

A Threefold Cord

A Narrative and Reflection

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Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NRSV)

On the occasion of Atla's 75th anniversary, the preparation of this volume reminds me to be grateful for its 50th anniversary predecessor, which has been of so much use to my "Theological Librarianship" students and me. It is good both to look back and to look forward. Moreover, it is good to look back in order to look forward. What strengths of our profession indicate that we will successfully meet the challenges ahead? Let me answer that question with a story of how Atla helped me meet a professional challenge. After that look back, I will reflect on three key strengths it reveals about our profession.

I have been a member of Atla since 1992, when I began working as a librarian in an ATS-accredited seminary library. Until then, my professional formation had taken place exclusively in the context of the church of my childhood. Since I had grown up in a preacher's home and had attended and taught at colleges connected with my own religious upbringing, I did not know very many professional people outside my own church tradition.

That began to change when I came to know the folks of the Tennessee Theological Library Association (TTLA) and Atla. I will always remember the closing dinner of the 1994 Atla Annual conference in Pittsburgh, when we all sang together at the end of a dinner cruise, with Seth Kasten leading us, "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past." The first woman I ever heard preach was Renita Weems at the 1995 Atla Annual hosted by Vanderbilt. The first time I was asked to lead prayer with men present was at the Wabash Colloquy for Theological Librarians in 2000.

The two most important papers that have shaped my professional life were read at Duke at Atla Annual 2001. Anne Womack's comment on her images of Chartres Cathedral still rings in my ears: "If you don't begin thinking now about making content digitally accessible, you will be standing on the curb when that bus pulls away." Herman Peterson's paper on the ministry of theological librarians as stewards, servants, and sages still helps me organize my teaching and speaking about our profession.

After twelve precious years in Tennessee, I moved to Texas in 2004. At the Atla Annual in Kansas City, a month after I started my new job, Executive Director Dennis Norlin recruited me to teach an online course in theological librarianship being jointly designed by Atla and the library program at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Norlin soothed my protests with reassurances: the Atla Professional Development Committee had already prepared the syllabus and had nominated me. They knew I was an experienced professor and that I had been teaching online at my seminary in Tennessee. Illinois would handle the technological and administrative details. The course was scheduled to begin the fall of 2005, so I had a year to prepare. I checked with my dean and he checked with the provost, and then I agreed.

What followed the first excitement was a year of dread, with rising panic. I didn't have a PhD in library science. I had never taught library science at all, much less at Illinois. I had never managed a library. How could I teach librarianship when I had experience in only one area of library practice as a cataloger? How could I lecture two hours a week online about things I had never been responsible to do? What was I going to do with the 100-page syllabus that the Professional Development Committee had given me? How would I organize the content? What would I use for a textbook? I was choking, drowning, anticipating humiliation. I was

sure I was alone and would fall, like the unfortunate person in the Ecclesiastes text: “Woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.”

But desperation led to clarity. My pretended self-sufficiency broke down. I was not alone. I had others to help. I was part of a generous and hospitable community of practitioners, most of them with much more experience than I had in the subject I had been called to teach. For more than twelve years I had learned from my Atla colleagues first through my own library and the TTLA and then through Atla Annual. It finally occurred to me that my Atla colleagues, not I, had all that my students needed. It was just up to me to make the introductions.

Melody McMahon and David Stewart let me use the pre-print edition of *A Broadening Conversation* as a text. I began calling and emailing Atla folk to invite them to be interviewed about their experience in librarianship, in collection development, in teaching and reference and information literacy, in library management, preservation, exhibits, archives, serials, diversity, professional development. They said yes, and yes, and yes again. Now, fifteen years later, dozens of my Atla colleagues have answered the students’ questions about purpose and practice. It has been a triumph of partnership and generosity for the sake of students. We have, as the text says, “a good reward for [our] toil.”

