

Questions for an Open Cultural Institution:

Thinking Together in Provocative Places

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The capacity of a rich cultural institution – like the Smithsonian Institution -- is both formidable and promising, as complex and daunting to its users as it is intriguing and convivial. It is also formative; great institutions transmit concepts of evidence and experience, inquiry and experiment. Museums, libraries and archives construct complex situations for understanding the possibility of knowing more. When a cultural institution proclaims an embrace of openness and clarity, the visibility of knowledge and the formative intentions of a rich collection expand. It can actively affect the future of knowledge and judgment among its present and virtual users, and awaken their tendency to reflect. How does an institution enact the values and practices of access and transmit them to users? How can the conversations begun here – and the reflections that follow these beginnings – serve the intellect of the nation? How might these conversations continue for us?

We live in all we seek.

Annie Dillard

For the Time Being

Because I have become an old observer in museums, and your experience is so young and fresh, I worry that I may at times sound as though I am speaking a foreign language to you, a language learned in a different place, in a time that is over. Sometimes it seems that way to me. So I think it might be useful to present the conclusions or at least the foundations of my talk first. That way you will know where I am going, but more important perhaps, where I have come from.

Everything I do or say when I speak to you stands on my belief that there are thoughtful, capable, common people in this society whose horizons include complex, powerful and lasting unknowns that do not inspire fear. In fact, they inspire something far different. Among the concepts that move these people forward, and in my view move the nation forward, the intellectual, the historical, the ethical, the moral, and the aesthetic are more powerful than the economic and political. These people live authentic lives in a world that is neither remote nor ideal.

Knowledge of the museum kind is best when it helps such people over time to be more engaged, more curious, more empathetic, and more reflective; less judgmental; more aware of the fragile; and less afraid of ambiguity. Such knowledge leads us to that rare thing: the long view of life on earth. The long view is the better, harder view, but it is more difficult and requires a deeper world. Cultural institutions deepen the long view.¹

The very brief version of this talk goes this way: Infuse lives with courage, mind and heart. Risk your self in generous acts. Live as a teacher in all situations. Take the long view and speak about it.

Introduction

I am grateful for the challenge of this day and for your presence here to think with me. Thank you for being here; it would be a much smaller experience without you in every way. After leaving 40 years of teaching I found that I had also left a daily opportunity to create a space together with my students, something between us to define, an opening that we could fill, space to separate and contain our understandings, invented by each of us in response to the experience of thinking with others on that day. What happened in that space was for me the play and the promise of the possible.² I feel the loss of that play every day, and I envy you for having a daily opportunity to affect the play of the possible in the intellect of the nation.

Think with me about the space that has just now begun here between us, containing

nothing before we speak and think with each other in it. By our presence the openness is immediately occupied and enlarged by everything we carry with us, not just the collective thinking about important work done here. We bring our entire lives, holding the many possessions that define us but we may find difficult to describe: Experiences and expertise, things we believe, things we trust and value. Things we care for and tend in our memories yet may not yet have come to understand in full.

What is the state of curiosity in the Smithsonian Institution this morning? How will you stir and deepen it? When a person arrives here to use these museums, the most important part of the mind's experience is also present: the moment we recognize something never seen before. And then the mind connects and recalls, and thinks of questions, imagines contexts and finds words to say. So begins something that is not present unless we are present. In a place like this as a museum user, I always begin with some small event, a moment of attention for an object that draws me. This moment was not possible in my life before. That object did not exist in my experience before my attention. And then I ask, what am I to do with it? What has now become possible for me to do or think? How will the moment be unlocked and opened?

