

Carl Sandburg's Wisdom through Humor

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Erik Erikson wrote that he “can’t imagine a wise old person who can’t laugh.” Several wisdom scholars like Richard Trowbridge have listed humor as one of the qualities or values of the wise.¹ In another essay, I have dealt at length with the wisdom of the poet, Lincoln biographer, and public entertainer Carl Sandburg and his wife Paula, but did not give much attention to the way his humor reflected his wisdom.² Here I’ll rectify that oversight, first by elaborating more on his humor, and secondly by indicating how that humor was connected to his wisdom.

That Sandburg had a rich sense of humor there can be no doubt. After his death, Paula wrote, “It seems to me that Carl and I were always surrounded by children, books, and animals. The children had everything that the two of us had to give—love, attention, and in Carl’s case, the gift of imagination and humor.”³ He entertained both his children and many others by writing and reading out poems and children’s stories and singing folk songs, many of which were humorous. In his two volumes of children’s stories published in 1922-1923, *Rootabaga Stories* and *Rootabaga Pigeons*, he created an imaginary world especially suited for American children. Most of the folk songs he sang he gathered from extensive travel around the United States, where he often entertained audiences by reciting his poetry and singing while accompanying himself on his guitar. In his *The American Songbag* (1927) and *The New American Songbag* (1950), he published many of these songs such as “Casey Jones,” “The Horse Named Bill,” “Mister Frog [Froggie] Went A-Courting,” and “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!”

One of his best friends, Jewish-American humorist Harry Golden, wrote that “he was the first American historian who made use of the native American talent for telling tall tales, for laughing, and for appreciating the vernacular.” In one of his Lincoln volumes, Sandburg stated that “Lincoln was the first true humorist to occupy the White House. No other President of the United States had come to be identified, for good or bad, with a relish for the comic.” Sandburg then devoted most of a chapter to examples of Lincoln’s humor. In his epic poem *The People, Yes* (1936) at least a third of the work was devoted to people’s often humorous myths, folklore, and sayings. His chief biographer, Penelope Niven, writes of his youthful “exuberant sense of humor” and quotes one of his friends who noted his “redeeming sense of humor.” She also comments on his appreciation, while doing film reviews for the *Chicago Daily News*, of comedian Charlie Chaplin, about whom he wrote, “As an artist he is more consequential in extent of audience than any speaking, singing, writing or painting artist today.” Golden wrote that “the impression you get from Carl Sandburg’s home is one of laughter and happiness,” and that “the solemn has always been mixed in this man, but along with it is a great sense of fun.” He

¹ The Erikson quote can be found at Trowbridge’s “The Scientific Approach of Wisdom,” www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc. See also Cophorne Macdonald’s “Values That Various People Have Associated With Wisdom,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html> (All web sites referred to in this essay were accessed between June 1 and June 15, 2010).

² “The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf>.

³ From her “Introduction” to Carl Sandburg, *The Sandburg Treasury; Prose and Poetry for Young People* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 7.

gave as one example the way Sandburg handled the hate mail or that which was strongly critical—he simply replied: “Thank you for your letter. I shall try to do better.”⁴

In 1960 famed actress Bette Davis starred in a stage review entitled *The World of Carl Sandburg*. Toward the end of the review she said that although they were tempted to end the review with the “theme of death,” there was “too much irrepressively alive in Sandburg to permit this. Instead we followed the contour of his own nature by making room for comic relief. For among his many other attributes, Sandburg is a collector of jokes.” She and the rest of the cast then recited some of them.⁵

But in addition to his massive multi-volume work on Lincoln (for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in history), it was primarily his poetry (for which he also won a Pulitzer) that made him famous. And it is there that we should primarily look for his humor. In his introduction to Sandburg’s *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960*, critic (and poet) Mark Van Doren wrote: “Carl Sandburg . . . brought something back to poetry that had been sadly missing in the early years of this century. It was humor, the indispensable ingredient of art as it is of life. Just as we cannot take a man seriously who lacks the sense of humor, so we cannot take the poet. Humor is the final sign and seal of seriousness, for it is proof that reality is held in honor and in love.”⁶

