

A THREAD IN THE LOOM*

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Last spring, at a conference in Chapel Hill attended by practicing librarians and school teachers from all parts of the state, the participants reached general agreement on and mutual understanding of a number of problems relating to education for librarianship. Throughout the proceedings, however, they voiced frequently one common theme. There is need, the conferees agreed, for library schools to give more attention to developing a suitable "professional attitude" in library school students. The frequency with which this recommendation was made suggests rather pointedly that newly-trained librarians do not have a professional attitude, or, at least, do not have a sound one.

Cursory examination of library school programs offers substantial evidence that the schools have never disclaimed this responsibility and do, as a matter of course, give considerable attention to developing this elusive quality in their students. No doubt they have not always been successful. Nevertheless, without excusing the schools for any shortcomings in their methods, I have been wondering recently whether this seeming lack of sound professional attitudes in the young may not perhaps reflect a diminution of good professional attitudes in the older members of the profession — at least in some if them. I think perhaps it does, for the young in our society learn from their elders, and if the model falls short of perfection, the copy is likely to exhibit the same defects.

What do we mean by professional attitude? It is not easy to define something which is both abstract and necessarily complex, but it may be possible to summarize it in a meaningful way. If so, I would describe professional attitude as the conscious, willing acceptance of responsibility to be active in helping to build a society within which individual members have the widest opportunities for self-realization and the "good life," and to assist the individuals who comprise this society to achieve the maximum self-realization of which they are capable. Such an attitude requires that one's own ambitions be subordinated to the common good and that one's own efforts be directed as much or more to the improvement of the other fellow's lot as they are to the improvement of one's own. The professional person is dedicated to giving service to his fellow men in order that they may realize the best that is in them, and such dedication is a characteristic of every profession, be it medicine, law, education, social work, or librarianship.

It is not surprising that this responsibility of the professional person has become somewhat obscured in a society which has, for a generation or more, attached more importance to material gains than to immaterial values. It would be disturbing, however, if the professionals in our society were not to call attention to the dangers in this one-sided development of society and to do what they can to restore a proper balance between the material and non-material aspects of life. On the whole, the record of librarians in describing the dangers and in working to restore balance is a good one. Even so, it seems to me that there are some evidences of chinks in our professional integrity, gaps, if you will, in our professional attitude which we ought to repair before they develop into major breaks.

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Three of the most pernicious chinks are my concern in this paper. They are 1) professional apathy, 2) preoccupation with status, and 3) confusion of objectives. Let us examine the evidence for each in order to identify our shortcomings and thus be able better to correct them.

There are several disturbing signs of professional apathy among librarians. First in importance, perhaps, is a widespread lack of interest in the profession as a whole. In part this is reflected by the surprising failure of many librarians to belong to, support, and participate in the activities of the several professional associations, often on the grounds that "I get nothing out of belonging." (It is interesting to note here the subordination of the common good to individual gain.) In part, this lack of interest in the profession as a whole is reflected in the atomization of the professional associations into smaller interest groups. Special interest groups are both desirable and necessary in the larger professional associations, for only through such organizations is it possible for the individual member to participate fully in the affairs of the larger body. However, all too frequently such special interest groups are organized solely on the basis of a presumed need to give special attention to special problems and without recognition of or concern for the multitude of problems which are, or ought to be, the common concern of all librarians, regardless of their special interests. Evidence of this atomization can be found in the rapid growth in recent years of the several divisions and sections of the American Library Association, the multiplication of library associations, and the popularity of splinter groups, for example, the documentalists. Even library school teachers are guilty, for they have two professional associations for their relatively small segment of the profession: the Association of American Library Schools which admits personal members, and the Library Education Division of the American Library Association which is, of course, not limited just to library school teachers. The fault does not lie so much in the multiplication of these groups as it does in the tendency of many librarians to identify themselves so particularly with the special interest group, the state or regional association, or the segment of the national associations that they lose sight of common needs and goals and fail to work together most effectively to achieve them.

