Why We Have Professors

By Monroe S. Miller

It surprises even me that it took this long — over thirty years — to answer completely what seems an easy and obvious question. You would think everybody knows why we need professors.

I should be the last one to even be thinking about this question. After all, I have lived in Madison since 1964 (except for two years in the Army when I was a resident of a Saigon suburb) and Madison has LOTS of professors. We have emeritus professors, former professors (usually people who switched careers to make more money), and active, working professors on the UW-Madison campus.

It is common for Madison area residents, especially the Madison westsiders and Middleton citizens, to have a professor as a neighbor. When I lived on Tomahawk Trail, only a block from my golf course, Dr. Jack Berbee lived next door. He was a great guy — still is — and a regular sort of fellow who had an excellent career in the Plant Pathology Department. His son was one of the best employees I've ever had; ask Mike Lee about that.

You'd guess a west side club like mine might have a number of professors as members, and we do. Over the years I have gotten to know them as golfers, not renown faculty members like many of them are. They have been awfully nice to me, extending respect for what I know and what I do. Once incident in particular tells a lot about them, and it pleases me every time I think of it.

A while back — quite a while back, actually — the dean of the medical school was elected to our board of directors. Dr. Peter Eichman was a professor of neurology, too, and he really likes to play golf, despite a physical handicap. When I was introduced to him for the first time, I shook his hand offered something creative like "it's nice to meet you, Dr. Eichman."

His reply spoke volumes: "Call me Pete." At Blackhawk, I guess, he sort of wanted to get away from the duties and hassles of building a new hospital and administering the medical school and the concerns about his patients. He simply wanted to be known by his first name. I was impressed then and all these years later, it still sets him apart from others.

In my own case, there are professors in my family. My great uncle was a professor of music at the University of Minnesota, and my youngest sister — Dr. Virginia Miller-Hamre — is a faculty member at a Chicago college. My oldest daughter is into the second year of her PhD program — Minnesota again — and can see the day when her dream to be a professor will come true.

Neighbors, friends, family and work — no matter where I go, it seems, there are college professors.

All the Madison area superintendents, as well as those elsewhere, have had their lives profoundly affected by college professors. It seems impossible that Drs. Love, Worf, Newman and Koval are retired; that notwithstanding, the respect and gratitude and even affection extended to these men is rare. They were our teachers; they conducted research to help us solve our problems and as the years went by their Extension activities kept us sharp and current. When we were in trouble, their phones where the first to ring. Their career purpose was a noble one, indeed.

Obviously, professors are in one of the really special careers in our society. There is little question about what they do and why they are important and why we need them. Three separate events this past winter, taken together, focused on what may actually be the biggest thing they do for us. They were good reminders.

Dr. Dan Potter, an entomology professor from the University of Kentucky, travelled to the GCSAA conference to give a lecture and share his research about black cutworm control with us. It was a fascinating lecture to listen to — I took nary a note. I was too busy listening.

It was a story of how an observation — golf course superintendents noting cutworms often reappear a short five or so days after treatment - led to some experiments involving where cutworms lay their eggs. This led to the discovery that the eggs were always deposited on the grass plant leaf blade tips. Mowing greens (or tees) each day removed almost all of the cutworm eggs, leading to an experiment to determine where they were coming from when they would reappear. Surprise! They crawl on from surrounding turf! That also explained why insecticide applications often last for such a short period.

The next step was figuring out how far these larvae would crawl. Potter and his grad student also found out that some rough grasses like those used for surrounds are resistant to cutworm damage. The upshot of this wonderfully interesting research was that

by mowing, depositing clippings a distance away from the green or tee, and sodding surrounds with resistant varieties, a golf course superintendent could nearly eliminate insecticide use for cutworm control.

It seemed to me Professor Potter did more than research — he thought through a problem with logic, did some studies, followed them with some more thinking about the next stop. His thinking was driven with concern for us and his interest in control methodology that did not use insecticides. His curiosity also drove this research project. It was a beautiful story to hear.

Less than two hours after that, in the same lecture hall, I listened to Dr. Frank Rossi lead the assembled superintendents through the sensibility and practicality of understanding what Rachel Carson's Silent Spring has brought to our places of business. Although I am highly prejudiced, I think Frank might have been the only one, or one of the few, who could have given a conciliatory, open minded lecture like this one. Or at least few could have done it better.

Frank did not defend the weak science or poor data or any of the other shortcomings of this book, but neither did he dismiss Carson as an irrelevant old spinster who happened to be an excellent writer. He suggested some of her insights were valuable, even legitimate.

Silent Spring marked the beginning of the environmental movement. It caused a lot of changes that Frank gently suggested were necessary — the right-to-know rules, environmental impact considerations of all kinds, and scores of other equally obvious things. He reminded us how Silent spring has inspired us to posture ourselves as environmentalists "in our own right." In the time since this book, we have become better educated, have better trained staff members, and have learned to appreciate the value of public relations.

Frank emphasized how we must continually change our behavior or be regulated to an extreme. Research into all the unknowns of our business must go on, another of what Rossi thinks is a legacy of Silent Spring. Carson's words have put us under scrutiny, made us more accountable and diligent. He emphasized his agreement with Carson that we must share the earth's limited resources, learn to cooperate and not dominate.

Frank's efforts impressed me. He is more thoughtful and deliberate on these matters than any of us, or at least he is more articulate. And who more than Frank would be so unabashed to speak so bluntly with such eloquence? I was proud of him — Wisconsin guy, you know — but also grateful for the influence he was having on me, a positive influence. My guess was others were reacting the same as me. That he is able to be that influential at such a young age must be respected.

Prior to departing for San Francisco, I had xeroxed Professor Kussow's Wisconsin Soils Report article that was going to appear in the March/April 1995 issue of THE GRASS ROOTS. I had proof read it before leaving, an easy job with Wayne's writing, but wanted time to read it carefully for content.

You will remember it — "Managing Potassium in Putting Greens". In that piece, Wayne asks a question, proposes an answer and then shares either research results or his own theory. It is an intriguing trip through the mind of a Soil Science professor as he works his way to a rational and reasoned recommendation that involves soil test K levels, annual applications, N:K ratios and the like. It was a lesson in logical thinking, and at the end of the article I was smiling. How lucky we are to have him in our corner, thinking about our problems. And he does this in every issue of THE GRASS ROOTS. And in the research he does and in the classrooms where he lectures and from the podium when he speaks.

That's what professors do so well and might be why we need them the most — they think through problems and map out solutions or ways to get to a bottom line answer. They are able to put tremendous resources into their thinking — a lot of education, libraries, colleagues in and tangential to their field, some inherent patience, discipline, exceptional intelligence and a big intellectual curiosity. We might be able to handle a few of those items, but usually not all of them. Their work is different from ours — we tend to spend a lot of time problem solving, too, but for more practical and immediate problems. And make no mistake — we are indeed good problem solvers.

I contend that it takes a different kind of person to sort out the details, design experiments and think through ways of dealing with the cutworm problem, for example, than it does for keeping a crew of twenty employees motivated and focused and moving on a hot summer. I didn't say harder, just different. We need professors to do specialized thinking for us, the kind of thinking we are not necessarily trained to do or particularly interested in doing. We need them looking at the big picture AND studying the smallest and minutest molecular details.

They are our security blanket for today; they hold a good bit of our future prosperity in their labs, in the research plots and in their minds. Without them and their independence, we aren't going to get far or improve very much.

God bless them all! ^/