

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



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## Of Similes, Metaphors, & Intimacy

**E**nvironmental health is the sun around which the health, safety, and security of our communities orbit. The presence of the sun is warm and reassuring on a frigid, blustery morning. Lengthening daylight is harbinger of pleasant spring weather. The sun's ultraviolet light fuels photosynthesis, the very foundation of life on earth. The reliable presence of sunlight in many parts of the world. It is always darkest just before the dawn, when the sun breaks through in the east, welcoming the possibilities of a new day. Our profession is like the sun.

Yes, I believe I know what you are thinking. "I'm not going to waste my time reading this." I ask you to hang with me for a moment. As I lay down these thoughts, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Environmental Health's FY 16 budget is under assault. Yet again. This agency is the intellectual and financial foundation around which much of our professional work is grounded. While I won't dive into the details and tales of woe, the evidence is all around us that society values our work and what we represent, but does not understand us. Our usual and customary response? Evidence. Data. Statistics. If we could only repackage our report, get the public information officer's attention, or get the press on our side, then the evidence will sway the public's opinion. Sound familiar? My inner voice tells me we are wrong.

People, including elected officials, generally do not act on data; they act on their values and beliefs. The recent measles outbreak in the U.S. is an illustration. Evidently there is

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no amount of data on the safety and efficacy of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine that will dilute the autism conspiracy theory. Furthermore, I am acquainted with many people who are ardent objectors to the fluoridation of drinking water because of some perceived government plot, and there is no pile of health benefit data or return on investment reports that can convince them otherwise. The data analysis you mastered in statistics may help you get published and perhaps earn you fame, but it will not guarantee your success as a practitioner.

The educational processes that provided you and me the scientific basis of our professional identity are deeply flawed in some crucial features. Think about it. A vast majority of our preparation is laser focused on basic science. My crude estimate is 90%. Now reflect on how decisions are made in your company, association, or agency. Almost every decision and opinion program is grounded in social science. My crude estimate is 90%. Therein lies the conundrum. We are in many ways uniquely ill prepared, academically speak-

ing, to promote environmental health with the general world around us in a manner that predisposes us to success, and more importantly, understanding.

There have been recent efforts to address this issue. Our friends at the American Public Health Association have provided leadership with their shepherding of the National Environmental Health Partnership Council. The council has been working in collaboration with Frameworks, an organization that makes complicated issues accessible to the general public. You can learn more about Framework's efforts on behalf of our profession on their Web site: [www.frameworksinstitute.org/environmental-health.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/environmental-health.html). I encourage you to explore their findings and test their proposed frames (metaphors).

I also believe we have something that almost no other public health profession has—the power of intimacy and image. Again, think about it. There are few things more intimate than the act of breast-feeding. Are there risks associated with breast-feeding? Of course; most of these are related to maternal environmental exposure, to organic pollutants, pesticides, and metals. In such unfortunate cases, we engage in the "lather-rinse-repeat" cycle, of being the experts where we identify the sources, describe the exposure pathways, and present the implications. Then we come to a full STOP. This is the problem. I am tired of being the bearer of bad news—or as I like to call it, "the prince of darkness."

We need to do a much better job of relating to society in a manner that resonates with

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them, irrespective of how unscientific it sounds on the surface. The energy industry has no qualms about bending the rules. Think about “Clean Coal” campaign. People, the last time I checked there was no such thing as clean coal.

In the breast-feeding example, we could express our commitment to universally held maternal values, such as infant-mother bonding through the act of breast-feeding. Let’s be associated with loving and nurturing acts, the values shared by all humans. Let’s get into the intimacy business. What is more intimate than the food we prepare and place in our children’s mouths? How about the universal recognition of the value of clean water? Let’s



*The intimacy of the parent-child bond. The intimacy of our relationship with the environment.*

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align ourselves and our messages with society’s values and beliefs.

*The environmental health profession believes that mothers who choose to breast-feed should confidently nourish their child free from worry. As parents, we too value wholesome food and clean water. As citizens we desire our families to recreate in parks free from things that might harm us. You can count on us as predictably as the morning sun, and be confident that we will shine sunlight on things you need to know about to keep your family safe. We work every day to protect your families and ours.*

Complacency kills careers. It’s time to rethink ours. 🐞

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