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ADDRESS*

by

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Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare

MISS LUDINGTON, MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION, DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I am grateful for the opportunity you have given me to be a part of your conference.

For a layman to speak to such a distinguished professional organization is always a challenge. In thinking of what I might say to you today, I tried to think of exactly what a library means to me and what it must mean to you.

A library is more than a "repository" of knowledge. It is more than a place where something is deposited for safe keeping. A library is an intellectual arsenal of our democracy. It is a treasure-house of knowledge which continuously encourages people to roll back the frontiers of their learning.

Your organization by its vitality has proven its dedication to one of America's greatest traditions—freedom of the mind. It has proven its dedication to its mission of supporting our free educational system.

It is clear that you feel in yourselves a most serious responsibility in these respects, and I cannot help asking myself if we who pass through your doors are fulfilling our obligations. I think of how we must seem to you as we stream through your doors—singly, by the dozens, hundreds, thousands.

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Why do we come to your libraries? As individuals, we come to learn. And in this particular place—the library—we are above the tumult and the shouting, the demands on our time and attention. Here—in the library—we are the seeker rather than the sought.

In the library, we are alone. We may have gone to the library with a friend, but within its walls, we are alone.

Is it not significant that the sanctity of our individualism is so profoundly manifested in this place—the library? The library, where the free mind may seek—and perhaps find answers.

There are two other circumstances in life which equally recognize the sanctity of our individualism. They are religious worship and free elections.

As we enter your doors and are blessed with this individualism, I think we also assume a grave responsibility. Walt Whitman recognized this in his "Democratic Vistas" when he said:

"Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but in highest sense, and exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work..."

Whitman also said:

".....Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does."

He did not put an exclamation point after that sentence, but I should like to do so.
And while the reader has a responsibility to the book, so does the book have a responsibility to the reader. An eminent librarian of Congress once said in a paper he read before the Social Science Convention at New York in October, 1869:

"The true question to ask respecting a book, is, has it helped any human soul?"

And so we have, I believe, in these two thoughts the essential basis for our mutuality of interest, of responsibility—the reader's responsibility to the book, the book's responsibility to the reader.

And the librarian, with his insistence upon the sanctity of the individual in the library, with his insistence upon the individual's right to seek knowledge and truth, becomes the instrument that assists man to push back the barriers of ignorance and move forward under the shield of enlightenment.

Some years ago I glanced up at the facade of the Union Station in Washington, and I shall always be grateful for that chance look. I was caught and entrapped by an inscription, which I later learned was a Spanish proverb. It said:

"He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him."

In his "Life of Dr. Johnson," Boswell made an interpretation of this proverb. He said, "so it is in travelling, a man must carry knowledge with him if he would bring home knowledge."

I like Boswell's interpretation. It has a special significance to me for what librarians do. For I conceive of librarians as equipping people for their expeditions.
This function that you perform may seem, on the surface, only to facilitate some student in preparing an essay ... some person to read for entertainment ... a writer or researcher to determine a fact.

But in the long view, these people, with your assistance, are being outfitted so that they may make the most of their travels--their travels in personal affairs, their travels in public affairs.

This process of equipping people to take their place in the world -- to make the most of their travels in life -- happens over the total span of a lifetime.

For those who work in Government--their responsibilities are transacted more efficiently, with more understanding, because of government libraries--and librarians.

For young people who are in elementary, secondary, and higher institutions of education--their job of learning is made easier, richer, by libraries and librarians.

For all of us, whether in business or at home, our lives are made fuller, wiser, by libraries and librarians.

Our great network of government, school, and public libraries is playing an even more significant role than ever before. It is being called upon to play an increasingly important part in our educational process. It is being called upon to meet certain needs of the rapidly growing number of older people in our country. It is being called upon to make easily available the record of the past so that men may deal more wisely with the problems of the present.

In education, the need for good libraries has increased. Today the American schools are tackling the tremendous job of educating a vastly increased generation of youngsters. There are grave shortages
of adequate classrooms and well-trained teachers. But there must never be a lack of good books from which young people can learn and prepare themselves for upholding the American heritage which is theirs.

In better equipping Americans for their role of leadership in the world, the American Heritage Project is outstanding. I have been greatly impressed with the skill and ingenuity with which this project has brought together Americans from all walks of life to consider and discuss the fundamental issues of today against the backdrop of history.