“Open” in my thinking means unfinished, improvisational, incomplete. A cultural institution is always an open work, completed in a particular way as it is experienced, a way that cannot be reproduced because it is woven into a private performance as we gaze in the presence of the new.³ What we casually and uncritically call learning is not a

part of it; it is **experiencing what is before us** that matters before anything else matters. And it is thinking, not “learning,” that makes us different. Here is a place where content and its value are first performed by the user who stands inside the event. And then they are re-performed (perhaps for the rest of one’s life) as memory or story or insight, in imagination and recollection. *This thought, we might say in the future, was opened for me in the Smithsonian Institution one day, and here is the difference it has made.*

So I want to turn the idea of the open from its relatively narrow meaning in the world of scholarly access to a concept much larger. Open access to a cultural institution like this one includes its accumulated knowledge, responsive tools, and practitioners who live in a constant flow. You too are living vessels of knowledge and instruments of change. Here, you serve and inspire something that is always unfinished, always in process, mostly invisible, and certainly impossible to measure. How should we grow to think of ourselves, to make practice visible and responsive to unknowns that Mr. Smithson could never have imagined? My talk is about the openness of an institution, the openness of its practices, and the idea of its service to unfinished, open lives in our nation.

My intention is to extend the ideas and values of an open access environment to every user. I want to suggest that through you the museum’s voice expresses the value of thinking and questioning freely. For the user, the experience of being here is also an experiment; its possible effects are unknowable. After the museum, I think it is possible that a user’s story will differ, and – because of you -- they might have felt or seen the

beginnings of a slightly different intellect. People use the museum in order to experience something, to see and sense something, and – uncertainly, tentatively, cautiously– to become something they have not been before.

I hope to recompose – to reconjure, if that is possible -- a conversation around the concept of open access. I hope to draw your thinking toward the implications of an open environment for professional service, scholarship, and authentic advocacy for the Smithsonian user. The term, of course, is redundant. “Open” means accessible. “Access” implies openness. So it needs a better noun, and perhaps a different adjective as well.⁴ As a librarian turned museum observer, when open access is talked about as a new information concept, I think of John Cotton Dana, who seems to have practiced it for the people of Newark at the start of the Twentieth Century, another time of greed and oligarchy.

To reconjure the idea, I need to expand the lexicon: “open” means more than “freely shared”. I think its most important meanings are “unformed,” “malleable,” “permeable,” “expansive,” “generative,” “possible.” These are also the characteristics of a democracy at its best, living up to its original promise, something unfinished and always under our design and construction. In a democracy, I think that the highest work of institutions is to create an open field for citizens to do the building, and to provide some of the lumber that democratic conversations require. I dare to think it is not too late for this. If any institution is the place where our culture is made clear, where

intellectual fear and mistrust are abated, where the oversimplification of the complex is revealed, where knowledge is not remote but imminent and permeable, and where our resistance to difficult conversations can erode, I trust that place must be a museum or it is a library.

Museum users are here, alive with invisible, unspoken things. They bring all that has happened to them so far and all that they want to have happen still. Their lives appear in the open spaces of the museum today, even as they occupy our thinking this morning. For all of the museum's people, an open world is arriving and waiting to be created and acknowledged. We have no idea what it will contain. We have no idea what will happen. We are all as one, observing, pausing, questioning, improvising. For me, this is where authentic experiences of the museum begin.⁵

II. The Open

The environment of possibility that we occupy this morning is not a place or a collection, so much as it is an invisible thing that is always about to happen. This invisible, impalpable concept fills the open space between us with immanence and possibility. Our presence together makes this space new. Users of this great museum, encounter a formidable, challenging space apart from their lives of predictable experience. Because both the museum's content and situation are extraordinary, this is a place where the capacity of lives and the integrity of thoughts can be proven. The invisible, inviting dimension of the museum asks us to be present and true to a given moment, even

though what we want and what moves us forward in to the open space, we cannot see.

In service as a librarian, I found that no matter what information is given to library users, it is the quality of the giving, the encouragement, what is said, how we talk together, that is always at least equal in value.⁶ As a teacher, and as an observer in museums, I came to learn that it is similarly the quality of the openness between us that defines our reciprocal and conversational transactions of knowledge and practice. The opportunity to approach and imagine, to pause and go back, to disassemble and reconstruct assists thinking and creates the promise of some active possibility.

