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The Art of Being Oneself
May 2011

The Sun Also Rises... Over Butler Library

It's an intimidating building—I'll admit it. With its substantial columns and enormous windows, the place looks as if it comes straight from a novel about a creepy old mansion where wicked things happened in the past. Its perimeter is labeled with names of grand figures, such as Vergil (misspelled purposefully to remind the new generation of the appropriate Latin spelling), Demosthenes, and Plato. And, in the middle, there is a rather small entrance to its inner secrets. I'm talking, of course, of Butler Library, the scary dark library that has become a refuge over the years for the thousands of Columbia University students who have realized that they barely studied during the semester and desperately need a 24-hour library to cram in.

There is something comforting about old books. Maybe it's the rotting pages dangling loosely from the spine, maybe it's the fading cover trying to still entice the reader, or maybe, just maybe, it's that putrid smell of hands and mildew that has permanently been soaked into the decrepit pages. In any case, for some reason, there is nothing more comforting than books—well, maybe a nice cozy bed, but let's ignore that fact for now. I bring this up not to start a discussion of why Butler Library is the best library in the world—for the record, it is. No, instead I bring up this issue to try to bring some context to what I'm about to say next. I have moved around many times in my life. I moved to and from Israel over five times and, just in America, I have lived in ten different houses. Each house had its own charm and personality, each location its own perks, but through it all, I never really found a home. It might just be that I don't know what a home really is, but the statement "home is where the heart is" never really worked for me. If the statement is true, then I should consider any place that I moved with my family a home. The problem is that I don't. I never have. I have this idealistic idea of what home is, and, truthfully, I

haven't found it. I imagine a white picket fence with a flower garden alongside the white, two-story house that has a peaked roof and shutters and maybe even a puppy-dog scampering across the freshly mowed grass. Yes, my idea of home has no thoughts of family or any feelings of warmth, but it's damn pretty. In any case, I never found that home and have thus considered myself "homeless" in some strange way.

However, if there is one thing that makes me think a house might just be more than a house, it's books. Doesn't matter which books, how they are arranged, in what language they are in, or if they are old or new; books transform a space completely into something magnificent. I'm not saying that all libraries are works of art or visions of perfection because they are filled with thousands of books, but there is something about seeing a bookcase filled with books that makes everything seem okay.

For a very long time, I could never find a place that I could truly consider my home, but my childhood house is the only thing that ever came close. My old childhood house in Israel is tiny. The dirty stone steps, with the rusting railing that squeaks at the lightest touch, leads straight to the cobblestone pathway en route to the house. Made of multicolored stones with a casual wooden door that does not match the exterior or interior, and somehow even manages to clash with the subtlety green, though mostly yellow, patch of grass underneath the large windows, the place looks as if it was assembled from random pieces of Legos. Inside, the terracotta floor tiles continue their frozen lives, expanding into every room in the house. The walls are painted a simple white, though in my old room, at night, you can still glimpse the glow in the dark stars that have been painted over in order to hide the room's childish past. The kitchen does not have a working stove. The one that resides lightly on the counter above the dishwasher is just there for looks, old and decrepit, as if it had actually seen the test of time. The dishwasher clashes with

every other part of the room, brightly silver and modern, it seems like an alien from the future that has invaded the cottage-like kitchen of an older time.

And then there is the fact that there is no room for an oven at all, though really, where could one even fit it in the cramped little kitchen that barely has space for a fridge that itself looks like a teenage fridge going through growing pains while making the transition from young mini-fridge to full-sized fridge adulthood? And the two bathrooms right next to the kitchen, how do they even fit in the house? Simple yet functional, they serve their purpose with quiet tranquility. There are two other rooms in the house, including the living room which serves as a foyer, sitting area, and dining room all in one and has a small tiny bookcase waiting to be filled with classics of both Israeli and American fiction. The master bedroom barely has room for a bed, let alone a closet, and the smaller bedroom is so small, I wonder how my crib even fit into the tiny space. So, yes, maybe at one point in my life I considered this my home. Maybe I did think I belonged there at some point, but that house is no longer mine and thus no longer my home.

