

BLESSED BE THE TIES THAT BIND
ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

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Let me begin by expressing my pleasure at being here with you tonight. Welcome to our guests and congratulations to all on the 160th anniversary of this wonderful organization. Let me also echo many of my presidential predecessors, most notably Stanley Dorst, and observe that the president actually has very little to do, and so to those who do, and to all who have done, the difficult work of providing this banquet and keeping us on an even keel, let me express my thanks. To the gentlemen at the front table and to all who have preceded you in your duties, to your continued good stewardship, salute.

There is of course one presidential duty which is mine alone, and that is to address you tonight and to say something that will somehow live up to those who have come before me, a daunting task indeed. But again I am aided by their examples and advice. Keep it light, and keep it brief, and try to say something that will leave the members with the impression that the club is in good hands so they can go back to ignoring whatever it is that the president does. And so here goes.

As I stand here tonight I have reflected on the qualities and habits which have differentiated one generation of literarians from another. The good men I see before me tonight would not have fit easily, I believe, with the youthful strivers of the 1850s. To quote Gordon Christenson from a previous presidential address, these 1850s members were “young men in a hurry who wanted to change the way things were done...” If I have heard John Diehl correctly these past anniversaries, those were young men in a young city, all on the make. They gathered in order to use the serious give and take of written and spoken language as a vehicle for self improvement, that they might, I have supposed, enter mature manhood having lived up to the promise of their young lives, in

their young city, in that young country still blest with frontiers and the lure of unexplored horizons.

As I look around the room tonight, I see many men of quality and accomplishment, but these are qualities defined by, and accomplishments earned during long lives, such as the Immortals of the 1850s had yet to live. If they were to look in on us tonight and see in us their own worthy selves gathered for the anniversary banquet, they would surely feel like they were looking at Dr. Heidegger's mirror, showing them not as their youthful energies made them feel, but as they might be after many years, when the passions of youth were past, and one's pleasures included reflections on a life well lived.

My theme tonight is, however, not the qualities which differentiate us from past Literarians, but rather those which unite us. Apparently our club has existed since its first decade in a state of tension, with the desire to maintain cherished traditions and the pressure to keep abreast of the times always in some state of natural conflict. Our unity with our predecessors may be reflected in this shared struggle, but this is hardly unique to us; any organization with a history longer than one generation has engaged in similar tussles. And while this is true of us, it doesn't advance my inquiry very far.

In 2002 from this podium, President Rollin Workman rejected the idea that customs and traditions define the essence of the Literary Club. He quite reasonably pointed out that these have changed over the decades; the customs and traditions we observe would, like we ourselves, appear strange to the first generation of literarians, and theirs to us as well. For example, the prospect of drinking and singing into the wee hours and spending more on cigars than on drink, while appealing on some level, no longer suits us. Perhaps if we still met on Saturdays and observed the maxim, "Moderation in all things, including moderation," the old customs might be honored. But the dictates of good health and good sense have us offering our sacrifices more often at the temple of Apollo than of Dionysus. The emotional charge of the hot debate has been replaced by

the cooler, more dispassionate pleasure of the well marshaled argument and the well wrought phrase. I don't lament the change; I merely observe it.

So, if not customs and traditions, perhaps we can turn to the idea of the give and take from the podium and around the tables, what Sam Trufant, in his presidential address, referred to as the "liberal education" we partake of each week as we gather in these rooms. I think Sam has it about right. And before the more conservative members among us suffer from elevated blood pressures, let me hasten to remind you that, according to the OED, the term, before it was turned into a pejorative epithet, was "the distinctive epithet of those arts or sciences worthy of a free man," later "pertaining to persons of superior social status, or gentlemen," and "free from narrow prejudice, open minded, candid." At our best, it seems to me, that all of this could be reasonably said about the Literary Club. We gather freely, behave usually as gentlemen, and, in my experience, are free from prejudice and open minded, if not completely candid. To wit, the dullest paper will receive a round of encouraging congratulations, suggesting that we perhaps value clubability over candor. The parallel between the Liberal Arts and our gatherings will even withstand a glance at the trivium and quadrivium. The heart of what we do embraces the grammar, rhetoric, and logic of the trivium, and as for the quadrivium, I have heard papers that included music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Well, geometry may be stretching things a bit, but the others, especially music, are regularly heard subjects.

It is an oddity of the language, a *trompe de l'oreille*, a trick of the ear, to say that an organization so aware of its customs and traditions could at the same time be so classically liberal. There is a further reference from the OED that bears on my question; a liberal can be "open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform." And, again traditionalists relax, though I will share with you tonight an idea or two for the good of the order, I don't believe they will rise to the scope of "proposals for reform." More on this anon.

This liberal quality of ours is an aspect shared with all the Literarians who have come before, and I trust, of those who will follow us. Whether in the lively give-and-take of the early days or our more formal presentations, papers informed by knowledge and wit, by experience and aspiration, cannot help but contribute to the education of those who receive them with thoughtful consideration. In this regard, however, we are not fundamentally different from many other institutions of learning, except perhaps that the distinction between givers and receivers of knowledge is effaced; here we are all, in turn, both teachers and students. And we have it in our power to share some of this with many of our Literary Club predecessors, both those familiar to us and those who are only names on bygone rosters. We possess an extraordinary record of knowledgeable, witty, experiential, aspirational discourse to which we might give our thoughtful consideration.

