

Why?

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Abstract

Dr. J. Scott Vernon presented the 2017 AAAE Distinguished Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Agricultural Education in San Luis Obispo, California in May, 2017. The article is a philosophical work based upon the author's experiences in the agricultural education profession.

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”— Mark Twain

It was a hot day in July, I was irrigating corn in Hanford, California, a small farming town in the Central Valley. I was two months away from entering high school. With a shovel in my hand I looked up to see an old crew cab pick-up coming down the dusty dirt road. When it stops a man with a walrus like mustache and a big smile gets out and heads towards me. It was Mr. Loya, the local agriculture teacher. He was my older sister's teacher. He had been to our house so I already knew him.

“Hello Scott,” he said, “looks like a great stand of corn!”

“Thank you Mr. Loya,” I said, curious as to why he was there with me.

He told me, “You are going to be on the livestock judging team next year when school starts.” It was not a question.

“I have never been on a livestock judging team Mr. Loya.”

“No worries, I will teach you,” he said.

For the next 43 years he taught me more than I could ever imagine. He died on February 1st of this year. I was humbled to be asked by the family to give his eulogy. The church was overflowing and I relied on the skills he taught me to honor his life. I did the best I could. That is what he always wanted from his students – their best.

When people pass we often ask why? Why did they leave us so soon? We miss them. We often wish we could have had one last goodbye.

Why is an important question.

Good afternoon. I am honored to deliver the Distinguished Lecture to such an esteemed group of teachers, communicators, extensionists and scholars. I am humbled. When Rob Terry asked me if I would give this speech, I was privately reluctant. I asked myself why? Why me? Hell, many of you don't even now who I am. I am not the AAAE member of the year by any stretch of

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the imagination. I am not the most prolific researcher. I am not at a Land Grant Institution. My vita is not up-to-date. I am an agriculture teacher – an anecdotal scholar.

As I wrestled with the why, it hit me. I know why Rob asked me. He values teaching and he is a master teacher, a creative mind and an accomplished scholar. And possibly because I'm local, so there are no travel expenses against the association! Also, because we are friends, colleagues and brothers, of sorts. We get each other.

He knows I am not knee deep in ANOVAS and Chi Squares. My analysis of variance runs the gamut.

Why me? Because like Mr. Loya, I am an agriculture teacher. I love what I do. Thanks Dr. Terry.

Why?

Two reason, really: first, I love agriculture, our nation's most vital industry. Second, I love my students – young and old.

My first reason was easy, I grew up on a cattle and horse ranch. I learned the value of hard work and pride that comes with producing a quality product. I also enjoy the people involved in the industry. They are family farmers and ranchers who share common values of honesty, integrity and a strong work ethic. People in agriculture are some of the kindest, most sincere people on the planet. Good and decent people.

My second reason, my students, took me some time to understand. When I was young I did not particularly like kids. I was not the most patient person. I had little use for games and adolescent stupidity. I loved agriculture and by gosh, I was going to teach them what I loved. Along the way, I realized it isn't really about agriculture at all; it is about people. We are in the people business. It has been said that they do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care. I care.

But these are not the only reasons.

The other reasons included Mr. Loya, Mr. DeRuiter, Mr. Hill, Mr. Brandt, Mr. Mann, Mr. Lunstad and Dr. Joe Sabol.

My agriculture teachers.

Each day they demonstrated the knowledge and skills necessary to inspire and motivate young people to be the best they could be. I admired that in these men. They were masters in and out of the classroom. They worked hard, drove fast and liked winning. I did too. I wanted to be like them.

When I was young I did not know what a Ph.D. was. I was the first in my family to graduate from college. I went to Cal Poly. I was not surrounded by doctoral students and many of my professors were "Misters" – experts in their fields who used their strong industry experiences to relay their knowledge in the classrooms and labs. They were respected by family farmers and ranchers and were often leaders in industry organizations. Some were "Doctors," although I wasn't sure just what kind of doctors they were; I was naïve, but impressed nonetheless. I admired them as well. Again, I wanted to be like them.

