

Two Noble Professions

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Abstract: This is the introduction to Volume 23, Number 3 (Summer 2017) of *Reflections*, published on March 20, 2018. This is a special issue focusing on librarianship as a helping profession. The narratives are created by librarians sharing their reflections as helping professionals in public, academic, and special library settings.

Keywords: helping professions, librarians, librarianship, public libraries, academic librarians, helping, human needs

I began my social work education on a breezy September day in 1993 at New York University. Those first moments of my first social work class proved transformational and indelible. Still disoriented from a whirlwind of an arrival to the City from New England several days prior, I sat apprehensively in an old-fashioned, wooden desk-chair, squinting under fluorescent lights as my first professor entered the classroom. She moved with alacrity and purpose, wore a sharp, classic pant suit, sported closely cropped fiery red hair, and radiated a smile of true welcome. Making eye contact with each student, she passed among the desks, handing out NASW Code of Ethics pamphlets, her fingernails painted to match her hair. She stated that if we embraced the values and ethics outlined by NASW, we could expect gratifying, robust, and impactful careers. She averred, "Social work is a noble profession".

This was Dr. Constance Silver (New York University, n.d.). I enrolled in one of her practice classes three out of the four semesters of my MSW program and her gracious mentoring was integral in the development of my identity as a helping professional. A dozen or so years later, as I grappled with commitment to a service-driven career within the perplexities of professional evolution, Dr. Silver's wise counsel once again proved pivotal. She reminded me that whatever decisions I made, whichever path I traversed, my identity as a helper was ingrained. It had led me to her classroom in 1993, just as it would lead me forward into whatever my professional future might hold.

And so now, I am an academic librarian serving at Hunter College. A tenure-track faculty member of the Library Department, I am an instructional librarian and the Head of the Social Work & Urban Public Health Library. I work closely with the students and faculty of the Silberman School of Social Work. It is a professional trajectory that revealed itself bit by bit, almost as if by kismet, resulting in a providential outcome, but always guided by the principals of helping and social justice.

Founded in 1876, the American Library Association (ALA) is the oldest and largest library association in the world (American Library Association, n.d.). At its core, the American public library movement sought to establish a system of universal access to information through a publicly funded, egalitarian institution. During the nascent years, there were several decades of debate during which the values and ethos of the public library gained articulation and interpretation into practice (Wiegand, 1986). By the turn of the century, the public library as an

institution settled into the Progressive Era landscape as an agent for social justice (DuMont, 1977). The occupation of librarianship merged with those of teaching, nursing, and social work as helping professions, described also as 'feminized' professions, with a work force comprised by many who fit the social construct of the 'new woman' (Evans, 1986). ALA's core mission has endured as conveyed by its current Strategic Plan which includes 'Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion' among its four Strategic Directions as well as 'Intellectual Freedom' and 'Social Responsibility and the Public Good' among its eight Core Organizational Values (American Library Association, 2017).

I am proud of the entwined professional roots and missions shared by my professions. And yet sometimes it is perplexing and I ask myself, "What is it - this helping thing? What's it all about?" My own contribution to this special issue of *Reflections* expounds upon this query, inter-weaving my professional journey with the early history of the social welfare and public library movements. And it is truly gratifying that my narrative stands amid the half-dozen others that comprise this issue. Representing a range of library settings, practices, and orientations, each author exercises a unique and powerful voice in explicating how libraries serve, how librarians help, and how the professional and personal intersect.

Kristen M. Hallows' narrative, *Truth as Corollary to Knowledge: The Impact of Sandra Marlow*, speaks to one of the most powerful and potent functions libraries provide: that of truth-keeping. By definition, special collections and archives are intended to preserve and provide access to singular, irreplaceable items including business and personal papers that in aggregate provide unique insight into the institutions and/or individuals that created them. Such insights are not necessarily pretty or convenient; sometimes such insights reveal dark secrets concerning immoral, criminal, and cruel activities. Discoveries of this ilk, in and of themselves alarming, frequently present troubling and provocative sequela the management of which may or may not redress social injustice.

Take for example Australia's MacKillop Family Services' Heritage Information Services. The history of Australia's institutionalization of children through the early to mid-20th Century, including the forcible removal of indigenous children from their communities, is well known. A fairly new entity, MacKillop Family Services reconstituted upon the institutional footprints of three defunct orphanages and so it holds decades of archival records concerning the children raised in their care. The Heritage Information Services is an after-care program designed to assist the now adult residents in not simply accessing their case histories, but also in interpreting and contextualizing the material and supporting the psycho-social impact of the experience (Murray, Malone, & Glare, 2008).

Hallows introduces the reader to Sandra Marlow who was hired in 1991 to curate the Howe Library at the Walter E. Fernald State School, an institution founded in 1848 to provide residential care for mentally ill and developmentally disabled children. In her capacity as librarian, Marlow encountered records from the 1950s detailing the use of the school's residents in experiments involving the ingestion of radioactive calcium in the absence of the full knowledge or informed consent of the residents or their parents. Hallows enhances secondary source materials about Fernald's history through her own personal correspondence with Marlow.

