Good morning! I'm super excited to be here at Urban Librarians conference. Library Revolution is a topic near and dear to my heart. As you probably know, I am not personally an urban librarian, sort of the opposite really. But since YouTube has declared themselves "basically a library" I'm going to decide I am "basically a librarian of the internet" and speak from that perspective. Notes and slides are online here. In addition to my general rabble rousing (you might know me from such hits as "The FBI has not been here" and "We need a librarian of congress who doesn't suck") my main library job now is teaching Community Engagement classes at the University of Hawai'i. Engagement is one of those "soft skills" that people tend not to look at as real work. It's tough to scale well (though it can be taught) and usually requires human eyeballs and human hearts to do properly. I'm going to talk about basic and advanced engagement stuff that can be helpful in libraries.

on neutrality

Neutrality disclaimer: I am one of those "You can't be neutral on a moving train" sorts of people but I realize that this is a thing reasonable people may disagree on so we don't have to fight about it. However I will also say that when I think about Library Revolution in 2018, I think about the debates we've been having about neutrality. Maybe it's time. In any case, the engagement thing will be a framework to help think about all the rest of the stuff you'll be taking in today. Every talk you listen to or workshop you participate in, every new library worker you meet, every weird feeling you get when someone says something you disagree with, take it and think "How can I turn this into a thing that makes my community stronger, my patrons more resilient, me a better public servant, and, ultimately the world a slightly better place given that things are crazy and I am exhausted and don't need any more damned projects on my plate."

A Crash Course in community engagement

So I'll talk about what I talk about in class, and then a little bit about what I'd be talking about if I were 100% DGAF about it. My favorite thing about this particular conference is that I feel like I can talk about exactly what I want to.

