

A Librarian at Sea

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Abstract

This article explores one librarian's experience working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the author's emotional response and the realities of this type of upheaval.

Keywords: Coronavirus; COVID-19; library; librarian; pandemic; telecommuting

Working from home had always had such an allure. One conjures images of a contented young professional typing away in their sunny home office, a steaming cup of coffee nearby, a dog at their feet, public radio playing in the background. Even as the numbers of infected grew, and we all speculated about the inevitable building closures, I imagined myself in this cozy tableau. I was finally going to become one of the *at-home*. What I was not prepared for were the feelings of anger, bereavement, helplessness, and sleeplessness that would follow during the first weeks of telecommuting.

I have long known that the library is where I belong. From the moment I learned, at age thirteen, that a librarian was something that one could *become*, and that they were not somehow *born* from the musty pages and card catalogs that I had come to love, I had wanted to do just that. But to be a librarian without a library is to be unmoored and adrift. Through two unexpected job-losses, I had experienced this feeling before. The pull of the library was strong and the feeling of loss was crushing. I wanted nothing more than to return.

From the lessons learned during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, my University was prepared for this. Every utility and program that I used in my work had a web-based counterpart. Moving my work off-campus would be easy. I grabbed a few important files, a laptop, my headset, and I went home. The Library was only allowing students to use the first floor and I was confident that a building closure was not far behind.

Even as non-essential personnel were urged with increasingly strong language to start working from home and to not return to campus, the Library was not asked to close. Campus-wide emails that listed the types of essential personnel who were allowed on campus repeatedly excluded remaining Library staff and faculty, adding insult to injury. I was dumbfounded. I was so angry that my University would put students, staff, and faculty at risk in this way. I also felt guilty that all of my work could be done from home and that I was not one of the individuals who was needed to keep the building open.

Library staff were asked to take increasingly elaborate precautions in order to safely keep the building open. At one point we were told that there would be temperature checks. A student was overheard discussing her positive COVID-19 diagnosis with someone over the phone in the Library. It took twenty-four hours to identify the student, confirm the diagnosis, and get the ok to close the building. We were told that it would only be closed for two days, in order to disinfect the building.

As it turns out, the Library was not asked to reopen after being disinfected. And as the anger begins to subside, I am faced with the reality of working from home. My sunny home office is actually a sunny dining room. My year-old Catahoula mix is so thrilled to have me home all day and is happy to lie at my feet while I work. My steaming cup of coffee needs re-heating after I have been too absorbed in my work to remember to drink it. Public radio is simply just too much right now. Sleep is slowly normalizing.

Above all, though my thirteen-year-old self could not have articulated this, I became a librarian to serve the greater good. I can do that without a library building. I can do that without physical books. I can do that without ever meeting a patron face-to-face. Over two months later, my sensible work shoes now bear a coating of dust. My Library, along with most of the libraries in the United States, has been closed for almost as long. The *whens* and *hows* of reopening are a constant discussion among librarians everywhere. Will masks and gloves be provided? How will social distancing be enforced? Can we have plexiglass barriers installed at service points? Will we start with curbside service? As cities begin to reopen and some libraries start offering limited contact services, we all wait with bated breath for the predicted spikes, and wonder when it will be safe to fully reopen again.