Something, we think, could come of this.

And something does. When a cultural institution proclaims an embrace of openness and clarity, the visibility of knowledge and the formative intentions of its collection should expand and unfold with more encounters, more talk, more exchange. In an open environment the museum user looks for conviviality, landmarks, places of conversation, and common experiences that help to form questions. Never doubt that the journey to the museum is consequential to the user who undertakes it. Each life comes here to make and revise part of a cautious, tentative narrative of its own, original to the self that lives it, in a space that has been defined and constructed for them. To come here means that a person is creating something new in the story of one life, and the integrity of the museum is an essential part of it.

Cultural institutions complete and repair the fragmented world. When our previous constructions of a life are pierced or broken, or inadequate, or when they are overturned by complex events, knowledge is a form of restoration, solace and reconciliation. Among families and others, knowledge is a form of binding together, even if it is not joyous. In communities, without transmissions of fresh knowledge and art, entropy abides and stagnation takes us down. But knowledge restores; knowledge consoles. The open, active institution can change the model of the world we bring with us and compel us to take a fresh and maybe rougher view of our lives from a different angle. By changing our cognitive geometry, the museum or the library alters the mirror of the self. *How do I think in the presence of the complex, or in the presence of the unknown?* When any of us can speak within ourselves about changing our capacity to know things and think things, we have begun to write a new story of the self. The great collection, the great museum, is also an opening in the lives of its users.

My work today is to address what that opening in users' lives might mean here, and to bring to mind the value of cultural institutions in a democracy. Like you, I want many things to happen in museums and libraries; here are some of them:

- I believe that **conversations** should occur in cultural institutions that address matters of ethics, government, and public life; we can address the tensions of history as experienced in the lives of Americans; we can talk about the nature of knowledge and the reflective intellect; we can alter our reading practices and

our talking practices. We can learn to see processes that we cannot otherwise see: narratives of exploration and courage that can make empirical differences in how we imagine other lives than our own. We can discuss the historic fabric of ideas, and how we have gotten things wrong and sometimes right, and (in the long view) how every person encounters the challenge of telling the difference.

- In this unique cluster of collections, resources can assist users to **go beyond the museum**, to other museums and collections, to libraries and archives worldwide. There are handheld tools to be designed that explore the nature of knowledge and its applications in public life. The museum can develop public awareness of current explorations and recent discoveries; it can describe the many unknowns that still claim us. Here, knowledge, knowing and acts of mind – John Dewey used the word “mind” as a verb – can be the primary theme of every experience.
- Whenever the museum or the library brings **the day’s news** and **the ongoing crises of human experience** into the building – explorations of health, languages, environment, folkways, migrations, domestic lives world-wide -- a compelling case for knowledge is made. Evidence of the daily state of changing populations, communities in both erosion and triumph, the signs of endangered nature and the worldwide biosphere, explorers of frontiers on earth and above it, historic discoveries and reinterpretations, archaeological finds, and worldwide biological and health research. Much of what happens in the living world today should be

brought to awareness here, where its contexts and antecedents are documented and where we might stimulate an increase in thinking for the long run of human life and the long run of civilization.

- For the strongest themes in the museums, you might **curate the progress of information**, explore the most important open research questions, identify major research tools and databases, how specialists and scholars think. Demonstrate the infrastructures of knowledge and inquiry that create new knowledge and nurture fresh thought. Throughout the museum questions ought to appear: *How do we know this? How important is this? What remains unknown? What is the difference to be grasped? How do I find out more?*
- Any librarian knows that the most compelling intellectual activity does not respect academic disciplines, but draws from an interdisciplinary world. An adult equivalent to **Q?rious** might **explore themes and related readings across museum exhibitions**, documenting interdisciplinary insights and experiences. Scholars in dialogue can pull out the most interesting threads that tie common themes. Adults know that any grasp of complexity and context can be a revelation. Children need to see curious adults thinking and talking together.
- A series of **Smithsonian concept guides** published as applications for handheld devices would be a useful set of tools as well as a worthy publishing enterprise.

