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When I told one of my closest friends, the artist Mary Pratt, that I was going to be speaking to the gathering of urban libraries, she said, “I hope you’ll tell them how we both are madly in love with the man called Mr. Dewey Decimal.” And it’s a fact that both Mary and I, having been bossy creative little girls, fell in love with the Dewey Decimal System as frequent library goers. When I left St. John’s, Mary threw into my bag the 11th abridged edition of Dewey Decimal Classification saying, “They say they’re going to get rid of it so we’d better keep the bible.”

On the plane coming home I glanced at it, looking at the categories that had meant the most to me, 800 (Literature and Belles Lettres) realizing that C810, which would have been Canadian Literature, was really non-existent when I was growing up and going to the familiar 820 for English Literature. I can’t help it, I will always be hooked on Dewey Decimal and whenever I come across a second-hand book with those library numbers on them, I do feel a little pang and do feel that 940 to 990, being General History, meant a lot to me too. I guess I’ll just never get over it; I continue to go to second-hand book sales looking for books that other people stole out of libraries and incorporating them into mine.

I love to talk to librarians and I love to talk to them about the meaning of what reading and of what storage of books means in a civilized society built of communities that wish to include each other.

We know that we owe an incalculable debt to the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who supported 2,500 communities throughout the English-speaking world to build libraries. Regina, for instance, was given \$50,000 in 1907 which was an enormous amount of money then. They knew what they were about because their library crest read, (and I think it still does), “Qui Legit Regit” (translation is “The one who reads, rules”).

We just can’t begin to measure the extraordinary impact of Andrew Carnegie’s gift to the world. Millions upon millions of people have been informed, enlightened, educated and inspired by these libraries which are truly public institutions in all the best senses of that phrase. They are at the very root and heart of thousands of communities and it is your job to make sure that they remain that way.

Growing up as an immigrant child in Ottawa in the forties, the library was central to my life. I really discovered it on my own because it was halfway between my home and the public school which I went to, which was ten blocks away. Nobody thought of driving me to school; we didn’t have a car nor did any other people’s parents seem to have cars so we went in a little group and I would always peel off at the library because I quickly learned to understand that great Hebrew saying: “Hold the book in your hand and you are a pilgrim at the gate of a new city.”

I was at that gate so often that I was allowed the free range of my school's library (as I was known as a book worm who was bad at baseball), and eventually of Ottawa's main municipal branch. It was a Carnegie library, a beautiful building with grand steps and columns – quite the grandest of buildings in Ottawa except for the Parliament buildings. And right beside it was what they called the Girls and Boys House – a little Victorian brick house which smelled wonderfully of old paper. I spent hours after school there, opening books and inhaling their divine fragrance before making my choice of six for the next two weeks.

I used to pass the library twice a day, walking back and forth from school. Eventually I was able to supplement my six books every two weeks with books from my school library. At Kent Street public school, I had long discussions with the wonderful Miss Lois Stevenson, a librarian who also taught us rhythmic dance which we performed in small white muslin togas which had been supplied by the school. The spirit of Isadora Duncan ruled over us. I was eleven and we talked about all the things I was reading and wanting to read. One day she said: “Adrienne, I'm going to give you a book, but it's on a confidential basis. You are to read it without telling anybody else about it. Then you can just tell me what you think of it, and we will have a discussion.”

Then I became a pilgrim to a marvellous and secret world. What freedom! The book was *Jane Eyre*. She never asked what I thought of the relationship of Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre and the lady in the attic. I wasn't thinking about those bigamous possibilities either. I just thought it was a fantastic story and I told her so. Miss Stevenson said: "Well, if you liked that, here's another one written by her sister." Of course it was *Wuthering Heights* and I went absolutely mad. I was twelve and I thought "When is Heathcliff coming into my life?"

When we went to our cottage on McGregor Lake in the Gatineau, I longed to lean out the window and shout "Heathcliff, Heathcliff" the way Cathy had. I was obsessed and focussed, but Heathcliff still has never made his way across the imagined heath to my opened window.

