Editorial

by Elaine Harger

“I don’t want your hope.” Greta Thunberg
“The role of journalism is to monitor any center of Power.” Amira Hass
“In my ideal world, we would sit down together and talk through all of these things.” Adrienne Maree Brown

For 30 years this journal has questioned basic tenets of mainstream librarianship, from neutrality to a jump-on-the-bandwagon approach to new technologies. Progressive Librarian serves as a forum for politically engaged library workers dedicated to the liberatory potential of this profession. That will not change. However, PL is in a period of transition. One more print issue will appear after this one. Guest edited by Tom Twiss, Jessa Lingel and Ethan Pullman, issue #48 will focus on the struggles of Palestinian libraries, archives, education and cultural institutions. After that a new group of PL editors will determine its future. In my last editorial, I am compelled to offer a sketch of what I think must be on the agenda of progressive, leftist, social justice-oriented library workers. I also want to offer thanks to those individuals with whom I’ve had the honor to work over the past three decades.

Climate Emergency and Global Pandemic

Life on tiny, beautifully blue planet Earth has fallen victim to that sector of human society that gorges itself by othering everyone and everything in pursuit of control. What is named the Sixth Extinction and, now, the Great Pause are underway. In the first instance, all the accumulated knowledge of our species stands as nothing in the face of widespread refusal to change. A refusal rooted in ignorance, fear, uncertainty, entitlement – depending on who one is. In the second instance, the global coronavirus shutdown offers proof that knowledge

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can guide social action.

This past winter the continent of Australia was aflame. The koala bear replaced the polar bear as the face of not-so-cuddly death and extinction. We learned that one-quarter of the bird population in North America has died in the last 50 years due to habitat loss and pesticides. Pollinators are disappearing. Oxygen levels in parts of Earth’s oceans have dropped by 40-50%. Whales wash ashore, starved to death because the plastics filling their bellies supply no nourishment. Nanoplastics fall on the most remote mountaintops carried by snowflakes and raindrops. Plastic-rain – the new acid-rain.

And, now, the coronavirus, COVID-19, global pandemic and economic shutdown.

Libraries, schools, museums worldwide are shuttered to contain spread of the virus. Suddenly, for some, life shifted online – shopping, chatting, schooling, entertaining. Zoom soared. For others, already precarious lives teetered, collapsed – jobs and paychecks disappeared, social connections severed, services reduced or cut altogether. In some places care has emerged, in others police crackdowns are ordered.

After a month-and-a-half of this, everywhere a strong desire to return to normal. Back to work, to jostling friends in the hallways, to grocery store trips without facemasks.

Normality. But, what is normal? Normal, by whose definition? What if “normal” for some is COVID-like for others? What if normal is actually pathological?

In a New York Times op-ed piece, Rhiana Gunn-Wright, who helped craft the Green New Deal, addresses the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on poor communities and people of color, and the fact that the bulk of federal stimulus funds are earmarked for corporate returns-to-normal. She expresses outrage that no environmental initiatives were included and says of the pandemic’s impact on the economy that, “…we are watching a preview of the worst possible impacts of the climate crisis roll right before our eyes.”

Except, a hint of even worse rolled out a few days later when armed, right-wing protesters seized the steps of state capitol buildings demanding governors rescind stay-home orders, the sight of which inspired Trump to tweet “LIBERATE MINNESOTA.” Was the president actually suggesting an armed coup against elected state officials or simply engaging in a bombastic man-cave-like cheer usually reserved for sport teams?

And, a picture of even worse comes from India. In an April 3, Financial Times, essay, the writer Arundhati Roy tells of millions of migrant workers forced by stay-home orders to leave urban areas, walking for days to reach their villages, some dying along the way, then the living stopped at state borders by military forces, and told
to return to the refugee camps they’d just left. Describing horrors of suffering and of cruelty in “The Pandemic is a Portal,” Roy writes that the social and economic havoc wreaked by the pandemic

“…offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through it lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Librarianship has an opportunity to take up reimagining, rethinking, redoing within our broken communities. But we need a change in mindset first.

At the midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in January 2019, the Council passed a resolution adding sustainability as a core value of librarianship. Sustainability being carefully defined:

[ALA] Shall define sustainability using the “triple bottom line” conceptual framework: “To be truly sustainable, an organization or community must embody practices that are environmentally sound AND economically feasible AND socially equitable.”

The baggage that this framework carries dooms its intent. What is needed is degrowth, living with less and sharing more.

