

Century Marks

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Transforming losses: When David Fajgenbaum was a freshman at Georgetown University, his mother was diagnosed with brain cancer. Before she died, he decided to honor her by forming a support group, Students of Ailing Mothers and Fathers. He discovered that his peers found the group useful in dealing with their feelings of helplessness. The group organized fund-raisers for medical research and reached out to students in high schools. The group now has more than 20 chapters. Fajgenbaum is finishing a master's degree in public health at Oxford, and he plans to go on to study oncology in hopes of finding a cure for cancer (*Psychology Today*, March/April).

No pretense: In giving advice to younger religious educators, Thomas H. Groome recalls the incident in which John the Baptist was asked whether he was the much-anticipated Messiah (John 1:19-20). John responded, "I am not the Messiah." Groome suggests that educators make John's confession their prayer. "So, when you are not as good as you could be or should be, or when things do not go as planned (they never do), put your feet up and say, 'Well, I'm not the messiah'; leave the rest in God's hands" (*Religious Education*, Fall).

Aid for the poor: It is a myth that abject poverty can't be eradicated in our lifetime, says Mark Lange. The number of people worldwide who survive on less than \$1 a day dropped 27 percent between 1981 and 2001. And whereas abject poverty was once spread all over the world, it is now largely concentrated in fewer than 60 small countries in the sub-Saharan region, Asia and Latin America. But throwing more money at the problem doesn't help. One study indicates that when aid reaches 8 percent of a receiving nation's gross domestic product, it has zero effect on economic growth—and when aid rises above 8 percent of GDP, it has a *negative* effect. The issue isn't aid but the availability of skilled citizens who can deploy resources effectively. Self-directed programs, such as microenterprise development, also have proved successful at lifting people out of poverty (*Christian Science Monitor*, March 10).

Irony of it all: Last year Eliot Spitzer, the now-disgraced former governor of New York, gave a speech titled "The Need for Both Passion and Humility in Politics." Expounding on the dangers of hubris, Spitzer cited the work of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. "Driven by hubris," Spitzer said, "we become blind to our own fallibility and make terrible mistakes" (*Washington Post*, March 12).

Muslim caucus? Indianapolis voters chose Andre Carson to fill a seat vacated by his late grandmother, making him the second Muslim ever elected to serve in Congress. Like Representative Keith Ellison (D., Minn.), who in 2006 became the first Muslim elected to Congress, Carson is a black convert to the faith. The 33-year-old Indiana Democrat was raised Baptist and attended Catholic schools but converted to Islam over 10 years ago." Calling himself "a proud Hoosier," Carson said, "I just happen to be a Hoosier of the Muslim faith." He plans to run for a full term in May during his party's primaries. Before his election, Carson worked in Indiana law enforcement and with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (RNS).

Moving on: On average, Americans move 11.7 times in their lifetime. About 40 percent of native-born Americans don't live in the state in which they were born. Americans, Christopher Clausen argues, move not only for practical reasons, such as a job change, but because they're trying to move up the housing ladder. Realtors now consider any house under 2,000 square feet a starter house. Moving takes a toll: on average it takes two years for the trauma of moving to wear off and for people to feel at home in their new setting, according to one survey (*Wilson Quarterly*, Winter).

Enough to make you swear: California State University at East Bay fired Marianne Kearney-Brown, a Quaker mathematics instructor, because she refused to sign an unaltered state loyalty oath. In previous teaching positions she would sign the oath, but add her own modifiers so as to align it with her pacifist Quaker convictions. Instead of saying *swear* she inserted *affirm*. And she would add *nonviolently* when saying she would “support and defend” the U.S. and state constitutions “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” California State wouldn’t allow such amendments. Kearney-Brown said all the university cared about was whether she signed an unaltered oath, not whether she meant it; nor did it care about the quality of her teaching (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3).

Caveat lector: Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, is used by more people than Amazon or eBay. It’s immensely popular because it has 2.2 million articles and is constantly growing, thanks to the thousands of volunteers who contribute to it, and it is often one of the first results in Google searches. Wikipedia got a fast start from the beginning because it absorbed articles from the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is in the public domain. However, the articles can be vandalized. For instance, one vandal deleted the article on aging, replacing it with one sentence: “Aging is what you get when you get freakin old old old.” About 1,500 articles are deleted each day (*New York Review of Books*, March 20).

Drug heads: While sports fans debate the use of performance-enhancing drugs by athletes, academics have debated the use of drugs to enhance intellectual performance. Two Cambridge University researchers reported that about a dozen of their colleagues admit to using Adderall, a stimulant, and Provigil, which enhances wakefulness. Surveys of college students show that from 4 to 16 percent use stimulants or other drugs to improve their academic performance. Some argue that this development will lead to new standards about what is normal performance, widen the gap between those with access to drugs and those without, and undermine character development. Others claim that it is wrong to compare use of performance-enhancing drugs in academia and sports, since in academia the main point isn’t competition but the acquisition of knowledge—which seems to imply that the end justifies the means (*New York Times*, March 9).

Strange love: David Levy, an artificial-intelligence researcher from London, thinks the time is coming when humans will hook up with robots for love, sex and even marriage. “If the alternative is that you are lonely and sad and miserable, is it not better to find a robot that claims to love you and acts like it loves you?” he argues.

Already a robot at Osaka University is able to fool people for about 10 seconds that it is a human when positioned a few feet away. "People who grow up with all sorts of electronic gizmos will find android robots to be fairly normal as friends, partners, lovers," says Levy. Whether it is emotionally healthy to fall in love with a robot is another matter, his critics reply (*Scientific American*, March).