

## **Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting 2008 Archives Management Round Table**

### **“Work/Life” by Alexandra Gressitt**

Wednesday August 27, 2008 – 5:30-7:30PM

*How do archivists balance demanding work lives with fulfilling personal and family lives?*

Compared with workers in other countries, Americans work too much. We take little time off for rest and pleasure. More than half of us don't use our vacation time at all, adding up to more than 421 million unused vacation days a year. Let's face it Americans are workaholics. For archivists, often operating solo whilst meeting multiple demands – collection development, management, and access, facility management, program administration and fundraising – professional demands often lend themselves to a faulty perception of our obligations and duties – one that leads us to being our “own worst enemy.”

When approached to lead the discussion on balancing work and family life I knew it would be interesting. For many in our profession see what we do as a “calling” rather than a job. Our involvement is deeply personal and we often see ourselves as indispensable. Are we? Or is bringing balance merely a matter of being organized, accomplishing tasks in a timely fashion, so that one might enjoy both life and work. On analysis one quickly realizes there are no simple answers and that the topic is both extremely complicated and multifaceted. Complicated because we have made life thus with all our technological advancements that were to make our lives so much easier while still holding on to our traditional operational perceptions and procedures. In the remarks that follow choices had to be made; simplifications embraced and accepted. How I approach this topic is just one person's view. Quite possibly each of you would approach the topic differently and be equally valid in your selectivity. The limited nature of my remarks should not be taken to mean I am unaware of the deep philosophical and psychological nature of the topic – that is just somewhat beyond the scope of this discussion – our time together is simply not long enough.

One facet of the topic not under consideration today is situations in which there are legal issues – for instance, adversarial conditions created by mal- or non-functioning supervisors or colleagues. For these situations there are remedies, not necessarily immediate, even discord and evil take time to resolve and, one must remember both human resources and corporate attorneys have dual purposes. They represent first and foremost their employer, the corporate entity, and secondarily employees. They must, however, insure laws are faithfully implemented both for corporation and employee. It is, at best, a conflicted situation; a real serving-two-masters situation. A basic recommendation for situations such as this is to seek assistance from human resources, document in writing your concerns, seek external objective legal advice, and find a confidante outside your place of employment with whom you may be perfectly and totally candid. Remember too, life isn't about being fair and wheels of justice churn ever so slowly. Sometimes it is wiser to move along than wait for a resolution that may be legal but not fair.

Some key words or concepts in this discussion are: Balance, Curiosity, Flexibility, Forgiveness of self and others, Growth, Happiness, Letting go, Knowledge, Order or Organization, Peace, and Sense of Humor.

Work is like marriage. It is a defined relationship – two parties – self and corporate entity entering into a contractual arrangement. It may be love at first sight, it may be a developing love affair, or it might be infatuation that turns good or bad. It may last years or be over in matter of months. We have all heard the not so apocryphal stories of employees going out to lunch on their first day and never returning. Today everyone is preoccupied with making a living, being recognized in the work place or making a mark in life, falling in and out of love, having children or not, accomplishing something, making something of themselves, seeking to be recognized by others socially, all in a hurry-up flurry. We rush madly forward without taking time to absorb what surrounds and makes life livable, beautiful, joyous, and acceptable. How many of you have, lemming-like, little black books in which you dutifully check off all the “must do’s” that someone, somewhere, said every well educated, or in the swing, person must do? Do these switch lists provide comfort, a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, or are they a burden? Do you control it, or does it control you? My advice is, if you cannot control it, and it controls you, be bold, do the right, but difficult, and throw it out.

