

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

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## Along the Lee Shore

**B**lind Pass Beach lies between the Sanibel and Captiva Islands, nestled in coastal Lee County, Florida. This gem is serviced by a diminutive parking lot that extorts a \$5/hour fee from motoring visitors. I reluctantly forfeited \$10 from my checking account and endured the scorching hot sand to secure a spot where the Gulf of Mexico unites with the Wulfert Channel.

Within minutes of arrival I was captivated by the beach's charm as my wife and I waded into the Gulf and onto a sandbar some 100 m from shore. Shells, loose coral, and sand dollars were abundant. Reluctantly we left these potential souvenirs in the ocean where they belonged. The customary summertime tropical afternoon rain shower threatened to ruin the romantic moment, but then again, thunderstorms and torrential rain give rise to the vegetation and verdant colors that punctuate the location's charm. They are inseparable.

The maritime industry takes an entirely different view of the lee shore. Lee shores are known as coastal areas where the wind blows towards the beach. History is replete with stories of foundering ships that ran aground in part by the wind that drove their vessels onto the rocks. Proximity to the lee shore provides a glimpse of coastal ecological splendor and is at the same time to be avoided by all but the most skilled sailors. Beauty and danger are siblings, and they too, are inseparable.

I see a parallel of the gales that pummel the lee shore with two major risks that I have increasingly observed across the public health landscape. The first is the human tendency to regress to the mean or take the path of least

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resistance down the neural pathways of the familiar. These neural pathways are real. They reside in the brain and are like the repeated route we take when commuting to work. When a vehicle accident occurs during our morning commute, cortisol is released into our bloodstream as we manage our emotions and attendant stress. We enter a moment when our journey to work is disrupted and we ponder an alternate path for our vehicle. Make no mistake, the brain's plasticity can accommodate change but the immediate impact of an unwelcome confounder to our morning commute can be profound. Consider road rage if you doubt my hypothesis.

The second and more disturbing characteristic I detect is the Dunning-Kruger effect. The researchers who first observed and reported the phenomena summarized that people who are incompetent at a task will almost always overestimate their abilities. Ironically, these people are literally unable to recognize their own incompetence. Discretion and my continued employment as executive director temper my impulse to provide environmental public health illustrations. Privately, I am comfortable with the notion you can spot this attribute in people you know and love.

The neural pathways of the familiar and the Dunning-Kruger effect are cognitive fraternal twins. While most of us desire to closeout calendar year 2020 as quickly as possible, I am impressed that we should use this disruptive time to grow and escort the profession to a brighter future. A future characterized by recognition, sustained support, and professional self-actualization. If our neural pathways and ego are disrupted by COVID-19, then let us exploit this state of mental activation.

First, we should build on the Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH) articles published last year in the *Journal of Environmental Health*, *American Journal of Public Health*, and *Environmental Health Perspectives* through a partnership between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Environmental Health Association, and Baylor University. These workforce articles dispense with dated notions and provide clarity on who we are and our expressed needs. I recommend these articles be considered required reading in academic programs as they provide important markers of the state of this profession as it was in 2019.

Second, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in 2012 identified environmental health as a foundational public health service. They provided us a beachhead to disrupt cliché perceptions of who we are and what we do. Here is our opportunity to answer questions: What does foundational public health service mean?

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What core governmental environmental health services should each program be prepared to deliver? What menu of additional services should we provide reflecting local conditions? If we do not answer these questions, then someone outside the profession will fill the void on our behalf.

Third, lets rally around our strengths. We maintain good relationships with the American Academy of Sanitarians, National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council, Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs, and International Federation of Environmental Health. We also enjoy solid working relationships with our counterpart environmental health associations throughout the planet, as many of you observed during our recent Digital Defense virtual conference in August. What can we achieve together that we cannot achieve alone? This question is not intended to be a koan.

Last week we convened a hotwash after the Digital Defense virtual conference. The aim was to aggregate and summarize lessons learned from our first major virtual conference that attracted over 2,100 registrants. The conference suffered from warts, blemishes, and internal staff conflict, but hey, we pulled it off, door-to-door in under six weeks. We learned we could operate in a high-tech, high-touch environment. We learned that staff who considered themselves technically incompetent could acquire skills to use new software systems. Perhaps most importantly, we learned that when we work together and share credit, there is no end to what we can accomplish. I am struck how stress has the innate ability to provide illumination.

I commit to repurpose the dickery of 2020 into an opportunity in 2021 to disrupt our



Lee County shoreline in Florida. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

cognitive processes to chart a new navigational course. In fact, we may have entered a once in a career year to reestablish our professional identity as an essential public health service. We will not bask in the glow of our colleagues in the clinical professions. We cannot compete with the human drama and the emotions associated with the health-care setting, no matter how many lives we protect and life expectancies we extend. At the same time, our profession is at the intersection of the things our communities hold sacred—our family's health, safety, and financial security.

The Florida Lee County shoreline and the sailor's leeward shore represent more than a double entendre. Tropical gales and prevailing wind can nurture us or pummel us onto the rocky shorelines of our minds. We must dispense with our familiar grooves and create our future because history demonstrates

that someone who does not understand or appreciate our profession may do it for us. Our profession possesses the grit, the ability to work together, and willingness to share credit. We can do this.

As we departed Blind Pass Beach, Sanibel traffic came to halt in both directions. My cortisol level rose, the worst of my churlish tendencies on full display as I lamented the inept drivers around me. My partner dutifully called out my poor attitude and inability to relax and enjoy the scenery. I took a deep breath and looked to identify the source of the delay. A baby alligator trundled across the road while more thoughtful and appreciative motorists regaled in the photo opportunity. 🐊

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## Did You Know?

You can access NEHA's policy and position statements at [www.neha.org/publications/position-papers](http://www.neha.org/publications/position-papers). NEHA's latest position statement focuses on racism and environmental health. Other recent statements cover COVID-19, adoption and implementation of the current Food and Drug Administration *Food Code*, cottage foods, clean energy, ear piercing guns and micro-blading, and mosquito control. You can also view the declarations of support NEHA recently posted for World Environmental Health Day, National Food Safety Education Month, and National Preparedness Month.