A second sign of professional apathy is our attitude toward recruiting new members for the profession. How often we all deplore the scarcity of able young people training for librarianship; how little most of us do actively to remedy the situation! The problem of recruiting is not a simple one to solve. It has been with us for many years. It cannot be said that maximum effort has been directed to its solution, for our typical response is to dismiss recruiting as a personal concern and assign it to a committee. A less apathetic professional group might accept the problem as an individual challenge as well as a collective one when confronted with a wealth of evidence that the committee technique alone is not likely to solve it.

A rather negative attitude toward education for librarianship is a third disturbing manifestation of professional apathy. There is abroad in the land much uninformed and non-constructive criticism of the patterns of formal training for librarians developed by the library schools during the last decade. Such criticism, moreover, is often accompanied by a surprising lack of concern and even disdain for any helping to improve them. The schools have expressed their interest in cooperation with the practicing members of the profession in their efforts to design the most effective training programs to achieve mutual objectives repeatedly, yet positive suggestions for improvement in the educational programs and active cooperation by libraries and librarians with the schools to obtain this end are rarer than they ought to be.

And, fourth, many of us simply fail to keep up with our profession — to read and

to be informed about new developments and new ideas in library service. We have a responsibility as individual members of the profession to take part in exploring new ideas and testing their validity, and in forging from the new and the old better professional library service than our predecessors were able to furnish. Education for librarianship does not end with the award of a certificate or a degree; it is a life-long process. The responsibilities which we accept as librarians to help others achieve their greatest potential in society are grave ones requiring humility, sympathy, understanding, and knowledge. We need to cultivate and develop these qualities throughout our lives.

In this connection it might be well to recall Sir Francis Bacon's admonition which appears at the head of the editorial page in each issue of *The Publishers' Weekly*. How many of us have ever noticed it there, or pondered its meaning if ever we read it?

I hold every man a debtor to his profession, from the which, as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and ornament thereunto.

Professional literature, some programs and discussions at conference meetings, and on-the-job attitudes of many of us afford ample evidence that we librarians are tending to become overly-preoccupied with our status. In forging a truly professional library service, library administrators, personnel officers, and library school instructors, among others, have given close attention to the need to distinguish between professional and non-professional activities in libraries. Such differentiation is essential to effective and economical library services and is necessary to the definition of the profession of librarianship itself. Apparently the emphasis placed upon this distinction has been in part misunderstood. I have heard several employers comment upon the attitudes of their newer and younger employees toward professional and non-professional work. Some younger librarians are reported to have refused to perform any duties which might be considered non-professional even when such activities constitute only a minor and truly insignificant portion of their work assignments. This is real failure to understand the reasons for the distinction and reflects a poor comprehension of the whole work of the librarian. Inevitably all of us must carry on some "non-professional" activities in order to carry out our "professional" responsibilities, and it is neither realistic nor defensible to insist that so sharp a division be made here that one's status is impaired if any "non-professional" work of any kind remains a part of one's duties. Such an attitude also belittles the real contributions to good library service made by our non-professional employees.

The relatively poor economic status of librarians compared with that enjoyed by some other groups in our society, and the false values which society has attached to material gains have resulted in many demands by librarians for higher salaries, shorter working hours and longer vacations. Certainly improved economic status for the librarian is essential to good library service, but all too often these demands emphasize personal gain alone and fail to recognize that any benefit or privilege realized carries with it a responsibility. More money for less work should produce better work, yet there seems to be little thought by many of those who seek these benefits that this is a concomitant condition. Demands from academic librarians that they be granted "faculty status" do not often carry assurance that the librarians are prepared to accept all of the consequences of such status, including the onerous burden of committee assignments which is the typical lot of the faculty member in most American colleges and universities.

There is also a disturbing sign of preoccupation with status in the increasing insistence upon special recognition for the school librarian, the special librarian, and others, often accompanied by demands for special training programs to prepare these people for their assignments, even if such training must be given at the expense of funda-

mental general education, long thought to be an essential for good library service.

