

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue



EXIT IRAQ © Aislin, The Montreal Gazette

Letting go of revenge: Bonnita Spikes experienced a grief-driven desire for revenge when the hospital curtain was pulled back to reveal her husband’s dead body with a bullet wound to the chest. He was an innocent bystander in a 1994 convenience store shooting in New York City. The killers were never found. She eventually realized that until she “let go and let God” she was only prolonging her own pain. Since then, she’s worked with Open Society Institute–Baltimore, spending time with people on death row and their families, and with victims and their families. She opposes the death penalty—which, she says, is a way of honoring her husband, who was opposed to it. As an African American, she is particularly aware of the demographics of capital punishment: since 1923 the number of black men executed has consistently been three times that of white men (*Baltimore Sun*, November 7).

Taking counsel together: George McGovern, 84, is forming a bipartisan “Council of Elders” who will consult with each other from time to time and be available to

those making public policy. Although the group is still forming, it will include liberals like McGovern, the Democratic nominee for president in 1972, along with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Lewis Lapham and Gloria Steinem. Conservatives will include Howard Baker, Alan Simpson and Henry Hyde. McGovern says that America has so far not found a way of tapping the wisdom of older, experienced people (*Daily Herald*, November 8).

Where are the protesters? A *USA Today*/Gallup Poll conducted last month showed that antiwar sentiment is at the same level as in 1968 during the Vietnam War. Yet once the war in Iraq was well under way, we no longer saw mass protests. This is partly because there is no military draft. Also, the cultural atmosphere is much different. But some activists claim that it's the tactics that have changed. Much of the protest has moved to the Internet, for example. And many activists are trying to bring about change through the electoral system rather than taking to the streets. The war in Iraq is also more complex in some respects: many who oppose having gone to war in the first place are still concerned about the consequences of withdrawing U.S. troops (*Boston Globe*, November 5).

Interesting proposition: In an effort to get around the Qur'an's prohibition against usury, a problem for Muslims who want to buy a house, a California cooperative has been formed that shares the risk of buying a house with the potential owner. Potential homeowners pay \$1,000 to join the cooperative and \$20,000 to get on the waiting list. When their name comes up they pay enough to bring their total to 30 percent of the purchase price. The cooperative actually buys the property, and the would-be owner then enters into a rent-to-own arrangement. Both the owner and the cooperative stand to gain or lose money, depending on whether the property appreciates in value. Investors averse to earning from interest can become profit-sharing members of the cooperative. Some conservative Christians, noting the Bible's prohibition against usury, have inquired about participating in this cooperative (*San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1).

Inferno: Roland Weisselberg, a retired Protestant pastor in Germany, died after dousing himself with gasoline and setting himself on fire. He had left behind a note saying he was worried about the spread of Islam. Weisselberg killed himself during a Reformation Day service held in an Augustinian monastery. Onlookers reported that before he poured gasoline on himself, he stated, "Jesus and Oskar." This was assumed to be a reference to Oskar Bruesewitz, a Protestant pastor who burned himself alive in 1976 in a protest against the communist government that ruled East

Germany (ENI).

Give her a break: “It’s Sunday at 11 a.m. Do you know where your pastor is?” Perhaps she is on sabbatical. The increased popularity of clergy sabbaticals is partly a result of support by the Lilly Endowment, which since 2000 has awarded 881 “clergy renewal grants” of up to \$45,000 for such sabbaticals. The Alban Institute also has been promoting sabbaticals to help pastors avoid burnout and to encourage longer pastoral tenures. One surprise finding is that congregations discover some ways that they can get along without their pastor, freeing her from some tasks when she gets back—like attending myriad committee meetings. Catholic parishes are most likely to offer their clergy sabbaticals; next most likely are mainline congregations (*Dallas Morning News*, November 4).

R.I.P. I: Novelist William Styron, who died on November 1 at the age of 81, once said that “some of us are cursed with a dark view of life.” His novels dealt with depression, suicide, slavery and the Holocaust. He himself struggled with depression to the point of needing to be hospitalized, an experience he wrote about in *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (Random House). Still, he concluded that “depression is not the soul’s annihilation; men and women who have recovered from the disease—and they are countless—bear witness to what is probably its only saving grace: it is conquerable.”

R.I.P. II: Clifford Geertz, the leading cultural anthropologist of his era, died October 30 at the age of 80. He once observed that we start out life with the possibility of living a thousand different lives, but we end up living only one. Late in life he admitted that “a lot of people don’t quite know where they are going . . . but I don’t even know, for certain, where I have been.” He did conclude, however, that along with many others in the postwar era, he had lived a charmed life in a charmed time. After serving in the U.S. Navy near the end of World War II, he was told by a high school teacher whom he looked to as a mentor to apply to the avant-garde Antioch College. He did, and that move, with the help of the GI Bill, propelled him into a distinguished academic career. Geertz doubted whether such an opportune time in history would ever come again (American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 45).

Take and read: Readers who are daunted by Augustine’s *Confessions* should pick up *Reading Augustine: A Guide to the Confessions* (Cascade), written by Christian Century assistant editor Jason Byassee. Each chapter introduces one of the books of

the *Confessions* and includes questions for reflection—a helpful study guide for groups.

Camp out: Becky Fischer, the Pentecostal pastor featured in the documentary [Jesus Camp](#), has decided not to continue her “Kids on Fire” summer camp for children. She made this decision after the site of her camp, an Assemblies of God property in North Dakota, was vandalized. “I have a responsibility to keep the children safe,” said Fischer, who has been accused by some of brainwashing children in her campaign to recruit kids for “God’s army” (AP).

Crossed out: A British Airways employee at Heathrow Airport has been put on unpaid leave for refusing to cover up the cross that she wears, which is less than two centimeters wide (ENI). Meanwhile, the College of William and Mary removed the cross that has been in its chapel for 307 years in order to make the chapel less “faith-specific” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, October 30).