

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue



© 2008 Jianping Fan

Giving up stuff: In an effort to combat consumerism, Dave Bruno is taking a “100 thing challenge”: he aims by November 12 to have whittled his personal possessions down to 100 items. By personal items he means things that are totally his, not items shared with family members. And some things, like books, he groups together as a category (though he is considering trying to get his own library down to 100 titles). Bruno, owner of a Christian audio book company, is blogging about his efforts at a guynameddave.com.

Inconvenient choices: Last December Kurt Hoelting decided to live car-free for one year. Restricting himself to travel primarily by foot, bicycle or kayak will keep him within a 100-kilometer radius of his home on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound. Inspired by Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, Hoelting believes this lifestyle change is one that everyone will need to make eventually to deal with the challenges of global warming. He admits he doesn’t know what he will do after this year is over, since his work usually demands quite a bit of travel and he likes

traveling to distant places. Hoelting, who has a degree from Harvard Divinity School, differs in some ways with Gore: it is not enough to change lightbulbs, laws and technologies, Hoelting says; personal transformation is necessary (insidepassages.com).

Gospel in unexpected place: One does not expect to read a story of Christian grace and charity in *GQ*, but that is what appears in the magazine's July profile of V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. The article includes an account about a fellow priest, Ron Prinn, who kept his distance after Robinson revealed his sexual orientation. Prinn at first refused to share communion with Robinson and did not reply to invitations from Robinson and his partner for meals at their house. Later, after he developed Parkinson's disease, Prinn paid a visit to Robinson's house, where he discovered that the bishop and his partner had installed a lift in order to make their house accessible to people like himself. Prinn's wife says that in her husband's final months, when he could no longer speak, Robinson would sit quietly with him for hours, holding his hand, and before he'd leave Robinson would kiss Prinn on the crown of his head.

When we pray: "Petition and intercession have their place" in prayer, says Gunilla Norris, "but there is a difference between asking out of true relatedness to God and telling God how to run things." Adoration and gratitude "are like the two hands of prayer," which free us from trying to be "gods of sorts in our little words." Adoration is like seeing a fine play or reading a fine poem: it enlarges our world and frees us from the need to be in control. Thanksgiving flows from prayers of adoration, yet gratitude doesn't happen without our noticing the gifts God has given to us. Moreover, "gratitude creates space for God's gifts and allows for those transformations that the gifts demand of us" (*Weavings*, July/August).

Theological conundrum: Martyn Percy asks which is more important, "that the right people do the wrong things, or the wrong people do the right things?" Sacramentally minded Christians emphasize the first option ("the right people doing the wrong things is where it's at"), believing that though the duly ordained priest can make a mess of things serving the sacrament, that doesn't undermine the efficacy of the sacrament. But Percy thinks the Gospels take the other view: they show sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes—the wrong people—repeatedly doing the right thing. "The Gospels offer extreme cases of God being reckless with salvation—he's always giving entry passes to the Kingdom to a rather odd bunch of folk" (*Expository Times*, June).

Be it resolved: Thirteen U.S. towns and cities have passed resolutions urging the federal government not to take military action against Iran. And now Bob Kiss, mayor of Burlington, Vermont, is asking his fellow mayors to sign a resolution opposing such military action. “In these times when the Iraq war has sapped so many of our financial resources and cost the lives of our brave soldiers, I hope you will join me in voicing the determination of mayors across this country to stop a war with Iran before it begins,” writes Mayor Kiss. Pointing out that polls show that only a small minority of citizens favor military action against Iran, the resolution states that “nothing herein should be misconstrued as support for the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but it should be understood that a unilateral, preemptive U.S. military attack on Iran could well prove counterproductive to the cause of promoting freedom and democracy there.” So far 32 mayors have signed the resolution (alternet.org).

Pro-Israel coalition: It is often argued that American policy in the Middle East favors Israel because of a powerful Jewish lobby in this country. Without denying that reality, Walter Russell Mead argues that the U.S. is strongly pro-Israel due to a tradition of Christian Zionism that goes back at least to the early 19th century. He sees various strains of pro-Israel support: one strain sees the return of the Jews to Israel as fulfillment of biblical prophecy; another responds out of guilt over the atrocities that the Jewish people have endured; and another sees parallels between the history of the state of Israel and that of the U.S.—both took possession of lands held by indigenous peoples perceived to be backward and turned those barren lands into productive nations. Mead traces a countervailing pro-Arab sentiment to Christian missionaries in the Middle East who had an aversion to European nationalism; they not only sympathized with the plight of impoverished Arabs but hoped that a secular nationalist movement in the region would benefit Arab Christians (*Foreign Affairs*, July/August).

Choices: Theologian Gerald J. Beyer challenges his fellow Catholics to consider issues besides abortion when voting for president. While McCain seems the obvious choice for Catholics who oppose abortion, Beyer points out that McCain also supports embryonic stem cell research, which the Catholic Church opposes. On other issues that should be of concern to Catholics—ending the war in Iraq, using diplomacy and pursuing the root causes of war, promoting the welfare of oppressed and impoverished peoples, dealing with racism, and supporting domestic economic policies that are just—Barack Obama’s positions seem closer to Catholic teaching, he says (*Commonweal*, June 20).