Happily Ever After: Plateauing as a Means for Long-Term Career Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Little did I know when I attended Judith Bardwick’s presentation on plateauing at the ALA annual convention in 1988 that it would turn out to be one of the most valuable sessions I would attend at any library conference, since it has enabled me to understand the phenomenon of plateauing and to use the strategies she suggested to rejuvenate my career and personal life continually. Key concepts and solutions from her book and from other literature on plateauing will be summarized and examples given as to how I incorporated them into my life.

INTRODUCTION

On July 11, 1988 at the annual ALA conference in New Orleans, the Junior Member Round Table section sponsored a presentation titled, “Leveling Off and Lateraling Out: Plateauing and Tracking as Career Obstacles,” which was copresented by Herbert White and Judith Bardwick, author of The Plateauing Trap: How to Avoid It in Your Career... and Your Life. Within the course of an hour, she outlined the reasons why plateauing inevitably happens to everyone, defined the three major types of plateauing that exist (structural, content, and life), and offered concrete suggestions for avoiding the psychological malaise that usually occurs and instead using plateauing as a force for growth and change in one’s life. I found her talk interesting enough to take copious notes upon it, but since I had entered the profession only four years previously, it was one of those things that seemed to belong to a far-off future and it was both literally and symbolically filed away. In later years, as it became increasingly apparent that I was experiencing precisely what she had described in her talk, I began to apply the sugges-
tions she applied to my situation, which had the effects of keeping my job continually challenging and enabled me to cope more easily with the changes which come with the midyears of life. Indeed, it has probably been one of the most useful presentations I have ever attended at any professional meeting, because I have been able to use what I learned there for so many years; and it was an opportunity which could have been so easily overlooked in the smorgasbord of offerings that one finds at a typical ALA conference.

Literature Review

Just how likely is it that I would have learned about plateauing by other means? Before the advent of databases and keyword searching, it would have been more difficult due to lack of consistency in the use of subject headings by major indexes. “Career Plateaus” is the Library of Congress subject heading under which Bardwick’s book and other books on the topic of plateauing can be found. This subject heading is also used in four of the Wilson indexes: Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, Business Index, Social Sciences Abstracts, and Education Index, and as an identifier by ERIC. Surprisingly, “Career Plateaus” is not used in ABI/Inform, where dozens of articles dealing with plateauing are found under such broadly encompassing headings as “Career Development,” “Job Advancement,” and “Job Satisfaction,” so the searcher must use “plateau?” and read carefully through the abstracts to determine the relevance of the citations, since many articles do not use the words “plateau” or “plateauing” in the title of the article. An equally crucial resource for research on plateauing which also does not use “Career Plateaus” as a subject heading is Psychological Abstracts, since articles on the topic are found under the headings of “Career Development” and “Occupational Guidance.” So it would have been a real headache in the days of using the print abstracts to find the thirty-seven articles retrieved by an online search of the database for the period 1976–2000 using the search statement “(job? or career?)” and plateau?” and not all of those turned out to be relevant due to the weaknesses of keyword searching. In looking at the literature, I found that Bardwick did not introduce this topic, since the earliest usage of the term in the literature is by Warren, Ference, and Stoner (1975) in an article from Harvard Business Review, but she did popularize the topic due to her best-selling book, which is often cited in literature that deals with plateauing.

Most of the articles that have been published are in business periodicals targeted toward an audience of supervisors, and they deal with plateauing as a managerial problem. The few articles which are addressed directly to employees are more likely to be found in general periodicals such as Fortune, Money, Glamour, Newsweek, and US News and World Report. Interestingly, Working Woman published five articles on the topic, which is the largest number published by any one mass market magazine. With only a few exceptions (Kreuter, 1993; Messmer, 1999), most articles portray it as a
negative experience and almost all the articles focus narrowly on only the
two types of career plateauing (structural and content) and ignore the is-
sue of life plateauing, which is frequently an offshoot of the other two types
of plateauing and has far more serious long-range implications for what
people will do with the rest of their lives.

