Along the Lee Shore

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lind Pass Beach lies between the Sani-
bel 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 dol-
lars were abundant. Reluctantly we left these
potential souvenirs in the ocean where they
belonged. The customary summertime tropi-
cal afternoon rain shower threatened to ruin
the romantic moment, but then again, thun-
derstorms 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 sto-
ries 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
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 accom-
modate 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 charac-
teristic 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 abili-
ties. 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 illustra-
tions. 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 cal-
endar 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 rec-
ognition, 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 Under-
standing the Needs, Challenges, Opportu-
nities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Envi-
ronmental Health (UNCOVER EH) articles
published last year in the Journal of Envi-
rornmental 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 Bay-
lor University. These workforce articles dis-
pense with dated notions and provide clar-
ity 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 Sci-
ences, Engineering, and Medicine in 2012
identified environmental health as a founda-
tional 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, let’s 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 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 healthcare 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.

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

You can access NEHA’s policy and position statements at 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 microblading, 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.