INSPIRED THINKING

Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community

DOROTHY STOLTZ

WITH

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Introduction

What is the role of libraries in an age of instant gratification? How can libraries design opportunities and environments to encourage people and enhance their ability to think, problem-solve, and learn? Since the early 1980s, rapid advances in technology have given people easy access to information and the ability to learn and work from anywhere. This has not trivialized the library, however; the world still needs libraries. Technology alone cannot guarantee the exploration of ideas that can lead to profound discoveries. Technology alone cannot help anyone to learn to think intelligently, critically, and holistically. Libraries continue to help humanity get to the big ideas.

It was our own response to the big ideas themselves that helped us conceive the idea for this book, which is centered on ideas that have stood the test of time—for example, curiosity, charity, and goodwill—and that have been implemented by great thinkers ranging from the ancient Greek philosophers to Alexander Pope, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Abraham Lincoln. In this book, we are unabashedly promoting big ideas as a foundation for core values, perspectives, and a helpful mindset. But we are not promoting what people should think. We hope readers will learn to think for themselves.

Plato encourages us to go beyond forming an opinion in order to think through and activate big ideas such as contentment, gracefulness, and creativity. This book is a guide for leaders in any position and courageous followers in all types of libraries to tap the inspiration of big ideas and concepts.

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The book starts with a prologue because this helps us set the tone for the rest of the text. Our prologue acts as a loving tip of the hat to Shakespeare. It was inspired by examples of the prologues used in Shakespearean plays. Prologues in Shakespeare feature a character or a chorus that comes out in front of the audience and gives an opening salvo. Our prologue serves the same purpose as the Shakespearean prologue—to set the stage and tone. We're celebrating and cheering with delight the wonders of libraries in order to prepare the reader to read and enjoy this book.

Part I of this book describes the importance of cultivating ideas, including Plato's definition of an idea—big and small—and the role of thinking. By developing inspired thinking and an open mind, libraries of all types can advance human achievement and the civilizing force of culture.

Part II guides us to find big ideas and build a bridge to them. By creating positive expectations and focusing attention on the powerful potential of libraries, we can create a healthy culture to activate the best in our staff and customers.

Part III shows how librarians are sitting on a treasure trove of big ideas, wisdom, awareness, and insights in their stacks, physical and virtual, and in their offerings of activities. Through these at-the-ready resources, librarians are poised to implement big ideas, such as courage and helpfulness, and help others learn about big ideas, and explore and express them.

Part IV is a call to action for library staffers to tap curiosity as a joyous quest for expanding our awareness and becoming more effective in life—when we grow first, then we inspire others. When individuals seek out resources at the library to read, ponder, and connect to the essence of big ideas—such as humility, joy, and unity—libraries can become the great treasure they are meant to be.

Pondering Plato and other great thinkers, Dorothy Stoltz, a community engagement director, studies the art of thinking with big ideas and how to apply them to libraries, organizations, and businesses. Library director Morgan Miller draws out the creative thinker in others and uses history as a touchpoint for inspiration to support people in the dream stage of an idea to help it become a reality. A master of event planning, Lisa Picker, communications director for a public library, implements ideas through teamwork and weaves a collaborative spirit into the fabric of the community. Influenced by Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, Joe Thompson, a public services director, expects good things to happen, treasures an open mind for learning, and embraces value-added thinking. Library executive director Carrie Willson knows how to plan for the long term, advises other small and rural libraries, and enjoys reading great literature.

The concepts in this book are designed to generate interactions between big ideas and the needs of libraries and their customers—and to help us celebrate the enlightening of humanity.

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Prologue

Whether it sits in a school, stands on the main street of a town, connects college lecture halls, or perches on the top floor of a hospital, the library—as a guidepost for light and wisdom—issues a call to action. It compels all—young and old—to expand what we know and can do. It persistently beckons us to explore life.

The library brightens the shadows with insight, wisdom, and joy for thinking things through. It embodies the "golden rule" of customer service: to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. The library discovers how to cherish those it serves so that its patrons—its clientele—its students—revere its purpose.

The library is not the possession of any one faction or group. It does not discriminate. It does not disrespect. Instead, the library promotes opportunity for all.

