

IF, I WERE TO DO THIS AGAIN....

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I stand here with mixed emotions. While I am highly honored to have been asked to do this, I recall the list of individuals who have fulfilled this role previously and I am awed, nervous and challenged. I have been placed among elite company, and am not at all sure that I belong. However, I tell you up front that my intent is to at least try to approach the established standard and I desire to do well before you, my valued peers. I hope I do not soil your or my predecessors' reputations.

In spite of the obvious fact that I have been around **almost** as long as dirt, I probably have quite a bit in common with many of you and that, too, places me in good company. I am the first of three sons, born to hard-working parents who valued education. I was reared on a small farm which was the property of the School Land commission. I guess that means I was actually a ward of the state. Because we farmed, I grew up in poverty, but did not realize that until later; everyone I knew was in the same shape. What I am has been greatly **influenced** by close associations with Vocational Agriculture, FFA and Agricultural Education, in my case for more than 45 years. As a high **schooler**, I was a rather shy fat boy who was challenged, inspired and encouraged by his Vo-Ag teacher. In later times, I have been privileged to labor with dedicated and caring people who also provided inspiration and encouragement. Consequently, I have a profound belief in our profession and the people who serve it. I relate all this to document that I am probably not too different from most of you--certainly, no better; hopefully, no worse.

There is something else you should know about me. As I become more "experienced" (note that I

did not say older), I find that my attention is drawn to some rather different things. For example, there is a funny little two-letter word that increasingly creeps into my thoughts and conversations. That word is IF. I **find** that, as I am supposed to, according to grammarians, I often use IF for implying a condition, supposition, stipulation or, sometimes, a concession. In searching for means of illustrating to you the manner in which IF is used in these contexts, I came across a little book, Don't Sauat with Yer Spurs On! Its author advises:

"If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop diggin'."

"If it don't seem like its worth the effort, it probably ain't."

"If you get to **thinkin'** you're a person of some influence, try **orderin'** somebody else's dog around."

"If you're **ridin'** ahead of the herd, take a look back every now and then to make sure it's still there."

"If you're gonna go, go like hell. If you're mind's not made up, don't use your spurs."

"If you're **gonna** take the measure of a man, take the full measure."

"If you want to forget all your troubles, take a little walk in a brand new pair of high-heeled **ridin'** boots."

"No matter who says what, don't believe it if it don't make sense." (From Don't Sauat With

Yer Spurs On!, Texas Bix Bender, Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City)

Another piece of advice in the same vein, attributed to the cookie man, Famous Amos, recommends, “If you’re **goin’** through hell, don’t stop to take pictures.”

Then, there are other times when I find myself using IF in another grammatically-prescribed way: as a function word to introduce an exclamation expressing a wish. In most cases, when expressing a wish, it usually goes something like, “If I were to do this again....”

An 85 year old Kentucky belle, Nadine Stair, must have been thinking along these lines when she said:

“If I had my life to live over, I’d dare to make more mistakes this time. I’d relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I’d have fewer imaginary ones.”

You see, I’m one of those people who lives sensibly and sanely hour **after** hour, day after day. Oh, I’ve had my moments and if I had it to do over again, I’d have more of them. In fact, I’d try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I’ve been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I would travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances. I

would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.” (Nadine Stair, Louisville, Kentucky, reprinted from the Seeker Newsletter, 1977)

In terms of life in general, Ms. Stair had some sound advice that we probably should all follow. However, her treatise also caused me to start reflecting upon my professional life and the wishes I might have if afforded the chance to relive some of my career. I would like to spend the next little while sharing with you a few things I would change, IF I were to do this again. As I do so, and without intending to appear self-deprecating, you will see that what I share with you is not very deep philosophically, nor can much of it be substantiated by research or other authoritative sources. It is not intended to be a diatribe or criticism of past events in my career or yours. Rather, because of my love for my profession and my deep respect for my peers, my message is sincere and heartfelt. As I proceed, you may **find** that you do not agree with my methods, but I ask you to believe that I have honorable motives. The following are a few things I have come to feel strongly about and would try to differently if allowed to come this way again:

