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Talking With the Enemy

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That librarianship is a profession in change is obvious to most observers. That librarians are willing to look deeply into the ways that they and their profession could change is not. Certainly, many have discussed the effects of technology and economic and cultural shifts on the profession, but few have considered what it would really take to change deeply from within librarianship itself. It just might take the courageous act of seeing ourselves from the point of view of those who hold very different opinions of libraries and library services.

As a cataloger at the Mount Angel Abbey Library, I have the good fortune of working in a building designed by one of the world's greatest architects, the Finnish Alvar Aalto, whose signature designs include curved, open spaces and lots of natural light from spacious windows. This library must contain the most enviable environment for technical services in Oregon. From my desk I can look out of a large picture window from the top of Mount Angel onto the surrounding farmland and into the mountainous distance. By only slightly shifting myself in my chair I can gaze upon a variety of views.

As I look out on the landscape of librarianship, however, I am dismayed at the narrow view I often see. It seems as if librarians are much too comfortable with blinkered views of their purpose and their missions. Far too often we miss innovations because we fail to look at issues differently from our accustomed vantage point. Much discussion of the contemporary mission of librarianship seems to consist in preaching to the choir. Of course all librarians endorse such concepts as intellectual freedom, serving the under served, and more funding for expanded services. Who wouldn't? And yet there are strong voices in authority and public policy making which disagree with our strongly held beliefs.

It shouldn't come as a shock to some librarians that there are people who actively work against these positions. In the face of challenges to strongly held beliefs, however, human nature makes it easy to demonize and then refuse to even acknowledge those who hold differing opinions. But, sometimes all it takes is a slight change of perspective to move past this natural tendency. The following is a personal example.

As incoming chair of the International Relations Roundtable, I was invited to attend the OLA summer retreat in 2006. About a week prior to the retreat, I had cataloged a new book whose title, *How to Change the World,* immediately intrigued me. The title seemed ambitious enough but its subtitle even more so for it promised *how ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary results*. In reading the book I was struck by how the author, Robert E. Quinn, insisted that in order to affect what he called "deep" or "transformative change" within organizations we need to look from the point of view of those who oppose or resist that change.

In Quinn's model of organizational transformation, change agents often move through a regular succession of strategies. He calls the first strategy, "the telling strategy," the attempt to persuade others to change by using rational arguments. If this doesn't work, then they move to "the forcing strategy," where they try to use the power of authority or threats to cause change. Next, they may employ "the participating strategy" of dialog and negotiation. Quinn was surprised to discover however that this strategy did not always provide lasting change. Finally, he proposed the use of "the transforming strategy," part of which is to think yourself into the position of those who oppose change.

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Those of us who regularly read library literature and attend conferences often come across such words or phrases as "intellectual freedom" or "Library 2.0." We encounter them so often that we may stop thinking critically about their meanings and instead react emotionally and automatically to them.

Take the word "community," for example. What comes to mind when you think about community?

At the last meeting of the OLA summer retreat, Aletha Bonebrake, the current President of OLA, asked participants to brainstorm on the effects communities have on libraries and vice versa. Many of the usual responses were trotted out. By focusing on the groups that are traditionally supportive of libraries, there was a sense of "been there, done that." Many of the participants looked bored and frustrated. Hoping to find the proverbial elephant in the room that no one wanted to look at, I began searching for a way to change the direction of the meeting.

That's when I realized that the participants had not quite figured out what Aletha meant by the word "community." I understood that what she wanted us to do was to consider groups which we don't normally consider, groups which had "agendas," as she called them, different from our own as a profession. This tied in well with what I had just read in Quinn concerning a change of view. Some of these entities were easy to identify and name—Google, for example. Some of these groups were much more difficult to identify and we struggled with ways to name them. An example of that kind of group was "people who want to remove or restrict various materials in libraries." Labeling these people as "censors" we might have fallen into the trap of demonizing and therefore dismissing them as an important community to reach out to.

The meeting came alive. Although it was visibly uncomfortable for people to set their focus on these "communities," it was also invigorating. This was not the same old stuff. By slightly shifting the perspectives of the participants, the group was able to break through to a more successful mode of working together.

Most library directors—of public or private libraries—are well aware that there are those who oppose increases in funding. It is easy to fall into the trap of asking how dare they block what is obviously an intrinsic good? It is also easy to take the path of least resistance and talk only with those who support you. On the other hand, it takes courage to set aside your own emotions to engage in dialog with those who think differently. As Aletha says when she faces a library levy, the first action she takes as library director is to "talk with the enemy."

Could this present a model for the manner in which we as a group could begin to transform our profession? Do we need to think beyond being awed at the rapid changes in technology both in our profession and in society and consider what it would take to make deep changes from within? To compete and survive in uncertain economic times we need to move beyond the buzzword phrases so popular in our profession. To paraphrase Hilary Clinton, "It takes a whole community to support a library," not just select already supportive elements. But, in order to do that we need to stop dismissing the non-supportive elements.

Will you join me in talking with the enemy? One way to begin might be to open an online dialog describing the experiences librarians have had in dealing with those with opposing viewpoints. It just might spark a transformative change.

Reference

Quinn, R.E. (2000). *Change the world: how ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.