THE MOST IMPORTANT BUILDING IN THE CITY

Last year when I was Writer in Residence at the Toronto Reference Library I took the subway to work. I am of an age where men offer me their seats on public transit, and I welcome the courtesy. One hot day when we were hurtling along, a young man who appeared to be of mid-eastern descent offered me his seat. He asked if I'd had a good day, and I said yes. He asked where I worked and I told him. His face lit up at the mention of the Toronto Reference Library. He told me that when he came to this country, Toronto Reference Library was the most important building in the city for him. He explained that he knew that everything he needed to make a new life was in that building, and he went there every day.

That young man was just one of many. Every morning, the lobby of the library was packed with people waiting to get inside. Most, like most of us, were immigrants and like the young man on the subway and like generations of people who came to this country in search of a good life, the people in that lobby knew that the key to the good life was the library.

I was born in 1942, and when I started going to Earlscourt Public Library in Toronto, it was filled with what were unkindly referred to as DP's – Displaced Persons. As ugly as that term is, it offers a useful perspective for understanding what the library meant to people who came to Canada during those first post-war years. Libraries offered the displaced a place of belonging – a place where they could to learn to shape their lives to become the citizens they wanted to be. Like many people of my generation, I was the first in my family to attend university. When I started at the University of Toronto, my classes were filled with the students who had sat beside me at the shining oak tables in Earlscourt Public Library. Like me, they went on to live lives that would have been beyond the imagining of their grandparents, and they were able to do this because the libraries of this country have always offered people the tools to build new lives. Here in Calgary at my home library, Memorial Park, and at Central Library, I've seen students studying quietly after school. Memorial Park and Central are both downtown libraries and many downtown students don't live in homes that offer them a place where they can study, read, think and dream. Ernest Hemingway wrote a fine story about the human need to have a place where, whoever they are and whatever their circumstances, they are treated with dignity, as valuable members of the human race. The story is called "A Clean Well-Lighted Place". For generations, libraries have offered us all a clean well-lighted place to become the people we want to become. I hope we never lose sight of the value of that gift.

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