

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

Acting out: Playwright Arthur Miller, who died last month, likened politics to acting. Especially in the era of television, political leaders understand that “to govern they must learn to act” (*On Politics and the Art of Acting*, Viking). Presidents Reagan and Clinton were especially good at politics as acting, Al Gore was not. The current President Bush was not at first, but has gotten better at it, Miller claimed. Politicians must project sincerity, which suggests “honesty, an absence of moral conflict in the mind of its possessor. Of course, this can also indicate insensitivity or even stupidity.” Because human beings can’t handle much reality, it falls to politicians to “act” in such a way as to shield the people from hard truths.

The real divide: Perhaps it is too late to reclaim the word “liberal,” says Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge. Too bad, for the spirit of liberalism surely belongs to the gospel, which is generous, open-handed, freeing and bountiful. Conversely, “conservative” can suggest being narrow, pinched, fearful and retrograde. Still, she believes that theological liberals can rightly be accused of theological sentimentalism. She notes, for instance, her own denomination’s slogan in the ‘90s, “No outcasts.” Nobody could argue with it, yet it lacked theological grounding and connection with the biblical story. Mainline denominations won’t split because they disagree over homosexuality, but because some are recognizing that the new teaching about sexuality lacks theological foundation, and “the scriptures are not being interpreted with the sort of reverent searching that believers would like to see from their leaders” (in *Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian*, edited by Michael Welker and Cynthia A. Jarvis [Eerdmans]).

If you must: According to humorist Garrison Keillor, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America task force charged with examining the question of same-sex relationships came up with a document that “took 40 pages to avoid answering it, affirming a policy of *Don’t ask, don’t tell, never mind.*” The task force acknowledged deep divisions over the issue. It reaffirmed that “marriage is a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman.” It also accepted the fact “that people in good conscience might choose to challenge” this view, Keillor wrote, “and asking

them to be careful if they do and not make a big show of it but saying that if they do . . . probably nobody would give them a hard time about it.” In short, “Nothing has changed essentially, we don’t approve, though in a sense we do but probably not, but if you go ahead and do it, don’t feel bad about it, we understand. . . . This is the Lutheran way” (*Star Tribune*, January 28).

Model Muslims: When Cara Anna went to teach in a Pakistani school and live with a Pakistani family, she was never harassed, nor did she ever feel threatened. Her host family would not allow the American to do chores, nor would they accept payment from her. She found that life is not easy for women there, who cannot go outside the home without an escort. But this didn’t stop parents from sending their daughters to school. Her students wondered why the U.S. doesn’t like Muslims and why it keeps attacking Iraq. The principal of her school was committed to making his students “good Muslims.” “Some Muslims only say, ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet’ and then do nothing,” he said. “We should be Muslims to serve others” (*Austin American-Statesman*, February 13).

Time out: Many people in Western societies have more “free time” than ever, yet they feel “pressed for time.” But better time management isn’t the solution, according to Robert Sherman. Rather, we need to order our “lives in such a way that the Lord’s time [becomes] sovereign,” which could “become the means by which a gracious God liberates us from the tyranny of seemingly implacable and ultimately pointless time.” For biblical faith, it is the sabbath, a gift and blessing from God, which gives true meaning and direction for the other days of our lives. But our allegiance isn’t to sabbath, but to the God who gave us this day of rest that orients all our days. While the sabbath is first of all a gift, it is also a command, a form of discipleship that trains us in the “life-giving communion of divine worship, in joyous communion with family and neighbors, and in restful and appreciative communion with God’s good creation” (*Interpretation*, January).

Media bias: Christians, by reason of their commitment to a higher authority, should be wary of official versions of the truth—not just those from governments, but those from the media as well. The range of news stories is often limited, and the point of view inevitably carries bias. Here are some strategies for overcoming news media bias: Seek news sources outside the U.S. Become alert to the bias built into mainstream news coverage. Ask yourself whose voices are getting a hearing in the news coverage. Pay attention to the framing of a story. Is some larger narrative suggested? Ask yourself how many viable options are portrayed in the news. For

example, are only two extreme examples posed as possibilities? Look at the stories that get buried deep in newspapers. Why don't they get more prominent play? (*Currents in Theology and Mission*, February).

Consistent conservatism: During his failed bid to be U.S. senator from Illinois, the ultraconservative Alan Keyes called homosexual activity "selfish hedonism." It turns out that Keyes's own daughter, Maya Marcel-Keyes, 19, is a lesbian, and she gave a speech recently in which she commented on the difficulties of growing up as the daughter of an outspoken opponent of gay marriage and gay life. She acknowledged that Keyes's private behavior has been consistent with his public statements. Reportedly she was forced to move out of her father's apartment because of her sexual orientation (*Chicago Tribune*, February 15).

Endangered liberties: The Unemployed Philosophers Guild markets intellectual gift items like the "Disappearing Civil Liberties" mug, which features the Bill of Rights. "Pour in a hot beverage," its ad claims, "and watch your civil liberties disappear . . . pour in a hot beverage and see what remains thanks to the Patriot Act!" The supply of this mug was sold out within a week after the elections last October (www.philosophersguild.com).