

LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY

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Good afternoon. I'd just like to make a few general remarks about what literacy is and why it is important.

The wealth of nations and the health of democracy reside ultimately in the knowledge, skills and motivations of people. Not long ago, most American workers transformed raw materials into products, but by the start of the twenty-first century human capital had become the engine of economic growth, with texts the principal tools and literacy the principal craft of an information economy. Literacy once was principally a form of consumption - books improved the quality of life for people with the disposable income and leisure to read; but most jobs did not require high levels of literacy. The literacy achievement in the 20th Century was nearly universal completion of high school; the literacy achievement of the 21st Century will be nearly universal higher education. Work in the United States today puts a premium upon symbolic reasoning, with demand for literacy continually outstripping supply. Good citizenship in the 21st century requires more than party loyalty and good intentions; voters need to know how to access and judge expert opinion across the sciences and the humanities, and how to arrive at balanced and informed judgments regarding the common good. When schools, students, parents, the news media and government raise expectations for achievement in literacy they create the conditions for genuine democracy.

Literacy is an umbrella term for the capacity for focused attention that comes from making reading and writing a part of daily life. Literacy thus encompasses both the skills and habits of mind that enable a person to enter into a network of symbolic meaning, and the knowledge that comes from actively sorting information in the search for meaning and relevance. Literacy in both forms is multi-faceted. A fully literate person in 21st century America would possess a complex skill set that includes facility with reading and writing English either as a first or a second language; mathematical literacy that enables him or her to grapple with statistics and numerical analysis; artistic, musical and other forms of aesthetic literacy that inform individual and public decision making; the scientific literacy to distinguish science from pseudo-science and to assess the weight of competing forms of evidence; the computer literacy to enter into the World Wide Web; and the logical skills that make possible overall judgments of worth.

Literacy skills are inseparable from knowledge of the intellectual and cultural traditions in which they have their natural home. Scientific literacy, for example, involves knowing something about leading scientific theories, about Big Bang Cosmology, Quantum Mechanics, the theory of Evolution and Monetary Theory; aesthetic literacy depends as much upon knowing something about the history of art, music, and theatre as it does upon understanding music theory or the principles of literary criticism and art appreciation. The same could be said about the other competencies: Their greatest value occurs in the context of a broad and deep knowledge of the subject. The two forms of literacy work in tandem, with competence building upon knowledge and knowledge enhancing competence.

No list of literacies can be complete; every list of literacies is exclusive in some way. The political, economic and cultural dimensions of globalization – as well as a healthy respect for the opinions of mankind – demand both multi-cultural literary competence and knowledge of other cultures. I believe that the great books of the Western Civilization should be a core component of literacy in the 21st century. These are not just the musty thoughts of dead white European men; the dialogues of Plato, the Confessions of St. Augustine, the Old and New Testament and the plays of Shakespeare are expressions of the ability to transcend place, time and culture and to reveal universal truths. Self-transcendence is no less a feature of classic texts of other great civilizations, of the soaring transcendence of Lord Krishna in the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, the deep and profound wisdom of *Heart and Diamond Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism, the lyrical beauty of the Holy Koran in the original Arabic. Countless other texts, works of art and oral traditions from cultures all over the world express timeless truths.

This kind of literacy is central to the workings of democratic institutions in which free and equal citizens participate in choices that shape their lives and the future of their communities. Universities can be the engines of 21st century literacy in their traditional role as centers for the teaching of competency and content, and in the creation of new knowledge and new forms of knowing. Universities also can facilitate democracy through public forums of this kind, in which people are invited to participate in the political process. The Casino Forum held here year before last is a fine example of public scholarship in the service of grass roots democracy; last month the UWMC Democracy and Islam Forum enabled the people of central Wisconsin to participate in a national conversation of the first importance. These and other programs throughout the

state provide a model for civic engagement. Aristotle thought that the ideal community should be no larger than what a man could ride in a day; so that all citizens could participate in public life. Such small scale communities may be a relic of the past, but 21st century information technology can put at the fingertips of every literate citizen the means to participate fully.

Let me close on a more philosophical note: I think that the most fundamental form of literacy is autobiography. In fact, I think all forms of literacy are at bottom autobiographical. Not everyone keeps a diary or writes their memoirs, and these days e-mails and phone calls substitute for letter writing, but everyone keeps track of their life story. Each of us is the main character in a drama which we are constantly editing, revising and reinterpreting; a narrative that may never be written down as a text or studied by scholars, but which nonetheless lies at the heart of what we are as human beings. We all need to tell a story that makes sense of our lives, and invests it with meaning and purpose. Every other form of literacy feeds into the autobiographical narrative.

Reading, for example, is a fundamentally solitary act, even a bit anti-social. I like to curl up with a good book, have a private mental conversation with the author and with mental images of other readers. In the process, I define who I am; I create myself; make myself into the person I am. For me, literacy is not just one good thing; it is every good thing.