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Behrooz Parhami's Blog & Books Page

Page last updated on 2013 December 31

This page was created in March 2009 as an outgrowth of the section entitled "Books Read or Heard" in my personal page. The rapid expansion of the list of books warranted devoting a separate page to it. Given that the book introductions and reviews constituted a form of personal blog, I decided to title this page "Blog & Books," to also allow discussion of interesting topics unrelated to books from time to time. Lately, non-book items (such as political news, tech news, puzzles, oddities, trivia, humor, art, and music) have formed the vast majority of the entries.

Entries in each section appear in reverse chronological order.

Blog entries for 2013

Blog entries for 2012

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Blog Entries for 2013

2013/12/31 (Tue.): Here are six items of potential interest on this last day of 2013. Happy New Year!

(1) Quote of the day: "Jordan Belfort is not a fictional character, but when DiCaprio plays him he becomes one for the audience ... We like our scoundrels as entertainment, but it's easy to become disengaged from the real harm this guy did." ~ Robert Shearin, one of the many victims of "The Wolf of Wall Street," in [LA Weekly](#) [Christina McDowell, daughter of Tom Prousalis, one of the Wolf's partners in crime, **also writes** in "An Open Letter to the Makers of 'The Wolf of Wall Street,' and the Wolf Himself," about how her father defrauded his own family, just like many naive investors who trusted him.]

(2) Dieters' silverware: [Spoon design](#) for dieters. And the corresponding [dieters' fork](#). This is the best I could do for [dieters' knife](#).

(3) Kamancheh maestro: Kayhan Kalhor plays the kamancheh and sings "[Layli Bavanem](#)" at the 2012 Moreland Festival, accompanied by Reza Samani on Tombak.

(4) Middle-Eastern style [hidden camera pranks](#): Given the viciousness of some of the pranks and the way the prankster is pursued by those affected, I wonder if anyone got hurt in the process or there was a chance to explain that the pranks were for fun.

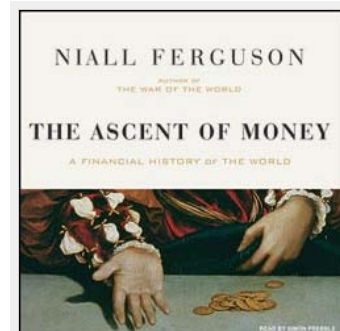
(5) These Afghan [boys with toy guns](#) have a dismal chance of escaping the culture of violence.

(6) A classic set of lectures on physics: I have just finished a second listening of Richard Feynman's audiobook *Six Easy Pieces: Essentials of Physics Explained by its Most Brilliant Teacher* (see my review of 2013/03/03).

2013/12/30 (Mon.): Ferguson, Niall, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, Tantor Audio, 2008; unabridged audiobook on 9 CDs, read by Simon Prebble.

This book presents a detailed history of finance in its various forms, from ancient coins made of precious metals up to and including complex instruments of recent decades that nearly led to the collapse of the US economy. Ferguson points out, quite successfully, that finance has played a key role in human history, determining the fates of empires and outcomes of wars, including the American Civil War. Similarly, absence of war and long periods of stability can be linked to financial innovation and forward-looking economic pacts among nations.

I enjoyed listening to this audiobook and learned a great deal from it. Afterwards, I discovered that PBS has produced a [4-hour documentary](#) based on this book. I think watching the PBS program is a more efficient way



Favorite quotations

Poetry

Pet peeve

Virtual retirement

CE Program

ECE Department

UCSB Engineering

UC Santa Barbara

of learning about the author's ideas than either reading the printed book or listening to the audiobook.

2013/12/29 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience." ~ Robert Fulghum

(2) Selfie etiquette: On President Obama's, David Cameron's, and the Pope's attempts to look cool in the eyes of the younger generation by trudging into [the selfie territory](#).

(3) On the perils of exponential growth with finite resources: Scientist David Suzuki's convincing arguments that our [preoccupation with growth](#) is misguided.

(4) Shortened version of a Christmas joke that is going around: One evening, Santa was in a foul mood. Everything that could possibly go wrong had gone wrong during the day and he was far behind in his schedule. He goes to answer the doorbell. A little angel holding a Christmas tree is standing outside, asking Santa where he wanted her to stick it. ... And thus began the tradition of a little angel atop each Christmas tree.

(5) Ten sentences that can change your perspective on life [sources unknown]:

People aren't against you; they are for themselves.

Climb mountains not so the world can see you, but so you can see the world.

We learn more from failure than from success.

The most dangerous risk is the risk of spending your life not doing what you want, thinking you can do it later.

Go where you are celebrated, not where you are tolerated.

You'll spend more time with yourself than with anyone else; so make yourself as interesting as possible.

If you accept your limitations, you'll go beyond them.

Motivation doesn't last, neither does bathing; that's why you need each of them daily.

Everyone you meet is afraid of something, loves something, and has lost something.

Comfort is the enemy of achievement.

2013/12/28 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The only exercise I take is walking behind the coffins of friends who took exercise." ~ Actor Peter O'Toole (1932-2013)

(2) Joke of the day: A plumber was asked to explain the difference between an Arab leader and a Western leader. He responded by likening the two to Middle Eastern and Western toilets. Asked to elaborate, he explained that whereas a Western toilet can be changed easily by removing four nuts, changing a Middle Eastern toilet requires removing the tiles around it and jackhammering the concrete slab underneath.

(3) Creating intricate designs in snow through walking: The mid-range shots show a guy simply walking in snow. But zoom out and you will see the [most amazing geometric patterns](#) etched in a fresh layer of snow. The patterns may be gone in hours, but the artist still makes them.

(4) Call centers trying to deal with the foreign accent problem: Premier Health Plans and a number of other businesses are experimenting with the use of messages that are prerecorded using an engaging female voice, in order to disguise the fact that their call centers are staffed by foreign nationals outside the US borders. The foreign operator chooses from a menu of available responses, including one that says the woman does not understand the question. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of December 30, 2013.]

(5) On quoting ancient poets: Iranians have a habit of quoting ancient poets as evidence that some opinion they hold is the absolute truth. Let me give you an example. If you wanted people to be fruitful and multiply because you are against birth control or have some political agenda that is served by increased population, you'd quote the second half of a verse by the great poet Sa'di: "Makhor howl-e eblis taa jaan dahad / hamaan kas keh dandaan dahad naan dahad" [Some sources replace "hamaan" with "har aan," but the meaning remains the same]. In the context of the full poem, the verse tells you not to worry about whether you'd be able to feed your child who has just teethed (characterized as a satanic thought), because the same being who provided the teeth shall provide the bread. Of course these people forget that whereas in Sa'di's time bread was the main concern, we now have a much more complex society wherein children also need childcare, cash allowance, health insurance, and education, not to mention personal electronics and entertainment. So, the next time you quote one of our great poets, please be mindful of the context in which the verses were written. [I am not pointing fingers here, as I have done this on occasion myself.]

2013/12/27 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest, all of them about music.

(1) Quote of the day: "How do you solve a problem like her acting?" ~ *Entertainment Weekly*, dissing Kerry Underwood's performance in the new TV production of "The Sound of Music"

(2) Satire, with a ring of truth: Rap artist Eminem's horrors at his daughter Hailie dating a guy who is a huge fan of his music, as imagined by [the Onion](#).

(3) Eight-year-old pianist: Macaulay Culkin lookalike [plays Chopin](#) at a London train station, while most people

walk by unimpressed.

(4) Beautiful, but joyless music: A couple of days ago, I watched the first half of a concert film from 1999 featuring the Lebanese singer Fairouz, an artist so popular that the MGM Grand Concert Hall in Las Vegas was filled with her adoring fans. She performed with a 42-piece orchestra and a full choir. What struck me as odd was the way she carried herself on stage. She was positioned at one point for the entire time, bore a grim face, and stood expressionless, or turned around and left the stage, after a round of applause from the audience of thousands; no smile, no acknowledgment of her fans by bowing, nothing! I could not find the concert or parts of it on-line, but here is [a sample video](#) that is similar to the concert performance, though here she does take a few steps near the end. Could this perpetual sadness, a culture of hurt and victimhood, and lack of humility be the elements that are keeping the Middle East back and causing the region's grave brain drain?

(5) Israeli singer performs Kurdish/Arameic music: [Hadassa Ysehurun sings](#) the Arameic song "Eli la Shuk" ("Don't Leave Me").

2013/12/26 (Thu.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?" ~ Pope Francis

(2) Hidden-camera fun: Customers face the antics of a supposedly [senile cashier](#).

(3) Talk about regression: Following a lawsuit brought by the stars of the TLC reality series "Sister Wives," a US District Judge has struck down a portion of the Utah law that bans polygamy. [Reported by *Time* magazine, issue of December 30, 2013.]

(4) Top 10 photos of 2013, according to *Time* magazine. [[Pictorial](#)]

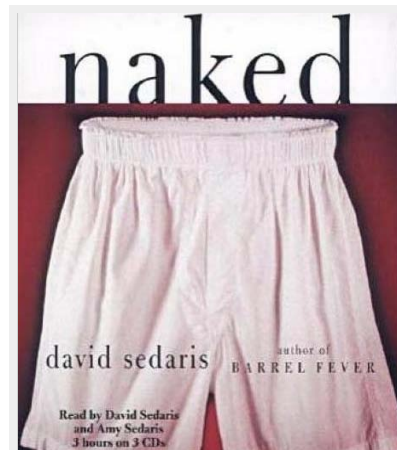
(5) The year 2013 in 365 pictures, according to *Time* magazine. [[Pictorial](#)] [Some of my recommendations: January 4, 28; April 11; June 23; August 30; September 15; October 14, 25]

(6) Muslim Brotherhood declared a terrorist organization by Egypt's interim government: This will mean a ban on the group's activities, including demonstrations. [[BBC report](#)]

2013/12/25 (Wed.): Sedaris, David, *Naked*, Time-Warner Audio; collection of essays on 3 CDs, read by the author.

[My library loan version of this audiobook was part of a 2000 box set that also included three other collections I had previously read or heard: *Barrel Fever and Other Stories*; *Holidays on Ice*; *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.]

In his typical self-effacing way, David Sedaris relates several stories from the rich terrain of his life, involving his own eccentric sensibilities and his family's weirdness. We laugh along with him at his tart-tongued mother who imitates her young son's nervous tics, to the amusement of his teachers. We delight at his politically incorrect telling of the story of a road trip with a quadriplegic companion. We find hilarity in his family's gathering at a wedding while pondering an imminent death. The writing style and humor of David Sedaris are indeed unusual, and his reading of these essays makes them a lot more enjoyable.



2013/12/24 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "What we recoil against most strongly is not that such surveillance can theoretically occur, but that it was done without a majority of society even being aware it was possible." ~ Edward Snowden, quoted in *Time* magazine (issue of December 23, 2013), which interviewed him as one of the candidates for Person of the Year

(2) Shop around for best price of generic drugs: Most people think that generic drugs cost pretty much the same everywhere. Not so. A report, broadcast last night on PBS Newshour, showed a difference of up to fortyfold (around \$11 to \$455) for a month's supply of the exact same generic drug. Costco is generally among the lowest-priced suppliers. In one case, a woman was able to bargain with Target to reduce the \$455 price of a drug to match the \$11 price of another pharmacy. Which raises the question: What kind of profit margins do the retailers have if they can cut the price so drastically?

(3) Social networking for grandparents: According to the Pew Research Center, 60% of the 50-64 and 43% of the 65+ US adults use a social networking site. The average 50+ American spends nearly 2.5 hours per day on social media. [From [AARP magazine](#), issue of December 2013 / January 2014.]

(4) Maria doing well without Arnold: "I was not brought up to put myself first, but you have to—because if you're not whole, you're not going to be a good mother, a good partner, you're not going to be good at your job. It's your job to know who you are. What do you value? What's your mission? What makes you happy? ... You can't go through life without experiencing grief and loss, but we don't have a culture for handling grief." ~

Maria Shriver, 58, in an [interview with AARP magazine](#), issue of December 2013 / January 2014.

(5) The British Library's historic collection of images from/about Iran: A vast collection of digitized images have been [posted on Flickr](#), thereby making them available to the general public for the first time. The images, taken from 65,000 volumes (with expired copyrights), published in the 17th to 19th centuries, include maps, various kinds of illustrations, decorative drawings, wall paintings, and more. The library curators have indicated that the images can be used by anyone for any purpose, but have encouraged viewers to supply details about some of the mysterious images. Crowdsourcing of this type is a trend that is catching on. Expect various scholars and ordinary people to extract nuggets of information from this treasure trove of images and to compile albums with specific foci. I have already seen one collection of such images relating to Iran, but, unfortunately, my searches revealed that the collection isn't on-line yet (I received it via e-mail).

2013/12/23 (Mon.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." ~ Alvin Toffler [Thanks to Sa Ra]

(2) The top 75 pictures of the year for 2013: This [amazing pictorial](#) contains so many interesting photos that it occupied me for a full hour.

(3) Actress Salma Hayek has been quoted as saying: "I keep waiting to meet a man who has more balls than I do." Hayek is a talented and beautiful actress, but I am sorry to see her aim so low in the anatomy of a man. Why not look for someone with more heart or more brains than her?

(4) Best and worst movies of 2013: *Entertainment Weekly's* two resident critics (Owen Gleiberman and Chris Nashawaty) don't agree on their selections, but their top-10 lists share "Before Midnight," "12 Years a Slave," "Gravity," and "Fruitvale Station." Their five-worst-movies lists have no film in common. On a more extensive list, compiled from the opinions of a dozen critics linked to various publications, the films "12 Years a Slave" and "Gravity" get an "A," while 6 films score an "A-": "Blue Jasmine," "Fruitvale Station," "All Is Lost," "Captain Phillips," "Star Trek into Darkness," and "Enough Said." The "D-" and "D" films on the latter list are "Getaway" and "Grown Ups 2," respectively.

(5) Best and worst of 2013 on TV: *Entertainment Weekly's* end-of-year issue reviews films, TV shows, books, plays, and albums/singles released throughout 2013. I already wrote in item 4 above about movies. Three TV shows made the top-10 lists of both TV critics (Mellisa Maerz and Jeff Jensen): "Breaking Bad," "Orange is the New Black," and "Mad Men." The only common entry in the two lists of five-worst-TV-shows is "New Girl."

(6) Corruption probe rocks Turkey: Dozens of government officials and their relatives have been arrested. Erdogan has countered by firing two dozen police chiefs and calling the probe a dirty plot against his government. This apparent [power struggle](#) within the ruling party is being fought with smear tactics through the Turkish media.

2013/12/22 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A ship is always safe at the shore—but that is NOT what it is built for." ~ Albert Einstein

(2) Person-of-the-Year citation: "For pulling the papacy out of the palace and into the streets, for committing the world's largest church to confronting its deepest needs and for balancing judgment with mercy, Pope Francis is TIME's 2013 Person of the Year." ~ Nancy Gibbs, *Time* magazine's Managing Editor, ending her introductory piece on the Person-of-the-Year special double-issue of December 23, 2013

(3) UN resolution on human rights violations in Iran: With 86 positive votes for the resolution (36 against, and 61 abstentions), the UN General Assembly expressed concern on December 18, 2013, for the alarming state of human rights in Iran. In what has become a predictable reaction, a spokesperson for President Rouhani's government summarily dismissed the resolution, claiming that UN's human rights mechanisms are being used to achieve political ends.

(4) University of Michigan Iranian students having fun [celebrating Shab-e Yalda](#).

(5) Some fairly intelligent and/or honest answers to test questions: These are adapted from actual tests.

Q. Write < or >: a. 0.5 ____ 1.0; b. 3.2 ____ 3.02; c. 0.7 ____ 0.07. A. or; or; or

Q. Where was the Declaration of Independence signed? A. At the bottom.

Q. Miranda can't see anything when looking down her microscope. Suggest a reason why not. A: She is blind.

Q. When should a motorist use his or her bright beams? A. When he wants to be an asshole.

Q. What is love? A. Baby, don't hurt me, don't hurt me no more.

Q. What is the strongest force on earth? A. Love.

Q. To change centimeters to meters you _____. A. take out centi.

Q. Why are there rings on Saturn? A. Because God liked it, so he put a ring on it.

Q. The first cells were probably _____. A. lonely.

Q. Dr. King had a dream. My dream is _____. A. to work at Taco Bell with my mama.

Q. Give a brief explanation of the meaning of the term 'hard water.' A. Ice.

- Q. What are three things you want to do in the future? A. get a girlfriend; kiss her; rule the world.
 Q. If you lived at Abraham Lincoln's time, what would you say to or ask him? A. Not to go to a play, ever.
 Q. I earn money at home by _____. A. I don't. I am a freeloader.

2013/12/21 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefiting the poor. But what happens instead is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger (and) nothing ever comes out for the poor." ~ Pope Francis, responding to his critics, who have called him names
- (2) Animated optical illusions: [Creating motion](#) from sliding still images.
- (3) Mohammad Reza Kakavand: A new Facebook friend of mine is a Kurdish musician from Iran who plays the santour in [this composition](#) of his.
- (4) More on Person of the Year: By now, you probably know that Pope Francis was chosen by *Time* magazine as Person of the Year for 2013. You'd be relieved to learn that the 4th or 5th candidate on the top-5 shortlist was not chosen. The other four candidates were whistleblower Edward Snowden, activist Edith Windsor, Syria's President Bashar Assad, and US Senator Ted Cruz.
- (5) River of clouds over the Grand Canyon: A once-in-a-decade [weather phenomenon](#), known as "temperature inversion," filled the Grand Canyon with a dense, white fog at the end of November 2013. Typically, the air is warmer near the surface of the earth and cooler higher up. With temperature inversion, the warm air above cooler air acts as a lid, trapping fog at the surface and preventing it from rising.

2013/12/20 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "The experimenter who does not know what he is looking for will not understand what he finds." ~ Physiologist Claude Bernard (1813-1878)
- (2) Incontrovertible proof of global warming: [Image](#)
- (3) A very young Neil Diamond in a [39-minute BBC concert](#) from 1971.
- (4) Hava Nagila (The Movie): This film traces the history of the famed Hebrew song, whose title means "Let Us Rejoice," and its transformation from a ritualistic/religious song rooted in Ukrainian melodies to an international symbol of joy. The song's variations are virtually endless. Some call it the "Song of the Diaspora," because it is more famous among American Jews than among Israelis. Here is a [10-minute sample](#) of the 73-minute film. And for your further enjoyment, here is a [Texas-style rendition](#) of the song.
- (5) Mona Tavakoli: This percussionist of Iranian origins and, according to Jason Mraz, the better half of his occasional 2-person band "The Duo Decibel System" likes to get knotty in bed. [[Image](#)]

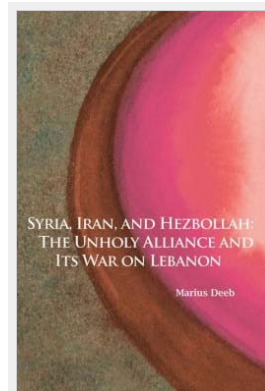
2013/12/19 (Thu.): Deeb, Marius, *Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah: The Unholy Alliance and Its War on Lebanon*, Hoover Press, 74 pp., 2013. [ISBN 978-0-8179-1665-7]

In this pocket-size book, which reads more like a book chapter than an actual book, the author, a Lebanese Christian and a Hoover Fellow, writes about how Syria's meddling in Lebanon has transformed this peaceful little nation from a model of peaceful coexistence and tolerance into a hotbed of ethnic and religious strife. Of course, the author's views of events and what motivates various groups are tainted by him belonging to one of the many sides of the conflict. There is no such thing as unbiased history, particularly when written as the events are unfolding. However, there is also no such thing as a bad book when it comes to learning about and understanding cultures. I came to learn from this book, for instance, that Lebanon's struggle for freedom and democracy, the so-called "Cedar Revolution" of March 2005, predated the Arab Spring by several years [p. 18].

Like many other revolutions, Lebanon's was also hijacked when, despite the withdrawal of Syria's army and its intelligence apparatus from Lebanon, it continued to exert influence via direct involvement in assassination of Lebanon's political leaders and support (in conjunction with Iran) for the parallel rule of Hezbollah, a political/military entity that essentially ignores the country's central government, while nominally participating in the political process.

After the Cedar Revolution fizzled, Hezbollah's well-supplied military forces and foreign financial support emboldened it to provoke a direct conflict with Israel in 2006. Each side earned some victories and suffered setbacks, but both Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah characterized the outcome as divine victory for their side [p. 28]. The 2006 war was a victory for Hezbollah only in relative terms, because for the first time ever, the Israelis couldn't wipe out their enemy.

The Druze sect (an offshoot of Shi'i Islam) is one of the key players in Lebanon's political scene. In 2007, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt established a group calling itself "The Lovers of Life," that contrasted its culture of life/peace with the death/war culture of Hezbollah and its allies [p. 23]. Jumblatt also flaunted his nationalistic



credentials by pointing out the fact that the Hezbollah leader "is not Lebanese because he received his orders from the Syrian regime and the [Islamic] Republic of Iran" [p. 32].

Over the years, many Lebanese political leaders have been assassinated, with each group accusing others of the deeds. UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon, charged with investigating and prosecuting those responsible for the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, widely believed to have been killed by Syria, became quite ineffective when the country's parliament was closed by its Syria-backed speaker in order to avoid cooperation with the body or endorsement of its findings [p. 31].

An overt example of bias in this book is how the author views decisions by the Lebanese government and its elected legislators. While praising some parliamentary compromises and deals struck to make a divided government in this multiethnic country work, the author criticizes the same groups for the resignation of pro-Syrian cabinet members and the subsequent shifting of Walid Jumblatt's block to ally itself with Syria in order to break a deadlock in forming a new government [p. 41].

I learned a lot from reading this little book, but will be looking for a more substantive, and hopefully less biased, source to fill the gaps in my knowledge about the region to the north of Israel, now that we know the said region's fate is closely tied to that of the Islamic regime in Iran.

2013/12/18 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Scientific knowledge is an enabling power to do either good or bad—but it does not carry instructions on how to use it." ~ Richard Feynman, in a 1955 address to the US National Academy of Sciences

(2) Google continues its foray into robotics: The Internet giant has [acquired Boston Dynamics](#), a company with international reputation for building certain robots with an uncanny sense of balance and others that can run faster than the fastest humans.

(3) Santa Claus is contemplating retirement due to old age: He is negotiating deals with Facebook (to collect and archive wish lists), with Google for deployment of robotics technology in his North-Pole workshop (see the preceding post "Google continues its foray into robotics"), and with Amazon for use of drones to deliver toys and other Christmas presents.

(4) Grade inflation is back in the news: "The revelation that the median grade at Harvard is an A– prompted lots of discussion, especially among Ivy-league educated journalists. Some speculated high grades reflect intelligence. Others say professors just want their students to get jobs, or, selfishly, they want favorable teaching evaluations. As a teaching assistant in the economics department at Columbia, I too inflated student grades, but for none of those reasons. I just didn't want to deal with all the complaining. ... Anything less than an A– would result in endless emails, crying during office hours, or calls from parents." [[Read the full article](#)]

(5) Mike Huckabee's "12 Days of Obamacare": Humor has been sequestered, because conservatives think there's too much of it in our society. Thanks to Stephen Colbert for this (faux) [jewel of American humor](#).

2013/12/17 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A man may fall many times, but he won't be a failure until he says that someone pushed him." ~ Elmer G. Letterman

(2) Four hours of Anoushirvan Rohani songs: This [3:54-hour audio compilation](#) on YouTube contains some of the older songs written and/or performed by the Iranian piano maestro. Listen to a beautiful rendition of "Saraab," beginning at the 2:24:30 mark.

(3) An hour with Vigen (pronounced Viguen): This [1:06-hour audio compilation](#) on YouTube contains songs performed by the late Iranian popular vocalist (1929-2003).

(4) Airships of the 21st Century: Getting much of its lift from helium and using downward-facing fans to assist with vertical takeoff and landing, the [Dragon Dream airship](#) can hover effortlessly at full load and can transport large items that don't fit in today's largest transport planes.

(5) Record-high temperatures in parts of southern California: Yesterday's daytime temperatures in the high 70s and low 80s in our area broke a 33-year record, as did the nighttime lows in the high 50s. The heat wave and below-average rainfall have increased the danger of brush fires and have forced wild animals to leave their habitats in search of food and water. Mountain lions have been spotted near residential areas and one was killed on a highway.

2013/12/16 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say." ~ Brenda Ueland

(2) Sniffing to detect skin cancer: Visual clues, such as skin discoloration or slightly enlarged moles, are easy to miss in early stages of melanoma. Charlie Johnson, Professor of Physics at the University of Pennsylvania, has developed a DNA-coated nanosensor that can detect the odor from cancerous human skin cells. There is hope that similar methods can be used in the detection of many other diseases. [Adapted from IEEE newsletter, *The Institute*, December 2013.]

(3) NSA speaks up in its own defense: Last night's "[60 Minutes](#)" program had a fascinating segment on the US National Security Agency, in which NSA officials discussed the agency's activities, code-breaking challenges, the damage done by Edward Snowden's revelations, and whether he will be given amnesty in return for a promise to stop further leaks. CBS News cameras were allowed inside the supersecret NSA headquarters, but no employees were shown.

(4) NCAA men's soccer championship: After UCSB was eliminated from the NCAA men's soccer tournament in the second round, my enthusiasm for the matches and their outcomes waned. This afternoon, the final match of the College Cup was played between 5th-seeded Maryland (that had prevailed 2-1 over Virginia in the semifinals) and 3rd-seeded Notre Dame (2-0 winner over New Mexico), with the Fighting Irish winning their first [national soccer championship](#) 2-1.

2013/12/15 (Sun.): Various authors/speakers, *The Spoken Word: British Writers*, audiobook on 3 CDs, The British Library Board, 2012.

Another road trip allowed me to listen to this wonderful audiobook in which a number of contemporary British authors speak or are interviewed, mostly near the end of their careers (or is it the British accent that makes them sound so old?) about their lives and their art.

The list of writers includes Arthur Conan Doyle (creator of Sherlock Holmes), Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*; 1907 Nobel Laureate), W. Somerset Maugham (*The Razor's Edge*), E. M. Forster (*A Passage to India*, and my favorite short story "The Machine Stops"), Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*), J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*), Noel Coward (*Pomp and Circumstance*), C. P. Snow (physicist-turned-novelist), Daphne de Maurier (*Rebecca*), Ian Fleming (creator of James Bond), Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*), Muriel Spark (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*), Doris Lessing (*The Golden Notebook*; 2007 Nobel Laureate), and John le Carre (famed spy novelist).

One thing I have surmised over the years is that great authors do not necessarily make interesting speakers. Speaking requires a more direct and informal language, and not all authors are good at switching between the writing and speaking styles. Nevertheless, it is a treat to hear many of these iconic writers through rare recordings (in some cases, the only or one of a handful of surviving sound recordings from the writer).

2013/12/14 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Everything you want is on the other side of fear." ~ Jack Canfield

(2) Pope Francis is *Time* magazine's [Person of the Year](#) for 2013.

(3) The cute Iranian-American girl on Saturday Night Live: Doing dead-on impersonations of Barbara Walters, Kim Kardashian, and Arianna Huffington is only a small part of Nasim Pedrad's repertoire. In recent years, several comedians of Iranian origins, mostly male, have progressed successfully from Persian-style comedy, which tends to be slow and often continues well past the punch line, to the fast-paced American style. As she begins her fifth season with NBC, the UCLA graduate has become a [key cast member of SNL](#).

(4) A Geneva Convention for cyberwarfare: Should we start worrying about fighting fair in cyberspace? The cyberwar era began in 2007, when Russia hacked Estonia's government networks during a political dispute between the two countries. The United States and China constantly accuse each other of sponsoring major cyberintrusions, while other countries, including Iran, are getting into the picture. Is it time for nations of the world to get together in order to define what is fair in cyberwarfare, the way they did for conventional war in the Geneva and Hague Conventions? Does cyberwar have a counterpart to chemical weapons that we should ban? In its December 2013 cover feature, [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#) tackles these and related questions.

2013/12/13 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Do not leave your longings unattended." [Altered advisory sign.]

(2) Embarrassing things we all do, and why: Do you see yourself in these [top 6 examples](#)?

Getting caught talking to yourself. Repeating stories.

Dropping a cell phone, especially in a toilet. Lying about seeing a movie, especially a refined one.

Pushing a pull door, and vice versa. Getting song lyrics wrong.

(3) Conducting fantasies coming true: On September 24, 2013, Improv Everywhere put a Carnegie Hall Orchestra in the middle of New York City. An empty podium, with the sign "Conduct Us" in front of the musicians, invited everyone to give it a try. Random New Yorkers of all ages accepted the challenge and stepped up to the conductor's podium. The amusing results are captured in [this 4-minute video](#). You can also see a [66-picture gallery](#) of the day's event on Flickr.

(4) Flash mob: The [US Air Force Band](#) surprises visitors at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum with an amazing performance.

(5) On weapons of mass distraction: The condition suffered by people who fear being without their cell phones or the absence of a cellular signal is known as "nomophobia." [From the "Technically Speaking" column in *IEEE*

Spectrum, issue of December 2013.]

2013/12/12 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If we are to answer the challenge of our times successfully, we must manage to combine the new economy and old morality." ~ E. M. Forster

(2) A large collection of **puns and one-liners**: Here are some examples from the first two pages.

Seven days without pizza makes one weak. A backward poet writes inverse. A bee's dream is to someday live in Pollenisia. A bicycle can't stand on its own because it is two-tired. A boiled egg in the morning is hard to beat. A criminal's best asset is his lie ability. A dog that gave birth near the road was cited for littering. A dyslexic man walks into a bra. A gossip is someone with a great sense of rumor. A hangover is the wrath of grapes. A hot dog vendor didn't relish his job.

(3) An embarrassment for the US Navy: *Time* magazine, issue of December 16, 2013, reports that two US Navy commanders have been named in a scheme whereby they provided an Asian businessman classified fleet schedules, and directed ships to his most lucrative service ports, where he exorbitantly overcharged the Navy, in return for cash, free trips, concert tickets, and escorts.

(4) A 50-degree day in California and in Michigan. [[Image](#)]

(5) Epic prank played on a drunk driver sends a message: This **5-minute video** shows a prank played on a drunk driver, who is led to believe he is coming out of a 10-year coma in a pretend hospital room. A fake news program on the hospital room's TV (beginning at the 2:47 mark) speaks of Miley Cyrus's eviction from a trailer park and President Hilary Clinton threatening war on Canada.

2013/12/11 (Wed.): Rivers, Joan, *I Hate Everyone ... Starting with Me*, adapted audiobook on 4 CDs, read by the author, Penguin Audio, 2008.

I listened to this audiobook on Sunday 12/08, during my 4-hour round-trip drive to Los Angeles. Joan Rivers is at her crass self in this lighthearted, uninhibited, and at times unpredictable stand-up-style presentation, making fun of everyone including the author herself. Throughout the book, Rivers explains why she hates various things (and there are a lot of things that she hates). Among her jokes is one that suggests the Titanic would not have sunk if Kate Winslet were 20 pounds lighter. The blurb on the CD package cover states that Rivers lives by her own motto: "Do unto others before they do unto you." An okay audiobook to cheer you up in Los Angeles traffic, but don't expect anything serious or profound.

2013/12/10 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The world is changed by your example, not by your opinion." ~ Paulo Coelho

(2) Water-sharing pact signed by Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority: The three governments will build a pipeline between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea to rejuvenate the latter, whose water level has been falling by about 1 meter each year. **The project**, which may cost as much as \$0.4 billion, will also provide desalinated water for drinking and agriculture to the region.

(3) Iran's moderation is for external consumption only: Even as low-level political prisoners are being freed and negotiations with the West continue, Iran has stepped up the pace of executions, making the country's per capita execution rate the highest in the world. Some 600 prisoners have been executed this year, more than half of them since Hassan Rouhani took office as the new president 4 months ago.

(4) Iran's conversion to an uncivilized society: Many people of Iranian origin boast about having a civilization that is thousands of years old. Yet, practically speaking, we don't see signs of civility in the way people deal with each other within Iran and in the way they treat those outside the country, be they foreign nationals or Iranian expats. Fistfights after traffic accidents, continuous chanting of "death to x" (for several values of x), and use of abhorrent language when talking about political opponents or professional rivals, are but a few manifestations of this lack of civility; a problem that has gotten much worse over the past 3.5 decades of Islamic rule. Now Iranians worldwide are embarrassed by the many comments posted on the Facebook page of **Leo Messi** (Argentinian soccer star, who plays professionally in Barcelona), after Iran and Argentina were placed in the same preliminary group of the soccer World Cup, to be held in Brazil during June-July 2014. Quite a few Iranians have posted apologies for the crass comments of their countrymen.

2013/12/08 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Cyrus Cylinder at the Getty Villa: I have been wanting to visit the Getty Villa in Los Angeles to catch a glimpse of the Cyrus Cylinder, a carved stone from the 6th century BCE that declares the deposed king of Babylon an impious oppressor and extols Cyrus as a benefactor, who improved the lives of the citizens of Babylonia, repatriated displaced people, and restored their temples and sanctuaries. I couldn't make it there for various reasons, including not being able to get tickets for the times that I could go. Finally, after they extended the exhibit by a few days, I managed to pay a visit on **the exhibit's last day**.

(2) History loves winners, but it should not forget bigots: British politicians who fought against boycotting the apartheid regime in South Africa or distributed "Hang Nelson Mandela" posters as members of conservative student groups are now jumping on the bandwagon of lionizing him. In the US, former Vice President Dick Cheney, appearing on an **ABC News program**, called Mandela a "great man" who had "mellowed" in the decade after his release from prison, but he maintained that his vote in the US Congress against an anti-apartheid act was correct.

(3) Faster than light (FTL) travel and communication: Intrigued by **a news story** that NASA is supporting work on some ideas that would allow travel to points in the universe that are many light years away in a matter of weeks, and not understanding any of the arguments and explanations offered, I performed a Google search and found this **very informative article** about the meaning of FTL, arguments against its possibility, and some as-yet-open arguments for its possibility.

(4) The Omid Djalili Show: **A mix of stand-up and skit comedy**. Not all his jokes are about Iran and Iranians; he is an equal-opportunity offender and does accents quite well.

2013/12/06 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Comedy juggling act: Michael Davis performs at Ford's Theater in front of Ronald Reagan and other dignitaries. [**9-minute video**]

(2) Amazon's chaotic storage concept: Given the large number of items that Amazon.com keeps in stock and the dynamic nature of its inventory, regular classified storage (items grouped as books, jewelry, clothing, electronics, furniture, etc.) would not be feasible or efficient. So, the **storage scheme used** is pretty much random, with a sophisticated database directing employees to an item's location. Items to be shipped are grouped together and an optimal route through the warehouse is calculated for retrieving each group.

(3) Paul Simon's African concert: Zimbabwe was the site of an enjoyable concert by Paul Simon in 1987 that I watched a couple of nights ago. Simon's mix of a unique folk/rock-music style with African beats shows up best in "Graceland" and "(You Can) Call Me Al." Many of the songs from the concert, which featured a number of African artists, are on YouTube, but the complete concert has been subjected to removal of songs (likely due to copyright issues). Here is **a sample**.

(4) How to trick your brain into monogamous contentment [adult content]: In **this 3-year-old article**, Marina Robinson outlines, with humor and brutal honesty, how staying in love forever isn't in our genes and how we can trick those genes to make it happen anyway. Falling in love ("pair bonding," in cold scientific terms, or going gaga, less formally) is controlled by a primitive part of our brain that wants to maximize the chances of producing offsprings. The very same part of the brain subsequently makes us look for a new mate to ensure the survival of our genes via genetic diversity. Daily bonding activities, derived from basic mammalian infant-caregiver attachment behaviors, can counteract the promiscuity genes.

2013/12/05 (Thu.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Beautifully videographed and edited action/sports scenes. [**5-minute video**]

(2) Test your knowledge of Europe: Do you know all the countries in Europe? I could correctly identify only about 2/3 of them. See how well you do on **this quiz**.

(3) Google enters the **robotics war**: After acquiring 7 robotics companies over the past 6 months and hiring Japanese engineers specializing in humanoid robots, Google appears poised to move into the field of robotics, beyond its investment in self-driving vehicles.

(4) Scientists study recently found **400,000-year-old DNA**: Up to very recently, DNA that was older than 10s of thousands of years could not be analyzed, due to deterioration effects. Now, perfect preservation conditions in Spain's Pit of Bones location, combined with advances in devices and techniques, have allowed a number of fascinating discoveries about humans who lived hundreds of millennia ago and their possible interbreeding with even earlier human species.

(5) Iran may start an oil price war: According to **Financial Times**, Iran has threatened OPEC countries with raising its oil production to 4M barrels a day, a 43% increase, even if it leads to price reduction from the current \$110 a barrel to \$20. This may have been just a bluff ahead of OPEC meetings, but such an illogical act, that would hurt Iran more than any other country, isn't beyond its confrontational Islamic regime.

(6) A life of struggle and triumph comes to an end: **Nelson Mandela (1918-2013)** was imprisoned for nearly 1/3 of his illustrious life for fighting against the white minority rule in South Africa. The world has lost a true leader, a compassionate human being, and an icon of conviction and courage. May he rest in peace! Mandela had an amazing capacity for forgiveness. Those imprisoned by the Shah of Iran chose revenge over forgiveness. Perhaps the current political prisoners in Iran follow Mandela's example if and when they come to power.

2013/12/04 (Wed.): Jarvis, Jeff, *What Would Google Do?* Harper Audio, 2009; unabridged audiobook on 8 CDs, read by the author.

[I recently listened to this audiobook for a second time during a long road trip. A few days ago, I posted a quotation from the book, which is the author's way of pointing out how the simplicity of Apple products and their interfaces hides a great deal of complexity: "Simplicity is complexity well done." Google too strives for simplicity, a key reason for its success. It turns out that simplicity is not only good for attracting users and customer but is also a pillar of reliability and safety, a point that I stress in my ongoing fall 2013 graduate course on fault-tolerant computing. Here is my original review of the book, posted in July 2011.]

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!

2013/12/03 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Santa has been arrested: Bail is set at \$25K. Those of you who expect presents from him later this month, please go get your piggy banks and send me cash contributions; I will try to get Santa out in time for his sleigh ride.

[Sorry, couldn't resist the joke. Actually, the man being handcuffed belongs to a group of protesting Walmart employees who demand a salary of \$25K per year.]

(2) Most Americans are surprised about the actual size of the [wealth/income gap](#) between the haves and the have-nots in the US, as compared to what they think it is.

(3) Aerial panoramas provide 3D virtual tours: [An impressive collection](#) of high-resolution panoramic aerial photos on a noncommercial Russian Web site, with planned expansion to cover virtual 3D tours and 360-degree videos of the most interesting places on our planet.

(4) The various versions of the nuclear deal with Iran: In this [Persian-language article](#), Amir Taheri points to key differences in the English, French, and Persian versions of the Iran nuclear pact recently signed in Geneva. He also makes an interesting observation: When the economic sanctions affected only the Iranian people, the Islamic regime discounted them as ineffective, godsent, or boons to achieving self-sufficiency; as soon as the sanctions started to hurt the regime itself, Khamenei saw a need for flexibility.



2013/12/02 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) A compilation of five different car-related hidden-camera pranks. [[9-minute video](#)]

(2) Golshifteh Farhani at the 13th annual Marrakech International Film Festival: Photographed at the opening ceremony [with Marion Cotillard and Martin Scorsese](#), she will serve as a jury member.

(3) Smoking and nonsmoking identical twins: If looking at these [side-by-side photos](#), compiled as part of a study at Case Western Reserve University, does not convince smokers to quit, I don't know what will.

(4) Hebrew song with a beautiful melody: The song "[Hatikvah](#)" ("The Hope"; Israel's National Anthem) is played by Shirin on piano. She notes in her YouTube post that the melody derives from "La Mantovana," a 16th-Century Italian song composed by Guiseppino del Biado.

(5) Iran's first split-level highway opens: The 11-km east-west [Sadr expressway](#), located about 2 km to the south of north-Tehran neighborhoods of Tajrish and Niavaran, connects the city's eastern and western sides.

[Note added on 12/03: It has been brought to my attention that [Iran's first split-level highway](#) was built in Isfahan a few years ago. So, whereas Tehran's Sadr Expressway may be the longest or the first with a specific kind of construction, it definitely isn't the first overall.]

2013/12/01 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "... when I read Bruce McCall and David Letterman's terrific new book, *This Land Was Made for You and Me (But Mostly Me)*, I was deeply jealous. Not because the jokes and drawings that parody one-percenters are great ... No, I was jealous because McCall and Letterman were rich people who had figured out how to seem like they cared about income inequality. And got paid to do it." ~ Joel Stein, in his *Time* magazine column, December 2, 2013

(2) Persian culture: In this [hilarious satire](#) (in Persian), Ebrahim Nabavi expounds upon why the slogan "Death to America," far from being harmful to diplomatic negotiations, is actually a sign of extreme closeness between the two countries. It has to do with the way in which many Iranians express affection. Examples he cites include "aasheghetam, avazi," "zaleel-mordeh, yeh saree bia peesh-e man," and "Kessafat, elaahi bemeeri keh dalam baraat yeh reezeh shodeh bood."

(3) Bill Gates is said to look forward to books by this man: [A prolific author](#), who has published three books just this year, Vaclav Smil (professor emeritus of environment and geography at University of Manitoba) heeds Ernest Hemingway's advice to get up early and write at least 500 words every day. He tackles some of the biggest problems facing humankind: energy, food production, manufacturing ... His books tend to be data-intensive and are meticulously researched.

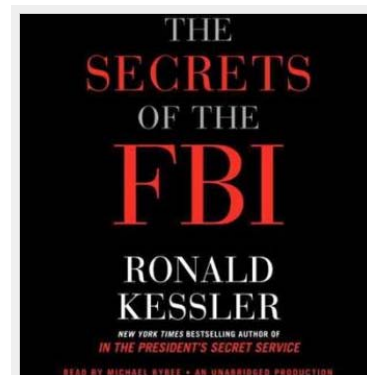
(4) Shameless copying: The nicely done "Nosafar" ("Nouveau Traveller") video, released by President Hassan Rouhani's office to commemorate his 100th day in office, bears a striking resemblance to Barack Obama's "Yes We Can" video from 2008. There is a vigorous debate on Iranian news sites and blogs about whether this is legal or ethical. Here is [a mix of the two videos](#) that establishes their similarity beyond any doubt.

(5) The sexless Japan: Some of you may find the thesis of this [14-minute sound recording](#), that men and women have nothing in common, offensive, but I view it as a worthwhile pursuit in the interest of open discussion. In my view, modern humans are driven more by culture than by biology or evolution. It has been reported in a [Guardian article](#) that the rift between the sexes is nowhere greater than in Japan. There are more single people in Japan than anywhere else, and more than half of the singles aren't in any kind of romantic relationship. The speaker theorizes about why this is the case and postulates that the mechanized world will bring the same conditions to the entire world. This is far-fetched in my view, but worth thinking about nonetheless.

2013/11/30 (Sat.): Kessler, Ronald, *The Secrets of the FBI*, Random House Audio, 2011; unabridged audiobook on 7 CDs, read by Michael Bybee. In this audiobook, one of several that helped keep me awake during recent long-distance car trips, prolific author Ronald Kessler offers a behind-the-scenes look at the FBI, including its J. Edgar Hoover era, the various scandals, spies and moles within the Bureau, the 9/11 investigations and the transformations they triggered, and other fascinating details about break-ins, wiretapping, bugging of embassies, and covert investigations. Many of the stories were new to me, but other reviewers have complained that much of the book is a rehashing of material from Kessler's previous books or from other (fairly old) sources, admitting, though, that the details of how FBI caught spy Robert Hansen in its midst is mostly new.

Kessler writes passionately about how FBI's antiquated computers during the 1990s hindered its investigations and how Louis Freeh, FBI Director at the time, had an aversion to using computers.

If you have not read/heard Kessler's previous books on the FBI, this is a good book for catching up; a sort of greatest-hits, FBI-themed compilation from the author.



2013/11/29 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) How ironic: According to *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of December 6, 2013, the last film ever rented at Blockbuster before it went out of business was "This Is the End."

(2) Mobius-strip building: A proposed arts and literature center for the city of Taichung in Taiwan may take the shape of a mobius strip, according to architect Vincent Callebaut's [ambitious design](#).

(3) Litsten to Einstein: In this 1941 sound recording, a [9-minute radio address](#) to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Albert Einstein reads his essay entitled "The Common Language of Science."

(4) What boys want: An interesting article, published in *Time* magazine (issue of December 2, 2013), maintains that the emotional lives of boys are just as complex as those of girls. But whereas girls have communication skills that help them cope with anxiety, boys are left to fend for themselves. Our expectations of boys and the male peer-group dynamics don't help either. For years, parents have worried about the effects of hookup culture on girls, forgetting that boys suffer from it just as much. Many more girls than boys report that they experience depression, yet, in the 10-24 age group, 81% of suicides are committed by boys. Meanwhile, the percentage of male college students has dropped from 58% in 1970 to 43% today.

2013/11/28 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Thanksgiving Day: A shopper was looking for a turkey but couldn't find one that was big enough. She asked the store manager: "Do these turkeys get any bigger?" He replied: "No ma'am, they're dead."

(2) NASA will try to grow plants on the moon: **Experiments planned for 2015** will place plants in coffee-can-size sealed containers that will also hold cameras, sensors, and communications electronics. A likely candidate plant is Arabidopsis, "the lab rat of plant biology."

(3) Whirling dervishes inspire scientific discovery: While channel-surfing idly, three scientists forced to stay indoors due to dreary weather chanced upon a documentary on whirling dervishes and were fascinated by the striking, long-lived patterns on their skirts. **The trio's collaborative studies** led to a paper entitled "Whirling Skirts and Rotating Cones" (November 27, 2013, issue of the *New Journal of Physics*), which broadens our understanding of flexible objects and of pattern formation in rotating systems.

(4) The hard-to-find fatwa: Iranian officials have claimed on numerous occasions, including during the Geneva nuclear negotiations, that producing nuclear weapons is against the foundations of Islam, citing a fatwa by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei against the production of such weapons. Regardless of whether Khamenei is qualified to issue a fatwa (many Muslim clerics think he isn't), and even disregarding the possibility that he may be using "taghieh" (divinely sanctioned lying to protect Islam), several researchers who have pursued this claim have failed to pinpoint this **elusive fatwa**. For example, the fatwa is cited on several official Islamic Republic Web sites, but its actual text does not appear anywhere. Oddly enough, Western news sources are often cited as evidence for the existence of the fatwa.

2013/11/27 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Time changes everything, except something within us which is always surprised by change." ~ Thomas Hardy

(2) Street art in the making: **5-minute time-lapse video**

(3) Netanyahu has done Iran a huge favor: By characterizing the nuclear pact between Iran and the West as a "historic mistake," the Israeli Prime Minister has made it easier for the Islamic regime to sell the deal to certain hardliners, who began sounding sour notes as soon as they sensed a deal was imminent. Interestingly, the Israeli military is in favor of the deal, making one suspect that Netanyahu's opposition is orchestrated by the West as part of an appeasement strategy.

(4) Remarkable archeological find in Israel: In the Judean lowlands, at the site of a highway project southwest of Jerusalem, **archeologists have discovered** the remains of a 6000-year-old temple and a 10,000-year-old house that provide a glimpse into human development for many millennia.

(5) Happy Hanukkah to everyone: I am sure you've heard the **news about a merger** between Christmas and Hanukkah to form a broader holiday named "Chrismukkah." The deal is said to have been in the works for about 1300 years, with the aim of reducing overhead costs for 12 days of Christmas and 8 days of Hanukkah.

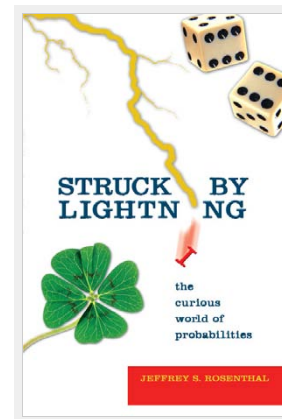
2013/11/26 (Tue.): Rosenthal, Jeffrey S., *Struck by Lightning: The Curious World of Probabilities*, HarperCollins, 597 pp., 1999. [ISBN 0-00-200791-6]

If you are bewildered by the fascination of many with winning the lottery, while forgetting that dying in an auto crash or even being struck by lightning may be more likely, then you are probably already aware of the points Rosenthal makes in this highly informative and entertaining book.

The book is organized in short, digestible pieces, covering everything about probabilities, from odds in casino games (and how they are designed to benefit the house in the long run) to uncertainties in life (probability of dying in a terrorist attack or by contracting SARS is too small to even worry about). He shows how utility theory can be used in setting public policy or for making personal decisions. For example, we learn that while insuring ourselves against catastrophes is often cost-effective, other forms of insurance are rarely worth their cost.

The reader is appropriately warned that probabilities are useful for assessing what happens in the long run. However, we cannot focus only on the long run and forget about short-term trends and variations. In the words of economist John Maynard Keynes, quoted on p. 42 of the book: "This long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they can only tell us that when the storm is long past the ocean is flat again." The author uses the well-known Monty Hall problem [p. 206] to accentuate the fact that assigning probabilities to events can be difficult, occasionally baffling even the experts.

Randomness is both our enemy and our ally. We detest not being in control and constantly fear random events such as terrorist attacks. But we also like certain surprises, and we put randomness to good use in encryption schemes that protect e-commerce. Because of this dual role, it is important for all of us to develop an informed



perspective on probability and laws governing random events. The book under review provides a gentle and highly entertaining introduction to this important subject.

2013/11/25 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Time is the fairest and toughest judge." ~ Edgar Quinet

(2) Ending violence against women: November 25th is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. According to the **United Nations**: "Violence against women continues to be a global pandemic. Up to 70 per cent of women experience violence in their lifetime."

(3) Slavery wasn't only, or even primarily, about race: [I am sharing here a comment I offered in response to a friend's Facebook post, inspired by the movie "12 Years a Slave," with those who may not have access to the original post about slavery and racial prejudice.] Most slave owners did not hate their slaves; they relied on their labor and prospered because of them. It just so happened that a lot of blacks, who were brought to this country by slave traders, were available and needed jobs to survive. Had there been no blacks to exploit, the same slave owners would have used the poor white, Native Americans, or any other economically disadvantaged group they could find. Slavery has been practiced all over the world, and in all cases, the slaves were viewed as possessions to advance the economic and social well-being of their owners. Arabs took slaves when they won wars, and their slaves were often not of a different race. What slavery did in the US 150 years ago the economic divide is doing today. So, the next time we oppose raising the minimum wage, insuring the poor, or any other step toward economic fairness, we should bear this in mind. A person need not be shackled and physically abused to be deemed a slave. [I came across this **modern slavery example** (three women hidden in plain sight in London) after writing the preceding paragraph.]

2013/11/24 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is the profound source of spirituality." ~ American astrophysicist Carl Sagan (1934-1996)

(2) Sweden's new movie rating system: Swedish movie theaters have adopted the Bechdel test (named after graphic novelist Alison Bechdel) to rate screened films with regard to whether women have significant roles in them. According to *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of November 29, 2013, Hollywood fails miserably on this test, which asks three questions about a film: Are there two named women in it? Do they talk to each other? About something other than a man [or shoes or clothes]?

(3) Politics does not have a father, nor a mother: This denunciation of politics is a widely quoted Persian saying. Here is how Javad Zarif (Iran's Foreign Minister) has described yesterday's nuclear deal with the US and its allies: "The most important element of the deal is a recognition of Iran's right to enrichment." Meanwhile, John Kerry has said the exact opposite, that no such right is recognized in the agreement. An account by US Administration officials, which better matches the actual text of the agreement, goes like this: The United States has not yet recognized a right to enrich uranium by Iran. But in the interim agreement, the language is more ambiguous, saying that a "comprehensive solution would involve a mutually defined enrichment program with practical limits." [**The New York Times**]

(4) College soccer: Well, it was good while it lasted, but UCSB Gauchos' soccer season came to an end tonight with a 0-1 home loss to Penn State in a second-round match of the NCAA tournament. UCSB did not play well, but having a player ejected due to a red card in the 6th minute of the game did not help. The Gaucho's ended their season with the overall record 12-6-3.

2013/11/23 (Sat.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Saying 'Death to America' is easy. We need to express 'Death to America' with action." ~ Hassan Rouhani, the so-called "moderate" new President of Iran, in a 2013 campaign speech

(2) The most waterproof material ever: Inspired by nasturtium leaves and butterfly wings, MIT researchers have synthesized **super-hydrophobic surfaces** that could keep clothing dry and stop aircraft from icing over.

(3) The monetary worth of your life: Life is priceless, right? Not according to insurance companies, other businesses, or the government. This **2-minute video** comes with a description that includes a list of sources.

(4) Bob Dylan music: This **Web directory** contains MP3 files for 13 Bob Dylan songs. If you click on the first entry ("Parent Directory"), you will find links to music by a large number of other artists. Enjoy while they last; I suspect that copyright enforcers may go after the site's owner(s).

(5) No press conferences for Khamenei: Iran's Supreme Leader is one of only a handful of world leaders who do not hold press conferences. Perhaps his being injured by an explosion at one such event during the early years of the Islamic Republic has something to do with this aversion. More likely, however, not wanting to address or take questions from reporters, even friendly ones representing Iran's state-run media, is due to his self-imposed aura of infallibility, which would be crushed if he is even mildly challenged or appears to be inconsistent over time. His main mode of communicating with the people of Iran is via lecturing to hand-picked audiences,

who chant "death to this" and "death to that" in approval.

(6) Breaking news on CNN (7:35 PM, PST): President Obama announced a **nuclear deal** with Iran.

2013/11/22 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Today is the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination: **A somber tribute** is planned by the city of Dallas.

(2) Quote of the day: "There was no conspiracy. This young President had promise (although not as much as you think!), and one reckless man killed him. Sometimes that what happens." ~ John McAdams, 68-year-old associate professor of political science at Marquette University, who has devoted his entire career to debunking conspiracy theories about the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy

(3) Conspiracy theories that won't die: Many books have been written about that fateful autumn day in 1963 and about JFK's legacy. A good fraction of these books either peddle or indirectly support one assassination theory or another. This is not surprising, because a recent poll, overseen by the University of Virginia professor Larry Sabato, indicates that fully 3/4 of Americans are skeptical of the Warren Commission conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone and on his own initiative in shooting President Kennedy. Recent revelations confirm that the FBI hid information from investigators, but they may have done so for self-protection: the Bureau had collected vast amounts of information about JFK and his clan, which might have been disclosed to their embarrassment had they been forthcoming with information.

(4) First ever Google-Glass driving ticket: A California woman, who was pulled over for speeding and also got a ticket for **wearing a Google Glass**, will fight the ticket in court on grounds that the Internet-enabled device is less distracting than GPS or phone.

(5) Proposed tuition freeze for University of California: In her first **report to the UC Regents**, the new UC President Janet Napolitano proposed that the 2014-15 tuition remain at the current levels so as to avoid further erosion in UC accessibility. She also suggested that the number of transfer students from the state's community colleges be increased. Among other initiatives she advocated is a push, via research and innovation, to make UC a zero net energy consumer by 2025.

2013/11/21 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and one on sports.

(1) Quote of the day: "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is the profound source of spirituality." ~ Carl Sagan

(2) Evolutionary Facebook for primates: According to Michael Alfaro, an associate professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at UCLA, greater **facial color variations and complexity** is seen in primates that tend to live in larger groups or are more social. "We think the color patterns have to do both with the importance of telling individuals of your own species apart from closely related species and for social communication among members of the same species."

(3) Comet ISON's close encounter with us: The comet ISON (pronounced like an Apple product), which is made up of rock and lots of ice, has a core the size of Manhattan and an overall span the size of the US, according to last night's Nova science program on PBS. It is supposed to be as bright as the full moon, when seen from the earth this week. On Thanksgiving Day, it will get very close to the Sun, meeting one of several possible fates: emerging brighter than ever and shooting out into interstellar space, evaporating, or breaking into a series of small comets known as a "string of pearls." Here is a **nice animation** of the comet's movement from August 2013 to January 2014, along with time periods when it will be visible to the naked eye (this week, plus much of December and the first half of January).

(4) NCAA soccer tournament: UCSB has been seeded 10th in a field of 48 teams, making it eligible for a first-round bye in the tournament. Teams seeded 17-48 will play in the first round on 11/21 to determine which 16 teams get to play the top-16 seeds in the second round. UCSB will play the winner of Penn State and St. Francis Brooklyn at home on Sunday 11/24, beginning at 6:00 PM. Should the Gauchos prevail on Sunday, their most likely third-round opponent will be New Mexico on 12/1, and then they may get a rematch against Cal State Northridge in the quarterfinals, to be held on 12/6-7. If the Gauchos advance to the 12/15 final match in Philadelphia, a likely opponent will be the top-seeded UCLA. Here is the **tournament chart**.

2013/11/20 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A problem well stated is a problem half-solved." ~ Charles Kettering

(2) Oxford's word of the year: "Selfie" (meaning self-portrait or photograph) has been selected by Oxford Dictionaries as the **2013 word of the year**. The usage frequency for the word has increased by 17,000 percent in the last year. Other shortlisted candidates for the honor included "showrooming" and "bitcoin."

(3) Google search reunites old friends: This is a story we have heard many times. Google takes advantage of this human longing to produce a very effective **3.5-minute video ad**, which is a kind of mini-movie.

(4) Day to night: This is the name given to a **series of photographs** by Stephen Wilkes, who usually begins by capturing a scene without any people in it (he got lucky in the case of NYC's Times Square, because during

his shoot, the police evacuated the place due to a bomb scare) and then shooting it over and over during an entire day. He finally merges the photos into a single image that captures the progression of the scene from sunrise to sunset.

(5) The most useful invention of all time: Cell phone beats all other inventions hands down, getting 71% of the vote (82% among young adults, 18-24) in a Time/Qualcomm poll. Coming second is disposable diaper, with 5.2% of the vote (9% in the US, 14% among US females). These are followed by alarm clock (4.2%), Velcro (3.9%; 14% in Germany), TV remote (3.7%), cruise control (3.7%; 12% in UAE), rice cooker (2.9%; 10% in Indonesia), and blow dryer (1.1%). One would not have thought that rice cooker ranks so high, but it's a very important invention if your survival depends on rice. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, November 25, 2013.]

2013/11/19 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Everyone agrees that trans fat is bad. This is one of the least contentious issues in nutrition." ~ Dr. David Katz, Director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, on the new FDA announcement that it will take steps to eliminate artificial trans fats from the US food supply

(2) Duet by Iranian and Israeli singers: Ebi and Liel Kolet sing "[I Can Hear Christmas](#)" to make a statement about friendship and peace by honoring a Christian tradition.

(3) Andre Rieu and an unnamed choir perform "[I Will Follow Him](#)" in Rieu's "Under the Stars" live concert.

(4) Landfillharmonic Orchestra: I learned about this very unusual orchestra (from Paraguay) on CBS's "60 Minutes" program. All the instruments used by the orchestra members are made of material gathered from landfills. The orchestra has transformed a poor, downtrodden community into a joyful and cultured one. What an inspiring story! [[13-minute video](#)]

(5) Four score and seventy years ago: Exactly 150 years ago, President Lincoln delivered a 2-minute address that has become iconic in its brevity, directness, elegance, and poeticness. On the site "[Learn the Address](#)," presidents, celebrities, and ordinary Joes/Jills have posted their recitations of the address. By the way, this coming Friday marks "four dozen and two" years since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

2013/11/18 (Mon.): Multiple authors, *Selected Shorts: A Celebration of the Short Story—Even More Laughs*, The Symphony Space, 2010; audiobook on 3 CDs, read by various performers.

I've had several long car trips over the past two weeks, which allowed me to listen to a couple of audiobooks; this is the second of the two (I reviewed the first one on 2013/11/16). The 8 humorous short stories in this highly entertaining collection were performed for, and heard on, US Public Radio nationwide.

My favorite story in this collection is Thomas Meehan's "Yma Dream" (11 min, read by Christine Baranski), a hilarious farce about an imagined party in which Yma Sumac, Abba Eban, Uma Thurman, Ava Gardner, Agha Khan, and several other guests with similar-sounding first names arrive, as the host introduces them to one another: "Yma, Uma; Uma, Yma; Yma, Abba," and so on, until the process gets out of hand when a newcomer has to be introduced to a dozen or so guests.

My second favorite is T. C. Boyle's "The Lie" (39 min, read by Stephen Colbert), the story of a man who gets tangled in his own web of lies, when he tries to get a day off work "because his baby is in the hospital." Then he mindlessly claims that the baby died to get more time off, and is very surprised by the generosity and affection of his co-workers, who shower him with gifts and kind words when he returns to work. Then a co-worker calls the man's wife at home and all hell breaks loose.

The seasoned performers assigned to read the stories do an excellent job of inducing chuckles and belly laughs. Here is a list of the other 6 stories in the audiobook:

Jonathan Lethem, "The Spray," read by Sean Leonard (14 min)

Miranda July, "The Swim Team," read by Parker Posey (13 min)

Saki (Hector H. Munro), "The Schartz-Metterklume Method," read by Marian Sekles (13 min)

Harry Mathews, "Country Cooking from Central France: ... ," read by Isaiah Sheffer (36 min)

Julia Slavin, "Covered," read by Alec Baldwin (24 min)

Philip Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews," read by Jerry Zaks (35 min)

2013/11/17 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Simplicity is complexity well done." ~ Jeff Jarvis, in his book *What Would Google Do?* (an audiobook I just finished listening to, and will be reviewing shortly), on how the seeming simplicity of Apple products and their interfaces hides a great deal of complexity

(2) Canada arrests 348 in broad anti-child-porn operation: Those arrested include teachers, coaches, doctors, and nurses; 108 of the arrests occurred in Canada and 76 in the US. The [3-year investigation](#) is still ongoing and further arrests are expected. Close to 400 children are said to have been rescued. Thank you, Canada!

(3) Inside people's fridges: Photographer Mark Menjivar looks inside people's refrigerators to explore the intersection between eating habits and identity. This [collection of side-by-side photos](#), published in *Slate*,

shows how the fridges of some people looked in 2012, four years after he first shot them in 2008.

2013/11/16 (Sat.): White, Betty, *Here We Go Again—My Life in Television: 1949-1995*, Simon and Schuster Audio, 1995; audiobook on 3 CDs, read by the author.

I've had several long car trips over the past two weeks, which allowed me to listen to a couple of audiobooks; this is the first one. In this book, Betty White has written about what was then (in the mid-1990s) a 46-year TV career that included 4 incarnations of "The Betty White Show," regular roles in several successful TV sitcoms, and frequent guest appearances in a multitude of game shows, talk shows, and other programs. She writes about her successes ("Password," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "The Golden Girls") and her failures (series that were not picked up or didn't go past a few episodes). She appears to be genuinely befuddled by TV programming decisions, which are, at the core, business decision, with likeability of the cast and even audience preferences being, at best, secondary considerations. White is as usual upbeat and, with very few exceptions (such as lashing out at network executives for not giving Bob Newhart the treatment he deserved), sugar-coats everything. I had fun with this book because of anecdotes about White's career and all the celebrities she met along the way. Her accounts of how various TV shows took shape, thrived, or died out tend to be simplistic. So, if you are looking for insight into how show-business works, this thin volume (short audiobook) likely won't impress you, but if you are a fan of Betty White, you may not mind being exploited by her.

2013/11/15 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I will love the light, for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness, for it shows me the stars." ~ Og Mandino, best-selling American author (1923-1996)

(2) Persian jazz: Ziba Shirazi sings "[One Request](#)" from the album "Fresh Breeze."

(3) Unintended discoveries: This [10-minute video](#) reviews 24 scientific and technological discoveries that arose from accidents or in the course of experiments to find something else.

(4) Timeline on Iran's Nuclear program: The *New York Times* has compiled a [list of milestones](#) in the development of Iran's nuclear program, from its inception in the 1950s to April 18, 2013.

(5) College soccer: The playoffs season for NCAA soccer is here. After getting a bye in the first round of the Big West Conference tournament due to its high rank, UCSB played Cal State Northridge in a semifinal match tonight, losing to CSN 2-3. It was an ugly game with many yellow cards and 2 red cards (both to UCSB players). CSN will play the Big West tournament's final match on Sunday 11/17 against UC Davis, which defeated UC Riverside 3-1 in the other semifinal match. Given UCSB's regular-season championship in the Big West Conference and its 10th-rank national standing, it will likely get a first-round bye in the NCAA tournament, which begins on Thursday 11/21.

2013/11/14 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "You will know that forgiveness has begun when you can recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well." ~ Lewis B. Smedes

(2) An interesting juggling act: Juggler shows [impressive control](#), with up to 9 balls.

(3) Virgin America's musical flight safety instructions: [5-minute video](#)

(4) Iran's censorship of Wikipedia: This is the subtitle of a 21-page report "Citation Filtered," by Nima Nazeri and Collin Anderson (available on-line as a [PDF file](#)). It exposes in detail the Islamic Republic's strategy and methods of filtering content available on the Persian Wikipedia. The authors state: "Given its open source nature, the broad range of topics covered, and its large user-base, Wikipedia is the ideal environment for surveying the type of information and speech Iranian censors aim to block. Censorship of Persian Wikipedia is, in effect, a microcosm of Iran's broader censorship regime." Themes of censored articles include: civil/political, sex/sexuality, religious, human rights, the arts, media/journalism, and academia. Slightly more than half of the restricted entries were bios, with more than half of those being about persons who were detained or killed.

(5) On the joys of teaching: Earlier this year, James Bonk, Duke University's legendary chemistry professor who taught some 30,000 students over his career, passed away. Many stories were told by his colleagues and former students during ceremonies that honored him. The "Flat Tire Story" is one of them, which has circulated in cyberspace without attribution for some time. Four of his students traveled to party in Virginia during the weekend preceding a final exam. Being totally unprepared for the exam, they approached Bonk and told him that they had a flat tire on the highway and discovered there was no spare. Because of this traumatic experience, they asked for postponement of their final. Given that the four students had been doing fairly well in class, Bonk accepted their excuse and made up a special final exam for them, with two questions: a chemistry question worth 5 points and the question "Which tire?" worth 95 points. [Adapted from Henry Petroski's column in *ASEE Prism* magazine, November 2013.]

2013/11/13 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Wonders of our planet, final installment: (i) Canal through a [paddy field](#) in Vietnam. (j) Clear blue waters of [Lake Huron](#) in Ontario, Canada.

(2) Assets of the Ayatollah: [A Reuters story](#) (in 3 parts) claims that Khamenei's conglomerate thrived as sanctions squeezed Iran. His direct control over a giant financial institution, that is not accountable to the President or the Parliament, gives him the financial muscle to act independently and not be affected by political infighting in the country. No wonder he said on many occasions that the sanctions are God-given gifts.

(3) How to interact with the introverted: [This illustrated guide](#) is both funny and helpful. It suggests that you respect the personal space and aversion to energy waste on chit-chat and other trivial matters that are hallmarks of the introverted.

(4) France and nuclear deal with Iran: Laurent Fabius, the French rep at the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran is taking heat for throwing a monkey wrench in what was viewed as a done deal. Various sources have commented that in its opposition to a deal, France is motivated by the protection of its economic ties to the Persian Gulf Arab countries, who are worried about ending Iran's isolation. I have commented elsewhere that France should not be vilified for having a different agenda. USA and Germany already have strong footholds and lucrative deals with the Gulf states and, behind their representatives' smiling faces, are their own national interests which will be served by striking a deal now, just as those interests were served by sanctions until now. I am sharing [this interview link](#) taken from Laurent Fabius' Facebook page, where readers have let him know what they think of his stance. Many of the comments are in Persian or Arabic; most are childish rants that neither address the problem nor give reasons for their disagreement. For example, one Iranian writes that if the French had any brains, they would not call 80 "four twenties."

2013/11/12 (Tue.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Wonders of our planet, continued: (g) [Crooked Forest](#), with its bent pines, in Poland. (h): [Zhangjiajie Stone Forest](#) in Hunan, China.

(2) Relief efforts in the Philippines: The death toll from the super-typhoon Haiyan (said to be 3.5 times as strong as Hurricane Katrina that hit the US) keeps rising. The US is contributing helicopters for search and rescue, as well as shelters, water, food, and other necessities for the survivors. Destruction of airports, roads, and bridges is hindering relief efforts. [Please be vigilant](#) when making donations to help the victims. Scammers often go into overdrive following such disasters. If you don't know a charitable entity, do some research on-line to find out about their status and track record. Even if a charity's name is familiar, go to its Web site via direct search, rather than by clicking on links within solicitation e-mails. Scammers sometimes set up fake Web pages that look very much like those of real charities.

(3) Brooklyn murder-suicide: The 4 people dead as a result of one person shooting 3 and then himself appear to be members of the rock band Yellow Dogs, formed by [Iranian expatriates](#).

(4) Google's hypocrisy: A panelist on Fareed Zakaria GPS (CNN, Nov. 10) observed that it is hypocritical for Google to criticize the US Government for collecting data on US citizens, when Google's own business model relies on mining the data of its users. While it is true that Google users sign data privacy agreements, very few bother to even read the many pages in the document and those who do, likely do not understand the full implications of the permissions they grant.

(5) Quote of the day: "Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it." ~ Mark Twain

(6) While driving this morning, I heard a radio host announce: "In a few seconds, it will be 08:09:10 11/12/13." We will have 09:10:11 12/13/14 next year, but nothing more after that, for a while.

2013/11/11 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Wonders of our planet, continued: (e) [Cherry Blossom Lake](#) in Japan. (f) [Guelta d'Archei Oasis](#) in the Sahara Desert.

(2) College soccer: On Saturday, cheered by 12,805 fans (an NCAA record for this season), the UCSB Gauchos defeated archrival Cal Poly 2-0, to end their unbeaten Big West Conference season with a record of 7-0-3. This Conference-best record earns UCSB a bye in the first round of the playoffs and ensures home-field advantage in the semifinals and finals, to be played on 11/15-16. The Gauchos are also guaranteed an NCAA Tournament appearance, with rounds scheduled for 11/21, 11/24, 12/1, and 12/6-8. NCAA semifinals and finals, dubbed "College Cup," will be played on 12/13-15.

(3) Instrumental music: Theme from ["Pirates of the Caribbean"](#) by Klaus Badelt, performed by Shirin (piano) and Kerstin (percussions).

(4) America can't do a damn thing: This [man-on-the-street interview](#) on Iranian TV tries to convey to the viewers that the average Iranian, in line with the Supreme Leader Khamenei, is anti-US, whereas only a small minority harbor such feelings.

(5) A most universal word: "Researchers visit native speakers of 10 very different languages on five continents,

and discover remarkably similar-sounding words that serve the same essential purpose: mending a broken conversation." The word referred to by this [Los Angeles Times article](#), which embeds a [video](#), is "huh?"

2013/11/09 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Wonders of our planet, continued: (c) Gorgeous fall foliage, with reflection; location unknown. (d) The [Redwood Forest](#) in California.

(2) How to break out of bad habits: Our brain loves habits because they conserve energy. Most of our decisions are based on habits and thus fall outside of awareness. For this reason, we tend to make more social mistakes at home, because the environment is so familiar to us, than we do in contexts that require more conscious processing. [This article](#) suggests three steps, dubbed "TIP," for improving your relationships: Think repeatedly about the desired change; Imagine in detail how to overcome any barriers; Practice specific behaviors in simulated stress and in real life. All in all, a very enlightening and practically useful article.

(3) Super-typhoon Haiyan is moving on its destructive path: Due to widespread evacuations in central Philippines, the human toll has been fairly low thus far. But if assessments that this is perhaps the strongest storms ever on our planet hold up, [more devastation](#) is to be expected from the 195 mph sustained winds and 235 mph gusts.

(4) Khamenei hedges his bets: In recent years, Khamenei has been cultivating the image of a politically savvy renaissance man, who can say or do no wrong. Thus, he has been speaking cryptically rather than through direct statements, often leaving it to others to issue clarifications or interpretations. This approach gives him deniability if something goes wrong. The latest in this strategy is his statements about negotiating with the US. After characterizing such negotiations with the term "heroic flexibility," he is now talking about negotiations being admissible if you hold firm and don't compromise on principles, adding that he isn't optimistic that anything useful will come from these negotiations. He has covered himself either way: if the negotiations are successful, then he can claim credit for authorizing them; if not, he will go the I-told-you-so route.



2013/11/08 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Wonders of our planet: (a) Volcanic island of [Aogashima](#), Japan. (b) [Preikestolen](#) (pulpit rock), Norway.

(2) Skating SUV drivers emulate figure-skating couple: Impressive [precision driving on ice](#), especially if done with no special effects.

(3) From the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows: Sonder, *n*. The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk. [[Video](#)] [Note: This thought-provoking term is a made-up one, with no scientific or linguistic basis. It became popular through spreading on Tumblr. It is not listed in any official English dictionary, but has been adopted by the Urban Dictionary.]

(4) Twitter goes public: With its IPO, Twitter enters the technology big league. Here is how the newly minted public company compares with other technology giants in terms of total valuation, rounded to the nearest multiple of \$20B. [Source: *New York Times Business*, November 7, 2013.]

460 Apple
440
420
400
380
360
340 Google
320 Microsoft
300
280
260
240
220
200 IBM
180

160 Oracle
 140
 120 Cisco; Facebook; Intel; Qualcomm
 100
 080
 060
 040 HP; TI; Yahoo!
 020 Adobe; LinkedIn; Twitter
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2013/11/07 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Refusing to invest [in science] is the budgetary equivalent of cutting off your feet to save money on shoes." ~ Elizabeth Warren
- (2) Evolution explains why mean girls get the guys: This is the title of [a brief in Discover magazine](#) that cites the results of various "studies" to conclude that girl-on-girl, indirect, and non-violent aggression have evolutionary bases in women.
- (3) Floating data centers: Google is known to hold a patent for data centers that float off-shore, potentially benefitting from free cooling and, perhaps, wave-generated energy. Now, [two huge barges](#), moored in San Francisco and off the coast of Maine, have raised suspicions that Google has actually gone ahead with implementing this idea. No one knows for sure what the barges are for.
- (4) The deep Web: The November 11 issue of *Time* magazine contains a fascinating cover feature by Lev Grossman and Jay Newton-Smith that exposes some very scary details about the deep Web, the part of the cyberspace where content encryption and user anonymity allow the trading of drugs, guns, child pornography, and murder contracts, with impunity. Dealing with these problems constitutes one of the greatest challenges of our information-based society. A wave of recent arrests seems to indicate that law enforcement is gaining the upper hand, but, unfortunately, things will become harder when the somewhat traceable exchanges of real money are replaced by fully digital payment schemes, a la bitcoin.

2013/11/05 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Old saying: Think before you speak. New saying: Google before you post.
- (2) Saudi Arabia is upset with the US: These clowns (the king and thousands of princes), whose palaces and exuberant lifestyles won't last long without the support of US and other Western countries, have the nerve to lecture America on how to conduct its [foreign policy](#).
- (3) Khamenei's anti-US speech: In [this speech](#) (in Persian), Iran's Supreme Leader nominally endorses President Hassan Rouhani's diplomatic efforts to improve Iran's relations with the West. However, every one of his supportive statements ends in "but ..." or some other form of equivocation; and the crowd's chanting of "Death to America" is clearly encouraged. With this speech, Khamenei leaves no doubt as to who is in charge of Iran's foreign policy.
- (4) US MLS playoffs have begun: After a knockout round to choose the last 2 of 8 semifinals contenders from among 4 teams, the first of two games (the total score of which decides which teams advance to championship games for Western and Eastern conferences) has been played: Portland 2, Seattle 1; Salt Lake City 0, Los Angeles 1; Kansas City 1, New England 2; New York 2, Houston 2. The next matches will be played on 11/6-7. You can follow the results via [this chart](#).

2013/11/03 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "College is a place where a professor's lecture notes go straight to the students' lecture notes, without passing through the brains of either." ~ Edwin E. Slosson (scientist, editor, and author)
- (2) Modern dictionary: Studying (v.)—Texting, eating, and watching TV, with an open textbook nearby.
- (3) Environmental movement in Iran: A large group of environmentalists and sports enthusiasts gathered to protest the destruction of "Kooch Shah" mountain in southeastern Iran for its iron mines and other natural resources. Mr. Haloo, humorist poet and political dissident, [recited his poem](#) in support of the movement at the gathering.
- (4) Coursera co-Founder visits UCSB: On Friday 11/01, I attended a talk by Daphne Koller, Stanford University Professor and co-Founder/co-CEO of Coursera (a pioneer of MOOCs, or massive open online courses). The talk was entitled "The Online Revolution: Learning without Limits." Coursera now has 500+ courses, serves 5.3M learners, including students in every country of the world, and is partnering with most top universities in the world. It has started to tap into local resources in many countries to facilitate learning via translation services and face-to-face peer interaction. Many instructors who prepare MOOCs move to the inverted classroom model in their own teaching, meaning that they ask their students to watch on-line lectures and then devote the face-

to-face class time not to lecturing, but to discussion and exploration.

2013/10/31 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Happy Halloween! Stats cited on the news today indicated that compared with any other night, twice as many kids have auto accidents as pedestrians on Halloween. Please be careful as drivers tonight and tell your kids to be safe.
- (2) First quote of the day: "We are so fixated on the movie-star look ... An interviewer once said to me, 'Well, you're not Michelle Pfeiffer.' I thought that was so rude! I told him, 'Well, she's not me'." ~ Oscar-winning Actress Kathy Bates
- (3) Second quote of the day: "In China, it's believed powdered black rhino horn can cure a variety of ailments from snake bites to devil possession. Wow, those Chinese have some crazy beliefs. Everybody knows the way to cure devil possession is with holy water." ~ Comedian Stephen Colbert
- (4) Young talent: Girl with powerful, highly developed [singing voice](#), perhaps better than Jackie Evancho's.
- (5) How world population is changing: Populations in Russia, Japan, and eastern Europe are shrinking, while the highest growth rates are seen in Africa and parts of the Middle East. [[Color-coded map](#)]

2013/10/29 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "What's the big deal? You didn't discover the cure for cancer." ~ Kathy Bates, relating what her mother told her when she became a successful actress
- (2) Antifragility: Last night, I attended a lecture by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (best-selling author of *Black Swan* and *Antifragile*) in UCSB's Campbell Hall. Entitled "Lessons for Volatile Times," the lecture centered around the theme that the opposite of fragile isn't resilient or robust; the latter indicate the absence of fragility, not its opposite. The concept of antifragility has been known since ancient times, but until recently, we had no word for it. As the UCSB Arts and Lectures flyer notes: "The antifragile is beyond the resilient or robust. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better and better." Certain natural and human-made systems thrive from adversity, variations, and uncertainty. Trying to impose order on these systems (such as attempts at controlling economic swings and cycles) is detrimental to their health and development. [Note: If interested, see my review of *Black Swan* in my Blog and Books page under 2011/10/30.]
- (3) Male monogamists: [An interesting article](#) in *AARP magazine* (yes, I do admit to reading it) cites data from a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center that only 22% of men have ever engaged in marital infidelity and only 1 in 20 do so on a regular basis. Nearly 15% of women say they have cheated, but the gender gap seems to be closing. Now for the kicker: men who don't cheat are rarely driven by moral reasons or love for their wives. It is mostly because they are lazy, startlingly ugly, cheap, fear getting caught, short of time, boring, or have seen "Fatal Attraction."

2013/10/28 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "We live in a culture that discourages empathy. A culture that too often tells us our principal goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe, and entertained." ~ US President Barack Obama
- (2) Math puzzle: You are joining Coin Flippers of America and your dues will be decided by flipping a coin, until a 5-toss pattern of your choosing appears. For example, if you choose HHHHH and it takes 36 flips before the pattern appears, your annual dues will be \$36. Should you choose HHHHH, HTHTH, or HHHTT? Does it matter? [Note added on 2013/10/29: See [this paper](#) for insight: Nickerson, R. S., "Penny Ante: Counterintuitive Probabilities in Coin Tossing," *The UMAP J.*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp, 503-532, 2007.]
- (3) Another coin-flipping puzzle: After joining Coin Flippers of America, you enter a tournament and face the first opponent. Each of you picks a different head-tail sequence of length 5, and a coin is flipped repeatedly. The player whose sequence appears first is the winner. What sequence would you choose if you were to go first?
- (4) On the perils and joys of social networking: "Right now, there are two generations in the workforce who think in dramatically opposite ways about identity. Executives who came of age in the pre-smartphone era take it as a given that you should have a separate professional persona that reads like a profile in *Forbes* and doesn't overlap with your personal life. But my generation ... understand[s] that the business leaders of the future will be three-dimensional personalities whose lives, interests, hobbies and passions outside of work are documented and on display." ~ Randi Zuckerberg, writing on why we should stop pretending we can separate our personal life from our work life, *Time* magazine, issue of November 4, 2013

2013/10/26 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows." ~ Sydney J. Harris
- (2) Earning potential of different college majors: The average earnings of college graduates (all degrees) in the top 10 and bottom 10 majors are provided on [this Web page](#). There is a separate chart for those with bachelor's degrees only.

(3) Clerical music: Previously, I had posted a video of two rabbis singing "The Sound of Silence" in the Israeli TV's talent competition program "Rising Star." Here is their rendition of **"Hotel California."** Let's see mullahs and priests try to match these!

(4) A message of solidarity for the Iranian people: Archbishop **Desmond Tutu speaks** to the people of Iran, Iranian political and religious leaders, and the world at large about human rights abuses in Iran.

(5) The Reluctant Fundamentalist: This is the title of a tense and multilayered post-9/11 drama, directed by Mira Nair based on a novel of the same title by the Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. I liked this complex movie, starring Riz Ahmed, Liv Schreiber, Kate Hudson, and Kiefer Sutherland, but it was neither a box-office hit nor a critical success, according to my on-line research. [[Trailer](#)]

2013/10/24 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Classification of mathematical problems as linear and nonlinear is like classification of the universe as bananas and non-bananas." ~ Anonymous [I was pleased to learn that at least one other person thinks the same way]

(2) BBC documentary about Baha'is in Iran: This **26-minute program** reviews the plight of Iranian Baha'is, who have come under increased pressure to abandon their faith in the past couple of years. It also touches on the history of the faith and why it is headquartered in Israel (a point that the Iranian regime conveniently uses to prosecute Baha'is as Israeli spies).

(3) A champion of science and research in the US Senate: According to a profile in *ASEE Prism* magazine, issue of October 2013, Barbara Mikulski, the diminutive senior Democratic Senator from Maryland, is known for her unrelenting defense of government-supported research, particularly space exploration. She now chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee and may be able to exert greater influence on the future of science in the US.

(4) Nerdy math jokes: Here is a **collection of math jokes**, containing this example. Q: What is the volume of a disk of radius z and thickness a ? A: $\pi \cdot z \cdot z \cdot a$. And if those aren't enough, here are **many more math jokes**. Sample: A mathematician organizes a lottery in which the prize is an infinite sum of money. Someone wins and demands to know how the infinite sum of money will be paid. The mathematician replies: You get \$1 now, \$1/2 next week, \$1/3 a week after that, and so on.

2013/10/22 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) College soccer: After securing three straight come-from-behind overtime road victories over Cal State Northridge (2-1), UC Irvine (2-1), and UC Davis (3-2), the UCSB men's soccer team returned to play at home tonight, with a chance to clinch a Big West playoff spot. The Gauchos extended their winning streak to 7 games, their Big West Conference record to 6-0-0, and their overall record to 11-4-0 by a somewhat disappointing 2-1 victory over Sacramento State.

(2) Celebrating Chemistry: These **15 jokes that only chemists understand** (there are explanations for the rest of us) are presented to celebrate the National Chemistry Week, October 20-26. Here is an example: If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the precipitate.

(3) Absent-minded professor: Hungarian Professor Theodore von Karman fled the Nazis and came to the United States, securing a teaching position at Cal Tech. One day, he absent-mindedly delivered the lecture in German during an early morning class. When he realized what he had done and apologized, a student reassured him: "Professor, don't worry. It makes very little difference.: [See the next item for the source of this anecdote.]

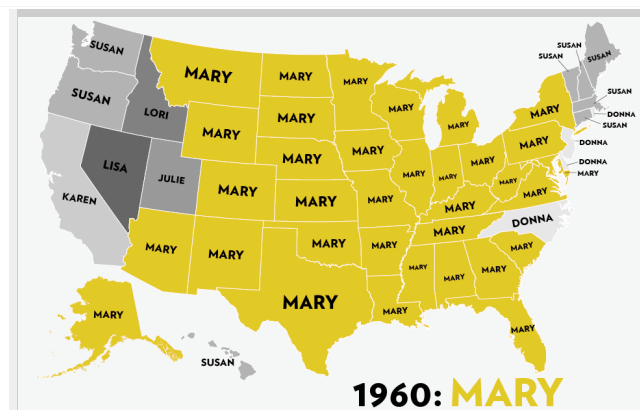
(4) On old professors: If you are a student who takes classes with old professors, or a faculty member who can't stand his/her older colleagues, or in the job market for a faculty position which is not readily available because some old professors aren't retiring, you may enjoy this tongue-in-cheek article written by Gabor Temes and Laszlo Solymar, US and UK professors in their mid-80s. The article, which appears in *Proceedings of the IEEE*, Vol. 101, No. 11, pp. 2315-2318, November 2013, is entitled **"The Old Professor in Action."**

2013/10/20 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The most popular baby names for girls in the US: Data from the Social Security Administration is visualized in this GIF image for 1960-2012, going from Mary to Sophia.

(2) Iran's top-10 tourist destinations (**pictorial**): Tourists? In Iran? President Hassan Rouhani's government may be trying hard to restore Iran's reputation as a tourist destination, but it will take many years to bring back the lost confidence to international travelers.

(3) Modern-day slavery: Here are **some maps**



showing the distribution of the world's 30M slaves, in absolute and relative terms.

(4) The lasting effects of US Government shutdown on science: The economic impact of the 16-day US Government shutdown isn't difficult to estimate. The shutdown is said to have taken \$24B out of our economy and shaved 0.6% or more off the annualized fourth-quarter 2013 GDP growth. There are, however, much larger intangible costs. Setting aside the US citizens' peace of mind and faith in their government, research and innovation **took big hits** that are very hard to quantify. Long-running scientific experiments, such as those being conducted at the Antarctica, had to be shut down and the attending scientists sent home, causing irreparable damage. Also, the looming threat of other shutdowns in the near future makes experimental scientists hesitant to begin working on long-running research projects.

2013/10/18 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Happiness is good health and bad memory." ~ Ingrid Bergman

(2) More pork-barrel politics: Apparently, the **McConnell-Reid Senate deal** for ending the US Government shutdown and raising the debt ceiling included provisions for increasing funding for a Kentucky dam/lock project from \$0.8B to \$2.9B. Oink, oink!

(3) Turkey gives Iran the identities of up to 10 Israeli spies: **The Washington Post** reports that the identities of up to 10 Iranian nationals who met with Israeli agents in Turkey have been given to Iran. It appears that the action was taken more to slap Israel in the face over longstanding Israeli-Turkish feuds than to assist Iran. Mossad had been a partner of the Turkish intelligence, so the betrayal came as a surprise, potentially affecting Turkey's future intelligence collaborations.

(4) Complex geometric sculptures made of **interlocked coins**.

(5) Two rabbis enter a bar: Actually, they enter the Israeli TV's **"Rising Star" competition** and perform "The Sound of Silence."

2013/10/17 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The word LISTEN contains the same letters as SILENT." ~ Alfred Brendel

(2) US Government shutdown ends: By nearly a 2-to-1 margin, the House voted last night to accept a Senate proposal to end the US Government shutdown and to raise the debt ceiling until early next year.

(3) Fair and balanced sometimes don't go together: "What do you do when the actual reality of a news story is not balanced between two sides? ... This month's fiscal crisis is one such situation. One party (in fact, one wing of the Republican Party), seeking the elimination or delay of Obamacare, precipitated a government shutdown and threatened a default on U.S. debt. Period. There was no corresponding threat or demand on the Democratic or White House side; having passed the Affordable Care Act into law three years ago, they are not in the position of saying, 'Pass Obamacare or we shut 'er down'." ~ James Poniewozik, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 21, 2013

2013/10/16 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Happiness is a state of mind that has little to do with material wealth.

(2) Quote of the day: "Those who are at war with others are not at peace with themselves." ~ William Hazlitt

(3) Message on Uncle Sam's computer screen: "America was not shut down properly. Would you like to restart America in Safe Mode with free healthcare and no guns? (Recommended). Choose Y/N."

(4) Women in science: Now that all six 2013 Nobel Prizes and their 13 recipients have been announced, let's celebrate some history by looking at **14 Nobel-honored women in science** since Marie Curie's wins in 1903



(physics) and 1911 (chemistry). Of the 14 women, 1 won in physics, 3 in chemistry, and 10 in medicine.

(5) Hashemi Rafsanjani's speech disrupted: A group of attendees (numbering 10-15, if you believe Rafsanjani's official Web site, or masses of people, according to conservative news sources) started chanting "Death to America," causing Rafsanjani to **abruptly end his speech** in Kermanshah. Rafsanjani had hinted a couple of weeks ago that the slogan should be discontinued, citing a conversation he had had with Khomeini, who supposedly approved of this change.

2013/10/15 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "You cannot negotiate with people who say what's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable." ~ John F. Kennedy

(2) Here is a list of **Nobel Prize winners**, announced during the week of October 7-14, 2013.

Chemistry: Martin Karplus (Harvard), Michael Levitt (Stanford), Arieh Warshel (USC); computer simulations

Economic Sciences: Ugene Fama, Lars Peter Hansen (U Chicago), Robert Shiller (Yale); economic prediction

Literature: Alice Munro; Canadian master of the contemporary short story

Peace: Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; in light of the ongoing Syrian crisis

Physics: Francois Englert (U Brussels), Peter Higgs (U Edinburgh); confirmation of the Higgs boson particle

Medicine: James Rothman (Yale), Randy Schekman (Berkeley), Thomas Sudhof (Stanford); cell transport

(3) Freedoms vs. the Simpsons: According to a 2006 AP poll, only 0.1% of Americans (one in 1000) could correctly identify the five freedoms (speech, assembly, religion, press, redress of grievance) guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, but 22% could name all the members of the Simpsons family. Sheila Kennedy's **blog post** contains a lot more info along these lines.

(4) A new high-impact journal on technology: World Scientific has started the publication of **Technology**, a journal aimed at reporting important engineering, applied science, and technological innovations in the same way that *Science* and *Nature* do for advances in the natural sciences.

2013/10/14 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If you really want to do something, you'll find a way. If you don't, you'll find an excuse." ~ Jim Rohn

(2) Iran needs a quick deal with the West: **Kenneth M. Pollack's essay**, entitled "Iran: US Has Time, Rouhani Doesn't," maintains that this time around, Iran won't drag its feet during negotiations with the West in an effort to buy time for its nuclear program. Rouhani is already paying a price at home, where he is under constant attack by conservatives. He needs a quick victory of some sort, or else he may be sidelined by the Supreme Leader changing his mind about flexibility in negotiations and by his opponents gaining the upper hand via questioning the West's sincerity.

(3) "Ha! Ha! That's life": This was the Iranian Foreign Minister's **response to David Keyes** asking him whether it was ironic that he enjoys posting on Facebook while his government bans the Web site in Iran. Here is Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's answer to another question on whether Majid Tavakkoli, the prominent imprisoned student leader, will be freed: "I don't know him." Here is the response of Iran's UN Ambassador to why Facebook and Twitter are banned in Iran: "Are Facebook and Twitter banned in Iran?" And after he was reassured that they are: "Personally, I don't do it, so I'm not involved." So, these smiling, friendly-looking bunch that have taken over from the grim former Iranian government officials are simply out of the loop and don't have much sway, or they are sticking their heads in the sand; either way, this is bad news for Iran and Iranians. [This story is also featured on **Iranian.com**.]

(4) College soccer: The UCSB men's soccer team is on a roll, having won 5 straight matches. Going into the weekend, they had a 7-4-0 overall record, after winning their first two Big West Conference games 3-0 against Cal State Fullerton and 2-0 against UC Riverside. On Friday 10/11, they played the highly ranked Cal State Northridge, coming from behind to win the match 2-1 in overtime. Sunday's match against UC Irvine was a repeat performance: giving up a goal in the first half and coming back to win 2-1 in overtime. The Gauchos next take their 9-4-0 record to UC Davis for a Saturday afternoon match, before returning home to take on Sacramento State on Tuesday evening 10/22.

2013/10/12 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Senator Ted Cruz was born in Canada. So while we were worried about Iran, China, and North Korea, a Canadian shut down the US Government. Well played, Canada!" ~ Comedian Seth Meyers

(2) The science of stage fright: We can't overcome the biological processes that lead to **stage fright**, so we must adapt to them.

(3) Africa's Ennedi Plateau: Situated in the northeast corner of Chad in the great Sahara Desert, the Plateau provides **breathtaking vistas** of rocks sculpted by nature.

(4) How to create chocolate out of nothing: In **this trick**, a 6-by-4 bar of chocolate is divided into 4 pieces, a

1-by-1 piece is removed, and the remaining 3 pieces rearranged to form a 6-by-4 bar, implying that you can repeat this process to get as much free chocolate as you want. See if you can find the catch.

(5) Arguments on the human-made nature of God: Dr. Michael Shermer, founder of the Skeptics Society, speaks at Oxford University. His point is that most believers think that a specific God exists and dismiss all the other gods and holy books worshiped by religions different from theirs. Atheists are pretty much the same, but they go just one god further. [[16-minute video clip](#)]

2013/10/11 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Amazing fall colors.

(2) Iran's foreign minister **blames back pain on critics**: He accused his critics, including the conservative Kayhan daily, of fabricating headlines to undermine the Rouhani government's diplomatic efforts in improving relations with the West. Reporter Masih Alinejad implied in a post that Javad Zarif should toughen up and remember that he isn't the first person to be hospitalized from stress caused by inciting news and headlines in the conservative press; political prisoners, dissidents, and their families have been targets of spiteful and defamatory reporting for many years now.



(3) Malala Yousafzai on the Daily Show: Comedian **John Stewart interviews** the 16-year-old Nobel Peace Prize nominee and is awed by her. He quips at the end: "Oh! I forgot to ask her how you can solve a government shutdown."

(4) Photoshop to the rescue: The caption of [this photo](#) reads: "My new job required a photo of myself in a suit for their website. I don't own a suit."

2013/10/10 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Bill Moyers' **insightful essay** on the US government shutdown.

(2) Oscar-winning actress launches STEM contest for teenage girls: Natalie Portman's love of science prompted her to take the role of an astrophysicist in Marvel's "Thor: The Dark World." Portman is now involved in Marvel's **Ultimate Mentor Adventure**, a program that allows girls to conduct interviews, participate in science experiments, and meet inspirational female figures in the sciences.

(3) Parody invitation to a protest march against Benjamin Netanyahu: The Israeli PM had commented that Iranians would prefer to wear jeans and listen to Western music if they were allowed to do so. These words caused uproars among Iranians at home and abroad, who characterized Netanyahu as a simpleton and a liar, and called for protests against him. The girl in [this cartoon](#), being chased by the Decency Police, is saying: "See, Mr. Netanyahu? We do wear jeans!"

(4) The lowly to-do list gets some overdue attention: Nothing seems easier to provide on computers and cell phones than a to-do list, a simple ordered list of action items. Yet, most current to-do apps fall short of providing a clean, intuitive interface, efficient management tools, and simple associated conveniences. Here is the **fascinating story** of how an Israeli entrepreneur, hiring a group of intelligence specialists (for their language analysis/understanding expertise), built the ultimate to-do app and, in the process, influenced the design of Apple's iOS7.

2013/10/08 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Free access to information: "The Iranian government's objective is to provide free access to information for the people. Presently, even Iranian villages have access to satellite [television]; all you have to do is to look at their rooftops." Two days after President Rouhani made the statement above in a press conference, the Revolutionary Guards' Fajr Brigade showed its distaste for free access to information by lining a street in Shiraz with confiscated TV satellite dishes and having a tank and various other heavy vehicles drive over them.



(2) Cyrus cylinder in Los Angeles: This artifact from the 6th century BCE, which was discovered in 1879, is now on exhibit at the **Getty Villa** until December 2, 2013.

(3) Iranian pop-art playing cards: During the 1930s, the government of Iran ordered specially designed playing cards to De la Rue & Co., Ltd, of London. In [these cards](#), designed by V. Romanowski de Boncza, the court figures are shown wearing exotic costumes from different dynasties.

(4) The architecture of Yale University: During last week's visit to New Haven for the wedding of my nephew, we had a stroll through the Yale University campus, marveling at its impressive architecture. Yale is said to have been established in 1701, more than 3 centuries ago, yet much of the campus, as it stands today, was built in the last century. Among the most impressive structures on the Yale campus is the **Harkness Tower**, which was

built between 1917 and 1921.

2013/10/06 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) College soccer: Karen and I had another soccer outing this evening, watching the UCSB men's soccer team beat UC Riverside 2-0. The Gauchos scored in the first minute of the match, but kept the Highlanders' hopes alive by missing other scoring opportunities, until the 82nd minute, when freshman Ismaila Jome scored an unassisted goal.

(2) Iran becomes the Asian volleyball champion: Traditionally, Japan and S. Korea have been the powerhouse teams in the continent, but Iran defeated S. Korea in 3 sets to take the championship for the second time in 2 years. Iran had defeated Japan in the semifinals 3-0.

(3) Employers say they don't trust GPAs: Colleges better wake up and face their responsibilities in properly evaluating the performance of their students. Already grade inflation has made GPAs nearly meaningless, rendering the efforts spent on administering exams and keeping academic records quite wasteful. The *Wall Street Journal* article "[Are You Ready for the Post-College SAT?](#)" reviews some aspects of the problem of proper student training and assessment.

(4) Global rankings on innovation and competitiveness: In an 8-page advertising insert, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that appears within *Time* magazine's cover feature on "The Class of 2025" (issue of October 7, 2013), the US rankings in various important indicators are cited to show how much work will be needed to restore competitiveness to the US economy. Here are some of the rankings, along with the top 3 countries in each category.

Higher education attainment, #10 (S. Korea, Canada, Russia)

Science and technology researchers, #6 (Finland, Singapore, Japan)

Corporate investment in R&D, #5 (Japan, Finland, S. Korea)

Government investment in R&D, #8 (Austria, Finland, Singapore)

Share/quality of world's S&T publications, #14 (Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands)

Among other indicators, the US does better in some (#1 in GDP) and worse in others (#37 in trade balance).

Taking all indicators into account, the US ranks #4, behind Singapore, Finland, and Sweden.

2013/10/05 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Congressional comedy: Jon Stewart [skewers Senator Ted Cruz](#) and his 21-hour filibuster attempt, during which he quoted budget and health-care experts Ashton Kutcher and Dr. Seuss.

(2) Bookless libraries: The first library without (hard-copy) books opened in 2002. The all-digital existence of this branch of Arizona's Tucson-Puma Public Library System, however, didn't last long, as patrons started demanding traditional printed books. Arizona's bookless library may have been ahead of its time in the pre-Kindle, pre-Nook, and pre-iPad age. "But with a quarter of Americans 16 and older now reading e-books, those behind San Antonio's new Bexar County Digital Public Library ... are convinced its time has come." [From *Time* magazine, issue of October 7, 2013.]

(3) Poo~Pourri commercial: [Hilarious ad](#) (apparently not a spoof) for a product that, when applied prior to using the toilet, kills unpleasant odors. The company promotes its Poo~Pourri deodorizer with the slogan: "Leave the toilet smelling better than you found it."

(4) Rouhani feels the squeeze: The new President of Iran is under attack from two unlikely allies: Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, whose cryptic remarks about certain aspects of the recent diplomatic efforts (likely referring to Rouhani's phone conversation with President Obama) being "improper" will no doubt trigger additional internal criticisms of Rouhani's government. Whether these remarks show the beginnings of a rift between Iran's top officials, or they simply represent an instance of playing the age-old trick of "good-cop/bad-cop" on the West, remains to be seen.

2013/10/04 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The US Republican Party shows signs of a divide: [Leaks from a private meeting](#) indicate that senior members of the party are turning on hard-line House members for painting the party as obstructionist and fighting quixotic wars that help Obama.

(2) College soccer: After a preseason record of 5-4-0 (3-3-0 at home, the last two matches being a 1-2 loss to Stanford and a 1-0 win against Loyola Marymount, and 2-1-0 on the road), which wasn't good enough for a place in the top-20 team rankings, the UCSB men's soccer team played its first Big-West conference game tonight, defeating Cal State Fullerton 3-0 in a fast-paced game. The Gauchos next face UC Riverside on Sunday 10/06 at home.

(3) Iran's head of Cyber Warfare Command apparently assassinated: The Islamic Republic officials confirm the death of [Mojtaba Ahmadi](#), a Revolutionary Guards commander, but deny that he was assassinated.

(4) Rouhani on the cover of *Time*: All three editions of [Time magazine](#), published for regions other than the

US (Asia, South Pacific, and Europe/Middle-East/Africa) bear an image of President Hassan Rouhani on the cover of the October 14, 2013 issue. The US edition cover bears an image of the Capitol Building. With the caption "the end of majority rule."

2013/10/03 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Fabulous electric violins: [Escala performs](#) in "Britain's Got Talent." Like the all-time-best-selling string quartet Bond, this group is composed of four female violinists. [Escala's [official Web site](#)]
- (2) Why there are so few women in science: [An enlightening article](#) in today's *New York Times* examines the overt and hidden causes of women not being encouraged to pursue careers in math/science and not being rewarded appropriately when they do.
- (3) Falling for a spoof ad: The ad claimed that upgrading to iOS7 would waterproof your iPhone, causing several iPhone users to damage their devices. [Reported by *Time* magazine, issue of October 7, 2013.]
- (4) Foster fathers can now marry their foster daughters: Iran's parliament has recently passed a law that reverses a previous ban on marriage between foster fathers and their foster daughters. This is a clear case of sanctioning child abuse and one more step in the direction of making women subservient, second-class citizens.

2013/10/02 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "There is no respect for others without humility in one's self." ~ Henri Frederic Amiel
- (2) Joke-like news story of the week: "Imam Khomeini approved of discontinuing the 'Death to America' slogan." ~ Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president of Iran
- (3) Jon Stewart's hilarious take on the US government shutdown. This [video clip](#) is from September 30. Comedian Jimmy Kimmel also weighed in by showing street interviews with a few people who hated "Obamacare" but loved the "Affordable Care Act" (ACA). Most of these people liked ACA's provisions, when asked about them separately, without referring to Obamacare, but they still maintained that Obamacare is no good. Kimmel quipped (not an exact quote): These people hate the product, but like the ingredients when they learn about them; sort of the opposite of Chicken McNuggets.
- (4) Rouhani criticized for taking Obama's phone call: Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, is the first high-ranking Iranian official to openly [criticize Hassan Rouhani](#) for his foreign policy.
- (5) US government shutdown: I don't see why people use "Obamacare" to refer to the "Affordable Care Act" (ACA). Yes, President Obama was for it and signed the bill, but like every other law in this land, the Congress discussed it and had an opportunity to improve or radically change it. So, if you want to give it a nickname, "Congresscare" is more appropriate. If ACA is a bad law, it isn't the first one and won't be the last. When opponents have the vote, they can proceed to scrap or enhance it. Meanwhile, ACA is a law of the land and must be followed by everyone, including members of Congress. What is being done now is like a mother withholding lunch and dinner from her son, because he ate something unhealthy for breakfast.

2013/09/28 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Joke of the day: After improved relations between the United States and Iran, hardliners in Iran refer to the US as "The Small Satan" and conservatives in the US include Iran in "The Axis of Not-So Evil." (From a *New York Times* cartoon)
- (2) President Rouhani pleases conservatives in Iran, disappoints others: Moderates and reformists who voted for Hassan Rouhani in Iran's presidential election are said to be disappointed with his UN speech and his refusal to meet, at least informally, with President Obama. Meanwhile, conservative analysts, military generals, and other Islamic Republic of Iran insiders have praised Rouhani's "intelligent" speech and his not falling into the trap of meeting with American officials. They are trumpeting the Americans' willingness to meet with Iranians, and the British foreign minister's admission that placing Iran in the "Axis of Evil" was a dumb mistake, as strategic retreats brought about by Iran's power and steadfastness.
- (3) Rouhani's language vs. Ahmadinejad's: An [analysis of the frequency of words](#) used in Rouhani's 2013 UN speech and Ahmadinejad's in 2012 has revealed that Rouhani's top 3 words were "Iran," "violence," and "world," while Ahmadinejad's were "international," "world," and "nation."
- (4) Our inner map: It seems that an [appreciation of geometry](#) is part of what makes us humans. When small kids were given maps with triangular-shaped regions and told to place various objects at marked spots, they did remarkably well, even though they had been taught nothing about geometry yet.
- (5) Powerful software helps linguists: "Linguists who once spent an entire career reconstructing a major language family now can accomplish that in just a few hours." Thus begins a fascinating article in *Communications of the ACM*, issue of October 2013, which likens the study of language evolution via the processing of massive amounts of data to the problem of gene sequencing. What linguistics shares with genetics is the need for analyzing vast amounts of data and envisioning how slow, evolutionary changes can lead from one language to a variant (subspecies) or a new language (new species). Faced with an unknown, possibly long-

dead language which may or may not be connected to one of today's languages, a linguist can enter a text (say, from a stone tablet) and use a computer program to analyze it. One such program has demonstrated 99% accuracy in determining which symbols stand for vowels and which ones for consonants.

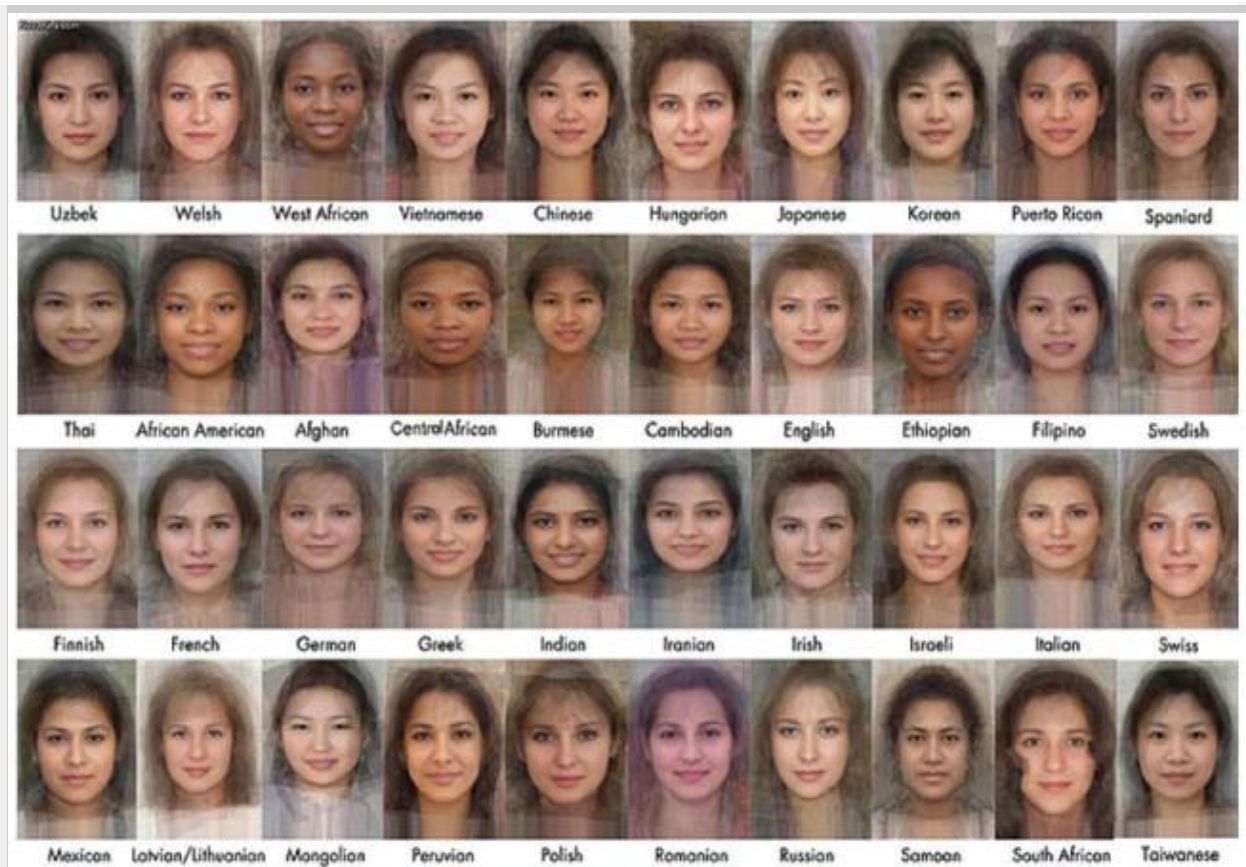
2013/09/26 (Thu.): Here are six items of potential interest.

- (1) The inverted logic of some Republicans: Everyone having guns will make us safer, but everyone having healthcare will kill us all.
- (2) Shi'as and Sunnis: Here is one of the clearer explanations that I have seen about why/how Muslims were divided into **Shi'a and Sunni sects**. The word "Shi'a" is short for "Shi'a-t-Ali" or "the Party of Ali"; Shi'as believe that leaders inherit their positions or are appointed directly by God. The word "Sunni" means "observer of tradition"; Sunnis believe in elected leadership. The division was thus politically motivated but has come to have spiritual significance also, as Shi'as reject the traditions (hadith) based on the testimony of some of the Prophet Muhammad's companions who were on the "wrong" side in the early years of discord about leadership.
- (3) Iranian-Chinese: In a book on the history of Iranian Jews, which I have finished reading and will review shortly, it is mentioned that during periods of more intense anti-Semitism, many Iranian Jews fled eastward, some going as far as China. Apparently, some non-Jews also settled there when the eastern border of the Sassanid Empire extended to western China. This fascinating **slide show**, set to Persian music, is entitled "Iranian People of China."
- (4) Hollywood's glamor days: In this **1953 publicity still** for the film "How to Marry a Millionaire," Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable, and Lauren Bacall appear with a number of their contemporary actresses.
- (5) Disconnect to connect: **Cool Thai ad** on missing live connections while using cell phones.
- (6) Mountaintop penthouse to be dismantled: A Chinese man's six-year effort to build his dream house atop an artificial mountain sitting on a Beijing apartment block may have to be undone due to complaints from neighbors and safety concerns. [**Photos and video**]

2013/09/25 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

- (1) The Reasonable Ineffectiveness of Mathematics: Playing on words via inverting Eugene Wigner's now-classic article title "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences" in his October 2013 **Proceedings of the IEEE article**, Derek Abbot maintains that mathematicians are predominantly Platonists (they believe that mathematics has a world of its own where truths reside, awaiting our discovery), physicists are Platonists in public, but waver when pressed in private (they consider the amazing success of the human-made system of mathematics in explaining natural phenomena almost a miracle), and engineers are often openly non-Platonist (they are simply too familiar with approximations and breakdown of models when used beyond their domains of applicability to see any miracle in mathematics). He then proceeds to present arguments in favor of the non-Platonist view.
- (2) El Al planes to be equipped with laser weapon against heat-seeking missiles: Since an incident in November 2002, when two heat-seeking missiles narrowly missed a 757 plane carrying hundreds of Israeli passengers as it took off from Mombasa, Kenya, Israeli defense contractors have been working on countermeasures. The solution, a bathtub-size pod that attaches to the plane's belly, right behind the wings, senses the missiles, tracks them, and blinds their homing devices with a very powerful laser beam. All El Al planes will be refitted so that the pod can be attached to them, but to save fuel, only planes going into dangerous areas will actually carry the pods. [Adapted from *ASEE Prism* magazine, issue of September 2013.]
- (3) Flying in formation to save fuel: The leader does the heavy work when ducks fly in formation, while the others coast in its tailwinds. Now, USAF wants to use the method to save on its \$9 billion annual fuel costs. Tests under varying conditions, including night flight, have led to up to 10% reduction in fuel cost, which may be increased to 20% via improvements and fine-tuning. [Adapted from *ASEE Prism* magazine, issue of September 2013.]
- (4) Ikea's refugee shelters: We read heartbreaking stories about refugees and their difficult living conditions almost every day, but we seldom hear about people in the background whose efforts allow these refugees to survive. The Swedish furniture giant Ikea has teamed up with the United Nations' refugee agency to develop a **flat-pack shelter** that can be assembled quickly on site. The solar-powered shelters are being used in a number of locations, including within and around Syria.

2013/09/24 (Tue.): Here are six items of potential interest.



(1) Average faces of women around the world: This photo of average faces of women in a number of countries is from faceresearch.org, whose [Web site](#) contains fun tools for experimentation. [Image: Average men]

Note: These averages are likely not based on representative samples. It seems that participants self-select by going to the organization's Web site and providing photos along with their nationalities. This process skews the samples (for both men and women) toward urban, young, and tech-savvy. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that people who look better than average are more likely to want to share their photos.

(2) Quote of the day: "The Affordable Care Act ... was an issue in last year's election, and the candidate who called for repeal lost." ~ Barack Obama

(3) Iran's president follows Putin's example: Read his [opinion piece](#) in *Washington Post*, interspersed with highly accurate annotation (what he really is saying) by Max Fisher.

(4) Voice-activated elevator: Four-minute [comedy routine](#).

(5) New academic year: The fall quarter officially started on Sunday at many UC campuses and classes will begin on 9/26. Yesterday, our campus was abuzz with new undergraduate and graduate students trying to find their way to various offices and pre-instructional activities, and returning students who are resuming their academic plans a year closer to their goal. Welcome to the academic year 2013-2014!

(6) Former chancellor of Tehran University apologizes to a young Baha'i girl for [being denied admission](#) to Tehran University and for her mother's 5.5-year imprisonment on charges of home-schooling such kids.

2013/09/22 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Riddle of the day: Yesterday—heroic fibbing (taghieh). Today—heroic flexibility. Tomorrow—heroic flight.

(2) Joke of the day: Husband: "Honey, what's our password?" Wife: "Our anniversary date." Husband (under his breath): "She did this on purpose!"

(3) Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the discovery of DNA earlier this year. [Image]

(4) Rita Hayworth is "Stayin' Alive": [Clips of dance routines](#) by Rita Hayworth set to the Bee Gees' hit song.

(5) The supertrees of Singapore: A beautifully designed artificial garden holds 18 of these trees, ranging in height from 25 to 50 meters. They adorn Singapore's central business district, provide energy through their solar panels, and serve as a tourist attraction. [Pictorial]

(6) Disappearing skyscraper: Charles Wee, who has more than 30 towers to his credit, has gotten tired of building the next tallest tower, so his proposed design for a [tower in Seoul](#), South Korea, is one that fades from view at the flick of a switch. It acts as a giant TV screen that displays whatever happens to be behind it.

2013/09/20 (Fri.): Today's five items begin with some very interesting images.

(1) Slam dunk!

(2) Bicycle in a tree: A boy left his bike chained to a tree when he went away to war in 1914. He never returned, leaving the tree no choice but to grow around the bike. [\[Image\]](#)

[Note added on 9/22: Since posting this item, I have learned that while the photo is real, the story attached to it is an urban legend. The bike was left by a boy too embarrassed to be riding a girls' bike and wanted to "lose" it, not because he went to war. I apologize.]



(3) New York City from above: Aerial photographs of New York City are always impressive. This particular collection of [67 photos](#), mostly taken on July 7, 2010, contains some of the best.

(4) Joke of the day: Toddler to his mother: "Mom, if you tag me in one more picture, I will unfriend you!"

(5) College soccer: Tonight, UCSB faced Yale, which they totally dominated for the entire length of the game, winning 3-1. The bad news is that UCSB had many more scoring opportunities that they missed and the goal they allowed (and a couple of other scoring opportunities for Yale) resulted from defensive mistakes.

2013/09/19 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) The art of misdirection: In this [9-minute TED talk](#), Apollo Robbins demonstrates how he takes advantage of limited attention spans to pick pockets and do other magic tricks. I had to watch a second time to figure out how something he inquires about at the end happened.

(2) Grounded cruise ship is now upright: Costa Concordia, the cruise ship that was grounded when it hit rocks and tilted on its side off the coast of Italy, [has been set upright](#) atop a specially built platform on the seabed. It will be repaired in place minimally so as to become towable. It will then be towed away and scrapped.

(3) A feminist's take on a sexist product: Ellen bashes "Bic for Her," [a new line of pens](#) made just for women.

(4) Nasrin Sotoudeh and 10 other [political prisoners released](#): Sotoudeh has served 3 years of a 6-year sentence. While this is better than the previous state, there are still thousands of other political prisoners in Iran. Releasing a few of the more notable prisoners for international posturing won't make a dent in Iran's terrible human rights record, particularly since these releases did not come with an admission that they should not have been imprisoned in the first place. Ironically, these releases were not even announced officially.

(5) NBC's Ann Curry interviews Iran's president: Behind-the-scenes [photos and 4-minute video clip](#) of parts of the interview with Hassan Rouhani.

2013/09/18 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Math puzzle: What is the fourth root of $9^2 + (19^2)/22$? Explain the surprising answer.

(2) Sign at an Italian coffee joint, to reduce morning grogginess: a cup of coffee, 3 euros; a cup of coffee, please, 2 euros; good morning, could you please make me a cup of coffee, 1 euro.

(3) Putting time in perspective: [This fascinating blog post](#) begins with the observation that "the spans of time in human history, and even more so in natural history, are so vast compared to the span of our life and recent history that it's almost impossible to get a handle on it." Beginning with the last 24 hours in someone's life, a series of diagrams are provided that zoom out to cover, after several steps in each case, the lifespan of a 30-year-old, US history, recorded history, human evolution from apes, the presence of animals, and age of the universe. It then begins going into the future to the disappearance of our solar system, end of star formation, all stars dying out, and eventually, the universe reaching its near-zero energy state.

