

The Library as a Place to Stand
McGarvey Ice
Friends of Abilene Public Library Annual Board Meeting
7 November 2017
Abilene, Texas

It is both my pleasure and privilege to preach to the choir today. The work you do on behalf of our libraries is valuable work. It is important work. It is sacrificial work, often it is hard work, yet the effects of it will outlive all of us in ways we can neither predetermine nor anticipate. Yes, indeed, this crowd knows libraries. You understand the value they add to our city, and you are committed to their advocacy and support. So, what to say?

A good question, and one I've asked of myself many times over these last few weeks. I thought about leading with some factoid about information, such as how the rate of the creation of new information is truly mind-boggling. A 2015 *Forbes* article claimed more data was created in the previous two years than in all prior human history combined.¹ The information age is fully upon us and we are only beginning to learn how this new reality shapes us. And there is great work to be done about how to navigate it.

In a sense libraries exist because information objects exist. Whether it was cuneiform tablets in the government archives in Mesopotamia or papyrus rolls in Athens, or parchment codices at any one of dozens universities in Europe, or the reference shelf of the local small-town library, or a consortial digital repository containing data that will form one of the 44 zettabytes of information projected to exist by 2020,² libraries exist to

¹ Bernard Marr, "Big Data: 20 Mind-Boggling Facts Everyone Must Read" at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2015/09/30/big-data-20-mind-boggling-facts-everyone-must-read/#79517c3317b1>. Accessed 22 October 2017.

² Ibid. A zettabyte is one trillion gigabytes.

mediate content to users based on interest, demand, relevancy, importance and a host of other factors. One basic factor is that information exists and we librarians feel compelled to make it available. We want to find it, select it, classify it, organize it, describe it, and put it out there for use.

And this is where my thoughts took me after I found that factoid: namely, I get that the rate of creation for information is pervasive on a scale we've never seen and it will only increase exponentially. I get that. But what about competency? What about skill in using information? What about information literacy? Or creativity? Or wisdom? What about imagination? Intellectual entrepreneurship? What about discernment? What about empowerment? What about seeking the common good? What about creating choices where none exist? What about creating atmospheres conducive to choice and opportunity and equality of access? I don't have pat answers, but I think it worthwhile to raise the questions.

Libraries exist because information objects exist. Libraries also exist because of all these other questions, and more like them. Libraries exist because of our shared sense of 'oughtness.' In short, we are discontented with the way things often are and we feel compelled to make things better. We, like most all right-thinking people, share a sense of obligation to seek good and suppress evil. Tempered by our commitment to freedom of access to any information is a parallel commitment to responsibility in its use, fairness of inquiry and research, freedom of speech and thought and mind. It is the sense of oughtness, that truth matters, as does honesty, decency, charity, mindfulness, and morality, that drives us to take the inherent risk of freedom. We know that though a democratized, leveled playing field of information and ideas may be fraught with risks of

one kind, it alone can ensure the possibilities of another kind. Perhaps the wisest contribution a library can make to society is one that goes more or less completely unnoticed because it is a latent assumption. The assumption that undergirds all our work is that library folk know our generation is not the first to ask the hard questions. Further, we know that we would do very well by ourselves if we would pause and inquire of predecessors and colleagues.

So we give all voices a seat at the table because we are confident that though the process can be an iterative mess, in the end truth will out. We may not live to see it, but we will do our part, here, now and with the tools and resources in our stewardship, to carry forward what we have received. We know the irony of a charitable stance toward even the most uncharitable voices. Yet we submit them to the scrutiny of the entire community—past, present, future-- because we know we will be better off for hard work of examination and cross-examination, evaluation and re-evaluation, criticism and revision, testing, experimentation, refutation, better ideas, insightful proposals, innovative solutions.

I want to read a poem that may resonate with you.

Give me a nook and a book,
And let the proud world spin round:
Let it scramble by hook or by crook
For wealth or a name with a sound.
You are welcome to amble your ways,
Aspirers to place or to glory;
May big bells jangle your praise,
And golden pens blazon your story!
For me, let me dwell in my nook,
Here, by the curve of this brook,
That croons to the tune of my book,
Whose melody wafts me forever
On the waves of an unseen river.

Give me a book and a nook
Far away from the glitter and strife;
Give me a staff and a crook,
The calm and the sweetness of life:
Let me pause—let me brood as I list,
On the marvels of heaven's own spinning,—
Sunlight and moonlight and mist,
Glorious without slaying or sinning.
Vain world, let me reign in my nook,
King of this kingdom, my book,
A region by fashion forsook:
Pass on, ye lean gamblers for glory,
Nor mar the sweet tune of my story!³

That may resonate with you on a number of levels. At one level I love it because on more days than I care to admit, I'd appreciate nothing more than to be left quite alone in my nook, with my book, by the curve of this brook. 'Pass on, ye lean gamblers for glory, Nor mar the sweet tune of my story!' It may resonate with you because you may long for the days when folks sat by actual brooks, with paper books, rather than

³ William Freeland, 'A Nook and a Book' in Brander Matthews, *Ballads of Books*. New York: George J. Coombes, 1887, 58-59. Matthews cites William Freeland, *A Birth Song and Other Poems*. 1882.

streaming a waterfall on YouTube on one device as background noise while they surf the latest vain iteration of social media on another. I feel your pain. It is sentimental and evocative of certain kind of romanticized use of books, and knowledge, and engagement with ideas. It certainly evokes the stereotypical library type.

But deep down I don't think any librarian I've ever known was content with only that. Not Catherine Golden, librarian for forty-two years at Hendersonville Elementary School. Mrs. Golden's door was always open to me as I waited for my mother to finish her day. Mrs. Golden believed I would do great things, I know because she told me...often. And she always wanted to hear about what I was reading. Same for Georgia Bridgeman, librarian at Goodpasture Christian School whose always greeted us with a smile and encouraged us to read the hard books. She knew that in reaching beyond what we thought we could accomplish we would learn something far more important than the vocabulary of a book above our grade level. Not James Ward, Head Librarian at Lipscomb University or David McWhirter, Archivist at Disciples of Christ Historical Society, both of whom talked with me for hours on end about books and whose kindness and guidance helped me love the bibliography of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The sum of it all is they all understood the potency of information and possibilities of ideas. We library types may be lampooned and caricatured as pattering about the stacks in sweater vests, spectacles, and bow-ties, but we know better. My librarian heroes weren't like that: they were much more. Yes the world of information, as it were, was at my fingertips. But alongside me were caring, knowledgeable, capable, competent professionals.

We know and understand—right down in our innermost souls—that the problems and challenges and opportunities, the crises and triumphs of our time, all that is before us, should be met with broad access to the best and most diverse set of information resources. We know that transformative spaces, be they physical spaces or intellectual ones, to search, discover, select, and use these tools are a *pressing* need. We know that every librarian, staff member, administrator, supporter and key advocate is on the front lines of shaping the kind of world we want to leave for our children and grandchildren. We know that though a child’s home may be an information desert, or perhaps also their school or even the community at large, not so in the library. Not in this space with this collection, these databases, these librarians, this staff and administrators and friends. We know the challenges before us are great; at the same time we know the potency of information and the enduring value of well-formed character to use it well and wisely. And we know that the library is the place to find both.

We know and we believe that our lives, our communities, our world, can and ought to be better. And we know there is a great and mighty leverage for that right in our own libraries. Archimedes famously said, ‘Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.’ The library a place to stand? *Yes, now more than ever.* I put before you a question I already know the answer to, as do you. Who will help make our libraries a wonderful place to stand?