

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



December 1, 2018

Issue 4: *Laughter and Forgetting*

In Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (published in English translation in 1980), the multiple characters of this disparately abstract narrative are enmeshed in the complexities of love and memories, or at least some pliantly unreliable ways of recreating what the characters thought was real. The component of laughter is something a bit more complex, but also that which is a common theme in the works of Kundera (b. 1929), including his early novel *The Joke*, which in Czech has a beautifully crisp and evocatively playful sound: Žert! But the joke and laughter of Kundera's world is that of his literary godfather Franz Kafka (1883-1924), whose works were abstract and absurd tales that led both characters and readers into an abyss



Good Soldier Švejk

of relentless confusion and outright fear. Kafka was not the only Czech writer, though, who wrote in this tradition. Fellow

Bohemian Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), who lived nearly the same time as Kafka, wrote a somewhat

parallel universe of characters in his acclaimed and humorous work *Good Soldier Švejk* in 1921, in which the main character Švejk was a sloppy goof of a soldier, bumbling about through laughable scenes of the Great War—in fact, one volume of this unfinished work is called “The Glorious Licking,” which probably received more of a humorous reaction a century ago than today. Yet under this humor, there was something a little deeper, even darker—a dark humor that both probed and mollified the harsh realities of life at that time, but also of the torments of authoritarian governments, unstable economies, and uncertainty about the future. This style of writing evolved and blended with other types of literary and artistic forms well into the 20th century. My first introduction to Kundera came around the time I was introduced to

the absurdist poetry and theatrical works of Vaclav Havel (1936-2011), who was both a literary figure and then first president of the Czech Republic. I had a Czech classmate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, whose family had been close to Havel, and from whom I learned more about the nature and environment in which Havel and others wrote during the 1960s. At that time in 1968, Czechoslovakia came under Soviet control, and the old Kafkan idea of the curious uncertainty and absurdist direction of life came into new focus with writers like Havel.

In our current world, we often think about all that is going on, and muse as to how absurd the present state of affairs may be, no matter what our political affiliations or biases. It also makes me think about how we come to understand our present in respect to our pasts (plural), and how these are constructed on the basis of documents—the written or printed word. From ancient times and antique climes, we have relied mostly on “the Word” in all that that means, to help us excavate histories. Recently, a colleague in the History department gave me a copy of Harvard history professor Jill Lepore's new history of the United States, *These Truths*. Weighing in at a hefty 800-pages, the work is a thoroughly insightful tome, which tackles many of America's riches, as well as ills from the get-go. But an area that she probes insightfully early on, is the question of how historians can faithfully explain or describe history, when our written and artifactual remains are so fragmentary. In very clear language Lepore notes: “Most of what once existed is gone. Flesh decays, wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the study of what remains, what's left behind, which can be almost anything, so long as it survives the ravages of time and war...” (p. 4). There is so much truth to this that we must take stock and realize how much we should appreciate what *has* remained in places like Bridwell and other libraries.

As Lepore writes, things decay, rot, or are destroyed. Last month, I spoke about borders and fires, and how nature itself can be destructive. I had mentioned that I'd contacted the library district of Paradise, California, where that massive wildfire destroyed nearly the entirety of that village. Since last issue, I received a beautiful message from the local librarian there, detailing some of the tragedy and their current needs. I will share part of that here:

Dear Anthony,

I apologize for the significantly delayed response to your kind email. The support of our fellow library colleagues has been such a comfort to us. While the library is intact, we do not yet know the extent of the smoke damage to the entire contents of the building. We are working on assessments now. The community needs are vast and many. Only three percent of the town's homes are left standing. Our four Paradise Library staff members and 5 other Butte County Library System staff have lost their homes. We have received a tremendous amount of support from near and far and are very grateful.

We are currently accepting small amounts of books/materials in good condition. We unfortunately do not have a large amount of storage space at present. The donated materials are being handed out to families at the disaster recovery center in Chico, CA at present and we will evaluate usage of donated materials for the collection once we know the state of damages. [...]

Thank you again for writing to us. It means more than we can say that other libraries are taking the time to express their concern and offer encouragement.