(4) The financial collapse of 2008: In this [60-minute fact-based TV drama](#) entitled "The Last Days of Lehman Brothers," one of the root causes of the 2008 US financial collapse is exposed.

(5) A technical hitch lifted restrictions on social media in Iran for half a day: But celebrations by Iranians, who thought a new policy regarding Internet access had taken effect, were short-lived. Technical problems were solved and [filtering was restored](#) in a matter of hours. Some analysts speculate that there was no technical problem and that the removal of blockage was either a test run to see what would happen without censorship or an attempt to identify those who would try to access banned sites.

2013/09/17 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Quote of the day: "Talking is just repeating what you already know. Only through listening will you learn something new." ~ Anonymous

(2) Google undersea view? Not quite, but close. A project, partially sponsored by Google and others, aims to capture wonders of the world's coral reefs, using 360-degree panoramic cameras, before they disappear altogether. At Gallery section of the [Catlin Seaview Project Web site](#), you can get a taste of the reefs.

(3) Will license plates go digital? California is said to be considering Kindle-like devices that would display the license plate number, eliminate the need for renewal stickers, and flash alerts if a car lacks insurance or has

been linked to a crime. Privacy advocates are concerned that equipping a vehicle with a state-supplied device may lead to abuses, such as tracking. [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 23, 2013.]

(4) The smart-watch wars: Wearable gadgets form the next logical step in the procession of computing platforms from laptops, through notebooks/tablets, to smartphones. The September 23, 2013, issue of *Time* magazine features brief descriptions of 4 such gadgets: Sony Smartwatch 2 (not yet available in the US), Samsung Galaxy Gear (\$300, coming in October), Qualcomm Toq (\$300, also coming in October), and Pebble (\$150, monochrome, available at Best Buy).

(5) Do what you love, live longer: According to Dr. George Bartzokis of UCLA, "being able to do what you love makes you more satisfied, less depressed, and you'll probably do better with your body as a result ... When you use your brain a lot as opposed to sitting around looking at the wall, you're repairing things centrally." In the past, we have underestimated the regenerative power of our brains. Myelination, or growth of fatty insulation on neurons which keeps brain circuits running smoothly, begins in babyhood, but these insulating layers are still being laid down when we are in our 50s and 60s. To the extent that the brain's processing power diminishes in old age, it compensates in a way that creativity is actually enhanced. One example is increased information exchange between the right and left brains. Also, older people tend to get off the treadmill of life (raising kids, nurturing a career, worrying about the mortgage), which frees up some horsepower in the service of creativity. [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 23, 2013.]

2013/09/16 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Imagine a person with a gift of ridicule. [He might say firstly] that a negative quantity has no logarithm; secondly that a negative quantity has no square root; thirdly that the first nonexistent is to the second as the circumference of a circle is to the diameter." ~ Augustus De Morgan (1806-1871)

(2) The Sanjay Gupta Problem: The puzzle known as "The Monty Hall Problem" deals with probabilistic notions in a game-show context. I have posted the problem before, but have just read a wonderfully simple explanation of the solution. For those of you who know or remember the problem, here it is. Switching is twice as likely to lead to the top prize, because if you stick with the initial choice, you win the top prize only if you had originally selected it (prob. 1/3) but if you switch, you will win the top prize only if you had not selected it (prob. 2/3)" This next puzzle has to do with testing for diseases, so I call it "The Sanjay Gupta Problem." A newly developed diagnostic test for a particular disease gives the result "positive" with 99% probability if you have the disease and with 2% probability (false positive) if you don't. Assume that 1% of the residents of a city have that particular disease. A randomly chosen person from the city is administered the test, with the result being "positive." What is the probability that the person has the disease?

(3) Keep your eyes off those legs: This is the title of an [article in *The Economist*](#) about fashion in Iran. Apparently, many Iranian women are wearing tight leggings that occasionally show from beneath the hemlines of long, baggy dresses. This kind of clothing, according to conservative commentators, violates the mental and physiological peace of Iran's youth and even endangers the moral health of older men. Iranian women, meanwhile, are defiant and continue to enjoy the relatively lax enforcement of dress codes on city streets by the so-called "Guidance Patrol."

(4) Fifth anniversary of the US financial collapse: Five years after the financial crisis, some things are back to normal, but many risks remain. In her *Time* magazine article (issue of September 23, 2013), Rana Foroohar enumerates five serious risks: too-big-to-fail institutions are still with us; bank leverage ratios have come down somewhat, but they are still too high for comfort; weapons of financial mass destruction remain unregulated; shadow banking by unregulated bank-like institutions remains largely invisible; the culture of finance is still topsy-turvy, with the big banks making up an even larger share of the GDP than before the crisis.

(5) Syria claims victory over the chemical weapons issue: There seems to be no defeat in politics. Every retreat and change of plan is trumpeted as a victory, thus creating a multitude of win-win situations. The latest "victory" of this kind is [claimed by a Syrian minister](#), who credited "the achievement of Russian diplomacy and the Russian leadership."

2013/09/15 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Anti-violence bronze statue, by the Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd.

(2) Joke of the day: Verizon pitchman: "Can you hear me now?" NSA eavesdropper: "Yes."

(3) Comfortable, but eerie, resting quarters for rock climbers. [[Image](#)]

(4) Tokyo 2020: Tokyo has joined the list of elite cities to host the summer Olympics games, following Rio's turn in 2016. The 1964 Olympics games were also held in Tokyo.



While people in Tokyo celebrated the prospects of 150,000 jobs and over \$30 billion of economic activity, those in Istanbul and Madrid mourned their losses.

(5) There is no change in the policy of government approval for books printed in Iran: Iran's new Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance had stated a few weeks ago that the process of **prepublication approval** for books will be replaced by a post-publication check, meaning that publishers must self-censure or face the prospects of financial losses if an already printed book is deemed unsuitable. Now, the minister has reneged on his promise of slight liberalization and indicated that the old process of prepublication approval will continue as before. This means that many books will be banned, while others will be published with major changes dictated by the government, often after months or even years of delay due to the censorship bottleneck. On the positive front, House of Cinema (a guild) has been reopened after its two-year closure by Iranian authorities.

(6) College soccer: After losing last week 0-2 to Gonzaga in a tentatively played game, with major offensive and defensive mistakes, and falling to UCLA 0-1 in an evenly played match on Friday 9/13, the UCSB men's soccer team recovered to beat University of Pennsylvania 2-1 in double overtime today. The Gauchos currently have a 3-2-0 record and a 17th-place national ranking. UCSB's next game will be against Yale on Friday 9/20.

2013/09/14 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I hope Putin has taken adequate protections. Now that he is a Russian journalist his life may be in grave danger." ~ Tweet by former world chess champion Gary Kasparov on Vladimir Putin's New York Times opinion piece

(2) Evolution of end-zone dancing: **Comedy routine** by Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake, poking fun at football players' dancing in the end zone upon scoring a touchdown.

(3) LED streetlights in Los Angeles: Many cities are switching to **LED streetlights**, given their energy savings of about 63%, lower maintenance costs (due to longer life), and more pleasing light.

(4) A winding highway in east Nepal. [**Image**]

(5) An interview with Code.org founder Hadi Partovi: The September 2013 issue of *Communications of the ACM* has published an **interview with Hadi Partovi**, founder of Code.org, an organization devoted to inspiring people to learn computer programming. Among the efforts of Code.org is a sleek promotional video in which numerous celebrities inform the viewers that it is cool to be able to program, either by making statements or by sharing their own experiences. This is a very worthy cause, but I wish people wouldn't exaggerate in order to gain support or sympathy. In answer to a question, Partovi, who left Iran for New York in 1984, states in connection with his own initiation to programming in Iran: "Obviously, there were no CS classes there."

Actually, by 1984, computer science programs and vocational classes had been in existence for at least 15 years. I went to teach in one such university program myself, when I returned to Iran in 1974.

2013/09/13 (Fri.): Today's four items are about history and anthropology.

(1) Quote of the day: "I learned much more about acting from philosophy courses, psychology courses, history and anthropology than I ever learned in acting class." ~ Tim Robbins

(2) Egypt's church of Zabbaleen: In a southeastern Cairo region inhabited by garbage collectors (or Zabbaleen) who are predominantly Coptic Christians, sits a very unique church. The magnificent **"cave church"** has been built under and inside cliffs.

(3) Europe's fastest growing males: An Oxford study has found that European men's height increased by an average of 11 cm in the 11 decades from 1871 to 1980. In per-decade growth figures, men in the Netherlands were the fastest growing (1.41 cm), followed by Germany (1.25 cm), and Denmark (1.24 cm). [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 16, 2013.]

(4) Eskimo vs. Inuit: Let me share with you something I learned from **an article** that I chanced upon a few days ago. Eskimos don't call themselves Eskimos, because this is a derogatory name, meaning "eaters of raw flesh," given to them by the Indians. They refer to themselves as "Inuit," which means "the people." Many tribal names worldwide translate as "human beings," implying that such tribes did not think much of outsiders. Cherokee Indians believed that different races developed when the creator made the mistake of undercooking

the dough in one case (ancestor of the pale people), overcooking it in another (leading to the black race), and getting it just right in a third case (producing the Indians). This kind of attitude toward one's own tribe, race, or culture is the norm, rather than the exception. The information above is paraphrased from the opening paragraphs of a fascinating article entitled "Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist," which is the text of a 1980 Annual Faculty Lecture by the Santa Barbara City College Sociology/Anthropology Professor Henry H. Bagish. The article describes why the author changed his mind about cultural relativism (all cultures are equally good, and we must accept them without judging), moving to an intermediate position that considers relativism a useful research paradigm (to ensure objectivity, without prejudgment) that must be abandoned when certain red lines of our system of values are crossed.

2013/09/12 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) UCSB ranked #11 among US public universities: The latest *US News & World Report* ranking of US public schools places UCSB at #11, with 4 other UC campuses ranked higher (Berkeley #1, UCLA #2, Davis and San Diego tied at #9). Occupying nearly half of the top spots on the list is quite an accomplishment for California.

(2) Fear of stress is harmful, stress itself isn't: In this **14-minute TED talk**, Dr. Kelly McConigal of Stanford University relates how she went from demonizing stress to recognizing that stress is your body's way of rising to the challenge of a difficult situation. Stress also makes you social and more caring.

(3) Higher speed limits prove safer: This is highly counterintuitive, but several US states that have recently raised their highway speed limits report fewer accidents. There's a good reason: "Studies show that collisions are less likely on highways where velocity is limited to the speed that 85% of drivers normally don't exceed." In other words, within reasonable limits, it is the variation in vehicle speeds, not the speed limit itself, that creates accidents. Interestingly, higher speed limits do not necessarily mean that drivers would go much faster. Utah's newly introduced speed limit of 80 MPH on some roads has raised the average speed of autos by only 1 MPH. [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 16, 2013.]

(4) Russia lecturing the US: Vladimir Putin's **opinion piece** in yesterday's *New York Times* is a master stroke of political manipulation. He addresses the American people directly, something that he believes is necessary "at a time of insufficient communication between our societies." Using logical and compassionate statements, he urges the US to honor international laws, while conveniently forgetting the history of Russia and the former Soviet Union in ignoring the same laws. He is using the current disagreements in the US as a pretext for showing himself to be the grown-up and the peacemaker. He ends his opinion piece by knocking American exceptionalism, asking for the Lord's blessing, and reminding everyone that God created us equal. A master stroke indeed!

2013/09/11 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If something comes to life in others because of you, then you have made an approach to immortality." ~ Norman Cousins

(2) Joke of the day: The vast majority of Americans favor sending Congress to Syria.

(3) Proof of Solomon's mines found in Israel: Radiocarbon dating of material from a new site in Israel's Timna Valley leaves no doubt that the **discovered mines** are from King Solomon's period. Now a national park, Timna Valley was a vast copper production district during King Solomon's reign (~1000 BCE), with advanced smelting technology and a high level of social organization. Because Timna Valley residents lived in tents, they would have been invisible to archeologists were it not for the mining operation.

(4) College athletes should be paid their fair share of sports revenues: "The idea of paying players is no longer just fodder for academic debate. It's an ethical imperative." So writes Sean Gregory in *Time* magazine, issue of September 16, 2013. Everyone is making money off these athletes: coaches with multimillion-dollar annual salaries, schools' athletic directors and other personnel, NCAA and its officials, TV networks, and even video-game makers. Many of these athletes are professional players for all intents and purposes. They devote more than 40 hours per week to sports, with studying being a distant second on their list of priorities. College PR departments use the athletes to sell merchandise and to raise funds from donors. Whereas the afterglow of a major scientific discovery fades within days or weeks, elite athletes provide a constant source of name recognition and cash. In short, college athletes are being cheated of their fair share of sports revenues.

(5) The 12th anniversary of 9/11: Moments of silence will be observed in New York City at the time of the two planes crashing into the **WTC twin towers** (8:46 AM and 9:03 AM). Ceremonies are also planned at the Pentagon and in southwestern Pennsylvania, where the fourth plane crashed short of its intended target due to heroism by passengers. Let us not forget the victims of this senseless crime and their still-grieving loved ones.

2013/09/10 (Tue.): On wealth and charity: "We know that wealth does not always make people happy, but does it make them kinder? Studies suggest exactly the opposite. Instead of being more magnanimous, the rich are more likely to lie, cheat, steal and in general display less compassion than the poor. And this finding

remains consistent even after controlling for gender, ethnicity and spiritual beliefs." Thus begins a *Los Angeles Times* [opinion piece](#) by Rabbi David Wolpe. He cites a *Scientific American* article to build his case that the well-off have a compassion deficit which arises from their wealth, rather than the other way around. A series of studies at the University of Rotterdam found that the perception of having wealth made people prefer to play and work alone, distance themselves from acquaintances, and be less helpful toward those needing assistance. "We didn't choose being born into an era, or a nation, that allowed our talents to develop. We ride in cars and live in homes we did not build, are warmed by heating and cooled by air conditioning we did not invent, live in cities others created for us organized by a government and protected by a military shaped by our predecessors. ... No one likes to feel that what they have achieved stems more from luck than merit. So the well-off salve their consciences by assuring themselves that it is hard work and merit that brought them success, which also leads them to conclude that it is a lack of merit that keeps others from succeeding."

Yesterday, Rabbi Wolpe's opinion piece produced heated discussions on a Facebook friend's post, so I dug deeper and found [an article](#) in *The Atlantic* that maintains: "One of the most surprising, and perhaps confounding, facts of charity in America is that the people who can least afford to give are the ones who donate the greatest percentage of their income. In 2011, the wealthiest Americans—those with earnings in the top 20 percent—contributed on average 1.3 percent of their income to charity. By comparison, Americans at the base of the income pyramid—those in the bottom 20 percent—donated 3.2 percent of their income."

The Atlantic article also discusses research findings that exposure to need affects generosity, suggesting that the lack of compassion on the part of the wealthy may result from their relative isolation from other people's misery. In a study, the compassion levels of the wealthy began to rise when people from various economic backgrounds were exposed to a video on child poverty.

One Facebook commenter argued that some charitable donations are anonymous, so statistics in this area may be skewed. This statement made me wonder about the fraction of charitable donations that are anonymous. Various sources I consulted differed on this question, placing the fraction roughly in the 5-15% range, with a noticeable rise in recent years. So, such donations don't make a dent in Wolpe's argument or in the stats from *The Atlantic* article. It turns out that the topmost reason for donating anonymously isn't modesty but avoidance of further contacts from fundraisers.

The Facebook discussion also included a comment that rich people frequently help out their friends and acquaintances, contributions that are not tax-deductible and may again skew published results. It turns out that underreporting is more likely to occur at the low end of the income scale, because the vast majority of low-income taxpayers do not itemize their deductions.

2013/09/09 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "OMG, I have finally discovered what's wrong with my brain: On the left side there is nothing right, and on the right side, there is nothing left." ~ Anonymous

(2) Mom and kids on the first day of school: [Image](#)

(3) A dozen pianists at play: In Persian, there is a saying that with two cooks at play, the chowder either becomes too salty or not salty enough. In this [6-minute video](#), Washington Conservatory pianists show that the result can be much more interesting with a dozen pianists at play.

(4) What does matching job seekers and companies have in common with dating? Quite a lot, if you ask eHarmony, which has moved to introduce a job recruiting service. Both recruiting and dating involve costly search processes. And while money plays a role in both domains, it usually isn't the central factor. The most important parameter in job placement is matching the corporate culture with an applicant's personality. The success of eHarmony in producing better-than-average stable marriages stems in part from foregoing the posting of photos in favor of deeper characteristics. Implicit in eHarmony's new venture is the assumption that corporations also pay attention to superficial qualities of applicants, rather than dig deep to discover what would make a potential employee happy and productive. [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 16, 2013.]

2013/09/08 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "In matters of conscience, first thoughts are best. In matters of prudence, last thoughts are best." ~ Robert Hall

(2) All-in-one 3D printer: The "all-in-one" designation is used for printers that also scan, copy, and, perhaps, fax. An [all-in-one 3D printer](#) has been built by two PhD students at USC. The students are founders of AIO Robotics and are using Kickstarter to fund their development.

(3) Why do our best ideas come to us in the shower? According to [this article](#), it's a combination of our unconscious brain being freed during a routine, mindless activity and the relaxation that comes from being in a comfortable, solitary environment.

(4) Indian author killed, execution-style, by the Taliban: [Sushmita Banerjee](#), 49, a women's rights activist, had authored a book about her life in Afghanistan and her dramatic 1995 escape from the Taliban, which was

made into a Bollywood film in 2003. Ms. Banerjee had recently moved back to Afghanistan to live with her Afghan businessman husband.

(5) US national Grandparents' Day: In 1978, President Carter designated the first Sunday after Labor Day as Grandparents' Day. Here are five fun facts about grandparents.

- a. The average age of first-time grandparents in the US is 47 (2012 AARP survey).
- b. Your grandma is likely on Facebook: Some 38% of adult social media users are over the age of 65.
- c. The average number of grandchildren is 7; almost a quarter of grandparents have 10 or more grandkids.
- d. Not everyone likes the terms "grandma" and "grandpa"; they may prefer "nana," "papa," "granny," etc.
- e. There is an official song for Grandparents' Day: [Music with lyrics](#)

2013/09/07 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest about Iran.

(1) An interesting conversation on Twitter: Iran's foreign minister tweeted "Happy Rosh Hashanah." Nancy Pelosi's daughter thanked him, adding that "The new year would have been even sweeter if you would end Iran's Holocaust denial, sir." Javad Zarif tweeted back: "Iran never denied it. The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone. Happy New Year."

(2) Iran in third place of the top 30 list of world boys' volleyball teams: In the rankings published on September 2, 2013, the Iranian boys' volleyball team [ranked 3rd](#) behind Russia and Brazil, improving by 4 notches over its previous ranking.

(3) Darwinian evolution: In [these photos](#), numbered 1-5 (the first four real, and the fifth a projection), Khomeini women are seen evolving over 5 generations, from his wife to his great great granddaughter.

2013/09/06 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Glass Beach: Located on California's Highway 1, about 140 miles north of San Francisco, the city of Fort Bragg is home to a [very unusual beach](#), a former trash dump that was cleaned up by residents decades ago, with Mother Nature doing the rest.

(2) No one dies in [130-car pile-up](#) in southeast England: Low visibility caused by foggy conditions is blamed for a web of tangled cars and trucks that miraculously caused no deaths. There were 8 injuries requiring hospitalization and dozens of minor ones.

(3) Riddle of the day: What do you say to comfort a grammar Nazi?

[Answer: There, their, they're.]

(4) When the Oxford comma (the one preceding the last item in a list) makes a difference: Consider this example: "For next month's party, I am inviting the corporate buffoons, my boss, and you." Without the Oxford comma, it becomes something quite different: "For next month's party, I am inviting the corporate buffoons, my boss and you."



2013/09/05 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The Jewish year 5774 begins today: Happy Rosh Hashana to all friends and acquaintances who observe this holiday. [This music video](#) puts Rosh Hashanah lyrics on the old pop favorite "Can't Take My Eyes off You," or, in some renditions, "You're Just Too Good to Be True."

(2) Ayatollah Abdolhamid Masumi Tehrani condemns the mistreatment of Bahai's in Iran on his official Web site: In a letter attributed to him and published on Facebook, but not on [his official site](#) (as of today), he advocates full civil rights for Baha'i citizens and condemns the killing of Ataollah Rezvani, an Iranian Baha'i.

(3) Photoshop a favorite tool of Hollywood and Islamic Republic: Hollywood uses Photoshop to remove excess pounds from celebrity photos, while Islamic Republic uses it to cover up hair, skin, and curves. The latest reported incident of the latter kind is Khomeini's granddaughter covering up her daughter a bit more, while posting a photo of her as the winner of an Ontario Centers of Excellence (OCE) competition in Canada.

[Amateurish Photoshopping](#) aside, why does Khomeini's granddaughter even use Facebook, this "exploitation tool of the decadent West," which is banned for ordinary citizens in Iran? Many of the officials of the Islamic Republic, including the Supreme Leader himself, now have Facebook pages, using anti-filtering software to get around their own censorship mechanisms.

(4) Record of largest male gator broken, twice: [Two unrelated groups](#) caught gators that weighed 723.5 lbs (26 lbs heavier than the previous record) and 727 lbs, about an hour later. The record for the largest female gator stands at 295.3 lbs.

2013/09/04 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Joke of the day: Mom's text to son: "What do IDK, LY, and TTYL mean?" Son: "I don't know; love you; talk to you later." Mom: "Okay, I'll ask your sister."

(2) Linguistics research enters the era of big data: Language researchers used to interview a limited sample of subjects to gain insight on how people use language. Now they analyze a vast array of tweets to discover nuggets such as these: tweets containing the word "awesome" are more likely to emanate from wealthy neighborhoods; areas with large Hispanic populations use more emoticons; women are more likely to use personal pronouns such as "I" and "my," as well as exclamation marks, especially repeated ones; young twitters are more apt to type in all-capitals or use expressive lengthening of words, such as "niiiiice"; older tweeters tend to use emoticons with noses, :-), while younger tweeters often omit the nose, :). So, are such research results of any practical value? Mitre Corp. researchers discovered that they can tell the sex of a twitter based on a tweet's content 75% of the time. Throughout these studies, researchers should bear in mind that the population of twitters skews young and urban; hardly an unbiased sample. Another complication is that twitters add to and modify the English language, so new and old research results may be irreconcilable. [From *Time* magazine, issue of September 9, 2013.]

(3) The new leaner and more profitable airlines: Unless there are some unexpected increases in fuel costs, US airlines should continue to operate with record profits for years to come. Airlines used to operate like government agencies instead of lean-and-mean businesses that they have now become. They are cutting marginal routes, instituting new fees, making fewer trips with larger (nearly full) jets, using mergers to reduce their footprints and competition, and persuading travelers to buy more expensive tickets by making leg and elbow room optional commodities. [From *Time* magazine, September 9, 2013.]

2013/09/02 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Working while standing: The trend of introducing stand-up workstations at offices began a few years ago. Here's [one person's account](#) of changes (mostly positive) he observed after 2 years of working on his feet.

(2) Planting fake memories in, and erasing others from, a brain: MIT scientists have managed to do this in mice by changing, for example, recollections of fear into recollections of pleasure. In this [15-minute TED talk](#), the authors of a newly published study in the journal *Science* speak of a world where we can reactivate any kind of memory we like and deactivate those we dislike. The job of neuroscientists is to explore every possibility; it is for the rest of us to think about moral implications of such discoveries and to institute the requisite safeguards for our societies.

(3) Rafsanjani's comment on Syria published, then modified, by [an Iranian news agency](#): His originally published remark read: "The people have been the target of a chemical attack by their own government and now they must also wait for an attack by foreigners." Shortly thereafter, the phrase "by their own government" was dropped from the story. This is important, because it shows that Iran isn't sincere in its claim that the Assad regime wasn't responsible for the sarin nerve gas attack.

2013/08/31 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest on geography and on society.

(1) Twelve gorges around the world: [They are all fascinating](#), but the second one on the list, Arizona's Antelope Canyon, which was formed by erosion of Navajo Sandstone, is the most intriguing in my view.

(2) One of the world's biggest canyons hides under Greenland ice: [The 800-km canyon](#), which is longer than Arizona's Grand Canyon, was carved by a river that flowed from central Greenland to its northern coastline before the ice formed. Now, the canyon is packed with a deep ice sheet so heavy that it has pushed down the center of Greenland from its former elevation of 500 meters above sea level to its current 200 meters below.

(3) Another example of hospitals ripping off patients: [This New York Times article](#) traces the journey of a bag of saltwater solution from its manufacturer price of less than \$1 to charges of \$500 or more it generates on a patient's hospital bill.

(4) Working while standing: The trend of introducing stand-up workstations at offices began a few years ago. Here's [one person's account](#) of changes (mostly positive) he observed after 2 years of working on his feet.

2013/08/30 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Human-to-human brain signaling demonstrated: In [an experiment](#), recorded on video, one University of Washington computer science researcher, wearing a helmet that can read and stimulate the brain, caused a colleague across the campus wearing the same helmet to move his finger to hit a computer-game button. The two helmets were connected via the Internet.

(2) Fastest-spinning human-made object: Spinning at more than a thousand times the rotational speed of the dreaded dental drill, a microscopic sphere, created by researchers at the University of St Andrews, uses the miniscule forces of a laser light to levitate and to [rotate in a vacuum chamber](#).

(3) [Ten fascinating skybridges](#): The first entry, the Marina Bay Sands Skybridge in Singapore is absolutely

mind-boggling. It resembles a cruise ship, has an area of 2.5 acres, contains a 146-meter swimming pool, and is built to withstand significant motion in the three towers it connects.

(4) Memories of years past: Does anyone remember the plastic dust covers that protected our computers, keyboards, and monitors when we weren't using them? What a concept: not using your computer long enough for it to require protection from dust!

2013/08/29 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Cartoon of the day: People who have been gassed hold a sign that reads "Hoghoogh-e bashar" (Persian for "Human rights") and Khamenei counters with a sign that reads "Hoghoogh-e Bashar" ("Bashar's rights").

(2) Kurdish music and dance: From a program [broadcast on TV in Israel](#).

(3) Modern Persian music: The musical group Eendo performs "[Sharghi-e Ghamguin](#)" ("The Melancholy Easterner") with Hossein Mansouri.

(4) Thousands of caves dug on the walls of an immense gorge in Nepal reveal secrets of an ancient civilization: An estimated 10,000 of the caves, dating back thousands of years, have been found in the former kingdom of Mustang in north-central Nepal. Mysteries about the caves abound, including why they were dug and how people climbed into them. [[Text, breathtaking photos, and a video](#)]

2013/08/28 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) March-on-Washington's 50th anniversary: Fifty years ago today, a quarter-million people descended on Washington to demand jobs and freedom. Equality and rights weren't front-and-center on the list, but the March came to represent these demands as well. On that summer day, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech as he stood atop the steps of Lincoln Memorial. The "dream" part of his speech wasn't prepared, but improvised. According to *Time* magazine's commemorative special issue (August 29 and September 2, 2013), legendary singer Mahalia Jackson told MLK, just as he was getting ready to speak, to share his dream, and the rest, as they say, is history. *Newsweek* magazine also features the 50th anniversary of the March in its issue of August 23, 2013. President Obama, who represents part of MLK's dream coming true, is scheduled to speak from the same spot atop the steps of Lincoln Memorial today.

(2) America is still highly segregated: [This collection of maps](#) color-codes the white population (blue dots), blacks (green), Asians (red), Latinos (orange), and others (brown) in various US regions. Most striking among the maps is that of Detroit, which shows a near-complete segregation on two sides of a road.

(3) EXP CAL YYYY: This is the name given to [a perpetual calendar](#) made with expiration dates from food packaging and other merchandise. It took the creator of the calendar 4 years to collect all the required dates.

2013/08/27 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Aftermath of chemical attacks in Syria: Whoever is responsible for these atrocities, one thing is clear; chemical weapons must be destroyed worldwide, including in Western countries. [[Pictorial: horrific images](#)]

(2) The US aided Saddam Hussein when he gassed Iranians: Much fuss has been made over CIA's recent admission that it orchestrated the 1953 coup to overthrow the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh. However, this info was already in the public domain through the writings of former CIA operatives, if not openly admitted by the US government. New revelations from CIA files contain something even more sinister: the US lent a hand to Saddam, while it knew that he was launching some of the [worst chemical attacks in history](#); far worse than what Assad has allegedly done. So, the US's threat to punish Assad's Syria because of his use of chemical weapons is quite hypocritical.

(3) The forgotten cuisine: In the United States, there are restaurants offering food from every corner of the world: Thai, Greek, Ethiopian; you name it, we have it. But something very important is missing: Native American cuisine. Nephi Craig, who graduated from culinary school in 2000, is doing something about this. He wants to move from cooking at a 5-star French restaurant to [cooking in the tradition of his people](#): Apaches and Navajos.

(4) High cost of textbooks: Periodically, discussion of the unreasonably high cost of textbooks and other instructional material flares up, and then dies down with no resolution. [Newly published data](#) confirm that the situation is getting worse, pushing students to download course material from unauthorized Web sites (34%, up from 20% in 2010). Textbook prices have been increasing at 6% annually, far faster than the US inflation rate. More than a quarter of students in the US refrain from buying the assigned textbooks because of high cost.

2013/08/26 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest about the Middle East.

(1) A multiethnic love song: Yavuz Bingol sings "[Aglama Yar,](#)" a Turkish song based on an old Kurdish tune.

(2) A short guide to the Middle East (a letter by Mr. K. N. Al-Sabah, from London):

Sir, Iran is backing Assad. Gulf states are against Assad!

Assad is against Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim Brotherhood and Obama are against General Sisi.

But Gulf states are pro Sisi! Which means they are against Muslim Brotherhood!

Iran is pro Hamas, but Hamas is backing Muslim Brotherhood!

Obama is backing Muslim Brotherhood, yet Hamas is against the US!

Gulf states are pro US. But Turkey is with Gulf states against Assad; yet Turkey is pro Muslim Brotherhood against General Sisi. And General Sisi is being backed by the Gulf states!

Welcome to the Middle East and have a nice day.

(3) Former Israeli foreign minister **Tzipi Livni is back**: During the 2007-08 negotiations with the Palestinians, she became a favorite of the Palestinian negotiating team and was also respected and trusted by the Europeans. Then, things started falling apart and she lost a close race to Benjamin Netanyahu. With Israel's domestic issues being on the minds of Israeli voters in recent years, her peace-focused, center-left party couldn't muster any support. Having forged an unlikely alliance with Netanyahu, Livni is now back in the spotlight as Israel's point person for the new peace negotiations promoted by John Kerry, through which she hopes to achieve her dream of a two-state solution.

2013/08/25 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) English now officially includes "brief on-line post" as a meaning for "tweet": Breaking its own rule for including a new word only after it has been in use for at least 10 years, the Oxford English Dictionary has listed "tweet" as both a noun and a verb, adding the new meanings stemming from Twitter (in existence for only 7 years) to "a brief high-pitch sound or call made by a small bird." Other technology-related terms added in the most recent update include "big data," "e-reader," "mouseover," "flash mob," "crowdsourcing," "live blog," "3D printer," and "search engine optimization." [From *IEEE Computer*, issue of August 2013.]

(2) Young Western academics head to China: **Declining employment opportunities** at home has led to an exodus of academic talent from the US and other Western countries to the Far East, especially China.

(3) A comprehensive profile of Iran's Supreme Leader: Khamenei's photo graces the cover of the September/October 2013 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, which carries a long article by Akbar Ganji on his background, opinions, and power base. According to Ganji, "[Khamenei] is not a crazy, irrational, or reckless zealot searching for opportunities for aggression. But his deep-rooted views and intransigence are bound to make any negotiations with the West difficult and protracted ..." He is an avid reader who loves novels, his favorite being *Les Miserables*.

(4) A song for my late uncle: When searching for the correct Persian spelling of Mashallah [it turns out that its preferred form is spelled with, and an alternative form without, a "hamza" before the final "allah"], I came across **this video** containing a Bollywood-style performance of "Mashallah" (Arabic music). My uncle Mashallah, who passed away last week, would have had a hoot. May he rest in peace!

2013/08/24 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity; the female sex." ~ Mahatma Gandhi

(2) Tehran, summer 2013: This **10-minute driving tour** of some of Tehran's streets and highways isn't for the faint-hearted.

(3) Iran's mixed feelings about the events in Egypt: The fall of President Mohammed Morsi, who was less than friendly toward Iran, **caused some satisfaction** among officials of the Islamic regime. But now they realize that events in Egypt may doom political Islam everywhere.

(4) Luxury hotel on desert sand is an engineering marvel: No the hotel isn't one of those proliferating in the Persian Gulf sheikdoms but is **located in Inner Mongolia**, 800 km west of Beijing. Building such a hotel on sand precluded the use of a standard concrete foundation. The hotel sits on the desert sand as a boat floats in water. Stability is provided by filling the inside of the structure with sand and letting the inner and outer sand pressures cancel each other out.

(5) What most schools don't teach: This is the title of a **10-minute video clip** produced by Code.org that advocates teaching programming skills in K-12 grades.

2013/08/22 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The scriptures present a God who delights in genocide, rape, slavery, and the execution of nonconformists, and for millennia those writings were used to rationalize the massacre of infidels, the ownership of women, the beating of children, dominion over animals, and the persecution of heretics and homosexuals." ~ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*

(2) Costa Rica's no-cage policy: By the end of next year, all zoo animals in Costa Rica will be set free as part of the country's no-cage policy. [From: *Time* magazine, double-issue of August 26 and September 13, 2013.]

(3) Bounty for downing a drone: Deer Trail, a ranching town in Colorado, is considering paying bounties to anyone who shoots down an unmanned drone. In the old days, it was common to pay bounties for killing

animals that preyed on livestock. Once the **new ordinance** is in place, residents will be able to buy a \$25 drone hunting license.

(4) Al Jazeera America debuts on cable: **PBS Newshour reports** that the American franchise of the Qatar-based news network has entered the crowded cable news market in the US.

2013/08/21 (Wed.): Here is a quote and four science-technology items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "... religions all have the same timeline ... First the people feel the need to worship something. The sun or the giant ear of corn. That's the first thing. Then the guys say okay, now that we've got the giant corn thing going, how can we use it to oppress women?" ~ Carol Anshaw, *Carry the One*

(2) Cord cutting: According to Rana Foroohar's column in *Time* magazine, double-issue of August 26 and September 13, 2013, people are selling their cable and telecom stocks, as customers of cable-TV services flee (cut the cord) and migrate to free and low-cost on-line content. Foroohar likens the fight of the giants CBS and Time Warner Cable to buggy whip manufacturers and distributors arguing over who gets how much of the profits, as people move to cars in droves.

(3) Simulating the human brain: The Japanese K supercomputer at the Okinawa Institute of Technology needed to spend 40 minutes to **simulate 1 second of activity** carried out by 1% of a human brain.

(4) Dining with Glassholes: In his humorous column in *Time* magazine, double-issue of August 26 and September 13, 2013, Joel Stine tries to imagine what it would be like to dine with someone wearing Google glasses. Based on his previous negative experience with people putting their cell phone on the table and texting once in a while as they dine, he calls such people "Glassholes." He quips: "Technology improves our lives but ruins those of everyone who hangs out with us."

(5) Testing human-robot cooperation: A 34-cm **Japanese minirobot** has been sent aboard a Japanese rocket to the International Space Station to test human-robot cooperation via voice and face recognition.

2013/08/19 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

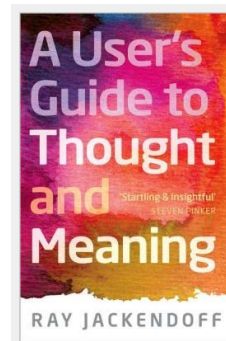
(1) Quote of the day: "While Westerners still often see the veil as a symbol of women's inferior status in the Muslim world, to Muslims, Western women's perceived lack of modesty signals their degraded cultural status in the West. In both cases, the assumption is that women are either covering or uncovering to please or obey men." ~ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*

(2) Egyptian museum ransacked: Artifacts of ancient civilizations that have survived centuries of hostilities against all odds may not survive 21st-century conflicts. **A looted museum** in the city of Minya brings to mind what happened in Baghdad a decade ago.

(3) Patriotic Persian poetry: In this **4-minute video clip**, young poetess Anahita Torkamaan first reads a few verses from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and then recites her own poem entitled "Iran-e Javidan-e Man" ("My Immortal Iran").

2013/08/18 (Sun.): Jackendoff, Ray, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 288 pp. (ISBN 978-0-19-969320-7)

This is a fascinating book that makes you scratch your head in virtually every one of its 43 short (6 pages long on average), highly readable chapters. The author, previously acclaimed for his *Foundation of Language*, discusses the relation between language, meaning, rationality, perception, consciousness, and thought in a style that everyone can understand. In a dust-jacket blurb, Steven Pinker praises the author as "a monumental scholar in linguistics who, more than any other scholar alive today, has shown how language can serve as a window into human nature. Combining theoretical depth with a love of revealing detail, Jackendoff illuminates human reason and consciousness in startling and insightful ways."



Beginning with observations about languages and words, the author builds up his case for meanings and thoughts being completely unconscious, with language being a mere facilitator, albeit an important one. In the author's own words [p. 243], "rational thought isn't an alternative to intuitive thought—rather, it rides on a foundation of intuitive thought ... [in other words,] rationality is intuition enhanced by language." We express thoughts in words and sentences, which allow us to make deductions and relate ideas to each other, but the meanings associated with sentences or thoughts remain in our unconscious mind. The fact that the human mind must have a way of representing language-independent meanings becomes clear if we think about our immediate recognition that "the lion chased the bear" and "the bear was chased by the lion" are the same thing, or about translation of ideas between different languages.

Study of languages is a tricky undertaking: a word may have different senses or various meanings ("The fire smoked a lot"; "Bill smoked a cigar"; "Bill smoked a fish"; "We smoked him out"; "She stood on the river bank"; "She took money out of the bank"). The various meanings of a word may be related (as in the case of "smoked"

above) or unrelated ("bank" in the preceding examples). These examples show that digging deep into the meaning of practically any randomly chosen word reveals complexities beyond expectation. So, it should come as no surprise that the word "mean" or "meaning" is difficult to define and understand.

For example, try to define the word "book." It turns out that things belong to the "book" category in varying degrees, much like the membership of the class "bald" or "red." Just as it is hard to define where "red" ends and "orange" begins, it is difficult to classify some objects as belonging or not belonging to the category "book." Take for example blank books or e-books. The first one violates most standard definition of book, and the second one did not even exist until recently. The author provides this amusing example as the linguistic counterpart of an ambiguous image, where a second interpretation of the image pops out when you view it long enough or at a certain angle: "Pas de lieu Rhone que nous," which is a French sentence masquerading as an English one when you hear it read aloud [p. 119].

In another example [pp. 164-165], we are asked to imagine Gina, talking to Phil, referring to "the guy drinking a martini over there." If Phil thinks that the guy is drinking something else, then he may be confused by the reference. Alternatively, he may understand the reference if he reconciles his truth with Gina's truth. The reconciliation may occur through further linguistic exchanges ("Do you mean Bob over there?" or the less tactful version, "Do you mean the guy drinking water?"), or it may be tacit. Phil likely has a reference file for Bob, which is tagged with "is drinking water"; upon hearing Gina's remark, he may update his tag to "is drinking martini" or add a new tag "Gina thinks he is drinking martini." Most human communication is similar to the example above, with lots of gaps and uncertainties. The bottom line is that language is messy. "You can't demand a clean answer when the situation is dirty" [p. 165].

What exactly constitutes a language isn't an easy question to answer. The boundary between language and dialect is fuzzy [p. 9]. There exist instances of dialects that became distinct languages overnight. A striking example is a language called Serbo-Croatian, spoken in the former Yugoslavia. The country's disintegration in the civil war of the 1990s suddenly elevated the two dialects into the distinct Serbian and Croatian languages. Nothing in the two dialects, now official languages, changed in the process, until political authorities began creating artificial differences between the two.

Chapter 36 [pp. 207-215] on the nature of rational thinking begins with a quotation from Ogden Nash: "Descartes was one of the few who think, therefore they are; Because those who don't think, but are anyhow, outnumber them by far." The author points out the difficulty of dealing with even simple propositions such as "All Xs are Y. Z is an X. Therefore Z is Y." After citing a couple of examples of the proper application of this rule, he challenges the reader with the following: "All houses on Goden St are clumped together in one block. My house is a house on Goden St. Therefore, my house is clumped together in one block."

The author uses examples from music to show how rational thinking is integrated with intuition, making it difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. He maintains that playing notes correctly is a rational undertaking that is enhanced by repetition through practice. However, understanding the intent of the composer and the feel of the final product comes from musical intuition. The quality of the final product depends not only on the skills and engagement level of individual musician but also on the way they click with and complement each other. He further notes: "I think science is a lot like chamber music. You can't just do your own stuff. You have to be constantly listening to everyone" [p. 231].

The author ends his treatise by the important observation [p. 247] that "there's no overarching, perspective-free Truth About the World. Our questions about our world don't converge on a single mutually consistent set of answers. There are only different ways of understanding our world, some of which work better for some kinds of questions, and some of which work better for others. This is not the ideal solution to the Problem of Knowledge, but it's the best we can do, so we'd better learn to live with it."

2013/08/17 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "After listening to Rick Santorum, I'm now for late-term abortions (say up to age 53)." ~ Quentin R. Bufogle

(2) Rouhani's cabinet choices belie his moderate label: David Amess' [insightful analysis](#) of why the selection of Rouhani under the banner of moderation was the Iranian regime's "pragmatic way of achieving the goal of keeping things just the way they are." The article was published before it became known that the only 3 somewhat reasonable ministerial candidates (with ties to the reformists) were turned down by the parliament.

(3) How Iran censors the Internet: Two anonymous Iranians and a computer science professor in the US have teamed up to conduct what might be the first published study of Iranian Internet censorship. The study has found that nearly half of the 500 most-popular Internet sites are censored. The censored sites do not include only the obvious pornographic fare, but also those covering art, society, and news. Iran's Internet is configured to let through ordinary Web traffic at full speed, while anything using encrypted SSH, which enables tunneling, runs at 20% of the full speed. [The study's findings](#) were presented at a Usenix Conference in August 2013.

(4) Other Moore's laws: Moore's law, predicting exponential growth in the complexity and performance of

integrated-circuit chips, has come to signify rapid technological progress in the electronics industry. Researchers at Santa Fe Institute and MIT looked at 62 technologies across a broad spectrum and found at least three others that **exhibit exponential progress**: photovoltaics, wind energy, and DNA sequencing.

2013/08/16 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest on women's and minority rights.

(1) Quote of the day: "I find it strange that practicing law in a comfortable well-heated office is considered too demanding an occupation for women, yet laboring from dawn's first light in crowded, drafty, ill-lit sweatshops is not." ~ Shirley Tallman, *Murder on Nob Hill*

(2) The feminists of Zion: Orthodox and progressive **Israeli women are united** in their efforts to save their country from fundamentalism. They have grown tired of being harassed, and in some cases assaulted, when they jog or bike through certain neighborhoods, even while wearing modest clothing.

(3) Woman elected to Qazvin's city council **too sexy for conservatives**: Iranian women are facing an uphill battle in regaining their civil rights, even under a president who promised to address issues of gender discrimination throughout his campaign. Hassan Rouhani appointed a token woman as his second VP, but he introduced an all-male cabinet to the parliament. And now, under him, the election of a city council member has been overturned because the elected woman, an engineer by training, looks like a "catwalk model."

(4) Women activists in Egypt fighting on multiple fronts: When protesting for or against a particular cause on the streets, **Egyptian women** must also keep alert to ward off molestation and outright sexual assaults from fellow male protesters. This is abhorrent on so many levels. Some claim that the harassments and rapes are orchestrated by groups that want to discredit the demonstrators. "But the fact that the assaults occurred under Mubarak, the military, Morsi and the current interim president, Adly Mansour, suggest the problem may have far deeper roots."

(5) Why Russia harasses gays: Russia's heavy-handed treatment of its gay population is an unsolved mystery to me. After all, the only "reasons" for opposing and condemning gays that I have ever heard are passages in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures cited by clerics and anti-gay activists. So, why is secular Russia, with its anti-religion recent past, so bent on vilifying this group of human beings? I have not yet found a reasonable explanation for this dilemma. Russia legalized homosexuality in 1993 and, a few years later, also removed it from its list of mental illnesses. Apparently, Russia knows that it has no firm ground to stand on, so it is dubbing its anti-gay efforts as combatting pedophilia.

2013/08/15 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) About Reza Aslan's new book 'Zealot: The book was propelled to the top spot on NYT's best-seller list after Fox news aired a hostile interview with the author, repeatedly questioning why a Muslim would write a book on Jesus (see item 2 on my blog for July 30, 2013). Writing for the *Daily Beast*, columnist Kristen Powers points to the fact that most scholarly works on Islam are written by Christians and Jews. She not only defends Aslan's right to pen a book about Jesus but also calls his book a groundbreaking contribution that should be welcomed, despite disagreeing with many of its conclusions.

(2) Making sense of the world through 40 maps: **These maps** show some very interesting features of our natural and human-made world. I particularly liked Map 2 (countries that do not use the Metric System), Map 4 (the old supercontinent that broke apart around 200M years ago), Map 7 (the most common surnames in Europe by country), Map 10 (global Internet usage based on time of day), Map 17 (highest paid US public employees by state), Map 25 (worldwide oil import and export flows), Map 27 (different writing systems of the world), Map 29 (shifts in the world's economic center of gravity), Map 30 (the world divided into 7 regions, each having a population of 1 billion), Map 38 (the longest straight line you can sail on earth).

(3) Gerrymandering puzzle: I am studying the book *Mathematics and Democracy* in connection with my research on voting systems for dependable computing. This puzzle is based on a diagram in the book that demonstrates there is no simple solution to the problem of gerrymandering (drawing district boundaries to ensure the election of certain kinds of candidates). The 5-by-9 grid on the left below represents 45 areas/cells of equal population and their preference for blue (B) or red (R) candidates. Assume that all citizens in each cell vote exclusively for B or R, as indicated on the grid. We want to divide this region into 9 districts, each of which is composed of 5 contiguous grid cells and will elect one representative. Derive a districting plan that would lead to 8 of the 9 elected representatives being blue. Then, derive another plan that leads to 7 of the 9 being red. An example of districting is shown on the right below.

B B R R B B R R R 1 1 2 2 5 5 5 9

R B B B R R R B R 1 1 3 2 6 6 8 5 9

R R B B B B B B 4 1 3 2 2 6 8 8 9

B R R R R B B R B 4 4 3 3 6 6 7 8 9

B B R R B B R R B 4 4 3 7 7 7 8 9

2013/08/14 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Instead of loving your enemies, treat your friends a little better." ~ E. W. Howe

(2) Honey bees and the future of our food: Almond trees are almost totally dependent on honey bees for pollination. Other crops are less dependent on honey bees, but fully 1/3 of our food crops will be affected if honey bees are wiped out in the US, something that is quite possible, given the recent mass deaths that have been driving beekeepers out of business. [Time magazine](#) (issue of August 19, 2013) reports on the problem, claiming that if progress isn't made in dealing with bee-killing pests, bacterial and viral diseases that wipe them out, and safer pesticides, the outcome may be disastrous. One bright spot is the use of genetic engineering to make certain pest species self-destruct by disrupting the way their genes are expressed, thus obviating the need for harmful pesticides (that are not very effective anyway) and wiping out bee-killing pests.

(3) 7000-year old pottery was used for making cheese: A single genetic mutation first allowed adult humans to drink milk. Before then, adult human beings did not drink milk, because they could not digest it. From there, it was just a short step to making cheese and other dairy products. [Scientists believe](#) that pots with holes in them from 7000 years ago were used as strainers to make cheese. The practice is believed to have spread from the Middle East to Europe as part of the Neolithic transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture.

(4) An open letter to Shirin Ebadi: [Iraj Mesdaghi's letter](#) (in Persian) to the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner is quite long, but it is worth reading, because it exposes some inconsistencies in Ebadi's positions over the years.

(5) A religion to like: The [Like4Real project](#) was launched by the Dutch artist Dadara, who has raised funds to transform Facebook's "Like" into a religion for a short while and then burn a giant golden version of the symbol during the Burning Man 2013 festival.

2013/08/12 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Seen on a stroll around the neighborhood: The recently reopened beach stairway near our house bears a plaque with the inscription: "Steve's Beach"—In Memory of Best Friend, Bruddah, Below Average Surfer

(2) Violin virtuoso David Garrett Plays "Billy Jean" and other [Michael Jackson songs](#).

(3) Serial inventor: Inventive engineer James Dyson has previously introduced vacuum cleaners, hand dryers, and fans. He has now come up with the idea of a [vacuum-mop](#), a cordless unit that combines the functions of a vacuum cleaner and a mop.

(4) The oldest datable Qur'an in the world: Assembled from fragments of parchment, that have been precisely dated to 70 years after Prophet Muhammad's death (based on accompanying architectural drawings), this version of the [Muslim holy book](#) reveals new details, some of which remain controversial at this time.

(5) Shakespeare adventure games: "[To Be or Not to Be: That Is the Adventure](#)" is the name of a choose-your-ending book, a genre that is becoming quite popular. Canadian writer Ryan North figured he could create the book by raising \$20K on Kickstarter. He ended up raising \$581K for a book that mainstream publishers wouldn't touch, and he is now planning a sequel: "Romeo and/or Juliet"

2013/08/11 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest about Iran and Iranians.

(1) Quote of the day: "The Iran I'm dreaming of maybe doesn't exist anymore." ~ Paris-based Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani, on making peace with her life in exile

(2) Iran is the FIBA Asia basketball champ: After beating Chinese-Taipei 79-60 in the semis, Iran faced Philippines in the championship game, [winning 85-71](#) to remain unbeaten in the tournament. Both finalists will head to the FIBA Basketball World Cup tournament in Spain.

(3) A humorous poem by Hadi Khorsandi: Alluding to Iran's regression in areas of culture and humanity, this 2011 poem uses the refrain "Dear fellow countryman, what made us regress?" to make its point. [[Text](#), [Video](#)]

(4) A preview of Maz Jobrani's forthcoming comedy special: "[I Come in Peace](#)"

2013/08/10 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Why are pound and ounce abbreviated as "[lb](#)" and "[oz](#)"? Short answer: The abbreviations come from the ancient Roman weight measure "libra pondo" and the Medieval Italian "onza."

(2) The making of Facebook's Graph Search: [IEEE Spectrum](#) magazine's [on-line post](#) of 2013/08/06 tells the story of Facebook's newly introduced Graph Search capability from the viewpoint of the engineers who made it work. The new tool exploits the hidden structure of Facebook's massive database, perhaps allowing it to avoid the fate of other purely social networking sites such as GeoCities and MySpace. Finding out who among our acquaintances works at a given company, which restaurants in a particular city our friends prefer, or service providers with whom people we know had good experiences, may give Facebook the utilitarian edge that elevates it beyond just chit-chats and curiosities.

(3) Iran's basketball team is on a roll: [Iran handed Jordan its worst defeat](#) in the FIBA Asia tournament, 94-50, en route to the semifinals to face Chinese-Taipei (which defeated China, Asia's top power, 96-78). On

the other side of the bracket, Philippines will face South Korea. With China eliminated, Iran's chances of winning the gold medal look pretty good.

(4) The Indo-European branches of the language tree: **This tree** shows the development of Greek, Tocharian, Armenian, Indic, Iranian, Slavonic, Baltic, Gothic, Germanic, Osco-Umbrian, Romance, Celtic, and Anatolian languages from their common roots.

2013/08/09 (Fri.): Burton, Robert A., MD, *A Skeptic's Guide to the Mind: What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Tell Us About Ourselves*, St. Martin's Press, 2013, 264 pp. (ISBN 978-1-250-00185-6)

In the book's introduction [p. 7], the author characterizes his book thus: "This book is best read as a late-night meditation. Rather than promising answers to age-old questions about the mind, it is my goal to challenge the underlying assumptions that drive these questions." So, the author is skeptical, challenging not only some proposed answers provided by neuroscience, but also a number of the questions asked by researchers.

Quoting from the final paragraph of the book [p. 232], "study of the mind is a data-based art form, not another branch of the basic sciences." A few pages earlier [p. 229], the author had distilled his book: "The unavoidable takeaway is that a constellation of involuntary mental sensations play a critical role in how we think about what a mind 'is' and 'does.' ... even if there were to be a final and absolute last word on the nature of the mind, we wouldn't recognize it unless we all thought the same way—and that's a physiological impossibility."

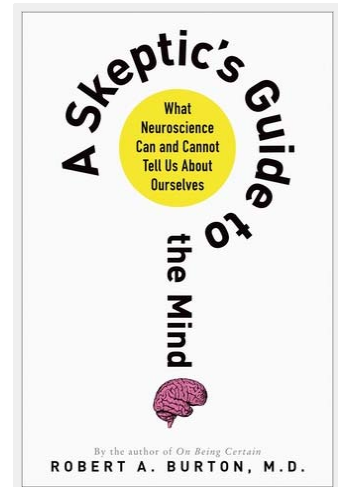
Burton praises advances in neuroscience and the vast amounts of data that have led to a clearer understanding of how the brain works. But understanding the mind and consciousness is quite different from discovering brain and neural functions. We each bring our prejudices to the task of interpreting scientific data. The author likens a neuroscientist to a mystery writer, with clues corresponding to the data collected and weaving of a story around the data being similar to the construction of a novel around the clues [p. 222].

A recurring theme in the book is that the human brain's involuntary mechanisms make unbiased thought impossible, while creating the illusion that "we are rational creatures capable of fully understanding the mind created by these same mechanisms." A full understanding of the mind has eluded philosophers and neuroscientists, despite inquiries spanning thousands of years and phenomenal recent advances in basic neuroscience, thanks to powerful new tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scan. Yet, even lay people like me are often taken aback by blanket claims about why we prefer one soft drink to another and sensationalisms reflected in headlines such as "Bad behavior down to genes, not poor parenting" or "Possible site of free will found in brain."

Given our inherent limitations in understanding the mind, the author advises caution and humility, quoting the following conclusion to a research paper as a model all neuroscientist should follow: "Although we feel we have done a competent job in making a strong case for this analysis, studying empirically, and drawing out relevant implications, our thesis leaves us with one haunting worry that we cannot vanquish. That worry is that this article may contain faulty logic, methodological errors, or poor communication. Let us assure our readers that to the extent this article is imperfect, it is not a sin we have committed knowingly."

According to the author, Heraclitus' proclamation that "Character is destiny" begs the question "What exactly is character?" There is ample evidence that our character changes by the environment. Experiments have shown that we tend to be more generous and helpful in front of a bakery than outside a neutral-smelling store. We think that we are creatures of reason, but a lot of our reasoning is used to justify choices we have already made in our emotional brain.

Under the humorous title "trolleyology," the author alludes to experiments about moral choice involving a moving trolley and humans whose lives are in danger. Suppose you were on a trolley, with nonfunctioning brakes, about to hit and kill five people. You have a split-second to exercise the option of throwing a switch that would divert the trolley to another line, where it would hit and kill a single person. Most people say that they would exercise the option. Now, suppose that to save the five people, you had to push someone in front of the trolley, thus sacrificing him to save five people. Most people say that the act is too repulsive, so they would not do it. Therefore, the answer to the question, "Would you knowingly kill one person to save five others?" isn't a simple yes or no. In the words of psychologist Jonathan Haidt, "The emotions are, in fact, in charge of the temple of morality, and ... moral reasoning is really just a servant masquerading as a high priest" [p. 197]. One point of contention of the author with some neuroscience researchers is whether the brain "hardware" holds all the answers to our thoughts and memories. For example, he faults the grand proclamations made about connectomes (subject of a book I plan to read shortly), predicted by some to hold the key to human self-discovery via direct reading of human memories from the brain wiring, so that preservation of neural circuitry



after death could allow access to those memories [p. 192].

The author maintains that it is difficult even to ascertain the extent to which our minds are independent entities, acting on inputs and other stimuli, versus a collective mind of the kind that allows the lowly slime mold to exhibit extremely intelligent behavior and effectively solve mazes. Here is an experimental set-up: Using a topographic template (relief map) of the UK, researchers placed a slime mold colony on London and ample oat bran on the locations of major British cities. Within a day, the slime mold had extended "legs" that connected the major oat-bran cities. The connections were optimal, in the sense of following the same pattern as the existing road network in the UK. So, the lowly creatures were able to find optimal shortest paths to food locations, arriving at the same routes previously selected by highly trained engineers.

As another example, how does one explain the isolation and antisocial behavior of locusts when food is plentiful and their collective pursuit of any food source, including each other, when the land dries out and food becomes scarce? It is now postulated that locusts seek each other when food is scarce and the increased population density drives the change in their behavior. In fact, until the late 1920s, and before the current understanding came about, two species of locust were thought to exist [p. 99]. Fraternity hazing rituals and certain genocides are other examples of acts that stem from a collective mind.

In closing, Burton's book uses clinical observations, interesting thought experiments, personal experiences, and cutting-edge neuroscience to discuss what neuroscience can teach us and where it fails to enlighten.

[This [52-minute KOED program](#) is a good source for finding out whether the book might interest you.]

2013/08/08 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music, yet sublimely pure, and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show. The true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than Man, which is the touchstone of the highest excellence, is to be found in mathematics as surely as poetry." ~ Bertrand Russell

(2) On the beauty of numbers: "Why are numbers beautiful? It's like asking why Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is beautiful. If you don't see why, someone can't tell you. I know numbers are beautiful. If they aren't beautiful, nothing is." ~ Paul Erdos

(3) Debate on religion and reason: See authors Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*) and Reza Aslan (*No God but God*) in this [90-minute debate](#) from 2007, moderated by Jonathan Kirsch (fast-forward to minute 5:00 to skip the session's opening, or to minute 10:30 to also skip the moderator's introduction).

(4) Kurdish music: This [8-minute video clip](#) contains lively music from Iran's Kurdistan province and some of Rastak Group's behind-the-scenes work to perform it.

(5) The Sun's magnetic field will flip before the end of 2013: Some Web sites are making a big deal of this periodic event that [occurs every 11 years or so](#). The event disrupts some communications and affects the Earth's weather, but just as no one remembers the last solar magnetic field flip in 2000, we will forget the 2013 event soon after it occurs.

2013/08/07 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day (about books): "A book is the only place in which you can examine a fragile thought without breaking it, or explore an explosive idea without fear it will go off in your face. It is one of the few havens remaining where a man's mind can get both provocation and privacy." ~ Edward P. Morgan [He was obviously talking about free societies, not places where the book and its author are burned at the stake.]

(2) [China's richest man](#) lives on \$20 a day: He is known for his simple wardrobe, gritty language, and eating with his workers. He attributes his success to focusing on doing one thing and doing it well.

(3) Don't trust the number of "likes" or visits on Facebook and elsewhere: Many of these indicators of popularity are illusions created by click farms, run by a farm master or click farmer. These modern-day sweat shops in Bangladesh and other poverty-stricken countries pay a fraction of a dollar per day to employees who work in three shifts to click on links and "like" pages in order to create the illusion of popularity or large numbers of visitors.

(4) A record of deception: Those who are optimistic about the election of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani leading to the settlement of the nuclear issue and lifting of economic sanctions, should watch this [video clip](#) from his interviews, where he proudly points to his record of deceiving the West and expanding Iran's nuclear program, while stalling for time in negotiations and signing agreements that were designed to pacify "the illiterate," with no practical impact whatsoever.

2013/08/06 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on Iran.

(1) Iran, the dominant basketball power in Asia: After winning its first three games, Iran crushed India 102-58 at the 27th [FIBA Basketball Championships](#) in Philippines, scoring a tournament-high 14 three-pointers.

(2) Taking on the Supreme Leader: Few in Iran dare to criticize Khamenei directly. [This letter](#), written by political prisoner Mostafa Tajzadeh from Evin Prison, answers Khamenei's challenge to the opposition and, in the process, names many names. For example, he reveals that arrest warrants for members of the reformist camp during the 1999 elections had been issued three days prior to the election and thus had nothing to do with their allegations of fraud and "engineering" of the election results.

(3) Rouhani meter: This [Iran watch Web site](#) has identified 45 of Hassan Rouhani's campaign promises on economy, domestic policy, socio-cultural matters, and foreign policy, and plans to track them over the first 100 days of his presidency, using a scale from 0 (not yet achieved) to 100 (fully achieved).

(4) Are there any women in Iran? Inauguration of a new president, nomination of cabinet ministers, and a former president's future plans, have put Iran in the news quite a lot in recent days. Looking at various news stories and their accompanying photos, it dawned on me that if someone unfamiliar with Iran sees these photos, they might think that there are no women in Iran. Here are some of the photos: [inauguration](#) ceremony, nominated [cabinet](#) ministers, [Quds Day](#) march (during which the so-called "moderate" president marched under the banners "Death to Israel" and "Death to America").

2013/08/05 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Humans of Iran: The photographer who runs the highly popular "Humans of New York" Web site also displays an impressive collection of [photos he took in Iran](#).

(2) Five ways you know you are [watching a Spielberg movie](#): Daddy issues; Streams of light; Awestruck faces; Direct and reflected images intermixed; Music by John Williams.

(3) Appjacking: This happens when an application developed for one purpose is used for a different purpose, good or bad. Sometimes the developer or seller of the app doesn't mind the repurposing; at other times, defensive and legal actions are taken against the appjackers. Among the noteworthy examples listed by *Time* magazine, issue of August 12, 2013, are the following: Use of Instagram in Kuwait to sell sheep and comics (don't ask me why these two specific items), by overlaying price and contact info on photos; Use of LinkedIn for prostitution by escorts listing "sexy massages" on their profiles; Use of Pinterest for disaster relief, by pinning photos of needed items; Use of fake Facebook accounts to artificially boost brand popularity (Facebook has deleted 7M fake accounts over the past 6 months).

(4) Helping the US Congress pass more bills: Writing in his regular "The Awesome Column" for *Time* magazine, issue of August 12, 2013, Joel Stein observes that the US Congress is on track to have a least-productive year, crushing the record low 88 bills it passed in 1995; thus far this year, it has passed a mere 22 bills, some of which, such as naming of a bridge and picking a diameter for a commemorative coin, aren't even real bills. He proposes several bills that might pass easily, including a bill honoring Tom Hanks (whom everyone loves), a bill to create a beer appreciation day, and a bill declaring that America is the greatest country in the world.

2013/08/03 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Spectacular spits around the world: A spit is an elongated landform, attached to shore and extending into the ocean, which is made by the deposition of sand where waves meet a beach at an angle. [\[Pictorial\]](#)

(2) The most beautiful melody in the world: [This piece](#) by Jan Swafford in *Slate* magazine does not answer the question, but provides some food for thought by reviewing melodies the author considers beautiful in the works of classical composers and in pop music.

(3) The Islamic interpretation of moderation is different from its Western meaning: With Iran's President-Elect about to take office, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has been issuing [guidance and directives](#) on how Hassan Rouhani should govern or choose his cabinet. As is common with Khamenei's speeches, he talks in general and abstract terms and leaves it to his cronies to translate what he meant; this gives him deniability, because he can always claim that his intentions were misread. In his comments about what the Leader meant in a recent speech, IRGC General Mohammad Reza Naghdi has said: "Moderation has a religious and an Islamic meaning, while also carrying a Western interpretation. ... Islamic moderation is staying on the path of the Imam's course, that of velayat and the original course of the revolution." A cleric close to Khamenei had earlier said that, "We should not view moderation to be the opposite of possessing the jihadi spirit ... moderation does not mean retreat vis-a-vis the desires of the enemy. Rather than being deceived by the enemies, we must deceive them ..."

(4) Ellen DeGeneres to host the 2014 Oscar event: The [Academy Awards show](#) will be aired by ABC on Sunday, March 2, 2014. Ellen's warmth, humanity, and gift of comedy were cited as the reasons for her selection.

2013/08/02 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) How much caffeine is in your coffee? [This graphic](#) compares various coffee shops.

(2) Top 10 [most popular Facebook pages in Iran](#) (listed in order, from 1 to 10): Manoto TV; Ebi (singer);

Parazit (political show); YAS (rapper); Shadmehr Aghili (singer); Dariush Eghbali (singer); Golshifteh Farahani (actress); Radio Javan; Googoosh (singer); Mehran Modiri (director, actor). An extended list contains BBC Persian at 12th, Mohammad Reza Shajarian at 16th, and Shahin Najafi at 20th.

(3) Statue of Iranian poet Ferdowsi in [Rome's Ferdowsi Square](#).

(4) The soccer ball that generates electricity: The [Socket ball](#) converts kinetic energy into electricity and stores it in a built-in battery. Thirty minutes of play time is enough to power an LED lamp for 3 hours.

(5) The German coach of the US national soccer team: [Jurgen Klinsmann](#) has worked miracles on the US team, which is currently on a record 11-game winning streak and has just won the Gold Cup for the first time since 2007. Klinsman was part of the German national team that won the 1990 World Cup and played as a lethal scorer in several European countries, before retiring as a player in 1998.

2013/07/31 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Double-positive riddle: Professor Sharp was attending a lecture in which the speaker talked about the fact that in many languages, double-negatives cancel each other out, leaving a weak positive. For example, "I didn't do too badly on my test" means that I did okay. The speaker went on to say that a double-positive does not make a negative in any language. At this point, Professor Sharp made a comment that embarrassed the speaker. What did he say?

(2) Heart-wrenching photos of the aftermath of the train crash in Spain, killing 78. [[Pictorial](#)]

(3) No, this isn't [Noah's cruise ship](#); it's a hotel.

(4) East-West fusion music: Bond strings group plays "Fuego." [[Video](#)]

(5) Interesting mathematical puzzle: [This puzzle is about playing chess, but it isn't a chess puzzle; to solve it, you need no knowledge of chess, only awareness of the fact that the probability p of winning a chess game, assuming equally skilled players, is slightly greater than 1/2 when you are the white side rather than black.] To be admitted as a member of a chess club, you have to play 3 matches against the last admitted member, winning 2 straight matches. Assuming that the sides alternate playing white and black, is it to your advantage to be the white side in the first match?

2013/07/30 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) East-West fusion music: Bond string group plays "[Fuego](#)."

(2) One of the lowest lows in US journalism: [Watch Fox News embarrass itself](#) while interviewing Reza Aslan about his new book on Jesus as a historical figure. I happen to disagree with Aslan on many issues, but the Fox News anchor interviewing him seems to believe that because he is a Muslim, he should not be writing about Jesus.

(3) The slippery slope of censorship: Twitter's policy of country-based censorship makes sense to some people, who think positively of the blockage of a neo-Nazi account in Germany at the request of the German government, citing existing German laws against the use of Nazi symbols. However, many other country requests have not been acted upon, and no one knows why. And this is the problem with the scheme. Many countries have laws that do not make sense. Honoring all such laws would be problematic and against human decency. Arbitrarily selecting which requests to honor presents a different kind of problem, because it would place Twitter and similar organizations above nation-states. It would be best to simply say this is our scheme of operation; you can block all of our content in your country or else live with the rules like everyone else.

(4) Asian countries have both the [fastest and slowest Internet speeds](#): Hong Kong leads the way with an average peak Internet connection speed of 54.1 Mbps. Iran's 2.9 Mbps is the slowest, not only in Asia, but in the entire world. For reference, US ranks 14th in the world.

2013/07/29 (Mon.): Here are four socioeconomic items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I predict that the first person to live to 150 is probably already in middle age, and that most people in their 20s now will probably live to at least that old." ~ Aubrey de Grey, computer scientist and author of *The Mitochondrial Free Radical Theory of Aging*

(2) Stop complaining about expensive burgers at US restaurants: You have to pay an average of more than \$25 for a burger in N'Djamena, Chad, \$20 in Luanda, Angola, and \$12.50 in Geneva, Switzerland. [Info from *Time* magazine, issue of August 5, 2013.]

(3) Babies have innate senses of morality, justice, and bigotry: Experiments at [Yale Baby Lab](#) have shown that babies as young as 3 months old can distinguish right from wrong (when given a choice, they overwhelmingly choose a puppet that was shown to be nice, over one that acted mean). They also prefer puppets that were mean to other puppets previously shown to be mean (punishment, justice). On the dark side, babies approve of mean behavior toward puppets that are different from them, as reflected, for example, in affinity for certain kinds of food (bias, bigotry). Fascinating stuff!

(4) Jane Austen's image to appear on a British bank note: The Bank of England has revealed its new design for

a **10-pound banknote**, to become available in 2017, that bears an image of the novelist Jane Austen. Meanwhile, the woman who campaigned for the new banknote has received rape and death threats on Twitter.

2013/07/28 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "We know there are about 80 supercentenarians [people 110 years of age or older] out there. And my take-home from seeing photos of them recently was this: you don't want to be a supercentenarian. ... I'm not convinced that I want to be 120 or 130." ~ Walter Bortz, 83-year-old Professor of Medicine at Stanford University and expert on robust aging, who recently ran his 10th Boston Marathon and 43rd marathon overall, on the prospects of living to 150 and beyond

(2) Climate change causing bumpier flights: We have all heard about extreme storms, rising sea levels, and species migration as consequences of climate change. Experts are adding bumpier flights to that list. Even though we are continually assured that modern aircraft can withstand the worse turbulence the atmosphere has to offer, we tend to hold on to the armrest upon the gentlest bumps. "The effect that climate change is having on flying conditions boils down to warming by different amounts in different places. It is the difference of the temperature between the North Pole and the equator at flight altitudes that drives the jet stream, and the difference is getting larger due to climate change. At 10 km up it is getting warmer more at the equator than at the North Pole." [Adapted from *E&T* magazine, issue of August 2013.]

(3) The world's first temple? I was fascinated when reading about Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, a site now claimed to be an 11,000-year-old temple. If this hypothesis is confirmed, it would upset the current thinking that temples and other sites of worship were not built at the time of hunter-gatherers but came about only after humans settled into agricultural communities. It seems that some sacred rituals were indeed carried out at the site, but some skeptics believe the site to be a collection of residences, not a monument specifically built for sacred rituals. The dating of the site does not seem to be in doubt, and this in itself is impressive, as it predates Stonehenge by 5000 years. This [NPR report](#) considers the ongoing debate about the nature of the site.

2013/07/27 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The most powerful thing we can do today is to get people to take a walk ... that's a tangible, proven thing." ~ Walter Bortz, 83-year-old Professor of Medicine at Stanford University and expert on robust aging, who recently ran his 10th Boston Marathon and 43rd marathon overall

(2) Most memorable Darwin Award: The posthumously awarded Darwins recognize "individuals who self-selected themselves out of the human gene pool via death by their own stupidity." A recent laureate was a zookeeper, who tried to cure an elephant's fit of constipation by administering an enema, and then drowning in you-know-what.

(3) Passenger aircraft safety has improved immensely: The recent crash of Asiana Airlines Boeing 777 in San Francisco, killing two teenagers, was actually a testament to the success of safety enhancements in passenger aircraft. Aerospace experts have confirmed that the aircraft stood up well to the stresses resulting from the crash-landing and that pilot error was likely the main cause of the accident.

(4) Applying computer science to longevity and graceful aging: Based on extensive data analysis on biological databases, computer scientist Aubrey de Grey has come to the conclusion that deaths from aging result from only **seven kinds of damage**. We should focus on applying technology to reverse or repair each category of damage, one by one, in order to extend human life beyond the current upper limit of about 120. Three of these are at the cellular level: number of cells in an organ falling too low, because dying cells are not regenerated; number of cells rising too high because of cells dividing when they are not supposed to; number of cells becoming too high, because cells that are supposed to die refuse to do so. Four categories of damage are at the molecular level: two kinds are intracellular and result from the accumulation of junk, byproducts of normal metabolic processes; two other kinds, occurring outside cells, are responsible for diseases like Alzheimer's.

2013/07/26 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) German is compared with four other languages in this [1-minute spoof](#).

(2) Robot rock band: Okay, it was bound to happen sooner or later. The **Z-Machines rock band**, currently popular in the Japanese party scene, is fronted by guitarist and singer Mach, backed up by keyboardist Cosmo and six-armed drummer Ashura.

(3) My fears for open-access science/tech publishing are being confirmed: In the open-access model, authors pay to have their work published and readers can access the published work for free; that is, the opposite of the currently prevalent model in which publication is mostly free and the costs are recovered from readers via subscription or pay-per-use fees. The open-access publication fee (sometimes called "article processing charge") is typically paid by authors' institutions or from their research grants. It seems like a reasonable model, until you stop to think more deeply. The more papers an open-access publisher accepts, the more money it makes, so there is no immediate incentive for quality control. The reader-pays model, on the other hand, has built-in

quality control, because no one would pay the subscription or access fee for a low-quality product. By far the largest component of publication cost is ensuring high quality: this involves careful referee selection (good referees are typically very busy, so it takes many rounds of contact to get them to commit and then to follow up until they submit their reviews) and extensive copy-editing (again in multiple rounds, to ensure that technical accuracy is not compromised). Most open-access publishers either have no refereeing at all or use staff-picked referees, followed by staff selection of articles based on mechanical rules such as simple majority. Today's open-access publishing is, for the most part, vanity publishing in which authors who are willing to pay the costs amass long lists of publications that they can put on their CVs or Web sites as evidence of research productivity. This is no different from people paying the publication costs out-of-pocket to have a novel/memoir "published" or paying to have their poems appear in anthologies that no one ever reads. Hence, I wasn't surprised to hear that Hindawi, one of the predatory open-access publishers, that spams experts and non-experts in various fields to recruit journal "guest editors" as a way of gaining access to a large number of articles in one fell swoop at virtually no cost to them, has been more profitable than Elsevier, a publisher with a much longer track record. [Jeffrey Beall's [blog about Hindawi](#) and its profits.]

2013/07/25 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The original is unfaithful to the translation." ~ Author Jorge Luis Borges, himself a translator, who believed that whereas many a translation butchers the original, there are instances where excellent translations add value to an author's work

(2) Electronic gadgets don't mix with water: According to *Time* magazine, issue of July 29, 2013, making cell phones, tablets, and other electronics waterproof, or at least water-resistant, is a definite trend. People use their favorite gadgets everywhere, and losing an expensive device to a spill or splash is a downer. Sony is a leader in this area, offering waterproof cell phones and tablets that are even sleeker than the industry-leading Apple products. Apple itself has shown no interest in going this way, although other companies are doing brisk business by offering water-proofing cases for its products.

(3) On the benefits of bilingualism: A special report in *Time* magazine, issue of July 29, 2013, reviews the results of recent research on how bilingualism affects the development of human brain. Among interesting pieces of information in the article are the facts that language acquisition ability begins a few months prior to birth and peaks before a child turns 1. In utero, babies learn to recognize their mothers' language rhythms, so if the mothers are bilingual, they develop affinity for both languages. Those sounds and their characteristic rhythms are absorbed by the baby's brain, thus becoming comfortingly familiar at birth. This is why a newborn pays more attention to someone speaking his/her mother's tongue than another language. Researchers have found that "multilingual people ... are better at reasoning, at multitasking, at grasping and reconciling conflicting ideas. They work faster and expend less energy doing so, and as they age, they retain their cognitive faculties longer, delaying the onset of dementia and even full-blown Alzheimer's disease."

2013/07/23 (Tue.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born." ~ Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani education activist who was shot in the head by the Taliban, addressing the UN on her 16th birthday

(2) On the Snowden leaks: "Comrades: cancel your Facebook accounts; you've been working for free as CIA informants." ~ Iris Varela, Venezuelan minister, in a tweet

(3) Kissing the feet of a Baha'i boy: I am generally skeptical of members of Iran's power circles, enjoying material wealth and lining their pockets for decades, suddenly realizing the brutality and injustice of the Islamic regime and joining the ranks of dissidents. I can't help but think that these individuals are hedging their bets, now that the regime seems weakened and internally divided. However, I found the action of one such nouveau-dissident in [kissing the feet of a Baha'i boy](#) quite touching. Even before the Islamic Revolution, most Iranians viewed Baha'is with disdain, and the situation got much worse when the Islamists came to power, leading to many executions of Baha'i leaders and imprisonment of citizens who simply practiced the faith or taught the Baha'i youth, who are banned from attending universities. Mohammad Nourizad, an influential Iranian journalist and filmmaker (a former ally of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a writer for the ultraconservative state-run newspaper *Keyhan*), says that when he publicly kissed the feet of 4-year-old Artin, whose grandfather was executed several years ago and whose parents are now in prison, he was following the example of Pope Francis.

(4) Britain is being taken over by Jews: Mehr News Agency, a mouthpiece of Iran's Islamic regime, has published a story claiming that Kate Middleton's mother, with the maiden name Goldsmith, was a Jew, making Kate and the new royal offspring Jews as well. [The story](#) goes on to claim that Princess Diana's mother was also a Jew, making her, and sons William and Harry, Jewish. Wait, there is more: Diana was an illegitimate child of her Jewish mother from an extramarital love affair with a Jewish banker.

2013/07/21 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The US soccer team has advanced to the Gold Cup semifinals after beating El Salvador 5-1: LA Galaxy star Landon Donovan scored a goal and was involved in the other four. This was the **9th straight US win** in international competition.

(2) California wildfire: **Weeklong blaze** near the scenic mountain community of Idyllwild (Palm Springs area) has been contained with help from rainfall, leading to the lifting of evacuation order for area residents.

(3) Several California community colleges are told to shape up: If these colleges do not make improvements in maintaining academic standards, they **may lose accreditation**, and along with that, eligibility for state funding and federal financial aid.

(4) The number pi holds all the secrets of our universe: It is well-known that pi is an irrational number, which means that pi's decimal or binary representation is infinite and non-repeating. If you let the digits stand for letters and other symbols, somewhere in that infinite sequence is the name of every person you love, the date and manner of your death, and answers to all scientific questions. So, for example, the facts and formulas for Einstein's theory of general relativity were somewhere among the digits of pi before he ever discovered them. There are two problems with this line of thought, recently promoted on Facebook. The first problem is practical: so what if every theory is already written in pi, because so is the exact opposite or negation of that theory; names of people you hate or don't know are also represented, as well as every possible date. Per Shannon's theories, a random sequence contains no information at all. The second problem is a deep mathematical objection: the fact that pi is a non-repeating decimal does not imply that its expansion contains all possible combinations of digits; the latter property is suspected and is likely present, but it has never been proven (there are examples of irrational numbers that do not contain all possible sequences). [Adapted from Robert W. Lucky's column in *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of July 2013.]

2013/07/20 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Spectacular overhanging rocks: Many of the rocks in **this pictorial** have appeared on Facebook and in other posts, seeming both majestic and frightening, because of people sitting or standing near their edge.

(2) My letter to the editor of a technical journal: On May 5, 2013, I posted a letter I had written to *Communications of the ACM* to take issue with an article it had published that was dismissive of massive open on-line courses, or MOOCs. My letter, entitled "Too Early for Verdict on MOOCs," has been published in the July 2013 issue of *CACM* (see the **2nd letter to the editor**).

(3) Space for electronic devices in cars: Auto industry engineers constantly track what items people bring into their cars and design **special spaces for them**. Customers today require more than just cup-holders. The trouble is that cellphones and tablets don't have standard dimensions (neither do cups, I guess) and new products are introduced at a faster rate than the four-year redesign cycle for a car.

(4) Iran has fallen behind by 6 months in its **loan payback to the World Bank**: The bank's nonperforming loan list includes only one other country: Zimbabwe.

(5) To steal a mockingbird: **Harper Lee**, whose only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was a literary and commercial success (winning a Pulitzer Prize and still selling 750,000 copies per year), is in a court battle with her former agent Samuel Pinkus, whom the 87-year-old author accuses of duping her into assigning to him the copyright of her book for no compensation. The same agent is named in a lawsuit by Thom Steinbeck, son of the famed author John, over proceeds from his father's books and associated movie projects.

2013/07/18 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) World's largest building completed in China: **A mini-city** the size of 329 football fields and 328 feet high, the building houses a water park, two 1000-room hotels, a 500-foot-wide video screen, and an IMAX theater.

(2) The legacy of Institute for Advanced Study: Located within walking distance of Princeton University, but not affiliated with it, IAS is one of the last remaining scientific research centers in the US, where geniuses are given complete freedom to work on problems that interest them. With an endowment of \$650M, the future of IAS is more or less assured, but similar research centers have gone or are going the way of dinosaurs. IAS director is alarmed that our society is moving toward short-term thinking, focusing on research problems with immediate industrial rewards. Meanwhile, China is pouring money into R&D at a rate that should allow it to overtake the US in research expenditures within a decade. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of July 22, 2013.]

(3) Rouhani supportive of Assad and Nasrallah: Iran's President-Elect **has sent messages** to Syria's Bashar Assad and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, indicating support for the two regional allies of Iran.

(4) UCSB Emeritus Professor Roger C. Wood passed away yesterday: The former Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, who played a key role in the early stages of growth and increased prominence for UCSB's College of Engineering, Computer Science Department, ECE Department, and ECE's Computer Engineering Group, passed away at his home. He was surrounded by family and friends in his final hours. Memorial services have not been planned at this time. This 2009 **"ECE Profile of Distinction"** interview

reveals some of his passions and contributions. Roger was still very active when I joined UCSB in 1988. He was honored as an effective teacher multiple times and played intramural sports up to age 70. May his soul rest in peace! [UCSB's College of Engineering posted this "[In Memoriam](#)" on July 26, 2013.]

2013/07/17 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) [Stick-on eyes](#), for those who want to sleep in class.

(2) Iran sweeps Germany in volleyball: While I was out of town and not paying attention to sports news, something almost miraculous happened. Iran's national volleyball team [beat the powerful German team](#) 3-0 in a World League match. Germany returned the favor the following night by beating Iran 3-0.

(3) Iranian director under attack: Mohsen Makhmalbaf is [taking criticism from all sides](#) for his attendance at an Israeli film festival and comments he made there: He had predicted that he will face accusations of working for the CIA and Mossad, when he dedicated his prize for the film "The Gardener" to all the people of Iran, Israel, and Palestine who have struggled for peace. He further commented: "We, the Iranian intellectuals, are divided into two groups. Of course, both groups yearn for peace. But one group, apart from yearning, struggles for it as well. The other group is sitting, waiting for Israel to attack, and then issue statements condemning Israel. Why not light a candle rather than curse the darkness."

(4) [Ahmadinejad's plans](#) for remaining in the circle of power: He is reportedly forming an "Office of the Former President," with a staff of 25, as part of Iran's Presidential Complex and subject to its rules and funding, citing the benefits the country would derive from the expertise of a former president. Apparently, these benefits did not apply during his own 8-year tenure. Seeing what has happened to other Iranian presidents before him, Ahmadinejad has good reasons to try to have a place for himself, with armed security guards, outside the notorious Evin Prison.

2013/07/16 (Tue.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When someone you adore leaves you, do not despair. It was their loss, not yours. You lost someone who didn't care for you. They lost someone who loved them." ~ Anonymous

(2) Trial by media and a jury of millions: Those who feel compelled to protest the "not guilty" verdict of the George Zimmerman trial should direct their time and energy elsewhere. Our legal system is pretty good. There are experts (judge, prosecutor, defense team) working with a jury formed via a selection process with many safeguards. They go through mountains of evidence and testimony that are in no way available to the general public (that sees the case through the filter of self-serving pundits on news programs and talk shows). Like any human system, mistakes are inevitable in legal proceedings. That's why we have safeguards in place to deal with such mistakes: appeals, higher courts, watchdog groups (both within and outside government). The time and energy spent on such media frenzies are better spent on working toward improving numerous other social systems that are in much worse shape than our courts.

(3) Egypt tries "streetocracy": Having failed in their first-ever experience with democracy, Egyptians took to the streets again in hopes of steering their new-found freedoms and rights in a new direction, even though the new direction they are getting is really the same old militocracy. Yet, they can't be blamed for fearing a fate similar to Iran, where the establishment of Islamic Republic, with heavy initial support from intellectuals (because of promises of the clergy staying out of the day-to-day governmental decision-making), turned into a blatant theocracy.

(4) Exploiting children in spectator sports: Fashion and pageant industries are known to exploit children for financial gain. Now, through competitive leagues for basketball and other popular sports, profiteers are exploiting second-graders and other very young children. Parents, in part driven by their own misguided ambitions and partly lured by the excitement of their kids, spend large sums of money on training and travel in connection with these leagues. Youth psychologists warn that too much competition too early can burn kids out.

[Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of July 22, 2013.]

2013/07/14 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Hello readers: I am back from a trip to Milwaukee and Wisconsin Dells, where I attended the wedding of a relative. The wedding was held on a small sandy beach on the shores of the Wisconsin River in the Dells area. We were shuttled to/from the wedding site by boats. The boat rides through [the scenic Dells](#) constituted highlights of our trip. The geological marvels known as the Dells were formed some 15,000 years ago, after a glacier turned the Wisconsin River into a new channel through the center of a sandstone plain. French-Canadian trappers used their word "Dalles," meaning a trough or narrow passage, to describe this portion of the Wisconsin River. The Wisconsin Dells, nicknamed "The Waterpark Capital of the World," is a bustling tourist town with many attractions during the warm season. Its year-round population is about 2700.

(2) University of California President named: Janet Napolitano, US Secretary of Homeland Security and former governor of Arizona, has been named the [20th President of the UC System](#). The University Regents are

expected to approve the appointment in their meeting of July 18.

(3) Mr. Haloo's new poem: Poetry reading by Iranian dissidents continues, after their main venue was closed. In [this poem](#) (#151), Mr. Haloo contemplates a new twist on the classic tale of the fox and the crow.

2013/07/10 (Wed.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Dustin Huffman feels the women's pain: He reminisces about his dressing as a woman in "Tootsie" and what he learned from it about [women's fight](#) against gender stereotypes and other social injustices.

(2) Massacre in Cairo: A young Egyptian photographer is said to have documented the entire length of a Cairo street rally by supporters of the ousted president, Mohamed Morsi, that [resulted in 51 casualties](#), up to and including the photographer's own death by a sniper bullet.

(3) Eloquent, politically savvy boy: This [12-year-old Egyptian](#) puts a lot of adults to shame by the way he discusses current events in his country.

(4) Defining modesty based on hijab may be wrong: [This proclamation](#) by the Iranian president-elect Hassan Rouhani has been welcome by many Iranians, despite its tentative tone ("may be wrong"). In a recent interview with a weekly Iranian youth magazine, Rouhani also condemned the politicized approach to dealing with young people and argued against Internet censorship and the government meddling in the citizens' private lives.

2013/07/09 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Riddle of the day: How much does the cheapest possible concert cost?

Answer: \$0.45 [50 Cent, with Nickleback].

(2) Ice cream for dinner: Sounds like a [dream come true](#) for most kids and many grownups, but this is serious stuff. Options include spicy bacon ice cream in a bourbon-maple base, carrot ginger sorbet, and feta ice cream served over fresh watermelon.

(3) Architect's hidden message in the floor tiles of a UCLA building discovered: The message, installed during a 2011 renovation project for the engineering building, spells out ["lo and behold!"](#) to memorialize the first Internet message ever sent and UCLA's role in it. The 1969 message was supposed to be "LOGIN" but was accidentally transmitted as "LO" instead. In May 2013, a computer science student noticed that the 14 bars of eight tiles could be interpreted as ASCII symbols, when the dark and light tiles are viewed as 0s and 1s, respectively. The student posted his discovery on a UCLA Reddit forum, and word spread from there.

2013/07/06 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Forough Farrokhzad: The rebellious Iranian poetess, whose autobiographical poems broke many taboos, has always been popular with fans of Persian literature, but her current prominence among the younger generation is fueled, in part, by the religious extremism that permeates the sociopolitical atmosphere of Iran. Her books, and books about her, are much in demand, to the chagrin of Islamic Republic officials.

(2) For Elham Asghari: [Cartoon by Mana Neyestani](#), for the Iranian swimmer whose record has not been recognized because her swimwear isn't "officially sanctioned."

(3) Today is international kissing day: Kisses come in various forms and have different meanings. Enjoy a kiss to/from your child or parent, a kiss of gratefulness, a kiss for a long-lost friend with whom you have just reconnected, and, of course, a kiss for your special soulmate.

(4) Volleyball World League: After trailing 0-2, Iran's national team rallied to beat Cuba 3-2 on July 5. Tonight, [Iran beat Cuba again 3-1](#).



2013/07/05 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Contact lenses with telescopic vision: Prototype contact lenses allow the wearer to zoom in on something to a magnification of 2.8. [[Popular Science](#), posted on July 2, 2013.]

(2) Douglas Engelbart dead at 88: As the [inventor of the computer mouse](#) and many other pieces of modern computers, Engelbart fueled the rapid growth of successful computer companies, yet he wasn't in the limelight and did not share in the fortune.

(3) The contrast between Iran and Egypt: Egyptians took to the streets in millions to demand political and economic reforms, and they got their wishes (although, the fact that an elected president was ousted by the unelected military leaves a bad taste in one's mouth). Iranians tied their destiny to a chameleon who, after decades of insider status at the highest levels of the regime, is championing reforms. Meanwhile, various regime mouthpieces are asking people to lower their expectations and be resigned to the fact that reforms will take time. Those in control of the Islamic Republic have made their views known that Iran's president is the country's

economic manager, with very limited powers. The pacifying election of Hassan Rouhani to presidency might have set back the causes of democracy and human rights by years, if not decades.

2013/07/03 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally. Make it the object of pursuit, and it leads us a wild-goose chase, and is never attained. Follow some other object, and very possibly we may find that we have caught happiness without dreaming of it." ~ Nathaniel Hawthorne

(2) Chief of Iranian TV worries about images of women in sports arenas: "Spectators with different cultural backgrounds and clothing were present [during the Iran-Italy volleyball match in Rome] and, given the warmer weather, the situation will get worse in Cuba. We have contacted our cultural counterparts in Cuba to ensure that spectators show up in sweatshirts and pants, in order to avoid similar conditions. ... Not broadcasting sporting events might drive our people toward satellite channels." [Note: There will be two volleyball matches between Iran and Cuba on July 5 and July 7, with at least one of them [streamed live](#).]

(3) The former Shah's first wife dead at 91: [Princess Fawzia Fuad](#), Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's first wife, who was divorced in 1948 after a 9-year marriage because she did not give birth to an heir to the throne, died yesterday in Alexandria, Egypt.

(4) Jazzy French music: Zaz performs "[Je Veux](#)" (with English subtitles).

2013/07/02 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Every man is a suffering-machine and a happiness-machine combined. The two functions work together harmoniously, with a fine and delicate precision, on the give-and-take principle." ~ Mark Twain

(2) The game of happiness: The July 8/15, 2013, double-issue of *Time* magazine has a series of features about happiness and factors that contribute to it. The following tidbits are taken from the issue.

- More than 1/3 of US marriages now start on-line and those unions are slightly less likely to end in divorce.

- Commuting is one of the most-hated activities; better spend money on eliminating a commute than on a large suburban house.

- Homeowners aren't any happier than renters; they are more likely to experience stress and pack extra pounds as a result.

- Losing a job crushes a person's sense of well-being, more from losing social status and self-esteem than from lack of income.

(3) Hazards of firefighting: All but one of the 20 members of an elite firefighting team in Arizona perished when a [fire northwest of Phoenix](#), fueled by winds and extremely dry conditions, turned on them, leaving them no option but to deploy their last-ditch emergency shelters, which proved no match for the intense fire. Hats off to these brave young men!

(4) Off-the-charts temperatures: A large number of [US Air flights](#) out of Phoenix were cancelled due to high temperatures, which were literally "off the charts." Due to decreased air density, an airplane needs a longer runway to take off in high heat. A couple of days ago, the temperature in Phoenix hit 119, whereas pilot charts went up to 118, leading to cancellations.

2013/07/01 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Memorializing President Dwight D. Eisenhower: Eisenhower's family, would have liked a modest memorial, a simple statue in the middle of green space, consistent with his humble approach to the presidency. The Eisenhower Memorial Commission, however, decided to proceed with its plans involving [an ambitious design](#) by architect Frank Gehry, to be housed near the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC.

(2) Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee: This is the title of a [YouTube series](#) produced by Jerry Seinfeld in which he discusses various topics, including the nature of comedy, sitting in a car or restaurant, while sipping hot coffee or eating. Guest comedians so far include Alec Baldwin, Sarah Silverman, David Letterman, Mel Brooks, Chris Rock, and Don Rickles, and Gal Elmaleh (French comedian).

(3) The greatest movies of all time: I like lists, because they make us think about things in perspective. Whether or not we agree with the list-maker's selection and ordering of the items, seeing our favorites is reassuring and wondering about where we would place any item that didn't make the list is a great pastime. The top selections change depending on the ranker and over time, but a number of classics tend to appear near the top every time. With this introduction, here are [Entertainment Weekly's top-10](#) in its list of 100 best movies ever. (1) "Citizen Kane," directed by Orson Welles, 1941. (2) "The Godfather," Francis Ford Coppola, 1972. (3) "Casablanca," Michael Curtiz, 1942. (4) "Bonnie and Clyde," Arthur Penn, 1967. (5) "Psycho," Alfred Hitchcock, 1960. (6) "It's a Wonderful Life," Frank Capra, 1946. (7) "Mean Streets," Martin Scorsese, 1973. (8) "The Gold Rush," Charlie Chaplin, 1925. (9) "Nashville," Robert Altman, 1975. (10) "Gone With the Wind," Victor Fleming, 1939. Some of my favorites from the rest of the list are "Jaws" at number 18, "Some Like it Hot" #21, "Vertigo"

#38, "The Silence of the Lambs" #61, "Network" #63, and "Lawrence of Arabia" #76.

(4) The greatest books of all time: In the same issue where it presents a list of 100 best movies ever (as well as TV shows, music albums, and stage plays), *Entertainment Weekly* also rank-orders the 100 best novels ever. Here are the top 10 selections. (1) *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy. (2) *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald. (3) *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen. (4) *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens. (5) *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. (6) *My Antonia*, Willa Cather. (7) *Harry Potter* (the series), J. K. Rowling. (8) *The Rabbit Quartet*, John Updike. (9) *Beloved*, Toni Morrison. (10) *Charlotte's Web*, E. B. White.

2013/06/30 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) An exhibit of paintings by Naneh Hassan: **Pictorial**

(2) Ideas and campaigns to spark social change: On the "Creative for Good" Web site of the World Economic Forum, you can see a selection of **61 great ideas** that help bring about social change to our world by taking small steps. One example is a campaign that urges people in India to ring doorbells when they hear a violent argument inside a home. Another is the videogame SPENT that helps impress on the well-to-do how difficult it is to live on \$1000 a month.

(3) On the benefits of processing metadata: While we in the US fret over loss of privacy due to the release of our electronic communication patterns, several developing countries are benefitting immensely from researchers getting access to anonymized **records of cell phone calls** provided to them by major telecomm companies. They use the data for predicting the spread of diseases, preventing violence, studying population shifts, and planning for emergencies.

(4) Poems by Google: Here's a new geeky pastime, according to *Newsweek* magazine, issue of June 26, 2013. Type a phrase into the Google search bar and read aloud, with feeling and conviction, all of its suggestions for how the search phrase should continue. The continuations you get depend on your search history and what others have been searching for lately. Here is what I got for "I want to":

I want to know what love is
I want to break free
I want to hold your hand
I want to marry ryan banks
I want to draw a cat for you

2013/06/29 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Supermoon images from around the world: On June 23, the moon was about 13.5% closer to the Earth than normal (a once-per-year event), leading to some **spectacular photos** of the 30% brighter full moon.

(2) In World League Volleyball, **Iran beat Italy 3-1**: Apparently, the match was broadcast live on Iranian TV. In one frame, posted on Facebook, a couple among the spectators is shown kissing. This prompted a reader's tongue-in-cheek comment: "I will no longer allow my kids to watch Iranian TV after 10:00 PM."

(3) Silvio Berlusconi convicted, but will likely never serve time: The former Italian Prime Minister was sentenced by an all-female panel of judges to serve **7 years in prison** for having sex with an underage belly dancer and for using his office to do favors for her. By the time his appeals have been exhausted, however, the 76-year-old Berlusconi will be too old to serve jail time according to the law in Italy.

(4) Rabbi David Wolpe on the necessity of **recognizing gay marriages**: "When I sent a letter to my congregation stating that the clergy had unanimously decided to perform same sex marriages I received a good deal of reaction. Some people were angry, some bewildered, some hurt. The letters I most treasure were those from women and men who had felt marginalized, who were grateful that their home was at last welcoming them home. Reading those letters and having those conversations, witnessing the healing after hiddenness and estrangement I could only recall the reaction of my 16 year old daughter when I told her I was sending the letter: 'What took you so long?' "

(5) US soccer: A couple of hours ago, I watched a weird soccer game between Los Angeles Galaxy and San Jose Earthquake. The game was 2-0 in favor of LA in minute 65 and 2-1 as time was running out. Then, SJ scored 2 goals in stoppage time (minutes 92 and 93) to win the game, as the LA defense went to sleep. This was the first time I have seen two goals scored by a team in stoppage time.

2013/06/28 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Finally some relief for the middle class in California: A just-passed **state "scholarship" legislation** would cut by up to 40% (gradually over the next four years) UC and Cal State tuitions for some students.

(2) Why does the air smell so good after it rains? Our affection for the **scent of rain** may have been inherited from our ancestors who needed rainy weather for survival. When rain falls after a prolonged dry spell, it releases certain oils that are secreted by plants during dry periods. Rain also releases some chemicals produced by soil-dwelling bacteria. Another component of the smell of rain may come from ozone. It is this last

component (carried by wind from neighboring areas) that some people detect when they "smell rain coming."

(3) Persian cuisine was featured in yesterday's *Huffington Post*: [Pictorial, with links](#) to recipes.

(4) Hassan Rouhani's doctorate may be annulled: Glasgow Caledonian University, where the President-Elect of Iran received a PhD degree in the 1990s, has confirmed the [receipt of allegations](#) that Mr. Rouhani plagiarized sections of his PhD thesis from a book authored by Hashem Kamali. The University is said to be investigating the allegations.

2013/06/26 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) American Society of Engineering Education celebrates its 120th year: The year 1893 was a remarkable year for engineers and engineering. The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago opened on a grand scale, featuring, among other marvels, a giant rotating wheel with a capacity of 2160 riders, designed by the young engineer George W. G. Ferris, Jr. Ten-story "skyscrapers" were just starting to appear. Electric power distribution was still in its infancy, making the unprecedented bright lights of the Chicago Exposition harbingers of electrical engineering advances still to come. [Adapted from Henry Petroski's article in *Prism* magazine, summer 2013.]

(2) A review of key conflicts between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other Iranian officials over the past few years: This BBC Persian [clickable image](#) has an introductory text, plus 22 instances of conflicts between the outgoing Iranian president and other Islamic Republic officials.

(3) Another plagiarism accusation against an Iranian politician: President-elect Hassan Rouhani, who got his PhD at Glasgow Caledonian University under the name "Hassan Fereidoon," has been [accused of plagiarizing](#) parts of his doctoral dissertation, based on a just-released one-sheet abstract. The full dissertation is said to be unavailable for analysis.

(4) Iranian authorities won't recognize [a woman's accomplishment in swimming](#): Elhamolsadat Asghari, a 32-year-old ocean swimmer recently swam 18 km in about 9 hours, but Iranian authorities refuse to acknowledge and record this feat, citing the fact that no type of swimwear is authorized for women. What makes this feat even more remarkable is the fact that the swimmer was burdened with about 6 kg of extra weight due to her Islamic cover. The swimmer has been urged to switch to a different sport.

2013/06/25 (Tue.): Nahin, Paul J., *The Logician and the Engineer: How George Boole and Claude Shannon Created the Information Age*, Princeton University Press, 2013.

Despite what one might think from its title, and classification by our campus' library at UCSB as "biography," this book isn't a double-biography of two computing pioneers. Rather, it is a technical book that puts the contributions of mathematician George Boole (to Boolean logic) and electrical engineer Claude Shannon (to switching circuits and information theory) in perspective, connecting them to each other and to modern topics such as thermodynamics of computing and quantum information processing.

The author tries to explain some concepts in gentle, nontechnical terms, but it is fair to say that readers not already familiar with Boolean algebra, switching circuits, and information theory will find it difficult to follow all the details. For computer science/engineering students and professionals, however, the book is quite useful as background reading and for grasping the importance of the collaborative nature of the work by Boole and Shannon, even though they lived a century apart. Shannon, who idolized Boole, effectively put Boole's ideas into circuits, creating the fields of switching circuits and information theory.

Early in the book, the reader is exposed to the use of Boole's formalism for solving logical reasoning problems, with the appropriate cautionary note that logical reasoning isn't a cure-all. A number of examples are given where using Boole's notational convention helps make what seems like a complex problem easily tractable. Then, the following interesting example of a paradox/puzzle is provided on pp. 8-9.

An experienced lawyer agrees to teach law to a young man, who signs a contract to pay \$1000 up front and another \$1000 when he wins his first court case. Several months pass after the training is over and the young lawyer doesn't begin his career. The teacher becomes impatient and sues his former student for the \$1000 owed. He tells the young man, who has decided to argue his own case, that he might as well pay up before the trial, because if he loses the lawsuit, he will have to pay by court order, and if he wins, he will have to pay according to the terms of the contract he signed. The trainee counters that he does not have to pay at all, because if he prevails in court, he owes nothing per court's decision, and if he loses the case, he still owns nothing according to their contract. Who is right?

Try to solve the paradox/puzzle above before reading the explanation that follows. The outcome of the challenge depends on whether the contract or the court decision is supreme. With the contract being supreme, the teacher loses his money if he wins the court case and gets the money if he loses. With the court decision being supreme, however, the teacher gets his money if he wins the lawsuit and forfeits the money if he loses the case. In the arguments above, each side mixed the two interpretations to suit his purposes. Absurdities such as this one arise in a number of situations when a concept or statement is applied to itself, the simplest example being the truth or falsehood of the statement, "This statement is false."

One of the interesting side notes in the book (p. 132) pertains to Hamming's single-error-correcting-code, which is well-known and rightly attributed to him. However, while Hamming's publication of his idea was delayed by Bell Lab's legal department as part of their patenting strategy, Shannon independently discovered and published the code in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949).

The author also reviews some ideas pertaining to Turing machines and the role they have played in the study of computation, although, appropriately for his style and target audience, he does not provide much detail. Examples include the fact that any computable function can be computed by a 2-state or 2-symbol Turing machine (p. 167) and the equally surprising fact that there exists a universal Turing machine with 6 symbols {0, 1, A, B, X, Y} and 21 states, not counting the halting state (p. 168), that can emulate any other Turing machine using a stored description of the latter (a program).

An example of recreational math problem with significant theoretical and practical consequences is the Busy Beaver problem, so named by mathematician Tibor Rado (p. 167). Consider a Turing machine with the 2-symbol alphabet {0, 1} and n states, plus a halting state, starting with a "blank" tape containing all 0s. What is the maximum number of 1s that the Turing machine can print on the tape before halting? We can denote the number using the function $BB(n)$. We know that $BB(3) = 6$ and $BB(4) = 23$. However, beginning with $n = 5$, the value of this function is unknown. We know lower bounds, such as $BB(5) \geq 47,176,870$ and $BB(6) \geq 10^{10,566}$. The value of $BB(10)$ is such a huge number that we can't even write down a lower bound for it without inventing a special mathematical notation. The function BB is noncomputable.

Quantum information and quantum computing are discussed briefly as tools for overcoming certain inherent limitations of conventional computing devices. An interesting poem by one of the pioneers of quantum algorithms is used to lighten up the discussion of quantum computers (p. 190). Shor's poem is:

If computers that you build are quantum,
Then spies everywhere will all want 'em.
Our codes will all fail,
And they'll read our e-mail,
Till we get crypto that's quantum and daunt 'em.

The book ends with an epilogue (pp. 210-218) which contains a wonderfully funny description of a useful gadget for the information age: the anti-amphibological machine (or in plain English, the language clarifier). Upon receiving a batch of divorce papers which he can't understand, an inventive man teams up with his former professor to design a machine that receives incomprehensible, convoluted text as input and produces a straightforward and clear translation as output. The inventing team puts a prototype of its machine to the test by feeding it with the following speech of an academic dean:

"Even in institutions like our college, which may be expected to have rather homogeneous populations, one encounters a tremendous diversity in the family subcultures that students come from, in addition to the idiosyncratic mix of assets and liabilities that characterize them. ... We thus encounter students whose educational aims are crystal clear, as well as others whose purposes have all the clarity of an amorphous mist emanating from a thick cloud of existential miasma."

To their delight, the machine spits out the following clarified translation:

"No two students are alike ... Some students know what they want, and others don't."

Over time, lawyers become enthusiastic users of the machine, after it is tweaked to work forward as well as backwards, thus allowing simple texts to be converted to legal documents. Then, the US Department of Defense shows interest in the machine and offers its inventors \$1M per year to transfer the technology to them and forget that the machine ever existed. The inventors put the Pentagon proposal and suggested contract through the machine; hundreds of pages of terms and conditions, and pertinent articles of law, are translated to:

"Sign the agreement, forget you ever heard of the Language Clarifier, and you get a megabuck a year for life. Don't sign the agreement, and they toss you in the slammer (with one 60-second cold-water, low-pressure shower every 10 days) and throw away the key."

I found only one serious error in the book. After describing a 10-state solution to the puzzle of two adults and two children wanting to cross a river in a boat that can hold only one adult or two children (p. 141), the author notes that if the children and the boat were to remain on the same side of the river where they started, while the adults end up on the opposite side, an eleventh state or step would be needed (the children going back in one crossing). However, the 10-state solution already contains the desired state right before the final state; thus, only 9 states would be needed for the modified puzzle.

I enjoyed reading this book and learned a great deal from it. The book has my highest recommendation for those who study about or work with computers and information technology.

2013/06/24 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) If you are from my generation, you remember telegrams. If you have no idea what they are, don't despair. According to *Time* magazine, issue of July 1, 2013, India's state-owned telecom company will discontinue the

world's very last telegram service by mid-July, because the antiquated service is losing \$23M per year.

(2) Report on the Iranian presidential election: *Time* reporters and photographer, who were provided unprecedented access to Tehran and Qom before, during, and immediately after the recent presidential election, present a 6-page pictorial report in the magazine's July 1, 2013, issue. They paint a positive picture of the country and its people, who "have carved out a life for themselves between strict religious control and their more artistic and sensuous heritage, between the weight of economic sanctions and their history as traders. Young women in chadors have elaborately painted fingernails. Young men kneel to pray wearing tight T-shirts and fashionably frayed blue jeans. ... We saw a country that challenged our assumptions, a cosmopolitan capital that thrives in the face of sanctions, even as residents grumble about the price of rice and cooking oil."

(3) On human decision-making: Our decision system comprises three components. We have an autonomous mind, which is governed by intuitive processes, and an algorithmic mind, which applies logical and statistical principles. The control system is the reflective mind, which calls upon the algorithmic mind when not satisfied with the autonomous decision. [From the report "Of Machines and Humans: The Art of Decision Making," *Mathware and Soft Computing Magazine*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 31-32, June 2013.]

(4) Observations on US government's electronic surveillance: I think we are a bit oversensitive when it comes to electronic communication. We are not about to enter "1984," George Orwell's fantasy about a society in which everything, including rewriting of history, is under government control. According to a report in *Time* magazine, issue of July 1, 2013, Amazon.com's sales of 1984 have increased by 5800% since the recent revelations about electronic surveillance. Here is a typical scene in a film about gangsters (main movie villains before we became obsessed with terrorists). An agent enters a bar, strikes up conversations with shady characters, sees who is sitting with whom at the tables, overhears others (nonsuspects) talking, notes the arrival/departure times of the patrons, etc. The above is way more intrusive than what has been going on with electronic communication, except that many thousands of agents have been replaced by computer programs.

2013/06/23 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The **Daily Show** reacts to the Iranian presidential election: The 72% voter turnout is good news, because it means that everyone not under house arrest voted.

(2) After a respite of only a few days, the Iranian regime resumes its usual insults: Ayatollah Alamolhoda, member of Iran's Assembly of Experts and city of Mashhad's Friday Prayers Leader, says that the presidential election was a victory for the regime, not for the licentious people who danced in the streets. In a the same sermon, he says that the recent **win by the national soccer team** was a victory for Islam and the Islamic youth, not a cause for immodesty and spreading prostitution via inappropriate celebrations.

(3) An interesting puzzle/paradox, from a book I will review shortly: An experienced lawyer agrees to teach law to a young man, who signs a contract to pay \$1000 up front and another \$1000 when he wins his first court case. Several months pass after the training is over and the young lawyer doesn't begin his career. The teacher becomes impatient and sues his former student for the \$1000 owed. He tells the young man, who has decided to argue his own case, that he might as well pay up before the trial, because if he loses the lawsuit, he will have to pay by court order, and if he wins, he will have to pay according to the terms of the contract he signed. The trainee counters that he does not have to pay at all, because if he prevails in court, he owes nothing per court's decision, and if he loses the case, he still owns nothing according to their contract. Who is right?

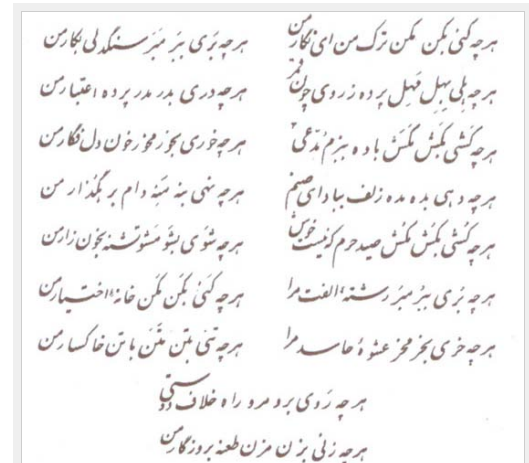
2013/06/22 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A masterfully composed Persian poem by Mohammad-Taghi Fassiholmolk, writing under the pen name "Shourideh Shirazi."

(2) Live performance of "Freedom" in Shanghai concert by the Chinese 12 Girls Band. [**5-minute video**]

(3) How the 1% does Disneyland: There are both legitimate and morally despicable ways in which the rich avoid waiting in lines for rides and other attractions. The so-called VIP pass, costing hundreds of dollars more than regular admission, is one option. Lately though, some have started paying hundreds of dollars to hire a **disabled guide or escort** that would allow an entire family to get to the head of a long line.

(4) Tehran has become a party town: The **street parties** to celebrate the election of Hassan Rouhani to presidency and the qualifying of Iran's national soccer team to appear in the 2014 World Cup finals occurred within a few days of each other, injecting some life into the capital city. The gathering crowds took the opportunity of a very sparse presence by security forces to make political statements amid the celebratory gestures.



2013/06/21 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Longest day of the year: Summer has finally arrived for everyone to enjoy, along with the side benefit of longer days to accommodate more outdoor activities. Here is how Google honored the [Summer Solstice](#).
- (2) Miami is the NBA champion: Game 7 of the championship series between Miami and San Antonio went down to the wire, but in the end, San Antonio fell apart and committed unforced errors in the final minutes, as it did in Game 6. Miami won both games with solid defense down the stretch.
- (3) The inverted classroom: This is the name given to a way of blending on-line and in-person instruction that has proven quite effective in campus tests. The students watch a lecture on-line and then take a quiz before attending class. A computerized report of the quiz results alerts the instructor to focus on problem areas. In support of this method, which tends to cut study time substantially, Paul Peercy, a just-retired dean at Wisconsin, says: "We can't continue to just lecture the students ... We can't continue to try to teach them using the methods of the Middle Ages." [Adapted from *ASEE Prism* magazine, issue of summer 2013.]
- (4) An insightful analysis of the recent Iranian presidential election: Setareh Sabety's blog post on [iroon.com](#) indicates that she harbors both hopes and suspicions.

2013/06/20 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Soccer celebrations: Iranians throughout the world (including in many cities inside Iran) took to the streets and used various creative methods to celebrate their soccer team's qualification to appear in the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil. Women's dual celebrations for the new "moderate" president and soccer victory were short-lived, because it was announced that women won't be allowed to attend welcoming ceremonies for the returning national team at Azadi Stadium.
- (2) The testosterone replacement scam: Playing on male insecurities is nothing new. Huge industries exist that promise cures for expanding waistlines, receding hairlines, and erectile dysfunction. Now, drug companies have set their sights on "testosterone deficiency." While the male body does produce less testosterone as we get older, this isn't a *disease* that needs treatment. Big pharma, however, has a different idea, as it searches for another Viagra-like cash cow. Drug companies spent more than \$100M in 2012 creating and marketing the new syndrome. *Consumer Reports* is fighting the new scam. In its July 2013 issue, the magazine advises men to stay clear of the treatment that can cost hundreds of dollars per month and comes with more side effects than benefits. [Adapted from [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of June 19, 2013.]
- (3) The Taliban, Part 2: The Afghan and US governments are apparently talking to the Taliban for some kind of peace deal. It is quite disturbing to me that our government is willing to negotiate with a group whose members burn down girls' schools and shoot a girl who dares to speak up for women's rights in the head. A story in last night's PBS News Hour had it that in Qatar, the Taliban have an office, which they identify as the "Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." In other words, they are dreaming of ruling the country once again, rather than participating in its political processes.



2013/06/18 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest on sports, politics, and society.

- (1) Exciting day in US sports: The US national men's soccer team beat Honduras 1-0 to stay in first place in its qualifying group and virtually ensure an appearance in the 2014 World Cup finals. In basketball, Miami tied the game in regulation and went on to win in overtime with its excellent defensive plays to force a game 7 in the championship series.
- (2) Iran will go to the 2014 Soccer World Cup: [Iran's 1-0 beating of South Korea](#) in Ulsan led to both nations qualifying for the 2014 soccer World Cup. Uzbekistan was denied on goal differential, despite beating Qatar 5-0, but still has a remote chance for qualifying.
- (3) Khamenei's tactical retreat: The recent presidential election provided an excellent opportunity for Iran's Supreme Leader to change course while saving face. Hiding behind the "political epic" of a 70+% voter turnout, Khamenei has conceded that his heavy-handed internal rule and Quixotic foreign policy have not worked. What will become of former president Ahmadinejad, who dared to stand up to the Leader on multiple occasions, and the former moderate candidates, Moussavi and Karoubi, who have been under house arrest for 2 years with no trial or even formal charges, is still unclear. So far, Rouhani hasn't even mentioned the arrested reformists. [See this post on [Iranian.com](#)]
- (4) An excellent solution to government overreach in collecting personal information: In this PBS Newshour segment, Jaron Lanier, artist and computer scientist, proposes that government and other users of our personal information should have to pay for it. This has the effect of prioritizing and moderating the use, because users have to stay within their budgets. [[9-minute video](#)]

2013/06/17 (Mon.): A marvelous invention: Paul J. Nahin, the author of *The Logician and the Engineer: How George Boole and Claude Shannon Created the Information Age* (a book I am reading and will review shortly),

had previously written a wonderfully funny piece entitled "The Language Clarifier" about a very useful hypothetical invention.

Upon receiving a batch of divorce papers which he can't understand, an inventive man teams up with his former professor to design a machine that receives incomprehensible, convoluted text as input and produces a straightforward and clear translation as output. The inventing team puts its machine to the test by feeding it with the following speech of an academic dean:

"Even in institutions like our college, which may be expected to have rather homogeneous populations, one encounters a tremendous diversity in the family subcultures that students come from, in addition to the idiosyncratic mix of assets and liabilities that characterize them. ... We thus encounter students whose educational aims are crystal clear, as well as others whose purposes have all the clarity of an amorphous mist emanating from a thick cloud of existential miasma."

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2013/06/16 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Fathers' Day: "The older I get, the smarter my father seems to get." ~ Tim Russert

(2) Quote of the day: "2 percent is fine for low-fat milk, but not for women in the Senate." ~ Current California Senator Diane Feinstein, speaking in the 1980s, when only 2 women were in the 100-member US Senate (she campaigned on that slogan in 1992 and won a Senate seat)

(3) Iran's new president: Hassan Rouhani has won 50.7% of the votes cast for 6 candidates. While Rouhani's campaign slogans and his message to people following his victory do indicate a difference between his views and those of the outgoing president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (a fake newspaper headline screamed in gigantic font, "Mahmoud Raft" or "Mahmoud Is Gone"), or the views of the Supreme Leader for that matter, I do not share in the optimism of Rouhani's supporters that he will be able to implement changes that the former reformist president Khatami could not. I certainly do not celebrate the prospects of another 3.5 decades of the Islamic regime in Iran. At best, I will remain cautiously optimistic when political prisoners have been released, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities have been reinstated, and formal apologies have been issued for lawless filterings, interrogations, imprisonments, and executions. Progress, if any, is bound to be slow, given that the powerful Revolutionary Guards and their information/intelligence operations have grown deep roots.

(4) The Nicaragua Canal: The Panama Canal cannot handle the largest "post-Panamax" cargo ships, so named because their size exceeds the maximum capacity of the Panama Canal. Furthermore, even ships that can cross the Panama Canal have a wait period averaging 12 days. These factors have motivated the Nicaraguan government to partner with a Chinese company to start the \$40B Nicaragua Canal project which will connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The canal, which was considered for the first time some 190 years ago and has since been reconsidered multiple times, will use Lake Nicaragua and existing rivers to the extent possible, requiring only some 10-20 kilometers of digging from scratch. [Info from CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS."]

2013/06/15 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day about the recent US NSA leaks: "... as the author of the Patriot Act, I am extremely disturbed by what appears to be an overbroad interpretation of the Act." Wisconsin Republican Senator Jim Sensenbrenner, quoted in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of June 12, 2013.

