

# Remembering the Future

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Midwest Data Librarian Symposium 2020



Welcome to the closing reflection for MDLS 2020.

I'm Jamene Brooks-Kieffer; Data Services Librarian at the University of Kansas. I use she/her pronouns.

This is the fifth time I have presented for MDLS's closing session. I want to thank this year's hosts, Trisha and Cameron, for inviting me back to do this again.

## What to expect

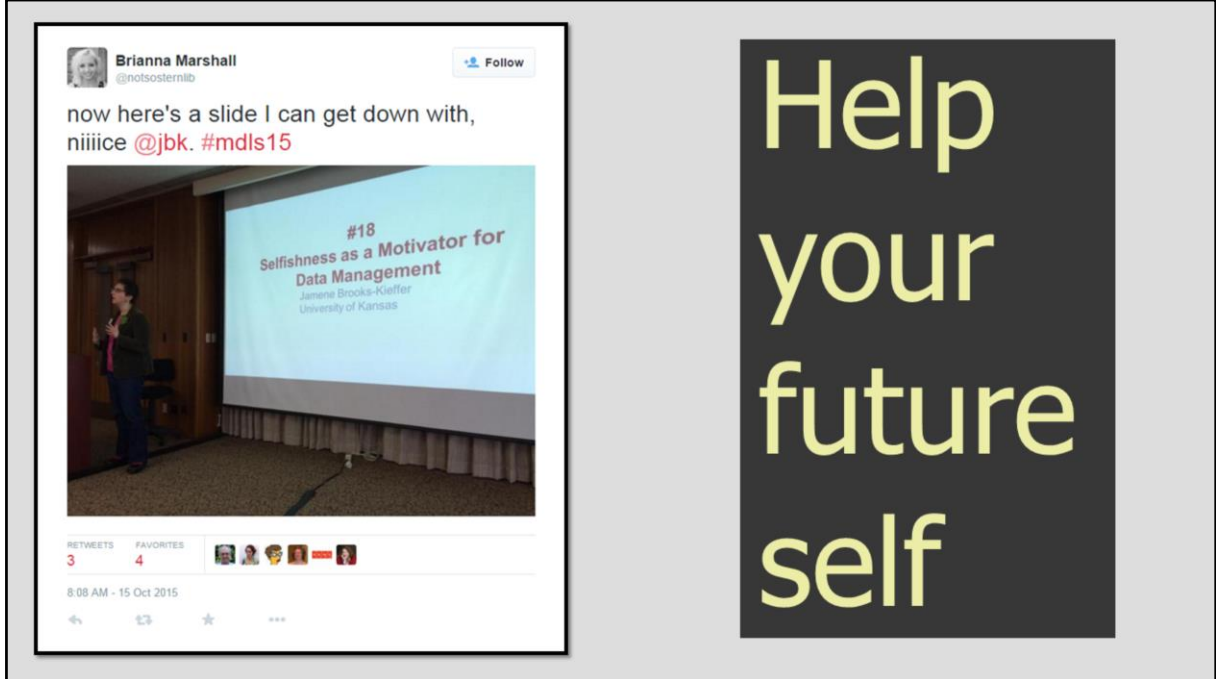
- Memory
- Soul
- Writing
- Conversation

I want to give you an idea of what to expect during this session.

In keeping with the theme of this year's symposium, we will remember some elements from previous symposia.

Then we'll use those memories to examine what, if anything, is special about MDLS.

We'll have some writing time, and follow that up with some conversation in breakout rooms about what you've written.



I want to start us off with an idea we'll circle back around to.

Back in 2015 at the first MDLS, I submitted a slide to a show-and-tell session about data management training and instruction that was facilitated by Lisa Johnson from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

The slide reads, "Selfishness as a Motivator for Data Management"

During my 3 minutes, I talked about the rationale for data management that I emphasize every time I teach this topic, which is to (click) Help your future self.

