Strengthening Our Identity, Fighting Our Foibles

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Incoming SAA Presidents typically have taken one of two approaches to their mini-addresses at the closing plenary: Some have introduced the themes of their presidencies and foreshadowed their presidential addresses. Others have used the opportunity to speak about something completely different – on the supposition that with so few chances to address the profession, one might as well get as many ideas out there as possible.

I have chosen a middle path — one that looks at my presidential theme somewhat tangentially, or at least from a different angle than I plan to take at ARCHIVES 2008 in San Francisco. That theme is the identity of our profession, complete with issues of unity and divergence, of union *based* on diversity. I have a longstanding concern that we've been worrying about our image in society and in our institutions but have never settled some fundamental questions about how we see and define ourselves.

During my 23 years in the profession and as a member of SAA, I have developed concerns about the identity and future of archivists and archives. It is that professional history that gives background to some, let's say strong opinions. Many of the issues that concern me have to do with the ways in which I think we inadvertently undermine ourselves and weaken or distort our professional identity. I feel an obligation to try to change those things that I see as debilitating this profession.

My concerns arise because I love this profession, and more than that I feel absolutely fortunate to be a part of it, much less have come to lead its national organization for a year. As I thought about how to present such thoughts I remembered one of my favorite SAA presidential addresses, issued actually before I became an archivist, and I read it during my graduate education. If you haven't read Maynard Brichford's "Seven Sinful Thoughts," I highly recommend it. It was published in the Winter 1980 issue of *The American Archivist*.

Maynard's address was deliberately provocative. He spoke of the "pathological [and]…scandalous" avoidance of empirical research by archivists. He stated that archivists should accept that not all accessioned materials are worth extraordinary conservation measures. Instead, he said, we should "'Let them rot.'" Sometimes being provocative is just what is needed to stimulate serious dialogue and — possibly — change current realities.

I mean to be provocative as well. Acknowledging my debt to Maynard, I'd like to touch briefly on what I might call Five Frustrating Foibles. These peccadilloes are not mortal sins but traits to which we all — and I include myself — may more or less often succumb; it's not that by committing one, we're no longer within the pale of the profession. But as a whole, I see these traits as diminishing our professional identity and our future.

1) We are too resistant to change.

Three studies have concluded that our profession is composed of more "guardian" personality types than the population as a whole. A "weakness of the [guardians] is that they tend to resist

change."[1] One can argue that we resist changes both large and small, but for now I want to look at our resistance to change in asking small "why" questions about method and practice. For example, why do we replace folders and paperclips while our backlogs grow?

In this sense we too often "seem to be defined by [our] processes, rather than using them as a means to an end…. Processes are vital, but in constantly changing …landscapes, they must be as agile and flexible as the people they serve."[2] We become so comfortable with (and sometimes so defined by) our processes that we don't ask why we do things that way. Or we do ask the questions but it takes much too long to gain serious discussion, much less concrete testing and response.

Let's look for a moment at a tradition that is almost as old as the profession: the finding aid. Based on user studies, we are increasingly aware that our patrons find it difficult to navigate and interpret traditional archival finding aids. But there has been barely a whisper within the profession about how we might re-conceptualize this tradition to be more relevant to our users. Do we really prefer tradition to better user service?

In an exception, Tom Hyry and Michele Light suggested a concrete application of a postmodern concept: adding to finding aids the visible and explicit tracks of the processor and users to the contextual information presented about a collection in the finding aid.[3] Take another recent

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[1] Barbara L. Craig, "Canadian Archivists: What Types of People Are They?" *Archivaria*. 50: Fall 2000, p, 89. See also Ann Pederson, "Understanding Ourselves & Others: Australian Archivists & Temperament," 1999 (http://www.archivists.org.au/events/conf99/pederson.html) and Charles R. Schultz, "Archivists: What Types of People Are They?"" Provenance 14: (1996) 15-36.
[2] Margaret Lloyd and Sheridan Maguire, "The Possibility Horizon." *Journal of Change Management* 3: 2002, 153.
[3] Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002), 414-19.

suggestion for change: Joel Wurl has posited ethnicity as provenance, a new way of relating to material generated by immigrant and minority communities.[4] Where are the discussions of these ideas on the list, in the journals, or in our conferences?

As one colleague commented, "There are many exciting challenges ahead that should help us generate some adrenaline, develop some exciting new solutions, and allow us to test our ideas against the world."[5] I hope that as a profession we begin to move further away from presentations and articles and list posts that are of the "how we do traditional things traditionally at our shop" variety. We need to move to more examination of our practice in the face of 21st century realities (like backlogs and user studies) and intellectual currents (like postmodernism and multiculturalism).[6]

We can be — are, certainly, at times — bold and innovative. But we must make boldness and innovation hallmarks of our profession. Change for the sake of change is chaos. <u>But change based on creative assessment of our mission and circumstances is energizing, inspiring, and essential</u>.

