



Rajmohan  
**GANDHI**

*Remarks at the 8th Annual*

**Library Society Dinner**

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It is a pleasure to be together with the leaders of this university, the backers of its libraries, those working in them and the student ambassadors. And it is an honor to speak at an event like this.

Let me come out right away with an embarrassing truth. Though I have lived nearby in east central Illinois for more than 12 years, this is only my second visit to the state of Missouri (not counting layovers at the airport in St. Louis). My first trip to Missouri, made about eight years ago, was to Hannibal, for Mark Twain, of course.

Let me tell you of when I first heard of another of Missouri's great sons. This was in the fall of 1948 — the contest for the American presidency was on. I had just turned 13 and was listening in New Delhi, India, to a wise Indian houseguest in the apartment where I lived with my parents and three siblings. This houseguest, who worked at a major Indian university and was a friend of my father, told me with authority that Harry S Truman was going to lose, and his opponent was going to win. [Thomas E.] Dewey, he said, was "like the morning dew." In 1948, our houseguest in New Delhi was not the only person who guessed wrong. Some, as we all know, published not only the wrong prediction but also the wrong result.



Tonight I feel I am among kindred souls. If I have done some useful things in life, libraries are a good deal responsible. Books from libraries and files in archives have helped me not only to understand our world and to share my understandings with others, but they have also helped me earn my bread. I think they might have provided some of the substance for my brain cells and, possibly, even for my bones and muscles. To libraries, I perhaps owe weeks, months and maybe years of my life.

As to my life, I was born in India in 1935, four years before World War II started, 12 years before Indian independence, well before the Cold War began, and I have spent most of my years in India. My first visit to the U.S. was in 1957 as a

voluntary worker in an effort to change the world by changing people, starting with myself. That year, as a 22-year-old visiting Atlanta, my 57-year-old father, Devadas Gandhi — a journalist and the youngest of [Mahatma] Gandhi's four sons — died suddenly from a heart attack. I returned to India and continued my attempt to change the world. I became a journalist, organized campaigns against corruption, tried to reconcile divided groups, helped create a center in Panchgani in western India (a beautiful center I must say, where people can seek inspiration, healing and reconciliation), fought for human rights and democracy, experienced what it means and takes to be a politician, served in the Indian Parliament, and, in a think tank called the Center for Policy Research, I wrote some books.

Since 1997, when I turned 62, I have lived and taught almost continuously here in the U.S., at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Although my wife and I now live in this country, as do our daughter and son, I remain an Indian citizen and cannot vote here.

But my friends and neighbors in Urbana are American. For much of the year, I live and move and have my being in America. I observe American life and follow American politics. I root (not always successfully) for sporting teams from Illinois — and when they show no promise, for teams from nearby Missouri. Those interacting with me in Urbana assume I am an American. This is not something that happens in other parts of the world, where those arriving from other places remain outsiders for decades, as do their children and grandchildren.



To return to libraries: Like others who have gathered here this evening, I have spent hours in them — libraries in New Delhi, Old Delhi, in Mumbai and Ahmedabad in western India, in Chennai in southern India and Kolkata in eastern India, in Lahore in Pakistan, in London and Oxford, the Library of Congress in D.C., and the wonderful and large library of the University of

Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, with its striking wood-paneled reading rooms.

I am aware that a library also leads to films, videotapes and files on the Internet, but this particular reader — belonging to a vanishing breed no doubt — likes to hold bound books in his hands and to turn pages of paper.

In libraries I have read at times according to plan and for a set purpose. At other and more enriching times, I have been lured by a title unconnected to my purpose which satisfied an unrealized hunger or led me to an unsuspected new world.

But I should also speak of titles to which I have turned my back, even when I knew I should read them. These were books that I knew would disturb my picture of the world or my picture of history. I stepped away from books likely to dispute my beliefs, question my truth, challenge my conclusions. I didn't want to acknowledge their existence, let alone hear their argument. As the old saying goes, you can take a horse to a library, but you can't make it read if it doesn't want to!

Just as candidates campaigning for the same office might run into one another at a gas station, diner or motel, advocates of conflicting theories or rival histories often find themselves in the same library, searching in the same place for a quotation to demolish the opponent's case. This makes a library a potential center for dialogue and even, who knows, reconciliation, provided inconvenient pages are opened and read, and fresh points of view are entertained.

