differ in only one letter. He noted that most pairs of 5-letter words can be transformed to each other, but that there exist 671 "aloof"

words, such as ALOOF, EARTH, and OCEAN, that are not neighbors of any other word. Also, there are 103 pairs of 5-letter words with no neighbors except each other. The maximum number of neighbors for a word is 25, which occurs for BARES and CORES.

Martin Gardner himself wondered whether there is a closed chain that changes SPRING to SUMMER to AUTUMN to WINTER.

I wonder whether Doublet would be sufficiently interesting with Persian words. One can change the 3-letter word SORKH to SABZ by using the intermediate words SARD and SABAD (ideal doublet).

Here are some suggested Doublet games, with 3- and 4-letter words, some of which I have not yet solved myself: put PALANG in BISHEH; turn DAANESH into SERVAT; put ELM into AMAL; change BARGH to GAAZ; learn DARS from MASHGH; bring MARDOM into SAHNEH; shoot TEER to HADAF; decree HARAAM to be HALAAL. It seems that there are far fewer possibilities in Persian than in English for making Doublet games.

2010/07/16 (Fri.): Tonight, I read an article entitled "[From Bricks to Bits: Building the Lego Universe Online](#)" in the July 2010 issue of *IEEE Spectrum* (pp. 46-51). The author, David Kushner, writes about efforts by Lego to enter the cyberspace through a multiplayer online game. Any parent, who when playing with his/her child has been frustrated by the amount of time spent looking through piles of Lego blocks to find the right piece, will share my glee for the online version which would allow you to secure just the right piece, in any desired color, in a snap. Telling my daughter Sepideh about this new Lego world, she said something to the effect that "it won't be as much fun." I too can't help but feel a sadness for the loss of the tactile experience, the crisp noise of Lego blocks being shuffled, or the snap of one piece falling into place as it is attached to another. Lego is approaching the problem with great care, in part because it does not want to jeopardize its multibillion dollar market and in part because it cares genuinely about preserving the creative experience that is a hallmark of its products. One challenge, for example, is that in online gaming, children and adults intermingle and it is not an easy matter to protect the kids from weirdoes who may build obscene or otherwise inappropriate objects. Lego plans to hire hundreds of moderators, conversant in many different languages, to keep a watch on its online universe. It seems that Lego will be offering a service whereby after building an object online, one can order the exact set of blocks needed for its physical construction through a store interface. Fascinating!

2010/07/14 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) According to an [article in Education Week](#), computing will be one of the fastest-growing job areas in the coming years, but US universities are expected to fall far short in producing graduates in the field. Initiatives from companies, such as Google and Microsoft, and an AP high-school course that appeals to a broader and more diverse audience (to compensate for the dearth of women and minorities pursuing computing degrees) are among the efforts to address this gap.

(2) Having been born to parents who grew up in Iran's Kurdistan province, and not having visited that province myself, I was delighted to find this [collection of 42 photos](#) depicting its natural beauty.

(3) I am a fan of speed in everything. I have no choice: with all the technical journals to keep up with, general-interest newspapers and newsmagazines to browse, e-mail messages to read and answer, and articles/books to write (not to mention Facebook posts to compose or follow), I would not make it through my day without speed. However, there is an alternative view that I learned about in a [Newsweek article](#) by Malcolm Jones. The article begins with a description of The International Day of Slowness (March 21, which is the longest day of the year) and proceeds through a host of examples of people who equate slowness with better understanding and greater enjoyment. Read and judge for yourself!

2010/07/13 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) After more than 80 contenders were disqualified for not meeting a number of contest specifications, including fuel efficiency, safety, and range, superlight aerodynamic prototypes from a single company are the only ones remaining in the multimillion-dollar X-Prize contest to design the first 4-door sedan to run at 100 miles per gallon of fuel. Here is the AP report, as published in [The Christian Science Monitor](#).

(2) I have seen the creation of art on a canvas of sand before, but the artist in this [8-minute video](#) takes the art to a new level. Hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

2010/07/12 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Morgan Freeman, playing Nelson Mandela in the movie 'Invictus,' in a speech to fellow black South Africans: "Our enemy is no longer the Afrikaner. They are our fellow South Africans ... our partners in democracy. And they treasure Springbok rugby. If we take that away, we lose them. We prove that we are what they feared we would be. We have to be better than that. We have to surprise them ... with compassion ... with restraint and generosity. I know, all of the things they denied us. But this is no time to celebrate petty revenge. This is the time to build our nation ... using every single brick available to us."

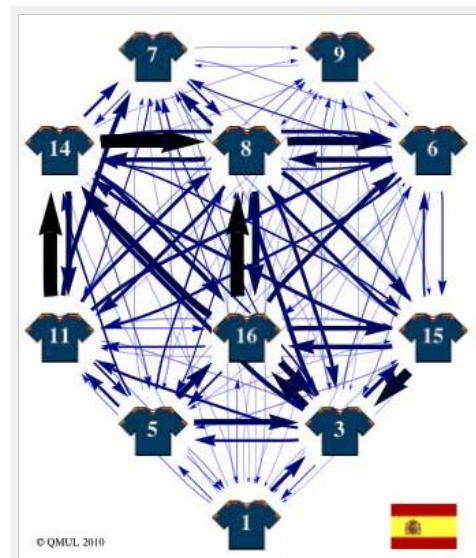
I wish someone could play this speech for the current rulers in Iran, and for some Iranians who are already talking about bloodshed and settling scores, once the current regime falls.

[See a version of this post, including a photo, on [Iranian.com](#).]

(2) A women's soccer team from Germany goes to Tehran for a match with its Iranian counterpart. The German team wears Islamic uniforms, a gesture of friendship and tolerance that says a great deal about how far Germans have come from their dark past. However, the darkness over Iran still remains: witness in this **10-minute video** how the announcer discourages the all-female spectators from showing emotion and joy in cheering up their team. The bright spot is how the spectators react and talk.

(3) Probability puzzle: The numbers 1 through n are written on slips of paper and placed in a hat. Two players take turns drawing numbers from the hat. If a player draws the number 1, the game is over and that player wins. If the player draws a different number, that slip of paper is destroyed and the turn passes to the next player. Who has the advantage, the player who goes first or the one who goes second?

2010/07/11 (Sun.): Finally, the FIFA World Cup 2010 soccer tournament is over, with Spain earning the bragging rights for the next four years. All the craziness, from the annoying vuvuzela horns to predictions by Paul The Octopus, can now be put to rest. However, some interesting concepts also came to light during this year's FIFA tournament. One of the most intriguing, from my point of view, is the notion of representing the performance/style of a soccer team by means of a specially constructed directed graph. The 11 vertices of this graph are the players at various positions. The graph can be constructed for a single game or for a set of games, using data available from FIFA. A directed edge from player i to player j means that player i made some passes to player j during a particular game or a set of games. The graph is drawn so that the thickness of each directed edge is proportional to the number of passes: a thin arrow means there were very few passes, while a thick arrow signifies a large number of passes. Examining such a graph reveals the extent of ball control by a team (general density of the graph), as well as its preferred attack routes. The accompanying graph represents Spain's team in all of its FIFA World Cup 2010 games, prior to its final match against the Netherlands. For more detail, and graphs associated with some other teams, see [the University of London mathematics research team's Web site](#).



2010/07/09 (Fri.): A few days ago, while browsing magazines at a Borders bookstore, I came across the summer 2010 issue of *Scientific American Mind* (Vol. 20, No. 1), bearing the cover headline "169 Best Illusions." The issue contains 10 articles, all written by S. Martinez-Conde and S. L. Macknik, with the order of names reversed in some articles. Because the article titles give an accurate sense of the contents, I list them below, along with brief comments in some cases.

- (1)** The Neuroscience of Illusions, pp. 4-7; overview article discussing brightness illusions, color in context, illusory motion, ambiguous figures, shape distortion, and 3-D illusions.
- (2)** A Perspective on 3-D Visual Illusions, pp. 8-11; twin towers, coming together, breaking the rules, thinking inside the box, what is real?, and anamorphic art (3-D sidewalk paintings).
- (3)** The Neuroscience of Yorick's Ghost and Other Afterimages, pp. 12-15.
- (4)** Colors out of Space, pp. 16-25; objects of identical colors looking different because of background, White's effect, discombobulating color, color blindness test, the McCollough effect.
- (5)** What's in a Face?, pp. 26-35.
- (6)** The Eyes Have It, pp. 36-41.
- (7)** The Illusions of Love, pp. 42-47.
- (8)** Art as Visual Research: Kinetic Illusions in Op Art, pp. 48-55.
- (9)** Sculpting the Impossible: Solid Renditions of Visual Illusions, pp. 56-63.
- (10)** Food for Thought: Visual Illusions Good Enough to Eat, pp. 64-71.

You can find [a small sample of the illusions](#), one per article, on-line, but I highly recommend purchasing the magazine if you are at all interested in visual illusions.

2010/07/07 (Wed.): Moezzi, Melody, *War on Error: Real Stories of American Muslims*, University of Arkansas Press, 2007.

The author decided to write this book when the events of September 11, 2001, created a distorted image of the

life aspirations and loyalties of Muslim-Americans in the minds of many. This is clearly a worthy goal that has been addressed by other writers, and filmmakers, with mixed results. The author approaches her subject by presenting the life stories of 12 individuals: 7 women, 5 men. Those chosen include the author herself, her husband, and several very close friends. As such, these 12 people do not represent an unbiased cross-section of the Muslim-American community. The author admits to this bias, but rather than being apologetic about it, derides the scientific sampling approach: "If I was going to be at all successful in helping to create a meaningful understanding of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim American, I wasn't going to do it with a statistical sampling—thank God! Besides the fact that I am absolutely lousy at statistics and find them dull, lifeless, and easily manipulated, there was also my deep-seated mistrust of the accuracy of statistics ..." [p. xx]. I won't even attempt to state how many errors and misconceptions this single passage contains. Blanket dismissal of anything the author does not like, and praise for what she does like, is the rule in this book. A couple of pages later, we encounter this gem of an observation: "Video games and virtual reality, for example, are inherently inhuman. To boot, they breed obesity, violence, indolence, and stupidity ..." [p. xxii]. These kinds of biases and emotional outbursts permeate the entire volume. We see very pleasant quotes from Quran, such as "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error" (2:256)[p. 152], but not "slay those who ascribe divinity to other than God" (9:5). In the concluding chapter, the author opines: "If we want to educate non-Muslim Americans about the true beauty of Islam, we first have to speak out against this mistaken minority of hate-mongers and power-seekers who fraudulently claim to be acting in the name of Islam" [p. 154]. This would be a near impossibility in my view if one puts the author's subsequent statement that "Our greatest ally in this effort is the Holy Qur'an itself" alongside "Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends" (5:51). The book under review is not a bad read, when viewed as a collection of very brief biographies of 12 particular individuals, who (as advertised on the back-cover blurb) constitute a very diverse group, but it falls far short of achieving its intended goal.

[Note: This review was published today under the title "[Falling short](#)" in [iranian.com](#).]

2010/07/06 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) The escalating war between students who cheat and instructors who try to detect cheating is going even more high-tech. Here is an article on page A1 of today's [New York Times](#) on new methods of detecting plagiarism, homework copying, illicit help during exams, and other forms of academic dishonesty.

(2) In a [24-minute talk](#), Sam Harris (author/CEO) discusses the relationship between science and values. He argues that the commonly held belief that science does not take sides in arguments about good and evil, or right and wrong, is mistaken. In his own words, "the separation between science and human values is an illusion. ... Values are a certain kind of fact. They are facts about the wellbeing of conscious creatures."

2010/07/05 (Mon.): Another challenging math/probability problem: A few days ago, on July 1, I posted a challenging probability problem that generated a great deal of interest. So, now that everyone has had some rest, I pose another one. **Problem:** The wall surrounding a castle has a footpath along its top. There are 12 towers at various locations along the wall, with the spacing of towers being arbitrary and unknown (visualize this as a clock face on which the 12 tick marks are unevenly distributed). Shortly before noon, there is a guard at each tower. Each guard tosses a fair coin and then starts marching along the path at precisely noon, going clockwise if his flip was heads, counterclockwise if his flip was tails. Guards all march at a speed which would take them once around the castle in one hour. When guards encounter each other, they instantly turn around and march in the opposite direction. They continue doing this (i.e., marching at a constant speed and reversing direction when meeting another guard) until midnight. (1) Show that all guards are back at their starting positions when the castle clock strikes midnight. (2) Find the probability that all 12 guards are at their starting positions after k hours, for $k = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 11, 12$. [Problem statement and solution in a [PDF file](#)]

2010/07/04 (Sun.): Today is the official birthday of the United States, the 234th anniversary of the adoption of its Declaration of Independence. However, today also marks the 100th anniversary of a very important boxing match (I am no boxing fan, but this one is special). In the late 1900s, African-American boxer Jack Johnson became the first nonwhite to win the title of World Heavyweight Champion, to the chagrin of many in the racist society of that day. One of those who took offense, Jack London (great writer, not-so-great human being), coined the expression "the great white hope" to refer to a wished-for white boxer who would correct this "humiliation" of the white race by winning the title back. Several candidates were considered, but none took up the challenge, until the never-beaten boxer Jim Jeffries was lured to come out of retirement to try to reclaim the lost glory. Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries entered the ring in Reno, Nevada, on July 4, 1910, with Johnson triumphing in the 15th round in front of 20,000 spectators. "The Great White Hope" is the title of both a critically acclaimed play and a movie. Jack Johnson's struggles to break the molds that were set not just by white people, but also by black folk, who preferred to conform than to fight, is the subject of a PBS documentary "Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson." Learning

of Jack Johnson's story and what the phrase "the great white hope" signified inspired me to write this Persian poem which advocates compassion, equality, and justice for both genders and all races. The initial letters of the half-verses spell "Sara" to honor a friend who recently posted a few items about women's struggles and rights.

Here is a loose English translation of the Persian poem above: Whether you're green in outlook, or are inclined to be red; Take my advice to heart, lay intolerance to bed; Offer love and justice, to every woman and man; No matter if they're white, or the darkest shade of tan.

سبز است گر مرامت ، یا آنکه سرخ رنگی
از من به تو نصیحت ، عیب است چشم تنگی
رحم و تساوی و عدل، بر مرد و زن عطا کن
ار پوستش سفید است، یا تیره است و رنگی

2010/07/03 (Sat.): "In 1975, future Hall of Famer Roger Staubach had the football but little else in a playoff game against the Minnesota Vikings. Behind by four points at midfield with 24 seconds to go, the Dallas Cowboys quarterback closed his eyes, threw the ball as hard as he could, and said a Hail Mary. (For you soccer fans, this would be like David Beckham taking a shot on goal from midfield late in injury time.) ... Thirty years later, the semiconductor industry threw the equivalent of a Hail Mary pass when it switched from making microprocessors run faster to putting more of them on a chip—doing so without any clear notion of how such devices would in general be programmed. The hope is that someone will be able to figure out how to do that, but at the moment, the ball is still in the air." [Quoted from "The Trouble with Multi-Core," an article by David Patterson in *IEEE Spectrum*, Vol. 57, No. 7, pp. 28-32 & 53, July 2010.]

2010/07/02 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) It sounds weird, but the Pahlavi family are on Facebook! Here are stats on their fans: Reza Jr. 18,658, Farah Diba 11,223, Mohammad Reza 58, Reza Sr. 43. It's also weird that long-dead people have Facebook pages. Kourosh Hakhamaneshi, for example, "only shares certain information with everyone." Both Amir Abbas Hoveyda and Abolhassan Bani Sadr have yet to garner any fans, whereas Saddam Hussein has 1076. Go figure!

(2) In the article "This Is Your Brain. Aging." published in the June 28 & July 5, 2010, issue of *Newsweek*, Sharon Begley reviews some good news about age-induced memory loss. Even though after age 25, our memory and problem-solving capabilities start going south, we compensate for these losses in a variety of ways (although, she notes that doing crossword puzzles and similar activities may not have the positive effects once suggested). It turns out that in many previous studies comparing the brains of 20-somethings to those of 80-somethings, say, much of the differences may have resulted from generational factors (new generations being better at many things) than from age factors. A recent study has led to the hypothesis that the synapses and spines, which are not lost with age, are responsible for maintaining expertise and knowledge. According to Begley: "This may be how the brain retains what it learned decades ago, and why a professor of cell biology can teach well into his 80s."

2010/07/01 (Thu.): Here is a good way to test your skills in probability theory. I first saw this problem in the August 2009 issue of *Communications of the ACM*, but it has been floating around for many years. Even though, at first glance, the problem seems to require tedious calculations, it can be solved fairly easily with the proper insight. **Problem:** An aircraft with 100 seats is fully booked, with the 100 passengers standing in line to board it. The first passenger loses his/her boarding pass, so s/he takes a random seat. Each subsequent passenger either sits in the assigned seat or (if the assigned seat is already occupied) takes a random seat from among those available. What is the probability that the last passenger will sit in his/her assigned seat? [For the solution, see item 2 on [p. 110 of CACM, September 2010.](#)]

2010/06/30 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) This video is nearly a year old, but since many people I encounter are unaware of the methods and potentials of transferring electric power wirelessly, I am posting it here. In this [10-minute video](#), Eric Giler, CEO of WiTricity, explains and demonstrates the wireless transfer of electric power.

