

Century Marks

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Something about that wall: In 1996 writer William Zinsser and his spouse met with Duong Tuong Tran, a writer, poet and Vietnam's most influential art critic. The Vietnam war didn't come up until Duong Tuong described his visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. He said he had written a poem while at the memorial, and offered to let the Zinssers read it. The Zinssers were moved to tears by the poem, whereupon Duong Tuong signed the poem and gave it to them (from William Zinsser, *Writing About Your Life*, Marlowe).

The original free Americans: Some two decades after the Louisiana Purchase, when the land that native Americans possessed but never owned was sold out from under them, an Osage Indian named Big Soldier went to Washington as part of an Indian delegation. Big Soldier's response to the government's colonizing pressure was to tell the white people that he admired their manner of living: they lived in nice warm houses, and they had machines for doing almost anything they wanted. However, observing that the white people also had slaves, he commented that "everything about you is in chains, and you are slaves yourselves. I fear if I should exchange my pursuits for yours, I too should become a slave. . . . I was born free, was raised free, and wish to die free. . . . I am perfectly contented with my condition." Vine Deloria says this is "the best thing any Indian ever said" (George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation*, Fortress).

Close shaves are good: Out of 14 presidential elections since World War II, six of the winners polled less than a majority of the popular vote: Truman in 1948, Kennedy in 1960, Nixon in 1968, Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and George W. Bush in 2000. Only five times during this period did the winner garner a landslide vote, which is considered 55 percent of the popular vote or more. Historian Ralph E. Luker notes that four of the five landslide victories during this period were for second-term presidents, and their second terms turned out to be unremarkable or disastrous. Landslide victories give American presidents a sense of mandate and tempt them to overreach, argues Luker (www.ralphluker.com).

Emperor has no church: Despite the fact that President Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” celebrates the role of religious communities, Bush himself seldom attends church and doesn’t belong to a congregation, according to Amy Sullivan (*New Republic*, October 11). His supporters explain that he’s too busy, that the security precautions would drive other congregants away and that the president doesn’t need to prove his religiosity by going to church. Sullivan agrees that the president’s religious habits shouldn’t matter, and that the public policy decisions he makes are more revealing of his religious faith. Still, more than any other president, Bush has staked his reputation on his religious faith, and “the fact that he isn’t himself a member of a congregation should be relevant.”

The “I” word: When Bush President called Kerry “a liberal” in the presidential debates, candidate Kerry accused the president of trying to scare voters by “throwing labels around.” But Robert Kuttner of the *American Prospect* said he wishes that Kerry would have proudly accepted the liberal label and declared instead: “Let me tell you about my kind of liberal. . . . It’s a leader who keeps America militarily and economically strong while winning the world’s respect. . . . It’s a leader who opens up opportunity and provides security through great liberal programs like Social Security, Medicare and college aid. It’s leadership like Bill Clinton’s, to clean up Republican fiscal messes and to provide 20 million new jobs. It’s leadership like Martin Luther King’s, fighting for civil rights. That’s a label I don’t run from” (*Boston Globe*, October 13).

A confessing church: A group of mostly seminary professors, concerned about what they deem to be a theology of war in the U.S., has issued a five-point confession of faith reminiscent of the Barmen Declaration in Nazi Germany. Titled “Confessing Christ in a World of Violence,” the five points maintain that Jesus Christ knows no national boundaries; Christ commits Christians to a strong presumption against war; Christ commands us to see the evil in our own nation, not just that of others; loving one’s enemies is the heart of the gospel; and humility is the virtue befitting sinners. The initiators of the statement—Richard Hays, George Hunsinger, Glen Stassen, Richard Pierard and Jim Wallis—are soliciting endorsements from others, especially theologians and ethicists (for a copy of the statement, e-mail dshank@sojo.net).

Catholics—a peace church? About one-third of the 221 Catholic colleges and universities in the United State have some form of a peace studies program. In response to 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, more Catholic

schools have established peace programs in order to develop a culture of nonviolence, according to a spokesperson from the Kroc Institute for International Peace at the University of Notre Dame (*Chicago Tribune*, October 12).

Costly religion: When Andrea Armstrong converted to Islam, she decided she could no longer wear the usual uniform as a forward on the women's basketball team at the University of South Florida. She told her coach that she wanted to play in a Muslim head scarf, long pants and a long-sleeved shirt. He said she'd have to quit the team. At first she complied, then she appealed to the Council of American-Islamic Relations for help, after which the university reinstated her athletic scholarship and pledged to petition the NCAA for a uniform waiver. But in response to harassment and hate e-mails, Armstrong quit the team again, saying she didn't want her case to divide the team, school and community (*Sports Illustrated*, September 27).

The color purple: Emily K. Strand, assistant to the director of campus ministry at the University of Dayton, dyes her blonde hair to teach her students about the different liturgical seasons. "How can you forget that it's Lent when your teacher's hair is purple?" she asks (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15).

Ark-e-ology: Everything I need to know, I learned from Noah's Ark. One: Don't miss the boat. Two: Remember that we are all in the same boat. Three: Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark. Four: Stay fit. When you're 60 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big. Five: Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done. Six: Build your future on high ground. Seven: For safety's sake, travel in pairs. Eight: Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs. Nine: When you're stressed, float awhile. Ten: Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals (beliefnet.com, September 26).