Democracy and Libraries

When the Founding Fathers added the First Amendment to our U.S. Constitution, they believed Americans must have the right to think, believe, and worship freely—and, in turn, to express beliefs freely to their neighbors and to the government. This is sometimes referred to as *freedom of conscience*.

One of the more notorious periods during which freedom of conscience was stifled came during the late 1940's and early 1950's, known as the McCarthy era, named for Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin, a demagogue who used fear of Communism as a weapon against the American public, turning one citizen against another, creating an environment in which one had to take extreme care when conversing about anything controversial. Newsman Edward R. Murrow took on McCarthy in a March 9, 1954 television broadcast. It is an inspiring piece of writing, and it is worth citing the following excerpt. Murrow stated in part:

"*We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. This is no time for those who oppose Senator McCarthy's methods to keep silent,* or *for those who approve. We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result. As a nation we have come into our full inheritance at a tender age. We proclaim ourselves, as indeed we are, the defenders of freedom—what's left of it—but we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home. The actions of the junior senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his; he didn't create the situation of fear he merely exploited it and rather successfully. Cassius was right. 'The fault dear Brutus is not in our stars but in ourselves.'* "

And what has this to do with libraries? If our society has any repository for its freedom of conscience, it is bound up in our public libraries. This is where controversy, the dissent that Murrow talks about, takes refuge from those who would stifle knowledge by purging from the mind of man heretical and controversial thought. And it is the defiant librarians of this country who not only protect those ideas from being purged, but encourage their dissemination.

We are experiencing a revival of the tactics employed by Joseph McCarthy. Thoughts are once again under attack. Not just communistic ideas, although the taint of that history remains in the public memory. No, these days it is another fear, or several of them; fear of people who are different from us, either their religion, or their skin color, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation. Yes, even their politics. And it is in libraries where information and viewpoints on these differences are made available to the public. As author Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Knowledge is the antidote for fear." It is libraries that guard this knowledge against those who would expunge freedom of thought from public access.

Yes, libraries and librarians are the guardians of knowledge. Not just the popular ideas, but the unpopular ones as well. How can we discuss and reject bad ideas if we are not even exposed to them? We cannot understand one another if we do not talk to one another. The same applies to exposure to books and ideas.

There is a small but vocal group who are seeking to remove books from schools so as not to expose young minds to ideas deemed inappropriate for their age—or any age, it seems. These same proponents will say, "If people want to read these books, they can go to public libraries." And then we find some of these same groups petitioning public libraries for removal of certain books.

In 2017, the *Washington Post* newspaper adopted as its slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness," a statement whose provenance comes from a U.S. Court of Appeals case concerning the dangers of secrecy in government. But when a group of concerned citizens attempts to suppress ideas, it may be doing the government's work for it; and we

must not forget that in essence, we the people, are the government. And if we are to keep democracy, libraries are where we must guard the proverbial flame of knowledge.

And we are not protecting the people who will grow up to be the next generation of citizens by keeping from them information that they need so as to become fully-formed Americans. Remember what Murrow said: "We can deny our history and our heritage, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result." When we deny something that is right before our eyes, when we try to protect ourselves or our children by denial, it can backfire.

Texas journalist Molly Ivins wrote in the introduction to one of her collections of essays:

"*I believe all Southern liberals come from the same starting point—race. Once you figure out they are lying to you about race, you start to question everything. If you grew up white before the civil rights movement anywhere in the south, all grown-ups lied. They'd tell you stuff like, 'Don't drink out of the colored fountain, dear, it's dirty.' In the white part of town, the white fountain was always covered with chewing gum and the marks of grubby kids' paws, and the colored fountain was always clean. Children can be horribly logical.*"

And that's how progressives are born. Keeping information from one another, or simply not discussing those ideas, is a form of self-censorship that can lead to intolerance and illiberalism. Democracy thrives on sharing and discussing ideas, and libraries are a great place to store ideas that we find can broaden our ability to understand those ideas. Ideas are not dangerous, but ignorance can be.

Richard Waterman