Perspective

SCOTT CLINE, editor

Of Archivists and Other Termites

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Abstract: Archivists have long sought greater public awareness and understanding of archives, believing that this would lead to increased support. Generally, though, demonstrations of archival competence have not yielded adequate resources. In our focus on scholarly users and executive resource allocators we have ignored natural allies whose urge to remember is expressed through historic preservation, antique collecting, genealogy, and reading history and biography. Borrowing perspectives from biology and philosophy can help us in our quest and give us another sense of the meaning and value in our work. We must broaden our perspective to see our work as serving a universal human need to connect among people and across time through acts of memory.

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COMPLAINTS ABOUT NOT BEING understood or appreciated have long been commonplaces of archival literature, conversation, and bad jokes.[1] As early as 1848, a committee of England's House of Commons complained that only a fraction of the public understood the extent and value of the nation's historical documents. "Our public records excite no interest," the authors reported, not even among those whose records are well maintained and whose interests are protected by them.[2] In another country, in the next century, Margaret Cross Norton, state archivist of Illinois, echoed her English predecessors. For most people, Norton said, "the term archives still connotes merely musty, dirty files of loose papers and decayed leather folios." If ordinary people had any sense that archives had value, it was only because historians kept telling them so.[3]

Archivists have sought understanding of their work for its own sake, but especially because we believe that if archives were better understood, society would appreciate their value and provide additional resources for chronically undersupported archival programs. "We are recognizing," said David B. Gracy II, that "*the cause* of our inability to provide adequate care" for the nation's records lies in substantial measure in the lack of general awareness and understanding of them.[4]

In this century our primary means of gaining support has been the proverbial old-fashioned one, to earn it by improving our institutions and ourselves. Earlier generations of archivists and manuscripts curators built what is now an impressive network of public and private repositories; we aren't finished yet, but we have made an admirable beginning.[5] More recently, and very deliberately, we have tried to improve our standing in society by improving individual archivists, giving them better education and training, better planning and management skills, and a program for certification. A few archivists may have been driven to this by status anxiety, and some understandably want to improve their salaries, but most archivists seek improvement in order to gain resources for their work. We have hoped collectively, and probably against the record of our experience, that when we have enough "good" archives, enough good labor, women's, and municipal archives staffed by enough competent, dedicated professionals, we will reach a kind of critical social mass that finally yields the resources we need.

Efforts to build programs and improve practitioners have been augmented by those who have contributed to a small literature about the purpose, meaning, and value of archives.[6] In the years since we developed a sense that we were a craft, then a profession, we have achieved a rough consensus about our purpose: to bring records into professional custody, to paraphrase Richard Berner, so that they might be used.[7]

[1]My personal favorite is that an archivist is a historian with moderate brain damage.

[2]T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, 1956), 6-7. Although 1948 is early in American archival development, Schellenberg reports that historians in England had worked by then for two centuries to win public acceptance of archives.

[3]Margaret Cross Norton, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management*, ed. Thornton W. Mitchell (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975), 4.

[4]David B. Gracy II, "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 10.

[5]Susan Grigg, "Archival Practice and the Foundation of Historical Method," *Journal of American History* 78 (June 1991): 228-39.

[6]See, for example, Schellenberg, Chapter I, "Importance of Archival Institutions," 3-10, and Chapter XII, "Appraisal Standards," 133-60, and William L. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 124-33.

[7]Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 122.

But we have never achieved a consensus about the meaning and value of what we do, and the advent of what is called the Information Age has aggravated an old quarrel about whether the value of archives is essentially cultural or essentially utilitarian, about whether we are society's collective memory or bureaucracy's favorite child.[8]

The lack of consensus about meaning and value has hindered our efforts to explain ourselves. We have invested relatively little in thinking about meaning and value as compared with, for example, arrangement and description. Those who participate in our occasional discussions have been mostly archivists, joined by a few colleagues from related fields, and we have seen the audience for the debate as composed primarily of scholars and the executives who control our budgets, that same local internal audience we have been attempting to impress by improving archival programs and practitioners. Given our meager effort, our own persisting division, and a lack of clarity, especially about cultural value, it is not surprising that we have not been able, even when so inclined, to communicate to the public the value of what we do.

