Drinking from the Firehose -- The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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Drinking from the Firehose — The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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originally thought this column would be about my continuing woes with the handling of e-journals and/or would connect somehow to the tragedy of that “other woman” whose name sounds like Katina. (Whether or not ALA will have its summer conference in New Orleans in 2006 I don’t know, but perhaps we’ll hear something by the time you read this.)

Change has become a word that means nothing anymore, because we hear it so often. With every other breath these days, in fact.

This has been an amazing year of change for me. The major change is the new library building in which I am now working. After years of dreaming of, talking about and planning for a new library building, Appalachian State University actually has a new library. In 2000, the citizens of North Carolina passed a bond referendum that infused the state’s university system with money for building projects and the Carol Grotnes Belk Library and Information Commons was conceived. Its birth, after a gestation of several years, occurred this spring. The labor and delivery was hard and complex, but successful. The good news: beautiful, flexible and usable space, room for growth, and the challenge of providing popular new services. The not so great news: constant tweaking of the leftovers on the punch list — for example, convincing engineers and contractors that Special Collections really needs separate HVAC systems that actually work, that back-of-house spaces like Technical Services really do need secure doors that lock; and that public services staff who work in the new building really do need training on how to operate and maintain the myriad of new security and support systems that make the building operational. It will all get done in time.

I have a beautiful new office, with new furniture. I have 20 boxes of “stuff” yet unpacked, and considering I threw away at least that much prior to moving, I am confident I can probably get rid of half again more when I find the time to haul the boxes out of storage.

It was amazing that my coworkers and I were able to stop almost all meaningful work for close to a month during the actual move, and then resume it in a strange but lovely new place, and the world did not come to an end. Students and faculty were inconvenienced to be sure during that period in May and June when they could not check out books or study in the library, but since it was a slow time of the year, they survived it and so did we.

The move went incredibly well. Most of the headaches involved change, of course. Especially the last minute kind, but then, we discovered that almost everything we thought we “knew” and everything we thought we “planned” changed. Then it changed again. And after awhile, nothing surprised us.

Of course, one of the reasons that moving the physical library was not that much of an inconvenience was that so many of our resources are now online. The library Website, the online catalog and the databases and other resources did not stop working at all, or hardly at all, and certainly no more than they ever did before the move or since. The IT cutover probably went better than anything, although there were moments of concern and a few sleepless nights for those involved.

But now that we are settled in our new digs, I haven’t stopped thinking about change. Now we have other issues with which to grapple. The new building challenges us everyday to remember that we envisioned the future when we planned this building and now that future is here.

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So in my little realm of the library we are faced with:

- Completing the transition to a new interface of our online system (it was always in the plan but it is finally happening)
- Reviewing vendors, work flows and staffing
- Reprioritizing the importance of certain tasks
- Struggling with the onslaught of more and more e-journals and their attendant complexities
- Considering services we never dreamed of in the past

Another change in my life occurred this year when I celebrated the passing of my 50th birthday. I am half a century old. As I reflect on this, I realize that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In other words, the older you get, the less change surprises you.

With that in mind, I cannot help but make comment on the recent death of a beloved colleague who knew this better than anyone. Lyman Newlin passed from our world in September, and what a marvelous repertoire of memories and experiences he shared with us during his lifetime. The span of his career was vast and deep. I know that the 25th Charleston Conference will celebrate Lyman, and we will miss him terribly. Who will ring the bell for us to come back to the main room after the break? Who will we watch for not to run over in his motorized cart, while waving his cane? Papa Lyman was such a part of the fabric of our professional lives. This is truly a turning point in history, not leaving Lyman with us at conferences and in the pages of Against the Grain and elsewhere and everywhere. He would occasionally call me out of the blue, asking for an interpretation of some esoteric thing he read somewhere; on some point he assumed I might be knowledgeable. Sometimes I had no idea what he was talking about; sometimes I was able to help him understand the thing he found puzzling. Hearing from him was always a delight, and always, it made me feel special. If my life turns out to be half as rich as that of Lyman Newlin’s, I will be truly blessed.

I share my 8 x 15 existence with my eighteen year old blind cat and I am thankful that I have only stepped on her once since we arrived. I have decided to take the first two weeks getting more acclimated (well, the heat and humidity are somewhat familiar) to the left-behind culture of my youth. I am trying to catch up on about twenty years of few sleep hours, juggling two and three jobs with school, church and family needs, and the stresses of not knowing who and where I am. I brought Tigger and Pooh and a stuffed Christmas bear that shared my bedroom in Columbia, my family and friend pictures, a large note pad and envelopes. Seems I have lost my disks with my articles and stories and research, so reconstructing will be tough. But, I am here! I am a serials librarian at last.

When I first began trying to get the MLS at FSU, it was the eighties and all I could dream about was becoming a serials cataloger. I married again (for the last time) and in a year, my husband required all of my care-giving nature and time to survive. We battled that for ten years until his death and then I took care of friends and eventually had a small stroke (TIA). I re-hab-ed myself, having been trained to do so in undergraduate work, and began again. It was difficult to go back to school when making sense of written words was still a problem, but the School at USC had confidence in my abilities to cope. I regenerated my writing in order to learn more quickly, and in hopes that the mental exercise would be a stimulus to my tired confused brain. The stubbornness that is a common trait in our family came to the fore and I survived, with a few kicks from friends and family. Sometimes I feel I really don’t know where I am and other times I come out slugging.

I am thankful for the chance to share my knowledge and skills with others. I am also thankful that the TS Librarian is such a good mentor and patient with me as I learn so many new skills. I will do some collection management, acquiring of serials through vendors, learn Voyager, catalog serials and when I am further trained, I will work some hours (four) on the Reference desk next term. This term, I will take the beginning Aeronautical Sciences course to give me background in the vocabulary, theories and excitement of the profession of Aeronautical and Aerospace Sciences. Introspectively, I need them as much as they need me and I am beginning to find out what I will be doing. I will go where some have gone before, but I will make it my path, my courage and my strength designing perhaps a newer alternative. The lessons we learn in school should be applied to our new positions and enhance our abilities to guide and strengthen our profession through the many future changes and crises. If all the graduates follow that dictum, we should be able to weather even the toughest problems in the field. See you in Charleston!