

Mark Sargent from Greece

Contributed by Mark Sargent

LETTER FROM GREECE#18: "...and the living is easy." "It's a lot easier to watch somebody make a mistake when they do it with their hair on fire." "I don't know. What's easy about it? I love snooping around sports news for just these types of pronouncements, along with the metaphor laden slang. Here in the Levant, especially in Turkey and Greece, we have a concept or theory referred to as the deep state. It's a loose term and in Turkey it is used by nearly all factions, so the Islamists supporting Erdogan suspect the Islamists behind Gulen, the secularists are convinced it's the Islamists and so on, though, of course, the CIA is behind everything. In Greece too we have the notion of the shadow government, the state within the state, which is nationalist, corporatist and deeply connected within the various intelligence services, the military and business mafia. Or think Pakistan, where the national intelligence agency, the ISI, appears to have its own domestic and foreign policy and pursues this without interference from democratically elected officials. I'm not big on conspiracy theory, but I have been getting a growing sense of such a deep state within the U.S. government. More and more we realize that elected officials are not in charge anymore. The head of the NSA, James Clapper, can deliberately lie to Congress, or, as he put it, "speak the least untruthfully as possible" and he keeps his job. Same with the CIA director. And you have a president saying he didn't know the extent of the surveillance program. Or, more obviously, second day in office, more than five long years ago, Obama signs a document closing Guantanamo. But the system in place says, no you can't. Mark Danner, the distinguished investigative journalist and Berkeley professor, has a terrific series of articles running in the New York Review on Rumsfeld and Cheney and the secret intelligence organization they put in place and which is still there. Besides formally torturing prisoners[i] (others can do it), Bush's war on terror program is still in place. The CIA monitors the computers of a Senate Committee investigating it? And they get away with it, that's the part that smells deep. Last May Obama said he wanted the CIA out of the drone business, that this should be run by the Defense Department. So are they? Nope. CIA is flying drones in Yemen and Pakistan, for instance. At the kangaroo court being conducted in Guantanamo these days you have the FBI hounding the defense attorneys, pounding on their doors in the middle of the night and demanding answers to their questions. But better yet, in the courtroom is an emergency security light and the judge, the prosecutors and the defense team all have a button to control this light. The idea being that if testimony gets into the realm of really secret security issues the button can be pushed, the light flashes, the courtroom cleared and the matter discussed. So the trial is stumbling along and suddenly the security light starts flashing. Everyone in the courtroom looks up with a huh? Nobody had pushed the button. A bit of investigation revealed that unbeknownst to anyone the CIA had tapped into the system and given themselves a button too. Ha ha. Even the military judge was enraged with that one. But all they did was disconnect the CIA's button. When it comes to these organizations, even when they're caught they're allowed to say, Oops, my bad and move on to their next devious act. Here's something from Mark Danner. "Though we have become accustomed to President Obama telling us, as he most recently did in the State of the Union address, that 'America must move off a permanent war footing,' these words have come to sound, in their repetition, less like the orders of a commander in chief than the pleas of one lonely man hoping to persuade." "New York Review, March 6, 2014. Perhaps, but diminished expectations, he's obviously well plugged into the war on terror with his kill lists, surges, and secrecies. But who plays the Cheney role now? It can't be Joe Biden. No way. And when I hear people who should know better braying that they're Ready for Hillary in 2016 I get a sinking feeling. She's the ultimate status quo candidate, the champion of the same old shit: oligarchic control of public policy, constant interference in the affairs of other nations and a gush with the unique American hubris that the U.S. knows best. "Where else on earth would a president who rescued big banks from bankruptcy with taxpayers' money and allowed the rest of us to lose \$12 trillion in investment, retirement, and home values be called a socialist?" "The above from a short essay by Charles Simic that I strongly recommend. <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/mar/20/age-of-ignorance/> "How's the apple?" Mirella gestures, "It's, you know, softer than hard." "The meaning of life is that it stops." That's what we do. And we use the dead to give