(2) On the presidential elections in Iran: When you stop and think, you realize how successful the Islamic regime has been in pacifying its opponents by blaming everything on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. People who abhor the rule of the clergy are now excited because a "moderate" cleric (yes, a cleric) has taken an early lead over four hardliners. Assuming that Hassan Rouhani either miraculously garners more than 50% of the vote or else gets less than 50% in the first round and survives in the run-off, when the hardliners will be represented by a single candidate, the country will still be ruled by Khamenei and his cronies in the parliament and the judiciary, who will ensure that all ministers meet the Supreme Leader's approval and that every important organization is run by his appointees or is under the watchful eyes of his "representatives," forming a shadow system of governance. So, even buying into the claim of Rouhani being a reformist (which is a big stretch), what will he be

able to do that Khatami couldn't do?

(3) Canada's four major chocolate makers are **caught fixing prices**: One company, Cadbury, has received immunity in exchange of cooperating with the authorities; Nestle Canada and Mars Canada admit no wrongdoing and plan to defend themselves against the charges. Reporting on this story, *Newsweek* magazine observed that no such price fixing is needed in the US, given Americans' appetite for chocolate.

(4) Which US regions file most patents? Among the top 5 patent-intensive cities in the country, only the first one is unsurprising. **The numbers provided** are patents per 1000 workers (patent intensity) and average patents per year, over 2007-2011, respectively. The top 5 cities are: San Jose, CA, 10.29, 9237; Burlington, VT, 6.86, 826; Rochester, MN, 5.70, 606; Corvallis, OR, 4.83, 194; Poughkeepsie, NY, 4.70, 1226.

2013/06/14 (Fri.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When you tug at a single thing in the universe, you find it's attached to everything else." ~ John Muir, quoted at the start of the film "Connected: An Autobiography about Love, Death & Technology"

(2) Hope Concert for the People of Iran: Roxana Saberi, formerly imprisoned in Iran (apparently for her religious beliefs), delivers a very effective **7-minute opening speech** at the Berlin concert.

(3) Discussion of the US PRISM program goes into overdrive: There is nervousness and objections at multiple levels. First is the very existence of such a program that puts everyone under suspicion, until proven innocent. Officials have explained that the surveillance of phones and other forms of electronic communication is not linked with names, until there is some suspicion of illegal activities. This is like saying we will install cameras in your homes, but will process the videos they transmit anonymously, until there is suspicious activities that lead us to look up your address and barge in. Second, is the way our government outsources highly sensitive intelligence programs to private contractors, whose profit motives lead them to do minimal vetting and supervision of their employees. Third is the nerves of a twenty-something vigilante, who takes justice into his own hands, despite the fact that he could have approached a number of lawmakers known to oppose such programs for support and legal action. Imagine what would happen if every employee in every government organization or private company called in the reporters when s/he thought that some principle s/he holds dear was violated. Fourth is the manner in which big businesses opened their servers to government snoops, feeling no obligation to protect the privacy of their customers.

(4) The Age of Plenty: This is the title of a **special report** in *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of June 2013, that focuses on the growing, making, and tracking of our food, as well as its future. It begins thus: "We think of things like nuclear submarines and luxury cars as emblems of technological sophistication. But turn your attention now to an ordinary local supermarket in any developed country. It probably stocks 15 000 to 50 000 different products, including items like organic red quinoa and Tahitian vanilla beans."

2013/06/13 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest on Iran's presidential election.

(1) Women backing misogynists: Something does not compute when I see a seemingly modern woman carrying a sign in support of one of Iran's presidential candidates, the same candidates who endorse Islamic laws that equate a woman with half a man, require that she obtain her husband's or father's permission in order to travel, and prevent her from enrolling in certain college majors. And this isn't limited to the so-called moderates or reformists: I've seen women holding signs in support of the Supreme Leader himself.



(2) Iran election polls: According to a polling organization (whose **Web site** is now blocked in Iran), Rouhani has taken the lead over Ghalibaf by about 2 points (26.6% to 24.8%).

(3) Quote of the day about Iran's elections: "I am quite nervous about my one vote, worrying about whether or not to cast it. Those who fabricate votes by the million, or torture and kill people for protesting the election, must have nerves of steel." ~ A Facebook friend (translated from the original post in Persian)

(4) Google warns of Iranian phishing attacks: In a **blog post**, Google has warned its users in Iran to be particularly careful about phishing attacks. An example is convincing the recipient of an e-mail message to click on a link, which opens a fake Google sign-in page, allowing the attackers to intercept user names and passwords. Google has observed a significant uptick in phishing attacks from Iran in the three weeks leading to today's presidential elections.

(5) The scapegoat: All remaining presidential candidates in Iran seem to agree on the country's current economic and social crises being the fault of Ahmadinejad and his cronies. These candidates are either in denial or else they are afraid to point their fingers any higher, including blaming the entire system and its backward laws (that are ironically enforced only haphazardly). Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad himself is uncharacteristically quiet; he could be scared to reveal the secrets he said he knew about various political rivals, or he might be waiting for an opportunity to inflict maximum damage.

2013/06/11 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) It ain't over till the referee's whistle blows: This video of a [soccer penalty kick](#) shows the perils of premature despair and celebration. Here is [another example](#) of premature celebration of a penalty kick save.
- (2) Unwinding of the US as a nation: "It is impossible to read *The Unwinding* without thinking about what is not being discussed in Washington. There is no discussion of the overwhelming power and moral hazard of the five largest banks, which hold assets equal to 56% of the total U.S. economy and remain too big to fail. There is no discussion of the destructive growth of the financial sector, which is siphoning off our smartest young college graduates to create ever-more-complicated (and less substantive) investment schemes ... [or] of the decline of the middle class ... What do we do about the unraveling of middle-class values ... ? Where do we find moral authority in a society that ... celebrates an unapologetic former crack dealer like Jay Z?" [Joe Klein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of June 17, 2013, on George Packer's new book, *The Unwinding*.]
- (3) Hacking the Capitol: Young entrepreneurs and techies from California's Silicon Valley are getting more involved in the US political scene. Their "get out of our way and we'll do fine" attitude is changing to a deep desire to shape the political discourse in the nation's capital, in part because of the far-reaching effects of new legislation on the high-tech industry. Examples include immigration reform, service apps (such as those for finding a taxi) that have run afoul of labor laws and local regulations, resistance to on-line education, potential legal problems for gadgets like driverless cars and video-recording eyeglasses, and privacy issues connected with large data-collection operations. High-tech firms and their lobbies are hiring former politicians in large numbers to help them with their legislative agendas. From the other side, politicians are increasingly courting the Valley's multimillionaires and companies with deep pockets in their pursuit of campaign contributions. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of June 17, 2013.]
- (4) Education technology is coming of age: A start-up company, Knewton (whose employees don T-shirts bearing the "Knerd" inscription), is gaining a foothold in the field of personalized and adaptive educational systems. The company offers a program that tailors lessons and test questions according to a vast repository of data, including a student's performance on previous modules, time taken to answer questions, his/her performance at different times of day, other students' performance on the same or similar topics, and a host of other data. The program compiles a learning profile for each student and uses the information to maximize the effectiveness of lessons. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of June 17, 2013.]

2013/06/09 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Persian fiddle music: Bijan Mortazavi performs "[Dance of Fire](#)" in his Greek Theater concert.
- (2) Kurdish music and dance: Bijan Mortazavi plays "[Ronak](#)" on his fiddle, accompanied by a group of female and male dancers (sans traditional Kurdish costumes).
- (3) Drowning often doesn't look like what we see on TV: A [person who is drowning](#) cannot scream or wave for help, because s/he is instinctively putting breathing first and using arms to stay afloat.
- (4) Some oddities of the US-Canada border: This [5-minute video](#) provides interesting historical context on how the border between US and Canada came to have its current shape.
- (5) Thinking of *Animal Farm* and *1984*: Not one day passes when news stories from Iran do not remind me of George Orwell's two masterpieces. The latest examples are the following. First, about *Animal Farm*. Remember when the pigs gradually and cleverly changed the rebellious farm's motto from "Four legs good, two legs bad" to "Four legs good, two legs better," as they learned to walk on their two hind legs? The Islamic Republic now characterizes nuclear technology as "our indisputable right," which is fine, except that in the early days of the regime, a former foreign minister under the Shah was summarily executed for negotiating a deal to build a nuclear power plant in Bushehr, with the court citing that given Iran's vast oil and gas reserves, pursuing nuclear technology is a treasonous waste of the nation's public funds. Second, about *1984*. Orwell envisaged a dictatorial regime that was continually rewriting history to suit its changing needs. In a recent presidential debate, Ali Akbar Velayati, one of the favorite candidates of the Supreme Leader, claimed that Ferdowsi created his epic *Shahnameh* by combining Iranian chivalry and the Imams' traditions, completely changing the historical fact that Ferdowsi's poetry, far from approving the invading Arab culture, was meant to save the Persian language from Arab influences.

2013/06/08 (Sat.): Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books, 2009. (ISBN 978-0-547-24799-1)
Fast and accurate decision-making is an important asset in our modern world. We all crave the ability to decide well when we make a major purchase, choose a mate, or embark on a career path. Good decision-making is also crucial in the business world, in politics, and during military campaigns, to name just a few domains. After struggling for decades and pursuing many false theories, science is finally on a promising path to explain the bases of good decision-making.

In this best-selling and highly accessible book, Jonah Lehrer surveys recent advances in understanding the human decision-making process, packaging the information with many interesting and useful examples to show

us that decision-making relies on two computational mechanisms: the very powerful supercomputer of our emotional brain, that learns via experience (and, in particular, from mistakes), and the much less complex computer in charge of our reasoning in the prefrontal cortex. The latter is not fully independent, as it is connected to, and draws information from, almost all parts of the brain, including its emotions center. It is the importance of learning from mistakes that makes praising children's efforts (which encourages them to try harder and not fear failure) more effective than complimenting them on their intelligence (which may discourage them and fill them with self-doubt, when faced with more challenging tasks).

For a long time, we thought that emotions are inferior to reasoning and that better decisions can be reached if only we could control our utterly irrational emotions. Patients who have lost their emotions due to brain damage have proven this theory wrong. Such patients are utterly incapable of making decisions. When presented with even two alternatives, they go endlessly back and forth, analyzing the merits and drawbacks of each choice, without converging on a decision. They are paralyzed by becoming fixated on too many insignificant details. We have learned that complex decision-making is all but impossible without the significant computational power of the emotional brain. In other words, "A brain that can't feel can't make up its mind" [p. 15].

Contrary to conventional wisdom, reasoning and analysis are effective only for simple decisions. Our prefrontal cortex is easily overwhelmed when dealing with more than a few facts or parameters, leading it to poor decisions (sometimes worse than purely random selection from among possible alternatives). The author cites many examples where too much information reduces the quality of our decisions. Consider this example. Before modern medical technology allowed detailed imaging, doctors typically dealt with lower back pain by prescribing bed rest, a hands-off approach that was highly effective. Then arrival of MRI in the 1980s allowed doctors to see the spine and the surrounding soft tissue in vivid detail. As a result, the diagnoses of disc abnormalities skyrocketed and number of surgeries increased, without improving the health outcomes. These vivid images are, in most cases, quite misleading, as disc abnormalities are rarely root causes of lower back pain. In the words of Herbert Simon: "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" [p. 159].

Complex decisions require the vastly greater processing capabilities of the emotional brain. Many studies have shown that if a subject is presented with a set of facts about a complex decision and s/he is then distracted by some other task, so that the conscious brain is occupied right up to the deadline for announcing a decision on the original problem, the decision-making quality improves. When we make a decision based on emotions and are then asked to explain the bases for our decision, we tend to make up arguments that have no bearing on what went on in our minds. This theory is confirmed by the "poster test," in which students who picked a free gift from among a set of posters were much more satisfied with their choices months later, compared with students who were forced to provide an explanation for their choice, before they could pick and walk away with their free poster. We tend to repress inner contradictions, so if our emotional and conscious brains disagree, we construct bizarre explanations to reconcile the two outcomes. Split-brain patients, who have no connectivity between the two sides of the brain, may reach contradictory conclusions, which they then proceed to justify by fabricating a reason.

Moral judgments are also emotion-driven. This is why it's so hard to argue with someone about a moral issue; we render a judgment and then build arguments to rationalize the decision. In the words of G. K. Chesterton: "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason" [p. 171]. Or, quoting Benjamin Franklin: "So convenient a thing is it to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do" [p. 173].

Even though our emotional brain often comes up with good decisions in the face of complexity, the ability to overrule the emotional brain when it makes poor decisions is very important to success. Most four-year-olds aren't able to resist the lure of eating a marshmallow right away, even after they are told that they will be rewarded with two if they wait a few minutes. It turns out that this very ability for delayed gratification has a much stronger correlation than IQ test score with future SAT results. Retailers like Costco aim to prime the pleasure center of our brain by displaying attractive and luxury products in high-traffic areas of the store. Then, even if we don't end up buying the giant-screen TV, just looking at it makes us more likely to buy something else, because the activated pleasure center creates a craving for a reward. The same end is achieved by products carrying tags such as "hot deal" or by framing, such as describing a cut of meat as 85% lean instead of 15% fat. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom in economics, consumers are seldom rational. We tend to outsource much of the computation required for making a decision to our emotional brain, basing our decision on its pleasure-versus-pain reaction.

Near the end of the book (pp. 243-250), the author lists a few general guidelines to help us make better decisions: (a) Do analyze simple problems; when a handful of variables or attributes are involved, reasoning leads to better decisions compared with gut feeling. (b) Novel problems also require reason; without prior experience, our emotional brain is unable to suggest good solutions. (c) Embrace uncertainty; don't become so confident in being right that you neglect all contradictory evidence. (d) You know more than you know; a great deal of knowledge is compressed and stored in our emotional brain, leading to good decisions without explicit

awareness. (e) Think about thinking: for example, you can't avoid stupid mistake resulting from loss aversion, unless you know that the mind treats losses differently from gains.

The book's final paragraph (p. 259) reads thus: "The first step to making better decisions is to see ourselves as we really are, to look inside the black box of the human brain. We need to honestly assess our flaws and talents, our strengths and shortcomings. For the first time, such a vision is possible. We finally have tools that can pierce the mystery of the mind, revealing the intricate machinery that shapes our behavior. Now we need to put this knowledge to work.

2013/06/06 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Magnificent evening and night skies. [[42 photos](#)]

(2) Night and day: Photographer Stephen Wilkes shoots a single scene during the day and at night. He then combines the two shots to create a half-day-half-night image. [[8 images](#)]

(3) Tehran Symphony Orchestra: Led by composer/musician Shardad Rohani, Iranian musicians perform Tchaikovsky's [Piano Concerto No. 1](#) in B flat minor.

(4) Tehran Wind Orchestra: "[Get up and Boogie](#)" from an unlikely source.

(5) Obsolete technologies that remain in use: Payphones on street corners are quickly disappearing, but we still have 305K of them in the US. Some 10M Americans still access the Internet at the peak speed of 56.6 kb/s or less. See [this page](#) for info on 10 other obsolete technologies.

2013/06/05 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "People have only as much liberty as they have the intelligence to want and the courage to take." ~ Emma Goldman

(2) Magnificent tree, at Portland's Japanese Garden: [Image](#)

(3) Lenses, focusing, and zooming soon to be things of the past: Rather than a lens that places the image on an array of sensors, Bell Lab's [lens-free camera](#) uses a single sensing element to successively sample the field. The samples are then assembled into the complete image. This kind of "compressive sensing" reduces the amount of data and uses processing power to make up for the missing parts. Far less data is collected than in conventional cameras and the scene will always be entirely in focus. The method can be readily extended to wavelength outside visible light, thus allowing the design of cheap cameras for other wavelengths too.

(4) A new world leader is to be elected and there are 3 candidates. Which one gets your vote? Candidate 1 associates with crooked politicians, consults with an astrologist, has had two mistresses, chain smokes, and drinks 8 to 10 martinis a day. Candidate 2 was kicked out of office twice, sleeps until noon, used opium in college, and drinks a quart of whiskey every evening. Candidate 3, a decorated war hero, is a vegetarian, doesn't smoke, drinks only an occasional beer, and never cheated on his wife. Don't read the answers, shown below in reverse, until you have made your choice.

[Candidate 1 is nilknarf tlevesoor. Candidate 2 is notsniv llihcruhc. Candidate 3 is hploda reltih.]

2013/06/03 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Music and dance from Gorjestan: [Spectacular combination](#) of traditional and modern dance.

(2) Quote of the day: "I wasn't actually sleeping. I'm a beta tester for Google Eyelids." ~ Actor Morgan Freeman, on why he was dozing off during a promotional interview for his new film

(3) On the [perils of introspection](#): "Tim Wilson at UVA demonstrated [the futility of trying to rationalize our aesthetic choices] with The Poster Test. He brought a group of students into a room and showed them a series of posters. The students were told they could take any one they wanted as a gift and keep it. He then brought in another group, and told them the same thing, but this time they had to explain why they wanted the poster before they picked. He then waited six months and asked the two groups what they thought of their choices. The first group, the ones who just got to grab a poster and leave, they all loved their choice. The second group, the ones who had to write out why, hated theirs. ... This brings up a lot of concerns. It calls into question the entire industry of critical analysis of art—video games, music, film, poetry, literature—all of it. It also makes things like focus groups and market analysis seem like farts in the wind. When you ask people why they do or do not like things, they must then translate something from a deep, emotion, primal part of their psyche into the language of the higher, logical, rational world of words and sentences and paragraphs. Also, when you attempt to justify your decisions or emotional attachments, you start worrying about what your explanation says about you as a person."

2013/06/01 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion" ~ Physicist Steven Weinberg

(2) Joke of the day: One day, a little girl notices that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out

and inquisitively asks, "Why are some of your hairs white, mom?" Her mother replies, "Well, every time that you do something wrong or make me unhappy, one of my hairs turns white." The little girl thinks about this revelation for a while and then says, "Oh, that's why grandma's hairs are all white."

(3) The mother of all slide shows: This is the nickname given to an annual presentation by Mary Meeker, tech-analyst-turned-venture-capitalist, outlining the state of the Internet. **This year's presentation** contains 117 slides. Enjoy!

(4) Engineers learn to dance: According to the **Associated Press**, Northwestern University students are taking a swing-dance course as part of what school officials call "whole-body thinking." Professor of Dance Billy Siegenfeld is teaching students known for left-brain thinking (biomedical, mechanical, and chemical engineering majors) to use more of their brains' right sides. The students believe that the ability to think on their feet and work collaboratively with dance partners will help them to become better engineers.

2013/05/31 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Most of our problems in life arise for one of two reasons: Doing something without thinking; thinking without doing anything." ~ Anonymous

(2) 3D printing enters the fashion world: The dress shown in **this image** was made from 17 individually printed pieces, connected together at 3000 articulated joints.

(3) Ten time-saving tech tips: This **6-minute TED talk** by the *New York Times* technology columnist David Pogue is well worth your time.

(4) The most studied patient in neuroscience: Known in the field as HM, Henry Molaison underwent brain surgery in 1953 in the hopes of treating his epilepsy. While the experimental procedure achieved its intended purpose, it came with the very heavy cost of leaving the patient with **no ability to form new memories**. Until his death 55 years later in 2008, HM's life consisted of an endless sequence of 30-second experiences, each forgotten almost immediately. HM's experience is referred to as *Permanent Present Tense* in the title of a book by Suzanne Corkin, who worked with HM for decades, beginning when she was a graduate student. A lot of our current knowledge of human brain and how/where it stores memories is owed to this one patient, whose brain was continuously scanned for clues on brain functions and to test various hypotheses.

(5) A guide to Iran's elite-8 presidential candidates: **Foreign Policy blog post** outlines the backgrounds and qualifications of 8 candidates running in next month's presidential election.

2013/05/30 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani isn't upset that he was disapproved as a presidential candidate. What bugs him is Ahmad Jannati telling him he's too old to become president." ~ Anonymous [Jannati, 86, jokingly given the title "namir-ol moemenin," is the Chairman of Iran's Guardian Council]

(2) Joke of the day: Husband to wife: "No, I don't hate your relatives. In fact, I like YOUR mother-in-law better than I like mine!"

(3) Earthquake near UCSB: As I was walking from home to work around 7:40 AM yesterday, I felt a rumble and a jolt, followed by the street surface rising a few inches and then falling. Because the entire affair lasted only 2-3 seconds, I thought it was some sort of explosion nearby. It turns out that there was an earthquake centered only 4 miles west of where I was walking in Isla Vista. The magnitude of the quake, a shallow one (only 4.5 miles deep) just off the Pacific Ocean coast, was in the range 4.6 to 5.3, depending on which report you believe. There appear to be no damages.

(4) The largest public-transit infrastructure project in the US is completely invisible: Digging a massive tunnel under NYC's East River began in 1969. When the underground **East Side Access Project** is finished in 2019, tens of thousands of people will see shorter commutes via the connection of the Long Island Railroad to the Grand Central Terminal.

(5) Africa's solar potential: In one year, an average of 2.2 TWh of solar radiation arrives on 1 square kilometer of desert, which means that the 17,000 TWh annual energy need of the entire world can be satisfied by using a tiny 200-by-260-kilometer patch of African desert (assuming a 15% conversion efficiency).

2013/05/29 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest on computer technology.

(1) Quote of the day: "First we thought the PC was a calculator. Then we found out how to turn numbers into letters with ASCII—and we thought it was a typewriter. Then we discovered graphics, and we thought it was a television. With the World Wide Web, we've realized it's a brochure." ~ Douglas Adams, British satirist

(2) Should access to the Internet be considered a human right? There are arguments on both sides of the issue. Vinton Cerf, Google's Chief Internet Evangelist, believes that it is not. He likens the Internet to horses, which at one time were necessary for earning a living. He points out that the ability to earn a living is a human right, but not the means used. If we had asserted rights status to horses specifically, we would have ended up valuing the wrong thing. Writing in *Communications of the ACM*, issue of June 2013, Stephen Wicker and

Stephanie Santoso disagree. They argue that the impact of the Internet on freedom of expression dwarfs all other modes of communication. Thus, one's ability to participate effectively in political choices might be impaired with inadequate access to Internet resources. Wicker and Santoso do not imply that governments should hand out computers or that ISP services should be free. Rather, they suggest that, as is the case with other fundamental goods, the government should implement a regulatory policy that recognizes the rights status of Internet access.

(3) Are apps that try to mimic the real world holding us back? In a thought-provoking article (*Time* magazine, issue of June 3, 2013), Lev Grossman questions the usefulness of the realistic look of many apps whose developers still cling to the notion that real-world connections are soothing to users. Examples of such leftovers from the days of early Mac computers, that introduced the now-familiar trashcan and other icons, include a calendar with details like stitched leather, on-screen calculators with button layouts and tiny displays like real ones, iPhone's books app with a bookshelf featuring wood grain, and page-turning effects on e-readers and other book-reading apps. He argues that applications will become more efficient, more versatile, and better-suited to the way they are used on digital displays if we abandon these relics. Apple is rumored to be pursuing just such an approach in the design of the next versions of its operating systems.

2013/05/28 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The beauty of literature. I lose a cow. I write about her death, and this brings me in enough to buy another cow." ~ Jules Renard, French writer (1864-1910)

(2) Getting closer to the proof of the twin primes conjecture: Twin primes are pairs of prime numbers that differ by 2, such as 5 & 7, 11 & 13, and 29 & 31. Such twin primes get rarer as we move to larger numbers, but an unproven conjecture suggests that there are infinitely many such pairs, meaning that you can find twin primes no matter how far out you move along the number line. Later, the conjecture was extended to pairs of primes separated by any even number. For example, a separation of 8 yields the pairs 5 & 13, 11 & 19, and 23 & 31. While proofs of the original or the extended conjecture are still out of reach, an unknown mathematician, Yitang Zhang (who could not find an academic job upon getting his PhD from Purdue in 1991, forcing him to work for several years as an accountant and even in a sandwich shop) has proven that there exists some separation smaller than 70 million for which there are an infinite number of prime pairs. Others had come close to proving this result, but **Zhang bridged the gaps** in a very clever way. The celebrated **Golbach conjecture**, that any even number is the sum of two primes, may also be on the verge of being proven.

(3) Mr. Haloo will vote in Iran's election: He says that his humorous poem of two years ago with the theme of boycotting in the Iranian elections had caused him trouble during interrogations, so **he has composed a poem** in which he says he will take part in next June's voting and recommends that others also participate.

(4) Amazing talent: **Three-year-old Iranian girl** reads and writes Persian at the 5th-grade level, speaks English, and uses a computer.

2013/05/27 (Mon.): Pagel, Mark D., *Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2012 (ISBN 978-0-393-06587-9)

[*Note:* To get a sense of the contents of this book without reading my entire review/summary, you can examine the first two paragraphs and the last one (that begins with "This delightful book").]

The central thesis of this book is that humans are driven by culture every bit as much as, and perhaps more so than, by genes. The age-old question, "Are we pretty much fixed by our genes or is the environment also a factor in our destiny?" has to do with genetic versus cultural influences [p. 113]. Elements of culture can act like genes in the sense of being capable of transmission and reproduction [p. 2]. But whereas humans are stuck with genes from their parents, there is no such limitation in the transfer of ideas. Unlike other animals, humans derive their behaviors from the accumulated knowledge of their ancestors, rather than solely from the genes passed on to them. Ironically, forming tribes and cultures that are perpetually at war with each other is in direct conflict with our genetic disposition to get along and be mutually altruistic [p. x].

The deep influence of culture arises from the fact that even if only one person entertains a thought, it can still potentially spread to the entire human population through social learning. Good ideas survive and spread and bad ideas die out. Here, goodness is not judged by moral standards but by the contribution of the idea to human survival. The culture into which we happen to be born determines our diet, language, who we befriend or mate, and who we fight or kill. The culture's influence is so strong that it can even get us to kill our own children ("honor" killings), something that is in direct conflict with our evolutionary imperative to spread our genes [p. 8]. I may come to believe that there is only one true and just God. This belief might make my mind vulnerable to the further idea that people who believe in other gods should be punished or perhaps even killed [pp. 22-23]. Other animals also exhibit some social learning (such as the blue tit, a bird closely related to the American chickadee, learning to poke holes in the foil tops of milk bottles left at the doorsteps of houses in a southern England village, a behavior that spread in that region for some 20 years), but the extent of their

learning is very limited [p. 38].

Bodies are mere vehicles to help genes survive. Viruses use our bodies in much the same way for their own survival. Cultural elements or ideas are viruses of our minds, using our bodies as vehicles to propagate in much the same way as biological viruses do. In the words of philosopher Daniel Dennett: "A scholar is just a library's way of making another library" [p. 21]. But whereas our genes share a common route into the future, elements of culture survive more or less independently of each other. Cultural evolution allowed humans to be the first species to spread out and occupy every corner of the world, regardless of climate and available local resources. All other animals are limited by their genes to life in specific environments [p. 46]. The development of culture is probably what saved us humans from extinction. About 80,000 years ago, there may have been 10,000 or fewer of our ancestors alive, so we were as endangered as a species as today's rhinoceros [p. 4].

Biologically, species acquire new traits as a result of random genetic mutation. Those new traits that contribute to the species' survival then propagate, as members of the species lacking them die off or do not reproduce as much. In this way, evolution tends to produce uniformity in survival-relevant traits, but other traits, such as height, hair color, personality, or math ability, may exhibit more variations if they are not critical to survival. Examples of uniformity in mammals include the same number 7 of neck vertebrae (yes, even in giraffes), 2 arms, and 10 fingers [p. 117]. Our genetic evolution is still in progress. For example, the ability to digest milk as an adult is a very recent genetic development in humans [p. 264]. We have been evolving to become more peaceful beings. UK data shows that crime has been steadily declining for 1000 years [p. 266]. There are no genes for various professions or religions, but your genetic makeup gives you a particular temperament or personality that can influence your attraction to some profession or religious faith [p. 114].

We have evolved to be optimistic and trusting. We have also developed a capability to detect among us the social cheats, those individuals who benefit from the others' good will, without intending to return it, as demonstrated by the research of my UCSB colleagues, Leah Cosmides and John Tooby [pp. 208-209]. The rose-colored glasses we wear sometimes hide certain ugly truths from us. I was surprised to learn that "people susceptible to depression often have more accurate perceptions of the world than non-depressives. When they say they have no friends, nobody likes them, they are hopeless at their job, or have no future, they are often more right than not" [p. 150].

Natural selection has accomplished all this by sculpting simple local rules, not the complex, finished systems that we see in nature. New research has revealed that complex system can possess emergent properties that no one designed into them [p. 351]. Termites build large, elaborate structures not by thinking and designing the structure in its entirety, but by following simple local rules [p. 352]. An example of such a rule might be: If you see a woodchip and you are not carrying one, then pick it up and move on; otherwise, drop the woodchip you are carrying next to the one you see. By each termite following this simple rule, large piles of woodchip will materialize over time, without any planning or even awareness on the part of the participating termites. More generally, following very simple local rules can lead to global, self-organizing systems.

Evolution is often viewed and explained in the competitive context of "survival of the fittest." However, we now understand that selflessness and collaboration also contribute to survival, albeit in an indirect way. There is no better evidence of the evolutionary basis of sacrifice and altruism than this anecdote about slime molds, also known as social amoebae. Most of the time, they lead a solitary existence. But when threatened with starvation, they send out a chemical alarm summoning them to unite. Then, the amoebae cooperate, climbing up over each other to build a physical tower or stalk. From those who reach the very top of the tower, a fortunate few participate in launching spores that may be carried by the wind or passing animals to better lands. The rest will die, having given their lives for total strangers [p. 77].

The large size of our brain distinguishes us from other animal species. Generally speaking, Carnivores have larger brains relative to their body sizes because they have to outwit their prey [p. 246]. Using our oversized brains to outmaneuver and take advantage of other animals, including other humans, is part of our nature [p. 195]. "No one would ever ask if a snake's deadly poison has been a force for good or why the snake embraces it. No one would ask why our armies embraced better longbows, or later on, better guns. In fact, because of culture and civilization, we no longer need such a large brain, so after a remarkable growth spurt in recent evolutionary history, the human brain has started to shrink [p. 254]. The ability to make decisions is another hallmark of humans (next on my to-read list is Jonah Lehrer's *How We Decide*). Many of our important decisions are instantaneous, but if asked how we made the decisions, our minds require some time to explain the logical bases for those decisions, suggesting that the initial snap decisions did not involve logical reasoning or detailed trade-off analyses [p. 329].

Like all other animals, human beings are better at copying and following than at innovating and leading. Fortunately, cultural learning allows novel ideas to propagate, even if only a few people produce them. This is why as a survival skill, social intelligence is more important than inventiveness [p. 247]. We are also not very good at connecting causes with effects. We easily mistake correlation for causation. For example, doctors know that most common illnesses get better on their own within about 2 weeks. Now, if someone proposes a ritual or

ceremonial treatment, we may come to associate the improvement with the treatment [p. 145]. Pigeons fed at random times have shown a tendency to move or prance in a certain way within their cages, if they were engaged in similar movements at a few of the random feeding times [p. 142].

Religion is a very important component of culture, in the sense of influencing human behavior. Throughout history, religion has thrived by providing hope as well as motivation to fight. First, regarding hope: A man who had survived Haitian hurricanes in 2008 and 2009 and then lost his wife and children in the 2010 earthquake was thankful that God had chosen to spare him [p. 149]. Second, fear and hatred of despicable people is more motivating in a bitter conflict than thinking of your enemy as a person just like you who happens to be competing with you for some limited resource. In other words: "Up against a group in battle who consider you despicable, it might be useful for you to acquire your own brand of motivational bigotry" [p. 151]. "Now, if you are the sort of person who can hold false beliefs, or have an ability to act on blind faith, you are probably also the sort of person who could be persuaded of the moral superiority of your group over the one next door. When group conflict is never very far away, religious believers become the kind of people others like to have around" [p. 156].

One of the most interesting information nuggets in the book is the description of an experiment performed on monkeys placed in a room, with a banana hanging from the ceiling. There is a box on which a monkey can hop to reach the banana. But whenever a monkey tries to do this, the entire group is sprayed with water, something the monkeys hate. After a while, no monkey tries to reach the banana by hopping on the box and if an errant monkey decides to do that, the other monkeys would restrain it. Then a monkey is removed and replaced by a newcomer to the group. Not surprisingly, the uninformed newcomer tries to hop on the box, but the other monkeys restrain it each time, until the new monkey is indoctrinated. The original monkeys are replaced one by one with newcomers, until no member of the original group is left. The monkeys continue to restrain any adventurous soul that tries to hop on the box, although at this stage, none of them knows why it's not a good idea to try to get the banana [p. 151].

The most important tool in the development and spread of culture is language, which allows us to express ideas for propagation in time and space. Human language is digital, offering an endless combination of words; other animals communicate via continuous howls and the like [p. 289]. Language has its own intriguing evolutionary history. As our languages evolve and branch out, more frequently used words undergo small or virtually no changes, whereas less frequently used words change drastically. Some 25% of speech is made up of 25 words, and this is true in nearly any language [p. 293].

Language allows us to propagate many ideas, but our brain has not kept up in its ability to process vast amounts of information. Today's humans misuse the wealth of information available to them from many different sources, "because our brains assume that the rate at which these things come to our attention from all over the world is the same as the rate in our local area. ... So, when I hear every day of children being snatched, my brain gives me the wrong answer to the question of risk: it has divided a big number (the children snatched all over the world) by a small number (the tribe)" [pp. 338-339].

This delightful book is full of interesting observations and useful information, weaved together in an entertaining and easily understood way. The author instills in us the idea that culture is really a system for selecting best ideas and practices and for enabling cooperation through managing a currency of reputations. Culture may in the end allow us to move beyond our tribalism and ethnocentric tendencies that have been ingrained in us "because all that is required for it to have been a successful strategy throughout our history is that markers of common ethnicity were a better-than-chance predictor of common culture, and thus common goals and values" [p. 368]. But the aforementioned system of reputations allows us to reach out to people outside our tribes and ethnic groups and to develop mutual trust.

2013/05/26 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The beauty of literature. I lose a cow. I write about her death, and this brings me in enough to buy another cow." ~ Jules Renard, French writer (1864-1910)

(2) The Parhami family reunion: The third in the annual series was held today in the beachside community of Pacific Palisades, hosted by a second-cousin and her immediate family. An estimated 100 members of the clan, from various generations, came together to renew their ties and to celebrate the family's heritage. Priceless conversations and good food were augmented with a slide presentation by my second oldest surviving uncle and one of the oldest cousins.

Here are some quotes about family and reunions:

"The great gift of life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you." ~ Kendall Hailey

"Family faces are magic mirrors. Looking at people who belong to us, we see the past, present and future. We make discoveries about ourselves." ~ Gail Lumet Buckley

"Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need

one." ~ Jane Howard

"The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life." ~ Richard Bach

"Any family tree produces some lemons, some nuts and a few bad apples." ~ Anonymous

"A family reunion is an effective form of birth control." ~ Anonymous

"Families are like fudge: mostly sweet with a few nuts." ~ Anonymous

"A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it." ~ Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*

"Behind every successful man stands a surprised mother-in-law." ~ Voltaire

(3) Iranian spy ring exposed in Turkey: The [Turkish-language newspaper *Hurriyet*](#) has reported on the arrest of two dozen Iranian nationals, including 10 women, on charges of spying for the Islamic Republic. The report alleges that some of the women got personally close to key security, armed forces, and government figures with the aim of extracting information from them.

(4) Country/blues music: Performance of "[It's Good to Be King](#)" by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

(5) Spectacular looping animated GIFs: Erdal Inci, an Istanbul-based artist, creates [endless moving images](#) via the magic of replication and looping.

2013/05/25 (Sat.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Ironically, many of the factors that led to success in the Shuttle software were related to limitations of computer hardware in that era, including limitations in memory that prevented today's common 'requirements creep' and uncontrolled growth in functionality as well as requiring careful functional decomposition of the system requirements in order to break it into small pieces that could be loaded only when needed." ~ Nancy Leveson, on lessons learned from the development of software for NASA's Space Shuttle Program, in *Communications of the ACM*, issue of June 2013.

(2) Cockroaches are evolving to avoid sugary baits: Some mutant cockroaches have been observed that are repulsed by glucose-rich jam (they jump back after tasting it), choosing instead to eat peanut butter, which contains a much smaller amount of sugar. [Experiments have revealed](#) that in these mutant cockroaches, receptors for bitter compounds respond to glucose, thus inhibiting the response from sweetness-sensing cells. Changing the sensitivity of receptors is nature's way of evolving efficiency. For example, the sweetness sensors of honey bees have become less sensitive over time, so that the bees only collect concentrated nectar.

(3) Uncertainty intervals in chemistry: To deal with uncertain quantities in numerical computations, we sometimes use intervals. If I measure a quantity and get the value 54.6, and I know that the measuring instrument's error is at most 0.1 unit in either direction, I may indicate the outcome of my measurement as [54.5, 54.7], using an interval bounded by the minimum and maximum possible values of the measured quantity. Twice the quantity measured will be represented by the interval [109.0, 109.4]. Similarly, we have rules for adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing intervals. With intervals, numerical values carry with them a measure of their accuracy and we have an absolute sense of the worst-case errors at all times. I was thus delighted to learn that intervals are also being used in chemistry. Here is the story. We have been thought that atomic masses of various elements are constants of nature: oxygen's is 15.999, carbon's is 12.011, and hydrogen's is 1.008. The atomic mass is determined primarily by the number of protons in the nucleus. Every element has a number of unstable or decaying isotopes, whose atomic masses differ from the common version, because of the differing number of neutrons in their nuclei. But some elements have a number of stable isotopes too. For such elements, depending on the environment and location on earth, the most abundant isotope may be different, causing problems in defining atomic masses. Magnesium, for example, has three different stable isotopes, and they vary slightly in abundance in different environments, making the average mass of a magnesium atom different, depending on location. To solve the problem, the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry is now using intervals, rather than single numbers, to specify atomic masses. For example, magnesium's atomic mass is specified by the interval [24.304, 24.307], bromine's by [79.901, 79.907], and sulfur's by [32.059, 32.076].

2013/05/24 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Optical illusion: Look at [this image](#) long enough and you'll be able to make the train change direction by simply thinking about it.

(2) Self-aiming rifle: According to [the *New Scientist*](#), the technology that allows fighter-jet pilots to lock their weapons on a target and then fire without a need for precision aiming is coming to a rifle near you. A \$22,000 "precision-guided rifle," made by the US start-up company TrackingPoint, uses a laser rangefinder, inertial sensors, and environmental sensors (to pick up parameters such as wind speed and temperature) to accurately hit targets up to 900 meters away. Yet another killing machine to be celebrated by NRA and feared by parents and most other citizens!

(3) Another female politician assassinated in Pakistan: Zohra Shahid Hussain, 60, a senior vice-president and a

mother figure to the Tahreek-e-Insaf party, is the latest among 150 victims in the run-up to Pakistan's national elections. **She was killed** a week after the elections and just before a scheduled revote in parts of Karachi.

(4) Food for thought: Think about all your ancestors throughout human history. Imagine that even if only one of these ancestors had not produced a child, because s/he slipped and fell over a cliff, was eaten by an animal, or simply decided to forego childbearing for some other interest, such as art, you would not be here today. So, the odds of your existence are extremely small. (Idea from Mark Pagel's *Wired for Culture*, a book that I have finished reading and will review shortly.)

(5) On the perils of live TV: CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer interviewed Rebecca, a woman who fled with her 19-month-old son Anders, moments before a tornado destroyed her home.

Wolf Blitzer: "You're blessed. Brian, your husband is blessed. Anders is blessed. ... I guess you got to thank the lord, right?"

Rebecca: Smiles and tries to shrug-off the question.

Wolf Blitzer: "Do you thank the lord for that split-second decision?"

Rebecca: "I ... I ... I'm actually an atheist ... we are here, and you know, I don't blame anybody for thanking the lord."

Wolf Blitzer: "Of course not."

2013/05/23 (Thu.): The theme for today's five posts is geography.

(1) Wonderful hilltop towns and villages: Ancient humans were fond of building their towns or villages on top of hills. They tolerated problems, such as more difficult access to water, for easier defense against invaders that the hilltop site provided. Many of these communities have **survived to present day**.

(2) NASA's panoramic photo of a 6000-miles-long, 120-miles-wide strip on earth: The strip extends from southern Russia to the southern tip of Africa. You can zoom in and out as you move over the posted version of the photo. You can also watch short (4-minute) and complete (15-minute) video reviews of the photo.

(3) Today's Mecca: The massive Grand Mosque (Beitul Haram), where Muslim pilgrims congregate during Hajj, is **dwarfed by skyscrapers** housing multiple luxury hotels and a clock tower. The construction at the lower left is part of the mosque's expansion project. **This article** reviews some of the concerns with the way historically important sites and artifacts were destroyed to accommodate new development.

(4) National Geographic photographers document the astounding diversity of Ecuador's Yasuni National Park.

(5) Village that spent nearly 3 decades under water is reemerging: The Argentinian village Villa Epceun was a thriving tourist hotspot until 1985, when heavy rains caused a salt-water lagoon to burst its banks, submerging the area under 9 meters of water. Now, the water has almost entirely receded, **revealing images** of a ghost town whose residents had to leave in a hurry.

2013/05/22 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On autonomous vehicles: "... given that more than 90 percent of crashes result from human mistakes, the combination of emerging driver-assist features, connectivity and ultimately autonomous vehicles offer the promise of safer mobility." ~ Mitch Bainwol, Automobile Manufacturers President, speaking on Wednesday, May 15, 2013, at a Senate hearing on driverless vehicle technology [Now, if only Google can develop a Senatorless Senate, we'll be all set!]

(2) Iran's brand new Islamic penal law: One notable feature of the law, enacted last week, is that it's nearly impossible to comprehend without knowing some Arabic. The law contains page after page of articles dealing with an-eye-for-an-eye type of punishment for every possible harm inflicted on human organs. If you read Persian, you might be able to decipher the following entertaining/alarming **articles of the law:** 222, 233, 238, 262, 394, 406, 550, 552, 663, 665. For those who can't read Persian, the law contains some definitions of various sexual acts, some variations on the prescribed punishments for a number of crimes depending on the sex or religious faith of the perpetrator and the victim, specifying that the organ cut in retaliation should not exceed in length or area the organ harmed, and a few other issues defined with mathematical precision. Perhaps this precision is what necessitated the invention of special machinery for cutting human organs during legal punishments, according to pictorial reports of a few months ago.

(3) More on global warming: Any opinion expressed about global warming is bound to generate passionate comments from one side or the other in the endless debate. Here is my elaboration on a disapproving comment on my post of yesterday, as it appeared on Facebook.

As a scientist specializing in computing, I don't have the time or the requisite knowledge/tools to independently investigate every area of science, so I rely on consensus among specialists in each field to inform me of important findings as they occur. When there is no consensus, I keep an open mind and wait for problems to be resolved. As a citizen, however, I am interested in all aspects of science that affect my life and the lives of my family, including all future generations that must live on this earth. This is the nature of my interest in climate science. If there is even a 10% probability that the earth will be overwhelmed and destroyed by careless

exploitation, I want someone to look into it and to find the causes and possible solutions, even if our societies later decide that the solutions are too costly to implement. I'd be very happy if someone proves that global warming isn't occurring, because that would ease my mind and free up research dollars for other endeavors. The proof should be aimed at specialists who can judge its merits, not at lay public with the expectation that they cheer on and shout slogans against the climate-science conspirators. [Bill Coleman's documentary](#) is far from convincing. For one thing, it focuses on contradicting that CO2 emissions are causing global warming. My post wasn't about CO2 emissions, but about global warming itself (rise in earth temperatures). If something other than CO2 is causing it, then let's look for the culprit. The fact that the earth has survived for millions of years isn't a guarantee that it will survive the next 1000 years. People have lived in China for thousands of years, yet residents of Beijing are suffocating from pollution. For another, Coleman's documentary has been viewed only 1400 times in over 3 years since it was posted. I would expect the views of a "respected" authority to generate more interest among our fellow citizens. (I know, I will be reminded that there is a conspiracy against dissenting views!)

2013/05/21 (Tue.): Here are three sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Prosperity is a great teacher; adversity is a greater. Possession pampers the mind; privation trains and strengthens it." ~ William Hazlitt

(2) On global warming [my response to a Facebook friend who took issue with a post about global warming]: Okay let's talk data. Every plot of average global temperatures that I have seen shows an unmistakable upward trend, amounting to about 2 degrees Fahrenheit over the past 100 years. Prior to that, there was a dip, but the rise is still 1.5 degrees if you go back to 1880, when reliable record-keeping began [see, e.g., the first chart in this [Wikipedia article](#)]. Is it a mere coincidence that the 10 warmest years on record have all occurred in the past 14 years (9 of them in the past 10 years)? [See the "Warmest Years" section of the article] What are the chances of that happening with random variations, of the kind we have had throughout human history? What's the warmest decade on record? It is 2000-2009, by a wide margin. The second warmest decade was 1990-1999, by a similarly wide margin over the 3rd warmest, 1980-1989 [see the "Warmest Decades" section of the article]. One natural question is why no other scientific finding on which national science academies agree is contested in the same manner as global warming. Research funding competition exists in virtually all areas of science and technology, but again scientists in no other field have been accused of "ganging up on" or bullying the dissenters. Of course, the warming trend does not in itself show that humans are responsible for it, although the strong correlation of the temperature curve with greenhouse gas emissions does provide a good hint. So, let's not deny global warming but rather collaborate on discovering its causes and ways of reversing it.

(3) My take on the upcoming Iranian presidential elections: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's campaign to become Iran's President for the second time (he served two consecutive terms during 1989-1997) is quite troubling. It seems that, after entering the race at the last possible hour once he interpreted signals from the Khamenei's aides as the Supreme Leader's tacit agreement with his candidacy, he is positioning himself as the savior of the people, rather than as their servant. His first campaign statement sounded as if he thinks he is doing Iranians a huge favor just by running. The conservatives have fielded multiple candidates, on the surface claiming that they have not yet reached a consensus. But this might be a deliberate strategy to dampen the opponents' blows against any one candidate and to see if any damaging revelations surface for some of them, before pushing one forward. Meanwhile, the conservative candidates appear to be trying to outdo each other by their claims of past toughness/brutality against street demonstrators and university students.

2013/05/20 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Keep your face always toward the sunshine, and shadows will fall behind you." ~ Walt Whitman

(2) The Millennials: "[The Millennials, aka Generation Y] are fame-obsessed: three times as many middle school girls want to grow up to be a personal assistant to a famous person as want to be a senator ... Whereas in the 1950s families displayed a wedding photo, a school photo and maybe a military photo in their homes, the average middle-class American family today walks amid 85 pictures of themselves and their pets. ... They got this way partly because, in the 1970s, people wanted to improve kids' chances of success by instilling self-esteem. It turns out that self-esteem is great for getting a job or hooking up at a bar but not so great for keeping a job or a relationship. ... we've learned later that self-esteem is a result, not a cause." ~ Joel Stein, in a *Time* magazine article (issue of May 20, 2013) focusing on the generation whose members were born from 1980 to 2000

(3) Sorry if this post grosses you out: The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization points out that to feed the world's growing population, we have to consider food made from bugs, which are highly nutritious (high in protein, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, and fiber), super-easy to raise, and gentler on the environment. [From "Bugs a la Mode," an article in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 15, 2012.]

(4) Location, location, location: The Americans' schizophrenic "blend of isolationist ambivalence and missionary arrogance" is the result of their country's circumstances, never having had to face a predatory neighbor threatening its very existence. This has led to a kind of self-delusion when dealing with societies where ethnic, religious, and other kinds of hatred are embedded deep in the DNA. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 15, 2012, explaining the persistent lack of understanding between America and the rest of the world.]

2013/05/19 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how you use them." ~ Anonymous

(2) YouTube's **Comedy Week**: During the week of May 19-25, YouTube is hosting a number of comedians, both those who have been using YouTube and those new to the medium.

(3) Optical illusion dance: Half-black, half-white costumes **obscure the boundaries** between dancers.

(4) Anti-pretty-face drug for men: Many men suffer from impaired judgment around attractive women. This is the basis of the 'honey trap' in the terminology of spy movies. "But thankfully researchers in Japan are at work on a solution to the problem, and according to a recent report, they may have identified a medication that can blunt the male urge to blindly trust the next pretty face." The medication, minocycline, is an antibiotic that has been around since the early 1970s. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 15, 2012.]

(5) US cities of the future: While many US cities are losing residents, the following are top gainers of the highly mobile younger workers by virtue of expansion in areas such as consulting and green energy. The numbers in parentheses represent the annual net migration of young people, aged 25-34, into the city for the period 2009-2011: Washington, DC (10,337), Houston (10,306), Denver (9457), Portland (8249), Austin (7774), Dallas (6714), Riverside (6229), Seattle (4478), San Antonio (3796), Charlotte (2835). [Data from *The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*, by Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley]

2013/05/18 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The weightless guitar player: NASA astronaut Chris Hadfield performs "**Space Oddity**" (a David Bowie song) at the International Space Station.

(2) An observation: I would have taken climate-change doubters more seriously if the group did not have such a large intersection with the set of evolution deniers. [Note: On Facebook, I posted the following elaboration in response to a friend who objected: I did not say that the two sets are the same; I said merely that the two have a large intersection. The first set does contain some prominent scientists who are not evolution deniers. Please see the chart at the beginning of this [Wikipedia article](#). Citing a 2010 joint statement, the article notes, at the end of its second paragraph, that the main conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change "are recognized by the national science academies of all the major industrialized nations."]

(3) If you have ever wondered about the definitions of various generations in the US popular culture terminology, this guide, adapted from the May 20, 2013, issue of *Time* magazine, will come in handy. The generation name is followed by the birth years of its members and a very brief description.

- Missionary Generation (1860-1882): Grew up after the Civil War; hit middle age during Prohibition; architected the New Deal
- The Lost Generation (1883-1900): Were crushed by the Great Depression in midlife; later paid high taxes to help fund WW II
- The Greatest Generation (1901-1924): Fought WW II; later, built suburbs and highways and contributed to scientific advances
- The Silent Generation (1925-1942): Children of the Great Depression; considered lucky because they suffered fewer war casualties
- Baby Boomers (1943-1960): Lost fortunes in the stock market crash of 1987 and postponed retirement due to the Great Recession
- Generation X (1961-1980): Many had working moms or broken homes; first group to earn less in real dollars than their parents
- The Millennials, or Gen Y (1980-2000): Products of 9/11 and new media; haunted by unemployment and rising national debt

2013/05/17 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Climb the mountain so that you can see the world, not so the world can see you." ~ David McCullough, in a **commencement address** entitled "You Are Not Special"

(2) Airports from the air: Jeffrey Milstein's impressive **aerial photographs** of some major airports.

(3) Humans of New York: Even in neighborhoods that have come to be known as dangerous and crime-ridden, most people live normal, unexceptional lives. In short, the world isn't as dangerous, violent, or sexy as it is

portrayed on TV and other media. This is what the photographer who runs the Facebook page "Humans of New York" tries to portray in his images, and in this [16-minute TEDx talk](#).

(4) Greater transparency in healthcare costs: Steven Brill's landmark *Time* magazine report (see my blog post of 2013/03/04) that exposed hospital overcharging practices and their so-called "chargemaster" list of highly inflated prices for services, supplies, and medications, played a big part in the decision of US Department of Health and Human Services to [publish chargemaster prices](#) for all hospitals in the country, alongside what Medicare pays them in each case. Medicare uses a cost-based scheme to determine compensation rates that are many times lower than what hospitals charge uninsured patients (insurance companies negotiate their own rates, often using Medicare rates as leverage in their negotiations, but even large insurers do not have as much sway as Medicare, so they end up paying more).

2013/05/15 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) New York City at "Window of the World" theme park in Shenzhen, China. Here is a [9-minute tour](#) of the entire park on YouTube.

(2) The Mustangs of Las Colinas: Beautiful Robert Glen [bronze sculpture](#) (1.5 times life size), installed in 1984 in Irving, Texas.

(3) The puzzle of Iranian politics: Former President Rafsanjani talked to a woman. Former President Khatami shook hands with a woman. Current President Ahmadinejad hugged a woman. Extrapolate to find what the next President will do.

(4) Soybeans patent case decided in favor of Monsanto: An Indiana farmer's claim that 'because genetically modified herbicide-resistant soybeans designed and patented by Monsanto replicate themselves, he was not violating patent law when he used harvested soybeans to plant his crops' was rejected by the US Supreme Court. [The Court ruled](#) that farmers must pay Monsanto every time they plant the patented seeds.

(5) Gut bacteria that cause weight loss identified: In a promising development, certain bacteria have been successfully used to reverse obesity and type-2 diabetes in animals. The [weight-loss bacteria](#) are thought to change the gut lining and the way food is absorbed.

2013/05/14 (Tue.): The following puzzles, taken from the May 2013 issue of *Communications of the ACM*, pertain to tiny ants that move at the speed of 1 cm/s in whichever direction they are facing. When two ants meet head-to-head, they both reverse directions and continue moving at the speed of 1 cm/s.

First puzzle: Ant Alice is the middle ant among 25 ants facing in various directions on a very narrow 1-meter stick. At time 0, the ants start marching in whichever direction they are currently facing. Those reaching the end of the stick fall off it. How long must we wait before we are sure Alice has fallen off the stick?

Second puzzle: If the ants' initial positions and directions they face are uniformly random, what is the probability that when Ant Alice falls off the stick, she falls off the end she was initially facing?

Third puzzle: Ant Alice is one of 12 ants, each initially placed uniformly at random on circle with circumference of 1 m. Each ant is initially facing clockwise or counterclockwise with equal probability. The ants begin marching at time 0. What is the probability that 100 seconds later, Alice will find herself exactly where she began?

Hint: If the ants are indistinguishable in appearance, their turning around when they meet head-to-head can appear as if they passed through each other. So as far as positions of ants, without regard to their identities, is concerned, considering that colliding ants turn around or go through each other would lead to the same results. An alternative is to imagine the ants carrying tiny flags and exchanging their flags as they turn around. Then, each flag will always move in the same direction. There is never an ant without a flag or a flag without an ant.

2013/05/13 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Mother's Day shooting in New Orleans injures at least 19, according to [NBC News](#).

(2) Americans have their priorities straight: According to a [Time magazine poll](#), conducted in collaboration with Microsoft and the Motion Picture Association of America, only 57% of Americans value beauty as an asset. Creativity, with 94%, tops the list of characteristics deemed valuable, followed by intelligence (93%), compassion (92%), humor (89%), and ambition (88%).

(3) Computing's new landscape: During the second half of the 20th Century, and the first decade of the 21st Century, computing devices proliferated to cover the demand. Initially, there were only mainframes. Later the need expanded upward and downward, resulting in supercomputers and minicomputers. Then, we got microcomputers in a variety of shapes and forms: workstations, desktops, portables, laptops, notebooks, subnotebooks, netbooks, tablets, and PDAs. At the low end, things seem to be moving toward the dominance of tablets and smartphones, perhaps only the latter. At the high end, warehouse-scale data centers and the attendant cloud infrastructure are making mainframes and traditional supercomputers less relevant. So, computer engineers of the future will be working only at the two extremes of tiny and super-scale computing devices. On Friday 5/10, I attended a talk entitled "Building Large Computers" by Urs Holzle, Senior Vice

President of Technical Infrastructure at Google. Dr. Holzle, who was a CS faculty member at UCSB more than a decade ago, was brought back to speak as part of a distinguished lecture series. He outlined a number of technical challenges in building warehouse-scale computers: the required energy infrastructure, getting rid of vast amounts of heat produced by many thousands of servers (both water-based and forced-air cooling is used in the industry), networking challenges to connect the servers within and between warehouses, and finally methods for running software seamlessly on a large number of cooperating servers worldwide. A 2009 "synthesis lecture" ([120-page PDF document](#), authored by Luiz Andre Barroso and Urs Holzle) captures some of the aforementioned challenges.

2013/05/12 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Mother's Day to all moms; past, present, and future!

(2) Rafsanjani now more likely to enter Iran's presidential race: A number of high-ranking clerics, including Ayatollah Sistani of Najaf, have asked former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to run for President. It seems that the Green Movement is also ready to throw its weight behind Rafsanjani, making it more likely that he will run. He has indicated that he will not run without Khamenei's backing, putting the latter in a serious bind. Ironically, Rafsanjani, with all his disagreements with the Supreme Leader, may be the latter's best chance for survival in view of challenges from several factions, including Ahmadinejad's band.

(3) Word Play Masters Invitational: For those who love words and wordplays, [this site](#) provides an opportunity to invent new words with funny meanings or to assign absurd meanings to existing words. The first word below is my submission for the 2013 competition. The other words are some of the other new entries. Enjoy.

Sefficient (adj). Efficient, but barely so

Economyst. An expert in creating mystery when explaining economics

Forgeous. A person, usually female, whose gorgeous appearance is attributable to plastic

Glumorous. How to describe a beautiful but unhappy woman

Macademia. Nuts doing research for, teaching at, or attending colleges and universities

Matricide. Portion of the bed slept upon by mothers

Niagra. A diuretic drug for men

Retrobuton. The act of avenging oneself whilst wearing bell-bottoms and platforms

Universe. A one-line poem

2013/05/11 (Sat.): The theme for today's five posts is music.

(1) Life on Four Strings: Last night, I watched on PBS the inspiring story of Jake Shimabukuro, who started playing the ukulele as an awkward teenager and went on to become the world's most accomplished player of the instrument. Here is his talk/performance at Google. [[69-minute video](#)]

(2) The video that endeared ukulele to the world: Jake Shimabukuro's performance of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" ([5-minute YouTube video](#) that has been viewed 12 million times so far).

(3) Schubert's "Serenade": [Piano performance](#) by Shirin, aka ahang1001.

(4) Persian guitar music: Faramarz Aslani's "[Ageh Yeh Rooz](#)," played by a couple of talented young men.

(5) Persian music: Kourosh Yaghmaei's 1970s pop song "[Gol-e Yakh](#)" is performed at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

2013/05/10 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Fireworks: Artificial and natural. [[Image](#)]

(2) Highly creative storage of logs. [[Image](#)]

(3) Doors make you forget what you were thinking about before you went through them: This is an old *Mail Online* [article from November 2011](#) that I found quite reassuring for obvious reasons, hence this post.

Psychological studies have indicated that because they signal entering a new environment with new requirements and challenges, our minds tend to reset once we go through a door, forgetting, for example, why we decided to enter a room. Experts call a doorway an 'event boundary' that delimits the end of one memory episode and the beginning of another.

(4) Data can clarify the gun control debate: Recently, NRA has taken the stance that only good guys with guns can stop bad guys with guns. Tell this to the families of some 19,000+ US suicide victims in 2010 who shot themselves. Tell it to 1082 women who were killed (mostly with guns) by their intimate partners. A gun is 22 times more likely to be used in criminal assault, accidental death/injury, suicide attempt, or homicide than for legitimate, legally justified self-defense. Civilization and the rule of law have been responsible for centuries-long decline in violent crimes. NRA seems to want to take us back to self-help justice for settling disputes. [Adapted from [Scientific American](#).]

(5) Hero? NOT: The man who was identified through TV interviews as the hero who helped rescue three abducted women from their house-jail in Cleveland [is a felon](#) who has served prison terms for three separate

domestic-violence convictions.

2013/05/09 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Political quote of the day: In his book, *The River War* (1899, Vol. 2, pp. 248-250), Winston Churchill opined about numerous sociopolitical and military topics, including Islam and Islamic societies. His comments are often misquoted in various on-line forums. Here is a part of what he actually wrote in the book:

"How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! ... Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement; the next of its dignity and sanctity. The fact that in Mohammedan law every woman must belong to some man as his absolute property ... must delay the final extinction of slavery until the faith of Islam has ceased to be a great power among men. ... No stronger retrograde force exists in the world."

(2) Qualcomm cofounder featured in [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#) (May 2013): Irwin M. Jacobs, Qualcomm cofounder and winner of the 2013 IEEE Medal of Honor (IEEE's highest award), for his contributions to digital communication and wireless technology, including broadening the use of CDMA, is featured in this article about his technical contributions, personal life, and philanthropic passions.

(3) US Air Force's sexual assault prevention officer arrested for groping: According to [ABC News](#), lieutenant colonel Jeff Krusinski was arrested and charged with sexual battery near Washington DC. This incident places the US military's efforts for dealing with an increasing number of sexual assaults under renewed scrutiny.

2013/05/08 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) IMAX 3D movie about Jerusalem: This [7-minute trailer](#) provides a glimpse of the holy city and the landscapes to its west, north, and east.

(2) A profound math problem: Designated by the Clay Mathematics Institute as one of seven Millennium Problems in 2000 (one of which, Poincare's Conjecture, has since been solved by Russian mathematician Grigori Perelman, who refused the \$1M prize on grounds that he didn't deserve it, given that he was following on the path established by others), the "P = NP problem" deals in essence with whether or not there exist computational problems whose solutions will forever be beyond the abilities of our most powerful computers. There exist problems which appear to be of this kind, but at this point we do not know whether these problems are inherently difficult or simply appear difficult because of our incomplete knowledge of potential solution strategies. *The New Yorker* has published [this popular account](#) of the problem and its history.

(3) The sixth mass extinction may be coming: There have been five previous mass extinctions of species on our planet, with the dinosaur extinction being the most recent. Some 185 million years ago, over a span of 100,000 years, huge volcanic eruptions are thought to have caused the so-called "Great Dying." At present, some 27,000 species of all kinds go extinct per year. Many of these have minimal impact on our lives, but if the condition known as "colony collapse disorder" causes bees to go extinct, their loss will lead to a domino effect, because many crops rely on them for pollination. Our African ancestors began exploring the world around them over a million years ago, using their superb survival skills to overcome extremely harsh conditions (another human group, the Neanderthals, did not fare as well). Now, our long-term goal should be to chart a strategy to ensure human survival for another million years. [Adapted from [Newsweek magazine](#).]

2013/05/06 (Mon.): Here are three sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Judaism and gender equality: In most Jewish societies and families, women's rights are celebrated and honored. However, Orthodox Jews (a small minority) believe that women are inferior and should not be allowed to wear a prayer shawl or read a Torah scroll aloud. This minority is now losing battle after battle, even in Israel, where they have traditionally had a strong influence on politicians and laws. Activists in Israel will continue to work against backward laws with a monthly service on May 10, where they will try to challenge the law against women reading a Torah scroll aloud. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of May 13, 2013.]

(2) On religions' bases for prohibiting incest: The modern scientific/genetic explanation for incest being undesirable is well-known and widely accepted, but on what did religions base their edicts against it? After all, if God created Adam and Eve, then their offspring must have committed incest to prevent human extinction. Similarly, incest must have occurred when Noah and his family were the only humans who survived the big flood. I have seen two explanations in defense of the biblical account of Genesis, neither one of which applies to the situation after Noah's flood. One is based on God having created other humans after Adam and Eve, but this is a cop-out, given that there is no mention of these other humans in the Bible or any other religious text. The second is based on Adam, Eve, and their family having "pure blood" by virtue of being direct descendants of God, making them immune to genetic problems. Are there other explanations that I have missed?

(3) On knowing the mayor of your town/city: Joel Stein's *Time* magazine column (issue of May 13, 2013) makes a valid point that residents of Los Angeles do not care about local politics, by and large don't vote in

municipal elections, and many don't even know the name of their mayor. This reminded me of New York City, whose mayor is widely known not just to city residents, but nationwide. Why the difference?

2013/05/05 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Newly discovered hormone could eliminate insulin injections for diabetics: A Harvard researcher and his post-doctoral fellow have discovered that [injection of betatrophin in mice](#) leads to the pancreas producing up to 30 times as many insulin-making beta cells. This is potentially a landmark discovery for treating type-2 (or even type-1) diabetes.

(2) A very reasonable suggestion: Bringing back species that have been extinct for thousands of years is an exciting possibility that may be on the verge of realization. However, William Y. Brown of the Brookings Institution thinks it is more prudent to first make sure we have preserved DNA material for all the currently existing species before it is too late. This "DNA Noah's Ark" will ensure that nothing will go extinct any more. Partial collections already exist in museums, but they form only a fraction of what is needed. [Adapted from *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 3 and 10, 2013.]

(3) Too early for verdict on MOOCs (my letter to the editor of *Communications of the ACM*, to appear in the July 2013 issue of the journal published by the Association for Computing Machinery): Michael A. Cusumano's Viewpoint "Are the Costs of 'Free' Too High in Online Education?" (Apr. 2013) gave an essentially positive answer despite hedging with phrases like, "Maybe, but maybe not." It was clear from the context which side he is on, saying, for example, "The industries I follow closely are still struggling to recover from the impact of free." Comparing traditional institutions of higher learning with online course offerings is somewhat unfair, as it involves contrasting institutions that have undergone decades or even centuries of refinement with a new paradigm still in its infancy. Moreover, face-to-face interaction in a classroom is wonderful under ideal conditions, but university systems in much of the world lack ideal conditions today. For example, face-to-face interaction is unlikely when a disengaged professor teaches hundreds of students in a large lecture hall. Students have difficulty even seeing the professor, viewing the projected slides, or reading the scribbles on the board; they are often in uncomfortable seats or no seat at all in the case of over-enrolled classes. Students sometimes forego courses they prefer in favor of available ones and wait weeks before receiving any kind of feedback on homework submissions or exam papers because the professor is too busy or there are too few teaching assistants. Online courses have been successful in part because they can provide immediate feedback and peer-to-peer interaction, as well as flexibility and variety. Institutions of higher learning must adapt to this wonderful new resource, and not assume a defensive stance, insisting on business as usual. [Note added on 2013/07/18: This letter was published in the July 2013 issue of *CACM*.]

2013/05/03 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Upper classes are a nation's past; the middle class is its future." ~ Ayn Rand, Russian-born author (1905-1982)

(2) Hand that holds up an elevated freeway segment: [Street art](#).

(3) The biggest rubber ducky in the world: [Image](#).

(4) Interesting lecture at UCSB: Yesterday, I attended a lecture by Dr. Steven Chu, Physics Nobel Laureate and Obama Administration's former Secretary of Energy (now a faculty member at Stanford), entitled "How Discovery, Invention, and Innovation in Energy Change the World." The lecture was the first in College of Engineering's "Engineering the Future" series. Chu left the DoE in late April, so one of his quips was that this lecture was the first one for him in a long while without wearing a suit. On another occasion, he mentioned something about climate change, following his remark with, "You can't say that in Washington." Visible security measures were in place, as one might expect. Chu showed several video clips in the course of his informative lecture, the final one being Carl Sagan's ["The Pale Blue Dot"](#) (the title referring to planet Earth, as seen from outer space).

(5) Insect-size robots are here: The idea of tiny flying robots has been toyed with in research labs for more than a decade now. Such robots find applications in security surveillance, rescue efforts, and military operations. Finally, Harvard University researchers have an implementation of the concept that weighs less than a gram and has very precise wing movements, allowing it to navigate through tight spaces, such as inside collapsed buildings. [[BBC report](#)]

2013/05/01 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Grammar is the difference between knowing your shit and knowing you're shit." ~ Anonymous

(2) Daniel Day-Lewis playing Obama, or is it the other way around? Steven Spielberg and President Obama team up to [poke fun at Day-Lewis](#) at the 2013 White House Correspondents' Dinner.

(3) Children of killers: Three-year-old Zahara Tsarnaev, daughter of the dead brother who bombed the Boston

Marathon, is likely oblivious to her father's crimes and may not even know about his death. However, her father's actions will cast a long shadow on her life and her future. Children of killers are also victims, but often do not receive the proper care and treatment. When such children get older, they are bound to wonder if they are genetically prone to violence and are haunted by the societal notion of "bad seed." [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of April 26, 2013.]

(4) Futuristic Intel headlights make rain invisible: The headlights have a camera, a processor, and a projector. The camera picks up images of raindrops, the processor uses image processing algorithms to predict the location of each raindrop over time, and the projector blocks out light emission where it expects the rays will hit a raindrop. The result is a driver view that is pretty much devoid of raindrops and their reflected light. See the video demo in this [c|net story](#).

2013/04/29 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest about Iran and Iranians.

(1) An old Persian song, "Shab Bood, Biaban Bood," [performed in Persian and Japanese](#), by Nahid and Yukiko during the Mehregan Festival.

(2) Iranian pilgrims heading to Mecca on a Pan American flight, circa 1974. [[Photo](#)]

(3) Middle Eastern acting school: Do you want to land a role in a Hollywood film playing a Middle Easterner? Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani [teaches you how](#).

(4) What are Iranian people to do? The first prime minister of the Islamic Republic (Bazargan) became known as a Westoxified liberal and was forced to resign; their first president (Bani-Sadr), who assumed office with the highest recommendation from Khomeini himself, has been rebranded as a Mojahedin-e Khalgh spy; the Prime Minister who led the country during the Iran-Iraq war (Mousavi) is now under house arrest for leading the so-called "sedition"; the President, who characterized his own 8 years in office as the "era of construction" (Rafsanjani), is now under suspicion as tacitly supporting the sedition by not speaking up against it; the reformist president (Khatami), is sidelined, because of his support for a number of people involved in the sedition; the current President (Ahmadinejad), now in final days of his 8 years in office, heads what the conservatives call the "deviant current." Could someone please clarify to the people of Iran why they should be hopeful that their next choice, from among the candidates pre-screened by the Supreme Leader and his cronies, would fare any better?

2013/04/28 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When the thieves who robbed your house start fighting among themselves, don't raise your hopes that the winner will give part of your property back to you." ~ Anonymous (in connection with the infighting among the Iranian officials)

(2) One of the worst serial killers in US history: Today's ["60 Minutes" newsmagazine](#) broadcast an interview with a former male critical care nurse who is believed to have killed hundreds of patients over 16 years in 9 different hospitals. Ironically, he had been dismissed from many of the hospitals after they suspected foul play. Yet none of these institutions alerted others, allowing the killings to continue. He admits to 40 murders, characterizing them as mercy killings, but the evidence suggests otherwise.

(3) UCLA chemistry professor to stand trial for fatal lab fire: In what is believed to be the first such prosecution involving an academic lab accident in the US, UCLA's Professor Patrick Harran [will stand trial](#) on felony charges stemming from a 2008 fire that killed research assistant Sheharbano Sangji.

(4) Cartoon of the day: [Turkish cartoonist's depiction](#) of how cooperation and compassion lead to success.

2013/04/27 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Marriage is like a game of cards. In the beginning you just need two hearts and a diamond. By the end, you wish you'd been dealt a club and a spade." ~ Anonymous

(2) SBCC is the top-ranking community college in the US: The [Aspen Institute](#) has given an award to Santa Barbara City College as one of two community colleges in the country that are tied for the top rank among their peer institutions. The award is based on the overall student outcomes, high transfer rates, and equity.

(3) Friction is good: It is difficult to imagine mechanical devices working properly without friction. The right amount of friction, at the right place, enables a host of devices to function properly. Our information economy is heading toward the total elimination of friction and this, according to Moshe Vardi, writing in *Communications of the ACM* ([PDF file](#) from the issue of May 2013), isn't necessarily good. He cites a 30-year collection of letters between a mother and her daughter in 17th-century Europe as an example. These letters, which have been preserved, are deep, full of emotions, and a treasure trove of French literature, primarily because of the 2-week separation between a letter and its reply. We have removed this friction via e-mail and instant messaging, creating a tsunami of bland, thoughtless, and unnecessary communication. Will anyone be interested in reading our communications several centuries from now?

(4) Remembering last April: Last year around this time I was in St Louis, cheering on Dos Pueblos High School's

robotics Team 1717 as it competed against teams from around the world in a basketball-like game. This year, my daughter is in college, but I still feel a special connection with DPHS's Engineering Academy, which continues to train high school students in various areas of engineering by engaging them in the practical problems associated with building robots. This year's competition involves throwing Frisbees, rather than specially built basketballs. Competing in the Curie division, Team 1717 had four qualification-round matches yesterday will have one early this morning. I wish them the best of luck.

2013/04/26 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) **Quirky health facts** (answer true/false): (a) Your nose grows like Pinocchio's when you lie. (b) Neuroticism, a la Woody Allen, lengthens your life. (c) Sleeping longer can make you less sensitive to pain. (d) Milk drinkers are more likely to be geniuses. (e) Polluted air can make you cranky.
- (2) SJSU launches the first US graduate program in battery technology: This is yet another example of California's leadership in high tech. Battery storage has emerged as one of the most important areas for technological advances, both for electric cars and for taking advantage of renewable energy, where the supply fluctuates and may not match the demand. San Jose State University, in partnership with the CalCharge alliance, will offer a **2-year master's degree** in this field.
- (3) Flow of students from US to Canada: The **NBC Nightly News** reports that the lower cost and simpler processes for admission and financial aid have made Canadian universities more attractive to US students, increasing the number of US student north of the border by 50% over the past decade.
- (4) Can't argue with this logic: According to one of his relatives, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the main suspect in the **Boston Marathon bombing**, "was angry that the world pictures Islam as a violent religion." Let me get this straight: he was ticked off by those who perceive Muslims as violent, so he killed people at a public event to help correct this perception.

2013/04/25 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) A lateral thinking puzzle: What should be the next term of the following sequence?
0 | 10 | 1110 | 3110 | 132110 | 1113122110 | 311311222110 | 13211321322110 | ?
- (2) Humorous Persian poetry: Two recited poems of Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) about the Iranian elections have been repackaged in this **13-minute video**, which also includes some anti-regime political commentary.
- (3) On the Boston Marathon bombing: A number of Muslims in Norway publicly praise the Boston terrorists, calling the two brothers "real lions." It is ironic that some people do everything in their power to leave their homelands and settle in countries they hate.
- (4) One way of reducing the intake of calories: In a **psychological experiment**, two groups of people were given different printed menus containing the exact same items, an ordinary menu and one that listed for each item the number of miles of brisk walking needed to burn off the calories from consuming the item. The group with menus containing the extra information ordered and ate much less than the other.

2013/04/24 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) A geometric puzzle: You are given a triangular piece of carpeting with a small stain on it. How would you go about cutting the largest possible rectangular piece of the carpet that does not include any part of the stain?
- (2) The second biggest hole dug by humans (after Utah's Bingham Canyon Mine): The **Mir diamond mine** in Russia is now abandoned due to the extreme difficulty of mining operations during Siberia's long, brutal winter. The 1200-meters-across, 525-meters-deep hole creates a downward air flow above it, making it hazardous for helicopters flying overhead.
- (3) Iranian man bearing fake Israeli passport **apprehended by the Israeli embassy** in Katmandu: He obtained the passport in Kuala Lumpur and used it to enter Nepal on April 3. His frequent visits to the embassy area made the Israelis suspicious.
- (4) Khatami's contradictions: He is sending signals that he might become a candidate in the upcoming presidential elections in Iran. He considers Iran's economy to be in a dire state, emphasizing that fixing the economy by experts and confronting semi-governmental entities that are making life difficult for free enterprise should be a top priority. He also speaks of the golden days of the Islamic Republic under Khomeini. What he does not say is how he will reconcile his belief that the economy needs immediate attention with Khomeini's famous musing that "economics is the purview of donkeys."

2013/04/23 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) A physics puzzle: Why don't top and bottom switch positions in your mirror image (that is, your image isn't upside-down), but right and left do (when you raise your right hand, the mirror image raises its left)?
- (2) Canadian police nabs members of Al Qaeda with connections to Iran: The two thirty-something men

arrested after a long surveillance period [wanted to place bombs](#) aboard a Canada-US train.

(3) FIFA's stand against stadium hangings: In a letter to Islamic Republic authorities, the international soccer body has asked that they refrain from conducting [hanging ceremonies](#) at soccer stadiums. [Talk about pregame or halftime entertainment!]

(4) Techno-dining: Writing in *E&T* magazine, issue of May 2013, columnist Vitali Vitaliev tells the readers about London's [high-tech restaurant Inamo](#), where diners can see the menu on tables that double as large computer screens. When you touch a particular menu item, an image of the food is projected onto an empty plate, creating the illusion that it is already there in front of you. He found the illusion so powerful that he was tempted to taste a couple of the projected dishes.

2013/04/22 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Reconstructing the scene of the Boston Marathon bombing: I am very fond of sketches and maps that show the relationships of things, so a set of [New York Times diagrams](#) showing the bombing locations and where the victims were found really absorbed me. There is an overall sketch on this page, with tabs leading you to the location of the first and second bombs.

(2) Kindness keeps the world afloat, or pay it forward. [[Video](#)]

(3) How we see ourselves, versus how others see us: [This video](#) tries to convince women, young girls in particular, that they are more beautiful than they think. [This spoof](#) is the men's version.

2013/04/20 (Sat.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world." ~ Christopher Hitchens

(2) Iranian children's emotional challenges: Whether we like it or not, a child's emotional development stems from his/her parents. No wonder why many Iranians have a hard time bonding with and loving other people. As children, they never see their parents be affectionate toward each other; kissing and hugging in front of the kids is considered taboo, but not fighting and cursing. There are some exceptions to this rule, but by and large it is true. So, such kids never see affection; not at home, not at school, not on TV, not in films. How are they supposed to learn it?

(3) Iranian men support women's rights: Following a few incidents of the Islamic Republic officials forcing criminals to wear women's clothing, while being paraded on city streets (presumably to shame them), many Iranian men have begun posting on-line photos of themselves wearing women's clothing, to tell the regime that demeaning women is a shameful practice.

(4) Advice to "marry young" generates controversy: In a [letter to Daily Princetonian](#), alumna Susan Patton advised women students to find a husband before graduating, arguing that they will never again be around so many smart men with interests similar to theirs. She goes on to suggest that whereas men often marry pretty women who aren't as smart as they are, "smart women can't (shouldn't) marry men who aren't at least their intellectual equal." Princeton students appear to be divided on this advice, some considering it insulting and old-fashioned and others seeing some merit to her viewpoint.

2013/04/19 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Fakhteh Borhan passes away: Fakhteh was the daughter of close family friends, who were our neighbors in Tehran for many years and later lived within a couple of city blocks from us. After she relocated to France and my family departed Iran for good, we continued to be in touch via remote communication. Living in Paris, Fakhteh had been struggling with health issues of her own for several years, yet she was adamant in taking care of her ailing mother, who passed away recently. As a cherished friend to me and my three sisters, she will be sorely missed. May her soul rest in peace!

(2) The biological clock ticks for both sexes: Older couples are often told about dangers of conception, but the focus is by and large on the woman's age. Older men, particularly celebrities, usually do not hesitate to father children. For example, Michael Douglas' last child was born when he was 58, Clint Eastwood and Rod Stewart had children at 66, and Rupert Murdoch at 72. An interesting article in *Time* magazine (issue of April 22, 2013) suggests that a man's advanced age may be more detrimental to a newborn's health than the woman's. "Baby girls are believed to be born with all the eggs they'll ever have. Sperm, on the other hand, must be produced anew constantly and divide, on average, every 16 days. ... every division represents a chance for a genetic copying error. ... On average, a 20-year-old male passes 15 to 25 such genetic typos on to any child he fathers; for a 45-year-old, the figure is 65. Mothers, no matter how old they are, pass along only about 15."

(3) Batteries not included: This phrase has come to be regarded as a negative feature of toys and other electronic devices, often conjuring the image of a manufacturer that opts for keeping costs/prices down, rather than focus on user enjoyment and convenience. This is about to change. The race is on to build products that do not need batteries at all, scavenging for their very low energy needs using ambient light, vibrations, and

various other methods.

2013/04/18 (Thu.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear ... I was perfectly content before I was born, and I think of death as the same state." ~ Film critic Roger Ebert (who passed away on April 2, 2013), contemplating on his own demise
- (2) Are we really that old? This is the title of a [slide show](#) that juxtaposes photos of our favorite Baby-Boomer idols in their heydays and at present (as of February 2011).
- (3) A journey to Iran: A [10-minute slide show](#) (prepared by the Iranian Students Association at Penn State) that covers scenes from various regions of Iran with samples of their traditional music. Enjoy!
- (4) NASA eyes 3D printing: The rapidly advancing 3D printing technology might be a perfect fit to the needs of space missions. The technology allows NASA engineers to try out various new designs, repair/retrofit existing parts, or build on-demand in space. This [c|net news story](#) includes a video tour of the NASA Space Shop.
- (5) UCSB continues its rise in prominence: [UC Santa Barbara has been ranked #2](#) on Leiden University's list of the top 500 major universities, preceded in the rankings only by MIT.

2013/04/17 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Name me an ethical statement made or an action performed by a believer that could not have been made or performed by a non-believer." ~ Christopher Hitchens
- (2) The other 95% of our universe: The visible universe is only about 1/20 of the whole thing. The fact that spinning galaxies do not fall apart has been explained by the existence of dark matter within them. The amount of dark matter required to pull the cosmos together leads to the prediction of a certain number of collisions between dark-matter particles. In its 2 years of operation, a spectrometer aboard the International Space Station has detected 400,000 positrons, a product of colliding dark-matter particles. This number matches closely the number of collisions predicted by existing models. With the confirmation of dark matter, we now know about slightly less than 1/3 of the universe. So far, no one has a clue about the other 2/3+, i.e., dark energy. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 22, 2013.]
- (3) Boston Marathon bombing investigation will use crowd-sourced data: Led by an FBI special investigator, the team working to find who perpetrated the terrorist bombing [will use cell-phone photos](#) taken by Marathon spectators. Twitter, YouTube, and other social media are abuzz with photos and videos that investigators can use. There is a good chance that the bombs were planned shortly, rather than days, before the event, so eyewitness accounts and photos are expected to be quite useful.
- (4) Imam Mehdi saved Iran from the destructive force of a strong quake: An Islamic Republic official, when asked on TV to provide [info on the 7.8 quake](#) (Iran's strongest in 5 decades) near the cities of Saraavaan and Khaash, states that fortunately because the country is under the protection of Imam Mehdi and the timing of the quake coincided with the Fatemieh period, there was no loss of life and minimal damage. Other sources reported that the relatively small number of deaths (scores, on each side of the Iran-Pakistan border) and limited destruction is due to the quake's depth, estimated to be about 60 miles.

2013/04/16 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and engineering.

- (1) Bringing engineering and social sciences together: Engineering products and processes can benefit immensely from taking human factors into account in their designs. Recognizing this fact, many engineering schools have begun incorporating concepts from social sciences in their curricula. One barrier to effective communication between engineers and social scientists is the relative weakness of the latter group in quantitative methods. [Adapted from [ASEE Prism magazine](#), issue of March/April 2013.]
- (2) Brain research encouraged by the US administration: NIH directors are thrilled with President Obama's advocacy of brain research to find answers for Alzheimer's and other ills. Success in this area will likely produce results comparable in significance to those of the Human Genome Project. Reverse-engineering of the brain presents many scientific and technical challenges, but it is also one of the most exciting research endeavors in the coming decades that can potentially lead to the mapping of all 1000 trillion connections in the human brain. Effective tools, such as fMRI, that allow neuroscientists to peer into human brain as someone learns, sees, remembers, or sleeps, are already in place and new ones are being developed, courtesy of progress in nanotechnology. [Adapted from [ASEE Prism magazine](#), issue of March/April 2013.]
- (3) Life on a chip: "Soon ... there may be an alternative [to testing on animals]—and one developed by engineers. At the University of Maryland's Clark School of Engineering, Cal Poly, and elsewhere, researchers are developing human tissue in a lab, opening up a new pathway for testing medical therapies without involving patients—or subjecting animals to what some consider inhumane treatment. To Andrew Rowan, chief scientific officer of the Humane Society-U.S. and CEO of HS International, this kind of research is the wave of the future. He predicts that together with other changes in practice brought about by regulation, the new technological

advances will result in an abolition of invasive testing by 2025 and all testing by 2050." [Quoted from the March/April 2013 issue of *ASEE Prism magazine*.]

2013/04/14 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Quote of the day: "The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species." ~ Christopher Hitchens

(2) Dom's laptop is in Iran: Animator Dom Deltorto found out upon returning to his London home one day in February that his MacBook and iPad had been stolen. He had installed **hidden security software** to report the location of the laptop and photos taken by its camera. He did not hear anything for a month, but then he received info that the laptop is in Tehran, and he got a few photos of its current users. Because the British police can't do anything about recovering the laptop, Deltorto has set up a Web site to see if someone can identify the perpetrators. Of course, the new owners may not even be aware that the laptop was stolen.

(3) US universities with greatest expansion in their engineering programs: Based on 2007-2011 data just published, the following are the top six schools in terms of the net increase in the number of engineering degrees awarded: UCLA; Georgia Tech; Texas A&M; Purdue; Louisiana State; Michigan. All six schools have expanded their engineering programs by more than 200 graduates. With an increase of 159 degrees, Cal Poly is ranked 11th on the list. [From *ASEE Prism magazine*, issue of March/April 2013.]

(4) Focusing on beauty in engineering and technology: Writing in *ASEE Prism magazine*, issue of March/April 2013, Lakshmi N. Reddi, Graduate Dean at Florida International University, maintains that our efforts to recruit talented students to engineering and technology majors will get a boost from emphasizing the beauty of ideas and well-designed products and driving home the point that technology and nature aren't necessarily at odds.

2013/04/13 (Sat.): Carnegie, Dale, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, Pocket Books, revised edition, 1981 (originally published in 1936).

Dale Breckenridge Carnegie [1888-1955] received his education at a teachers' college. After giving various professions a try, Carnegie became famous when he pursued his main passion of coaching and motivating politicians, salespeople, managers, teachers, and others to perform at the peak of their abilities by becoming better communicators. His books and methods are still in use by Dale Carnegie Training, a century after it was founded in 1912.

The book under review enumerates 30 principles, discussing them in depth and providing examples of how real people (mostly students or advisees of Mr. Carnegie, but also a number of famous historical figures, such as US Presidents and other world leaders) have benefited from them. The principles are presented in four groups, as follows. [I have renumbered the principles from 1 to 30, rather than use the book's numbering, which restarts at 1 within each section.]

Part One: Fundamental Techniques in Handling People [Principles 1-3]

1. Don't criticize, condemn, or complain; 2. Give honest and sincere appreciation; 3. Arouse in the other person an eager want.

Part Two: Six Ways to Make People Like You [Principles 4-9]

4. Become genuinely interested in other people; 5. Smile; 6. Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language; 7. Be a good listener and encourage others to talk about themselves; 8. Talk in terms of the other person's interests; 9. Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.

Part Three: How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking [Principles 10-21]

10. The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it; 11. Show respect for the other person's opinions and never say, "You're wrong"; 12. If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically; 13. Begin in a friendly way; 14. Get the other person saying, "yes, yes" immediately; 15. Let the other person do a great deal of the talking; 16. Let the other person feel that the idea is his or hers; 17. Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view; 18. Be sympathetic with the other person's ideas and desires; 19. Appeal to the nobler motives; 20. Dramatize your ideas; 21. Throw down a challenge.

Part Four: How to Change People without Giving Offense or Arousing Resentment [Principles 22-30]

22. Begin with praise and honest appreciation; 23. Call attention to people's mistakes indirectly; 24. Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person; 25. Ask questions instead of giving direct orders; 26. Let the other person save face; 27. Lavishly praise every improvement, no matter how slight; 28. Give the other person a fine reputation to live up to; 29. Use encouragement and make the fault seem easy to correct; 30. Make the other person happy about doing the thing you suggest.

Most of the principles derive from common sense, once we note that each person is the center of his/her own universe and tends to focus on problems and issues of immediate interest to him/her. Remember that "Even our friends would much rather talk to us about their achievements than listen to us boast about ours" [p. 153].

Furthermore, "No one likes to feel that he or she is being sold something or told to do a thing. We much prefer

to feel that we are buying of our own accord or acting on our own ideas. We like to be consulted about our wishes, our wants, our thoughts" [p. 156].

A key recommendation is to try to see problems from other people's perspectives. People you meet have a need to feel important. So, give praise where warranted, listen more than you talk, and avoid snap judgments. The importance of compassionate listening is evident from this confession: "I had never listened to [my daughter]. I was always telling her to do this or that. When she wanted to tell me her thoughts, feelings, ideas, I interrupted with more orders. I began to realize that she needed me—not as a bossy mother, but as a confidante, an outlet for all her confusion about growing up. And all I had been doing was talking when I should have been listening. I never heard her" [p. 152].

We must learn to control our urge to find mistakes in other people's words and actions, begin our comments with negative observations, or fret over unimportant annoyances. We read on Page 120: "When someone expresses some feeling, attitude or belief, our tendency is almost immediately to feel 'that's right,' or 'that's stupid,' 'that's abnormal,' 'that's unreasonable,' 'that's incorrect,' 'that's not nice.' Very rarely do we permit ourselves to understand precisely what the meaning of the statement is to the other person." On page 14 of the book, Carnegie reproduces a touching letter by a father to his son, expressing regrets about scolding the son for what he has come to realize were trivial infractions. This [YouTube video](#) contains the text of the letter, as read by Dale Carnegie himself.

The need to feel important is so fundamental that some people actually go insane to find the feeling of importance they were denied in the real world. For example, the author tells us about a particular unhappily married woman who went insane and created her own imaginary world, in which she divorced her husband, resumed her maiden name, and married an English aristocrat [pp. 21-22].

The futility of arguing is stressed emphatically. You have to allow others to change their minds by providing facts and making them realize how they can benefit from their decision, rather than by direct argumentation. "Nine times out of ten, an argument ends with each of the contestants more firmly convinced than ever that he is absolutely right" [p. 110]. Allow others to save face when they change their minds or correct their mistakes. The book contains numerous memorable quotations, such as the following:

"Don't be afraid of enemies who attack you. Be afraid of the friends who flatter you." ~ Mexican general Alvaro Obregon [p. 27]

"Flattery is telling the other person precisely what he thinks about himself." ~ King George V [p. 27]

"Use what language you will; you can never say anything but what you are." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson [p. 27]

"You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him to find it within himself." ~ Galileo [p. 117]

"Be wiser than other people if you can; but do not tell them so." ~ Lord Chesterfield [p. 117]

"I judge people by their own principles, not by mine." ~ Martin Luther King, when asked how, as a pacifist, he could admire US Air Force General Daniel James [p. 126]

"If you want enemies, excel your friends; but if you want friends, let your friends excel you." ~ La Rochefoucauld [p. 154]

All in all, this is an enjoyable book to read, especially when you find yourself saying "yes, yes" to many of Carnegie's statements (see Principle 14). One minor annoyance is the author's tendency to state that something is so profound or important that it merits repeating, and then going ahead and actually repeating the statement in print. I learned a great deal from this book and have no doubt that even the most successful communicator will find something of value here.

2013/04/12 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "What can be asserted without proof can be dismissed without proof." ~ Christopher Hitchens

(2) The mystery of animal grief: This is the title of a [special feature](#) in *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013, with the thesis that many animals grieve just like us humans. Some primates carry their dead babies for days and show elevated stress hormone levels when a relative or companion dies. Elephants attend the body of a dead herdmate for a week and they examine elephant bones on their paths with reverence. A dog in Japan went to a train station looking for its deceased owner every day for a decade.

(3) Free on-line high school and college courses: Numerous Web sites are sprouting in the cyberspace with the claim of offering free on-line courses. Many of these are money-making operations that lure you with free products and then ask you for money for stuff you really need. Others may be free to users but make money from running ads on their pages. [Education Portal Academy](#), about which I have written before, is one of the exceptions. It has a growing menu of courses, from GED and high-school AP to college subjects in science, business, English, and humanities, is nicely organized in terms of subjects and units within each subject, and is free from annoying ads. Do check it out for yourself.

(4) Bitcoin loses half its value in panic selling: The [virtual currency](#) had experienced a sharp rise in value over the past few weeks. This is just another instance of a bubble bursting, to the delight of speculators.

2013/04/11 (Thu.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Is it too modern to notice that there is nothing [in the ten commandments] about the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide?" ~ Christopher Hitchens

(2) Religious wars for Latinos: Currently, 2/3 of the 52M US-based Latinos are Catholics, but they are fleeing Catholicism in droves, many of them (particularly the younger generation) joining evangelical Protestant congregations. The Vatican's choice of the Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as Pope is seen in part as an attempt to reverse or at least slow down this trend. The Southern Baptist Convention is already making plans for 7000 Baptist Hispanic churches by 2020. So it seems that Latinos, who will form some 29% of US population by 2050, will shape not just the US political landscape but its religious composition as well. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013.]

(3) A father writing to his son: This [4-minute YouTube video](#) contains a father's letter to his son, as read by Dale Carnegie, whose book, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, I will be reviewing soon.

(4) The RighTel Mirage: This is the name of a [Web site](#) which has been established to campaign against deploying RighTel 3G mobile phone technology in Iran. The site includes fatwas from a number of religious bigwigs and opinions by sociologists who take positions against RighTel on the grounds that its imaging capabilities and Internet connectivity will lead to moral decay in society. Doing some research, I found out that the rightel.ir domain name is registered to Majid Sotoodeh. Whether this vicious campaign is due to infighting among various companies and merchants that market competing technologies in Iran or arises from a genuine fear of greater connectivity (that might lead, for example, to more coordinated anti-regime street demonstrations) remains to be seen.

2013/04/10 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Use what language you will; you can never say anything but what you are." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

(2) Reviving long-extinct species: "Jurassic Park" (now back in theaters in a new 3D format) had it almost right, except that de-extinction is unlikely to happen for dinosaurs, because they lived so long ago. However, creatures that lived more recently, say during the latest Ice Age, can be revived via a 4-step process, which includes locating well-preserved intact cells (or at least an intact nucleus in a dead cell), finding a host for the cell or nucleus (typically from a similar species, such as using elephants for reviving woolly mammoths), prompting the new cell to begin dividing until it becomes a viable embryo, and transplanting the embryo into an egg or womb of a host animal. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013.]

(3) Bushehr's magnitude-6.1 earthquake: The [death toll of the quake](#) that hit the southern city of Bushehr in Iran on 4/9 rises to 37, with hundreds of residents of the sparsely populated area injured. The destruction and loss of life aside, the safety of Bushehr's nuclear power plant in a region prone to earthquakes has raised concerns. Some sources have indicated that the quake's strength was 6.3; others have reported that the power plant, which is said to be operating normally for now, cannot withstand a magnitude-7 quake and may even suffer damages from weaker quakes under some operating conditions.

(4) Universal background checks: A law mandating universal background checks for gun sales (closing the gun-show loophole) appears to have bipartisan support in the US Senate. Once passed, it will go to the Republican-controlled House, where it faces an uncertain fate.

2013/04/09 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Excellent advice: "When someone expresses some feeling, attitude or belief, our tendency is almost immediately to feel 'that's right,' or 'that's stupid,' 'that's abnormal,' 'that's unreasonable,' 'that's incorrect,' 'that's not nice.' Very rarely do we permit ourselves to *understand* precisely what the meaning of the statement is to the other person." ~ Dale Carnegie, in *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (I have just finished reading the book and will post a review soon)

(2) The down side of globalization: Everyone sings the praises of globalization. But curtailing globalization via protectionism may actually be a good thing; it might prevent "countries like Cyprus from using Russian tax evaders' money to create a banking sector that's 716% the size of the national economy and threatens to create financial panic across southern Europe." [Rana Foroohar, *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013.]

(3) Cheating on taxes: The percentage of a country's GDP that goes untaxed due to cheating is fairly low in many Western democracies (around 9% in Switzerland and the US, for example), but it reaches 27-30% in countries such as Korea, Italy, Greece, and Mexico. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013.]

(4) Elite US colleges admit academically struggling gladiators and turn down accomplished Asian-Americans: Many US colleges reserve a sizable portion of their admission slots for athletes and legacies (code name for children of rich alumni and donors). Yet, they have established de facto quotas for admitting Asian-Americans, limiting their numbers to 15-20%, despite the fact that 70% of US math and science Olympiad winners are

Asian-Americans. [Fareed Zakaria, *Time* magazine, issue of April 15, 2013.]

2013/04/08 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "I judge people by their own principles, not by mine." ~ Martin Luther King, when asked how, as a pacifist, he could admire US Air Force General Daniel James
- (2) Margaret Thatcher dead at 87: Britain's first and only female prime minister has **died of a stroke**. The rise to power of this grocer's daughter, nicknamed "The Iron Lady," was the subject of a recent movie starring Meryl Streep, who won the Best-Actress Oscar for her performance.
- (3) Letters from Khomeini and Bazargan to President Carter: During a Voice of America program entitled "The Shah Is Gone" (in Persian) Abbas Milani, a researcher of contemporary Iranian history, reveals the existence of correspondence between the Iranian Islamic regime under Khomeini and the Carter Administration, whereby the latter was provided assurances about reigning in communism and maintaining the flow of oil to the West. [Watch minutes 43-46, if you don't have time for the entire **hour-long VOA program**.]
- (4) Isla Vista street party produces one death and multiple injuries: "Deltopia," a street party that replaced "Floatopia," a weekend beach party banned by our city's authorities due to unsafe and ultrapolluting behavior in prior years, has claimed several victims, including an 18-year-old Cal Poly female student whose body was discovered on the beach and multiple hospitalizations due to the collapse of an overcrowded balcony at a Del Playa frat house. Causes of the death and of balcony collapse are under investigation.

2013/04/06 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Ancient Chinese puzzle: The following puzzle, posed in the form of a verse by the Chinese scholar Sun Tsu some 1500 years ago, is deemed to be the oldest reference to residue number systems, a method of number representation now used to improve the computational performance in certain signal processing applications. "What number leaves the remainders of 2, 3, and 2, when divided by 7, 5, and 3, respectively?"
- (2) Word of the year: According to *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of April 2013, the word "hashtag" beat out other contenders such as "fiscal cliff," "Gangnam style," and "YOLO" when it was chosen by the American Dialect Society as Word of the Year for 2012.
- (3) Solving the electric car's range problem: Rapid progress is being made in deploying technology that allows an electric car's battery to be recharged as it is driven on specially equipped roads. This would remove one of the key objections to electric cars and will also lead to cost and weight reduction as a result of using smaller batteries. Taking advantage of coupling between the electromagnetic field of transmitting coils buried in the road and pickup coils underneath a car is two decades old, but transmission efficiency has been low and the need for pickup coils to be very close to the road surface has made them vulnerable to damage as a result of road bumps. Both problems can be solved via resonant coupling, now under study at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of April 2013, reports that shaping of the field to minimize leakage holds the key to the new technique, which will see commercial deployment soon.
- (4) Jon Stewart's take on the arrest of an Egyptian comedian who was charged with insulting both the President and Islam: "Seriously? That's illegal in Egypt? 'Cause if insulting the President and Islam were a jailable offense here in the United States, Fox News would go bye-bye."

2013/04/05 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "I don't know how the hell I'm going to decide this case, but it appears from the paperwork that we now have a warehouse owner who staunchly believes in the power of prayer and an entire church congregation that thinks it's all bullshit!" A Texan judge, on a court case involving allegations by a brothel that the destruction of its building expansion by lightning strike just before the grand reopening ceremonies was caused by prayers in a local church
- (2) UCLA Celebration of Iranian Cinema: **Complete program** for the 2-week series (April 13-28, 2013), sponsored by Farhang Foundation and held at the Billy Wilder Theater of Hammer Museum, is now available. All films are in Persian, with English subtitles.
- (3) Start-up to offer quality college courses without pricey campus trappings: Saxifrage School plans to have classes meet at public places such as coffee shops and to do away with highly paid administrators, aiming for a price of **\$395 per class**.
- (4) Suicide ruling for UCSB engineering graduate questioned: Last June, UCSB electrical engineering PhD graduate Shane Todd was **found dead in his apartment** in Singapore. Todd's family subsequently questioned the suicide ruling by Singapore's police, pointing out that Todd's work for Huawei, a Chinese telecommunications firm, was highly sensitive because of its possible military applications and that Todd had expressed anxiety over his job jeopardizing US security. The United States and Singapore have begun to cooperate on a more detailed investigation of the case.

2013/04/04 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Women of impact: *Newsweek* magazine's double issue of March 29 & April 5, 2013, contains a special feature, naming and describing the contributions of 125 women of impact (The [Daily Beast version](#) names 150 women). The list includes politicians (led by Hillary Clinton), women's rights champions, social aid workers, business leaders, artists, movie stars, and more.

(2) The [Passover story](#) retold: What if Moses had an Internet connection?

(3) Those pesky Jews: According to [Mashregh News Agency](#) (a mouthpiece of the Islamic Republic) Iran's ancient Sizdeh-Bedar Festival (13th day of Norooz, which was the day before yesterday) has its roots in the massacre of Persians and the attendant celebrations by Jews. Referring to the Esther story in the Bible, the article claims that after the Jews, who had infiltrated the royal court through the spy/whore Esther, had Prime Minister Haman killed, they eliminated hundreds of thousands of Iranians (more than half the country's population, by some accounts) around the time of this festival. This is anti-Semitism at its vilest. The article does not explain why despite the claimed massacre, Persians and Jews have lived peacefully since the time of Esther, whereas a natural consequence of such an event would have been centuries-long hostilities. The Iranian regime is trying to kill two birds with one stone: spread hatred against Jews and demean ancient Persian traditions. [Aerial views of Sizdeh-Bedar in Tehran are featured in [this pictorial](#).]

2013/04/02 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I don't know how much longer I'll be around. I'll probably be writing when the Lord says, 'Maya, Maya Angelou, it's time'." Maya Angelou, in response to a *Time* magazine question (April 8, 2013) whether there will be another autobiography after her just-published seventh one, *Mom & Me & Mom*.

(2) Amazing [antique-style desk](#), with tons of storage compartments, some of which are well-concealed.

(3) Kinds of grapes in Iran: [An old post](#), but still mouth-watering.

(4) Gathering the harvest: Fruits and vegetables form [colorful art pieces](#).

(5) Guitar maestro in concert: Tonight, I watched Jesse Cook perform at the intimate setting of Santa Barbara's Lobero Theater. Cook and his four band members (Chris Church, Rosendo "Chendy" Leon, Nicholas Hernandez, and Dennis Mohammed, all excellent musicians) performed his standards, a few songs from his latest album, "The Blue Guitar Sessions," and, near the end of his second set, a couple of well-known songs of other artists.

[This 4-minute video](#) shows a sample of his work, a live performance of a composition entitled "Baghdad." Here is a complete 105-minute [Jesse Cook concert](#) from 2007.

2013/04/01 (Mon.): All of the following four items are true on this April Fools' Day.

(1) Quote of the day: "There's a song called 'I Hope You Dance.' Incredible. I was going to write that poem; somebody beat me to it." Maya Angelou, in a *Time* magazine interview (issue of April 8, 2012).

(2) Russian millionaires' solution to traffic problems: They rent "Ambulance taxis," emergency vehicles, outfitted with plush interiors, that breeze through dense traffic for a mere \$194 per hour. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 8, 2013.]

(3) Embryonic stem cells used as ink for 3D printing of tissues: "Whereas human embryonic stem cells have proved too fragile to print in the past, scientists at Scotland's Heriot-Watt University and Roslin Cellab, a stem cell technology company, say they have developed a new technique that allowed them to deposit droplets of a consistent size containing living cells that survived the process and maintained their ability to develop into different types of mature cells." [From [Nature journal](#).]

(4) Four-year-old pianist: Impressive performance in this [4-minute video clip](#).

2013/03/31 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Pakistan's civilian government survives for an unprecedented 5 years: In its 65-year history, this is the first civilian government that has survived for a full 5-year term. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 1, 2013.]

(2) Suicide car bomber hits a civilian minibus in Somalia, killing at least 10: Al Qaeda claims "credit" for the mistaken suicide bombing in Mogadishu, whose intended target was the city's security chief. Interestingly, there is no hint of regrets or apology for killing innocent people. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 1, 2013.]

(3) Jupiter's watery moon: Underneath its icy cover, Europa, Jupiter's moon (which is about the same size as our Earth's moon), has a warm-water ocean that may be up to 100 miles deep in places. Cracks in the ice cover cause geysers to erupt on the surface and also let surface minerals to seep through, potentially creating an environment that is hospitable to life. [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 1, 2013.]

(4) Quote of the day: "Imperfection, ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err, to sin, to do the wrong thing: all of these are constitutive of human freedom, and any concentrated attempt to root them out will root out human freedom as well." Technology skeptic Evgeny Morozov in his new book, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (Public Affairs, 2013).

2013/03/30 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The singing, ringing tree: A [musical sculpture](#) in England's northwest region.

(2) The trouble with hands-free electronics in cars: Increasingly, new cars are incorporating hands-free phone devices in their dashboards. Some believe that hands-free telephone conversations while driving are only marginally safer than those using hand-operated devices. In their quest to attract more and more buyers, car manufacturers are going even further by providing hands-free texting and, in a few cases, hands-free Facebooking. Writing in *Communications of the ACM*, issue of April 2013, Robert Rosenberger takes a stand against allowing such devices in autos, citing NTSB's 2011 (nonbinding) recommendation to ban all cell-phone usage in cars.

(3) North Korea on path of war: US officials are said to be treating [Kim Jung Un's comments](#) as bellicose threats but are nevertheless nervous that North Korea's inexperienced leader may blunder his way into a war.

(4) Iran is the primary beneficiary of the 10-year Iraq war, according to [the Los Angeles Times](#).

2013/03/28 (Thu.): Daryaee, Touraj (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, Oxford, 2012.

After an introductory chapter by the book's editor, the material on Iranian history is presented in 16 chapters by various authors. These chapters are followed by a chronological list of ruling dynasties in Iran and an extensive index.

01. The Iranian Plateau from Paleolithic Times to the Rise of the Achaemenid Empire (Kamyar Abdi)

02. [~2470 years] [-3000 to -530] The Elamites (Daniel T. Potts)

03. Avestan Society (Prods Oktor Skjoervo)

04. [220 years] [-550 to -330] The Achaemenid Persian Empire (A. Shapour Shahbazi)

05. [184 years] [-330 to -146] Iran at the Time of Alexander the Great and the Seleucids (Evangelos Venetis)

06. [471 years] [-247 to 224] The Arsacid Empire (Edward Dabrova)

07. [427 years] [224 to 651] The Sasanian Empire (Touraj Daryaee)

08. [~170 years] [661 to ~830] Iran in the Early Islamic Period (Michael G. Morony)

09. [~600 years] [661to ~1258] Medieval Iran (Neguin Yavari)

10. [80 years] [1256 to 1336]The Mongols in Iran (George E. Lane)

11. [138 years] [1370 to1508] Timurids & Turcomans: Transition & Flowering in the 15th Cent. (A. Anooshahr)

12. [221 years] [1501 to1722] The Safavid in Iranian History (Kathryn Babayan)

13. [73 years] [1722 to 1795] The Afghan Interlude and the Zand and Afshar Dynasties (Kamran Scot Aghaie)

14. [126 years] [1795 to 1921] Qajar Iran (Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nezam-Mafi)

15. [54 years] [1925 to 1979] The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context (Afshin Matin-Asgari)

16. [30 years] [1979 to 2009] Iran after Revolution (Maziar Behrooz)

We learn in Chapter 1 that Iranian-speaking people arrived in Iran between the Bronze and Iron Ages, more than 3000 years ago. They originated from somewhere north of modern Iran; exactly where, it isn't quite known [p. 31].

The description of Zoroastrianism in Chapter 3 makes it clear that Islam, at least in the form it took in Iran, borrowed many ideas and practices from that earlier religion. Use of horsewhip strokes to punish someone who raised a weapon with intent to harm [p. 105] and considering a menstruating woman to be in a state of impurity [p. 107] are just two examples.

In Chapter 4, we learn that by the late second millennium BCE, groups of the eastern branch of the Indo-Europeans, which called itself Airya (from the Greek *aristos*, the root of aristocracy), settled around the Hindu Kush mountains and nearby regions, ultimately giving the name "Iran," the land of the Aryans, to their home [p. 122]. Cyrus II, the Great, derived much of his power and authority by virtue of the fact that he was the heir to both the Median and Persian thrones, from his mother's and father's sides, respectively [p. 122]. King Darius went to Egypt and ordered that the Red Sea be connected to the Nile. The envisioned canal was dug, allowing ships to go from Egypt to Persia [p. 127].

Iran's takeover by the Muslim Arab invaders was caused in part because the Sasanians had been weakened by a recent defeat at the hands of the Byzantines and suffered from infighting among the nobles [p. 208]. Iranians adapted Islam to their culture, in a way that surpassed Islam's initial message. In fact, by the 11th century, the Persian language became the main vehicle for the spread of Islam in the east [p. 6]. Later, Iran also became a major influence in the spread of Shi'ite Islam, when "[t]he force of [the Safavids'] militant piety changed Iran from a largely Sunni Muslim population with sizable Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian minorities into a Shi'ite empire, pressed between the Ottoman and Mughal gunpowder empires" [p. 8].

During the Pahlavi dynasty, the semicolonial status of the Qajar Iran began to change, although later Iran became a client state of the US (which reinstated Shah Mohammad Reza via a CIA-sponsored coup in 1953, after he had fled the country) and a close ally in America's Cold War with the former Soviet Union [p. 356]. Reza Shah tried to use Turkey's model for modernizing Iran, but there were key differences between the two countries that thwarted his efforts. One important difference was that Turkey already had the requisite

institutions and physical infrastructure to rely on from the late Ottoman period, whereas Reza Shah had to build the Iranian nation-state almost from scratch [p. 348].

History of Iran after the Islamic Revolution is discussed in three stages: 1979-81 (power grab by fundamentalists and an intensifying conflict between the ruling sect and the opposition), 1981-1989 (the clergy establishing themselves as the center of power; by Khomeini's death in 1989, the power was too concentrated to be challenged by the opposition, including the left faction within the clergy), 1989-1997 (Khamenei's usurping of power, despite his relatively low status within the clergy, and the sidelining of all other factions, religious and otherwise), 1997-2004 (Khatami's presidency, and the resulting opening up of political discourse and the so-called "dialog of civilizations," later rendered ineffective by the election of George W. Bush and the September 11 tragedy), 2005-2009 (Ahmadinejad's first-term presidency on a populist platform, along with the rigged elections of 2009; the subsequent souring of relations between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei falls outside the period covered in this book).

I learned many new facts from this book. However, I do not believe that spending time on this book (which is an academic tome and not a casual history) is the most efficient way of learning about Iran's past. Reading through page after page of prose, consisting of linear narratives and page-long paragraphs, with almost nothing in way of diagrams, photos, maps, and charts, is quite difficult. In reading such books, I often wonder when fields of humanities are going to catch up not just with advanced technology, but with methods of presenting information in a user-friendly and readily digestible form.

Someday soon we'll have an interactive history book of Iran, which allows the reader to explore the events along the time dimension or within geographic regions, easily seeing the temporal and special relationships of historical figures and events. Furthermore, this ideal source will allow us to search for specific ideas and personalities via a few clicks and to move back and forth through time, from one ruler to the prior one or the next, and across space, from region to region. Color-coded maps will show the time-varying distribution of tribes and ethnic populations, movement of armies, and changes in borders. Until then, we have no choice but to avail ourselves of existing imperfect and reader-unfriendly sources.

[P.S.: I have tried to provide an example of visual aids to understanding history in my table of contents at the beginning of this review, where time periods and dates help the reader grasp the relative significance of each era or ruling dynasty.]

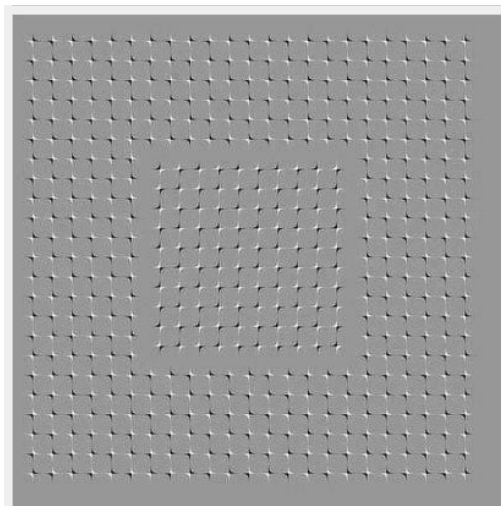
2013/03/27 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Optical illusions: Search Google Images for "motion optical illusions" and you will find a large collection of fascinating images in which some parts of a static drawing appear to move as we stare at it. This image is one of the best examples that I have seen. To verify that this is indeed an optical illusion and the image is not moving at all, cover the area surrounding the central part that appears to be shifting.

(2) Persian music: Shirin, aka ahang1001, plays her own composition "**Dancing Girl**" on Clavinova.

(3) Norooz in Paris: Persian new year traditions, regional costumes, and dances are featured in the Norooz celebration program in Paris, highlighted in this **11-minute video**.

(4) Why would anyone trust/respect an ideology that breeds such hatred? **Read and watch** how tombstones in a cemetery are kicked down by a group of hatemongers. The Libyan government apologized for the destruction of British war graves.



2013/03/26 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) An interesting math puzzle (from *IEEE Potentials* magazine): If you were born in the year 1978, you have this going for you: $19 + 78 = 97$; that is, the sum of the first half of the year and its second half equals the 2-digit number in the middle. The number 3846 is another such 4-digit number ($38 + 46 = 84$). Write a general rule for forming 4-digit numbers $abcd$ of this kind.

(2) Yahoo reportedly pays \$30M to buy a **teenager's start-up**: Nick D'Aloisio, the 17-year-old Brit who developed a news-reading app capable of taking long-form news stories and shortening them for smartphone displays, will soon join the ranks of multi-millionaires if the deal with Yahoo goes through.

(3) Biometric similarity of identical twins: An interesting article in *Computer* magazine, issue of March 2013, reports on research efforts trying to deduce similarities in DNA and other biometrics for identical twins. Incidents motivating the research include a drug-trafficking case in Malaysia and a jewelry heist in Germany in which the identical-twin suspects had to be freed by judges because neither the police nor DNA evidence could pinpoint

the culprit.

(4) The following is claimed to be from actual court records.

Attorney: She had three children, right? Witness/defendant: Yes. Attorney: How many were boys?

Witness/defendant: None. Attorney: Were there any girls?

Witness/defendant: Your Honor, I think I need a new attorney. Can I get a new attorney?

2013/03/24 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Ahmad Ashourpour's "**Norooz Waltz**," performed by Edris and Visro Foroughi.

(2) First commercial deployment of a **quantum computer**: A US military contractor has bought a quantum computer from Lockheed Martin. The contractor will use this one-of-a-kind computer (the first quantum computer to reach commercial deployment) to solve a number of computational problems millions of times faster. The speed and efficiency of quantum computers result from the ability of a set of qubits (units of information replacing bits of conventional computers) to represent not just a particular state, but exponentially many states at the same time, using the superposition property of quantum mechanics.

(3) Condemn evil acts, regardless of the perpetrator: Today, I came across a post that pled for supporting efforts on behalf of a 15-year-old rape survivor who has been sentenced to 100 whiplashes in the Maldives for the sin of having sex outside marriage. I know some posts of this kind are fakes and some others are thinly veiled anti-Islamic propaganda. What I don't understand is some Muslims' comments on such posts that, instead of condemning the evil act, point to the fact that evil occurs everywhere and among followers of every religion. Such observations are quite true, but one evil act does not justify others. I wish all commenters started by condemning the evil act, before expressing their reservations about the veracity of the story or the poster's motives. Any other evil act should be publicized and condemned separately, so as to avoid the appearance of endorsing one action on account of others.

(4) President Obama brokers **Israel-Turkey rapprochement**: Under pressure from President Obama, Israel apologized to Turkey for the killing of Turkish citizens aboard the intercepted flotilla vessel that challenged Israel's naval blockade of the Palestinian-run Gaza Strip. Turkey accepted the apology, paving the way for the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two sides. Israel has also agreed to conclude an agreement on compensation for the victims' families.

2013/03/23 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Ambiguous image: This image, showing a man's face or a park with a tree and a woman, is one of the best of its kind that I have seen.

(2) Click "like" or comment on a post to see something amazing: Certain tantalizing images are posted on Facebook and elsewhere, with instructions to "like" the image or type in a word/number as a comment to see something tantalizing. Examples include a naked girl whose posted image is partially obstructed, with your "like" or comment supposedly exposing the full image. Be assured that there is no way a Facebook comment can affect an accompanying image. These items are posted by people who want to laugh at the gullibility of their audience (there are images of this kind that have garnered hundreds of thousands of comments) or, somewhat charitably, they are parts of psychological experiments to assess the power of suggestion.

(3) Snake drawing in one brushstroke: **Artist draws a snake**, without lifting the brush or applying more paint.

(4) A practical lesson on how to unload a truck: Truck driver **unloads a large cargo of metal bars** single-handedly in less than one minute (actually, he uses no hands at all).

(5) Norooz celebrations in Tehran: **Giant eggs** adorn Mellat Park for Norooz 1392 (2013).



2013/03/22 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Liability for driverless cars: Whose fault is it when a driverless car crashes? Should the company that built the car and designed its control hardware/software be held accountable or the car's passengers? Massimo Calabresi, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of March 25, 2013), suggests that new laws should be enacted to make manufacturers liable. In this way, insurance premiums can be held low by bundling them with the car's sales price, based on the manufacturer's "driving record," not the passengers'.

(2) Web site offering free Persian books: KetabFarsi.com offers a large collection of Persian books as PDF files (currently, 13,000+). On **this page**, look under the letter "d" and proceed to "divan" near the end of the list to find books of poetry from numerous poets.

(3) How Iraq would have fared during the Arab spring, under Saddam: Ten years and hundreds of thousands of

casualties later, do Iraqis prefer that the US invasion had not occurred, because they think Saddam would have been toppled in a bloodless revolt? No, Iraqis have concluded that there was no other way for removing Saddam from power. Saddam's Iraq was quite different from Tunisia or Egypt. Even Libya and Syria aren't good models, given that their revolts started from remote regions, where the government had a shaky grasp on power. For Iraq, Kurdistan is the only such region, but the Kurds, who defend themselves fiercely, have no love for Arabs in the rest of the country. Like Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Basijis, Saddam's elite and loyal forces would have had no reservation in killing all the revolutionaries. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of March 25, 2013.]

