

WOLFGANG MIEDER

A PAREMIOLOGIST'S DREAM COME TRUE:  
"THE WOLFGANG MIEDER INTERNATIONAL PROVERB  
LIBRARY" AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

**Abstract:** This is a report describing the events that resulted in the establishment of "The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library" in May of 2019 at the University of Vermont. It is an account of Prof. Mieder's donation of about 9000 proverb collections and studies about proverbs to his university. They are now housed in the historical Billings Library on campus. As a research center it welcomes scholars and students from anywhere to pursue their paremiographical and paremiological research projects. The report also includes a number of press releases that reported on this exciting matter. Several pictures of the beautiful bookcases appear at the end of these accounts.

**Keywords:** Billings Library, international, Wolfgang Mieder, paremiography, paremiology, research center, Thomas Sullivan, University of Vermont.

Miracles do happen – at least at the University of Vermont! It all started with Prof. Wolfgang Mieder turning 75 on February 17, 2019. A surprise birthday reception sponsored by UVM's President Thomas Sullivan and his wife Leslie and attended by close to two hundred colleagues, students, and friends took place on February 20th. At the end of several laudatory remarks Prof. Mieder was presented with the celebratory volume *Living by the Golden Rule. Mentor – Scholar – World Citizen. A Festschrift for Wolfgang Mieder's 75th Birthday* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), edited by his colleague Prof. Dennis Mahoney and his former student Dr. Andreas Nolte. This was followed by a champagne dinner for some special guests, with Prof. Mieder and his wife Barbara Mieder being seated next to the Sullivans. One word led to another, and quite naturally the discussion turned to what one day might happen to Prof. Mieder's large proverb library housed in his country home at Willison, Vermont, and in the International Proverb Archives in the Waterman Building at the university. President

Sullivan and his wife had seen the almost 9000 books on previous occasions, and they most certainly understood the concerns of the Mieders about the future of this unique personal library of the world's paremiographical and paremiological scholarship. As the unforgettable birthday event came to an end, President Sullivan mentioned in parting that he had an idea that we should discuss and that I should be in touch with him. And the rest is history, as the saying goes.

It so happened that the recently restored Billings Library that served as the university library between 1885 and 1961 and that was designed by the famous American architect Henry Hobson Richardson was in need of a special collection of books to fill twelve beautiful bookcases with glass doors and interior lighting. President Sullivan contacted Dean of Libraries Mara Saule and Head of Special Collections Jeffrey Marshall and together it was decided that Prof. Mieder's proverb books should find their permanent home in them. Here is Prof. Mieder's overjoyed response of March 19, 2019:

Thank you for your kindness and generosity. I am still in disbelief that this is all of a sudden working out. It is truly unbelievable, and let me assure you that Barbara, I, and hundreds of proverb scholars throughout the world are so relieved, thankful, and happy about this development. It really is like a miracle!

Yes, we can plan on working on the measurements [of all the books] next week. I am afraid that we shall need a few more bookcases when I sit here at home and look at my collection. But as you indicated, there is room for another bookcase in each cove, and I am sure we can find the money for what is needed.

I definitely think that Scott [Miller] and I as well as you [Jeffrey Marshall], if you wish, should look at the collection again and do some official measuring next week. It will all work out, and I thank you [Jeffrey], Mara, and Tom from the bottom of my heart. Do I really deserve this wonderful treatment and recognition? Amazing!

Wolfgang

And here is yet another of several such short notes from March 16, 2019, in which Prof. Mieder expressed his appreciation and

thankfulness for having found a space at UVM for him to donate his proverb book collection:

What absolutely fantastic friends I have!!! You all - of course Tom and Leslie - and many, many more. How is it all possible!?

This is a DREAM come true! Let me assure you that this has been on Barbara's and my mind for many years. And now my beloved UVM is doing this for me. Truly incredible!

We shall forever be thankful, and this proves once and for all that it was the right decision to dedicate our lives to the University of Vermont. We also want to stress again that we can help pay for the additional shelves.

