

Executive Director's Message

By Alane Wilson.

The Paradox of Relativity

"Sit in a Board meeting for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a friend for an hour, and it seems like a minute. THAT'S relativity." (with apologies to Albert Einstein)¹

I decided to write my first piece as Executive Director of BCLA using Einstein's theory of general relativity as my framework. But in case you're now afraid of venturing further into this column for fear you will have to read about "the passage of time, the geometry of space, the motion of bodies in free fall, and the propagation of light", rest assured, I am only going to do so as these pertain to my role at BCLA, and how I got here. I'll only be so self-indulgent this one time, I promise.

The Passage of Time

I was born in London, England....skip several decades and an ocean and continent from there, and I am attending the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia, after completing a BA and all the coursework for an MA (but not the thesis...I should not have chosen Joseph Conrad as my subject) at the University of Waterloo. As my undergraduate minor had been in Classical Civilizations, I had thought I would go to the University of Toronto's museology program without any clear notion of what one did after that—except probably work in a museum. (see the next section, The Geometry of Space, for the leap between museology and libraryland).

After I graduate from SLAIS, I head for the University of Calgary to be a reference librarian, leaving many classmates in Vancouver who would rather be Part-Time-On-Call-Ad-Hoc-Just-In-Time librarians than leave The Lower Mainland (this phrase is always capitalized). During the very long Alberta winters over the next ten years, I wonder if they weren't all savvier than I was. My next move should be proof that they were. I went to Alaska.

¹ *General relativity*, Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_relativity (viewed Jan 12, 2009)

Not the scenic, relatively balmy coast of Alaska—no, I went to the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in the middle of the State—where the temperature is unmoderated by the ocean and which has many days of ice fog blanketing the city in the winter that lasts quite a bit longer than an Alberta winter. I was the Head of Reference and Instructional Services, climbing up the academic library career ladder.

There's a saying in Alaska: people go to live there and stay a year, or stay forever. I was a one year person, forever a cheechako², never a sourdough³. During that year in Alaska, I had decided to try a different ladder, and that is how I went over to the "Dark Side." Yes, I joined OCLC. Known now only by the initialism, OCLC began as the Ohio Consortium of Library Catalogs back at the beginning of the 1970s. By the time I began work there in the Sales division, OCLC had members in almost 100 countries. After ten mostly wonderful years at OCLC, and ten years of living in the middle of yet another state, Ohio, that has more cloudy days than BC, I jumped at the chance to become unemployed and move back to BC.

So, that's the passage of time over 24 years. Each of those years passed as years do, day by day. But the years passed in a flash as well, as I am reminded when I renew acquaintances with old classmates and remember them as library school students as vividly as I see them in front of me.

The Geometry of Space

I am not one of those people who can claim knowing that working in a library was foreshadowed from an early age. True enough, books were important in my family. There were quite a few around the house, and reading and being read to were features of life. I still recall having The Silver Chair by C.S. Lewis read to my sister and me as a

² <http://www.yourdictionary.com/cheechako> (viewed Jan 12, 2009)

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sourdough> (viewed Jan 12, 2009)

bedtime event, probably in 1966. But, as a child in England and Scotland, I don't recall ever going to a library, and that, given the interests of my parents, suggests there weren't many to visit. When we emigrated to Canada—I was ten—that changed. One of my clearest memories from that first year, when we lived in the "Jane Street Corridor" in Toronto, was getting lost on the way to the library. I lived in a small village in Scotland and had no trouble roaming for miles in the village or the surrounding area. In Toronto, I got lost within a few streets of the library and our apartment.

But I did learn to find the library where ever I lived, and obviously felt enough of an affinity for the library that when I started at the University of Waterloo as an undergraduate in 1975, the Dana Porter Library was the only place I applied for a part-time job. I recall feeling very pleased with myself as I sat at the circulation desk, wearing a groovy blue striped turtleneck, and my new hair cut. Gone was the long "do" with droopy bangs. In with the "Dorothy Hamill" wedge. And in with what has turned out to be a life time of work in libraryland.

At first, the work was just a really good student job, but I was fortunate to get hired full time for a summer job, assisting in the bar coding project. Now, boys and girls, this is taking place during a time when libraries were not automated as we think of it. Signing books out meant pushing a punch card into a machine that read the holes—and we thought that was pretty cool. So, getting a job sticking bar codes on books (which makes it sound way simpler than it was...all the problems of accession numbers not matching with the bar codes!) was eye opening. I remember sitting in a staff meeting in which we were being briefed on...something...and thinking...well, isn't this all very interesting! Truly, at that moment, I realized careers were to be had and the vague notion of museology disappeared. (I did get sidetracked on that Conrad thesis for a year or two, but that's another story that I promise never to subject you to). And that's how I came to spend more than ten years as in academic libraries, learning a lot about reference services, instruction, placating angry faculty after severe journal cuts, and serving on university level committees which would be decent training, I contend, for sitting on UN tribunals. Beyond this, the ten years I then worked at OCLC I actually learned what I had never learned at library school or in academic libraries: about specific fields in MARC records, metadata and ILL standards, consortial purchasing and statewide contracts, membership governance and advisory committees. I learned a lot about public speaking, writing, researching, and representing an organization—whether the organization was loved or reviled that particular week.

The Motion of Bodies

The bodies in motion in this section are, for the sake of illustration, mine and my husband's. He was made redundant in Ohio, after an acquisition, which left him searching for jobs across the US and me nixing the places he found a suitable job posting (Coeur d'Alene? No, we are not moving there."). After several months I suggested he look in Vancouver or Seattle (that was my spousal way of being supportive and flexible). And that's how I ended up back in Vancouver, jobless, after working in academic libraries and for a library services provider. The wonderful thing about the trajectories that all our careers cast is the invisible net of connections among all the bodies we encounter. The wider the trajectory, the more people in your net. They may not help you get your next job, but they'll be darned supportive while you look. And some of them will be fabulous references.

The Propagation of Light

Now, one of the purposes of this story is to illuminate the paths that careers for libraryland people might take. It would be a mistake to promote the fictions that "once an academic librarian, always one" or "you can't jump from a special library to something else" which I have heard during my career. This does a deep disservice to the talents and connections that people develop, particularly if they venture beyond a sector. I hope that all of you will, when presented with candidates for jobs, consider the virtues of the "sector shifter."

But beyond this, I want to encourage all of you to let your little lights shine beyond your immediate space, so that collectively we all benefit from the accumulation of that light. You may feel the time you have to contribute is limited and so not worthwhile, but it is only through the aggregation of effort—one day here, another there—that volunteer organizations such as BCLA thrive.

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