(2) Mokarrameh Ghanbari (1928-2005) was a self-taught Iranian painter whom I had not heard about until today. She began painting at age 63 (64?) and received numerous recognitions until her death at age 77. It is regrettable that we Iranians learn about our national treasures only after Westerners show interest in them. There are rumors that Hollywood is in the process of making a movie based on this extraordinary woman's life and has recruited Meryl Streep for the lead role. There is a [Web site](#) with more information about her. Wikipedia also has a short article on her, with some useful links, and there is a Facebook group one can join. One story I read about this extraordinary painter states that she had two "havoos" (husband's other wives). She worked on the fields, even after she had become famous as an artist. She included her husband in one of her paintings, but then decided to white him out!

2010/06/23 (Wed.): Today, I read in *Grad School News* that, in the wake of recent disasters associated with engineering projects, a number of US universities are considering new graduate programs that focus on safety engineering. Unfortunately, this is the wrong approach: dealing with safety in separate engineering programs that educate a limited number of students reinforces the disturbing attitude that safety is something to be considered after-the-fact and by safety specialists only. While such specialists are no doubt required, a more appropriate reaction would have been the strengthening the safety (as well as engineering ethics) content in all educational programs. One of my favorite engineering books is Henry Petroski's *To Engineer Is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design*, in which he focuses on what engineers learn from failures. The story goes something like this: We build a new kind of structure (say, a suspension bridge), factoring in a great deal of redundancy because of our uncertainty and lack of confidence in our knowledge of how it will fare during use. We then build additional versions of the structure, gaining greater confidence with each, shaving a bit off the overdesign or safety factor as a result. Until, eventually, the n th structure becomes too streamlined, and it fails (think of the Titanic). We then go back and see where we erred and how we might eliminate the causes of failure. These failures are part of the learning process for the engineering profession, so they should be taught as case studies in regular engineering courses. As Petroski puts it in another one of his books, *Success Through Failure*: "When a complex system succeeds, that success masks its proximity to failure. ... Thus, the failure of the *Titanic* contributed much more to the design of safe ocean liners than would have her success. That is the paradox of engineering and design."

2010/06/22 (Tue.): Mohammad-Hossein Shahriar's poems are some of the tenderest and most lyrical among the works of classical Persian poets. Here are selected verses from one of his **patriotic poems** written for Ferdowsi's Millenary Celebrations in 1934. The verses chosen are not consecutive but appear in the correct order.

به هنگامی که نادانی به گیتی حکم فرما بود / تمدن در جهان همخوابه سیمرغ و عنقا بود
در ایران کیش زرتشت آفتاب عالم آرا بود / همای فتح و نصرت همعنان پرچم ما بود
جهان را تا جهان بان بود زنده نام ایران بود / خوشا ایران زمین تا بود مهد علم و عرفان بود
فلک یک چند ایران را اسیر ترک و تازی کرد / در ایران خوان یغما دید و تازی ترک تازی کرد
وطن خواهی در ایران خانمان پر دوش شد چندی / بجز در سینه ها آتشکده خاموش شد چندی
بدان با جان پاک موبدان آزارها کردند / سر گردن فرازان را فراز دارها کردند
چون از شهنامه فردوسی چو رعدی در خروش آمد / به تن ایرانیان را خون ملیت به جوش آمد
به جز عشق وطن دیگر کجا بودت به سر سودا / زهی آن عشق و آزادی، زهی آن فر و استغنا
کنون بیدار شو، فر و بهای خویشتن بنگر / فراز مسند خورشید جای خویشتن بنگر
زیارتگاه عالم تربت این شاعر طوسی است / در این کشور به پا جشن هزارم سال فردوسی است

2010/06/20 (Sun.): To share, or not to share: that is the question. I have previously written about my displeasure with the new privacy policies, or lack thereof, adopted by Facebook (FB). So, to provide some balance, I thought I should share the other side of the story, which I am now more inclined to embrace. I should also note that since my initial comments, Facebook has reversed some of its "default" sharing policies under pressure from its user community. In a thoughtful **"My Turn" essay**, published in the June 21, 2010, issue of *Newsweek*, Emily Gould explains her decision to combine her public persona and a private blog that she maintained anonymously, because she has come to realize that the statement "if people share more, the world will become more open and connected" by FB founder Mark Zuckerberg is more than a lame excuse for justifying a greedy, economics-based decision. She offers the following quote from David Kirkpatrick's *The Facebook Effect* to show that Zuckerberg's ideas resonate with others as well: "more transparency should make for a more tolerant society in which people eventually accept that everybody sometimes does bad or embarrassing things." She concludes with the following observation: "there's much good that can come from behaving consistently in both [our online and offline lives]."

2010/06/19 (Sat.): King, Barbara J., *Roots of Human Behavior*, The Great Courses Series, audiobook of 12 lectures, The Teaching Company, 2001.
Professor King (College of William & Mary) is a biological anthropologist who has studied monkeys and great apes in various settings in Africa and the US. In this series of 12 lectures, Professor King draws from her experience with our closest relatives in the animal kingdom (the great apes: orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos) to explain the roots of certain behaviors in human beings. The lectures in this highly informative series have the following titles: (1) The four facets of anthropology; (2) Social bonds and family ties; (3) The journey away from mom; (4) Males and females—really so different?; (5) Sex and reproduction; (6) Tool making—of hammers and anvils; (7) Social learning and teaching; (8) Culture—What is it? Who's got it?; (9) Dynamics of social communication; (10) Do great apes use language?; (11) Highlights of human evolution; (12) Exploring and conserving a legacy.

2010/06/18 (Fri.): Hoffman, Tod, *The Spy Within: Larry Chin and China's Penetration of the CIA*, Steerforth Press, 2008.
Larry Wu-Tai Chin, whose life story is the focus of this book, was a Chinese spy who penetrated the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and fed top-secret information to his handlers in China for more than 30 years,

spanning much of the Cold War, the Vietnam war, Nixon's reapproachment with China, and ending with his arrest in the mid 1980s. His identity was discovered through hard work, and some sheer luck, when a Chinese intelligence official, recruited as a spy by a US operative in China, provided a hint and a few bits of information about the infiltrator's travels. The story of Larry Chin is proof positive that real espionage cases can be a lot more intriguing than those concocted by imaginative fiction writers. One learns from this book that catching a mole is not as easy as depicted in spy novels or movies: even after Chin's identity had been pinpointed, it took a lot of work to collect the types of evidence that would lead to conviction in a court of law. Complicating the situation was the fact that evidence had to be collected without alerting Chin in any way that he was a suspect. So, overt surveillance, and directly interviewing other CIA personnel, were out of the question. The spy recruited in China also could not provide a lot of detailed information: for one thing, he did not know the identity of the mole and, for another, he could not divulge much information without compromising his own position and thus jeopardizing his life. Chin was eventually found guilty and sentenced to 133 years in prison, where he committed suicide. Tod Hoffman, an 8-year veteran of the China desk of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, interlaces Larry Chin's story with bits and pieces of other espionage cases in the Cold War history, including some information about John Walker, the most significant of the American traitors (he spied for the Soviet Union in the 1960s). All in all, this is a very interesting and informative read.

2010/06/13 (Sun.): Howard, Roger, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, I. B. Tauris, 2007. This book, by the author of *Iran in Crisis? Nuclear Ambitions and the American Response* (Zed Books, 2004), has a simple thesis: that it is Iran's natural resources, and not its nuclear program, that should inform the reaction of the West to its manipulative foreign policy and ambition for regional domination. In other words, by pursuing sanctions and other punitive measures, the United States may be misjudging Iran's real weapon (ample natural resources) and undermining its own power. The US trade embargoes on Iran benefit only the US's rivals, who will cheerfully take advantage of the vacuum through investments and trade partnerships. Iran, for its part, uses rather sophisticated strategies to exploit the rift between the US and other world powers over its natural resources. For example, Iran has cleverly timed tantalizing announcements of new oil/gas field discoveries, with supposedly vast new reserves, to coincide with international worries over its nuclear intentions or snags in multilateral negotiations on monitoring and oversight (p. 4). China, India, Russia, and other countries, with either a need for Iran's oil and natural gas to fuel their rapidly expanding economies, or with an eye toward the vast Iranian market for foreign imports, are tempted to turn a blind eye on that country's utter disregard for international treaties, so as to keep their favored positions for lucrative economic deals. Overall, this book provides some interesting insights into the very sensitive relations between Iran and the United States, but there are occasional inaccuracies in describing Iranian institutions and political figures. For example, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are referred to as "premier" or "prime minister" (e.g., p. 37). This mischaracterization may be deliberate, though, given that the function of "President" in Iran is closer to that of prime minister in other countries. Other observations, such as those having to do with the brutality of the Iranian regime and its total disregard for individual freedoms, are surprisingly accurate and current, given that the book was written long before the recent popular protests and the attendant waves of arrests and imprisonments. In the last few paragraphs of the concluding chapter, the author advises against the use of labels such as "aggression," "terrorism," and the like. Instead, he favors the use of language that avoids these highly charged, and ultimately ambiguous and unhelpful, terms in US's dealings with Iran.

[Note added on 2010/06/15: This review was published today under the title "[Oily Relations: Insights into ties between Iran and the United States](#)" in [iranian.com](#).]

2010/06/12 (Sat.): In the interest of preserving the legacy of my father, Salem Parhami, I took this photograph of his technical books written in Persian. These 12 volumes were used at Iranian universities for many years. At the center of the photo, you see a 5-volume set of textbooks entitled "Modern Electrotechnics," volumes 1-3 with black hard covers and volumes 4-5 with pink soft covers. The other books are, clockwise from the top left corner: A 2-volume textbook set entitled "Fundamentals of Electricity and Electronics," "Industrial Electricity: Theory and Practice," "Electrical Safety," "Illustrated Dictionary of Electricity,



Electronics, and Computers," "Plumbing: Design and Installation," and "Pumps: Selection, Installation, Operational Principles, and Maintenance" (translation from English).

2010/06/11 (Fri.): Today, all eyes are on soccer and the 32 teams that are competing in South Africa for the world's most coveted sports trophy: The World Cup. Earlier today, I watched South Africa and Mexico play to a 1-1 tie in the opening match of the tournament. What a glorious day for SA, the lowest-rank team to ever play in the World Cup, and the first African nation to host it. Mexico had more goal-scoring chances overall, but SA could have won it near the end with two excellent scoring opportunities.

Soccer is, of course, the main story today, but there is a side story that might be just as intriguing: How an impressive 70,000-seat stadium was built as one of the venues for the 2010 World Cup. *E & T*, the magazine of the Institution of Engineering and Technology, has some [details of challenges](#) that had to be overcome in designing and building the Green Point Stadium in Cape Town, the host city. The stadium is an engineering marvel in architecture, use of advanced technology, and environmental friendliness.

2010/06/08 (Tue.): In an open letter, dated 2010/06/04, to the University of California faculty, a group of UC librarians have warned of a possible faculty boycott of the Nature Publishing Group (publishers of *Nature*, *Scientific American*, and other journals) for its outrageous price increases and monopolistic practices. Some background information can be found on the [California Digital Library](#) Web site. Interestingly, the Nature Publishing Group draws much of its prestige from UC faculty publishing their research in its various journals or serving on their editorial boards.

2010/06/07 (Mon.): Occasionally, right after making a research discovery or connecting the dots in a complex pattern of scientific evidence, I find myself smugly pleased or even gloating. This is why I keep this gem from Isaac Newton, one of the most influential scientists of all times, handy: "I do not know what I may appear to the world. But to myself I seem to have been like a boy playing on the seashore, and enjoying myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble, or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

2010/06/04 (Fri.): Lanchester, John, *I.O.U.: Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay*, Simon & Schuster, 2010.

If you would like to understand derivatives, CDOs (collateralized debt obligations), CDSs (credit default swaps), and other financial "innovations" that got the world into the current economic mess, then this is the book for you. I enjoyed reading this book immensely and learned a great deal from it. The author is not an economist or a business journalist, as one might expect, but rather an accomplished novelist who "stumbled across the most interesting story [he'd] ever found" while doing background research for one of his novels. He explains complex ideas and their interrelationships in a clear and entertaining way. Once you understand all the risky behaviors of our financial "geniuses," many with PhDs, you can't help but wonder about the rotten system (composed of bankers, regulators, and their political chums) that allowed such scoundrels to thrive, pocketing vast sums of money during good times and leaving the bill for us to pay when things went south. The author begins Chapter 2, "Rocket Science" (p. 45), with this gem of an observation: "Finance, like other forms of human behavior, underwent a change in the twentieth century, a shift equivalent to the emergence of modernism in the arts—a break with common sense, a turn toward self-referentiality and abstraction, and notions that couldn't be explained in workaday English." In explaining the deepest reason why some Western governments are reluctant

to use nationalization as a threat to keep financial firms from misbehaving, the author states (p. 229): "Because it would be so embarrassing ... We've gloated at the French fear of debt, laughed at the Germans' nineteenth-century emphasis on manufacturing, ... and so on. It's embarrassing to be in a worse condition than all of them." In the end, it seems, we should be thankful for this equivalent of a mild heart attack, which may end up being beneficial if it leads to our facing the facts and bringing about changes in our lifestyles. In his concluding paragraph (p. 232), the author writes: "... now it's time to slow down, calm down, and decide how to make the finance industry back into something that serves the rest of the society, rather than preying on it. ... In a world running out of resources, the most important ethical, political, and ecological idea can be summed up in one single word: 'enough.'" Amen!

2010/06/03 (Thu.): Agatha Christie [1890-1976] is known as the most prolific writer in the world. She wrote 80 detective novels that sold more than 4 billion copies in all; only the Bible has had more copies printed. Now, a British professor, Ian Lancashire, has fed some of Christie's works into a computer and discovered a remarkable pattern. Somewhere around her 73rd novel, written when Christie was 81, her writing pattern changed: she used simpler sentences and a smaller vocabulary. Lancashire takes this to be a sign of Alzheimer's, although she was never diagnosed with the disease. Ironically, the 73rd novel was entitled *Elephants Can Remember*, with its main character being an aging female novelist who struggled with memory loss, perhaps a sign that Christie herself was aware what was happening to her. Other studies, including one at University of Minnesota, lend credence to the theory that a person's likelihood of developing Alzheimer's in old age can be predicted with great accuracy from their earlier writings. This is confirmed by the so-called "Nun study" in which a group of nuns volunteered to participate in a University of Minnesota investigation of the effects of aging on the brain (they authorized researchers to chronicle their lives and to examine their brains upon death). With all of us having growing records in the form of e-mail, blogs, and so on, perhaps it won't be long before such methods become applicable for early diagnosis of Alzheimer's. Read the full story at the [NPR Web site](#).

2010/05/30 (Sun.): There is a Web site where you can convert Persian text into beautiful Nastaliq script. The accompanying image contains a sample. You create Persian text using whatever tool you like (such as Behnevis), cut/paste the text into the appropriate box at the [Nastaliq Online](#) Web site, and press the "khat'taati kon" button. An image of the Nastaliq text will appear in your browser, which you can then copy and paste into other programs for cropping, resizing, or format change. Make sure to uncheck the box "saayah" if you do not want shadowed text. You will discover many features on the site, such as choosing the text size and the color of your pen, adding a decorative frame, and so on. Enjoy!



2010/05/29 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Raised as an Iranian woman: A heartfelt and beautifully written [essay by Sherri Nader](#) about her difficult transition from the Eastern culture of modesty and "ta'arof" (offering compliments, often insincere ones) to the Western norms of openness and frank expression of feelings.

(2) A new hypersonic flight speed record: In a 3-minute test flight, the unmanned X-51 WaveRider reached a speed of 3500 mph (Mach 4+), before plunging into the ocean. See the [Los Angeles Times story](#), which includes a video of the rocketlike aircraft being released from a B-52 bomber.

(3) Will computer viruses spread through humans?: You have heard of humans infected with viruses from the animal world. Now, a British scientist has demonstrated that humans can spread computer viruses through implants and other increasingly sophisticated embedded electronic devices, according to a [BBC News story](#). In trials, the scientist has shown that a purposely infected chip inserted in his hand could pass on the virus to external control systems and, from there, to other devices that interact with the infected systems.

