

1983-84 A SEASON OF TRAGEDY, BAD FAITH, RAVISHED TRADITIONS

A paper presented at the open meeting of

The Athenaeum Society

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by

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As you read on the front page of your program, the Athenaeum society this year is ~~86~~ years old. Every society that's ~~87~~ years old has its deeply rooted traditions--many of them utterly ridiculous, ~~ones.~~ Like this business of the president asking the secretary to "Call the first paper." Why can't the president himself call the first paper? You'll hear more of that bit of protocol later in the program. Why is it that I am the one--not Dr. Iord--to go first? It's because everything and everybody in the Athenaeum goes according to seniority. I've been in the society almost forever; Dr. Iord, a mere four years. If you want to know who is going to be president next year...well, it's going to be Paul Turner, because he's right behind Kenneth Cayce in seniority. Then the next president after Turner will be Robert Sivley. The holy roster of the members, carefully listed in the order of their seniority, is on the back page of your program. ~~Note that there are no women, no blacks, probably no Roman Catholics.~~

Another tradition of the society is that one of the papers at <sup>is</sup> the open meeting will review the papers and noteworthy occurrences at the other eight meetings of the year, meetings at which the only guests may be males who do not live in Christian county. These male guests are usually prominent individuals, who indicate the clout in

high places possessed by the member whom they accompany. Only rarely is such a guest identified as <sup>just a</sup> ~~mere~~ relative or old friend.

Now, putting some of this together, you might ask, "Why does it fall your lot to do the silly paper reviewing all the others? After all, you're senior to Dr. Lord." But you might not be aware of the fact that Lord is my minister and I'm getting close to the golden age. You might not know that I've been a dutiful Christian ever since my mother carried me up to that baptismal font, kicking and screaming, before age 11. I just don't want to take any chance of blowing all that <sup>have</sup> so close to the end. Therefore, when the reverend one took me aside <sup>one</sup> ~~that~~ day last fall and informed me, firmly enough, that he was going to <sup>do</sup> something on Mozart for this meeting, I knew better than to pull rank on him. Then too, <sup>he</sup> was fresh from his annual summer in Europe and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about that musical genius of yesteryear. I recalled hearing that Dr. Lord, as a boy, had taken piano lessons. You who have heard him chant ~~the~~ ~~song~~ may find that hard to believe.

The subject that I very earnestly wanted to write about was the parade of new discoveries in molecular genetics. You members will recall that wonderfully stimulating paper on genetic engineering which I delivered a couple of years ago, when we were meeting in the posh upper room at Lone Oak. <sup>Genetics</sup> ~~This~~ is such an exciting field now, with significant discoveries being announced almost week by week. My own interest is the structure of the system which allowed <sup>molecular</sup> life itself to ~~begin~~ <sup>go on</sup>.

It appears that, even in the beginning, it had to be so ~~incredibly~~<sup>some</sup> complex and interdependent that it had to be the work of ~~a~~ creator, had not a <sup>possibility</sup> ~~chance~~ of occurring through happenstance. But to treat this subject in a manner that permits it to be readily understood requires illustrations, large and complex ones. Presenting such illustrations in this room at this meeting would just not be practicable. Here we run into another Athenaeum tradition. We always have our open meeting at "the club." So I will just have to content myself with being devilishly clever and amusing, when, as most of you know, my thoughts run far, far deeper.

It has been a season of disappointments. We expected the tenure of Mr. Cayce, as president, to be a bright chapter, sort of Kennedyesque in flavor. He was known for his quickness in our meetings and for his formidable acumen in our business community. We just presumed that his character was of equal quality.

But at our first meeting in September, Mr. Cayce told us cooly that he had excused one of the scheduled presenters from appearing that evening. This was of course an unprecedented break with tradition, with no constitutional support whatsoever. Down through the years, if a man does not appear as scheduled, he is immediately cashiered and drummed out. In his rashness, Mr. Cayce went a step farther. He said that he had excused John Newsom for reasons that he did not feel the membership needed to know, an intentional slap in the face of our tradition. But Athenaeum members, for the most part, are not

outraged

quick to anger. We are far more interested in ideas than emotions, ~~however immature they may be~~, and there is a <sup>general</sup> understanding of that ~~entirely~~ wonderfully unnatural concept of forgiveness, Christian or otherwise. So there was no demonstration. It should be said that Dr. Newsom is a member of Mr. Cayce's church, also that Dr. Newsom was seen on two occasions that day in his hunting togs, and finally that it happened to be the opening day of the season <sup>for shooting</sup> ~~of~~ mourning doves. Enough said.

