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Passion, Commitment, and Renewal after 25 Years:

A Conversation between Loretta Rielly and Susan Barnes Whyte

by **Susan Barnes Whyte**
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and

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Susan Barnes Whyte started as a librarian in 1982 as a cataloger at Mt. Angel Abbey library. She received her MLS from Emory University. She actually learned cataloging by typing card sets! And she learned online searching using a phone stuck in a duplex where every minute counted and cost. She worked in technical services for the first decade of her professional life and then moved to public services in 1990 at Linfield College. At Linfield she created the distance learning library services program for adult degree students, co-taught the first online class in 1993, and then moved to the director position in 1999. As director, she continues to co-teach in the Mass Communication Department and in course-integrated information literacy sessions. Her passion throughout her librarian career has been to create learning environments with faculty so that students begin to be able to think their way through myriad sources of information, i.e., to create informed skeptics of us all.

Loretta Rielly began her professional life as an English composition teacher at two midwestern universities. While she liked teaching and the students, she didn't like grading papers or, sometimes, reading them. ("If I had to read one more paper comparing living at home to living in a dorm, I would have had to be committed.") Librarianship provided a career in an academic setting where she could work with students but not have to be the authority figure. She earned her MLS in 1988; her first position was as bibliographic instruction coordinator at Northern Illinois University. She came to OSU as library instruction coordinator in 1990.

Susan and Loretta met at the OLA conference in Ashland in 1991 where, with their then pregnant friend, Connie Anderson, they held the first meeting of OLA's Library Instruction Round Table. Loretta and Susan discovered their affinity for working together and collaborated on several confer-

ences and workshops. This collaboration led to the first LOEX of the West, held at Willamette University, which continues to thrive today. Loretta and Susan also started a traveling gig focused on student learning back before this became the norm. And, what fun we had!

LR: Susan, you said you want to talk about passion. Why?

SBW: Because passion drives me and sustains me even when I think I need a sabbatical. Passion for students and learning, passion for what we say we do in the academy, and passion for libraries which represent knowledge in all forms open for the world to learn about. I'm driven by learning and by the students who at a place like Linfield open their souls to ideas, questions, and different points of view.

LR: Let's back up. What do you mean by "passion for what we say we do in the academy?"

SBW: Ah ha! Because I think that we are not always clear about what we do in higher education and that it is not always apparent to our students that our primary role is to participate in their learning and research. Over the years, I have found that sometimes we get so tied in knots about policy, accreditation, assessment, resources, that we can lose track of the essential role we all play in academia to pass knowledge on and to make new knowledge for the next generation of citizens in our democracy.

LR: It's not just passing it on, though. It's helping students learn to discover their own knowledge. I feel my role is more passive. I'm thinking of a consultation with a student about her research paper on doors in Hawthorne.



We sat at a computer and shared words—when I said “portal” she took off. All she needed was a new way to think about a door as a metaphor. Twenty minutes later, she was scanning articles in Project Muse, looking at bibliographies, and telling me what she was finding. All I had to do was sit back, listen, and occasionally encourage her to focus. I love being present at the moment of discovery.

SBW: Yes, I couldn’t agree more. I love that discovery with students. But, I don’t think our role is “passive.” One thing that has changed a lot since 1982 is the wealth of sources easily discoverable, and yet, the words still matter. Librarians are still experts at lateral thinking, and coming up with synonymous words so that those suggestions can go a long way towards opening doors, so to speak, and to nudge students to think beyond their conception of the world of knowledge. That nudging is teaching and when the light bulb goes on for the student, I am lit as well. Discovery is fun, never dull, constant puzzle solving.

SBW: Loretta, 25 years later, what makes you happy about coming to work 20 years later?

LR: People. Students, yes, but also my colleagues. We’ve hired quite a few new librarians over the past five years and I’m learning so much from them. I have a blog! I have RSS feeds! I do Jing presentations! I Captivate! I’m having so much fun learning new things and finding new ways to share information in my teaching. I teach a credit class in literary research for the English department and am always looking for ways to keep students and myself engaged. (I get bored easily.) Some of the new social tools allow students to collaborate in exciting new ways. I’m starting to work on a project for my class next year using one of the timeline creators such as [http://www.x](http://www.xtimeline.com)

<http://www.dipity.com> to trace a literary work from publication to the critical conversations that followed, placing these in the historical, social, and cultural contexts that influence new readings, new understanding of a literary text.

