

# Century Marks

Century Marks in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue



© Christo Komarnitski

**Practical solutions:** The digging of the Panama Canal was almost prevented by outbreaks of yellow fever and malaria. It wasn't known at the time that mosquitoes were carriers of these dreaded diseases, and it was even thought that contracting one of these illnesses represented a moral failure. Once the true causes were discovered, practical measures were implemented to ward off the diseases. "Some problems are caused by moral weakness and solved by implementing a strong moral community," says David Sloan Wilson, yet "all the moralizing in the world" won't resolve "problems [that] require practical solutions" (*Evolution for Everyone*, Delta, 2007).

**Childhood faith:** Poet Christian Wiman says that if you return to the childhood of your faith after long wandering, as he did, people with a secular orientation will suspect that this shift is due to some unconscious, psychological motivations. But Wiman says you can't just return to the faith of your childhood "unless you've just woken from a decades-long and absolutely literal coma." The life you've lived in the meantime will have an affect on your faith, "which means, of course, that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at 50 what you believed at 15, then you have not lived—or have denied the reality of your life" (*The American Scholar*, winter).

**Gracious God:** The *Paris Review* (Fall) asked novelist Marilynne Robinson whether she's ever had a religious awakening. "No," she responded, "a mystical experience would be wasted on me. Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me." When asked about her practice of occasionally preaching in her home congregation, she said, "In my tradition, there's a certain posture of graciousness you have to answer to no matter what the main subject of the sermon is. . . . The idea that you draw a line and say, The righteous people are on this side and the bad people are on the other side—this is not gracious. . . . To think that only faultless people are worthwhile seems like an incredible exclusion of almost everything of deep value in the human saga. Sometimes I can't believe the narrowness that has been attributed to God in terms of what he would approve and disapprove."

**Case not closed?** *Newsweek* received over 40,000 reader responses in the days following the publication of "The Religious Case for Gay Marriage," written by Lisa Miller and appearing in the December 15 issue. Many of the negative letters were sparked by a campaign by the American Family Association. Miller's essay doesn't plow any new ground; what is unusual about her piece is that it is an advocacy essay appearing in a news magazine. And it portrays opponents of gay marriage as caught in a cultural lag.

**Ahead of his time:** Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, his environmentally sensitive story for children, was not a big hit when first published in 1971, but it has picked up sales as people recognize the threat of global warming. Sales of the book have doubled in the last five years, according to the publisher, Random House/Golden Books. The Lorax tells the story of the Once-ler, a greedy businessperson who can't see the forest for the trees. He chops down luscious trees to meet the demand for the product his firm markets, something called a "thneed." The Art of Dr. Seuss collection is planting three trees for the sale of each Lorax print; so far nearly 10,000 have been planted (*Los Angeles Times*, December 15).

**Islamic centers:** Vincent Biondo has researched Muslim communities in southern California and northern England ("two of the most concentrated post-1965 immigrant communities") and has concluded that the most successful ones tend to promote social integration. They "primarily use English, actively pursue outreach and public relations and reject foreign funding." In southern California, some of these more assimilationist groups are modeled after evangelical megachurches. They are not just mosques, but "Islamic centers" that deal with issues such as premarital sex and the risks of gangs and drugs and also promote education (*The*

*Muslim World*, October).

**Unwelcome wagon:** Conservative columnist Cal Thomas thinks he has an answer to the threat of domestic Islamic terrorism: we should tell “all non-Western” immigrants before they arrive here that we intend to Westernize them. They will have to learn English and embrace the history of their host country. Muslims will have to worship in existing mosques; no new ones can be built. And these mosques, by the way, will be monitored to ensure that hate toward the host country isn’t being taught (*Jewish World Review*, December 2).

**Disarming:** A Christian women’s group in Japan has produced New Year postcards, in English and Japanese, to promote a war-renouncing clause in the country’s 1946 constitution. Some politicians have in recent times tried to amend this clause. Tens of millions of New Year cards are delivered throughout Japan on January 1 (ENI).

**Code language:** The staff and press entourage traveling with Barack Obama has its own private language: PEOTUS stands for the President-elect of the U.S. and FLEOTUS for the First Lady-elect of the U.S. Alternatively, their initials are used, PEBO and FLEMO. Pro-Bamas are the people who line the streets when PEBO is expected to pass, and the Foe-Bamas are the ones who concern the Secret Service personnel. *Lid* is the jargon used when PEBO is done for the day and won’t be available to the press or public anymore. “We have a lid,” the press pool concludes (*Chicago Tribune*, December 16).