The writings of Luke, in chapter 12, verse 48, remind us that “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” In my view, Agricultural Educators approach their responsibilities under the realization that indeed, we have been given much and that we must labor long and hard to merit this. Unfortunately, professional demands and activities, many of them self-imposed, have exacted a heavy toll on the well-being of some of our cohorts and their families. Because of that, IF I were to do this again, I would search for ways to help colleagues reduce or at least better deal with professional strife and stress which have adverse effects on marital and family relationships and even personal health. My goal would be, where possible, to help them head off those situations. Failing that, I would try

to find ways to be more understanding and supportive as they sought to deal with those challenges; to be there when and if they needed me.

I would try to find ways to help us work smarter. As a profession, you are extremely loyal and dedicated. You demonstrate a genuine love for your calling. You seem to exhibit adherence to a philosophy like that described in a comment I saw recently which was based upon Proverbs 13 : 11, and which says, "Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." Obviously, you value your work and you work hard. In fact, I don't think most of you could work much harder. But, I am convinced, you and I could work smarter. We need to get out of the mode of attempting to be too many things to too many people; of continually taking on more assignments. We need to find ways of saying, "no." We can, and should, better utilize our own and the talents of colleagues around us. We can better manage time and resources. In general, we need to create and maintain enjoyable and productive working environments. In a recent presentation on our campus, a speaker cited research from an unnamed source which indicated we spend 1/3 of our time working. Yet, only 2-5 percent of workers say they are excited about their jobs when they go to work. While I do not think those figures typify our profession, I venture that there are times when we would all have to admit to some less than positive feelings toward our chosen careers. Perhaps learning to work smarter might cause us to feel better and, subsequently, be more excited about our chosen occupations more often.

I would continue to advocate high performance standards for members of our profession as they strive toward tenure and promotion. However, particularly for the benefit of younger colleagues, I would insist that these standards be kept equitable and consistent. We need to make certain that the trends emerging in some areas do not gain a foothold in our profession. As an example, on ours and other campuses I have seen evidence that senior

faculty in some other areas, who have already gained tenure and promotions, seem bent upon setting higher levels of expectation for those who follow them in attempting to gain the same professional status. This is not right and needs to be headed off as quickly as possible. Those of us who have "made it", have moral and ethical obligations to our young peers.

My guess is that one of the charges to every search and screen committee assisting in recruiting for vacancies is for them to identify and recommend only those individuals who are worthy of long-term commitments and who have potential for being productive well into the future. Then, once this is done, and the new person is on board, it is expected that each co-worker will assume an obligation to contribute to the success of the new hire. This includes making them aware early and often of what they must do, helping them monitor their progress toward these expectations and otherwise doing everything possible to assist them to successfully reach appropriate professional plateaus.

I would strive to bring more credit to good teaching, the portion of our mission for which most of you have the highest level of expectation of yourself, from which you derive the greatest satisfaction when you receive the accolades of students and peers, but for which there are the lowest levels of tangible rewards and recognition. Agricultural Educators are good teachers. I believe that and I think the rest of you do too. We have ample evidence to support this contention and we have shared such with each other on numerous occasions. However, we have probably been essentially preaching to the choir. If I were to do this again, I would search out ways of sharing that documentation with those who administer the reward systems so skilled and successful teachers will receive their just due.

