

VIEWPOINTS

A Pretty Near Perfect Place

BY PAULA BOSCO DAMON

"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."
JORGE LUIS BORGES, WRITER, POET, LIBRARIAN

This will be a 40-minute writing exercise since that's how much money I put in the meter to visit the Sioux City Public Library.

Really, no one should have to pay to park at a library. In fact, no one should have to pump the meter anywhere. It's what I would call death to the downtown by parking meter. An entirely different story all together.

But that's not why I'm here. I came to reminisce about one of my great loves in life – libraries.

Every time I visit one, memories of my first visit come rushing back. I was not quite yet school age when I first stepped inside the Philipsburg's Holt Memorial Library located in the heart of Pennsylvania.

Back in the 50's, it was a one-room hole-in-the-wall sort of place but a library, nevertheless, organized by the Dewey Decimal System.

Stuffed floor to ceiling and wall to wall with hardbound books, that tiny space instilled in me an insatiable appetite for learning. I felt empowered.

My eyes widened, as I marveled at the tall ladder mounted on a wheeled grid, which librarians glided on to reach the wide expanse of volumes high on the shelves.

The unmistakable aroma – redolent with a musty blend of binding glue, paper and dust.

It was the one place where the sound of whispering voices milling around neatly ordered rows made me feel less alone. Still does.

How could I forget the cumbersome oak card catalogue with its many file drawers? Freestanding as a mighty weightlifter holding the whereabouts of human-kind since the beginning of time on hundreds of those tiny two-by-three-inch index cards.

The broad imposing yet eternally welcoming checkout desk with its universal greeting, "Can I help you?"

The stampers that inked return dates on loan cards neatly placed in handy manila pockets inside thousands of front covers.

And my library card – a treasured passport granting me access to ancient maps and complicated wars. A golden ticket to front rows seats of empire building and falling, global arts and architecture and authors like Shakespeare, Faulkner, Twain, Salinger and so many more.

Over the years, I've spent a good amount of time in libraries. When dating my now husband almost 50 years ago, we'd meet at the library to do homework or just hang out.

One of my first jobs when I moved to the Midwest was at a library. I was a display artist responsible for promoting library materials throughout the building and in a showcase window visible from the street. I really enjoyed that job.

In our first year of marriage, my husband worked at the front desk at the Wartburg College Vogel Library in Waverly, Iowa. I always looked forward to stopping by the reference desk for a quick, "Hi."

No matter where or when I travel, I always seek out the nearest libraries. Serving as a homing device, it's the one place I can settle in and get my bearings – even the Library of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.