Everyone today is in fast forward mode; we seem to have forgotten there are at least three other buttons in life: go, pause and stop. We seem to know only one speed until our gears through fate come to a grinding halt or we retire. And then, for many, that is simply another invitation to dive into yet more activities, or lacking hobbies and external interests, a return to work – because we in America seem only to know how to work. We live in a constant state of frenzy. We say yes or “maybe-cum-yes” when we should say no. We live a schedule at work and when duty calls our Puritan/Pilgrim proclivities, regardless our real heritage comes through and we keep on working, extracting years out of minutes. What we do, is run from ourselves, cloaking this activity in a shield of self-righteousness, known as work. What we fail to do is to live our whole lives. We make room for work and then more work, but fail to make room for home and family, for professional and personal development, and above all, for relaxation. Like retirement savings for some, our whole life is an afterthought, and technology today has made it all too easy for almost everyone to carry work or some portion of it with them – cell phones, BlackBerrys, computers and etc. How often have you been to a business meeting or an opera, church, a movie or even a romantic evening only to have your partner (or yourself) engage in electronic communication with another party? Are there really that many fires to put out that we cannot for a moment put connectivity on hold and interface with a live person? Is our attention span as fleeting as data on the information highway? Today we are connected twenty-four seven to action - action without respite. Endless action without pause and reflection ultimately corrupts decision making and arrests intellectual development. It superficializes every aspect of a life. There are those who telecommute turning their home from safe-haven to workplace. [This, by the way, is not the best method of making yourself indispensable to your company in an economic crisis. Out of sight-out of mind.] We have become chained to technology – letting it control us rather than we controlling it. And no, this is not a tirade against technology - it is simply a fact of life – every aspect of our life. We even have better and faster transportation so we live further and further out wasting precious time and energy commuting and sputtering in gridlock. It takes little or no thought to realize what single feature in our life has caused us all to attain such unbalanced life styles. I have been employed long enough to have known a different world – a slower world – though not one without technology. Our online world is far more complex than our off-line world ever

was. We are here today to talk about choices – taking that other, less traveled, road that will make all the difference [Robert Frost].

Having a richer fuller more meaningful life is all about understanding the balance – integrating each part of our life into a whole, slowing down, pausing to refresh both inner soul and external self. This is not easy. Our fast paced life is like a habit – and habits are hard to break – especially bad habits. The anomaly is that to be successful in balancing life one has to constantly work at it.

How, in looking at work, home and play, can we successfully balance our lives? My version of the three-legged stool analogy is, for there to be stability or balance in life, each of the legs, work, home and play, must be separate but equal parts of our lives connected by rungs. Let me illustrate.

## AT WORK

- 1) Know who you are and why you do what you do – without knowing who you are, you are likely to spin your wheels - not to decide is to decide [Harvey Cox.] No-one should wake at retirement or their funeral and ask what have I done for the last 30 years? One should know and know why. The reason doesn't really matter. It's the knowing why that is essential. Take the time to know.
- 2) Understand your chosen profession. Know the basics. Keep up with changes by participating in professional development opportunities. Knowing professional expectations enables one to work smarter and more efficiently. There are many state and regional organizations with offerings within reach of most budgets. Network with former classmates and establish new contacts. While technology is actually a boon to networking don't forget personal interaction – the personal touch is often the touch that refreshes the spirit.
- 3) Instead of eating at your desk make a point of meeting with other professionals for lunch. Choose a topic for discussion or, if a lone arranger, create your own opportunity by calling someone at a neighboring cultural institution. Make a point of taking a walk, getting out of the office, or at least away from the desk. The pause that refreshes will also ease mind and spirit and enable work to proceed at a less hectic pace. Most of our frenzied state of mind is self inflicted – the eternal conflict between ego and reality.
- 4) Know the mission of your institution and department. Know long and short term goals and identify steps to meet these goals. Write them down, then set daily, weekly or monthly objectives or targets and when the bell rings – go home. Small steps add up to big accomplishments – remember the tortoise and the hare and who finished first [Aesop's Fables.]
- 5) Learn to distinguish between a true emergency and something that can wait until later or even another day. If in the end it is an emergency, don't tear yourself up about it, address the issue, review, assess, learn from the situation, use it to your best advantage, and then - let it go; move on. Most importantly, don't let someone else's failure to do their job become your burden – this I know is often easier said than done, for the show must go on.
- 6) Learn to clear your desk at the end of each day and create or revise a to-do list. Or, at least organize stacks in such a way that at your next day of work you face order not chaos. I have done this all my life – at home because I was raised that way, at school because I found it easier to survive in a right-handed world, and at work for