When in the early 1980s I began research for my study of Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia in the context of British rule, I soon became conscious of my dislike of some books — books that I knew questioned a conventional mainstream narrative of Hindu tolerance and Muslim aggression or the standard Indian nationalist story of exploited Indians and greedy Brits.

For me, the other point of view seemed a self-aggrandizing or even a malicious point of view, very different from the fair and objective perspective of a mind like mine. Luckily, I recognized what I was doing — or not doing. I

observed my resistance, and decided to overcome it. I opened my mind to standpoints differing from mine. Some of these struggles with myself, eventually successful, took place in libraries in Oxford, England, where I spent the summer of 1983; some others in libraries in New Delhi and Chennai in India; and some in 1984, while I was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., and I obtained privileged access to that incredible treasure, the Library of Congress.

The book that resulted, *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter* (also published under the title *Understanding the Muslim Mind*), remains in print, in English and a few Indian languages, and seems to have meant something to Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians, as well as to Muslims and Hindus. To my delight, a Pakistani publisher had it translated into Urdu, Pakistan's national language, and brought out the Urdu version in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city. It is fair to say, even though I might say it (and others, too, have said it), that this book has advanced understanding and reconciliation in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

I should add that libraries are also a useful antidote to pride. In 2008, when I was generously invited to speak at the Library of Congress on what then was my newly published Gandhi biography, I arrived there with nervousness but also with gladness at having completed what for me was a difficult 700-page book.

As I walked, with this book in hand, toward the room where I was to speak, past shelves and shelves of books in that great library, and conscious all the time of innumerable rooms around, above and below me, containing countless more shelves of books written throughout the decades and the centuries, the smallness of my 700-page accomplishment hit me.



Dear friends, our libraries contain treasures made from the sweat, tears and prayers of earlier generations. They preserve for us the hopes, dreams and intellectual forays of our forebears.

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“ Our libraries contain treasures made from the sweat, tears and prayers of earlier generations. They preserve for us the hopes, dreams and intellectual forays of our forebears. They are the means by which we can touch our roots; they link us to the beginnings of time and the ends of the earth; they contain pieces of the memory of the world. ”

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Among lines that my grandfather Gandhi daily recited is Verse 63 from Chapter II of the Bhagavad Gita — one of the sacred texts of Hinduism. It states, simply and tersely: “From the loss of memory follows the death of reason. All is lost.” From the loss of memory, all is indeed lost, including rationality. With the death of libraries, all will be lost, including the ability to act wisely.

In the line I have recalled, the Gita is not referring to what illness or old age can do to memory. It is speaking of loss of memory connected to a moral failure. It alludes to drawing a curtain over facts which, if remembered, would spur individuals and the world to act more wisely, and if buried, might enable a re-enactment of folly or horror.

Dear friends and scholars, the world cannot afford to draw a thick curtain over what happened in the past or to be forgetful of what our forebears discovered, thought, endured or created. The world cannot afford to screen off past events of generosity or cruelty, of triumph or tragedy, nor can it afford to send to oblivion cultures, identities and histories that some would dismiss as small or peripheral.

The book of life teaches me that for a truly long life, “memory” might need the support of

forgiveness. The opposite might also be true. We cannot forgive what we do not remember; we must remember in order to forgive.

But when we remember and yet do not forgive, our memory loses clarity. Anger obstructs important rays of truth. Forgiveness preserves an event of pain as a unique memory, not one that gets lost amidst a chain of unpleasant memories.

I am saying nothing new. If I have underlined it, that is because in so many parts of the world, including the region I come from, we greatly need both memory and forgiveness, to know our neighbors beyond the labels they wear or the labels we give to them. And we need the ability to take in the stories of our neighbors (whom we sometimes see as enemies) and not just our own stories.

Fortunately, we don’t have to invent wisdom, including the wisdom of tolerance, compassion, respect and forgiveness. We only have to recognize it. People practice it daily, for the sake of sanity and survival. We only have to see it, honour it, embrace it and allow it to melt our hardness.

To illuminate minds and to preserve memory — to preserve every old story of achievement and suffering and to ignite new achievement — isn’t that the purpose of libraries?

Friends, to dine with and to speak to Missouri’s lovers of libraries — Missouri’s custodians of memory — is a joy and a privilege. I salute and thank you.

