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**Charley's Corner:
Of Geniuses and Librarians**

by Charles R. Dyer, Director of Libraries, San Diego County Public Law Library
Nothing in this column represents the view of my Library or its Board of Trustees. These are just my personal opinions.

As I write this column in December 2001, Hollywood, as it usually does, is releasing a number of films simultaneously that have a similar theme. Other than the fantasies based on children's books, the main theme this year seems to be the flawed genius—the schizophrenic mathematician, the family of genius losers. The Calendar section of the *Los Angeles Times* included an article on them, with the query why is it that Hollywood must depict geniuses as always flawed somehow. First, it postulates that Hollywood does that to make the film accessible, that the rest of us can only appreciate geniuses when they too suffer like the rest of us. After all, if the common person understood what the genius actually did in his genius, then it would not have been genius, would it. Then, it goes on to postulate that there is something about geniuses, the obsessions they have, which require them to give up other things, such as an adequate sense of social life. I believe it dangerous to generalize from the various examples of genius, real or imagined, that all geniuses must somehow have a tragic flaw.

I happen to know a few geniuses who do have flaws. But for every genius whose flaw has dealt him one of life's harsher existences, I know more who enjoy comfortable lives in the midst of academia or think tanks. Their social skills do leave a lot to be desired. Often, the proverbial absent-minded professor is so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he is discourteous, too. Or they just don't get it. The law professor who can expound at length on deconstructionist theories of law as politics often fails to recognize that law students living on loans cannot afford fancy drapes in their meager apartments. And there is the judge who can write at length of precedent and economic theory but never really feels the pain of an unemployed food service worker who is getting evicted.

How do librarians fit into this? Generally, we don't have geniuses among us librarians. Most of us, in order to survive both the need for social interaction in our workplaces and the constant interruption of others whose momentary informational needs are greater than our own, give up whatever obsessional patterns one must have in order to do enough in a narrow area of endeavor to reach the rank of acknowledged genius. Yes, we can read sentences like the previous one. We can go further and understand geniuses when they ask questions at the reference desk. We often rate very high on I.Q. tests and win at Jeopardy. But librarians don't have the time to be geniuses.

We tolerate geniuses, but we do so differently from the toleration we show the mentally ill obsessive. Geniuses don't waste our time. Much to the genius's surprise, we are more concerned for him (or her) than for the hypothesis the genius is studying. Our service is service

to the person, rather than the idea.

Personally, I have had the good, bad, and mixed fortune to work with a couple of geniuses. I have found such experiences both rewarding and humbling. A couple of times, I have been able to be the muse for some very good writing about some very good ideas. Through all that, I have learned that I personally am incapable of the amount of obsession needed for true genius. But I have helped those projects in two ways.

First, I have edited the writing so that the language is no longer the writer's personal style, but one capable of being read by others. Geniuses sometimes have the habit of leaping from one point to another without transition. The logic is there, but the genius tends to leave it out as obvious when it isn't obvious to the rest of us at all.

Second, I have helped the writer get through the labyrinth of social contacts needed to get the work published or the grant awarded. Most geniuses need the help of others in ways similar to these.

Librarians translate the world of knowledge to people who have less understanding of how the world of knowledge is organized. In fact, librarians are the organizers. And when we organize, we stay mindful of the fact that we don't want a product that takes a genius to understand. When computer companies began trying to organize their data so that it doesn't take a genius to search their databases, they called on librarians. Librarians suffer fools gladly, unlike most geniuses.

I know full well that some of you will automatically think of people among your colleagues you would call geniuses. (Certainly, some of the winners of the Joseph Andrews Bibliographic Award come to mind, if you are thinking of obsessive people.) Nevertheless, I present these revelations to you in order to postulate a thesis that I think would not be negated by the existence of librarian geniuses. The world at large does not recognize librarians as geniuses, so we never win those prizes reserved for the truly great. No Nobel Prize winners. No MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant winners. No best-selling biographies about our inspired leaders.

