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Ned Kraft

Smithsonian Institution Libraries, nkraft@sil.si.edu

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Adventures in Librarianship: To be or not to be.

by Ned Kraft (Smithsonian Institution Libraries) <NKRAFT@sil.si.edu>

A young, para-professional colleague just mentioned starting library school. When I hear that enthusiastic, helpful, supportive self wants to tell him all the reasons why he should do it, why it’s a grand profession. Then, creeping close on all fours, comes the cynical, cautious, doubtful self that wants to bite that young man’s ankle, show him the error of his ways.

“You think I should matriculate? Is it worthwhile?”

He should know better, talking to me so early in the morning, before coffee and email. Not too bright. Wonder what his GRI is like? But look at that fresh, hopeful face, that innocent grin ready to organize and classify the world. What should I say?

“Sure, it’s a great job … and every town on the map needs at least one librarian,” I say this while my demon reminds me that many staffs are shrinking. Much of what used to be done by librarians is now done by lower paid clerks. And many libraries are selling chunks of their work to private companies with rootless, drifting, temporary help.

Then I add, getting into the swing of it, “You’re, you know, part of this great academic mission.” Uh-huh. The noble cause. Picking, parsing, providing the world’s intellectual riches. That’s true of course, but when you’ve just spent your day so glued to your screen that your eyes feel nummified, you might have to squint to see the noble cause. When you’re hired in acquisitions to spend your days claiming overdue sci-tech titles (claims that the publisher will likely ignore), or in cataloging to code serial holdings, or in the stacks to shelve AR through EC, you might define your place in the world with a little less enthusiasm.

Just to torment myself, I blurt out: “It’d be great to have you as a fellow librarian!” Right. One more competitor in an overfull field. Just what I need. A young competitor at that, no mortgage, willing to work for peanuts and a pat on the back.

“I’m starting to twitch. I need my coffee. “You uh, you work hard, work smart, and move right up the ladder!” And the demon asks, ladder? Is there still such a thing? Aren’t promotions mysterious things, often unrelated to talent, work ethic, and IQ?

“And, and…there’s no stopping me now: I’m stuck in the war between the good librarian and the bad...and it’s a steady job, you know, calm, contemplative.” Oh now you’ve done it, the bad one says. You’ve crossed the line. You’re spouting outright lies. Librarianship is a field changing so fast you have to run to keep up. And if you don’t run, you’re dead.

The hair on the back of my neck is standing up as I say, “Books. We’re all book lovers here. That’s why we p-g-g-go into this profession.” That’s right. And if in a few years, libraries no longer care much about books, would you still want to be a librarian? Hmm? Or would you end up counting yourself among the many lost and disappointed souls?

The kid perks up and says, “But it’s so expensive,” just as my left eyelid begins to twitch.

“Well worth it,” I insist. “Worth every penny.” Have you done the math? Have you? Do you know how long it will take to pay for a graduate education on the average starting salary? Can you spell “eternity?”

Maybe sensing my condition, the young man smiles his innocent, sympathetic smile and says, “Thanks. I think I’ll take an intro course this summer. Just try it out.”

“Good. Good,” I say, watching him leave and checking my forehead for perspiration. Where is that coffee?