And what did I learn from this? Among many other things, I learned that the imaginations of others are so great that they can capture mine. They seem to make me theirs; I felt and dreamed what I read. Such adventures were no templates for what life was going to be like necessarily, but I was moved to a wider range of emotions than I could ever have experienced for myself.

So you see that I learned early that the book could open us up to emotions, worlds, everything that we could not possibly live in all our lives combined. At twelve, when I graduated to the adult library, I was dizzy with delight. The library had a ventilation system so the smell was not as strong, but I could still find that fragrance within certain books that hadn't been opened for a long time. With its beautiful Doric columns and the ascending stairs between them, it was a temple. It was my temple of the worship of reading.

I remembered when I was pulling together my notes and writing my memoirs *Heart Matters* two years ago that I had a little ritual that I had not remembered till I was plumbing the depths of my memory to write the book. The ritual was that I started to read the books that I was going to take out at a table in a library before I had checked them out and that half hour with the new treasures made me so happy that when I checked them out, I would walk home with them under my arms, having made them already mine.

Naturally, the architectural jewel that was the Ottawa library, with its gorgeous Doric columns and the ascending majestic stairs, was torn down some thirty years ago to be replaced by a hideous new concrete and indeed irredeemably ugly 20-storey building belonging to the Federal Government. The library is still tucked away within, invisible from the street. It is a particularly graceless reminder to me of what Philistines most people building government buildings are.

In this beautiful building, I learned about Pericles and Alcibiades from a terrific early 20th century writer named Gertrude Atherton. She sure doesn't ring many bells today – she was out of fashion even when I was reading her fifty years ago. Her books were extremely fragrant. But I'd still highly recommend her to anyone, especially the young. For historical fiction, she can't be beat. I don't know if anybody else was reading them. I doubt it. It was definitely my private odyssey. But that's where I first heard the oratorical gift of Pericles, where I learned about ancient Athens and democracy and the speeches of Pericles that began with the exhortation "Men of Athens." When people ask me how and why I quote people like Pericles or Thucydides in speeches, the answer is simple. I was learning about all these people and these ideas from these historical novels when I was still a teenager. They were a revelation to me and they were an education that ran parallel to what I was getting in school.

But I certainly was getting a good education in Ottawa's public schools. I was becoming a true Canadian. Working with Miss Stevenson, Miss Jackson, Miss Dunlop and all the other vestal virgins of learning who had taken their vows to Canadian public schools at the time, I learned our history, our geography and our values as a people. I was given excellent instruction in English and eventually in French. There were only a handful of public schools in that Ottawa of 90,000 people and I went to school with all kinds of children. Some had to be examined once a month. They were called out by the school nurse to see if they had what we called "cooties". This was head lice and some kids also had ringworm, but they still came to school with those stockings on their head and they were not shunned. We were acutely aware of poverty in the forties.

The new War Museum, which opened two years ago, was built on land called Lebreton Flats which was near my public school. Many of the houses there did not have indoor plumbing and our classmates who came from there didn't have birthday parties, although we invited them to ours. There were toxic industrial plants and the land had to be completely decontaminated before the War Museum could be built. In any case, we understood that for whatever reasons, the home conditions of some of our classmates were not the same as ours. But it didn't make any difference to us as kids. I remember thinking that they weren't different even though I had been to their houses a couple of times to play after school and realized that it didn't look like ours. But the real jolt came when a girl from our grade 8 class had to leave because – amazingly to me – she was going to have a baby. Then I knew there was a difference.

These public schools, then and now, are the bedrock of the society we have built in Canada and the public libraries have a place right alongside them. The two are interwoven. They are the warp and woof of our democracy. We need even more now to ensure that all our citizens have this access to the knowledge, the skills and the opportunities that they need if they are to participate responsibly in society. Our schools and our libraries are essential to this success because they are public. They are essential to the social equality that Canadians are working so hard to build.

We have a country which is taking in over 250,000 immigrants a year and aims to make that 1% of population or 310,000. We cannot possibly hope to make people feel at home in our society, to make them feel as though they belong and can participate without a strong public library system. And I'll come back to that later.

