

# CELEBRATIONS: TRADITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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The Chicago Literary Club  
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Congratulations to The Chicago Literary Club on 150 years! This is, I am told, the 4806th meeting of the Club, and I have been asked to consider the phenomenon of celebration.

According to one source,<sup>1</sup> in addition to personal occasions, there are at least three thousand holidays, festivals, celebrations, commemorations, holy days, feasts, fasts, and other collective observances worldwide. Why do we celebrate? How do we celebrate—publicly and privately--and how has this Club celebrated its past milestones? Does celebration have a purpose beyond giving us an excuse for a festive gala? Do celebrations have meaning?

Examining these questions from the perspectives of a variety of disciplines--and there is, interestingly enough, a *Journal of Festive Studies* devoted to an interdisciplinary approach to celebrations--I have come to believe that celebrations create a liminal, transformative and present space in which we both connect with our past--our ancestors--and look to the future and our legacy with a new or renewed vision. Celebrations and traditions create connections which grow communities and stimulate transformation.

As a culture, we celebrate public holidays and private accomplishments, religious holy days and bacchanals, and all sorts of commercial commemorations from Mother's Day to National Hot Dog Day. Individually, we celebrate baptisms, bar mitzvahs, birthdays,

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<sup>1</sup> Holidays, Festivals, and Celebrations of the World Dictionary (Abbey 2010), cited in *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, Volume 7, Number 1, Summer 2016

graduations, military promotions, victories, weddings, anniversaries, the cycles of the sun and the moon and the seasons, plantings and harvests, and in the end, celebrations of life itself.

Celebrations often involve rituals, the cultural, religious, ethnic, national and family customs and traditions which connect us. They can be as simple and routine as serving matzah during Passover, the singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” for the Seventh Inning Stretch at Wrigley, the good morning kiss or Sunday family chicken or spaghetti dinner. Consider weddings, which, in Western culture, include the ritual exchange of vows and rings, followed by prescribed festivities which often involve cake and music, first dances, and thrown bouquets. Weddings reinforce traditional cultural mores about cohabitation, and may divert attention from our own disappointing relationships, giving us hope.

Baptisms, brides, bar and bat mitzvahs, quinceañeras, Seijin Shiki and social club inductions, are all rituals which welcome the honoree into a community larger than immediate family. When we participate as guests in other people’s religious or cultural rituals or traditions, we are not necessarily accepting the dogma or nationalism that they adhere to, but acknowledging that we are part of a community larger than our own. Even within some religious groups, attendance to the traditions does not necessarily indicate acceptance of all of the dogma. Many American women attend Catholic Mass despite the Church’s refusal to ordain them or to condone birth control. For them, ritual has an emotional, not necessarily rational, component, symbolic of some connection to the group. One might say that, while we are all 100% unique, most of us don’t want to be so isolated as to be terminally unique; most of us want to belong to some group of others, large or small—our “peeps.” Engaging in ritual or traditional behavior marks us as connected to something larger than ourselves, even if we are part of the loyal opposition to that something.

We have some perhaps peculiar, but common, ritualistic ways of celebrating certain events, particularly public ones. Fireworks, for instance, are the go-to entertainment spectacle for public celebrations such as the Fourth of July. They produce three primary effects: noise, light, and smoke, and are not unlike bombs bursting in air. The first skyrockets were used in warfare. Some historians date fireworks to the Han dynasty in China (202BCE to 220CE), when people threw bamboo stems into a fire to produce an explosion. Later, gunpowder was packed into small containers to create a similar explosive noise.

Fireworks have been popular in America since the earliest settlers and were used to celebrate the first anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1777, even though no one knew yet whether the country would survive. George Washington's 1789 inauguration was also accompanied by a fireworks display.