What concepts cross these collections? Migration, community, tools, families, adaptation? At least one **selective, well-stocked bookstore** on the mall could provide current, diverse, accessible nonfiction and history works in affordable formats, tied to concepts at hand. Live and virtual **book conversations** would naturally follow. You might provide annotations for independently published works to guide the reader toward Smithsonian evidence.

Before I am done this morning I will add at least one more *desideratum* to this list: the creation of a **Smithsonian heuristic**, a sequence of naïve but essential questions for useful thinking in the presence of the unknown, by any user, in any museum (or not), anywhere.

You have been thinking about open access, and so have I in different ways for about thirty-five or forty years. From teaching badly long ago in an open classroom, to entering library service as one who wanted to redefine the institution as a community center; then, as a professor of information tools and an advocate for open books and lives; to now, when I am still haunted by the closed and often uninformed quality of public thought, especially the inability of the nation to engage in sustained open dialogue for its own progress. Fear and mistrust, oversimplification and distortion are invidious barricades, almost impossible to dismantle, and I had not expected them to rise as they have, nor to be so impervious to conversation.

I think we live in an ambiguous sphere where much that is vital has been made unstable and unpredictable; national ethos is in flux; and we have become distant from common strengths and capabilities. For me, the questions we need most to address have no answers online and only partially on paper. And so, a lifetime later, I see that we still require an open place for contemporary thinking, with all the slowness and deliberation needed to think well, and all the information and depth only thoughtful citizens and committed professionals in great cultural institutions can bring to the conversation.

When each day begins here essential themes of the Smithsonian begin as well. Human beings enter with bundles of memories and anticipations of fresh experiences; the museum draws them right up to the edge of what they know and what they can say. Perhaps they can step beyond that edge to think again or recombine what they know with something new. Think of lives, think of your life: how you remember and anticipate, and how you mind each other and mind the world. So much of this vast collection of the visible and tangible is about the purely imagined thing, a concept or a principle, a motive or a symbol – diversity, recovery, injustice, invention, daring -- and so it is always useful to consider what you cannot see. Think of the mind moving from the visible evidence to the invisible suggestion, connecting and broadening, finding a metaphor or an image, then asking a question, or restoring briefly the situations and contexts of other times and places. There are invitations to think beyond the moment everywhere, and it requires a specific kind of genius to accept them.

I think that what happens to every user in this vast ensemble of collections is a personal struggle to find the words, to hold the image in mind, to connect it among other pieces, and to link it to continuing themes of one life. The purpose of being here is not to learn anything but to think anything and to follow the thought. It is a formidable institution. More important, it is a formative institution, an instrument of opening and unfolding something in the American imagination. The tension of the cultural institution as we experience it is between the visible and the invisible, how they touch us and how we touch them.

III. Think of Lives

We must think more closely about lives and their aspirations. I began to observe museums in 1983, when I thought I could understand “learning” until I later found that the museum was not about learning at all. As an outsider, and still an outsider, I heard the special languages, the precise orthodoxies of interpretation, a fundamental basis in history and artifacts and empiricism, and a reliance on the values and language of curatorial disciplines. As a former schoolteacher, I recognized didacticism and curricula; as a librarian I felt a constant need for information to lighten the density.

I came to think of places like the Smithsonian as public minds left open for people to walk in and out, making observations and having thoughts. Then I stopped seeing the museum as a mind and began to see it less as a brilliant gathering of collections, and more as a forum for the collective mind stirring in its users, all of them thinking and

becoming something together at once, each engaged in “the play of the possible.” It was the quality of the stirring that enticed me to think of them, to think with them, and this still remains for me the objective of being here.

