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Follower is the New Leader, or Leading from Anywhere

Presented by Jean Amaral

Information Wrangler, Antioch University New England

Catherine Redden Lecture

New Hampshire Library Association (NHLA) Conference

May 19, 2009

When I accepted the invitation to be the first Catherine Redden lecturer, I knew I needed to learn about Catherine and her contribution to the New Hampshire library community. Having only joined this tribe in September 2006 when I returned to New England from the west coast, I'm still in the process of becoming familiar with our libraries and librarians. So Steve Butzel graciously volunteered to arrange a meeting of librarians who knew Catherine well. I owe a debt of gratitude to Judy Haskell, Ellen Knowlton, Janet Angus, Lesley Kimball, Andrea Thorpe, and Steve Butzel, all of whom took time out of their busy schedules to share stories about Catherine with me.

In preparing to speak today, I struggled with how to capture the essence of this extraordinary person whom I did not have the opportunity nor the privilege to know. In trying to do so, I'd like to borrow from a ceremony that my Clinical Psychology graduate students engaged in a few weeks ago. These were fourth year students who were leaving soon to start internships all around the country, and they wanted to recognize and honor the staff and faculty who had mentored them in their four years at Antioch. At the end of the year celebration for the department, they asked each individual to stand and a student read a list of words that described the person and their interactions with the class; they ended by thanking them for being their teacher and mentor.

I would like to do the same for Catherine. Please hold her in your mind for the next minute or two. In the words of Catherine's friends and colleagues, this is how Catherine is remembered: Always smiling, a positive force, amazing quilter, librarianship was her calling, a true class act, candy—lots of candy, focus on others, always positive, our numbers person, empowered others in the profession, generous, chocolate—lots of chocolate, could find the god wink in any situation, always gave out little gifts or a little something when she came back from conferences or traveling, inspiring, gracious, brought out the best in each of us. Catherine, thank you for being a mentor and teacher to so many members of our community.

Catherine died on September 26, 2008, at age 59 after a one-year battle with cancer. I am honored today to dedicate this, the first Catherine Redden Lecture, to Catherine's memory. And in her memory, I'd like to share a few things with you which you'll find on your tables: chocolates, of course, which I hope will help get you through your afternoon sessions, and bookmarks and sticky notes for you to share with folks back home, as Catherine would have.

So this talk is entitled Follower is the New Leader, or Leading from Anywhere.

I'd like to talk with you about leadership in the 21st century. It is said that Voltaire wrote, "I am a leader, therefore I must follow." I think it's time we turned this idea on its head. In the 21st century, our mantra should be "I am a follower, therefore I must lead."

But let me be clear: You might think with this call to action that I am a leader myself, that I have aspirations to become a library director or head of reference, that leadership comes naturally to me. None of this is true—though I do sometimes think about how the world would be different if I were Benevolent Dictator of the Universe, then we'd only ever say yes to our patrons, or have a darned good reason for it when we didn't.

But the truth is, leadership does not come naturally to me, and when in situations where it's called for, I have to work hard and consciously at it. In fact, my thinking about leadership and my decision to apply to the New England Library Leadership Symposium last year was prompted by an absolutely, completely horrible failure on my part. Okay, this is the first time I've admitted this publicly. I feel like I should be at a 12-step meeting: Hi, my name is Jean, and I'm a lousy leader.

So here's the story behind that horrible failure. Beginning in fall 2007 and continuing through the spring of 2008 I was a member of a committee at my university. Actually I was a member of several committees, since, as you probably know, everything in higher education gets done, or not done, by committee. But there's one committee in particular I want to talk about. The chair of this committee was not a strong leader, and he struggled to get us all to work well together.

And it was a struggle: some committee members complained about the chair, others complained about the poor communication, while others complained about IT and administration and community members complained about the process. Nobody and nothing went unscathed. Committee members rarely stepped up or volunteered to do any of the work that needed to get done, so it primarily fell to the chair. And none of us took responsibility for the role we played in perpetuating these problems. Committee and community members had a plethora of criticisms, and a dearth of solutions. In other words, your typical, dysfunctional work group, which I'm sure you've experienced at some point in your careers.

