

Dangerous Words: Liberating Libraries and Resisting Censorship

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, April 2, 2023
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1024, When the Spirit Says Do; #318, We Would Be One; #121, We'll Build a Land.

Special Music: Prelude in G# minor, Op.32, No.12, Sergei Rachmaninoff; "Strange Fruit," Abel Meropol (song made famous by Billie Holiday), "Lonely House" from *Street Scene*, Kurt Weill, Langston Hughes (book by Elmer Rice); see Notes on Censored Music, printed following the sermon.

Sermon

When I was growing up in a small town in the Midwest, our red-brick public library was a 20-minute walk from my house, and a shorter bike ride. The children's library was on the basement level, with short bookshelves, tables and chairs, and its own staff. It wasn't long before I went upstairs, where I browsed in stacks that towered above my head. On one side of the main floor, sunlight poured through a tall window over a low round table with dozens of magazines in clear plastic binders. Sitting and reading in the lounge chairs, I learned about global events and political perspectives different from those I had known at home.

In truth, my family subscribed to newspapers and magazines, but I was lonely at home. The library was a like another home. I enjoyed the kindness of the staff at the desk when I was asking a question, checking out materials, or paying late fees (which I did frequently). The library was a place I could be around other people in safety and pursue my interests. One of my discoveries: they would let you check out record albums! I took home a variety of records, especially movie soundtracks for the James Bond series of movies. I would play them in my bedroom at high volume and conduct the orchestra in front of the mirror. I transcribed the main theme songs, memorized them and sang them. Anthony [looking at our music director], I am available. Just let me know.

Mary Grahame Hunter is a young librarian in Ferndale, Michigan. "The reason I wanted to be a children's librarian," she said, "is because it's one of the few places where a child is treated as their own entity." Children can explore, choose, read, and respond as their spirit leads them. Hunter said a children's library "is designed for children's needs *first*."¹

By their existence, libraries demonstrate that everyone is equal. Everyone can get a library card, even kids. All of us have access to the same electronic resources, reference books, novels, music, and poetry. Some libraries let us borrow garden tools. Here I Sacramento I have the freedom to sit at a table reading the *Wall Street Journal* or *Harper's* magazine. At another table a few feet away, a homeless woman has the freedom to relax indoors when it's cold and raining outside, or when it's 107 degrees Fahrenheit. Yet these amazing anchors of community are under threat by forces which betray the open spirit of democracy. One threat is the politics of scarcity. The other is the politics of reaction and fear.

Vermont is a state with a progressive and upscale reputation, but there's a lot of poverty there. A small fraction of residents does very well, but many are just getting by.

According to the Vermont author Garret Keizer, the state's rate of per-capita spending on state colleges and universities has been one of the lowest in the nation for years. Recently the new president of the Vermont State University system announced a plan to save \$500,000 a year by closing the libraries on its four campuses. It would lay off the librarians, digitize part of its collection, and get rid of nearly all of the 300,000 books it holds.²

Garret Keizer writes:

I can't believe that anyone, let alone a person charged with directing an institution of higher learning, would fail to see that a college without a library is like a body without a heart. Or that the deepest kind of scholarship is never entirely self-directed, that it requires the random browsing and serendipitous cross-referencing best done with material texts and in the aisles between opposing shelves. To say nothing of the indispensable assistance of knowledgeable librarians both to students at the school and to community members like me, who depend on the ample collections of a college library for their business or pleasure. Actual people and physical books are what make a library as real as the world it exists to serve.³

Yet Keizer says this financial decision is not merely about the books. He sees it as one more step in the dissolving of democracy for the sake of money. To empty out a library and lay off librarians is to assert that the only things that matter are things you can quantify in dollars. Since you cannot put a number on the worth of such local resources, these assets must not be worth anything. Money is all that matters. In Vermont, the faculty, students, and other stakeholders have been protesting the university president's plan, but it is not clear that they can change it much.

The other kind of danger to libraries is an ongoing series of aggressive campaigns to challenge books and get them removed from public schools and libraries. Book banning has never gone away, but these current campaigns have less to do with particular books than with intimidation of library leaders.

