

Public Library Closures: Covid and the Act of Sanitizing Human Cultures

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Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

“The very existence of libraries affords the best evidence that we may yet have hope for the future of man”- T.S. Eliot

One of the earliest casualties of the COVID-19 lockdown was the public library. It seemed evident, even in the weeks leading up to its demise, that this unusually vibrant and very necessary hub of community life was destined for closure - especially given its unique feature as a “hands on” sort of venue where people are frequently handling the same physical materials day in, day out.

After all, the library is a place where people are continuously leafing through pages that have been pinched, pressed, folded and gently tugged at by hundreds (if not thousands) of other patrons. Not to mention the casual touching and fondling of the many covers and spines themselves, as is the nature of some casual strollers to simply pull a book out from the shelf, examine its exterior and simply slide it back in among the other volumes before trailing their finger along the rest of the row, as though they were reading Braille.

To be sure, the public library is a hub of physical touch just as much as it is one of community and social gathering. People come to such a place for that very reason; to feel and to experience. For this reason, perhaps it is one of those rare and special exemptions in our current climate of germ phobia that we actually don't mind fondling something that has been in intimate proximity with a complete stranger (indeed many, many complete strangers), before finding itself in our hands, in our laps, or in our children's laps for that matter. We don't seem to care that the very book we are holding in our hands has been in somebody else's home for several weeks. Likewise, it seldom crosses our minds that another person may have been blowing their nose while reading it or perhaps even kept it in their bathroom for those opportune moments of reading pleasure whenever nature happened to call.

For that matter, how many of us ever questioned whether these thousands upon thousands of books were ever wiped down, let alone sanitized by the library staff once they were returned? Personally, I've always assumed they were returned directly to the shelves in precisely the same condition as they were when they were hastily dropped off by their previous borrowers. A little more worn, maybe, with perhaps a lingering scent of the private home from whence they briefly took residence. And while sometimes noticeable to you and I - the fresh and prospective borrower - did we even care?

The truth is that we don't come to a library with nearly the same expectation as when we go to a bookstore. Bookstores, for the most part, are for shopping. Though I would argue that they, too, are fundamentally necessary in our society, they are there to serve a role in the

marketplace and thereby aim to provide a product. The bookstore promises ownership; a small piece of collective literary content that we can call our own and with which we either build a private collection or else gift to someone else. It is a sweet and marvelous aspect of human culture, though clearly not a library.

I would argue that a library (as opposed to a bookstore) exists purely for the transmission of ideas. Like a proverbial union station of sorts, the library is responsible for the transfer of specific content from writer to reader, and thereby facilitates an education of sorts that is quite unique from other community venues. The reader is there simply to access the information provided by the book itself, and is quite happy – once the information has been ingested – to leave the book for others to enjoy and to glean from. Additionally, the fact that the books are considered completely communal in nature, coupled with the understanding that libraries are funded predominantly by the readers themselves through their tax dollars, renders the whole concept of a library as a highly-regarded social agreement of sorts. In other words, the contract is made possible because the community agrees to pay the cost of the operation while expecting, in turn, to be able to benefit from it. Furthermore, every taxpaying citizen expects that the service will be made available in equal proportions to every other citizen as well.

To a greater or lesser degree, patrons of library services recognize that the written word carries a considerable type of value in a community of persons; a society's own cultural currency that is virtually priceless. Indeed, some would even consider books to be more essential than money itself, serving to promote humanity's sense of integrity and responsibility as "*mirrors of the soul*," as Virginia Woolf once put it.

Without a doubt, the library is that rarest of places where a person is invited to spend as much time as possible to simply loiter the content (though arguably not the property exclusively) and to peruse the creative inventory without any pressure or market agenda as to which item is worthy of consuming and which is not. Plainly put, the very fact that a book exists on a shelf warrants it as being worthy of reflection and consideration. Likewise, upon ingestion, it is worthy of being argued against and either philosophically or morally debated. Finally, the fact that such an eclectic array of words is made freely available to virtually every person on a daily basis is what places the public library near the very top of what I would call "essential services."

