

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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Studiis et Observatione Notari: Reflections From the Arena

It was 1986, a year that found me despondent and depressed, yet determined. My monthly apartment rent was an exorbitant \$185. The Space Shuttle Challenger had exploded on takeoff in January. The meltdown of reactor number 4 in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant had been front page news since April. The unemployment rate was hovering around 7%. I couldn't buy a break in my attempts at securing employment with my biology degree. Well, one that paid more than \$12,000/year.

Then serendipity introduced itself. The Chesapeake Chapter of the Audubon Society inquired if I would participate with a group of pro-environment volunteers to meet with elected officials in Washington, DC. I accepted their invitation. (Yes, we stayed at the infamous Hotel Harrington.) The week would culminate with us meeting in person with Lee M. Thomas, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. With that meeting, everything changed. The absence of career advisement I endured was turned on its head as Thomas articulated the public health path forward for our nation, albeit under the conservative Reagan Administration. I was hooked.

So, it was 35 years ago this month that I joined the public health profession. Work has brought me to around 70 countries and most of the U.S., with the exception of South Dakota and Alaska. I endured a couple health scares this year, neither involving COVID-19. These brushes with mortality have produced a reflective mood. In that spirit, I'd like to share with you the top 10 things I've learned

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while working in the coolest, most interesting, and amazing profession on the planet.

- 1. Environmental Health is profoundly local.** Yes, you knew this one was coming, so let's get it out of the way. SARS-CoV-2, Ebola, *Legionella*, *Salmonella*, Zika, Lyme disease, hantavirus, harmful algal blooms, droughts, floods, and workforce decisions are hyperlocal. Enough said.
- 2. The public health significance of water is underappreciated and undervalued.** Take me seriously. From handwashing to premise plumbing, private water, septic systems, droughts, floods, heavy metals such as lead, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), vectors, microorganisms of all kinds, and yes, drowning. For you early career readers, dealing with too much, too little, or contaminated water will increasingly represent a sizeable part of your workday.
- 3. Tribes Matter.** Humans, the public in public health, relate to each other and trust individuals as a function of their professional

and personal tribes. They see life through the lens of their collective values, beliefs, and absorbed ideas. People are hard-wired to discount facts and data, and place greater relevance on the opinion of someone familiar. While on this subject, it would benefit all of society to listen and learn from Native Americans and Indigenous people everywhere who understand our natural environment and how best to manage it.

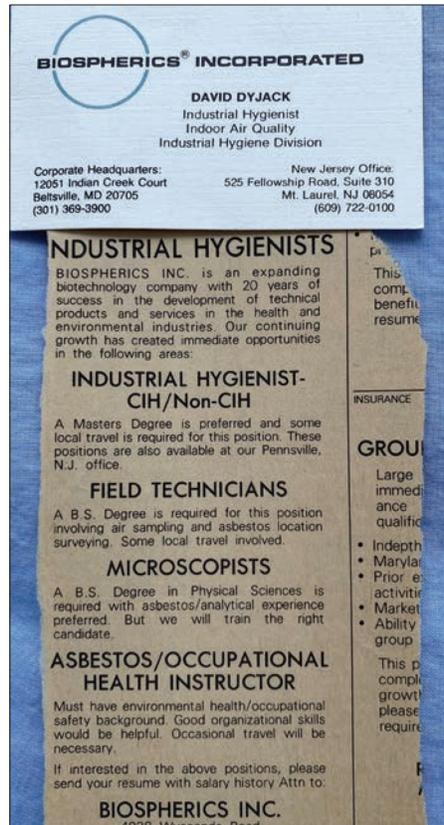
- 4. No one is afraid of change.** Change is a natural part of life. No one expects to look the same as they did in their first grade class photo. Professionals generally desire to mature and take on new and important responsibilities. Alternately, people are afraid of loss. Loss of jobs. Loss of influence. Loss of access. If we consider and factor in individual values, loyalties, and losses before introducing change, much workplace drama could be avoided.
- 5. Leadership matters.** But perhaps not in the way you are thinking. A pattern I have observed is that effective leaders create the conditions under which individuals, teams, and society tap into the best versions of themselves. These leaders articulate a vision and in the process, tolerate and encourage creative conflict so that the best ideas float to the surface. These leaders then get out of the way while generously extending credit to those around them. They also embrace failure as a necessity on our journey to a better world.

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6. **Women are society's change agents.** There is an old saying in the international nongovernmental organization crowd that rings true to me. My version is: Give a man a dollar and he will spend it at the local pub. Give a woman a dollar and she will feed her family, start a small business, and create a rainy-day fund. Investing in female children is critical. My observation is that when young adults complete high school, are in a committed relationship, and start a family, in that order, society and the environment benefit.
7. **Weed out evil in the workplace.** This one is certain to upset many readers. Narcissists (self-love), those with Machiavellian tendencies (manipulators), and sociopaths (lack of a conscience) must go. The irony is that these individuals are often highly visible, productive, and influential employees. People with these traits cannibalize organizations from the inside out as altruistic team players choose to work elsewhere.
8. **The best ideas and solutions frequently arise from those with the least impressive titles, degrees, and visibility.** I once worked on a project where we charged Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone (back in the days of human telephone operators and landlines) hundreds of thousands of dollars to identify the source of carbon monoxide in a building. I was interviewed on television (Dave Dyjack featured live at 5 p.m.!)—oh, those were the halcyon days. After considerable study and pontification, the sad fact was that we never identified the source. Approximately one year after the event, I was in



The help wanted ad and business card that started it all. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

the neighborhood of the building in question and stopped by for a social call to see if there had been any additional detection of combustion products. I started a conversation with the individual in charge of building maintenance. He beamed one of those Cheshire Cat smiles when I inquired with him. He described in considerable detail that when the wind blows from a certain direction, the exhaust from the boiler would be entrained into

the building HVAC system. Throughout the duration of our study, including an expensive and complex tracer gas analysis, he suspected the source of the carbon monoxide. When I inquired why he didn't say anything, his response was, "No one asked me." Lesson learned.

9. **Action is in the space between the professions.** For most of us, the single largest professional contribution we will make is cultivating greater understanding and collaboration between us and nonenvironmental health sectors and professions. In my opinion, the next big opportunity is at the intersection of the clinical professions and environmental health. This juncture is where our data and electronic health records can be used to make better and more informed patient care decisions.
10. **You matter.** In a world of almost 8 billion humans, our individual and professional potential is lubricated by relationships. One relationship at a time. How you dress. How you act. How you treat and help those with the least ability to help you in return. As Senator Alan Simpson (R-Wyoming) was once alleged to have said, "If you have integrity nothing else matters." If you don't have integrity, nothing else matters.

Well, those are my top 10 observations. I possess a multitude of stories to accompany each, but space is limited. Send me your top 10 at ddyjack@neha.org and let's start a discussion. 🐼

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