

# un/reliable reflections

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Midwest Data Librarian Symposium 2018



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In this space, you are  
Valued | Supported | Respected | Secure

Welcome

We've been together all day, but I want to intentionally welcome you to this space and time where you are valued, supported, respected, and secure.

Welcome.

(Seppala & King, 2017)

## What to expect

- Metaphor
- Discomfort
- Confusion
- Writing

When I create these reflections, I rely heavily on metaphor to get us where we're going.

You may find the metaphor, or your reflections, uncomfortable or painful. You may not like some of the things I'm going to say, or they may confuse you.

I invite you to sit with your discomfort and confusion – these feelings are how we learn and grow, and this is a safe space in which to have these feelings. I hope that tomorrow's reflection will ease some of your discomfort and confusion.

You will be doing some solo writing, so have at hand something you like to write with and on, whether that's your computer or pen and paper.

And one more thing...

For now, be selfish

I invite you to be selfish during this time. You're going to be focusing a lot on yourself and your own experiences.

# The Burden of Reliability

Monday, October 08, 2018

# Enterprise IT

Web

Email

Payroll

Storage

Enrollment

Course mgt.

The things we rely on every day to get our work done – and there are many more not on this list. Depending on our environment, we may/not trust in their reliability. But they are ubiquitous and essential.

# Enterprise IT Incentives

- Maintain existing services
- Introduce new things gradually
- Cultivate buy-in from many stakeholders
- Avoid sudden disruptions

In enterprise IT, the incentive is maintaining services without interruption, combined with intermittent, sometimes gradual injections of new things or changes to existing things – e.g. new campus email or financial system could require 2-3 years of preparation and planning. Gradual is the incentivized norm.

An enterprise service outage affects many, many people, in sometimes catastrophic ways. What happens when the financial system goes down the night before payroll is supposed to go out? Do those enterprise IT people keep their jobs? (maybe, maybe not, in academia. In the commercial sector, almost assuredly not).

So there's an element of fear to the incentives that Enterprise IT has to do its work in the way it is expected to.

# Enterprise IT Practices

Web

Email

Payroll

Storage

Enrollment

Course mgt.

Secure

Stable

Proven

99.999% uptime

Neeman (2018), slide 18

To fulfil expectations, earn trust, and keep jobs, Enterprise IT has created a strong set of best practices that keep its services well within the expected norms.

Services are secure and secured, and security professionals work every day to keep them that way.

Hardware and software deployed at the enterprise level are stable and proven. Even though computing has a reputation for changing very quickly, enterprise solutions don't really do that – think of Microsoft Exchange, which powers Outlook and other email clients – it's been around for a long time.

Best practice for enterprise IT services is 99.999% uptime – let's see what this really means

# Uptime has its costs

Percentage Uptime	Percentage Downtime	Downtime per Year	Downtime per Week
99.999% ("five nines")	0.001%	5.25 minutes	6 seconds
99.99%	0.01%	52 ½ minutes	1 minute
99.9%	0.1%	8 hours, 45 minutes	10 minutes, 5 seconds
99%	1%	3.65 days	1 hour, 41 minutes

Cost increases 5-10x with each additional nine

(Marcus & Stern, 2000, Table 2.1, p.10)

Walk through the chart, pointing out the enterprise best practice (99.999% uptime)

None of the sources I consulted had hard figures because computing-related pricing is always changing, but as an unrealistic example (starting at the bottom),

If 99% ("two nines") costs \$5

99.9% ("three nines") will cost \$25 (multiply by 5 because we are at the lower end of the scale)

99.99% ("four nines") will cost \$175 (multiply by 7 because we are in the middle of the scale)

99.999% ("five nines") will cost \$1750 (multiply by 10 because we are near the top of the scale for available computing reliability)

## Reliability requires...

Redundancy  
Maintenance  
Infrastructure  
Personnel  
Training  
Commitment



I suspect that most of us in the room could make a back-of-the envelope list that looks something like this if we were asked what IT systems required to be reliable.

And all these requirements turn into one requirement, really, which is money. How much money do you have to throw at something to make it more reliable?

I would invite you to consider how many of these you have in your own work situation as they apply to your job responsibilities, and whether your organization has prioritized spending its money in this way

Costs are fundamentally different when what you're measuring reliability for is primarily machines (IT) instead of people (libraries) – lots of money is not the same as this...