I wanted to be a teacher. And, in following that dream it occurred to me that if I wanted to do it at the university level, I needed a Ph.D. So I got one. Big deal. I chased some grants. I did some research. Asked some good questions. Published some results. Boom. I got tenured and promoted. I did okay. I am a teacher.

So my question is this...*why do you do what you do?* Is it your passion? Is it your calling? Is it just your job?

Is your research useful? Do you solve problems – real problems? Does it serve agriculture? Our students? Our citizens?

Is your teaching engaging? Creative? Informed? Varied? Do your students know how much you care? Or are they simply a grade in the gradebook?

Please understand, I appreciate sound research. I value outstanding teaching. But there are times I wonder if we can be our best if we try to be “all things, to all people.”

Your “why” will change, evolve and mature. It has to for you to survive and thrive.

I know the environment we work in – The Ivory Towers of Higher Education; that lofty, sometimes ridiculous place where our actions are not always driven by our passions, but instead by our committees. Peer reviewed or otherwise. We all have our “why?” Tenure and promotion. Publish or perish. I get it. I did it. Many of you have as well. It is what it is.

At this point you are probably thinking, “this guy isn’t very distinguished at all!!” How could he be so ignorant about what we do to “further knowledge and discovery?”

After all we are at a research conference.

Good question. Maybe I am ignorant, but I am certain – I am an agriculture teacher. I am confident that is why I was placed on this earth. It has been my calling. And at the risk of sounding arrogant...I am good at it. Why? Because I focused my attention on being the kind of teacher I want my two sons, Conner and Kyler to have in school. I want them to have excellent teachers. I want their teachers to know who my boys are and work to meet their educational needs in and out of the classroom. Wouldn’t you want that for your kids?

When I die nobody will wax poetic in an eulogy about how many papers I published or how much grant money I secured. No, I hope they will share how I made a difference in the lives of my family, friends and students. I want people to know that I was an agriculture teacher who loved the industry and his students.

You see, that is my passion. What is your passion? Are you asking the right questions? Are you enjoying your work? Do you make a difference...really? Is your scholarship useful, relevant and are you growing as a professional?

I’ll be honest, I haven’t heard many distinguished lectures. Well, maybe one and it was 30 years ago. I forgot who gave the lecture or the point of the message. I apologize. But this I know, each of you in this room today are working to distinguish yourselves on your campus. Your lectures are distinguished. You are working hard and making a difference. You are agriculture teachers, communicators and extensionists. You are scholars. I admire and respect you for your dedication

to this profession. It is honorable. It is needed. You matter. Your work is important. Your intellect is sharp.

There will be days when you question your “why?” Why me? Why here? Why now?

Please know that your “why” is critical to your success. It is what keeps you moving forward in your profession. It is what keeps you focused in times of adversity (and budget cuts). Your why may not be like everyone else’s why. That is okay. But you must know why!

Each day I remember my why in the students who have touched my life.

It was a cool winter day and I was at my desk at Cal Poly. Brad, a 6’2” young man with muscles built on his northern California farm and a head full of brown hair walked into my office. He was a freshman and a long way from home. He asked, “Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Sure.” He was visibly shaken and needed to talk.

“I just got back from Sierra Vista Hospital,” he said as he began to cry.

“They told me I have cancer and I should probably go home and get my things in order.”

My heart sunk. My first thought was how is it possible that the doctors could be so cruel as to tell this young man he has cancer while he is all alone and his family was hundreds of miles away?

I stood. He stood. We hugged. I didn’t know what else to do. I could feel the weight of his world in my arms.

I tried to comfort him and then went into teacher mode. “Let’s figure this out and get you to your family,” I said. That is what teachers do. We solve problems. We care about kids.

“Thank you Dr. Vernon,” he said softly.

We got him home to his family and he kept in touch over the next quarter and the summer. He returned in the fall and came to see me.

“It’s great to be back! I have some catching up to do,” he exclaimed.

