MICHAEL B. WESSELLS

Community Library Coordinator
Timberland Regional Library
Raymond, Washington

Feeding the Hand That Bites You

INTRODUCTION

"Do to others as you would like done to you." Service providers are trained in this ethic and none more so than librarians, who live to serve the needs of others in a notoriously self-effacing manner. It is no surprise — though something of an outrage — to see "librarian" serve as a recognizable link in the chain of wimpish occupations in a political cartoon last year. With one notable exception, to be discussed later, librarians are not seen as aggressive combatants beset by enemies in a world of tooth and claw. In fact, it is hard to imagine a group less likely to have enemies than librarians.

There are questions, however, that tend to place librarians in potentially confrontational stances with other groups. For example, who will fund the library and at what level? The answer may set public librarians against local government officials, and academic and school librarians against administrators. What books should be on the shelves, who should have access to them, and in what priority? Over these questions, school and public librarians can find themselves in a face-off with irate parents and community members; academic librarians can tussle with faculty. Beneath the librarian's placid and benign exterior lie many avenues for inner pugnacity to emerge. That it does not do so more often is the result of a fortunate conjunction between an ethical imperative and practical common sense.

Practically, it is a waste of energy and poor strategy to engage in warfare before seeking a peaceful and mutually beneficial solution. Ethically, the librarian's code requires that he or she provide "the highest level of personal integrity and competence" (ALA, 1987, p. 244). The prevailing Judeo-Christian atmosphere in Western civilization

implores one to love one's enemies — if not to convert them to friends, then to heap coals of fire upon their heads.

Before taking up cudgels and rushing to the barricades, librarians need to look upon enemies the way they look upon patrons and do what they do best: ascertain the patron's needs despite what may be a hazy representation of those needs, and then meet the needs in the way that makes the patron happiest without compromising one's own integrity. When conflict seems imminent, librarians should be the first to leave the trenches and explore a peaceable solution.

Steps in Conflict Resolution

There are four basic steps in this process. First, librarians must learn the language of their enemies. What are their outlooks, priorities, and goals; what do they mean by the words they use to describe situations? Librarians must grasp enough of their world-view to communicate, to provide "skillful, accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses" to any perceived or underlying "request for assistance" (p. 244).

Second, librarians must find some common ground, however tiny. The tension only rises if the focus is on issues that divide. Instead, librarians need to begin from a sense of community and establish even the smallest sense of shared purpose to create some basic credibility. They must discipline themselves that their mission is to solve a problem, not to wage a war.

Third, librarians must initially meet some need that they perceive their "enemy" to have. This establishes a context of helping, a positive momentum that keeps the focus on resolution and surprises the enemy. By not playing by the rules of war, librarians can insist upon a different relationship altogether.

Fourth, librarians can move from common ground toward their own particular needs and concerns. In this process, they can evolve from enemies to symbiotic partners and become, if not allies, at least respectful neutrals. Only if this procedure fails should a fight be initiated. By reducing the enemy's numbers, fighting energy is saved for the truly unavoidable conflicts. If this process sounds very familiar, that may be because it is basically a dressed-up description of the reference interview!

CASE STUDY 1: THE LIBRARIAN VS. CITY HALL

Two case studies will serve as examples of how it works. The first scenario deals with the public library in a small-to-medium sized town at budget time. The enemy is obvious. Not only has the city comptroller

never been in the library in his life (the librarian suspects he may be a borderline illiterate), but he is not aware of the self-evident value of the library and the consequent sanctity of each budget request item.

When the final budget emerges from the smoke-filled room, there is much weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. The muted complaints of the librarian are ignored or quietly filed in the drawer marked "Things to deal with after the turn of the century." Everybody knows librarians have very little political clout. That is why they have so few enemies. "Maybe we'll find some funds for the library next year." In these terms, the fight is hopeless. The library has no chance. The fault, however, is at least partly with the librarian. The city fathers are treated as enemies when in fact they should be treated as patrons. It requires a shift of mind from looking at the keeper of purse strings as an impediment to seeing that person as a patron in need of some kind of information, a need librarians are ethically bound to satisfy.