Moreover, Hallows provides the reader with a riveting overview regarding the evolution of institutional care of vulnerable juvenile populations starting in the mid-19th century, the impact of the eugenics movements during the early 20th century, and the use of incarcerated populations as uninformed subjects in the investigation of the biological impact of radioactive materials during the mid-20th century.

One of the noteworthy aspects of this narrative lies in Marlow's alliance with two Fernald workers who grew up as Fernald residents and were members of the cohort fed radio-active milk. Integral collaborators in garnering public attention to redress this injustice, they also fought to protect the documents themselves including the surreptitious removal of some of the most vital and revealing documents from Fernald - a brash and daring act.

Rhiannon Jones begins her narrative by debunking the notion that academic librarians are an insular lot who eschew civic engagement. This is a position I applaud not only because I also am an academic librarian who has first-hand knowledge of civic contributions made by my colleagues in the academe but also because such efforts are increasingly studied and documented. Recent examples of such efforts include service to refugees (Bowdoin et al, 2017), assessment of academic librarians' civic mindedness (Barry, Lowe, & Twill, 2017), voter registration drives as a reference service (Bonnell, 2014), and linkage to social services (Hines, 2017).

In *Shelter Should not Mean Sheltered: Creating an Information Resource Centre for Abused Women*, Jones addresses not only the above but moreover she tackles problems associated with compassion fatigue among librarians, particularly in light of the dearth of material about the topic in the library literature. Depleted in both her professional and personal life, Jones found revitalization in volunteerism. In sharing her story, she gives voice to a simple and eloquent truth endemic to helping professionals: that in our efforts to lift up others, at times we are ourselves elevated. It is a tricky balance, to be sure. As a social work student and practitioner, I recall well the discourse about the nature of the "wounded healer", a conversation that persists today (recent examples include: Amundson & Ross, 2016; Cvetovac & Adame, 2017). Moving fluidly between the practical, the personal, and the philosophical, Jones traverses this landscape with heart.

In *Journey to Mecca and Home Again: A Library Intern's Pursuit of Her Career; a Mentor's Renewal to Her Profession*, an experienced and a discerning library professional, Melanie Elizabeth Hughes and Selena McCracken, share first person accounts of their intern / supervisor relationship. While most helping professionals are likely able to share their own experience on one or both sides of this coin, as I did in opening this introduction, it is a rare opportunity to observe both sides simultaneously. It is a resonant piece of writing. One can feel the pleasure in Hughes' reflection on her own career in service to a novice as well as her simultaneous concern for and curiosity about the ever-present churn in the nature of academic library resources and services. Likewise, one can palpably perceive McCracken's eye-opening wonder as myriad paths of librarianship are revealed to her.

And frankly, I find it brave. Granted, Hughes and McCracken's narrative describes a mutually

fulfilling mentorship which lends itself positively to revelation. But still, there are elements that require a level of comfort with exposure and trust in the strength of the relationship that are not necessarily de facto in all internships: for example, Hughes deliberates over a potential job change while McCracken considers her burgeoning preference for public over academic librarianship.

Fatima Taha and Kathy Zappitello offer narratives that walk the reader through the door of the modern public library in the shoes of the librarian. In *Ink vs. Bytes: The Delicate Balance I Tried to Maintain in a Library*, Azam's narrative echoes Jones' in addressing misconceptions about what librarians do, what they believe, and what libraries provide. A unifying theme throughout her narrative, Azam posits that librarians are first and foremost educators with unique abilities to meet the needs of users through multiple formats running across a vast range of online, digital and print materials.

On the 'bytes' side of her story, Azam offers timely and thoughtful vignettes concerning the use of job hunters in the library. Her narrative reflects an anecdotal trend that has gained popular traction in recent years: that the library frequently serves as a safety net for job hunters who, for myriad reasons, lack the skills and access to resources required for a successful employment search, especially during times of economic down turn and high unemployment. Azam employs an approach that social workers might describe as "meeting the clients where they are at" and that acknowledges that different people may arrive at the same place through very different journeys. Her responses are empathetic and tailored by an understanding of the context of the patron's needs.

And on the 'ink' side of her story, Azam offers some pretty creative programming: card making and letter writing workshops for children and adults. I am a fan of archival research for many reasons, one of which, admittedly, is the visceral experience of handling original objects that often generates a feeling of deep connection to the humanity of the object's creator. It also made me wonder about the last time I wrote or received a hand-written note on paper. It's been a long time, I miss the kinesthetic and the sentiments. There is an undeniable intimacy in engagement with print materials that is lost through the convenience of email, digital books and the like. That libraries should address balance between immediacy and intimacy via a broad range of formats seems perfectly apt.

