

OLA Quarterly



Burnout

From New York to Europe to Hawaii to Fiji to Hawaii to Portland:
Reflections on the past 35 years

Change Is the Only Constant

My Mama Told Me, or How Two Generations
of Library Workers Avoid Burnout

Librarian Crisp

No More Candles!
Second career librarians tell their stories

Terms of Engagement

Polly Wolly Doodle, or My Life as a Secret Agent

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Burnout Table of Contents

2
From New York to Europe to Hawaii
to Fiji to Hawaii to Portland:
Reflections on the past 35 years
Perri Parise

4
Change Is the Only Constant
Rita Jimenez

6
My Mama Told Me,
or How Two Generations of Library
Workers Avoid Burnout
Alicia Salaz

10
Librarian Crisp
Faye Chadwell

14
Ten Tips to Avoid Burnout
Joanne V. Halgren

15
No More Candles!
Second career librarians
tell their stories
Jane Corry & Rachel Mendez

19
Terms of Engagement
Deborah B. Dancik

21
Polly Wolly Doodle,
or My Life as a Secret Agent
R. Toady

24
On Preventing,
or Dealing With, Burnout
Phyllis McCracken



OLA Quarterly is indexed in *Library Literature*.

Introduction

I am so lucky: I have the perfect job. As an art librarian, I get to use my master of fine arts, as well as my MLS. I get to be around other artists all day, and, as library director, get to initiate and lead exciting projects. My job is both intellectually and socially stimulating. On top of that, I work for an institution I admire, believe in, and feel proud of.

I was surprised, then, last year, to feel some symptoms of burnout. Nothing changed at work to cause these feelings, but I started to hate Sunday nights because they meant the workweek was starting again. I started longing, every weekday, for Friday afternoon to arrive. Committee work started to feel like a strain, rather than an opportunity to collaborate. I started eyeing lottery tickets at the grocery store counter, and wondering just how bad the odds of winning really are. I actively reminded myself, every day, that I love my job, and that I am fortunate to have it. Those reminders helped, but it helped even more to research literature on librarians and burnout.

Turns out, there is a lot written on the subject, especially in regard to

academic librarians, such as myself. Unfortunately, less is written pertaining to support staff. Although the public may perceive our jobs as easy and fun, we, like many people in helping professions, are not immune to burnout.

My burnout experience and subsequent research inspired me to suggest the topic for this issue of the *Oregon Library Association Quarterly*. What do Oregon library workers have to say about burnout on the job?

Faye Chadwell and Deborah B. Dancik both look to literature on the subject of burnout to present thoughtful essays examining the problem.

Two contributors, Rita Jimenez and Perri Parise, share their unusual career routes, letting us see that one way to avoid burnout is to explore alternatives to the traditional. On the flip side, Jane Corry and I interviewed a panel of librarians who burned out in previous careers and have found welcome refuge in the world of libraries.

MLS student Alicia Salaz contrasts the fresh perspective of one new to the career with her mother's perspective as long-term support staff. Roberta Richards, who has worked as support

staff and is a recent MLS graduate, reaches back to her time teaching world religion to look at librarianship through the lens of Buddhist thought.

Joanne Halgren offers readers a list of practical tips for dealing with burnout based on her experience at the University of Oregon Knight Library.

Finally, a lighter side of burnout rounds out the issue with Phyllis McCracken's rhyming poem and a farcical, spy-fi look at life in the library, written by a Portland area artist and writer who works under the pen name of "R. Toady."

I'm happy to report that my own burnout has burned itself out. Perhaps I cured myself by reading so many articles on burnout. Perhaps it is the relief of finally finishing off the *Quarterly*. Whatever the cure, it is good to know that burnout can pass, even without taking a single yoga class or even a vacation.

Rachel Mendez
Director of Library Services
Pacific Northwest College of Art
Guest Editor

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From New York to Europe to Hawaii to Fiji to Hawaii to Portland:

Reflections on the past 35 years

by **Perri Parise**
*Academic Advisor
Emporia State University School
of Library and Information
Management*

How have I managed to stay in the same career for almost 35 years? For me the answer is simple—it's the library profession itself that has helped me avoid burnout. I have taken advantage of the diversity this career offers—first by traveling and working in other cultures, then by taking on different aspects of librarianship.

Right after I finished college, I considered teaching or social work as a career—definitely something in the “helping professions.” I tried social work in New York City, working with drug addicts and people who had attempted suicide. But being an idealistic child of the 60s, I felt that social work was not for me. I felt that I was just counseling people to conform to society's norms.

So, I took off with all the money I had and a one-way ticket to Europe. I had never flown before, had never been on my own. For two weeks, I cried myself to sleep every night. My pride was the only thing that prevented me from going back home. After those first two difficult weeks, however, I settled into a vagabond's life and began to enjoy myself. I traveled alone all over Europe with no particular itinerary. In retrospect, it was the best thing I ever did for myself. I gained self-confidence and learned that ultimately I have to rely on myself for what I need in life.

While staying in a youth hostel in Holland, I met a woman who was taking a break from her MLS studies, and I actually asked that naïve and clichéd question: “You mean you need an MLS to shelve books?” She was very polite as she patiently explained to me what a librarian really does. And it clicked! I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life!

I continued my travels for five months, until my money ran out. After returning to

New York, I began the process of applying to graduate school. All my traveling made me adventurous, so I decided to get away from the familiar and apply to schools in places where I would like to live for two years. One of those places was the University of Oregon, which still had a library school at that time. For reasons that probably do not require much explanation, I ended up choosing the University of Hawaii.

While there, I was very fortunate to be able to be a part of a special federally funded institute called “Cross Cultural Training in Librarianship: The Librarian in a Pluralistic Society.” And Hawaii was the perfect setting in which to pursue this type of study. The institute was made up of 10 LIS students and 20 practicing librarians. I was able to filter all my course work through the lens of multiculturalism and how libraries can adapt traditional systems to meet the needs of underserved communities.

I left library school with high hopes, ready to get started in my new career. Unfortunately, it was 1972 and the economy had hit bottom. It was a time of gas rationing and price freezes, and very few jobs for first time librarians. The lack of employment only succeeded in feeding my travel bug, and I decided to join the Peace Corps. A position opened up right away in Fiji, and I knew I could not pass up this plum assignment. While there, I worked for the public library system. One of my duties was to develop and then teach a certificate program for paraprofessionals. Through this program I realized that I enjoyed teaching adults. Once again, my travels were teaching me something about myself and my career.




After living in Fiji for two years, I decided I was not ready to go back to the “Mainland” (the continental U.S.). Instead, I got a job on the Big Island of Hawaii, at the University of Hawaii at Hilo. Next, I worked as the head of a combined public and school library. These jobs allowed me to develop many different skills, including collection development, project management, supervision, program planning, story hours, reference, teaching, and of course handling “politics.” Whenever I thought I might be getting bored or to the point of burnout, I tried to re-invent my job as much as I could.

