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Adventures in Librarianship — Death on the Podium

by **Ned Kraft** (Smithsonian Institution Libraries) <nkraft@sil.si.edu>

"You know, there was a study that showed most people fear public speaking more than they fear death. In other words, they'd rather die than make a speech."

If that was designed to encourage me, it missed the mark.

My wife and I were in Chicago for a library conference — she as a spectator, I as a speaker. This was only my third speaking engagement, all three within one year, so I was still enough of a novice to be shaking in my boots. My wife is honest to a fault — a family trait — and she's a cataloger who can't help analyzing the situation.

"Thanks," I said, "I'll try to remember that as they clip the microphone around my neck."

Add to that anxiety the fact that this conference weekend marked two other disturbing events: my fortieth birthday and the last cigarette of my life. Just pass me a bowl of Valium, please.

"When's that firing squad?"

I looked at my watch. "Thirty-one and one-quarter hours to go."

My fortieth birthday. It wasn't so bad, really. My twenty-ninth was traumatic. Twenty-nine marked the spot where I had to stop fooling around, had to get serious, make some important decisions for a change — more important than, say, which nightclubs are best on Friday nights and which on Saturdays, or, can I still get away with purple ties. So at twenty-nine I put away childish things, became a librarian, lost my hair, and got married.

My fortieth birthday. Did I say that already? I am getting older, you see.

Only one problem: the fear that I was becoming set in my ways, conservative, cautious, that all my purple ties were now replaced by muted shades of respectability. I was giving up cigarettes — another vestige of the younger, rebellious self gone. I owned property, worked from nine till five, wore shoes surprisingly similar to those my father wore, and appreciated fine

port. Just point me toward the podium. It's time to die.

I checked my watch again. "Twelve more hours ... and twenty-two minutes."

My wife told everyone we met at the Saturday night reception that it was my birthday. I saw her chatting with strangers, librarians from who-knows-where. I walked up to them, handed my wife the plate of hors d'oeuvres I'd just gathered and before any word of introduction had passed, one of the strangers said to me, "You don't look forty."

Am I so insecure that I need such stroking? Maybe.

Eleven hours and three minutes to go as the band played "The Girl From Ipanema" and I scoured the dessert table for something perhaps not so loaded with cholesterol.

A librarian! A forty-year-old librarian! What would the boys in my neighborhood think, the boys I played football and soccer with? "Ya know, Ned is now a forty year old librarian. No, I'm not kidding." They may as well say that Ned is now wrapped in tweed, paunchy, and near-sighted. Oh, that's not fair, I know. Blame it on panic ... and a plummeting blood-nicotine level.

As I turned off the lights that night I stood for a moment looking out toward the Chicago skyline. Vibrant. Glorious. A dome of glow lit the black as if Bucky Fuller had succeeded in



covering the toddling town with his geodesy. Hey, wasn't he quite old when he hit full stride? I glanced toward the bedside clock. Nine and one-half hours to go ...

"Good Morning!" I rehearsed as I stepped into the shower. "Hello" as I tied my (muted maroon) tie. "Welcome" as I paced the room waiting for my wife to finish her make-up. Fifty-two minutes to go.

A librarian ... about to give a speech on fund-number design as it relates to organizational structure and reports! Yikes! Maybe no one will show. Maybe the world will end and I'll be saved from giving my speech. Maybe ... I checked myself in the mirror one last time and realized that all this worry about my becoming hide-bound and safe was superficial. That the risks I'd taken as a young man — physical things like rock climbing, skiing the double-diamonds, wandering into bad neighborhoods, or the general risk of letting life happen — none of that was nearly as risky as what I was about to do. To face a crowd, just me and my experience and a few notes scribbled on index cards, that was by far the greater risk. The possibility of humiliation is so real you can smell it. Put away the childish risks and take up the adult.

"Good luck." My wife kissed me on the cheek and pushed me toward the front of the room. The seats were gradually filling. Two and one-half minutes to go.

Lo, though I walk through the valley ...

The moderator clipped the microphone to my collar. She said something to me. I don't know what she said. I just smiled.

I shall fear no evil ...

The moderator turns toward the room. She introduces me as somebody who does something in some library. I ... I can't quite make it out. Then all eyes turn toward me. I smile back at them. Who are these people and why are they here? I check my watch. Three. Two. One.

"Good morning ... "

Rumors

from page 14

major upgrade to our electronic journals system and significant new products like PhysicsWeb."

The **Oryx Press** book that was named a *Library Journal* "Best Sci-Tech Book" of 1991, has been completely expanded for the second edition. *How the Technology Works: A Guide to High-Tech Concepts* by **Robert J. Cone** and revised and updated by **Patricia Barnes-Svarney**, explains in clear, easily understood language how high tech systems work and how they affect our daily lives.

continued on page 32

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