

Century Marks

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Values clarification: For several years after 30-year-old Ann Nelson died on 9/11 in the World Trade Center, her laptop computer remained untouched back home in North Dakota. Her parents weren't computer literate, for one thing, and it was just too painful for them to deal with the laptop. But eventually her mother learned to operate the computer and found a file labeled "Top 100," which contained a list of Ann's goals. Among them: be a good friend, keep in touch with the people I love and that love me, make a quilt, never be ashamed of who I am, and appreciate money but don't worship it (*New York Times*, May 17).

So shall the wicked perish! The Reformed congregation in which Martin Tel grew up would typically sing from the *Psalter Hymnal* during morning worship and turn to lively gospel songs for evening hymn sings. When congregants were given an opportunity to suggest a favorite hymn in these evening services, his father would sometimes ask for something from the psalter, such as Psalm 68 ("God shall arise and by his might / Put all his enemies to flight"). Later in life Tel discovered that his parents, who grew up in the Netherlands, had memorized at least one verse from each of the 150 psalms as part of their grade-school education. These were the songs they sang in church while Nazi authorities kept surveillance over the

congregation. The psalms sustained Dutch Reformed congregations during the Nazi occupation, and the Nazis never suspected that the words subverted human authorities (*Theology Today*, April).

Just what Dr. Huxtable ordered: Entertainer Bill Cosby is on an 18-city tour to encourage African Americans to look for answers to their problems from within their own communities rather than from outside. “I have no problem with Jesus or God,” he said recently to an audience in Washington, D.C. “I have a problem with people sitting there and saying that Jesus and God will find the way. I have a problem with Christian men who won’t dress up and go down and confront the drug dealers.” To parents who ignore their children he said, “I’m calling you out, and I’m holding you accountable” (*Washington Post*, May 17).

Turning tide? In a review of Kevin Phillips’s *American Theocracy*, Jeff Madrick argues that “there are encouraging signs that Americans are turning against right-wing religious priorities.” For instance, two-thirds of Americans surveyed didn’t think the government should have intervened in the Terry Schiavo case. Further, “there has been a backlash against pressures to teach intelligent design in the schools,” and “a majority of Americans still favor providing individuals with choice with regard to abortion, notwithstanding the views of the evangelical churches.” Finally, “a Pew Research Center survey shows that in March, only 54 percent of white evangelicals approved of President Bush’s performance compared to 72 percent in early 2005” (*New York Review of Books*, June 8).

Simple things: In a baccalaureate address at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, Bill Moyers told the Jewish tale about Shalom Aleichem, a Job-like figure who experienced every misfortune imaginable, but nevertheless went about his life returning good for evil. His reputation for goodness was so hailed in heaven that when he arrived there all the angels and the Lord were present to greet him. Shalom was told that whatever he might wish for would be granted him. All he wanted was that every day in heaven begin with a hot buttered roll. The angels and even the Lord wept at the beauty of the simple thing he was asking for (www.hamilton.edu).

Bitter pill: Some members of the graduating class at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, booed and others walked out when the senior speaker, Ben Kessler, said it is selfish for women to use the pill for contraception. One classmate said afterward that Kessler was the selfish one for having forgotten he was not the only one graduating. The director of women’s studies wondered why Kessler didn’t

add that male forms of contraception are selfish. Kessler, who later issued a written apology, is going to Rome to study for the priesthood (insidehighered.com, May 24).

The world in Kansas: Some residents of Smith Center, Kansas, are upset that representatives of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi have bought land outside their town to build a World Capital of Peace. The maharishi's followers, who practice transcendental meditation, plan to build a retreat and training center. "Some people call them a cult, and some little old ladies are locking their doors," says a local farmer. "You're in the Bible Belt, and this is a Hindu-based religion. People don't like that idea." But not all the townspeople oppose the new venture. A local banker says: "Sometimes people forget that this country is based on freedom of religion. If what they want is peace and understanding, I'm all for it" (*USA Today*, May 23).

Circuit-riding preachers: Some congregants at a church in Georgia did a double take during a recent sermon by Andy Stanley. Filmed with a high-definition camera previously owned by NASA, Stanley's visage was so lifelike that some thought he was preaching live. Such viewing is part of a growing trend called "godcasting," in which churches use remote feeds—either live or by DVD—for sermons. This technology allows congregations to start new churches—in movie theaters, for example—with pastors preaching in more than one setting at the same time (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 18).

Apocalypse now: First there were the Left Behind books, followed by several movies. Sometime later this year a video game will be released based on the Left Behind version of the apocalypse. According to a representative of the company producing the game, it includes "one cataclysmic moment [in which] millions of people disappear, throwing the world into instant chaos. The Rapture has arrived, and those who have been saved are swept into Heaven." One of the game's cocreators says the game has "all the Christian stuff, and it's still got all the cool stuff" (www.leftbehind.com).