

# In a Slightly Different Voice, or Perspectives

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ONE SATURDAY NOT LONG AGO my local newspaper, to which I frequently turn for omens about the larger culture, offered two fish stories for my consideration. The first described the plight of several million suicidal anchovies that swam into a shallow harbor on the California coast and suffocated there. The second article described an exclusive dating service in Boston that required for admission not only a certain level of income and a graduate degree but the ability to pass other tests as well. The head of the service justified this exclusivity by explaining that the service could not very well include auto mechanics and carpenters because women members would not date them. But blue-collar workers could take some comfort because they were not the only ones excluded: the service also refused to admit men born under the astrological sign of Pisces because the women members would not date them either!

Each of us could no doubt find other illustrations of curious phenomena.

Some would think, for example, of planks of the platform that emerged from the Republican Party convention in Dallas this summer, especially those that dealt with rights and liberties. There may even be one or two among us who believe that holding an annual SAA convention over the Labor Day weekend in the District of Columbia is another bit of . . . whimsy, perhaps. Each of these actions and decisions has different causes, ranging from shifting trade winds to the economic imperatives of hotels, but each can also be characterized as representing a certain loss of perspective.

These images are described not to suggest that the Society of American Archivists is a school of fish gasping for air in shallow waters. No one among us has urged that we drum out of the Society all men who are Pisces, and we certainly share the best values of the "new American spirit" even when we disagree vehemently about rights and liberties. And we came in record numbers to at-

tend the 1984 annual meeting for good reasons.

I do want to suggest, however, as politely as I am able, that I perceive some very occasional, ever so slight, loss of perspective among us.

My first observation concerns the information revolution, about which we have heard so much in recent years. Although I cannot agree with one speaker's assertion at the annual meeting that we archivists are at the center of the information revolution, I could agree that the information revolution is at one of our centers. The future, as we observed during the course of the annual meeting, is "now," and mainframes and microcomputers are realities for many of us. Few of us yet occupy offices that are truly paperless, but now many of us can at least imagine such an office. We can also imagine that automation will bring radical change in our ability to store and manipulate information, so radical that it will alter some of our conceptions of records.

But, as historians and historiography remind us, with change, even the most radical sort, there is continuity. Machine-readable records and floppy disks may dominate our offices and fill up our repositories, but we will continue to exchange cards on Valentine's Day and Christmas and to treasure old photo albums or home movies that families bring out on special occasions. People will still have emotional responses to these private "documents," just as they respond to public documents, such as the U.S. Constitution, that symbolize some aspect of our heritage. It is true that we will create and use many records solely for their information content. We will use and value others, however, because they are artifacts, physical links to a past we personally want to recall and our feelings about which we want future generations to understand

and share. The record as artifact will persist, and as such it deserves some share of the Society's attention and resources.

My second observation on perspective concerns the subject of our identity as a profession. The gentleman seated next to me on the flight from Minneapolis to Washington, D.C., for the annual meeting watched me for a while as I read my Goals and Priorities Task Force report and then asked, "What's an archivist?" My first thought was that President David B. Gracy had planted this man next to me to improve even further my support for the Task Force on Archives and Society of which he is so justifiably proud. I decided, nevertheless, to treat the question seriously, and I attempted to define an archivist. Think of archivists, I said, as first cousins of librarians, or think of us as archaeologists in reverse: we bury things for others to dig up later. In the conversation that followed, I learned that my fellow passenger was a computer programmer for Honeywell and that despite his being a member of our information community—and obviously a bright and curious one—he had never heard of an archivist. I was tempted to despair.

But then I remembered that I could not have defined an otolaryngologist until I met a woman who worked for one, and I knew little about sheet metal workers and welding until I began to build a brass cage for a garrulous African Grey parrot named Fred. I share the concern we express so frequently about our identity problems—I too have flinched at hearing archivists defined as historians with only moderate brain damage. I also recall the salaries we pay professional athletes and entertainers while two hundred million people face starvation this year and the rest of us face the promise of nuclear war and extinction. Gifted writers and artists can-

not earn enough to support their art, while anyone who can crank out a novel about high fashion becomes wealthy overnight. Reminding myself of these facts is useful because it prompts me to conclude that as an archivist I would be foolish to turn to this culture for any form of validation of the worthiness of my work and my profession. I—and we—need society at large for the resources necessary to do the work that often seems so little valued, and we will need all our skills and some additional luck to obtain even that much. The other rewards, especially dignity and recognition, we will have to find within ourselves or in such places as the Society of American Archivists.

My third observation concerns planning and vegetables. Many of us grew up, I suspect, confronted with vegetables as medicine, with the logic and necessity of the vitamins they contained, and with the threat, if all else failed, that we would damn well sit there at the table until we ate the peas or carrots or squash or whatever. I ate my lima beans and broccoli dutifully and more than a little resentfully without developing any fondness for them until they were presented a bit differently. Brown butter and caraway seeds reconciled me to Brussels sprouts and mushrooms and bacon made spinach positively endearing. This is to suggest not so much that our planning activities need a parsley garnish but that their presentation may need to be more considered and a bit less medicinal. Goals and objectives need to be related to daily work in repositories, and we should consult senior administrators in our profession about their experience with planning and their vision of the future. We also need to remind ourselves more frequently than we have lately about the varieties of custodians of records who make up the membership of the Society of American Archivists. The

needs of some, no matter how compelling, are not the needs of all.

Most important, as we consider planning, we need to remind ourselves that planning suggests—indeed promises—the ability to control. Elsie Freeman, one of the more eloquent of the Society's iconoclasts, recently observed that technocracy *is* the illusion of control, and that it can be a dangerous illusion. If we are not cautious, we may come to believe that if we are bright and diligent, we can control developments in the Society, the profession, and the world around us. I believe that if we are bright and diligent, we may be able to guide and promote good causes, but my reading of history and my acquaintance with large institutions forbid venturing much farther. I hope that collectively we will not pursue that illusion farther, lest it not only aggravate the loss of perspective but prompt a search for devils when the world proves once again that it cannot be controlled.

My final observation is that we need to laugh a bit more, for humor is the ultimate expression of a healthy sense of proportion. The items on the agenda of the Society and the profession must be taken seriously, but we should not be unduly grim. The state of public records, for example, is generally awful, but the National Archives and Records Service is almost free. Academic interest in history and historical records may have declined but a sense of history is flourishing where people study the experience of black women in the Midwest, ethnic and racial groups, gays and lesbians, local history, and any other history that has personal and group significance as well as cognitive value. We should recognize our deficiencies as a Society and profession in not planning or in not interpreting our work effectively, but we should not forget that we have performed good works together.

For all the opportunities that the coming year presents and because of all the good works and good times we have shared, I look forward to serving as president and to promoting the interests of all the members of the Society.