



Photographs by IRAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

RESEARCHERS from UC Riverside are working to map hazardous materials in the Salton Sea's sediment.

Can need for lithium cure what ails the Salton Sea?

Studying the complexity of mud on the ocean floor is a life's work for Timothy Lyons, so when the tall and lean biogeochemist asks you to join an expedition in search of chemical mysteries buried deep beneath the waves, be prepared to get wet and dirty.

On a recent foray onto California's largest and most troubled lake, Lyons rode a Zodiac skiff with a 15-horsepower engine across the Salton Sea against a backdrop of desolate mountains, dunes and miles of shoreline bristling with the bones of thousands of dead fish and birds.

As he approached the center of the lake with a clutch of passengers including two members of his laboratory at UC Riverside, Lyons said, "Cut the engine.

Extracting the useful metal from geothermal brine could benefit the environment, advocates say

By LOUIS SAHAGÚN
REPORTING FROM THE SALTON SEA



PROFESSOR Tim Lyons and doctoral student Caroline Hung prepare a core to collect sediment.

Let's grab some mud." Moments later, Caroline Hung, 24, and Charles Diamond, 36, dropped a coring device over the side, then hauled up a sample of sediment that was gray on the bottom, dark brown on top, and as gooey as peanut butter.

"The big problem at the Salton Sea is intermingled with that organic brown layer on top—and to be honest, it's scary," said Lyons, 63. "It's loaded with pesticides and heavy metals—molybdenum, cadmium and selenium—that linger in greatest concentrations in deeper water."

"That should worry people, because the Salton Sea is shrinking and exposing more and more of this stuff to scouring winds that carry

[See Salton Sea, A10]

STEPHEN SONDHEIM, 1930 - 2021



KIRBY WIGGLESWORTH Associated Press

RAISING THE BAR
Stephen Sondheim infused emotional complexity into shows like "Company" and "Sweeney Todd."

Acclaimed lyricist, composer elevated Broadway musicals

By DENNIS McLELLAN

Stephen Sondheim, the award-winning composer-lyricist who took the Broadway musical to a higher level of emotional complexity than his predecessors in shows such as "Company," "Follies" and "Sweeney Todd," has died at his home in Roxbury, Conn.

Sondheim's death was confirmed by Broadway publicist Rick Miramonte, president of DKC/O&M, but a cause of death has not been disclosed. He was 91.

In a Broadway career launched in 1957 at age 27 as the lyricist for the classic "West Side Story," Sondheim went on to write the lyrics for the 1959 hit "Gypsy" before writing both the lyrics and music for the 1962 hit "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," winner of the Tony Award for best musical.

But it was as the composer-lyricist of what former New York Times theater critic Frank Rich described in 2000 as "a new, jarring, adult kind of Broadway musical" that Sondheim became "the greatest and perhaps best-known artist in the American musical theater."

As Tony-winning actor Hugh Jackman reflected on Twitter, "Every so often someone comes along that fundamentally shifts an entire art form." [See Sondheim, A7]

This year, Black Friday isn't the usual shopping experience

"We're honestly pretty stunned to see such a minimal turnout," one early arriver says.

By LAURENCE D'ARMIENTO,
ANGEL CARRERAS,
JAIMIE DING,
SALMA LOUM
AND ANUMITA KAUR

Ashton Caudillo headed out with his father early Friday morning to the Westfield Santa Anita in Arcadia looking for a hard-to-find PlayStation 5 well before the mall's 7 a.m. opening. What they found surprised them: only a handful of other shoppers.

The 29-year-old's father, Lawrence, has a distinct memory of Black Fridays past, when hordes of people made the experience less than pleasant, so he wasn't complaining.

"Black Friday used to be like Disneyland, waiting in line 45 minutes to spend money. I'd rather shoot myself in the foot than do that. So this, this is nice," the elder Caudillo said with a smile.

"I love when there's not a lot of people around." This year the most consumption-oriented nation on Earth, Black Friday has long been viewed as the ultimate looking glass, reflecting all that is good, bad and so-so about the world's largest economy.

This year the message seems to be: Black Friday is not what it was. A series of factors came together to

[See Shoppers, A3]



CAROLYN COLE Los Angeles Times

SOME malls had relatively light foot traffic Friday—but not the Citadel Outlets, which drew long lines.

Survivor found in Siberian mine

The rescue is called "a miracle." The presumed death toll now stands at 51. **WORLD, A5**

Overhaul of oil leasing program

Interior Department proposals disappoint environmentalists and industry. **NATION, A5**



RINO H. W. CHIU Associated Press

REGGIE Jackson, right, defends in Clippers' win.

