

Panel Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Panel on Literacy Toronto Public Library

Cedarbrae District Branch

February 2, 2004

Thank you for inviting me today. I'm really happy to be part of this distinguished panel to discuss the importance of literacy in our society in the Toronto Public Library.

As a public person, and someone who has recently completed my Ph.D. in History, I can tell you that I consider public libraries to be absolutely essential, not only in our academic lives, but also in our daily lives.

I will let you in on a little known part of my life. When I first graduated from McGill University in 1962 with an Honours degree in History, I was accepted into the Masters programme to study Library Science. The reason I chose the field was because I love books, and I am always happy in a library, especially in the stacks. That environment gives me a sense of peace because it is so quiet, and I surround myself with learning throughout the ages. I still love the stacks, but I don't really have the time to spend there anymore.

I didn't become a librarian. The reason was that, after having gone through many years of concentrated study of a limited number of subjects, I decided what I needed was to read as many books as possible to broaden my knowledge, and, being slotted into a concentrated Masters programme right away would not permit me to do that. My decision had nothing to do with the fact that my friends at the university all said that I didn't look like a librarian anyway, whatever that meant.

You know, I haven't thought about this until I was approached to speak on this panel, and I hope to be able to convey to you the importance of reading widely to gain general knowledge. But of course, in order to do that, you need to have the literacy skills to grasp what you are reading, no matter in what language.

We should first look at how well Canadians are doing in terms of our literacy skills.

Although Canada's official literacy rate is very high at 97%, the ABC Canada Literacy Foundation estimates that 22% of adult Canadians have serious problems dealing with any printed materials, and 24% of Canadians can only deal with simple reading tasks. For 2004, these numbers are shocking, especially given the relation of literacy to success in the workplace.

Since Cedarbrae District Library is located in a multi-ethnic area, it is interesting to look at literacy skills among immigrants, and the numbers are intriguing. Proportionally, more immigrants may be at the lowest level of literacy than in the Canadian-born population, but there are also proportionally more immigrants at the highest levels of literacy. I somehow think the latter may be due to our immigration policy.

For immigrants who have come here with few resources, libraries may be able to give them the help they need to achieve their educational goals, as well as help them to learn Canada's two official languages. I believe the difference in literacy skills is closely related to access to libraries like this one.

Today, the role of libraries has expanded beyond books to include Internet access, and other formats, but books are still the heart and soul of the library. They are essential for learning how to read, and write.

I'm sure many of you remember the talk of cinemas being obsolete because you can see movies at home. Well, cinemas are still in great demand. The same was said about books, magazines and newspapers. You now have the Internet so, supposedly, you can get all the information you need from your computer, but that's not so. There's a lot you still need books for, and I can vouch for this from my own research experience. And besides, there is a great difference between reading a book and reading the screen on your computer.

I want to clarify that when I speak of literacy skills, I mean in any language. Our libraries provide access to materials in many languages, which is a source of comfort for new Canadians. More and more libraries like this one are working to serve the needs of their diverse communities.

In looking over the material about the Toronto Public Library, I'm very impressed by the number of languages that are represented. According to the information I received, there are over 100 languages which represent 15% of the total circulation. Torontonians must be made aware of this terrific resource that we have.

In respect to other printed materials, it is not surprising that, despite dire warnings about the end of newspapers, the number of newspapers in Toronto has actually increased over the last few years, and among them are many community newspapers in many different languages. This goes to prove that reading never goes out of style!

As a perpetual student, and as the Chancellor of University of Toronto, I am very aware of the importance of academic achievements. However, I can never stress enough the need for general knowledge.

There are many highly accomplished people who have a very narrow range of knowledge. It is true, we always have our likes and dislikes, such as I tend to like reading about real events and real people instead of novels, and I am aware that needs to be corrected.

I believe, in this day and age, when it is quite common for people to change their jobs 4 to 5 times during their working years, it is a definite advantage to have a wide knowledge of what goes on around us. For that reason, I have always advocated cross-disciplinary education for undergraduates at universities where students are exposed to the humanities, social sciences, arts, and sciences. If I could do it again, this is what I would do. But since people like me come from a different educational system, in a different time period, we need libraries like this to get the exposure to the knowledge that we crave.

Libraries give us access to reading across the disciplines, and help us to become fully developed and interesting individuals. Just consider scientific issues such as the human genome project, cloning and patenting, none of which are purely scientific issues. The general public needs to understand their human and ethical implications.

In business as well, it is no longer just a consideration of the bottom line anymore. Due to the global impact of business, we need to understand the effects of doing business on individuals and on societies.

There are also so many ways that we can transport ourselves to another time and place through books, as well as through other technological mediums that are available in our libraries. One of my greatest joys in life is to curl up in a comfortable chair with a good book.

My friends, libraries are our windows on the world. There are just so many programs available that we, and our family members, can be entertained, and learn at the same time. For those of you who want to learn another language, there is much to choose from as well.

Real literacy rates in Canada should be 100%, and frequent use of our libraries is our best chance of ensuring that increase. Please remember that our libraries are free, and they are fun places to take your families.

I now look forward to hearing the other panelists' perspectives on literacy.