But why fireworks? The Independence anniversary celebration took place in the midst of the Revolutionary War, and explosions, artillery fire, and "bombs bursting in air" were not exactly a cause for joy and celebration. Many historians point to John Adams's letter to his wife, Abigail, informing her that the Continental Congress had declared independence. He wrote "[This day] ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." John Adams's ideas grew out of hundreds of years of royal pomp and pageantry as well as plays romanticizing combat, particularly as associated with national events. King Henry VII included fireworks at his wedding in 1486, the first known use of fireworks at a Western national celebration. By the 18th century the displays in Europe, which had grown particularly extravagant and opulent under King Louis XIV and Peter the Great, were a popular

way to celebrate national prosperity and patriotism.<sup>2</sup> Today, as we experience the explosion of fireworks in a large audience, I think we are at least momentarily bound together, in shock or fear, excitement or awe.

On behalf of florists everywhere, FTD reminds us that flowers are used all over the world to celebrate holidays, congratulate individuals, comfort the sick or extend sympathy. Flowers, they say, convey meaning through their color, scent and cultural indications. For many centuries, people from the Middle East used flowers to convey messages that they could not or would not say out loud. Flowers were also popular in the UK where, during the Victorian Era, it was considered impolite and against the norm to be too direct in stating affections and emotions. High society developed a language of flowers to subtly communicate strong feelings for one another. The color red, for instance, symbolized romantic love; white meant purity; pink, affection. Because different colors and different kinds of flowers have different meanings in different countries, FTD devotes an entire website to help customers avoid etiquette errors.

Although we live in an age where expression is free and frequent and seemingly without boundaries, we don't need flowers to communicate specific emotions, but still we may use them to express a feeling beyond words, or merely to mark an occasion as special when words might understate or overstate the sentiment. Flowers still mark a day as special, connecting the giver and the recipient in some ephemeral way. Sixty-four percent of us send flowers to our mothers on Mother's Day, spending \$1.9 billion dollars. On Valentine's Day, we also send \$2.3 billion dollars' worth of flowers and spend an additional \$23.1 billion on other gifts, including \$6.2

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/story/why-do-americans-celebrate-independence-day-with-fireworks>

billion on jewelry and \$2.2 billion on candy<sup>3</sup>. (Forty-three per cent of us buy Valentine candy for ourselves!<sup>4</sup>) As an unsolicited piece of advice, apparently, we waste \$9.5 billion on unwanted Valentine's Day gifts such as tools, sporting equipment, kitchen appliances, cheesy stuffed animals, mix tapes and gym memberships.<sup>5</sup>

We also celebrate public events with flowers. For instance, since 1886, the winner of the Kentucky Derby has been awarded a gorgeous blanket of 564 red roses, symbolizing the beauty of the horse and the achievement of the animal and its jockey.

On Memorial Day, the President of the United States places a wreath of flowers at the grave of the unknown soldier, and flowers are often ceremonially placed on other memorials, such as at the sites of the 9/11 tragedies. When a celebrity dies, his or her home is often deluged with flowers left at the gates by grief-stricken fans. An astonishing 15 tons of flowers were left at Kensington Palace after the death of Princess Diana.<sup>6</sup>

Parties, of course, mark many public and private occasions. Parties are gatherings of people who have been invited by a host for the purpose of commemorating or celebrating any of a number of occasions, and come in a variety of forms: private dinner parties, surprise parties, garden parties, cocktail parties, tea parties, soirees, open houses, costume parties, pool parties, showers, housewarming parties, welcome parties, farewell parties, banquets, receptions, dances, balls, block parties, cast parties, street dances and even after-parties.

Parties can be held in private homes, restaurants, nightclubs, outdoors, or even in warehouses and in the streets. Huge festivals such as Lollapalooza, Burning Man and Mardi Gras

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<sup>3</sup> Horton, Cassidy, "Valentine's Day Spending: How Much Do People Spend in the Name of Love?" Feb. 10, 2022. <https://fullyvested.com/insights/valentines-day-spending/>

<sup>4</sup> Menyes, Carolyn. "How Many Pounds of Chocolate Do Americans Buy for Valentine's Day?" Daily Meal, Feb. 5, 2020. <https://www.thedailymeal.com/holidays/chocolate-valentines-day-pounds/>

<sup>5</sup> *Supra.*, n. 3

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mylondon.news/news/nostalgia/royal-family-60-million-flowers-24997045>

are often characterized as parties. Most parties involve food, beverage and music or other entertainment.

