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On the Road: Bad Trip to London

Celia Wagner
celiaw7@gmail.com

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one, that in her view, the greatest challenge for libraries today was to figure out “how to slow people down.”

In those moments when attention drifted at the conference, diversion had always been at hand in a view of the Hyde Park grounds through the high windows of the room. Tourists were often in sight, coming from the **Visitor Center** where they’d bought tickets for the museum and **Roosevelt** home, both a short walk through the falling leaves. Many of the tourists were elderly, some traveling in groups. A few used walkers or were pushed in wheelchairs, the weaker vessels escorted by the stronger, as if moving in a World War II convoy. Some, as they approached the museum’s exhibits, must have called to mind their own exhibits, from memory, of the one president of their childhood, **FDR**.

For conference-goers too, once the meeting had ended it was a natural thing, before returning to the parking lot and then home, to take the same short walk to the museum. With a presidential election only weeks away and the next president sure to face financial crisis at home and war abroad, as **Franklin Roosevelt** had when he was inaugurated in 1933, it was a natural thing too to walk through the museum’s special exhibit on the famous First 100 Days of the **FDR** presidency.

One section of the exhibit covered the banking crisis of 1933, when in his earliest days as president, **Roosevelt** had declared a bank holiday and put emergency banking legislation through **Congress**. **President Bush**, the day before the library conference opened, had announced government investment of billions of dollars in the banking industry, which was threatening to collapse in 2008 as it had in 1933, and as the mortgage industry had collapsed a month ago. Small talk at the conference, as for the whole country, had usually included conversation about this. Most visitors to the **First 100 Days Exhibit** lingered extra moments at the museum’s banking display, watching the film clips and reading the captions of photographs and charts which showed what **FDR** had done with the banks.

It’s doubtful that any visitors to the exhibit found answers to their questions about America’s collapsing economy. It’s doubtful that anyone had expected answers. Instead they were browsing, browsing through a visual, physical representation of economic forces that most citizens don’t understand. Maybe their browsing wasn’t very different from the unmethodical, unordered searching in the stacks the conference panelists described. And maybe not different from the librarians’ hope that in leaving their campuses they might learn something new about libraries. Everyone had left home to visit a place where they joined others in the kind of searching where answers aren’t always expected, and even the questions rarely are clear. 🌱

Editor’s Note: *Celia Wagner was most recently Vice President of Operations, West, at Blackwell. She is pondering her next job, and working on a book. She sent in this “On the Road” column because she is now ready to share it. — KS*

I was headed from Portland to our Oxford office, and I was happy because I had scheduled an extra day on the front end of the trip. As luck would have it, a childhood friend would be passing through London just as I was arriving. We had arranged to stay at a hotel together, and see a play.

So I flew to London, excited to see my friend **Bonnie**, but the plane was diverted as a freak blizzard closed Heathrow. We landed in Birmingham, and the airline put us on a bus back to London. The trip took hours, as the bus crept along icy roads. Night fell, the driver turned off all the interior lights, and made sure the heat was on high, and I took off my glasses and fell asleep. It had been a long time since I’d left Portland.

The airline wasn’t obligated to take us all to our homes or hotels, so I woke up just as the bus stopped at Piccadilly Circus, in central London. Time for all of us to get off, grab our bags, and make our way from there. I was sleepily wheeling my bag through the snowy night to the nearest taxi stand, wondering how much cash I had in sterling (I’d meant to get some at Heathrow), when I realized I was missing my purse. I had left it on the bus. I turned and ran back to where the bus had been, but it was already gone.

I did a quick inventory.

I had my suitcase. But I didn’t have the key, which was in my purse. I had one of those passport-holding things you wear around your neck. But it was also in my purse. (Don’t ask.) I had four American pennies in my pocket. I had a decent coat. And that was it. I had no passport, no ID, no cell phone, no money, no breath mints, nothing.

If you have ever had a life-altering adrenaline rush, you’ll understand my next few minutes. The lizard brain jolted into gear in the first three milliseconds, proffering a suggestion followed by a hasty retraction. I didn’t think of calling the police or the American embassy. I thought, “Sell my body in an alley! NO! Won’t work! Too old, plus it’s cold out.”

Really. That was Plan A.

And then the emotional wave hit. And the emotion was overwhelming shame. I wasn’t ashamed of the lizard brain’s idea, but of being the sort of bonehead who leaves things on a bus, in a blizzard. The

only thing that mattered to me at that moment was that no one EVER learn of this. If they knew, my colleagues would write me off. My family would disown me, and as for my friends, well, at that moment I forgot I had any. I would be unemployed and alone forever, because I was frankly too dumb to live. In fact, it would be good to die in a ditch then and there. YES! DEATH was a plan! It would work! I had no ID, so with luck my headstone would say “Unknown Woman, Died in Blizzard,” rather than, “Here lies **Celia**, who did something so dumb, we couldn’t believe it.”

If you have not had one of those massive adrenaline reactions, you probably think I’m kidding.

Then the mist cleared, and plan C bobbed up: Find the hotel where **Bonnie** and I were staying. I had torn a teeny map of London out of the in-flight magazine, and it was in my pocket along with the four cents. I could use it to find my way to the hotel, which — I remembered! — was called the **Marriott Regent’s Park** and must be near *Regent’s Park*!