2013/03/21 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I applied. However, I'm married. I'm divorced. I'm heathenish. And I'm a girl. Bad combo." ~ Jody Williams, Nobel Peace Prize winner and activist, in response to a question about her wanting to be the Pope when she was little

(2) Nobel Women's Initiative: The Seven living women Nobel Peace Prize winners have gotten together to work toward a violence-free world in [this worthy program](#).

(3) Facebook's new money pot: Did you know that it now costs money to send a Facebook message to someone you don't know? Joel Stein (who writes a regular humorous column for *Time* magazine) found out that he is a member of the prestigious \$15 club: people who generate \$15 of revenue for Facebook each time someone who is separated from them by more than one degree on Facebook's friendship graph sends them a message. To find this out, he created a fake Facebook account and from there, sent himself a message. I tried to verify Stein's claim by sending him a Facebook message. The message went through, and I was not asked to pay any money. I then realized that the page I used may have been a fake one. I performed another search and found a different page, and sure enough, I was asked to pay \$15 if I wanted my message to go to Mr. Stein's in-box; otherwise, the message would go to his "Other folder," which he may never check. It occurred to me that this distinction may be a good way of telling real pages for well-known people apart from fake pages. Anyway, it seems that teams of people are sitting in Facebook offices thinking up new ways to extract money from us users, in this case cashing in on many people's desire to communicate with well-known individuals and celebrities. By the way, Joel Stein responded to my message thus: "I hope this helps with your Facebook experiment. Now give me my \$15."

(4) Senjed in English: Talking about the traditional Norooz haft-seen, I needed to explain senjed in English. Farsidic.com ("kind of wild tree and its partially dry fruit, resembling the mountain-ash") and my Aryanpur Persian-English dictionary ("oleaster, oil tree, wild olive," along with "elegantus edulis" for edible senjed and "sea buckthorn, willow thorn" for wild senjed) were inconclusive. Finally, I found "dried fruit of the lotus tree" at a Web site describing the haft-seen; a reverse image search confirmed that this is the appropriate equivalent.

2013/03/20 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest on Norooz and the Persian new year.

(1) Spring and the new Persian year 1392 begin today at 4:01:56 AM local California time. May the ancient Iranian festival of Norooz be an enjoyable one for you, bringing with it promises of happiness, freedom, and restoration of human dignity in our motherland. Happy New Year! The Persian poem in the image is the latest in my attempts to spread Norooz joy.

(2) President Obama's [Norooz message](#): In a special message, which is a bit too political for my taste (but likely more welcome by Iranians worldwide than the musings of some of the Islamic regime's officials, who warn their countrymen that Norooz celebrations are anti-Islamic and remind believers to mind the mourning period for Prophet Mohammad's daughter, Fatemeh, which this year coincides with Norooz), President Obama quotes Hafez: "Plant the tree of friendship that bears the fruit of fulfillment / Uproot the sapling of enmity that bears endless suffering"

(3) Learn about Norooz: Like everything Iranian, there are different accounts on how Norooz came to be and we seem unable to converge of a unified history. [This article](#) does a good job of reviewing the significance of the Norooz festival, along with its traditions and historical roots.

نوروز مبارک! (به مناسبت نوروز ۱۳۹۲)

| | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| ن | نسترن آمد به باغ، باد بهاری وزید |
| و | وجد فزاینده شد، عید چو از ره رسید |
| ر | ریزش باران نرم، مژده ی فصل نوین |
| و | وز پی سبزی و گل، سال نو آمد پدید |
| ز | زردی و رنج و الم، از رخ ما پاک شد |
| م | مام جهان لاله گون، تا که ز آتش پرید |
| ب | بر همه میمون و شاد، آمدن فرودین |
| ا | از همه سو بر شما، بخت بگردد مزید |
| ر | راه نیاکان ما، طالع نوروز بود |
| ک | کام شما همچو شهد، روز شما پرنوید |

بهر روز پرها می - سنتا بار بار ا، کالیفرنیا - نوروز ۱۳۹۲

2013/03/19 (Tue.): Here are six items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Husbands are like pancakes. There's no shame in throwing the first one out." ~ Riley, Jennifer Love Hewitt's character on "The Client List"
- (2) Spring is in the air: [Persian music](#) entitled "Dance of spring," featuring solo piano, composed, conducted, and performed by Shardad Rohani.
- (3) Iran in pictures: These [Boston Globe photos](#), titled "One Photographer's Journey inside Iran," are both artistic and representative.
- (4) Three crater lakes: So close to each other, yet [so very different!](#)
- (5) Financial advisor jailed: John Farahi, host of the financial talk show "Economy Today" on Persian-language KIRN-AM radio, has been sentenced to 10 years in federal prison for running a [Ponzi scheme](#) targeting the wealthy in Los Angeles's Iranian-Jewish community.
- (6) UCLA celebration of Iranian cinema: This [2-week festival](#), organized by Farhang Foundation, will be held at Hammer Museum's Billy Wilder Theater during April 13-28 (Sat.-Sun.), 2013.

2013/03/18 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "I think there's a mythology that if you want to change the world, you have to be sainted like Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela or Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Ordinary people with lives that go up and down and around in circles can still contribute to change." ~ Jody Williams, Nobel Peace Prize winner
- (2) Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering: The [inaugural prize in the series](#) was awarded to five Internet pioneers: Marc Andreessen, Tim Berners-Lee, Vinton Cerf, Robert Kahn, and Louis Pouzin.
- (3) Lab-grown meat: Winston Churchill once predicted that "Fifty years hence we shall escape the absurdity of growing a whole chicken in order to eat the breast or wing." Well, he was several decades off in timing, but not in essence. Scientists now take would-be meat cells (embryonic cells with the potential to become muscle), cultivate them, expand them in 3D by attaching the cells to a scaffolding made of organic material, and finally combine the cells and the scaffolding under conditions that mimic a living body. The result is artificially grown meat from a few animal cells that are extracted from them through painless biopsies. [From *Time* magazine, issue of March 25, 2013.]
- (4) A high-ranking Republican woman: As the highest-ranking Republican woman in the US Congress, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rogers finds herself in charge of conveying the message that the GOP does not consist only of a bunch of sexist, old, white guys. Even though she has made it clear that she does not seek a seismic change but only some modernization, the old guard is not amused by her stance. She wants to get women more involved in politics, both as candidates and as voters. On many issues, however, she toes the party line. She even agreed to introduce the GOP's version of the "Violence against Women Act," which uses a narrower interpretation than the competing Democratic version. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 15, 2013.]

2013/03/17 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest on education and child rearing.

- (1) One way of reducing the high cost of college education: There is this general misconception that sports programs bring abundant cash to colleges and universities. In a vast majority of schools, however, students and taxpayers subsidize athletic scholarships, exorbitant salaries for coaches, and other costs associated with intercollegiate athletics. Less than 10% of institutions participating in Division-1 sports have self-sufficient athletic departments, according to USA Today. A study by the American Institutes for Research has revealed that at public schools with top-tier football teams, athletic subsidies per athlete rose 61% from 2005 to 2010, whereas per-student academic spending rose only 23%. [Sean Gregory, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of March 25, 2013.]
- (2) Sparks flying in California's system of higher education: A [California Senate bill](#) (SB 520) seeks to establish a statewide system of on-line college courses to ease the access problem for bottleneck courses that may lead to delayed graduation for some students. A second bill, SB 547, mandates the state's three systems of higher education (University of California, California State University, and state community colleges) to develop on-line undergraduate courses that meet the requirements for all three systems. In a letter to the faculty, dated March 15, 2013, UC's Academic Senate has stated its opposition to SB 520, on the ground that there was no consultation with faculty in writing the legislation.
- (3) Parenting like a corporate executive: "We're conditioned to seeing home as a place to relax, but that's not the reality. You go home from work, but you still have a bunch of to-dos. If you treat running a family like a business, you can be really efficient." ~ Bonnie Rochman, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of March 25, 2013

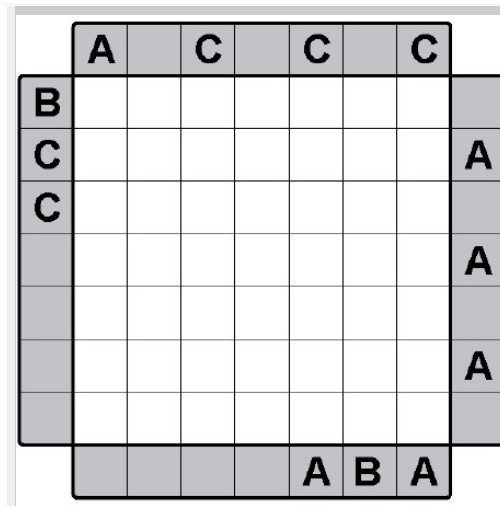
2013/03/16 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Example puzzle from the World Puzzle Championship ("Easy as ABC"): Place the letters A, B, and C in this grid so that each letter appears exactly once in each row and in each column. The letters given outside the grid indicate the letters seen first in the

corresponding direction. For example, moving down in the rightmost column, you should encounter C first and A last.

(2) Hilary Clinton reflects on **Islamic fundamentalism**: How the US bred terror-minded Islamists in the Middle East to defeat the Soviet Union and then left the countries in the region to deal with the problems.

(3) Islamic disco opens in Turkey: Raja News of Iran ran a story about the **opening of a disco** in Istanbul. The opening ceremonies began with Islamic prayers, after which a number of veiled women danced and performed music "in front of Muslim men." Raja News cites this as an example of "Americanized Islam" being pushed in the Muslim world.



2013/03/15 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Conservative Iranian filmmaker sued by 13 actresses: **The actresses have complained** that Farajollah Salahshour, a conservative filmmaker and a close ally of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, called them whores and characterized Iranian cinema as "a whorehouse."

(2) Whispers of Love: Dick Davis, professor emeritus of Persian at Ohio State University, who, as a child, was inspired by Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, is on a remarkable quest to translate the greatest works of Persian poetry. Davis, who left Iran just before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has never gone back for fear of tarnishing his precious memories of the country. Davis has translated (by himself or in collaboration with others) many books of Persian poetry, including Ferdowsi's epic *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings). Interestingly, he is also the translator of *My Uncle Napoleon*, a highly popular Persian satire, with its central character being a Francophile who is infatuated with the British conspiracy. **Davis's latest book**, *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*, focuses on the famous mystic poet and his contemporaries. Here is an example translation from the book, a poem by the female poet Jahan Khatun. So far, I have been unable to find the original Persian version of the poem.

Your face's absence leaves mine waxy-white, like a candle;
 How long will my tears drip, blearing my sight, like a candle?
 You sleep, and on your pillow I lie broken, self-consumed,
 Awake and weeping till the morning light, like a candle.

2013/03/14 (Thu.): Here are three sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Iraqi Kurds having fun: This **11-minute video** shows scenes from a Kerkuk wedding, featuring Kurdish music and dancing.

(2) The new face of feminism: By all measures, **Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg** is a highly successful human being, perhaps even a living proof that women can achieve anything they want. Yet in her book, *Lean In*, Sandberg argues that women are held back by men and by their own penchants for sacrifice and deference. She suggests that women should be leaning in, instead of pulling back. While women have made progress in occupying positions of power in the corporate world, the rate of progress leaves a lot to be desired. In the 10-year period 2003-2013, the number of women heading Fortune 500 companies increased, but only from 1.4% to 4.2%. The number of women occupying corporate board seats inched up from 14% to 17%. Sandberg likes to cite the results of a 2003 experiment in which students considered a successful entrepreneur more likable when she was introduced using a man's name, showing that success and likeability are oppositely correlated for men and women. One thing Sandberg is adamant about is that it is not enough to achieve equality at work, but also necessary to have a fairer division of responsibilities for housework and child rearing.

(3) Musings of some officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as reported in the news:

"America was founded by 13 British exiles; a bunch of vagrants." ~ Mohammad-Reza Rahimi, Ahmadinejad's first lieutenant

"Music, dancing, and other unrestrained activities for celebrating Norooz are anti-Islamic." ~ Ayatollah Saafi Golpayegani

"[The] Islamic Republic of Iran is going to sue all those who have been active in the anti-Iran domain, including directors and producers." ~ Mohammad Lesani, General Secretary of The 'Hoax of Hollywood' conference in Tehran, referring to the film "Argo"

2013/03/12 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A hobby is only fun if you don't have the time to do it." ~ Leo Beenhakker

(2) A walking motorcycle: [moving image](#).

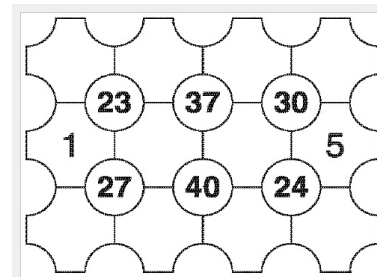
(3) Extreme photo manipulation: See [55 notable examples](#) of how photos can be manipulated to present misleading, interesting, or otherworldly images.

(4) Joke of the day: A man fell in a ditch and was badly bruised. A priest who passed by preached that he must have committed a sin for which this was the punishment. A reporter, arriving on the scene by chance, interviewed the man to write a news story. A physician prescribed pills for his pain. A psychologist tried to convince the man that his parents must have conditioned him for falling into a ditch. A motivational speaker told him that to get out, all he needed was a strong will. An optimist opined that he is lucky not to have broken any bones. This went on for a while, until an uneducated farmer extended the man his hand and pulled him out of the ditch.

(5) Pros and cons of MOOCs: Thomas L. Friedman writes in his [New York Times column](#) that, while there is "huge value in the residential college experience and the teacher-student and student-student interactions it facilitates," colleges should come to terms with the fact that massive open on-line courses (MOOCs) are here and must take advantage of them "to improve education outcomes in measurable ways at lower costs." Responding to Friedman in an [op-ed piece in Inside Higher Ed](#), Carolyn Foster Segal, an emeritus English professor, snaps back that "Friedman begins by excitedly informing us that he's just returned from a 'great conference' sponsored by MIT and Harvard on 'Online Learning and the Future of Residential Education.'" [Friedman] doesn't explain why he had to attend in person, or question why the conference wasn't online." Expect to hear more of this debate in the months and years ahead, with science/tech educators being more open to greater use of technology and humanities faculty being predominantly pro status quo. Personally, I empathize with some of the arguments against on-line education, but I also see Friedman's point in this memorable final sentence: "When outstanding becomes so easily available, average is over."

2013/03/10 (Sun.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Example puzzle from the World Puzzle Championship: Place the numbers 1-12 in the 12 cross-shaped boxes (1 and 5 have already been placed), in such a way that the number in each circle equals the sum of the four numbers surrounding it.



(2) The Persian New Year 1392 starts at 4:01:56 AM PDT on Wednesday, March 20, 2013. Note that this appears to be a day earlier than expected (first day of Farvardin is on Thursday, March 21, as usual).

(3) Verse of the day: "A lover is a mirror clear as water. I can see in her, my every part." ~ Rumi

(4) Mitt Romney still doesn't get why he lost the election: In an interview with Fox News' Mike Wallace, he said, "The weakness that our campaign and that I had is we weren't effective in taking my message primarily to minority voters," totally forgetting that the parts of his message that leaked out unintentionally were what doomed his candidacy.

(5) The priest who abused and plundered: Jason Berry, author of *Render unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, writes a searing expose about Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, who lived like a king, abused many boys and young men, had multiple children with very young women, and eventually retired to a plush gated community in Florida, all of this while the Vatican (under two different Popes) was informed of his misdeeds and chose to do nothing about them. For years, the Catholic Church branded victims of abuse as forces of dark and part of a conspiracy against the Church, admitting to criminal acts only when overwhelming evidence and public outrage made continued denial impossible.

2013/03/09 (Sat.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) [Belated post in honor of International Women's Day, March 8] Our hardwired prejudices: We humans are now more aware than ever of our built-in prejudices (80% answering yes to whether they have any prejudices, compared with 5% about 20 years ago). Some methods of dealing with such prejudices are quite simple: the practice of auditioning of musicians behind a curtain doubled the number of women hired by major symphony orchestras, from 20% to 40%. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 8, 2013.]

(2) Why Israel is Different: A feminist Israeli delivers [an eloquent speech](#) to her parliament. Mirav Michaeli's education is apparently limited to high school, but her speech puts many PhDs to shame.

(3) Iran's president attends Hugo Chavez's funeral: Watch out for Ahmadinejad being blasted in Iran for hugging Hugo Chavez's mom during the [Venezuelan dictator's funeral gathering](#). He has already been scolded for saying that Chavez will be resurrected with Christ!

(4) Joshua Foer's UCSB lecture: On Monday March 4, I attended a lecture in Campbell Hall as part of the "UCSB

Reads" program. The speaker, Joshua Foer, discussed his book *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, which I reviewed last month [see my blog entry for 2013/02/16]. At the end of the lecture, I asked the author the following question: You describe in your book a person who was essentially paralyzed by a memory that was too good. Some believe that a memory that is too good may stifle innovation; that is, if one knows or remembers a lot of different ways to do something, s/he may have a harder time discovering new ways. What is your take on this? Foer responded by agreeing that memory may be at odds with thinking and innovation, crediting Jorge Luis Borges, an author who has described a fictional case similar to the real one in Foer's book, as writing the memorable line: "To think is to forget." In the course of his lecture, Foer mentioned that his next book project is about hunter-gatherers, for which he has been spending a great deal of time in Africa. He believes that because such human societies are in their final stages of existence, now may be our last chance to find out about their ways of life.

2013/03/08 (Fri.): Here are four miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Example puzzle from the World Puzzle Championship (qualifying round; the "missing peace puzzle"): The names of 19 Nobel Peace Prize winners are listed in the image.

Supply the 16 missing letters at the center of the grid so that the word-search puzzle contains 18 of the 19 names.

(2) Iran less popular among Arabs and other Muslims:

According to a chart in this [BBC Persian report](#), since 2006, Iran's favorable ratings have declined from 70-90% to around 40% or less among Arabs and other Muslims.

Lebanon is the sole exception, where Iran's popularity has recovered to its earlier level, after some decline.

(3) World's largest religious gathering: Millions of Hindus congregate on the shores of Ganges to [purify themselves](#) in the river's cold, gray current for Kumbh Mela.

(4) The sellout of American universities: Tough economic times are sending US universities abroad in search of revenues. Some university leaders justify this trend by saying that a world-class university of the 21st century requires a global footprint. Other stakeholders are skeptical about motives and outcomes. One set of objections is based on the difficulty of quality control abroad. Here are a couple of objections based on academic and other freedoms. "Students at Yale's new Singapore campus will not be allowed to organize political protests or form political-party student groups—on or off campus." How is this consistent with Yale's mission and traditions? "The legal code [in Abu Dhabi] discriminates against Jews and gay people. What is NYU doing in a place like that?" [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 1, 2013]

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2013/03/07 (Thu.): Here are four society news items of potential interest.

(1) UN concert by Israeli/Iranian singer: Rita Jahanforuz sings at the UN on March 5, after being introduced by the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon (music begins in minute 18 of the [83-minute video](#)). This is a sly move by the Israeli government, knowing that the concert's video will become an overnight sensation in Iran.

(2) The evolution of lying: For much of human history, our words have flown in the wind, leaving no trace behind. Now, however, e-mails, text messages, on-line forums, and social networks create a permanent record of our words. As politicians are discovering all the time, lying has become significantly harder. Human beings are thus in a period of evolutionary flux, not yet adjusted to the fact that words have become permanent, which leads them to make weird mistakes. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 1, 2013.]

(3) World Puzzle Championship: "It has taken place annually for the past 21 years; in 2012 it drew 145 contestants from 26 countries, many of them people who eat, breathe and, on the rare occasion when they sleep, dream about puzzles full time." [From *Time* magazine, issue of March 11, 2013.] The worldwide puzzling population numbers in the hundreds of millions; tens of millions of Americans are crossword puzzle addicts. Now that puzzles are at our fingertips via smartphones and tablets, the number of puzzlers is bound to grow. I will post a number of challenging puzzles from prior world championships over the next few days.

(4) Chinawood: The Hollywood century is coming to an end and Bollywood, while still thriving, will not be able to compete with China's exponentially growing entertainment industry. "Thanks to an enormous internal market, by 2020 [China's] box-office receipts will top those in the U.S. ... spending on entertainment and leisure activities in China rose 56 percent from 2010 to 2011." [Christopher Dickey, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 1, 2013.]

2013/03/06 (Wed.): Here are four political items of potential interest.

(1) Political quote of the day: "[Diplomacy is] saying 'nice doggy, nice doggy' until you can find a stick." ~

Richard Armitage, former US Deputy Secretary of State

(2) A portrait of Bashar Assad: Nihad Sirees's portrait of Bashar Assad for [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of March 1, 2013) is detailed and well-written. Sirees, a writer who fled Syria last year for Cairo, faced the same dilemma as the hero of his own novel, *The Silence and the Roar*, about a writer whose novels were banned and who could not work or write. Bashar Assad, who was preparing himself for postgraduate work in ophthalmology in London not too long ago, seems to have become trapped in the brutal machinery of his father; a set-up with no fewer than 14 security agencies and a corrupt system that handsomely rewards those loyal to the tyrannical ruler. Bashar Assad came to power after Hafiz Assad's death, in part because his older brother, the heir apparent, who was much better known in Syria, had died in a car crash earlier.

(3) The Iranian regime loses another ally: With Bashar Assad all but gone, the [death of Hugo Chavez](#) of Venezuela at 58 severely cuts the number of world leaders the Iranian Islamic regime can claim as friends.

(4) The Italians have made a mess of their political system: They have elected a number of factions into office that can't form any reasonable coalition for [governing the country](#). The only option left seems to be a grand coalition that would include both right and left extremes. Just imagine a coalition in the US that includes both the Tea Party and the most liberal Democrats!

2013/03/05 (Tue.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Pluto's fifth moon: The demotion of Pluto from "planet" to "dwarf planet" has not stopped interesting discoveries about it. The New Horizon spacecraft, due to fly by Pluto in 2015, will help explore the fourth and fifth [Pluto moons](#), discovered in 2011 and 2013. Voting is now in progress to name the new moons.

(2) Building downward: There is a global race to build ever taller skyscrapers. But some smarter cities are hiding their less glamorous facilities under the ground. Norway and Finland have underground water treatment and heating/cooling plants. Oslo has buried its national archives underground and has built a sports complex from old bomb shelters. Montreal has 20 miles of shop-lined pedestrian tunnels. Kansas City has carved the world's largest underground business complex from old limestone mines. KC's 5M square-foot SubTropolis, depicted in [this Wikipedia article](#), takes advantage of limestone pillars that are 3 times as strong as concrete.

(3) Korea, a leader in smart-city technologies: Seoul is the world's second most-wired city. South Korea ranks fifth in its share of the world construction market. Combining these two strengths, South Korea has embarked on making the country a leader in [smart building technology](#) and succeeding to a large extent. At least 28 smart cities are in the planning stages, and this does not include retrofitting projects for existing urban centers like the capital city of Seoul and South Korea's second largest city, Busan. It is estimated that making buildings smart through the embedding of sensors and other electronic devices in them adds about 10% to structural costs, which would lead to a quick return of investment from various savings.

(4) Live-virus [cancer therapy](#) is back: Injecting unchanged or genetically engineered live viruses into cancer patients is back as a promising treatment; early studies of this kind in the 1950 proved inconclusive. It is not known how the treatment works, but theories and approaches include the viruses directly killing cancer cells or modifying them so as to become more susceptible to existing treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiation.

2013/03/04 (Mon.): The sorry state of healthcare in the US: "Bitter Pill: Why Medical Bills Are Killing Us" is the title of a comprehensive, [20,000-word report](#) by Steven Brill (*Time magazine*, issue of March 4, 2013) whose four sections explore different aspects of the runaway healthcare costs in the US. Brill, a dogged journalist, spent 7 months on researching and writing this report and has been appearing on CNN, PBS, and other media programs discussing it.

Richard Stengel, *Time's* managing editor, introduces the report thus: "Brill inverts the standard question of who should pay for health care and asks instead, Why are we paying so much? Why do we spend nearly 20% of our gross domestic product, twice as much as most other developed countries, which get the same or better health outcomes? ... Brill meticulously dissects bills and calculates the true costs. He employs a classic journalistic practice: he follows the money, and he does it right down to the 10,000% markup that hospitals put on acetaminophen. ... Brill's story is resolutely nonideological, but it resets the terms of one of our most important policy debates." This is an eye-opening report for ordinary citizens and politicians alike.

Brill cites many examples from actual hospital bills where items are marked up by factors of up to 100, even when compared with retail prices (not what hospitals pay for them). Meanwhile, hospitals, many of which are nominally nonprofit, post profits that would be the envy of any other business and pay multimillion-dollar salaries to their top executives. The profits are often used to increase the compensation of top executives and to expand (even though there is no shortage of hospital beds in the US), the latter leading to the need for overtreatment and extra charging to recover the costs.

Ironically, Medicare, detested by the antigovernment folk, is one of the few bright spots in this mess. Medicare sets prices for various goods and services based on cost measures (including overhead and salaries) that are spot-on, as confirmed by the health-care industry's own internal reports. Hospitals often complain about

Medicare rates, but Brill's analysis shows that doctors and hospitals would still turn a profit if they treated no one but Medicare patients. By the way, the abhorred Medicare rates are much higher than prevailing rates in other countries.

A key indirect contribution of Medicare is that its rates are used by private insurance companies in their individual negotiations with healthcare providers to gain discounted rates, leading to savings in premiums for everyone else. Ironically the uninsured poor, who can least afford exorbitant prices, are the ones billed at full "Chargemaster" rates (a hospital's list of rates for everything from paper cups and blankets to advanced cancer drugs costing thousands of dollars per dose). These rates have no relationship with cost: they were set arbitrarily a long time ago and keep rising each year, again at arbitrary rates.

Horror stories about hospital bills include a \$21K bill for heartburn and a \$9.4K bill for a slip-and-fall that led only to a nosebleed. In fact hospitals overcharge so much that a mere mention that you want to pay the bill but can't afford it will get you a 30-50% discount. A growing cottage industry of medical-billing advocates can negotiate greater discounts for those who can't pay. Some 60% of personal bankruptcies are caused by out-of-control medical costs. A former emergency-room doctor describes the prevalence of unnecessary, and sometimes harmful, tests thus: "Giving out CT scans like candy in the ER is the equivalent of putting a 90-year-old grandmother through a pat-down at the airport: Hey, you never know."

The healthcare industry is perhaps the only area in which advances in technology have not led to lower costs; quite the opposite, costs are increasing with better technology. In defense of their exorbitant charges, hospitals often cite their charitable treatment of the poor. However, the figures they cite for charitable giving is based on their Chargemaster rates. If the cost of goods and services they donate to the poor is considered, their charitable giving is often less than 1%. [Subsequently, *Time* corrected the latter figure to 5%.]

Billing advocates have noted that some hospitals do what they call "triple-billing," a practice that is clearly illegal. "First they charge more than \$2,000 a day for the ICU, because it's an ICU and it has all this special equipment and personnel. Then they charge \$1,000 for some kit used in the ICU to give someone a transfusion or oxygen ... And then they charge \$50 or \$100 for each tool or bandage or whatever that there is in the kit."

Medicare is particularly good at catching these superfluous charges; it will not pay for blankets, surgeon's gowns, or IV tubing, which it considers part of hospitals' overhead, already incorporated in their rates for rooms and other facilities.

The silliest defense of these actions by hospital administrators is their statement that nobody pays Chargemaster prices and these are just used as starting point for negotiations. However, no one tells patients that they should negotiate. Imagine if bananas at the supermarket were tagged at \$10 a pound and you had to negotiate with the checkout clerk to pay the fair price of \$1 per pound.

The cost of drugs is an interesting story. Hospitals routinely mark up drug prices by hundreds of percent. Advanced cancer drugs, costing thousands of dollars per dose, are particularly profitable for hospitals. A typical drug of this kind costs tens to hundreds of dollars to manufacture. It is then sold at thousands of dollars per dose (some of the markup is reasonable, as pharmacological companies do research on many drugs, not all of which become successful). Hospitals add 50% to the price they pay for the drug; that's an easy \$5000 profit on a \$10,000-per-dose drug. The artificiality of the high drug prices becomes obvious when one sees that the exact same drugs are sold by the same producers at a substantial discount in other countries.

While Brill has done us an immense service by bringing into the open the obscure, and highly inflated, rates at which the healthcare industry charges the consumers, his proposed solutions are not very well thought-out. I think every US taxpayer should read this report. Only after understanding the overprescribing and overcharging aspects of our current healthcare mess can we hope to come up with a reasonable solution to runaway healthcare costs.

2013/03/03 (Sun.): Feynman, Richard, *Six Easy Pieces: Essentials of Physics Explained by its Most Brilliant Teacher*, Helix Books, 1994 (ISBN 978-0201483062).

Yesterday's long, solo drive to Los Angeles and back amid some heavy traffic gave me a chance to listen to this very interesting audiobook. Characterizing Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman as physics' most brilliant teacher is no exaggeration. From 1961 to 1963, he delivered a set of lectures on basic physics whose contents were transcribed to create broadly usable material for teaching of physics. Six of those lectures are included here:

- (1) Atoms in motion—exploration of the atomic theory of matter and how atoms interact
- (2) Basic physics—a history of physics, covering both before and after the formulation of quantum mechanics
- (3) The relation of physics to other sciences—use of physics to explain chemistry, biology, geology, astronomy
- (4) Conservation of energy—the fundamental energy conservation principle and how energy can change form
- (5) The theory of gravitation—the history and progress in explaining gravity, from Kepler to Einstein
- (6) Quantum behavior—how simple thought experiments demonstrate the weirdness of quantum behavior

Despite the passage of half-a-century since they were delivered, these lectures are still invaluable for providing an introduction to the basic principles of physics for both experts and casual observers. The audio quality is

quite low on the first CD, but is acceptable on the remaining ones.

2013/03/02 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

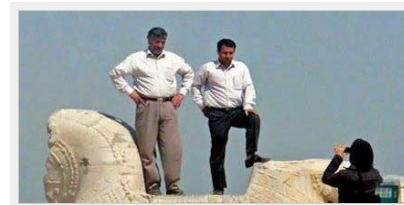
(1) Iranian children in a music video: The song, "**Ey Sarzamin-e Man**" ("Oh, My Homeland"), is said to have been recorded but not broadcast by the Iranian TV.

(2) The beginnings of the Shah's downfall: The Islamic Revolution occurred in early 1979. Nearly four years before that (March 2, 1975), in a surprising 2-hour **news conference** held at his Niavaran Palace, the Shah announced the dissolution of all political parties and the institution of the single Rastakhiz Party to take their place. He announced that anyone who does not believe in the new party's three principles, that is, the Constitution, the monarchy, and the 6th-of-Bahman Revolution (a euphemism for his socioeconomic reforms), either belongs in an Iranian prison or can depart the country, with all the customary passport fees waived. He maintained that such a person isn't Iranian.

(3) Transparent display allows tactile 3D manipulation: SpaceTop is a **futuristic device** with which the user can manipulate 3D objects, including documents and tasks that are in the background. The user places his/her hands under a transparent display which depicts a 3D object space located behind its surface. Proper 3D perspective on images is maintained by tracking the user's head movements.

2013/02/28 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Artifacts of Iran's ancient civilization threatened: The Taliban famously destroyed two giant statues of Buddha because they considered them anti-Islamic. The Iranian regime, when it does not actively destroy artifacts of Iran's ancient, pre-Islamic civilization, helps their demise through neglect and lack of enforcement of existing laws for their protection. This image shows just one example of such utter neglect.



(2) Street art meets math. [\[Image\]](#)

(3) On the dearth of legitimate news and entertainment sources in Iran: The uproar among the Iranian community, both in Iran and abroad, over the movie "Argo" makes one wonder: Given the extreme significance of the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran and the 444-day detention of American hostages, why hasn't an Iranian filmmaker told the story in a movie? The answer is quite obvious to anyone who knows even a little about Iran's sociopolitical atmosphere since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

First, no one is brave enough to tackle a story about which there is a broad spectrum of opinions among Iranians: from those who consider it a courageous, necessary, and just act to those who deem it shameful, cowardly, and treasonous.

Second, even assuming that such a brave filmmaker emerges from somewhere, s/he will have a hard time getting the necessary permits and licenses to begin work, finding financial resources (given the project's dismal chance of success), and editing a final product that makes sense after the government censors are done with it. The latter censorship stage would require that the film contain nothing negative about Khomeini and his close aides and nothing positive about those who opposed the hostage-taking from the beginning or worked hard (either due to their sincere beliefs or to protect their own interests) to have the hostages released. So, it is only natural that foreign entities try to quench our thirst for news and entertainment via radio/TV programs, books, documentary films, or movies.

This scheme of things will continue until Iranians start owning up to their mistakes and take criticisms like adults, rather than like spoiled children. The film "Argo" is just one example of Western investors spotting the public's thirst for information about that particular period in Iran's history and moving to capitalize on it. Here is another example: When I lived in Iran, I experienced first-hand (and later, in the West, via contacts in Iran) the closure of newspapers and magazines that dared to say anything negative about the government of Iran and its top leaders. It took only one dissatisfied top-level official to spell doom for a newspaper or magazine. What is the best source for learning about this process? Not any Iranian writer or organization, but BBC Persian Service that has produced a brief history of media **copyright and self-censorship in Iran**. When the media point out weakness in the system, instead of thinking about how to correct those weaknesses, the Iranian government immediately thinks about how to restrict the media so as to keep those stories from being published. For example, news sources occasionally publish photos of Iranian members of parliament dozing off, Web-surfing, or being occupied with something unrelated to their duties. Instead of correcting this problem, the Iranian parliament considers **passing a law** that limits media access to its sessions.

2013/02/27 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Once upon a time, back in the era of AOL's cheery 'You've got mail!' alert, receiving an e-mail was a pleasant, even welcome experience. That was then. ... These days, the best thing about e-mail isn't getting it. It's getting rid of it." Harry McCracken, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of March 4, 2013) on

start-ups that have introduced or will soon offer e-mail management apps that help users tame chaotic inboxes.

(2) Cartoon caption of the day (words spoken by Lincoln's statue at the Lincoln Memorial): "ARGO?! ... You mean I lost to the carter administration?!"

(3) On films about Iran and Iranians: [Omid Memarian](#) writes about why we shouldn't blame films such as "Argo" and "Shahs of Sunset" and should look instead for their root causes within ourselves.

(4) One for the records book: Perhaps we should stop complaining about \$5 cups of coffee drinks. A Washington State man paid \$47.30 for his add-on-heavy Frappuccino, reportedly the costliest Starbucks drink ever. [From *Time* magazine, issue of March 4, 2013.]

(5) New monetary unit for Iran: Proposals for changing the monetary unit of Iran from "rial" (currently worth about 0.003 cent, or 30 micro-dollars) to something more manageable have been floating around for many years. The currency's steep loss of value over the past few years has made the change more urgent than ever. [News reports](#) indicate that Ahmadinejad's government may push the removal of four 0s from the currency through the parliament as one of its final economic acts. Polling by Iran's Central Bank suggests that "parsi" enjoys the greatest public support as the name of the new monetary unit, equivalent to 10,000 rials (US \$0.3), with "derik" favored for a smaller, secondary unit; "toman" is a close second in the polling for the name of the new monetary unit, but its choice may be problematic, given the prior use of "toman" as a popular, though unofficial, equivalent of 10 rials. In recent years, many have been using "toman" as a stand-in for 1000 tomans (a la "one grand" in the US), so this usage precisely aligns with the proposed new monetary unit.

2013/02/26 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I couldn't get a sports car, they won't let me bungee jump, so instead I cut my bangs." Michelle Obama joking about her self-described 'midlife crisis.'

(2) New rules for faculty promotions in Iran: What was a covert practice thus far has become public through new [faculty promotions bylaws](#) announced by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. A key element in deciding whether a faculty member can be promoted to associate or full professor is his/her commitment to religious values.

(3) Photoshop, a God-given gift for the Islamic Republic: The latest use of Photoshop for Fars News Agency is modifying a [photo of Michelle Obama](#) at the Oscars to make her look a tad more Islamic. Why do they even have to cover the Oscars?

(4) The exploitation film that led to serious political discussions: The Oscar-winning film "Argo" has generated a great deal of negative reviews. The most benign criticisms are those from film critics who question the embellishment of facts for entertainment. For example, they point out that the CIA had only a minor role in the escape plans and that the airport interrogation and the final chase scene on the runway never occurred. The Americans left Iran via Mehrabad Airport with no incident; it wasn't a cliffhanger at all. The most serious political criticisms come from three very distinct camps. Royalists question the brief narrative at the beginning of the film that attributes the Islamic Revolution to dictatorial tendencies by the Shah and American intervention in the country's internal affairs. The narrative does have some inaccuracies, but it is by and large correct. Islamists, who participated in hostage-taking and have fallen out of favor with the current regime, fault the film's depiction of them as brutal simpletons, with no regard for the rule of law. The third group, that supported the revolution initially but quickly lost interest when it led to the establishment of another dictatorship, disparage the film for lumping Iranian people into one big, zombie-like, American-hating mob, with only a handful of exceptions. They criticize the film for not showing that the bulk of Iranians were also effectively held hostage by dogmatic power-grabbers who were just as intolerant of internal dissent as they were of foreign nationals. Even though I think that "Argo" is overrated, and has problems even as a fictional action-thriller, I do welcome the political discourse generated by its receiving multiple awards. [For several very informed viewpoints on the film, watch this [one-hour Voice of America Persian interview program](#).]

2013/02/25 (Mon.): Here are two short items and a brief audiobook review of potential interest.

(1) My Academy Awards predictions II: With one exception, all my predictions came true (Best actor: Daniel Day-Lewis; Best actress: Jennifer Lawrence; Best actress in a supporting role: Ann Hathaway; Best director: Ang Lee; Best picture: "Argo"). I had actually said that the races between Lee and Spielberg and between "Argo" and "Lincoln" were too close to call. The supporting-actor Oscar went to Christoph Waltz, instead of my predicted Tommy Lee Jones. [[Complete list of winners](#)]

(2) The real Tehran: The cyberspace is awash in photos of Tehran as a modern metropolis, with its high-rises, freeways, shopping malls, and latest sports automobiles. These depictions are highly biased and totally ignore city neighborhoods where the poor (mostly immigrants coming from other regions of Iran in search of employment and other opportunities) live. See [the contrast](#) for yourself.

(3) Clinton, Bill, *Back to Work: Why We Need Smart Government for a Strong Economy*, Books on Tape, 2011

(ISBN 978-0-307-99071-6).

In this rather short audiobook (5 CDs), Bill Clinton uses his razor-sharp wit and command of numbers to thrash the Tea Party's agenda and the Republicans who are held hostage to it, proclaiming that "There is simply no evidence that we can succeed in the 21st century with an antigovernment strategy [based on] a philosophy grounded in 'you're on your own' rather than 'we're all in this together'." He provides the Democrats with ammunition, in the form of talking points, to confront the extreme right's disinformation and tries to cement his own legacy by pointing out how much better things were during his two presidential terms. His proposals for reviving the US economy range from sketchy to detailed and innovative. He underscores many areas in which he supports President Obama's policies and points to a few disagreements (notably on nuclear energy).

2013/02/24 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Asteroid Apophys is coming our way: Compared with the asteroid that will barely miss us in 2029 and can potentially hit Earth in 2036, the recent crash-down in Russia was a mere flea bite. According to current calculations, chances are good that the 1000-foot Apophys will also miss Earth in 2036. However, there are enough uncertainties to make scientists worry. If it does hit the Earth, it will do so with the force of 20,000 Hiroshima bombs. Asteroids hit Earth quite often on a historical scale. The Russian one would have been a city-buster, with the power to flatten the largest metropolis, had it exploded closer to the ground and hit a population center. Apophys is in the nation-buster class. Planet-busters come our way rarely: we had a collision of this kind 65M years ago. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of February 22, 2013.]

(2) Images of the Russian meteorite impact: It struck some people as strange that so many Russians had recorded the meteorite streaking by in the sky and eventually crashing to the ground. It turns out the mounting video-cams on car dashboards is quite common in Russia, because motorists want to protect themselves against fraud, corruption, highway negligence, and violence. The rate of hit-and-runs and other accidents make Russia's roads the most dangerous in the world. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of February 22, 2013.]

(3) Skin color is skin-deep: "Human beings are all one species. Move your family to a sunnier spot, and your skin will change color after a few dozen generations," writes [Eli Pariser](#) on the results of a new research paper by anthropologist George Chaplin in *American J. Physical Anthropology*. Revealing maps in the article correlate darkness of skin with average temperatures.

(4) Young women in Iran: [High school girls speak up](#) on social restrictions, political suppression, and women's rights.

(5) My Academy Awards predictions: I had planned to see all Oscar-nominated films before the awards ceremonies later today. I saw "Lincoln" a couple of nights ago and now I am out of time (yet to see "Amour," "Django Unchained," and "Zero Dark Thirty"). Even though I have not seen all the films, I am willing to bet on Daniel Day-Lewis winning as best actor for his amazing portrayal of Lincoln. For best actress, my bet is on Jennifer Lawrence. Tommy Lee Jones and Ann Hathaway should win for supporting roles. For best film, "Lincoln" and "Argo" seem to be neck and neck. The Best-director race appears to be close as well, with Ang Lee having a slight edge over Steven Spielberg.

(6) A [4-minute journey](#) through previous best-picture Oscar winners and this year's nominees.

2013/02/23 (Sat.): Gabbay, Tom, *The Tehran Conviction*, William Morrow, 2009 (ISBN 978-0-06-118845-9). [Read this review and possible reader comments on [Iranian.com](#).]

The author's third book featuring Jack Teller (reminiscent of Jack Ryan in Tom Clancy's early spy thrillers), a recruit to the newly formed CIA, is quite riveting. The two volumes preceding this "Novel of Suspense" (as announced on the cover), *The Lisbon Crossing* and *The Berlin Conspiracy*, are mentioned in the front matter. I rarely read fiction, but this historical fiction attracted me because its events span two critical periods in Iran's recent history: the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the Shah, and the 1979 hostage crisis shortly after the overthrow of the Shah and his Pahlavi dynasty via the Islamic Revolution. The protagonist, Jack Teller, was part of the agency's team in 1953 and found his way back to Tehran in 1979 in an attempt to rescue from the Ghasr Prison an aide to Mosaddegh, whom Teller had befriended and betrayed in 1953. The stories of the two eras are interleaved, with the narrative going back and forth between them.

Except for some rather unusual names chosen for the Iranian characters (Yari, Kharon, Afsharti) and geographical impossibilities (like Jack Teller finding himself at Cafe Naderi moments after he walked into the Bazaar), the story-telling is compelling. The central Iranian characters are Yari Fatemi, a top-level aide to Mohammad Mosaddegh, and his sister Zahra, who flirts with Teller but ends up using him as a mentor and protector against a family that wants to marry her to an undertaker she does not love. Later, a cleric emerges as another character connecting the two eras in Iran's history: he was the ring-leader during a 1953 stoning ritual in Qom, just before becoming aware of Teller's CIA ties, and later was a senior warden at Ghasr Prison, where Teller ended up after being arrested during the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran.

The initial failure of the CIA coup, due to the unexpected presence of army units around Mosaddegh's residence, triggered a hastily conceived Plan B, consisting of street riots in support of reinstating the Shah, who had fled the country. As Gabbay tells it, paid mobs were sent into streets and succeeded beyond CIA's wildest dreams to incite ordinary people, who were dissatisfied with Mosaddegh's policies and were also suspicious of him because of the CIA team's media campaign and kidnapping of Tehran's royalist police chief to paint the prime minister as being surrounded by communist party members and anarchists. The 1953 part of the story ends with the CIA team's triumphant departure from Iran, after using, blackmailing, and leaving behind Teller's "friend," Yari. The word "conviction" of the book's title, in both of its senses (a fixed or strongly-held belief and the act of being found or proven guilty), aptly describes the story.

The first meaning refers to the optimistic belief of Yari Fatemi that Mosaddegh was a great man, destined to be Iran's savior, and an equally unshakable belief by Jack Teller that the US had a golden opportunity to rescue Iran from the claws of communism while the Soviet Union was still working out how it should proceed following the recent death of Stalin in March 1953. The US believed that Iran's communists (members of "Tudeh Party," or "Party of the Masses"), taking their orders from Moscow, had infiltrated Mosaddegh's government and would be in a position to turn Iran into a communist state as soon as their internal squabbles following Stalin's death had been worked out.

The second sense of the word "conviction" shows up when Teller, about to be released from the overtaken US embassy, because he carried Canadian identification papers, is spotted by the cleric he had crossed path with in 1953 as a CIA agent and is thrown in jail. When he finds out, after suffering many sessions of interrogation and torture, that his jail is in fact the Ghasr Prison, which brought him back to Iran in the first place, he plots to escape and to rescue Yari, who was also held in the same prison.

Nuances in telling the story make it both believable and likable. Teller comes to understand and respect Yari, who talks to him about the aspirations of the Iranian people in terms of the ideals of the American Revolution and major US historical figures. In the end, however, a sense of patriotism and his conviction that the Soviet Union must be stopped at all cost make Teller go along with CIA's coup plans. Teller's willingness to risk his life to return to Iran to rescue Yari shows the remnants of a sense of guilt that didn't quite go away by his nationalistic justifications.

Gabbay's story is slow to grab one's attention, but does captivate the reader as it progresses. I read the second half of this thought-provoking book in just two sittings.

2013/02/22 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Cryptic quote of the day [each letter stands for a different letter]: "TYJ BTTS HFVYB ZLTGH NGMVE, OFJY VH FVHM WTG, WTG UJJX YT DZVY." ~ LTL NZQXJW

(2) Drawing in 3D: [Demo video](#) for a new pen that allows you to draw 3D stick figures.

(3) The MOOC movement goes international: Universities from other countries join Coursera and EdX, the two leading US companies specializing in massive open on-line courses. Among the [international partners](#), institutions such as France's Ecole Polytechnique, Switzerland's EPFL, Hong Kong's Chinese University, and University of Toronto stand out.

(4) Welcome to the age of biotech: A [precedent-setting lawsuit](#), brought by Monsanto against an Indiana farmer, has reached the US Supreme Court. The case is rather complicated, but the gist of it is that farmers buying patented (and, thus, fairly expensive) seeds from Monsanto must agree to buy new seeds each time and cannot replicate them. Monsanto claims that allowing farmers to replicate seeds will remove incentives for research, because each farmer will only buy once. Apparently, Monsanto believes that patent infringement occurs also when farmers buy unlabeled seeds, which include some fraction of the patented ones, from third parties. The importance of the discussion is that it would apply to any self-replicating technology. Imagine, if you will, a woman receiving patented genes as part of her medical treatment. The woman's giving birth to a child can then be viewed as patent infringement, because the patented genes may be passed to her offspring.

2013/02/21 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) World's Internet usage: According to the March 2013 issue of *E&T magazine*, the fraction of population connected to the Internet is (in decreasing order): North America (79%); Oceania (68%); Europe (63%); Latin America (43%); Middle East (40%); Asia (28%); Africa (16%).

(2) Olympians will wrestle no more: The International Olympics Committee has voted to [drop wrestling](#), a sport that was part of the ancient games, starting in 2020 (candidate cities are Istanbul, Madrid, and Tokyo).

(3) Techno name trend: An Israeli couple named their daughter "Like." A newborn Egyptian bears the name "Facebook Ibrahim." Can "iPad Smith" and "Laptop Brown" be far behind? Writing in the March 2013 issue of *E&T magazine*, Vitali Vitaliev (who relates amusing stories about having to spell his name all the time) suggests that the tech trend actually started in the former Soviet Union. Names meaning "drive gear," "arctic explorer vessel," and "first space rocket" were common in post-revolutionary Russia.

(4) Beyond counting sheep in bed: **Bedtime Math** is a nonprofit organization (currently with a staff of five) founded by Laura Bildeau Overdeck, an astrophysicist who tried the method she promotes on her own children and, later, via an e-mail distribution list, on friends and others. Bedtime Math has a Web site with free resources; a book and an app are forthcoming. According to Overdeck: "Everyone knows they should read a book to their kids before bed, but nobody knows they should be doing math too." The idea is to make children comfortable with math: "If it's related to schools, it sounds compulsory. We want kids to feel about math the way they feel about dessert after dinner." Research shows that early math skills predict academic success better than reading ability. Here is an example problem: M&Ms last 13 months, but Life Savers last only 9 months, despite their name. How many months will those M&Ms outlast the Life Savers? Overdeck is hoping that candy and child-friendly puzzles can remedy math anxiety. [From *Time* magazine, February 25, 2013.]

(5) How China hacks America: A **massive report** by the cyber-security firm Mandiant details how a branch of the Chinese government has hacked 115 US companies with the goal of obtaining all kinds of information, including trade secrets. Operating out of a massive 12-story building in Shanghai that can house as many as 2000 personnel, the cyber-warfare unit has 1000 servers and state-of-the-art communication capabilities.

2013/02/20 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Cryptic quote of the day [each letter stands for a different letter]: "HB HC HRXEV XDWVW'B CE HNXECEPG, NCZWBB GEN'VW YWYHVWI XE VJBT XDW YEBBJAJZJXG EM BXHVSJCF." ~ AWC TJCFBZWG

(2) Humorous quote of the day: "When I was assuming responsibility for Iran's cinema, I asked Ahmadinejad for his one-sentence advice. He suggested that I should internationalize Iranian cinema. I proposed that this would require winning an Oscar as a first step. He responded that I should proceed and do it. And this is how it happened. ... It was all according to a plan. When you step into the international arena with the goal of winning an award, you cannot act according to your own criteria and must accept the prevailing norms. ... Some people do not believe that the Oscar nod was a result of careful planning on our part. These people may think that creation and life are also accidental." ~ Javad Shamghadri, Iranian President's **Advisor on Film and Cinema**, shamelessly taking credit for Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning film 'A Separation,' while also trying to deflect possible criticism from the conservatives, who have been knocking Farhadi's film as un-Islamic and a product of Iranian cinema's decadence.

(3) Egyptian woman **shoe-whacks** Salafi fundamentalist: He came up to the Christian woman and told her "Cover your face you harlot!"

(4) Replicating world-famous architectures: "Forget Louis Vuitton knockoffs: China has been churning out counterfeits of the West's greatest architectural hits, from UNESCO heritage zones and Le Corbusier icons to Manhattan skyscrapers and Orange County gated communities." [from *Newsweek* magazine]. For example, Shenzhen, China, is home to a 100-meter-high **replica of the Eiffel Tower**.

2013/02/19 (Tue.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) The Russian meteor shower, captured on **11 short videos**.

(2) Portable wind turbines: **The Revolver**, winner of a 2012 Braun Prize for sustainable design, is an umbrella-size wind turbine that can generate 35 watts from a mere breeze, enough to power a laptop or small light.

(3) Improving the Panama Canal: An **amazing engineering project** is underway to double the existing capacity of the Panama Canal and to recycle 60% of the 52M gallons of water currently lost to sea per transit. The project will be completed in early 2015. The US Army Corps of Engineers is already preparing American ports for the expected increase in traffic and for much larger ships that can pass through the improved canal.

(4) Book introduction: Having just finished writing a review of Joshua Foer's *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (see my blog entry for March 16), I was immediately attracted to *Connectome: How the Brain's Wiring Makes Us Who We Are*, a book by MIT's Prof. Sebastian Seung (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 359 pp.). I have placed the book on my to-read list and will write an eventual review, to complement my review of Foer's book. For now, let me share with you some snippets of a review by Robin Tatu, published in the January 2013 issue of **Prism magazine**.

"A professor of computational neuroscience in the departments of Physics and Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, Seung believes that the key to unlocking the brain's secrets lies in its neural connections, collectively known as the connectome. ... For readers hazy about the specifics of that biology class, Seung devotes early chapters to reviewing the basics, including how neural synaptic firings, re firings, and reweightings form the links of this intricate map. ... The chapters in the latter sections of the book elaborate upon connectome theory, underscoring Seung's conviction that these synaptic chains will reveal the "memory," or record of past activity, with crucial information about how the brain and the body work. Comparing commonalities and differences will help identify abnormalities linked to neurological disorders, while the next steps will be to determine how to rewire and reweight problematic connections."

2013/02/18 (Mon.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest about Iran.

(1) Iran, before and after the Islamic Revolution: This [45-minute documentary](#) (in Persian) contains a fairly balanced account of events immediately before and after Iran's Islamic Revolution. It includes segments of Mike Wallace interviews with both the Shah and Khomeini.

(2) Khamenei's educational background revealed: Did Ali Khamenei graduate from Patrice Lumumba (Peoples' Friendship) University in Russia? [This 3-minute video](#), produced to promote the university, claims so.

[Please ignore the Persian propaganda about Khamenei's "horrible secret" and just watch the video. There is nothing wrong in my view with him having studied in Russia, but the fact that this is kept secret bothers me.]

(3) Advice on how to deal with Iran: This [24-page PDF file](#) contains a policy paper by Dr. Harold Rhode, published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Rhode, who studied at Iran's Ferdowsi University and worked as an advisor to the US Secretary of Defense, is quite insightful in his analysis; although given his connections, one should be careful in accepting all the points he makes. The paper aims to convince Western countries to act like Iran, which has developed a rich knowledge of the Western culture and sensibilities and uses this knowledge to gain the upper hand or drag out negotiations until it achieves its goals. The West, on the other hand, has a limited understanding of the Iranian culture, which is detrimental to it in the chess-like game of international politics.

(4) On child brides in Islam: This [Islamic cleric states](#) that Ali, Prophet Muhammad's son in law, married his 7-year-old daughter to his 57-year-old foe Khalif Omar to avoid trouble and discord. He does not say that marrying a 7-year-old girl is wrong, but only argues against the implications of a questioner's theory that the marriage could be a sign of good relations between Ali and Omar. Nor is he concerned about the use of a human being as a commodity or bargaining chip.

2013/02/17 (Sun.): A tribute to my father on the 21st anniversary of his passing:

We have gathered here, as we have done 20 times before, to commemorate my father's passing on February 16, 1992, pay tribute to his memory, and renew our bonds of love and respect. There isn't one person of my generation or the one before in the Parhami family who was not touched by him in some way or did not have a high regard for his honesty, integrity, and humanity.

The great physicist Neils Bohr once said: "One of the favorite maxims of my father was the distinction between the two sorts of truths, profound truths recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth, in contrast to trivialities where opposites are obviously absurd."

It was profound truth that occupied my father Salem since his teens. I have seen traces of his thinking in bits and pieces of his diaries that survived the many upheavals in his life and numerous moves. Being one of the 12 surviving children of my grandfather Mikaeel, he had to become independent beginning with his high-school years, which he spent in Tehran, away from family and childhood friends. Spending many lonely days and weeks in Tehran's scorching summer sun and cold winter air heightened his awareness of the plight of the poor and downtrodden, who suffer the elements with no shelter or means of coping.

During an early morning stroll on the hills outside Saghez, when he visited his beloved Kurdistan after several years of studying in Tehran, he was awed by its natural beauty and a young shepherd boy's display of strength of character and maturity in effortlessly guiding a large flock of sheep as they grazed. He was a friend of the common man and a foe of the privileged who took from society more than they gave back.

It is befitting that we pay this tribute to my father on Sepandarmazgan (Bahman 29, coinciding with February 17 this year), an ancient Zoroastrian festival celebrating love and Mother Earth. My father's love and guiding soul are still with us, even though his body has been reunited with the earth that created it.

May he rest in peace, and may his path be followed by many!

2013/02/16 (Sat.): Foer, Joshua, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, Penguin, 2011 (ISBN 978-0-14-312053-7).

This is a best-selling book by science writer Joshua Foer, who started looking into how some people can memorize and recall lists of thousands of numbers or the order of the cards in multiple decks of cards and, in the process of his participatory research, ended up winning the 2006 US Memory Championship. After this surprise accomplishment, the author decided against going back for more competition. Instead, he spent several additional years of research and contemplation to produce this book, which brings together cognitive science, cultural history, Classics, and philosophy.

I obtained a copy of the book from our campus library when it was announced as the official selection of "UCSB Reads 2013," a campus-wide reading program. Multiple discussion forums and a public lecture will be devoted to the book during the winter 2013 quarter.

This review is intended to give you a synopsis of the book. A [20-minute TED talk](#) by the author is a good complement to my write-up. My review is an amalgamation of two trains of thought or threads. The first one concerns my impressions of the author's claims and an assessment of the usefulness of the techniques he

discusses. The second one is the contrarian view that the importance of good memory (at least of the kind stressed in the book) has been exaggerated in our popular culture and that modern humans can function effectively with a mere average or even subpar memory. Interspersed with the two threads above are interesting facts about memory storage/recall and functioning of the human brain.

In my contrarian thread, I take issue with one of the quotes from the book, selected for discussion by the UCSB library: "A great memory isn't just a by-product of expertise; it is the essence of expertise." This quote is in conflict with a long-held belief of mine, reflected in the following statement of Friedrich Nietzsche: "Many a man fails as an original thinker simply because his memory is too good." While I agree with the author that success in invention requires an inventory or bank of existing ideas [p. 203], reinforced by the observation that the words "inventory" and "invention" are from the same Latin root, innovation often requires forgetting about how things have been done in the past.

In fact, the author agrees with the assertion that too good a memory may be a hindrance rather than an asset. He devotes Chapter 2 to a real subject known as S, "the man who remembered too much." S remembered every detail of his experiences, to the extent that he was unemployable and could not hold a job once employed [p. 37]. The author then quotes Jorge Luis Borges, who in describing a fictional version of S, crippled by his inability to forget, quips: "To think is to forget." By the way, the most forgetful man in the world also gets a fairly lengthy coverage (Chapter 4).

One advantage of good memory that comes to mind immediately is its contribution to organization and efficiency, and thus, reducing time waste. In Chapter 1, while recounting his experience of reaching the finals of a memory championship, Foer casually mentions that he once read about the fact that the average person wastes 40 days per year compensating for forgetfulness. If this is indeed all the penalty for forgetfulness, investing time and effort in trying to remember better may not be an efficient use of time. Remember that training of memory and organizing items to be remembered by our memory also take time and it is not immediately clear that they are time well-spent.

The second purported advantage of good memory is reflected in the following passage from page 7 of the book: "To the extent that experience is the sum of our memories and wisdom the sum of experience, having a better memory would mean knowing not only more about the world, but also more about myself." I contend that "distillation" is better word than "sum" in this statement. Let me provide an example. I encounter hundreds of examples of Nigerian and other financial scams; I distill the experience gained into the nugget "Immediately delete all unsolicited e-mail messages that offer you more than \$1000." I may not remember any of the details, but I don't need to. A person with 10 times the experience of another may not remember 10 times as many facts or events. S/He may in fact remember less, due to achieving a higher distillation factor.

I maintain that expanding and strengthening our internal memory isn't nearly as important as reorienting it to be more useful for our dealings with externalized memory. Remembering how best to search for information on the Internet is vastly more useful than remembering hundreds of phone numbers and passwords. The author effectively endorses this assertion when he states that merging of internal and external memories is a fundamentally bigger step than genetic engineering or life-extension technology [p. 160]. Thus, I find the following catchy thought experiment suggested by the author somewhat misleading: "Imagine waking up tomorrow and discovering that all the world's ink had become invisible and all our bytes had disappeared. Our world would immediately crumble. Literature, music, law, politics, science, math: Our culture is an edifice built of externalized memories" [p. 19]. Yes, our world may crumble, but our internal memory would be a very poor tool in such a "Fahrenheit 451" setting.

Like every other part of our biological faculties, human memory evolved in environments quite different from today's world [pp. 90-91]. Human memory is optimized to remember the location of food and resources, and the route home or to a shelter. It is, therefore, not surprising that our memory is ill-suited to remembering phone numbers, passwords, and facts about US history. The principle common to all memory enhancement methods is that our brains don't remember all kinds of information equally well: hence, the technique of changing mundane facts into things that are colorful, exciting, and memorable.

Accordingly, the essence of the method advanced by the author is the ancient strategy of visualizing a "memory palace" in whose rooms, passages, and other locales one can stow away facts one wishes to remember. "The idea is to create a space in the mind's eye, a place that you know well and can easily visualize, and then populate that imagined place with images representing whatever you want to remember" [p. 96]. In the Middle Ages, Romans developed and refined the method, because they really needed it to remember things such as speeches and poems.

Part of the method is to make the images as vivid and bizarre as possible in order to make them stick. The title of the book represents an example of such colorful imagery. The author goes further and suggests that most people do better when the chosen imagery contains nudity or outrageous acts, often of a sexual nature. I wonder if this is true in general, but the highly competitive, socially awkward crowd that participates in extreme memory competitions is hardly a representative sample of society.

A helpful and complementary memory method is chunking: dividing the information to be remembered into meaningful chunks [p. 62]. This is why phone numbers are shown in chunks, rather than as a continuous stream of digits. Remembering the number 413 might become easier if we view it as "4 minutes and 13 seconds," and then relate it to the time it takes to run a mile. In a sense, these and other memory enhancement methods can be viewed as the software (artificial memory) that we choose to run on our hardware (natural memory) [p. 96]. Another helpful tool is the use of song and dance that make words easier to remember; hence commercial jingles and children's alphabet song [p. 128].

Remembered learning and memory recall aren't one and the same. Sometimes we remember things without knowing it, given our inability to recall the information. But research has shown that these hidden memories still affect our behavior and our ability to learn [pp. 80-81]. Exposure to words and concepts that we cannot consciously recall (unconscious/implicit vs. conscious/explicit remembering) shapes our personalities.

Memory is also a function of our sense of time. As children, we tend to have a new experience virtually every hour of the day. Our sense of time is that it is something intricate and long-drawn-out. As we age, some of our experience transforms into automatic routines that are hardly noticeable [p. 77]. As noted by William James in his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, "the days and the weeks smooth themselves out in recollection to countless units, and the years grow hollow and collapse." The speeding of life as we grow older is related to its becoming less memorable.

When we start losing our memory, as in aging or Alzheimer's, most-recent memories blur first, which is quite counterintuitive. The reason for this reversal is that memories are strengthened by use and by being linked to other memories [p. 82]. One interesting fact about memory, observed by Freud, is that older ones are remembered as if captured by someone else holding a camera, whereas our newer memories are seen through our own eyes.

The physical aspects of remembering, such as areas of brain for storing various kinds of experiences, are quite fascinating. Memory training has been shown to lead to physical changes in the brain, proving that the brain is neuroplastic, and dispelling the myth that our brain stops growing and adapting when we turn into adults. A case in point is the training of London cab drivers, who ride the city for a long time on motorcycles and try to learn locales, routes, traffic conditions, and so on. Experiments on these cabbies have shown growth of the brain in certain areas [p. 38].

An interesting physical aspect of the brain is that it is an energy-intensive organ. It accounts for only 2% of our body mass, but it uses 20% of the oxygen we breathe and burns about 25% of our glucose [p. 124]. Not surprisingly, then, good nutrition and physical health are important to improving human memory.

We would be amiss, however, to think that remembering is a purely physical process. Infants and toddlers do remember well, but they lack models and language tools for interpreting the world and relating the present to the past. This is why our earliest memories begin at the age of 3-4 [p. 84]. Dreams too play a part in our long-term recall processes: "... the reason our own dreams so often feel like surreal recombination of elements plucked from real life is that they are just the by-product of experiences slowly hardening into long-term memories" [p. 83].

One of the most intriguing parts of this book for me was Chapter 7, "The End of Remembering" (pp. 137-161), leading me to take more detailed notes. We learn in this part, for example, that silent reading did not become common until about the 9th century (this coincided with the introduction of spacing and a richer set of punctuation marks). In ancient times, reading was done aloud, as what appeared on the page were the sounds of words [p. 141]. It was this difficulty of reading that made it necessary to memorize a text, or at least become very familiar with it, before reading it (as in a prepared speech). A factor in this need for familiarity was the fact that punctuation had to be inserted mentally by the reader.

Lack of punctuation, spacing, line breaks, page numbers, and indices meant that texts could not be easily consulted after reading, unless a good chunk of it was memorized [pp. 142-145]. In fact, the ancient Greek word for "read" meant "know again" or "recollect." The invention of the index, which turned the then common sequential access into the potential for random access, was such a big step that scholars speak of the pre-index and post-index Middle Ages. Even after the introduction of indices, remembering what one read was quite important. A medieval scholar reading a book knew that in all likelihood, he would never see that book again. Interestingly, people in old times had very few books (a Bible, an almanac, and a handful of others) and they read those books intensely. Now we read broadly, but shallowly [p. 147-148]. So, why do we read, when we forget almost everything we read? The answer is that reading benefits our judgment. We may forget people and events in books, but the gist of what we read stays with us in our unconscious memory.

Given the importance that we place on a good memory, there has never been a shortage of entrepreneurs who pursued this human desire for profit. It seems that memory peddlers fooled even Mark Twain, a celebrity fad chaser who vouched for the effectiveness of a memory instructional system sold by Professor Alfonse Loiset, deeming it worth thousands of dollars an hour [p. 154]. Twain later regretted this testimonial, which was put to full use by Loiset. Twain reportedly thought poorly of his memory, to the extent of experimenting with writing

the main topics of a speech on his 10 fingers. Later, Twain patented his own memory game/method, which did not catch on.

Memory champions, and basically all high-level experts (regardless of their domain of expertise), must transcend what the author calls the "OK platform" [p. 170]. For much of our routine activities, we stop improving upon reaching a good-enough level of expertise, be it in typing, driving, cooking, and so on. Reaching the OK platform reduces our motivation for further improvement, particularly since such improvement becomes more difficult and requires greater effort.

Because playing around with human brain can be quite dangerous, much of what we know about the brain in general, and about memory in particular, has been derived from experiments on human subjects who have some form of natural brain defects that set them apart from normal people [p. 224]. For example, experimentation on a 10-year-old boy, who accidentally took a baseball pitch to the left side of his head and later came to with an amazing ability to calculate calendar dates and remember the daily weather, contributed immensely to our understanding of memory and other brain functions. Transcranial magnetic stimulation (that affects the electrical firing of neurons) and zapping the left temporal lobe (that makes subjects more creative) are among the techniques involving temporary, reversible damage to the brain for the sake of scientific investigation [pp. 225-226].

The author's description of how to "erase" items stored in memory palaces, in order to store new information or correct/modify old information, is nearly nonexistent. On p. 238, he refers to part of the preparation for a memory championship as "spring cleaning of memory palaces," which involves removing any lingering images from prior uses of the locations to ensure that things do not get mixed up. However, there is no discussion of how this is best done.

The author ends with this concluding thought [p. 270]: "Our memories make us who we are. They are the seat of our character. Competing to see who can memorize more pages of poetry might seem beside the point, but it's about taking a stand against forgetfulness, and embracing primal capacities from which too many of us have become estranged." I do recognize that good memory is an asset that should be nurtured and cherished. I would like very much to learn the names of all my students by the second or third class lecture, rather than weeks into the quarter.

On the other hand, I believe that remembering a lot of facts, of the kinds expected of "Jeopardy!" contestants, isn't a very efficient use of the brain. When I teach my graduate students about a new subject, I expect them to take away from the class a big picture, composed of key ideas and relationships, and the knowledge of how the missing or forgotten details can be filled in from various classical or up-to-date information sources.

Undergraduate classes are more heavily oriented toward learning facts and skills, but even there, the detailed specs of a particular computer, say, are less important than its design philosophy and technical impact. Put another way, a typical college course isn't intended to transfer a set of facts to the students, but rather to impart to them a "knowledge palace," if you will, that contains indispensable tools of the field and spaces corresponding to key ideas and subfields. This knowledge palace is partially populated by the end of the course, but within a few months, it becomes nearly empty in the mind of the learner, with faint traces of the ideas lingering in the air as one walks inside.

A key difference between my knowledge palace and Foer's memory palace is in how they are used. In Foer's memory technique the palace is incidental; it is erected only to house the facts that a person wants to remember. In my knowledge palace, it is the palace's shape and structure, and not its contents, that should be remembered. The facts are incidental and replaceable. I maintain that humans of the 21st Century need more of this kind of memory and less of the ability to store facts. Facts can be more readily deduced from analytical reasoning and critical thinking than the other way around.

2013/02/15 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Nearly 1000 injured in Russia due to 10-ton meteorite crash: Almost all injuries were due to broken glass in buildings near the impact site in the Chelyabinsk region. **The meteorite** was one of several created when a large meteor burned out in Earth's lower atmosphere. Some Russian conspiracy theorists have claimed that the incident wasn't a meteorite crash but a US weapons test.

(2) Russians come alive: Six-minute "**Puttin' on the Ritz**" (or is that "Putin on the Ritz"?) flashmob, involving hundreds of Russian youth.

(3) Do as I say, not as I do: Ironically, **this Fars News Agency report** that providing links to filtered and prohibited sites (such as Facebook and Google+) has been declared a punishable crime in Iran is immediately followed by the usual Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and other social media icons that allow sharing of the story.

(4) Nat Geo's Iran issue from 92 years ago: This **118-page PDF file** contains the complete issue of *National Geographic Magazine* from April 1921 (Vol. XXXIX, No. 4), which is devoted to "Modern Persia and Its Capital." Some color photos are included.

(5) Two-minute **speed painting demonstration**.

2013/02/14 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Happy St. Valentine's Day to everyone! Remember that V-Day is about appreciating love, in all its shapes and forms, and not just about romantic love. In ancient Iran, the Zoroastrian festival of Sepandarmazgan was a combination Love/Earth Day. It was originally held on the 5th day of Esfand in celebration of mothers/wives, including Mother Earth. According to Wikipedia, the festival's currently popular date of Bahman 29 (coinciding with February 17 in 2013) emerged after multiple reorganizations of the Persian calendar, beginning with the work of the Persian philosopher/poet Omar Khayyam. The festival's name is based on Spanta Armaiti, the feminine angelic spirit of the Earth.

(2) Quote of the day: "To see what's in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." ~ George Orwell

(3) Car-free Chinese City: Built from scratch, to include a very dense high-rise core and surrounding green space, [China's Great City](#) will be entirely walkable.

(4) NBA star in the making: Toddler amazes everyone with his [basketball skills](#).

(5) Persian music: Delsa Ghorbani, a new singer, performs Mohammad Nouri's "[To Bemaan](#)" (Ey Iran).

2013/02/13 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) State of the Union Address: Last night, President Obama [laid out his plans](#) for the US economy, immigration reform, gun control, and foreign policy. He showed some flexibility and readiness to strike a deal with the opposition. Senator Marco Rubio, who delivered the Republican response, struck the same old chords that led to the defeat of his party in the last election. [Rubio's response](#) contained no signs of the rethinking that is afoot in the Republican circles to abandon their inflexible, holier-than-thou attitude and get in line with modern America, with its diverse and shifting composition.

(2) MOOCs prove to be a dividing force, but a force nonetheless: Massive open on-line courses are being taken more seriously by US colleges as mechanisms to slow down runaway tuition costs, causing a backlash among the proponents of traditional classroom-based learning. Writing for [Inside Higher Ed](#), former eLearning President at Drexel University cautions against a top-down approach, arguing for the need to get faculty and senior staff involved in planning and implementation via appropriate incentives (in the form of revenue-sharing and/or support of scholarly activities).

(3) North Korea's nuclear test creates tensions in the region: Japan, China, and South Korea are alarmed about a [nuclear test](#) that is said to be larger-scale than the first two in 2006 and 2009.

(4) Super funny: Archie Bunker of "All in the Family" (Carroll O'Connor) is called upon to [eulogize a buddy](#) he didn't know was Jewish.

2013/02/12 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Joel Stein's hilarious take on Facebook's graph search: He used it to find reasonable, middle-of-the-road people, based on their Facebook 'like's, who should be leading the US in this age of polarization. Here are some of his amazing finds:

- More than 1000 people like both John Boehner and Nancy Pelosi.
- There are 131 members of Moms for Gun Control who also like the NRA.
- There are people who like both PETA and bacon.

(2) Quote of the day: "I want every girl, every child, to be educated." Malala Yousafzai, in her first on-camera statement after she was shot in the head by the Taliban.

(3) One in five credit reports contains errors: [Credit-reporting agencies](#) have come under fire for inaccurate record-keeping. According to a "60 Minutes" investigation, as many as 20% of credit reports issued contain errors and efforts to have erroneous info corrected often go nowhere. Customer complaints are shipped overseas for processing by clerks that have neither the authority nor the incentive to put things right.

(4) Turning the tables on S&P: Standard & Poor, which downgraded US government's credit two years ago, has been accused by the Justice Department of misgrading bonds based on subprime mortgages. The civil lawsuit alleges that the undeserved AAA ratings were given to please the bond creators who paid S&P's bills, a clear conflict of interest. An internal S&P e-mail reads: "Let's hope we are all wealthy and retired by the time this house of cards falters." [From *Time* magazine, issue of February 18, 2013.]



2013/02/11 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The shiny little thing on Mars: Scientists are baffled by a [small shiny object](#) seen by Curiosity and are racing to find an explanation. The leading theory as of now is that it is a piece of iron from a meteorite.

(2) The ancestor of all mammals: Meet [your ancestor](#), and the ancestor of the 200-ton blue whale, the 1.5-gram bumblebee bat, and other mammals in between. We all evolved from this small insect-eater that lived shortly after the demise of dinosaurs. Make sure to watch the 4-minute video about the reconstruction effort.

(3) Quote of the day: "Never has a country ostensibly at war been so isolated from the sound and sight of devastation. The use of drones as weaponry augments this separation ... We might do well to realize that we may not long be the sole proprietors of this technology." ~ Rodger Lewis, in a letter to *Time* magazine.

(4) Man, what a sexist language: Roughly half of the US states have taken steps toward using gender-neutral language. Use of "she or he" or simply "s/he" is easy to enforce. Replacing "penmanship" with "handwriting," "freshman" with "first-year student," and "sportsman" with "outdoor enthusiast" raises few eyebrows. But there are trouble spots such as "airman" and "manhole." [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of February 18, 2013.]

2013/02/10 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I was the Justin Bieber of the '70s. Really. Ask your mother." ~ Barry Manilow, at the opening performance of "Manilow on Broadway"

(2) Janice and Sonia cover "Gangnam Style": This [acoustic guitar and voice cover](#) of the hit song is better than the original.

(3) This [moving torus image](#) is fascinating.

(4) National Ballet of Georgia's fantastic performance [[8-minute video](#)].

(5) Insightful [article about Lebanon](#): National borders are often described as ad hoc and meaningless, but they are nowhere more so than in Lebanon. The Lebanese aren't a nation, but disparate people (Middle East's largest Christian population, one of the largest proportion of Shiite Muslims in an Arab country, and a most comfortable Sunni middle class), that live in different neighborhoods, interact very little, watch different TV channels, don't agree on much politically (including on Israel, Iran, and the protracted civil war in Syria). Lebanon has perhaps the freest media in the region, but given that each group watches/reads sources that reinforce its world views and prejudices, the media diversity isn't synonymous with free thinking.

2013/02/09 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The maturation of computer science and engineering: According to data published in the February 2013 issue of *Communications of the ACM*, over the period 2004-11, the number of US doctoral graduates in computing who accepted post-doc positions more than doubled (100 to 250), whereas the number of tenure-track faculty hires nearly halved (220 to 120). Hiring in other categories, such as teaching and research faculty, showed no significant change. Expecting recent graduates to accept post-doc positions before they are deemed ready for faculty appointments has been quite common in more established scientific disciplines such as physics. So, is the new trend a sign that the field of computing is maturing? I think so.

(2) The road to across-the-globe day trips: [This is the last of three how-to article summaries posted by me from the February 2013 issue of [Engineering & Technology magazine](#) (Vol. 8, No. 1), published by IET.] People who travel a lot for work or pleasure have something remarkable to look forward to: 3-hour trips to the farthest reaches of the world. The supersonic Concorde was retired because of a number of technical and safety problems and economic inefficiencies. Now, hypersonic speeds, already proven feasible in military jets, are coming to passenger planes, and plans for commercial aircraft flying at 5 times the speed of sound are afoot. It will likely be 2 decades before all the pieces come together: engines capable of operation at hypersonic speeds, materials that are lightweight yet tolerant of very high temperatures, navigation and control systems that can react to events extremely quickly, and solution to a number of socioeconomic problems (cost of the aircraft and their fuel, as well as legal, insurance, and regulatory hurdles).

(3) Erasing history, a la 1984: A friend/fan of actress Golshifteh Farahani posted this comment on her FB wall a week or so ago (my translation from Persian): Yesterday was the opening of the Tehran's 31st Fajr Film Festival. When they screened highlights of some of the successful films from prior years, including your films "Santoori" and "M, as in Mother," none of the selected scenes included you; only other actors were featured.

(4) Iran's TV and *Kayhan* daily fall for an [Israeli TV joke](#): Israel's privately owned Channel 10 broadcast a humorous news story about Syrian jetfighters flying low over Tel Aviv and causing widespread panic. The story went on to say that the Israeli air defenses did not react to the fighters, because they looked eerily like Israel's own. Not recognizing that the story was a joke, the Iranian TV reported the "news" and Tehran's *Kayhan* newspaper made it its top headline.

2013/02/08 (Fri.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Sense of perspective: This [George Steinmetz photo](#) looks unremarkable at first sight, until you realize that what you think are camels are shadows of camels photographed directly from above.

(2) Jews and Words: "Jewish continuity has always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements, and on a unique human rapport. In synagogue, at school, and most of all in the home, it has always involved two or three generations deep in conversation." Excerpted by *Newsweek* magazine, issue of February 1, 2013, from *Jews and Words*, a new book by father-and-daughter team Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger.

(3) The Republicans' road to nowhere: "[The Republicans] attack Obama for refusing to cut entitlements but also for cutting Medicare, because their elderly supporters like Medicare. They rarely propose their own spending cuts, except for PBS, NEA and other small-dollar liberal favorites; they often defend wasteful farm subsidies, because ag states tilt Republican. They warn that cutting military spending will kill jobs, the same Keynesian logic they mock when it comes to abstract government spending." Michael Grunwald, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 11, 2013.

(4) Education Portal: I had mentioned this [useful Web site](#) in a previous post. Revisiting the site yesterday, I found that it has expanded its educational modules (videos) on English, math, history, social sciences, business, and science. It's good to see learning resources becoming more accessible.

(5) Iran plays Lebanon in Asian soccer: In a group qualifying match for the Asian Cup 2015 to be held in Australia, [Iran beat Lebanon 5-0](#) in a home match.

2013/02/07 (Thu.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Viagra for weight loss: Unexpected applications of new drugs are discovered each year. The latest instance is a discovery by University of Bonn researchers that sildenafil can help convert undesirable white fat cells into good brown fat cells which burn off fat as energy. It may be years before [converting fat cells](#) can be used for humans, but the approach seems promising.

(2) Blimp-like craft is a heavy lifter: Being developed by a California company, the Aeroscraft lifts off vertically and flies at the relatively low speed of 130 mph, but it can lift extremely heavy loads, is fuel-efficient, and can travel to locations that do not have airports or runways. Military applications will dominate, but luxury cruises are also envisaged. [[Photo gallery](#)]

(3) US FCC proposes large public WiFi networks: According to [Popular Science](#), the plan calls for freely accessible wireless Internet service throughout the US. The 'super-WiFi' will use a portion of the spectrum currently allocated to TV broadcasts, making it possible for the signals to travel further and pass through obstacles more easily. Of course, conspiracy theorists will claim that nothing is truly free and that the government has plans to monitor all of our conversations and on-line activities. My take is that the visionary proposal comes from the realization that access to digital media has become as essential to our daily lives as breathing unpolluted air and drinking clean water; that is, part of the needed societal infrastructure.

(4) The fate of our digital assets when we die: Increasingly, our possessions come in a variety of digital forms. We own e-books, music files, movies, videogames, photographs, and domain names. We also have extensive trails on e-mail servers and social media. What happens to all these possessions when we die? Can we will them to persons of our choice? As things stand now, terms-of-service contracts (that nobody reads before checking "agree") prohibit the transfer of digital possessions. Apple Computer, for example, claims that it does not have a policy that allows a person's iTunes collection to be transferred to his/her heirs. Isolated cases are being, or soon will be, tested in courts. But wholesale updating of inheritance laws is sorely needed for the digital age. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of February 11, 2013.]

2013/02/06 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Chess boxing: The [sport/game combo](#) imagined in 1992 by the French graphic novelist Enki Bilal has found some ardent fans and practitioners, who fight in the ring and on the board.

(2) Soccer's gigantic scandal: "Soccer fans will turn their attention to World Cup qualifying games and other international matches on Wednesday, but only after the soccer world was stunned by [Europols's revelation](#) on Monday of massive match-fixing. Europol ... has been investigating suspect games across the globe for 18 months, which also involved major tournaments, including the World Cup and the UEFA Champions League."

(3) Bogus argument: "Walk into most any pawnshop, jewelry store, currency exchange, gold store in the country, and there will be an armed guard nearby. Why? As currency, jewelry, gold are precious. Who complains about the presence of these armed guards? And is this wealth more precious than our children?" David Mamet, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 25, 2013. [The argument is bogus because schools aren't the only places where children are present. Should we have armed guards at birthday parties, little-league games, ballet classes, charity car washes, and kids clubs?]

(4) Makes you want to scream: A Saudi cleric, who suspected his 5-year-old daughter as having lost her virginity, [beats her to death](#) and is freed after a short prison term and giving \$50K blood money to "the girl's mother or other relatives." Calling the rulers of this backward land "conservative" is a disservice to the term. They aren't ultraconservative; they are ultrabarbarians.

2013/02/05 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I never quite understood that. People accept that someone can fly around buildings like a spider, but not an actor who's a few years older than the character they're playing." Oscar-winning actor Kevin Spacey, responding to criticisms that he was too old to have played Bobby Darin in "Beyond the Sea."

(2) Building demolition: If you are as fascinated as I am with the demolition of large buildings, you will love this collection of [demolition videos](#). It is quite an art to make a very tall building fall in a way that it does not damage nearby properties.

(3) Scientific renewal in the Islamic world: [This article](#) in *The Economist* maintains that after centuries of stagnation, science is making a comeback in Islamic countries, which have started to allocate more funds to research. Reconciling the kind of freedom that science needs with the dogmas of political Islam is still a problem. However, there are reasons for hope. "Released from the restrictive control of the former regimes, scientists in Arab countries see a chance for progress. Scientists in Tunisia say they are already seeing promising reforms in the way university posts are filled. People are being elected, rather than appointed by the regime. The political storms shaking the Middle East could promote not only democracy, but revive scientific freethinking, too."

(4) Blaming the victims (continues): An [Iranian chief of police](#) has said that when couples sit or behave inappropriately in public, they provoke members of the society, many without prior records, to commit sexual crimes against them. This outrageous attitude, against all Iranians, particularly women who are the chief victims, should not be tolerated by the international community. Ironically, the qualification "in public" is redundant, as mass rapes have occurred against families who were celebrating in private parties at home.

2013/02/04 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Anniversary of an iconic building: NYC's majestic [Grand Central terminal](#) turned 100 on February 2.

(2) The road to 100 mpg: [This is the second of three technological how-to article summaries I plan to post from the February 2013 issue of [Engineering & Technology magazine](#) (Vol. 8, No. 1), published by IET.] Electric vehicles will remain limited to short-range driving, given challenges in battery technology and their need for recharging. On the other hand, due to improvements in internal combustion engines, the long-sought 100 mile-per-gallon milestone for automobiles is within reach. This extreme level of efficiency will be achieved with new designs in the works by multiple car manufacturers. Here are the top contenders and their current mpg performance levels: Renault Clio (90); Hyundai i20 (88); Smart Coupe (86); Vauxhall Corsa (85); Citroen C3 (83); Fiat Punto (81); Ford Fiesta (76); VW Golf (75); Fiat 500 (74); VW Up! (71). We'll see which manufacturer ends up winning the race.

(3) Gore's revenge: "[Al Gore] is a man who not only survived one of the truly excruciating losses in U.S. political history but then picked himself up, staggered forward and soon found himself winning an entirely new race. ... Gore has built his net worth from \$2 million in 2000, when he reluctantly entered the private sector, to some \$300 million, according to the scorekeepers at Forbes. By their measure, he is now richer than the renowned supercapitalist Mitt Romney." David Von Drehle, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013.

(4) "Chinese" restaurant in Iran: This [impressive restaurant](#) with Chinese architecture and decorations is located in Isfahan, but the menu is that of a typical chelow-kabobi.

2013/02/03 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Super Bowl XLVII started as a lopsided game, but ended up being a nail-biter all the way to the final play: Baltimore Ravens 34, SF 49ers 31.

(2) Worlplay: Each year, World Play Masters International runs a contest in which contestants assign funny meanings to existing dictionary words or propose new words, with their purported meanings. To vote in the 2012 contest, now in progress, or to just have fun with unusual words and definitions, go to [this page](#). You can also contribute words and definitions to the 2013 contest. As a sample, I am including the three words that I voted for in the 2012 contest.

Phonogenic: Someone who sounds way more attractive on the phone than in person.

Lexicon—noun: A shady purveyor of used Lexus automobiles.

Likosuction: Medical procedure that removes the fatty substance from the teenaged brain which causes the involuntary overuse of the word 'like.'

(3) Pope's 1981 shooter now claims he took orders from Khomeini: The Turkish gunman has changed his story several times, so this new version should be taken with a grain of salt. However, he does say now that he was trained in Iran after escaping from a Turkish prison and that Khomeini personally told him to [kill the pope](#). The Vatican has dismissed the new claim.

(4) Ahmadinejad's final days in power: Ahmadinejad is headed for one of three fates, like all former presidents and prime ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran: assassination, exile, or marginalization. He seems to be a fighter and won't go quietly. Appearing at the parliament to respond to the impeachment of his minister of labor and social programs, he [played a tape](#) in which a brother of the speaker of the parliament and head of judiciary (two of the three Larijani brothers who are close allies of the Supreme Leader) is caught asking for position and money in exchange for using his influence to push through certain economic initiatives.

2013/02/02 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Paradise above the clouds: The village of Filband, sitting at 2300 meters above sea level in Mazandaran, Iran, is a popular summer retreat. [This pictorial](#) shows photos from above the clouds, taken by a hiking group.

(2) Proud to be a Californian: After years of preparation and legal battles, California launched a carbon cap-and-trade system at the beginning of 2013, imposing a declining limit on the state's greenhouse-gas emissions. A similar cap-and-trade system proved highly successful in the 1990s to cut sulfur dioxide emissions that cause acid rain. So, while our nation's legislators are in denial, the world's 9th largest economy has decided to continue with its trailblazing social and environmental policies. Past experience shows that other states and the federal government will eventually follow California's lead, as happened with smog regulations and energy-efficiency standards. [From *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013.]

(3) The road to landing humans on Mars: [This is the first of three how-to article summaries I plan to post from the February 2013 issue of [Engineering & Technology magazine](#) (Vol. 8, No. 1), published by IET.] Multiple competing plans exist for landing humans on Mars, but a consensus about which plan is most practical and cost-effective has not been reached. The conventional wisdom is that we need a big spaceship, given the 6-month duration of the trip each way and the amount of supplies and scientific equipment needed. Such a big spaceship must be assembled in space (say in a space station positioned between the Earth and the Moon, where neutral gravity will make its escape toward Mars possible). An intriguing, but extreme, proposal for direct flight to Mars involves sending multiple smaller spacecraft according to a carefully planned schedule. The first two, sent initially, will carry supplies, return vehicles (main and spare), a habitat, instrumentation, and water and oxygen-making equipment to Mars. Some two years later, when supplies and equipment are already in place and Mars is again close to Earth, astronauts will be sent, who will stay on Mars for 18 months to seize the next opportunity for returning to Earth over a short path. This is an extreme proposal in view of both the 18-month stay-over and the tight quarters for the crew during both of the 6-month departure and return trips.

2013/02/01 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The \$10,000 college degree is catching on: Since the first challenge to Texas colleges to offer a flat tuition rate of \$10,000 for certain college degrees to help control the runaway costs of higher education, the movement has been gaining steam. Now, all 23 four-year [community colleges in Florida](#) have accepted Governor Rick Scott's challenge to cap their degree costs at \$10,000.

(2) The [Goleta postal murders](#) of 2006: A deranged former postal employee killed an ex-neighbor, 6 coworkers, and herself 7 years ago (January 30, 2006). She was known to many as "the crazy lady" and had been previously apprehended by the police for bizarre behavior in her workplace. Yet, she cleared the background checks and acquired an automatic pistol in New Mexico.

(3) The French accuse Iran's space program of dishonesty: [France 24 reports](#) (in French) that the baboon Iran claims to have been brought back safely from a space mission isn't the same one sent up.

(4) Bootleg "Argo" DVDs have taken Iran by a storm: The Iranian government has banned the Oscar-nominated film and is reportedly filming its own version of the historical events depicted in the film. Meanwhile, [bootleg copies](#) of Ben Affleck's historical drama, with Persian subtitles added, are selling like hotcakes in Tehran and other cities.

2013/01/31 (Thu.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Technology review 2013: The February 2013 issue of [Engineering & Technology](#), published by the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET), reviews a number of hot technology areas. I was particularly impressed by how-to articles in 3 subject areas, about which I will post summaries in the next few days. (a) How to reach 100 mpg. (b) How to land a human on Mars. (c) How to go around the world in six hours.

(2) Cardboard bicycle: Israeli inventor Izhar Gafni is close to mass production stage for his \$20 bicycle made almost entirely of cardboard. A secret mix of organic material is used to make the cardboard, whose special foldings make it very strong, water- and fire-proof. Here is [the story](#), which includes a video demo.

(3) NASA's new shuttle: NASA has been very quiet about a [substitute vehicle](#), 1/4 the size of Space Shuttle, that is solar-powered, is sent to space like a satellite, and can land like an autonomous drone. The X-37B Orbital Test Vehicle, as the new shuttle is known, was placed in orbit for 224 days a couple of years ago; another vehicle of this kind, OTV-2, returned to Earth last June after 469 days in space, shattering previous records. A second launch of OTV-1 occurred recently with little fanfare.

(4) Silent reading isn't really silent: [A new study](#) has confirmed that silent reading produces high-frequency electrical activity in auditory areas of the brain, confirming the theory that when we read silently, we actually hear a voice (usually our own) reading the text aloud. A side point in the article is that most of our walking time is spent talking to ourselves covertly.

2013/01/30 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Zaz covers the Edith Piaf song "Dans ma Rue": I got interested in [this video](#) when someone posting it on Iranian.com gave his post the title "Someday on Streets of Iran," perhaps expressing a wish that something like this street performance happen in Iran someday. I looked up the [English translation](#) of the lyrics and found them mesmerizing.

(2) Bird snatches baby: In this [1-minute video](#), we see a little kid being lifted by a golden eagle several feet into the air and dropped when it proves to be too heavy for the bird. I am usually pretty good at spotting hoaxes, but this one was clever enough to fool me, to the extent that I prepared and posted a commentary on Facebook about possible ways of protecting babies against giant birds. The film was produced by some film students in Canada.

(3) Time to retire the Penny: Suggestions for taking the Penny out of circulation have been appearing for some time, especially since 2006, when the cost of producing a 1-cent coin became equal to its value (currently it costs 2 cents to produce a Penny and 10 cents to produce a Nickel, so both coins present a burden on the US government). Opponents of getting rid of the Penny cite studies that claim the action might lead to price increases, thus hurting consumers. Unfortunately, some of these studies were funded by the metal manufacturer that has made a fortune from selling the metal blanks used for making the Penny to the government, largely via exclusive, no-bid contracts. Most economists believe that the impact of removing the Penny from circulation will be negligible or even positive (time saved by customers and cashiers in handling the coins and the recovery of metals, once the coins have been collected by banks and sent to the Federal government). Furthermore, most proposals suggest that prices should continue to be expressed with two decimal digits, so that credit- and debit-card payments, currently constituting 2/3 of all sales transactions, will be unaffected. The rounding of prices will occur only for cash customers, a dwindling group. One down side is that removing the Penny will increase demand for the Nickel, which is also a burden to the Federal government. So, some proposals include discontinuation of the Nickel as well. We will soon find out which group is right, because Canada's Penny will disappear from circulation, beginning on February 4. Many other countries have withdrawn their smallest denominations, with no ill economic effects. [Info from *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013.]

2013/01/29 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Best tweets on discovery of horse meat in UK burgers [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013]: "To beef or not to beef. That is equestrian."

"All who ate #horseburgers are in stable condition."

(2) It's wise to avoid eating out during the flu season: According to *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013, some 40% of US workers, mostly in the service industry, do not get paid sick leaves, increasing the odds that your sandwich is being made by a flu-infected employee.

(3) Airport full-body scanners: *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013, reports that current full-body scanners at US airports are being discontinued and replaced by ones that produce a less anatomically vivid image.

(4) "Is al-Qaeda on offense, or are thugs in Africa just trading on terrorism's best-known brand?" Writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013, Fareed Zakaria maintains that it's the latter. Thugs, who thrive on trading drugs and kidnapping of Westerners (earning them more than \$5M per hostage, on average) have latched on the al-Qaeda brand in the hope of enhancing their appeal to the local population and gaining global attention. Their causes are mostly local and they have no ambition for taking over the world.

2013/01/28 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The majority of reviews online are real and peer-to-peer, but fake reviews are an ongoing issue ... when it comes to truth in advertising the World Wide Web has become the Wild Wild West." Consumer advocates David and Amanda Horowitz, warning about reviews posted by company employees and hired reviewers, in [The Costco Connection](#), issue of February 2013.

(2) Hundreds dead in [Brazil nightclub fire](#): When will nightclub owners and patrons learn that pyrotechnics and the cramped space of a nightclub filled way above capacity do not mix?

(3) Entertainer on a bus: In this [11-minute video clip](#), an older Iranian man (Mostafa Mirhashemi) entertains city bus riders in Aabaadeh, Iran.

(4) The US military's moral decline: For 30% of US military commanders relieved of duty in the past 8 years the cause has been sex-related offenses. [From *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013.]

(5) A slowdown in the pace of tech advance not necessarily bad news: Citing stats about the price of software and IT equipment not declining as fast as before, economic columnist Rana Foroohar, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 4, 2013, maintains that the attendant technology slowdown may have some beneficial effects. "Despite the boost it has given to overall growth, the white-hot pace of tech advancement over the past few

decades is also a key driver of higher unemployment and inequality ... Research shows that technology powers job growth only if educational levels keep pace with technological change—a relationship that began to break down in the 1970s in the U.S."

2013/01/27 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Food waste: A report by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers states that 1.2 billion tons of food, as much as 50% of the world production, gets thrown away. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of January 28, 2013.]
- (2) High heels for men: It seems that in the past, both men and women wore high-heel shoes. Over time, the men's version got broader heels and the women's version got narrower ones, that are common today. Then, somehow, **men stopped wearing them**.
- (3) Deterrence vs. total prevention: An Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps leader has stated in **a speech** that had Salman Rushdie been killed, as directed by Khomeini in his infamous fatwa, others would not have dared to insult Islam and the prophet Muhammad. Reacting to this statement, an Iranian-American comic said that killing everyone would have totally prevented any future insults.
- (4) The Supreme Leader may be selecting the **next Iranian president** through his surrogates: A three-man coalition, closely linked with Iran's Supreme Leader (Ali Akbar Velayati, his advisor on foreign affairs; Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, an academic and cultural advisor; and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, his appointed national police chief and, later, mayor of Tehran), will be naming a presidential candidate and a slate of recommended cabinet members in the interest of maintaining national unity.

2013/01/26 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Two-buck Chuck no more: Fans of \$2 bottles of wine sold at Trader Joe's must come up with a new name for the wine's producer, now that soaring production costs have forced Charles Shaw to raise the price to \$2.49.
- (2) Antimissile systems reconsidered: Ronald Reagan's proposed antimissile defense system was ridiculed and JFK famously called Khrushchev's claims about his country's antimissile missiles an empty boast. Yet, the recent Israeli interception of 85% of the missiles fired at them by Hamas tells a different story. Antimissile defense is expensive: a rudimentary missile costs little, but intercepting it requires much more sophisticated technology. Equipping the missiles with simple navigation systems will make the defensive missiles even more expensive. But the effectiveness of the interception strategy seems to be no longer in doubt. [Adapted from *IEEE Spectrum*, January 2013.]
- (3) A nonprofit competitor to Google Books: Google's monopoly in the domain of on-line books, leading to its heavy-handed treatment of publisher and author rights, has made quite a few people nervous. "In 2010, university librarians met in a national conference and decided to create an alternative called the Digital Public Library of America. ... The Digital Public Library has a lot of things going for it ... What it doesn't have is money—or at any rate not enough of it to scan and organize every book in the United States. ... Instead, the Digital Public Library will serve as the archive for other archives. All around the country, from the Library of Congress to the Internet Archive in Northern California, libraries have been scanning books and setting up individual databases for their collections. The Digital Public Library of America hopes to produce a search engine that will coordinate with these institutions." [From *IEEE Spectrum*, January 2013.]

2013/01/24 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Today, twenty households with average broadband usage generate as much traffic as the entire Internet carried in 1995." Katie McAuliffe of Digital Liberty, commenting on the challenges of supporting the data flow in today's Internet.
- (2) Large-scale identity theft in Greece: A man who had in his possession 9 million personal records of Greek citizens (including identity cards, tax IDs, license-plate numbers, and addresses) was arrested late last year by the police who, as of now, have no idea how he got the info or what he planned to do with it. Barring some duplicates, the list potentially includes most of the country's population of about 10.8 million. [From *IEEE Computer*, January 2013.]
- (3) FAA under fire for Boeing 787 battery problems: FAA's approval of Lithium-ion batteries, dismissing their tendency to overheat and ruling that mid-flight battery burnout would be okay as long as the fires were contained and fumes were vented, **has come under intense criticism**, following two battery-caused fires on board Boeing 787 "Dreamliner" aircraft.
- (4) Evin Prison is like a hotel: A member of Iran's parliament, who visited the notorious Evin Prison recently, has opined that everything there is hunky-dory and that its amenities resemble those of a hotel. He claimed that the meals served there are of better quality than those at his family home and that the prisoners who complain about their treatment at Evin are just spoiled rich kids. Here are some examples of comments underneath a post of this story on Facebook:

- I hope that he and his family are fortunate enough to be taken to this hotel.
- This will make things simpler for the secret police, as all undesirable visitors can be taken directly to the Evin Hotel upon landing at the airport.
- Yes Evin is an excellent hotel, but you can't choose your check-in or check-out time and your room key is held by the staff.
- It's great that the Iranian officials like Evin, because that's where they will end up soon.
- I do hope that they let me get a room with my boyfriend; ordinary hotels don't.
- Who said Iranian officials are humorless; they are continuously entertaining us with their words.

2013/01/23 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The era of 35mm film has come to an end: When Kodak shut down the production of Kodachrome, the most successful line of 35mm color films, a photographer asked and was granted the honor of shooting the last 36-frame roll. He turned this into a memorable project for National Geographic, which is documented in this [31-minute video](#). My own farewell to the 35mm era came a couple of days ago, when I discarded an old Fujifilm camera (shown in the image) during some routine cleaning.



(2) Building-scale 3D printing: Working with large-scale printing expert Enrico Dini, architect Janjaap Ruijssenaars plans to create earth-inspired buildings in the shape of Mobius strips in various locations around the world. The [industrial-sized 3D printers](#) will use sand and a special binding agent to create a material stronger than cement.

(3) California's community colleges to come alive: With a slate of [budget proposals](#), Governor Jerry Brown has placed a renewed focus on California's community colleges. Brown's bold and controversial initiatives are aimed at keeping the 112-college system, which has been struggling under the twin pressures of huge funding cuts and increased demand, affordable, accessible, and moving students faster through the system to graduation or transfer to 4-year institutions.

2013/01/22 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Outsourcing for profit: According to [ABC News](#), a software developer has been caught in the US for surfing the Web at work all day, while his tasks were completed by Chinese programmers paid a fraction (\$50K) of his substantial salary (described as "several hundred thousand dollars"). Using the developer's credentials, the Chinese subcontractor logged into company systems to do his work for him. He received glowing performance reviews throughout this ordeal.

(2) Overzealous prosecutors should be held accountable for Aaron Swartz's death: Yes, Aaron Swartz was depressed and might have eventually killed himself for other reasons, but there seems to be widespread agreement that [overzealous prosecutors](#), who pursued him for the sin of downloading millions of scholarly articles at MIT (even though there was no evidence of him doing this for financial gain), played an important part in his decision to hang himself. Swartz was a champion of free access to information, a passion that is shared by thousands of university faculty and researchers across the US. Just days ago, I attended a UCSB forum on "open access," in which faculty representatives outlined UC Academic Senate's plan to present a united front against greedy publishers by insisting that they grant authors the right to post copies of their publications in a free repository to be maintained within the California Digital Library. Faced with a possible boycott from the most productive researchers in the world, whose work is essential to the prestige of their journals, publishers have quietly agreed to this modest demand. It is unfortunate that someone like Swartz, who worked to ensure free access to information, is so relentlessly pursued by prosecutors, to the extent of nearly going bankrupt by legal fees, while bankers and other financial mischief makers are yet to be held accountable for bringing the US economy to the brink of collapse, while lining their pockets.

(3) Alexandria's magnificent library: For centuries, Alexandria was the seat of power and learning in Egypt, boasting the world's largest library. Whether it was Christians, who burned the library down in the name of God, Julius Caesar, whose setting fire to his own fleet led to the disaster in view of prevailing winds, or Muslim conquerors, who swept through Egypt in the 7th century, isn't quite clear. The good news is that the library is being rebuilt with a [distinctive architecture](#) that stands out among the city's European-style buildings and the minarets of local mosques. Alexandria is waiting to take its rightful place on the world stage. [Adapted from *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 18, 2013.]

(4) Girls and boys cannot study in the same space: According to Islamic rulers in Iran, it is no longer enough to have separate classes for male and female students. [A recent directive](#) from Iran's Ministry of Education has banned the use of the same educational space for different sexes, even if such use occurs on different days for boys and girls.

2013/01/21 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) President Obama's inauguration ceremonies are held on MLK Day: This coincidence has more than a passing significance. In electing Obama to a second term, Americans have confirmed that his election the first time wasn't a fluke and that our society has transcended racism. If only America's transcending sexism can also be confirmed soon. [President Obama's second term actually began yesterday, when he took the oath of office in a private ceremony.]

(2) President Obama's second inaugural address today provides an excuse to recall the five best inaugural speeches by US presidents (according to *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 18, 2013):

Lincoln's second (1865)—authentic and the most quoted: "With malice toward none, with charity for all ..."

FDR's first (1933)—leadership through difficult times: "... the only thing we have to fear is fear itself ..."

Jefferson's first (1801)—a plea to rise above partisanship: "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists ..."

JFK (1961)—the most beautifully and memorably written: "... ask not what your country can do for you ..."

Theodore Roosevelt (1905)—visionary, yet realistic: "Upon the success of our experiment much depends ..."

(3) An uplifting **5-minute dance video** from Matt Harding: A cast of hundreds from around the world dance to "We're Gonna Break the Night."

(4) Persian fusion/modern music: Pallett performs Waltz No. 1, "**Delam Mikhaadet**" ("My Heart Desires You"). Here is another song of theirs, "**Naro ... Bemaan**" ("Don't Go ... Stay").

(5) Osprey, the ultimate fisher: Amazing **3-minute video**, showing osprey snatching large fish out of the water and carrying them effortlessly.

2013/01/20 (Sun.): Bergman, Ronen (translated from Hebrew by Ronnie Hope), *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, Free Press, 2008. [ISBN 978-1-4165-5839-2. This book review was also posted on Iranian.com.]

This book is an Israeli investigative journalist's account of how intelligence services of Western countries and Israel operated in connection with Iran during the last few years of the former Shah's reign and nearly three decades of subsequent Islamic rule. A number of chapters also deal with Iran's influence and activities in Lebanon, Palestinian territories, and Syria.

The book has five parts (22 chapters, plus an epilogue): I. Green Storm Rising (3 chs.); II. The Hidden War in the Middle East (5 chs.); III. The Global War (6 chs.); IV. The Second Coming of Hizballah (3 chs.); V. The First Shi'ite Bomb (5 chs.).

Some of the claims in this book are outlandish and I don't have the time or resources to verify them. On the other hand, they are not beyond the realm of possibility. Hidden war of the title refers to intelligence clashes, as opposed to open propaganda wars or military confrontations (of which Iran has had none with the US or Israel). This hidden war became open to inspection in the early 1980s, when the student activists occupying the US Embassy in Tehran and holding Americans hostage published, in some 61 book volumes, secret diplomatic and intelligence documents they had put together from shredder strips. With very few exceptions, the author's portrayal of Iranian personalities is quite accurate. One significant error (p. 113) is stating that Rafsanjani ran against Montazeri in presidential elections.

In reading such a book, the first question that comes to the reader's mind is the veracity of the information divulged: would the author's sources, which seem to include high-ranking military and intelligence officers in Israel, actually reveal the true intentions of spying programs and how they are implemented, given the likelihood of still-continuing operations of the same kind? I must admit that I don't have a satisfactory answer to this question. There are some indications that suggest openness and accuracy. For example, the disarray and lack of coordination between the Israeli army and intelligence units is exhibited by an incident (p. 81) when in January 1987, a border unit of the Israeli army shot an agent approaching to warn them of an impending Hizballah attack. There are enough other details (such as pursuing agents shooting and killing two terrorism suspects who had raised their arms in surrender) that show the Israeli secret service in a bad light to make the entire account believable. Or might it be the case that Mossad planted the self-deprecating parts in order to feed us misinformation elsewhere? One can never know. Having said this, I found the book fascinating reading.

Early in the book (pp. 15-27), we are told that during the Shah's reign, intelligence services in Iran, Israel, and Turkey collaborated through regular meetings and information exchange. Ethiopia was later added to this group, which had open and unlimited access to the rulers of the respective countries. In 1978, the Israeli intelligence warned the Shah in a face-to-face meeting about Shi'i extremism and asked for his help. Those who met with him found the Shah delusional and surrounded by sycophants who didn't tell him the truth about the situation in the country.

Both the CIA and the Israeli establishment ignored Mossad's warnings about the Shah's weakening grip on power, opting instead to believe the conventional wisdom that the Shah's regime was strong and would last for many more years. Israeli intelligence even brought Moshe Dyan, a general that the Shah admired and was then serving as Israel's foreign minister, to try to talk some sense into him. The Shah and his generals, however,

insisted that they were in firm control. In a separate effort, Saddam Hussein's half-brother brought a message to the Shah, containing the advice that he must treat the rioters with an iron fist, hinting that it would be no problem to have Khomeini eliminated in Najaf if the Shah so desired. When the Revolution broke out, 34 Israelis were stranded in Tehran, hiding out in three apartments and communicating via messengers, until they gradually got out.

The story of a large arms deal between Israel and Iran in 1981 is quite fascinating (p. 47). A key figure in arranging and negotiating the deal was Sadegh Tabatabaei, a relative of Khomeini and one of his confidants. The arms were flown into Tehran's Mehrabad Airport via Cyprus, where the plane's Israeli pilots (who could be trusted to land at Israeli military installations) were replaced by pilots of other nationalities whose lives would not be threatened in Iran. Later (p. 111), Manouchehr Ghorbanifar, who was highly connected to the Iranian rulers, is revealed as a major go-between in selling arms to Iran. Ghorbanifar eventually scammed all three countries (US, Israel, and Iran) during the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages affair.

Chapter 9 concerns the assassination of Iranian dissidents in Europe and elsewhere, as well as various legal actions by European countries against Iranian diplomats/officials. Chapter 10 deals with the search for a missing Israeli fighter pilot, Ron Arad, which led to complications and engendered multiple related events, including terrorist attacks on Jewish targets in Argentina. The latter are discussed in Chapter 11, after this observation on p. 168: "Fighting a terrorist regime forces every Western nation to confront its bedrock values. It also presents tactical dilemmas. In the pursuit of Ron Arad, Israel tried kidnapping and torture, without success. When Dirani's capture led nowhere, the Israelis tried again—and triggered an avalanche."

In its attempts to export the Islamic Revolution, Iran pursued strategic actions in multiple arenas. We are told, for example, that Iran financially supported and trained militants in Turkey, who were charged with assassinating the Islamic regime's opponents and attacking Western and Israeli targets (p. 188). Later, we read that Iran and several other countries were involved in forging US \$100 bills, doing such a good job that even experts had a hard time telling the fake and real bills apart (pp. 199-201). The so-called "superbills" had only a handful of very minor flaws, which, upon discovery, were kept secret to prevent the forgers from making corrections. One such flaw that was leaked out led to an immediate correction in the forged bills.

The author presents a detailed account (pp. 273-279) of a botched terror operation by a Mossad team in Jordan, which after poison-spraying a Hamas leader, was forced to provide the antidote to the poison to Jordanian authorities to save their target's life in return for extricating their two arrested operatives, in a tit-for-tat deal with Jordan's secret police.

Throughout the book, several incidents are described where Iran, allegedly acting through its operatives in Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere, instigated terror attacks inside Israel to derail ongoing negotiations that bore some signs of potentially resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or to reduce tensions between the two sides. These accounts are quite believable, as they match well numerous analyses by others, concluding that Iran needs the Palestinian issue as an external focal point to avert attention from its domestic problems.

Some information about the relationship between Iran and Hamas is presented, beginning on page 283, where quoting the Hamas Web site, the author outlines the allocation of \$240M from Iran: a \$100M direct grant to the government, \$45M towards salaries of civil servants, \$60M to the unemployed, and \$35M to construction and cultural programs. Iran's support for Hizballah and Hamas was kept secret on all sides, but over time, beneficiaries of the Iranian largesse began boasting about financial and other support from Iran (as evidenced by their on-line posts), perhaps to quell internal discord.

The story of an Israeli citizen, who ran an extensive arms trade with Iran in the 1990s, is quite interesting and puzzling (p. 311). Even today, it is not known whether Nahum Manbar acted out of greed, was a traitor, worked for the CIA, or followed direct orders from the Israelis.

The author begins Chapter 19, entitled "Importing a Russian Bomb," with the claim that the late Shah had plans for acquiring atomic and other weapons of mass destruction (p. 316). If this claim is true, Iran's Islamic revolution actually slowed down, rather than caused, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Khomeini himself stated his opposition to the acquisition of nuclear weapons on multiple occasions. But as early as 1987, Khomeini said at a secret meeting of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization that Iran's enemies will be deterred if they knew that Iran could defend itself, encouraging the staff to work hard and fast to develop the bomb. This step in the direction of contradicting Khomeini's fatwa did not become public, however, until 2006. Since President Rafsanjani's 2001 declaration that Islamic countries should pursue nuclear weapons, because a single nuclear bomb can destroy Israel whereas Islamic nations will only suffer setbacks, Iranian leaders have been more cautious in their pronouncements.

In the pursuit of nuclear technology, Iran hired unemployed former Soviet Union and Iraqi nuclear experts and sought technical assistance from Russia, which apparently played a horrid game, signing trade deals with Iran that had in them promises for nuclear technology beyond reactors, while secretly promising the West that it will do all it can to drag out the project to ensure that Iran does not become a nuclear power. This appears to be one of the more suspicious claims in the book: Is it the truth, or are the Israelis trying to create discord in the

relations between Iran and Russia, already strained by the two countries' vastly different world views? The author's discussion of the relationship between Iran and Syria is also quite eye-opening. The importance of this alliance was best explained in 2008 by Mohsen Rezaie, former commander of Revolutionary Guard Corps, who said military cooperation with Syria would allow Iran to use short-range missiles in fighting Israel, rather than long-range missiles which would be required from the Iranian territory (p. 357). He opined that any attack on Iran or Syria would bring an attack on the other one in its wake and it will then be followed by attacks on resistance organizations in Lebanon and Palestine. A secret project for developing nuclear weapons between Syria (supplying land and facilities), Iran (funding), and North Korea (expertise) was fatally damaged by an Israeli bombing raid.

The author's account ends in early 2008 (the original version of the book was published in 2007, but apparently the author added some new observations to the translated edition). Much has happened since then with regard to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and many events have exposed the continued danger of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of rogue regimes. Books such as the one under review provide valuable insights into the underworld of arms deals, the fundamental role of energy resources in world politics, and the pursuit of strategic national interests to the detriment of international security, in spite of the fact that the information cannot be fully trusted.

2013/01/19 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) The Kalashnikov story: Mikhail Kalashnikov, the WW-II inventor of AK-47, never made a dime from his invention, yet the gun named after him is the world's most popular assault rifle, making gun manufacturers around the world loads of money. Kalashnikov, now 93, says that he has a clear conscience, despite many people being killed by his invention, because he contributed to arms design and improvement to help defend his country. He does wish, however, that he had invented a machine people could use in their work, rather than a killing machine. [Adapted from [Barney Brantingham's column](#) in the *Santa Barbara Independent*]

(2) Israelis and Iranians connect on Facebook: The 41-year-old Israeli graphics-design teacher, who started the "Israel Loves Iran" campaign by posting images of ordinary Israelis, gives a [15-minute TEDx talk](#) about his efforts and what they produced.

(3) Olive oil is not health food: In this informative and entertaining [10-minute talk](#), the so-called "Mediterranean diet" is dismissed, because it focuses on the unhealthiest component (olive oil) among those that supposedly improved the lifespan in parts of the region.

(4) Boeing's "Nightmareliner": all the new [Boeing 787 Dreamliners](#) have been grounded, while investigators take a hard look at their electrical systems. Lithium-ion batteries produce the most energy with the lightest packages, but are known to overheat, causing difficult thermal management problems, especially in larger capacities required for autos and, now, aircraft. Ironically, Boeing's use of batteries, instead of drawing power from the aircraft engines, was meant to make the engines more efficient and thus the entire aircraft "greener."

(5) Question: What do Beijing and Tehran have in common these days? Answer: Their worst-ever air pollution. Tehran's longstanding pollution has reportedly gotten worse from the use of substandard fuel, brought about by the Western economic sanctions. Beijing's, as reported in the January 18, 2013, issue of *Newsweek* magazine, is due to the rapid growth of car ownership, dust from construction sites, and burning of more coal due to unusually cold weather.

2013/01/18 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Ice and Snow Festival: Each winter, Harbin, China, hosts many artists who create sculptures out of ice and snow. Here are some photos from the [14th annual event](#).

(2) A wonderful and touching [art project](#): "In the autumn of 2005, Najaf Shokri was on his way to work when he made an intriguing discovery in a rubbish bin near his house in downtown Tehran. The bin, outside a branch of the National Civil Registrations Organisation, was filled with old national identification documents, all issued in 1942 and long expired. ... He decided to create an art project out of his find, a collection of ID photographs that documents a generation. Shokri called the project Irandokht—"daughter of Iran"—after he noticed so many women by that name among the documents. It used to be a common first name in Iran."

(3) Dynamic pricing: The practice that was pioneered by airlines is now being adopted by many on-line merchants. Over the past holiday season, some retailers changed their prices as often as every 10-15 minutes. Sports teams have been charging different admission prices, depending on day of the week, time of the day, and the opposing team. Now the action is spreading deeper among retailers. They are abandoning MSRPs altogether and letting automated programs set their prices, starting from a lower bound and using information on inventory levels, item velocity, and competitors' offers. John Zhang, pricing expert at University of Pennsylvania, contends that retailing is coming full circle. Before supermarkets and department stores, merchants sized up their customers and priced their goods accordingly. They bargained and made trade-offs. Personal identification storage technology is allowing them to go back to the dynamic pricing strategy they were

doing for a long time. [Adapted from *Time* magazine, issue of January 21, 2013.]

(4) Homayoun Khorram, famed Iranian violinist and composer, passes away at 82. Here are a performance with pianist Javad Maroufi and a collection of his songs. [[YouTube video](#)] [[Fifty memorable songs](#)]

(5) More Iranians snatched in Syria: [Al Arabiya reports](#) that 20 more Iranians have been captured by the Syrian rebels. Days ago, 48 Iranian prisoners were exchanged for 2130 Syrians held by the Assad regime. Seems like the rebels have found a way to gain the release of their prisoners.

2013/01/17 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest from the worlds of politics and arts.

(1) President Obama speaks up on gun control: He introduces [new legislation](#) and signs 23 executive actions on matters that do not need congressional approval. BBC News had previously reported on NRA's introduction of a [shooting game](#) for iPhone and iPad. Approved for children as young as 4, the game simulates practice at a shooting range.

(2) President Odepicted in dubious company: The Iranian regime has installed a [10-story-high painting](#) alongside one of the main thoroughfares in Tehran that depicts President Obama standing with Shemr, a widely hated character who commanded Yazid's army against Imam Hussein in the Battle of Karbala. The caption reads: "Be with us, be safe."

(3) Robotics kits for the iPhone generation: The latest incarnation of [Lego's Mindstorm](#) robotics kits can talk to, and be controlled by, smartphone apps.

(4) Our galaxy is estimated to have about 17B Earth-size planets: Back in 1600, former Roman monk Giordano Bruno was burned alive for postulating that life can thrive on other planets. Today's astronomers need not fear such a fate for extrapolating from the findings of the Kepler space telescope, which has already identified 2740 potential planets orbiting 2036 stars, that the Milky Way holds 100B planets, some 17B of them being the size of our Earth. [From *Newsweek*]

2013/01/16 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest in academia.

(1) MOOCs to get a major real-world trial: Companies specializing in massive open on-line courses, which so far have been providing skills and knowledge to motivated on-line learner, with no cost and no academic credit, continue their pursuit of greater recognition by the academic community. Companies that have partnered with prestigious universities to offer such courses, in the hopes of someday being able to charge fees in exchange for formal academic credit, are exploring various avenues for achieving their goals. Now, Udacity, one of the pioneers of MOOCs, [has reached a deal](#) with San Jose State University to create for-credit courses, which will be limited, for now, to certain remedial subjects.

