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A Pair of Wonderful Mentors, in Retrospect

*Technicalities* Column

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*Introduction*

Long a beneficiary in my career of de facto mentorship from a pair of outstanding human beings, I was inspired to take stock of the true extent and specifics of their influence when I learned that the second of them had died suddenly at the start of this year. Countless times these librarians were there for me with helpful advice and perspective at key junctures in my professional (and personal) life. This column includes a collection of memorable quotes, along with some of the context to explain their significance.

The first person was **Elizabeth Ruth (Betty) Baughman** (May 17, 1925-December 13, 2000), my library school cataloging professor. Born in Effingham, Illinois, she overcame a decade of tuberculosis and a 14-year start to life living in hospitals to pursue preparation to become a teacher. Short in stature, with a curved back, she was denied her dream of teaching high school history, despite being highly qualified. Her first job at the Chicago Historical Society involved finishing an author's history book posthumously. The entire set of book's references existed solely on index cards found in the pockets of his suit jacket located after his death and she had to reconstruct the full bibliographic apparatus for the text, making frequent usage of a library tool designed for self-service, the Society's catalog.

Drawn to libraries, catalogs, and the study of their use and construction, she moved west and acquired a second Master's degree at University of California, Berkeley, prior to teaching for over 20 years in University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Graduate School of Library and Information Science.<sup>1</sup>

*"You matched me."*

Alerted by others to her reputation for outstanding teaching techniques using the Socratic method, I rearranged my work schedule in order to end up with her as my professor, from among the four class session offerings from three different professors listed in my initial quarter. Besides the selected readings where we were invited to read critically and reflectively, another major learning exercise was working through photocopies of book title pages, to create the bibliographic description that conformed to the latest cataloging code. The title pages were carefully chosen to illustrate the complexity of analyzing the conditions of authorship and the challenge of writing clear rules that would apply to those data layouts. When students shared decisions they had made in their small groups, Betty might let you know "You matched me." She studiously avoided ever saying anything so declarative as "You are right." If cataloging is a professional activity and not emblematic of a highly-scripted and derivative body of rules governing our work output, we should never expect anything as definitive as that!

*"It depends"*

Once during those title page exercises, the question arose as to whether it truly mattered which wording was selected for transcription of the "imprint" among such variations as

- John Wiley
- J. Wiley
- Wiley
- Wiley & sons
- etc.

Betty memorably responded “It depends on what you want to do with the data. If your library director wants to produce lists of new acquisitions by publisher, then you will probably need an imprint authority file.” A couple decades after I had graduated, I became involved in pioneering work involving deciding how to apply a new metadata schema for use in digital library project work, Dublin Core. In the crosswalks from MARC, the distinction between transcription in MARC field 260 (Publication, Distribution, etc. (Imprint) and 264 (Production, Publication, Distribution, Manufacture, and Copyright Notice) and the possible additional authorized access point (7XX, Added Entry) was not preserved. One had to decide which function of MARC data should take precedence in Dublin Core metadata. The inclination I had toward the latter appears echoed in the thinking seen in today’s linked data for the publisher entity.

*“You may not be interested, but don’t say it’s not important!”*

At one point in my first year of three quarterly cataloging courses with Betty, a significant number of students did not do as well as they had expected on a mid-term exam and were grumpy about it, to the point of being dismissive about the class they were taking. In a rare show of anger, she challenged the thinking of those students in front of the whole class. “You may not be interested, but don’t say it’s not important!” It was a demand for respect about the subject matter. I

took away a general lesson from that day that I have always applied to the vocational choices made by others, particularly those working in other specialization areas of the library field, in domains where I might have anticipated the intellectual issues involved were not as compelling as in my own.

*“This goes to show you what can happen when you give enough red marks!”*

One year after I had graduated, while I was attending my first job-funded American Library Association (ALA) Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, I got to witness my professor being presented with the highest award in the cataloging field, the Margaret Mann Citation. Before the festivities began, she shared with her UCLA colleagues her discomfort with all the attention and admitted that she had tried, prior to making the travel arrangements, to turn down the award, but acknowledged that her dean would absolutely have refused to let that occur. She was not the type to preen with “Look what I accomplished!” Unable to eschew the limelight completely, when it was her turn to speak at the moment of presentation of her award, she led with self-effacing commentary, “This just goes to show you what can happen when you give enough red marks,” referring to the professorial review of many thousands of student assignment papers over the years with red-ink comments. In other words, “I was just doing my job.” With the job title of Senior Lecturer, she had been recognized as the equivalent of a full professor at UCLA. However, she anonymously collaborated with her students over the years while she was shaping them and their thinking. I learned a personal lesson about how important it really is (not) to receive a professional award in one’s career. A truly great leadership can involve a willingness to be invisible.

*“You’re a good judge of character—You’ll know!”*

Five years later I was in midst of filling a librarian serials cataloger position at University of Georgia for the second time since being promoted out of it to a section head. One finalist had recently obtained her library degree at a western U.S. institution. I called Betty up to ask what she knew about the quality of that program. She responded, “Well, it used to be not very good, but my knowledge is outdated. Things could have changed. You know, *anyone* can learn to catalog, if they read the right things.” I was taken aback that she would say such a thing. She had every opportunity to perceive herself as a special go-to guru for a quality cataloging education. Yet, here again, she displayed a clear-cut humility about her own personal importance.