In essence, to first consider yourself in the future while you're making decisions in the present about your project or data. While it's important to be accountable to your collaborators and funders, you can only do that if you are first taking care of yourself. After all, "your most frequent collaborator in 3 months is you, and your past self doesn't respond to email."

We're going to come back to this idea of selfishness in a few minutes.

# Memory

2015 | 2016 | 2018 | 2019

First, I hope you'll indulge me in remembering the themes of previous closing reflections.

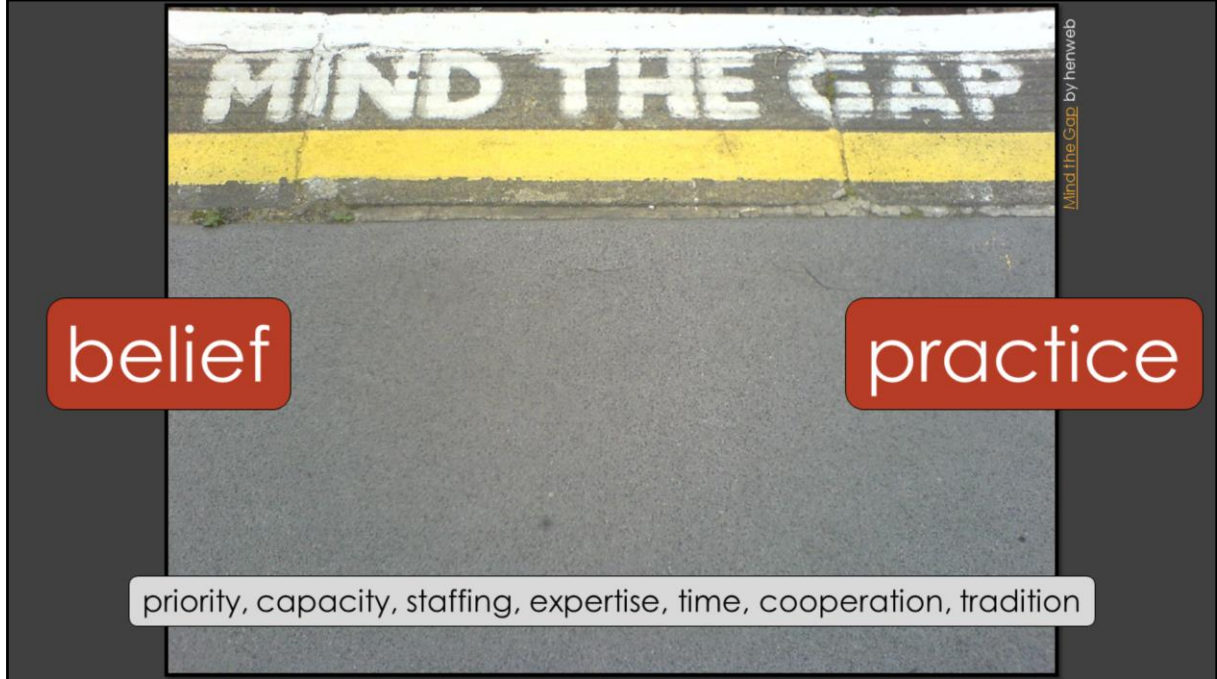
For context, the next 4 slides you'll see are excerpted from the closing sessions I led in 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2019.



I remember Scope.

At the end of the first MDLS, in 2015, I had the task of distilling two amazing days of conversation with other regional folks involved in research data services. There were so many great ideas; so much to take home and try; it was euphoric and overwhelming.

I used the metaphor of a garden to help us process that it was okay to leave ideas on the table and to only take home and try out approaches that would grow and blossom at our individual organizations.



I remember Belief and Practice.

For MDLS 2016, I struggled with following up the previous year's garden metaphor and closing that so many people told me was meaningful and valuable to them. I tussled with the question of what had brought us back together; what made us want to gather again?

