

THE ARC OF JUSTICE

Speech by writer and PEN International board member Ola Larsmo, held during a ceremonial gathering by the Martin Luther King Monument as a part of the opening of the 88th International PEN Congress. The monument is a sculpture by made by artist Olof Hellström in 1974 and is located behind the University Building. The title of the work is Befrielsen (Liberation). The Congress was arranged by Swedish PEN and PEN International.

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“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

This is a famous quote by Dr Martin Luther King, given in a speech in 1968, just a few days before he was assassinated. It is a beautiful quote, and most of us have heard it before. But what does it have to do with PEN?

King should have visited Uppsala in 1968, the same year he held his speech. But he was killed in April. This monument was erected as a memorial over a visit that never happened. But there is a back story to the quote, which might clarify this connection. King quotes the unitarian minister Theodore Parker, but King packs his rhetorical version with more punch. Parker, in his turn, held his speech in 1853. He dedicated his life to the abolition of slavery. Eight years after his speech, USA descended into civil war, a war that ultimately would end slavery. Parker didn't know this, but he held this belief: there is such an arc.

Is there? Do we believe that?

If we look at the work of PEN over the last century, I think we can claim that our work is an illustration to the credibility of such a belief. When I visit the PEN office in London, I want to steal one of the posters hanging on the wall. (The staff know this and guards it.) That is a protocol from the German PEN in Exile club, founded in London in 1934, as the first Exile center. Things must have looked hopeless: the Nazis were tightening their grip on their country and Stalin was obliterating all resistance in the Soviet Union. Mussolini was dictator of Italy and the civil war in Spain would follow. They were all alone, in a room in London.

Among the names on that poster is Ernst Bloch, German philosopher, who coined the phrase of "Das Prinzip Hoffnung" - the principle of hope. A three-volume work he started during the Nazi regime and finished in exile. In his work, Bloch echoes the idea of Parker and King: there is a moral gravity. There is a future where the idea of justice will prevail.

Is there? Isn't that just false hope, that makes us lean back and leave the work for justice to history itself? I don't think so. I think the hope - in hope itself - is necessary to get there. And when we look back on the 100 years that PEN has been in business, we do have reason to feel hope. PEN has been there to support writers during the Spanish civil war, Nazi dictatorship, communist oppression, the fatwas of the mullahs - and so on. We are still here. There is war in Europe, journalists are killed in Mexico, dictatorship in Myanmar, religious oppression in Afghanistan... but we have been here before. The moral arc of the moral universe bends towards justice - if we hang on to it and bend it down with our weight. Friends, there is work to be done.

/Ola Larsmo