The broad social benefits issuing from libraries were never more obvious than during the Great Depression. My dear friend Doris Anderson who has left us told me that that was particularly true on the Prairies when she was growing up. It was very important for men who could not get jobs, but who had some education, to be able to go to the public library and read books. Many unemployed people, refusing to succumb to despair, turned to their local library. They found in them a path to education (probably using the Dewey Decimal System) or a source of pleasure in a very bleak time. That's what books did and that's what they still do. They help us to understand, to think in larger terms, to gain some hope and to prepare ourselves for what may come next.

I was very fortunate as Governor General to visit a large number of libraries around Canada. And one that particularly impressed me with its renewed sense of mission was the Carnegie Centre in Vancouver. One of the most exciting places where I have been is an old Carnegie-like library like the one I loved so much in Ottawa. It's in Chinatown, the original Chinatown, where many people – the older ones – still don't speak much English. It's also right next to an urban Aboriginal community. And it's in the most troubled part of town – the downtown east side – with serious poverty, drug and homelessness problems. Its nearest neighbours are soup kitchens and church halls where food and clothing are distributed.

But in the midst of this, the Carnegie Centre is a place of tremendous hope. It is still a library as we've always thought of them, with the staircase and its Shakespeare stained glass window. But this is a library with books, newspapers and magazines in English and Chinese, with drop-in and workshop rooms where people come to write poetry or draw or simply chat. It has a cafeteria with healthy food at very good prices. It's like a very civilized gigantic living room in the middle of a community. In that kind of community, we can sense what the real mission of a library or any kind of neighbourhood hub can be and should be in Canada.

The Centre brings people together in an atmosphere in which they can cultivate their minds, shape their attitudes towards the people and places where they live and also to imagine that there are other ways of life, there are other ways to grow. They learn what truth and freedom are really all about, that they are not about being on one side or the other or always sharing the same views. Freedom is about access and opportunity within a society, where each of us can find a dignified way to contribute to a united whole.

I visited the Carnegie Centre twice in six years and each time I met with good poets, crazy people, obsessive artists, but what this place was saying to them and to me was that there is room for all of us and that the more we get to know each other on this basis, the better it is for all of us. Society is much too segmented into silos – that very popular metaphorical image – but we should not ever accept to be in silos. Places which help us to mix it all up are helping us to become better citizens.

And it's this that I wish to have for our new citizens. That they can enter a library and feel that they are going to be at home, that there will be ways of giving them special access to the technology which might be difficult if they don't speak good English, to reading groups, to activities which involve more than the solitary (albeit delightful) joy of one person, one book. The humanity of what reading brings to us is essential for us to understand.

When I used to go to schools all over the country, one of the things I liked to do with kids who were in grade 5 – the obstinate age for children as far as I'm concerned – I would follow the reading with some questions to see what the effect of the book or the chapter was. I used to often read the opening chapter of *Anne of Green Gables* – the one where Anne is met at the railway station and there is the huge disappointment on the part of Matthew and Marilla that she is a girl and not a boy. The book has always been my favourite because I think it taught me more than anything what it is to be a Canadian than any history book could have.

The children in Moncton and I talked about Anne as an orphan, the terrible feeling of being left out and how she finds a way to become part of a life of the people who have taken her out of the orphanage and a way to become loved. An eager and insightful discussion began among these little students. They came out with the most extraordinary thoughts that had been prompted by the book. One told me about his parent's divorce, while another spoke about the bitter misunderstandings at the dinner table. This was all related to the fact of Anne being an orphan, and Anne feeling unwanted. My little talk with the children showed me that reading books can do something for them but nothing else can. Because books can be a form of salvation, a way out of loneliness, a method of understanding and of being understood. That is why literacy without imagination makes for a very sparse and one dimensional culture.

Our great writer, Robertson Davies, said: “Culture is simply the way in which people live ... One of our difficulties in Canada is that too many of us insist on thinking of culture as a kind of lacy frill which is attached to the edge of life, whereas to be worth anything it must be the whole fabric of life.” The way that these Moncton children, for example, were able to imagine the life of another and then relate it to themselves and their own situations shows that libraries are not just store houses of information. The public library really is a kind of temple and it ministers to the needs of the spirit as much as it does to the requirements of our minds.

