

Interview with Betty Sue Flowers

Matt Finch, mechanicaldolphin.com

Betty Sue Flowers, Ph.D., is a writer, editor, and international business consultant, Emeritus Professor at the University of Texas, and former Director of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum.

She has been a consultant for NASA and the CIA, Visiting Advisor to the Secretary of the Navy, Public Director of the American Institute of Architects, and editor of scenarios for organisations including Shell International, the OECD, the University of Oxford, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

She has written scholarly works on Robert Browning, Adrienne Rich, and Christina Rossetti among others, as well as serving as a consultant to television series including PBS's *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. [You can see more of her work and her extensive publication history here.](#)

In September 2020, I talked with Betty Sue about her career, her accomplishments, and her understanding of the diverse fields she's worked in, from foresight and healthcare to poetry, literary studies, and library leadership.

*

You've had such a varied and accomplished career, it's hard to know where to start. Then I saw one of the earliest and most curious entries on your CV: you were a lab assistant at something called the Rhythmic Systems Laboratory?

I started life off as a scientist. I put my way through college working in a zoology lab. I'm still in touch with my mentor, who went on to the University of Virginia. My love of poetry took me away from that path - I just kept following it in another direction.

What are "rhythmic systems"?

Everything has rhythm, from poetry to the passage of a single day. Circadian rhythms are the rhythms that the body has around the 24-hour cycle.

Our zoology lab was studying extra-retinal photoreceptors in birds - that's to say, trying to find cells, for example, which respond to light but aren't located in the eyes. What I learned in that lab has helped me avoid jetlag over a lifetime of international flights!

So why zoology?

I'd originally started off wanting to be a doctor. I was doing pre-med and the professor of my freshman biology class asked me to start working in his lab during the following year. I continued doing that after I switched to poetry.

In high school, I worked after school in a hospital, and that's where I got to know institutions, and how institutions work. I worked in every part of the hospital from the emergency room to the autoclaving room in the basement. Over the years I saw hierarchies, management; I learned a lot about how human systems work. It turned out to be a wonderful experience, even though I didn't become a doctor.

You've had a long relationship with several institutions, including UT and Shell. Institutions can provide a home, but also restrict our liberty. Is there a tension there?

It depends on how you define yourself; you can define yourself freely within an institution. If it's too oppressive, you can leave! But the experience that really gave me a glimpse into large institutions was the LBJ Library because I was a federal bureaucrat, working for the national archivist under the complex rules of the federal bureaucracy.

What was it like entering Libraryland? How did you come to head up the LBJ Library?

I knew people who had been part of LBJ's administration, and I'd also been an administrator at the University of Texas. Although I'd been a university administrator, I'd never run an institution before, but I'd worked with a lot of corporate leaders, and I thought: "You know, I should put myself in harm's way, at least once!"

I learned to deal with budgets, and people, and boards, and all those things you learn to deal with when you're the boss.

I had all these plans for conferences and such, and then the first day, when I took a tour of the building, down below I saw stalactites and stalagmites - the building was about to fall in! The architect was a New Yorker who didn't really understand the weather in Texas, which is hot one day and freezing the next. He had designed this flat marble plaza where ice had cracked the marble and other problems had been caused. So I spent the next seven years making repairs underground - you couldn't even see the effect of the thirty-three million dollars we spent! It was invisible. I still have the hard hat.

That wasn't the only unexpected thing; on that tour, I also saw lots and lots of stanchions. I asked what they were there for, and I was told, "Mrs. Johnson's funeral."

I hadn't taken into account that this was a semi-state affair, with all these protocols, and then we spent years planning that, and overseeing it when it happened. We made one very bad decision, which had to do with our estimate of the timing it would take to drive from the funeral to the burial site at the LBJ Ranch. We thought we would drive slowly through town and then speed up on the highway, not counting on people lining up on the highway all the way to the Ranch, many with signs and flowers. So we had to drive funeral speed all the way. Very moving.

Can you see a common thread running through your diverse career, from pre-med to running the LBJ library?

