

arsonists in, whenever they're ready and when they have the initiative. It's hard to bet on the other guys.

The other, more disturbing reason is because I watched Sule Pagoda for two hours and nobody came. This matters because this unpretentious stupa in the center of Yangon represents the mythological Mount Meru, around which Theravada Buddhist cosmological order coheres. The ring of shops surrounding its base was empty. No one buying incense, amulets, miniatures of the Buddha, or the other trappings of complex ceremony that ritually maintain spiritual order and keep chaos at bay.

On the contrary, all the myriad and visible signs of the underlying "primitive religious system" that Theravada Buddhism exists to suppress abounded. Engagement with the spirit world, common everywhere in Southeast Asia, has always been particularly visible in Burma. But what I saw was a level of obsession, permeating the consciousness and activities of the people in the streets—written on their faces, as it were, in swirls of rice powder, tattooed on their bodies in ink, worn as charms or amulets, and codified in precise rituals of gesture, art, language, and behavior ever so tightly wound, to ward off the animate evil that they have come to believe defines their age and controls their fate. This apathy has been building for years, but the processes were clearly accelerated by a putative uprising attempted by Buddhist monks who began peaceful demonstrations in the streets of Yangon last year.

At the time, I began receiving overheated calls and e-mails from all over the world inviting me to rejoice in the imminent deliverance of the Burmese by means of the "Saffron Rebellion." "They won't dare shoot the monks!" Burma's well-wishers enthused. I thought the junta would not only dare, but would rather enjoy ordering their village-boy soldiers to do just that, showing every-

one, God included, once and for all who's really boss in Myanmar. Apparently I was right. The monks were gunned down, and then the cyclone hit. It broke the back of the higher religious system that stands between order and chaos in society, but not those thugs who hold a country hostage.

I was younger and a lot smarter when I saw the same thing start to happen in another Theravada Buddhist country in 1972. Of course it's a lot more comforting to think that a cabal of Left Bank intellectuals calling themselves Khmer Rouge, through sheer malevolence of personality and program, turned a peaceful, docile, kindly, and very civilized nation called Cambodia into a

charnel house of homicidal maniacs. The idea that such things might be related to violence, hopelessness, and fear inflicted upon people in unimaginably toxic doses, causing the collapse of belief itself, ushering in the reign of chaos, is almost incomprehensible. It might give people pause when considering whether to interfere in other obscure and mysterious places. Like I told the girl from Rio: just get on your plane to Paris and forget this place entirely, lest you turn into a pillar of salt—or something worse. ■

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# Perfect Sowing

Cultivating the American character

By Jeremy Beer

HE TRAVELED the three miles to the mill 63 times during the 87th harvest of his life, his old International pulling the wagon my uncle filled with beans or corn. I don't know why he counted the trips; perhaps it helped pass the time and focus his wavering mind on something other than the pain. He said to my father that he wanted to bring in one last crop. He almost did, clearing the beans but only getting halfway through the corn before he swallowed hard and told my uncle that they had better hire another man. The agony was too much, his back too hunched, his vision too cloudy and constricted. He asked my father to check him into the nursing home. A few days later, he died.

The house he lived in for more than 60 years had been his father-in-law's—

whom he often recalled as a lazy farmer, with an air of gentle reproof. His wife, the last of 14 children, had been born in that house. Her oldest brothers had even gone to school in the neighboring one-room red-brick schoolhouse, which later became an outbuilding to house a tractor and a few implements. The old blackboards are still affixed to the walls, but only longtime local residents know what the building once was.

A few years after my grandmother Betty died, he decided to record for all of his descendants the story of how she had contracted polio. She was pregnant with their fourth child. For five months, he recalled, she lay immobile in the hospital, consigned to an iron lung. The doctors called him in to say goodbye on several occasions, but against all odds she

had survived. After he had been alone for a few years, he could not remember that long-ago crisis without emotion.

He told of this so frequently that, frankly, we wished he would move on. It was not that we tired of hearing his stories. It was just that he had so many others to tell, some of them uproariously funny, and we wanted to be regaled, not depressed. Once he got going, he would string memories together in a peculiar staccato style and rural idiom filled with colorful turns of phrase not often heard anymore. It was wildly entertaining.

But he kept coming back to the polio story, probably because he was trying to come to terms with his gratitude. He was overwhelmed by the grace of a God who had allowed his wife and the mother of his small children—including the one

heavy midday heat to bring lemonade and cookies to the men in the fields. My brother and I wouldn't be working, usually, but would just be hanging out with the men, riding along in the tractor or lolling about in the wagon, waiting with eager anticipation for someone to come by with the combine and dump in a load of wheat or beans or corn.

The story of Grandma's polio always led my grandfather to mention Ruby, the Amish girl who helped the family during Betty's illness and recovery. She had lived in the large Amish community that his farm bordered. Despite his frequent interactions with its members, he always spoke of the Amish as exotic creatures. Considered theologically, historically, or in manner of life, they were not so different from his own Anabaptist denomina-

Palmer House. The trip was truncated because there were cows to milk back home, and dairy farmers hate imposing that duty on others for long.

Yes, his was a local horizon, but he was not incurious. He knew every road and almost every family, respectable or otherwise, in the county, and virtually everyone knew him. Indeed, I am still placed by folks in the area with reference to my status as his grandson. He was one of those individuals by whom others take their bearings, a fixed point in the map of the local mind.

He decided to run for office late in life and served several terms as a county commissioner and councilman. He set a county record, so far as anyone could tell, for amount of blood donated to the Red Cross, giving as often as possible until they finally had to turn him away because of his age. He volunteered at the hospital, and for a couple of decades he drove a school bus, never bothering to let it warm up before picking us up on subzero January mornings. He removed the snow from every neighbor's driveway without being asked. During the worst blizzards he would patrol the road, plowing what he could and pulling strangers out of drifts. He was generous, stubborn, proud, charming.