(2) Verifying on-line identities for those seeking academic credit: A key challenge facing companies specializing in on-line courses, before they can offer academic credit or verified certificates of completion, and thus improve their bottom lines by charging fees, is ensuring that a person taking a test is the same person who originally enrolled in the course. Coursera, a major provider of on-line courses, has announced [its proposed solution](#) to this problem: using webcam images at the start of each session and analyzing keyboarding patterns. The latter part works as follows. The student types a supplied phrase at the time of registration and then at the beginning of each submitted assignment. Other companies are working on setting up testing centers, where the student must appear physically to take tests.

(3) Cash for academic prestige: Saudi universities, including King Abdulaziz in Jeddah and King Saud in Riyadh, have been recruiting foreign talent as permanent and visiting faculty, by providing exorbitant salaries and perks. Now, following Saudi Arabia's notable rise in research ranking based on citations of research papers, information is disseminated in cyberspace about how the Saudis have offered to pay highly cited researchers to declare a second affiliation with Saudi universities, even when there are no meaningful connections or cooperation. The following [Science magazine blog](#) is from a year ago.

2013/01/15 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) What engineers do when they get bored: Here is the most elaborate [Rube-Goldberg contraption](#) I have ever seen.

(2) A tablet that makes itself lumpy: The screen [bulges and recedes](#) to make the keys on a soft keyboard feel real.

(3) Tech Talk: Hilarious [SNL skit](#) in which three techies complaining about iPhone5 and its apps are shown the light by three Chinese factory workers who assemble it.

(4) Violence, with and without guns: What the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting did for bringing gun violence to the front and center, the Indian rape case may have done for dealing with violence against women. Except that we Americans should not be lecturing Indians on the vulgarity of the case: similar incidents are happening in our own country, right under our noses. Writing in the [New York Times](#), Nicholas Kristof points out the similarities between the Delhi rape incident with the one in Steubenville, Ohio, in which an unconscious

16-year-old girl was dragged from party to party and raped repeatedly. Oddly, in both cases, some people rushed to blame the victim. Are we going to say "enough is enough" for all kinds of violence? Will members of congress reconsider their nonrenewal of the Violence Against Women act? If there is one area in which the US can lead the world, without spending a fortune or risking the lives of its youth, this is it.

2013/01/14 (Mon.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Either intelligent life exists in space or it doesn't. Either thought is frightening." ~ Arthur C. Clarke

(2) Persian political poetry: Bidaad's highly emotional recitation of his own poem in a [14-minute video clip](#) that is well worth watching. A very brave man, indeed! The poem begins thus: "Granted that your superb rosewater is from Ghamsar [the rose capital of Iran] / What good will that do, when flowers had to be crushed to make it."

(3) On a precarious balance of power and 2013's fiscal crisis: "Obama doesn't like Republican obstruction any more than his liberal critics do, but he recognizes it as a feature of the political landscape he can't just wish away. Legislation that cannot pass Congress cannot advance his policy agenda ... The last-minute deal that prevented a dive into severe austerity reveals what he really cares about: protecting the recovery and the vulnerable more than reducing the deficit or soaking the rich." Michael Grunwald, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of January 14, 2013.

(4) Kurdish folk music: Denmark-based [Vesal Ensemble](#) performs "Kolanja."

(5) Mr. Haloo's poem answered: In this [9-minute video clip](#), Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam recites his poem "Haloo, without Aleph." The young poetess Elaheh Malek-Mohammadi then reads her response to the poem.

(6) Reddit developer dead: [According to CNN](#), "Aaron Swartz, an Internet savant who at a young age shaped the online era by co-developing RSS and Reddit and later became a digital activist, has committed suicide."

2013/01/13 (Sun.): Here are six items of potential interest.

(1) A very wet year in Southern California: According to Santa Barbara County's Flood Control District, this year's rainfall in my town Goleta is already 113% of normal; and we still have months to go to the end of the 2012-13 water year (August 31).

(2) Before being retired, the flight deck (cockpit) of the Space Shuttle Endeavor was fully powered for one last time to create an amazing view. [[Pictorial](#)]

(3) On the joys of flying: "We are old enough to remember the glory days of flying, when flight attendants were happy, attractive people, eager to please ... [Nowadays, they] could not wait to get it all over so they could disappear into their nest at the front of the plane ... Yikes. Misery. Speaking of misery, the airlines need a dress code. If we see another man in an armpit-baring tee shirt, we will truly have to use those barf bags." Bill Tomicki, in *ENTREE* travel newsletter.

(4) [Origami engineering](#): Yes, it seems like an odd combination of a recreational activity and serious technology, but methods developed for paper folding happen to be quite useful for building self-assembling structures from superthin nanomaterials. Smart sheets that fold themselves, with guidance from their embedded electronics, can form the cornerstones of devices for minimally invasive surgery, with material inserted through small incisions folding themselves into devices and structures needed to perform the operation inside the body.

(5) Joke of the day: A man was crying. A friend asked him why he was crying. He answered that he regrets not having listened to his father's advice. "What advice did he give you?" asks the friend. "I don't know; I told you that I did not listen!"

(6) Music and laughter are the [best medicines](#).

2013/01/12 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Cyrus cylinder: [Photo and text](#) of what some have called the first-ever charter of human rights, translated into Persian, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

(2) The woman in a red shirt: Afghan women are fighting for their rights and in some cases their lives. They are making their Iranian sisters, who are engaged in a fight of their own, proud. Here is a [blog post](#) by an Afghan woman, entitled "A Letter to My Tormentor."

(3) One of Mohammad Nouri's signature songs: Mario Taghadossi, Rashid Vatandust, and Mohammad Reza Sadeghi sing "[Jaan-e Maryam](#)" ("My Beloved Maryam"), accompanied by pianist Negin Sarir and an orchestra conducted by Mohammad Sarir.

(4) California's proposed budget good for higher ed: "The University of California and California State University systems would receive a total of \$534 million more than in this fiscal year under the governor's plan, giving them more than \$5.6 billion combined from the state's general fund. Brown said the increase would be more than adequate to keep the universities from hiking tuition again any time soon. Community colleges would also get a boost—roughly \$700 million over this fiscal year, for a total of about \$5.5 billion." [[LA Times](#) story]

(5) **Driverless-car prank** baffles drive-through-window attendants.

2013/01/11 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Academy Awards nominees announced: There are some, but not many, surprise inclusions and exclusions. The best-actress category contains both the oldest- and youngest-ever nominee. [See the **full list**.]

(2) Record for warmest year broken: It's official; 2012 was the warmest year on record in the continental US, not by a small fraction of a degree, which is how such records are often broken, but by a full degree Fahrenheit. Of the 48 contiguous US states, all but one registered temperatures that were the highest ever or much above normal; Washington was merely above normal. **This map** from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says it all.

(3) David Guetta and Faure cover of **Titanium / Pavane**. [It's so nice/unusual to like/share your teen-aged daughter's music selection.]

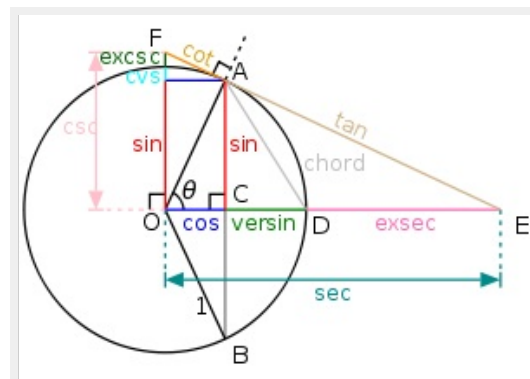
(4) **Father goes into baby crib** but can't get out.

(5) Will Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood cover up women in its ancient art with hijab? (**Cartoon**)

2013/01/10 (Thu.): Here are four miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) How trig functions got their names: This diagram and its attendant **explanations** are quite easy to remember visually.

(2) Quote of the day: "We are becoming more and more untethered from the truth [about slavery] ... and if you can make that torment more and more palatable by putting the right soundtrack around it, by casting the right actors, by throwing in a few jokes here and there, you can make slavery easier to swallow, and you can sell it. But it completely distorts the truth about our history." ~ Tavis Smiley, speaking to *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 4, 2013, about whether Quentin Tarantino's new Western film "Django Unchained" is authentic, as the director claims.



(3) Mr. Haloo recites his funny Persian poem entitled "**Moshaaver-e Tablighaati**" ("Publicity Advisor").

(4) Protecting Iran's national unity: In one of the sessions for poetry recitation, Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) vented against **Persian jokes** that make fun of various ethnicities within Iran, reciting part of a poignant poem by the Azeri poet Mohammad-Hossein Shahriar that criticizes Tehranis for deriding their countrymen of various ethnicities.

2013/01/09 (Wed.): Here are four miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The principal difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed, in constituting this representative assembly. It should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them." ~ John Adams [I saw this quote alongside a graphic that indicated that the US Congress has 50 times as many millionaires as the US population at large (50% vs. 1%)].

(2) Subway station in NYC, where trains don't stop: See the fascinating **pictorial story** of a beautiful and historic station that had been closed up for years and can now be viewed, as trains pass through it without stopping (the reason is safety concerns, due to the wide gap left between long subway cars and the platform, given the track's curvature at the station).

(3) NASA astronaut explains shooting stars in this **2-minute video clip** from 2009.

(4) Django Unchained: Quentin Tarantino has made yet another controversial movie. This time, however, he is up against some serious criticism, as two influential African-Americans (Spike Lee and Tavis Smiley) take issue with his version of black history. Tarantino sets himself up for the challenge by declaring the black-history icon "Roots" inauthentic, thus implying that he has presented a more authentic version in his new Western film. Speaking up in *Newsweek's* issue of January 4, 2013, **Tavis Smiley** objects to Tarantino's attempt at reducing the black suffering to revenge and retribution.

2013/01/08 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Had a Martian descended to earth in January 2003, spent a few days listening to Washington Republicans talk foreign policy, and then returned in January 2013, she would likely conclude that the Iraq War had been a fabulous success." ~ Peter Beinart, writing for **the Daily Beast**.

(2) The new American diet: AARP advises older Americans to stick to a **sensible diet**, using a US map made of fruits and vegetables as a prop.

(3) Too big to jail: Playing on the phrase "too big to fail," applied to industrial and financial institution whose failure could trigger economic catastrophe, thus being confident that they will be bailed out by the government

should they ever approach collapse, Daniel Gross, writing for [Newsweek magazine](#) in its first all-digital issue (dated January 4, 2013) wonders why none of the big players, who brought the US economy to its knees due to profiteering via risky investments, has been jailed. Some big financial institutions paid multibillion-dollar fines, but escaped unscathed otherwise.

(4) On gun owners supporting gun control: "Before the slaughter in Aurora, Colo.—and long before Sandy Hook—a survey of gun owners found that nearly 9 out of 10 of us support criminal-background checks for anyone who seeks to buy a gun. ... And I don't know a single hunter who supports the legal purchase of 30-round clips. ... Those massive ammo clips are useless for target practice, and pointless for personal protection. If you can't protect your home with three shots, you're not going to be able to do it with 30." Gun owner and enthusiast Paul Begala, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#).

2013/01/07 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest on higher education.

(1) UCSB ranked 7th worldwide: Let's begin the new academic quarter at UCSB with some good news. Based on publications in Thomson-Reuters Web of Science database from 2005-2009, the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Netherlands' Leiden University has ranked [UC Santa Barbara number 7](#) among the world's top 500 major universities. All 6 institutions ranked higher than UCSB are private schools (MIT, Princeton, Harvard, Rice, Stanford, and Caltech), making UCSB the highest-ranked public university.

(2) Making science and engineering majors cheaper: Florida was the first US state to consider lowering tuition and fees for STEM majors in order to attract talented students to these areas of national need. Now, Canada seems to be toying with this very [sensible approach](#).

(3) Pennsylvania's lawsuit against NCAA is a disgrace: Pennsylvania's governor [is challenging](#) sanctions placed by NCAA on Penn State University in light of the deplorable child sex abuse by an assistant football coach and inaction on the part of university officials once they learned about what was going on. It seems that the university's and the state's acceptance of the sanctions (i.e., admission of guilt) at the time was a convenient lie that allowed them to circumvent the storm of public opinion, until people calmed down and forgot the shameful acts aptly documented by Penn State's own investigation.

2013/01/05 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) How to strip a Jeep to its parts and reassemble it, all in [about 3 minutes](#).

(2) Jasmati rice: A hybrid between Jasmine (inheriting its nutty aroma) and Basmati (with its softness when cooked), this traditionally developed [hybrid crop](#) (i.e., not genetically modified) is reportedly becoming popular in the US.

(3) Formal Fridays? In the beginning, people dressed up for work, so someone decided to reduce workplace stress by inventing casual Fridays. Enter the tech industry, which upended all dress codes, making every day casual-dress day. Now the same industry is trying to escape the conformity of hoodies and jeans by instituting, what else, [formal Fridays](#).

(4) Blaming the victims: An Iranian TV program host has provided this gem, when commenting in [his blog](#) on the brutal rape and murder of a 23-year-old Indian girl by six men. "Why should girls be allowed to exert emotional pressure on young men and to disturb their focus, peace, and families? Improper clothing worn young girls and their salacious behavior intensifies serious crimes against them. ... There is but one solution to these problems: hijab."

(5) Islamic mourning or political rally? This [9-minute video](#) seems to depict a run-of-the-mill Islamic mourning ceremony in the city of Yazd. However, the poem chanted can be interpreted as an anti-dictatorship manifesto. View and judge for yourself (the words appear in Persian under the video on YouTube).

2013/01/04 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Imaginative [street art](#) photo (location unknown).

(2) A mathematical puzzle: In the following sequence of digits, what are the first five and why? *Hint:* The spacing of digits is deceptive. ?????581321345589144

(3) Cartoon caption of the day, by Gary Varvel: Richard Mourdock to his therapist: "The liberal media made me lose." The therapist: "Mr. Mourdock, isn't that something God intended to happen?"

(4) Giffords to meet with Newtown families: Former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was shot in the head 2 years ago, will [meet in private](#) with the families of schoolchildren killed in Newtown school shooting.

(5) New identity fraud law in Arizona: If a [proposed law](#) passes in Arizona, creating social media accounts under other people's names will become punishable by prison terms, when done without permission and with malicious intent.

2013/01/03 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Useless facts: Did you know that 2013 is the first in 26 years to consist of 4 different digits? The last one

was 1987. It is also the first in 581 years to use four consecutive digits (0-3). The last such year was 1432.

(2) Carnegie Mellon University wins \$1.17B patent infringement lawsuit: The Marvel Technology Group and Marvell Semiconductor Inc. were judged to have knowingly infringed on Carnegie Mellon's patents on accurate high-speed reading of data from magnetic disks, with "no reasonable defense" for doing so.

(3) Mixing reality and fantasy: Fox News has branded a number of actors and actresses as hypocrites for appearing in anti-gun PSAs, while toting firearms in action movies with gun violence. Isn't this like saying that an actor who plays the role of an abusive husband has no right to speak up against domestic violence? [When I posted the above on Facebook, a friend commented that the domestic violence film does not glorify the act, so there is a difference. Here is my reply: Not really. If the actor/actress shoots bad guys, the act should encourage a kid to go into law enforcement or pursue a career as a bounty hunter. Why do some people think that it encourages viewers to shoot innocent children en masse?]

(4) The ultimate in dishonest reporting: A story on Iranian.com, that has climbed to the top of the front page, reads: "Isfahan's 1.5 million residents ordered to leave the city—Radioactive leakage from a nearby nuclear site has now reached an emergency." The headline is very definitive and leaves no room for doubt. The first sentence of the report, however, paints a different picture, as it uses the much less definitive "could be leaking radioactive material." It then ties this speculation to an advisory by the authorities about high levels of pollution due to car emissions. The latter claim is linked to a very authoritative tweet by "Man from #Iran." While I do not dismiss the possibility of such an accident having occurred, no corroborative evidence is provided in the story above. [This item has also been posted on Iranian.com, where there may be comments.]

2013/01/01 (Tue.): Let us begin 2013 with these three items of potential interest. Happy new year!

(1) The new year 2013: Every year, during my high school and college days, some friends and I tried to use the digits of a new year to form natural numbers from 0 to the highest possible. Each digit was to be used once and the digits were to appear in order. Mathematical symbols could be inserted between adjacent digits and parentheses were allowed anywhere. For example:

$0 = 2 + 0 + 1 - 3$; $1 = -2 + 1 \times 0 + 3$; $2 = 2 + 0 \times 1 \times 3$; $3 = 2 \times 0 \times 1 + 3$; $4 = 2 \times 0 + 1 + 3$; $5 = 2 \times (0 + 1) + 3$

See if you can continue this to 10 and beyond. As of today, I have found solutions for numbers up to 24. Multiple solutions may exist for some numbers.

(2) The most-hated words/phrases of 2012: Fiscal cliff **topped the list**, beating out Spoiler alert, Bucket list, Trending, Superfood, Job creators, Guru, Passion/Passionate; Double down, and Kick the can down the road.

(3) Top-earning dead celebrities in 2012: According to Forbes, Elizabeth Taylor **topped the list**, followed by Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, Charles Schultz, Bob Marley, John Lennon, Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Theodor Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), Steve McQueen, Bettie Page, Richard Rogers, and George Harrison. Alas, there is only one scientist among the top 13!



Blog Entries for 2012

2012/12/31 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest for this last day of 2012.

(1) Educate the Heart: Interesting **2-minute promotional video** prepared for the Dalai Lama Center.

(2) Movie exploring the Afghan society: In this **101-minute movie** from 2012, Golshifteh Farahani portrays an Afghan woman who is empowered when her warrior husband becomes paralyzed. The film's title "The Patience Stone" refers to a fabled stone that listened to and soothed women's sufferings. The liberated woman voices and explores her sexual desires with a young man, himself a victim of violence.

(3) How the Taliban turn children into suicide bombers: In this **8-minute TED talk**, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy explains how the Taliban target poor Pakistani families to recruit their children into schools for brainwashing.

(4) Beautiful artwork from eggshells: After Wen Fuliang was laid off from his job, he turned to a 10-year hobby of his, creating intricate **sculptures from eggshells**.

2012/12/30 (Sun.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Asian-Americans offended by a Google app: "**Make Me Asian**" is an app that takes a person's photo and makes it look Asian by changing its facial features and adding things like a rice-paddy hat.

(2) Mathematician's deathbed dreams come true a century later: Self-taught Srinivasa Ramanujan set the world of mathematics on fire for a short period of time, before his untimely death at 32. **On his deathbed**, "Ramanujan cryptically wrote down functions he said came to him in dreams, with a hunch about how they behaved. Now 100 years later, researchers say they've proved he was right. ... Ramanujan believed that 17

new functions he discovered were 'mock modular forms' that looked like theta functions when written out as an infinite sum (their coefficients get large in the same way), but weren't super-symmetric. ... The expansion of mock modular forms helps physicists compute the entropy, or level of disorder, of black holes."

(3) An underappreciated woman of science: **Rosalind Franklin** is remembered for several scientific contributions to the study of viruses and DNA. However, other scientists ended up getting credit for her key contributions to the study of viruses and discovery of DNA's double-helix structure. "Unpublished drafts of her papers (written just as she was arranging to leave King's College London) show that she had independently determined the overall B-form of the DNA helix and the location of the phosphate groups on the outside of the structure. Moreover, Franklin personally told Crick and Watson that the backbones had to be on the outside, which was crucial since before this both they and Linus Pauling had independently generated non-illuminating models with the chains inside and the bases pointing outwards. However, her work was published third, in the series of three DNA Nature articles, led by the paper of Watson and Crick which only hinted at her contribution to their hypothesis." Quoted text from Wikipedia.

2012/12/29 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Best nature pictures of 2012: The end of a calendar year provides an excuse to review the year and present "top" and "best" lists of various kinds. This collection of **53 nature photos** depicts the earth and creatures that share it with us (mostly shown in their natural habitats, rather than in zoos).

(2) Writing advice from professional writers: A collection of **105 tips**, including Ernest Hemingway's preference for short sentences and first paragraphs, Mark Twain's avoidance of the word "very," George Orwell's use of active voice and short words, F. Scott Fitzgerald's shunning of the exclamation mark (it is like laughing at your own joke), and Lillian Hellman's "don't listen to writers talking about writing."

(3) Find peace by giving up **these 8 things**: Old regrets and excuses; The burning desire to have all the answers; The false hope of a pain-free life; Ties to insensitive people; Obsessing yourself with negative news; The belief that fulfillment resides in the end result; Measuring your success by material wealth; The need to keep everything the same.

(4) Pressure on Iranian Baha'is continues: Following multiple imprisonments of Baha'is in Mehdishahr (formerly Sang-e-sar, a town in Iran's Semnan province) over the past couple of months, **a new report** (in Persian) indicates that the community's old cemetery has been bulldozed by unknown operatives, who were given free reign by law enforcement authorities. Sang-e-sar had a sizable Baha'i community before the Islamic revolution, but fear of persecution led to mass migration, leaving only a small group.

2012/12/28 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Mehr News Agency **pictorial** shows Iran's Persepolis ruins in dire state of disrepair.

(2) New, improved flash memory: A technique of lengthening the life of flash memory through self-healing can potentially broaden its applications. Typically, flash memory's ability to store information degrades after a certain number of erasures. This is fine for a thumb drive, where the number of write operations is quite limited. In devices such as digital cameras, special memory management software ensures that no area of flash memory is reused beyond its erasure limit. For solid-state drives of PCs and servers, however, the problem cannot be easily overcome, given the higher frequency of write operations. The new flash technology being developed self-heals through selective spot heating, potentially extending the number of write cycles to billions. Provision of the required heating elements changes the architecture and manufacturing processes, but solutions to the various problems appear to be at hand, according to a report in *IEEE Spectrum*, issue of December 2012.

(3) Rafsanjani's family sues an Ahmadinejad ally: According to **The Guardian**, the Iranian ex-president's family has sued Hamid Rasai over his claim that corrupt methods were used to pressure the judiciary to free Rafsanjani's detained son.

(4) Norman Schwarzkopf dies at 78: The retired US general, who led Operation Desert Storm to drive the invading Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, **has died** of complications from pneumonia.

2012/12/27 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A publishing milestone: After nearly 80 years of publication, *Newsweek* magazine has issued its last print edition bearing the date December 31, 2012. The photo shows the last print cover alongside the very first one, dated February 17, 1933. Given the magazine's fully digital future, the



following quote from what *Newsweek* published 18 years ago (in its issue of February 26, 1995) is ironic: "Nicholas Negroponte, director of the MIT Media Lab, predicts that we'll soon buy books and newspapers straight over the Internet. Uh, sure."

(2) Person-of-the-year honorable mentions: *Time* magazine chose President Obama as its 2012 Person of the Year, but its year-end issue also has extensive articles on four other finalists who were considered: (a) Malala Yousefzai, the Pakistani girl whose voice was amplified as a symbol of women's rights worldwide when she was shot in the head by the Taliban; (b) Tim Cook, Apple Computer's CEO who has had to fill the big shoes of Steve Jobs; (c) Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first-ever democratically elected president who is now facing trouble at home; (d) Fabiola Gianotti, the physicist whose obsession with uncovering the nature of reality helped detect the elusive Higgs boson. The *Time* magazine issue includes alternate covers with photos of the four individuals above, following its main cover bearing President Obama's image.

(3) This **54-minute film**, entitled "The Iranian Americans," premiered on PBS on December 18, 2012.

2012/12/25 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Merry Christmas. May the spirit of the season stay with you all year!

(2) A little-known contribution by Turing: Alan Turing's contributions to computing theory are well-known and aptly celebrated during this Centennial Year of his birth. A lesser-known contribution of Turing is the use of Bayesian statistics for reasoning under uncertainty. He used this method in the British government's effort to decipher German communications codes during World War II. As explained in the book *The Theory that Would Not Die: How Bayes' Rule Cracked the Enigma Code, Hunted Down Russian Submarines & Emerged Triumphant from Two Centuries of Controversy* (by Sharon B. McGrayne, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 83), Turing used Bayes' rule to tame the combinatorial complexity of breaking highly sophisticated coding schemes: "As a measure of their belief, [code-breaking] team members assigned a Bayesian probability to each speculative code group according to how often it had occurred in already deciphered messages. The most probable blocks, as well as borderline or especially important cases, were studied further."

(3) Quote of the day: "I was being held in an Islamic Republic prison when I heard the anthem 'Iran, O Abode of Hope' over the PA sound system. I immediately began to weep. My cellmate inquired about the reason for my despair. I told him that I was the poet who wrote the lyrics to this anthem." ~ Huoshang Ebtehaj

(4) Persian translation of "**Let it Snow**": Funny.

2012/12/23 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Be humble and kind. A single tree can produce millions of matchsticks, but when circumstances change, a single matchstick can destroy millions of trees." ~ Anonymous

(2) New year's resolutions: Everyone makes them, but very few keep them. The culprit here may be the overambitious nature of most people's resolutions. Make small, incremental changes and build up on them. If you don't exercise at all, resolve to do it for one minute, rather than half an hour, per day. As Oliver Burkeman suggests in his **Newsweek magazine article**, issue of December 24, 2012, "willpower is a depletable resource: the more of it you use making one change, the less you'll have left over to make others. Pushing yourself to exercise leaves you more susceptible to burgers."

(3) One Billion Rising: With the background that "One in three women on the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime," **this movement** asks women to rise up and dance on February 14, 2013 to **break the chain**.

(4) Christmas music: "**Carol of the Bells**" for 12 cellos.

(5) Persian solo piano: **Hooman Tabrizi's rendition** of Shardad Rohani's "Sweet Moments," which he performed for the Star-Musician competition.

2012/12/22 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It's a curious truth about the happiness industry that, unlike most other industries, it doesn't have much to gain from selling a product that actually works." ~ Oliver Burkeman, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of December 24, 2012, referring to the fact that when a self-help technique fails to make the changes one seeks, the blame is placed not on the technique or its promoters, but on the user, who 'was not thinking positively enough.'

(2) NRA is truly out of touch: Finally, a full week after the school shooting in Newtown, CT, the National Rifle Association broke its silence by its president declaring: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." He then went on to call for government funding to put an armed guard at every school.

(3) **Our beautiful planet** is worth protecting: Glad it survived doomsday!

(4) Note to the NRA: "Columbine had an armed guard. Virginia Tech had its own police department. Ft. Hood was a military base." ~ Anonymous response to the NRA, which advocated the use of armed guards at schools to prevent mass shootings similar to the one in Newtown, CT.

(5) Note to ladies: "When you ask a man to do something for you, rest assured that he will do it. There is no need to remind him every six months."

2012/12/21 (Fri.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Happy **Shab-e Yalda** (Persian festival marking the winter solstice or longest night of the year)!

(2) Quote of the day: "[The idea that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to bear arms is] one of the greatest pieces of fraud—I repeat the word 'fraud'—on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime." ~ Conservative Republican and former US Chief Justice Warren Burger, 1991.

(3) Global warming debate heats up again: Sixteen prominent scientists have signed a piece entitled "No Need to Panic about Global Warming," published by the *Wall Street Journal*. This article has caused opponents of global warming research to jump up with joy. However, these 16 scientists aren't saying that global warming is not occurring or that CO2 isn't a factor. Their points are that it isn't occurring as fast as others claim and that *drastic* action isn't required. As a scientist, I don't like public funds to be spent on useless research, but please allow me to be skeptical when I don't see those objecting to climate research also being critical of exaggerated assessments of national security threats and the attendant funding for defense and weaponry R&D.

(4) Hardship fees for savagery and hijab: Foreigners hired by Third-World countries such as Iran are often paid lucrative salaries for the hardship of living in inhospitable societies. At the time of the Shah, such salary augmentations, referred to as "savagery fee" ("hagh-e tavahhosh"), were rightly opposed by many Iranians. Now we hear, through what might be a slip of the tongue, that foreign women serving in Iran are given salary augmentations for wearing the hijab. A member of Iran's parliament has **criticized Russian women** at the Bushehr nuclear power plant for not wearing proper hijab, despite receiving hijab fees.

2012/12/20 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Honestly, I don't have time to hate the people who hate me, because I'm too busy loving the people who love me." ~ Anonymous

(2) IBM releases its annual "**5 in 5**" report: Each year, an IBM report predicts 5 key technologies that can be expected to mature over the next 5 years. This year's predictions consist of computers perfecting the 5 senses of vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.

(3) President Obama honored by *Time* magazine: In choosing President Obama as 2012 "Person of the Year," *Time magazine* stated: "We are in the midst of historic cultural and demographic changes ... And Obama is both the symbol and in some ways the architect of this new America."

(4) Watching guitarist Jesse Cook in concert on PBS prompted me to look up his work and find a **2007 concert** at the Metropolis.

(5) Guitar-shaped Forest: Argentine Pedro Ureta planted this **2/3-mile-long forest** in the shape of a guitar to commemorate his lost wife.

2012/12/19 (Wed.): Reflections on mass shootings and gun control: I was enraged by an *The American Spectator* article entitled "**God Help Us,**" which asks us to view the Newtown mass shooting "in perspective," meaning that we should not get too roiled up about it.

Elsewhere on the Web site there is an article "Abortion and Newtown: The Culture of Violence" that begins with this preposterous digest: "Mass shootings on the rise since Roe v. Wade: Planned Parenthood as the NRA of Abortion?" This is despicable on so many levels. Objective studies have found that violent crimes have declined since Roe v. Wade. It does not take a doctorate in sociology to understand why: unwanted children are at much higher risk of engaging in criminal activity.

Now back to the article which is the subject of this post. Yes, the world has much bigger problems than the death of 27 children and school staff. But so what? One should not dismiss the problem of poverty in the US by

pointing to the fact that Africa has it much worse. If a homicide happens in your neighborhood, it is not comforting to think that Detroit has a much higher incidence of crime. And saying that gun control laws would not have helped in this particular case is disingenuous. For every mass shooting case that you show me where gun control laws might not have helped, I can show you at least one where they could have helped.

It is unrealistic to expect gun violence to disappear altogether, but cutting the number of incidents in half is still quite an accomplishment. Furthermore, if owning certain weapons becomes illegal, then those who do own illegal weapons will take much better care of them, hide them, and so on, making them less accessible to children and young adults. So, one should not focus only on the direct effect of laws on gun ownership but also on indirect effects on their accessibility. If a drunk driver has illegal guns in the trunk of the car s/he is driving, a routine search would reveal and remove the guns. This is another example of the indirect effects of gun restriction and registration laws.

Last, but not least, the argument that criminals would not care about gun control laws and that such laws will therefore hurt only law-abiding citizens also does not hold water. Law-abiding citizens can still get guns for self-defense or hunting if assault weapons are banned or if gun registration laws are strictly enforced.

2012/12/18 (Tue.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "One failed attempt at a shoe bomb and we all take off our shoes at the airport. Thirty-one school shootings since Columbine and no change in our regulation of guns." ~ John Oliver

(2) Ali Khamenei is now on Facebook: While Facebook is blocked for many Iranians and several people have been prosecuted and imprisoned for the "crime" of belonging to Facebook, [Iran's Supreme Leader](#) has set up a page for himself under "Khamenei.ir" and has also become active on Twitter and Instagram (photo-sharing site). As of yesterday, the FB page has garnered 5389 likes and several critical comments that have not been censored. The article provides a link to his FB page.

(3) Ahmadinejad and Netanyahu: The quarrelling leaders act like twins in this [video montage](#) of their speeches at the UN.

(4) The massacre of 1988 in Iranian prisons: This [45-minute documentary](#) is about the 1988 mass execution of 4000 political prisoners in Iran, under direct orders from Khomeini, whose handwritten decree authorizing the executions is shown and read in minute 6:45 of the video. Also, a Khomeini speech in which he expresses regrets that, early on, he did not allow reporters' pens to be broken and hanging frames to be erected in public squares, implying that the oversight should be corrected, is shown in minute 2:15.

2012/12/17 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The very purpose of religion is to control yourself, not to criticize others. Rather, we must criticize ourselves. How much am I doing about my anger? About my attachment, about my hatred, about my pride, my jealousy? These are the things which we must check in daily life." ~ Dalai Lama

(2) Addition of 120 Islamic majors in Iranian universities: According to [Khabar Online](#) (story in Persian), revision of social sciences curricula at Iran's universities has begun to bear fruit and these new recommendations constitute the first phase of sweeping changes being discussed.

(3) Christmas music: "[Christmas Market and Mulled Wine](#)" is the title of this solo piano medley by ahang1001, aka Shirin (video shows Christmas sights from Germany).

(4) Not one word on [NRA's Web site](#) about the school shooting in Connecticut: We know they support gun ownership, but there is no conflict between that position and condemning the mass killing of 6- and 7-year-olds or sympathizing with the devastated parents.

(5) Baked or roasted beet: Offered by street vendors, "[laboo](#)" is a tasty treat on a cold winter day in Iran.

2012/12/16 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Never argue with a fool; onlookers may not be able to tell the difference." ~ Mark Twain

(2) Another school shooting: Every time a tragedy such as the one in Connecticut occurs, a few people talk about gun control or mental health care, a few others oppose those ideas based on the Second Amendment and privacy concerns, and within days, we all go back to our daily lives, until the next shooting. Why isn't this problem a constant part of our national conversation? To those who retort "if guns kill people, then pencils misspell words," I say that on this same day, an attack on a school in China with a knife injured 22 people but killed only one. So, guns do make it easier to kill.

(3) Science news in brief: (a) Museum of math opens in NYC. (b) Engineer who co-invented the bar code dies. (c) Twin probes will crash-land on moon on 12/17. (d) Violent past revealed by moon's interior map.

(4) Sign seen in Newtown, Connecticut, site of the most recent [school shooting](#): "Our hearts are broken, our spirits are strong."

2012/12/15 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Fantine is not just a character that lived centuries ago ... Women are having sexual experiences for less than a dollar a day so their children can eat. There's someone like her a block from us right now." Ann Hathaway on "Les Miserables," the soon-to-open musical spectacle, with potential for several Oscar nods, including for best actress.

(2) Talented and principled actors: There are many talented actors of both sexes in Hollywood and elsewhere. However, occasionally one encounters extreme talent in people who also have their heads screwed on right. Last Sunday, I watched a "60 Minutes" interview with [Hugh Jackman](#), who talked about how he learned from his father that family has the highest priority, leading him to reject roles that would cause him to be away from his wife for extended periods of time. He ended up making an exception for a "role of a lifetime" in the musical "Les Miserables." The December 10, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine carries a feature on [Marion Cotillard](#), whose newborn is "a revelation about how you deal with yourself because you're not the most important person anymore." She also opines on social problems and priorities.

(3) The coconut craze: "The coconut is becoming America's latest trendy exotic edible, following the path of the pomegranate and the acai berry. The hottest part of the market is coconut water ... Other parts of the coconut are in demand too ... It has all the makings of a health-food success story, but growers and processors are worried that the coconut craze may not be sustainable. ... Fair-trade programs have not yet reached as far into the coconut trade as they have with other commodities, like coffee." Krista Mahr, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of December 17, 2012.

(4) Childhood photo re-creations: Many adults re-create childhood photographs for fun. But Helsinki-based photographer Wilma Hurskainen has turned this fun activity into an obsession, traveling widely to snap re-created photos. Here are [some of her re-creations](#) with her three sisters and, on occasion, her parents.

2012/12/14 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Live rich, die poor; never make the mistake of doing it the other way 'round." ~ Walter Annenberg, American philanthropist

(2) Victories for both the Palestinian Authority and Israel: The decision to admit Palestine as an observer state into the UN General Assembly has been viewed as a resounding victory for the Palestinian Authority. However, Israel has also scored a victory in this process, because Palestine's application for statehood was based on the 1967 borders, implicitly accepting those borders and relinquishing any claim to the Israeli lands.

(3) Looking for Genghis Khan's tomb: [New findings](#) may lead to the discovery of Genghis Khan's tomb, which has been sought for centuries by historians and treasure seekers. "Legend has it that Khan's funeral escort killed anyone who crossed their path to conceal where the conqueror was buried. Those who constructed the funeral tomb were also killed—as were the soldiers who killed them." A 250-ton stainless-steel statue of the warrior stands outside the capital of Mongolia.

(4) In support of the World Food Program: Sami Yusuf sings "[Forgotten Promises](#)" with help from people of the world.

(5) Paul Ryan caught between a fiscal cliff and a hard place: "If he accepts the tax hikes Democrats demand, he could alienate his longtime fans on the resolutely antitax right. But if he stands firm and take the party over the fiscal cliff, he could not only damage his qualifications as a problem solver but also start a war within the GOP." Massimo Calabresi, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of December 17, 2012.

2012/12/13 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Do you remember what you were doing at 12:12:12 on 12/12/12?

(2) **Political cartoon:** "People who aren't free-thinkers will never experience freedom; they will just be led into progressively larger cages."

(3) Sitar virtuoso [Ravi Shankar dead at 92](#): Complications from surgery have claimed the life of Ravi Shankar, whose work popularized Indian music and influenced the Beatles, among others.

(4) Top 10 ridiculously obvious study findings: From [Time magazine's 55 top-10 lists](#) of everything of 2012.

Number 10. Use of common pesticide linked to bee colony collapse

Number 9. Want to limit aggression? Practice self-control!

Number 8. Moderate doses of alcohol increase social bonding in groups

Number 7. Blood pressure drugs don't protect against colorectal cancer

Number 6. To "think outside the box," think outside the box

Number 5. Web offers poor and often inaccurate info on designer vagina procedures

Number 4. Monogamy reduces major social problems of polygamist cultures

Number 3. Monitoring spinal cord during surgery may help prevent paralysis

Number 2. Why older people struggle to read fine print—new study

Number 1. Dogs learn to associate words with objects differently than humans do

2012/12/12 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Today is 12/12/12: Today's date is just a coincidence of numbers. Such a repeated sequence occurred 13 months ago (11/11/11), a little over a year before that (10/10/10), and so on. However, the same kind of pattern will not recur until the beginning of the next millennium, that is, January 1, 3001.

(2) Quote of the day: "Happiness is not achieved by the conscious pursuit of happiness; it is generally the by-product of other activities." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(3) Finally, a move in the right direction: The fiscal crisis in American universities has led to plans for larger increases in tuition and fees for majors in which students have higher earnings prospects, the thinking being that such students can afford to take out larger loans. I have argued on multiple occasions that this is backwards: engineering and science majors should cost less, in order to encourage students to pursue them. Now Florida has begun to move in the latter direction, [planning to cut tuition and fees](#) for several majors that are in demand in the job market.

(4) The dumbing effect of marriage: [A law has just passed](#) the Islamic Republic's parliament postulating that to leave the country, a single woman under the age of 40 needs permission from her father or another male guardian. According to President Ahmadinejad's advisor on women's affairs (who is a woman), single women under the age of 40 are incapable of making important decisions and are easily deceived. Already on the books is a law prohibiting a married woman under the age of 50 from leaving the country without her husband's consent. Which begs the question: Does marriage dumb a woman down by 10 years?

2012/12/11 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Today is 12/12/12: Today's date is just a coincidence of numbers. Such a repeated sequence occurred 13 months ago (11/11/11), a little over a year before that (10/10/10), and so on. However, the same kind of pattern will not recur until the beginning of the next millennium, that is, January 1, 3001.

(1) Quote of the day: "To see ourselves as others see us is a most salutary gift. Hardly less important is the capacity to see others as they see themselves." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) The students' viewpoint: People smoke and drink for a few days and they become addicted. We have been studying since childhood, without developing an addiction. That's called self-control!

(3) Fall colors in Tehran: [Photo](#)

(4) Conservatives blame the liberals for the 2008 US fiscal crash: They cite the subprime mortgage crisis, brought about by several US administrations' housing policies over three decades, as the sole cause of the 2008 crash. This explanation is hopelessly outdated, however. "The [2008] crash was, at first, explained simply as a fallout from the United States subprime mortgage crisis ... It was subsequently accepted that there had been other factors at work." [This article](#) goes on to explain that the subprime mortgage crisis acted as a triggering event. A large number of other factors could have triggered the crash, which, simply put, was "an accident waiting to happen."

(5) School heater explodes in Iran: Kerosene heaters are used in thousands of schools in Iran, including in other classrooms of the same elementary school that has been reopened following a heater explosion on December 6 that left some 30 fourth-grade girls with severe burns (at least one has died of her injuries). Apparently someone attempted to remove the heater from the classroom, instead of letting the kids out first. The burning heater blocked the doorway, leaving the students trapped. Notice at 2:15 in [this video](#) how the school windows, potential escape routes in case of accidents of this kind, are secured with metal grills, as if this were a prison or asylum. The early part of the video shown Iran's minister of education appearing before the parliament to explain the accident.

2012/12/10 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "So long as men worship the Caesars and Napoleons, Caesars and Napoleons will duly rise and make them miserable." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) Most looked-up words of 2012: According to [Merriam-Webster](#), "socialism" and "capitalism" jointly occupied the first position. In many cases, people looked up both words, one after the other. Here is the rest of the top-ten list of 2012's most looked-up words: touche, bigot, marriage, democracy, professionalism, globalization, malarkey, schadenfreude, meme.

(3) Iran and Saudi Arabia face off in Asian soccer: Playing a match of the West Asian Football Federation Championships in Kuwait City, Iran and Saudi Arabia failed to score and ended the match in a **0-0 tie**.

(4) Humans of New York in Iran: [Pictorial report](#) from Tehran.

(5) Parade of Lights: Tonight, we attended Santa Barbara's 27th Annual [Parade of Lights](#) at the harbor. Boats decorated with lights paraded around Stearns Wharf. The event was followed by spectacular fireworks.

2012/12/09 (Sun.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." ~ Aldous Huxley

(2) Obama "Gangnam Style" parody: [3-minute video](#).

(3) Correlation of college education with [voting preferences](#) in the US: All 10 of the best-educated states in the US (32-39% college-educated among those 25 years of age or older) voted for President Obama in 2012. Nine of the 10 least-educated states (18-24% college-educated) voted for Governor Romney.

(4) The Dark Ages for Muslim nations? A Facebook friend of mine observed in a post that Christian countries spent several centuries in utter misery, once religious dogma prevailed over scientific thinking, and wonders if the same thing will happen in the Middle East and other Islamic regions.

(5) Iranians help design and rebuild a pair of bomb-damaged shrines in Iraq: The project, whose vast dome is covered with 23,000 gold tiles, is said to have cost \$100M, paid "personally" by Iraq's Ayatollah Sistani.

According to a report by [Fars News Agency](#) (in Persian), these shrines have been destroyed and rebuilt 13 times over the course of history.

2012/12/08 (Sat.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Never give children a chance of imagining that anything exists in isolation. Make it plain from the very beginning that all living is relationship. Show them relationships in the woods, in the fields, in the ponds and streams, in the village and in the country around it. Rub it in." ~ Aldous Huxley

(2) Find out which nations are most/least emotional: This is one of those polls that don't mean much, but we humans find them of interest. Gallup has surveyed 150 counties to rate their citizens' smiling and laughing frequency and other indicators of emotions. According to this poll, North America and much of Latin America rank among the most emotional, whereas Russia and a handful of other Asian nations are low on emotions. [Poll results in a [color-coded map](#).]

(3) Iran's chief of police [blames satellite TV](#) for crimes: According to him, most murders, prostitution activities, and drug offenses have their roots in the spread of foreign cultures via satellite TV channels. He said police efforts in removing satellite dishes have been effective and that fewer people now watch such programs. The police chief also defended the way officers handle suspects, challenging ordinary people to accompany police officers incognito, to see if they can avoid beating people up by the end of the day.

(4) Muslim countries of the world: As of the year 2000, there were 65 states with significant Muslim populations on three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Here is a [map of Muslim states](#), color-coded by percentage of population that is Muslim.

(5) Robot sails across the Pacific: A surfboard-size, solar-powered robot has completed its 10,000 mile trip from San Francisco to Australia. According to [Forbes](#), the robot was equipped with a dual-core ARM processor running Linux, along with a battery pack, sensor arrays, a GPS unit, and wireless communication systems.

2012/12/07 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest from the intersection of arts and sciences.

(1) Quote of the day: "First Shakespeare sonnets seem meaningless; first Bach fugues, a bore; first differential equations, sheer torture. But training changes the nature of our spiritual experiences. In due course, contact with an obscurely beautiful poem, an elaborate piece of counterpoint or of mathematical reasoning, causes us to feel direct intuitions of beauty and significance." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) Driftwood art: These [horse sculptures](#), which are made out of driftwood, are amazing.

(3) Time-lapse [video of Sydney](#), Australia.

(4) A fascinating merger of photography and sculpture: "New York artist [Michael Mapes](#) creates elaborate specimen boxes by dissecting photographs and then compartmentalizing individual fragments within plastic bags, glass vials, magnifiers, in gelatin capsules, and on insect pins."

(5) The latest twist in [scientific fraud](#): Several authors of scientific papers have been caught fabricating reviewer names that they propose to journal editors. Any e-mail message sent to the fake individuals, who are often given believable or even prestigious affiliations but a Gmail or Yahoo contact address, is received by the authors, who promptly write and submit a very positive review of their work! Several papers have already been retracted by multiple scientific journals and a number of investigations are ongoing.

2012/12/06 (Thu.): Here are five miscellaneous items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is man's intelligence that makes him so often behave more stupidly than the beasts. ... Man is impelled to invent theories to account for what happens in the world. Unfortunately, he is not quite intelligent enough, in most cases, to find correct explanations." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) Not for acrophobes: I got dizzy just watching the climb of this worker who repairs communication gear atop a 1768-foot communication tower, in what must be the [world's most dangerous job](#).

(3) Dave Brubeck dead at 91: The jazz master, whose most famous composition "Take Five" bridged jazz and pop, introducing numerous people to the wonders of jazz, has died of heart failure. [This article](#) has a link to a 1966 performance of the classic.

(4) World's oldest person dead at 116: [Bess Cooper](#) died peacefully on 2012/12/04 near Atlanta, Georgia.

Born on August 26, 1896, she experienced life in three different centuries. According to Guinness, Ms. Cooper passes the torch to fellow American Dina Manfredini from Iowa, who is 115. The oldest person ever was French-born Jeanne Calment, who lived to be 122 before dying in 1997.

(5) Is the supposed end of the world on December 21, 2012, according to the Mayan calendar, a valid excuse for not buying any Christmas presents this year? My family thinks that it isn't. What do you think?

2012/12/05 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Maybe this world is another planet's Hell." ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) A private venture to announce a manned Moon mission this week: According to [Wired](#), the announcement will occur on Thursday, December 6.

(3) Nasrin Sotoudeh ends her hunger strike after 49 days: A group of family members and supporters met with the jailed human-rights attorney at the Evin prison, bringing word of assurances from the authorities about lifting all restrictions on her family, as she had demanded. [[LA Times story](#)]

(4) The Iranian-Americans: [PBS documentary](#), premiering on Tuesday, December 18, 2012.

(5) The breads of Iran: Here is how [sangak bread](#) was baked in the Iran of my youth. The modern way is different, though, as evident from [this post](#) containing the makings of barbari bread today, in a contraption resembling a pizza oven.

2012/12/04 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'Try to be a little kinder.'" ~ Aldous Huxley, British author (1894-1963)

(2) President Obama's red line: In a [statement delivered yesterday](#), Obama warned Syria's Assad of consequences if he decides to use chemical weapons.

(3) A man snaps a photo of the [Space Shuttle Endeavor](#), on its way to California's Science Center in Inglewood, Los Angeles, on October 13, 2012.

(4) Lovely Persian love couplets from [Mahmoud Seraji](#), aka M. S. Shahed.

2012/12/02 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On human communication: As I sit watching Sunday morning news programs, which are focused on the so-called 'Fiscal Cliff' in the US, I can't help but think of this quote from the British author Aldous Huxley: "For in spite of language, in spite of intelligence and intuition and sympathy, one can never really communicate anything to anybody."

(2) High price not necessarily correlated with quality: "Forget what the foodies and gourmards tell you. Some of the tastiest and healthiest food around is also the least expensive and most ordinary. And you need go no further than the supermarket to find it." Dr. Mehmet Oz, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of December 3, 2012), on why expensive food is no better, or only marginally better, than inexpensive items found in supermarkets.

(3) Rafsanjani's [preposterous claims](#): In a gathering of historians of the Islamic Revolution, Rafsanjani, who was one of the top officials of the Islamic regime from the very beginning, and is still heading one of its key councils, sought to distance himself and Khomeini from hasty executions and other extremist actions, claiming that lawlessness in those days was due to the Revolutionary Council's lack of a firm grip on the country's affairs and actions of inexperienced youth.

2012/11/30 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Sign seen at a political rally in Lyon, France: "Un papa, une maman / la parite / pour les enfants." Unexpected opposition to gay marriage, in a progressive society with a socialist-dominated government.

(2) Makeshift touchscreens: An MIT student plans to perfect and market a computer that is screwed in the socket of a desk lamp and is equipped with a projector and a camera that can turn any desktop surface into an [interactive touchscreen](#).

(3) Mercury contains ice and organic matter: The closest planet to the Sun in our solar system has been determined to have vast deposits of [frozen water and organic matter](#). Our Earth is 2.6 times as large in diameter and about 2.6 times as far from the Sun as Mercury. Yet the latest findings show that the two planets have some features in common, raising the possibility that Mercury may hold the answers to some questions regarding the origins of life on Earth. Surface temperatures on Mercury can reach 800 degrees, but because its axis is only tilted by less than 1 degree, there are some regions near its poles that never see the Sun.

2012/11/28 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Walk a mile in her shoes: Image from [Toronto's parade](#) to end violence against women.

(2) Engineering wizardry in Australia: [Video](#), and a [close-up view](#).

(3) The Iranian regime is losing its Arab friends: The ayatollahs in Iran are facing a **crucial decision**. Their friends, Palestine's Hamas faction and Syria's Alawite regime, cannot see eye to eye. They are bound to lose one or the other as friends.

(4) Top 10 **bizarre or ridiculous fatwas**: Most, but not all, of the following fatwas were mocked in the Islamic world and their issuers chastised. (10) The Earth is flat and the Sun revolves around it. (9) Salman Rushdi, author of *Satanic Verses* should be killed. (8) Unladylike women or tomboys are violating Islamic tenets. (7) Mickey Mouse is one of Satan's soldiers. (6) Emoticons are evil and especially should not be used by women to express their emotions to non-mahram men. (5) Muslims should not play soccer with 11 players, as the heretics, Jews, and Christians do. (4) Polio vaccine is a conspiracy to make Muslims sterile. (3) Nudity during sex invalidates a marriage. (2) Drinking the urine of Prophet Muhammad is a great blessing. (1) Women can become mahram with male coworkers, and thus be alone with them in the office, if they breastfed the men.

2012/11/26 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Dynamic paintings, set to music: This **demo page** contains a number of dynamic paintings (cityscapes, landscapes, and abstract art) that slowly change to present seemingly endless variation.

(2) Another poet imprisoned: **Mostafa Badkoobei** (aka "Omid"), the brave, patriotic poet, whose readings of his own work at poetry nights roused audiences in Iran, has begun serving an 18-month jail term at Tehran's notorious Evin Prison.

(3) Islam exposed, or Hamas exposed? Many photos are being posted in cyberspace that portray violence in Islamic societies, such as the lynching of suspected Israeli spies in Gaza, bearing the inappropriate title "Islam exposed." I abhor this kind of punishment, carried out on mere suspicion, rather than via an open and fair judicial process (not that lynching would be acceptable after trial). However, the title "Islam exposed" is just as inappropriate as the heading "Christianity exposed" for the photo of a black man's lynching in the US decades ago. The title would have been inappropriate even if 50% of Muslims condoned the act (which they don't), out of respect for the remaining half.

(4) Street musician in Tehran: A young Iranian violinist plays **a beautiful piece**. It is a joy to see so much talent in a young person, but sad that it's not given an opportunity to develop into a national treasure.

2012/11/25 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Thanksgiving, **in the past and today**.

(2) Modern Persian music: A nice jazzy rendition by **Zohreh Jooya** of the popular oldie "Shaneh" ("Comb"). The video is so-so, and I don't see the point of a female band member pretending to play the sax.

(3) Azar Nafisi's best-known book turns 10: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* enjoyed a long run on best-selling book charts in the US and has been read worldwide in 32 other languages (alas, not in Persian). In this **VOA video**, the author talks about her book and how literature provides a channel for individualism and self-expression in a society that stifles creativity and demands conformance.

(4) Evolutionary explanations for homosexuality: Writing in the **Chronicle of Higher Education**, David P. Barash ponders the question: "If homosexuals reproduce less than heterosexuals—and they do—then why has natural selection not operated against it?" He reviews a number of possible explanations, including the now-discredited claim that homosexuality is a learned behavior and not a genetic trait, but concludes that more work is needed in this area.

(5) Iran's stepped-up crackdown on journalists and dissidents (**10-minute PBS video**).

2012/11/24 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Modern Persian music: Rana Mansour sings "**Baroon**" ("Rain").

(2) Artwork's first responders: A complex **network of volunteers**, thought up and created after Hurricane Katrina, is working nonstop to rescue and restore artwork damaged by superstorm Sandy.

(3) Forced confessions in Iran: Maziar Bahari's **54-minute documentary film** about his own and a number of other forced public, often televised, confessions under the threat of torture by the Islamic Republic authorities. These confessions were at first forced upon armed opposition groups but they are now used mostly for writers and secular intellectuals.

(4) Islamic physics: Ali Akbar Velayati, a physician and former foreign minister who advises Iran's Supreme Leader on international affairs, has mused that he has had a change of heart about science. He used to believe that physics is physics, that is, unlike social sciences where the Islamic world view influences content, natural sciences do not change, no matter what ideology you follow. Now, he has reached the conclusion that natural sciences are also tainted by secular Western thought and must be purified for use in Islamic societies. [Persian language report by **Fars News Agency**.]

2012/11/23 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Shahkar Bineshpajoo's latest [music video](#) entitled "Behesht." Good video and musical arrangement, so-so lyrics.

(2) Hadi Khorsandi's [humorous Persian poem](#), entitled "Nasrin Sotoudeh is Dangerous." Here is my English translation (loosely based on the poem) of selected verses.

The bastard owns cannons and tanks / Dollars from oil in hundreds of banks
Surrounded by guards in summer and fall / His palace has walls so mighty and tall
Security systems in front and back / Plus an escape tunnel in case of attack
I don't know why, it's way too bizarre / That he so fears Nasrin and Sattar

(3) Bed bugs are finally being defeated: Past efforts for dealing with bed bugs have been utterly ineffective. A new approach lures these annoying pests to bite humans who have taken [special pills](#) containing a parasite medication that kills them, while being perfectly safe for the subjects. The down side is that overuse may lead to the bugs developing resistance to it.

2012/11/22 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Thanksgiving Day to all my family members and friends. May you all have an abundance of things to be thankful for, and may our relationships and friendships have better fates than the Thanksgiving Day turkey!

(2) My experience with a MOOC: Massive open on-line courses (MOOCs) are all the rage today, so I decided to check one of them out by enrolling in it. I chose Stanford's ["An Introduction to Computer Networks,"](#) a 6-week course taught by Nick McKeown, a senior professor whom I knew from prior contacts, and Phillip Levis, a young associate professor whose hair colors/styles provided a much needed relief from the dry subject matter. My motivation was to refresh my knowledge of computer networking and to discover what can be done within the framework of such open on-line courses. Even though I learned a lot from the course, my overall impression is that of disappointment. The primary medium of instruction was short videos of duration 5-23 minutes, during which one of the two instructors discussed a specific topic, with longer topics broken down into a series of video lectures. Lecture slides were shown as the instructor talked and occasionally marked them up with notes and sketches. Quizzes consisted of true/false and multiple-choice questions and some small-scale problems requiring an integer or fixed-point answer. The questions were by and large vague, in many cases not very instructive, and contained some errors (particularly towards the end of the course). Some quiz questions asked, for example, about a feature required in a particular RFC identified only by a number. Exams (graded problem sets) were much better in terms of clarity and accuracy. As of this writing, the course Web site includes six interesting hour-long guest lectures by Nick McKeown (Why was the Internet designed this way?), Nina Taft (Introduction to Internet measurement), Jon Peterson (Governing in the Internet), Jana Iyengar (Oh, end-to-end, where art thou?), Matt Welsh (Making the mobile Web fast), and Vint Cerf (Re-inventing the Internet), which I found quite informative.

(3) Marital infidelity is at an all-time low: "Many Americans believe [the sexual-affair scandals of recent years] reflect a precipitous decline in respect for marital fidelity. If anything, however, such respect has never been higher. In a 2006 poll by the Pew Research Center, 88% of Americans said adultery was immoral—a higher number than for any other of 10 unsavory behaviors they were asked about. According to a 2009 Gallup Poll, only 6% of Americans believe extramarital sex is morally acceptable. Tolerance for male adultery is certainly at a new low. In letters and diaries written during the Colonial and Revolutionary eras, men routinely bragged about their extramarital conquests—even to the brothers and fathers of their own wives! ... As late as 1930, Somserset Maugham's play, 'The Constant Wife,' was considered shocking because the heroine confronted her husband about his affair instead of simply ignoring it, as most women in polite circles did. ... Some of the men involved in these scandals are clearly pigs. Some of the women are opportunists. But most are otherwise decent people who have not yet been able to adjust 200 years of conditioned sexual responses to our evolving emotional and intellectual preferences. ... We will know we have made progress when equality and friendship become more sexy than adoration and uncertainty." Stephanie Coontz, in an insightful [CNN opinion piece](#) about gender roles and why men continue to engage in risky sexual behavior.

2012/11/21 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) More than 99K: Number of Texans who, after President Obama's reelection, signed a petition for their state to secede (according to *Time* magazine, issue of November 26, 2012). Way more than 99K: Number of people from other states who endorsed the petition (according to me).

(2) How to dance Gangnam Style: Directly [from the horse's mouth](#).

(3) The miniature world of Michael Paul Smith: [These photographs](#) look ordinary, but are anything but; the artist constructed the town of his dreams on a scale of 1/24 and then photographed its various sights.

(4) The global intelligence files (Wikileaks release): A large collection of e-mail messages from the private [security firm Stratfor](#), that works for big corporations and some agencies of the US government, points to shady and often illegal practices that include bribery, tracking of dissidents, information hiding, and money

laundering, all under the nose of the US congress and other so-called watchdog agencies.

2012/11/19 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest about the US political scene.

(1) Quote of the day: "To be a patriot is to love your country as it is. Those who seem to despise half of America will never be trusted to govern any of it. Those who cherish only the country's past will not be entrusted with its future." David Frum, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 19, 2012.

(2) The media's vested interest in pretending that each electoral race is a close one: "On TV and websites like Politico, commentators incessantly hype individual polls and bluster about their 'sense' of 'where things stand,' creating the illusion that the candidates are trading the lead and that the contest is a so-called toss-up. Sure, the Everything Is Breaking News All the Time business model keeps readers and viewers entertained. But it also makes them cranky, suspicious, and misinformed." Andrew Romano, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 19, 2012. [He maintains that the race was never as close as the pundits made it seem and that a quantitative analyst (Nate Silver) had predicted the electoral vote counts precisely (332 to 206) and the popular vote to within 0.4% (50.8% to 48.3%, vs. the actual result of 50.4% to 48.1%).]

(3) A conservative's take on the Republican Party: "To break the losing habit, Republicans must resist the temptation to make excuses. We should dismiss the following thoughts from our minds: it was Hurricane Sandy's fault; it was Chris Christie's fault; the mainstream media gave Obama a pass on Benghazi; a Mormon can never be president; a private-equity guy can never be president; the Tea Party went too far; the Dems' ground game was better in Ohio. Forget all that. These are just ways of denying the deeper causes of Mitt Romney's defeat. Until we face up to these, we will keep on losing. Indeed, I predict now that we will lose in 2016, even when faced with a less ruthlessly effective campaigner than President Obama." Niall Ferguson, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 19, 2012.

2012/11/18 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "21st-century conservatism must become economically inclusive, environmentally responsible, culturally modern, and intellectually credible." David Frum, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 19, 2012.

(2) President Obama having some [fun at the White House](#) after a long, hard-fought campaign.

(3) An Iranian comedian and his [broom guitar](#).

(4) Sharif University of Technology to promote space and Voodoo sciences: This former center of state-of-the-art teaching and research in Iran, whose graduates are still widely sought by universities worldwide, is moving in the direction of Voodoo science. Its president has recently declared that his biggest wish is to see people hold group prayers on one of the planets. A recently announced public lecture on campus must have been authorized by that president, because many of the faculty, current students, and former graduates have protested or poked fun at this kind of nonsense masquerading as science. The topic of the lecture by Dr. Hossein Ravazadeh is "The Shadow of Zionism on Food and Pharmaceutical Industries." On YouTube, search for "Dr. Ravazadeh" and have fun listening to some of his musings

2012/11/17 (Sat.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Faith does not give you answers; it only stops you from asking questions." – Mohammad Zakaria-ye Razi, 9th-Century Persian philosopher, physician, and chemist

(2) Middle East trouble spots: *The Atlantic's* [pictorial](#) on the current devastation in southern Israel and Gaza is more balanced than most other reports, although it still has more photos from destruction in Gaza than from Israel's civilian casualties. Both sides are guilty, but the asymmetric firepower (including Israel's ability to intercept many of the missiles fired at her) is bound to produce more devastation in Gaza, so one cannot fault *The Atlantic* for including more photos of the latter.

(3) The true cause of war in the Middle East: The Israeli "occupation" is just an excuse for spreading hatred and for absolving Arab leaders of their direct role in the subpar progress and prosperity of Palestinian Arabs. Here is part of [what incites hatred and inflexibility](#) in Arab extremists.

(4) Nuclear power, then and now: The Islamic Republic's current insistence on Iran's right to nuclear power is ironic, given that a number of officials in the former Shah's regime were accused of treason, and one was executed, for the crime of advocating the use of nuclear power. [This article](#), from a regime newspaper a few months after the Islamic revolution, maintains that given Iran's vast oil and natural gas reserves, as well of the dangers of nuclear technology, spending money on building nuclear power plants is a waste of *beit-ol-mal* (Muslim nation's public funds).

2012/11/16 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) High-resolution (15.9-gigapixel) image of Machu Picchu: On this [image of the Inca citadel](#), you can move around by using the hand tool or zoom in by double-clicking on a point.

(2) Newly elected physicist congressman calls for more scientists in politics: **Bill Foster**, a particle physicist and businessman from Illinois, plans to devote some of his energies while in office as an advocate for bringing more of his peers to Washington.

(3) A serious media mix-up: **Neda Soltani's** face was mistakenly put on signs honoring Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was shot dead by the regime operatives during a demonstration in Tehran. Soltani has written a book, *My Stolen Face*, about how this mix-up affected her life, including her inability to go back to Iran in view of the Iranian authorities' vile claim that she is the real Neda Agha-Soltan and that she faked her own death for propaganda against the regime.

2012/11/15 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "You really can't have a sustainable recovery in an economy that's 70% fueled by consumer spending when 90% of the income gains since the recovery began have accrued to 1% of the population." Rana Foroohar, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of November 19, 2012.

(2) On-line courses a step closer to being counted for college credit: Massive open on-line courses by Coursera, a leading on-line education company, are being evaluated by **American Council on Education** with respect to their suitability for college credit, thanks to a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

(3) Why despite my candidate prevailing, the 2012 US presidential election left a bad taste in my mouth: Elections in the US are no longer about politicians advancing ideas they believe in and trying to rally public support for those ideas. They are now about number crunching and formulating ideas/policies that appeal to niche populations perceived to be critical in turning this country's 50-50 electorate in favor of the candidate. Unfortunately, President Obama was guiltier than Mitt Romney in this regard, primarily because he had access to a larger data set, perfected over 5-6 years. Strategies used by dozens of campaign number crunchers to link voter and donor databases with various other information about people's lifestyles, shopping habits, and the like are outlined in an interesting piece in *Time* magazine, issue of November 19, 2012. Secret algorithms were used to find out the best way of targeting ads, selecting TV shows during which the ads would be run, finding off-the-beaten-path locales for last-minute campaigning, and deciding when/where to appear on social media. As the article by Michael Scherer suggests in its final sentence, "In politics, the era of big data has arrived."

2012/11/13 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Love sees no color: A song in 16 languages, with the **12-minute video** filmed in 18 different countries, including Iran (see minute 9:10). [Behind the scenes of **shooting the video** in Iran's Persepolis ruins.]

(2) Women and the 2012 US elections: According to **the Daily Beast**, "Women made history this week, scoring a slew of interesting firsts for Congress, including the first openly gay person in the Senate, the first Asian-American woman in the Senate, and the first Hindu-American in Congress. A record number of women—binders full, some might say—will serve in Congress, with 20 in the Senate and at least 76 in the House."

(3) Superstorm Sandy's impact on our climate change discourse: "Before New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg cited the issue in his post-Sandy endorsement of President Obama, most of the political discussion about climate was about the lack of political discussion about climate. Mitt Romney never mentioned it except to mock Obama's pledge to slow the rise of the oceans, and Obama rarely mentioned it except to mock Romney's antiscientific mockery. ... But the U.S. has quietly begun its transition to a low carbon economy. Sandy could be the moment that accelerated the transition." Michael Grunwald, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of November 19, 2012.

2012/11/12 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Petraeus's rules for living: This is the title of a one-page compilation by Paula Broadwell, which ironically appeared in **Newsweek magazine**, issue of November 12, 2012, just before the news about the general's extramarital affair broke. Topping the list of 12 rules is this one: "Lead by example from the front of the formation. Take your performance personally—if you are proud to be average, so too will be your troops."

(2) Resilience engineering: As attractive as the pronouncement "failure is not an option" sounds, it isn't a realistic position. Failure occurs all around us and is an inescapable part of the engineering of complex systems. Today, the typical reaction to failure in companies is firing some people to put others on alert and to show that the management is in control. According to a discussion, published in *Communications of the ACM* (issue of November 2012, Vol. 55, No. 11, pp. 40-47), companies with critical computing infrastructures have started to adopt resilience engineering, a practice that has been common in other high-risk industries, such as aviation and health care. Under resilience engineering, companies actively prepare for failures and occasionally purposely induce catastrophic failures to test the staff's reaction and the readiness of their emergency procedures and back-up systems. In other words, they take the age-old advice of embracing failures and learning from them.

(3) Thanks to all the caring people in the world: I sometime wonder what I would do without all the caring

people in the world who, on a daily basis, inform me of huge lottery winnings, send me business propositions worth millions of dollars, remind me that my filled mailbox must be reset, and watch out for me in many other ways. Thank you all!

2012/11/10 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) The Petraeus story is quite sad: The [Daily Beast](#) reports that earlier this year, General David Petraeus praised his wife Holly as "the greatest source of support, wise counsel, and love that any soldier could have." Holly Knowlton followed her husband faithfully throughout his steady rise, playing the roles of mom and dad as he went away on various assignments.
- (2) Postcards from Google Earth: Clement Valla's [images taken from Google Earth](#) show the glitches involved in stretching satellite photos to fit the planet's surface.
- (3) Cause of a political prisoner's death: According to testimony by 41 political prisoners in Tehran, Sattar Beheshti, a 35-year-old blogger and political activist who [died in custody](#) (purportedly from heart failure) had signs of severe torture on all parts of his body when he was brought to Evin Prison's Section 350. These political prisoners know that they will get in trouble for their testimony, but decided to do the right thing anyway.
- (4) Hijab for Iranian men: An official in Iran's Ministry of Guidance has said that men's clothing is in many cases against Iranian and Islamic norms, promising to implement [new programs](#) in this regard beginning next year. Despite being against any restriction on appearance and personal conduct, I kind of like this new development, which may lead to a united front of all Iranian citizens, men and women, against arbitrary restrictions on people's personal freedoms.

2012/11/09 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Those who try to ban friendship between people of opposite sexes by invoking the fire in Hell say their daily prayers in the hopes of sleeping with fairies in Heaven." Attributed to Ahmad Shamloo (Iranian poet), although I could not verify its authenticity.
- (2) UC thanks the public for Prop 30: The President and all 10 chancellors of the University of California have signed [a letter](#) expressing relief and gratitude for the passage of Proposition 30 that provides funds for higher education. However, [Inside Higher Ed](#) reports that the past cuts have been so deep that California higher ed still faces an uphill battle.
- (3) Major shift in California politics: Democrats have won [2/3 supermajorities](#) in both state houses, something that had not happened for them in more than a century (Republicans enjoyed it in 1933). This is a significant development because according to a constitutional amendment in California, no law that creates new revenues for the state can be enacted without 2/3 approval in both houses. These supermajorities also enable the legislature to override vetoes by the Governor, if needed. I hope that the Democrats do not abuse this new-found power.
- (4) The biggest threats for SEALs: The US Navy SEALs have fought traditional and nontraditional enemies of all kinds, dealing them serious blows. But [recent developments](#) have shown that their biggest enemy is the lure of fame and Hollywood celebrity. Currently, as many as 10 films about the SEALs are out or in production.

2012/11/08 (Thu.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

- (1) No end to on-line hoaxes: The story, spreading via on-line posts and e-mail, that George W. Bush accidentally voted for Obama is a hoax. I suspected this when I read in the story the word "mismaladjusted," which sounds like Bush-speak but a bit suspicious. A bit of research [confirmed my suspicion](#).
- (2) Stories of courage and humanity emerge in the wake of superstorm Sandy: One of the world's most important Internet hubs is located in lower Manhattan. It survived Sandy without a hitch, because the staff went out of their way to acquire provisions and enough fuel for their generators to ride out the storm. They slept on cots and sleeping bags in very uncomfortable positions to keep the data flowing. Elsewhere, a Coast Guard rescue swimmer dove into house-sized waves to save crew members from a sinking ship, swimming back and forth multiple times between a life raft and a helicopter hoisting spot. These and other heartwarming stories of courage appear in a special section of [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of November 12, 2012.
- (3) Ahmadinejad and the notorious Evin Prison: Even though the judiciary in Iran has turned down President Ahmadinejad's request to visit the Evin Prison, he should not be concerned about the unfavorable decision. Very likely, he will get to visit the prison in due time, perhaps shortly after his term of tenure as president ends. LOL!
- (4) Masculinity, manliness, courage, and valor: A deplorable part of the Iranian culture, which is a direct result of its deep-rooted patriarchal nature, is the use of the terms "mardi" and "mardaanegui" (manhood, manliness) as synonyms for "courage" and "valor." This unfortunate situation sometimes manifests itself in a bizarre way: Some men praise particularly courageous or selfless women by ascribing to them the traits of "mardi" and/or "mardaanegui." Another aspect of the same problem has to do with the word "gheirat" (honor), which is often

invoked in keeping women under wraps and in justifying "honor" killings. Ms. Azadeh Azad found such ascriptions particularly offensive when a political group supporting the plight of political prisoners in Iran produced a poster imploring men to learn "gheirat" and "mardaanegui" from Nasreen Sotoudeh, an unjustly imprisoned lawyer. [Ms. Azad's article](#) makes the point forcefully, although there are passages in her write-up that I do not endorse.

2012/11/07 (Wed.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

- (1) You just can't trust Obama: Last year he said he was 50. Now he says he is 51. I bet his story will change next year too!
- (2) See/hear Islamic democracy in action: [Hilarious clip](#) (in Persian) of deliberations at the Islamic Republic's parliament with regard to summoning Ahmadinejad to explain his role in the extreme devaluation of the country's currency. The summoning action was demanded by 102 representatives, 25 of whom changed their minds and retracted their signatures when Khamenei said that internal squabbles among the country's authorities is against national interests.
- (3) Secret talks with Iran: Shiraz-born Valerie Jarrett, a senior advisor to President Obama and a close friend of Michelle Obama, [is said to be in Iran](#) as part of a delegation trying to communicate behind the scenes with the representatives of the Islamic Republic's supreme leader.
- (4) News footage from April 9, 1939: Believe it or not, before Internet and TV news, we got our visual news from newsreels shown prior to movie screenings in theaters. [This example](#) shows the black opera singer Marian Anderson performing "Ave Maria" (in German) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. As I wrote earlier, her performance there was arranged by Eleanor Roosevelt, after the latter's request for staging this event at the Constitution Hall failed to materialize because the Hall's controlling authority insisted that the singer must enter the Hall from the servants' entrance. During this year's UCLA Parents' Weekend, we watched the complete performance from news cameramen's footage preserved at the UCLA film and TV archive.

2012/11/06 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) President Obama re-elected: Obama's victory was expected, but it came much faster than anyone could project. With the re-election of President Obama, a couple of the posts that follow may seem moot, but they are still quite revealing of our political process.
- (2) Everybody loves solar: Even though 92% of likely voters, including 84% of Republicans, favor more extensive use of solar energy, Republicans in Washington show a strong disdain for it. Ditto for electric cars. (Obamapower and Obamacar, a la Obamacare?). [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of November 5, 2012.]
- (3) The renewable energy industry returns Romney's barbs with niceties: "America's solar industry shares Governor Romney's desire to achieve energy independence ... We also applaud Governor Romney's recognition that the federal government can help ensure access to diverse and reliable sources of energy ... We also support Governor Romney's desire to cut red tape." From a statement by the Solar Energy Industries Association, as quoted in *Time* magazine, issue of November 5, 2012. [Special interests always try to avoid antagonizing potential presidents.]
- (4) Wall Street is still rigging the game: "Four years after the crisis and two years after the passage of Dodd-Frank ... fewer than one-third of the regulations have been finalized, and more than three-quarters of the required deadlines have been missed. The Wall Street lobby has spent more than \$300 million trying to kill—or insert loopholes into—key rules that would ensure greater transparency in derivatives and bar banks from betting against their own customers. And five of the nation's largest banks are even bigger than they were before the financial meltdown." Greg Smith, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of November 5, 2012.

2012/11/05 (Mon.): Ebrahimzadeh, Cyrus, *Mosaddiq in His Own Words: Behind the Curtain of Negotiations*. This Persian-language book, published in Los Angeles in 2004, paints Mohammad Mosaddegh (I prefer this more common spelling), the Iranian prime minister ousted by a CIA-sponsored coup in 1953, as a cowardly, indecisive, self-serving, and flip-flopping leader who made a lot of promises but did not deliver any results. I scanned the book and returned it to the UCSB library recently, because I did not consider it worth reading in detail. The writing style is terrible and the book lacks structure. Bold typeface is used indiscriminately for both quotations and emphasis, sometimes in passages spanning more than half a page. A lot of sources are cited (incompletely) and extensively quoted from, but the book lacks a bibliography or explanatory notes. Page after page of narrative and quotes are presented, without giving the reader any sense of direction or critical analysis. While Mossadegh is certainly not above reproach, better-written and more analytical works in the domain of criticizing his personality and policies exist.

[Note added on 2012/11/09: This brief book review was also posted to [Iranian.com](#).]

2012/11/04 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Paths to the White House: Considering the outcomes in 9 battleground states, there are $2^9 = 512$ paths to the US presidency. This highly informative [New York Times interactive graphic](#) shows that of the 512 possible paths, 431 lead to an Obama victory, 76 lead to a Romney victory, and 5 lead to a tie.

(2) Multiple SIDosis: Minutes 5:00 to 9:00 on [this video clip](#) (1970, by Sid Laverents) is what I watched at UCLA at a special screening of some its film and TV archive holdings. Bear in mind that this film was produced years before digital music and film tools would make such a one-man-band performance trivial.

(3) Betty Boop, as Snow White: A [7-minute cartoon](#) from 1933, shown to us at UCLA's special screening of some its film and TV archive holdings.

(4) Scene from "Follow Through": This [4-minute musical number](#) entitled "I Want to Be Bad" from the 1930 musical comedy "Follow Through" was shown to us at UCLA at a special screening of some its film and TV archive holdings.

(5) Iranians do not appreciate Khamenei: Sheikh Hassan Nassrollah, leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, who had previously offended many Iranians by claiming that "there is no such thing as Persian civilization in Iran, there is only Islamic civilization," has also opined that "Iranian youth do not appreciate ayatollah Khamenei, the Muslim world's leader, as much as we do" ([Mehr News Agency report](#)).

2012/11/03 (Sat.): UCLA Parents' Weekend: This weekend (Friday and Saturday), we attended an interesting and highly informative event at UCLA designed to provide Bruin parents with a glimpse of the life on campus. My daughter Sepideh accompanied us when her class schedule permitted. Other than attending community meals, including a dinner with entertainment provided by the marching band and a DJ, we took a campus bus tour, went to a reception for parents who are alumni themselves, and watched a student spotlight program marking the reopening of the famed Pauley Pavilion after major renovations. Several faculty lectures were on the program, of which we attended two:

(1) "Stem Cell Immortality," by Professor Amander Clark, who began her talk with an introduction to the three stem cell types (embryonic, induced pluripotent, and adult) and the ongoing research in the field. She then described her own work on using stem cells to treat infertility.

(2) "Economic Crisis and the Reuse of Egyptian Coffins," by Professor Kara Cooney, who described her theory on how hard economic times in Egypt at the end of the Bronze Age, combined with the desire for elaborate and socially significant rituals surrounding the dead, forced people to dig into their family tombs to find coffins of distant relatives or long-dead loved ones (no longer remembered by those alive) for reuse, often after scraping and other work on the paint and artwork. Cooney has been traveling around the world to personally see as many old Egyptian coffins as possible to gather evidence for her theory, which already enjoys broad support. Professor Cooney has been involved in the production of some historical documentaries, including "Out of Egypt" and "Egypt's Lost Queen."

The highlight of the weekend was a presentation by Ian-Christopher Horak, Director of UCLA's Film & Television Archives (the second largest in the world, after the one at the Library of Congress), which included an introduction to the Archive's holdings and restoration work, followed by unforgettable clips of old and not-so-old footage for entertainment and historical reflection. An example of the latter was a rousing rendition of "Ave Maria" (in German) by the black opera star Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Her performance there was arranged by Eleanor Roosevelt, after the latter's request for staging this performance at the Constitution Hall failed to materialize because the Hall's controlling authority insisted that the singer must enter the Hall from the servants' entrance.

2012/11/01 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) For fiddle music fans: An [album of 15 tunes](#) by Velocipede, with free on-line streaming, and a 30-minute [live performance](#).

(2) *Moonwalking with Einstein*: This is the title of a book by science writer Joshua Foer, who started looking into how some people can memorize and recall lists of thousands of numbers or the order of the cards in multiple decks of cards and, in the process of his participatory research, ended up winning the US Memory Championship. In this [20-minute TED talk](#), Foer talks about some of his findings. His aforementioned book, which brings together cognitive science, cultural history, Classics, and philosophy, is our campus's "UCSB Reads 2013" official selection.

(3) Who do people of other countries want to lead the US? According to a [BBC poll](#) conducted in 21 countries, Obama is the overwhelming choice (50% to 9% overall). Obama's approval rating is a high 73% (vs. 3% for Romney) in France, while Romney is most favored in Kenya with 18% (vs. 67% for Obama). Pakistan is the only country in which Romney holds an edge (14% to 11%). So much for Mitt Romney's claim that President Obama has damaged the international stature of our country!

(4) Is Alzheimer's preventable through diet? New evidence is emerging on the connection between poor diet and Alzheimer's, lending credence to the theory that Alzheimer's is just [another form of diabetes](#) (type 3).

2012/10/31 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) NYC, as you haven't seen before: New York City is synonymous with bustling, elbow-to-elbow crowds and bumper-to-bumper traffic. So, seeing this [time-lapse video](#) of deserted or near-empty streets and other public places is a bit spooky.

(2) Superstorm Sandy worst ever for NYC: The US East Coast is in a state of shock following at least 40 deaths, widespread blackouts, disruption of public transportation systems, and major damage from superstorm Sandy.

[This video](#) shows flooding in a NYC tunnel.

(3) Malala: The [brave girl](#) who makes ignorant grown men with machine guns tremble in fear.

(4) End of season for [UCSB men's soccer](#): With its chances of having postseason play already miniscule due to the loss of a must-win game against UC Davis on 10/28, the UCSB men's soccer team was dealt a final blow by being pulled from the playoffs because of a player's pushing of the referee to the ground after Davis scored a golden goal. Additionally, the offending player has been removed from the team and the head coach has received a one-game suspension.

(5) Ironic to the max: The Iranian Helal-e Ahmar organization (similar to the Red Cross in the US) has announced its readiness to assist victims of the superstorm Sandy. This is so ironic, given that thousands of Azerbaijanis are freezing in their tents in northwestern Iran, more than 2.5 months after they lost their homes due to a 6.4 earthquake.

2012/10/30 (Tue.): Three math/logical puzzles: Many of us have dealt with puzzles involving coins and a balance scale, being asked, e.g., to find a heavier/lighter counterfeit coin among a set of coins. The following puzzles are of the same nature (they involve coins and a balance scale) but need a different kind of reasoning. [Source: *Communications of the ACM*, issue of November 2012.]

(1) You are given 13 coins and told that any 12 of them can be split into two piles of 6 coins that balance perfectly on the scale. Prove that all coins must have the same weight.

(2) You are given 8 coins and told that they have at most two different weights (some of them, possibly all, weigh w_1 and the rest weigh w_2). How can you determine if all the coins weigh the same using only three weighings on the balance scale?

(3) Repeat Puzzle 2, with the same rules but with 10 coins.

2012/10/29 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Why Hurricane Sandy will inundate NYC and Connecticut: Landfall is expected in southern New Jersey, but the worst storm surges are expected to be 50-75 miles to the north. [Here is why](#).

(2) College soccer: Yesterday, the UCSB men's soccer team fell to UC Davis 1-2 in overtime, in what was a must-win game to keep the hopes of playing in post-season alive. As in the last few games, UCSB offense seemed out of sync, missing on quite a few scoring opportunities. The defense was also disorganized, allowing a tying goal 5 seconds before the end of the first half. The deciding golden goal came when a Davis player was given a gift due to the UCSB defense failing to clear a ball. A UCSB player, who [charged the ref](#) immediately after the match, was taken away in handcuffs.

(3) A funny poet's take on Chinese imports: Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam (aka [Mr. Haloo](#)) pokes fun at the abundance of Chinese imports in Iran, using wordplay to mix in a healthy dose of Persian expressions that have "Cheen" (Persian word for "China") in them.

2012/10/28 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Good news: A magnitude-7.7 quake that hit the western Canadian coast last night and the resulting tsunami that was predicted and arrived weaker-than-expected in Hawaii seem to have caused little damage.

(2) Interesting commercial for [LG IPS monitors](#): What would you do if the elevator floor gave way and fell down the shaft?

(3) Taj Arabia in Dubai: At four times the original size, this \$1B [replica of Taj Mahal](#) is set to complete in 2014. It will serve as a wedding venue, luxury hotel, shopping destination, and more.

(4) A Friday-prayers leader's sermon in Iran: "The message of our revolution to the world is peace, friendship, and kindness." The crowd chanting in approval: "Death to America; death to Israel; death to opponents of the guardianship of the Islamic jurist."

2012/10/26 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) College soccer: In a nonconference match to be followed shortly by a few must-win Big West Conference games, the 25th-ranked UCSB men's soccer team lost 0-1 tonight in overtime to an energized Stanford team.

(2) Sakharov Prize honors two Iranian dissidents: The European Union's [2012 Sakharov Prize](#) for dedication to the defense of human rights and freedom of thought has been awarded to Nasrin Sotoudeh (imprisoned lawyer for representing opposition figures) and Jafar Panahi (banned film director).

(3) The oil and gas boom in the US: In addition to making good progress on the path to clean and renewable energy sources, the US is well on the way to becoming a **net exporter of energy**. It is projected that by the end of this decade, the US will overtake both Russia and Saudi Arabia to become the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas.

2012/10/25 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The common bond of humanity and decency that we share is stronger than any conflict, any adversity, any challenge. Fighting for your convictions is important. But finding peace is paramount. Knowing when to fight and when to seek peace is wisdom." Wes Moore, in his best-selling book *The Other Wes Moore* (see my review posted on Mon. 10/22).

(2) Top 75 'Pictures of the Day' for 2012: **Amazing pictures** (mostly photos, but also some art). The great ones are too numerous for me to mention here, as I liked more than 2/3 of the entries (see #31, in particular).

(3) On the disruptive aspects of social media and on-line friendships: "Look, there are eight of my friends in some Facebook photo together at ... is that a barbeque? Who had a barbeque? Why wasn't I at that barbeque?" Robin Marantz Henig, writing in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of October 22, 2012.

2012/10/24 (Wed.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide for those who have little." From FDR's second inaugural address.

(2) A rousing endorsement of Obama: This *New Yorker* editorial eloquently reviews President Obama's achievements and, more importantly, the less visible, but equally impressive, aversion of economic catastrophe brought about by 8 years of clueless governance and a longer period of reckless deregulation.

(3) Obama trumps "The Donald" on the Tonight Show: President Obama jokes that the discord between Trump and him dates back to when the two had run-ins on the soccer field as they were growing up in Kenya. He also acknowledges that Hilary Clinton will probably leave her post before his second term.

(4) Republicans are self-destructing: With comments such as "I highly approve of Romney's decision to be kind and gentle to the retard" (tweeted by conservative commentator Ann Coulter after the third presidential debate) and "even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that is something that God intended to happen" (spoken by Indiana Senate candidate Richard Mourdock), the Republicans, and conservatives in general, seem bent on losing this presidential election; given the projected changes in the US demographics and a growing number of citizens who do not identify with any organized religion, they can only go downhill in future elections.

2012/10/23 (Tue.): Here are three political items of potential interest.

(1) Romney isn't a real businessman: In a comprehensive article, published by *Newsweek magazine* (issue of October 22, 2012), David Stockman, Ronald Reagan's budget director, takes a scalpel to Romney's claims as a job creator. "Mitt Romney claims that his essential qualification to be president is grounded in his 15 years as head of Bain Capital, from 1984 through early 1999. ... Except Mitt Romney was not a businessman; he was a master financial speculator who bought, sold, flipped, and stripped businesses. He did not build enterprises the old-fashioned way—out of inspiration, perspiration, and a long slog in the free market fostering a new product, service, or process of production. Instead, he spent his 15 years raising debt in prodigious amounts on Wall Street so that Bain could purchase the pots and pans and castoffs of corporate America, leverage them to the hilt, gussy them up as reborn 'roll-ups,' and then deliver them back to Wall Street for resale—the faster the better. That is the modus operandi of the leveraged-buyout business, and in an honest free-market economy, there wouldn't be much scope for it because it creates little of economic value. But we have a rigged system—a regime of crony capitalism—where the tax code heavily favors debt and capital gains, and the central bank purposefully enables rampant speculation by propping up the price of financial assets and battering down the cost of leveraged finance."

(2) Ahmadinejad is **denied visit to Evin prison**: Citing "the nation's best interests," Iran's judiciary has denied a request from the Islamic Republic's president to visit the notorious Evin prison, where one of his aids is being detained alongside numerous political prisoners. Ahmadinejad, who is getting a taste of his own medicine, has accused the judiciary of unconstitutional conduct.

(3) A former radical Muslim champions democratic values: "This stifling, totalitarian victimhood ideology had taken the responsibility for reform away from our people, by simply finding satisfaction in blaming everyone else for their ills." Maajid Nawaz, quoted in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of October 22, 2012.

2012/10/22 (Mon.): Moore, Wes, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Tales*, Spiegel & Grau, 2010.

"This is the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore. One of us is free and has experienced things that he never even knew to dream about as a kid. The other will spend every day until his death behind bars for an armed robbery that left a police officer and father of five dead. ...

It's unsettling to know how little separates each of us from another life altogether." Thus begins the introduction to this remarkable true story that came to my attention when it was assigned for reading and discussion to my daughter during her freshman orientation at UCLA.

The author, a successful black man (decorated US Army veteran, Rhodes Scholar, White House Fellow, and now a best-selling author) learned of the existence of another Wes Moore as he was preparing to attend Oxford in 2000. He wrote to the other Wes Moore, got a response, and paid him many visits in prison to learn his story. The book alternates between the two life stories, with each chapter covering the same year in the two lives. A number of photos of the two Wes Moores and their families are included.

The author avoids the question of what led to the vast differences in the lives of the two Wes Moores who grew up under similar circumstances, except in an afterword written for the paperback edition, where he also offers some opinions expressed by the readers of the original hardcover edition. What all the reader responses have in common is that they point to the decisive power of information and stories, as provided and modeled by friends, family, mentors, or books. The author confides that it was reading Colin Powell's *My American Journey* as a young man that made him realize how people's lives are changed by the power of stories. The author also had chance meetings with a number of individuals who became his mentors and supporters.

In a revealing passage on p. 138, we read that the other Wes Moore was conflicted about his life on the street and involvement in dealing drugs. He enjoyed the money and the street creds, but hated to see individuals, neighborhoods, and entire cities destroyed. But "his thoughts contradicted his actions; he had long since accepted that. It was just that his tolerance of his own hypocrisy was wearing thin." With 4 babies and their two mothers and his own mother to take care of, Wes wasn't sure he could ever get out. This feeling of helplessness, along with a lack of social support and suitable role models are likely causes of his downfall.

In an epilogue, the author informs us about the current status and whereabouts of the various characters in his book. We learn in this chapter that the other Wes Moore became a grandfather at 33 and that his mother is raising 6 children: 3 of Wes's, her niece, her nephew, and her own youngest son. Wes's brother, Tony, was also sentenced to life in prison (in his case, without the possibility of parole). The book includes an extensive resource guide that points the readers to help that might be available through organizations devoted to advocacy, arts education, (general) education, entrepreneurship, social services, and tutoring.

The following passage from p. 168 of this highly recommended book constitutes an apt nugget for concluding my review: "The common bond of humanity and decency that we share is stronger than any conflict, any adversity, any challenge. Fighting for your convictions is important. But finding peace is paramount. Knowing when to fight and when to seek peace is wisdom."

2012/10/21 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Execution is one of the "values" of Islam: The **Islamic Republic's judiciary chief** has said this in response to the latest UN human rights report, which was critical of the large number of executions in Iran: "Not only in Iran but also in all Islamic countries, the death penalty exists and it is in effect one of the values of all the Muslims of the world." He further called for the Muslim world to condemn such attacks on Islamic laws.

(2) Roadblock for free on-line higher education: Citing a decades-old law, Minnesota's Office of Higher Education has informed Coursera, a provider of open on-line courses, that **it lacks permission** to operate in the state. An official the state's Office of Higher Education said similar letters had been sent to all postsecondary institutions offering courses in Minnesota. I hope other states don't follow suit. In a climate of chronically declining state funding for colleges, with no realistic prospects for fiscal improvement, erecting roadblocks for pioneers of free education is the last thing our country needs.

Note (added on Tue. 10/23): The Associated Press has reported that, after a flurry of complaints and critical blog posts, Minnesota has reversed its ill-advised decision to enforce a 20-year-old state law requiring universities to get permission from the state before offering any courses, conceding that the law didn't envisage today's crop of free on-line courses. Dah!

(3) Advances in genetics may lead to data storage breakthroughs: "Harvard geneticist and biomedical engineer George Church ... encoded all 53,426 words and 11 illustrations of his latest book ... in DNA along with a JavaScript computer program. He then had his tome copy itself 70 billion times. In all, some 700 terabytes, or 5.5 [petabits], of information was stored in a single gram of DNA. ... Church notes [DNA] could survive intact in the desert for 400,000 years. The encoding process remains expensive and relatively slow—Church needed several days to transcribe his book. But he expects speeds to increase and costs to drop dramatically. The genetics revolution may spark one in data storage as well." [See the story: "**The Knowledge Gene**"]

2012/10/20 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Young people having fun building an outrageous "Rube Goldberg" contraption **to promote Coke**.

(2) A neurosurgeon's take on the existence of heaven: [I find this item interesting, though I am not convinced by the neurosurgeon's account.] "According to current medical understanding of the brain and mind, there is

absolutely no way that I could have experienced even a dim and limited consciousness during my time in the coma, much less the hyper-vivid and completely coherent odyssey I underwent." Eben Alexander, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of October 15, 2012, about his visions of afterlife.

(3) College soccer: Last night, in an electrifying game with about 14,000 paid attendees (one of the highest for college soccer), Cal Poly defeated UCSB 2-1. UCSB took the lead in the second half, but Cal Poly tied the score minutes from the end of regulation and won the game on a golden goal in the first overtime period. The game was wide open, with both teams having many scoring chances, but UCSB forwards continued to underperform (a midfielder scored the sole goal).

[*Note* (added on Wed. 10/24): For an opposing view, see this [post from Sam Harris](#).]

2012/10/19 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) World Cup 2014 qualifying match: After surviving some serious threats from the rivals' potent offense and losing a player to a second yellow card, [Iran scores a goal](#) to win its soccer match against South Korea 1-0. On the negative side, news reports indicated that all spectators watching the game at Tehran's 100,000-seat Azadi Stadium were men (no women were admitted).

(2) Shame on Facebook for wanting to sign up even more kids: "Recent reports that a new flirting app, called Skout, resulted in three separate cases of children being raped by older men have driven home the dangers confronting minors when they go on the Web. ... [Currently,] 7.5 million kids 12 and younger are on Facebook." Lee Siegel, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of October 15, 2012.

(3) The new culture war over fairness: "We all agree that something is broken in the U.S. We all agree that the other side is to blame and that tax policy can be used to restore basic fairness. We just can't agree on what fairness means." Jonathan Haidt, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 22, 2012, on the three interpretations of fairness: Proportionality (the more you pay in taxes, the more benefits you deserve), equality (the economic version of "one person, one vote"), and procedural uniformity/transparency (the same rules apply to everyone).

2012/10/18 (Thu.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) UCSB's Computer Engineering Program has recently established a [Facebook page](#).

(2) On my becoming an IEEE Life Fellow: Upon renewing my annual membership in IEEE (an institute or professional society for electrical and electronics engineers), I found out that I will become a Life Fellow of the Institute beginning in 2013. Life Membership (Fellowship in my case) is intended to honor those who have supported the Institute for a long time (42 continuous years in my case) and whose years of membership plus age add up to or exceed 100. As a Life Fellow, I will be exempt from paying membership dues. Keeping continuous membership in IEEE wasn't easy. I recall that for several years after Iran's Islamic Revolution, it was very difficult to get a foreign exchange permit to pay dues to international societies (ditto for buying books), so I had to spend an entire day, sometimes two, to get the required approvals annually. In the end, I managed to remain a member in good standing, from my first year as a graduate student until now.

(3) The shrinking plane seats: If you get on a plane and notice that you are physically closer to other people, without having less leg room, you are not imagining things. [Plane seats are shrinking](#) in thickness thanks to new carbon materials that provide the same strength and more flexibility (thus requiring thinner cushions) with much slimmer frames. Airlines are slowly changing to the new seats, which allow them to add one extra seat across and a few extra rows in the cabin.

(4) Hailing a cab will never be the same: Taxicab companies are looking into [smartphone apps](#) that allow a user to call a cab by a simple click. GPS is then used to find the rider's location, dispatch a cab, and show the progress of the vehicle as it drives to the rider's location. Alas, future Hollywood movies may lack the thrill of a chance meeting between a man and a woman, as they both try to enter a hailed cab at the same time.

2012/10/17 (Wed.): Here are three sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." ~ William Shakespeare

(2) Romney's Mexican heritage: When asked about immigration reform, Mitt Romney keeps mentioning that his dad was Mexican. This is technically true, but Romney's dad was born to his American grandparents in Mexico. And why was Romney's American grandfather living in Mexico? Because he was a polygamist, who fled the US law against polygamy to take shelter in Mexico. That's quite a different story from Mitt Romney being the son of an immigrant.

(3) Let's hope we remain friends after the US elections: "Politics, classic etiquette tells us, is a subject best avoided when friends come to dinner. It may be time to amend that advice to include Facebook. The Pew Research Center found that nearly 1 in 5 social networkers has blocked, hidden or unfriended someone over political material that was too frequent or too disagreeable. ... Political oversharing is facilitated by what psychologists call the Internet's disinhibition effect ... people feel emboldened by the lack of real-time response

and the sense that the things they do online are less serious than actions in the real world." Katy Steinmetz, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 22, 2012.

2012/10/16 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) College soccer: After losing two games in a row, the UCSB men's soccer team recovered tonight to beat the visiting Sacramento State 2-0. The win, which improved UCSB's season record to 9-2-3, was sweet, but the large number of missed opportunities and some serious defensive mistakes, that luckily caused no harm, were troubling. The Gauchos' next game will be a televised home match against archrivals Cal Poly at 8:00 PM on Friday October 19.

(2) Former Australian paratrooper (daredevil Felix Baumgartner) sets **three separate free-fall records**: highest jump platform (24 miles), longest free fall (4 min 20 s), and fastest vertical speed (833.9 mi/hr = Mach 1.24). Besides setting these records, the jump will provide valuable information about the design of next-generation space suits as well as the effects of high altitude and supersonic speed on human body.

(3) Murder in cold blood: The Taliban's shooting of 14-year-old **Malala Yusufzai** was nothing but the latest example in **cold-blooded assaults** in the name of religion or ideology throughout human history. This is why today, the separation of church and state is more important than ever. The brave girl has been transferred to a UK hospital, in part due to security concerns in Pakistan, given the Taliban's avowal to keep trying to kill her.

(4) Shame on Facebook: "Facebook, which hit a billion users last week, has sent a 20-page letter to the FTC imploring the agency to reconsider its planned revision of the 1998 act, which would prohibit the collection information from children online, a lucrative practice that the social-networking behemoth clearly would not like to give up." Lee Siegel, writing in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of October 15, 2012.

2012/10/14 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Dirty campaigning continues: You may have received, as I did, photos purporting to show President Obama "desecrating" the Oval Office by putting his feet on his desk. The photos are real, but nearly every president, including Bush and Ford shown in this **Snopres.com report**, has done the same. It's not socialism, Islam, or Kenyan upbringing (as the e-mail put it) that makes the president do that. It's just being very tired at the end of a long day.

(2) About Ben Affleck's "Argo": Jennifer Epps, **writing in OpEdNews**, maintains that films about Iran and Iranians occupy a spectrum from hate/kill-them-all ("300") to they're-also-human ("The House of Sand and Fog"). Ben Affleck's "Argo," the story of how six Americans were rescued from Iran at the time of the hostage crisis by having them pretend that they are the crew of a sci-fi B-movie, is a complex film that combines the three elements of CIA, Hollywood, and Iran in interesting ways. Yet, it ends up being closer in spirit to "300" than to the other end of the spectrum. Iranians depicted in the film are mostly mob members, with a few other characters that speak very few lines (some of their lines aren't even translated in subtitles). Iranians are shown to have child-like reactions to the fake sci-fi movie, belying the fact that Iranian cinema and Iranians' view of cinema were already fairly sophisticated by the late 1970s.

(3) This so-called "Islamic scholar" recommends that people **stop drinking Pepsi**, because the name is an acronym for "Pay Each Penny, Save Israel," implying that a penny from each sale will benefit Israel. This actually gives me an idea: IRI is an acronym for "Idiots Ruling Iran."

2012/10/13 (Sat.): Here are two science/technology and two sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Curiosity's first rock discovery on Mars stuns scientists: The **pyramid-shaped rock** resembles the kind found on oceanic islands like Hawaii and rift zones like the Rio Grande.

(2) Human family tree: Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History provides this **clickable family tree** in which mouse rollover gives you info about each group within the tree and clicking on a particular subspecies takes you to a summary page with more detail.

(3) Stop the madness of **forcing young girls into marriage**: Every year, about 10M young girls are forced to marry men who are old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have joined forces to end this brutal practice.

(4) There is class warfare, but not the one most people think about: The class warfare that is driving our current political discourse in the US isn't between the poor and the rich, but among different tiers near the top. The poor and middle-class in this country have never resented the well-to-do, but it seems that the very rich (top 1%) resent the ordinary rich (the next 2% below them) and the super-rich (the top 1% of the top 1%) have no love for the rest of the very rich in the top 1%. These are themes addressed by David Frum in a **Newsweek magazine column** (issue of October 15, 2012). From this very revealing column, one understands the need to pay close attention to words spoken by politicians, as they are usually chosen to muddle and/or hide ideas. When Mitt Romney says that the revenue reduction caused by lowering the top marginal tax rate will be made up by closing loopholes, so that the rich will not pay any less in taxes, he is correct only if "the rich"

refers to those making \$100K or more. Romney, of course, never defines what he means by "the rich," but Frum infers this from an analysis offered by a Romney advisor in the *Wall Street Journal*. The Romney advisor admits that the cut in marginal tax rates would reduce revenue by \$5 trillion, but states that it is feasible to recover a comparable amount from closing loopholes: "All it would take is a 30 percent reduction in the tax deductions available to everybody reporting taxable income of more than \$100,000," as Frum phrases the advisor's analysis. So the super-rich, the bulk of whose income is taxed at the highest marginal rate, will gain significantly from the cut, and won't lose much to the closed loopholes, while those with incomes in the range \$100K to \$250K (which, by the way, do not consider themselves rich, but middle-class or upper-middle-class) will lose more in disallowed deductions than they gain from rate cuts. So, this is a case of the very rich sticking it to the ordinary rich and the upper-middle class. The poor and the lower-middle class won't see a difference under either plan. The bottom line for me is this: President Obama is proposing a tax reform that would increase his own tax liability, both as a sitting president and in future, when he will surely make a lot of money from books, lectures, and the like. Romney, on the other hand, favors a tax code that makes him much richer, now (with his assets in a blind trust) and in future when he returns to his businesses. And this is even without considering Romney's plans to eliminate the inheritance tax, which is paid by a tiny fraction of the very rich. Somehow, it's easier for me to trust a person whose views do not coincide with his own self-interest.

2012/10/12 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Couldn't you just go to the future and then come back and kill that [cheating] Arnold?" Jon Stewart, interviewing Arnold Schwarzenegger.

(2) An Oscar-worthy work by Adele: In [this music video](#), Adele sings the theme she composed for "Skyfall," the latest James Bond movie. This is reminiscent of John Barry's "Goldfinger," sung by Shirley Bassey.

(3) Indian kids become Gandhi for a day: To mark the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, Indian children dressed as him in an October 2, 2012, rally against violence.

(4) Hyperimages allow exploration of details: This is an example of a [superhigh-resolution image](#) that allows you to select points and zoom in to explore all the details that interest you.

(5) Forum on STEM education: This morning, I attended the [annual forum](#) of the Central Coast STEM Collaborative, with the theme "Building Bridges in STEM."

Dean Jane Close Conoley (UCSB's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education) opened the meeting, along with John Keller, Director of a Center of Excellence at Cal Poly. Then, representatives from the two counties made a brief presentation of the next-generation science standards (part of a nationwide initiative) to be adopted by next fall in lieu of California's current science curriculum from the early 1990s. A unique feature of the new standards is the inclusion of engineering concepts for the first time. David Cash (SB School District Superintendent) and Ben Romo (Executive Director of SB County Education Office) spoke about opportunities and challenges, with Romo focusing on the added burden schools face because of economic realities of SB county, that is, the tourism-heavy economy in the south and the agriculture-based economy of the north, which dictate a large population of relatively poor families. The morning program ended with a panel on building a successful program, with participants consisting of school administrators, community volunteers, and representatives from Raytheon and ATK Space Systems.

Jeff Henley, Chairman of Oracle Corporation since 2004, delivered the luncheon address on building the nation's STEM workforce (he is the person after whom UCSB's Henley Gate is named). He focused on the shortage of talent in the high-tech industry with which he is intimately involved. This shortage is partly due to inadequacies of our domestic math/science/engineering education (failing to get kids excited and not doing a good job in advertising the "coolness" of the field) and partly due to immigration policies that make it difficult to issue visas for recruiting foreign talent. One interesting part of Henley's talk was his mentioning of three Stanford female graduate students who founded a start-up whose first product, [Roominate](#), is a dollhouse kit that young girls can put together, including both the building and its wiring, to promote interest in science and engineering. Due to a busy schedule in the afternoon, I decided to skip the exhibits (by 20 local schools and businesses) and the closing session. All in all, the forum was interesting and highly educational for me.

2012/10/11 (Thu.): Here are five science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "These practices have no basis in science or medicine, and they will now be relegated to the dustbin of quackery." Jerry Brown, after signing a California bill that outlaws therapies purporting to turn gay minors into heterosexuals.

(2) Purdue University goes on a [hiring spree](#): Over the next five years, the school plans to hire 107 engineering professors to maintain quality standards, increase enrollment, expand into new fields, and improve its national ranking.

(3) Microsoft to increase its [focus on hardware](#): With sales of the Windows operating system and other software products failing to meet expectations, Microsoft is set to become more involved in devices and

services, according to a letter sent to shareholders by its CEO.

(4) Effect of chocolate on cognitive function: A tongue-in-cheek report on the correlation between per-capita chocolate consumption and Nobel Prize winners in different countries, from Columbia University's Frank Messerli, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. See Fig. 1 in [the article](#).

(5) Fascinating biological research: Is reverse inheritance (mother inheriting traits from a child) possible? I was surprised to find out from an article in [Newsweek magazine](#) (by Amanda Schaffer, issue of October 15, 2012) that it is. It turns out that DNA material from a fetus, even one that is later aborted or miscarried, can slip across the placenta and end up in various parts of the mother's body. In a recent study, for example, male DNA was found in female brains, whereas a newborn female definitely does not have such DNA in her brain. So, the male DNA is acquired later in life. Discovery of such DNA in the brain of a 94-year-old woman indicates that the material can survive for many decades, despite our expectation that the body's immune system wouldn't tolerate the foreign material. Studies suggest that the genetic modification of a mother by her fetus has both beneficial and harmful effects, but much more work is needed to find out how this anomaly might cause, accelerate, or help stop various illnesses.

2012/10/10 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is impossible to retouch women out of reality." Ewa Bjorling, Swedish Trade Minister, referring to Ikea's erasure of women from photos in catalogs shipped to Saudi Arabia.

(2) Nobel prize in physics: The [2012 physics Nobel](#) was awarded to Serge Haroche (College de France) and David Wineland (US Nat'l Inst. for Standards and Technology) for their quantum-physics methods for controlling and observing single particles without destroying them. Their approaches are said to be polar opposites. Haroche controls and measures photons by sending atoms through a specially prepared trap. Wineland traps ions and measures them with light.

(3) Chicago's green roofs: Chicago is a leading city in the use of [green roofs](#) for energy efficiency. The heat stored in buildings and road pavement are major sources of overheating, increased air-conditioning costs, and associated power outages in big cities. Chicago is tackling this problem by promoting the use of green roofs, which have temperatures that are tens of degrees lower than conventional roofs, and special street surfaces, that are porous, let water through, and cool off due to evaporation on hot days.

(4) Fact checking has little or no effect on voters: "[Scientists asked subjects] to read an article that included President George W. Bush's claim that his tax cuts had increased revenue for the U.S. Treasury, which was provably false. Then they added a factual correction: the Bush tax cut led to a three-year decline in tax revenue, from \$2 trillion in 2000 to \$1.8 trillion in 2003. The correction worked among liberals, but among conservatives it produced a curious backfire effect: conservatives were nearly twice as likely to say the Bush tax cuts increased revenue after they had been told this was not true. [The same effect was observed among liberals when one of their beliefs was contradicted by facts.] ... The studies show that facts that contradict our biases actually have the effect of reinforcing them." Michael Scherer, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 15, 2012.

2012/10/09 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Question by an Iranian student during religious instruction at school: If imamzadehs (certain religious shrines, thought to be burial sites for descendants of Shiite imams) are capable of curing the sick, why is it that the most notable among the ayatollahs and other Islamic authorities either bring foreign doctors to their homes or travel to Europe to seek treatment there? Why don't they go to imamzadehs like many of their followers to pray for a cure?

(2) Just one of Mitt Romney's many flip-flops during the first presidential debate: He said "I reject the idea that I don't believe in great teachers or more teachers." [This video of a campaign speech](#) shows him saying the exact opposite. Neither position is inherently wrong. There are good arguments for hiring more teachers and for cutting back, but a principled person has to stick to one of these positions.

(3) Defected photographer hands over films/photos of Iran's nuclear sites: Ahmadinejad's and Khamenei's special photographer, who [defected to the US](#) during the Iranian President's recent trip to New York for the UN General Assembly, is said to have delivered to CIA films and photos of secret Iranian nuclear sites. Other sources report that Iran's government-run media have confirmed this story, accusing the photographer of being a nuclear spy.

(4) A national case of confirmation bias: "The candidates see the world in different ways and deploy their own facts to confirm those views. The most disturbing truth in the story is not about the falsehoods of any one candidate but the scientific studies showing that voters with more information are likely to be more biased than those who know less." Richard Stengel, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 15, 2012.

2012/10/08 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Humorous take on Iran's reformers: Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) [recites his own poem](#), poking fun at Mohammad Khatami and his Islamist reform movement.

(2) Peer advice to college freshmen: Sometimes, young people provide great advice to their peers and they do it in a language that is better understood by the target audience than lectures coming from grown-ups. Here is part of the advice from a UCSB sophomore, apparently coming from personal experience, to entering freshmen: "People do things they don't really want to do all the time, and if you're a freshman straight out of high school, you're especially susceptible to this phenomenon. After all, college is the most anticipated, idolized and idealized time in a young person's life. You're expecting it to be a certain way, and many of you—whether you know it consciously or not—will move mountains to keep it that way. It's through this long and arduous process that you'll make decisions that don't always coincide with your beliefs, and do things that run contrary to your character ... don't allow yourself to be motivated by the expectations of others. Don't become the person your friends want you to be to appease them, or become the kid your parents don't want you to be to spite them."

(3) Islam and homosexuality: Those who think Khatami was in some ways better than Ahmadinejad, please ponder his response to a student's question about why homosexuals are executed in Iran: "We are at a university, a center of knowledge, so let us speak scientifically. Punishment exists in all religions and systems of government. Punishment isn't, in and of itself, violence. Punishment is in fact a cure for violence and deviant behavior. Without punishment, societies cannot survive and take roots. So, it is correct/appropriate that in Islam 'lavaat' is a crime and has its due punishment."

(4) Everyone's a comedian today: "For all of history, humor has been wielded by unattractive, skill-less men in their desperate effort to reproduce. ... But now everyone has to be funny. The new vocabulary of texts, tweets, Facebook updates ... seems to require that all information be conveyed in jokes. ... Serious authors have to go on 'The Colbert Report' and 'Real Time with Bill Maher' if they want to sell books. ... [Conan O'Brien] agreed with my theory about there being too much comedy in our culture. ... Maybe comedy is part of the debauchery of the end of an empire." Joel Stein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 8, 2012.

2012/10/07 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) A math problem: Show that if someone's salary is paid biweekly, there will be at least two 3-paycheck months in each year. What is the maximum possible number of 3-paycheck months?

(2) Wishful thinking: I would love it if someday a simulation technology became available that allowed one to "see" the state of the country if a particular election went another way. I am particularly interested in these three scenarios: (a) Al Gore elected in lieu of George W. Bush; (b) McCain elected in lieu of Obama; (c) George W. Bush was allowed to run, and elected, for a third term.

(3) World university rankings: A just published ranking of engineering and technology universities places Caltech at the top, followed by Princeton, MIT, UC Berkeley (4th), Cambridge, Stanford (6th), UCLA (7th), ETH Zurich, Georgia Tech, Imperial College London, Oxford, Nat'l U Singapore, Texas Austin, Lausanne Poly, Carnegie Mellon, Northwestern, UC Santa Barbara (17th), Cornell, Michigan, Illinois. California had an impressive showing, with 5 schools (including 3 UCs) in the top 20.

From [this Web page](#), you can access the rankings by region or subject. For example, in life sciences, MIT is tops, with Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSD also appearing in the top 20.

(4) A disappointing college soccer match: This evening, the 4th-ranked UCSB men's soccer team played its Big West opponent Cal State Northridge, losing 1-0 in a lackluster performance. After suffering this first loss of the season, UCSB now has a 8-1-3 record. The Gauchos seemed to be sleep-walking for much of the game, when many of their passes missed the mark or were intercepted. Northridge, which was better at passing accuracy and ball control, deserved to win, despite creating fewer scoring opportunities. It's now back to the drawing board for the Gauchos, before they play UC Davis on the road and then return home for a 4-game stretch.

(5) Politics on Facebook: Paul Ryan's Facebook page is much more popular than Joe Biden's (4.0M vs. 0.4M likes), but Barack Obama's popularity beats Mitt Romney's by a wider margin (29.4M vs. 8.6M likes). Eight of my Facebook friends like Barack Obama's page, twice the number of friends who like Mitt Romney's.

2012/10/06 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Beautiful night at the Hollywood Bowl: Friday night's sold-out Hollywood Bowl concert by Jason Mraz and Christina Perri was quite enjoyable, despite the very tiring trip (2 hours from Santa Barbara to UCLA, 2.5+ hours between Westwood and Hollywood Bowl in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and the post-midnight return to Santa Barbara). I think Mraz has matured a great deal between his previous concert that we saw in Santa Barbara and this one and the concert had excellent production. Here is Mraz's setlist, the last four items constituting his encore: Everything Is Sound / The Remedy (I Won't Worry) / The Woman I Love / A Beautiful Mess / You and I Both / Living in the Moment / Lucky / Make It Mine / Live High / Butterfly / Frank D. Fixer (with a verse of The World as I See It) / Plane / When We Die / Careless Whisper (Wham!/George Michael cover) / Only Human / I'm Yours / Three Little Birds (Bob Marley cover) / You Fckn Did It / I'm Coming Over /

Going Up the Country (Canned Heat cover) / Song for a Friend / Distance (with Christina Perri) / 93 Million Miles / I Won't Give Up

(2) Trickle-down economics doesn't work: [A 2012 study](#) indicates that wealth of the super-rich does not trickle down to improve the economy, but tends to be amassed and sheltered in tax havens with a negative effect on the tax bases of the home economy.

(3) Egypt's Salafism problem: "In Egypt, the combination of media and mosque helped propel the Salafis to an impressive showing [20% of the vote] in parliamentary elections last winter ... After Morsy outmaneuvered the generals to wrest control of the country, the Salafis expected him to give them Cabinet positions appropriate to their status as the second largest political faction. When he shut them out, they were infuriated." Bobby Ghosh, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 8, 2012.

(4) Our town's 13-year-old chess wizard: [Agata Bykovtsev](#), who aspires to be an engineer and considers chess a hobby, will travel from Goleta to Slovenia in November for the 2-week world youth chess championships, where many of her opponents will be professional chess players. She hopes to make it to the US chess championships in a few years.

(5) Buildings that sweat to keep cool: [Researchers at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology](#) have developed polymer roofs that absorb and lock moisture inside when it rains and become hydrophobic when heated, releasing the moisture and creating a cooling effect, much like a body cools itself off by sweating. A reduction of 60% in air-conditioning loads is anticipated from using the new material.

2012/10/05 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(3) On the futility of collecting art: "I am not a collector. It would make no sense to have it. I love to see it when I come to a museum or to a show, but there's no need to own it." Gerhard Richter, who in May 2012 had one of his abstract paintings sold for \$22M, in a *Time* magazine interview, issue of October 8, 2012.

(2) First US presidential debate: Words are meaningless if they do not represent the truth. Here are some fact checks from [Salon.com](#) and [BBC News](#).

(3) A logical puzzle: Two women are sitting in a sidewalk cafe, talking about their children. One says that she has three daughters. The product of their ages equals 36 and the sum of the ages coincides with the number of the house across the street. The second woman complains that this information is not enough to figure out the children's ages. The first woman adds that her oldest daughter has beautiful blue eyes. This added piece of information resolves the problem. How?

(4) Iranian-Austrian comedian's fear of flying: As Michael Niavarani puts it, fear of flying is a misnomer, because he loves flying, he is afraid only of crashing ([9-minute stand-up routine](#), with English subtitles).

(5) J. K. Rowling's new book gets rave reviews: "I have a genuine love for Harry Potter, but ... a lot of young adult authors have tried their hands at literary fiction, and ... not a lot of them have succeeded. But *The Casual Vacancy* ... is a different beast entirely. It's a big, ambitious, brilliant, funny, upsetting and magnificently eloquent novel of contemporary England, rich with literary intelligence and bereft of cant." Lev Grossman, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 8, 2012.

2012/10/04 (Thu.): Krugman, Paul, *The Great Unraveling*, Penguin, extended paperback edition, 2004.

This is a rather old book. Yet, everything in this collection of newspaper columns by its Nobel Laureate author appears quite fresh and relevant a decade after it was first put together (the columns go back to 1997, but most of them are from 2000-03). The author confides that he finalized the introduction to the original 2003 hardcover edition of the book the day after Baghdad fell to the US forces and he wrote the introduction to this paperback edition exactly one year later. Many of his predictions and worst fears about the Iraq war proved correct in the intervening year.

Krugman reiterates some of these points (no WMD, no link to Al Qaeda or 9/11, using the afterglow of military victory to push through a big tax cut) in a new introduction, where he also states that three new chapters have been added to include his columns that appeared after the 2003 edition went to print. The new introduction ends thus: "This is not, I'm sorry to say, a happy book. It's mainly about economic disappointment, bad leadership, and the lies of the powerful. Don't despair: nothing has gone wrong in America that can't be repaired. But the first step in that repair job is understanding where and how the system got broken."

In the preface, Krugman explains [p. xxxix] why he is the right person to write the columns that appear in this book: "The stock in trade of most journalists is inside information ... This leaves them vulnerable: they can be seduced with offers of special access, threatened with the career-destroying prospect that they will be frozen out. But I rely almost entirely on numbers and analyses that are in the public domain; I don't need to be in the good graces of top officials, so I also have no need to display the deference that characterizes many journalists."

The book is organized into six parts, as follows, with chapter titles given in parentheses. Each chapter consists of 3-11 columns.

