The Public Library Inquiry, a study performed by an independent team of social scientists at the behest of the American Library Association, was documented in a series of monographs printed between 1949 and 1952. These monographs made repeated reference to the "Library Faith," articulated by Robert Leigh, director of the study, as "a belief in the virtue of the printed word, especially the book, the reading of which is held to be good in itself or from its reading flows that which is good." The Public Library Inquiry asserted that the library faith had been the central value of the public library movement in America and that it "retains persistent validity."

This paper is a brief history of the Library Faith in American public libraries, followed by an examination of work by selected writers about public libraries and public education which focuses on the relationship between reading and democracy and the role public libraries have played and can continue to play in ensuring, in John Dewey's words, "that an organized, articulate Public comes into being."

Headings:

Public libraries -- History

Public Library Inquiry (Project)

Public libraries -- Aims and Objectives

Librarianship -- Social Responsibilities

Reading -- Educational Aspects

Gimme That Old Time Religion: Practicing the Library Faith in the New Millennium

by
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Approved by:

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Advisor

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Bloody Mary:
Happy talk, keep talkin' happy talk,
Talk about things you'd like to do.
You got to have a dream,
If you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?

Rodgers and Hammerstein – "Happy Talk"

Introduction

A 2004 report issued by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk*, based on a study of more than 17,000 adults, reveals that, in the 20 years previous, the percentage of adults who read literature (novels, short stories, poetry, or plays, irrespective of any judgments of quality) declined dramatically to less than half the population. The number of adults who read *any* book dropped 15 percent between 1982 and 2002. The rate of decline for the youngest segment of the population studied, adults between 18 and 24, was 55 percent greater than that for adults in the aggregate. There are doubtless those who think this isn't such a terrible thing. The book, they would maintain, is well on its way to being a moribund technology. (Bradshaw, 21)

Some of these people are themselves librarians, or so, at least, they describe themselves. In a seminar last summer, I heard a library director pronounce yet another death sentence on the "books and bricks" public library. As evidence of the rapidly advancing doom of print, he volunteered that he had downloaded "all the classic works of literature" to his PDA. I'm pleased to report that he refrained from hauling out the chestnut about buggy whip manufacturers and horseless carriages, but the meta-message which accompanied his exaltation of the exciting opportunities for change promised by the digital millennium

(which presumably include the thrilling prospect of reading *The Brothers Karamazov* on a tiny LCD screen) was clear. The MLS degree we were all in the process of obtaining was a one-way ticket to Palookaville.

For more than a decade the librarian profession has been in the throes of an identity crisis. The radical economic and social transformations effected by networked personal computers have nowhere been more in evidence than in libraries. Now that we are all falling all over ourselves in a mad rush to become information professionals and data management specialists, the word "librarian" itself is acquiring a quaint sort of old-timey quality, like "haberdasher" or "governess." We all chuckle at the comic absurdity of our Nancy Pearl Librarian Action Figures, with their shushing fingers and sensible shoes and stacks of bulky books. On the evidence of much the professional literature, one might draw the conclusion that codex books have become an embarrassment to the information profession, and the dusty buildings in which they reside shameful reminders of its humble origins.

In the late 1940s (and, perhaps, as long as there have been libraries) librarians were undergoing a reassessment, in some ways similar, of the nature and future viability of their profession. In 1945 Devereux Josephs, President of the Carnegie Corporation, proposed a joint investigation by the Corporation and the American Library Association into the reasons that lay behind the low status and salaries of public librarians in the United States. As Douglas Raber writes, describing a situation that seems not unlike that which prevails today, "the profession had not fared well through the Depression. Increased demand for services had been met with decreased financial support….

conditions were so bad that many believed that the Public Library Movement had come grinding to a halt."(Raber, 28)

Prompted by Devereux's suggestion and by a panel discussion at the ALA Midwinter Conference, Carl Milam, Secretary of the ALA, commissioned an independent study by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan which *The New York Herald Tribune* later described as "a study to determine who used the public library and why and how well public libraries served their communities." (Raber, 26) The results of the study, led by University of Chicago sociologist Robert Leigh with contributions from psychologist Alice Bryan, political scientist Oliver Garceau and Columbia Library School Dean Bernard Berelson, were published in five monographs and seven supplementary reports.

Two of the monographs, Leigh's *The Public Library in the United States* and Garceau's *The Public Library in the Political Process*, articulate the idea of "library faith". Following a brief survey of the history of public libraries in the United States, Garceau states "Out of this past has come what we may call the library faith. It is a fundamental belief, so generally accepted as to be often left unsaid, in the virtue of the printed word, the reading of which is good in itself, and upon the preservation of which many basic values in our civilization rest. When culture is in question, the knowledge of books, the amount of reading, and the possession of a library – all become measures of value, not only of the individual but also of the community." (Garceau, 50)

The language in this passage is striking. Perhaps in a time when the tenor of public intellectual discourse was less ironic and distanced, people used words and phrases like

"civilization" and "fundamental belief" more casually, but Garceau's diction evokes a

vision of librarianship as a calling of gravity and consequence. Just as they did in the

mid-20th century public libraries today face shrinking budgets, rapid social and economic

transformations in the communities they serve, and the challenge posed by a newly

omnipresent electronic information medium. But the profession of librarianship seems,

all too often, to have lost sight of the fundamental system of belief that once sustained it.

At any rate, confronted with the task of justifying their existence to the public which

funds them, a public which, if statements in the popular press are to be believed

(circulation and attendance figures at public libraries might tell another story), believes

that libraries have become largely irrelevant since "everything is on the Internet,"

librarians are curiously reluctant to articulate their basic values. In "Perspectives for the

Academy and from the Field" Ken Haycock writes, "Our values are constant yet we seem

unable to express them." (Horrocks, 64) He describes how the Congress on Professional

Education, which he chaired, assigned themselves the task of arriving at a statement of

core values, and a six-month timetable in which to accomplish it. "Three years and two

task forces later," he writes, "the profession is still unable to fashion a succinct statement

of values." Indeed, the compromise statement the Congress finally adopted, he says,

consisted not of values but of "orientations, civic obligations and ethics." (Horrocks, 64)

Similarly, Michael Gorman reports the unsuccessful decade-long efforts of two task

forces to arrive at a statement of values for the American Library Association. "The

central difficulty" he says, "lies in the fact that the very idea of a value is hard to grasp

and easily confused with other beneficial and beneficent things." (Horrocks, 55)

Nevertheless, he maintains, it is more essential than ever at this juncture in history,

confronting "the crisis of confidence that we see in some areas of our profession – that existential dread that perhaps libraries will not survive at all or will be so transformed by digital technology as to be unrecognizable," that librarians reaffirm a set of shared beliefs, what Gorman calls "the golden thread" which stretches back to Callimachus and the library at Alexandria. (Horrocks, 56)

In this essay, after a brief exploration of the centrality in American public librarianship of the ideology which the Public Library Inquiry aptly termed library faith, an ideology which posits the cultivation of readers and reading and the stewardship of the written cultural record as pillars of a healthy democracy, I will examine the ways in which some current theorists and advocates articulate visions of a library faith for the 21st century, or simulacra thereof.

The Library Faith in Public Library History

Origins of the Library Faith in Colonial Culture

The Library Faith, in Robert Leigh's words, "a belief in the virtue of the printed word, especially of the book, the reading of which is held to be good in itself or from its reading flows that which is good," (Leigh, 12) has been an essential element of American civic life from the time of the first European settlements in North America. The Puritans who founded the settlements of New England were self-consciously "people of the Book." Protestant Christianity stipulated that the only route to salvation was the unmediated encounter of the individual soul with God as revealed in his Word, and this emphasis, facilitated by the spread of typographical technology, had, in the century prior to the arrival of colonists in the New World, resulted in an explosion of vernacular literacy among adherents of the Reformed faith. Concomitant notions of freedom with respect to religious conscience had contributed directly, in the civil and religious strife which wracked the Continent and Great Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the evolution of the ideas of personal liberty and the right to political self-determination which lie at the root of American democracy.

Literacy and righteous action were understood among pilgrims to the New Jerusalem to be intertwined. "Whatever else may be said of those immigrants," Neil Postman writes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* "…they and their heirs were dedicated and skillful readers whose religious sensibilities, political ideas, and social life were embedded in the

medium of typography." (Postman, 31) Access to the written word was, they believed, a person's best defense against the lies and seductions of a fallen world and the manipulations of a volatile political environment. In 1647, the General Court of Massachusetts passed an act which proposed to teach all children in the colony to read and write in order that "Satan might not keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures or becloud their sense by false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers." (Garceau, 4) In the second half of the seventeenth century the rate of literacy in Massachusetts and Connecticut hovered around the ninety percent mark, which was, Postman asserts , "quite possibly the highest concentration of literate males to be found anywhere in the world at that time." (Postman, 31)

Even in the colonies further south, emigrants, while not fanatically committed, like their Puritan neighbors to the north, to pursuit of salvation through the written word, embraced the humanist tradition of literature as the guide to human knowledge and the written word as the instrument of human improvement. In 1699 the Reverend Thomas Bray brought his Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge to Maryland, where he successfully instituted a system of parish libraries, intended primarily for the use of clergy but which included eleven free lending libraries for laymen. The Bray libraries comprised a collection of more than 34,000 volumes, which was stocked by donations from collectors and booksellers in England. The culture of books in the colonies was not, as it had been for untold generations in Europe, held to be the exclusive domain of the upper classes. In contrast there emerged, Garceau writes, "a common concept of an educated man in the minds of colonists both North and South, the ideal of the well read man, the informed citizen." (Garceau, 6) In 1772, Jacob Duche wrote with respect to literary egalitarianism

in the mid-Atlantic colonies, "The poorest laborer on the shore of the Delaware thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiment in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentleman or scholar…Such is the prevailing taste for books of every kind, that almost every man is a reader." (Postman, 34)

Garceau postulates that widespread literacy in the colonies played a key role both literally and metaphorically in inspiring the events which culminated in the American Revolution. The proliferation of newspapers and pamphlets available to and eagerly consumed by the colonists stimulated an appetite for political involvement and fanned the flames of dissent in a population already disposed by circumstance and inclination to fractiousness. At the end of the eighteenth century, Postman notes, with less than half the population of Great Britain, the former colonies had two-thirds as many newspapers. The Stamp Tax that was imposed on newspapers, among other items, was one of the key events in a chain which led to open hostilities. But, in addition to the direct influence of newspapers, pamphlets like Paine's *Common Sense* (which sold, says Postman in comparative 1985 population terms, the equivalent of 24,000,000 copies), and Enlightenment political thinkers like Locke and Voltaire, Garceau attributes the birth of the democratic ideal in American political life to a semiconscious metaphorical understanding of the world which had resulted from the experience of near-universal literacy. "The book of nature was open for all to read in a language that all could understand, and its message was that all men were created free and equal and therefore should be governed only by their own consent. Government was established by contract between men and could be changed by men when necessary and proper." (Garceau, 11)

The establishment, Robert Leigh writes in *The Public Library in the United States,* by the framers of the Constitution of a central authority and self-governing commonwealths all dependent for their existence on the consent of an informed franchise of citizens, placed renewed "emphasis on reading as a means of providing the citizenry with the learning necessary for a sound judgment on public affairs."(Leigh, 13) While the eighteenth century had seen the establishment in American urban centers of various proprietary, subscription, mechanics', apprentices', and other social libraries, the most famous of which is undoubtedly the still-extant Library Company of Philadelphia, many in American political life in the early years of the Republic called for the establishment of a permanent resource maintained at public expense for the provision of mental sustenance to the voting populace. In 1815, abolitionist and public education advocate Dr. Jesse Torrey published *The Intellectual Torch*, a pamphlet which proposed the "Universal Dissemination of Knowledge and Virtue by Means of Free Public Libraries." In an 1809 letter to John Wyche, Thomas Jefferson, in language that, while it eschews reference to Satan, nevertheless evokes that of the Massachusetts Court of 1647, wrote, "The people of every country are the only safe guardians of their own rights, and are the only instruments which can be used for their destruction. And certainly they would never consent to be so used were they not deceived. To avoid this they should be instructed to a certain degree. I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the country under such regulations as would secure their safe return in due time." (Garceau, 31)

An Intellectual and Literary Common

The first real public libraries, though, didn't appear in America until the middle of the nineteenth century. Sidney Ditzion's *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* relates the history of the establishment in Massachusetts of the first American public libraries, with a particular emphasis on the campaign by Edward Everett and George Ticknor for the Boston Public Library. The public library, Ditzion argues, was the logical extension to adult citizens of the idea of public education which Americans had enthusiastically adopted for their children and which they rightly viewed as a necessary precondition to any sort of meaningful democracy. "The American workingmen, in whose behalf public libraries were urged frequently and strongly, had always benefitted from far more schooling than had their brethren abroad. Their political privileges and duties in most of our states demanded the existence of agencies of popular culture in a more compelling way than did the social position of the English artisan and mechanic." (Ditzion, 2) Ditzion's account, published in 1947, takes a charitable view of the motives of Everett, Ticknor, and the other trustees of the Boston Public Library. He interprets their advocacy and financial support as manifestations of a genuine concern for the health of the polity and of a sort of *noblesse oblige*. He quotes Francis Wayland, president of Brown University, who lobbied the Providence Athenaeum (a social library) in 1838 to make its collection available to the citizens of Providence and himself endowed a public library in the town of Wayland, Massachusetts, as having said in a speech at Union College that "it is the duty of society not only to care for the instruction of the individual, but also to provide the means for rendering this instruction in the highest degree available." (Ditzion, 11)

A later generation of library historians would question the motives of the BPL trustees. "In the 1970s," Ronald McCabe writes in *Civic Librarianship*, " revisionist historians such as Michael Harris and Dee Garrison…found… that George Ticknor and the other original Boston Public Library trustees were committed not to democracy and education but to elitism and social domination.." (McCabe, 33) To be sure, their generosity was alloyed with both an upper-class concern about unsettling mid-century political developments in Europe, in particular the spread of socialist ideology and the revolutions of 1848, and with an anti-Irish, anti-Catholic sentiment that seems less-than-creditable from this vantage point in history. Ticknor, Ditzion relates, "was able to write comfortingly to his friend, Prince John of Saxony, that the 'wise' men and even 'the great mass of people at the North' viewed the destructive revolutionary movements disapprovingly…illiteracy explained the attraction of the masses to these movements, according to the American analysis." (Ditzion, 16) The public library, its Brahmin proponents believed, would furnish American workers with the only proven defense against the 'false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers' like Marx, Engels, and Bakunin.

Likewise, it was hoped, the public library would prove a bulwark against Popery and any other un-American influences which might accompany the huge waves of European immigrants just commencing at mid-century. The Yankee xenophobes were perhaps right to be afraid. The Irish and the Southern and Eastern Europeans who followed them would utterly transform American cultural and political life in the decades to follow. "In New England towns of the period," Ditzion writes, "Yankee Protestantism with its Federalist background was frequently on the defensive against Irish Catholicism and the Democratic Party which championed its cause." (Ditzion, 61) He cites the will of C.E.

Forbes, which bestowed a substantial endowment upon the Boston Public Library. A judge and devout Congregationalist, Forbes wrote that the library "will be found the most efficient if not the only protection against the inroads of a foreign superstition, whose swarms of priests, Jesuits, monks, ministers, and agents are let loose upon us, and engaged in the unholy work of enslaving the minds of the multitude and moulding them into instruments of power." (Ditzion, 62) An unquestionably conservative current of thought can readily be discerned in nineteenth-century discourse about the public library. As one advocate wrote later in the century, "Light is always the one cure for darkness, every book that the public library circulates helps to make Alderman O'Brien and the railroad rioters impossible." (Ditzion, 73)

Indeed, as Michael Gorman has pointed out, conservatism is natural to libraries – they are, by their very nature, small-c conservative institutions. Nevertheless, the Boston Public Library and the countless American public libraries which followed in its wake were institutions which would have a profoundly progressive impact on American culture, and to dismiss Everett and Ticknor and their fellow trustees as cynical elitists is unfair and inaccurate. "This critique," McCabe writes, "…does not accept the possibility that an educated elite might have altruistic motives or that the sharing of the values of the elite might have a positive effect on society." (McCabe, 33) The most signal effect of this impact was the creation of what Ditzion calls "an intellectual and literary common," the cultural equivalent of the physical space which stood at the center of the traditional American township, a shared area open to all and maintained explicitly for the purpose of public assembly and discourse, a quarter where "the humblest and highest would meet on equal terms just as they did at the polls." (Ditzion, 60)

From the very inception of public libraries in America, interested parties have engaged in heated disputes about the sorts of materials which ought to be included in collections. Edward Everett, Joshua Bates and others on the Board of Trustees of the Boston Public Library envisioned the educational mission of the library in very narrow, formal terms. The primary function of the collection was to serve the reference needs of clerks and tradesmen and to facilitate self-education in the mechanical arts and engineering. Circulating materials, they felt, ought to be limited to items of a demonstrably "improving" nature – philosophy, science, history and languages. George Ticknor, though, had broader notions of education and insisted from the outset on the inclusion of materials that would satisfy not only "intellectual and moral," but "possibly imaginative wants" as well. (Ditzion, 180)

"It is a fact," Garceau writes, "which librarians have long felt uncomfortable about, that their institution came into being when novel reading began to grow and has lived much of its public life in the companionship of this demi-monde of literature. In the last two centuries the novel has become the folk art of the literate masses, what music, dancing, and story-telling were to other peoples." (Garceau, 13) As the idea of the public library spread, despite the profound and frequently expressed reluctance of those who explicitly articulated their social role in terms of moral and intellectual pedagogy, librarians, following the example set by the Boston Public library, included fiction in their circulating collections. "Doubtless," as Ditzion points out, "the reform, humanitarian and educational purposes of the public library would have been served best if only 'good' literature were read by the clientele. Libraries would, however, have defeated their purpose by offering exclusively that reading which trustees, directors, and librarians

considered beneficial. The book collection had to be attractive to the majority of potential readers in the population." (Ditzion, 181) Before the Library Faith could effect the salvation of the unlettered masses it was necessary, so to speak, to "get them into the tent."

Many Progressive Era librarians and library advocates would refer, if called upon to justify the inclusion of popular materials in a collection maintained at public expense for the purpose of providing the intellectual resources whereby those , in Everett's words, "whose means do not allow them to purchase books" and who had "an earnest desire for self-improvement," might advance their social and economic status and become capable of participating in an informed, constructive way in the political process, to a pedagogical principle known as graded reading. "By [this] mechanism," Ditzion says, "the common folk would start with simple popular books and graduate to more solid forms of reading." (Ditzion, 181) Even a no-nonsense autodidact and partisan of bootstrap self-elevation like Andrew Carnegie conceded the utility of fiction and other popular materials in public library collections. Characterizing Carnegie's views on the subject of 'light' reading, Ditzion writes, "The ultimate goal of this educational agency was to implant a taste for reading in the masses in order to start them on the road to higher intellectual attainments. It was partly on these grounds that Carnegie supported the policy of providing large numbers of novels to public libraries." (Ditzion, 153)

Josephine Rathbone, an instructor of Library Economy at the Pratt Institute in the late 1890s, taught her students to construct "reading ladders," by means of which readers interested in a particular subject or theme could be gently, almost imperceptibly, guided by the librarian to relevant texts of increasing complexity and sophistication. "As an

experiment at the Buffalo Public Library showed," Juris Dilevko and Candice Magowan write in *Readers' Advisory Service in North American Public Libraries, 1870-2005,* "Rathbone's graded fiction lists were successful in guiding readers to better fiction." (Dilevko, 65)

This kind of pedagogical legerdemain was the ideal toward which librarians strove in the first decades of the twentieth century. At this time a number of distinguished public librarians including Frederick Crumden of St. Louis and Walter Brown of Buffalo, put forward the notion of the library as "the people's university," a community resource, Robert Lee writes in *Continuing Education for Adults through the American Public Library*, *1833-1964,* "whose educational role was to take up the education of citizens at the point where it was discontinued by the public schools." (Lee, 40)

 But, whereas teachers in the public schools and the universities could impose discipline on their charges through formal lesson plans, homework, and examinations, librarians who sought to be "professors of books" in the people's universities were dependent on their own powers of persuasion to cajole recalcitrant 'pupils' to stretch themselves. Should a library, wrote ALA President Herbert Putnam in 1898, one year before he was appointed Librarian of Congress, "assume the position of an educator, it finds that its authority is one which the constituents themselves are unanimously unwilling to concede." (Lee, 41) Indeed, lamented John Leete, director of the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, far from viewing the public library as a people's university, "Too many think of it as a place where one may borrow without expense the transient novel that he does not consider worth buying for himself." (Lee, 42) Nevertheless, Leete continues, as the

caretakers of a public trust, librarians must valiantly attempt "by hook and by crook, to interest readers in things worth reading."