He was, in short, an unselfconsciously rooted agrarian citizen-leader and republican aristocrat. He never read Jefferson, I am sure, and it is almost as likely that he never voted for a Democrat, but he nevertheless was an almost impossibly pure example of the democratic Jeffersonian ideal. And there were once hundreds of thousands like him, leavening Middle America and making it into an iconic land of friendly homes and warm hearths. I do not mean the pioneers, who were at best ambiguously heroic, always chasing the sunset and leaving behind them dearth and desert; naturally, we honor them and bathe them in romance. No, I mean the sober,

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with whom she was pregnant—to live. She was gone, but all those children lived close by, even those who had once made their homes far away. Three lived within walking distance, not that anyone often walked out here in the flat, windswept Indiana countryside. So, too, in the area were innumerable cousins, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and folks of no blood relation who nevertheless could not resist calling him Grandpa Beer. God had been good.

Betty emerged from the polio with a limp and a crippled left arm that was nearly useless. She was not supposed to drive but she did anyway, often taking us to doctor's appointments or picking us up from Little League practice. She was admired throughout the neighborhood for her skill in the kitchen, and I well remember her wading through the

tion, which also shunned television, movies, jewelry, makeup, alcohol, higher education, and worldliness in general. If he had ever thought about that, it didn't seem to matter. His horizon was local, and what might have looked to scholars or outsiders as mere differences of emphasis or minor divergences to him made the Amish quite odd. Yet he was large-minded enough to allow that most of them seemed to be right with their Maker.

He didn't often leave Kosciusko and Elkhart counties. Forays outside the state, at least beyond Illinois or Michigan or Ohio, were rare indeed. He visited my parents when they lived briefly in Phoenix in the late 1960s. With them he visited his other son in Alaska in the late 1990s. And in 1944, he had honeymooned for two or three nights with Betty in Chicago. They had stayed at the

quiet members of the post-pioneer generations, the ones who worked harder to settle America than anyone has before or since, and who have been repaid by our popular culture with mockery and endless recriminations for robbing oh-so-many would-be Sister Carries of the satisfying careers and sex lives they so richly deserved. No matter. They're just about all gone now, and so is he.

By our unofficial family count, a thousand people showed up for the viewing, held over two days just a few hundred yards away from his biggest field. The line extended for hours outside the door of the funeral home on a characteristically raw and blustery late October day. Ruby and her family were there, along with concentric circles of relations, church members, and friends from the community—the vast majority of them still persisting, quietly, on a land that their own German-speaking grandfathers and great-grandfathers once settled with thousands of large families and small farms.

It was joyful to re-enter this little bit of near medieval *gemeinschaft* that somehow has survived into the 21st century. But after we buried him, after the traditional big lunch at the church's fellowship hall, the drive back past his house was filled with evidence of that older world's rapid decay. Nearly all the fences have been ripped out. Barns sag. Menacing semis rather than plodding tractors roar down the road. Litter lies in the ditches. The once settled, prosperous land has been emptied of big families and is continually losing its most able sons and daughters. It is being transformed into a giant meth lab, an agricultural industrial park, a rural slum, a place for losers. Another chapter in the unsettling of America. I am happy that he won't be around to read it. ■

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### **One important ally is not enthusiastic about the change of administration in Washington.**

Turkey's leaders are extremely concerned about the impending Obama presidency, so much so that they have alerted their embassies to prepare their press officers and media contacts to counter possible disturbing developments coming out of Washington. The Turks fear an Armenian genocide resolution, as was nearly passed by Congress in October. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who refers to the "incidents of 1915" to describe the Armenian massacres, spoke directly to the Obama transition team during his recent G-20 visit to Washington, expressing concern that the resolution will be revived in 2009 with presidential support. In a letter to the Armenian National Committee of America in May 2008, Obama reportedly wrote, "I share your view that the United States must recognize the events of 1915 to 1923, carried out by the Ottoman Empire as genocide..." He called the Bush administration's failure to identify it as such "inexcusable." The Turks also believe the increase in Democrats in the House and Senate will probably mean more votes in support of the resolution. While there is little doubt that there was systematic mass killing of Armenians during World War I, good relations with Turkey are far more important than appeasing a domestic lobby with a longstanding grievance about wrongs committed by people long dead and serving a government that no longer exists.



### **Confidential intelligence assessments relating to Afghanistan are increasingly grim.**

The CIA is predicting that the Taliban will have a sustainable presence in 75 percent of the countryside within a year and will effectively control all the access roads into Kabul from the south and east. The Agency believes that President Hamid Karzai will move to cut a deal with the Taliban to save his own extremely unpopular and incompetent administration, though the Taliban will probably make demands that are unacceptable to Karzai's Western backers, including complete amnesty, legalization as a political party, and key cabinet positions. The U.S. will surge as many as 40,000 troops into Afghanistan in the next year as part of a last-ditch effort to stabilize the country, but the increase in manpower will largely be offset by the departure of many European contingents.



### **Where is Ben-Ami Kadish?**

The New Jersey resident who was part of the Jonathan Pollard spy network was arrested last April 22 for spying for Israel. He was released that same day on \$300,000 bail and was due to return to court on May 22. But he did not reappear. No one in the media seems interested in the case. The Federal Court for the Southern District of New York website is supposed to include all past and pending court cases, but if you search for Kadish, you come up with nothing. If you call them to find out the status of the case, they promise to call you back but do not do so. The same happens when you call the Department of Justice. Perhaps someone should file a missing person's report.

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