Editorial
Hard Choices

Characterized as the "Professor of Gloom" by *Newsweek*, Richard Lamm, governor of Colorado, suggests "It isn't that we're faced with problems. It's that our problem-solving machinery has gone awry."

In a "Hard Choices" course that he is teaching, Lamm focuses on social and cultural issues. In librarianship, while the issues are less dramatic, the choices are relatively hard. Demands increase and supplies decrease.

In librarianship, the door to the future is ajar. We hear the words "postindustrial society," "knowledge work," and "third wave." When we visualize the future, it is often with a sense of wonderment. And yet, as in a dream, our grand thoughts are not followed by corresponding action. We seem to limp forward. Maybe we are experiencing a typical pattern of behavior when faced with such complexity and novelty.

Almost weekly I read about some new and exciting development in the online industry. A whole range of potential library applications shines forth. Likewise, the possibility of reaching beyond the walls of the library to users in situ (i.e., in their own place) seems to become more and more feasible. As our systems increase in complexity, the value and absolute need for strong library instruction programs also increases. However, when I view (1) how we allocate resources, (2) what services and programs users will support, not just in principle but with dollars, and (3) what fiscal agencies will fund, I also see high hurdles. The wonders on the horizon fade and I am faced with a bewildering array of barriers.

Usually, because of our responsibilities or inclinations, we strive to achieve a balance, often a balance of interests. Some call this fence-straddling. I don't like fence-straddling as a permanent posture, but I do accept it as a temporary strategy. In the debate between those who posit the continuance of classic librarianship or the discontinuance of librarianship as we know it today, I have been a fence-straddler. My view of the future as a reality is weak: on the other hand, my view of how we might begin to construct a preferred future is strong.

Last week I fell off the fence. From where I landed, academic librarianship has a bright future if we start with a shared vision of a preferred future. If we continue to limp forward, we may find that the erosion rate is faster. Or we can stride forth.

This is easily said on paper. It is another thing to put it on the table, to add it to the agenda, and to proceed. My reality is that I work with people. If we move forward, we should do it together. Somehow our challenge is to construct or offer a view of the future that also holds out a promise for others. This is how we can rebuild our problem-solving machinery. This is how we can begin to make the hard choices.

In the July editorial I used a container/content metaphor to make a point. Philip Metzger (see "Letters") dislikes the metaphor because it does not adequately describe the reality that he sees. Because the point I was making is important I would like to drop the metaphor and restate my argument in blunt terms. That is, if librarianship is to make important gains as a profession it must focus on the value that our materials have for the reader. Today we circulate a book and that is the extent of our commitment. I believe that words, images, and

sounds transformed into meaning or understanding by the human mind, the user's mind, are the key to our professionalism.

In a paper ['' 'Stemming the Tide of Mediocrity': The Academic Library Response,'' in *Libraries and the Learning Society: Papers in Response to A Nation at Risk* (Chicago: ALA, 1984), p.5], Richard Dougherty states that the absence of attention to libraries in the *At Risk* report reflects ''the reality that libraries are not judged central to the current problem,'' that is, the erosion in the quality of education. If we decide to focus on user meanings or understandings, we will move into the center; we will also move into an uncharted area. We will fail from time to time. Yet it seems better to fail occasionally at what is deemed central than to succeed only in a sphere considered peripheral.

The users of academic libraries are essentially comfortable with what we now provide. As professionals, it is our challenge to unlock the potential inherent in the new technologies, to find somehow the means to transform our information (collections) into a dynamic force and, in the process, transform ourselves.

CHARLES MARTELL

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