

The Librarians Are Not Okay

ANNE HELEN PETERSEN
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This week, I gave a talk at the CALM ([Conference on Academic Library Management](#)) Conference. I'm sharing it here because I've received several requests for a written copy, but also because I think you could substitute pretty much any passion job for "academic librarian" here and the descriptions (and advice) will hold. The librarians are not okay. The nurses are not okay. The teachers are not okay. The journalists are not okay, the clergy are not okay, the social workers are no okay. And we can't start the long-term work of recovering from the burnout and demoralization of the last year until we acknowledgment as much.

So here's the talk, which seems to start in the middle of the nowhere but that's just because I did some normal casual intros and positioning in the beginning. Please forgive the more conversational tone (which is how I write talks), the repetition of phrases (again, how I write talks) and the abundance of dashes (an approximation of the way we often actually speak). I hope it's useful to you in some way, regardless of whether or not you're a librarian or work in a passion job – because writing it, and delivering it, was certainly

useful to me. Real, enduring empathy demands that we understand some corner of others' contexts. And this is the crucial context that I've seen missing from so many conversations about people leaving jobs and industries and fields, and struggling mightily to stay within them. As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments below.

Your job has become incredibly difficult. And even though I can't understand the very specific ways it has become difficult — what a life in your shoes feels like — I do understand the overarching ways it has become difficult, and think we should spend some time acknowledging them.

First: You work passion jobs, and passion jobs are prime for exploitation.

Until I started writing about my own burnout back in 2019, I didn't grasp why it would ever be problematic to pursue work that you love. I thought that's what everyone should, in some way, be trying to do — and if they weren't, I had some sort of quiet pity for them, like WHO WANTS TO BE AN ACCOUNTANT? THEY MUST BE SO BORED!! This perspective was not, by any means, unique: for people on the college-track in the 1990s and 2000s, this was the air we breathed, passed down in maxims like *do what you love and you won't work another day for the rest of your life* and in Steve Jobs' [oft-quoted 2005 commencement speech at Stanford](#).

To be able to follow that ideology felt so aspirational — like setting yourself up for a future of guaranteed fulfillment. But it also set up a whole lot of us to conceive of our jobs not as jobs, but as vocations, as callings — with the understanding that pushing back, in any way, on the conditions of our employment was somehow evidence of a lack of commitment to the work.

Now, I know I don't have to go into detail on the precepts of *vocational awe* — you are my one audience to whom I wouldn't have to explain [Fobazi Ettarh's work](#). But just as it's significant that my writing on the experience of burnout emerged from a background in academia and journalism, it's worth considering the fact that one of the most influential pieces of writing on the state of contemporary work came from....a librarian! And more specifically: a Black librarian, with a particular perspective on the way that a profession had come to normalize, ignore, and otherwise excuse some of the most pernicious components of the industry as a whole, and of *passion work* in general.

The second thing I want to acknowledge: you're working a passion job that is feminized and, by extension, devalued. To be clear: I know not all librarians identify as women. But because so many within the field *are* women, and because there is a historical and lingering understanding of these jobs as jobs that *you would do for free* — well, you are often treated as if you are doing the labor for free. The same is true, of course, for care workers, for educators, for nurses, and for so many people working in the non-profit sphere, and it's such a convoluted logic that keeps it in place: the work is feminized, so it's low-paid; the work is low-paid, so it's feminized. This is of course bullshit, but that doesn't mean it's not a real problem, made even more insulting when the people who *do* rise amongst the ranks into top leadership positions are men.

The third thing that makes your jobs hard? You're working for higher ed. We are in a moment of unprecedented crisis when it comes to the future of higher ed, and everyone is feeling it in some way. Maybe you're feeling it in continued cuts to state funding that have stymied attempts to increase salaries even just in line with the cost of living. Maybe your institution laid people off with the pandemic, and now wants you running at the same levels as before, but without adding back those staff. Maybe you're watching as yet another person on your staff retires, and there's no money to hire their replacement, and yet the institution just made the decision to break ground on a new stadium, and you're fitting the bitterness turn to bile in your throat. Maybe you're watching as fellow faculty and staff members leave, or make plans to leave, or tell you that they don't know if they can take it anymore and are building their life rafts.