I called us a congregation – a community united in belief – and called on us to support each other through the gaps between what we believe and what we are able to practice at any given time.

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The back-of-the-envelope list of beliefs from the MDLS16 slide deck:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Integrity
- Equitable access to resources
- Data discover, reuse
- Protection of research subjects
- Responsible data practice is teachable and learnable



# Practice doing less without fear

I remember unreliability.

For MDLS 2018, I brought the lens of reliability from enterprise and research computing to an investigation of Fobazi Ettarh's concept of vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018).

Together, we explored and practiced what it might mean to be less reliable in order to be more exploratory and creative.

In practicing unreliability, we rejected implicit expectations, articulated by vocational awe, that we burn out in order to be "good" librarians.

## Slow Librarianship | Slow Leadership

- What am I doing to / for **myself**?
- What am I doing to / for **others**?
- What am I modeling for my **organization** and **profession**?

I remember Slow.

At MDLS 2019, I brought an investigation of Slow practices within the academy – including data librarianship.

We explored how personal strategies for slowing down ignore systemic issues that make it impossible for all but the most privileged to choose how to spend their time.

We also looked at how we can resist Fast by bringing an ethics of care for ourselves and care for others to our workplaces and our profession.



# Writing Prompt 1

**One Minute**

What do you remember from MDLS that was meaningful for you?

This session is not only about my memories. Here is a quick writing prompt:  
What do you remember from MDLS that was meaningful for you?  
If this is your first MDLS, draw on this experience for your writing.

It would be lovely if people want to share their memory by writing in the community document, but this isn't required.  
It's fine to write for yourself alone. Pen or keyboard. I will keep time.

# Memories matter

Personal > Collective > Systemic

Why do these reflections matter, one to five years later?

They matter to me – they represent some of my best work; some of my most committed, engaged, and vulnerable thinking and feeling about why I do what I do.

You've told me that they matter to you – in person, on Twitter, via email. And you keep asking me to do it again. Something in these reflections is resonating for you and, sometimes, changing the way you work or the way you think about your work.

And they matter to this symposium as a gathering – as a congregation – because they demonstrate a journey of awareness – from the personal to the collective to the systemic.

# Soul

Is MDLS special?

I want to dig a bit into the conversations we had earlier during the symposium about the future of MDLS.

Infrastructure, Finances, Sponsorship, and values are important. They create a skeleton for this body of people we call MDLS.

But I want to talk about MDLS's soul.

What makes this an event that people love, that they work uncompensated to host, that they jockey for registration slots to be able to attend?

Folks for whom this is your first MDLS may not know – this symposium has carried on annually on a volunteer, ad hoc basis since 2015.

What about this event makes that kind of feat possible?

## “Normal” library career experiences

- Inadequate onboarding, training, and support
  - Competition
  - Job creep
  - Fear and anxiety
  - Overwork
  - Exhaustion
  - Burnout
- Plus:
- Microaggressions
  - Hostility
  - Racism
  - Retaliation
  - Erasure

(Andrews, 2020; Kendrick, 2017; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Wood, 2020)

Let’s consider some of what we might think of as “normal” experiences during library employment. (Work through the list)

Plus, in an overwhelmingly White / cis profession grounded in a Western European cultural framework, indigenous colleagues, colleagues of color, LGBTQIA colleagues, and colleagues with disabilities will likely experience (work through the list)

I am using quotes around the word “normal” because I don’t want to give the impression that any of these experiences are okay. But there is a significant body of LIS literature showing that these are common experiences of library workers.

## “Normal” is destructive

”

I’m the only one who does data at my library.

Data isn’t part of my official job, but I do it because I think it’s important.

This is new to me. Someone else left and I got their data responsibilities.

“

I have a discipline background. I’ve never worked in a library before.

These experiences are not only common; they’re destructive.

Read the quotes.

These quotes are simulated, but they’re simulated from 6 years of attending MDLS and other data-related meetings.