غافل منشین نه وقت بازیست / وقت هنر است و سرفرازیست
دانش طلب و بزرگی آموز / تا به نگرند روزت از روز
جانی که بزرگ بایدت بود / فرزندی من نداشت سود
می‌کوش به هر ورق که خوانی / تا معنی آن تمام دانی
گفتن ز من از تو کار یستن / بی کار نمی توان نشستن
با اینکه سخن به لطف آیدست / کم گفتن هر سخن صوابست
کم گوی و گزیده گوی چون در / تا ز اندک تو جهان شود پر

2010/05/28 (Fri.): Many sayings in the Persian language have their origins in the works of our great classical poets. Still, I find it amazing that a single poem from Nezami Ganjavi contains so many of our beloved Persian sayings. Here are selected verses. I have taken the liberty of making a couple of corrections to the version available on [ganjoor.net](#). You can also see this posting in an [iranian.com blog entry](#).

2010/05/25 (Tue.): Fagan, Brian M., *People of the Earth: An Introduction to World Prehistory*, Prentice Hall, 13th ed., 2010.

Studying world history is quite fascinating, but looking at our prehistory is even more so. Several years ago, in an article published in a popular science magazine (I have forgotten which one), I encountered a map of the world on which the migration paths of modern humans from their origins in Africa (near Lake Victoria) to various continents were drawn, with each path segment marked by an approximate date [similar to the adjacent map].



I understood from the article that the tracing and dating of the paths is based on genetic comparisons of human fossils dug up in various regions. I have since discovered that many versions of this map exist, with each one giving different migration paths and dates. However, the overall pattern is decidedly similar: In very rough terms, modern humans developed in Africa 100K years ago, then some groups migrated to Southwest Asia around 60K years ago, and from there to East Asia and Europe 40K years ago, and eventually to North and South America only 20K years ago. I have discovered an [animated, interactive version of this timeline](#) at the Bradshaw Foundation Web site. Beginning with a red dot in Africa, the interactive map exposes a subset of the migration paths with each click on the "play" button at the center of the diagram, while a moving bar underneath the map traces the passage of time. With this background, I was excited to discover that a UCSB colleague has a textbook on world prehistory. I acquired the book from the campus library and set out to learn more about our prehistory. This 552-page book packs an amazing amount of information and is full of photos, maps, timelines, and other visual aids. I recommend it highly. However, be aware that despite being in its 13th edition, the book still contains some errors. For example, in the timeline that appears on the right side of the world map on page 73, a number of the listed events are not properly aligned with the corresponding dates. The five parts of the book, following an introductory chapter, are entitled "Beginnings" (to 40K years ago, chs. 2-3), "The Great Diaspora: The Spread of Modern Humans" (from 45K years ago, chs. 4-7), "First Farmers" (from 12K years ago, chs. 8-13), "Old World Civilizations" (from 5K years ago, chs. 14-20), and "Native American Civilizations" (from 4K years ago, chs. 21-22). Of particular interest to me was Chapter 15 "Early Civilizations in Southwest Asia" (pp. 325-342), which covers the prehistory of a region that includes parts of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and western Iran.

2010/05/23 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) From the fun of scientific research to the grunt work needed for practical applications:

In *Newsweek's* May 24 & 31 double issue, Sharon Begley and Mary Carmichael write about the difficult process of, and the many obstacles to, turning scientific discoveries into practical treatments for diseases. They note that "from 1999 to 2003, the budget of the NIH [US National Institute of Health] ... doubled, to \$27 billion, and is now \$31 billion. ... But judging by the only criterion that matters ... the return on investment to the American taxpayer has been [quite unsatisfying]." Interestingly, the health care reform bill that recently became law in the United States includes a "Cures Acceleration Network" provision that is intended to help promising discoveries make the transition into useful treatments.

(2) Many of our fears are based on emotions rather than logic:

"What should you really be afraid of?" is the title of Back Story in *Newsweek's* May 24 & 31 double issue. It lists some events that most of us fear, alongside events we do not consider very scary. However, the second event of each pair is 2 to 100,000 times more likely to harm us. See if you can estimate the risk ratio for each of the following pairs of events: a child's abduction vs. drowning in a pool; shark vs. dog bites; dying from terrorism vs. flu; dying in an airplane crash vs. car accident.

(3) Walt Whitman, "the poet of democracy and freedom":

Walt Whitman [1819-1892], a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, wrote his poems some 150 years ago. Yet our generation is discovering unexpected freshness in his intimate verses. He has come to be known as the poet of democracy and freedom. Here is a sample from one of his poems: Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy, / Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only, / The Past is also stored in thee, / Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone, not of the Western continent alone, / Earth's resume entire floats on thy keel O ship, is steadied by thy spars, / With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations sink or swim with thee, / With all their ancient struggles, martyrs, heroes, epics, wars, thou / bear'st the other continents, / Theirs, theirs as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant; / . . .

2010/05/21 (Fri.): Bradbury, Ray, *Fahrenheit 451*, Simon and Schuster, 1950.

Prompted by my daughter's reading of this book as part of her English assignment, I decided to reread it after several decades. Before starting to read the book, I came across an enjoyable and informative audiobook, *An Introduction to Fahrenheit 451*, National Endowment for the Arts, 2006, which provided me with some of the

background material for this review. Book-burning, be it in the literal sense of the term or in the form of preventing publication or confiscating printed copies, has a long history. Many important religious texts, philosophical treatises, and social commentaries have been banned at one time or another, and quite a few remain banned a decade into the Twenty-First Century. Bradbury writes about a futuristic American society in which books have been banned and the remaining copies are incinerated upon discovery. People no longer enjoy nature and they are glued to large TV screens most of the time. Guy Montag, a firefighter turned book-burner, starts having doubts about his job and his world view, in part because of a free-spirited young girl, Clarisse, who befriends him. A number of disturbing events in Montag's life, including Clarisse getting killed by a speeding car, push him over the edge. Following confrontation with his boss, whom he incinerates, Montag becomes a fugitive and finds a renegade group, "the Book People," who have memorized many great books as a way of preserving them. After a televised chase and an air raid, carried out to destroy Montag and his new friends, the group moves on to search for survivors and rebuild civilization. Bradbury wrote the first draft of this great book in nine days, after he discovered that in a basement room at the UCLA library, he could rent a typewriter for 10 cents per half-hour. At the time, his home had no space for an office, so that basement room became his office. He went there with a pocketful of dimes and began typing, occasionally going upstairs to collect quotes from library books, returning to the basement to write about them. When asked which book he would choose to memorize if he were one of the Book People in his own fiction, Bradbury said that he would chose *A Christmas Carol*.

2010/05/20 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Facebook banned in Pakistan: will Iran be next? It was reported widely today that Pakistan has blocked Facebook over the social networking company's creation of a site where people can submit caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. I have not visited the site myself, because I heard in a radio program this morning that some of the drawings submitted are very offensive. Friends in Iran may want to prepare themselves for the blocking. Here is the [Los Angeles Times](#) report of what happened.

(2) Stanford University is leading the way in bringing about the libraries of the future: small, people-oriented facilities that feature brainstorming areas, digital bulletin boards, and lots of computers for accessing e-books, e-journals, and other on-line material. Read the details in [San Jose Mercury News](#).

2010/05/19 (Wed.): Here is a [PDF file](#) with a large number of Persian proverbs and other sayings ("massals"). Unfortunately, the document contains the common mistake of calling them "zarbol-massals," which really means "quoting or using massals" ("massal zadan"; "zarb" is Arabic for "zadan"). Elsewhere, you can find a [useful listing](#) of Persian proverbs, with literal English translations, connotations, and equivalent English proverbs, where available.

2010/05/17 (Mon.): Here is a [video clip](#), containing an interesting mix of classical ballet techniques and Persian music/dance. Enjoy!

2010/05/16 (Sun.): I found out today that May 15 was Ferdowsi day. Yesterday, I had received a 9-MB, 2316-page, PDF file of the full text of *Shahnameh* and tonight discovered that a free [English translation](#), by Helen Zimmern, is also available.

2010/05/15 (Sat.): Tonight, I came across a Wikipedia article on the "[Ey Iran](#)" anthem. It contains the Persian lyrics along with English transliteration and translation. At the end of the article, under "External links," you will find several renditions of the anthem (I recommend the first, MP3 audio, version and versions performed by Darya Dadvar in concerts). This is a wonderful resource, particularly for younger people of Iranian origin who may not be able to read Persian.

2010/05/13 (Thu.): The human brain is in many ways more capable than the most powerful supercomputers we can build today. Yet, when it comes to multitasking and parallel processing, the brain has some limitations. The following experiment provides an apt demonstration. While sitting on a chair, lift your right foot off the floor and draw clockwise circles in the air with it. Simultaneously, try to write the numeral 6 in the air with your right hand. You notice that as you begin the 2nd task, the direction of your right foot changes involuntarily. Most likely, you can't avoid this, no matter how hard you try. There is a sneaky way to perform both tasks simultaneously, but I'll let you discover it for yourself.

2010/05/11 (Tue.): Heilemann, John, and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*, Harper Collins, 2010.

The authors paint an intimate portrait of the 2008 US presidential campaign, with a lot of juicy tidbits that are either not available elsewhere or had not been previously reported in this much detail. The focus is on the

candidates and their spouses, rather than on campaign platforms or strategies. However, it is made abundantly clear that the candidates' personalities and spousal relationships greatly impacted all aspects of their campaigns. For example, Hillary Clinton is said to have made detailed plans on how to deal with her husband's indiscretions, if and when damaging revelations erupted (p. 50). Elsewhere, we learn that, after his wife showed her displeasure with being kept in the dark about his serious consideration of seeking his party's nomination, Barack Obama told a campaign aide (p. 57): "Next time I decide to make a big announcement, would you remind me to tell Michelle?" Another example is Karl Rove calling Joe Lieberman to plead that he turn down the vice-presidential slot if offered to him by McCain, in order to "save McCain from himself" (p. 357). Even though the authors do not provide detailed source notes, as is common in such investigative works, it is clear that the account is based on numerous lengthy interviews with people intimately familiar with the various camps. All in all, this book is an interesting read for political junkies.

2010/05/10 (Mon.): I would like to share here two Web sites introduced to me by friends. The first is a tastefully done site that contains a compilation of the cultural marvels found in the [city of Yazd](#), Iran. Set to peaceful music, the site offers 360-degree panoramic views of each site, with a control panel that allows you to choose your viewpoint. The control panel, and the map below it, can be moved out of the way by clicking on the hollow circle at the very top. This will give you a complete, unencumbered view. A menu bar at the top of the page allows you to pay virtual visits to other towns and sites in the Yazd province. The second Web site is devoted to [Mowlavi \(Rumi\)](#), the great 13th-Century Persian poet (1207-1273). It provides access to his complete works.

2010/05/06 (Thu.): Tonight, I came across two items worth sharing here. The first is a delightful [photo essay on Iran](#): the work of a foreign tourist who spent three weeks in the country. Among its 100 photos, one finds depictions of the usual historical sites and Iran's serene nature, but it is also rife with images of ordinary people on the street and very interesting close-ups of ceramic and other designs. Watch for photos of an amazing tiled dome (#69) and a traditional "tanoor" in a bakery (#76). The second is a poem entitled [Why the Silence, Oh Iranian Woman?](#) Even though I am not a fan of modern Persian poetry ("she'r no"), preferring the classical style of the old masters, I found this work of Shahab Taherzadeh quite touching.

2010/05/04 (Tue.): Today is Teacher Appreciation Day. We teachers are thrilled and reassured by every thank-you note we receive from a former or current student. Here is [a very touching note to a teacher](#), written in Persian, by a Baha'i student who has been denied access to higher education in Iran.

2010/04/23 (Fri.): Tonight I discovered a new Persian poetry Web site and a poet (Tahereh) that I did not know about. Here is [a sample of Tahereh's work](#) that is absolutely beautiful in content and structure.

2010/04/10 (Sat.): Dawkins, Richard, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*, Free Press, 2009.

Many books have been written on the theory of evolution, with quite a few (including several by Dawkins himself) aimed at the nonspecialist. This book is one of the most lucid popular science books I have ever seen. It presents the evidence for evolution, as well as experimental set-ups used by scientists to collect the required data, with wonder and clarity. Along the way, Dawkins touches upon, and solidly refutes, all the key arguments against evolution offered by creationists. As the author of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins does not hide his distaste for religion, an unfortunate choice that somewhat dilutes the strength of his arguments and makes them suspect to a majority of the faithful who need more convincing than others. Despite this drawback, I would recommend this book to anyone who has not looked at evolution in detail.

2010/04/06 (Tue.): (1) Fatemeh Sadeghi writes a moving piece (in Persian, [iranian.com](#)) about why mandatory hejab laws are inhumane. Coming from someone who was raised with hejab and whose father (Sadegh Khalkhali) was a prominent cleric in the early years of the Islamic revolution, the piece is doubly effective in bringing attention to women's rights in Iran.

(2) Sedaris, Amy, *I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Hachette Audio, 2006.

I learned about this author after listening to an audiobook by her brother, David Sedaris (see the entry for 2010/03/31 below). While not as consistently funny as her brother, Amy has quite a few comedic tricks up her sleeve. This audiobook is not all comedy, however: it also contains some real recipes and hints for being a gracious host to various types of invited and uninvited guests.

2010/04/04 (Sun.): Zeydabadi-Nejad, Saeed, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*, Routledge, 2010.

As I began reading this book in March 2010, I learned of the imprisonment of Jafar Panahi, a New-Wave Iranian

filmmaker, along with several friends and members of his family. This made the subject matter of the book highly topical and quite relevant to today's political struggles in Iran. Further evidence of this topicality is the fact that Iranian government ministers have lost their posts or were impeached because of films. We learn from this book about two important genres of Iranian cinema: art films (made for the educated elite and film festivals), and social films. Prominent among the latter category are films about women, increasingly by female directors. Because of the severe restrictions placed on women and their rights, such women's films are doubly explosive. Discussing women's issues and women's films, a prominent Iranian film actress, who is now a director herself, is quoted as saying: "I know many men who are avid readers, are very well aware of what is going on in the world, but when it comes to women, they are extremely narrow-minded. Iranian men are influenced by the culture of this society. There are words that have been handed down to them and they have accepted without question, such as *gheyrat* [jealous zeal] and *namus* [sexual honor]" [p. 136]. We also learn that Iranian cinema before the revolution was star-centered, whereas the postrevolutionary version is identified with the director and/or scriptwriter. The latter make much more money than the actors (not that there is much money in Iranian cinema) and their incomes are often supplemented by book sales. Iranian films that are not banned outright, are routinely censored, but such censorship is not a new phenomenon. For example, Mehrju'i's *The Cow* (1969) was released only after the filmmaker agreed to add statements to the film that its story, showing backwardness in Iranian villages, took place before the Pahlavi dynasty. One interesting dynamic at play in Iranian cinema is a heightened awareness of censorship among all involved. Movie audiences readily figure out which parts of a film have been censored and what might have been removed or altered. On page 89, we read about a ploy of some Iranian filmmakers, who, guessing about which parts of their films will be censored, "have the solution [e.g., alternative dialogs] ready to fix those parts." The conservative clergy are torn about cinema and its role. On the one hand, they do not trust the intellectual filmmakers, and on the other, they have come to recognize the power of film as a tool to advance their agenda. While boasting about the successes of Iranian cinema at international film festivals, these authorities view with suspicion the motivation of festival organizers for honoring dissident and intellectual filmmakers. The author quotes Makhmalbaf, a filmmaker who no longer carries favor with the clergy, despite the fact that his early films met with strong approval, as saying [p. 66]: "Iranians live like people in Los Angeles at home and like Saudi Arabians on the streets. You cannot get to know this society from the streets. If you go to people's houses, you see the real people." My own longstanding criticism of Iranian cinema, which seems to resonate with others (according to the author), is that it has become disjoint from the tastes and concerns of the Iranian people. The efforts of filmmakers to satisfy the censors, on the one hand (improbable story lines, a woman wearing her hejab even when alone with her kin at home, unrealistic dialog), and pandering to the art-film style favored at international film festivals (use of child actors, filming exclusively on location, undue focus on the poor and uneducated), on the other, have rendered the protagonists of modern Iranian films unrecognizable to the average Iranian. Interestingly, Iranian filmmakers may be given more credit than they deserve, both inside and outside the country. Audiences in Iran sometimes read nonexistent political messages in ambiguities that may have resulted from censorship or poor cinematic execution. Festival critics and foreign audiences tend to view those same ambiguities as signs of sophistication or depth. To wrap up, this book (the author's doctoral thesis) is a very useful contribution to the understanding of Iranian cinema and its prominent role in the country's social and political scenes.

2010/03/31 (Wed.): Sedaris, David, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Hachette Audio, 2001.

David Sedaris sees something funny in every event, no matter how insignificant. And he describes it with his trademark self-deprecating style. He reads his book with perfect comic timing, making the listening experience infinitely superior to reading on your own. His uncannily accurate Billie Holiday impersonation, singing commercial jingles, is an extra treat that would not be as enjoyable in written text. His dysfunctional family is, as usual, prominently featured in this autobiographical work, as are his travails in learning and speaking French. One of the more interesting stories in this book describes his interactions with a speech therapist who wanted to help him with his lisp. Instead, he set out on a quest to find s-free words.

2010/03/24 (Wed.): Friedman, Thomas, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America*, updated and expanded Release 2.0, Picador, 2009.