Despite a continued emphasis on education and uplift in discourse about the purpose of public libraries, the practice of circulating popular materials had, in the early decades of the twentieth century, become firmly entrenched, and it is during this period that librarians first concerned themselves with boosting circulation figures in order to demonstrate the civic value of their services to funding bodies. "By providing library users with more of the books they wanted to read," Lee writes, "librarians increased circulation. Then, they began to point out that more extensive use of the public library was proof that it was truly a democratic institution which provided reading for all classes of people." (Lee, 36) Indeed, many librarians became more comfortable with the idea that by circulating novels, even novels of questionable literary merit, the library was fulfilling a valuable social role by providing harmless diversions for the restless energies of the working class. In a speech at the dedication of Haston Public Library in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, psychologist G. Stanley Hall gave credence to this view by asserting that novel reading "rests the nerves in a way more wholesome than does a good strong cup of tea. Certainly more wholesome than some of the other drinks and activities resorted to by urban industrial workers." (Ditzion, 183)

Some libraries sought simultaneously to boost circulation and to salve consciences made guilty by the encouragement of novel reading through instituting the 'two-book system."
"It was a common practice," Esther Carrier writes in *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876-1900,* "for readers to be allowed to take out only one book at a time and to change novels or stories not oftener than once or twice a week. Many librarians favored such restrictions

as an aid to controlling the amount of fiction reading." (Carrier, 172) Under the two-book system, patrons were allowed to check out a second volume only so long as it was not a work of fiction or a recently acquired item. The second stipulation was to encourage patrons to explore less-used areas of the stacks. Edward Birge, president of the Wisconsin Library Association and a dean at the University of Wisconsin, published a study in 1898 on the effects of the two-book system on both circulation and 'elevation of patron intellect' in Wisconsin public libraries. He concluded that the effect on circulation was negligible, since most patrons only borrowed one book at a time, and of those who did borrow a second, most were obtaining it for a family member. With regard, however, to the potential pedagogical benefit for the librarian vis-à-vis the patrons, he wrote, "It enables him to educate without trying to reform his patrons; to teach without compelling them to learn; to widen their mental horizon in a natural, sympathetic way; in a word, it enables him to aid their mental growth without posing as a teacher or making his patrons feel that they are the objects of reform." (Carrier 1965, 173)

Many educators and thinkers had begun, during the Progressive Era, to sanction recreation as a positive good in itself, and recreational books – "because they promoted the healthy and intelligent use of the faculties, and they often assisted individuals in the achievement of emotional stability, in the development of better spoken and written language, and in the development of social skills" (Lee, 37) – were endorsed as not merely harmless, but educative. In a speech published in *Public Libraries* in 1905, Edward Birge exhorted librarians to stop treating pleasure reading as an unfortunate sideline to their educational mission, and to look upon it rather as the most essential element of the library's teaching work. "We cannot remind ourselves too frequently that

the fundamental purpose of good books and so of the library which possesses them, is to give pleasure, and that the library ought to be more closely associated with pleasure than with any other institution supported by the public." Lee, 37) In furtherance of this pleasure principle, many urban libraries began to expand the notion of the "intellectual common" by sponsoring lectures and classes, displaying visual art, and making slides and phonograph records available to patrons.

Reading with a Purpose

The years which followed World War I, however, saw a recommitment to more narrowly focused ideas about the library as an institution of public education. Many librarians, inspired by the adult education work they had performed for Army and Navy personnel as part of the American Library Association's Library War Service Program, returned to peacetime library work determined "to find a means of…applying the lessons of the military camp to the civilian population." (Lee, 46) Veterans of the War Service Program, which Lee describes as having "had an energizing effect on the profession as a whole" (Lee, 44), put together a plan of action called the ALA Enlarged Program, which was adopted in 1920 by the ALA Executive Board. The Enlarged Program called for the extension of library service to previously underserved populations, most notably immigrant populations, rural dwellers, and the blind, and it proposed vigorous attention on the part of librarians to focused programs of self-improvement crafted by librarians for individual readers based on extensive consultation. Following the recommendations of the Enlarged Program, libraries in Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Louisville created special departments for the provision of these

intensive programs of guided reading, a service which became known as "readers advisory."

In 1924 the Carnegie Corporation provided funding for five independent studies of "the character and scope of nonvocational adult education in the United States." (Lee, 48) Four of the studies were conducted by researchers reporting directly to officers of the corporation, but the fifth was performed by the ALA Commission on the Library and Adult Education, under the supervision of Judson Jennings, director of the Seattle Public Library and, at the time, president of the ALA. Jennings, a rather fundamentalist adherent to the Library Faith, opposed the introduction of lantern slides and phonograph records to public library collections and the sponsorship by libraries of classes and lecture programs. "The legitimacy of any library service," Lee writes, characterizing Jennings' comparatively narrowed view of the proper scope of the public library, "depended upon its relation to the promotion of reading." (Lee, 48) The Commission, which met from 1924 to 1926, published a report on its findings entitled *Adult Education and the Library*; it saw to the creation of the ALA Subcommittee on Readable Books, "for encouraging the production of books of educational value" – specifically, books designed to introduce topics of interest in a style that adult learners of limited educational attainment might not find forbidding ; and it began the ALA bulletin *Adult Education and the Library* "to stimulate the study of adult education as a necessary foundation for an understanding of the place of the public library in American life and of its relation to other agencies of adult education." (Lee, 49) But the most important result of the Commission's work was the institution of the Reading with a Purpose program.

This program published a series of pamphlets, sixty-six in all and ranging in length from 22 to 74 pages, which were sold in public libraries at cost (ten cents). They outlined courses of reading designed by subject specialists for "the adult student, who, without joining a club or an extension class, wishes to pursue a certain line of study through independent reading." (Doud, 3) The pamphlets covered topics such as psychology, twentieth-century American novels, "the poetry of our times," and "pivotal figures of science," and consisted of an introductory essay followed by an annotated list of selected titles "in the order in which they should be read for further knowledge of the subject." (Dilevko, 98) Between 1926, when publication began, and 1933, when the program was discontinued, 850,000 pamphlets were sold. While the agenda of the Reading with a Purpose program was still the sort of gently shepherded 'uplift' which a proponent of 'graded reading' like Josephine Rathbone would have recognized, the crafters of the pamphlets went to some pains to impart an urgent contemporaneity to their courses, the sort of quality which today is referred to *ad nauseam* as "edginess." Margery Doud, in *The Readers Advisory Service of the St. Louis Public Library*, describes the Reading with a Purpose booklets as "booklists that keep up with the times" designed for "busy, restless people living in a restless, rushing age." (Doud, 3) Dilevko and Magowan describe the pamphlets as, for the most part, "written with infectious enthusiasm," "keenly observed," and, in some cases, "well-wrought meditations about the American soul." (Dilevko, 99)

While Jennie Flexner, like all readers' advisors of the period, made use of tools like the Reading with a Purpose pamphlets, the kind of service she advocated was individually tailored to each reader and intended to build skills which would enable the reader to confidently navigate library resources in pursuit of a highly individuated path to self-

development. "The chief concern," she wrote in 1929, "must be with the reader's increasing capacity to help himself and to think for himself in selecting books." (Feinberg, 10) Flexner, perhaps the most notable figure in the 'golden age' of adult education through guided reading in American public libraries, is a woman whom Dilevko and Magowan single out as an exemplar of what they term the "art of librarianship." This language, which they use to describe a number of notable librarians of the 1920s and 1930s including Flexner, Margery Doud, and Helen Haines, is taken from "Do We Want Library Science?," a 1931 speech by C. Seymour Thompson of the University of Pennsylvania, who answered the question in his title by declaring "if we can have science only by adopting the psycho-sociological laboratory methods that are being urged upon us, my answer is, No, we do not want librarianship to be a science – let it be an art; a Fine Art – untouched by science." (Dilevko, 113) Flexner came to the New York Public Library in 1929 from the Louisville Public Library, where, while serving as head of circulation and as president of the Kentucky Library Association, she had published an influential article in *Library Journal* on the nascent field of readers' advisory, "The Loan Desk from Both Sides." She was a graduate of the library school at Case Western University, where she had been a protégé of Cleveland librarian William Brett, pioneer, with John Cotton Dana, of the open shelves movement in public libraries.

Flexner's method, modeled on the informational reference interview, depended on extensive one-on-one consultation intended to limn the exact shape which the patron wanted the educational process to take. "The request for lists of 'best books,'" she writes in *A Readers' Advisory Service*, "comes with disconcerting frequency, but can usually be converted to something more real and specifically helpful." (Flexner, 12) Flexner's

arrival in New York, and the institution at the NYPL of readers' advisory, coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression, and the services she provided to large numbers of newly unemployed library patrons, while they often addressed specific educational and vocational needs, were just as frequently directed toward projects of self exploration that were less immediately practical, but every bit as vital, for the individuals concerned and for the public weal. Describing the spike which the NYPL had seen between 1929 and 1933 in bewildered, dislocated patrons turning to the Library Faith for deliverance from the economic and emotional wastelands in which they suddenly found themselves, she writes, "Men who had considered themselves fairly settled in life were suddenly jolted out of habitual grooves and forced to turn to every available source for help…in meeting a new call for self-expression in a world where standards are being raised and altered." (Flexner, 31)

The Second World War, as had the First, prodded librarians to evaluate and rearticulate the Library Faith. In 1941 the ALA issued a policy statement which emphasized the obligation of libraries "to furnish citizens with an unbiased knowledge of current events," and, in addition to providing information to the public about civil defense and supplying technical books to defense workers, librarians addressed themselves to the duty "to promote understanding of the principles on which the United States form of government is based." (Lee, 72) Following the war, ALA president and Librarian of Cincinnati Carl Vitz, reflecting the widespread exhilaration and sense of democratic purpose many Americans felt as a result of hard-fought victories against totalitarian regimes, published an opinion piece in the July 1945 *ALA Bulletin* which asserted that, "To help in the creation of a community of thinking citizens, holding opinions independently gained

[was] the principle task of librarians." (Lee, 73) In the years after the war the ALA

responded to censorship, loyalty oaths and HUAC hearings by adopting the Library Bill

of Rights and a resolution condemning loyalty investigations. It initiated, as well, two

programs, the Great Issues program and the American Heritage Project, which were

aimed at stimulating reading and discussion by adult Americans with respect to issues of

public import. The issues addressed by these programs included "such problems as

inflation, world government, management and labor relations, the United States and

Russia, and civil rights. (Lee, 73)

This activist educational role reflected one point of view which had, perhaps, been

expressed most influentially by Alvin Johnson in his 1938 report for the American

Association for Adult Education, *The Public Library – a People's University*. As he

made clear in the title, Johnson advocated a return to the Progressive Era idea of the

public library as an informal but focused institution of higher learning. Johnson boldly

opined that "collecting and distributing books without any regard to the influence they

exerted was not educational in character." (Lee, 67) He characterized catering to popular

taste as "the misplaced commercial principle of giving the public what it wants."

(Dilevko, 119) Public libraries which followed the whims of the marketplace were no

different than tawdry bookshops "offering for sale …vulgar merchandise, merchandise

that can float only on the folly of the purchaser." (Dilevko, 120) As an entity which

justified its funding by making claims to status as an educational institution, he

maintained, the public library has a responsibility to provide the public what it needs.

In contrast, other thinkers had a more fluid idea of adult education and of the kinds of

materials suitable for inclusion in public library collections. Lyman Bryson, an instructor

at the Teachers' College of Columbia University and a consultant for the CBS broadcasting network about adult education, wrote in 1939, "If one accepts, as I do, the concept of the librarian as primarily an adult educator, and the concept of adult education as primarily an individual's search after the satisfactions of his own soul, most of what librarians and libraries do will always be the building up of those possibilities that put persons in reach of books." (Lee, 66) Indeed, some librarians found the educational label misplaced. Harry Lydenberg, Librarian of New York Public Library wrote in 1933 that, "library workers…must realize that we are not educators…but, rather, caretakers." (Lee, 66) The same year, Robert Miller wrote in the ALA Bulletin that librarians should abandon their pretensions to being an educative force and acknowledge that "the main business is distributing books." Lee, 66)

The Public Library Inquiry

As noted above, debate in the profession about the civic purpose of libraries and concern about the social and economic status of librarians prompted the ALA, with financial backing from the Carnegie Corporation, to commission the Public Library Inquiry. The fragility of democratic institutions which had been demonstrated by world events in the previous decade lent a further note of relevance and urgency to the Inquiry's examination of the works which the Library Faith had produced in American culture and of the viability of that faith as an ideology and of the public library as an instrument of democracy. "Among those who developed, supported, and conducted the Inquiry," Douglas Raber writes in *Librarianship and Legitimacy: the Ideology of the Public Library Inquiry*, "was a fear that what had happened to Europe in the 1930s could happen in the United States." (Raber, 140)The propaganda potential of the modern information

industry had been made alarmingly clear. "Modern methods of mass communication can be used to reach and persuade a discontent, atomized mass society …and provide legitimacy for simple answers to complex questions." (Raber, 140) The need in American public life for what Robert Leigh calls "a general center of reliable information" was clearer than ever.

The conclusions arrived at in the several monographs published by the PLI between 1949 and 1952 amounted, in sum, to a qualified endorsement of the Library Faith. The public library, they concluded, was only patronized with any regularity, in 1950, by approximately one in ten Americans. About one in four held library cards. As Bernard Berelson concedes in The Library's Public, "adult library clientele is relatively small…a self-selected minority with special characteristics." (Berelson, 130) Nevertheless, as Robert Leigh writes in *The Public Library in the United States,* "adequate services to the existing and potential group of natural library users have a social value much greater than the gross numbers involved." (Leigh, 48) Leigh devotes considerable attention to the commercial mass media which, then as now, inundated most American lives. "It is estimated," he writes, "that the average adult is engaged for a quarter of his waking hours" in media transactions of one form or another. These communications, Leigh asserts, while not as pernicious as alarmists would have it, are, as an inescapable consequence of their commercial nature, even in the absence of deliberate intent to deceive, nevertheless distorted by sensationalism, the cult of celebrity personality, and avoidance of the unpopular or challenging. Commercial sources of information, Leigh concludes, "leave undone or slight the performance of communication services which are indispensable for the health of our society." These services, the "uniquely appropriate

functions" of a noncommercial information agency like the public library, include the provision of materials "selected by experts…as the most reliable and authoritative…including artistic products of merit"; materials "selected to give adequate and balanced representation to new, critical, often unpopular ideas"; materials "not new, but of current relevance because of their enduring quality"; and those materials which comprise "the full resources of record… on a particular subject or problem." (Leigh, 50-51)

The PLI was fairly unanimous in concluding that the proper role of the library was not to attempt to compete with commercial mass media for the attention of the public at large. "Like the economy as a whole," Berelson writes, "the public library is limited in facilities, time, money, and staff. Since it cannot be all things to all men, it must decide what things it will be to whom." (Berelson, 134) The public library, while it was available to all without prejudice, was inevitably only utilized by a fraction of the public. But this fraction, the people whom Berelson dubbed "opinion leaders" in various civic and cultural areas, exerted an influence on their communities which was beneficial to the entire polity. "Universal enlightenment," says Garceau, "is not a completely realizable ideal. Only a minority, probably a small minority, will really understand and participate in leading the enormously differentiated culture. Only a few will be really involved effectively and with sustained interest and activity in the democratic polity." (Garceau, 147) The PLI wasn't referring to an elite clique of Platonic "guardians." Different groups of opinion leaders would emerge in the multifarious areas of public interest germane to the mission of the public library. The exigencies of modern life and the complexity of the world we inhabit make depth of knowledge on most subjects an impossibility for most.

"Today," Leigh writes, "a man or a woman devoting full time and exceptional talent to current public problems can hope in his lifetime for mastery of no more than a tiny segment of the whole area of civic knowledge…The early nineteenth-century concept of the omnicompetent citizen has become an absurdity in our day." (Leigh, 49) The public library is an invaluable source of reliable knowledge and information for the "unofficial, informal, and flexible…network of opinion leadership" in which "any citizen may be both a follower and a leader" (Leigh, 50) and a repository of the shared cultural heritage of individual communities and of the larger American democratic community which should be available to all citizens. "The library faith," Garceau writes, "retains a persistent validity…More precisely, the democratic society believes that, few though they be, the minority who can use books and do want them should have access to library resources." (Garceau, 148)

Charles Armstrong, in *Money for Libraries: a Report on Library Finance*, makes a similar argument, specifically that, in Raber's words, "the number of users of a public service is not necessarily an effective measure of its social utility." (Raber, 74) Armstrong dismisses the utilitarian critique of the public library by making an analogy with police and fire departments. Most citizens never directly require the services of those civic agencies. Nevertheless, they are worthy of public support, and provide a value to each citizen, by virtue of their very existence. It is just so, Armstrong maintains, with the library. Citizens who don't use the library might mistake the service it renders, the provision of impartial, reliable knowledge and information, as a dispensable benefice – nice if you can afford it, but logically the first to go in belt-tightening times. As Raber says, "library service remains intangible. The threat of the collapse of democracy due to

lack of public information seems remote compared with the threat of loss of life or property." (Raber, 73) At the time Armstrong was writing, though, both Dr. Goebbels and Sen. McCarthy had, in recent memory, demonstrated the very real threat to public safety posed by saint-seeming deceivers, with regard to property and person, in the absence of impartial information. A threat, one might argue, which remains every bit as urgent today. And, Armstrong points out, in light of a very demonstrable need for the benefit libraries provide to the public, it was a bargain at the price – in 1948, the cost of all public library service in the United States accounted for one sixth of one percent of total government expenditure. (Raber, 73) Pennywise, indeed.

Undue attention on the part of the library, "to expressed public demand irrespective of quality, reliability or value," in Leigh's terms, while it may boost circulation numbers and ease relations with parsimonious boards looking for bottom line results, represented, in the view of the PLI, a betrayal of the pedagogical imperative with which public libraries had always justified themselves. It was, in effect, a sort of apostasy from the Library Faith. "Libraries," Garceau wrote, "would seem to weaken their position by overlooking their serious purpose and becoming trivial." (Garceau, 150) From a strictly economic point of view, setting aside any civic obligation to provide "the most reliable and authoritative" materials to constituents, it would represent rank folly on the part of public libraries to attempt to compete with an industry able to bring vastly superior forces to bear. "This alternative objective," Leigh asserts, "not only turns away abruptly from the librarian's traditional faith in the ameliorative power of books, but also engages the public library in direct competition with the commercial agencies of communication on their own terms. As a long term goal it…would doom it to gradual extinction because of

the greater resources, reach, and competitive skill of the commercial media of mass communication." (Leigh, 224)

Give 'Em What They Want

Despite the PLI's prognostications of doom, the emphasis in public library service in the second half of the twentieth century adhered increasingly closely to the commercial model. In *Readers' Advisory Service in North American Public Libraries 1870-2005*, Juris Dilevko and Candace Magowan make an eloquent case that New Left populist rhetoric and critiques of adherence to "elitist" cultural standards had the ironic effect in the 1960s and the decades that followed of trivializing a once vital institution of public education and depriving the underprivileged in American society of an invaluable resource. The public library had been created, the PLI asserted, to level the playing field a bit, to address the inequities of a political reality where, in Raber's words, "some groups, occupations and classes have the power to command the respect and resources they need to determine their advantage at the expense of others." (Raber, 140) Like the Colt revolver, another transformative if significantly less beneficent gift of mid-nineteenth century American culture to the world, the free public library was a "Great Equalizer." The Library Faith as articulated by the PLI is rooted, Raber says, in a belief in meritocracy and fair play. "While…social equality will remain elusive, it does not imply that equality of individual opportunity…cannot serve as the fundamental principle of democracy." (Raber, 150)

 But, allege Dilevko and Magowan, during the past half century public librarians have, by falling into the very trap the PLI warned against, abandoned their pedagogical mission

and, in effect, turned their backs on the Library Faith. "Providing meaningful educational opportunities through serious and purposeful reading for less-advantaged individuals," they write, " …became a lower priority for public libraries as they concentrated on satisfying 'the enshrinement of subjectivity' of economically advantaged patrons," (Dilevko, 155) by which they mean the redirection of library purpose toward the provision of light entertainment to the middle class.

