

Century Marks

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*"We'd like you to leave out the poorer, sickness,
and death parts—they're a little dark."*

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Buddy system: Nearly 20 years ago Deborah Bial became disturbed by the high dropout rate of promising minority students recruited by top-notch universities. A light went on for her when one of these students told her he would have stayed in school if he had had his posse with him—urban jargon for one's neighborhood buddies. This gave Bial the idea of recruiting high school students in bunches, helping them develop into a cohesive group, and then sending them en masse to excellent universities. She started the Posse Foundation, which has sent about 2,200 students to 28 different universities with \$220 million worth of full-tuition scholarships. Posse students have a graduation rate of 90 percent, compared to 50 percent for all students beginning as freshmen at four-year institutions (*Chicago Tribune Magazine*, August 3).

It's about us: The history of the United States, says columnist E. J. Dionne, is a struggle between individualism and communitarianism. The genius of the country is

that there will always be a correction if the balance tips too far in one or the other direction. Right now Dionne thinks there is a communitarian correction after a period of time when the individualistic metaphor of free markets reigned supreme. McCain's notion of honor associated with the military is more communitarian than individualistic, and Obama's slogan "Yes we can" reflects deep communitarian commitments. Dionne also observes a renewed interest in service to others (*Hedgehog Review*, summer).

It's about them: James W. Skillen of the Center for Public Justice has this perspective on the federal government's strategy for saving Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the nation's two large mortgage companies: "Americans believe so much in the free market that we approve of government keeping its hands off as long as the economy is growing and we are experiencing personal gains. But when things go bad, our only recourse is to government's emergency action to try to keep the market from collapsing. We, the public, then become the bail-out team for the market's investors, who must be assured of a profit so they'll stick with us" (Capital Commentary, August 1).

Anything but serene: The Serenity Prayer, popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, has long been attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr. In his own lifetime he claimed authorship of it, and his daughter Elisabeth Sifton wrote a book about it in which she claimed that her father first used it in a worship service in 1943. But now law librarian Fred R. Shapiro has stirred up a controversy by claiming to have unearthed earlier forms of the prayer that are attributed to others. "My interpretation would be that he probably unconsciously adapted it from something that he had heard or read," says Shapiro, who is editor of *The Yale Book of Quotations*. But Sifton vigorously disagrees, saying that her father traveled widely to speak and preach and that those other sources may have gotten the prayer from his earlier use of it (*New York Times*, July 11).

Bomb, bomb Iran? In 2005 Eric Yoffie was the first rabbi ever to address the student body at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. Over lunch with Falwell the subject of Iran came up. Falwell suggested to Yoffie that President Bush was too constrained politically to take out Iran's nuclear weapons program and that Israel would have to do the job instead. Falwell then said, "The day Israel takes out the weapons of these barbarians, there will be eighty million evangelicals at the gates of the White House cheering. And I'll tell you something, President Bush will be cheering, too" (Zev Chafets, *A Match Made in Heaven*, HarperCollins).

Whosoever will: Leaving Islam is a grave sin that in some parts of the world is punishable by death. Hence, Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, has created a firestorm in the Muslim world by asking, “Can a person who is Muslim choose a religion other than Islam?” and then suggesting that the Koran says that it is possible. He quotes three verses: “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion”; “Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve”; and “There is no compulsion in religion.” Gomaa is no liberal: he still believes apostasy is a grave sin for which one will be punished in the next life. And in some settings he believes that it is tantamount to “sedition against one’s society” (*Economist*, July 26).

It isn’t funny: Timothy Shriver, chair of the Special Olympics, says that the movie *Tropic Thunder* is an unchecked assault on the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities. In one dialogue between the characters played by Ben Stiller and Robert Downey Jr., they make fun of people who are developmentally disabled. Shriver says that it wasn’t funny when Hollywood poked fun at African Americans, and this movie isn’t funny either. Boycott it, he says, and “talk to your children about language that is bullying and mean” (*Washington Post*, August 11).

Give it a break: During the first five months of 2008, Americans drove 30 billion fewer miles compared to the same period a year earlier, according to statistics from the Federal Highway Administration. The high cost of fuel may be the environment’s best friend: this drop in miles driven decreased the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere by 30 billion pounds (*New Yorker*, August 11 & 18).

Wacky world of religion: A Google search for “Obama” and “Antichrist” gets nearly a million hits. Some conservative evangelicals are identifying Obama with a character in the apocalyptic Left Behind series, a young politician who starts the One World religion, a sign of the Antichrist. A recent ad from the McCain camp attributing to Obama messianic qualities has played into this hysterical reaction. . . . A New York church raised eyebrows when it purchased a large fan from Big Ass Fans, based in Kentucky. Now the church is having difficulty coming up with the funds to install it. The fan company is offering to help pay for installation by allowing its employees to come to work Fridays in shorts in exchange for \$10 contributions to the church. . . . Pictures on the Internet depicting Jesus smoking a cigarette and holding what appears to be a can of beer have caused repeated trouble for media in Asia in recent months. A newspaper in Malaysia that caters to the country’s ethnic Indian minority was closed down by the government for a month after publishing an image of Jesus

smoking. (Sources: *Time*; UPI; ENI.)