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## the library ethos



As a child, I was radicalised by libraries into believing that life can be a glorious adventure of joy and learning.

The first time my mind was blown as a child was when I visited a library. I always had books in my family home. My dad liked to read about politics and history, and my mum liked to read literature, and in retrospect it's a cute mental image I have of them: both in bed, with their bedside lamps on, reading. I don't think any of my siblings particularly took to books the way I did, but I fell in love with them. I would read books late into the night with my own little desk lamp, and when I woke up, I would pick up where I left off, and keep going until the world interrupted me in some way.

I must have been really young when my mum first brought me to the library. I think it would've been Tampines Regional Library – I distinctly remember they had these cute "trains" that were like little box rooms you could climb into, to sit and read. You can see why kids loved them – they were intimate little spaces and they helped you feel like you were in another world.



<http://www.visakanv.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/tampines-library-train.jpeg>

Being born and raised in Singapore, **I witnessed many religions** <http://www.visakanv.com/blog/religion/>. My own family is Hindu, and so we observed the festivals and rituals and all that. I went to an Anglican kindergarten, and I witnessed Christian prayer and hymns. I have friends who are Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist... I was exposed to all of that from very early on. But when I look back, I think the most magnificent and awesome thing to me was The Library. The Library was the magical place that contained all information and knowledge. The Library was proof that there's something good in the world. That there are authors who don't know me, and nevertheless spent time and energy writing books to share their knowledge and stories with me. Which I could read, for free! I could even borrow their books and bring them home – a sacred act of trust.

Through these books, from a very young age, I would learn about ancient Egypt, and Greece, and Rome, and their various mythologies. I would learn about supervolcanos and plate tectonics and electromagnetism. I would learn about dinosaurs and galaxies and carnivorous plants. The library ensured that school would be a fundamentally miserable experience for me – because I always learned more, and better, on my own in a library, than I ever did in school.



<http://www.visakanv.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/peanuts-library-card.png>>

*Peanuts, April 4, 1960*

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And then, at about age 7 or 8, I discovered the Internet. I never quite fully got around to articulating my desires as a child – I knew I loved libraries and books and that I wanted to be involved with that somehow, but I didn't know how. I didn't personally know anybody who wrote for a living. I imagined it must have been some kind of complicated and professional process – and come to think of it I must definitely have read library books about how to write books – you have to find an agent, and a publisher, and things like that, but I didn't know anybody in my life who had anything to do with any of that. I vaguely had the sense that maybe if I did very well in English in school (which I did), and my compositions scored well (which they did), then I might be put on some sort of track to becoming a writer. But it all seemed really abstract and removed... until I discovered the Internet.

The Internet, to me, seemed to be a magical, infinite library *that I could contribute to immediately*. Which is what I did. I excitedly created my own home page – I think it was something like [freewebs.com/vkusanagi](http://freewebs.com/vkusanagi) (after the video game character Kyo Kusanagi, from King of Fighters). I happily learned HTML and frames and spent many wonderful hours assembling lists of my favorite jokes and links to my favorite websites and resources. I had a hit counter and a guestbook and everything. I was a webmaster! I excitedly joined all the forums and commented and replied on everything I could. I'm still technically doing this, though these days you'll find me mostly on **Twitter** < <http://twitter.com/visakanv>> , and now I'm making videos on **my YouTube channel** < <http://youtube.com/visakanv>> .

(There's a whole sideplot here about how I also discovered music, and started a band, and joined MySpace... but maybe that's **a topic for another post** < <http://www.visakanv.com/blog/music/>> .)

Anyway. I was obsessed about the Internet. I still am. It struck me as a place where a lonely, disconnected nerd could find others like himself, make friends, build relationships, discuss anything and everything, and contribute towards building a global hypertext library that would envelope the world in a warm embrace of knowledge and understanding.

It punched me in the gut to discover that not everybody feels this way about the Internet. Lots of people see the Internet as a place to vent, to get angry, to be mean and cruel to other people. It made no sense to me, and it's still a bit of an uphill struggle for me to properly empathize with that point of view. Why be mean when we can be friends? The universe is so vast, and life is so short, why not use this time to learn and explore and discover? We know so little about each other and ourselves, why not use our precious time and energy to really listen to each other?

Still, I'm happy to report that I'm not alone in this, and that there are many other people who yearn for the same thing I do. A spirit of enlightenment, joy, curiosity, wonder. A sense of kinship with the others. To me, libraries have always functioned as lighthouses – living, breathing monuments to the light of human consciousness. They are places that lost and weary souls can go to in search of relief. Public libraries are one of the things that civilization got really, really right. And I'm very happy and honored to be able to devote the rest of my life to upholding the ethos of the library.

