

OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.



Glenda Burgeson
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Honor heroes by following their lead

Ceremonies across the country, including in St. Cloud, are commemorating the 20th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center.

It is a time to honor the memories of lives lost and reflect on the lessons of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Those of us who were spared personal tragedy have our own poignant memories of that terrible day. Most recall the beautiful, clear blue skies in New York City before the planes struck the towers. Here in Central Minnesota, it was a beautiful fall day as well, much like the fair weather we have enjoyed this week, when the sunlight softens with a shimmer of an early autumn glow.

Dealing with shock and disbelief, I remember finding comfort in the commonplace. I took a walk and listened to the sounds of nature, and I felt such relief when I heard the birds singing. Something so normal in the midst of such sorrow and confusion felt profound.

I remember as well hearing an announcement that U.S. airspace was shut down, and international flights to the U.S. had been diverted to Canada. Ah yes, our friends to the north, I remember thinking with a flood of relief and gratitude.

When tragedy strikes, we often are reminded of the comforting words Fred Rogers said his mother used to tell him: "Look for the helpers."

The people of Canada were our helpers that awful day, and I remain forever grateful.

Every now and then a post circulates on social media that features the iconic photo of the twin towers, with black smoke billowing from them. The image is tagged with the caption "Never forget."

Whenever I see that post, I'm confused. Of course we won't forget. That should be obvious. So what is the point? Who designed it and for what purpose? It feels sinister. It feels divisive and designed to trigger rage.

And yet the events of 9/11 united us as Americans. That unity was demonstrated most dramatically when the members of Congress stood together on the Capitol steps and sang "God Bless America."

That gesture feels far removed from the divisions of our present-day civic life, but it is worth remembering.

There were hundreds of helpers and heroes that day, especially the first responders and the passengers and crew

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EDITORIAL ST. CLOUD TIMES

Lack of transparency breeds distrust

Minnesota State Police officers approach a crowd of protesters May 30 in Minneapolis. The Minnesota State Patrol purged e-mails and text messages immediately after their response to protests in the wake of George Floyd's death last summer, according to court testimony in a lawsuit that alleges the State Patrol targeted journalists during the unrest. JULIO CORTEZ/AP FILE

Without record retention penalties, law enforcement operates without accountability

In June 2020, the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of journalists who were targeted and attacked by police while performing their work in Minneapolis, covering protests after the killing of George Floyd.

The lawsuit was filed against the city of Minneapolis, the Minnesota State Patrol and Minneapolis police.

According to court records of testimony in the case released earlier this month was this troubling fact: The Minnesota State Patrol promptly purged emails and text messages immediately after protests last year.

Seems a little strange, doesn't it?

The lawsuit alleges police tear-gassed, pepper-sprayed, shot in the face with rubber bullets, arrested without cause and threatened journalists at gunpoint, all after the journalists identified themselves and were clearly engaged in their reporting duties.

When journalists are prevented from doing their job at the hands of government agencies, the First Amendment right of a free press is in jeopardy.

Under accusations that members of the State Patrol physically attacked journalists during the unrest following Floyd's murder, purging communications seems a counterintuitive act. Those communications, after all, could presumably have served to demonstrate that members of the patrol acted in accordance with their duties.

If they did not act within the scope of their jobs, getting rid of the communications will hamper efforts to hold them to account.

During a July 28 hearing, State Patrol Maj. Joseph Dwyer testified that he and a "vast majority of the agency" deleted messages after the protests and riots.

Minnesota's Data Practices Act regulates "the collection, creation, storage, maintenance, dissemination and access to government data in government entities. It establishes a presumption that government data are public and are accessible by the public for both inspection and copying unless there is federal law, a state statute, or a temporary classification of data that provides that certain data are not public."

That law's presumption of public access is rooted in

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- Lisa Schwarz, News Director
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the very simplest of concepts: Government works on behalf of the people, so its records belong to the people. Those records must be created, retained and made available for the public's use unless there is a very compelling reason to withhold, under Minnesota law.

Why, then, did the patrol's records disappear?

State Patrol spokesman Bruce Gordon told the Star Tribune that officers follow all requirements for retaining data, but that he couldn't comment further due to the pending lawsuit.

Lawyers for the ACLU argued to a judge that "the purge was neither accidental, automated, nor routine. The purge did not happen because of a file destruction or retention policy. No one reviewed the purged communications before they were deleted to determine whether the materials were relevant to this litigation."

Under Minnesota law, law enforcement text messages and emails are considered records of official activity, according to Don Gemberling, spokesman for the nonprofit Minnesota Coalition on Government Information. Such messages can only legally be deleted under a schedule approved by a state records retention panel, he said.

During a hearing on the lawsuit, however, a patrol major testified that it is "standard practice" for such messages to be deleted after a major event. He also

See **TRANSPARENCY**, Page 13A

Mental health days could help Minnesota kids – and adults – cope



Linda M. Larson
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Minnesota should follow the template of Illinois' mental health days for students and expand the program to include adults.

When I began my career, "mental health days" were ridiculed as "being lazy for no good reason" days. A person had to be physically sick, not-able-to-leave-the-bathroom sick, to justify missing a work day.

Thankfully, that has changed over time. Now (hopefully) people are staying home when they're ill. And we're more aware that psychological symptoms deserve our help and compassion.

Those symptoms are escalating. Children at the beginning of the pandemic had an increase in hospital emer-

gencies dealing with mental health — 24% for ages 5 to 11 and 31% for ages 12 to 17. This was only for the months of March through May.

Illinois students will be able to take five mental health days off from school. The days will be excused absences and won't need a doctor's note.

Other states allowing student mental health days are Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Nevada, Oregon and Virginia.

The Illinois mental health days begin in January when school districts are required to have a plan in place.

A mental health day is not a free day, for example when the fictional Ferris Bueller skipped school.

On the contrary, when students have a second mental health absence, a school counselor will contact the student and encourage them to talk to a trusted adult.

The counselor can also determine if students need more professional help.

The pandemic has amplified kids' worries. An NPR report shows that young children are worried about their parents and themselves getting sick. Teens are worried about social and school issues, such as face-to-face learning after being online.

Children of all ages are expected to need more help.

One piece that is missing from this excellent policy is parents and caregivers may not have the same access to days off. A student may need a day off, but a parent might have to decide the student has to go to school if the parent's job doesn't have enough paid time off.

Adults could use their own mental health days as well. For adults, we could say that a mental health day requires a follow-up from a counselor. Some workplaces have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) already in place.

The Illinois bill doesn't address the lack of access to psychological care. Ac-

ording to USA Facts, a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, 30% of American adults had anxiety or depression symptoms on May 24. Yet 37% of the population live in areas with a shortage of mental health help. They estimate a need of 6398 professionals currently. In Minnesota, 31.58% live in an area with a shortage.

Scholarships for those interested in becoming counselors or social workers or expanded loan forgiveness programs for those who work in underserved areas might help this shortage.