# Reliability's other costs

“Ability to handle the stress of performing multiple concurrent tasks with interruptions as needed.”

This quote comes from a management-level posting in an area of an academic library that includes data management.

This quote is in the top 5 of a list of 27 required skills for this position. The posting preferred, but did not require, a second advanced degree.

It's well-documented by now that humans cannot multitask, however much we think we can. What we are really doing is time-slicing – dividing our attention very quickly between or among a number of things. And we will drop details, make mistakes, and embarrass ourselves (at the very least). There's a great example of this in Celeste Headlee's book *We Need to Talk*, which is really helpful for learning how to have meaningful conversations.

But this is a top 5 requirement for this position. An impossibility for the human brain.

In effect, this is what five nines of reliability might look for someone in a data librarian-type position that includes management and supervision responsibilities. And because this is a top 5 requirement, this is going to be the normal working environment for the person who is hired. And who will be blamed for mistakes and embarrassments? The position that requires this degree of reliability? Or the person

in the position? This is burnout, exhaustion, and turnover, all in one job posting. This is a burden.

So, with this example in mind, think about what reliability looks like in your own mind or in your professional setting – and get ready to write.

# Writing Prompt 1

Five Minutes

I expect of myself **OR**

I feel my organization expects of me

(how many) nines of reliability.

The consequences for me are...

Timed freewriting to the prompt (note that the prompt is slightly different on your handout – use whichever version speaks to you)

In sentences. For yourself only. “I have nothing to write” if you get stuck, until you get unstuck.

Will give a 30 second heads up before time.

(after time’s up)

Now that we’ve begun to explore the expectations we or our organizations have about our level of reliability, and what the consequences might look like, let’s try to suss out where these expectations are coming from.

# Vocational Awe

**Critiques** implicit ideas that:

- Libraries' work is inherently good and sacred
- Librarians must sacrifice to perform this work
- The work is more important than the individual

(Ettarh, 2017, May 30)  
(Ettarh, 2018, Jan 10)

In January of this year Fobazi Ettarh published a seminal piece on a concept she calls "vocational awe" – and this concept is critical to understanding where our beliefs about reliability are coming from.

It is impossible to do justice to her ideas in two slides, and I apologize that I'm eliding them. If you haven't read one or more of her pieces, go do so as quickly as possible.

The concept of Vocational Awe gives us a framework for critiquing systemic ideas about libraries as institutions and employers.

What surfaces in these ideas are:

- 1) Libraries' work is inherently good and sacred (alignment with the religious and devotional)
- 2) Librarians, being servants of library as an institution, are obligated to sacrifice in order to conduct this "good," "sacred" work.
- 3) In belief and practice, the work is more important than the individual performing the work.

In this culture that enacts vocational awe, the organization, under the guise of the institution of libraries and librarianship, often mistreats the individual, or at the very

least fails to sufficiently care for that individual – and this mistreatment plays out in ways that mirror the racial and systemic biases already present in our culture. This environment leads to job creep, burnout, and under-compensation.

In other words, treating librarianship as a sacred calling encourages expectations that the librarian's degree of reliability is directly proportional to their devotion to and passion for the institution's work.

# Awe = Fear

“In the face of grand missions of literacy and freedom, advocating for your full lunch break feels petty. And tasked with the responsibility of sustaining democracy and intellectual freedom, taking a mental health day feels shameful.”

(Ettarh, 2018, Jan 10)

Ettarh points out that the feeling of awe is fearful and overwhelming, not comforting, and that it is used to intimidate people into obedience (2018, Jan 10).

And the argument that the institution’s work is inherently good and noble makes it very difficult for an individual librarian to push back against these expectations to meet their own needs as a person and an employee., or to expect or believe that the employer should be obligated to meet those needs. (read the quote)

Furthermore, these expectations fall more heavily on librarians from underrepresented groups – particularly librarians of color - who already experience oppressions from working in an overwhelmingly white profession.

Examining Ettarh’s concept of vocational awe is a way to:

Clarify what makes up the burden of reliability,

Examine how the predominant culture of libraries and librarianship sustains and normalizes expectations for high degrees of reliability,

Dig around in the reasons why the burden of reliability falls more heavily on some than others

If

reliability is a **virtue**

Then

**unreliability is a vice**

Looking at reliability through the lens of vocational awe, invoking notions of the sacred, the good – basically the morality that librarianship invests itself with – we can cast the burden of reliability in a logical test –

If reliability is a virtue  
Then unreliability is a vice

This is not an empirically true statement, but the framework of vocational awe gives us language and space to understand why we might feel, at some level, that it is true – or why we might believe that our organizations, supervisors, mentors, and peers feel that it is true.