The word “public” is critical, just as it is in understanding our approach to education. It means that libraries are for everybody. It does not mean that everybody will get the same thing out of them. An egalitarian society means that everybody gets an equal start, a field of opportunity that is level. But it certainly doesn’t mean that everyone ends up homogenized.

George Locke was the Chief Librarian in the Toronto system eighty years ago, when he wrote “The pride of a library is not the mere possession of books, but rather the explanation of the significance of those treasures in the development of interest and pleasure among those who may have the taste, but not the material means of satisfying it.”

It is interesting to note that when George Locke became the Chief Librarian, in addition to the French and the German volumes that the library already held, he began to stock Toronto libraries with books in Russian, Yiddish, Italian and Lithuanian specifically to meet the needs of arriving immigrants. Our libraries must meet the needs of many diverse populations and I think that that is what our public libraries have always meant and still mean to our country.

When I hear about a municipality attempting to close a library it sends me into such a rage that I simply can't control myself. I usually have to go out and speak about it as I did several times during my term as Governor General.

Libraries are the raw material of which democracy is made. They put books as well as other doorways to wisdom and wonder – now technology – into the hands of people who might not otherwise have access in that context of culture and learning. Everybody can have access to a computer now and do all sorts of things – look at Facebook; Google madly; watch porn. But in a library you can actually give people access to something that will open their minds, that will refresh their imaginations. Their background doesn't matter. Their economic status doesn't matter. And for children, it's especially meaningful that it doesn't matter whether their parents can or do read, or whether there's a book in the house. If they can get to a library, they can read for themselves. If they can get to a library, the doors of the world are open.

I have a friend who is a great Quebec director, playwright and performer. Gilles Maheu grew up in a harshly utilitarian setting (that is putting it kindly) in the east end of Montreal where survival had to be his family's main pursuit. He wrote: "Books are the meaning of humanity. They permitted me to become the man I have become. I've had two lives: one before I met books and one after. I came from a difficult background where the only reading in the house was *Allô Police* and *Reader's Digest*. I was expelled from school in grade 11 and I never went back. One day somebody spoke to me about the fact that there was a possibility I could become a clerk at the Bibliothèque nationale – the national library in Montreal. I jumped on it ... and I realize today that this job saved my life. It made me the man of theatre, the man of words, the man of acting that I have become ... I want to say that culture can help wounds and save lives."

That is what we want to do for our new citizens. I believe that we have not got much time to help new citizens to be put into the mainstream of Canadian life. When I was growing up, one would always hear that people would become Canadians “within a generation”. My feeling is that that time is unrealistic because it’s too long. Time to speed it up. There is too much open to everyone in the world of the good and the bad for us to believe that a generation – 35 years – is a time that people must spend in some kind of limbo of not belonging and barely tolerated. That is why I asked the government for a legacy project which is called The Institute for Canadian Citizenship/L’Institut pour la citoyenneté canadienne, which was established as a foundation and not-for-profit organization almost immediately after my leaving Rideau Hall. Its purpose is to help new Canadians, who have already lived in the country obviously or they wouldn’t be citizens, to become part of what we really know as Canada, those of us who have lived here all our lives or who have become acculturated in the last 25-30 years.

I want established Canadians to be aware of the new citizens as vigorous students of our public schools, community colleges, technical schools and universities. I want you as librarians to be aware that there are 250,000 new co-citizens who could use the resources that you steward, who come from different backgrounds but who have something to offer. New citizens come with a strong sense of family and community bonding, even if they come from countries in anarchy, lacking true democracy. Remember they are not just taking from us; we are learning from them. It’s a two-way street. Remember that.

What is this Canada? Well, it's a Canada that has a wonderful nature, a wonderful natural landscape and camping spaces. It is a Canada filled with good writers and artists and theatre. It is a Canada with institutions like museums and art galleries and symphonies and chamber music and rock groups and folk singers. It is a Canada that has a dual nature, French and English, which it acknowledges as part of its great strength as a country with a mission in the world. I want new citizens to be able to be part of all that I am part of in this country. I want them to be able to go to a museum or an art gallery and feel that they can look around and that they have access to it – after all, their tax dollars are helping to pay for it. I want them not to feel anxious about going to a large hall where a concert is going to be held. I want them to feel just as comfortable going to a symphony as to a soccer game.