Having read (actually, listened to) Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*, I approached this book with great anticipation. I was rather disappointed. The book does not lack in sobering facts, nor is it devoid of amusing nuggets. Examples of the latter include a bumper sticker (How many miles per dead soldier does your SUV get?) and a clever joke on p. 249 (An American golfer walks some 900 miles and drinks 22 gallons of alcohol per year: it kind of makes you proud that he gets 41 miles per gallon). However, I found it quite exhausting to try to get the big picture from paragraph after paragraph of linear text. It appears that modern popular accounts of economics and other science/technology topics are modeled after works of fiction: A linear narrative, with

characters and plot twists introduced in a measured way to peek the reader's curiosity and to keep him/her in the dark for as long as possible. What happened to "A picture is worth a thousand words"? How can one discuss any serious economics topic without images and charts? This book contains a grand total of 6 charts/diagrams: a pie chart on p. 242 and 5 graphs on pp. 129-134 (ch. 6) purportedly showing the negative correlation between the price of oil and "freedom," with the latter quantified by various indices. The book offers no end notes, but has a decent index.

Friedman's message in this book is that being green is good business strategy. Only corporations that embrace energy frugality and own up to the seriousness of global warming will thrive in the long term. The problem with this claim, even if accepted on faith, is that it solves none of our urgent problems. This is a lot like "Honesty is the best policy," which has not stopped anyone from lying and deceiving. Witness the large number of forty-somethings who sold their hyped-up dot-com holdings to "retire" in large mansions, leaving millions of naive shareholders to face the consequences of greed. Overall, I find myself agreeing with Gregg Easterbrook's review of this book in *slate.com* (posted on Monday, September 8, 2008).

2010/03/23 (Tue.): Today, I chanced upon a column by Vitali Vitaliev in *Engineering & Technology* (an IET journal) where the recent fad of condensing great works of literature into tweets, or "Twitterature," was discussed. Here are a couple of examples:

Inferno, Dante Alighieri—"I am having a midlife crisis. Lost in the woods. Should have brought my iPhone."

Paradise Lost, John Milton—"Falling unto the abyss!!! . . . Oh my God I'm in Hell."

Vitaliev maintains that the idea of tweeting is not new, citing the following examples:

Oscar Wilde—"I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again." [Having labored for hours on polishing a single poem, I can very much identify with this tweet.]

Anton Chekhov—"I dreamt that what I had thought was reality was a dream, and what I had thought was a dream was reality." [This one's beyond my personal experiences: I usually have no trouble distinguishing my dreams from reality.]

Samuel Beckett—"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail better." [This one's on my favorite quotations list.]

2010/03/14 (Sun.): Levitt, Steven D. and Stephen G. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, unabridged audiobook read by the second author, Harper Audio, 2005.

What led to the sharp decline in US crime rate in the 1990s? Popular explanations at the time credited innovative policing techniques, a stronger economy, stricter gun laws, and an aging population. Then came a landmark 2001 paper by John J. Donohue III and Steven D. Levitt in *The Quarterly J. Economics* that traced the root to legalization of abortion some two decades earlier, offending both sides of the abortion debate in the process. The lesson one takes from this example, and many others in this book, is that correlation and causality are quite different animals. To establish causality, one looks for correlation as a starting point, but then one must be diligent to account for, and weed out, other possible influences. Just because kids with a lot of books at home test better at school does not mean that the said books are responsible for the performance edge; the root causes may in fact be certain traits of the kids' parents who brought those books home in the first place. The rogue economist in the subtitle is the first author; the second author, a journalist, is apparently an ardent fan of the first.

2010/03/10 (Wed.): Osanloo, Arzoo, *The politics of women's rights in Iran*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2009.

I enjoyed reading this book and learned a great deal from it, but I have mixed feelings about its message. On the one hand, it is a scholarly work that covers a lot of ground on women's rights in Iran before and after the revolution. On the other hand, I did not like the author's apologetic tone when she tries to show that the discriminatory practices against women in Iran are somehow due to cultural differences and must be understood in the context of an Islamic society. While I have nothing against viewing sociopolitical problems in appropriate cultural contexts, certain rights and claims to justice and equality supersede cultural considerations. I take it for granted that a human being is a human being and gender should not be a basis for additional or more restricted rights. The culture of modesty and relations between opposite sexes only in the framework of marriage, even if accepted by everyone, does not give anyone a license to restrict only one of the two sexes. Let's imagine a day when a blind person can walk and drive just like sighted people through technological aids. What would men think if a government then removed all restrictions on women's clothing and instead required men to be blindfolded at all times when outside their homes. This would accomplish exactly the same goal as women's hijab, but very few men would submit to the rule.

Let me cite specific examples from the book that created the aforementioned mixed feelings. On page 104, the author marvels at how much women who know the law and their rights can extract benefits from the Iranian justice system. For example, there are specific fines associated with various infractions in clothing or wearing

makeup: "Mascara is a certain amount, lipstick another, and so on." One woman boasts that because the judge saw that she was informed, he reduced the fine to a third of the original amount. Is this reduction of fines really a victory for women? In discussing the Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (IDHR) on page 183, the author glosses over the limitation of the right to marry (which in the Universal DHR is required to be without discrimination based on "race, nationality, or religion") for a Muslim woman by specifying that she can only marry a Muslim man. This is not a trivial limitation and merits further discussion. On page 206 and elsewhere, the author refers to "liberal Islamic Republic," an obvious oxymoron. Elsewhere, the author claims that women in Iran do have rights. For example, a large number of women attend universities, much more so than in many Western countries. But then she fails to follow up on this by investigating the types of jobs offered to women. They certainly cannot become the country's president, and they are allowed to serve in the cabinet only in certain token positions having to do with education, health, and the like. It is almost tempting to think that permitting women to attend universities is not out of respect for their rights but rather a mechanism to keep them content and under check.

Despite the shortcomings just outlined, there are useful nuggets of information in this book. For example, one learns that the former Shah did not dare to truly reform marriage laws. Rather, he got around Islamic rules (that recognize the right of a man to unilaterally divorce his wife) by having the husband grant the right to divorce to his wife in a marriage contract. Thus, the law did not say that men and women are equal in this respect; rather, it required the man to "voluntarily" forego his exclusive right to divorcing his wife. It is regrettable that a decade into the 21st Century, we still have a need to discuss women's rights as if they were different from human rights.

2010/03/07 (Sat.): Krugman, Paul, *The Return of Depression Economics, and the Crisis of 2008*, unabridged audiobook read by Don Leslie, Random House Audio, 2008.

This is an updated version of the author's 1999 classic in which he pointed to lessons we could learn from the financial crises in Asia and Latin America. But the West was apparently too busy feasting on various bubbles at the time to take note. Many of the explanations offered by the author are quite enlightening, although I am not sure that the types of governmental intervention and cash injection that he prescribes would solve all of the current problems that are rooted in human moral failures, rather than economic modeling errors.

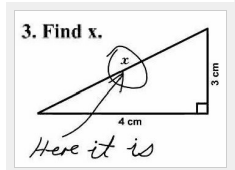
2010/02/15 (Mon.): Bacevich, Andrew J., *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, unabridged audiobook read by Eric Conger, Macmillan Audio, 2008.

American exceptionalism, the view that the United States' unique place among all nations obliges it to act on behalf of the entire world, is an old creation of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) which was embraced by neoconservatives to justify the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The main theme of this book is that America's reliance on military power to guard its national security interests is misguided. The author, a retired colonel and a Boston University Professor of international relations, had been critical of George W. Bush's doctrine of "preventive war," even before the 2007 death of his son in Iraq. He is outraged by politicians who do not tell their constituents about the hard choices they must face in order to protect America's future. War in recent years has been used to feed the Americans' appetite for consumption, which requires easy access to energy sources and credit. However, war can never be a long-term solution to economic and social ills. Thus far, the post-Cold-War conflicts have accomplished exactly the opposite of what they were meant/hoped to do. Exerting military force in the absence of an existential threat is a tell-tale sign of a deteriorating hegemonic power. As Reinhold Niebuhr, a contemporary American theologian and philosopher (and a favorite of President Obama), once wrote: "One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun."

2010/02/13 (Sat.): Feiler, Bruce, *Where God Was Born: A Journey by Land to the Roots of Religion*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2005.

The author travels to Israel, Iraq, Iran, and other Middle Eastern locations to put the stories of the Old Testament in the context of where they are supposed to have happened. Long sections in the narrative are devoted to Cyrus-the-Great's role in the liberation of Jews and other oppressed people from Babylon, and to Zoroastrianism as an enlightened religion/philosophy. The author stresses the common roots, and shared histories, of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, preaching flexibility and accommodation. Yet, at the same time, he issues broad proclamations regarding the justness of the Iraq war and the supremacy of Western pluralism. To its credit, this book paints a more accurate picture of today's Iran than many other modern accounts. For example, the author marvels at Iranian Jewish synagogues not having, or needing, the tight security that has become necessary in other parts of the world, and he commends his Iranian contacts' openness in discussing their religious and political views.

2010/02/05 (Fri.): What will judges do next? They elected a president for us a few years ago. Then, they enabled corporations to elect our future officials, by supporting their favorite candidates with loads of money. Now, they are telling our schools what type of math to teach. According to *Seattle Post Intelligencer's* [report of 2010/02/04](#), a judge in Seattle has ruled that a school district's choice of the *Discovering Math* series of textbooks and the associated curricula is "arbitrary" and "capricious." To be fair, I must state that the judge's decision was informed by testimony from a retired math teacher and a university professor, but it is not hard to find "experts" who support or oppose any given viewpoint (take the issues of climate change and vaccine-autism connection, for example). The winning side in this argument is already gloating about its victory and expects the battle to spread to other districts and cities around the US. The moral of this story is that if you do not run for leadership posts in education, or do run but aren't elected, you can still advance your plans by finding the right judge.



2010/02/04 (Thu.): Ariely, Dan, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions*, unabridged audiobook read by Simon Jones, Harper Audio, 2008.

This book provides an eye-opening and highly enjoyable introduction to behavioral economics, a field that challenges the market-knows-best maxim of standard economics. One reason for the latter's failure in many of its predictions is the underlying assumption of rational players or agents: that each person has perfect knowledge of his/her needs and can calculate the utility (value) of different options. This is a highly questionable assumption. We are far more influenced by emotions and social norms than by market norms. As David Berreby notes in his *New York Times* review of this book, "We aren't cool calculators of self-interest who sometimes go crazy; we're crazies who are, under special circumstances, sometimes rational." An interesting example is when we face a choice between X and Y, versus when we have the three choices X, Y, and X-, where X- is a less appealing version of X. Under rational behavior, whether we prefer X to Y should be independent of the presence of X-. When the options include X-, however, we are much more likely to choose X over Y than when we have only the two original options. In other words, our preference for X over X- affects how we view Y. Needless to say, marketers make very good use of decoys (the subpar version of X) to steer us toward a particular choice (X). While it invalidates standard economics theories, our irrational self is rather predictable, leading to alternate theories that are advanced within behavioral economics. For example, it is not difficult to predict that people would buy stuff they can't afford or that they can be lured into buying things they don't need, when those things come with free offers or gifts. Alas, it seems that marketers grasped the theories of behavioral economics before scientists did.

2010/02/01 (Mon.): Sedaris, David, *Live at Carnegie Hall*, audio performance, Time Warner Audio Books, 2003. The following description is from Publishers Weekly: Bestselling humorist Sedaris likes to test out new material on twice-a-year reading tours to get the rhythm and phrasing perfected before he puts them down on the page. This live recording of his October 22, 2002, reading at Manhattan's Carnegie Hall finds Sedaris performing seven hilarious new pieces and taking a few questions from his audience. As uproarious as Sedaris is on the page, he's even funnier reading his wickedly jaundiced reflections. With brilliant deadpan timing, Sedaris is a charm, whether being coaxed into purchasing his clothes in the women's department by his sister Amy ("I'm the guy in a crowded steak house removing a jacket with the label reading 'Sassy Sport'") or untangling the Dutch legend of St. Nicholas and his "six to eight black men" slaves/assistants or trying to explain to guests--in French--that his boss has a rubber hand. Sedaris reaches his pinnacle of hilarity describing his purchase of the "Stadium Pal," an exterior catheter marketed to "sports fans, truck drivers and anyone else who's tired of searching for a bathroom." He praises the "freedom leg bag" that conveniently attaches to the user's calf: "The bag can be emptied and reused up to 12 times, making it both disgusting and cost-effective."

2010/01/29 (Fri.): Baer, Robert, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, Crown, 2008. This is a very interesting book, full of obscure pieces of information and insightful connections. The author's basic thesis is that the United States should recognize Iran for the regional power that it is and follow a policy that was later suggested by Henry Kissinger as well: restore stability and balance in the Middle East on the two pillars of Iran and Israel. Several problems, however, detract from this seemingly reasonable message. First, there are a number of contradictions in the book, beginning with its title. The phrase "the devil we know" suggests that Iran is a familiar entity in the Middle East. However, nearly every chapter of the book contains statements to the effect that the US knows very little about Iran. It is not clear that the author himself knows much about Iran. Writing in the *New York Times*, Elaine Sciolino (author of *Persian Mirrors*) suggests that the author, a former CIA case officer, is intimately familiar with much of the Arab world and speaks fluent Arabic, while he knows little about, and has far fewer sources in, Iran. Another example of the many contradictions are the statements that Iran's Supreme Leader rules by consensus and that everyone else in the Iranian

government is completely powerless. The second problem is that the author takes some of his suggestions for dealing with Iran to extremes. He believes that Iran has already annexed southern Iraq for all intents and purposes, and that it is seeking to control Islamic holy sites in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He does not hide his distaste for Sunni Arabs, blaming them for many of the problems in the region, while speaking of Iran as a responsible and calculating player. He writes, for example, that "America's two traditional allies in the Middle East are failing states. Pakistan is held together by an army that gives every sign of cracking. Saudi Arabia is led by a flamboyantly corrupt, greedy royal family, taken seriously by almost no one save the United States. These are the least well-positioned countries to serve our long-term national security interests" (p. 198). His solution is to allow Iran to expand and to exert control over a number of other regions, in order to ensure their stability. For example, he is sympathetic to Bahrain being returned to Iran and to the idea of joint patrols by Iranian and American forces in the Persian Gulf. Despite these and other shortcomings, the book is worthwhile and, at times, eye-opening.

2010/01/15 (Fri.): *Radio's Greatest Sitcoms*, Prime Time Nostalgia, 1992. This 5-CD set, sampling five successful radio sitcoms from the 1940s and 1950s (The Bickersons, Duffy's Tavern, Our Miss Brooks, The Phil Harris / Alice Faye Show, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet) serves as a reminder of how little the sitcom format has changed, over more than half a century, despite amazing advances in mass media programming and associated technologies.

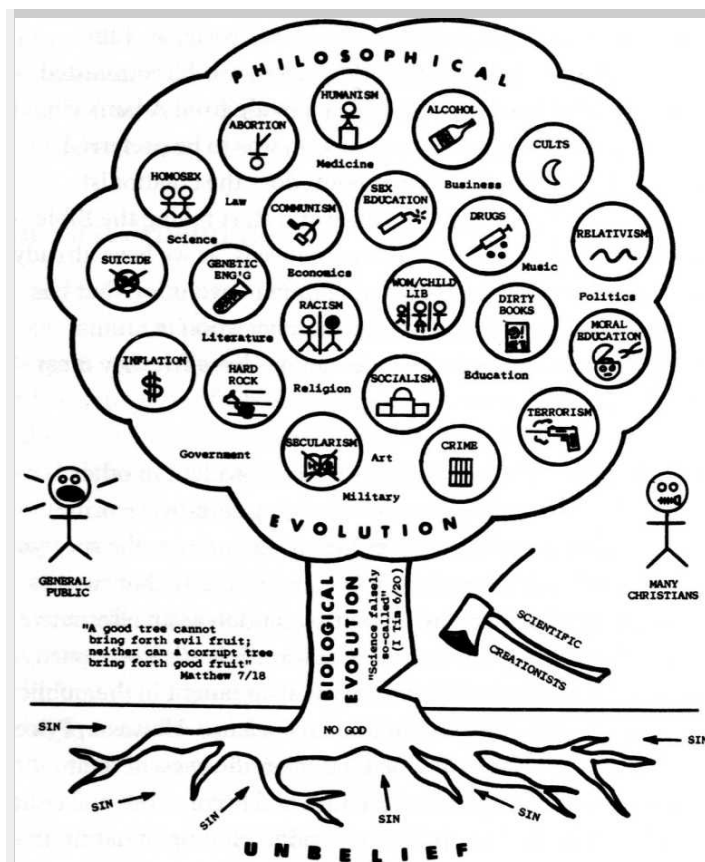
2010/01/04 (Mon.): Hirsi Ali, Ayaan, *Infidel*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Recorded Books, 2007. A prominent free speech and women's rights advocate, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has lived under armed protection since 2004, when Theo van Gogh, her collaborator in making the controversial short film *Submission* was assassinated by a Muslim extremist of Moroccan descent. This book is not only an account of the author's torturous life in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, and her eventual escape to the Netherlands and later to the United States, but a courageous manifesto against the treatment of women under Islamic pretenses. The author had a ghostwriter, who remains anonymous for security reasons. Despite its worldwide success, this book is not without its critics. In an extensive Web-based collection of reviews that accompany 0-10 numerical ratings, the only scores that appear are 0, 9, and 10. This bimodal distribution indicates that something rather unusual is afoot here. Readers who rated the book 9 or 10 were impressed by the author's courage in discussing taboo subjects and in leading the fight against inhumane treatment of women in many Islamic societies. Those who used the 0 rating complained about the one-sidedness of the account, blaming the backward Somali tribal traditions on Islam, and the author's not-so-hidden political agenda. Lorraine Ali, a *Newsweek* contributor and a Muslim herself, cites similar grievances from other Muslim women, concluding that Hirsi Ali is more of a hero among right-wing zealots and Islamophobes than among the women she claims to represent and defend (*Newsweek*, February 26, 2007). While I see some validity to Lorraine Ali's points, I can't help but admire Hirsi Ali's determination in rising from misery and brutal circumstances (including unusually cruel mother and grandmother and an aloof father, who though relatively kinder and more enlightened, eventually disowned her for refusing an arranged marriage) to a best-selling author, an elected representative, and a political activist. IMHO, instances of violence, hatred, condemnation, and other forms of intolerance in the name of Islam are too numerous to be attributable to fringe elements with a serious misreading of the faith.

