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# Unanticipated Career Change

## *Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It . . .*

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Few among us can't relate to the well-worn saying, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."<sup>1</sup> For many of us, this applies as much to our professional lives as to our personal ones. Career paths are not always linear; in fact, they are often serendipitous or circuitous routes that bring exciting challenges our way, help us develop new interests, and take us to places we never dreamed we'd be. In this reflective column, Aleteia Greenwood shares the story of the transcontinental journey she made, traversing the disciplinary spectrum in tandem. Her insights underscore the rewards of taking chances and being open to possibilities, and the meaningful opportunities that come from doing so.—*Editor*

**I** absolutely did not *plan* a career trajectory to be the head of a large sciences library. With a team of twenty-eight librarians and support staff, we serve the circulation, information, reference, research, and teaching needs of seven faculties and more than fifty departments, schools, and research centers, in applied science, physical, ocean and earth sciences, medicine and allied health, pharmaceutical science, dentistry, land and food systems, and forestry—roughly half of the University of British Columbia (UBC) Vancouver campus enrollment.

In thinking about how I arrived at this point in my career I am struck by how often outside variables impact a career, and how it is possible to be in a position without actually setting one's sights on that exact job. In my case, I had no intention of becoming a manager when I graduated from library school. Other than wanting to work in libraries, a primary reason I pursued a Master of Library and Information Sciences (MLIS) degree is because of the potential it offered to work elsewhere than my birthplace of Vancouver.

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### **THE JOURNEY BEGINS AND FATE INTERVENES**

My first job as a new MLIS graduate fifteen years ago was as an on-call librarian in a public library. I enjoyed the variety of questions, but I was looking for a permanent position, preferably one "away," and ideally as an art librarian. As a practicing artist with a strong knowledge of art history, and with encouragement from UBC art librarians whom I had worked for as a student, art librarianship was my career goal at the time. My application to become the Assistant Librarian at the E. Kirkbride Miller Art Library, Baltimore Museum of Art, was successful, and I was very excited to begin my art librarianship career, as well as to work in an entirely new geographical location. I was up for, and eager to, move three thousand miles

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from home and live in an eastern city with a vastly different culture and climate from that of the west coast. The most enjoyable part of the job itself was providing reference services to the curators and museum staff and to the public.

At the Baltimore Museum of Art, I was fortunate to meet lovely people who became dear friends that I am still in touch with. Through these relationships, I met a group of astrophysicists who worked at Johns Hopkins University. The opportunity to become acquainted with these scientists offered me a view into a world I didn't know existed until then. I was fascinated by their work and grateful for their patience as they described their research to me and I attempted to understand it. Because I grew up in a household in which literature and artistic endeavors were commended, science was much less on my radar.

One day I was invited to lunch with this group, who had a tradition of asking a question that everyone around the table then had to answer. That day's question was, "If you could go to the moon and back without any risk, would you?" Of course I assumed that everyone at the table, given their research interests, would answer with a resounding "Yes!" But that wasn't the case. All of a sudden I was able to bring together the people and the discipline, and suddenly science had names and faces! I was delighted to be included in this cohort and was enthralled by their passion, energy, and creativity. They were musically talented, comedic, and highly enthusiastic. The opportunity to spend time with them and learn about their work was intriguing. I had an epiphany. This glimpse into the world of scientific research made me realize that I wanted to work in a position that was captivating and that would challenge me to grow in new directions. I wanted to work in a science library.

I left the Baltimore Museum of Art Library and moved back to Vancouver. After a few months, I was fortunate to be hired at UBC's Science and Engineering Library. Although it was a short contract, it was fortuitous in that it allowed me to get my foot in the door. After nine months the permanent position was posted, and I believe that the previous months' experience helped me obtain the ongoing position.

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## NEW OPPORTUNITIES

As a science and engineering librarian without any science or engineering background, I experienced a lot of "firsts." A significant one was learning about the terminology and abbreviations that abound in science and engineering research. During the first few months my head swam with the acronyms of the many associations, societies, and institutions that I encountered while helping patrons. Another noteworthy first was coauthoring a chapter on mechanical engineering resources. This had a three-fold advantage:

1. Working with a co-author, an engineering librarian of considerable experience, helped build my knowledge of the world of engineering libraries.