New variant of virus prompts limits on travel

Markets are rattled by the emergence of Omicron, and flights from southern Africa face restrictions.

By RAF CASERT
AND CALVIN WOODWARD

BRUSSELS — Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the world raced Friday to contain a new coronavirus variant potentially more dangerous than the one that has fueled relentless waves of infection on nearly every continent.

A World Health Organization panel named the variant Omicron and classified it as a highly transmissible virus of concern, the same category that includes the predominant Delta variant, which is still driving higher cases of sickness and death in Europe and parts of the United States.

"It seems to spread rapidly," President Biden said of the new variant, only a day after celebrating the re-

sumption of Thanksgiving gatherings for millions of American families and the sense that normal life was coming back at least for the vaccinated. In announcing new travel restrictions, he told reporters, "I've decided that we're going to be cautious."

Omicron's actual risks are not understood. But early evidence suggests it carries an increased risk of reinfection compared with other highly transmissible variants, the WHO said. That means people who contracted COVID-19 and recovered could be subject to catching it again. It could take weeks to know if current vaccines are less effective against it.

In response to the variant's discovery in southern [See Omicron, A4]

What is Omicron?

The variant, which is linked to a recent spike in COVID-19 infections, has been detected in South Africa, Hong Kong and Botswana. **A2**

Suffering Hondurans face a monumental choice at the polls

By JARED OLSON

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — Three years before he was elected Honduras' president in 2013, Juan Orlando Hernandez impressed U.S. State Department insiders as a

charming, relatively young, law-and-order candidate capable of stabilizing one of the world's most violent countries.

But Hernandez has left the nation in ruins as tens of thousands of Hondurans flee for better lives in the U.S. and elsewhere. The president's years in power have been marked by human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, stolen public money, poverty and complexity in drug trafficking at the highest levels of government. Sunday's elections are arguably the most consequential in decades to restoring order in this troubled Central American country.

"Juan Orlando is leaving us with a broken country," said Lenn Láinez, a congressman for the opposition Libre party. "A country in debt, with serious narcocorruption, with high levels of criminality and one of the most unequal populations in Latin America."

The ruling National Party's dependence on drug money and elite military units has led Hondurans to call their land a "narco-dictatorship." This atmosphere is part of a wider trend of backsliding in democracy across the region, from Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua to Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala. It has spurred mass emigration in recent years.

Honduras has been in crisis since a 2009 military coup that Washington did not move to stop. That led to the

[See Honduras, A4]

OPINION

OP-ED

This Hanukkah, revisiting a memory that may not exist

MY HANUKKAH menorah is broken. My wife tells me there's a piece missing, a branch that is supposed to go from the Star of David in the center of the candelabra to a slot on the back behind the shamash — the candle used to light all the others. It's been broken for 50 years or so, by my estimation, since I can't recall it ever looking any different than it does now. Still, I don't want to burn the house down, so we placed it on a shelf where I can still see it and swapped in a slick new menorah that looks like a piece of modern art: brushed chrome, smooth lines. It's important to create new traditions.

Which is funny because the truth is that I'm not much of a Jew; my faith is more in metaphor than God. I believe in being a witness to history, in many of the teachings of the Talmud, in the practice of asking questions, of the sacred being open for discussion and interpretation. But love and trauma have caused me to believe in an afterlife that no holy book makes space for, and that what I hold dear, at the end, is for me. So, when I light my menorah, I want to recall the rededication of Jerusalem, it is to light the way to my own past.

This time of year, I often find myself beset by a memory that I'm not sure is real. It's about a book that I keep on my desk: "A Book of Jewish Thoughts," edited by Joseph Herman Hertz. The hardcover is blue moire, the spine gilt-lettered in navy, the title embossed in an austere roman font. It has been in my family for 40 years.

In my memory, I am 7 years old and my grandfather, Poppa Dave, is in his basement in Walla Walla, Wash., smoking a cigar and reading the book. It was one of three books that were always stacked on the side table next to his chair — one blue, one burnt orange, one black — in descending order of size. I sat on his lap. It was late December, too cold to be outside. I asked him what his book was about, and he said, "Do you know what it means to be Jewish?"

He flipped through the book and told me how, when he was my age, he'd escaped the pogroms — massacres of Jews in the Russian Empire — in Bar, Ukraine, his family stuffed in sacks of potatoes, his infant brother dying in his arms. How they'd come to live in Walla Walla. How his last name — Barer — which is my middle name — forever marked them as being from that place, no matter where they went. And

then he closed the book. "Can you imagine leaving your home behind, tomorrow, forever?" I could not. I cannot.