But something happened this year, something strange and exciting and unfathomable. This year, I found a home. In the city that never sleeps, in an area I never realized was so damn perfect, I found an unusual home right on the Columbia University campus. No, my dorm room has never been like a home. Though my wall is full of memories of past years, as well as the current one, there has always been “hostile vibrations” as they say in my favorite Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire movie, *Funny Face*. So instead of wallowing in my depressing, dark room—I should probably call facilities to change the light-bulbs at some point—I started searching for a hideout, a place to escape the crazy college life and just do my homework in peace. And guess what? I found it. Hidden among the mass amounts of dorms, science buildings, and random cathedrals, I found a home in Butler Library.

Now, I realize that libraries are not meant to be homes. Libraries are intended strictly for research, cramming, and sleeping while trying to research or cram. Libraries are known as the bane of most college students' existences. Libraries are known around campus as places of last resort, places in which hopefully students can finally finish that calculus homework that was due the previous Monday, or finally understand what the hell glycolysis is anyways. In any case, libraries are not usually entered willingly or just for fun, at least I haven't heard of that ever being the case, until now.

Out of all the libraries on campus, Butler is the most intimidating. It is the one entered only on those severe occasions where one realizes that nothing but a 24-hour stint in the library will actually drill the important facts and figures into one's head. In any case, Butler is entered with trepidation, with caution, and with a total sense of hopelessness and defeat. So, you might be wondering why on earth a place that reaches such depths of insanity and depression would be able to be turned into a home? So instead of trying to prove to you how wonderful Butler is with random anecdotes, let me take you on a tour of my newfound home and show you where I truly live on campus.

Entering through the small doors I am greeted by the security woman. Slightly on the larger side with thick large glasses and lip-gloss a few shades too bright, she smiles widely at me. I don't know her name, but she also works at Furnald, a residence hall on Columbia campus, and knows me quite well, since I go to Furnald often to visit my friend Solomon. Anyhow, I stop for a bit at the security desk, swipe my ID on the scanner, and discuss security woman's love life. Apparently she went on a blind date with a creep who told her two hours before their date that he does not look like the guy in the picture on E-Harmony. She was clearly freaked out. I mean,

who does that? In any case, we all know that love connection is going nowhere, but I wish her good luck and finally make my way into the large entrance of Butler Library.

In the middle of the entrance there is a large painting of Columbia represented by the prototype Athena and other weirdly struggling figures underneath her. The painting is disturbingly creepy, and I always try to avoid it when making my way to the third floor. Yes, the third floor. For some reason, the idiots who built Butler Library decided that the entrance floor should not be Lobby or Level 1. No, for some reason it's Level 2. Weird, right? Anyhow, to the right and left of the massive painting are wonderfully white marble staircases with gold railing. As I heave myself to the top of the stairs, I am encountered by more paintings; one of Dwight D. Eisenhower—president of Columbia University at some point in the past—the Queen and King of England at Low Library, and other random paintings of Columbia's majestic past. Anyhow, eventually, after much effort, I make it to the top of the staircase, completely out of breath. I turn to the right and head to my favorite room in the entire library, the Catalog Room.

The Catalog room is a large rectangular room with a second floor snuck into its perimeter. All along the walls there are shelves and shelves of books and drawers with catalog cards. The entire place is lined with dark mahogany wood and the railing along the second floor is a beautiful gold and wrought iron mix. As my roommate described it to all our friends the first time she entered, "it's very Harry-Potter-esque." The truth is, the place would fit right into Hogwarts Castle. It would be the perfect location for the forbidden section of the library. Everyone enters this room in search of an elusive spot on the second floor. I climb the spiral staircase at one end of the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of a forgotten table to steal for the night. Sometimes, a table just appears and I quickly mark my territory. Camping in Butler is strictly forbidden, but everyone—and I mean everyone—ignores that rule completely. In any

case, after finding an open table, I take out my laptop, some notebooks, and a few bottles of Arizona Sweet Tea; slide my power cord down to the floor to plug into the socket; and pray that I can somehow find internet—a tricky task for the inexperienced. Then, scrounging around the narrow hall of desks, I steal as many chairs as I possibly can for the eventuality that my friends, AKA The Butler Crew, will arrive.

