

WISE MEN LAY UP KNOWLEDGE

**REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF THE INSTALLATION
OF THE DEAN OF THE USC LIBRARIES**

President Steven B. Sample and Dean Catherine Quinlan
October 2, 2007



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Steven B. Sample
President, University of Southern California

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ur procession of deans today is not simply some sort of ceremonial flourish. The participation of our deans in this particular decanal installation signifies the centrality of our libraries to the university's entire scholarly mission. *Uni*-versity: uniting many diverse components into one. That is what USC is—out of many academic units, we are one university. And one of the essential things we all value in common is our library.

Indeed our libraries, comprising the collections and the buildings themselves, are the *genius loci* of our campuses—that is, they are the very spirit of the place. But our library's collections and spaces provide not merely a fitting atmosphere for intellectual pursuit and discovery; they are the very wellspring of scholarship and creativity for the entire Trojan community.

Without our libraries, we are not a university. Without a great library, we are not a great university.

It gives me particular pleasure, therefore, to formally install the new dean of the USC Libraries, Catherine Quinlan. Dean Quinlan has taken on a pivotal role at a pivotal time in USC's history. She oversees a large and complex domain, and it is a domain that is changing rapidly.

In an increasingly digital era, our libraries must navigate adroitly in two worlds—one world consisting of our beloved traditional libraries with their quiet stacks, study carrels, and the lines of books on shelves that beckon us to read and discover; and the other world consisting of the digital treasures available with our fingertips at the keyboard—online journals, databases, digital archives, multimedia resources, and so forth.

Preserving the past, advancing the future, and meeting the scholarly needs of a wide array of students and faculty in a wide array of disciplines—that is, giving them the resources they must have—are challenging endeavors. I believe Catherine Quinlan is an outstanding match for these challenges.

There were 191 candidates for this deanship. They came from across the continent and around the world. When I interviewed Catherine Quinlan back in February, she said to me, "If you don't want me to do anything as a dean—if what you really want is a person to maintain the status quo—please don't hire me. That wouldn't be any fun."

As most of you know, Catherine is Canadian. But, more crucially, she is originally from Newfoundland. As I understand it, Newfoundlanders are a special breed. They are known for two things: first, they're known for speaking their minds; second, Newfoundlanders are known as do-ers. They are not the kind of folks who are all talk and no action. It was clear to me and to Provost Max Nikias that Catherine was the kind of person who likes to get things done and to move things forward.

It was clear to me also that she is an optimist. I myself am an incurable optimist, so I know one when I see one. To my mind, optimism is one of the greatest resources for making visions and dreams into realities.

Before arriving at USC, Catherine spent a decade leading the libraries of the University of British Columbia. For the final three years of her time there, she also directed the building of a \$74 million prototype for academic information management. She raised much of the funding for this facility herself, including securing a \$30 million gift—the largest capital gift ever to the University of British Columbia—from lumber baron and philanthropist I. K. Barber. She tells me that the Forestry Department at UBC—which had its sights on Mr. Barber—still hasn't forgiven her.

Prior to UBC, she served for seven years as director of libraries and chief librarian at the University of Western Ontario. Holder of both an M.B.A. degree and a master of library studies degree, Dean Quinlan comes to USC with an excellent track record in library leadership, in broadening the scope of libraries and their mission, and in fundraising.

USC's stated goal is to become one of the most influential and productive research universities in the world. I know that the goal of the USC Libraries, under Dean Quinlan's leadership, is to become one of the most influential and productive research libraries in the world, a research library of the 21st century. The success of this vision will depend on many things, but chiefly this success will be in the hands of all of you here who work directly with and for our libraries.

A great library has, of course, great resources. It has committed donors and friends. It has talented leadership. And a great library must also render great services.

We are in the midst of an information explosion. Information, however, is not knowledge. In order to transform information into knowledge, and in order to create new knowledge, we need the services of our library faculty and staff—for research, reference, acquisitions, archives, cataloging, circulation, and location. We need a whole host of experts skilled at helping students and faculty find what they need. We need experts to help us avoid the frustrations of runaway search engines that overwhelm us with useless links. We need experts to help us locate that obscure journal article, the out-of-print book, the historic photos, the fine-art slides, the Web pages with startling new research and the latest findings.

What our libraries must foster amidst this overwhelming explosion of information is a culture of service; they must cultivate the philosophy and practice of service as a noble art. Without it, our students and faculty would be left trying to cut a path through a jungle with a feather.

Last May USC gave an honorary doctorate to Vartan Gregorian, a preeminent scholar and leader in higher education who also served for a time as president of the New York Public Library. Dr. Gregorian tells the story of a visit he once made to the British Museum during which he gained insight into the transcendent purpose of libraries.

