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SENSITIVITY, BLESSING, AND DOXOLOGY ARCHIVAL PRACTICE AS SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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When archivist and blogger Eileen Parris describes what she does for a living, the replies range from, “‘Oh, you are an architect,’ or ‘Archaeology sounds so interesting!’” . . . to inquiries about what she studied “in order to become an ‘anarchist.’”¹ Archival science is a relatively young discipline and admittedly undertaken in out-of-the-way places—often by design—by nondescript keepers of old paper. No wonder misinformation and stereotypes abound. Be that as it may, my conviction is that archivists are poised to offer a relevant, critical service, indeed a vital and robust gift, to the church.

Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?

I want to propose how the practice of archival science in Athens might walk alongside the practice of Christian spirituality in Jerusalem. I will be grateful if my remarks prove relevant to the larger Christian tradition although I have in mind archival collections and their keepers within the Stone-Campbell Movement.²

A Summary of Archival Values and Practice

Compelled by the potential of information and the knowledge built upon it, archivists appraise, acquire, process, arrange, describe, preserve, and make available documentary records³ of enduring historical and evidentiary value.

^{*} Speech given at the Annual Meeting of the Restoration Quarterly Corporation Board 23 Sept. 2014, Abilene, Texas.

¹ Eileen Parris, “Turning a Roomful of Straw into Gold, or What Archivists Do” at <http://vahistorical.wordpress.com/2013/09/13/turning-a-roomful-of-straw-into-gold-or-what-archivists-do-2/> retrieved 27 May 2014.

² In the Stone-Campbell context, historically, the college, university, and seminary libraries serve as repositories for archival materials. Disciples of Christ Historical Society, for many years located in Nashville, TN, began in the women’s dormitory at Culver-Stockton College in Canton, MO, and is currently relocating to Bethany College. Not to be overlooked or underestimated are congregational libraries and private collectors and scholars who scout, sleuth, and safeguard historically significant materials.

³ By ‘documentary record’ I have in mind its broadest sense and usage. Though records may take many forms (from documents to photographs to born-digital files to

They value gaining and maintaining certain kinds of control of the records in their custody. Their first objective is to understand the content of their collections (intellectual control). Then they retrieve and convey that content to users effectively and efficiently (physical control). The entire archival enterprise rests upon gaining and maintaining these controls. It is a foundational value.

A corollary to an archivist's high regard for record content is an equally high regard for the record's original, as-created order. Individuals or institutions create records for a variety of reasons. It may happen as a by-product of conducting daily affairs, with a conscious eye for posterity, or for any number of other reasons. Whether stated or not, these reasons often surface in the way materials are kept and arranged. "The principle of original order," writes Kathleen Roe, "states that records should be maintained in the order established by the person or organization that created, accumulated, assembled, or maintained them."⁴ Inasmuch as this order "affects their evidentiary value," they must be "arranged in a manner that will protect their integrity as historical evidence and as evidence of organization and function."⁵ Convicted that the inner logic of the aggregate set reveals as much about their nature as their content, archivists will always seek to maintain original order. If marred or disrupted, they recreate it as near as evidence and research allows.

The twin values of establishing control and maintaining order call for certain habits of practice. Since archival materials are by nature unique,⁶ the habits of the discipline are structured so as to account for one-of-a-kind items: how to describe them and provide for their care and use. Once archivists appraise and acquire materials, their perpetual daily challenge is to engage in a set of tasks ensuring materials are described as to content, provenance, nature and function. Taken together, they comprise the term *processing*⁷ and result in the generation of finding aids, guides, registers, or catalog records. These access points convey the material's provenance and order, reflect the archivist's research about their creator/s, and enable reliable and efficient retrieval of their information. Finally, archivists ensure equal access to collections in their care. By providing reference and public service, they assist patrons in clarifying and focusing research topics and then physically retrieve items. Further, they publicize holdings, prepare exhibits, and conduct outreach.⁸

artifacts and realia), their commonality is that they document, preserve, or transmit information. See Richard Pearce-Moses. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 326–28.

⁴ Kathleen D. Roe, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 16.

⁵ Schellenberg, 118, 179ff.

⁶ James M. O'Toole, "What's Different about Religious Archives?" *The Midwestern Archivist* 9.2 (1984), 102.

⁷ I use 'processing' in a broad way to include preservation, arrangement, and description. Cf. O'Toole, 119–24.

⁸ O'Toole, 125–30.

While brief, this is a basic outline of those values and practices at the core of the archival profession. I want to call especial attention to one pervasive activity, a center of gravity for this work. T. R. Schellenberg, architect of modern archival theory and praxis, simply stated, “basic to practically all activities of the archivist is his analysis of records.”⁹ I want to suggest that this activity opens a way for Christian archivists to see their work as spiritual discipline ready and eager to bless the church. An archive holding records of Christian ministry is analogous to a journal. The work performed to preserve those records is analogous to the discipline of journaling. The canons of archival practice, from appraisal to promotion, apply to religious records as well as public civil records. That the items housed hold evidentiary and historical value judged to be of enduring, even permanent significance, is as true in secular archives as it is in religious ones. I understand the difference to lie in the character of the underlying narrative—the underlying Christian story—that gives meaning to the work of Christian archivists. Christian archives preserve, document, record, and keep a journal of deeper Christian realities, Christian confession, and Christian mysteries.¹⁰