At this point in the essay, it might be a good idea to discuss the so-called Butler Crew. Formed after my friends and I realized that finding a spot for four people can be difficult but maintaining one is even harder, we formed a group, a conglomeration of individuals all dedicated to studying—and procrastinating—in the best library ever. Solomon, my tall and lanky friend always comes around nighttime—he’s not a vampire, although he wants everyone to believe he is, since he just started watching *True Blood* online. He has light orange-tinged hair and wears overtly colored clothing. If you want to find someone who wears a bright purple pleather jacket, he’s your guy. A vegan who’s converting to Judaism, Solomon is one of my most interesting friends. Then there is Elyna. Born in America, she now lives in England and is prone to random outbursts and crazy thoughts of just leaving school to wander the streets of London. Blond-haired with funny references to random TV shows—“I’ve made a terrible mistake” by Gob from *Arrested Development* being her ultimate favorite—she makes our full-day stints in the library bearable. And then there is the crazy girl who shows up at three in the morning, Chaya. Voiced with strong opinions, Chaya has no shame Skyping in the library or randomly leaving for eight hours and returning at four or five in the morning—and yes, I was there when she returned as the sun slowly made its way into the sky. How I fit into this group, I’m not exactly sure, but I do; somehow we just mesh.

The Butler Crew is not just a group that inhabits Butler library, searching for tables on every floor and violating every single rule that Butler library tries to enforce, we do our work, eventually—I promise. But Butler is an experience that takes time to fully settle into. So after finding a spot to sit at, we watch a movie, or two. And then getting antsy after sitting too long with our tired sleepy feet, we abandon Butler's hallowed halls and make our way to Starbucks, M2M, Uni Café, or Morton Williams for some coffee, sushi and mochi, bagels with cream cheese and lox, or ice cream. Hidden in our bags, backpacks, and totes, the food easily gets past the guards and makes its way to whichever room we have occupied, whether it be the catalog room, where food is not allowed but brought in anyhow, or the fourth floor, where food and drinks are allowed in any capacity since it's technically a "green-zone." In any case, after a few hours of procrastination with *Arrested Development*, lots of food, and random Facebook chats, we all get to work, hoping to finish an assignment before the sun rises over Butler library.

Sometimes, okay, whom am I kidding? All the time, there are no open spaces in the catalog room, so we either move to the other side of the hall, where there are random desks lined up all over the room and a few armchairs in some well-hidden nooks, or head upstairs to the fourth floor—the food floor. Somehow, as I've mentioned before, food is completely allowed on this floor. I don't understand why the guards are so obnoxious and tell everyone who tries to enter Butler with food that they must throw it away when a few floors above food is completely allowed. If you, or your friend, figures out this conundrum, call me. I would love to know. The Butler food policy is just ridiculous. If you are allowed to eat or drink on an entire level of the library, why have a policy that you cannot bring any food in? And don't say that it's because there is a café inside of Butler; no one eats there when there are vastly superior options a few steps away. Ok, back on subject. The fourth floor is made up of several rooms that are all

connected. The first room, right off the elevators, has long wooden desks. For some reason, that room is always much colder than any other room in the entire library—usually the catalog room is the hottest room in the library and people strip down to almost their underwear, determined to maintain their spots. Even if it's extremely warm outside, I always bring a jacket, just in case I end up studying in that room. There are two other rooms with a similar premise, but slightly larger and warmer. In addition, there are several group study rooms, which are surprisingly not conducive for studying. The group study rooms are large square rooms with four outlets, a desk, and a few chairs. Although they are called group study rooms, I don't remember the last time I actually got work done there. On one very special occasion, the Butler Crew decorated an entire group room with signs, posters, and balloons for Solomon's birthday. After bringing a few oranges as a makeshift vegan cake, we turned off the lights and waited silently—ok, there were a few giggle fits—for Solomon to enter the room, turn on the lights, and hopefully scream with delight. Of course he did and the party in Butler was a great success (good thing those rooms are also soundproof, since we screamed quite a bit). I think, after throwing a party in Butler, it is safe to say that I basically live there.

