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Kudos to C span.



6/7/94 Pioneer Press St Paul MN

Great Midwestern Think-Off will grapple with the meaning of life

LARRY MILLETT STAFF WRITER

New York Mills, a community of 972 souls in west central Minnesota, is not usually regarded as a hotbed of meta-physical discourse.

But come June 25, the town will give itself over to a serious bout of full-contact contemplation.

On that date, four deep thinkers will grapple with a mighty poser that has bedeviled humanity since Adam and Eve got the boot from paradise.

They question they will publicly ponder

is this: Does life have meaning and, if so, what is it?

Naturally, there are those who would argue that the meaning of life, like the contents of a hot dog, is beyond the ken of mere mortals, and that, in any event, ignorance is bliss.

But don't tell that to John Davis, founder of the New York Mills Cultural Center and organizer of next month's event, a cerebral celebration officially known as the Great Midwestern Think-Off.



■ On June 25, this small community of 972 in west central Minnesota will be the scene for the Great Midwestern Think-Off on the meaning of life.

THINK CONTINUED ON 5A ►

appointing Gordon Hinckley and Thomas as first and second counselors. Both had served in those positions. The president and counselors constitute the First Presidency, the church's top executive and policy-making authority.

He was next in line for the presidency as a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, the church's highest level of leadership after its president.

His ordination by the quorum to the church's top position took place Sunday in the Salt Lake Temple.

He, who will turn 84 this month, also is next in line to become the church's president, which is a position of great responsibility. He is followed in seniority on the list of Apostles by Monson, who is 66, and then by L. Tom Baker, the new acting president of the quorum, who is 69.

During World War II, the Mormon church has had presidents who were in their 70s or older when they took office. Four died in their 90s no longer able to carry out their official duties in their final years. Armand Mauss, a Mormon sociologist at Utah State University, told the Salt Lake Tribune that since 1940 the church has had either a weak or incapacitated president "half the

JEFFREY ULBRICH ASSOCIATED PRESS

KIGALI, RWANDA

Government forces struck at rebels near the southwestern town of Kabgayi on Monday in their first major counterattack since the Rwandan civil war began two months ago.

As the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels surrounded the capital of Kigali and cut all major roads out of Gitarama, provisional seat of the government 30 miles west of Kigali, the Rwandan army started a drive to push them back, said Maj. Jean-Guy Plante, the spokesman for the U.N. forces in Kigali.

The war is both a political and ethnic conflict. The government is controlled by the majority Hutu tribe, while the rebel forces are dominated by the minority Tutsi ethnic group.

"It is a major counterattack," said Plante. "Obviously they want to push back the whole of (rebel) forces from the south. They are trying to push them east of the river."

Maj. Gen. Paul Kagame, commander of the rebel army, denied any significant losses from the counteroffensive.

Plante said the shelling of the rebel-controlled airport Sunday, which forced an aircraft carrying an Italian political delegation to flee before discharging passengers or cargo, might have been part of a plan to boost morale among government troops. All relief flights were suspended.

Meanwhile, the 450-man U.N. force in Rwanda began rationing fuel Monday because of shortages due to the shutdown of Kigali airport.

John

THINK

▼ CONTINUED FROM 1A

The event, now in its second year, is believed to be unique in the United States.

"I think we've really struck a nerve with this," says Davis. "We supposedly live in this great information age, but nobody thinks anymore. Nobody is challenged."

Judging by the think-off's growing popularity, the public does indeed hunger for serious talk about serious ideas.

Last year's inaugural think-off attracted 125 contestants, a respectable turnout. This year, however, 650 entries poured in from 12 midwestern states. "It was overwhelming," Davis says. "We really had to scramble."

All entrants were required to submit a 750-word essay on the chosen topic. A team of judges then winnowed down the entries to four finalists.

This year's finalists include two on each side of the does-life-have-meaning question. The naysayers are a former professional gambler and commodities trader from St. Paul and a Zen Buddhist monk



Rodin's "Thinker" sitting atop a tractor is the logo for the Great Midwestern Think-off.

from Coon Rapids, Iowa, neither of whom is likely to remind anyone of Norman Vincent Peale.

Here's a sample from the essay of Warren Bishop, the ex-gambler: "I watch in contempt as others fan the flames of meaning, knowing in essence time is the mausoleum of all hope and desire."

Charles Carpenter, the monk, offers a more cryptic defense of meaninglessness: "Life, or more precisely, existence, does not have any intrinsic ... meaning. It just 'is,' beyond meaning and non-meaning, beyond sense and non-sense, beyond understanding and non-understanding." If Carpenter wins, the audience presumably will have to practice the sound of one hand clapping.

The other two finalists — Peter Hiltz, a fisherman turned teacher from Lakeville, and Joan Moore, a teacher and artist from Montrose, Iowa — take the opposite tack, arguing that life is its own reward.

Hiltz detects meaning in the age-old rhythms of the human experience: "This then is the meaning that life contains, the ancient cycle of death into birth, sorrow into joy. At its core, all meaning in life is one or the other."

For Moore, meaning lies in the web of relationships that make up everyday life. "We each have to make our own lives meaningful," her essay says.

The four amateur philosophers will square off in New York Mills at 7 p.m. on June 25, and it's expected that a full house — 150 people — will be on hand at the cultural center to watch all the cogitating.

Two judges — an assistant philosophy professor from Moorhead State University and a philosophy student — will select winners in the "yes" and "no" category following an initial round of debate and discussion. Then comes the grand championship, a head-to-head debate in which the ultimate winner will be determined by audience vote.