2. We (still) don't put our users first.

One big-picture change we continue to resist is the shift from placing primary emphasis on service to our users rather than our collections. There remains a deeply ingrained "cult of the

[4] Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues*, 29:1 (2005), pp. 65-76.
[5] Personal email.
[6] An interesting example of embracing change, from our librarian colleagues, is "A Librarian's 2.0 Manifesto," 2006, http://liblogs.albany.edu/library20/2006/11/a_librarians_20_manifesto.html

record" that insists that archivists are guardians and servants of the material, not facilitators and servants of our researchers. Although I could cite many articles that make a strong case for a user-centric approach to our profession, more compelling is the evidence that our resource allocators reward service to users — whether those users are internal to the organization or external, depending on the type of repository. Certainly we are occasionally rewarded for saving or rescuing some collection or other with a high profile, but if we then turn around and put that material in our backlog where users can't get at it, will the rewards last?

Even when it seems on the surface that it is our role as guardians or auditors of records and "record-ness" that matters (as in the recent dispute between Vice President Cheney's office and the National Archives regarding implementation of certain security classification rules), what is at stake is not the abstract commitment to a set of records but the ultimate ability of archivists to acquire and protect those records for *access* by the press and public — for purposes of oversight and a generally informed citizenry. Few of our resource allocators or constituents share or appreciate our traditional guardian mentality enough to support that role.

This concern for users certainly includes processing and digitizing collections more quickly. It may entail finding ways to solicit user input into collection-development and even appraisal decisions, as has been tried in Australia.[7] It may entail having user interest drive prioritization of processing and digitization.[8] It may even entail finding ways to permit users to annotate or add information to finding aids.

[7] Stephen Yorke, "Great Expectations or None at All: The Role and Significance of Community Expectations in the Appraisal Function," *Archives and Manuscripts* 28:1 (2000), 24-37.

If we wish to change the perception our profession has in the eyes of society or our home institutions, of dusty people caring for dusty boxes, we had better understand that what matters most (not exclusively, but most) is our ability to serve users.

3. Frankly, my friends, we whine too much.

We must strive to be consciously and consistently proud and optimistic. Otherwise, our image in our institutions and society will suffer. Our identity is unfailingly undermined and tarnished by our too-willing denigration of our own profession. I realize that a certain amount of griping is par for the course within any profession, but after 23 years I am frustrated by the extent to which archivists complain about their profession. "Our status in society is not high enough." "Our bosses don't understand what we do and why it's so important." "We don't get enough resources." And so on. Not that every archivist does this, and not that each of us hasn't done a little of this, but too many of us seem to spend way too much time kvetching.

On what grounds do we complain? Society doesn't value us enough? How much should we be valued? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we get paid just about what firefighters get paid, and a recent television news story on the New York City police noted that new officers make $25,000 a year. When next we think we're not valued enough, consider being paid less than we are and risking one's life day to day. Or do we miss the hero-worship more than the money?

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[8] Evans, "The Archival Time Machine," 7-8.

We can't simply expect respect and visibility; we have to work for it actively and consistently. If our bosses don't understand what we do, that is surely not their fault but ours. If we haven't explained and demonstrated to resource allocators why what we do is so important, there is nobody to blame but ourselves. Perhaps we still have much work to do in better understanding what our resource allocators and our constituents really value, and in better articulating when and how we provide that value — very little of what we do is self-evidently important.

We must accept that our fate and future is in our own hands, and that improving our stature requires strong advocacy, led by each of us at our own institutions and led at a higher level by the national association, based on pride, strength, and clarity of message rather than grumbling, weakness, and the assumption that our importance is obvious.

4. Advocacy is not fully integrated into our daily and professional work.

It's not enough to be proud of our profession — we must more consistently project our strong belief in the importance of what we do and why we do it. In other words, we must steadily and staunchly advocate for ourselves and our values.

We must do that as individuals, certainly, as we have in the recurringly successful campaigns to convince Congress to reinstate funding for NHPRC. But each of us must find other, consistent, grassroots methods of promoting and advancing both our individual institutions and the mission of archives. Beyond advocating as individuals, we must also support our professional organizations' advocacy efforts when it counts — as we have begun to do more successfully —

from testifying to Congress on the Presidential Records Act to presenting our position on copyright to the Library of Congress.