After nine years, though, it was clear that the only way I could develop further in this environment was to go into upper-upper management. I still wanted to work directly with patrons, not become sealed off from that in the world of management.

My husband and I decided that this would be a good time to move. True Oregonians have no problem with the idea that someone would choose to move from Hawaii to Oregon, and that is exactly what we did. We set our sites on Portland. My experience in Fiji showed me that I loved teaching adults so I was thrilled to get a job at Marylhurst University right away. As an institution that focuses on adult learners, Marylhurst was a perfect fit for my interests. I stayed there for 14 years without burning out. As in my previous job, I was able to move into different areas—first in technical services, then to reference and teaching. One of the great benefits of working in a small library is that you often get to learn to do a bit of everything.

Now I am the director of Emporia State University’s MLS program in Oregon. In this position, I get to combine my many interests and years of experience. I am an education geek, and I love working with adult students. I get to shepherd the new recruits into the world of librarianship, and greatly enjoy the academic advising I do along the way.

I’ve been lucky in my life to have been able to follow my curiosity and spirit of adventure while at the same time developing in my career as a librarian. I relish the fact that after 34 years as a librarian, every workday is different. I relish feeling a sense of “home” here in Portland after 20 years, but sometimes, just between you and me, those traveling feet start to itch a bit... 

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Change Is the Only Constant

by **Rita Jimenez**
Community Services Director
Multnomah County Library

“Once upon a time you worked for one organization your entire working life, got a promotion or two (you hoped), and retired with a gold watch.” That was the workplace dream I was told, growing up in gritty 1970s Detroit, amid the auto factories where some of my family worked. My mother worked for ATT as a billing clerk (before and after deregulation). The workplace reality I saw was quite different; strikes, plant closings, and layoffs were more the order of the day. We all know what happened to the U.S. auto and telecommunication industries, as well as our economy in the subsequent years. As a young person, I witnessed two of the big upheavals of U.S. capitalism up close.

I share this because those early experiences shaped the way I look at work and the decisions I have made about my own career as a librarian. What I saw growing up shaped my perspective on the permanence, or impermanence, of work. I have cultivated an attitude that any job is finite, and therefore should be enriching and beneficial for all parties involved.

Because I loved books from an early age and grew up in a rich cultural blend of Mexican, Puerto Rican and U.S. cultures, I had a strong calling to experience other countries and overseas work. The end result has been a career in librarianship that started as a researcher at the Library of Congress, a sabbatical in Costa Rica with the ALA Library Fellows Program, and a six year hiatus to work in international development at the Peace Corps. My current position as the Neighborhood Libraries Director at Multnomah County Library has allowed me to use all the skills I learned along the way as I oversee operations at 16 branch libraries and library services to language minorities.

Watching my family and neighbors struggle with these massive changes drove me to look at work with a unique perspective, and shaped my philosophy,

outlined in this article. My observations have helped me learn to manage my own moments of imminent burnout and to stay focused on the big picture. I have identified six elements that have helped keep my work life dynamic and virtually burnout proof.

1. REFLECT ON YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR JOB AND YOUR EMPLOYER.

Being able to have a solid sense of how you look at work, what role that has in the larger scheme of your life, and the attitudes you bring to that environment will help ensure that you stay grounded.

2. IDENTIFY WHAT EXCITES YOU AND KEEPS YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT YOUR WORK AND PURSUE IT.

Make sure that you keep that flame burning. From a young age, I was a news junkie interested in politics. I took a position at the Library of Congress's Congressional Research Service, where I was immersed in the makings of public policy on a daily basis—soaking up the energy of serving Congress. In my current job at Multnomah County, one of my joys is connecting with community members. No matter how busy, I make sure that I build in a visit to a community organization, a talk to high school students, or tape a radio program that plugs library services. These moments keep me energized and focused on why I love libraries and the impact we have in our community.

3. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.

When you notice the first twinges of burnout, boredom or diminished performance, let honesty surface the information you need to make the needed changes. Where is your dissatisfaction coming from? Can it be changed without leaving? What would make a difference? It is up to you (not your boss) to work toward making the changes needed to end or head off possible burnout, whether it is finding a new



job, getting training, etc. After five years at the Library of Congress, I felt restless and recognized the early signs of burnout. Although the job was interesting, I wanted new challenges and a new environment. Still, I was not quite ready to say goodbye to my current position. By taking a one year sabbatical to work overseas, I came back renewed and equipped with new skills and confidence to switch careers.

4. BE A RISK TAKER.

I do not think it is possible to expand and grow without pushing yourself out of the “comfort zone.” Both the Library Fellow position and my career change to work at Peace Corps headquarters were risks that pushed me out of my comfort zone into jobs where nearly everything was unfamiliar. Taking risks and seeking change has been my way of making sure that I am growing and expanding my skills. When I arrived in Costa Rica, I knew virtually nothing about the Internet, yet my host library badly needed someone who could train them on this new tool that was going to transform libraries. I taught myself how to use various Web technologies to navigate the Internet and developed a training curriculum and materials in Spanish. My new expertise opened the door to exciting consulting opportunities in Panama, El Salvador, and Uruguay, which naturally developed my skills as a trainer who could operate in a cross-cultural context even further. It also led me to a decision to change careers so I could focus my energies on working in international development in Latin America—a latent passion that blossomed with my experiences in Central America.

5. RECOGNIZE THAT WORKING FOR ONE ORGANIZATION AN ENTIRE CAREER MIGHT NOT GIVE YOU ALL THE GROWTH AND PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES YOU WANT AND NEED.

Organizations and communities change constantly. Your career should be the

same. In many organizations where I have worked, I saw staff who expected the organization to “take care of them” by providing them with a clear path of advancement and a cradle to grave work environment that remains static. I believe viewing your employer with that attitude can be a setup for disappointment. Competition for the always limited opportunities for advancement is real. Your organization might offer those chances infrequently, and if you are at or approaching burnout, you need to take action, rather than wait and hope a promotion will materialize. When I left the Library of Congress for the Peace Corps (a limited appointment), some colleagues were amazed I would leave the security of a permanent position for something finite and unknown. About seven years later, my former department underwent a major reorganization and was eliminated, with many colleagues retiring or being dispersed to other locations, with a loss of many promotional paths that once existed. It was a painful lesson that highlighted that what seems secure is generally not.

6. MAINTAIN A GOOD LIFE BALANCE.

I cherish a rich community-based life, volunteer, stay active (finished four marathons) and use my vacation time to see the beautiful corners of the world. That is in addition to having a strong grounding in my family and faith tradition. When you hit a patch when the job is not fulfilling you, you have an array of other places to turn for inspiration, joy, and stress relief.

As Andy Warhol put it:

They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.