This pandemic has made life tougher for most of us, physically and mentally. Let's be compassionate to ourselves and financially support our mental health.

This is the opinion of Times Writers Group member Linda Larson, a St. Joseph resident. She is the author of the national award-winning "Grow It. Eat It," and "A Year In My Garden." Her column is published the second Sunday of the month.

Afghanistan withdrawal was attempt to save face



Gerry Feld
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Amazingly it's been 20 years since the devastating attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, on America. Unlike the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 by the Japanese, this time, we had no country to retaliate against and no government willing to take responsibility. The attack of Sept. 11 was purely an act of hate, fueled by the evil rhetoric and racist sentiment of Osama bin Laden.

Retaliating against a nation that attacked you is something everyone understands. But attempting to fight a hateful ideology that has spread throughout the world is a task no nation on earth will ever be equipped to handle.

No doubt every American wanted someone to pay for the deaths of 3,000 innocent people, but in the same, we all knew this enemy had no borders, had no capitol city we could occupy to reflect a victory and the masterminds lived in caves, or wherever they found safe refuge.

As in any war, America poured its heart and resources into defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan, while searching for those responsible for the attacks. We found and killed bin Laden, and many of his top aides, while capturing several high-value targets that gave us credible intelligence.

Nevertheless, as in any war, the human cost is always the hardest to accept. The war in Afghanistan cost the lives of 2,461 American service people, while 20,000 more were wounded. Additionally 1,200 NATO troops from 40 countries lost their lives, while nearly 60,000 members of the Afghan Security Force were killed. We may never know for sure how many Taliban were killed, however it's estimated to be around 51,000 from many different countries. The Associated Press reports the overall cost of America's 20-year war in Afghanistan will top \$2.26 trillion.

In Afghanistan as well as Vietnam, it was impossible to defeat the mindset of its citizenry. They'll back whoever appears to be winning while seeing the government in Kabul as corrupt and uncaring about their daily existence. Much like in Vietnam, the enemy you're fight-

ing during the day might be the the same people selling you food and gifts by night, or at times, acting as your guides.

During the Vietnam war, the average age of a soldier was 19. In Afghanistan, the average age of the 2.77 million people that served in 5.4 million deployments was 33.4 years of age. The increase in age was primarily due to the large amount of National Guard troops being called up for deployments. Nearly 225,000 combat personnel deployed at least three times.

There will always be people questioning whether or not we could have defeated the Taliban. For a possible answer to that question, you need look no further than a 2011 Newsweek interview with Mujahid Rahma, a Taliban fighter. He told Newsweek reporter Sami Yousafazi that he had been fighting against America for eight years. He stated, "Your watch batteries will run down, and its hands will stop. But our time in the struggle will never end. We will win."

Regrettably, the path President Biden chose to end the war was ill-advised, flawed in every respect and anything but honorable. By July 23, 2021, Biden realized things were falling apart in Afghanistan, he understood he was now in charge of a complete debacle. It became clear that he needed help to bail out his plan before everything collapsed around him. In a phone call to Afghan President Ghani, Biden said, "I need not tell you perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan, I believe, is that things are not going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban. And there is a need whether it is true or not, there is a need to project a different picture."

So the ending to America's long involvement in Afghanistan became a matter of how the final outcome was perceived by the world, regardless the outcome, so President Biden could save face.

America's pain after 9-11 never went away, but now the shameful disgraceful actions by the Biden Administration to save Americans in need will haunt us forever.

— *This is the opinion of Gerry Feld, whose column is published the second Sunday of the month. He writes about issues from a conservative perspective and is a published novelist.*



Bridging the gap for senior, technology accessibility



Your Turn
Deb Taylor
Guest columnist

The "digital divide" has become an increasingly critical conversation in today's ever-shifting tech landscape, especially in wake of the past year and half's isolating pandemic. The term refers to the gap between those that have access to modern communications technology and those who do not or have restricted access. This tech includes telephones, computers, personal devices and internet connectivity. If our time quarantined has taught us anything, it's that the ability to effectively navigate digital technology has become a key component of fully participating in society. If we do not make efforts to ensure everyone has access and training, we effectively shut them out from society. In the case of seniors in our community, this inflates an already worrisome trend of isolation and loneliness.

Debunking myths about seniors and tech

There seems to be a perception that when it comes to older adults, they're simply uninterested or unwilling to learn and adopt the newer technologies so many of the younger population takes for granted.

According to a study by AARP, over the last five years the share of U.S. seniors using technology has increased to 75%. Despite this growth only 25% of seniors report feeling "very confident" in using technology, while 73% say they need help when setting up or using a new electronic device.

These findings suggest that the problem doesn't lie in an attitude of unwillingness to adapt, but rather the lack of resources that offer senior-focused tech services that combine not only accessibility, affordability, and support, but also training.

Barriers to Entry

Many older adults simply aren't aware these solutions are available to them, let alone how to access or install them effectively. Simply put, all the technological advancements empowering independence for older adults are useless without knowing how to implement them and being given the proper education.

Other significant barriers to access for lower-income seniors are low-speed internet or outdated equipment, or lack of equipment altogether. Rather than perpetuating myths about generational differences, we should be working to bridge the gap by building technical literacy for those who didn't grow up using the tech so many are naturally accustomed too.

Firsthand experience

At Senior Community Services, a west-metro nonprofit, we've seen this

"Many seniors we work have a good understanding of their technology; there are just those one or two little knowledge holes they are trying to get assistance with."

Mary, a tech support volunteer in Wright County

need firsthand. We know how important it is for all of us to age in place in our own homes and communities while being able to participate meaningfully, and technology has become an undeniably crucial component of allowing us to do that. "Many seniors we work have a good understanding of their technology; there are just those one or two little knowledge holes they are trying to get assistance with," says Mary, a tech support volunteer in Wright County, who works seniors one on one in our technology support program.

We saw the pandemic compound issues of isolation and loneliness to extreme levels. Suddenly technology became a necessity for staying connected to loved ones and community when unable to do so physically. And without access to and knowledge of how to use these tech solutions to connect communities and families, that isolation increased exponentially.

Bridging the gap

With greater investment in creating accessibility and tailored digital training, technology has the potential to become a powerful tool for reducing loneliness among older adults, empowering us to connect, create, and contribute online as we age. In addition, much of the tech taken for granted by younger generations can significantly improve the ability to age in place as long as possible.

We can work together to bridge the "digital divide" by building community resources that meet people where they are and then provides them with the right level of training to take advantage of the tools keeping us all meaningfully connected.