Thank you for now for everything you have done to make this possible,

Wolfgang and Barbara

Six large bookcases were added to the six that were already placed into the North Lounge of the Billings Library. Each bookcase is divided into three sections with glass shelves measuring 33 inches each (4 shelves x 99 inches = 396 inches per bookcase x 12 cases = 4752 inches). Each bookcase has wooden doors at the bottom for another shelf for oversize books (1 shelf x 99 inches = 99 inches per bookcase x 12 cases = 1188 inches). The total of 5940 inches or 495 feet or 165 yards of shelf space was the perfect fit for the large collection. It is arranged alphabetically by languages (Afghan, African, Arabic, Armenian, Canadian, Chinese, Czech, Danish, etc.), but there are also large sections on dictionaries of quotations, international collections, and slang as well as an invaluable comprehensive section of scholarly studies about proverbs. The cumbersome move took place on May 6 and 7, 2019, giving Prof. Mieder the joy of writing to Thomas Sullivan, Mara Saule, and Jeffrey Marshall on May 8:

It took four of us [Scott Miller from the library, two professional movers, and Prof. Mieder] fifteen hours to move my books to Billings. All 12 cabinets are filled, and it all looks absolutely beautiful! Thank you for making all of this possible. It is a great honor for me. I still can't believe it!

Take care, Wolfgang

Once the “book” dust settled, it gave Prof. Mieder much pleasure and joy to inform the international community of proverb scholars and students about “The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library” that is meant to serve as a research center for visitors from around the world. Numerous paremiologists from Canada, China, Germany, Hungary, Kenya, Mongolia, Russia, and of course the United States had done research here before, and it is hoped that many others will come in the future to benefit from this rich research base. Here is just one letter of June 1, 2019, in which Prof. Mieder informed his many colleagues and friends about the much-appreciated research center at the University of Vermont:

Dear friends,

Fantastic news! My entire International Proverb Library with thousands of proverb collections and proverb studies has now been moved to one of the most beautiful buildings of the University of Vermont. It is the Billings Library, a completely restored building that is over one hundred years old and on the green of the campus. The books are in twelve special bookcases under glass. I still can't believe that my beloved University of Vermont did this for me. As you all know, this is a truly unique collection of thousands of phraseological/paremiological books from around the world in many languages. Another about 10.000 copies of scholarly publications from journals, dissertations, etc. are also part of my holdings, making all of this a valuable center for international proverb studies.

Come and have a look, but in the meantime, dear Barbara has taken a few pictures yesterday that I am attaching here for you. We are both so very thankful and happy that our worries about what will happen to my library are now over. And I didn't even have to convince the university to take all of this. It just happened with the President of the university together with the Dean of Libraries and the Head of Special Collections deciding that it would happen. I am truly blessed with dear friends and what an honor for me to donate fifty years of collecting to my university.

Take a look at the pictures, please, and sense my joy, even though I now need to go to the library in order to use my treasured books!

Wolfgang and Barbara (who is thrilled to know that my library is at a beautiful place)

Speaking of pictures, Sally McCay, the university photographer, has taken a series of photographs of “The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library” that are attached at the end of this report. Since this scholarly event drew plenty of attention by the media, five reports and interviews that reached across the country and beyond are also reprinted as an impressive documentation of this unexpected and thus incredible happening.

As a final comment, it should be noted that this report is not meant that Prof. Wolfgang Mieder is looking for additional publicity or praise. It is simply felt that the fact that a permanent home could be found for his proverb book collection that has now officially been assessed at the value of \$275,315 is noteworthy for future generations of proverb scholars. It carries with it the hope that they will come to the University of Vermont in beautiful Burlington to make good use of these invaluable paremiological treasures.

The following article by Emma Pettit appeared on July 15, 2019, together with a picture of Wolfgang Mieder in “his” library in the electronic version of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

***A Scholar of Proverbs Built a Vast Collection of Books. Then Opportunity Knocked.***

Enna Pettit

Good artists copy; great artists steal. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin knew as much, because when he wrote his famous *Poor Richard's Almanack*, he did not cite sources for the proverbs that peppered its pages.

To many, quippy sayings like, “Time is money,” are synonymous with the Founding Father. People think Franklin thought them up. But Wolfgang Mieder, one of the world’s leading proverb scholars, knows better.

Mieder and a colleague [Damien Villers] traced the saying to a short, anonymous text published in a London-based newspaper,

*Free Thinker*, in 1719. In fact, many of the sayings commonly attributed to Franklin actually come from English proverb collections, said Mieder, a professor of German and Folklore at the University of Vermont.

Tracking down the origins of proverbs is “detective work,” he says. “You kind of feel like you’re discovering things.” He has researched and written about cultural wisdoms for nearly five decades and, in the process, amassed a one-of-a-kind scholarly library. It includes about 9,000 books (including 252 that Mieder has written, co-authored, or edited) and 6,500 photocopied articles and dissertations, all about proverbs. He doubts anything like it exists, anywhere.

Until recently, the tomes were stacked high in his home and campus offices. Now, the Burlington university has assembled Mieder’s collection on campus, in the brand-new Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library.