They locate the beginning of public librarianship's forty-plus years in the wilderness fairly precisely. "Starting in 1963," they write, "there was a fundamental change in the way that the relationship between public libraries and education was construed." (Dilevko, 33) At that point in time, they assert, the American public library ceased to be what the Boston Trustees termed "an instrumentality of higher instruction to all classes of people," and became a 'happening,' where self-absorbed, pampered suburbanites could check out the latest bestseller when they weren't availing themselves of checkers, pick-up sticks, table tennis, guitars, pets and judo demonstrations.   They quote D.W. Davis, who wrote at the time, "Librarians who look upon libraries as centers for social services and entertainment do not necessarily believe that books and culture are out of place in libraries. They simply believe that reading and uplift are incidental to the library's main purpose."

In 1963, Director Charlie Robinson and Deputy Director Jean-Barry Molz came to the Baltimore County Public Library, from, respectively, the Free Library Company of Philadelphia and the Enoch Pratt Library, with the intent, they reported, in an interview with Nancy Pearl in the September 1, 1996 edition of Library Journal, "to make Baltimore County a 'good' library." They soon concluded that, although they had both

been "raised in the tradition of the great collections – making sure you gave people the definitive works of literature," to make selection decisions, let alone give direction to patrons, based on considerations of intellectual or literary merit, "was ridiculous. It was insane." (Alabaster, 8) Robinson and Molz viewed the whole 'people's university' construct as a castle in the air. "Jobs, housing and education," they maintained, were issues "libraries can't do anything about." (Dilevko, 143) Instead they developed a policy which they termed "Give 'Em What They Want," which looked to best seller lists for collection development guidance and mandated rigorous weeding for titles that failed to circulate.

Robinson and Molz also applied the commercial model to management practices, and were pioneers in what came to be known as the 'deskilling' of the profession. Librarianship, like the canon which Robinson, a Tom Clancy fan, admitted, "puts me instantly to sleep," was, in their view, a lot of high-flown hooey. "The library school," Robinson asserted in the same interview, "is very important for keeping the mayor's cousin out of the library and as a union card," but little else. Paraprofessionals trained in customer service and the efficient performance of routinized tasks were the order of the day. "Because," Dilevko and Magowan write of the "Give 'Em What They Want" ethos, "it was not in the purview of public libraries to think about providing meaningful educational opportunities for patrons through serious fiction and nonfiction, professional librarians were superfluous." (Dilevko, 143)

Initially, the Baltimore County Public Library was dismissed in professional journals as "the bestseller library" and "the bookstore library," but in succeeding decades most American public libraries followed suit. The shift away from self-consciously educational

collections and toward providing popular entertainment in public libraries was in keeping

with a more generalized embrace of popular culture in the society at large, and with the

rejection of traditional authority structures which characterized the 1960s zeitgeist.

Librarians who embraced the new ethos viewed 'outdated' notions of cultural excellence,

Dilevko and Magowan say, borrowing language from Edward Shils, as "repressive

instruments of authority, which are thought to represent the dead hand of the past."

(Dilevko, 35) The new paradigm was represented in professional literature most notably

by the work of library historians Michael Harris and Dee Garrison, who asserted, with

respect to the average "man on the street," that the pedagogical agenda of the orthodox

Library Faith "was designed to control him, not to liberate him." (Dilevko, 35)

In the 1980s, Dilevko and Magowan maintain, the educational mission of the public

library was further weakened by a widespread shallowness and narcissism which came

to pervade American culture and a concomitant abdication by most Americans of any

sense of civic or personal responsibility. The "Give 'Em What They Want" ethos

devolved into one which they call, borrowing a phrase from journalist David Brooks,

"Less Rembrandt, More Me." The Less Rembrandt, More Me public library reflected a

social milieu described by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* - one in which

the alienated, solipsistic subject, no longer a citizen in any meaningful way, has "no

interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image."

(Dilevko, 29) In such a library, they write, "the value of serious and purposeful reading to

gain significant cultural, historical, and political knowledge was downplayed; the value

of reading as an activity associated with narcissistic entertainment and pleasure was

highlighted."

While their analysis is, for the most part, astute and their rhetoric elegantly persuasive, Dilevko and Magowan indulge, not infrequently, in a withering Canadian contempt for American yahooism (although fellow Canuck Catherine Ross receives a healthy portion of their ample disdain) that sometimes seems, if not exactly wrong, at least a little unsporting. Joyce Saricks, doyenne of American readers' advisory for several decades and prolific proponent of what they rather meanly call the "Advisermatik" approach, is a favorite target of their Olympian Northern Scorn. As a sublime example of her Yankee dopiness, they offer her suggestion that fledgling readers' advisors consult an article by Georgine Olson, "How to Read a Novel in Ten Minutes." "Here," they gleefully report, "readers advisors were told, among other things, to: "Hold the book and look at its basic features. Is it heavy? When you open it, do the pages lie flat?" (Dilevko, 150)

Bullies though they are, Dilevko and Magowan are accurate in their assessment of the way in which metaphors and methods of commerce have come to pervade public library service, and of the implications for a democratic society of this shift in emphasis. *The Responsive Public Library: How to Market a Winning Collection*, a manifesto of the 'customer'-centered 'responsive' library movement by Sharon Baker and Karen Wallace which is awash with "the heady rhetoric of 'core markets,' market segmentation,' 'standard life cycle of products,' 'product analysis' and 'stock turnover rate,'" is typical, they say, of the contemporary vision of librarianship in that it delivers an injunction for "librarians to think of themselves as retail managers whose stores only carry products that move off the shelves." (Dilevko, 29) They make a powerful case that, by adopting the 'Have It Your Way' mores and strategies of industry, the library has become its stooge. "We suggest," they write, "that post-1980s readers' advisory was an unwitting promoter

of unfettered capitalism, despite the fact that its practitioners liked to see themselves as stalwart defenders of a 1960s New Left counterculture ethos based on a radical interrogation of existing social structures." (Dilevko, 5)

The intellectual common, they warn, is in grave danger of permanently losing touch with its history, traditions, and purpose, and of becoming an outlet for the entertainment industry, just another storefront performing (poorly), in Robert Leigh's language, "a supplementary and secondary rather than a distinctive role in the communication field." (Leigh, 224) In its headlong rush to remain au courant, the public library will doom itself to extinction. "When Saricks," Dilevko and Magowan write, "praised the following opening gambit [in a readers advisory interview] – "'Looking for something light for the summer?" makes a good beginning on hot July days' – one could be forgiven for not knowing whether one had entered a public library or a clothing store. Both now offered seasonally fashionable and ephemeral items to economically advantaged consumers convinced by the promotional reach of the entertainment industry that the ethos contained in the 'Give 'Em What They Want' slogan was the essence of democratic freedom and not a manifestation of market censorship." (Dilevko, 151)

Michael Gorman and the Enduring Values of Librarianship

Won't Get Fooled Again

Ken Haycock begins his essay "Librarianship: Intersecting Perspectives from the
Academy and the Field," collected in the anthology *Perspectives, Insights and Priorities:
17 Leaders Speak Freely of Librarianship*, by quoting the Yogi Berra chestnut about déjà
vu all over again. "What we do," he writes, "remains fundamentally the same – and that
is good." (Horrocks, 63) The image of librarianship he presents, though, is hardly one of
laudable consistency and continuity but, rather, one of pusillanimity and otiosity. On the
very same page he says, "Our notion of forward motion is, regrettably, illusory."
(Horrocks, 63) After a few warm, fuzzy nods to service and freedom of expression, he
gets around to what he really has to say, and the reason for his impatience with
librarianship's alleged lack of dynamism becomes apparent. Haycock, an MBA and
executive search consultant, displays, in this essay, at least, the symptoms of what
Michael Winter called, in an article in the 1998 *Progressive Librarian*, Corporate
Wannabe Syndrome. "Our business is a business," (Horrocks, 66) the Kenneth proclaims
in tough-talking management-guru style. "Libraries can no longer stand alone as silos
dedicated to the public good" (Horrocks, 67) he declares as he exhorts all the girls and
the girly-men to get in there and roughhouse with the big boys. Haycock isn't afraid to
tell the tough skinny, even if he has to dust off a hoary railroad business/transportation
business cliché to do it. He acknowledges that the analogy is less than daisy-fresh ("How

many times have you heard…"), but some truths, apparently, are timeless. If librarians don't pull their noses out from between the covers of those dusty books, he warns, and get comfortable with finance and leadership and marketing and all the other realities of the grown-up world, modern American society, which has tolerated their effete indolence long enough, will toss them onto the trash-heap of history with the steam locomotives. Public service may have been acceptable back in the soft old days, but in today's tough times, on-the-go Americans demand *customer* service. "The age of entitlement," he admonishes, "is over. The age of accountability is here." (Horrocks, 65)

In an essay in the same volume, Patrick Jones also describes a profession "doing what we have always done and always will do," but in his characterization, the essential uniformity of contemporary with traditional practice is a source of pride and hope rather than impatience. As he sees it, the obstacles which librarians face in the "information age" are as familiar as the professional skills they bring to the task of confronting them. I suspect that librarians practicing at the time when the PLI was performed, if magically given a glimpse of the public library landscape today, despite experiencing some technological disorientation (heaven knows I have), would recognize an all too familiar set of difficulties. As Jones says, "Look at the twenty-first century challenges we face: new technology, patrons not just new to libraries but new to speaking English, not enough staff or resources or space or political support, and the normal litany of library laments…This situation is not unfamiliar to American public libraries; it is ingrained in our roots." (Horrocks, 74) Jones titles his essay "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss," a line from a classic Who song, the title of which is itself resonant with respect to consideration of the pertinence of the Library Faith to democracy in the face of the

alleged sea changes of a Web 2.0 age: "Won't Get Fooled Again." Beginning in the fifties and sixties and continuing in the decades which followed, public libraries responded to criticism of their "relevance" (as the SDS types might have put it) by trying to remake themselves in the image of a broadcast media based popular culture. As competition for attention from television did then, so does networked digital communication today tempt librarians to turn away from the ameliorative power of books and to try feebly to compete with commercial agencies of communication. Robert Leigh's warning still applies. The new boss is, indeed, the same.

Michael Gorman, another contributor to the Horrocks collection, has, in addition to his pivotal contributions to the profession in the area of bibliographic control, written extensively on the core values of librarianship. For nearly two decades he has been an embattled David defending the Library Faith against the philistinism of those heedless technophiles he has dubbed "the boogie-woogie Google boys." His essay in *Perspectives, Insights and Priorities,* "Library Values in a Changing World," is an appeal for the articulation by librarians of a cluster of beliefs, "a golden thread" to serve as the lifeline which will assuage our existential anxiety when confronted by nattering nabobs with the inevitability of our demise. The values he proposes in this essay are identical with those he has refined over the years in *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, & Reality* (1995, with Michael Crawford), *Our Enduring Values* (2000) and *The Enduring Library* (2003). They are, in every way, testimony to the continued vitality of the Library Faith and to the continued need, if the United States is to remain a democracy in fact and not just in name, for public libraries.

The leitmotif of Gorman's writing on the values of librarianship is a calming skepticism with respect to the doomsayers. Reports of the imminent death of the public library are, he assures us, greatly exaggerated. "The technological changes that we have seen in libraries over the past twenty-five years have been dramatic," he writes in *Our Enduring Values*, "but they pale in comparison to parallel changes in society, politics, lifestyles, and almost every other aspect of human life." (Gorman 200, 14) As he points out, change is just about the only constant in history, and that change has almost always seemed unprecedented and even cataclysmic to those experiencing it. The impacts of past social and technological transformations appear pallid in comparison to those we ourselves are about to undergo, but that is only because we know how those stories turned out. While online catalogs and networked databases undeniably offer potentials of functionality of which a librarian at the turn of the twentieth century couldn't even have dreamed, the library and its role in the culture have remained *essentially* unaltered. "The tasks of the librarian," Gorman writes, "do not change, but the means and the processes we use to accomplish those tasks can, should and will change. Further, the mission of the library today and the broad tasks of the librarian have far more in common with the libraries and librarians of the nineteenth century than they do with a computer center. "(Gorman 2000, 14)

Inevitably, when I find myself conversing with relative strangers in some awkward social situation and, in response to the "what do you do?" conversational gambit, I reveal that I'm in library school, I'll get an amused, faux-pitying shake of the head (entirely familiar since, the better part of a lifetime ago, I was an undergraduate English major) before the interlocutor informs me, with a barely concealed delight at my hopeless chowder-

headedness that is for all the world like a smirking Peanut headed off for a fun-filled night of trick-or-treating while Linus settles in fruitlessly to await the arrival of the Great Pumpkin, that "no one goes to the library any more. Everything is on the Internet now." I will mumble something and think, behind my frozen smile, "Well, sure, *you* don't go to the library, but idiots never did." There is in my silent but mean-spirited response, admittedly, more than a little of the defensiveness born of a middle-aged underachiever's fear of having made yet another poor decision. Nevertheless, the point, while it might be made more generously (let alone bravely, *out loud*), stands. All the people staying away from the library in droves while they surf the Web for information were staying away before there was a Web.

While reference librarians have always connected seekers with resources (information and, more importantly, the strategies to obtain it) to satisfy factual queries and while they continue to do so now and will in the future, this is not, nor has it ever been the library's chief purpose. "Librarians have been warned that," Crawford and Gorman write, "…they will see a future in which libraries will not be the means by which most people obtain the information they need…but the truth is that libraries have never been the sole, or even the primary, source of information for the majority of people…To reduce this argument to the absurdity that it is, we are being told that libraries are obsolete because they can no longer be something they have never been or wished to be." (Crawford and Gorman, 116)

Crawford and Gorman refer to a 1986 book by Mortimer Adler, *A Guidebook to Learning*, that proposes a hierarchy of the "four goods of the mind": information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom (Nikhil Sharma, in "The Origin of Data

Information Knowledge Wisdom Hierarchy," says the distinction originates with T.S. Eliot, in the 1934 poem "Choruses from the Rock" (Sharma)). These goods "ascend in a scale of values, information having the least value, wisdom the greatest." (Crawford and Gorman, 4) Although libraries contain a virtually inexhaustible mother lode of information for the curious, at heart they are repositories of knowledge and, not infrequently, understanding and wisdom, carefully selected and arranged with a view toward providing patrons with access to the best that has been thought and known. "The collection and absorption of data and information…may have a utilitarian purpose (usually brief)" they declare, "but it has no enduring meaning unless the information so acquired is fitted into an intelligible structure of knowledge…Data and information, therefore, are building blocks for organized knowledge or they are nothing." (Crawford and Gorman, 5-6) I think perhaps they understate the case. Information without context, information that is not logically situated in a coherent way within the structures of meaning that constitute a culture, is not merely empty. As will be discussed later in this essay, in a democracy, the free-floating non-sequiturs that constitute the "data smog" which most of us negotiate on an hourly basis pose an actual threat to the rational exchange of ideas.

The Enduring Values

Library as Place

Librarianship, at its very core, is about context and continuity. "Librarians who accede," Crawford and Gorman write, "to being called information professionals…have lost control of their destinies. It goes right to the root of the identity of a profession and a

centuries-old cultural construct- the library- of great tradition, honor and usefulness."
(Crawford and Gorman, 182).

Our Enduring Values is a manifesto of sorts in which Gorman asserts the continued validity of the "golden thread" of the Library Faith. It is an impassioned plea to librarians, for untold generations the caretakers of the recorded knowledge of civilization, to step up and become caretakers of their own history and traditions.   The first traditional value for which he argues is respect for the library as place. Gorman believes strongly not only in the vital necessity for the library as a social construct, but in the continued need, as well, for the library as physical edifice. The presence, he points out, of religious organizations and commercial enterprises on television and the Web has " not led to calls to replace religious buildings with "virtual houses of worship…[nor has] shopping by catalogue, on television and on the Net…led to calls for 'virtual shopping malls.'" (Gorman 2000, 46)

Not only does the library constitute, by virtue of its contents, a valuable shared mental space, an intellectual common. Gorman asserts, using the language of sociologist Ray Oldenburg, that the public library should materially be "the great, good place" of a city. In *Future Libraries* Rudolf Anaya is quoted on the civic value of the public library as an environment at once secular and sacred. "A library should be the heart of a city. With its storehouse of knowledge, it liberates, informs, teaches and enthralls. A library should be the cultural center of any city. Amidst the bustle of work and commerce, the great libraries of the world have provided a sanctuary where scholars and common man alike come to enlarge and clarify knowledge, to read and reflect in quiet solitude." (Crawford and Gorman, 178) Attention to the architecture of public libraries in the United Stated

would reveal that this notion of municipal sanctuary has long informed, whether consciously or not, the role they have performed in the pageant of American public life. The vocabulary of public library design has borrowed heavily from the temple, the cathedral, and the cloister, the better to convey the purity, monumentality, and timeless, reasoned beneficence of democracy. "Public libraries," Gorman says, "had solidity, magnificence, and sacred appearance that made it clear that here was something important, something to be reckoned with, something of permanence and permanent value." (Gorman 2000, 52)   Only the traditional courthouse carries a heavier freight of meaning as a municipal enshrinement of the civic religion.

Gorman has no patience for the virtual library's breathless enthusiasts. The library without walls bandied about in the popular press and, rather disgracefully in Gorman's estimation, in the professional literature is, he maintains, anything but the egalitarian vision of equal and effortless access for all that it purports to be. It is, he says, "a cruel hoax," a self-indulgent fantasy of the pampered middle class. "Many people," he points out, "live and work in circumstances that do not offer them a quiet place to study and think," let alone the wherewithal to purchase a computer. A silent place for reflectivity, like the technological means for intellectual connectivity, is a precious resource essential to the mental life of all citizens participating in a democracy to their fullest potential, but it, too, is a resource which the blithe proponents of the virtual library take for granted. "It seems to me," Gorman writes, that we need more walls, not fewer – more library buildings with more to offer and not phantom libraries catering to alienated and isolated individuals bereft of human warmth and human context." (Gorman 200, 47)

Stewardship

It is frequently suggested that the romance of historical librarianship as a tale of the embattled saviors of an imperiled legacy (as viewed by librarians of course – I rather doubt that most people give much thought to librarians at all, historically or otherwise), whether one likes to imagine scribes at Alexandria snatching a precious handful of scrolls from the flames of Caesar's legions, or monks diligently scratching away through the Dark Ages in some rocky Lindisfarne fastness in order to shelter a feeble flame of civilization from the gusts of ignorance and violent oblivion, is, in a modern context, comically inapplicable. The precious texts have themselves become the threatening forces of disorder and librarians, like sorcerer's apprentices, struggle desperately, often hopelessly, to gain some control of their charges. Civilization, or at least sanity, in this scenario, seems imperiled by an apparent superfluity of cultural heritage.

