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## The library fix

**When politics gets mean and dumb, you can cheer yourself up by walking into a public library.**

By Garrison Keillor, June 27, 2007



Consumer confidence was down in June, and so was mine, though for other reasons. I see politics stuck in a spiral of dumbness and the Republican candidates -- the Cavalcade of Unhappy White Men -- leading the way. The other day, Mr. Giuliani came out against "putting government in a situation where government is in charge of so many different things," and a short time later he called for the government to build a fence the length of the Mexican border, "a technological fence," which I guess means something fancier than a mud fence, possibly using kryptonite. And shortly thereafter, he and his fellow Republican candidates arm-wrestled to see who could be more in favor of torture, or "enhanced interrogation techniques," as it's called now.

When politics gets mean and dumb, you can cheer yourself up by walking into a public library, one of the nobler expressions of democracy. Candidates don't mention libraries -- they're more likely to talk about putting people behind bars and no coddling or shilly-shallying with appeals and that judicial nonsense, just throw them in the dungeon and stick their heads in the toilet and do what you gotta do -- and yet when I walk into the library near my house and see a couple hundred teenagers studying, most of them Hmong or Vietnamese, I see the old cheerful America that Washington has lost touch with, the land of opportunity.

The library is the temple of freedom. Growing up, we kids were aware of how much of our lives was a performance for adults. In school, at church, in Scouts, adults were

watching, cueing you, coaching, encouraging, commenting; but in the library, you didn't have to perform for the librarian. She simply presided over an orderly world in which you had the freedom of your own imagination. The silence was not repressive but liberating: to allow your imagination to play, uninhibited by others.

Of course, a boy's imagination headed in some directions that the public library could not satisfy, or would not satisfy -- I thought that those particular books were kept behind the librarian's counter and that if she liked me, she would let me see them, so I was a very, very good boy, but then it dawned on me that she probably thought a very, very good boy wouldn't be interested in that sort of thing. (This would happen to me often with women.)

Libraries have rushed forward into the new age (whichever one we're in now), and the word "librarian" is out. They're Information Professionals now, and it's a Media Resource Center, and it's wired to the max. Just as we novelists have become experiential document specialists producing sensory-data-based narratives encoded in a symbolic format that informally we refer to as English. But a library is still a library. It's a place where serious people go to have the freedom to think without anybody poking and prodding them, in the company of other serious people who sit silently around us and yet encourage us in our own pursuits and projects.

My old hometown Carnegie library with the columns and high-domed ceiling was irreplaceable, and so of course it was torn down by vandals in suits and ties and replaced with a low warehouse-looking library that says so clearly to its patrons, "Don't get any big ideas. This is as good a library as you clowns deserve." But the spirit lives on, in the ranks of dedicated women and men who run the place.

The ceremonial strut of candidates competing to show cruelty is pornographic politics. The thrill of talking about torture -- "I would tell the people who had to do the interrogation to use every method they could think of," said Mr. Giuliani. "Waterboarding?" asked a reporter. "... Every method they could think of," said Mr. Giuliani - it was like a bad novel come to life. (The bald man looked out the window toward the trees where the prisoners were sitting chained to each other. He lit a cigarette. "Use every method you can think of," he said quietly. "How about red-hot needles?" asked the lieutenant. "How about dragging them behind trucks and beating them with barbed wire?" The bald guy smiled. "Spare me the details," he said. "And get me the information.")

The future of our country is not in the hands of bullies, it's with the kids in the library who are doing the work. I am going to bet on that from now on.

- - - - - (Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard Saturday nights on public radio stations across the country.)

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**About the writer**

Garrison Keillor is the creator and host of the nationally syndicated radio show "[A Prairie Home Companion](#)," broadcast on more than 500 public radio stations nationwide. For more columns by Keillor, visit his column [archive](#).