

# Century Marks

Century Marks in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue



Tea Party violence Bob Englehart, The Hartford Courant

**Understanding genius:** When God sends us an artistic genius, God usually sends someone else who “gets it,” says screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi. “Vincent van Gogh had his brother, Theo. Emily Dickinson had her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. The Beatles had Brian Epstein.” Understanding the genius of an artist is itself a vocation. “There are two kinds of people in the world: people who are artists and people who are supposed to support them. Figure out which you are and do it with vigor” (*For the Beauty of the Church*, edited by W. David O. Taylor, Baker).

**Something to sing about:** Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman from the Netherlands who lost her life at Auschwitz in late 1943, wrote in her diary and in letters to friends about her abysmal life in concentration camps. Yet she seems never to have given up her faith in God or her joy in living. She had no answer as to the why of suffering. She wrote: “Of course, it is our complete destruction [the Nazis] want! But let us bear it with grace. There is no hidden poet in me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry. And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it” (quoted in *Spiritual Life*, Spring).

**Vive la différence:** Science depends on testing and religion on trusting, says John Polkinghorne, particle physicist and Anglican priest. Science treats the world as an object that can be broken down and tested through experiments that can be replicated. Religion involves encounters between subjects—between persons and between persons and God—which are never the same. Both science and religion

pursue truth, and both need humility to recognize when they may be wrong. Religious people don't have a monopoly on humility or on goodness and compassion, but they know these virtues come from God ([incharacter.org](http://incharacter.org), March 22).

**Out of work:** From the time he was twelve, Tony Judt wanted to be a historian. He ended up doing what he had always wanted to—and getting paid for it. He realizes that many other people aren't so fortunate. Their jobs “neither enrich nor sustain” them. The persistent notion that we are defined by our work makes unemployment “a shameful condition: something akin to a character defect,” says Judt. “Well-paid pundits are quick to lecture ‘welfare queens’ on the moral turpitude of economic dependence, the impropriety of public benefits, and the virtues of hard work. They should try [unemployment] some time” (*New York Review of Books*, April 8).

**Supersized?** The problem with portion control isn't a modern phenomenon, according to brothers Brian and Craig Wansink. They analyzed 52 of the most famous paintings of the Last Supper completed between the years 1000 and 2000. In that period, they determined, the size of the entrees in the paintings increased by 69 percent, the size of plates by 66 percent and the size of the bread by 23 percent. But Lisa Young, author of *The Portion Teller*, a history of meal portions in the 20th century, says that in everyday life, as opposed to painting, it's only in the past three decades that meal portions have significantly increased in size (*International Journal of Obesity* via *Chicago Tribune* and [newsweek.com](http://newsweek.com), March 23).

**Discuss this:** In a forum on intellectuals' perspectives on America, the editors of *Dissent* asked, among other questions: “Do you consider yourself a patriot, a world citizen, or do you have some other allegiance that helps shape your political opinions?” Katha Pollitt wrote that the problem of patriotism for Americans is that “it prevents us from seeing ourselves the way others see us.” As a result, Americans wonder why the rest of the world doesn't love us. Patriotism keeps us from seeing that we may be regressing—class distinctions, poverty and homelessness are increasing—and we end up living in an idealized past (*Dissent*, Winter).

**Stuffing stuff:** Although it isn't a popular concern among conservatives, evangelical pastor Gordon MacDonald has defended the health-care reform bill. He says he is glad that millions more Americans will have health insurance because Jesus took seriously the health needs of people to whom he ministered. MacDonald says he has difficulty listening to anyone who argues we can't afford expanding

health-care insurance. “The fact is that our country—we the people—can afford it, even if it means that each of us surrenders a few more bucks that we would have spent on things for ourselves. We just have to conclude that compassion in the face of human need is a greater value than accumulating more stuff” ([Out of Ur](#)).

**Speaking of health:** As recently as 1963 the American Medical Association’s Committee on Quackery attempted “to contain and eliminate chiropractic” medicine. Many Christians have long objected to chiropractic medicine because its originator, D. D. Palmer, was a spiritualist who believed in the harmony of divine and human nature and rejected concepts like sin and redemption. Now chiropractic is a mainstream practice in both the medical and religious worlds: chiropractors treat 5 million people each year, insurance companies provide coverage for it and an estimated 10 percent of Americans have received chiropractic treatment. Most chiropractors still harbor a harmonialist philosophy, according to Candy Gunther Brown, but that has not hampered their being widely accepted (*Church History*, March).

**State of poverty:** Bread for the World has an online resource providing state-by-state information on hunger and poverty (see “State Hunger Facts” in the resources section at [offeringofletters.org](http://offeringofletters.org))—a great comparative tool. In Illinois, 11.1 percent of households struggle to put food on their table, compared to 17.4 in Mississippi and 14.6 nationally; 12.2 percent of households in Illinois live below the poverty line compared to 21.2 in Mississippi and 13.2 nationally.

**Real conservatives wanted:** Columnist E. J. Dionne points to three contributions conservatives make to the national discussion: they are suspicious of innovation and thus mercilessly interrogate all grand plans; they attempt to preserve the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors; and they understand that human nature can’t be remolded like plastic. However, Dionne says, the opponents of health-care reform have not represented conservatism well, for they oppose even government programs “that have stood the test of time” and “they seem to imagine a world in which government withers away”—a vision, says Dionne, that sounds more like Friedrich Engels than William F. Buckley (*Washington Post*, March 23).