8-21-2014

Speech to the Improvement Association, delivered on August 21, 2014

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In the beginning we used the annual dinner to celebrate birthdays of members who became ninety years of age. Not many years passed before ninety-five years became the cause for celebration and then one hundred. In the past twelve months Ralph became 102 and George 96. There is considerable success amongst our membership of late to remain positioned on the planet. I think, therefore, that our annual party should recognize the birthdays of all who are members of the Improvement Association in gratitude for another year together.

This past year all members survived so no tributes are necessary. Unfortunately, one of our member, Bill Sprague, is not with us because of ill health. We want him to know that we love him and miss him. One former member passed away. Peter Wege, whose philanthropy in our community made a significant positive impact. So tonight we salute him for what he did and what he empowered others to do. Peter's interest in our Association did not last long. Had our honorary member, Susan, desired to attend weekly meetings instead of annual ones, he might have stayed. He had worked with Susan for years and engaged her counsel and worked well with her on environmental and other philanthropies. We know Peter worked most comfortably when women were among his advisors. As
a player in a men’s golf foursome was probably his most enjoyable all-male activity. Our community is better because of him, and long after names become dimmed in public consciousness, his deeds will still be serving the public interest.

I have been reflecting on the origin of our Association. We know that Linc Linderholm put it together. Susan has provided us with information about the members and the chronology of the group. Her book has placed us in the annals of Grand Rapids history. But why did Linc convene the group? Was it purely for the reasons Jack Chaille composed? “Our objectives are vague, our accomplishments frail. Since we aim at nothing, we can hardly fail.” I have a hunch perhaps not.

Frank McKay was dominant in Grand Rapids and Michigan politics. His reputation was tarnished and would become more so a decade after the founding of the Improvement Association. I wonder if Linc thought a dozen business leaders from Grand Rapids should meet weekly to discuss their city and what should be done to improve it. In the early years there was no Secret Committee as final decider, nor were minutes kept, a tradition that continues. When the Secret Committee came into being, minutes were kept, but written with invisible ink on invisible paper so it is difficult to know its origin let alone the origin of the Association itself.

The Improvement Association began about the time our most senior member, Ralph, left the editorship of the Grand Rapids Herald to begin a military
career that was among the most distinguished. He was the first American, a member of General Eisenhower’s staff, who entered Paris at the time of its liberation from the Germans. For six years he served. Yes, at the time, he made his living by serving. We who were around at the time, and those who have intelligently studied history, are forever grateful to those like Ralph who won the Second World War. Pause for a moment and think how an ardent libertarian, young Tea Partier, might think. Ralph, you lived off the taxpayers for six years in a war we should have avoided. We have a few who are worse than Idaho’s Isolationist, Senator Borah in the 1930’s and 1940. Who’d a thunk it?

A tradition of the Improvement Association is to give the power of leadership to the eldest member. When Bill Martindill passed away, Ralph inherited his mantle of leadership. He was less inclined than Bill to exercise authority. He had joined our group more recently, after he was ninety; claiming before that his business made it impossible to attend meetings. The most senior member in age after Ralph was George who was a member of longstanding and Secretary of the group; keeping the only records that exist.

You can see that a power struggle was inevitable or perhaps a power vacuum. Both George’s and Ralph’s qualifications were impeccable. George had been the purveyor of milk to all West Michigan. His cows were the best. He was noted for the time that he promoted cow’s milk rather than mother’s milk for
babies. He was only modestly successful in weaning infants from their mother’s breasts, but his company flourished nonetheless. Ralph’s greatest accomplishment had moral force to it. He closed the brothels of France to American troops. That requires more skill than outflanking a German tank division. I have often wondered if Ralph was consulted when the McKay machine was defeated, his brothels closed, and prostitutes sent into the street where they belong.

The issue of control of the Association was at stake. The situation created a power vacuum and power vacuums are filled by short people. In the past decade I have shrunk in height by three inches, but I was still not short enough. The situation was perfect for Dick, who moved on it. In addition to being short, he is good natured. He and Napoleon are about the same height, but there is no danger that the Improvement Association is headed for a Waterloo under his friendly management. George will continue to hold the assets and Ralph will have a final say whenever he chooses.

You, our spouses and guests, may wonder what we do in our hours together. Well, we propose complete solutions to complex problems. Since we are committed to doing nothing, nothing comes of these great solutions, and that’s a shame. The world would become a better place if they were. There are implications for our future in these perfect solutions. Some day one of them will leak, and some bright woman will use it to her advantage. Then she is likely to
say, “If I am good enough to apply your solution I am certainly good enough to have lunch with you on Monday’s!” Then we are in trouble. George doesn’t have enough money in the account to fight a law suit. If Susan would agree to weekly meetings, that would solve the problem, but the camel would be in the tent. Are we ready for that?

We have to face the future. Gender discrimination will soon be a discrimination of the past. Given the fact that women usually outlive men, there is the possibility of an all-female Improvement Association by the 22nd Century. Then Jack Chaille’s theme will certainly be shelved as a quaint anachronism, and those perfect solutions generated will indeed make a better world.

In this age of multiculturism I am afraid we again may not measure up. Yet we are a fairly diverse group; our ancestry can be found in England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and in one case back to the bastard son of an English Earl, a brush with royalty.

Besieged as we are with these uncertainties, we somehow muddle through. We are content with who we are. Our only danger is that one day our genius will be discovered, and then we will no longer be able to abjure improvement.
Spirit of love, forgiveness, and salvation, Great God of our lives, we are grateful for friends, associations, and relationships that make us human. That makes it possible for us to love and receive love, to forgive and be forgiven, and to understand what is revealed to us. We know there is reality beyond our comprehension. We know that we are sustained, but we do not penetrate all the mysteries of that sustenance. We are only grateful for it. Please keep us all wrapped tightly in the virtues of love, gratitude, forgiveness, humor, and humility for only then can we really approach you. Amen.