

The Book and The Library in an Age of Technology

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It is a great honor and privilege for me to be here today to help celebrate The Financial Times Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year Award. Honors such as this are important not only to the writer who is recognized for the excellence of his or her work but to all writers and all readers because we are reminded how much we love and cherish books. How much books matter. And how much we learn from books.

But how would we even be able to learn from any book, on any subject, if we did not spend time with it? If all we did was dip into it and then jump out again after learning a little something about the book from blog posts or podcast reviews or the 140-character commentary on Twitter or a remark left on our Facebook newsfeed, for example? After all, one of the greatest tools we have to help us learn is the act of reading. It is not only the process of reading, however, but also of *comprehending* the deep meaning of words and content that allows us to know the past and understand the present in order to find our way forward into the future.

Virginia Woolf understood the special place that books and reading have in our lives and how precious they are to us when she wrote, “I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards— their crown, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy, when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, ‘Look, they need no rewards. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.’”

And indeed, as all of us assembled here tonight will surely attest, a love for reading books is a critical component of our lives. After all, reading provides a renewal. What is renewed is the imagination. Its active independence is able to take the measure of everyday events from a point just beyond our reach. That point, the act of reading provides. Reading constitutes a self renewal, an imaginative act and a human act. It forces us to see how we would be poorer, what

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kind of experience we would be missing and what strengths we would lack if we did not read. And let me add—if we did not read *books*.

A few years ago, the noted journalist and media commentator Jeff Jarvis wrote an article in which he more or less declared that books were dead. He said, “The problems with books are many: they are frozen in time without the means of being updated and corrected... They tend to be too damned long because they have to be long enough to be books. [And] they aren’t searchable... They are thrown out when there’s no space for them anymore. Print is where books go to die.” To be fair to Jarvis, he was lobbying for the notion that, in his words, “We need to get over the book. And then we can reinvent it.” That reminds me of a cartoon I recently saw in *The New Yorker* in which people on an airplane had their heads buried in their Kindles, Nooks, Sony Readers and so forth when the pilot announced on the intercom, “We’re about to take off. Please turn off your books.”

Well, I am here to tell you that we cannot turn off our books. And in doing so, let me paraphrase Mark Twain by stating categorically that rumors about the death of books are greatly exaggerated! Books are still cultural icons in our society. They are still among the first gifts that people give to their beloved children, that friends and lovers exchange with one another. You can dedicate a book to someone you love but we haven’t yet reached the point where we dedicate flash drives! And contrary to what may be popular belief, book sales are still doing fine. In 2009 publishers sold approximately 3.1 billion books for more than \$40 billion dollars. In the category of poetry and drama books alone—hardly what one thinks of as the most popular class of publications—nearly 12,000 new titles were published in that same year. Furthermore, at the 2010 Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, the largest annual book and media fair in the world, hundreds of thousands of visitors attended along with 7,539 exhibitors from 111 countries. In addition, approximately \$8 billion worth of used books are sold every year in the U.S.—so much for Jarvis’ idea that books are thrown out when there’s no room for them anymore. In fact, a recent article in *Slate* entitled “Confessions of a Used Book Salesman,” relates how competitive the used book field has become. The author, Michael Savitz, notes that he uses a laser scanner attached to a PDA as he sorts through bins of used books in order to immediately determine whether or not to buy a particular volume. Savitz explains, “The software I use tells me the going price, on Amazon Marketplace,

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of the title I just scanned, along with the all-important sales rank, so I know the book's prospects immediately. I turn a profit every time.” And he’s hardly alone in the field of buying and selling used books. Not only Amazon but also BarnesandNoble.com, E-bay and many other online sites are helping to keep used books passing from hand to hand, as are the countless church, synagogue, school and other book fairs where men, women and children still consider that they’ve found a treasure when they come across a book they want to read.

And to those who say that young people don’t read anymore, let me point to the Harry Potter phenomenon and remind them that the Harry Potter books have been translated into some 67 languages, and it has been estimated that more than 400 million copies have been sold around the world. I believe that many of the Harry Potter fans and the dedicated readers of other books for young people like the *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, which has sold over 8 million copies, will become lifelong readers and lovers of books. In fact, I have no doubt about that. Books and reading open up doors in our imagination that we didn’t even know were there. The human spirit cannot be simplified, compartmentalized, isolated, abridged, or made virtual and books will always help to remind us of that.