And how do we judge our colleagues of color by this metric? Especially newer colleagues of color? Even unintentionally. We do it. A culture that combines existing implicit biases with moralizing about our colleagues' reliability is toxic to them.

We've arrived at a place where we might start to understand our profession's and our employers' beliefs about reliability. Since I have invited you to be selfish, it's time to turn our gaze inward.

## Writing Prompt 2

Five Minutes

What does it mean about me  
if I am unreliable?

Same freewriting guidelines – in sentences, for yourself, to the prompt. I will give you a 30 second heads up.

(after the end of the writing time)

Depending on what you believe about unreliability, this may have been an uncomfortable five minutes.

We've seen how high degrees of reliability are associated with stability and incremental change – through the lens of Enterprise IT – and how this much reliability comes at high prices – both financial costs and, in the case of libraries, human costs.

We've also seen how this burden of high reliability is driven by fear – in the case of Enterprise IT, it's fear of a service outage that will affect many, many people and the consequences of such an outage (likely including job loss) – this is a pretty straight line from cause to effect.

But for librarians, the fear driving expectations for a high degree of reliability is more complex. The culture that holds libraries above critique, values the work over the worker, and awes librarians into sacrificing their own needs to the work of the library

creates this environment of fear.

What if my co-workers don't see me at my desk?

What if I don't volunteer to teach that Saturday workshop?

What if I don't agree to serve on that committee?

What if I don't go to the All Staff meeting?

What if...

Am I  
reliable  
enough



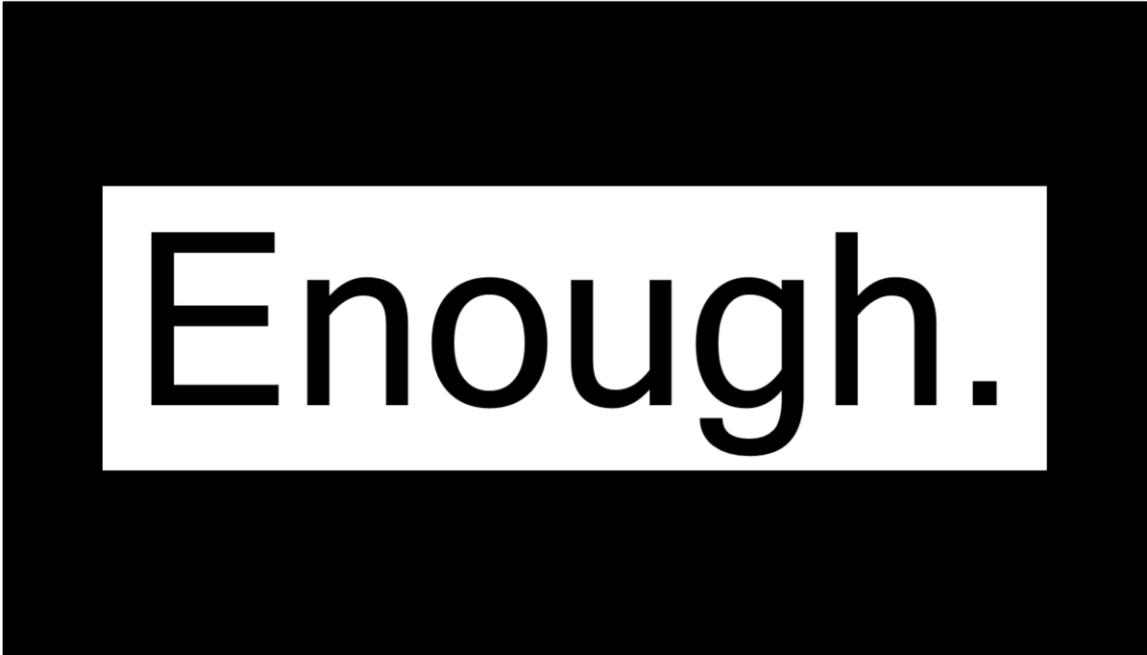
Am I  
good  
enough



There's one of those moral words creeping in...

Am I  
enough ?

