

“All Things Considered”
(a brief talk to the ILC by Joseph Hingtgen)

(The famous Groucho Marx said that he would never be a member of any club that would accept him as a member. But, I’m sure he would have made an exception for our club!)

First I want to congratulate Gene Lausch for being the oldest club member to have run in 35 consecutive mini-marathons. We know this to be true since it was on the front page of the Indianapolis Star. We won’t ask him where he finished; it’s the start that counts. Thanks to Dick Rosengarten and Bill Doherty for inspiring me to make these comments. And, thanks to Bo Connor for chiding me to make sure my remarks are literary in nature.

This is not a short talk promoting a National Public Radio program called “All Things Considered.” It is about a man who in 1908 published a book with that same title. That man was Gilbert Keith Chesterton, one of the outstanding English writers of the first four decades of the 20th century. His vast output includes hundreds of novels, biographies, religious works, essays, poems, the GK weekly magazine and, of course, mysteries, of which the Father Brown series is the most famous. Most of his works remain in print to this day. Chesterton was a giant of a man, not just for his literary achievements, but for his 6 foot 2 inch height, and his weight of well over 350 pounds. Shaw described him as “not only large in body and mind beyond all decency, but he seems to be growing larger as you look at him.” Chesterton, who liked to dress up as OLD KING COLE, said that “I always enjoy myself more than most, there’s such a lot of me having a good time.” He often wore a long black great-coat adding to his immense size. When boarding the ocean liner to sail to America for his second visit, he said that one of the porters mistook him for a very large steamer trunk.

During that second visit to the States in 1930, Chesterton was invited to Notre Dame for six weeks to give lectures on Victorian literature and assorted other topics. Sadly no transcripts of the Notre Dame lectures exist, but students and faculty of that time report that he amazed all who attended these sessions with his wit and knowledge. He was wined and dined royally throughout his stay, and along with his wife and his secretary was given a most gracious welcome. He attended his first American football game and, being a well known devotee of food and drink, he also delighted in visiting a speakeasy. Because of his huge size student chauffeurs had a hard time getting him in and out of cars. One helpful young man suggested that he slide in sideways to which he replied, “Son, I have no sideways.”

Let’s pretend that Chesterton had been invited to the Indianapolis Literary Club and asked to make a few remarks. As a lover of humor, paradox, metaphors and aphorisms this is what he might have said. (Many of these are as timely today as they were decades ago.):

Not being shy of making fun of his own country he might have said:

One of the first questions I was asked when I landed in New York was how I might explain the current wave of crime. Naturally I replied that it might possibly be due to the number of poor English lecturers who had recently landed.

The Englishman is enormously delighted for the disadvantages he does **not** have. He will always say “My house is not damp” at the moment when his house is on fire.

The funniest thing about England is that even if you love it and belong to it, you still can't make heads or tails of it.

The real vice of the Victorians was that they regarded history as a story that ended well – because it ended with them.

He also was not reluctant to poke fun at America: (he wrote two books based on his trips here.)

It has long been recognized that America was an asylum. It is only since prohibition that it has looked a little like a lunatic asylum.

It appears that the strongest supporters of Prohibition are the bootleggers.

We have not good comic operas of late because the world has been more comic than any possible opera, such as when the chief organizer of murder in the United States, Al Capone, is sent to prison for an error in his income tax return.

America has a genius for the encouragement of fame.

The Americans have established Thanksgiving Day to celebrate the fact that the Pilgrim Fathers reached America. The English might very well have established another Thanksgiving Day to celebrate the happy fact that the Pilgrim Fathers left England

Although religious he was happy to use his wit on it:

Faith is that which is able to survive a mood.

I believe in preaching to the converted for I have generally found that the converted do not understand their own religion.

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.

It is the root of all religion that a man knows he is nothing in order to thank God that he is something.

The test of a good philosophy and a good religion is whether you can joke about it.

Going to church makes you no more of a Christian than standing in your garage makes you a car.

If there were no God, there would be no atheists.

On social issues he might have said:

It is really not so repulsive to see the poor asking for money as it is to see the rich asking for more money.

Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it.

To be clever enough to get all the money, one must be stupid enough to want it.

The poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly; the rich have always objected to being governed at all.

Bigotry is an incapacity to conceive seriously the alternative to a proposition.

Many men are pleased to say that women are equal to men, but are infuriated by the suggestion that men are equal to women.

Even if a man is the head of the house, he knows he is just the figurehead.

It is terrible to contemplate how few politicians are hanged.

On mankind in general:

In all the parks and cemeteries that I have walked I have never seen a statue of a committee.

There is no such thing as being a gentleman at important moments; it is at unimportant moments that a man is a gentleman. At important moments he ought to be something better.

I think there is one thing more important than the man of genius – and that is the genius of man.

The idea of the equality of men is in substance simply the idea of the importance of man.

The man who represents all thought as an accident of environment is simply smashing and discrediting all his own thoughts including that one.

Merely having an open mind is nothing; the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.

It is very good for a man to talk about what he does not understand as long as he understands that he does not understand it.

The mere pursuit of health always leads to something unhealthy. Physical health must be enjoyed not worshiped.

On modern trends:

What embitters the world is not the excess of criticism but the absence of self-criticism.

A small artist is content with art; a great artist is content with nothing except everything.

If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.

Psychoanalysis is confession without absolution.

Vandalism is of two kinds, the negative and the positive as in the Vandals of the ancient world who destroyed buildings and the Vandals of the modern world who erect them.

By a curious confusion many modern critics have passed from the proposition that a masterpiece may be unpopular to the other proposition that unless it is unpopular it cannot be a masterpiece.

Writing badly is the definition of journalism. (Remember he himself was a part-time journalist.)

Life in general:

The only way of catching a train I have ever discovered is to miss the train before.

I regard golf as an expensive way of playing marbles.

Silence is the unbearable repartee.

Humility is the mother of giants. One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak.

It is assumed that the skeptic has no bias whereas he has a very obvious bias in favor of skepticism.

The most essential educational product is imagination.

He who has the impatience to interrupt the words of another seldom has the patience rationally to select his own

I object to a quarrel because it often interrupts a good argument.

Wit is a sword, it is meant to make people feel the point as well as see it.

Romance is a very real part of life and perhaps the most real part of youth.

Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese. (He wrote a Sonnet to Stilton cheese).

Finally, the idea of a round table is not merely universality but equality.

He might have ended his talk with the last lines from one of my favorite Chesterton poems, “The Rolling Road”. In this poem he tells about the drunkard who laid out the English rolling, crooked roads which take you to unexpected places before you get to where you want to go, perhaps a metaphor for the paths we sometimes take before we reach our ultimate destination.

But (We) walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that wandereth,
And see undrugged in evening light the decent inn of death;
For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.

Kensal Green is an area of greater London with a famous cemetery, and in honor of Chesterton a charming pub named Paradise by Way of Kensal Green is now located there. They also have regular literary club meetings. Ah, the civilized English. We missed that pub on our last trip to England, but now we know where to find it.

So, if Chesterton, or even Groucho Marx, had visited our Club, I feel certain they would have felt right at home, where they would find that all our meetings are convivial, all our papers are fascinating, and all our members are above average.

Thank you.