Because
representation matters
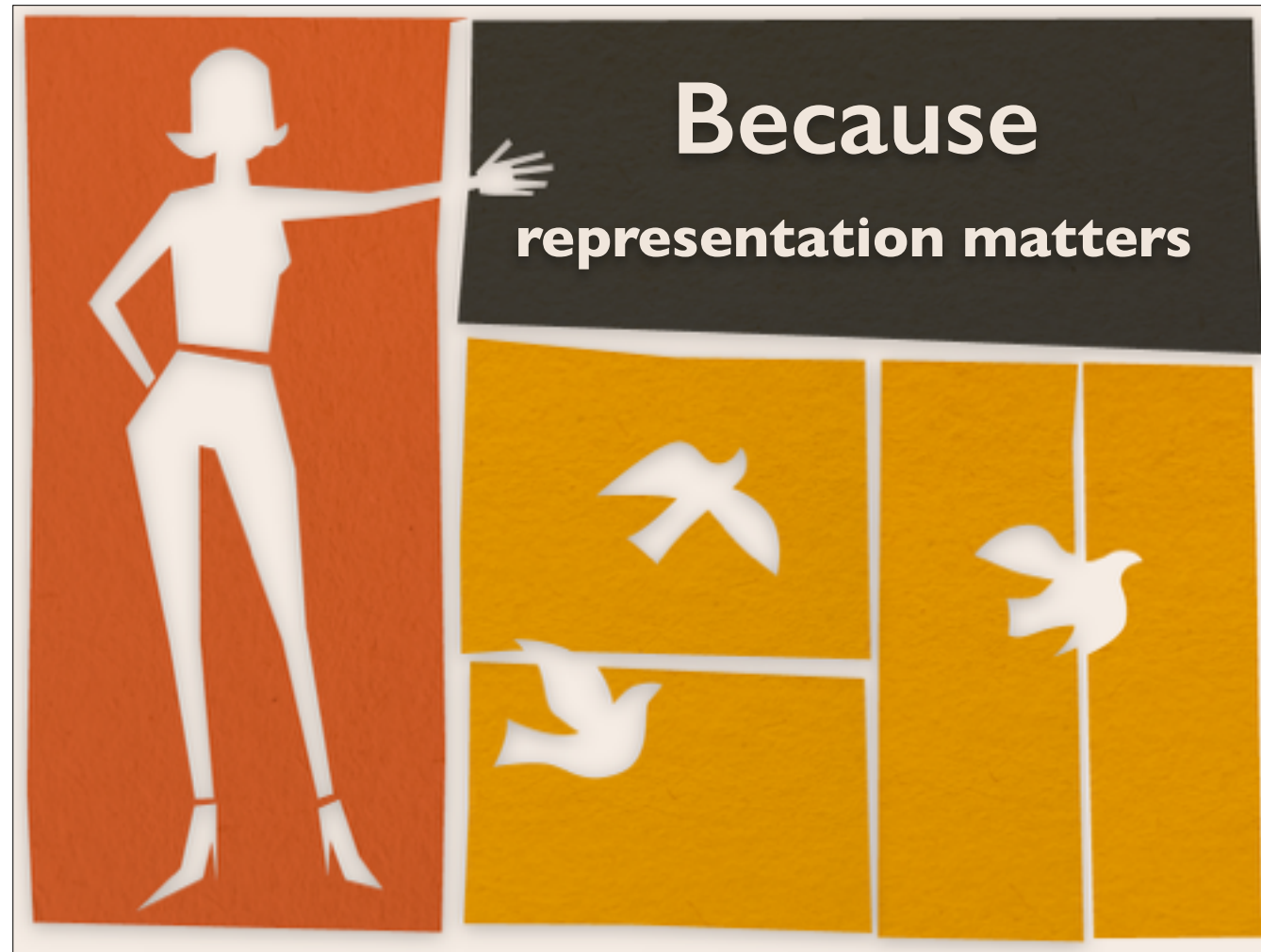
This is the easiest way I can sort of "get in" to talking about a lot of my general pet projects. The #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement has been a great jumping off point for friendly conversations about how kids need to see themselves in books and also THE REST OF THE DAMNED WORLD. Other sorts of representation are critical to larger political questions like "Who is an American?" and "Who deserves rights?" questions I don't need to tell you are getting more urgent. Libraries are one institution that gets to help form the answer to that question in an affirming cultural way (all of us!), not a strictly legalistic way.
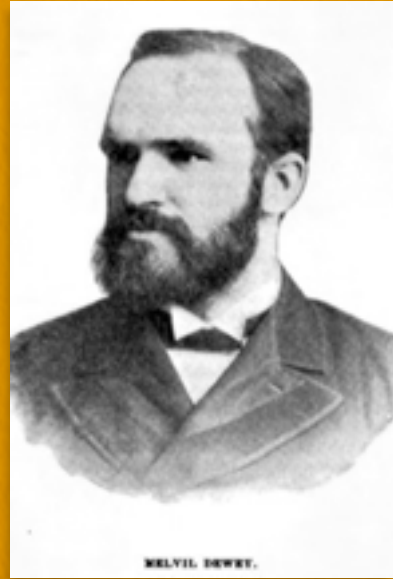
meta-representation

➡ Subject headings

➡ Genre stickers

➡ Website & print materials

➡ Behind the reference desk

➡ In upper management

And while we in libraries are doing GREAT at diverse books, truly, in the hinterlands like where I am from there's still an uphill battle to work on meta–representation. And I contrast that to, for example, this Alabama public library that I visited that has two sections for religious books, Christian and… Other. [click] I wonder where they got that idea? So thinking about representation not just in our collections and our services but in other things just a little further outside that circle.

meta-representation

- ➡ Subject headings
- ➡ Genre stickers
- ➡ Website & print materials
- ➡ Behind the reference desk
- ➡ In upper management

MELVIL DEWEY.

And while we in libraries are doing GREAT at diverse books, truly, in the hinterlands like where I am from there's still an uphill battle to work on meta-representation. And I contrast that to, for example, this Alabama public library that I visited that has two sections for religious books, Christian and… Other. [click] I wonder where they got that idea? So thinking about representation not just in our collections and our services but in other things just a little further outside that circle.

