Professionalism, Part 1

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The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.

—Mark Twain

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves who am I to be bright, brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?

—Marianne Williamson
(quote sometimes attributed to Nelson Mandela)

Almost everyone can identify with the following scenario. You walk into a store, restaurant, or office and the staff looks at you with distrust, disdain, ordisinterest. Or, they don't even look at you. You put your items on the counter, order your food, or ask a question, and the service is barely adequate. Walking out you wonder whatever happened to the "customer matters" attitude you remember. You might be fuming, resigned to this type of service, or simply immune to it after so many occurrences. You can call the behavior many things, but you won't call it professional.

What does it mean to be a professional? What distinguishes a professional from a nonprofessional? Is it merely a degree, or is there more to it? Can a person have all of the credentials and titles and still not be "professional?"

All of these are pertinent and important questions, especially to the librarian. Articles are written on the erosion of professional jobs and entire positions given to paraprofessionals. Departments are shut down and activities outsourced. Entire libraries are closed. Are librarians, libraries, and the skills and underlying philosophies of information and library services obsolete and of no value?

Much has been written on the value of libraries, librarians, and information; the glut of information; the speed of technological change; and the changing role of the information providers. One aspect of this is the specific role of the professional librarian. Education and training, job preparation, management and personal skills, codes of ethics, and so much more are involved in the creation, nurturing, and development of the librarian. It is more than just the MLS credential–important though that is–but also the deeply held belief in the philosophies of service, ethics, and mission that guide the people who are proud to call themselves librarians. Insight into professionalism can come from a number of subjects, and a selection will be presented in this column and the next.

Author's note: Headers in this column are taken from Johnson's seven suggestions for librarians to meet today's challenges.[1]

Tying Our Library Program Goals to the Larger Goals of Our Educational System

An extremely well-researched and scholarly text, Freidson's *Professionalism* is a sociological treatise that defines the term "to exist when an organized occupation gains the power to determine who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance."[2] To some extent this defines librarianship. The book is a very difficult read, and may only be of interest to those with a serious interest in the topic, as it doesn't directly discuss our profession and is abstract rather than practical. However, the closing sentences are very appropriate for librarians: "Professionals claim the moral as well as the technical right to control the uses of their discipline, so they must resist economic and political restrictions that arbitrarily limit its benefits to others. While they should have no right to be the proprietors of the knowledge and technique of their disciplines, they are obliged to be their moral custodians."[3]

Both John N. Berry's editorial and his article in the November 2003 *Library Journal* are worth reading and provide an excellent introduction to professionalism and the profession as well as a view of our future.[4] He makes a strong case for the value of the library degree and the skills, knowledge, and values that are part of the study for the degree. While he acknowledges that the MLS degree needs to evolve with the times, and that there can be some changes in the packaging of the degree, he defends the

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opinion that the degree and the trademark skills are still essential. Short but to-the-point, these provide expert opinion by a respected librarian.

Focusing on school librarians, Johnson's succinct article makes some important points.[5] First, librarianship under pressure is no different than many other professions—most have a crisis now and then. Second, school librarianship may "never be seen as a permanent part of the educational landscape" and librarianship as a whole often may be a threatened part of that landscape.[6] So, what to do? He states "our very vulnerability demands that we as a profession need to continually find ways to strengthen our programs and roles. I would suggest we take a hard look at the challenges we currently face and see how we can rise to meet them."[7] He then suggests seven areas for that action. These seven are used as headers in this column. Quite frankly, these are practical, realistic, and almost painfully obvious. However, in the flood of publications about the information environment, the prognostications, and the gloom and doom of many, these suggestions are important enough to be printed off and placed on the bulletin board in every library. In about two thousand words Johnson reminds us of the value of our degrees and of our profession. Must reading and a great discussion starter.