Whatever the role the library is playing in each of our lives to enable us to meet head on the problems and challenges that life brings, we need turn to it as an intellectual arsenal where we can replenish our inner supplies. Just as the reservoir runs dry, so does the human body and mind if it does not have this chance to fill up.

We can never be sure that each of us is doing his fair share in meeting our joint responsibility toward educating and maintaining the freedom of our people—toward the library as a treasure house of knowledge, an intellectual arsenal.

You as librarians may feel at times that you are not meeting your full responsibilities in this great trust—the library. We as non-professionals certainly must recognize that we do not always measure up on our side of the scales.

Today we sail an ocean of seething currents, some of them, it seems, so dark... so untried.

If I understand your feelings, you are troubled, deeply troubled because you feel that the great principle of freedom of the mind is in jeopardy.
If I understand your temper, you are outraged. And as I witness your actions, it is evident that you are willing to fight for what you believe.

In the noblest tradition of your function, let us take counsel—not of our fears, but of our evolution, and of our existing way of life.

Where, may I ask, is there a better place than our libraries themselves to find support and reassurance of our mutually shared and basic faith in the fullest exercise of the democratic process—in its essential health and vigor?

Here—in the library—is where students may go who have been assigned both sides of a debate. In some parts of the world only one side of the question may be admitted to discussion.

Is the fact that our libraries so function today encouraging?

I know it is. And I also know that you wonder if this function is being impaired. If, in fact, it is in danger of being wrecked.

I have no fear—none whatever—of the final answer.

Controversy has been a part of this Republic not only since it was founded, but in the process of its founding.

I hear people refer to the difference between constructive controversy and intemperate, destructive controversy. In the long view where the democratic process is concerned, I think this is really a distinction without a difference.

Walt Whitman, who was indigenous to our democratic development, lived in a period of national turmoil and strife, and his life and observations included perhaps the Nation's most turbulent and terrifying experience—the War Between the States.
Let us listen, for a moment, to Whitman's counsel. Again, from "Democratic Vistas," he said:

"Not for nothing does evil play its part among us...Sham will always be the show, like ocean's scum; enough, if waters deep and clear make up the rest....

"...a nation like ours....is not served by the best men only, but sometimes more by those that provoke it--by the combats they arouse. Thus national rage, fury, discussion, better than content. Thus, also the warning signals, invaluable for after times."

Let us listen also, for a moment, to a contemporary voice, the voice of Henry M. Wriston, president of Brown University. In a recent article, he said:

"...we tend to regard the confusion of tongues as more characteristic of the current scene than of bygone times.

"The reason is simple; history emphasizes what was done, and what was said by those who did it. It spends little time on the alternatives which were not acted upon or on the utterances of those who failed to achieve their purposes; the pages devoted to minority opinion--that which did not prevail--are relatively few....But since history gives short shrift to arguments that failed, there is the natural illusion, common to each successive generation, that the current confusion of tongues is new in the land; in the days of our fathers there was no such cacophony of voices..."

Against this analysis showing the similarity of yesterday and today, Mr. Wriston then points out:

"There is nothing in the Bill of Rights that promises the freedom guaranteed can always be enjoyed in comfort or in a serene atmosphere.
In the long history of freedom, discomfort has always accompanied speaking on controversial matters. There never has been a time when there were not social sanctions against candor. But if freedom is to amount to anything, one must be ready to pay the price of freedom. When a man speaks out he must be ready to receive, if not to absorb, criticism."

And so in this Nation and in this world, the history of our great controversies proves to us that when freedom is under attack those who have learned under it will reach new heights and establish new gains in its defense.

Many revered authors on the shelves of your libraries were in their day condemned.

Orthodoxy condemned Keats because he did not write like Pope.

Orthodoxy condemned Swinburne because he was unchristian.

Walt Whitman lost his position in the Federal Government because of the independent thought in his private writings.

There will always be controversy and at the moment when the struggle is taking place the living generation will feel the sharpest impact, and the greatest peril. But our generation and the ones to follow will take up the struggle and will serve the cause of the Republic as well as those gone before us.

You as librarians must continue to stimulate our search for knowledge. You must be on watch to guard our freedoms.