Am I enough to be a disciple to this vocation of librarianship? (said with a high degree of disdain and sarcasm)



# Enough.

Enough.

This is how and why we burn out. How we wind up doing the work of two or three. How we oppress ourselves and each other with expectations that are impossible for humans to meet.

Librarianship is a profession, not a calling. We are employees, not devotees. Our labor should be compensated, not exploited. (Ettarh, 2018, Jan 10; Douglas, 2018, July 23)

Enough.

I want to close for today with a quote from David Johansen, founder and lead singer of the New York Dolls (aka Buster Poindexter).

“

What a **refuge**  
it is to be  
completely  
**unreliable.**

”

David Johansen | SiriusXM The Loft | Mansion of Fun | May 27, 2018

A refuge. Not a pleasure. Not a vice. A refuge.

I'll see you tomorrow.

In this space, you are  
Valued | Supported | Respected | Secure

Welcome Back

Welcome back to this space where you are valued, supported, respected, and secure.

(Seppala & King, 2017)

## What to expect

- Metaphor
- Writing
- Conversation
- Resolution

We are carrying forward the metaphor that fueled our reflection yesterday. You will be doing a little writing – less than yesterday - and more talking in a one-on-one setting. For some of you, the act of talking to a listener will be uncomfortable; some of you will be challenged by the form of listening we're going to practice. For everyone, I hope that by the end of this reflection you will find some resolution to any discomfort and confusion you've experienced. I also hope that you find some ways to carry these reflections home with you.

And one more thing...

Today, be generous

I invite you to be generous during this time. Today you're going to be focusing on others as much as yourself.

# The Refuge of Unreliability

Tuesday, October 09, 2018

Here and now, **unreliability**  
means doing less, without fear

# Power and Privilege

- Privilege to do less
- Who can advocate for you?
  
- Power to encourage others to do less
- For whom can you advocate?

Advising people to do less is tricky. I stand up here with a stack of privileges – white, cis, tenured, experienced – so this is easy for me to say, but may seem ridiculous or impossible to do.

Do you have privilege? If not, who can advocate for you?

Do you have power? If so, for whom can you advocate?

Think about who is doing work – especially service work, and who does not feel safe enough to say, “No, I don’t want to participate.” Colleagues of color. Younger colleagues. New hires.

How can you use your power and your privileges to protect them and their time?

It is the responsibility of those of us with power and privilege to advocate for those who have less, or none.

# “Work that Matters”

What is not working?

How can we stop doing it?

Practice.

(Birkinshaw & Cohen, 2013)

There is a Harvard Business Review piece from a few years ago that gives executives a framework for identifying and making time for the work that matters.

We are not going to do the whole exercise, but we will do the piece that helps identify the things we do that aren't effective, don't have much impact, or are otherwise time sucks.

We have the expertise and the right to say what is and is not working in our jobs, but working in an environment that expects and normalizes always doing more, not less, means that it can be difficult to have those conversations.

When something is difficult, we don't learn how to do it by avoiding it.

We learn how to do it by practicing in a place and time that is safe. And that's here and now.

# Writing Prompt 1

One Minute

Jot down a few things you do that take time but don't have much impact.

## Writing Prompt 2

One Minute

Choose one.

Jot down some ideas that begin to build a case for not doing that thing, or for doing it less.

**Practice doing less  
without fear**

# The Rules

- Partner with someone from a different institution
- Discard your title
- Vegas Rules  
(what happens in your discussion stays there)

# The Roles

## Client

**Practice** telling the story of the thing you want to stop doing.

## Helper

**Listen** actively, **without evaluating**, during the story.

**20 min total – 10 min per person**

(DeEtta Jones and Associates, n.d.)

Client: Practice telling the story of the thing you want to stop doing. Use these guidelines as much or as little as they are helpful to you in telling this story:

- Present the task and your current view of it
- Explore options or alternative approaches to the task
- Decide what options or alternatives to pursue in ending or decreasing your involvement with the task

Helper: Be an active, non-evaluative listener during the client's story. This kind of listening requires you to practice some valuable skills:

- Resist the urge to identify aloud with the person's problem or insert your own story into the conversation. This conversation is about the client, not you.
- Resist the urge to tell the client how to solve the problem. This conversation is effective when you support the client in talking through their own thoughts about the task.
- Ask open-ended questions about the task, such as, "What would happen if...?"
- Restate what you are hearing the client say. It may be helpful to separate facts, feelings, and values in these restatements, such as:
  - Facts: "What I hear you saying is..."
  - Feelings: "It sounds like this makes you feel..."