Alright, you say, that sounds sweet and touching, but what does that mean, really? Well, it starts with individual acts of scholarship. It starts with reading and writing and publishing what matters to you. It can be anything from profoundly meaningful to playfully weird, silly and irreverent.

One of my favorite things to do on the internet is talk to people. Over 20 years of writing and publishing online, I've been privileged enough to cultivate a bit of an audience – people who have seen what I'm doing, and like what they see. So I get lots of people talking to me. And I hear all sorts of interesting worries and anxieties from people. Lots of people say something like, "Oh, I would like to be more playful and passionate, but that's not what the world cares about. The world only cares about what is popular, what is controversial, what makes money." To which I say – so what? You don't have to care about what "the world" wants. "The world" is a big, big place with lots of room for all sorts of people to do all sorts of things. You don't have to go along with it. You don't have to suppress your own instincts and desires in order to mimic what everyone else is doing. You can actually just do whatever you want. And this is what I want.

I can go in many directions from here. I could talk about my grand vision for how we must surely be able to create a global renaissance in our time, in part by doing what I've just described, and through complementary things like **building communities** < <http://visakanv.com/blog/communities>> . But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself there. For now,

I just wanted to articulate something that's obvious to me, that's not obvious to others: that life can become something meaningful, beautiful, profound, exciting, compelling – when we internalize and embody the ethos of the library.

We are not mere individuals struggling in isolation. We are part of a vast unbroken chain of explorers, academics, thinkers, orators, artists, musicians – people who have wanted to keep the light of human consciousness alive, people who have lovingly tended to that flame, for themselves and for others. You too can be a Keeper of the Flame. There is no one single Order or Temple or Church or Authority. It's a wonderfully complex, loose assemblage of hundreds of millions of people throughout space and time. I am never truly alone, for I have the light of human consciousness pulsing through my nerves. I am a verse in a song that echoes through millennia. I am Feynman and Archimedes, I am laughter and joy, curiosity and awe, discovery and delight. We have always been here, trying to keep hope alive for ourselves and for future generations.

And you are absolutely welcome to join us. ❤️

*"You think you are alone, and as the years go by, if the stars on your side, you may discover that you are at the center of a vast circle of invisible friends whom you will never get to know, but who love you. And that is an immense reward." – Jorge Louis Borges [source < <https://twitter.com/visakanv/status/1273250776333168642>> ]*

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*The following is a short "story" that I wrote on Twitter.*

You suck at something. It bothers you, so you work hard at it & many years, through lots of pain and failure. You are now good at the thing, and it comes easy to you. You look around and you see that most people suck at this. Why don't they just get good?? Being good rules!

You can't say that, that's rude, and dismissive. So you don't say it. But it's awkward, to be around people whose problems would be solved if they simply committed to solving their problems. You have to conclude they don't really want to solve their problems, not like you did.

It's lonely to be around people you can't entirely be honest with. So now you have to start looking for new friends.

Thankfully, you are Good at Stuff, and being Good at Stuff is a great shortcut for meeting others who are Also Good At Stuff. You have a shared unspoken bond.

It's mostly great! although you also find that a lot of the people who are Good At Stuff are... naturals. A lot of them had great parents, families, support networks. Many of them don't know what it's like to Have Sucked. Over cocktails, you find yourself missing your old friends.

It dawns on you that you don't belong here either.

So, less bitterly than the last time, but with the same underlying sadness, you leave this city and head off again, this time more randomly, directionless-ly, wandering to see if the world can still surprise you.

You wander a great many lands, see a great many sights.

You develop a growing fondness of life itself, all-laughing, all-colorful, and a begrudging respect for its hideous cruelty, its senseless destruction.

Everywhere people are different. Everywhere people are the same.

You go to a great many parties, with wondrous lights and sounds. You meet delightful people of every race and tongue/ You spend hours and days in total stillness, by the vast and endless sea, until you forget to remember who you are. And still your restless heart trembles.

What is this dissatisfaction you feel, you who have bitten so deeply into the fruit of life? Who are you to feel unease, when everything is easier for you than for others? Is this a burden or a blessing, a boon, or bane? Why won't it leave you alone? What does it want of you?

After a great deal of wandering, you find the ruins of an old, abandoned city, derelict and forgotten. Curious, you make your way to the center, towards a great tower, kindred and beckoning. Perhaps it was a church to the gods, you wonder, or maybe a throne room for the kings.