For certain events, including religious holidays, the foods served may be prescribed by ritual or tradition: for example, for Rosh Hashana, apples dipped in honey symbolize the sweetness of the Jewish New Year, and “new fruit”—usually pomegranate—symbolizes gratefulness for the gift of life and the hope that good deeds will be as plentiful as the number of seeds in that fruit; for Thanksgiving, the turkey is thought to recreate the first feast of the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims, although that is not historically accurate; for Mardi Gras, the King Cake is frosted in purple for power, green for justice and gold for faith, and its round shape represents the Three Kings and the unity of faith; for New Year’s Day, black-eyed peas and collards or greens represent, in some Southern states, coins and dollars; for many celebratory occasions, champagne, the drink of 18<sup>th</sup> century European royalty, is said to represent overflowing abundance and joy,<sup>7</sup> and of course, for birthdays, we have the birthday cake.

Birthday cakes with candles are ubiquitous symbols of celebration. These cakes are often round like the moon and the sun, to symbolize the cyclical nature of life and the beginning of a new year.

The Greeks placed candles on top of the cake to make it glow like the moon goddess, Artemis. They prayed over the flames, believing that the smoke carried their wishes up to her and the gods. The Germans burned a large candle that had twelve lines and numbers, marking the 12 months of the year. It represented the Light of Life and was used for religious practices.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/32829-why-celebrate-with-champagne.html#:~:text=wine%2Dmaking%20world.-,The%20tradition%20of%20drinking%20champagne%20to%20mark%20celebrations%20originated%20in,man's%20wit%2C%22%20Guy%20said.>

And then there is the most frequently sung English song in the world, “Happy Birthday to You,” which was composed as “Good Morning to All” by Patty Smith Hill, a kindergarten teacher in Louisville, Kentucky, and her oldest sister, Mildred Jane Hill, a pianist and composer. The birthday lyrics first appeared with the Good Morning tune in a piano manufacturer’s songbook in 1915 and again in 1924, and in a Broadway musical in 1932. Two years later the song was used in a satirical sketch in a musical revue by Moss Hart and Irving Berlin, and the composers’ sister Jessica took legal action and copyrighted all the versions of *Happy Birthday to You* in their name. For years legal battles raged over whether the song was in fact public domain, and in 2013 a New York filmmaker initiated a class action lawsuit. Arguments were still being heard in 2016 when Warner Music finally ended the matter by paying \$14 million to the plaintiffs and put it in the public domain.

While singing the song is celebratory, it might also make your birthday cake taste better. Researchers from Harvard University and the University of Minnesota found that engaging in a ritual before eating heightens our enjoyment of the food.<sup>8</sup> Many religious traditions observe a practice of blessing bread—a meal—before dining, both in celebration and in gratitude.

Songs help us celebrate special occasions. Through repetition and rhythm, beat and key, songs may express simple sentiments or sentiments which, like flowers, are so nuanced as to not be fully expressed in spoken words. We sing our national anthem at sporting events as if it is a constitutional requirement, we cheer our favorite teams with fight songs and victory songs, we remember our schools with alma maters, and religious groups have both ritual songs for services

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<sup>8</sup> Vohs, J., Y. Wang, F. Gino and M. I. Norton. “Rituals Enhance Consumption,” [https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/10686852/vohs,%20wang,%20gino,%20norton\\_rituals-enhance-consumption.pdf?sequence=1](https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/10686852/vohs,%20wang,%20gino,%20norton_rituals-enhance-consumption.pdf?sequence=1). See also, Gray, Nathan. “How do you eat yours? Foot rituals may boost flavour perception, suggests researchers,” Foodnavigator.com, July 24, 2013, <https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2013/07/25/Food-rituals-may-boost-flavour-perception-suggest-researchers>.

and seasonal songs for holidays such as Christmas. As an example of celebratory song I offer this mash-up, which, if it were 100 lines and at all literary, would be the form of poetry known as a cento:<sup>9</sup>

We're loyal to you Illinois<sup>10</sup>

With our colors flying

We will cheer you all the time<sup>11</sup>

We Are the Champions of the World<sup>12</sup>

Make every play clear the way to victory<sup>13</sup>

Hey Chicago, what do you say? The Cubs are gonna win today<sup>14</sup>

Hail to the victors valiant<sup>15</sup>

We will, we will rock you!<sup>16</sup>

We the loyal sons and daughters

Hail for good and great<sup>17</sup>

Shake down the thunder from the sky<sup>18</sup>

Oh say can you see<sup>19</sup>

My old Kentucky home<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://poets.org/glossary/cento>. A cento is a collage poem, consisting entirely of lines from other poets' poems.

