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Le Petit Prince

By David L. Tate

Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is the winning entry in the Inspiring Book category.

"Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

On the surface, *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*)¹ is a children's book, a fantasy about a young boy living on a tiny asteroid, who travels around the galaxy by harnessing a flock of wild birds. The boy meets a king, a businessman, and a drunkard, and befriends a fox. He talks to his rose, and rakes out his three tiny volcanoes to prevent them from erupting. He obtains a pet sheep, which is actually just a drawing of a box that he knows contains a sheep. All of this seems very much like a simple fantasy tale for children.

As an adult, it is easy to overanalyze this book and get hung up on these imaginative elements, thus missing the underlying messages. I was able to tap into my past childlike mindset and learn some important lessons that changed my life.

At one point in his journey, the Little Prince arrives at a planet occupied solely by a businessman, who sits at his desk toiling away. The Little Prince asks the businessman what he's doing but is dismissed because the man says he is too busy doing calculations. Through his persistent questions, the Little Prince learns the man is making an accounting of each of the stars in the sky, which he claims to own. When asked what he does with the stars, the man replies, "I manage them. I count them and then count them again. It's difficult work. But I'm a serious person!"²

It is important to keep in mind our motivation for the things we do. At work, are we trying to provide value to our coworkers, our clients, the policyholders? In all of my interactions in life, I do not want to be like the businessman: simply calculating, managing, counting, being a serious person. I try to have the attitude of the Little Prince, who thinks to himself, "That's amusing, and even poetic. But not very serious." He then



admonishes the businessman, "I own a flower myself, which I water every day. I own three volcanoes, which I rake out every week. I even rake out the extinct one. You never know. So it's of some use to my volcanoes, and it's useful to my flower, that I own them. But you're not useful to the stars."³

The Little Prince sums up the sad life of the businessman, "He's never smelled a flower. He's never looked at a star. He's never loved anyone. He's never done anything except add up numbers."⁴

As an actuary, it is easy to become engulfed in my calculations, forgetting the most important things in life. The Little Prince reminds me to be useful to the flowers and volcanoes in my life. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 De Saint-Exupéry, Antoine. 1943. *The Little Prince*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- 2 Ibid., 49.
- 3 Ibid., 49–50.
- 4 Ibid., 30.