By the late 1960s some archivists began to search for ways to communicate that were less old-fashioned and much more direct. Under a general rubric of outreach, archivists exhibited materials, contemplated public relations campaigns, and invested in education of potential new audiences, not only to increase use of records but to build a base of support for the long term.[9] But it was the election in 1983 of David B. Gracy II as president of the Society of American Archivists that marked an important point in outreach. Gracy, who had long been concerned with the image and place of archivists in society, appointed a Task Force on Archives and Society whose mandate was "the quest for public understanding of archives."[10]

The task force began by commissioning an in-depth, face-to-face survey of forty-four executives from for-profit and nonprofit government agencies and nongovernment organizations. Each executive who was surveyed controlled the funding of an archives or had strong influence over its funding.[11]

There was surprising good news in the Levy Report, as the survey is known. The executives responded that they understood what an archives was, who used it, and why it and its uses mattered. They praised the competence and dedication of the archivists in such a way that one senses, even from the printed page, that the praise is genuine and not *pro forma*. Much less reassuring was the executives' belief that their archives received a fair share of the organization's resources, a belief one imagines that most of the archivists did not share.[12]

When asked about the general public's understanding of archives, the executives contrasted it to their own relatively sophisticated one and sounded a familiar note: the general public does not know much about archives and, if it does at all, carries the old impressions of dustiness and dead ac-

[8]For a helpful summary and introduction, see Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Tradition in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991): 160-75.

[9]See, for example, Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111-23; and Freeman, "Buying Quarter-Inch Holes: Public Support Through Results," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 89-97.

[10]James E. Fogerty, "Report of the Task Force on Archives and Society," *SAA Newsletter* (May 1987), 15.

[11]Social Research, Inc., "The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions" (unpublished report submitted to the Society of American Archivists, December 1984), 1.

[12]"The Image of Archivists," 5-7, 21-23, 43-45, *passim*.

cumulation. To the public, archives seem "arcane," and archivists, people who spend their lives "poring over old pieces of paper in a damp, dark cellar." This perception did not unduly trouble the executives, for they were convinced that most people would never have a need for archives in their daily lives.[13]

Broadening Our Definition

The methods we have used to gain understanding and support seem to have brought us to an impasse: we continue to lack adequate resources for our work, and the solutions proposed may help—have helped—some archivists in some repositories, but they are not enough. Achieving power through competence and expertise, as the authors of the Levy Report recommended, will help archival programs in some organizations, particularly those corporations we imagine as tough-minded, but they are less likely to be as effective in persuading small liberal arts colleges and nonprofit organizations to fund archives.[14] No one can fault attempts to improve our programs and ourselves, but excellence has been no guarantee of security. For too many archivists, only one executive or one bad budget year stands between the minimum we can do and disaster. Investment in long-term education and public relations programs promises a gradual growth in, and cumulative collective awareness of, archives—but that is still only a promise.

One source of difficulty is the heritage of the archival profession itself. Our language and our traditions focus us inward, primarily on the records we keep: how to acquire, appraise, arrange and describe, and preserve them, and how to promote their use. Our principal word, *archives*, is from the Greek word *archeion*, which means records or the place where the records are kept. From philosophy, the mother discipline, we have received a sense of memory as place and an abiding interest in memory's content and accuracy. St. Augustine's "great cave of memory" is our damp, dark cellar or splendid new facility, and with historians, those from our sister discipline, we have devoted most of our energy to what is in the facility and how it is used.[15] Our more recent interest in ourselves as a profession has increased our tendency to look inward. As we focus, narrow, and define our work and interests, we are more separated from a general public and less likely to see connections with others.

We need to find other avenues, and we might start by shifting our attention from the place and its contents, users, and keepers to the act of keeping records, to the universality of what I tentatively call acts of memory.[16] Many of us, especially those working in manuscripts repositories, have noticed, as Thomas Kreneck did of Mexican-American families in Houston, that nearly every family and every person has saved some fragment of memory. Susan Grigg noted that nearly every Smith College alumna had kept a scrapbook that she wished to give back to the college. Darlene Clark Hine, director of the Black Women in the Midwest collecting project, saw the same phenomenon. Although society had placed little value on African-American history, especially the history of African-American women, most of the women who cooperated in her project had kept some-

[13]"The Image of Archivists," Chapter III, "Public Awareness of Archives," 53-61.

[14]"The Image of Archivists," ii-iii, *passim*.

[15]*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed., s.v. "memory."

[16]Among those who have considered the importance of the act are Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40-46; Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378-92; and James M. O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10-25.

thing, and they knew of others who had too.[17]

New Perspectives on Social Memory

Once we begin to look around in nontraditional places, we can find other acts of memory. Those who collect baseball cards and cranberry glass and those who regularly visit classic car shows and roadside historic sites are also engaged in acts of memory. To the large numbers who visit and use archives we can add those who write family history, keep orally the memories of their neighborhood, and read history and biography.[18] We can include those who serve on city heritage preservation commissions and the thousands of historic buildings and districts they protect. With a new arithmetic we can see how large is society's investment in archives and history and remembering.