All four finalists this year will receive \$500 in cash and either a

gold, silver or bronze medal engraved with the contest's logo — Rodin's "Thinker" sitting atop a tractor.

And as with any big-time sporting event, the think-off will offer special box seats — for "armchair philosophers," says Davis — at \$50 each. Regular tickets cost \$8, and seats are still available.

Davis, a 32-year-old artist who moved to New York Mills from the Twin Cities seven years, dreamed up the think-off while on a long vacation in 1991.

Contemplating Bosnia, Somalia and other contemporary horrors, Davis says he got to wondering about the nature of good and evil and how "the average Joe and Jane," as he puts it, might confront the issue.

And so the think-off was born.

Initially, Davis expected that many of the contestants would come from the groves of academia, where abstract thinking is a way of life. But that has not proved to be the case.

"I don't think we had more than 10 entries this year from college professors," he says. "But we've gotten essays from an amazing variety of other people — factory workers, funeral directors, prison inmates, truck drivers."

Age has also run the gamut. "Our youngest entrant this year was 10 and our oldest was 92," Davis says.

Contestants have shattered stereotypes as well. Last year, for example, a 16-year-old cheerleader from Wichita, Kan., was among the four finalists who tried to fathom the nature of evil, which — as we all know now — has something to do with the ownership of a professional basketball team.

In any event, the cheerleader, contrary to expectations, argued that people are inherently no good. Rah. Rah. (Last year's audience, torn between good and evil, couldn't agree on a winner and ended up naming two champions, although the cheerleader was not among them.)

Davis believes the think-off will continue to gain popularity, and if that proves true, who knows what could happen next?

Maybe Nike or Adidas will introduce a line of state-of-the-art thinking caps. Maybe millionaires will organize the National Thinking League (how about the Minnesota Musers for a local franchise?). And maybe all across this great land, rumination will replace Beavis and Butthead as the coolest thing going.

Then again, maybe not.

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...her contempt for
arch authority in the June 2 arti-
to remain one more day in
r jobs. Who needs them? If they
not accurately teach the faith,
should we pay good money and
rust our children to them so
y can have their faith de-
ayed?

Actually, I would like to see the
e and bishops take this a step
ther and clarify a few more is-
s. Let's stop debating abortion,
ificial contraception, divorce,
nosexuality and other errors
t will never be accepted by the
holic Church. This will enable us

en cannot be priests because "tradi-
tionally" they have not been, and,
more specifically, that Christ chose
only men to be Apostles, is a weak
attempt of explaining why the
Catholic Church continues to disre-
gard the equal rights of women and
enforce patriarchal systems of
power that can no longer be ex-
plained or justified.

Would the pope ever make a
statement such as: "None of
Christ's Apostles were Italian,
therefore it is tradition that we
have no Italian priests — or
popes"? Would the Catholic Church
support a pope who would say:

community will not allow this mi-
sogyny to continue.

SHELLEY HARRIS
ST. PAUL

Regarding John Paul's recent
communiqué barring dialogue
about ordination for women:

It seems so strange that the pope
is convinced that sacramental
grace can flow through only one
gender, the male, in priestly roles.
That surely limits God's creativity.

I suggest that the time has come
to form a church of small peace
communities all over, such as those
Jesus himself and also the very
early Christians enjoyed. I have an
idea that many priests and bishops,
particularly the prophetic ones,
would want to join. Let us grace-
fully encourage the male hierarchical
caste system to phase out. It is my
conviction that all of us were
"priested" when we came forth
from our mothers' birth waters.

Here are questions to consider:
Shall we do what pleases Jesus, or
mind the pope 'til all Hell freezes?

ROSE TILLEMANS
MINNEAPOLIS



An American soldier wades through water under heavy artillery and machine gun fire to reach the Normandy beach on D-Day.

For vet, memories aren't of glory

In 1990, I visited Omaha Beach, where I saw these words in a small chapel at the American Cemetery: "Think not only upon their passing. Remember the glory of their spirit."

When I returned, I showed my pictures to a veteran of D-Day. I anticipated a few stories about the bravery of June 6. But, overcome by the nightmarish memories of his youth, the man bolted from the room.

As a baby boomer, I could look back to "the glory of their spirit." The ex-soldier, however, had other thoughts. He had once been cast into hell — and hell is what remained.

M.H. ZAWITOWSKI
ST. PAUL



Crossed rifles in sand pay tribute to American soldier killed in D-Day invasion June 6, 1944.

After reading John Sondag's May 31 guest column regarding restricting Roman Catholic priesthood to men, ... I am wondering, if Jesus Christ took on human form and returned to earth in 1994, how would he feel about the issue of women priests? Would he say that thousands of years ago, the first time he was here for a short 33 years, he had only male disciples and therefore, he will do the same now? Or would he simply tell us that all of those thousands of years ago, times were different, and in order for him to accomplish things quickly and decisively (he had already rocked too many boats) he decided to go with the status quo, assuming that social justice and equality would be the things that would be remembered and "traditionalized" about his life and teachings, not the fact that he was a man.

I feel bad for anyone whose worship experience relies on the gender of the person leading the worship. Lucky for Rome, most of the Catholics I know don't pay a bit of attention to any of it.

DEBRA MUELLER
ST. PAUL

Quist problems

Personally, I have no problem with Julie Quist having an abortion, associating with lesbians and then finding religion and having a family.

Politically, the problem I have with Julie Quist is that she and her husband would show no such tolerance toward me.

RAE KELGREN
ST. PAUL