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Public Discourse and Libraries

Two people, with distinguished lifetime careers in the world of public Libraries in Pennsylvania, have had a profound effect on the way I think about Libraries. It is not so important to say who they are or were, and how they have contributed in their professional roles, but rather what they said to me that so profoundly influenced my thinking about the importance of Libraries to the public discourse.

The first person spoke about intellectually isolated populations and broadened my view considerably about who fits into the meaning of such a term as “intellectually isolated.” I began with a clear understanding that inner city populations often feel so isolated, that residents may suffer from a prejudiced and otherworldly characterization of their lives, and that they may be ill prepared to reach out for the broader benefits of life in America. I knew that there could be a sense of deprivation, especially a deprivation of opportunity based on skin color.

What this first person showed me is that there can be something akin to that characterization too in rural life, the rural life that applies to some of Westmoreland County, the area served by WLN Libraries. People in these relatively sparsely populated areas can also be deemed intellectually isolated for lack of integration into the larger scope and meaning of “society.”

In both cases, inner city and rural, that isolated characterization is maybe shared in the sense of being and feeling apart culturally and intellectually from the larger, more nuanced world, with all the opportunity for intellectual growth that non-isolation implies. Libraries must attend to both confined societies in their role as traders in books and information generally. So said person number one.

Of course, we are all culturally and intellectually isolated in some ways, more or less.

The second person spoke of democracy and the essential role of Libraries towards preserving it for all. In fact, she held the strong view that there can be no democracy without public Libraries. They are the bearers of Truth in a world that is hell bent on obfuscating Truth.

I might temper that somewhat by saying first that it is not that Truth cannot be found outside of the Library, say on the more modern vehicles of Internet or television for example. It is that Truth in those places is so mightily and intentionally obscured by fiction and self-serving lies that to find the Truth is a task beyond the capabilities of many on their own, even when supposedly “educated.” People’s information skills have not caught up with technology change. The vexing question is how to mine for the gold of Truth by oneself, before even being cognizant of how easily it is obscured.

Many just cannot distinguish the informed from the uninformed. And, their predispositions often make them cherry-pick only that which they already believe. Belief is not necessarily Truth, not at least in the sense that objective-minded scientific thinking requires.

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So thank you to my two earliest Library friends for starting me off in my journey through the Library World with this philosophical understanding about the importance of the public Library and its part in preserving, and opening doors.

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