It is incredibly difficult to get anything done — let alone innovate and rethink the way you do things, or a better manager, or try and break down the white supremacy or settler thinking undergirding the institution — when precarity and scarcity are this ubiquitous.

This precarity and scarcity mindset fosters *horrible* work habits — in so many types of jobs, but particularly amongst millennials and younger Gen-Xers working passion jobs, many of whom have endured small and not-so-small traumas attempting to find and keep employment during and after the Great Recession. Our primary coping mechanism for dealing with those traumas? *Working all the time* — even after an immediate threat to one's job had passed. (I'll just note an interesting aside here from media researcher Melissa Gregg, [who's studied the proliferation of productivity books and apps](#) over the course of the last 40 years. Want to know when they spike? During recessions. People are desperate to at least *appear* more productive, [to LARP](#) (that is, live-action-role-play) their jobs in different ways, when they feel that their job is most insecure. When I first read Gregg's work, it blew my mind — and made perfect sense).

And that mindset? That frantic need to feel and look productive, to work all the time, to allow work to swallow all parts of your life? It's a burnout trap. But it's also a means of trapping us within our organizations: we become so yoked to our work identities — in your case, as a librarian — and so deeply immersed in the work, that it becomes impossible to even conceive of doing anything other than what you're doing. For many people, it's not unlike being in an abusive relationship, where your partner convinces you that they're the only person who would ever want to be with you, that you're nothing without them — only in this case, the partner is your job.

But again: you know all of this, and how difficult it is to grapple with work that, on its own, can feel so fulfilling — like doing what you love! — and the ways it's been addled by realities that have so little to do with the actual work itself.

And this is where Doris Santoro's [conception of demoralization](#) becomes salient: it's not just that you're burnt out, and feel like you could make a few changes and come back and do your job well. Professional demoralization is the dawning realization that there is no longer a way to do your job in a way that feels moral or just — not for yourself, not for your coworkers, and not for the people you serve.

The fourth thing that's making your job really, really hard? You just worked through a pandemic, and an ongoing reckoning with systemic racism, and a contested election,

and an insurrection, and several climate catastrophes. Plus, *we are still in a pandemic*. Some of you were asked to be present in situations that felt unsafe every day. Some of you had to deal with people who were butts about masks. Some of you got sick or are still sick, many of you have spent the last twenty-four months in various cycles of fear-based adrenaline pushes through the week followed by debilitating crashes. And because of the way that academic librarianship often works, and how little control people have over where they end up — you likely endured so much of it without much of a familial safety net. It's okay, *no, it's necessary*, to talk really frankly about just how hard it is, and how none of us have actually recovered from the grief and trauma of the last two years, and won't anytime soon.

I often talk about burnout being the feeling of hitting the wall, then scaling the wall, and then — you just keep going, because what other choice do you have? And that's where so many of us are: ground into a fine pulp of self with a striking resemblance to an actual human.

The other day, I was asking people on Instagram to tell me about just how much their jobs had expanded over the last few years — how many jobs each of them was expected to do, even though they're just one person who also, in most cases, also has significant caregiving duties. And maybe it's because of who my followers are, but as with any time I talk about systemic problems with burnout, and exploitation, and overloaded jobs, I heard from a lot of librarians — people who really have absorbed responsibilities that were previously the work of three FTEs, if not more, and how they're expected to just....have a better attitude about it? And when I reposted one of these stories in my feed, I put in the caption: THE LIBRARIANS ARE NOT OKAY.

