

173rd Anniversary Celebration of Cincinnati Literary Club

Delivered 31 October 2022

They say the best men are molded out of faults

And, for the most, are much more the better.

From William Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure"

The Literary Exercises for an Anniversary Celebration ought to have a "measure" of looking back as well as forward. Thanks to Historian Vitz, we've been treated to another tasty dollop of Literary Club legacy. Delicious, as always.

Shifting forward, on the almost-immediate horizon is our 175th anniversary, coming in 2024. In the months to come, there will be more info re: the planning for this notable milestone, although for no fault of its own, 175 doesn't get a spiffy name like sesquicentennial or bicentennial. We're going to make that right and everyone will be able to be involved (the latter is so easy to say as someone who'll be comfortably seated in the back of the room when 2024 rolls around). We've begun discussions within the BOM, a bunch who I want to recognize and thank by name for their time, attention, and diligence (as an aside, any group that, based on last names, runs the gamut from sterling to sketchy is a mosh pit that I am happy to be a part of): Secretary Peerless, VP Cobb, Clerk Cuni, Treasurer Blaylock, Past President Hague, and Trustees Friedman, Rutz and Motley. Their service to the ideals and working of the club is invaluable. Aside from their sagacity, it's the abundance of time and good cheer that they give us, and as we know, now in the latter half of our lives, those two entities are very precious resources.

Futurists, and there are a few birds of that feather in our club's nest, remind us that to get wherever we want to go, we must know where, and who, we are now.

We are a literary club of idealistic intentions.

Business book pundits are fond of the phrase "leaning in" which refers not to canes, crutches or cantilevering our upper halves to get some momentum moving forward. Nowadays, leaning in translates to feeling strongly about a company or club like ours and working to maintain and build upon that. The Literary Club is fierce in reverence for our venerable history. Founded and organized, as quoted from our constitution: "to provide a forum for its members to read original papers" this has chiseled into stone as the LC's version of the 3 R's -- reading, writing and orating.

We appreciate insights and reflections presented from the podium as well as the sound of words smartly strung together. Delivered like musical notes - emphatic, tympanic, melodic - a finely crafted piece of writing is the penultimate gift from author to audience, which in a harmonious coda, responds with applause and praise for good works. Our saving grace, our safety net, is being united and galvanized by the written and spoken word.

We are a long-lived clan of individual stories.

Physiologists have determined that the athletes peak at 21 for explosive power. Marathoners hit their stride, as they say, in their 30s. Although the human body starts to slow past the age of 30, the human mind is capable of ever expanding and learning for decades after that mark, all the way until...whenever. We are marathoners of the mind – writing, reading and orating keeps us sharp. For Literarians, this means we are in our sweet spot for a full half century, from 30 to 80 and possibly well beyond. Dr. Robert Smith will always be our model exemplar. If Literary Club merchandising ever expands beyond ties and notebooks, I propose a Robert Smith patron saint statue to adorn our dashboards that would keep us from getting lost on our Monday nights travels to 500 E. 4th, even though it might direct us into driving in the left lane.

While many of us count our years on fingers and toes...times four, nonetheless we could all perish tomorrow if Putin pushes the punish button or Mother Nature dials it up to 11 with her version of James Taylor's "Fire and Rain." There are countless dreidel versions of dystopian demise, because as we all know, the top will at some point stop spinning. But more likely, we'll continue to blink out in random syncopation. So far, every single person who has ever lived on this planet has already, or will, pass. This is the Venn diagram which philosophers, physicians, and poets all agree. We can either individually strain and sweat and tilt against the inevitable windmill or collectively realize there's a reason to put on a tie and enjoy our time together.

We are a luminous collection of imperfect souls.

We all aspire to be stalwart ambassadors of the Club, so we double down on the Holy Trinity/Three Torches of Literary Club: to be well-considered, well-spoken, and well-regarded. But inherent human fallibility mandates we will always slip just a bit below our aspirations. Hence, it's crucial in this world where chaos seems to reign supreme that we collegially hunker down on Monday nights, greeting fellow Literarians upon entry, raising a glass to and finding a seat amidst fellow members, and attentively supporting whoever brings a paper that evening. This should never change.

Separated by a century, we've weathered two pandemics, with the most recent spawning a few illnesses but thankfully no mortal losses. Starting with the Civil War, we have similarly weathered over twenty wars, according to Wikipedia, since 1849. Time and again, be it for illness or battle, Literarians returned to the clubhouse, scarred but not scared. During more lackadaisical times, we've dithered, drowsed, dilly-dallied, and been delighted by the company we keep and the papers perused.

