

OEMA Speech  
10-14

Good morning.

It's exciting to be with a group that may have a bigger image problem in Hollywood than journalists do.

I refer, of course, to the Donna Reed Dilemma.

I trust you remember the movie.

Twenty years before she became the official milk-and-cookie dispenser in 1950s America on "The Donna Reed Show," she was the heart and soul of "It's a Wonderful Life." The queen of the prom. Everything Jimmy Stewart – make that George Bailey -- ever wanted but was afraid to ask for.

She was, at least, until George Bailey got to see what the world would have been like had he never been born.

Always been one of my favorite movie scenes of all time.

Sweet ol' Bedford Falls has disintegrated into Pottersville. Martini's Bar is a honky tonk. Ma Bailey runs a boarding house and Uncle Billy is in the insane asylum.

And Donna Reed?

"You're not going to like it," Clarence the Angel says. "She's an old maid. She never married ... She's about to close up the library!"

And you remember her, in that stiff gray suit, no make up, afraid of her shadow. When I first saw “It’s a Wonderful Life” back in high school, I still thought she was quite the babe.

That’s Hollywood. It isn’t much kinder to journalists.

Have you ever seen Richard Gere in “The Runaway Bride”?

John Belushi discovering the great outdoors in “Continental Divide”?

OK, so they pretty much get it right in “All the President’s Men.”

But the best impersonation of a newspaper columnist I’ve ever seen is provided by Gene Kelly in the movie, “Inherit the Wind.”

Kelly plays a columnist from Baltimore (evoking H.L. Mencken, I suppose) who’s down in Tennessee in 1925, covering the Scopes Monkey Trial, the great circus involving the Bible and evolution.

Kelly is frequently drunk and perpetually cynical, but somehow he delivers the most succinct description of my job that I’ve ever heard.

The obligation of a journalist, he says, is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

Afflict the comfortable. Comfort the afflicted.

And I’d argue: You all could do a lot worse than to adopt that as the official slogan of the Oregon Educational Media Association.

The brief description about your keynote speaker on the on-line program schedule notes that I sponsor an annual reading contest and that I am “an advocate against censorship.”

Now, hold the phone.

Censorship, of course, is the librarians' cause celebre. Every September, the American Library Association rolls out Banned Book Week. It cites the year's most challenged book (Robie Harris' *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health* topped the 2005 list) and the decade's most challenged author (Alvin Schwartz edged Judy Blume, the blood-curdling Maya Angelou and the terrifying R.L. Stine). The ALA even hawks Banned Book Bracelets.

As I said, censorship is the librarians' political rallying cry.

That's why I hope I don't disappoint anyone this morning when I confess that I believe someone better start censoring what kids are reading.

And who's better qualified than this glorious assembly?

I love my job. You'd love it, too. The Oregonian trusts my judgment. I have carte blanche. I can write about whatever I want. That's why I'm in no hurry to go do something else.

That said, I've always wanted to open a book store. Well, a little more than a book store. Books would be the heart of the place, but there would also be comics and pulps and children's illustrated art and tin toys and a bunch of shelves that bow to my obsessions.

That store would also have a very precise discipline. It would reflect each and every one of my biases. It would testify to my judgment, to my experience, to my conviction that I've been around long enough to understand the difference between the temporary night lights and the eternal flames.

That's why, for example, my store would have everything about Venice and nothing about Florence. Florence is a nice place to visit, but Venice is in a class by itself ... in my humble opinion. And in my bookstore, my humble opinion would be the only one that mattered.

I would celebrate Buck Rogers and forget about Flash Gordon. In illustrative art, showcase Warwick Goble, not Arthur Rackham.

And when it came to books, I would limit the store to no more than 200 authors. I would celebrate the best there is out there ... and I would ban the deplorable crap that floods the market.

I would welcome Graham Greene ... and bar the door to John Grisham.

I would celebrate Larry McMurtry, Willie Morris, Haruki Murakami, Richard Marius, Henry Miller, Donald Miller and Frank Miller. But Mitch Albom? Not even to clean the toilets. Not even to sop up the fresh coat of varnish on the book shelves.

Why? Because like all of you, I've been reading books for a long, long time.

Like you, I recognize the stories that go through the motions and the stories that cause the earth to move beneath our feet.

And like you, I want to pass on what I know to those who haven't had my good fortunate or experience when it comes to reading.

There's a great C.S. Lewis quote – from *Mere Christianity*, I believe – in which Lewis makes the point that every decision we make turns us into a more heavenly creature or a more hellish creature.

Every unremembered act of kindness draws us a little closer to the light.

Every selfish, bitter display nudges us a little further into the shadows.

I happen to feel the same way about books and reading.

Every minute spent with a great book brings us a little closer to empathy, to grace, to the mysteries of love, to the marvels of language, why even to the kind of sensibility you need as an evolving teenager and a maturing adult.