Libraries, too—the greatest of all treasure houses of books and the repositories of countless other types of learning materials—are hardly in danger of going out of business. According to the American Library Association, today there are more public libraries in the United States than McDonalds has franchises for Happy Meals. Let me highlight one reason I think that libraries continue to thrive even in this age of technology when Google Books and the like can easily provide online access to the 12 million or so volumes that have already been scanned and made available on the Internet: it is because people need to be part of a community comprising other real, live human beings, and a library is the center of such a community. A library is a learning and a reading place, but it is also a gathering place, a meeting place, a place where cultural events happen, where children sit in reading circles with other children of every race, ethnicity, and class, where both children and adults are taught to read, where immigrants learn English, and bridge the distance between their “old country” and their new adopted land. In that regard, it’s no wonder that in 2008, in the borough of Queens, which has one of the largest concentrations of immigrants in the United States, over 22 million items were circulated by the Queens Library

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system. In that same year, at the Queens Library, which has more than 6.6 million items in its collection, in-person attendance was over 15.3 million people; some 544,000 individuals attended nearly 28,000 free programs; and there were nearly 828,000 active borrowers. And, libraries are hardly falling behind when it comes to incorporating e-books into their collections. Not at all. As Anne Thornton, director of reference and research services at The New York Public Library points out, "E-books aren't changing the library's mission but rather influencing the ways we can deliver our mission." Michael Santangelo, who oversees almost 13,000 titles available online as curator of the electronic book collection at the Brooklyn Public Library, agrees. "You have to respond to what your patrons want," he says. "We are just trying to go where people are at right now, and we are trying to build upon that."

Still, we must also remind ourselves that while it has been said that the Internet may soon become the greatest library of all, allowing each and every one of us to have something akin to our own Library of Alexandria at our fingertips—in fact, I have said this myself—we must recognize that it costs money to get online, which can have a tremendous impact on who can and cannot access the Internet. Not everyone can afford those monthly fees for high-speed or even low-speed connections, particularly given the current economic situation. And all the devices we have fallen in love with that help us log on—laptops, blackberries, smart phones, netbooks, wireless routers and so forth, all cost money. So does music. Buying books, subscribing to journals and magazines involves cost. But going to the library is free; you can enter a library, borrow a book, a movie, a CD or DVD, a newspaper, a magazine or delve into any other resource without a penny in your pocket. Hence, we must remind ourselves that libraries remain free because people have decided to support library operations by contributing as taxpayers as well as individual benefactors. In part this is due to our recognition of the historical role of libraries in our society as great equalizers. They have continued—and I hope they will continue—to provide access to one and all with no proof of need, income, ability or even citizenship required.

It is also important to remember that in libraries, there are those wonderful guides to knowledge and understanding known as librarians. Ask a librarian a question about where to find something or how to research a topic and you are more than likely to get not only personalized attention, but also the assistance of a thoughtful, educated individual who will help you navigate the shelves of books,

magazines and journals as well as the seemingly infinite corridors of the virtual world of the Internet.

Today, there is so much information available on the Internet—which, by the way, I recently heard someone refer to as the Encyclopedia of Everything—that it has become like an endless smorgasbord. At such a heavily laden table of information, data, and hyperlinks, one is liable to be so dazzled by the first items that turn up in a Google search, for example, that one will not forge onward to find out what else there is to be known about a particular topic. And let me tell you, as a former teacher, student, lifelong seeker of knowledge and lover of libraries, there is *always* more to be known.

Still, it is understandable that today, we are *all* dazzled—and we should be—by the new world of technology that has opened up to us, but as lovers of books and libraries, we must remember that we have nothing to fear from technology. It can be a kind of reading partner when we want, or need it to be. Certainly, technology is not our adversary. Technology is a multi-faceted medium of transmission and of access to information, knowledge, and wisdom, but it is not, by itself, a provider of content. The ability to carry around the entire corpus of Greek literature on one CD may be astonishing, but that does not mean that the individual who possesses such a CD actually *knows* anything about Greek literature. One still has to read. One still has to listen and see with one's own eyes. One still has to ponder ideas and discuss them with other people. One still has to *think*, because connectivity does not necessarily guarantee connection or conversation. We must not allow advances in technology to deceive us into thinking that whatever is not in the computer or data bank does not exist. After all, God did not create life with two computers!

And conversely, of course, we must also not allow ourselves to believe that just because something *is* online means that it is true—or even close to it. Let me give you a famous example of this phenomenon, which I think of as the “Wikipedia-zation” of knowledge because a notorious event involving Wikipedia has come to represent how easily false information can virally infect factual knowledge. What is called the Seigenthaler Incident began in 2005 when a false biography of the noted journalist Robert Seigenthaler, Sr., who was also an assistant to Robert Kennedy when he was Attorney General in the 1960s, was posted on Wikipedia. Among

the scurrilous “facts” in the biography were that “For a short time, [Seigenthaler] was thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John, and his brother, Bobby. Nothing was ever proven.”

