Editorial:
Spotlight on Librarianship

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Recently, I went with a few librarian friends to see "Spotlight," the Oscar-winning depiction of *The Boston Globe*'s role in exposing the Roman Catholic Church sex abuse scandal. The film follows the work of a special investigative team of journalists as they slowly reveal the extent of the cover-up. A critical realization occurs while examining directories in *The Boston Globe*'s library. As the protagonists scanned the shelves, my friends and I turned to each other and silently nodded in approval. We were all pleased with the movie's portrayal of our profession and appreciated the idea a librarian had a role in bringing such an injustice to light.

It reminded me of a conversation I had had with a friend earlier. Taking a somewhat morbid turn, we discussed who, or what, would be affected by our deaths. My friend joked my dying thought would be, "Oh, no! Those books left uncatalogued!" – not a great loss to the world. Indeed, the day to day tasks of the librarian seem trivial. It is doubtful that any librarian, *qua* librarian, is going to cure cancer, right injustice, prevent war, or change the world. Nevertheless, I assume most librarians believe they are doing good work, as in, "good for the world." I happen to feel this way myself, but I have to wonder what kind of good it is, or if I can ever be sure.

Librarianship is an attractive profession to me because it allows one to help others without prescribing solutions. We facilitate education and discovery, but avoid telling people what they ought to think or do; we help people help themselves. This means we are often removed from the effects of our work. I doubt the *Globe* librarians would want to claim any credit for cracking the case, even if I'd like to give it to them. The important social good one is doing may be obvious in some cases – like a legal librarian helping prepare an important civil rights case – and *is* obvious in a lot of small cases, like seeing children's appreciative faces when helping them find fun books to read. Nevertheless, these cases may be vastly outweighed by mundane work with no tangible benefits. Yet all that work is just as necessary; if the librarian had never catalogued those directories properly, the Spotlight reporters would never have found them.

One must not forget people can use the knowledge they gain at a library for good or ill. In 1986, Stella Nickell researched the use of poisons at her local library and went on to kill two people (Kohn, 2001). If I think it unfair to give any blame to a librarian for those deaths, ought I forego praising the *Globe* librarians, or thinking I actually do good by working in a library? Maybe I should just take solace that, at the very least, I'm less likely to exploit people in this job than in many others.

I suppose I'll be inclined to go on hoping librarianship is a (morally) good profession. I believe libraries are an important social good and instrumental in building just societies. I also have enough faith in humanity to believe more library patrons resemble the Spotlight crew than Stella Nickell. Given the amount of work a library requires and librarians' remove from the fruits of their labor, I think being a good (i.e. effective) librarian requires a little faith you will also be serving good ends. Choosing to become a librarian is not, in itself, a moral decision; one could choose to do many other things with one's life. But, if you are going to be a librarian, there is an imperative to do one's work well. You may have a hand in changing the world, even if you never know how.

References

Kohn, D. (2001). Bitter pill: A wife on trial. *CBS News.* Retrieved from
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