

THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

This month's cover is *The Creation of Adam*, a detail from Michelangelo's magnificent ceiling fresco in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. Painted in 1508, it was one of the first sections completed in the project that was his full-time work from 1508 to 1512. Fresco is tempera on plaster, in which paint is applied to wet plaster. It fuses with the lime as it dries, becoming permanent. Michelangelo's genius is apparent when we realize that he was not a painter but a sculptor, and that he had never painted in the fresco medium except briefly as a student. Also, as a sculptor he was free to move about his work, but to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling he had to lie flat on his back on a scaffolding 40 feet in the air. It would take months of studying the ceiling to find all the theological and historical subtleties in it, and we have chosen to look at one of them in this month's cover. At first glance the impression is that God has just created Adam and is reaching out to infuse life into him—but the Bible says, “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). Look at the hands. Adam has already been given life, and now God is reaching out to him as a loving Father reaches out to his child. God has stretched his arm and his hand to their full length, and it is now up to Adam to reach out and complete the contact with him. His body is relaxed, however, and his hand is flaccid. While God shows energy and enthusiasm, Adam is half-hearted and apathetic. This is a powerful allegory of the relationship of man to God, and there can be no doubt that Michelangelo knew exactly what he was doing when he painted them that way.

Richard R. Losch+

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A Word from the Editor

I love watching nature documentaries, and I never cease to be amazed at how many species, from ants to apes, are what we call “social” animals. They function well and often produce well only when they interact with others of their species. Many cannot survive at all as individuals. This even occasionally crosses species. In what biologists call symbiosis, two completely different species can survive only when they interact with each other, each supplying something that the other must have. Anthropologists universally agree that man is also a social animal, and that at least for good mental health if nothing else, he needs regular social intercourse with other humans.

Today, for the first time in human history, that is breaking down. We rely for communication not on personal contact, but rather on electronic devices that increasingly separate us from each other. At least when our main device was the telephone we heard each other's voice, complete with all the expression and intonation that that entails. Our younger generation does not even have that. They communicate on “social” (which is really anti-social) media in sound bites and memes. They text each other rather than talking, interpolating their messages with “emojis” and terse abbreviations. They never even hear a voice, let alone experience a facial expression or the touch of a hand. Recently a young lady said to me, “I hate the telephone. Talking on it makes me feel unsafe, like they're invading my space.” How sadly lonely she must be!

I hope that this is not just an old man's rant about the young, because I sincerely fear for the mental health of our society, and I believe that we can do something about it. I believe that the lack of personal contact is a major contributor to the exponential rise of violence, crime and division that result from a loss of respect for human life and dignity. What can we do about it? We cannot force ourselves into the lives of others without violating that very dignity that we want to restore. What we can do is pray. Praying for others and for our own relationships with others has an amazing power to unify. It is

very hard to remain aloof from those for whom we pray, let alone to disdain or despise them. Another amazing thing is that even when people do not know you are praying for them, they often sense the developing of some kind of spiritual bond, and they will respond to it positively. It will also make the one who is praying more sensitive to what he is praying about, and thus more able to recognize what he can do and how when the opportunity arises to act.

Try it. I think you will like it.

Father Rick Losch+

Be Wordly Wise

Quintessence

Aristotle proposed that everything in the world is composed of four elements (*stoicheia*, στοιχεῖα), earth, air, fire and water. This concept remained an integral part of “natural philosophy” from Aristotle’s time (4th century BC) until the rise of science in the early Renaissance, and it was still commonly believed by many until well into the 19th century. In Medieval Latin these were the *quattuor essentiae* or four elements. Aristotle also believed that while things on earth are flawed and corrupted with evil, everything in the heavens is perfect—everything moves in perfect circles, and the sun and moon are perfect spheres without blemish (Galileo dashed that idea when he discovered sunspots and lunar craters). Because they are perfect, heavenly bodies must be made of a perfect fifth element, the *pemto stoicheio* (πέμπτο στοιχείο) or *quinta essentia*. According to Aristotle this fifth element is latent in all earthly things, so when something demonstrates extreme goodness or purity it is allowing the *quinta essentia* to function. The word quintessence came into English from Medieval Latin via Old French. It means the most perfect representative of a quality or class, as in “He demonstrates the quintessence of good sportsmanship,” or “She is the quintessential genteel lady.”