“Sitting there,” he said, “seeing those millions of books suddenly makes you feel humble. The whole of humanity is in front of you. What are you trying to do? Is it worth doing? What are you going to say or add or write that has not been said and written about? It gives you a sense of cosmic relation to the totality of humanity, but at the same time a sense of isolation. You have a sense of both pride and insignificance. Here it is, the human endeavor, human aspiration, human agony, human ecstasy, human bravura, human failures—all before you.”

“One gets thrilled and frightened at the same time in the presence of a great library,” Dr. Gregorian continued, “because it reminds one of one’s past, present, and, most, of the possibilities for the future.”

Standing here today outside our rich and beautiful Doheny Memorial Library—a place with transcendent purpose—as we formally install our new dean of libraries, I see the past, the present, and above all great possibilities for the future. Under Dean Quinlan’s leadership, I have every confidence that this wellspring of scholarship and creativity—our libraries—will become an even greater underpinning for an even greater research university.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the new dean of the USC Libraries, and my fellow optimist, Ms. Catherine Quinlan.

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Catherine Quinlan
Dean, USC Libraries

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Thank you, President Sample, for that very warm welcome. It is a tremendous privilege for me to be a part of this great university. It also is a great pleasure to welcome such an esteemed group to the beautiful Doheny Memorial Library: President Sample, senior vice presidents, representatives from the Office of the Provost, and my fellow deans.

I would like to add a personal welcome to three very special guests.

Mrs. Kathleen Leavey McCarthy is a great supporter of the USC Libraries. One need only look across McCarthy Quad at the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Library to grasp the significance of her dedication to libraries and learning at USC.

Glenn Sonnenberg is an energetic advocate and president of the board of the Friends of the USC Libraries. My thanks also to the other Friends and Friends board members who are here today. I am grateful for your support.

And Professor Kevin Starr has been an inspiring and supportive colleague since my arrival in August.

I would also like to thank my two immediate predecessors: Jerry Campbell and Marje Schuetze-Coburn. We all stand on the shoulders of those who come before us, and it is truly an honor to stand on their shoulders.

It is customary at this point in the proceedings to acknowledge family members in the audience. Unfortunately, my family could not join us today.

However, as my younger sister pointed out, I have all of you—the Trojan family—here with me. So I thank all of you for coming this afternoon.

I would like to begin my remarks with a story. A story that embodies what I believe are the qualities of a great library. My parents were born in Europe—my father in Poland, my mother in England. After World War II, they decided that their future lay outside of Europe. As our family history tells it, they tossed a coin, trying to decide whether to go to Canada or Australia. And as the story goes, the heads had it—and Canada it was.

They left England aboard the *Empress of Scotland* and arrived in Toronto, Ontario, with 48 cents. My mother was always fond of reminding us that she was the first one to find a job.

My parents did not come with many possessions. But as my mother was a musician and my father a physicist, they did bring a respect for knowledge, as well as a handful of books from which my mother often read aloud.

Though my siblings and I were under the age of five, these were not children's books. They were, however, books—like *Jane Eyre*—that included children in their stories.

We found these tales entrancing, perhaps because they were so far beyond our own experiences. As the youngest at the time, I would sit on my mother's lap, looking at the old script on the pages as she read.

I remember quite vividly the moment when I realized that these lines and shapes actually were the story that my mother was telling.

At the time, I did not grasp the intellectual significance of that moment, but to this day, I remember the utter astonishment I felt when I discovered that those marks on the page meant something—and that I could understand them. I remember the feeling of the world opening up when I realized that I had learned something that would allow me to experience these stories on my own. And those feelings are what I would like to inspire in every user of the USC Libraries.

When you enter our libraries, use our collections in their many forms, and take advantage of the many services we provide, I want you to experience the joy of pure wonder, the pleasure of discovery, and a sense of awe at the universe of knowledge that is available to you.

And that is why research libraries persist as institutions on our campuses, and as inspirational symbols in our hearts and minds.

However much we seek to inspire, we are also concerned with our impact on the real world. We seek to enrich the minds and spirits of our community, but we do so with an end-result in mind—the development of engaged human beings who will contribute meaningfully to society.

So where, then, do we situate libraries between the lofty aspirations of the world of ideas and the necessity of contributing tangibly to the development of our students, faculty, staff, and society as a whole?

A clue to the answer rests above the entrance to this pavilion. Carved into the limestone beneath the two seated, reading figures, is a proverb. Some of you may know this proverb, or may have seen it on your way in this afternoon. It says, simply, “Wise men lay up knowledge.”

Much more than an architectural detail, this proverb speaks directly to both the ideals and the practical value of libraries.

It acknowledges the ceaselessness of the creation of new knowledge. It declares the urgency of preservation and memory. And it underscores one of the most significant contributions a library can make to the advancement of society—an appreciation of the value of past knowledge, in all its forms, and the library’s role in informing the scholarship of the future.

