
Atla Board of Directors

Presidential Address, June 14, 2019
Jennifer Bartholomew

Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity, after serving on the Board of Directors for the past five years, and as your president this year, to make a few remarks today. Yesterday we were warmly welcomed to the Atla Annual conference by Cindy Alders, our Local Host Committee Representative, and Alec Dan, one of the Knowledge Keepers of the Musqueam nation, and I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

I'll begin by sharing a look back at an interaction I had two weeks ago, late on a Friday afternoon, when I was the only staff member at my library, working in my office with the door open. One of our community patrons wandered back to say hello. Sister Eileen comes by to use our library occasionally and that day she was there to do research for a homily she will give in June for the Salvatorians' Jubilee Celebration. This smiling sister, a retired academic still serving as a spiritual director, just wanted to say thank you for the use of our space, and our resources... and to connect for a moment.

We chatted a bit about her joy at being in our library—the attractive space, the light, the resources—the challenge of writing for different audiences, how to choose the right words, how to shape the message so your audience will remember it. I was reminded of two recent occasions when someone had said that speakers need to distill their message down to about one sentence or six words. The first advice was from our homiletics professor, a twenty-three-year deacon in the Catholic Church, who has preached many weddings, funerals, and Sunday mornings. His mantra is “one sentence”—you should be able to reduce your homily to one small sentence, and then use a few stories to illustrate different aspects of your message. The other example I shared with Sister Eileen was a keynote speech I heard at ACRL in Cleveland this April. Michele Norris, former journalist and host of NPR's “All Things Considered” and founder of The Race Card Project, talked about her work. She asks people to

“Think about the word Race. How would you distill your thoughts, experiences or observations about race into one sentence that only has six words?” Norris’ examples of what people wrote and the stories around them were fascinating. Six little words can open up worlds. Six words can tell a story that sparks deep thoughts, and deeper conversations.

Sister Eileen and I talked more about the power of scripture and the beauty—the poetry—that can be found in the weekly readings that are common to our faiths. She is one of those people who radiate joy, whose presence warms you and lifts you up in a way that opens your heart so you can hear her message. I have no doubt that she preached a strong homily at the Jubilee, but I also suspect that her homily could be about something innocuous and people would leave having “heard” something transformative. But there she was, grateful for our library, grateful for the commentaries she’d been consulting, and glad to be able to say that thank you to someone. She wanted to connect and let us know how our collection matters.

I have six words for you to think more deeply about. Well, seven words—“Collectors and Connectors in Religion and Theology.” We are collectors, connectors, collaborators, curators, aggregators, disseminators, preservers, providers, teachers, advocates... We are passionate about our profession, our vocation, our work.

Other speakers at previous conferences have spoken to you about change: changes in education, changes in service, changes in the church, change in society, the rate of change, adapting to change. I see all of you as professionals who care about their collections and their work so deeply that they embrace change in some way, every single day that they go to work. I see us as a group that consistently tries to be relevant. In today’s world that means trying a new perspective, seeing from a different vantage point, and learning to listen more deeply.

Five years ago, under the leadership of Beth Bidlack, the board began work on a Big Hairy Audacious Goal—a BHAG. Our goal was to envision a new future for ATLA that would help our profession to serve by becoming a hub for scholarly communication—a global hub for scholarly communication. We worked hard over the next few years, wordsmithing carefully to create a new vision, our core purpose, and core values.

In order to heed the call to transformation, to achieve our new goals, we needed to let go of some of our old identity; we needed to say no to some things and make room for the new. We created new goals and new Organizational Ends, and we asked our Executive Director to create a strategic plan and begin working towards those new goals. About two years ago the board understood that it was time to rebrand ATLA. We would legally remain the American Theological Library Association, but we wanted to transform our visual identity and name to allow a new global identity to emerge. The work we do in religion and theology should not be limited to “American” and should not be limited to one expression of faith. Over the past five years, with the leadership of Beth Bidlack, Kelly Campbell, Tim Lincoln, and Matt Ostercamp, twenty-five Atla board members have participated and contributed to this process.

Rebranding began with the branding firm gathering input and performing an environmental scan. They discovered that there was opportunity for our association to grow and to become a global entity—not just American collectors and connectors but worldwide collectors and connectors. The process was bumpy at times—the board dreamed, the board discussed, the branding firm responded—two steps forward, one step back. Late in 2018 a new identity emerged that is tied to our A-T-L-A roots and also is open to our new vision and intention to become a worldwide hub. We have visually transformed our identity to one that more easily allows us to welcome others who share our mission.

I have only been a member of Atla for fifteen years. This association has been a place of professional and personal transformation. I have experienced the core values through positions at two different seminaries with generous colleagues who have given their time and talent to encourage, mentor, and challenge me. I have been able to give back a little by serving Atla on its Education Committee and the board. Thank you for these opportunities and for our shared common purpose in higher education.

I would like to leave you with a challenge to be open to ways we can achieve our vision—whether by widening our tent, finding ways to include more voices in our collections, being hospitable to the strangers in our world, listening deeply, while maintaining excellence in our collections, providing access, and collaborating

in creative, innovative ways. Transformation is possible—we have the vision! Let’s do all that we can to live our values and bring this vision to life.

Your contribution may be to continue your work in collecting, but please consider that your contribution will also be measured by how you connect with others. Working together, we can find better ways to collect and share the scholarship we value. Let’s continue to meet the change we are encountering by exploring new partnerships to advance our collective vision of a worldwide hub for scholarly communication in religion and theology.