Richard R. Losch+

Baptism and the Plague

Infant baptism has been a contentious point in Christianity since the early days of the Protestant Reformation. Ulrich Zwingli denied its validity in about 1520, and thus inspired the Anabaptist movement.¹ As Protestant sects evolved, some continued the ancient practice of infant baptism and some rejected it, and there was not a lot of further discussion about it. In the 1950s and 60s it became a heated topic among Protestant theologians, and then it faded out, more from weariness of the arguments than from having reached any agreement.

In the literature of the first hundred years of Christianity there is no mention of it at all. It is neither affirmed nor denied. The New Testament makes several references to the baptism of whole families, but there is no conclusive evidence that this included infants and small children, particularly when it refers to Greco-Roman families. In that culture young children were nonentities with few more rights and privileges than slaves,² and thus were often completely ignored in discussions that involved adults. In literature of that era any reference to a *familia* (family) extends far beyond just parents and their children, but means an extended family that can include many people.

The first known reference to child baptism in Christian literature is in AD 180 in a proclamation from Irenaeus on heresies. He simply mentions it, neither affirming nor opposing it, which indicated that it was in common practice and was not a

¹ The term Anabaptist has its roots in Greek, and basically means to baptize again. The Anabaptists denied the validity of infant baptism, and required that all who had been baptized as children must be re-baptized. The most significant modern descendants of the Anabaptists are the Mennonites (of which the Amish are a branch). The Baptist Church, which also denies infant baptism, did not originate with them. It is an offshoot of the English Puritans, whose main descendants are the Congregationalists.

² In the Greco-Roman culture slaves had no rights whatsoever. They were not considered human beings, but chattel property to be possessed, like a good table or a useful domestic animal. If they were freed, as often happened, they were then again legally recognized as human beings.

controversial issue in the Church. The next known reference is not until 20 years later, when in AD 200 Tertullian wrote a treatise on baptism in which he opposes the baptism of children who are too young to understand what it means. It is also clear in his treatise, however, that infant baptism was a common practice in the Church, even though he disapproved of it. In about 215 the theologian and liturgist Hippolytus proposed a specific rite for the baptism of infants as distinguished from that commonly used at the time for both adults and children.

During this time theologians also began developing a specific theology dealing with infant baptism. It was essentially that since the sacramental grace of baptism is a free gift of God and cannot be merited or earned, receiving it does not depend on human virtue or on reason or understanding. Infants, while they bear Original Sin, are because of their ignorance innocent of actual sin. Although as yet they are incapable of understanding God's grace, they are just as capable of receiving that grace as are rational adults. Since it was the Church's belief from the very beginning that baptism is necessary for salvation, it is not reasonable to withhold it from infants, who (especially in those days) are at least as vulnerable to sudden death as are adults.

Apparently, although infant baptism seems to have been practiced since the earliest times, there was a sudden great surge of it in the latter part of the 2nd century that may have led to Tertullian's objection to it. Historians have sought for some cause of this, yet there is little information in the literature of the time to explain it. Recent thinking, however, has come up with a plausible explanation. In the middle of the 2nd century the Romans sent a large expeditionary force into its ancient enemy Parthia (modern Iran). These soldiers were deployed from every corner of the Roman Empire. The attack was unsuccessful, but when they returned home they brought back with them a disease theretofore unknown in Europe. From what was written about it at the time, historians believe it was smallpox. The pandemic was devastating. It was a new disease and the people had no immunity to it. It killed 90% of the population of a large section of Egypt, and wiped out an estimated 20% of the entire

population of the Roman Empire. Caravans of carts laden with bodies were seen leaving the cities 24 hours a day, to be taken to continuously burning pyres. There is evidence that in Rome there were 5,000 deaths daily.¹ This pandemic, known as the Antonine Plague, raged during the reign of the Antonine emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. AD 161-180).