How the library came together was quite fortuitous, says Mara Saule, the recently retired director of libraries at the university. Mieder, who is 75, needed a place to store his collection. A wing of the newly renovated Billings Library needed books to fill its shelves. Moving the collection there would kill two birds with one stone.

Or perhaps, said Saule, “Good things come to those who wait.”

*“As Contradictory as Life”?*

It was in the 1960s, as a Ph.D. student at Michigan State University, that Mieder first fell in love with the language of proverbs. “I noticed that these bits of wisdom that are part of literature clearly play a significant role as far as rhetoric is concerned, or philosophical ethical messages, but also humor and parody,” he said.

He learned that many of the proverbs people treasure are traceable to Greek and Roman antiquity (“Time flies.”) or to religious texts (“Pride comes before the fall.”) or to an era in which Latin was the lingua franca (“Not everything that glitters is gold.”). Then there are proverbs that are indigenous to specific cultures. “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” and “Go big or go home” are quintessentially American, Mieder said.

Importantly, proverbs are not absolute truth, Mieder said, since the wisdoms they impart often don't align. Yes, "absence makes the heart grow fonder." But also, if you're "out of sight," you're "out of mind."

"Proverbs are as contradictory as life," he says.

And they are anything but sacrosanct. Proverbs can be racist, sexist, and ugly. A saying that's fallen out of fashion, thankfully, is "A woman's tongue is like a lamb's tail," meaning it never stops moving, Mieder said. Proverbs are essentially metaphors and therefore can be harnessed as powerful political rhetoric, Mieder said. Adolf Hitler, with his anti-Semitic proverbs, was a master of that.

Sometimes, a proverb that seems innocuous is not. The phrase "To call a spade a spade" is an old Greek expression that means, essentially, to call something by its name, Mieder said. But in American slang, a "spade" can be a derogatory term for an African-American, and therefore the proverb can take on a racist meaning. Knowing that, it's best to avoid using it, Mieder wrote in one of his books, *Call a Spade a Spade: From Classical Phrase to Racial Slur*.

To Mieder, each proverb is a window through which to view history, philosophy, ethics, and culture. "You could say to me, 'Oh, c'mon, Wolfgang. You spent almost a year doing this,'" Mieder said, referring to the spade book. "But it was a journey. Look at where it took me – to Greek antiquity all the way to card games."

Mieder tells his students his work is like being King Arthur at the Round Table. He's got a knowledge base on which to rely. But he has the freedom to take his horse – his scholarship – wherever he pleases. "Proverbs, to me, are so alive," he said, "and my pleasure in life has been that [in] my scholarship, I can go in any direction I want."

#### *A Proper Reading Room*

Over his career, Mieder's compass seemed to point everywhere.

He has written about Bob Dylan, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. He has written about Barack Obama, whose "linguistic prowess" is "mind-boggling."

He would write about President Trump, but he can't, he says. "The man doesn't use metaphor."

This winding journey also led Mieder to books. Heaps and heaps of books. Friends sent them from Estonia or Latvia. Mieder tracked them down in second-hand stores, spending \$10 on some and \$300 on others. (His favorite is Archer Taylor's classic 1931 study *The Proverb*. At a shop called Serendipity, he stumbled across the original, dust jacket intact.) He estimates that the whole collection could be worth a quarter of a million dollars, but he's giving it to the university, free. "A penny saved is a penny earned" is boring advice, anyhow.

He and his wife, Barbara, who taught high school for 40 years, had to build an addition onto their country home to store all his books. He'd joke to his students that he'd occasionally have to "smuggle" a new book into his own house. Although, Mieder notes, none of his collecting would have happened without his wife's "interest, care, and love."

Over the past decade, as the Mieders grew older, they periodically wondered what was going to happen to the collection. Mieder put out feelers, but he's a realist. Libraries have no space, and books are no longer the coin of the realm. Maybe all good things really do come to an end.

But hope springs eternal.

At his 75th birthday party, Mieder spoke with Tom Sullivan, then the president of the university, about his dilemma. Sullivan thought a newly renovated library on the campus needed some books to make it feel like a proper reading room. "All of a sudden it clicked," Mieder said.

Mieder got to work, measuring the bookshelves the university had ordered. "Six of those babies weren't going to do the trick," he said, so the university ordered more. A moving company took 15 hours to pack up and move all the books. Now, at home, his office echoes a little, he said.

Mieder's lifelong collection is displayed behind glass in a wing of the Billings Library, which has a "Hogwarts" feel to it, with a long wooden hallway and high ceilings, said Jeffrey D. Marshall, director of special collections.

