

Century Marks

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Stories about home: When representatives of the native community met with British Columbia officials to discuss contested land, the natives expressed dismay that the government claimed rights to land their people had long occupied. One native elder asked: “If this is your land, where are your stories?” He understood that story gives meaning and value to the place we call home. But “can one land ever really be home to more than one people?” asks J. Edward Chamberlin. Can Catholics and Protestants live together in Northern Ireland, or Jews and Arabs in Palestine? Chamberlin thinks so, provided they listen to and understand the roots of each other’s stories about their homeland (*If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* Pilgrim Press).

Generous, naturally: Philosophers have long pondered whether humans are capable of genuine altruism. Some have maintained that altruistic acts are simply disguised forms of egoism, motivated by the sense that aiding someone in need now might result in some reciprocity in the future. Richard Dawkins furthered this argument with the suggestion that humans have a “selfish gene” which ensures personal survival. More recent research suggests, however, that a complex interaction of evolutionary culture and genetics might give humans the propensity toward true altruism. “Our species is apparently the only one with a genetic makeup that promotes selflessness and a true altruistic behavior,” conclude two researchers from Switzerland (*Scientific American MIND*, premier issue).

Getting your life together: In its first issue of the new year, *U.S. News & World Report* (January 3) suggested 50 ways to “fix your life.” Some had a religious dimension: learn to meditate (#2), take up philosophy (47), volunteer (48) and forgive (50). Seems like they saved some of the most important for the last.

You have to see it: Essayist and novelist Susan Sontag, who died late in 2004, wrote several book-length treatises on the impact of photography on conscience and culture. In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), she explores whether humans can truly identify with the suffering of others, including

the victims of war, through seeing pictures of their suffering. Although some argue that photographing the victims of war is voyeuristic, and that photographs desensitize people to suffering (a point Sontag herself had argued in *On Photography*), she thinks there is still some efficacy in seeing such images. “Public attention is steered by the attentions of the media” and “thus, the protest against the Vietnam War was mobilized by images.” And though viewing images of the victims involves distancing one’s self from them, she wryly notes: “There’s nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: ‘Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time.’”

Graham crusade: In July 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson was starting to feel the heat over the Vietnam War, evangelist Billy Graham sent the president a word of encouragement: calling the criticism unjust, Graham reminded Johnson “that the most criticized men in America were those whose names shine brightest in history—such as Lincoln, Wilson and Roosevelt. Also, remember that they crucified Jesus within three years after he began his public ministry. It is what God thinks about our actions—and what history will say a hundred years from now—that really counts. Therefore, it is my prayer that you will continue to face the somber realities of this hour with faith and courage. The communists are moving fast toward their goal of world revolution. Perhaps God brought you to the kingdom for such an hour as this—to stop them. In doing so, you could be the man that helped save Christian civilization” (courtesy of Michael G. Long, a professor at Elizabethtown [Pennsylvania] College).

Blessed assurance: After the election, the Reverend Bob Jones III, president of Bob Jones University, wrote President Bush to affirm his divine mandate: “In your reelection, God has graciously granted America—though she doesn’t deserve it—a reprieve from the agenda of paganism. You have been given a mandate. . . . Don’t equivocate. Put your agenda on the front burner and let it boil. You owe the liberals nothing. They despise you because they despise your Christ. . . . Undoubtedly, you will have opportunity to appoint many conservative judges and exercise forceful leadership with the Congress in passing legislation that is defined by biblical norms regarding the family, sexuality, sanctity of life, religious freedom, freedom of speech, and limited government. You have four years—a brief time only—to leave an imprint for righteousness upon this nation that brings with it the blessings of Almighty God . . .” (*New York Review of Books*, January 13).

Not your neocon: Writing in the *American Conservative* (January 17), Mideast expert William R. Polk says there are just three options for the U.S. in Iraq, none of which is very good: stay the course; try Vietnamization (find a way out without admitting defeat); or choose to get out rather than being forced out. The longer the U.S. waits to exercise this third option, says Polk, the harder it will be. Steps toward this third option include an unequivocal declaration by the U.S. that it will give up its lock on the Iraqi economy, a truce, and a subsequent pullback of U.S. forces. Only after an American pullback could Iraqis begin the task of seeking a national consensus. In the period during and following evacuation, Iraq doesn't need an army, just a police force. "A UN multinational peacekeeping force," Polk believes, "would be easier, cheaper, and safer."

Will heaven be "dry"? In the sixth century, St. Bridget of Ireland poetically conceived of heaven as a lake of beer where the Holy Family is lapping up its frothy content for all eternity. But on the consumption of alcohol there is a religious divide: Mormons and Southern Baptists call for abstinence, as do Muslims and Buddhists; but Catholics, among other Christians, and Jews not only use alcohol ceremonially, but also view it as an enjoyable gift from God. Monks have brewed beer and distilled alcohol since the Middle Ages. The Catholic approach is one of moderation: any abuse of God's gifts is sinful. The Mormons, however, eschew not only alcohol but also tobacco, tea and coffee. One of the fastest growing religious groups in the country, their upright lifestyle has made them favorite recruits for the FBI (RNS, January 4).

Honorable mention: In an editorial assessing the future of progressive political voices in America, the *Progressive* (December) listed the Christian Century among other religious periodicals which "are trying valiantly to persuade others that there is more to the Bible than homophobia and sexism."