

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

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Baltimore to Beirut

“Dad, be careful!” Nathan and I were rolling east on I-70 toward St. Louis in a large rental truck. Our son had been accepted into Johns Hopkins University and I volunteered to drive with him cross-country to gritty, glorious Baltimore. I inhaled deeply; my son’s e-cigarette released its dose of nicotine and I savored the momentary alertness brought on by one of the most reviled drug-delivery instruments of the modern public health era.

Dr. Dyjack inhaling an e-cigarette? Indeed, and intermittently over 3 days. This experiment was conducted before the recent disclosures of illness and death from vaping. I am not glorifying e-cigarettes and am an older man whose appetite and biological propensity/brain chemistry for addictions are long gone. Knowledge is transferable. Experience is not. I desired the experience. If you find this incongruence with my public persona disturbing, please be comforted that I am doing my best to get Nathan to quit. I entertain opposing thoughts absent any sense of contradiction, which may be a strength or fatal character flaw.

To further illustrate my point, consider the following:

- I believe climate change is an existential crisis, yet I once worked for Exxon, an experience I savor.
- I spent 18 years in academia aware of my privileged place in the ivory tower and at the same time, worked to improve the health of immigrant communities.
- I did not become an overnight chief executive officer (CEO). I learned my craft

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through many years armed with a clipboard, respirator, Tyvek, and steel-toe boots. I possess abundant experience collecting samples, conducting environmental risk assessments, and reporting results to clients.

- I have lived much of my life in relatively wealthy coastal metro regions that possess immense disparity, while also being proximal to think tanks, such as those found on K Street in Washington, DC. At the same time, I have spent and continue to spend considerable time in the American Heartland and possess great affinity for the challenges of rural and frontier America.
- Poverty and health equity arguably should be priorities for our association and yet, I have been unable to map out a process that would

meaningfully and sustainably advance progress in these areas of concern. I believe our association and its membership could act as professional sextants in these oceans of challenge even though they are not classic environmental health workforce issues.

The incongruencies that make up the fabric of our lives offer valuable insight. On some days I find myself in Washington, DC, where people speak swiftly with vocabularies reflective of elite education. These conversations often center around urban health issues. The next day I’m somewhere between Connecticut and California, where the people are equally intelligent and committed, but might lack the privilege and benefits of white-hot coastal economies. These conversations appropriately focus on the plight of rural America. It’s almost as if these two groups live in separate universes. What role does our association play in threading these different experiences together?

This spring I led a Council on Education for Public Health site visit to the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. While I don’t want to fall victim to false impressions left by a short visit with people on their best behavior, I was nonetheless left breathless by their atmosphere of inclusion. Regional politics, religious strife, and other factors that tend to drive Middle Eastern communities apart were absent by design. Everyone from all walks of life were welcome to study in relative safety and security.

Like a safe university campus ensconced in an unstable and militarized region, the contra-

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Dad (aka Dr. Dyjack) and Nathan in the American Heartland. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.



Dr. David Dyjack at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

dictions in our professional lives are abundant. We are trained scientists and often play an enforcement role in that capacity. Many of us, however, joined this profession to protect and improve the lives of our communities. Historic health and economic disparities are at the root of much of our contemporary ills. How do we harmonize our passions with the challenges at hand? How do we ensure that we don't passively observe the fragmentation of our profession along the lines of the coasts and Heartland?

Most of us live in middle America and watch or participate in food being grown, resources being extracted, and can't afford fair trade coffee. Our members in Wichita, Kansas; Omaha,

Nebraska; and Richmond, Kentucky, bear witness. I believe the National Environmental Health Association should lead through example and exert principled influence where it can to maintain balance in our vision of health for all. Let's think and act in a manner that ensures that the passions of the coastal champions can be harnessed to connect with and improve the working lives of our members and their communities in places like North Dakota, Iowa, and Mississippi.

Our country is large and diverse. Diversity, when properly and respectfully harnessed, makes us stronger and more resilient. This is true in ecosystems, workplaces, and econo-

mies. Let's endeavor to keep our professional community, in whatever form or function it appears, threaded together. And at the same time, let us increasingly recognize the importance of all people and places—whoever they are and wherever they may be.

American author F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. Let's see what we got. 🚗

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