

102nd Anniversary Observance

Gentlemen, good evening and welcome to this 102nd observance of our founding.

By his own signature, we know that on January 3rd, 1885, the club had a distinguished visitor, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, accompanied by his friend and associate, George Cable. We also know that Clemens' appearance here was part of a visit to Cincinnati for two days of lectures and readings, played to full

houses. What we do not know is whether this exposure to the Queen City was the genesis of the famous Mark Twain aphorism that he wanted to be in Cincinnati when the world ended because things hereabouts generally happen seven years behind everywhere else.

Tonight we are convened to offer at least partial evidence that Mr. Clemens' observation was accurate. Those of you possessed of sufficient memory will recall that in the years leading up to the celebration of our sesquicentennial in 1999, a book was being prepared to commemorate that milestone of the club's longevity. Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the printer. In fact, several funny things. Some would say a whole host of funny things. Suffice to say, the anniversary - like Mark Twain's end of the world - came and went with no book about this most venerable of Cincinnati's institutions.

Tonight, two years after the event and not seven, I am happy to announce that the book is making its belated debut, fresh off the press and chock full of everything you ever wanted to know about us.

For its appearance, we have many to thank. But heading the list must be our fellow member, Dr. J. Roger Newstedt, who invested time and talent in the enterprise until his health failed and the project floundered. It was resuscitated by two more eminent physicians, first John McLeod and then Stan Troup. But I believe they would acknowledge the indispensable role played by a remarkably tenacious young editor and mother, Beth Franks, whose dedication to the book and to the club far exceeds any monetary rewards she received for her work.

Close readers will doubtless recognize her keen eye and deft, professional touch that make this volume the most comprehensive of any in the series of club histories begun in 1890 and continued more or less every quarter century since, give or take a few years.

So thank you, Mark Twain, for affording us the flexibility we needed to put the 150th anniversary volume in the hands of our members this evening - albeit a little behind schedule.

One cannot peruse the book's contents without being struck by the dedication of members over the years to the club's wellbeing. For example, a list of the club's treasurers from the beginning discloses that our own Dr. George Rieveschl has now served longer than any of the chancellors of the exchequer who have preceded him. In fact, tonight we celebrate the 20th year of his services. George not only has spent two full decades keeping our accounts in order but his efforts above and beyond the green eye shade have left this club more financially solid than at any time in its history. In recognition of these superlative accomplishments, I am privileged to announce that the Board of Management this month has elected Dr. Rieveschl to the rank of honorary member. He joins such luminaries as Rutherford B. Hayes, Alphonso and Charles P. Taft, Murray Seasongood, Eslie Asbury and Victor Reichert, together with seven from our present membership. So let us raise a toast to George in recognition of his new status - and in recognition of the fine wines he selects for us.

It has become customary for presidents to use this occasion to assess the health of the club and more often than not to offer a prescription for its betterment. In the past we have been admonished to publish more books, become more democratic, become younger, face up to the inevitability of the feminist revolution and so on. I prefer not to do that. Rather I think it is altogether appropriate for us at least for one evening to glory in the unique community which this place represents and which binds us together. I know of nothing else quite like it. The idea that the Literary Club should be seen within the matrix of political correctness strikes me as an absurdity.

Barely two years into a new century, we can look back on the 152 years that this club had existed and we can see how it has served as a kind of bridge across the chasm of contemporary uncertainty. Today's culture, however one chooses to define its elements, is surely vastly different from the way of life that prevailed when our literary forebears gave birth to this institution. In our own tiny corner of the world, the Club has been the vehicle which has sustained values worth preserving. Born in a time of national insurrection and beset by social and technological upheaval at so many turns along the way since then, we have stood as a kind of anchor in the storm.

Rather than respond to every gust that whips through our sails, it seems to me there's something to be said for standing fast, realizing that what has brought us here is a worthy craft. Care for it we surely must. But change its configuration for the sake of change, or because some cultural zephyr we do not fully comprehend makes us uncomfortable, is for me hardly a valid reason.

In his wonderful new novel titled Jayber Crow, my friend Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet, essayist and novelist, speaks of a rustic place he calls "The Grandstand." It strikes me as having many of the characteristics of the Literary Club. Allowing for some literary license, I think you will recognize the similarities.

The Grandstand is not a grandstand at all but a spot in the woods near the edge of the mythical town on the Kentucky River, where Wendell locates his stories about the Port William membership. It's a place not far from here. Wendell explains: "A number of men and grown boys of the neighborhood went there for a certain freedom that the town did not publicly countenance. It was a place where water could be unguardedly diluted, or done without, where talk could proceed without fear of interruption by anybody who would mind. No preacher

or teacher or woman or public official or anybody self-consciously respectable would be there. . .