It's not visible from the outside, because there's very little overlap between working at Shell on scenarios and teaching poetry, but I think I've always been on a quest to understand the way the world works, whether through science, or art, or human institutions, or the amazing capacity human beings have to shape their own environments through the stories they make up about the future. Curiosity has driven me, and fun - it's got to be fun!

As a pre-med student, I had already loved poetry. The pull to be a doctor had been to relieve suffering, and as I worked in the hospital I saw that a lot of suffering was caused not by physical injuries but the stories we told ourselves. I thought I might be better at helping to relieve unnecessary suffering through stories. If you break your arm, of course you'll necessarily endure some pain, but although the suffering caused by the stories we tell ourselves is very real, often it is unnecessary. This is why I began to look into the fictions that create us.

Was that a common perspective in a literature department at the time - narrative as a tool to make an impact in the real world?

No, definitely not. When I got back from my dissertation work at the University of London, I returned to the department I'd been a student in. Everything had changed in my absence; deconstruction was the fashion. It was highly abstract and philosophical, kind of the opposite of using narratives or using anything else, for that matter. That led me off into all kinds of side currents, because I felt as if my profession had abandoned me. I stayed because I loved teaching, but it led me to do a lot of other, non-academic writing, alongside my scholarship.

I'd been writing poetry since my childhood; I always thought of it as just part of living. I never thought you could make a living at it, however, until I saw poetry professors as an undergraduate. That was very eye-opening.

I decided to "follow my bliss", as Joseph Campbell says, and to keep studying poetry until somebody or something stopped me, and nobody ever did. Poetry is like a combination of music and thought. It seems to me fundamental to human beings; babies speak in poetry before they speak in prose. I don't think most people see it that way, but I really see it as key!

That draw to be a poet, and to be a doctor; did those come from family traditions? Were these pursuits encouraged from an early age?

No, not at all. I grew up in West Texas, and we didn't have many books in the house. In fact, that's how I got mono vision, near-sighted in one eye and far-sighted in the other, from reading the library books under my covers at night. It had a permanent effect on me, this reading.

The physiological impact of our curiosity and our choices...

Given your interest in alleviating the suffering caused by the stories we tell ourselves, and your early experience in the hospital, did you ever consider becoming a therapist?

I had a Jungian training psychoanalysis, and did consider doing that with the left hand while being an English professor with the right.

We dream in stories, we make sense of the world through stories. Poetry exists to undo the sense we've already made, and recreate something inside us, with the sensemaking mechanism. I've written about poetry therapy: reading poetry, which goes straight to the emotions, can have a healing effect.

It makes me think of [an article by George Burt and Anup Karath Nair](#), who talk about scenario planning as an “unlearning” process “by which individuals and organisations acknowledge and release prior learning (including assumptions and mental frameworks) in order to accommodate new information and behaviours.”

Burt and Nair argue that whereas “to learn” derives from a Germanic word related to tracks or furrows, to “unlearn” implies “eradicating furrows and returning to the unfurrowed flux of [...] experience [...] Unlearning requires letting go or relaxing the rigidities of previously held assumptions and beliefs, rather than forgetting them.”

So we don't fall into the same rut.

I love the idea that poetry can cause that.

As a scenario writer, I want to drop some seeds into the new furrows before you cover them over. Then different things grow out of it, and you might be able to harvest them for a long time to come.

An image can be the seed of a poem, just as a rhythm or an emotion can be. Poetry arises from lots of different seeds. With scenario writing, no matter how it's arisen, I do try to come up with some images which will encapsulate the feeling of the whole. “Jazz”, for example, suggests people playing together with their own emergent structure, created in the moment.

Such images help people to build on the scenario, which is what you want. You're not aiming for a reading experience like *Jane Eyre*, where you sit down with the beautiful prose and the amazing story; they're meant to lead to strategy, to action. It's very different from most literary forms, and a very intriguing form which merits more literary analysis.

If the scenario process was taught the way poetry is taught now, working together to create stories of the future, it would be of great benefit. I think we have to work together to take control of the stories we're telling about the world to come. That means inviting more people to create scenarios, and also theorising the scenario process more profoundly and rigorously.