The evolving conversation around accessibility barriers and technical literacy will be explored in more detail by industry experts at the 6th annual Reimagine Aging Conference "Bridging the Digital Divide: Empowering Senior Independence Using Technology." The conference, hosted by Senior Community Services, will be 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 6 in Hopkins, MN, featuring panels and presentations lead by experts from Google, Medica, Cyber Seniors, T-Mobile, PCs For People, OmCare, and more. In an effort to increase accessibility, we'll have both in-person and virtual attendance options. For event details, visit seniorcommunity.org/rac

Deb Taylor is CEO of Senior Community Services, is a Minnetonka-based nonprofit that helps older adults and caregivers navigate aging to maintain independence and quality of life.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unvaccinated men should know of dysfunction risk

As reported by the highly respected medical site WebMd, "COVID-19 increases the risk of developing erectile dysfunction (ED) by nearly six times, according to data from the first study to investigate the association between ED and COVID-19 in young men in a real-life setting."

Please pass this information along to men who have so far ignored the overwhelming consensus of scientific opinion by refusing to get vaccinated and/or wear a mask in public settings.

Chuck Sher
Petaluma, California

Voting rights depend on ending the filibuster

In 2006, 192 House Republicans vot-

ed to renew the Voting Rights Act. Now, we can't get a single Republican senator to come out and unequivocally support protecting the freedom to vote for the American people.

That tells you everything you need to know about our hopes for passing voting rights legislation without abolishing the filibuster.

It's time for President Biden to recognize this reality and use the power of his office to demand the Senate abolish the filibuster. Supporting voting rights legislation alone is simply not enough.

Please, President Biden, we need a strategy. Put the freedom to vote of the American people ahead of any reservations you have about abolishing the filibuster. The stakes are too high to lack your leadership.

Annie Simones
St. Cloud

Transparency

Continued from Page 12A

testified that individual officers decide when to delete such messages.

"What they've done raises a whole lot of questions," Gemberling said.

If the patrol followed the agency's and the state's data retention rules — and it looks as if a court will referee that debate — then stronger, more specific rules are needed and lawmakers need to create them. And tough penalties for violation, up to and including loss of a peace officer's license, need to be imposed for violations.

Members of law enforcement do hard jobs that subject them to scrutiny. They do those jobs on behalf of the people. Transparency is how the people come to trust that they're doing those jobs as fairly, conservatively and as well as possible.

Lack of transparency — professional insularity — breeds suspicion even where there is no wrongdoing. And it creates a divide between the public employees and the very public those employees serve.

That divide has proven deadly to both officers and civilians across America in the recent past. Why would we not do everything possible to close it?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Derek Larson
Guest columnist

Economic signals are troubling, but life here is still wildly good

Groceries, gas, clothing — indeed most consumer goods — have risen in price in recent months and in some cases simply aren't available at all. The combined impacts of a global economy struggling under the impacts of COVID-19, supply-chain issues driving shortages of some goods and rising labor costs in the U.S. are visible all around us. Car prices, according to Business Insider, are "completely and utterly out of control" with wholesale prices up 40% from last year. Treasury bond yields are up and headlines warning of the specter of inflation are common.

Despite these signs it's important to recognize that Americans today enjoy lifestyles that would have been unreachable historically for the vast majority of the population. Many of the goods we buy today remain incredibly inexpensive compared to similar items purchased a generation or two ago. According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American household spent nearly 80% of its income on "necessities" in 1901 but only 50% a century later.

Typical expenditures on just two items, food and clothing, accounted for half of household spending in 1900 but just 20% in 2000. The USDA reports that last year Americans spend on average just 8.6% of their disposable income on food, reflecting a downward trend that has halved such spending since the 1960s. Despite the current grocery-store sticker shock we are shelling out a far smaller proportion of our household income on food than our grandparents did.

The story with gasoline is similar. Despite a national average price of \$3.35 at the pump in August we are paying less for a gallon of gas, when adjusted for inflation, than our parents did in the late 1970s. Prices have in fact trended slowly downward since 1978, with relatively brief bumps after the Persian Gulf War and 9/11 attacks, while our cars have become more fuel efficient.

The chunk of household income spent on clothing, another vital consumer staple, has decreased by 2/3 since 1950 and fell below 3% a decade ago. The offshoring of the textile and garment industries made that possible, though of course at the cost of a great many American jobs. Today most of us own far more items of clothing than our elders did, but they come at a much smaller cost, almost to the point of being disposable.

Televisions offer an example of both rapid technological improvement and

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OUR VIEW



The St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra is working on new ways to connect with its audience virtually. KRIS A. FREMO

Find a way to support what matters

The news came Friday that three Central Minnesota arts organizations will be requiring audiences to not only mask up, but prove their vaccination status or provide a recent negative COVID-19 test (within 72 hours of the event).

Certainly, many patrons of the Paramount Center for the Arts, the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University Fine Arts Series and the St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra will welcome the move as a gesture of care for the people who support their programs by buying tickets.

Other patrons, to be sure, will not welcome it. Some will stand on their conviction that such requirements infringe on their freedoms. Other would-be members of the audience will just decide it's a hassle they can't be bothered by — they'll go back when things are "normal."

We encourage those in the latter group to think again. Arts organizations, entertainment businesses, concert venues and all of those amenities that are vital to our quality of life but optional during a lockdown need us right now. Or they might not be there when things get "back to normal."

They were among the entities that, like bars and restaurants, lost an entire season of revenue and support. Now that they are reopened, even with restrictions, the shows must go on if they are to remain fixtures on the Central Minnesota scene for the future.

Please consider taking the extra steps requested by these local arts organizations as well as any made by the orchards, Christmas tree farms, zoos, breweries, bars, restaurants, gyms and studios we all enjoy.

Please consider putting on the mask or getting tested or vaccinated so you can see a show, go out for dinner and a movie, hear the concert, take the kids to the pumpkin patch.

The hard-core deniers will not comply and thus can't help support these local treasures right now. The

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true believers already have taken the necessary steps. So it's the people in the middle of this debate who need to hear this call: Get the shot, or get the tests, and then get back out there, mask in place when recommended by the business or venue and with a healthy distance from one another.

A hassle? Maybe. But worth it so that the lifeblood of these organizations — your financial support — can continue to flow.

Which bring us to one more option for people who won't be vaxxed, tested or masked but who want to support small businesses and civic and arts groups: donations in lieu of your ticket purchases or the spending you would do in "normal" times probably wouldn't be unwelcome.

That strategy keeps your convictions in place, respects the organization's efforts to support safety, and keeps them around for all of us when things go "back to normal."

— *This is the opinion of the St. Cloud Times editorial board, which consists of News Director Lisa Schwarz and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.*

The debate about booster shots reflects science at work



Barbara Banaian
Guest columnist

When the first COVID-19 shots came out there were shouts of joy from many corners of the world. The booster shot, however, is not getting the same hurrahs.

COVID-19 booster shots using the Pfizer vaccine (but neither Moderna nor Johnson and Johnson just yet) are being offered to some segments of society. There are restrictions, including age, health and initial vaccines. The booster is believed to be effective, but questions remain, such as which groups should get the shot, and in what order?