A true test of the library's commitment to the idea to "welcome all" occurs whenever the community is called to be tolerant and forgiving to those who are hostile and self-centered. At other times the library's dedication to "welcome all" is tested when we must cope with people from political, economic, and other groups who differ in some way from ourselves. These may be strangers to the library or to each other, but they may need assistance, encouragement,

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and inspiration. They need to discover that they can respect each other and get along. The library challenges itself and each of us to "welcome all," embracing the human impulse to grow and *celebrating life*.

A delight in improving our skills can soften the rough edge of doubt. Many of us discover the right book at the right time to solve a problem. However, the benefits of a library may not impact us overnight, but rather soak in gradually as we broaden our horizons. If we settle for instant gratification, we deprive ourselves of the transformative power of the library to enlighten humanity for the long haul.

A library does not judge. It surveys its community and comprehends the scene of diversity and at the same time the panorama of oneness. It poses opportunities to think, create, and bring out our best talents. Yet, it does not pester; instead, it nudges, nurtures, and nourishes by encouraging us to explore the many resources it offers.

The people's university—any library—kindles enthusiasm for learning. Through its informational treasures—classics and modern tomes, journal serials and newspaper archives, high-tech and low-tech resources—a library gives its customers the opportunity to learn and to grow. When correctly used through bibliographic instruction, experiential learning, and other engaging activities, the library expands curiosity, never shrinking it.

A lawyer may not know how to sift through the dross to discover research nuggets, but a librarian can help a law firm find the gold to produce excellent work. Without a library, we reduce a college's ability to inspire creativity; we sap a city's vitality; and we impair a school's capacity to teach children to become independent thinkers.

Humility, optimism, and cooperation are universal ideas to tap and express. Helpfulness, tolerance, and respect are designs of thinking that can generate opportunities for growth. The library is a beacon of light shining forth to make the seemingly impossible possible. Without a library, a town would become a dark place indeed. Folks from all walks of life may overlook whether a website is current, accurate, and authentic. But once they discover the library—and those of us working there—they are bound to notice the goodwill, expertise, and enthusiasm for asking the right questions that produce understanding and know-how.

With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino, we learners explore, discover, and grow. An iris grows each spring, blossoms, and eventually dies, but the inner essence of the iris continues on. The bulb maintains the nature of an iris and springs back to become a beautiful flower every year. Plato describes how opinions reflect our likes and dislikes but do not capture the inner essence of universal thinking or big ideas such as harmony, truth, and reverence.

A library increases our ability to understand big ideas. It brings forth streams of insight and restores our dreams. When up against opposition for

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financial support, the library turns inward to assess its service tone, its ability to listen and respond to customers, and its flexibility to collaborate.

The library is not self-absorbed or shortsighted; it works with big ideas, integrating them as much as possible into service to its community. It promotes unity, excellence, and the ability to know. It is greater than its physical facility, personnel, and educational resources. It works hand in hand with Shakespeare, Albert Schweitzer, and the like to clear away confusion and heal the distresses of the mind and heart.

The practice of medicine's big idea is maintaining health as opposed to focusing on healing sickness. A medical library helps its clientele stay attuned to its big picture. The practice of humility is to accept life, see the goodness in each situation, and use it as a springboard for growth and optimism. The library works with Mark Twain, Abraham Lincoln, and other practitioners of humility to help us increase our understanding and our ability to apply this ideal concept.

The library is a magnet drawing us into a realm that can elevate our capacity for learning, discovering excellence, and contributing to life. It encourages reflection. Collaborative workspaces and places to ponder can be found in today's top-notch library. No matter what our background or circumstances are, all of our boats can rise when we ask: What good can I do today? What good have I done this day? Ponder on this: every library, no matter whether it is academic, public, school, or specialty, helps us all to become wiser, more learned, more just, more everything.

The field of dignity is a realm open to all who walk through the library's doors. Whether a dabchick waddles or an old bird swoops in, the library can help uplift anyone who is willing to take flight anew.

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PART I

Cultivating Ideas

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1

What's the Idea, Plato?

When we are exalted by Ideas, we do not owe this to Plato, but to the Idea, to which also Plato was debtor.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Libraries are filled with ideas tucked away in books. Ideas may bubble up in a discussion program or a technology activity. Some ideas are "small" ones that can benefit us but have finite applications. Other ideas are "stupid" ones that don't benefit us and may even be harmful. We need to find and recognize the *big ideas*. What is a big idea? Some people may think it's like the genetic code of something, but that is not accurate. A big idea is not inherent in a physical form, nor can it be reproduced like the nucleotide base sequence of DNA. Although valuable, it is not the next marketing or branding opportunity. Likewise, a new educational curriculum on mathematics or a judicious operational approach for solar electric power may be important, but they do not translate into big ideas.