My Mama Told Me, or How Two Generations of Library Workers Avoid Burnout

by **Alicia Salaz**
MLIS Candidate
Information School
University of Washington

When I was a little girl, my mom would take me to the Hollywood branch of Multnomah County Library to pick out as many picture books as my little arms could carry before stopping at McDonald's for a cone on the way home. She was hired as a part-time clerk at the library when I was ten, and soon began bringing home a graduated treasure trove of materials for me, much of which my friends' parents found completely objectionable. My fifth grade summer reading list included: Stephen King's novels *Carrie*, *Cujo*, and *Salem's Lot*, and a biography about a man who was detained for twenty years in a Mexican prison, the name of which currently escapes me.

Today, Mom's help is as indispensable as ever. She reminds me about where we keep the extra library users' guides, how to link a call to the reference desk, and what to do to troubleshoot a finicky self-check machine. She's a full-timer now, and has been working at the Hollywood library for over fourteen years. I've been working alongside her for nearly a year, and I mean that literally. Patrons will come to the desk, peer at us both a little sideways, arch an eyebrow, and then ask, "Are you two...?" And the answer of course, is yes we are. So here we are, me and my mom, hanging out together at the library. It's just like the old days, but with more Janet Evanovich.

Mom and I are both career library workers. I've been in school getting an MLIS while working for the library, and she plans to retire out of her current position. Though our paths have converged for the moment, my mother and I represent two very different kinds of worker. These two kinds of workers are motivated differently. They possess different aspirations. They require different treatment from managers and they bring different strengths to the table. And they get burned out by different things. The two types of workers are:



Alicia Salaz and her mother, Vicki Smith, in Prague.

- 1) The worker who knows they aren't going to be doing this job forever, and
- 2) The worker who knows they are going to be doing this job forever.

Worker number one corresponds to me, and worker number two corresponds to Mom. I have yet to find my career niche; she's definitely found hers. If (or when) we experience burnout, it will be for completely different reasons. Since this isn't my "forever" job, I might get tired or frustrated with the work tasks, or experience stress over the uncertainty of my working future. I might be extending myself in other ways outside of the job, which competes for my work-time energy, or I might lack a sense of integral belonging or importance in the workplace. Mom, on the other hand, might at times feel under-rewarded for her long-term investment in her organization, or simply bored of the scenery.

Libraries are full of these kinds of workers—including part-timers, and students who will eventually move on, as well as those support staff and professionals who, for a variety of reasons, will remain indefinitely. Everyone knows that libraries stand on the shoulders of their staff members, and it follows that keep-



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ing those shoulders fit and happy is in the interest of administrators and employees alike. The question is: in terms of keeping it fresh, avoiding stress and boredom, and especially maintaining motivation, which of us has it easier—her or me? Type one or type two?

Much like the number of library records solicited under the Patriot Act, the world may never know. What's important is that she and I have explored ways to stay motivated at work, rather than succumbing to "the burn."

Mom, whom I shall hereforth refer to as "Vicki," her real name, says that the demands of her job have increased over the last fourteen years. The drastically increased usage and materials circulation that Multnomah County has experienced since the early 1990s is a testament to the library's success. But for Vicki, this sometimes means "doing the same thing over and over again as fast as possible in an effort to stay caught up." Her strategy for coping? "I take a few days off about every three or four months,"

she told me. "I think having the vacation time to use really helps avoid burnout because I can regularly take a few days to just relax, do nothing and regroup."

The benefits of periodic R&R are well-documented. Public libraries, commonly residing in the public sector of the work world, tend to offer decent vacation and holiday benefits to employees. Workers should be sure to take advantage of these benefits.

Time off isn't the only option for a change of pace, however. Vicki regularly involves herself in a variety of committees and teams at work, all of which provide opportunities for her to exercise different skill sets as well as offering her a break from the normal routine. During her tenure at Multnomah County, she has worked multiple tours of duty for groups like the Summer Reading Committee, Circulation Committee, and Budget Committee. Her role in these groups has ranged from simple ("I basically just took notes and reported back to the branch") to noteworthy ("I actually got to write a piece of circulation policy from scratch!"). These achievements, undoubtedly, were recognized by her peers and superiors, another factor which Vicki says influences her motivation at work. "I get a lot of positive comments and good feedback from my supervisors, coworkers, and the public, too." She says. "It really helps me keep going."

My own strategies for avoiding burnout at work are similar in many respects. I too, have taken advantage of opportunities to participate on committees and teams at Multnomah County. My current at-work extracurriculars include participation in our Circulation Training and Intellectual Freedom committees. In contributing to these committees, I am able to practice Web content maintenance and training of other staff. Since I only work part-time for the library, these activities aren't necessary for diversifying my routine. Instead, I see them as an opportunity to improve my skills



Vicki prepares to relax in Prague.



and experience. Hopefully, I'll be able to apply the experience I gain in some future endeavor. In addition, this work brings relevance and immediacy to my job, and makes it something that I want to invest energy into. As far as periodically taking time off from work goes, I'm as well-versed in the practice as anybody. The difference is, where Vicki prefers R&R, I prefer activity. This year, I've taken time off work to finish school, to do an archiving internship at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, to learn how to sky dive, visit Cuba, and play disc golf. A healthy portfolio of non-work activities that I enjoy helps me to stay happy, energized and optimistic in general, which in turn has a positive effect on my work attitude.

Earlier this year, Vicki and I had an opportunity to combine work-related development with vacation time in a two-week tour of libraries in the Czech Republic, hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Charles University in Prague. What we discovered there was fascinating: a country full of vibrant, well-preserved and extensive library systems and collections, growing more visible and more accessible by the day. We visited public,

academic, private, special, and medical libraries, including a very special stop at the Libri Prohibiti, or banned books library, which served as a solemn reminder of the recent decades of oppressive Soviet control over Czechoslovakia and of the extensive censorship of materials and ideas during that time.

When I was speaking with my mother for the purposes of this article, I first asked her point-blank what motivates her at work. Her immediate and unhesitating response reminded me of our time in the Czech Republic. She said, "I believe in the value of libraries. I feel that I'm performing a public service—a valuable service."

The recognition of the value of your work is one of the most important ways to keep from burning out. Luckily for all of us, there is something inherently, fundamentally valuable about the services that all libraries provide. I think that anyone who works in a library should be able to draw on this as a source of motivation on a hard day—and as a source of pride on a good day. No matter what your role or function, you are a kind of angel for everybody out there who came to your library to get some information. Remember that. 🌿



Alicia drinking to our health in Prague.



Librarian Crisp

by **Faye Chadwell**
Head of Collection Development and Acquisitions
University of Oregon

This essay could have been titled “Reflections on a Librarian’s Burn-out,” but my light went out a while ago. Without light there can’t be any reflection.