"Maybe two or three times a year, on good nights of spring or fall, a water-drinking party would be announced by grapevine, and on these occasions, beyond the usual pastimes, the featured event would be a supper of fried fish or wild game or hen soup."

Well, shortly after he arrived to become the town barber at Port William, Jayber Crow was invited to one such memorable gathering. The invited guests proceeded to engage in a night of eating fish fried in grease, passing around their jugs, playing a card game called tonk, running hound dogs and telling tales. Eventually Jayber fell asleep, anesthetized by the jug passing ritual. I'm sure by now you can already begin to identify the similarities between us and the Port William community, including the soporific effect of the proceedings on some.

At this point Wendell Berry, the master story teller, takes up the narrative through the eyes of Jayber Crow:

"When I woke up," he has Jayber recall, "it was well on in the morning. The sun was high, and except for the birds singing, the world seemed to have stopped. There was not the least breeze, and the card players were sitting still with their heads up. They held their hands of cards in front of them but they were not looking at their cards. They were listening. I lay without moving and listened also. I could see that now there were only five of us. . .

"After a moment, Roy Overhold got up and tiptoed over to where he could see down the road. And then quietly and seriously he began to climb a small sugar tree that branched nearly to the ground. He went up in a hurry and the other three came in quick succession right behind him.

"What awakened me, what they had heard, was Cecilia Overhold, Roy's wife, slamming her car door down beside the road. For just a moment after Roy and Wisely and Rufus and Big Ellis had gone up as high as they could go in the tree, it was absolutely quiet again.

"And then I saw Cecilia Overhold coming up the path. She was wearing a sort of baggy hat tilted stylishly over her right ear, a nicely tailored broadcloth coat with a fur collar, and stockings and high heels. And she was walking like the Divine Wrath itself. She was a beautiful woman still, in those days, really something to look at. But I did not regard her with extreme pleasure that morning. . .

"Lying there with my eyes shut, filled with alarm and the recognition of catastrophe, I fully expected her to come right up and kick me. I was tensed for the blow. But she paid no attention to me at all. . .I heard her gathering up the scattered cards and throwing them onto what was left of the fire. She picked up a piece of a limb and knocked loose the hanging lantern and sent it flying. She battered all the tin plates. And then I heard her breaking the jugs and bottles that were lying around. She even broke the water jug. The fury of battle was on her.

"When I heard her walking over toward the sugar tree I opened my eyes. I have never beheld such a spectacle in all the time since. Roy Overhold was at the very top of the tree; Wisely Jones was under him, and under him was Rufus Brightleaf, and under him was Big Ellis. They all gazed downward like treed coons, and then they gazed upward as if hoping to find that the tree continued into the sky like Jack's bean stalk. The tree looked like a totem pole that had come to life and sprouted branches and leaves. And down at the foot was that beautiful outraged woman, looking up, with her fists on her hips.

"She said, 'Come down from there you Sunday card-playing sons of bitches!'

"The only one up there with any conceivable reason to come down was Roy, and since he was at the top, he could not come down unless the others would come down first. Big Ellis would have had the honor of being first to accept her invitation, and he declined. Nobody came down. Nobody said a word.

"And then Cecilia looked over at me and saw that I was watching. Our eyes meet for a second and a chill passed over me. "What are YOU looking at, you bald-headed THING?" Well, in fact I was getting bald, but I had been telling myself that it wasn't very noticeable. I hate to admit my vanity, but what she said hurt my feelings probably worse than anything else she could have done. What else she could have done, and did so, was pick up a smallish rock all jaggedy and crusty with fossils and throw it at me. It hit me square in the mouth. After that, I played dead (which wasn't hard). Even after she went away and I heard her start her car and turn it around, I lay still with my eyes shut, tasting blood and feeling my broken tooth with the end of my tongue. It was a while too before the others came down out of the tree. It was as though Cecilia had run us not out of the place but out of the day, and it took some time and thought for us to get back in. And when we finally gathered ourselves together again among the ruins, we were changed."

As I said at the outset, Wendell Berry's Grandstand carries for me some metaphorical resemblance to the Literary Club. So the next time our esteemed membership faces that perennial question of whether to admit members of the opposite sex - as it is sure to do - I hope you keep in mind Cecilia Overhold. Just as her presence changed the Grandstand forever, so, too, I fear, would the Cecilia Overholds of today's society be sure to change ours.

