

The Literary Club Presidential Address – October 28, 2019

170 years less a day ago, the Literary Club was born. Her dozen fathers' average age was 25. They were, as President Edmundson described in his 2009 Address, "young guys in a young city." They formed our Club perhaps feeling unwelcome by the Semi-Colon Club, founded earlier by Dr. Daniel Drake and other leading male and female writers in burgeoning Cincinnati. Our Club's founders nourished their motherless infant, knowing she would stretch their minds and enrich the culture of then America's sixth largest metropolis.

24-year old Ainsworth Rand Spofford handwrote the proceedings in legible penmanship, that now nearly extinct artform. Appointed 15 years later as Librarian of Congress by Abraham Lincoln, Ainsworth inscribed the purpose of this Club:

[T]o discuss the leading questions of the age; to compare views on all the topics of politics, morals, science and literature; to acquire and communicate ideas, and to develop our habits of thought and our faculties of speech. And for the practical attainment of these objects, with a firm faith in intellectual progress, we hereby pledge to each other our hearts and hands, and to draw closer together the brotherhood of mind....

So we began and thrive in 2019 as America's oldest continuing literary club.

Congratulations, old lady. You are our Monday mistress. You've served us well – those in the majority and those of us who carry on corporeally. This hall is blessed with the wisdom of our ghosts and the energy of the living. We celebrate tradition. And it is our tradition to evolve this Club in our time to strut upon the stage.

1849 Club meetings were dinner and debates. Two members took the affirmative, two the negative, and the President summarized before a vote. The first question? "Ought a system of

universal and liberal education to be conducted at the public expense in this country?’ That failed 5-4. The next topic? “Ought capital punishment to be abolished?” That passed 9-3.

Here is my question tonight. What does it mean today to be the **Literary Club**?

Let’s start by asking why we joined. It was not to be “clubbable,” much as we expect that of ourselves. We’re not a Moose Lodge or an Oddfellows Hall. We’re not a secret fraternity or a canasta league. We enjoy one another’s company, and forever may it be so. But that is not the heart of it.

We are not a social club, though we become friends and colleagues. We more than respect - we expect - differing views. We care about and for each other. Being social is a healthy branch but not our tree.

We don’t gather to exchange business cards. We enjoy food and beverage, but we’re not a bourbon society or a liverwurst and cheese gourmet club.

What then is our essence?

I think President Carey approached it in his 2010 address. “I love the papers – Well, most of them.” Those that challenged him, like Bishop Herb Thompson’s paper about rap. Those that educated him, like Ted Silberstein’s. Those that told stories as though we were huddled around an ancient campfire - like those of Ollie Gale, Norm Levy’s presentation entirely in verse “Rhymes for our Times,” Bob Norrish’s “Dear Mom,” a deeply personal letter he failed to deliver in her life. “Each picked me up and transported me to another place.” Well said, Gibby. Or as President McGavran phrased it in his address about Monday evenings, “We never really know who will be touched that night. Who knows? We may see a star, invisible to the tormented worlds ... and hear another voice to join the chorus in our heads.” Whether we see a star or a

moon or a black hole on any Monday evening, each of us grows from crafting and editing and polishing and presenting his offering and from absorbing those of others.

Is this enough for our Club to be what it can be as a brotherhood of mind? In our time, to what do we pledge our hearts and hands?

I think the answer comes from this - we gather here for the love of words. Words shape us as we shape them. It is the play of phrases and humor and hopes and anguish and history and poetry and memoir and yes, what we experience each Monday that we celebrate. And the stream becomes a river of thought that flows into an ocean with faith that the waves will generate currents of intellectual progress.

We know this from how we labor when it's our turn to come with a paper. Preparing one can be like rearing a child. We can't put it down. When we turn away, it cries out for attention, one more edit, a that instead of a which? a comma or a semi-colon here? Feed me, help me become what I am meant to be, the paper cries. Sometimes the draft rebels. So we dress it up – or down. We caress it, abandon it, come back to it, and in that embrace we find ourselves through our literary offspring, and we're the better for it.

It is the power of words that draws us here. And this is not simply to be captives of word spells our members cast. It is at its deepest, as our founders declared, to “communicate ideas” that enrich our minds, our city and our world.

There is much at stake. The literary arts are at risk. Almost all of us grew to adulthood with television displacing reading time, most of us with the internet, some of us getting news from tweets, each digiphone spruiking for our attention and gathering believers into tribal corners. Newspapers shrink and vanish. Walter Cronkite has no heir. We live on bursts of sports

scores and stock market moves. TV channels channel our politics. Smartphones are opioid devices of our time. Why read when Alexa and Siri speak the answers? What has happened to words that have meaning, truth that is real, debate that challenges rather than insults, stories that inspire?

