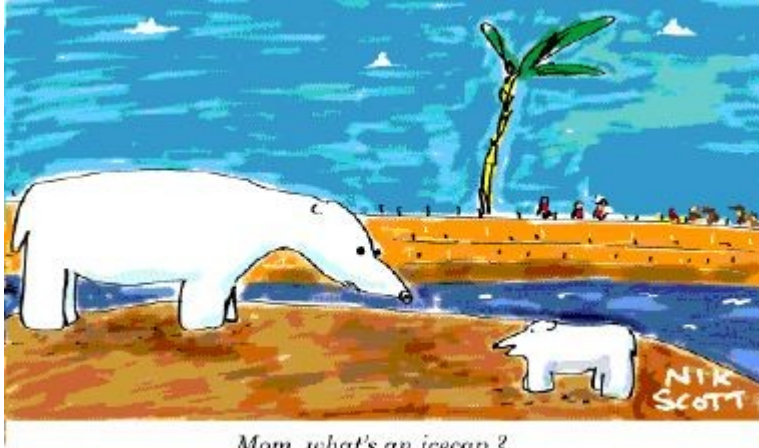


Century Marks

Century Marks in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue



Mom, what's an icecap?

Global Warming Nik Scott, Australia

Smell the coffee: When Chris Hedges was a teenager, he asked his father, a Presbyterian minister, what he said when he visited people who had recently lost a loved one. He thought surely his father would have some wisdom to dispense. “Mostly I make the coffee,” his father responded. At the time, Hedges disdained this response, but now he honors it. “There is little to do in the face of death but make the coffee. We have no words to blunt its awfulness. It was his presence, more than anything he could say, that mattered” (*Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America*, Free Press).

With God there is forgiveness: James Atlas’s parents were secular Jews with no patience for organized religion. Concerts were the only occasions that drew them to the temple. Atlas was in his 50s before he ventured into a temple. At first he was put off by having to address “the Lord,” who seemed to be an all-powerful God who turned adults into needy children. But he was gripped by the message of Yom Kippur: we are flawed human beings and have sinned. “This God was no fool. He didn’t overestimate his audience. He saw—and forgave—human frailty.” Atlas recognized as well that putting one’s faith in this God assuages loneliness. Still, he was taken back by the expectation that he should apologize to all those he had injured. He would need a year to do that, working his way through his Rolodex (*My Life in the Middle Ages*, HarperCollins).

Two loves: Prior to his presidency, Jimmy Carter engaged in what Baptists refer to as “pioneer missions.” On one assignment he was teamed up with Eloy Cruz, a pastor from Brooklyn, and together they witnessed to Spanish-speaking families in Springfield, Massachusetts. Carter was both embarrassed by the deference with which Cruz treated him and impressed by the gentle yet effective way in which Cruz was able to engage the Hispanic families. Afterward Carter asked Cruz what the source of his gentle approach was, to which Cruz responded (in Spanish): “Well, our Savior cannot do much with a man who is hard.” And then he added, “You only need two loves in your life: for God, and for the person in front of you at any particular time.” Carter found these simple words more profound than those contained in all the theological books on his shelves (*Our Endangered Values*, Simon & Schuster, forthcoming).

Sinking feeling: An unintended consequence of the construction of Louisiana’s levee system, which has kept the Mississippi River from flooding, is that the city of New Orleans has sunk two to three feet in the past century, according to Mike Tidwell, author of *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana’s Coast*. While it was a deluge from a hurricane that devastated the city, much of which is below sea level, it and other coastal areas remain threatened by the rising sea level. Some analysts predict the sea level will rise one to three feet by 2100 because of global warming. There is a plan to restore the marshlands and develop a new levee system that would protect New Orleans, but so far it is unfunded. It would cost \$14 billion—equal to the amount spent in Iraq in six weeks or what was spent on the “big dig” tunnel in Boston (*Baltimore Sun*, September 14).