Sincerely,

Emily Goehring
Paradise Branch Librarian
Butte County Library
5922 Clark Road, Paradise, CA 95969

The city of Kundera, Kafka, and Hašek has one of the most beautiful libraries in the world—the Strahov Library in Prague is a gem of architectural and aesthetic beauty and has been fortunate to withstand centuries of external elements and ruptures in society. Other libraries around the world have not been so fortunate. Both by natural disaster and human folly—there are bountifully sad lists online that we can see: Zaluski Library in



Central U. of Bucharest

Poland (1944), National Library of Cambodia (1976-79), Central University of Bucharest (1989), National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992), Iraq National Library and Archives (2003), Mosul Public Library (2015), and others, all burned down by human hands. Those places that have rebuilt or found comfort in their communities, despite war or other tragedies, continue to rebuild and strive for the preservation of human knowledge and the continuation of shared information, and attempt with all their available resources not to allow us to *forget*. We must not *forget* about any aspect of our past, about the materials that were lost, about the collections that report to us from the past, or even about those events that purposely sought to erase the memories, documents, and materials that gave us traces of our collective histories. *Forgetting* is part of our life and world, but it can have both natural and sinister expressions that feature in our society.

Over the eight months I've been in Dallas, I've attended dozens of church services, and one thing that I've noticed is how humor, jokes, and laughter play into the sermons, or as many churches now call them "the message"—especially in big evangelical churches. In one mega-church, recently, a pastor got a laugh from the 4,000+ person congregation after he made a joke about a woman who saw a "painting of Jesus in his living room," and who then remarked that "the guy on the wall was hot." Whether or not this is funny is not the point, rather the collective congregation laughed quite loudly. The idea that

people could find Jesus ‘hot,’ even beyond some idea of God ‘being good-looking’ is a mode of dissonance in what we think is *proper* or *meriting respect*. I’m sure our Maimonidean, Aristotelian, and Calvinist friends must be reeling at such comments! In a Zimbabwean church I’ve attended a few times, humor and jokes and laughter are *key* to the sermon-message. Nearly every few minutes there is a comment or joke that sets off laughter, which clearly frees the body of stress and brings comfort and connection to the parishioners. It is possible that you can be laughing, funny, serious, and profound all at once—and even forget your earthly woes through the power of the religious message.

A few months ago, I went to the Waxahachie Chautauqua, where I participated in Laughter Yoga—a practice that originated in India only twenty-five or so years ago and was developed by Dr. Madan Kataria into a worldwide phenomenon.



The Waxahachie Chautauqua

Our laughter was deliberate, but useful; it was a practice which made us pair off and make our laughing partners do just that: say something funny, mimic or mime a ridiculous act, force a deep-deep belly laugh, and move around with great energy. The purpose of this activity was not just simply to connect with our group—many of them strangers—but to allow relaxation of our muscles and body in such a way that it made our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional self as a whole come into a place that allowed us to take more relaxing possession of ourselves. *Anima sana in corpore sano*—“healthy mind in a healthy body,” or some variation of that is not just the acronym for ASICS shoes—it is an age old truism. The body keeping the mind healthy, through things like laughter, stimulates the biology of the brain and allows us to withstand stress. Some have said that it has some influence on how we remember better, or decrease *forgetting* or *forgetfulness*—an important distinction, which points to how we choose to remember in contrast with more physiological *forgetfulness*.

Not long ago, I was examining some of our storage areas in Bridwell and discovered that our library had many old paintings, sculptures, and other pieces of art. As Jon Speck and I were going through several of these items, one caught my eye for its unusual color and structure—a fairly modern work of art with characters from another era, in fact something *comical*, but also a *serious* piece of art. I



Marlinde von Ruhs’ painting

asked Jon to bring it out and see how it might look in our conference room. Upon seeing it in that space, both Jon and I thought it quite fitting, and decided to install it.

Not long after, a visitor in the conference room asked about the origin of the work, so we did a little sleuthing, and identified the artist as Marlinde von Ruhs, who still lives and has her works displayed in Europe. This extraordinary painting is playful, vibrant, and even has some historical associations with laughter considering its themes; and yet it also embodies *forgetting*—as an object that has been forgotten in storage, forgotten how it got here and what its purpose had been, or even forgotten what theme it represented. Despite the complexities of what we see in the world, the absurdities, the laughs, the good jokes and “groaners,” the trials and traumas of lost components of histories or destruction of cultural artifacts, we will most likely experience some *laughter* and *forgetting* now and again. Hopefully these expressions will bring us together to live healthier, happier, and more productive lives, and be arbiters of promoting culture when it is most needed.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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