

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue



Music appreciation: Tony Cicoria, an orthopedic surgeon, was struck by lightning and had a near-death out-of-body experience. After a short period of modest memory loss, he began to have an insatiable craving for piano music, even though his music preference before was mostly rock and roll. First he bought classical albums, then he purchased sheet music and began to teach himself to play the piano. Eventually he started hearing original piano compositions in his head and had to learn how to notate music that he believed came from heaven. Oliver Sacks thinks near-death experiences have a neurological basis. Cicoria prefers to think of his experience in spiritual terms: he is a different person, which he considers a blessing and a grace (*New Yorker*, July 23).

Auction block: A synagogue board in the Bronx once wrote to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asking his advice about whether to sell their old synagogue to a black Baptist church or a bank. Heschel read the letter to one of his classes, asking the rabbinical students how they would reply. One student said, "Never [sell] to a church!" But Heschel responded: "If it is sold to a bank then it will become a temple of capitalism; if sold to a church, it will continue to be a temple of God. Should a rabbi endorse a *shul* being converted into a temple of capitalism?" (Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, forthcoming from Yale University Press).

Secular immortality: You would think that if God does not exist, as atheists argue, there is no hope for life after death. But that is not necessarily so, says Jim Holt (*New York Times Magazine*, July 29). Plato believed that though the body as physical reality is perishable, it will be survived by the soul, which is imperishable. William James speculated that our brains don't necessarily produce our mental life but rather transmit it from a transcendent "mother sea" of consciousness which lives on beyond our lives. In *Immortality Defended*, cosmologist John Leslie argues that our life patterns are part of an "existentially unified" cosmos that will live on after our lives. And the late philosopher Robert Nozick speculated that a person's dying energy could bubble into a new universe made in that person's image. His suggestion: first imagine what form of immortality would be most desirable, then live that life in the present as though it were already a reality.

God's friends: There is a distinct difference in the way John and Paul understood friendship with Jesus and therefore friendship with God, argues John Fitzgerald (*Interpretation*, July). In John's Gospel, Jesus declares that the disciples are his friends, with the implication that the disciples are friends to one another. Jesus' crucifixion, therefore, is a sacrifice for his friends. For Paul, on the other hand, Christ's death is the basis for human reconciliation with God. Jesus' death isn't for God's friends, but for the ungodly. Yet it is also "the event that makes friendship with the divine possible."

Vacation for God: While some clergy take it as a fact of life that attendance will be down in the summer, some churches and synagogues in the Atlanta area are finding creative ways to engage members in these months. St. Anne's Episcopal Church has a summer camp that runs all summer, plus a Kids for Peace program in which three Muslims, three Jews and three Christians from Jerusalem spend 10 days with children in the diocese to teach them about the different religions. St. James United Methodist Church has a summer party in July, and on Wednesdays invites families to ride bicycles. At Congregation Etz Chaim the rabbis take a break in July and let lay members conduct services. Earlier Sunday services draw more people at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church. But Patricia Templeton of St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church accepts the reality that people are going to be gone during the summer. "Even God has to take a vacation," she says. "That's why he invented the Sabbath" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 25).

Eros and theos: In the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, researchers reported 237 reasons why (mostly) university students have sex. Among them: "I wanted to get

closer to God.” “Most of the literature shows that religious people have more sexual problems,” one of the researchers observed, “but several people endorsed the idea that religion and sexuality were actually closely linked” (*Chicago Tribune*, August 1).

Seize the chance: Arguing that diplomacy is needed now more than ever, former Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross says, “timing is to statecraft as location is to real estate.” In this regard, the Bush administration has missed many opportunities to advance Middle East peace. For instance, when Ariel Sharon turned over Gaza to the Palestinians, the U.S. should have made every effort to ensure that life would improve there for the Palestinians. Or when the Saudis criticized Hezbollah at the outset of its conflict with Israel last summer, the Bush administration should have taken that as a chance to mediate an Arab plan for ending Hezbollah’s status of a state within a state before Israel’s extensive bombing of Lebanon. “In each case, the Bush administration missed the boat. . . . It treated these developments as if they were merely interesting, not historic” (*American Scholar*, Summer).

Enough death: Canadian James Loney, who along with three other Christian Peacemaker Teams members was held hostage for four months in Iraq (see “Cell Group,” July 24), has said that he refuses to testify against his abductors, who are allegedly in custody. He doesn’t think the Central Criminal Court of Iraq will give them a fair trial. And he opposes the death penalty, a likely outcome of the trial. American Tom Fox, one of the four CPT members captured, was executed. Loney says the three who were set free have forgiven their captors. “We’ve had enough with bombs and guns and gallows,” Loney said (*Toronto Star*, May 23).

Lights out: When the Gallup poll began in 1944 to ask people about their smoking habits, 41 percent of those polled said they smoke. A new Gallup poll shows that number is down to 21 percent. However, according to a report last October from the Center for Disease Control, an eight-year drop in the rate of smoking has stalled (WebMD Medical News, July 27).

Mooned: The pastor of Times Square Church is trying to get a state court to block a billboard company from displaying certain ads on the Broadway building that houses the church and its school and day-care center. The ads are for a bidet company, and they show naked backsides with smiley faces on them (*Redeye*, July 10).

Online with God: PrayAbout.com is a Web site where people can leave prayer requests and give support and encouragement to those with prayer requests. The

site, which includes no advertising, has posted more than 10,000 prayer requests since it was launched in May (*Boston Globe*, July 30).

Correction: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel delivered the eulogy at Reinhold Niebuhr's funeral, not vice versa, as was mistakenly stated in the July 24 CenturyMarks. Niebuhr died in 1971, Heschel in 1972.