Van Doren’s comments also offer a segue to considering the relationship of Sandburg’s humor to his wisdom. The critic thought that “the sense of humor in him is more than anything else the sense of the absurd, or, as he might say, the cockeyed, the loony, the goofy.” And it was central to the way Sandburg perceived the world. Van Doren went on to write that “Thomas Carlyle once remarked that the presence of humor in a poet—he meant Shakespeare chiefly—enables him to see what is beneath him and about him as well as what is above him. . . . The real poet studies the world as it is: lovely, terrible, sensible, grotesque; and would ask for no other one in its place. In this sense, Sandburg is a real poet, so that it is no wonder people trust him and adore him.”⁷

Seeing “the world as it is” is one of the characteristic traits of wise people. A prominent wisdom scholar writes that “wisdom involves . . . seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are . . . deeply understanding the human/cosmic situation.”⁸ Another scholar writing on political wisdom thought that it was “a gift akin to that of some novelists, that which makes such writers as, for example, Tolstoy or Proust convey a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life; not just the sense of a chaotic flow of experience, but a highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest, whether from the point of view of the writer or that of the characters he describes. Above all this is an acute sense of what fits with what.”⁹

These quotes lead us to the heart of the connection between Sandburg’s wisdom and humor. While wisdom perceives “what fits with what,” humor often deals with the opposite—that which does not fit, the incongruous. A philosophic encyclopedia declares that the most

⁴ Harry Golden, *Carl Sandburg* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961), 85, 104, 248; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years*, Laurel ed., vol. 3 (New York: Dell, 1959), 607; Penelope Niven, *Carl Sandburg: A Biography* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1991), xvii, 375, 682.

⁵ Norman Corwin, *The World of Carl Sandberg* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1961), 55, 58.

⁶ From his “Introduction” in Carl Sandburg, *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co, 1960), 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

⁸ Cophthorne Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way to Inner Peace, Love & Happiness* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2001); available online at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 46.

dominant theory of humor is one that sees it “as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness.”¹⁰ In an essay on poetry, Sandburg wrote that “the nearest that men have come to answering the question, ‘What is the beautiful?’ has been in their saying the beautiful is *the appropriate*, that which serves [or fits]. No hat is a beautiful hat which does not fit you and which the wind can easily blow off your head.”¹¹ While he sometimes depicted the beautiful (that which was fitting or appropriate), he also possessed the wisdom to know what fit and what did not fit and presented the latter with the humor it deserved.

Wise person that he was, Sandburg saw that life is both a comedy and tragedy, containing vibrant life and sad death, the beautiful and the ugly, the wise and the foolish, moments of transcendence and ones of banality. As the Bible’s book of Ecclesiastes says (and Sandburg admirer Pete Seeger later adapted for his folk song “Turn, Turn, Turn”):

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die . . .
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Commenting on Sandburg’s appreciation for such contrasts, Van Doren wrote, “he owes more here to the Bible than he does to [Walt] Whitman,” who was a major poetic influence on him.¹²

Great writers of the past like Shakespeare and the Russian dramatist and short story writer Anton Chekhov also wrote of both the tragic and comic. “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” Shakespeare’s Puck proclaims in the comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But both writers wisely perceived that folly could be seen from a tragic and/or comic perspective. In an essay on Shakespeare’s wisdom, Alan Nordstrom emphasizes the importance of treachery in Shakespeare’s plays. But after pointing out what an important role it plays in his histories and tragedies, he observes that “even Shakespeare’s comedies—especially Shakespeare’s comedies—turn to treachery for their success. Duping and delusion, knavery and gulling are the warp and woof of all their motley foolery.” After mentioning the comedies, he adds, “Pretty depressing, when you view it all. But then, that’s life, and Shakespeare gives us life. He shows us what we are, yet also what we may be, at our best: honest and honorable, faithful and true, loyal and trustworthy, constant in love.”¹³

Chekhov also depicted folly and nobleness, both tragically and comically. During his lifetime and ever since debates have raged whether some of his plays, e.g. *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*, should be regarded as comedies or tragedies. One critic noted that “in his humanity [Chekhov] was . . . more keenly aware at once of the ludicrous and the tragic aspects of man’s folly and futility. Humor runs all through his serious drama.”¹⁴

¹⁰ “Humor,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor>. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 49-50, where Niebuhr’s essay “Humour and Faith” makes a similar point. The essay is also available at http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt.