Koss writes a short commentary that is a no-holds-barred look at the unprofessionalism of spineless librarians.[8] While she commends those with "a strong sense of mission" that "would go through a brick wall rather than leave a patron stranded," she condemns wimpiness and tolerance of problems that really aren't acceptable.[9] She ends with "if we can only be 'liked' and 'respected' by putting our spines in escrow, it is not worth it. The standard for being tough enough to do our jobs should not be how much mediocrity and stupidity we can tolerate."[10] There is no room for the stereotype of the librarian in the profession!

Demonstrating and Publicizing Our Effectiveness through Accountability

Two fascinating and thought-provoking books by Michael Gorman discuss the library profession's values. In *Our Enduring Values,* he defines the term "values" in some detail (briefly, values are enduring beliefs), including that they "are useful and usable because they are standards by which we can assess what we do; measure how near we are to, or how far we are from, an object; and compare our actions and our state of being to those of others and to the ideals represented by our values."[11] After a discussion of values and Ranganathan, Shera, Rothstein, and Finks, Gorman creates a list of eight core values—stewardship, service, intellectual freedom, rationalism, literacy and learning, equity of access, privacy, and democracy. Each is developed in the following chapters. His concluding chapter is "Keeping Faith," where he states "I am convinced that, if our society is to prosper spiritually, intellec-

tually, and materially, libraries *must* continue to acquire and give access to, arrange, make accessible, and preserve recorded knowledge and information in all formats, and provide assistance and instruction in their use . . . this is by no means an easy task in an atmosphere of hype and fantasy, but pride in our achievements and value and clear-eyed assessment of where we are and where we are going will prevail."[12]

In *The Enduring Library*, Gorman takes us on a rapid overview of technological changes that have implications for the library profession and then discusses these changes and how they interact with each other, our lives, and our profession.[13] For example, he notes a list by David Schenk of the effects from information and stimulus overload—increased cardiovascular stress, weakened vision, confusion, frustration, impaired judgment, decreased benevolence, and overconfidence—and adds resignation and despair.[14] He suggests several actions to deal with stress and information overload. They include avoiding discussion groups and meetings, making and keeping priorities, keeping a wide vision, saying no, focusing on the "real job," having a hobby, avoiding trends and peer pressure, not surfing the Web, meditating, and reading. Readers will need to consider these for themselves and see what really is practical and useful.

He concludes with a chapter titled "Seeking Harmony and Balance," in which he quotes and discusses an eclectic range of sources, including Tiger Woods, Buddhism, Etzioni, the ALA Code of Ethics, and more. He states:

> Many librarians feel buffeted by change, alienated from one or another aspect of modern libraries, and challenged by the two-headed dragon of shrinking resourses and technological demands. There is, I am convinced, only one way to restore our delight in our jobs and balance in our lives. It is to look at where we are and where we have been with clarity of vision and to act on the basis of the understanding that clarity brings. To understand the processes that are at work and the forces that shape our working lives is to take control of both.[15]

Gorman always makes one think deeply and carefully. Whether or not his observations and conclusions coincide with the reader's, the journey is always worth the time and effort. Both of these books should be on the must-read shelf.

Attracting the Best to Our Field

Told in poetry, comics, stories, and essays, *Revolting Librarians Redux* is funny, scary, poignant, biting, sarcastic, and a number of other adjectives.[16] It is also a disturbing, thoughtful, honest skewering of our profession that forces

the reader to step back and look at many things we accept as gospel. The pieces on library school are particularly strong, but all of the chapters are worth reading. Some might feel angry, others laugh uproariously, others may want to cry, and some might miss the point completely; for the latter it is suggested that the piece on library stereotypes be checked. While the titles are often funny–"Why *Librarian: The Musical* Is Doomed Before It Starts," "Being a Cataloger Is Better Than Gutting Fish for a Living Because . . . ," "Damage Noted: Journal of a Public Librarian"–beyond the laughs are a number of issues that requires thought and discussion. What are we about? What about our education, actions, interactions, appearance, and issues? Very highly recommended for the librarian who is willing to look outside the routine reading lists. Sections might be great for use during brown-bag discussions or before a meeting gets to the agenda items.