And it's true, isn't it? The nurses are also not okay, the high school teachers are not okay, the graduate students are not okay, the adjuncts are not okay, the social workers are not okay....and the librarians, you are not okay. You're not okay because you're undervalued. You're not okay because you're drowning in student loan debt. You're not okay because there's way too many applicants to too few jobs. You're not okay because you're trying to furiously tread water.

You're not okay because like all of those other professions that aren't okay, you're nominally essential — the most valuable parts of our society, the vaunted upholders of democracy! — but often treated as societally worthless. And that's not okay, and I'm here to say it's not okay, and if you feel so hopelessly bitter and resentful and lost, it's also okay for you to say: I can't do this anymore. That's something you don't hear very often in a professional development talk, but I think it's essential to acknowledge what often goes unsaid: when it feels like the job is sucking all that is good from you, it is okay to save yourself. There is no shame in that, even though there will be — and I can speak from experience here — therapy, and, you know, tens of thousands of dollars in extent loans.

With that said, though, I don't think that we're past the point of despair. You are located at the intersection of structural and systemic failures, but there are still strategies that you can implement — as individuals, as teams, as organizations — that can make the profession more resilient, less fragile, and most importantly, more sustainable.

So where do you start?

On the level of the industry: Rethink the credentialization process. I think slash know I'm singing to the choir here, but the reality is that the current cost of library and information science degrees ensures that people who follow this path will either come from privilege — and make it all the more difficult to rectify the longstanding issues with staffing diversity — or they will be saddled with the sort of debt that yokes them to toxic working conditions and disincentivizes them from pushing for change. It's time to start thinking about how credentialism is inflecting the state of the entire industry, and even better than thinking about it, it's time to start imagining what different solutions could look like. (AHP afternote here: I'm not saying get rid of the MLS, necessarily. I'm saying get rid of how MLS degrees are funded — and how many people are accepted into the programs).

On the institutional level, you start with honesty. Not all of you are in the position to affect this sort of change, and I realize that, but you can modify anything that I say here to things that you can try and think through on the level of your team. The honesty starts with an acknowledgment: *We are not okay. And if we want to get through this, if we don't want to be miserable, if we want to do these jobs that we would theoretically delight in if we weren't so damn tired and overextended, then we need to change some things. Not just say that we'll think about changing them, but actually change them, and continue to iterate and change them, until we arrive at something that works.*

And then you honestly look at what is the work — who is doing it, and when are we doing it, and if we're trying to do too many things with too few people, what do we *have* to do less of? I know this is a PARTICULARLY difficult question when it comes to library services. But if a person's body can only create one widget a day, and they're paid to work five days a week, and they're told they must create seven widgets — something's gotta break, the number of widgets or the employee's body and health. You've all been breaking yourselves to do more. And it has to stop, no matter how much of a failing it might feel like to cut back on a part of your work that felt essential.

It might help to think of it this way: sometimes less is more, and sometimes, as in the case of so many overstretched institutions, more is actually *less*. Decreasing the number of services, or the number of service hours, or the number of responsibilities will almost certainly make everyone a lot better at their jobs.

You're not going to change the way that your institution funds you. You're not going to impress the state legislature into taking your work seriously. But you can try to create a match between the amount of work there is and the capacity of your team to do that work well.

On the team level: you need guardrails, and you need solidarity.

Guardrails stand in opposition to what's often referred to as *boundaries*. Boundaries, particularly when it comes to work, are easily compromised. Boundaries are the responsibility of the worker to maintain, and when they fall apart, that was the worker's own failing. In fact, breaking informal boundaries — like when work stops and starts — are often a way for people to evidence their commitment to the job itself.

Boundaries, at least in the way we've come to understand them in phrases like "work-life balance," are bullshit.

But guardrails? They're structural. They're fundamental to the organization's operation, and the onus for maintaining them is not on the individual, but the group as whole. They're not just what the organization says it values, but what it values in practice — and they're modeled from the top echelons of leadership all the way down to newest and most junior hires.