So look, it's easy to dish on Dewey but I'm still trying to explain to my town librarian why there is a special heading for African American Police Officers or Women Doctors and the best we can do is "it's complicated." I started teaching (distance) at the University of Hawai'i's library school in 2016. UH is arguably the most diverse state school in the US. This is their advisory board. I get the usual faculty emails "Hey stolen moped on campus" but also emails from the chancellor about the 125th anniversary of the illegal overthrow of the Hawai'ian monarchy, and a list of winter holiday celebrations that includes not one, two or three holidays but eight. EIGHT. It's got a completely different relationship to whiteness and cultural imperialism than I am used to, so I've been learning a lot, in addition to teaching a little.
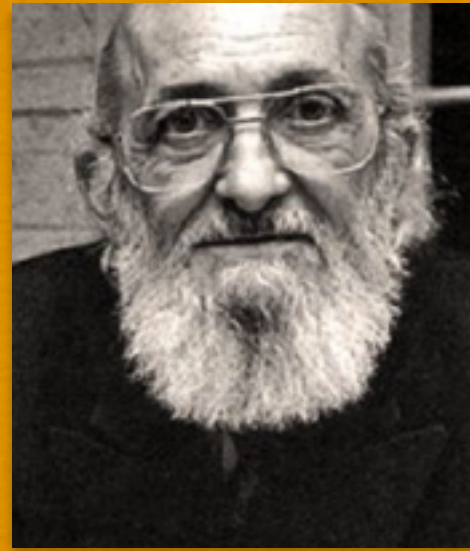
Paulo Freire

"Education either functions as an instrument used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it,

or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which [people] deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

I'm not trying to teach my students to become Marxists, but I do try to teach them about Freire, and about praxis, the idea of informed and reflective action. And that educating without mindfulness can be indoctrination if done thoughtlessly. I don't think he's the end-all-be-all but he's very accessible for students (and it maybe helps that he looks like a grandpa) We had a great chat in class one week (after the anniversary of the governmental overthrow) talking about holidays and the appropriate ways to reflect and respect many people's differing feelings about holidays, if you're a public institution.

Again some of this may be second nature in NYC, but I'm still coming up against "No really, I don't celebrate Easter" sometimes in my town. And figuring out how to talk about the traditions from other holidays without either being appropriative or giving the one Jewish librarian the Hannukah storytime gig every year.

The basic idea of community engagement is just to come full circle. When you do things for your community, you do them with your community. A slogan I like to use as a reminder (lately from disability rights activism but it predates that) is Nothing About Us Without Us. Constant, iterative outreach.

That every project or program or service has elements of the service population as part of the plan, part of the program. If youre bragging about reaching a community, make sure that community has input into whatever you're up to. This is, of course, work. Engagement is work, and that's one of the more challenging things about it. Making a case for it, for that hard work, is part of why UH decided to teach a class on it, to show students (and the larger LIS community) that it's as much a part of our work as collection development or cataloging.

be engaging?
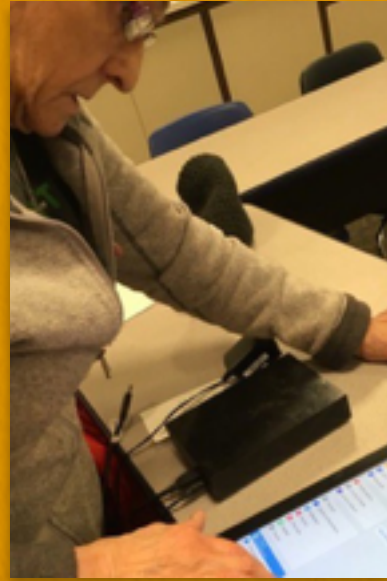
→ **Stories**

→ Numbers

→ Good combos

So at a basic level I break it down into areas of engagement for my students, and we look at differing ways to relate what is going on with various groups of people. I have an active Twitter thing that I do on Tuesdays. I run a drop-in time at the local tech center where people come in with their tech questions. This is a picture of Katie who needs to figure out why she's out of space on her ipad and how she can make backups from her laptop. I help people with their computers and then I come home and discuss their challenges on Twitter. Many of the people reading these stories on Twitter are tech people who may not be thinking how their design choices affect the average and maybe somewhat clueless end users. (we all got a big dose of this with facebook vs congress this week) These are stories they might not see or know otherwise, it helps them empathize and maybe make better choices.

be engaging?

→ Stories

→ Numbers

→ Good combos

Then we talk about numbers, statistics we've heard, ones we've remembered. It can be tough because people often feel that it's the "math" part and I don't want it to be that (though there is utility in knowing math) Often they are ones that are what I might call consciousness raising. One in ten (ish) people are GLB. One in every six women will be sexually assaulted, one in 33 men.