While it is fair to point out the merits of online and digital services that are now being provided by public libraries, I would warn that this feature is purely complementary or supplemental at best. After viewing the landing pages of several public library websites across the planet during our current COVID climate, it is clear that these institutions are trying to preserve whatever literary relevance they can by offering things like online book discussions, virtual story time, and (perhaps most obviously) the promotion of e-book collections. These are helpful and certainly worth taking advantage of, though I would insist that these measures are but a mere stipend of what a library is able to offer us simply through its nature as an entrenched part of a community; a visible, physical space in which the user is free to actually roam rather than merely "search."

To be sure, the library is a space. We must never mistake the beauty and sanctity of this space as being equal to a digital one. Indeed, the library offers us a very physical and distinct set of chambers, corners, hallways and nooks which – by their very oddity in comparison with the gloss and the concrete of our modern world – have a way of inviting us

into a different realm of concentration; a different realm of consciousness even. My concern, therefore, is that the sanctity and fundamental importance of this space is not being considered as importantly as it should right now.

Almost daily, I check the local library's website to see whether any administrative agent, in their sudden wisdom, has seen fit to open the doors to one of our community's most precious intellectual commodities. Instead, I get the chilling and utterly sterile advisory that *"All Library Branches and Book Drops Closed Until Further Notice to Minimize the Risk of COVID-19."* How ironic is it that what is intended as a public health precaution comes across as a thinly-veiled agenda to keep people away from books; away from ideas themselves, and away from a space where one will have the natural opportunity to peruse an idea without having to run a search for it on Google. How ironic that such a move has only helped the regressive surge of humanity as it retreats to the comforting enclaves of screens and digital devices or, as Aldous Huxley aptly put it in *"Brave New World,"* to the 'soma holidays' where difficult emotions never have to be experienced.

In the first couple of months of library lockdown, my children pleaded for the chance to be able to go to their local book hub. Pleas eventually turned to questions about the reasons for it, and questions eventually morphed into anger for the knee-jerk reactions of provincial and city officials, and regional controllers. Now, sadly, my children seem to ask about the library less and less. It's almost as though the removal of this fundamental part of their lives has gradually become accepted. And while I try to teach my children about the myth of powerlessness in our everyday life, every so often I am struck with the reality that we live in a world where so many people accept powerlessness as being synonymous with being "socially responsible." In such a world, teaching the virtues of accountability and leadership can sometimes be more challenging - mostly because we are teaching things that go against the grain of entrenched submission, blind acquiescence to directives, and the pervasive addiction of entertainment.

For this reason, I remind my children that they are privileged to live during the time of COVID, as it will help them to better recognize human passivity in a collective form and - more importantly - to understand the importance of expressing one's truth when it is difficult to do so.

In my view, the public library is extremely essential in that it permits the individual as well as the family unit to healthfully loiter a space where diversity naturally exists in the written form and entrenched ideas are historically challenged. It is one place where the concept of healthy deviance is traditionally entertained, and where materials on this subject are freely available.

And I, for the record, am willing to take full responsibility for my own health by entering into its premises and leafing through its pages - despite the so-called risk of COVID-19.

I am told that the public libraries will be gradually phasing in access measures until we eventually reach a point of (hopefully) restored in-house service. Apparently such a time is coming. In the meantime, I simply wish to convey my deep disapproval over the library's poor decision-making in the face of our government's COVID curriculum over society. The decision to close and to keep closed our libraries has been nothing less than a key element in the progressive disemboweling of our culture. It is a neutering of our human spirit, and a stain on our sense of reason.

And though I don't consider myself an alarmist, I would simply warn that the brief closure of such an institution this time around will only serve to lubricate additional (and potentially longer) closures in the future. You see, the library is merely the symbol of a much larger thing. It is an icon of human exchange and the free trade of ideas.

Surely, we take such a thing seriously in society. Do we not?

"The only thing that you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library."- Albert Einstein

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