



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“St. Patrick’s must rely solely on the generosity of visitors, midtown working people and friends like you.”

-Plaque in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York City

There are ongoing discussions in various library venues about what the modern library should look and sound like. I have commented on some of these in previous columns, and I was reminded again recently on a trip to New York City. As I was taking a walk, I came upon St. Patrick’s Cathedral on 5th Avenue, between 50th and 51st streets. It is difficult for me to resist a place of worship, especially one as spectacular as St. Patrick’s. And when I went inside to admire it, the Friday 1 p.m. mass was about to start, so I decided to stay.

I don’t think I have attended a Catholic mass since I was teenager, when I used to go with a friend and her parents to a Latin one in San Francisco. I love the ritual of religions. As the child of a Jewish father and southern Baptist mother – neither of whom engaged in any kind of regular religious observances – I satisfied my attraction to ceremony by occasionally visiting the local churches, in particular the Presbyterian one

down the street. There I listened to the sermons, sang the songs and dropped my allowance into the basket as it went around. My favorite parts were the singing and the brief yet warm handshake from the minister as I left. “Hello,” he would say as he looked me directly in the eyes and took my hand in his, “it’s good to see you again.” I was never sure if he actually remembered me, since I didn’t go that often, but it felt like he did.

During the thirty minutes of this recent mass, as I was contemplating the peaceful beauty of the building, I was reminded of my childhood church experiences. While I took in the sight of the priest splendid in emerald green, and the intricate and brilliant colors of the stained glass windows, and the combined smell of incense and hundreds of small prayer candles burning, and the sheer vastness of the building, I couldn’t help thinking about the twin comforts of tradition and a safe place to spend some

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time. Somehow that led me to think about the people who perhaps think of public libraries that way. Not as places of worship, of course, but as sanctuaries.

After the mass, I mentioned that thought to my husband and he immediately agreed. After all, he pointed out, he is the one who has to find something to do while I am yet again chatting with a librarian at some library in some town on one of our trips. He relies on these libraries to provide a quiet place for him to read the newspaper and maybe a magazine or two. He expects it and likes it, just as many people who visit public libraries all over the country expect the same sort of experience.

This is not to say that libraries shouldn't provide all the other services they do now. It is appropriate to have story times, with the attendant child-related sounds, and sing-alongs and the low – and sometimes not so

low – after school voices of local students. However I think it is important to not only acknowledge the history of the public library as a kind of quiet haven, but also to support the idea. In our rush to embrace modern life with its virtual worlds and web-based branches, we must assure our public we haven't forgotten the value of a calm and contemplative silence. We should make sure they can always find it somewhere in our libraries.