While I could see all of this, probably much more clearly in hindsight than in the moment, I wasn't able to positively affect a change even though I wanted to. I was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. When I looked back on the experience, I was disheartened by this personal failure and wanted to ensure that I didn't find myself in that position in the future.

It now seems obvious to me that the committee needed leadership not just from the chair, but from every member of the committee. I needed to learn to lead from anywhere—as a committee member, as a staff member, as an association member. I needed to find my inner leader and coax her into the light. Or, as the authors of *The Leadership Challenge* state, "It's our collective task to liberate the leader in each and every one of us." (Kouzes and Posner, p. 341)

The New England Library Leadership Symposium was the first step on a journey that I expect will continue throughout my professional career if not the rest of my life, and I'd like to talk a little bit today about that journey in the hopes that you all will consider leadership in your own lives and consider taking up the call: I am a follower, therefore I must lead.

Recently, in the leadership field, more attention is being paid to followers. According to Barbara Kellerman, author of *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders*, followers are those community members "without particular power, without positions of authority, and without special influence." (p. xx) As a reference librarian, that kinda sounds like me. But, Kellerman continues, "while followers by definition lack authority, at least in relation to their superiors, *they do*

not by definition lack power and influence,” two widely acknowledged characteristics that contribute to the success of leaders.

But what does it mean to say that we as followers must become leaders? Does leadership from anywhere look different than leadership from a position of authority?

It does if we only think of traditional top-down, command-and-control forms of leadership. But we’ve seen in the past thirty or forty years, and even more so in the last decade, a move away from this type of hierarchical leadership in organizations and companies, and a move toward other models, such as servant leadership and transformational leadership. Servant leadership in particular, I believe, can provide guidance for followers who would lead from anywhere.

Servant leadership was first proposed by Robert Greenleaf in 1970, and the banner has since been taken up by organization and management gurus such as Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, and Meg Wheatley, among others. In servant leadership, the leader becomes a follower, and I would argue as well, followers are more likely to become leaders.

As librarians, we are well situated to be servant-leaders, like Catherine Redden so obviously was. Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammel describe it this way: “Servant Leadership is not about a personal quest for power, prestige, or material rewards. Instead . . . leadership begins with a true motivation to serve others.” (p. 144) So I’d like you to raise your hand if you chose a career in librarianship for the power, prestige, and material rewards. Right.

McGee-Cooper and Trammel go on to say that “Rather than controlling or wielding power, the servant-leader works to build a solid foundation of shared goals by (1) listening deeply to understand the needs and concerns of others; (2) working thoughtfully to help build a creative consensus; and (3) honoring the paradox of polarized parties and working to create ‘third right answers’ that rise above the compromise of ‘we/they’ negotiations. The focus of Servant Leadership is on sharing information, building a common vision, self-management, high levels of interdependence, learning from mistakes, encouraging creative input from every team member, and questioning present assumptions and mental models.” (p. 144) Now that’s leadership I can get behind, and leadership I want to strive for in my own actions as a follower. What transformation might have been possible in the committee I served on if each of us had come to the table as a servant leader, as a follower leader?

Our organizations can only be *stronger* when we encourage this kind of leadership in all of our community members, not just those in positions of authority. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, believes that leadership is “the capacity of a human community to shape its future.” (Greenleaf, p. 358) Not the capacity for one individual—president, director, head of a department, chair of a committee—to shape our future, but the capacity of all of us. I am a follower, therefore I must lead.

But why lead now? Why at this moment in time? There are many voices saying: because the time is right. And it’s right for a couple of reasons.

What Antioch tells our prospective students is this: *Because the world needs you now.* We can’t wait for leaders in positions of authority to solve the problems we see or implement the solutions we believe are needed. There’s too much to be done and so much changing so quickly. We need to act now.

And because now, more than ever, it's possible for followers to lead from anywhere. It's possible because of new technologies and the information revolution. We see the trends on our bookshelves: From *The Wisdom of Crowds* to *Here Comes Everybody* to *Tribes* to *The Starfish and the Spider*, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. People are writing, talking, blogging, and podcasting about the brave new world of the information age and social media. While it may not be the revolution some claim, especially in rural areas, our organizations, companies, and communities are evolving in response.