The need may be basic and simple, even rudimentary. Some years ago, the author was on a consulting expedition during which town meetings were held in several communities where library staff, community leaders, and patrons were invited to sit together and talk about the future of library service in the area. In the midst of the meeting, the angry librarian rounded on the city comptroller, demanding to know why the library budget had not been increased in several years. The city official icily retorted that she had received no request from the library, no specific itemization of need, no timely information on which to base a budget allocation. Soon, the two of them had their heads together discussing what information would be necessary for the following year's budget and how it could appropriately be presented. They had found the common ground and were fast on the road to becoming allies. It was amazing that these two key individuals had offices directly across the street from one another and had never sat down face to face to discuss how they could facilitate one another's job. The chance meeting proved very beneficial to the librarian. How much more useful would purposeful approaches to city officials on a regular basis have been, providing in advance and neatly tabulated the data that was needed. Then the brief public confrontation would not have been necessary.

Libraries are useful to their funding bodies not only in ways that are eventually self-serving, but also in other instances that city officials might never consider if left entirely to their own devices. Librarians should aggressively seek out opportunities to serve them. The author's fantasy library school has a course called The Vagaries of Local Governments 101. It deals with the madness of public library funding and the ways librarians can overcome the system through personal com-

munication and the provision of key information at the optimum time; in other words, being the professional partners in government that they can and should be. It involves aggressively seeking out the information needs in the camp of the enemy and meeting those needs. Most cities have one or several informal communication centers. In the author's town, it is Bob Ryan's Raymond Café where one can sit down, have a cup of coffee with the mayor, and find out what is happening, interjecting at the opportune moment, "I've got that data at the library, I'll send it over this afternoon," "We can host that meeting at the library," and so on. Librarians should be as evangelical about feeding their funders as they are about literacy programs and proactive efforts aimed at other reluctant users. This is the library version of the Biblical injunction to "go out to the highways and byways and compel them to come in."

CASE STUDY 2: THE LIBRARIAN VS. THE FUNDAMENTALIST

This manner of operation comes to seem commonplace by the time one becomes a library director, and the language and outlook of funding bodies may not be so very different from those of the director. There are wider chasms to cross as one moves to the far bloodier battlefield of intellectual freedom. Here the librarian reigns proudly as the doughty warrior standing valiantly in the gap against the censor. This is the notable exception to the librarian's wimpish image, the one area where he or she is transformed from Clark Kent to his alter ego. But it is no denigration of the vital importance of these battles for intellectual freedom to suggest that a number of them need not be fought at all. For example: A mother enters the library with her child. She is home-schooling the child because she believes that secular humanism has rendered the public schools unsafe for Christian children. The child is not allowed to read fiction because it is not true, and certainly not fairy tales or myths, which the mother thinks may be demonic. Mother is a member of Citizens Against Rampant Pornography (CARP), and even attends some of their meetings, though she lets the more vocal leaders do most of the talking. The occasion of her visit to the library is her concern about a picture book with illustrations that are more explicit than she feels is right for children. She shows examples. It is her forthright contention that the book should not be on the shelves. Furthermore, she would like to see more good Christian books, especially some that argue the case against evolution.

This is a familiar scenario. Most public and school libraries have been there, and all see the signal to draw swords and defend the bastion of intellectual freedom. But the first enemy is a stereotype. Librarians

can be justly proud of their role in combatting any number of sexist and racist stereotypes, but the dominant one of our time — the "Fundamentalist" — continues to be perpetuated: a closed-minded obscurantist with a narrow view of life, determined to shackle everyone else to his or her priorities because he or she is too fanatical to rise above them. There is just as much generalizable truth in this picture as there are in abhorrent racist and sexist stereotypes.

