

THE LIBRARY

A man will turn over half a library to make one book. Samuel Johnson

Books that you may carry to the fire, and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all. Samuel Johnson

Our knowledge is a little island in a great ocean of non-knowledge. Isaac Bashevis Singer

I am a librarian with a disconcerting tale to relate. "Oh Hum", I suspect is what you, the readers are thinking. "What can a librarian tell us about anything that we would find interesting?" Well, maybe you are right. After all, in my chosen profession, I have a vested interest in encouraging as much reading as I can by as many people as possible. I assure you that my motive for what I am about to recount has very little to do with promoting reading.

Let me give a little background about myself. I have been a librarian all my professional life. As a youngster I was an unabashed bookworm. I read incessantly, often to the chagrin of my parents who could not understand what was so interesting about books. "Book learning is a waste of time. You acquire far more from the workplace, sports and interactions with other people of your kind," was a constant refrain all my folks continuously recited. Even my school teachers berated me. I think they were apprehensive about a student knowing more than they did. It seemed that no one could appreciate the fabulous stories which took one nearly anywhere, the fantastic insights into the biological, psychological and physical world as well as the humanities and the arts. History transported me to the development of human thought past and present, in other words, to Philosophy, the most fascinating of human endeavors.

I could have chosen from a myriad of professions yet I decided to be a librarian. I think that this choice occurred after reading about the history of libraries. If the definition of 'library' is a place where all documents, be they written, audio, or visual, of whatever sort are stored, then this institution has a long and fascinating history. Perhaps the prehistoric images on the walls of caverns painted by primitive cave-people were the first libraries.

In any case, I became enthralled with libraries as places where I could easily indulge in all my fantasies and allow my imagination to run rampant. I quickly realized that perhaps the best definition of a library was that it is a massive garbage bin containing a very few nuggets of beauty and wisdom. I will soon return to this dilemma.

I have been a librarian for the last sixty years. Currently I am probably the most renowned one that ever existed on the face of this planet. For the last thirty years I have been responsible for downloading everything and I mean everything that is in the public domain, stretching as far back in time as possible, into a novel computer of infinite capacity with speed of retrieval that has never before been matched. This has been my main chore and I am glad to assert that I have been successful in this endeavor. All new materials are now automatically inserted into the computer. There are, of course exceptions, namely all materials classified as secret by governments. These are stored in very safe computers controlled by the appropriate authorities.

I think I have reason to be satisfied with my work. However there remains one fly in the ointment. I have never figured out how to separate the preponderance of totally banal, useless, and downright falsehoods from the truly beautiful, useful and fundamental truisms that over time have been generated by great savants. I do not see a solution to this problem because it would require highly subjective criteria to make the necessary distinctions. In any case I was smugly sure that my achievement merited all sorts of accolades. I had been awarded every prestigious prize available and some created solely for my benefit. As it turned out, my achievements were over-rated.

After completion of my primary work goals, I spent the next year monitoring inputs and verifying our ability to quickly retrieve them. This was rather mundane and boring. I was contemplating that perhaps it was time for me to retire or at the very least radically alter my profession and become a professor of library science at a prestigious university, in particular, one that had offered me a very lucrative position.

I was on the verge of accepting the offer when I had an unexpected alien visitor. At first glance there appeared to be nothing extraordinary about him. I had received countless visits from aliens from far off galaxies and had discerned, without exception, that their means of storing and retrieving inputs into their libraries was essentially no better and often far worse than what I had contrived. I assumed that this caller was no different and was simply interested in the best library ever conceived. Once ensconced in my office he introduced himself and named a planet from a very distant galaxy as his home.

He then proceeded to explain the purpose of his visit by first informing me that he was very well aware of my innovative achievement and congratulated me on it. He agreed that, by far, this was the best library he had come across, safe one, namely the one from his planet.

He continued by stating that the image of him before me was a holograph transmitted from his home world using time space warps making the transmission nearly instantaneous. He explained that the reason for this was that on several occasions he and others from his world had faced unexpected hostile and violent reactions upon their visits. Using holography was their way of avoiding such responses. Before continuing he strongly asserted that the citizens of 'Earth' had nothing to fear from him and his kind. He had come here on a mission of exploration, as soon would become evident. In point form, what follows is the gist of what he related.

- The library of his planet is truly planetary in that it consists of every one of its living persons. It has no specific locale. It is located in the minds of all.
- Each individual is able to assimilate information on a scale so large that it is unimaginable.
- This is a biological trait so that no artificial technology is needed.
- The absorption of information is a biological necessity. They are nurtured by it as we are by food, liquids and oxygen.
- Despite this and for reasons of redundancy, each of them is assigned certain specific areas to incorporate into their memory.
- Since each is also telepathic an individual's memory is instantly available to everyone else, enabling cross fertilization of ideas.
- The decision as to what is true and beautiful as distinct from the trite and patently false is based on an instantaneous consensus of all of them. In the former

instance a famous poet equated truth and beauty as unity. As for the second point, it is analogous to 'truth' being nothing more than consensual reality.

- The disposition of what can be labeled garbage is everyone's responsibility. A significant portion of their memory is given to this onerous task. However, they are sagacious enough to know that they are not infallible: what is considered nonsense today may be of extreme value tomorrow. Our own history is replete with such examples.
- Finally by far the most disturbing point he made was that in their obsessive quest for knowledge, facts, data and nearly anything else of relevance, everything on the hard drives of every computer on this planet and on all other planets they had visited have been integrated into their memory. He sensed my discomfiture and again assured me that their purpose was, 'knowledge for its own sake'. They were a peace loving people and had no deleterious thoughts in mind. I was not convinced but there was nothing I could do about it. There is an old bromide that 'knowledge is power'. If what had just been recounted was true, they were far and away the most powerful personages ever.

Now there was one thing that none of us had taken into account. All current computers used a DNA molecule instead of the old silicon chip and as such were vulnerable to real viruses. Before any preventative action could be taken, our alien friends were infected by a virus that totally wiped out their memory. The consequence of this was that every computer in the universe crashed because they too became infected. Since all societies in all the so-called civilized worlds were totally computer dependent the universe simply regressed to a dark time akin to the Dark Ages prior to the Renaissance but far worse. I am writing this missile by the light of an old fashioned candle using a quill as my writing tool. Unfortunately no library exists in which I can place this meager opus.

Jack Basuk

Oct. 18, 2005

<http://www.jackbasuk.com>