This is “normal” for data professionals employed in libraries, and they illustrate how job creep, competition, burnout, and worse affect our specialty. MDLS has been an essential community for supporting us as we work in these “normal” environments.

And we inhabit a pretty small specialty. When one of us burns out and leaves the specialty or the profession, we all suffer from that loss of perspective and experience.

For these and so many other reasons, MDLS’s future – its soul – is tied to resisting this version of “normal”

## “It’s Not Imposter Syndrome”

“ When are we going to stop signalling that fear and anxiety is normal within our profession, and instead examine how these narratives are the result of institutions deflecting the need for change? ”

(Andrews, 2020, p. 4)

Some of the experiences I listed may bring to mind the phrase “imposter syndrome” as an explanation. I want to draw your attention to a recent paper by Nicola Andrews in *In The Library With The Lead Pipe* called “It’s Not Imposter Syndrome.”

Andrews points out that labeling workers’ experiences and feelings as “imposter syndrome” puts the work of change onto the individual rather than the workplace. We treat “imposter syndrome” as a personal problem that is normal within library work, while ignoring the systemic cultures and values of library workplaces that make these experiences so common.

Andrews asks, (read the quote)

In other words, when will we shift from personal strategies to systemic changes in our efforts to improve our profession and our organizations?

## Sample MDLS experiences

- Intentional inclusion of LIS students
- Peer-led, hands-on learning
- Real talk about mistakes
- Practical opportunities to improve
- Time / Congregation / Reflection

I argue that MDLS is trying to make that shift, and I want to contrast what has happened at previous MDLS meetings with the lived experiences of library workers in their organizations and in the profession.

The symposium has reserved registration seats for LIS students and actively recruited their attendance when possible.

The schedule focuses on peer-led, hands-on learning, with an emphasis on working within organizational realities.

Whether officially on the schedule or part of informal conversation, we talk openly about our mistakes and their consequences.

And there are always practical opportunities to improve what we're doing. Some examples from the last five years are:

- Crafting elevator pitches about data services (2015)
- Creating researcher personas (2016)
- Making better charts as an approach to teaching data visualization (2017)
- Examining the ALA Code of Ethics from a data lens (2018)
- Writing job postings for equity, diversity, and inclusion (2019)

And we choose to take time to be together, to commune and congregate – not only to network – and to reflect. And when we reflect, we are examining the systemic forces that affect us and our work.

## MDLS's history resists "normal"

- We recognize that we can't do everything
- We support each other as library and data workers
- We resist sacrificing ourselves to be "good" librarians
- We care for ourselves and others according to our privileges
- We reject pressures to participate in Fast

And in those reflections, we resist what our profession considers "normal." (work through the list)

I'm not saying that people who attend MDLS are immune to the oppressive aspects of our profession's culture.

What I'm trying to draw attention to is that the environment at MDLS, from what I have seen, is radically different from the environment our profession accepts as "normal".

So what if MDLS is the gathering that rejects reality and substitutes its own?



## What if “normal” means...

- ...your whole self is welcome and embraced
- ...not knowing
- ...exploring and asking questions
- ...giving and receiving care
- ...breaking processes, not people

What if “normal” means (work through the list)

We know that this isn’t the current lived reality for many people at professional meetings, at work, or in their personal lives.

But.

What if?

MDLS came about because Kristin Briney asked, What If?, and then Kristin and Brianna Marshall co-hosted the first symposium to start finding out the answer.

I’m not saying MDLS is here right now. But we’ve started by resisting what is considered normal in our profession.

And we could use that experience to keep asking, “What if?”; to push the organizations we are coming from to recognize that our current “normal” is toxic and destructive; that it comes from systemic problems; and that it is irresponsible and oppressive to recommend personal strategies to solve systemic issues.

What would I do – What would you do – in such a space, during such a time?

