

## Commentary

# Als Ik Kan...My New Year's Resolution

by Jim D. Roach

### Inspiring New Students

I keep a small vial of a white crystalline compound near the phone on my desk. Each time new students matriculate onto our campus, I take that vial to a large lecture hall where I welcome those students and their parents on behalf of the faculty. I try to encapsulate the goals of higher education in a few brief statements and then I tell them a story about the chemical in the vial. The remarks typically go something like this...

I ask,

Why are you here today? Why have you chosen to attend college?

With a wry grin I say,

Those of you seated next to your parents would probably say..."Well Dr. Roach, I'm here to get an education!"

I chuckle and say

and you are.

I continue with

Some of you might say that you're here to perform, artistically or athletically. Still others, that you're here for the college experience...you're here to meet new people and to do new and exciting things. Nine years after I started college I had earned a Ph.D. in physical chemistry. For the years since, I have taught and done research at the college level. It has taken some time, but I think I can best distill the goals of higher education to this: you are here to find that subject...that discipline...that activity for which you have a true passion. And you're here to become a proficient practitioner of that thing you have a true passion for doing. For the *very* fortunate among you, that thing you have a true passion for doing will also be that thing that earns your livelihood and becomes your career...as it did for me. My passion is teaching chemistry, especially through research. I absolutely love my job, and I look forward to being on this campus each and every day. Now as a professor of chemistry, I would be somewhat remiss if I didn't teach you all a little something about chemistry.

Then, holding the vial just over my head I say,

So, I'm going to tell you a story about the chemical I have in this vial. Years ago, a wheat farmer in western Kansas used the material in this vial to fortify the soil in his fields. That enriched earth was able to provide enough wheat to produce ten loaves of bread, where only one loaf was possible before... bread that fed the hungry and the starving in both this country and abroad. But with this same material...with this same stuff....loaded in the back of a Ryder truck, another man in Kansas made a bomb that when detonated killed 168 people including 19 children. The chemical compound is ammonium nitrate, the principal component of commercial fertilizer, which when heated becomes a potentially deadly explosive. It can fortify and enrich—or it can destroy.

How you spend your time in college is a lot like this bottle of ammonium nitrate. You can, through hard work and diligence, spend your time enriching your future by finding that thing you have a true passion for doing. Or, through laziness and indifference, you can destroy the opportunity that now lies before you. Elie Wiesel, a very wise man, once said "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."<sup>1</sup> Don't be indifferent about the work that you do here. Write every paper; give every performance; take every test...to the absolute best of your abilities. On behalf of the faculty, welcome to Emporia State University.

### Academic Lethargy

Unfortunately, far too few heed my admonition to resist the tide of academic lethargy that has swept over higher education in recent years. The juxtaposition of dedication and indifference; of potential and squandered opportunity, appears in strikingly sharp contrast in the attitudes of today's college students. I would argue that the top students of today are as good as the top students of decades past. But faculty at all levels of education have lowered the bar of acceptance to such an extent that today's average students arrive ill-prepared for college; and they leave incapable of positively contributing to the professional sector. Passing grades are assessed and diplomas bestowed for doing little more than making a limited effort. By condoning, if not elevating, mediocrity, we have created a system that no longer instills in students the drive to passionately seek knowledge. Too little has been expected of students for far too long and we, the faculty, must do something about it. Of course programmatic change is difficult, but faculty can restore higher education to prominence by demanding more, expecting excellence, raising the bar one class at a time. I have a mantra by which we can all seek to abide...Als Ik Kan.

Als Ik Kan logo,  
courtesy of the  
Stickley Museum at  
Craftsman Farms.



## Levels of Expectation

At the turn of the last century, a particularly skilled craftsman was producing some of the finest pieces of furniture the world had seen. Using solid oak and peg construction he created a style (Mission) that was simple, elegant, and functional. Because of the superior craftsmanship used in the production of these pieces, many are still around today. And you know you have one these masterpieces because the man that made them emblazoned each with his company's logo...a medieval joiner's compass surrounding the Flemish words *Als Ik Kan*. While translations of the phrase vary, my favorite interpretation is "to the best of my ability". We frequently hear (or even use) similar statements in our everyday conversations, but rarely, if ever, are they spoken with the fervent passion Gustav Stickley intended. What if we all started giving lectures to the best of our abilities? What would happen if students started turning in papers and saying, "Here it is; I did my best?" And meant it! How would Stickley's model for furniture design translate to higher education?

Stickley valued the hand-made and guaranteed products that were of the highest quality. He had exceedingly high standards and refused to compromise those standards even when many competitors were mass-producing pieces at the onset of the industrial revolution. Perhaps technology in general and the Internet in particular are to higher education today, what mechanization was to the craft-guilds of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a consequence of mass-production, the world learned to accept a new concept that previously it would have found absolutely abhorrent: designed obsolescence. This made it okay to manufacture an inferior product that lasted only a few years; the factories could easily and cheaply produce another one just like it. Accepting designed-in obsolescence in the manufacture of our goods is one thing, but we cannot tolerate it in the education of our students.

## A Resolution: Raise Standards

Colleges and universities have become little more than student-factories; turning out products that are inferior or worse

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yet, obsolete when they walk off the commencement stage. As a physical chemist I can appreciate the importance of technology in both teaching and research. But, proficiency with technology does not guarantee good teaching. Perhaps we should all use a little more chalk and a little less tech; spend more time training students to think and less time telling them where to click. I have a New Year's resolution; a new strategy that I plan to unveil at the start of the spring semester (and at the beginning of every semester thereafter). I'm hoping that dedication and passion are contagious! My standards are going up; my time spent with students is going to increase. Students will have excellence demanded of them and excellence demonstrated to them...*Als Ik Kan*...to the best of my ability.

## Note

1. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1986, in *U.S. News & World Report* October 27, 1986.

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