

Century Marks

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Those who know, do: Wangari Maathai was the first environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize. For 30 years the Kenyan woman worked to plant 40 million trees in Africa, spreading the message that care for the environment is a way to safeguard democracy. When asked what inspired her work, she said: “Passion begins with a burden and a split-second moment when you understand something like never before. That burden is on those who know. Those who don’t know are at peace. Those of us who do know get disturbed and are forced to take action” (*Discover*, May).

Hope for Middle East peace? Shimon Peres, former foreign minister of Israel, once told a delegation of American diplomats that they will find three kinds of Arabs and Israelis: the righteous, the collectors of arguments and the problem solvers. Peres advised the diplomats to ignore the first two types and focus on the third. But Aaron David Miller, who for two decades advised both Democratic and Republican administrations on U.S. policy in the Middle East, said that in his experience both Arabs and Israelis displayed all three characteristics. “In varying proportions they all believed deeply in the rightness of their cause, and they all advocated that cause sometimes with an intensity that could drive you to distraction,” Miller says, “and

yet they could all come up with practical ways to solve problems” (*The Much Too Promised Land*, Bantam).

Wright story: Bill Moyers, who interviewed pastor Jeremiah Wright on his PBS program, reflected later on the tragic division between Wright and Barack Obama. “We are often exposed us to the corroding acid of the politics of personal destruction,” says Moyers, “but I’ve never seen anything like this . . . wrenching break between pastor and parishioner before our very eyes. Both men no doubt will carry the grief to their graves.” Moyers thinks that to some degree we’re all culpable. “All the rest of us should hang our heads in shame for letting it come to this in America, where the gluttony of the nonstop media grinder consumes us all and prevents an honest conversation on race. It is the price we are paying for failing to heed the great historian Jacob Burckhardt, who said ‘beware the terrible simplifiers’” (PBS.org, May 4).

Generational divide: *Politics* magazine (April) profiles a family in which the adult son and daughter-in-law are voting Democrat, to the consternation of their staunchly Republican and evangelical Christian parents. The article suggests that there is a generational shift among evangelicals—the younger evangelicals aren’t convinced that they should vote solely on the basis of issues like abortion and same-sex marriage; they’re concerned about the environment and poverty too. Peter Ilyan, who calls himself a Christian environmental evangelist, says one explanation for this shift is that many evangelical youth have gone on mission trips that exposed them firsthand to poverty. When activists like James Dobson say that evangelicals should focus on opposing gay marriage and abortion, Ilyan says the younger generation has a response: “One of our jokes is that gay married couples have the fewest abortions of anybody.”

Cover up: Taj al-Din al-Hilali, a Muslim cleric from Australia, claims that the Bible mandates that Christian women, like Muslim women, should wear the veil. He says the purpose of his book *The Legitimacy of the Veil for Women of the Scripture* is to show commonalities between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Besides citing references to veiling in both Old and New Testaments, Sheik Hilali points out that the Virgin Mary was often depicted wearing a veil. He caused an uproar with a sermon in 2006 in which he compared immodestly dressed women to “uncovered meat” (BigNewsNetwork.com, April 26).

Seeing double: Many scientific discoveries are made by more than one person at about the same time even though they are working independently: Newton and Leibniz both discovered calculus; Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, evolution; and Joseph Priestley and Carl Wilhelm Scheele, oxygen. Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray both invented a telephone at the same time—they filed notice with the Patent Office on the same day—though Bell gets the credit. Science historians refer to these incidents as “multiples,” and some assert that scientific discoveries, unlike works of art, are not the work of solitary geniuses. Rather, something is in the air—previous research lays the groundwork, for example—which enables people to reach similar conclusions (*New Yorker*, May 12).

History lesson: George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” And Samuel Coleridge opined, “If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us!” But historian Gordon S. Wood says, “History does not teach lots of little lessons. Insofar as it teaches any lessons, it teaches only one big one: that nothing ever works out quite the way its managers intended or expected. History is like experience and old age: wisdom is what one learns from it” (*The Purpose of the Past*, Penguin).

Suspect nuns: About 12 nuns were turned away from the election polls in South Bend, Indiana, on May 6 because they don’t have state or federal identification bearing a photograph. The nuns, in their 80s and 90s, had been told earlier that they would not be able to vote without such an ID, but they came anyway. Indiana’s photo ID law is the strictest in the country. It was challenged by the state’s division of the American Civil Liberties Union, but the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the law in a decision issued shortly before Indiana’s presidential primary (AP).

“It would be wonderful one day to meet an American whose God has made his life harder, not easier.” —*Leon Wieseltier, commenting on Barack Obama’s statement about people clinging to religion out of economic frustration* (*New Republic*, May 7).

“Capitalism without failure is like Christianity without hell.” —*Investment billionaire Warren Buffett, arguing that not every failing business or investment bank should be rescued, but that homeowners who were deceived about the terms of their adjustable rate mortgages should be helped.* (*Chicago Tribune*, May 5).