Editorial: Koyaanisqatsi
Marc Truitt

Life out of balance. Those who saw it will surely recall the 1982 film that juxtaposed images of stunning natural beauty with scenes of humankind's intrusion into the environment, all set to a score by Philip Glass. The title is a Hopi word meaning "life out of balance," "crazy life," "life in turmoil," "life disintegrating," or "a state of life that calls for another way of living." While the film, as I recall, relied mainly on images of urban landscapes, mines, power lines, etc., to make its point about our impact on the world around us, it did include as well images that had a technological focus, even if the pre–PC technology exemplars shown may seem somewhat quaint thirty years later.[1]

The sense that one is living in unbalanced, crazy, or tumultuous times is nothing new. Indeed, I think it's fair to say that most of us—our eyes and perspectives firmly and narrowly riveted to the here and now—tend to believe that our own specific time is one of uniquely rapid and disorienting change. But just as there have been, and will be, periods of rapid technological change, social upheaval, etc.—"Been there, done that, got the t-shirt," to recall the memorably pithy, if now slightly oh-so-aughts, slogan—so too have there been reactions to the conditions that characterized those times. A couple of very different but still pertinent examples come to mind.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a reaction against the social conservatism and shoddy, mass-produced goods of the Victorian era began in England. Inspired by writer and designer William Morris, the Arts and Crafts movement emphasized simplicity, hand-made (as opposed to factory-made) objects, and social reform. By the turn of the century, the movement had migrated to the United States—memo to self: who were the leading lights of the movement in Canada?—finding expression in the "Mission-style" furniture of Gustav Stickley, the elegant art pottery of Rookwood, Marblehead, and Teco, and the social activism of Elbert Hubbard's Roycrofters.

Fast-forward another half-century to the mid-1960s and the counter-culture of that time, itself a reaction to the racism, sexism, militarism, and social regimentation of the preceding decade. For a brief period, experimentation with "alternative lifestyles," resistance to the Vietnam war, and agitation for social, racial, and sexual change flourished. Whatever one's views about, say, the flower children, civil rights demonstrations, or the wisdom of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it's well-nigh impossible to argue that the society that emerged from that time was not fundamentally different from the one that preceded it.

That both of these "movements" ultimately were subsumed into the larger whole from which they sprang is only partly the issue. And my aim is not to romanticize either of these times, even as I confess to more than a passing interest in and sympathy for both. Rather, my point is that their roots lay in a reaction to excesses—social, cultural, economic, political, even technological—that marked their times. They were the result of what might be termed "life out of balance." In turn, their result, viewed through a longer lens, was a new balance, incorporating elements of the status quo ante and critical pieces from the movements themselves. Thesis —> Antithesis —> Synthesis.

We find ourselves in such unbalanced times again today. Even without resort to over-hyped adjectives such as "transformational," it is fair to say that we are in uncertain times. In libraries, budgets, staffing levels, and gate counts are in decline. The formats and means of information delivery are rapidly changing. Debates rage over whether we are merely in the business of delivering "information" or of preserving, describing, and imparting learning and knowledge. Perhaps worst of all, as our role in the society of which we are a part changes into something we cannot yet clearly see, we fear "irrelevance." What will happen when everyone around us comes to believe that "everything [at least, everything that's important] is on the web" and that libraries and librarians no longer have a raison d'être?

For much of the past decade and a half—some among us might argue even longer—we've reacted by taking the rat-in-the-wheel approach. To remain "relevant," we've adopted practically every new fad or technology that came along, endlessly spinning the wheel faster and faster, adopting the tokens of society around us in the hope that by so doing we would stanch the bleeding of money, staff, patrons, and our own morale. As I've observed in this space previously,[2] we've added banks of über-connected computers, clearing away book stacks to design technology-focused creative services and collaborative spaces around them. We've treated books almost as smut, to be hidden away in "plain-brown-wrapper" compact storage facilities. We've reduced staffing, in the process outsourcing some services and automating others so that they become depersonalized, the library equivalent of a bank automated teller machine. We've forsaken collection building, preferring instead to rent access to resources we don't own and to cede digitization control of those resources that we ostensibly do own.

Where does it end? In a former job, I used to joke that my director's vision of the library would not be fully realized until no one but the director and the library's system administrator were left on staff and nothing but a giant super-server remained of the library. It seemed only black humor then. Today it's just black.

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More importantly, where has all this wheel spinning gotten us, other than continued decline and yet more hand-wringing and anguish about irrelevance?

It's time to recognize that we are living in a state of *Koyaanisqatsi* (life out of balance). And it's up to us to do something new about it by creating a new balance.

Here are a few perhaps out-of-the-box ideas that I think could help with establishing that balance. Spoiler alert: Some of these may seem just a bit retro. I can't help it: my formative library years predate the Chicxulub asteroid impact.