It's wonderful, Mieder said. Already, proverb scholars from China, Kenya, Mongolia, and South Africa, among other countries, have visited. "There are crazy people like myself, a few in



every country in the world, who are obsessed,” Mieder said. “In a positive way, I hope.”

Mieder says he was trained in an era when professors built their own libraries. Now that practice is dying out. But he isn't bitter about it. Different strokes for different folks. He knows his life circumstance allowed him to do it. He and Barbara both worked and have two Labradors, but no children. He isn't, for example, a young assistant professor with two kids and mounting bills who lives in a small apartment.

“In a way, I'm a dinosaur,” Mieder said. “But I'm so happy that my dinosaur has found a home.”

Link: [https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Scholar-of-Proverbs-Built-a-246681?cid=wcontentlist\\_hp\\_latest](https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Scholar-of-Proverbs-Built-a-246681?cid=wcontentlist_hp_latest)

On August 3, 2019, Jeff Wakefield of the publicity office of the University of Vermont posted the following text, once again with a picture of Wolfgang Mieder in the proverb library, on the *UVM Today* electronic website:

***In Proverbial Happy Ending, Scholar's Massive Book Collection Finds a New Home***

Jeff Wakefield

Of all people, Wolfgang Mieder would seem to deserve the peace of mind that comes from hard work and goals accomplished.

Over his nearly half century at UVM, the gregarious German professor has written or edited well over 200 books and published over 500 articles on proverbs, his academic specialty. For decades he's produced a massive annual of proverb criticism called *Proverbium*, published at UVM. He's given more than 500 talks in two dozen countries on his special topic. And he's been the subject of no less than six festschriften, collections of essays written by scholars commemorating a fellow expert.

But for a good decade, Mieder has been troubled.

The source of his worry? A bulging addition to his home, the largest room in the house, that held – in floor-to-ceiling shelves covering all four walls – the massive array of proverb collections and proverb studies he had accumulated over five decades of acquisition.

It wasn't the strain on the domestic infrastructure caused by his habit of adding 100 new books a year that was making him anxious; it was what would happen to all those volumes in the future. Mieder turned 75 this year.

His wife Barbara, surveying the stuffed shelves, would ask, "Wolfgang, you're getting to an age; what am I to do if something happens to you?" Mieder recalls.

"It was such a unique library, I didn't want it to be dispersed," Mieder says. "That was my big worry – seeing the books end up at some book sale selling for a dollar apiece."

That would be a significant loss, and not just for sentimental reasons.

In the last few years, hordes of proverb scholars from the U.S., Kenya, China, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, Russia, Spain and beyond have trooped to Mieder's home in Williston to access his proverb collections in 20-plus languages and dip into proverb studies with titles like *The Adages of Erasmus* and "*Right Makes Might*": *Proverbs and the American Worldview*, Mieder's latest. "There really is no other collection like it in the world," Mieder says.

The logical way to preserve such a treasure would be to transfer it to the special collections department of a university. But time and again, at universities abroad and in the U.S., including UVM, Mieder heard the same story – his collection was too much of a good thing.

"Nobody wants collections," he says. "There isn't the space."

The size was a deal-breaker, confirms Jeff Marshall, Special Collections director at UVM. "There simply wasn't room for it."

#### *Friends in high places*

The topic of what would happen to his collection was never far from Mieder's mind, and he wasn't above giving voice to his worries with his friends, some of whom – like Leslie and Tom Sullivan, UVM's former president – were not only sympathetic, but in a position to help.

At Mieder's 75th birthday party, a gala event with a special dinner held in the Alumni House's Pavilion in February, the German professor was seated next to the Sullivans.

“He’s always sharing with me what his new books are, and I’ve seen his library,” Sullivan said. “He said, as he’s said before, ‘I’m not quite sure what I’m going to do with my books.’”

By coincidence, Sullivan had just returned from a visit to the Billings Library, where North Lounge, a majestic room once stuffed with books when Billings was UVM’s only library, was now eerily book-free while Special Collections staff puzzled over the space. It lacked the security to house any of the department’s collections. What could go there instead?

“Wolfgang, I have an idea; I’ll get back to you,” Sullivan said to his dinner companion.

*Solution looking for a problem*

Sullivan promptly paid a visit to then dean of libraries Mara Saule and suggested Mieder’s collection would be a perfect fit for North Lounge. She warmed to the idea, likening Mieder’s books and North Lounge to two puzzle pieces that fit together perfectly.

Marshall – who was close to moving a large collection of surplus books to the space for ornamental purposes only – was also bullish. The North Lounge space was “a solution looking for a problem,” he says, and one had magically appeared.