We share our founders' mission, but we are not frozen in their epoch or the glaciers of the past. Our charge is to adapt the literary mission to our time. We change like language itself.

Ponder the quotidian pronoun "they." Last month the Merriam-Webster Dictionary approved an alternative meaning for "they" as "used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary." Instead of being a he or a she, an individual can identify as both. As Merriam-Webster explains, "If I were introducing a friend who preferred to use the pronoun *they*, I would say, 'This is my friend, Jay. I met them at work.'"

This may startle. But when the oldest American dictionary maker nods approval, it's a powerful sign of gender identity evolving, of a four-letter word stretching and transforming how we view ourselves and others.

Like vocabulary, institutions change. Great traditions are not fossils. To live and thrive, traditions must be recreated. So what shall we do together?

T.S. Eliot left us a clue – "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Consider the 18th century London club of Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, of Joshua Reynolds and Adam Smith. They dined over words, debating and honing their thoughts that became classic works. They did not listen quietly and politely shake hands in a receiving line. They were each other's

challengers and collaborators, foils and editors. And the literary friction of their evenings together generated light that beams through the centuries.

In that spirit our Club is launching an experiment. Some of our esteemed members have volunteered to serve as a Mentor or a Critic, available on request and by agreement. You can ask a Mentor or a Critic to join you in the quest to be a better writer and communicator. A Mentor will discuss literary technique, offer editorial comment, be available as a companion in your struggles with words. Or a member may enlist a Critic. A Critic would offer constructive criticism before or after a paper, explore how to deepen and present it, help us overcome hurdles that arise in the race to come with a paper. Seek out a Mentor or a Critic or become one for a fellow member.

Or join a Writers Circle. 16 of us meet monthly now. We critique each other's drafts of short stories, books, essays, book proposals and poems. We discuss editing, biblical narrative, scene, point of view and other literary topics. Last week we reviewed chapters of a John Brackett novel in progress and conversed about songs that define us. For some the Writers Circle inspires a path to publication. For all it's a roundtable of literary nourishment, a collaborative master class in writing. If there's interest, we can start a second Circle or a third.

This spring on a Thursday we'll host here a Poet's Evening for members and guests male and female. This builds on our consensus to have mixed company in this building on special occasions, just as in the 19th and 20th centuries there were more than one Ladies Nights.

Consider this, our home for almost 90 years. We occupy it three hours a week except for summer. Let's consider how this space can be used to promote the literary arts beyond Monday evenings. Why not invite writers and other literary arts groups to meet here on occasion?

Consider writers and teachers in our community to invite as guests and membership candidates. We want members committed as we are to the literary arts. Let's continue to diversify our membership by age, profession, race, national origin, creed and otherwise. That's essential if we are to assemble, hear and be the voices of our day.

Through digital publishing let's explore how we share our papers and audiofiles with the community. Long ago we decided to bind in red and gold two copies of our papers and deliver a set to the Museum Center, available publicly as a rich archives of Cincinnati history and thought. With author permission, papers and audiofiles can be instantly available to anyone, allowing our distant and infirm associate members to join us remotely Monday evenings or later and for the world to access our offerings. We could launch a Literary Club podcast series or a YouTube channel. We could, as this Club once did, publish an annual Best of the Club anthology, available on the web or at local bookstores. In a print-on-demand world we could provide an outlet for the works of our members.

These ideas are offered to stretch how we think about our grand old lady in her 170th year. She can be what we choose to make her beyond our Monday nights together.

Back to the papers, our central and worthy exercise. Let's be bold in our offerings. Each paper should make us reach, to go deep, then deeper, to move beyond our usual path, to take our voice to a braver level. You know when that happens, when a paper burns into you, makes you think, stirs you. Who was not moved by Jack Lindy and Bill Friedlander and Gordon Christenson? Who was not enriched and challenged by Ted Striker's excursion into anesthesia or Dick Wendel's insider's analysis of our healthcare system? How many of us began a dream journal after Bill Pratt's *Perchance to Dream*? Were you engaged when Tom Bennett reintroduced debate as a literary format? Did you think differently about the homeless when

Doug Maundrell reminisced about Two Dollar Betty? I must stop here, or I'll exhaust the membership Directory.

With your turn at the podium, dare with your words, gather them like a mother hen to her chicks, sound them like a bugle or bassoon, shape them like a Rodin or a Giacometti, let them sing out like Luciano Pavarotti or Beyoncé. Do this so we might take your offerings into our souls as though supplications, so they might echo within us like the Bhagavad-Gita or the Gettysburg Address or the poetry of Rumi or the Book of Job.

May this Club inspire us to be better writers and communicators, to advance the mission for which our Monday mistress beckons. May each Monday night be a blessing and a summons. The majority passed the torch to us. We must hand it blazing to those who follow. We do this for what words can mean. We do this for the love of words.

Joseph J. Dehner

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