

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

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Bite at the Cherry

Hurricane Ida is predicted to announce its arrival in my neighborhood this evening, sometime around sunset. While the wind and rain will be less pronounced in Maryland than it was in Mississippi and Louisiana, we nonetheless anticipate gully washers and abnormal tides in the Chesapeake Bay drainage system. The storm is arriving. Tornadoes are predicted. We know the drill. “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes”—a quote inaccurately attributed to Mark Twain. What can we learn from our forebearers?

Florence Nightingale might offer some insight. She almost single-handedly reframed the manner in which we think about sanitation, hygiene, and disease. Nightingale was assigned to a barrack that had been converted into a military hospital in November 1854 during the Crimea War. As the story unfolds, she had been alerted to the deplorable conditions of the wartime healthcare by Sir William Howard Russell, a reporter who described the setting there as having “not the least attention paid to decency or cleanliness.” Nightingale used her considerable charm and connections to ascend to the position of barrack administrator and went about the business of changing British army hospital policy.

Nightingale enjoyed considerable influence in the U.S., though I find no reference of her ever visiting here. American Unitarian Minister Henry W. Bellows was inspired by what was learned from the British and lobbied Secretary of War Simon Cameron in 1861 to create a Civil War-era sanitary commission. President Abraham Lincoln issued an execu-

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tive order to create what he referred to as the “fifth wheel” to the coach of state. Environmental health was formally recognized as an essential element of government, a decision that proved to reduce morbidity and mortality in dramatic fashion when compared to the Mexican–American War of a few years earlier.

As we see, individuals matter. Their personalities and enthusiasms matter. The linkages between the press, an inspired nurse, a committed minister, a secretary of war, and ultimately the president of the U.S. matter. Seeing ourselves as essential workers would benefit from a reframing. This moment in time we must think about ourselves individually and collectively as modern-day Florence Nightingales. In that spirit I can’t free myself of an experience I had with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2013.

I hosted a meeting convened in Chicago, Illinois, focused on primary care–public health integration. Bechara Choucair was health director of the city and in that capac-

ity secured the commitment of the mayor to speak for 5 minutes to jump-start the proceedings. Most people know that Emanuel is assertive and has a reputation for being abrasive. I found his staff to be nice but difficult to work with. For weeks they pummeled me with endless questions in an effort to pin down details and preparations—all for a 5-minute welcome speech. His administrative staff did not speak with his security detail. In the end I negotiated the details among and between the various internal city hall factions who desired to control every moment of his visit, including which door he would enter. Minutes before he arrived, I was exasperated. I expressed my frustration to my boss inclusive of a few animated words not suitable for print. Then the moment arrived.

As I introduced Emanuel, he was unlike anything I had expected. He was humorous, knowledgeable, and spontaneous. He sensed he had a friendly audience and he worked them. The 5 minutes turned into 10, then 15. His staff were somewhat apoplectic as they tried in vain to get his attention by tapping on their wrist watches. He was on a roll. He demonstrated a masterful display of a politician at the peak of his game. As he wrapped up, I believe he sensed my nervousness and asked me if I would validate his parking voucher, much to the amusement of the attendees. He had won me over.

The same Rahm Emanuel was recently interviewed by a reporter for a podcast to which I subscribe. The host asked him if we have entered a new era, perhaps one where Ameri-

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cans would take public health, pandemics, and climate change more seriously. His response floored me. He replied yes to us potentially entering in a new era. Then came a sobering clarification. These are not his exact words but he said something to the effect that public health's job is to divide and isolate us, industry's job is to connect and bridge us. Ouch. Emanuel has been nominated to be ambassador to Japan and in that role will continue to be an outsized influencer. Divide and isolate is not the essence of public health. What went wrong?

I have been asked to speak on the future of environmental health at an upcoming Food and Drug Administration regional seminar. While my allotted time is 45 minutes, I've prepared 42 slides. I am reluctant to remove even one slide because I feel each is like a gem, carefully considered and complementary of those before and after. We all know that's way too many slides for a 45-minute presentation. Perhaps I am part of the problem. I'm so obsessed with being right with my



Ahead of the storm. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

slide deck that I've left the Rahm Emanuels of the world to draw their own conclusions about public health and the environment.

In professional life we rarely have a second chance to make a first impression. I sense that moment is now. Various parts of the country are simultaneously under drought or flooding conditions, are arguing about masks, are suffering from algal blooms, and are victims of

tornadoes—all the while enrollments in academic public health programs are skyrocketing. This time is our generation's Florence Nightingale moment. I must get to Emanuel before he jets off to Tokyo. 🐼

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NOMINATIONS OPEN!



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