

Christi Osterday and Dustin Fife

# Motivations and Personal Development

A Year of Exploring Why We Choose Librarianship

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. In past issues, the topics were proposed by the authors. However, in 2026, this feature will focus on the authors' stories of librarianship—how they got here, why they stay, and even why they consider leaving or transitioning at times. During this time of great upheaval in higher education, exploring our many “whys” is a worthy venture. — *Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Dustin Fife (DF):** Christi, as an accidental librarian, I did not “choose” librarianship *per se*, but I did quickly find my “whys” when I began working in libraries, and so I have chosen to stay. As the series editor for this column, I serve a dual role when I am also one of the writers, and right now, I can admit I am taking a certain prerogative to reinforce my life's decisions.

I am not sure if you have noticed, but higher education had an “interesting” 2025. So during 2026, I want to use this column to have a collection of library professionals explore their “whys”—why they chose to work in libraries, why they keep coming back, and what they hope to accomplish through their labor and careers. Something within me screams that we need these conversations.

So Christi, how did you get where you are today, and why are you choosing to stay? No wrong answers.

**Christi Osterday (CO):** Dustin, I never tire of talking to other accidental librarians! It reminds me of how I discovered libraries and how unhelpful imposter syndrome truly is. It wasn't until I was a student library employee in grad school that I discovered how interesting libraries could be. Patrons and staff would discuss big life topics in a meaningful way, and after being trained on how to help doctoral students both find and use resources, I was hooked. The possibilities were seemingly endless on how a library could support or even provide community. As a musician and undergrad student, I was taught how to teach myself, but the focus was in music performance and analysis. In a library, I could teach others how to do the same in any field. I don't need all the answers because I discovered a pathway is always possible to find.

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One critical reason I chose to stay, and still do, is that I've seen how damaging poor leadership can be—when someone manages others just to get the paycheck and simply does not care, or for even worse reasons. Everyone deserves better. It not only affects the employees but also patrons' access to material they have a right to find. Again, I don't have all the answers, but I find that having a passion to support others goes a long way.

How did you accidentally end up in libraries, Dustin? Why do you choose to stay?

**DF:** Christi, I love that “aha” moment you had. Something similar happened to me. When I was in graduate school studying history, I decided that was not the path for me, but I didn't really have a plan. Luckily, my partner did, and I followed her to a remote part of the world where she had gotten an incredible job. Even when we decided to move, I still did not have a plan. While I had some aspirations—in the most White Dude way ever, I was going to walk all the trails and write a great American novel—I still needed to find a job. There were openings at the local public library, and I fell into the work.

It was a small public library system in a very rural part of America, and I could not have found a better job for me. My “aha” came when I recognized two important intrinsic motivators. I got to work with people every day on things that mattered to them, and each day of my life was different in Library Land. I knew quickly that I was motivated by variety at work and by engaging with people. The library was a perfect place to do that work for me. I spent several years doing everything you could in a small public library until I began to wonder if I could bring my newfound passion for libraries together with my previous academic aspirations. I made the shift to academic libraries; I was able to maintain the variety that motivated me and continued to be able to work with people on projects that appealed to them. It worked for me, and I have been in academic libraries ever since.

Christi, I'd love to hear more about how observing management keeps you coming back. What are you seeing out there on them library streets?

**CO:** I appreciate your round-about journey to get here, as well as the transition to academic libraries. I've seen a fair amount of negative bias between public and academic library worlds, and it's good to see the transition is possible!

My first school was an incredibly conservative institution. Some levels of employment would hire only from within the student population, and others would hire only very specific demographics (men, usually White) who had graduated from within their circle of allied schools.

Though there were many who genuinely respected their roles and influence over others, there were others who didn't. At one point, I was passed over for promotion because it would be “inappropriate for me to lead men.” After leaving for another school for a year, I was encouraged to apply for the same role because they couldn't find a candidate who would stay. The same person who encouraged me to look elsewhere fought not only to hire me but at an equitable wage. While confusing, it provided opportunities I wouldn't otherwise have been able to pursue. I also feel that I was able to provide academic services for students and faculty during my time in this role that I hadn't seen regularly delivered in that setting.

Prior to my current position, I've seen leaders spend the majority of their working hours on a doctoral thesis at the expense of work that needed to be done. I've seen another take on an interim director role so they could later land another permanent director role, leaving

their department rudderless. I've also seen student employees be scheduled without care, causing conflict and chaos on any given week. Watching all these practices has motivated me.

