

The Library

I thought we would come to blows over yellow tape.

It was another in a series of long meetings we were having to organize the school library. Paula, who was to be our librarian, was arguing her case with fervor.

“Books for young children have to be marked. They should have yellow tape, to be easily spotted.” Paula was an experienced public school librarian, and thought she would like to try her hand at something a little different with us. But old habits are hard to shake off.

“Why do we need it?” I kept asking. “Are we afraid the kids will pick up an adult book by mistake?”

The argument raged. Paula was afraid kids would be discouraged if they accidentally picked up a book they would find too hard. As she saw it, the adult world was a fearful place for youngsters, and school had to shelter them from frustrating or painful encounters with it.

To most of us, the yellow tape was just another symbol of how grownups patronize children. Another example of how adults misread the ferocious determination in each child to master and conquer the real world.

A vote was finally taken, after months of heavy, high-sounding debate. The yellow badge was defeated. Paula resigned soon after, before school had even opened. She was never to see the library in action.

Well, not really “in action.” More like “in Inaction.” For us, the Idea of a library is simple: it is a great passive resource, a reservoir of wisdom there for everyone to dip into when thirsty for knowledge. (The standard metaphors apply in this case.)

What pained us about all the school libraries we had ever seen was their sterility. First of all, we didn't want all the books in a separate room or wing called “library.” That had the ring of “morgue” to it: a place apart, where everyone had to be still and whisper, where people moved cautiously and a bit fearfully under the often glassy eye of the librarian. We wanted books to be everywhere, comfortable, cozy, easy to reach, there for casual browsing and not just to be “taken out.”

We wanted kids to take books off the shelves. Lots of them. We weren't afraid of messing up the library.

Mostly, though, we wanted a lot of good books. Books people liked and cared about.

For that, we had to come up with a new kind of acquisition policy. The usual method just didn't seem right. We could never quite believe that a person whose interest was books qua books would know how to find the really interesting ones written in each and every field of knowledge. We wanted the people who loved each field to find the gems in it.

That's how things were done. It was really quite simple, and very inexpensive. We asked people to donate part of their personal libraries. These were books each person had chosen over the years because they liked them, because they were interesting and useful and special. Sudbury Valley's library was built, and continues to be built, by an army of "experts."

Of course, the books aren't all good. Are any library's? Pick a book, any book, and before long you can generate an argument about its merits as heated as ours on yellow tape. But at least the books we have were read and valued by the people who chose them.

Before long, the school building was filled with books. Year after year, room after room got new shelving to house new acquisitions.

In fact, sometimes we almost drown in an ocean of books. Then we hold book sales.

Sometimes we get donations that are just a bit too much, collections that are a little too esoteric. Like the full set of Massachusetts General Statutes, accompanied by extensive commentaries. With or without yellow tapes, this was hardly browsing (or even heavy reading) material for any of us. Or several beautiful runs of technical scientific journals. We have to find a way to dispose of such items, usually by selling them or giving them away. For the most part, though, we put what we get on the shelves. And the children browse.

Of course, sometimes we buy books, when somebody needs titles we don't have. Then they become a special expenditure.

One day in the mid-'70s, we got a letter in the mail from the State Education Department. In it was a check. It turned out that Uncle Sam, in one of his many magnificent attempts to aid education, had decided to give out money to schools all over the country to buy books. I guess Congress figured that books were a good thing and that schools would be better if there were more books on the shelves. The publishers, I am sure, did not oppose the idea.

At any rate, here was our manna from heaven, whether we needed it or not. Our first inclination was to send it back, but that didn't make sense. "Don't look a gift horse ..." So we used it to help the School Meeting defray special expenditure requests for books.

Presidents come and go. Politics swing left and right, back and forth. The checks keep coming.

What about the yellow tape?

Well, we ended up making a few concessions. Books that clearly announced themselves to be meant for little kids were not placed on the top shelf in the most remote room. They were, after all, made physically accessible to little kids without need for a fire ladder.

But no tapes. No chance that someone would find a little child reading an untaped book and say, sternly, "What are you doing with that, young man!"

And no chance that an older student sneaking a look at a pretty "children's book" will be embarrassed by a telltale tape on the spine.