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A New Librarian Prepares for the Future (Reflections on Right Livelihood)

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We new librarians are zealots. In library school, we embrace the concept of libraries as the cornerstone of democracy. We are inspired by the concept of intellectual freedom, and are eager to start doing our part to protect the free flow of information. We know the power of information literacy, and cannot wait for the opportunity to start promoting it. Many of my classmates entered library school after burning out in the private sector, and came to library school to seek more meaningful work. What could possibly be more fulfilling than spending your days connecting people and information?

With our idealism running high, imagine our surprise when we learned that some veteran librarians do not share our enthusiasm. Early on in our library school program, a professor instructed us to go to a reference desk with a question and see how we were treated. We visited a range of different libraries, both public and academic, in several different states. Most students reported being treated satisfactorily, and a few received exemplary service. However, a surprising number of us got a response that was perfunctory at best. We had just studied the art of the reference interview, and were dismayed that some librarians did not bother to delve deeper into the questions we brought them, even when they were not apparently busy. Worse yet, a few of us encountered librarians who were dismissive, and one was downright surly.

Perhaps these crabby librarians were burned out. They definitely did not seem to be enjoying their work. The thought of a burned out librarian, however, is a difficult concept for the enthusiastic library school student to digest. In a tight job market, these working librarians have the privilege of staffing the all-important reference desk and getting to use those incredibly cool information tools we were studying. They

spend their days basking in the satisfaction of helping patrons meet information needs. On top of all that, they even receive a paycheck. How, we wondered, could anyone get tired of connecting people and information, upholding democracy, and defending intellectual freedom?

Of course, my classmates and I well know that when we (hopefully) find jobs, we will need to find ways to sustain our enthusiasm as our ideals come face to face with the mundane realities of daily life as a librarian: equipment failures, belligerent patrons, budget cuts, meager salaries, and the like. Assuming that we succeed in our first challenge, finding jobs, we will eventually face the challenge of not becoming burned out like some of the librarians we encountered at various reference desks. Fortunately, some of us can bring insights from our previous jobs to our new careers as librarians. I am one of those fortunate ones. My previous job was teaching world religion classes. My students and I explored the ethical tenets of different traditions on a range of topics, including the subject of work. Here I encountered the intriguing Buddhist concept of “right livelihood.”

Buddhist teachings on the topic of work trace back to the Eightfold Path taught by Buddha over 2,500 years ago. The fifth step of this path, “right livelihood,” joins the other steps (right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation) to define a life path for Buddha’s followers in their quest for enlightenment. A right livelihood is one that avoids treachery, deceit, usury, exploitation, or other harm to humans or animals. Buddha specifically identified five occupations as violating the “right livelihood” requirement: trading in arms, living beings, flesh, intoxicants, or poisons. In the ancient Indian society in which these teachings



arose, this tenet would forbid work as a munitions dealer, hangman, pimp, butcher, liquor store owner, or any other profession that brings harm to living beings.

Western Buddhists have embraced and expanded this concept of right livelihood, with a bit of creative reinterpretation (i.e., maybe alcohol really isn't as bad as Buddha thought). From the basic teachings that work should increase what is helpful and decrease what is harmful, modern Buddhists have developed the principle of meaningful work. Such work is beneficial and wholesome, producing useful goods and services. Choosing meaningful work means avoiding not only those jobs that are directly harmful, such as producing hazardous pesticides, but also those that may be subtly harmful, such as producing frivolous luxury goods or shoddy junk, or fanning desires through advertising. Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat

Hanh advises, "Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion" (Hanh, 1991). In a similar vein from a different tradition, Pope John Paul II taught that "human work has an ethical value of its own," and that properly exercised work should "increase the common good" and "add to the heritage of the whole human family" (Pope John Paul II, 1981).

The most frequent examples of contemporary meaningful work are doctor, nurse, teacher and artist. Shouldn't librarian also be included as an example of meaningful work? Unequivocally, librarians "add to the heritage of the whole human family" as we organize information and make it accessible. Without question, we "increase the common good" as we staff the libraries that are at the heart of many schools and communities. The respect conferred upon our profession by the public is ample evidence that our work is meaning-



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ful. But is the recognition of the value of our work enough to prevent burnout? Perhaps not—those crabby librarians presumably began their careers full of conviction that their work was honorable and beneficial.

Here we must delve deeper into the world's religions. One of the points upon which all the great traditions agree is the need to overcome egocentricity, and to live in service of something other than yourself. That something might be defined as God, interbeing, society or nature, but the great religions and moral philosophies agree that the spiritually and morally mature life is focused on the Other, not on personal gain. Even those contemplative traditions that focus on inward meditation are not simply navel-gazing, but are seeking to transcend the sense of the 'skin-encapsulated self' to connect with the larger whole.

Western Buddhists use this non-egocentric spiritual foundation to provide advice for practitioners who are activists in the peace or environmental movements. These so-called "engaged Buddhists" are taught that certainly they should work as hard and effectively as they can to stop nuclear proliferation, rainforest destruction, or whatever their goal may be, consistent with the Buddhist teaching of "skillful means." However, if activists connect their egos to the achievement of these elusive goals, they may experience a sense of personal failure, followed by burnout. Activists should pursue their work from the spiritual foundation of a more expansive sense of self, one that includes both the rainforest and its loggers, the warmongers and their victims. From this non-egocentric perspective, activists do not need to be sustained by successes to continue the fight. They identify with their community and their world so completely that their work for human or ecosystem well being is natural and sustaining, just as our efforts to promote our own health are natural and sustaining.

We new librarians need not be enlightened Buddhists to learn something from these teachings about the connection between ego and burnout. We bring high ideals to our work, as we should, but are doomed to burnout if we tie our egos to achieving those goals. We are never going to teach all of our patrons to be critical about their information sources. We will never have the funding to provide all of the information sources our patrons need. We will never convince all of our leaders that information needs to be free. Certainly, we can make progress toward these goals, perhaps tremendous progress, but there will always be more new technologies to master, more information to organize, more information needs to meet. Perhaps we will be able to face this constant onslaught without burnout if our goal is service, not personal accomplishment.

This focus on service is what makes our profession such an honorable one. As a new librarian, I realize that I am not qualified to give advice or sermons to those with more experience working in this field. Decades of service for which one is overworked and underpaid may indeed push any of us who are not saints or monks down the path towards burnout. Still, it may help to keep in mind that our service is in the cause of noble goals, and that our livelihood promotes the common good. Being a librarian fulfills the criteria of some of the great religious traditions for work that is meaningful and beneficial. We new librarians may indeed be zealots, but our zealotry is well founded. 🌿

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