The Romans, of course, attributed the plague to the anger of the gods. They went into a frenzy of temple building and special sacrifices to appease them. They also blamed the “atheistic” Christians and Jews and stepped up persecutions of them. To the Romans, anyone who failed to sacrifice to the Roman gods was an atheist. Atheists were considered traitors, because by angering the gods they endangered Rome. The Christians also attributed it to the anger of God, but said that he was angry because of the immorality of the pagans. The fact that the mortality rate in the Christian communities was significantly lower than elsewhere convinced them that this was God’s retribution on Rome, and their own deaths were mere “collateral damage.” The likely reason for the difference in mortality rates is not only that the Christians often had little contact with other Romans, but also that they were far more caring of one another than the typical Roman, nursing the sick and helping the needy. Notwithstanding, many Christians also died, and since smallpox is even more lethal to children than it is to adults, huge numbers of children died. The Christians believed that baptism is necessary to salvation, and were loath to deny their children that gift. As a result, it became the normal practice to baptize their children as soon as possible after birth. That remained the universal practice of the Church until the 16th century, when some Protestant sects began to deny its validity.

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¹ We generally think of such things in association with the Black Death in medieval Europe, but ancient history records many similar plagues. A plague in the 6th century was a factor in the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Most of them cannot be specified as to the actual disease, although in the majority of them it seems to have been either bubonic plague or smallpox.

Martha and Mary of Bethany

Martha and Mary, the sisters of Jesus' friend Lazarus, were not only good friends of Jesus, but were clearly also his disciples. The two not only had very different personalities, but they were unusual by the standards of the time in that they do not seem to have been married, and they lived with their brother. One or both women, and possibly also Lazarus, may have been widowed. Adult siblings living in the same house together was unheard of in Judea in those times, but it appears that they may each have lived in their own homes in a compound. We draw this conclusion because when Jesus and his twelve apostles all showed up, there seems to have been no problem housing and feeding them on short notice. We read that Martha "opened *her* home to them" (Lk. 10:38). This also indicates that money was no problem for them, for few poor people in those days could have afforded to house and feed thirteen or more people who showed up unexpectedly on their doorstep.

A major cultural phenomenon in ancient times that still exists in much of the world today is hospitality.¹ In the earliest days this was a matter of survival among those who essentially lived in a wilderness. If a stranger showed up, even if there were a chance that he was from an enemy tribe, you immediately offered him food, protection and shelter (Gen. 18:1ff). Violating hospitality either by denying it or by abuse of it was a major social infraction, and tribal war could even be started over it. It was a matter of survival—you offered it because there might come a time when you would need it yourself. Jesus and his followers were friends of Martha's, not strangers, but that made no difference in the rules of hospitality. In modern Western society, short of a dire emergency, you would never show up at a friend's home unexpected and ask to be fed and sheltered, but that was common in the ancient Middle East. When they arrived, Martha at once started preparing a meal and a

¹ This was especially true in the Middle East and in Greece. Many of the major conflicts in the Old Testament and in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the result of violations of hospitality.

place for them to stay.

Mary and Martha may have been sisters, but they were very different personalities. While Martha was bustling about preparing a meal and arranging sleeping accommodations, which is what a woman was expected to do, Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach (Lk. 10:39). Jesus' arrival would not have gone unnoticed in that small town, and probably a large crowd had gathered. Finally, Martha came out and rebuked not Mary, but Jesus, saying, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (Lk. 10:40). But he in turn rebuked her saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Speaking someone's name twice is very rare in the Bible, and only occurs when God is calling someone to do something very important (e.g. Gen. 22:11, Ex. 3:4, 1 Sam. 3:4, Acts 9:4). Here Jesus was calling Martha to be less concerned with her worldly duties and to focus on her spiritual ones. While what she was doing was right and good, she needed to reorganize her priorities.

