

Commencement Address

School of Information Science and Policy, SUNY/Albany

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TEN GRACES FOR NEW LIBRARIANS

Good evening. It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you. The last time I addressed a graduating class, it was as valedictorian at my own high school — thirty-one years ago. Sister Bernadette, who was my speech coach and who rid me of my Bronx accent, gave me one sentence of advice: Be charming, she said, and be brief.

I will endeavor to follow her advice now, as I did then. But in seeking wisdom as to what to tell you, I sought some from my own colleagues and yours. I put a call out on the net. I sent a query via e-mail to my various library listservs, and asked my fellow librarians online. I asked them what they thought I should tell you, newly minted, freshly picked librarians, as you take your degrees and go forth.

I got more than eighty responses, from twenty-one states and three foreign countries. They were, universally, heartfelt and upbeat and wonderful, in the original sense of full of wonder. Even though I am clearly not David Letterman (although Letterman and I are exactly the same age), here is a list of ten, well, let us call them admonitions or blessings, graces, if you will, for new librarians.

THE FIRST should be pretty obvious — join a listserv! Actually, it is much broader than that — link yourselves to your colleagues in the field. There are many library-related listservs, and through them, you can be in touch with people who do the same work as you across the country and the world. Particularly for new librarians, and those who find themselves in smaller libraries, that connection will keep you sane. Join your professional associations — your state association surely, but also the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the

Art Libraries Society of North America — whatever your particular library specialty is, find your colleagues and talk to them. As Sue Searing of the University of Wisconsin says, “library work culture is basically collaborative.... Seize the opportunities for support.” There are many such opportunities, and as you exploit them, hold fast, in your dealings with your colleagues, to the gentle rules of courtesy. Say “please” and “thank you” and “well done!” and “that was great!”

NUMBER TWO: You have your degree, but you make your education every day. One of the great joys of being a librarian is that it is the last refuge of the renaissance person — everything you have ever read or learned or picked up is likely to come in handy. Realize that your degree is only the beginning. The world of librarianship is unimaginably different now from what it was in 1972 when I got my MLS from the late, lamented Columbia University; in fact, it is unimaginably different from what it was five years ago when I got my first e-mail address; or two years ago when I first heard the words, “world wide web.” Keep learning stuff; as a librarian, you are in a unique position to do so.

NUMBER THREE: “Make your own luck” was the way Taina Makinen of Toronto put it. Take advantage of what comes your way, and put yourself in the way of opportunity. A positive attitude, and a realistic sense of your own selfhood, are tools at least as precious as the skills you have learned in school. Your first job won't be your last, but it is your first chance. Learn your own organization thoroughly — most libraries aren't very good at staff development. And learn, as soon as you can, how to speak up: at meetings; with trustees; before community boards. Find the courage to raise your voice and be heard.

NUMBER FOUR: Find and keep and nurture your sense of humor. People in service professions, especially in public service, need a finely-honed sense of the absurdities of life, because you will deal with them every day, and many of them will not have an aroma of sweetness about them.

NUMBER FIVE: With Richard Palladino of Iona College, I say, “be the librarian you would have wanted to encounter as a patron: approachable, attentive, facilitative, generous.” And with Lisa Richland of the Library in Greenport, New York, I say that “public doesn't mean clean or sane or similar to ourselves, and that the public responds to a

sincere interest and an open smiling face.” We are a service profession, and we need a tender openness toward those we serve: students, faculty, children, adult learners, executives.

NUMBER SIX: If you are a mom or a dad, if you're in love, I don't even have to tell you this. But with Kathy Deiss of the Association of Research Libraries, let me remind you, “keep your life and work in balance.” Make sure that you have interests, hobbies, distractions, and passions outside of the workplace. They will enrich your life, and make the unbearable possible.

NUMBER SEVEN: Change is what happens. Change is the only surety. We can create and embrace change, or we can fear and fight it, but change will come in either case. It is far less stressful to frame change as an adventure. A corollary to this was expressed by two folks in very different fields of librarianship: John Haskell Jr of the College of William and Mary and Judy Jerome from a school library system in New York State: Judy said, “work within the system, but be subversive.” John was more direct: “rules are meant to be bent and even broken; they can also be changed or discarded.”

NUMBER EIGHT: Develop a strong sense of your own self-worth, and the worth of the profession. Honor and respect the women and men you work with. Take the values you learned in library school and apply them in the real world. As Sarah Pritchard of Smith College says, Don't permit a false dichotomy to be made of a “social issue” versus a “library issue” — examine how the issue affects equity and access and intellectual participation for our users and for ourselves as professionals. In the words of the ancient Jewish philosopher Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”

NUMBER NINE: Make your particular vision part of the cultural memory of librarianship — write for publication. From book reviews to a column in the local newspaper, from Letters to the Editor in [American Libraries](#) to feature articles in *Library Journal* or your own library's web site, write about what you have learned, what you want to share, how you think about what you do. It is the deepest legacy you can leave for those who stand beside you, and who will follow you.

Tenth, and last: I believe that librarianship is the connecting of people to ideas. Now, very late in the twentieth century, it doesn't matter, often, where the people are, as they call up and dial in and fax over. It doesn't matter where the ideas are, either, in a book or on a video or over the net. And it's not just good ideas, not just worthy ideas, but bad ideas and lousy ideas and dangerous ideas and silly ideas. We particularly need to save the dangerous and silly ideas, because if we don't, who will?

Go and celebrate now, with your families and your loved ones. We share a great profession. And we get to buy books with other people's money. Rejoice in having the good fortune to be a librarian. If you let it, it will bring you joy.

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This essay also appears, lightly edited and updated, in *The Whole Library Handbook 4*, ALA, 2006.

A video made when I delivered this speech as part of my 40th college reunion celebration, Thomas More College, Fordham University, is [linked here](#), but the sound quality is not good.

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