“Once it clicked, everyone was like, this is perfect,” says Selene Colburn, UVM Libraries’ communications director

Sullivan, whose office contributed six sets of three bookshelves to the project, delivered the news to Mieder, who was delighted. About two months later, his collection of about 8,000 [almost 9,000] volumes – 6,000 from Mieder’s home and another 2,000 in a proverb archives down the hall from his office in Waterman Building – had taken up residence in Billings, moved in two giant truckloads and placed on the shelves in careful order by Mieder and three library staff.

The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library, the only one of its kind, officially opened in the middle of May.

For Mieder, the worry is gone. “It’s a dream come true, and I couldn’t be more grateful to UVM,” he said. “My American colleagues all say this is just incredible that the university has done this.”

Marshall is happy, too. “It looks great. And it’s a meaningful collection that will be useful to scholars.”

And there are ancillary benefits. Those proverb scholars from around the world whom Mieder hosted at his home for days on end? “Now they can sit at the library all day, and I’ll take them out to dinner.”

Link: <https://www.uvm.edu/uvmnews/news/proverbial-happy-ending-scholars-massive-book-collection-finds-new-home>

A third press release, again with a great picture of the library by Lisa Rathke from the Associated Press appeared in many newspapers throughout the country and beyond on September 16, 2019:

***Collection of Premier Proverb Scholar Opens at UVM***

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) – From “Strike while the iron is hot” to “Been there, done that,” proverbs have been developed around the world for centuries, spread by word of mouth, writings, and nowadays social media.

University of Vermont professor Wolfgang Mieder, thought to be the world’s premier paremiologist, has been studying the concise statements for 50 years, amassing thousands of books and writings that are now housed in a new unique library named after him at the school.

“In my wildest dreams I never thought this would happen,” said Mieder, 75, a university distinguished professor of German and folklore, who’s thankful to find a home for his unique collection.

The extensive library of about 9,000 volumes ranges from collections of proverbs including German, Chinese, Turkish and Hungarian to thousands of books and dissertations on what proverbs are, their origins and function. It includes, of course, Mieder’s own writings.

He is “one of the greatest proverb scholars of all times and the greatest of our generation,” said Dan Ben-Amos, a professor of folklore at the University of Pennsylvania, in an email.

The energetic 75-year-old has written 246 books and 569 articles on proverbs, edited a scholarly annual called “Proverbium” and given 405 talks on his favorite topic in 21 countries, according to UVM.

“Bolstered by his incredible library, his studies are about how movers and shakers of society make a difference, and shape movements, with their speech,” said Simon Bronner, a distinguished

professor emeritus of American studies and folklore at Pennsylvania State University, who is now a dean and professor at the University of Wisconsin.

Mieder's working definition of a proverb is: a concise statement of an apparent truth which has currency. They can be religious or secular. Among his favorites: "Different strokes for different folks," which people may remember from a television show or song.

"I like that proverb because for once it's not prescriptive. It doesn't tell you what to do," he said. "It tells you to be reasonable, to realize that people have different priorities, different thoughts, different ideas."

He also particularly likes one that Martin Luther King Jr. used a lot, "Making a way out of no way."

Mieder said his wife had become concerned about what would happen to the books if something happened to him. The couple had already added onto their home a few times to accommodate a good portion of his collection.

Over the years he's had scholars visit from around the globe and taken them to his home to see the collection.

Mieder talked with UVM's library officials but the school had no room for the books. That was until recently.

In 2018, the school had just renovated a building that it considers to be its most architecturally important – the Billings Library – which over the years was no longer serving as a library. But a large lounge that returned to its original function as a reading and study room – with long tables – was lacking something on the rich wood-grained walls.

"A room without books is like a body without soul," as the proverb goes.

Mieder's collection soon found a home. The library opened in May.

Other professors haven't been so lucky, said Mieder, who said he knows of retirees who have had to give away their books or give them to secondhand book dealers, dispersing their collections.

"I think it speaks very, very highly of UVM that all of this happened," he said. "And seemingly everybody is happy about it. I certainly am. And I'm extremely thankful."

Link: <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2019/sep/16/collection-of-premier-proverb-scholar-opens-at-uvm/>

This fourth website text is based on an interview with Mitch Wertlieb of the Vermont Public Radio station on November 22, 2019:

***Professor's Collection of 9,000 Books of Proverbs Has New Home at UVM Library***

Mitch Wertlieb

Professor Wolfgang Mieder has taught at UVM for more than 40 years. The school's Billings Library is now home to Mieder's private collection of thousands of books of proverbs.

