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Jim O'Donnell
Arizona State University, jod@asu.edu

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Back Talk — A Librarian Is Not Like A Bat

Column Editor: Jim O’Donnell (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

The famous philosopher Thomas Nagel asked in a very influential article a few decades ago “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?” (The Philosophical Review, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450). I woke up one day and found out I had become a librarian. So what is it like to be a librarian?

There are things around me that are just different — like all the people who asked if I needed help unpacking my books — never had that experience before. Then a couple more came along and asked me how my books were organized and if I had cataloged them. Hadn’t been asked that before either and was too embarrassed to answer.

But I have the keys to the building now, and anytime I like, I can go out wandering in the stacks, where all sorts of wonderful stuff lies in arm’s reach. For a professor of classics, that’s pretty neat. I don’t doubt my staff will get used to having to send somebody out to find me and reel me back in for my next meeting.

That’s all the dream-come-true part, and I know I’m surrounded by smart and interesting and nice people. Already, even in my own behavior, I’m beginning to notice interesting things. For example, when I know that I want one particular book from the stacks, I sit quietly at my desk and click a few times and then a few hours later go out, downstairs, and across a broad concourse to the circulation desk to pick up the book there — I don’t actually go out into the stacks to look for it. By the time I’ve had it paged, I have to walk further for it, but think less.

The stacks are pretty quiet most of the time. Our circulation figures don’t show exactly how much of what leaves the building has been personally selected from the stacks by a patron and how much is paged down to the desk for pickup, but that category has grown dramatically.

Our buildings are heavily used by students, of course, but many of them aren’t using library print materials when they do. A fair number are using our online materials from inside our building, of course, and we get an appreciable number of online chat connections coming from people who are sitting in our facility and could easily find a live librarian for face-to-face questioning if they looked up from their screen now and then. Going to the library, though, remains of high value as a way of making oneself get serious about one’s work in a way that isn’t so easy to do in a dorm room or a student union food court.

Divine wisdom decided to lift me up my first month as a librarian by sending Noah’s flood to our science library. (The “deluge” sprinklers failed in the wee hours of the morning and burst into action in an amazing torrent I wish I’d been there to see. Damage is in the seven figures.) With a lot of other things starting to happen, I saw this as an opportunity to intervene in the necessary reconstruction process, to figure out what we should do that would let us not just reopen but also reinvigorate the building and the services it provides. Everything is an opportunity if you look at it the right way.

Soon, the bigger conversations are coming. Our fifty year old main building needs drastic renovation, so that’s an opportunity to think about what we want it to be for the next fifty years. That means getting faculty and students, who might normally take us for granted, to think about what is it already like, for us to live in a place where the information we most need and want doesn’t come prepackaged, but is created for us at the intersection between our curiosity and intelligence — and that of a lot of other people we’ll never meet or have any business dealings with? Librarians used to be able to put the right book on the table in front of readers. Now we increasingly work with readers as they go into the vast caverns of information possibility, hoping to shape the right query and get back what is most needed.

For myself, personally, that’s a disquieting way to think about the world. It makes me happy to have moved into a place where I’m surrounded by smart librarians. I will need them, I think, more than ever. We all will.