ANTICIPATION IN LIBRARIANSHIP: the interplay of texts, agendas, and creativity

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ABSTRACT:

Librarianship offers the hope of seeing topics from multiple viewpoints. This consists in gathering and curating multiple resources, formats, disciplines, phenomena, and persons with the goal of facilitating a synthesis. This then encourages the development of information literacies for individuals and groups of learners. The term “anticipation” will be explored in the literatures of philosophy, management, and psychology with the goal of identifying patterns and compelling stories.

“Close reading” will be used to tease out some implications in an ancient Biblical text. This can lead to a possible heuristic of anticipation that could be developed and applied to prospective anticipatory projects. This will exemplify the exegesis and interpretation of classical works in the humanities. “Lectio divino” will also be practiced around the recent book The Theology of Anticipation by Anette Ejsing. This book will serve as a prompt for brainstorming the topic of the ethics of anticipation in order to clarify some of the attitudes necessary to keep the future open rather than prematurely closed.

The value-added intent of this presentation will be to strengthen our understanding of how a well-informed preparation facilitates alternative interpretations. Such built-in flexibility fosters more humane options and ultimately the capability to foresee open futures.

1. INTRODUCTION

I come as a practitioner to “the wall of the future.”

Thank you for this safe opportunity to brainstorm a bit about interdisciplinary possibilities and ways to cultivate some hopefulness about the future of joyful truths. This is a personal testimony in the spirit of phenomenological evidence.

I propose bringing three values as my way thru the Dantean forest: openness, preparedness, and the human. I will try to keep these as my guiding principles. This is an opinion piece, not a scientific study.

Libraries have been great repositories of the past, providing springboards into studies that re-shape our forward orientations

To be open to a library is to be open to study, texts, and increasingly all manner of objects and symbols. These represent the disciplines and discourses and debates and agendas past and present.

But what about the future? Can we look at it? Shape it? Respond to it? And the futurists? The actuaries, the statistics, and the exceptions. Can we tweak it, delay it, embrace it? How do we plan? How can we make space for good study, good practitioners, good discussions of what is positive in psychology and society?

How do we express our best anticipations midst our worst fears?

1. OPENNESS

The future calls us into the unknown, that is, our areas of ignorance, our fields of research. We are asked to be open to new wisdom. And some of this may be old wisdom that we have forgotten. So libraries hold much old wisdom, which library users are assessing and re-assessing in order to come up with new wisdom. This is the vibrancy of the future: living people encounter old wisdom and make it real or new for themselves and others.

One example from one of our texts of ancient wisdom, the Bible (2 Kings, ch. 5:1-15—the reading each year now for the third Monday of Lent):

The story of Naaman, the Syrian general who suffered leprosy, and took the advice of a captive Hebrew girl to go consult a Jewish prophet. This was an act of desperation—of grasping at straws when the prevailing wisdom of his own culture offered no answers. This was praying for hope beyond hope. And the ultimate counsel seemed absurd and offensive—dip in the Jordan seven times. But after some hesitation he followed the advice—and was healed. This was an act of faith, a leap of faith—anticipating a “miracle.”

So a close reading suggests that we might expect a few surprises and miracles along our way into the future—particularly if we maintain and practice some openness toward our futures.

1. PREPAREDNESS

Preparedness is doing our homework: study, write, re-write until we get it right: just, comprehensive, loving, appropriate, balanced, positive. We scour our experiences and our knowledge-bases for relevant good counsel. In our desperation we Google. We search and we re-search and we test and we begin to develop a method—scientific or simply pragmatic.

I prepared for this conference by reading a book that bridges theology and philosophy using the theme of anticipation (Theology of Anticipation, by Anette Ejsing. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006). I learned much about the philosophy of C.S. Peirce. First, that learning (epistemology) begins with a shock—the shock that our current reflexes have no response for some predicament. This is the problem of Naaman, the problem of suffering, the problem of ignorance, the signal of an opportunity to learn and grow and heal.

The second thing I learned is that after this initial shock, our minds may start to generate hypotheses to explain the shock, and these become working hypotheses for us to test in life and lab. Peirce calls this the logic of abduction, a sort of middle ground between deduction and induction. This is a fertile zone that entails openness to the divine, if the divine chooses to rush in. Peirce tenderly calls this the role of “The Muser,” where one is open to suggestions from afar, including those intuitions that might still be very vague.

Thirdly, The Muser “must decide on some self-controlled activity” (p. 167). This is the beginning of the creation of new knowledge either within existing disciplines or in the form of new disciplines that may in fact be disruptive. Ultimately in the West this has led to the scientific method, but it starts with an initial judgmental process of finding the most suitable hypotheses to test. This I call the management process of trying to arrive at good sense and reasonableness.

1. THE HUMAN

The final value I urge is humanness. By this I mean the humility to accept each other with our limits. We very much want a future full of love, and I suggest that keeping a human scale is the way. This includes a respect for time and the good use of time such that we keep our expectations reasonable and incremental—that we not burden ourselves with too much grandiosity. This includes the courage to cultivate our own voice midst the clash of many voices. This includes the courage of considering vague problems, of musing indeed, so as to grow first positive psychologies and then ultimately positive institutions. The person and personality becomes the bridge for interdisciplinary efforts and thus a map and measure for the future. With the components of imagination and creativity we can start to envision humane futures.

A quick survey of management literature found the intriguing titles Foresight and Innovation and Narrative and Innovation as well as the provocative subject category “complexity theory—surprises.” The movement of positive psychology is showing much impact in the literature, most notably in centered around the classificatory work of Character Strengths and Virtues. In librarianship I found material focused on teaching reading at the elementary school level, a variety of study skill manuals and advice, and a few broad treatments on types of reading such as skimming, first readings, and close reading.

1. CONCLUSION

In conclusion I wonder what we can reasonably expect. How can we prepare for the most reasonableness possible, the most positive psychology and positive institutional behavior? Our concept for the ultimate positive future has been heaven and various shades of utopias. Perhaps as we develop our scenarios and put ourselves in them, we can apply reasonableness tests to our dreams. And mustering our virtues we can stay open to the surprises and unknowns coming our way. This interdisciplinary adventure passes through multiple experiences of mystery, humility, and strong emotion.

Try as we might to stay objective and reasonable, the future seems a most malleable reality, requiring great flexibility and openness to the new. As we look forward, let us carry forward our virtues, our best thinking, our good sense. Let us become students of absorbing the shocks of new predicaments and generators of reasonable hypotheses that can extend our knowledge.

As we keep in mind the constraints of time and the limits of our personalities and capacities, let us also stay open to the musing that lets in the un-expected, the un-anticipated. Let us not presume to foreclose on our futures even as we let go of our presumptions to grandiosity.

I see libraries as a meeting ground of multiple studies and creativities where we try to establish new momentum research, where we begin to imagine the next good steps for building understandings, appreciations, and virtues.