## A possible MDLS future

“

A trauma-informed approach **does not inherently pathologize nervousness**, and it allows people to acknowledge and work through concerns, **without punitive judgement**. Similarly, a trauma-informed approach might **make job expectations and support clear**, while **holding institutions accountable** for co-creating conditions conducive to healing with their staff.

”

(Andrews, 2020, p. 11)

In “It’s Not Imposter Syndrome,” Andrews offers Trauma-Informed Care as a framework for resisting our tendency to blame individuals rather than examining and changing systems.

Read the quote.

Again --

What would I do – What would you do – in such a space, during such a time?

# MDLS is where we practice

Care | Generosity | Scope | Attention

Before you tell me that whatever happens at MDLS doesn't affect what happens in individual organizations, I want to remind you that MDLS is where we practice.

The things we've been practicing over the past 5 years:

- Care
- Generosity
- Scope
- Time and Attention

are all necessary components of a trauma-informed approach to our specialty.

So, is MDLS special? Yes, I think so, because MDLS is where we practice the skills, conversations, and mindsets that help us improve.

## Practice changes systems

“ ...we may unknowingly influence systems simply by altering the way we interact with them. ”

(Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009, quoted in Andrews, 2020, p. 12)

If we practice MDLS's version of "normal" in ways that are aware of systems, we can change them.

Read the quote.

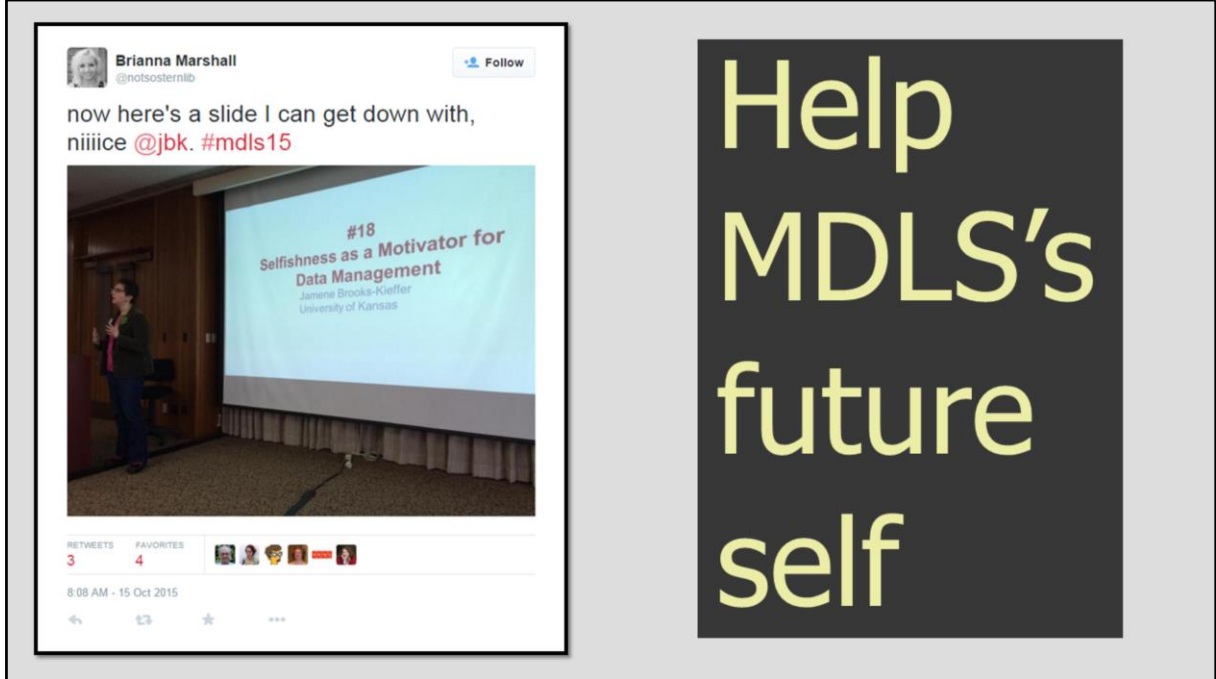
Think about all the systems within research and academia that we come into contact with besides librarianship. What other systems could we influence? The research enterprise? Computing and Information Technology? Administration?

