

Century Marks

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Repeating ourselves: Laurel Wamsley, 20-year-old daughter of a Vietnam veteran, traveled to Vietnam to come to terms with what the U.S. did there a generation ago. She discovered that people didn't hate her because she's American, but they didn't seem to want to talk about the war. At the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City she saw displays of the atrocities of that war—a photo, for instance, of American soldiers holding the decapitated heads of Vietnamese, and another of an American infantryman with a Vietnamese captive on a leash. Wamsley wonders what Americans have learned from the Vietnam experience. That war is hell? That it divided the U.S.—never mind what it did to the Vietnamese? On the war in Iraq, she says: “If we don't force ourselves to realize that the war isn't just about us, that our military isn't just a metaphor for the American tale of heroism, then we will go through all of this again” (*Utne*, January-February).

Hound of heaven: In his memoirs *American Ghosts* (Beacon), novelist David Plante admits he's haunted by the God he left behind in childhood. Novelist friend Mary Gordon won't let him forget the faith of his youth. Gordon introduced Plante to a priest friend of hers, who tried to convince him that the church had changed in many ways since his childhood. Plante asked the priest: “What happened to the Church Militant?” The priest responded: “I'd like to think it has been replaced by the Church Compassionate.” Gordon asked Plante: “Do you think the worst thing that's ever happened to you is the loss of your religion?” He admitted she was right, but resisted her gentle nudgings to let go of his resistance to God.

True evangelicals: “Evangelical” is a term often used as a distinction: conservatives use it to distinguish themselves from liberals; the largest Protestant body in Germany is so named to distinguish it from both Catholics and nonconforming Protestants; and while Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and high-church Anglicans use it to refer to Jesus' teaching in the four Gospels, low-church Anglicans use it to distinguish themselves from Anglo-Catholics. Evangelical, of course, refers to “good news,” and according to Paul Trudinger of the University of Winnipeg, it should not be considered an exclusive appellation for Christians alone,

let alone a particular kind of Christian. The Old Testament is itself evangelical—proclaiming the good news of God’s realm and empowering presence. He makes the daring claim that all those “involved in ‘doing justice,’ and ‘loving mercy’ are evangelical, whether they use the term or not,” even those outside the Judeo-Christian tradition (*Expository Times*, December).

Not good news: In a letter to the editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, a reader wrote: “I was sick and you privatized medicine; I was homeless and you built sports stadiums; I was thirsty and you polluted the lakes; I was hungry and you gave control of the food chain to multinational corporations” (quoted in *Expository Times*, December).

Reformation, Islamic style: Mohsen Kadivar, a reformist cleric in Iran who has served time in prison for his beliefs, is sometimes referred to as the Martin Luther or John Calvin of Islam. He argues that Muslims have to coexist with other faiths, and says Islam does not condone religious coercion, citing Koranic texts to make his point: “Duress is not permissible in religion, as the path has become clear from falsehood to light, therefore anyone that takes the idols as tyranny and starts to have faith in God, has truly found a support that is never separated from him.” Kadivar believes that “faith is strengthened by reason and principles. That which is created with force and pressure is only a superficial idea and no more than that” (*Current History*, January).

Hume comes to Syria: Syrian intellectual Ammar Abdulhamid says that Arab countries don’t have the intellectual foundations to establish a free and democratic society, casting doubt on the American project to turn Iraq into a beacon of freedom in the Middle East. But Abdulhamid plans to do something about that void: he is introducing a new line of books, cheap and accessible Arabic translations, with commentary, of the basic texts of the Western intellectual tradition, including the *Federalist Papers* and the works of Descartes and Hume. Translations of Erasmus, Spinoza and Locke are in the works. But the risks are high: Syria has a Baathist dictatorship and a tightly controlled news media. The first of these translations has yet to be examined by the Department of Censorship, and one person involved with the project worries about being put in jail (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 14).

Upper- and lower-case questions: Quoting Charles Miller, Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, makes a distinction

between upper-case and lower-case questions. It is an upper-case question to ask: “To what mission does God call this church today?” Or “What kind of church serves God’s mission in the world today?” A lower-case question is one that asks about the future of denominations. The colonial organizer of American Lutheranism, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, said that the structure of the church is but “the external scaffolding of the spiritual edifice.” Nevertheless, lower-case questions still matter: Will denominations like the ELCA persist in serving as preservers of a once immigrant tradition in an increasingly pluralistic context? Will they be defined by the issues that divide them rather than the gospel, faith and mission that bind them? Will denominations be responsive to the desire people have that faith makes a difference, not just in their personal lives but also in the world? And will denominational leaders be prophetic by calling their members away from self-preoccupation and out into a world in need of healing and hope? (*Word & World*, Winter).

Single-minded: Catherine von Ruhland argues that you can tell what married people think about marriage by their responses to people who are single. When a counselor said, “You ought to be married,” she took that to mean he had a good marital relationship and could see what she was missing. But to the person who opined, “I thank God for every day I was single,” von Ruhland responds: “Honey, if he’s that bad, get out.” Sometimes married people patronizingly tell singles, “Marriage isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” never realizing they are making an argument for either divorce or cohabitation. As a single, she knows what she is missing, and it’s not just sex. “I would love having my hair stroked, or to listen to a man’s heartbeat. . . . Sometime I could just do with a blooming good hug; I rarely experience human touch. . . . There are myriad ways of making and showing love besides sex” (*Third Way*, June).

Glass is half full: Researchers who have developed ways to measure optimism conclude that optimists tend to cope better with life and have better health habits. A Dutch study, which for nine years followed people age 65 to 85, concluded that the most optimistic group had a 55 percent lower risk of death compared with the most pessimistic group, and that their risk of heart disease and stroke was 23 percent less. Researchers couldn’t determine whether good health led to the optimism, or whether the sunnier disposition created better health or the inclination to do things that contributed to better health (*Harvard Health Letter*, January).