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Values For Libraries, Conference 2000 Featured Speaker

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VALUES FOR LIBRARIES

CONFERENCE 2000 FEATURED SPEAKER

Michael Gorman is the Dean of Library Services of California State University, Fresno.

This is a summary of his presentation to the ACL Conference, at Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California, June 13, 2000.

Values are useful and useable because they are standards by which we can assess what we do; measure how near we are to, or how far we are from, an objective; and compare our actions and our state of being to others and to the ideals represented by our values.

Mr. Gorman's paper dealt with the values of our profession based on a humanistic analysis of more than 40 years work in libraries and the scant but important body of writing on the philosophy, ethics, and values of librarianship.

In his view, the question of the future of librarianship is controversial and there is a discontinuity between academic theorists, "information scientists," and many library educators on the one hand and working librarians and library users on the other. The gap between the elitists and the workers in and users of libraries has never been greater.

His study of a number of writings on library philosophy and values combined with the experience of working for more

than 40 years in libraries has led him to the conclusion that the following are the basic library values:

- Stewardship
- Service
- Intellectual freedom
- Privacy
- Rationalism
- Commitment to literacy and learning

- Equity of access to recorded knowledge and information
- Democracy

He cited a number of writings that are skeptical of the more far-reaching predictions of the impact of technology on society and stated that the all-digital hype can only be countered by visions and values based on reason, experience, and history. Those values are necessary to sustain and encourage daily working life.

If real libraries were to be replaced by "virtual libraries," the consequences would include the abolition of the library as a place; human beings interacting with the records of humankind in isolation and communicating with other human beings electronically; and an economic model that is predicated on access to recorded knowledge and information being conditioned by, and dependent on, a fee-for-use basis. These are all negative consequences that would increase social alienation. It suits people who push the digital solution to everything to characterize libraries and librarians as place-bound, but saying does not make it so. Library service is rooted in places called libraries but has never been bound by those places. Gorman cited, for example, mobile libraries, services to the housebound and the incarcerated, telephone and email reference services, and inter-library resource sharing. One reason why we need and will continue to need places called libraries is that we will have to house, arrange and make accessible collections of physical library materials for the indefinite

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future. It is not generally acknowledged that those who push the all-digital future are, in fact, preaching a narrowing of choice. In their conception, electronic technology is a Procrustean bed into which all human communication has to be fitted, irrespective of its suitability for being so transformed for the desires and needs of the users of that form of communication. The essential point that he sought to make is that the history of human communication has been one of flowering and enrichment, one that welcomes electronic technology for its enhancement of communication and will welcome future methods of communicating yet undreamed of.

We also need the library as a place because we are human beings. Religious people may, and do, pray in private but most feel the need to assemble in churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, and other places dedicated to the idea of religion. He feels there is a parallel with libraries. They are places that embody learning, culture, and other important secular values and manifestations of the common good and that there is a human need to visit such places. He thinks it is worth at least a passing thought that TV evangelism and religious sites on the Internet have not led to calls to replace religious buildings with virtual houses of worship. Nor have shopping by catalogue, on TV, and on the Internet led to calls for virtual shopping malls. There is an enduring human need for human contact and appropriate buildings in which to foregather.

Those who are enthusiasts for the Net and the all-digital future seem to forget that many people live and work in circumstances that do not offer them a quiet place to study and think. For many such, the library is the only place that they have that is free from the distractions of everyday life. To the affluent and the comfortable, quiet space is freely available. To the poor and the struggling, such a set-up would be unattainable and replacing real

libraries and real library service with electronics is yet another fantasy, another cruel hoax. Mr. Gorman stated that we need more walls, not fewer; more library buildings with more to offer, and not phantom libraries catering to alienated and isolated individuals bereft of human warmth and

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a human context.

WHAT IS A VALUE?

There are, essentially, two types of value. The first, derived from faith, is inherently unanalysable. The values advanced by Mr Gorman are of the second type—that which derives from a community of interest and experience and is neither universal nor eternal. Such a value is something that is of deep interest (even self-interest) to an individual or a group. When a group of values are assembled, they form a “value system.”

WHY VALUES?

In application, values are useful and useable because they are standards by which we can assess what we do; measure how near we are to, or how far we are from, an objective; and compare our actions and our state of being to others and to the ideals represented by our values. Values also provide a basis for argument and discussion and a set of premises needed for fruitful interaction with other people and with other groups. In addition to their usefulness as yardsticks to measure our conduct, goals, and ways of life, values are also psychologically important to individuals and groups.

LIBRARY VALUES

Mr. Gorman then spoke briefly

about each of the values mentioned earlier.

