

Reaction Versus Proaction: Moving From Here to There

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Lorne C. Plunkett and Guy A. Hale, in their book *The Proactive Manager*, wittily and aptly described proaction and reaction in terms of the famous quotation, "To be or not to be."² In a world of black and white, one can either react to events or one can create events by assuming a proactive stance. Mankind probably often falls somewhere into a gray area between the two. For example, it is often obvious that individuals are bound by constraints that direct their individual roles; it is equally obvious that some individuals seem more able than others to create opportunities, or to take positive advantage of situations. The same scenario applies to the archival profession as a whole. Constructive activity by individual archivists or by groups of archivists can enhance our profession as we move into the 1990s. Those activities must build on our present situation.

How can a profession become energized, and assume a proactive role? A prerequisite is a sense of identity as a profession. A further prerequisite is the acquisition of skills to ensure that our profession is capable of fulfilling its responsibilities. Those skills may range from learning more about and applying descriptive standards in our work, to making an effort to become familiar with new technologies, to defining our role vis-à-vis information and records managers, to acquiring a knowledge of conservation requirements, to seeking out general management skills. A proactive stance would dictate that these skills are not only acquired but also applied. The final mark of a mature and proactive profession would be in the enunciation and advocacy of its philosophy to its users, sponsors, and the general public.

In her fascinating book, *How Institutions Think*, Mary Douglas has made the point that the concepts or roles which receive the broadest acceptance by society are those which have intellectual validity, but a validity based on what she calls a "socialized or naturalized" validity.³ If one's role is seen as part of the natural order of the universe, then it is widely accepted. Physicians, priests, lawmakers, and storytellers have been accepted since time immemorial. Archivists also provide a service that touches one fundamental and enduring aspect of humanity: the delineating of a lineage, whether personal or institutional. All else, the healing of the sick, proselytizing, documenting of injustices, or telling of stories, grows out of that essential keeping of a record. Thus, the role of the archivist will continue in society, as it has since

delicate visual memories of beasts were first imprinted by unknown artists on the wall of a cave. Douglas points out that institutions (in this case our profession) can also remember and forget.⁴ The arguments mounted in the early 1970s as to whether the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association should become a separate archival association are replicated to a certain extent in contemporary discussions of the role of special interest groups within the Association of Canadian Archivists. Proaction dictates that, as a professional association, our remembering can offer the possibilities of a perspective, let us see commonalities, and apply past lessons hard-learned by others to our own state as a profession today. If one moves far enough back, as the first travellers in space have discovered in our generation, one sees more commonalities and far fewer differences. Rather than ignore or reject the differences in both philosophical and cultural senses, one can reaffirm the excitement and the vitality of that diversity. Looking at archival development in that much broader context could help to remove the sense of anxiety archivists often express about the depredations of museologists, librarians, information and records managers, the "new technology," or even about certain groups of our fellow professionals, whether divided by national boundaries or some other identifier.

We seem, when one views the wide range of expressed concerns and problems, a particularly anxiety-ridden profession. Why is this so? Perhaps it is partly because we have not yet, like the young adolescent, defined exactly who we are and how we fit into the rich historic continuum and into a place today, here and now. To continue the analogy, we may have developed physically as a profession — respectable and in fact ever-increasing numbers call themselves archivists — but intellectually, and perhaps even spiritually, we as a profession have still a long way to go to reach that goal of adulthood.

Such striving to distance ourselves on a regular basis from mundane concerns can give us renewed strength for, and perspective on, the developmental work that lies before us at this time. It can give some cause for hope that we will survive as "archivists," as a recognizable unit in society, our adult guise still a good deal like the gangly uncertain adolescent, but perhaps with some intriguing new viewpoints and aspirations as a result of our newfound maturity. If we can throw aside our insecurities about our continued existence, and direct our energies toward the constructive ways in which we can move towards professional adulthood, we will have taken the one major step which will ensure that we can survive as a profession.