One of Jesus' important encounters with Martha was at Lazarus' death. She and Mary had sent to him in Galilee to tell him of Lazarus' critical illness. Nonetheless he chose to delay until after Lazarus had been dead for four days (John 11:17).¹ When he finally arrived she once again rebuked him, saying that if he had come earlier he could have saved her brother's life. He told her that Lazarus would live again, and of course, she thought he was speaking of the General Resurrection. It was then that she affirmed her belief that he is "the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27). This is very

¹ He waited in Galilee until Lazarus was dead (John 11:14). This delay was intentional, but his reasons for it are more complicated than we can go into here. It was a three to four days' walk from Galilee to Bethany (which is about two miles outside Jerusalem). Since the Jews always buried their dead before sundown on the day they died, Lazarus would have been in the tomb at least four days when they arrived (John 11:39).

significant, because the only other one who made that affirmation openly was Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8:29).

Jesus' last time at their home in Bethany was when he was on his way to Jerusalem just before his death. Martha put on a dinner in his honor, and Lazarus (after his raising) "was one of those at the table with him" (John 12:2). John would have mentioned this only if he wanted to indicate that Lazarus and Jesus were close friends. His early readers, knowing the seating customs at dinners, would have recognized that meaning immediately. It is also noteworthy that it was Martha who "served," meaning that she was the hostess. This and many other references to her indicate that she was in effect, if not legally, the leader in the compound, a role that normally would have gone to the oldest male (Lazarus). It is only conjecture, but it is possible that she was the source of the money (which seems to have been considerable), perhaps left to her by a now dead husband, and that the land on which the compound stood was hers (Jewish law allowed women to own property).

At the dinner Mary brought out a jar of expensive ointment, poured it out on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. In ancient Judea this was a sign of extreme devotion. Judas criticized her, saying that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor.¹ Jesus immediately came to her defense, praising her devotion. There is a similar story of a prostitute washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair (Lk. 7:38). In AD 591 Pope Gregory I conflated these two stories with one about Mary Magdalene, identifying all three women as prostitutes. Some even say that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are the same person. There is absolutely nothing in the Bible or tradition to support any of this. Mary's action was purely one of devotion.

Soon after that evening Jesus and the Apostles went to Jerusalem, and a week later he was condemned and crucified. The family in Bethany may have expected him to stop there again

¹ John says that the real reason Judas was angry was that he was the treasurer of the group, and was stealing money from them (John 12:6).

on his return to Galilee, but that return did not happen. There is no mention of them being at the foot of the cross, or of the sisters being among the women who prepared Jesus for burial. We know nothing more about them. Perhaps when they heard of the crucifixion they fled, because they knew the Temple priests wanted to kill Lazarus (John 12:9ff). There are several early traditions of their fate, but none are particularly reliable. One says that they were set adrift in a boat with no oars and left to die on the sea, but the boat drifted to Cyprus where they were saved (another tradition says that they drifted to Gaul). There is also a tradition that Lazarus became the Bishop of Cyprus, where he died naturally 30 years later.¹ His feast day is December 17. There is also a story that Martha converted a large portion of southern Gaul (France), where her relics are enshrined at Tarasçon in Provence. Her feast day is July 29.

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Thy Rod and Thy Staff

Most of us have known Psalm 23 all our lives, but unfortunately this familiarity has led many to take it for granted without exploring the enormous number of fascinating facts that lie behind it. Understanding them greatly enriches its meaning.

Sheep herding is one of the oldest professions in the world. Sheep were one of the first farm animals domesticated by humans about 13,000 years ago.² Shepherding methods changed very little over thousands of years until the appearance of modern technology a little more than a century ago. In most of the underdeveloped world it is still done exactly the same way that it has been done for millennia. A Syrian shepherd today would understand exactly what David was talking about when he wrote the 23rd Psalm 3,000 years ago.

¹ This is highly unlikely, since the first Bishop of Cyprus in AD 45 was Saint Barnabas, who accompanied St. Paul in his early journeys. No one named Lazarus is on any record of early Bishops of Cyprus.

² Dogs were domesticated about 20,000 years ago, but they were first used for protection and hunting, and not as farm animals.

