

People Move Books, Books Move People

The Wired Word for the Week of November 11, 2018

In the News

On Saturday, November 3, a bookstore in Southampton, England, called October Books opened in its new location, which is a former bank building the bookstore had recently purchased. Getting the store's inventory from its old location, which was about 500 feet down the street to the new one, was accomplished by some 250 local volunteers who formed a human chain and passed the books from hand to hand.

October Books was founded in 1977 and has been a part of the Southampton community ever since, but rising rents in its old location led the owners to purchase a building of its own. But without the help of the community, that couldn't have happened, because there weren't funds available. So the bookstore launched a campaign over the summer to raise \$400,000 to buy its own space. This was done through donations, crowdfunding, and people who donated money as "loanstock" -- the shop will repay them the money that they've lent after one, five or 10 years depending the loan terms.

But funds were still tight when it came to moving, so the bookstore's operators put an announcement on Facebook asking for volunteers to help move stock. They said it would require heavy lifting, and the moving would be happening throughout the week.

The store's staff hoped that 100 people would step forward but the first day, some 250 showed up, and rather than lug heavy boxes of books, the volunteers soon realized that there were enough people to form a human conveyor belt between the two locations. On Sunday, the first day of the move, 2,000 books were passed hand to hand.

"It was just amazing," said Clare Diaper, an employee of the bookstore. "We started with 10 people having to run between shops and ended up with 250 people passing books." She added that she got "quite emotional" and found the level of community support "heartening."

Others soon got into the action. Nearby cafes brought cups of tea to the volunteers. Passersby and people at bus stops joined the chain themselves.

"We had elderly people, children and everybody in between," said Amy Brown, another of the store's staff members.

The rest of the store's inventory, including more than 18,000 volumes and furnishings were moved by volunteers over the rest of the week, and the bookstore opened in its new location on schedule.

In separate news, but also involving books, we learned recently that in Hudson, Wisconsin, Todd Bol, the creative force behind Little Free Library, died last month at 62.

In 2009, Bol, a teacher and later an entrepreneur arranging fellowships for nurses from overseas to come to the United States, replaced the wooden door on his garage and decided to use some of the wood from the old door to build a small book-sharing box as a tribute to his mother, who'd been a schoolteacher. He posted the two-foot square box in front of his house in Hudson and stocked it with books that anyone was free to take, and if they wished, leave books of their own for others to take.

Some other people who saw the box did something similar, and soon Bol formed the Little Free Library as a nonprofit endeavor.

Today, there are more than 75,000 Little Free Library boxes, each stocked with about 20 books, in operation in all 50 states and 88 countries. All are curated by volunteer stewards who put up the boxes to begin with and use their own taste to manage the collections.

Though Bol is gone, the book-sharing effort he started is expected to carry on and grow.

"He was a true believer in the power of one person to make a difference," said Margret Aldrich, a spokeswoman for Little Free Library. "And he certainly did."

But it took the power of a worldwide community of booklovers to make the Little Free Library more than one box in front of one man's home.

More on these stories can be found at these links:

British Store Forms Human Chain to Move Books. *VOA*

Todd Bol, Creator of Little Free Library Movement, Dies at 62. *The New York Times*

Little Free Library. *Little Free Library*

Applying the News Story

Regarding the power of books, we're reminded of the novel *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, which has also been made into a movie more than once, where a man in the 19th century invents a time machine that takes him many years into the future, where society has fallen badly. He eventually returns to the 19th century long enough to remove three books from his library to take back to the future with him. Wells never said what those books were, but we assume the man took books whose subjects he thought would offer help to denizens of that dystopian future.

Regarding the power of community, we're reminded that while one definition of community is people who live in the same place, another is the feeling of fellowship that comes to people who share common attitudes, interests and goals regardless of their physical proximity to the others. We are also reminded that the church, as described and envisioned in the New Testament, was a community in that second sense.

Although "community" tends to have positive connotations, another word that describes this second sense is "tribe," which sometimes has negative connotations, although it need not. Tribe originally referred to people having blood or marriage kinship, but it is now often used to mean people having shared attitudes, interests and goals. The existence of a community or tribe implies that there are people who are outsiders -- not "one of us" to the insiders. In looking at our relationships to people, shared community and tribal differences both come into play, in various ways.

The news stories include communities in both meanings of the word. The human chain moving books consisted of people who lived in the same town, but at the same time, they were among the ones within that municipality who saw the value of working together without payment to accomplish something that many could benefit from. Most of those who have posted and curate Little Free Library boxes don't live near each other, and probably don't know one another, but they share the belief that books are valuable for human development, civilization and pastime,

but the places where they locate their little boxes are within communities where people of all kinds live near one another.