It may be that, in this dreadful pandemic year of 2020, even while we look back at this moment in gratitude to celebrate our 75th anniversary, we might also be secretly besieged by paralyzing fears. Will we or our colleagues die? Will a global economic crisis destroy our academic institutions, our library budgets, our jobs? How will the economy affect our Atla products business? Will our Atla staff be able to continue to innovate? Even if we survive, how will new models of theological education emerge, accelerate, and change the way we carry out library work? How will our mission and identity be transformed by new global partnerships, interreligious dialogue, and developments in scholarly publishing and the information industry? Will our courage fail in the face of these challenges? We might, like the solitary ones in the Ecclesiastes text above, feel alone, and cold, and faced by foes.

Be of good courage. We have a three-fold cord of community.

We are not alone, because we are a community committed to stewardship of a body of knowledge both ancient and ever new, the human yearning to understand and experience the divine. We all are concerned with the vitality, quality, and accessibility of religious and theological studies worldwide. We understand that our efforts to preserve archival materials help our institutions interrogate and interpret their own history. We are busy expanding and diversifying scholarly work on our field of practice. We believe that libraries are the natural hub for institutions’ development of platforms and best practices for scholarly communication. Like the laborers in Ecclesiastes, we work hard and carry a big load. But we know that if

we stagger or fall, someone in our community will help us solve the problems, pick us up, help us learn, or lead us to think in new ways. We have deep reservoirs of subject domain knowledge, a real sense of the direction that academic scholarship in religion is going and where it is yet lacking. Our everyday purpose of identifying religious knowledge to collect for preservation is the first cord that binds us together.

We are warm instead of shivering alone because we are a community committed to a professional culture of service—a set of habits, skills, and values that have forged our identity. Whether we are concerned with acquisition, preservation, arrangement and description, access, assistance, or the technological innovations that are transforming each of these, we know and discuss and develop and support good practices. We also cherish values that give our practices meaning, such as access to information, freedom of inquiry, the right of researchers to own their own voices, civil and religious liberty, hospitality to diverse voices. We may be excruciatingly helpful, but we are also fiercely intellectual. We believe in knowing and being known. Our subject material is infused with awe that humbles us and challenges our character. We value the dignity of inquiry as an act of faith. We possess that central conviction of humane education: knowledge of the truth frees. The millions of details of text and bibliography and source code that pass through our hands form a vast web of connection between the voices of the past and the students and faculty and pastors and scholars whom we serve. Our professional culture of connecting people with resources welcomes and empowers and releases creativity. Our profession of service is the second cord that binds us together.

We are wise in withstanding forces that threaten our professional mission because we are a community committed to relationships in teaching and learning. First, in our own institutional settings we have valuable partnerships with our colleagues, the faculties, the administrative officers, and the accrediting associations whose standards we voluntarily develop and agree to. Furthermore, we as members exercise moral ownership of our own professional association, including its bylaws, its endowment, and the policies by which our elected board governs Atla's business operations. We express our imagination of the good through Atla's institutional ends. Most importantly, we have a robust relational infrastructure of cooperation and conversation among ourselves. Whether in regional meetings, Atla Annual, or in the work of committees and interest groups, we know and respect and stand with one another. We worship together. We remember those we have lost. We welcome the newcomers. We tackle big problems by working together. Sometimes we quibble. But because we understand hospitality—that ability to restrain one's own point of view sufficiently to learn from others—we develop trust. Our wisdom as teachers and learners in community is the third cord that binds us together.

We do not know what lies ahead. We don't know how we will solve the problems that will arise. Will seminaries close or merge? Probably. Will the economy of libraries change? Probably. Will we still be a community? Certainly. We have, in a way, been preparing for a long time to meet the crisis. When I felt absolutely terrified fifteen years ago, Atla had already been at work for six decades building collections, expertise, and relationships—the very things I needed to meet my own little challenge when I finally admitted that I couldn't succeed alone. If anyone in theological education can figure out how to go forward, we will do that because we will do it together. We have been at work for 75 years, bound together by our purpose and our professionalism and our relationships with one another. Theological librarians will serve and succeed because we rely on one another. We are bound together by stewardship, service, and wisdom. A threefold cord is not easily broken.