Two years ago, I received a reading-contest entry from Peter Roberts, a 66-year-old retired DMV worker from Eugene. He'd read 61 books, including Barbara Ehrenreich, Seymour Hersh, Molly Gloss and Dennis Lehane. He recalled the 1947 Christmas gift of Classic Comics that was the impetus of his reading career ... and he spoke of the exhilarating experience of reading Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* for the fourth time.

"I can't get over that book," he said. "The vision of Honus Wagner playing third base with a first baseman's glove. He was from a coal miner's family; he had these enormous hands. He would go to his right and scoop up the ball and the dirt and the cigarette butts and the chews of tobacco, then skim part of the infield across the diamond. It was up to the first baseman to sort that crap out.

"I don't know why that makes me happy."

That's OK, Pete. It matters only that it does. That's the heavenly residue of a good book.

But that experience is increasingly rare. The good books are still heavily outnumbered. There's a guy in Ashland named Gerard Jones. He wrote a marvelous book called *Ginny Good*, a memoir about growing up in the 1970s. In the last six months, he told me in a truly discouraging email, that book has sold 24 copies.

That brings us to John Grisham, who struggles, in the best of times, to write an evocative sentence. But his new book, *The Innocent Man*, is featured in Time magazine. His new book has a first edition of 2.8 million copies.

And every moment spent with that book is a moment wasted, an opportunity lost, an experience that turns a teenager into a more impatient, distrustful, jaded, superficial reader ... and pushes them a little closer to the conclusion that reading isn't all that it's cracked up to be.

Who do you think is available to counsel these young readers ... if not you? Who else can gently strip them of that dog-eared copy of *Chicken Soup for the Teenaged Soul* and say, "You are so much better than this."

Who – after taking stock of each reader – is going to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted? Who's going to challenge the smug kid who's coasting on Nora Roberts and comfort the kid who is bogged down in Cormac McCarthy?

Starbucks? They're hawking Mitch Albom's new book, *For One Day More*. Did any of you read his last book, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. As I said in my review, I am absolutely convinced that is one of the five books that will be remaindered in hell. It was that pandering, that shallow, that maudlin, that manipulative. Yet even as I speak, Starbucks Entertainment is pitching his follow-up at the corner coffee shop.

Think about where else people get their reading suggestions these days. The pallets at Costco. The airport kiosk. The New York Times best-seller list, consistently over-stocked with Dan Brown, Ann Coulter and Bill O'Reilly. Consider the media barrage, the ad campaigns.

Heck, I'll even fault your average Honors English class. When I dropped by my daughter's class at Lake Oswego High School's back-to-school night, this is what I saw:

*Huck Finn. The Crucible. The Scarlett Letter. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. The Fall of the House of Usher. Ethan Frome. On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.* And finally – if any of these kids are still breathing – a little Thornton Wilder, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez.

But just a little. I wanted to ask the teacher: As good as some of these books are, do you really think the last great piece of American Literature was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

I wanted to ask: Have you read *Lonesome Dove? Kavalier and Clay? Empire Falls?* Is it possible those stories may provide fresh lessons in reading and storytelling that are equal to Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Edgar Allan Poe's? Is it possible that these novels may give the students a better understanding of the connection between great fiction and the world around them?

You guys have probably read those novels. And for all I know you weren't impressed. You may not have my weakness for Stephen King, particularly a book like *Desperation*. (King, I will parenthetically add, is curious about faith, and in *Desperation*, he designs a story that forces his readers to consider the possibility that God is cruel ... and that God's cruelty is refining.)

That may not pique your curiosity. You may not share my opinions. But you need opinions. You may not have my experience, but in every display case, every catalog order, every reading group and reading list, every room-shaking improvisation, you need to broadcast your experience and upgrade your product. You need a voice ... and you need to use it, because the kids who wonder into your library are starving for good advice.

Like my newspaper, you just might be yesterday's news. Like any newspaper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you're in serious danger of being an afterthought for school-aged kids. A last resort. A rest stop on the brutal speedway of imagery and information that is the Internet. A 50-cent paperback exchange with cobwebs and sun-bleached spines in the windows.

That's why you need an infusion of personality. An opinion. An attitude about the books that truly matter and a disdain for the imposters that do nothing but fill time and space. You need the voice of authority when some utter novice or cynical veteran stumbles in, desperate for an adventure or an escape that might reverberate through the years.

When he or she shows up seeking directions to the best theologians writing today, would you send them to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rick Warren or that ol' standby, Clive Staples Lewis? Or are you up to speed on Frederick Buechner? Donald Miller? Annie LaMott? Mary Doria Russell? Have you read *Dakota* by Kathleen Norris? Have you wrestled with Jack Miles' biography of God? Did you catch Garry Wills' *What Jesus Meant*, the best single book I read last year?

