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You Gotta Go to School for That?

Spousal Obligations

by Jerry Seay (College of Charleston) <seayt@cofc.edu>

I live in close contact with a research fanatic. (I will protect the individual's privacy by omitting my wife's name.) Fortunately for her, she lives in close contact with a librarian. This is a useful arrangement. It reminds me of a nature documentary where a bird rides on the water buffalo's back and both are pleased with the relationship (the bird is eating the bugs on the buffalo, you understand — not that I have any bugs on me).

I suppose that doctors and plumbers and firefighters have a similar burden to bear from their spouses, that of being a private professional to their respective beloveds. I suppose a doctor must get a call from her spouse on a regular basis: "Say, honey, could you prescribe something for this virus I seem to be getting." I imagine the plumbers in the world are constantly getting that "Golly, darling, please come home and backflush the sewer system" call. And you know what the firefighters in the world are expecting from their spouses. "Hello, sweetheart, when you get a chance, could you swing by the house and put out this raging inferno that seems to have engulfed the kitchen?"

No less a professional spousal burden can be placed on librarians. Indeed, my wife understands the universal dictum that "the only thing better than being a librarian is being married to one." Thus, am I consigned, as part of my spousal duty, to direct all of my available energies upon any reference dilemma my beloved may see fit to put upon me.

When my wife calls my office, there is no telling what kind of reference materials she will ask me to consult on her behalf. Most recently she was hot on the trail of the following: scorpions (she had seen one on the bathroom ceiling, and the sources she'd already consulted including several state wildlife agencies and national zoos, said they were ALL poisonous); bottlenose dolphins (the book she was reading wasn't specific about their length at maturity, and one can hardly expect to consort with dolphins on their own terms if ignorant of this fact); Emperor Nero (just what was he playing at the Burning of Rome — lyre, violin, or tuba); and social security (why I don't know; we aren't that old).

I blink twice at none of this. But she did

get my attention when she wanted to know the potential weight of a Labrador/mastiff. You have to understand this is the woman who went to the SPCA three weekends in a row and came home with a pet each time. She has since been barred from any and all places available dogs and cats are housed.

When I received the call, my mind ran through the clues like Sherlock Holmes dissecting a crime scene: 1) the woman speaking to me was my wife; 2) our home at times has resembled the St. Louis Zoo; 3) my wife has, in my presence, admitted she has a soft spot in her heart for gargantuan dogs; and 4) long ago when she was a newspaper reporter, she had interviewed a dog breeder who owned and showed mastiffs. I'd seen the pictures she'd taken to run with the article. The dogs resembled bull elephants — minus the trunks.

We were there on the phone line. She had asked her question and was waiting for my professional and efficient answer. She got it. Only her husband speaking and not a librarian. "Honey, it doesn't matter how big they get. We are not getting one. Right?"

Silence.

"Right?" I asked hopefully, encouraging her affirmative response.

Silence.

There was now desperation in my voice. "Right?"

Manic laughter.

It was a set up. It was not the first time. One slow night on the reference desk, she had one of my colleagues pass me the phone and tell me the patron on the line wanted to know if our library had the red-covered book her professor had held up in class that day. I had used my best "I am not noticing that this a stupid question" voice when I took the receiver and offered my professional assistance. "Miss? Did you happen to see the NAME of the AUTHOR of the red-covered book when your professor held it up?"

"No," a sweet, Southern drawl replied. "But it's red. You know which book I need, don't you?"

I do not wish to imply that my wife does not give me the professional respect that my exalted position of librarian deserves. She knows, certainly, that librarians are nearly as important as, say, publishers in the world of information professionals. Yet her wisdom leads her to insert bits of levity into my tough, demanding, dog-eat-dog world of librarianship. Actually, she just can't help herself sometimes. And she believes, for some reason, that the gene that predestines librarianism is the same gene that imparts gullibility. Go figure.

Well, gotta go. I have to fax somebody the Dead Sea Scrolls. Unrolling these things on the copier is going to be a real pain.

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