

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Organ grinder: The dean of Northwestern University's School of Music has proposed ending its organ degree programs, citing low enrollment (only one undergraduate enrolled in the program in the past three years) and the need to use the school's resources wisely. Some students and alumni are incensed at this proposal, with one graduate vowing to take the program out of his will. The school was begun in 1895 to train organists and church musicians. Some believe the current low interest in the organ reflects changes in worship, with pianos and guitars taking over the place once held by organs. Frederick Swann, a graduate of the program who is president of the American Guild of Organists, says the decision is short-sighted. The organ is one of the most majestic and versatile of all instruments, and unlike the situation in some areas of music performance every organ graduate can find a job, however humble, since churches face a shortage of accomplished organists (*Chicago Tribune*, February 29).

Give so it doesn't hurt: Researchers at Cornell University have conducted what they call "holier-than-thou" experiments to see how generous people think they are compared to how generous they think others are. Invariably, people judge themselves to be more generous than they really are and think others are less generous. In one experiment undergraduate students were given \$5.00 each, and then asked how much of this money they thought they would give to charity. On average, they thought they'd give half of it away and their peers would give only \$1.80. In reality, students in the group donated only \$1.53. The researchers' conclusion: people intend to be generous, but don't actually make the necessary sacrifice (Julie Salamon, *Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary to Give*, Workman).

Give where it does most good: Here are seven reasons to contribute to charitable organizations rather than to political candidates: charities are more efficient, accountable and effective; you are already paying for political candidates through matching funds from taxpayer money; charities won't flip-flop on their basic commitments; charities are in it for the long haul; and campaign contributions aren't

tax deductible (www.charitynavigator.org). But if you think politics is important too, you might not want to choose between the two options.

Costly discipleship: Maine resident Richard Albert lives so close to the Canadian border that the customs office is right next to his house. He goes to mass in Canada. The customs station is closed on Sundays. Since May, when border security was tightened, the gate at the checkpoint has been closed and locked. So Albert would simply drive around the gate on his way to and from church. Then a camera caught him on tape driving around the gate, and he was fined \$10,000. To get to the nearest border crossing staffed on Sunday, Albert would have to drive 200 miles out of his way, over treacherous logging roads (Reuters, February 10).

Dark side of Easter: In the black church, remembers columnist Clarence Page, Easter was always a joyous holiday, featuring new clothes, bunny rabbits and Easter egg hunts. But a rabbi who grew up in a central European village and survived the Holocaust gave Page another perspective. After Easter mass each year, the rabbi said, Christian children would roam the streets looking for Jewish kids to beat up and taunt as “Christ killers.” It is easy to see why the film *The Passion of the Christ* is deeply disturbing to people with this history, concludes Page, since Jews are depicted in the movie as urging the Romans to crucify Christ. A recent Anti-Defamation League poll shows that one-fourth of all Americans believe the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus; an ABC News/Primetime poll found that fewer than 10 percent think Jews today are responsible (*Houston Chronicle*, March 1).

Smarts aren’t everything: Income rather than intelligence determines whether young adults will get a college degree by the time they are 24. Of those from high-income families (over \$85,000) 51.4 percent will get their degree by age 24; only 12.4 percent of youth from middle-income families (\$35,000-65,000) will get a degree by that time; and for low-income people the percent drops off to 4.5 (*Newsweek*, February 2).

Civil unions for all: One way to finesse the gay marriage debate would be for the state to get out of the business of defining marriage—leave that to churches, mosques and synagogues—and give civil unions to everyone, straight and gay. This is not that radically different from what we do now, according to Alisa Solomon, because the license comes from one institution and, in most cases, the blessing from another. Solomon points out that her rabbi won’t perform interfaith marriages, which is his religious prerogative, but that is not the law of the land. Alluding to the

movement for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriages, she quotes Rabbi Arthur Waskow: “God forbid—and I do mean God forbid!—that as a country we dig ourselves into a pit where Orthodox Jews and Southern Baptists are affirmed by the Constitution while Reform Jews and Episcopalians are ghettoized” (*Village Voice*, March 3-9).

Small change: President Bush’s reelection effort had raised \$131 million by the end of January and is expected to tally a total of \$250 million. The *Nation* (March 1) has some thoughts about how that money might be otherwise used: buy body armor for 166,666 GIs; cover the cost of removing 23 million landmines left in Egypt after World War II; pay off the personal share of the national debt for 10,455 people; cover (nearly) the payroll of both the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox; or buy 12 million pheasants for Vice President Dick Cheney to shoot.

Did you know, did you? Theodor Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), who would have celebrated his 100th birthday earlier this month, has sold over 500 million children’s books, but he never had any children of his own. The classic *Green Eggs and Ham* resulted from a wager with his publisher who said he couldn’t write a book using only 50 words. *The Cat in the Hat* took a year to write. Twenty-seven publishers turned down his first book, but now his books occupy a dozen spots on *Publishers Weekly*’s 100 best-selling children’s books of all times. Anna Quindlen said Dr. Seuss would be remembered for the murder of “Dick and Jane,” a “mercy killing of the highest order” (*Daily Herald*, March 2).