

“Why Won’t They Let Us Read From 9-5?”

It’s a pleasure to be invited to give closing remarks at this gathering of library staff members in Prince Georges County. I examined the agenda of the things that were discussed today and saw a wide reaching array of topics touching on such subjects as customer service, outreach to the Spanish-speaking community, working with teens, as well as new technology. I also saw a reference in the program for a discussion of special collections.

All these topics are important if the public library is to remain central to the lives of its citizens. I mention the word citizens because the public library is a key institution when we discuss democracy or freedom in our society. The library is as important as the church, synagogue or mosque. The library is as important as city hall. The library is as important as our schools. The public library is where we measure the quality of our lives. What makes the public library important is that it not only contains the knowledge of who we are as human beings and Americans, but that it is free and open to all. This simple fact is sometimes forgotten. The only thing in America that might be free is a ride on the Staten Island ferry.

I was invited to give closing remarks. If this was a baseball game, I would be the relief pitcher coming in to pitch in the ninth inning. I would be the closer. The person you want to throw strikes. So, let me begin with my first pitch. When I was asked for the title of the remarks I would make, I thought for a moment and then decided to call it “Why won’t they let us read from 9-5?” This title entered my mine because I was invited to talk to people who work in libraries. One would assume the reason why you work in a library is because you like books, enjoy reading and have a favorite author. I think the person who works in a library is like a monk or nun. They are people who have taken vows. They are people who share what they know with others. So, for a moment let us not look at people who come into our libraries as customers but as family, friends and lovers. Let us for a moment not think about the market and the buying and selling of things. For a moment let us not think of who is coming through the doors of our libraries; let us just think about why you are here. Why are you working in a public library?

I think if you don’t love books and reading then you’re in the wrong profession. You are in the wrong line. You are on the wrong team. I think everyone here should want to read from 9-5. If you have that desire, then I know that joy, that pleasure will be felt by a child who inquires about a book. If you are responsible for opening the doors to a library of monitoring the reference desk, your love for books and reading will be conveyed by how you talk and even how your body moves.

The person who wants to read all day is not lazy. He or she is imaginative. One might be reading a book for stories, or how to improve one’s life, or how to learn a skill. When you find yourself not wanting to put a book down, working in the public library might just be the place for you. Now there are many people who are not going to come through the library doors. You may have to stop and think about how to save these lost souls.

My father, Egberto Miller, born in Panama, was a man who I believe only once visited a public library. I know I only saw him in a public library in the 1980s (near the end of his life) when he came to hear me read poems in the New York Public Library in Chinatown. Growing up in the South Bronx, I never saw my father reading a book. I mostly saw him looking at the pictures and headlines of *The Daily News*. Even though my father was not a man of the book, he did encourage his children to read and study. He wanted us to have a better life. In his own quiet way one of the secrets he gave to my mother was a promise to take my sister, brother and I to the public library. I know the Hunts Point Public Library in the Bronx was as familiar as Yankee Stadium. My brother fell so in love with the public library that they had to send a library official to our apartment on Longwood Avenue in order to recover the unbelievable number of overdue books he had borrowed and not returned. These were the days before Borders and Barnes & Noble, and my brother Richard who would become a Trappist monk, would worship books after he worshipped God. Unlike my brother, however, I fell in love first with librarians and later on when I was older I had an affair with books. I enjoyed reading but I also loved being around the people who worked around books. This might sound a bit old-fashioned but in the old days a librarian could change a young person's life. Talk to many famous writers or read about their lives and sooner or later they will mention how a librarian opened the door to the writing life.

The last two years, I've been fortunate to visit public libraries in Florida, Arkansas, California, Texas, Kansas and Louisiana. I've been participating in a project coordinated by Poets House in New York which sends poets into the libraries to discuss the work and lives of famous poets. I've been talking about Langston Hughes and helping public libraries to do outreach and cultural programming. I think it's critical that a partnership exist between writers and libraries.