- I. Bubble Trouble (Irrational Exuberance; Portents Abroad; Greenspanomics; Crony Capitalism, U.S.A)
- II. Fuzzy Math (The Bait ... ; ... And the Switch; $2 - 1 = 4$)
- III. Victors and Spoils (Things Pull Apart; The Private Internet; Exploiting September 11; A Vast Conspiracy)
- IV. When Markets Go Bad (California Screaming; Smog and Mirrors; Foreign Disasters)
- V. The Wider Views (Global Schmobal; Economics and Economists)
- VI. One Year Later (War and Terror; Dollars and Cents; Abuses of Power)

The subtitle "the truth about crony capitalism from the man who can prove it" and the column "An Alternate Reality" [pp. 248-250 in Chapter 10] accurately describe what this book is about. Chapter 10 ends with this observation: "What this country needs is a return to normalcy. And I don't mean the selective normalcy the Bush administration wants, in which everyone goes shopping but the media continue to report only inspiring stories and war news. It's time to give the American people the whole picture."

Krugman writes that he knew things would turn out badly when he first noticed that TV sets over bars were being tuned to CNBC instead of ESPN. "We are, all of us, hunter-gatherers lost in the big city. And therein, say the theorists, lie the roots of many of our bad habits. Our craving for sweets evolved in a world without ice-cream; our interest in gossip evolved in a world without tabloids; our emotional response to music evolved in a world without Celine Dion. And we have investment instincts designed for hunting mammoths, not capital gains" [p. 31]. Just as Henry Petroski has said in the context of engineering design, Krugman believes that we can learn a lot more when things go wrong (from design failures and sinking ships, in the words of Petroski) than when everything hums along smoothly [p. 53].

I particularly liked these two insightful observations from the author. Days after the 9/11 attacks, Krugman wrote: "In retrospect, our national neglect of airport security boggles the mind. ... In Europe, the people screening your bags are paid about \$15 an hour plus benefits, and they get extensive training [in the US, we pay \$6 an hour and provide only a few hours of training]. ... If we refuse to learn that lesson, if we continue to nickel-and-dime crucial public services, we may find—as we did last week—that we have nickel-and-dimed ourselves to death" [pp. 229-231]. Elsewhere he opines: "Almost every politician in modern America pretends to be a populist; indeed, it's a general rule that the more slavishly a politician supports the interests of wealthy individuals and big corporations, the folksier his manner" [p. 279].

No one, not even a respected Nobel Laureate, is above the fray. In the essay "Behind the Great Divide" [pp. 287-289], Krugman correctly attributes the differences among America and Europe to the news sources on the two continents. For example, anti-war demonstrations just before the Iraq war were portrayed accurately and analyzed objectively in Europe, while some US news sources dismissed them as unpatriotic and delightful to Iraqis. He goes astray, however, when he refers to the "misrepresentation" that the French are more anti-American than other Europeans. As evidence of this misrepresentation, he cites the fact that anti-war demonstrations in other European countries which supported the Iraq war were just as strong as in France. In this comparison, he does not factor in the fact that when a government is already against the war, opponents of the war among its citizens are much less motivated to demonstrate than when their government is inclined to go to war.

Here are some interesting points from the rest of the book. In an essay entitled "The Scrooge Syndrome," Krugman writes [p. 380]: "When asked how much of the federal budget should be devoted to foreign aid, Americans typically come up with a number around 10 percent—about 20 times what we currently spend. [But] they think that the share of foreign aid in federal spending should be *cut* to 10 percent. ... Americans are, in other words, living in the past: the Marshall plan ended more than 50 years ago, but they haven't noticed." In the essay "Supply, Demand, and English Food," we learn about how British food got so bad and stayed that way for so long (until recent years). In other words, why didn't market forces work to create better cuisine for those who were willing and able to pay, once the dire economic conditions set off by early industrialization and urbanization dissipated? The answer is that once people have adapted to and are satisfied with dismal choices, businesses have no incentive to provide better choices: they make more money by raising the prices for the lousy choices than by investing to create better choices. The said public must demand better choices for businesses to cater to them. And this demand did not come until worldwide travel and tourism exposed the British to fine cuisine in other countries [p. 392].

One of the fun things I learned from this book is Robert Mundell's economic notion of "impossible trinity," comprised of free capital movement, a fixed exchange rate, and an effective monetary policy [p. 397]. A country can pick any two of the three, but can't have them all. When Canada decided to forego a fixed exchange rate in the 1960s (before Mundell formulated his Nobel-worthy ideas), it was ridiculed. It turned out that Canada's decision made perfect sense, given that it could not curb capital movement across its vast border with the US and it did not want to give up its ability to control economic parameters via an effective monetary policy. Krugman does not mince his words when he speaks of the failure of the US government to deal with terrorism: "Real counterterrorism mainly involves police work and precautionary measures; it doesn't look impressive on TV, and it doesn't provide many occasions for victory celebrations" [p. 430].

On the role of the media, Krugman has this to say in an essay entitled "The China Syndrome" [p. 472]: "Leave aside the rights and wrongs of the war itself, and consider the paradox. The BBC is owned by the British government, and one might have expected it to support that government's policies. In fact, however, it tried hard ... to stay impartial. America's TV networks are privately owned, yet they behaved like state-run media." This kind of pandering to those in power or entities that can help the bottom line (as Rupert Murdoch's flag-waving Fox News pandering to China's repressive regime to get his programming into that vast market) is a natural byproduct of free-market forces in the media.

The author has some harsh words for Alan Greenspan [pp. 461-463]: "The traditional definition of chutzpah says it's when you murder your parents, then plead for clemency because you're an orphan. Alan Greenspan has chutzpah. ... Mr. Greenspan pushed through an increase in [payroll] taxes on working Americans, generating a Social Security surplus. Then he used that surplus to argue for tax cuts that deliver very little relief to most people, but are worth a lot to those making more than \$300,000 a year. And now that those tax cuts have contributed to a soaring deficit, he wants to cut Social Security benefits."

A revealing chart on page 465, presented as part of a column dated March 9, 2004, shows wishful thinking by the Bush administration that, in each of its 2002, 2003, and 2004 February forecasts, predicted job growth at the rate of more than 2M per year as a result of its economic policies. The actual job numbers from Bureau of Labor Statistics show an average decline of 0.5M per year for the period of 2002-2004.

All in all, this is an interesting and informative book. I read Krugman's later book *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (which I liked better) before this one. He tends to be preachy at times, and got some deserved flack for that from the president of Estonia when he responded to Krugman's pontification and calling his country "a wasteland." However, there is no doubt that Krugman knows his stuff and that he is passionate about making sure that economic theory is in the service of society, rather than big business and special interests.

2012/10/03 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) A worthy on-line used-book source: [Better World Books](#), a nonprofit company that dubs itself as "a business with a mission to promote literacy," buys and sells college textbooks as well as general-interest books, always providing free shipping.

(2) Of interest to mathematicians: Elsevier has made the [archives of its math journals](#) (going back from 4 years ago) freely accessible. Of particular interest to me is the journal *Discrete Mathematics*, which now has more than 10,000 open-access articles, dating from 1971 to 2008.

(3) American women might have it wrong: "Like most working mothers, I have snuck out of meetings to attend piano recitals and missed track meets when a deadline was looming. I have sprinted through airports in the futile hope of catching an earlier flight home and tried to comfort a sobbing child when, inevitably, the plane was late. I delivered my first lecture in a suit that reeked of infant throw-up from earlier that morning and crashed the minivan into a tree as I raced to retrieve the correct ballet costume." Debora Spar, Barnard College President and former Harvard Business School Professor, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of October 1 & 8, 2012, on American women's need to learn from women in other countries not to try to have it all.

(4) Iranian actresses in a round-table discussion: In this [55-minute video](#), three Iranian-born actresses, representing veterans and newcomers (Susan Taslimi, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Shabnam Tolouei), talk in Persian about their experiences in theater/cinema, their views on women on stage/screen, their forced departure from Iran, and their careers in exile.

(5) Politics is in the air: Five weeks before this year's US presidential election, politics pervades everything. Even [corn mazes](#) have become politicized.

2012/10/02 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Take a close look, because you may never see the [Interstate 405](#) in west Los Angeles this empty again.

(2) A logical puzzle: When asked about his age, a boy says that he was 12 the day before yesterday and will turn 15 next year. Can the boy be telling the truth?

(3) Possible succession crisis in Saudi Arabia: "For six decades the monarchy has passed from one son of the founder, Abdulaziz, to the next. But this line of brothers is running out. King Abdullah is nearly 90 and ailing; his crown prince is 76; and the youngest of his remaining 43 brothers is nearly 69. At some point soon the extended royal family of some 7,000 princes is going to have to pass the crown to one of the grandsons of the founder. At stake for the family is not simply who gets to rule but the prospect that the selected prince's branch of the family will then pass the crown to its sons in perpetuity, precluding other branches from ruling again. If the family divides, so likely will the country." Karen Elliot House, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of October 1 & 8, 2012, on women's lives and rights in Saudi Arabia. She notes that some oppressed women in the Kingdom want their daughters to live isolated lives just like them, so that they can go to heaven.

(4) Obama may turn into the Democrats' Reagan: "Obama has been playing a long, strategic game from the

very start—a long game that will only truly pay off if he gets eight full years to see it through. That game is not only changing America. It may also bring his opposition, the GOP, back to the center, just as Reagan indelibly moved the Democrats away from the far left. ... But the reality of Reagan, especially in his first term, was very different. He was, in office, a center-right pragmatist who struggled badly in his first term, reversed himself on tax cuts several times, was uneasily reliant on Southern Democrats, invaded Lebanon, lost 265 U.S. servicemembers, and then fled, and ran for reelection with a misery index of unemployment and inflation at 11.5 percent. (Obama is running for a second term with a misery index of 9.8 percent.) Reagan also got major flak from his right wing, as Obama has from his left." Andrew Sullivan, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of October 1 & 8, 2012.

2012/10/01 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) I dedicate this passage from Maya Angelou's *Letter to My Daughter* to my youngest child, who has just moved away from home to attend college and is missed dearly: "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution."

(2) Free Stanford on-line class on computer networks: This fall, Professors Nick McKeown and Philip Levis are running a public on-line class entitled "[Introduction to Computer Networks](#)", consisting of a series of about 30 videos, each 15-20 minutes long. At the end of the course, the instructors (not Stanford University) will provide a certificate of completion. I have signed up to take the course myself to learn about the process of conducting such massive on-line classes.

(3) Driven by a sense of guilt: According to this [Israeli TV report](#) (in Hebrew with English subtitles), a group of Germans, whose fathers and other ancestors belonged to Hitler's secret police, visit Auschwitz and other sites where WWII atrocities had occurred.

(4) Joke of the day: A woman traveling to Italy is dropped off at the airport by her husband. Before saying good-bye, she asks him if he wants her to bring anything back from Italy. He replies, jokingly: "A cute Italian girl." The woman smiles, but says nothing more. Upon returning from Italy, her husband picks her up at the airport and inquires if she had gotten him what he had asked for. She responds: "I tried my best, darling, but at this point, I have no idea whether it will be a boy or a girl."

2012/09/30 (Sun.): Here are four varied items of potential interest.

(1) A math puzzle: I have some pencils and some jars. If I put 9 pencils in each jar, I will have 2 jars left over. If I put 6 pencils in each jar, I will have 3 pencils left over. How many pencils and jars do I have?

(2) Jokelike news story of the week: [Justin Bieber](#) wins a round in his lawsuit against makers of the videogame "Joustin' Beaver."

(3) Interesting facts about spelled-out English numbers: The first four letters of the alphabet (a, b, c, d) do not appear anywhere in the spelling of the numbers 0-99. The letter 'd' appears for the first time in 'hundred,' 'a' in 'thousand,' and 'b' in 'billion.' The letter 'c' is never used.

(4) Free Stanford on-line class on computer networks: Professors Nick McKeown and Philip Levis are running a public on-line class entitled "[Introduction to Computer Networks](#)" consisting of a series of about 30 videos, each 15-20 minutes long. At the end of the course, the instructors (not Stanford University) will provide a certificate of completion. I have signed up to take the course myself to learn about the process of conducting such massive on-line classes.

2012/09/29 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest on science and education.

(1) How to get to Mars: Excellent [7-minute video](#) showing stages of a space flight to Mars (this is one of the older flights, not the recent one involving Curiosity, which had a much gentler landing).

(2) Flat tires will soon become things of the past: A [self-regulating tire](#) with an internal sensor that detects low pressure and opens up a valve on the tire's sidewall is being developed by Goodyear. Using energy from the tire's spinning and the vehicle's weight, a computerized control system injects air into the tire until the pressure is back to normal.

(3) Huge waiting lists in California's community colleges: The [Los Angeles Times](#) reports on the dire state of California's community colleges, which, after suffering \$800M in funding cuts since 2008, now have nearly half-a-million students on waiting lists to get into the courses they need.

(4) On-line education is spreading: There are now many Web-based educational resources, allowing everyone to pursue his/her academic interests at no cost. [Educational Portal Academy](#) is one such resource for entry-level courses in biology, business, chemistry, economics, English, history, math, and psychology.

2012/09/28 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A math puzzle: I have some pencils and some jars. If I put 9 pencils in each jar, I will have 2 jars left over. If I put 6 pencils in each jar, I will have 3 pencils left over. How many pencils and jars do I have?

(2) The bees atop a New York City hotel: Waldorf Astoria creates [a small farm](#) on its roof to produce fresh vegetables and honey for its chefs.

(3) Do as I say, not as I do: Ramin Mehmanparast, the spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, was apparently beaten and showered with insults (involving his mother and sister) by a group of Iranian protesters as he walked on a New York City street. Some Iranian friends reported the physical and verbal abuse, including the misogynist insults, in celebratory posts on Facebook and elsewhere. I am sorry, but I can't join in celebrating this event, which shows the same intolerance and disregard for the rule of law and human rights as those of the Islamic regime in Iran.

(4) Even monkeys do not accept unequal pay for the same job: In [an experiment](#), two monkeys are rewarded with cucumbers (not much of a treat) for a task they perform. They are both fine with this reward. Now, watch what happens when one monkey gets grapes, while the other one continues to be rewarded with cucumbers.

2012/09/27 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Crooner Andy Williams loses battle with bladder cancer at 84: Here is his 1961 performance one of his signature songs, ["Moon River."](#)

(2) Colorizing iconic photographs: [This Web site](#) contains colorized versions of some of the most iconic photos in history, including those of Churchill, Darwin, Einstein, Hitchcock, Lincoln, and Twain.

(3) After the choice of the movie "A Cube of Sugar" by a special committee to represent Iran's cinema in next year's Oscars, an Iranian official has declared that to protest the film insulting Prophet Muhammad, Iran will not participate in the Oscars. Earlier access to Google and G-mail had been blocked indefinitely to protest the same thing. It appears that Islamic authorities have found the perfect excuse to further isolate the Iranian people from the international community.

(4) California governor signs the state's [driverless-car law](#): The law will allow Google to test its autonomous vehicles on California roads, provided that a human passenger is always present as a safety measure.

2012/09/26 (Wed.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Bias against female scientists: [A new study](#), published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* confirms a systematic bias in hiring male over female scientists. The study was conducted at 6 (anonymous) universities, where applications were submitted for faculty lab manager positions. The set of applications was identical, with the sole exception that the applicant's sex was specified as "female" in half the submissions and "male" in the other half. Alarmingly, there was no perceptible drop in the bias against female scientists when the professor making the hiring decision was female.

(2) Right person, right place: According to [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#) (issue of October 2012), Elvis Presley and Josiah Wedgwood (an 18th-century potter) were similar people, as far as innovation theory is concerned. Major advances occur in two phases: idea and implementation. Success in each phase requires a different kind of social network, so people who are most suited to the first phase often lack the needed connections for success in the second phase, except in rare cases, such as with Presley and Wedgwood. Ideas flourish when a person is connected to multiple networks (such as Presley's deep ties to African-American rhythm and blues and white American country and folk. Implementation, or packaging the idea for the world at large, requires dense connectivity within a smaller network that forms the ideal scaffold to get a new innovative idea off the ground.

(3) A far-fetched, but very intriguing scenario: We often wonder why some advanced extraterrestrial civilization has not visited us here on Earth. There are potentially billions of planets in the universe that could support life and, statistically speaking, many of these life forms could be billions of years older, and thus more advanced, than ours. The answer provided by Geoffrey A. Landis, a NASA scientist writing in [Communications of the ACM](#) (issue of October 2012), is that these alien visitors are indeed here, but they have transformed themselves for a slow-paced eternal life, using quantum information encoding. We call them "rocks."

2012/09/25 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Bill Gates calling Steve Jobs: Gates: "How's heaven Steve?" Jobs: "Perfect, Bill. We have no fence or wall here." Gates: "So?" Jobs: "So there's no need for gates or windows."

(2) Conspiracy theories never end: There is an Iranian saying used when anything suspicious or undesirable happens in the political arena: "It's the work of the British!" Now enter the Islamic rulers' version of the above: "It's the work of the Zionists!" The latest evil attributed to the Zionists (Netanyahu, in particular) is the killing of the American ambassador to Libya. Read the [seven "reasons"](#) and laugh.

(3) Russia's brand new university at its border with China: The [Far Eastern Federal University](#) and its surrounding infrastructure, including a convention center, banks, shops, housing, and three spectacular bridges, were built by Russia at a total cost of \$20B to boost a geopolitically sensitive, but economically deteriorating,

region on its border with China. The Kremlin expects the new campus to become one of the world's most prestigious universities within a decade.

(4) Rubaiys on [love debating reason](#), by Mahmoud Seraji (aka M. S. Shahed). Here is the English translation of a sample poem: They tell me to forget this impossible love / Which is nothing but a delusional dream // I reply that if I'm dreaming, waking up would be foolish / And if I'm awake, sleep would be my undoing.

2012/09/24 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) 2000-piece jigsaw puzzle, finally completed.

(2) Eliminating prejudice and ignorance takes time: "Blasphemy was severely punished even in Britain—thought to be the most liberal country in Europe—in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Even in the U.S., public tolerance for attacks on religion was low until recently." Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of October 1, 2012.

(3) Numerically challenged [Iranian deputy finance minister](#) has a hard time understanding the figure he is reporting. Pure comedy, albeit unintentional!

(4) Ahmad Shamloo's take on the Persian language and national identity: In this [16-minute audio file](#), the revered Iranian poet reads parts of his fictional travel diary, written in the style of diaries of the Qajar kings. Shamloo's fictional king travels to the US and is frustrated by the butchered Persian language of the second-generation Iranian-Americans, who use English words where there are totally acceptable, and at times very common, Persian equivalents.



2012/09/23 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) College move-in weekend: Yesterday, my youngest child moved away from home and into a dorm room at a college, which will be her second home for a few years. The experience of seeing her move was bittersweet. I already miss her dearly, but, at the same time, am very happy for her being able to spread her wings and take firm steps towards becoming a responsible adult. Fortunately, she will be within comfortable driving distance, which allows us to visit often.

(2) UCSB men's soccer remains undefeated: Going into this weekend's matches (Friday against UCLA, tied 1-1, and today against Harvard, won 1-0), UCSB's men's soccer team was ranked third nationally. Their current record of 6-0-2 may not be good enough to keep them in third place, because of a tie with the 12th-ranked team at home and a weak win today, despite having a lot of scoring opportunities.

(3) [Cartoon of the day](#): We have "North America," "South America," and a new continent, "Hate America."

(4) Open letter to candidate Romney: From a member of the 47%, a mother living in Laramie, Wyoming. Her name is Sarah Zacharias (aka The Bucking Jenny). I am always suspicious of [letters such as this one](#), because they may be campaign ads, disguised as citizen comments. In this case, as far as I can tell, the person and her letter are genuine.

2012/09/22 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Once I was ready to burn *The Satanic Verses*. Now I know that his right to publish it was a more sacred thing than any religion." Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim woman who, like Salman Rushdie, lives under heavy security, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of September 24, 2012..

(2) Cartoon caption contest: *The New Yorker* magazine runs a cartoon caption contest each week. Here are the three candidates for best caption in [last week's contest](#), which showed a number of massive stones shaped like Mitt Romney's head and facing the same direction on a beach. (a) "They keep watch on the offshore accounts." (b) "They used to face left." (c) "Fortunately, they only cover one per cent of the island."

(3) Bathroom iEtiquette: There are two key questions about using electronic gadgets in the bathroom: etiquette and hygiene. Most people do use cell phones in the bathroom, even though etiquette experts frown upon the practice. According to a short *Newsweek* magazine piece by Jesse Ellison (issue of September 24, 2012), "[a] study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that one in six cellphones tested positive for traces of, er, bathroom activity. ... We've pretty much got it sorted out how to keep our clothes off the floor. But I don't know what they are doing with their iPad when they have to wipe, and it makes me nervous."

(4) College move-in day:

2012/09/21 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I think things will work out OK with Maria, but if they don't, I'm getting me a 20-year-old honey." Arnold Schwarzenegger, quoted by his next door neighbor in a *Newsweek* magazine piece on his

planned comeback with an autobiography (already derided as "True Lies"), to be unveiled on "60 Minutes" on September 30, 2012.

(2) There will be blood: The path from today's crazy, divided, and violent world to one in which humans will not distinguish themselves by race, religion, or class won't be smooth. Curbing free speech, as suggested by some critics of the person who made the sophomoric movie "Innocence of Muslims," isn't the answer. We should not despair. For proper perspective on the harrowing events of the past week, compare the tens of deaths resulting from the riots to the millions we have already lost to religious conflicts and millions more before we can straighten out our societies. There is no easy, painless path to human harmony.

(3) Another victim among Iranian actresses: After campaigns of smear against Golshifteh Farhani, Shohreh Aghdashloo, and Leila Hatami, the Iranian regime is aiming at Tahmineh Milani, the popular actress who was recently honored by her peers for a distinguished acting and moviemaking career. In a gathering of cinema personalities, she apparently paid homage to Ezzatollah Entezami, the 88-year-old iconic actor, by hugging him. She was intensely criticized in government-controlled media for "breaking social norms." In this 15-minute video clip of a [TV panel discussion](#) (in Persian) with two older male participants, Milani is shown to hold her own, offering a frank discussion of Iran's social issues, as depicted in films.

2012/09/20 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Cartoon caption contest: *The New Yorker* magazine runs a cartoon caption contest each week. Here are the top three captions for the [contest of two weeks ago](#), which shows a politician orating on a cloud. (1) "I hear he forged his death certificate." (2) "I just don't care about Medicare anymore." (3) "He's pro-afterlife."

(2) Quote of the day: "Research shows the presence of women raises the standards of ethical behavior and lowers corruption." ~ Hillary Clinton

(3) Joke of the day: Math teacher: "I have 5 bottles in one hand and 5 in the other. What do I have as a whole?" Student: "A drinking problem."

(4) iPhone case doubles as a stun-gun: An inch-thick \$125 [Yellow Jacket case](#), that can turn your iPhone into a 650K-volt stun-gun, gives a new meaning to computer security. Users can turn off the gun and use the case simply as an extended 20-hour battery. Remember not to mess around with iPhone owners!

(5) A uniquely Japanese solution: They reportedly resort to [adopting adults](#) (mostly men in their 20s and 30s) to keep family businesses within their family.

2012/09/19 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest on the upcoming US presidential election.

(1) On political flip-flopping: "Romney has dumbed himself down to fit a Republican Party that has become anachronistic, hateful and foolish. He has never once stood up to the party's extremist base in this campaign—not even ... on immigration and contraception, issues that sent women and Latinos scurrying toward the exits." Joe Klein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of September 24, 2012, on a candidate who plays dumb on issues he once advocated passionately.

(2) People who pay no income tax: The [Romney gaffe](#) about 47% of Americans who pay no income tax being dependent on government and considering themselves victims has by now been fully analyzed and everyone, except those very closely linked to his campaign, thinks he committed a major error. First, income tax is, by definition, paid by the rich. You pay income tax on the portion of your income that remains after the following have been taken out: payroll tax (including Social Security and Medicare taxes), personal exemptions for yourself and your dependents, property taxes, state taxes, some child care, educational, and medical expenses, and charitable donations. For nearly half of all Americans, nothing is left as taxable income. So, the first part of Romney's error is that he equated "not paying income tax" with "not paying taxes." About 2/3 of that 47% (according to CNN data) do in fact pay various kinds of taxes, including payroll taxes, state taxes, property taxes, and, of course, sales tax. Lower- and middle-income people pay more in payroll taxes than in income tax. Furthermore, more than half of the 1/3 of the 47% who pay no taxes are unemployed. By the way, that 47% includes nearly all of the soldiers fighting in our two wars, the vast majority of veterans, and seniors on nontaxable Social Security income. So, it was indeed foolish for Romney to say that he did not care for them. Obama is likely smiling for this unexpected gift.

Note: This is exactly what Romney said about the 47%: "My job is not to worry about those people."

(3) More on Romney's core beliefs: "The formula [Romney] sketches is this: People who are forced to make it on their own have drive. People who receive benefits have dependency. But, of course, no middle-class parent acts as if this is true. Middle-class parents don't deprive their children of benefits so they can learn to struggle on their own. They shower benefits on their children to give them more opportunities—so they can play travel sports, go on foreign trips and develop more skills. People are motivated when they feel competent. They are motivated when they have more opportunities. Ambition is fired by possibility, not by deprivation, as a tour through the world's poorest regions makes clear." David Brooks, writing in the [New York Times](#).

2012/09/18 (Tue.): Here are a couple of items of potential interest on the US economy.

(1) The US economy is in better shape than most critics admit: "Americans think the 2% [growth] economy is terrible; in Europe, it would be a gift. ... The bottom line is that the year-to-date performance of U.S. equities has surpassed everything from gold to oil to bonds to any kind of emerging-market stocks." Rana Foroohar, writing in [Time magazine](#), issue of September 24, 2012.

(2) Worth of a college degree: The cover feature in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of September 17, 2012, asks the question: "Is College a Lousy Investment?" It contends that at the rate college costs are rising, which is well above the inflation rate, college has become a poor investment for everyone but those with the brightest minds and utmost motivation. Many graduates simply can't get good-enough jobs to be able to repay the massive debts that a college education engenders. Students who try to graduate with as little effort as possible will likely not find college worth its cost, while those who maximize their learning opportunities will get something worthwhile from the experience. To the first category of students, a professor is quoted as saying: "Why is it that you guys spend so much time trying to get as little as possible for your money?" In many cases, the value of a degree is the credential it provides (i.e., a degree serves as a signal that its holder is disciplined and capable of hard work) rather than the knowledge and skills that supposedly go with it. In the current economic climate, the credential value has declined substantially and the worth of knowledge has soared.

2012/09/17 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Health fact: As of September 6, eight visitors this year have contracted Hantavirus, the deadly, rodent-borne virus, at Yosemite National Park; 3 have died. Some campsites have been closed as a result. [Info from: [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of September 17, 2012.]

(2) The dire situation in Syria: Much has been written (including in some of my own posts) about Bashar Assad's brutal treatment of the Syrian uprising, but there are troubling signs of savagery on the other side as well. [Newsweek magazine](#) (issue of September 17, 2012) reports on stealth assassinations, decapitations, and kidnapping by the rebels. An eyewitness talked of meeting a man who "executed a number of prisoners after videotaping confessions of atrocities he says warranted death. One such confession had been elicited simply by putting a gun to the suspect's head."

(3) Hatred breeds hatred: [Time magazine](#), issue of September 24, 2012, has a comprehensive cover feature about how the film "Innocence of Muslims" came to cause worldwide violence and multiple deaths. The high-schoolish film was made by Sam Bacile (a pseudonym) last year, was screened in Hollywood earlier this year, and parts of it were posted to YouTube in July. All three events went largely unnoticed and generated no reactions. In early September, Morris Sadek, an anti-Islamic Egyptian-American in Washington, DC, publicized the film by sending a mass e-mail and posting it on an Arabic-language blog. In the meantime, the creepy Florida pastor Terry Jones announced his support for the film, adding his own call for a public trial of Prophet Muhammad. Then, Sheik Khaled Abdallah, an opportunistic and hate-mongering Egyptian TV host, broadcast clips of these various postings in his show and added his own vitriolic language. The rest, as they say, is history.

2012/09/16 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Joke of the day: "McCain had a choice between me and Romney. He picked me. Just think about that!" Faux quote, attributed to Sarah Palin

(2) Salman Rushdi's head is now worth more: Indicating his frustration that Khomeini's fatwa on killing author Salman Rushdi has not yet been carried out, thus emboldening others to insult Islam, a representative and confidant of Khamenei announced **an increase of \$0.5M** in the reward for Rushdi's head, bringing the total reward to \$3.3M.

(3) On Khomeini's death in 1989: [BBC Persian](#) pieces together the health status of Khomeini in the 1980s and circumstances surrounding his death in 1989, using bits and pieces of info from doctors and nurses who treated him and others in his inner circle. If one believes this story, Khomeini was very ill (including being saved multiple times by his attending medical team) long before the Iranian public was told anything, and he had been dead for a day before the news was broadcast on radio and TV. Even though he technically died of a heart attack as announced, the cause of death was really a very aggressive form of stomach cancer and the attendant chemo treatment, which triggered the massive attack.

2012/09/15 (Sat.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) The worst drug scandal of all time: **This scandal** has been going on since the 1950s, when the over-the-counter tranquilizer Thalidomide was hailed as a wonder drug and was prescribed to everyone, including some 100,000 pregnant women, who had at least 90,000 miscarriages and thousands of deformed babies. Many of the company's scientists were former Nazis, and there is a suspicion (as yet unproven) that they did some of the research on this drug at concentration camps. Only very recently has the company's new CEO issued a formal apology to the victims, who are yet to be properly compensated. None of the people in charge of the

company at the time the drug was sold, or through the five decades of silence and denial, has ever apologized.

(2) One of the safest communication towers in the world: You wouldn't think that the **Skytree tower**, the tallest in the world at a height of 2080 feet, is considered one of the safest in the world, given that it is situated in earthquake-prone Japan. But a number of engineering measures (detailed study of the site up to the depth of 1.8 miles, provision of tree-like roots, decoupling of the tower core from its outer steel structure, and using a balancing weight against swaying) have led to extreme resilience against earthquakes and nasty winds.

(3) Plagiarism case shakes **University of Waterloo**: An Iranian graduate student and her PhD supervisor have been caught plagiarizing the works of scientists from MIT and UC Santa Barbara. It appears that they took material from prepublication versions of other researchers' work in January 2010, submitted a paper based on the plagiarized work within 5 days of the work appearing on-line, and had the paper published less than two weeks later (the advisor was an editor of the publication and may have given it preferential treatment).

2012/09/14 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest on current world events.

(1) Libyans hold **pro-America rally**: But angry mobs still storming embassies throughout the Middle East.

(2) The Egyptian regime is caught between a rock and a hard place: It wants to simultaneously appease the protesting mobs, to shore up its Islamic credentials, and to court the international community, from which it is seeking forgiveness of \$1B in debt, \$5B in new loans, and extensive investments. [[LA Times story](#)]

(3) On respect and tolerance: The movie "Innocence of Muslims" has caused riots and violence in much of the Muslim world. Some Muslims are genuinely offended, but the rioting and violence is incited by political and religious leaders who want to take advantage of this opportunity to cover up their own failings in the formation of righteous and prosperous societies. While we should not condone any misguided insult on the basis of freedom of speech, we should be wary of comments by regimes such as Iran's, asking for apologies. The insults in the aforementioned film pale in comparison with insults that the ruling clerics in Iran and their followers dole out daily against Baha'is, Sunni Muslims, ex-Muslims, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, including mocking their beliefs and their leaders/figureheads and calling for punishments up to and including execution. If you want respect for your beliefs, you should offer others the same respect. The site [Andishe Qom](#) quotes Khomeini as saying in response to a question that all non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews, are to be considered unclean and despicable.

[Side note: Has anyone else noticed that the said movie triggered no riots or violence in Iran but only led to a call for apology from the Islamic Republic officials? Of course, one reason might be that there is no US embassy or consulate to attack, but there may be more to this difference than a mere absence of American targets.]

2012/09/13 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) DARPA's mule-like robot: The robot, **built by Boston Dynamics**, will help carry gear for soldiers.

(2) Fujitsu developing a math whiz program: Following the success of IBM's Watson program in playing the game of "Jeopardy!", a computer program is **being developed by Fujitsu** to ace the math portion of the entrance exam for University of Tokyo. Given that not even calculators are allowed at the said exam, this looks more like a publicity stunt, except that if successful, it would be quite unsettling to the Japanese, who take their university entrance exams very seriously. The goal is for the self-evaluating-and-improving program to do reasonably well by 2016 and to be admission-worthy by 2021.

(3) The weird story of the film "Innocence of Muslims": As new information emerges about the film that triggered violence in several Middle Eastern and North African countries, **weirder details** come to light. It is now known that an Egyptian Coptic Christian made the film and that the cast/crew of the film apparently did not know what kind of film they were making. NPR reports that nearly all offensive dialogue was dubbed over different lines in the script given to, and performed by, the actors. Based on new information and the inconsistencies observed, NPR advises caution about the movie and related claims.

(4) Warning to parents of small children: Buckyball, an "office toy" made of small, powerful magnets, is a serious health hazard. **Recalling the toy** is being debated, because, if swallowed, the magnets can stick together inside the body or even puncture holes in the stomach or intestines through magnetic force applied from the two sides.

2012/09/12 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The cure for anything is salt water—sweat, tears or the sea." ~ Isak Dinesen

(2) A most versatile engineer: According to **this ad**, the agricultural engineer shown also does family counseling, installs TV satellite dishes and other high-tech equipment, is a calligraphy and painting expert, teaches English, sings traditional and popular Persian songs, and has international credentials for teaching yoga and other combat sports.

(3) Official medal counts for the London Paralympics: **Iranian athletes ranked 11th** overall, with 10 gold, 7 silver, and 7 bronze medals.

(4) The global brain trade: The September 2012 issue of *IEEE Spectrum* presents a chart showing the percentage of researchers who are immigrants and the percentage who emigrate out of various countries, dividing each number by country of origin/destination. Australia, Canada, and the US are among countries with a surplus flow of researchers into them. India and Italy have the most severe deficit flows. As is usual for such studies, Iran isn't mentioned, given the dearth of reliable data.

2012/09/11 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest on terrorism and other threats.

(1) Yet another anniversary of 9/11: Both US presidential candidates plan to avoid airing negative ads today in honor of the 11th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. They will return to normal mode on 9/12, spending millions on content-free ads. Meanwhile, the country and its politicians, wrapping themselves in the US flag, forget the real lessons of the incident and the two wars it triggered.

(2) The Bin Laden story, in a book and a movie: *No Easy Day*, an account of pursuing and killing Osama Bin Laden, by the now-outed Navy Seal Matt Bissonnette (writing under the pseudonym "Mark Owen") and Kevin Maurer, has hit the bookstores. Kathryn Bigelow, whose "The Hurt Locker" won a best-film Oscar, is already making a film and may have had the book's author as one of her sources (reportedly, the CIA also cooperated with her). Here is a *Los Angeles Times* story about the furor the film is causing.

(3) America's coming infrastructure disaster: "[For] decades, America has scrimped on taking care of the public furniture, endangering people and weakening the economy as bridges rust, roads crumble, dams weaken, and water mains leak. ... Even greater threats can be found among the decrepit corporate-owned infrastructure, including high-pressure oil and natural-gas pipelines that can explode without warning, electric power poles long past their replacement dates, and a telecommunications system that is far less reliable today than it was two decades ago. ... America's infrastructure gets a grade of 'D' from the American Society of Civil Engineers." [David C. Johnston, writing in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of September 10, 2012, and warning that events such as explosions, bridge collapses, and extended blackouts (of the kind that recently crippled India) will become the norm, unless the US government and corporate America act to make infrastructure upgrade a priority.]

2012/09/10 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." African proverb, as quoted by Al Gore.

(2) Rerelease of Michael Jackson's 'Bad' album: Three CDs and one DVD comprise this special package that includes remastered material, remixes, live performances, and a few previously unreleased tracks. [Info from: *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of September 14/21, 2012.]

(3) Do US presidents age prematurely? According to *CBS News*, reporting on a JAMA paper, US presidents on average exceed their life expectancy, primarily because they are more educated, are wealthier, and have better health care than the average American. The graying that we notice is quite natural, given the age (40s and 50s) at which most men become president.

Food for thought: Could the extreme graying be a result of candidates dying their hair to look more youthful and then avoiding hair dyes when they are under intense media scrutiny as sitting presidents?

2012/09/09 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest on politics and a festive occasion.

(1) Let's hear it for grandparents: I found out from my calendar that today (first Sunday after Labor Day in the US) is **Grandparents' Day**. A few more countries celebrate on the same day, while others use different days. It is a good idea to honor grandparents for their love and guidance, just as we do moms and dads on their special days. I was not fortunate to have meaningful relationships with my grandparents: on my mother's side, they lived in a different country; on my father's side, my grandfather was bedridden since I was very young and my grandmother was very limited in her interactions with her grandkids. Now that we are on the subject of honoring, next Sunday 9/16 is stepfamily day.

(2) Are the Republicans ashamed of the two Bushes? Why didn't they appear at the Republican convention? (To be fair, Jimmy Carter is also persona non grata with the Democrats, but one former president did make an appearance at the Democratic convention.)

(3) Quote of the day: "Donald Trump was bumped from speaking at the Republican convention because of Hurricane Isaac. See, nobody ever talks about the good things hurricanes do." Jay Leno, on the Tonight Show.

(4) The ultimate in hypocrisy: In the course of a single day, VP candidate Paul Ryan passes through one or more modern airports on government-paid trips, receives protection from the Secret Service, travels via Federal highways on the way to/from airports, uses the gym and dining facilities on the Hill, and sends e-mails and surfs the Web for free. He is well-paid and enjoys a generous health-care plan. Which one of these services/perks should his hated government cut?

2012/09/08 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) An interesting image: Who is hugging whom?

This is an example of optical illusions stemming from right-brain and left-brain capabilities. Which person you see hugging the other depends on whether you are right-brained or left-brained.

An even more amazing demonstration of this phenomenon is found in this [dance video](#), where different people see the dancer spinning clockwise or counterclockwise. Once you see a spin direction, you can change the direction at will by simply focusing.

Note added on 9/9: The mere fact that the same photo can be

interpreted in two different ways, or a video can show rotation in opposite directions, is remarkable. Doing some research to try to understand the left-brain/right-brain connection, I came across [this blog entry](#) from Steven D. Levitt (one of the co-authors of *Freakonomics*), whose experiments, though small in number, showed limited utility in predicting the dominance of left- or right-brain in an individual.

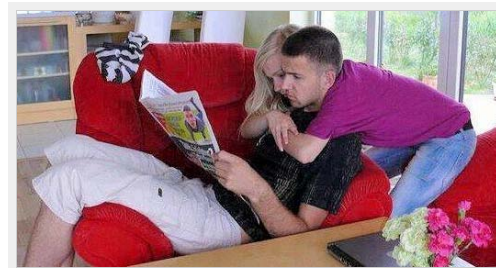
(2) A math puzzle: Jack buys some pizzas and heads home, where his friends are waiting to celebrate the start of the new academic year. After walking for a block, a bully stops him and takes half the pizzas plus 1/2 pizza.

At the next block, a second bully demands and gets half the remaining pizzas plus 1/2 pizza. Right before getting home, a third bully also takes half the remaining pizzas plus 1/2 pizza. At this point, Jack notes that he is left with no pizzas. How many pizzas did Jack buy?

Once you are done with the puzzle above, try to solve it in the more general case where Jack is left with n pizzas at the end.

Note added on 9/9: Also generalize to the case of k bullies, instead of 3.

(3) Islamic rulings on wigs and hair extensions: Believe it or not, [elaborate rules](#) exist based on fatwas from Islam's religious leaders on wearing wigs and hair extensions. There is general agreement that wigs made of human hair are forbidden, whereas opinions differ on wigs and hair extensions made of animal hair or synthetic material. One "scholar" declares: "If a woman wears a wig and adorns herself with it, even if she does this for her husband, she is imitating the kaafir women [referring to Jews], which the Prophet forbade." Another one deems certain kinds of wigs okay, provided the woman first obtains her husband's permission.



2012/09/06 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) A Persian version of the Khan Academy ([free instructional videos](#) on a number of subjects) is kicked off by a group of Stanford University students.

(2) World's oldest continuously operating scientific society: [UK's Royal Society](#), founded in 1660 by Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and other prominent scientists of their day, is the world's oldest and, perhaps, most prestigious scientific organization. It got its royal charter in 1662, exactly 350 years ago. Of its 1450 Fellows, 80 are Nobel Laureates. Among functions performed by the Royal Society are advising the British government and participating in debates of the day on issues such as global warming and genetically modified crops.

(3) The latest million-core, petaflops-scale parallel computer: The advent of many-core processor chips has made it possible to increase the total number of cores, and thus the overall performance, of top-of-the-line supercomputers. The current record-holder for performance, sitting at the top of the latest release of the top-500 supercomputers list, is an IBM BlueGene Sequoia, featuring 1.6M cores and a sustained/peak performance of 16/20 petaflops. It requires 8 MW of power to operate and runs a Linux operating system. The second and third computers on the list, a Fujitsu K Computer and a smaller configuration of the IBM BlueGene architecture, also have nearly a million cores (0.7M and 0.8M, respectively). IBM machines occupy the 4th, 7th, and 8th spots as well, with a former record holder, the Chinese Tiahne1A, sitting at 5th position and a Cray computer occupying the 6th spot. Rounding up the top-10 are machines by France's Bull and the Chinese Dawning Nebulae. [Info from: *Engineering & Technology* magazine, issue of September 2012.]

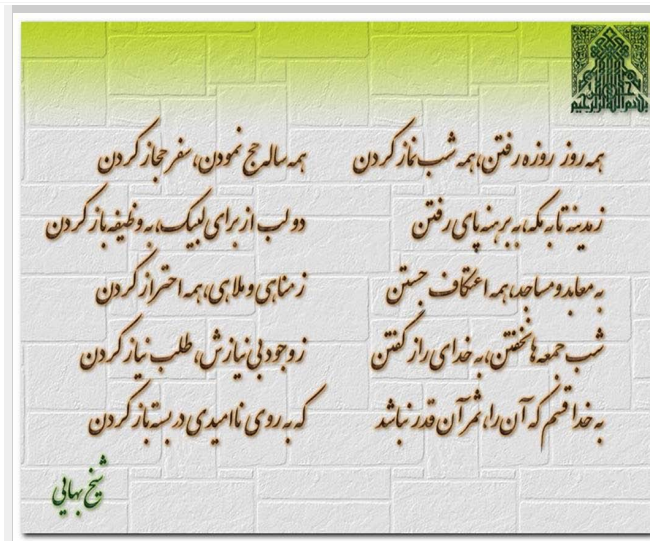
2012/09/04 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A beautiful poem by Sheikh Baha'i.

(2) Art blends with nature: The 1000-acre New Zealand farm owned by art collector Alan Gibbs contains many examples of sculpture that are meant to blend with nature. [A prime example](#) is this one depicting a napkin falling to the ground.

(3) Why history is against Romney: "[Romney] scorns what history suggests is his best credential.

No businessman has been elected President without holding high office first, and more



governors have won the White House than Senators or even Vice Presidents. But Republican doctrine discourages talk of Romney's term as Massachusetts' governor, which featured state-mandated health care, gun control, abortion rights and other heresies." Barton Gellman, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of September 3, 2012.

(4) Supply-side economics disbelieved: "Americans simply don't buy into supply-side economics any more. An April CBS News/New York Times poll found that when it comes to deciding the best way to promote economic growth, most Americans prefer spending more on education and infrastructure while raising taxes on the wealthy and businesses to pay for it (56%), while fewer than half favor lowering taxes and cutting government spending (37%). Americans overwhelmingly want the government ... to do more to help the financial situation of the middle class, and that desire cuts across party lines." Rana Foroohar, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of September 3, 2012.

2012/09/03 (mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Labor Day: "Of life's two chief prizes, beauty and truth, I found the first in a loving heart and the second in a laborer's hand." Khalil Gibran

(2) Can we learn to forget our memories? A lot of research has been done on improving our memories and learning to remember/recall things better. Our capacity to forget is just as important, but can we learn to suppress certain memories (this is of immense practical importance for soldiers suffering from PTSD or for some crime victims)? Researchers at University of St. Andrews in Scotland have provided a tentative 'yes' answer to this question. We have a long way to go before putting their results to practical use, but there is a glimmer of hope nonetheless.

(3) How US presidency is different from running a business: A US president must deal with every important problem that comes his/her way. A president cannot walk away from a problem the way a businessman can. According to a *Time* magazine article by Barton Gellman (issue of September 3, 2012), as head of Bain Capital, Mitt Romney stepped away from 499 out of every 500 business deals that came his way. When you have a choice, it is easier to come out a winner than when you must fix every problem presented to you.

(4) Interviews that were cut out: A hilarious collection of interviews by reporters of the Iranian TV (in Persian, with lots of Arabic tossed in), which, for various reasons, **were never broadcast**.

2012/09/02 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On perils of investing: "It's easy to feel superior to crazy Albanians or Madoff's dupes, but I am not really sure you and I have been that much smarter. Look at the succession of bubbles over the past 20 years as people have desperately convinced themselves that there is a surefire way to get rich without working ... or at the very least, to work for 30 to 40 years, save 5 percent of their income, and then spend 25 or 30 more years in an equally comfortable retirement. ... The answer is probably that we can't—or rather, that we never could. And yet whom do we elect? Whose books do we buy? The people who tell us that they can make this impossible thing happen. We've become our own three-card monte dealer." Megan McArdle, in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of August 27, 2012 (in connection with "Arbitrage," a film starring Richard Gere and Susan Sarandon).

(2) Talk of earthquakes in Iran: Much is being said about the recent quake in Iran, with some experts dismissing the possibility of a devastating one in future (particularly in Tehran). **According to Wikipedia**, the strongest earthquake in Iran with a known magnitude was a 7.9 shaker in Damghan, with an estimated 200K fatalities. Over the past century, the maximum has been 7.4 (7.1 for the Tehran region). The maximum strength over the past decade has been 6.6 in Bam. These sound reassuring, but remember that natural disasters follow the power-law, which means no strength can be ruled out based on past data.

(3) It's not okay to spread lies, even about an evil person or group: The story that the Taliban beheaded 17 for partying and dancing may be incorrect. A **later explanation** has it that infighting among Taliban commanders

over 2 women may have led to the massacre, and all fatalities likely resulted from gunshots. This explanation does not make it any more acceptable, but correcting any error is necessary, regardless of the kind or motive.

2012/09/01 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Interesting street art in Olsztyn, Poland. [This page](#) contains many other examples of street art.

(2) The real Indiana Jones: here is [the story of Forrest Fenn](#), an eccentric art dealer, who obtained much of his wealth through digging up and, some say, stealing art. He has now buried about \$1M of his treasures somewhere in the mountains north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and has written a poem that he says contains all the information needed to find it.

(3) The most effective [campaign for Obama](#): Donald Trump's continued praise for Romney.

(4) Leave history to historians: In "Historical Reflections: Seven Lessons from Bad History" (*Communications of the ACM*, September 2012), Thomas Haigh writes about how V. A. Shiva Ayyadurai's false claim that he invented e-mail spread like wildfire on the Internet (and even entered some "mainstream" media) due to a nifty public-relations campaign on his part, including registering the domain names inventorofemail.com, historyofemail.com, and theemailab.com and filling them with self-serving information. The author then offers lessons to be learned from this experience.

- Blog coverage is easy to get, but people still notice print
- Almost nobody understands intellectual property
- Sometimes less is more (referring to journalist being overloaded, with little time to check their stories)
- Information illiteracy is not just an academic problem
- Pioneers and historians can work together (i.e., leave history to historians)
- On the side of truth and accuracy, but only up to a point (i.e., the spread of sensationalism)
- People love technology legends



2012/08/31 (Fri.): Here are four Iran-related items of potential interest.

(1) Persian music: Masterful [violin performance](#) by 24-year-old Yara Amir Bahonar from Tehran, playing Bijan Mortazavi's "Toofan" ("Storm"). He participated in the competition by sending in a video, because he could not get a visa to travel to the US.

(2) Shameless accusations against Leila Hatami: Mashregh News, in yet another [slandering article](#) (in Persian) badmouths the award-winning actress Leila Hatami and accuses her of the "unspeakable crime" of wearing [an outfit](#) typical of Jewish women at the Cannes Film Festival. How low can you go?

(3) Distorting the Egyptian President's speech: According to [Al Arabiya](#), "Iran's state Radio and Television has come under fire for tampering with the speech of Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi during a summit of Non-Aligned States held in Tehran. Critics said a translator for the Iranian media distorted President Mursi's speech to make it fit with the Islamic Republic's official propaganda discourse. While covering Mursi's speech, the official television network refused to translate the Egyptian president's statements critical of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad." The translator also replaced references to 'Arab Spring' with 'Islamic awakening.' "When Mursi spoke about the Arab Spring countries and mentioned Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, the translator replaced 'Syria' with 'Bahrain'."

(4) Mossadegh nationalism or the return of Cyrus the Great? This is the title of a [thoughtful essay](#) (in Persian) by Amin Bozorguian in which he attributes extreme nationalism to a sense of national humiliation of the kind the Germans suffered in World War I and Iranians are experiencing today. He maintains that Mossadegh's nationalism, with its aims of equality, is to be preferred to the supremacist view of royalists and those who wrap themselves in the glories of Cyrus the Great and Iran's ancient civilization.

2012/08/30 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "We have discussed how United Nations can work together with Iran to improve the human rights situation in Iran. We have our serious concerns on the human rights abuses and violations in this country." UN chief Ban Ki-moon, speaking at a news conference in Iran (now hosting the Nonaligned Movement gathering), as he sat next to Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, who frowned at the remarks.

(2) What science can learn from the arts in authorship questions: Credits at the end of a movie do not entail just a list of names, but a detailed specification of the role played by each person/entity (director, producer, lead actors, supporting cast, music composer, set designer, etc.). A book often lists author(s), editor, graphic designer, publisher, and so on. So, why do we in science provide a list of authors, without any indication of what role each has played in producing the results? [From an article by E. Marcos, J. M. Vara, and V. de Castro, in

Communications of the ACM, September 2012.]

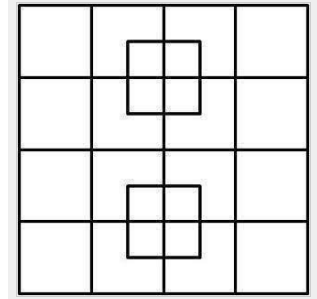
(3) Amazing events captured by [Google Street View](#): "From allegedly cheating husbands, to drug deals in action, to embarrassing moments, Google Street View has captured some interesting snapshots of human life. Artist Jon Rafman, has made it his goal to scour the Earth and compile those fascinating images. This list of 30, seen at Demilked, is full of truly amazing shots. And there are more at his website."

(4) Persian music: A nice performance of the oldie Persian song "["Shaaneh"](#) (duet by Asatur Aslanyan and Tamara Jamharyan).

(5) Persian music: A performance of the Persian oldie song "["Shayad Biaei"](#) ("Perhaps You'd Come"), the Persian version of "Hava Nagila," by Nahid. [Viguen's [original version](#)]

2012/08/29 (Wed.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) How many squares do you see in this image? A bit more challenging puzzle of this kind asks you to count the number of triangles within a side-5 equilateral triangle tiled with 25 unit-triangles. Visit [this Web page](#) for an image, the answer, and a general solution method.



(2) Mars revealed: The [sharpest image ever](#) of the Martian landscape, courtesy of Curiosity's telephoto lens.

(3) Pursuing the dream of human-powered flight: Fulfilling an ancient human dream and earning a cash award of \$250K (the Sikorsky Flight Prize) will drive a number of participants later this week, when they gather in Toronto to achieve [human-powered flight](#) that lasts at least 60 seconds and achieves a height of 3 meters or more at some point.

(4) Space elevator: The idea of a space elevator, a cabin that goes up and down a superstrong ribbon made of lightweight material and held vertically in space because much of its weight is on the other side Earth's geostationary orbit, was proposed several years ago (I first encountered it in 2010). It is still a pie-in-the-sky idea, but its developers are proposing to build a [smaller version](#) on the Moon, to be used for dropping items there or retrieving them for transport back to Earth. This project will be simpler, given the Moon's much weaker gravitational pull. Still, nearly \$1B will be needed to implement it.

[[Wikipedia article](#) about the original space elevator idea (Earth version)].

2012/08/28 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Kayaking in Glacier Bay, Alaska: Let's hope [such sights](#) will be seen first-hand, rather than through images, a few generations into the future.

(2) I wrote the following very brief review for the 2004 book *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (by John Perkins) in October 2007.

"[Economic hitmen] 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."

Today, I came across this [54-minute interview](#) with the author about his book and why he wrote it.

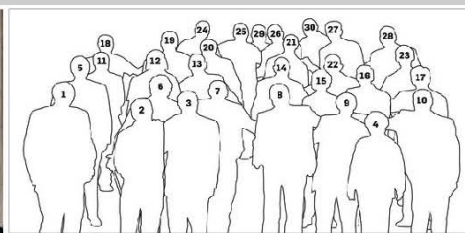
(3) Talk like an Iranian: A hilarious take on Iranians' [taarof tradition](#) (exaggerated or insincere praise) and how Westerners can learn to live with it. [[Persian translation](#) of the article.]

(4) Quote of the day: "Now is the time to stop this bloodshed and for the Syrian people to regain their full rights and for this regime that kills its people to disappear from the scene. ... There is no room to talk about reform, but the discussion is about change. ... friends of the Syrian people in China and Russia and other states [need to back ordinary Syrians]." Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi attempting to sway the handful of countries that still support Bashar Assad.

2012/08/27 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.



The Turing Centenary Celebration featured the largest single gathering of Turing Award laureates in computer science history. The key below identifies the 30 laureates in this group photo. Missing, but in attendance, were Joseph Sifakis and E. Allen Emerson (both 2007 recipients).



ACM A.M. Turing Award Laureates:

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Charles Bachman 1973 Award Recipient | 11. Niklaus Wirth 1984 Award Recipient | 21. Robert Tarjan 1986 Award Recipient |
| 2. Alan C. Kay 2003 Award Recipient | 12. Ken Thompson 1983 Award Recipient | 22. Edward Feigenbaum 1994 Award Recipient |
| 3. Raj Reddy 1994 Award Recipient | 13. Ivan Sutherland 1988 Award Recipient | 23. Stephen Cook 1982 Award Recipient |
| 4. Fran Allen 2006 Award Recipient | 14. Frederiek P. Brooks, Jr. 1989 Award Recipient | 24. Richard Stearns 1983 Award Recipient |
| 5. Butler Lampson 1992 Award Recipient | 15. Barbara Liskov 2008 Award Recipient | 25. Dana Scott 1976 Award Recipient |
| 6. William Kahn 1989 Award Recipient | 16. Juris Hartmanis 1993 Award Recipient | 26. Charles Thacker 2009 Award Recipient |
| 7. Robert Kahn 2004 Award Recipient | 17. Leonard Adleman 2002 Award Recipient | 27. John Hopcroft 1986 Award Recipient |
| 8. Judea Pearl 2011 Award Recipient | 18. Adi Shamir 2002 Award Recipient | 28. Richard Karp 1985 Award Recipient |
| 9. Fernando Corbató 1990 Award Recipient | 19. Leslie Vellant 2010 Award Recipient | 29. Ron Rivest 2002 Award Recipient |
| 10. Vinton Cerf 2004 Award Recipient | 20. Edmund M. Clarke 2007 Award Recipient | 30. Donald Knuth 1974 Award Recipient |

- (1) Photo of 30 Turing Award winners: On June 15-16, 32 of the 39 living ACM Turing Award winners, dubbed "The Nobel Prize of computing," gathered in San Francisco to celebrate the 100th birthday of Alan M. Turing (which was on 6/23) by presenting lectures and conducting discussions. This photo depicts 30 of those present.
- (2) Secrets of Bisotun: This [6-minute video](#), narrated in Persian, reviews the history of the Bisotun Mountain in western Iran and the monuments and tablets built around or carved in it.
- (3) Numerous quakes hit so-Cal: A swarm of [about 70 earthquakes](#), having magnitudes of up to 5.5, has shaken the Southern California region over the past few days. Some area schools were closed today in order to assess the damage. Are these omens of stronger quakes to come?

2012/08/26 (Sun.): Yergin, Daniel, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*, Penguin, 2011.

The author's credentials on energy matters go back to his 1979 groundbreaking book *Energy Future*, making him the best-known and most widely quoted American on energy-related matters. In this volume, he weaves together the fascinating story of how energy has shaped today's world and how it will continue to be a crucial factor in world relations. The forms of energy may be different in the years to come, but the influence of energy on the world's balance of power will only increase.

Sandwiched between a highly informative introduction/prologue pair of chapters (beginning with the devastating March 2011 earthquake/tsunami combo in Japan and ending with a brief discussion of key developments in Russia) at one end and a concluding chapter entitled "A Great Revolution" at the other are 35 numbered chapters, packaged in six parts.

One—The New World of Oil; 10 chs., including one on the demand shock and one each on Russia, Iraq, China.

Two—Securing the Supply; 6 chs., including one on the dwindling supplies and another on natural gas.

Three—The Electric Age; 4 chs., including a detailed discussion on nuclear energy.

Four—Climate and Carbon; 6 chs. dealing with environmental impacts and pertinent international agreements.

Five—New Energies; 6 chs., including one on the importance of efficiency and one each on solar and wind.

Six—Road to the Future; 3 chs., discussing everything from biofuel to remaking of the automobile (EVs).

The book ends with 34 pages of notes, a 16-page bibliography, and an impressive 31-page index.

Within this large tome (800+ pages), there are a number of interesting and important observations about how energy resources affect the fate of nations in the modern world. For example, stability or lack thereof in developing countries is directly related to whether they possess significant energy resources or are of strategic importance in routing of oil and natural-gas pipelines. Impact of energy on the future of the human race, via climate change, is also treated in depth.

The book's appeal is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of 32 pages of historical photographs and drawings. Among the most interesting images for me were, in order of appearance, Mikhail Gorbachev announcing his resignation and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, President Woodrow Wilson walking to church (after he introduced "gasoline Sundays" in the face of severe oil shortages during World War I), a dense array of piers at the onset of off-shore drilling in California's Santa Barbara region in the 1890s, Ronald and Nancy Reagan in a TV ad for a transistor radio (before he began peddling freedom, instead of electric gadgets), Margaret Thatcher at work as a food chemist (long before becoming the first world leader to give a speech on climate change), young Jerry Brown addressing a renewable energy hearing in 1979 (an event that kick-started wind power in California), and George Clooney arriving at the 2006 Oscars venue in the suddenly-hip Toyota Prius.

Having presented an encyclopedic view of energy and its current and future importance, the author concludes the book thus: "There is no assurance on timing for the innovations that will make a difference. There is no guarantee that investment at the scale needed will be made in a timely way, or that government policies will be

wisely implemented. Certainly, lead times can be long, and costs will have to evolve. As this story has shown, the risks of conflict, crisis, and disruption are inherent. Things can go seriously wrong, with dire consequences. Thus, it is essential that the conditions are nurtured so that creativity can flourish. For that resource will be critical for meeting the challenges and assuring the security and sustainability of the energy for a prosperous, growing world. That is at the heart of the quest, it is as much about the human spirit as it is about technology, and that is why this is a quest that will never end."

2012/08/25 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Neil Armstrong, the first human to walk on the moon, **dies at 82**.

(2) Prison term of 21 years for killing 77 people: Talk about a **slap on the wrist!** Andres Behring Breivik was declared "sane" and sentenced to only 21 years in prison for gunning down 77 people last year. In accepting his sentence, he "apologized" for not killing more people.

(3) US deficit spending during recent presidential terms: Much is being written about President Obama having added \$5T to the US national debt. The \$5T number is correct. Our national debt went from \$11T to \$16T (in round numbers). But it went up by \$5T during 8 years of Bush-2's presidency, whereas Clinton added only \$2T to the debt (about the same rate as the Reagan/Bush-1's \$3T in 12 years). One should cite numbers in context, using figures from **non-partisan sources**. US debt growth during Bush-2's 8th year was 16%. It has been 15%, 14%, and 8% during Obama's first 3 years, showing an improving trend, despite the dire economic conditions Obama inherited from Bush-2. These numbers show that the bulk of debt increases under Obama have their roots in events that started during Bush-2's term. Just as important as the debt amount is the annual interest expense, which burdens the US budget. The average interest expense was 3.0% during Bush-2's term and 2.8% so far for Obama; the historical average over the past quarter-century is about 3.8%.

2012/08/24 (Fri.): Here are a couple of science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Martian 360-degree panoramas: Mars Rover Opportunity (not the latest, which is called "Curiosity") continues to send amazing photographs of the Martian landscape. A number of these photos have been assembled to form 360-degree panoramas available at **this site**.

(2) Knottable, cable-shaped batteries: Batteries that **look like strings**, and can be knotted or otherwise abused without failing, are being built by LG of Korea. Applications are envisaged for powering cell phones (through a headset cable) and wearable electronics (via jewelry or textile fibers)

2012/08/22 (Wed.): Today, we attended an orientation session for families of UCLA's entering freshmen, where my daughter will begin her studies in the fall. In various lectures and workshops, we heard from officials and facilitators of UCLA's transition programs, on-campus housing, student health services, parents and family programs, campus safety, and counseling services. We also attended a very entertaining faculty lecture were treated to lunch at the alumni center, and participated in a campus tour, ending with a brief visit to a residence hall. At the end of the day, we met my daughter, who had spent the last 3 days at the student version of the orientation program, and headed home to Santa Barbara after the obligatory stop at a Persian restaurant. As part of the campus tour, we were treated to a number of urban legends traditionally told to entering freshmen. One of these pertains to the supposed 52 deliberate imperfections (one for each Sunday of the year) incorporated in the the design of **Royce Hall** by its architect, including the obvious asymmetry.

2012/08/21 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Polygamists and the 2012 US presidential election: An **interesting take** on how polygamists in Utah take comfort in the polygamist roots of the candidates from both parties (family trees of both Obama and Romney are included).

(2) Rome's sense of order: The ancient Roman town of Thamugadi in today's Algeria had an orderly grid-based plan. The town's design included a market, ceremonial gates, bath complexes, a library, and a 3500-seat theater. [From: **National Geographic magazine**, issue of September 2012.]

(3) Three myths about cell phones: [Info from: *Time* magazine, issue of August 27, 2012]

a. They are more addictive than crack: One study indicated that resisting social networks is harder than saying no to alcohol or cigarettes, but the same study also found that participants had a stronger urge to do work than to e-mail or surf the Web.

b. Smartphones dull our memories: We can look up anything, anywhere, at any time, but we must remember where or how to look, so we don't have less need for memory but need for a different kind of memory.

c. Texting reduces attention span: While the limits on size of text messages might seem severe, studies have found that messages in older modes of communication (telex, postcards) seldom exceeded 160 characters.

2012/08/20 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A milestone for driverless cars: Google's autopiloted cars have reached 300K miles without causing an accident (one was rear-ended, though). [Info from: *Time* magazine, issue of August 27, 2012.]

(2) The "Golhaa" program is on-line: This program of Persian poetry recitation and music, with the original full name "Golhaa-ye Rangaarang" and various other names throughout its life, ran on Iranian national radio for 23 years (1335-1357, Persian calendar). Now an [archive of the program](#) is available on-line, thanks to the efforts of Jane Lewisohn, an American, born in New York, educated in Iran, and now living in England.

(3) Peddling US college degrees: An industry has sprouted in China, India, and elsewhere that caters to rich families wanting US college degrees for their children at any cost. Some of these "education agents" are legitimate, helping applicants make sense of the complex admissions process and keep track of the documents and requirements. However, most of these firms are shady or outright illegal. They write the applicant's statement-of-purpose, falsify documents (including transcripts), and otherwise mislead both the applicants and the colleges to which they apply. They are paid via a hefty up-front fee, plus bonuses based on results. Unfortunately, US institutions have lax application processes, especially now that they need foreign students more than ever due to devastating budget cuts. Some US institutions even collaborate with such agents under the guise of certifying them to avoid being misled. It is interesting that within the US, it is illegal to pay agents for recruiting domestic students, but no corresponding prohibition exists internationally. [Info from: *Time* magazine, issue of August 20, 2012.]

2012/08/19 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A brainteaser: Three mountain climbers want to collaborate so that one of them can reach a peak requiring 6 days to climb. Each person can carry only 4 days' food and water. Don't worry about the successful climber's return trip after reaching the peak (e.g., assume that he will be picked up from the peak by a helicopter).

a. Show how the climbers can reach their goal in the least amount of time.

b. Could one mountain climber achieve this feat with no one to help him/her?

(2) Cyber vs. military attacks: According to *IEEE Computer* magazine (issue of August 2012), a book to be published in 2013 by Cambridge University Press (*Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare*) will contain the consensus of today's top legal experts on how international law applies to cyber warfare and under what conditions an attacked country can retaliate in self-defense per UN's "use of force" guidelines, which were devised before the age of cyber warfare. Recent electronic attacks by state-sponsored groups have made the updating of international law necessary.

(3) On a possible earthquake in Tehran: This well-researched [29-minute documentary](#) (in Persian) cites estimates of 400-700K casualties in a strong quake. Lack of emergency preparedness, shoddy design and construction in most neighborhoods, and dense development with sketchy road access are the main culprits.

2012/08/17 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Brief entertainment news: Clint Eastwood endorses Mitt Romney; I still like him as an actor/director and will watch his films. Snoop Dogg changes his name to Snoop Lion; Simba weeps. Elton John says Madonna looks like a "fairground stripper"; Madonna holds her tongue.

(2) Les Ballets Persans: This [27-minute BBC Persian program](#) is devoted to the work of guest choreographer Nima Kiann with the Tajik National Ballet at city of Dushanbe's Opera House, interspersed with interview segments. Persian ballet dancing lives on, despite the total ban on it in Iran. If you don't have time to watch the entire program, minutes 15-18 and 24-26 of the video constitute good samples.

(3) [Syria kicked out](#) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Iran is the only member of the 57-nation body to oppose the action.

(4) On God, intelligent design, and evolution: Richard Dawkins discusses his book, *The God Delusion*, with Steven Colbert in this [7-minute video clip](#).

2012/08/16 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Art from high heels: [Very imaginative!](#)

(2) Iranian composer/violinist/singer: Bijan Mortazavi is featured in this [15-minute video](#) of instrumental music. In [this second video](#), he plays "East-West Harmony," a mix of two popular songs.

(3) Most common [male and female names in Iran](#): Based on 90M birth certificates issued, the top 5 male names are: Mohammad, Ali, Hossein, Mehdi, Hassan. For females, the top 5 names are: Fatemeh, Zahra, Maryam, Ma'soomah, Sakineh.

Note added on 8/19: The most common male names in the US are (2-3% each): James, John, Robert, Michael, William, David. The top female names are (1-2% each): Mary, Patricia, Linda, Barbara, Elizabeth, Jennifer.

(4) Many among the Taliban are sick of Al Qaeda: But unfriending a terrorist group isn't easy. When a former Taliban minister suggested a political solution in Afghanistan, he was caught in a [hail of bullets](#), which he luckily survived. He has since received warnings from Al Qaeda for continuing his anti-bloodshed talk, but has

vowed not to be silenced.

2012/08/15 (Wed.): Here are three art/entertainment items of potential interest.

(1) Well, it was just a matter of time: Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) has been arrested in Iran, apparently for his humorous poems criticizing the Islamic regime. In a latest example, he dissed the regime for continuing to be absorbed by events in Syria and ignoring earthquake victims in Iran's East Azarbaijan province.

This news story about the arrest has a link to one of Mr. Haloo's humorous poems.

(2) Fall movies to offer history and politics, not fantasy: "A quick glance through this Fall Movie Preview [issue] would indicate audiences are currently in the mood for history. ... Does it mean that in these uncertain times we look to history for answers? Does it mean that we hunger for leaders, like Lincoln and FDR [subjects of films by Steven Spielberg and Roger Mitchell], as our faith in today's leaders crumbles? Or could it be that entirely by coincidence a bunch of fine directors—directors who currently have the power to get movies greenlit—happen to like politics and history?" Jess Cagle, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of August 17/24, 2012.

(3) I am looking forward to these movies in fall 2012 (info from *Entertainment Weekly*):

September: Trouble with the Curve (Clint Eastwood, Amy Adams).

October: Taken 2 (Liam Neeson), Argo (Ben Affleck stars and directs), The Big Wedding (Robert De Niro).

November: Lincoln (Steven Spielberg), Skyfall (James Bond), Anna Karenina (Keira Knightly, Jude Law), Life of Pi (based on the brilliant novel by Yann Martel).

December: Hyde Park on Hudson (life of FDR), The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (Peter Jackson), Les Misérables (musical, Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway), Zero Dark Thirty (the 10-year search for OBL, Catherine Bigelow), The Guilt Trip (Streisand's back!).

2012/08/14 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Information blackout about the recent quakes in Iran: A number of posts on Facebook have suggested reasons for the government-controlled media in Iran pretty much ignoring the East Azerbaijan earthquakes: the quakes occurred close to some of the holiest nights of Ramadan. For clergy, who attribute quakes and other natural disasters to the various sins of people, it would have been rather difficult to explain the occurrences at this time. It is noteworthy that the strong Olympics performance of Iran had previously been attributed to prayers and other religious observances, which would also clash with a sin-caused natural disaster. Lack of information and the resultant chaos, combined with Iran's rejection of all foreign aid offered, have led to additional suffering for the victims. [[Los Angeles Times story](#)]

(2) Fareed Zakaria accused of plagiarism for his column on gun control: He has been suspended by *Time* magazine and CNN, which published his work. In the articles, Zakaria took liberally from Jill Lepore's *New Yorker* essay. Zakaria has admitted to wrongdoing and [has apologized](#) for his serious lapse. It is unclear whether this indiscretion will hurt his credibility in the long run.

Here is [an opposing view](#), maintaining that Zakaria's offense did not rise to the level of plagiarism.

(3) Iranian-Americans chronicled: PBS So-Cal will air a documentary entitled "The Iranian-Americans" this December. Judging by this [5-minute trailer](#), it should be quite interesting.

2012/08/13 (Mon.): I was away on a family vacation trip to attend a surprise birthday party for my youngest sister. She was truly surprised to see a good chunk of the family show up at her doorstep!

A lot has happened over the past few days. Leading the news were a pair of devastating earthquakes in Iran's northern province of East Azarbaijan (300 dead, thousands injured). Casualties and damage were out of line with the quakes' 6.2-6.3 magnitudes; a sign of poor construction and planning. The usual clergy musings about the earthquake being either due to women's improper hijab or caused by evil Western powers and Zionism are already afoot.

The London Olympics games came to a close amid expected results (gold for USA in women's soccer and men's basketball) and controversy (US women's soccer team's immodest celebration, despite what was viewed as a rather lucky win over Japan). Iran added to its already best performance ever in terms of medals, leaving London with 4 gold, 5 silver, and 3 bronze medals.

2012/08/10 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Engineering's greatest Olympian: US jumper Ray Ewry won 8 gold medals in the 1900, 1904, and 1908 Olympics. Orphaned at 5 and contracting polio at 7, he was told by doctors that he would never walk again. Ewry developed his own exercises to strengthen his leg muscles, leading to his inordinate ability to jump like a frog and excelling in a number of standing jumps (no longer included in today's Olympics, so his world records will remain unbeaten forever). He studied engineering at Purdue, where his unusual athletic abilities were noted. Ewry retired from sports competition in 1912 and worked for the city of New York as a hydraulics engineer.

[From: *Engineering & Technology magazine*, August 2012.]

(2) Engineering the Olympics (an inspiring story): Stuart Morris, an engineer who found his career stalled at age 24, decided to go back to school. A few lucky breaks and chance meetings later, he ended up doing research on boat design, helping his country win a couple of championships. A decade later, his boat designs are being used in the London Olympics, but he is already looking forward to the 2016 Olympics, where his research might produce the greatest payoffs. Morris is a former canoeing champion himself and considers interacting with athletes and learning what they want in their canoe or kayak to be his greatest joy. [From the Olympics special issue of *IET Member News*, July 2012.]

(3) The US drought's one bright side: This year's US drought is quite serious, affecting many farmers and costing the taxpayers an estimated \$11B in bailouts. However, the fruits and vegetables that survive the drought tend to be more flavorful; sweeter watermelons and peaches, zestier peppers, more bitter dill, carrots, and fennel, and more pungent onions and garlic. [From: *Time* magazine, issue of August 13, 2012.]

2012/08/09 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Fairy-tale villages of the Faroe Islands: [Pictorial](#)

(2) Engineering the Olympics (sustainable development): "Front and center in the mind of the [London Olympics development team] was that so many previous Olympic stadia have ended up as white elephants. ... You go around the houses [in the formerly decrepit London neighborhood slated for the Olympics games] for a few months debating that, talking to different people, and asking them if they'll be interested after the Games. ... And that's how we finished up with a demountable stadium, so that after the Games we could take it from being 80,000 seats to 25,000 seats." [From the Olympics special issue of *IET Member News*, July 2012.]

(3) Mars Rover Opportunity: The excitement over the Mars Rover Curiosity has overshadowed the accomplishments of Opportunity, another rover that recently celebrated its 3000th Martian Day by beaming back a vivid [panoramic photo](#) of the Martian landscape around it. In the photo, assembled from 817 component images taken between 21 December 2011 and 8 May 2012, you see the rover's own solar array and deck, freshly made tracks, and the largest impact crater ever observed up close by human beings.

(4) Poets should not be too open in expressing emotions: In his remarks at a gathering of poets a couple of years ago, whose text appears for the first time in a just-published book, [Khamenei badmouths](#) the popular late Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad and other unnamed female poets for lewd and ugly notions in their compositions. His advice to young women is particularly stern: observe some limits and don't go all the way to the bottom of your feelings.

2012/08/08 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A [pictorial review](#) of the London Olympics: One week in.

(2) Engineering the Olympics (communications and broadcasting): The first Olympics games to be filmed and broadcast were the 1948 London games, which were the first to be held since 1936 in Berlin. The BBC paid the whopping sum of 1000 BP for broadcast rights (a bit over 60 hours of coverage). State-of-the-art TV cameras used were the size of a very large suitcase, mounted on industrial-strength tripods. For the 2012 London games, NBC paid a reported \$1.2B to IOC. All sorts of fixed and mobile cameras are being employed and the results are stored, streamed, enhanced, and packaged for sale in many different ways, in addition to being brought to consumers via standard live and time-delayed TV broadcasting to an estimated 4 billion viewers. [From the Olympics special issue of *IET Member News*, July 2012, Wikipedia, and other sources.]

(3) Persian birthday song: In this [2-minute video clip](#), Hayedeh sings "Tavallodet Mobarak," accompanied by the song's composer, Anoushirvan Rohani, on the keyboard. By the way, Rohani has a [Web site](#), which though rather incomplete, is a treasure to his fans. It has music on the main page, video clips of some of his concerts, and more.

(4) High-speed Internet access to be provided for all of the [32,000 imamzadehs](#): Iran's Minister of Communications and Information Technology indicated that some 1200 imamzadehs have already been equipped with high-speed Internet access and the rest will get it in due course. Each imamzadeh will also have a Weblog so that pilgrims can record their experiences, making it easy for future pilgrims to determine which imamzadeh to visit for specific wishes/problems.

2012/08/07 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) An evening of Norah Jones music: We had an enjoyable night at the Santa Barbara Bowl, listening to Norah Jones in concert. She sang mostly from her new album ("The Fall," a blend of moody rock, blues, and alt-country), mixed in with a few of her classics and a couple of well-known country/blues songs. The opening act, Cory Chisel & the Wandering Sons was also quite good.

(2) More Olympics medals for Iranian athletes: Ghassem Rezaie's gold in Greco-Roman wrestling (96 kg division), Behdad Salimi's gold in weightlifting, Sajjad Anoushirvani's silver in weightlifting, and Ehsan Haddadi's silver in discus throw have brought Iran's total medal take to 4 gold, 3 silver, and 1 bronze, the country's best

ever performance in Olympics competitions. There are still more opportunities for medals in freestyle wrestling, a strong suit for Iran.

(3) Iranian universities ban the admission of girls into many majors: According to [Mehr News](#), 36 Iranian universities have collectively banned the admission of girls into 77 majors within the schools. Engineering majors lead the list, but fields such as accounting and chemistry are also included in some cases.

(4) Taking back my post about the London Olympics being a breakthrough event for women: I apologize for a previous post in which I showed excitement over the fact that for the first time ever in Olympics history, every participating nation, even Saudi Arabia, has fielded a female athlete. I fell for IOC's official propaganda, which according to the AP sports columnist [Jim Litke](#), is all show and no substance. Olympics organizers colluded with the Saudis and a couple of other countries by lowering longstanding performance thresholds for their female athletes, just to give both sides something to talk and brag about. Apparently, Saudi women, who secretly compete in underground sports leagues, worry that women's participation in the Olympics may result in a crackdown, rather than more opportunities. At the moment, there are no physical education classes for girls in Saudi Arabia. Their Olympics judo participant apparently only trained at home, coached by her father, never fighting in an organized event anywhere. She went to London with absolutely no chance of winning a single match, and all those involved in pulling this scam knew this fact. There were no news stories in the Saudi media about the participation of women from their country. If this is truly in the spirit of equal opportunity, why are the Saudis hiding it from their people?

2012/08/06 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It's not the voting that's democracy; it's the counting." ~ Tom Stoppard

(2) Curiosity [lands on Mars](#) safely: Scientists receive the expected sequence of 3 messages indicating the approximate landing position, stopping of motion, and emission of a continuous stream of communications. Images and other info should begin arriving soon.

(3) Public survey, Iranian style: In a [public survey](#) on the design of its new Persian-language Web site, Bureau of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism for Tehran Province provides three response options: Aali (Excellent), Khoob (Good), Nazari nadaaram (No comment). Very much in line with the "democracy" in the rest of the Islamic Republic!

(4) First 2012 Olympics gold medal for Iran: Greco-Roman wrestler (55 kg weight group) Hamid Sourian overcame Azerbaijan's Rovshan Bayramov to win the first gold medal of these Olympics for Iran, bringing the country's medal total to 2 (including an earlier bronze). Today's news had a second Greco-Roman wrestling gold medal for Iran, this time for Omid Noroozi in the 60 kg weight group.

(5) The US women's soccer team advances to the gold-medal match against Japan: In an exciting soccer match, USA and Canada played to a 3-3 tie in regulation, with Canada taking the lead each time and USA benefitting from some lucky breaks to tie the score. The 3 Canadian goals, a hat-trick by Christine Sinclair (a one-on-one with the US goalie and two headers), were well-deserved and beautifully executed. USA won 4-3 in the final seconds of added time in the second 15-minute overtime period.

2012/08/05 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A simple math puzzle: A pond contains a very large number n of fish, 99% of which are goldfish. How many goldfish should you remove from the pond so that 98% of those remaining are goldfish?

(2) New York City's grand plans: A new graduate engineering school, to be run by a partnership between Cornell University and Israel's Technion, will transform New York's [Roosevelt Island](#) from a symbol of urban decay to a bustling 21st-Century economic engine designed to improve the city's image as one of the world's foremost technology hubs. Groundbreaking for this product of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's visionary leadership will occur this summer.

(3) London Olympics is a [breakthrough event for women](#): For the first time ever in Olympics history, every participating nation, even Saudi Arabia, has fielded a female athlete. Yet, many hurdles remain, particularly for Muslim women who have to fight a double war with regard to participation rules and proper attire, at home and against international sporting bodies.

(4) Iranian films on YouTube: Here is a list of [120 Iranian movies](#) (cinematic and made-for-TV) that are available on YouTube. Examples include "[Meem, Mesl-e Maadar](#)" ("M, as in Mother," with Golshifteh Farahani), "[The Guests of Hotel Astoria](#)" (with Shoreh Aghdashloo), and Manijeh Hekmat's "[Women's Prison](#)" (banned in Iran).

2012/08/04 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Seeing something that isn't there: This is an interesting optical illusion. Stare at the small white dot on the nose of the negative image for 15 seconds. Then look at the blank space to the right of the

image to experience something quite unbelievable. Other examples of the same effect and similar ones can be found on [This page](#). This phenomenon, known as "**negative afterimage**," is well-studied. Apparently, if you blink your eyes quickly and repeatedly after diverting your gaze, the afterimage will last longer.



(2) Images that **look PhotoShopped**, but are not.

(3) Quote of the day: "No government kills its people, unless it's run by a crazy person." Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in an interview with ABC's Barbara Walters.

(4) Persian lyrics on [Tchaikovsky's music](#). [Same video on [YouTube](#).]

2012/08/03 (Fri.): Here are four sociopolitical items of potential interest.

(1) Women's soccer: The [US women's Olympics soccer team](#) continued its championship quest by defeating New Zealand 2-0. They will play against Canada (victors over Britain 2-0) in a semifinal match on Monday 8/6 and (I hope) in the final game against the winner of the France-Japan game on Thursday 8/9 (both games at 11:45AM PDT). In quarterfinal games, France came from behind to beat Sweden 2-1 and Japan prevailed over Brazil 2-0. If US ends up playing France in the final match, it would give France a chance to make up for its 2-4 loss to the US in the preliminary round. A match against Japan will give the US an opportunity to take revenge for the bitter loss (on penalty kicks) in the final game of last year's World Cup.

(2) An ugly sidebar to the London Olympics: "With so many Africans in Greece ... at least the West Nile mosquitoes will eat homemade food!!!" The tweet for which Greek athlete Voula Papachristou was booted from the London Games by her country's Olympic committee [From: *Newsweek* magazine, issue of August 6, 2012.]

(3) Americans' praise for the Islamic Republic of Iran: In the wake of recently announced death sentences for 4 Iranian bank officials convicted of embezzling \$3B, some praise for the swift justice appeared in the comments section of [Huffington Post](#). Apparently, Americans hate their bankers so much that they are willing to side with Iran on this one issue.

(4) The other side of the coin: It is interesting at times to take a peek at the other side of the coin. We read and write daily about the hardships faced by the Iranian people and the total lack of personal and political freedoms in that country. Yet, if you are an Iranian living in Iran and have no access to the international news media, this is what you'd see: nary a hint of those hardships or absence of freedom in the July 31, 2012, daily Persian press headlines, compiled by [Tehran Times](#) (a mouthpiece for the Islamic regime).

2012/08/02 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) US FDA approves the first swallowable electronic device: [Popular Science](#) reports on the approval by the US Food and Drug Administration of a pill that when swallowed, monitors the insides of a human body and relays the information it collects to a patch placed on the patient's skin, and from there, to a healthcare provider. The tiny pill, that contains a sand-grain-size silicon chip, generates its own power by interacting with digestive juices. Many invasive procedures, such as biopsies, may be avoidable with this development.

(2) Curiosity's Mars landing event to be shown in Times Square: NYC's Times Square has become synonymous with historical events, and NASA seems determined to exploit this status for publicity. The landing of NASA's \$2.5 billion rover on Mars, scheduled to occur at 10:31 PM PDT on Sunday August 5, 2012, **will be broadcast** on a large screen in New York City's Times Square. The indicated time is the so-called "Earth-received time," because radio signals take about 14 minutes to reach Earth from Mars. Viewers won't see real-time video of the landing, but rather will witness mission-control personnel at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory as they await the signal that indicates the rover's touchdown. [[More info on Curiosity](#)]

(3) Forty-year-old physicist wins **the most lucrative science prize**: "Nima Arkani-Hamed, a scientist at Princeton University, is among 9 scientists receiving the biggest prize (\$3,000,000 each) in theoretical physics. Nima is the son of Jafar Arkani-Hamed, former professor and chairman of Physics Department at Tehran's Sharif University of Technology."

2012/08/01 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Be fruitful and multiply (in the procreation sense, not in the math sense): Zahra Sajjadi, an official in charge of women's and family affairs at the office of the Iranian President has said that while having 2 or fewer children leads to a higher standard of living, the Islamic Revolution was not about standard of living but about making our country proud. In her view, birth control is misguided

when an estimated 20% of Iranian women are infertile. This is the same woman who had said that female prisoners should not be compelled to wear chadors, because doing so will harm the sanctity of the Islamic body cover.

(2) On clutter and material possessions: "[There is] a pretty direct correlation between the number of objects tacked to a refrigerator and the amount of clutter in the house. ... The average [American] family had 52 items on the refrigerator ... 438 books and magazines, 212 CDs, 90 DVDs and VHS tapes and 139 toys. The U.S. has 3.1% of the world's kids and 40% of its toys. ... Although most of the homes had backyards with grills, decks and pools, more than 75% of parents never spent any leisure time outdoors." Joel Klein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of August 6, 2012.

(3) Iran to have a prime minister, not a president: A taskforce of the Iranian parliament will study the removal of the President's position, replacing it with a parliament-picked Prime Minister. This completes the circle back to institutionalized dictatorship: Leader elected by the clergy handpicked by the Leader, members of parliament elected by people from among candidates approved by the clergy (i.e., Leader), Prime Minister elected by the yes-men/women of the parliament.

2012/07/31 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

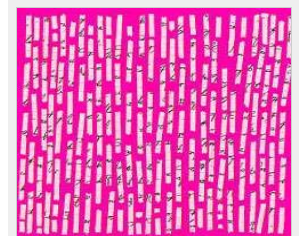
(1) Quote of the day: "The level of commitment is so much higher. If I cheat, I'm cheating on three people." A polygamist, quoted in *Time* magazine's feature on polygamy (issue of August 6, 2012), whose proponents, emboldened by the success of gay-marriage initiatives, have stepped up their efforts to gain recognition.

(2) US women's Olympics soccer team remains undefeated: US squeezes by North Korea 1-0 in a difficult win that was a bit jarring, given that US had prevailed over France 4-2 and Columbia 3-0. France had beaten North Korea 5-0 earlier, foretelling an easy win by the US side. The first elimination-round game for the US will be on Friday 8/3 (6:30 AM PDT) against New Zealand. I am looking forward to semifinal and gold-medal matches on Mon. 8/6 (9:00 or 11:45 AM PDT) and Thu. 8/9 (11:45 AM PDT).

(3) The real heroes: "I must criticize one element of your article [on soccer player Hope Solo]: An incredible amount of attention was given to her troubled dad and nary a word about the mother who struggled to hold down the fort. Sports reporting always gravitates to the unsavory characters over the workmanlike (albeit boring) heroes. To this day, we still read more about Jose Conesco than Cal Ripken Jr. Let's turn a new leaf and start celebrating the courage of the man or woman who gets up every morning and simply goes to work in order to feed his or her family." Warren Demurjian, in a letter to *Newsweek* magazine, issue of August 6, 2012.

2012/07/30 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Shredder puzzles: This image shows the pieces of a shredded document that DARPA asked participants in its challenge to reassemble to decode its handwritten message. Only one of the 9000 participating teams completed this challenge, and four more difficult ones, to win the \$50K prize. Recent algorithmic advances allow increasingly larger puzzles of this kind to be solved. These advances have raised hopes of completing within a couple of years the reassembly of a number of documents that were hand-torn and abandoned by the East German secret police. [From: *Communications of the ACM*, issue of August 2012.]

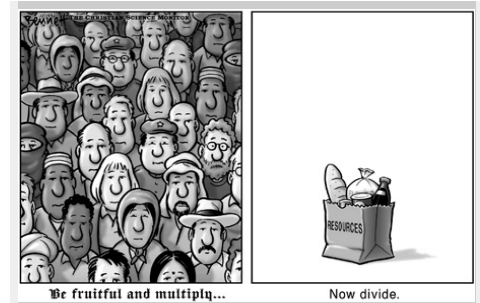


(2) Danger of polio in Afghanistan and Pakistan: The ban on polio vaccinations in tribal areas controlled by the Taliban has caused much concern among world health authorities, given the highly infectious nature of the disease. Rising infections in one area would put the entire world at risk. The Taliban fear that the CIA might use vaccination programs as means of spying on them, a fear that is not unfounded, given how a similar vaccination program was used as a pretense to collect DNA samples from the Osama bin Laden household. [From: *Time* magazine, issue of August 6, 2012.]

(3) Lesson in marital relations: An Islamic clergy **tells the story** of how Prophet Mohammad, after sleeping with a maid, promises one of his 9 wives, who was noticeably upset, that he will refrain from having sex with that maid again.

2012/07/29 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Keep your words sweet, because someday you may have to eat them." ~ Anonymous



(2) US women's Olympics soccer team to play North Korea: Already ensured of advancement to the elimination round by virtue of 4-2 and 3-0 wins over France and Colombia, the US women's soccer team will play its last preliminary-round match against North Korea on Tuesday 7/31 at 9:30 AM PDT.

(3) Iranian table-tennis player doing well in the Olympics: The 20-year-old Noshad Alamiyan wins his first two matches against opponents from Australia and Hong Kong.

(4) Heroes in the Batman movie theater tragedy: According to *Entertainment Weekly* (issue of August 3, 2012), images of heroes are emerging in the wake of the terrible massacre at the Batman movie premiere in Colorado. Two men, Jonathan Blunk and Matthew McQueen, who used their bodies to shield their girlfriends, died in the shooting, saving the women. No cape is needed for heroism.

2012/07/28 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The Brits' Olympics show: The London Olympics opening ceremony was quite entertaining and had some interesting touches, like Queen Elizabeth, accompanied by Daniel Craig (James Bond) on a pretend helicopter ride, ending with her parachuting into the stadium, and J. K. Rowling reading during a fantasy show that featured Mary Poppins and other memorable characters. The musical spoof by Rowan Atkinson (Mr. Bean) was also quite funny. It seems that the Brits decided to take the comedy and pop-music angle, rather than try to outdo the Chinese on glitz and spectacle. It worked.

(2) Khamenei says **birth control policies** in Iran are misguided: He declares that the trend of having 2 or fewer children is harmful and that Iran's population should at least double to 150M. He said nothing about what such an increase would mean to the price of chicken and other necessities. The running joke among Iranians about the dearth of eggs and chicken meat is this: which one disappeared first, the chicken or the egg?

(3) Of raccoons and other wild animals: An interesting e-mail discussion is going on within our faculty housing complex about raccoons and their place in our community. The discussion started when someone reported an aggressive raccoon that attacked a pet and a small child. After about a dozen messages, a few homeowners suggested that the raccoon family (which includes some newborns) should be trapped humanely by animal control authorities and transported to some distance place. These suggestions were informed by the near-death of a child in a nearby day-care facility owned by UCSB, the fact that UCSB had to pay a large settlement to the family of the child who developed brain damage, and our homeowners' association being similarly liable if it takes no action in the face of available information. The flood of e-mails continued, so far numbering at least 50. Some homeowners are accusing others of cruelty, with the tone becoming hostile after a dead baby raccoon was found in one of the installed traps. I for one do not appreciate certain homeowners lecturing others (who are genuinely concerned about the safety of their children, who play in the open areas of our complex, and face the prospects of serious illness from coming in contact with raccoon feces) on morality and proper behavior. One dead raccoon found in a trap in no way indicates that the trap caused its death; animals die in nature all the time from maladies, injuries, and various other causes. Drawing conclusions from incomplete information and lecturing fellow human beings is the ultimate social offense in my view.

Postscript [added on Sunday 7/29]: It turns out that the dead baby raccoon had been euthanized by animal control, after being trapped, and placed in the trap to attract the adults. It has been explained to the homeowners that the normal practice is to euthanize threatening animals that have been "citized," because their internal parasites may adversely affect the wild animal population if they are relocated. At least one homeowner has apologized for his rash e-mail message.

2012/07/26 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If you don't follow medical teachings from hundreds of years ago, why would you follow moral teachings from thousands of years ago?" ~ Anonymous

(2) Free on-line college course offerings to expand: UC Berkeley has joined Harvard and MIT in offering not-for-credit, **free on-line courses** through edX. It will also take a leadership role in edX's governing body.

(3) US off to a good start in Olympics soccer: After falling behind 0-2 against France, the US women's soccer team recovered to win its first **2012 London Olympics** game 4-2. The US will play Colombia on Sat. July 28.

(4) To find out about the 2012 London Olympics games coverage on your local TV stations in the US, go to this **Web site** and enter your zip code.

2012/07/25 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Building a miniature London in Japan: Sand artists, exhibiting incredible artistry in a very difficult medium, build a **replica of London in sand** to honor Britain and the 2012 London Olympics.

(2) The one-a-day suicide epidemic among active members of the US military (it's 18 per day when veterans are also included): In 2011, 20% of deaths for active US military personnel were due to suicides (compared with 7% for the civilian population). The bulk of these (roughly 5 out of 6) were in the US, rather than in deployment zones. Combat deaths accounted for 26%, with transport accidents being responsible for 17%.

[From: *Time* magazine, issue of July 23, 2012.]

(3) The effects of hijab on vitamin D deficiency: [Soheila Vahdati](#) writes a comprehensive piece (in Persian) on the health consequences of permanent wearing of hijab and practical methods for dealing with the resultant vitamin D deficiency. In one passage she states that those who choose to cover themselves with hijabs (when it is optional) should also take steps to minimize its health consequences. Along these lines, the British Ministry of Health has issued an advisory about vitamin D deficiency in Muslim women and their children. In societies where hijab is mandatory, so that women cannot remove it even when strolling in women-only parks, more drastic measures may be needed.

2012/07/23 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Joke of the day: "Dear Optimist, Pessimist, and Realist: While you guys were busy arguing about the glass of water, I drank it. Sincerely, The Opportunist"

(2) Responsible fast-food entrepreneur: "At his Chipotle restaurants, Steve Ells serves pasture-raised pork burritos and antibiotic-free chicken tacos. It's paying off. ... Chipotle's restaurant-level margins, at about 26%, are among the highest in the industry, despite its spending more on food than its competitors do." [From: *Time* magazine, issue of July 23, 2012.]

(3) Iran is building a [power plant in Iraq](#): All costs will be paid by Iran's Ministry of Energy as a gift to the Iraqi people. A lot of questions have been raised in the opposition media, and a few by commenters on Iran's state-sponsored media. Why this largesse, when Iran itself is in dire need of additional power plants? When Iranians are experiencing major economic hardships? When Iraq is paying billions of dollars to Kuwait as war reparations and some Iraqi lawmakers are asking that Iran should likewise pay Iraq for their 8-year war, which was started by Iraq? When Iraq owes Iran millions of dollars for energy imports? When Iraq, with its smaller population, has higher income from oil exports than Iran?

(4) Fareed Zakaria's humorous take on the skyrocketing [price of chicken in Iran](#) and a suggested ban on images of chickens shown on TV.

2012/07/22 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) A few more interesting images from the *Odd Stuff Magazine*.

Take a look at this 260-km [Chinese traffic jam](#) to appreciate the ones in your own city.

A [restaurant in Zanzibar](#) that can be reached on foot or by boat, depending on the tide.

Each floor of this amazing [tower in Dubai](#) can be rotated to change its occupants' views, giving the building a constantly changing shape.

(2) A twist on off-shoring: "The high-tech economy of Silicon Valley may be thriving, but it is short on one thing: highly skilled programmers. Visa restrictions have long kept some foreign-born techies from working on U.S. soil, but now one company has floated a new solution to the skilled-manpower shortage: house them (just slightly) offshore in the Pacific. Blueseed, which bills itself as 'Silicon Valley's visa-free offshore start-up community,' plans to anchor a converted cruise ship in international waters 12 nautical miles off Half Moon Bay, just south of San Francisco, providing a home and work site for more than 1,000 foreign entrepreneurs. No visa would be required, just a passport. The venture faces a number of challenges, not least raising the tens of millions of dollars needed to acquire and retrofit a suitable ship." [From: *Time* magazine, July 23, 2012.]

(3) Numerology (not Scientology) predicts Tom Cruise's future: Tom Cruise divorced each of his three former wives when they were 33 years old. Each was about 11.5 years younger than the previous one. Extrapolating from these data points, the next Mrs. Cruise must have been born in 1990 and will be divorced in 2023. [From: *Time* magazine, issue of July 23, 2012.]

(4) More dimensions coming to a theater near you: 3D movies have already lost their novelty. So, a South Korean company plans to bring 4D films to US theaters in 5 years, with the fourth dimension comprised of thumping seats, smoke scents, and the like. Ticket prices are expected to be about \$8 more for special 4D films. This is good news for theater owners, who saw attendance drop to a 16-year low in 2011. [From: *Time* magazine, issue of July 23, 2012.]

2012/07/21 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Test your physics knowledge: This photo has been circulating in cyberspace with descriptions such as: "This is the sunset at the North Pole with the moon at its closest point. And, you also see the sun below the moon. An amazing photo and one not easily duplicated. You may want to save this and pass on to others." I heeded the first part of the advice (saving the image), but only to challenge you to come up with an explanation of why this can't be a real photo. After thinking about it for a while, see [Snopes.com](#) to verify that the claim is a hoax and get some information about who created this artwork.



(2) World's lightest material: Scientists in two German universities have created a porous carbon material that is 75 times lighter than Styrofoam and four times lighter than the lightest human-made material to date, the nickel-based microlattice introduced six months ago. [The new material](#) weighs only 0.2 mg per cubic centimeter. A prime application might be in producing lighter, and thus more energy-efficient, batteries and electric vehicles.

(3) Tech and tech-savvy students: Even though South Korea, like the US, has started to worry that its young people, raised in affluent big cities, are increasingly pursuing higher-paying jobs outside technical fields, they are still in a better position. One in four South Korean college students majors in engineering, compared with one in 20 in the US. Their workforce is also highly tech-savvy. One reason might be that South Korea's ministries of education and science/technology are one and the same. [From the [Washington Post](#), July 17, 2012.]

(4) An Evening with Yanni under the Stars: This is the title of a concert I attended at Santa Barbara Bowl tonight. Yanni and his amazing band of musicians, including two vocalists, played a few songs from his latest album, along with many of his most memorable earlier compositions, some with fresh arrangements. The atmosphere at the Bowl was electric, as the audience cheered on excitedly through two encores. I particularly enjoyed "Nightingale," a song Yanni composed for his 1997 tribute [concert in China's Forbidden City](#).

2012/07/20 (Fri.): Gunman [kills 12, injures 59](#), at the Batman movie premier in Colorado: We are always one step behind in our reactions to violence. Movie theaters showing "The Dark Knight Rises" have stepped up security, as if the next crazy person will target theaters showing the same movie. It is easy accessibility of assault rifles that is at fault here.

Upon posting this story on Facebook, comments were offered to the effect that gun ownership is a cherished right in the US and that swift capital punishment is the answer to such crimes. My reply follows.

The Second Amendment to the US constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." [Slightly differently worded versions exist in other sources, but there is no significant difference in meaning or interpretation.] At the time the Second Amendment was written, arms included knives, swords, and rudimentary guns. I have no problem with people keeping such arms for self-protection or, collectively, to confront a central government with dictatorial tendencies. However, if you extend the definition of "arms" to include various kinds of explosives, assault rifles, or chemical/biological weapons (on the grounds that our central government and other countries possess such weapons), then you are abusing the amendment. Several references I checked agree that no US legislation has ever been struck down on Second-Amendment grounds, which is a sign of the US Supreme Court agreeing with the more limited interpretation of "arms." Requiring that guns be registered in no way conflicts with the Second Amendment, just as registration of real estate and automobiles does not infringe on property rights. Swift capital punishment is essentially in conflict with the Second Amendment. Many dictatorial governments around the world use swift executions to get rid of their political opponents by mixing them with criminals and hoping to hide their crimes via quick or secret trials. Justice must be slow to be fair.

2012/07/19 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A few interesting images from the *Odd Stuff Magazine*.

The floor of this Paris computer game store is [completely flat](#), despite what you see.

This piano-shaped [building in China](#) uses a transparent violin to house its escalator.

Between a rock and a hard place is an apt description for [this house](#) in Portugal.

(2) On physics and its strange jargon: "If physicists didn't sound so smart, you'd swear they were making half this stuff up. The universe began with a big bang called, well, the Big Bang. It's filled with wormholes and superstrings, dark matter and galactic bubbles, and assembled from little specks of stuff called fermions and leptons, top quarks and charm quarks, all of it glued together by, yes, gluons—and if you claim you understand a bit of it, you're probably lying too." [Introduction to an article on the Higgs boson discovery, in *Time* magazine, issue of July 23, 2012.]

(3) An iceberg twice the size of Manhattan break offs from the [Petermann Glacier](#) in northern Greenland: It is interesting that statistically, each of the recent events (record number of storms, inordinate flooding, hundreds of temperature records set this summer, and ice caps melting) can be explained by normal fluctuations, as critics of the global-warming theory point out. However, all of these happening in rapid succession is a sure sign of something more than statistical variations.

2012/07/18 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I love everybody. Some I love to be around, some I love to avoid, and others I'd love to punch in the face." ~ Anonymous

(2) Wearing 50 pounds of bees [don't click on [this link](#) if you can't bear to see a man completely covered with bees]: "On his way to second place in a bee-wearing contest in Hunan Province, a contestant disappears

beneath a carpet of insects lured by a queen bee in a cage. A scale he was standing upon tallied his total take: about 50 pounds of bees." [From: *National Geographic*, issue of August 2012.]

(3) Sizing up the animal species: "Seventy million years ago the largest known mammal weighed only six pounds. From then, some animals grew steadily. But slowly. Large-scale changes in body size actually took millions of generations." To get an animal the size of an elephant from one the size of a sheep, for example, requires some 1.6 million generations. The process can go backwards at a higher speed: it takes 0.1 million generations for an elephant-size land mammal to decrease 100-fold to the size of a sheep. [From: *National Geographic*, issue of August 2012.]

(4) African Union's **first female leader**: The US and Iran are quite different in many ways, but they share one thing in common: neither has had a woman in its top leadership position. It's interesting to try to guess which one will be the first to follow in the African Union's footsteps.

2012/07/17 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.



(1) Humankind must not forget these evils: The sign at the entrance to an Auschwitz compound on the left of this composite photo says (in German) "Work Sets You Free." Inside the compound, however, the Nazis had other ideas for how their detainees should be set free. [From an [Iranian.com pictorial](#).]

(2) Poetic humor of Mr. Haloo: Prolific humorist [Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam](#) suggests alternate verses for Nezami's epic love story "Khosro o Shirin" in order to satisfy the government censors, who, after 900 years, have suggested some cuts to the classic work of Persian poetry.

(3) An interesting blog on religious laws: Ari Siletz clarifies one of the peculiarities of [Beth Din](#), the Jewish version of the Islamic Sharia law, via an entertaining example linked to game theory.

2012/07/16 (Mon.): [Book review] Gow, Christopher, *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places in-Between: Reframing Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

Summary: An outsider's view of domestic and emigre Iranian cinemas, with the thesis that the "new" post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is in fact a continuation of rich filmmaking traditions that were merely interrupted by the Islamic Revolution.

[*Note:* You can also read this review on [Iranian.com](#), along with possible reader comments.]

Cinema has always been a puzzle in Iran. During the Shah's regime, it was both an ally and a thorn in the side of the dictator. Movies were made to entertain and distract audiences or to sing the praises of the King of Kings, who was moving Iran toward "the Great Civilization." There were also films with direct or thinly disguised political messages that would never see the light of day or were screened only after the censors were satisfied through cuts, alternate dialog, or, occasionally, changes in the storyline.

In the first couple of decades after the Islamic revolution, things hardly changed as a matter of principle: we had propaganda films and independent (art) films. The former toed the official line of sanctioned themes and storylines, while the latter experienced a period of dormancy as new rules were being laid out, and then tried to stay afloat through innovative storytelling within the rigid framework on what was and was not allowed. A prime casualty was depiction of women in satisfying and complex roles; children, on the other hand, became major characters in films because they could act and talk rather freely, and lament over their harsh living conditions, without getting the filmmaker into trouble. Childlike dialog or playfulness was acceptable where their adult counterparts might have fallen prey to censors.

It isn't until pp. 57-59 that we find out what this book is about: "The paradoxes of the new Iranian cinema are many: new yet old; global yet local; modernist yet postmodern; Islamic yet secular. A better understanding of these paradoxes is nevertheless crucial to the more comprehensive panorama of Iranian filmmaking ... Iranian filmmakers are very conscious of how they and their country are perceived. They are more than aware of who is watching them, whether the glance is cast from outside or from within their own country."

The author is distressed by the fact that foreign audiences sometimes act as if the new Iranian Cinema is a product of the Islamic Revolution, thus overlooking the filmmaking traditions and influences that preceded them.

"More often than not the Revolution is perceived as a catalyst for, rather than an interruption of, Iranian cinema's creative renaissance" [p. 3]. The rich pre-revolutionary traditions of Iranian cinema are often overlooked in the West [p. 10]. The progressive image of Iran that has emerged through its cinematic success, and the associated prestige enjoyed by Iranian filmmakers, is in stark contrast to the clichés of bearded men, veiled women, raised fists, and blindfolded hostages parading endlessly in Western media [p. 41].

The Islamic regime thought, for a while, that it could exploit this new prestige to boost its image abroad, but in the end, decided that cinema was more trouble than help. Recently, regime officials have stepped up their attacks against film artists, actresses in particular, as exemplified by one referring to Leila Hatami's very modest outfit at the Cannes Film Festival as "lewd" and Mashregh News manufacturing a fake news story about Shohreh Aghdashloo's supposed drug abuse. It was within this troubling new context, which was of course unknown to the author when he wrote his manuscript, that I began writing this review.

One interesting dilemma of the author was coming up with a precise definition of what constitutes Iranian cinema [p. 64]. The success of Iranian filmmakers has made projects with international financing, and participation by foreign artists, quite common in recent years. Should one count a film directed by an Iranian, but featuring cast and crew from other nationalities, as an Iranian film? What about emigre or exiled artists? Is a film made by Iranians living in Germany still part of Iranian cinema? How does the question of exile vs. diaspora (as analyzed by Hamid Naficy; p. 71) figure in this regard?

Hence, the author's decision to devote separate chapters to native and emigre Iranian cinemas (Chapters 1-2, comprised of 51 and 66 pages, respectively). He augments these two main chapters with "close ups" on filmmakers Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless (Chapters 3-4, 20 and 43 pages). The foregoing chapters are sandwiched between short introductory and concluding chapters (8 and 12 pages). The book ends with notes (12 pp.), bibliography (10 pp.), filmography (3 pp.), and index (7 pp.).

Acknowledging his limitations as a non-Iranian observer of Iranian cinema, the author hopes that his "foreigner" status can help bring a new perspective to an area of study that has been dominated by Iranian academics working in the West, stating parenthetically that many Iranians have found Kiarostami's films just as challenging and problematic as the author has.

I have written elsewhere (see my review of *The Politics of Iranian Cinema*) that critics are often too kind to Iranian cinema (and to art films, in general): "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."

If a microphone or a flying plane appears in a scene from a movie set in ancient times, it is normally identified as a sign of a low-budget B-movie. In an art film, the same faux pas may be construed as a clever device for mixing fiction and reality. The author is aware of the corrupting influences of film festivals on national cinemas, quoting Bill Nichols [p. 42]: "Films from nations not previously regarded as prominent film-producing countries [such as Iran in 1989] receive praise for their ability to transcend local issues and provincial tastes while simultaneously providing a window onto a different culture."

The book treats the Islamization of domestic Iranian cinema and what it has meant to various film genres rather superficially. The effects of Islamization on women is discussed in the context of this quote from Hamid Naficy [pp. 47-48]: "It is in the portrayal and treatment of women that the tensions surrounding the Islamization of cinema crystallize ... Muslim women must be shown to be chaste ... not to be treated like commodities or used to arouse sexual desires ... [which] meant that until recently women were often filmed in long-shot, with few close-ups or facial expressions."

Chapter 2 on Iranian emigre cinema begins with a lengthy discussion of the distinction between exile versus diaspora, with minimal cinematic content. Part of the reasons for a lack of focus on films in this chapter is the author's difficulty in obtaining copies of films in this category. It is interesting that the author is compelled to discuss in this chapter "The House of Sand and Fog" [p. 120], a film about an Iranian family that has little to do with Iranian cinema. The film is made relevant to the discussion by the fact that it introduced the difficulties of life in exile to mainstream international audiences. These same difficulties were prominent in emigre films immediately after the revolution, when storylines focused on dislocation, anxiety over visas, dealing with racism and hostility toward people of Iranian origins, but they did not attract as much attention.

It is increasingly true that for some filmmakers, freedom of expression and professional fulfillment trump nationality. In an interview with Hamid Naficy, Saless once showed his trepidation over this issue [p. 187]: "I must admit with extreme sadness that I have no nostalgic longing for Iran. When each morning I set foot outside my house ... I would feel at home, because I had no difficulties. ... I think one's homeland is not one's place of birth, but the country that gives one a place to stay, to work, and to make a living." Yet, even though Saless spent much of his filmmaking career in Germany, there is an unmistakable similarity between his work and that of Kiarostami [p. 187]. Unlike Saless, however, Naderi's work is assessed as exhibiting "a clean break with his filmmaking past upon moving to the United States" [pp. 145-146].

Having read this book, I agree with the author that his outsider's views and analyses have enriched the discussion of Iranian cinema. At the end of Chapter 2, two films by directors who returned to Iran after 20-year absences are noted as examples of collaborative efforts between Iranian local and emigre filmmakers: Parviz Kimiavi's "Iran is My Land" (1999) and Fariborz D. Diaan's "Iran Is My Home" (2003).

This blending of approaches and styles is viewed as inevitable by the author [p. 199]: "History has proven that very few national cinemas are capable of sustaining indefinitely the interest of foreign audiences. The decline in popularity of the New Iranian Cinema is, therefore, perhaps an inevitability." Cinema has assumed a transnational nature and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to draw boundaries between what used to be distinctive national cinemas in Europe and elsewhere. Even the lines between art films and Hollywood-style commercial movies are becoming blurred.

2012/07/15 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) My family and I had fun at Santa Barbara's French Festival at Oak Park today. We watched Moroccan belly dancing, listened to Polynesian music, and ate overpriced hot dogs, crepes, waffles, and other "French" food.

(2) Amazing [panoramic views of Taj Mahal](#) (clicking on helicopter icons will change your viewpoint).

(3) S. N. Bose, the invisible man: There were stories in the news that Pakistanis want nothing to do with their Nobel Laureate physicist Mohammad Abdus Salam (1926-1996), whose work helped the recent experimental confirmation of the Higgs boson particle, because he belonged to the wrong Islamic sect. Now, according to the July 17, 2012, issue of [Newsweek magazine](#), Indians are upset over the insufficient credit given to physicist Setyendra Nath Bose, whose work Einstein honored in naming the boson particles. "Boson famous, Bose remains forgotten," headlined an Indian paper. The Indian government has issued a press release on the topic.

(4) Some facts about our on-line addition [From [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of July 16, 2012]:

A third of smartphone users go online before getting out of bed.

80 percent of vacationers bring along laptops or smartphones so they can check in with work while away.

Mothers are now breastfeeding and bottle-feeding their babies as they text.

The brains of Internet addicts ... look like the brains of drug and alcohol addicts.

2012/07/13 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Fact of the day: "[Heat waves kill more people](#) in the U.S. than any other weather phenomenon, including tornadoes and hurricanes, and they're only going to get worse. ... Given how serious severe heat can be, one would think more people would embrace expert advice on staying safe. ... Americans tend to strip down as soon as summer comes, the skimpier the better. In the desert though, they know better; to combat the heat, you have to cover up."

(2) History's largest broadcasting operation: "The last time London hosted the Olympics was in 1948, the first year the games were broadcast to home televisions. Lauded at the time as a huge technological achievement, the operation would be considered quaint by today's standards. As the sole broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corp. shot the competitions with three then-state-of-the-art Emitron cameras wired to two control vans parked outside the famous Empire Stadium and its nearby pool (now Wembley Stadium and Arena). From the vans, engineers relayed pictures through coaxial cables strung along telephone poles to a central studio, where a producer chose the best program to pass on to the BBC's only transmission station, at Alexandra Palace. The broadcasts, totaling 68 hours 29 minutes, reached just 500 000 viewers—most within a 65-kilometer radius. Sixty-four years later, broadcasting the Olympics from London couldn't be more different. By the start of the games this month, thousands of engineers, technicians, and producers from 148 broadcasting organizations will have descended on London in anticipation of the world's largest broadcast operation to date. Every event will be shot in high definition and, for the first time, streamed live over the Internet. Nearly 5 billion people will watch the games on home televisions, PCs, tablets, and smartphones." [[IEEE Spectrum](#), issue of July 2012.]

(3) A Conversation with my 12-year-old self: Jeremiah McDonald made a VHS tape in which he posed some questions to himself 20 years later. Recently, the 32-year-old Jeremiah discovered the tape and edited in his answers, creating [a video](#) that has gone viral on YouTube (7M views).

2012/07/12 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Apes with apps: Can apes really learn human language, or do they just mimic humans? Using specially designed apps on tablet computers, scientists have determined that a small group of bonobos they studied can in fact become great communicators. [From: [IEEE Spectrum](#), issue of July 2012.]

(2) David Brooks on the opportunity gap in America: "Political candidates will have to spend less time trying to exploit class divisions and more time trying to remedy them—less time calling their opponents out of touch elitists, and more time coming up with agendas that comprehensively address the problem. It's politically tough to do that, but the alternative is national suicide." [from the [New York Times](#).]

(3) No political prisoners in Iran: Both president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and human rights official Javad Larijani

have claimed that [Iran has no political prisoners](#). Technically, they are both correct, but this is because political offenses are not defined in Iranian law. Several times over the past century, both before and after the Islamic revolution, attempts were made to enact laws that define political offenses, but nothing came out of these attempts, because dictatorial rulers prefer vagueness in this arena. This allows them to accuse opponents, political or otherwise, of acting against national security. So, all the writers, poets, reporters, artists, and lawyers currently in Iranian prisons are not considered political detainees, but national security threats, by the Islamic rulers.

2012/07/11 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) The Higgs boson subatomic particle: Discovery of the so-called "God Particle" engendered serious discussions and also much humor, like [this cartoon](#).
- (2) Man has driven 3M miles in his beloved 1966 Volvo: Remember this [world record](#) the next time you feel like complaining about your old clunker having more than 100K miles on it.
- (3) Iranian poet's prison sentence: [Mostafa Badkoobei](#), poet and political dissident, has been sentenced to a 3-year prison term and a 5-year ban on reading poetry in public. [Here is [one of his memorable poems](#).]
- (4) Badmouthing Iranian actresses: As part of its crusade against cinema and film artists, the Islamic regime in Iran is conducting a systematic campaign against actresses, both inside and outside Iran, calling them names and accusing them of being morally despicable; the more popular and successful an actress, the viler the attacks against her. Leila Hatami was condemned by a regime official for her "lewd" outfit at the Cannes Film Festival. The latest victim of this campaign is Shohreh Aghdashloo, who according to a report in *Mashregh* (full of grammatical errors and childish prose, with no credible source cited), has not been offered any Hollywood roles in recent years because of her addiction to drugs, a claim that is readily refuted through an on-line search for her filmography.

2012/07/09 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Optical illusions: I had shared some of these [8 very interesting optical illusions](#) before, but this piece in *Woman's Day* is still worth posting.
- (2) Ernest Borgnine dead at 95: He wasn't a glamorous or leading-man actor (one exception being in the film "Marty," for which he won an Oscar), but he was versatile and appeared in many [memorable movies](#). May he rest in peace!
- (3) Al-Ghazali's quest for the ultimate reality: One of the best-known Persian philosophers and Islamic thinkers was a prolific writer who influenced other luminaries around the world. This [80-minute documentary film](#) overviews the life and works of the man known as "the alchemist of happiness." The first Persian comment posted on Iranian.com contains interesting background info and links to additional references.

2012/07/08 (Sun.): Palca, J. and F. Lichtman, *Annoying: The Science of What Bugs Us*, Wiley, 2011.

NPR journalists Palca and Lichtman have done a fantastic job of collecting in this highly recommended book the current state of human knowledge about what annoys us and why. They begin by asserting that annoyance is an understudied topic and that we still have a long way to go before we understand the causes and consequences of this important human emotion.

Realizing in the middle of a baking project that you don't have eggs is annoying, because you now have to go out to get them. Lack of eggs interferes with your goal. "Whether it's a fly diverting your attention, a dripping faucet preventing you from sleeping, a traffic jam keeping you from reaching your destination, ... or those twist ties that are attached to every part of a toy in its box for protection during shipping, ... annoyances slow you down in some way." Besides interfering with your goals, other kinds of annoyances include physical discomfort and violation of social rules [p. 134].

A number of common annoyances result from unexpected or puzzling events, because we humans are information-seeking, prediction-loving beings [p. 4]. We are annoyed by people talking on their cell phones in a restaurant, in part because we hear half of a conversation (a halfalogue). Our brain is programmed to extract as much information as it can from the environment and when we hear only half of a story and can't make sense of it, we become annoyed. If the phone conversation is in a language we don't know, we can tune it out, but if we do understand the language, we find it impossible not to pay attention. To make things worse, we are at a loss about when the conversation will end; thus the element of unpredictability adds to the annoyance.

Paradoxically, for many positive attributes that we seek in a friend or mate, there is a flip side that can become annoying over time [p. 153]. Nice and agreeable can later become passive and softie; strong-willed can become stubborn; a risk-taker can become an irresponsible parent; laid-back can turn into lazy; a successful person can become a workaholic. People find arrogance annoying, but arrogant people do not consider themselves annoying. In general, people who are annoying don't realize that they are annoying.

Annoyance is a function of culture (more generally, emotions are shaped by culture). In the US, conformity is

annoying and individuality is praised. The Japanese saying "the nail that stands out gets pounded down" embodies the opposite view. Thus applying make-up in public (a sign of individuality and self-importance) may be acceptable in the US but it is deemed annoying in Japan. However, certain things are universally annoying. Among the latter are the aforementioned cell-phone conversation, bodily noises, skunk smell, and the sound of fingernails on a blackboard.