Though, now, I worry I am conflating experiences. Didn't we usually go to Walla Walla in the summer? Maybe he was reading one of the other books, maybe it was the burnt orange one — "Holy Mountain: Two Paths to One God" — which is beside me now. Yes. It was late July, not December, too hot to smoke outside. Afterward, he showed me the framed family tree on the wall, the cigar smoke growing

When I was 7 my grandfather asked me if I knew what it meant to be Jewish. I'm still seeking the answers.

By Tod Goldberg



MENORAHS owned by the writer, along with books on the Jewish faith inherited from his grandfather.

for my own metaphysical struggle. I began to read the Torah, the Talmud, much of the Midrash (early Jewish commentary or interpretation of biblical texts), my shelves filled with theology and eschatology, and I am no closer to answering my grandfather's questions. Which is the essence of any spiritual journey: knowing that there are things you will never know.

Tomorrow, when Hanukkah begins, I will light this new menorah, will stand in its flickering shadow, reciting a prayer I may not believe, but content in the unknowing and in remembering a memory that may not exist; free, in any case, to believe.

TOD GOLDBERG is the author most recently of "The Low Residency: Gangster Stories." He directs the Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts at UC Riverside. @todgoldberg

Are Gen Zers past partisanship?

Only 10% of college students think the GOP is moving in the right direction. Just 18% say that's true of the Democrats.

By Jeremi Suri and Samuel J. Abrams

THE PERCEPTION of a liberal, monolithic student body on college campuses needs to change. Critics of higher education often rail against the left-leaning prejudices of students, but the fact of the matter is that the political hearts and minds of undergraduates are not overwhelmingly aligned with either major political party.

While students largely reject the Republican Party, they are not heavily supportive of the Democrats either. Instead, most students are independents and untethered to either major party, suggesting that a huge opportunity exists for whichever party is wise enough to pay attention to the growing number of Gen Zers in college today.

A new survey of more than 1,500 college students nationwide conducted for us by College Pulse reveals a deep disconnect between students and both major parties. Most college students do not see themselves as Democrats or Republicans. Some 34% of students surveyed identified as strong or weak Democrats, and 18% claim to be strong or weak Republicans, leaving the majority, 54%, identifying as independents — those who say they still lean toward a party, or something else entirely. There are notably more Democrats at private schools (41%) than at public institutions (38%), but Democrats are far from dominant on most campuses today.

Moreover, the collegiate figures show that students are no more Democratic than the nation as a whole. Nationally, about 23% of registered voters identify as Democrats, about 31% (29%) identify as Republicans, and the remainder (34%) are independents. Although college students are less likely to be Republican and more likely to be centrist, they are not necessarily more leftist than the rest of the nation.

Some fields of study do have higher proportions of Democrats, because

they may draw students who are more focused on politics and activism than others. But once again, the data reveal far more balance than what many believe. Just 38% of those who major in the humanities, arts and various area studies — the departments that tend to be the most progressive and activist-oriented — are Democrats, while 9% are Republican. The majority of students in these fields are somewhere in the middle. Students in the performing and visual arts lean more Democratic, but nearly 40% don't identify with either major party.

Moving beyond the humanities, 29% of students majoring in business or an allied field such as accounting or management identify as Democrats, 7% as Republicans, and the majority (52%) are in the middle. Engineers and computer scientists look very similar: 29% are Democrats, 13% are Republicans, and the majority (58%) are centrists. As for those studying economics and the social sciences, just 27% are Democrats and 15% are Republicans. Again, most (58%) students in these fields are in the middle. Across the campus population, students are far less captive to any party than many observers contend.

The Republican Party has clearly alienated many college students. Still, most of these students have not migrated to the Democratic Party. In fact, most students dislike both parties: Only 10% think that the Republican

Party is moving in the right direction, and just 18% say that's true of the Democrats.

College and university students appear generally pessimistic about both parties. Some 60% said they are very or somewhat pessimistic about the future of the Republican Party; 4% felt that way about the Democratic Party. The 2020 American National Election Study found that 47% of Gen Zers said there was no party that represented their views reasonably well and they were less likely to consider traditional politics as part of their identity. Our research and polling show that this generation wants a viable, moderate party has done enough to connect with them.

As Gen Zers mature, they will become a large part of the electorate and thus critically important for the parties as the Silent Generation (people over 80) and the boomers die or age out of the political world. Moderate pragmatism and greater efforts at connecting with them now might be a better strategy with these voters than rigid ideologies, which they are already rejecting.