A big idea is what Plato referred to as an idea or pattern of thought stemming from a universal principle. Big ideas are blueprints for concepts that can help improve life. They embody the desire to make things better. Big ideas are designs of thinking for optimism (Helen Keller), freedom (Thomas Jefferson), charity for all (Abraham Lincoln), the examined life (Socrates), and energy (Nikola Tesla).

A way of understanding big, small, and stupid ideas is through understanding the big idea behind nourishment. The ancient Greek physician

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Hippocrates realized that food enables a person's body and mind to help create vitality and maintain wellness. Often referred to as the "Father of Medicine," Hippocrates said, "Let thy food be thy medicine and thy medicine be thy food." The small idea of baking oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies can lead us to the blueprint of nourishment. By applying the recipe, cookies provide protein, iron, potassium, calcium, and vitamin A. Oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies for dessert or a snack offer both nutritional value and enjoyment. By contrast, a stupid idea would be an exclusive diet of cotton candy—which has no nutritional value. Although it may be a pleasant and satisfying experience, eating cotton candy three times a day doesn't connect to the big idea of nourishment as a way to create vitality and maintain wellness—and it may even cause harm to one's metabolism in the long run.

Where do big ideas come from, and how can libraries promote them? During the time of Plato, the Muses were said to have frolicked around the "Pierian springs" of northern Greece and would symbolically offer a cup of spring water—thereby transferring inspiration—to chosen philosophers, writers, and poets. Alexander Pope, the eighteenth-century English poet, wrote in his *Essay on Criticism* that "A little learning is a dang'rous thing; / Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring." The act of drinking the *full* cup of insight—delivered by the Muse—would be enough to inspire someone for a lifetime. Nikola Tesla, the brilliant electrical engineer, entrepreneur, and futurist, had a flash of understanding as a young adult about the fundamentals of electricity and spent the rest of his life trying to express all that he learned.

A common practice in ancient Greece was the *symposion* or "drinking party, a convivial gathering of the educated." It mixed relaxed conversation and creative discussion around big ideas. Tesla occasionally socialized with friends and associates over dinner for lively discussion. Julian Hawthorne, a friend of Tesla and son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, was struck by Tesla's abundance of culture. Rarely did one meet an engineer or scientist, Hawthorne noted, "who was also a poet, a philosopher, an appreciator of fine music, a linguist, and a connoisseur of food and drink."[1] All libraries should offer symposia—with or without drinking—but always with the enjoyment of discourse around big ideas.

Libraries have groups like book clubs where people state their opinions, but *stating an opinion is not thinking*. The origin of the word *opinion* can be traced to "conjecture," "fancy," "belief," "suppose," or "choose or prefer." By contrast, "truth" is "steadfast," and "knowledge" is "the capacity for learning and understanding." An opinion stems from a small idea that may be flawed by emotion or ambition. It may even be a stupid idea that is filled with bias and prejudice. Unfortunately, opinions are sometimes, and perhaps often, believed to be truth. Insights from great thinkers into defining why opinions are not true thinking include the following:

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Opinion is the medium between knowledge and ignorance.
—PLATO

Prejudice is a great time saver.
You can form opinions without having to get the facts.
—E. B. WHITE

Science is the father of knowledge, but opinion breeds ignorance.
—HIPPOCRATES

Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming
that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted.
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Stubborn and ardent clinging to one's opinion
is the best proof of stupidity.
—MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

It takes considerable knowledge just to realize
the extent of one's own ignorance.
—THOMAS SOWELL

Be able to notice all the confusion between fact
and opinion that appears in the news.
—MARILYN VOS SAVANT

Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion
without the discomfort of thought.
—JOHN F. KENNEDY

A difference of opinion is what makes
horse racing and missionaries.
—WILL ROGERS

Most people are other people.
Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry.
—OSCAR WILDE

Loyalty to a petrified opinion never yet
broke a chain or freed a human soul.
—MARK TWAIN

The practice of thinking—inspired thinking or thinking things through—starts with discovering and examining big ideas.