This horrendous misinformation—represented as truth—existed on Wikipedia for 132 days before Seigenthaler’s son, also a journalist, happened upon it and called his father. Seigenthaler, Sr. then had Wikipedia remove the hoax biography, but not before the same false facts had migrated to other sites such as Reference.com, Answers.com, and who knows where else. Probably, somewhere in the estimated 15 billion online pages, it still exists. Thank God, Wikipedia has taken steps to address such problems, but there are an estimated 182 million web sites on the Internet, with more being created all the time, and there is no central authority, no group, individual or organization to oversee the accuracy of the information they purvey.

An even more recent example of how quickly false information can spread online—fed by sources such as the 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week news cycle that is constantly chattering at us on cable television—is a story that began in the print and web editions of a questionable news publication, migrated to a major cable network, and was soon spreading throughout the blogosphere. Specifically, it was that the city of Los Angeles had ordered 10,000 jetpacks for its police, paramedics and fire department, at a cost of \$100,000 for each of the devices. The story went on to quote Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa as saying, “We’ll all be flying around L.A. soon...And it’s another great tool for law enforcement.” Of course, this was nonsense, but so many people took it seriously before the story was withdrawn that Twitter was literally a-twitter with outraged citizens complaining about one more example of out-of-control government spending.

In fact, what was really out of control was the ability to stop, take a deep breath, and think critically about the information that people who read this story were being exposed to. One reason for this may be the point I alluded to earlier, about spending time with a book or other publication in order to actually comprehend what one is reading and integrate it into one’s overall storehouse of knowledge acquired over a lifetime. To make comparisons, dig deep, and see if what you’re reading enriches what you understand about the world or not. Isn’t that one of

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the main joys of being a literate person—to understand what you know and what you don't, to be always ready to learn more, but also to be able to dismiss pure nonsense when you come across it? U.K. *Guardian* journalist and Orwell Prize winner Andrew Brown makes an interesting point in this regard, noting that nowadays, people expect information to be delivered to them in quick sound bites or instant messages or rapid-turnover television stories that are often conveyed in the loose structure of speech rather than the controlled, thoughtful, and admittedly often time-consuming form of writing. Hence, he warns, “To a fully literate person, authors have voices more distinct and personal than most of the people they will ever talk to. There are clearly millions of people for whom this is not true, and never will be: they have been taught to read in a functional sense, but the whole activity still feels unnatural. The chief characteristic of written language, for them, is that it is an artificial, painful and ineffective way of conveying meaning.”

In that connection, let me highlight the fact that I think the current debate about the viability of books, as evidenced by the arguments set forth by Jeff Jarvis and other advocates of digital communications are somewhat misleading, because they focus on delivery platforms, not content. The ability to read with joy and to extract from reading a deep and multilayered understanding of a subject is not dependent on whether a book is written on a papyrus scroll, bound between the paper pages of a book or digitally encoded to be delivered to an iPad or other electronic device. A book is still a book, even if it is an e-book; an idea is still an idea, and a writer is still sitting somewhere, writing *to us*, trying to convey *to us* what he or she has learned or dreamed up or figured out through research or uncovered in the course of their travels or discovered through dedicated investigative work. This will never change, because writers write because they *have to* write. And they write for posterity. Indeed, writing is an act of immortality, of transcending the limitations of time and space to connect with humanity today, tomorrow, and on into the future. Hence, writing will always be with us because a craving for the future will always be with us. Because a yearning for immortality will always be with us, as will the yearning to reach out to future generations and speak to them over the span of decades. Of centuries. Even of millennia.

The knowledge that writing and reading bring us is no less valid because of the way we chose to interact with it, as indicated by just how vigorous the sales of electronic books have become.

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Barnes & Noble, for example, expects to generate \$1 billion in revenue from the sale of digital books, including e-books and e-textbooks by 2013. And in the current year alone, the Kindle store, which has more than 400,000 titles available for download, has sold 22 million copies of these publications. These *books*. The fact that one may interface with them by reading on a Kindle or listening to a recorded voice read to us on a Nano or an iPod Shuffle—a device so tiny that when it's clipped to a jacket or shirt, one might be forgiven for mistaking it for a brooch—is irrelevant. In fact, as I see it, the efficacy of each of these platforms, from paper to pdf file, is more an economic issue in terms of sales and royalties and so forth that publishers, authors, booksellers and others in the field need to hash out rather than it is something for readers to worry about. For loving readers and seekers of knowledge, the diversity of media available to bring books into our lives is a true blessing that brings real joy.

