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Bob Schatz

Everett's, everbob@yahoo.com

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sotto voce: Some thoughts on the "bump" in bumper stickers

by Bob Schatz <everbob@yahoo.com>

It is early March, just after "Super Tuesday." As I write this, Bill Bradley and John McCain have just dropped out of the race, and we're now left to endure the absurdity of going through the other half of the primaries when the candidates for President have already been selected. For a time, I had both Bradley and McCain bumper stickers on my car, not because I agreed with all the positions they took, but because I wanted people to believe they were real alternatives to the front-runners backed by the big party money. I wanted this to be an election, not an annointment.

What I hate most about this kind of electoral outcome is that it stifles the dissection of political positions that comes from long-term competition for the hearts and minds of voters. McCain and Bradley provided a great service to the American people by (temporarily) keeping Gore and Bush from waltzing to their respective parties' nominations. Unfortunately, that competition died before all states holding primaries had a chance to vote.

Elections are processes that encourage, if not compel us, to celebrate our differences of opinion. Instead of letting such differences destroy us, we rebuild our society on a regular basis by airing our ideological conflicts for the whole world to see. I love the concept that each of us, mighty and small, gets to participate in that process, even when we are choosing between less-than-ideal candidates.

The freedom to build a stronger society by nurturing both conservative and liberal voices is always being challenged. In this new century we will experience pitched battles between those celebrating diverse ideas and those who see too much ideological diversity as a threat to social order. An odd and frightening thing about democracy is that people can actually vote to restrict their own freedoms. In cases of true emergencies, that may be a necessity. When it simply restricts those who have an alternate way of looking at things, it is frightening. I hope that this election will remind people that electing people who represent a wide range of opinions is our best hope for a healthy society.

These issues are not removed from the world of librarianship. Libraries are democracies-in-miniature, because they provide

free access to books, journals, and websites that represent a broad, and sometimes divergent range

of ideas. Every tome housed in a library is given equal treatment: records in the OPAC don't play favorites, listing citations for one school of thinking before those of another; warning notes are not added to some titles, alerting unsuspecting patrons that the thoughts contained in a particular work might be dangerous. Whether the books represented by those bibliographic records reflect thinking that is acceptable or abhorrent to librarians, they all get "equal protection" under the library's roof.

Protecting freedom is not typically recognized as part of a librarian's job, but it is there, and it isn't always an easy thing to fulfill. Many is the collection development or acquisitions librarian who has participated in the purchase of titles whose ideas differ from beliefs they may hold dear. Sometimes reference librarians and administrators are called upon to defend access to material that they, as individuals, find offensive. The Internet has now complicated matters with its easy access to a nearly endless array of sexually-oriented websites. In a great demonstration of "How to shoot the messenger," librarians are now cast as pornographers if they question the effectiveness or appropriateness of installing Internet filters.

In the real world, it is difficult to remember that those who protect the right to distribute unpopular ideas are not necessarily endorsing those ideas themselves. Their duty and commitment to higher values compels them to provide that protection though, which I admire. Outsiders have little understanding of that aspect of librarianship. They'd rather get some laughs at the notion that Library School consists of learning how to tie your hair into a bun and say "shhh" to noisy patrons.

From both symbolic and practical standpoints, libraries play a crucial role in the health of a free society. Every time patrons suggest titles for acquisitions, access websites via library computers, or check-out books, they have been afforded individual freedoms as important to our culture as the right to vote.

A new bumper sticker will soon adorn my car. In November, I will cast my vote. In the meantime, I think I'll make a contribution to one of several libraries I try

to support, if for no other reason than to remind myself that active participation in the democratic experience need not be limited to casting my vote.

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