If someone shuffles in beneath a backwards baseball cap looking for a sports book, do you know the difference between John Feinstein and the best sportswriter in the country, Gary Smith? Do you know the most honest and revealing book on Michael Jordan –

*The Jordan Rules* by Sam Smith – or what’s to be gained by reading Richard Ben Cramer’s *Joe DiMaggio*, David Remnick’s *King of the World* or *When Pride Still Mattered* by David Maraniss?

If they’re captivated by mysteries, have you read Don Winslow? Robert Crais? Lee Child? Dennis Lehane?

If they’re hooked on horror, do you know about Jonathan Nasaw?

If they’re anxious for fantasy, can you point them to George R.R. Martin?

If they’re into thrillers, can you introduce them to the incredible series of novels about state cops and snipers by Stephen Hunter, the film critic at The Washington Post?

And if they were looking for the best graphic novels, where would you take them? I mean, beyond *Maus* or *Persepolis*? They’re great books. They deserve the props.

But have you read *Watchmen* or *Promethea*? Were you tracking Alan Moore before “V for Vendetta” hit the silver screen? Are you stocking *Flight*? Have you read *Hicksville* by Dylan Horrocks. Brian K. Vaughan’s *Ex Machina*. Seth’s *Wimbledon Green*. Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan*. And, finally, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*?

*Fun Home* should win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It’s that good. It’s the story of a daughter coming to terms with the suicide of her father, a closeted homosexual, and Bechdel employs Proust, Camus, Collete and James Joyce in the storytelling.

It's the sort of book, I would argue, that might change everything for someone, in terms of what they realize is possible in writing and possible in reading, at the very least.

I've been reading for as long as I can remember. I was reading the sports section of the Washington Post when I was in the second grade, even as I was reading all the Tarzans, all the Chip Hiltons, all the Horatio Hornblowers, all the great P.C. Wren Books: *Beau Geste*, *Beau Sabreur*, *Beau Ideal* and the incomparable *Soldiers of Misfortune*.

Why? I don't really know. Because I found books in my paternal grandmother's attic in Minnesota? Because the shelves of my maternal grandparents' home in Philadelphia was lined with books? Because I wanted to write books of my own?

I don't know. But if there's a mystery as to why I started, there's no mystery as to why I continued. I discovered things that otherwise I had no access to.

I don't know if it matters what first brings that home to a reader. I'll never forget the afternoon --- I think I was a freshman in high school -- when I was reading Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and I stumbled upon those early sex scenes between Sonny Corleone and the bridesmaid.

I was sitting in the family living room. At some point I think my father walked past; I'm sure I rapidly and sheepishly turned the page. But I remember thinking, as I burrowed deeper into that chair, that the ol' man had no idea that I'd just been handing an E ticket to the wildest ride at Disneyland.

You know, I was going to show up today with a copy of *The Godfather* and read one of those scenes, just to shake up the room.

But I guess the word is still out. There wasn't a single copy at Powell's or the main branch of the Multnomah County Library.

When that ride with *The Godfather* ended, I jumped the next ride that came along, and never slowed down. I went through my Mickey Spillane phase, my Tom Robbins phase, my Stan Lee and Jack Kirby phase, my Vladimir Nabokov phase. While *Lolita* is the subject of my Masters' thesis and the novel I chose for the central library's exhibition of "The Books We Love," I still believe McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* is the great novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am totally absorbed by Donald Harington, Richard Marius, Alice Hoffman, James Ellroy, Joan Didion and the current state of the graphic novel.

And I can only hope that my kids, and all their friends, will have – with your help – access to the same experience that I've had. That they will understand what Jorge Luis Borges meant when he said, "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."

I want to close with the final paragraphs of a column I wrote back in 2000. I started the reading contest – in which I bet my kids, at a nickel a page, that I could read more than they could – in 1996. That first year, my son, Michael, who was 11 at the time, read 40 books by R.L. Stine and cost me plenty.

I brought the contest back in 1999. This time I was better prepared and they were a little less impressed with the value of a nickel.

"All told," I wrote, "the kids read 85 books, not a single one by R.L. Stine. Far too few, I suppose, were classics, but even the mediocre books seemed to increase their appetite for the stories worth their weight in chocolate.

"We were no longer counting pages, after all, on the after-Christmas train ride to New York City when I found Lauren bent

over Harry Potter, Christina deep into Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, and Michael all wrapped up in some video-game magazine.

“Two out of three ain't bad.

“Although it is true that my children have not yet asked for the stepladder so they can climb through our library toward the paradise of the upper shelves, their handprints are on the wall at the downtown Borders. As much as they enjoy playing hide-and-seek in Powell's, they also know the best places to turn a few pages while they're waiting to be found.

“And each time I crept upstairs last year to kiss them goodnight and found them peeking at me over a book jacket, happy to see me but pained by the interruption, giggling that they were gaining on me, I had my revenge against a world that thinks the written word is fading, a future resigned to the notion that we'll spend the next millennium drawing all our inspiration from a television or computer screen.

“Reading is bliss. And sweet revenge.”

For me, for all of you ... and for everyone who seeks shelter under your wing.