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Charley's Corner:

Defragging Old Brains

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Nothing in this column represents the view of my Library or its Board of Trustees. These are just my personal opinions. This particular column was pre-tested by several people of varying age, all of whom had different opinions about what should come first. Under an aura of hedonistic revelry, I have decided to go for the dramatic presentation, as opposed to the sensible. Young people, please be forewarned. This column does make sense to older folks. Hang in there.

My eighty-four year old father has one of those Brother word processor typewriters with the small LCD screen that shows only a few lines at a time. He bought it four years ago for \$400. When my brother and I have tried to talk him into getting a PC and getting on the Internet, he maintains that he can do it with his Brother typewriter and refuses to spend the money or let us buy it for him. Of course, there are arcane directions for hooking up his Brother, but even my brother's partner, a computer programmer, could not connect it.

Last year, my truck driver brother-in-law set up my mother-in-law with Web TV, and she now regularly emails all her relatives. She is an eighty-seven year old country woman, living in Centralia, Missouri, a spot decidedly on the technological byway, if you will. Yet my father won't do Web TV either.

What makes it happen that some people can manage a paradigm shift while others cannot? My father was a supervisor in the Post Office, and he knows how to type, having filled out interminable three-part governmental forms and written reports for years. My mother-in-law was a cook in a barbeque restaurant. Typing was a sometime thing. Like the forty-year-old theoretical physicist, who is past his prime because he cannot adapt to the evolving theories, we all latch onto the technology that we learned when we were still striving, career-oriented upward-moving professionals. Those who never had any technology are often more open to learning some later in life.

We also latch onto the music of our youth. I still like the pop music of the 60's. Fortunately, having learned guitar late in life, I have been able to develop an appreciation of both older and more modern music. But, except for my thirteen-year-old grandson, I'd be clueless as to what teenagers listen to. Bloodhound Gang (a notorious music group currently popular with teens) makes references to things that did not exist in the 60's. I find the following lyric fascinating: "You and me, baby, we ain't nothing but mammals. Let's do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel." Not because of the meaning, but because watching the Discovery Channel is a common enough experience that even a hard-core counter-culture singer will employ this supposedly pabulum experience (watching animal films) as a defining sentiment. (See <http://www.statepress.com/fall99/spm990930/local01.html> for an older review, containing the lyric.)

As a gray-haired Baby Boomer, I am representative of the latest class to move into the age in life wherein we no longer strive for upward mobility. I know my job, and I am not planning to move to another one. (I have begun to look at what I might do when I retire, but that's another column.) But my present job requires me to plan for the future. We're looking at a possible new building in seven to ten years. (We don't just sit on the beach here in San Diego. We also sit in meetings.) I'm hiring staff that may work here for twenty years or more. (More meetings.) So I need to look at the latest technology, to look at the latest management theory, to look at the latest demographics. (It was just announced that non-Hispanic Caucasians now constitute less than half the residents in California. My most recently hired reference librarian is Polish-Japanese, but I don't think of her as a minority because she is a native San Diegan with a Southern California accent.)

All this leads me to my point for today: my thoughts about the AALL meeting. Our fearless incoming SIS leader, Regina Smith, did a little exercise at her meeting for SCCLL SIS committee chairs and members. We all got to divide up into groups by age. Of the thirty odd people in the room, only three were under forty. Gadzooks!!! Our profession is aging.

The American Association of Law Libraries has a very elaborate system of receiving input for program development at its annual meetings. Special interest sections have their education committees submit suggested programs. AALL committees suggest programs. Chapters suggest programs. Individuals suggest programs. Then the Annual Meeting Program Committee goes through an elaborate process to rank the programs, eventually choosing the seventy or so winners out of the hundred and fifty entries. What the AMPC wants is clarity on those applications. They want to know the learning outcomes, the intended audience, the costs—all reasonable requests, necessary to give the committee members something to latch on to while making their rankings.

Trouble is, in this day and age, things seem, at least to me, to be changing faster than the program planning process allows for. Programs are usually based on someone's recent successful new project at his or her library. But the idea itself is two years old before we here about it at an AALL Meeting. It took a year to get it from idea to successful project at that library and another year to get it through the AALL program planning process. Maybe we should devote some AALL programs to those who make educated guesses, or just guesses.

As someone who does not need basic training, and, noting Regina's exercise, there are a large number of us in AALL, I need programs that tell me what's happening now. I like the new ideas. They keep me vital. But I don't have the energy I had when I was younger and learning things for the first time. Now, I'm learning things over again, having to make paradigm shifts. My mind is no longer a tabula rasa. It's cluttered with years of learning and experiences, some of which are useful, and some of which are not any longer. Yet I have to find space for new information. Think of my brain as a hard drive. It needs a judicious weeding of old files, and then it needs a defragmentation program.

(Speaking of hard drives, I remember when a 10 Mb hard drive would last someone for several years. Now we just added a 42 Gb hard drive to my wife's nine-month old computer,

which had a 15 Mb drive and the Gateway salesman's proclamation that 15 Mb should last for a while. Have you tried streaming video lately? It's a shame that human brains cannot just evolve new storage space as fast as our computers.)

Anyway, to end this rant: After all these years, I feel like I know less of what I need to know than I knew years ago. (Remember the lyric that went something like "I was much older then; I'm younger than that now.") Yet I know I know much more than those younger than me who are somehow confident that they know what they need to know. I believe their confidence comes from the knowledge that they still have time to learn what they will yet need to know. I don't have that opportunity. I must make choices, and mistakes, now. Undoubtedly, my successor will proclaim that I did not know what I was doing when I planned that new law library building. And he or she will be right. My consolation is that so many of my colleagues at other law libraries are in the same boat.

So what have I learned from all this? I learned, very much to my surprise, that in some respects, it would be better to emulate my mother-in-law than my father. I may not know these new things, but I should try them out. I can learn things from people younger than me.

I have also learned enough to get going again. Go ahead and make those choices. Do the best I can. I won't be right. But I should not let the fact that I know I won't be right stand in my way. And at least I know that I will have done as well as anyone else could have done.

Is my brain defragged? Perhaps not, but I have learned not to pause so much at each of the old fragments I come across when I think things out.