



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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*“The America I love
still exists at the front
desk of our public
libraries.”*

-Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. “I
Love You, Madame
Librarian” August 6, 2004
(InTheseTimes.com)

A recent visit to the doctor made me think about information: getting it, using it and understanding it. Over the years, I have come across doctors who seem unable to understand the idea that a patient may want to know more. These doctors, who have been both specialists and general practitioners, are begrudging when it comes to answering questions; rude when pushed; and, condescending when all else fails.

My latest doctor-patient experience was particularly frustrating because it has been years since I have encountered this kind of behavior. I have chosen my health care practitioners carefully and in general I have been lucky - my regular doctors, nurse practitioners and physician's assistants are kind, caring and responsive. Also, for the last nine years I have been working on a reference desk next to librarians who are both respectful and helpful, and consequently I have forgotten what bad service looks like. So, today I am going to talk about what I

consider the basic rules of providing information, whether one is a doctor or a librarian.

To start with, I think asking for information, whether it is the title of a book or the meaning of a diagnosis, makes us feel vulnerable. We are in some way revealing a hole in our knowledge and we are asking for help: both of those take a degree of courage and self-confidence to reveal. I stay aware of this each time I am asked a question - I don't want to give the impression that I am impatient, disinterested or unwilling to answer. I want people to ask me questions - that's why I'm there. I want them to feel listened to, supported in their quest and satisfied when they leave. It is easiest to understand this when talking with children. Frequently a parent with a small shy child will come up to me and say: “My child has a question.” At that moment it is up to me to make that child feel comfortable asking whatever it is, because it is my responsibility as a librarian

continued on page 2

to help guide him or her toward revealing the question. Children are smart and astute enough to know when an adult is listening and supportive and when they're not.

My experience with the doctor was the opposite of this. Every time I asked a question, the answers got less concrete and more vague. The culmination of this was when I asked why a particular symptom came and went. “Well,” the doctor told me, “that’s more a philosophical question. Why does anything happen?” I have to admit, I was speechless. Why indeed, I guess I could have said. Or I could have told him his answer was mean, out of touch and less than helpful. I didn’t though, as I suspect library users who are given an inadequate or curt answer to their question don’t tell us. They just walk away.

However, I will never forget how he made me feel. Even though I started our brief

interaction by inquiring if I could ask a few questions, he never gave me one direct piece of information. I guess I should have worded it differently: Will you *answer* my questions? would have been more to the point. Had he been a librarian under my charge, I would have sent him to a class in how to conduct a reference interview. First, listen, he would be taught. Then, check to see if you heard it right. Next, try to give the best answer you can. Finally, check to see if it was good enough.

I can answer that last one for him right now: No, doctor, it wasn’t.