these reasons and many more, most importantly because it enables me to focus on the message, the task at hand, and not the detritus of everyday life. It gives me the power to control what gets done, in what order, and to turn away unnecessary interruptions. It also empowers and provides even if only momentarily a sense of elation when tasks are completed and an item is removed from a list.

- 7) Tame the ego within. Learn to accept that you are not indispensable –delegate, delay– the world will not end if you take a day off, or put off a meeting until the next day.
- 8) Learn to laugh at yourself and with others – this creates new and invigorating chemical balances. From my high school geometry instructor I learned that “A smile is a gentle curve that sets many things straight.” I still carry this on a slip of paper in my wallet as a gentle reminder that, when the going gets tough, upward curves are easier to achieve, take less energy, and make life happier, than downward curves. And yes it really works. A word of caution – humor is very personal and creates strong responses. Exercise care when indulging in humor in the work place.
- 9) Stretch your mind and know your limits. Intellectual challenges and trying something new or different can be as refreshing as a 15 minute break. It can create excitement and magic. Without question, to survive in today’s world education must be a continuum.
- 10) Take vacation - like going home on time, and not coming in early - work won’t self-destruct if you aren’t there. Physical and spiritual refreshment gained by a break creates magic. I am talking about a REAL Vacation - leaving work and troubles behind - disconnecting from the chains of technology – finding peace and silence. For some this is easy, for others, a huge challenge, requiring cooperation of an employer.

#### AT HOME

- 1) Know what it is you want in life. This will change as you grow and mature. Take time to think about life but, don’t spend so much time thinking about it that you forget to live it. Don’t be afraid to change directions. Life and career changes are challenging but, may make all the difference to your peace of mind and happiness.
- 2) Know what it takes to run your household such as cleaning, laundry, shopping, cooking, maintenance on house and grounds, finances, and vehicular care: schedule such tasks to minimize their impact and maximize your free time. For instance – clean your house or do your grocery shopping the same time every week. Use lists and don’t dawdle. Good practices repeated soon become good habits.
- 3) Know what it will take to accomplish goals. Know the difference between wants and needs. Personal happiness is created one small step at a time. Financial security is created one dollar at a time. A year ago financial stress was not a hot topic or an overbearing stressor – today it is. Life shows us that if good individual choices are made global events will not impact nearly as strenuously as they would were educated and considered choices not made. This kind of stress comes and goes throughout life just as all stress comes and goes. It can be transitory or controlling, but that is up to each individual and the choices made.
- 4) Spend time with family members and friends– immediate and extended. Pause for moment and unbidden, childhood memories come stealing in – images of family members assembled around a piano singing songs and hymns, games of

badminton, croquet, and horseshoes, and hours spent reading to ourselves and to each other. This brings to mind a verse of Robert Louis Stevenson's ["The Land of Story Books"]

At evening when the lamp is lit  
Around the fire my parents sit:  
They sit at home and talk and sing  
And do not play at anything.

How often today does anyone sit at home of an evening, reading, laughing, singing, talking and playing at nothing in particular?