Continuing the analogy of moving towards archival adulthood and maturity, most parents would perhaps identify a need for instilling in their children a fundamental sense of spiritual identity. In our profession, that translates into acceptance of a code of ethics, and we in Canada have not yet accepted such a code of ethics and made it a standard of conduct for our calling. Is it not time that we took this fundamental step? Moreover, in our more practical, day-to-day relations with the world, with other professions, and with each other, we could begin to define more nearly what we perceive to be our role, realizing that it will continue to evolve and change over time. Some of our energies could be used to define the basic minima by which we are known as a profession, through accepting the reality and utility of standards of professional certification. Work is already well advanced in this field in the United States. It has even been suggested that a joint American/Canadian committee of archivists might be structured to address the matters of professional certification.⁵

The qualities required for certification might indeed be quite similar, regardless of the locale. The certification qualities and procedures of other allied professions can also be brought to bear on developing Canadian certification standards.

Beyond defining and accepting a coherent and innate sense of identity, archivists can be proactive on at least three other levels: the acquisition of skills; the application of skills; and the enunciation of our philosophy through advocacy.

Archivists are at a turning point in some ways in this era, when there is a necessity for acquiring a whole range of skills that are just beginning to be developed in the profession. For example, one can hardly overemphasize the importance of archivists learning about, debating, and finally accepting the standards for archival description that are being prepared by various working groups under the aegis of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists and with the support of the Canadian Council of Archives. Each of us has the essential responsibility to accept and adopt these standards in our own operations, to exercise "quality control" over our products, and to ensure increased ease of access for our researchers.

Some individuals fear that adopting descriptive standards implies that we will all be working on computers and using the "MARC format." Kent Haworth and others have gone far to address and demystify this issue with a series of descriptive standards workshops, and have made clear that we archivists must put our house in order in other ways before beginning automation to any extent in our repositories. Work is going on in many other related fields. Regional subject heading authority lists have been developed over the past few years in Alberta and Nova Scotia, and are being developed in Ontario. A general approach to describing our archival holdings was enunciated in the Report of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards. Standards for description of all archival media at the fonds and series level are presently being developed. A Committee on the Canadian MARC format now contains archivists so as to ensure that our viewpoint is considered. All of these areas are ones with which we must become more familiar, with a view to use in the day-to-day work in our repositories. Other standards for description already available, such as AACR II, the series of adaptive manuals by Hensen and Betz and others, dealing with description of various archival media, and various Canadiana and Library of Congress name authority files, are available for nominal prices. Such documents should form part of every working office in every archival repository in our country. The development of standards that emphasize our similarities is one of the ways we can move toward professional adulthood. Acquisition of knowledge about the various techniques now available to provide consistency in descriptive practices is an individual responsibility which each of us must assume.

Some archives in Canada, still in a minority, have begun to acquire a certain level of expertise in the various new technologies. The bewildering variety of both possibilities and options is symptomatic of a developing area. We can learn from each other on such matters, as well as from experts in the field. In the area of computerization, for example, many of us are still in the skill-acquiring stage, learning from office to office about various kinds of hardware and software that might be suitable for various uses in our repositories. More information about the practical experiences of colleagues may eventually help all of us decide what particular configuration suits our needs, without having to establish through expensive trial runs whether certain

systems will work. One of the great advantages of annual professional meetings is the opportunity to talk with colleagues about developments in their own offices. We are in the midst of a technological revolution in the means of entering and storing data, such as use of the optical disc, and we must be aware both of the implications of such changes for our profession and the inevitable problems we will face if we do not make use of these new skills.

Some archivists have expressed fears, for example, that information managers might well be seizing the initiative for the care of the record from both archivists and records managers. Information managers are seen to be more familiar with, and comfortable in, a computerized environment. They generally have aimed their persuasive arguments towards higher levels of management; they are closer to the pinnacle of power, and often share in that reflected authority and esteem within an organization.

