

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

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Not a Trail

Trail dust, the consistency of confectionary sugar, enveloped my hiking boots as I regaled in 28 square miles of the Soapstone Natural Prairie Area's pristine, wide-open vistas. Mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and horned toads scurried off into the bush, no doubt more than a little disgruntled by the disruption of their collective morning rituals.

Rituals and traditions also play an important role in the lives of people, their communities, and the organizations they choose to associate with. We are no different. Every Monday morning at 8:00 a.m. sharp, the voice of Alexis streams through the ether into my headset as the National Environmental Health Association's leadership team and I digest and reflect on recent developments. Alexis is a given name derived from several saints venerated by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and it roughly translates to helper or defender. In our case, Alexis is not a podcast host or an artificial intelligence app but rather, Lexi Nally, our member services representative. Lexi is a personification of helper and defender as she describes to the leadership team what she has learned about you and your struggles while she offers insight on how we can support and advance the environmental health profession. Lexi serves to remind us that you are the reason our association exists.

Lexi and her supervisor, Association Membership Manager Jonna Ashley, have expressed that the most important thing we can do during this time of national disruption is to be a stable source of meaningful and relevant pro-

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fessional continuing education. Let me clear, our nation is grateful for you and your work, and we are producing as much cost-free or affordable continuing education that we can muster. We understand training and travel budgets have been decimated. We recognize local businesses and the tax base they support have been profoundly impacted by the pandemic. We know you are professionally stretched like plastic wrap on last night's leftovers. Some of you have worked seven days a week since February.

If this information is not sobering enough, many members have shared their personal stories of workplace conditions that are deeply disturbing. Some of us are being asked to disband social events and inspect bars and restaurants late at night to assure compliance with occupancy and masking directives. Some of us are being physically threatened by the public we serve. Some of us are being directed to do things that are counter to our environmental and public health training. Traveling this professional trail is not what I envisioned when I took the reins of our association. As President Barack Obama once quipped, "Challenges find you." The chal-

lenges are real. Our profession appears to be amid an existential crisis—low environmental health academic enrollments, an aging workforce, and now the collapse of the public health enterprise as we know it.

My serene Soapstone hike was unceremoniously turned upside down by a noise I had not heard since I last watched Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Among the beauty of the vintage American grassland was a prairie rattlesnake. I would have stepped on it if it had not made its presence known. What irony. The guy who had disrupted the pronghorn antelope an hour earlier was now being disrupted by a venomous serpent. Had I stepped on it, there was no cell service and no one else within miles. Challenges find you.

The professional trail we have chosen contains vipers. We are enveloped by the rattling of budget cuts, misguided decisions, and outright buffoonery. No sector is immune. We have the best environmental health and public health talent on the planet. I am disheartened to find our country in this mess.

I am realistic about the limited influence we leverage given the U.S. federated model of governance. Having said that, however, I want you to know that Doug Farquhar, our director of Government Affairs, and I have been caucusing on possible maneuvers that will serve to protect and promote the profession. Jesse Bliss, our director of Program and Partnership Development, and his team have been burning the midnight oil in efforts to secure new sources of organizational revenue that can be repurposed to provide support to

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the profession. Jonna Ashley and Lexi Nally from our Membership Department are surveilling the country to ensure we know what we need to know to assist the profession. Laura Wildey, our senior program analyst in food safety, is leading efforts to strengthen our relationships with the Food and Drug Administration, National Association of County and City Health Officials, Conference for Food Protection, and Association of Food and Drug Officials. We are blazing new trails, hopefully with fewer poisonous creatures lying in wait.

This time in history is testing our mettle. I ask that we be drawn into the future, rather than driven by the nonsense of the past. Every culture in the world values honesty, loyalty, kindness, courage, fairness, creativity, and perseverance. I know environmental health professionals are deeply anchored in these qualities because I have witnessed them for decades. Please do not fall prey to the seductions that might otherwise deplete



Soapstone's beauty (left) and its beast (right). Photos courtesy of David Dyjack.

your vessel of these virtues. Abraham Lincoln said it best when he encouraged Americans to listen to the "better angels of our nature."

I also believe that remaining positive, while cliché, is effective. Remain engaged, find new meaning in your work, accomplish what you can, and search out positive relationships. These attributes have been empirically proven to work. Yes, science and data support what I am saying.

The Soapstone wilderness area provides a glimpse of nature in its rawest beauty. You

can also encounter some of the deadliest creatures in North America. This prairie is a metaphor for the current state of public health. It is not the trail we chose, but if we remain true to our values and character, they will take us where we can protect and promote the health of the public. Our vocation is disrupted. Our call to service remains intact. 🐍

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Did You Know?

NEHA continues to add to its Environmental Health Heroes in the Time of COVID-19 blog. Through these blogs, the work of NEHA members responding to the COVID-19 pandemic from the frontlines will be highlighted. Read what NEHA members are doing on local, industry, and international levels to ensure the health and safety of the public and the environment during the COVID-19 pandemic at www.neha.org/membership-communities/get-involved/day-in-life.

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