- Values: “I hear this is important to you because...”

The goal is to help the client figure out how to tell their story as effectively as possible.

Decide which partner will be which role. After 10 minutes, switch roles.

# Listening without evaluating

- Restate **facts**:  
“What I hear you saying is...”
- Restate **feelings**:  
“It sounds like this makes you feel...”
- Restate **values**:  
“I hear this is important to you because...”

Suggestions for active listening

## “It’s not just me”

What did it mean to articulate, and be heard, that you wanted to be unreliable?

What did it mean to listen actively, without judgment or self-identification?

Open the floor for anyone to share with the room something about the experience of either role.

Remember, don’t share the contents of your conversation (Vegas rules). This time to talk back is about the experience of practicing the conversation

And if you’re still processing internally, that’s fine. Some folks who process externally may say something that rings true for you, leading to that “it’s not just me” moment.

# (un)Reliable Research Computing

Percentage Uptime	Percentage Downtime	Downtime per Year	Downtime per Week
95%	5%	18.25 days	8 hours, 24 minutes

(National Science Foundation, 2017, Phase 1 System Reliability and Usability)

Yesterday we talked a lot about Enterprise IT and what best practice reliability looks like in that realm. Here I want to talk about the best practice reliability of research computing, which is radically different.

On the screen, you see the percentage uptime and downtime required by a 2017 NSF solicitation for funding computing facilities.

Note the level of reliability – 1.5 nines, with over 18 days of downtime per year. This doesn't even approach the base level of two nines reliability (99% uptime) that we saw yesterday.

And yet, this is just fine with NSF. Why?

# Research Computing is...

Exploratory | Unknown

Fast and flexible | Unstable

Cutting edge | Unproven

Creative | Unpredictable

(Neeman, 2018, slide 18)

Because research computing is exploratory, it is also unknown.

Because it is fast and flexible, it is also unstable.

Because it is cutting edge, it is also unproven.

Because it is creative, it is also unpredictable.

The refuge of 5% downtime is that research computing is expected to exhibit all of these characteristics, not just the positive ones.

## Enterprise <sup>Library</sup> IT Incentives

- Maintain existing services
- Introduce new things gradually
- Cultivate buy-in from many stakeholders
- Avoid sudden disruptions

Looking back at the Enterprise IT incentives we discussed yesterday, we notice that these could also look a lot like the incentives libraries have taken on – stability, incremental change, lots of buy-in.

This incentive structure makes sense in the framework of Vocational Awe – the belief that we have to keep doing what we're doing because it's sacred.

# Research Computing Incentives

- Discover
- Disrupt
- Originate
- Break stuff

**“Research is the Enterprise testbed”**

(Neeman, 2018, slide 21)

Instead, let's look at the incentives for research computing:

- Discover new things
- Disrupt outmoded methods
- Originate workflows and protocols
- Break stuff and learn from it

These are the things – not stability - that get funding for research computing, so it's okay to tolerate and even encourage a fairly low degree of reliability. Because the major losses come, not with downtime, but with lack of discovery and exploration.

Even more important than funding, though is this – “Research is the Enterprise Testbed”

Whatever research computing is doing now will likely be incorporated into enterprise services in the future.

And I suspect that data librarians – meaning those who identify with the work of data, whether or not you hold an MLS – would like to be working here more (that is, in ways that are exploratory and creative, not in research computing, per se) because this is how the library figures out and develops what will become its “enterprise”

services in 5-10 years.

In this space, you are  
Valued | Supported | Respected | Secure

Remember

When you are valued, supported, respected, and secure – as you are here: (and I hope you are all of these things in your workplace, as well)

You don't have to work at five nines reliability out of fear.

You can support your colleagues in decreasing their level of reliability.

You can bring a degree of unreliability to your own work in order to be creative, flexible, and present for opportunities to grow and stretch. In order to inform what libraries will see as enterprise in 5 to 10 years.

You are enough. We are enough. We don't have to expect, or deliver, perfection. Because...

(Seppala & King, 2017)

“

Out of  
perfection,  
**nothing** can  
be made.

”

David Johansen | SiriusXM The Loft | Mansion of Fun

Thank you.

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# Special thanks

Sharon Riley, KU Libraries

Tami Albin, KU Libraries

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