Wolfgang Mieder, a professor of German and folklore at the University of Vermont, has a private collection of 9,000 books of proverbs from all over the world. Amassed over decades, his collection stretches more than the length of two football fields. It's now housed at UVM's Billings Library, but before that? He was in danger of losing the vast majority because he was running out of space in his Williston home.

Mieder told VPR he and his wife had even built shelving onto their home to accommodate the large book collection.

"Books were lying on top of each other and behind each other," he said, "so this idea of the University of Vermont establishing the International Proverb Library as a research center is so unique – not because of me – but it is so unique that it went around the scholarly world."

But what if that space hadn't been available at Billings? Mieder said he had spoken with other libraries, but noted there really wasn't enough space for all those books. He said, worst case, his collection would have been broken up and "destroyed" over time.

"It would have been a shame, I think, because this is a collection that is truly unique," Mieder said. "I don't care what library you go to in the world, including the Library of Congress – you're not going to find this."

Wolfgang Mieder has acquired books of proverbs in more than 20 different languages, including Russian, Ukrainian, Chinese and Spanish among them, as well as some very old English proverbs, like this collection dated back to 1768.

Mieder is one of the world's leading proverb scholars, and he publishes an annual critique through UVM on the subject called *Proverbium*.

What is a proverb?

"A good working definition would be that a proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth which has currency," Mieder explained. "And the word apparent is important because not every proverb is necessarily always true. After all, we have these contradictory proverbs, like "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "out of sight, out of mind."

"But it is important proverbs are short – the average length is about seven words – and it has to gain some currency among people."

Different cultures, similar proverbs

"Many proverbs are dealing with such basic human matters, like love and understanding and friendship – of course, also hate – compassion," Mieder said. "So there's no reason why proverbs that are quite similar, if not identical, shouldn't be created in different cultures."

"What becomes interesting is that every culture has of course its indigenous, its own proverbs," he continued, "and those are the ones that give translators a tremendously difficult time. Because from culture to culture, proverbs might want to say the same thing but they use different metaphors."

As an example, Mieder noted the popular English proverb "the early bird catches the worm" – but a similar-meaning proverb in German translates to "the morning hour has gold in its mouth."

Mieder said those different metaphors make translating on the fly tricky. That's why, Mieder said, United Nations translators were known to keep Russian proverbs nearby to quickly consult their meaning when translating Nikita Khrushchev.

In general, Mieder said he would like more focus in today's world on ways people are similar. "The more you study them," Mieder said of proverbs, "the more you realize that we human beings are really much more alike than different."

Picking some favorites:

Mieder said an American proverb he particularly likes is "different strokes for different folks," which he traces back to the 1940s. "That is a proverb that almost had to have grown on

American soil,” Mieder said. “You need a democratic viewpoint to come up with ‘different strokes for different folks.’”

Two other proverbs he said he shares with students are “making a way out of no way,” and also what’s known as the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

“I tell the students, ‘You know, it might sound primitive but if you could attempt to live your life maybe by those three little tidbits, it might not be a bad idea,’” he said.

Link: <https://www.vpr.org/post/professors-collection-9000-books-proverbs-has-new-home-uvm-library>

Finally, this fifth report, an expanded version (repeating the first few paragraphs) of Jeff Wakefield’s earlier report above, appeared in February 2020 in *Inquiry*, a campus publication featuring major accomplishments at the University of Vermont. A shorter version also appeared with a picture in *The University of Vermont Quarterly* (Fall 2019), p. 10:

### ***King of Proverbs***

#### ***Billings Library is a fitting home for the research collection and scholarly legacy of Wolfgang Mieder***

Jeffrey Wakefield

Of all people, Wolfgang Mieder would seem to deserve the peace of mind that comes from hard work and goals accomplished.

Over his nearly half century at UVM, the gregarious German professor has written or edited well over two hundred books and published more than five hundred articles on proverbs, his academic specialty. For decades, he’s produced *Proverbium*, a massive annual of proverb criticism. He’s given hundreds of talks in two dozen countries and been honored with no fewer than six *fest-schriften*, collections of essays written by scholars commemorating a fellow expert.

But for a good decade, Mieder has been troubled.

The source of his worry? A bulging addition to his home, the largest room in the house, that held – in floor-to-ceiling shelves covering all four walls – the massive array of proverb collections and proverb studies he had accumulated across five decades.

It wasn’t the strain on the domestic infrastructure caused by his habit of adding one hundred new books a year that was making



him anxious; it was what would happen to all those volumes in the future. Mieder turned seventy-five this year.