However, I'm going to admit that sometimes, sadly, I cheat on Butler. Sometimes Butler is just far enough from Barnard that I actually consider staying within the confines of my dorm room. Although I always tell people that Butler really is not that far away, in the rain, sleet, or snow, Butler might as well be around NYU for all I care. In those conditions, I'm lucky to get out of bed for class. However, my room is still a dark dungeon and I must escape to another location in order to get some work done. This usually happens to be the Barnard Library. For all I know, there are no books in Barnard Library. The more times I go there the fewer books I see. I can tell you that there is a maple wood magazine shelf with a magazine called *SEX* but that's

about it. As far as books are concerned, I have yet to see them truly manifest in that place. Of course, there is a reason I cheat on Butler with Barnard Library: than the fact that it is extremely close, convenient, and connected to the Barnard Tunnel system (a true lifesaver on snowy days!). Maybe there are no real books—as far as I’ve seen—but the idea of having books in there is enough to make me feel like it is a home away from home.

Barnard Library has three floors. I’ll admit that I’ve only been to the first two. Somehow I’ve never had the need to explore the third floor and see what is up there. As I walk up the stairs to the library, I walk past the friendly security guard who tilts his head at me as I show him my id—for some reason Barnard Library is not sophisticated enough to have scanners. My friend Rose loves the first floor. She won’t even enter the second floor unless there are no tables on the first. On the first floor there are large tables with plugs and comfortable chairs, but I usually turn left and start my way up the plain stairs to the second floor.

Opening the door to the second floor, I make my way to the right, and sit down right in front of the windows. The back wall of the library is completely made of different-sized windows. When it’s beautiful outside, the light streams onto the entire second floor and creates a cozy warm environment. Truthfully, the place is rather plain. The desks in Barnard library are all simple wooden structures and the chairs are also made of wood. Yet somehow, the plainness of the space makes the library feel endearing. Usually, when I don’t have class in the middle of the day, I choose to come to Barnard Library instead of heading to Butler. I honestly don’t have the patience to start looking on every floor for an open table. Barnard Library is just a few steps away from my room and always has open desks. I see no reason to waste my precious study time on a table scavenger hunt in Butler when I have class in half an hour. At Barnard Library, I can look out the window and see the sun shining—or more likely, raindrops slowly sliding down the

window, merging together and gliding faster along the glass window—and hope, wistfully, to finish work before class starts, so I can sneak in a nap to get me through the rest of the day.

I don't spend nearly as much time in Barnard Library as I do in Butler, but I still consider it to be a second home. Somehow those imaginary books allow me to relax and enjoy studying. Most of the chairs, unlike the stiff wooden chairs in Butler, are so comfortable my legs never fall asleep, and I can sit and do work for hours at a time without worrying about not being able to stand up as soon as I'm ready to leave. In addition, food is completely allowed into the building. I'm not saying that I will bring a balanced meal up to the second floor, but a few snacks never hurt. Also, did you catch that? The second floor is actually the second floor. Finally there is proof that Barnard College is more intelligent and logical than Columbia—I think this is a win for females everywhere. In any case, Barnard Library is the plain Jane of the libraries of Columbia University, but its simplicity and small size only make it cozier and friendlier—kind of like Casper the Friendly Ghost, but without the ghost part.

So, Butler Library and Barnard Library, two polar opposite libraries have someone become my home. No matter which one I enter, or when I enter, they both beckon me with open arms. When I feel alone or worried, or just simply am having a complete nervous breakdown, I head to one of them and everything resolves itself. A few weeks back, when all the stress of the world seemed to rest on my shoulders, I came to Butler at three in the morning with ice cream, crying. The rest of the Butler Crew was there, ready to tell me whale jokes and finally plan the designs for our Butler Crew t-shirts (“Butler Crew” printed on the front and an individualized call number on the back, which is based on a book within Butler that contains our name). After an hour of just sitting in the library, joking around, and not paying attention to the outside world,

I felt so much better. All libraries might be considered dark hellholes, but Barnard and Butler libraries have somehow become my two wonderful homes.

* Names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals described in this essay.