Some are wondering why a booster shot is necessary so soon after the first shot. Isn't that too fast for immunity to

wane? Should vaccines last at least one year? Why do only some vaccines need booster shots? Will we need a booster for this booster?

Vaccines teach our systems to recognize certain pathogens, or disease-causing agents. We are realizing that immunity doesn't always last forever. Immune cells have a memory that can get fuzzy over time. So, you might have to get the same (or similar) shot again, maybe weeks or years later.

We do this with other vaccines. How much protection you get from one shot varies as well as how long your immune system remembers how to fight that pathogen. When a virus mutates, the immune system can fail to recognize that this pathogen is a close relative to the one you got the vaccine for, and not fight it. So the more one mutates, the more likely it is you need a booster. Influenza mutates a lot so an annual shot makes sense. Measles and mumps, on the other hand, don't mutate much at

Vaccines teach our systems to recognize certain pathogens, or disease-causing agents. We are realizing that immunity doesn't always last forever. Immune cells have a memory that can get fuzzy over time. So, you might have to get the same (or similar) shot again, maybe weeks or years later.

all.

Alas, COVID-19 is good at mutating, as we have learned to our chagrin this summer. Therefore, the plan is to offer the booster shot to everyone in the U.S. as a potent reminder to the immune system.

Meanwhile, some are asking if the world would be better off if everyone got one shot, rather than people in some countries getting three shots? Should we give booster shots before the world has had at least one dose? How can we stop the variants without worldwide

vaccinations?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has asked the developed nations to refrain from offering booster shots through the end of this year. This would make them available for poorer, undeveloped countries. According to the Associated Press, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "We do not want to see widespread use of boosters for healthy people who are fully vaccinated."

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Gerry Feld
Times Writers Group
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Merry grim Christmas and happy dystopian new year

Well, another year has about passed us by, and we are in that magical season where we will be wishing each other a merry Christmas and a happy new year. No doubt we send out these greetings with all sincerity, although in many cases we are sure it may not be a great holiday season nor a joyous new year for everyone. And as we end 2021 with increased inflation, everyone's pocketbook will be suffering.

Dashing over the river and through the woods to grandma's house this holiday season will cost us a lot more. Gas prices are soaring, and the Biden administration is still investigating whether or not they will shut down more pipelines. Your car to make that holiday trip may be getting up in age, but you need to keep it running, if the parts are available from China. Of course you could retire the old Pontiac and buy a new car, but most new car lots are empty, because computer chips from China are keeping auto makers from building new models.

So maybe staying home to eat and sending Grandma a gift card from J.C. Penney might just be the best idea. But when you went grocery shopping, you discovered how many of your favorite foods were not available, because they are sitting on ships surrounded by sharks off the West Coast. So after altering your menu, you come up with a meal plan the family would enjoy. But the higher cost of those foods means you will not be able to pay your daughter's college tuition next month.

So mom decides you will all go out to eat at your favorite restaurant. Not surprising, every restaurant you call for a reservation is closed, because they can not get enough employees to work. Luckily after dozens of calls, you do find a restaurant that will take your reservation. Regrettably after you arrive, you are told you will not be allowed in because you have no proof you have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

Feeling dejected, you leave the restaurant to discover the Pontiac has been stolen. You immediately call the police department, to be told by the dispatcher that their office has too few officers to investigate the theft today, and they will get at it first thing tomorrow.

So now we are back to the car issue again. Due to the increased demand

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EDITORIAL ST. CLOUD TIMES



The sun shines on the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul, Wednesday, May 15, 2019. STEVE KARNOWSKI, AP

Minnesota needs to look at tax policy

With a \$7.7 billion budget surplus, state needs to make adjustments to leave more money in our wallets

Minnesota officials are projecting a \$7.7 billion surplus in the state budget.

Where did all that extra money come from? Much of the projected surplus was thanks to higher-than-expected tax revenues. Only \$364 million, according to reporting from the Associated Press, was due to lower-than-expected state spending.

That means Minnesota collected more tax money than it needs to operate.

Some of the projected surplus is already spoken for in a contribution to fully fund the state's \$2.7 billion budget reserve.

A surplus is always a good thing. And a full rainy day fund is even better. But a multi-billion dollar overshoot of what we thought we needed to run the state means it's time to reexamine the policies that led here to ensure we're leaving as much money as possible where it belongs - at home with the people who earned it.

A measured, long-view approach is called for. While a large surplus can be used to defend slash-and-burn tax-cutting acts in an elec-

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tion season, it's not wise.

Remember that in February, Minnesota's budget forecast anticipating a \$1.3 billion deficit due to the pandemic had grown to a projected \$1.6 billion surplus. In 10 months, that \$1.6 billion grew by more than five-fold. So anyone who claims to know for sure what the state's budget will look like over the remaining 19 months of the budget period is not to be trusted. The accuracy of the forecast will depend on the continuing pandemic, economic outlook and whatever else gets thrown at us in the coming year.

However, huge surpluses during hard times signal that scrutiny is called for.

A surplus is always a good thing. And a full rainy day fund is even better. But a multi-billion dollar overshoot of what we thought we needed to run the state means it's time to reexamine the policies that led here to ensure we're leaving as much money as possible where it belongs - at home with the people who earned it. A measured, long-view approach is called for. While a large surplus can be used to defend slash-and-burn tax-cutting acts in an election season, it's not wise.

Where possible, using that money to fully fund mandates already on the books (we're looking at you, special education cross-subsidies) is step one.

Step two should be in finding out which levers of the state machine can be adjusted to reduce the projected monetary stockpile while not jeopardizing state operations.

Step three is making those adjustments to leave more money in

See **SURPLUS**, Page 15A

Christmas memories help us honor all the places we're from



Glenda Burgeson
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

"Where are you from?" It's a question I have heard all my life.

Growing up, I never lived anywhere long enough to call it home. Whenever someone asks me where I'm from — as often happens in Minnesota once someone hears my drawl — I'm at a loss to answer.

To say I'm not from anywhere — or I'm from everywhere, for that matter — doesn't satisfy the questioner. Still, no one wants to hear me recite the names of towns in six states I have inhabited, so I usually offer a generic reply, "Texas and Oklahoma," because 10 towns in those two states comprise the majority of my childhood homes.

And yet, each year, as I unpack my

Christmas trove of ornaments, decorations and music, I am reminded of where I've been in Christmases past, and who I am. These trinkets tell my story.

Years ago, I adopted a custom my mother-in-law practiced. An avid world traveler, she often purchased Christmas ornaments on her trips. The ornaments and CDs I have collected over the years reflect not only my travels but also the places I have lived.

And so, with each item I unwrap to hang on the tree or arrange around my home, I unpack a memory.

As I write this column, I am listening to a Christmas CD by Blake Shelton. He grew up in Ada, Oklahoma, the county seat of Pontotoc County. As a child and young teen, I lived in a small town nearby, and I remember Ada as a bustling commercial and cultural hub.