But as a father I worry that the public library means something different to my children. It's not a sacred place to them. My daughter a second year law student at George Washington University spends hours and hours each day in the GW library but seldom uses a public one. I don't think my son who is a junior at Widener University owns a library card. When my children were young I took them to the Mt. Pleasant Public Library (DC) as much as possible. We read books together. I wanted them to see the library as home and as an emotional shelter from life's storms. I wish my children possessed that desire to read from 9-5, but I'm afraid they are not children of the book. I'm afraid they will never be library consumers the way you or I would like them to be. They might never enter this temple where you work.

This makes your work in a public library even more important. In many ways the things you do here are responsible for preserving a way of life that is constantly changing. You are the keepers of the flame, the protector of the stories that keep us warm. Every one here is a custodian of memory. The work you do, the cataloging, the acquisition of materials, even the guarding of the front doors is a responsibility in many ways vital to national security, because that security is the security of the soul and not simply the borders of a nation.

Contrast the problems of public libraries with prison libraries and you'll quickly see that the access to knowledge is something you don't want to deny a person. The freedom to read or even select a book is something we must all cherish. What is being lost

between generations (today) is that understanding of how important a place of resource the public library is. Behind these library walls is our blood and bone, our cultural DNA.

Changes in technology will continue to redefine the role of the library in our society. We must not abandon what we do, but simply do it better. Technology is a tool and not a way of life. How we work and love is what defines us. Our values, our art, music and literature gives everyone human dignity. Let me share with you a poem I wrote about how technology has changed our lives. The poem is *Those Winter Days Before Cell Phones*:

*In the days before cell phones
We spent our time looking for loose change.
We ran to the phone.
We tripped over phone cords
Or stood on lines waiting to use a phone.
We forgot phone numbers.
We were listed in phone books.
There was no text messaging.*

*In the days before cell phones
There was phone sex and people
Slept with their phones. Phones were big
And they hung on walls. You could cradle
A phone and wait for a sweet dial tone.
If you were lonely you could call the operator.
There was always someone to assist you.*

*Today everyone has a cell phone
And they spend days and nights
Talking in strange places. You could
Be in the middle of reading a poem
And someone's cell phone will ring.
In the days before cell phones you
Searched frantically in your bag
Trying to find something to write with.
You wanted to find a pen not a phone
Before the ringing in your head stopped.*

I think we all must answer the ringing in our heads. There is much work to do if we wish to improve our communities. I remember how even the good old days were filled with problems. The future will not be different and the present is a dangerous place to live. Our jobs simply remind us of the work we must do. The task is not an easy one. Taking care of a home is challenging, raising children and taking care of elderly parents is challenging and demanding, but we do it. We do it not out of service but because of love. Life can be very fragile and maybe that's why we build monuments and libraries. It's why we take flowers to funerals. A reminder of how quickly life can end. Yet we

always stop to admire the flowers for their beauty. We inhale their fragrance, and celebrate their glory as we measure each breath.

There must always be a place for one's dreams. When I was growing up in the South Bronx I thought that place was the public library. I thought the people working in the library were dream keepers. Now, many years later, I still believe in dreams. I believe in the magic that comes with love. Let me close with what is my signature poem, *Divine Love*:

Divine Love

I wish I had loved you many years ago.

*I would have loved you like Ellington loved jazz and Bearden loved scissors.
I would have loved you like Langston loved Harlem and the blues loved Muddy Waters.*

*I would have loved you like Douglass loved to read and Garvey loved parades.
I would have loved you like Zora loved stories and DuBois loved suits.*

*I would have loved you like Louis loved boxing and Mahalia loved to sing.
I would have loved you like Carver loved peanuts and Wheatley loved poems.*

*I would have loved you like Jimmy loved Lorraine and Ossie loved Ruby.
I would have loved you like Martin loved Jesus and Malcolm loved Allah.*

Comments made by E. Ethelbert Miller on Staff Day at the Prince George's County Memorial Library System, Oxen Hill Branch. P.G. County, Maryland.

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