

IT'S WHY WE DO IT THAT COUNTS:
THE ROLE OF ARCHIVISTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

Joan Chittister

I'm reminded of a story about speaking in your own hometown: A man was asked by his hometown historical society to speak at their next meeting. When he arrived the only ones there were the board members and a couple of old geezers in the back. "Did you tell them I was coming?" he asked them. "No, I guess we really didn't," the chair answered "but it sure looks like the word seeped out."

And from the philosopher Boethius: "Every age is a dream that is dying and a new age coming to life."

From the paleontologist Chardin: "The only task worthy of our efforts is to construct the future."

And from the Zen: "The meaning of life is to see."

I have spent a great deal of time thinking about this conference and this presentation for two reasons. The first is a simple one: if there were ever a place where I would not expect to be invited, this would certainly seem to be it. I would certainly understand an invitation to colleges and civic social groups, to spirituality centers and ecumenical programs, yes. But at a conference of archivists? Trust me: until now, at least, the chances were slim to non-existent

And yet, the second reason I've thought so much about today's presentation is equally simple: if there were ever a group I identify with--as well as with writers and speakers, with educators and researchers, with historians and theologians, archivists are definitely it.

What that means is that I could not be further away than I am from the life of an archivist. But it also means that as a woman, as a writer, as a social scientist I realize my indebtedness to you and to your profession.

I value your work and I respect your dedication to it. In fact, I think the values and sensitivity with which archivists approach the development of public archives may actually be what is missing in much of public life today. Which is why I want to talk today about what it means to choose a profession, to make a career a vocation, to decide between making a salary and making a difference,

I want to explore what it means to make a conscious decision between choosing a job and making a life, about giving our lives to something because it not only fits us but fits the world around us, as well.

And then I want to talk about what, as an outsider, I see as the call and the social

contribution of your profession and your own personal lives.

There are several stories from the ancients which, I think, make those distinctions clear and the impact of those choices life-changing—for all of us.

The first story is from *The Tales of the Hasidim*: "What good work shall I do to become acceptable to God?" the disciple asked the rabbi.

"How should I know?" the rabbi answered. "Abraham practiced hospitality and God was with him. Elias loved to pray and God was with him. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him, too. Judith led the people and God was by her side."

"Well, then," the disciple said, "is there some way I can find my own allotted work?"

"Ah, but of course," said the rabbi, "Just search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it."

Point: the development of the whole of the self, the coming to fullness, to maturity of the abilities with which we were born, is what life is about. The marriage of personal fascination and intellectual ability enkindles both excellence and happiness in us. It brings a sense of purpose to a delight in life.

But the best news of all is that everything we are meant to be is already within us. It is simply a matter of choosing what we shall do and be from the inside out—from what we have within us to do it—rather than from the outside in, from what other people tell us we should do or be or become, because it's more popular, or better-paying, or more exciting, or takes less effort or demands less preparation.

It is a matter of going where our talents, our interests, our excitement, our gifts, our skills lure us and lead us rather than struggling to go where prestige or status or power or money are our only real goals and always, always, let us down in the end.

It is in the fulfillment of the self that both fullness of life and happiness lie.

The second story is from the Zen: "Master," a disciple asks, "How shall we know that our lives are complete?" And the master answers, "For the raindrop, joy is entering the river. Joy is entering the river."

It is becoming the most of what we are; becoming the fullest of what we were made to be that is the measure of the happiness we seek and the acme of the happiness we achieve.

For the musician, it lies in seeing others, too, losing themselves in the tune. For the writer, it is struggling a thought onto paper that someone else can identify with. For the born teacher, it is watching a pupil succeed. For the gardener, it is giving someone else the fruit of the land, and seeing the first bloom of the rose. For the builder it lies in

turning over the key. For the researcher it is finding the one piece still missing in the puzzle.

It is, in other words, being able to do what we do best in order to give the gift back to the world for whose good we have received it in the first place.

And finally, there is a third story, this time from the life of an old rabbi who was asked by the younger generation how he knew he wanted to be a rabbi.

“It happened at the slaughterhouse,” he said, “where as a child I saw the cows being selected for kosher. As the kine came down the chute, the executioner counted them off over and over again: he called out, ‘1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-and the tenth one for God. ‘1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-and the tenth one for God.’ And I knew in my heart,” the old rabbi said, “That I was one of those.”