How exactly does a librarian become crisp? Most victims begin as highly motivated and successful people. They are passionate and committed to their work. [Imagine a slender elegant taper burning slowly but steadily—even brightly.] Their enthusiasm drives them to undertake project after project and commit to one assignment and then another and then another. [Envision a candle left burning all night or better still a candle burning at both ends.] Eventually these industrious souls over commit themselves. [Now picture the candle’s flame being extinguished along with the motivation and the passion.] At least this is the way I experienced burnout.

Who is to blame? Critics and even colleagues would say, “She has no one to blame but herself.” I say, “There’s no need to go there because I have already been there.” No one knows better than I that arm-twisting wasn’t required to get me to say yes to opportunities. I could have made a stronger case for not taking

on some assignments. If I had, unavoidable stress factors that eventually happen to all of us, such as the death of a parent or another loved one, serious health issues for self and family members, changes in important relationships through divorce or empty nests, would not have compounded the stress of work.

Is there anyone else to point the finger at? Maybe. How many of us find ourselves in an organization whose culture thrives on individuals who take work home with them, who launch late night e-mails, or who waken in the wee morning hours to crank out the latest greatest Web site?

What about a state that has such woefully inadequate funding so as to force us to repeatedly do more with less? Aside from doing more with less is also the stress or pressure of making up for the less. Shepherding ballot measures takes a lot of energy and the blow of a failed ballot measure must be crushing.

In her article, “The (D)evolution of a Director,” Julia Blake discusses why she opted to leave a director’s position for something with less responsibility. Blake’s article is one of two I read about library directors who had left their director positions because of burnout. Describing her condition, Blake says, “...rather than doing things well, I could do them only well enough.” This statement really rang true for me! Blake goes on to add, “I wouldn’t have called myself a perfectionist, but for most of my life I’d focused on finishing first and doing it right the first time. As I took on more committee assignments, assumed responsibilities for open positions in my department, and just dealt with the craziness that is our profession these days, I increasingly felt that a half-assed approach to completing most projects had become *de rigueur*.”

Let’s be clear. Stress in and of itself is not a bad thing. In fact, stress can be a good thing. As a runner who has a couple of marathons under her belt, I know that to finish a marathon you have to train. Training means submitting your body/your



Faye Chadwell



legs to a certain amount of stress so as to condition them to run faster and run farther. But in order to take on that stress you have to be in general good health, eat right, drink enough water, and get adequate sleep. If you don't, eventually your body is either going to break down or else you simply can't finish the race when you need to do so.

When discussing burnout among academic teaching librarians, Deborah Sheesley pointed out that it is useful to position stress, distress and burnout on a continuum. "At one end is a feeling of well being, and next to it a perceived sense of imbalance that is righted through the use of effective coping strategies. Further on is a stage in which the use of inappropriate coping strategies results in a loss of physical and mental resources; things are out of control. Last is burnout in which one feels "done in" by the stressful situation."

Is there something singular about working in libraries that triggers burnout among library workers more quickly or with greater regularity than in other helping professions? Probably not. Most of the research I read confirms that librarian burnout results from the same factors that toast other professionals.

What are the common causes of burnout? Below are seven that most of us have probably read about at some time or another in a magazine like *Ladies Home Journal* while waiting at the dentist's office. As you might imagine, there are also thousands of sites on the Internet offering similar information about what lies at the core of burnout:

- Lack of clarity about job requirements or work roles
- Inhuman work demands—both overload and underload



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- Times of high stress with no down times
- Huge consequences in the event of failure
- Lack of personal control
- Lack of recognition and positive feedback
- Poor leadership

From my perspective, if the first six factors are a problem at your workplace, then it is a no-brainer that you have a case of poor leadership.

Herbert White reiterates the sources of burnout particular to our profession. White writes, "Burnout does not come from simply working hard, when that work is toward achievable ends that carry successful conclusion, credit, reward, and celebration. Hard workers do not get burnout, and they sleep well at night. Burnout comes from frustration; from insoluble dilemmas; from the recognition that the backlogs cannot be eradicated no matter how hard we try; that we can never succeed and never get credit; that irascible users will never understand and never be satisfied; and that certain managers will neither understand nor care while they blithely cut budgets in the confident expectation that nothing bad for them will result."

Work overload is a perennial problem for librarians. So few of us work outside the public sector; so many of us fall victim to the tribulations of being public employees. In Oregon, that means we have endured years of budget reductions or budget stagnation that translate into our doing two peoples' jobs while trying to be all things (or at least a lot of things) to a lot of people. Year after year we are expected to do more with less.

When you couple work overload with the technological tidal wave of the last decade, it is a wonder that more librar-

ies haven't simply gone up in smoke. Will Manley made an interesting point about how technological innovations have impinged upon our daily communications and so contribute to burnout. Manley said, "It seems to me that we are so busy transmitting and receiving information that we don't have time to communicate with people we really care about. Oh sure, with our car phones, voice mail, and e-mail we're in instant touch with each other; but because our pagers, beepers, and cell phones are always buzzing, beeping, and ringing we're too distracted to talk about anything more substantial than what company makes the best battery-powered lap top computer." Basically, we are working harder but not necessarily smarter; we communicate more, but not necessarily better or more clearly. Personally, I miss the daily coffee breaks similar to those I enjoyed with former South Carolina colleagues where we just discussed baseball, beer, or the latest book I had read. These breaks offered moments to get a decent perspective on working to live rather than living to work.

In a recent *American Libraries* article, long-term librarians recounted the ways they keep their work fresh. At least two of the responses referred to the importance of discovering something new daily. Yes, newness is refreshing but it is also a double-edged sword. Newness can keep work from being boring but newness can also press upon you like a mound of stones. What does your favorite blog say about this issue in libraryland? What company has merged with this company? Have you heard about the latest software to help you manage life in the third dimension? Remember that classic *I Love Lucy* episode when she and Ethel took jobs wrapping candy in the candy factory? The unwrapped candy came to them on the manufacturing belt faster and faster. To keep up, they began shoveling the pieces into their mouths and pockets until the factory had to shut the line down. New dis-



coveries often feel like that and I often feel like I can't take another bite of newness.

Ruminations on librarian burnout wouldn't be complete if they didn't include something about identity issues. Identity issues have been with us since our professional girlhood. While contemplating my own burnout, I read Peter Nicholson's piece, "The Changing Nature of Intellectual Authority. It made me believe our identity issues have now evolved. President of the new Council of Canadian Academies, Nicholson argues that "intellectual authority in contemporary societies—who and what to believe—is changing fundamentally." He asserts that as the information explosion goes nuclear in our society, at the same time "the agents we have relied upon traditionally to filter and manage information, and to broker formal knowledge—agents like research universities and their libraries, the serious media, and highly trained experts of all kinds—are less trusted as intermediaries than they once were." Why pay the overhead costs to produce resources like *Britannica* when a source like Wikipedia is freely available and it affords a user the chance to participate in the social Web, not just a social web?