A handbook that covers many of the topics of interest to the future librarian, the library school student looking for a job, or the professional librarian looking for some change, *The Librarian's Career Guidebook* offers sections on education, jobs, promotion, skills (including public speaking, time management, speaking and writing), professional development, and life balance.[17] Especially useful for people interested in becoming librarians are the sections on career planning and education. While some of the chapters are somewhat useful to the experienced librarian (speaking, writing, and balanced life issues stand out), the book is most appropriate for the prospective or newer librarian. It also provides a number of suggestions for the manager discussing professional degrees with employees, students, or others interested in becoming librarians. One additional use–if you ever have one of those dark days in which everything seems to go wrong and you question whatever made you select this career path, read the final chapter, "Conclusion: Librarianship for the Love of It." As one librarian states, "It's the most satisfying work I can imagine. Every single day I am privileged to touch someone's life . . . I thrive on immediate gratification, and the opportunity to perpetually be on a treasure hunt–and they pay me to do it!"[18] Each of us may have a different take on our job, but reading the quotes is very encouraging. A very useful book.

Keeping Our Core Values

Bill Crowley and Deborah Ginsberg explore the future of librarianship in several publications. Their chapter in *Ethics and Electronic Information* (reviewed in Summer 2005) discusses the valuation of librarianship and its survival.[19] Credentials, education, and terminology are integral aspects of the discussion. This short essay states, "librarianship is either a separate field with identifiable educational, informational, and recreation components or it is a subset of information science. . . . The future struggle to defend librarianship, or to define it away, will be intense because the stakes, for all involved, are so high."[20]

Their 2005 *American Libraries* article uses the term "deprofessionalization of librarianship."[21] They state "to retain our professional status, librarians will need to trade on 'intracultural reciprocity': the changing, context-specific perceptions of mutual worth by participants in geographical, organization, social, cultural, and other arenas."[22] This hinges on librarians being part of "a group that accepts and supports their professionalism."[23] Narrowing the definition of librarianship can be dangerous to this support and to the future of the profession. Both these are well worth reading.

In 2003, Crowley and Ginsberg discussed the short-sighted and dangerous results of poor treatment of public librarians by administration.[24] Underpaying, understaffing, and removing librarian tasks to nonprofessionals will have negative effects on the profession. This short article makes a compelling case for serious consideration of the role of the professional librarian.

Remaining Experts in Helping Others Make Meaning Out of Technology

Status is a topic of great interest. One aspect that has received a great deal of attention is faculty status for librarians. Just as the library profession stands for access to information from many viewpoints, the range of opinion on this topic is wide. Blaise Cronin presents a very strongly worded disagreement with faculty status for librarians, stating it is counterproductive to customer service.[25] He writes that it is a vanity that decreases professional productivity, is a vanity, and gains libraries little overall. Herbert White also points out some of the problems with faculty status, including the lack of time to do the research, the different types of time constraints, and the anonymity of much that we do.[26]

An extensive bibliography and a useful overview of the literature on faculty status and professional appointments recommend the article by Diane E. Ruess.[27] She clearly points out the pros and cons, concluding that the choice is really a personal one. It must be determined by each individual based on his or her goals, strengths, and preferences.

While written in 1996, Neal's three-page article is a positive overview of some of the changes that have occurred and are occurring and an affirmation of the profession.[28] He starts with the role of the virtual library, a reality that is now entrenched. However, he moves beyond that, calling for a "virtuoso library, with the expertise and resources to locate, acquire, and access vast amounts of information on a global scale . . . [which] will require continuing investment in subject and language expertise and professional skills to select, organize, service, and preserve."[29] The "virtuous library" will also "preserve and advance the fair use rights of faculty and students in the face of the complex

rethinking of copyright law. The paradigm of virtuality, virtuosity, and virtuousness will define academic librarianship into the next millennium."[30] He provides a brief discussion of a number of issues that will have implications for the profession, concluding that the two paths are either to be marginalized or to take the lead. It is his contention that we will take the lead. Short but interesting reading, even if it is ten years old.