PEN America is an advocacy group for free expression and the freedom to read. PEN reports that the number of *attempts* to ban books doubled from 2020 to 2021; in twelve months, 1,648 unique book titles *were banned* across the country. It projects a new high record for 2022.⁴

You know, the Unitarian religion started with a banned book. Michael Servetus was a Spanish physician, scientist, and theologian. In 1531 he wrote a book entitled *On the Errors of the Trinity*. For several years, he was in hiding, but in 1553 he resumed his anti-trinitarian arguments in another book, *The Restoration of Christianity*. Later that year Servetus was tried by the city of Geneva, Switzerland, at the urging of Protestant leader John Calvin. With his books tied to his waist, Servetus was burned at the stake in the town square. Before there was the name Unitarian, he was killed for the risk which its ideas posed to the dominant religions. A year later, in response to this atrocity, Sebastian Castellio wrote: "To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine. It is to kill a man."⁵

In the early 1800s, many Unitarians led the establishment of public libraries in their cities and states in this country. This included Senator Horace Mann, a legislator in Massachusetts. He's remembered as a founder of public education *and* a founder of libraries. But you don't have to go to the East Coast to find UU ancestors who founded libraries. In 1860, civic leaders in Sacramento raised funds to organize a public library. Eight years later, a number of the same people organized the First Unitarian Church of Sacramento.

We have a lot of authors in our congregation, including some whose books have been targeted. When [Marilyn Reynolds](#) was an urban schoolteacher, she couldn't find books for students that dealt with tough issues that many teenagers face, like sexual abuse and bullying. So she started writing those books. She has published 11 of her Hamilton High novels. One book is about a teenage pregnancy, entitled *Detour for Emmy*. In 2005 it made the list of the Top 10 banned books in the country. At first Marilyn felt proud, but then she got angry. She felt sad for those teens who wouldn't know about her books, but in some cities, clever teachers and librarians found ways to work around the bans. In response to her books, young readers expressed their thanks. One wrote this in response to *Detour for Emmy*: "This book encourages me to not get pregnant at a young age because when I pretend that I'm *Emmy*, I realize . . . she had to change her plan and goals of life." Another girl said: "I am a sixteen-year-old mother, and *Emmy's* story helped me realize I can make a good life for me and my baby. Thank you."⁶

Another author in the congregation is [Lisa Bunker](#). She's written several novels and biographies for children, which include a rainbow of characters. Yet their particular LGBT identities are not the story, just one aspect of who they are. Recently, Lisa published *Zenobia July*. It's about a transgender girl who solves a cyber-crime and who finds a family in the process. In Texas, a legislator is attempting to ban this book. While many legislative bodies and school boards in Texas have earned a reputation for censorship, in Connecticut a few years ago a librarian at a middle school put one of Lisa's titles on a list of suggested books for summer vacation reading—and that librarian was fired.⁷

Sometimes banning a book will cause more people to find out about it and read it. More often, however, books disappear without publicity. The child who could have been inspired by a book, won't know it even existed. The teenager who could have come to realize: "I'm not the only one; I'm not alone," will continue to feel isolated.

To be sure, it can be a bold and risky endeavor to open the pages of a book, any book. Whether you are a youth or an adult, you may encounter unsettling words, news, actions, images, or ideas. This is why talking about books with other people is important—with family, friends, teachers, and of course, librarians. But it's no reason to keep other people from reading a book.

The most important thing to remember about current challenges against particular books is this: it's not about the books. In the words of writer Melissa Gire Grant, "Banning books has become a call to arms," providing radical right-wing activists a way "to question the function and the existence of the public library." It is a strategy for defunding one more anchor of democracy.⁸

In many school districts and public libraries, it's easy and simple to file a challenge against a book—just a little slip of paper to fill out. Often you don't even have to have read a book to file a challenge. In some states, when a book is challenged, it must be taken off the shelf while staff have to take time to write reports to explain the reasons for having the book in the library. Imagine if dozens of people are fired up and mobilized to bury a library staff in hundreds of book challenges. That's happening in many places.