Oddly enough, I have also felt the pangs of a loss of deference from within our own ranks—from younger colleagues who IM, spill metadata spiel with ease, blog just as soon as breathe, and are almost young enough to have never known a world without personal computers. Sure, I may be able to recite 10 reference sources that every library should own to provide biographical information on woman scientists. But my value to my own library appears dubious when I can't use Dreamweaver effectively and don't use RSS feeds to ingest even more information.

The disquiet I feel about changes to our professional roles got me to thinking about that dependable but lonely guy, the Maytag repairman. So I Googled the guy and discovered that Maytag, with the assistance of their ad company Leo Burnett,

had actually undertaken a review of the viability of this TV character. To my amazement, I discovered that Maytag and Burnett didn't decide to immediately retire the older character. Rather they partnered him with a younger version who was supposed to exude innovation, not just dependability. Laugh if you want, but our users and perhaps our bosses are probably dreaming about the implications of such a change on our behalf. More change is just what a burnout victim needs, right?

We probably all have suffered burnout at some level during our careers. Perhaps we just burned out implementing a tough project. If you suspect that you are burning out, there are tons of free tests and assessments to cruise on the Internet. If you are truly burned out, this might offer one way to escape the crush of work you now hate while appearing to work.


The Stress Doc, aka Mark Gorkin, talks about practicing "safe stress" on his Web site (<http://www.stressdoc.com>). Gorkin emphasizes his four Rs for rejuvenating and rehabilitating yourself in order to safeguard your sanity: reading, ruminating, writing (okay that doesn't really begin with an R), and reframing. I wish I had protected myself better and avoided burnout. Since I didn't, I found it a scary prospect when in the context of talking about recovering from burnout, Gorkin quotes Pablo Picasso: "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction." Does this mean my 20-year old career in libraries is kaput?

Well, that is one option but it is not my only option and not the option I would choose. I still love being a librarian. The most important thing is to get help, and the very organizations that might have fueled the fires that consume us can try these simple strategies to reduce and prevent burnout among library workers:

- Identify stress factors
- Reduce the amount and intensity of stress factors



- Strengthen workers' ability to cope with stress more effectively
- Recognize and help those workers who aren't coping well with stress and who risk burnout

In his essay on creative burnout, Scott Berkun asks, "What would you do if you ran out of water? Would you become one with your couch, pizza in hand, watching movies all day long, leaving it to the fates to decide if you'll ever drink water again?" He thinks not and I think not. "You'd go out to the store, or perhaps to a neighbor's house and ask to borrow some of theirs. Burnout is entirely survivable." 

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Ten Tips to Avoid Burnout

by Joanne V. Halgren

University of Oregon's Knight Library

- 1) Meet with your colleagues on a regular basis and discuss improvements and changes in your workplace
- 2) Make technology work for you. Remember WE created IT.
- 3) Visit similar work sites to see how others are doing the same job in different ways.
- 4) Ask others in your organization to cross-train and kill two birds with one stone. Enliven your own work day and if the time comes when either position is in need of temporary help, you will be prepared.
- 5) Keep yourself involved in activities outside of work that are fun and interesting.
- 6) Take vacations that stretch your limits or fulfill your dreams.
- 7) Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Many times this is when you learn the most.
- 8) Take stock on a yearly basis and measure how far you have come since your last review. You will be amazed at how much you have accomplished.
- 9) Eat a balanced diet and get enough sleep.
- 10) Celebrate successes, birthdays, anniversaries... anything that encourages you and your co-workers to keep on truckin'...



No More Candles!

Second career librarians tell their stories

by *Jane Corry*
and *Rachel Mendez*

AUTHORS

Jane Corry, Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management in 1997.

Rachel Mendez, Director of Library Services at Pacific Northwest College of Art. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management 2002.



“Although none of the librarians had seriously planned a career in libraries, every one present is quite a bit happier as a librarian than in their previous careers.”



“Wherever your path leads, remember the twisting paths these people took to get where they are today. And remember that the place you end up might be a place you like very much indeed.”

PANELISTS

Lee Catalano, Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Syracuse University School of Library and Information Science in 2001.

Victoria Oglesbee, Branch Supervisor at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management in 2000.

Steve Armitage, Reference Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Columbia University School of Library Service in 1988.

Rose Jackson, Reference Librarian and Information Consultant to the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State University. Graduated from Syracuse University School of Library and Information Science in 2002.

Susan Smallsread, Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library. Graduated from Emporia State University School of Library and Information Management in 2000.



On a beautiful day in July, a group of librarians gathered around Jane Corry's dining room table. They had been called there because they are all "burn-ins": burnouts from other careers who found their way to librarianship.

The assembled company chatted over iced tea and spice cake while Quincy, Rose's beautiful young daughter, played with Toobers and Zots in the living room. The conversation meandered and people laughed a lot. Out of this easy conversation three threads emerged:

- A mid-life career change to librarianship was a positive experience for all participants.
- Although none of the librarians had seriously planned a career in libraries, every one present is quite a bit happier as a librarian than in their previous careers.
- All felt that library work is socially important, fulfilling and worthwhile. Some commented that librarians who have not had a previous career are sometimes less able to recognize this fact, and will even express a fear that library work is somehow unworthy or unnecessary.

In my past life...

Our panelists came from an interesting variety of careers. As you might expect, a few came from other helping professions: two teachers (and one who tried teaching and just said, "No") and a social worker. You might not expect, however, that our librarians include a former Navy officer (still in the Reserves), a pharmaceutical salesperson, a furniture salesman, a candle maker, and one who quit her job at a power plant trade journal because she was afraid she was "becoming a Republican." (Not that there's anything wrong with that. – ed.)

Both our teachers quit after having their own children. Jane admitted that after she had her own child other children started seeming less cute and their parents pushy. Victoria quit her elementary school teaching job after having five children of her own. Rose, after leaving her full-time Naval position, briefly tried teaching high school before realizing it was a very bad idea indeed.

Susan put in a full 23 years as a social worker, working in youth services, sometimes with very disturbed kids. Steve, when he found his artwork wasn't selling, became a salesman at a furniture store, and put in 20 years. After leaving her trade writing job, Lee became a grant writer for nine years, until she couldn't stand to ask one more person for one more dollar. Done with teaching, Vicky started a candle making business. She was so successful that she had to quit because she was so sick of seeing candles. She got to the point of saying, "No more candles!"

How I became a librarian

Only a couple of our panelists had considered library work earlier in life. Jane was the only one who wanted to be a librarian as a kid, although several panelists remembered their elementary school librarians quite fondly. Lee actually applied to library school at age 22, but decided that she'd had enough school for the time being.

Others, though, had no "calling" to library work at all. Most seemed to fall into the career accidentally. Steve started considering it after meeting his future wife, a youth librarian at the time, who enjoyed her work much more than he did his. He took it more seriously after playing Trivial Pursuit with friends and impressing them so much that one told him he should be a reference librarian. One even sent Steve's name and address to various library programs so that catalogs would come to his home.

