

Editor's Column: A Whole New World

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As some of you may know, I recently changed jobs. No, no, I didn't leave academic librarianship (as if). After 18 years at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM), I took the position of Director of University Libraries at Northwestern State University of Louisiana (NSULA). Somewhat ironically, ULM used to be known as Northeastern State University, so I have lamely joked that I left Northeastern for Northwestern. I had planned to end my career at ULM, but circumstance has a way of disrupting plans. I was sad to leave my ULM Library family; they have graciously stayed in touch and checked in on me since I started at NSU.

But they were not the reason I left ULM. The reason I left ULM is very simple: a bad boss. I'm not going to throw shade, as the kids say; NSU is a University of Louisiana (UL) System school just like ULM. I'm not here to burn bridges. However, I am here to say that I chose to leave the situation. I chose to put myself and my health first. That's how bad the boss was. She created a work environment that verged on hostile (e.g., unrealistic deadlines; failure to provide sufficient information or detail to completed assigned tasks; disregard of basic human compassion aka immediately requesting a meeting to discuss something that could wait as I am telling her that my father has fallen and potentially broken his hip).

My breaking point came after the death of one of my dearest and oldest friends in July of this year. I was under three deadlines – two external for reporting and one for my boss (which was therefore in her power to be flexible on). I had been right on schedule with all three and was in no danger of missing any of them. However, she had been near pathological in wanting daily

updates, which I dutifully provided. My friend's funeral was on a Tuesday in Mississippi. I was at work on Monday; before I left, I provided updates on the three deadlines. I also indicated that because of where I was staying (in a rural area) and travel, I would not necessarily be available by email. She asked if she could forward me things that might be important. I said yes but that I made no promises to answer email on the *day of my friend's funeral*.

My husband went with me to Mississippi for the funeral; we traveled Monday night. Along with my high school best friend, who was also close to the friend who had passed, we attended the funeral Tuesday morning. We took my friend back to her workplace, and my husband and I traveled back to Monroe. He had to go to work, and I wound up taking a nap, not having slept much in the previous nights from grief. After several hours, I woke up from the nap and checked my phone. There was an email from my boss. It began "I hope you are back from your sad journey" and then launched into a requesting an 8 a.m. meeting on Wednesday morning so I could provide her with updates to the three deadlines. The three deadlines I had not worked on since leaving work Monday because I had been at a funeral. In another state. For one of my oldest and dearest friends. Three deadlines I had worked on and about which I had provided her with updates before leaving work Monday. Three deadlines I had not worked on that day, Tuesday, because I had been at a funeral in another state, trying to honor the memory of a man who had seen me through some hard years, tough times, and never let me forget that I mattered – that all his students mattered.

Something in me broke at that moment. I consider myself resilient, and if I am fair to myself, I really am quite resilient. But something in me gave out in that moment, and I knew I had reached a moment of critical mass. I realized I had done my due diligence trying to be communicative with my boss. I had given this woman the very best I could, but it was never

going to be enough. Her micromanagerial “leadership” style, the changing task parameters (one week, I’m meant to be documenting faculty work hours, then suddenly the next time it’s supposed to be ALL library personnel work hours, then after that it’s even library student workers, too), the disregard for personal boundaries, the disregard for my time whether professional or personal...none of it was ever going to stop. Whether that is how she is with her other direct reports is unknown to me.

But what was known to me was that I was not going to survive emotionally, mentally, or physically if I remained in that work environment. Early in my career, I endured an even worse workplace environment which was hostile and toxic. I left my first job out of library school after six months. On paper, it was my dream job (at the time): Coordinator of Library Instruction. In real life, it was a living nightmare of screaming matches between department heads, staff and librarians engaging in temper tantrums, dismissive (if not outright neglectful) library administration, and an overall lack of support. I reached a dangerous point: I was crying on the way to work and crying on the way home, every day. I wanted to die. I mentally started to prepare for it. However, I got lucky – ULM and Southeastern Louisiana University (SELU) both had reference librarian positions open. I was offered both but took the ULM position.

I had not reached that point at ULM, but it was clear I was nearing some crisis point. I had tried to pin a lot of my growing interpersonal and health issues on being in graduate school for my doctorate, working full time, and – you know – just being a human being in a time of an unprecedented global pandemic resulting in economic instability. The reality sank in: I was once again working in a hostile work environment that was terribly toxic. My attempts to reach out to Human Resources for guidance (and potentially relief) went unanswered. I struggled with what to do. If I left, I felt sure my boss would wreck the Library, driving off the many great faculty

and staff that kept the Library running. People who work hard and had been supportive and encouraging to me from day one of becoming the Director (and, in many cases, even before that). However, I also knew I was reaching a point where I couldn't buffer for them anymore. I wouldn't be able to help them or myself for much longer. I had to do something.