These new media have also contributed to the burgeoning field of business books. Certainly, it must be noted that this is an era in which business and economics have taken center stage on the both the national and international scene—often in ways that have substantially impacted the lives of men and women everywhere in unfortunate, even tragic ways. But in the same vein, it must also be clearly stated that with courage, determination and conviction, the business press, along with journalists, authors and publishers across different media platforms have stepped up to the plate and made it a priority to better analyze and understand world markets and national business trends as well as to identify what's gone wrong and what can—and must—be put right in terms of getting the nation's financial house in order once again. This requires looking back at history, keeping a sharp eye on current-day issues and marshalling our forces to point towards the future. And by the way, in regard to the connection between our current-day economic woes and what the future may hold, it is interesting to note a recent comment in a Fortune magazine interview made by Jamie Dimon in speaking about the book *This Time It's Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*, by Reinhart and Rogoff. Dimon suggested that after humanity carries out another thousand years of economic policy, the sages may look back and conclude that “the biggest risk [to economic stability] just might be us.”

The point is that talented and thoughtful people are doing the work that needs to be done in order to move our nation forward. And all this work is being reported on and written about, and what is

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being learned is also being widely disseminated. While Adam Smith was the father of capitalism, in my book, when it comes to chronicling the impact and influence of business, the father of the field is the late Thomas C. Cochran, Benjamin Franklin Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, whose 1942 book, *The Age of Enterprise*, was not only a groundbreaking treatise on American economics but also opened up the modern field of business history. Yet one wonders if the critical ideas discussed in the pages of this book were ever really integrated as fully into the American mainstream with the same speed and influence that would be possible today because of the new media that are hungry for content and eager to push it out through both print and digital platforms. For example, let's look at some relevant statistics: on average, every year about \$3 billion worth of books about improving business are sold. Last year alone, nearly 9,000 new business titles were published, the majority of them made available not only as print publications but also in electronic editions. Major online publications such as the Huffington Post, Salon, Slate and The Daily Beast all have specific sections devoted to business or business and technology. Amazon now regularly rates and ranks the top business books of the year. So does *Library Journal*—information, it must be noted, that is also readily available on the publication's web site, libraryjournal.com. And of course, in all our local libraries, along with the shelves devoted to fiction and cooking and reference books, one is going to find a robust business section that's likely to be one of the busiest areas in the building.

Actually, I would be willing to guess that *all* the areas of *all* our libraries are busy—and that just about every other source we can find to provide reliable, verifiable, and factual information is also being pressed into service on an ever-increasing basis. And that's reassuring, because I believe we have come to a moment in our society when we must make a real effort to separate the wheat from the chaff, to delineate confusion and self-deception from truth and insight. To help advance the information technology revolution that affects all of us by adjusting many of the structures of our society in order to accommodate, assimilate and exploit what is lasting and valuable about the new technologies while also recognizing what is not. In that connection, we must remind ourselves that technology is only a tool—*only* a tool. Technology is not a universal panacea. We still have to read, but above all else we still have to think. When I was president of Brown University, there were times when I heard students say, “This is a free country, we can say anything we want,” and I would reply, “If you have nothing meaningful to say, it doesn't

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make any difference.” In that regard, we must always bear in mind T.S. Eliot’s anxious questions, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

In the decade ahead, our democracy and our society will be facing a major challenge. Many, in our society, will have access to information, to knowledge, and hence to power; power of autonomy, power of enlightenment, power of self-improvement and self-assertion, power over their lives and their families’ future, and there will be others who will have much more limited access to information and therefore, to knowledge. Such a cleavage will have tremendous consequences for the future of our nation and our world. We cannot allow knowledge to become a commodity with a price that only some of us can afford to pay because none of us can afford to live a life without reading and learning. We must all have the opportunity to undergo what Emile Zola called the fatigue of learning because those who do so are pursuing the rewards of knowledge not only for themselves and their families but for our society as well. They learn in order to become good citizens and good ancestors. I thank them as I thank you. We must always remember the fact that while microchips and fiber optics and source code are part of the technological framework of today, the raw input is still human thought and human creativity. And we must remember that even in this age of the computer, reading is still a wonderful act. It provides pleasure, discretion, silence, creative solitude, and privacy. Transcending the limitations of time and space is one of the primary pleasures of the act of reading for it allows not only the renewal of one’s imagination, but also the development of one’s mind. Reading universalizes us. It is an activity that is limitless, borderless, and without boundaries. In a world that too often emphasizes our differences, reading books, whether in the Australian outback, or an African village, a European coffee shop, a Latin American café or on a commuter train carrying us home from our offices in an American city, remains an act of reverence for learning and knowledge that we all still share.

Thank you very much.