Rose, Susan, and Vicky all volunteered at the library and got hooked. When Susan



started burning out as a social worker, she underwent career counseling. Tests concluded she should be a social worker or a librarian.

In reality, not many librarians get to read on the job, and it seems naïve to us when patrons say, “I’d love to be a librarian because I just love to read.” Still, a few of our panelists did become librarians simply because of liking to read. When trying to figure out what to do next in life, they figured, “Hey, I like books!” For example, Lee said, “I liked to read, and I liked the Central Library building” in downtown Portland. Vicky decided to go to library school for an even more unusual reason. She just wanted to get good at research for her own writing projects, not work in a library.

The decision of where to go to school was just as capricious for many. Lee chose Syracuse because they didn’t require her to re-take the GRE. Vicky quickly changed her birthday plans when told she’d have to join the current cohort immediately, or wait three years for the next one. Steve chose Columbia over a school closer to his home in Connecticut because the local library director said she would hire him with a degree from Columbia, but not the closer school. He commuted to New York, worked 40 hours a week, and went to graduate school at the same time.

Rose ended up going to Syracuse while waiting for the University of Washington to start their distance program. Shortly after becoming a library clerk, Jane saw a flyer for Emporia and thought, “Why not?” Susan heard about a coworker doing a distance program, and enrolled in Emporia. Except for Steve all attended distance programs.

Older and wiser

Steve was 47 when he started library school. Victoria worried briefly about the fact that she’d be 50 when she got her MLS, but then realized that if she didn’t start school, she’d be 50 and not have an MLS. Lee worried, too, about starting at 45, but

a friend told her that was stupid. Once she was in the program at Syracuse, she found that she was not the oldest student by any means. She met many mid-career students.

Jane never worried about her age, her own mother got a BS at age 40, followed by two masters. Susan is from a family of multiple degree holders, so it didn’t seem strange to her either.

You look like a librarian

When she announced her impending career shift, Rose got negative feedback from friends, not because of her age, but because she was going to take such a salary cut. She hadn’t even checked the salaries before pursuing a career as a librarian, but has no regrets.

Most people received positive comments about their new career choices, although many of them were backhanded compliments. One of Vicky’s sons said, “Mom I know why you want to be a librarian, you look just like one.” (Another son was less enthusiastic, saying, “Mom you’re nuts, librarians are so mean.”) Rose’s family told her that being a librarian was perfect for her since she was such a geek. Susan’s older brother thought librarianship made sense for her, since she had always been a reader.

Happily ever after?

All of our panelists reported feeling quite satisfied as librarians. Most said they are happy to go to work. Every day at work is different. All the different questions, some quite unusual, allow the librarians to learn things themselves. Steve loves the job because we help people and information is free for everyone. Libraries, he pointed out, are a true democratic institution where everyone gets treated the same.

For Susan, after so many years committed to helping children who had grown up in terrible conditions, she now relishes helping children and families develop from the start. She feels that she practices



society's commitment to children as a librarian, rather than trying to repair the damage as she did in social work.

Rose appreciates that she no longer has to have an edge. In the Navy, where she watched people tinkering with propulsion systems, everything was life and death. In sales, she needed an edge to convince people to buy her products. Now she gets to say, "How can I help you?" instead of telling them what to do, or cajoling them to buy.

As a grant writer, Lee had to always think of an angle to convince people to give money. As a librarian she can simply say, "We're a good place."

Vicky enjoys being in management at the library, and working with her branch's community. She gets to do outreach to communities we don't yet serve, and gets to help groups network with each other. She remembers fondly her library work in the 90s, when she helped seniors connect with computers. It inspired her to see people so late in life being active and vibrant learners.

Encourage or discourage?

Our panelists encourage interested people to pursue a career in libraries, but warned that the job market is tough these days. Many people with MLS degrees are working as paraprofessionals, our panelists reported.


Be aware that you might have to move, they cautioned. You might have to take a pay cut from your previous career, and you might have to wait awhile before finding a job.

Interestingly, several people mentioned that libraries are the only job they've been in where workers spend time questioning the relevancy of their work. Panelists wondered if technological advances, specifically the advent of the Internet, have caused this sort of questioning. All our panelists agreed, though, that they believe strongly in the importance of libraries and library workers.

Burnout? Nein danke!

All in all, the panel was unanimous in loving library work. Would a group of other workers be so positive about their careers? And, as some panelists pointed out, is it harder for people who never had a first career? Does coming to the library as a second career give one a uniquely positive perspective?

Perhaps the message to take from our panelists is that it is good to make a change when you feel burned out at your current job. That change, we also learned, doesn't have to be something you've always planned on. It can happen suddenly, by accident, or because of all the wrong reasons. Maybe, as happened with Jane, you'll apply for a job because a friend talks you into it. Maybe you'll decide one day to follow a childhood dream. Maybe you already work in the library, but will decide to try a different track—go from clerical work to reference work, or from reference to cataloging. Maybe you'll leave management, as Steve did, and feel refreshed by being able to focus on reference work once again.

Wherever your path leads, remember the twisting paths these people took to get where they are today. And remember that the place you end up might be a place you like very much indeed. 



Terms of Engagement

by **Deborah B. Dancik**
University Librarian
Willamette University

I can't imagine being in the library profession 20 years, 25 years, or even 30 or more—and still liking it? How do people last? At any stage in a career, especially one where rapid change is endemic, individuals can experience burnout. Those classic signs: emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion, which characterize burnout, can happen at different phases or stages of a library career and for a variety of reasons. Perhaps our high expectations have not been met. Perhaps the organization in which we work has become overly bureaucratized, is stagnant or lacks vision, or has an organizational climate of conflict and blame, and is continually “doing more with less.” Perhaps there is too much new to learn and one's competence feels threatened, or there isn't enough room to learn and grow so frustration or boredom sets in. Recognize any of these?

So, why do people stay in this profession a long time and how do they manage

to avoid burnout? As Donna Millard found in her survey of academic librarians, we stay in the profession because “We like what we do. Our Career Commitment is very high...” Millard used Blau's definition of “career commitment” as “one's attitude towards one's profession or vocation,” aspects of career enjoyment, accomplishments, challenge, creativity, collegiality, and participation in professional activities.

It is true there are individuals who become disenchanted and move on. Their “fit” with the values and actual work are not right for them, or their imaginations have been captured by the ideals or action in another career. For those who do stay in librarianship (or any other profession), there are two major avenues to work-life burnout. It's helpful to distinguish between them. For the sake of discussion, I'll call them the situational and professional engagement; one is about the environment in which we do our work, and the other is the nature of and our relationship to the work. Yes, the two are intertwined, and one certainly does affect the other, but considering them separately can inform how we might approach our own professional future.

