

Introduction: Speaking For Myself (draft)

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So, here's a confession: I'm not brave. I have plenty of opinions, it's true, and I live in an era when expressing them publicly is incredibly easy. I have smart friends who know a lot more than I do about many things and (given that many of them are librarians and all of them are generous) they are quick to share their knowledge, and that makes it even easier to stay on top of things, encounter interesting news, and form opinions about whatever is going on.

But let's put this in perspective: I'm not as brave as young people who are the first in their family to go to college and who risk not only failure, but alienation from their family and friends because they're stepping over a border into an unfamiliar world, or people who stand on windy corners waiting for a bus to take them to their second minimum-wage job, or people who care for chronically sick children or aging parents, or even that adjunct faculty member who just set up an instruction session with a librarian before confessing she won't be there. Annoying though that may be, it could be that she's piecing together teaching gigs at three universities and spends every evening marking papers, and she's trying to get everything organized as she travels to a conference she can't afford so that if she's really, really on her game and lucky to boot, she might land a job with benefits and a salary that will bring her income above the poverty line. These are people who have enough courage to keep going without much encouragement in the hope that what they do might make things better or simply because they want to do what's right even if they have few options. That's brave. Me, I'm lucky.

I was lucky to be born in an era when people thought it made sense for everyone to have an education, including college if they wanted it. My elementary education was actually at a Catholic school, where there were some formidable English teachers behind those wimples, but when it came time to go to college I was able to go to a good public university without ever having to even think of borrowing money. I could get by with minimum wage jobs in campus libraries and the art museum, and still had plenty of time to stop by my professors' offices to chat about whatever was on my mind. Maybe they were as frantically busy as faculty are today, but if so, it didn't show. They had cartoons and newspaper clippings taped to their doors, which were open most of the time, and we talked about everything under the sun.

I was lucky enough to start my adult life after college with no pressing worries, casually assuming I'd find work that would pay the rent, even with a major as useless as Russian literature. Older relatives used to frown with concern when they heard what I was studying and say "I guess you'll be a translator at the UN, then," because they couldn't think of anything else it was good for. I'd have to confess my Russian was terrible; the only thing I was any good at was reading big, fat novels and writing papers. But that, at the time, was a good place to start.

I entered grad school, but quickly realized that I really wanted to be an eternal undergraduate, not a specialist mining a narrow seam of scholarship, competing for tenured positions, and writing obscure monographs, so I wandered over to the library school to see if they would have me. No worries, the dean said. I could start taking courses in the spring.

My Russian graduate advisor who tried to talk me out of it told me “working in a library isn’t like *working* in a library” as he poured me a glass of sherry. (I am not making this up – he kept a decanter of sherry handy for when he needed to dissuade a grad student from leaving the program.) He thought that only the kind of research scholars like him did would be intellectually satisfying. But I found out he was wrong. Librarianship is challenging, creative, and rewarding work. Better yet, I soon discovered I could continue my undergraduate exploration of just about anything that catches my eye.

And, though I wasn’t expecting it, there was another benefit to working in libraries. If I recall correctly, there were approximately four tenure-track jobs open in Russian Studies in the entire country the semester I tried it out. No wonder each of the graduate students was trying hard to be the best. It was as if there was a high stakes competition going on in every conversation, and whoever could quote the most French theorists won. But I wanted to work with people who could kick ideas around without always trying to score a goal. Librarians, I found out, are good at working with one another. Helping people out is what we do. Showing off, not so much.

At times, this reluctance to stand out can make it harder to do what we do. As T. Scott Plutchak has pointed out, we tend to act as if there are no people involved in making things happen at the library. We attribute new programs, resources, ideas, and projects to the building we work in. The library did it. In reality people did, people so invested in helping others that they have a tendency to erase themselves and make it all seem automatic, a frictionless mechanical platform for the care and feeding of other peoples’ ideas, no human effort or thought involved.

Why do we do that? Why aren’t we bubbling over with excitement about our discipline? Librarians have the best job on earth! And there’s so much more to do.

I’ve been lucky to have wandered haphazardly into a profession that has been going through amazing changes and is incapable of being dull. Who wouldn’t love being a librarian these days? I know that students embarking on an MLS are heartily tired of being asked “why ever would you go into a profession that’s going extinct?” but we know that’s nonsense. These unenlightened would-be advisors see an edge to fall over, because to them the world extends only to the point where they can’t see further. We want to see what’s just over the horizon, because we know there’s more, lots more, than what we can see from here. In some ways, that’s the essence of our field.

Every morning is a brave new world full of challenges and new things to explore. Every semester brings a new crop of students who have so much to learn. Every time I take two minutes to look at my Twitter stream I find fifteen more things I want to read and learn about. But underlying all the bubbling change, which can at times be a little overwhelming, is a foundation of solid values, big generous values that

support everything we do and seem to have a magnetic field embedded in them that gives us cardinal points to refer to when we're not sure which direction to go in.

