

Friday, April 20, 2007

Underdog is a year old.

Today is Underdog Blog's first anniversary. Many blogs start tentatively but soon peter out. Ours is here to stay, and, with only four exceptions, has published every weekday since April 20, 2006. My articles on blogging are here and here. Our Underdog title comes not from the forty-year-old cartoon character (today's drug war madness might have exposed him to prosecution for possessing his secret energy pills), but because we immediately move to level the playing field in fighting against the government and other large entities. The underdog concept stuck with me after one of my favorite trial law teachers, Steve Rench, spoke of his satisfaction fighting for the underdog. The Internet has profoundly weakened the grasp of the New York Times and other major periodicals, the major book publishers, and the major booksellers on the distribution of the written word. I feel empowered to get my ideas instantly and directly to the public through our blog and website. Sadly, too many great writers -- of course, the Internet and blogosphere run the full gamut from great writing to abysmal writing -- have had their voices squelched including, in more recent times, Pramoedya Ananta Toer by the Sukarno and Suharto regimes and beyond, Vaclav Havel before the communist regime fell, and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn under the Soviet regime. Index on Censorship regularly reports on writers who are still censored to this day. I became obsessed with free speech from the time my eighth grade social studies teacher made freedom the year's focus of study, leading into my work with Amnesty International in college, my subsequent subscriptions to Index on Censorship, my active involvement with the American Civil Liberties Union, and my defense of free speech at the political, libel defense, and adult entertainment levels. Some people will go to extraordinary lengths to overcome censorship. The late legendary -- and constantly censored -- author Pramoedya Ananta Toer started his Buru tetralogy orally through a chain of his fellow Buru island prisoners when he was denied pen and paper, only to write the story in book form years later. Sometimes he was able to smuggle out notes "written under adverse conditions." When I finally met Mr. Toer in 1999, his writings still were officially banned in his native Indonesia -- and the ban on some of his books had not been officially lifted by the time of his passing in 2006. Speaking on tour in 1999, Mr. Toer was deeply emotional when he said that the Indonesian government's efforts to ban his books was like trying to cut off his life. When my turn came at this event to have my book signed, I tried to speak briefly with Mr. Toer in my limited Indonesian; his preferred languages were Indonesian and Dutch. I did not get much more of a response than a polite "yah." I later found a news article underlining that Mr. Toer's hearing was so profoundly impaired by an ear infection caused by a soldier's hitting him in the head with a rifle butt, that he referred most inquiries to his indispensable editor Joesoef Isak, whom I also met that evening. This man who had suffered so many injustices during his life was profoundly respectful to everyone when I met him, and had clearly retained his dignity despite all the indignities he had suffered. As to Vaclav Havel, I was stunned with glee at how quickly he had transformed from a constantly suppressed and hounded author to an uncensored political leader in Czechoslovakia (one who appointed Frank Zappa -- who was a firm censorship opponent -- an unofficial cultural attaché). (That is not to say that I automatically expected to agree with all of Havel's politics -- I do not know of any such government official yet -- but that I was ecstatic that he had broken free of his suppression). Shortly after Havel assumed political leadership, I had received my Index on Censorship t-shirt with Samuel Beckett's likeness on one side and Havel's on the other, Beckett having written his "Catastrophe" play for Havel in 1982. One of the first times I wore the shirt, I ran past the Czech embassy near Rock Creek Park, and called over to one of the employees standing outside (possibly security, and possibly a holdover from the Communist period) to happily display the t-shirt. (As it happened, the Czech embassy and Indonesian ambassador's residence sat one hundred yards apart on Tilden Street, and one hundred yards in the other direction from the Indonesian ambassador's residence sat the Kuwaiti embassy, with all those buildings being on one of my favorite long-distance running routes (the street has one of the area's best running hills and parallels a branch into Rock Creek Park), but where I felt dread during Gulf War I with my opposition to that war as, at the very least, having been launched with gross prematurity and gross limitations on journalists' movements in the Gulf.) In other words, my motivation for blogging goes far beyond having a web presence for our law firm, to a thirst to express critical messages about justice, to increase the number of people who will assert their rights with the police so as never to need our criminal defense services, and to keep my mind and pen sharpened for written and oral advocacy. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:05