

THE HEART OF THE ACADEMY

Remarks at the opening of the Leatherby Libraries,

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I am pleased and honored to be here addressing this distinguished gathering on this auspicious occasion.

Auspices are, as you all know, favorable indications of future good fortune and how can we doubt that the future of this university has been brightened and improved by this most important addition? My wife and I recently visited Bologna and toured the ancient Basilica di San Stefano—which is noted for containing seven churches under one roof. I note that the Leatherby Libraries have gone three better incorporating, as they do, ten libraries under one roof.

The distinguished Southern historian Shelby Foote once observed that a university is a library surrounded by some other buildings. Given the news that I have heard of the positive flurry of library buildings in the town of Orange, we could say that a town is a gathering of libraries surrounded by some other buildings. Though that is a slightly flippant observation, it does point to the power and importance of libraries as both centers of communities and physical manifestations of their highest aspirations. Also, thinking of Shelby Foote's remark, it is worth noting here that university libraries predate most of the parts of the university we know today. In fact, departmental libraries of the kind found in our great universities existed before the departments they serve. The predecessors of departments were groups of faculty who shared collections of books on topics of mutual interest. The existence of libraries from the very beginning and formation of universities points to a central fact of the importance of libraries and their position in the world of learning.

There are only three ways in which human beings learn. They learn from experience and have been doing so since the emergence of the very first human beings. They learn by interaction with people who are wiser and more knowledgeable than they—teachers, rabbis, shamans, etc.—and have been doing so since human beings first started to communicate in words. Lastly but by no means least, they learn from interaction with the human record—those aggregations of texts, images, and symbols that are the collective memory of humankind. Literacy matters because of reasonable, practical societal concerns—the illiterate have little control over their lives and little prospect of living fully realized lives in modern societies—but is important in even deeper ways. Literacy is the way in which we gain access to the wisdom and folly of the ages, it is the way in which we transcend space and time and learn from teachers long dead and or in remote places we will never visit in person.

The great Italian writer and thinker, Umberto Eco, has pointed out that the history of human communication can be divided into three categories. The first is animal—the elaborate and unique apparatus of the human brain. The sorrow of this animal memory is that all the memories and knowledge accumulated in a life die with the individual, unless they are communicated and those communications are preserved. The second is vegetable—the memories of human beings recorded on papyrus (made from reeds) and paper (made from wood, bark, cotton, straw, and many other fibrous vegetable materials), each of which has proven to be capable of preserving knowledge over millennia. The third, and the most chronologically interesting, is mineral. Everyone knows of the earliest records being incised on clay tablets or on stone (obelisks, stelae, monuments, etc.) but few reflect that we now store substantial chunks of the human record on silicon chips in computers and other mineral carriers (such as CDs) and that the apparatuses used to communicate those parts of the human record are

entirely mineral. An interesting feature of Eco's analysis is that the least permanent of the three forms of memory—the animal—is the one without which the other forms of memory are useless. A human brain is needed to tell human hands to drive a pen across paper, to incise stones, and to manipulate a computer keyboard. The texts, images, and sounds that constitute the human record with which libraries are concerned are the products of human brains and can be the extension of human lives—years, decades, and centuries into the future—if they are preserved for future generations.

Thomas Carlyle said that, with the invention of writing, many millennia ago, “the age of miracles” began. Something written down can communicate knowledge and wisdom to generations yet to be born and to people in distant places. More, in the right format, the written word never dies. When we learn from experience or from a teacher, that knowledge dies with us or with the teacher if it is not written and collected to be communicated to posterity. People of the great monotheistic religions of the world are

often known as the People of the Book (it is significant that the word "*Bible*" is derived from the Greek for book, the word "*Talmud*" from a Hebrew word meaning to learn, and the word "*Koran*" is derived from an Arabic word meaning to read), but they would more properly be known as the People of the Text. It is texts themselves that are transcendentally important, not the vehicles by which those texts are communicated. A text is true and valuable or even sacred whether it is read in manuscript, in a book, or on a computer screen, but we should always bear in mind that those vehicles matter if they affect the onward transmission of texts. The sometimes trivial debates about books and computers do reflect a genuine concern, not about which is better for reading texts, but about the question of the preservation and onward transmission of the human record. The late Hans Wellisch pointed out that each development in human communication was more extensive and less durable than its predecessors. Words carved on stone conquer time but do not conquer space. E-mail messages conquer

space—they can be transmitted to Paris, France, or Paris, Illinois in an instant—but they do not conquer time. (One of the great philosophical questions of our time is “Does an e-mail message exist if it is deleted unread?”) The book—the Western printed codex—is both universal and durable. The five hundred years of the Age of Print have been a period of accumulation of texts in libraries and the means by which each generation knows more, or at least has more recorded knowledge and information available to it, than its predecessors. Now the library is a place of many means by which texts and images are communicated—of books, microforms, videos, sound recordings, and computers. Libraries have always welcomed new means of reading and viewing and have always incorporated them into their collections and programs. There are challenges—financial and in terms of preservation—that we face in dealing with electronic technology, but there are also great benefits and I am confident that the Leatherby Library and all the libraries in the Golden State, in the USA, and in the world will, each

in their own way, deal with those challenges and prosper in using those benefits.

Most of us have warm, almost sentimental, feelings about libraries and those feelings are justified. The autobiographies of successful people are littered with references to childhood and young adulthood happiness in libraries and thanks to librarians who opened their eyes to the world of reading. We should not mistake this warm glow for the whole truth, which is that libraries are mysterious and powerful places in which lives can be changed. It can be dangerous to enter the infinite labyrinths of texts and of library catalogues. You can lose your way and find things of which you have never even dreamed. You can spend hours in a library and become unconscious of the passing of time and then leave a different person from when you came in. That power and mystery lie in the texts and images the library makes accessible to you—the vast river of words and pictures that make up our collective memory and the accumulated wisdom, knowledge, information of the ages.

Here is a brief excerpt from Haruki Murakami's new novel—*Kafka on the shore*—that illustrates what I am talking about. The protagonist is in a library:

I go back to the reading room, where I sink down into a sofa and into the world of the Arabian nights. Slowly, like a movie fadeout, the real world evaporates. I am alone—inside the world of the story. My favorite feeling in the world.

The real world evaporates ...I am inside the world of the story... these are mysterious statements on the pleasures and dangers of reading and libraries.

This library is as imbued with that power and mystery every bit as much as are the great national libraries and research libraries of the world. Had John Donne been a librarian he would surely have written "No library is an island," because all libraries are connected to all others as manifestations of the noble mission of the preservation and onward transmission of the human record. To the individual library user, however, any library, large or small, can be as

magic an island as Prospero's and though, like the actors in *The tempest*, we are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little lives are rounded with a sleep, our libraries endure—places of learning, magic, mystery, knowledge, wisdom, and pleasure; institutions that endure to enrich and change the lives of generations yet to be.

Thank you.