To the first of those points—the endless creation of new knowledge—it is in one sense easy to define the library’s contribution.

Library faculty and staff work with students to help them become critical—and not simply eager—consumers of information.

Students graduate, become scientists and CEOs, surgeons and social workers, or perhaps they pursue the scholarly life themselves. And so the cycle continues, creating new knowledge for new students, who build on it by investigating the world they inhabit.

Although supporting and encouraging that process is a fundamental part of a research library’s purpose, considering the library’s role from that perspective alone can lead to a too-passive view of our contribution.

In countless ways, we are active creators of meaning, without which, future scholarship would be—at the very least—extraordinarily difficult to produce.

I am sure that many of you have—in various forms—libraries of your own. Yours may be a nascent collection of popular editions of your favorite writer, or it may comprise an exhaustive catalog of rare first editions.

No matter how diverse in contents or ambitious in scope our personal libraries may be, they nevertheless share one unifying characteristic—they are organized in a way that is meaningful.

You may think of the seeming chaos of your bookshelves and laugh at the notion that they are organized in any recognizable way. I believe, however, that meaning resides in the disorder as much as it might in more rigorous and more readily apparent systems of organization.

Whatever you collect—books, photographs, DVDs, PDF documents haphazardly kept on your computer—the mere fact of the collection’s existence creates what Argentine writer Alberto Manguel calls a “mesh of associations” covering a “seemingly immeasurable distance.”

What meaning, then, lies in that mesh of associations?

In his collection of essays, *The Library at Night*, Manguel describes the associations he encounters in his library as a kind of spontaneously developing narrative, as a story of personal discovery and rediscovery.

“Margaret Laurence’s African stories conjure up in my memory Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*,” Manguel writes, “which in turn makes me think of her *Seven Gothic Tales*, which leads me back to Edgardo Cozarinsky...and his book on Borges... and further back to the novels of Rose Macaulay, which Cozarinsky and I discussed one afternoon long ago in Buenos Aires.”

If such an involved series of associations can arise from our personal libraries, think of the possibilities on an institutional scale.

As the library at this great research university, we of course cannot and should not organize our holdings according to a secret, personal order. We look to the Library of Congress and other such bodies for standards that guide our systems of organization.

We seek simplicity and easy access for our users.

Yet, the appearance of simplicity is the result of many complex decisions. Take, as an example, the recent book by essayist and novelist Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Immediately, the questions present themselves: Is Joan Didion an essayist, a novelist, or a journalist? Is she all of those, and if so, what does that make this book? Is it journalism? Is it autobiography? Is it a work of psychology?

Librarians ask those questions every day, and the environment of the library—and therefore the experience of its users—is shaped by their answers.

Consider the experience of an undergraduate who first encounters *The Year of Magical Thinking* serendipitously, while browsing through shelves of autobiographies. She also comes across Frederick Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, or perhaps Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Inspired, our student seeks out Hurston’s fiction, which she finds in an anthology of Southern women writers titled *Downhome*. Here she finds stories by Bobbie Ann Mason, Flannery O’Connor, and Eudora Welty.

Think of how different the mesh of associations would be for this student if she were to encounter Joan Didion’s book among works of journalism. One need only think of the difference between Zora Neale Hurston and Bob Woodward, or between Flannery O’Connor and Hunter S. Thompson, to see the contrast.

This is but one of the ways libraries actively contribute to the creation of meaning. Libraries and librarians, through the very acts of collecting and organizing, essentially create new stories.

The Year of Magical Thinking is a useful example because it is the embodiment of the power of stories to carry forward memories of the past.

Joan Didion's story is a personal one. It is about family and loss. It is about mental health and emotional perseverance. It is both inspirational and practical.

Yet, we receive her private memories in a very public way—in the form of a book, a popular book, in fact—a National Book Award winner. To publish is, in one aspect, an act of protection. Her memories persist so long as they remain available for countless others to discover.

This, again, leads us to the library.

We may experience memory as an intimate phenomenon. But we are also driven by an impulse to preserve our memories because of our imperfect capacity to remember.

We file away wedding photographs and hoard newspaper clippings. We keep digital videos of family reunions and audio recordings of grandparents telling tales of their youth.

Libraries, I believe, are institutional expressions of this private urge toward preservation.

And by this I mean more than just matters of scale. Yes, libraries collect vast stores of knowledge, but we do not collect solely for the sake of collecting.

A great research library collects to achieve permanence—as with our growing digital archive—so that primary-source materials remain available to a global audience of researchers.

We collect to complement the unique strengths of the university and our community—as with our special collections in the areas of cinematic and other performing arts.

