

“Can We Talk About Vocational Awe?”

Text of Talk at the March 7, 2022 Lambda Chapter Initiation Ceremony for Beta Phi Mu International Honor Society for Library & Information Studies by Dr. Betsy Van der Veer Martens, Professor Emerita, University of Oklahoma School of Library & Information Studies

Thank you for the introduction, Elizabeth! I’m delighted to have been invited as guest speaker for tonight’s initiation ceremony. I’ve been a part of this annual event as the chapter’s faculty advisor for the past 6 years and I’ve truly enjoyed what all our previous guest speakers have had to share each spring. As a historical note, I’d like to mention that this guest speaker portion of the proceedings was initiated as part of the Lambda chapter’s 50th anniversary celebration back in 2017 and our very first speaker was longtime member Tom Rink, who is the current national president of Beta Phi Mu, which is certainly reflective of the excellence of this particular chapter!

Now that SLIS faculty member and fellow Beta Phi Mu member Dr. June Abbas has graciously accepted the chapter advisor torch from me, I’m pleased to step into my new role as professor emerita at the School of Library & Information Studies and share some of my own thoughts, about what’s been called “vocational awe.”

The first time I saw this particular phrase way back in 2018, when Fobazi Ettarh introduced it as the title of her lengthy, well-researched post on *In the Library with A Lead Pipe*, I felt an immediate jolt of recognition. Since, as a Baby Boomer, I was pretty much born into what Robert Leigh’s 1950 book, *The Public Library in the United States*, actually called “the library faith,” I was also quite taken aback by her subtitle, which is “The Lies We Tell Ourselves.”

But what Ettarh wrote about in 2018 dovetailed pretty much exactly with how I’ve viewed the profession since 1970, when I first started out as a library shelver. Those things she has identified: the library as sacred space, the library profession as gatekeepers and guardians of culture and knowledge, the library values of upholding democracy, education, intellectual freedom, and the importance of librarians themselves, as one of Tulsa’s most famous librarians, Nancy Pearl, once put it, “Being a librarian is one of the best, and noblest, careers that anyone could have” have all been part of my personal professional credo.

I freely confess that I have been, in fact, in awe of the profession, the various ways it has evolved and changed over the past 50 years in response to social and technological challenges, the ways in which it has tried to cope with its often dubious past, its contentious present, and its uncertain future, and also the many people who have been a part of all this, whether as Oklahoma’s own “Library Legends” such as Ruth Brown of Bartlesville or as more contemporary librarians on the national scene such as Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress or Alison Macrina, founder of the Library Freedom Project. During those times when I was not technically in the profession, even though it was always in the closely related area of publishing, I felt envious of those who were. As a library educator, too, I have always been incredibly proud of what our students and alumni have accomplished.

But Ettarh also astutely pinpointed some of the problems that I as a “true believer” have tended to discount, so I would encourage you all to follow her tweets and to read at least some of the growing library literature that has sprung from this idea of “vocational awe” as problematic for the profession. These problems are generally associated with the stark reality that our libraries are institutions which are deeply embedded within a nation that, both philosophically and practically, has been built on centuries of

economic and social inequities. School libraries must support curricula that are usually state-mandated, public libraries are accountable to the taxpayers that fund them, and college and university libraries must devote their increasingly limited budgets to reflect their stakeholders' often competing priorities. Moreover, in order to justify their existence, libraries of all types are forced to advocate their very value on a continuing basis, much more proactively than many other cultural and educational organizations have to do.

The most recent example of this is American Library Association president Patty Wong's response this week to an opinion essay published in the *New York Times* which claimed that library titles and materials support librarians' own political agendas rather than those of their communities.

Wong wrote in response, "This could not be further from the truth. Libraries represent values that are core to democracy. Trained and certified librarians and library workers provide services and collections that inform, engage, and help people of all ages learn more about the world around them.

Libraries across the country are addressing the effects of historical inequality and systemic racism on library users, especially people of color and those who belong to historically marginalized and minority communities. Library professionals are dedicated to developing collections that allow every person to see themselves in library resources and provide a means to build understanding among all users.

The American Library Association is committed to free access to information and fair treatment of all people. We call on library colleagues at all levels and the public to promote the freedom to read and work toward addressing complex topics that affect policies, practices or behaviors."

So, this type of advocacy work has become central to librarianship, whether it's countering a growing number of school library book challenges, dealing with the many accessibility and price inflation problems imposed on libraries by our major publishers, or promoting the innovations that are increasingly prevalent in all types of libraries, whether it's hotspot lending, addressing local food insecurity issues by free cafés on library premises, training to work more effectively with neurodiverse members of the library community, or the emergency administration of narcan to prevent opioid-related overdose deaths of library patrons.

