It Is the Best of Times, It Is the Worst of Times

William K. Mygdal, EdD

If you majored in the humanities in college, or took a literature survey course, or just like to read classic stories, you’ll recognize that my column title is a repetition of the first two phrases of Charles Dickens’ novel, A Tale of Two Cities.1

Dickens’ subject in that stirring book is the French Revolution, with all its attendant promise and its very real dangers. His opening lines continue as quoted below, eerily foreshadowing our alternating feelings of hope and discouragement, uncertainty and resolve as we contemplate the future of our discipline:

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
It was the season of light, it was the season of darkness,
It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

The upside of the Revolution—inspired by the American one 13 years earlier—was that it ushered in a period of rapid social, political, and economic change that helped shape the social and democratic structures of the Western world. Citizens rapidly gained the right to vote and the opportunity for education and social mobility. The economy quickly created much greater wealth as the French bourgeoisie was freed from the shackles of the old social order. The Revolution’s downside was that this rapid change came at the cost of great social and political instability. There were several difficult decades, which included the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic era, until stability was achieved. A lesson from this and other movements is that social change is messy, difficult, and ambiguous.

You’ve probably heard the news about the recent blow to Title VII funding, but let me recap: On December 30, 2005, President Bush signed the Labor-HHS Appropriations Bill. This legislation reduced funding for Title VII of the Public Health Service Act from $88 million to $41 million, and it ruled out new funding cycles. Currently funded Title VII projects can thus complete their project activities (with some cuts), but no new requests for proposals will be forthcoming. In the political judgment of many, there is little possibility that this funding will be restored in its present form.

One way to react to these funding cuts and other challenges is to let our thinking focus on negative and irrational thoughts. We could, for example, think of our current predicament as a “season of darkness,” or a “winter of despair.” We could voice doubts about our long-term prospects and talk ourselves into a funk: “Who are we kidding? Family medicine never gets the support it deserves.” It would be easy to do, but I think we’d be wrong.

Famed psychologist Albert Ellis3,4 alerted us to the dangers of dwelling on the discouraging, the negative, and the irrational, warning against the mental habits of “awfulizing” and “catastrophizing.” He demonstrated in his books and lectures just how unproductive and unrealistic these habits of mind really are. Following Ellis, I recommend instead that we work to think rationally and positively and that we get to work finding solutions. We need to be tough-minded, and we must remind ourselves regularly that social change, including the 4 decades of the family medicine movement, is messy, difficult, and ambiguous.

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From the Faculty Development Center, Waco, Tex.
President’s Column

Let’s put this in context: the US philanthropic community donated almost $250 billion to worthy causes in 2004, and that was over and above the large amounts of dollars awarded by federal and state agencies interested in health care. That’s right—$250 billion! The workshop leaders believe that family medicine faculty members have been setting their sights too low. They feel that the time is here to dream big and to learn how to raise the funds to support one’s vision.

How successful was the workshop? Larry Bauer, the Academic Fundraising Workshop lead faculty member, told me, “I think we hit a home run.” One hundred percent of the participants said they would “recommend this workshop to colleagues.” Ninety-five percent of the participants reported that they feel “more confident that they can succeed in implementing a fundraising initiative in their home organization.” Other comments included:

• “Powerful! Exceeded my expectations!”
• “I have never been to a conference/workshop that is so joyful.”
• “This will help us reorganize our department’s infrastructure to help make fundraising effective.”

The Academic Fundraising Workshop serves as the kickoff experience for five Fundraising Fellows who, during the coming year, will pursue their individual passions, projects, and visions. They will be supported in their efforts by the fellowship faculty who will provide regular weekly tutoring and coaching to the fellows. Fellows will report their progress during a session on April 27 at the 2006 Annual Spring Conference in San Francisco. In addition, a second Academic Fundraising Workshop will be held April 25–26 as a preconference session in San Francisco. Details for this offering can be found at www.fmec.net.

So, you see, in a small way it is the spring of hope and the season of light. By our efforts to learn new skills now, we’ll be able 10 years from now to look back on this period and call it the “epoch of belief.”

Thanks for your involvement and commitment.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to Dr Mygdal, Faculty Development Center, 1600 Providence Drive, Waco, TX 76707-0276. 254-752-2636. Fax: 254-756-0358. wmygdal@wacofdc.com.

REFERENCES