SBW: Yes, it’s imperative as a professional that we discover what rejuvenates us intellectually, isn’t it? For some, that means changing jobs every five years or moving on to another university. For others, perhaps more place-bound, I think we would all agree that as librarians, all is changing all of the time and we only need to participate, take risks, and keep on trying new ways to engage with students and faculty. Remember, Loretta, when Jerry Campbell declared that the reference desk was dead, oh, about 15 years ago. And, what do we see? We see across academic librarianship, new approaches to how we do reference, IM, chat, reference consultations, email, Facebook all are examples of new approaches. The important component to renewal is to continue to imagine and get excited about the potential. With experience we can add in the “why does this matter” question and reflect about other experiments in librarianship, some of which have played well and some of which have not. The best part about librarianship is the collaboration with our colleagues.

LR: I love chat reference! I thought I would hate it but students have responded so positively. Most of our chat questions end with a “thank you” or “this is awesome.” And students are fine with giving their e-mail if a question can’t be answered during the chat. They seem to be more patient than they are at the desk, probably because they can work on something else while they chat with us. At the desk, they can’t multitask in the same way. Chat also bridges space. A couple of years ago a candidate we inter-



viewed said, “To the distance ed student, we’re the ones who are distant.” That comment changed my thinking about service to students: meeting them where they are is literal as well as figurative.

SBW: Yes, I love that quote. I think that’s another idea that I love about librarianship now. When I was in graduate school, my training was all about the management and control of collections and the management and control of the reference interview and the reference process. I like this new world, pushed by technology and by traditional-aged students’ prowess with that technology. I think it’s more interesting that we in the library have to focus more upon people now, their research habits, their discovery models. It brings into question what we’re about as librarians and makes us think harder about what we do and why we do it. I think that’s healthy for us as a profession. Even though I ran technical services operations in several libraries for a decade, I’ve never really been that interested in control as my leading idea.

LR: But you’re a manager? Doesn’t that require control?

SBW: Actually, what I’ve come to realize over the past almost decade of being a director, is that as a leader, I cannot control and do not wish to do so with my colleagues.

LR: You’re a director in the theatrical sense—someone who plans and suggests and lets the actors discover the truth of the characters and the script.

SBW: And my favorite teaching and leadership metaphor has always been as a leader of a jazz ensemble. There is a theme, but variations fly and riffs can be wonderful to listen to. As I learned to let go and let even the discordant notes tumble, in the end we

create a library environment that works well for Linfield students and faculty. And, I hope, for each of us. Leading and managing are not perfect because human beings are bundles of unexpected behaviors and contradictions, but I always believe in the value of people.

LR: I’m in a larger institution so I don’t get to know students as well as you do but I still value the connections I make with them, in the classroom, on chat, at the desk, on the phone, wandering around the stacks. OSU is creating tools that we hope will enable students to discover and create without our intervention. Not everyone wants to ask for help, and because of staff and budget issues, we can’t meet with as many classes as we’d like. We’re looking at alternatives that take the library to the classroom. Our “Course Assignment Pages” (<http://ica.library.oregonstate.edu/course-guides>) suggest paths for students and include a chat box and e-mail link for students to ask questions if they don’t understand. And they do ask. I’ve heard concerns about moving from high touch to high tech. I think today’s students concept of high touch is different than ours. I love the creative aspect of libraries and changing to meet new needs.

SBW: I resonate with Loretta’s sentence above about creativity and change in libraries. That is fun for me. I also have enjoyed working my way into leadership positions and like the large view these positions bring to my perspective of librarianship. I cannot always say I love budget work, but I do like bringing the library perspective and unique library ethos to other departments at Linfield and to other organizations. The future is bright for libraries and librarianship both in terms of the teaching and learning which Loretta and I are passionate about, and also in terms of the promise of digitization new

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and new media tools which create mashups (video, audio, and text) and hence new ways of seeing and learning about ideas.

LR: One of the things I've been thinking about lately is how social networking will transform libraries. Libraries have always been places where people come together to meet, hear talks, read. We need to accommodate new generations that want to share their ideas with everyone, everywhere—as simple as being able to contribute reviews of the books they've read. They want to know what their peers think about *Astonishing X-Men*—they probably care more about what their peers think than what a librarian thinks.

SBW: And, We can't be afraid that if we let students put stuff into our catalogs, that they'll put bad stuff. We've always been about the sharing of ideas.

SBW: In the end, what drives us always has been the promise of change and better service and connection for people, students, faculty and each other.

LR: Yes, we're very lucky to be energized by change and comfortable with uncertainty. 

