Back Talk -- Quo Vadis?

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When I was first asked by Katina to write this column several years ago, she suggested that by “Back Talk” she meant that I should at times take a whack at whatever in our profession and practice that I thought needed it. In general I have been very well-behaved and only occasionally snuck a caustic comment in here or there.

I decided that I should turn over a new leaf and get mean. I have always wanted to write about our own organization: The American Library Association. But I was always afraid for fear that I would never be able to find work again. Now, however, I am in Hong Kong and we are on the eve of Katina becoming president of ALA so I decided to take this opportunity to say a few choice words.

I was trying to decide how to begin this column. Part of me suggested that I should begin with a little biblical verse:

“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet.” (Matthew 7:6)

Now while I, and everyone else who feels that there is no better professional meeting in the world than the Charleston Conference, agree that Katina is a pearl of inestimable value and a nearly holy (well, maybe only capable of raising holy hell), I decided to suggest that I and all other members of ALA were swine or dogs was not in good taste. (Lest you consult the most recent ALA directory, I think I am now a lapsed member) Then I thought of beginning with a playful set of questions about an unnamed group: What organization

- Has 13 groups looking at continuing education?
- Spent 3.8 million dollars on a recent conference but took in 5 million?

The answer is of course the American Library Association.

But, the most important question that I should discuss is, is ALA a good place for a nice girl like Katina?

My complaints with ALA are actually few. Simply put, when I am at ALA national meetings with the smell of new carpet blocking my sinuses I question, is this a good idea gone awry?

ALA’s motto and mission statements contain good ideas:

“The best reading, for the largest number, at the least cost.”

(Adopted 1892: reinstated by ALA Council, 1988).

“The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.”

(Both quotes from ALA Handbook of Organization, p. 8)

Who can quarrel with
- Good reading material?
- Free access to reading material?
- Cost effective reading material?
- Development, promotion, and improvement of good service and the profession?
- Enhanced learning and access to information?

Well, of course, there are a few governments and individuals around the world who fear that some information is dangerous or bad – but most people, including me, feel that free access to reading material is a good idea.

The worry about ALA that I have is, given all the energy that the thousands of thousands of members spend on ALA activities – have we become so involved in the means that we loose track of these simple ends? Have our passion become for committees, nominating people for committees, holding committee meetings. I was never a great ALA’er but I do remember many days of running from one committee to the next to make sure that the