<sup>10</sup> [https://fightingillini.com/sports/2015/11/10/traditions\\_threeinone.aspx](https://fightingillini.com/sports/2015/11/10/traditions_threeinone.aspx)

<sup>11</sup> [https://nudictionary.mmlc.northwestern.edu/wildwords/index.php/Go!\\_U\\_Northwestern](https://nudictionary.mmlc.northwestern.edu/wildwords/index.php/Go!_U_Northwestern)

<sup>12</sup> Mercury, Freddie. "We the Champions of the World."

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/queen/wearethechampions.html>

<sup>13</sup> Hoffman, Al. "Bear Down, Chicago Bears." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear\\_Down,\\_Chicago\\_Bears](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_Down,_Chicago_Bears)

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, Steve. "Go, Cubs, Go." <https://genius.com/Steve-goodman-go-cubs-go-lyrics>

<sup>15</sup> University of Michigan Fight Song. [https://mgoblue.com/news/2009/6/29/Michigan\\_Fight\\_Song.aspx](https://mgoblue.com/news/2009/6/29/Michigan_Fight_Song.aspx)

<sup>16</sup> May, Brian. "We Will Rock You." <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/queen/wewillrockyou.html>

<sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On,\\_Wisconsin!](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On,_Wisconsin!)

<sup>18</sup> <https://und.com/trads-nd-fightsong.html/>

<sup>19</sup> Key, Francis Scott. "The Star-Spangled Banner." <https://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/the-lyrics.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> Foster, Stephen. "My Old Kentucky Home." <https://songofamerica.net/song/my-old-kentucky-home/>



Should auld acquaintance be forgot<sup>21</sup>

For he's a jolly good fellow<sup>22</sup>

I Just Want to Celebrate<sup>23</sup>

Everyone around the world, Come on!<sup>24</sup>

L'Chaim<sup>25</sup>

Alf Mabrouk<sup>26</sup>

Felicidades<sup>27</sup>

Alleluia!

The essence of these celebrations, with or without food, beverage and entertainment, is the *gathering*, and as a noun, a “party” is defined as a social gathering. We gather to celebrate not just public events but also individual accomplishments, such as academic commencements. Somewhat circularly, the fact that we celebrate the accomplishment gives it much of its value—the gathering recognizes it as special. But in celebrating an individual success, the community also elevates itself, celebrating itself as the group--friends, supporters, co-participants--that supported the individual in his or her efforts. In a rite of passage, for instance, the community celebrates the addition to the tribe of a new member, and on a significant birthday, perhaps the addition of a new adult or elder.

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<sup>21</sup> Burns, Robert. “Auld Lang Syne.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Auld-Lang-Syne>

<sup>22</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. “For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow.” (American version).  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For\\_He%27s\\_a\\_Jolly\\_Good\\_Fellow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_He%27s_a_Jolly_Good_Fellow)

<sup>23</sup> Kool and the Gang. “Celebration.” <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/kool-the-gang/celebration>

<sup>24</sup> Kool and the Gang. “Celebration.” <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/kool-the-gang/celebration>

<sup>25</sup> Hebrew (To life)

<sup>26</sup> Arabic (A thousand thanks)

<sup>27</sup> Spanish (Congratulations)

For the individual, the celebration of mundane experiences--like another year of life or marriage--is meant, some say, to stun us. Milestone birthdays such as 21, 25, 30, 40, and especially 65 and 70, certainly shocked me, and caused many of us to pause and ponder our past experiences and perhaps the meaning of our lives. At such times, we become acutely aware of not only the past, but also of our present moment and circumstance, and, of course, the possibility of a future, albeit an ever shortening one. Memorials and celebrations of life may similarly stun us into such reflection.