He knew, that is, that there was in him an inner magnet, already drawing him, to the meaning of the word, to the call of the Torah, by which he was meant to direct his own life so that the lives of others could also be enriched. He knew he had a vocation, a direction, a call, a gifting, rather than simply a profession.

There was a time, of course, when the idea of such a thing as a vocation was reserved and said only of the clergy, for those who were called to a special “religious” ministry in life, for those who officially dedicated their lives to doing the work of God by doing the work of their churches and the temples and synagogues.

These were separated out of the human family, distanced from the common life, even dressed differently than the society around them, called “special” for the sake of doing special liturgical tasks. From this perspective, a call was something professionally religious—not done by people like us, to people who made the world go round.

A vocation was something that simply happened to someone, without explanation, without cause. Uniquely. Martin Luther called it “a stroke of fate.”

But however it was named, everyone knew that the call was a command to some special few from God to sacrifice their lives to proclaim the proclamations of God—whether they wanted to or not; whatever else they would be unable to do as a result of it.

Vocation, from that perspective, was an end in itself, not a unique gift particular to the person or even a particularly intense or magnetizing interest in any particular aspect of ministry. It meant simply giving life over to be disposed of in the service of religion as life saw fit with little of choice left in it after that first and final sense of call.

It was a good and holy and devoted life. but, we came to understand as the centuries went by, that it was itself theologically deficient: that, in fact, we were all called to do something in life that was life-giving to others.

We are all called to leave the world when we depart it in better condition than it was when we came—simply because we have been here. But to do that we must do what we do best. We must love what we're doing.

We ourselves must understand what we're called to do for others by doing it, what we like, for them as well as do for ourselves. And we must give ourselves entirely to the doing of it with all the skill it demands of us and all the commitment we have.

Because it is our vocation. It is our own personal, private, special call to be co-creators of the world. We must, in other words, have a sense of purpose beyond, as the Irish say, "Just knocking one more day out of it till the great day comes."

It is knowing that there is within us something that marks each of us in a special way and that this quality has been given to us for some reason greater than ourselves and that that giving is of the essence of our coming to wholeness.

The task of determining what that special quality is and what we're to do with it is the single great work of being alive.

Point: the mind may know what we want to be in life—because the social messages are so clear. We are to get power, amass goods, get money and have comfort. But it is the heart that knows what we are meant to be in life:

- signs and models of goodness,
- givers as well as takers,
- builders rather than destroyers,
- preservers of the best our society has known up to now

so that those who come after us may have stars to steer by.

That's what being a human being is all about. And that's exactly what archivists do best.

They devote themselves to finding the brightest stars in our collective sky, the biggest ideas, the greatest events. They have an eye for the discovery of the trends of the times, for recognizing the underlying engines of social change: for defining its most sweeping transformations, its most epochal undertakings its soundest ideals, its finest examples of what it means to be a human being in inhuman situations, the most humanly human lodestars in every category and quietly, carefully, they hang them all on the tree of life for all the rest of us to see and take hope from.

But, the even greater question is this one: If archivists don't do it, who will?

Let me give you an example from my own life. No, correction, let me describe for you a disaster in the record of humankind that is demonstrated by my own life.

I'm a Benedictine sister. Benedictinism is the oldest religious order in the history of the church. In fact, after its more than 1500 continuous years of development from 480 to

now, to today, in 2013 the only institution older than the Benedictine order in the Catholic Church is the church itself.

Religious life for both men and women hermits, ascetics who lived solitary lives had existed in the deserts of Syria and Egypt since the end of the second century. Religious orders of both men and women who began to live communally under what is known as the Rule of Benedict developed in Europe by the end of the fifth century and existed as the sole model of monasticism and religious life there for seven centuries, until the 13th century.

During that period, history is clear, this single religious order became the sole civic anchor and agricultural organizer of peasant populations who had been driven off their lands, by waves of internecine wars from one end of Europe to the next.

These communities were built in such a way that people could cross the continent on roads no longer patrolled by Roman legions and so now being ravaged by itinerant gangs of thieves and still sleep safely every night in a Benedictine hospice—just one day's ride from the Benedictine hospice they had slept in the night before. We were the first Holiday Inns in Europe!

