

Librarianship as a Spiritual Practice

As a profession, librarianship often suffers from negative stereotypes, lack of visibility, and dismissive attitudes. Yet, that's a view from the outside looking in (and a negative look at that). How do we conceive of ourselves? *What drives us as librarians? Why are we here?* While I'm sure that the answers to those pertinent questions are as nuanced as the richly textured individuals who staff our libraries, there has to be some hint of a common answer.

These questions naturally lead us to the philosophy of librarianship, stemming back, at least, to Ranganathan's five "immutable" laws: (1) books are for use, (2) every reader has his or her book, (3) every book has its reader, (4) save the time of the reader, and (5) the library is a growing organism.¹ These principles provide a philosophical foundation for librarianship — the basic *doctrine* of our profession, if you will — but where is the soul? I think we can gain a needed layer of depth if we look at what we do as a spiritual practice.

Yet, how does the spiritual practice of librarianship mesh with the day-to-day tedium of MARC records, the frustrations of "problem patrons," the endless cycle of meetings, and the new initiatives we have to dream up just to get people in the doors?

We can choose to see the world as a grey mass of uninteresting requests and high expectations, or we can choose to see the world around us, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, as gradually becoming "luminous from within."² So, before we embark on investigating librarianship as a spiritual practice, we must decide — we must *commit* — to seeing ourselves as spiritual beings, investing meaning and worth into our actions. From that perspective, then, what practices might inform our spiritual view of librarianship? There are multiple spiritual practices that are promising; here, I suggest a look at the connections that librarianship on a spiritual level might have with the practice of the presence of God, mindfulness, and — most fruitfully — *lectio Divina*. Admittedly, with the exception of mindfulness, the practices that I will outline are most applicable to librarians from the Christian tradition; however, these practices are still suitable for librarians from other religious backgrounds with minimal adjustment of the object of focus. The first two practices are essentially relevant to any task one performs, whether in a library or not, but I offer a version of the final practice that is tailored specifically to the library context.

Our first stop on this path of investigation is commonly known as "the practice of the presence of God." This specific mystic practice can be traced to two particular individuals. The first, and primary, individual to define the practice of the presence of God was the sixteenth-century monk Brother Lawrence. In his small book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he outlined his method of viewing every opportunity and activity of the day as a potential moment of intimacy and prayer with God.³ Through his own experience of washing dishes in his monastery, Brother Lawrence described the basics of this practice quite simply as the awareness in each moment that "He [God] is by your side, over you, around and in you."⁴ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, an eighteenth-century French Jesuit, advocated a similar activity in which a practitioner understood each and every moment as a sacrament in which the grace of God could be communicated to a participant and that participant could communicate with God.⁵ In order to view this practice with regard to librarianship, you might try the following method:

¹ S.R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras: The Madras Library Association, 1931). Cf. Richard A. Leiter, "Reflections on Ranganathan's 'Five Laws of Library Science'." *Law Library Journal* 95, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 414.

² Robert Faricy, *The Spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), 21.

³ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims* (Grand Rapids, MI: Spire Books, 1999).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. by Kitty Muggerridge (New York: HarperOne, 1989).

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1. Set aside time for a specific, defined activity. Catalog a book, help a patron, create a LibGuide, update your library's Facebook page, or even just take notes in a meeting. The most common activities are the perfect context for the practice of the presence of God. Practicing the presence of God is essentially the process of paying *attention* to spiritual things right here, right now. Ponder how the mundane tasks of your life can be prayer.
2. Pray like Brother Lawrence: "Lord of all pots and pans and things, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!" You might also adapt this prayer to the life of the librarian: "Lord of books, articles, and all information, make me a saint by answering questions and all manner of categorization!"
3. Designate a simple prayer word of action rather than a longer prayer. For instance, pray the word *here* every so often during your day — just to remind yourself that God is right here, right now.

There is not necessarily a "right" or "wrong" way to practice the presence of God, so don't feel bound by these instructions. You can feel free to vary the method according to your own personal preferences. While this option may be perfect for some engaged in librarianship, it might not resonate with others, particularly if you do not locate yourself within the Christian tradition, but it is far from the only option.

