
Volume 8
Number 1
The Enduring Value of Libraries (Spring 2002)

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Van Sickle, A. (2014). The Enduring Value of Libraries. *OLA Quarterly*, 8(1), 6-7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1605>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

The Enduring Value of Libraries

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On the morning of September 12, 2001, I found a message on my desk from the librarian who had worked the reference desk the prior evening. “People just wanted to talk with me,” she wrote. “I began to wonder whether I was really doing my job ... and then I realized that one of the primary jobs of a public library is that of building community!”

I could not agree more with her assessment of her “job,” and I strongly suspect that people who staffed public service desks in all types of libraries on September 11 of this past year experienced the same reaction. People came to the library to talk, to wonder, to find both information and empathy. Libraries are welcoming. By providing trained staff and open access to information, they help us make sense of that which is beyond our experience. Most of all, libraries are “safe” places to ask questions because they reflect the twin freedoms of information and expression.

In the time since September 11, libraries across the nation have been reaffirming their role as central to the life of their communities. They have held focus groups and discussion groups, created programs to support the ability of people to care for themselves during an emergency, and developed gateways to useful information about the crisis. Some libraries expanded their hours; others kept their televisions and radios tuned to late-breaking news at public service desks.

Despite the justifiable focus librarians place on being slightly ahead of the curve in the new worlds of information access opened by current technologies, there is more to libraries than information. Libraries offer the history of ideas, the gift of imagination, the comfort of stories that expand our vision and teach us to hope. Uniquely American in concept, the public library was designed to be a source of free education for an immigrant society and the cornerstone of the democratic process. Education is the key to an informed electorate. It is still the voters who hold

the power to create and support our communities—local, national, and global.

Last week a message appeared on the PNLA listserv that the Governor’s budget in the State of Washington included the proposal to close the Washington State Library. Close ... as in SHUT DOWN! An excellent letter from the State Librarian and the President of the State Library Commission listed the benefits and services that would be lost by this extreme action. The results would include the elimination of the following services: research and information services to the legislature and state agency staff; support to local communities to establish and develop their own public libraries; the opportunity to receive \$3 million dollars a year for the improvement of libraries in the state through federal support; access to special collections held only at the State Library; facilitated access to government information online; and centrally-supported library service to state institutions. Any library director faced with cuts in services can empathize with the Washington State Library staff and probably add to the litany of losses.

As powerful as this factual list is, what resonates with me is that this state agency was established in 1853 as part of the “Organic Act of the Territory of Washington,” and that its counterpart can be found in every other state in the union and many U.S. territories. The Washington State Library is part of a state and national heritage that encompasses the mission of all types of libraries. It is a legacy focused on supporting a statewide community of users, and the information provided by the Library is an essential component of decision making for legislators and state agency staff, and a means to encourage library development throughout the state.

The concept of lifelong learning is a key element in the development of an educated electorate. Lifelong learning begins with storytelling and an emphasis on reading readiness for preschoolers. It expands into formal education in schools, colleges and universities; it finds expression in adults




browsing the stacks of public libraries; and it is represented by legislators who make better decisions about pending bills based on information provided by state libraries. The idea that “it’s all on the Internet” is no substitute for the skill of professional librarians in compiling and providing authority for information, and then classifying it to provide easy access to library users.

Information ... education ... vision ... imagination ... ideas. These are all great concepts, valid components of a library. Each of these concepts supports the role of the library in the building of community. But there is another, equally valid and long-term role for libraries. When I was in graduate school, there was a young woman in my cataloging class who had dropped out of school to “find herself” by spending a year on the crew of a Turkish sailing ship. As someone who loves stories in whatever form, I was enchanted by her spirit of adventure, but I remember her most for something she said in class one day when the rest of us were stumbling through the more archaic and convoluted principles of the classification system.

“I used to sit on the deck of my ship at night,” she mused. “I would look at the moon and the stars, and I found myself thinking of the enormity of what librarians try to do. We classify, organize and make available the entire world of ideas and information, what has been known and all that ever will be known. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I could imagine no more romantic career for myself. Think about it! The doors we open!” She thought for a moment and added, “So, OF COURSE, I came back to library school.”

In our pragmatic world, words like “romance,” “mystique,” and “myth” are often viewed through the eyes of skepticism. We see ourselves as practical, focused, and technologically astute professionals, and we work diligently to diffuse the stereotype of the “idealistic librarian” many of us have tried to outlive. Most of us spend so much time justifying our

purpose and mission to our governing boards and commissions that we tend to validate our libraries numerically: reference questions answered, circulation statistics, programs offered.

But there is romance in the historical support by libraries for First Amendment freedoms. There is mystique in the unique place libraries have earned in their role as community builders. There is even a mythic quality to the prevailing idea that libraries are somehow “good”—right up there with motherhood and apple pie. As we expand our offerings and create new opportunities for our users, we would do well to remember that while the tools we use change, our enduring value lies in our ability to serve and sustain our communities, to continue to provide “safe” places for discussion and inquiry, and to connect people to ideas that expand their imagination and vision in ways that may, ultimately, facilitate a better world. 

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