



Remarks to Berkeley Public Library Foundation Council

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Public libraries: A path for navigating a ‘post-truth’ world

Tonight, I’ve been invited to speak on the role of the library in a changing world. To answer that question, I had to first ask myself, what’s changing?

To find an answer, I looked to the editors of Oxford Dictionaries. They noticed a change last year, a change in our use of a particular word—a 2,000% increase in the use of that word in just one year. That earned the word the notable, or perhaps notorious designation of word of the year.

That word, of course, the 2016 word of the year, is *post-truth*. *Post-truth* is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

The word itself has been around for a few decades. The first instance of *post-truth* being used with this meaning ascribed can be traced to a 1992 essay by the late Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in the magazine *The Nation*. Let me reacquaint you with its debut: “We, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.”

Strange, and of particular interest to me, is this association between *post-truth* and freedom. So I put the question to you. Do we? Do we wish to live in a *post-truth* world?

The juxtaposition of freedom and truth reminds me of a passage from *Through the Looking Glass*, featuring the wise words of Humpty Dumpty.

Humpty Dumpty says to Alice:

‘...There’s glory for you!’

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory,”’ Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t—till I tell you.

I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument,”’ Alice objected.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

There are two concepts here that I'd like us to consider in relation to the library: the first is meaning, and the second is mastery. Let's take meaning first.

The American Library Association's Committee on Literacy defines literacy as follows: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute...Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society."

Put another way, literacy is the ability to find and create meaning.

As a champion of literacy, the library has a profound role in the search for and creation of meaning. The library is a place where any and all sides of a question may be explored. This is the foundation of intellectual freedom—the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction.

I do not believe that libraries are the destination, the end point of this quest to seek and receive information. Instead, I see libraries as paving stones that form a path along this quest, a firm surface to travel upon. Libraries democratize access to ideas and information so that people may inform themselves in their quest to find and create meaning.

The freedom to create meaning is so fundamental to our way of being that it is upheld in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion...to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas..."

That leads me to our second consideration: mastery. How do we achieve mastery? Once again, I offer you an idea that I encountered in book.

Joshua Foer, in his book *Moonwalking with Einstein*, states: "To improve, we must watch ourselves fail, and learn from our mistakes." He suggests that the best way to do this, in fact, is to practice failing. So I ask you: How do we practice failing at creating meaning?

Perhaps this is our task in navigating a *post-truth* world. It comes with no small measure of risk. Ideas can be dangerous. The American Library Association's Freedom to Read statement reminds us that "Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours," and that "the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society."

"Every silencing of a heresy, every enforcement of an orthodoxy, diminishes the toughness and resilience of our society and leaves it the less able to deal with controversy and difference."
"Freedom is no freedom if it is accorded only to the accepted and the inoffensive."

If we believe this, then to practice the failure of meaning is to begin to realize that a wider range of meaning exists. *A vastness that we struggle to comprehend.* As it happens, this is how psychologists define awe.

One of our neighbors at UC Berkeley, Dacher Keltner, along with his colleague Paul Piff at UC Irvine, wrote a piece for the *New York Times* in which they described awe as “[imbuing] people with a different sense of themselves, one that is smaller, more humble and part of something larger.” [They say,] “Awe helps bind us to others, motivating us to act in collaborative ways that enable strong groups and cohesive communities.”

So I offer this to you: Our experiences at the public library are qualitatively different than those same activities experienced elsewhere *because they are shared with others*, because they introduce us to ideas and encounters that are part of something larger than ourselves.

To read a library book is to invite awe through shared experience. A library book holds within it a reminder that someone has gazed upon that book before you, and someone else will turn its pages after you. Think of a library book as the relay baton of our democracy.

Now I return to our original premise—the role of the library in a changing world. The role of the library, quite simply, is to inspire awe. I leave you with a few words from Walt Whitman, and invite you to think of them as a call to action in a *post-truth* world:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*