Sociologists say that “through celebration, chronos turns into kairos.”<sup>28</sup> Kairos stands for a different conception of time: not linear or quantifiable, as in sun or moon time, but “lived as an intensely felt experience.”<sup>29</sup> These are understood only in terms of personal “experiences of connectedness in time and space.”<sup>30</sup> These moments of kairos, according to Merriam’s, are “a time when conditions are right for accomplishment of a crucial action, the opportune and decisive moment.”<sup>31</sup>

Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr puts it this way: “We are in liminal space whenever past, present and future time come together in a full moment of readiness.”<sup>32</sup> In that moment, we are reminded of our ancestors, and for this purpose, Reverend Barbara Holmes uses the word ancestor “as an indicator of legacy and interconnections.”<sup>33</sup> She says,

...they connect with us in dreams, in memories, and in stories. The stories reveal a promise that the community will continue beyond the breath of one individual.... The end

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<sup>28</sup> Journal of Comparative Research, Id. at note 1.

<sup>29</sup> Id.

<sup>30</sup> Id.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.Meriam-Webster.com/dictionary/kairos>

<sup>32</sup> Rohr, Richard. Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-fullness-of-time-2021-03--08>

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, Barbara. Center of Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations. <https://ac.org/daily-meditations/wisdom-beyond-the-vil-2021-03-09/>

result is that I know that I am not alone. I am connected to the past and the future by the ligatures of well-lived lives, the mysteries of “beyondness,” and the memories and narratives that lovingly bind and support me.<sup>34</sup>

This leads, Rohr says, to ever-greater circles of inclusion. Thus, the individual celebration leads to a celebration of all of life, and while for the day we blow out the candles, open gifts, have our own importance to the community acknowledged and our ego gratified, at the same time, that self-affirmation gratifies the whole.

It is interesting to note that the Celebration song by Kool and the Gang is based on a celebration of the whole of life itself and is said to have been inspired by a passage in the Q’uran: “the passage where god was creating Adam, and the angels were celebrating and singing praises.”<sup>35</sup>

Rev. Holmes appears to agree that parties can be sacred. She says:

We are told that Jesus hung out with publicans, tax collectors, and sinners. Perhaps during these sessions of music, laughter, and food fellowship, there were also sacred moments when ...mutual care and concern became the focus of their time together.

\*\*\*God breaks into nightclubs and Billie Holiday’s sultry torch songs; God tap dances with Bill Robinson and Savion Glover. And when Coltrane blew his horn, the angels paused to consider.<sup>36</sup>

Celebrations, then, are inherently community events. Is there a sadder scene than a single person with a single cupcake with a single candle celebrating his or her birthday at a table for

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<sup>34</sup> Id.

<sup>35</sup> Celebration” by Kool and the Gang. Genius. <https://genius.com/Kool-and-the-gang-celebration-lyrics>

<sup>36</sup> Rohr, Richard. Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations. [https:// cac.org/daily-meditations/sacred-art/](https://cac.org/daily-meditations/sacred-art/) (September 29, 2023)

one? Commenting on Jesus's parable of the Lost Sheep in a 1951 sermon, mystic Howard Thurman said, "There's a certain something that is creative and redemptive about the sense of community, about the fellowship."<sup>37</sup> The sheep was lost, and the shepherd left his flock of ninety-nine to find the one missing. Thurman takes the sheep's point of view in commenting on the parable: "And why was he lost? He was lost because he was out of touch...with the group that sustained him, the group that fed him, that gave him a sense that he counted."<sup>38</sup> In a restaurant, we sing happy birthday to strangers, not because we know them but because they are, on some fundamental level—no matter how very different from us they might appear—a member of our tribe, our human tribe.

Public holidays also create transformative, sacred moments. The very concept of a national holiday includes the halting of business and other normal activities, stopping the flow of the ordinary or mundane, and infusing the day with a kind of sacredness.

Public holidays consolidate and distinguish tribes, for better or worse. National holidays, for instance, can be times of "collective joy" which foster an egalitarian social structure: everyone who is part of the tribe can share the same festive experience--the fireworks over Lake Michigan or the town park. Even though they celebrate for reasons as different as "America First" and "Freedom to dissent," members of the community come together.