"It was such a unique library, I didn't want it to be dispersed," Mieder says. "That was my big worry – seeing the books end up at some book sale selling for a dollar apiece."

That would be a significant loss, and not just for sentimental reasons. In the last few years, hordes of proverb scholars from around the world have trooped to Mieder's home in Williston to access his proverb collections in twenty-plus languages and dip into proverb studies with titles like *The Adages of Erasmus* and "*Right Makes Might*": *Proverbs and the American Worldview*, Mieder's latest.

The logical way to preserve such a treasure would be to transfer it to the special collections department of a university. But time and again, at universities abroad and in the United States, including UVM, Mieder heard the same story—his collection was too much of a good thing.

No one had the space.

If a bulging book collection in serious need of a home is the end phase of a celebrated scholarly career, how did things begin?

After earning a PhD from Michigan State University in German literature in 1970, Mieder thought he'd be content to live the life of a traditional German professor. "I love teaching German and always have," he says. But after joining UVM's German and Russian Department the next year, he began to expand his horizon.

"I thought my career could be broader and more international if I used my language skills" – he speaks three languages fluently and can get by in another half dozen – and brought them to bear on what was becoming a scholarly specialty, proverbs, the subject of his PhD dissertation and of several papers he'd published in German.

His CV shows that Mieder leapt into the life of proverb scholarship with a vengeance. By his mid-twenties, he had already published several books, in English as well as German, and numerous articles on his specialty.

It helped that Mieder found proverbs – which he defines as distilled generalizations and observations of human behavior and experiences expressed so concisely they are easily repeated – to be endlessly fascinating.

For starters, they span the history of human civilization, he will tell you. The first recorded proverbs – including *Big fish eat little fish* and *One hand washes the other* – were etched in cuneiform on Sumerian tablets about 2,500 B.C.

Antiquity was a golden age for proverbs, giving rise to many gems still in use today, from *Times flies* to *Many hands make light work*.

“Then there are the ones that all of us like so very much that got their start in medieval Latin were translated to other languages,” Mieder says, like *Strike while the iron is hot* or *When the cat's away, the mice will play*.

Humans have been spouting proverbs since time immemorial for several reasons, Mieder says. Importantly, they lend an air of authority. “It isn’t just the speaker saying something,” he says, “When you say, *Two wrongs don’t make a right*, you have the weight of history and tradition behind you. It gives your words extra force.”

One thing proverbs don’t represent, Mieder says, is absolute truth. The proof? They often contradict one another.

The most famous pair of contradictory proverbs, Mieder says, is *Out of sight, out of mind* and *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*.

“We pick the proverb that fits a particular case,” he says. “If a relationship of a young daughter or young son has broken up, what should the mother or father say to console the youngster? You might say, Remember, *Out of sight, out of mind*, or you could say, *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*. It all depends what message you want to send.”

One of Mieder’s favorite areas of inquiry is what he calls the “anti-proverb,” a term he coined that has become so useful to proverb scholars, it now merits its own Wikipedia entry. “Proverbs can be played with,” he explains, so their meaning is subverted or changed entirely. Advertising copywriters have long made great use of this technique, often for comic effect.

But there are more serious uses of anti-proverbs, too. “We all know the proverb, *Nobody is perfect*; we’ve said it a thousand times,” Mieder says.

“But if you just take the word nobody and split it, you all of a sudden have *No body is perfect*. And that is, of course, a

completely different meaning,” one that has been adopted by feminists, among others.

Contemporary proverb scholarship includes examining the increasing influence of American proverbs spinning out worldwide on the wings of pop culture and modern media. Mieder counts *There's no such thing as a free lunch* and *Garbage in, garbage out* as distinctly American proverbial wisdom. Mieder finds that development “exciting,” not because he is a cultural imperialist, “but because you can now study the dissemination of proverbs.”

While research, including his own, shows that young people use fewer proverbs than earlier generations, Mieder is skeptical of those results. It's true that “they don't use the proverbs that the older generation did. But the modern generation has also its own proverbs.”

He has that fact on good authority. In the proverb course he's taught to UVM undergraduates across the past decade, Mieder challenges his students to identify new proverbs. Some of his favorites gathered over the years? *There's an app for everything*. *Sun's out, guns out*. And the ski slope inspired *Go big or go home*.

Of course, to do all of that scholarship – across time and cultures – requires access to scholarly materials, especially for a scholar as exacting as Mieder.

“If you really want to become an expert in something, you've got to stick with the program,” he says, referring to the books and articles he amassed year after year. “If I write an article, and I know that there's this little note in a book somewhere in distant Australia, then I need to get it before I write because it might be relevant.”