It's where we went shopping, to see a movie or dine out. It's where I first nurtured my love for music, beginning with

piano lessons from Mrs. Crabtree. It's where I saw the first of many performances of Handel's "Messiah."

I have since sung this beloved oratorio at a community sing-along in Oklahoma City, attended a performance here in St. Cloud at The Paramount, and more recently at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis.

I have several nutcracker ornaments. They remind me of the many times I have attended a performance of that enchanting ballet, in Chicago, at the University of Oklahoma, again at The Paramount and in downtown Minneapolis.

I associate my Lenox ornaments with memories of Christmases spent over a 45-year span with my in-laws in New Jersey, where the Lenox company is based.

My husband and I have a chili pepper ornament and a string of chili pepper lights that represent our love for the American Southwest and its spicy cuisine.

A silly Santa ornament, fashioned from a starfish, represents my years in Southern California before moving to Minnesota.

A collection of caroling figurines adorns my piano and reminds me of the many wonderful holiday concerts I have attended, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in Oklahoma, California, and in St. Cloud.

I never learned to ice skate, but as the mom of a figure skater, I have collected figure skater ornaments through the years. They remind me of the many St. Cloud Figure Skating ice shows and competitions we have attended and worked as volunteers.

Like many a sentimental mom, I still treasure the handmade ornaments my daughter made growing up. She now has a little one of her own and will soon have her own keepsakes from her daughter.

My Christmas decorations tell me

See **BURGESON**, Page 15A



Linda M. Larson
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Great River libraries are a tool in the effort to end hunger

We have too many hungry people in Minnesota — 149,060 too many. That's the number of residents in Minnesota who experience food scarcity, according to the Census's Household Pulse Survey for week 39 of this year. Food scarcity means "either sometimes or often not enough to eat in the last seven days."

At first glance, that number may seem low because it's about 4.1 percent of Minnesota's population. Yet would we be outraged if every person in St. Cloud was hungry?

The 2019 population estimates of St. Cloud, Sartell, Sauk Rapids, St. Augusta and St. Joseph added together equals 112,829. We'd have to find a few more cities to make up the extra 36,000. These numbers illustrate that hunger in Minnesota is a pressing problem.

Thankfully, two organizations are stepping up to help feed families and children. Every Meal has teamed up with the Great River Regional Library system now through Jan. 3. According to Eric Blotkamp, senior circulation assistant with GRRL, in an e-mail exchange states, "GRRL Executive Director Karen Pundsack was contacted by Every Meal's Kebron Mamo, and GRRL thought this would be a great program."

A nonprofit based in Roseville, Minnesota, Every Meal donates food bags to our local libraries as part of their Winter Meal Program.

Every Meal's website states that they taste their food. This is a good thing because free food doesn't always taste good. A senior showed me free frozen senior meals from a different organization. I'm sure they are healthy, but the limp fish entree looked unappealing. The mac and cheese was soggy. The corn compartment looked like someone opened a can of corn, dumped corn with lots of liquid into the meal tray, and froze it. Just because food is free doesn't mean it should be unappetizing.

Perhaps that's why Every Meal sorts their shelf-stable food bags according to preferences. The bags have a color-coded system for every palate — blue for East African, orange for Latinx, purple for southeast Asian, yellow for ready-to-eat and green for variety. Every Meal emphasizes healthy food, everything from coconut milk to beans to granola.

The food is free. During regular library hours, a person can walk into a local GRRL library branch and pick up a bag. There is no need for identification or any other contact information. The Every Meal truck delivers the bags on Fridays, and libraries that aren't open get their bags through the library's books and media delivery system.

So far, the system-wide program has been popular. Waite Park Library Services Coordinator Michelle Goebel estimates they'll give out 60 bags each week. For St. Cloud Library, the original order was 96 bags of food, which were quickly distributed in one week, so they're trying to double their order to 192 bags.

Currently, this program will end on Jan. 3, but Blotkamp states, "If Every Meal wanted to partner with us again, we would certainly do it."

Let's hope the GRRL and Every Meal pilot program's success will lead to an extension of the program. Because one hungry person is one too many.

— *This is the opinion of Linda Larson, a St. Joseph resident. She is the author of "Grow It. Eat It," which won a national award, and "A Year In My Garden." Her column is published the second Sunday of the month. She welcomes comments at notes4linda@hotmail.com.*



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Build Back Better, a brief synopsis

To the editor:
The now \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better deal's provisions have been kicked around since this summer. The current version of the bill that passed last week includes child care/preschool, \$400 billion; home care, \$150 billion; child tax and earned income tax credits, \$200 billion; clean energy and climate investments, \$555 billion; affordable health care credits, including in uncovered states, \$130 billion; Medicare hearing, \$35 billion; housing, \$150 billion; higher education and workforce, \$40 billion; equity and other investments, \$90 billion, totaling \$1.75 trillion in expenses (over 10 years).

The "zero-dollar cost" bill details how it plans to pay for these measures. A 15% corporate minimum tax at \$325 billion; stock buybacks tax \$at 125 billion; corporate international reform to stop rewarding companies that ship jobs and profits overseas, \$350 billion; AGI surcharge on the top 0.02%, \$230 billion; close Medicare tax loophole for the wealthy, \$250 billion; limit busi-

ness losses for the wealthy, \$170 billion; IRS investments to close the tax gap, \$400 billion; prescription drugs: repeal rebate rule, \$145 billion. In all, totaling \$1.995 trillion in revenue.

Some of these provisions are essentially direct handouts, e.g. the increased Medicare benefits. This money could be used productively as a means of private capital but will instead contribute to a higher federal debt and decline in our GDP. However, other programs will contribute to an increase in labor productivity, e.g. the childcare program, which will also have positive externalities in the coming years as these children mature into our society. The public infrastructure plans contribute to government spending and increase the debt, while decreasing the GDP (because of the private capital loss), but increased infrastructure can increase private market productivity. The remaining programs will contribute mostly to the debt, and therefore a loss of private capital, which can lead to lower wages for workers.

Dylan Christensen, St. Cloud State University student

Having COVID-19 is not a badge of shame

Greta Van Susteren
Guest Columnist

The email I received from the White House Correspondents' Association last week began like so many other letters emailed to business employees and school communities:

"Dear Colleagues, We're writing to let you know that a member of Monday's in-town pool received a positive test result for COVID-19 this morning, following mild symptoms that began on Wednesday. Because this individual developed symptoms within 48 hours of being in the briefing room Monday, we are sending this advisory. ... We expect the White House Medical Unit to reach out to anyone who is deemed by that office to be a close contact."

Who? No name.
And for the next several hours, of course, everyone who would have been anywhere near the White House press operation was speculating about who the COVID-19 positive person was.