We need to be much more conscious of the stories that we're living into, that we just accept blindly. Economics, for example, for all its use of scientific methods, resembles theology more than anything else; you can't question the basic assumptions all that much.

Teaching young people how to build scenarios, would make for a better politics, even. Perhaps that's a utopian vision.

I'm reminded of JFK's remark, “[if more politicians knew poetry, and more poets knew politics, I am convinced the world would be a little better place to live.](#)”

By poetry, I do think he means poesis, the imaginative process and the ability to appreciate imaginative constructions. Then you could make better imaginative constructions, which is after all what politics is all about. Scenarios are literary constructions which don't live in the ivory tower; they exist to make a difference in the world.

In that same speech, JFK spoke about “the differences between the laboratory and the legislature”, and the need for engaged intellectuals. [As President, he also wasn't afraid to talk about Robert Frost](#), and the artist having a “lover's quarrel with the world”.

Your first book, was a study of Browning's poetry. Browning was known for debunking spiritualism, which made me think again of scenarios and “unfurrowing”, and in your book you explore his writing from a number of angles: the musical analogy, common speech, the prose-poetry method. It made me think, again, of the scenario as this genre which is somewhere between creating a poetic seed and creating a stage set on which others can play. Can you connect this to your later scenario work?

Browning was well-known for his dramatic monologues, which were quite different from Wordsworth's “emotion recollected in tranquility”. Browning was holding a present conversation.

Scenarios, it seems to me, are trying to evoke a strategic, dynamic, and dramatic conversation that actually performs work in the world. Browning's conversations were artistic entertainment, perhaps with the effect of influencing individual lives, but not an attempt to save the planet or improve politics - but there is that notion of dramatic action in the present.

Before I wrote poetry as a teenager, I also wrote plays. There's something about drama, and seeing drama on the stage, which gives a sense of dynamism and being in the moment. That can be when the most potent work of scenarios is done. It's like improv: making up a story that is deeply meaningful and might shape the future in the dramatic moment. It's all intertwined.

And drama is often intended to be political. I think of Vaclav Havel's journey from playwright to president of the Czech Republic.

Look at Boris Johnson, look at Trump! Reality TV is about staging, not reality. Politics and drama have so much in common.

So scenarios become the place to offer alternatives. It begins as fringe theatre, and then some scenarios may receive mainstream attention.

Just thinking of your own writing for a moment, with your early poems, with your teenage plays, did you have an ideal audience, or a specific reader in mind?

I wrote plays for my cousins to perform at Christmas, but actually as a teenager, a play I wrote was performed on television in my home town of Waco, Texas. It was a satire on the Kennedy administration. It was put on TV, and I thought it was quite funny, and obviously it was a political play, intended to be of relevance to the world; they were going to rebroadcast it, and then the assassination happened, and that was the end of it.

That shocking, moving event changed my sense of where I was heading. But my first published poem, which I wrote as a Brownie scout, was about meeting a beggar selling pencils on the street in Abilene, Texas. I was in my uniform, and I thought the appropriate thing to do was to give him the Brownie salute: to stop and acknowledge his humanity. I did this, and he saluted me back, and that was an interaction I wrote about. The little girl and the beggar. The point of the poem was to establish a human connection which overcame the way people were treating him on the street. Insofar as my writing has had an implicit purpose, it was something about opening eyes.

Can you talk a bit more about your process when you're writing your own poetry?

With an academic essay, I have an idea; with a poem, I have something that's more like an embodied feeling. It comes in rhythm, it's more like a melody you hear, that is shaped by thought, but isn't a thought, until you start writing it. Then different things happen - including throwing it out! But you just don't know until you do it.

There's a relation to scenarios, too; if you can find the right image for a story you need to tell, knowing that leaders are very busy and don't have time to read academic prose, then those leaders can recreate their own story from that particular image.

A lot of scenarios are written in that very academic prose, which they have to be, so that they stand up to scrutiny. But a powerful, memorable theme is something that leaders can use as a platform for their own thoughts.