According to the American Library Association, right now the books attacked the most are those with "content by or about people of color, LGBT people, or people with disabilities."⁹ Published in 2019, the book *Gender Queer* is a graphic novel which has become the most challenged title in the country. In Jamestown, Michigan, a conservative

group spread leaflets at a Memorial Day parade about this book. They said pornographic books were “being handed out to kids at a local library.” Targeting the library director by name, it said she “promoted the LGBT ideology.” Last year, the group campaigned against a renewal of the portion of the property tax that funded libraries; normally it was an overwhelming vote in favor of it. “Protect Childhood Innocence,” their signs read; “[librarians] are trying to groom our children.” The tax renewal failed to win a majority vote, cutting most of the library’s funding.¹⁰

“Moms for Liberty” is misleading name of the largest of several campaigns that make lists of books they accuse of being pornographic or promoting pedophilia. In response to the group’s outrageous accusations and social media posts, crowds of angry people fill school board meetings and library board meetings. Reciting scripted words, they accuse a library of “grooming” children to be trans, lesbian, or gay simply because there are books containing those true-to-life topics. Or they go into a library and scream at the library workers, calling them pedophiles. On the phone, angry people call up and make violent threats. All of this is highly organized.

Speaking of the phone, the Attorney General of the State of Louisiana has set up a telephone tip line so people can report on librarians and teachers engaged in what he calls “taxpayer-[subsidized] sexualization of children.” He provided a list of targeted books “along with model letters of complaint” to use to file challenges.¹¹

This is all shocking to those of us who care about the freedom to read. It is unsettling to those who value democracy, diversity, and liberty. It is outrageous. Yet it is important to know, and to remember, that there are more people in this country who support libraries than hate them. According to a survey done for the American Library Association a year ago, 71 percent of US voters were against the removal of books from public libraries. Melissa Gira Grant says: “A strong library with strong community support can withstand threats from those who want to weaken the library.... It’s not enough to defend a title. You have to defend the library, the work of defending intellectual freedom. That includes defending the people who do that work.”¹²

We *can* defend these anchors of democracy. We can learn about attacks on books, libraries, and schools by visiting the websites of the American Library Association and PEN America. We can donate to these organizations. We can find out who is on the boards of our libraries and who’s on our school board, whether or not we have children. We can get to know them and introduce ourselves to them.

If we have are lucky to live in a city or state which respects the mission of libraries, we can encourage people we know in other places to speak out and show up to oppose threats to their libraries. Last December, hundreds of ordinary people filled library board meeting in Louisiana. They testified against repression and censorship. “We support our librarians,” they said. They held signs above their heads: “Trust our librarians.”

And wherever we may live, we can join the public library and use it. When we talk with a library staff member, we can say: “Thank you for your service. Thank you for being here.”

Protect the children. We hear that slogan a lot. In spite of the violence that underlies these campaigns against books, libraries, and schools, that’s the refrain we hear from them: protect the children.

Well, I want to protect children too. Let's protect their freedom to follow their curiosity into books, magazines, music, and art. Protect the children who thrive in the community of a library, those who find assurance in a friendly face and respectful answer at the library information desk.

I want to protect the children living in difficult family situations, those who can learn that they are not alone and can then find resources for their needs. Protect the children who may be curious about their gender identity or sexual orientation or about sexuality in general. They deserve to learn from books written, reviewed and selected by professionals rather learning from the dangerous, unsupervised world of the internet.

I want to protect the children by trusting libraries to put the children's interests at their first priority. I want to protect the children who will grow up to be adults who use the library to conduct a job search, learn a new skill, watch a movie, or study the stock market. And let's protect any of our children who grow up to be adults who work in libraries!

As with most campaigns to censor free expression, cut funding and attack the institutions of democracy, there are more of us who love liberty than hate it, more of us who welcome diversity than fear it. But in order to protect liberty, we must pay attention, spread the word, speak out, and show up. The story of liberty is still being written, as it must be in every generation. Let us add to the story, together. Let us add to it our words, our courage, our hope, and our love. Amen.

Notes on Censored Music

Our Soul Matters theme for the month is the path of resistance. Rev. Roger's sermon is entitled "Dangerous Words," and it's about censorship. Today's musical choices remind us that censorship has threatened artists for generations.

