

Writing Prompt: Explain the importance of libraries and the preservation of knowledge in society, history, and the world, from your point of view.

Airports and trains and bus routes for feet. Factories and cranes and mills for hands. Homes and shelters for the pumping lifeblood of the heart. Cathedrals, mosques, and synagogues for a growing soul, and schools and universities for an ever-expanding mind.

These are the parts and pieces of society's body, the physical dimension of human interaction. It stretches and grows and reaches for new achievements, it is twisted and warped by time, and will never be otherwise. Our laboratories push society's mind toward new understandings of our world, our courts pass sentence on the moral questions of our day, our poets dream the dreams that guide our sleep. Beyond and behind all these things, behind every step taken, every hand shaken, every heartbeat and every head bent in prayer, resides the reason why. Each understanding gained, each insight seen along the path toward the present becomes another piece of that reason, another aspect of the rationale for all we do. That reason and that rationale, the core of our identity and the fuel that presses every waking mind forward into tomorrow's questions, have their beginning in memory. Within the body of society, no single location may more reliably be said to act as memory, as identity, than the library.

One of the most common complaints of old age is the fading of memory. Details of life become hazy or are lost altogether; names and faces are often entirely forgotten with the advance of time. The modern world has forgotten more of its own history, more of the faces from its past, than it currently even remembers, by a deep margin. The infancy of our history, as a world, is told in broken pieces, scattered across the planet, telling partial stories handed down seventh-hand from those few of our predecessors who took the time to record their stories in the first place. We know only the hundredth part of who we are, as people, as nations, as a world community. But what we do know, those bits and pieces of our faded memory, we remember because of libraries.

This societal memory, this repository of identity, is no passive receptacle of paper scraps and historical anecdotes. The work of libraries is in seeking out knowledge, collecting and preserving the pieces of our world, and making those pieces available to society. Those engaged in this work are involved in shaping the identity of the world around them, one piece at a time. Every time a librarian takes on a collection of records and organizes them for later reference,

lends out the biography of a world leader, or teaches a patron how to find a job online, they are changing the world. They create a world that will remember the subject of those records, that will remember that leader, where the job seeker can be remembered and his future career can be found.

Let us, as a society, contemplate the alternative. If fewer libraries existed, if they began slowly disappearing one at a time, what would be the impact? Pieces of history would be slowly set aside or found only in private collections, beneficial to a few but not to the greater community. The access provided by libraries to knowledge and, just as importantly, to those who understand how to find the needful knowledge in every circumstance, would quickly begin to erode, beginning with those whose need for such access is greatest. The collective knowledge of a society will fade as its libraries close. Faces of the past become blurry and are eventually lost altogether. It is no alarmism to say that the mind of society will recede into the infirmity of old age. Such a recession would, in this case, be a recession brought on by choice, not just by time, and be all the deeper for the difference.

On the other hand, let us consider the growth of opportunity. What wonders could result from sharpening the memory of mankind? Greater understanding of our beautiful and barbaric human nature, of cultural identity, of the physical universe, deeper acts of empathy, bolder imaginings of a future unbounded by amnesia . . . these are the goals that libraries help make possible. This is the movement that sharpened societal memory enables. Future generations will remember our world, as set down and preserved by us. They will understand our failings and our successes. They will understand those things in us which they find within themselves, and understand those things within themselves all the more clearly for having found them in us also. They will build on our achievements, expand on our abilities, advance their dreams on the backs of ours. Society will grow, and remember, more than it ever could have otherwise.

Contemplate the opportunity, remember the past that has already been preserved, hold on to the building blocks of the present, and watch. Watch as the future rises on the steady foundation of the lessons our society has learned. Watch, and remember that such things are possible because of libraries.