There are truly poignant moments in Zappitello's *The Shared Experience*, reminding the reader of the public library's erstwhile and continuing commitment to the most vulnerable among us. Zappitello reprises a debate stemming from the very first days of the public library movement concerning the purpose of the library, specifically its role in community health, leisure and recreation (McCrossen, 2006). In her role as a director of a small Ohio library, Zappitello details not only a personal epiphany but also her subsequent reset of the library's mission, programs, goals, and objectives. Starting with a training model to enhance the empathetic stance of her personnel, Zappitello re-envisioned her library as a universally welcoming space offering respite to all.

As a button to this special edition, Abby O'Neill shares her experience as the child of social

workers. Raised by parents in possession of an anti-oppressive and social justice oriented world view, O'Neill carries this ethos into her work as a public librarian. In her narrative, *The Business of Libraries*, she speaks of the library as a sanctuary, a place for the disenfranchised, and posits that the business of the library should engender a proactive egalitarian stance by offering service specifically designed to alleviate need and enrich the human experience.

Both Zappitello and O'Neill tap into a foundational tenet shared by both the early 20th century progressive library and the settlement house movements: that human problems such as poverty are a form of oppression requiring a social justice response that nurtures the individual and uplifts the entire community (Trattner, 1999; Garrison, 2003). In the Progressive Era library, this translated into practice through services and programs outside of traditional library service such as access to bathrooms and kitchens, lecture and concert series, and children and family centered services. It is an enduring practice across the United States. Just a few examples include Washington D.C. Public Library's collaborative efforts to provide Summer Science programs including a free lunch (Evans, 2012), the promotion of online career training and job hunting services through the Warren County Public Library in Bowling Green, Kentucky (Baker, 2009), New York Public Library's free eBook loan program for low-income children (Schuessler, 2016), and the use of libraries during times of urban crisis (Chancellor, 2017).

In closing, I would concede that my personal bias is in clear evidence: I believe that librarians and social workers function within strikingly parallel processes. More, I believe that librarianship and social work not only go side by side, but can also go hand in hand. We are natural collaborators. And there are some salient examples of this that are noteworthy. Take for example the work of Dr. Jama Shelton (a social work professor) and Dr. Julie Winkelstein (a library science professor) with homeless LGBTQ adolescents. An extraordinarily marginalized and vulnerable community, LGBTQ youth often find themselves locked out of all those places typically assumed to be welcoming including their homes, schools, social services organizations, and libraries. Shelton and Winkelstein are advocates for in-the-trenches collaborative responses that combine the efforts of social workers and librarians to hold and nurture homeless LGBTQ youth toward more stable footings (Shelton & Winkelstein, 2014).

Likewise, Sara Zettervall (a librarian) and Dr. Mary C. Nienow (a social worker) discuss such efforts as Whole Person Librarianship. In their presentation and panel discussion at the American Library Association's Annual Conference 2017, they explored the practical and theoretical aspects of Whole Person Librarianship, a model in which social workers are co-located within libraries and receive library patrons for case management, linkage and referral from librarians (Zettervall, Nienow, Lowe, Horn, & Johnson, 2017). Since 2007, at least 26 such programs have been developed in the United States and Canada. One such program, Breaking Ground, described by panelist Heather Lowe, is run through the Outreach Department at the Brooklyn Public Library. Program data presented at the conference indicated 254 patron contacts occurring in 53 out of the system's 59 branches providing linkage and referral for food stamps, health care, housing/shelter, and mental health services (Zettervall, Nienow, Lowe et al, 2017). These initiatives stretch current concepts of 'point of service' and 'co-location' while also harkening back to the Settlement House precept that optimal engagement and change occur from within the community.

Finally, it has been my pleasure to introduce this special issue of *Reflections*. My colleagues' narratives provided much grist for the mill: a chance not only to ruminate on how it is that social work and librarianship are akin to one another as helping professions but also to imagine how in the future our two noble professions may continue to strategically coalesce in the service of social justice.

A Word of Thanks

This issue of *Reflections* came to fruition through the diligence of two people who deserve a resounding 'Thank You,' if not also a well-earned round of applause.

The first is the guest editor, Laura Habat, MLIS, MSW. As a librarian, Laura has worked at municipal and county libraries and served as a reference librarian at the Cleveland State University library. More recently, Laura completed a Masters in Social Work, and it was during her recent studies that she worked with *Reflections'* editor Michael A. Dover to create this special issue. From writing the call for papers, to coordinating submissions through peer review, to supporting authors through revisions, Laura shepherded this collection of narratives into a cohesive whole. As a member of our two noble professions, I have every confidence that Laura's helping has had and will continue to have a long reach.

The second thanks belongs to the aforementioned Michael A. Dover, Ph.D., whose tenure as *Reflections'* editor comes to an end with this issue and he moves on to the role of *Reflections'* publisher. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Mike in his capacity as editor. When he approached me to write the introduction, he shared his own affinity for libraries, including the 250 days he spent in Toledo libraries and the Ohio Historical Center completing his dissertation! I am thankful for Mike's generosity of vision with regard to this special issue and I wish him all continued success in his new role on the *Reflections* team.

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