But Gorman argues that our duty to help Americans to navigate the deluge of texts, hypertexts, data streams, and factoids that constitutes life and citizenship in the information age makes stewardship more important than ever as an enduring value of librarianship. Librarians, by virtue of education, vocation, and commitment are specially qualified, obligated even, to separate the gold from the dross and store it up to benefit their own generation and those to follow. The capabilities of digital technology for reproduction and dissemination of information, and the consequent mutability of that information (information which sometimes encodes, as in the case of the PDA holding the "all the great works of literature," traditions of knowledge and wisdom) due to human error, data corruption, and inherent technological imperfection, make it essential, he argues, for librarians to hold the line as guardians of "the complete cultural and historical

legacy of the records of humankind" in paper form. "If a substantial amount of the worlds recorded knowledge and information," he writes, were to be available in digital form, and only in digital form, we would be facing a crisis in the preservation of the human record that would dwarf anything that we have seen since the dawn of the age of printing." (Gorman 2000, 59)

Gorman refers to historian Elizabeth Eisenstein's work on incunable printing, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change,* to illustrate the long-term dangers to cultural integrity inherent in digital dissemination and preservation. According to Eisenstein, reproduction of texts by movable type differed from manuscript reproduction, with respect to cultural integrity, in that it promoted standardization, dissemination, and fixity. Gorman asserts that electronic reproduction and distribution is subject to the same proliferation of idiosyncratic versions which characterized the manuscript age. "Manuscripts of the same 'work' differ greatly from one another," he writes, to the same degree that various versions of electronic texts differ from other versions – for the same reason (each copyist introduced change and error) and with the same deleterious effect." (Gorman 2000, 60)

In addition to the inherent bias toward uniformity of typographic technology, Gorman ascribes great cultural virtue to "the bond of trust between the author, publisher, and reader." (Gorman, 61) While publication over the Internet has, undeniably, democratized the distribution of information and opinion in that it has put the mechanism of publication within the reach and the control of (some) authors themselves, Gorman argues that the effect has been deleterious to the seriousness and reliability of the cultural discourse essential to democracy itself. Books produced according to the conventions of the

traditional publishing apparatus (as represented by what he calls 'reputable' publishers) are , he says, what they say they are. Facts have, within the limits of ability, been verified. Opinions are labeled as such. Citations point the way for the interested reader to the verification of those facts and opinions in other sources. Most importantly, "each manifestation of a clearly labeled edition of a text is identical to all other manifestations of that edition." (Gorman, 61) Readers of a text in different times and places can be sure that they are all, quite literally, on the same page. And books printed on paper, even when stored under the very worst conditions, are stable platforms for the transmission of information. Centuries from now the most brittle of books, while frangible, will be decipherable. The same cannot be said for digital media only decades old today - computer tapes for example. "It is beyond question that the best, indeed the only proven way to preserve recorded knowledge and information," Gorman writes, "is to print it on acid-free paper, make many copies, bind those copies well, and distribute them to libraries throughout the world." (Gorman 2000, 61)

Of course it is not part of the primary mission of the vast majority of public libraries to serve as cultural repositories, a function much better performed by research institutions. As he and Crawford write, "We recognize that most institutions cannot maintain wholly comprehensive collections – and have never been able to for that matter –but we feel the line should be drawn before the common pool of historical and current material is abandoned altogether." (Crawford and Gorman, 110) Part of what stewardship means in a public library context is the stewardship of cultural values through selection. While he believes it is entirely appropriate for the library to circulate 'light' materials for the purpose of entertainment, Gorman maintains that the real mission of the public library is

to fashion the best citizens by means of the best the society has to offer.   In essence, this is endorsement of the idea, to use a politically loaded phrase, of cultural literacy. "If, as many have said," he writes, "an informed and educated citizenry is essential to democracy, it is obvious that the collective memory provided by libraries is as essential to democracy as classroom instruction." (Gorman 2000, 161)

This notion of exclusive rather than promiscuously inclusive stewardship is orthodox Library Faith. Like Dilevko and Magowan, Gorman is disturbed by the erosion, if not the complete erasure, of standards of aesthetic and intellectual excellence which has, ostensibly in the name of catholicity and tolerance and "giving 'em what they want," become *de rigueur* in library literature and practice and in public discourse as a whole. "Every branch library," he and Crawford write, "should have the works of William Shakespeare, a reasonable collection of other classic literature, some classic movies on video, and some sound recordings of, for example, Beethoven, even though those materials will not circulate as often as genre novels, how-to books, and popular videos and CDs. Cultural artifacts…need to be available…so that users can see how our culture has evolved." (Crawford and Gorman, 121) Children's librarians are the objects of his particular admiration for, among other reasons, being the only librarians in the current environment with a "willingness to distinguish between 'good' books and those that are inferior and to make selection choices based on their principles and values." (Gorman 2000, 64) It is, he asserts, the reluctance to live up to those values of cultural stewardship and take responsibility for their educational mission that has led public librarians to question the validity of their own roles and to fear for their continued existence. The

current crisis is less a crisis of identity than a crisis of faith. "We stand for excellence," he writes, "or we stand for nothing." (Gorman 2000, 26)

Service

Gorman begins his attention to the subject of service by selecting those three of the twenty definitions of 'service' available in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* that best articulate his sense of what the word means in relation to librarianship: "duty done or required"; "professional or other useful ministrations"; and "effort inspired by philanthropic motives or dedicated to human welfare or betterment." (Gorman 2000, 74) These three choices are telling in that they are at odds with the "customer service" model which Haycock endorses. Business school nostrums like "service improves with a customer orientation" (Horrocks, 67) might sound good at the leadership seminar, but as someone who worked in the hospitality industry for years, I can attest that while people on the receiving end of "customer" service may feel pampered, there is an inevitable rube/sharpie dynamic to the transaction. In the white-tablecloth restaurants where I cooked, the customers were called guests, but hosts, in the host/parasite sense, would have more accurately reflected the nature of their relationship with the service providers. They were the dogs and we were the ticks. I worked at a restaurant where the service meeting concluded nightly with the phrase "Let's go take their money." Every helpful smile in the service *industry* masks an attitude of contempt. It's only natural – individuals who make their livings bowing and scraping to make other people feel important have somehow to maintain some semblance of a sense of their own dignity. Discreetly nursed scorn for customers salves a lot of bruised ego and disappointed ambition in the private sector.

Librarianship, on the other hand, as Gorman makes clear with his choice of definitions, ought to be a public service and a professional activity, undertaken out of a sense of civic duty and a desire to give aid where it is needed. "Our desire," he says, "is to serve individuals and, in doing so, "to serve society as a whole." (Gorman 2000, 74) The mega bookstore model of librarianship is not only a dereliction of the public duty implicit in the Library Faith, it is a curious choice of operational metaphor for a vocation so subject to status anxiety. Librarians are desperate to be taken seriously as professionals and yet current models of best practice frequently undermine the very services which make librarianship a professional activity. In particular Gorman addresses the idea of 'disintermediation,' which, in *Future Libraries*, he and Crawford term a "suicidal trend."

While they don't deny the value of the fashionable area of librarianship that they point out is "erroneously called bibliographic instruction," they decry user education that has as its goal disintermediation (in a footnote they make the claim that the uglier the neologism, as a rule of thumb, "the more undesirable the notion it describes"), "the idea that every user in every library should be handling all research work and coping with all research resources." (Crawford and Gorman, 107) Library literature which advocates disintermediation, they claim, while it pretends to empower the user, is really about the same sort of 'deskilling' of the profession which Dilevko and Magowan maintain has been a not-so-hidden agenda of American public library management since the 1960s. "It would be astonishing," Crawford and Gorman write, "to hear of plumbers or electricians giving speeches in favor of disintermediation – that is, the desirability of training everybody to do his or her own plumbing or electrical work." (Crawford and Gorman, 108) Disintermediation is folly, they argue, in two ways. It devalues librarianship -

denying, in effect, that it is a professional activity - and it presumes an unrealistic willingness on the part of most users to master a highly specialized set of skills and resources. Turning patrons loose to navigate the resources of the library or, worse yet, the uncharted waters of the Internet without the professional guidance librarians are trained to provide is an abnegation of public duty and a profoundly self-destructive mode of practice. If Americans come to believe that libraries and librarians are obsolete, Crawford and Gorman assert, it will be "because librarians themselves have devalued their role enough for those outside to believe that a computer can do as well. Lemmings have exhibited superior survival instincts." (Crawford and Gorman, 109)

The service Gorman advocates for public librarians is, according to his choice of definitions, marked not only by professionalism, but by a dedication to human welfare or betterment. He refers to this essential aspect of librarianship as "comforting the afflicted." The public library was established in the United States first and foremost as a resource of knowledge and information for those who have no other.   It fulfills its role most fully when it extends the universe of knowledge to those without the formal education or the technological wherewithal that many Americans enjoy, those for whom the free library is, so to speak, the last door on the block. "Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the altruistic service ethic that pervades librarianship," Gorman writes, "is our historic mission to help everybody, but especially the poor, societally disadvantaged, and powerless." (Gorman 2000, 81)

Equity of Access, Intellectual Freedom, and Privacy

The public library's obligation to safeguard the right of the comparatively powerless to the same fund of knowledge available to other citizens is at the heart of Gorman's antipathy to the notion of the "library without walls." "The whole virtual library idea," he argues, "is essentially an elitist construct that writes off sections of society as doomed to be 'information poor.'" (Gorman 2000, 134) Not only do public libraries provide, in many cases, the only available access to networked computers for those without the financial means to purchase their own, as well as guidance and instruction in their use, they also serve as a lifeline for the disenfranchised to recorded knowledge and information in all formats and in relation to any issue or difficulty. He quotes the philosopher Abraham Kaplan, who wrote of librarianship that "we ought to be prepared under suitable circumstances to be helpful with regard to any and every area of concern." (Gorman 2000, 17)

Gorman bemoans the fact that, while politicians and philanthropists are eager to throw funds, or at least rhetoric, at fostering computer literacy among the educationally disadvantaged, unless those skills are founded on basic literacy and cultural literacy competencies, talk of "crossing the digital divide" will be meaningless. The digital divide, as he points out in *The Enduring Library*, is "a symptom of far wider social problems." (Gorman 2003, 77) Students in impoverished rural and inner-city schools, Gorman writes, "with no or poor library service absolutely will not have equity of access to the same universe of knowledge even if their schoolroom is connected to the Internet. Real library services and collections are as necessary to all children as good teachers." (Gorman 2000, 133) The Internet, which seems to most Americans to promise a

flattening of the hierarchies which control the flow of knowledge and information is, to those without the literacy skills both digital and typographic which the public library is eminently suited by virtue of resources and mission to provide, as cruel a hoax in terms of equity of access as the virtual library. As Gorman says, "there is an inherent contradiction in society's approach to the use of technology – the disconnect between the idea of technology making more information accessible to more people and the inability of many (because of who they are and their economic status) to take advantage of that accessibility." (Gorman 2000, 134)

The issue of intellectual freedom is closely related, from a philosophical point of view, to equity of access. Both of these enduring values of librarianship draw on the metaphor of the common, the free space devoted to public intercourse and "accessible to everybody without fear or favor." The librarian's civic duty with respect to each of these values might be said to be small-r republican rather than small-d democratic in that it involves protecting the rights and interests of the few from being trampled by the will of the many. "In short," Gorman writes, "we are for the common good but do not take a majoritarian or even utilitarian point of view. The common good is the good of each individual funded collectively, not the good of those who think alike. Ultimately the belief that the common good is advanced by the freedom of the individual restricted only by adherence to the golden rule is at the heart of library ethics." (Gorman 2003, 143)

Gorman is the first to admit that the kinds of rigorous selection decisions he advocates elsewhere might be, indeed have been, decried by the advocates of "Give 'Em What They Want" as a form of censorship. He admits as well that fighting the good fight can, and most often does, involve nuanced ethical choice. Manifestos such as the statements on

intellectual freedom by the American Library Association and the Canadian Library Association are correct to take a hard line on censorship. "Librarians," he says, "believe in intellectual freedom because it is as natural to us, and necessary to us, as the air that we breathe." (Gorman 2000, 90) But the world in which most librarians function is "infinitely more complex and one to be negotiated in light of both principle and practicalities." (Gorman 2000, 91) A librarian upon whom a small community depends for access to knowledge, when pressed to make compromises concerning intellectual freedom by powerful forces in that community, forces which might control the future of her service to the library, "may well feel inclined to make small accommodations…in order to preserve the greater good of the library and its users." (Gorman 2000, 92) Making a point might not be worth sacrificing a career of service. The Faith might not best be served by martyrdom.

Privacy, though, in Gorman's view, is another matter, one upon which there can be no compromise. "Librarians," he writes, "should never agree to the loss of privacy and should work hard to preserve the privacy of the individual by enunciating principles, creating policies, and putting them into action." (Gorman 2000, 154) The protection of patron privacy is not only an ethical obligation for an occupation that makes a claim to professional status and the trust that such status implies, it is, for those who find marketing metaphors less distasteful than I do, a value that libraries can add to the information/knowledge transaction. So far as I can tell, in the private sector there is no free lunch. Most of the information available for free on the Internet comes at the cost of other information – about the seeker. Gorman quotes the chairman of Sun Microsystems,

whose admission, "You already have zero privacy – get over it," he cites as "a chilling indication of the attitudes of these modern robber barons." (Gorman 2000, 153)

The information and knowledge gained from the library isn't exactly free either, and I'm not referring to the taxes which support it. As taxpayers we aren't paying for a convenient service, we're paying for a public benefit. The childless citizen pays for public schools because public education makes his polity a better place to live. At the most calculating level, he might consider it money well spent because his fellow citizens, with the options an education makes possible, are, perhaps, a little less likely to rob his home. I'm referring instead to the presumption that citizens who use the resources of the public library will, having received a benefit from the public, become a benefit to that same public. For those enchanted with "the market" and the invisible hand and fair exchange, there is still a sort of zero-sum in operation, but there is no hidden agenda and the exchange is one based on trust and, dare I say it?, love.

Rationalism

"Libraries," Gorman writes, "are the children of the Enlightenment and of rationalism. They stand, above all, for the notion that human beings are improved by the acquisition of knowledge and information and that no bar should be placed in their way." (Gorman 2000, 103) Gorman addresses this enduring value by looking, one might say, both in and out. Rationalism is embodied in the library by the bibliographic control it imposes on the knowledge it contains. Like trust, order is an added value the library can provide to a user that the Internet cannot. "Libraries," Crawford and Gorman write, "generally deal more in information that someone has organized with some thought than in late-breaking news and raw data. That has always been their primary role and should continue to be."

(Crawford and Gorman, 125) That librarians are simultaneously committed to order and freedom is, Gorman believes, the central paradox of the profession and the unique source of their irreplaceable contribution to a democratic society. "We use order," he says, "to set minds free, to allow each human being to expand his or her mind, to learn and to understand…An individual deprived of the whole range of library service is as mentally enslaved as an individual deprived of political or economic freedom is physically enslaved."

Rationalism, given material form within the library by the hierarchical structures which are established for the knowledge therein contained, is embodied by the public library in the polity which supports it. "There is no better antidote to the forces of unreason than a well-stocked, well-organized library – the natural home of someone seeking objective information and well-founded knowledge and with the willingness to discriminate between them and the ill-founded and the unreasonable." Libraries are bulwarks against ignorance and unreason with both real and symbolic value for the communities they serve. Just as the Library of Congress, the British Museum or any national library stands for permanence, authenticity and cultural continuity and contributes an air of intellectual authority to the governments it serves and represents, so does a public library demonstrate the commitment of its community to reason, education, and civilized discourse.

Literacy and Learning

Michael Gorman, like the authors of *Reading at Risk,* is deeply concerned about the decline of reading among Americans. He cites the claim of educator Alan Purves that

"the ratio of readers to non-readers is probably at the lowest ever since the Massachusetts Bay Colony." (Gorman 2000, 121) Gorman, an instructor at a state university library school in California, attributes the poor English language skills he encounters with frustrating regularity directly to the declines in funding experienced by public libraries and school media centers as a result of the Proposition 13 property tax cut legislation enacted in the state in 1978. "Had all those public library branches (and, in a few cases, whole systems) not been closed and had California's public schools not degraded or lost their fine school libraries, we would not be lamenting the low reading and writing skills of university graduates in that state today. Cause and effect operates in the non-profit areas of society as much as in the profit-based sector." (Gorman 2003, 141)

Public libraries have long provided assistance to patrons who wish to improve basic literacy skills, and many libraries, such as, perhaps most notably, the Queens Public Library System in New York City, have shown an outstanding commitment to adult learners with underdeveloped reading and writing skills and to new Americans struggling to master the language and the complexities of the culture. Gorman wholeheartedly endorses the "institutionalization" of adult literacy programs in public libraries, which are particularly suited to providing this sort of education because librarians are professionally committed to the ameliorative power of reading and because the library is a place "adult illiterates could enter with neither shame nor embarrassment." By "institutionalization" he means that "the public library must become not just a convenient home for the adult literacy program but embrace that program as a natural part of what it does." (Gorman 2000, 126)

But, Gorman maintains, instruction in the skills of functional literacy is not enough. He facetiously notes as "interesting" a statement made on their website by the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services which advocates "helping children and adults develop skills they need to fully participate in an information society – whether it's learning to read or exploring the Internet." The real problem in American society, at least in relation to "full participation" in a democracy and in a largely information-based economy, is less one of functional illiteracy than what Gorman and others have termed "aliteracy," "those who can do such things [read a book or a lengthy article] but choose not to. In their lives they read what they must but no more and write, if at all, using debased forms such as "text messaging." (Gorman 2003, 41) Real literacy, he maintains, is not limited to the ability, however important, to read instructions or fill out a job application. It isn't even, in his view, a benchmark, a point of educational stasis that can be reached and forgotten about. "What I mean," he says, "by 'literacy' (or 'full literacy') is the lifelong process of learning to read and write ever more deeply and effectively after one has mastered the mechanics of literacy." Illiteracy is a lingering problem in the United States, a legacy of historical inequities in American which librarians have a duty to address. But aliteracy is the real creeping contagion they must combat, a contagion which, as will be made clear in the next chapter, threatens the process of rational democratic discourse and shows every indication of burgeoning into an epidemic. "I suppose it is better to be aliterate than illiterate," Gorman writes, "but operationally it seems like a distinction without a difference." (Gorman 2003, 117)

Democracy

Ultimately, democracy is the enduring value of librarianship from which all the other values spring. The Library Faith is really faith in democracy. As Gorman puts it, "Libraries have grown and flourished in the soil of democracy, and our fate is inextricably bound with the fate of democracy…Libraries serve democracy, not least when they are living examples of democracy in action." (Gorman 2000 159-160) They need, Gorman believes, to reassert the principle of the intellectual and literary common on which they were founded and again become places where active citizens can meet both intellectually and physically and participate in civic decision making. " The library can not only provide space for citizens to gather," he says, "but also the recorded knowledge and information necessary to fuel the discussion." (Gorman 2000, 164)

In addition to directly providing information on issues of public import and, resources permitting, serving as a place for citizens to meet and share thoughts on those issues, libraries serve and embody democracy by performing a key role in an educational process that produces well-rounded, reasoning, empathetic, deliberative citizens by fostering "reading and the love of self-improvement and pleasure that reading can bring." (Gorman 200, 124)   The democratic process is meaningless without the kind of real literacy that Gorman advocates. Intelligent, informed scrutiny of and control over power elites by enfranchised citizens is only possible when those citizens have the access to knowledge, critical thinking skills, and understanding of cause and effect which only "the sustained reading of complex texts" can supply. "It is a sad irony," he writes, "that as American democracy has reached its theoretical ideal – the enfranchisement of all adults,

irrespective of gender and race – it is in danger because of an increasingly ill-informed, easily manipulated, and apathetic electorate." (Gorman 2000, 160)

The saint-seeming deceivers are still among us, Gorman warns, and digital and broadcast mass-communication technology have combined with the marketing expertise and psychological sophistication of post-industrial capitalism to endow them with unprecedented reach and persuasiveness. The methods and perhaps the motives of the players in American public life have become intricately intertwined with those of private enterprise. Money and power interests have always ruled politics, of course, but the sheer volume of messages to which Americans are subjected, and the subtlety with which they are crafted, has made it increasingly difficult as we live our mediated lives to distinguish the news from the entertainment and the advertisements from the programming, let alone to catch a glimpse of the man behind the curtain spinning the dials. Public discourse, Gorman cautions, has become interchangeable with commercial advertising. "Campaigns for election and about public policy issues built on images and spin," he writes, "are explicitly and intentionally deceptive. They seek to present things and people as they are not and substitute emotion for reason and feelings for thought…Citizens who lack understanding of political issues or who cannot relate those issues to a wider social understanding are as easy prey to political advertising as they are to commercial advertising." (Gorman 2000, 162)

The Decay of Democratic Discourse

The Age of Show Business

Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is an examination of the ways in

which communications media have caused a degradation of public discourse in America

and, more alarmingly, an apparent diminution of our capacities to process complex texts

and to situate events, ideas and information within a meaningful intellectual context.