The following point is not a criticism of the book itself but of the audiobook's production. While the author's reading of her own work offers an authentic listening experience, it severely hinders understanding of the text. If it is okay to use a ghostwriter to correct and polish the prose, it would also be okay to use a professional performer for clarity of speech and greater effect. Perhaps the publisher encountered difficulties in recruiting a person to read the book, for the same reasons that forced the ghostwriter to remain anonymous.

Blog Entries for 2009, April to December

2009/12/24 (Thu.): Dixon, Thomas, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2008. [The following comments on this small (11 cm by 17 cm), thin (150 pp.) book end my blog entries for 2009. Wishing everyone the best for the holidays, I hope to resume my entries early in the new year.]

The longstanding conflict between science and religion has two layers. At the first layer, science and religion compete for the control of our thoughts and educational systems. Two watershed events in the course of this conflict are the 1633 trial and conviction of Galileo by the Catholic Inquisition and his being forced to recant the belief that Earth is not the



center of the universe (p. 1), and the 1925 Scopes trial in the US, which led to the conviction of John Scopes, a science teacher, for violating a Tennessee law against the teaching of evolution by state employees (p. 83). The most notable form of this conflict in today's United States is the battle between advocates of Intelligent Design and the vast majority of others who believe in Darwinian evolution through random variations and natural selection. The first side in this conflict, in its extreme, is reflected in the accompanying image, produced in the 1970s by the Pittsburgh Creation Society to advance the thesis that the "Evolution Tree" is nourished by sin and unbelief and bears fruit that include various deviant behaviors and evils. At the second, deeper, layer, the conflict is between those who deem science and

religion compatible, versus those who believe in irreconcilable differences between the two world views. This second conflict has led to its own paradoxes and ironies. One example is the principle of accommodation, which tried to explain factual errors and inconsistencies in the Bible by claiming that it "was written in language accommodated to the limited knowledge of the relatively uneducated people to whom it was initially revealed" (p. 26). All in all, this book constitutes an excellent point of entry into the essence and complexities of the religion-versus-science debate.

2009/12/12 (Sat.): Esfandiari, Haleh, *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran*, Ecco, 2009. The author, a close associate of Empress Farah before the Islamic Revolution, and currently Director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, writes about her tribulations in Tehran immediately before, during, and after her four-month solitary confinement and interrogation at the notorious Evin prison. Much of the narrative comes across as authentic and plausible. However, there are instances where the author's understandable bitterness toward her tormentors have led to unwarranted statements. One example is a passage on page 55, where the author accuses Mr. Ja'fari (her primary interrogator) and his colleagues of having divided her clothes and other confiscated belongings among their wives. Dr. Esfandiari's story could have been told in fewer pages, but the obligatory, and by now somewhat tiring, recap of the modern Iranian history (as on pp. 106-121 and 137-141 of this book) indicates that the book is targeted at those who have never read another book on today's Iran. Dr. Esfandiari paints a disconcerting picture of the multiple centers of power that exist among the ruling authorities in Iran, each with its own security/intelligence wing and media outlets, and of how all these authorities are in effect afraid of their own shadows, believing every dissenter and critic to be involved in a sinister plot against their rule. Also alarming is the extent to which Dr. Esfandiari's troubles were rooted in the fact that she had married a Jew, thus committing the ultimate sin from the viewpoint of her captors. From time to time, the human face of the seemingly intolerant agents of repression in Iran shows through their ugly dogmatism, as in the case of several female prison guards who interacted with the author. All in all, this book is a worthwhile read.

2009/11/18 (Wed.): Rivoli, Pietra, *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade*, unabridged audiobook read by Eliza Foss, Recorded Books, 2007. At a student demonstration on the campus of Georgetown University in 1999, the author heard a young woman ask the people around her a simple question, "Who made your T-shirt?"—using the question to point out the dreadful conditions of the working poor in a number of Asian factories that are part of the production chain for large multinational companies. The author, a business professor, was intrigued by the question and decided to pursue it, thus creating this highly entertaining and enlightening book. Her quest to discover where

her T-shirt came from led her to Florida, where the T-shirt was printed, to China, where it was manufactured, a cotton farm in west Texas, where the fibers were grown with subsidies from the US Government, and, eventually, to a secondhand market in Africa, where the T-shirt began its second life.

2009/11/15 (Sun.): Collins, Billy, *Billy Collins Live: A Performance at the Peter Norton Symphony Space*, Books on Tape, 2005. A former US Poet Laureate, who, according to comedian Bill Murray's witty introduction, was not reelected to the position, Billy Collins reads 24 of his humorous poems, interspersing them with irreverent comments about the poems, his childhood memories, and other topics. His deadpan delivery makes listening to this short audiobook a real joy.

2009/11/01 (Sun.): Afkhami, Gholam Reza, *The Life and Times of the Shah*, University of California Press, 2009. One can hardly expect an unbiased account of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's life and times from someone who was an insider in MRP's regime, had unprecedented access to the royal family members and their closest friends during his research for the book, and is now affiliated with the Foundation for Iranian Studies, a research institute established and funded by MRP's twin sister. Even though a few token opposition groups are listed among the sources, the latter are too few and too inconsequential to sway the imbalance. These facts, along with the book's daunting 713 pages, made me leaf through the chapters before deciding whether or not to read it from cover to cover. My suspicions were confirmed after reading a number of passages from the book. On page xi, the prerevolutionary Iran is characterized as "a development showcase," rather than a country on the verge of economic collapse. On page 167, restoration of MRP's rule by the CIA is described thus: "The miracle that had occurred resulted from Iranians' patriotism, the friendship shown by the West, and God's benevolence." On page 400, the widely known and aptly documented torture techniques employed by the regime's secret police, SAVAK, is dismissed (by MRP, in an interview with David Frost) as the work of a prototypical interrogator who "gets so mad at the behavior of the fellow he has arrested that he loses his head, and he just punches that fellow or breaks a chair on his head." Even though many of these passages express MRP's viewpoints, as told to friends and subordinates, the author never entertains the possibility that the Shah actually knew about acts of torture; in other words, the improbability of the Shah having been in the dark, despite his admitted twice-weekly meetings with SAVAK's chiefs, is not addressed. As a final example, on page 552, the mild criticism of MRP for not trying to save his former prime minister from execution, and not even issuing a statement after the fact, is preceded by statements of how the governments of Morocco and Bahamas had forbidden him to engage in politics.

2009/10/23 (Fri.): Swarup, Vikas, *Slumdog Millionaire*, unabridged audiobook, read by Christopher Simpson, BBC Audiobooks America, 2009. Here is what I wrote about this book, when I listened to an abridged version in 2006, under its original title *Q & A* (having seen the Oscar-winning movie based on the book, the second listening was even more enjoyable, especially given Simpson's admirable job with Indian and other accents): A poor Indian orphan boy, working as a waiter, is arrested for fraud at the urging of producers of the TV quiz show "Who Will Win a Billion," who have no intention of paying him after he wins the grand prize by correctly answering a series of 12 questions. In conversations with his attorney, the boy reveals how he luckily came to know the correct answer to each question through his life experiences with a few friends, masters, and other acquaintances.

2009/10/20 (Tue.): Last month, the British government finally apologized for its horrendous treatment of one of the most influential computer scientist the world has known: the genius for whom Association for Computing Machinery's prestigious A. M. Turing Award, the "Nobel" prize of computing, is named. Unfortunately, the apology did not come until tens of thousands of people signed a petition demanding the action. A [Daily Telegraph article](#), dated 2009/09/10, contains info about the apology and some of the indecent things that were done to Turing under the guise of promoting "decency"; actions that led to his suicide in 1954, at the age of 41. It is mind-boggling to think how much more Turing could have contributed to the advancement of science and technology had he been allowed to live his life in peace. The centenary of Turing's birth will be celebrated in 2012, designated as [the Alan Turing Year](#).

2009/10/15 (Thu.): Kolbert, Elizabeth, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change*, unabridged audiobook read by Hope Davis, Simon & Schuster, 2006. This sobering book is based on a series of articles by the author in *The New Yorker* magazine. The author traveled around the globe and talked to climate experts and nonexperts to produce her "field notes." Many of the points made by Kolbert are not new and have been presented in many forms before. However, she has packaged the material into a readily comprehensible form to draw our attention to the urgency of the problem. An interesting fact one learns from this book is Pacala and Socolow's notion of a "wedge" in efforts to stabilize or reduce carbon emissions. The Earth's atmosphere currently contains some 800 billion tons of carbon in the form of CO₂, with half of the 7 billion tons of annual

production accumulating in the atmosphere (the other half is absorbed by natural sources). The rate of carbon production is projected to double in the next 50 years. The notion of wedge allows us to think about the options, and the scale of the problem, more clearly. A wedge represents a concrete step for reducing the annual carbon emissions by a billion pounds. Hence, just to maintain the current rate of carbon accumulation over the next 50 years, we need seven wedges (i.e., to prevent the doubling); to stabilize the amount of carbon in the atmosphere at acceptable levels, we need 15 wedges. Let me just cite two examples for a wedge. Doubling vehicle fuel efficiency (say, from 30 mpg to 60 mpg) constitutes one wedge. Installing 20,000 km² worth of solar cells is another wedge. These two examples drive home the enormity of the task of garnering 7-15 wedges over the next half-century. A very nice [summary of this book](#) is available online, courtesy of Helen Amos of the University of Washington.

2009/10/10 (Sat.): On Tuesday 2009/09/22, I wrote about my impressions of the book *Persian Letters*, by Montesquieu. Here are a few more notable quotations from the book.

Letter 78: ". . . the degree of severity of a punishment does not make people observe the law any better. In countries where punishments are moderate, these are feared exactly as they are in countries where penalties are tyrannical and horrifying."

Letter 83: ". . . history is full of wars of religion; but . . . it is not the multiplicity of religions that produced these wars, but the spirit of intolerance animating the religion believed itself to be dominant."

Letter 105: "[The author stretches] out his material . . . mercilessly, never heeding the suffering of his poor reader, who exhausts himself condensing what the author has taken so much trouble to expand."

Letter 106: "It seems . . . that the brains of the greatest men contract when they are gathered together, and that where there are more wise men, there you will also find less wisdom."

Supplementary letter 8: "A man who lacks a certain talent will compensate himself by despising it; he eliminates the obstacle which blocks his path to excellence, and, as a consequence, sees himself as the equal of the rival whose work he fears."

2009/10/08 (Thu.): The Web page http://ubu.com/film/lelouch_iran.html contains an interesting 20-minute documentary on Iran by the famed French director Claude LeLouch (1937-). When you visit the Web page containing the video, the commentary there leads you to another 70-minute documentary by the French director Albert Lamorisse (1922-1970), entitled "Baadeh Sabah" (The Lovers' Wind / Vent Des Amoureux). This latter documentary was filmed in 1970 and completed and released in 1978, years after his death in a helicopter crash while filming the Karaj dam near Tehran. It has a soundtrack of beautiful traditional Persian music and a few regional folk songs. Both documentaries were commissioned by the Shah as propaganda films, although he apparently did not like Lamorisse's version, which does not depict him looking cool in white clothes riding a horse!

2009/10/06 (Tue.): Vanderbilt, Tom, *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)*, audiobook read by David Slavin, Random House Audio, 2008. I have always been curious about the chaotic behavior of automobile traffic and how traffic engineers attack the seemingly insurmountable problems. So, I snatched this audiobook as soon as I saw it on the library shelf. Vanderbilt describes, in a clear and absorbing way, the highly complex web of physical, behavioral, and technical factors that influence traffic. Among the surprising facts one learns from this book is that most people actually don't mind a 20-minute daily commute that gives them a private space between home and work; a space where they can sing, cry, and, perhaps, pick their noses. Here's another example: When we forecast traffic conditions, and the forecast is to be made public, we have to account for drivers' reactions to the forecast in our forecast!

2009/09/28 (Mon.): Today, I came across a Web page (<http://www.benfry.com/traces/>) that is one of the most impressive I have seen in a long time. Computer Scientist Ben Fry has created a visual representation of how Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution evolved over time. When you visit this page, you see a visual map of the first edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Each line of text is represented by a tiny horizontal bar, with chapters spanning multiple columns of such bars. The visual map then starts to change, indicating in a different color how each subsequent edition, up to the 6th in 1872, was modified and expanded. By placing your cursor over different spots on the visual map, you can actually read the text and see the details of the changes and additions. You can pause the book's evolutionary process at will, to examine the changes between the 2nd and 3rd editions, say.

2009/09/22 (Tue.): Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, translated by Margaret Mauldon, Oxford University Press, 2008. This new translation of a classic novel is based on the original 1721 edition, which was published

anonymously, but includes in an appendix the text of 11 letters the author added to his revised 1754 volume. Ironically, a less authentic, posthumously published version (1758) is the one best known around the world. Through the vehicle of fictional letters exchanged between a pair of Persian noblemen traveling in Europe and their friends, acquaintances, servants, and wives, Montesquieu brilliantly criticizes both the Eastern and Western societies for their lack of understanding and tolerance toward each other and pokes fun at the rigid social and religious traditions of each group. In Letter 56, he has one of the Persian travelers write about the Parisian society: "An infinite number of Masters of Languages, Arts, and Science teach what they themselves do not know; this is quite a notable talent, for to teach what one knows requires but little wit, whereas an infinite quantity is needed to teach what one does not know." Later, in Letter 94, we read: "There are philosophers here who, it is true, have never attained the heights of oriental wisdom ... nor known the fearsome experience of a divine ecstasy; but on their own, deprived of any knowledge of holy marvels, they follow in silence the path of human reason."

2009/09/20 (Sun.): Verne, Jules, *Around the World in 80 Days*, unabridged audiobook read by Jim Dale, Random House Audio, 2004. Returning to this classic was both delightful and disappointing. I was taken with this tale as a schoolboy and later saw the star-studded movie, when it was released in 1956. The plot, however, does not fare well by 21st-Century standards. Apparently, neither the idea of a time-constrained trip around the world, nor the key plot twist of gaining an extra day when travelling eastward, was original to Verne. He simply put many suggestions in the literature of the mid-1800s about the former, and Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 short story "Three Sundays in a Week" hinting at the latter, to good use in his story. Wikipedia has a great deal of interesting information on the origins and context of Verne's book, including the fact that during a serialized publication of the story in 1872, some readers believed that the journey was actually happening and placed bets on its success or failure. Apparently, as the story unfolded in "real time," railway and ship liner companies lobbied Verne to make them part of the story. So, advertising via product placement is not that new!

2009/09/03 (Thu.): Perrucci, Robert, and Carolyn C. Perrucci, *America at Risk: The Crisis of Hope, Trust, and Caring*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. The sparse annotation and the size of this slim 160-page book indicate that the Purdue University sociology professors wrote it for the general public, not for their peers. The authors are quite successful in pinpointing the roots of the current crises in the US. In short, the culprits are: (1) The shrinking middle class and the attendant growth in the earnings gap (over three decades, the share of income for the top quantile of Americans grew by about 18%, while those of the other four quantiles dropped by 3, 11, 19, and 26%, in order from top to bottom; also, in the span of just one decade, the CEO-to-average-worker earnings ratio rose from about 107 to 411); (2) The lack of confidence in leaders and institutions (less than a quarter of Americans trust the congress, big business, organized labor, the presidency, and the news media, with the congress being at the bottom of the pile, at 14%); (3) The inattention to the plight of the poor, homeless, and incarcerated, which disproportionately belong to various ethnic minorities. The picture painted above is simplistic and decidedly nonscholarly, as I have left out dates, sources, and methods of data collection. However, the findings do resonate with many ordinary Americans who are experiencing the erosion of hope, trust, and caring in their communities firsthand. In the last chapter, the authors provide some suggestions on how to confront the crises. Here, they are much less successful. Their solutions are limited (only restoring trust in congress, as an institution, is dealt with) or simple-minded (job creation through voluntary contributions by citizens at income tax filing time and by "reallocation" from DoD and NASA budgets).

