

Hello all, and welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the podcast where I get to talk about all of the things that you are talking about so that together we all have something new to think about. Just a friendly reminder, I have a master's degree in library and information science, but I don't have an advanced degree in law or medicine or anything else like that, so if that is the kind of advice you need please seek out one of those professionals.

Today we're going to talk about something that has come up multiple times in the library recently in light of certain local, national, and even global conversations that are happening. So today we're going to talk about the assumption that the library is a "safe place."

The idea of public libraries as safe places needs a little bit of unpacking-- of course, it does, or we wouldn't be devoting a podcast episode to it. First, just to get it out of the way, let's talk about physical safety at the library. Should the library be a physically safe place? Yes, to the best of our ability to make it so. That's why we put wet floor signs out when it rains and people track water in-- it does rain here sometimes, I swear-- and it's why our staff are trained on how to move people out of the building in case there's a fire. Physical safety is behind many of the policies that we have governing how people should behave when they are in the library and it is why, recently, we've added a bunch of extra sanitizing practices to our usual repertoire to fight off those pervasive viruses. Do we do our best to make the library a safe place for you physically? We do.

But let's be honest, when most of you come talk to me about the library being a safe place, you're not talking about safety in terms of physical bodies but in terms of ideas. And here there's a lot more to unpack, and we'll need the help of a couple of prepositions to do it.

Do you remember prepositions? For me it was sixth grade language arts, and Mrs. David made us memorize the whole list for reasons that still elude me. Today, we're only concerned with two, and those are the prepositions "from" and "for." I'm sure all of you can understand that if we make the library a safe place for people to express their ideas, then it cannot be a place where people are safe from ideas. And if we were to make the library a place where people are safe from ideas, then it cannot be a safe place for people to express ideas. When it comes to safety and ideas in the public library, we are always going to err on the side of "for."

Some people get a little nervous when I say that, because they think that I'm saying that the library is a free-for-all and that anything goes. That's not true. First of all, we have a limited budget and limited space, so we can't purchase every book, every movie, we can't invite every speaker, and so on into the library. We have to pick and choose what comes in, and that's based on standards that we share extensively in our policies. The quick and easy version is that whatever we purchase, or whatever classes or events we host, have to have some sort of artistic merit or credibility for us to initiate those things. We don't spend any money on movies that are rated X, for example, because they have no artistic merit. And we have a staff member who has interacted with an individual who recently said that the sun is fake, that the real sun is gone and the one we see in the sky is a government replacement. You won't find anything in the library with that kind of information in it because that information has no credibility. Other people, of course, have the right to say and to believe things like that if they want to, but the library won't sponsor those kinds of ideas. We need artistic merit or credibility.

Now, just like some people get a little nervous when they think that anything goes here, other people get nervous when I start talking about selection criteria because they think that the

library ought to be completely neutral. That's not actually true either. We have certain issues that the library as an organization has taken a stance on, and that includes things like protecting your privacy, organizational transparency, and developing a library that reflects this community. All of these stances can again be found in our policies, so you if you want to know more you can feel free to read those-- they're up on the website. Outside of those particular issues, however, our goal is to create a library that is tailored to meet the needs of the entire community. Most of the time that makes sense to people. No one would think it was weird if I said that a higher percentage of our books are on topics like gardening, farming, or raising livestock than in, say, Chicago, Illinois' libraries. And no one would be surprised to hear that we are more likely to bring in a speaker about the advantages of solar power than a library in Seattle, Washington might be. We simply have more sunlight. Those are both examples of tailoring to our unique community. But don't think that means that this community shares the same opinions and ideas on all topics. Think for a moment about that neighbor that you have, the one you almost can't talk to because you disagree about everything from politics and taxes to religion and how to raise kids. Now imagine how you would feel if the library only catered to that neighbor's opinions and ignored yours because that neighbor is louder. Can you reverse the scenario too? In order to remain somewhat neutral, we have to be sure that we include resources-- books, films, speakers-- that run the full range of the spectrum.

And we don't steer clear of controversial ideas simply because they might cause controversy. If you can't encounter, discuss, debate, or even debunk an idea at the public library, where can you? When it comes to politics, religion, economics, environmentalism, communication, and a huge number of other issues, there is a whole range of opinions about what the problems might be and how to solve them. If we're doing our job well, you can interact with that whole range of opinions right here at the library, because we are a safe place for people to look into and express ideas. If that still sounds scary, here's four pieces of good news for you.

Number one, exploring an idea doesn't mean that you have to accept it. Maybe some people you respect say that they think we're turning into a communist nation, and you realize you don't understand what they mean by a communist nation. Or maybe your neighbor says that he is Hindu, or she is Catholic, and you don't know a lot about the Hindu religion or Catholicism. The library is a safe place for you to come learn about politics and religion and other "impolite" topics of conversation, and you don't have to become communist or Hindu just because you learned about those things.

Piece of good news number two, the library doesn't embrace all of the ideas that are expressed here. Just because someone said it, or you read it, or you saw it here at the library doesn't mean it's the library's opinion. In order to pull that off, we would need to have the institutional equivalent of multiple personality disorder. That means, unless you're violating one of our policies, we're not going to shut you down for exploring a new idea or for expressing an idea that runs contrary to what you read or heard at the library. You be you.

Good news number three, just like we encourage people to explore and express ideas, we encourage counter-speech also. Counter-speech, or the ability of one person to say to another, "I hear you, but on this topic I think/feel/believe this..." that's always more beneficial to all the parties involved than simple censorship ever is. As long as people are being respectful and following the rules, we encourage debate, or bringing in different speakers, suggesting different books titles, and anything else that might help you or others learn something new. This is a safe space for your ideas too.

And good news number four, you don't have to interact with all of the ideas you may encounter here at the library. However an idea is expressed here, you always have the option to simply ignore it. Silence is just as acceptable as counterspeech. We can never tell you what to think, nor can we tell you what to think about. Our job is simply to be here and be ready when you do have an idea that you want to explore, but you can choose to explore or ignore as it best suits you.

So yes, the library is a safe place for ideas, even controversial ones. If you're not sure how to jump into conversations about important or controversial topics, we've got an opportunity for you. We're starting a new book discussion group this fall that we're calling Compelling Issues, and we're reading books about racism, freedom of speech and hate speech, economic inequality, partisan politics, gender inequality, capitalism, environmentalism, and mass incarceration. We'll be discussing these books in small groups to keep the conversations intimate, and kind, and productive. If that sounds interesting to you, check out the library's website for more details. We have every confidence that this community's desire to learn from each other and better the community will lead to excellent discussions. If you have any questions about any of this, just get in touch with me at the library. You can call me at 970-532-2757, or you can send an email to [podcast.bclld@gmail.com](mailto:podcast.bclld@gmail.com) and I'd be happy to talk more with you. Thank you for listening, let me know what other ideas you'd like to hear about, and as always, I'm proud to say *This is Berthoud*.