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# OUR ENDURING VALUES REVISITED

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# OUR ENDURING VALUES REVISITED

LIBRARIANSHIP IN AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD

MICHAEL GORMAN



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*About the cover:* Presiding over the Library of Congress from a central position is Minerva, the Roman Goddess of learning and wisdom. In this mosaic by Elihu Vedder, she is portrayed as the Minerva of Peace and appears as the guardian of civilization with her armor partly laid aside. Image and description courtesy of the Library of Congress; photograph by Carol M. Highsmith. Cover design by Kimberly Thornton.

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This book is dedicated to the memory

*of my brother*

**DAVID GORMAN**

1946–2005

*and my friends*

**COLIN ANDREW**

1933–2013

**JOHN GARFORTH**

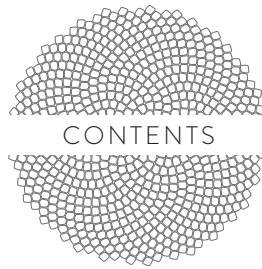
1934–2014

**BRYAN McENROE**

1941–2011

Let their memory be a blessing.





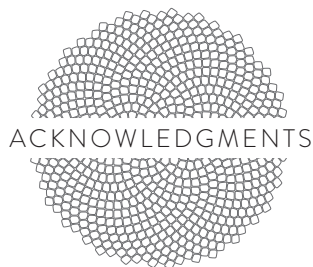
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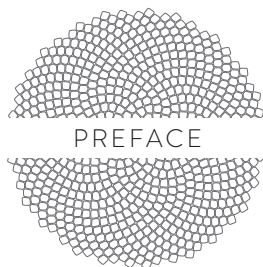
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*Most of all, I thank my wife, Anne Reuland, for too many things to list.*



## PREFACE

# THE WORLD TURNED RIGHT SIDE UP?

There is no shortage of people prophesying the “death of libraries,” some with glee, some with sadness, and some just consumed by techno-lust and laissez-faire economics. One such is someone called Tim Worstall, who called, in *Forbes*, the magazine for greed-heads, for the closing of public libraries; those libraries to be replaced by free subscriptions to “Kindle Unlimited”—an Amazon.com product giving access to more than 600,000 e-texts.<sup>1</sup> A more serious person, Dr. Mark Miodownik, a British materials scientist and broadcaster, stated in an interview broadcast on the BBC World Service,<sup>2</sup> that hackerspaces (communal workshops also known as “makerspaces”) are “more important than public libraries” and that cities should convert their public libraries to hackerspaces. He argued that everyone had “access to more books than they could ever want” and could download them and read them on their smartphones in their homes at any time. Also, that there is universal access to “information” but not to the skills, tools, and materials needed to make useful objects in order to



transform citizens from consumers to makers and society from a culture of waste and landfills to a culture of recycling and conservation.

I wrote *Our enduring values* in the late 1990s. It was published by ALA in 2000, the last year of the twentieth century and of the second millennium of the Common Era. In the decade and a half since, the world has endured the savagery of September 11, 2001; the deaths of millions in wars and other conflicts, many waged in and over the cobbled-together countries that are the poisonous legacy of colonialism and imperialism; the almost complete collapse of the post–World War II financial architecture and the Great Recession that cupidity-fueled collapse caused; the ideologically and economically driven sustained attack on the public services of which libraries are such an ornament; the economic rise of China, run by communists who are much better at capitalism than the capitalists of the West; the looming and multifaceted environmental challenges of anthropomorphic climate change; the promise of the Arab Spring and its repression; and a variety of other unsettling global and national societal happenings and trends. Since I wrote that book, we have been blessed (or otherwise?) with iPod and iTunes (2001); Facebook (2004); YouTube (2005); Twitter (2006); the mass adoption of smartphones and streaming video (2003–); devices for downloading and reading e-books, such as the Amazon Kindle (2007) and Barnes & Noble Nook (2009); the enormous economic reach of the advertising-company-with-a-search-engine Google, which has contrived to hit brand gold by becoming a verb that is the near-universal substitute for “use a search engine”; Wikipedia (2001) and the whole social media, hive-mind, crowd-sourcing, “wisdom of the crowds” thing, felicitously summed up as “digital Maoism” by Jaron Lanier;<sup>3</sup> a huge and lucrative videogame industry; giant flat-screen digital televisions foreshadowed by Ray Bradbury (and the Jetsons) decades before; three-dimensional “printing” (relatively inexpensive consumer devices available since 2010)—all these, variations on them, and many more digital innovations great and small adding up to a complex world with endless opportunities for infotainment, commercial exploitation on a massive scale, and—to put the case for positive results—the creation of giant, ever-connected “communities” and new dimensions of education and creativity.