Letters like this are part of the reason we are failing in our quest to vanquish COVID-19. We have made it a badge of shame, suspicion and superstition, followed by a Big Brother-sounding official visitation. Unfortunately, human beings have a long history of stigmatizing disease, which has persisted even as science and medicine have progressed. Not long ago, cancer patients were routinely shunned; "healthy" people thought they could catch it. The same with AIDS patients.

We are doing something very similar now. I have a news flash: COVID-19 is not a moral test; it's spread by a miserable airborne virus. Getting COVID-19 is not cheating on a spouse; it is not stealing from an employer. It is nothing to be ashamed of. It is simply being exposed

to an omnipresent, highly contagious virus and becoming infected by it. If you interview a lot of medical experts, as I do, the general expectation is that most of us will eventually contract COVID-19.

Yes, it happens more frequently to the unvaccinated — and they remain the most likely to become seriously ill, be hospitalized and even die — but as we can see from the data in highly vaccinated states like Vermont, the vaccinated can still get sick.

Yet when notices are sent out, with multiple identifying details, all except the person's name, the implicit message is one of secrecy and shame. Revealing a positive COVID-19 test sounds very much like confessing to having contracted a sexually transmitted disease. And by doing this, we make people more reluctant to both be tested and come forward. Moreover, there are consequences for our COVID-half-reveal protocols: They aren't helping us to contain the virus.

Not identifying the person who has tested positive could enhance the risk of further spread. Yes, the infected person may be interviewed for contact tracing, but how many of us can accurately remember all the people we came into contact with over two, three or even seven days? But a co-worker might well remember chatting in a hallway with you or me. Rather than becoming an asymptomatic spreader, that co-worker could get tested and take extra precautions. Discussing COVID-19, without judgment, could even help Americans who have been reluctant to get vaccinated. It would lower the temperature around the disease.

Greta Van Susteren is the host of "Full Court Press." She is also a former television news anchor for CNN, Fox News and MSNBC.

Surplus

Continued from Page 14A

the wallets of Minnesotans.

Then, if there's still bandwidth for more reductions, lawmakers can start to talk about business tax relief.

Of course, evaluation of state spending should be (and is) a constant part of the legislature's fiscal oversight. As needs change, so should spending. Where waste is found, it should be eradicated.

Constituents should not expect perfection in this rebalancing, however.

The recent past have been overflowing with proof that predicting the future with precision is impossible. And, just like Minnesota families and businesses, it makes sense for the state to have a reasonable financial cushion against uncertainty.

Still, if we're able to be above water to the tune of more than \$7 billion in one of the most tumultuous times of the century, Minnesota needs to look at ways to keep more would-be tax money in the hands of its residents.

— *This is the opinion of the St. Cloud Times Editorial Board, which includes News Director Lisa Schwarz and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.*

Feld

Continued from Page 14A

for good used vehicles, values have increased astronomically, but your insurance company is not taking that into consideration when they reimburse you for the loss of the Pontiac.

If all that was not bad enough, you are still feeling guilty about the lack of presents under the Christmas tree. The problem was, no matter what stores you went to, all the popular toys you wanted are still sitting on unloaded ships, aside of the ships containing your Christmas dinner.

Feeling a bit cold that your entire Christmas holiday has been a bust, you walk over to the thermostat to increase the temperature in your house. Suddenly you remember, with the price increase of natural gas last month, you could not make the copay for little Tommie's orthodontics check-up.

Walking over to the 52-inch plasma TV and leather recliner, remembrances of past plentiful Christmases, you turn on the news. There on the south lawn of the White House is President Biden, wishing you and all Americans a very splendid Christmas, as he reminds you his Build Back Better program he wants Congress to pass will cost you absolutely nothing.

"Nothing?" you yell as you watch the president and first lady climb aboard Marine One for a short trip to Andrews Air Force Base, where they will take Air Force One for a flight to Hawaii to relax.

Before you throw your shoe at the TV you change channels. There is big Ed, of Big Ed's Used Car Emporium talking about the recent clean used cars that just arrived on his lot, and are ready to go. As the camera scans the lot, there sits the Pontiac.

May YOUR holidays work out better!

— *This is the opinion of Gerry Feld, whose column is published the second Sunday of the month. He writes about issues from a conservative perspective and is a published novelist.*

Burgeson

Continued from Page 14A

where I'm from. They decorate my memories of places I have been and the special people I have had the opportunity to know across this country.

I have lived in St. Cloud far longer than I have lived anywhere. I can't say what the Christmas future holds for me. But for the present, St. Cloud is the place I call home. It's where I'm from, drawl and all.

— *This is the opinion of Times Writers Group member Glenda Burgeson, a St. Cloud resident. Her column is published the second Sunday of the month.*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor should be the author's original work and credit other sources when appropriate. They should be typewritten, exclusive to this newspaper and no more than 300 words. Include your name, address and daytime phone number for verification. Letters are edited for length, clarity and grammar.

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YOUR TURN GUIDELINES

Columns should focus on timely local, national or international issues of concern to people in our community. State your opinion and use facts and well-reasoned arguments to support it. Be typewritten and about 600 words. Include a paragraph at the end explaining who you are. A photograph of the writer also is requested to accompany the article. Include your name, address and daytime phone number for verification. Some Your Turns may be edited for length, clarity and accuracy.

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OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.



Your Turn
Linda Larson
Guest columnist

Systems gap slows compostable plastic progress

When I turned my face, I could see a tiny square of light. On the floor, the holiday glitter glimmered. After I washed my face and swept the floor, the glitter went into the garbage and down the drain. But then what? Made from plastic, glitter is forever.

Everyday people, like myself, want to live an environmentally responsible life, and we're willing to make small sacrifices.

During lockdown, we requested no plastic utensils with our take-out orders, but we got them anyway. One of my favorite meals from a restaurant comes in a plastic foam container, which doesn't disintegrate. When my willpower is low, I still order the food.

I remove the plastic labels on yogurt containers and I recycle the containers, but the plastic labels end up in the garbage.

Yes, I re-use, but no, these kinds of plastic can't be recycled. I don't understand why manufacturers continue to create new plastic that isn't recyclable.

Sure, it's cheap in the short term, but expensive for our environment, and we humans have no choice but to live here now.

Yet I have some good news.

Granulated sugar and flour sell in sturdy paper bags. Oatmeal is in a stiff paper canister. One of my favorite teas is packaged in a paper tea bag, which I throw in my compost bin when I'm done. I think we could use similar paper technologies for other items.

Years ago, I bought Sun Chips in a compostable bag, which did break down in my compost pile. Because the bag was too noisy, the company quit using it in 2011, but I say it's time to bring it back.

On NPR's "Science Friday" Dec. 31 episode, Ira Flatow interviewed professor of chemistry Silvia Vignolini, who has invented biodegradable glitter made from plants. Hopefully, in the future, crafters can use glitter without the guilt.

This summer I ate at the café at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. I discarded my compostable plastic fork, salad container and beverage cup in a special bin intended for compost. According to World Centric's website, the items can break down in 180 days. These items need to be composted in a "commercial composting system," according to the package.