Archival literature and traditions don't help us think about the implications of these acts of memory, but the work of noted biologist Lewis Thomas and philosopher Harry Frankfurt does.[19] Lewis Thomas helps us conceive of these ubiquitous acts as one of the large collective enterprises of the human species. Philosopher Harry Frankfurt's work lets us focus on the act of remembering rather than on what is remembered, how it is used, and by whom. Whether we use their conceptions strenuously, or for their heuristic value, we can gain much from the possibilities they offer us.

Termites as collective achievers. In the early twentieth century the eminent biologist William Morton Wheeler invented the term "Superorganism" to describe the collective behavior of colonies of social insects, among them termites, ants, and bees. These social insects, Wheeler said, were "somehow equivalent to vast, multi-creatured organisms, possessing a collective intelligence and a gift for adaptation far superior to the sum of the individual inhabitants." According to Thomas, this became "a central notion" in entomology for a quarter of a century before it "abruptly dropped out of fashion and sight."[20]

Thomas proposed to revive this "huge idea" and to expand its possibilities to humans. In *Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* he offers examples from social insect life to prompt us to see human societies as organisms. As an example, he says, consider the termite. The individual termite is "a tiny, blind, relatively brainless" creature with little to recommend it. But bring together enough termites and these biological zeros will construct edifices as grand for their size as Manhattan is for us. And such collective behavior is not limited to insects, Thomas adds. Slime-mold, school fish such as herring, and flocking birds engage in similar behavior where, as we might say, the whole is significantly greater than the sum of its parts, or where, as Thomas says, the "individual organisms [are] self-transcending in their relation to a dense society." If fish and birds and slime-mold can do it, Thomas asks, why not humans?[21]

Thomas believes that the principal way in which humans behave as social organ-

[17]Thomas H. Kreneck, "Documenting a Mexican-American Community: The Houston Example," *American Archivist* 48 (Summer 1985): 278. Susan Grigg and Darlene Clark Hine provided this information to the author in 1984 and 1985.

[18]Many visitors to archives come not to do research that adds to human knowledge but to see *and feel* a grandparent's letters.

[19]Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), and Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80-94.

[20]Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, 149.

[21]Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, 150, 157, 13-15. Perhaps not coincidentally, the termite bears a striking resemblance to the ant that David Gracy chose as the animal whose attributes most closely parallel archivists' (because the "little ole ant . . . could move the rubbertree plant"). David B. Gracy II, "What's Your Totem? Archival Images in the Public Mind," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 17-23.

isms or Superorganisms is in building language. Some of our collective behavior—for example, building cathedrals in twelfth-century Europe—is chosen and optional. In that century cathedral building seemed a right and necessary activity, one that absorbed the time and resources of large numbers of people, though the point of all the activity, Thomas says, is now largely lost. But language is not optional, Thomas asserts. Language is "the biologically specific activity of human beings," the equivalent of the nests termites build or the hives bees construct. We are "genetically programmed" not just to use language but to build it, whether or not we are conscious of our act of "conjoined intelligence."[22]

To support his contention, Thomas offers evidence from biology and the evolution of language that is too technical and lengthy to detail here. One example does suggest what he is about; it is the origin and derivation of "the most famous and worst of the four-letter Anglo-Saxon unprintable words." That word, Thomas says,

> comes from *peig*, a crawling, wicked Indo-European word meaning evil and hostile, the sure makings of a curse. It becomes *poikos*, then *gafaihaz* in Germanic and *gefah* in Old English, signifying "foe." It turned from *poik-yos* into *faigjaz* in Germanic, and *faege* in Old English, meaning fated to die, leading to "fey." It went on from *fehida* in Old English to become "feud," and *fokken* in Old Dutch.[23]

The word, which began as "evil" and "hostile," evolved into a damning expletive. We may treat the word as an obscenity, Thomas says, but "buried within it is a powerful curse meaning something like 'May you die before your time.'"[24]

The general notion we have about the evolution of language is that words change and evolve without human agency, by some accident of the tribe moving over the mountain, or local misunderstanding of a stranger's pronunciation of "river." Thomas believes, however, that language is the product of human activity, even if most of the activity is yet unconscious. With language, he says, we are building something as huge and grand for us as the castle is for the termite. We do it by fits and starts, erring as we go. Each of us has a twig or bit of mud to carry with us.[25]

Just as Thomas sees our Superorganism building language, I believe we are also constructing another edifice. All of our individual acts of memory, from neighborhood reminiscence to oral history, from keeping a family scrapbook to keeping archives, cumulate to a body of human memory that is both physical and nonmaterial. We are only partially conscious of this collective act of conjoined intelligence, though some members of our species now speak of "collective memory." Some of the lead workers—archivists and historians among them—are a bit nervous about some of the contributions of the drones, for example, the commemorative plates and the uglier uses of nostalgia. But we have made a beginning, Thomas would say. We are still amateurs, but we are proceeding.