When I started working at my first full-time library job, which happens to be the same one I'm in now (except like Heraclitus's stream, I walk into a different library every day), I was the second librarian at that college to have "bibliographic instruction" in my position title. I followed on the heels of an energetic librarian who had left me a filing cabinet brimming with class handouts and floppy disks full of Wordstar documents for the class material she'd developed. She had blazed quite a trail, conducting a needs assessment, establishing relationships with faculty, teaching a formidable number of library sessions. She moved on to other things, and I arrived just as the card catalog was being supplanted by an online catalog. My first task, I was told, would be instructing people how to use it. As it happened, it wasn't a big deal; people figured it out pretty quickly, though every now and then during those first years it went down. One member of the English department who taught courses on the beat poets used to take the personal offense whenever the terminals became unresponsive and would take poetic license to curse at that blinking cursor, walking away from the terminal leaving a screen full of a four-letter words as a kind of blank verse.

But though I was only the second librarian charged with instruction, I came to realize a learning focus for the library was nothing new. I stumbled across a document in the files written by a visionary library director who described our library as a teaching library back in the 1950s, who wrote in a 1965 planning document for the building I work in today, that the focus would be "more on *student* learning and less on *faculty* teaching." The library was being designed to bring students and ideas together in conversation, and it's working pretty well.

Since I was the only librarian involved in teaching (except at the reference desk, where everyone took a turn), I felt a little lonely. We had a very traditional organization, but being small, each of us had our area of specialty. We could go off to conferences once a year to meet fellow practitioners and read journal articles in the meantime. I could talk about teaching with faculty in other departments, and those involved in our writing across the curriculum program seemed to be thinking about the same issues that consumed me. But it wasn't enough. I had too much to learn.

It was an extraordinary thing when I signed on to BI-L, started by Martin Raish in 1990, which I think of as the year I got connected. It was amazing to sit at my desk in a small library in a small town in Minnesota and be in touch with hundreds of people interested in the same things I was, with ideas I could use, who were working out what librarians should do to support meaningful student learning in libraries all over the place. It was magic. And it was a place made up of nothing but people's voices, engaged in a conversation that never ended. Some of those conversations, in fact, were cyclical. At least once a year it seemed we had to hash out whether it was better to work our teaching into existing courses or whether we should be developing our own. Though we never came to agreement, we had a good time thrashing out the pros and cons of each approach. In 2002, the list was adopted by ALA and became ILL-L, which as I write has over 5,000 members. That's a lot of company, and a lot of conversations over a couple of decades.

I was trying out my voice, as well, with traditional publications. The first article I sent out to a journal disappeared into a black hole. After months of anxious waiting I wrote to see what had happened to it, and I got my first rejection letter of many. It was humbling, even humiliating, but I read through the manuscript again and thought to myself “this is *good*.” So I poked around and found another possible home for it and it was accepted – and then turned up on the LIRT list of the twenty best instruction articles of the year.

This is the kind of story I like to share with students: if you believe in what you have to say, don’t give up too easily. I also share the time I got a reasoned rejection and thought “they’re right. There’s really not much substance, here” and chalked it up to experience. And the times I got conflicting reviews, including ones with bulleted lists of everything that was fatally wrong with my research, and how, after gritting my teeth and mumbling things under my breath, addressing those points made my work stronger.

The second article I wrote came out of a connection I’d forged with the director of our writing program who was hired the same year I was, which led me to explore some of the literature in her field. I was impressed by some of Janet Emig’s work on the writing process and thought I could make a totally original contribution to the field. Tenure, here I come! While working on a small grant application to fund the work, I got up to stretch and strolled out of the office to check my mailbox, where I found a journal routed to me. As soon as I opened it, I saw that someone else had the very same idea and had gotten there first, this annoying woman named Carol Kulthau, who had done her dissertation under – I could hardly believe my eyes – Janet Emig. I was crushed, but only for a few minutes. I decided it just went to show that I was on to a good thing. Other people were interested in this subject! So I got back to work on the grant proposal and did the research and had a great time interviewing students about their experiences.

Another chance encounter led to the chance to publish my first book. When I attended a talk at my first ACRL conference given by a man who grew completely flustered when he couldn’t get his microphone to work, I could feel people all around me tuning him out. I heard one neighbor mutter “he’s not a teacher.” But I disagreed; while he wasn’t a great performer, he had great ideas for the classroom. I took my courage in both hands and went up to him after the talk and said “that was fascinating. Do you have time to go get a cup of coffee?” It turned out he was grateful for the company, feeling deflated by the audience response. We corresponded for a while, and when we met at another conference, he asked what I was working on. I’d heard an English professor say he had trouble finding literature by third world women for his syllabus, and I thought there was a need for a handbook on that topic. He put me touch with an editor at Greenwood, who asked for a proposal and quickly signed off on it, just in time for my tenure application.