¹¹ Carl Sandburg, *Early Moon* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 18.

¹² “Introduction” in *Harvest Poems*, 12.

¹³ Alan Nordstrom, “Shakespeare’s Take on Human Wisdom,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Borny, *Interpreting Chekhov* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006), 230, quoting H. Müller, *The Spirit of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 288. In a forthcoming essay for the Wisdom Page, I intend to deal at more length with exemplars of wisdom like Shakespeare and Chekhov in an essay on “Humor and Wisdom.”

Sandburg's poetry is full of the incongruous, of contrasts, of things that don't seem to fit together—and yet paradoxically sometimes do. In *The People, Yes* he repeats various lines he had heard among the people: “You are to be hanged and I hope it will prove a warning to you.” “I took so much medicine I was sick a long time after I got well.” “I can never get these boots on till I have worn them for a while.” “The new two dollar a day street-sprinkler driver took his job so serious he went right on driving while the rain poured down.” And he mentions the Irish policeman who arrested a Pawnee Indian and said “why don't you go back where you came from?” He later adds,

The people is a tragic and comic two-face:
hero and hoodlum: phantom and gorilla twist-
ing to moan with a gargoyle mouth.

And “the little two-legged joker, Man” is the same “Man” who produces magnificent skyscrapers.¹⁵

In one of Sandburg's early poems, “Child of the Romans,” he ironically contrasts an Italian-American railway worker who works a ten-hour day, lunches on bread and bologna, and keeps the roadbed of the rails so smooth that “flowers in the cut glass vases” of the dining cars “shake hardly at all,” not bothering the men and women in the dining cars, eating steaks and strawberries and cream. In another early poem, “To a Contemporary Bunkshooter,” Sandburg contrasts a fire-and-brimstone preacher with the true message of Jesus:

You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . . yelling about Jesus.

Where do you get that stuff?

What do you know about Jesus?

Jesus had a way of talking soft and outside of a few bankers and higher-ups among the con men of Jerusalem everybody liked to have this Jesus around because he never made any fake passes and everything he said went and he helped the sick and gave the people hope.

You come along squirting words at us, shaking your fist and calling us all damn fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips . . . always blabbing we're all going to hell straight off and you know all about it.

I've read Jesus' words. I know what he said. You don't throw any scare into me. I've got your number. I know how much you know about Jesus.¹⁶

The incongruous, however, occurs not only in others, but in ourselves. And Sandburg was humble enough, as are the wisest people, to realize that he too shared the human penchant for folly. In *The People, Yes* he wrote, “To never see a fool you lock yourself in your room and smash the looking-glass.” And the late poem “Dreaming Fool” states:

I was the first of the fools
(So I dreamed)
And all the fools of the world
were put into me and I was
the biggest fool of all.

¹⁵ Carl Sandburg, *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 320, 473, 490, 496, 616. Many poems from Sandburg's early collections can be found on the Internet. See, e.g., <http://carl-sandburg.com/POEMS.htm>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 29

Others were fools in the morning
Or in the evening or on Saturdays
Or odd days like Friday the Thirteenth
But me—I was a fool every day in the week
And when asleep I was the sleeping fool.
(So I dreamed.)¹⁷

In *The People, Yes* he has a father give his son the following advice:

Tell him to be a fool every so often
and to have no shame over having been a fool
yet learning something out of every folly
hoping to repeat none of the cheap follies thus arriving at intimate understanding
of a world numbering many fools.¹⁸