JEREMI SURI is a professor of public affairs and history at the University of Texas at Austin. SAMUEL J. ABRAMS is a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College and a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

UCLA STUDENTS vote in the Sept. 14 gubernatorial recall election.



LETTERS



AHMAUD ARBERY'S mother is comforted after the trial of the men who killed her son.

'A long time coming'

Re Ahmaud Arbery's killers found guilty of murder, Nov. 24

I WROTE LETTERS to this newspaper because I want to give a Black person's perspective on social issues to a portion of your readership that might not otherwise understand that viewpoint. The visceral reaction to the guilty verdicts against Ahmaud Arbery's killers is almost palpable.

In this country, we never take for granted what might seem like a foregone conclusion. Our history here has more often than not seen obvious injustices and so many perpetrators of violence against our people being set free that when a verdict goes our way, it's an immense relief and huge release of pent-up emotions.

We understand that these victories aren't just for the case in question, but rather they represent the thousands of cases before and the assured future cases of unjust treatment toward a persecuted race of people.

ROD LAWRENCE, Los Angeles

What was on trial in the Arbery case was not the three defendants, but rather a centuries-old unwritten law that if a white man says a Black man or a Native American man is "bad," it is OK for them to administer their own justice, which can include death.

This is the same unwritten law that allowed slavery to exist and Indigenous land to be stolen. Sadly, the unwritten law was used too by Kyle Rittenhouse's defense lawyers when they were allowed to call his victims bad people — the reason they were bad, apparently, was because they were at a protest defending Black lives.

This unwritten law was used by the defendants in the Arbery case. May God bless the jurors for standing up for what is right and true.

As Arbery's father said as he was being led out of the courtroom, "It's been a long time coming."

HECTOR HERNANDEZ, San Clemente

Bad sidewalks and priorities

Re "L.A.'s sidewalks of shame," editorial, June 23

In California, landowners are responsible for maintaining sidewalks. The city of Los Angeles should revert to the state law and cite property owners to compel them to make repairs within a reasonable time, after which the city should contract to have the work done and place a lien on the offending property.

As I write this, to my astonishment the city is replacing serviceable sidewalks in front of my property. Why? There are so many more urgent sidewalk repairs needed nearby. In some parts of Los Feliz, curbs have completely disappeared, almost turning urban rights-of-way into country lanes. Priorities are a jumble at City Hall.

RICHARD STANLEY, Los Feliz

The problems with sidewalks in Los Angeles commenced before the 45 years ago mentioned in this article. Decades before the city took responsibility for sidewalk repair, it did the same for tree maintenance.

Long ago, someone at the city decided to plant eucalyptus and ficus trees on parkways. In Playa del Rey, there isn't a sidewalk that isn't broken and heaved at least a foot where eucalyptus trees are planted.

Many of my neighbors and I have paid dearly to remove the eucalyptus

trees in front of our property along with having to pay to replace both the curb and sidewalk. We even had to pay the city for the permit allowing us to do this work.

Unfortunately, not all property owners take this kind of initiative.

JOANN DURAY, Playa del Rey

If the city does not deal with the trees that cause so much of the sidewalk damage, this problem will never go away. City arbitrators seem to value appearances too much.

Ficus trees, which are beautiful and provide great shade, are the worst choice for sidewalks.

FELIPE HERNANDEZ, Glendale

Modern life will be our doom

Re "Tax carbon to save sequoias," letters, Nov. 24

It's not an "infinitesimal percentage of the world's inhabitants" ruining the Earth for everyone else, i.e., the oil and coal industries. It's "everyone else" — that is, everyone living the modern life.

What would happen if we shut down the oil and coal industries tomorrow? There would be no or much less lighting, heating, air conditioning, cooking, transportation or manufacturing.

We must wean ourselves from fossil fuels, but scapegoating the entities and people who made the Industrial Revolution and our current lives possible accomplishes nothing and is beside the point.

As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

ALLAN BAKER, Morongo Valley

Drawing truth

Re "Gargantua, updated," Opinion, Nov. 22

Years ago, the first thing I did when I opened my paper was look at the Paul Conrad cartoon and marvel at the occasionally brutal but always sophisticated political thrust.

I got that same feeling when I saw Steve Brodner's "Gargantua, updated." With a nod to not only Honoré Daumier but also Thomas Nast and Paul Conrad, I salute Mr. Brodner.

ROGER WALTON, North Hills

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