Anyway, here goes:

- Cease worrying so about "relevance." Instead, identify our niche: design services and collections that are "right" and *uniquely ours*, rather than pale reflections of fads that others can do better and that will eventually pass. We are not Google. We are not Starbucks. We know that we cannot hope to beat these sorts of outfits at their games; perhaps less obvious is that we should be extremely wary of even partnering with them. Their agenda is not ours, and in any conflict between agendas, theirs is likely to prevail. We must identify something unique at which we excel.

- Find comfort in our own skins. Too many of us, I sense, are at some level uneasy with calling ourselves "librarians." Perhaps this is so because so many of us came to the profession by this or that circuitous route, that is, that we intended to be something else and wound up as librarians. Get over it and wear the sensible shoes proudly.

- Stop trying to run away from or hide books. They are, after all, perceived as our brand. Is that such a bad thing?

- Quit designing core services and tools that are based on the assumption that our patrons are all lazy imbeciles who will otherwise flee to Google. The evidence suggests that those folks so inclined are already doing it anyway; why not instead aim at the segment that *cares* about provision of quality content and services—in collections, face-to-face instruction, and metadata? People can detect our arrogance and condescension on this point and will respond accordingly, either by being insulted and alienated or by acting as we depict them.

- Begin thinking about how to design and deliver services that are less reliant on technology. Technology has become, to borrow from Marx, the opiate of libraries and librarians; we rely on it to the exclusion of nontechnological approaches, even when the latter are available to us. Technology has become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

- Libraries are perceived by many as safe harbors and refuges from any number of storms. They are places of rest—not only of physical rest, but of emotional and intellectual rest. They are places of the imagination. Play to these strengths. Those seeking to reimagine library spaces as refuges could hardly do better than to look to Jasper Fforde's magical BookWorld in the Thursday Next series for inspiration.[3] Stuffy academics and special libraries take note: Library magic is not something restricted to children's rooms in public libraries. Walk through the glorious spaces of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library or visit the Reading Room at the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library—known to the present generation of students as the "Harry Potter Room," for its evocation of the Hogwarts School's Great Hall—and then tell me that magic does not abound in such places. It's present in all of our libraries, if we but have eyes to see and hearts to feel.

- The library was once a place for the individual. To contemplate. To do research. To know the peace and serenity of being alone. In recent years, as we've moved toward service models that emphasize collaboration and groups, I think we've lost track of those who do not visit us to socialize or work in groups. We need to reclaim them by devoting as much attention to services and spaces aimed at those seeking aloneness as we do at those seeking togetherness.

The preceding list will probably brand me in the minds of some readers as anti-technology. I am not. After spending the greater part of my career working in library IT, I still can be amazed at what is possible. "Golly? We can do *that*?" But I firmly believe that library technology is not an end in itself. It is a tool, a service, whose purpose is to facilitate the delivery of knowledge, learning, and information that our collections and staff embody. Nothing more. That world view may make me seem old fashioned; if such be the case, count me proudly guilty.

In the end, though, I come back to the question of balance. There was a certain balance in and about libraries that prevailed before the most recent waves of technological change began washing over libraries a couple of decades ago. Those waves disrupted but did not destroy the old balance. Instead, they've left us out of balance, in a state of *Koyaanisqatsi*. It's time to find a new equilibrium, one that respects and celebrates the strengths of our traditional services and collections while incorporating the best that new technologies have to offer. It's time to synthesize the two into something better than either. It's time for balance.

References and Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Koyaanisqatsi," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koyaanisqatsi (accessed July 12, 2011). *ITAL* readers in the United States can view the entire film online at http://www

.youtube.com/watch?v=Sps6C9u7ras. Sadly, the rest of us must borrow or rent a copy.

2. Marc Truitt, "No More Silver Bullets, Please," *Information Technology & Libraries* 29, no. 2 (June 2010), http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/lita/publications/ital/292010/2902jun/ editorial.cfm (accessed July 13, 2011).

3. Begin with Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001) and proceed from there. If you are a librarian and are not quickly enchanted, you probably should consider a career change very soon! Thank you, Michele N!

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we give to the organization. The LITA Assessment and Research Committee recently surveyed membership to find out why people belong to LITA, this is an important step in helping LITA provide programming etc. that will be most beneficial to its users, but the decision on whether to be a LITA member I believe is more personal and doesn't rest on the fact that a particular Drupal class is offered or that a particular speaker is a member of the Top Tech Trends panel. It is based on the overall experience that you have as a member, the many little things. I knew in just a few minutes of attending my first LITA open house 12 years ago that I had found my ALA home in LITA. I wish that everyone could have such a positive experience being a member of LITA. If your experience is less than positive how can it be more so? What are we doing right? What could we do differently? Please let me or another officer know, and/or volunteer to become more involved and create a more valuable experience for yourself and others.