Another possible spiritual practice for librarians is mindfulness meditation. The term *mindfulness* has been created to define a set of meditation practices that are common among many different religious and spiritual traditions. While the most direct source of this spiritual practice is the Buddhist tradition, parallel versions appear in every major world religion. Additionally, mindfulness has become popular in a generic form which does not specifically tie it to a particular metaphysical worldview. The practice that I will describe here is generic in this sense. Mindfulness also has great potential for simple relaxation and stress reduction, even if no spiritual goal is intended by the practitioner. The following practice is based on the "body scan" described by Jon Kabat-Zinn,⁶ but there are many variations of mindfulness practice. Still, we have to start somewhere, so try this method:

1. As you are performing a task that does not require great concentration and does not have too much possibility for interruption (at least until you get used to the practice), gently let your attention settle on your breath, "riding the waves" of your own breathing with full awareness for the full length of inhaling and exhaling.
2. Take a few moments to feel your entire body as a whole, the "envelope" of your skin.
3. Bring your attention directly to your task and, more specifically, to the part of your body performing that task. As you direct your attention there, see if you can direct or channel your breathing to that space as well, so that it feels as if you are inhaling *into* your hands, for instance, and exhaling *from* your hands. It may take a while for you to get the hang of this so that it doesn't feel forced or contrived. The point of the practice is not to do it perfectly but to simply bring your attention to exactly what you are doing right here, right now.
4. Allow yourself to *feel* any and all sensations, and if you don't feel anything at the moment, that is fine too. Allow yourself to feel "not feeling anything."
5. Also, bring your mind back to the breath and to the region you are focusing on each time you notice that your attention has wandered off, after first taking note of what carried you away in the first place or what is on your mind when you realize it has wandered away from the focus on the body.
6. In this way, continue maintaining the focus on your breath and on the sensations within the individual regions as you come to them, breathe with them, and let go of them.

These simple practices are designed to help us bring back our attention to the present and to the wonders that pass us by every day because we have such a difficult time just paying attention. Still, these are spiritual practices intended to seek

⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013), 77-79.

God, the Ultimate, or cosmic balance as we go through practically *any* task in life. There is nothing in these practices that make them specific to librarianship. How can we practice something more specific?

Let's take a look at *lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina*, or sacred/divine reading, is a mystic practice that specifically deals with sacred texts, usually the Bible. In this practice, a participant selects a portion of a reading and then reads through it multiple times. Each reading has a specific purpose beyond comprehending the historical meaning of the text. The practice helps one to meditate on scripture, or any chosen spiritual book, in order for one to meet God. *Lectio* typically has three or four steps, and they follow this general pattern:

1. The first stage of the practice is *lectio*. In this stage, choose a passage and read it slowly and repetitively. You may choose a different reading for each session.
2. The second step is *oratio*. In this stage, the passage should be read aloud. Focus on what God is saying to you. Look for a specific word or phrase that stands out to you.
3. The third stage of *lectio* is *meditatio*. In this stage, concentrate on the word or phrase that stood out to you when you were reading. Focus on how God could be speaking to you today through this word or phrase. Then end your prayer time with the Lord's Prayer or another personally meaningful prayer, and keep meditating on the word or phrase that stood out to you from your reading throughout the day.
4. The final stage of *lectio* is *contemplatio*. This stage is something the individual cannot control. This is where God meets you, and it can happen any time or anywhere. The process of *lectio* helps one to be attentive to those "eureka" moments when an insight strikes you suddenly because God is not necessarily limited to showing up in burning bushes.

You may be thinking that this spiritual practice is all well and good, but how is it specific to librarianship? After all, it's only a misconception that we spend all of our days reading books. I propose that we adapt this method as the basis for our own practice, for *bibliothecarius Divina* (sacred librarianship), perhaps?

The first three stages — *lectio*, *oratio*, and *meditatio*, or more naturally, *reading*, *speaking*, and *concentrating* — could be seen as the routine of our daily tasks. These disciplines of librarianship can be likened to the ways we breathe in and out as we wait on God or the Ultimate. These tasks of waiting are inextricably linked to our philosophy of librarianship. They are the ways in which we are seeking to "save the time of the reader" no matter what our particular assignment in the library might be. These tasks are not simply "going through the motions" because we are committing ourselves through them to the belief, the philosophical underpinning, that each person might only be one good book or piece of information away from their destination on their journey toward discovery and truth — *maybe just one!*

As for the last stage of our spiritual practice, it is a bit like *contemplatio* in *lectio Divina*. We are not entirely in control of it. However, we do have a little more tangibility in our spiritual practice than in typical *lectio*. When we put a seeking person in touch with the information they request (or give them what they are really looking for, even if they request something else), that is the moment of spiritual climax in our practice of librarianship. The moment a patron asks for help in research, interlibrary loan, a particular author's works, etc., that is our moment of *contemplatio*, of helping them, even just a bit, on the road toward truth.

Now, must we look at librarianship with such subtlety and sublimity? No, of course not. We can view it simply as a job, a means to an end, a paycheck. However, we run the risk of missing the potential joy deep within ourselves if we don't view librarianship as something more. We may miss the opportunity to touch spiritually a deep insight — that truth is ever at our finger tips all around us, but it is as expansive as the universe itself. *What drives us as librarians? Why are we here?* We are here to seek truth and to help others as they seek truth, *if* we choose to see librarianship as a spiritual practice, as our unique spiritual practice.