Rising tides: Environmentalist (and *Century* editor at large) Bill McKibben reports that according to one prediction up to 150 million people worldwide could become “environmental refugees” by the year 2050, “forced from their homes by rising waters. That’s more than the number of political refugees sent scurrying by the bloody century we’ve just endured.” No single hurricane can be attributed to global warming, McKibben admits, but there is evidence “that tropical storms are lasting half again as long, and spinning winds 50 percent more powerful, than just a few decades ago. The only plausible cause: the ever-warmer tropical seas on which these storms thrive” (*Newsday*, September 14).

Blaming God: A day after Katrina made landfall, a pro-life group declared that a satellite image of the hurricane took the shape of a six-week-old fetus. The not-so-subtle message was that God had struck Louisiana because it has “ten child-murder-

by-abortion centers, and five are in New Orleans.” No word on why similar disasters didn’t hit New York or Illinois, which have more abortion clinics than Louisiana. But then maybe God was targeting licentiousness and homosexuals instead. A group called Repent America pointed out that the hurricane struck New Orleans just days before “Southern Decadence,” an annual event that attracts tens of thousands of gays to the French Quarter. New Orleans is also known for its unrestrained revelry during the Mardi Gras celebration. Whatever God’s intent, New Orleans is now both abortion-free and Mardi Gras-free, exulted the Rev. Bill Shanks, pastor of the New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans (*Chicago Sun-Times*, September 13).

The mind of the beholder: Racist intent is often hard to prove, but what else explains why two similar photos distributed by the Associated Press (August 30) received very different captions? One photo shows a black male wading through chest-deep floodwater in New Orleans; the caption says he has just finished “looting a grocery store.” A similar photo of a white man and woman has a caption that says they were wading in water after “finding” food at a grocery store.

Still separate and unequal: Since the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregation of schools in America is de jure illegal. But America’s schools are de facto separate and unequal, especially if one compares mostly white suburban schools with inner-city schools largely populated by minorities. Take Illinois: in the suburbs north of Chicago, largely white school systems spent from \$10,627 to \$17,291 per student in 2002-2003, whereas the Chicago city schools spent only \$8,482 per student (review of Jonathan Kozol’s *The Shame of the Nation* in the *Chicago Tribune*, September 11).

Calling the kettle black: In a teary statement at the Senate Judiciary Committee’s hearings on John Roberts’s nomination to the post of chief justice of the United States, Senator Tom Coburn (R., Okla.) said: “When I ponder our country . . . my heart aches for less divisiveness, less polarization, less fingerpointing, less bitterness, less mindless partisanship, which at times sound almost hateful to the ears of Americans.” Coburn’s own fingerpointing in the past has included stating that doctors who perform abortions should receive the death penalty and that the “gay agenda” is “the greatest threat to our freedom we face today” (*Daily Show*, September 13).

White meat, please: The U.S. House has passed and the Senate is considering the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act, which makes broadcasters liable for a fine of

up to \$500,000 for disseminating obscene or indecent material. To a major network this is mere petty cash, says Garrison Keillor, but it puts the fear of government into the hearts and minds of small outlets, like the station in Kentucky that canceled one of Keillor's shows because he read a poem that contained the word *breast*. Though there is nothing obscene about this poem, Keillor sympathizes with the small-time operator who did not want to take a risk. But if you can't use this word, wonders Keillor, how do people in Kentucky—of all places—order chicken? (Tribune Media Services, September 14).

They said it...

"We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

—Representative Richard Baker (R., La.), in a September quip to lobbyists quoted by the *Wall Street Journal*. Baker denies having said this, but the *WSJ* stands by the report.

"It was a war of all against all—'you're on your own'—in the center of the American empire. But now that the aid is pouring in, vital as it is, do not confuse charity with justice. I'm not asking for a revolution, I am asking for reform. A Marshall Plan for the South could be the first step."

—Cornel West, professor of religion at Princeton University, commenting to readers of the British *Observer* on the slow arrival of hurricane relief (September 11)