The fact is, fundamentalists are just as complex and variegated as librarians or any other group of human beings on the planet (Marsden, 1980). There is, however, a need to learn their language and the difference in how the same words are meant by nonfundamentalists. While it would take a full-length book to deal exhaustively with this topic, there are three major tendencies of thought that may characterize the fundamentalist community and which must be understood in order to bring about a meeting of the minds. At the obvious risk of generalizing and oversimplifying, the following concepts describe them in sufficient detail to see how language learning can work.

Basic Concepts of Fundamentalism

The first concept that applies to fundamentalist thought is an intense reification. Constructs that are often used metaphorically to deal with concepts and ideas are taken as quite real in fundamentalism. For instance, the devil, which is used as a symbol of ultimate evil or even as a buffoon in story and discussion, is an actual person to fundamentalists, with a real agenda and real targets. As another example, stories that are powerfully symbolic representations of inner realities are seen as reconstructions of actual historical events. This tendency to reify is at the heart of such concerns as the literal truth of the Bible, avoidance of Halloween, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus, and distrust of fairy tales, myths, and speculative fiction.

The second concept is a strong concentration on individualism as opposed to corporatism in religion. This manifests itself in the focus on individual salvation and person-to-person interactions, a concern with one's personal responsibility for both self and neighbor, as distinct from more general and abstract social commitments. As a rule, fundamentalists feel a personal calling to give freely and often to the last resort, whatever their own economic circumstances, where in other Christian traditions there is more a focus on corporate action. How else could people like Jim Bakker bilk so many individuals out of so much money? Yet, when this example is used to characterize the fundamentalists, attention is on the crook rather than on the thousands of generous people who put their money where his mouth was.

The third concept of note is a cosmic dualism — an ongoing battle between good and evil that is of universal importance and in which the battleground is not only the individual but all places and concepts with which the individual comes in contact. In terms of this conflict, there is a perceived cause for alarm in the fragile nature of our society constantly under bombardment from evil and ever in danger of immediate disaster.

The ultimate future of any individual depends completely upon action being taken within a timeframe of extreme urgency. Most nonfundamentalists seem to live within a world view encompassing the stable continuation of the universe more or less infinitely for all practical purposes. Those people particularly alert to environmental and nuclear issues may feel an inner dread for the world of their children and grandchildren, or even for the next decade. For the fundamentalist, however, there not only is no assurance that the universe will continue indefinitely, but a positive guarantee that it will not, that a catastrophic end is in the plan. There is a continual haunting fear that this event is already on the calendar for next week. When this occurs, the sheep will be separated from the goats forever. In this context, then, efforts to bring people over to the "right" side must be made now because tomorrow may be too late. It may be salutary to remind oneself that the constant harassment of the "unsaved," which one may view as intrusive and wrongheaded, is rooted in a genuine and generous concern for the ultimate welfare of total strangers.

The combination of these three ingredients — reification, individual responsibility, and cosmic dualism — provides the driving force behind much of what is quickly and rightly labelled censorship. The chain of logic can then be followed from the unprovable but also irrefutable cosmic dualism through the responsibility of the individual for not only him- or herself and his or her family, but for other people as well. If the concepts by which one explains and understands this situation are seen as concrete and present in a literal way, what other way should one reasonably and ethically act but the very way fundamentalists are observed to act?

Finding a Common Ground

There are, of course, negative factors in the equation that are already very familiar. The sense of individual responsibility may be distorted into a tendency to judge and control others. Obsessive concern with the important cosmic battle may induce a fear reaction that blocks open acceptance of new and different ideas. (Would that librarians were free of similar tendencies!) But there is a strong common ground between

the fundamentalist, would-be censor and the librarian. That common ground is the ineradicable belief that the book is important — that what people read or view has a very real and vital impact on their lives, and that libraries matter.

When librarians face the hypothetical, censorious mother described previously, they start from this common ground. The first thing to do is meet a need. Librarians, being natural psychologists, know that people first of all want to be heard and understood, but it is not so obvious that people also need to be taken seriously, as if their point of view is at least arguable, defensible, and deserving of more than derision. This was the point of learning their language.