These Benedictine communities—of both men and women—also opened schools, and infirmaries, scriptoriums and art centers for the copying of manuscripts and the preservation of the arts and at the same time, built the great cathedrals of Europe as well. Historians say that it was Benedictines—men and women who “saved the culture of Europe.”

And yet—and yet—when the monasteries of Benedictine women—smaller, less endowed—and so less secure—disappeared due to the continuous attacks of marauding bands or collapsed under the burdens of poverty, not one archive from a woman's community in all those hundreds of years was kept. Not one. Not one male monastery, not one barony, not one of the great new universities absorbed those archives.

After all, of what importance were women or women's communities either, for that matter?

So despite the fact that their lives and works were exactly like the male communities we have all been taught to revere, an entire subculture of women was simply allowed to vanish from human sight and thought: their experiences ignored, their wisdom demeaned, their contributions buried with them.

Lena Eckenstein in her doctoral dissertation, “Women under Monasticism” written for Oxford University in 1896, writes of that period: “There is a growing consciousness nowadays of the debt of gratitude which mankind as a whole owes to this monastic and religious orders (of women), but the history of these orders remains...unwritten.” She explains elsewhere: for lack of resources.

With the loss of those archives, with the total disregard for the history of women's communities—the history of women's organizations in Europe was lost while the history of men's organizations became the only model left of an institution centuries old.

The monastic history of women's communities—were as equally vital to the preservation of culture in Europe as were those of the men. But their stories, their chronicles and logs and letters and legal documents and royal lineage which they, too, brought to so many royal abbeys were totally disregarded, simply fell off the face of the earth—leaving their women leaders and organizers and social centers unnoted, leaving no tracks for other women at other times to follow.

And why? Because no one kept the archives of women—of the other half, the disdained half, the scorned and disparaged half of the human race.

Where were the archivists then who would judge such a history valuable, notable, necessary at least to the intellectual integrity of the male writing and research of the rest of the human enterprise?

To this day, as women Benedictines we know nothing of our histories, our great leaders, our dreams, our devastations, or our centuries-old learnings about what it means to be either spiritual or alive as independent spiritual women. We know only that they were there—and gone—and made invisible.

We stand deprived of twelve centuries of history that men take for granted, claim as their glory, count as their success, and consider must be our models, too. And why did that happen? It happened because you weren't there—that's why it happened.

What would those same kind of women want today for the sisters who followed them? We don't know and we have no way to find out.

As a young sister, I set out to do an historical review of women's monasteries—the works they did, the women who went to them, the contributions they left behind. After all, we had done that kind of research for years on the subject of European male monasteries that are also closed now but still being revered for their gifts to civilization.

So I went to the source: I went to a book written by the Benedictine monk and historian, Stephen Hilpisch, an esteemed Benedictine scholar, whose work cast a heavy shadow on the 1500 year old character of the Benedictine order.

He was, after all, the national authority on the subject and he had written two volumes of works on Benedictine history. The first on Benedictine men called: *Benedictinism through changing centuries*. The second volume on Benedictine women, *A History of Benedictine nuns*, the introduction to which reads to this day: "The Benedictine nuns did not make Benedictine history. This is not woman's work."

Clearly, without archivists a society loses its history, whole peoples are made invisible. The world ignores the richness of difference, the lessons of social change, the paths

that were tried and failed, the paths that were trodden over, the paths that were never tried at all. And great ideas are lost in cobwebs of time.

Oh, yes, it's true, the keepers of a culture are many:

- they are the musicians who write its songs and the singers who echo them down the ages;
- they are the artists who paint its countryside and preserve in color for all to see both the tint of its soul and the character of its people;
- they are the architects who raise its aspirations to the sky and its poets who plumb its heart and break open its hopes;
- they are its chroniclers who trace its days and hand down the names of its leaders to be cherished for generations to come;
- they are its historians who keep alive for a nation to remember the glories and struggles of its rising.

But musicians can only preserve what of the culture of music has been given to them, and artists are beholden to particular scenes from given times and passing scenes from previous moments.

And architects come and go with the materials with which they build, and poets provide an intuition of what it means to be alive but not the life of those who lived it

Chroniclers provide only an outline of a people and not the insights of the people themselves and historians tell the stories given to them by story tellers before them.

But archivists hold the key to its memory, to its conflicting ideas, to its struggles to make them come out even. Obviously, the real keepers of any culture are you, our archivists.

