

on the edge

To every book its believer



From the desk of the Library Provocateur

Some weeks ago, matters of a spiritual nature surfaced in the Provocateur household.

Quite out of the blue one night over dinner, our five year old 'blessing from heaven' looked up from willing her peas into another dimension, fixed her father with a steely gaze and casually dropped a singularly electrifying three letter word into the conversation.

As the world-weary parents of two intellectually curious children, we had long dreaded this moment and had both pre-prepared short and illuminating discourses on the topic – mine replete with references. And that topic gentle reader?

Why the form and nature of G-O-D, naturally – we covered sex last year, and that was a doddle in comparison.

And so it was that last weekend, having fully explored the local Judeo-Christian traditions and suffused in the warm glow of ecumenicalism, we found ourselves driving some considerable distance to a quiet Buddhist retreat in the country and their 'Karma Klub' for children. It was, sadly, an unmitigated disaster.

Now, the Book of Genesis notwithstanding, the Provocateur is not a card-carrying fan of snakes, particularly the venomous, biting kind. So, the appearance of a rather large and businesslike Eastern Brown on the veranda of the bush hall did detract somewhat from the meditation taking place within.

That crisis however, paled into relative insignificance when our spiritual guide finally called everyone back to order, dispensed with the meditation (better to have all eyes alert and scanning for snakes) and instead invited the children to discuss the concept of 'spiritual aspiration' with their parents.

Spiritual aspiration! As an adult with university degrees I'm not entirely sure I know what that concept means. For our children, such esotery was the final straw. In rasping stage whispers, they both declared themselves keen to scare up another life-threatening serpent; anything to take the edge off their boredom. And so we all shook our shoes very carefully and quietly departed.

Turning to the topic of this month's sermon then, I can't help but think that many of our colleagues in the library profession feel similarly confused about the concept of 'advocacy'. What does it mean for the profession, and more importantly perhaps, at a personal level for them?

Recently, I enjoyed reading Dr Rachael Kohn's book *Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality*, published by the ABC in 2007. Kohn is the producer and presenter of ABC Radio National's *The Spirit of Things* and in *Curious Obsessions* reminds us that many of the best ideas in the world, including libraries, have been, in their time, labelled eccentric or mad. The very fact that these ideas survived though is in large part testimony to the eccentricities and obsessions of some very interesting individuals.

In Chapter 3, *Mad About Books*, Kohn applies her thesis to private libraries of the late medieval and renaissance period; a time when the religious orthodoxy saw "bibliophiles who fell foul of the Church...tortured for their curiosity and desire for knowledge."

Kohn relates the story of Abbot Orazio Morandi, an ambitious 17th century monk from Tuscany who enjoyed the patronage of the powerful Medici family and used the largesse they bestowed to indulge his passion for banned books. Banned, that is, by order of the all powerful Catholic Church. Kohn reminds her readers that lists of banned books are still issued by the Vatican today.

During his lifetime, Morandi collected and protected a substantial private library covering topics including, but by no means limited to, astronomy, astrology, various occult sciences and a smattering of erotica. Mindful of the power of the Roman Inquisition, Morandi – cleric, seer and proto-librarian – cultivated many influential friends. His lending records included several cardinals, at least one Pope, and noblemen too numerous to recount; all of whom had at one time or another

'patronised' his library. Unfortunately for Morandi, collecting knowledge was not enough – he also felt moved to use it, albeit with what he thought at the time to be the best intentions. Thus he achieved considerable notoriety as an astrologer and soothsayer. In the early 1700s, in church dominated territories, this was a dangerous vocation – astrology had been banned by the Vatican on pain of death in 1586.

So why did Morandi pursue the occult? For the simple reason that many powerful people, including Pope Urban VIII, liked having their fortunes told. And furthermore, in return for his services (all provided on the 'Q-T' of course), they were prepared to offer Morandi the two things he craved most in life – new books and high-level protection for his library.

Eventually the Machiavellian politics of the period caught up with Morandi and he was arrested for what I will call here 'honesty in astrology' – telling a Pope he was not long for this world. Not surprisingly, many powerful officials feared what his trial might reveal about their reading habits and he was the victim of suspected poisoning in a Rome jail in 1630.

So what lessons are there for Australian librarians in 2010 from the tragic life of Abbot Orazio Morandi?

Well, for a start, unlike the concept of 'spiritual aspiration', I believe we all do need to understand what is meant by advocacy; and start practicing it on behalf of our libraries and profession in a real and meaningful way. I'm seeing precious little evidence of it at present.

While he could not do so openly, Morandi was, until the final year of his life, a very astute advocate for his collection. He was an exceedingly canny political operator who built strong networks of supporters at the highest levels of Italian society.

I think librarians too often allow themselves to become the victims of the quaint and inoffensive stereotypes that still cling to members of our profession like static-charged cardigans. When the political temperature rises, we blush coyly behind our hand fans and hope others will step forward to defend our honour.

For supposed professionals, I think we are too often guilty of letting others, including our professional associations and large institutional libraries, do the bulk of the heavy lifting when it comes to advocacy. Sadly, the political reality of today is such that whatever they are able to do on our behalf will never be enough to guarantee a bright and optimistic future for libraries.

In a federal political system such as our own, it is critical that state and local concerns are advocated strongly by people on the ground, with reference wherever possible to national campaigns run by our many professional associations and state and national libraries.

One of my favourite advocacy initiatives of all time is the Libraries Change Lives campaign launched by the American Library Association in the mid-1990s. I still have the t-shirt and wear it with pride. It is black and exudes 'street cred' and attitude. Libraries do change lives – we all know it. We've witnessed it first hand across reference and circulation desks and will tell this to any librarian at any library conference around the world. We are an affirming profession. And that's our trouble.

Librarians love preaching to the converted – it's so much easier and enjoyable than the alternative.

But if I may return to the spiritual musings that presaged this month's column, what happens when the ranks of the converted start to thin and the 'congregation' shrinks? How do we answer those with searching questions about the form and nature of our services? How do we respond to the unbelievers? And significantly, how do we convert them to our way of thinking – our beliefs?

ALIA urges every member to be an advocate. I'll say Amen to that!

Now believers, go forth and proselytise!

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