By comparison, literature on plateauing in the library profession is
sparse. Library Literature does not use "Career Plateaus" even though there
are more articles on the topic of plateauing (eleven) than are found in
Education Abstracts (five), which does use "Career Plateaus." Instead, the
existing literature is found under even broader subject headings than those
used by ABI/Inform, since it uses "Librarians—Careers" (376 citations),
"Personnel—Administration" (763 citations), and "Working Conditions"
(293 citations), which would have taxed the patience of the most deter-
mined searcher if the print index had to be used to retrieve the relevant
citations on plateauing from among the large number of listings under
those headings. Searching the database using the term "plateau?" yielded
only eighteen citations, none of which was dated later than 1997 for arti-
cles that fit the context that was being searched. Two of the eighteen list-
ings were duplicate citations for articles that had been published in more
than one source, and five articles were not relevant because "plateau" was
used in a sense unrelated to the context of the topic being searched. One
article, entitled "Plateau," reported the results of a survey taken by ALA
about librarians' attitudes about career-development needs, problems, and
plans; and while it did not specifically address the concept of plateauing, it
is always cited by anyone writing on this topic because it does give crucial
information about librarians' own insight into their possibilities for and
obstacles to career advancement (Bernstein & Leach, 1985). Two articles
dealt with the problems of specialized groups of employees: paraprofession-
als (Massey, 1997) and children's services librarians (Feehan, 1994). One
article offered specific methods used in the author's own library to com-
bat the problem (Gossen, 1990), one was a literature review of books and
articles in the business and managerial field published up to that time (Osif,
O’Neil, & Harwood, 1995), and only one article addressed the issue of life
plateauing and saw plateauing as a positive opportunity for growth and
change (Launey, 1995). Much more needs to be written since the organi-
zational structure of libraries and the nature of the work performed almost
guarantees that librarians are at risk for experiencing plateauing.

PLATEAUING: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT OCCURS

Plateauing is not an easy concept to define because it impacts all ma-
ajor areas of life and the effects are strongly intertwined. To begin with the
most usual sense of its analysis in the literature, there is what Bardwick
(1986) refers to as structural plateauing, which occurs "when an employee
has reached the highest level he or she can go in the company" (Schiska,
1991, p. 1). Structural plateauing is caused by limitations inherent to the company's hierarchy, since the farther one goes up the structure, the fewer positions exist; and employees plateau because they either do not possess the skills or the ability to be moved to the next rank, or more frequently, because there is no place further up to move people. The latter situation has occurred because the last thirty years has seen an explosion in the ranks of qualified persons in all fields, largely due to the demographics of the large baby boom generation which went to college and graduate school in greater numbers than their parents. This factor, coupled with economic factors such as automation, downsizing, and relocation of companies overseas, has nullified the organization structure based on the idea of upward mobility in one's career that was part of the expectations of employees from 1950 to 1970 (Fierman, 1993; Leach & Chakiris, 1985). Instead, what Bardwick (1986) calls "the rule of 99%" will occur—that is, virtually everyone will plateau due to the sheer numbers of people trying to ascend the organization hierarchy (p. 36). Furthermore, employees will plateau at earlier ages, depending on their fields, but most will plateau by midlife, a time in which many major life issues are under scrutiny. In order to retain what have been variously called "solid citizens" (Ference, Stoner, & Warrén, 1977, p. 608) and "productively plateaued employees" (Leibowitz, Kaye, & Farren, 1990, p. 30) who are still valued for their continuing contributions to the organization, companies should move away from promotion-based reward systems and eliminate unnecessary layers of management to create an organizational structure that offers their employees more respect, autonomy, and challenge.

A second type of plateauing which usually occurs in conjunction with structural plateauing is content plateauing. This happens when "work is mastered and there is essentially nothing new to learn" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 67). Although professionals are probably most susceptible to it, Bardwick warns that anyone can experience it if "the responsibilities and problems feel repetitive" (p. 68). It can take anywhere from three to five years to reach this state; and though content-plateaued employees remain competent and satisfactory workers, some adapt to the situation by becoming resistant to change and doing everything they can to increase their sense of security because they are fearful that change may bring failure (pp. 73–74). In order to avoid these negative consequences, employers should do all they can to increase challenge in the job by encouraging employees to set new goals and to take on different tasks.