Most people have heard of Richard Feynman, the prototypical genius physicist, but few know of William Frederick Poole, the inventor of the periodical index, and he was actually pretty obsessive. Many people think John Dewey invented the Dewey Decimal Classification system. There are quite a few people who work in law libraries who have never heard of the Marian Gallagher Award, the highest award given to law librarians as law librarians.

Most people marvel at the work done by geniuses. They know they could never do that. Our trouble, boys and girls, is that most people think they can do what we do, that the work of a librarian is easy and obvious. Most people cannot distinguish between the experienced librarian and the kid we hired last week to shelve books. More than a few have said to me, even after I introduce myself as the *director* of the county law library, that it must be fun to be a librarian, because you can sit and read all the time.

But I believe that times are changing. As we have seen starting salaries for librarians rise at three

times the average increase in salaries since about 1995, we now find librarian positions that are compensated closer to their worth in comparison to other professions. Most corporate leaders now know that librarians, far from being replaced by computers, are more in demand than ever.

Of course, there are those who think that artificial intelligence will make computers capable of thinking like humans and that they will still someday replace librarians. But they haven't thought it through yet. A computer that thinks like a human may still be somewhat short of what would be needed. Librarians serve others so well because we are able to place ourselves in the others' positions, momentarily to "walk in their shoes," to know what makes them tick, so that we can direct them to places in the literature that can solve their problems. Not all humans, not even geniuses, can do that.

We translate the reality that is common within our society to the more narrow and often skewed reality that the individuals in front of us believe. We make assessments of the needs of library users based on all sorts of cues, including their body language, their clothes, the tempo and pitch of the questions they ask, the peculiar words they use to describe their situation. If we get to the day when an artificial intelligence computer can do all that and accurately and quickly (without a thirty-page questionnaire) address the needs of the users they face, then those computers would have to be trained by librarians. And as our society, our culture, moves along, we librarians would have to re-train these computers.

When you think about it, we're not the ones who should worry. Computers are very good at repetitive tasks. Computers can make those calculations that used to take years within a few minutes. Computers can do what only people with obsessive personalities can do. Perhaps it is the days of the genius that are numbered.

A few tangential thoughts on my little thesis: I realize that, as the library as a place begins to disappear as a paradigm, the term "librarian" is becoming outmoded for what we do. I still like it. I believe that chat room style "live reference" over the Internet will not replace standing before an actual live reference librarian at a reference desk until it is coupled with video conferencing, not so the researcher can see the librarian, but so the librarian (cybrarian, whatever) can see the researcher.

Finally, I have been reading some rather good books lately that attempt to add some aspects of "science" to the profession of library science. I recommend John Budd's *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science: A Philosophical Framework* (Scarecrow 2001) as a good one. It is heavy reading until you get well into it, when he starts bringing library science into the discussion. Professor Budd's aim is an epistemological study of library science. He ends with an examination of modern phenomenological studies, and he admits he has not finished his search. He complains about the inability of writings in library science to address the problems he sees. Most of the problem with those writings, in my opinion (IMHO, as they say), stem from addressing the concepts, such as "service", in terms of place, i.e., a library (and thus locked in time).

It ain't the library as a place that distinguishes a library from a bookstore; it's the librarian. The

librarian—the non-obsessive knower, the person who approaches knowledge always as a process, rather than an objective, sensible (in the meaning of “senses”) fact. The librarian—the one who deals always in the pragmatic, getting the answer you need, rather than the Answer of All Answers.

We, as law librarians, are not relativists. We know that the patron needs a specific answer because our society requires that he knows that answer, the one that is socially, politically, judicially acceptable in his time and place. Not just any answer will do. But that answer is today’s answer. It’ll be different tomorrow.

I don’t have an end to this column. I think I’ll pick up the theme again in a later issue. But I do have a closer, for the moment. If most people are fish, swimming in the sea of knowledge, and maybe geniuses are the whales, then we must be the swans (or pelicans perhaps). We know how to dive in and grab and come up again. We see that the sea is huge, too big to see all at once, seemingly limitless, too much for any one person. The others, stuck in the water, don’t have very much perspective at all. No wonder we are so misunderstood.