2009/08/29 (Sat.): Wilson, Mike (ed.), *Terrorism: Opposing Viewpoints*, Greenhaven Press, 2009. Contrasting views are presented with respect to four questions: (1) Is terrorism a serious threat? (2) How is society susceptible to terrorism? (3) What causes terrorism? (4) How should governments respond to terrorism? Some of the answers to question 1 are quite enlightening, as they reveal how the "security industry" exaggerates the terrorism threat and uses hype to quell more level-headed and logical assessments. Another interesting piece of information pertains to the stark difference between Al Qaeda's public face, as reflected in sources prepared for international consumption, and its true agenda, that is revealed only in its internal documents (recently translated from Arabic). Four to six essays are included in each part, typically paired to cover the two sides of an issue, such as the threat of cyberterrorism.

2009/08/22 (Sat.): Menzies, Gavin, *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance*, unabridged audiobook read by Simon Vance, Blackstone Audio, 2008. I began listening to this audiobook and went as far as the second CD, before deciding that the theories advanced, though intriguing, were too far-fetched. Checking on-line sources, including an extensive Wikipedia entry on the book, I found out that in fact the theories lacked credibility and have been dismissed by many historical scholars. The author, who had previously written *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, claims that many European discoveries and advances were triggered by (or stolen from) Chinese visitors to the continent. Among his claims are those

pertaining to Columbus and other European explorers carrying with them elaborate maps of the lands they supposedly discovered. Of course, this does not mean that the Chinese did not influence the West; only that there was no systematic stealing/copying and no attendant cover-up. Despite the verdict above, such challenges to the established order, and to Eurocentrism in particular, can serve a useful purpose. As Henry Adams, noted writer and historian put it, "History will die if not irritated."

2009/08/14 (Fri.): Coughlin, Con, *Khomeini's Ghost: The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Militant Islam*, Harper Collins, 2009. Con Coughlin is a highly controversial journalist/author with a record of outrageous claims. Despite this fact, his books have received critical acclaim and are useful if read with skepticism and due diligence. This new book consists of two parts, dealing with Khomeini's origins (up to the Islamic revolution, in five chapters) and legacy (establishment of the Islamic Republic to the present, in six chapters). In the first part, which is more even-handed and less burdened with sensationalism, one reads that the conflict between Khomeini and the Shah intensified with the latter's reform program, dubbed "the White Revolution," including its provisions of voting rights for women and non-Muslims. This so-called revolution was initiated after JFK took office in the US and almost immediately threatened Third-World leaders thus: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable"; to which the Shah reportedly reacted, "I can start a revolution for you, but you won't like the end result." Khomeini is said to have dismissed the voting-rights provisions as a plot by the Zionists to weaken Islam and "to corrupt our chaste women" and was successful, after a meeting with the then prime minister Asadollah Alam, in having the offending clauses removed. Among the interesting passages in the second part are an account of Khomeini's interview with Oriana Fallaci (p. 168; you can Google it). Later in the second part, we encounter the claim that in a formal letter written in his final year of life, Khomeini ordered the acquisition of biological and nuclear weapons within five years (p. 242). This is one of the suspicious pieces, in that the claimed letter also spells out in detail the number of fighter planes, helicopters, and tanks to be acquired, a level of detail that was not his style. Khomeini rarely cited numbers or statistics in his speeches and mostly stuck to generalities. Those who have witnessed the Iranian revolution first-hand will find many inaccuracies in this account, including sloppy misspellings of names. The book is worthwhile reading, nonetheless, because it is bound to fill in some details that were censured in the Iranian media, both before and after the revolution.

2009/08/12 (Wed.): Gill, Michael Gates, *How Starbucks Saved My Life: A Son of Privilege Learns to Live Like Everyone Else*, Unabridged audiobook read by Dylan Baker, Penguin Audio, 2007. A sixty-something executive, downsized years ago after nearly three decades of loyal service to one company, is at his wit's end because his consulting business is struggling. He surprises even himself when he accepts a half-joking job offer from a young Starbucks manager and finds contentment in reaching across age, class, and race boundaries.

2009/08/09 (Sun.): Stewart, Ian, *Professor Stewart's Cabinet of Mathematical Curiosities*, Basic Books, 2009. On his personal Web page, Professor Ian Nicholas Stewart describes himself as "mathematician, science writer, science fiction writer." He has published widely on many topics and is particularly well known for his efforts in promoting and popularizing mathematics, and science in general. This book may be classified as recreational mathematics, but it is much more than that. Alongside games, magic tricks, and a few mathematical jokes, the reader finds accurate, albeit simplified, discussions of Fermat's last theorem, Fibonacci numbers, distribution of different digits in numbers, chaos theory, the Poincare conjecture, Mersenne primes, fractals, and the Riemann hypothesis. Books such as this cannot be read in a single sitting, but this one is awfully hard to put down once you get started. I will refer to it from time to time for fun and inspiration.

2009/08/01 (Sat.): Troost, J. Maarten, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific*, unabridged audiobook read by Simon Vance, Blackstone Audio, 2007. A fascinating and humorous account of life on a Pacific atoll, where shortage of drinking water, paucity of food options, and abundance of bacteria and heat create quite a culture shock for a couple of young Westerners in search of the proverbial paradise at the end of the earth. The book's title, which has nothing to do with its contents, except that the early settlers of the islands in the region were cannibals (almost by necessity, it seems), is indicative of the author's style of weaving humor into his narrative of the sad aftermaths of colonialism and exploitation.

2009/07/23 (Thu.): Majd, Hooman, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran*, Doubleday, 2008. Fascinating account of the social and political realities in Iran, as the ancient traditions of a proud nation clash with the religiopolitical musings of the clerical leadership and their followers. Readers of Iranian origins would enjoy this book immensely, as they find the customs and contradictions pointed out by the author entirely familiar, but the book is also quite accessible to others. Reading the book after the recent presidential elections in Iran makes it seem rather out of date, however, particularly where the author refers to the Supreme Leader as a moderating influence, because "[he] listens to his constituents, the Iranian people, he listens to all sides of

the political spectrum, he considers public and world opinion ..." (p. 210). The uncertainties and contradictions in modern Iran leave a lot of room for disagreement on the current ailments and their cures. A persecuted religious minority's views will certainly be different from those of an ayatollah's descendant (the author), even after the latter has been thoroughly Westernized.

2009/07/19 (Sun.): After four months of work, migration to a new Web site, including revised structure and page formats, is complete. To the extent possible, former page names have been maintained, so that existing bookmarks remain valid in a great majority of cases. In the process, I learned some HTML to allow me to design pages that would look precisely the same when viewed with different browsers. My previous Web pages not only did not look the same to different viewers, but they had a lot of formatting and typeface problems even with the same browser on different computers. My hope is that the new structure is general and flexible enough to last for a decade.

2009/07/12 (Sun.): Ram, Haggai, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession*, Stanford Univ. Press, 2009. It is a common malady among authors, academics in particular, to churn out hundreds of pages to convey what could be said in a dozen or so pages. I just finished reading this 220-page book, more than 1/3 of which consists of endnotes and bibliography. The author manages to convey the following simple message in 135 pages: Iran and Israel are more similar than either side would like to admit. Both peoples are Easterners in their outlook and traditions, although the Israelis (the Zionists in particular) tend to view themselves as guardians of Western values in the Middle East. This is more than a bit ironic, given how the Jews were dismissed as inferior "Easterners" throughout Europe before they settled in southwestern Asia. One indication of this similarity is the use of Tel Aviv streets to shoot the Tehran scenes in a 1991 Hollywood movie (p. 132). And the governments of the two countries need each other desperately: Israeli politicians to justify their immense security apparatus by an exaggerated "Iran threat," and the Iranian ruling class to divert the attention of the masses from dire socioeconomic problems and the attendant widespread corruption.

2009/06/30 (Tue.): Here are two interesting books about comedy.

— Maslon, Laurence, *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*, Twelve, 2008. This is an eclectic collection, dealing with the context and key players of comedy in the United States over the past century. Right before reading this book, I had watched Michael Kantor's six-part PBS documentary on which the book is based. The documentary film was excellent, but the book offers so much more. All major film and television comedy stars are covered, as are ensemble programs such as *Laugh-In* and *Saturday Night Live*. With its 384 large pages and heavy paper, one can't read this book, except while sitting at a desk. But the myriad of photos and quotes from both comics and producers make it well worth the effort.

— Davis, Tom, *Thirty-Nine Years of Short-Term Memory Loss: The Early Days of SNL from Someone Who Was There*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Tantor Media, 2009. Speaking of the history of comedy in the US, these memoirs, by one-half of the comedy team "Franken & Davis" (the former now a US senator from Minnesota) traces the history of this drug-laden duo through their high-school and college years, and their subsequent success after they were hired in 1975 to fill a single apprentice-writer position on *SNL*, sharing a salary of \$350 per week.

2009/05/04 (Mon.): Stewart, Ian, *Nature's Numbers: The Unreal Reality of Mathematics*, Basic Books, 1995. An insightful and accessible collection of essays on how mathematics helps explain many natural phenomena. From Chapter 1 (entitled "The Natural Order"): "Numerology is the easiest—and consequently the most dangerous—method for finding patterns. It is easy because anybody can do it, and dangerous for the same reason. ... The big problem with numerological pattern-seeking is that it generates millions of accidentals for each universal. Nor is it always obvious which is which."

2009/04/25 (Sat.): *Shakespeare: The Seven Major Tragedies*, 14 recorded lectures in "The Modern Scholar" series, delivered by Prof. Harold Bloom of Yale University, Recorded Books, 2005. Romeo and Juliet (1 lecture), Julius Caesar (1), Hamlet (3), Othello (2), King Lear (3), Macbeth (2), Antony and Cleopatra (2).

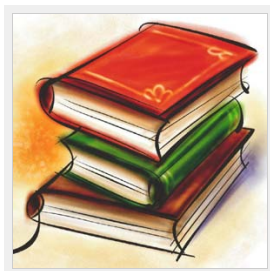
2009/04/15 (Wed.): There is something utterly fascinating about aerial photographs. You get a glimpse of monuments and city skylines as you approach population centers in a passenger plane, but high-resolution aerial photographs offer so much more than what you can see from a small, gritty airplane window. Only an aerial view can provide a sense of scale and accurate positional relationships, not to mention a display of features that are not visible from anywhere else (e.g., rooftops). I have often admired collections of aerial photographs in books with the generic title "X from the air" or "X from above," where X stands for some interesting locale such as Greece, Italy, or New York. Today, I discovered a collection of aerial photographs depicting Iran. The photos, taken by Georg Gerster shortly before the 1979 Iranian revolution, are featured in a

current exhibit entitled "[Paradise Lost: Persia from Above](#)" in New York City.

2009/04/12 (Sun.): Lencioni, Patrick, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, unabridged audiobook read by Charles Stransky, Books on Tape, 2006. An old-school CEO comes out of retirement to take up the challenge of transforming a group of self-centered executives into a smoothly functioning team, teaching the reader/listener a number of valuable lessons on effective collaboration in the process.

2009/04/01 (Wed.): This is as good a day as any to start my blog, although I do realize that readers may take what I say today with a grain of salt. So, I'll keep it short. One of the advantages of working at a university is the almost unlimited access to books and other information resources, via the on-site library and its interlibrary loan program. The UCSB campus library still maintains a "new books" shelf where one can browse the (hard-copy) books that have just arrived. Discovering new books on this shelf is one of my favorite activities. Many of the books listed in the next section, as well as others yet to be listed in this blog, are results of this discovery process. The browsing capability is still in its infancy within the digital world, although the virtual bookshelves at [zoomii.com](#) come close to emulating this discovery process.

Books Read or Heard Until March 2009



[2009 Mar.] Cahill, Thomas, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*, unabridged audiobook read by John Lee, Books on Tape, 2003.

[2009 Mar.] Lencioni, Patrick, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, unabridged audiobook read by Charles Stransky, Books on Tape, 2006.

[2009 Feb.] Behrends, Ehrhard, *Five-Minute Mathematics*, translated from German by David Kramer, American Mathematical Society, 2008.
Based on 100 weekly columns written for Die Welt during 2003-05.

[2009 Feb.] Gore, Albert, *The Assault on Reason*, unabridged audiobook read by Will Patton, Books on Tape, 2007.

Gore argues, quite effectively, that the public discourse in the United States has moved from reasoned exchange, advocated by the framers of our constitution, to dogma-driven force-feeding, enabled, in part, by the wide reach of 30-second television ads. He remains hopeful that modern communication channels, such as the Internet, will reverse this trend, which gathered steam during the administration of Bush Jr.

[2009 Feb.] Bielby, Denise D., and C. Lee Harrington, *Global TV: Exporting Television and Culture in the World Market*, New York Univ. Press, 2008.

A scholarly examination of cultural and economic factors that might explain the worldwide popularity of shows like "I Love Lucy" and the screening of utterly Western reality programs (e.g., "America's Next Top Model") in scores of countries, including Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates. Particularly enlightening is the authors' narrative on the ways in which TV programs are described, in terms of genre and content, to potential buyers (see example quotes from advertising brochures on pp. 81-84).

[2009 Feb.] Mills, Brett, *Television Sitcom*, BFI Publishing, 2005.

Provides insight into how sitcoms work and why the genre is so successful. Because most of the examples cited are from the British TV, the points made are not as easy to grasp for American readers. An interesting fact one learns from this book is that, whereas American sitcoms are often run on British TV in their original forms, British sitcoms are usually remade, with different characters and casts, in the United States. For more on the culture-specific nature of situation comedies that necessitates this retelling of stories, see pp. 52-54 of *Global TV* by D. D. Bielby and C. L. Harrington (listed above).

[2009 Jan.] Becker, Gary, and Guity Neshat Becker, *The Economics of Life*, McGraw Hill, 1997.

This volume contains a collection of magazine columns by a Nobel-Prize winning economist and his historian wife. The authors praise the positive role of free markets in all aspects of personal and societal development. The arguments are, for the most part, well-presented and convincing. Nevertheless, there are several contradictions that weaken the authors' message. For example, financing the sharply rising cost of higher education through "loans with appropriate fixed interest rates and with paybacks contingent on the financial success of borrowers" is characterized as a worthwhile governmental undertaking (p. 81). However, such risk-free loans (to the borrower) essentially constitute extreme cases of income-based repayment rates, which the authors maintain should not coexist with the fixed-rate policy (p. 70). As a second example, the authors' view

of the indispensability of economists, despite the admitted unreliability of their predictions (p. 311), is at odds with their ridicule of environmental scientists for the same shortcomings (p. 289). Some of the ideas, such as those dismissing the seriousness of environmental pollution and global warming, are clearly out of date and in need of revision.

[2009 Jan.] Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, University of California Press, 2008.

Paints a broad picture of the multitude of religious threats to secular nationalism, a Western ideology that the author likens to a religion in its terminology and machinations. For most readers, the material on international terrorism is just a rehashing of widely known stories that have dominated our news since 9/11. However, the emphasis on the zeal of fanatics, from all religious traditions, comes across as new. Anyone who feels threatened by the Islamic fundamentalist brand of terrorism would do well to read a section entitled "The Militant Christian Right in the United States." This last quarter of Chapter 4 contains a description of fringe groups in the US, such as adherents of the Dominion Theology (and in its extreme, Reconstruction Theology) and Christian Identity (which includes Aryan Nations), who would not hesitate to use violence against all who disagree with them and their world views. Economis.com, 2008/05/01, notes: "Mr. Juergensmeyer distinguishes between the effects of secular nationalism and transnational religion, but he says little about religious nationalism, the opportunistic but effective combination of these two supposed opposites. As any thieving Balkan warlord knows, decent people often kill in the name of a half-forgotten national cause and for a religion in which they hardly believe. Using both tricks at once is especially effective."

[2009 Jan.] Goldsmith, Marshall (with Mark Reiter), *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, unabridged audiobook read by Marc Cashman, Books on Tape, 2007.

[2009 Jan.] Livingston, Gordon, *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now*, unabridged audiobook read by James Jenner, Recorded Books, 2005.

[2009 Jan.] Harris, Sam, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, unabridged audiobook read by Jordan Bridges, Simon & Schuster, 2006.

[2008 Dec.] Noonan, Peggy, *Patriotic Grace: What It Is and Why We Need It Now*, Collins, 2008.