The third type of plateauing is life plateauing, which is seldom discussed in the periodical literature because most of the articles are focused solely on career-based plateauing as represented by structural and content plateauing. This exclusion is unfortunate because, as Bardwick (1986) points out, "plateauing in life is vastly more serious than either structural or content plateauing, because it involves the sense that there's little fulfillment in any area
of life” (p. 100). Life plateauing is a psychological state that is characterized by a feeling of being obliged to honor commitments made in the past to which one may no longer feel a sense of attachment, and this state is intensified by the sense that “the future holds nothing but an unchanged extension of the present” (p. 102). It can often occur as a result of being more immersed in careers than in personal lives, and unsurprisingly many workaholics experience life plateauing. But the danger of focusing on the role of career to the exclusion of all others can result in a tremendous midlife crisis when such persons realize they are structurally and career plateaued, since they take stock of their lives and realize how much they have missed by being too career-focused. It causes examination of all aspects of life, and it “might end with the realization that you need to give up some goals, some of yourself, in order to get something that you haven’t had and don’t know if you can gain. An assessment can challenge essential values that you previously took for granted” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 110).

Awareness of life plateauing results in change only if the pain of remaining on the plateau is greater than the fear of change, but when that decision is made, the process could be life-altering because it may involve major changes in identity, personal relationships, the level of commitment to a job, or a change of vocation. When done correctly, with careful assessment, it is possible to create “a future that fulfills the person they have become . . . they are free to create a life in which they can become more complex, more involved, more spontaneous—more youthful, as it were—than they ever were before” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 128).

**Some Solutions to Plateauing for Librarians**

Librarians are probably less prone to dissatisfaction with structural plateauing than persons working in the corporate sector, since their organizations are smaller, with fewer levels of administration; and because librarians are less concerned with wielding “authority/influence over others” (Bernstein & Leach, 1985, p. 179). It is also not uncommon to see librarians voluntarily remain at a certain level in the organization structure because they prefer that particular type of work. For example, reference librarians may pass up opportunities to move into administration because they prefer working with the public at the reference desk. And since the profession is predominantly female, some employees will opt to remain at a particular level because family responsibilities such as small children or aging parents rule out the possibility of taking on the increased responsibility inherent to higher-level positions. But just as in the corporate sector, structural plateauing will most likely occur because there are simply more good people in the organization than there are positions to which they can be promoted. In that case, either restructuring the organization to eliminate levels of management or instituting team-based management can work very well as solutions to the problem of structural plateauing. Management
Restructuring was done in my own library three years ago, when a vacancy occurred in the position of the head of the reference department. The department of which I am a member asked for the opportunity to reorganize from a traditional department structure with a department head to a team-based management system in which each member of the department would be responsible for an area of the department's function. We would have weekly meetings led by a coordinator and frequent communication by e-mail in order to set policy and tend to the day-to-day business of running the department. Also, we instituted a peer-based evaluation system for our annual reviews. In doing this, we found we communicated more effectively; increased productivity; instituted a greater number of cooperative projects, presentations, and publications; had a higher level of satisfaction with our jobs due to greater autonomy and a more challenging and varied array of tasks; decreased turnover in positions; and improved department camaraderie due to increased interaction with each other. The system worked so well that within a year the rest of the library had adopted the model, and longtime employees who have been with the library a number of years have expressed their belief that it is the best change they have experienced in the organization. Such a structure allows all employees to feel equally valued and respected, and it also eliminates much of the competition that can occur when too many people are competing with each other for scarce upper-level slots. While this solution may not work for all libraries, it should be considered when an organization has a number of employees who are likely to remain in the organization for more than five years, since it allows them to redefine their place in the organization and to avoid the loss of self-esteem that can occur in a traditional organization with the realization that one is structurally plateaued.

Less drastic forms of restructuring the organization can also help overcome content plateauing, the other major type of career plateauing. Even for people who enjoy their work and have no desire to advance upwards in the ranks of administration, this one is bound to hit them eventually because of the sameness of the routine and the lack of challenge, an issue that cannot be ignored since 82 percent of all respondents in a survey on career development cited "challenging/varied work as the most important factor in job satisfaction" (Bernstein & Leach, 1985, p. 179). SUNY at Albany had some favorable results when they instituted a cross-training program in which persons from different departments in the library explained their policies and procedures to others outside the department and gave them the opportunity to do hands-on work there. The staff benefited from this program by increasing their self-confidence, renewing their sense of job worth within the organization structure, reflecting on their own career goals, examining work flow within the library with an eye to improvement, and keeping up with technological change in other parts of the library (Gossen, 1990, p. 8). Such cross-training programs can even be used as a
stepping-stone to the more radical solution of employees engaging in lateral transfers to different departments. While it has been noted that there is an initial loss of productivity as the employee learns the new tasks, it is later offset by the increased interest, fresh outlook, and renewed vigor that the employee brings to the job (Bardwick, 1983, pp. 70–71). This technique has been used with great success in my library, where several existing employees have moved into newly created positions outside their former departments or have engaged in lateral transfers between existing positions in two departments. Examples of the former include a reference librarian who asked if she could fill a collection-development position we were preparing to advertise; the head of circulation who had become proficient enough with the library’s computer systems to be chosen as the head of automation; and a cataloger who became our first acquisitions librarian when the entire library adopted the team management structure. Lateral transfers have been few, but one of the most interesting occurred when a reference librarian swapped positions with the another librarian who worked most of the time in archives and wanted to work full-time in reference. In each case mentioned above, the employee had been with our organization at least five years and will likely be with us for a number of years, so the changes have been good for the employees in that they are not dissatisfied with being in the same job for too long and good for the library in that each employee has brought a fresh perspective to the job and has instituted beneficial and exciting changes to each department.