context to our images, like an appetizer, like Kafka quotes scribbled on loo walls or Lou Rawls or Too Tall Muthafucking Jones and it works because we can separate the living from the dead and because everybody is getting sick, inching towards death and cancer is impermanent too but it keeps knocking on the door, it is more insistent than we are, demanding our attention, which we don't have to give because we are separating the living from the dead because no matter how long we stare at the dead they don't speak, ever. They never come back to speak to us. They aren't capable of reconstituting after dissolving into nothing or as Billy Preston once sang, "Nothing from nothing is nothing." Nothing previous, nothing after. A friend wrote that she had decided to forgo the Mahamudra practice of 100 thousand prostrations. I wrote back, even after one hundred large times with yr face to the ground, even then, even then there is nothing. And how many times have you heard someone say prostrate when they meant prostate? I love it when people do that. Or the other fucking way around. How many prostate operations does it take before you piss your way to enlightenment? Dribble? Or must we all stagger into the void impotent and incontinent? Hello nothing, my old friend. A more nuanced nothing, mind you. Is cancer the herald of impermanence? Put the dead on the wall and adjust the lighting. They came from Zanzibar knowing they would never return. This is the 21st Century and it is time to let go of religion and its life-after-death conceits. They serve no purpose, now, and certainly later. Bardo my butt. The tool is not the product. Or is it? The tools Buddhism provides are well honed and ready for use, but to use them doesn't necessitate the rest, though there are many self-serving teachers who will tell you differently. We arrive only to exit. "Play more." "But I'm just repeating myself." "Ah, cicada lips, you must repeat yourself until it sounds different." I know too much of too little. And yet, when I consider the expansion of consciousness, I hesitate. Is that what I want? What I'm conscious of now seems like plenty, I'm having trouble keeping

track. Yes, I know the argument that with expansion will come the ability to keep ever more balls in the air: look Ma, no hands! But I got my hands full, do I need more? * My wife, who paints quite well, is as utterly without artistic pretension as I anyone I have ever encountered. She considers her paintings paint on canvas, and nothing more. If they are nicely rendered, she's happy about it. Having lived an artsy life I find this attitude luminous and alive. We're discussing a friend of ours. She's unhappy with her life and regularly comes up with a new plan, which generally requires moving to a new town, ever farther from her mother, among other things. "She doesn't know what she wants, neither do I," M says. "Really?" I know what I want to do, and I'm doing it." M tsks, "Everything is so easy for you." Huh? Is that true? I've never thought about it in those terms. Easy? I wouldn't say that my life has been hard. Sure, we all suffer, that's a given, but this question is more about the mechanics of living. Certainly anyone born into white middle class America in 1950 to a stable nurturing family has already won. And bonus points if you're male and heading out to compete in the marketplace. Competition, that's something I've avoided. I mean, how does one compete in the poetry/art world? And what would the rewards be, in poetry? Oh, you can contrive to compete, of course, but I have remained on the periphery, unknown, my reward the doing of it. Now deigning not to compete is, I realize, a different type of privilege. But back to easy. I'm wary of artists who talk about how hard they work, especially writers. Certainly there are those who slave away night and day and more power to them. But I've dug ditches, baled hops, swung a hammer, and to me, that's what hard work means. You stink and ache at the end of day, maybe you've been carrying sheets of plywood in the rain through six inches of mud. That's what I'm talking about. Sitting at a desk just ain't the same. Perhaps this just reveals my lackadaisical work habits when it comes to the creative process? I don't know, what the hell, it's not something to worry about. That is, hard or easy, little or lots, whatever. The world is not waiting for my next poem or movie or reading, it will percolate along very well without. So why not take it easy and work at one's leisure? I've been reading Albert Camus' Notebooks. They're great. Here's something I got out of volume one. It comes from Edgar Allen Poe and A.C. just modernized it a bit. The Four Conditions of Happiness. 