Such celebrations can also have a negative side, separating the "ins" from the "outs." National ethnic days can exclude those who aren't part of that ethnic tribe—except perhaps, St. Patrick's Day, where, at least in Chicago, "everyone's Irish." Religious holidays can be

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<sup>37</sup> Thurman, Howard. Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations. <https://cac-org/daily-meditations/a-sheep-lost-and-found-2022-080-30/>

<sup>38</sup> Id.

particularly divisive, such as Christmas and Easter, which can separate Christian tribes from others, and are celebrated by both religious and secular communities for different reasons and with different rituals. Every year we seem to experience a more intense movement to de-commercialize Christmas and put “Christ” back in, just as we are also reminded that Happy Holidays is a more inclusive, potentially less divisive greeting than “Merry Christmas.”

In addition, festivities meant to foster egalitarianism can have the opposite effect. Consider the Roman Saturnalia, which, like the modern British Boxing Day, is meant to temporarily invert power. Saturnalia was the most popular holiday on the ancient Roman calendar, derived from farm-related rituals and the winter solstice, and thought to be a precursor of Christmas Day. During Saturnalia, work and business ceased and normal social patterns and norms were suspended. History.com tells us:

People decorated their homes with wreaths and other greenery, and shed their traditional togas in favor of colorful clothes known as *synthesis*. Even enslaved people did not have to work during Saturnalia, but were allowed to participate in the festivities; in some cases, they sat at the head of the table while their masters served them. Instead of working, Romans spent Saturnalia gambling, singing, playing music, feasting, socializing and giving each other gifts.<sup>39</sup>

In the fourth century,

In many Roman households, a mock king was chosen: the *Saturnalicus [sic] princeps*, or “leader of Saturnalia,” sometimes also called the “Lord of Misrule.” Usually a lowlier member of the household, this figure was responsible for making mischief during the

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<sup>39</sup> How the Romans Celebrated Saturnalia, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-rome/saturnalia#how-the-romans-celebrated-saturnalia>

celebrations—insulting guests, wearing crazy clothing, chasing women and girls, etc. The idea was that he ruled over chaos, rather than the normal Roman order.<sup>40</sup>

Some academics view these practices as a pressure valve, releasing inherent tensions in the class struggle in support of the status quo, while others see in such celebrations the possibility of subversion. The taste of the possible can both incite revolution and inspire transformation. Some say that the whole concept of a floating holiday is a mini-rebellion against being told by governments and employers which holidays to observe.

And so we come to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chicago Literary Club particularly cognizant of our rituals and traditions. In creating a celebration, we are not expected to reinvent or revolutionize the Club, but to connect to our history and ancestors, and to gather as a community to celebrate what the Club stands for. But we are also aware of this liminal space--the opportunity for transformation, both personal and institutional--which this occasion provides.

We can date the earliest organization of our Club to the first meeting of its organizers—three clergymen, including the first president, Rev. Robert Collyer, a judge and two others, plus a lithographer who came to the meeting on March 13, 1874, only hoping to make a sale. The First Annual Dinner was held that same year on June 15 and President Collyer gave the first address, describing the need for such a club. Speaking of the purpose of the Club, he said:

And in these decadent days when the finer flowers of literature have been largely submerged in a welter of rapacious greed and luxurious living, it may not be unprofitable to let our thoughts turn backward for a moment while we contemplate that enthusiasm.

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<sup>40</sup> Id.

The need for a like stimulus is apparent when on every hand we hear men say that the agonizing events through which we have lived in the last decade have made it almost impossible for them to think of or to care for literature or art or to turn their minds to things eternal when temporal things are so insistently engrossing.<sup>41</sup>

In turning member's minds to things literary and eternal, he sought "to build up in our young city a society of men who will do all they can for the development of literary culture."<sup>42</sup> As Past President William Nissen reminded us at the beginning of our 149<sup>th</sup> season, many early members served the city as philanthropists and board members of city parks, museums and libraires, contributing significantly to the cultural development of the city. Today, despite the ravages and disruptions of COVID, the cultural life of Chicago is vibrant and requires not so much development as attention and support. But there is no question that today's society is every bit as greedy and as distracting, and world and local problems and events as agonizing, as in the post-Civil War, post-Chicago Fire era. As an institution, the Club is no longer needed to build up a society of cultural leaders, although arts, literature and culture require continued support. What brings us together, I imagine, is not a social mission as grand as Collyer's but our own personal interests in intellectual development and literary pursuits.

