

Century Marks

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Seven times 70: After Angelina Atyam’s daughter was abducted by rebel troops in Uganda, she and the parents of 29 other girls taken from a Catholic boarding school met weekly to pray for the release of their daughters. One day, as a priest led them in the Lord’s Prayer, the parents realized they could not say the words “as we forgive those who sin against us.” They silently filed out of the church, went home and began to examine themselves. By the next meeting a transformation had happened: they prayed to forgive the rebels and they began to share their story of forgiveness with others. Atyam’s daughter was released after seven years and seven months of captivity. In 1998 Atyam won a United Nations prize for human rights for her advocacy on behalf of abducted children (*Divinity*, Winter).

The eyes have it: Mischa Berlinski was in San Francisco during the 1989 earthquake, and he and his family were in Port-au-Prince when the January 12 earthquake struck. In the first 24 hours after the Haitian disaster, he heard no sirens and saw no helicopters flying overhead. Instead, he heard women praying and singing. Port-au-Prince is a city of walls, he says, which came down in the quake, disclosing beauty not seen before—secret gardens and hidden terraces. Prison walls came down too, allowing some prisoners to escape. Initially Berlinski saw in the eyes of the people a sense of profound surprise, a visage that in days would turn to

“weariness, despair, misery, grief, and very often joy” (*New York Review of Books*, February 25).

Only a moment: When New York-based writer Edwidge Danticat was able to contact relatives in Haiti after the earthquake, she learned that one cousin had been killed in the collapse of a four-story building, another had an open gash on her head that was still bleeding, and a third had a broken back and could find no place to have it X-rayed. Crying over the phone, Danticat apologized to a cousin for not being with the family. “Don’t cry,” she said. “That’s life. . . . And life, like death, lasts only *yon ti moman*” (a little while) (*New Yorker*, February 1).

This guy gets it: In 2001 Oxfam accused pharmaceutical companies, and GlaxoSmithKline in particular, of “waging an undeclared war on the poor.” But Glaxo now is being hailed for its efforts to aid poor countries, thanks to the leadership of Andrew Witty, who became the company’s CEO in 2008. Witty started out as a Glaxo trainee and spent ten years in Asia and Africa, observing poverty firsthand. Witty has promised to keep drug prices for poor countries at no more than 25 percent of what is charged in rich ones (*New York Times*, February 9).

First-fruits giving: Steve Yoder, San Francisco bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, and his two teenage sons write a column on personal finance. In a recent installment, son Levi, 14, admits he hasn’t made good yet on his new year’s resolution to give 10 percent of his earnings from the column to his church and other charities. Feeling rebuked by his son’s good intentions, Steve Yoder says his own parents taught him to give a tithe (10 percent) of his earnings to charity, but he acknowledges that his charitable giving doesn’t add up to that much. He recalls the behavior of a Mennonite farmer he knew while growing up: the farmer always gave the proceeds from the sale of the first calf each year to the Mennonite Central Committee, no matter his financial situation. “Giving first—before spending on yourself—has got to be a life style choice,” writes Yoder (WSJ.com, February 7).

Food-stamp diet: Last year during Lent, David and LaVonne Neff tried to eat on a food-stamp budget. LaVonne blogged about their experience—discussing what they ate and what they were learning. For this Lent she’s organized and reprinted the entries. LaVonne says, “Maybe the simple act of trimming our food expenses for 40 days would help those of us in affluent countries to be grateful for what we still have, and mindful of the needs of others” (thelentenexperiment.blogspot.com).

Spiritual food: Pretzels, Welch's grape juice and McDonald's Filet-O-Fish sandwich each have a religious connection. It is widely thought that a seventh-century Italian monk created pretzels as an incentive for children to memorize scripture—the shape depicting folded arms in prayer. Welch's grape juice was developed by a 19th-century dentist because he thought fermented wine was inappropriate for communion. McDonald's created the Filet-O-Fish sandwich at the request of a franchise owner in Cincinnati who noticed that Friday sales were down in that largely Catholic city (mentalfloss.com).

What would Benedict say? Benedictine monks at Buckfast Abbey in southern England have come under fire for producing a fortified wine that some call the “scourge of Scotland” because of its high alcohol content. The tippie, officially known as “Buckfast tonic wine” but nicknamed “commotion motion” or “wreck the hoose juice,” has become a national favorite brew in Scotland, doubtless in part because it contains about 15 percent alcohol. In one Scottish police constabulary, “Buckie” has been mentioned in some 5,000 crime reports, one of every ten involving violence, over the past three years. The Buckfast Abbey monks reject requests for interviews (ENI).

Got religion: A recent study concludes that sociologists are not only paying more attention to religion but are seeing religion in a more positive light than they did 25 or more years ago. Then it was typical for sociologists to think socioeconomic factors mattered most in understanding human behavior; religion was seldom considered as an independent variable. The increased attention to religion reflects the failure of secularization theory to explain contemporary realities, as well as the generous funding of research on religion by foundations like Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lilly Endowment and the John Templeton Foundation ([Inside Higher Ed](#), February 9).

Hindsight: Jenny Sanford is estranged from her husband Mark, governor of South Carolina, who admits to having an affair with an Argentine woman. Jenny recalls that when they were preparing for their wedding, Mark refused to say vows that included the promise to be faithful. At the time she thought his honesty was brave and that perhaps his reservation was just a normal case of a groom getting cold feet (*Staying True*, Ballantine).