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Not Go to Charleston?

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When I moved from Head of Acquisitions to Assistant Director for Technical Services, my boss said that I needed to “move on,” leave acquisitions behind and focus on assistant director activities. This included the expectation that I would leave The Charleston Conference behind and find other more suitable venues for professional participation. Nevertheless, more than a year has passed and I have just returned from my 11th Charleston Conference. I’ve been asking myself whether I am simply a stick in the mud, unable to move on. Am I still attending the conference because Charleston in November is so delightful, the food so plentiful and good, the faces so familiar, the habit just too strong to break? Two things struck me at the 1999 conference. One, this conference is not just about acquisitions as much as it once was. The scope has widened considerably over the years, in part a reflection of the blurring lines between collection development, acquisitions, cataloging and user access issues in libraries. Second, despite the fact that others can boast longer attendance records (some since the very first Charleston Conference), I’ve been attending and working at The Charleston Conference long enough that it has become a marker in the passage of the year much like New Year’s Day, July 4 and the arrival and departure of Daylight Savings Time.

Automation has come a long way in the nineteen years since the first conference, both in terms of the publishing industry and in the form of library management systems. That automation has knit together formerly separate activities. Formats have proliferated, complicating the acquisitions process. Licenses have brought a whole new area of concern to the entire library, affecting selection decisions, ability to purchase, equipment and software choices, questions of interlibrary loan, user education and enforcement of license terms, the latter also forcing us to confront the intrusion of contract law into library activities. In our headlong rush to embrace electronic information sources, we are occasionally reminded, by decisions such as Tasini, that there might be holes in that electronic record. Cataloging has crept into the acquisitions process, not just in terms of acquisitions personnel cataloging materials at point of receipt, but also in the general use of MARC records. The idea that there might be holes in that electronic record. Cataloging has crept into the acquisitions process, not just in terms of acquisitions personnel cataloging materials at point of receipt, but also in the general use of MARC records. This indicates a scope much beyond the original focus. People at this level must find meaning in the conference given the many demands on their time and the many other conference opportunities available. I certainly did. Issues discussed at this conference impinge on every area of technical services and beyond as well.

I’m certainly not one of the conference “originals,” but it has been sufficient to firmly cement this conference into my life. When I think seriously about not attending, I realize that I cannot pass it up! Not only is there too much good information and the priceless networking with colleagues, but it has become a personal seasonal marker. There are certain things I need to do before I head for Charleston: move the sheep to winter quarters, get in the winter’s supply of hay, collect pine needles for garden mulch, make the autumn visit to Vermont, mail holiday gifts to England, hunt down the elusive Wolf River apples so I can make and freeze applesauce, find the winter curtains (but delay putting them up as long as possible), get my vehicle inspected. Having checked these items off my list, I can head south.

There are not such seasonal chores in the office. There is instead a layer of routine punctuated by fairly frequent crises. The most noteworthy seasonal event is the end of the fiscal year in June, the big moment when all budgets, acquisitions, student payroll, supplies, equipment, must all be spent down to zero. Of course, it is always helpful to know what the budget is by early November and see the figures in the university’s system, but that didn’t happen this year.

In the fall, the weather rules. Before Charleston it often holds pretty well with warm, golden days still possible even after the loss of Daylight Saving Time. After Charleston, we are nose to nose with the middle of the month, the weather rapidly deteriorates into cold, dark, ice and snow and it’s a straight run to Thanksgiving, the holidays, the darkest time of the year, New Year’s.

Sometime along in there, a box arrives with a Charleston return address. It will contain the evaluation forms from the conference. Having been perused by Katina, they are ready for input into software that will spit out numbers and assemble comments to help us analyze what it all meant. Planning for the next conference had already begun. One of the first years that I handled the conference evaluations, my son thought that this box, which arrived a few days before December 25, was a Christmas present. I’ve never quite been able to see 100+ forms in quite that light, but perhaps I should!