Stewardship. Librarians have a unique role in preserving and transmitting the records of humankind on behalf of future generations. Many library values and missions are shared with other groups and interests, but librarians and archivists alone are dedicated to the preservation of recorded knowledge and information. If a substantial amount of the world's recorded knowledge and information were to be available in, and only in, digital form, we would be facing a crisis in the preserva-

tion of the human record that will dwarf anything that we have seen hitherto. It is imperative that librarians work together to produce a grand plan for future stewardship that contains practical and cost-effective means of ensuring that future generations know what we know.

Service. Librarianship is a profession defined by service. We serve both individuals and humanity as a whole in what we do. Every aspect of librarianship, every action that we take as librarians can and should be measured in terms of service. Our service can and should pervade our professional lives so that it becomes the yardstick by which we measure all our plans and projects and the means by which we assess success or failure of all our programs.

Intellectual freedom. Librarians believe in intellectual freedom because it is as natural to us, and as necessary to us, as the air that we breathe. Censorship is anathema to us because it inhibits our role in life—to make the recorded knowledge and information of humankind freely available to everyone, regardless of faith or the lack of it, ethnicity, gender, age, or any other of the categories that divide us one from the other.

Privacy. The confidentiality of library records is not the most sensational weapon in the fight, but it is important, both on practical and moral grounds. In practical terms, a lot of the relationship between a library and its patrons is based on trust and, in a free

throughout life; more and more able to interact with complex texts and, thereby, to acquire knowledge and understanding. Instead of seeing the world as divided between the illiterate, a-literate, and literate, we should see literacy as an open-ended range of possibilities in which librarians,

which, at different times, revolutionaries, women, and ethnic minorities fought are being vitiated by a culture of sound-bites, political ignorance, and unreasoning dislike of government. Libraries are part of the solution to this modern ill. As an integral part of the educational process and as a repository of the records of humankind, the library stands for the means to achieve a better democracy. All our other values and ideas are democratic values and ideas—intellectual freedom, the common good, service to all, the transmission of the human record to future generations, free access to knowledge and information, non-discrimination, etc.

The ideal library of the future will be one in which access to all materials and services (including electronic materials and services) will be freely available, without barriers imposed by lack of money or lack of technological sophistication.

society, a library user should be secure in trusting us not to reveal what is being read and by whom. On moral grounds, we must start with the premise that everyone is entitled to freedom of access, freedom to read texts and view images, and freedom of thought and expression. None of those freedoms can survive in an atmosphere in which library use is monitored and individual reading patterns are made known to anyone without permission.

Rationalism. Libraries are children of the Enlightenment and of rationalism. We stand, above all, for the notion that human beings are improved by the acquisition of knowledge and information and that no bar should be placed in their way. We stand for the individual human being pursuing whatever avenues of enquiry she or he wishes. We also stand for rationalism as the basis for all of our policies and procedures in libraries. Bibliographic control, collection development, reference work, library instruction, etc., are all based on rational approaches and the scientific method.

Commitment to literacy and learning. Literacy is not a simple question of being able to read or being unable to read but a process by which, once able to read, an individual becomes more and more literate

educators, and students work together to learn and become more learned using sustained reading of texts as a central part of the life of the mind.

Equity of access to recorded knowledge and information. The question of access to library materials and library services is linked to the importance of intellectual freedom to libraries. It is important to make everything accessible to everybody without fear or favor, but it is equally important to ensure that such access is practically possible and not biased in favor of the better-off or the more powerful. Such unfettered access is brought into question by some aspects of technology. The idea of charging for access to library materials and library services is much more popular today than it was before and the whole virtual library idea is, essentially an elitist construct that writes off sections of society as doomed to be information poor. The ideal library of the future will be one in which access to all materials and services (including electronic materials and services) will be freely available, without barriers imposed by lack of money or lack of technological sophistication.

Democracy. Democracy—"The American idea"—depends on knowledge and education. The rights for

CONCLUSION

Gorman ended by saying: Change is all about us, in libraries and in the wider world. We are dealing with new ways of doing things, with the incorporation or invasion of technology into all aspects of libraries and their services, and with the psychological dislocation that such pervasive change brings to all of us. But change is just concerned with processes; it is a serial event not the heart of what we are. All the more reason then, if we are to survive and thrive in such a time, to distinguish between the process of change on the one hand and the meaning and values of what we do on the other.

We will have new libraries and many of our programs and services will be new and different from what we have known, but our mission remains the same and the values that inform that mission remain the same. It is, it seems to me, a time, above all, for clear-headed appraisal and for the ability to distinguish between new methods and enduring principles.