#### AT REST or PLAY

- 1) Know who you are. Know what your interests are. Know your strengths and weaknesses. This is not an easy undertaking but essential to a balanced life. And who you are grows and changes as you mature through life. Take time every now and again to marvel at how far down the road of life and adventure you have traveled and how the changes affect who you are and how you operate.
- 2) Spiritual experiences, however defined, refresh. Spend time in thought alone – meditating, reading something uplifting, walking in the rain or on the beach, taking time to appreciate nature – there are a million and one things to do to translate your life from the present into the “Land of Counterpane” [Robert Louis Stevenson.] Try to recapture the unembarrassed fluidity and joy of your childhood imagination. Spending time alone will enable one to make contributions to personal and professional associates and enriching shared experiences.
- 3) Develop interests and hobbies outside work: such as journaling, photography, learning another language or musical instrument. When I was in undergraduate school – just a few short years ago – just because my hair is white doesn't mean I'm that old - an anatomy and physiology professor argued that all we learned in school was how to work - we didn't learn how to enjoy life. One of his missions was to change that course of events. At the time I was in school we had a 4-1-4 semester system – during the one month interim we focused on special topics. This professor offered extracurricular recreational courses during the interim (taken in addition to focused studies) and one year it was Cribbage and Pinochle - which of course I took. And while my parents always wondered what Crib and Pin meant on my grade report, beyond the games, I learned a lasting lesson from that very wise professor: to enjoy your chosen profession learn to play and enjoy life.
- 4) Participate in social or cultural events within the community – something different from daily work – something to stretch the mind and spirit –and yes distract from tasks at hand.
- 5) Participate in some type of physical activity – such as gardening, walking, hiking, Scottish Country Dancing, birding – some of these can double for hobbies.
- 6) Cultivate friends and acquaintances of all ages and backgrounds – diversify.
- 7) Vacation. Get away from routine for a simple relaxing jaunt. This doesn't have to be costly. Sunday newspapers usually provide low-cost day-trip travel ideas. Disconnect the technological umbilical cord. Email will be there when you return and if there's too much you can always just, oops, hit the delete key. Life will go on. Besides it is

likely retrievable as your IT department has probably backed everything up to the dawn of the computer age. Everything in your life will be there on your return but, it will seem different because you will be renewed. There may even be magic in your eyes. [Thomas Hardy, "When I set out for Lyonesse."]

- 8) Above all don't be afraid to just sit and stare off into nowhere; absorb the beauty of a sunset or watch tides come and go – just remember not to stagnate in that state.

## ACHIEVING SUCCESS

Achieving success, in living your whole life or your life wholly, comes with slowing down and paying attention to what is really important in life: what matters in the final analysis at the end of the day, the year, or your life.

- 1) For those who listen to PBS, Suze Orman talks about cleanliness as necessary to financial success. Whether one uses the word cleanliness or orderliness it amounts to the same thing – knowing oneself and acting on it. Give structure to your life. Dispossess yourself of extraneous baggage. Where there is structure there is balance and periodic straying from a standard becomes possible without disrupting routine or flow for it will instead become an enriching experience.
- 2) Identify external factors that impact life and address them. Most of us have to work and live somehow and somewhere so those are givens in life. Within those givens there is a multitude of opportunity for change - for instance, technology which makes life both easier and more complicated; urbanization of life; economic factors; natural and artificial disasters or other life altering events. One Lent, feeling pressed and stressed at overwhelmingly depressing news (Desert Storm era), I consciously chose to turn off incoming electronic bits by unplugging the TV. The impact and relief was palpable and I've never looked back. A small step to control quantity and quality of incoming data made a huge improvement in my life.
- 3) Know what you can control and what you cannot control. Make thoughtful decisions and take control of your life rather than letting others or inanimate objects control you.
- 4) Keep an open mind. Continuing education should be fun. Be flexible. Be adventurous. Jump in a mud puddle or skip down the street. Don't be afraid of taking a chance.
- 5) Learn to say No; Learn to Pause; Learn to Stop – you can always Go again. Leave that Fast Forward button alone, unless there is a true emergency, for whizzing through life is neither productive nor enriching. Pause in solitude and refresh your spirit even if only as Robert Frost suggests in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His House is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

How often do any of us stop on our way to and fro to watch a sunset, tides ebb and flow, meteor showers, snowflakes or a rising moon?

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