Meditation

Archives and archivists can serve the church as partners in the first great spiritual discipline: meditation.¹¹ Peter Morgan names three faults of memory: “amnesia (forgetfulness), romanticism (distortion), and antiquarianism (separation from the present).”¹² However, it is in the nature of archival practice to uphold the whole documentary record, as complete as it can be, received as it is. Archives and archivists therefore engage in meditative practice when they call to mind what some never knew about their faith and what others would rather forget. They engage in meditative discipline when they make available as full an array of sources and voices as they can muster. They bid us to pause in the face of our tendency to privilege this one or that one. Committed as they are to ensuring the record from the past is readily available to resource present challenges, they check purely antiquarian tendencies. When archives, in the course of their work, raise the church’s attention and arouse the church’s self-awareness, they accomplish the purpose of Christian meditation, for the records preserved are in fact stories. They are stories of people and congregations, of missions and ministries. They are stories about choices, however noble or shameful, however brave or selfish. They are stories of sacrifice, ministry, mission, and mercy. Ultimately, the stories Christian archives preserve are stories of which God is the lead character. An archive that assists church in

⁹ Schellenberg, 118.

¹⁰ O’Toole, 94–95.

¹¹ Richard Foster proposed three grand divisions for spiritual disciplines: inward, outward, and corporate. I select one from each: inward in meditation, outward in service, and corporate in celebration.

¹² Peter M. Morgan, *Meditations on the “Soul” of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1996), 5.

meditation is one that remedies the faults of memory. Such an archive is well equipped to bring hidden things to mind, to bear witness to information long lost, to testify to God's fullness.¹³

Service

"Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access to their services and the records in their care without discrimination or preferential treatment, and in accordance with legal requirements, cultural sensitivities, and institutional policies. Archivists recognize their responsibility to promote the use of records as a fundamental purpose of the keeping of archives."¹⁴ Fifty years earlier Schellenberg simply said "the servicing activity is doubtless the most important of all activities performed by an archivist."¹⁵ Alongside their librarian cousins, archivists are driven by devotion to users and their needs.

While Richard Foster may not explicitly mention archivists, his words nonetheless aptly describe their work: "When we set out on a consciously chosen course of action that accents the good of others and is for the most part a hidden work, a deep change occurs in our spirit."¹⁶ I want to probe beyond the obvious nature of service professions (as significant as that is) to raise the deeper issue that the nature of the story Christian archives point to is one of the self-giving love of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christian archivists ought to actively promote equal access, hospitality, freedom, forthrightness, and truth-telling, not only because it is accepted practice of the profession but because such values are close to the heart of the Christian confession. In times of ferment, uncertainty, and stress, a Christian archive imitates the gospel story when it serves the church, all of the church, by resolutely discharging its duty to everyone on an equal basis. All archivists cherish an ethic of service, but Christian archivists pursue service because of the character of the story to which the materials in their custody testify. Engaging steadfastly in the "hidden work" of describing and processing of records of Christian ministry, archivists bless the church by modeling humility and service.

Celebration

Archives sojourn with the church in the discipline of celebration. By prompting the church to remember its joys and sins alike, the Christian archive joins with the people of God to celebrate his steadfast love. If archival science

¹³ Joyce Huggett, "Learning the Language of Prayer," *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*, eds. Richard J. Foster and Emilie Griffin (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 11.

¹⁴ Richard E. Rubin, "Ethical Aspects of Reference Service," in *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction*, eds. Richard E. Bopp and Linda C. Smith (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), 36–37. See also the Society of American Archivists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, available at <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

¹⁵ Schellenberg, 119.

¹⁶ Foster, 114.

gives the church a gift of wider knowledge, deeper insight, and clearer perspective, it also journeys with the church in declaring God's abiding presence. Indeed, the hard part of learning better our story is to face realities we would rather forget and to own chapters of our past we would rather rewrite. If by preserving materials that bear witness to these realities, archives aid the church in developing or maintaining a critical awareness of itself within the story of God, then they have pointed back again to the grace of God. Having seen ourselves more nearly as who we really are, do we not then see how deep and wide and great is the love of God? Having processed in the aggregate account after account after account of selfless ministry, faithful proclamation, attentive teaching, sacrificial counsel, and steadfast hopefulness, will not the archive and the congregation join voices to praise the one who is all in all?

Claude Spencer, pioneer archivist of the Stone-Campbell movement, remarked the Disciples were notorious for producing paper for the moment, consuming it, then casting it aside. It has fallen to later generations to follow behind and piece together the fragments. Undaunted in this challenge, Christian archives and archivists, by the nature of their work and the content of their collections, are poised to render to the church significant gifts. They can in fact redeem the rigorous canons of their chosen profession as spiritual disciplines, particularly the habits of observation and description, for the good of the church.

The disciplined application of inward meditation will bring before the church a wide array of voices, resulting in the gift of sensitivity. The disciplined application of outward service renders a hospitable and humble blessing. The disciplined application of corporate celebration holds high God's work in our midst: from exemplars of the faith worthy of our imitation, to God's far-reaching grace and unfathomable love for us even in our worst moments. Pondering God's gracious acts in this way, how can we not break forth in grateful doxology?