When I researched commercial composting in Minnesota, I found that yard waste composting is different from commercial composting. In Cen-

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EDITORIAL ST. CLOUD TIMES



Signs highlight the mask policy during the first full day of school Sept. 9, 2021, at Tech High School in St. Cloud.
DAVE SCHWARZ/DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

Count to 10, omicron isn't done with us yet

This week, the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul reinstated indoor mask mandates.

Businesses everywhere are running short-staffed. The worker shortage not only isn't getting better, it's deepening as the workforce makes new decisions about how to and to whom to sell its product — skills, knowledge and effort — and for what price. And then there are the short-term staffing crises as illness and infection-control isolation periods take still more workers off the job temporarily.

We are nowhere near to emerging from the pandemic's shadow, at least not in the new-year-fresh-start paradigm we all hoped to see.

It's frustrating on a personal, family, community and global level, because if the pandemic is about two years old, pandemic fatigue has been building for at least 18 of those 24 months. That's about when store-aisle confrontations over masks starting going viral, followed by an explosion of violent incidents on airplanes, followed by a rise in I-want-to-speak-to-the-manager behavior documented coast to coast.

We're not only saddened by the pandemic, angered by others' responses to it and frustrated by it, we're collectively worn out with it, even if good days outnumber bad ones in any individual life. We're all over having to cope with the pandemic.

The Editorial Board

Our View represents the Times Editorial Board, whose members seek to provide opinion, information and leadership that promote public discussion and build a better community.

BOARD MEMBERS

- Lisa Schwarz, News Director
- Anna Haecherl, Content Coach

If only that mattered.

Omicron's surge is clearly going to shift the landscape for all of us again in the short term (see: Twin Cities' mask mandates). Businesses locally and regionally are reducing hours to manage staff fatigue and shortages. Schools are adjusting their calendars, too. Everyone organizing an event on the social or business calendar is reassessing daily whether the show will go on.

We are simply not in control of the biological imp that is causing all of the chaos. Being "so over it" doesn't change that.

But we can be in control of getting through this next phase as a community. It takes some old-fashioned attention to what our grandmas would call good manners.

Is there a sign on the store window say masks are encouraged? Put one on or exercise your freedom to choose another

store — much like visiting someone's home, it's their place, their rules. But has the management declined to post that sign? Then let the bare-faced go about their business without your opinion, or choose another store. Did it take longer than usual to get your dinner order? Take a look around before escalating — there's a big difference between a server who's hustling hard to keep up and one who's leaning in a corner texting a friend.

The chaos of the past two years isn't done with us yet. There are more frustrations, changes of plans and debates about what to do about it ahead in the coming weeks. How we handle those frustrations will make the situation either better ... or worse.

When in doubt, we can choose to act with grace. We can decide to not make the day worse. We can choose to support businesses and organizations whose values align with our own and we can choose to simply avoid those that don't — without centering those opinions loudly in every encounter.

We can, and should, do our best to keep our cool, make good decisions, show patience in the face of frustrations and assume everyone is doing their best until proven otherwise.

Count to 10. It's not over yet.
This is the opinion of the St. Cloud Times Editorial Board, which consists of News Director Lisa Schwarz and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.

Saving a life lasts forever: Donate your blood in 2022



Your Turn
Glenda Burgeson
Guest columnist

This is the time of year when we dig out last year's resolutions, cross out 2021 at the top of the list and rename it 2022.

Most resolutions aim for self improvement, and they are on a continuous loop year to year. They range from modest goals with minor tweaks to high hopes for a personality overhaul. You know the drill: Eat more fiber. Eat less (fill in the blank: carbs, sugar, red meat). Save money. More household organization; less clutter. More exercise; less sloth. Et cetera.

All well and good. But this year, I have noticed some modest proposals to tone down expectations for our annual per-

sonal performance review. The idea is that, what with COVID fatigue, the challenges of political extremism and ill will, the Great Resignation, airline passenger wars and general exhaustion, many of us lack the will to cope with the rigors of actual resolutions.

One suggestion is to replace the concept of resolution — which, let's face it, can feel demanding — with intention, thereby providing some wiggle room.

Some alarmists may view this idea as coddling and a worrisome sign of our softening national character. Even so, an intention to improve indicates a sense of optimism that is sorely needed with the new year.

I've also seen a variety of suggested new year's resolutions that can be summarized as Be Better. These include practicing compassion, being more tolerant of others and listening more. Several, like the St. Cloud Times' Dec. 26 editorial, have called for more kindness,

plain and simple.

For those who feel kindness was in short supply in 2021, here is a gentle reminder of how kindness works. Recently, as I approached an exit at a local business, a gentleman who was several steps ahead of me let go of the exit door. As I reached out to catch the door from slamming shut, he spun around, grabbed the door, held it open for me and apologized for letting it go. I laughed and thanked him for his kindness.

And there you have it: a pleasant, positive interaction in a public space between two strangers. This simple exercise demonstrated regard for someone else and left each of us with a feeling of goodwill.

There are many ways to practice kindness, and they all add value to our public life, but there is one act of kindness that can save a life. That is to donate blood.

Blood donations are at their lowest

levels in a decade and are urgently needed. Donations typically drop during the winter, but officials say the pandemic has made matters worse, and staffing shortages are an added complication.

I have known about the life-saving potential of blood donations from an early age. My father's blood type was rare, and I have a vivid childhood memory of a sheriff's deputy showing up unannounced at my dad's workplace in Paducah, Texas, and escorting him to a neighboring county to make a life-saving donation.

This impressed upon me the value of my dad's blood, but he was furious with the way the matter was handled. He understood the gravity of the situation, and he was a lifelong donor. "All they had to do was ask," he said.

As a young adult, I followed my dad's

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OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.



Barbara Banaian
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Removing masks will be unique to each of us

COVID-19 cases have peaked and are declining, and our hospitals are less full than before. Late last year we were told that disposable masks were better than cloth, and many of us dutifully bought an extra carton of them. Now the mask mandates are ending.

Should we put our masks away? I say, not yet.

In the two years since masking was advised, I have not gotten sick even once. I attribute this to Covid-19 vaccinations, masks and social distancing. And it seems like we are going a second year without a significant amount of seasonal flu. (The CDC says the last two years have had less flu than the previous four years.)

So, I'm not in a hurry to give up my masks. In the winter, they are sort of like a scarf. And we mask to keep others safe, too, especially if someone has a cough. Respect and concern for others is so important, especially in these uncertain times.

There is nothing new about masks. In fact, facial masks (for health) go back at least 2,000 years, when Pliny the Elder, a Roman philosopher (23 to 79 AD), used animal skins as protection when working with the (toxic) mineral cinnabar. In China, Marco Polo (1254 to 1324 A.D.) observed servants wearing facial scarves when preparing food. As time unfolded and industrialization increased in the 20th century, anti-smog masks became important, especially in England.