It was at this point that I realized I had no glasses. I’d put them safely in my purse when I took my bus snooze. I couldn’t read the little map to see where Regent’s Park was. Nor — in the snow, in the night — could I read the street signs to figure out where I was. London was depopulated; there was no one to ask. I decided to wheel the suitcase up to the next streetlight, and see if that helped. There were several green splotches on the map, probably parks, so if got my bearings, I could trudge off in the right direction.

The first streetlights were no help, and I was afraid to go too far in the wrong direction. I was standing under streetlight number three, peering at the teeny map, trying this trick I’d heard about on Car Talk for when you get up in the middle of the night and need to read something but you haven’t got your glasses: you make an itty-bitsy aperture with one curled finger and peep through it, and it does something to focus light on one spot on your retina.

And then a woman walked up to me and said, “Yes?”

(Later, one of my friends said, “Oh. She was a godsend.” I had never thought about that word before. It’s a great word.)

The whole story poured out (I’d never see her again). She said, “I’m afraid you’ve been rather deceived, dear, since that **Marriott** isn’t very near Regent’s Park. But I am walking in that direction myself. The underground isn’t running [there had been an accident where one line came above ground to cross a bridge, and all lines were closed down], nor are the busses running, so most of London is walking home tonight.”

She had her teenage son with her, and we set off. He even wheeled my suitcase for part of the journey, and we chatted. (She was in

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theater, had gone to Oxford, her name was **Annabel**.) The London populace re-materialized. Lots of people were walking, and some entrepreneurial types were selling tea in paper cups. Four cents wouldn't buy me tea, but even so, I started to feel like a person again. **Annabel** said I was very brave and I said no, very stupid, and she said well, perhaps both. She made me laugh.

After about an hour, we parted ways, but the **Marriott** sign was in sight. The lobby was chockablock with people who should have checked out but were trying for another night, because Heathrow was closed. I began dripping, as my snow melted. I elbowed to the counter and asked for my room. They asked for my ID, passport, driver's license?

The whole story again. They called **Bonnie's** room, but she wasn't there. (She was walking back from her appointment on the other side of London. She had miles to go yet.) I asked them to let me in. They said not without ID, but I could wait in the bar. I said, "You're not listening. I have four American pennies. No bar." They said sorry, I might be anyone, they couldn't let me into the room.

I got steely. "Look at me," I said, pointing to my dripping hair, and getting the counter wet. "As you can see, I am a Harmless, Middle-aged, American Woman. Now. Let. Me. Into. That. Room." (Okay, in hindsight, the tone of menace probably made "harmless" sound pretty debatable, but I was winging it at the time.)

Finally, they let me into the room. I had been planning my next move. I would tell **Bonnie**, but she'd known me since junior high and harbored no illusions. I couldn't call anyone who saw me as a capable adult, but I could call my travel agent! I did, and asked if she could contact United, and figure out which bus I'd left my purse on, and see about getting it back. She said she'd try. But she didn't call back.

A couple of hours later, the hotel room phone rang. It was my teenage daughter. She said, in her patented calm-and-patient tone, "Mom, your purse will be at Heathrow, at the United lost and found counter, where you can retrieve it tomorrow morning."

I asked how she knew about my purse. She said, "Oh, everybody knows about your purse. The bus driver found it right away, and took it to United. It had your business cards in it, so United called your office in Portland, and they called Oxford, but no one in either office knew where you were, though they asked everyone on staff. You should have called and told somebody what happened. People have been searching for you for hours."

It was true. My mortifying secret was common knowledge. Absolutely everyone knew I had left my purse on a bus. New people, people I had never met, people in Oxford, they all knew I had left my purse on a bus. After I got home, people who hadn't exchanged six words with me in months would stop me in the hall, and say how glad they were I was okay, and what happened, anyway? How could I leave my purse on a bus? Did I know about those little passport-holder things you can wear around your neck?

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It was good for me. Valuable life lessons abounded: If you are in trouble, tell everyone immediately. They will find out anyway, they might help, and it saves time. Also, it turns out that other people never thought you had it all that together in the first place, so they are often

kind and consoling. Plus, for me, there was a special bonus: for years afterward, people would bring me their bonehead travel disaster stories, as if I were a collector of such things. In time, I became a collector of such things. It's not a bad gig at all. 🐼

As I See It! — To License or Not to License? SERU's the Question

Column Editor: **John Cox** (Managing Director, John Cox Associates Ltd, United Kingdom; Phone: +44 (0) 1327 861184; Fax: +44 (0) 20 8043 1053) <John.E.Cox@btinternet.com> www.johncoxassociates.com

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One of the unintended consequences of the migration to online distribution of journals,

followed by reference and other types of eBook, has been the administrative burden of negotiating licenses. Licenses became necessary because neither publishers nor libraries were clear about how electronic resources could or should be used. There was no experience, little understanding of the other's needs and concerns, and no meeting of minds. This in turn has been created by uncertainty about how copyright law would deal with digital usage rights. Let us remember that online journals became a reality less than fifteen years ago. The technology offered functional-

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