But since it is not always possible to restructure the organization to overcome the problem of structural and/or content plateauing, there are other solutions that can be applied by management and the individual. They are:

1. Consider plateauing to be a concern that involves all departments in the entire organization, from the director to the intermediate supervisor to the employee. Otherwise, “the more individuals feel they own the problem and have to fix it alone, the less likely it will be resolved” (DeLon, 1993, p. 15).

2. Once the issue of plateauing is established as an ongoing concern in the library, educate people about the three types of plateauing. According to Bardwick (1986),

Understanding the three kinds of plateauing gives people a perspective that makes it easier for some to seek challenge in employment and others to increase their involvements outside work. The information about plateauing should include the relationship between identity, work, self-esteem, and aging; the appropriate role of work in life and how that changes over time; the interaction between work and personal life; and retirement and second careers. (p. 132)

3. Once the issue has been established and employees have been made aware of the problem, managers should first come to terms with the is-
sue as it pertains to themselves before they attempt to counsel employees. Their role in counseling is that of a sympathetic listener who asks the right questions to elicit dialog and who points out the choices available to an individual rather than focusing on one solution (Bardwick, 1986, p. 150).

4. Establish a clearly defined personnel policy which lessens the emphasis on traditional rewards such as promotions, and instead come up with alternative compensations such as ceremonies, time off to go to conferences or do research, public praise verbally or through newsletters, and the opportunity for employees to show off their expertise through such activities as leading a task force or conducting an in-house seminar (DeLon, 1993, p. 15).

5. As part of the personnel policy, give plenty of feedback and be honest in giving it since, according to a 1985 ALA study, “a large number of respondents want feedback regarding job-related strengths and weaknesses” (Bernstein & Leach, 1985, p. 180). The ideal proportion is “lots of praise and only a little criticism” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 156).

6. Encourage employees to seek growth opportunities. This can be accomplished by learning new skills in house or through formal means, taking on short-term special projects which allow for more autonomy, being mentors for junior employees, or becoming representatives for the library within the community.

These are by no means the only solutions for dealing with structural and/or content plateauing, but they do provide a starting point for dealing with the issue in a library if it has not yet dealt with the issue of career-plateaued employees.

The final type of plateauing, life plateauing, may seem to be outside the scope of this paper, but it is very relevant because people who have allowed themselves to be caught up in their careers and who become aware they are plateaued in their careers usually come to the realization that they have become plateaued in life as well because too much of their attention has been focused upon their careers and insufficient attention has been paid to other roles in their lives. When this realization sinks in, they may find themselves asking, “What is the purpose of work and life?” (Launey, 1995, p. 27). To answer this question, they must first “realize that [they are] on a journey . . . of personal and professional self-discovery” (Koonce, 1998, p. 18) to determine future goals and values, to get in touch with creative or spiritual aspects of their natures, and to realign the balance between all aspects of their lives. Launey (1995, p. 27) mentions Richard Bolles’ theory about the three boxes of life: learning, work, and play, and that many people experience plateauing as a result of spending too much time in the work box. Bardwick (1986, pp. 174–176) goes even further and challenges her readers to take the 168 hours of a week, divide it into sections on a pie
chart, and see what portions of time they give to work (including work done on evenings and weekends), sleep, the spouse or lover without the children, the children without the spouse or lover, the family as a whole, reading unrelated to work, hobbies, arts, athletics, the community, friends, and themselves, of which the latter state is defined as being a time when they “are not to feel responsible for anyone else” (p. 177). The results of the exercise can be quite alarming, since:

work, commuting, and sleep can account for 60 to 75 percent of the hours in the week. That leaves little time for anything else and little energy with which to do it . . . Completing the pie chart often reveals that little spontaneous time is given to a spouse, the children, or friends. Most frequent of all, people find that they give little time to themselves. (Bardwick, 1986, pp. 176–177)