These are activities that can be undertaken successfully only by organizations, and usually by national organizations representing a collective voice. Advocacy must be part of our professional priorities, and members should be willing to support this work with effort. Effort can come by way of, for example, sections and roundtables identifying relevant advocacy issues, drafting position statements, and forwarding them to the Council for consideration. We can also do more, I believe, by more deliberately working in conjunction with other archival and allied organizations, from regionals to CoSA, from ALA to OAH, in articulating our concerns and priorities.

It has been said that, "the most effective advocacy is when archival programs deliver what they promise and what is expected."[9] <u>What we promise must be more important and inspiring than acid-free folders, and what we deliver must be more than tidy boxes; we must advocate for a profession that has a compelling and clearly understood institutional and social purpose</u>.

5. We pay too much attention to the trees and too little to the forest.

As one Canadian researcher noted about archivists in her country, "As professionals, archivists are down-to-earth people who are comfortable with factual evidence and who subscribe, or, perhaps more accurately, understand its values. [The population at large has more people

[9] Max J. Evans, "The Archival Time Machine: A Closet Engineer Looks at Our Profession," *NEA Newsletter* 31:1 (January 2004), p 5.

who]…are more focused on larger possibilities and see patterns and combinations which are possible rather than actual."[10]

One example, as most of you know, is that I think we are still too focused on individual items in a world of millions and billions of paper and electronic documents, photos, and other materials. This is a problem that is *not* encountered just during processing but during most stages of archives administration.

We still too often appraise at the item level — what we call "weeding" — because we're worried about missing an individual document that should be kept or disposed of. We have to get over thinking this way! Similarly, in the realm of digitization, where too many of us employ item-level handling and description, we are doing ourselves and our patrons a disservice. The University of Wisconsin system is using file-level metadata to speed provision of digitized material to researchers.[11] Given the demand by our researchers for more and more digitized material, why would we not adopt such a useful and useable shortcut? We must acknowledge what Max Evans has characterized as the "seemingly overwhelming challenges of a society drowning in a sea of information" — and "that means we must be inoculated against the disease of *mindless* itemitis."[12]

These "forest and trees" foibles are emblematic of a larger issue for our profession, which is our tendency to focus too intently on the particulars of daily work and not intently enough on the

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[10] Craig, "Canadian Archivists: What Types of People Are They?" pp 87, 89.
[11] Joshua Ranger, "More Bytes, Less Bite: Cutting Corners in Digitization," unpublished paper presented at the fall 2006 Midwest Archives Conference symposium, on the web at http://www.midwestarchives.org/2006_Fall/presentations/Ranger%20Omahapresentationranger.doc

purposes underlying our actions. We can and often do go on at great length about which kind of folder labels are most "archival," disputing and comparing with almost Talmudic precision, yet less often seem engaged with the big-picture question of our fundamental purpose.

Let's think about our overall mission and goals more often than we think about which paper clips to buy or finding homes for everything we weed from a collection. We should follow Rand Jimerson's advice "to confront the 'why?' questions in the field, going beyond the 'how' and 'what' of methodology and practice, and the technical concerns that we address in our daily work." This might, he continues, raise "some fundamental challenges to our (self-) image as custodians, public servants, and technical experts and confront us with the social, intellectual, and political issues arising from archival endeavors."[13]

As I will argue more fully in the year to come, our self-image must be broad, inclusive, and substantial enough to sustain us through this century — <u>we must articulate forest-size ideas about our profession, if our institutions and society is to fully value archives and archivists</u>.

In his 1979 address Maynard Brichford was clear about wishing to avoid a "'Chicken Little'" attitude. I wish for the same. I speak of these Five Frustrating Foibles not from a position of despair, but from one of hope. I hope that my remarks will challenge people to think more highly of themselves, their profession, and their colleagues, and to expect more of SAA and of themselves. If we are united, proud, outward looking, and willing to confront the tasks and

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[12] Evans, "The Archival Time Machine," p. 8.
[13] Rand Jimerson, "Prospectus: *Archives and Society: Memory, Documentation, and Social Justice"* (working title).

changes that are core to our profession, I believe there is a future for archivists and curators that is bright and unlimited — both within our institutions and within society.

At ARCHIVES 2008 in San Francisco, I hope to talk more specifically about a broad, united identity for archivists. For now I suggest that we consider a vision of archives in which:

- Creativity should replace craft as we examine our daily work;
- Users should replace collections as we ask ourselves "why" we do things a certain way;
- Pride in our role within our institutions and society should replace prickly sensitivity to perceived slights;
- Advocacy should replace insular navel-gazing about our practice;
- Commitment to professional unity should overtake the pull of fragmentation; and
- Change is the order of the day.

<u>To achieve our potential we must embrace change and collegiality; service and advocacy; diversity and unity; and certainly pride — in ourselves, our association, and our profession.</u>

I look forward to sharing an exciting — and optimistic — year with you. Thank you.