No library is an island, and libraries and the practice of librarianship have been rocked, socked, shaken, and stirred by all these societal, economic, and technological changes. Very few libraries can say that they are

better off than they were before the Great Recession eight years ago, and many—or even most—will tell you they are much worse off. Many of our colleagues have lost their jobs; many have had to take jobs that pay substantially less than they and their contributions are worth; and many graduates of LIS programs cannot find jobs, have had to take part-time positions, or have had to move to places far from where they really want to live. For the first time in my more than fifty library years, I have hesitated when asked if I would recommend someone to enter an LIS master's program. All this when public libraries are increasingly society's only serious attempt to bridge the digital divide that threatens to deny the advantages of the brave new technological world to the poor, the rural, the armies of the unemployed, and all the others whose noses are pressed up against the windows of the glittering salons of the digerati. All this when academic libraries are under the unprecedented strain of trying to do more with shrunken budgets, aggravated by the pressure of managements and IT departments obsessed with shiny and new tools and lacking any idea of the ends to which their digital means are to be applied. All this when cuts in government spending and savage corporate retrenchments have attenuated or abolished many special libraries. So it goes, but libraries battle on, boats against the current, continuing to do good work and serve individuals and communities.

In the preface to *Our enduring values*, I wrote of the defeated British and German troops marching away after the surrender of Cornwallis in Yorktown in October 1781. They played an old British march called “The world turned upside down.” Fifteen years ago, I wondered if the world of libraries had been turned upside down and if the time had come for librarians to beat a retreat. I did not believe that then, and I do not believe that now. The ideas that the digital revolution has made libraries irrelevant, that libraries can no longer be afforded, or that libraries are no longer needed seem, at best, based on ignorance and the willful avoidance of realities and, at worst, the malign triumph of ignorance, materialism, and philistinism. I believe that librarians have a duty, now more than ever, to organize convincing rebuttals to those arguments and to revisit the values that inform our profession. That is why I have revisited and updated a book from the last years of the twentieth century.

The magnitude of the task ahead can be seen in the remarks of Dr. Miodownik, the respected and influential scholar referred to in the first paragraph of this preface. He is neither an ignoramus nor a vandal. Quite

the reverse: he is an advocate of an enlightened turn away from consumerism and waste in favor of communitarian effort to restore the dignity of labor that would have been familiar to, and welcomed by, the likes of William Morris.<sup>4</sup> Why would such a man call for his workshops to take over public library buildings? (Rather than taking over, say, dollar stores, payday loan shops, off-track betting centers, or any of the many other institutions that prey upon the poor?) The simple answer is that he has bought into a number of cybermyths (in this case, that “everything” is available, free and freely, on the Internet; that “everybody” can find what she wants with ease; and that “everyone” can apply the critical thinking necessary for the productive use of “everything”) and that he, as with the majority of even highly educated people, has only the sketchiest idea of what libraries are and what they do, and of the role of librarians.

The following examination of our professional values is intended to illuminate the present and likely future state of libraries as we adjust to a world that seems to be turned upside down with some regularity without ever being quite the right side up.

