

Century Marks

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January 13, 2004

Retrospective challenge: Joanna Jepson, an Anglican priest in Britain, is legally challenging an abortion that took place in 2001. The fetus, which had a cleft palate, was beyond the legal limit of 24 weeks. However, abortions are allowed in Britain beyond 24 weeks if there is a substantial risk of severe handicap. Jepson, who herself had a cleft palate that was corrected with surgery when she was a teenager, argues that this abortion was for a mild disability and was without merit. She thinks it raises the disturbing specter of eugenics. But abortion rights activists and some in the medical field are troubled by Jepson's case, saying that British law allows doctors and families to make decisions about aborting fetuses with disabilities, and that third parties shouldn't have the right to challenge decisions after the fact (*Christian Science Monitor*, December 17).

Slavish power: Americans are often told that the District of Columbia became the site of the nation's capital because three influential Virginians—Washington, Jefferson and Madison—wanted the boost in prestige and commerce it would bring to their region. In *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power* (Houghton Mifflin), Garry Wills argues that the real reason was slavery. Philadelphia, dominated by antislavery Quakers, was the more likely spot at the time; but it had just enacted a law declaring that slaves brought into the city could be held for only six months, after which they'd have to be released. Powerful southern politicians didn't want to give up their maids and servants in order to serve in the federal government. Despite their usual antipathy toward the consolidation of power, the three Virginians manipulated the decision-making on the capital so that it did not involve Congress. When the government moved to the Potomac, one-fifth of the District's residents were slaves, and it became a center of the slave trade. The Virginians got what they wanted: presidents could preside over the country—12 in a row—in an executive mansion maintained by slaves (excerpted in *American Heritage*, November/December).

Pastoral call: When Lawrence Wood went to college he had little interest in the church. But then he came to know Edmund Perry, a religion professor, who invited Wood and some other students to his house for Sunday dinner, provided they first went with him and his wife to church. There Wood found, to his amazement, church people who were “real people—humane and open-minded, comfortable with doubt.” Over time, he started attending church regularly, God became real to him and quietly he became a Christian. One Sunday, Perry asked Wood: “Larry, when are you going to become a Methodist minister?” When Wood laughed, Perry held his gaze and said intently: “Larry, the Methodist Church needs pastors with balls.” Says Wood: “And that is the story of my call. I became a pastor because someone cared enough to ask me, and to put it in the most blunt and urgent words” (Wood, *One Hundred Tons of Ice and Other Gospel Stories*, Westminster John Knox).

Heavenly treasures? In a national survey designed to see what business ethics and values matter to Americans in making investment choices, the top five concerns cited were use of sweatshops, product safety record, high executive compensation, impact on the environment and equal opportunity employment. The top four concerns were the same for people who consider themselves religious or spiritual, but concerns about the marketing of adult entertainment took the fifth spot for the latter group. Compared to a similar survey done in 2001, high executive compensation jumped from sixth to third place (MMA Praxis Mutual Funds at mma-online.org).

Betting odds: In 1988 only two states had casino gambling on a large scale, compared to 27 states currently. Thirty-seven states now sponsor a lottery, and legal gambling of some sort exists in 48 states. There are an estimated 4 million problem gamblers in the U.S., and the problem is being passed on to the next generation. A Harvard Medical School study showed that between 4.4 and 7.4 percent of youth in their sample met the diagnostic criteria for “pathological gambling,” which is two to three times greater than the percentage of the adult population. Several studies indicate an inverse relationship between religious attendance and the risks of problem gambling: the more a person is engaged in religion, the less susceptible they are to problem gambling (*Sightings*, December 18).

Good news: U.S. teens between ages 13 and 17 who have access to the Internet report using it for religious purposes three times more often than using it for pornography, according to the National Study of Youth and Religion. NSYR reports

that the Web has become a significant place of connection for a sizable portion of teens who are religious.

How ironic: William Lee Miller calls Reinhold Niebuhr the greatest religious thinker on politics that the U.S. produced in the 20th century, yet what he is best known for today is his Serenity Prayer. Legend has it that when the New York City Council voted in the 1970s to name the corner of Broadway and 120th Street “Reinhold Niebuhr Plaza,” all the Jews on the council knew who he was, but none of its nominal Christians did. How quickly people forget (*Boston Globe*, December 14, in a review of *The Serenity Prayer* [Norton], a book by Elisabeth Sifton, Niebuhr’s daughter).

Untidy bowl: The University of Oklahoma football team is playing for the national championship in the Sugar Bowl this month. Some people think that it shouldn’t be given this opportunity because Oklahoma didn’t even win its own conference championship. But columnist Derrick Z. Jackson thinks there’s another reason why they shouldn’t have this privilege: the graduation rate for its football team is only 33 percent, third lowest of all teams playing in the Bowl Championship Series this year. If the recommendation from the Knight Commission would have been accepted in 2001, only teams with a graduation rate of 50 percent or better would be allowed to play in a bowl game. This year, that would mean that 26 of the 28 bowl games would be canceled; only Purdue vs. Georgia and Navy vs. Texas Tech could proceed (New York Times News Service).

Fact: There are an estimated 40 million more hungry people in the world today than there were ten years ago (*Chicago Tribune*, December 22).

Books to make you crazy: Patti Thorn, books editor of *Rocky Mountain News* (December 13), says she needs Prozac to calm her nerves when she sees: another book on an obscure battle in World War II (she’d like to tell publishers that that war is over and the brutal onslaught should end); a children’s book by a celebrity author (to Madonna and Sting she says: having a child makes you a parent, not an author); or another book filled with political rants from either the right or the left.

Writers who make you crazy: Many people wonder how author Joyce Carol Oates can be so prolific, given the fact that she also teaches. One anecdote passed on by another writer recounts that when Oates was serving on a breakfast panel at a convention, she didn’t speak with those around her, eat, or listen to the other speakers. Instead, she wrote furiously until it was her turn to speak. Oates says jogging is important to her creative process: while she is running, she works out

snags in her writing projects. To write, says Oates, invites “angry censure from those who don’t write, or who don’t write in quite the way you do” (*PWDaily*, December 9).