But all this comes with a heavy cost, as Ettarh rightfully points out about "vocational awe." When a library takes on the burden of trying to ameliorate many of the problems of our society in addition to improving its own practices and principles, that burden tends to fall on the library workers themselves. These tend to be those most committed to a service point of view, which is often exactly why they are in the profession, and they can find it hard to live up to all these expectations, both for themselves and for their library, even and perhaps especially as they also become more aware of the fact that this "vocational awe" can actually stand in the way of the type of changes that can help improve the profession, so *they* may be complicit as well.

Now this can also seem like a comparatively minor concern in today's environment of pandemic, economic downturn, possible world cyberwar, and potential global ecological collapse, all of which are among the "complex topics" that Wong points to in describing the library's informational mission, so it adds to our sense that perhaps we're just not doing enough to combat such issues as fake news, information illiteracy, and digital surveillance in addition to our more routine responsibilities.

It also becomes very difficult to criticize the library as an institution, especially by those who are attempting to enter the profession, without being perceived as someone who isn't truly committed and who is therefore undeserving of being a part of the field. New graduates in particular tend to internalize

this as they embark on their first job search and attempt to present themselves as “awesome” as possible in order to fit into what they perceive as this ideal. The longer and harder the job search, the more despondent new graduates can become, as they may view this as failure on multiple levels, in a way that someone looking for a first job as an accountant, for instance, seldom feels.

For those already in the profession, reconciling “vocational awe” with the realities of library work, which can often be as mundane for a branch public librarian as making sure that the restrooms are clean because of their heavy usage by local residents, or for a school librarian, covering three different elementary schools every day because otherwise there would be no library services let alone a makerspace for these students, or for a university librarian, attempting to find open access online resources for new courses each semester in order to supplement each semester’s shrinking materials budget, or for a tribal librarian, just trying to keep the library doors open on a daily basis. These problems are well-known within librarian circles but aren’t generally discussed outside.

For those at the managerial level, the ongoing pressure of trying to make the internal institutional improvements to address conflicting needs to diversify the collection, improve employment practices, and enhance programming initiatives is intensely stressful while at the same time maintaining the unperturbed external appearance that is normally expected of an iconic organization such as “the library” is perceived to be by its many publics with their differing agendas.

Of course, most of these levels are actually represented here tonight, which brings me to the real reason I chose “vocational awe” to talk about. As I hope you are already aware, Beta Phi Mu candidates for initiation are chosen not only for their academic prowess but for the shared perception by SLIS faculty that they are very likely to be strong future contributors to the profession. It is clear to me from our group of initiates tonight, even though as a retired faculty member, I didn’t participate in the vote this year, that that perception still holds, as I certainly share it about you all.

So, to get to my final point, Beta Phi Mu’s own motto, which we’ve heard tonight in Latin as “Aliis inserviando consumor” and which, for those like me who *don’t* remember their high school Latin, translates into English as “consumed in the service of others.”

Now all the English majors in the house know that “consumed” itself has several meanings in English. One of these meanings is roughly to be proactive in, preoccupied with, or even obsessive about something, and I suspect that *that* meaning was the intent of the librarians who originally chose this particular phrase to represent Beta Phi Mu’s core values. However, another common meaning of “consumed” is to be eaten, to be used, or even to be destroyed by an external force. So we can either view “consumed in the service of others” as an imperative to try to just do the best we can in providing service leadership in librarianship or as a warning not to let ourselves be so overawed even by the possibility of being a part of one of the few institutions today that can be considered symbolic of what we as a society can hope to become through continued efforts to realize our values of democracy, equity, freedom, justice and knowledge that *individually* we just burn out.

The Beta Phi Mu lamp of knowledge is also accompanied by our other emblem, the dolphin and anchor printers mark, which represents the mandate to “make haste slowly.” Elizabeth asked me to share my words of wisdom tonight, and I don’t think I can do better than to ask you to consider the importance of just helping each other in illuminating the multiple challenges and opportunities as you lead the way (and I believe you will!) toward the future of Beta Phi Mu and librarianship as a whole.

I have seen such significant change for the better within the library profession and its many contributions to its communities over the past decades (though frankly these *have* tended to be slow and sporadic compared to what you may have in mind) and my hope is to see you all transform this notion of

“vocational awe” into awesome new ideas for the future of libraries and library workers everywhere. As I’ve said earlier, this continues to make me a “true believer” in your potential and that of the profession as a whole.

It’s been a wonderful six years with the Lambda chapter: thank you for having me!!!

References

- Ettarh, Fobazi. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
- Leigh, Robert D. (1950). *The public library in the United States*. Columbia University Press.
- Pearl, Nancy. (2003). *Book lust: Recommended reading for every mood, moment, and reason*. Sasquatch Books.
- Wong, Patty. (March 6, 2022). Opinion: Your librarian wants to challenge, not ban. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/opinion/letters/libraries-book-banning.html>