As I too became a different person, I imagined the unfinished lives of users, and the unfinished issues that configured their experiences, just as I did my own. These are the matters that shape us over time, that come to us early perhaps, in our families, our schools, in our experiences of faith and ethics, our caring for others, the complexities and confusions of feeling, the losses and successes of becoming adult. Because these unfinished issues are complex and definitive for us, they do not disappear and they retain their power for us regardless of how vigorously we pursue them. In some ways, they design our attention and the events that give us a sense of agency and purpose. Every person here and every person who enters any cultural institution carries an array of unfinished issues. They are not simple and they are not accidental.

I came to believe that people want knowledge in their lives and in their own hands, not because knowledge is power, but because knowledge is possibility. Here, the contexts of human lives are always in play, never static. As I moved through museums, I asked myself questions in search of those contexts and how to respond to the possibilities. *Is this something I have the capacity to understand? Is knowledge of this kind within my reach? How has my life prepared me to grasp it? How must I change my thinking?* I do not doubt that my grandchildren, three and younger, ask questions of this kind in some

form, and look for someone nearby, as we all do, to be a source of courage and fearlessness.⁷

My intention is to inspire questioning lives, people finding their edges and moving across them fearlessly. I believe that it is an ethical necessity for cultural institutions to do this, because it is clearly a critical time for intelligence in our democracy. A difficult time for being in public schools as teacher or student.⁸ A difficult time for science and effective public policy. A difficult time for knowledge and decisions related to public health, the degraded environment, the preservation of life. A difficult time for ethics, trust, empathy, generosity. A difficult time for higher education. And as always, a difficult time for adults, out of school, who want to change their minds and lives for reasons of work and prosperity, but also for vitality, self-renewal, and personal integrity.

I worry about the many appearances of inhibition and hesitancy in American life. Fear of the other. Fear that nourishes undemocratic impulses. As for me, I fear the nation becoming smaller in its generosity and lessened in its kindness, more distant from possibilities of change. Each of us knows the fear of a compromised life. These are all parts of what a cultural institution addresses in a democracy.

And so: think of lives. What would be the effect of Americans across the nation who suddenly have an increased tendency to say, "I have the capacity to ask this question." Or, "I am capable of being a critical thinker." Or, "I need to know more about that." Or,

“I need to find a book (a trusted source, an expert who knows) about that.” Think of what would it mean to any museum or library if each user, each day, uttered one previously unspoken question aloud? This is what you must want to cause.

Think with me of lives in one more way. Think of your mother’s life, your father’s life. Think of your grandparents and their parents, so we are now deep into the past by one or two centuries. Do not think abstractly about their lives; think of what they experienced and how these experiences created their anticipations of the world, their frames of reference, challenges and sorrows, the schooling they completed or did not get, the work they loved or endured, the jobs won and lost, their families and marriages and relationships, and the variables of family structure, their lasting challenges and comforts.

When we do this, we understand that lives are composed of variable, continuous strands of experience, inevitably interwoven and at once potentially empowering and demonstrably fragile. They are different for each of us. Embedded in these strands, they shape us and guide our thinking. We know the contexts that have most meaning and the parts of our lives we must continue to explain to ourselves. And from these places, we ask questions and look for connections to what we know and what we might still become.

The continuities of one life cannot be fully observed except from within the life. All the strands that compose one life evolve differently. All strands are connected and potentially equivalent in holding power over our aspirations. Events in the context of one strand have effects on other life strands. Consequently, no plan will last for long, no awareness will be untouched by others. When we arrive here, we are in the midst of crises, accidents, needs, and aspirations, because we are alive and our questions and unfinished issues make us ready and open for new information. But you will never know what brings us here, until you ask about our lives and offer ways to deepen and extend their grasp.⁹

IV. Cultural Institutions as Democratic Institutions

For me what is definitive about our nation's experience is its open character, our audacious exploration of knowledge unmitigated by privilege or ownership. Where that impulse exists, it refreshes our scholarship, inspires our art and language, and writes a fluent record for our culture. Every cultural institution has a place in that ethos because each one is devoted to honing the edge of an evolving life. We steadily try out our knowledge of the world; we use it to build more and make more out of what we have been given and what we have hewn ourselves. It appears to be part of our historic character to reimagine everything, to remake and reinvent and possess the past on our own terms.