The situational is the one associated with the organization in which we work. Leiter and Maslach describe six areas in which the nature of the job is not aligned with that of the people, and thus are elements in work-place burnout. We are familiar with these to a lesser or greater extent: a) workload; b) control over one's work; c) reward, both the external ones of salary and benefits, and the intrinsic or internal ones of satisfaction in doing something of importance and doing it well; d) community where there is shared praise, humor, social support, etc.; e) fairness which communicates respect and confirms individuals' value or self-worth; and f) values where the requirements of the job and the employee's



Deborah Dancik




personal principles need to have congruency. Of course, good management practices are the key to good organizational health in these areas.

It is important to remember, however, that we are not complete pawns of the organizations in which we work. We contribute to the climate and need to understand our own behavior and contributions. Leiter and Maslach report that the one most successful element in preventing and intervening in burnout situations is engagement. Healthy organizations encourage and foster engagement. But there is also personal responsibility for engagement and it is this element that keeps us vital as professionals, giving us staying power.

So what might engagement look like? It is an energetic, involved, and effective state of interaction with the work. It is neither organizational commitment nor job involvement, which focus on aspects within the organization, but rather it is the intellectual and emotional connection one has with one's work. We stay in the profession not simply because the organization in which we work is agile, has a healthy capacity to change, and supplies us opportunities for growth, but because we ourselves can embrace that capacity by being agile, ready to lean into change, and intent upon our own professional growth. We have to be intellectually curious, seeing not only what is immediate, but looking at what we do as part of a bigger whole. We take initiative and the responsibility for problem solving or decision making within the context of the work. Engaged librarians have a commitment to the tenets or values of the profession, incorporating these into subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways of how we approach our work. We have opinions and ideas about the work and we share them. We think about the work, even when we are not at work. Creativity, a sense of challenge, and what I call "intellectual appetite" are part of being engaged.

It's good to be clear about burnout in a job versus burnout in the profession. While the first can certainly lead to the latter, we have to have enough courage to take care of our professional selves. At a certain point in one's career, it's very tempting to fall into commitment to a job because of salary, health benefits, earned pension, commute time, or family logistics. If we find ourselves in a job where we can't grow or an organization that tries to limit our engagement, we are the ones responsible for preventing our professional burnout. If we are honest with ourselves and think about it, most of us do have choices. We have to figure out ways to remain engaged. We can look for new ways to do our work, seek new responsibilities within the larger organization, commit to professional activities, or expand our own skill or knowledge base. And in the end, we can move. Yes, move to new employment. Are you still engaged with the work of librarianship. Do you like what you do? Then stop thinking that where you are is the only place you can be.

Remember, engagement is both a prevention and a therapy for burnout. Yes, we can do yoga, go to counseling, or take a long vacation to avoid the exhaustion that is part of burnout. But, in the final analysis, it's about having an appetite for the work, and the knowledge that we do have choices, that can make the difference in a healthy and long professional life. 

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Polly Wolly Doodle, or My Life as a Secret Agent

by R. Toady

I'd like to take a few moments of your time to talk about my own personal experiences with Library Burnout.

My job as a person working in a library started in March of 1987. I had used up my savings and was desperate for work. When I saw that the Kernetis County General Public Library of the Arts and Sciences was hiring I got right on my bike and pedaled over there as fast as I could to apply, despite my apathy towards books and the written word in general. And I had no knowledge that could with any degree of honesty be said to pertain to either the Arts or the Sciences. I was apparently the sole applicant and they hired me on the spot.

Despite my lack of enthusiasm about reading, the work proved to be so easy that within six weeks I was already feeling bored with my job. To be honest this was actually a record of sorts for me at the time. The longest I'd ever stayed at a job previous to this one was a seemingly eternal nine day stint at the Hammingburg Dunkin Donuts (the one right off the highway, not the one downtown where that girl shot all those people before throwing herself into the scalding vat of donutmaking oil). So, six weeks was quite a victory as far as that goes. My parents were ecstatic and I didn't have the heart to tell them I was ready to move on. Besides, I owed them three months' worth of rent.

What saved me from suffering further burnout and therefore leaving the place was my boss, Mr. Avery Winn, or Number Three as I came to know him. At the end of a particularly dull day of stamping books and saying "that'll be due back in three weeks" he called me into his rather Spartan office in the library basement.

He gestured to a metal folding chair and told me to sit. I noticed there was an identical chair on his side of the desk and he settled onto it with much more grace than his rather hefty frame would have been supposed to possess, perching like

a rather obese pelican. He crossed his plump fingers and, wiggling them once, leaned forward towards me.

"Well, you've been here six weeks now, Joan, and I was wondering how you liked the job so far."

I drew in breath through my teeth. Should I tell him the truth, that the job was almost unspeakably dull and I felt like killing myself or one of the many vapid library patrons who came so cluelessly up to the counter with their arms full of books full of criticism of Mindi Reinhold's poetry, or reference books of 19th century Mongolian fungicides? Or should I play the good employee, strong and silent, never complaining about my lot?

"I'm rather bored, sir," I stated plainly.

He nodded rapidly as if he'd expected just such an answer.

"Yesyesyes, Joanie, may I call you Joanie? Of course you're bored, my dearest Joanie. I would be surprised to hear otherwise. I mean, someone of your intellect... well, I'm not surprised at all that you're finding yourself a little... rather bored."

I just looked at him, wondering what gave. It stated clearly on my resume that I hadn't completed high school. In fact I had failed three admittedly half-hearted attempts at procuring my GED. I knew I was no brainiac. What was this guy getting at?

"Well, I have some good news for you. You see, there is a very special mission I had in mind for you when I hired you." He smiled, a huge smile that exposed tiny yellow teeth. Silver crowns glistened from the dark recesses of his mouth.

He leaned closer and motioned that I should do the same. I scraped the chair a little closer to the desk.

"I need you for a very delicate mission," he whispered. He quietly slid open the top and only drawer of the gray metal desk and pulled out a thick manila envelope.

"You see," he said, "this is not a library at all."



He pushed the envelope across the desk towards me and tapped it with one fat sausage. "And as of this moment, you are not a library assistant. You are an operative for a secret government agency code-named The Dugong. And you will hereby be known as Number Seventeen."

I started to laugh but the look on his face stopped me.

"I know it's a lot to take in all at once," Mr. Winn said, quietly. He smiled. "Take this file home, memorize its contents, and destroy them. Come in to work tomorrow and act like none of this happened. Not all of our staff is made of agents of course, in order to preserve secrecy. There is a code phrase which we agents use to recognize each other." He paused and spoke so quickly I barely heard.

"The secret words are Polly Wolly Doodle."

I couldn't hold it in anymore; I busted out laughing. He smiled and looked down, and I thought I detected a slight blush.