In relating Wendell's little story, I hope I show no disrespect for those whose opinions on these matters differ from my own. I suppose some would say that I myself sound like a treed coon. If that is the case, I assume you had some sense of what you were doing when you elected a president from Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, of all places.

You will recall that when Alexis de Tocqueville made his journey into America, the feature of this young nation that struck him so forcibly was the presence of interdependent communities of interest - those ameliorating and mediating structures that intervene between public and private spheres. He called them associations and found in them the genius of the American experiment, forming an amalgam that cements a way of life.

I don't think it is being unduly rhapsodic to describe this club as one of those communities - its members from diverse stations and callings freely joined together in their mutuality of interest. Out of this association has come loyalty and affection on the one hand and a common devotion to an idea on the other.

Indeed, we are part of a tradition "that joins all sharers of literature, writers and readers, living and dead."

At the heart of Wendell Berry's thought in his long and distinguished career as novelist, essayist and poet is his aching concern for what he senses is the disintegration of community. He calls it "the epidemic illness of our time." He looks at the sad state of marriage and the traditional family, the inexorable decline of small town America and the family farm, and indeed the acrid and selfish nature of so many relationships between people today - all these being but symptoms of an overall loss of community.

Of pertinent interest to us here this evening is Mr. Berry's belief that this disintegration of

community is intimately linked to what he sees as the disintegration of language. He believes that over the past 150 years - about the span of our club, you will note - we've seen a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning. One has only to listen to the post-tribal grunts and mutterings that pass for so much social communication these days in order to grasp his point, or to observe the post-modernist penchant for slash marks, jargon and made-up words. Mr. Berry points out that language by its very nature is communal, so that when language deteriorates, so does community. For after all, the words we use define the culture we create.

It seems to me that beneath the good fellowship that has bound this club together for 152 years rests our true *raison d'etre* - to celebrate the written word.

If Wendell Berry is correct about the deterioration of language, then the Literary Club - as a community of interest - can play a crucial role in our corner of the world in standing fast, in rededicating ourselves to our central purpose.

When we gather together each Monday evening to sip our toddies and to listen to one who comes with a paper, we are engaging in a ritual with a purpose. That purpose, in its essence, is to nourish the word.

Through many meetings the late Ed Merkel and I had a running comic debate about whether this club could properly be termed anachronistic. We would pull apart the components of that word and argue whether our chronos was out of kilter with society's clock. It will probably come as no surprise that we ended up on the same side of the question, concluding that our chronos remains vital tectonic shifts in our culture.

The late Denham Sutcliffe, for many years a Mr. Chips figure on the campus of Kenyon College, once issued a small but wise book of essays entitled "**What Shall We Defend?**". He was concerned about the telltale

assaults on the liberal arts as the foundation of higher education - most especially his chosen field of English - seeing these incursions on core studies as a proxy for undermining Western civilization itself. With a keen eye he recognized that our legacy of the humanities is the very point at which the culture terrorists strike when they seek to erode the building blocks of civilization. Language is supposed to be the means by which we communicate reality. Its purpose is to tell the truth about things. But it is through the distorted and destructive use of words that the assault on our core values is taking place, aimed at changing the reality of the way our culture sees its foundational beliefs. Relativism has achieved great respectability and now runs rampant, claiming as its casualties not just the words we use but the values we hold dear. A nursery rhyme I ran across in a book titled "The Space Child's Mother Goose" neatly catches the nub of the problem:

"Probable, Possible, my black hen,

She lays eggs in the Relative When."

Just like "Dennie" Sutcliffe, we need to ask the question on anniversary occasions such as this, just what shall we defend?

The answer, it seems to me, remains essentially unaltered after 152 years. As a genuine community, we defend a unique little corner of the literary universe, dedicated to the preservation and encouragement of creative thought cast into words - beautiful words, truthful words, precise words, challenging words, words powerful enough to transport the human spirit.

The poet Czeslaw Milosz once wrote that "language is the only homeland." To present members of The Literary Club is passed the responsibility by those who have gone before of preserving this homeland.

I believe we are up to the task.

As some of you know, I am fond of single malt whiskies. Recently the Scotch Malt Whiskey Society located a particularly rare bottling and to convey its excitement over the find described it thusly to its member: ". . .a first-fill American cask and a very active one at that. . .Delectable, complex and beautifully formed."

As I read that, I thought what a great description for this old club - aged in a very active American cask, delectable, complex and beautifully formed.

Thank you and happy anniversary.

Sources:

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