Folly occurs in part because of our ignorance. In the preface to his *Complete Poems*, he wrote that “the inexplicable is all around us. So is the incomprehensible. So is the unintelligible,” and he quoted humorist Will Rogers—“We are all ignorant but on different subjects.” In *The People, Yes* he adds:

Who knows the answers, the cold inviolable truth?
.....
And how few they are who search and hesitate and say:
"I stand in this whirlpool and tell you I don't know and if I did know I
would tell you and all I am doing now is to guess and I give you
my guess for what it is worth as one man's guess."¹⁹

Among the 38 definitions he gave of poetry are the following:

Poetry is a series of explanations of life, fading off into horizons too swift for explanations.
Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at barriers of the unknown and the unknowable.
Poetry is the harnessing of the paradox of earth cradling life and then entombing it.
Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.²⁰

Sandburg’s acknowledgement of our collective ignorance and sometimes folly paradoxically reflects a certain wisdom reminding one of the "Crazy Wisdom" found in Tibetan Buddhism. One description of it said its most adept practitioners

expressed the unconditional freedom of enlightenment through divinely inspired foolishness . . . vastly preferring to celebrate the inherent freedom and sacredness of authentic being, rather than clinging to external religious forms and moral systems. Through their playful eccentricity, these rambunctious spiritual tricksters served to free others from delusion, social inhibitions, specious morality, complacency—in short, all variety of mind-forged manacles.

¹⁷ Ibid., 490, 713.

¹⁸ Ibid., 449.

¹⁹ Ibid., xxi-xxii, 614.

²⁰ Ibid., 318.

These spiritual fools had what was called a "cosmic sense of humor" that saw through the illusions of society's conventions towards a greater interconnectedness of being. Although this is certainly getting into the area of metaphysics, these teachers in a nutshell, were fools because they understood we are a universe of fools, who became foolishly attached to our possessions and our conventions, while failing to see how these attachments lead to suffering.²¹

Sandburg also perceives a "cosmic sense of humor."

THERE was a high majestic fooling
Day before yesterday in the yellow corn.

And day after to-morrow in the yellow corn
There will be high majestic fooling.

The ears ripen in late summer
And come on with a conquering laughter,
Come on with a high and conquering laughter.²²

More insight on the relationship of humor and wisdom is offered by perhaps the twentieth-century's most influential U. S. theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). He once wrote that "to meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom." He also shed light on the humble need for realizing our own sporadic folly and seeing the humor of it.

Humour is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humour is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humour do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to "stand off" from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.²³

Esteemed wisdom researcher Robert Sternberg noted that many "smart and well-educated people" sometimes "seem foolish to the world at large." Often it is because they "are particularly susceptible to four fallacies," which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four are tied up with too big an ego, with overestimating our own importance and powers, and with lacking the self-deprecating humor that Niebuhr suggests we all need.²⁴

Although Van Doren was correct in perceiving that "the sense of humor in him is more than anything else the sense of the absurd," Sandburg's "absurd" is different than the twentieth-century's Theater of the Absurd understanding of the term. He did not share their view that life

²¹ Joe Guse, "George Costanza, Paradoxical Intention, Crazy Wisdom & Laughter," <http://ezinearticles.com/?George-Costanza.-Paradoxical-Intention,-Crazy-Wisdom-and-Laughter&id=692772>.

²² From the poem "Laughing Corn" in *Complete Poems*, 87.

²³ Niebuhr, 54, 56-57.

²⁴ "It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom," <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

was “devoid of purpose,” that “cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”²⁵ An early poem of his (“Bath”) hints at how his view is different.

