

Century Marks

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Vocation, take one: When Anthony Robinson asked a young seminarian how he was called to ministry, he confessed that he had been a teenager from hell. He started drinking in ninth grade, moving on to drugs a year or two later. He barely made it through high school and flunked out of college the first year. He was living with his girlfriend, and for some reason they started attending a small Presbyterian church. The pastor told him, “I think that you would be good working with youth.” She kept after him until he gave it a try. Eventually he went back to school and finished his degree while still working at the church. One day he said to his girlfriend, “I think God is calling me to ministry.” And much to his surprise, she said, “I think that’s right.” So they went to his parents to tell them about this call. Upon hearing the news, his mother started to cry and said: “You don’t know this, but we had a hard time conceiving a child. I had several miscarriages. One day I was at church and heard this story about Hannah and how she had trouble conceiving a child, and about how she promised if she had a son he would be a minister, so, Sam, I did that.” Sam, the young seminarian, said, “That’s how I got here, and I’ve learned never to underestimate God” (*Cloud of Witnesses: An Audio Journal on Youth, Church, and Culture*, volume nine, Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry).

Vocation, take two: When writer Lynn Freed implored a Japanese piano teacher to take her seven-year-old daughter as a student, the teacher said she didn’t teach Caucasian (or Japanese) children, because they lack dedication. She said she only teaches Chinese children, because they understand excellence. But Freed persisted, the teacher relented, and for seven years Freed’s daughter took lessons from this instructor, learning to make the most of her abilities. Despite her success, as a teenager she rebelled against the discipline of lessons and practice. Freed concluded that although her daughter “had a nice touch and a passable technique, she lacked what is essential in any art: a vocation” (*Reading, Writing, and Leaving Home*, Harcourt).

The bottom line: If every business in the U.S. were to cut its workforce by 10 percent, then outsource another 10 percent of its workers, 20 percent fewer American workers would be employed, demand for goods and services would decline and the American economy would suffer. George Shaffner, business executive turned novelist, wonders what might happen instead if business executives had some humane objectives rather than simply economic ones. Suppose a company were to set as an objective to “make sure no child is cold at night.” Wouldn’t the word get around? Maybe some consumers would be willing to pay 5-10 percent more for products from a company like that (*Algonkian*, Spring).

Pro-life? Former president Jimmy Carter is personally opposed to abortion, but he faults the pro-life movement for its opposition to family planning, sex education and the use of contraceptives, all measures that actually decrease the rate of abortion. Writes Carter: “Canadian and European young people are about equally active sexually, but, deprived of proper sex education, American girls are five times as likely to have a baby as French girls, seven times as likely to have an abortion, and seventy times as likely to have gonorrhea as girls in the Netherlands. Also, the incidence of HIV/AIDS among American teenagers is five times that of the same age group in Germany” (in Garry Wills’s review of Carter’s *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* [Simon & Schuster] in the *New York Review of Books*, February 9).

Caveat lector: Patricia Owen, a children’s literature specialist, has detected a change in the books awarded the Newbery Medal for best literature for children. Earlier books (the awards began in 1922) often included children in difficult circumstances, sometimes without parents, but they usually had an adult mentor or a community to support them. In recent decades the protagonists in many Newbery winners are projected as autonomous human beings who have all they need within themselves. What is valued is the virtue of self-reliance. The message that children have all the resources they need to rise above adversity strikes Owen as a hollow claim. She also maintains that many of the recent Newbery winners aren’t appropriate for the ages they are pegged for—9 to 14—but would be better for more mature teenagers. Just because the protagonist in one of the books is ten years old doesn’t make the book appropriate for a reader of that age. Two books with this problem are *Out of the Dust* (1998) and *Kira-Kira* (2005). For Owen’s list of the best ten Newbery winners, got to www.marshillaudio.org/resources (*Mars Hill Audio*, volume 73).

Diplomacy, please: There are at least six good reasons why military action against Iran, by either the United States or Israel, is unwarranted and unwise (Richard Falk in the *Nation*, February 13): One, a nuclear threat is not imminent; the earliest Iran could develop nuclear weapons is 2008. Two, the U.S. and even Israel's military superiority should discourage Iran from aggressive action. Three, the destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities would be difficult because they are widely dispersed and many are in underground bunkers. Four, Iran has means of retaliating: missiles with conventional warheads could be launched at Israeli targets, or Iran could collaborate with the Shi'ites in Iraq. Five, Iran, the fourth largest oil producer in the world, could embargo its oil and plunge the world into deep depression. Finally, military action would merely strengthen the Islamists in the region and the hardliners in Iran itself.

Saintly role: The 50-year-old story of five young missionaries from the United States being killed by jungle tribesmen in Ecuador has an iconic status in the evangelical community. Now the story, in which some of the widows and their children carried on the work of evangelizing these tribal peoples, is getting a new life in the film *End of the Spear*. But the film itself is causing a stir among evangelicals: Chad Allen, cast in the lead role, not only is gay, but has been an outspoken advocate of gay marriage and adoption. Every Tribe Entertainment, which produced the movie, says the company didn't know about Allen's background until after he was cast (*Chicago Tribune*, February 3).

Help wanted: CenturyMarks aims to touch the head, the heart, the funny bone and the spleen. In other words, we want to inform, inspire, humor and provoke—without inciting—readers. We welcome suggestions. Send items, with sources identified, to the *Century* at centurymarks@christiancentury.org or fax them to News at 312-263-7540.