

The Community of Librarians

by Gillian D. Ellern

All right, I know you do this, too. There you are, on vacation at some exotic location or visiting friends or family in some faraway town. Or maybe you are on a business trip or at a conference and you see it. There it is along the side of the road or down the street. It beckons from a distance and you can't help yourself. At the least, you just make a note of its location and keep going. You might slip and point out yet another one to your less-than-impressed traveling companion. But sometimes you just can't fight that urge, and you have to stop and visit, if only for a minute, to see.

Those signs can get you lost in some strange town, never finding the quarry. But the challenge of the hunt still makes you want to try this time.

Sometimes it magically appears out of nowhere or in the strangest places, when you least expect it (at a shopping mall, an antique building or the rough section of town). There it will be, and it will be so unusual, you'll just want to stop in for a moment. Or maybe, it will be a logical place for one to be. You know that every city and college has at least one if only you can just find it. Here you are — bored, lost, or maybe just walking by, but you know there has to be one around here somewhere.

What I'm talking about; I'm sure you already figured it out: a library in Anytown, USA!

But what makes us do this? Why do we librarians feel this pull toward other libraries and other librarians? What makes us want to look at yet one more library when we spend all those working hours in our own?

I think that there are two reasons why we do this.

The first is curiosity. Humans are all curious about how others live, work, and play. In the case of librarians, our profession tries to enhance this human characteristic. The basis of reference work is an exercise in curiosity. Every time we are asked a reference question, we effectively say to that person, "let's find out."

Librarians always are concerned about the quality of the service that we provide and want to compare to see how our library measures up. We are curious about how others have solved the problems that we also face. Perhaps they have worked out a better way than we have. And so we use our reference training on ourselves and say, "let's find out."

The second reason is an understanding of the power of sharing. Perhaps it's because the stuff we collect and protect — information — doesn't do anyone any good unless it is shared. Every day we engage in resource sharing because the real value of a library is not in the collecting and hoarding of resources, but in the usefulness of these resources to the patrons it shares them with.

I think that resource sharing, networking, and cooperative partnerships have been, and will continue to be, inescapable and inevitable for several reasons. It's never been practical to get or keep everything we might ever want or need. Also, budget limitations, space constraints, and variations in information availability have always made sharing necessary.

I would argue, however, that we would be resource sharing even if the cost benefits were not glaringly obvious. Librarians, by the very nature of their work, build associations and connections between diverse items so that they can be used and shared. It doesn't matter whether it's books on a shelf, librarians in the state, or information in a database, librarians have a unique way of thinking, organizing, arranging, and then sharing information. It is creating associations that we do best.

So are these the reasons we are drawn to other libraries and librarians? I think the motivations of curiosity and sharing are the source of these urges, but the attraction continues because of something more fundamental. After years and years of working together, of sharing our resources, however large or small, we have begun to think of all librarians, all libraries, and all patrons as our own community. That is where the real benefits are — in a sense of community and shared purpose.

A recent episode of *Babylon 5* comes to mind, where Ambassador Delenn of the Minbari Federation maybe has said it best, "Everywhere humans go, they create communities out of diverse and sometimes hostile populations. It is a great gift and a terrible responsibility, one that cannot be abandoned." I think that librarians have more of this quality than the average human.