You've written elsewhere about "fire alarm time"; the idea that leaders only have the time when they're forced away from the desk by a fire evacuation to consider these thoughts.

This is what happened to me on my first day at Shell! There was a fire drill and I ended up standing next to the head of Group Planning, who otherwise I'd never have encountered. He dared me to write a scenario in ten pages; I took him on, not realising that typical Shell scenarios ran to hundreds of pages at that time.

I still produced the lengthy scenario documents, but I also produced a ten-page public booklet, and then a twenty-page internal version, and then two hundred pages of studies backed it all up. It was the "have your cake and eat it too approach", but you could still get the main story from the ten-page booklet.

The big challenge was working with a team, which is always fun but also difficult. Writing poetry, you're by yourself, but when you're producing scenarios, especially somewhere like Shell, you're really herding cats, and often working with a lot of people who are smart and have strong opinions.

A scenario is very different to, say, a novel. What's it like when you're writing something while being very conscious of the fact that you're going to invite someone else in to populate the stage or bring the scenario to life?

When you're writing a story with a lot of people in a scenario workshop, you listen in a slightly different way to the other participants. I'm listening for the story that wants to emerge.

In [Presence](#), a book I did with Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, and Joseph Jaworski, we explored this idea of emergent phenomena. I'm trying to sense the stories that are emerging from people talking about various bits and pieces of the world, of the future that might come to be.

In these situations, is there a story somewhere “out there” which the collective are reaching for, and you can see it by virtue of where you're training your gaze while they're busy talking - or are you yourself creating the story by how you selectively piece together the mosaic of their individual contributions?

Every observer disturbs the system, especially one who is trying to find images that will hold things together in one piece. I'm mangling it, but I try to hear what is emerging from what they are actually saying. That's where the fun is for me, because it's not my story, not something that I thought up but something I hear and then retell.

It resembles an ancient form, oral storytelling. You listen to people, hear the story and tell it your way, and then someone else, hearing you, will retell it again their way. It's more word-of-mouth; I really think of scenarios, initially at least, as stories that are told by and to groups. They're not primarily intended to be read. They are more like folk forms than literary forms.

Rafael Ramírez, who I work with on the scenarios programme at Oxford, talks a lot about the importance of the scenarios process relative to the product. The “a-ha” moments come when you're figuring out the scenarios, as much as when they're finalised. And he also talks about conversation itself as a form of technology.

I'm also reminded of the work done by scholars of children's play on the kind of open-ended, plotless storytelling very young children do to make sense of the world: [“Whatever has latest caught their fancy is tested on their perpetual stage.”](#)

And [Josh Polchar at the OECD has compared scenarios to instructional fables](#) like the Tortoise and the Hare - stories that needn't come true for us to learn from them, and make better judgments after hearing them.

How do you find a story that people will take away and share further?

I'm kind of a hit-and-run writer, so I don't always get to see how they've taken hold. However, I have seen some images take hold. The “Jazz” scenario which I wrote for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development in the 1990s kept popping up. The word conveys this notion of loosely improvised self-organising systems and people kept using it – or discovering the image for themselves. The World Energy Council even had its own “Modern Jazz” scenario some years later.

I've also seen some of the scenarios that I wrote for Shell come true - and that's a strange feeling, to live long enough that you see some of the things you were writing actually take place.

Yes, with [this year's scenarios for the future of schooling in Norway](#) we had an accelerated version of that experience. We saw that in a highly digitalised future controlled by “the algorithm”, children’s health became a battleground between parents and institutions who each thought they knew what was best for the child.

Our scenario team had projected that forward to the year 2050, but within weeks of publication, COVID-19 meant we saw parents lobbying the city of Oslo on Facebook because their kids were expected to attend school even though the parents were working from home during the pandemic.

You wrote a widely circulated essay about the writing process, “[Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge](#)”, describing the roles we have to take on to successfully create a text.

These roles are like Jungian archetypes. I really tapped into something when I hit on those four words. I recently was planning a writing workshop, where I was going to create some slides for a Powerpoint presentation, and when I was googling for an image to represent “madman”, I found that a number of people had already created visuals to accompany my text! It’s been used not just in writing essays, but in other fields, including music, architecture, and law.

