Century Marks

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Freud's fetish: Sigmund Freud had an obsession with ancient Egypt. His famous psychoanalytic couch was covered with a large print of Ramses the Great's temple. Images of Egyptian gods, goddesses and noblemen and fragments of mummy cases were festooned about his office. He told a friend that he read more archaeology than psychology (although there was little evidence of that in his library). And Freud is only one of many people who have been fascinated by ancient Egypt, according to Egyptologist Bob Brier. What's the attraction? For one thing, it's really old; for another, artifacts from ancient Egypt are accessible. But more important is the notion that ancient Egyptians were privy to some secret and profound knowledge. "For Occultists and New Agers, Egypt is the imagined repository of all lost knowledge—the advanced civilization that had medical cures for all your ills, where true religion was practiced" (*Archaeology*, January/February).

Play or pray: Youth sports leagues have grown 400 percent over the last 25 years and increasingly games are scheduled Sunday mornings, especially in suburbia. Sports fields are in such demand that Sunday mornings provide a good time for getting in playing time. This creates conflict for parents who want their children in church and still want them to play organized sports. But some communities are trying to put the brakes on this trend. For instance, the Summit (New Jersey) Interfaith Council has petitioned a Pee Wee football league to schedule games Sunday afternoons rather than mornings (the league hasn't yet responded). The recreation department in Milnius, New York, has two soccer leagues, one that plays on Saturday and the other on Sunday (for its Jewish population). Other parents are urging their congregations to hold evening services so their kids can both play and pray. Some observers think this Sunday sports trend suggests that sports is becoming our religion (*Christian Science Monitor*, December 25-26).

Time out: Rabbi Arthur Waskow observes that the Hebrew word for Sabbath (Shabbat) comes from the verb for pausing or ceasing. The Hebrew Bible not only issued a directive to cease from commercial activity on the seventh day of the week; it also prescribed a sabbatical year every seventh year when the land would get a

rest and people would become hunters and gatherers again, eating only what could be gathered from uncultivated lands. And it called for a Jubilee every 50th year when land was redistributed equally among the clans. In these revolutionary passages in the Bible the word for justice is never used, says Waskow, but rather words meaning “release.” “The deepest root of social justice, according to these biblical passages, is the profoundly restful experience of abandoning control over others and over the earth,” he says. (*Take Back Your Time*, excerpted in *Utne*, January-February).

Time to die: Americans born in 1900 had an average life expectancy of 47.3 years; today the average life-span has stretched to 77.2 years. Some medical researchers envision a time when people might live to 150 or longer. But if this is an attainable goal, the question remains whether we should strive toward it. Will greater quantity of life be accompanied by a meaningful quality of life? And if people live longer, what are the implications for the social security system, pension systems and health care? Fred Turek, neurobiologist at Northwestern University, thinks that research should be directed less toward extending life and more toward “successful aging,” increasing the number of people who stay healthy longer. As polls have shown, most elderly people fear living in a nursing home more than they fear dying. The “preacher” of Ecclesiastes had it correct: there is a time to live and a time to die (*Chicago Tribune*, January 4).

Lost opportunity: Here’s what President Bush should have said to the nation after 9/11, says William Sloane Coffin, pastor emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City: “We will respond, but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor. We refuse to ratchet up the cycle of violence that brings only ever more death, destruction and deprivation. What we will do is build coalitions with other nations. We will share intelligence, freeze assets and engage in forceful extraditions of terrorists if internationally sanctioned. I promise to do all in my power to see justice done, but by the force of law only, never by the law of force.” Coffin adds that it could have been a teachable moment to help Americans deepen the quality of their suffering by identifying with others around the world who suffer, and to help them abandon the American illusion of invincibility (*Nation*, January 12/19).

No word about Adam and Eve: Humans are so closely related to each other that there is less genetic diversity among them than there is in a small group of chimpanzees. In fact, last year some geneticists concluded that all humans have

descended from a population of as few as 2,000 hunter-gatherers who lived in northern African from 70,000 to 140,000 years ago. This claim supports the controversial theory that all Homo sapiens come from Africa. Studying mutations in 1,056 individuals in 52 population groups around the world, these geneticists are tracking the successive waves of migration from Africa to Europe, Asia and the Americas (*Discover*, January).

Good arrangement: An estimated 60 percent of marriages worldwide are arranged by family members or religious leaders. No one has investigated the type or levels of infatuation these couples have for each other, but it is known that they become very attached. One reason for this is that proximity is a core element in human attachment, according to Cindy Hazan of Cornell University. A second reason is that in stress we seek solace from those close to us or in a similar state, which also strengthens one's attachment. A third factor contributing to emotional attachment is repeated sexual contact. If it works for arranged marriages, why not for the other kind? (*Psychology Today*, January/February).

Pedagogy of the impressed: Thomas Goodwin, professor of chemistry at Hendrix College in Arkansas, one of four U.S. Professors of the Year, is particularly noted for engaging undergraduates in hands-on research. He takes students to an elephant habitat to research how elephants communicate through biochemical analysis. Goodwin admits he doesn't have a very developed philosophy of teaching, but he describes what he does in graphic terms: "I think of myself like I'm up in a helicopter and I'm flying over my students, who are wading through a swamp. I have a bullhorn and I'm saying, 'Don't go that way, there's an alligator over there! Watch out!'" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 12).