All that care resulted in a huge oeuvre of first-rate work – and a household library groaning with books and articles.

The topic of what would happen to his collection, in light of the polite rejections he'd received from libraries around the world, was never far from Mieder's mind. And he wasn't above giving voice to his worries with his friends, some of whom – like Leslie and Tom Sullivan, UVM's former president – were not only sympathetic, but in a position to help.

After hearing Mieder's tale of woe at dinner one day, Sullivan paid a visit to then library dean Mara Saule and Special Collections director Jeff Marshall. Saule and Marshall, Sullivan knew, had a challenge of their own – how to best to stock shelves in the recently re-opened Billings Library North Lounge space.

Sullivan sensed a fit. Mieder's books could be a top-drawer working collection, a scholarly complement to hallowed Billings, but wouldn't require the same level of security and climate control of volumes in the permanent collection.

Within a week, his collection of eight [about nine] thousand volumes – six thousand from Mieder's home and another two thousand in a proverb archives housed near his office in Waterman Building – had taken up residence in Billings, moved in two giant truckloads and fastidiously placed on the shelves in careful order by Mieder and three library staff.

The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library, the only one remotely like it in the world, officially opened in May 2019.

For Mieder, the worry is gone. "It's a dream come true, and I couldn't be more grateful," he says.

It couldn't have happened to a nicer, or a finer, scholar, say his peers.

"He is the king, the world's leading proverbs scholar," says Dan Ben-Amos, professor of Folklore, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and a top proverb scholar in his own right.

Simon Bonner, professor emeritus of American Studies and Folklore at the Pennsylvania State University and currently dean of the College of General Studies at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, goes further. He calls Mieder's proverb library "a monument to one of history's great scholars. It's not just a collection of proverb books. I hope that, years from now, it will inspire us to ask about Wolfgang Mieder and what kind of person he was, what kind of model he is for all scholars."

***Postscript:***

On July 31, 2019, UVM's registrar Veronika Carter, a former undergraduate and graduate student of Prof. Mieder, sent him a congratulatory note on "The Wolfgang Mieder International Library" simply stating that "I did not realize I wrote this 13 years ago! I am thrilled that President Sullivan made it happen. Congratulations!" And here is her attached letter to then President Daniel Fogel of November 10, 2006:

President Fogel,

I read with interest your essay about the future of the University of Vermont. I have a suggestion to add to your vision for the future of the University. I believe that UVM would benefit from having a Proverb Collection in the redesigned Special Collections section of the Billings Library. In addition to being a staff member of the Registrar's Office, I am also pursuing a German Master's Degree at UVM and have had the pleasure of taking a German Folklore class with Professor Wolfgang Mieder. I had completed a German minor in my undergraduate studies at UVM and this is not the first time I've had the opportunity to take a course from Prof. Mieder.

In addition to being an extraordinary teacher, he has amassed a wealth of knowledge about proverbs and folklore in general. UVM currently has a room on the fourth floor of Waterman dedicated to his proverb collection, but I know that he has a much larger assortment of materials at home. Students and scholars alike would benefit from having the complete collection in a more central and accessible location. I think it is important to recognize Prof. Mieder's status as a world-renowned expert on proverbs and I would like to point out that his name is mentioned in the Wikipedia entry for "Proverb" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proverb>).

I hope that you will consider my suggestion to add an extensive proverb collection to the Billings Library. I believe that it would be a shame not to, especially if UVM is to become the nation's premier small public research university.

Sincerely,  
Veronika Carter

President Fogel responded kindly but could not act on this thoughtful suggestion. It took more than ten additional years to raise several million dollars to restore the Billings building. Thus, it fell on President Thomas Sullivan to make this long-forgotten plea a reality. In any case, this is what Prof. Mieder wrote to Veronika Carter, whom he meets daily in the Waterman Building at UVM, on the same day that she contacted him:

Dear Veronika,

This is incredible! And you even found your valuable letter!

So let me thank you for taking this initiative so many years ago! When I see my friend Dan Fogel the next time, I will tell him about your letter.

Above all I want to thank you for your kindness and vision. All of this means the world to me. And how wonderful that what you envisioned has now become a reality. So you are quite the prophet!

Always know that you will be one of my very favorite students!  
Wolfgang

There is so much good will, support, and love that played into the unexpected creation of “The Wolfgang Mieder International Proverb Library”. Thoughtful visionaries and mountain movers made it all possible, and Prof. Wolfgang Mieder and his wife Barbara will forever be thankful to them and their beloved University of Vermont for making a permanent home possible for the world’s proverb scholarship for the benefit of scholars and students from everywhere.













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