Postman dates the beginning of this process of decay to the introduction of the telegraph

in 1847 and his book, written in 1985, doesn't even imagine the networked world we

inhabit in 2008. Many of his arguments, however, which critique a nation peopled by

citizens cognitively crippled by the side effects of communications media and, in

particular, television, apply with equal force to the 'wired' mediascape. Indeed,

Postman's son, who wrote the introduction to the twentieth anniversary reissue, quotes a

former student of Postman's, a teacher himself, who says "When the book first came out,

it was ahead of its time, and some people didn't understand its reach. It's a twenty-first

century book published in the twentieth century. (Postman, xv)

Postman, a student and devotee of Marshall McLuhan, grounds his case in an idea

McLuhan popularized in the groundbreaking *Understanding Media,* to wit that

technologies transform not only the ways we conduct our lives but also the ways we

conceptually structure the reality we inhabit. This is the import of the oft-misquoted

dictum "the medium is the message." In effect the technologies, and this is especially true

of communications technologies, operate as subconscious tropes "like metaphors,

working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like."(Postman, 10) Postman asserts that the "argument" has shifted from that implicit in the media metaphor of typography – that words have "semantic, propositional content"; that events happen, located in time and space, like words in a sentence or pieces of type in a form, ineluctably, one after another, effect following upon cause; that the world, and the knowledge which attempts to describe it, has a complex, nuanced, hierarchical structure - to that implicit in media metaphor of electronic communications media- that the hierarchies of meaning have been flattened, with every meme of equal import; that context, consequence and history have become irrelevant to the point where they cease to make sense as concepts; and that "no matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure."
(Postman, 87)

As a brief illustration of the social problem that I think is being described, let me confess here that as I was writing this paper today, or, more accurately, as I was procrastinating, I emailed a news story about some third graders in Georgia who plotted to kill their teacher with a steak knife to several friends because the sinister absurdity of it amused me. "True crime" has long been a source of entertainment in the culture, but my intent wasn't to evoke a frisson of horror in my friends. It was, rather, to provoke a chuckle and perhaps a cynical comment in response. "I hope to persuade you," Postman says, "that the decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based

epistemology have had grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by

the minute."(Postman, 24) *Mea culpa*. Silly and chillingly callous. Living in a time

before Fark (a blog for jaded hipsters where I got the steak knife story) and YouTube (It's

creepy to think that, a little more than a year ago, *I* was living before YouTube. What, I

wonder, was that like? I can hardly remember.) I don't think Postman had an inkling of

how much more utterly without context, consequence, or meaning our consciousness

could become.

Postman puts this modern contextlessness in context by painting a vivid picture of the

richly literate quality of American culture before the advent of mass communications.

"Telegraphy," he asserts, made public discourse essentially incoherent. It brought into

being a world of broken time and broken attention…The principal strength of the

telegraph was its capacity to move information, not collect it , explain it, or analyze it."

(Postman, 69) In what he calls "typographic America" rates of literacy were

unprecedented and a keen appetite for the printed word cut across all class lines. De

Tocqueville wrote in 1835 that "the post brought knowledge alike to the door of the

cottage and the gate of the palace." (Postman, 38) Dickens, visiting the country in 1842,

was literally mobbed by fans. "His reception," Postman writes, "equaled the adulation we

offer today to television stars, quarterbacks, and Michael Jackson." (Postman, 39)

As a result of all this reading, Americans of all classes and across a gamut of occupations

possessed cognitive abilities, he asserts, beyond the capacities of most university

graduates and even professionals today. He calls this widespread mental sophistication

the "typographic mind." In contrast to McLuhan and other theorists such as Jack Goody,

Walter Ong and Julian Jaynes, Postman doesn't maintain, at least for the purposes of the

work under discussion, that the use of certain technologies results in physical effects on neurological structure. Instead, he asserts that "a major new medium changes the structure of discourse…by demanding a certain kind of content – in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling." (Postman, 27) And all forms of discourse, in his estimation, are by no means created equal. "I believe the epistemology created by television," he says, "is not only inferior to a print-based epistemology but is dangerous and absurdist." (Postman, 27)

Postman's most telling illustration of the cognitive difference between nineteenth century Americans and Americans today is his description of the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in their 1858 U.S. Senate race. They ranged in length from three hours at Ottowa, Illinois, to more than seven hours at Peoria. The speakers expressed themselves in long, complex sentences, employed sophisticated rhetorical tropes and referred casually and extensively to issues and events the mention of which assumed a broad knowledge of history and current events on the part of the audience. All of this took place before crowds of as many as 15,000 people who hailed from the entire nineteenth-century American economic and social spectrum. While the debates, which were rare and welcome occasions for public holiday, certainly had what Postman calls "a carnival atmosphere," the audiences, made up overwhelmingly of people who could hardly be called cognoscenti, nevertheless followed the arguments closely for hours, voicing frequent encouragement to or disagreement with the speakers. "Applause was frequent," Postman reports, "usually reserved for a humorous or elegant phrase or cogent point." (Postman, 45)

Similar turnouts now for an event that requires extended attention to complex discourse
would, in the age of the "sound bite" and the YouTube town-hall debate, be
unimaginable. And the sort of content-driven, clause-laden, and comparatively bookish
style employed by even a speaker as noted in his day for plain speech as Lincoln would
today be political suicide. "It is hard to imagine the present occupant of the White House
being capable of constructing such clauses in similar circumstances," Postman sneers. Of
course, it is impossible for him to imagine that a subsequent occupant would make the
object of his contempt look like Cicero in comparison. "And if he were," Postman
continues, "he would surely do so at the risk of burdening the comprehension or
concentration of his audience." (Postman, 46)

Americans of the nineteenth century, Postman makes abundantly clear, were trained by
the habit of regular reading in the subtleties of reasoned, adult discourse. They expected
verbal communication to convey meaning. "Whenever language is the principal medium
of communication – especially language controlled by the rigors of print – an idea, a fact
, a claim is the inevitable result…As a consequence a language centered discourse such
as was characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century America tends to be both
content-laden and serious." (Postman, 50) Postman dubs this time the 'Age of
Exposition,' which has been followed, in a decline even more drastic than that of the
statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, by what he calls the 'Age of Show Business.' In the
Age of Exposition, he writes, "To attend school meant to learn to read, for without that
capacity, one could not participate in the culture's conversations." (Postman, 62) In the
Age of Show Business, literacy has become a mechanical skill. The ability to
comprehend, let alone contribute to, sophisticated discourse is no longer within the

purview of most Americans. Few today, even among the ostensibly educated, are able or willing to engage in what Postman, borrowing language from Walter Ong, calls the 'analytic management of knowledge.' "The modern idea of testing a reader's 'comprehension,' as distinct from something else a reader may be doing, " he notes, "would have seemed an absurdity in 1790 or 1830 or 1860. What else was reading but comprehending?" (Postman, 61)

Language and thought in the Age of Show business, Postman asserts, have been divorced from consequence and continuity. He describes how his students, when it is brought to their attention that their writing is rife with incoherence, non-sequitur and self-contradiction, are at a loss to understand the central premises of the criticism. Weaned on the discontinuity of television discourse, they are unable to grasp the one-thing-follows-another assumptions that a typographic mind brings to expository prose in particular and to the exchange of ideas in general. "The difference between us is that I assume 'there' and 'here,' 'now' and 'then,' one paragraph and the next to be continuous, to be part of the same coherent world of thought." (Postman, 110) The world of thought they inhabit he dubs the "now…this" world, in reference to the abrupt transitions typical of the television newscast, in which "what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see." (Postman, 99) As a result of living in a "now…this" world, where the principle of cause and effect has eroded as an intellectual construct, where all ethical judgments are deemed relative, and where every event, idea, or value is equally transitory and insignificant, his students and their generation, Postman fears, are culturally and morally adrift. Cut off from history and any kind of reliable communal presuppositions about the nature of

reality, they are resourceless to distinguish true from false, right from wrong. "In a world of discontinuities," he writes, "contradiction is useless as a test of truth or merit, because contradiction does not exist." (Postman 110)

When the electorate is thus disoriented, democracy is indeed vulnerable to the saint-seeming deceivers. In a featureless ethical and rational landscape such as Postman describes, with no landmarks whereby to make comparisons and establish proportion and perspective, believability replaces authenticity and likeability leadership. As Postman puts it, in the democratic discourse of the Age of Show Business, "The credibility of the teller is the ultimate test of the truth of the proposition. 'Credibility' here does not refer to the past record of the teller for making statements that have survived the rigors of reality testing. …Political leaders need not trouble themselves very much with reality provided that their performances consistently generate a sense of verisimilitude." (Postman, 102) Television has created an intellectual environment in which even true statements take on the character of lies. "Now…this" discourse turns information into what Postman, borrowing a term from the intelligence agencies, terms *disinformation.* "Disinformation," he writes, "does not mean false information. It means misleading information – misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented, or superficial information – information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing." (Postman, 107) Although it is outside the scope of his analysis, I think what he says of television is even more true of the unregulated informational Wild West of the Web. The very passivity of the television information encounter might alert the cannier viewer to be wary that what he consumes has been crafted for his consumption. The channel surfer knows she is part of an audience. Not so the Web surfer. The seeming interactivity of the

Internet lends an illusion of mastery – the world, so to speak, at one's fingertips. But the surfer unequipped with the "analytic management of knowledge," a facility which typographically-minded Americans of earlier generations took as their birthright, is unable to distinguish information from misinformation or disinformation, let alone ignorance from knowledge or wisdom from folly. "I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well-informed." Postman writes. "Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?" (Postman, 108)

The Infotainment Telesector

It was once the task of librarians, Ed D'Angelo asserts in *Barbarians at the Gate of the Public Library: How Postmodern Consumer Capitalism Threatens Democracy, Civil Education and the Public Good*, to help the public make these distinctions. "The first generation of public librarians," he writes, " conceived their role to be 'gatekeepers' of the culture and defenders of such public goods as democracy, education and morality." (D'Angelo, 7) D'Angelo's book, like Postman's, posits the emergence of a culture in which the reasoned exchange of ideas upon which a meaningful democracy depends is untenable. While Postman's argument attributes this degraded culture to the largely unintended effects of telecommunications media, D'Angelo, a former professor of philosophy at Renssalaer Polytechnic who left academia in 1992 to become a public librarian in Brooklyn, lays the blame on the willful manipulations of the 'powers that be' in an untrammeled capitalist market. "Postmodern consumer capitalism," he claims in his introduction, "threatens the public sphere of rational discourse and…the healthy functioning of this sphere is essential to democracy. Postmodern consumer capitalism

transforms discourse into a private consumer product and as such reduces knowledge to mere information or entertainment." (D'Angelo, 1)

In the past thirty years, D'Angelo maintains, "the market" has been apotheosized in American political and social thought and Americans have come to see themselves as consumers first and citizens second, if at all. Information, and, in particular, information as "entertainment," is commoditized and trivialized in the postmodern consumer economy. Reflection upon the public good and the interchange of ideas about what that good might constitute have been replaced by arguments based on a civic model that emphasizes individual consumer satisfaction. Metaphors of commerce have come to dominate political discourse and government service, and the public library, which traditionally saw itself as an institution of public education and played an important social role by informing rational democratic deliberation, has increasingly staked its continued existence on brand placement.

D'Angelo begins his analysis with a discussion of Steve Coffman's 1998 proposal in *American Libraries*, which at the time excited considerable controversy, that, in order to capture a share in a competitive information economy, public libraries should model their operations on those of corporate chain bookstores. "Several years later," D'Angelo reports, "Coffman's article looks more like a forecast or description of trends affecting public libraries than a radical proposal for change." (D'Angelo, 2) The people's university has degenerated into the Idea Store (the actual name of a library in east London where it was decided, according to a spokesperson D'Angelo quotes, that young people "in our increasingly retail-focused and lifestyle-conscious world…[are] far more likely to borrow books…if the ambience reminds them of a superstore." (D'Angelo, 3)

The selection traditionally performed by professional librarians is centralized and automated and all too often "outsourced" to vendors. Circulation figures (understood, metaphorically, by "customer oriented" librarians as sales) drive collection development, and "there is no discrimination between 'good' literature and 'bad' literature; there is no mission to serve the public good; there is no mission to promote democracy or education." (D'Angelo, 2) Even the ALA, longtime stalwart defender of the Library Faith, has, to D'Angelo's disgust, thoughtlessly absorbed the ubiquitous paradigm of commerce. Its *Output Measures for Public Libraries* show, he says, "a bias toward measures of success in the public library which mirror measures of success in the capitalist economy…But if democracy and an enlightened citizenry were the goals of the public library, then we would measure success not merely by how many items we circulate, but by how many readers we have helped to become better citizens. That in turn depends on the quality and diversity of materials we circulate as well as their number, and highlights the need for professional judgment in collection development."
(D'Angelo, 9)

D'Angelo devotes much of his argument to examination of the ways in which what he calls "post-modern consumer capitalism" and, in particular, to use another of his coinages, "the infotainment telesector," have diverged from the classic liberal capitalist model, a model which is nevertheless constantly evoked in public discussion as the rationale for rampant piracy and the laissez-faire policies which permit it. In the classic model, what Adam Smith called the "invisible hand" of the market directed transactions toward an outcome that, ultimately, was the most just and equitable possible, given the circumstances, for all concerned. Supply and demand inevitably balanced out. This was

because consumers brought their already formed desires to the market. It was also because the market Smith envisioned was made up of many small entrepreneurs and consequently yielded slim profits. "Large and sustainable profits," D'Angelo writes, "are possible only when competitors are restricted from entering the market. In other words profits are possible only when the market is not free or liberal." (D'Angelo, 44) In the postmodern capitalist economy the small fry have been gobbled up and the market brings desires to the consumer. D'Angelo quotes political scientist Benjamin Barber, who writes, "The ancient capitalist economy in which products are manufactured and sold for profit to meet the demands of consumers who make their unmediated needs known through the market is gradually yielding to a postmodern capitalist economy in which needs are manufactured to meet the supply of producers who make their unmediated products marketable through promotion, spin, packaging and advertising." (D'Angelo, 77)

Consumer demand is even more malleable, and the deleterious and unpredictable effects on the equilibrium predicted in the classic model are even greater, D'Angelo maintains, "when the product being consumed is information, because information has the power to change consumers' beliefs and desires." Furthermore, he continues, because, like all products in a capitalist economy, information is marketed to generate profit and not to benefit the consumer, the economy, or the society, "consumers' beliefs and desires will be transformed not for the purpose of improving them but for the purpose of maximizing profits." (D'Angelo, 49) In the early nineteenth century, when capitalism was establishing itself in this country, naked greed was restrained not just by the invisible hand, but by a shared cultural system of ethical norms. What makes postmodern

capitalism postmodern, according to D'Angelo, is the evaporation of this common understanding. "In the absence of a moral consensus," he writes, "ethical liberalism gave way in the twentieth century to 'economic liberalism,' to a form of liberalism no longer tempered by moral restraints or the imperative to serve the public good, but in which the market becomes its own measure of good." (D'Angelo, 39) Public good and the legitimate needs of the consumer are sacrificed on the altar of a market Smith would no longer recognize.

In a postmodern capitalist information economy dominated by a handful of media behemoths, "they" no longer know what they want. They want what the infotainment telesector tells them to want. This is the worm at the heart of the "Give 'Em What They Want" apple. At least, that is, according to D'Angelo's analysis. I think perhaps he overstates the case a little. I'm not sure that I think all possibility of agency is removed in our mediated environment. I do think, though, that on the whole he is correct. I can say from my own experience that I have repeatedly become interested in a band or a book or, heaven forefend, a fashion trend (body modification, say), which I'm not quite self-absorbed enough to think I discovered, but which I nevertheless thought was an esoteric interest I shared with a few discerning others, only to discover I was on the leading edge of a media-fueled popular mania. When, the onset of middle age no longer plausibly deniable and knowing that there's nothing more pathetic than an aging hipster, I decided to embrace my inner dork (it's not, I hasten to add, as though I had *ever* fooled anyone else), I suddenly found the media sphere inundated by the idea of nerd-chic. Apparently my decision was nothing of the sort. There's no getting away from it. Wherever you turn, there's a marketing niche that has been crafted especially for you.

In *The Enduring Library,* Gorman discusses the proposed applications of this niche marketing as it specifically relates to the consumer's information ingestion. Starry-eyed prophets of the Information Age wax rhapsodic about a future in which people can customize their newsgroups and RSS feeds into a daily news source which is tailored to their interests and (most likely) political inclinations. Such a source, which Gorman dismissively calls *The Daily Me,* is the exact opposite of a newspaper. A large part of the point of reading a newspaper is to share the experience with other readers of the same paper and to encounter the world as it is by at least glancing at stories and maybe even points of view that one might, given the choice, not have chosen. *The Daily Me* is a mirrored cocoon in which we will be able to take shelter from everything that is inconvenient or challenging or vital. Most people have a hard enough time figuring out that the world doesn't revolve around them (I know I have.) without having their solipsism confirmed daily over morning coffee.

Market segmentation, which D'Angelo believes was the ultimate stroke of evil genius by twentieth century capitalism, has, he claims, come to dominate not only our economic life but our political life as well. "By the 1990s," he writes, "an extreme form of consumer capitalism had appeared which almost completely replaced the citizen with the consumer…Consequently the notion of the public good was progressively narrowed, until the nation splintered into various identity groups competing for private goods." (D'Angelo, 65) The Republic, it would appear, is a quaint old idea for quaint old men in powdered wigs. The age of entitlement is over. It's *res privata* now, baby. Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what has it done for you *lately*? "Politicians representing business interests," he continues, "took advantage of the consumerization of

American society by promoting privatization and deregulation while paying homage to multiculturalism…and as the pursuit of private consumer goods became the primary preoccupation of most Americans, there was increasing pressure to either privatize government services or to model them on business practices. Government itself came to be viewed as a customer service." (D'Angelo, 65)

The rhetoric of customer service has become endemic in the public sphere. Americans are encouraged to think of themselves not as participants in a joint enterprise, the goal of which is, if I may quote from a quaint document of the powdered wig days, "to promote the *general* welfare," but instead as smart shoppers who demand short term personal value for their tax dollars. As an example of this kind of thinking, D'Angelo quotes *Wall Street Journal* pundit John Fund, who writes "If government were a consumer product on a store shelf, it would be removed for being defective and sued for false advertising." Americans, Fund goes on, as though this were a good thing and not a betrayal of everything a republic stands for, "want to be treated as customers, not constituents." (D'Angelo, 73) D'Angelo goes on to tell a story that would be the *reductio ad absurdum* of this mindset had it not, in fact, happened. In 2001, reacting to a poor public image aggravated by the 1997 broom handle rape of Abner Louima and the 1999 shooting of Amadou Diallo, New York City Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik declared that police would be "expected to use a customer service model, similar to that used by Wal-Mart Stores, aimed at making precinct houses more businesslike and accessible. To that end, officers will be assigned to greet people as they walk through station house doors." (D'Angelo, 73) This lends a whole new meaning to the phrase "blue light special." (Yeah, I know. Block that mixed super-store.)