The other presenter scheduled for that infamous date was Robert Fairleigh III. He did appear and delivered a paper on what really happened to John Wilkes Booth after Booth assassinated our, most sainted president. Booth did not drown in his escape, <sup>as generally believed</sup> but slipped away, <sup>Fairleigh declared</sup> in disguise. This shocking bit of unorthodoxy was confirmed by the head of the history department at our branch of the University of Kentucky, Dr. Brooks Major, who rose to say that he had, with his own eyes, viewed the embalmed remains of Booth, either at Chatauqua or at an early carnival, his faltering ~~in~~ memory not being able to distinguish which.

At the October meeting, it was Wendell Rorie and Carmichael Fels. Mr. Rorie, true to his own tradition, flaunted his summer trip before the society, this one to Greece. There was audible grinding of teeth from those who had paid him retainers last year. Mr. Fels, in his very first paper, sophomorishly discussed areas in today's economy where investments should show the most growth--suspiciously similar to an

Edwards  
would  
have  
is  
Lambert

Speaking Mr. Fel's did not say it is reported that it was he who called a meeting  
directors + employees

article in Fortune magazine. I learned later that there is a specialist in each of these areas at Mr. Fel's bank.

I think it was at ~~the~~ <sup>our</sup> October meeting also that the membership committee, headed by Robert Sivley, proposed a number of candidates to fill the few vacancies in the society's limited roster of 40. These were all splendidly qualified individuals, with impressive educations and the cordial type of personality which would make for pleasant companions at dinner and interesting participants in <sup>the latter</sup> discussion. Every one of them was voted down. It takes only three votes in our secret balloting to deny membership. I felt sorry for the young chaps but I felt sorry mainly for Bob Sivley, because I had considered him one of our most perceptive individuals. ~~I always look forward to his comments; they are ever fresh and imaginative.~~ What I can't understand about Sivley is how he did not realize that this society doesn't want the healthy-minded, clear-headed, All-American type of individual. These guys are great in Kiwanis or Rotary, or some such constructive organization. The Athenaeum is not such an organization. We don't do anything for anybody else. The Athenaeum cherishes its image of a learned society, and as such, it doesn't seek great guys. It seeks egg-heads and eccentrics. I just don't understand why Bob Sivley wasn't ~~inductive~~ <sup>sharp</sup> enough to pick up on this. All he had to do was look at the individuals whom the society has taken in during recent years and realize that these are the characters it likes and votes in.

This ~~very~~ mature display of humility on Curtis' part ~~shattered~~ yet another Athenaeum tradition. It was the first time any member had ever admitted that he might possibly be even slightly in the wrong.

Then in November, Richard C. (for Curtis) Brasher and Franklin Nash. From his recent chapter as a restauranteur and bon vivant, Curtis chose a subject in which he could be fully enthusiastic, "Alcohol in U.S. Politics." As is his habit, Mr. Brasher waxed even more enthusiastic in his rebuttal to the comments, launching into totally new corrolaries of his main theme, until at the end of some 25 minutes, he was reminded of the 20-minute limit on rebuttal by that dependable watchdog of Athenaeum tradition, Graham Duncan. Mr. Brasher <sup>never</sup> decently apologized to the society.

Franklin Nash took full advantage of that flaw in Athenaeum format which allows a member to choose any subject which pleases him. Its <sup>7</sup> always Mr. Nash's choice to come up with a subject so obtuse or so far removed geographically that few members have a fighting chance to offer substantive comment. Of course this does not really stop them, certainly not Jack Amis, whose comment nearly always includes the line, "It reminds me of a story I heard..." For this occasion Mr. Nash had chosen a title, "Phenomena Associated with Volcanic Eruptions, Particularly Mt. St. Helens, " or something like that. He even passed out little plastic bottles of volcanic dust from Mt. St. Helens, the authenticity of which was questioned by some who said the dust was more likely some old sweepings from Mrs. Nash's vacuum. But the samples were free, so no one questioned them too much.

