February 2000: Libraries as Camelot

Dacus Library
Libraries as Camelot

Be near me when my light is low,
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick
And tingle; and the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of being slow.

Be near me when the sensuous frame
Is racked with pangs that conquer trust;
And Time, a manic scattering dust,
And Life, a Fury slinging flame.

Be near me when my faith is dry,
And men the flies of latter spring
That lay their eggs, and sting and sing
And weave their petty cells and die.

Be near me when I fade away,
To point the term of human strife,
And on that low dark verge of life
The twilight of eternal day.

These familiar lines are from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, a poem he wrote in honor of his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam’s untimely and premature death. Note how Tennyson talks about time, about life. The image is nothing if not memorable: Time, a manic scattering dust/ Life a fury slinging flame. If you’re over forty, you understand this in a way you may not have when you read it at twenty. And if you’re at forty-plus, you may find something in these lines that makes summer in your veins.

I begin the *Corner* in this manner because I want to take just a few moments to remind us what makes libraries so important, why we need them, why we *must* have them (and why, of course, your support of Dacus is so critical).

It seems to me that in an age that threatens to undo all of us with its bits and bytes, we do well to ponder the more important, permanent things.

One of my favorite writers is G. K. Chesterton. Not only is he wildly funny, but also a devastating and brilliant wit. During one of his more solemn moments, G. K. was asked what great books he would want with him were he to be stranded on a deserted isle in the Pacific. Other en- ments had been previously consulted, so Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* had been taken; Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, already eloquently commented upon. Shakespeare, of course, had heretofore been noted. George Bernard Shaw, G. K.’s life-long debate adversary, claimed he wanted his own works on that remote isle (natch!). Picture the scene: the enormous G. K.- he topped the scales at over 350 pounds before his death and looked, as he always did, like he had been dressed on the fly - paused,
scratched his chin, and said, “Ship-Building Made Easy.”

G. K. was nothing if not eloquent. He pegged for me what it is about libraries that attracted me to their service 20 years ago. No doubt it’s something like this which attracts you to them. When asked why he wrote so much (the new edition of G. K.’s complete works now exceeds thirty, 300+ page volumes) Chesterton said, “To aid the divine Gift of Language and Letters to outlive us all.” I do like that. One could devote a life’s work to it, eh? It is, if you’ll pardon the self-serving sound of it, a noble and a high calling.

Go back and re-read those lines from Tennyson. Or, if he is not to your liking, then another poet. Where else but in a library can you grumble or laugh (silently, of course) with George Will, fall into (muffled) gales of laughter with Balzac, smile knowingly at the enormous characters in Flannery O’Connor’s novels (many, no doubt, live in your neighborhood and mine), or muse thoughtfully at Godot and his wait? What other place offers you such headliners as Plato, Aristotle, Chaucer, Dante and Shakespeare?

Isn’t that, in the end, why we have libraries in the first place? They aren’t warehouses of just anything and everything, but repositories of the best that the brightest has been able to produce. In many ways, they are monuments, testaments really, to all that is good and noble and worthy about those creatures we call human. It’s easy to get depressed about humanity when you look about the world, what with its rampant ‘isms everywhere you look. It’s easy to turn one’s back on humanity when yet another senseless murder occurs, another ridiculous war breaks out over yet one more ludicrous reason.

Before falling too downcast, turn your eyes on a library and open your mind to its treasures. Seine the depths of its masters in science, law, philosophy, literature, mathematics or astronomy. Of course the human condition will remain its dogged leopard self because it cannot change its spots. But there are bright exhalations of humanity at its gleaming best in the firmament of any good library. And for one brief shining moment, even if only a mere shadow of the thing itself, you really can almost see Camelot.

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the dean's corner

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