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How Many Roads Must a Librarian Walk Down?

When Location Shapes Vocation

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Unlike many of my librarian colleagues, I did not grow up with a love of libraries. They were not formative places for me, and I had no influential librarians in my life. I loved books an awful lot, and I appreciated libraries as a free and simple source of piles of books, but good books also came from bookstores and my brother's shelves. My most vivid memory of my childhood library is the "cha-chunk" of the date-stamping machine with the metal plate in it that worked with my library card. Man, that thing was cool.

Libraries themselves, though, were not especially cool to me. That impression changed after I got my first passport in the spring of 1990. I was a junior in high school. My brother was a junior in college spending a year studying abroad in Aberystwyth, Wales. My mother and I went to do touristy things in London with him and his English girlfriend, who is now his wife. We went to the British Library almost as an afterthought; it was part of the British Museum, and we had bog people and colonial plunder to see. I am not sure that I had any expectations for the British Library, really, as a kid from a small North Carolina university town. I do know that seeing Henry VIII's personal Bible, with Henry VIII's personal marginal notes, was astonishing. I believe there were some original Handel's Messiah manuscript pages on display as well. My family had to drag me away from all of the display cases full of numerous impressive books, manuscripts and maps, but those two, Henry and Handel, stick out in my memory as proverbial lightbulb experiences. I remember thinking, "Oh, of course, these things really happened. These people really lived. It happened here, and here is the record of it."

After my encounter with history in the British Library, my heart beat faster with a craving for the real. I had not found it in the Chapel Hill Public Library; more accurately, I could not yet recognize it there. I did not see it in my college's undergraduate library, as a student or a library worker. I started to see it in my college's main research library, as a student and a library worker. I found it in full measure in my college's rare book and manuscript library, where I worked for my last two undergraduate years. Here were letters and novel drafts and sketchbooks by important people. Here were complete collections of all the editions of works I had never heard of by authors I had never heard of. Here were researchers coming from around the world to gather evidence for their arguments about what really happened in a book or a place or a life. They saw this library, my library, the way I had seen the British Library. As I watched them do their work, I realized that even if they might not envy the routine of my particular job, they envied my access to the collections that had drawn them there across borders and oceans. When they left, I would stay. I began to understand that my everyday life could play a part, however small, in someone else's dreams.

Thanks to a fortunate combination of geography and affordable airfare, I could fly to Europe from my college's city for not much more money than it cost me to fly home to North Carolina. I still had my passport; my choices were obvious. I went to places like the Danish Royal Library, which is still one of my favorite places in the whole world. In the fullness of time, as they say, I graduated from college. I went to work for an American school in the Netherlands. My job title was "Teaching Intern," but I was their middle school librarian. I had agreed to do it because I wanted to be in that place at that time, and my employer saw the library experience on my resume and thought I could fill a need that they had. It was a win-win situation. I had expected to have a good year and wear out my rail pass. I had not expected to come out of it wanting to be a professional librarian. To my surprise, I did.



I discovered two very important things as the middle school librarian for the American School of the Hague. My first discovery was that my fifth- and sixth-graders were just as compelling, just as really real, as Henry VIII or Handel or John Dryden or Teddy Roosevelt. History was happening right there in my library, and the world would never be the same when these kids grew up, no matter what. My second discovery was that the standard American school library collection—Judy Blume, Laura Ingalls Wilder, biographies of American sports heroes and presidents and inventors, birds of prey and dinosaurs and volcanos—represented *home* to many in the school community, and to my homesick self, in a way I had never thought of when it had just been part of the scenery. Like my brother's English girlfriend, who had never done the touristy stuff in London because she *lived* there, I had never really read the books for what they were. I had never really looked at the people around me for who they were. Reality is everywhere, I learned. History is everywhere. As it had in the British Library, my heart beat faster.

While I was still living and working in the Netherlands, I made a point of visiting Aberystwyth, where my brother had studied six years before. Naturally, I also made a point of visiting the National Library of Wales, perched up above Aberystwyth's harbor. It did not quite live up to my expectations, possibly because my expectations were so high, or because it did not have a very good public exhibition area, or because I had to climb up a really big hill and illegally go through various construction-cluttered parking lots to get there. In any case, it was not all I had hoped for. I found my disappointment reassuring in a way. What is real and important and true is not always awe-inspiring, whether one encounters it in an institution that is the steward of a nation's history or in a school library that is doing its part to help children along their way to becoming competent, conscientious adults.

Since my time abroad, I have worked in public libraries, special libraries and academic libraries. In each, I have tried to help make them places where people could walk in and see not only books and magazines and films and music, but connections. Information is important; enrichment is important; even entertainment is important. Most important of all, though, is the fact that information, enrichment and entertainment are things that we share. They are contextual, relational, and historical. Libraries for me have been the embodiment of particular contexts, relations, and histories. For whatever reason, I had to first learn to see these embodied communities in libraries far away from home.

Today, I am the Director of Library and Archives at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Naropa understands itself as “North America's leading institution of contemplative education,” building on “the rich intellectual and experiential traditions of East and West” (Naropa, para 1). Students and scholars come from around the world and set their minds and bodies and hearts on learning and teaching others to “engage courageously with a complex and challenging world, to help transform that world through skill and compassion” (Naropa, para 2). I do my best to ensure that our library collections and services support them in their efforts to understand and shape the reality of the world we share. I do my best to encourage them through the inevitable disappointments. My heart beats a little bit faster every day. When the time comes for me to walk down another road, however near or far it takes me, I know there will be a library at the end of it. There always is. 🌿



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