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## NOTES

1. Worstall, Tim. “Close the libraries and buy everyone an Amazon Kindle unlimited subscription.” *Forbes.com*. [www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2014/07/18/close-the-libraries-and-buy-everyone-an-amazon-kindle-unlimited-subscription/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2014/07/18/close-the-libraries-and-buy-everyone-an-amazon-kindle-unlimited-subscription/) (July 14, 2014; consulted August 21, 2014).
2. On “The life scientific” program. March 11, 2014.
3. Lanier, Jaron. “Editing digital Maoism: the hazards of the new online collectivism.” *Edge: the third culture* (May 29, 2006). <http://edge.org/conversation/digital-maoism-the-hazards-of-the-new-online-collectivism>.
4. See, for example: Morris, William. “The development of modern society.” *Commonweal*, volume. 6, numbers. 236–240 (July–August 1890); and Wilde, Oscar. “The soul of man under socialism” (1891). <http://libcom.org/library/soul-of-man-under-socialism-oscar-wilde> (consulted July 14, 2014).



# VALUES

Let us begin with some definitions:

- *Values* are beliefs and ideals that are major, significant, lasting, and shared by the members of a group. Values define what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable for that group. They are the foundation of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and policies within that group and act as commonly held bases for those attitudes and policies.
- In psychological terms, values represent the way that members of the group define themselves both within the group and within the wider society.
- A *value system* is a set of those beliefs and ideals that has been adopted and/or has evolved within a group as a system to guide actions, behaviors, and preferences in all situations.
- *Ethics* are moral beliefs held by a group or community (what is good and bad or right or wrong) and a definition of the moral duties (to do or not do certain actions) that stem from those beliefs.
- *Principles* are starting points for reasoning or guides for thinking and action.

Values, ethics, principles, and morality are related, overlapping, and intertwined concepts. They are often circular in that they define each in terms of the others. For example, *Webster's Third* defines “ethics” as “the discipline that deals with what is good and bad or right and wrong or with moral duty . . . a set of values . . .”<sup>1</sup> I, in common with most of the rest of humanity, am not qualified to pronounce on morality and have no intention of doing so here. That reluctance to deal with moral questions is one of reasons why I am more concerned here with values than with ethics, principles, or morality. In my opinion, the study of values is concentrated on what is valuable and desirable to do and to avoid more than it is with matters of morality and other abstractions. In other words, defining, agreeing on, and acting on values can be of practical utility rather than dealing with what are ultimately abstract matters that belong in the realms of philosophy, theology, and aesthetics.

## THE WIDER WORLD

Libraries, library services of all kinds, and librarianship are inextricably of the world and cannot exist without context. They are part of, and affected for good and ill, by the societies they serve, the communities in which they live, the countries in which they exist, and the wider world. Though libraries have undergone dramatic change (heavily influenced by technological change) in the last decades, those changes must be seen as influenced by wider changes in society, politics, lifestyles, and every other aspect of human life. In 1999, I listed trends and changes that had made an impact on humanity in the previous quarter of a century. The following updated list contains many of those changes (the originals listed in *italics*):

- the globalization of trade
- the consequent flight of manufacturing to low-paid developing countries
- the change from industrialized to service economies in the developed world
- the economic, political, and military rise of China
- *the creation of an interdependent world economy*
- the explosive growth of social media

- the economic centrality of the online world
- the rise of global terrorism
- dramatic increases in cybercrime
- the “War on Terror” and its subsequent actual wars
- *the transformation, for good and ill, of societies (politically and economically) in Eastern Europe and Asia*
- advances in medicine that have increased life spans and led to the aging of populations
- the success of the women’s movement in developed countries
- *the advent and sweeping power of global information-technology-based companies*
- the shape-shifting of higher education
- the “death of privacy”
- the financial collapse that led to the Great Recession
- *the rise of fundamentalism across the world*
- the current and future impact of anthropogenic climate change
- the Arab Spring

It is remarkable how many of those trends have endured and developed since 2000 (including a number of the trends given in roman above that are extensions or rewordings of those listed fifteen years ago). It is also obvious that many of these changes are driven—or, at least, influenced by—technological innovation and that many of them are entwined with others. Globalization depends on communication technologies. The change from manufacturing to service industries in the developed world is technology driven. Terrorists have websites that appeal to and develop would-be terrorists. Cybercrime, cyberbullying, and the assault on privacy are some of the other monsters that result from technological change. We live, ineluctably, in a world in which the blessings and afflictions of technology pervade our lives. It is important to maintain perspective and remember that crime, bullying, intrusions into private lives, terrorism, transnational companies, booms and busts and the other contradictions of capitalism, transnational communications, and all the rest existed long before computer networks were ever dreamed of. Closer to our concerns, the recurrent rows about “filtering” and other forms of preventing access are peculiar to the online environment, but the desire to censor for religious, political, and moral reasons has been with us for centuries.

