

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

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Ikigai

Renowned for its acoustics, whispers were clearly audible within the walls of the Terry Concert Hall at Jacksonville University in Florida. The venue seats 400, divided among a concourse and balcony, providing musicians an opportunity to display their talents in functional elegance. I took my seat along the isle, four or five rows from the wooden staircase leading to the stage. My heart skipped a beat as I was introduced as the commencement speaker for the School of Nursing graduation ceremony. As I ascended to the lectern, fidgeting family members, faculty, and graduates collectively gave me a look that conveyed, “Say your thing quickly so we can get on with our celebration.” Ikigai.

Within 20 seconds I felt confident I had their attention. Cell phones dropped to people’s laps, children uncharacteristically hushed, and faculty beamed with interest as I unapologetically harpooned evidence-based nursing, big data, cloud technology, telehealth, telemedicine, Fitbits, electronic health records, electronic medical records, and GIS. Our country possesses the best information technology in the world and our life expectancy is less than the residents of Slovenia, Malta, and Costa Rica. Mobile phone apps are not the answer.

The answer is that the greatest improvements in our collective health status might not lie in our technical acumen but rather in the compassion, empathy, and love we bring to our respective professional enterprises. I suggest to you as we enter 2021 that love is the key to healing and health promotion in

our respective communities and within the environmental health profession.

In *Love and Survival*, Dr. Dean Ornish cites many peer-refereed publications that provide an empirical foundation for my hypothesis around love. Ornish coauthored a study at Yale University that involved 119 men and 40 women who underwent coronary angiography. Those who felt most loved and supported had substantially less blockages in their hearts than other subjects. In a separate study of 10,000 married men, those who felt their partners did not show them love experienced twice as much angina when compared with men who felt loved by their partners.

Love’s benefits are not limited to chronic disease. Social ties with friends, family, coworkers, and communities that involve love and intimacy might also protect against infectious diseases. In a study of 276 healthy volunteers, participants were exposed to rhinovirus, the tiny beast responsible for the common cold. Researchers assessed subjects on 12 types of relationships, including those with spouses, parents, in-laws, children, and classmates, among others. The participants

who reported less than four types of relationships had more than 4 times the risk of developing a cold than those reporting six types of relationships. If you doubt me, I encourage you to conduct a PubMed search and see what you discover.

Here’s a sample of what I found.

- A study of a community that followed 3,000 people for 12 years found individuals who volunteered in a variety of settings lived longer than those who did not volunteer.
- A Finnish study of 13,000 people reported socially isolated individuals were 2–3 times more likely to die sooner than those in active relationships. This finding controlled for serum cholesterol, age, smoking history, and blood pressure.
- A meta-analysis of many studies demonstrated the act of being heard is healing in itself. That is, we can be a healing influence in our communities by practicing active listening.

Ikigai is a Japanese concept that roughly translates to our reason for being. It’s our purpose in life. It represents the confluence of many factors, namely what you love and what you are good at. I feel that love and sense of purpose when I’m around our members and colleagues, and I have missed that interaction with you during the pandemic.

As you read this column in December, please recognize that I wrote this piece in early October. At this moment in December, the election cycle is complete, the calendar year is ending, and a new cast of elected

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characters are headed to the halls of Congress. My hunch is that we don't have a generally available vaccine, there is some civil unrest, and the economy is unsettled, particularly the dimension that affects state and local governments.

I ask at this moment in history that you revel in your *ikigai* and bring your love and enthusiasm to your work and home life. We are the glue that keeps society functioning. I direct these comments to our private sector members, as well as those in the governmental public health enterprise. We mediate food, water, septic systems, air—the essentials of the human condition. The tone we set, the professionalism we display, and the love we express are essential if we value the health, safety, and security of our nation and those of our esteemed partners worldwide.

We also recognize that appropriately giving and sharing love provides health benefits to the giver. There is insufficient space here to unpack the evidence but again, rest



Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

assured there is abundant data to support this assertion. We represent the second larg-

est segment of the public health workforce, and the single largest element that interacts with the public and the regulated community. The love we bring to our work, our coworkers, and the public we serve matters to them, and it matters to us. I feel that during my lifetime, it matters more today than any time since my birth.

The finest public speech of my career was not at Jacksonville University. It was at an all-staff holiday season talk I gave in 2009 to the Riverside County Health Department in California. The venue was the 430-seat Annenberg Theater in Rancho Mirage. It's an extraordinary theater in the round and I was on point. That story, however, is for another day. This story is about love. Please give, receive, and share in its abundance because our lives depend on it.

Best for the holiday season and New Year.



Dave

ddyjack@neha.org
Twitter: @DTDyjack

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