

Since I was going to be on vacation, I asked two of my daughters – Katie (who lives in Somerville, Mass.) and Rae Ann (who has just returned from Burlington, Vt.) – to co-write this week's column. Here it is:



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
October 20, 2006

Guest columnists:
Rae Ann and Katie
Winkelstein-Duveneck

“Books that you may carry to the fire and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all.”

-Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784

Our mother worked as a jails librarian for six years, and when we were little, we loved to go to the El Cerrito recycling center with her to collect magazines for the inmates. If the Dumpster was not heaped too high, she would help us climb the sides, and then we would jump down on top of the slippery heap of magazines.

We had memorized the hierarchy of titles, anything involving cars, books or people being especially prized. *Reader's Digest* and *Sports Illustrated* were like gold.

Exploring the Dumpster, our feet sliding around as we sifted through those magazines, it was as if we were alone -- we could see nothing of the outside world but the tops of buildings, the trees and sky -- and yet, we were not alone. The magazines were there with us, waiting patiently and agreeably. It is a familiar feeling -- the feeling of

being in a library.

A library is a place for people to interact with books. Of course, it has many other important functions in the community, but the greatest thing is that you are guaranteed privacy and a book. Like trusted friends, books are both stable and dynamic. You can return to one after years and find the cover unchanged, every word inside just as it was left.

And when that book is first reopened, the familiar smell of glue or ink re-emerges, and any original impressions come back. Along with these are new associations, and new smashed bugs, and someone else's coffee stains, and their forgotten, cryptic notes on scraps of paper. These things are part of the book's evolution as an object, and the process goes both ways: After we read it, parts of the book will likely

become welded to our personalities, and neither the book nor we will ever be the same.

Lately, there has been a lot of talk about digital books -- basically a type of file that can be downloaded onto a handheld device that looks roughly like a book -- much like an MP3 player. Like books, the files are bought, sold and exchanged. Many people believe these will eventually replace books altogether. While scanning books and storing them digitally is a good idea, a digital book could never equal the thick or thin stacks of bound paper we now carry around.

Like a human being, a book has a personality that does not change except by its interactions with other people. This kind of near-human interactivity and tangibility allows it to transcend both information and entertainment, and it allows us the feeling of greeting an old friend.

At the assisted living home where I (Rae Ann) work, I met a lady named Susan who

loves books and always has them scattered over her bed and chair and lap, though she can't remember from one minute to the next what book she's holding. But that's the fun part, because that means she gets to discover each book over and over again.

One day, she turns one over to see its cover and exclaims, "Oh, I love Walt Whitman. Where did I get this?" It's from her daughter -- it's written inside the front cover. I read the inscription to her. "Oh, Nora did? My peach plum. I'd like to read that."

She falls asleep again, the book open in her lap, until I come in again to give her eyedrops. "Thanks, bebbah," she says to me. "My eyes get very dry, because I'm always reading."