What is annoying to people is also a function of the pace of life in their culture. In a fast-paced culture, any tardiness in your appointment or flight departure may be annoying, whereas in a slow-paced culture you may think nothing of someone offering you a cup of tea and engaging in small-talk before attending to your business. On p. 181 of the book, the authors offer a table that lists various indicators of the pace of life (walking speed, postal delivery time, accuracy of clocks in public places) and relate them to an overall pace of life (Switzerland is first, Japan 4th, US 16th, Mexico 31st).

Research on how and why we get annoyed is made difficult by the subjectivity of the topic. If you ask people to rate their annoyance on a 1-10 scale, the 10 of one person may be quite different from the 10 of another [p. 38]. Similarly, there is no way to objectively measure "saltiness" or "bitterness"; there are supertasters with much greater sensitivity to food flavors than normal people. Such scales work well on an individual basis: if you describe the level of your pain as "7" and a pain-killer reduces it to "3," this is meaningful measurement. But you can't use such scales to compare across groups of people. It is obvious that annoyance has a range of intensities, but not so clear how one could go about measuring it.

Some annoyances have their roots in our evolutionary past and are caused by things that are bad for us. We know, for example, why the sound of vomiting is annoying (we are programmed to avoid sickness). No one knows, however, why fingernail on chalkboard is annoying [p. 58]. A skunk wants to be as annoying as possible, because for it being annoying means staying alive. The authors tell an interesting story about the myth of tomato juice taking the skunk smell away. It turns out that the receptors in your nose tire of sending signals to your brain, so after a while, you just get used to an annoying smell and tune it out. Therefore, if you are bathing your pet in tomato juice, by the time you are done, the smell does not bother you anymore and you think that the tomato juice eliminated the odor.

Part of annoyance is also genetic. Absence of certain genes in mice has been shown to make them more annoying. When replacements for the missing genes are provided, hyper-aggressive mice turn back into normal mice. People with bipolar disorder are more easily annoyed, and there is some support for the hypothesis that the lack of a similar gene is to blame. There is evidence that annoyance isn't just mild anger. The body experiences physical changes when we are annoyed, but at this point, we don't know for sure whether the physical changes are the causes or results of annoyance.

Interestingly, while science has ignored the topic of annoyance, the world of arts has not. Books, movies, and plays are full of annoying characters, with writers and artists exhibiting a canny ability to create such characters. In particular, sitcoms thrive on having a host of annoying characters, whom, for the most part, we enjoy watching. Perhaps this acts as a pressure release mechanism for all those instances when we are annoyed but can't display our annoyance. Or perhaps we are relieved that it's not happening to us but to some TV character.

One way to fight annoyance is to take advantage of your capacity for "intentional blindness." If you are scanning the rows of a theater for an open seat, you may walk by a close friend without noticing him, even if he waves at you. You are so focused on the task of finding a seat that you tune everything else out. So, when something annoys you, don't dwell on it. Instead, focus on your goals. Experiments have shown that when people are given specific tasks and are incentivized to perform them well, they tend to miss a lot of other details. In a now classic experiment, a majority of observers did not notice the appearance of a person in a gorilla suit at the center of a scene, when they were focused on counting the number of passes thrown between two players.

The authors sum up their views in this final paragraph [p. 244]: "So, as a last-ditch effort, remember that bad feelings—on the whole—usually aren't so bad. They signal that something is wrong, which throws into relief that things usually aren't. If overhearing an annoying halfalogue is your biggest problem, buy some earplugs and be thankful." This is great advice!

2012/07/06 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) A rather fun way to learn Persian: [Short video](#) describing the concept of "tarof," while teaching the words and phrases associated with it. Apparently, this is one of several videos/podcasts in the series "Chai & Conversation." This is the [first video/podcast](#) in the series.
- (2) Fareed Zakaria's commencement address: The Harvard graduate delivers an intelligent [18-minute speech](#) at his alma mater, crediting the school with teaching him how to think.
- (3) Poor hijab is a sign of mental disorders: According to the semi-official [Fars News Agency](#) of Iran (in a Persian-language report), a woman psychologist has attributed poor hijab, or lack of it, to mental problems such

as hysteria, inferiority complex, sadism, and masochism, elaborating that such women like to inflict on themselves pains associated with prostitution and moral corruption. This assessment is extremely disturbing, coming from a woman and a psychologist.

(4) Robot avatars a step closer to reality: According to UK's *New Scientist*, "researchers with the international Virtual Embodiment and Robotic Re-embodiment project used fMRI to scan the brain of university student Tirosh Shapira as he imagined moving different parts of his body." A team at Israel's Bar-Ilan University "first took Shapira through several training stages in which he attempted to direct a virtual avatar by thinking of moving his left or right hand or his legs. The scanner works by measuring changes in blood flow to the brain's primary motor cortex, and using this the team was able to create an algorithm that could distinguish between each thought of movement."

2012/07/05 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Explaining the observance of the **Higgs boson subatomic particle:** Physicist Victor Stenger explains what it means to "discover" new subatomic particles that live for a tiny fraction of a second, before disappearing.

(2) About the photo I posted on July 3: The Zip disk was top of the line for its day in terms of capacity (an amazing 100 MB). The typewriter "golf ball" holds one of the Persian fonts that were available for IBM Selectric. An electrical mechanism would rotate the ball and tilt it, before striking it on a plastic ribbon situated in front of the paper, thereby making an impression of one letter in black or red (selectable by pressing a button). I typed the camera-ready copy of my first textbook "Computer Appreciation" (published in 1984) using an IBM Selectric typewriter and this font ball.

(3) Weighty nations: I love statistics, particularly when they reveal things that are counterintuitive. At 180 lbs (43 lbs over the world average), the US population is first in the world in terms of weight. This part isn't surprising. Here are the next five countries, with average weights shown in parenthesis: Kuwait (171), Qatar (169), Croatia (168), UAE (167), Egypt (163). [Info from: *Time* magazine, issue of July 9, 2012.]

(4) Pakistani man **burned for blasphemy:** An angry mob drags an accused man who was in police custody for blasphemy, pours gas on him, and scorches him to death.

2012/07/04 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest on the US Independence Day.

(1) Quotes of the day: "Freedom is nothing but a chance to be better." ~ Albert Camus
"Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves." ~ Abraham Lincoln

(2) Happy 4th of July: "Here's what we're not taught [about the Declaration and Constitution]: Those words at the time they were written were blazingly, electrifyingly subversive. If you understand them truly now, they still are. You are not taught—and it is a disgrace that you aren't—that these men and women were radicals for liberty; that they had a vision of equality that was a slap in the face of what the rest of their world understood to be the unchanging, God-given order of nations; and that they were willing to die to make that desperate vision into a reality for people like us, whom they would never live to see." ~ Naomi Wolf, *The End of America: A Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*

(3) Be safe on this July 4th: "A statistician made a few calculations and discovered that since the birth of our nation more lives had been lost in celebrating independence than in winning it." ~ Curtis Billings

(4) Fireworks in Goleta: Today, our family went to Girsch Park for live music (by the local band Area 51, billed as "Santa Barbara's hottest dance band") and a fireworks spectacular. We were pretty close to where the fireworks show was staged and enjoyed it immensely.

2012/07/03 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Does anyone remember these two objects? One is much older than the other, and they are both obsolete. I found these in my office today, while doing some summer clean-up.

(2) Avizenis wins the Eckert-Mauchly Award: For his pioneering contributions to fault-tolerant computing and computer arithmetic, Dr. Algirdas Avizenis (UCLA Emeritus Professor; my former PhD advisor), has been honored with the prestigious IEEE/ACM **Eckert-Mauchly Award**.

(3) Relentless **heat wave in the eastern US:** Millions of homes remain without power and records are being broken daily. Yesterday's temperature map was almost completely red, meaning high temperatures of 90-100 degrees nearly everywhere in the continental US. Meanwhile, the western US is struggling with wildfires due to very dry conditions.

(4) Andy Griffith dead at 86: The **legendary actor** (1926-2012) was best known for "The Andy Griffith Show" and his role in it as a small-town sheriff. In his later years, Griffith acted in "Matlock," a series of legal dramas on TV, of which I watched quite a few episodes, mostly during reruns. May he rest in peace!



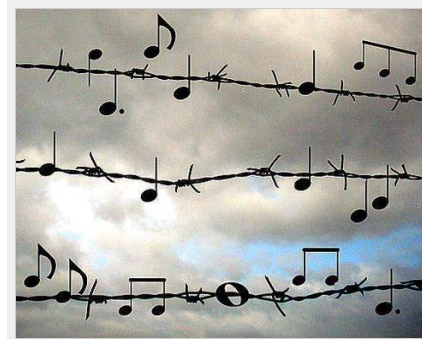
2012/07/02 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Music as a potent weapon: "First occupied by the Soviets in 1939, then by the Nazis, and then by the Soviets again, Estonia lived through decades of terror. By the end of World War II, more than one-quarter of the population had been deported to Siberia, been executed, or had fled the country. Music sustained the Estonian people during those years, helping to maintain the Estonian language and sense of culture. It was such a crucial part of their struggle for freedom that their successful bid to re-establish their independence is known as the Singing Revolution." [From the introduction to "[The Singing Revolution](#)."] **The Singing Revolution.**"

Perhaps Iranian music and film can play similar roles, and this may be why they are viewed with contempt by the Islamic rulers.

(2) A simple exercise that helps you lose weight: Turn your head to the left, and then to the right. Repeat many times. Perform this exercise whenever you are offered sweets or other high-calorie foods.

(3) Gay celebs continue to come out: The latest addition to the wave of revelations about the sexual orientation of public personalities and other celebrities is Anderson Cooper, CNN news anchor, who has come out in an on-line letter published by [The Daily Beast](#).



2012/07/01 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A math puzzle: Consider a triangle ABC and a point D inside it. Is it necessarily the case that sum of the lengths of AD and DC is less than the sum of the lengths AB and BC?

(2) Spain beats Italy convincingly to win the Euro Cup 2012 on **four beautifully executed goals** from precision passes. With the 4-0 win, Spain sets a record for the biggest margin of victory in the European championship finals.

(3) US dollar **surpasses 20,000 rials** in Iran: The price of gold also rises sharply, indicating that the rial has been substantially weakened. Meanwhile, an Iranian official has said, apparently with a straight face, that the event is a bubble, induced by political manipulations, because the price of gold in international markets has not changed at all. Either this official is lying through his teeth, or he should be sent to take Econ 101 to learn that when the price of gold goes up in one place and not in others, it is because the local currency is losing its value.

2012/06/29 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest about Iran.

(1) Iranian Vice President **blames Israel and Talmud** (Jewish religious laws) for worldwide drug trade and abuse: He claims that Zionists and the Jewish state are bent on destroying non-Jews through promoting drugs and various other means.

(2) Women's achievements and rights in Iran: Before the Islamic revolution of 1979, women were far from being treated as equal in Iran, but they were moving in the direction of gaining broader rights and greater equality. **This article** (in Persian) contains a timeline of women's-rights events in Iran, before and after the revolution. It states that at one point during the late 1970s, there were 22 women in the Iranian parliament, 2 in the senate, and 333 (20%) in regional councils. Also, 5 mayors, 1 governor, 1 cabinet minister, and 3 vice-ministers were women.

(3) Reza Pahlavi's doublespeak: In an **interview with Focus**, a German on-line magazine, Reza Pahlavi has apparently said that he is the lawful king of Iran, that he might play a role similar to Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi, and that his father preferred to focus on education before democracy. Here, I do not want to challenge the veracity of these statements. I just point out that they are in stark contrast to what Mr. Pahlavi has said elsewhere, particularly in his Persian interviews. His official Web site has denied that he made these statements and attributes them to mistranslation. [[Persian translation](#) of his interview.]

2012/06/28 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The world's largest cave: The incompletely explored cave, located in Vietnam, has a forest inside it and can accommodate a skyscraper. See this [National Geographic pictorial](#).

(2) Sixty photos of sights and places: You'll never run out of **interesting places** to visit on earth.

(3) President Obama's **health care reform upheld** by the US Supreme Court: Instead of Justice Kennedy casting the decisive vote alongside the four liberal justices, as everyone expected, it was Chief Justice Roberts who joined them, writing that the health care mandate is not unconstitutional because it is similar to a tax.

(4) Animal rights eloquently defended: Philip Wollen's **10-minute talk** about how removing all animals from our diets can help solve many of the pesky world problems.

2012/06/27 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) An awe-inspiring musical display: In this [19-minute video](#), 10,000 amateur choristers participate in rendering Beethoven's 9th.

(2) The living bridge: In a region of India, where heavy rainfall can wash away even the sturdiest, most advanced human-made bridges, an [ancient technology](#) of building bridges by redirecting the branches and roots of trees has thrived for centuries.

(3) London Mayor declares his city ready for the 2012 summer Olympics: In a witty interview with *Time* magazine, issue of June 25, 2012, Boris Johnson says that he is not trying to outdo China: "Beijing was wonderful, but we don't have the capacity to spend half our defense budget on fireworks." He also pitches in on other topics, such as elections, risky banking practices in London, and Keith Richards.

[A June 25 piece in *Newsweek* magazine identifies Johnson as the first stand-up comic to be elected mayor of a major city, adding that on the Daily Show, he offered to accept New York City refugees who are distraught by the city's ban on supersize sodas.]

2012/06/26 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest on education.

(1) Quote of the day: "Now I'm the father of four and find myself subject to the same impulses and cultural encouragements that influence other parents of means. ... And while they're special to me beyond expression, I recognize my kids—like my students—are no more or less important than anyone else's, no more or less deserving of happy, productive lives, lives that shake a joyous fist at mortality, lives that matter beyond themselves." [David McCullough, Jr., in his ["My Turn" essay](#), *Newsweek* magazine, June 25, 2012.]

(2) America's need for a reality check: "There's a growing dystopian groundswell of opinion that we've given our children everything—except for the thing they need most and the thing no one can provide, the ability to find their own core passion without artificial support. And the understanding of how much work, how much sheer effort, it takes to succeed. ... Today's kids inhabit a world where the cultural hype they have been fed at home and at school about how wonderful they are is about to meet a rude comedown. ... Bowed down by a decade's worth of college debt, these kids are going to have to be pretty special—and very lucky—to live anywhere near as well as their parents did. And nothing about their upbringing prepared them for this. Perhaps we should allow them one last summer of grand illusion." From [Tina Brown's editorial](#), in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of June 25, 2012.

(3) Free on-line courses: Recently, I was introduced to [Education Portal Academy](#), a repository of free on-line educational courses. I listened to the first 7-minute clip in the course Psychology 101 and found it interesting. As a plus, you don't even have to log in or register to access the courses.

2012/06/25 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) MIT building hacked for playing Tetris: A group of MIT students secretly installed colored lights on window sills and hacked the electrical control system of a campus building, essentially converting its face to a giant screen for playing the [game of Tetris](#).

(2) Millionaire-friendly countries: The US is ranked 7th in the world in terms of the number of millionaires, as a fraction of the population (4%). Singapore (17%), Qatar (14%), Kuwait (12%), Switzerland (10%), Hong Kong (9%), and UAE (5%) have more millionaires in relative terms. [Info from: *Time* magazine, June 25, 2012.]

(3) History of money: Cashless society has become a cliché, even though so far it hasn't quite materialized. Now we hear cries of a plasticless society (no credit cards), where cell phones double as electronic wallets. Money has come a long way from the days of gold coins to 0s-and-1s in computer memories. The June 2012 issue of *IEEE Spectrum* contains the article "A Brief History of Money: or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace the Abstraction," which also offers a timeline of important events in the evolution of money to its current form. Here is a quote from the article.

"When the Federal Reserve wants to increase the money supply, it doesn't have to go looking for El Dorado. Neither does it phone up the United States Mint and order it to start printing more dollars; in fact, only about 10 percent of the U.S. money supply—about \$1 trillion of the roughly \$10 trillion total—exists in the form of paper cash and coins. ... When a bank makes a loan, it typically just puts the money into the borrower's bank account, whether or not it has that money on hand—banks are allowed to lend more money than they have in their reserves. And so with each home equity loan, car loan, and mortgage, banks add incrementally to the money supply."

2012/06/24 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest from the worlds of business and entertainment.

(1) Where people get their coffee: According to *Time* magazine, issue of June 25, 2012, 29% of people get their Joe at home, 25% at Starbucks, 16% at McDonald's, and 11% at Dunkin Donuts. All other sources combined account for only 19%.

(2) Greek-style yogurt on the rise in the US: The [Greek yogurt](#) market share has expanded from near-zero to

about a quarter of the \$8B industry in the US within five years. A key player in this expansion is Hamdi Ulukaya, a Turk who created Chobani Greek Yogurt and made it into an American business success story.

(3) Virtual Elvis and MJ are on their way: Recently, Tupac Shakur made his Coachella debut as a hologram, which made concert promoters contact and obtain the blessings of the estates for a number of artists such as Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Michael Jackson. Holographic versions of these and other artists should begin to appear in concerts soon. Expect a whole lot of shaking from the virtual artists. [Info from: *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of June 29, 2012.]

2012/06/23 (Sat.): Here are three items about centennial celebrations in science and technology.

(1) Google's Turing Machine: Today is the 100th anniversary of Alan Turing's birth. To honor the day, Google has constructed a Turing Machine on its search portal page, which is programmed to count up in binary.

(2) We must learn from the loss of Alan Turing: Mike Lynch's [insightful article](#) on how the society failed Turing and what his loss teaches us.

(3) *Proceedings of the IEEE's Centennial Issue*: Volume 100, No. 8, of this flagship IEEE journal contains a number of surveys, historical reviews, and forecasts for the coming century. Articles in this issue are open-access and can be read by anyone. Of particular interest is [this review](#) entitled "Spaceflight: The Development of Science, Surveillance, and Commerce in Space" on pp. 1785-1818. The fascinating survey is preceded by a prolog, on pp. 1782-1784, written by Dr. Faramarz Davarian, Manager of the Advanced Engineering Program for NASA's Deep Space Network at JPL. Here is the first page in the 3-page [table of contents](#) for the special Centennial issue.

2012/06/22 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest on scientific ethics.

(1) The Ethics of Science: This is the title of a very useful volume, which should be required reading for every scientist and engineer. The book can be downloaded for free in [PDF format](#).

(2) Predatory Scholarly Publishing: This is the title of a [letter by Moshe Vardi](#), Editor-in-Chief of *Communications of the ACM* (appearing in the July 2012 issue), in which he discusses the imbalance created in the world of scholarly publishing by predatory practices by both authors and commercial publishers via "easy" (i.e., no hassle of dealing with pesky editors and peer reviewers), pay-to-publish channels. Vardi refers to the Web page [scholarlyoa.com](#), which contains a directory of predatory publishers and journals, and concludes his letter thus: "While not all commercial publishers are predatory publishers, they are all primarily driven by profits, which creates a conflict of interest between publishers and authors. The future of scholarly publishing belongs to association publishing, where the members are publishers, authors, editors, and reviewers, sharing commitment to scholarship."

2012/06/21 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A new study claims that coffee drinkers live longer than people who don't drink coffee. Of course, coffee drinkers waste all those extra years waiting in line at Starbucks, so it evens out." ~ Conan O'Brian.

(2) Longest day of the year: We have just entered summer, which means that today was the longest day of the year. Iranians celebrate the beginning of spring (Norooz), fall (Mehregan), and winter (Shab-e Yalda, the longest night of the year), but so far as I know, there is no corresponding celebration for the beginning of summer and the longest day of the year. Let's celebrate anyway!

(3) Playing the blame game: Marching donkeys down a street, clad in the US and other countries' flags, stomping on national flags, or using them as doormats at the entry to toilets and such, won't solve Iran's problems. Instead of walking the street with costumed donkeys, go back to your desk, factory station, health-care facility, or wherever your workplace happens to be and do something practical to solve someone's problems. Not only is the latter much more productive for the country, it will also boost your ego way more than insulting others can do.

2012/06/19 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Microsoft introduces [tablet computer](#): The announcement didn't provide a lot of detail, but the "tablet," known as Surface, seems to be a cross between today's tablets and laptops. The Windows RT version of Surface, which is both lighter and thinner, will become available first, before the slightly bulkier Windows 8 Professional version.

(2) Turing's Centenary also celebrated in Iran: I just came across [this poster](#), announcing the "Mind, Logic and Computation" lecture series to celebrate the centenary of Alan Turing's birth (2012 has been declared Turing Year throughout the world). I hope that someone is brave enough to mention during these lectures that Turing's contributions to computing were cut short by his suicide, which happened in part because he was prosecuted and belittled as a gay man in a country that brands itself as civilized and noble. What would have

happened to Turing had he lived in Iran (today's or that of the last century)?

(3) Scandinavians are the heaviest coffee drinkers: The gloomy weather and darkness in winter are believed to be the main reasons for requiring the invigorating effects of coffee. The Swedes (sixth on the list of top coffee nations that begins with Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Netherlands) take their coffee breaks so seriously that they are written into employee contracts. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of June 18, 2012.]

2012/06/17 (Sun.): Here are a couple of items for this Father's Day.

(1) Remembering my dad: More than 20 years after his passing, I still remember my father, Salem Parhami, as someone whose love, sacrifices, and teachings allowed me to get where I am today. Happy Father's Day!

(2) Five short-but-sweet Father's Day quotes:

"The older I get, the smarter my father seems to get." ~ Tim Russert

"Being a great father is like shaving. No matter how good you shaved today, you have to do it again tomorrow."

~ Reed Markham

"By the time a man realizes that maybe his father was right, he usually has a son who thinks he's wrong." ~

Anonymous

"Dad taught me everything I know. Unfortunately, he didn't teach me everything he knows." ~ Al Unser

"If you enjoy being a dad, thank your kids. You wouldn't be one without them." ~ Linda Pointdexter

2012/06/16 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest on the Beatles.

(1) Tonight, I attended the Beatles tribute "**Twist & Shout**" concert at Santa Barbara's Granada Theater. It was a very enjoyable evening and by the end of it, the entire audience was standing up and dancing to the concert's final song, "Twist and Shout." See a sample of the concert on [YouTube](#).

(2) The math behind a famous musical edit: In a short article on pp. 16-17 of [this newsletter](#), Jason Brown and Robert Dawson explain how (in the days before digital sound editing tools) record producer George Martin used simple math to merge two takes of the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," recorded in different keys and with different tempos. He solved the key-difference problem by playing the two versions at different speeds, and he was aided in his project by the fact that nonexpert humans do not notice slight differences in tempo. [Thanks to Olivia Leonardi, whose "[Computer Science and Music Technology](#)" article led me to this fascinating bit of musical history.]

(3) Hey Jude: I found this solo piano performance of "**Hey Jude**" by Shirin (accompanied by a slide show of Nazi concentration camps) quite interesting. Wikipedia has a [long article](#) about the song and its history, including the assertion that it was originally called "Hey Jules" and was written by Paul McCartney to comfort John Lennon's son Julian, after Lennon's divorce from his wife Cynthia. Lennon himself believed that the song was written for him; this assertion is supported by the fact that much of the latter part of the song seems to have been addressed to a grown man, rather than a child.

2012/06/15 (Fri.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I've lived long enough to know that people occasionally do weird things for attention: rich actresses shoplift, basketball players name themselves Metta World Peace, musicians appear on *Glee*. But when six horrifying cannibalistic attacks occur at once, it is time to blame the culture. And because it is so easy to blame the culture, I have volunteered to do it." [The opening paragraph of Joel Stein's column in *Time* magazine, issue of June 18, 2012.]

(2) Linus Torvalds is one the two winners of the [Millennium Technology Prize](#): His creation of the Linux operating system, which powers millions of computers, smartphones, and other electronic systems, is cited as the contribution being recognized by the \$1.5M prize. The other winner, who will share the prize with Torvalds, is Shinya Yamanaka, a physician and adult-stem-cell researcher from Japan.

2012/06/13 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest on the history of Iranian Jews.

(1) The language of Kurdish Jews: I have been digging into the history of my ancestors coming from a group of Jews in Iran's Kurdistan region. I found a couple of Wikipedia pages related to the special language spoken by Kurdish Jews, which they call "Lishana Noshan" (literally, "our own language"). Apparently, this language is estimated to have 2200 speakers worldwide, mostly in Israel and the US, and is a branch of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic languages. [[Northeastern Neo-Aramaic](#)] [[Lishanid Noshan or Lishana Didan](#)]

(2) On the history of the Purim festival: I was informed recently that my assistance has been acknowledged by authors Farhad Arbab and Daniel Berry at the end of their article "Why Jews Wear Costumes on Purim" (*Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, spring 2012).

The authors are computer scientists, who have tried to apply their scientific analysis skills to discovering the source of a Jewish tradition that has its roots in the biblical story of how Queen Esther of ancient Persia saved her people from being killed when her husband, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), issued a decree to have all Jews

massacred on a single day in response to a request from his prime minister Haman. Their paper was rejected by a more orthodox Jewish venue and even the reformist venue where it was eventually published requested multiple rounds of changes.

The central thesis of the paper is that it seems in the aftermath of the killing order, Jews reacted by wearing Persian costumes so as to blend with the rest of the population and not be recognizable to the dispatched killers. Hence, the tradition of dressing as non-Jews on Purim, a festival that commemorates the events. The authors maintain that this explanation is more consistent with historical records that show a long period of peaceful coexistence between Persians and Jews following the planned massacre, whereas the commonly held belief that Jews killed tens of thousands of Persians in self-defense is at odds with subsequent events. Kings' orders in those days could not be revoked, so if the king had a change of heart, all he could do was to issue another decree to mitigate the effects of the first one. In this case, we have been told, the king indicated to Jews that they should feel free to defend themselves if attacked.

While the authors' claim that the Jews foiled the attempt by wearing disguises may be controversial and impossible to verify after thousands of years, they should be commended for a good piece of detective work. The authors have asked that I do not redistribute the preprint of the paper sent to me. Instead, if interested, you can write directly to Professor Daniel M. Berry (dberry [at] uwaterloo [dot] ca) to request a copy. Should the paper become publicly available on-line in the future, I will add a note here with the URL.

2012/06/11 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Mr. Haloo's humorous poem addressed to Imam Zaman: [This 2011 clip](#) is apparently more benign than the recent rap song addressing Imam Naghi, as it has not led to a death fatwa for the poet (as far as I know).
- (2) Professors against Plagiarism: This [Persian-language blog](#), which was established by a group of university professors in Iran following an alarming rise in plagiarism and other cases of scientific misconduct in the country, has moved to a new home. It now comes in a much nicer format and is easier to navigate.
- (3) What you see isn't what you get: At first, this [LA Times news story](#) sounded like a joke to me, but upon further reflection, I can see that there might be some merit to the proposed approach. Tokyo University researchers have invented a pair of computerized goggles that use an algorithm to magnify the size of the food while keeping the hand holding it at the actual size. The perception of eating more is apparently enough to produce noticeable weight loss.

2012/06/10 (Sun.): Here are a quote and three nature-related items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Follow your heart, but take your brain along too." ~ Anonymous
- (2) Mosquitos and raindrops: A raindrop can weigh as much as 50 mosquitoes, so it is amazing that mosquitoes can fly through a downpour and survive. When a raindrop hits a mosquito, the creature is pushed downward with a force that can be up to 300 times as strong as that of gravity. A recently published paper in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* attributes this feat to the mosquito's low mass, its strong exoskeleton, and its ability to "go with the flow," rather than resist the impact of water. [From [Wired magazine](#)]
- (3) When rivers collide: "In geography, a confluence is the meeting of two or more bodies of water. Known also as a conflux, it refers either to the point where a tributary joins a larger river, called the main stem, or where two streams meet to become the source of a river of a new name ... The confluences below were selected for their dramatic visual contrast." [[Photos](#)]
- (4) The most beautiful crater lakes: Each of the 15 lakes in [this pictorial](#) is unique in its serenity and beauty.

2012/06/09 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Unpleasant fact of the day: "1 in 5: Ratio of American adults who admit to peeing in pools; no data are available for those who do so and deny it." [From *Time* magazine, issue of June 18, 2012]
- (2) Facebook and marital problems: "A recent study in the U.K. showed that more than one-third of all divorce filings contain the word Facebook. And that was before people invested in the company's IPO." [Joel Stein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of June 11, 2012]
- (3) The Olympics or Oscars of the art world: "Kassel, Germany, is no great shakes. Bombed flat during World War II, it makes Peoria seem like Paris. Yet twice a decade for the past 57 years, it has become the center of the world for the planet's culturati. Beginning June 9, something like three quarters of a million visitors are expected to head to Kassel for its Documenta festival—a kind of art-world cross between the Olympics and the Oscars. It often sets the artistic agenda: the conceptual art that is now everywhere took hold at Kassel's fifth Documenta, in 1972; the expressionist painting that boomed in the 80s got a big break at Documenta 8 in 1982; the 11th showed art from beyond Western culture, and now there's no ignoring artists from Africa and Asia." [From [Newsweek magazine](#)]

2012/06/08 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "While jostling against all manner of people it has been impressed upon my mind that the successful ones are those who have a natural faculty for solving puzzles. Life is full of puzzles, and we are called upon to solve such as fate throws our way." ~ Sam Loyd, Jr. (recreational mathematician, 1927)

(2) On insults and fatwas, part 2: Hossein Bagher Zadeh writes a [level-headed analysis](#) (in Persian) of the furor over Shahin Najafi's insult to a Shi'i imam and fatwas by several ayatollahs condemning him to death. He quite rightly points out the dilemma faced by liberal Muslim believers who can stomach neither Najafi's rap song nor the killing orders.

(3) Rethinking the end-of-life care: In her [Newsweek article](#) (issue of June 4 & 11, 2012), Amanda Bennett raises some very interesting questions about the high cost of care in the last two years of a sick person's life. Citing the example of her husband, who was billed \$33K for one hospital stay and \$44K for the next, she reflects on the many times his blood was drawn, urine sample analyzed, MRIs and CT scans performed, all while knowing that he doesn't have much longer to live. Granted, some treatments can be life-saving, but in many terminal cases, excessive medical attention can be detrimental to the patient's quality of life. Palliative care in a hospice would be both more pleasant and more dignified than shuttling the patient back and forth from testing unit to testing unit and from specialist to specialist, none of whom really knows the patient and views him/her only as a particular organ that happens to be ailing.

2012/06/06 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Planet Venus passing in front of the Sun: NASA [video and images](#) capture Venus as it passes between the Earth and the sun, showing up as a tiny dark circle in front of the Sun for 7 hours.

(2) On insults and fatwas: Iranian.com has posted [an article by Abdolkarim Soroush](#), a self-appointed Islamic philosopher, in which he blasts those who insult "great people," with apparent reference to the Iranian-born rapper who was recently condemned to death by several ayatollahs for his rap lyrics addressed to one of the Imams. He also criticizes the ayatollahs who, by their silly fatwas, cause people to abandon Islam. In a comment to the post, I argued that greatness is not absolute and that both Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il might be viewed as great men by certain of their followers and that the ayatollahs whom Mr. Soroush criticizes might also be considered great by some. Finally, I challenged his assertion that the word "kafir" means "non-Muslim" and is thus value-free (neutral). Both Dehkhoda's Encyclopedic Persian Dictionary and Wikipedia define kafir as anti-faith, godless, and unbeliever, thus making it an insult, at least from Mr. Soroush's point of view.

(3) Sara and Zahra: A couple of days ago, I was involved in discussing the use of "Sara" and "Zahra" as names among people with Iranian roots. I maintained that even though the names sound alike, they are different, one being biblical and the other of Arabic/Persian origins. To make sure, I did on-line searches and found the following Wikipedia entries.

[Sarah \(given name\)](#), with "Sara" being its most common variant

[Zahra \(name\)](#), bright/shining/brilliant or flower/blossom/beauty

2012/06/05 (Tue.): Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

As the world's most prominent atheist, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has never shied away from controversy. He has been in great demand as a speaker and TV talking head for many years, and he is now spreading his ideas via the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, whose mission statement includes "to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering."

In this book, Dawkins argues that the belief in God is irrational and that religion is divisive and dangerous. He uses evolution to debunk the theories of intelligent design and pokes fun at the idea that God deliberately deceived us by creating the fossils and burying them in just the right depths. He also vents about the fact that the use of the word "God" by Einstein and other scientists is taken as evidence of their belief in religion. Einstein is quoted as saying that his "God" is not a personal God and that his religious belief is "the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it." The following disclaimer at the end of the introductory chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book: "I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else."

I think that both believers and non-believers can benefit from this book, as it contains a comprehensive compilation of the arguments against the existence of God (and has a chapter devoted to arguments for God's existence). In the process, Dawkins covers the notion of "goodness" and arrives at the conclusion that we can be good and moral beings without the need for believing in an almighty creator. Dawkins' methodical review will not convert any brainwashed religious fundamentalist, but those who already harbor some doubts, will find his extensive compilation and appeal to reason most stimulating.

2012/06/04 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Cute public-service [video clip](#) (in Persian and English) about stereotyping and racial prejudice.

(2) Australian billionaire to build Titanic II: This [replica of the original](#), scheduled to sail from England to New York by the end of 2016, will be truly unsinkable (or so everyone hopes).

(3) Man who can turn his head 180 degrees: I remember Meryl Streep's head was turned backwards using special effects in the movie "Death Becomes Her." The man in [this video](#) can turn his head backward for real. The video seems legit, but I have seen enough fake ones to be a bit wary.

(4) The times they are a-changin': Newsmen Walter Cronkite (1916-2009) is often cited as the most trusted media personality (and, at times, as the most trusted person) in the US. Yet, when one examines his life and career through the lens of today's expectations and standards, one wonders whether he would not have been fired for various shortcomings, if he were still alive and working. Find out why by reading this fascinating review of a new [Cronkite biography](#).

2012/06/02 (Sat.): Here are four Iran-related items of potential interest.

(1) Tulips in a mountainous region of Iran: Garmab Village, around 15 km past Karaj on the Tehran-to-Chaloos highway, holds an [annual Tulip Festival](#), where beautiful, locally grown tulips are put on display.

(2) Food in Iran (a 2006 photoessay): Farah Ravon shares [73 photos](#) of some heavenly-looking food on Iranian.com. Click on the photo to advance to the next one.

(3) Rafsanjani considers [Facebook a blessing](#): The sidelined and deeply mistrusted former Iranian president has said that a free Facebook page or a viral video can affect people in ways that several radio and TV stations can't. If this story is true, watch for sparks flying over the next few days.

(4) Persian-style architecture in Kuala Lumpur: Architects bring [Persian-style architecture](#) to Malaysia with bridges, cultural center, and other monuments.

2012/06/01 (Fri.): Here are four science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) The life of an Iranian mathematician: I remember Parviz Shahriari (who died on May 11, 2012, at the age of 85), as a dedicated high-school teacher, prolific author, and publisher of the popular science magazine *Getting to Know Mathematics*, which was instrumental in getting high-school students excited about math. From [this video](#), that reviews his life and contributions to the Iranian math scene, I learned that he was also a political activist, who was jailed both under the Shah and after the Islamic Revolution. I read his magazine on a regular basis, unaware of an interesting back story: Shahriari began with the title *Making Peace with Mathematics* (using the Persian word "Aashti" instead of "Aashnaee") but was later ordered by the authorities to change it, apparently because "peace" was considered a dirty word in the days of the Iran-Iraq war. Here is an [informative obituary](#).

(2) The Stuxnet worm was a joint US-Israeli project: The [New York Times](#) reports that based on an 18-month investigative effort, it has determined the Stuxnet worm, designed to cause havoc at Iran's nuclear facilities and escaping into the wild as a result of a coding error, to have been one of the products of a stepped-up cyberwar against Iran, ordered by President Obama from his first months in office. The paper has started a similar investigation of Flame, the latest cyberweapon.

(3) First private space mission ends successfully: The [Dragon capsule](#), launched by SpaceX, splashed down about 560 miles southwest of Los Angeles on 5/31, after delivering half a ton of food and clothing to the crew aboard the International Space Station and bringing back the same amount of cargo and experiments. Because of its reliance on companies like SpaceX now that the Space Shuttle program is over, NASA is quite happy with the successful mission.

(4) Engineering degrees in 3, 4, or 5 years? Reforming engineering education in the US has been a topic of discussion for many years. Some would-be reformists want to keep the current 4-year structure of the degree programs, focusing on curricular changes in terms of units and courses or the mix of theoretical versus practical training. However, the most vocal groups among the reformists believe that earning engineering degrees should be possible in 3 years (a model that is being used in the UK, among other places) or that the entry-level credentials should become a 5-year master's degree. The first group would strip much of the liberal-arts requirements from engineering degree programs, whereas the second group would add more in-depth classes and labs to the technical content. In addition to purely technical reasons cited in the arguments by these groups, the economics of education (particularly, the crushing weight of large student loans that today's typical college graduates are burdened with) constitutes a large part of the discussions. [From [Prism magazine](#), American Society for Engineering Education, Summer 2012 issue.]

2012/05/31 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest on computing.

(1) Most complex cyber-attack ever discovered: Affecting mostly businesses and universities in a number of Middle Eastern countries (including Iran and Israel), the [Flame rootkit/worm combo](#) has been characterized as a data-vacuuming malware. The attack's sophistication and absence of actual financial theft point to a government-sponsored effort.

(2) Computer Science's biggest-ever event: The list of invitees and speakers at the Alan Turing Centenary Conference (100th anniversary of his birth), to be held at the University of Manchester and Manchester Town Hall during June 22-25, 2012, reads like a who's who in the field. I hope that these historic lectures are made available on-line. As of the end of May, **confirmed speakers** (many of them winners of Association for Computing Machinery's prestigious Turing Award) include:

Fredrick Brooks (North Carolina), "Pilot ACE Architecture in Context"

Vint Cerf (Google), "Turing's Legacy in the Networked World"

David Ferruci (IBM), "Beyond Jeopardy! The Future of Watson"

Tony Hoare (Microsoft Research), "Can Computers Understand Their Own Programs?"

Gary Kasparov (former world chess champion), "The Reconstruction of Turing's 'Paper Machine'"

Don Knuth (Stanford), "All Remaining Questions Answered"

Roger Penrose (Oxford), "The Problem of Modeling the Mathematical Mind"

Michael Rabin (Harvard), "Turing, Church, Godel, Computability, Complexity and Randomization"

Adi Shamir (Weizmann Institute), "Turing's Cryptography from a Modern Perspective"

Leslie Valiant (Harvard), "Computer Science as a Natural Science"

Andrew Yao (Tsinghua), "Quantum Computing: A Great Science in the Making"

2012/05/30 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The religion of one age is the literary entertainment of the next." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson.

(2) Urban legend regarding codes on fruit/vegi stickers: Claims have been circulating in e-mail messages and posted on Web sites that the 4- or 5-digit codes you see on tiny fruit and vegetable stickers in supermarkets carry information about whether they are conventionally or organically grown or are genetically modified. **This article** debunks this urban legend.

(3) Time for Greece to thank Germany: "By one estimate, since it gained its independence from the Ottomans in 1832, Greece has been in default or restructuring for half this period. ... [Now] Germany is being asked to take its taxpayers' money ... and use it to bail out a country like Greece, which is guilty of mismanagement, poor competitiveness and financial fraud. And it has said yes! In return for this, Germans are being called Nazis in Greek newspapers." [Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of May 28, 2012.]

(4) Cheerful modern Persian song: Soprano Kamelia Dara, singing "**Vals-e Noroozi**" ("The Norooz Waltz") in this 6-minute video, received her training in Austria as an opera singer.

2012/05/28 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest from the worlds of art and music.

(1) I Madonnari, street painting festival: This afternoon my family and I viewed chalk paintings in front of Santa Barbara Mission. The street painting festival is an annual event in Santa Barbara, held during the Memorial Day weekend.

(2) Tonight's 50th Anniversary Reunion Tour concert by the Beach Boys at the Santa Barbara Bowl was very enjoyable. This **Wikipedia page** describes the tour and lists the 40+ songs they perform in two sets (the sets vary slightly from location to location).

(3) A classic song reinterpreted: Bette Midler has fun with "**Under the Boardwalk**," a song written for the Drifters by Kenny Young and Arthur Resnick.

(4) Young boy plays modern Persian music (**acoustic guitars and vocals**) with his grandfather. Here is the same kid's solo performance of "**Del-e Divaaneh**."

2012/05/26 (Sat.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) There is less water on Earth than on Europa: The image accompanying **this article** shows the small sphere that can be formed from all the water on Earth and contrasts it with the slightly larger corresponding sphere from Europa (Jupiter's moon).

(2) German teen solves centuries-old open math problem posed by Isaac Newton: The Indian-born 16-year-old was working on a school project when hitting upon a way of calculating the **exact path of a projectile**, subject to gravity and air resistance.

(3) Our universe may be a tiny part of a multiverse: Brian Greene, writing in **Newsweek magazine**, issue of May 28, 2012, outlines the arguments for (and potential pitfalls of) this proposition, which seems to be gathering supporters. A strong incentive for supporting this argument is that it provides a way of explaining the big-bang in its entirety. Currently, we have theories that are valid from a split-second after it happened, while not explaining what might have caused or powered the bang itself. Scientists are on the lookout for experimental methods to confirm the multiverse hypothesis, but as of now, the idea falls within the domain of high-risk science.

2012/05/25 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Goleta's Dos Pueblos High School earns **two distinctions**: It is listed among the top 1000 high schools in the nation by both *Newsweek* magazine and *US News & World Report*.
- (2) Oldest known musical instruments found in German cave: **Recently discovered Flutes** made of bird bones and mammoth ivory are thought to be 42K-43K years old, ages that are consistent with an earlier hypothesis that humans and technological innovation moved into central Europe 40K-45K years ago through the Danube River corridor.
- (3) Husband throws acid on the faces of wife and 2.5-year-old daughter in southeastern Iran: No motive has been reported, but the man is characterized as a drug addict. [**Photos**]
- (4) Female Iraq war vet, who lost both legs when her helicopter was shot down, takes on the Tea Party: Remember **Tammy Duckworth's** name, as you will likely hear it often in the years to come. She is running for congress and has started flying again, after a long rehabilitation and passing the FAA's physical exam (the one for able bodies, not the one for disabled flyers).

2012/05/24 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "You may be very smart, you may be using a state-of-the-art computer, but your efforts will be in vain if you try to run an obsolete program on it." Bashar al-Assad, showing his displeasure with Turkey's closure of its embassy in Damascus, imposing sanctions on Syria, and calling for its leader to step down.
- (2) A cappella Persian music: Emad Ameri supplies the vocals and the sounds of a number of instruments in this a cappella performance of "**Morgh-e Sahar.**"
- (3) Google pushing deeper into the mobile market: It completed the **\$12.5B acquisition** of Motorola Mobility, nine months after setting its sights on the cell phone pioneer.
- (4) Many Indian engineers are math-challenged: At UCSB, some of our brightest graduate students used to come from India, but we have noticed a marked quality decline in recent years. A story in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 21, 2012, sheds some light on why. In a recent study, Indian engineering graduates were asked the following question: "A bag is full of 20 bananas and no other fruit. Rajeev draws a fruit from the bag. What is the probability that he draws a banana?" Some 30% of the graduates were unable to answer this question, indicating a notable decline in math skills. The same study showed that English language skills are also in decline.

2012/05/23 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Technology quote of the day: "I don't have broadband at my home." Steve Wozniak, Apple cofounder
- (2) Political quote of the day: "The liberals who ousted longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak after 18 days of protests—the bloggers, the tweeters, even the Google executive Wael Ghonim—have all been sidelined, and the battle is now between the Islamists and the remnants of the old regime." Dan Ephron, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 28, 2012.
- (3) Disingenuous quote of the day: "It's just simply the case that we don't have a label for every body of water." Google's disingenuous explanation of why it removed the label "Persian Gulf" from its maps, since every other body of water in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf is mentioned by name. [Source: *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 28, 2012.]
- (4) A mighty wind: We should be very thankful that the dinosaurs are no longer frolicking on earth, not only because they could be a danger to our infrastructure and even our lives due to their physical size, but their **super-sized winds** (nearly 2700 liters of methane per day for the gigantic brontosaurus) might have forced us to walk around with nose plugs. A British scientific study has postulated that dinosaurs contributed to climate change in their day, perhaps bringing about their own extinction. To visualize the impact, consider that, on a smaller scale, methane emission from cattle is responsible for 2% of greenhouse gases today.
- (5) Strong-willed boy does not recognize the word "disability": Remember **this video** the next time you feel like complaining from aches, or other maladies.

2012/05/22 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest in science/technology and education.

- (1) Time-lapse image of the solar eclipse of May 20 over Sunset Beach, CA, posted by "jimnista" on **Flickr**.
- (2) Status update seen on an electronic billboard in NYC: NASDAQ listed [FB] May 18, 2012
- (3) First private rocket launched into space: Following NASA's decision to turn over basic low-earth-orbit space transportation to the private sector, a **Falcon 9 rocket** was launched by the SpaceX company today to transport a capsule with some required supplies to the International Space Station. Once there on Thursday, the capsule will remain docked at the ISS for a week, before returning with experiments and equipment.
- (4) UCSB ranked 7th among the world's top universities: UCSB has earned its highest ranking ever from Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands based on the impact of research

publications, as measured by the Thomson-Reuters' [Web of Science](#) database.

2012/05/21 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Thank God for the dominance of the Church coming to an end; the worst oppressions were imposed on human beings in the name of Godly values." Words uttered by [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in a university gathering, apparently with a straight face.
- (2) Twin baby boys engaged in a [deep conversation](#): I may be mistaken, but they seem to be mimicking adults who might have told them that they can't do something.
- (3) Misconceptions about plastic debris in the ocean: [This article](#) debunks some myths about the concentration of plastic debris in the "Pacific garbage patch," a region of the North Pacific Ocean where a vast, gently circling body of water has attracted tons of plastic garbage over the years.
- (4) Some thoughts on social change: I exchanged Facebook comments with a friend who had posted her opinion that the solid work of actresses like Tahmineh Milani has done more to break taboos than the shocking acts of Golshifteh Farahani and Shahin Najafi. She maintained that breaking taboos can be more effectively accomplished if one works within the prevailing social framework than through shocking acts that may alienate the masses. I happen to think that both strategies of cautiously chipping away at rigid, unreasonable social boundaries and turning them upside-down and inside-out via the "shock and awe" of bold actions are appropriate for attacking the problem from multiple angles. To use an analogy from nature, our world evolves both due to the slow, erosive effects of flowing water or shifting sand, and from abrupt changes brought about by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. We can't say that one class of mechanisms is more important than the other in shaping the world as we know it.

2012/05/20 (Sun.): Here are three sociopolitical items of potential interest.

- (1) Whether true or not, [this story](#), told by a New York City taxi driver, is great food for thought.
- (2) When in Rome, do as the Romans do—Not: Bribery is a fact of life in many countries where US companies do business. According to US law, bribery is a punishable crime, which puts American businesses at a disadvantage when competing for business in such countries. Enforcement of the US law in this area has been quite lax in the past, emboldening many companies which engage in bribery and then sweep the dirt under the rug when someone blows a whistle. Walmart provides the latest example of an American corporation that has been caught with its hand in the cookie jar, distributing some \$24M into the pockets of local Mexican authorities to win approval for its store expansions. [The US Justice Department](#) is investigating.
- (3) Mitt Romney was never a governor, it seems: Paul Begala, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#) issue of May 7, 2012, points to the curious fact that US presidential candidate Mitt Romney stresses his business background and his father's rise from a struggling salesman to CEO and governor (just as he did when he ran for public office in Massachusetts), but glosses over how he actually applied his business skills during his own governorship, and what his methods accomplished. "His state was really 47th in job creation, behind only Ohio and Michigan, both of which were being ravaged in the manufacturing meltdown, and Louisiana, which had been devastated by Katrina. ... While the country as a whole enjoyed 5 percent growth, Romney's Massachusetts grew at 0.9 percent."

2012/05/19 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) World's second most popular sport: Based on the record of single-game viewership, cricket, with 150M viewers for its 2011 semifinal game, is second in worldwide popularity. It trails soccer (620M, 2010 World Cup final game), but is ahead of American football (111M viewers, Super Bowl XLVI), baseball (25M, Game 7 of the 2011 World Series), basketball (24M, Game 6 of the 2011 NBA finals), and ice hockey (9M, Game 7 of the 2011 Stanley Cup finals). [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of May 21, 2012.]
- (2) Persian piano: [Shirin plays a composition of hers](#), entitled "Where My Heart Beats." An accompanying video shows Darband, a suburb in northern Tehran, where young people are seen hiking and strolling alongside a stream, with many teahouses and restaurants on its banks.
- (3) The US is far from being in decline: In his [Newsweek magazine article](#) (May 7, 2012), Daniel Gross takes issue with the conventional wisdom that the US economy is in decline and will likely never recover from its 2008 free fall. In support of his thesis, Gross cites some stats, such as the S&P 500 gaining 104% since March 2009, a record 62M foreign tourists visiting the US in 2011, a 34% rise in US exports from 2009 to 2011, and 4M jobs created by the private sector since February 2010. "When the definitive history of this period is written, it is possible—no, likely—that this post-bust era will go down not as a time of economic decline, but as one of regeneration."

2012/05/18 (Fri.): Here are a couple of items of potential interest on cultures and society.

- (1) Cultural differences: Eight Pakistani men and an Afghan refugee [have been convicted](#) and will serve long

jail terms in Britain for abusing teenagers and running a child sex ring. While it is unfortunate that the crimes of this group of Muslims have brought about abhorrent racist commentary in the UK, there is something very troubling in the way some Muslim men treat women, particularly non-Muslim women, as possessions and sex objects. This is reminiscent of the "cultural differences" explanation supplied following child sexual abuse allegations against an Islamic Republic diplomat at a Brazilian swimming pool. Cultural differences are respectable only if the cultures involved start from the same premises of justice, equality, and human rights.

(2) Women in ancient myths: In the article "Women's Social Status and Sexual Bearing in Ancient Myths," written in Persian, [Dr. Shokoufeh Taghi](#) maintains that ancient myths provide a rich source for studying women and their lives and rights throughout history. Because of their use of allegories, story-tellers had a freer hand to discuss a number of social issues that would be considered taboo for historians and other writers. One telling story from "1001 Nights" goes like this. A king wants to marry his vizier's beautiful daughter. The vizier refuses, citing the fact that she has been promised to a cousin. The king takes offense and orders the girl to be forcefully married to the ugliest hunchback in town. To reclaim his honor, the vizier sets out to kill his daughter. [Yes, his innocent daughter, and not any of the other characters who stained his "honor."]

2012/05/17 (Thu.): Here are three science/tech items of potential interest.

(1) Contiguous USA graph: The 48 contiguous states in the continental US, plus Washington DC, can be drawn as a graph, with the vertices representing the states and the presence of at least one drivable road between two adjacent states represented by an edge. In [this graph](#), which is due to computer scientist Donald E. Knuth, the least connected state is ME (just one connection to NH) and the most connected ones are MO and TN (8 connections each).

(2) Beauty and the genius: People with normal vision will see Albert Einstein in [this photo](#). Near-sighted people will see Marilyn Monroe. If you see Einstein, view from further back.

(3) English-only instruction at an Italian university: [Politecnico di Milano](#), known for its science, engineering, and architecture programs, has announced that beginning in 2014, most of its degree courses, including all graduate programs, will be taught and assessed entirely in English. The rector of this acclaimed science/tech school believes that staying competitive internationally demanded such a drastic action.

Commentary: Like all other commodities, the competition for talent, in the form of graduate students and faculty members, is growing worldwide. Oil-rich Arab countries, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been attracting foreigners by offering lucrative compensation packages and English-language instruction for years. My guess is that the trend toward English instruction and assessment in science/tech fields will continue, as universities and countries try to tap into the same worldwide pool of talent, particularly students from a number of developing nations who may find it inconvenient to learn a less useful language for the sake of earning a graduate degree. Shrinking university budgets resulting from a decline in public funding sources is likely to speed up and intensify this trend, as institutions must increasingly rely on private donations and tuition-paying students.

2012/05/16 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "We can talk about the importance of marriage and fathers all we want ... but we can't forget the 18 million kids [more kids raised by single moms in the US than Germany has children] whose fathers no longer live in their homes." Bay Buchanan, a conservative member of the Reagan administration, in her new book *Bay and Her Boys* [From Paul Begala's column in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of May 14, 2012.]

(2) Melinda Gates takes on the Catholic right: "Visiting vaccine programs in sub-Saharan Africa, Gates would often ask women at remote clinics what else they needed. Very often, she says, they would speak urgently about birth control. ... Gates believes that by focusing on the lives of women and children, and by making it clear that the agenda is neither coercive population control nor abortion, the controversy over international family-planning programs can be defused. Right now, she points out, 100,000 women annually die in childbirth after unintended pregnancies. Six hundred thousand babies born to women who didn't want to be pregnant die in the first month of life." [From [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of May 14, 2012.]

(3) IBM attacks the weight loss problem: According to the *New York Times*, IBM engineers have developed a program "to make shedding pounds as geekily fun as playing Xbox." The IBM program is said to be based on a customizable model that "can be used by anyone from kosher eaters to moms trying to get their children to eat peas." One limit on the program's usefulness is that it relies on self-reporting.

2012/05/15 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest about Iran.

(1) Iran is world champion of freestyle wrestling: After defeating the US in Round 4 and the host country in the finals, both by the score of 4-3, Iran's wrestlers won the 2012 FILA Freestyle Wrestling World Cup in Baku. The US earned a bronze medal by defeating Russia 5-2.

(2) No more utility bills for mosques in Iran: The Iranian parliament voted by a wide margin to make mosques in the country [exempt from paying for utilities](#). Can you guess who will end up paying for this generosity?

(3) Iranian judiciary kills two birds with one stone: It **convicts 13 people** for the crime of spying for Israel (the faces of the accused are blurred in videos, leading to accusations that they are Islamic Republic thugs) and blames satellite TV networks for playing a role in recruiting them as Mossad agents, perhaps setting the stage for further crackdown on the installation of satellite dishes.

2012/05/14 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Joke of the day: The US now has a virtual embassy in Iran. The Islamic Republic's Foreign Ministry has reportedly reacted to this news story thus: "There can be no embassy without a wall that we can climb."

(2) College of Engineering gets the largest gift in UCSB's history: **The \$50M gift**, from Oracle Chairman and UCSB 1966 alum Jeffrey Henley and his wife Judy, is slated to help the highly ranked College of Engineering and its Institute for Energy Efficiency, which will get a new building to house its acclaimed research programs on novel energy saving and storage schemes, including energy-efficient lighting and smart materials. [*LA Times* also covered the story.]

(3) Boy wants hug, girl doesn't: Little boy's **persistence doesn't pay off**, though, as the little girl keeps pushing him away.

2012/05/13 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Mothers, as viewed by three US presidents. Happy Mother's Day!

(a) "My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. All I am I owe to my mother. I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her." ~ George Washington

(b) "All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." ~ Abraham Lincoln

(c) "The memory of my mother and her teachings were, after all, the only capital I had to start life with, and on that capital I have made my way." ~ Andrew Jackson

(2) Yahoo chief exec steps down amid accusations that he included a **fake degree** on his CV. Memo to degree fakers in the US and elsewhere: There is absolutely no way that such an act of forgery will remain undetected forever.

(3) Word of the week: **ro.bo.grad.er** *n.* computer software that can score essays faster than humans, with similar accuracy, according to a recent study. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of May 7, 2012.]

(4) Oldies but goodies: Stevie Nicks and Rod Stewart perform "Young Turks" and "Leather and Lace" in an **April 2011 concert**. A commenter wrote that Stewart refused to rehearse the second song, thus messing up the lyrics and throwing the more professional Nicks off on multiple occasions.

2012/05/12 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

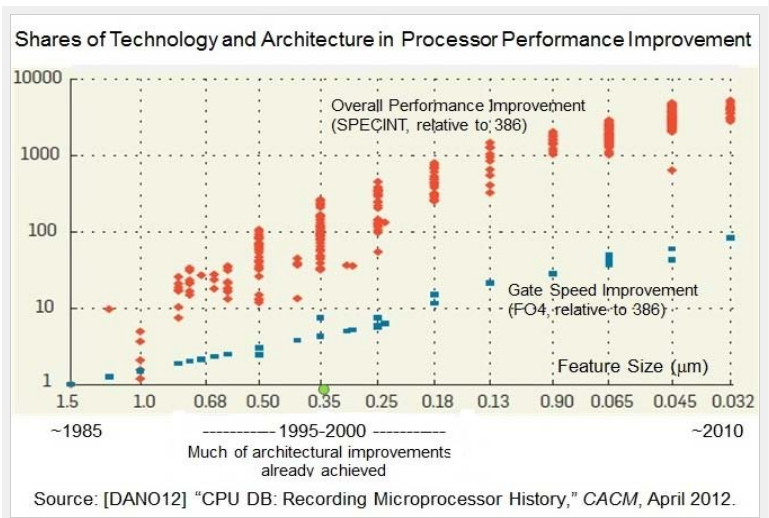
(1) A valuable resource for computer engineers: Stanford University has made public its **CPU database**, spanning the 30-year history from Intel's 4004 microprocessor, introduced in November 1971, to the present. The accompanying image, adapted from the Stanford CPU database, shows that over the past quarter-century, technological advances have contributed a factor of about 100 to improved performance, whereas architectural innovations have been responsible for a factor of 30-50.

Furthermore, much of the contribution of architectural techniques had already occurred by the turn of the 21st Century.

(2) Mariam Adib's Playfulness with

Persian words carries political overtones (uppercase denotes Persian words transcribed in English): This is the land of inverted words. GNJ (ganj = treasure) becomes JNG (jang = war). DRMAN (darmaan = remedy) becomes NAMRD (naamard = scoundrel). QHQH (qah-qah = ha-ha or sound of laughter) becomes HQHQ (heq-heq = wah-wah or sound of crying). But DZD is the same DZD (dozd = thief), DRD is the same DRD (dard = pain), and GRG remains GRG (gorg = wolf).

(3) The biggest spammer: India has overtaken the US as the world's biggest source of spam, the result of a perfect storm created by an increasing number of its citizens using the Internet and their computers being very poorly protected. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of May 7, 2012.]



2012/05/11 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Calm and collected 5-year-old takes over during a **911 call**, when her dad experiences breathing problems and can't talk.

(2) The post office's death isn't caused by e-mail: The culprit is legislation, passed during the administration of George W. Bush, mandating that the USPS set aside 75 years of health-care costs for its retirees over the ensuing 10 years. "Critics of the 2006 legislation say it's a poison pill, forced on an agency that has accommodated itself to change many times over—from railroads and telegraphs to airmail, AOL, and Amazon.com." [From *IEEE Spectrum*, May 2012.]

(3) The underwear bomber, part 2: A few years ago, a primitive attempt was made by a terrorist to take explosives tucked into his underwear on board a plane. Thankfully, that unsuccessful underwear-bombing attempt did not lead to the removal of underwear becoming part of the security screening process at airports (unlike the similarly unsuccessful shoe-bomber, whose attempt did result in the TSA requiring passengers to remove their shoes). The bomb carried by the latest incarnation of the underwear bomber had greater sophistication and was designed to evade detection by security checks. However, the man, that Al Qaida operatives in Yemen thought was their latest suicide-bomber recruit, turned out to be a British citizen of Saudi origin, working for the Saudi intelligence. He turned over the bomb to the CIA, which immediately began its work to understand its construction and to assess possible damage in case bombs of the same kind have been supplied to other would-be terrorists. It has been reported that the same infiltrating agent provided information that led to a key senior Al Qaida member being killed in a drone attack.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/11/underwear-bomber-agent-british-al-qaida>

2012/05/10 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Spreading **cheers through music** at the Seattle Children's Hospital.

(2) The Salman Rushdie of music: An Iranian ayatollah in the city of Qom has issued a death sentence against Shahin Najafi, a rapper whom he accuses of apostasy. The sentence was decreed after Nafisi released the song "Naqi," which shares its name with a Shi'ite imam. Najafi has written a response (in Persian) to his critics. I have not heard the song in question and am generally not a fan of rap music, but I find it reprehensible to advocate killing people for their words, drawings, or music.

(3) Harvesting energy from the bloodstream: Implantable electronic devices are advancing rapidly, but we are still some distance away from being able to power them without clunky batteries. A group of researchers are trying to use glucose molecules in the human blood as a source of power, much like the way muscles get energy from them. The group built a tiny fuel cell, covering its anode with a special enzyme that pulls electrons from glucose molecules. They then coated the cathode with a plant enzyme that pushes electrons onto oxygen molecules, thereby producing a measurable current. Once the method has been perfected, it will be used for powering temporary implants. If successful in this limited context, longer-term or permanent implants, including tiny devices to stimulate nerves and alleviate chronic pain, will become possible. [From the May 2012 issue of *IEEE Spectrum*.]

2012/05/09 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Rhino, aspiring to become a unicorn (**cartoon**).

(2) The battle over e-books: "The antitrust lawsuit filed by the [US] Department of Justice on April 11 against five major book publishers and Apple has all the trappings of a David and Goliath tale. Only the parties involved can't seem to agree on who's who." Apple, Macmillan, and Penguin are fighting the suit, whereas Hachette, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster quickly settled. The publishers are accused of colluding to jack up e-book prices in 2010. The lawsuit tends to paint Amazon.com as a victim of this conspiracy. [From *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of May 11, 2012.]

(3) The Comedy Awards: Celebrity guests at the Second Annual Comedy Awards, which aired on Sunday 5/6, assembled for a memorable **class photo** backstage. [From *Entertainment Weekly*, issue of May 11, 2012.]

(4) The ultimate in cruelty to animals: Every Thursday, a zoo park in Sari (a northern city in Iran, near the Caspian Sea) feeds its lions by presenting them with a live donkey. Unfortunately, people are shown watching and filming the donkey's torturous death, instead of protesting the inhumane practice. The donkey continues to struggle almost to the end of this hard-to-watch **15-minute video**.

2012/05/08 (Tue.): Fonda, Jane, *Prime Time: Making the Most of Your Life (Love, Health, Sex, Fitness, Friendship, Spirit)*, unabridged audiobook (10 CDs) read by the author, Books on Tape, 2011.

The focus of this (audio)book is on how we can become energetic, loving, and fulfilled people as we reach and surpass our grandparenting age. If what Fonda wrote in her previous memoirs, *My Life So Far*, constitutes Acts I and II in the play of life, this book covers Act III. Fonda provides advice to the elderly on how to live happy, fulfilling lives into their 80s and 90s.

Jane Fonda is far from universally loved as a celebrity. Her personal choices during her youth and middle age, including multiple marriages to a string of powerful men, are often frowned upon. She acknowledges her mistakes and attributes them to her insecurity as a woman, stemming in part from her troubled relationship with her father, the actor Henry Fonda. Though she was not abused herself, Fonda was apparently scarred by abusive relationships in her family.

The following quote, taken from a *Newsweek* magazine article (issue of August 22 & 29, 2011) about Fonda, is quite revealing and representative of the author's frame of mind as she wrote this book. "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."

The book contains both broad-brush spiritual guidance and the nuts-and-bolts of daily life when we are no longer as energetic, dexterous, and flexible as we were in our youth. Alongside tips on health monitoring and nutrition, Fonda provides a good deal of frank talk (that some people may find unsettling), about companionship and sexual relations that is particularly useful to single women during their third acts. Fonda finds much joy in aging and counsels enjoyment of our accumulated wisdom, freedom from caring for others, and relative financial comfort, instead of fretting over the things we can no longer do.

2012/05/07 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest about righteousness.

(1) Quote of the day: "We can never judge the lives of others, because each person knows only their own pain and renunciation. It's one thing to feel that you are on the right path, but it's another to think that yours is the only path." ~ Paulo Coelho (Novelist)

(2) Some Iranians vilify a dead artist: On the occasion of the passing of long-time Iranian actor and director Iraj Ghaderi, many on Facebook and elsewhere posted stories about his impact on the Iranian cinema and generations of movie-goers. A few commenters used the occasion to level accusations of immorality against the popular artist. Whether or not these accusations have a basis in truth, their questionable timing has outraged many Iranians. Firstly, morality is a relative term: what is deemed immoral by one person may be perfectly acceptable to another. Secondly, accusations require evidence or citation of sources, rather than being leveled casually in a brief Facebook or blog comment. Thirdly, coming at a time when the Islamic Republic authorities are labeling the entire film industry of Iran as immoral and "loose," the accusations have touched a raw nerve. On her Facebook post, the popular actress Shohreh Aghdashloo confronted one such commenter by asking him to refrain from judging a colleague of hers who was loved by millions.

(3) How the Islamic Republic censors the Western media: Everyone knows that the Islamic Republic censors all news media in Iran, on top of banning and burning books that it does not like. The regime's censors have to approve anything that is posted on government sponsored Web sites. Even when a critical or embarrassing story inadvertently sneaks past the censors, it is often modified or removed within hours. Private Web sites are self-censored by the threat of imprisonment, torture, or worse. Lesser known is the fact that the Islamic Republic's censors have a long reach that affects media in many Western democracies. The same threats that prompt journalists and general public residing in Iran to exercise self-censorship, affects Iranians in diaspora who travel to Iran on occasion. The regime in Iran operates an extensive Internet-monitoring bureau that scans the cyberspace for signs of anti-regime activities. [This article](#) discusses the disturbing trend of Iranians asking news media and Web sites to remove their previous articles and postings (for fear of themselves or their families in Iran falling prey to the regime's enforcers), arguing that while people are free to write or not write whatever they wish, they do not have the right to modify or delete an item once it is in the public domain.

2012/05/06 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school." ~ Albert Einstein

(2) Reframing is the key to happiness: An insightful and funny [18-minute TEDx talk](#) about how circumstances of our lives matter much less than how we see them.

(3) The Brazilians do not understand Islam: Following accusations by Brazilian authorities that an Islamic Republic diplomat had molested young girls while swimming in a pool, the Islamic Republic's reaction was quite embarrassing: they attributed the incident to a lack of understanding of "cultural differences." This hilarious piece in Persian by [Mollaa Hassani](#) pokes fun at the ridiculous explanation.

(4) An interesting puzzle (not very hard): Jason is picked up from school by his mother every day at 3:00 PM. One day, school finishes early, at 2:30 PM, and Jason starts walking home along the same path that his mother always takes to go fetch him. Unaware of the early finish, Jason's mother leaves home at the usual time to fetch her son. Fortunately, she sees Jason walking along the road, picks him up, and drives him the rest of the way home, getting there 10 minutes earlier than usual. For how long was Jason walking before his mother picked

him up?

2012/05/05 (Sat.): Here are three science/technology items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient ways of going backwards." ~ Aldous Huxley

(2) Microsoft opens a new research lab in New York City: This **13th Microsoft lab** worldwide will aim to exploit the talent available in the New York area and to focus on some of the hottest new topics in computing research, including on-line social behavior, prediction markets, and machine learning.

(3) Erasing information gives off heat: According to a theory proposed by Rolf Landauer in 1961, erasing each bit of information gives off a tiny amount of heat, which has come to be known as **the Landauer limit**. Because computing usually involves erasing old pieces of information and creating new ones, some energy consumption would be inevitable. Currently, we are orders of magnitude away from the Landauer limit in terms of the energy required for using computing devices, but scientists are curious about how far we can extend energy-efficient computational methods. The trouble is that at 3 zepto-Joule (zepto being a prefix that means 10 to the power -21), the minute amount of energy has been impossible to measure until now. A group of European scientists recently came up with an ingenious experimental set-up that allowed them to observe and measure the energy, thus confirming Landauer's theory.

2012/05/04 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "A man is incomplete until he is married. After that, he is finished." ~ Zsa Zsa Gabor

(2) Half-portraits: Artist **Jesus Gonzalez** combines photos of several faces and cuts the result to create interesting, and sometimes unsettling, images.

(3) A window into terrorists' minds: I just read one of the **letters, attributed to OBL**, in a just-declassified collection. If these letters, obtained from the Abbotabad raid that led to the shooting death of Osama bin Laden, are authentic, access to them is perhaps more important than OBL's demise. They provide a window into the mindset of one of the world's most ruthless terrorist groups and how behind the piety mask, they are prone to the same calculations and compromises as other power-grabbing despots.

2012/05/03 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Teacher's Day: Teacher is accidentally **set on fire** when students tease him to celebrate Teacher's Day. I hope my students don't do this.

(2) Composing Persian texts: On-line **typing aid with keyboard** allows you to compose text directly in the Persian alphabet.

(3) Age brings wisdom ... not: Idiiotic **grandparents arrested** for towing a toy plastic car behind their SUV, with their 7-year-old granddaughter sitting in it.

(4) Artwork from crowd formations: "At first glance these **celebrity portraits** appear to have been created from aerial photographs of dozens of people. But a closer examination of this series, by Atlanta-based artist Craig Alan, reveals that the tiny figures were actually painted into place."

(5) It's good that we import toys and electronics from China, and not buildings. Here is the tale of how a 13-story building in China turned from **vertical to horizontal** a few years ago.

2012/05/02 (Wed.): Here are three science and technology items of potential interest.

(1) My iPhone-owning friends with musical interests should be happy to learn that a wide variety of apps exist to suit their needs and tastes. Enjoy this **top 10 selection**, but please forgive the very sloppy writing (after all, the source is called "Geeky Journal"). Other than the selection just cited, I came across this **demo video** for the Intua Beatmaker (\$10).

(2) New research explains why your brain may be at its most creative when you are asleep: In one study, subjects were asked to work out a series of complex math problems whose standard solutions were tedious but also admitted elegant arithmetical shortcuts. About one quarter of the subjects found the shortcuts right away. When subjects were allowed to sleep for 8 hours before continuing, the success rate increased to 59%. It seems that if you have an idea for a simpler solution that is developing in your head, you still tend to go with the familiar approach. Sleep gives the clever alternate approach a better chance to emerge. [Jeffrey Kluger, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of April 23, 2012]

(3) Reflections on a century of progress in electricity and electronics: "In 1912, when the Institute of Radio Engineers was founded, my mother was 10 years old. She lived on a farm in a house with no electricity. She had never seen an automobile, and it would be quite a few years before she heard a radio station or saw an airplane fly through the sky above the farm. Yet she lived to see, on television, a man walk on the moon. What an age of achievement!" Thus begins Robert W. Lucky's **tribute column** on the 100th anniversary of the formation of IEEE (actually, of a predecessor society that eventually merged with another entity to form today's

Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers). He goes on to say: "In the U.S. National Academy of Engineering's list of the 20 greatest engineering achievements of the 20th century, nearly half are directly related to electricity and electronics: electrification, electronics, radio and television, computers, telephone, Internet, imaging, household appliances, and laser and fiber optics. I have a strong sense of shared pride in contemplating that list. We engineers did those things. We changed the world."

2012/05/01 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Joke of the day: "Mr. President: I know that you won't be able to laugh at any of my jokes about the Secret Service. So, cover your ears, if that's feasibly possible!" Jimmy Kimmel, at last night's Whitehouse Correspondents Dinner. [[More jokes](#) from Kimmel and the President.]

(2) Is capitalism ruining America? Michael Sandel, Harvard's rock-star moralist and its most popular professor, believes so. According to him, we should examine how markets dictate our public lives and how obsession with consumption limits our freedom to engage in a full civic life. He cautions against the corrosive effects of applying economic thinking outside its traditional realms. [Adapted from Michael Fitzgerald's review of the book *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, in the April 23 & 30, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine.]

(3) Avenger of burnt faces: In its issue of April 30, 2012, *Time* magazine presents a list of the 100 most influential people in the world. The list contains world leaders, scientists, entertainers, and even despots. Among these, the person who impressed me most is Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Pakistan's first Oscar winner for the documentary "[Saving Face](#)," a film that brought her country's acid violence problem to the world stage.

2012/04/30 (Mon.): I am back from St Louis, where I attended the [FIRST Robotic](#) Competition's championship event. My daughter Sepideh's Team 1717, from Dos Pueblos High School in Goleta, did quite well. During qualifying rounds, Thursday afternoon through Saturday morning, Team 1717 accumulated an overall record of 8-0-1 (8 wins, 1 tie), finishing as the second-seed in its division. It then chose Teams 469 and 2471 as alliance partners for the elimination rounds, advanced to semifinals, and lost to the 3rd-seed alliance (Teams 68, 330, 639) 2 matches to 1.

Overall, Sepideh's robotics team had a great run during the competition season, finishing first at the Long Beach and Madera regionals, advancing into the 8-alliance round of the [championship event](#) in the Newton Division, and winning its quarterfinal series 2 matches to 1 to move into the semifinals. The team was affected by some bad luck in being assigned match slots in which the communications router (supplied by the venue) malfunctioned, causing the robot to freeze on more than one occasion. If this were a sporting event, the matches in which such malfunctions occurred would have been replayed, but the focus on this event isn't on winning or losing, so the organizers decided to let it go. Sepideh tells me that there was some dissatisfaction from participating teams with the way the tournament was organized and run. All in all, it was a great learning experience for Sepideh and her teammates.

In the final ceremonies, the D'Penguineers, as the team is nicknamed, were honored with an award for Most Creativity for the design of their robot's drive train. Congratulations, Sepideh, for a job well done!

The return trip from St Louis was eventful, as we were soaked in a thundershower downtown, on the way to the airport. Then, we had to take shelter at the airport for a while, waiting for a hailstorm and threat of tornados to pass. The parked planes had to be inspected to ensure there was no damage from the ice-cube-sized hail. In the end, we flew out just in time to catch our connecting flight from San Francisco to Santa Barbara.

2012/04/29 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Every man is dishonest who lives upon the labor of others, no matter if he occupies a throne." Robert G. Ingersoll

(2) The US State Department has issued a [travel advisory for Iran](#). In related news, Canada has closed its embassy's visa and immigration section in Iran, transferring all of its services to Turkey.

(3) An [insightful review](#) of a book with the theme that a person's 20's form his/her defining decade.

(4) A classic song: Mariah Carey's beautiful rendition of "[I Can't Live](#) (If Living Is Without You)."

(5) Persian music: Armin and Azin's rendition of "[Shahzadeye Roya](#)" ("The Prince of Dreams").

2012/04/27 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is a thousand times better to have common sense without education than to have education without common sense." Robert G. Ingersoll

(2) An iconic bridge's diamond anniversary: [Golden Gate turns 75](#) on May 27, 2012.

(3) Stop complaining about taxes: "We are nearing the IRS filing deadline, which means the tax whiners are in full cry. First up is the Tax Foundation, which annually declares a Tax Freedom Day—the day our national earnings to date will cover our annual tax bill. (Tax Freedom Day 2012 falls on April 17, which is also tax filing day.) ... When it comes to corporate taxes, you can always count on whining from the U.S. Chamber of

Commerce." Yes, the US corporate tax rate of 39% is highest in the world, but what corporations actually pay is around 12%. Germany has a lower tax rate of 30%, but they actually collect at 30%. ... "I live in the richest country in the history of the world, one that offers a free basic education and a billion cable channels. It has baseball. We are protected by a kick-ass military. And after April 17, it's all free? Go ahead, raise my taxes. Or lower them if you want. Just sign me up for another year." Bill Saporito, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of April 23, 2012.

(4) Clear evidence that stereotyping continues to hurt girls' chances of success in STEM fields: Researchers at the University of Michigan have looked at how middle-school girls respond to [women exceling in STEM fields](#). The subjects were asked questions about women, exhibiting different degrees of "femininity," who were successful in math and science fields. The girls signaled little interest in STEM topics when presented with successful female role models who specialized in those fields and displayed "feminine" characteristics, such as wearing makeup or dressing in pink.

2012/04/26 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Anger is a wind which blows out the lamp of mind." Robert G. Ingersoll

(2) I am headed to St Louis today to cheer on my daughter Sepideh and her Dos Pueblos Engineering Academy peers, as they continue their world championship quest in the FIRST Robotics Competition, following their first-place finishes at Long Beach and Madera regionals. Their Robot, Lindsay Rose, is a top favorite in the tournament (consisting of basketball-style matches), deemed to be #1 in offensive power and #2 in adjusted ranking among 2300 participating teams worldwide. If you follow the preliminaries via live streaming, look for Team 1717 on the Newton Field.

[\[Info on the championship event\]](#) [\[Live streaming from NASA\]](#)

(3) A challenging geometric puzzle [from *E&T magazine*, issue of April 2012]: We have a piece of linoleum, almost in the shape of an 8-by-8 checkerboard, the difference being as follows. Label the rows of an 8-by-8 checkerboard A-H, from top to bottom, and the columns 1-8, from left to right, with the square at A1 being white. The piece of linoleum has black squares A8 and G8 missing, but has two black squares protruding at B9 and F9. Obviously, if we are allowed to cut these two protruding squares and refit them into A8 and G8, we can form a complete 8-by-8 checkerboard from the 3 resulting pieces. Can the same end be achieved with only one cut, producing two pieces?

(4) Fun day at the boat launch: It seems like a truck backing into the water to launch a boat gets stuck, leading to a [series of maneuvers](#) by other vehicles to pull it out.

2012/04/25 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is an old habit with theologians to beat the living with the bones of the dead." Robert G. Ingersoll

(2) An essay about secularism: Robert G. Ingersoll (Civil War veteran & political leader) wrote this essay 125 years ago and David M. Beadle (agnostic and environmentalist, describing himself as "a Father and Husband, trying to raise freethinking children in a world of spin and superstition") turned it into a [5-minute short film](#).

(3) The following is from a "Dilbert" cartoon strip by Scott Adams.

Boss: "How's your quantum computer prototype coming along?"

Wally: "Great! The project exists in a simultaneous state of being both totally successful and not even started."

Boss: "Can I observe it?"

Wally: "That's a tricky question."

(4) Book about the CIA-led coup that overthrew Mossadeq: This [Persian translation](#) of a book attributed to Donald Newton Wilber appears to be a legitimate account of how the CIA led a successful effort to overthrow the popular Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and to reinstall Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. What makes me somewhat squeamish about its authenticity is that, unlike other history books, it contains not a single reference citation.

2012/04/24 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) On the human need for computation: "[An] understanding for our need to compute can be found in the mathematical formalism ... Algorithmic Information Theory, or AIT. Perhaps the most important insight from AIT is that information is a conserved quantity, like energy and momentum. Therefore, the output from any computation cannot contain more information than was input in the first place. ... Kurt Godel's celebrated incompleteness theorem can be seen as a straightforward consequence of conservation of information. AIT provides a simple three-page proof of Godel's theorem ... And one of the quantitative implications of Godel's theorem is that a 'Theory of Everything' for mathematics cannot be created with any finite quantity of information." [Douglas S. Robertson, in a letter to *Communications of the ACM*, issue of April 2012, p. 7]

(2) Why perfect security may be undesirable: "Because we are all simultaneously members of many different

subsets of society with competing interests—family, friends, colleagues, party, nation—we need security failures for progress. ... In other words, sometimes rule breakers are a threat to society, and sometimes they are its best hope." Paul Wallich, in [his review](#) of Bruce Schneier's *Liars and Outliers: Enabling the Trust That Society Needs to Thrive* (Wiley, 2012).

(3) Spy networks within Iran: In this [news story](#), unnamed US officials are quoted as confirming the presence of CIA and Mossad spy networks within Iran. This, of course, comes as no surprise to anyone, given the nature of modern intelligence and counterintelligence operations. However, I am always squeamish about taking such anonymous tips at face value. Spying agencies either minimize/hide their operations or exaggerate them, depending on which one best serves their goals.

2012/04/23 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) You are what bugs you: "Remarkable: a charming and insightful book that explains how studying what annoys you can make you both less annoyed and less annoying. I feel better already!" Chris Anderson, writing in praise of the book *Annoying: The Science of What Bugs Us*, by NPR journalists Joe Palca and Flora Lichtman, Wiley, 2011. [I have ordered this book via interlibrary loan and look forward to reading it.]

(2) Photoshop faux pas: The Russian Orthodox Church issued an [official apology](#) for digitally removing a luxury watch from an image of Patriarch Kirill. The watch, valued around \$45K, was digitally removed from the wrist, but its reflection in the tabletop remained intact, causing a firestorm in cyberspace.

(3) Bare-handed hunting: During a conversation with my son, Sepehr, I learned that ancient humans, before they developed tools and weapons, used to hunt by simply chasing their prey until the animals collapsed from exhaustion. After some on-line research, I learned that the method, known as [persistence hunting](#), evolved 2M years ago. Whereas we humans can sweat to reduce body heat, our quadrupedal prey must slow from a gallop in order to pant. This evolutionary advantage of humans over other species is responsible for producing today's excellent marathon runners. Persistence hunting is still practiced in some regions of the world.

(4) Supreme arrogance: "The difference, you want to scream, is we don't have a burial-insurance crisis in America. We aren't spending 17 percent of our total national wealth on burials year after year. We aren't bankrupting families because burial costs are out of control. Perhaps most important, if a person doesn't get good health care, he or she will die. If someone doesn't get a good burial, well, she or he is not going to die. Because, you jerk—I mean, your Honor—that person is already dead." [\[Paul Begala](#), ridiculing Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, on his argument that buying health insurance should not be mandated, just as we do not require people to buy burial insurance.]

2012/04/22 (Sun.): Today, I offer a quote and 3 technology-related news items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "We go on multiplying our conveniences only to multiply our cares. We increase our possessions only to the enlargement of our anxieties." Anna C. Brackett

(2) The April/May 2012 issue of PenguiNews is on-line: The DP Engineering Academy has published the latest issue of its [newsletter](#). It features a photo of "1717ina" (the recently-named Santa Barbara Zoo penguin mascot for DPEA) and Part II of "Portrait of a Build Season" (covering days 35-65 in the team's hectic schedule to build and fine-tune a world-class robot for the FIRST competitions).

(3) Computer does well on IQ tests: "In many IQ test questions, takers are asked to identify the next number or image in a sequence. Mathematical software such as Mathematica and Maple were fed the number sequence problems and got scores below 100, which is considered average intelligence in a human. But Claes Strannegard, a researcher in philosophy, linguistics, and theory of science at the University of Gothenburg, says a program he and his colleagues developed scores 150 on number sequences questions, and 100 on progressive matrix problems, which ask a test taker to select the correct image. ... The software applies Occam's razor, giving preference to the more succinct patterns. It also gives greater weight to more general patterns." [From: *Communications of the ACM*, issue of April 2012, p. 16]

(4) The down side of hyping your products: [AT&T has been successfully sued](#) for advertising unlimited data plans and touting its "fastest" network, while throttling the busiest of its 17M smartphone accounts to limit their usage. In the wake of this landmark case, businesses will think twice before hyping their products with false or exaggerated claims.

2012/04/21 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Canadian pennies lack currency: Canada has announced that it will stop minting 1-cent coins, because each of them costs 1.5 cents to produce.

(2) Should teachers and students be Facebook friends? Increasingly, teachers and students join each other's circles of friends, both in high schools and at colleges. [This article](#) provides some food for thought about whether such friendships are appropriate.

Note added on 4/24, after a number of friends commented on my Facebook post: There are good arguments on

both sides. Some parents, who have seen too many male teachers and coaches use their greater experience, authority, and power over the lives of their teenage daughters (and female teachers with their sons, although to a much lesser degree) to abuse or harass their children, cringe at the thought of the predators gaining even more power after learning a lot of personal details about their prey. Others point to the benefits of such friendships in increasing educational effectiveness. The first group says that we should err on the side of caution: that even one abused teenager is too many. The second group presents an argument similar to that of gun enthusiasts, who maintain that "guns don't kill; people do." I count myself among the first group. I hate to see teenagers and their families devastated as a result of inappropriate teacher-student "relationships." Most schools already have Web sites for academic interaction, such as homework submission, grade reporting, and the like. Perhaps adding a social component to such Web sites would form a good intermediate solution that allows social interaction between students and teachers, while allowing some degree of oversight.

(3) A wealth of data: The full **1940 US census**, complete with names and addresses, has been uploaded to the National Archives' site, garnering 37M hits in the first 8 hours. The data is published now, because its 72-year privacy restriction just expired. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of April 16, 2012]

(4) On the absence of democracy in certain countries: "Why does it seem that democracy has such a hard time taking root in the Arab world? ... the mere presence of Islam or Islamic culture cannot be to blame. [Harvard economics professor Eric] Chaney points out that many countries in the Arab neighborhood share in the democracy deficit ... yet they are not Arab. ... He notes that the democracy deficit today exists in lands that were conquered by Arab armies after the death in A.D. 632 of the Prophet Muhammad. ... Arab imperial control tended to mean centralized political authority, weak civil society, a dependent merchant class and a large role for the state in the economy." [Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of April 16, 2012]

2012/04/20 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Organic portraits: Prompted by a pictorial in the May 2012 issue of *National Geographic*, I looked up the works of Klaus Enrique and found this interesting **collection of portraits** built of flowers, vegis, and fruits.

(2) A team of engineers is trying to reverse-engineer the amazing Inca road system: "The Inca road system wends some 14,000 miles through the Andes from Ecuador to Chile, via Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina. It reaches heights of 16,500 feet and has to withstand freezing temperatures, heavy rains, and fairly frequent earthquakes. Yet, 400 to 500 years on, it's still trekkable. So as civil engineering accomplishments go, it's pretty amazing." [From *Prism*, the magazine of the American Society for Engineering Education, April 2012]

(3) Tom Petty's prized guitars stolen/recovered: As Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were preparing to launch their new tour, **five prized guitars** belonging to Petty and his band members were stolen from a Los Angeles soundstage. The instruments have been recovered and a private security guard arrested in connection with the theft. Interestingly, tips generated on Facebook played a key role in the recovery, given the very limited market for such expensive guitars.

2012/04/19 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Calculations commonly applied in structural design today would have disallowed the Roman Pantheon, which has withstood 19 centuries of use, earthquakes, floods, and wars." Renato Perucchio, Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Biomedical Engineering, University of Rochester

(2) The Jefferson Bible: "If you go to the second floor of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., you'll find a small room containing an **18th-century Bible** whose pages are full of holes. They are carefully razor-cut empty spaces, so this was not an act of vandalism. It was, rather, a project begun by Thomas Jefferson when he was 77 years old. Painstakingly removing those passages he thought reflected the actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Jefferson literally cut and pasted them into a slimmer, different New Testament, and left behind the remnants (all on display until July 15)."

(3) Shameless profiteering: **Dr. Phil McGraw** used to say that he does not like diets, because "people that go on diets gain more weight during the year than people who don't." Yet, he has touted the "17-Day Diet," mentioning it 27 times on a single program of his. Interestingly, until very recently, he failed to disclose that his son has financial interests in the publication of the diet book, as well as in another diet regimen aimed at women, which McGraw also promoted.

2012/04/18 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Team 1717 in the Santa Barbara Channel 3 local news: For those who missed the KEYT's coverage of the DP Engineering Academy, following their impressive first-place finishes at the Long Beach and Madera regional FIRST Robotics competitions, Dave De Heras has graciously put together a single **13-minute combined video** from the different news segments on Santa Barbara's ABC station (Channel 3).

(2) Catching predators: A **determined prosecutor** is on a mission to have piled-up rape kits, which are often ignored by resource-challenged police departments after hours-long rape-kit exams of victims, tested for DNA.

Too many rapists are walking free because of this negligence.

(3) Possible next Pakistani premier: "Almost 60 percent of Pakistan's population is under 25, and they are sick of the status quo: the military's grip on power, tired political dynasties, and a lack of economic opportunity." Mike Giglio, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of April 16, 2012, on the playboy and former cricket star, Imran Khan, who is running for next year's elections and has received multiple death threats already.

2012/04/17 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it." Thomas Jefferson

(2) Fantastic photography: [Nature's eye](#).

(3) App economy taking off: According to *The Christian Science Monitor*, app economy, "a burgeoning industry of mini-software at micro prices, ... has spawned nearly \$20 billion in sales and 466,000 jobs, ... and it shows no signs of slowing down." One indicator of the sector's growing status is Facebook's shelling out \$1 billion to acquire Instagram, the hip photo-sharing smartphone app.

(4) Next term in the series: In many IQ tests, one is asked to determine the next term or image in a series. Try these two examples. [Hint: No logic or math is needed.]

Example 1: O, T, T, F, F, S, S, E, N, ___

Example 2: 1, 11, 21, 1211, 111221, _____

Additional challenge question: What is the largest digit that can ever occur in the sequence of Example 2?

2012/04/16 (Mon.): I was away in Washington, DC, attending the "Circle on the Road" workshop over the past 3 days. [Math circles](#) provide means of getting children and youth of all ages excited about mathematics, using problems that are readily accessible, yet involve deep math for those who are able to, and want, to dig deeper. I squeezed in some sightseeing during the workshop's off hours. The 100th anniversary of the Cherry Blossom Festival was in progress, but there was no sign of the pink blossoms yet around the [Tidal Basin](#) where the famed Jefferson Memorial is located.

2012/04/12 (Thu.): Engineering jokes: Each country has its own group of people to make fun of, and within professions, lawyers and engineers are the butts of more jokes than others. According to a column by Vitali Vitaliev, published in the April 2012 issue of *E&T magazine*, mechanical and computer engineers appear to be the Jews and the Irish of the world of engineering jokes. Engineering jokes tend to be long-winded, but here are a few short ones from the said column. Enjoy!

(a) To the optimist, the glass is half-full. To the pessimist, the glass is half-empty. To the engineer, the glass is twice as large as it needs to be.

(b) Mechanical engineers build weapons. Civil engineers build targets for those weapons.

(c) Four engineers are traveling in a car which breaks down. Each of the first three suggests a way to deal with the problem, depending on his/her area of expertise (mechanical, electrical, chemical). They then ask the computer engineer what he thinks they should do. He responds: "Perhaps we should all get out of the car and get back in."

(d) The architect says he likes to be with his wife to build a solid foundation for their relationship. The artist says he enjoys being with his mistress, because of the passion and mystery of the affair. The engineer says he likes both his wife and his mistress, because each assumes he is spending time with the other while he goes to the lab and gets work done.

(e) How can you tell an extroverted engineer from an introverted one? The introverted engineer looks at his shoes when he is talking to you, whereas the extroverted one looks at *your* shoes.

(f) Normal people believe that if it ain't broke, you shouldn't fix it. Engineers believe that if it ain't broke, it doesn't have enough features yet.

(g) Engineer: Nice bike; where did you get it? Friend: Oh, a girl was riding by; she stopped, disrobed, and told me to take whatever I wanted. Engineer: Good choice; the clothes probably wouldn't have fit.

2012/04/11 (Wed.): Here are three education- and technology-related items of potential interest.

(1) California community colleges in transition: According to [Inside Higher Ed](#), community colleges in California are approaching a retirement wave for faculty members, a transition that could create better jobs for the part timers on whom the campuses depend. According to the most recent survey results available, 31 percent of full-time faculty members plan to retire by 2017 and 39 percent by 2020.

(2) Asking Siri questions: Apple has added a new subject for our jokes by introducing Siri, a voice-recognition and speech-analysis program that often misunderstands our commands and questions if they stray beyond the simple and routine. However, we are making rapid progress in the direction of more powerful and extremely useful speech input capabilities for computers and other electronic devices. Fundamental advances are expected

over the next decade in the two main application areas for speech understanding: command recognition and dictation. **This photo** shows Siri's attempt at answering one of the deepest questions in theoretical computer science: "Is P equal to NP?"

(3) The global gold rush in technology patents: Microsoft has agreed to pay more than \$1B for 800 patents held by AOL (about \$1.3M per patent). According to **the Washington Post**, "Companies are spending billions to buy patents, not always to innovate but often as insurance against legal attacks or to threaten their competitors with lawsuits." Other sources report that AOL will hold on to some 300 of its patents. Big patent deals are becoming more common. Facebook recently bought 750 patents from IBM to shore up its defense against Yahoo's accusation of patent infringement.

2012/04/10 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Surprise on a quiet street corner in Belgium. **Well done!**

(2) Gerald Estrin dead at 90: One of the pioneers of computer systems architecture passed away on March 29, at the age of 90. **Gerald (Jerry) Estrin**, Emeritus Professor of Computer Science at UCLA, was an early contributor to projects for building digital computers in the US and Israel. He proposed a fixed-plus-variable-structure computer way before it became technologically feasible to augment the capabilities of a general-purpose machine with configurable accelerators and special-purpose engines devoted to performing specific compute-intensive tasks. In the early 1970s, during my doctoral studies at UCLA, I had him as a professor in a couple of regular classes and a number of research seminars. I remember him fondly as a knowledgeable and caring instructor and a role model in both professional and personal development of his students. He is survived by his wife, Thelma, and daughter Deborah, both Professors in the same department at UCLA, daughter Judy, a tech entrepreneur and author, and daughter Margo, a medical doctor. May he rest in peace!

(3) The furor over a reality TV show: "Shahs of Sunset," a **Bravo TV series** about the lives of some Iranian-Americans, has caused a stir in Los Angeles and other cities with large populations of people of Iranian origins. Most reactions are negative, claiming misrepresentation and sensationalism. Others, like the news/radio personality Homa Sarshar, counsel that it is wrong to smash the mirror if it shows a horrifying image. My advice to fellow Iranian-Americans is to chill out and take the series for what it is: a commercial enterprise that is unlikely to shape anyone's view of our community. I seriously doubt that the image of Italian-Americans, or even Sicilians, has been damaged by multiple TV series and movies about the Mafia. We people of Iranian origins are notoriously thin-skinned when it comes to being criticized or unfairly portrayed, while we reserve the right to make fun of any nationality or ethnicity. We even mock other groups of Iranians when they differ from us in language dialect, culture, or even political views.

[By the way, I loved Homa Sarshar's insightful **interview with Voice of America**.]

2012/04/09 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) A very challenging geometric puzzle: We have two square pieces of linoleum with checkerboard patterns: a 6-by-6 and an 8-by-8. Can you cut each piece into 2 pieces (for a total of 4 pieces) and refit them together to form a 10-by-10 checkerboard? The linoleum pieces have the pattern only one side, that is, you can't turn them over during refitting.

You can find a host of other interesting puzzles, as well as the answer to this one (Puzzle 176), in the book *Amusements in Mathematics* (by Henry E. Dudeney), which is **available on-line**.

(2) Dispelling some myths: We all assume that young people today care more about the environment than the baby boomers. Not so. Americans questioned materialism a great deal more in the 1970s. "Compared with boomers and Generation X-ers, Gen Y-ers are the least willing to cut down on driving and electricity use." Joel Stein, writing in his tongue-in-cheek *Time* magazine column (issue of April 2, 2012) about published research of Jean Twenge, the author of *Generation Me*.

(3) The ratings game: "The Hunger Games" aims to gross \$1B worldwide and to become a successful series, much like the "Harry Potter" and "Twilight" franchises. The PG-13 rating given to it, despite a great deal of violence (many teens killed by arrow, harpoon, and machete), will help it achieve this goal. "Bully" is a documentary that exposes the methods used by teen-aged bullies and depicts them using foul language, which is one of their key intimidation methods. The R rating it received makes this useful film less accessible to its target audience (bullies and their victims). This is a bad case of inverted priorities. [Info from a *Time* magazine article by Richard Corliss, in the issue of April 2, 2012.]

2012/04/08 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Mike Wallace dead at 93: The **veteran CBS newsmen** is praised by media personalities and many others.

(2) Tsunami debris, part 2: I previously posted a story about debris from last year's tsunami in Japan making their way to the west coast of US and Canada. The first item, a floating ghost ship which has traveled 1000s of miles, showed up off the coast of Canada and, later, near Alaska. The US Coast Guard **sank the ship** to

prevent any hazard to shipping traffic. The ship and its supply of fuel are now safely buried under the Gulf of Alaska. The amount of fuel is said to be small enough to dissipate from natural wind and wave actions.

(3) Quote of the day: "I think peace should be done not only among governments but among people. ... And politicians today are conditioned by the people more than the people are being governed by the politicians." Two-time Israeli Prime Minister, Shimon Perez, on why he has joined Facebook. [*Time* magazine interview, issue of April 2, 2012.]

(4) How to stay alive while being black: "You will have to make allowances for other people's racism. That's part of the burden of being black. We can be defiant and dead or smart and alive. ... Racism is about reminding you that you are less human, less valuable, less worthy, less beautiful, less intelligent. ... The best way to counter [racists] involves not your fists but your mind. ... The best revenge is surviving and living well." Toure, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of April 2, 2012, advising young black men not to give racists and profilers an opportunity to make a mistake.

2012/04/07 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) California Central Valley regional event of the FIRST Robotics Competition: Goleta's Dos Pueblos High School fielded its team 1717 to participate in the international FIRST Robotics Competition. Following its impressive first-place finish at the Long Beach regionals, team 1717 repeated the feat at California Central Valley regionals, held in Madera. Videos from all elimination-round matches (3 hr 22 min) and the awards ceremony (48 min) are available from [this Web site](#). Team 1717, part of the championship alliance, along with teams 330 and 2102, won 15 out of its 16 matches, including three consecutive 2-game sweeps in 2-out-of-3 quarterfinals, semifinals, and final series of matches. Read an account of the competition, including some behind-the-scene interludes on the [Noozhawk site](#).

(3) The art of video games: This is the name of [an exhibit](#), now at Smithsonian's American Art Museum, in Washington DC. After being snubbed for decades as being disreputable, videogame images now hang on walls as art. A book of the same title, by Patrick O'Rourke and Chris Melissinos, contains images from videogames over 4 decades.

2012/04/06 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Passover to all my Jewish friends! This [old video](#), "The Jewish-Arab Peace Song" (with English subtitles), has probably been posted many times before, but there is no harm in sharing it again on the occasion of this Passover eve.

(2) Iranian singer performs a couple of [Israeli songs](#): Disco versions of "Hava Naguila" and "Shalom Aleikhem" by Leila Forouhar.

(3) Jewish surf music: Meshugga Beach Party is advertised as "World's premier Jewish surf music band." LOL. Here is their rendition of ["Shalom Aleikhem."](#)

(4) Music of the plants: [This video](#) intrigued me, so I decided to do some research on the claims made in it that plants are intelligent enough to produce music when connected to a synthesizer via a pair of electrodes. I searched the Web, particularly YouTube, for "plant music" and various other word combinations involving plants, music, synthesis, etc. and found the videos listed below. Through some of these videos, I learned that the electrodes measure variations in the electrical resistance of the plants (for example the uneven movement of food from the roots to the leaves can produce such variations). It appears that the electronic synthesizers they use take these more or less random variations as input and translate them to music. So, it is the synthesizer program or algorithm, and not the plant itself, that is producing the music. You might say that the synthesizer program takes the input from plants as "inspiration," in the same way that a musician might be inspired by natural or human-made sounds. In my view, no intelligent behavior on the part of the plant is involved. You could attach electrodes to two parts of a wet garment hanging from a clothesline as the wind blows and very likely produce similar sounds. I am not knocking those involved in these projects. If the sounds so produced are comforting to some people, then so be it. Some people find sounds produced by ocean waves, sea shells, or rainfall relaxing. In fact, sounds of nature tend to be relaxing in general. But they should not be advertised as being signs of intelligent behavior.

[[Music of the plants](#); Sounds of Plants, [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#); For a Culture of Peace, [Part 4](#)]

2012/04/05 (Thu.): King, Ross, *Michelangelo & the Pope's Ceiling*, abridged audiobook read by Alan Sklar, Audio Partners, 2003.

In 1508, ignoring advice from those around him, Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo Buonarroti to paint the vault of Rome's Sistine Chapel, which had just been restored. The ensuing 4-year labor of love was full of political intrigue, venomous rivalries, and technical difficulties. This book, which is in equal parts about art and history, describes the project and the circumstances that surrounded it, including the strained relationship between Michelangelo and Julius II. Among Michelangelo's challenges were poor health, the physical demands of painting

in tight spots at great heights, financial problems, and competition from Raphael, a rising young painter. We learn from this book that Julius II, "the warrior pope," was an impatient boss and a ruthless ruler, willing to start a war with whatever municipality that harbored an artist whom he needed for some work. He fought invading French forces as well as upstart cities within Italy. On the other side of the relationship, Michelangelo, the brilliant artist whose creations are viewed as pinnacles of Renaissance art, sometimes emerges as arrogant, judgmental, manipulative, obsessive, and paranoid, to cite but a few of his negative traits that are evident from historical records, including some of his private letters.

The mechanics of Michelangelo's fresco (Italian for "fresh") painting style are also discussed in some detail. He would draw pieces of his painting in cartoon form, which he then enlarged by the squaring method and transferred them to wet plaster. The plaster would absorb the paint and dry into vivid colors. It was critical that the work be divided into sections small enough to be completed in a day or so (a "jornata"), before the wet plaster had a chance to solidify. On occasion, Michelangelo would prepare the cartoons and then forego the squaring method, opting for freehand painting instead.

All in all, this is an interesting book for art lovers and history buffs alike.

This [Web site](#) contains a complete view of the ceiling, as well as details of its various parts.

2012/04/04 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "If you don't know what dictatorship is, you are probably living under one." Ifnazio Silone (pseudonym for Secondino Tranquilli)

(2) Al-Qaeda Web sites are going off-line: Some [experts theorize](#) that the arrest of a key operative in Spain may have led to info about the sites' hosts and operators.

(3) Russian Army Choir: Precision in singing, dancing, and playing music is on display in this [6-minute video](#). Enjoy, but please ignore the slogan "Long Live the Russian Army!!!!" at the end of the video's description. LOL.

(4) Fareed Zakaria praises Pat Robertson, after the latter declares the war on drugs a failure and points out that America, with 5% of the world's population, has a quarter of its prisoners: "In 1980 the U.S.'s prison population was about 150 per 100,000 adults. It has more than quadrupled since then. So something has happened in the past 30 years to push millions of Americans into prison. That something, of course, is the war on drugs. ... More than half of America's federal inmates today are in prison on drug convictions. ... Since 1980, California has built one college campus and 21 prisons. A college student costs the state \$8,667 per year; a prisoner costs it \$45,006 a year" [From *Time* magazine, issue of April 2, 2012.]

(5) Making a bald friend for Barbie: This [excellent idea](#), that was realized quickly following a grassroots lobbying campaign, is, of course, a serious matter, so I hope nobody takes offense from my tongue-in-cheek wish that Mattel also make a bald male friend for Ken, in order to boost the self-esteem of middle-aged men who are bald or balding.

2012/04/03 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) To my US friends, on the final 2-week stretch before tax returns are due: A cartoon I use on a lecture slide for one of my courses bears the following caption (one person saying to another, while talking about taxes): "Of course it's impossible to figure out. Why else would they call it the tax *code*?"

(2) Apple in hot water over its Chinese supplier: Foxconn Technology Group, the maker of popular Apple products and a good chunk of all consumer products worldwide (40% by one account) [has been accused](#) of violating workplace-safety and overtime laws of China, as well as poor treatment of student interns.

(3) Ahmadinejad continues to defy the mullahs and they continue to chastise him: In a gathering of Iranians living in Tajikistan, Iran's president suggested that [Ferdowsi rescued Islam](#), referring to his Shahnameh as "Towhidnameh" ("Book of Monotheism"). Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, without referring to Ahmadinejad by name, suggested that he should watch his words because they can have dire consequences.

(4) Student-to-faculty ratio: One of the measures by which universities and departments are judged by prospective students with regard to their desirability for undergraduate education is their student-to-faculty ratio (STFR). For example, a department with 600 undergraduate students and a faculty size of 40 is said to have an STFR of 15, which is less desirable than 12 (same number of students, with 50 faculty members), say. *Prism*, the magazine of the American Society of Engineering Education (ASEE), has published a related measure of [bachelor's-degree-recipients-to-faculty ratio](#) (BDRTFR) in its March 2012 issue, based on data from 2010. Emerging on top of the list are Howard, North Texas, Caltech, Yale, and George Washington, with BDRTFRs in the range 1.13 to 1.24. UCSB ranks 12th, with its 1.68 ratio. At the bottom of the list, one finds Cal Poly Pomona, Saint Thomas, San Jose State, Kettering, and US Naval Academy, with BDRTFRs ranging from 7.82 down to 6.18. The US national average BDRTFR has been around 3 for the past two decades.

2012/04/02 (Mon.): Brookshaw, Dominic P. and Nasrin Rahimieh (eds.), *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, I. B. Tauris & Co., 2010.

[Note: I have used the spelling "Forugh," instead of the more common "Forough," for consistency with the usage in the book under review.]

[*Overview*: A synopsis of Forugh Farrokhzad's life and works in an English-language volume is a welcome addition to the literature on this iconic poet and women's rights pioneer.]

Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967) achieved great fame after her untimely death (in an auto accident) at age 32. Her esteemed place in the Iranian literary and visual-arts circles is in equal parts due to her beautiful and sensual poems (and some experimentation with film) and her rebellion against traditions that disempowered Iranian women. The latter aspect of Farrokhzad's role explains why she achieved even greater fame after the oppression of women became institutionalized under Iran's Islamic regime.

This book, composed of a 6-page introduction by the editors and 13 chapters, written by various authors, is based on presentations given at the Iran Heritage Foundation's July 2008 conference to mark the 40th anniversary of Farrokhzad's death. Here is a list of the 13 chapters (FF stands for Forugh Farrokhzad):

1. On the Sins of FF, by Homa Katouzian [pp. 7-18]
2. Men and Women Together: Love, Marriage and Gender in FF's *Asir*, by Marta Simidchieva [pp. 19-33]
3. Places of Confinement, Liberation, and Decay: The Home and the Garden in the Poetry of FF, by Dominic P. Brookshaw [pp. 35-52]
4. FF's Romance with Her Muse, by Rivanne Sandler [pp. 53-67]
5. Bewildered Mirror: Mirror, Self and World in the Poems of FF, by Leila Rahimi Bahmani [pp. 69-82]
6. Personal Rebellion and Social Revolt in the Works of FF: Challenging the Assumptions, by Kamran Talattof [pp. 83-99]
7. Garden in Motion: The Aesthetic of the Space Between, by Michael Beard [pp. 101-107]
8. FF's Apocalyptic Visions, by Sirous Shamisa [pp. 109-124]
9. Capturing the Abject of the Nation in *The House is Black* [pp. 125-136]
10. The House is Black: A Timeless Visual Essay, by Maryam Ghorbankarimi [pp. 137-148]
11. FF as Translator of Modern German Poetry: Observations about the Anthology *Marg-e Man Ruzi*, by Nima Mina [pp. 149-164]
12. Alien Rebirths of 'Another Birth,' by M. R. Ghanoonparvar [pp. 165-178]
13. Rewriting Forugh: Writers, Intellectuals, Artists and Farrokhzad's Legacy in the Iranian Diaspora, by Persis M. Karim [pp. 179-194]

The short introductory chapter is full of insights about Farrokhzad's life and travails. We learn, for example, that FF "was a lonely woman, an intriguingly unyielding rebel; an adventuress of both body and mind; an iconoclast who asked (and sometimes answered) the wrong questions. Relentlessly, she trespassed boundaries and explored new domains. Zestfully, she demanded of life the gratification of her desires—intellectual, emotional, and sensual—troubling herself less and less about so-called moral proprieties" [p. 1]. She always shied away from talking about her life, once dismissing the question by saying that when and where she was born, which school she attended, and how she fell in love or got married are not as important as her work. Farrokhzad was sincere and daring in expressing her feelings. "Her poetry reveals the problems of a modern Iranian woman with all her conflicts, painful oscillations, and contradictions" [p. 4].

Chapter 1 exposes more of FF's personal attributes. A letter she wrote from Munich to her father in Tehran is quite revealing: "My greatest pain is that you never got to know me and never wanted to know me. I remember when I used to read philosophical books at home ... You would judge me by saying that I was a stupid girl whose mind had been poisoned by reading journals. I would then fall into pieces inside myself, tears coming to my eyes for being so much a stranger at home ... Why did you lack respect for me, and why did you make me keep away from home ..." [pp. 11-12]. She was also quite adept in foreseeing social conflicts outside those related to women's rights. We learn from Chapter 8, for example, that she "foresaw the contradictions and the lack of harmoniousness between the traditional segment of society (which was its largest component), and a superficially modernized stratum" [p. 110].

Needless to say that FF's writings and attitude toward religion and its associated rules and rituals did not endear her to the clergy. She wrote the famous poem "**Paasokh**" ("Response") in which she accuses them of duplicity and superficial piety. Another example is cited and analyzed in Chapter 8: "The prophets brought with them / into our century their message of ruin / These continual explosions / These poisoned clouds / Are they the echoes of holy verses? / O friend, o brother, o relative / When you reach the moon / Write down the date the flowers were massacred" [pp. 119-120].

Chapters 9 and 10 focus on FF's documentary film "The House is Black," commissioned by the Society for Aiding Lepers, which shows daily life in a leper colony in northwestern Iran. About this film, Hamid Dabashi is quoted as saying: "In lepers and their predicament, Farrokhzad saw her own projected image: ashamed of yet attached to a guilt falsely carried. In the face of the lepers, Farrokhzad saw her own face. ... The leper was Farrokhzad's vilified public persona, to which she now lent her defiant poetic vision" [p. 128].

The only photos in the book appear in Chapter 11 [on pp. 158-159]: one shows FF in Munich with her older

brother, Amir Mas'ud, and the other is a group picture that includes a number of students and graduates of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, as well as some exiled members of Iran's Tudeh Party. This chapter also includes some samples of Farrokhzad's handwriting.

Several chapters include sample segments of FF's poems in Persian with English translation. Others only use English translations to discuss her work. More samples of Farrokhzad's poetry would have been welcome, as would consistent inclusion of the original Persian versions of her poem alongside English translations.

Overall, this book provides valuable insight into the life and works of an iconic Iranian poet to the English-speaking world and people of Iranian origins alike. The editors are well-qualified for undertaking this project: Brookshaw is Lecturer in Persian Studies and Iranian Literature at the University of Manchester, and Rahimieh is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine.

Many of FF's poems can be found on [this Web site](#).

2012/04/01 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Wow! Magnitude -7.8 quake hits Central Mexico at 3:32 AM today, with shock waves felt as far north as San Francisco. There are no reports of casualties at this time ([latest report](#)), but some damage is already visible here in Santa Barbara.

(2) Talented opera singer Raeeka Shehabi-Yaghmai [talks \(in Persian\)](#) about her performance in "Madama Butterfly" and how she aspires to make opera accessible to everyone. She mentions that nowadays, opera houses show the words uttered by performers in English on a projection or running display above the stage. see the [Wikipedia article on "Surtitles"](#) for details.

(3) Here is a truly challenging logic puzzle. Read the statement carefully, as it has been formulated precisely. The answer similarly requires precise reasoning. And be aware that it's not an easy puzzle. Good luck! The puzzle of blue/brown-eyed islanders: Inhabitants of an island are blue-eyed or brown-eyed, but none of them knows the color of his/her own eyes, and must commit ritual suicide the next day at noon if s/he ever finds out. (Okay, please do not say the setting is unrealistic and just follow along with the assumptions that such nutty people might exist, there are no mirrors on the island, etc.) The islanders are quite proficient in logical reasoning and won't miss any chance to deduce their eye color, should there be enough information to do so. Unaware of the islanders' traditions, a visitor giving a speech on the island begins his talk with: "It's so good to see someone else with blue eyes on this island." What are the consequences of this faux-pas? You can assume that there are 10 blue-eyed and 90 brown-eyed islanders if you want, although the islanders obviously do not know these numbers (and the actual numbers don't even matter to the reasoning process).

Here is an extension to the puzzle above. Following the visitor's blunder, everyone on the island would immediately figure out the date of their extinction (via mass suicide) to within 1 day. So it is logical that they would look for a solution to save their community, while staying true to their eye-color ritual. Can this society prevent the impending extinction through execution and/or suicide of select members? As many people as necessary can be killed off to save the remaining population. The solution must specify how these sacrificial members are chosen and by whom. The objective is to prevent the society from extinction.

2012/03/31 (Sat.): Fey, Tina, *Bossypants*, unabridged audiobook (5 CDs) read by the author, Hachette Audio, 2011.

In this (audio)book, whose title is based on the popular saying, "You're no one until someone calls you bossy," Tina Fey describes her personal and professional experiences in her trademark writing style. She tells us a lot about how a determined, nerdy, half-Greek girl entered show business via theater and went on to achieve fame as a performer and head writer on "Saturday Night Live" (first woman to achieve this on SNL), creator of the successful sitcom "30 Rock," and winner of many honors, including the Kennedy Center Annual Mark Twain Prize for American humor.

Fey writes about her distaste for photo shoots in particularly funny and insightful terms, and ends up defending Photoshop as an evil, but necessary tool. She also does a great job of telling the reader/listener how she responds to disturbing e-mail messages. She laments over the double standard that still applies to women in the workplace and provides this piece of advice to those who encounter discriminatory or sexist remarks: Always ask yourself whether the person uttering the comment stands between you and what you want to do. In most cases, the answer is "no" and you'd be wise to move on, ignoring the statement and the person making it. If "yes" (such as when the person is your boss), then, and only then, should you think of doing something to address the problem. Here, she is essentially giving the age-old advice that you should pick your fights carefully, as you have finite energy and resources. If something is inconsequential, ignore it and attend to more important tasks.

I enjoyed listening to this audiobook and recommend it highly to everyone. Even people who do not like SNL's style of comedy might enjoy this critically acclaimed book. Here are a few examples of rave reviews. In her *New York Times* review, Janet Maslin characterizes the book as "a spiky blend of humor, introspection, critical

thinking ..." Comedian Janeane Garofalo, writing for NPR Books, describes the book as "honest and intimate, ... a great read from a mature thinker." Katie Roiphe, writing for *Slate*, likes how Fey wields jokes as a personal display of power.

2012/03/30 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Hungry for change: [Trailer for a documentary film](#) exposing the diet and weight-loss industry.
- (2) A Nowruz show in Stockholm: This [10-minute video](#) contains a sample of the program celebrating Chaharshanbeh-soori and Nowruz in Stockholm (nice to see that their Haji Pirooz has not blackened his face).
- (3) Stomping on US and UK flags: Someone please tell these simpletons that you can't fight world powers using [playground methods](#). You need to develop modern agricultural and industrial know-how so that you are not dependent on these real or imagined enemies for your basic food and consumer-product needs.
- (4) Learning about Saturn moons: Saturn has 62 moons with confirmed orbits. Most of these moons are tiny; only 13 have diameters larger than 50 km [source: Wikipedia]. NASA's Cassini spacecraft captures [detailed images](#) of some of these moons during fly-bys.
- (5) Jean-Claude Laprie Award in Dependable Computing: Three classic papers in the field of dependable and fault-tolerant computing were announced as this year's winners on March 30:
 A. Avizienis, "Design of Fault-Tolerant Computers," *Proc. AFIPS Fall Joint Computer Conf.*, 1967, pp. 733-743.
 J. F. Meyer, "On Evaluating the Performability of Degradable Computing Systems," *IEEE Trans. Computers*, Vol. 29, No. 8, pp. 720-731, 1980.
 D. A. Patterson, G. Gibson, and R. H. Katz, "A Case for Redundant Arrays of Inexpensive Disks (RAID)," *Proc. ACM SIGMOD Int'l Conf. Management of Data*, 1988, pp. 109-116.

2012/03/29 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Muralist extraordinaire: [Photos of creations](#) by Marie Hildreth Meiere (1892-1961).
- (2) Older singer performs well on "Next Persian Star": Rahman sings "[Ye Ashegh](#)" ("Someone in Love").
- (3) Premature aging of a revolution: [Ali Amiri](#), Afghan writer and university professor, discusses signs of premature aging for Iran's Islamic Revolution, at a time when it should be most vibrant. In one passage he observes that the usurpers of power have made is so that there is no bad dead person and no good live one, recalling the fact that all former presidents and prime ministers, save the dead Mohammad Ali Rajaei, are now viewed as deviants or foreign agents.
- (4) Persian classical music: Uzbek singer Yulduz Turdieva masterfully covers "[Bot-e Chin](#)" ("Chinese Idol"), music and lyrics by Ali Akbar Sheida. It's bittersweet to see elements of our cultural heritage being attacked inside Iran and preserved outside its borders. I hope that someday this talented singer gives a concert in a free Iran, thereby providing a role model for young female singers who are waiting in the wings for an opportunity to express themselves publicly.
- (5) Made by Apple, in name only: The March 2012 issue of [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#) contains an interesting report on worldwide manufacturing that shows 10 international companies, whose names you may have never heard, are responsible for manufacturing the bulk of consumer electronic items, from iPhones to laptops and desktops. Six of these 10 companies are based in China and Taiwan. For example, Foxconn Technology of Taiwan makes iPods, iPhones, and iPads for Apple, computers and components for Dell, HP, and Acer, Phones for Sony Ericsson and Nokia, and various electronic devices for Intel, Cisco, Nintendo, and Amazon.com.

2012/03/28 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "We ascribe beauty to that which is simple; which has no superfluous parts; which exactly answers its end; which stands related to all things, which is the mean of many extremes." Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist (1803-1882)
- (2) Iranian actress [Soraya Ghassemi](#) alive and well at 71: A fast-spreading rumor that the prolific and popular actress had died of a heart condition was quelled by the actress herself.
- (3) Movie magic via CGI: Green screens have been used for some time to modify parts of a scene, but this kind of [large-scale modification](#) of a set/location, as well the use of computer-generated images in lieu of make-up is impressive. So far, these are expensive methods and have not led to any cost reduction in movie production, as judged by recent film budgets, but eventually, inexpensive apps will be able to do the same for amateur and professional filmmakers alike.
- (4) Change of address for an island nation: The people of Kiribati, living on a Pacific atoll, will soon be left with no land as a result of climate change. Kiribati's government intends to purchase 6000 acres in Fiji to relocate its 103,000 citizens. The change in address is projected to take effect in 2062. [From *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 19, 2012.]

2012/03/27 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Now, we could decide as a society that it is O.K. for people who suddenly need health care to get it only if they can pay for it. The market would work just as it works for BMWs: anyone who can afford one can buy one. That would mean that the vast majority of Americans wouldn't be able to pay for a triple bypass or a hip replacement when they needed it." Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of March 26, 2012, on why we can't leave health care to market forces.

(2) Fusion musical performance: English/Kurdish [tribute to Nowruz](#).