In order to achieve balance between all aspects of the self, it becomes necessary to embark on the journey of rediscovery where “you turn inward, or homeward” (Fierman, 1993, p. 60) in search of “a measure of wisdom” (Kiechel, 1988, p. 231). It will not be a quick or easy solution since “transition phases in life ordinarily take four to five years, because changing in basic ways is hard” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 165). Some steps in the journey are:

1. If you are considering switching jobs within the profession, remember that the rule of 99 percent catches up with everyone in the end: “If you change organizations, you may rise higher and delay structural plateauing, but unless you are very exceptional, you’ll eventually reach a level beyond which you will not climb. You never escape the long-term need to accept that. . . . Just changing where you work can mean doing old work in a new place” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 169).

2. If you are thinking of switching careers, analyze your current skills, interests, experience, and motivation for making the change. You may have to come to terms with limitations which might make it difficult to fulfill, such as lack of capital, appropriate experience, or the need for extensive education in order to be able to do the job (Edwards, 1989, p. 115). You also need to recognize that, as a late starter, you have to be less concerned with ambition and promotion and more concerned with personal satisfaction and “the mind-stretching, rejuvenating exercise of great challenge” (Bardwick, 1986, p. 169).

3. If you decide to stay put, think about what satisfied you in the past, as well as what you might want to do in the future. (And remember what you want to do in the future does not necessarily mean what you want to do in the future at work.) Consider going on a retreat or taking courses to get in touch with creative or spiritual aspects of your nature in order to identify possible new work-related goals or personal interests that can help you achieve satisfaction with your life outside the workplace (Koonce, 1998, p. 18).
4. Examine your goals, values, and habits. Let go of any that are no longer assets and in which the psychic costs incurred are higher than the gains (Bardwick, 1986, p. 165).

5. The need to communicate with others will never be more apparent than at this stage of life. Talk to others about your dreams and goals, but avoid "overly practical or judgmental people. They may try to squelch your search for self by telling you to regain your senses" (Koonce, 1998, p. 18). And even more importantly, you should tell people what you are trying to do so they will understand that you are "less predictable," especially if they are persons "who are affected by your efforts" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 165). And get marital, vocational, or psychological counseling if you think you need it; after all, your intention is to get off the plateau, not blow your life to pieces by taking hasty and radical actions.

6. Take an active role seeking change since to "wait around for superiors or fate . . . [will] increase your sense of being powerless" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 167).

7. Embrace continuous learning, whether it is on the job, by self-training, or through formal courses. This continuous learning not only gives you new interests to pursue for increased satisfaction in your personal life, it also gives you new skills that not only refresh the content of your job but can also make you a prime candidate for advancement (Bardwick, 1986, pp. 172–173).

8. Make relationships with family and friends a vital priority in your life. The people around you can be an important source of support and stimulation. Time causes children to grow up, parents to die, friendships to wither if they are not nurtured with attention; and once these people are gone from your life, you "can’t recapture that—it’s gone, an irrevocable loss" (Kiechel, 1988, p. 229).

9. Find an activity outside your career to alleviate any sense of disappointment or frustration that you may feel with your employment situation. In her ALA presentation, Bardwick highly recommended travel and creative activities, but solace can be found in pursuits as varied as a father who spent his nights and weekends coaching his son’s Little League and his daughter’s basketball teams, an Apple executive who coped by doing yoga, or a Chevron manager who rebuilt a 1932 Ford coupe in his driveway (Fierman, 1993, p. 60).

