

VIEWS ON HISTORY, INFORMATION AND THE FUTURE

By Linda Van Wert

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

-- from **The Rock** by T.S. Eliot (1934)

The best part of going to SLA in New York was not really being in the great city. It wasn't riding the subways or going running in Central Park or visiting the museums or seeing the Puerto Rico Day parade or walking around Ground Zero or even touring the "vestpocket parks." And visiting the Manhattan emergency walk-in clinic for several hours with a bleeding forehead is certainly not one of my favorite New York memories.

This year, SLA's conference theme was dedicated to "the Future," and it offered a wide selection of interesting programs. Hearing Madelyn Albright's lecture was stimulating and thought-provoking. But the most captivating and most inspiring program I attended was the keynote lecture by David McCollough. Maybe it was because he was so charming and so respectful of the library profession. I think, however, that it was colored by my appreciation for history. Maybe it was the pleasure of hearing stories told by the person who had edited my college textbooks that impressed me the greatest.

McCollough is so old-fashioned that he actually writes on a manual Royal typewriter because he likes the clicking sound it makes. He described the way he approaches the researching and writing of his books, and the important role that librarians have played in his career. He does not think of a library as a place with books or information but more as a place where there are librarians. He tells his students to go to the library and "ask a librarian." He was glad to note that there are more public libraries in the country than there are McDonalds. He said that knowledge and learning consist of more than mere information. What is important is how we arrive at the place of knowing. It is through the experience of learning that we begin to feel the depth of knowledge. Learning cannot be gained from encyclopedia information, but it can be experienced in a library. Great libraries, he said, bring the written word and preserved record back to life.

McCollough explained that history consists of stories, and that we all need stories for lessons. History is about cause and effect, and about the way people, life, chance, and human personality combine. His books are written to include the human equation because the critical influence is actually human nature, chemistry or personality.

Researching history means to cast a wide net yet get below the surface; it means to see things within their context. Libraries are a resource to get at the truth. We can dig through many accounts of an event and a variety of points of view, and then we can combine them. Through that process, we can try to see the real facts.

History can develop our capacity for empathy so that we can almost become the other person. McCollough chose to write biographies (e.g., Benjamin Franklin, John Adams) because people ARE history – what they eat, how they relax, how they spend their money and all the other details of their lives provide the most evidence about the times.

Since most people no longer keep diaries or write letters, much of our history is being lost. We who are proud of having so much information at our fingertips will not leave any personal information behind indicating what we were actually like. McCollough described finding an inkblot over a word in Theodore Roosevelt's diary and how a chemical specialist was able to uncover the word, which gave insight into Roosevelt's inner feelings. With our dependence on electronic information, will something like that be possible in the future?