I got lucky. I was a finalist for three separate jobs in the state at the same time. My family and friends were so very supportive as I made the decision to leave ULM. Once my ULM Library family understood the situation, they were supportive, too. 18 years is a long time to work somewhere – it wasn't easy to make the decision to leave. But I had to leave, because I was no longer able to be effective, productive, or even healthy. I had stopped recognizing myself. And others in my life began to realize, too.

My new job is a whole new world. At ULM, I was the director of one library. At NSU, I oversee four libraries – two on campus, one in Leesville, and one in Shreveport. Two are specialized – one is for music, and the Shreveport location mainly serves the College of Nursing and School of Allied Health (CONSAH). These libraries are not, however, without problems and challenges. Some of them are workplace related; I suspect my areas of research (emotions in the library, emotionally intelligence, workplace issues) definitely caught the search committee's attention! And hopefully I can leverage my experiences and expertise in those areas to help rectify some of the issues that these libraries are facing. No one should have to dread coming to work; no one should have to dread meetings. No one should have to feel that coming to work means working with a target on their back.

I am sharing all of this for a few reasons. One, I find myself a statistic of COVID-19 in the sense that lockdown gave me an opportunity to understand what my old job was doing to me. It gave me a renewed sense of my priorities and values, both personally and professionally. I am

one of those people who left a stable job during the pandemic (because contrary to popular belief, it's still technically going, even if it's getting better) for greener pastures. I realized my worth and value as a professional and that my health was not worth the stability of that job. Is it scary? Hell yeah. I'm trying to ready my house to sell so I don't have to pay a mortgage and an apartment rental forever. I'm not enjoying living apart from my husband and cats. In some ways, I'm starting over – nearly 20 years at one institution, you develop certain habits and contacts. I'm having to learn new ways of doing things, new habits, and new contacts. But at the end of the day, I don't leave work in tears because it's crushed my soul. I look forward to coming to work every day because it's feeding my soul.

Two, I share this because I think it's crucial to be transparent about our emotional experiences in the workplace. I think it's important to be frank about workplace issues. I research and publish on this stuff, and yet I was victimized by a bad boss. I experienced unprecedented professional burnout that took a serious toll on my personal life. It all bled together until it was a bloody mess. In two short years, I lost crucial parts of myself. I feel like I'm in recovery. A friend of mine said, "You are – you are recovering from what I consider to be an abusive relationship." And he's not wrong – that's what it was. I was in an abusive relationship with my boss. There was a power differential which she leveraged always in her favor, to the detriment of me, Library faculty and staff, and the Library as an organization. I will openly acknowledge this because it's what happened, and it should never have happened.

Three, I share this because one of the first questions I got when it became public that I was leaving ULM was "What's going to happen to *Codex*?" It's a valid question. I was at ULM when I started the journal. I received support from the then-Dean to make it reality. That expertise led me to help two different departments on ULM's campus establish their own open

access scholarly journals (one in psychology, one in nursing). I am proud of those accomplishments, proud that my experiences led others to starting open access journals. But there were some obvious associations: did that mean ULM controlled *Codex*? Would I “take” it with me? What would happen? *Codex* is technically supported by the Louisiana Chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries (it’s there in the title). We use the Open Journal System as its platform (hopefully not for much longer though), which ULM in no way sponsors, funds, or supports. ACRL-LA does. In other words, where I go, *Codex* goes. As long as I work with ACRL-LA, *Codex* has a home. And when I’m gone? ACRL-LA can decide what to do with it. I hope they’ll keep it going – I think it’s a great opportunity for library folks in Louisiana and beyond. I think it’s a great contribution to the library scholarship. But I’m admittedly biased.

So: yes, I’m in a whole new world with new libraries and new people and new challenges. I’ve learned a lot about myself, workplace issues, and the emotional dimensions of librarianship. I’ve learned a lot about my worth and value. And I’ve learned that a lot of people really care about me and not just because of *Codex*, but also that a lot of people care about *Codex*, too. And all that wonderful learning has really helped me cope with what happened and all the very quick changes that have occurred. If you need a sign to make a change for the better, let this be the sign. If my research isn’t enough of a sign, let my own heartbreak be that sign. As my mother might say dramatically: learn from my suffering.

I believe in being open about my experiences. I believe in documenting those experiences to help others. While starting *Codex* was done as a way to make quality, scholarly, peer-reviewed research more accessible and to encourage Louisiana libraries, it has also become a venue for documenting library experiences as a way to help others, too. I’m glad I can continue to do that, and that others value *Codex* as a channel for that as well.