1) Life in the open air 2) The love of another being 3) Freedom from all ambition 4) Creation According to that formula, I should be exceedingly happy. And sure, but it's not a term I use, 'happy'. Probably because it smacks too much of infantile American attitudes and the desperate pursuit of it, a circle with smile drawn on it. Fulfilled, engaged, balanced, at ease, perhaps—happiness is not something that requires consideration, is it? But nevermind the term, the four conditions are interesting. Note that it is 'the love of another being,' not loving another being. I would probably flip that one. Moving to Greece 24 years ago allowed me to make a life defined by those conditions. That and independent funds, of course. Camus again. "For a man who is 'noble born,' happiness lies in taking on the fate of everyman, not through a desire to renunciation but with a will to happiness. To be happy, you need time. Lots of time. Happiness too is a long patience. And it is the need for money that robs us of time. Time means having time to be happy when you are worthy of happiness." 'Worthy of happiness,' aren't we all worthy? What is the criteria? I don't know. Camus was never sentimental about poverty. Near the end of the television drama True Detective, the character Rust Cohle asks, "What's the point in cake if you can't eat it?" It has been said that water buffaloes look at you as though you owe them money. Yes, water buffaloes as the arbiters of value. You owe, Markos, you owe big time. Certainly, but no matter, we all pay with our lives in the end. * "False comforts have their uses. In fact they are all we have." Nathaniel Rich 5 May 2014 Sargent

[i] Sarah Palin says, Waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists. An awful sentiment, to be sure, but rather clever. Someone else must have written it. LETTER FROM GREECE#20: Law & Habit "keep your eyes wide, the time won't come again." Bob Dylan We can only hope. "For those of you unfamiliar with how, until the 1990s, Ireland dealt with unmarried mothers and their children, here it is: the women were incarcerated in state-funded, church-run institutions called mother and baby homes or Magdalene asylums, where they worked to atone for their sins. Their children were taken from them... Ireland knows all this. We know about the abuse women and children suffered at the hands of the clergy, abuse funded by a theocratic Irish state. What we didn't know is that they threw dead children into unmarked mass graves. But we're inured to these revelations by now." Emer O'Toole, The Guardian Nearly 800 infant corpses found in Ireland in a septic tank at a former home for unwed mothers run by the Catholic Church. Ancient Sparta is famed for disposing of the less than perfect and, perhaps, excess baby girls. Nikos has forwarded the novel interpretation that the promotion of these stories served the Spartans, assisted in the myth of the warrior society, spread the fear. The implication being that perhaps the Spartans exaggerated their fierce pragmatism; psychological warfare, you dig. Perhaps, we'll never know, but we know that the 20th century history of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland is heinous and the horrors continue to unfold. My niece Helena very recently informed me that one of her cousins was briefly incarcerated by the nuns but was then rescued by his mum and they escaped across the Irish Sea to England where being an unwed mother wasn't quite the crime it was in Catholic Ireland. This is not ancient history. I have a friend who in his younger days was a soldier in the IRA. I like to tease him that the IRA was fighting the wrong occupying army, that they'd have served Ireland a lot better if they'd been killing priests and nuns, if they had driven the church from the island. But I'm not kidding. When the Church discovered that a priest was bugging altar boys they moved him to a new parish to bugger again, but imagine if instead the IRA had drug him from the parish hall and put a bullet in his head. Better a pedophile cleric than a falsely accused mother of ten. Might have sent some of those bastards back to masturbating in the sacristy alone, without a boy's assistance, only the cold hand of god. Brrr. If the IRA had been a revolutionary force instead of a nationalist one perhaps they would have taken on the church, as the Republicans did during the Spanish Civil War. Alas, they lost the war before they were able to rid Spain of Catholicism. A tall order. Same with the emerald isle. A theocratic state, the phrase conjures up images of Iran. The West likes to castigate the Muslim world's treatment of women, but where on this planet is safe for women? * Mirella, a great fan of Mrs. Dalloway, is finding Jacob's Room a slow push, but, she says, she can't stop because then she'd miss the Woolfean moments such as, she holds open the book and says, read this paragraph: "And for ever the beauty