And we collect—as with our extensive base of electronic journals and reference materials—so that our users can thrive in an environment that values multiple points of view that are as easily accessible as they are broadly representative.

We devote resources and expertise to building a great library wherein the knowledge of the future exists in a potential state, waiting to be discovered among the stories of the past.

Any discussion about the preservation of knowledge must include the question of how best to do it. And any discussion of how a library goes about its work leads inevitably to a conversation—if not a disagreement—about technology.

For many years, libraries and librarians have looked toward the digital future with enthusiasm and apprehension.

We have wondered at the promise of online search tools and social networking.

We have worried that our treasured collections of books might suffer as we pursue the advantages of new media.

And we have studied the changing behavior of users—many of whom are voracious adopters of new technology—and adapted our services to better meet their needs.

These thoughts have been with us for a good while. So long, in fact, that the very question of a digital versus a print future is somewhat behind the times.

I believe that this question is not just an old one. It is also the wrong one.

Amid the rush of evolving technology—with new students arriving every autumn with new devices designed to keep them connected to their friends, to entertainment, to commerce—and with so many innovative faculty members working toward new modes of digital scholarship, it is easy for us to conflate the urgency of these issues with novelty.

However, the problem of media is not new at all. It is, in fact, quite ancient. As early systems of writing emerged, so did the need for a material on which to write. The Sumerians carved cuneiform into clay tablets. The Egyptians brushed ink onto papyrus.

The consequences of that difference in media have long outlived the practical considerations of the time. Classics scholar Lionel Casson makes this clear.

“[Clay] has a virtue dear to archaeologists,” Casson tells us. “It is durable. Fire, for example, which is death to papyrus, simply bakes [clay] hard, thereby making it even more durable. So when a conqueror set a...palace ablaze, he helped ensure the survival of any clay tablets in it.”

In contrast, the perishable quality of papyrus is why less information recorded by ancient Egyptians is available to us today, thousands of years later.

And that is why the choice that should concern us most is not between types of media. Such decisions have always been—and always will be—upon us. As an academic research library, our choice—our only choice—is to think first of what technology will best serve our exceptional society of users.

I believe that the best action we can take in that regard is to continue to use and understand the value of books, manuscripts, and other physical forms that have served humanity so well—while applying new technologies to make their contents as accessible as possible, over the greatest possible period of time.

Our special collections hold the oldest printed book on USC’s campus—a chapter from the *Shi Ji*, or *Records of the Historian*, dating from the late 11th century. Will we discard this book simply because we have the technology to create a digital facsimile? Of course not.

Do we appreciate the substantial benefits of digitizing such a valuable artifact—and do we see it as a fundamental part of our mission—to make its contents accessible to researchers around the world? Of course we do.

I hope that what I have said this afternoon has encouraged you to think of libraries in ways you may not have considered before. I hope that you have a sense of how seriously I take the USC Libraries’ contribution to the success of this university. And I hope that you share some of my enthusiasm—and optimism—for what great libraries mean to our community, our culture, our civilization.

Greatness, of course, requires a great deal of work. I am happy to count among my new colleagues in the libraries many talented and dedicated people.

It was two months ago—to the day—that I announced to the library faculty and staff that we would begin planning the next stage of our development. I am pleased to report that the process is well underway.

Before I conclude, I would like to share just a few themes that have begun to emerge from our planning.

We have resolved to continue to build vital partnerships that will inform the development of strong interdisciplinary collections and programs.

To that end, the libraries must partner with more faculty members like Bruce Zuckerman, with whom we collaborate on the InscriptiFact project—a remarkable example of the possibilities of digital scholarship.

We must partner with more schools and units. Through collaborations with the Thornton School of Music, for example, student performances have brought eager audiences into the libraries. And they've brought library holdings—like the Bernstein and Korngold collections—to life for many people.

And we must partner with more historical, educational, and arts organizations—in Los Angeles, the region, and the world. Such partnerships enrich our collections, as well as our stature as a cultural force on campus and beyond.

We also have reaffirmed our commitment to service. We will be agile, progressive, and aggressive as we seek to connect our users with the information they need to excel.

And finally, we are determined to cultivate an intellectual and physical environment that will help attract and keep the top-tier students, faculty, and staff necessary to support the global ambitions of USC.

If we are successful in realizing this vision—and I believe we will be incredibly successful—the USC Libraries will be an innovative, inspiring, and integral partner in the scholarly achievements of this university. And in so doing, we will contribute to the development of knowledge and the advancement of the greater society.

The USC Libraries will be—to paraphrase Proust—like a rope let down from heaven to draw us up from the abyss of not knowing.

Thank you again, President Sample, for welcoming me with such grace and enthusiasm.

And my thanks to all of you for joining me today, and for welcoming me so warmly to this great university.