That is your vocation.

The real keepers of any culture are those who maintain it unedited and unadorned for those who will come after it to learn from for their own age. The real keepers of a culture are its archivists. That is your vocation, your call, your gift to society.

Archivists are the deciders of a people. Archivists are they who decide what to keep, whose work to collect, whose notes to preserve, whose ideas to protect whose simple leavings to maintain so that the leavings of many may be heard and heeded centuries later.

To be an archivist means to have a heart for the matter and materials we know intuitively must have meaning in days to come but have not yet a clue what that meaning may be. Archivists collect so that others, centuries later with the perspective that comes from time and distance, may realize what has really gone before us.

Out of someone's well-organized archives come not only the snippets of the past but

the questions we need to guide the future, as well.

Culture, history, ideas, information and the concerns of a period all hide in somebody's archives waiting to be found, waiting to be dealt with, waiting to be saved and seen again, waiting to become the learnings of the ages.

Archivists give society the time it takes to understand what the present has really been about. As Schopenhauer wrote, "Life must be lived forward but it can only be understood backward."

If archivists don't keep the streams of society flowing, don't access them carefully, historians cannot possibly deal with them when a new world needs them most. Indeed, on the shoulders of archivists rest the insights of tomorrow.

In a hectic, connected, technological world where 24 hours of daily information now trumps the process of understanding, archivists make reflection possible—and if not now certainly in times to come. Archivists give the present the kind of value in the future that few understood when it was happening. They are our only guarantee that newspaper stories and facebook and twitter do not become our substitute for history.

They determine how history will be read when the dust settles and what's left rises to a new kind of consciousness. Archivists separate the dramatic from the determinative for us. They enable a people to realize that the early signs of global warming, ignored and under-reported, were more important than simply the dating of the storm.

Archivists are the missing link in the daisy-chain of experience. They bring the designs of activists and the reflection of researchers into real life contact with the world at large. They enable a people to eventually transcend the politics of power and the power of money that regularly obscure and obstruct the better angels of a generation.

The materials they keep for us, which as years pass, form the mosaic of an age, expose both the brilliant and the brutal so that the brutal can be foresworn in times to come and the brilliant amplified for the sake of the world. Archivists are, at the same time, both the lighthouse and the hermit's cave of an era.

And why is that important? They tell the story of a westerner, excited to be on a safari for the first time, who force-marched his native guides through the jungle in ruthless search for game. They made good time the first two days but on the third morning, the hunter found the guides sitting on their haunches and doing absolutely nothing to prepare for that day's excursion.

"Why aren't we moving on?" the man demanded. "Because," the chief guide explained, "They are waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies."

Archivists are the rear-guard of society. They have the last word about what their era and its institutions and organizations were all about, the one they contemplated for

years so that our national soul might eventually someday catch up with our fevered, agitated minds.

To assess the impact and the meaning of the path we're on is the only thing that makes the search worthwhile and the path valuable. What you do, as archivists now, to cull the intellectual leavings of this society and all its parts—to identify and organize and preserve and make them accessible for generations to come—enables that to happen.

You bring the present into the future. You give the world, as the Zen master teaches, the eyes they need to see what the soul is inclined to deny.

No doubt about it: you have a vocation, a call to your own development and to ours. Your vocation is basic, essential, necessary to our own. You make possible what Boethius predicts when he predicts the coming of the next dream.

You provide the shards and snippets, the documents and decrees, the pieces of notepaper and the collection of memoirs, the dulled and rubbed building blocks of the past that are essential to the construction of a worthy future.

My hope for you is that having followed “the deepest inclination of your heart,” as the spiritual master directed, having brought all your own personal skills and continuing commitment to it, as the rabbi taught, you will find yourself, like the raindrop in the river of your life, and recognize the immense value of what you do.

Then here and now at this very conference, may you realize in doing it what philosophers since Aristotle, humanistic psychologists of our own time, and all the great spiritual traditions in the world have always told us comes with having a sense of transcendent purpose, an awareness of personal call and a recognition of genuine vocation—and may you know the personal happiness which without doubt, such service to humanity must surely bring.

Indeed, no doubt about it: if the question is What is the role of archivists in a changing world? my answer is: just try to imagine what a soul-less, pathless place it would be without you!

Thank you for doing what you do, God bless your work, for all our sakes.

MARAC
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