

“READING IS THE GATEWAY SKILL THAT MAKES ALL OTHER LEARNING POSSIBLE.”

where at once. When you're at home, you might try to get your kids to read, but you're competing with other by-products of the technology revolution, TVs and DVDs and video games, things they have to have in every room of the house. Children 8 to 18 spend three hours a day watching television; they spend 43 minutes a day reading.

Our kids aren't just seeing these temptations at home, they're seeing them everywhere, whether it's their friend's house or the people they see on television or a general culture that glorifies anti-intellectualism so that we have a president who brags about getting Cs. That message trickles down to our kids. It's too easy for children to put down a book and turn their attention elsewhere. And it's too easy for the rest of us to make excuses for it, pretending if we put a baby in front of a DVD that's "educational," then we're doing our jobs. If we let a 12-year-old skip reading as long as he's playing a "wholesome" video game, then we're doing okay, that as long as he's watching PBS at night instead of having a good conversation about a book with his parents, that somehow we're doing our job.

We know that's not what our children need. We know that's not what's best for them. And so as parents, we have to find the time and the energy to step in and help our children love reading. We can read to them, talk to them about what they're reading, and make time for this by turning off the television set ourselves.

Libraries are a critical tool to help parents do this. Knowing the constraints that parents face from a busy schedule and TV culture, we have to think outside the box, to dream big, like we always have in America, about how we're going to get books into the hands of our children.

Right now, children come home from their first doctor's appointment with an extra bottle of formula. They should come home with their first library card

or their first copy of *Good Night Moon*.

I have memorized *Good Night Moon*, by the way: "In the great green room there was a telephone" I love that book.

It could be as easy to get a book as it is to rent a DVD or pick up McDonald's. What if instead of a toy in every Happy Meal there was a book?

Libraries have a special role to play in our knowledge economy. Your institutions have been and should be a place where parents and children come to read together and learn together. We should take our kids there more.

We should make sure our politicians aren't closing libraries down because they had to spend a few extra bucks on tax cuts for folks who don't need them and weren't even asking for them.

Opening doors

Each of you has a role to play. You can keep on getting more children to walk through your doors by building on the ideas that so many of you are already pursuing: book clubs and contests, homework help, and advertising your services throughout the community.

In the years ahead, this is our challenge, and this has to be our responsibility. As a librarian or a parent, every one of you can probably remember the look on a child's face after finishing their first book.

During the campaign last year, I was asked by a reporter from the *Chicago Sun-Times* if she could interview me about the nature of my religious faith. It was an interesting proposition. I sat down with the reporter, who asked me some very pointed questions about the nature of my faith, how it had evolved. Then the reporter asked me a surprising question. She asked me, "Do you believe in heaven? And what's your conception of it?"

I told her, I don't presume to know what lies beyond, but I do know that when I sit down with my 6-year-old and my 3-year-old at night and I'm reading a book to them and then I tuck them

in to go to sleep, that's a little piece of heaven that I hang onto.

That was about a year ago, and what's interesting now is watching my 6-soon-to-be-7-year-old reading on her own now. My 4-year old will still sit in my lap, but my 7-year-old, she lies on the table and on her own. She's got the book in front of her. She's kind of face down, propped up. And I say, "Do you want me to read to you?" "No, Daddy, I'm all right," she says, and there's a little heartbreak that takes place there.

Yet, when I watch her, I feel such joy because I know that in each of those books she's picking up, her potential will be fulfilled. That's not unique to me. It's true of all of us who are parents. There's nothing we want more than to nurture that sense of wonder in our children. To make all those possibilities and all those opportunities real for our children, to have the ability to answer the question: "What can I be when I grow up?" with the answer "Anything I want. Anything I can dream of."

It's a hope that's old as the American story itself. From the moment the first immigrants arrived on these shores, generations of parents worked hard and sacrificed whatever was necessary so that their children could not just have the same chances they had, but could have the chances they never had. Because while we can never assure that our children will be rich or successful, while we can never be positive that they will do better than their parents, America is about making it possible to give them the chance, to give every child the ability to try. Education is the foundation of this opportunity.

The most basic building block that holds that foundation together is the Word. "In the beginning was the Word."

At the dawn of the 21st century, where knowledge is literally power, where it unlocks the gates of opportunity and success, we all have responsibilities as parents, as librarians, as educators, as politicians, and as citizens to instill in our children a love of reading so that we can give them a chance to fulfill their dreams. That's what all of you do each and every day, and for that, I am grateful. ❖