Now, I'm grateful to work in a library whose leaders seem to be on the same page, and we all put in the work. Instead of hypervigilance to keep me from repeating the mistakes of others, I get to look to other leaders for inspiration. This gives me space to heal while also propelling me to do better and motivating my continued work in libraries. Everyone deserves committed leadership.

Dustin, where do you look to find inspiration in leadership? What propels you forward?

**DF:** Christi, I think you have hit on something that resonates deeply with me. Reading your leadership development story and how that motivates you is at the heart of these conversations. What motivates each of us? While I am not an expert on the hierarchy of needs that must be met for each of us to thrive, it is important to recognize that we all have social, emotional, and physical needs. If those can be sufficiently met, we can begin to consider other extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.

I can see how you are motivated to create a profession with committed and empathetic leaders. I share that hope with you. As I wrote earlier, I am also motivated by experiencing variety and creating meaningful connections. To add to those, I think something that many of us might share is being motivated by the opportunity to learn and grow. I stay in librarianship because I am still learning and growing. I am allowed to be curious regularly and try new things. I am motivated to help build a profession that creates that opportunity for others as well.

In the shortest terms possible and in answer to your question, as a library leader, I remain inspired because I feel engaged. Helping others feel engaged is the crux of what I hope to accomplish as a librarian.

So, Christi, what keeps you engaged in libraries?

**CO:** Dustin, I fully relate with being motivated by the opportunity to learn and grow. And not only have I wanted better for those around me, but even before this I was personally inspired by the research process itself. So, working with faculty and/or students and their unique needs provides me with that human connection. I learn about their topic, and the joy of seeing them move forward with access to resources is life-giving for me. I feel engaged, and their curiosity and energy are contagious. As librarians, we are given both permission and a mandate to remain curious. Even the simple act of showing a new student how to find a book is a bit energizing.

I'm also driven to build community and knowledge by using library space. With events like author or artist talks, general nerding out over a topic with something fun to eat, or some other activity that brings interested people together, I get to witness that same energy and curiosity spread among others. It's this drive to help library patrons form community, as well as gain a little more interest in going to the library, that leads me to find ways to remove intimidation factors for patrons.

I appreciate your mentioning of the hierarchy of needs, and though I'm also not an expert, they deserve recognition in this discussion. I want to provide and cultivate a psychologically safe<sup>1</sup> and respectful space for those around me. This is what grounds my commitment, but my gut motivator is more closely tied to connection and curiosity, which loops me all the

way back to my original “aha” moment and I believe will keep me coming back for years to come.

What now, Dustin? How will your “whys” keep you coming back?

**DF:** Well, Christi, I think I will keep coming back—at least for now—because I want to help build the library that I needed and, more importantly, the libraries that other people and communities need now. That is my biggest “why”! Ruha Benjamin encouraged folks to “remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within.”<sup>2</sup> As so many people have reminded me, the library is one of the last public places on earth where some people can exist without directly spending money or using their time in a directed or mandatory manner. That freedom allows people to imagine and build new dreams and, by extension, new worlds. We can only help in that process as library professionals if we are curious and engaged. These are lofty aspirations; however, I do not think they are impossible for individuals or in communities, especially if we build together.

While I would usually end on an aspirational note, I want to make sure and end with a caveat here. I truly believe people will be more fulfilled if they are engaged with their work, but I do not believe that library professionals owe their lives or their happiness to their work. As Fobazi Ettarh has taught us, vocational awe<sup>3</sup> is the enemy of sustained engagement. And, as Meredith Farkas shows, slow librarianship<sup>4</sup> is actually the friend of curiosity and fulfillment.

Christi, thank you for having this conversation with me. To be completely frank, connections with people like you keep me motivated and keep me coming back. Everyone in librarianship needs colleagues like you. ♪

## Notes

1. A. C. Powers and D. Fife, “Psychological Safety in Libraries: It’s a Team Sport,” *College & Research Libraries News* 86, no. 3 (2025): 104–07, <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/26701/34620>.

2. Ruha Benjamin, “Ruha Benjamin Examines the Relationship between Innovation, Inequity and Imagination,” *TED* (2023), [https://www.ted.com/speakers/ruha\\_benjamin](https://www.ted.com/speakers/ruha_benjamin).

3. Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018), <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

4. Meredith Farkas, “What Is Slow Librarianship?” *Information Wants to Be Free* (blog), October 18, 2021, <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2021/10/18/what-is-slow-librarianship/>.