



Mayon volcano eruption, Philippines.

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Courage and caution: Parting words from a library leader

“ Libraries have a deep commitment to collaboration. We can think and re-think, uplift, build capability and infrastructure, test ethical questions, and share our collections and services better together. – Marie-Louise Ayres



Barbara Lemon is a curator, historian and library professional who specialises in oral history and digital collections for national libraries. See more at www.lemonbell.press

On a chilly autumn evening in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, six information sector leaders recently convened for a panel discussion inspired by Rūaumoko, the atua Māori (Māori god) associated with earthquakes, volcanoes, and the movement of the land. It was about disruption on the one hand, creativity and transformation on the other.

On the panel were the heads or deputy heads of the Library of Congress, Library and Archives Canada, the National Archives of Australia, Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, the National Library of Australia, and the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa.

News headlines that week were dominated by the war in the Middle East, the global fuel crisis, and by political and domestic upheaval around the world. Disruption is not the exception, the panel agreed, it has become the norm. The challenge for libraries is not to stand apart from that disruption but to take part in it, to make meaning from it.

Two weeks later, one of the panel delivered her valedictory speech. Dr Marie-Louise Ayres was set to retire after thirty years in the library sector, nine as Director-General of the National Library of Australia (NLA). Her reflective remarks considered some of the “values, principles and qualities that underpin the international library community”. They were delivered in six chapters and an epilogue, abbreviated here.

1. Tenacity. Sticking at things and finding new ways to create value from past investments. Consider the Australian Joint Copying Project, which began in 1948 and ran for half a century. Documents held in British institutions, organisations and private homes, dating from 1560 to 1984 and pertaining to Australian history, were copied onto a

total of 10,419 microfilm reels and sent to Australia. The introduction of the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) standard in the 1990s enabled a viable proposal to convert this material and accompanying indexes into searchable text but multiple funding bids failed and it was 2020 before the archive was digitised. Now, with the application of HTR technology, these eight million images and 10,000 pages of handwritten text will be fully searchable 80 years after the project began.

2. Working together. Libraries have a deep commitment to collaboration. We can think and re-think, uplift, build capability and infrastructure, test ethical questions, and share our collections and services better together. The world-famous Trove online archive, hosted by the National Library, wouldn’t exist if some of its partner organisations hadn’t begun sharing metadata decades ago, and hadn’t jointly committed to microfilming newspapers, campaigning for digital legal deposit legislation, collecting web archives and digital publications, forming principles for the management and description of Indigenous archives, and fighting “the scourge of book bans”. Public libraries are “an amazing piece of social infrastructure hiding in plain sight”.



Marie-Louise Ayres.

3. Courage and caution. We must have the courage to completely re-think (or un-learn) what we think we know. Introducing Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols ahead of federal legislation in Australia took courage, said Dr Ayres. Caution may be called for in the adoption of AI technologies that enable faster processing or exciting displays but also compromise the responsibility of libraries to act as “stewards of others’ words, lives, art, creativity, cultural and intellectual property”.

4. Inspiration. Libraries talk about being places of inspiration but library leaders themselves can and should be continually inspired by the tenacity, curiosity and creativity of the readers, creators, writers, historians and scholars of all ages who use libraries every day.

5. Steadying ourselves. Leaders must be ready to face constantly shifting and challenging conditions. Budget tightening, cyberattacks, online trolling, inclement and changing weather both political and literal (within a few short years, the NLA endured fire, smoke, pandemic, storms and hail, the latter so damaging that its entire copper roof had to be replaced and almost every vehicle in the public carpark was written off).

6. Human values applied for human good. Those in libraries have “a shared sense of mission” and it’s about people. Libraries are not interested commercial returns, our decisions are made in the interests of the creators and the communities we serve. We collect for future generations.

And the epilogue? That was about love. For the people who visit, work in and support libraries, and for the profession that has “sustained me, fascinated me, driven me, captivated me”. Words to heed and sentiments to hold close in these volcanic times.

For the full valedictory speech, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLp1Qv0ny0Q. **IP**