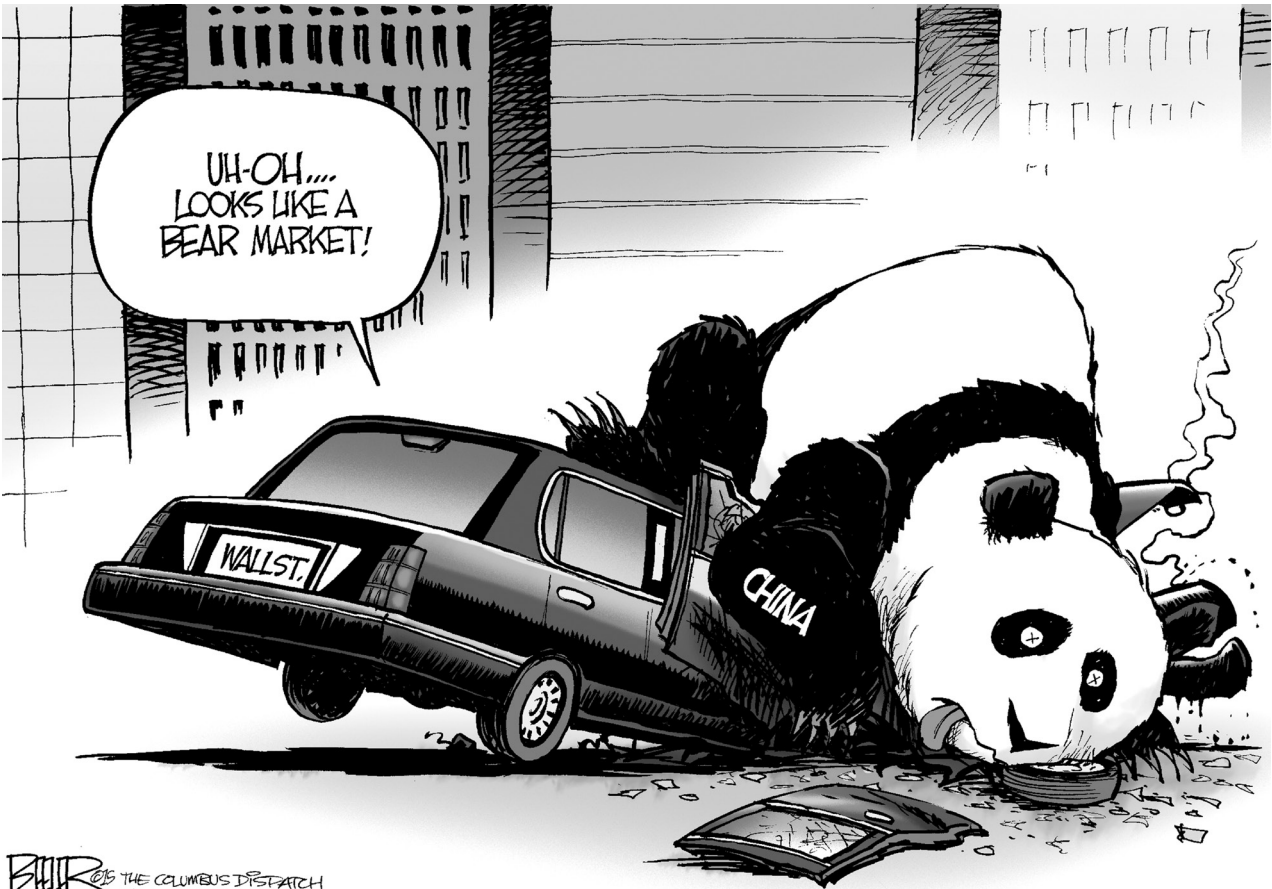
I love all libraries big and small. Some are really, really impressive. A shout out to the Waverly [Iowa] Public Library, Hot Springs [S.D.] Public Library, Edith B. Siegrist Vermillion [S.D.] Public Library, Lakewood [N.Y.] Memorial Library and Kearney [Neb.] Public Library. You can tell donors to these libraries sure have put their money where their hearts are. Oh, and by the way, parking there is free.

I often conduct public readings of my short stories in libraries, including those of my youth in Pennsylvania and New York. What a thrill it was to return as an adult and have friends, family and local folks flock to hear my stories, some of which were set in those very towns.

To this day, libraries remain the one place I can go empty-handed and leave brimming with possibilities.

Libraries are one place I can enter poor and walk out rich.

Paula Bosco Damon is a national award-winning writer whose columns appear weekly in regional newspapers of the Upper Midwest. For more information, email boscodamon.paula@gmail.com.



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THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

Taking Care of America's Elderly May Not Be a Top Priority

BY TRUDY LIEBERMAN
Rural Health News Service

During a recent visit to Copenhagen, I squeezed in a visit with city officials to learn more about the Danish health system particularly the country's arrangements for long-term care, a topic that draws endless complaints from American families, including many readers of this column.

Coincidentally, the day I returned home, I learned the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), which runs both programs, had just released star ratings for the country's home care agencies that provide services to nearly 5 million Americans. The home health industry did not shine brightly.

Only three-quarters of the agencies gave the government enough data for a rating. Nearly 50 percent of those that did provide data earned a mediocre three stars out of five. Twenty-eight percent earned two stars or below while fewer than 3 percent got five stars.

CMS official Kate Goodrich spun the news this way, "A large portion of home health agencies are performing reasonably well." Is that good enough?

Industry representatives complained that agencies, which didn't get high scores, might go out of business because hospitals won't refer patients to them. That's the point. Families can now use the ratings to identify bad agencies.

I put all this in the context of my visit with Danish officials who told me satisfaction with elder services in Denmark has been consistently high over the years, hovering around 90 percent for both nursing facility and home care including personal and practical help like shopping and doing laundry.

Funding comes from both the

national and municipal governments, but municipalities pay most of the bills and can adjust services to fit the needs of their communities.

And, yes, Danes do pay high taxes for their health services. But families do not have to spend their assets and income to become poor enough that Medicaid will pay their bills. Nor do they have to fret about losing the family farm as some readers told me they have done.

