

Resilience in the archive; Or, reflections on a 100-year-old lollipop

By Andrew McDonnell

As I work in a couple of archives on campus, I have been thinking about all the stuff I currently own that will outlive me.

It's not that I plan on croaking anytime soon, but working in archives I am confronted daily by the artifacts of our predecessors in Wisconsin. I encounter their photographs, their wax cylinders, their pennants, their film reels, their clothing: I have seen the stuff of others carefully nestled in acid-free boxes, labeled, numbered, and stored upon a shelf to assume its place in history. I have even pulled apart the gluey pages of a student scrapbook from 1916 to find a lollipop some young person had taped there a century earlier. Had they suspected, as they secured their candy to the page, that this candy would not only outlast them, but would warrant mention in this award-winning essay 106 years later? It was probably not in their thoughts at the time. How could it have been?

So of all the things I currently own, how many will outlast me? Which of them will define this present as "the past" for some novice archivist in 2122? I am hopeful that I will leave more than a packet of candy corn in the pocket of a fleece for some historian to discover. Actually, I know that will not be the case, because given time candy corn sublimates directly to a gas. But I hope that the mark I make on the future is more than a misplaced bag of Skittles in a notebook.

Resilience on its own is not inherently good. A lollipop might be resilient. Our mistakes can be resilient. Our insults and bigotry can outlive us with stubborn resilience, and the resilience of a functioning archive will ensure that they do.

Our wasteful approach to natural resources is at least as resilient. We have proven capable, as a species, of making indelible marks on our land, our water, our air, and the biological composition of an entire planet. We are impressive! But "impressive," like "resilience" and "interesting," is a value-neutral word that doesn't inherently equate to "good," even though we often think it does.

There are innumerable types of resilience, but the ones worth pursuing are the resilience of conscientious thoughts and action. Remembered or forgotten, attributed or anonymous, the way we behave on earth will outlast us. Most of us do not live with that in mind. I believe that most of us think we walk through the world unnoticed and that the mark we make is too small to signify. We use our perceived lack of consequence, our smallness and our irrelevance, as an excuse to behave badly in hundreds of ways. We do not think of ourselves as agents of history. But we are exactly that. I am. You are. As lonely as we may feel some days, none of us truly act alone and all of us leave a mark more resilient than we will fully understand.

When people talk about wanting to leave something meaningful behind, what they are usually saying is they want to produce something resilient that will resonate forward in time and impact the lives of others in some beneficial way. This is lovely and wonderful. Most of us find distasteful the idea that we will someday be forgotten. However, to be remembered just for the sake of not

being forgotten is only vanity. If the world remembers me fondly for another 100 years because I endowed a worthy cause, but I spent my living days as a greedy monster, I'd consider that an empty brand of resonance. That's just P.R. for the dead. I'm not saying that a person can't be posthumously redeemed through their generosity. Actually, I kind of am. But what I'm trying to say is: surely it would be better to live a life, every day, that didn't need that kind of afterlife P.R. budget?

What will I leave behind? The better question might be, how can I leave less behind? The resilience of things is not to be underestimated. We are getting better and better at creating things possessing a wicked gift for resilience. Archives encapsulate fragile documents in plastic for a reason. Plastic isn't going anywhere.

We are regularly bombarded with advice on how to positively impact our world. Drag your totes to the grocery store. Drive less and use public transportation more. Eat less beef. Recycle and compost and please refrain from throwing your cigarette butts into the koi pond and feeding spoiled egg rolls to the raccoons in your backyard and doing any of one million things that you know are better than the alternative. The ever-growing litany of ways to be better can feel exhausting, and an individual can despair at the enormity of our challenges. I'm writing in the hopes of emphasizing that you matter, and your actions matter, regardless of how isolated and insignificant they may seem in the context of our cohort of 8 billion earthlings. In fact, that makes them matter all the more.

Our actions are resilient. They are significant. Our smallest choices will outlive us when we least expect it. We should recognize that now and now and now and now. We should embrace our significance. We should find joy in it. And then, we should act accordingly.

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