We imagine and build institutions because we are part of the American impulse to engage in an open way with forms and practices. Cultural institutions are ways we have created to think with each other in the presence of our great narratives of hope and possibility. My thinking in libraries and museums has caused me to reimagine the capacity of these institutions for sponsoring self-renewal, especially among American adults whose voices and experiences are rarely expressed in dialogue with each other.

I can offer no blueprint for the convivial thinking that has not yet happened in American life. However I believe that we will see evidence of one soon, in the opening of public access to African-American history and experience in our nation. I cannot imagine a more necessary place at a more necessary time. In addition to the evidence of experience it will offer to us all, there is a fresh record to be made of museum users naming the salience of that place for themselves, anticipating the conversations it will provoke with their peers and their families because of what they have seen of the past and themselves there. If you do not believe in the collective vitality of thinking together and becoming something together, that museum might cause you to think again, as that large building will become an intimate personal space for countless citizens. They will go to the museum on a particular day and use the unfinished parts of history to find themselves, and to look deeply around for resonance and wholeness that cannot be erased. The objects and narratives will mean most in their traces.

In my view, the sudden unexpected transfer of past experiences, past voices, and still unforgotten aspirations into the moving and living currents of the present is the purpose of great museums.

Assume that every person who enters this new space wants something to occur there that deepens and sustains them and evokes something elusive or lost in the past. An insight, a connection, a revelation, a suggestion, something overlooked, something forgotten and worth recovering and re-examining. Such fresh moments can become parts of the individual's future: a conversation with family, a book to be read, an unexpected idea that persists over time. A voice, a vibration, an image. Assume as well that we do not often have the words to say what it is we are looking for, or what it is that might change our understanding of our experience. Recognize that not one of these persons who has arrived here is likely to predict or describe the event or moment that needs to happen for them, because no one can. But those moments will happen in places of trust – places of ambiguity and tension, certainly – but also places for fearless thought. We are stronger and more competent than we think, once we are open to possibility. "We live in all we seek."¹⁰

Our lives say this: when we know something, we can become something, we can do something, we can think something. My advocacy is for steady steps to assure that the democratic motive inevitably ascends in all museums and collections. The means of ascension are common. Knowledge needs voices and contexts beyond the labels, giving

less data but more story. Assume for a moment that it is your voice, neither curatorial nor didactic. What will that voice say? What thinking should it encourage? What does the museum want to stir in its users? Nothing happens here unless something provocative is stirring the intellect in the unexpected privacy created by the museum voice.

Even in great collections, something is meant to be overturned. As readers, we are drawn to works about overturned lives. If we want to see aspects of the infinite in the consequences of everyday lives and understandings, we need to overturn something to see its underside.¹¹ Our understandings of ourselves can change and challenge us best when conventions and expectations are overturned.

No dedicated museum or museum user is still. And in the great objects just a few steps away from here, something is open and continues to move. Human lives are changing, permeable, variable, and consequential as they move in the museum. Something is always moving along the strands of an individual life, in intellect and values and in the imagination of the possible. Without a museum, they would be impossible. Without this place and its collections, what events would never occur, what experiences would be lost? What knowledge, what curious questions would disappear? What connections would be missed?

Your greatest powers in service to the nation lie in the open conversations that can take place here about knowledge and its origins in inquiry and connection. Connection, because knowledge has neither meaning nor use without a knower, one who holds it and acts on it and explores its combinatory qualities. Connection to a user's imagination, values, ethics and consciousness, to gradually loosen the grasp of magical and uncritical thinking, and to open the complex world to view. The democratic motive, realized here, invites engagement and thought toward self-renewal and the rise of the free intellect among us, with deep and continuous implications for public life and thought.