10. Finally, do not let yourself be largely defined by just one role such as your job, since there can be an identity crisis when plateauing occurs or upon retirement or the loss of a job since so much of an individual’s self-esteem is invested in one role. If you balance your commitments to persons and activities outside of the job and remain open to change and growth, you will likely have few problems with life plateauing.
DEALING WITH PLATEAUING IN MY OWN LIFE

In 1984 I began my professional career when I was hired as a reference and interlibrary loan librarian at Valdosta State College. At that time I expected to stay there about two or three years; and though I had not yet heard of the concept of plateauing, I had already accepted the possibility of structural plateauing because I liked the duties and I had no desire to progress up to higher administrative posts that would not allow me to continue this work. I began looking for jobs with similar areas of responsibility at major universities in larger metropolitan areas or in major academic communities, and I went on nearly a dozen job interviews during the period from 1987 to 1994. But as the years passed and I received no job offers, I began to realize that “the advantages of staying put have outweighed the uncertainty of moving on” (Edwards, 1989, p. 115), because I couldn’t be sure that I would have the “freedom and flexibility” (Edwards, 1989, p. 115) that my present position offered due to my senior status within the department. It also would have been financially disadvantageous because our director had successfully negotiated raises that brought our salaries up to the same level as those of teaching faculty at the college. So, faced with the realization that I might be spending the rest of my career here, I dug out my notes on Bardwick’s lecture, read her book, and then began to incorporate her suggestions into my life.

Because I have had to keep learning new skills over the years to cope with the changes of going from a microfiche catalog to Endeavor’s Voyager catalog, from print indexes to GALILEO’s hundred databases, from teaching library orientation classes using overhead transparencies to demonstrating how to search the Internet on a computer hooked up to a projection screen, I have never felt in serious danger of content plateauing! Still, to keep the job fresh, to exercise autonomy, and to bring new challenges to the work, I have undertaken special projects such as composing an interlibrary loan policies and procedures manual which is currently in its fifth revised edition, compiling reading lists of biographies of women, African-Americans, and Georgians that are revised every few years, creating Web sites which list our newspaper holdings on microfilm chronologically and geographically, and designing a Web site listing the titles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century periodicals held by our library. And due to an attack of tennis elbow that was incurred by inputting interlibrary loan requests that were increasing in double digit percentiles every year, I also restructured our interlibrary department to take advantage of as much automation as we could get. I added to our system OCLC’s IFM and custom holdings features, electronic request forms, and ARIEL, which simplified the process enough to make it possible to design the work flow so that student assistants could process many of the borrowing requests with minimal supervision. I continue to look for more ways to streamline the interlibrary loan process, and I take note of situations in which new find-
ing aids might be useful as possibilities for new projects so I can continue to feel challenged in my job.

I have also managed to get inspiration for what to do in my job by reading the professional literature and becoming more active in the profession. Much of my activity has been in the Georgia Library Association, where I have served on committees, been chair of the Interlibrary Cooperation Round Table, and given a couple of presentations to the above-mentioned Round Table. I have also attended conferences of the Southeastern Library Association and the American Library Association; and fittingly enough, considering that I first heard Bardwick’s talk at an ALA conference in New Orleans, I gave a presentation on new features of OCLC at the 1998 ALA Midwinter Conference in New Orleans. I have also attended workshops devoted to interlibrary loan and gone to interlibrary loan conferences in Colorado, Canada, and Finland. (It also cannot be denied the travel necessary to participate in professional organizations and events affords wonderful opportunities for learning and a chance to enjoy some of the cultural, recreational, and gastronomic amenities that a smaller community lacks. And I always make a point of taking off a couple of extra days so I can sightsee.) Each time I have returned to my job spiritually refreshed and stimulated with new ideas that have reshaped my role in the profession, but I also find that I make contacts that sometimes have unexpected results, such as hearing a speaker whom I recommended to the Georgia Library Association as a keynote speaker or meeting persons who would later become instrumental in helping me secure an opportunity for a publication or presentation.

One rule that I tend to follow is to keep alert for new opportunities and to follow them, since you never know where they might lead. A chance conversation with a member of the history department who was looking for a new project led to a collaboration on the Depression-era Farm Security Administration photography project in Georgia which resulted in two articles in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Montgomery, Schmier, & Williams, 1993; Schmier & Montgomery, 1994), but the biggest thrills came in interviewing one of the families who were the subjects of a set of photographs and in going to Puerto Rico to interview the late Jack Delano, who was the photographer in Georgia responsible for that particular set and for most of the photographs in the project.