men seems to be set in smoke, however lustily they chase footballs, or drive cricket balls, dance, run, or stride along roads. Possibly they are soon to lose it. Possibly they look into the eyes of far-away heroes, and take their station among us half contemptuously, she thought (vibrating like a fiddle string, to be played on and snapped). Anyhow, they love silence, and speak beautifully, each word falling like a disc new cut, not a hubble-bubble of small smooth coins such as girls use; and they move decidedly, as if they knew how long to stay and when to go—oh, but Mr. Flanders was only gone to get a programme." * Next time some plutocrat argues against higher taxes on the rich, quote him the market's philosopher king, Adam Smith. "It is not very unreasonable that the rich should contribute to the public expense, not only in proportion to their revenue, but something more than in proportion." * New businesses are opening in Sparta! Unfortunately, nearly the only idea local entrepreneurs have is the ubiquitous café/bar, and so, four new ones have opened, all within a block of each other, and these within a two blocks of another dozen, at least. The only thing people are willing to bet their money on is caffeine and nicotine. That, and the social nature of this society. Greeks love hanging at the café. And then, in the evening they show up again. And given that 60% of the young folks are out of work, well, there's a lot of time to kill and Greeks can nurse a frappe for hours. So around noon you borrow five euros from Mom and head out to the café. Well, maybe ten euros as you have to buy tobacco too, if she's got it. * "Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear -- kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor -- with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exorbitant funds demanded" General Douglas MacArthur. One would hardly put forth MacArthur as a champion of democracy unless the oligarchy he installed in Japan is your idea of participatory government. He was essentially the real emperor of Japan for six years after the end of the Second World War. In 1949 he also took on command of the UN forces in Korea, where he destroyed what was left of his reputation and was eventually relieved of his command. I have a family anecdote that concerns the general. First, a wee bit of history. MacArthur was a real Asia hand. He spent most of the twenties and thirties as Field Marshal of the Army of the Philippines, at the invitation of the Philippine government, mind you, which was, essentially, an American colony. Consequently, he had deep connections with many in the army and government there. Two and a half years after being driven from the island by overwhelming Japanese forces, on October the 20th, 1944, the Allied forces landed on the island of Leyte in the Philippines. That afternoon my father, an officer with the Army Corps of Engineers, having landed hours earlier, was zooming along a road that skirted the beach in a jeep driven by a Philippine officer assigned as his liaison. This man looks down at the beach and exclaims, "Look, it's MacArthur! I must go say hello!" So they turn onto the sand and race down to the surf where the General and his staff are famously wading in the last few meters because there weren't any available landing craft. Photographers were there and the myth of MacArthur and his return began. They were hardly the only people on the beach but there was time for brief introductions all around. My father was of the "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" persuasion and his memory of MacArthur is typically laconic. "Well, he was the commanding General and so you assumed he was competent and you hoped he was as good as he thought he was." Though he later coordinated cartography for the proposed invasion of Japan, I don't know if he had any more contact with the man. He was an admirer though. Winning makes all the difference. * Dave Eggers. The guy can really do it. His writing is amazingly propulsive and swiftly paced. The immersion is immediate and you look up and you've read fifty pages, a hundred. His newest effort, a dystopian novel entitled *The Circle*, is more of the same. In the very near future a company, the Circle, has managed to gobble up Google, Facebook, Apple, etc. and is swiftly racing towards global control of all information and consequently everything else. It's great fun. He skewers the naïf thinking of the tech world with great dexterity and reveals the inherent fascism of the social networking world. It's a jolly thought that we have, more than likely, many more Eggers books to come. * The IMF said, very recently, that Greece has made "significant progress ... towards rebalancing the economy" but it ain't enough. Claims part of the problem is that "adjustment fatigue" has set in. Adjustment fatigue, finally we understand what the country is suffering from! What is particularly disturbing to International Finance is how difficult it still is in Greece to dismiss employees collectively, en masse. So far, the only instance publicly is the national media organization, ERT, who, as you may recall, were summarily sacked last year, 2400 in all, with mere hours notice. An article in today's *NYTimes* commented on