This editorial is not the place for an exploration of degrowth as an economic theory, but it most certainly is the place for suggested reading. Library workers must inform ourselves if we are to contribute to rethinking normal.

1972 Limits to Growth, by Donella H. Meadows et al.
1973 Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered, by E. F. Schumacher
2005 Discussion Course on Voluntary Simplicity, from Northwest Earth Institute
2008 “Climate Change, Development and the Three-Day Week” by John Stutz
2019 “Against Advertising,” by Nicole Ashoff
2019 “Challenges for the degrowth transition: the debate about wellbeing,” by Milena Büchs and Max Koch.

Perhaps the portal Arundhati Roy suggests we take just might be a ray of hope that Greta Thunberg would accept.
Gratitude

After 30 years of helping put out *Progressive Librarian*, the last of the old-timers, I am stepping away from the editorial work so that the journal can become what the next generation wants and needs it to be.

First thanks must go to the authors whose work fills these pages. Each article represents the intellectual curiosity, critical analysis, and political commitment to social justice that our profession very much needs in these precarious times.

In this issue’s lead article, Carolin Huang writes that “the desperation librarians have to keep up with technological trends is intimately connected to the logic of our current economy.” Huang’s analysis of this anxiety echoes PLG’s commitment to be “actively engaged in social struggles against capitalism,” and if one considers the climate crisis, it becomes crystal clear that librarianship very much needs our voices. Alistair McPherson’s article on hate literature in the library continues in the vein of *PL*’s longstanding challenge to neutrality as a professional standard, and serves as timely support for those librarians now grappling with hate speech in the library. At a time when “data” is all the rage, Dana Lachenmayer’s article on how uncollected, unanalyzed, unreported data serves current, racist power structures highlights the need for vigilance in protecting people’s right to know. Heightened attention to mis- and disinformation and outright lies is a priority. Lily Rose Kosmicki’s compilation of thoughtful ways libraries provide services aimed at building social equity within their communities is inspiring. Steven Harris’s article will prove to be of help as librarianship grapples with the its role and responsibilities regarding restitution to the descendants of enslaved Africans. The two Braverman contest winning essays, by Alessandra Seiter and Yoonhee Lee, stand as proof that social justice percolates in the minds of LIS students today, maybe even in LIS curricula. Julian Jaravata’s interview with Shiraz Durrani highlights the importance of understanding and ongoing analysis of social class. As PLG’s statement of purpose puts it, we “recognize that libraries are sites where structures of injustice, exploitation, control, and oppression are nourished, normalized and perpetuated.” Without clear understanding of where the library sits in terms of class structures we cannot hope to be active agents of social justice change. And, true to that commitment, the annual compilation of entries from the Union Library Worker blog documents class dynamics at play in the workplace over the past two years. The two documents closing out the issue deal with racism.

* See PLG’s statement of purpose and commitments at http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/content/commitments.shtml
in librarianship – past and present. Lastly, Babak Zarin reviews my book, *Which Side Are You On?* What can I say, Babak? You clearly gave it a careful read, understood its purpose, and reviewed it to *inform*. An author can ask no more. Many thanks!

Next thanks go to Nathaniel Moore, Jennifer Williams, Holiday Vega and Alexis Tharp for the time, energy, intellect, and heart you put into PLG, the journal, website, book discussion group, and *forthcoming podcasts*! And, a grateful callout to David Lesniaski and his everchanging crew of LIS students for all those hidden organizational tasks of maintaining membership lists, bank account, mailing address, for stuffing envelopes with journals and hauling them off to the post office.

Finally, to the entire cast of past *Progressive Librarian* editors. It’s been an honor to work with each of you, and now a conundrum! How shall I list your names? By age? Years known? Alphabetically? By number of PLG, SRRT, ALA Council meetings we attended together? Number of drinks at conferences? By zipcode? Well, it’s come to this…a list by roughly how long we’ve served together as editors of this journal: Mark Rosenzweig, John Buschman, Henry Blanke, Kathleen de la Peña McCook, Peter McDonald, Lynn Anderson, Rory Litwin, Lincoln Cushing, Susan Maret, Katharine Phenix, Mike Matthews, Al Kagan, Tom Eland, Bill Stack, Melissa Riley, Eric Estep, Elliott Shore.

And, of course, deepest thanks to all you readers and contributors! PL couldn’t have existed without you! Love to all!

In solidarity,
Elaine Harger