I missed the December meeting entirely, although I didn't plan it that way. I had ~~marked~~ the calendar for the Thursday after the first Tuesday, which is the meeting night of the Church Hill Grange. It turned out that, for the first time this century, Thursday came before a Tuesday that month. I didn't even go by to pick up Robert Fairleigh,

spending, as I calculate it, some 20 cents worth of extra gasoline for about 17 cents worth of his off-brand bourbon. In a way, I'm glad that I didn't go to the meeting. It was the last one for our long-time secretary, the most literate one of us, Dr. Leslie Crane. I kind of hate good-bye's and I would have hated it the more, knowing that he was throwing up his hands in despair at the sad state of our society, and leaving us forever. ~~for br~~

On the program that evening were William Turner and John Newsom, Newsom apparently having completed his "harvest" of the soft-calling little doves. Dr. Newsom tried to make up for his September snub of the society by choosing a timely subject: "Background for the American Seizure of the Island of Grenada." William Turner, as might be expected, chose "Old Homes in Hopkinsville--Circa 1900." Turner's presentation, complete with slides, must have been a rehash of one that my wife heard him deliver at the museum. Mr. Turner has a talent for being able to get several exposures out of a given set of data, then selling it to some commercial sponsor who wants to put out a booklet. Few ~~of the rest~~ of us are so resourceful. Perhaps George Boone, because some of his papers sound like a few of his past newspaper columns stapled together.

In January, it was Graham Duncan and Bill Rowlett. Graham is at that stage where he is looking backward as well as forward, and is wanting to see and touch some of the things his ancestors touched when they came to this part of the country. This time his paper was on those hardy Scots, experienced ironworkers from Glasgow, who came to Muhlenberg county and built a furnace at Airdrie. The furnace bombed, but the coal under the land was later to become the foundation for the Duncan fortune.



The other presenter, Bill Rowlett, is widely known as an earnest, practice-what-you-preach kind of ~~Christian~~<sup>guy</sup>. He uses his vacation time to go off to Africa and do free eye surgery year after year. Apparently, he is not dogmatic; he wants to know more. As part of this searching, he had looked into the writings of C. S. Lewis, the Oxford scholar who had, almost reluctantly, given his allegiance to the Cross. Now there's another tradition of the Athenaeum that papers shouldn't deal with either religion or politics--the most important subjects of all--because, well, they're controversial, and we just don't like to hurt ~~people's~~<sup>anyone's</sup> feelings. But feelings today aren't as tender as they were 80 years ago. ~~I think we need to hurt some feelings to~~  
~~wake up some of our people.~~<sup>people</sup> Heaven knows we do ~~them~~ a favor when we enlighten them. This old tradition is surely the most counterproductive of all. Bill Rowlett didn't violate the ~~the~~ doctrine. Cleverly, he made Lewis' life so intriguing that a number of us hard-heads got copies of "The Screwtape Letters" or "Merely ~~Christian~~" and had a breath of fresh air.

The program for the February meeting announced Dr. Thomas Riley and Dr. Sam Traugher as the presenters, so we ate our pot roast and broccoli with great expectations. Our ~~high~~ hopes were soon deflated as Tom droned on and on about the history of the Masonic order in Kentucky and then in Christian County. He recounted the establishment of chapters at such cultural centers as Dawson, Lafatette, and even Pee Dee when Masonry was in full flower. It seems that Tom is a high ranking <sup>officer</sup> in that organization and stands a chance of achieving national rank, with such detailed knowlege of its history. But for the Athenaeum, it came down like a cloud of nerve gas, enervating our most attentive members. For the president of a college, it was a very unworthy effort.

Then came Sam Traugher with a paper explaining why things are what they are in the field of health care today--yes, why they always seem to be so damnably expensive. He made a real good case, by showing how much more effective ~~and successful~~ is today's medicine and how many more citizens are partaking of it. When he detailed some of the costs for a medical education, they seemed so unreasonable that my eyes began to water a little bit, and I reached for my handkerchief. But as I looked around, I didn't see tears in anyone else's eyes. Then I noticed the perfect tailoring of Sam's blazer, his Brooks Brothers shirt, his \$30 tie. My tears had stopped. My cynicism had returned. When the revolution <sup>finally</sup> comes, all medical doctors must go to the guillotine, also Dr. Tom Riley.

