



If you open up scripture, the Gospel according to John, it starts: “In the beginning was the Word.” Although this has a very particular meaning in Scripture, more broadly what it speaks to is the critical importance of language, of writing, of reading, of communication, of books as a means of transmitting culture and binding us together as a people.

More than a building that houses books and data, the library represents a window to a larger world, the place where we’ve always come to discover big ideas and profound concepts that help move the American story forward and the human story forward. That’s the reason why, since ancient antiquity, whenever those who seek power would want to control the human spirit, they have gone after libraries and books. Whether it’s the ransacking of the great library at Alexandria, controlling information during the Middle Ages, book burnings, or the imprisonment of writers in former communist bloc countries, the idea has been that if we can control the word, if we can control what people hear and what they read and what they comprehend, then we can control and imprison them, or at least imprison their minds.

That’s worth pondering at a time when truth and science are constantly being challenged by political agendas and ideologies, at a time when language is used not to illuminate but, rather, to obfuscate, at a time when there are those who would disallow the teaching of evolution in our schools, where fake science is used to beat back attempts to curb global warming or fund lifesaving research.

At a time when book banning is back in vogue, libraries remind us that truth isn’t about who yells the loudest, but who has the right information.

We are a religious people, Americans are, as am I. But one of the innovations, the genius of America, is recognizing that our faith is not in contradiction with fact and that our liberty depends upon our ability to access the truth.

That’s what libraries are about. At

the moment that we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold, that magic threshold into a library, we change their lives forever, for the better. It’s an enormous force for good.

I remember at different junctures in my life feeling lost, feeling adrift, and feeling that somehow walking into a library and seeing those books, seeing human knowledge collected in that fashion, accessible, ready for me, would always lift my spirits. So I’m grateful to be able to acknowledge the importance of librarians and the work that you do. I want to work with you to ensure that libraries continue to be sanctuaries of learning, where we are free to read and consider what we please without the fear that Big Brother may be peering over our shoulders to find out what we’re up to.

Some of you may have heard that I gave a speech last summer at the Democratic convention. It made some news here and there. For some reason, one of the lines people seem to remember has to do with librarians, when I said, “We don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states, or the blue states for that matter.”

What some people may not remember is that for years, librarians have been on the frontlines of this fight for our privacy and our freedom. There have always been dark times in our history where America has strayed from our best ideas. The question has always been: Who will be there to stand up against those forces? One of the groups that has consistently stood up has been librarians. When political groups tried to censor great works of literature, you were the ones who put *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye* back on the shelves, making

BARACK OBAMA, Democratic U.S. senator from Illinois, keynoted the Opening General Session at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, June 23–29. This article is an adaptation of that speech, which drew an enormous crowd and garnered a standing ovation.