Archivists must plan, adopt, and enunciate a consistent role for archives in the area of information and records management. There are multitudes of books and articles available, both on records management and on the broader principles of information management. It remains for Canadian archivists to take advantage of this wealth of information and to apply a consistent approach as a profession. Those archivists who ignore the whole realm of the record before it reaches the archives are limiting both their role and their effectiveness. One way in which our profession could work in this area is to establish an ACA select committee or an interest group, to postulate the role of our profession in integrating information and records management with other archival responsibilities.

Conservation is another area where archivists can take the professional responsibility to be aware and proactive, even if they do not undertake the actual treatments for their collections. The fine disaster preparedness handbook prepared by John Barton and Johanna Wellheiser provides, for a few dollars' investment, the blueprint for an appropriate approach to conservation in our repositories.⁶ All of the five or six provincial and territorial needs surveys available at present have listed conservation as an area of professional concern in Canadian archives. We have to do more than express our concern, however; we have to divert energy into action in this area. Preventive conservation is as much a matter of mindset and knowledge as it is of expensive supplies.

Aside from such specific and rather technologically oriented skills, however, it appears that the kind of skills archivists truly need to acquire are more general and relate to the field of management as much as they do to the traditional tasks of archivist to appraise, acquire, preserve, and make records available. The sense of anxiety and uncertainty mentioned earlier may well have its basis in the lack of formal training many archivists have in "managing" with all its concomitant skills, whether in a small corner of an archival empire or as the head of a portfolio, division, or repository. Certainly some management skills can only be hard won in the field of battle; for example, "book learning" is not much help to the person facing the practical matter of negotiations with bargaining units.

Much of the literature of management takes the human model as its example: "how organizations think;" "goal setting for individuals, groups and organizations." An article by W. Jack Duncan presents the thesis that most individuals are non-rational

in their management approach; it is human nature, rather, to “muddle through” many problems.⁷ The general management skills, such as setting goals, designing, implementing and motivating, controlling, evaluating, and communicating, are all proactive in stance. They have their respective partners in the human condition; striving, exercising imagination, introspection, cooperation, persuasion, and enunciation, are all personal skills that lead to appropriate management. By developing such positive personal traits, one can be sure of contributing to one’s personal development and ultimately to that of our profession.

The literature of management underlines our responsibility to work toward using less haphazard ways of undertaking our professional work. The major point is the necessity for both individuals and organizations to have:

[A] clear focus on where we are going, a timetable for getting there, and a clear understanding of how to meet the timetable. Otherwise strategic planning is merely hollow rhetoric that leads to nothing by inaction.⁸

Implementation, after all, is the goal of all our planning. If we try to look objectively and carefully at the work of our professional association over the years, we may find that we have expended more energy in defining the goals for our profession than we have in reaching them.

The proceedings of the Tenth International Congress on Archives dealt in large part with the nature of management and the implications of management skills for archives. Mike Swift presented an excellent paper, “The use of management techniques and technical resources in response to the challenges facing modern archives.” Following the paper, Dr. Wilfred Smith, the Dominion Archivist, made an intervention which bears repeating:

I believe that the appropriate application of modern management techniques should not only be endorsed in principle by archivists but be adopted in practice by every archives, large or small, in any stage of development. I am convinced that ensuring the most effective use of the resources available, and the reputation of archivists as good managers of those resources, constitutes the most promising of responses to the challenge to archives. There may be a tendency to consider attention to business-like practice as an aberration or detraction from archival missions. On the contrary, such practices ensure that the role of collective memory is carried out most effectively and productively.⁹

The 1984 Congress concluded with recommendations, one of which proposed “that the teaching of management techniques be included in basic archival training curricula and that within regional or national continuing training programmes high priority be given to this same topic.”¹⁰

Only one workshop devoted to archival management techniques has been mounted, funded partly by the ACA and held in Toronto in the early 1980s. Is it not time that the professional associations consider consistent support for this basic need? And is it not time that we as individuals accept this subject as a personal developmental responsibility as well?