The first step, then, is to listen with an empathetic ear — to make it clear to this mother that her problem is a serious one and that it is apparent how, given her premises and understanding, the problem needs a solution that is satisfactory for all. Reflective techniques and other emotionally neutral interactive skills used so proficiently in reference interviews should be employed here. Immediately, the librarian and patron are on strong common ground; the librarian can pounce upon this aspect of her present problem to meet a need right at the outset. Instead of a knee-jerk negative to the censorship request, the librarian can begin with a focus on collection building: "More Christian books? The anti-evolution viewpoint? An excellent suggestion. Are there titles or authors you might recommend?" Thus can be satisfied both the patron's need and the librarian's ethical imperative to reflect differing points of view in a balanced collection. This particular case is aided by the growing number of readable Christian books that meet any reasonable criteria for selection. Even borderline materials that are not particularly cogent or well-written can be added if they meet a patron demand. If Nancy Drew can be tolerated cheek-by-jowl with the Newberry Award winners in the children's room, why can't the library add some of the more nontraditional Christian publications in the area of, for example, creationism?

Librarians have a professional responsibility for knowledge of bibliography in general and their own collections in particular. This means they should know the fundamentals of their patrons' literature as well. Even before asking this particular patron for her suggestions, the librarian should be pointing out to her strong examples of her point of view that may be already in the collection. Thus do the librarian and patron become firmly rooted together on common ground.

Having established a rapport, one can now address the censorship issue. Even here, one should accentuate the extent to which library policies meet patron needs. The single-minded idealist sometimes forgets that traffic in censorship runs in both directions. Anti-religious censors

have strong objections to the presence of sectarian works on the shelves. Librarians must resist these efforts just as firmly as they must resist the fundamentalist's. The very zeal that protects the picture book's place on the shelves also keeps the Bible available to patrons. One has now moved directly to the library's needs. Yet again, the librarian starts with the patron's point of view, appreciating the importance of a parent's role in monitoring children's behavior and taking care not to usurp this role by deciding what things are or are not suitable for a given parent's child. Librarians have no mandate to stand *in loco parentis;* they do have the ethical mandate to make a wide variety of materials available so all parents and children can make their own choices. Just as one may respect the mother's strong stand for her beliefs, so the mother must see the need for others to stand by theirs. A procedure is then initiated for processing complaints of this nature if the patron wishes to pursue the matter further.

CONCLUSION

By following this or similar sequences, the "enemy" is given numerous opportunities to resolve things amicably by librarians taking the first step towards peace in each instance, yet without abandoning their strong sense of ethical commitment to freedom of access. While these examples are drawn from the public library field, where most of the author's experience has been, the same process will work in any setting, from academic and special librarians adjudicating between user and administration demands, to school librarians who may be blindsided on occasion by censorship from above, from school boards, and from principals.

It would be näive to believe that all censorship battles will vanish in as easy a fashion or to believe that librarians are not already using these tactics to sideline the anger of head-on disputes. The ethical issue argued here is an attitude of mind that resists confrontation and war as a first resort, an attitude that takes the responsibility for making the first move toward communication and understanding and that seeks to promote the highest level of service in the opponent's terms as much as possible. Only when that cannot be achieved without violating the Code of Ethics should one even conceive of the option of all-out battle (Burger, 1978).

The experience of converting enemy to friend, an experience that librarians do achieve on occasion, can give rise to a feeling only to be described as euphoric, if not salvific. The author exhorts his readers to go out and experience this for themselves.

REFERENCES

American Library Association. (1987). *ALA Policy Manual.* Chicago: ALA.

Burger, R. H. (1978). The Kanawha County textbook controversy: A study of communication and power. *Library Quarterly, 48*(2), 143-162.

Marsden, G. M. (1980). *Fundamentalism and American culture: The shaping of twentieth century evangelicalism, 1870-1925.* New York: Oxford University Press.