

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

Down to earth: Writer-teacher-activist Parker Palmer was leading a retreat for government officials in Washington, D.C., all of whom were motivated by an ethic of public service. One staffer from the Department of Agriculture reported that he had on his desk a controversial proposal aimed at preserving Midwest topsoil, which is disappearing rapidly due to short-sighted farming methods employed by agribusiness. This official himself had been a farmer in Iowa for a quarter of a century, and was sympathetic to the bill, though his superior opposed it. By the end of the retreat this man decided that he had to follow his farmer's heart and promote the proposal, come what may. When asked how he would handle his boss, this farmer-turned-bureaucrat said the retreat had helped him remember something important: "I don't report to my boss. I report to the land" (*A Hidden Wholeness*, Jossey-Bass).

Long life: At age 71 Roger Pierce finds contemplating his mortality enlivening. But the "cruise-ship, eat-and-drink mentality" of many retired folk, he says, "puts our incapacities center stage and reinforces the feeling we're a useless drag on younger generations." He questions the strategy of older people forming lobbying groups to look out for their own interests. "Is it so obvious that 80-year-olds need or deserve medical care more than eight-year-olds? What if the American Association of Retired Persons said, 'We'd like our grandchildren to go to the head of the line, then our children, then us'?" Living in the shadow of death might inspire seniors to help other people's kids by providing child care or to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity or to provide comfort to people in hospitals and hospices. They might even take some risks by helping clean up toxic waste dumps, or volunteering to serve in the vanguard of military convoys moving along mined highways, or enlisting in "special corps of geezers who would put up their bald heads first in a fire-fight" (*Orion*, September-October).

God's ghostwriter: Linda Pearl, a freelance writer from Illinois, has started an online venture in which she writes letters, posing as God, to members of the military or their families (www.directfromgod.com). She charges \$5.95 per letter, but letters

are free to families of killed military members. To the family of one soldier slain in action, “God” wrote: “How very proud and honored I am to have Mike sitting here beside Me”—presumably in heaven. To military personnel “God” typically writes that they “epitomize all that is good and clean and pure about humankind. Much like my own Son.” Pearl is dismayed that people are reacting negatively to her enterprise—for both posing as God and for profiting from her efforts. Pearl, who gives tarot readings in her kitchen, also markets bumper stickers that say: “Holy war is an oxymoron” and “There are no wars in my name . . . only peace.—God” (*Chicago Tribune*, September 29).

Buckle up: Bill Moyers, who will retire from PBS at the end of this year, told an audience of journalists last month that their job is “to gather, weigh, organize, analyze and present information people need to know in order to make sense of their world.” He also observed that an expected “close election in November could turn on several million good and decent citizens who believe in the Rapture index.” What’s that? Go to www.raptureready.com, where the index as of this writing is at 154. This Web site explains that “the Rapture index is by no means meant to predict the Rapture.” It is designed “to measure the type of activity that could act as a precursor to the Rapture. You could say the Rapture index is a Dow Jones Industrial Average of end-time activity, but . . . it would be better if you viewed it as prophetic speedometer. The higher the number, the faster we’re moving toward the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture.” The site advises believers to “fasten their seat belts” when the index is 145 or higher. To people who believe in the Rapture, estimated at 15 percent of the electorate, “the Middle East is not a foreign policy issue, it’s a biblical scenario,” says Moyers, whose speech is posted at commondreams.org.

Borderline issue: From 1990 to 2000 the population of the U.S. grew by 32 million, roughly the equivalent of the population of Canada. Lawrence R. Harrison of Tufts University argues that this growth came largely from immigration, and he wonders why immigration isn’t an election-year issue, given that it was of such concern to the 9/11 Commission and that 1.5 million immigrants settle in the country each year, about a third of whom are illegal. He surmises several reasons why there’s no public debate about immigration, beginning with the fact that both parties are trying to woo a growing Latino population. Immigration growth has attracted some strange bedfellows: conservatives and libertarians think immigration keeps the U.S. competitive in the global economy; liberals tend to see the world through the eyes

of Emma Lazarus, who penned the words “Give me your tired, your poor” 120 years ago when the U.S. population was about 55 million compared to 294 million today (*Boston Globe*, September 29).

Hoax or what? A draft is being felt in cyberspace, with e-mails a-flutter claiming that the Pentagon and the Bush administration have a secret plan in place for reinstating conscription sometime after the fall election. One person admonishes draft-age young adults to “pay no attention to the upcoming presidential election if you are 18 to 25 years old, and don’t mind being drafted into the military.” Presidential candidate John Kerry and former candidate Howard Dean have also suggested the administration might have just such a plan up its sleeve. The administration and the Pentagon vehemently deny these rumors, and they’ve been likened to a suburban myth. The two bills in Congress for reinstating the draft were both put forward by Democrats, including Congressman Charles Rangel of New York, who is opposed to the war in Iraq. Rangel thinks that the draft would draw personnel more equally from all sectors of society than does the all-volunteer military, and consequently would provoke more opposition to the war. Since Kerry argues that greater troop strength is needed to bring stability to Iraq, some claim a draft would be more necessary if he were to win the election.

Vow of silence: Several churches in Monterrey, Mexico, are using state-of-the-art technology developed for security purposes in Israel to block incoming calls during worship services. The signal-jamming equipment is turned on just before services begin, causing a “no signal” message to be displayed on worshipers’ cell phones. These churches are now being bombarded by calls from other churches about installation of the same system (Reuters, September 21).