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At Your Service

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Real Life in Timber Country

I was delighted to hear that Carol Hildebrand had been named “Educator of the Year” at the annual Citizen of the Year banquet. I’ve known her for nearly thirty years now in our small-town way, and the good news first struck me as both a well-deserved honor and an unexpected one.

Carol is a librarian who presides over the Canyonville Public Library, and though she is not a teacher or professor I saw immediately the justice of the award. She spends her working days helping people, in a dozen ways, to get the knowledge that drew them to her small section of city hall. It is heartening to watch her patient and skillful work in greeting the patrons—taking the time to listen to their worries and hopes, their joys and sorrows – and always providing gentle suggestions for sources of further information or amusement.

It was only later that I remembered the cuts. At the moment when Carol was being honored, her library was facing a severe budget cut. A few months later the Canyonville Public Library lost six of its twenty-two open-door hours—a major loss not just in library service but also to the well-being of the town.

Getting people to understand the great social value of our free public libraries has become increasingly difficult over the past twenty years. I have heard it argued that maintaining a library at public expense is a waste of tax revenue in this age of easy internet access. This line of reasoning always seems to come from people who are perfectly able to pay the small necessary annual tax, and who haven’t actually set foot in a public library for several years. If a public library were a mere tool, like a screwdriver, a dictionary or the internet, such talk would be reasonable. Fortunately, our free public libraries are much more than that.

Both the internet and the library are sources of information. The difference is that the virtual help offered by the worldwide web is impersonal, while libraries have librarians. When you walk in the door of your local public library, there is someone there who is ready to help you. Librarians aren’t there to run a scam on you, nor to try to turn a profit, nor to deceive you—all common enough occurrences in this, the so-called “information age.” A librarian is more than just a specialist but rather a sort of friend to one and all, someone with nothing more than your own good at heart.

We live in an age of epidemic loneliness. Along with our gadgets and our wealth have come increasing isolation and alienation. Our virtual magic carpets have whisked us off to illusory worlds with much to delight the eye and the intellect but nothing to please our hearts. I have often, over the years, thought of our free public libraries as temples of knowledge. It is only lately that I have come to understand that they are temples of compassion as well.

The creation of free public libraries is, in itself, a compassionate act. Properly understood, compassion is a matter of acknowledging that others are equal to us; and therefore they are deserving of the same respect and kindly assistance that we would accord ourselves. Compassion is an essentially egalitarian approach to living and our free public libraries first came about as a way to extend that personal compassion to entire communities. A public library is one of the few places that I know of where I am always treated with real respect, as an equal rather than as a mere consumer or client, patient or employee.

I am, I admit, quite fond of librarians. Alone among the professional classes, they have consistently earned my admiration throughout my life. I have lived long enough at the bottom of the societal heap to have seen oppression in both its gross and petty forms and to have



learned from it a deep-seated distrust of the credentialed products of what passes for “higher education” in our society. It has often struck me that “the evil that men do” in these modern days is mostly done by those who hold advanced college degrees. Yet, when I contemplate the horrible mediocrity of our mass culture and the terrible pain brought to so many through their inescapable poverty and through the cold-blooded ill treatment that is their daily share, it comes to me that librarians, at least, are consistently creative and helpful people.

We seldom fully know the full worth of the good we do. A kind word or an off-hand suggestion at the right time can often save a life or launch a useful career. The people we meet in our daily lives remain largely mysterious to us. A stranger met once may never be met again and yet the memory of that meeting may affect his or her life or our own for decades afterward, perhaps enriching a life or two or thousands of other lives. The front desk of a public library is not just a place where such things can happen. It is a place whose purpose is to make sure that it will happen—repeatedly and “for the common good.”

The premise underlying free public libraries is neither liberal nor conservative. It is, however, an American premise: that all of us need to have an equal opportunity to educate ourselves. I like to think of libraries as both the university of the poor and the place where the truly educated go to continue to learn. It is obvious that an education through a process which aims at obtaining accreditation is a very inferior sort of education, one that at best prepares us to learn on our own. And where but in a public library can a thorough lifelong education take place free of charge and assisted by a kindly neighbor?

It is distressing that we live in a radically libertarian age of rampant tightwadism, and sad that our free public libraries should be closed because of “bottom line” small-mindedness. Must all the public good that can’t be expressed by strings of digits and displayed on a spreadsheet lose public funding? Have we, as a society, concluded at last that we must abandon generosity and compassion in order to prosper? Not so very long ago these were said to be the essential ingredients in the humane glue that holds us together as a nation and as a people. 🌿

