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Just Think ... The Archivist as Prophet

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THE ARCHIVIST AS PROPHET

What is the role of the archivist? This apparently simple question is not easy to answer. And it is being asked more often and more insistently than ever before--not only by archivists, but also by public officials, newspaper and television commentators and the general public. Many answers are given, but the answers archivists accept must be firmly grounded on an understanding of the history, nature, and purpose of their work.

The true archivist might have an antiquarian's delight in the discovery of things past, but is not only an antiquarian; might have an historian's knowledge of the causes of past events, but is not only an historian; might have a records manager's appreciation of the importance of current records, but is not only a records manager. The role of the archivist includes, but is different from, these other roles.

An archivist is not delayed by historical side-lights, does not confuse nostalgia with history, is always aware of the incompleteness of documentation, is wary of a past that is interesting but not meaningful. Above all, the archivist realizes that *there is no past*. The past did exist, it was real, but it does not exist now, except in our perception of it. Documents that have survived from the past are interpreted by us in the present. If, suddenly there were no more discoveries of old records or acquisitions of new, if the attics and cupboards no longer yielded their stored treasures, it would still be necessary to re-write history and to visit archives to review the records, interpreting them by new lights. As the present changes, so does our perception of the past.

The role of the archivist is to make possible the

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proper study of the past. Archivists seek out the necessary records, acquire them and make them available for researchers. Naturally, appalled by the condition of many of the records, even more by the non-existence of some documents, archivists encourage, indeed demand, the proper keeping of current records and their orderly transfer to depositories.

It is important to emphasize the role of the archivist because, along with the present interest in archives, there is a tendency to tell archivists how to do their work. Many people want to prompt archivists on what should be in the archives and who should be allowed access to it. In response to this the archivist should be a prophet--not one who "fore-tells," but one who "speaks forth"; not one who predicts the future, but one who describes the present. The archivist must state clearly what records should be kept, how both privacy and accessibility can be guaranteed, and how records should be preserved and used. In these areas we archivists are the experts and must be the leaders.

In this post-Watergate and Post-Vietnam era, some people regard the past, especially the recent past, with cynicism and disappointment. They therefore disdain the importance of records and the role of records keepers. If their attitude toward us is due to ignorance of our role, we can educate them. If, however, they correctly perceive our role but oppose us, then we must accept the challenge of justifying our work. If we thus become more engaged in discussion, more apt to be criticized, more embroiled in controversy, so be it. We are in an important time of transition in our role and in the public's perception of it.

Keepers of records, advisers to records makers, proponents of both privacy and freedom--these are challenging roles for our profession. The day of the quiet archivist is past.