



Fight for libraries as you do freedom

By Karin Slaughter

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My father and his eight siblings grew up in the kind of poverty that America doesn't like to talk about unless something like Katrina happens, and then the conversation only lasts as long as the news cycle. His family squatted in shacks. The children scavenged the forest for food. They put cardboard over empty windowpanes so the cold wouldn't kill them.

Books did not exist here. When your kids are starving, you can't point with pride to a book you've just spent six hours reading. Picking cotton, sewing flour bags into clothes — those were the skills my father grew up appreciating.

And yet, when he noticed that I, his youngest daughter, showed an interest in reading, he took me to our local Jonesboro library and told me that I could read any book in the building so long as I promised to talk to him about it if I read something I didn't understand. I think this is the greatest gift my father ever gave me. Though he was not a reader himself, he understood that reading is not just an escape. It is access to a better way of life.

But, why do we need to read? It's not a survival skill. Contrary to how some of us feel, we won't die if we can't read. I think the need for reading boils down to one simple issue: Children are selfish. Reading about other people creates a sense of balance in a child's life. It gives them the knowledge that there is a world outside themselves. It tells them that the language they are learning at home is the key to unlocking the mysteries of the greater world.

Reading develops cognitive skills. It trains your mind to question what you are told, which is why the first thing dictators do when they come to power is censor or ban books. It's why it was illegal for so many years to teach slaves to read. It's why girls in developing countries have acid thrown in their faces going to school.

You would just as soon cut "Romeo and Juliet" from a high school curriculum as you would cut algebra. Both train young minds how to think in critical ways. Both foster problem solving and spatial reasoning. Both create adults who question and contribute to society. Fundamentally, reading creates better societies. This is not a theory. This is a quantifiable fact: There is a direct correlation between the rate of literacy in a nation and its success.

This is why the funding of American libraries should be a matter of national security. Keeping libraries open, giving access to all children to all books is vital to our nation's sovereignty. For nearly 85 percent of kids living in rural areas, the only place where they have access to technology or books outside the schoolroom is in a public library. For many urban kids, the only safe haven they have to study or do homework is the public library. Librarians are soldiers in the battle for our place in the world, and in many cases they are getting the least amount of support our communities can offer.

We need to shift our national view of libraries not as luxuries, but as necessities. When tragedy strikes in other

nations, Americans are generous, but our libraries are being hit with a tsunami and there has been no call to action. Staffs are being fired. Hours are being cut. Doors are being closed. Buildings are being razed. Kids are being left behind. Futures are being destroyed.

Libraries are the backbone of our educational infrastructure, and they are being slowly broken by bankrupt municipalities and apathetic politicians. As voters and taxpayers, we have to demand that our local governments properly prioritize libraries. As charitable citizens, we must invest in our library down the street so that the generations serviced by that library grow up to be adults who contribute to not just their local communities, but to the world.

Kids who read become students who do well in school. Students who do well in school go to college. College students graduate to good jobs and pay higher taxes. Libraries don't service only Democrats or Republicans. They don't judge by class, race or religion. They service everyone in their community, no matter their circumstances. Rich or poor; no one is denied. Libraries are not simply part of our guarantee to the pursuit of happiness. They are a civil right, the foundation upon which time and time again the American dream has been built. If we lose our libraries, we risk losing our communities, our families and ourselves.

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