Increasingly I have come to realize how important it is for administrative units in higher

education institutions to have critical mass, a broader base and a willingness to expand spheres of influence and activity. And, I recognize that our programs have the potential for “good fit” with certain other entities within colleges of agriculture. Too, I know there have been some outstanding successes with regard to consolidations of Agricultural Education with other programs and I am very supportive of such moves when they are mutually beneficial. We have much to offer in the way of leadership for the formation of such units. And, being afforded opportunities to be involved in this is probably a real compliment to our programs and people. However, I worry that in some instances such “marriages” or other mandated changes in direction may result in the diminution of what has been our mainstay--the teacher education mission. Therefore, if I were to do this again, I would undertake a vigorous campaign, the central theme of which would be to make certain that regardless of administrative structure, programs of Agricultural Education maintain a focus on teacher education. I would continually remind folks that we have had a tremendous amount of success with that mission. It has brought us far. It still offers us much. I would warn all that abrogating or eroding the teacher education mission will adversely impact our well-being, even our existence as a discipline into the future.

I would have a greater commitment to helping us regain and then maintain unity within our profession. In my view there is less of that than we once had. It seems to me that within our own ranks, we are exhibiting more differences in philosophy, expressing more disagreement with regard to stances we should take on issues, being more vehement in expressing viewpoints and at times being less inclined to team up with others in efforts to serve the best interests of Agricultural Education. In saying this, I do not mean that we should all see things the same way; that there should be no differences. Nor, do I mean that there should be any hesitation in expressing these differences. Quite the contrary. Discussing and

debating our philosophical and other differences can be very productive. However, especially during times when a majority have agreed upon a direction or concurred with a certain action, we need to put differences aside and work among ourselves as well as with others in such a way that it will appear to those observing us that we are unified and dedicated to achieving the best possible results for all concerned. I think we failed to do this at the height of the trials and tribulations of the Council. As a result, I feel our organization lost some prestige and respect within the Agricultural Education family and I personally experienced some disappointment because we did not respond as positively as we could have to requests for assistance and support. I think those circumstances have changed somewhat and I would strive to make certain that others in our professions were made aware of that.

In a context that encompasses far more than Agricultural Education, IF I were to do this again, I would stress the need for, and dedicate myself to the practice of more civility in interactions with my fellow man. There is great need for curbing the rising cynicism and negativeness that seems to more frequently characterize our discussions of individuals and institutions. Our recent national elections should have served to remind us of the tremendous freedoms we enjoy in a democracy. Unfortunately, they also provided evidence of just how derogatory and mean some can be toward those people and organizations whose views and practices differ from theirs. In some cases, it would appear that a new definition of constructive criticism has emerged-- that criticism is constructive only when we are criticizing someone else. Perhaps we all need to remind ourselves that there is really nothing wrong with being nice to each other on occasion.

The list of things I would wish to do IF I were to do this again could continue to grow were it not for the fact that I know it is just a wish. No, not even a wish - a mere pipe dream. It is not an

option. I cannot, nor can you, erase the past. Even if we could, not only would it be frustrating, wasteful, even futile, but it would also require us to go against our very nature, for as a now-forgotten author put it.

“If God had wanted us to look back on each yesterday, he would have set out heads upon our necks in a different way. Had we been meant to trod old pathways we had once known, our feet would fit just opposite on our ankle bones. Our joints are hinged in such a clever way, it is far easier for us to reach ahead to each new day. Our eyes would be behind our heads if we had been meant to stare into the past and brood upon mistakes committed there. God know what he was doing when he fashioned us his way, and if we will but follow his design for us, we cannot go astray.”

So, is there a choice? What are my and your options? It is rather simple: we follow the grand design and reach ahead to the time before us and use it to the best of our abilities. I plan to try to do just that. I am not through yet. Even though it appears I have snow on my rooftop, that does not mean there is no fire in the furnace. While I cannot change what has transpired in the past, I can have a part in making a positive difference now and in what is to come. To accomplish this, I should heed James Thurber’s advice when he said, “Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness.” Also, for the part of my life that the Creator allows me to manage and control, it would be well for me to believe in and put into practice a simple little creed which states, IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME! I invite you to join with me and lets see what, together, we can cause to BE for the good of humankind and the betterment of our profession.