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Reflections on Libraries in the 21st Century

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I have a longtime love of libraries, reaching back to my earliest days, when my mother would leave me off at our town library while she did errands elsewhere. Our library had been built at the turn of the 20th century and was designed by the same architect who built our church so there were similarities. Facing each other on either side of the street, they looked like a matching set. The library, a huge stone structure, with ornate stained glass windows, resembled more a cathedral than a house of books. It was easy to absorb the essence this building was supposed to represent, a reverence for books. This early experience exposed me not only to books but to a feeling of flight. My mother always left me off at the entrance to the children's room. I was about 9 or 10 at the time and I would walk right past the children's room into the so, for a few wonderful hours, I was on my own in a huge building full of books, which in itself gave me a sense of freedom but, I also learned that the books that rested on those mahogany shelves could take me just about anywhere. The librarians knew me and helped me find interesting things – for some reason I was drawn to the psychology section and always browsed in there. Or perhaps in the fiction section. Willa Cather was a favorite in a vast field of shelves. This was like heaven to me! I had no idea that when this building was built, it was state-of-the-art.

And so it is my pleasure now, so many years later, to find that I am sometimes invited to libraries to read from my work. These ventures take me around to many places and a variety of libraries that range from the grand city libraries, like the one of my youth, all echoing marble and mosaic tiled floors, to the little places in towns I have sometimes never heard of. A couple of winters ago, for instance, I traveled to Post Mills, Vermont (an outpost of the larger village of Thetford, pop. 2,617). I wondered how such a small town could support two libraries but the more often I visit these little book shrines, the more I realize how tightly woven these institutions are into the fabric of their communities, how much love and tradition they represent.

The reading in Post Mills was scheduled for seven on a cold February evening. I found my way, two hours north of my home on icy roads. From the outside, the library was small, wooden, with white clapboards, black trim, and thin, ornate pillars holding up the gable front. A painted sign which read The Peabody Library swung from hooks on a post near the road. I parked, tight beside snow banks and crept

up the slippery path to the shelter of the porch, lit by a single bulb. I opened one of the double doors and stepped directly into the 19th century.

The single room was long and wide with high ceilings. Stairways on either side led to balconies lined with old books, spines dark brown and solemn. Colorful new bestsellers lined the wings of the front desk. In front of me was a very long library table, not unlike a banquet table, and around it sat a goodly number of people, mostly women, some young, some older, some ancient, all regarding me with curiosity and warmth. They welcomed me and indicated that they had saved me the seat at the head of the table. I made my way past the stacks to the throne-like chair. The room smelled of antiquity. I looked around at the ornate woodwork, railings, and figural enhancements, all freshly painted and polished. I felt totally embraced by this little temple and all it held inside.

I began to read, choosing sections that felt right for the people I was with. The lights were somewhat dim, giving me the feeling of a séance or the meeting of a secret society. Many of the women were busily knitting or doing needlework while I read passages from my various books so their heads were bent over their work as if in prayer. Occasionally, they looked up to smile or laugh, encouraging me with their eyes. At the end, they asked questions and we sat and talked as if we had all just shared a good meal together.

The evening at the Peabody Library came to a slow end as everyone there was suitably proud of the library and gave me a brief rundown of its history. All around me, there was no shortage of love for or pride in this unique library. I crept home to New Hampshire along the wintry roads, suddenly curious why libraries exist at all in this new world of the internet and books subscribed to on Kindle or other electronic devices. In the current economic and technologic climate, I wondered what keeps a library like that alive.

In the case of the Peabody Library, the answer is (somewhat) simple. Above the door, there had been a huge, gilt-framed portrait of an elegantly dressed man of the 19th century, hand inside his vest in Napoleonic stance. From where I sat at the end of the table, he appeared to be looking straight at me. I inquired as to who he was and learned that he was George Peabody, the man who had endowed this building and its upkeep even to the present day, even though he only ever spent one winter in Post Mills, with his uncle, at the time he was eleven. He never came back but he felt strongly enough about Post Mills to give the town this long-lasting gift. So that answered the question of money for that particular library. Many other libraries in New England and elsewhere are funded by Andrew Carnegie's devotion to the idea of public libraries. But most libraries exist on taxpayer's money, and facilities vary widely from town to town.

The library in the tiny town of Roxbury, Vermont, just had a toilet installed, a fact that merited an article that was syndicated across the country. The tone of the article inferred that the writer felt he had discovered a prehistoric village nesting undiscovered in the Green Mountains. Not really. Here in New

England we have plenty of small libraries without such conveniences. I know of several that have neither running water nor bathroom facilities. If, when visiting such libraries, I have the need, I am escorted to the nearby town hall or to the neighbor's house next door. It's a minor inconvenience that's worked for years. Most regular patrons know the situation and come prepared.

Libraries in New England lead stubborn existences. I can think of a library that exists in what would otherwise be the downstairs living room of a lovely house in the center of a very small town. When you go in, ring the bell on the desk and the wife of the house will come downstairs and take care of you. Once when I went there, her hair was in curlers and children were crying upstairs. I recently went over to the little library in a neighboring town and asked for a certain book. The librarian didn't have it on the shelves so she asked me to wait while she drove home to get it. On her way out, she locked the door and flipped the sign from Open to Closed. Another one-room affair, the library had invested in computers, which sat blinking into the sunlight. New books with colorful dustjackets lined the oaken bay window. Magazines such as *Martha Stewart Living* and *GQ* and *Rolling Stone* fanned out beside them. I sat in the rocking chair beside the window and read while I waited for her to return. I didn't mind being locked in. It was warm in there. I thought it would be a lovely place to spend an afternoon.