2. Being forced to learn more about core engineering resources.
3. Understanding the real value of those resources and, where possible, making sure my library had them.

Each day I was highly challenged, which I love to be. My colleagues were extremely supportive—training, mentoring, and providing an ideal environment for me to learn. I answered reference and research questions for students and faculty in physics, math, statistics, chemistry, earth and ocean science, computer science, and chemical, civil, mechanical, electrical, mining, and materials engineering. It was an incredible chance to both see up close *and* support a vast array of scientific and engineering research. I worked closely with faculty members to make curriculum specific presentations, co-taught with faculty and students, and did collection development for my liaison areas. I was in love with my job.

After seven years of being a science and engineering librarian, learning something new every single day, teaching classes, working with the faculty and students in amazing programs such as Science 1,<sup>2</sup> and supporting faculty and student research, the opportunity arose to apply for head of Science and Engineering. Until that time I had not thought about an administrative position. In fact I loved my job so much I didn't want it to change. But I did feel ready for another challenge, so I applied for and attained the position.

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## LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

As the head of the Science and Engineering Library, I experienced a whole new set of "firsts," such as leading strategic planning for my unit, getting to hire and mentor librarians and support staff, and building a fantastic team. In this role, I also worked closely with the associate university librarian for collections, augmenting my knowledge of resources beyond science and engineering, learning about publisher and payment options, and building relationships with vendor representatives.

While head of Science and Engineering, I pursued many leadership opportunities offered at UBC and beyond, including participation in the ARL Research Libraries Leadership Fellows program.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this program, I was exposed to the challenges of leading academic institutions in the twenty-first century, as well as to the leadership processes that are necessary for operationally and strategically functional libraries. All over again I was in love with my job, which I did for five years. And then came an unexpected change. The university library decided to merge the Science and Engineering Library with Woodward, the medicine, allied health, and natural sciences library. I was appointed its head.

As the head of Woodward Library, the past two years have brought me a new array of exciting and daunting firsts.

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## FACILITIES

Not surprisingly, working in a fifty-one-year-old building has numerous facilities challenges. My team and I spend a lot of time dealing with the workings of the building, both routine and unusual matters. Typically, broken elevators need to be fixed; burnt out lights and dead door alarm batteries need to be replaced; leaks need to be repaired. Less typically, I spent many months investigating where to respectfully consign two human skulls that had been donated to the Woodward Library many, many years ago.

### Strategic directions

A current trend in libraries is to redefine how space is used. I spent considerable time investigating the creation of a Maker Space in Woodward Library, only to be thwarted by a lack of infrastructure capacity to plug in the equipment that would be needed.

I work closely with Library Development. In one instance we wrote a successful grant and received funding for display cases and a co-op student, to describe the more than three hundred surgical and medical instruments that have been donated to the library in the past. Once the instruments have been described, we will be able to create thematic displays.

Like many academic library leaders, I spend time with my team figuring out how to be effective at our work with fewer employees.

### Projects

A major project was the merging of Science and Engineering Library with Woodward Library, and some months later, merging two of the three UBC hospital libraries with Woodward. These consolidations of course precipitated considerations and decisions about staff space. We are currently undergoing a staff space renovation for which decisions had to be made about furniture, flooring, and paint colors, as well as about location of staff once the renovations are complete.

This past year we celebrated Woodward Library's fiftieth year. This was a perfect opportunity to showcase the past support the library has provided to health and medicine and natural sciences, as well as to highlight current services, and ask for input on the future Woodward all-sciences library. A working group planned and executed many events, and working with Library Development we had an excellent turnout for the formal celebration. These events were almost a year in the making.

Woodward Library has two rather unique spaces, the Memorial Room and the Sherrington Room. The Memorial Room used to house historical works about science and medicine. A couple of years ago these were moved to UBC Library's Rare Books and Special Collections, allowing us to plan to open up this beautiful space for quiet study. Two very large tapestries hang in the room. Before we can make the space publically available, we needed to determine how to

best protect those tapestries, which also needed cleaning and preservation. I'd never dealt with this type of problem before, so it was interesting trying to find an expert in tapestry repair and preservation, and an expert in tapestry security.