This little gem (192 small pages) is written in three parts, which could have been titled "In defense of the not-so-great Baby-Boom Generation," "Assaulting the dignity of middle-aged women," and "Why no one talks about what to do after the next big attack on America." The book is full of insights and earnest observations, such as the ones found in the following passages from the prologue: "America is on line at the airport. America has its shoes off, is carrying a rubberized bin, is going through a magnetometer. America is worried there is fungus on the floor after a million stockinged feet have walked on it. But America knows not to ask. America is guilty until proven innocent, and no one wants to draw undue attention. ... America makes it through security, gets to the gate, waits. The TV monitor is on. It is Wolf Blitzer. He is telling us with a voice of urgency about the latest polls. ... No one in the crowded Gate 14 looks up to see what happened with the poll. No one. Wolf talks to the air. ... But here is something they notice, we notice. Our leaders are now removed from all this, removed from life as we live it each day. There is ... a fine and bitter sense that [President Bush] has never had to stand in his stockinged feet at the airport holding the bin, being harassed. He has never had to live in the world he helped make, the one where Grandma's hip replacement is setting off the beeper over here and the child is crying over there. And of course as a former president, with the entourage and the private jets, he never will." On the subject of government panels and their voluminous reports, we read on page 142: "What follows is not a government study featuring such sentences as 'Critical infrastructure protection requires triple-tiered response initiatives including but not limited to the efforts of multiple private-sector entities operating with and in conformance to federal, state, and local quality-control efforts.' Believe me I've read these reports. You don't ever want to read them. They are marvelous collections of wordage—they are mass word-dumps—that seem actually designed to tell you: nothing." There are some less well thought-out points, which can be forgiven, given the fortitude of the author's overall message. For example, on page 165, Noonan dismisses the isolationist label attached to the United States: "The immigrants ... spent half their time sending money back to the home country. You might say they were working to keep their old countries afloat. This wasn't very isolationist of them—of us." Even if each of one million immigrants from a particular country sent home \$1000 annually, the resulting \$1 billion per year would hardly be enough to keep that country afloat.

[2008 Dec.] Estrin, Judy, *Closing the Innovation Gap: Reigniting the Spark of Creativity in a Global Economy*, McGraw-Hill, 2009.

Drawing upon many years of experience as a technology leader and entrepreneur, one of the three scientist

daughters of Gerald and Thelma Estrin (prominent UCLA emeriti professors, and pioneers in the design and use of computer and biomedical technologies), writes about the dire consequences of inattention to science and technology education, as well as to long-term investment in basic research.

[2008 Dec.] McKenzie, Richard B., *Why Popcorn Costs So Much at the Movies: And Other Pricing Puzzles*, Copernicus Books, 2008.

The author (a business professor at UC Irvine) dismisses standard justifications given for the price of popcorn at the movies ("trapped customers") or cheap/free printers with very expensive ink cartridges ("naive users") in favor of more rational explanations. Most movie-goers buy popcorn, so it is the total price of ticket and popcorn that determines their demand. Movie theater owners have to fork out 70-95% of the ticket sales to movie studios/distributors, whereas popcorn sales garner a 70-95% profit that they do not have to share with anyone. Guess which one is more likely to go up in price! Similarly, a cheap/free printer may be viewed as a loan to the user, with interest payments built into the price of ink cartridges. This is a high-risk loan, in the sense that the user may not buy any ink (s/he may discard the printer when the ink runs out) or may buy very few ink cartridges, so the cost of this risk is also built into the ink cartridge price. Far from being naive, a cash-strapped small business owner may willingly minimize the initial investment by buying a cheap printer, hoping to make deferred payments in the form of more expensive ink. Similarly, a home user with poor credit, who faces a choice between not having a printer at all or buying it with a credit card that charges 20% interest, may decide that the credit offered to him in the form of a cheap/free printer is the lesser of two evils. Other interesting pricing puzzles include why all movies have the same ticket price, regardless of their quality, popularity, and production costs, and the real reasons behind widespread use of sales and discount coupons. In all cases, the explanations offered are thorough and enlightening.

[2008 Dec.] Ledeen, Michael A., *The Iranian Time Bomb: The Mullah Zealots' Quest for Destruction*, Truman Talley Books, 2007.

[2008 Dec.] Martin, Steve, *Pure Drivel*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2007 (book published in 1999).

[2008 Nov.] Deutch, John, and James R. Schlesinger (Task Force Chairs), *National Security Consequences of U.S. Oil Dependency*, Report of an Independent Task Force of the Council on Foreign Relations, 2006.

[2008 Nov.] Hitchens, Christopher, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Twelve, 2007.
Publisher's summary: "A case against religion and a description of the ways in which religion is man-made."

[2008 Nov.] Albright, Madeleine, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2006.

An insightful assessment of the role (both positive and negative) of religion in world affairs.

[2008 Oct.] Phillips, Kevin, *Bad Money: Reckless Finance, Failed Politics, and the Global Crisis of American Capitalism*, Viking, 2008.

For many years, rational economists had been warning about the financial meltdown that occurred in late 2008, but no one was listening. From the preface: "Far more worrisome is the possibility that neither Washington nor Wall Street is willing to confront the deeper problem—the ascendancy of finance in national policymaking (as well as in the gross domestic product), and the complicity of politicians who really don't want to talk about it."

[2008 Oct.] McMurtry, Larry, *Books: A Memoir*, unabridged audiobook read by William Dufres, Tantor Audio, 2008.

A fascinating account (by the author of *Lonesome Dove* and the co-screenwriter of "Brokeback Mountain") of how book enthusiasts went about collecting and trading rare books before the age of audiobooks and e-books.

[2008 Sep.] Sharifian, Ruhangiz, *The Day I Fell in Love a Thousand Times (Ruzi ke Hezar Baar Aashegh Shodam)*, collection of short stories in Persian, Morvarid Publications, 2005.

[2008 Aug.] Huffington, Arianna, *Pigs at the Trough: How Corporate Greed and Political Corruption Are Undermining America*, Crown, 2003.

The corrupting influence of executive compensation that is disjointed from true performance, corporations' exclusive focus on the bottom line, use of "creative accounting" to inflate revenues and profits to raise stock prices, and the way in which lobbyists extract government subsidies and softer regulations are described via case studies and statistics. Some of the data are truly eye-opening. However, the book is poorly structured and

its explanations are dumbed down via repetitions and excessive use of tongue-in-cheek "humor."

[2008 July] Loewen, James W., *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, unabridged audiobook read by Brian Keeler, Recorded Books, 1995.

[2008 July] Mack, Robert L. (ed.), *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, Oxford University Press, 1998. This 939-page paperback edition of the classic *Thousand and One Nights* is based on Antoine Galland's 12-volume *Mille et une Nuit* (1704-1717) and its rendering into English by the anonymous 'Grub Street' translator (ca. 1706-1721). The main frame story concerns King Shahryar of Persia who, upon discovering his former wife's infidelity, has her executed and comes to believe that all women are unfaithful. He begins to marry a succession of virgins, only to have each one executed the next morning. Eventually his vizier cannot find any more virgins. Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, offers herself as the next bride, with a plan to save many innocent women. On the night of their marriage, Scheherazade tells the king a tale, but does not end it. The king is thus forced to keep her alive in order to hear the conclusion. The next night, as soon as she finishes the tale, she begins another. And so it goes for 1001 nights. The tales told by Scheherazade are of Persian, Indian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian origins. These are mostly classical folk tales of morality, virtues, and good-versus-evil, that are found among many cultures. Some can be traced back to the Persian *Hezar Afsaneh* or the Arabic *Alf Khurafa*, and their subsequent adaptations and mixings with tales of other parts of the world. Over the years, the stories have inspired many artists: musicians, poets, authors, movie makers, and so on.

[2008 July] Tyson, Neil deGrasse, *My Favorite Universe*, twelve lectures, The Teaching Company, 2003.

[2008 June] Hawking, Stephen (with Leonard Mlodinow), *A Briefer History of Time*, unabridged audiobook read by Erik Davies, Random House Audio, 2005.

[2008 June] Burke, James, *The Day the Universe Changed: Pivotal Moments in Time that Radically Altered the Course of Human History*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Audio Renaissance, 1990.

[2008 June] Nahai, Gina Barkhordar, *Caspian Rain: A Novel*, MacAdam/Cage, 2007.

[2008 June] Larson, Edward J., *The Theory of Evolution: A History of Controversy*, twelve lectures, The Teaching Company, 2002.

[2008 May] Poitier, Sydney, *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Collins, 2000.

Poitier describes the social context and circumstances of his youth and of his path-breaking career as a black actor, the first to win an Academy Award.

[2008 May] Feynman, Richard P., *The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist*, unabridged audiobook read by Raymond Todd, Blackstone Audio, 2007.

[2008 May] Obama, Barack, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House, 2006.

[2008 May] Shenon, Philip, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation*, Twelve, 2008.

[2008 Apr.] Ephron, Nora, *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*, Unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House, 2006.

[2008 Mar.] Milton-Edwards, Beverley, and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945*, Routledge, 3rd ed., 2008.

[2008 Mar.] Rich, Frank, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina*, unabridged audiobook read by Grover Gardner, Penguin Audio, 2006.

[2008 Feb.] Siegfried, Tom, *A Beautiful Math: John Nash, Game Theory, and the Modern Quest for a Code of Nature*, Joseph Henry Press, 2006.

Discusses how game theory is invading many branches of inquiry in both physical and social sciences.

[2008 Jan.] Wallace, David Foster, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, abridged audiobook read by the

author, Time Warner Audio Books, 2005.

Four essays: "Consider the Lobster", "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", "Big Red Son", and "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart".

[2008 Jan.] Angier, Natalie, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*, unabridged audiobook read by Nike Doukas, HighBridge Audio, 2007.

[2007 Nov.] Bryson, Bill, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir*, unabridged audiobook read by the author, Random House, 2006.

[2007 Nov.] Isikoff, Michael, and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War*, unabridged audiobook read by Stefan Rudnicki, Blackstone Audio, 2006.

[2007 Oct.] Perkins, John, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, unabridged audiobook read by Brian Emerson, Blackstone Audiobooks, 2005.

EHMs earn a living by rendering strategically important Third-World countries dependent on, and thus under the influence of, the United States through convincing their leaders to accept enormous loans for infrastructure development and making sure that the resulting lucrative projects were contracted to US corporations, such as Bechtel and Halliburton.

[2007 Oct.] Voltaire, *Candide*, unabridged audiobook read by Tom Whitworth, Tantor Media, 2002. Originally published in 1759.

[2007 Sep.] Vonnegut, Kurt, *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, Audiobook read by Scott Brick, Books on Tape, 2000.

This book of imaginary interviews with dead people began as a series of 90-second interludes for WNYC, New York City's public radio station.

[2007 Sep.] Maugham, W. Somerset, *Ten by Maugham*, audiobook read/performed by various artists, KCRW FM, 2000. Collection of short stories, on 10 CDs.

[2007 Sep.] Anderson, Fred, *The War that Made America: A Short History of The French and Indian War*, Audiobook read by Simon Vance, Tantor Media, 2005.

The Seven Years' War entailed expansion of the British colonies into French territory, in the context of the Native American struggle for survival. From the box cover: "... how America, as we know it today, emerged from a series of fractured colonies and warring tribes into a nation ripe for independence."

[2007 Aug.] Bacall, Lauren, *By Myself and Then Some*, abridged audiobook read by the author, Harper Audio, 2005.

Updated version of the author's memoirs on the silver anniversary of the original publication.

[2007 Aug.] Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe, *Ideas that Shaped Mankind: A Concise History of Human Thought*, The Modern Scholar Lecture Course Series, Recorded Books, 2004.

Fourteen lectures based on Professor Fernandez-Armesto's 2003 book, *Ideas that Changed the World*.

[2007 July] American Society of Magazine Editors, *The Best American Magazine Writing 2006*, Columbia University Press, 2006. Diverse selections from feature articles, reports, profiles, commentaries, columns, essays, reviews, and short stories.

[2007 July] Johnstone, Bob, *Brilliant! Shuji Nakamura and the Revolution in Lighting Technology*, Prometheus Books, 2007.

An account of the development high-brightness LED technology at a small Japanese company (Nichia), how that company foolishly chased away the goose that laid the golden egg, the legal intrigue as Nichia and Nakamura sued each other (the company claiming that Nakamura had leaked their trade secrets and Nakamura countering that his efforts in developing a billion-dollar business were inadequately rewarded), and the effects on world energy requirements when LED-based low-energy lighting replaces the current incandescent and fluorescent lightbulbs (e.g., saving an estimated 30% of the total energy used in the United States). The author has used numerous interviews with Nakamura and others, along with Nakamura's Japanese-language autobiography, *Breakthrough with Anger*. This is an amazing story that is marred by some inconsistencies. For example, we learn on p. 62 that, circa 1987, "Nakamura had come to the conclusion that he should no longer listen to what

his boss said ... he would do the opposite of what people told him." Then, on p. 214, more than a decade later, we read that "Like the loyal employee that he was, Shuji did as he was told." However, given that the sources of information are primarily people who were (and some still are) involved in the technical developments and suits/countersuits regarding intellectual property, self-serving statements and the attendant conflicts are to be expected.

[2007 July] Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States: Highlights from the Twentieth Century*, audiobook read by Matt Damon and the author, Harper Audio, 2003.

This audiobook comprises the second half of a book by the same name, expanded to include the Clinton presidency and other recent events. Traditional history is told from the viewpoint of "heros" (kings, generals, influential politicians), leaving out the resistance and suffering of victims of conquests, who, in their desperation, sometime turn on other victims. From the introductory comments by the author: "My viewpoint in telling the history of the United States is ... that we must not accept the 'memory of states' [borrowing a phrase used by Henry Kissinger to define history] as our own ... This book will be skeptical of governments and their attempts, through politics and culture, to ensnare ordinary people in a giant web of nationhood pretending to a common interest."

[2007 June] Nemat, Marina, *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir*, Free Press, 2007.

The author, born in 1965, was 16 years old when arrested by the Iranian regime two years after the Islamic revolution. This autobiography covers the author's life up to age 18, although it also contains brief accounts of the later years and her eventual resettlement in Canada. It is mainly the story of her imprisonment (a little over two years in the notorious Evin Prison) and marriage to one of her prison guards, Ali, who used his family ties to have her execution sentence commuted to life imprisonment. The prison stories are interlaced with formative events in the author's family life and schooling. It is very difficult to criticize someone who has been through so much and who has gathered the courage to write about private matters that most Iranians would not dare disclose. Yet, there are inconsistencies in the account that tarnish an otherwise compelling work of nonfiction. Foremost among these is the explanation of why she agreed to convert to Islam and to marry Ali, a man who claimed to be in love with her and yet was willing to use the threat of having her parents and a friend executed in order to force her to marry him. [Note added on 2007/09/20: Apparently, this book's depiction of the Evin Prison has touched some raw nerves. See, for example, the Persian review by Monireh Baradaran: <http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=10487>]

[2007] Gurwitch, Annabelle, *Fired*, Audiobook Produced by L.A. Theater Works, 2005.
Comedic monologues about being fired from various, mostly trivial, jobs.

[2007] Green, Jane, *To Have and to Hold*, unabridged audiobook read by Kate Reading, Books on Tape, 2004.

[2007] Suskind, Ron, *The One Percent Doctrine*, unabridged audiobook read by George Guidall, Recorded Books, 2006.

". . . the most detailed, revealing account yet of American counterterrorism efforts and a hard-hitting critique of their direction." [Publishers Weekly]

[2007] Berntsen, Gary, and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker -- The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander*, Audiobook read by Robertson Dean, Books on Tape, 2006.

[2007] Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, abridged audiobook read by Grover Gardner, HighBridge Audio, 2001.

The author takes us on a journey that follows the development of human societies and uncovers several deciding factors that helped create the vastly differing levels of development on the various continents. According to *The New Yorker*, "The scope and explanatory power of this book are astounding."

[2007] Friedman, Thomas L., *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, abridged audiobook read by Oliver Wyman, Audio Renaissance, 2005.

[2007] Chomsky, Noam, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, Metropolitan Books, 2006.

[2007] Johnson, Steven, *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life*, unabridged audiobook read by Alan Sklar, Tantor Media, 2004.

Presents a lot of interesting facts, including how our brains have evolved to take care of certain routine tasks

with little or no processing, and how a rough-and-quick processing center (the emigdula) manages to keep us out of danger when normal processing of sensory data would take too long for us to react in time.

[2007] Ricks, Thomas E., *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Abridged audiobook read by James Lurie, Penguin Audio, 2006.

[2007] Woodward, Bob, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*, Abridged audiobook read by Boyd Gaines, Audioworks (Simon & Schuster), 2006.

[2007] Chomsky, Noam, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Metropolitan Books, 2003.

[2007] Clark, Richard A., *The Scorpion's Gate*, unabridged audiobook read by Robertson Dean, Penguin Audio, 2005.

Fictional tale set in the Middle East, circa 2010, and involving two fundamentalist Islamic republics: Iran and Islamyah (former Saudi Arabia, in which the al-Saud family has been toppled).

