

## The Literary Club

Budget – February 25, 2013

### *Après Soirée*

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Dr. Oliver Sacks has recently addressed the delicate situation of memory. “There is,” he writes, “no mechanism in the mind or the brain for ensuring the truth . . . of our recollections.” Yet, and further, “for the most part, our memories are relatively solid and reliable.” Most importantly, he continues, our memories have “great flexibility and creativity.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we get things right. Sometimes we are certain of things that never happened. Most often, we confuse the sources of our memories and mix the lessons they hold for us. We borrow from story and history; headline and anecdote to form a stew of recollection. Sometimes, and most amazingly, those faulty and amalgamated memories stay with us longer and yield larger, more durable truths.

Today, in my memory, the Soirée is of such a jumble. If I had to date the Soirée, I would use Clooney time -- George, not Nick. If that thing called my memory serves me, then the Soirée lasted from George Clooney’s last year on *ER* to sometime before *Oceans Twelve*. But that archeological dating may be all wrong.

There was a definite routine to the Soirée, although from dinner to dinner the membership would change slightly. At La Normandie, we supped at the round table near the kitchen with John Vester seated at 12 o’clock; Frank at two; Nick would be at four, I would be at 8 o’clock, Stan at 10 and the places in between would be filled with rotating attendees. We would all drink the same cocktails; order the same dinners; and, sometime between the first and

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Speak, Memory*, N.Y. REV. BOOKS 19, 21 (February 21, 2013).

second cocktail, the conversation would commence always with a mischievous question from John. Inevitably, we would rush to finish dinner to get to the Club because the table talk always overtook the meals themselves.

As memory serves, Stan was the first to depart, leaving Cincinnati for the Hollywood Hills to be near his children. Milo departed for parts South. Nick took his leave and Dr. Vester ran into his series of health problems. As members dropped off, the Soirée ended – or did it?

Several years after the Soirée disbanded, while seated in a darkened movie theater, the Soirée came crisply back to life. The movie – *The Ides of March* – was written, directed, produced, and starred in by one George Clooney. The movie was the story of the moral corruption of a neophyte political operative. The operative, played by Ryan Gosling, was inspired, then deflated and corrupted, by the Ohio Governor running for president played by George.

Clooney's campaign flounders, runs into its set of challenges, yet the campaign moves on. Along the trail, George appears on the Charlie Rose Show. At one point in the brief interview, Rose starts to ask George a question about the death penalty. In anticipation, George says: "Yeah, I know. Would I still be in favor of the death penalty if my daughter was murdered? Well Charlie, you should understand that we deserve a society better than we are."

Ah hah! We deserve a government that is better than us, its citizens?! That is a great response to a politically and morally entangled problem. Indeed, it was a response I had not heard or considered before and, I suspect, a response that had not occurred to most of us. To Thomas Aquinas, maybe, but not to most of us. It was a terrific Clooney response – Nick, this time, not George. (That Xavier High education was certainly not wasted on either Nick or John.)

The response on the Charlie Rose Show was neither new nor original; nor did it come from the creative pen or mind of George Clooney.

After our Annual Dinner two years ago, Nick and I repaired next door to the Bar at the Phelps. My first question to Nick: “Well do you get residuals?” Nick smiled his puckish Nick smile, and I continued, “You know the line in *The Ides of March* on the Charlie Rose Show about society being better than we mere mortals. You gave us that line many years ago.”

Nick acknowledged the line in his own Nick-ish way: “Funny story, that’s exactly what George told Charlie after they filmed that scene.”

So, the Soirée lives! The memory of those La Normandie dinners reappeared in my mind’s eye as if we were there last Monday, not over a decade ago. Here memory and history unite and were accurate. We did have that conversation; that debate about the death penalty; and those words were spoken. Still the memory of that conversation carried more force in recollection.

Hearing Nick’s familiar words on the big screen was a surprise and a delight and, in a small, but not insignificant way, that short scene captured Nick and it captured the Soirée.

Nick, of course, has a father’s love for George. And, also of course, that love is returned. If you don’t believe that, then you should watch *Good Night and Good Luck*, George’s love letter to his father. The death penalty quotation also revealed that father and son exchanged ideas sometimes to the point at which they became partners in crime. If you don’t believe that, then roll tape on the arrest of Clooney *père et fils* on the mean streets of D.C. outside of a Washington embassy. Yet, the *Ides of March* vignette has at least one more lesson for us.

For not only did that little vignette recall the Soirée, it exemplified it. It also exemplified the Club.

Of the Club's many customs, totems, and taboos one of the most unspoken, yet most observed – and, perhaps the wisest – is that politics on Monday evenings is verboten and can be touched upon lightly, if at all, and then, not for long and most often cryptically only.

The Soirée, then, was an outlet for all the political vinegar and fire that we all harbor and that needs release. Political talk can too easily bruise feelings even among the closest of family and friends. Ill-timed or ill-tempered comments can end relationships. However, in the hands of a master – in John Vester's delicate hands – not only was the subject of politics allowed at the Soirée it was its very reason for existence.

Now here is where memory, as porous and as faulty as it can be, can also be instructive as well as creative. Soirée-type political conversation was undertaken respectfully but at no loss of seriousness. Political talk at the Soirée was an attempt for us to appeal to the Angels of our better nature. Nick's argument about the death penalty is as good example as any.

When Nick told us that society should be better than us, he meant it sincerely; he did not mean it as a debating point. He acknowledged authorship of the idea but never took ownership of it. He certainly would not go on to make claims about how his arguments appeared in a major motion picture.

Nick held, indeed holds, ideas deeply, passionately even, and expresses them thoughtfully. Politics cannot be reduced to sound bites. From Nick, we learned about politics and passion.

Stan's comments were always delicately put. Indeed, most often he would respond to questions rather than insert his views. So from Stan, apropos of a caring psychiatrist, we learned to listen and reflect.

John, as noted, was our MC. He came to dinner not with a paper but with a question on the politics of the day. He was always open to discussion and, naturally, more than held his own. From John, we learned to debate as gentle souls as well as gentle men.

Frank, like Stan, never imposed his strongly considered and held views. Rather, Frank was a great resource. He could teach us how politics works from the inside; how it worked in the world, not as it appears on television. Frank taught us about the hollowness of political punditry and about the seriousness and dedication of public servants.

Yes, the memory of the soirée is a warm one. And, yes, I may romanticize it a bit. But I don't think so. Rather, that memory is alive and it is provocative. It easily leads to a series of questions really. If the Soirée was held tonight, what would we have discussed? Streetcars? Privatizing Cincinnati parking? Stalling Chuck Hagel's appointment?

Looking down through the years, what would the table have had to say about Iran? Iraq? Bush v. Gore? Gun control? Fox News and Sarah Palin? John Stewart and news parody? What would Dr. John Vester have had to say about Obamacare? Or Nick about Obama? You see, politics is never far from the surface of what we talk about daily.

There were times, undoubtedly, when one or all of us may have had knots in our stomachs, or catches in our throats, or when our collars grew a little too tight. The mashed potato incident proves the point. But those were the times when we wrestled with ourselves; when we tried to be full conversants and good listeners; and, when we tried to engage each other and

become better learners more than better teachers in a comfortable environment among friends; respected, even loved, friends.

For me, the political conversation at the Soirée was a template for the historical, cultural and literary conversations at the Club. That round table, near the kitchen in La Normandie taught us what good Soirée conversation could be. It also taught us to respect the good conversations at the Club. At the Soiree, we learned to be ourselves; we learned to converse; we learned to be better Literarians.