

Following is Dr. Price's keynote address, entitled Trustees and American Civic Culture, which was presented at the annual Workshop in Library Leadership (WILL) Conference in Olympia, Washington on September 15, 2005. The address embodies many of the criteria for the "Trustee Recognition Award."

Library Trustees and American Civic Culture

Secretary of State Sam Reed; State Librarian, and New Jersey native, Jan Walsh; Karen Goettling, who has done so much to make my arrival here at once possible and pleasant; and Jonalyn Wolf-Ivory, who brought me to the attention of the organizers of this conference, Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank and salute you all. I am thrilled to be with you and my fellow conference presenters. The 2005 Workshop in Library Leadership Conference certainly recognizes one of the more compelling realities of our era—the need for smart, dedicated, well informed, and daring leaders in the public sphere, especially in libraries. Libraries are complex organizations—they require multiple skills and talents from their trustees and administrative leaders. And libraries, like all public institutions, arise out of local historical narratives that are connected to regional and national narratives. In other words, every library has its story to tell, but every library is a part of a larger constellation of stories from institutions that are important to our civic culture, our way of knowing how to sustain what is most important to us as citizens. The array of workshops at our conference speaks well of the complexity of the challenges we all face.

The last time I was in Olympia it was at the behest of the National Endowment for the Arts. I was here on a site visit of the state arts council. Although that was many years ago, in the mid-1980s as I recall, I have held onto the vivid memories of this truly beautiful part of the American landscape and the generous friendliness of the people I interacted with here. It is very good to back and real honor to be the keynote speaker for the morning session.

What I have to say this morning amounts to the third and final draft of what was initially intended as an ode to the importance of library trustees in sustaining and enriching civic culture through assertive leadership in civic boosterism and challenging the popularization of civic passivity.

Indeed, when I began crafting my speech in the late spring/early summer of this year, I had in mind somewhat of a history lesson on early and contemporary public library movement in the United States, emphasizing the early 20th century moorings of libraries, museums and other learning and civic institutions.

Then, during mid-summer, I retooled the speech after I served as the chair of the Newark Public Library's director's search committee. I wanted to include some of what I learned from some really bright candidates who represent the next generation of urban library directors. They talked about making libraries noisy and busy places. Just think of the revolutionary nature of that vision: the library as a noisy place! They spoke of libraries and library directors as change agents. Such imagery challenged me to think anew about my own institution and libraries in general: the library as a dynamic, assertive and boldly futuristic institution. And such, I had to imagine that a library needs professional leaders and trustees with a considerable amount of civic power, or the ability to acquire such power over time.

And so with the The Newark Public Library's directors search fresh in my memory, my speech increasingly focused on how trustees need to become more aggressive in pushing their library's agenda before the general public, elected officials, the corporate and philanthropic sectors.

But more recently, over the past two weeks, after hurricane Katrina hit the southlands of the Gulf of Mexico, I went back to my speech, reassessing what was on my mind before the storm's aftermath of human, physical and civic calamity. Not unlike any reasonably alert person, I feel that I must in some way look at our era through a different lens, a lens that America creates when catastrophe looms.

And so while my topic remains the same, Library Trustees and American Civic Culture, the specter of a nearly devastated old American city is very much on my mind this morning. In the months and days ahead, the rebuilding of communities that collapsed under the storm's fury will challenge the American library community to make certain that librarians and library trustees are at the table of a reconstructed Gulf region.

Katrina exposed once again the fault lines of race, class and generation in our society. Most reasonable Americans know this to be true. What also needs to be known is that the public library is implicated in the social distress and social Balkanization that was brought into high relief after the storm did so much

physical damage. Schools, libraries, housing authorities, social service agencies, and the larger network of helping agencies might want to see the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as both a challenge for renewal and a warning that the public sector has left far too many Americans at the bottom of our priorities. Put another way, we Americans may have quietly lowered the curtain on our quest for equal opportunity, social justice and empathy for the downtrodden. If that is the case, and many believe it is, the public library is imperiled.