A MAN saw the whole world as a grinning skull and cross-bones. The rose flesh of life shriveled from all faces. Nothing counts. Everything is a fake. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes and then an old darkness and a useless silence. So he saw it all. Then he went to a Mischa Elman [a famed Russian violinist who made his U.S. debut in 1908] concert. Two hours waves of sound beat on his eardrums. Music washed something or other inside him. Music broke down and rebuilt something or other in his head and heart. He joined in five encores for the young Russian Jew with the fiddle. When he got outside his heels hit the sidewalk a new way. He was the same man in the same world as before. Only there was a singing fire and a climb of roses everlastingly over the world he looked on.²⁶

Sandburg’s chief biographer said that he believed in “the courage to go on doggedly,” and that “love for work or others can enable transcendence over harsh circumstances.” She also wrote that “for Sandburg, poetry was the supreme myth, which enables human beings to endure reality, to survive it, even to transcend it.”²⁷ Like Abraham Maslow and many other wise people, he realized the importance of transcendence.²⁸ Although he believed in some sort of divine force, he adhered to no specific religious faith, once humorously declaring “I am a Christian, a Quaker, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Shintoist, a Confucian, and maybe a Catholic pantheist or a Joan of Arc who hears voices. I am all of these and more. Definitely I have more religions than I have time or zeal to practice in true faith.”²⁹ One of his last poems, “Timesweep,” suggests that he maintained his humility regarding ultimate answers and yet a positive approach to life in the face of death itself—for Erikson the true test of wisdom.³⁰ He wrote:

. . . Each of us makes his life
in what to him is the Known and for each of us there is a
vast Unknown and farther beyond the vaster Unknowable--
and the Ignorance we share and share alike is immeasurable.
.....
Where I go from here and now, or if I go at all
again, the Maker of sea and land, of sky and
air, can tell.³¹

Like most wise people, including Shakespeare and Chekhov, Sandburg believed that despite all the human folly, people could act more wisely. Sandburg’s friend Golden said of him

²⁵ Martin Esslin, quoting the dramatist Eugène Ionesco, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), xix.

²⁶ *Complete Poems*, 26.

²⁷ Niven, 392, 613.

²⁸ See Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Viking Press, 1971), 271-72, for transcendence over death, pain, and sickness, and all of Ch. 21 on “Various Meanings of Transcendence.” Macdonald (see <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>), among others, has written on how Maslow’s “writings tell us much about the nature of wisdom.”

²⁹ Golden, 64.

³⁰ Erik H. Erikson, “Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle,” in *Aging, Death, and the Completion of Being*, ed. David D. Van Tassel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 60.

³¹ *Complete Poems*, 770-71; the poem is also available at <http://www.nps.gov/archive/carl/people/archives/poems/time01.htm>.

in 1961: “His instincts are with the people. He believes they have an infinite capacity for good.”³² In his *The People, Yes* he explains the motivation of their laughter.

The people laugh, yes, the people laugh.
They have to in order to live and survive under lying politicians, lying
labor skates, lying racketeers of business, lying newspapers, lying ads.
The people laugh even at lies that cost them toil and bloody exactions.
.....
Time goes by and the gains are small for the years go slow, the people go
slow, yet the gains can be counted and laughter of the people
foretokening revolt carries fear to those who wonder how far it will go
and where to block it.³³

These lines remind us of Niebuhr’s later observation regarding the humor of African-Americans.

One thinks for instance of the profound wisdom which underlies the capacity of laughter in the Negro people. Confronted with the cruelties of slavery, and socially too impotent to throw off the yoke, they learned to make their unpalatable situation more sufferable by laughter. There was of course a deep pathos mixed with the humour, a proof of the fact that laughter had reached its very limit.

There is indeed a limit to laughter in dealing with life's frustrations.³⁴

Laughter as a means of maintaining mental balance was something Sandburg also mentioned in his Lincoln books.