We are working on projects which will help give access to all of these institutions and will also kick-start some human contact between new citizens and what we call established Canadians. We have a program called Citizens for Citizenship which hopes to put together people initially at community citizenship ceremonies where they will talk at roundtables for an hour before becoming citizens with Canadians who have successful and often super successful lives in Canada. Our democracy is one in which people like Members of the Order of Canada feel that they want to meet new citizens and talk to them. We are all proud of our country and we would also like to know some of the people who are coming to join us either because they want to or because they didn't have anywhere else to go and we were willing to take them in. I know what it feels like to be the latter because we arrived as completely stateless people. Eventually we became Canadians and it has meant everything to me in my life. I hope it has meant something to Canada.

And you have your role to play with the libraries because without our libraries' deep roots in the public good, without the belief that they should be freely accessible to everyone, we do not have the basis for a democratic society. We cannot possibly fulfill the mission we have set ourselves to take nearly 300,000 immigrants a year, which is a kind of contract we have made with them towards the building of a diverse and free society, without public libraries.

Libraries stand for freedom. Keeping libraries open, making books accessible allows people to connect with another mind through the printed word. In countries where there is repression, in countries where democracy is not a norm, what is attacked? Freedom of speech, freedom of writing, freedom of expression. And here in our country, libraries make possible all of these freedoms and make it possible for us to have intense, vivid and private relationships through the printed word. The essence of how human beings communicate with each other – at the most sophisticated and intelligent level – is found in the meeting of the minds of writer and reader. Writers want to be read.

When I was writing my memoirs I wasn't writing them as therapy to be given to my psychiatrist. I was writing them for the ideal reader – the woman who comes up to me when I'm waiting for a light to change at a corner and says: "I would like to talk to you about my relationship with my mother." Writers don't expect everyone to agree with them or love them but they long to make those connections with others. This is a fundamental desire for all of us but we can't all express it as writers. How we can express it is as readers.

I was delighted to hear that my book was being taken out a great deal at the public libraries in Toronto because I believe that that's what is necessary for a writer – not just a book buying public but a book reading public. Libraries are important custodians of this yearning and they are among the most important meeting places that a culture can have.

I love quoting something from Alberto Manguel, one of our great writers who says as an immigrant himself from Argentina, and a spiritual wanderer I may put it that way. He says that for him “the landscape of Canada is less a picture postcard image of our wilderness ... than the extraordinary and brave libraries ... continue to survive across our country. My map of Canada is dotted with such bastions: the generous and comfortable Metro Library in Toronto ...; the tiny, beautiful Memorial Library in Calgary, constantly threatened with closure; ... the Municipal Library of Winnipeg; ... the wonderfully efficient National Library in Ottawa; the Jesuit College in Quebec City and the Literary and Historical Society which date back three centuries; ... the Friendly Library of Campbell River, British Columbia; the stately Halifax Library; ... [and dozens of struggling university libraries].”

All the work for the good of public libraries know that we will need some careful navigation to get them to a safer harbour but we have to do it because the future of our country is at stake in it, because we have our role to play in helping new Canadians become totally comfortable and totally at home with everything that our culture stands for.

We have to get to a safe harbour with our libraries. Our links to the past, our bonds with the present, our past to a civilized tomorrow are all maintained by libraries. I am asking you as librarians to join with us at the Institute in pursuing common goals, with a common purpose. I hope we can work together as we put together our committees of Citizens for Citizenship across the country. We're natural partners; we want the same thing. You are agents of the public good. We are all pilgrims at the gate. You watch over the sources of knowledge and imagination. We are always at a threshold, constantly at the verge of creating a new civil society. It is so important for us never to forget that that's what we are all about, that we are at the gates of that city. We are all waiting to get into the city which we may or may not achieve in our lifetime, but we must help ourselves and all other Canadians to go towards it. It is the eternal city of the good, of the beautiful and the true.