Most of my serendipitous opportunities have come about as a result of being subscribed to the ILL-L and Stumpers-L listservs, since they offer the best opportunities for networking for people who cannot afford to travel to national conferences on a regular basis; and for learning about opportunities for publishing, presentation, workshops, or conferences that might be unknown otherwise. In 1993 I mentioned a survey that I had done about the impact of telefacsimile on Georgia libraries in a posting to the ILL-L and received an invitation to publish it (Montgomery, 1993); and my pre-
sentation at ALA and the article you are presently reading came about as a result of responding to notices posted on the ILL-L listerv. The ILL-L listerv has also been invaluable for learning about new developments in the field as well as for passing on advice to younger colleagues. Stumpers has enabled me to keep my reference skills sharp by answering hundreds of questions over the years, and it has enabled me to learn about reference sources, both print and Internet-based, that I did not know of previously. And some of my postings were even published in the Stumpers anthology (Shapiro, 1998), a compilation of questions and answers drawn from the Stumpers archives. These were outcomes that I never dreamed of when I took my first hesitant steps with e-mail back in 1993.

E-mail and the decrease in phone rates over the past few years have been a great help in maintaining old relationships and developing new ones, since relationships are an important component in maintaining life satisfaction if one is structurally plateaued. After an interval of seventeen years, I had a reunion with my best friend from graduate school, and we now have a steady exchange of phone calls and e-mail and an annual visit every summer. My college roommate offered to introduce me to a man she supervised back in 1991, and it has resulted in a very satisfying long-distance relationship. I even convinced my father to buy a computer, and it has been great fun receiving e-mail from him and teaching him to use the Internet, while he has taught me how to play Freecell! I have also launched a Web page which grew out of my Ebay trading for Princess Diana collectibles. Since I found I was sending out longer and longer e-mails to fellow traders about where to find sites on the Internet where Diana merchandise could be purchased more cheaply, I had an idea for a Web site, the Princess Diana Shopping Arcade (Montgomery, 1999). It started out as a listing of sites from which to buy Diana merchandise and royal family memorabilia, but it eventually expanded to include informative sites in the “Free Stuff” section, pictures and text of an exhibit of Diana memorabilia that I put up as a display in our library in the summer of 1999, and pictures of my trip to Althorp, Princess Diana’s ancestral home, in the summer of 2000. Almost every week I receive e-mail from visitors as far away as Sweden and Australia. While much of it is fan mail, I also receive and answer reference questions from people who want to know where to buy a particular item, how much something is worth, or unusual questions like what kinds of wedding gifts were received or when Princess Diana and her sons visited Disneyland. It is a lot of fun, and I have made some new friends along the way. And the process of learning how to do a Web page did wonders for my computer skills, opening up further prospects for enriching the content of my job.

Getting accustomed to looking for challenges and opportunities served me well when in 1999 I received a diagnosis of endometriosis following a stressful series of medical procedures. As soon as I could hobble to my com-
puter after the surgery which initially diagnosed it, I was looking for information about the disease in order to make informed medical choices about a physician and subsequent treatment, which was further complicated by a diagnosis of low bone density since that condition ruled out taking a medication which could further reduce bone density. As a result of the medical problems, I have become greatly interested in the study of health and aging, something which I neglected prior to that time, I am taking a greater interest in spirituality, and I made major changes in my eating habits and took up weight-lifting in order to increase the amount of weight-bearing exercise I was getting. I believe my attitude in considering it another challenge and an opportunity for growth and change had a great deal to do with making the stress involved with the incident more bearable and with being able to adapt to greater discipline in eating and exercise habits.

As for the future, I have an interest in photography which was awakened by the study of the Farm Security Administration photos, and within the next couple of years I am going to take some courses to learn how to take better pictures. I am going to make time to read the books of the Great Books program, since I loved studying literature as an undergraduate and in graduate school. Writing for Stumpers and my Web page has made it considerably easier for me to write, and I may undertake some lengthier projects. I am also concentrating on investing with the goal of early retirement, since it will allow me to choose where I wish to live and give me the opportunity to travel more and the time to pursue creative activities that are hard to do when you go to work every day. Until then, I will continue to be on the lookout for opportunities that will continue to keep my job and my life fresh and exciting.

CONCLUSION

Although plateauing is often thought of as a negative condition, it does not have to be this way. When one is prepared in advance for it, it can actually become an unparalleled opportunity for growth and change in all aspects of life as well as for readjusting priorities which may have become skewed earlier in life. While it is not an experience anyone really wants to endure, once it is over we have the inner resources to make the most of the rest of our lives.

REFERENCES