These statistics have rhetorical value to people who may not engage deeply with these topics for whatever reason. The one I like to use is 15% of all Americans do not use the internet. This is roughly the same percentage of Americans, though not the same Americans, who smoke cigarettes. It takes something that's somewhat invisible, the digital divide, and equates it with something somewhat visible, smoking. So people who might not think they know someone "offline" can look around and see people who smoke and think "it's that same number of people"

And then there's putting it together. I think there are a lot of iffy infographics out there (and a lot of SEO masquerading as "helpful" infographics), but the ones that work well are a thing of beauty because they communicate in a way that is brief, effective and evocative. And people don't feel like they are being lectured to. It's weird to watch but oddly effective. Which brings me to a thing that can be a little bit touchy in libraries…

Design. Anyone here from this library? I think, and this may be me coming from my non-urban librarian perspective, that design can be mistrusted as style over substance. Or historically people have worked with designers who are, themselves, bad at engagement (Seattle). But I think... again from my library revolution perspective, that the excuse of design or re-design can open a door to making some changes. And those changes aren't all style.... TBH I don't know if this library had gender neutral bathrooms before, but now it definitely does. Changing design can mean increasing accessibility, usability. Moving from where we've tried to be, with diversity and inclusion, to where we'd like to be: equity and justice.

So with that in mind, a few characteristics we can keep in mind while working with these engagement principles as we do our work.

Design. Anyone here from this library? I think, and this may be me coming from my non-urban librarian perspective, that design can be mistrusted as style over substance. Or historically people have worked with designers who are, themselves, bad at engagement (Seattle). But I think… again from my library revolution perspective, that the excuse of design or re-design can open a door to making some changes. And those changes aren't all style…. TBH I don't know if this library had gender neutral bathrooms before, but now it definitely does. Changing design can mean increasing accessibility, usability. Moving from where we've tried to be, with diversity and inclusion, to where we'd like to be: equity and justice.

So with that in mind, a few characteristics we can keep in mind while working with these engagement principles as we do our work.

advanced

This is basically going from "okay here are first principles: stories, numbers, graphics, design, UX and general intersectionality of these things" to "how do you turn this into informed actions you can do in your everyday life? and what *are* those actions if I want to be a righteous civic actor?"

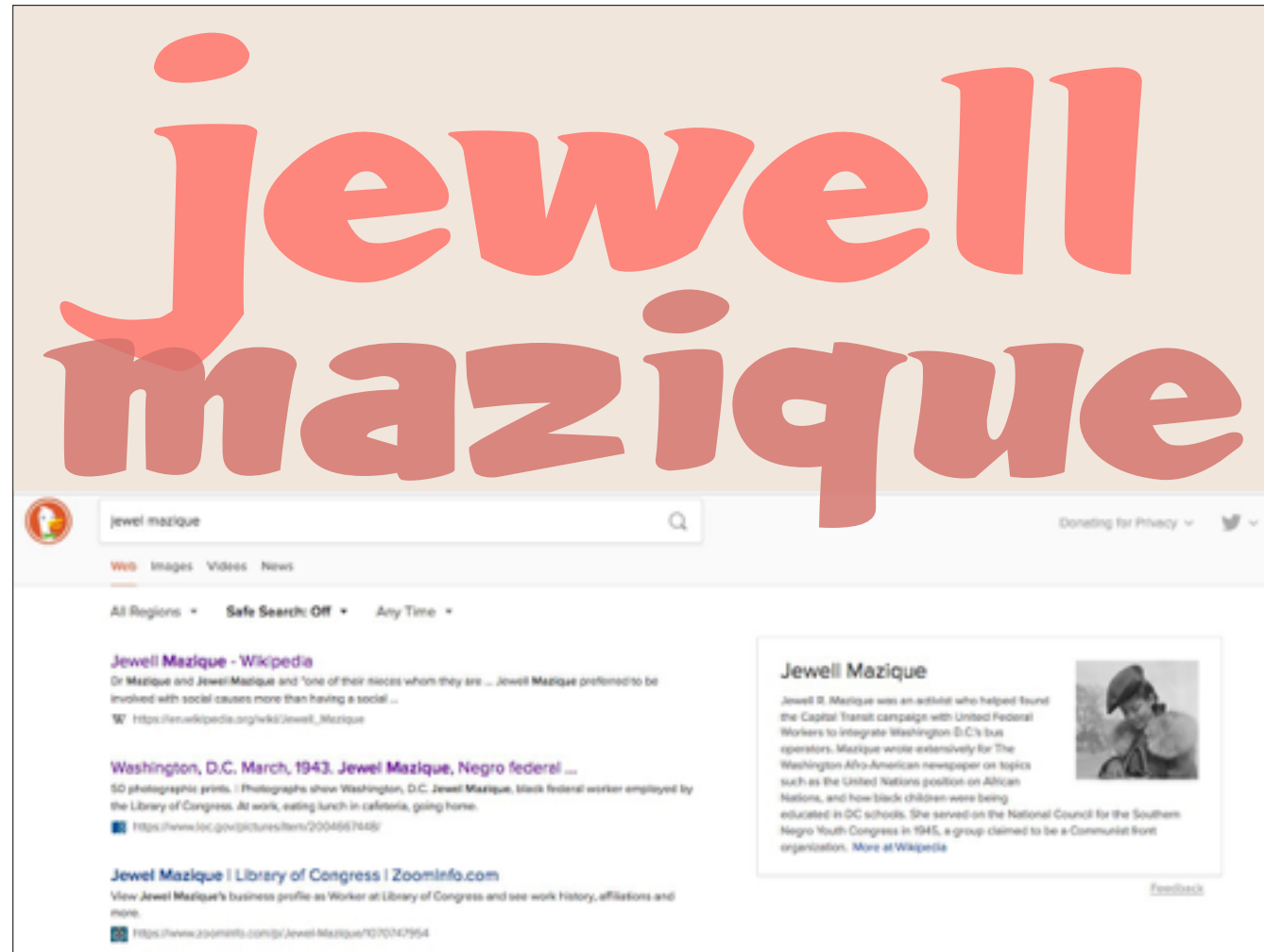Here is my advice. I think that community engagement, when done correctly, can be revolutionary.