ten years of smokeless pubs in Ireland and how no one thought it possible and yet it occurred smoothly and swiftly. The article claimed that Ireland's success inspired other countries to do the same, including Greece (the smokingest of all) in 2010. Ha ha. This is yet another instance where laws are collectively ignored in this country. Sure, there are a few upscale restaurants and clubs in Athens that may be smokeless, where there is enough demand for such a thing, but there isn't a smokeless café/bar/restaurant in Sparta, not a one. Truly, as though the law didn't exist, for not only is there no will to obey, there isn't any to enforce either. That's the way it works here. A dominant theme in the national psyche is denial. So the deep gnawing recession the nation has endured is all the fault of Germans, the Troika, but certainly not because of anything Greeks did. And come on, smoking is smoking, it doesn't really have anything to do with your health. Seatbelts, aren't they a rather silly nuisance? As my niece Helena very recently described Lakonia: "The sun pours a cigarette ash haze over everything. Every minute the colours and shapes of the mountains move and change." They surely do, and the laws of man pass swiftly into the void of the past. 11 June 2014 LETTER FROM GREECE#19: Looking up from the bottom Julie Jarman writes asking after Greece having viewed an incendiary but soft spoken interview with a young Greek filmmaker and journalist, Aris Chatzistenaou (<http://www.kontext-tv.de/node/430#get%20embedding%20code>) who implied that the streets were dense with the homeless and the nation rife with suicide. Let me respond. Of course the situation here is bad, but homelessness is more prominent in Portland, Oregon or pick a U.S. city, than in Greek cities. And yes, the suicide rates for males are significantly up, that's truly awful, but they were the lowest in Europe to begin with and are still far beneath the Scandinavian countries or Belgium or the U.S., for that matter. Greeks aren't prone to suicide. What a horrible thing, to finish yourself, to be brought to that despair. It is easy to think yourself to that cliff, that life is without meaning and so,

what's the point?Â But to actually leap I believe means that the pain of living is too much to bear.Â (Of course, there are other reasons.)Â But is the pain caused by this imposed economic austerity?Â How do you determine this?Â Also, they don't yet have good statistics for the past three years when austerity has really taken its bite.Â Perhaps the numbers will climb?Â Obviously, hard times are going to push some folks over the edge, but how many?Â And the numbers do not represent a self-snuff epidemic when put up against the rest of the developed world.Â This story has been repeated so often that many take it as gospel.Â I have found that I need to be especially skeptical of reports and data that I'm inclined to believe.Â That is, what has been done to Greece and what Greece has done to itself, is horrible, disheartening, but that doesn't mean that every report describing its suffering is valid.Â Â Â Â Â Mr. Chatzistenaou is spot on in many regards.Â Public health care is a disaster, it was also shit before the crisis, a real sink hole of corruption. Â Now it is definitely worse. Â Before, the system had pharmaceuticals because they weren't paying for them, now they don't have them because the pharmaceutical companies won't extend any more credit.Â They used to send a big van around performing free mammograms, now they cost 30 Euros (more than a day's pay for many) and so, women aren't getting them. Â That's a time bomb. Â People are having to drive hours to Athens to get ordinary problems such as a broken leg attended to. Â Modern preventive medicine, not much of that. Â There are attempts at privatization but I don't know how it is working out, I admit.Â He claims that doctors say that the incidence of cancer and heart disease will rise due to increased 'existential fear'. Â Well, that's right up my alley, but is it really hell on the heart?Â Once again, the Scandinavian countries are notorious for existential fear as a cause of suicide but their rate of heart disease is not high.Â I think it's the long dark freezing winter.Â Chatzistenaou claims that people are literally dying in the street.Â Hmm, I am curious how many he's seen or can even document.Â I suspect he'd be hard pressed to come up with any.Â Â Due to the very low Greek murder rate, once again, any American city has many more people dying in the street.Â For that matter, Greece has a significantly higher life expectancy than the U.S., according to 2013 figures. Â One way they must be dying in the streets is that pedestrians insist on walking right behind the car while you're parallel parking without giving the car a second look.Â Greece used to have the worst driving fatality rate in Europe but they've been passed in recent years by the likes of Poland and Romania.