Because most shepherds were very poor they were usually at the bottom rungs of society, yet good ones were respected as highly skilled laborers. They had the responsibility of caring for one of the most valuable commodities of the ancient world, which was sheep.¹ To us it might seem like a simple matter just to lead a bunch of animals out to a pasture, but it was far from simple. It took a great deal of skill, knowledge and experience to know where to take them at what time of year, to find good pasturage and safe water for them, to protect them from thieves and from wolves, lions and the many other predators that roam the wild even today, and to see that the sheep (who are not very bright) do not wander off and get separated from the flock, where they become easy prey.

For thousands of years shepherds have generally carried with them only four tools. These are a knife, a sling, a staff and a “rod.” The knife was not a weapon, but was simply for cutting whatever needed to be cut. The sling was rarely used as a weapon, even though an experienced slinger could project a pebble almost as fast as a bullet and hit his target at a considerable distance (as Goliath learned the hard way).² While the sling could be used to drive off predators prowling at a distance, it was more often used to control wandering sheep. Even though dogs were used for herding in ancient times, few shepherds could afford one. If the shepherd saw a lamb starting to wander off too far away to shoo it back personally, he would sling a pebble near it on its far side. This would startle it and send it scooting back to the flock. The staff, also called a crook, was a sturdy stick about five feet long, bent into a hook at the top. It served several purposes. It gave him something to lean against, and it helped him steady himself when he was clambering through rough terrain, which he often had to do, especially when in search of a lost sheep. The hook served to help

¹ Sheep provided wool (for millennia the most important textile), leather, and food (meat, milk and cheese), as well as horns, hooves and bone for tools and decoration. They were also the most important sacrificial animal.

² Most ancient armies had a large corps of professional slingers.

a lamb that had slipped into a ravine or was caught in the brush. He could hook the lamb's leg or neck and give it a gentler boost back to safety. The staff also served as a prod to keep the flock together. Sheep are herd animals, and feel safest when they are close to each other. If the flock starts to spread out too much, a few gentle taps with the staff on some of the outside sheep will make the flock tighten up again very quickly. The last tool is the rod. To most of us that word means a slender shaft, but that is not at all what it was. The rod was more of a club. It was a sturdy thick stick about three feet long, with a heavy knob at the end. Sometimes the knob was embedded with sharp stones or bits of iron. It was a formidable weapon that usually hung from the waist, and was used only in close combat. In a skilled hand, a single blow of the rod could easily dispatch a wolf or lion. Whenever in the Old Testament we see the word rod it is the Hebrew *shevet* (שֵׁבֶט). This is the same word that is used for a king's scepter. The scepter is a symbol of the king's responsibility to be the shepherd of his people and to protect them from their enemies.¹ The medieval mace was a weapon that derived directly from the shepherd's rod.²

Sheep are easily frightened, and a nervous or jittery flock is visibly calmed when they see that their shepherd is near. They seem to know instinctively that he will protect them. Any shepherds would understand immediately what David (who had once been a shepherd) meant in Psalm 23. He had identified God as his shepherd, and said, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The flock, knowing that their shepherd is with them, are calm in the knowledge that he will protect them with his rod, and that with his staff he will keep them together in safety and help them if they should fall into difficulty.

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¹ In Christian tradition the bishop is a shepherd, but he carries a more peaceful symbol, the staff or crook.

² When the Bible refers to a "rod of iron" (Ps. 2:9, Rev. 15:16) it does not mean an iron rod, but a wooden shepherd's rod with iron spikes set in the head, like a mace.

He Restoreth My Soul

While tradition is the backbone of stability, it can sometimes bind us to inaccurate ideas that we are loath to let go. This has happened in many instances of Bible translation. For example, in the 14th century John Wycliffe, in the first English translation of the Bible, identified Joseph and Jesus as carpenters. While all the evidence indicates that they were much more likely stonemasons, the image of the carpenter is now so ingrained into our culture that it is unlikely that it will ever be challenged except among scholars.¹ So it is with Psalm 23:3, which in the majority of translations is rendered the equivalent of “He restoreth my soul.”² The Hebrew uses the word *yeshu-vev* (יִשׁוּבֵב), which derives from *shuv* (שׁוּב). In almost every case that this word is used in the Old Testament it refers to a shepherd retrieving a lost sheep.

