

Absurdity in the Time of Corona

By [S. M. Smyth](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*Perfect love casteth out fear — **King James Bible**, 1 John 4:18*

*Awake, my soul, and with the sun
thy daily stage of duty run;
shake off dull sloth, and early rise
to pay thy morning sacrifice.*

— **Thomas Ken**, *The Book of Common Praise*

I must confess I am not entirely clear what such a sacrifice would entail. Perhaps climbing out of a warm bed, to tiptoe across a cold floor, fumbling to light the fire to chase the chill? For myself, I like to get up in the morning, and also to go to bed at night. Simple but satisfying.

Now in a time of crowning idiocy, perhaps we may, amidst what often seems an unmitigated disaster, grasp the nettle, seize the day, grab the chimeric crisis and make it holler uncle.

The advice to “be in the moment” is all very well, but hard to do when one is paralyzed with fear. The best things in life may be free, and certainly it is good to appreciate the “simple things” but sometimes it is not so easy, and anything but simple, far less “dead easy” as the late lamented James Barber crowed in delight as he whipped up another culinary triumph for his salivating TV audience.

Perfect love does seem a likely candidate with which to cast off fear. And dull sloth, too, as a bonus. But until we reach perfection, perhaps a good belly laugh can be a saving grace. It is harder to be frightened when clutching one’s aching sides.

What makes us laugh? Famously, Norman Cousins laughed himself out of illness [watching Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers](#). [Chaplin’s antics, as he is mechanically force-fed](#) at the factory conveyor belt by a bevy of efficiency experts, are hilarious in their absurdity. Surprise makes us laugh, irony makes us chuckle, *non sequiturs* provoke giggles.

Certainly there is no dearth of absurdity in our present circumstances, with the current cast of clowns strutting their stuff to their captive audience in this cockamamie circus. Certainly the emperors presiding over the Roman circus did it better. But what a golden opportunity to see the funny side.

Central Casting's own Klaus Schwab has been cited most often by the observant, for his very creditable homage to Ian Fleming's arch-villain Ernst Stavro Blofeld. As has been pointed out, he only lacks [the white Persian cat](#). Personally I prefer Donald Pleasance in the role, but everyone to his own taste. And lest we forget, Herr Schwab has showed promise for future sci-fi portrayals, in his Neo-Klingon outfit. One wonders where he gets his wardrobe, now that Edith Head is sadly no longer with us.

As we feverishly chase elusive white bunny tails down labyrinthine underground warrens, trying to understand what is happening to us, we can be forgiven any fleeting desire to see the Red Queen pop up, screeching: "[Off with their heads!](#)"

Charles Dodson certainly saw humour in the darker elements of absurdity; there is no lack in the fate of the innocent little oysters, being slyly seduced to their inevitable doom by the slick verbal blandishments of the Walrus:(1)

'It seems a shame,' the Walrus said,
'To play them such a trick,
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!'
The Carpenter said nothing but
'The butter's spread too thick!'
'I weep for you,' the Walrus said:
'I deeply sympathize.'
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.
'O Oysters,' said the Carpenter,
You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?'
But answer came there none —
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.

"Normal" may have been anathema to a generation reading [Paul Goodman's Growing Up Absurd](#), but it is doubtful many could even begin to imagine the bizarre level of "new normal" absurdity we have now achieved. And in such a short time. Warp speed. Shades of *Star Trek*, or in *Ben Hur*, the mallet-wielding pausarius' command to the galley-slaves toiling at the oars: "[Ramming speed!](#)"

Might not we, from time to time, as comic relief, pop out of the box of our normal mentality—old or new—taking advantage of our sense of the absurd, of the potential for risible explosion at incongruence. Even "cognitive dissonance" could serve as grist for the humour mill and not an invitation to follow latter-day walruses out onto the sands.

Some daring and athletic souls use the terror of imminent destruction, climbing sheer rock faces, to pop them out of their everyday mind-sets, to be truly present—as the greater fear ousts the lesser. But for those who lack opportunity and inclination perhaps humour is the better method. A sense of the ridiculous is something all people share, along with the love of good food, song and dance, and the love of others of their kind. And I believe we were all born with a sense of wonder, of appreciation for all creation, of a sense that all of it is a gift.

Some of us have been robbed of this gift at an early age. Others have retained this wondrous sense, only to be confronted by those who would tear it from them. We might

take a cue from Sandy, formerly so “reliable,” as she [confronts her Mussolini admiring teacher](#), Miss Brodie: “[You really are a ridiculous woman.](#)” Or from the “[Boggart-Banishing Spell](#)” used to cast away fear in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*: “[Riddikulus!](#)”

Perhaps we could try enchanting the present moment’s boogiemens, those “[ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties](#)” infecting our minds, and infesting the body politic. Perhaps, after all, laughter truly is the best medicine.

*

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S.M. Smyth was a founding member of the 2006 World Peace Forum in Vancouver, and organized a debate about TILMA at the Maple Ridge City Council chambers between Ellen Gould and a representative of the Fraser Institute.

Note

(1) [Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass](#)

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