

Century Marks

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Plague on their house: People tend to think of strangers as the spreaders of contagion. The Mongols were accused of spreading the Black Death in Europe and the Dutch were held responsible for the Great Plague in London of 1665. Tanzanians blame the high rate of AIDS on the Ugandan troops who invaded their country in the late 1970s. Foreigners sometimes do transmit disease, unwittingly or not. Cortez was able to conquer Mexico because the natives had no immunity to smallpox. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the anthrax postal scare of 2001 was instigated by a foreigner, as was first thought. A fraction of the expenditure on bioterrorism preparedness in the U.S. could save a half million lives in India each year (*American Scholar*, Spring).

Swing voters: The mass media often leave the impression that the Religious Right and evangelicalism are synonymous and that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson speak for all conservative Protestants. But conservative theology and conservative politics don't necessarily mix. While opposed to abortion and gay marriage, "freestyle evangelicals" are concerned about social justice for the poor, the environment and the war in Iraq. These evangelicals tend to be swing voters, who helped elect Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, but switched to George W. Bush in 2000 because of the ease with which he talked about his faith and because of his rhetoric about compassionate conservatism. Numbering between 8 and 10 million, these politically moderate evangelicals are mostly white suburbanites living in the South, Midwest and Northwest (*American Prospect*, April).

Boom in giving: Despite baby boomers' reputation for being self-absorbed, experts in philanthropy sense a rising tide of charitable giving by this group—for several reasons: They are expected to receive a collective inheritance of \$7.2 trillion from their parents. They are moving into their best giving years, which is typically between 50 and 64. The giving patterns of the baby boomers differ from those of their parents, however: they are much more likely to give to local, hands-on causes, such as Habitat for Humanity or hospice care. They also are creating more family and local community-based foundations, through which funds can be designated for

local causes (Associated Press, March 28).

Demographics: By the time Sara Knauss of Allentown, Pennsylvania, died at age 119, she had been on Social Security for 53 years. Her 97-year-old daughter had been drawing from Social Security for 35 years and her grandson, for 15 years (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, February).

Bus reading: In 1942, 13 years before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama—thereby inspiring the civil rights movement—Bayard Rustin sat upfront on a bus from Louisville to Nashville and politely refused to move. Rustin, a young black Quaker who became a key figure in the civil rights movement and a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., was then arrested by police, kicked and beaten. When the officers went through Rustin’s belongings, they found copies of the *Christian Century* and *Fellowship* (published by the Fellowship of Reconciliation). In Nashville, an assistant district attorney asked Rustin about the *Century*, his life and his views on the war. Rustin was eventually released because his account of what happened on the bus and afterward rang more true than that of the police officers, and because of his conciliatory disposition (*Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weiss, Cleis Press).

Fetal distraction? On August 6, 2001, President Bush was briefed on Osama bin Laden’s determination to attack the U.S. and told that there were 70 ongoing FBI investigations into the terrorist threat. According to columnist Joan Vennochi, there is no evidence that the president demanded more information regarding these investigations. She speculates that the president was preoccupied with the speech he was preparing to give on August 9 in which he called for limiting but not cutting off federal funding for stem cell research. This “was billed as the most important, wrenching, and politically sensitive decision of his then-young presidency” (*Boston Globe*, April 13).

Marriage myths: 1. *All you need is love.* Actually, marriage demands good relational skills and hard work—and at least as much attention as your career. 2. *People don’t really change.* Expectations are often unrealistic. Think about starting by changing yourself. 3. *My spouse doesn’t know how to listen.* Talk and communication aren’t the same thing; don’t use your version of the truth to beat your partner into submission. 4. *When you get married, you create your own family legacy.* The behavioral patterns we learned from our families of origin impact our

intimate and family relationships, even when we think we're choosing alternative patterns. 5. *Egalitarian marriages are easier than traditional ones*. In fact, many couples are deeply conflicted over gender roles and expectations. Aim for fairness, not necessarily equality. 6. *Children solidify marriages*. Children actually add pressure in a marriage. For the sake of both marriage and children, your partner must come first. 7. *The sexual revolution has made great sex possible*. In fact, couples are often frustrated because reality doesn't measure up to the expectations projected by the culture (from John W. Jacobs, M.D., *All You Need Is Love & Other Lies about Marriage*, summarized in *Psychology Today*, April).

Dumbed-down theology: It's not likely to make a seminary reading list, but it was inevitable that a book titled *Christianity for Dummies* would find its way into print. (The author is Richard Wagner.) The choice of foreword writer—Kurt Warner, quarterback for the St. Louis Rams and a born-again Christian—is a tip-off to the intended audience. The book has a conservative slant, but contains useful information about the Bible, theology, and some of the major differences between denominations. No women are included in its list of the top-ten Christian leaders, namely Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, John Calvin, John Wesley, William Wilberforce, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (the last choice is especially curious). The list of Christian holy days and seasons starts with Lent, omits Epiphany and Pentecost, and includes the National Day of Prayer. And it perpetuates the stereotype of the Pharisees as religious legalists.

Undercover agents: When independent booksellers across the country were asked what titles they most enjoyed selling over the past five years, for fiction they chose the following, some with religious themes:

- *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday)
- *Bel Canto*, by Ann Patchett (HarperPerennial)
- *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown (Doubleday)
- *Empire Falls*, by Richard Russo (Knopf)
- *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel (Harcourt)
- *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold (Little, Brown)
- *Peace Like a River*, by Leif Enger (*Atlantic Monthly*)
- *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver (HarperPerennial)
- *The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant (Picador)
- *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd (Viking)

Next issue we'll list the booksellers' nonfiction selections (booksense.com).