The library in the town I now call home is a little brick Gothic gem that was built in the 1800s as a church for the town's millworkers to attend. Soon after, a bigger church was built and the earlier one was abandoned and eventually fell into ruin, losing its roof, floor, and windows. The building sits lakeside so the basement filled with water and the children of the town used it as a swimming pool during the summer and a skating rink in winter. But the building itself, being brick, survived those times and eventually became the sweet little one-room library it is today. This is not unusual in our small New England towns. Our library, another one-room beauty, is open only three days a week. They'd like it to be more but resources are scarce, another sorrow they share with many small town libraries.

The library, as an institution, was once a place strictly reserved for learning, which is why the library in my hometown could have been mistaken for a university – or a cathedral. And that was also what was behind Andrew Carnegie's passion, to create a place where anyone, no matter how poor, could pursue learning, at a time when just reading books was considered to be a privilege. Bookstores were scarce or nonexistent and the purchase of a book was a major expenditure. Private libraries were the domain of the wealthy. Robert Pike, author of *Tall Trees*, *Tough Men* and *Spiked Boots*, grew up in Upper Waterford, Vermont, observing the river drives and the drivers which gave rise to the books for which he was noted in his later years. But first he had to get beyond where he was raised. The library in Upper Waterford was part of the local saloon and Pike told me that he read every book in that library in his very young years, while sitting shoulder to shoulder with river drivers quenching their thirst at the bar. Bolstered by that unusual beginning, Pike went on to Dartmouth and then to Harvard for his Ph.D. and

became a professor but his early education took place in that rough and possibly unique saloon/library combo. He never forgot that the library provided him with his education, something that all libraries were intended to do, in the towns fortunate enough to have one, in those early days. That was the gift that men like George Peabody and Andrew Carnegie intended to give these communities.

In 1833 the Unitarian minister in Peterborough proposed the creation of the Peterborough Town Library, a collection of books that would be owned by the people and freely loaned to the town residents, hence the first free library. Not everyone owned books in those days, just as citizens these days do not all own a computer and go to the library for free use of the technology available there.

I'm aware of the challenges to many libraries and librarians these days and the stretch of the mind that is necessary to look into the future and see what might be important down the line in accordance with their needs. The challenge to stay relevant is always lurking.

In 2004 I traveled to Seattle to visit my sister and, while there, I was anxious to see the much-talked about new library in Seattle, designed by the famed architect, Rhem Koolhaas. The library is deliberately designed to look like it might fall over or certain parts of it might tumble to the ground. It is radically out of balance. I took the tour, conducted by one of the librarians and was surprised to learn that one of the most important considerations in their design was accommodating the homeless – a very puzzling and persistent problem in Seattle. The main floor is wide open so no one can hide behind anything and the bathrooms are painted in specially mixed paints, colors known to be repellent. The women's room is painted ice white. Apparently no one will stay very long in a room painted that color. And the men's room is some kind of orange that similarly makes people anxious to leave. It's pretty sure that Andrew Carnegie could never have predicted such an outcome for libraries and their use.

Many libraries have a Friends group that organizes book sales and other fundraisers. These events range from the standard book sales to talks by local celebrities to story circles wherein the older residents tell stories about the days gone by. Often, the Friends provide cookies and punch to make the gathering more festive. If nothing else, the evenings liven up a town, summer and winter, give it a stronger sense of community, and make it seem like a great place to live. As well, the funds raised helps buy new books.

But savvy librarians have seen the future and brought it to their patrons. Recent innovations at many small town libraries include the investment in a satellite dish which affords patrons the use of high-speed internet and wi-fi. These are popular additions in towns where cell phone signals are sometimes nil and access to high-speed is still widely sought. Can't get it at home? Go to the library, just as those early patrons like Robert Pike went to expand their horizons. Many now make use of this free and mysterious service. In addition, the library internet access draws those who are searching for employment, apparently a whole new reason for going to the library.

Sometimes, coming home late at night, I see a car, sometimes two, parked beside our darkened town library, the eerie glow of a computer screen illuminating the interior of the car. Wi-fi's a miraculous way for libraries to expand their hours and, even more so than ever, the library can take you just about anywhere.

Six years ago, that beautiful idyllic library from my youth, where I wandered unfettered through the brass-railed stacks, blew up! The entryway and the main floor of the building were destroyed by a mysterious gas leak, all still unresolved. I didn't know this until I was researching the building for this talk. No matter, I was horrified to learn of this and yet, six years and 5 million dollars later, the library entrance has been rebuilt, somewhat radically changed from its earlier appearance. But still recognizable and still dignified. The need for change sometimes shakes us up and precipitates changes, changes we might never have made without this sudden need. Enormous changes at the last minute come in the most surprising ways.. Who knew that the homeless population would cause radical changes in library design? Who knew that computers would cause libraries to feel threatened? Who knew that tiny libraries in tiny rural towns would not only continue to maintain their significance in these changing times but in some cases, become even more important, the glue of a community. We think we know the future

But we never really do.



For more information about Edie Clark's work, go to www.edieclark.com