The point of the essay is to make writing easier for people. Often I’m helping people who are already very talented writers in terms of grammar and so on, so the “Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge” just helps to structure the writing process.

Do those roles, which are internal for an individual author, get decomposed and shared out among a group working on scenarios together? Do you have to encourage people to be the creative, generative “madman” so that you can later be the “carpenter” and nail their ideas together?

Very much so. If I get a chance to help shape the workshop, I try to design it so that there’s a lot of free thinking, which can then be shaped into stories. Other people work differently, and prefer to collect stories first, then combine them. But I like what bubbles up when people are just throwing things around, and aren’t trying to shape their ideas into a story yet.

Those archetypes aren’t just figures you can use to help writers get from inspiration to a polished final text. They underlie other aspects of the scenario process too.

If you find an archetype, it doesn’t just apply to one thing. Archetypes underlie what’s happening now, and will emerge in different ways on different projects. When you’re faced with a huge transformation, like this pandemic, we go down to the most basic human level: freeze, fight, or flight. There’s a longer-term perspective, which I’d call community, but to get to that, you have to get rid of the fight-flight-or-freeze response, you have to leap over that.

Yes, there are some [interesting analogies between strategic or organisational panic and the kinds of fear reactions that have to be overcome by say, scuba divers, or air marshals, who have to deal with high-adrenalin situations.](#)

That fight-flight-or-freeze response comes out of fear, and when you get down to it, if you want to speak poetically, the opposite of fear is love. So when you are talking about a crisis like the pandemic, there are responses formed of fear, and responses formed of love.

If you think archetypally, scenarios will share some elements because they're being created by humans who have been thrown back on those archetypal, primal resources by the global crisis we are facing.

That also intrigues me, when we think about crises which may await us in the future, such as climate change, to consider them in terms of fear and love - not just for our present and those around us, but love for successor generations.

That might be the [Indigenous concept of “deep time”](#) and all that will outlast us, or [Andri Snaer Magnason’s meditation on the generational impact of climate change](#). He writes that:

“[I]f you were born in the year 2000 you might become a healthy 90-year-old. At that time you might have a favourite 20-year-old in your life. A grandchild perhaps, someone you have known and loved for 20 years. When will that person be a healthy 90-year-old, maybe talking about you as the greatest influence in their lives?”

The students do the maths and come up with a year like 2160. That is not an abstract calculation. That is the intimate time of someone in high school or at university today. This is time whose meaning they can touch with their bare hands. If we can connect deeply to a date like this, what do we think of scientists warning of catastrophe in 2070? Or 2090? How can that be beyond our imagination, as if part of some sci-fi future?”

For me, this also connects to Joseph Campbell. Prior to my work on scenarios. I'd written a television tie-in book with him, which became a number one bestseller. People responded to that book not because of the mythology, but because of what he'd learned from Jung: he told these stories in an archetypal way, which made them appeal to many people. There have been much better scholars in myth than Campbell, but his ability to tell the story in a way that spoke to people made him the best-known and most influential.

That work on Campbell led, indirectly to you working on scenarios at Shell. How did that come to pass?

After I'd written the Campbell tie-in, people were calling me all the time for help with their books, and I turned them all down except for one person, Joseph Jaworski.

He was writing a book on leadership, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, and though I'd never met him, I decided to say yes to his proposal.

I've always gone by this little voice inside that says "Yes", and if it says "Yes", I never go against it. It's gotten me into a lot of trouble - good trouble. I didn't have time, I was running the honours program at UT, I was a professor, I had a small child, and I wasn't interested in his topic either - he wanted to write a book about the American Leadership Forum.

The little voice said "Yes" when he called, and when that voice says yes, you follow it, but the project doesn't have to work out. I thought I'd give it my best shot, but it's hard to write a book, especially if you're very busy, as he was - he was among the top ten per cent of trial lawyers in the United States. I thought it was unlikely he'd finish, so I had him dictate pages and mail them to me every Friday. I just tossed them in the corner, thinking he'd give up - but he never gave up! After a few months, he said we should meet, so I thought, "I'd better read this stuff!" It was very boring, except when he talked about his own life, so I re-dictated those parts and shanghaied my brother into retyping my dictation.