The March meeting was on a soft spring evening when the early Somers tarried on the porch and talked of earthy, pleasant things. For dinner there were charbroiled sirloins, 1.27 inches thick, the like of which had never been served to the society before. No one could understand why; no one dared ask.

The first paper was by Pruitt Owen on Transcendental Meditation. Now that Dr. Owen has retired, he has time for some of the way-out notions that he would have considered frivolous in the years when he was building his fortune at Hilliard-Iyons. In the discussion on this paper, some of the chaps made it appear that Pruitt would go to any lengths to improve his golf score, to the point of closing his eyes and meditating quietly before attempting a long putt. I asked Pruitt about my loan officer at the bank who would close his eyes and scrootch up his face while I was explain<sup>ing</sup> exactly why I needed some more money. I sometimes <sup>had to</sup> reached ~~ed~~ across the desk and tugged ~~ed~~ on his sleeve to bring him out of these exasperating seances. The meditation never seemed to improve his disposition.

Then Paul Turner, the attorney who is buying up banks faster than the Butcher brothers, gave a paper on the very uplifting subject of "Fetuscide." Now there is no limit in our constitution on the time allowed for a paper, but most members try to hold it to 20 or 30 minutes--even George Draper. But Paul ground doggedly on, surely for over an hour, about pregnant women getting kicked in the stomach and what the trial court, the court of appeals, and the supreme court had to say about ~~the~~ whether the fetus was in fact a legal person, which apparently it now is not, thus there can be no murder of a non-person. Mr. Turner feels it is the duty of the legislature to define which fetu are persons and which are not. Most of our lawyer members stayed tactfully awake during all of this. The rest of us were limp;

he had talked all of the oxygen out of the air.

Last month's program announced Frank Yost and <sup>Charles</sup> ~~Paul~~ Tilley. Mr. Yost, as your program shows, is No. 1 in seniority. He is also No. 1 in personal endowment, now that Norman Lazarre has resigned. Norman explained that he found himself getting so deep into his abstract, Einstein-type thinking that he just couldn't depend on thinking about such prosaic things as putting on the parking brake before leaving his car. Perhaps we'll have to ask Betsy to join. But back to Frank Yost. His subject was "The People of Russia, " and he described a paranoid society in which the <sup>social</sup> ~~political~~ ideals of Lenin have been largely snuffed out by the oligarchy of Stalin and his successors, and where any stranger must be treated as a member of the secret police. One comment suggested that Mr. Yost is still embittered by the shrewdness of the Russian ~~grain~~ traders who so skillfully bought up the huge quantity of American grain without running up the price, along about 1975.

<sup>Charles</sup> ~~Paul~~ Tilley was not on hand to deliver his paper, but had asked Robert Baker to take his place. Mr. Baker had the temerity to come up with an old speech which he had delivered to both the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs some years ago, but one which he keeps handy to defend his University Heights Academy against the running criticism from public school purists. It turned out to be not a bad paper for the Athenaeum because it set up such familiar targets of debate as U.S. control of educational doctrine and thus U.S. control of political thinking, U.S. constitutional guarantee for freedom of religion, U.S. presidents, and U.S. blacks.

~~godlessness~~. For the first time in 25 years, all members stayed for the discussion period following intermission, and seemingly all participated with their comments. There were cries of <sup>"You're</sup> "Sermonizing!" directed at both Dr. Amis and Dr. Major as they waxed enthusiastic over their pet philosophy. <sup>ies</sup> More than once, Graham Duncan had to interrupt harshly with a reminder that the 20-minute limit on commentary had been exceeded. The real hero of the evening was Bud Hudson, an Athenaeum enemy of Bob Baker for some time now, who sat patiently through the debate and, with self control worthy of a pope, refused to rise and crush the young headmaster with a single blast from his coach's sideline voice. Even after adjournment, there were little groups of three and four who kept it up as we went out. You could hear, as you passed them, phases like, "What you can't seem to understand is..." or "My Lord you're liberal; ~~my~~ how old are you?"

So the tragic season ended on an up-beat sound--the debate going at full ~~throttle~~ <sup>blast</sup>. This is the best part of the Athenaeum, that a member's personal notions, even his tastes, can be exposed to the notions and tastes of others, and thereby broadened, tempered, and frequently enriched. If there are personality adjustments also involved, these too can result in improvement. The exposure is the ~~main~~ thing.