This actually happens from time to time, such as when John Diehl brings forth his annual historian's paper, enlightening and inspiring us with tales of the Immortals and other early Literary Club worthies whose lives, but especially whose writings, might provide some guidance to those twin questions: Who have we been? and; Whom should we become? To be frank, I am aware that the words of the Immortals are not recorded in the club records; would that they were. But it is also true that the papers we do have records of are only slightly more available to the average Literarian. To ameliorate that condition, I intend, in addition to the little the president already has to do, to promote the introduction of our precious records to 21st century technology. I believe they could learn to get along with one another to the great benefit of each of us, but especially to our organization. The paper I am reading tonight takes up about 20 kilobytes of memory, which means there is room for about 30,000 papers like it on one 15 cent CD. Creating and organizing a data base of our bound papers will take more effort and resources, but I believe it is an effort well worth the making.

In his presidential address Tony Covatta observed with Heraclitus, "You can never step into the same river twice," to illustrate the idea that, whether you will or no, life goes on, like the Literary Club, always changing yet always the same. Rivers are like that, but rivers also invite the explorer to work against that flow and seek upstream to

discover the source. I remember a paper by John Wulsin recounting another Literarian (his grandfather as I recall) and his canoe expedition to the headwaters of the Mississippi, inspired perhaps by those British imperialists who sought the headwaters of the Nile and every other river they encountered. Before I leave this dangerously weighted metaphor, I would like to suggest that we consider the club's bound papers as the chart to our own source. There is something about knowing a river, or anything else, in its full length that holds an appeal for many of us.

Before I turn to my conclusion, I beg your indulgence for a short reflection on the nature of education. It is only natural that I would consider this a significant part of what we share with our predecessors. Having been involved in the public education racket for some years now, I try to understand the world in terms that are most familiar to me. Many of you as well have worn the mantle of teacher. Whether you identify yourself primarily as a lawyer or a scholar, a man of business or of the cloth, a doctor or an artist, or whether as parent or elder brother, you have been a teacher. And your affairs have prospered, I suppose, to the extent that you have been successful in getting others to understand what you wanted or needed them to know. The question of education is so fundamental to our society's well being that we have been throwing more and more money at it ever since Sputnik first beeped its way around our sense of national superiority. And I believe we will eventually succeed in getting, if not our money's worth, at least an acceptable outcome; we simply have no choice.

There is something fundamental, however, that rarely is spoken of in our conversations about education, which I will try to illustrate with a brief anecdote. Years ago, in my early days as a classroom teacher, I encountered a friend who was running a small business. We each said hello with a sigh; I had had a tougher than usual day wrangling teenagers and my expression must have revealed my mood. We each told a story of having to discipline someone, he an employee and I a student. My experience had left me with that uneasy bitterness that always follows angry confrontation – this is no doubt what my friend observed in me. He then said, “Tough love is tough on everybody,” and it brought me up short. I remembered being tough, but I had no

recollection of acting in a way that I or anyone else could describe as loving. The thought stayed with me for days, and I eventually concluded that if I couldn't love these kids, I would never amount to much as a teacher.

There, in that shocking four-letter word, is the answer to my question and where I have been aiming all along. And for the fourth time this evening, before the potential ickyness of the idea induces dyspepsia, allow me to explain. Talking about love and education easily leads to thoughts of inappropriate contact between teacher and students; this is not what I have in mind. Nor am I conjuring images of flower-power, everything is groovy. What I have in mind is, again from the OED, "that disposition with regard to others that manifests itself in the solicitude for their welfare, delight in their presence and desire for their approval, warm affection, arising from instincts of natural relationship." Again I find much here that resides within our organization.

What we share with all the Literarians who have come before us, and what has kept us going for these 160 years is, I believe, this sort of love. Love of the subjects we share from the podium, love of our club and its traditions, love of learning for its own sake, love of the comradeship we share on Monday nights, love of one another. The labors of all who have kept us going, from the earliest gatherings to the present day, have been in some sense labors of love. When Ethan Stanley urged us to let our lights shine, "Luceat Lux Vestra," this is in part what I understood him to say.

You may have noticed that I have referenced the presidential addresses of past presidents throughout tonight's paper. My labors in this regard have been made lighter because each of the references was available on the Literary Club website. Imagine for a moment having at your fingertips all the papers for the last 25 or 50 years, or even all of our bound papers.

Some years ago, Robert Smith urged us to include more poetry in our papers, and so here is some from his anniversary address.

What words dear friends can I impart
The product of both mind and heart
What distillate, what essence rare,
Digestible, post-prandial fare,
Expression of our gratitude,
Unspoiled by common platitude,
For papers that each week are brought
From brimming minds full rich with thought

To which I add:

To share our best, to teach and learn
Each man a Solon in his turn
Prepared with love, however pure
So will our fellowship endure.