

Century Marks

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"Hold on—I think you got my toast."

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Long, winding road: Zachariah Jok Char was only five years old when he walked 1,000 miles for the first time. He was one of the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, victims of a 20-year civil war, who crossed Sudan, walking single file, to safety in Ethiopia after their villages were leveled and their families murdered. Char was nine when he and others were forced across a crocodile-infested river back into Sudan after war broke out in Ethiopia. And then they walked another 1,000 miles to a refugee camp in northern Kenya, where they lived for eight years. On June 16, Char walked in a procession of a different sort: down the aisle of Grace Episcopal Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to be ordained to the priesthood. "This was the fulfillment of the call God gave me," said Char, who will lead a congregation of about 100 Sudanese immigrants who belong to Grace (Episcopal News Service).

Green power: Physicist Freeman Dyson thinks that people will be skeptical about biotechnology and genetic engineering so long as it is controlled by large corporations like Monsanto. He envisions a time when the technology will be available to individuals and they can use it, for example, to breed new varieties of roses and orchids, leading to greater biodiversity. He also sees biotechnology

solving ecological and economic problems. Most plants use the energy from the sun with very low efficiency. What if plants were devised which had silicon leaves that could use sunlight more efficiently, thereby requiring much less land for crop cultivation? Dyson also foresees a “green revolution” that will restore more power and wealth to rural areas (*New York Review of Books*, July 19).

The greening of the Vatican: The Vatican is making a bid to become the first entirely carbon-neutral sovereign nation. In addition to taking measures toward greater energy efficiency and use of solar power, the Holy See is cooperating with a private firm that will reforest a park in Hungary to offset the carbon dioxide emissions in the Vatican. One skeptic notes that the Vatican isn’t actually paying for the planting of the trees; Planktos/KlimaFa, a for-profit firm, is making this donation to the Vatican as an in-kind gift. And Planktos is getting a lot of free publicity from its Vatican-sponsored project (UPI and other sources).

Penalty kick: The 10th annual Robocup soccer tournament took place last month, drawing university teams from all over the world. The teams consist of autonomous robots—no joysticks or remote controls are allowed—which pass, kick and shoot against one another following official soccer rules. The goal is to create a robotic team that could play against World Cup soccer champs by the year 2050. This year’s winner—on a penalty kick—was Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. What’s next, robohooligans? (*American Scholar*, summer).

Collateral damage? In order to investigate the effects of the war on average Iraqi civilians, the *Nation* (July 30) interviewed 50 Iraq war combat veterans. Dozens of the veterans testified to having witnessed the killing of innocent Iraqi civilians, including children—actions that seldom get publicized or punished. The nature of the counterinsurgency conflict makes the soldiers think that every Iraqi is hostile. Also, fighting in densely populated urban areas leads to indiscriminate use of force and many civilian casualties. But there is an attitude problem, too. “A dead Iraqi is just another dead Iraqi,” one American soldier said. In a study done by the Pentagon, only 47 percent of soldiers and 38 percent of marines agreed that noncombatants should be treated with respect. After they returned home and had time to reflect on their experience, some of the soldiers began to feel guilty about the conduct of the war and their part in it.

Business of ABCs: Jonathan Kozol warns that the future of public education in the United States is in jeopardy because entrepreneurs are viewing it as the last great

opportunity for privatization. He names executives in the “education business” who advocate for school vouchers as a means of giving poor families a choice in education, but who assure investors that it will be the companies making the choices, not the parents. If free enterprise were to prevail, for-profit companies would seek out the best students from the wealthiest families, and poor people would get left behind again. Speaking of “left behind,” the federally mandated No Child Left Behind program has also cracked the door open for business enterprises, especially in urban school systems. Underperforming schools are pressed into hiring the services of third-party companies to help get their test scores up to standard (*Harper’s Magazine*, August).

Where the money is: The Congressional Research Service reported that CEOs are paid, on average, 179 times more than rank-and-file workers—almost double the 90-to-one ratio of 1994. If the federal minimum wage had risen as much as executive pay has since 1990, it would now be \$22.61 an hour, according to the Institute for Policy Studies. Instead, it increased to \$5.85 on July 24, the first increase in a decade (AP).

Aid for aids: The head of the World Council of Churches says he is prepared to defend a country that breaks international patent laws in order to provide medicines to its citizens. “If a country finds itself in a situation where to access those drugs they are bound by international trade treaties, I would advocate for the countries to violate the treaties to have drugs to treat their own people,” said Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the WCC. International trade rules require member countries of the World Trade Organization to grant patents on drugs and medication. These patents are seen as driving up the cost of drugs in most cases and putting them out of reach for many people in developing countries. Countries that violate WTO rules can face economic sanctions (ENI).

True prayer: Reflecting on the purpose of prayer, Elie Wiesel asks: “Why should God need our prayer? Why should God need our flattery? How come He is not repulsed by all that?” Wiesel concludes that “God does not need our prayers. We need them. We need to be able to pray in sincerity and beauty. And the prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody. That is a true prayer, when it is for some else, not for yourself.” He adds: “I would like *my* prayers . . . to be turned into stories” (*Literature and Belief*, vol. 26, no. 1).