



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Ethics, too, are nothing but reverence for life. That is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring and limiting life are evil.”

-Albert Schweitzer, 1875-1965

As I was doing some of my library school reading recently, one of the pieces was the “American Library Association Code of Ethics,” adopted June 28, 1995. I have always been interested in the concept of what is ethical, and so I was interested to see what the American Library Association (ALA) had come up with nine years ago and if it was still appropriate today.

It begins with an explanation of why it exists: “As members of the American Library Association, we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians.”

I like the idea that my work is guided by principles other than the daily conversations and decisions we make at the reference desk: who is next in line; monitoring the Internet sign-up; how to be helpful and instructive at the same time. As mentioned in one of my earlier

columns, we have a mission, and I think our ethical code should help us further that mission.

The next section of this document “states the values to which we are committed”: “We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.”

You may have encountered this part of a library’s ethical code if you have ever complained about some library material as being inappropriate, inflammatory or just not right for the library. Having a collection of material that represents all points of view can be offensive to some and confusing to oth-

ers, but as the code states: “We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.”

What about “informed citizenry” and “intellectual freedom?” It is difficult to have in-depth knowledge if information is limited or one-sided. On the other hand, not all material makes it into a library’s collection. The reasons for this are partly financial and partly because libraries are not just repositories for all written material; the items in a library have been selected. As the ethics code states: “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources.”

The other aspect of this ethics code that interested me was section VII: “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the

aims of our institution or the provision of access to their information sources.”

So, not only can it be uncomfortable for library users to encounter materials they find offensive, it can be challenging for the librarian, too. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves we aren’t librarians just because we love to read. We are librarians because we believe that all people should have access to as many forms of information as possible. And with that access comes the ability to form opinions and make decisions.

This week’s book review is from Claire and the book is Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, translated by Edith Grossman. Claire says this book is “a new translation about the famous knight, his servant and their adventures.” She describes this book as “beautifully translated” and recommends it because “this classic is lively and timely.”