Like Dilevko and Magowan, D'Angelo asserts that customer service orientation has caused the public library, in large part, to abandon its historic mission to educate and to become, instead, an agency for entertainment. "Education," he writes, "presupposes professional authority based on knowledge. The purpose of education is to edify students. The purpose of entertainment is to give the customers what they want. It presupposes no distinction between right and wrong because the customer is always right. Entertainment is a species of consumerism." (D'Angelo, 33) The loss of the librarian's professional authority, and the erosion of the library's civic status as a public repository of wisdom and knowledge, as opposed to a clearinghouse for the private consumption of information and entertainment, was made possible by the ascendance in academia and in public discourse of what he calls, borrowing the idea from journalist Thomas Frank, "the school of Cultural Studies." Prior to the 1960s, he asserts, there was general agreement on the idea of a literary and intellectual culture in this country. While that culture was undeniably exclusionary in that it didn't always recognize the voices of the relatively powerless in American society, that it existed was on the whole, in D'Angelo's estimation, a good thing for the country. Publishing, in the time before the infotainment telesector, stood for something other than profits, just as libraries stood for something other than circulation figures. "Publishing," he says, "was…a serious business and was obligated to adhere to the highest standards….As repositories of all that has been printed, or at least of all printed material that was worth preserving, libraries defined the culture." (D'Angelo, 56)

The Cultural Studies school, ostensibly in the name of inclusiveness and disavowal of patriarchy and racism and class prejudice, rejected the notion of high culture vs. pop

culture. In so doing they applied a principle which Frank calls "market populism – the belief that in spending our dollars we are voting for products in a plebiscite that is more democratic than government ever could be." (D'Angelo, 47) But pop culture, D'Angelo points out, is not folk culture. It is a product. He paraphrases Frank, who argues that "popular culture is a business, not a democratic forum. Its purpose is to generate profits, not to satisfy the democratic will of the people." (D'Angelo, 54) Although the intent may be an egalitarian suspension of value judgments, the practical effect of a "Give 'Em What They Want" policy is capitulation to the designs of interests that are, by their very nature, exploitive, and denial of crucial intellectual resources, selected by professionals with a view toward quality and reliability, to those who need them most. "Hierarchies of taste and culture may not serve as instruments of social oppression," D'Angelo writes, "but when they do, popular culture may serve as an instrument of social oppression as much or more than high culture." (D'Angelo, 54)

Postmodern consumer capitalism has also eroded public space in contemporary America. D'Angelo, drawing on Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, traces how biases in the availability of federally subsidized loans in favor of single-family dwellings in predominantly white neighborhoods led to widespread suburbanization and a consequent deterioration of community and community values. "As white, middle class Americans retreated behind white picket fences, their conception of the public good narrowed…The inequities of the housing market produced inequities in public services such as schools and libraries that were funded by local property taxes." (D'Angelo, 66) Suburbanization in turn led to the ubiquity of shopping malls and the decline of downtown shopping districts. Not only

have Americans lost their sense of being engaged in a common enterprise, but there has been a falling away of the physical common that is disastrous for a civic exchange of ideas free from the agendas of commerce. As D'Angelo points out, citizens frequenting a business district enjoy all of their rights to free expression. They can make speeches, assemble, engage peaceably in discussion or dispute, circulate petitions, and otherwise participate actively in the democratic process. Shoppers at malls are on private property and can only express themselves at the discretion of the management. He quotes Barber, who says "The isolation of commercial space from every other kind of space hinted at by the world's fairs and certified by mall development has allowed commercial consumption to dominate public space, transforming every other human activity into a version of buying and selling. (D'Angelo, 67)

Libraries, commons open to all citizens, even the inconvenient citizens many would rather not think about, are more necessary than ever as commerce-free sanctuaries in a thoroughly mediated, relentlessly bought-and-sold America. D'Angelo makes a persuasive case that consumerism has infiltrated every aspect of American life. Even the degradation of thought and language that Postman attributes to an unfortunate but inadvertent side-effect of mass communications media is, in D'Angelo's analysis, the result of the deliberately engineered transformation which Barber refers to, in which every interaction is a transaction. All values become fungible and moral and political leadership is replaced by trend forecasting, market research and product placement. The artificially contrived needs which post modern capitalism foists upon the consumer are paralleled in the public sphere by wag-the-dog misdirection and policy statements indistinguishable in their utter lack of meaningful cognitive content from ad jingles.

"Just as the extreme capitalist economy," D'Angelo says, "reduces use value to exchange value, so does the postmodern information economy reduce meaning and knowledge to mere information. The extreme capitalist economy is an endless exchange of money and commodities that never comes to rest in any use value…The postmodern information economy is an endless exchange of signifiers that never comes to rest in the referent." (D'Angelo, 91)

D'Angelo compares Americans in the twenty-first century to the prisoners in Plato's cave, confusing the shadows on our pixilated screens with reality. "We are living in an epoch," he writes, "in which visual images have replaced words as the primary means of communication." (D'Angelo, 84) This, he says, is because "images whet our appetites and generate emotions such as greed, lust, fear, and envy more effectively than words," (D'Angelo, 93) and the infotainment telesector, of which government is arguably a wholly-owned subsidiary, depends upon us to let our ids run our lives and our country. Our only hope of wresting control from the puppeteers and escaping from the cave into the light of day, D'Angelo argues, lies in consequential language and reasoned discourse. Liberty and literacy are inseparable. And the public library can point the way to our deliverance, but only if it rejects the Idea Store model and returns to its mission of education. "Democracy requires rational deliberation." he writes. "But only words enable citizens to deliberate with one another or reason abstractly. Thus without rational deliberation there can be consumer choice. But there can be no democracy. The public library offers an obvious remedy to these ills, but as government abandons its responsibility to educate citizens for democracy in favor of providing better customer

service, the public library has fallen into the clutches of the postmodern information economy, too." (D'Angelo, 86)

It's not too late. Faith, they say, can move mountains.

Education for Freedom

Prophesy

"What is public education," Lawrence Cremin asks in his 1976 book *Public Education*, "and how does public education relate to the public?" Although written, like *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, before the transformation of American society by networked personal computers, *Public Education* is highly relevant to discussion of the Library Faith and the role of the public library as an instrument of public education in a Web-linked world. Cremin's work is addressed to what he terms "configurations of education" in a society which has, as he says, "been living through a revolution" for a quarter-century at the time of its composition. The revolution he describes is multifarious, with causes and effects manifested in politics, social organization and technology. The results of the revolution and their implications for education sound, thirty years later, eerily familiar. He details demographic shifts and movements for political and economic empowerment which "have created new and extraordinary clienteles to educate"; an economy altered utterly by "the changing character of work associated with the emergence of a postindustrial society, and in particular the rapid growth of the so-called knowledge industries"; and a technological transformation (television) that "has drastically altered familial education…has radically changed the education of the public at large…and has fundamentally transformed the context in which all schooling proceeds." (Cremin, x)

What is public education? Cremin, a disciple of John Dewey, is emphatic that public education is a more far-reaching process than the formal acculturation and drilling in basic proficiencies that is practiced by the public schools. "The fact is," he writes, "that the public is educated by many institutions, some of them private and some of them public, and that public schools are only one among several important public institutions that educate the public. There are, after all, public libraries, public museums, public television, and public work projects (the most extensive of which are the military services)." (Cremin, 58) And as the pace of change continues to accelerate and adult Americans are faced with an ever shifting set of challenges, , Cremin points out (and, like Postman, he would, no doubt have been both perturbed and pleased – who among us is generous enough, after all, not to take at least a little pleasure in having been right – at the staggering proportions which the problems he warned of have assumed), it is more true than ever that just as the locus of public education cannot be confined to the school system, so the intended audience of public education cannot be confined to children and adolescents. "For free societies," he writes, the goals of [educational] planning must be, first, to establish structures and methods that will assist individuals throughout their lives in maintaining the continuity of their apprenticeship and training and second, to equip each individual [here he quotes UNESCO's Paul Lengrand] 'to become in the highest and truest degree both the object and the instrument of his own development through the many forms of self-education.'" (Cremin, 53)

It is not difficult to find people willing to endorse and sometimes even to fund the first of these goals. Words like training and apprenticeship have a pleasingly no-nonsense quality of which not even the most fiscally conservative could disapprove. Rightly so.

Economic realities being what they are, maintenance and acquisition of salable skills can only increase in importance for the American public. And the public library, as it was in Edward Everett's time and in Jennie Flexner's, will continue to be an invaluable resource where new and displaced workers and new and displaced Americans can learn the competencies they need to take care of themselves and their families.

But Cremin, rightly as well, maintains that the second goal is every bit as important. The first American public libraries had education in the practical and mechanical arts very much on their agenda. But central to their establishment and to the creed which has always informed the Library Faith is the idea that reading and free access to the best that America has to offer will produce better Americans. "For most of human history," Cremin writes, "men and women have believed that only an elite is worthy and capable of an education and that the great mass of people should be trained as hewers of wood and drawers of water, if at all." (Cremin, 85) The radical idea at the heart of the "people's university" was akin to the radical idea at the heart of the American political experiment. All citizens were adjudged worthy of the traditional prerogatives of the aristocrat – education and franchise. The *noblesse d'epee* was replaced by a government which gave ear to all and recognized only dignity of merit. Every American was, ideologically, at any rate, both governor and governed, and civic duty in addition to personal ambition dictated that he look to his own self-improvement.

The liberal education which sons of the nobility received was designed to make them, in theory, fit to rule. The founders of public schools and public libraries in the United States believed that a populace which proposed to rule itself stood in need of the same sort of education. When Jefferson proposed a library in every county so that the people would

not be deceived and made the instruments of their own destruction, it was not vocational education, valuable as that indisputably is, that he had in mind. Are "configurations of education" that concentrate solely on the testable and the practical, whether they are public schools focused on meeting "No Child Left Behind" standards or public libraries which practice the privileging of Internet literacy over cultural literacy that Gorman decries, not saying, in effect, that the public they serve is only fit to be the twenty-first century equivalents of "hewers of wood, drawers of water"?

This goes to the heart of the second half of Cremin's question. "What does public education have to do with the public?" "In the last analysis," he writes, "the fundamental mode of politics in a democratic society is education." (Cremin, 77) Cremin defines the purpose of education by citing Dewey. "The end of education, Dewey asserted, is the growth of the individual human being, and there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, and nothing to which education is subordinate save more education." (Cremin, 72) But, although the growth of the individual is the object of public education, the individual is not the ultimate beneficiary. Public education is for the good of the Republic, the *res publica*, "the public thing." We educate individual citizens, Dewey says in *The Public and Its Problems*, "so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being." (Cremin, vii) By encouraging individuals in their efforts toward self-realization, the polity invests in a long-term yield of human potential, widened perspective and wisdom. The hope, as I see it, is that the old saw about a rising tide raising all boats doesn't just apply to supply-side economics. Public education equips us to govern ourselves and each other and to deliver ourselves and each other from the bondage of ignorance and want and selfishness and despair. In a moving passage that is evocative of

Leigh's articulation of the Library Faith, Cremin quotes Dewey on the role of the educator in a democracy, who "wrote in 1897 that the teacher is always 'the prophet of the true God' and 'the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.'" Cremin goes on to say that, "The millennialist tone of these phrases has always left me a bit uncomfortable, but the insight is nonetheless profound. Prophesy: in its root meaning, the calling of a people, via criticism and affirmation, to their noblest traditions and aspirations. Prophesy, I would submit, is the essential public function of the educator in a democratic society." (Cremin, 77) Let my people go…to the library.

Libraries are particularly suited to the kind of idiosyncratic, lifelong education that Cremin believes is essential to the health of democracies and their citizens. They provide the resources and, ideally, the communities that Americans need to make sense of their lives and their country. Adult education is, in his view, an essential government service, and not a frivolous benefit to be extended or discarded according to political whim. "[W]e know with respect to some older people," he writes, "that continued learning can literally come to mean the difference between life and death, that some things, like poetry and drama, that made no sense in high school and college suddenly make a great deal of sense and that it is easier to pursue those things in informal clubs rather than formal classrooms, in the company of others rather than home alone." (Cremin, 87) Cremin views the educational journey toward maturation of their potential that individuals undertake as a journey that reaches its destination only if it prods them to "extend their horizons, heighten their sensibilities, and rationalize their actions." (Cremin, 51) The steps on that journey constitute a process that, borrowing from the theories of Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport, he calls "propriate striving." "From the perspective of

education," he explains, "a key phenomenon is the emergence of a characteristic life-style in the maturing individual, the core of which might be described using Gordon W. Allport's concept of the 'proprium.' One behavioral characteristic of a maturing individual is an increasing amount of propriate striving, part of which clearly takes the form of intentional efforts to develop the self along particular lines, or, alternatively, self-education. In the Socratic sense, propriate striving is to the individual what *paideia* is to the society; the former conceives of education as individual aspiration, the latter as social aspiration." (Cremin, 39)

These aspirations, individual and social, are realized, and thus the investment of time and effort by the individual and resources by the society are justified, in the attainment of an enriched set of metaphors by which the individual understands herself and the world. "Everyone has some kind of metaphor of self…even in the absence of a written autobiography and even though the metaphor may be conceived and expressed in commonsense terms." (Cremin, 43) Metaphor is more than a colorful way of talking about reality. It is an essential cognitive structure, in the words of James Olney, whose *Metaphors of Self*: *The Meaning of Autobiography* Cremin cites here, "by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of the objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and controlling." (Cremin, 42) The self and the world are enlarged as these metaphors are modified and expanded through the process of propriate striving. The citizen, having received the gift of an education addressed to growth of his personal metaphors, is empowered to participate with mature understanding in the democratic process and to contribute an enriched self, simultaneously freer and more accountable, to the community, making thereby a return

on the public's investment. If he is true to it, Cremin postulates, the process of developing his own proprium will inexorably lead a striver to return to the polity what was freely given. "In fact, individuality is only liberated and fully realized," he writes, "as the individual interacts with an ever widening variety of communities." (Cremin, 72)

 The proper goal of education, Cremin believes, is not the stockpiling of knowledge or skills but the expansion of consciousness. In his conclusion he again quotes Dewey, who writes in *Democracy and Education* that "the ultimate value of every institution is its distinctively human effect – its effect upon conscious experience." (Cremin, 93) What, then, is public education? Cremin concludes that it is "the artistic linking of tradition and aspiration." (Cremin, 96) And how does public education relate to the public? By enlarging their metaphors of the self and the world and by allowing them to articulate current limitations and conceive new possibilities, public education provides individuals with the opportunity to become thoughtful, questioning citizens worthy to "serve society in helping to define and realize legitimate social aspirations." (Cremin, 97) If, as Cremin writes of the university, although the statement would apply to the public library or any other institution of public education, it "has taught them only knowledge and skills…it will not have educated them properly for service in a democratic society." (Cremin, 94)

Glimpses of Self

Mark Edmundson's *Why Read?,* like *Public Education*, is about a kind of education for citizenship that falls outside the scope of a high school civics class. Being a good citizen in a complicated society while constrained by the demands placed on time, energy, and attention by a high-paced information-based economy and deluged by the incessant inducements to narcissism and apathy of consumer culture, involves more,

Edmundson believes, than knowing How a Bill Becomes Law or even staying informed about current events. It entails perfecting the habits of mind that only, to borrow Gorman's phrase, the sustained reading of complex texts can develop. "What happens now and in the future if our most intelligent students never learn to strive to overcome what they are?" Edmundson asks. "What you're likely to get are more and more two-dimensional men and women. These will be people who live for easy pleasure, for comfort and prosperity and the satisfactions of cool, who think of money first, then second, and third; who hug the status quo." (Edmundson, 139)

Edmundson's book is a fervent apologia for the ameliorative power of books and in particular, literature, which he, with commendable boldness, defines as the kind of writing "that can redeem a life, or make it worth living." (Edmundson, 2) He acknowledges that most civilians and, rather perversely but in his experience even more vehemently, most professional teachers of literature "see all of literature – or at least the kind of literature that's commonly termed canonical – as an outmoded form." (Edmundson, 2) He admits they would likely dismiss his claims for reading as grandiose and absurd. But Edmundson, himself a professor of English at the University of Virginia, makes the stakes of his argument clear from the outset by quoting William Carlos Williams, who wrote "It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack of what is found there." (Edmundson, 1) His assertion of the power of books to address the woes of a culture in the throes of what Kierkegaard called "the despair that does not know it is despair" is unabashedly evangelical. "Literature is, I believe, our best goad to new beginnings," he writes, "our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth." (Edmundson, 3) Without actually using the phrase, *Why Read?* is

unequivocally a confession of the Library Faith, an affirmation of "belief in the virtue of the printed word, especially the book, the reading of which is held to be good in itself or from its reading flows that which is good." The Good News never had a more zealous and eloquent mouthpiece.

For, while Edmundson is not a librarian and his book is not explicitly about public library service, he is certainly working the same side of the rhetorical street as the members of the Public Library Inquiry with respect to the importance of books and reading to the well-being of America and Americans. Information technology has given many of us access to more answers than we might once have dreamed possible, but Edmundson asks whether we are losing touch, at a time when we as individuals and as a culture can least afford to, with our capacity to frame the most important questions. "The most consequential questions," he writes, "for an individual life (even if one is, as I am, a longtime agnostic) are related to questions of faith. I also believe…that at this historical juncture, the matter of belief is crucial to our common future." (Edmundson, 27)

In the past thirty years an increasing number of Americans have turned to charismatic fundamentalist religion, a turn which has arguably had an unfortunate effect on American domestic politics and foreign policy. Edmundson suggests that this is partly because secular discourse and, in particular, the discourse of the educational establishment has ceased to address the "big" questions, which, however ill-suited to theoretical models and scientific method they may be, nevertheless form the epistemological subtext of most lives. "So far we've left the quest of truth to Falwell and to faith," he writes. "Perhaps it is time again to confront the Sphinx, who now, as always, poses the riddle of life: What use will you make of the world (And what use might it make of you?) How do you intend

to live?" (Edmundson, 51) As eagerly as we have all embraced the bespoke tailored lifestyles that technology, market segmentation and postmodern capitalism have made possible, navigating the world with no guide more authoritative than *The Daily Me* has provoked a deep if not entirely conscious existential dread in twenty-first century Americans. "How will we give a meaning and a shape to life?" Edmundson asks. "How will we tell ourselves stories, collective and individual, about our time here that can make life worth living?" (Edmundson, 138)

Reading books, or, to be more precise, reading books that are crafted with the care and seriousness of intent if not of content that qualifies a work, in his estimation, as literature, is, Edmundson argues, an exercise in asking ourselves these questions and telling ourselves these stories. While the proponents of digital information technology are quick to point out the limitations of latitude and referentiality manifest in a linear codex text as opposed to a nexus of hypertext documents or a database, the plodding, deliberate nature of paper-based communication imposes a solidity and coherence on the thought contained therein. What is lost in breadth is more than made up in depth. As Edmundson says, "By putting a world of facts at the end of a key stroke, computers have made facts, their command, their manipulation, their ordering, central to what can now qualify as a humanistic education. The result is to suspend reflection about the differences between wisdom, knowledge, and information." (Edmundson, 15) The miscellany of messages and their lack of relationship to each other or to any established structure of meaning or values to which Postman pointed with alarm in 1985 have, with the infiltration of the Internet into every aspect of modern life, multiplied exponentially. The hierarchical arrangement of human thought for which libraries and textual culture have always stood

is fast disappearing from the paradigm of intellectual discourse in a Web-based world. "Everything that can be accessed online can seem equal to everything else," Edmundson continues, "no datum more important or more profound than any other. Thus the possibility presents itself that there really is no more wisdom; there really is no more knowledge; there is only information. No thought is a challenge to what one currently believes." (Edmundson, 15)

Edmundson illustrates that the value of a humanistic education is to provoke such challenges by discussing an idea similar to Cremin's metaphors of self. He borrows this idea of "final narratives" from psychologist Richard Rorty. "All human beings," he explains, "carry about a set of words which they use to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives…They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives." (Edmundson, 25-26) An individual who remains in a state of growth, Rorty maintains, is continually amending the final narrative – it is, in fact, anything but final. But most people arrive at a set of terms and values in early adulthood and remain stuck there. "Most of us," Edmundson says, "stay at home." (Edmundson, 26) It is the function of a humanistic education to nudge us out of our emotional and ideational nests, to supply us with new terms and metaphors, to confront us with a wider world and, indeed, with a wide spectrum of worlds. Reading literature allows us to confront otherness under conditions of relative safety and to emerge from the encounter changed, our horizons enlarged and our sense of the multiple possibilities of selfhood extended. "The rise of the novel," he says, "coincides with a realization expressed, or perhaps created, by the development of democracy, That realization is of the great span of individuals to be found in the world, of the sheer

proliferation of divergent beings…A humanistic education begins in literature because, unlike philosophy, literature does not assume that one or two or five paths are enough to offer human beings." (Edmundson, 67)

Gorman makes a distinction in *The Enduring Library*, a distinction which he concedes is crude and by no means definitive, between those in the library profession who consider themselves "book people" and those who consider themselves "tech people." The tech people, he claims, are always accusing the book people of wanting the one thing in life that by definition is impossible – that things should remain exactly as they are. The techies assert that the texties, in their attachment to an outmoded technology and mindset, are cowering hopelessly in a leaky dinghy while the dreadnought of Inevitability bears down upon them. Similarly, Dilevko and Magowan pointed out that the Give 'Em What They Want advocates accuse librarians practicing D'Angelo's "gatekeeper" role of being elitist, paternalistic, and out of step with the times. Edmundson, without question a book person and a proponent of, at least, the idea of gates if not of any specific dress code or password, makes the case that a liberal education acquired by reading good books is the best preparation for negotiating times of flux.