The conditions that created the modern American public library are still relevant to any discussion about contemporary and future issues facing those who care about libraries, specifically trustees. To serve as a trustee of a public library places a citizen on an even higher ground shaped by the better part of modern American history. To be a trustee of a public library places one very close to major transformations in American life and culture.

I have been a trustee of the Newark Public Library for twenty years. Alas, I am the most senior member of the Board of Trustees, having served with three directors and under the aegis of two mayors. Many Americans of a certain age, say, over 50, know something of Newark—its infamous riot of 1967 and the years of decline that followed, making it one of the nation's least enviable cities. What may not be known is that the city survived its precipitous decline and over the past twenty years has nearly recovered its balance and its civic purpose. Newark is now a livable and forward thinking city, due in no small way to the stability and the good work provided by the Newark Public Library and other public institutions.

In old industrial cities like Newark, and in the so-called Blue and Red states, trustees have witnessed a sea change in the role of public library. Some of the changes have been positive. Libraries, as an example, have played an important role in popularizing public spaces at a time when private conceits and private spaces seemingly prevail. Libraries also made possible research across a broad spectrum of the citizenry. It is fair to say that public libraries still enjoy a unique stature in American civilization: they are viewed favorably by those who patronize them, especially young learners and those for whom the book is a permanent artifact in life-long learning and discovery. Educators are in lock step with the librarian's search for an orderly presentation of information and connecting the dots that lead from childhood learning to respect for tradition to civility to the responsibilities of citizenship.

We are among the people's most hallowed training grounds for citizenship. We are the people's university!

These facts notwithstanding, trustees of public libraries have also seen an unmistakable decline in the stature of the public realm. Libraries, schools, parks, and other institutions now compete with private entities that have superior resources and clout. Some social critics argue that we are living through the corporatization of American life...a transformation that rivals the rise of the welfare state during and after the Great Depression of the 1930s.

One of our very distinguished library leaders, Joey Rodgers, believes that the well endowed vision of civic spaces and civic culture that led to the establishment of public libraries is, as she puts it, "no longer a dominant one in our nation. We are now a nation whose policies tilt toward serving those of privilege, we confuse learning with entertainment and distraction, and we rarely trust individuals to determine their own paths, requiring levels of conformity and competition that keep products flying off the store shelves. If we lose the public libraries, we will lose some of our remaining commitment to equity and to 'unsponsored' learning. It will matter...at least many of us think so. If we lose public libraries, American society in the 21st Century will not create a new publicly-supported institution to pay attention to equity and life-long learning ensuring that we don't lose them is the work of our leaders."

Those who know Joey Rodgers know that she is a bold yet discreet thinker, so her argument—found in a brilliant essay titled *Leadership for the Perfect Storm*—stirred my thinking about the future of libraries and those, like trustees, who care for them.

Indeed, I think it is appropriate to ask where libraries are situated amidst the many transformations underway in our society. Are we prepared for the likelihood that the future will be quite different than the past as far as matters public are concerned. In other words, will the public continue to support that which is public? What will become of civic spaces as corporate spaces become the dominant arenas for interaction between citizens?

What will become of the book—and its stewards—as the digital age takes us farther away from customs and habits of long standing?

Will libraries continue to be among the first publicly supported venues sought out by the newest immigrants, as was the case for the immigrants of the early 20th century?

And what does the near and distant future have in store for library trustees? Will trustees in the future simply be called upon to lend their good names, some financial resources and time? Or, will the trustee have to become more conversant with the changes well underway in our society. Will the trustee have to be more active in situating the library near the center of civic culture?

The answer to these last questions is yes!

Civic culture is hard to define, but we know it when we see it. It is the realm of public engagement, where citizens exercise a range of civic choices and duties—participation in the life of the community; promoting a sense of local well being; using the public sphere to ameliorate civic discord and discourage unfairness; voting and holding elected officials accountable for their actions; investing time toward the improvement in conditions facing the least fortunate; becoming conversant with matters historical and democratic; passing along civic traditions to newly arrived settlers; and valorizing public rituals, such as parades and other activities that take place in public places.