Not only

What would I do in such a space, during such a time?

But also

What can I start doing now to create this space, to reserve this time?



We began with a peek at the idea of selfishness as a motivator – to do data management in order to help our future selves.

click

Let's use some of this time selfishly to generate some ideas that will sustain this community – to help MDLS's future self.

# Writing

Get out your notebook

“

...in slowing...down...you're looking into the future that you want to create, with the things you value at its center.

”

(Savage, 2019, p. 88)

As we move into our longer writing prompt, I want to bring back a quote from Adam Savage that I used in 2019 to emphasize the value of slowing down.

Read the quote.

In this context, I'd like you to focus on the idea of creating a future that you want to be in, with your values at its center.

Specifically, thinking about MDLS's potential as an influencer of systems, what futures and values do you see for this congregation?

## Writing Prompt 2

**Five Minutes**

If you could ask one question of MDLS 2023, what would it be?

Our writing prompt gives you some structure for thinking about this convergence of futures and values.

Read the prompt.

MDLS 2023 = 3 years into the future

You have five minutes to think and write for yourself – typing or writing, not in the community document.

You may find that you have many questions for future MDLS, and it's fine to write them down as you go. After writing, you'll be asked to bring only one question to a conversation.

I will keep time and give you a 30 second heads-up.



# Conversation

Let's talk

Our Zoom host is going to be moving us into breakout rooms to talk about some of what you've been writing.

While the breakout rooms are getting set up, here's what we're going to be doing in them.

# Breakout Rooms

**15-20 Minutes**

- Share your questions.
- What futures do your questions point to?
- What values are centered in those futures?
- How might you take steps to get to one or more of those futures?

In your breakout room:

Share your question, then use the next 3 questions on the slide to guide your discussion (read the questions)

These questions are referencing the quote from Adam Savage – looking into the future you want to create, with the things you value at its center.

You may recognize this as a form of backward design – first figuring out where you want to go, and then mapping out the steps to getting there.

Please take notes in a shared document during your conversation (links provided in the conference shared document)

Take 15-20 minutes (depending on time). The host will give all the rooms a one minute heads up before the rooms close.

# Report Back

**10 Minutes**

What futures and steps did your group discuss?

I will go around the breakout rooms and ask someone from that group to summarize their discussion. We'll do our best to get to every group in our remaining time; feel free to also leave comments in the chat or the whole conference shared document.

Ask for /hand in the chat for breakout groups who want to talk

“

I am not so little or lacking that I cannot improve with practice. My current state is not due to a fundamental flaw, and my path to greatness is ordinary.

”

(Friend, 2017)

As we close, I want to leave you with one more thought on practice.

The author, Adrienne Friend, wrote this in the context of comparing her significant cooking skills with her then-developing coding skills.

Read the quote.

I can improve with practice. We can improve with practice. Let's keep practicing together.

Thank you.

## Recommended reading

Andrews, N. (2020, June 10). It's Not Imposter Syndrome: Resisting Self-Doubt as Normal For Library Workers. *In The Library With The Lead Pipe*. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/its-not-imposter-syndrome/>

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# Works Consulted

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# MDLS Resources

- **Closing slides:**

- 2015: [https://dc.uwm.edu/mdls/2015/wrap\\_up/2/](https://dc.uwm.edu/mdls/2015/wrap_up/2/)
- 2016: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/134687>
- 2018: <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/27399>
- 2019: <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/29834>

- **Content archives:**

- 2015: <https://dc.uwm.edu/mdls/2015/>
- 2016: <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/134687>
- 2017: <https://osf.io/view/mdls2017/>
- 2018: <https://osf.io/view/mdls18/>
- 2019: <https://osf.io/meetings/MDLS2019/>