Next, she pivoted to point out that academic libraries typically hold interviews with finalists for professional positions, which many colleagues will also witness. She added, “You’re a good judge of character—*You’ll* know! [if the candidate would make a good hire]” The various discussions I had in library school with my professor during slower moments of my research assistantship work under her, about current politicians then in the news had come back to her, and she reflected that back to me. With that unforgettable comment, she boosted my self-confidence for the remainder of my career. She concluded the conversation with another gem, relating the trainee I would eventually hire, “Nothing will improve your knowledge of a subject like having to teach it to others.”

I thought that exchange was incredible for a couple of reasons. (1) I fully would have expected someone who devoted her life to guiding the thinking of others to

feel it was highly beneficial or desirable or indispensable to be in her presence to effectively learn cataloging. But no, humble person that she was, she did not want any part of a cult of personality. (2) In her act of issuing reassurance to me, I thought at the time she was just being nice and supportive. I gradually came to believe her comment about an ability in judging character and was thankful for what that did for my self-confidence. I am still amazed at how much she accomplished in that one five-minute phone call!

*“I never did anything for the money.”*

At another point in the 1980s, I was involved in a different phone conversation with her, where I was weighing the importance of taking advantage of an imminent opportunity to move up in the hierarchy and pay scale by taking advantage of a job opportunity at another, more prestigious institution. Betty reflected on her own life, with “Well, I never did anything for the money.” That bit of perspective was highly beneficial and liberating to have. It enabled me to make a decision that it would be perfectly fine to stay where I was. It had taken my wife five years after our move to the South to land a significant job in her field of public health education. I wanted her to have a chance to show the world what she could contribute and what she was capable of. My professor had given me mental permission to pursue a dream of an egalitarian relationship. When I later got scolded by my university library director for non-utilization of the great opportunity he had arranged for me (“You would not even talk to them!”) I could calmly shake that off and go on.

I wonder if Betty ever grasped what a profound and far-reaching effect she was having on the lives of everyone she taught, but perhaps that is the lot of the teacher--never to be able to measure how much good he or she is doing.

The second person was **Katha Massey (September 1,1942-February 9, 2023)**, my decade-long department head supervisor in my first professional job. Born in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, she was a student of linguistics and held a fascination with the myriad of ways the words of the English language could be put together. She attended library school at Rutgers University and landed a first professional job at Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee. Shortly afterwards, she moved to the University of Georgia Libraries, where she rose to be a head of nonbook cataloging before her promotion to head of cataloging. In the latter stage of her career there, she worked in the new statewide unit, the Digital Library of Georgia.

*"We were fortunate when you decided to come to work with us."*

At the outset of my professional career, when the immediate supervisor of my position was inexplicably cool to my impending arrival, Katha went out of her way to convey a warm welcome to me and pave the way for the same from the rest of the hierarchy. I received a reassuring encore from her two years later when my immediate supervisor left for another job. After quickly stepping in to cover the annual evaluations due for my serials cataloging teammates, I was invited and encouraged to accept an appointment to become a new section head. Katha was a good person to turn to for advice when facing any personnel challenge.

*“I certainly would never get hung up on what a person **looked** like!”*

One day Katha privately vented to me about a personal conflict that had emerged against someone in the workplace, one which featured animosity toward the victim’s personal appearance. Katha recoiled from that as the basis for expressing ill will. “I certainly would never get hung up on what a person *looked* like!” she told me. That day left an indelible mark on me. Ever afterwards, I have always double checked myself against judging anyone I ever encountered by their outward physical appearance, be it in a job interview or in a social setting. My conviction was that it should always be what is on the inside that counts.

*Observations on the ALA Resources & Technical Services Division Presidency of Ruth Carter*

I recall the reflections Katha shared with me on returning to work after an ALA Annual meeting in the 1990s. Katha had been elected as a member-at-large for what was then the Resources & Technical Services Division. She was in awe of how the divisional president Ruth Carter presided over the in-person executive board meetings. Ruth said remarkably little, let people talk, and occasionally asked a clarifying question. This contrasted markedly in Katha’s experience with verbose controlling types, who acted very hands-on throughout the proceedings.

*“Some people are limited by their low self-esteem.”*

When I ran into inexplicable but severe mistreatment by a couple of supervisors later on in my career, she cared enough to patiently listen to the details. Katha went beyond that to give me her insight into what would cause a person to behave in that manner. She explained how their low personal self-esteem was undermining

them, holding them back and blinding them to the opportunity to have won over and benefitted from a potential strong ally in me. When the situation became completely intolerable and I had successfully interviewed for a new job offer back home where I had been raised, she did something remarkably unselfish. She pushed me away. "There is nothing here for you anymore. As much as I like your company and having you around, for the sake of your career you need to get out of here."

I listened to the heartfelt advice and accepted the new job. I had been highly committed to the institution I was working for, across two decades, and this was the only time I moved to a new institution. The tag attached to a small bag of farewell gifts contained these words of sendoff, "Knock 'em dead." I placed the tag in a plastic sleeve used for preserving baseball cards and carried it in my brief case for the next two decades. I considered it my "mandate."

### *Conclusion*

These were a powerful pair of mentors that bookended my own career. One I realized the value of from the very beginning of my career and the other's degree of influence over me I have come to appreciate only recently. If you have any instinct or impulse to help those who have come along after you did, please go ahead. If you take the time to sit down to answer a question or spend little time merely talking with someone, you may have no idea of how powerfully influential or helpful you might turn out to be!

<sup>1</sup> Sara Shatford Layne. "Miss Elizabeth (Betty) Baughman" *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 25:2/3 (1998) 83-92 [https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v25n02\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v25n02_06)