Lest these remarks be misunderstood, I hasten to add that I have no quarrel with a realistic distinction between professional and non-professional duties, with adequate salaries, fair working hours, and generous vacations, nor with legitimate efforts to improve one's status. As a profession we should work collectively and individually as much for the betterment of our fellows in librarianship as for the welfare of society generally, but we must not lose sight of our responsibility in the process. Improved status is a valid gain only when it enables us to do our job in society better; it is invalid when it is sought for purely selfish ends.

The third chink in our professional attitude was described as a confusion of objectives. While great clarification of our objectives has taken place through the years, there is still much room for improvement. The materials of our profession — books, papers, pamphlets, magazines, and other graphic, pictorial, and now sound records of civilization — are intended to be used. If they were not so intended, there would be no need to preserve them and pass them along to future generations. Yet there are many among us still who subscribe only half-heartedly or not at all to this *raison d'être* for librarianship: the cataloger who obscures the content and usefulness of a book in order to make his description of it conform precisely to a code of rules; the curator of a special collection who impounds the materials entrusted to his keeping in a vault so as to preserve them from use; the head of circulation services who restricts access to library collections for purely administrative reasons, because management is easier that way; the interlibrary loan librarian who refuses to borrow or lend materials for the use of others because the reasons for borrowing or lending do not conform precisely to the provisions of the interlibrary loan code; the librarian who squanders his financial resources on collections which would be nice to have but for which there is neither a demonstrable local need nor any regional or national responsibility to collect them. In fact, any librarian who establishes a practice which interferes with the fullest possible usefulness of his collections and who justifies his action on the grounds that his way is easier or less troublesome than some other and who does not consider and weigh judiciously all the effects of his decision upon the use of his library is guilty of confusing the objectives of library service. He also demonstrates his lack of a sound professional attitude.

And now these remarks have become a sermon. Even the text is from theological sources. The late Henry Ward Beecher once interpolated the following extemporaneous thought into one of his sermons:

He who is false to present duty breaks a thread in the loom and will find the flaw when he may have forgotten its cause.

Since the records do not show which sermon was thus amended, it has not been possible to identify the particular sin which exercised Beecher. It may have been indifference. But I think his thought may have some real meaning today with reference to this matter of professional attitude.

There are those among us who lose interest in our work, who become clock-watchers, and who, among friends at least, express dissatisfaction with what we are doing. The library is our "office," and we consider it in that light. We live not for the hours of work, but for the hours of leisure, not for the majority of the year, but rather for the vacation respite. We become unhappy and frustrated, and we blame our work or our working conditions for our unhappiness and dissatisfaction. We become apathetic about our profession, overly-concerned with our position within it, and confused about our aims, our objectives and our responsibilities.

Let us rephrase Dr. Beecher. He who does not cultivate and maintain a sound pro-

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fessional attitude contributes to his own dissatisfaction with his work and to the potential decline and increasing ineffectiveness of his profession within the society it serves. He observes and decries the results without recognizing that he has himself contributed to bringing about the very conditions he deplors. A poor professional attitude is like the broken thread in the loom. It results in a second-rate and unsatisfactory product.

Librarianship is certainly a long way from deteriorating into a second-rate profession, but the concern about unsatisfactory professional attitudes now often expressed by many librarians suggests rather forcefully that we had better take another look at ourselves and repair our professional faults in order to make sure that our libraries continue to serve effectively that society which supports them and of which they are an important part.



VISITING CELEBRITIES

Adding greatly to the personal as well as the professional benefits derived from the conference was the participation by the nationally known visitors shown above. Miss Julia Bennett, Director of the Washington office of the American Library Association, was the speaker at the Public Libraries and Trustees Sections luncheon. Mrs. Orcena Mahoney, Executive Secretary of the ALA Division of Cataloging and Classification, spoke to the Catalog Section. Our own Dr. Ben Powell served as official host to the speaker at the first General Session, Dr. L. Quincy Mumford, Librarian of Congress and past-president of the American Library Association.