"By being a citizen, you have rights to quite good care not based on how much money you have," says Anders Jakobsen, a former official in the Danish Ministry of Health. "You pay your share of taxes during your working life and the money is there when you need it."

In Copenhagen personal care and practical help such as house cleaning and shopping are free to those who need them. So are in-home nursing services; assistive devices and technologies that make it possible for people to stay in their homes; and care in nursing or residential homes. Danes do pay nominal amounts for some things such as help with laundry and food delivered to their homes, which run about \$7 for the daily big meal. Jakobsen says there appears to be no waiting lists for municipal food services.

Waiting lists for home-delivered meals are common in the U.S. because of funding shortages.

While care in a nursing home is free, Danes do contribute an amount considered rent on the assumption they would have to pay to live somewhere. That contribution is low. For most people it's about 10 percent of their income.

Do differences in payment systems allow for more humane care at the end of life—that holy grail Americans say they want? I can't say based on my short visit, but I did detect an attitude

about elders not always found in the U.S.

"A nursing home is not a hospital or a semi-hospital. It's the old person's home," Helle Schnedler, chief of elder care, explained.

In the U.S. where the annual tab for nursing-home care can be \$100,000 or more, too often we think of nursing facilities as old-age warehouses. And we know from many media investigations care can be substandard. ProPublic, the non-profit newsroom, reported in July more than 100 nursing home residents have died or been injured over the past few years because staff failed to adequately adjust their doses of Coumadin, a potentially dangerous drug if not dosed correctly. Despite the well-known dangers, CMS inspectors have paid little attention.

It all comes down to funding priorities and which groups have the most claims on the public purse. Dr. Joanne Lynn, a well-known expert in end-of-life care, told me funding is not always available for substitute caregivers when someone breaks a wrist or needs meals right after a hospital stay. "I can order up a \$100,000 prescription for a cancer drug for my most demented patient in a nursing home, but can't get a nurse therapist to make a person smile."

What's important to you in caring for an elderly family member? Write to Trudy at trudy.lieberman@gmail.com.

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The *Plain Talk* encourages its readers to write letters to the editor, and it asks that a few simple guidelines be followed.

Please limit letters to 300 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the *Plain Talk* will accept no letters attacking private individuals or businesses.

Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Please mail to: Letters to the Editor, 201 W. Cherry St., Vermillion, SD 57069, drop off at 201 W. Cherry in Vermillion, fax to 624-4696 or e-mail to shauna.marlette@plaintalk.net.

Something bugging you?



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shauna.marlette@plaintalk.net

ON CALL WITH THE PRAIRIE DOC

The Value Of Family Love

BY RICHARD P. HOLM MD

I appreciate how the old prayer goes, "Bless the food before us, the family beside us, and the love between us..."

Our youngest son Preston recently had a break-in at his home. They took his computer with his pictures and all the songs he created. They also got away with my old film-dependent camera which was full of undeveloped pictures he had taken. He decided that it wasn't the loss of the computer or the camera; it was the loss of memories and ideas contained within. He was discouraged that he dreamt he caught them breaking into his house and ended up choking them and hitting them with a baseball bat.

It brought back the memory of advice one of my patients gave me one day, "If you want to destroy your enemy, make them hate." I

know how self-destructive hate can be. In that sense, the thieves got my son twice, once for the robbery and once for the deep anger they instilled in his heart.

Almost once a year I watch a family self-destruct as children of a dying parent return from afar to criticize the choices that the local family had made, often demanding more aggressive care when the parent is nearing end and it is time to let go.

I have seen lawyers at the bedside of a borderline-competent patient working a change in the will, giving more land to one child than another, resulting in the blackest of disharmony between kids that had grown up together as family, and who will never speak to each other again.

I have seen widows and widowers remarry and find joy once again after the sad death of a spouse, only

to have children selfishly scrambling for the spoils of the inheritance, leaving someone in the equation without their fair share. Truly there is nothing more heart-breaking than to see such destructiveness among family members.

But this does not always happen. In fact, more often than not, the death bed of a parent brings great moments of joy. I remember one family in particular surrounded their dying Mother with harmonious hymns in that hospital room as they had the family reunion that hadn't occurred in many years. Families most often come together around a dying parent or sibling joyously sharing family memories, while supporting and loving the one leaving.

Preston found a way to let go of the loss and anger following the robbery and moved on to new equipment and better creativity.

Vermillion

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