## WHY VALUES?

Fifteen years ago, I wrote that we live in a time of change, and it is obvious that the times have been a-changing ever since—and show no sign of ceasing to do so. That churning has meant that things and ideas that used to be certain are no longer. People now in middle age can remember a time when printed newspapers, IBM, Dodge cars, South American dictators, cameras with film in them, the big TV networks, cursive writing, VHS tapes, the solidity of banks, and public libraries were central and seemingly immutable parts of everyday life. I can still remember the shock I experienced two years ago when my then seven-year-old grandson, on seeing a bottle of Parker Washable Blue ink on my desk next to my fountain pen, asked me “What’s that blue stuff?” Given uncertainty and the indefinite prospect of more in the totality of our lives and in the world of libraries, it is important to find at least a few truly unchanging underpinnings for our profession to be an agreed framework for discussion and, I would hope, a pathway on which to proceed with hope and confidence.

Humankind intensifies the search for meaning when it is prosperous. That search intensifies in societies in which the basic physical needs—food, housing, education, health care—are widely available. Religion may be the opium of the poor, but it seems to offer, even in the vaguest terms (e.g., “spirituality”), not an escape from the rigors of life for the prosperous but an enhancement when one is well-off enough to come to the idea that material things are not enough. It can also be a consolation for those who fear change. Outside and beyond religion, individuals and groups seek principles, ethics, values, and determining beliefs. The results of that search not only define individuals and groups and give their various lives meaning, once they are beyond the struggle for survival; but also give them the means of overcoming the fear of change or even for preparing for the unknown changes to come. In libraries, a microcosm of the wider world, we are buoyed and even enhanced by technology while being challenged and threatened by it simultaneously. We are experiencing changes that most of us understand partially, if at all. This is a fertile environment for snake-oil sales pitchers of various kinds—library conferences these days feature a gallery of hucksters and Gladwellian one-trick ponies awash in tipping points, ten roads to success, and all the rest of the jargon-ridden eyewash. We have undergone a series of seismically negative economic events; and we

are buffeted and worn down by in-group verbiage, new demands for new services, febrile searches for the next shiny new technological innovation (the one that replaces the one we were so excited about six months ago), and, above all, that queasy, omnipresent, indefinable sense of the ground shifting under our feet in the world of libraries and in our whole lives. I do not claim that a clear grasp of our fundamental and enduring values is a panacea for our ills, but I do believe they provide a foundation upon which productive and satisfying library lives can be built.

## **WHEN VALUES ARE DANGEROUS**

Values are, as I have stated, lasting and fundamental beliefs and ideals that can be the basis for positive action and for making work more fulfilling. In thinking about values and taking action based on values, however, we walk an intellectual tightrope that stretches between lives made dreary and unfulfilling by the absence of beliefs and ideals and the lives of those to whom values have become absolutes and ideals and beliefs have curdled into fanaticism. We must, in my view, have beliefs and ideals, but we should never seek to impose those beliefs and ideals on the unwilling. There is a vast difference between defending one's values and making others conform to those values. Take, for example, the question of intellectual freedom—the belief that all people should be free to read what they wish, write what they wish, and think what they wish. Librarians, of all people, should be unyielding defenders of that value against those who wish to restrict reading, expression, and thought. What of people who sincerely believe—for religious, political, or other reasons—that some texts and some expressions of thought should be censored? In defending intellectual freedom, are we imposing our beliefs and stifling theirs? No, because no librarian would insist on someone reading a text that she found offensive. It is the censors who insist on imposing their values, not the believers in intellectual freedom. The distinction lies right there—the point at which beliefs become rancid is when they are imposed on others, something common to fundamentalists of all stripes. Librarians should always seek to open avenues of thought and research and stand against those who wish to close them. In other words, values that open avenues and broaden enquiry should always have preference over beliefs that seek to shut off avenues and narrow enquiry.



