

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

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## Jolie Laide

Cynthia Ozick's *Riddle of the Ordinary* rings true. "We often take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude." Touché.

While I spend less time musing on the 10th floor of our offices in Colorado and more at my residence in Maryland, the internal tension I feel on raising our profession's profile is no less intense. Ozick elegantly captures the conundrum. "The extraordinary does not let you walk away and shrug your shoulders. But the ordinary is a much harder case." How do we lead the profession from ordinary to extraordinary? I increasingly believe the journey starts with us. Let me share a story from the research community that might strike you as irrelevant. I feel, however, it reveals a few million years of evolutionary wisdom. The story begins in the springtime in a California wetland somewhere east of the Sierra Nevada.

Each spring spadefoot toads amble out of their winter slumber to copulate in vernal pools. The cacophony of male toads calling out to potential mates would drown out the clumsy, amorous advances of their human counterparts in bars and nightclubs. But here is where the spadefoot toad strategy diverges from their human counterparts: the toads croak their romantic intentions in unison. The harmonious amphibious symphony serves to intimidate potential predators and makes the location of any one individual male toad virtually undetectable.

A few years ago, the U.S. Department of Defense decided to change the flight path of

*Let's learn to sing  
in unison.*

their aircraft training sorties. The new route brought the fighter jets directly over the wetlands where the toads were engaged in their annual reproductive jubilee. The sound of the aircraft disturbed the toads who ceased singing as the aircraft passed by. As the early adopter male toads attempted to restart the process, their lone croaks were easily identified and located by coyotes and owls who selectively consumed them. Each time the planes flew by, the process repeated itself. Amphibian populations plummeted.

Community singing is a protective strategy for spadefoot toads. As I ponder the future of the profession, I feel there is a lesson to be learned here, bringing new meaning to the cliché of hanging together or hanging separately. I learned this week that in the late 1980s there were almost 40 states that required the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential as a standard of practice. I understand that number has plummeted to 22 as of 2021. Each state, like a lone croaking toad, is potentially picked off by local predators committed to the fallacy that the health, safety, and security of their constituents is best served by less qualified professionals.

Likewise, the soy industry pondered its future in the 1950s as this new source of protein failed to achieve market penetration. Evidently no one had an appetite for vegetarian meat, soy yogurt, or soy milk. The industry pivoted. Instead of having a marquee product, they employed an alternate strategy: put soy in everything. Today you can find soy in infant formula, breadcrumbs, gravy, cooking spray, soup, chewing gum, crackers, frozen desserts, snack foods, etc. This strategy is counterintuitive to me as I have long held to the notion that if you attempt to be everything, you end up being nothing.

This part of the column is where I seek your ideas. Do we remain true to our marquee services, such as food and septic systems, or do we embrace the full spectrum of the environmental challenges that our communities have and will encounter? The rub is that many of the emerging issues will not be funded under a fee-for-service model. Who is going to pay for the management of harmful algal blooms? Will local governments start charging a climate change tax? Microplastics? Fire recovery? Drought management? Extreme heat? Next pandemic? Tire shreds? Vector management?

As the national advocate for the profession, we take our charge seriously. While we owe it to you to be successful, we must increasingly be an organization of value. We should aspire to be a connector among the allied health professions, schools and programs, health-care, engineering, planning, and the private

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virtually. Despite this unusual start, I can honestly say that my favorite part of working at NEHA is the people I work with. Being the marketing and communications manager allows me to work with all departments within NEHA, which enables me to support their hard work and ensure that our membership takes advantage of everything we have to offer.

I graduated from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts in communications with an emphasis in mixed media and broadcasting, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in political science with an emphasis in American political systems. Prior to joining NEHA, I was the director of communications

with the Colorado Contracts Association for 5 years. Early in my career I worked with the Colorado House of Representatives and served as a communications and constituent engagement aide for the Denver City Council.

I grew up in the small town of Granby, Colorado, and moved to Denver after college. My husband and I own a home in Aurora and truly love the Denver metro area. My passions include traveling, music, interior decorating, hanging out with my husband and dogs, and spoiling my nephew. I am looking forward to growing with NEHA and meeting all of my wonderful coworkers in person. 🐾

## Did You Know?

Assembled in 2020, the NEHA History Project Task Force was charged to study and review the rich history of NEHA and the environmental health field, as well as make that history available to all. The NEHA History Project webpage highlights and shares the work of the task force, including an online virtual museum of artifacts from environmental health's past, electronic access to the "NEHA Green Book" that presents the history of NEHA's first 50 years, and much more. Check it out at [www.neha.org/neha-history-project](http://www.neha.org/neha-history-project).

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sector. Like the soy industry, we should embed ourselves in everything, not as a survival mechanism but because we can speak to the issues those sectors value. Value creation and fee-for-service might ultimately prove to be incongruent models.

What I describe is a journey, not a destination. Funders generally do not desire to support community engagement and partnership development. The emphasis is on deliverables—numbers, dollars, impact. These deliverables are easily demonstrated by regulatory and conformance style inspection and illness data. All the while, like spadefoot toads, public health officials and their authority are being picked off one by one by disruptions in the political universe. Where do we go from here?

Let's learn to sing in unison. We are exploring the potential opportunity to engage a consultant to develop communica-



*A view of the Pink Moon, a supermoon that occurred on April 26–27, 2021. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

tion tools and resources for both our public and private sector members. The aim of this endeavor would be for us to sing in unison,

from Guam in the west to Puerto Rico in the east. We would be better equipped to consistently tell our story, convey our value, and be generally more understandable and accessible to the public at large. Let's see if we can translate our organizational success into something valuable—a universally embraced profession. A profession whose broad training and preparation in natural and social sciences will serve to advance the health, safety, and financial security of communities everywhere.

I leave you with a photo I took of the April 2021 Pink Moon. The Cherokee Nation of the East Coast call it the "kawohni" or "flower moon," and the Creek Nation of the Southeast refer to it as "tasahcee-rakko" or "big spring moon." It symbolizes the arrival of spring rains and the promise of a bountiful summer. A vernal pool pregnant with possibilities. 🐾

*Dave*

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