“No worries, we’ll help you.” And we did...for a few months.

He became ill again. This time it was worse. His cancer had returned. He returned to his family farm. Later that quarter Brad died.

I took the news pretty hard. I cried for him, his family and myself. I could not fix it, no matter what I did. I lost another student. A good one. A great kid.

Some would think I made a difference in Brad’s life as a teacher. Perhaps, but the reality is Brad made a difference in my life. He made me a better teacher.

I am an agriculture teacher. That is why I do it. To make a difference.

I advise senior projects at Cal Poly. A capstone experience with a five chapter write-up much like a thesis. Students mostly hate them.

Holly had an idea. Holy was weird. Her wild hair was died jet black. She wore all black clothes. Her make-up was pasty white. Her lips were black. Her fingernails were black. She was a Goth.

One day in my office she said, as her hands flew in wild gestures, “There is this whole web of connectivity in the world, it is like veins running through our soul, it’s in the cyberworld and I want to harness its power and rule the planet!”

“That’s nice Holly,” I said as I was thinking earth to Holly, “but let’s figure out what you want to do for a senior project.”

She said, “That is what I want to do, I want to put agriculture in cyberspace.”

We worked together and she completed a senior project, but I talked her out of ruling the world.

I was wrong. I should have listened to Holly. If so, I would not be here giving you this lecture. The year was 1992. We all know what happen to the world wide web in the 90’s. Holly was right. She could have ruled the world. She went on to be successful in the Silicon Valley. I will never forget Holly.

In that instance I was the student. Holly was the teacher. I learned. I grew as a teacher. Sometimes our students know more than we do. We need to listen.

Back in the day when I was a high school agriculture teacher I coach the livestock judging team. Once when we were getting ready for a big contest at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, Billy, a freshman student came to me and said he he didn’t think he could judge in the contest.

“Mr. Vernon, I’m scared, I don’t think I can judge at the Cow Palace,” he said.

“Sure you can Billy,” I insisted.

“I don’t think I’m ready,” he continued.

Like any good teacher I employed the Socratic Method of questioning. We try to make the hard things easy.

“Billy, listen, you come from a purebred cattle ranch, right?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“You and your daddy raise some of the best Limousin cattle in the country, right?”

“Yes,” he said again.

“You sell cattle all over the United States, right?”

“Yes,” he said with more excitement.

“You and you dad buy some of the best genetics in the world, right?”

“Yes,” he smiled.

“Well Billy, then it is easy. When you get to Cow Palace, just place them like you and your daddy would buy them and you’ll be okay.”

“Okay, I’ll go,” he committed.

We went to the contest and the kids all participated in the contest. I had them write their placings and after the contest we went over how they placed the classes. I looked at Billy’s placings on a class of Hereford bulls. He had it completely backwards.

“Billy, why did you place the Hereford class backwards? Didn’t you see the number one bull? He is one of the best bulls in the country. He would be a herd sire in anybody’s herd. He is probably worth \$250,000,” I pleaded.

“But, but, Mr. Vernon, I was just doing what you told me to do,” he said.

“What?”

“I just placed like you told me. You said, place ‘em like me and my daddy would buy them and I knew we couldn’t afford the number one bull so I put him last,” he said confused.

Brad, Holly and Billy are just a few examples of why I teach. Over the past 34 years there are hundreds of stories, memories and students who made a difference in my life and my career. They are my why. I trust each of you have similar stories and experiences that help validate what you do each day.

As you participate in this conference and return home, it is my hope that you will reflect on your why. And, when you do, you will be energized to carry on or perhaps make changes that will resonate in your hearts and minds.

Again, I am humbled to deliver the Distinguished Lecture. It has been the highest honor of my career. My. Loya would be proud.

Mr. Loya was one of my teachers, a mentor and ultimately a friend. He was an agriculture teacher. I was his why. I am grateful.

Mark Twain once said, “*The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.*”

I hope you find your why.

Thank you and God bless you.