Symposia are conversations open to all. They set the tone for thinking aloud with others rather than just debating or offering opinions. When stating an opinion based on what we've heard or read or believe we understand,

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the expression of bias becomes clear in the end result rather than genuine thinking. We may like an idea—the computer tablet—without understanding how it actually works or the big idea behind it (discovery). In a symposium, the goal is not to reach a consensus or persuade anybody to think differently. The objective is to explore the diverse ramifications of ideas—and the difference between big, small, and stupid ideas. In addition, these conversations encourage our appreciation of each other's company.

The big idea for libraries is to connect people to big ideas. A library of any type can do this—school, public, academic, and specialty libraries. A library of any size, budget, or staffing situation can do it.

It is astounding how little is taught about the distinction between big, small, and foolish or shortsighted ideas. A big idea may be the inspiration for a Shakespearean play—as the big idea of mercy is behind *The Merchant of Venice*—or the Harry Potter series. A big idea is the thought or true science behind electricity or robotics. A big idea can be a wellspring of insights that will improve scholarly research or generate a richer understanding of a poem or lead to the design for an alternating power system in a car engine between gas and electric power.

FIGURE 1.1

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* promotes the big idea of mercy. In Aaron Posner's reimagined version, *District Merchants,* Antonio (left), whose "pound of flesh" the moneylender Shylock (right) is after. The Folger Theatre, Washington, D.C.

Photograph with permission: Teresa Wood

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Plato has challenged people for millennia. Instead of verifying a belief or opinion—small ideas—he sought the big ideas. He is credited with leading humanity on a quest for learning to use the mind. The superficiality of things has no place in big ideas. Plato coined the word *idea* (from Greek *idein*, "to see") to denote an immaterial pattern, archetype, or original universal concept. He explains that each person can train and exercise their mind to think and understand big ideas.

FIGURE 1.2

Plato (428/427–348/347 BC) was a philosopher in classical Greece and the founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world.

Carol M. Highsmith, photographer. Main Reading Room. Portrait statue of Plato along the balustrade. Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, D.C. Washington D.C, 2007. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2007684417/.

Until a person, as described in Plato's dialogue *The Republic*, is able to rationally conceive of the idea of "the good," think through a gauntlet of objections, and judge things not in accordance with opinion but according to absolute truth, he does not yet know the idea of the good. If such a person "gets hold of some image [or imitation of the good], you'll say that it's through opinion, not knowledge."[2]

Plato describes an idea or pattern of thought stemming from a universal principle (big ideas) as something independent of individual thought (small

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ideas). Through the years, the distinction between opinion and knowledge, between small ideas and big ideas, has become distorted from Plato's original concept. In part, it was because the Greek word for "idea" has been translated into English as "form." A form refers to the physical shape of something or "the look of a thing," that is, a small idea. Plato was actually describing the ability "to see," understand, and express the universal concept, pattern, or essence behind something, a big idea.

Libraries of all types, sizes, and budgets are poised to tap the power of big ideas and strategically infuse them into their collection development, building design, customer services, and program planning. For example, as libraries serving young children create "play and learn centers," staffers can ponder the purpose of play in the library (a small idea). Librarians can further connect to the essence of creativity (a big idea) to lead to the love of learning (a big idea) to guide the design of library spaces.

Many libraries offer activities to engage youth and young adults through technology innovation labs and hands-on makerspaces. The big idea behind this type of service is flooding one's mind with curiosity and discovery. The participants may not realize they are investigating their potential, creating new opportunities for themselves, and learning marketable skills because they are immersed in the enjoyment of the activity. From virtual reality and robotics to creative writing classes and Shakespearean discussions to collaborative art projects, libraries can inspire curiosity, growth, and serving one's community.

John Couch, the author of *Rewiring Education: How Technology Can Unlock Every Student's Potential* and the vice president of education for Apple Inc., says that the excitement of learning in elementary school shifted to drudgery in middle and high school when he was growing up. "Explorations had been replaced by expectations, collaborating by competing, discovering by memorizing. . . . [These shifts capture] the main weakness of our current educational system: a focus on *what* to think, rather than *how* to think."[3]

Students are sometimes encouraged to do research, but not as a stimulus for thinking. They are taught to look for and find an answer, but not to learn how to ask the right questions. How can students stimulate their creativity to solve problems? How can they expand their awareness and maturity in order to respond to challenges? How can they—and all of us—increase their ability to reason, organize, and prioritize? Students can discover their niche in life through big ideas, such as their capacity for innovation (in science, technology, engineering, math, art, or literature) or a keen awareness of their responsibility for pursuing their duties (in business, management, education, environment, government, family, friends), or the ability to promote kindness and unity (in all that we do).

