WHAT DO YOU WANT IN A LIBRARY DIRECTOR?

There was great rejoicing at the Fawville Public Library. Sam Grillo, the director, was leaving. The staff had been hoping - praying - for this announcement since he arrived six months ago.

Why this rejoicing? Put to the direct question, as, for example, on the witness stand, the staff would have answered, "Because the man has serious psychological problems that interfere with his and our ability to do our jobs." Asked to elucidate, they would have said that he was timid, supersensitive, and morbidly self-conscious. Timidity and shyness robbed him of all spontaneity and naturalness. He appeared cold, reserved, and stiff.

Were a psychologist to be called to the witness stand and asked to explain Grillo's behavior, such an expert might have spoken of his desire to return to the womb, meaning that the outside world seems so harsh and hostile, and the winds of circumstance so cruel and chill, that the victim feels like curling up in a shape that is literally embryonic, as though seeking refuge in a strange, dark, pre-natal condition. Was it not for this reason that Grillo was so attached to his office...because it sheltered, and enveloped, and gave the illusion of security? He would sit in it every day, tinkering with his computer, almost from the moment he arrived until the moment he left. The few times he ventured out and encountered people, they were invisible. When they spoke to him, he would answer but was clearly uncomfortable.

If the skeptical reader questions how this can be, it can only be said that there are such people in the library field and they do become directors - incredible though it may seem. To deny that such people exist is to close one's eyes to reality.

It would be a pleasant amelioration of the Grillo character to record that these unfortunate peculiarities are redeemed by excellent mental endowments. Unfortunately it would not be true. His talents were most ordinary.

The obvious retort would be that if this was indeed the case, how did Grillo become director in this community of 14,000?
To answer the question it is necessary to go back some 6 years to when Grillo was 22. He had a bachelor's degree in art history, a course of study he drifted into. How to put this degree to use became a major concern. When he surveyed the world of likely careers, nothing emerged. An aptitude test, taken after he had been unemployed for six months, identified three possibilities: teacher, museum worker, and librarian. Teaching was out because he wasn't much of a subject expert, and anyway he was far too uncomfortable with young people. Investigating museum work yielded nothing…No one evinced the slightest interest in his applications. That left librarianship - lucky it.

He applied to a library school. Since his GPA was 3.25 and his combined GRE 1040, and since his academic references spoke favorable of him as a potential librarian ("He should do very well in the library field," said one. "Admirably suited," said another), and since he had the right answers during the interview with a library school faculty member, there was no reason to deny his admission. He attended classes, never speaking unless asked a specific question. After a year he graduated - and remained totally unchanged as a result of the experience. True, he had successfully completed the requirements of his course, but other than impart facts the program did nothing for him.

How could it? There is a central core that is a person, and that core is always operative. Whitman put it this way: "Through angers, losses, ambition, ignorance, ennui, what you are picks its way." What he was - shy, timid, unassertive, solitary - picked its way. By the time he got to graduate it was too late. The damage had been done. People don't turn sharp corners. The good people who attend library school remain good, and become better. They learn, and build on the central core. For the others the experience is negligible - a union card. They leave as they came. To be sure they do the assignments, catalogue the books, examine the sources, solve the simulated exercises, and so on, but their interactions with others were fashioned long before they attend library school. (If you know your Principle of Psychology, and you remember James' chapter on "Habit," which is one of the miracles of literature, you will know this.)

Now if you had been Sam Grillo, what would you have done? Whether you like it or not, he was now a member of the library profession. A library school had put its seal of approval on him in the form of an MLS. He had invested thousands of dollars in an education and he expected a return on his investment in the form of a library job. Three library school faculty members wrote references on his behalf. He was now ready.
At this point the skeptical reader might say, "This is all very interesting, but is it true?" To which the response has to be, "It is completely true." "But is it typical?" the still skeptical reader asks. A sigh. "Very much so. But it would be a betrayal of confidence to reveal names and libraries."

Cynics quip that the place for someone like Sam Grillo is in a cataloguing department, which is exactly where he wound up after an eight month job search. But he was not happy. He became restless. He wanted out of the large city in which he was living and working, longed for the "peace and quiet" of a small town.

An announcement for a director of the Fawville Public Library, advertised at an obscenely low salary, appeared on the job board at Grillo's library school. He applied, was interviewed, and was offered the position. There was no competition. No one who was not single and willing to live in a room, or married with a spouse who was making a living wage, could afford to apply; for a married person it would be pocket money. No married person applied.

You will not be surprised to learn that the board of three trustees (appointed by the town manager) lacked experience interviewing applicants. They found Grillo's responses to their questions quite satisfactory. They hired him without inviting the staff of seven non-professionals ever to meet him.

The former director had been one of those married people for whom his library salary was not the mainstay of the family; he did have a library degree and left only because his wife took a job in another part of the country. He had been director for 16 years. During those years he "ruled" the library, never consulting with the staff on any matters except those concerned with their own immediate positions. They were there to do his bidding. Hence it was that it did not occur to the trustees to confer with the staff when they interviewed Grillo…the six women and one man had not been involved in anything of consequence before so that must be the way things operate in the library field. The staff was not unhappy to see the former director go, for vastly different reason…but let one of the all-purpose support staff members pick up the story.

"You mustn't think that things didn't get done with Sam around, and aren't now while were director-less. They did and are. We've 'muddled through' and managed to provide a measure of service for our users in spite of Sam's total lack of leadership and involvement.
"From what I've heard from people who work in other libraries, this is not uncommon - 'muddling through' in spite of directors who hinder rather than help.

"We've selected material, tried our best with reference questions, ordered supplies and stuff, kept the place going. But we resented having a sort-of 'kept' library director around, even on the crummy salary he was making. It just didn't make any sense.

So one day we got together, mustered up courage, and approached the trustees. I should add parenthetically that they've never been terribly involved in the library, but that's another matter. Well, we weren't surprised to learn that they weren't overjoyed with Sam either. One, a fairly frequent library user, had on several occasions sneered meaningfully in the direction of Sam's office when she was in, so we had a clue that they were less than pleased.

"Anyhow, to make a long story short, they let him go at the end of his six months probationary period. He put up no fuss at all. That was Sam. Weird!

"So here we are and here's what we need help with. We want and need a professional librarian. The trustees, Lord love 'em, have asked us what we want in a library director, what qualities, attributes, characteristics, abilities, talents, if you will, we think such a person should possess. Then, having come up with a list - and, by the way, they want qualities specific to a public library director - they've told us they want us to be in on the interview. Isn't that wonderful! We're going to get a chance to ask questions!

"But one of our concerns is how do you find out during an interview if the person has the qualities you're looking for? People can say the right things, put on their best faces, but how do you know you're getting what they say they would be like? We want someone who's skilled in the art of management. How can we find out if he or she is? We've had the extremes - an 'autocrat' and an 'abdicator.' Is that all there is?

"You see, when you're off and isolated the way we are with most of our contacts with other libraries being of the ILL variety and occasional attendance at local library association meetings, we don't get much in the way of help with our problems. The staff at the state library extension agency have been very nice, but they really haven't been able to help us with our immediate concern - selecting the right..."
person for the job. We've been burned - twice! An autocrat and an abdicator! How can we cut down on the possibility of making another mistake?

"By the way, the trustees are working at getting the director's salary up to at least the average for libraries our size."

There is a footnote to this story. Sam Grillo is no longer in the library field. He got a job in a small art museum, helping to prepare its catalogues.

Written by Dr. A.J. Anderson. Professor Emeritus, Simmons College GSLIS