

*SRC's president on the
humanizing role of libraries*

Literacy and The Free Mind

By Marion A. Wright

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THERE is a point about libraries which I have never seen thoroughly or scientifically explored. The point is that there is casual relation between literacy and good morals or ethics. If there should exist a dearth of literature on the subject, such lack may perhaps be accounted for upon the theory that it would be wasted labor to establish, logically and scientifically, what is so obviously true. All of us seem intuitively to know that there must be light if there is to be sweetness.

Voltaire touched upon it. "Go over the whole history of Christian assassins—and it is long," he said, "and you will see that never have they had in their pockets with their daggers a copy of Cicero or Plato or Virgil."

An old professor of mine kept in his home a string of keys to all of his rooms, each bearing in Greek the location of the lock it fitted. He was chided by a friend who declared that a burglar should not be given such helpful information, whereupon my professor replied, "No one who knows Greek will ever break into a house."

Perhaps, basically, this is the argument for libraries—they tend, at least, to civilize, to humanize those who use them.

In nothing is this humanizing process more evident than in the allergy which literacy has for prejudice. The first indication that one is becoming literate is to be found in the contraction and atrophy of his biases or, rather, in the expansion and extension of his interests and sympathies. The thoroughly literate mind is always the open mind. Bigotry will never thrive in a community of cultivated intellects. He who knows something of *all* ages and places will never live wholly under the tyranny of *this* age and *this* place.

It is my firm conviction that if, for the past fifty years, an efficient public library service had been available for all our people in the South, there would be no civil rights problems to plague us this day.

That is, perhaps, an over-statement. Until the millenium is at hand, even in the most literate society, there will be individuals who seek a preferred status and who feel that they advance more rapidly if others are held back. Those who lack any real superiority but who have power seem to be under the compulsion of proving that they are superior. Hence they surround and bolster themselves with all sorts of legal props designed to convert an actual equality or inferiority into an apparent superiority.

What I mean to say^a is that, if all of us in the South, white and Negro, had had

access to books to the same extent as the citizens of Massachusetts or New Hampshire, our *present* civil rights problems would long since have been behind us. The skirmish line would be far advanced. We would be contending over issues so tenuous, subtle and finely spun as now to be beyond our comprehension. We might still have questions of civil rights but they would be defined in new terms. . . .

From dark corners these days one occasionally hears ugly words—happily none in North Carolina—such words as “If the court should decide against segregation, ways and means will be found to evade and circumvent the decision.” Without minimizing the difficulties of enforcement—though I think they have been vastly exaggerated—it may be pointed out that one of the tests of the degree to which we are civilized is the extent to which we are obedient to the unenforceable.

And, speaking of the re-definition of terms, there were the terms “nullification” and “secession” which at least had about them a certain forthright honesty. They have sired the loathsome offspring “evasion” and “circumvention.” These words gain nothing of sanctity because the sentiments they reflect may have been uttered by a former member of the United States Supreme Court.

If the issue of segregation in the schools were entirely a political one, we might defer to the Governors of South Carolina and Georgia as being experts in that arcane field. But involved are questions of fair play, good faith, public morals, community ethics. Without one word of disparagement of either of those gentlemen, I see nothing in their careers which gives them authority superior to the rest of us where probity and conscience are concerned.

So when the ideas of evasion or circumvention of a court decision—whether by constitutional amendment, legislative act or the connivance of officials—emerge from the slime in which they are spawned, let us test their right to our acceptance, not by the eminence of their authors, but by our individual standards of what is a right and an honorable course for a state to pursue.

I am sure that if the question were asked anywhere in the country—Do you believe in slavery?—there would be no affirmative answer. The questioner would be told he should have his head examined, as Sam Goldwyn is said to have remarked about any one who would consult a psychiatrist. But the correct answer may depend upon definition.

What we would be thinking of, of course, is a condition of enforced servitude—a master and servant relationship of the ante-bellum kind. That slavery, of course, has no champions, no defenders.

But in a broader sense, slavery is a lack of privilege to do what free men do. There was the slavery of chains which merely restrained and limited locomotion. There may be the slavery of law and custom which commands: Use the rear seats. Don't sit in that grandstand. Don't go in that waiting room. Don't eat in that restaurant. Don't attend that church. Don't go to that school. Don't use that library.

Why? Because you are Negro. That slavery is subtle. The chains don't show. But custom and law may be hard masters. Wounds to the spirit may be deeper than mere leg sores produced by shackles.

Slavery is but half abolished, emancipation but half completed, while millions

of our fellow citizens are denied the right to use all of the instrumentalities, institutions and facilities of government upon precisely the same terms as every other citizen.

Now, of course, I must admit that all of my remarks are almost out of date—almost, but not quite. Things are moving so rapidly in the field of race relations that, in Alice's immortal phrase, we must run very fast just to stand still. What a pleasant task it would be if time permitted, to comment upon the changes we have witnessed—wrongs rectified in the fields of voting, jury service, appointive and elective offices filled, teachers' salaries, transportation, graduate and religious education, service in army and navy units—the list could be indefinitely extended—business, the stage, literature, churches, sports, entertainment and so on. All about us—everywhere—the walls come tumblin' down.

There remains one conspicuous exception—the public schools. That issue is on the laps, if not of the gods, at least of Nine Old Men.

At Fulton, Missouri, some years ago, Mr. Churchill coined a memorable phrase which has become a part of daily speech—"the iron curtain." It connotes a system or policy by which people in a certain area shut themselves off from ideas from abroad, place an embargo upon thought originating elsewhere, repel all new conceptions unless locally created.

Of course, ideas, like certain plants, have to be cross-fertilized if they are to flourish. There may be in-breeding of thought as of cattle. So a people who reject ideas from abroad rapidly lose capacity to develop their own. Convictions may lose robustness, virility—become anemic—if not compelled to compete upon equal terms with those of others. Hence Jefferson's "a decent regard for the opinions of mankind."

Now, not only in this country but everywhere throughout the world the tide of democracy is at the flood. Artificial distinctions which men reared between themselves are swept away by the combing surge. Caste perishes. The Ghetto crumbles. Little men stand erect in new-found dignity.

Nowhere more than in the South are these changes evident. And in the South nowhere more than in North Carolina. One could ask no higher honor for his state than that it stand at the head of this liberalizing movement.

In the public schools of the South segregation makes, if not its last, certainly its most significant stand. The conscience of the world condemns it. Indeed, when hearts are searched, the consciences of white Southerners are troubled and ill at ease. There is a certain sense of shame in seeing their states officially locked in combat with the world's enlightened forces, opposing their puny strength against world opinion.

For decades a certain type of political leader, now greatly reduced in numbers and thoroughly discredited, has tried to keep intact a kind of—shall we say cotton?—curtain about the South. The natural foe and inevitable conqueror of that kind of leadership is the public library.

When the last tawdry vestiges of that curtain, with all of its Jim Crow embellishments, come down, to the library, to education, to the press, to all forces of enlightenment and to men's attachment to Christian, Judaistic and humane principles will go the honor and the glory.