I talk about guardrails a lot when I talk about time off, and the fetishization of overwork, and how you can actually teach a bunch of overachieving strivers how to stop working all the time, because working all the time is not the same as doing good work, no matter how much we've tricked ourselves otherwise. People like that — like us — will whiz right by boundaries: again, they're exactly what we've been told we *should* break to prove that we're the best.

Guardrails are things like: we don't email when we're off, and if you do send an email when you're off, you'll actually be taken aside to talk about why that's not part of our culture here. Guardrails are: even if you, yourself, work really well at 11 pm at night, any communication you craft at that hour should be delay-sent to correspond with the start of others' workday, so they don't feel the need to be responding to work at that hour as well. Guardrails are being very clear about levels of urgency: an email is not a five-alarm fire, and you shouldn't train yourself to react as if it was, because that sort of vigilance is not sustainable.

One thing that's great for maintaining guardrails, particularly when upper level leadership is not on board? A union. Unions are accessible to a lot of you, but if you live in a right-to-work state, you know what is and is not available to you in form of union power. But regardless of whether or not you have a union with teeth, you can have the next best thing, which is worker solidarity.

Solidarity is not "we're like a family here." In fact, it's the opposite: solidarity recognizes each other not as intimates, not as people to whom you are *obliged* to care for, but as fellow workers, worthy of respect, worthy of control over their own time, worthy of a job description that they're capable of actually fulfilling. Solidarity as a manager means real and enduring empathy for and identification with the people you manage, not with the people who manage you. And it also means understanding — and respecting — pushes for better, more equitable, more sustainable working conditions for student workers, for graduate students, and for other staff. And all of that? It requires understanding what you do, yet again, as *work*. Work that matters, but work that becomes even more meaningful when it's not shrouded in a toxic work environment.

And on the personal level: it's time to build community. You might expect community to be slotted into the pile of work that needs to happen inside the library, or in outreach to patrons, or the placement of the library in the public imaginary. But those are things you talk about - and work on - all the time. I want to talk about each of you, as individual librarians, working to foster your own communities — especially and particularly *outside* of the library.

What am I talking about? I'm talking about the stuff you do when you're not working. I'm talking about hobbies that aren't e-mail or taking care of your children. I'm talking about meeting people who aren't your age or your students or your family, and investing time in communities of care, because the next time catastrophe strikes - and it will, that we know - you will have systems to cushion your fall, even when or if our established systems fail. I gestured to this above, but statistically speaking, librarians like you are [far more likely to live far from your parents](#), and far from where you grew up, and often find yourself in places where you don't have a single friend you could call to pick you up if your car broke down.

I don't say this to be cruel - god knows I've lived it - but to emphasize and EMPATHIZE with the feeling of just not having the same sort of de facto, long nurtured, care network as others. But that doesn't mean it's impossible: it just takes work, even when you feel like you have nothing more of yourself to give, because part of the reason you have so little of yourself to give is because you have so little support.

I've written extensively about how to cultivate these sorts of [communities of care](#), and I want to acknowledge, again, that the work of establishing them is really, really hard. But you need avenues for self-realization that aren't your job, you need to remember the things that brought you delight that weren't clearing your inbox, you need friends who aren't academics who can tell you when something is blatant bullshit, and you need someone who will trade babysitting and cat sitting, and you need someone who knows you not as a librarian, not as someone with a vocation, but just as YOU, as someone beloved and worthy of rest and respect.

So yes, in sum, the librarians are not okay. But you are also very much not alone. So many others have found their professions mired in this downward spiral of burnout and exhaustion, but also, on a deeper level, of demoralization, inequity, and exclusion. But there is hope for a different, sustainable way forward: as individuals, as institutions, as communities. But it hinges, absolutely, on the will to imagine it. The work is hard. But the work is hard because, in this moment, more than ever - it is so very much worth doing.

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