Barbara Kellerman sees two forces that brought us here: first, from the American revolution to the equal rights movement in the 1960s and 70s, a continual, cyclical movement through history to give underrepresented voices more power; second, the information revolution precipitated by the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Given these forces, Kellerman believes that “followers are gaining power and influence while leaders are losing power and influence,” (p. 18) and Seth Godin, marketing guru and author of *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*, agrees. Godin believes that now is our time. He argues in *Tribes* that “the barriers to leadership have fallen. There are tribes everywhere, many in search of leaders. Which creates a dilemma for you: Without a barrier, why not begin? . . . No one gives you permission or approval or a permit to lead. You can just do it. The only one who can say no is you.” (p. 138)

One of the best and brightest students at Antioch, Jess Skinner, illustrates this perfectly. This spring, Jess found herself in a number of conversations with Antioch folks—other students, faculty, staff, alumni—all about how wonderful it would be if Antioch had a community garden. Think of it, they all said: local food for the campus café, education opportunities for science teachers, and so much more. This was a tribe of gardeners and garden fans just waiting for a leader.

Jess saw this tribe in need of a leader and stepped up. She didn't ask the president for permission or wait for a faculty member to appoint her garden guru. What Jess did do was post the following note to Antioch's electronic bulletin board:

There has been a lot of talk about gardening at Antioch, and I wanted to draw attention to this forum as a common place for folks to place ideas, information, etc about our progress!

I'll start with what I know . . . Today is April 4th, 2009. I have spoken with a variety of different teachers about the possibility of making a garden happen this spring, including folks in the environmental studies and alumni offices. There is support not only from many of the faculty at Antioch, but the student body as well. There has been talk about making the garden project a practicum, so if anyone wants to look into it, I think that's a step in the right direction for making this project sustainable! Also, I've spoken with Doc [head of Antioch facilities] about possible space to have a garden, whether it be on the south side of the building facing the bike path, back behind the west wing, or simply out in front of the building! Let's get conversations going with Tim J. [our chief financial officer] to ask about available space, J & M Landscaping to keep them up to date with changes on the grounds, and get a proposal written before growing season is here!!

Who's in?? Aside from communicating online, I propose a 'Garden Committee' meeting [it is higher education after all] to chat about the possibilities, including students, faculty and staff. Let's make this a bit more formal, let's solidify some plans, and let's make this happen!

Go Jess! After a few meetings, Jess has over 25 folks on board. We have a tribe, and now we have a leader. Here's a student, a follower, a person with the least amount of authority in our university, leading all of us to a community garden.

Where are similar opportunities in your library? Or in the New Hampshire Library Association? Maybe you're a Jess. Or maybe there's a Jess in your library you can encourage.

Jess's story is also a great illustration of what we, as followers, need in order to be able to lead. First, we need to believe passionately—Jess does! We need to believe in our patrons, in our colleagues, in our services, in intellectual freedom, in our vision for the future of our libraries.

Second, we need to have ideas—Jess has got plenty of 'em, about where the garden might go, how to make it sustainable, and who to involve. And I'm sure there's no shortage of ideas in this room. We need to have ideas about the services needed in our communities, about how to continuously improve those services, and how to use new technologies effectively and productively.

Third, we need to have a bias for action, a desire to make something happen—Jess wasn't satisfied listening to all the conversations about a community garden; she has a decided bias for action. She listened to where the community wanted to go, and now she's working to help them get there. If we step back for a moment or two each day, we're likely to see things in our libraries, in our associations, in our communities that are calling us to action in this same way.

We probably need a few other things as well, but the last one I'll mention here is the most important. We need to make the choice—the choice to lead from wherever we are. The same choice that Jess made. *We* are the leaders we've been waiting for.

Where do we see people making this choice in libraryland? We see librarians taking on the leadership of designing award-winning OPACs, such as New Hampshire library hero Casey Bisson's Scriblio. We see librarians taking on leadership to provide free professional development through initiatives such as Five Weeks to a Social Library, conceived, developed, and offered by New England librarian Meredith Farkas, along with five colleagues from across the country and in Canada. And we see librarians leading the way in open access to information in many ways, including New Hampshire librarian Nancy Keane's children's literature and booktalks website, where she provides an invaluable knowledge-sharing resource for educators and librarians.