As an example, I still edit Wikipedia. But not because "oh hey it's the encyclopedia can edit" because THAT'S NOT TRUE. I do it because, tactically, it's one way to get more of the people who I think should have a higher profile on the internet actually ON THE INTERNET and I have only a small set of mostly-useless superpowers but Wikipedia Wizard is one of them (it's all rules, somehow I am good with rules). Here's an example.

I was nerding around looking at photos of people in libraries, like you do, when I found a photo of a young Black woman working in a fancy looking library in the 40s. I did some poking and it turned out she was a labor activist who happened to be part of a documentary photo series from the Office of War information (i.e. public domain) while she held a job as a clerk at LoC. There was no Wikipedia article about her. Now there is. (click)

Not only that, because of how search engines work, now you see a photo of her when you search for her name. Or when you search for "capital transit campaign" the massive protests and civil disobedience that resulted in the desegregation of the DC Capital Transit public transportation system you see her as one of the founders. That work helps make the internet better, not just not making it worse.

I was nerding around looking at photos of people in libraries, like you do, when I found a photo of a young Black woman working in a fancy looking library in the 40s. I did some poking and it turned out she was a labor activist who happened to be part of a documentary photo series from the Office of War information (i.e. public domain) while she held a job as a clerk at LoC. There was no Wikipedia article about her. Now there is. (click)

Not only that, because of how search engines work, now you see a photo of her when you search for her name. Or when you search for "capital transit campaign" the massive protests and civil disobedience that resulted in the desegregation of the DC Capital Transit public transportation system you see her as one of the founders. That work helps make the internet better, not just not making it worse.

Lauren Comito
23 hrs ·

Preparing for the ULU conference by lying in bed watching Cardi B on Jimmy Fallon.

Like   Comment

Christian Zabriskie, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich and 4 others

Jessamyn West Hey I just added a picture of her to her Wikipedia page. Now I am screenshotting this.
Like · Reply · 23h

Lauren Comito Oh dear
Like · Reply · 23h

I just became enchanted with Cardi B this weekend after seeing her on SNL. Cardi B's Wikipedia article has a photo because I put one there (there are tons of photos of her, she has tons of fans who try to edit her semi-protected wikipedia page, btu the overlap of those people and the people who can find and upload an image that fits the rules may be only one person). You're welcome.

