# POINT

# A New Ethical Code: Its Time Has Come

*by Lee W. Finks*

"Ethics? Library ethics? Come on, Dad, get with it. People don't want to think about ethics these days."

So one of my children said to me the other night when I was grousing about my profession's apparent lack of enthusiasm for a new code of ethics, one of my own professional crusades. I even had been on the verge of stating that my fellow librarians did not care about the ethical dimension of our work.

After all, I thought, what should we expect in the world in which we live today? The overall ethical tone of our society is so low, especially in business and politics, that even babes in their mother's arms are becoming cynical. The latest interpretation of America's ethical instincts, *The Day America Told the Truth*, tells us that we have no ethics. We are "making up our ethics as we go," we would rather not have to think about matters of right and wrong, and we certainly do not want anybody telling us how we are supposed to behave.

Does this apply to librarians? Are we in the mainstream of modern America's cynical and self-serving zeitgeist? I seriously doubt it. Most of us are far removed from the cultural mainstream — after all, we even prefer reading and thinking to watching television! — so I would not expect us to fit these dismal norms in regard to ethics and values. Instead, we want to do what is right, and we believe that there is a difference between right and wrong in the practice of our profession.

Ethical codes traditionally have been considered hallmarks of professions because they attempt to make it clear to the public that high standards and altruistic service to clients are expected of all practitioners and abuse of the code will not be tolerated. As a result, the public develops confidence in, and respect for, the profession.

Library ethics is not so much concerned with problems of dishonesty and unfairness among librarians, as it is with inspiring "good librarianship" and reducing "poor librarianship." We need an ethical code because we want to be as good as we possibly can. A formal statement of our ideals and standards will help us be good librarians. A code is not designed to be a standard of behavior forced upon the field by some higher authority. It is something we create and enforce ourselves, something that holds us to a higher standard of behavior, in addition to those required by law or morality.

For me, the obvious question becomes this: do we not want to have guidance available for our obligations toward society, toward the individual user, toward our profession and our colleagues, and toward our own institution and its managers? Suppose we had a code that we agreed reflected our mission and function, that was brief and positive, that clarified our priorities, and that had as its main aim the improvement of library service: would that not be a good thing?

In other professions, a well-conceived code of ethics defines the limits of acceptable conduct and gives guidance as to what kind of actions are regarded as right or wrong. Such a code can be a dynamic instrument of professional advancement by developing, establishing, maintaining, and raising the standards of conduct of practitioners.

As authorities on professional ethics have pointed out, an explicit statement of the principles of right conduct can sometimes be a better vehicle than the example of fellow practitioners. It gives a foundation for more consistent ethical behavior among members, and it can provide the practitioner with an impersonal and welcome way of refusing an unethical request. A viable code of ethics also establishes discipline within the occupational group. It discourages and prohibits behavior that will bring the group into disrepute, and discourages inferior practices. In this way, the code becomes a constructive influence in the occupation.

All of us know the arguments for how to improve our libraries: more financial support, more responsive management, recruitment of better personnel, improved library education, etc. But it is this author's belief that a positive, strongly-stated, and inspiring code of ethics, one that we are proud of, that we regularly refer to in our work, and that speaks for us to our constituency will give us a foundation on which we can work to accomplish our other, more practical goals.

# Is It Code
# or Is It Conduct?

*by Harry Tuchmayer,* Column Editor

Contrary to popular belief, I really do struggle with the opinions I put forth in this column. After all, I have a *professional responsibility* to help clarify the issues facing librarianship today. That isn't to say I don't exaggerate once in a while to make a point or carry an argument to some sort of logical extreme. But I'd like to think that what I have to say will help others deal with the problems we face as professionals. However, to argue against a code of ethics! Come on now, who in their right minds are going to take me seriously on this one? After all, how can anyone be against ethical behavior?

I'm not against ethical behavior. Far from it. I firmly believe that many of today's problems stem from the *absence* of any commonly *accepted* belief in what is right and wrong. And Lee is absolutely right when he says that "we would rather not have to think about" these things. But why do we spend so little time thinking about ethics? I don't think it has anything to do with "America's cynical and self-serving zeitgeist." We don't think about a code because we have confused the code with who we are. I'm not opposed to a Code of Ethics; I'm concerned with how its very existence has made it all too easy for librarians to ignore.

You see, the problem is we like to think of ourselves as somehow different, or even better, than other professions. And as much as I'd like to agree with Lee, the sad fact is librarians are no different than mainstream Americans. We aren't better, or more ethical than anyone else, yet we continue to perpetuate the myth that we are. Our very Code demands it! After all, we willingly proclaim that "Librarians must provide, resist, protect, adhere, distinguish, and avoid" so many things, is there any wonder that we share this misguided view of ourselves? Perhaps it's because we think we have already attained these lofty ideals for ourselves that we no longer concern ourselves with the daily effort necessary to achieve them.

We as a profession have become too complacent with regards to ethical concerns because we no longer believe they apply to us. The answer is not to formulate a new code, but rather to stop hiding behind the one we already have. Can it be that because our code demands "...unbiased and courteous responses to all requests for assistance," that we fail to recognize the subtle inequities in reference service to faculty and student, children and adults that takes place daily? Is it possible that because we proclaim our resistance to "all efforts by groups or individuals to censor library materials," that we have abdicated our own responsibilities in regard to collection development? Have we confused our role in protecting "each user's right to privacy with respect to information sought or... received" with some higher responsibility as guardian of those same rights?

The real problem with our code of ethics is that librarians have come to believe it is *the* definition of who we are, rather than who we would like to become. Your son is right, Lee. Librarians don't want to think about ethics these days. Not because of some deep seated cynicism, but because of the fear of what it might reveal about our own shortcomings. Librarians are not perfect. We are as capable of committing all the wrongs we should be struggling to avoid as any other profession. Recognizing this simple fact could go a long way towards revitalizing the Code we have.

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