

Good morning, everyone. My name is Neil Pearson, I'm the President of the Independent Libraries Association, and I'm delighted to welcome you all, in person and online, to the second day of this year's ILA Conference: Libraries as The Great Good Place.

It's good to be here. I hope you'll all take it in the right spirit when I say it's good to be anywhere. That we're here at all is down to the frankly heroic efforts of everyone here at the Leeds Library, who began organising this event in the depths of lockdown, with precious little hope of the event ever seeing the light of day, and with nothing but blind faith to keep them moving forward. The entire team here, led by Carl Hutton, Fiona Gell, Molly Magrath and Sarah West, deserve not only our profound thanks and admiration, but our awestruck wonder. Very many thanks and congratulations to you all.

The theme of this year's conference is Libraries as The Great Good Place. That title references a book of the same name by the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg. In that book, published in 1989, Oldenburg argues the crucial importance of 'third places', the first two places being home and the workplace. Third places are those places where both friends and strangers gather, places where (in Oldenburg's phrase) 'unrelated people relate', where new relationships begin, where old ones reinforce themselves, where a sense of belonging is fostered, and where the pulse and health of the wider community can be measured every day. Oldenburg cites the rural churches, drug stores and post offices of the United States as examples of such places in his homeland, but bemoans his country's lack of the distinctive informal gathering places of Europe, places that grew organically as part of the countries themselves: the coffee houses of Austria, the cafés of France, the fora of classical Rome — and, of course, the pubs of Britain where you can not only forget the cares and woes of the first two places but, if you devote enough time and work at it hard enough, you can actually forget where those places are. All third places, Oldenburg argues, perform a great service for us on both a personal and social level: third places encourage participation, and discussion, and the resolution of problems. The interaction we find there encourages us to develop our ability to see and understand the world through the eyes of others, to be less dogmatic when defending our own point of view, to understand that it's possible for well-meaning people to disagree, that it's possible that other people have thought of something you haven't, and that hearing that something

will sometimes cause a beneficial shift in you. All of this, Oldenburg argues, contributes to the greater, communal good, while at the same time bringing a sense of fulfilment, contentment and growth to the individual. And all of that, I'm sure we would all agree, describes perfectly one of the many roles libraries play in our communities.

So imagine my surprise when Oldenburg begins Chapter 11 of his book with this:

'Like all living things, the third place is vulnerable to its environment. [...] Unlike hospitals or libraries, which have exacting, complicated, and expensive internal requirements, third places are typically modest, inexpensive and small by comparison.'

Oldenburg, there, specifically excluding libraries from his definition of third places. Forget everything I said about understanding the world through the eyes of others, forget everything I said about being less dogmatic about one's own point of view. Oldenburg's clearly an idiot. The moment he specifically excluded libraries from his approved list of third places, I went right off him.

For my money, libraries fit perfectly into the third place paradigm. While libraries are places where actual talking does tend to be frowned on, the sort of beneficial third-place interactions Oldenburg describes are taking place in them all the time. A teacher once described reading to me as 'conversations with people who can't be there in person', and those silent conversations — challenging, illuminating, questioning, entertaining — embed themselves in us over the course of a reading life, coalescing to form in us a world view that is uniquely our own. We get that in all the third places Oldenburg describes, of course, but we get it in libraries too — and possibly in a more concentrated form.

To Henry James, the third place was something else again. The title of Oldenburg's book is taken from a late James short story called *The Great Good Place*, which was first published in 1900. George Dane is a middle-aged, very successful, very famous man of letters — just like, oh I don't know, Henry James — but for all his money, fame and success, Dane is unhappy. He's unhappy because by the time he's spent the day doing everything he has to to ensure that he continues to be famous and successful, he has no time or energy left to do any of the things that would actually give him pleasure. One morning a visitor he's forgotten he'd invited, a struggling writer whose name he can't remember, arrives for a meeting at breakfast (Dane is successful and perpetually busy,

and his working day finishes late and starts early). It's clear the visitor, unknown and unnoticed by the world, covets Dane's life; but it's also clear the feeling is mutual, complete obscurity being as attractive a prospect to Dane, as Dane's hectic success is to the visitor. Suddenly, in a change of setting we can't quite grasp and which may or may not be real, Dane gets his wish. He finds himself in some kind of semi-celestial country retreat where time is elastic and elusive, where he finds himself freed of all appointments and commitments and expectations, and where he is at last able to get back to the essence of himself he has been trying to regain, unsuccessfully, for so long. As it turns out, he's still unsuccessful: the story ends with his morning visitor waking him, and telling him he fell asleep on his couch eight hours ago.

For James, then, the great good place was not a physical location but a state of mind, and while we may not be able to live there we can at least glimpse it, be brought closer to it, by bricks-and-mortar buildings which encourage us to set off on that expedition. Buildings like this one. It's one of the many reasons that it's so good to be back spending time in these buildings.

While it would be stretching a point, rather, to describe Zoom as a great good place, over the last eighteen months or so it has certainly felt like one, playing its part in keeping the ILA's member librarians communicating, functioning, and above all sane. I paid tribute to our staff at ILA libraries in my message which is attached to this year's annual report, but I'd like to repeat some of that tribute here, because it can't be said often enough. Covid compelled us all to make fundamental changes to the way we live, and work, and interact with each other. Those changes were deep and difficult. ILA librarians' response to those changes was absolutely extraordinary. As soon as lockdown made visits to libraries — to anywhere — impossible, ILA-on-Zoom began to thrum. Members came together virtually to share ideas on how best to continue to provide core services to our subscribers; how best to keep them informed; and how best to prevent those with limited connectivity from becoming isolated, not just from their library but from communal life in general. And while the Zoom meetings of the past year have always, understandably, been primarily concerned with meeting the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic, participants in them seem never to have felt either defined or diminished by coronavirus: at no time in the last eighteen months has Covid been allowed to sideline the ILA's plans for its future. (It's worth noting that we managed to pick up two new member libraries during the Covid period, taking our total membership from 36 libraries to 38. A warm welcome to the

Powysland Club Library in Welshpool, and the Dr. Williams Library in Gordon Square, London.) At a time when everyone could have been forgiven for turning inward a little, ILA librarians turned out towards the communities they serve, and continued to serve them. Postal book loan services, digital provision of libraries' newspaper and magazine subscriptions — even safely-distanced pastoral visits to subscribers' doorsteps. Those Zoom meetings, both those with formal agendas and those without, did a lot more than help members keep their core services running, important though that was. The mutual support those regular online meetings fostered seemed to enable people to keep moving forward, at a time when one could have been forgiven for throwing in the towel. Planning for the future turned out to be a very good way to cope with the rigours of the present, and my thanks and admiration go out to everyone who contributed so much to helping each other through.

The first day of our Conference yesterday was an outstanding success — outstanding and trailblazing, in that for the first time in ILA Conference history papers were given by overseas speakers, Christine Zarett and Regina Bernard from New York. (Thank you once again, Zoom). Today, as well as the keynote address coming very shortly from Peter Francis of Gladstone's Library, we can look forward to no fewer than ten papers given by scholars and librarians representing member libraries from Bradford to Penzance.

Times have been tough, but the ILA is tougher. My thanks once again to everyone at The Leeds Library: as good places go, this is a great one. Many thanks for listening, and enjoy the second day of your Conference.