I wound up actually consulting for Wikipedia this year on their #1lib1ref project (show of hands) and it was a mixed bag. Very nice eager people. Mostly young men. Who were not used to people telling them "Hey you should fix this" (your ALT tags, your communication habits, your language, your behavior in meetings). They were used to basically working on this free project (but some people got paid) that was *like* a library, only not a library (not with access, not with inclusion, not with diversity) Working for Wikipedia was one of those bucket list things that turned into a supposedly fun thing I'll probably not do again. And the funny thing is the more I spoke to people about this, the more I found other people saying the same thing. But maybe not publicly.

Which doesn't mean I don't continue to add content about, this week, African American Postal Workers, just that I'm finding my own personal path to contribute effectively.

justice as foregone conclusion

Because to my mind, if you're claiming you're something for everyone, then things like access should be BAKED IN, not just something you try to do once you can get an open source developer to help you build it which was an actual response I heard when I helpfully suggested ALT text on their main blog (ALT text, the basicest of basics). Everyone has their THING that they work with, find lots of ways to advance your thing.
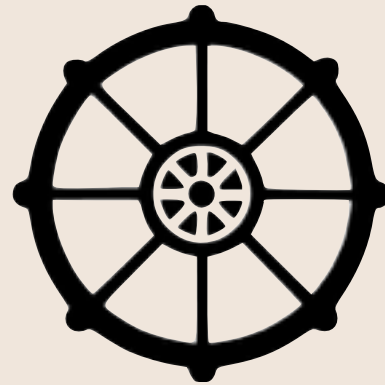
Just for anyone doing work that has an emotional component. We have a saying in internet-people world that you should put no your own mask before helping others. Because there's a cost to working with and for social justice especially if you've chosen working within an institution that may not entirely share that value. Whatever your thing is.

I am an anxious person. Self care for me is meditation, especially at those time when I tell myself "I literally DO NOT HAVE TIME FOR THIS FIVE MINUTES" because, well, I need it. We had a program at VLA last year which was all about meditation and it was helpful, just to even have time at the conference to chill (I think there was one here last year? so good!)

My Library Revolution advice is to make sure you're not just using self-care as a way of hiding from your capital-W work (i.e. there is a privilege nested in our ability to take time for ourselves) or from difficult questions or conversations. Remain mindful. Chill wisely.

Because it's easy to burn out and to turn your work into a thankless grind. The temptation to be a hero is strong. The rewards are… variable. One of the most difficult things about the work that I do is honestly assessing how much of it could be done without me. MetaFilter has been mostly fine without me. The libraries I have worked for have miraculously not shuttered because I no longer was there updating the website.
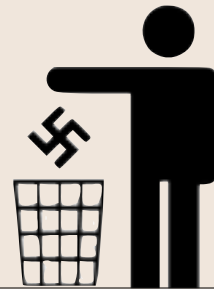
I don't think this needs explanation but I will still explain. We are moving into a time when the Holocaust will no longer be in living memory and anti-Semitism and other forms of white nationalism are on the rise. In the US white nationalists abuse their legally protected access to public spaces to foment hate. Have a plan for when the Nazis come (or the TERFs or ICE or the crisis pregnancy clinic), so you're not left like Toronto Public Library wondering if you made the right decision while parts of your community tell you they no longer feel welcome there.
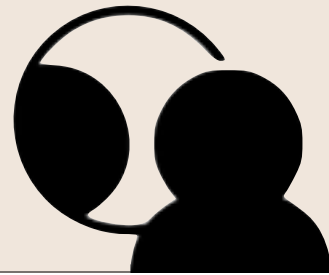
I've mentioned this in different contexts but i'll dredge it up here. I haven't mentioned the C word we always discuss, change, or the one I like to holler about which is copyright. There's a lot of "be the change" talk within activism which I think can be helpful as a reminder, but the larger thing that Gandi talked about I think is more useful.

"We (libraries, library workers) mirror the world. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a person changes their own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards them. This is the divine mystery supreme." So we do the things we do and the engagement work we do.... so that we can show the community to itself.

and maybe just a little bit better. The quote ends with… "A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."

As I was going over this talk this week, my partner looked at my notes and said "It seems like a loosey fight the power type of conference"

And I said, it was sort of like that, except in some ways we ARE the power.Please enjoy the revolution.

Thanks!

@jessamyn

librarian.net/talks/engage