V. A Museum Heuristic

And so, how do you practice to serve intellect in a cultural institution? How do you nourish other minds? What is the tension of the unknown in your lives? What is your capacity to ask good questions, where "good" means "useful and provocative"? What do others say? What is the value of thinking about differences among us? What happens when two minds meet? When we understand differences in the thoughts and experiences of others, how do our lives become more complex? What is the value of ambiguity and questioning to the intellect? Our questions are instruments for breaking through routine performances and uncritical observations whenever they occur. If a museum can transfer a useful question – or a set of useful questions -- to those who are its users, it is a great gift that follows and inspires.

My questions for you might lead toward a frame for seeing more clearly how knowledge matters here. How do you want to provoke the play of the possible that good questions will generate? What effect do you want to have on public discourse about science, the social and historical record, the health of our conversations, our fearlessness before art, our courage in the complex world? These are decisions to think of every day, even knowing that there is no end to them.

Long ago, I wrote a user's heuristic, following the idea that a problem-solving challenge can be opened up by thinking.¹² A heuristic is a way to manage hesitation, uncertainty, and complexity. It allows us tentative, experimental, even improvisational intellectual behavior, useful when we are looking at something we have never seen before.

What has been brought here? What ideas accompany it? How promising are these ideas in the light of my interests? What is nearby? How does my thinking change when looking at more than one thing? How will I recognize the difficult parts of this experience? How have I met such challenges before? What are my new questions now?

The naïve question works best. What is going on here? What memories are brought to mind? How might I use them to move forward? Naive questions, assuming nothing, turn the inquirer into a stranger, someone who has never seen a seashell before.¹³ They take away easy assumptions and subtract the element that obscures much of our lived

reality, the taken-for-granted, and the knowledge grounded in self-assurance alone.

What is expected of me here? How can I think of this experience?

A librarian knows that a question is an engine of language that moves and directs attention in probing ways, starting at the surface of things, but then going deep.

Here are museum users observing objects and speaking about them to each other. How might I deepen and extend the experience? How do people who ask large and challenging questions think? What do they see hidden among ordinary possibilities and mundane explanations? What evidence do they see that promises something more to be known? How does an intellect become engaged by a problem? How does the inquirer's attention differ when its object is a natural, historical, social, or aesthetic idea? How fully must conventional thinking be overturned for a mind to work well in this open space? What questions will engage users here, cause them to pause, and challenge them most?

I have said these things to you today knowing that evidence, when accompanied by imagination and courage, can evoke the unexpected steps we require in order to explore the strands of our lives. Complexity is what we are given every day and every day our insights grow from exploring it. It is possible to think that a mind is infinitely renewable, always capable, in a place of this kind, of extending itself in order to find itself. Capable of using the museum and its wholeness to think without limits. Capable of discovering the undercurrents of the collection. Going beyond the museum.

Thinking elsewhere. Breaking through. Using the evidence to discover a compelling story of the unexpected, evolving self.

Among the great complexities of service to the nation through this collection and its many parts, the one that I have hoped to address before you this morning is its need to be permeable and generous in its invitation to citizens, to make the presence and influence of knowledge essential to their everyday thoughts and deliberations. I see the evidence everywhere that you are uncompromising advocates for intellect, thought, and connection, and that your ethos is generosity: to give fitting and useful knowledge to users without restriction as a right of free inquiry in a democracy. This is, to me, how great cultural institutions regard themselves as instruments of progress, identity, and the responsibly informed self in a culture that has sometimes denied them. In my thinking, if citizens are to become something together, it will be by what we think and say to ourselves and to others in safe, open spaces where knowledge is most alive. This is how the trust of great public cultural institutions is linked fundamentally to justice.