The abundance of information that the techies have provided has made knowledge and wisdom ever more important. With greater power comes greater responsibility. And, speaking at a cultural level, intellectual sophistication unmatched by emotional and spiritual growth has a accounted for much human misery – untold millions murdered in the twentieth century alone. Materials devised as entertainment do not address the difficult questions posed by the human confrontation with change, nor do they prod the reader toward growth. Most popular materials are, I think, harmless. It would be

disingenuous for me, someone with a keen appetite for junk, to argue otherwise. As a

friend of mine says, sometimes you want a Twinkie. But a cynic might argue that their

very purpose is to misdirect the attention of the rubes. "Our culture changes at an

astounding velocity, so we must change or pay a price for remaining the same.

Accordingly the powers of self-rendering or self-revision are centrally important. These

processes occur best in language. Surely there is something to be learned from popular

culture. But we as teachers can do better...People who have taught themselves how to live

– what to be, what to do – from reading great works will not be overly susceptible to the

culture industry." (Edmundson, 135)

Edmundson advocates commitment by educational institutions to the technology of codex

books and to the idea of literary excellence, if not to a strictly defined canon, because

therein, he believes, lies the greatest potential for liberation. There's nothing wrong with

giving 'em what they want, but responsible educators have a responsibility to the public

also to give 'em what they need. What they do with it is up to them. As could also be

said of Dilevko and Magowan, Postman, and D'Angelo, Edmundson's posture is

conservative but the impulse deeply progressive. "Two related activities…are central,"

Edmundson says, " to a true education in the humanities. The first is the activity of

discovering oneself as one is in great writing. The second, and perhaps more important, is

to see glimpses of a self – and, too, perhaps of a world – that might be, a self and a world

that you can begin working to create." (Edmundson, 5) This is the essence of what a

public education that has to do with the public should provide. This, education as

prophesy, is the business of the public library. Democracy is about perceiving the need

for change and working together to effect it. "We need," Edmundson writes in his

concluding chapter entitled, appropriately, "Democracy and Faith," "to begin educating people now with full respect for their powers of determination. We need to give them the resources of the best that has been known and thought, and then stand back and let them make the decisions that matter." (Edmundson, 141)

Deep Time

Sven Birkerts, although the tone of his book is more melancholy than that of Edmundson's urgent but hopeful plea, has consonant ideas about the integral role reading plays in the kind of complex thought necessary to meaningful democratic discourse. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* is less an exhortation than a lamentation, the dirge of a rueful prophet weeping by the rivers of Babylon. As Birkerts portrays it, all hope is not, perhaps, lost, but, having worshipped at the altars of false gods, our nation is suffering a bitter exile. "My core fear," he writes, is that we, as a culture, as a species, are becoming shallower; that we have turned from depth – from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery - and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness. That we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web…we are leaderless and subject to the terrors, masked as the freedoms, of an absolute relativism. It would be wrong to lay all the blame at the feet of technology, but more wrong to ignore the great transformative impact of new technological systems – to act as if it's all just business as usual. " (Birkerts, 229) He argues that advances in communications technology have, paradoxically, impeded real communication, that "their real power is all in the service of division and acceleration." (Birkerts, 230) A culture based on printed texts, in contrast, shared a sensibility, which,

he points out, is another of those terms with more than a whiff of the archaic about it. Communication, however prolific and wide-reaching it may be, without the common conventions of language and rational idea exchange which result from a literate culture is all noise and no signal.

Birkerts foresees three significant dangers for democracy attendant upon a future in which books and libraries have been replaced by online information retrieval. The first and most alarming is the erosion of language itself. "Simple linguistic prefab is now the norm," he writes, "while ambiguity, paradox, irony, subtlety, and wit are fast disappearing. In their place, the simple "vision thing" and myriad other "things." (Birkerts, 128) Of course, *The Gutenberg Elegies* was written in 1994, back when George *H.W.* Bush seemed surreally inarticulate and text-messaging wasn't yet a blip on the radar of our diminishing consciousness. As it turns out, I think he rather understated the case, IYKWIM. ;) The second danger is the compression and ultimate elimination of historical perspective. As Birkerts says, "The depth of field that is our sense of the past is not only a linguistic construct, but is in some essential way represented by the book and the accumulation of books in library spaces…The database, useful as it is, expunges this context, this sense of chronology, and admits us to a weightless order in which all information is equally accessible." (Birkerts, 129) Americans' growing indifference to and ignorance of their own history will make them increasingly vulnerable to mendacious distortions and willful manipulations of the record. "The past that has slipped away," he writes, "will be rendered ever more glorious, ever more a fantasy play with heroes, villains, and quaint settings and props. Small-town American life returns as "Andy of Mayberry" – at first enjoyed with recognition, later accepted as a faithful portrait of how

things used to be." (Birkerts, 130) And, lastly, he predicts a withering away of privacy, interiority, reflection, and ultimately selfhood. We will have traded agency for access. "We will bring our terminals, our modems, and menus further and further into our former privacies; we will implicate ourselves by degrees in the unitary life, and there may come a day," Birkerts warns, "when we no longer remember that there was any other life." (Birkerts, 131)

Birkerts ascribes as much value to the act of reading as to specific texts. "[T]he process, he writes, " makes a change in the whole complex of the self. We are, for the duration of our reading, different, and the difference has more to do with the process than with its temporary object – the book being read." (Birkerts, 80-81) While he is thoroughly grounded in the Western canon and, as is obvious from the elegance of his own prose, by no means dismissive of standards of cultural excellence, he is very much of the opinion that any reading is far, far better than no reading at all. In a breathtaking passage that, for this reader, evokes Sal Paradise on the road and Francis Parkman on the Oregon Trail and Huck Finn lighting off for the Territories, he portrays sitting down with a book as in itself democratic, a bid for freedom, a quintessentially American act. "We tend to think of reading as a means to an end. Like driving, it gets us from here to there. We do it, often, in order to have done it. The act is considered a sponge for contents…But such an attitude greatly diminishes the scope and importance of reading. For beyond the obvious instrumentality of the act, the immersing of the self in a text has certain fundamental metaphysical implications. To read, when one does so of one's own free will, is to make a volitional statement. It is to posit an elsewhere and set off toward it. And like any traveling, reading is at once a movement and a comment of sorts about the place one has

left. To open a book voluntarily is at some level to remark on the insufficiency of either one's own life or one's orientation toward it." (Birkerts, 80)

Reading is not just a way out, toward freedom. It is also a way in, toward empathy. It allows entry into other lives, other ways of being, and reveals the underlying community, or perhaps communion would be more apt, of populations all too often at odds in the Republic. Birkerts describes how his own exploration of African-American literature opened a heart he hadn't realized was closed. He had never considered himself a racist – he had rarely considered race at all . He was perfectly content to let the Other remain other. As he tells it, "The prejudices I acquired in my suburban upbringing had less to do with notions of superiority and inferiority and more to do with difference. The message: These people do not have your history or cultural background and you cannot know their world; by the same token, they cannot know yours." (Birkerts, 106) One miracle of the written word which makes reading indispensable for democratic education is the intersubjectivity it affords, the way in which the most apparently fixed personal boundaries become permeable. And those boundaries, once breached, are forever altered. "True," Birkerts says, "the lives depicted in many of the works are in certain respects alien to me. But the fact of the portrayal, the fact that I can enter those lives by way of language, confirms for me the existence of a commonality prior to all cultural divergences." (Birkerts, 106)

Readers make better citizens because reading, at least in comparison with Web based sources of information, takes time. It requires at least a minimum of patience and persistence to yield its benefits. Occasionally it is difficult. All, says Birkerts, to the better. "Knowledge," he writes, "certainly in the humanities, is not a straightforward

matter of access, of conquest via the ingestion of data. Part of any essential understanding

of the world is that it is opaque, obdurate." Electronic media, on the other hand,

"substitute transparency, promoting the illusion of access….The field of knowledge is

rendered as a lateral and synchronic enterprise susceptible to collage, not as a depth

phenomenon." (Birkerts, 136-137) The days when Americans could listen to a seven-

hour debate are no doubt gone for good, but, Birkerts warns, we embrace apparently easy

solutions and instant gratification at our own peril. "The devil no longer moves about on

cloven hooves," he writes, "reeking of brimstone. He is an affable efficient fellow. He

claims to want to help us all along to a brighter, easier future….Fingers type keys, oceans

of fact and sensation get downloaded, are dissolved through the nervous system.

Bottomless wells of data are accessed and manipulated, everything flowing at circuit

speed. Gone the rock in the field, the broken hoe, the grueling distances. (Birkerts, 229)

But nothing comes free in this life, as the pragmatists are wont to say. The note comes

due for any contract, and in this case, Birkerts maintains, the cost of the shiny new toys

may be our own obduracy, our grit in the face of difficulty, our agency, our adulthood.

Perhaps the greatest loss, in fact, in a post-literate future, should it come to that, will be

depth - depth of time, perspective, and meaning. "Reading time," Birkerts says, is deep

time. Duration time, within which events resonate and mean." (Birkerts, 84) Readers

experience the world as a narrative. The metaphor may be wrong, but it allows

significance to human life and consequence to human action. "What reading does,

ultimately is keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating notion that life is not a sequence

of lived moments, but a destiny. That, God or no God, life has a unitary pattern inscribed

within it, a pattern that we could discern for ourselves if we could somehow lay the

whole of our experience out like a map…[A reader] is, by inclination and formation, an explorer of causes and effects and connections through time." (Birkerts, 85)

Birkerts, like Cremin and Edmundson, envisions education as a cycle of self-exploration, as he puts it, "that slow, painful, delicious excavation of the self by way of another's sentences," followed by self-revision, which is paralleled, as the educated subject begins to act in the world, by social and political exploration followed in turn by social and political revision. Language, and especially the structured, nuanced, *deep* language that is the hallmark of literate discourse, is unexcelled as a means of delving into the self and the world as they exist and of imagining what they might become. "Every true reader is a writer," Birkerts says, "and every true writer is a reader, and every person engaged in the project of self-awareness is the reader and writer of himself. Writer and reader: the recto and verso of language, which is itself the medium of our deeper awareness." (Birkerts, 113)

Situated Freedom

Educator and philosopher Maxine Greene asserts that what she calls "education for freedom" is necessarily a process that prepares a pupil for civic and social engagement. An education that has mere autonomy and self-sufficiency as its goal is inadequate to the purposes of a democratic society. "It is through and by means of education," she says, "… that individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space… I do not need to say again how seldom this occurs today in our technicized, privatized, consumerist time." (Greene, 12)   Real freedom, Greene believes, is about action, interaction, and, above all situatedness. "Freedom," she says, "cannot be

conceived apart from a matrix of social, economic, cultural, and psychological

conditions. It is within the matrix that selves take shape or are created through choice of

action in the changing conditions of life." (Greene, 80) And the object of a real education

for freedom is "to render problematic a reality that includes homelessness, hunger,

pollution, crime, censorship, arms build-ups and threats of war, even as it includes the

amassing of fortunes, consumer goods of unprecedented appeal, world travel

opportunities, and the flickering faces of the rich and famous on all sides." (Greene, 12)

A public education, to use Cremin's phrase, that has to do with the *public* is about

fostering the team spirit that, sports mad as we Americans are, we presumably endorse.

It's about driving home to each citizen that we're all in this together. No Marine is left

behind. We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately. American

values. But American education in the last part of the twentieth century (And, as Dwight

Eisenhower memorably said, "Things are more like they are now than they ever were

before."), Greene points out, had as its objects "'effectiveness,' 'proficiency,'

'efficiency,' and an ill-defined, one-dimensional 'excellence.'" (Greene, 12) American

education is designed to make workers and consumers "able to perform acceptably on

some level of an increasingly systematized world," and not citizens who notice

"dehumanizing forces in the society… and perceive them as obstacles to becoming."

(Greene, 12) Freedom, as Greene sees it, is never a state of being. It is always a state of

becoming, or it is not freedom.

Americans, Greene says, have traditionally articulated freedom in a negative way.

Freedom is to be left alone, not to be interfered with, blazing our own ways like Howard

Roark. Our sense of responsibility is similarly isolationist. Duty is to stand alone, to

depend on no one, like Will Kane at high noon. "It is not a question of freedom being neglected as an official value in America," Greene writes, "a kind of icon [Gary Cooper?] For all the absence of dialogue about what it signifies to educate free men and women in these times, there is constant emphasis on free choice and self-reliance, on people overcoming dependency and taking responsibility for themselves…To be left to one's own devices, to rely on one's own powers is to become stronger, more vital, more effective, or so it is said." (Greene, 17) This, Greene says, is only solipsism masquerading as freedom. Real freedom, *situated* freedom, is about "communities developing the power to act on perceived possibility." (Greene, 103) The function of the public library and of public education in general is to enable individuals as members of communities, as agents acting on behalf of public interest rather than in pursuit of consumer satisfaction, to articulate and negotiate the obstacles they face in common. "Only when individuals are empowered to interpret the situations they live together do they become able to mediate the object world and their own consciousness, to locate themselves so that freedom can appear." (Greene, 122)

 The lone pioneer mythos may play well at the movies, but it is an ideal to which most Americans find it impossible to live up. An overwhelming array of social and economic forces is marshaled against them. It might be argued that the dangers faced by the real pioneers of the storied past were much greater, and I think their struggles would undeniably stagger the modern imagination. But this country was settled by communities. Rugged individualism is a modern construct. Perhaps it is overstatement to allege a deliberate strategy of divide and conquer, but it doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to see who stands to gain from the isolation, alienation, and self-absorption which characterize

what passes for citizenship in post-industrial America. "Quite obviously, the wealthy, the advantaged, benefit from this new attention to freedom," Greene writes. (Greene, 17) A paranoid, according to William Burroughs, is someone who knows a little of what's going on.

Americans who are self-reliant and self-sufficient, or, more likely, who think they ought to be and consider the fact that they aren't quite making it on their own to be a shameful sign of their own lack of "excellence," won't get together to rock the boat. Whether it's Sons of Liberty or Suffragettes or Haymarket rioters, people acting in concert tend to spell trouble for the status quo. Left on their own, individuals might not have the perspective to see the need for change, and they certainly don't have the strength to effect it. "Enslaved persons," Greene writes, "have been known to believe they can exert their wills and achieve much of what they desire. It may even be that they can do so much of what they choose to do within these limits that they do not perceive them as obstacles….In what sense is a naming of those limits as obstacles required for the pursuit of freedom?" (Greene, 65) In her analysis freedom and its pursuit are one and the same. With apologies to Bob Dylan, any freedom not busy being born is busy dying.

Education for freedom, in turn, is the process by which individuals and, much more importantly, communities learn to perceive and to name the obstacles to freedom. As institutions dedicated to learning and naming, libraries are essential to education for freedom in the community. "I am suggesting that there may be an integral relationship between reaching out to learn and the 'search that involves a pursuit of freedom," Greene writes. "Seeing more, feeling more, one reaches out for more to do." (Greene, 123)

Greene (writing in 1988, but things are more like they are…) suggests that we are living in what Hannah Arendt, borrowing the phrase from Bertolt Brecht, "once called 'dark times.' They were marked, she said , by 'highly efficient talk and double-talk' of officials who 'explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns by a camouflage spread…by speech that does not disclose what it is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality." (Greene, 114) Stay the course, anyone? Extraordinary rendition? Defense of marriage?

Education for freedom, Greene, asserts, is about nothing more nor less than about shedding light on the darkness. And this can only be accomplished if we address the degraded state of language and literacy, in Gorman's sense of full literacy, in this country. "Americans," Greene continues, "generally do not perceive the darkness Arendt described; nor do they perceive the significance of a public space that might throw light." That's why we hear about the irrelevance of the public library. Information and more specifically, disinformation have made knowledge, and its precincts, appear inefficient, irrelevant, insignificant. We're trading our birthright for a mess of pottage. "Jefferson," Greene reminds us, "found in the 'diffusion of knowledge' the best guarantee of the public liberties essential for the republican way of life. This was because education could prevent 'tyranny over the mind of man' by reducing ignorance, allaying superstition, and loosening the bonds of external controls." (Greene, 29)

Civic Librarianship: A Secular Vocation

The Communitarian Library

How can public libraries reclaim their historic mission as institutions that nourish

freedom? How can the public education that is their reason for being become again a

public education that relates to the public? Ronald McCabe argues in *Civic*

Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library that, "Once education

has been transformed from the pursuit of truth to mere self-expression, it has lost its

moral purpose. Whatever cultural values are dominant will enter such a vacuum." As

several of the writers discussed in this essay have made abundantly clear, during the past

several decades the dominant cultural values in this country have been the values of

market capitalism. The Library Faith, a commitment on the part of the polity to

democratic education through the ameliorative power of books and reading, has, along

with civic engagement and social responsibility, faded from public discourse and

individual consciousness. A study cited by sociologist Amitai Etzioni in 1993 revealed

that, while Americans still believe they have a right to trial by jury, a majority of

respondents did not feel bound by civic duty to serve on a jury themselves. In the ethical

environment that prevails today, getting without giving isn't cheating, it's smart

shopping. Why pay more? "Without a moral framework to provide social context,"

McCabe continues, "education is reduced to a quest for personal advancement in the

marketplace." (McCabe, 17)

Democratic discourse in these "dark times" all too often consists of what Arendt called

"speech that does not disclose what it is." The press that once, ostensibly, held itself to

the professional ethical standards that befit a guarantor of truth and openness has been

subsumed by the infotainment telesector. "The economic goal," McCabe writes, "which

has been liberated from social purpose, has little to do with journalistic goals of achieving

accuracy, balancing coverage, and contributing to the democratic debate of public

issues." (McCabe, 76) If we as a culture hope to continue to insure public liberties, as

Jefferson declared, through the diffusion of knowledge, then the public library is more

necessary now than ever. It is not an amenity but a utility. Truth (information,

knowledge, and wisdom that, if not free of the taint of bias, is, at least balanced by

collocation with opposition and critique), the whole truth (within the limits of available

resources) and nothing but the truth (the library doesn't guarantee that everything it

supplies is correct, but, rather, that it is what it says it is) is as essential to the health of

the body politic as is clean water to the bodies of the citizenry. That health is sufficiently

important, I think, to be the proper concern of professional public servants rather than

deskilled and resentful customer service providers. The saint-seeming deceivers are

everywhere among us and more powerful today by geometric orders of magnitude. It

will, I am sure, come as no surprise to the reader that what I have to suggest with regard

to public librarians reclaiming their heritage and becoming custodians of the kinds of

institutions that Thomas Jefferson and George Ticknor would applaud is a wholehearted

return to the faith of their professional mothers and fathers.

McCabe's book supplies a forceful argument for just such a return. He begins his analysis

by tracing a shift in American public library service from "republican" values to values

he calls "libertarian." He borrows these terms from U.C. Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah's work on "American civil religion." Bellah's landmark 1985 book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* proposed the enduring influence in American public discourse of three schools of thought: "biblical," "republican" and "modern individualist." Bellah further distinguishes among the individualists by positing separate intellectual lineages of "expressive individualism" and "utilitarian individualism." The biblical tradition, which remains strong in popular culture, was most influential in American intellectual history during the New England Puritan era and during the evangelical Great Awakenings in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which had pronounced impacts on the movement toward American independence and the struggle for abolition of slavery. Biblical values in contemporary political discourse are generally confined to high-profile, red-herring disputes about sexual morality. Republican values, derived largely from idealized classical models and Enlightenment political thought, shaped the American constitution and most civic discourse until the twentieth century. McCabe argues without, I think, fear of arousing controversy, that the public library was a product of the republican tradition.