Fascinating sub-themes emerge when one combines progress in technology with progress in management. More than preceding generations, our generation is involved in a flat information model: more and more information is available to more and more individuals, such as employees in an institution. Information is generally regarded as power, but with the advent of the electronic generation and dispersal of information, more information is available to increasingly junior levels of management. An article by Terry Newell, "The Myth of the Disappearing Manager," makes the point that in the future more management tasks will inevitably be given to workers, thus allowing employees to behave more like managers. Newell's most important point from an archival perspective is that advances in technology mean that information is available all over an organization, not just at the top.¹¹

Working archivists faced with such scenarios can have more impact on creation of policy, and participate in making decisions that affect the way in which their institutions function. A broadening of the knowledge base also has positive implications for the concept of information networking between individuals and between repositories on professional issues. Devolution of information, and therefore of knowledge, thus allows opportunities for archivists to be more proactive and effective: the more rational and well-enunciated our goals as professionals, the more likely we can move toward their accomplishment. For example, the work of the ten provincial and two regional needs surveys will soon be coming to completion. Several provinces have already issued excellent needs survey reports; Alberta and British Columbia have created particularly impressive documents. Although the thrust of these surveys was to express institutional concerns, we are able to derive from them suggestions and recommendations about appropriate roles for our profession as well.

The recently published Strategic Plan of the ACA also begins to take the profession towards an understanding of what our goals should be. The recently published strategic plan of the Ontario Association of Archivists is an excellent example of a document which goes beyond the general establishing of goals to define actual ways by which certain of these goals can be accomplished. The TAAG Education Foundation position paper is an example of a thoughtful examination of one fundamental aspect of our profession. The ACA Education Committee's draft certification proposal is another example of information prepared to help us move more closely toward a defined goal.

It is important that we use management skills in dealing with such documents. We have begun to plan, in addressing any number of professional issues. Are we now capable of both implementing and re-evaluating, with objectivity and sensitivity, the general policies laid out in the various position documents? If we can do that, we will have moved toward our potential by having realistically identified our goals; by having established a priority for them; by having removed duplication of effort; and, by having worked in a collegial and cooperative way towards their attainment.

It follows that we should also be prepared to enunciate publicly our perceptions of our role as archivists. Through active participation in the information and planning process in our profession, we will become committed advocates with our sponsors, grantors, and the general public. Advocating the utility of an archivist's role in society is the final, crucially important part of our responsibilities as adult

professionals. It takes dedication, and many hours of time, to speak out on behalf of our profession. Only through enhancing public awareness of the way in which archivists function will archivists earn the respect due to a profession. It is our responsibility to generate the collective will to go forward in a positive, creative, and thoughtful way as we address all of these issues.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Windsor, Ontario, June 1988.
- 2 Lorne C. Plunkett and Guy A. Hale, *The Proactive Manager* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1982), p. 1.
- 3 Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (London: RKP, 1986), p. 52.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 5 Donn Neal, Executive Director of the Society of American Archivists, made this suggestion at the joint annual meeting of the Ontario Association of Archivists and the Lake Ontario Regional Archivists Association at Ottawa in May 1988.
- 6 John P. Barton and Johanna G. Wellheiser, *An Ounce of Prevention* (Toronto: Toronto Area Archivists Group Education Foundation, 1985).
- 7 W. Jack Duncan, "When necessity becomes a virtue: don't get too cynical about strategy," *Journal of General Management* 13 (Winter 1987), pp. 39-43.
- 8 E.A. Locke and G.P. Latham, *Goal Setting for Individuals, Groups and Organizations* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1984), p. 27.
- 9 *Archivum*, Proceedings of 10th ICA, 1984, p. 158.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- 11 Newell was investigating primarily government workers, but these same general statements could hold true for archivists as a working group. Terry Newell, "The Myth of the Disappearing Manager," *The Bureaucrat* 16 (Summer 1987), pp. 28-39.