On the day after [the North’s crushing defeat at] Fredericksburg the staunch old friend, Issac N. Arnold, entered Lincoln's office [and] was asked to sit down. Lincoln then read from [humorist] Artemus Ward. . . . That Lincoln should wish to read this nonsense while the ambulances were yet hauling thousands of wounded from the frozen mud flats of the Rappahannock River was amazing to Congressman Arnold. As he said afterward he was “shocked.” He inquired, “Mr. President, is it possible that with the whole land bowed in sorrow and covered with a pall in the presence of yesterday's fearful reverse, you can indulge in such levity” Then, Arnold said, the President threw down the Artemus Ward book, tears streamed down his cheeks, his physical frame quivered as he burst forth, “Mr. Arnold, if I could not get momentary respite from the crushing burden I am constantly carrying, my heart would break!” And with that pent-up cry let out, it came over Arnold that the laughter of Lincoln at times was a mask.³⁵

Although Sandburg had nothing like the burdens Lincoln had to bear during the Civil War, he did have his own difficulties. Two of his three children (all girls) had serious health problems, one with epilepsy and the other with learning disabilities that prevented her from finishing high school until age twenty-two. Partly because of his fear of long-lasting medical bills, he worked incredibly hard to provide for his family’s financial needs, and in 1927 suffered a nervous breakdown. But humor helped him to see that he had strayed from the path of wisdom. He indicated that his doctors told him to work less and told a friend that “if I don’t work less,

³² Golden, 271.

³³ *Complete Poems*, 537.

³⁴ Niebuhr, 57.

³⁵ Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 3, p. 620.

play more, and give the Works [his body] a chance, I'm a plain ridiculous fool."³⁶ Although decades later an editor still described him as "one of the hardest working writers I have ever known,"³⁷ he never again suffered another breakdown, and his sense of humor helped him retain a proper balance between work and relaxation.

Sandburg realized that some forms of humor were unwise and even evil. Declared a "major prophet of Civil Rights" by the head of the NAACP and made a life-long member of that organization,³⁸ he would not have cared for racist jokes. And in describing Lincoln's years as a young Illinois state representative in Springfield, he wrote:

In this period of his life he let himself go in sarcasm and satire that was to bring him shame and humiliation. He would change. He was to learn, at cost, how to use the qualities of pity and compassion that lay deeply and naturally in his heart, toward wiser reading and keener understanding of all men and women he met.³⁹

Like Lincoln's humor, Sandburg's became more benign with age. His humor enabled him to see life wisely as it really was, with all its comedy and tragedy, all its folly (including his own) and nobility, and yet with joy and good-will. The joy was evident throughout his adult life. A friend and fellow journalist at the *Chicago Daily News* in the 1920s, Ben Hecht, said he "was a man in love with life."⁴⁰ Decades later, guitarist Andre Segovia said of him "the heart of this great poet constantly bubbles forth a generous joy of life—with or without the guitar."⁴¹ By 1960, Golden thought that Sandburg was incapable "of a thoughtless act or an unkindness, and that goes for his politics in which he is so heavily involved."⁴²

Like most wise people Sandburg was hopeful, but not naïve, about life. Niebuhr, in his essay on "Humour and Faith," saw a connection between the two terms he linked in his title, but primarily in regard to his own Christian faith. Even though Sandburg did not confine himself to just one religious perspective, he was in the broadest and most ecumenical sense of the term a man of faith.⁴³

At a memorial service for Sandburg at the Lincoln Memorial in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson recalled his humor. He said that those who spent most of their life in politics could especially appreciate the humor and the insight of lines like the following from his "Money, Politics, Love and Glory":

Who put up that cage?
Who hung it up with bars, doors?
Why do those on the inside want to get out?

³⁶ Quoted in Niven, 458.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 586.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 699.

³⁹ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1926), 60.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Niven, 335.

⁴¹ Quoted in Golden, 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴³ Perhaps no one has related hope, faith, tragedy, and wisdom to each other more eloquently than the French philosopher and dramatist Gabriel Marcel; see, e.g., his *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond: Including, Conversations Between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 252-55; see also his *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope* (Harper Torchbook, 1962) and his *The Decline of Wisdom* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954).

Why do those outside want to get in?
What is this crying inside and out all the time?
What is this endless, useless beating of baffled wings at these bars, doors, this cage?

The president also recalled other Sandburg virtues, summing him up as a “vital, exuberant, wise, and generous man.”⁴⁴ We can only add that his sense of humor contributed to all these traits.

⁴⁴ John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28435>.