(3) Wings of Life: Fantastic [slo-mo and time-lapse photography](#) from a forthcoming documentary.

(4) Engineering unemployment rate is quite low: According to *US News and World Report*, the rate of engineering unemployment in the US, which had climbed to 6.4% in late 2009, reached 2% by mid-2011. Observers see demand across the board, but especially in electrical, biomedical, aerospace, computer, automotive, environmental, mechanical, and petroleum engineering.

2012/03/26 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) The kiss that produced thousands of 'Like's on Facebook. [The passports](#) say it all!

(2) Hate crime in California: A Muslim woman, mother of 5, who was severely beaten inside her own home, with a hateful note left beside her, has died of her injuries. [The story](#) says "Hate Crime Suspected," which ought to be the understatement of the year.

(3) Iranian film of 50 years ago: This [video clip](#) is a trailer for the 1962 Iranian film "Talaaye Sefid" ("White Gold"), starring Pooran and Fardin. It is not a comedy.

(4) One square mile of hope: Setting of a [world record](#) for the largest number (1925) of canoes and kayaks, floating together while connected only by hands, may not solve any of the urgent world problems but it is an exercise in charity, cooperation, and friendship. The event was on September 24, 2011, in the small town of Inlet, NY (population 400), and the world record was approved on January 31, 2012. See also an impressive photo of the event on the National Geographic site (second photo on this ["Visions of Earth"](#) pictorial).

2012/03/25 (Sun.): Here are three economics news stories of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "As individuals, companies and countries search for something magical to promote a competitive future, there is strong evidence that the ultimate wealth-creating machine is something created here in America and increasingly being noticed and copied by the rest of the world ... that something is the American research university, where a unique blend of the best and brightest students from around the world, top quality professors with aggressive research programs, and a close association with private industry has combined to spin off entrepreneurs with bright ideas for the next generation products, services, and new companies." Craig Barrett, CEO Emeritus of Intel, writing on the [Forbes Web site](#).

(2) Oil production and gas prices seemingly unrelated: It's hard to tell from the price of gasoline, which is at an all-time high, that the US recently became a net oil exporter after at least six decades of heavy reliance on imports. A combination of energy savings initiatives and a boom in production led to the US selling more petroleum products than it bought in 2011. [From *Time* magazine, issue of March 26, 2012.]

(3) On the rising economic clout of women: "Some experts predict that in 25 years, law and medicine will be female-dominated professions. Already ... single childless women ages 22 to 30 in the majority of large U.S. cities ... have a higher median income than their male peers." Liza Mundy, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of March 26, 2012, in an article entitled "Women, Money, and Power."

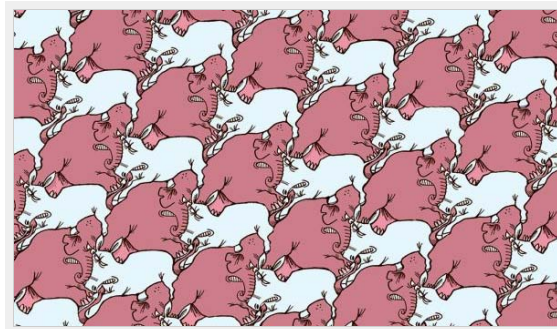
2012/03/24 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Washington gridlock: Excellent political cartoon, a la Morris Escher's plane-filling designs.

(2) Political cartoon by [Adam Zyglis](#): Santorum crucifies the Republican Party.

(3) Arabic music: Rachid Taha performs the upbeat Algerian song ["Ya Rayah"](#) ("Traveller").

(4) Creatively challenged ad makers: An Iranian Bank-e Mellat TV commercial steals shamelessly from a Jennifer Lopez video. Both the bank commercial and the original music video are linked on [this page](#).



2012/03/23 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest on technology.

(1) Chinese firm helps Iran spy on its citizens: The firm has provided Iran's government-controlled telecom company a [surveillance system](#) capable of monitoring landline, mobile, and internet links.

(2) Winged human flight is a hoax: A man, whose claim of bird-like flight through the use of a winged contraption created a worldwide sensation, may be a fake. [Wired Science](#) reports that no one knows the man

and that his education and employment info, posted on Facebook and LinkedIn, could not be confirmed. An [update](#) indicated that the filmmaker behind the "Bird Man" hoax has come clean on Dutch television.

(3) Digital humanities: Somewhat counterintuitively, humanities disciplines are among the leading beneficiaries of the digital revolution and its attendant gifts of cheap storage and virtually unlimited processing capabilities. For example, it has never been easier to gain access to the works of Jane Austen or any other literary figure or to analyze her writings for style and other variations over time. "There are now 167 Digital Humanities centers worldwide and in 2011, 134 academic courses in Digital Humanities were available." There are many on-line forums and other resources for humanities researchers. The [Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations](#) oversees the provision of this infrastructure. [From *ITnow*, British Computer Society's Magazine for the IT Professional, issue of spring 2012, pp. 50-51.]

2012/03/22 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) UCLA celebration of Iranian cinema: I am considering attendance at the Sunday, April 29, 2012, double showing at 7:00 PM: Mohammad Rasoulof's "Goodbye" ("Be Omid e Didar") and Jafar Panahi's "This Is Not a Film" ("In Film Nist").

(2) Iranian-American SF Sheriff refuses to resign: [Charged with domestic violence](#), Sheriff Ross Mirkarimi has refused to resign. Meanwhile, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee suspends him and is pondering his removal.

(3) Circumnavigating the globe in a superlight plane: Since January 2012, a pilot has been flying the 284 kg Pipistrel Virus SW914 plane around the earth, trying to simultaneously [set new records](#) for the lightest plane and least amount of fuel to achieve this feat. The plane can fly 4000 km on 350 liters of gas (around 31 miles/gallon). The trip is expected to take 2 months.

(4) Videogames and surgery: "Parents complain that their kids spend too much time playing videogames. But in future, when you need surgery, you'd be delighted to see a surgeon who grew up with a videogame controller in her hands." [Not an exact quote, from something I heard on NPR.]

2012/03/21 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Norooz message from President Obama.

(2) Is it "Norooz" or "Nowruz" or ... ? Based on phonetics rules and expert opinion, [this article](#) argues that "Nowruz" should be standardized as the name of the Persian festival at the beginning of spring. The article mentions that UN has sanctioned this spelling based on the approval of all the countries that celebrate the festival. Since a few years ago, I have been using "Norooz" in my own writings, given its simplicity and the ability of different nationalities to pronounce it correctly. However, I will follow this discussion and will switch if the proposed spelling gains acceptance. There is an advantage to having a uniform spelling for everyone to use, because the multitude of spellings now used is quite confusing.

(3) DP Engineering Academy shares photos/video: Here are [a number of photos and a video](#) from the Long Beach regional event of the FIRST robotics competition, in which DPEA's Team 1717 emerged on top as part of a coalition that included two other teams.

(4) A new milestone in magnetic recording technology: According to [PC Magazine](#), Seagate has achieved an impressive milestone in computer technology; that of storing 1 Terabit of data on 1 square inch, using heat-assisted magnetic recording. The new technology allows a linear bit density of 2 Mb/inch, once thought impossible. When it reaches the market, the new technology will allow 2.5-inch hard drives used in laptop computers to store 2 Terabytes of data.

2012/03/20 (Tue.): Mansfield, Peter, *A History of the Middle East*, unabridged audiobook (14 CDs) read by Richard Brown, Blackstone Audio, 1991.

The Middle East has been breeding grounds for millennia of interactions and conflicts between civilizations and religions. In this book, journalist/historian Peter Mansfield presents a capsule review of two centuries of history in this volatile region of the world, covering the period from Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt to the 1990 Gulf War.

The paradox of studying history is that no observer is totally disinterested and impartial. Historians from the Middle East tend to glorify their respective cultures and gloss over problem areas. Western historians, on the other hand, have often been paid to paint a flattering portrait of their sponsors. This book comes across as fairer than others. It correctly pinpoints the reasons for the region staying backward as Europe took giant leaps forward, even when no signs of oil wealth were in evidence.

The book paints a very unflattering portrait of rulers' ineptitude, tribalism, ethnic prejudices, and intolerance that have created an endless string of conflicts. Whereas the discovery of oil and other natural resources, the consequent meddling of powerful countries, and rivalries among such countries worsened the problems, most of the current difficulties are rooted in the pre-oil era, when the collapse of the last major Islamic empire of the Ottoman Turks resulted in unnatural partitions that defied common sense. The formation of a new state by

immigrant Zionist Jews created one of the hairiest political problems of our era, which is intensified by the reassertion of Islamic consciousness in the region.

I recommend this book highly to anyone who wants to make sense of complex relationships that exist among countries in the Middle East and surrounding regions. I will likely listen to this audiobook again, or read its print version, given that the density and dryness of the material make it difficult to grasp all important concepts in one go.

2012/03/19 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) The Persian new year begins at 10:14 (PDT) tonight: May your Norooz be filled with joy and may the new year 1391 bring you all that you wish. To celebrate the ancient festival of Norooz, along with natural and spiritual renewals that it brings, I have composed a poem and posted it as a [blog entry](#) to Iranian.com. Hope you enjoy it.

(2) President Obama's [message for Norooz 1391](#) (2012).

(3) How the Moon sank the Titanic: Everyone knows how the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912. It was an iceberg, first and foremost, that damaged the "unsinkable" ship, management missteps that increased the likelihood of the collision, and engineering hubris that led to an unthinkable death toll. A new study, that reads like a good detective story, finds that the Moon might have had a large share of the blame. Here is the explanation. In 1912, the Moon happened to make the closest approach to Earth in 1400 years along its slightly oscillating orbit, causing a stronger-than-normal gravitational pull. In January of that year, the Earth made its closest approach to the sun, which happens every year around that time. On January 4, the Sun, Moon, and Earth lined up in space, leading to tides that were higher than they had been in hundreds of years. A number of icebergs that had been grounded in shallow waters off the coast of Canada were freed by the historically high tides, turning trans-Atlantic shipping lanes into the deadly minefields they became that April. [From Time magazine, issue of March 19, 2012.]

2012/03/18 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Norooz is celebrated by more than just Iranians: The Dari/Pashtu song "[Sal-e No-et Mobarak](#)" ("May Your New Year Be Blessed").

(2) On the meaning of Hajji Firuz in Norooz traditions: There is a controversy about the meaning and significance of Hajji Firuz in Norooz festivities. I have always felt that it is a racist symbol (slaves, dressed in bright-colored clothing, entertaining their masters: a viewpoint that is reinforced by the first two words in the most common Hajji Firuz song, "Arbaab-e khodam" or "Hey, my very own master"). According to the [this Wikipedia article](#), Hajji Firuz has also been viewed as representing a Zoroastrian firekeeper, whose face is covered with soot. I wonder if the latter explanation isn't a made-up excuse in light of accusations of racism. I am inclined to forego Hajji Firuz and focus on the many other traditions that cannot possibly be linked to an abhorrent viewpoint.

(3) Masterful violin solo performance: [Kaitca Illenyi plays](#) the sad, but hauntingly beautiful, theme from Schindler's List, composed by John Williams.

(4) Quote of the day: "Many Americans were learning for the first time about this substance and the fact that it's in, reportedly, 70 percent of our ground beef ..." Bettina Siegel, Houston mother who writes the Lunch Tray blog, about recent revelations concerning 'pink slime,' a meat filler made from beef 'renderings' and treated with ammonia hydroxide that is found in some lunch school meals.

2012/03/17 (Sat.): Today's offerings are a quote and two engineering-related stories.

(1) Quote of the day: "That man is richest whose pleasures are cheapest." ~ Henry David Thoreau

(2) Dos Pueblos Engineering Academy part of the winning coalition in the Los Angeles FIRST Regional event: I was in the Long Beach Arena as a proud parent to watch the Dos Pueblos High School's robotics team 1717, in coalition with teams 987 (Cimarron Memorial High School, NV) and 3512 (Orcutt Academy High School, CA), win the championship, after emerging as the 4th seed in the preliminary competition and winning 3 straight 2-game sweeps in 2-out-of-3 elimination rounds.

The robots participated in a basketball-like game, in which they scored baskets and had other opportunities to earn points. Preliminary-round matches did not involve much defense. In the elimination rounds, more teams chose to use their robots to play defense by blocking or pushing away an opponent's shooting robot. Certain kinds of interference, such as reaching into the robot zone bounded by its padding, were not allowed and led to foul points being awarded to the opposing team. Balancing 1, 2, or 3 robots on one of the three "bridges" (seesaws) connecting the two halves of the court also earned points.

Team 1717 now moves to the Madera, CA, regionals, April 5-7, and then to the international competition in St Louis, April 25-28.

(3) Historic photos of the Iranian cross-country railroad project: [This photo](#) shows the construction of the

Veresk Bridge, one of the engineering marvels found along the railroad connecting the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf via mountainous terrain. You can see other photos of this collection by simply changing the "006" appearing at the end of the URL to "001" through "011".

2012/03/16 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Persian music and dance: [Ballroom dancing](#) to Viguen's "Chera Nemiraghsi?"
- (2) Arrests in Washington DC in front of the Sudanese Embassy: Actor [George Clooney](#) and others were protesting atrocities in Sudan.
- (3) Neutrinos can't go faster than light: [This story](#) refutes a previous claim (doubted by many scientists) that neutrinos have been observed traveling faster than the speed of light.
- (4) Bumblebee math: The traveling salesperson problem (minimizing the travel distance or cost for a salesperson who wants to visit every town in a predetermined set, with known distances or airfares) is one of the most challenging problems for algorithm designers. Essentially, given our current state of knowledge, no one knows how to find an optimal solution fundamentally faster than simply trying all possible paths that the salesperson could take. Bumblebees face this problem every day. They identify a set of flowers they find desirable and devise a path to visit all of them daily. Experiments have shown that bumblebees usually converge on the shortest path without trying all the possibilities. [Source: *National Geographic Magazine*, February 2012]

2012/03/15 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "Life has meaning only if one barter it day by day for something other than itself." ~ Antoine de Saint Exupery (1900-1944; aviator, writer)
- (2) Shirin Ebadi [warns Arab women](#) against falling in the same trap as Iranian women.
- (3) Marriage of 10-year-old and younger girls: This [abuse of children](#) is more deplorable than anything else that the Islamic Republic has done (and it has done some pretty awful things).
- (4) Computer translation for verbal communication: Microsoft's Frank Soong discusses and demonstrates a new multilingual translator integrated with voice synthesis (see minutes 12-21 in this [34-minute video](#)). One important goal is to allow people to carry out conversations, with each participant speaking in his/her own language and the translation system generating the translated version in the speaker's own voice, rather than a standard prepackaged or robotic voice, as done in today's systems.

2012/03/14 (Wed.): Today, I offer a math-related item along with three on geography.

- (1) Sounds of pi: Happy pi (3/14) day! In [this video](#), Professor Philip Moriarty demonstrates the music that results when digits of pi are mapped to musical notes.
- (2) Tsunami debris on the way to the US: Stretching thousands of miles over the Pacific Ocean and already reaching halfway across, debris from Japan's 2011 tsunami may reach the US West Coast in a year or so. Other than hazards due to millions of tons of floating items, health officials are concerned about all the radioactive water that escaped from crippled Fukushima nuclear power plants into the ocean. [Source: *National Geographic Magazine*, January 2012]
- (3) Earth's mantle to be sampled for the first time: Scientists have drilled a 1-mile hole at the bottom of a 2.5-mile deep ocean spot off Costa Rica (this is deep, even compared with advanced deep-sea drilling for oil) and hope to continue for another 2.4 miles to reach the boundary of the Earth's mantle, where they will sample green rocks that are thought to hold valuable information about the Earth's formation. [Source: *National Geographic Magazine*, January 2012]
- (4) Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan: Prompted by a pictorial article in the February 2012 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, I looked up some info about Astana and found this [set of photos](#) showing the breathtakingly beautiful and modern capital city of Kazakhstan.

2012/03/13 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Quote of the day: "If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." ~ Antoine de Saint Exupery (1900-1944; aviator, writer)
- (2) Killing the messenger: Dr. Mohammad Ghodsi, a former colleague of mine at Tehran's Sharif University of Technology is one of two people sued by a high-ranking university official accused of plagiarism for replacing the names of the original authors of an already published research paper with his and two other names in a fraudulently republished version. Dr. Ghodsi is one of the founders of the blog ["Profs against Plagiarism"](#) which has been set up to expose cases of scientific fraud in Iran's academia and to educate graduate students and faculty members about research ethics. In any other country, Dr. Ghodsi would have been praised for exposing fraud and defending scientific integrity. But in Iran, especially because some high-ranking university

and government officials have been implicated by the published stories in the said blog (which often places images of original articles and the plagiarized versions side by side), we may have to begin a "Free Mohammad Ghodsi" campaign soon. He has vowed to fight the charges and has asked for help in documenting cases of plagiarism for his defense.

(3) Why God would not get tenure at a university ([this image](#) says why He did not receive a PhD, but the contents are more in tune with tenure requirements for faculty). The original Facebook poster of this photo noted that the sign was seen on a biology professor's office door.

2012/03/12 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction." ~ Antoine de Saint Exupery (1900-1944; aviator, writer)

(2) Yearning for more civilized times: "It's hard to remember now, but Planned Parenthood once had broad bipartisan backing; in 1964, Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman served as honorary cochairs. Even as the abortion wars raged, its other reproductive-health services, which make up the vast majority of its work, remained largely uncontroversial." Michelle Goldberg, writing in the March 12, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine on Texas's war on women and Planned Parenthood.

(3) Fearless women honored: The March 12, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine is devoted largely to women. I have previously posted excerpts from some of the key articles. The centerpiece of the magazine issue is a [lengthy piece](#) entitled "The Lady's Destiny: 150 Fearless Women" (pp. 40-63). "They've started revolutions, opened schools, and fostered a brave new generation. From Detroit to Kabul, are making their voices heard."

(4) Obama's biggest problem: "When the actor George Clooney pressed President Obama to reveal what keeps him up at night, the answer wasn't negative ads or super PACs or any of the political *Sturm und Drang*. POTUS's one-word answer: 'Pakistan'." Paul Begala, writing in the March 12, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine, on how Obama could lose the election on one or more of three issues: Iran, Pakistan, and Oil.

2012/03/11 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Escaping an arranged marriage: "When I was 18, my parents threatened to kill me. And they meant it. If they had their way, I would probably be dead today." Thus begins an eye-opening "My Turn" essay by Sabatina James, published in the March 12 issue of [Newsweek magazine](#).

(2) Sarah Palin back in the news: "To be all at once urban and academic and born to a foreign parent and black on top of that—it was almost impossible for a single person to represent a more perfect opposite to Palin's invocation of 'real America'." David Frum, writing in the March 12, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine on Sarah Palin, the subject of the HBO film "Game Change."

(3) Bashar Assad's charming and smart wife: "These days, people aren't sure what to make of her ... Asma was regarded as [Bashar Assad's] asset: 'There must be something interesting about this man if he is married to this kind of woman.' But now that nobody likes Bashar anymore, everybody is saying, 'How can such an educated, elegant woman marry a monster like this? There must be something wrong with her!' ... Asma was the rose of the desert—and now she's all but forgotten in the storm of war." Christopher Dickey, writing in the March 12, 2012, issue of [Newsweek magazine](#) on Syria's First Lady.

(4) Great book, lousy movie: In its issue of March 16, 2012, *Entertainment Weekly* reveals its top 5 great books that became lousy movies. Here is the list, with the primary reasons for the movie's tanking in parentheses.

The Great Gatsby, 1974 (lifeless performances and a staggering lack of chemistry).

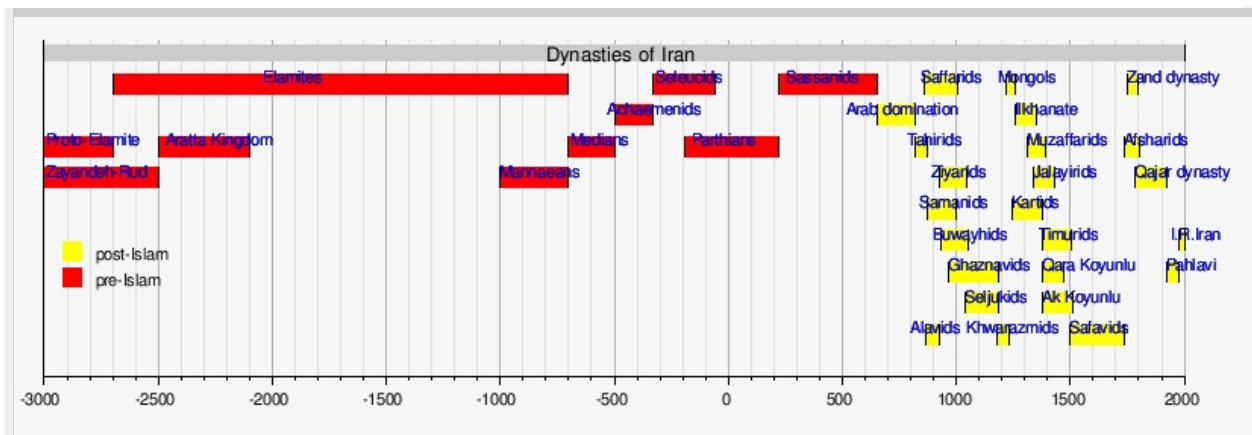
Dune, 1984 (soporific acting and self-serious dialog).

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, 1997 (story changes and watered-down idiosyncrasies).

The Bonfire of the Vanities, 1990 (cartoonish performances from miscast actors).

Dr. Seuss, The Cat in the Hat, 2003 (addition of raunchy humor and crude bathroom jokes).

2012/03/10 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.



- (1) Timeline of Iranian history: I am very fond of timelines, because they help us visualize the relationships between various events. The accompanying timeline, from Wikipedia, shows the 5000-year history of Iran in terms of its major ruling dynasties. For a full list of dynasties, including rival dynasties ruling concurrently over parts of the ancient Persia, see this [Wikipedia article](#). And here is a [Persian version](#) of the list.
- (2) Loved and hated states in the US: According to *Newsweek* magazine, issue of March 12, 2012, the best-liked US state overall is Hawaii (54% favorable) and the most-disliked is California (44% unfavorable). Among women, New York fares best, while men put North Dakota at the top. Democrats love California and Republicans favor Texas.
- (3) Quote of the day: "You cannot reign over women's-empowerment conferences and remain married to Arnold Schwarzenegger." Rebecca Dana, writing in the March 12, 2012, issue of *Newsweek* magazine, on Maria Shriver's apparent reconciliation with the former California governor. [I am ambivalent about this. Doesn't "empowerment" mean being able to make any decision that feels right to you, without being harassed or questioned about it?]
- (4) An old interview with Simin Daneshvar: In [this interview](#), apparently from the early days of the Islamic Republic, Daneshvar urges unity in supporting the Islamic Revolution and exhibits optimism about the future of women's rights, taking assurances from Khomeini at face value. She also says that she sees no reason for joining groups devoted exclusively to women's issues on the ground that once justice prevails, it will also cover women and children. Which goes to show that greatness in one domain does not ensure political sophistication.

2012/03/09 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Simin Daneshvar [1921-2012]: An academic, writer, and translator, who has a lot of firsts among Iranian women to her credit, died on this year's International Women's Day (March 8) at the age of 90. See this [Wikipedia article](#) for her bio and list of writings.
- (2) Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious: [Robert B. Sherman](#), the composer of many unforgettable Disney songs for "Mary Poppins" and "The Jungle Book," among others, and winner of an Oscar for the former, has died in London at the age of 86. He is the one you should blame when you go through the endless repetition of "It's a Small World" at Disneyland.
- (3) Iran's boundaries in flux: [This map](#) shows how Iran/Persia shrunk over the 19th and 20th Centuries to become the Iran of today. Let's hope that what is left remains united through the current troubles and the upcoming regime change.
- (4) Muslim cleric arrested in Spain: [He is charged with](#) inciting violence against women by suggesting that they should receive physical, psychological, and other forms of punishment for disobeying their husbands.

2012/03/08 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) International Women's Day, March 8: The UN has chosen the theme "Empower Women—End Hunger and Poverty" for this 101st anniversary of Women's day. Let us use this occasion to recall injustices to women worldwide and to renew our pledge to help correct such injustices, which unfortunately persist even in the developed world.
- (2) The stubborn gender gap: "When a Congressional committee hearing presented an all-male panel of witnesses to discuss female contraception last month, Rep. Carolyn Maloney made news by demanding, 'Where are the women?' Her question was surprising only because it so rarely commands public attention these days." [Leslie Bennetts, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of March 12, 2012.]
- (3) Foods that last and last and last: To make food with a long life span, three factors must be controlled: moisture, atmosphere, and microorganisms. Scientists are trying to solve each of these problems. Examples include NASA's bread pudding that can last four years and Pentagon's pound cake that stays springy for up to five years. In the near future, we may have to go to the grocery store once a month. Discarding food because it

has gone bad may also become a thing of the past. A prime application of the new technology is making long-lasting food for troops. Disaster relief efforts can also benefit from food with long life span. Poor developing countries waste a lot of food (as much of 70%) because of a lack of proper food distribution and cooling systems. So, the new technology might also lead to greater availability of fruits, vegetables, and other foodstuff at affordable prices. [From *Time* magazine, issue of March 12, 2012.]

2012/03/07 (Wed.): Here are two items of potential interest on computer technology.

(1) Tablets will push out PCs: According to the *New York Times*, Timothy D. Cook, CEO of Apple Computer, predicts "the day will come when tablet devices like the Apple iPad outsell traditional personal computers. His forecast has backing from a growing number of analysts and veteran technology industry executives, who contend that the torrid growth rates of the iPad, combined with tablet competition from the likes of Amazon.com and Microsoft, make a changing of the guard a question of when, not if." **Some analysts** believe that the prediction will likely be realized by 2017.

(2) Multiteraflops computer chips are on the way: According to *Wired magazine*, "By 2017, HP hopes to build a computer chip that includes 256 microprocessors tied together with beams of light. Codenamed Corona, this laser-powered contraption would handle 10 trillion floating points operations a second. [The] chip's 256 cores would communicate with each other at an astonishing 20 terabytes per second, and they'd talk to memory at 10 terabytes a second. That means it would run memory-intensive applications about two to six times faster than an equivalent chip made with good, old-fashioned electric wires."

2012/03/06 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) The Afghan government is appeasing the Taliban: President Hamid Karzai has defended a declaration by his country's top religious council that **women should not mix with men** in school, work, or other aspects of daily life and that they should not travel without a male relative, calling the declaration an act of defending women's rights. The **BBC Persian** report, which is a bit different and contains more details.

(2) Leila Hatami's Oscars night gown: It is unfortunate that Leila Hatami is being criticized by Iranians and Westerners alike for her choice of a **white gown** for the Oscars ceremonies. The critics view her outfit as unstylish, without bearing in mind that she is an actress still working in Iran who did not want to sabotage her career by wearing something that would raise the Islamic regime's ire. This is yet another instance of people blaming the victim or urging others to fight while sitting at a safe distance from the battlefield. One should also bear in mind that she does not have the big clothing budget of her American counterparts and she is not famous enough to get free outfits from designers.

2012/03/05 (Mon.): Fitzpatrick, Kathleen, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, New York University Press, 2011.

Discussion on the future of books, and scholarly publication in general, has been raging in American universities for several years now. The Institute for the Future of the Book was formed to help channel these efforts [p. 9]. The discussion really has two parts, which pertain to two kinds of academic disciplines: those in which researchers write articles to communicate their findings and to climb the academic ladder, and the ones where scholars are expected to publish books to show their mastery of their fields. Natural sciences and engineering are article disciplines, whereas the humanities are predominantly book disciplines. This book is concerned mostly with the future of publishing in book disciplines, although it does contain references to issues in article disciplines as well.

Compared with popular books or textbooks, academic books have very limited circulations, typically in the hundreds. There are of course exceptions when a book, often the work of an established scholar, makes the transition from academic circles to the popular domain and sells many more copies, but by and large, readers of academic books are other academics who need the information for their own research. This limitation is a source of many of the problems.

An important feature of academic books is that they undergo peer review, a notion that was introduced in the mid-1700s England. Peer review is what creates the "scarcity model" of publishing: each academic press receives many more books and book proposals than it publishes, with peer review being the main basis of selection. This assessment process can be unfair, as many biases and jealousies remain hidden behind the anonymity cloak. By contrast, the Internet, with its practically unlimited publication space, has created the "abundance model," with a postpublication assessment and rating framework replacing the peer-review prepublication filter [p. 38].

The current publication model has been built, in part, on financial incentives involving author rights and publisher rights. It is interesting to note that the legal notion of author rights was not conceived until there was a print technology to reproduce large quantities of text, a market system that could accept printed products as objects for sale, and distribution systems to make identical copies available in many places [p. 59]. Before the

advent of print technology, authors did not make a distinction between original and copied ideas and "copies" of the same book could be quite different, as commentaries and interpretations were added during the transcription process.

In truth, scholarly publishing does not represent a viable business model. That is why university presses do the bulk of publishing on scholarly topics. These presses are primarily nonprofit organizations that subsidize obscure books on esoteric topics through the occasional popular or even blockbuster book. Unfortunately, university presses have seen funding cuts like all other parts of the academia and are no longer able to sustain their previous modus operandi.

One of the impediments to the acceptance of new publishing technologies is the 600-year history of printed text which makes it necessary to move slowly and to make digital texts, at least in their early version, very similar to printed ones [p. 84]. For example, the notion of "page" is a carryover from the print era and has no natural meaning in digital texts. If digital texts are to be successful, however, they must be designed to offer the most efficient way of the reader and writer relating to each other, rather than as replicas of printed texts in a new format.

According to our current view, a (printed) book is something that is created and read in isolation. The author locks him/herself up in a room in order to focus on writing and the reader is usually alone, at a desk, on the beach, or on a bed, when reading the book. Digital texts, on the other hand, allow book writing and reading to become social activities, with a great deal more interaction between writers and readers [p. 106]. Thus, digital publishing formats must facilitate this interaction. For the most part, however, we seem bent on doing the new digital books in much the same way as print books, rather than dealing with the new on its own terms [p. 195]. Despite the clear benefits of digital publishing, many problems remain to be solved. An important concern in the world of digital books is sustainability. Paper books are resilient. Publishers can fail, libraries can be destroyed or burned (as has been done many times through the human history), and a few copies of each book will survive somewhere. We still do not have full confidence that digital books will survive correspondingly catastrophic events [p. 184].

Changes, though relatively slow, are coming to academic publishing and several experiments look promising.

Rice University Press, which had closed in 1996 due to financial difficulties, reopened a decade later as an all-digital press. Another case in point is *Philica*, an on-line academic journal that accepts publications on any subject and has set up the requisite mechanisms allowing readers to offer postpublication comments.

The author ends the book thus: "Change is here: we can watch our current publishing system suffocate, leaving the academy not just obsolete but irrelevant, or we can work to create a communication environment that will defy such obsolescence, generating rich scholarly discussions well into the future" [p. 196].

2012/03/04 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Iranian contradiction: In Iran, wearing a T-shirt with the emblem "**God Bless America**" is okay, as long as you show up to vote in the parliamentary elections.

(2) Universities are desperate for funds: "This relief you are now experiencing is made possible by a gift from Michael Zinman." Inscription on a bathroom plaque at the University of Pennsylvania [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of March 12, 2012, in a piece on how universities have gone from accepting large donations, for naming entire buildings after benefactors, to seeking smaller donations for naming rights to lecture halls, rooms, and other areas.]

(3) Drop in traffic fatalities: The number of deaths due to traffic accidents has fallen from 7.2 per 100 million miles travelled in 1950 to 1.1 in 2010, going through 5.0, 4.7, 3.4, 2.1, and 1.5 in the intervening decades. This is for the most part due to safer cars, advances in traffic engineering, and better enforcement of traffic laws. The only unwelcome development is that the number of deaths due to distracted driving is rising as a fraction of total deaths. [Source: *Time* magazine, issue of March 12, 2012.]

2012/03/02 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Nothing is impossible if you have the will: You have seen ballet dancers with missing limbs. Now watch a **pianist with missing fingers** on one hand.

(2) Miniature lake on a bed of rocks: White Pocket, Arizona, is home to this unusual **miniature lake**, where sandstone is discolored and fractured into irregular polygons owing to millennia of wear and tear by groundwater.

(3) Chindo, the miracle island: Residents of Chindo or Jindo Island, just off the southwest corner of the Korean peninsula, witness an unusual sight annually. On a variable day in spring or summer, water recedes to reveal a **natural land bridge** connecting the main island to the small Modo island about 3 km away. Residents take the opportunity to stroll between the two islands in the manner of Jews crossing the Red Sea to leave Egypt. The opening lasts for about an hour.

(4) Cartoon: A scene from the **remake of "Titanic"** in Saudi Arabia.

2012/03/01 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest in science and technology.

(1) India also goes the way of China: "Google and Facebook removed content from some Indian domain websites on Monday following a court directive warning them of a crackdown 'like China' if they did not take steps to protect religious sensibilities." [From [E&T magazine](#).]

(2) Modern railroad construction: When we think of railroad construction, most of us visualize images from Western movies depicting sweaty men who set down wooden sleepers and pieces of rail and then hammer various connectors down to secure them in place. This very interesting [5-minute video](#), showing a new railroad being built, demonstrates the immense gain in productivity due to the use of modern machinery.

(3) The science of building willpower: "The battle between your noble lobes and your ignoble ones isn't even close. Eating, having sex and sleeping are vital for the survival of the species, so evolution arranged for them to be irresistibly pleasurable. Acquisitiveness is important too, so shopping and gambling carry kicks of their own. As for smoking, drinking and taking drugs, they have no survival value, but they don't need to, since they sidestep evolution and pick the chemical locks of the brain's pleasure centers directly. ... Our brains operate at three levels: I will, I won't and I want. For many of us, the I-want part wins. ... But if willpower is elusive, it's also trainable and cultivatable. ... Crucial though it is, willpower doesn't act alone. It is channeled—by our daily routines ... The habits most of us follow each morning, it turns out, run exactly counter to the conditions that neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists tell us promote flexible, open-minded thinking. Our hurried wake-up leads us to miss imaginative insights ... The only thing most of us do right, in fact, is drink coffee. Caffeine increases the brain's level of dopamine, the neurotransmitter that promotes feelings of motivation and reward when we hit on a great idea. So what would a better morning routine look like? We'd set the alarm to go off a few minutes early and lie awake in bed, following our thoughts where they lead (with a pen and paper nearby to jot down any evanescent inspirations). We'd stand a little longer in the warm water of the shower, dismissing task-oriented thoughts ... in favor of a few more minutes of mental dilation. We'd take some deep breaths during our commute instead of succumbing to road rage. And once in the office—after getting that cup of coffee—we'd direct our computer browser not to the news of the day but to a funny video." [Jeffrey Kluger, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of March 5, 2012, pp. 42-47.]

2012/02/29 (Wed.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Cute letter from a little boy: Dear Maths, Please grow up now and solve your problems yourself. Regards.

(2) New 9/11 connection revealed: "A Saudi Arabian accused of associating with several of the September 11 hijackers and who disappeared from his home in the United States a few weeks before the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, is in London working for his country's state oil company." [From [The Telegraph](#).]

(3) TV interview with Leila Hatami: The talented actress of "A Separation" in a [post-Oscars interview](#) with CNN.

(4) Amazing control of abdominal muscles: [Belly dancer](#) flips coins and a dollar bill on her abdomen.

(5) Our water usage is unsustainable: "Water drives nearly every aspect of human activity, but you wouldn't know it by looking at the way humans consume their most precious natural resource ... By 2025, the U.N. estimates, 1.8 billion people will live in regions suffering from water scarcity, and two-thirds of the global population will live under water-stressed conditions." [From a special advertising section, sponsored by Coca Cola, in *Time* magazine, issue of March 5, 2012; don't mind the messenger, because the message is quite real.]

2012/02/28 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "The only people with whom you should try to get even are those who have helped you." John E. Southard

(2) Reactions in Iran to Farhadi's Oscar win: Asghar Farhadi's acceptance speech after being presented an Oscar for "A Separation" in the best foreign film category contained a relatively mild reference to warmongers in Iran and elsewhere. Some Iranian media mistranslated his speech to imply that he was critical of the West only. [This cartoon](#) exaggerates the notion and adds an Arabic verse to the beginning of his speech. One regime official berated the Oscars as being comparable to a film festival in a small town in Iran. Others simply ignored the event. Mohammad Khatami, a former president who (though not yet under house arrest like other opponents of the regime) has been marginalized in recent years, sent a congratulatory letter to Farhadi.

(3) The new science of feelings: This is the title of an article by Richard J. Davidson and Sharon Begley in the February 27 and March 5, 2012, double issue of [Newsweek magazine](#). "I have traced Emotional Style—and, specifically, the six components that make it up—to patterns of activity throughout the brain. ... I have found that, in contrast to the longstanding scientific orthodoxy, Emotional Style arises partly from activity in regions involved in cognition ... Locating the bases of emotion at least partly in the brain's seat of reason has several practical implications. None is more intriguing than this: it is possible to transform your Emotional Style through systematic mental practice. ... What we found, in a nutshell, is that people with greater activation on the left

side of the prefrontal cortex recovered much more quickly even from the strongest feelings of disgust, anger, and fear evoked by the images. ... The goal here is not to go from one extreme to the other: I'm not trying to change you from Slow to Speedy (or vice versa) on the Resilience scale, or from Cassandra into Pollyanna in your Outlook. Changing the patterns of activity and even connectivity that underlie the facets of Emotional Style is highly personal. It depends on what works for you."

2012/02/27 (Mon.): Here are five items of potential interest.

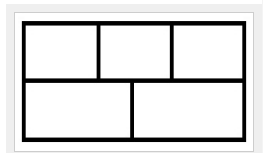
- (1) Getting what you ask for: Man dies from cardiac arrest while eating a 6000-calorie burger at Las Vegas's Heart Attack Grill. [Source: The February 27 and March 5, 2012, double issue of *Newsweek* magazine.]
- (2) Joke of the day: Addressing the judge and the jury, an attorney characterized his client as a hard-working, honest, and conscientious man, who has never hurt anyone. The client rose and screamed: Hey mister, I am paying for your services. Who are you defending here?
- (3) The hidden power of siblings: In this [21-minute TEDx talk](#), Jeffrey Kluger, author of *The Sibling Bond*, discusses sources and reasons for affection among siblings and a lot of interesting scientific findings of recent years about how siblings relate to each other.
- (4) Shame on you, Sony Music: The price of Whitney Houston's "The Ultimate Collection" was increased from 4.99 pounds to 7.99 pounds on Britain's iTunes immediately after the singer's death. Sony has admitted to making a "mistake." [Source: The February 27 and March 5, 2012, double issue of *Newsweek* magazine.]
- (5) Grandpa's iPad: Woman is surprised when she sees how her [grandpa uses the iPad](#) she gave him as a birthday gift.

2012/02/26 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) Alan Turing's Centenary: The year 1912 is best remembered for the sinking of the Titanic, but a far more important event of that year was the birth of British mathematician [Alan Turing](#), whose ideas have had key roles in the development of computer technology and of computer science. Turing led a team that broke a very strong German encryption code (the Enigma) during World War II, an accomplishment that played a big part in the subsequent victory of the allied forces. His Universal Turing Machine, so named because it can compute any computable function, is a keystone of developments in our field. It is difficult to imagine modern computer science without Turing.
- (2) Is Iran dangerous or desperate? "The reality is that Iran right now is more desperate than dangerous. Its economy is collapsing under the weight of brutal sanctions. Its prime ally, Syria, seems to be collapsing as well. Its internal politics are fractured. Ahmadinejad has been humiliated and marginalized ... Now Iran is nearly isolated in the world, the regime is extremely unpopular domestically, and its revolutionary fervor has ebbed. ... The Supreme Leader is facing the defining choice of his career: compromise or collapse. One way or the other, his time is running out." Joe Klein, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 27, 2012.
- (3) The 2012 Academy Awards: There were some expected wins (Octavia Spencer, supporting actress; Christopher Plummer, supporting actor; "The Artist," film, directing, and original score; "The Muppets," original song; "Midnight in Paris," original screenplay; "A Separation," foreign-language film) and a number of unexpected ones (Jean Dujardin, lead actor; Meryl Streep, lead actress; "The Descendants," adapted screenplay). Martin Scorsese's "Hugo" won many technical and artistic awards. Congrats to Asghar Farhadi and his cast and crew for winning the first Oscar ever for an Iranian film. I reiterate my pet peeve here that Farhadi's Oscar isn't an award for Iran, but for a particular group of artists who created the film. In fact, Iran, as a country, actually erected a lot of obstacles for the filmmakers and banned the screening of the film.
- (4) Please do not spread hatred: A number of posts on Facebook and elsewhere claim that [this photo](#) shows the massacre (though burning) of hundreds of Christians by Nigerian Muslims. This hoax, perpetrated by hateful individuals or groups, is unfortunately spread by well-intentioned people who are simply shocked by the alleged atrocities. The photo is real (not Photoshopped), but the charred bodies are the results of a tanker explosion in the Congo. There is enough real hate and intolerance in the world. We don't need to create fake incidents to make a point about hate being evil. Please do some research of your own before sharing news stories that appear too awful to be true.

2012/02/25 (Sat.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) A challenging puzzle: Consider the accompanying diagram which has a number of line segments between line intersection points (there are 16 line segments, to be precise). Draw a continuous curve that intersects each of the 16 line segments once and only once, or show that such a curve does not exist. *Hint:* Of the five smaller rectangles, two are bounded by 4 line segments and three by 5 line segments.



- (2) No Valentine's Day in Uzbekistan: "... authorities in the Central Asian country instead celebrated the Feb. 14 birthday of Mogul Emperor Babur. Florists were not amused." *Time* magazine, issue of February 27, 2012.

(3) An amazing photograph: Kim Jong Un, current leader of the world's only communist hereditary dictatorship, is front and center in [this photo](#) with an army unit that seems to have been created with a cookie cutter. Look at the precise spacing!

(4) Complicated family tree: It seems that Kim Jong Un, the current leader of North Korea and the youngest son of Kim Jong Il, is one of three children he had with his second mistress (he also had a son with his first mistress and a daughter with his wife). [[Family tree](#)]

2012/02/24 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Sepandarmazgan: This Zoroastrian festival is a combination Love/Earth Day from ancient Iranian culture. It was originally held on the 5th day of Esfand (February 24) in celebration of mothers/wives, including Mother Earth. According to Wikipedia, the currently popular date of Bahman 29 (February 18, which happens to be close to Valentine's Day), for holding the festival emerged after multiple reorganizations of the Persian calendar, beginning with the work of the Persian philosopher/poet Omar Khayyam. The name of the festival is based on Spanta Armaiti, the feminine angelic spirit of the Earth.

(2) France's Cesar movie awards: Asghar Farhadi's "A Separation" wins a Cesar as the best foreign film. Note that the competition for Farhadi's film was much tougher than at the upcoming Oscars: they included "Black Swan," "The King's Speech," and "Melancholia." Best-film, best-director, and four other Cesars went to "The Artist." [[Hollywood Reporter story](#)]

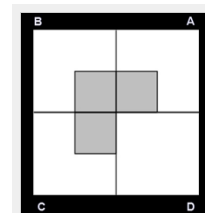
(3) Oscars 2012 ballot: If you'll be watching the Academy Awards Show this Sunday night, you may want to keep this [Oscars ballot](#) handy to play along and to match wits against *Entertainment Weekly's* Dave Karger in predicting the winners in key categories.

(4) Textbooks on tablets: Some 350,000 new eBooks were downloaded in the first three days after Apple launched its new iPad textbook initiative. In a pilot program at a Riverside, CA, middle school, students who used an iPad-based textbook for an algebra course scored an average of 20% higher on a standard test than their peers who used a traditional textbook. According to a top manager of Houghton Mifflin's Harcourt, the publishing company that administered the study, "We've gone far beyond the capabilities of an ebook to turn a one-way math lesson into an engaging, interactive, supportive learning environment." [From *Communications of the ACM*, issue of March 2012.]

2012/02/23 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Another interesting puzzle: Consider this image in which there are 4 white areas within the quadrants of the big square. Here are a series of increasingly difficult drawing tasks for you to do, using only straight lines:

- Divide the white area A into 2 equal parts.
- Divide the white area B into 3 equal parts.
- Divide the white area C into 4 equal parts.
- Divide the white area D into 5 equal parts.



(2) A humorous take on Facebook: Joel Stein's humorous column on the upcoming FB IPO begins thus: "The entire point of Facebook is to make you jealous. Why does that person have more friends than I do? Why do they go to such fun places when I'm at work? Why do their friends have better abs? Why does my wife has so many male friends who show off their abs?" (*Time* magazine, issue of February 20, 2012)

(3) Putin propped up by oil revenues: "The price of oil when Putin came to office was \$27 a barrel ... and is now \$116. And oil is the lifeblood of Russia's economy, providing two-thirds of its exports and half of federal revenue. ... The Russian state has used the revenue to dole out largesse across the country. It is widely believed in the West that Putin stays in power through repression. In fact, he does so in larger measure through patronage and bribery." Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 20, 2012.

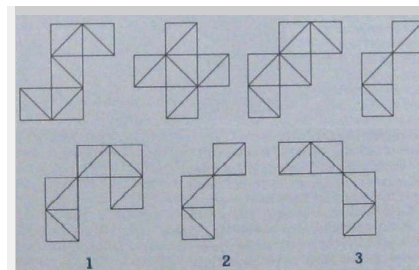
(4) Whitney Houston tribute: The February 24, 2012, issue of *Entertainment Weekly* features Whitney Houston on the cover and contains a 14-page pictorial tribute to her (pp. 20-33). Included is a list of her 25 best songs, beginning with the following five: "I Will Always Love You"; "The Star-Spangled Banner"; "How Will I Know"; "My Love Is Your Love"; "I Wanna Dance with Somebody".

2012/02/22 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) An interesting puzzle: Which of the shapes numbered 1-3 should come after the four on top?

Hint: This is a lateral-thinking, rather than a logical, puzzle.

(2) Quote of the day: "I would not look to the U.S. Constitution if I were drafting a constitution in the year 2012." Ruth Bader Ginsburg, US Supreme Court Justice, in a candid interview on the Egyptian al-Hayat TV, saying Egypt should instead look to South Africa as a model that



embraces human rights.

(3) The wealthy and the Oval Office: An article in *Time* magazine (issue of February 20, 2012) charts the wealth of all American presidents. When converting to 2010 dollars, JFK with \$1B was the richest president by far, followed by George Washington (\$525M), Thomas Jefferson (\$212M), Teddy Roosevelt (\$125), Andrew Jackson (\$119M), James Madison (\$101M), and Lyndon Johnson (\$98M). In the past 50 years, Bill Clinton (\$38M) has been the richest and Barack Obama (\$5M) the least wealthy. If Mitt Romney becomes president, he'll be the third richest ever (\$220M).

(4) Companies migrate to the 'Cloud': "Workday [is] a small but fast-growing company in Pleasanton, Calif., that sells software to manage personnel departments, payroll, and other back-end chores. That sounds mundane, until you realize that every company in the entire world needs this stuff. Workday is, in fact, a major innovator in tech's latest craze: **cloud computing**. Before Apple, Amazon, and Google were putting music on the cloud, Workday was doing the same thing, only with business software. ... Workday's cloud-computing model means companies don't have to install and maintain its software themselves. Instead, Workday runs the software in its own data centers, and users connect over the Internet. This makes life easier for customers and costs half as much as traditional back-end software programs. ... The migration of companies to the cloud represents one of the biggest shifts in the history of the HR industry. From 2010 to 2020 cloud computing will grow sixfold, to \$240 billion from \$40.7 billion, according to analysts ..."

2012/02/21 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Another icon cut to size: John F. Kennedy has long been known for his philandering, but a new book by Mimi Alford paints an even more damning portrait of this popular American president. She alleges that JFK used her as his sex toy, having a long tryst with her, without once expressing affection. Worse yet, he asked her to perform sexual favors for others in his presence. Her account, summarized in the February 20, 2012, issue of **Newsweek magazine**, is utterly believable. She was a vulnerable girl, who had not gone beyond a single kiss back in 8th grade, and she was raised to defer to men, so when faced with advances from the most powerful man in the world, she felt helpless and couldn't say no.

(2) The thrills and dangers of reading brain waves: "On Jan. 31, a team of scientists at the UC Berkeley, led by Robert Knight programmed computers to **decode brain waves** and replay them as words. Five months earlier, another group of Berkeley scientists showed their colleagues movie trailers and used computers to play back in color what people saw. ... The possibilities are immense: a paralyzed person could 'speak'; doctors could access the mind of a patient in a coma; you could rewatch your dreams on an iPad. There are, of course, equally dark prospects, such as the involuntary extraction of information from the brain."

(3) More on space debris: Some time ago, I posted an item about the large number of natural and human-made objects that are floating in space, creating hazards for satellites and space stations. It is estimated that some 16,000 objects larger than 10 cm in diameter and hundreds of millions of smaller particles orbit the earth at extremely high speeds. What is needed is a large **trash-collecting satellite** to track these objects and drag them into Earth's atmosphere, where they would burn out. As a first step in this direction, Swiss scientists plan to launch Clean Space One, whose sole function is to track and latch onto a single satellite whose scientific mission is completed and remove it from the Earth orbit. Beyond this simple, specific exercise, there will be some complications. Legal issues about who owns space junk and whether one country's space agency can clean up another one's trash are likely to cause heated discussions.

2012/02/20 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Incredible stats: Whereas only 1% of Saudi Arabia's population is on Twitter, Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal owns a 3% stake in the company. [Data from *Newsweek* magazine, issue of February 20, 2012.]

(2) The home foreclosure mess: "Here I am, the chief elected law officer of the state of California, and I did not read each page of my own mortgage." Kamala Harris, California's Attorney General, on why banks should be made to pay for the **foreclosure crisis**.

(3) The cost of Somali piracy: Ransoms paid to Somali pirates constitute only 2% of their total cost to the international community. Here are some of the other, more significant, costs: 40% as a result of ships having to sail faster (added fuel cost); 19% for military operations; 17% for added security equipment and guards; 10% due to rerouting of vessels; 9% in insurance surcharge. [Data from *Newsweek* magazine, issue of February

20, 2012.]

(4) Media frenzy in the US: The family of a girl, who woke up from a nap with uncontrollable twitches, was told that she is suffering from a psychological condition, not a physical illness. But the media isn't buying it and won't leave the family and their small town in upstate New York alone, especially since 19 others have developed the **mysterious condition**. Among those dispatched to the town are hoards of reporters and a researcher representing Erin Brockovich.

2012/02/19 (Sun.): It is hard to believe that 20 years have gone by since that dreadful day in February 1992, when I learned of my father's passing. Each year, we commemorate his passing through a family gathering at his grave (Santa Barbara Cemetery) and at my mother's place, where we pray, celebrate his legacy, and recall events in his life and ours. This year, I decided to collect 20 quotations about fathers and fatherhood, one for each year we have missed him. The quotes cover a wide spectrum, from spiritual/wise sayings to lighthearted/humorous ones. Here we go.

1. "A father is someone you look up to no matter how tall you grow." ~ Anonymous
2. "A man never grows up until his father dies." ~ African proverb
3. "Dads don't need to be tall and broad-shouldered and clever. Love makes them so." ~ Pam Brown
4. "He didn't tell me how to live; he lived, and let me watch him do it." ~ Clarence B. Kelland
5. "It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was." ~ Anne Sexton
6. "It's only when you grow up and step back from him; or leave him for your own home; it's only then that you can measure his greatness and fully appreciate it." ~ Margaret Truman
7. "My father gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person, he believed in me." ~ Jim Valvano
8. "Sometimes the poorest man leaves his children the richest inheritance." ~ Ruth E. Renkel
9. "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." ~ Mark Twain
10. "You only appreciate your father the day you become a father yourself." ~ Iranian proverb
11. "There are three stages of a man's life: he believes in Santa Claus, he doesn't believe in Santa Claus; he is Santa Claus." ~ Anonymous
12. "A father is always making his baby into a little woman. And when she is a woman he turns her back again." ~ Enid Bagnold
13. "By the time a man realizes that maybe his father was right, he usually has a son who thinks he's wrong." ~ Charles Wadsworth
14. "A father carries pictures where his money used to be." ~ Anonymous
15. "Fathers send their sons to college either because they went to college, or because they didn't." ~ L. L. Hendren
16. "It is a wise child that knows its own father, and an unusual one that unreservedly approves of him." ~ Mark Twain
17. "Those who have never had a father can at any rate never know the sweets of losing one. To most men the death of his father is a new lease of life." ~ Samuel Butler
18. "A king, realizing his incompetence, can either delegate or abdicate his duties. A father can do neither. If only sons could see the paradox, they would understand the dilemma." ~ Marlene Dietrich
19. "Fathers, like mothers, are not born. Men grow into fathers—and fathering is a very important stage in their development." ~ David M. Gottesman
20. "You will find that if you really try to be a father, your child will meet you halfway." ~ Robert Brault

2012/02/18 (Sat.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Norooz and the Persian New Year: Saal tahveel, or the moment of changing to the new year 1391, occurs on Monday, March 19, 2012, at 10:14 PM California time (PDT). Here is a table giving you the year changeover **time in many cities** around the world.

(2) The uses and abuses of superglue: You won't believe **what people do with superglue!** You can find many other incidents on the Web, including the story of an elderly woman who mistook superglue for her eye drops.

(3) One of six stories, with morals, included in the humorous "Five-Minute Management course":

A bird was flying south for the winter. It was so cold the bird froze and fell to the ground into a large field.

While he was lying there, a cow came by and dropped some dung on him.

As the frozen bird lay there in the pile of cow dung, he began to realize how warm he was.

The dung was actually thawing him out!

He lay there all warm and happy, and soon began to sing for joy.

A passing cat heard the bird singing and came to investigate.

Following the sound, the cat discovered the bird under the pile of cow dung, and promptly dug him out and ate him.

Morals of the story:

- (a) Not everyone who shits on you is your enemy.
- (b) Not everyone who gets you out of shit is your friend.
- (c) When you're in deep shit, it's best to keep your mouth shut!

2012/02/17 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1)** Cheerful Persian music: Three friends play a Persian dance tune entitled "**Garden's Secret**" on melodica (Saman Ehteshami), piano (Sina Salimzadeh), and tombak (Omran Foroozesh).
- (2)** Night sky, the way it used to be: Looking at the amazing night sky photo sequences in **this video** (shot in SD, WI, UT, and CO) might convince you to go, at least for a night or two, to a place with very low light and air pollution to experience these views firsthand.
- (3)** A puzzle of human evolution: "From an evolutionary standpoint, drug abuse is puzzling: Why should people find pleasure in the killing of their own brain cells? Why isn't the brain wired to reject any actions that would actively cause it harm? In a perfect world, nature would have already programmed us to avoid self-destructive short-term thrills, and we would be perfectly rational actors, never taking needless risks. Dangerous activities like drug use and reckless driving highlight an important gap between what might seem on paper to be optimal for evolution and biological reality. The dirty secret is that evolution isn't, in fact, perfect. It's just a random process. Over time, it generally produces good results, but there's no guarantee ... The paradox of drug and alcohol abuse is that addicts know that their lives are worse off in the long run. But in the immediacy of the moment, our reflexive systems—precisely because they are so much older—still hold the steering wheel. Maybe in the millennia to come, our deliberative systems will integrate better with our reflexive systems. Until then, balancing short-term pleasure with what makes the most sense in the long run will remain, for all of us, a constant struggle." [Gary Marcus, writing in *Newsweek magazine*, issue of Feb. 13, 2012.]

2012/02/16 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1)** Paul McCartney has a **new album** of old classic songs (from the Great American Songbook, a la Michael Buble) out, which got a good review from *Entertainment Weekly*. The song "**My Valentine**," featuring Eric Clapton on the guitar, is a great one, comparable to other classics on the album, where he collaborates with Stevie Wonder and Diana Krall, among others.
- (2)** Modern roboticists learn from Leonardo da Vinci: Yesterday, I attended a **fascinating lecture** at UCSB entitled "Leonardo da Vinci & Modern Robotics." Let me share here some of the key ideas imparted by the speaker, Mark Rosheim, who has a long history of building ingenious mechanical devices and is the coiner of the term "anthrorobotics," defined by Wikipedia as the science of developing and studying robots that are either entirely or in some way humanlike. In the mid-1990s, Mr. Rosheim built the upper body of a robot whose arm movements were quite natural and matched human movements in terms of smoothness and range of motion. Nearly all robots built today have somewhat jerky arm movements and/or limited reach/range. Hence, popular dance movements modeled after robots are distinctly 'robotic.' Recall da Vinci's iconic diagram that shows a man with outstretched arms and spread legs inside a circle, implying how far and wide the arms and legs can move. Well, most modern robots can't quite do this. Try this experiment: put both arms down on the sides of your body and very quickly raise them above your head. No robot can match the swiftness and smoothness of this motion. Shrugging of the shoulders is similarly difficult for robots. Mr. Rosheim said that he thought about how to emulate human arm-and-shoulder movements, coming to the conclusion that a pair of ball-and-socket joints, rather than a single one, would be required on each side. Once the needed joints are in place, the function of muscles can be easily performed by linear actuators. His excitement over his new discovery did not last long, because he later learned that in some of da Vinci's drawings, the same solution was presented hundreds of years ago. It seemed that da Vinci had produced a whole collection of drawings similar to the human ergonomic drawings we know so well, but with robots instead of humans. Mr. Rosheim believes that da Vinci must have built some robots, which were either destroyed/lost or remain somewhere, undiscovered. Today's robots with jerky motions are cheaper to build and easier to control, given their smaller degrees of freedom. However, the only hope for building robots that have the flexibility and range of motion of a human is to return to the more sophisticated mechanisms pioneered by da Vinci and built some 15 years ago by Mr. Rosheim. These more complex mechanisms will cost more and will challenge our control algorithms, but in addition to mechanical advantages, they offer greater reliability and robustness due to their natural redundancy (think of the Terminator robot, that kept going, even after losing body parts). Mr. Rosheim also referred to a university (in Italy?) that has a Chair of Leonardo Studies and suggested that actually, two separate Chairs are needed for Leonardo's contributions to art and to technology, which have completely different natures. A lot of da Vinci's work is still missing and researchers have to piece together segments of his work much like a jigsaw puzzle with missing parts. However, there is hope that more of the missing puzzle pieces will be uncovered in the years to come.

2012/02/15 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace." Sri Chinmoy Ghose, 1931-2007 (Though a controversial figure, accused of personal misconduct, Sri Chinmoy has left a wealth of astute advice. This particular quote is sometimes incorrectly attributed to Jimi Hendrix.)

(2) MIT's first free on-line course with certificate: According to BBC News, MIT "has announced its first free course which can be studied and assessed completely online. An electronics course, beginning in March, will be the first prototype of an online project, known as MITx." Bloomberg News adds: "For the past 10 years, MIT has provided documents and lecture notes online for more than 2,000 courses through its Open Courseware program to more than 100 million people. Through its new MITx initiative, non-MIT students will, for the first time, have their performance assessed and receive certificates if they show mastery in the subject ... Students will have video lectures, midterm and final exams, weekly deadlines to complete homework and labs and access to discussion forums. They can expect to spend about 10 hours a week on the course."

(3) Open college-level textbooks: The Saylor Foundation has licensed the following three textbooks for free use by educators and students worldwide. A nonprofit organization, Saylor is now focusing on its Free Education Initiative dedicated to creating zero-cost, self-paced, automated on-line learning resources as an alternative for individuals who lack the resources to attend traditional brick-and-mortar institutions and as a complement to the latter. This is great news for everyone, especially students in developing countries for whom the cost of textbooks is almost unbearable. The following links are to complete books in PDF format.

Kuttler, Kenneth (BYU), [Elementary Linear Algebra](#)

Kuttler, Kenneth (BYU), [Linear Algebra](#)

Bonaventure, Olivier (UCL), [Computer Networking: Principles, Protocols and Practice](#)

2012/02/14 (Tue.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Happy Valentine's Day: Let's celebrate the day with a verse from Hafiz, the great Persian poet: Everyone is seeking love, sober or drunk / Everywhere is a house of love, mosque or temple

(2) The war against botnets: Botnets are networks of (usually infected) computers that are commanded by criminal hackers for financial gain or for running havoc in the on-line world via denial-of-service attacks and the like. TDL4, the fourth generation of a Windows PC botnet, with a history going back to 2008, appeared last June and by now is estimated to have infected nearly 5M computers worldwide. This new botnet is so advanced that major virus/malware protection programs are ineffective against it. Interestingly, not a single Russian computer has been infected, because computers in Russia have no commercial worth for the operators of this botnet. [Source: *Communications of the ACM*, issue of February 2012]

(3) Insects with remote control: Oh, great! Now instead of swatting a mosquito, you just press a few buttons on its remote control and it'll fly away. Kidding aside, this is about a serious [MIT research project](#) that tries to gain control of insects' movements by implanting a probe into their spines. Immediate applications are limited to using the insects to spy on enemies. Longer-term goals include helping the rehabilitation of stroke victims via stimulation of nerve bundles.

(4) On how the US Republican Party got to the current disarray: "The nation-building neoconservatives, eager to improve the world, clashed with the America-first conservatives; the pork-barreling K Streeters clashed with the genuine fiscal conservatives; the prim social conservatives clashed with the libertarians; the pro-immigrant crowd clashed with the border-sealing caucus; and so on. The impulse at party headquarters was to slap a Band-Aid emblazoned with Ronald Reagan's smiling face over the wounds, which might have worked for a while—until the whole economy collapsed." David von Drehle, writing about election 2012 in *Time* magazine, issue of February 6, 2012.

2012/02/13 (Mon.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "It is easy to be brave from a safe distance." Aesop

(2) The new political geography: The world's political landscape is changing, not just because of upheavals in many countries but because large multinational companies are beginning to look and behave like independent nations. Such companies pursue their own interests and are not bound by loyalty to any one country. This lack of loyalty is exemplified by the statement of an unnamed Apple Computer executive in a *New York Times* story: "We don't have an obligation to solve America's problems." Whether any company can ignore its home market is open to debate. However, it is ironic that companies like Apple that are uninterested in dealing with US problems expect Uncle Sam to protect their intellectual property rights and to maintain a functional infrastructure (transportation, safety of shipping lanes, etc.) for importing goods from China and other countries. For more on this topic, read Rana Foroohar's column in *Time* magazine, issue of February 13, 2012, p. 21.

(3) Google Books string search: The gigantic Google Books database has found some research applications beyond its original intent. Here is an example. On the Google Books [Ngram Viewer page](#), you can enter a string of characters and get a graph of the distribution of usage for that particular string of characters over time

in Google's database of books. For example, I typed "Behrooz" (the search is case-sensitive) and the date range 1950-2000, and got a distribution that peaks around 1995. Remember that this is just a string search, so if your search is for "care," the search results will also include the occurrence of "scare," "caret," and so on. This is a very good research tool. For example, in its February 2012 issue, *IEEE Spectrum* magazine used the tool to find the time distribution of various job titles in engineering. The results show that the use of "programmer" peaked in the late 1980s, whereas "coder" peaked in the early 2000s. Note that the occurrence of a peak in the 1980s does not mean that there were more programmers then, but that the job title was referenced more often in books published at that time. The result for "engineer" shows two peaks: one in the 1910s and another in the 1940s, corresponding to the two World Wars.

2012/02/12 (Sun.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) Persian solo piano: Hooman Tabrizi plays "[Jaan-e Maryam](#)," a composition of Mohammad Nouri.
- (2) Iranian folk music: The all-female Shahrzad Ensemble plays the [Shirazi folk song](#) "Balal Balalam."
- (3) Engineers as entertainers: Leave it to the Germans to [entertain people](#) with a show featuring their engineering prowess and bulldozers.
- (4) Rain forest for ransom: Ecuador is demanding payment from the international community for not drilling for oil in the Amazon. The question asked by Bryan Walsh, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of February 6, 2012, is "Should the world say yes?" Here is some food for thought. "South America is becoming an increasingly important oil producer—the continent holds 20% of the world's proven reserves—and much of that crude is buried in and around the Amazon basin. That puts the rain forest in mortal peril ... Yet the financial burden of protecting our most biodiverse forests—nearly all found in developing nations—can't fall only on poor nations like Ecuador."
- (5) How electricity was invented: When Thomas Edison saw [this sign](#), that quotes him (in Persian) on the importance of chastity and modesty for women, he was so shocked that sparks flew off him, and the rest, as they say, is history.

2012/02/09 (Thu.): Here are two items of potential interest.

- (1) One of the best examples of political doubletalk: "If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it." "But, if when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it." Noah 'Soggy' Sweat, Jr.
- (2) The upside of being an introvert: This is the title of a fascinating *Time* magazine article by Bryan Walsh (issue of February 6, 2012) that digs deep into introversion, which is different from shyness. "Shyness is a form of anxiety characterized by inhibited behavior. It also implies a fear of social judgment that can be crippling. ... Introverts shun social situations because, Greta Garbo-style, they simply want to be alone." Here is a snippet from the concluding part of the article: "From the moment we wake up to the second we go to sleep—preferably after relaxing with a book in bed—introverts live in an extrovert's world, and there are days when we'd prefer to do nothing more than stay at home. But while our temperaments may define us, that doesn't mean we are controlled by them—if we can find something or someone that motivates us to push beyond the boundaries of our nerves." Unfortunately the full article is available only to subscribers, but here is a [capsule review](#) of the article that also has links to a list of famous introverts/extroverts and a quiz you can take on this topic.

2012/02/08 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

- (1) Ronald Reagan tells a joke, as only he can: I consider myself more aligned with Democrats, but a good joke is a good joke, no matter who it pokes fun at. The [story of a Republican](#) who had to speak from a democratic platform.
- (2) The language of Jewish Kurds: I was pleased to discover a program on [RadioRan](#), branded as "the radio of Iranians living in Israel" (which is different from the Persian service of Israeli government's "Radio Israel"). Of specific interest to me on RadioRan is a program on Wednesdays, 9:00-11:00 AM PST, that is devoted to

preserving a language spoken by my ancestors in Iran's Kurdistan region. The language, still in use by my mother's generation, has no name and I have heard it referred to as "Lishana Noshan" (literally, "our own language") by elder family members. I believe that it is an offshoot of Arameic, but I'm not sure. This language has been static for decades, so a large set of words from Kurdish, Persian, and even Western languages have crept into it. As in many other languages worldwide, one hears speakers of this language also utter "okay" or "merci" from time to time. I hope that some future broadcast focuses on the history of this language, including its roots and current area of usage.

(3) Apologies galore: A lot of former officials of the Islamic regime in Iran are issuing apologies these days. This is a welcome sign, as it foretells the regime's weakened state and its imminent demise. One would like to forget and forgive these elements, despite the fact that they were instrumental in the clergy consolidating power and establishing what is one of the world's most brutal dictatorships. However, the timing of these apologies by older people (some of them literally on their deathbeds), after benefiting financially and otherwise from the regime's largess over more than three decades, makes one suspicious that they are only trying to save their behinds in the event of a regime change. The latest apologizer is Ahmad Sadr Haj-Seyed-Javadi, who was a member of the Revolutionary Council and later became Minister of Justice in the early years of the Islamic Republic. He actually does use the word "apology," although he qualifies it and blames others for what happened afterwards. Earlier "apologizers," such as Abdolkarim Soroush, still insist that their idea of an Islamic Republic was sound and that if they had not been ousted from the government, it would have worked perfectly; that is, it was other people's fault that it didn't work.

2012/02/07 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest on science, technology, and education.

(1) Guilty till proven innocent (the science version): Scott Aaronson, an MIT scientist who works on quantum computing and has grown tired of people who doubt the feasibility of the concept for practical applications, has issued [a challenge to such deniers](#), offering \$100K of his own money to anyone who can prove the said infeasibility. As a scientist/engineer, I found this proposition absurd. It is up to the scientists/engineers who propose new theories or processes to show their feasibility. The prize offer is like a DA asking everyone under suspicion for committing a crime to prove their innocence in order to go free. The proponents of quantum computing, a fairly new theory, are the ones who need to convince the scientific community that their approach is feasible, not the other way around.

(2) Tiny autonomous helicopters: [Demo video](#) shows up to 16 quadrotors, roughly the size of a paperback book, flying solo or in formation, avoiding obstacles, and landing.

(3) US higher education in crisis: Public colleges and universities in the United States are undergoing changes that are quite scary for people like me who are inside the system and those who look at it from the outside. States are continually reducing their support for public higher education, and the attendant rise in tuition and fees is quickly putting a college education beyond the reach of even the middle class. Proposed solutions abound, ranging from pie-in-the-sky proposals (e.g., educate everyone for free in return for a fraction of their future earnings), that may have some merit but little chance of being implementable, to more realistic approaches exemplified by President Obama's proposed scheme for [reining in rises in tuition](#). He has proposed that Federal aid be shifted from colleges that don't control rising tuition to those that provide better value to students. Others have proposed that this stick-and-carrot plan be augmented to also reward colleges that cut average time-to-graduation, as the latter directly influences the cost of higher education.

2012/02/06 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Superbowl 2012 TV ads: The high cost of airing commercials during Superbowl brings out the creative side of ad makers to make the best use of a limited time. Here are [the 54 commercials](#) that aired during Superbowl 2012 yesterday.

(2) The coming tech boom: The *Wall Street Journal* predicts a coming tech-led boom: "In January 1912, the United States emerged from a two-year recession. Nineteen more followed—along with a century of phenomenal economic growth. Americans in real terms are 700% wealthier today. In hindsight it seems obvious that emerging technologies circa 1912—electrification, telephony, the dawn of the automobile age, the invention of stainless steel and the radio amplifier—would foster such growth. Yet even knowledgeable contemporary observers failed to grasp their transformational power. In January 2012, we sit again on the cusp of three grand technological transformations with the potential to rival that of the past century. All find their epicenters in America: big data, smart manufacturing and the wireless revolution."

(3) US Jews vote like atheists: This is quite counterintuitive. Every four years, Republicans try to rally Jews behind their defense-of-Israel slogan and every four years they fail. [US Jews vote like seculars](#), that is, 3/4 Democratic. Israel isn't a big factor in their voting. The only exception is found in a very small minority of Orthodox Jews, who vote mostly Republican. [Source: *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 30, 2012]

(4) Food for thought: Since 2004, there has been a 200% increase in the number of US pedestrians killed or

injured while wearing headphones. [Source: *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 30, 2012]

2012/02/05 (Sun.): Here are four items of potential interest.

- (1) An acoustic-guitar duo from Japan: Depapepe plays some very upbeat, soothing, and melodic tunes. Here are some examples from YouTube. [["Start"](#)] [["Morning Smile"](#)] [["Wedding March"](#)]
- (2) Oldest paintings by humans: The [Chauvet Cave](#) in southern France, where the oldest human paintings were discovered in 1994, is a significant prehistoric art site. Since its discovery, the cave has been scrupulously protected by the French government, which allows only scientists and archeologist to visit the site. So, my watching a few days ago of the 2010 documentary film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" was a real treat. Much of the cave's artwork was produced 30,000 years ago, although subsequent occupants added to the work some 5000 years later. A main reason that the artwork remains in such a good condition is the complete blockage of the cave's main entrance by a landslide that occurred about 25,000 years ago.
- (3) Social robotics: A while ago, I had posted something about the field of "social robotics" and Heather Knight, the young doctoral researcher who has become its ambassador. This [CNN story](#) reveals some new aspects of the field, such as robots telling jokes. Fascinating!
- (4) A conservative take on the US income gap: "Since the advent of Occupy Wall Street, there has been a tendency to assume that only the left worries about inequality in America. ... Regrettably, the Republican candidates ... have scarcely mentioned inequality in their recent debates. ... Charles Murray of the [conservative] American Enterprise Institute, whose new book, *Coming Apart*, offers by far the best available analysis of modern American inequality ... sees two nations where there used to be just one: a new upper class or 'cognitive elite' ... and a new 'lower class' ... As a consequence of these trends, the traditional bonds of civil society have entirely atrophied in lower-class America. There is less neighborliness, less trust, less political awareness, less of that vibrant civil engagement that used to impress European visitors ... Man is a social animal who can only really be happy in four social domains: family, work, local community, and faith. In poor America, all four are in a state of collapse." Niall Ferguson, writing in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of January 23, 2012.

2012/02/04 (Sat.): Various authors, *Short Stories: The Vintage Collection*, unabridged audiobook (6 CDs) read by several performers, CSA Word, 2009.

This fifth volume in the CSA Word Short Stories Series features a number of authors, such as Louisa May Alcott, Alphonse Daudet, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Hardy, Jerome K. Jerome, and Saki. Readers include Robin Bailey, Stephen Fry, Martin Jarvis, Hugh Laurie, Barbara Leigh-Hunt, and Kerry Shale. The most enjoyable story for me was "A Tale of Negative Gravity," an enchanting fantasy by Frank R. Stockton, in which the invention of a device to counteract gravity allows an older man to become a spry walker and mountain climber. However, he and his wife also face inconveniences and danger, leading to the story's dramatic conclusion. [[Read the story on-line](#)]

2012/02/03 (Fri.): Here are five items of potential interest.

- (1) The Bechdel test of women in movies: This [video statement](#) is so eye-opening! Even movies that feature women in what appear to be important roles do not necessarily depict the women in a way that gives them the same weight as the male characters.
- (2) Generators and holders of the US national debt: [Yet another representation](#) for dispelling the myth that Republicans are fiscally conservative and democrats are tax-and-spend. Bear in mind that the situation is even worse than depicted here, given that much of what President Obama has added to the national debt was necessitated by his predecessor's misguided policies that led to the economic collapse of 2008.
- (3) One more poem from Mr. Haloo: In this [satirical poem](#), entitled "As for Me, I Won't Vote," Mohammad Reza Ali Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) maintains that even if all social and political restrictions, which he enumerates, are lifted by the Islamic regime, he still wouldn't vote in the next Iranian election.
- (4) The cardboard Imam faux pas: A [cardboard replica of Khomeini](#), meant to honor him by reenacting his 1979 return to Iran, has led to an avalanche of posts in cyberspace. The "cardboard imam," as people have been calling him over the past day, is the butt of numerous jokes. Some Iranian authorities have reprimanded the individuals responsible for this (in retrospect) thoughtless act. One Facebook poster claims that the word "cardboard" is being blocked within electronic communications in Iran.
- (5) Quote of the day: "Under Obama's budgets, both past and projected, he would have added \$1.4 trillion in two terms. Under Bush and the GOP, nondefense discretionary spending grew by twice as much ... It takes work to increase the debt in times of growth, as Bush did. It takes much more work to constrain the debt in the deep recession Bush bequeathed Obama." Andrew Sullivan, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 23, 2012.

2012/02/02 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Soccer brawl leads to 74 deaths, 1000 injuries: An [Egyptian soccer match](#) between longtime rival teams turns deadly when hooligans supporting the winning team attack the opposing players and fans. If one can't find tolerance in sports, what hope is there for resolving nationalistic and religious differences?

(2) Alien particles in the solar system: The [Interstellar Boundary Explorer](#) (IBEX), a satellite orbiting the Earth some 200,000 miles away, has snagged samples of hydrogen, oxygen, and neon coming from interstellar space. Interesting question for the next Republican presidential candidates' debate: should we build a fence to prevent these alien particles from entering our Solar System and what kind of documentation should they be required to present? Seriously though, the fact that matter is exchanged between stars (solar systems) makes one wonder if similar exchanges occur between galaxies.

(3) Quote of the day: "The voters who will decide the 2012 election do not live on a left-right spectrum ... Instead, the world of moderate, independent swing voters lives on an up-down spectrum, moving between deference to elites and expressions of populist anger. And this is an angry moment, which is why smart politicians are moving not from left to right but from elitist to populist." Paul Begala, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 23, 2012, on why Mitt Romney's move to the right may be misguided.

(4) Build your own super-PAC: Like the earlier lowly political action committees, the new cash-rich super-PACs are exerting an inordinate amount of influence on the political process in the US and carry similarly content-free or misleading names. For example, a PAC that works on behalf of the worst industrial polluters may have one or more of the words "clean," "fresh," "environment," and the like in its name. Ben Crair, writing in *Newsweek* magazine, issue of January 23, 2012, humorously suggests that you can build your own super-PAC and give it a three-word name. Word #1 should be an active verb, coming from the list "make, endorse, heal, win, love, restore, fix, massage, rebuild, salve." Word #2, a collective pronoun or possessive noun calling on the American people, is to be chosen from the list "our, us, children's, the people's, the founding fathers', tomorrow's, America's, Uncle Sam's." Word #3, a noun or phrase invoking an American ideal, should be chosen from the list "freedom, liberty, trust, future, destiny, rights, prosperity, promise, greatness, guns."

2012/02/01 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Mute button: An [interesting experiment](#) by "Improv Everywhere," with support from the Guggenheim Museum. Makes you wish the world came with a mute button!

(2) Leonard Cohen's new album: Yesterday on NPR, I listened to a program that introduced Leonard Cohen's new album "Old Ideas." The following verses from one of the songs, "Crazy to Love You," stuck in my mind: Sometimes I'd head for the highway / I'm old and the mirrors don't lie / But crazy has places to hide in / That are deeper than any goodbye. You can [listen to the entire album](#) on-line (this may be a limited-time free access).

(3) Watch your information diet: Many of us mind what we eat, but when it comes to consuming information, we are pretty indiscriminate. We may not even be aware that we are consuming unhealthy amounts or kinds of information. This [blog post](#) suggests five ways to remedy this problem. They are, from #5 to #1: diversify you menu; find a better solution to boredom; damn the social network; decentralize your media consumption; burn your TV. Good food for thought, even though I myself may not be willing, or able, to follow all the suggestions!

(4) Bye-bye anonymity: [According to Prism](#), the magazine of ASEE (issue of January 2012), the coming together of facial-recognition software, social media, and profit-driven marketers may deal serious blows to our expectations of privacy. Carnegie Mellon University researchers have used off-the-shelf facial-recognition software and information from social media sites to see what they could learn about strangers. They successfully identified some folks who were using pseudonyms on a popular dating site, and a number of students walking on campus, based on Facebook photos. Similar methods are being applied to digital billboards that use facial detection software to target ads to different people in real time based on gender and other factors. Other high-tech marketers will soon venture beyond this, no doubt: imagine billboards that suggest products because they know if you're feeling sad or happy.

2012/01/31 (Tue.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Honor killings verdict: [According to CNN](#), a Canadian jury Sunday convicted three members of a family of Afghan immigrants (a man, his son, and his second wife) of the "honor" murders of four female relatives (the man's first wife and their three daughters) whose bodies were found in an Ontario canal.

(2) The Screen Actors Guild Awards: [SAG has honored](#) "The Help" (best cast), Jean Dujardin (actor), Viola Davis (actress), Christopher Plummer (supporting actor), and Octavia Spencer (supporting actress).

(3) A request from a hugely popular director: [Martin Scorsese](#), whose film "Hugo" is scheduled for screening at Iran's Fajr Film Festival, has been asked to withdraw from the event, where many jailed Iranian directors and actors will be absent.

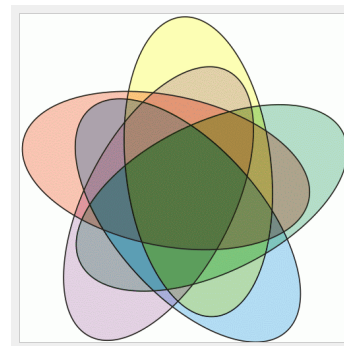
(4) Mr. Haloo strikes again: After answering some criticisms of earlier compositions of his, Mohammad Reza Ali Payam (aka Mr. Haloo) [dedicates a poem](#) to all the young people who are fighting dictators (in Egypt, of

course, ... wink, wink).

(5) Finnair's dancing crew: On a Finnair flight to Delhi, **passengers are surprised** when a dancing crew celebrates India's Republic Day on January 26, 2012.

2012/01/30 (Mon.): Here are three science/tech items of potential interest.

(1) On Venn diagrams: Everyone knows Venn Diagrams (named after John Venn who first used them), usually seen as a set of 2 or 3 intersecting circles. In the 3-circle version (Venn diagram of order 3), for example, the inside area of each circle represents the presence, and the outside area the absence, of some property. Let's denote the presence of the 3 properties by A, B, and C, and their absence by a, b, and c, respectively. Then, the order-3 Venn diagram partitions the plane into 8 regions corresponding to abc (the outside area where none of the properties is present), abC (where only C is present), aBc, aBC, Abc, AbC, ABC, and finally ABC (the area inside all 3 circles). A good example of an order-3 Venn diagram, showing the Greek, Latin, and Russian alphabets with their shared uppercase letters, appears at the beginning of a [Wikipedia article](#).



With 5 properties, we can construct an order-5 Venn diagram that partitions the plane into 32 regions, but this cannot be done by drawing circles (see the accompanying figure). In general, one can use arbitrary closed, smooth curves, not just circles and ovals, to build a Venn diagram. An order- n Venn diagram can be drawn for any n , a fact that is not too difficult to prove.

(2) The second-order effects of Steve Jobs: Much has been written since Steve Jobs' death about his role in the success of Apple Computer and its innovative designs. In an interesting article, published in *IEEE Computer*, issue of January 2012, pp. 10-11, Charles Severance reveals some key indirect contributions of Steve Jobs. Examples include the first version of the Web, developed at CERN in 1990, having been made possible by a NeXT cube, hardware developed by Jobs' company, and the first Web browser, Mosaic, benefiting immensely from the graphics and 256-color capabilities of Mac II, which made the development of an image library practical.

(3) Babbage's Analytical Engine being built: Charles Babbage, who was more than a century ahead of his time in designing computing equipment in the 1800s, proposed and designed two devices: the Difference Engine and the Analytical Engine. Complete plans for the Difference Engine 2, which had survived to modern day, allowed UK's Science Museum in London to build a complete replica in 1991. Now, the Museum has initiated a **10-year project** to build Babbage's more advanced Analytical Engine, which like modern computers, executed instructions and had both program and data memories. A key challenge in this project is that the design was never fully developed and only portions from multiple iterations of the design are available today.

2012/01/29 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Preserving big-game species through hunting them: Tonight's "60 Minutes" program on CBS had a segment on wildlife ranches in Texas that breed exotic animals, making money by allowing hunters to hunt a fraction (say, 10%) for anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars per animal. The operators of these ranches claim that their work has brought back several species from the brink of extinction and that the financial incentive works to expand their preservation programs. The program included film depicting robust populations of various rare animals, roaming much as in the African wilderness. Other guests on the program argued that killing these animals is wrong, regardless of the motives and end results. A clear dilemma: preserving a species by breeding a large population and killing a subset to pay for the cost of maintenance.

(2) He said, he said: President Obama's stern written warning, asking Iran to reconsider the threat of closing the Strait of Hormuz and any hostile act against the American naval forces in the region, has been reflected in the [Iranian media](#) thus: "Following the warning of the Army's chief commander [regarding the need for American naval forces to leave the Persian Gulf], the Americans wrote a letter of contrition, and we decided to show some flexibility by allowing their vessels to continue sailing in this area." (An unidentified high-level Basiji commander)

(3) Taking stock of your life: In this **17-minute TEDMED talk**, swimmer Diana Nyad explains how looking back at her life upon turning 60 gave her an urge to chase an elevated or extreme dream: swimming from Cuba to Florida, without using a shark cage. She was stung by box jellyfish and couldn't finish what she set out to do, but the mere fact that she had the courage to try made her feel good about herself. She's not done yet and will try again soon. She ends by paraphrasing the poet Mary Oliver, "So, what is it you're doing with this one wild and precious life of yours?"

2012/01/27 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "When a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares that it is

his duty." George Bernard Shaw

(2) After an excellent Persian dinner at Raffi's Place in Glendale, my daughter and I attended Cirque du Soleil's "**Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour**" at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. The program was a bit different from the Cirque's trademark gymnastics and aerial dances, mixed with comedy. Michael Jackson's music and dance style were, of course, prominently featured. There were also pyrotechnics and lights of various colors and shapes on the dancers' bodies that made their movements surreal in the dark.

(3) Glitzy concert in Yerevan, Armenia: **KOHAR performs** with stars of Armenia in a May 2011 concert.

(4) Viewpoint on fixing capitalism: "A key part of fixing capitalism will be reconciling the large and growing imbalances between the public and private sectors. National governments have, over the past several decades, seen the most basic pillars of their power erode. ... Meanwhile, corporations play nation-states against one another as they venue-shop for more-attractive tax or regulatory regimes. ... Corporations have morphed from legal entities designed to ensure that an enterprise could survive the death of its owners to institutions possessing more rights than people. ... The biggest companies—the Walmarts and Exxons of the world—have financial resources and political reach that rival all but a few dozen states." David Rothkopf, writing in *Time* magazine, issue of January 30, 2012.

2012/01/26 (Thu.): Here are three items of potential interest on language and education.

(1) Word as image: Ari Siletz has offered a video entitled "**Word as Image**" in a **blog post** and suggested that perhaps something similar could be done with Persian words. For example, he wrote the word "mosal'las" ("triangle") by replacing the 3 dots of each Persian letter "s" with a small triangle. As another example, he replaced the pair of dots under "sebil" ("mustache") with the shape of a simple mustache.

(2) History of the English language in about 10 minutes: I enjoyed watching these **ten 1-minute clips**, written by Benjamin Starr, about the development of the English language. They feature humorous narratives and fun animations.

(3) Low-cost on-line college classes on their way: According to *Inside Higher Ed*, Sebastian Thrun, a Stanford University professor who taught an online artificial intelligence course to more than 160,000 students, has left the institution to found Udacity, a start-up offering low-cost online classes, first in computer science and engineering and perhaps expanding to other fields down the line. Udacity could eventually seek to have its courses certified by third-party auditors, so that other colleges might accept them for transfer credit, and has not ruled out going for institutional accreditation in future.

2012/01/25 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest on science and technology.

(1) Science, then and now: "Four hundred years ago, the idea that the Earth goes around the Sun rather than vice versa was not just a scientific breakthrough but also a cultural bombshell. People were asked to reimagine the world they were living in. Not everyone welcomed the opportunity. Books were burned. In the case of Giordano Bruno, an author was burned."

"In the modern world, cosmological revolutions seem to cause hardly a ripple in public consciousness. Inflation, dark matter, dark energy—these ideas also call for a reimagining of the world we live in, but they have provoked very little fuss outside the community of science. It's certainly a relief that no one will be burned at the stake over matters of cosmological doctrine. But are we really more liberal and open-minded, or just not paying attention?"

The final two paragraphs in the article "**A Box of Universe**" (by Brian Hayes), *American Scientist*, Vol. 100, No. 1, pp. 11-16, January-February 2012.

(2) A rising tech company: **Dropbox**, the company that is "building the Internet's file system," aspires to become the next Apple/Google/Facebook, rather than be bought by one of these giants. Dropbox allows people to store files for free in order to collaborate with others or to sync files between multiple devices (phone, camera, tablet, PC). It already has 50M users and is adding a new user every second.

(3) Some rules of engineering (collected by Edward D. Spear):

The moment you design, you know you're going to be wrong. You just don't know when and in which direction. When presenting a design or analysis, give a number or a date, but never both.

Engineers who specialize learn more and more about less and less, until in the end they know everything about nothing.

Ask five engineers and you'll get five different explanations—six if one of them went to Stanford.

2012/01/24 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) What we see overrides what we hear: The McGurk Effect is demonstrated in this **video clip**. One hears the exact same sound differently, depending on lip movements that one sees.

(2) Newt Gingrich fooling Goldilocks: "At first they tried Papa Bear Cain's porridge, but it was a little too strange with that weird pizza-flavored aftertaste. Then they tried Mama Bear Romney's porridge, but it was a little too

watered down and had that disturbing, corporate smell. They even tried Uncle Bear Perry's famous Texas porridge, but when they went for a second byte he accidentally knocked his bowl off the table. Oops. Now they have tasted Baby Bear Newt Gingrich's porridge and mmmm, mmmm! A delicious blend of fiscal and social conservatism, a brash personality and public and private sector experience to boot! Maybe Newt Gingrich's porridge will be juuuuust right. Little do they know that Newt's secret ingredient is rat poison: The man is not electable in any way, shape, or form." Riley Schenck, UCSB *Daily Nexus*, Jan. 23, 2012.

(3) The evolution of YouTube: This quote and the timeline that follows it are from an article in *Time* magazine, issue of January 30, 2012, pp. 38-43. "For every minute that passes in real time, 60 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. ... It gets 4,000,000,000 page views a day ... It has 800,000,000 users (about the same as Facebook) who watch 3,000,000,000 hours of video a month. ... YouTube gets a billion search queries a day; if they were tallied separately from Google's, YouTube would be the second largest search engine on the Internet."

YouTube's 7-year timeline:

01/2005: YouTube is born. Domain name is registered a month later.

04/2005: First posted video, "Me at the Zoo," gets 6.6M views.

06/2005: First YouTube-created viral hit, "Chinese Backstreet Boys," gets 13.9M views.

09/2005: First video to reach 1M views ("Touch of Gold").

12/2005: YouTube is officially launched.

07/2006: 100M page views.

10/2006: Google acquires YouTube for \$1.65B.

05/2007: The video "Charlie Bit My Finger" gets 410M views.

07/2007: First CNN/YouTube debate.

12/2008: YouTube HD is launched, followed by YouTube 3D 7 months later.

10/2009: 1 billion page views per day, then 2B per day by 05/2010.

03/2011: Rebecca Black's "Friday" gets 190M views.

01/2012: More than 4B page views per day and 800M users.

2012/01/23 (Mon.): Here are six items of potential interest from the worlds of film and music.

(1) Quote of the day: "Those who, amidst the ongoing struggle between democratic forces and dictatorial elements, have chosen to focus exclusively on Golshifteh and her rights, should remember that while this story was unfolding, executions have gone on and several other women have joined Nasrin Sotoudeh in jail." [Morteza Kazemian; free translation from Persian by B. Parhami.]

(2) Beautiful music and dance: Celtic Woman performs "**You Raise Me Up**" on "Dancing with the Stars."

(3) New-age Persian music: Mohsen Namjoo & Golshifteh Farahani perform "**Hamash Delam Miguireh**" ("My Heart Is Always Heavy") in a Milan concert.

(4) Ballet combined with gymnastics: The Great China State Circus performs "**Swan Lake**."

(5) Modern Persian music: Siamak Abbasi performs "**Khoshbakhtit Arezooom**" ("Your Happiness Is My Desire"). The melody seems to be a variation of Aref's "**Koochooloo**" ("Little One"), which was in turn based on an Israeli song whose name escapes me.

(6) Classical Persian music: The Mastan Group plays a **percussion piece** in concert.

2012/01/22 (Sun.): 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.

Our frame of reference affects the way we view the world we live in. At one point in time, we thought that the world is flat and located at the center of the universe. Everything in the way we perceived the world revolved around, and was adapted to, this "truth." So, our understanding of science as objective and composed of a collection of indisputable and experimentally validated facts is misguided. Instead, science must be viewed as subjective and very much a function of the time and place in which it is created. The invention of the telescope by Galileo changed not just our scientific knowledge but the entire course of human history. There aren't very many such fundamental shifts, and this book examines the most important ones among them.

2012/01/21 (Sat.): Here are four tech news items of potential interest.

(1) Apple plans push into digital textbooks: **Apple is renewing its drive** to capture the lucrative education market by revolutionizing the textbook industry and getting more iPads into classrooms. A soon-to-be-announced set of tools will make it easier to publish interactive textbooks and other digital educational content.

(2) Smartphone screens with solar cells: Researchers at the London Centre for Nanotechnology at University College London think they have a viable plan for handsets that go a week or more without charging. Eventually, they believe, we might see a phone that never needs to be plugged in. To extend the time between charges, the London group used thin-film hydrogenated amorphous silicon to build a prototype device that converts ambient

light into electricity using an array of solar cells underneath the phone's screen. The energy harnessing system also recaptures much of the light from a typical organic LED display that, instead of being projected out of the front of the screen, escapes at the edges, where it is useless.

(3) Using math to predict serial-killers' behavior: According to [Live Science](#), researchers have discovered that the seemingly erratic behavior of the "Rostov Ripper" (aka Andrei Chikatilo), a prolific serial killer who took the lives of 53 people in Rostov, Russia, between 1978 and 1990, conformed to the same mathematical pattern obeyed by earthquakes, avalanches, stock market crashes, and many other sporadic events. Mikhail Simkin and Vwani Roychowdhury, UCLA electrical engineers, modeled the serial killer's behavior and discovered that even though he sometimes went nearly 3 years without committing murder, on other occasions, he went just 3 days. They theorize that the reason killings stick to a mathematical function known as "the devil's staircase" is that serial killers work to a rhythm driven by neurons in their brains.

(4) Software could identify criminals, even after plastic surgery: According to UK's [New Scientist](#), criminals who undergo plastic surgery to evade capture will be disappointed to learn about a new technique for matching faces before and after plastic surgery. The inventor of the method, Gaurav Aggarwal (University of Maryland), was inspired by a facial-recognition technique called sparse representation, which matches an image of a face by comparing it with combinations of individual features from faces stored in a database. If the closest matching combination turns out to be made up of features mostly drawn from one person in the database, the target image is also of that person with high probability.

2012/01/20 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Before you speak THINK: Is it True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary, Kind?

(2) Self-healing paint, from cars to iPhones: Japanese automotive giant Nissan is borrowing the self-healing paint used in its 4x4 vehicles and applying it to the iPhone. The [Scratch Shield iPhone case](#), being developed by Nissan, University of Tokyo, and Advanced Softmaterials Inc., uses an outer coating of flexible polyrotaxane to cover up blemishes. The chemical structure of the paint can detect fine scratches, then elastically bounce back to its original shape, filling gaps and healing damage.

(3) The billionaire revolutionary: The January 23, 2012, issue of *Time* magazine contains an article on Warren Buffett's economic and political views (pp. 32-38). He is described as a down-to-earth person who enjoys dining in family-owned restaurants and still lives in a 5-bedroom house he purchased for \$31,500 in 1958. He believes that the super-rich and corporations should be taxed at higher rates than they are now and that it is crazy for earned wages to be taxed at a higher rate than capital gains. Here is his response to Mitch McConnell, who had suggested that Buffett should simply mail a check to the government, if he thinks he should be paying more in taxes: "I have thought about that. But what I've thought more about, because Mitch McConnell put it out there, is offering to match the total amount of voluntary contributions by all Republican members of Congress. And I will. I'll go 1 for 1 with any Republican. And I'll go 3 for 1 with McConnell. And I'm not worried."

(4) The furor over Golshifteh's cover photo: Cyberspace has been abuzz with numerous posts about Golshifteh Farahani's partially nude magazine cover. According to [The Telegraph](#), Iranian authorities have banned the actress from her homeland, where she enjoys immense popularity. Iranians in diaspora, meanwhile, are showing varied reactions. Some are praising her bold move, which they see as a protest against the treatment of women in Iran, while others criticize her for doing damage to Iranian cinema at a time when it is under serious domestic pressure, arguing that she has provided ammunition to those who closed the House of Cinema in Tehran and have attacked the Iranian film industry in general. A third group suggests that Ms. Farahani should be left alone to make her personal and professional choices, calling the second group hypocrites for not extending the same liberties they enjoy in the free world to others.

2012/01/19 (Thu.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) President Obama participates in [honoring Betty White](#) on her 90th birthday.

(2) Five-member band, one guitar: I had seen two different people playing the same instrument, but this one must be a world record. Walk off the Earth performs ["Somebody that I Used to Know."](#) It seems like budget cuts are affecting the band's ability to buy enough instruments.

(3) Persian music: Shahabadin and Farnaz cover an old Persian song, ["Del beh to Daadam"](#) ("I Gave My Heart to You"), made famous by Delkash.

(4) Joan Baez sings for the people of Iran: This rendition of ["We Shall Overcome"](#) begins in English and then switches to Persian ("Maa Pirooz Mishim").

(5) A challenging logical puzzle: There are three incandescent light bulbs in a room and three switches at a distance from the room, each switch controlling one of the light bulbs, but we don't know which one. We cannot see the room or its door from the location of the switches. In the beginning, all three light bulbs are off and the room door is closed. You are allowed to toggle the switches a total of 3 times (that is, each one once, or one twice and another one once, or one switch three times) and enter the room only once to check on the status of

the three light bulbs (on or off). Under these conditions, how would you go about finding out which switch controls which light bulb?

2012/01/18 (Wed.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Ode to a spelling checker: "I have a spelling checker / It came with my PC. / It plainly marks four my revue / Mistakes I cannot sea. / I've run this poem threw it / I'm sure your pleased too no. / It's letter perfect in it's weigh / My checker tolled me sew." Penny Harper

(2) Why oil prices will not crash: According to Farid Zakria in last Sunday's GPS program on CNN, hopes for oil prices to crash and for the recent increases turning out to be temporary are unrealistic. Oil-producing countries need high prices to balance their budgets, in part because they are mostly dictatorships that keep their populations in check by giving them more and more perks. Today, Saudi Arabia needs to sell oil at \$80 per barrel just to balance its budget; a few years ago, it could do this with \$25 per barrel. Russia now needs \$110 per barrel to make ends meet. So these countries will do what they can, including controlling supplies, to keep oil prices high.

(3) Iranian student activist shot dead: [Gelareh Bagherzadeh](#), Texas Medical Center student and Iranian activist, shot dead in her car.

(4) Watch for these new computer viruses (adapted from *High Tech Joke Book*).

AT&T virus: Every 3 minutes it tells you what great service you are getting.

Dan Quayle virus: There is sumthing rong with yor compuetyer, ewe just can't figyour watt.

Right-to-life virus: Asks you to see a counselor about possible alternatives before you can delete a file.

Oprah Winfrey virus: It expands the size of your hard drive, then shrinks it, then expands again, and so on.

2012/01/17 (Tue.): Alda, Alan, *Things I Overheard While Talking to Myself*, unabridged audiobook (5 CDs) read by the author, Random House Audio, 2007.

This book is a follow-up to the author's best-selling memoir, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed: and Other Things I Have Learned*. Very early in the book, we learn two things about Alan Alda: that he is an excellent speech writer and that a near-death experience forever altered his outlook on life. Besides being a successful TV and film actor, Alda was apparently in high demand for delivering commencement addresses, eulogies, and keynote talks, given his unique ability to construct compelling stories from his life experiences, keen observations, and current events. In the book under review, he draws heavily from these speeches, which he reinterprets and embellishes in view of his privilege of living the "bonus" days he was given after, by sheer luck, his life was saved because an intestinal blockage specialist happened to be on duty at a small hospital in a remote part of Chile. Alda's writing style is sincere and engaging. He is quite successful in making the readers/listeners think about their own lives and how they might spend any bonus days. I highly recommend this short, enjoyable book. [[Alan Alda's Web site](#)]

2012/01/16 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." Martin Luther King, Jr.

(2) Golden Globe Awards 2012: There were no big surprises in the movie categories that I had been following and knew something about.

Drama: Movie, "The Descendants"; Actor, George Clooney; Actress, Meryl Streep

Comedy or muscial: Movie, "The Artist"; Actor, Jean Dujardin; Actress, Michelle Williams

Director: Martin Scorceese, for "Hugo"

Supporting role: Actor, Christopher Plummer; Actress, Octavia Spencer

Foreign-language film: "A Separation" (Iran). Asghar Farhadi, the film's director, dedicated his award to his peace-loving people. According to the [Washington Post](#), the award show was a big hit in Iran, with many staying up through the night to watch it.

(3) The Golden Globe Awards, music: Madonna's song, "[Masterpiece](#)," which won a Golden Globe in the best original-song category and, in the process, raised some eyebrows.

(4) The Golden Globe Awards and Iran: I hope my Iranian friends do not make the Golden Globe Award given to "A Separation" into a matter of national honor. Already a media circus has been created, with diverse groups, from the Royalists to the Greens, seemingly taking credit for this success! It is nice that some worthy artists, and an excellent film, won the honor, but this win does not give us bragging rights as a nation or culture. Much more remains to be done, and any time wasted gloating over a matter that is but a single step in bridging the divide between the Iranian and American people reduces our ability to engage in even more lasting initiatives.

2012/01/15 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) One bit can be stored on 12 atoms: According to [Technology Review](#), IBM researchers have stored and

retrieved 1s and 0s from an array of just 12 iron atoms. The findings, published in the journal *Science*, could lead to much denser and more energy-efficient main and mass memory devices.

(2) A story of survival and forgiveness: Intrigued by a local newspaper announcement of a "conversation" at Santa Barbara's Lobero Theater with Kim Phuc (pronounced "Fook"), the 9-year-old girl in the iconic 1972 photograph that etched the horrors of the Vietnam War in our minds and by doing so, perhaps helped end it, I looked up some information on the amazing 4-decade journey of this remarkable woman. She was not expected to survive serious napalm burns on her back, but she more than just survived: she set up the Kim Foundation and became an ambassador of good will and forgiveness. Listen to Phuc read her "This I Believe" essay in this [5-minute YouTube video](#).

(3) Women who dare to make war films: Angelina Jolie is in the news these days with her directorial debut in a film about the Bosnian War, "In the Land of Blood and Honey." Now get ready for the [firestorm](#) expected about Kathryn Bigelow's plans to tell the story of Osama Bin Laden (scheduled for release in December 2012). Bigelow is no newcomer to war movies: her 2008 "The Hurt Locker" earned critical acclaim and a best-director Oscar (plus 5 other Oscars).

2012/01/14 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Dictionary: Elephant (n.)—a mouse built to navy specification.

(2) Bob Dylan sings the blues: See his performance of "[Blind Willie McTell](#)" at the 2012 Critics' Choice Movie Awards show.

(3) Best-actress 2012 Critics' Choice Award: Viola Davis won for her role in "The Help" and delivered a very touching and powerful [acceptance speech](#). ["The Artist" won the award for best film, George Clooney for best actor, and "A Separation" for best foreign film.]

(4) Classical Persian music: A composition by Parviz Meshkati, entitled "[Khazaar](#)" ("Autumn"), featuring piano, kamancheh, daf, and tombak.

(5) Homeless teen is semifinalist for Intel science prize: Seventeen-year-old Samantha Garvey was chosen as one of 300 nationwide semifinalists in the prestigious [Intel Science Competition](#), with a shot at the \$100,000 prize. Samantha's grandmother recently died, and her parents lost their home after a car accident prevented them from working.

2012/01/13 (Fri.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Maybe I'm not as smart as I thought, LOL: Granted, the title question of [this article](#) ("Are Smart People Ugly?") is just a misperception, and looks have little to do with intelligence. However, the mere fact that the question is asked frequently makes me wonder. Do our kids need yet another reason for dumbing themselves down?

(2) Patent on ink-jet printing: If you consider yourself tech-savvy, try to find the answer to the following question: In what year and to whom was the first patent on ink-jet printing issued? Obviously, the mere asking of this question suggests that the answer is rather surprising: either it was way before or long after what most people might think. You can find the answer in a fascinating article on the promise of 3D printing that appeared in [IEEE Spectrum](#), January 2012 issue (Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 63-64).

(3) Electronic cotton: The cellulose that makes up cotton is naturally insulating, but the fiber can be made conducting by coating each strand with gold nanoparticles and adding a thin layer of conducting polymer. The resulting conductor keeps much of the flexibility and other mechanical properties of cotton fiber. Using such fibers, researchers have been able to build two different types of transistor. Applications of such transistors, that can be embedded in textiles, aren't very exciting at present: they include mostly various types of sensing for human body or the environment. However, remember that many other technologies that began with nonexistent or lame applications ended up being life-changing. "Still, don't expect to see underpants doubling as MP3 players anytime soon." [From [IEEE Spectrum](#), January 2012 issue, pp. 16-18.]

2012/01/12 (Thu.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Quote of the day: "After threatening the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, they [the clerical rulers of Iran] had to close something to save face; so they closed the House of Cinema." Ali Reza Khamseh, Iranian actor

(2) Some songs never get old: The Seekers, in their [1968 farewell concert](#) in London, sing "I'll Never Find Another You." Then, 42 years later, a gracefully [aged version of the group](#) sings it in 2010.

(3) Draper Prize goes to the developers of LCDs: The [US National Academy of Engineering](#) awarded its annual Draper Prize to George H. Heilmeyer, Wolfgang Helfrich, Martin Schadt, and T. Peter Brody for their seminal role in the development of liquid crystal displays (LCDs). "Liquid crystals, which at certain temperatures are in a state somewhere between solid and liquid, were discovered in the 1880s. But it was not until the 1960s that RCA engineers explored them as a way to manipulate light."

(4) Added to my to-read list: Based on this [very positive review](#) of Daniel Yergin's *The Quest: Energy*,

Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World (Penguin, 2011), I have put the book on my to-read list.

2012/01/11 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Settling a dispute, country style: [Buddy Hackett tells a joke](#) on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, as only he can.

(2) How to get smarter in 2012: An article with a catchy title in [Newsweek magazine](#), issue of January 9 & 16, 2012, includes a few standard steps, some surprising methods, and a number of dubious claims about how to make your brain work more efficiently. The suggestions include eating/drinking (turmeric, dark chocolate, yogurt, coffee, lots of water), playing (word games, videogames, a musical instrument), staying active (take tae kwon do, get out of town, write on-line reviews), learning (take classes, listen to lectures, go to a festival, visit a museum), and reflecting (toss your smartphone, go off-line, zone out, sleep a lot). The dubious recommendations include "wipe the smile off your face" and "get news from Al Jazeera."

(3) Washington state cold case linked to Mayflower: Prompted by a story I heard on NPR today, I did a search and found the details of an amazing discovery in connection with a [2-decade-old unsolved murder](#) of a teen-aged girl in Puget Sound. "DNA evidence recovered from the scene was recently sent to Colleen Fitzpatrick of Identifiers International in California. She says the suspect is a descendant of Robert Fuller, who arrived in Salem, Mass., in the 1630s and is related to two Fullers on the Mayflower." In the NPR interview, Fitzpatrick, who processes DNA information in connection with genealogy projects, stated that she does not know whether the information has been helpful to the Seattle police. However, she speculated that, equipped with the person's likely last name along with already available information such as approximate age at the time of the crime and a composite sketch, they should be able to narrow down the number of possible suspects.

2012/01/10 (Tue.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Scrabble's smartphone version catches on: According to [IEEE Spectrum magazine](#), Zynga, the company that took roots with FarmVille on Facebook, is enjoying phenomenal success with another big on-line game, "Words with Friends." The game is loosely based on Scrabble, which has lost its popularity now that families don't have the time to sit around a table to play. Here is an [interesting discussion](#) on how the new game was optimized for greater excitement.

(2) Ford to open Silicon Valley Lab: Emulating some of its rivals, Ford Motor Company plans to open a small [research lab in Palo Alto](#) to take advantage of the engineering expertise available in Silicon Valley. The lab will work on ways to better integrate phones and other electronic devices into cars.

(3) World's potential trouble spots in 2012: According to two articles in *Time* magazine, issue of January 9, the world's two potential trouble spots in 2012 are (surprise!) the Middle East (Iran to Libya, east-west, and Turkey to Yemen, north-south) and the Far East (the countries surrounding North Korea).

a. The Middle East (pp. 26-27): With three regime changes imminent (Syria, Iran, and Yemen) and troubles in virtually all other countries of the region, instability lurks. And this assessment was before Iran started its grandstanding with respect to the Strait of Hormuz. Israel has relied in the recent past on friendly regimes in Egypt and Jordan and a Syrian government which, though hostile on the surface, had come to a quiet understanding with its local enemy.

b. The Far East (p. 28): North Korean generals may not take orders from the 20-something Kim Jong Un, who has no military experience despite being a 4-star general on paper. China's tolerance of the North Korean regime is an embarrassment for a rising power that aspires to a greater role on the world stage. South Korea sent a delegation to attend the ceremonies commemorating Kim Jong II, but it's too early to tell whether the gesture was a one-off or a sign of a thaw.

2012/01/09 (Mon.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) Britain launches million-pound prize to celebrate engineering advances: There is already buzz that this award will become the [Nobel Prize for engineering](#).

(2) Zero-waste Olympics: According to the [Engineering & Technology magazine](#), organizers of the 2012 London Olympic Games have set the ambitious goal of creating no waste at all. All sorts of waste, from water flushed in 80,000 toilets (converted to water for irrigation) to waste generated during construction and eventual decommissioning and (partial) demolition will, be reused and recycled.

(3) Islamic Republic's war on cinema: A few days ago, I offered a post entitled "The Iranian regime's cinema problem," in which I wrote that the international success of Iranian cinema does not sit well with the Islamic regime. Well, the conflict between the regime and cinema artists in Iran has escalated into a full-blown war by the government's [closure of the House of Cinema](#), a trade organization of film industry artists. The government has taken control of this entity, which had threatened to boycott the government-sponsored Fajr Film Festival, on the eve of predicted successes of the Iranian film "A Separation" at the Golden Globes and Academy Awards.

(4) US Navy rescues Iranian fishermen: A US Navy destroyer rescued Iranian fishermen 40 days after their boat was commandeered by Somali pirates in the northern Arabian Sea. [According to NPR](#), "The political tensions ... over transit in and around the Persian Gulf gave way Friday to photos of rescued Iranian fisherman happily wearing American Navy ball caps."

2012/01/08 (Sun.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Persian piano duet: Accompanied by tombak player Omran Foroozesh, pianists Saman Ehteshami and Yalda Samadi play a composition by Faramarz Payvar in [Chahar Mezrab Esfahani](#).

(2) Shopping with smartphones: Cellphones are not only displacing cash and credit cards, but they are turning ordinary stores into showrooms for on-line retailers. Applications have been developed that allow shoppers to scan bar codes in any store and immediately see if the same product is available on-line at a lower cost. Brick-and-mortar merchants are infuriated with this new price-discovery tool that shrinks their sales and gives consumers more power. [From *Time* magazine, issue of January 9, 2012]

(3) Boeing's 787 Dreamliner: With production in full swing at 10 per month, it is becoming more likely that you'll fly on one of these new Boeing planes in 2012. Here are some key features of the new aircraft.

- The structure is 50% composite materials by weight, making the plane lighter and more fuel-efficient.
 - The cabin features better air quality, higher pressure, and 30% larger overhead bins than other aircraft.
 - The longer 8200-mile range makes many more nonstop routes to faraway cities (up to 450) possible.
 - Innovations, such as wings that adjust to counteract turbulence, make the ride far more comfortable.
 - High-tech features, like finely controllable LED lights and electronically dimmable windows, add comfort.
- One thing the new plane cannot promise is more leg room, as the seating plan is controlled by the airlines.

[Info from *Time* magazine, issue of January 9, 2012]

2012/01/07 (Sat.): Here are five items of potential interest.

(1) Quotes of the day: The following two quotes are from actor Alan Alda's *Things I Overheard While Talking to Myself*, a follow-up volume to his best-selling and highly acclaimed memoir. I am listening to an audiobook version of this work, which I will review shortly, but let me share here a couple of gems from the book.

Alan Alda, in a speech given at his daughter's college graduation: "We're giving you a world that runs like clockwork. And the clock it runs like is a cuckoo clock."

"The lure of the simple solution can lead to handing over your life to people who make the trains run on time—but who take away your freedom to go where you want on those trains."

(2) Around the world in 80 buffets: [BIG standup comic](#), John Pinette, talks about how he scares all-you-can-eat buffet managers, and other food experiences.

(3) Caught cheating, hidden-camera prank: [Man trying on a shirt](#) in store gets more than he bargained for.

(4) Art for everyday structures: One of the most successful attempts in turning everyday structures into art objects and tourist attractions is Vienna's Spittelau waste incineration facility [[photo](#), [1.5-minute video](#)].

(5) FIRST things first: "Imagine, if you will, a 70,000-seat arena packed with screaming fans. Cheerleaders and mascots roam through the crowd. On the field, the spectacle of competition is on full display. And at halftime, the Black Eyed Peas take the stage and perform. Now imagine that this is not the Super Bowl, nor any professional sporting event. These are high schoolers, and the athletes on the field are robots." Dean Kamen, writing in the [Huffington Post](#), about his starting the robotics competition known by the acronym FIRST, in order to encourage US youth to pursue careers in STEM fields.

2012/01/06 (Fri.): Here are four items of potential interest.

(1) At'taar on free speech: The following is the opening verse of a poem by the Persian poet At'taar of Neishapur, erroneously attributed to Rumi in some sources. A rough English translation follows the verse.

Gar naboodi dar jahaan emkaan-e goft / Kei tavaanesti gol-e ma'naa shekoft?

If there were no possibility of talking in this world / How could the flower of meaning ever blossom?

(2) Billion-dollar weather disasters in the US: The year 2011 had 12 such disasters, the largest number on record (more, in fact, than the entire 1980s decade, after adjusting for inflation). Of these, 6 were caused by tornados, 2 by flooding, and one each by hurricane, wildfire, blizzard, and draught. [From *Time* magazine, issue of January 9, 2012]

(3) The wonders of medicine: Dr. Mehmet Oz, writing in *Time* magazine (issue of January 9, 2012) reports on a new procedure for treating high blood pressure. The procedure, made available in Europe in 2012 and currently undergoing a pivotal US trial, consists of using radio-frequency energy to zap and disable a few select nerves in the kidneys. The said nerves help regulate the hormones behind the fight-or-flight response and in the process regulate blood pressure too. The role played by these nerves has been known since the 1930s, but until now, the required surgery was invasive and risky. An average reduction by 32/12 (e.g., from 150/90 to 118/78) can be expected from this procedure.

(4) A baby girl born in 2012: Hello. My name is Sophia [currently the most common baby girl name in the US]. I will be born in 2012, and I already know a few things about myself. I can expect to live 81.3 years. If I were a boy, I would have a life expectancy of 76.2 years. My parents can expect to pay \$150K on my in-state tuition at a public college, or \$500K at a private college. If I finish college, I can expect to get married at about age 30 (26, if I don't earn a college degree). I'll likely have 2 babies (the average is 2.09, to be precise, compared with 4.82 for a Nigerian girl). I've got a 23% chance that my marriage will end in divorce, and a 41% chance I'll never marry at all. [From *Time* magazine, issue of January 9, 2012]

2012/01/05 (Thu.): *The Dorothy Parker Audio Collection*, unabridged audiobook (6 CDs) read by Christine Baranski, Cynthia Nixon, Alfre Woodard, and Shirley Booth, Caedmon, 2004. Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) was a celebrated member of New York's literary scene. She published short stories in *The New Yorker* for 30 years. Featuring keen observations on the human condition, her work is characterized by humor, anger, love, and pity. This collection of short stories begins with her O. Henry Award winner, "Big Blonde," and includes her very first, "Such a Pretty Little Picture."

2012/01/04 (Wed.): Here are three items of potential interest.

(1) Zurkhaneh music: Zurkhaneh is a gymnasium where men gather to perform traditional (ritual) exercises dating back to pre-Islamic Iran. A male singer/drummer often provides the music, which is based on Shahnameh poems and characters. So, it was a big surprise for me to see a woman, **Maryam Akhondy**, performing the same kind of music.

(2) Flying robots build a small tower: According to NPR, **a 20-foot tower was built** using only flying robots, with no human involvement. The four robots swooped through the air, somehow avoiding each other, plucked one brick at a time using small plungers, carried each to the appropriate location, and laid the brick down to slowly build a wall.

(3) Virtual sky for indoor offices: According to the *Los Angeles Times*, researchers at Germany's Fraunhofer Institute for Industrial Engineering have designed a luminous ceiling that recreates the fluctuating lighting conditions occurring naturally outdoors on a cloudy day. The luminous ceiling is made of square tiles, each containing 288 light-emitting diodes. A combination of red, blue, green, and white LEDs is used to produce the full light spectrum.

2012/01/03 (Tue.): Here are two items of potential interest.

(1) Persian reed flute music: **Rare film clip** from the 1960s, showing a live performance by Hassan Kassa'i, the great Iranian ney master. [**Kassa'i's Web site**]

(2) Word Play Masters Invitational: WPM Invitational will run its **annual contest**, beginning on January 8, 2012. Interested people can vote for a period of 3 weeks on words submitted throughout 2011. Submissions are ordinary words, in original form or with a one-letter substitution, addition, or deletion, along with a humorous definition. Here are some examples, ending with my own entry in the contest. If you like my word, please consider voting.

Infantile = Flooring for a nursery

Manxiety = Condition resulting from prolonged contact with self-absorbed men

Occupi = 3.14 protesters

Rectilinear = Moving in a direction straight toward the backside

Washington = A city with so much dirty politics that it requires a lot of washing

2012/01/01 (Sun.): Old blog entries for 2005-2011 have been archived and a new Blog & Books page begins today with three items of potential interest.

(1) Pictures of the year for 2011: *Time* magazine's photo editors have chosen **365 stirring and diverse photos**, one per day, to capture the events of last year.

(2) The history of life: This **video clip**, entitled "The Unbroken Thread," is part of the "Symphony of Science" series. It focuses on the wondrous chain of evolutionary changes that led from the first complex molecules to today's humans. Can you imagine that, if there is still life on earth in a million years, some species might look at us the way we look at apes?

(3) The Iranian rial hits a new low: One US dollar has risen in value from 15,200 rials to 16,800 rials over the past two days, a 10% increase, as a result of new sanctions against the country's central bank, signed into law by President Obama. Unfortunately, the Iranian regime benefits from this **exchange-rate hike**, as nearly all of its oil income is in dollars and salaries and many of its other obligations are in rials. Oil prices are expected to



rise, which generates an even greater benefit to the clerical regime. Sanctions can at best create temporary hardship for the Iranian regime, because they will find a way to circumvent them. There are too many eager buyers and sellers of commodities that will pick up the slack. Iran may have to pay more to buy things indirectly or charge less than the market rate for oil, but the increase in the market price of oil, resulting from restrictions, will more than make up for the added costs.

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