Retaining Our Professional Teaching Status

Related, but not directly addressing librarianship, are several books worth reading by those seriously interested in the library professional as it relates to the larger academic environment. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* covers the interface between the university and the corporate world.[31] It acknowledges the changes brought about by the information economy and how this allows a greater role for universities. As the information world is at the heart of librarianship, the book provides a valuable framework. If time is an issue, the chapter titled "The Academic Capitalist Knowledge/Learning Regime" provides a decent overview of the book. While focusing on university faculty, *Collegial Professionalism* provides a look at the academy; its concerns; complaints both from the members and from those outside the academy; and suggestions and insight from a forty-year professor and administrator.[32] The book can be read with an eye on how the text applies to our situation and profession. The author ends the book with the remark:

> In all we undertake, we presuppose the intelligibility of reality, our ability to know it, and the meaningfulness of our endeavors. This trust supports the value and worth of our lives. There is an ultimate hospitality behind, beneath, and throughout all that we do—we cannot consistently think or act otherwise. This is the framework within which we live and think, construct conceptual dwellings, and perform the dances of teaching and learning. We engage this framework even in denying it. It is the ultimate answer to the malaise and cynicism in which we might otherwise dwell. [33]

In *The McDonaldization of Higher Education,* Hayes and Wynyard end their introduction with:

> The therapeutic university is the McUniversity of the near future. Aspects of the therapeutic ethos of the university are discussed in several of the contributions to this volume. . . . Robin Wynyard points out that, whether or not academics bemoan the coming of McUniversity, students will still value the experience. If that is so, it will be a triumph for the therapeutic approach in

building their self-esteem. They will feel positive about what they have achieved. They will lack self-doubt. But their confidence will be fragile and constantly require more therapeutic attention. Never before has such a therapeutic focus been part of a university education. The discussions in this book are about the future of higher education—if, indeed it has a future! The theme of all the contributions in this book is an ancient one: to argue that the unexamined life, the life built around improving people's self-esteem, is not worth living. [34]

This book really hits a sensitive spot for librarians. We frequently hear that we must change things because the students don't like aspects of the library (the call numbers, the physical arrangement of furniture, the ambiance, the need to be more like Google), and often these are taken as clarion calls for change, even change from things we know are better (in the long run) for the students. This book provides another look at paths we can take and at least asks us to step back and consider our actions and the implications of these actions. Very interesting reading.

What is valuable in all of these books is, even though they don't address our profession directly, they encourage us to look at the profession in a serious and different light rather than just consider the routine and narrowly defined view that we might have if we don't look beyond the daily practices and concerns. Interaction outside the library is key to individual professional growth as well as to personal and professional success.

Staying Connected

Several Web sites should be checked periodically. The American Library Association (www.ala.org) is an obvious place to look for documents and news on the profession. Of special interest is the Standards for Faculty Status for College and University Librarians (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardsfaculty.htm).

The Special Libraries Association (SLA, www.sla.org) also has a number of resources. SLA members can check the Career Planning and Competencies page for a bibliography on a wide range of professional issues.

One of the themes that comes through in most of these resources is the seriousness of our role as professionals. Our jobs can be a great deal of fun and personally rewarding. But they also carry a certain degree of gravity. Whether we do story hour with preschoolers or teach and assist with the research needs of post-docs, we are dealing with information on a number of levels—the immediate meeting of needs as well as the training of individuals to meet their own future information needs. We are also creating an atmosphere that speaks of the things the profession has held important—trust, support, and an environment

that speaks of both the importance and the enjoyment of information and libraries. Twain got it right. We can also say the librarian who doesn't epitomize the wonders of the library is no better than the person who doesn't like or use libraries. The role of professionalism is one that needs to be taken seriously as well as with a sense of humor every day. The image we present both in demeanor and in knowledge makes as much of an impression on our patrons as the one described at the beginning of this column. We can make going to the library an excellent experience. We and the library can be powerful beyond measure.

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