Out of about a hundred pages he'd sent, there were maybe ten pages that I truly thought were good. I thought, "Now he'll give up," because it's so disheartening to have just ten pages out of a hundred or more. But he didn't give up! It turned out, he had a little voice too, that was driving him to write this book. It changed his life when he completed it, forming the basis of his own publishing company.

A year into our process, he became head of scenarios at Shell - their first and only outsider in that role. He took the job on the condition that he could bring in his own editor, me, even though they questioned why they would need this Texan to help them write the Queen's English!

He wanted to finish his own book after hours, so at five, he would come to my office and I'd have him tell stories which I recorded and then would edit, leading to the bestselling book.

Once I'd done that scenarios round, Shell asked me back for the next one, three years later, and that's how it started!

Alongside this corporate work, there's also a concern with the very biggest issues of life and death, of our global future. The *Presence* book has this ecosystemic and existential perspective, and includes this wonderful anecdote of a man who has a terminal illness and takes the opportunity to let go of many petty things which have been troubling him. On hearing that his condition is in fact curable, he breaks down and cries, because he fears returning to those old, petty ways. And you wrote also on the "bald scenario" of death, arguing that the idea of an afterlife, even if untrue, is valuable because of the perspective it gives us on our temporal existence.

We don't realise the freedom we have to shape the world, often, because we're living by a story of the future which has been handed to us. But the future is always and only a fiction, and we can make a better fiction that can change the present.

This is why I've been so interested in politics. Leaders articulate the story of the future: from Moses' talk of the Promised Land to Martin Luther King saying "I have a dream". It's the job of leaders to tell the story of the future we will live into as a society. We should have better, more thoughtful stories of possible futures, and more of us coming together to devise stories and

scenarios, not just accepting whatever inadequate story a leader is telling us. We should be telling these stories together.

You said we can create a different story, a different future. Is there a particular choice, in life's garden of forking paths, where you really rewrote the story of what you could do next at that point?

No. I feel strongly about planning for the future, for strategy, as groups, but not as individuals. You might plan how to achieve a goal in life as an individual, but I don't think I've set an overall pattern for my life in advance. I think there's more mystery and variety in individual lives than communal lives, and so as an individual I've always just followed whatever called to me. That's so individualistic, you can't organise a company around that principle.

Right. Although I'm really intrigued by the possibility of new kinds of collective organization. There's a [Dutch nursing cooperative called Buurtzorg which has been very successfully operating non-hierarchically](#), in self-organising teams of ten nurses; in some ways the collective approach they take reminds me of scenario conversations.

You've spoken about following a little inner voice in your own life. It almost sounds like the scenario process is the effort to find the communal version of that little inner voice.

Yes, although it moves much more slowly than the individual, who can flit from one thing to another. That's the really high point, as Adam Kahane writes very beautifully in his book, when you're in a room and the group collectively senses the future. The vision of the future emerges and everyone recognises it; those moments are wonderful, and very rare.

It connects to this emotional aspect of scenario work and strategy. We've talked about political leadership as theatre, we know that decisions about what we do next can't just be boiled down to numbers.

I'm reminded of [Jerry Ravetz's comment](#) that after Descartes discarded the humanities in favour of geometry, "Many practitioners who nowadays receive emotional security from the belief that their spreadsheet will tell them precisely what to do with a project or company are living with the consequences of Descartes' desperate grab for certainty."

And James McMicking, presenting scenarios for the UK's Aerospace Technology Institute last year, said: "[We can manage by numbers but we can't lead by them, the narrative matters](#)."

In this data-driven world, how do you see the power of the story?

I think we're seeing some of the negative effects of the data-driven society, of algorithms that drive us into our rabbit holes, and lead us to the polarisation we're now seeing in the States.

It's very difficult to make any headway with people who are living in totally different realities. People won't recognise the validity or bearing of statistics or other evidence because that

information comes from another bubble. We have to make a conscious effort to learn other stories of reality.

