

Random Thoughts . . .

AS THE WALRUS SAID...

RICHARD FELDER

In the Fall of 1988, a two-page column entitled “Impostors Everywhere” with my name on it appeared in *Chemical Engineering Education*, Volume 22, Number 4. There was also a column caption, “Felder’s Philosophy,” at the top of the page, accompanied by a message from the editor (the late great Ray Fahien) that readers could expect to see more from me in future issues, which no doubt led to a national chorus of chemical engineering educators asking, “Why?” About three months later, there I was again in Volume 23, Number 1 with a column called “Nobody Asked Me, But...” and a caption “Random Thoughts.” (The column title switch resulted from my threats of violence if they didn’t get rid of that other one.) That column was a list of things I liked and didn’t like in the general realm of education, and this time I imagine the national chorus was “Who cares?” The columns have continued throughout the next 27 years, putting readers in the position of people living in an apartment right next to an elevated train in New York or Chicago. They may regularly enjoy intervals of peace between trains, but they know it’s just a matter of time before another one screeches by again.

If you browse through issues from Volume 22 through Volume 50 (which you can do by going to www.che.ufl.edu/cee/), you’ll find 107 original columns and four repeats. I soloed as author of most of the columns through 1995, and starting in the Summer 1996 issue my wife and colleague Rebecca Brent often joined me as coauthor. The nature of the columns didn’t change that much over the years, but if you skim through the photos of the author chronologically you’ll see a metamorphosis from a nerdy-looking 49-year-old with brown hair to a nerdy-looking 77-year-old with white hair. I tried to ignore that metamorphosis for years, but I finally accepted its reality and the corollary conclusion that I can’t keep doing everything I used to, nor do I want to.

My first step toward internalizing that conclusion was my retirement to emeritus faculty status in 1999, but that wasn’t real retirement—it was more of a shift in career focus away from engineering courses at N.C. State toward the teaching workshops Rebecca and I had started to offer on campuses around the world. About 10 years ago we felt particularly tired at the end of an academic year, looked back at our calendar, and discovered that we had given 34 workshops in the preceding 12 months and had been on the road for 126 days. I concluded that things had gotten out of control and finally started to get serious about cutting back. It took years to do it, but we eventually learned how to say no and we have now cut our workshop offerings to a little more than one a month. Last year we retired as co-facilitators of the ASEE National Effective Teaching Institute that Jim Stice and I co-founded in 1991, leaving future offerings in the good hands of Mike Prince, Susan Lord, and Matt Ohland. In the summer of 2015 the fourth edition of *Elementary Principles of Chemical Processes* came out, with my wonderfully talented N.C. State colleague Lisa Bullard joining Ron Rousseau and me as

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coauthor. I don't plan to be actively involved in the preparation of any future editions that might appear. And in a particularly life-changing event, the book that Rebecca and I had been working on since 2003—*Teaching and Learning STEM: A Practical Guide*—finally appeared in print. I don't envision any more book writing projects at this point, although I've learned to never say never.

Which gets me back to Random Thoughts. As you've probably guessed if you've read this far, I've decided that The Time Has Come to pass this torch on along with those others. Writing about the foibles and quirks of teachers, students, administrators, and academic life four times a year has gotten harder the farther away I have moved from that life, and so this will be my last regular column. (The first part of that sentence isn't about you, reader—from everything I've heard, you don't have any foibles or quirks. Those colleagues of yours, though, are another story.) I may occasionally wake up with a light bulb in a cartoon balloon over my head, however, and send in a new Random Thought if Phil Wankat is still willing to inflict them on *CEE* subscribers.

So now what? I don't see any rocking chairs on back porches in my immediate future—I have much too low a boredom threshold for that. I'll keep giving workshops with Rebecca and maybe an occasional solo seminar, and I'll probably take on some writing and consulting projects that catch my interest. I also expect to increase the amount of time I spend watching and participating in the scarily fast process of grandchildren turning into grownups.

I'll end with thanks to some of the mentors and colleagues who have helped me on my long journey from shiny new assistant professor to emeritus geezer. Thanks go first to Ron, who decided to write an undergraduate material and energy balance textbook while still an untenured assistant professor and then invited me to share in that foolishness. Sometimes foolish things turn out really well. I acknowledge with deep gratitude Jim Stice and the late Don Woods, the two mentors who put into my head the idea that you can make education

the focus of your faculty career and somehow thrive. Other colleagues served as friends and models of excellence while I was figuring out what I was doing, including Cindy Atman, Mary Besterfield-Sacre, Scott Fogler, Armando Rugarcia, Sheri Sheppard, Karl Smith, Phil Wankat, and whoever I will undoubtedly think of once the column is in print and slap my head for forgetting to mention. I have also drawn inspiration from admirable younger colleagues who have evolved into engineering education leaders, including Lisa Bullard, K.C. Dee, Stephanie Farrell, Cindy Finelli, Milo Koretsky, Glen Livesay, Susan Lord, Matt Ohland, Mike Prince, and David Silverstein (ditto about the head slap). The future of our profession is in good hands. Special thanks go to Ray Fahien, Tim Anderson, and Phil Wankat, the *CEE* editors who gave me this splendid forum for sounding off on whatever was on my mind, and to Carole Yocum and Lynn Heasley, the superb managing editors who gently notified me when another column was due and patiently dealt with my innumerable revisions after I submitted what were supposed to be my final drafts. I thank my finest proofreaders and critics—my children Kenny, Elena, and Gary, and my dear friends Barb Oakley and Maryellen Weimer—for going over so much of what I wrote and giving me so much invaluable feedback. Most importantly, I thank Rebecca, the finest coauthor, colleague, and life-partner anyone could possibly have. She read the manuscripts of every education-related book chapter and journal article and column I wrote during the past quarter of a century, tamped down my occasional bursts of hyperbole and sarcasm (ok, maybe they weren't so occasional), and gave me an uncountable number of ideas for improvement that always had their intended effect.

And finally, I thank you, the *CEE* readers who have hung with me for all or part of the last 27 years. It's been a pleasure to share ideas and maybe a few laughs with you. I wish all of you great success in teaching your courses, doing your research, juggling the competing time demands of those two activities, and managing to have a healthy, fulfilling life outside them. Ciao. □

All of the *Random Thoughts* columns are now available on the World Wide Web at
http://www.ncsu.edu/effective_teaching and at www.che.ufl.edu/CEE.