Since the very beginning, members of the Club have met regularly to share a meal, hear a paper read (without comment) by a member, and, as Payson Sibley Wild wrote in 1947, maintain a spirit of fellowship among members:

...drawn from a rigid 'selective service,' from the ranks of educated men, chiefly of the learned professions, as might be expected ... wherein may be found men eagerly in search

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<sup>41</sup> Shelton, Earle A. "A Twenty-Minute History of The Chicago Literary Club," delivered Nov 28, 1960. Published by TCLC 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Id.

of cultural values. \*\*\* [W]e are, a body of men of full intellectual stature and prominent station, differing one from another politically, religiously, philosophically, but *bound together* year after year by love of the beautifully and correctly written and spoken word, and by the *companionship* of kindred minds and spirits<sup>43</sup> [italics mine]

Perhaps he overstates the selectivity of our membership. While it is true that the founders of the Club rejected a proposed membership list drawn from a list of millionaires,<sup>44</sup> prior to 1881, sometimes 26 of 30 proposed members were literally blackballed. However, Wild's description of the composition of the club's membership is fairly accurate, with the exception that now women are of course an important part of the club, having been first invited to Club meetings in 1877, first admitted to membership in 1995 and now constituting about 30% of our resident membership. Importantly, several principles replaced the "millionaires" proposal: that the member 1) be of literary bent, 2) be a good fellow companionable to the group and 3) be expected to contribute.<sup>45</sup>

Being men and women of culture is part of the myth of our tribe; it is a perk of membership pleasing to our egos just to be able to say that you are a member of a "literary club." But early in our history there was concern that the name of the club, with its emphasis on "The" in *The Chicago Literary Club* was a "supreme arrogance of literary omniscience..."<sup>46</sup> Many alternative names were rejected, including "The Goodenough Club," "The Club Which Is Too Modest to Say What It Is" and the one that squashed the whole renaming idea: "The Club for the Aggregation and Fostering of Old Citizens Regardless of Qualification."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Id.

<sup>44</sup> Shelton, Earle A. "A Twenty Minute History of the Chicago Literary Club (Nv. 28, 1962) Pub, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> Id.

<sup>46</sup> Gookin, Frederick William, *The Chicago Literary Club: A History of Its First Fifty Years (1926)*, p. 35-36.

<sup>47</sup> Id.



As to our love of the beautiful and correct spoken word, it is interesting to note that there are few professional writers among us. Nationally known authors living in Chicago—such as fiction writers Stuart Dybek, Rebecca Makkai, Goldie Goldbloom, Jeffrey Eugenides, Audrey Neffenger and even popular writers like Sara Paretsky and Scott Turow are not members. Most of us have not published full length books, although many have enjoyed publication in university presses and professional, academic and literary journals and have independently or privately published.

We are not a writers' workshop. We are not a book club. We weren't born to membership as at some country clubs. We haven't earned membership as we might have in Phi Beta Kappa or some national Academy.

We are at heart a community of hobbyists—serious hobbyists who do not write for money but for the enjoyment of writing, of exploring a topic outside of our professional fields, and of sharing with others the product of our efforts. Hobbies are a powerful part of our lives: creative, good for our mental health, distracting, confidence building.<sup>48</sup> Our individual interests and preferred pastimes are all the more meaningful when we connect through them with others with similar interests. Not only does the author discover new ideas, but the process of reading a paper to this group turns the often-solitary process of research and writing into a communal activity, offering members the opportunity to discover new ideas and fresh perspectives. I dare say the communal aspect—otherwise known as peer pressure—also improves our writing in addition to giving it a more meaningful purpose.

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<sup>48</sup> Harry & David, "The Power of Hobbies in Our Lives," Celebrations Pulse, promotional email, October 2, 2022.