See, I told you I was lucky. And I even got to read a lot of lovely fat books again.

There’s nothing magical about finding a public voice. We each come to our work with a voice of our own. It just needs to be coaxed out with crumbs of curiosity and given regular exercise in conversations

on campus, emails with friends, on Twitter or Facebook or on those venerable discussion lists. There are so many intriguing conversations going on around us, so many questions to ask, so many problems to solve.

I fell into writing fiction for reasons not so different than my professional writing. In the mid-1990s, we totally reorganized the way we work together in my library. It was a time full of creativity, but also of conflict, and it wasn't always easy to see the bigger picture. I realized one day that I was getting sour on life in the library, spending too much of my energy feeling angry and defeated. One evening, leaving work after meetings full of frustration, I thought to myself "I could *just kill* . . ." and stopped myself. That wasn't me. I am not homicidal. I was taking small matters far too seriously and needed to find some balance in my life. If I was going to kill anybody, I'd do it in my spare time, legally, on paper.

I had grown up surrounded by newspapers and books. My father was a journalist who, by the time I came along, was teaching journalism; my mother was a self-educated reader who always had a stack of mysteries nearby, most of them British. I got an education in Golden Age mysteries by reading her copies of Dorothy L. Sayers, Josephine Tey, Ngaio Marsh, and Margery Allingham. After getting intrigued by a homicidal maniac named Raskolnikov and following him into the darker realms of Dostoevsky and his countrymen, I returned to reading mysteries during what could be characterized as a new golden age. Though often thought of as escapist fiction, I found that it was possible with contemporary mysteries to do that magic trick described by Cyril Connolly (quoted in Sankovch, 20) of giving us an escape not from but *into* life. The best crime fiction writers, I learned when I rediscovered mysteries, were writing about social issues in terms that, done well, performed the same cultural work as the nineteenth-century social novel, but with better pacing.

So, while searching for balance in my life, I tried my hand at crime fiction and found that I could escape into a different part of my imagination, so that I could go back to the library refreshed, our local dramas put into their proper perspective. Writing fiction also gave me a chance to get to know something about the trade publishing industry at a time of great upheaval, led me to connect with avid readers and delve into scholarship on the reading experience (fascinating stuff), and has given me an excuse to research all kinds of odd things: the history of surveillance of dissidents in America, the emotional aftereffects of sexual violence, the psychology of false eyewitness, and how communities respond to moral panics, not to mention the pesky minutia of whether a particular police organization uses jacketed or hollow-point bullets or what kind of search warrant would be needed for a totally fictional situation.

It just occurred to me that's something we get when we graduate with an MLS: a search warrant.

One of the other effects of our reorganization was that every librarian at my place of work became more involved in the big picture. We all began to teach, because it's too important a function to leave to one person. We all would build the collection and make budget decisions together. We'd each take turns serving in the role that in most libraries is reserved for a director and share the decision-making involved. This gave us all an opportunity to learn new things and to see how all of these activities fit together to make a library a place for learning.

Delving into budget spreadsheets and thinking about the priorities that guide budget allocations was a revelation. I became fascinated by the culture and commerce around scholarly publishing. I had first heard of the serials crisis in 1980, when earning my MLS at the University of Texas. The head of collection development had to break the news to the campus that there would be a painful but necessary trimming of periodical subscriptions. She showed me her charts; if prices kept going on, in a few short years the university libraries would have no budget for books. Though at the time the university system seemed to be floating effortlessly on oil revenues from the Permian Basin (which kept tuition amazingly low), the trend lines pointed clearly to a crisis, one we're still dealing with. Budgets are down, increased "productivity" in terms of numbers of publications is the measure of our worth, and the rapid transmission of information on the Internet has ironically made it even easier for a few giant corporations to corner a growing piece of the scholarly publishing market, earning profit margins that are shameful, turning research written to be shared into corporate property, refashioning themselves as the archivists and providers of knowledge, making libraries merely local purchasing agents.

But we don't have to go along. We don't need to sustain a publishing model that depends on subscriptions and licenses. There's no question information comes at a cost, but we can rethink how we sustain it and, at the same time, make it more universally available – which, if you think about it, is what our values tell us to do.

So once again, here we are, peering over the horizon. We know what libraries are for, and merely paying the bills for consumption is not it. We can work with scholars and with fugitives from an increasingly dysfunctional publishing industry to build something new and better, and I'm confident we will. There are too many options available today build something better, and too much at stake.

For me, though, the real purpose of all of this – the teaching we do, the collections we organize, and the role we will play in the future of scholarship – is the cultivation of voices and the ensemble that we form in conversation together. I find myself returning, again and again, to a passage by philosopher Michael Oakeshott in his essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," encountered in my first year as a full-time librarian. It seemed true then, and true today.

Voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure . . . we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation that goes on both in public and within each of ourselves . . . Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance. (198-199)

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