The Big Questions

1. If you had an opportunity to send three books to people of the future (assume they already have the Bible), what three books would you send? Why?
2. What books, other than the Bible, do you wish you had read at a younger age? Why?
3. In what ways do you see yourself as part of a human chain? From whom have you received valuable things and to whom and in what ways are you intentionally passing them on?
4. What communities, in both senses of the word, do you consider yourself a part of? What is the shared factor in each case?
5. What does any of this have to do with your faith in Christ?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Romans 12:16-18

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (For context, read 12:3-18.)

While these words from Paul sound like good advice for everyone, Paul was writing to followers of Jesus. His words here and in the context verses describe how members of the church community should function together. (For more from the New Testament writers about what the church community should look like, see 1 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Colossians 3:13; Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:8-11).

Questions: What other communities beside the church tend to follow practices such as these? How can these values be encouraged in other communities?

2 Timothy 4:13

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. (For context, read 4:9-13.)

These are requests Paul made to his coworker Timothy. Regarding the books, biblical commentator John Gill surmises that Paul "was a great reader of books, of various sorts, both Gentile and Jewish, as appears by his citations out of the heathen poets (Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12), and his acquaintance with Jewish records. And though he was now grown old, and near his exit, yet was mindful and careful of his books, and desirous of having them to read."

Questions: What books would you always want to keep even as you move from one house to another? What makes them valuable to you?

Ecclesiastes 12:11-12

The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (For context, read 12:9-12.)

There's always a minority view, even in the Bible, but this one at least reminds us that not all books are created equal, and that just because a volume has been published and is available in a library doesn't necessarily make it worthwhile reading.

Questions: What do you think about book censorship? Should adults be free to read whatever they want? Why or why not?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (No context needed.)

These verses can be read as being about the value of friendship or partnership, and indeed that's the case. But note that the last verse switches from the benefit of two to that of three, which in biblical numerology, often designated completeness. Even a friendship or partnership of two is a small community, so the verses can also be heard as affirming the benefits of community, regardless of number.

Question: When have you had occasion to affirm the truth of this passage?

2 Peter 1:19

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (For context, read 1:16-21.)

Here, Peter calls the scriptures "a lamp shining in a dark place," telling his readers of the scripture's value. He is, in effect, being part of the human chain that passes along the testimony of the Bible.

TWW team member Frank Ramirez comments, "Regarding the human chain. We are a human chain passing along scriptures -- whether we have a sampler on the wall with a verse, or a favorite text we recite at certain moments. Paul remembers a verse from Proverbs about the best revenge, being kind to an enemy, and passes that along in one of his letters. The image of the one like a son of Man standing by the throne on which sits the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 is referred to by Jesus and the images are echoed in Revelation. The community of faith passed the Lord's Prayer along the chain of believers and added the Doxology. We weave scriptures and scripture ideas into our hymns and our language. The King James Version of scripture helped define the English language and became (along with the First Folio of Shakespeare) the guide for the way we speak and think. This was true for Lincoln's way of speaking, for instance, and for the great orators of the Civil Rights movement."

Questions: What do you make of the claim that Christianity is always one generation away from extinction? In what ways do you participate in the human chain that passes the Christian faith from one generation to the next? How do organizations such as the American Bible Society fit into that scheme of things?

What kinds of opportunities are there in your vicinity to participate in or to create a human chain of volunteers to bring good for the community?

For Further Discussion

1. We mentioned this in a previous TWW lesson, but it fits here too: C.S. Lewis once said we need fewer books about Christianity and more books written by Christians with their Christianity latent in them. Why do you think he said that?
2. In times of great urgency, some communities form temporarily and do great good. Such was the case in Florida last year when about 80 beachgoers who didn't know each other formed a human chain to rescue a several members of a family who had become caught in a powerful riptide. Read the story here and then and then discuss what hope such incidents offer us.
3. Read this summary of the book *Education of a Wandering Man* by the prolific novelist Louis L'Amour, noting especially how his wide-ranging reading of whatever happened to be available contributed to that "education." Then discuss how your own reading of material not assigned in school contributed to your understanding of life.
4. It is common nowadays for a person to preface a discussion contribution with "Speaking as a _____", with the blank being filled in by some identifying label, such as "woman," "man," "African-American," "white," "Asian-American," "LGBT person," "evangelical," "senior citizen," "young adult" and so forth. This implicitly makes three claims: One, that membership in the labeled group in itself implies certain viewpoints and experiences. Two, that those who are different -- belonging to another "tribe" -- are not only dissimilar, but that this dissimilarity matters in the issue under discussion. Three, that those who share the label should also have the same viewpoint. Discuss these three aspects and how they can be beneficial as well as harmful in various contexts.

Responding to the News

This might be a good time for you or your church to become a sponsor of a Little Free Library in your own neighborhood. Sure, put a Bible among the books offered, but get to know your neighborhood well enough to be aware whether some neighbors might appreciate good reading on nonreligious subjects as well.

If your church has a lending library, this maybe a good time to promote it, perhaps featuring selected books on church's Facebook page or website.

Prayer

O Lord, thank you for the benefits of good literature and good communities. Let these contribute to our life as disciples of Jesus Christ. In his name. Amen.