Sheep are neither very bright nor very brave. They feel secure only when they are all together as a flock. It is extraordinarily rare for a sheep to separate himself from the flock voluntarily. However, not being very bright, they can easily become separated by sheer carelessness. In the pasture, if a sheep sees a choice tuft of grass he will go over to nibble it. If another catches his eye, he will head for that one. Little by little he can nobble his way a good distance from the flock, which by that time may have moved out of sight over a hill or around a bend. When the sheep looks up and sees that the flock is gone he panics. His first reaction is to run for cover behind a tree or a rock, where he huddles down and starts bleating pitifully. Again, not being very bright, he does not realize that his cries

¹ It is not really all that important. All that matters is that we know they were skilled laborers, and thus were not impoverished, yet would have been low on the social scale of the time. On the other hand, the physical strength he would have gained as a stonemason would explain how he was able to endure the torture of his scourging and yet still have the strength to carry his cross at least part of the way to Golgotha.

² “Revives” (Jerusalem, NEB); “has converted” (Rheims-Douay); “refreshes” (NAB); “renews” (Tanakh). Wycliffe: “He conuertide my soule.”

are an open invitation to predators. Wolves, lions and bears roamed the hills of the ancient Middle East liberally, so it was important for the shepherd to find his lost sheep as quickly as possible. Small flocks were relatively easy to count, and the shepherd did so frequently. As soon as he realized that a sheep was missing he would go in search of it, even if it meant leaving the rest of the flock untended for a while (Lk. 14:34). Even if it has been gone for only a short time, the sheep becomes almost catatonic from fear and cannot walk. The shepherd hoists it onto his shoulders, holding its feet in his hands, and carries it back to the flock.¹ The Hebrew word for this process (*shuv*) is what we usually translate restore in Psalm 23. In many art forms we see images of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders in this way.

In every biblical reference to this the word used is a direct derivative of *shuv*. While this can correctly be translated restore, it means to restore in the sense of to recover or retrieve, not repair.² A shepherd's reputation, his "good name," depended on his ability to keep the sheep where they belong, and to recover those who had strayed and return them to the right path: "The Lord is my Shepherd ... He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake."

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The Epistle is Online

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¹ Contemporary descriptions and archaeological finds of sheep's bones indicate that sheep were much smaller in ancient times than they are today. Carrying an average adult sheep today would require a pretty strong man, but in those days working men were strong and sheep were smaller.

² In Psalm 23:3 the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the verb *epistrepheiv* (επιστρεφειν), to bring back.

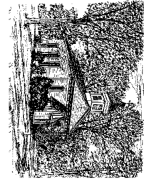
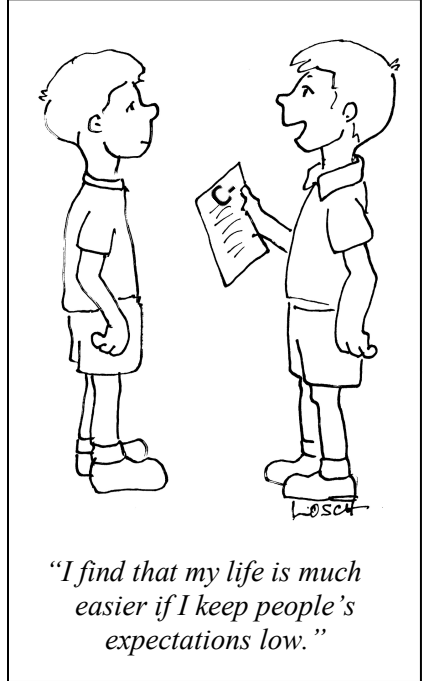
A Touch of Trivia

The oldest human in history whose age is authenticated was Jeanne Louise Calment of Arles, France, born in 1875. Her father ran an art goods store. He would go in the back room make her wait on Vincent van Gogh when he came in, because he was "ill-tempered and stank." She took up fencing at 85, and rode her bicycle until she was over 100. At the age of 117 she quit smoking because they convinced her that it was bad for her health. She attributed her longevity to olive oil, port wine and chocolate. She died in 1997 at age 122.

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