

“THE LIBRARY AS THE CENTER OF LEARNING”

Remarks Delivered to the
Faculty of the Virginia Commonwealth University Library

by
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Good afternoon. Thanks for the invitation to speak with you today, particularly about an organization and a profession that has played a vital role in my own career as an educator. Throughout my life, librarians advanced my own education, my teaching, and my scholarly work. So I come before you today in large measure to convey my appreciation and respect for the work you do—a work, I might add, whose value to the overall life of the university too seldom receives the full measure of praise it deserves.

I come also in hope that we might think aloud together about the future of libraries—at least in the context of a thesis that I will try to explain. If, as we talk about this thesis, it resonates with you, then I think you will also find that I come here today offering you a challenge as well as appreciation.

Now, I want to acknowledge right away how commonplace talks about the future of libraries have become. I know that I do nothing extraordinary in that regard. In fact, you could reasonably think it unimaginative of me even to attempt it. Does not everyone today anticipate a world of libraries rewired by technology to power conceptually and structurally altered realities for libraries?

On the other hand, I think it would be fair of you to reply that the very question, “what is the future of libraries?” is becoming an intruding anxiety by virtue of its so frequent repetition. After all, it is hardly the case that the mission of the academic library has become so opaque that we risk losing any reason to come to work if we don’t rapidly reinvent the library!

In fact, this is the chief concern that has led me to trot out a challenging thesis on this occasion. I state the concern thus: Too often I hear hand-wringing lament about the urgent need to re-conceive the library in the face of rising technology. The laments sometimes seem to bear the stamp of a fear that the library itself has, or at least threatens to, disappear before our very eyes. What I do not understand is whether this futurism reflects a greater sense of the potential of technology to reshape humane practices or an ignorance of the fundamental mission of libraries.

My thesis, simply put is this: We can best think about the future of libraries if we can still think of them as centers of learning.

I know that the role of librarians in teaching information literacy skills to our students is a role that is prominent today and one that is likely to continue to grow in importance. But that role, in and of itself, does not begin to convey what I have in mind. Indeed, though I will forebear, I invite you in your leisure to work through the contrasting etymological implications of “bibliography” and “information literacy”. You will find a sea change there, although the root of literacy is still “to read.”

Thinking through the same matter metaphorically rather than analytically, may I not hold that the library’s special role in the academy has something to do with the fundamental nature of the academy itself. In particular, we probably best conceive of the academy as an arena of trans-generational conversations focused on the most intense and most important human questions. While students look to faculty

members to present the “thinking of the ages” as the heart of their own studies, we cannot escape the reality that, unless librarians sustain the ready availability of the conversations of the ages in the form of collections—about which I will say more later—the professors will have but little to offer the students.

The reason for this, quite clearly, is that we professors, though perhaps confident of our capacities, can never escape the realization that we never do more than to approach the full fund of wisdom that age-old conversations offer us. The fact is that, even though we may know Socrates, it is the librarian who keeps Socrates ready to hand for us to get to know. In that sense the librarian must know Socrates as well. And although I might well be able to insist that I possess a much clearer, or at least more intimate, understanding of Socrates than any librarian I happen to know, it remains true that I would know nothing of Socrates at all but for librarians who serve as match-makers.

What this metaphor means to me is that the librarian is or should be no less a member of the faculty than I. The reason for this is that it is not in fact a matter of random chance what intellectual marriages get made in libraries. Many things have been said and written that have in their own right no particular claim to considerate intellectual observation. To that extent, therefore, it is indeed the task of the library and the function of the librarian to distinguish—not between the good and the bad book—but among the works that are “right” to engage the conversation across the ages.

I have seen this illustrated in my own teaching, as recently as one year ago when I offered a course entitled, “Moral Fables and What They Tell.” That class attained heights undreamed largely because of the collaboration with a librarian, who supervised the digitization of Michigan State University’s fable collection synchronously with the class and my students’ participation in mounting an exhibit of the library’s fable holdings. I could more surely distinguish a fable from a fairy tale than my colleague, but I had not been able to do so at all but for the resources made available to my review by my colleague. The librarian’s eye for the conversation was the key; he did not require the exactitude of science in order to spawn a clear, scientific understanding. Because of him, I gave my students what was more valuable than a particular truth; I gave them the library of truths.

Yet another way that librarians have conceived of their changing role in this age of information is to see themselves as knowledge managers. I cannot resist mentioning an old saw, which that particular function brings to mind. Commencement in one ivied community evoked from a senior faculty member the observation that “universities are full of knowledge; the freshmen bring a little in and the seniors take away none at all, and the knowledge accumulates.” A lot of that knowledge accumulates in libraries.

What I have in mind, however, is the fundamental role that librarians have played for as long as we have had libraries. It has to do with the vital role that librarians who are deeply engaged with the collections they and their predecessors have built can play in assisting scholars not only in locating materials relevant to answering the questions of their research, but also in thinking through what questions to ask. Through their own active intellect and scholarship, as well as their knowledge of collections and of indexing and retrieval tools, librarians help scholars define the parameters of their research.