Although it is interesting to look back at our history, celebration is not nearly as important, it seems to me, as looking forward with a view towards the future vitality of the Club. Celebrations such as those taking place this year bring us together, not simply to remember our ancestors, but to celebrate what we have in this Club and to propel us, in this liminal moment, this transitional moment, into a future that continues to meet the needs of its members, present and future, and to foster and support literature and the literary arts in Chicago.

Thanks to the current 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee led by Jim Thompson and its precedents led by Michael Koenigsnecht, we will celebrate our 150<sup>th</sup> with special meals in special places, special activities, after-dinner talks on historically interesting Club members, publications, videos, and public announcements. We will remember our ancestors in the Club and acknowledge how we are connected to their legacy. In their memories and their archived narratives, we may experience the mystery of beyondness. At the Centennial Banquet, Morris Fishbein toasted:

No doubt on Monday in some heavenly hall

They still assemble to the Monday call.<sup>49</sup>

And we will consider our future. Arthur Baer's toast at that celebration was to the Second 100 years, and he seemed to encourage the status quo:

What better wish for the future than a continuation of what has been enjoyed and relished, a conscious shelter from the furious winds of change?<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, on the occasion of our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Roger E. Ball delivered a talk in which he was asked to predict what the future may hold for the club. He declined to do that

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<sup>49</sup> As reported by Cyril O. Houle in Baer, Arthur and Others. *The Chicago Literary Club: The First 100 Years 1874-1974* (1974) p.67.

<sup>50</sup> Id. at 69.

exactly, since he said he didn't know, but he seemed to caution against the status quo, saying that the Club would need to "avoid the danger that besets all venerable institutions—the tendency to become excessively conservative, hidebound and set into long-established patterns of thinking and operation."<sup>51</sup> He then suggested his personal hopes for ways in which the Club could avoid that danger, including, interestingly enough—given the recent selection of Collyer Fellows--the recruitment of younger members.

As we celebrate 150 years of the Chicago Literary Club, this is perhaps a liminal moment for our Club, an opportune and decisive moment for a recommitment to our future, just as it was for Club members at 50 and 100 years. At the end of Frederick Gookin's history of the Club's first 50 years, he wrote:

The future of the Club will be largely what we make it. As we sow, shall we reap.

\*\*\*Each member in the future as in the past will need to have a keen sense of personal responsibility and be willing to give the Club his very best."<sup>52</sup>

What I think both Gookin and Ball realized, is that that when we look to the future of the Club and are either invested in having it stay exactly the same or are certain that the future is bright, we run the risk of thinking, "Everything's going to be fine." If as individuals we have been complacent about our participation in the Club in the past, we may be tempted to think we can continue to let others sustain it. If, on the other hand, we think the future is bleak, we may think there's nothing we can do about it. But theologian Brian McLaren, writing about the future

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<sup>51</sup> Id.

<sup>52</sup> Gookin, *supra* n. 38, p 200

of Christianity, says there is another way of phrasing the question about our future, and that is to ask the question about our future with an “open heart, an open imagination, an open mind.”<sup>53</sup>

Our story began with one person asking a couple of others to join him, and those people asking others, who asked others. If the Club is to move into a bright future, it needs bright new members, and it needs each of us to recruit them, with the same *open* heart, imagination and mind.

The celebration of this opportune and decisive moment is a time for members to reexamine why we belong and to recommit to the future of the Club. Each of us must take this moment to truly recognize how unique a venture this Club is and has been and to appreciate the courage of our fellow members in perfecting papers for delivery at our meetings. Let us share our enthusiasm for the Club with other good fellows of a literary bent and continue to contribute fearlessly our varied interests and intellectual pursuits in words beautiful and correctly written.

If we are enthused by our celebration activities—dinners and entertainments and special talks, if not fireworks and anthems--I am, like Roger Ball on the occasion of our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, confident that the Club will continue to meet each Monday in a local hall, where a member will read a “carefully and lovingly prepared” paper, and that “our imaginations and interests will be stirred.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> McLaren, Brian. Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/courage-to-ask-the-question-2022-11-27/>

<sup>54</sup> Ball, supra n. 46.