For the music for centering today Irina chose the music of Sergei Rachmaninoff, a great composer and pianist of Russian descent, whose 150th birthday is celebrated today throughout the world. In 1917 Rachmaninoff, threatened by the Bolshevik Revolution, got his family out of Russia and they moved to the United States in 1918 in self-imposed exile. Later, in 1931, the composer signed a letter in the *New York Times* criticizing the cultural policies of the Stalinist government of the Soviet Union. This got his music banned in his homeland until 1933. Yet, all through World War II he sent the proceeds of his piano concerts to help the Red Army in fighting Nazi Germany.

Many Soviet composers and artists were threatened, censored, and condemned for their originality and the caliber of their talent; they were instead expected to glorify the comradeship of the working class. A state newspaper called their music "cheap clowning" and "clever ingenuity... which may end up very badly." Some composers had to denounce their own works in order to survive. Many were prosecuted and sent to prison labor camps along with other artists. Irina will be playing a concert featuring these composers, including Rachmaninoff, here at UUSS, this August with Thomas Derthick on double bass.

In a few minutes we will hear a song from an American opera entitled *Street Scene*. Based on a play by Elmer Rice, *Street Scene* uses the words of African American poet Langston Hughes and the music of Kurt Weill. Weill was born in Germany in 1900. After the Nazi takeover, his left-wing politics and Jewish identity led to government criticism and even interference in performances of his

works on stage. Kurt Weill and his wife immigrated to the U.S. in 1933. Anthony will be singing and Irina will be playing “Lonely House” from *Street Scene*, which opened in 1947.

But right now we will hear a piano version of the song “Strange Fruit.” In 1937 an American Jewish poet and musician by the name of Able Meeropol wrote the words to “Strange Fruit,” and later wrote the music for it. It was a short, slow protest of the unchecked terror of the lynching and hanging of African Americans by white mobs. This is the first stanza:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

In New York City, the blues and jazz singer Billie Holiday was introduced to the song. She began singing it in nightclubs. It was so powerful that she ended her concerts with it, with waiters no longer serving, and lights out except for one beam on her face. She closed her eyes before starting, in a gesture of prayer. She was under contract to Columbia Records, but they wouldn’t let her record it under their label. Columbia’s executives feared a reaction by record store owners in the South as well as radio stations affiliated with CBS, the parent company of Columbia Records. Billie Holiday’s own producer refused to record it also. She negotiated a one-session release from her contract and got her friend Milton Gabler to produce it on his Commodore label. Her 1939 version of the song was listed in the National Registry of Recorded Music by the Library of Congress in 2003. Irina will play the tune to this song. Here is the first stanza again.

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

¹ Melissa Gira Grant, “Out of Print,” *The New Republic*, April 2023, 16.

[newrepublic.com/article/170920/conservative-book-bans-libraries-fighting-back](https://www.newrepublic.com/article/170920/conservative-book-bans-libraries-fighting-back)

² www.bostonglobe.com/2023/03/13/metro/vermont-shocked-by-decision-remove-books-state-college-libraries/?p1=Article [Inline Related Link](#)

³ www.bostonglobe.com/2023/03/22/opinion/vermonts-outrageous-library-plan-speaks-volumes-about-our-illusions/

⁴ Grant, 18.

⁵ At the time a number of Italian heretics lived in Switzerland. After the execution of Servetus in Geneva, many of them immigrated to Poland. This is how a Unitarian movement took root in Poland. The Polish Brethren flourished for 100 years and established the city of Rakow (Racov). Then all of their churches were taken over and its people exiled, executed, or forced to convert to Catholic Christianity. Yet because the Polish Brethren had their own printing press in Rakow, their radical ideas would circulate around Europe and Britain in books they had published.

⁶ Personal correspondence, March 31, 2023. See www.marilynreynolds.com.

⁷ Personal conversation, March 30, 2023. See www.lisabunker.net

⁸ Grant, 17.

⁹ www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks

¹⁰ Grant, 17. Note also: “Private donations came to the rescue, but “those have only bought the library enough time to remain open until early 2025.”

¹¹ Grant, 20.

¹² Grant, 20.