These folks are leading in a big way, but there are opportunities to lead in equally important small ways. Maybe it's leading the charge to change all of your library signs from a negative to a positive focus. You know those all-capitals, bold, triple-exclamation-point signs "NO CELLPHONES!!!" How about something like "Cell phones allowed in the lobby" or "Please use cellphones courteously and quietly for the sake of others nearby."

In our library, leading small meant seeing that faculty and staff at Antioch knew absolutely nothing about what technologies our students used in their personal and educational lives or how they used them. Rather than waiting for another department or someone else to get us the information, the library instituted an annual technology survey for incoming students, which the president and other academic leaders now rely on in making decisions.

As you can see from all of these examples, followers who lead are agents of change. And as we all know, change can be difficult, and change can be scary. Or as Seth Godin reminds us: “It’s uncomfortable to propose an idea that might fail. It’s uncomfortable to challenge the status quo. It’s uncomfortable to resist the urge to settle.” (p. 55) So here’s a triple dog dare for you: When you get back to your library later this week, before you do anything else, before answering email, before sharing your bookmarks and sticky notes, look around. What change, small or big, does your library (or your library coop or NHLA) need you to lead today? This week? This year?

I’d like to talk for just a few minutes about the I Love My Librarian Award for two reasons. First, because I know there are many many people in this room who are equally deserving of this award, and second, because I think it relates to what we as followers need to be leaders.

I wasn’t nominated for this award because I’m a phenomenal librarian. I’m not. I was nominated because I have phenomenal students and faculty. Because I believe passionately in those students and faculty and the important work they’re engaged in at Antioch. And because I believe that even when our library is doing a kick-ass job, we can do better.

Because I believe our library can always do better, I’ve got a few ideas, as you might imagine, about how to do that. And some of those ideas have been turned into action. Since 2006, the Antioch library has started IM reference, created a map mashup of where our environmental studies thesis and dissertation research has occurred around the world, instituted personalized new books lists and table of contents alerts for our print journals, posted a delicious tag cloud of the subjects of our clinical psychology dissertations, and initiated a 3-week library lifesaver workshop series held each spring. The library *can* save your life, and we’ll show you how.

But this isn’t the whole story. I didn’t really win this award. The entire Antioch library did. Because the perception of the whole library is reflected in the perception of my work. Everything each library staff member does is interconnected.

Cary Jardine, the second half of our reference team, who is much loved by her students and faculty, made it possible to win this award. Cathy Boswell and the rest of our interlibrary loan team boast a phenomenal fill rate of 96%; they made it possible to win this award. Our front desk supervisor, Emily Mason, and her staff, perform feats of A/V magic and deliver superlative customer service every day. They made it possible to win this award. And Marcy Leversee, our director, along with generally staying out of our way, ensures that all of us have the resources we need to make it all happen making it possible to win this award. At Antioch, we are all followers; we are all leaders.

Horace Mann, Antioch’s first president, left our university this legacy: “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” Every day, I work with Antioch students and faculty striving to attain this goal: from the environmental studies faculty member who is helping to establish a conservation biology program with colleagues at the National University of Rwanda; to the clinical psychology student who came to Antioch because he experienced, while teaching in the Mississippi delta, the desperate need in rural communities for the best that modern health care can provide; to the environmental advocacy and organizing students representing the Western Shoshone Defense Project at the United Nations. The students and faculty at Antioch New England are winning victories.

And I believe that every day librarians, in the tradition of Catherine Redden, in New Hampshire, in New England, and across the country win victories for humanity in big and small ways: fighting to keep the EPA libraries open so that citizens can have access to important scientific information, helping someone who's unemployed find a job, teaching an octogenarian how to access the internet and use email, challenging the gag order of the USA PATRIOT Act, teaching students and faculty about the information landscape of open access publishing, creative commons, and more.

I love working at Antioch, and I LOVE being part of the library profession, because they're about the same thing: winning victories for humanity, making our world a better place, a just place.

I am a follower, therefore I must lead. It's up to all of us to make our libraries and communities better places, just places, as Catherine Redden did and encouraged others to do.

Thank you.

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