As Robert Kennedy explained, "Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not." Big ideas stimulate the interest of students and enrich their awareness of what is possible. Alexander Pope encourages young people to drink deep of the cup of inspiration:

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> A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.
> Fir'd at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
> In fearless youth we tempt the heights of arts,
> While from the bounded level of our mind,
> Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,
> But more advanc'd, behold with strange surprise
> New, distant scenes of endless science rise![4]

Plato describes how to talk with students about tapping big ideas versus small ideas and the value of big ideas in chapter 10 of his *Laws* dialogue. He encourages the students to learn the skill of discernment and thinking things through. The goal is to think before acting and especially before *re*acting. The "Athenian" in the story demonstrates to his friend, Clinias, how to speak to a student on this topic:

> Now then . . . you're still young, and as time goes on you'll come to adopt opinions diametrically opposed to those you hold now. Why not wait till later on to make up your mind about these important matters [of distinguishing big ideas from small ideas]? The most important of all, however lightly you take it at the moment, is to get the right ideas about . . . [living] a good life:—*otherwise you'll live a bad one*. . . . [Y]ou're not unique. Neither you nor your friends are the first to have held this opinion . . . [that is, small idea thinking. You'll learn to tap big ideas and put them into action by discerning and gathering] your information from all sources . . . and then see which theory represents the truth.[5]

The real treasure in a library is the opportunity to access big ideas. The ultimate big idea is what Plato refers to as "the good." His message is: understanding how to live a good life is accomplished through working with big ideas. "Otherwise, you'll live a bad one."

Truly inspired human thinking always has its roots in a universal principle—in big ideas. Libraries can support and encourage big idea thinking in all areas of life, from education and government to business and the environment. Alexander Pope explored the big idea behind criticism, for example, to discover that it is not helpful to tear down a work of art by only finding its flaws, but to advocate for the ideal. As Pope says

> Good-nature and good-sense must ever join;
> To err is human; to forgive, divine.

In this way, the critic develops a habit or innate capacity not to ignore the flaws, but to recognize the blueprint or genius within a piece. The critic learns

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to judge not only the parts, but to focus on the whole. He or she approaches an examination of something in a balanced way—not too harsh, not too lenient. The result is to support and promote good art.

The ability to evaluate art or business or anything else in a useful way—a big idea way—means first learning to create and to think. It means developing a mental approach along with a guide to thinking clearly. It helps people of all ages and walks of life to work with big ideas and distinguish them from small idea criticism. The critic has a cherished duty—even more than the artist or poet or business person—to truth. The role of the critic is to consume the art or recite the poem or read a business report—and look for the big idea. The role is not to wallow in the imperfections of the piece, but to admire the inspiration behind it. Big idea criticism is not about frivolous admiration, motivation, or jealousy. It's about discerning the inner essence of meaning and developing our ability to write and speak about it.

Pope's *Essay on Criticism* exemplifies the ability to use big ideas to lift up the reader and encourage clear thinking. Written in a straightforward and conversational style, this nearly 6,000-word poem offers insights that are as relevant today as in 1711. Pope's acumen is refreshing as we grapple with modern challenges such as fabricated news, deceptive advertising, and the acceptance of lying as a political necessity.

The role of the library is to help people distinguish big ideas from small ideas (which are often practical and useful but not powerful) and from shortsighted or stupid ideas (which can be harmful) in order to tap those big ideas. Fortunately, it is relatively easy to do this. Great thinkers from Plato and Socrates onward have provided guidance. It involves learning not to dwell on imperfections. Playing "devil's advocate" is an invaluable aspect to examining projects and services—as long as it's accompanied by excellent planning. Successful libraries reach out and ask what people want. The best of human thinking and our ability to bring out the best in each other lies in our being able to explore, interact with, and be inspired by big ideas. Successful libraries of the future are helping their constituents to find, enumerate, and express big ideas.

To play off Walt Whitman:

> Come said the Muse,
> Read me a book no librarian has yet found,
> Read me the universal.
>
> In this new library,
> Amid the uninspiring and the slag,
> Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
> Nestles the seed perfection.
>
> By every curiosity more or less,
> Creativity born, conceal'd or unconceal'd
> The spark is waiting.

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NOTES

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5. Plato, *Plato: Complete Works,* 1545.

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