Emerson asks, “What is the hardest work in the world?” He answers, “Thinking.” In the hurried pace of contemporary life and the press of daily business, it is easy to get sloppy in our thinking or even to try to avoid it altogether. But, thinking is the essential work of the university and I believe it is also the essential work of librarians. We need to watch out for our tendency to think of libraries as a place where librarianship is done, rather than as a place where thinking is done.

A good friend of mine recently shared with me a passage she had read by Norman Cousins, which well captures this conception of the work of the library:

A library is not a shrine for the worship of books. It is not a temple where literary incense must be burned or where one's devotion to the bound book is expressed in ritual. A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas—a place where history comes to life.¹

I would emend Cousins to say, “where life comes to history.” My central thesis, then, is that we should find it next to impossible to conceive of the university without thinking first and fundamentally of the library.

From the library we organize our forays into inquiries that are the more important because the less foreseen. I speak of the library as a center of learning because, in this respect, it is the center of the university's reason for being.

Permit me to contrast the library with the classroom. I would expect any sympathetic listener to doubt whether the classroom were not more fully the center of learning than the library. I reply quite simply, that the classroom at its best launches our searches and our conversations, but in my experience it is the library that nurtures and sustains them. Moreover, the library engages us singly, while nevertheless presenting entire communities of discourse to our disposal. To be sure, libraries have hours (schedules) no less than do classrooms. What we do with those schedules in the one and the other case, however, differs profoundly.

Let us not think of the academic library as a book depository, therefore, not only in the information age but also throughout its history. Think, rather, that it is the expression of a recurring conception of learning through repeated generations over many centuries. That recurring conception structures an expectation that one could find a center in which the pathways to inquiry have been not only marked out but also organized so as to reward inquiry.

This important work throughout history has been the work of librarians but not only librarians. And this is where the thesis I pose to you takes on its sharpest urgency. For I maintain that the librarians have indeed been partners in thought with the faculties and departments in our universities—at least wherever they have performed properly. Typically today, or at least until recently, collection development turned around close collaboration between faculties and bibliographers. But if we focus, for an instant, not on that process of building collections, but the resulting logic of the collections built, we should begin to realize that a library is not a collection of any books or information. It is always this or that collection of books or information. And the key to the business is the “this or that.” The judgment that sustains the academic library is in fact a continuing work of active intellect (or at least should be in the best case), and that is the work that has enabled the library to become the center of learning. It is both expression and resource for the highest hopes for learning any faculties ever form.

Perhaps my notion of the library as a center of learning begins to be clear to you. I mean by it that the library's role in the university is not best understood as an administrative or support function but far rather as an academic or intellectual function. That is the reason the “collection” should always be important to the librarian; it is in fact the connection between the librarian and the professor that ought to create the “collection.” That joint intellectual construction is so essential to the continuing work of higher learning that I do not think it possible to conceive of carrying on the work of higher education without it.

Consider, for example, the now already familiar faculty lament that, “just because information is found on the web, that does not mean that it is a legitimate foundation for research.” You have surely

¹ Schielfelbein, S. “Editor's Odyssey: Gleanings from Articles and Editorials by N. C.” *Saturday Review* (April 15, 1978): 12-20.

heard it as often as I have. But what does it mean? It means that the extensive data storehouse that the web has become has not been organized by a guiding conception of human inquiry. It is a mere collection, not a library.

Every library is in fact a “special collection,” and if I were to join the futurist in attempting to foresee what would become of the so-called “traditional” library in the age of “information technology,” I would suggest that you look to the arts, practices, and competencies of your “special collections” department in order to appreciate the eventual role of the library altogether. Nor would that be a restricted role; in most respects it would constitute final recognition of the enduring role of the library as a center of learning, in which the book custodian and the book consumer, to speak blithely, are united in intellectual exertion. The librarian as curator—well informed resource—is the model of the librarian from the past and should be the model of the librarian in the future.

To reach that stage, though, universities must recognize that the role of the library, which is the foundation of the role of the librarian, must be at the center of the academic enterprise. It is not an auxiliary activity, and can no more be marginalized without harming the university than the university can be marginalized within society without harm to the society. We have centers of learning to begin with, because humane practice is fostered only by advances in learning.

A final view of what I mean in all of this may be evoked from remarks I presented to the Foreign Language Association of Virginia last fall. On that occasion, I defined a language as a store of untranslated meanings. Without developing the conception further here, I think it will be plain to you if I extend the figure to the library, as the store of meaningful human conversation. In light of the distinction adduced, I would say that the library is to the university what language is to humanity. In that light it is no less vital to the advance of humane consideration.

My friend and colleague, Gertrude Himmelfarb, in her essay “Revolution in the Library,” states that the use of information technology has enabled a “revolution, not only in library services but in the very conception of the library. But—and this is a large but—all this would be to the good only if the virtues of the new library are made to complement, rather than supplant, those of the old.”²

I choose Dr. Himmelfarb’s dictum as a fit close to these remarks, but only with the caveat, that I think the challenge of technology has been to force us to strengthen our conception of the library as a center of learning.

² Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Revolution in the Library,” *The American Scholar* 66 (Spring 1997):203.