Utilitarian individualism, which Bellah defined as the belief that "in a society where each vigorously pursued his own interest, the social good would automatically emerge," (McCabe, 15) has its philosophical underpinnings in the thought of Smith and Bentham and the rhetoric of market capitalism. While its effects on nineteenth-century American culture in the economic sphere were profound, McCabe maintains that it was only in the 1980s that utilitarian individualism, which he generally refers to as the "libertarian" perspective, came to dominate discourse on matters of public import. The way was

paved, he claims, for libertarianism's near hegemonic status in current public discussion by the cultural ubiquity of expressive individualist thinking in the 1960s and 1970s. "Turn on, tune in, drop out" segued smoothly into "greed is good" because both outlooks are, at heart, about "doing your own thing." McCabe quotes journalist E.J. Dionne, who writes "Far from being inconsistent with the antiauthoritarian thrust of the 1960s, much of what passed for conservative politics in the 1980s was really *libertarian*. Many young voters who had been drawn to the New Left and counterculture because they attacked authority were drawn to conservatism because it attacked the state. Thus did the New Left wage war against the paternalistic liberal state and defeat it. The right picked up the pieces." (McCabe, 14)

Expressive individualism, McCabe says, especially as it was manifested in the counterculture of the 1960s, is a direct descendent of the Romantic Movement in art, music and literature. The Romantics, to the degree that they thought about politics in any systematic way, broke with the Enlightenment cult of reason and took Rousseau's *Social Contract* as their politico-philosophical touchstone. The impact of Romantic ideas on education, McCabe believes, has been disastrous. "Romanticism made a brilliant contribution to Western culture," he writes, "but carried with it antisocial, antieducational values that have damaged individuals and society as a whole." (McCabe, 7) Central to Rousseau's thought, and to the Romantic disposition, was a conviction in the inherent goodness of human nature. People, in this view, are born pure beings with reliably beneficent inclinations. Education is a process of assaultive cultural propaganda which results in the spoilage of their sacred natural character.

The republican educational ideas which informed the foundation of American public

schools and public libraries, on the other hand, posited an ethically neutral human nature.

The mind of a citizen was understood to be a sort of shapeless moral and intellectual clay

that needed molding to acquire a socially and personally useful shape. "Education in the

Enlightenment understanding," McCabe explains, "is society's support for the

individual's free and purposeful pursuit of truth, a process that benefits both society and

the individual. Both Puritanism and Romanticism tend to view education as coercive

social indoctrination." (McCabe, 8) The countercultural values of the New Left rejected

received canons as a matter of course and viewed the hierarchical orientation toward

knowledge characteristic of educational institutions like libraries as inherently elitist. As

McCabe says, "So much latitude was offered individuals in expressing themselves that

the traditional project of using knowledge to make important personal and social

judgments gave way to an indifferent relativism." (McCabe, 16)

In public libraries, this distrust of making potentially "oppressive" aesthetic and

intellectual judgments and a rising concern about circulation figures, itself a "market-

oriented" response to the growing dominance of the utilitarian individualist paradigm in

public life, combined to transform the traditional library into what McCabe calls "the

libertarian public library." "The new public library," he writes, "like the cultural

consensus from which it is derived, was the product of the expressive individualism of

the Left and the utilitarian individualism of the Right." By adopting the libertarian

model, he says, librarians in essence abandoned the public trust and negated their own

professional status. According to the traditional model, the public interest was advanced

by the services of professionals who were entrusted by the community to make

qualitative pedagogical decisions on the basis of expertise. In the circulation-focused

libertarian library, selection decisions are made by what D'Angelo calls the plebiscite of

the marketplace, a process which is rhetorically justified, McCabe says, as the expression

of some sort of Rousseauan "general will." Coinciding with the philosophical shift away

from informed professional service and toward the mechanical retail model was a new

emphasis on "information" as the primary mission of the public library. McCabe cites a

1980 document prepared for the Public Library Association, *A Planning Process for

Public Libraries*, as evidence of the growing omnipresence of the information provision

mentality. "The ultimate purpose of any library," it reads, "is to meet the information

needs of its community." (McCabe, 35) No pretense of democratic education, let alone

faith here. "This striking shift," McCabe writes, "from education to information

demonstrated the desire among librarians to avoid the uncomfortable position of

functioning as educators and leaders in an era hostile to attempts to shape the behavior of

sovereign individuals." (McCabe, 35)

But, McCabe argues, by acceding to what they perceive as the general will, public

libraries have misled themselves and shortchanged the public. If they continue to do so

they run the danger, just as Robert Leigh warned in 1950, of trivializing themselves out

of existence. "Providing access to information for individuals," he points out, "is a weak

social purpose. This is especially true in a society experiencing a surplus of information."

(McCabe, 80) And just as information seekers have many options for meeting their

needs, most without question less reliable than the library but speedier and more

conveniently located, so can consumers in search of entertainment turn to slicker, edgier,

sexier sources for diversion. What public libraries can provide to the adult public as no

other institution can, and the basis on which they need to stake their claim for continued

maintenance at public expense, is education – both education in negotiating a world that

daily grows more challenging, and, "unpractical" perhaps, but every bit as important, the

kind of loosely structured, highly personalized education for freedom described in the

preceding chapter. "Education," McCabe says, "is a highly professional calling that is

morally purposeful. Education is desperately needed by our society. Access is a

mechanical function that is relatively easy to provide and generally taken for granted in

our information-rich society. Both society's needs and the need for public libraries to

continue to receive tax support argue for an educational mission." (McCabe, 100)

As an alternative to the libertarian librarianship which has dominated the profession for

three decades, McCabe proposes what he calls "civic librarianship." He bases his model

on the ideas of the communitarian movement, particularly as articulated by Amitai

Etzioni. The communitarian movement proposes a sort of third way in the Red and Blue

culture wars. The communitarian approach is in large part, as McCabe presents it, a

return to republican values in civic life, an orientation that balances public responsibility

with individual benefit. It offers a vision of democracy based on the kind of situated

freedom that Greene discusses. "The old map," as Etzioni writes in a passage from *The

New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* quoted by McCabe,

"centers around the role of the government versus the private sector, and the authority of

the state versus that of the individual. The current axis is the relationship between the

individual and the community, and between freedom and order." (McCabe, 20)

Civic librarianship, McCabe declares, "affirms the traditional public library mission for a

democratic society." (McCabe, 77) It is librarianship as leadership – both cultural and

civic. The communitarian ethos rejects the anti-intellectualism masquerading as openness which typifies expressive individualist rhetoric and which has been manifest in public library service as the Give 'Em What They Want approach to collection development. While it is decidedly not the role of a librarian to tell patrons what or how to think, it is her job to provide resources that will maximize reflection and reason in public discourse and decision making. It is her duty as a public servant not, so to speak, to hide under a bushel any light she might shed in these dark times. "Relativism," McCabe writes, "…treats ideas as personal preferences and, in doing so, devalues personal and social decision making. Education can make sense only where it is understood that some ideas are, in fact, better than others and that decisions can have important consequences for good or ill." (McCabe, 135)

McCabe does not oppose the inclusion of popular materials in collections. He merely advocates that the public library rely on the judgment of librarians rather than commercial trends or the decisions of vendors in determining the composition of collections. "The conclusion," he writes, "that such an institution should not provide popular fiction is unwarranted. If the premise is accepted that quality decisions can be made at all levels of complexity, it is possible to defend the idea of supplying the simpler forms of fiction." (McCabe, 149) As a Berkeley graduate and a yellow-dog Democrat, my sensibilities are New Left enough to find a phrase like "the simpler forms of fiction" a little obnoxious, but (it ought to be clear by now) I find the endorsement of hierarchical quality bracing. Neither all writing nor all scholarship is created equal. We of the Library Faith are democrats, not Levellers. There are good books and there are bad books and there are what Orwell called "good bad books." I wouldn't want to force my opinion or

make someone feel bad over an issue of aesthetics. That would be unkind and conduct

unbecoming a public servant. But I see nothing wrong with a little Edward Birge style

guerrilla acculturation. Dan Brown has enough promoters. You say you want something

with romance and suspense and dark secrets revealed? Might I suggest "Young

Goodman Brown"?

Public librarians need to demonstrate leadership in their communities as well. In cities

with rapidly dwindling public space, the library cannot take the place of parks and

promenades, but it can, resources permitting, provide space for citizens to interact and

structured forums for airing issues of public concern in a reasoned, civil, and, ideally,

informed fashion. "A library facility designed from the perspective of civic

librarianship," McCabe writes, "might make the commons area of the lounge a focal

point of the institution and increase the size of such an area to make this a more

substantial service." (McCabe, 124) The public library, if it is to continue as an American

institution, needs to abandon the metaphors of the marketplace and reassert its democratic

function in the minds of users. The *Metroön*, the archives of ancient Athens where were

stored, with all the other important civil documents, the copies of record of Aeschylus

and Euripides and Sophocles, adjoined the *Bouleterion*, the council hall, and not the

agora. The Athenians understood that nourishment for the mind was a matter of serious

public import, and not a commodity to be haggled over and traded. "If a large portion of

the public considers the public library to be the answer to a question that it no longer

asks," McCabe writes, "it is the job of library leaders to explain that the success of the

democracy still depends on making good decisions, making good decisions still depends

on public education, and public education still depends, in part, on the public library. The

public library can succeed in its mission of education for a democratic society only where people believe in working together to improve society through democratic institutions." (McCabe, 139)

Librarianship as Secular Ministry

The libertarian library shortchanges the very segment of the user population that depends most on library services and leads to disaffection and burnout among practitioners and a decreasing supply of talented entry-level librarians. "If the public library is not actively trying to strengthen communities through education, why should a highly qualified person be interested in this work?" McCabe asks. "As salaries are low relative to many other professions, libraries rely on the idealism of this work to recruit and retain professional librarians." (McCabe, 146) Marcia Nauratil, in *The Alienated Librarian*, concurs. The tough talk for tough times approach taken by library "advocates" like Ken Haycock is, she claims, a poor recruitment strategy and demoralizing for library students and new librarians. She writes that it is "self-defeating systematically to instill attitudes of resignation and accommodation... [T]he high expectations of fledgling librarians are a precious resource. Instead of dampening down such idealism in an attempt to reduce further disillusionment, professional education should actively foster idealism, aiding and abetting students in their realization of it." (Nauratil, 104) To tell them "our business is a business" is not only wrong, it exemplifies the sort of lemming-like defeatist mindset that Gorman rightly points out has become all too typical of "information age" librarianship. Those with the proverbial lick of sense would wonder "If that is indeed the case why, then, am I not in business school?"

It hardly merits the effort and expense of professional school to end up, functionally, upon graduation as the assistant manager of an Idea Store. "Within a marketing context," Nauratil writes, library users are transformed from clients and constituencies with needs deserving of satisfaction for their own sake to market segments with needs perceived as exploitable for the benefit of the organization…This conversion…presents a serious challenge to our professional values and an alienating influence on the librarian-client relationship. Exacerbating the effect is the emphasis that marketing places on market segmentation." (Nauratil, 77) Markets and marketing are inappropriate metaphors for the public library because they involve, by definition, a zero-sum game. Where there is a market, there is competition. Where there is competition, there are winners and losers. In a competition between interests for the allocation of resources, who will emerge the winner? As the shadowy man in the movie says, follow the money… "For market-oriented libraries," Nauratil continues, "it is a great temptation to select those market segments that will result in the greatest 'return' for the library." (Nauratil, 78)

Nauratil counsels that librarians consider the implications of the professional status on which they set such store. "On what grounds do the professions stake their claim to unique privilege?" she asks. Is professional just a self-appellation? Can anyone claim it? After all, she points out, athletes and tradespeople call themselves professional, to say nothing of the members of the "world's oldest profession." The word *professional*, she informs us (It was news, at any rate, to me.), has its origins in the ecclesiastical orientation of the medieval university. "Until the Renaissance, the term profession referred to something that was professed, an avowal of an expressed intention or purpose." (Nauratil, 20) The original professionals were called that because they took

holy orders. When the name came to be applied to university trained doctors and lawyers, who even today take a sacred oath to uphold the hallowed principles of their calling, "the association of these professions with the Church," Nauratil writes, "together with their use of Latin, increased the aura of mystery and authority surrounding the body of esoteric knowledge on which they were based." (Nauratil, 20) Even today, she maintains, the prestige afforded to professionals is a vestigial memory of the social leadership which men of the cloth once exercised. "Society grants these rewards 1) because the professions have special competence deriving from esoteric knowledge and this competence is essential to meeting societal needs and supporting societal values and 2) because the professions are committed to ethical public service, their motivation being altruistic rather than materialistic." (Nauratil, 20)

As educators, meeting societal needs with ethical public service, librarians would fulfill Nauratil's requirements for professional status. As purveyors of diversion, the difference between librarians and, say, video store clerks (another endangered "profession") seems more one of MLS degree than kind. I won't insist here that I think librarians should take sacred oaths, although I don't think it's a terrible idea (I'm grandiose that way – if it were up to me, we'd probably all wear Jesuit cassocks), but I do think that if librarians themselves were to treat the profession with more gravity and speak up for their institutions as the pillars of democracy that they are rather than attempting to appear "useful" by touting circulation statistics and other supposed indicators of popularity, then the communities they serve might be more likely to respond with the respect due a learned and selfless calling.

In the preface to *Sacred Stacks: The Higher Purpose of Libraries and Librarianship*, Nancy Maxwell tells of being introduced to a new faculty member at the Catholic university where she once worked. The chair of the new instructor's faculty, a nun, introduced her by saying, "Allow me to introduce you to Nancy Maxwell. She ministers in the library." It was, she says, an epiphany. She subsequently began to evaluate the spiritual dimension of her choice of profession. She decided it is no accident that many librarians refer to their work as a calling. Conducting an informal poll of coworkers she determined that ministry, if not the precise word many would choose to describe their service, is an apt metaphor for the way the work connects them to their patrons and to the world of knowledge. One, an agnostic, said "I'm not sure I even believe in God. But at the reference desk I feel like I am offering my work up to Something or Somebody beyond myself." (Maxwell, vii)

While I find the idea of a reference transaction as communion with the Divine, in one part of my mind, risibly self-important, there is certainly another part of me that eats it up. Maybe it's the hush or maybe the excitement that thousands of volumes arouse in a bibliofetishist, but libraries have always felt charged for me. I'm not sure I believe in God either, but I feel Something in the stacks, too – something akin to the sense of destiny that Birkerts claims is natural to the reading mind, an awareness of a unitary pattern that, if it exists by virtue of no other power, human intelligence has devised to make a chaotic world a little less terrifying. I feel a deep comfort in a library. With all of these smart people, how could the world not be getting better? It's a comfort, I would imagine, somewhat like that which some people get in church.

Like churches, Maxwell says, "Libraries are often positioned in the geographic center of community life, but they stand ready to provide refuge from it." (Maxwell, 86) They are places of silent sanctuary where people go for reflection and to be alone together. They are relatively austere in comparison to most places where people gather – there are, and Maxwell points out this is unusual in American public spaces, no refreshments served and none of the characteristic food smells that typify a movie theater, ball park or mall. Architecture in libraries, certainly during the Carnegie period but still quite frequently today, is calculated to evoke ideas of transcendence and illumination. And like churches, libraries are physical manifestations of the idea of community and "focusing lenses" for the values of a community. Maxwell notes, "Religion scholars have noted that locations deemed sacred 'apparently create a space in which personal and sometimes collective change can occur.'"(Maxwell, 89) Libraries and churches are, Greene would say, loci of situated freedom.

As libraries are to churches, so librarians are to people of the cloth. Maxwell jokes, "Given the common confusion of librarians and nuns, perhaps other similarities exist between those two populations." (Maxwell, vii) She's not the first to remark on the semi-sacerdotal quality of librarianship. Gorman quotes Pierce Butler (originator, I learned, along with Ranganathan, of the term "library science"), who said "the librarian has come to conceive his office as a secular priesthood, administering a sacrament of cultural communion to individual souls." Again, I'm conflicted. Part of me issues a mental raspberry and part of me thinks, well, isn't that what librarians do? Maxwell certainly thinks so. She details the ministerial functions that librarians perform: providing guidance and solutions in times of practical or spiritual difficulty, keeping confidences, developing,

over time, keen insight into the individuals they serve (She quotes Matthew Battles, who says, "Readers read books. Librarians read readers." (Maxwell, 29)), uplifting society and individuals, preserving traditions and linking people to an extratemporal dimension, and, of course, promoting community.

One function Maxwell describes is not just priestly but downright holy. If not actually divine, then, at any rate evocative of it. In the creation story which the three Middle Eastern monotheistic traditions relate, the Spirit of God moves upon the face of the waters and systematically creates the world by a process of disambiguation. He doesn't make it from nothing. The stuff is already there in the chaos of the waters, like some massive, eternal technical services backlog. The Lord calls creation into being by classifying it. The day was separated from the night, the land from the sea, and the beasts of the field from the birds of the air. This is this because it is not that. Yahweh is, at heart, a cataloger. Just so do librarians impose order upon chaos, summoning all of creation from the waters. "It is revealing," Maxwell writes, "that along with the information superhighway metaphor, surfing the ocean is often used to characterize the limitless Internet. The ocean can seem an uncontrollable force – the ultimate expression of disorder." Information consumed haphazardly as discrete unrelated bits in a now…this fashion is useless to human purposes. Like the matter in the primordial waters, without the meaning that context provides it remains in essence without being.

The knowledge of the library is structured and made accessible according to a hierarchical principle of arrangement and relationship that evokes another image from Genesis, the tree of knowledge. As Maxwell says, "Since the beginning of the written word libraries have not only collected knowledge but structured and therefore controlled

access to it. One frequent symbol of this imagined organized universe was, and continues to be, the tree. Among the various religious symbols and metaphors representing the chaotic universe at peace – a rainbow, a sunset, a ray of light shining through the clouds – the tree represents the orderly, organized, knowable universe." (Maxwell, 41) And in the garden of the nation's public libraries, no tree is forbidden. All citizens are invited, expected (as, arguably, were the inhabitants of that first garden) to eat the fruit thereof. The knowledge we gain thereby will not make us as gods but it will give us the agency that a free society demands, "the freedom," in Greene's words, "personally achieved when individuals make decisions they believe to be fully their own." (Greene, 101)

"Education for a democratic society is the great narrative behind the public library as an institution," McCabe writes, "The selection of this mission was an act of genius that resulted in a powerful national movement. This narrative can still inspire." (McCabe, 99) But it can only inspire, he warns, if librarians champion education, if they make evident the hostility to the general welfare of a utilitarian orientation. Our business is not a business. "The amorality of the marketplace contributed by utilitarian individualism is an unlikely foundation for a social institution," says McCabe. (McCabe, 39) Metaphors are important. They are not just ways of talking about things; they are the instrumental ways we structure our lives and our world. And the library as meeting house, as sanctuary, as the hallowed ground of democracy is much more congenial to me than an Idea Store.

Perhaps to call librarianship a ministry is too heavy handed for some. But it is, without question, a mission. The "business" of librarians is to carry light to the benighted. "Regardless of their religious persuasion," says Maxwell, "all librarians share a faith: belief in the power of the written word to uplift humanity." Garceau noted that, in 1950,

the Library Faith retained "a persistent validity." It retains that validity today. If the eloquent pleas of Postman and D'Angelo and Birkerts are to be believed, our democracy stands in greater need of the ameliorative power of books and reading than ever before. These are indeed dark times and libraries, to take a phrase from Greene, "throw light on human affairs by providing a space where persons can show 'in deed and word, for better or worse, who they are and what they can do.'" I submit that they are one of the Republic's last, best hopes. Faith, says Saint Paul, is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Keep talkin' happy talk. Keep the Faith.

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