

Will librarians become extinct?

When elephants first meet, they entwine trunks in a friendly greeting. I think about things like this as we move toward the Millennium with advancing technology. The process seems to be moving us further and further from our mammalian roots. We are becoming replaceable body parts - liver, heart, kidneys. Our fingers are useful for keyboards and eyes for screens. We are walking brains to be marketed. I reflected on this as I stood, eyes transfixed, on our new main library. A building full of artificial intelligence. I believe that is what it is called. What is progress and who benefits? What do we lose in our attempts to be quick and efficient? I marveled about the citizens who helped in devising the Dewey decimal system. I thought of the long arduous study it takes to become a librarian - and how the librarians of today are being down sized as though the stock market depended on it. Will patrons check out books like in the north bay library I visited, where one only had to push a bar code under a scanner - such as those that should be left in supermarkets, to check out a book?

I experienced difficulty using the scanning device and had to wait in a long line of disgruntled patrons for my turn with the only librarian. By the time the next generation is able to read with enthusiasm, librarians will have gone the way of California Condor. When I was growing up, I lived in Livermore Valley for 3 years. It was back when the town catered to old cow pokes and strange acting genius from the Rad Lab. Short for Radiation Laboratories (then the Lawrence Laboratories - now?? I don't know go look it up in the library.)

As books are banned and librarians are sent to wash dishes and flip burgers, I am reminded of what was known as the dark ages of western civilization when roving hordes of vandals - who created wars etc. - destroyed libraries - essentially burned knowledge that may have prevented the black plague. Which is why we need public education and public libraries and librarians to lead us to the knowledge that will prevent a second dark age.

Some may feel that all you will need in the future is a corner, in a room with an electric outlet for your computer - or you could live in your car and plug the laptop into the cigarette lighter - hopefully parked where not only the mosquitoes but all the crickets and frogs and many other living things have been conveniently extinguished. What kind of world is this? A world of machines and automation - where people are human phobic nerds and where push button technocrats control our lives - where we are caught on camera - smiling mannequin like as we drift through the isles of department stores? If we work it right we can go through life never relating to another person for any reason - groceries - self service at the gas station and now libraries.

Stand up citizens. Come out of your homes onto the streets and wave those banners. I'm thinking like this as I slowly make my way up the uneven, stained sidewalks of Cortland from the coffee shop to the library. I smile and nod politely to passersby. We need people to facilitate the information in the libraries and to assist us - those who still believe in human contact as a natural requirement to healthy living. Yes, technology and yes people BUT machines don't have broken finger nails or strands of hair in their face...there is no blood flowing in capillaries - no voice that raises and falls with feeling --- If there are no librarians we will be alone with only our footsteps filling the silence of space.

Chances are the only computer available has a rash - or is it a virus - or the whole system is down and the fellow stacking the shelves is on work furlough from jail and thinking of getting his GED and has never heard of Darwin or Webster's Dictionary.

It is not his fault. But this is the future. Do we want guards around telling us not to eat or sleep or wash under our arms in the bathroom basin if we are homeless? As it is I shall miss the card file --the smell of the wood box before me -- cards with holes at the bottom attached to a steel rod. What a marvelous invention this must have been. Ink notations - type written from various typewriters through the ages.

A librarian knows where to find information that will help us with useful knowledge - such as where free food is being served or where the children's books on electricity are so we can wire our own homes. It is so nice to go into the library and start a sentence with how - why - where and know someone will be there who who may be in any one of a number of moods - sad happy, just doing their job, bustling, plodding...you know human!