Â Alas, Greece is number one in Europe in another category.Â According to a new global poll by the Anti-Defamation League, Greece is the most anti Semitic country on the continent with 69% of the population harboring anti Semitic attitudes.Â This has always been my impression. Â Â Â And finally, he claims that Greece will within a few years closely resemble a third world country.Â Nah. Â Greece is going to remain on the periphery, a second rate European country, but to maintain that that is the equivalent of the Third World is uselessÂ hyperbole. Â And he says what is required are mass social movements as in Latin America.Â Â But in Latin America you have huge peasant/lower class populations with nothing, or damn little, to lose, which is not the case here. Â Bourgeois societies do not produce revolutions. Â Overall the near term will continue to be dreary. Â Many people who support SYRIZA, the main opposition party (usually referred to as The Coalition of the Radical Left), as we do, have their doubts, but are eager to see what would happen. Just to break the lock theÂ oligarchies have had on the national government would be invigorating.Â And Samaras, the current Prime Minister, is the quintessential oligarchic insider. Â A man who appears to have always felt he should be Prime Minister. Â And if radical policiesÂ implementedÂ by a SYRIZA government, not a certainty, provoked the 'deep state,' all the better, let's bring them out in the open. Â Of course, the EU, a very undemocratic institution, could bring a lot of pressure as well, but that's got to be part of the struggle. Â Â We just had local elections, as well as voting for representatives to the EU Parliament.Â Sparti, a very conservative agricultural area, elected a Communist as mayor with 59% of the vote. Â Not because the citizens have begun to dig comrade Marx, mind you, but because the man has a reputation for honesty and efficiency. Â And when it comes to local affairs, that's the whole game.Â Thirty miles south of Sparti is the sweet little seaport of Gythio.Â Name means earth of the gods, y'all, and is famed in mythic history for at least two events.Â Orestes, pursued by the Furies for murdering his mother Clytemnestra, gained some temporary relief by sitting on the stone of Zeus the Reliever and gazing out at the wee island of Cranae«», where, according to legend, Helen and Paris first fucked after slipping out of Sparti enroute to Troy.Â For years Gythio, and the surrounding area, had a terrible problem with garbage collection.Â It wasn't collected.Â It piled up every Summer in great stinking heaps, infuriating and shaming the locals, didn't charm the tourists either.Â Then, a few years ago, a man ran for Mayor promising to clean it up.Â He was given the chance and damn if that garbage didn't disappear from the streets and countryside and stay gone.Â Not only that but this guy managed to get his hands on lots of infrastructure monies and the town is a buzz with activity. Â He was just reelected with the ridiculous plurality of 93.4% of the votes.Â Shades of the percentages El Presidente for Life used to get.Â When your success is the very streets themselves, no one can miss it. Â Nationwide SYRIZA garnered 26.6% of the vote, which made it the most popular party in the country, as New Democracy, the center-right leader of the current coalition government received but 22.7%.Â Coming in third was the neo-Nazi party, the Golden Dawn with 9.3.Â An ominous figure, but as nothing compared to what the far right received in France and the U.K., where they received more than 30% of the vote.Â These parties sound a lot like the Republican Party in the U.S.Â An election for a new government doesn't have to be called until June of 2016, so one would imagine Samaras, if he can hold his coalition together, will wait this out and hope for a better election climate down the road. Â Â Â I believe that the crisis has been easier on the citizens in the countryside than in the city.Â The isolation, the dependency on electricity, no access to the wild food of the land and often, greater distance from the clan, the family, that comes with urban life cranks up the stress.Â In the village people don't go hungry or not very often.Â There's masses of immediate debt floating about, that is, folks are way behind on the rent, the utility bills, taxes, etc. Â Government says 2.5 million are unable to pay their taxes and that the citizens fall another one billion in arrears each month.Â Remember, this is a country of 11 million.Â And yet, out here in the country, it feels like the economy bottomed out a few months ago.Â One couple we know works at a small mattress factory on the outskirts of Sparti.Â At the low point, long after the wife had been laid off, her husband was down to one day a week.Â Looked like they might shutter the whole damn thing.Â Now, they are both back working fulltime. With a little money in yr pocket, life down here in Lakonia is lovely. Â Â 31 May 2014 Â