

Celebration of Concord Public Library's 150th Anniversary
October 1, 2023
John Palfrey, MacArthur Foundation

To all the people of Concord, Massachusetts, and particularly to the town's fabulous library staff and supporters: congratulations on your 150th anniversary!

Thank you for the honor of sharing a few thoughts on this historic day, in this historic place.

We should pause when things go right and take the time to celebrate. We should celebrate what you have done: you have built and sustained a public library for 150 years. And today, you unveil to the world a new facility—set for the next few generations of library goers. You will open whole new worlds to children and families and new neighbors for the next 150 years in this new space.

We should pause to celebrate when things go right because it is not so easy for institutions to persist for this long, for years counted in the hundreds. It takes good leadership, community, investment, ideas, listening, and evolving. It takes reckoning with the past and building for the future. You have done that today—and you deserve the thanks of all of us, even those who are not members of your own community.

We should pause to celebrate also because there is so much to struggle with today. Whether the rise of artificial intelligence, the ravages of climate change, the wars that rage around the world, the persistent stain of racism—we have very real challenges to grapple with. So it is important to celebrate the wins, when people come together and plainly get things right in our communities.

I pause today also to connect what you are doing here, what you are celebrating, here today to a longer and larger arc—the history, present, and future of American democracy.

I appreciate that some may roll your eyes and say that is too lofty—this is just a library dedication, after all.

Or you may groan because here comes someone in from Chicago to Concord and think you have to talk about minutemen, the Alcotts, Thoreau, and Emerson. (I am grateful to the minutemen who led us down the street and I will come around to Emerson.)

But no, despite the risk of eye-rolls and groans, I believe in my heart of hearts that today does connect in an important and inspiring way to our democracy in America.

I stand here with you as just another American citizen. I am not a politician looking for your vote; I am not a fundraiser asking for your dollars. I am a citizen who cares, as you do, about this

community of Concord; and about all 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts; and all the tens of thousands of communities across America.

I stand here with you today because I am worried about our democracy. I am worried about American democracy and about democracy around the world. I think we are in fact in crisis in our democracy. I should note that I am an extremely optimistic person in general--I tend not to worry too much and I am not prone to histrionics. But for the first time, I am truly worried that we might miss the scale of our crisis before it is too late.

Today, October 1, 2023, may well be remembered--and should be--as the 150th anniversary of this library. I [read in the Concord Bridge](#) that today is, in fact, officially "Concord Free Public Library Day" in this state!

It will not and should not be remembered as just another day on which our government had its doors open. And yet that is in fact the headlines of our newspapers would tell us about today--that we should celebrate the mere functioning of our democracy, hours after a standoff in Congress. Today should be about more than the mere operation of our government's most basic functions. And yet time and again, we are settling for this weakest, most tenuous form of democracy.

America is not alone in our polarization, nor in the spread of misinformation. America is not alone in the decline of our local news coverage, or in our growing inequality, or in our racism. We are not alone in our efforts to suppress the votes of those with less power or in the steady erosion of trust in our institutions. Authoritarianism is on the rise around the world. Unfortunately we have a lot of company.

I will not go on and on about the crisis. We all know it and we feel it. And the purpose of today is not to make one another depressed, but rather to celebrate.

That is why I think today matters, here in Concord, Massachusetts, here on October 1, 2023--Concord Free Public Library Day.

Today's event to me is about investing in communities small and large. Today is about investing in the local institutions that bring us together. I believe that the best answer to our polarization, to the coming apart of the fabric of communities, is in fact local solutions. When we come together to face and address local problems, we tend to see one another more clearly, to support one another, to see beyond our differences and toward how we can work together.

Libraries in general, and the Concord Library specifically, are the types of institutions that form the bedrock of American democracy. We know that trust is rapidly falling in our core democratic institutions, such as the Congress and the courts and the news media. But one place that trust is not plummeting? In our libraries. Despite book bans and funding cuts and countless other indignities, in study after study, libraries and librarians earn our trust in communities.

In fact, I think we should pause here and have a big round of applause for the library staff of Concord. Along with teachers and first responders and our volunteers, they hold our communities together.

We need to do more, of course, than to invest in our libraries to save and rebuild American democracy. It is not so simple, sorry to say, as what you have done--as good a start as this is.

Just as I would connect today to the larger arc of history, I would also connect your work on this library to a larger national effort that brings local initiatives like this one together. There are in fact many reasons for hope. I will cite just one of those many.

Across political lines, a bipartisan group of Americans has formed an effort called "More Perfect." You can find it online; there are plenty of ways to help. More Perfect joins Americans who care about democracy in working toward five goals: civic education, national service, bridging divides, trusted elections, and local news. These are called the five "Sustainable Democracy Goals."

I hope you might consider ways that you can support these goals along with us. At the MacArthur Foundation, where I serve as president, we have focused on several of these goals. One is the civic education, supporting mandatory civic education in our middle schools and high schools in our home state of Illinois--which is now the law of the state. We have supported Danielle Allen's efforts toward civic education and training teachers here in New England. We are stepping up with 21 other funders to put \$500 million--together-- toward re-energizing local news across the country--a field in crisis but also a field filled with opportunity. This initiative is called [Press Forward](#).

As one easy way to get involved: if you are not supporting the [Concord Bridge](#), your free weekly non-profit newspaper, I hope you will consider doing that as one take-away from today. And of course, support the amazing Concord Free Public Library in whatever it is doing!

I promised to avoid minutemen but that I would evoke Emerson. As you may know, [Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke at the opening of this library 150 years ago](#). As an active member of the library committee and devoted supporter, Emerson predicted, that day that the opening of the library would lead to lasting benefits for the community:

"...we may all anticipate a sudden and lasting prosperity to this ancient town, in the benefit of a noble Library, which adds by the beauty of the building, and its skilful arrangement, a quite new attraction, - making readers of those who were not readers."

Not for the first time, Emerson was prescient in his remarks. Here we stand today, enjoying the benefits of that civic investment 150 years ago. And we rededicate our efforts to the next 150 years. May your efforts make readers of those who were not readers before, supporting all those who wish to engage in your vibrant community of Concord, Massachusetts.

I stand here with you today, not asking for your vote—though I certainly think we all need to vote, every time, regardless of our party or persuasion. I am not asking for your money—though I certainly urge you to support the many good local causes that merit your generosity.

I am asking that each person recognize the role we have to play in our democracy. I hope everyone will join all those who have made today's celebration possible, all those who have committed to get and stay in the game of actively—not passively, but actively—supporting our democracy. The dictionary may say that “democracy” is a noun but it really ought to be a verb. We each have a crucial role to play. At this time of genuine peril in the world, we need to repair, rebuild, and re-energize our democracy—building block by building block. Today, here in Concord MA, is a really good start. Congratulations. Once again, Concord, Massachusetts, this country, and all of us who care about our democracy, owe you a debt of gratitude. Thank you.