Gently you push open the giant stone doors, which creak and groan with the weight of centuries. Spread before you are not jewels, or riches or gold, but... books. Countless books of all shapes and sizes, lovingly bound, meticulously kept. It's a library!

Excited, you grab one book, and another. You devour tome after tome, astounded by the souls of these kind strangers you have never met and will never know. Somehow they seem to know you by heart, in a way nobody else ever has, in a way you have yearned to be known all your life.

As days turn into weeks and months into years, it becomes clear to you what you must do with your life. You pick out an empty book... and you begin to write.



*The following is an essay from my maybe-I'll-publish-it-someday memoir, Naughty Boy.*



< <http://www.visakanv.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/reading-at-home-visakanv.jpeg> >

From early as I can remember, I was reading. Before the Internet, I was always lingering in libraries and bookstores. I would borrow my family members' library cards so I could check out multiple books at a time. I could be left unattended with a book for hours and hours on end, missing meals and ignoring the entire world around me.

What magical, intoxicating, mind-altering things books are – little packages of paper full of ordered squiggles, messages from one mind to another, sometimes across vast distances of time and space. I would read late into the night with my little desk lamp by my bed, and often I would wake up in the morning and grab the nearest book to pick up where I left off.

I taught myself all sorts of things from books before I ever had to go to school – I learned about pharaohs and pyramids, plate tectonics and carnivorous plants, nerve cells and asteroid belts. I read

about combustion engines and woolly mammoths, dinosaurs and poisonous frogs, eyeballs and supernovas.

So when I started school... I found it really, really boring. I'd already read all of my textbooks before the school year. I quickly found out that socialising during class time is frowned upon (and I didn't realise it then, but **being an extra-tall, extra-dark kid** < <http://www.visakanv.com/blog/misfit/>> meant getting singled out for extra attention from teachers).

And so I learned to read under the table.

There are a lot of ways to be a naughty child, but I think reading under your desk is the most exquisite. It's a pretty radical act, taking responsibility and initiative for your own learning, setting your own curriculum. It was, I truly believe, the most punk thing you could do. And some of the shyest, quietest kids were my co-conspirators.

It's interesting to reflect on the different reactions different teachers had to this. The best ones would let you read your own thing once you were done with classwork. The worst ones were personally offended by this display of defiance, and some were even punitive – sometimes grasping for ways to shame the child, perhaps by asking them to share their book with the rest of the class. I refused to be ashamed: I would happily use the opportunity to sell whatever story I was currently being intrigued by.

Teachers rarely expect you to call their bluff on this. Some will ask you to sit down and be quiet, others get further aggrieved and impose further punishments. Often they'd confiscate the book, and you'd be expected to perform some sort of repentance to get it back at the end of class. Sometimes they'd send you out of class altogether – which would be great, except you're not allowed to take your book with you. Needless punishment for a victimless crime.

Now that I'm an adult, I no longer have to read under the table. But I look back on it fondly. I am so proud of that recalcitrant child. If I could live my life over again, I would have disregarded the curriculum more brazenly. I would have brought more books to school, so that when one was confiscated I could've read another. And for the rest of my life, I'm always going to look for my fellow under-table readers. The kids with the twinkle in their eyes, burning with curiosity that refuses to be extinguished; not by authority, not by bureaucracy, not by anyone.

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**Public libraries are the crazy, radical ideas that might save society <**

**<https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/2019/12/05/public-libraries-are-crazy-radical-ideas-might-save-society>> (kinder.rice.edu)**

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**(source tweet < <https://twitter.com/visakanv/status/1017314604987265024>> )** When I was a kid I used to go to bed every night reading a book until I fell asleep, and I would pick it back up first thing in the morning until I either needed to pee, or my family members would come at me with some BS like “you need to eat” or “you need to go to school”.

Increasingly I’ve come to realise that this isn’t super common, and that it shaped my psyche, personality, vocabulary, grammar, worldview, imagination... all of me, to a tremendous degree. Other people who are similar in this way can usually sense it and we’re drawn to each other. Occasionally I realize some people think I’m putting on an act, being pretentious, for thinking and talking and writing the way I do, when actually the act is when I mirror *them*. My most authentic self is an avalanche of hypermedia, I am a tornado in a bookstore.

Part of the answer to “how do you tweet so much” is, I read so much as a kid that my nervous system is bursting with symbols and characters straining to break free. I almost can’t help it. If I weren’t tweeting I’d be blogging. If I weren’t blogging I’d be writing poems or something.

Every utterance is a proposal. Every string of text is an opportunity to practice magic. If you get good at it you can modify reality itself. Speak, friend, and enter.



By Visakan Veerasamy

@visakanv

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