

A Sense of Service

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OLA's Vision 2020 assumes that libraries "will maintain a sense of service and a commitment to provide many services to many people in many ways." That multiplicity of 'manys' and the call for 'a sense of service' reminds me that service is personal; we interpret and demonstrate it in our own ways. I developed my sense of service building on the examples of two people who influenced me at an early age.

Maldon Horton was my remarkable first grade teacher, remarkable not just for her personality and love of life, but for the confidence and sense of belonging she instilled in her charges. In hindsight, she taught me about service in ways I didn't recognize at the time. Teaching is perhaps the ultimate service if done by someone who is passionate and capable. Miss Horton planted the seed in my seven-year-old spirit that working with and for others was fun and challenging. After I finished first grade, she decided that I would be the first woman president of the United States. She was wrong on my future, but she was right to push me to think beyond my backyard and the schoolyard. She taught me that service is everywhere, if you look.

George Neuner, my grandfather, also taught me about service. He, too, was remarkable but, in very different ways from the vivacious Miss Horton. As an immigrant German adolescent, he excelled in his adopted country, becoming a lawyer without the normal educational background and eventually being elected as attorney general in Oregon. He impressed upon all of his grandchildren that working for the Post Office should be part of our patriotic duty. None of us followed his advice, but his great commitment to serving the community and the country was indelibly etched on my consciousness.

Given these two influences, my sense of service reflects both the joy of being part of something you are passionate about and the duty of contributing to the greater good of your community. I suggest that each of us in the library community has a sense of service. I further suggest that it manifests itself in many ways. However, sometimes it is challenging to maintain the joy of service or see the payback for your commitment. We can get bogged down in the daily task of running libraries: stocking the copier again, writing yet another report, giving directions to the restrooms, managing shrinking budgets, correcting a catalog record for the tenth time, cleaning up a spill on the new carpet.

So for those of you who have lost your sense of service or feel it needs refurbishing, I have some questions to consider that might help you revise, energize or just reconsider your approach to service.

- Whom do you serve?
- How do you serve?
- Why do you serve?

These are pretty basic questions. Here are my answers.

Whom do I serve?

My immediate answer is the people who work and study at OSU's Hatfield Marine Science Center. But, OSU is a land grant university, part of its appeal to me as a dyed-in-the-wool public librarian. So, I serve the people of Oregon. With more thought, I realize that I also serve my colleagues who are widely distributed throughout the world.



How do I serve?

For the locals, I open the doors every weekday, providing a quiet place to work, access to a wide array of science information, and some help with difficult citations or problems. Usually, I do this with a smile unless it's late afternoon and the question is weird. Then I may snarl a bit, but I try to be nice. The desperate grade school student calls, e-mails or chats about the life and death of the octopus, and the fisheries manager in Salem may chat about how to find sardine statistics. I apply my specialized expertise, gleaned from years of working around fisheries and marine information. I'm not a scientist, but I remain convinced that a good librarian can learn to navigate the landscape of almost any field.

Service to my colleagues is collaborative. That's what makes it interesting, sometimes trying, but consistently illuminating. I learn much about myself as well as those with whom I work. This goes for both daily local collaborations and the occasional virtual ones. My collaborations are planned as well as unexpected. So, the way I serve my colleagues varies because of who they are, where they are, and what we need to accomplish. Beyond my subject expertise, I have some aptitude with synthesizing what others are saying, and capturing what is important to our work. This means I get to serve on OLA's Legislative Committee and learn how strategize to improve libraries in Oregon. Professional or collegial service has taken me physically to Rome, Argentina, and Malawi as well as Baker City and Tillamook. Virtually, you can go even further afield.

Why do I serve?

It gets back to being part of something I enjoy as well as contributing to something beyond myself. I started volunteering in a library because I liked to read. Then I discovered that libraries did not have much of a voice at the funding and policy table, so I got my credentials. I found I liked the work we do in libraries and figured out how to combine my commitment to library work with my desire to contribute broadly. In 1989, I accepted an invitation by the chair of the OLA Legislative Committee to tag along to a meeting. I was new, but impressed that I could just show up and be part of something bigger that might make a difference. Just showing up, raising your hand to ask a question, saying yes when asked to do something for a colleague: that's how it starts. It continues because serving gives you something back much of the time (not always). There are the tangible successes: legislation that passes or a project that make access better for someone. There are the intangibles: talking with a colleague in India using Skype after corresponding for months, having a report cited by a librarian I'll never know.

Developing your sense of service is an ongoing process. I suggest that it entails taking stock of why you do it as well as how. There are many different scales of service as reflected in the Vision 2020. Those scales, as well as the variety of means to serve, keep my sense of service evolving. In 1899, Melvil Dewey described the ideal librarian as having a clear head, a strong hand, and a great heart. To meet the challenges of our libraries and communities today, we use our clear heads to look above the fray and envision the future, our strong hands to shape resources and services in good times and times of stagnant budgets and increasing demands, and our great hearts to empathize with our many users and meet their divergent demands. Using our heads, hands and hearts is how we serve and become part of our world. 