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Notes

¹ *The History Manifesto*, by Jo Guldi and David Armitage (Cambridge University Press, 2014) argues for the long view of history, asserting that new ways of managing historical data allow “new patterns of imagination” and critical perspectives never possible before. The book can be downloaded without cost at the Cambridge University Press site: <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/download/>.

² Martin Buber refers to play as “the exultation of the possible.” Among the most important books in my library is *The Play of the Unmentionable*, the monograph accompanying Joseph Kosuth’s installation at the Brooklyn Museum in 1990. My use of “play” is similarly an adult use, intended to imply improvisation and the imprecise variables essential to open places and conversations.

³ For more on this theme, see my essay, “A Museum is an Open Work,” first published in *The Journal of Heritage Studies* in 2001 and republished in *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, (AltaMira Press, 2003).

⁴ Here is a situation where replacing a phrase might do wonders for the idea it attempts to capture. (See also “net neutrality” and “educational achievement” as examples of public terms whose meanings have been made elusive by the politicization of the words themselves.)

⁵ Throughout this text I use collective pronouns like “we” and “us” without specifying their antecedents with sufficient clarity. My audience for this talk comprises museum and library professionals, but “we” also will refer to museum users and those who dwell apart from museums. “We are all as one” means that each of us possesses curiosity, recollection, and aspiration, though our relationships to the museum may differ.

⁶ See David Carr, “Meanings of the adult independent library learning project,” *Library Trends* 35(2): 327-345, Fall 1986.

⁷ The theme of a helping agent in museums, parallel to the agency of librarians in libraries, has been important to me in every way. The importance of Lev Vygotsky’s description of the “zone of proximal development” is, in my experience, unequalled in the literature of teaching. (See *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* [Harvard University Press, 1978].) The larger and more documented concept of apprenticeship is superbly developed by Barbara Rogoff in *Apprenticeship in Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 1990). A related concept, situated learning, is addressed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁸ Commentaries about the political status of schooling in America are abundant and worthy of debate. One might begin with the recent work of Diane Ravitch, such as “Making Schools Poor,” *New York Review of Books*, June 13, 2014, examining state funding for education (<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/jun/13/making-schools-poorer/>). Other topics mentioned here are also documented widely. On these and other issues, including the public understanding of science, economic disparity, and communication habits, and demographic changes, the work of the Pew Research Center (<http://www.pewresearch.org>) is worthy of professional attention. Its recent report on US adult perceptions of science (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/29/public-and-scientists-views-on-science-and-society/>) describes disparities between the contrasts between scientists’ beliefs and those of the public. For all cultural institutions, I strongly recommend its April 2014 report about emerging profiles of the American population, “The Next America” (<http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/>).

⁹ This paragraph is largely taken from a chart titled “Strands: Continuities and Possibilities of One Life,” on page 60 of my book, *Open Conversations: Public Learning in Libraries and Museums* (Libraries Unlimited, 2011). A version of this chart was added to the web announcement for this lecture. (I will send electronic copies at no charge to anyone who asks by email at carr.conversations@gmail.com.)

¹⁰ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*, New York: Vintage, 2000, p. 172.

¹¹ See my essay, An Aspect of the Infinite: New Zealand Talks. *Curator*. 53(1):51-70, January 2010.

¹² The idea of a heuristic for the museum is based on G. Polya’s book, *How to Solve It* (Second ed., Princeton University Press, 1957). I first discussed the concept in an essay published in the Fall 1991 issue of *Teachers College Record*, and republished in my book, *A Place Not a Place: Reflection and Possibility in Museums and Libraries* (AltaMira Press, 2006).

¹³ I first read Paul Valery’s essay, “Man and the Seashell,” published in his collected works, when I was an undergraduate. A grounding in aesthetic questions, it can be read here: http://monoskop.org/images/e/ed/Valery_Paul_An_Anthology.pdf.

Further reading

Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.

Vera John-Steiner. *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

Frank Smith, *To Think*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1990.