"It sounds a little silly at first, I admit, but that's just to throw off our enemies. So..." He reached his hand across the table and I took it. "Welcome aboard, Number Seventeen."

When I got home, I locked myself in my room and tore into the folder. It was filled with documents detailing what I would be doing at my new job. It was brilliant; I'd be fulfilling all my normal duties as library assistant without any noticeable change in routine. I would still be checking out people's books, checking in and shelving returns, all the while receiving my secret training from Number Three.

He taught me how to tell who was an agent and who was not. Who needed to be reported and who was harmless. I took note of every book checked out and entered them into the computer database so we could track the flow of information in and out of the library. I learned the

secret behind the Dewey Decimal system, how each of the numbers, when added to the numerical value of the subjects they stood for in a deceptively simple formula, became a coded language which we members of the Dugong used to communicate amongst ourselves. Soon I could tell instantly what messages were being passed on, just by glancing at the books being checked out and doing the simple equation in my head. I would take the message and put into a new code before passing it on to Number Three.

As per his wishes I never asked any questions about the organization, and as a reward for my reticence and loyalty, from time to time Winn would divulge a tidbit or two of information. For instance, his job consisted of contacting Number Two on a daily basis, though he'd never spoken with or met him or her personally. No one knew anything or ever spoke of Number One, and some had the view that there was no such person, or that Number One was some type of computer, or program.

It was also speculated that more than one individual sometimes possessed a single number, for instance, that there could be multiple Number Twos, all working in secret locations around the country. This seemed to be corroborated by something that happened to me about a year after I had started the job. A young woman, skinny to the point of anorexia, came up to the counter one day and put four books in front of me. I had never seen her before but she produced a very worn but valid library card and snapped her gum mercilessly as I checked out her books. I was astonished by the message encoded in her choice of books: it read, "Number Seventeen reporting for duty, mission accomplished." I looked at her. She stared over my shoulder at the poster of a large cartoon bookworm saying, "Books aren't for eating, they're for reading!" and drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter.



I had never sent a message back to any patrons, or revealed that I knew they were agents, but something made me feel like I should say something to this, my doppelganger Seventeen. I knew that it was dangerous to do so; that if she reported me, it could mean termination or worse, and when I thought about losing my job I was surprised to realize that I was filled with anxiety at the thought. For the first time, I had a job I really liked, I had found something that I cared about and enjoyed. Maybe someday I would burn out again, but for now, I did not want to get fired. Maybe this was a test. If so, I was about to fail it. I might not ever have a chance like this again.

“Polly Wolly Doodle,” I whispered.

The girl did not react. Maybe she hadn’t heard me. I repeated it, a little louder this time, as I slid the books across the desk to her. She grabbed them with no expression on her face and strode out the door without a word.


The following morning I grabbed the newspaper from the front stoop of my parents’ house and stopped back into the kitchen where the greasy smoke of burning bacon was filling the room as my mother performed her daily heroic attempt to cook breakfast. On the front page was a huge headline LOCAL TEEN FOUND MURDERED IN QUARRY. There was a huge photo of a quarry with a smaller photo of the girl I’d seen at the library yesterday beside it.

When I stepped into Mr. Winn’s office later that morning, hardly surprised to have been summoned there, the first thing I noticed was the pile of four library books sitting on his desk; the same four, obviously, that Number Seventeen had checked out before she’d been, uh, checked out. He smiled and once again gestured to the metal folding chair. He offered me a cup of his weak coffee which I declined.

“Good work, Number Seventeen,” he said. “I’ll be honest with you, Num-

ber Two doubted me when I hired you on, but you’ve proven that you meet the high standards we Dugongs expect of all our agents.” I found myself blushing as I thanked him.



So you see, thanks to Mr. Winn, my job has become interesting and important to me. He saved me from the edge of burn-out by giving my job new meaning and significance, though after all these years I’m still kind of unclear about what it is I really do. I’ve moved up in the agency from Number Seventeen to Number Six, and Mr. Winn says I still have my best years ahead of me. Of course I do have trouble sleeping nights, worrying that some counteragent will get past the security system I’ve had installed at my folks’ place, but the pills help some. And I’m pretty careful; I do my job, don’t ask questions. I don’t think there’s much chance of my getting burnt out any time soon, even if it does seem like it’s the same thing day after day, week after week. The life of a library assistant has proven to be surprisingly rewarding to me and I encourage you all to stick with it. The agency needs us all, each and every one of us. Besides, you never know what consequences there might be if you leave. 



On Preventing, or Dealing With, Burnout

by **Phyllis McCracken**
Salem Public Library

When I had worked at the same library thirty years and felt a need for change, the city graciously granted a six-month unpaid leave of absence. During that time I helped in the library of a small college in the Midwest. It was an opportunity to develop new friendships, expand my horizons, and refresh my perspective.

In a hive full of bees, each has work assigned,
Not just “if you please,” but a real daily grind.
Of course, one sees beauty in flowers that thrive,
But there’s also a duty to return to the hive.
Back and forth, day after day,
No time to take the scenic way.
Now, people differ from the bee,
And shouldn’t take problems too seriously.
We have eyes—not one, but two,
To lend perspective to our view.
A little differently, each eye sees;
With both they’re focusing with ease.
At times, the work’s so in our faces,
We need to step back several paces,
Quit being overly selective,
Back off to get a new perspective.
On company time we must not shirk,
But DO have a life outside of work!
In addition to sticking to our stations,
We need to plan some fun vacations.
Time off needn’t be too spendy or frilly.
It could be an evening of just being silly.
Develop new interests, make a friend,
Sign up for a class (and then attend).
Dig dirt, make a garden, draw a plan for a house,
Take a hike, ride a bike, build a trap for a mouse.
Provide for your spirit—it is the REAL you;
Nourish it, exercise, rest and renew.
Oh, yes—and take care of your physical, too.
At times, one cannot get away,
So make the working into play,
Collecting titles and authors that match,
Such as *The Byrds of Virginia* by Hatch.
We’re asked the same questions again and again.
Our patience, when stretched, wears mighty thin.
The counterbalance to the stress,
Is a sense of humor in the midst of the mess.
Humor is valuable, do not doubt it;
Never, ever, leave home without it.

Postscript

In short:

Maintain perspective.
Have a life outside the workplace.
Don’t take the problems too seriously.
Care for your spirit and your body.
Make work into a game.
Be creative, use your sense of humor.
Hang in there.



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Vol 12 • No 4 Winter 2006	<i>Tribal, Solo and Rural Libraries</i>	November 15, 2006	December 15, 2006	Richenda Wilkinson
Vol 13 • No 1 Spring 2007	<i>New Voices, New Views: The next wave of librarians</i>	February 15, 2007	March 15, 2007	Anne-Marie Deitering and Janet Webster
Vol 13 • No 2 Summer 2007	<i>President's Conference Issue</i>	May 15, 2007	June 15, 2007	Aletha Bonebrake



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