After forty years of publishing, all I know for sure is that words and their authors define determination. Writing isn't a medicine that might save countless lives, nor archaeology that traces how we got here, nor engineering that yielded flight, and electricity, and well, Pampers...but still and all, quote "it's only words, and words are all I have" a line uttered and engraved into stone tablets by the Delphic oracle better known as the BeeGees.

Our Constitutional command, our Holy Grail, is to write, deliver, listen to and praise good papers; that is, we put our best paper forward as we rally around the written word. But this writing of ours, like all writing, will never be exactly right, excepting for a few lines from Shakespeare, or the Gettysburg's Address, or Molly Bloom's soliloquy (I tossed that last one in there just to make you all wistfully smile).

Unlike the perfect equations of math and science, there is no precise prescription for prose that pushes all the right buttons. We are imperfect by nature, likewise so is the English language. Still and all, we persevere to approach a priori.

Because of our reverence for the printed and spoken word, we are oddballs nowadays, or at least curious characters, with curious in this case being a virtue. Such is reason for pride and praise. We must also acknowledge, that there are a lot of curious folks out there, and although we and they may not be as vocal as celebrities or politicians (those two groups also known as windbags), we and they quietly are genuinely interested in learning more.

Collectively, that's where our strength lies. Together, supported by our history and the intentions of the founders, we can be a community as well as a club. A community of writers and readers who welcome and support other writers and readers in Cincinnati, and by doing so, we become a more vital and important resource, so the Literary Club of Cincinnati supports the Cincinnati literate community. We must strive to do everything we can to ensure a literate Cincinnati is a majority of the populace, which is no small task.

Consider this from JR Moehringer's memoir, *The Tender Bar*: "We went there for everything we needed. We went there when we didn't know what we needed, hoping someone might tell us. ...Most of all we went there when we needed to be found. While I fear that we're drawn to what abandons us, and to what seems lost likely to abandon us, in the end I believe we're defined by what embraces us. Everyone has a holy place, a refuge, where their heart is purer, their mind is clearer, where they feel closer to God or love or truth or whatever it is they happen to worship. A lesson, a gesture, a story, a philosophy, an attitude – I took something from every man."

Novelist and biographer Susan Cheever, daughter of John Cheever, knows a bit about writers too. As she wrote in her biography of e.e. cummings, this story was related to her by her father, quote, "The way he (e.e. cummings) died...Marion had called him in to dinner as the day faded and the glorious sky lit up with the fires of sunset. 'I'll be there in a moment,' Cummings said. 'I'm just going to sharpen the axe.' A few minutes later, he crumpled to the ground, felled by a cerebral hemorrhage. He was sixty-seven. That," John Cheever told Susan, "was the way to die—still manly and useful, still beloved, still strong." We must continue to be useful and strong. Making it to a 175th anniversary, dreaming about 200th anniversary, would be rendered short-sighted if we expire as a group before reaching 201. This is two-century marathon we're undertaking, and more. And to keep running, we must stay relevant.

I worry, often, that perhaps we polish our history more than ponder a future. This stirs a bemused curiosity about the Shakers – those who chose to dance with wild abandon while abandoning procreation. Sure, they certainly left behind some beautiful furniture, but their belief in opportunity for intellectual and artistic development withered, then died, once the music stopped after the last dance.

Relevant is an essential quality that will determine our future. What does relevant mean when applied to the Literary Club? It's much like Potter Stewart, whose name adorns the federal courthouse a few blocks away, when defining obscenity as "I know it when I see it." It is up to us to orient the intrinsic offerings of membership that would attract and bond future Literarians so they know it when they see it, as they will decide whether the Literary Club continues beyond our time.

Gravity is not our friend, not to our clubhouse, not to our balance, not to our future. Will this vision, or version, of who we are be enough to sustain this institution and get us where we want to go? Our duty is to not let the ideals and bonhomie of this club die, and to do that we must look unblinking into the mirror and decide how best to metaphorically open the door and welcome future members. Over the last few years, the Literary Club has become more relevant to Cincinnatians, with public events featuring poet laureates, with two writers circles benefitting members with a workshop-based approach to improving their authorial skills, and with non-Monday tours of the clubhouse, its art, our art. Last week notwithstanding, technology can better capture our history, which in turn will broaden and buttress our future.

We need to do more...because we still can do more.

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