

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

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Lee Vining

*You stand out
as an inspiration.*

I am convinced my fingerprints remain etched into the steering wheel of the Silver Dragon, the nickname of our Nissan Xterra. Vehicle traffic on U.S. Route 395 had been limited to those equipped with chains. Police were out in enforcement. Oddly, law enforcement attention was on the northbound traffic narrowly targeting road warriors making their way from Bishop, California, in the south to Lee Vining, California, in the north. I was in Lee Vining, planning to head south during an epic snowstorm on Thanksgiving weekend. Since I was riding solo, and jacked up on espresso, I made the poor decision to saddle up the two-wheel drive Silver Dragon, sans chains, and risk the steep slopes and motor on down to Bishop. That drive was one for the ages. A 1-hour trip under normal conditions turned into an iconic 3-hour adventure worthy of a Hunter S. Thompson *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* yarn.

Lee Vining lies in Eastern Sierra, which is magical in many respects, particularly for those with an interest in water policy, environmental health, and the ecological impacts of humans on the environment. I was there with camera in hand to visit the old ghost town of Bodie and photograph the famous tufas—calcium carbonate formations that revealed themselves in Mono Lake after a thirsty Los Angeles diverted the lake's main water source in 1941. In short, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power began diverting Mono Lake's tributary streams 350 miles to the south. The water volume dropped precipitously, leaving some serious eye candy in the form of tufas, as well as an

awful ecological legacy. For those of you into movies, *Chinatown*, the 1974 neo-noir mystery film directed by Roman Polanski, captures some of the drama of water resource decisions of that period.

The adrenaline rush of dropping below the snow line pulsed through my veins as I careened through Bishop in route to Loma Linda, where I was employed as the dean of the School of Public Health. That memory returned to me yesterday as I enjoyed a lengthy zoom conversation with one of my colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The new Congress and administration imbued him with a sense of possibilities and enthusiasm customarily associated with a beautiful sunrise. Perhaps the recent draining of the public health enterprise to feed hungry bureaucrats pining for quick fixes and limited government can be amended after all.

With the dawn of the 117th Congress, there are some priorities that have direct relevance to us, accompanied by some alarming developments. First notes of optimism, and the elephant in the room: climate and health. There appears to be a serious all-government approach to climate issues, with an emphasis on climate justice. Communities that shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden

are regrettably communities with the smallest voices and influence. That could change over the next 4 years. Perhaps not a moment too soon. As reported in the latest scientific studies, the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), which drives the currents of the Atlantic Ocean, is showing evidence of stress. Recent reports suggest that AMOC is getting weaker, which has implications for the entire marine food chain, as well as the relatively mild environment enjoyed by residents of western Europe. This thermohaline circulation plays many other critical roles in our lives, particularly for those of us who reside on the eastern seaboard. We must take climate and health seriously. I am flummoxed by our country's propensity for cures over prevention in most matters of strategic national importance.

The federal government has identified other priorities. We can anticipate renewed interest and investment in reducing lead exposure, addressing root causes of harmful algal blooms, and maturing our efforts around per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), the group of man-made chemicals that have been showing up in drinking water in many of our communities.

We plan to strike while the iron is hot and in that spirit, have planned a virtual NEHA Hill Day 2021 on April 22. The NEHA Board of Directors will engage in about 50 individual meetings with federal lawmakers to ensure your interests are being advanced in the halls of Congress and felt throughout the federal government. I am delighted to report that

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Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan) may reintroduce the Environmental Health Workforce Act. The act could receive serious consideration in this Congress given its constituency and progressive orientation. Our fingers are crossed.

While these glimmers of renewed interest in our profession are reassuring, now is not the time to breathe a sigh of relief. The National Association of County and City Health Officials Chief Executive Officer Lori Freeman and President Jennifer Kertanis spoke to our board in February. Approximately 20% of the local health officials nationwide have resigned, retired, or been forced out of office as a function of the pandemic. The White House has released preliminary climate plans that regrettably failed to include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I am apoplectic. The prior U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator runs point on domestic climate issues, she knows better, and we can do better.

Amid these developments, I have commissioned the creation of a short, 2.5-minute animated video. This video will be targeted at elected officials, boards of health, and influencers. It will not be technical. It will not be scientific. It will not be complicated. The through line is that our profession is the guardian angel that protects our nation's health, safety, and economic security. The



Mono Lake at dawn. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

colors, narration, and sequencing have been meticulously considered. While the success and impact of the video are uncertain, I feel that if we are ever going to change the narrative around our profession, we need to take measured risks and experiment with unproven ideas like this one. Your careers and the health of the nation deserve no less.

Mono Lake at dawn is breathtaking. The lake, which is 2–3 times saltier than ocean water, is also a vibrant ecosystem comprised of algae, brine shrimp, and alkali flies. These comprise the base of a food chain that nourishes millions of migrating shorebirds. In

many parts of the country, the public health enterprise has had its resources redirected to other parts of government, leaving environmental health as the elegant and inspiring tufas in an ecosystem otherwise drained of leadership and pummeled by some elements of society I, for one, thank you and am inspired by your courage, tenacity, and commitment to your communities. At the dawn of a new era, you stand out as an inspiration. 🐼

Dave

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IN MEMORIAM CONTINUED

foot forward on everything he did and I had a deep admiration for that. With respect to balance, I envied how he was able to juggle everything he had in his life and how well he did it. He lived life to the fullest and no one facet was lacking,” stated long-time friend John Lai in his eulogy for Catanyag.

Donations can be made to the GoFundMe account set up to provide support for Catanyag's family at www.gofundme.com/l/dennis-catanyag. An online memorial site dedicated to him can be viewed at www.forevermissed.com/dennis-catanyag.

NEHA extends its deepest sympathies to the family, friends, and colleagues of Dennis Catanyag. His passion and devotion to protecting the health and safety of the communities he served, as well as the love and joy he brought to those around him, will not be forgotten.

Source: California Environmental Health Association, Oregon Environmental Health Association, Sacramento County Environmental Health Division, and www.forevermissed.com/dennis-catanyag. 🐼

Editor's Note: If you would like to share information about the passing of an environmental health professional to be mentioned in a future In Memoriam, please contact Kristen Ruby-Cisneros at kruby@neha.org. The *Journal* will publish the In Memoriam section twice a year in the June and December issues, or in other issues as determined appropriate.