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## BALANCING ACT

This is something of an oversimplification, but in positions of leadership and management, the focus is often on the long-term, the big picture, the strategic. A major challenging first as head of Woodward has been to work on all the above concurrently. During the past two years I have struggled with the simultaneity of juggling varied operational responsibilities and being the leader of a library with people, subject areas, and a building new to me, while also doing the work of a colleague with the other Heads, serving on selection committees, working groups, and standing committees. My challenge has been balancing the big picture with the reality of day-to-day problem solving.

The sheer amount of work in this position has made it necessary to maintain a healthy work-life balance. I have always enjoyed exercise and going to the gym regularly. In my new position, I have needed to be even more purposeful about maintaining a healthy lifestyle as work could so easily take over. I have pursued a wellness regimen to help me remain healthy in mind, body, and spirit. I am surrounded by literature on health and medicine so it is impossible not to be exposed to the importance of one's health!

In addition to my gym routine, I do yoga regularly, cycle, and walk, since health research shows that sitting in one place for hours on end is profoundly unhealthy. Being flexible physically also positively impacts mental, emotional, and psychological agility. I completed a six-week Mindfulness-at-Work program that trained me to look at situations, experiences, and people in a completely different way. I also look to books and articles to augment how I approach my work.<sup>4</sup> And most profoundly, I had an excellent coach who helped me build strategies and techniques that have allowed me to balance the big picture with the detail work, such as merging many distinct groups into one, strategizing about the work that needs to be done, developing techniques to confront historical attitudes and actions, and learning to trust my gut.<sup>5</sup> At the same time I was, and still am, learning about new subject areas of librarianship, interlibrary loan and circulation processes, building new relationships, and working with my team to develop a path forward as a new entity in the ever-transforming world of libraries.

I have noticed that as both an artist and as a supervisor, manager, and leader, it is necessary to be flexible, open to shifting directions, and comfortable with shifted outcomes. I have experienced and seen, as we mature in our profession, how important it seems to control outcomes and know what is coming. As we gain experience and years, and become extremely adept and knowledgeable at our jobs, we run the risk of losing the ability to take risks, and the joy of

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learning is sometimes replaced by the fear of failure. I have hesitated while working on a painting to try something different, afraid of the outcome, afraid that I might wreck it. So too as professional librarians we put pressure on ourselves to perform at a consistently high level. We can get so busy that we miss the opportunity to stop and think about how to do things differently, how to change a process, how to be comfortable with not knowing how things will turn out.

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## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Moving to Baltimore was a fortuitous career move, with an outcome I could never have imagined. My willingness to make a transcontinental move for art librarianship opened up the world of science in a way that I may never have otherwise experienced. Upon obtaining my MLIS degree, I never envisioned that I would work in a science library, much less lead one. My desire to be challenged, remain flexible, build relationships, be open-minded, and embrace the unknown, brought me to where I am. Supportive colleagues and a forward-looking team help me build on that foundation. And

interestingly, I've learned that there's an art to working as a science librarian—and as a manager.

I look forward to what comes next.

## References

1. John Lennon is often credited with coining this phrase in the lyrics to "Beautiful Boy" (1980), but a similarly worded expression appeared in the "Quotable Quotes" feature in Reader's Digest (1957), written by Allen Saunders.
2. Science 1 is an innovative first-year undergraduate program in which biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics are taught in an integrated format.
3. For a description of the program, see [www.arl.org/leadership-recruitment/leadership-development/arl-leadership-fellows-program#VcYysfknKDk](http://www.arl.org/leadership-recruitment/leadership-development/arl-leadership-fellows-program#VcYysfknKDk).
4. I have found the following three books particularly useful. C. K. Gunsalus, *The College Administrator's Survival Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin, 1999); Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (New York: Penguin, 2002).
5. DeEtta Jones of DeEtta Jones and Associates: [www.deettajones.com](http://www.deettajones.com).