It is a special kind of honor to be honored by one’s peers. I felt that when I was elected president of ASIS&T, and I feel it again with this award, but more strongly. An elected president has work to do, chores to perform. But in this case there are no chores or work. Instead, two gifts: a silver bowl and a briefly captive audience.

The timing is nice since this conference marks 40 years since my first ASIS conference and, to within a few months, 50 years – half a century – since I started in this field. How could that be? The explanation is that I started young.

In fact, this field was my second career. My first career was in the theater where I started really young and at the top. At the age of two weeks I starred as Jesus Christ in a Nativity play, and I stole the show. The difficulty was then to find comparable roles. My whole life has had to be an anticlimax after that elevated start. By the time I was a teenager acting in an English pantomime loosely based on the nursery rhyme about Little Miss Muffet and her spider, I was cast as half of the spider. Spiders have eight legs so the arms and legs of two people are needed to make a serious spider. Going from Jesus Christ Superstar to half of a spider was a poor career trajectory even if it was an anatomically correct spider. I left the stage.

My parents kept asking what I was going to do when I grew up. The English have a sense that it is a mistake to grow up, but one has to earn a living. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to discuss it. I thought, “If I give them an answer – any answer – they’ll stop asking.” But what answer? We lived next to a public library, and I thought that libraries were socially beneficial and probably a pleasant place to work. So I told them that I was going to be a librarian until I found something more interesting to do. Fifty years later, that is still my position. I am only temporarily in this field.
I went to work in the ancient library of Oxford University and observed the high price of poor management. Then off to library school where I learned an attitude: However things are being done, there’s probably a better way. Then as a professional librarian at Lancaster, I helped create a whole new library for a new university and discovered the satisfaction of good design and effective planning. After that, five years of full-time research.

In 1972 I became a librarian again, in the United States at Purdue University, where I learned a lot about people problems. I left to help the Berkeley School of Librarianship move towards becoming a school of information whatever. Then back a fourth time to library work in what is now the California Digital Library where I learned a lot about the power of technology. Finally I began an entirely new career as a mere professor and retired.

Looking back, I had clearly underestimated how interesting this field is and how socially beneficial. Who could not be interested in the many neglected questions and paradoxes inviting our attention, in the challenges of design as new techniques and new technologies become available and in the human interest of forgotten pioneers?

As for “socially beneficial,” libraries are concerned with community building and, within that, with making accessible the documents that people want or need. Archives, publishing and social media do much the same, widening our scope. Professional schools and professional associations need to remember that fact.

Library schools have a well-understood mission and role to prepare professionals to work in libraries. Library schools have an identified market, profession and professional associations to deal with.

I worry that “iSchools” seem to lack that clarity of purpose, mission and identity. There is a compelling mission at hand, and it is the following: With a few exceptions, notably privacy and security, ignorance is a bad idea. Who wants an incompetent dentist? A lawyer ignorant of current law? An auto mechanic without manuals? A physician unfamiliar with the best new treatments? A military using out-of-date maps? The list goes on and on. I like the slogan, “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance!”

The situation is getting worse because we are all increasingly dependent on second-hand knowledge. It matters for society who knows what. That consequence is the rationale for our field. It is my rationale for our field.

Now, anything that is a really important societal problem will be complex, requiring a versatile tool kit. Who can predict what kind of tool will be needed next? People of my generation with my background liked to think of themselves as generalists. It may be a vain delusion, but it is liberating because it encourages one to work on any problem and to pick up any useful tool. The problem should determine the methodology. Whatever works is a good choice. If some statistics would help, do some statistics. If you can, engage a statistician. Being interdisciplinary is not in itself a virtue because drawing on other fields can be wasteful and detrimental unless it really suits our purpose. Our field has suffered from that.

Many of us are expected to do research in some form. We tend to do what is feasible, so most published research is routine if not rather trivial. If our field is to thrive we need to address the difficult and embarrassing questions: Why use public funds to finance libraries? How come our most scientific work is built on questionable assumptions? The danger is in not thinking through the hard and unpleasant issues because sooner or later someone hostile will go there, and it is unwise to be unprepared.

Talking of dangers reminds me of my grandmother who was rather fierce. She had a murder list of people she was going to do away with when she became prime minister. As a mild-mannered, impressionable little boy I would be put on and taken off her murder list unpredictably and inexplicably.
These events were long before Margaret Thatcher and, eventually, I came to realize that maybe my grandmother might not become prime minister. That was a relief. She is dead now, so I am safe – at least from her.

I myself never compiled a murder list, even though sometimes tempted. Not yet. But I have often thought that a semantic murder list would be useful: Words that should be taken out of service. Our field has been plagued by terminological problems and a failure to remember the fundamental distinction between a thing and its name. (The next time someone says, “Information is…,” beware!)

In my high school we had an assignment called Paraphrase. We were given a passage of text and required to rewrite it with the same meaning but without using the same words. It is a good exercise. When people have difficulty rewriting, the reason is usually inadequate thinking, not lack of vocabulary. We could try it: “information”-free Fridays, when the word is avoided. Christians could give it up for Lent.

Three recent recipients of this noble award mentioned my name when they spoke of the ancients of their youth. That makes one feel old. So as I stand here in the twilight zone between senior and senile and survey this room of (mostly) younger people, you might wonder whether I wish I were young again. I think not. I have been there and done that, and I could not hope to be so fortunate a second time around. But I will admit to a little envy of the younger among you for this simple reason: You have so many more years ahead to explore the interesting and to engage in the socially beneficial and useful. Thank you.