Meanwhile, we are hearing that COVID-19 is reaching an endemic state. Endemic, the opposite of pandemic, means that it is becoming more predictable (and stable). But endemic does not mean harmless. Diseases like tuberculosis and malaria are considered endemic, and dangerous. And even if COVID-19 reaches a stable state, new variants may still emerge and still spread globally.

Since it is unlikely to disappear completely, it will probably become endemic, not unlike the seasonal flu which is predictable in its yearly surge of sickness in the winter.

We still do not completely understand this virus. It is hard to predict if omicron will be the last major variant. But the 1918 flu pandemic ended this way, with a variant that was less virulent but more infectious than the others. And, we are getting close to the time in which most pandemics end: two to three years.

Regardless of COVID-19's trajectory, we can always keep a mask with us. They are still protective of COVID-19 and other viruses, particularly in

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EDITORIAL ST. CLOUD TIMES



Leading lawmakers announced Friday how they will dispense with what remains of Minnesota's \$1.2 billion projected budget surplus, a framework that suggests the election-year legislative session is moving quickly toward conclusion. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Repeat of 'enormous' state surplus must not happen

Minnesota's state government bank accounts are riding high on a \$9.25 billion budget surplus, Minnesota Management and Budget announced Monday.

That's a number so big it needs some perspective. So here is some.

Minnesota's "extra" money for the two-year budget cycle could:

- Fund the state of South Dakota for about a year and half.
- Buy the New York Yankees. And the Miami Marlins. ... and the Oakland A's.
- Purchase a little more than one-third of Delta Airlines.
- Match Sartell's 2020 median household income for every household in the city for almost 18 years.

Less than three months ago, we wrote that a significantly smaller \$7.7 billion projected state budget surplus was cause to re-examine the state's ground rules.

"... a multi-billion dollar overshoot of what we thought we needed to run the state means it's time to reexamine the policies that led here to ensure we're leaving as much money as possible where it belongs - at home with the people who earned it," we said then.

Now, in less than 12 weeks, the budget surplus estimate has \$1.5 billion - a figure the Associated Press (an entity not known for hyperbole) called "enormous."

The majority of the state's surplus is directly attributable to higher-than-expected tax revenues. Less than 4% of the windfall comes from reduced state spending. That means we are sending vastly more money to St. Paul than it takes to run the government at currently

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- **Anna Haecherl**, Content Coach

expected levels for the next two years.

Responsibly, some of the overage is destined to fully fund the \$2.7 billion budget reserve. Like a family with a savings account, it makes sense to have some money stashed.

As is to be expected, there are interests lined up to propose giving it back in the form of election-year tax cuts. There are interests lined up to propose shored-up spending on the state's huge list of obligations, including education and critical deferred infrastructure maintenance.

And there are experts who say the uncertain state of the economy and world events call for cautious husbanding of the money.

Simple answers - "give it all back!" or "spend it on things we need!" or "hang on to most of it in case things get worse!" - are always the most comfortable answers. They're easy to understand and they're emotionally satisfying.

But uncomfortably complex answers are often the best solutions to complex issues. The answer lies in "some of all of the above."

Clearly our lawmakers will have to be

willing and able to think critically about what's best for Minnesota, not just their party or their re-election bids.

And then they'll have to be willing to make deals with people they don't normally agree with.

But while deciding how divvy up \$9.25 billion is a big job, the most important one is to begin to take a hard look at how our state revenue - taxes collected from people and businesses - became so out of step with budget needs, then take steps to prevent this from happening again.

Clearly, no one can expect to nail the balance of revenue and budget every year. Economic forces, systemic shocks like pandemics and wars, changes in other funding sources all make that impossible. But can Minnesota do better than take billions more than it needs from its people? We think so. Legislators faced with budget shortfalls do hard work and make hard decisions to resolve the imbalance. The same work is called for when a budget surplus reaches the level of "enormous."

Are they up to the task? We believe they are. Most - not all, but most - public servants try to do what they believe is right, most of the time.

They'll stand an even better chance if their constituents encourage complex thinking and accept complex solutions to complex issues. Fixing the system is the top priority.

This is the opinion of the St. Cloud Times editorial board, which includes Editor Lisa Schwarz and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.

Benedictines live an example of how to govern through diversity



Patrick Henry
Times Writers Group
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Religion - Christianity in particular - matters to me. I've studied it, taught it, written about it, puzzled over it, believed it, doubted it, and, with varying degrees of intensity and success, lived it.

Because Christianity matters to me, a recent story got my attention, and not in a happy fashion.

Vladimir Putin justifies his war in many ways. One rationale has received scant attention in the press but has been noticed by historians of religion: Putin's desire for the Orthodox Church everywhere to be, both in spirit and in fact, the Russian Orthodox Church.

Dynamics of interchurch relations in the Orthodox world are hard to keep

straight, even by those who know the names and pedigrees of the players. The interplay of ethnic, linguistic and political differences is extraordinarily complicated.

The relation of the church in Ukraine to the church in Russia is particularly fraught. It was to Kyiv in the 9th century that Saints Cyril and Methodius brought the Christian faith (and invented Cyrillic script). Over centuries, however, power shifted to Moscow, and during the 20th century Ukraine's church was subsumed by the Russian.

On Jan. 5, 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, known as "of Constantinople" though his mailing address is Istanbul, and who, unlike the Catholic pope, is first among equals, officially granted to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine the status of "autocephaly," which means "its own head."

He welcomed it into the family of 14 Orthodox churches around the world, and said this: "The pious Ukrainian peo-

ple have awaited this blessed day for seven entire centuries. And, behold, the fullness of time has come for them, too, just as so many Orthodox peoples beforehand, to enjoy the sacred gift of emancipation, independence and self-governance, becoming free from every external reliance and intervention, which have not always been nurturing and respectful of their own identity."

Metropolitan Epiphanius, the new church's new leader, said soon afterwards, "We must move away from those Russian imperial traditions that have been imposed on us for a long time."

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow did not take kindly to Bartholomew's initiative in undoing seven hundred years of Russian "intervention." Kirill has refrained from saying anything critical of Putin's invasion. He is complicit in the Russian president's mission to re-establish what is put forth as a model of "Christian empire."

I suspect Putin's motive is cynical,

but his vision resonates with the kind of nostalgia that fuels Christian nationalism not only abroad but also in America.

The marriage of state and church has been, through the centuries, a disaster for both citizens and believers. "Heresies" burned at the stake. "Witches" drowned. Ghettos. The list goes on, and the story is grim.

For nearly all my eight decades I'd not have thought to worry about a resumption of Christian nationalism in the United States.

I considered the separation of church and state a settled matter. But in recent years the claim that the Founders were Christians who intended a state where the Bible is the rule of law, with the Constitution subservient to it, has become mainstream, voiced openly by people with political authority and/or sizeable religious followings.

When it comes to dreaming of Chris-

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