

Ivan Held

Human nature often shows itself most vividly on islands. Look at Shakespeare's "The Tempest" or if that's not your cup of tea – how about a few episodes of "Gilligan's Island?" (Both available at the library, by the way.) Human nature – and our needs -- really become crystal clear on an island...

I'm a book publisher by trade so there shouldn't be a shortage of books in my family's life, right? So what do I need a library for?

Well, I'll tell you about a library that's a total lifeline for our family. Every summer we are lucky enough to go to Maine for vacation. The city of Portland has a great library system and a very small branch on the island where we stay. It's only open four days a week (and at odd hours) but, WOW, does it prove how needed libraries are.

How? Well...In terms of the basics, we have a computer in the cabin, but the library has more terminals. We have adult books in the cabin, but the library has a real selection. We have children's books in the cabin, but the library has nearly a thousand to choose from. We have magazines, well, you get the picture.

But that's not all. Libraries are (and have been since ancient times) repositories for ideas, and for stories and for information. They are supporters of writers (and for that matter publishers) and the knowledge and cultural industry as a whole. These are large concepts but they come to bear in each visit.

One summer I got it in my head to re-read as many Shakespeare plays as I could – and the Peaks Island Library had every one of them. (At the same time if I wondered what new thrillers were on *The New York Times* bestseller list -- they had that too...)

To go further, we don't have television on the island, but the library has a great movie selection. And there's no theater on the island but the community room next to the library has Saturday night movies 52 weeks a year (6pm for the kids' movie; 8pm for more mature audiences.) And I haven't mentioned the bathroom but that's a lifeline too sometimes – (and it's clean!)

You know, in theory you could order all this stuff up (minus bathrooms) on line or by mail too, right? Well, there's the main thing our library on Peaks Island has – community. What I'm describing is that the library is the *heart* of the island community. It's where notices are posted (for free flu shots or tickets to the Portland Art Museum or about a used dinghy for sale), and where the community newsletter is distributed (written by the librarians of course.)

Maybe the nicest piece of all this is that we know the librarians (one of whom grew up in Montclair/Glen Ridge). And more importantly – the librarians know our kids (and have no problem shushing them or telling them to behave or helping them find that DK Dinosaur book they're looking for...)

And it's perfectly natural for the kids tell their friends they'll meet them at the library. They do this as often as they say they'll meet at the beach or the ice cream shop or the baseball field.

So there you have it. Island life strips everything down. We could live without the three restaurants or the two hotels. We'd probably figure a way around using the post office every day too. But the library – with its entertainment, as a source of knowledge, as a place of community – it's one thing above all else that really makes the island habitable.

-Ivan Held is president of G.P.Putnam's Sons, an imprint of Penguin Random House.