## LE PLUS ÇA CHANGE . . .

The clichéd Chinese curse concerning “interesting times” appears to be always in effect. Reading the literature of any place at any time will tell you that people in each of those places and each of those times believed they were living in an era of unprecedented change. It may have been ever so, but the change we experience today is always more fraught than past change, for the simple reason that we know the results of past change but have no way of telling the outcomes of the changes we are experiencing, still less the changes that are forecast. However you look at it, change happens and more change is coming. There are two ways of dealing with these inevitabilities. The first is to be passive and reflexive, allowing what happens to happen. The other is to plan for and, where possible, to control and guide change. This is not a book on planning—there are far too many of them already—but a book that urges consideration of the values that underlie our work as librarians and library workers, because planning can never be effective in the absence of intellectual and principled underpinning. Without that, planning dissolves into the kind of jargon-infested Kabuki that darkens the soul. Human beings need a rationale for their activities because that rationale can raise work above drudgery and wage slavery and lift human lives to a higher level. This is by no means to advocate the veiling of burdensome toil or the sanctification of unnecessary labor, but to advance the idea that service and other values have a power to validate useful work. I imagine that, in our hearts, we librarians and library workers know that the results of what we do are useful and good and that the cumulation of our good and useful working lives is far greater than the sum of its parts. Despite this, in my experience of fifty and more years in libraries, there are now more of us who question what we do—the bases of our working lives—than ever before. Two words account for this phenomenon: change and uncertainty.

## VALUES AND VALUE

In every aspect of our lives, we live in an age of uncertainty. The prosperity of the 1990s and the end of the Cold War were succeeded by the low dishonest decade of the September 2001 attacks, hot wars, the “war on terror,” global financial chicanery that combined with debt bubbles to bring the

post–World War II global financial system to its knees, the resulting Great Recession and its sour legacies (economic, political, and social), the uneasy feeling that the government knows more about you than you like but not as much as Google and Amazon, and other ills too depressing to contemplate. Despite some significant social changes for the good, small wonder that many people are sick of change, yearn for certainties and imaginary past golden ages, and fear the changes yet to come.

The wider fears of society pervade our working lives. For at least three decades now, controversy has swirled around our profession, and it is difficult for working librarians, library workers, and LIS students to deal with the realities of budget cuts and doing more with less and with the unrealities of gaseous futurology. How are they to assess those various predictions, particularly those that say that libraries are obsolescent and librarianship is doomed to die? There has been, in those two decades and more, an ever-growing gap between nonlibrarian academic theorists, “information scientists,” many LIS educators, and even some library leaders, on the one hand, and those working in, and served by libraries, on the other.

## A LIBRARY?

In a discussion of the “right to forget” (the harebrained idea that individuals might be able, and can be empowered, to scrub the Internet of images, etc., that now embarrass them) in “Morning edition” on National Public Radio on May 23, 2014, one of the contributors likened it to “going into a library and telling them to pulp books.” Whatever one thinks of the practicality and morality of individuals whitewashing their digital history, the analogy with library bibliocide is both inaccurate and misleading. It is, alas, a manifestation of a widespread misunderstanding of the nature of libraries. Ellyssa Kroski has listed “7 things librarians are tired of hearing,” which sum up the misunderstandings that will cause all of us to veer between rueful smiles and tears of frustrated rage. They are:

- “Do people still even go to the library now that there’s Google?”
- “So, are you like, a volunteer?” Usually followed up with “What? You need to have a master’s degree to be a librarian?!!”
- “But isn’t print dead at this point?”