We have theorised numbers very thoroughly, and the high priests of our civilisation are the economists and technologists. We don't have an equivalent theory of stories, and we're only just beginning to recognise the effect of these algorithms which drive us into ourselves, into those furrows, in a pernicious way.

We don't yet have a sense of how new stories could rescue us, but we're hungry for them, because otherwise there wouldn't be these really insane conspiracy theories gaining credence all over the world.

We need think tanks about stories, not just economics and geopolitics. The closest we have to that right now is the scenarios programme at Oxford. You have the weight and prestige of the institution, and a commitment to thinking through this process methodically and putting it to use in the real world.

I would be keen to see this approach grow into a fully fledged think tank, and the development of those academic theories which, even if they never gain a wide readership, would still trickle down and enrich decisionmaking and the stories we tell ourselves, in communities, in organisations, more generally.

Adam Kahane's work on reconciliation also speaks to this. In the age of QAnon, conspiracy theories, fake news, will we need something like a truth and reconciliation process where communities polarised by algorithm will be able to come together?

I chair the board of a nonprofit called "Public Agenda, which researches the "hidden common ground" between these parties which seem to be at odds.

We put the results of our research on the front page of our partner newspaper, but it is yet to make a dent in the political conversation; again, I think it's in part a question of having the right theoretical underpinnings to give the *story* part of this work the same rigour and method that the polling data benefit from. It comes across as an opinion poll, whereas what we're trying to find is a new basis for political conversation. Even if we find the hidden common ground, people will still face the choice of one or the other political candidate who usually embody two extremes rather than any common ground.

Policies may address that common ground, but people don't vote on the policies. They vote on the drama, wanting to see what a Boris Johnson or a Donald Trump does next. People can't take their eyes away.

But perhaps, even if that work hasn't found purchase yet, it's a step in the right direction. Those three words, "hidden common ground", are as evocative as "jazz" was for those scenario planners. It implies a long termism; it implies a field in which new seeds can be sown; it implies a perspective that has nothing to do with the blunt either-or of which elderly white man is in the White House next.

I think we can bring this round to the question of libraries which we were talking about earlier. You headed up the LBJ Presidential Library, and [libraries are also very close to my heart](#), and in a strange way I think the library is still this hidden common ground.

It's a space where the user isn't instructed or dictated to, where they explore the shelves, choose a book for themselves, make meaning for themselves. Unlike teachers, preachers, doctors, lawyers, the relationship between the librarian and the members of the community they serve is very different.

Everything you said in your piece "[Research Libraries in the Digital Age](#)" in 2009 still seems relevant in 2020, which is either a marvellous tribute to your insights, or a sign that the sector has been evolving very slowly. Back then, you cited Auden, "We must love one another or die", calling for solidarity as institutions face turbulent and potentially tough times.

What's your take on libraries now, in 2020?

They're more important than ever. They're a space that has not been colonised by an ideology, or any particular mission besides freely offering everyone this space to explore. In the US, it serves as a polling place, a place where people get vaccines; anything and everything can happen in a library. Even if they are now more about the computer than the book, which is not what I feel comfortable with, given my generation, I can see that it's still a portal into the same things which books gave us.

They're the humanistic form of a church that's always open, the way that medieval churches used to be. A place of shelter, a place where your soul can be nourished. If there's one in every community, it can serve everyone as a haven.

I often went to the New York Public Library, and I'd see homeless people go there, and lay their heads down to sleep in these beautiful reading rooms, next to a scholar working away, and no one would bother them. That was very moving to me.

The successor to that in 2020 is something like the amazing [Rachael Rivera in Auckland Libraries devising services tailored to the needs of her homeless library users](#). Her work led to this amazing debate in New Zealand, and international recognition via the US Library Journal's Movers and Shakers award.

Libraries are underappreciated, and perhaps it's good that they fly under the radar of a political system that doesn't know what they were doing.

Perhaps that's the beginning of tilling the hidden common ground, and helping people develop the capacity to sow their own future seeds in that soil.