Historically, libraries have been beneficiaries of attempts to create a civic culture in the United States. To a great extent, the modern public library movement in the United States began in the late 19th century when civic reformers and the well-educated members of the expanding middle class began to challenge the unsavory legacies of the nineteenth century. Under the broad, embracing banner of Progressivism they valorized public learning, responsible citizenship; they called for tolerance toward the thousands of immigrants then landing on America's shores.

The Progressives were hardly revolutionaries. They were actually men and women of mostly moderate political temperament. But in retrospect, they had a revolutionary impact on society. They realized that the complexity of modern America called upon enlightened citizens to challenge some the ruthless legacies of the nineteenth century.

One of the more important objectives of the Progressives was to place education and learning near the center of American life. They were in favor of expanding compulsory, publicly supported schools throughout the nation. At a time when the country was settling millions of new immigrants, the Progressives envisioned schools as essential to assimilating the newcomers. They believed education was an antidote to ethnic and racial intolerance. Indeed, not unlike Thomas Jefferson, the Progressives believed that an educated citizenry was essential to success of a democratic republic.

Libraries figured prominently in the exceptionalism of the Progressive Era. We all know of Andrew Carnegie's penchant for building libraries in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand; 1,679 of them were established in the United States. During that time, many American cities and communities established libraries—grand or not so grand buildings that were in concert with the optimism of the new century. These were the entities that imposed a degree of social control on an otherwise increasingly loud and complicated society. In Carnegie's vision, the library helped the immigrants to embrace the English language and gave the common man—which he once was—an opportunity for individual uplift through learning.

By the end of the Progressive Era, the public library was a feature throughout urban America and increasingly in rural America. When suburbs took shape over the first half of the 20th century, one of the first things they did to mimic the virtues of the city was to start a library.

We are now more than a century removed from the heady optimism of the Progressive Era. Libraries enriched and survived the century, becoming in some respects the most revered public institution in America. In our major cities, libraries are architectural wonders that continue to make America's central business districts important destinations for enrichment. In rural areas, libraries are often the window onto the world within and the world without. They are social centers and metaphors for pride in small, homogeneous places. Most important, they are centers of learning, curiosity and information.

And yet library trustees must not take the historic and civic stature of urban, suburban and rural public libraries too seriously. Or, put another way, we trustees should be wary of the immediate and distant future because the legacies of the past—the Golden Era of the Public Library—may not resonate well into the future if we don't turn the future toward our higher interests and objectives.

The great movements of the past that valorized public work, civic purpose, and public sacrifice seem to have all but faded into a hazy memory of a distant time. Throughout the nation, libraries face recurring fiscal crisis; they find themselves hard pressed to recruit librarians adequately educated for the library and civic culture of the future. Moreover, libraries are seemingly unable to confidently compete with for profit venues that place books, trendy magazines, and digital toys near café latte and closer still to an opportunity watch other upwardly mobile sophisticates.

What are we to do at a time when consumerist values and an ethos of privatism increasingly compete with and overshadow civic culture?

We would do well to place greater faith in the public—our fellow citizens who have a sentimental attachment to what remains of the public sphere and also our new citizens, those who need to be introduced the transformative power of the library card, the public lecture, the public meeting.

Some libraries, notably the Hattiesburg, Mississippi Public Library, have used public referenda to garner community wide support for a major capital project—a new library. Library trustees will have to challenge their institutions to become more boldly interactive with the communities that they serve. Library trustees must insist upon a restoration of the library as the one the first institutions of Americanize new immigrants.

While the library is a unique institution, it cannot stand alone in the public sphere. Libraries should be in consistent collaborations with sister institutions—museums, historic places, performing arts venues, and other not for profits.

From the beginning of the public library movement in the United States, local, our civic culture—our penchant for commemoration, our valorization of public work, and the dignity to which we ascribe librarians—have been important to us. From my vantage point, we library trustees should be emboldened by the historic movement that created the institutions in our care. And we should also see ourselves as new progressives—taking life long learning, the preciousness of the public space, and the importance of informed citizenship deeper into American civic culture.

Clement Alexander Price
Board of Governors' Distinguished Service Professor of History
Rutgers University
Director, Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience
Newark, New Jersey 07102
Keynote Speech, WILL Conference
Olympia, Washington
September 15, 2005