- “You’re a librarian? That’s so hot!”
- “That must be great to just be able to read all day.”
- “So you, like, get to shush people all day?”
- “Well what do you think the future is for libraries? I have a theory . . .”<sup>2</sup>

(My smile is all the more rueful because I heard at least two or three of those things fifty years ago.)

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard or read a lazy-minded commentator likening the Internet to having “the content of many libraries at your fingertips.” Let us leave aside the demonstrable nonsense of “at your fingertips.” It is vital to remember that the library is not just its collections, important though they are. Those collections would be useless without two other essential components: a trained and value-imbued staff and a bibliographic architecture. The staff create and maintain the collections (tangible and virtual) and make those collections usable in the construction and maintenance of the bibliographic architecture and by providing help and instruction in their use. One has only to contemplate how children are being failed by the far too numerous school “libraries” with no librarian to realize the importance of having all three components—collections, librarians, and an organization and retrieval system.

## THE HUMAN RECORD

At the moment, the most powerful marker, the feature that distinguishes our species most decisively from closely related species, appears to be symbolic language. . . . Humans are the only creatures who can communicate using symbolic language: a system of arbitrary symbols that can be linked by formal grammars to create a nearly limitless variety of precise utterances. Symbolic language greatly enhanced the precision of human communication and the range of ideas that humans can exchange. Symbolic language allowed people for the first time to talk about entities that were not immediately present (including experiences and events in the past and future) as well as entities whose existence was not certain (such as souls, demons, and dreams). The result of this sudden increase in the precision, efficiency, and range of human communication systems was that people could share much

more of what they learned with others; thus, knowledge began to accumulate more rapidly than it was lost. Instead of dying with each person or generation, the insights of individuals could be preserved for future generations. As a result, each generation inherited the accumulated knowledge of previous generations, and, as this store of knowledge grew, later generations could use it to adapt to their environment in new ways. Unlike all other living species on Earth, whose behaviors change in significant ways only when the genetic makeup of the entire species changes, humans can change their behaviors significantly without waiting for their genes to change. This cumulative process of “collective learning” explains the exceptional ability of humans to adapt to changing environments and changing circumstances. It also explains the unique dynamism of human history. In human history culture has overtaken natural selection as the primary motor of change.<sup>3</sup>

The process of “collective learning,” described above by Dr. David Christian, depends on the existence of symbolic language. That symbolic language is the necessary prerequisite of the human record. The human record is the vast assemblage of textual, visual, and symbolic creations in all languages, from all periods of history, and found in all communication formats—from clay tablets to digital assemblages of binary code. Interaction with the human record is how ideas and literary works conquer space and time; how we know what unknown ancestors and persons in far distant places knew and thought; and how we can exercise our ability to learn and to create new knowledge, new ideas, and new literature for our unknown descendants. Though many people now think that digital technology has created an entirely new way of learning, the fact is that there are only three ways in which human beings learn and that digital technology is but the latest manifestation of the third and most recent of those ways.

Humans learn:

- from experience (physical interaction with, and observation of, the world) and have done ever since the first humans learned that one red berry may be tasty and healthful and another might kill you;
- from communicating with people who know more than they do (speech and hearing) and have done so since the first wise woman taught the first band of early humans huddled in the safety of a cave; and

- from interaction with the human record (written, symbolic, and visual records) and have done so since the age of miracles began with the invention of writing many millennia ago.

The third way of learning permits the first two ways to extend across space and time—the records of experience and knowledge allow those remote in time and distance to learn from the experience and knowledge of others.

The human record is central to learning, and its preservation and onward transmission are crucial to civilization and the perpetuation of culture. Thus, facilitating learning by fruitful and wide-ranging interaction with the human record is crucial and should be understood as the ultimate mission of all librarians.

## THE HUMAN RECORD AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The human record (all those texts, symbolic representations, and images in all formats that have accumulated over the millennia) is best understood when viewed in the larger context of cultural heritage. In 1972, the Unesco Convention on cultural heritage defined its subject in terms only of tangible human-made and natural objects:

### **Article 1**

For the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as “cultural heritage”: monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science ; sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and of man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological points of view.



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