[2007] Friedman, Thomas L., *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, audiobook read by the author, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2004.

[2006] Phillips, Kevin, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, Audiobook read by Scott Brick, Penguin Audio, 2006.

[2006] Young, Toby, *The Sound of No Hands Clapping*, unabridged audiobook read by Simon Vance, Tantor Audio, 2006.

[2006] Zoka', Yahya, *Dar Peeramoon-e Tagh'eer-e Khatt-e Farsi (On Changing the Persian Script)*, Naghsh-e Jahan, Tehran, Dey 1329 (Jan. 1951), in Persian.

This book provides an uneven history of attempts to improve the Persian script in order to simplify its learning and reproduction. In some cases, the author names a proponent or opponent of the idea, without giving any details of his contributions to the debate; in other places, it quotes from letters and other writings at length. The writing style is also quite poor, with many sentences running half a page or longer.

[2006] Fonda, Jane, *My Life So Far*, Audiobook read by the author, Random House, 2005.

[2006] *Ernest Hemingway: The Short Stories*, Vol. 1, Audiobook read by Stacy Keach, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2002.

[2006] Remnick, David, and Henry Finder (eds.), *Fierce Pajamas: Selections from an Anthology of Humor Writing from the New Yorker*, Audiobook read by various people, The New Yorker, 2001.

[2006] Rahnema, Ali (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (New updated edition), Zed Books, 2005.

Chapters from the 1994 first edition are titled Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani'; Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform; Khomeini's Search for Perfection; Mawdudi and the Jama'at-i Islami; Hassan al-Banna; Sayyid Qutb: The Political Vision; Musa al-Sadr; Ali Shariati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel; Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr. A new 75-page introduction "Contextualize[es] the Pioneers" in view of the significant events of the past decade and sketches a "Roadmap to Understanding." The following quotation (p. xv) is representative of the apologetic tone of much of the new introduction, because it conveniently ignores the facts that the one-man argument it postulates was supported by dozens of others who carried out, or provided logistical support for, the September 11 attacks and that the outcome of the attacks was celebrated by tens of thousands, while characterizing the reaction as being against Islam as a whole: "Essentially one man's argument that Islam commanded such a killing laid the foundations of a wrathful reaction against Islam." Near the end of the introduction, however, the editor strikes a different chord, noting that (p. lxxv) "Consumed by power, [pioneers of Islamic revival who entered the world of politics] lost patience and sacrificed the objects of the exercise, namely human beings who were to be properly guided" and (p. lxxvii) "a broad-based global re-examination and dialog is under way among Muslims of reflection as Muslims of desperation seemingly play out their last acts."

[2006] Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby (eds.), *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption*, Blackwell, 2001.

A well-chosen and diverse collection of essays on various aspects of popular culture (e.g., television, magazines,

music, sports, advertising) that reveals its exploitation for profit via tools such as celebrity and fandom.

[2006] Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, unabridged audiobook read by Cristine McMurdo-Wallis, Recorded Books, 2002.

The author gains first-hand knowledge of the lives and working conditions of those struggling with near-minimum-wage jobs by temporarily abandoning her upper-middle-class life as a writer and trying to make ends meet while holding a string of such jobs.

[2006] Alba, Ben, *Inventing the Late Night: Steve Allen and the Original Tonight Show*, Prometheus Books, 2005.

Describes how Steve Allen practically invented all the key elements of late night talk shows, now in common use, during his 1954-57 stint as the host of NBC's Tonight.

[2006] Swarup, Vikas, *Q & A*, abridged audiobook, read masterfully by Kerry Shale, Harper Collins, 2005.

A poor Indian orphan boy, working as a waiter, is arrested for fraud at the urging of producers of the TV quiz show "Who Will Win a Billion," who have no intention of paying him after he wins the grand prize by correctly answering a series of 12 questions. In conversations with his attorney, the boy reveals how he luckily came to know the correct answer to each question through his life experiences with a few friends, masters, and other acquaintances. The audiobook has won several awards, including an Audie for abridged fiction. [Note added on 2009/02/27: The movie "Slumdog Millionaire," which is based on this book, won the best-picture Oscar (and seven other awards) last night.]

[2006] Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, unabridged audiobook read by Anne Twomey, Audiobooks America, 2005.

From the cover blurb: ". . . highlights the people who've done everything right—gotten college degrees, developed marketable skills, and built up impressive resumes—yet have become repeatedly vulnerable to financial disaster." Offers interesting insights into the "career coaching" industry.

[2006] Fishman, Charles, *The Wal-Mart Effect*, unabridged audiobook read by Alan Sklar, Tantor Media, 2006.

Discusses the hidden reach and transformative power of Wal-Mart via revealing its (mostly secret) operating principles and business practices.

[2006] Carroll, Jamuna (ed.), *Television: Opposing Viewpoints*, Greenhaven Press, 2006.

Reprints of articles and other writings, arguing the two sides of controversial issues pertaining to the values that TV promotes, TV's societal impacts, effects of TV advertising, and methods of regulation.

[2006] Napoleoni, Loretta, *Insurgent Iraq: Al Zarqawi and the New Generation*, Seven Stories Press, 2005.

The tale of how an insignificant dissident of modest means was artificially elevated to the status of a legendary terrorist to provide one of the two key justifications for the Iraq war. Though not explicated in the book, the events described suggest that the Iraq war might have been a preemptive strike not against Saddam Hussein, but against Islamic fundamentalism that was spreading in Iraq by Arab fighters, who did not have much to do in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and were looking to northern Iraq as their next battleground.

[2006] Wiesel, Elie, *Night*, Recorded Books, read by George Guidall, 2006. New translation, copyright 2006, from the original French by Marion Wiesel, the author's wife.

This classic novel/autobiography depicting gruesome experiences of Jews in Nazi Germany's death camps was originally published in 1958. The author's preface to this translation describes why a new translation was deemed necessary and also supplies additional insights and background.

[2006] Feynman, Michelle (ed.), *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track: Selected Letters of Richard P. Feynman*, Recorded Books, narrated by Richard Poe and Johanna Parker, 2005.

This book reveals the human face of a key innovator of our time. The letters' contents range from discussion of minor issues (e.g., in encouraging notes in response to students and other ordinary people) to important philosophical observations exemplified by the following insightful statement: "What is not surrounded by uncertainty cannot be the truth."

[2006] Friedman, George, *America's Secret War: Inside the Hidden Worldwide Struggle Between America and Its Enemies*, Blackstone Audiobooks, read by Brian Emerson, 2004.

[2006] Petroski, Henry, *Small Things Considered: Why There Is No Perfect Design*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. I found this book on the library shelf when looking for the next book on this list. It is a fascinating account of design tradeoffs and decisions in everyday items such as the plastic tripod (the "thingy" that prevents the top of a pizza box from sticking to the toppings), water glasses, paper cups, calculator and telephone keypads, doorknobs, and light switches.

[2006] Petroski, Henry, *Success through Failure: The Paradox of Design*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2006. Having read Petroski's very well-known book, *To Engineer Is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design*, many years ago, I was intrigued by the title of his new book and decided to acquire and read it. Like the aforementioned book, the theme here is the importance of learning from failures, as illustrated by the following quotation from p. 95: "When a complex system succeeds, that success masks its proximity to failure. . . . Thus, the failure of the Titanic contributed much more to the design of safe ocean liners than would have her success. That is the paradox of engineering and design."

[2006] Yaqub, Salim, *The United States and the Middle East: 1914 to 9/11*, The Teaching Company, 2003. An audiobook in the Great Courses series, composed of 24 lectures.

[2006] Ridgeway, James, *The 5 Unanswered Questions About 9/11: What the 9/11 Commission Report Failed to Tell Us*, Seven Stories Press, 2005.

The questions, which form chapter titles, are: Why couldn't we stop an attack from the skies? Why didn't the Government protect us? Why didn't we know what was coming? Did US "allies" help make the attacks possible? Why couldn't the 9/11 Commission get to the truth?

[2006] Bergreen, Laurence, *Over the Edge of the World: Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe*, Harper Audio, 2003; Audiobook, read by the author.

[2006] Griffin, David R., *The 9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*, Olive Branch Press, 2005. This book presents an interesting mix of ideas in an effort to discredit the 9/11 Commission Report. The main theme is that the report covers up or distorts evidence of serious ineptitude on the part of the administration (military leaders, in particular) and goes so far as to suggest that the attacks were perhaps deliberately allowed to succeed because a new "Pearl Harbor" would be useful to the administration's plans for world domination. Interest in having an oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea region to the Indian Ocean, via Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as greater control over the oil fields of the Persian Gulf region, are cited as reasons for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, which needed the 9/11 attacks as a pretext. Conspiracy theories are usually full of holes, and this one is no exception. The problems start on the very first page of Chapter 1, where the author uses the fact that six of the alleged hijackers showed up alive after 9/11 to cast doubt on the identity of the 19 men who carried out the attacks. Of course, there is no hint of the explanation that the hijackers may have forged those identities or that there may be multiple people named X Y in the world. Later, on page 25, the fact that "fire had never before caused steel-frame high-rise buildings to collapse" is cited as one of six problems in the official account. Again, the gaping holes in the towers are conveniently ignored and the focus is placed on fires, as if they were the sole causes of the twin towers' collapse. The hypothesis that a small plane or a missile, rather than a large airliner, hit the Pentagon (p. 38) similarly ignores the inconvenient fact that if this were true, Flight 77 must have crashed or been shot down somewhere else. The question then would be how the crash of such a large plane was not witnessed by anyone and how it was successfully hidden afterwards; or, if it did not crash, its passengers and crew must have been hidden or silenced. On page 42, President Bush is criticized for not leaving the school in Florida immediately after he learned of the WTC attacks, thereby "making all the students and teachers potential targets of a terrorist attack." However, it is not explained how his departure would have made the school less of a target in attacks that were planned days, if not months, in advance. Material in the latter half of the book, about distortions to hide inconsistencies and possible lies, as well as allegations of conflict of interest on the part of the 9/11 Commission members and staffers, are more believable. Thus, the book is still worth reading.

[2006] Friedman, Thomas L., *Longitudes & Attitudes*, Audio Renaissance, 2002, abridged audio book, read by the author (winner of 2002 Pulitzer Prize for commentary).

A collection of columns written mostly in the months following the events of September 11, 2001. The author believes that while technology has facilitated worldwide communication, it has not improved our understanding and tolerance. In fact, because technology (the Internet in particular) allows people to select news sources that are most in tune with their own beliefs, it has helped build walls that hinder true understanding.

[2006] Preston, Richard, *The Demon in the Freezer: A True Story*, Random House, 2002, Audio book, read by

James Naughton.

The author paints a frightening picture of smallpox and anthrax as natural threats and as biological weapons. The tale of how selfless physicians and health workers eradicated smallpox as a natural disease is particularly impressive.

[2006] Menoret, Pascal, *The Saudi Enigma: A History*, Zed Books, 2005.

Reviews the history of Saudi Arabia via examining how the development of its current identity (that includes religious fundamentalism) and past and present political forces have affected its economy and society. Page 22 contains a revealing statement attributed to Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan: "the idea for the Taliban was British, the management American, the money Saudi and the groundwork Pakistani!"

[2005] Unger, Graig, *House of Bush, House of Saud*, Simon & Schuster Audio, 2004, read by James Naughton.

[2005] Greenberg, Karen J. (ed.), *Al Qaeda Now: Understanding Today's Terrorists*, Cambridge, 2005.

About 60% of this book is devoted to discussions by various experts and 40% to statements by OBL. The following quote, from page 5, aptly illustrates the attitude in the Arab world toward Al Qaeda and its leader: "In Saudi Arabia [the US has] a favorability rating of three percent, which is essentially zero. When polling is conducted in Saudi Arabia on bin Laden's political ideas, there is a fifty percent favorability rating. Interestingly, though, when we ask, 'Would you like bin Laden to be your leader?' the positive response is only five percent."

[2005] Berman, Ilan, *Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

[2005] Grisham, John, *The King of Torts*, Doubleday, 2003. Audiobook version, Random House, 2003, read by Michael Beck.

[2005] Satrapi, Marjane, *Persepolis*, and *Persepolis 2*, Pantheon, 2003 and 2004.

These "graphic novels" (which were followed in 2005 by *Embroideries*) depict the author's childhood and early adulthood in Iran and Europe. The books contain some worthy insights, but the few gems are far outnumbered by inaccuracies in characterizing sociopolitical events and gravely overshadowed by the author's tendency to blame individuals, events, and circumstances for her many failures. She paints unflattering portraits of several people, poking fun at their shortcomings, uptightness, or unattractive appearance, without acknowledging that those people too may have been victims of circumstances. In other words, while expecting everyone to be nonjudgmental toward her, the author does not cut these people any slack. On pp. 131-133 of *Persepolis 2*, she nonchalantly describes how, to avoid reprimand by the "decency police" for wearing makeup, she distracted them by accusing an innocent bystander of lewd conduct, knowing full well that the startled man would be in for a beating, at the very least. She never expresses remorse for putting an innocent man in grave danger (people have reportedly died from beatings during interrogations by the decency police); instead, she goes on to describe how moments later, her boyfriend laughingly praised her coolness and "instinct for survival."

[2005] Karolides, Nicholas J., Margaret Bald, and Dawn B. Sova, *120 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature*, Checkmark Books, 2005.

Divides the books into four 30-book sections depending on the primary reason for the bans: political (*Doctor Zhivago*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1984), religious (the three major holy books, *Oliver Twist*, *On the Origin of Species*), sexual (*The Arabian Nights*, *Lolita*, *Ulysses*), social (*Anne Frank's Diary*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Fahrenheit 451*). The bans have occurred in many different countries, including England and USA.

[2005] Levy, Habib, *Comprehensive History of the Jews in Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*, Mazda Publishers, 1999. Abridged and edited from the 3-volume Persian version by Hooshang Ebrami, Translated into English by George W. Maschke.

[2005] Goldin, Farideh, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*, Brandeis Univ. Press, 2003.

[2005] Martel, Yann, *Life of Pi*, audiobook version, HighBridge, 2003. An intriguing story, read masterfully by J. Woodman.

[2005] Afary, Janet, and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Foucault, a French philosopher, briefly acted as a journalist in Iran immediately before the Islamic Revolution. He wrote in glowing terms about the revolution for a short while, was harshly criticized for his views, and, apparently, later regretted his writings. Contains translated versions of Foucault's writings, responses by critics,

an in-depth analysis, and an epilogue entitled "From the Iranian Revolution to September 11, 2001". Here is a noteworthy quote from an Iranian woman (Atoussa H.; p. 209 of the book), writing in response to Foucault: "After twenty-five years of silence and oppression, do the Iranian people have no other choice than that between the SAVAK and religious fanaticism?"

[2005] Conway, Flo, and Jim Siegelman, *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, the Father of Cybernetics*, Basic Books, xvi + 423 pp., 2005.

I reviewed this book for *Mathematical Reviews* (published in Vol. 2005i:01008, Review #2105723).

[2005] Howard, Roger, *Iran in Crisis? Nuclear Ambitions and the American Response*, Zed Books, London, 2004.

[2005] Pelfrey, Patricia A. (reviser/expander), *A Brief History of the University of California*, UC Press, 2nd ed., 130 + x pp., 2004.

Traces UC's history from its conception at the constitutional convention in Monterey (1849), a year before California was admitted to the Union, through its official creation in 1868, to the present. Includes 1-2 pages on the specific history of each campus and complete lists of presidents and chancellors.

[2005] Mitnick, Kevin D. and William L. Simon, *The Art of Deception: Controlling the Human Element of Security*, Wiley, 2002.

Mitnick, a convicted former hacker (nonmalicious to begin with, and now a changed man, if one is to believe him), shows how vulnerable we all are to social engineering, i.e., the use of influence, persuasion, or manipulation to deceive people. The book is full of examples of methods used to infiltrate systems. For instance, collecting seemingly innocuous pieces of information from employees and then putting them together to create the illusion of an insider to get even more information.

[2005] Dumas, Firoozeh, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*, Villard, 2003; paperback edition by Random House.

This is a very funny book which focuses on a girl's experience of growing up in a foreign land while being constantly embarrassed by the behavior and poor English skills of her parents.

[2005] Plath, Sylvia (1932-1963), *Ariel*, Harper Prenal edition, 1999.

The poems in this book were written in the last months of Plath's life which ended by suicide in 1963, apparently in part due her husband's (poet Ted Hughes) philandering.

[2005] Hsu, F.-H., *Behind Deep Blue: Building the Computer that Defeated the World Chess Champion*, Princeton University Press, 2002.

Argues that the chess matches described should not be viewed as "human versus machine" but rather as "performing human versus tool-making human."

[2005] Nafisi, Azar, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Random House, 2003.

Recounts post-Islamic-Revolution Iran in four contexts related to her teaching of English literature: Lolita, Gatsby, James, and Austen. Describes how she was fired from a teaching post, went back to teaching, and eventually left Iran in 1997.