The importance of caring and remembering. Harry Frankfurt's work in philosophy complements that of Lewis Thomas by letting us focus on the act of remembering. Frankfurt proposed to add a third field of inquiry to philosophy's two traditional areas, epistemology and ethics. Epistemology, says Frankfurt, concerns what we believe, and ethics concerns how we behave towards others. His third field, which he has not named but which refers to ide-

[22]Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, 104-05, 15.
[23]Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, 160-61.
[24]Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, 161.

[25]Thomas also believes that the human species uses conjoined intelligence to construct art, music, and information.

als, concerns what we care about, what we do with ourselves rather than with others.[26]

The two essential concepts in Frankfurt's third field are caring and importance. For a person to care "presupposes *both* agency and self-consciousness." Caring, Frankfurt says, is prospective: the person who cares assumes there will be a future. A person cares about something "in a complex set of cognitive, affective, and volitional dispositions and states," the latter of which interests Frankfurt most. Can we choose, he wonders, what we care about? Can we control, by an act of will, what we care about?[27]

Frankfurt uses the idea of volitional necessity to address his questions about choosing to care. When Martin Luther made his famous statement, "Here I stand. *I can do no other*," he did not mean, Frankfurt argues, that he was compelled to act by someone holding a gun to his head. Rather, given his identity and his sense of his own integrity, he had no choice but to act as he did. Luther was paradoxically both free and not free to make his stand.[28]

Frankfurt's concept of importance, which he describes as so fundamental that it may defy analysis, nevertheless seems simpler on its surface. What we care about may or may not be independently important to us; that is, someone may care passionately about her health, which has an independent importance. She may care equally strongly about bird watching or stamp collecting, which do not have the same independent importance. But if she does care, Frankfurt says, birds and stamps become important because the act of caring is so central to human life. By caring about something, we confer importance on it.[29]

I think acts of memory are a form of caring, or perhaps a different but related act which is similar in importance to caring. Archivists may care about documenting women's history or the Gulf War, activities that have independent importance. Other people may care about—remember—cranberry glass, types of Model A cars, or visiting the birthplaces of presidents. If acts of memory are a form of caring, and caring is central to us as human, then people who care about antiques and classic cars confer importance on them simply by caring and wanting to remember them.

Archivists can and should use the ideas of Lewis Thomas, Harry Frankfurt, and others we may identify to modify the tradition that has turned us inward. We need not abjure our specific institutional missions to see our collective work as cultural, as one crucial part of a web of connectedness among people and across time. We can go on building repositories, storing and retrieving information, and helping researchers add to knowledge. But we should also think about and try to explain acts of memory to broader audiences, to help them put their fondness for cranberry glass, historic sites, and family scrapbooks into a larger context. Over time I believe a more general public understanding of acts of memory would increase the resources given to archivists to do their work. Even if it did not, even if the public behaved as the Levy Report's executives did, we would have made an important contribution to society.

Seeing archives as part of a larger phenomenon gives us another way to find meaning and value in our work. Acts of memory as I define them stem from an individual and collective sense of time, which is ultimately a sense of our own mortality, that most profound biological and existential fact of human existence. We express our sense of time and mortality in our children, simply by having them and seeing in them a connection with the future. We also write poems and nov-

[26]Frankfurt, *What We Care About*, 80-81.
[27]Frankfurt, *What We Care About*, 83-85.
[28]Frankfurt, *What We Care About*, 86-88, 91.
[29]Frankfurt, *What We Care About*, 92-94.

els, make music, sculpt from marble and clay, trying through all the forms of art to transcend our finiteness and mortality, to share our human condition with future generations. Our individual and collective acts of memory are another expression of mortality—and of solidarity with our species in time.

These thoughts on archivists and other termites are but a beginning. I hope they will provoke a new conversation about the meaning and value of what we do. I hope that what may emerge from our discussion and thought and research is less a theory of archives than a new way to connect what we do with this awesome species behavior. My great hope is that someday, to the delight of Lewis Thomas, we add to our language a new term: *acts of memory*. In our dictionaries that term will be designated "(archv.)." It will stipulate that these behaviors, conscious or not, express an individual's, a group's, or a culture's experience of time.