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Message from the Chairperson

by Tyree S. Wooldridge

Growing up in North Texas, I was exposed to more than my share of colorful characters, many of whom (oddly enough) turned out to be related to me in some way! Perhaps the most colorful of them all was the man I knew as my Great Uncle Slats.

Slats was a thin man who stood about six foot six when he wasn't sitting in his rocking chair. He was one of the last of a dying breed. Slats spent his entire 95 years living the life of a cowboy in Young County, Texas. As far as I know, he never set foot outside the county. In fact, he used to say to me, "I'll go anywhere in the world, as long as I can be home in time for supper."

Everybody else knew Slats as a bit of a country philosopher and his house always seemed to be full of old dogs and older people, all of them waiting to hear what he was going to come up with next. I have to confess though, most of the time I never knew what that man was talking about, but I always suspected that there was some wisdom in there someplace.

One of my all time favorite Slats stories is probably not even true, but it's worth a retell. He had built his house in the years before World War I, entirely of wood except for this chimney that poked through the roof. This chimney was constructed entirely of gaudy, red bricks.

Slats claimed that a very young farmhand drifted through his part of Texas and lived with his family long enough to help finish the construction of their house. The boy had no real work experience, but he was a hard worker. As Slats told the story, one afternoon a brick company came to the farm and unloaded a whole wagon of bright red bricks onto the roof of his unfinished house. Slats asked his young farmhand to climb up there and begin to lay those bricks for the chimney. Long before he finished though, the boy had figured out that he had far too many bricks than would be needed.

After finishing the bricklaying, the boy began to take the extra bricks down the ladder to one of Slats' wagons, intending on returning the extras for credit. If you have ever carted bricks up and down a ladder, then you know that you can't handle more than two or three at a time. When you drop a brick, it invariably gets damaged and those you cannot return for credit.

After about an hour, there were still a lot of surplus bricks on the roof. It was at this point that the farmhand began to show some enterprise. He spotted an old barrel near the house and he dragged it up the ladder onto the roof. Next he filled that barrel with the surplus bricks and tied a rope to the barrel. He then nailed a few two-by-fours together and affixed them to the prow of the roof as a sort of yard arm, onto which he attached a rusty pulley. He ran the other end of the rope through the pulley and down to the ground and stood there admiring his ingenuity and resourcefulness for a moment.

The plan was for him to tug on the rope until the barrel of bricks lifted off the roof and swung out beyond the house so that he could gently lower it to the ground in one fell swoop.

He pulled on the rope and the barrel did indeed swing free of the house, but he almost immediately became aware that the barrel of bricks was much heavier than he was. So, as the barrel began to come down, he began to go up. Maintaining his presence of mind though, he continued to hold onto the rope and shortly thereafter, the two met halfway, leaving the farmhand with a severe contusion on his forehead.

The barrel continued down and the boy continued up until he reached the



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pulley, jamming his fingers and breaking two of them in the process. At that same instant the barrel was contacting the ground. The barrel, being fairly old, could not stand up to the force of the impact and the bottom fell out, spilling bricks all over the yard.

In just a second or two, the boy became aware that he was now heavier than what was left of the barrel, and so he started back down and the barrel began to come up. Once again, they met halfway, this time giving the boy a series of lacerations to his shins. The boy continued down and the barrel continued up until he landed on none other than that pile of bricks in the yard, which left him with a whole assortment of bumps and bruises.

It was at that moment that the boy finally lost his presence of mind and let go of the rope, whereupon the remains of the barrel fell and struck him on the head, rendering him mercifully unconscious.

For years I wondered if there was a point to that story. I think I finally figured out what it was. Nobody would build a house for themselves without considerable expertise and training, and yet we do the equivalent of that all the time. When I completed the exams, I thought that I was ready for success, but nobody had ever taught me about being a good supervisor, or how to communicate effectively, or how to handle difficult people or even how to get promoted. Finishing the exams was just the starting point.

No one wants to be treated like an amateur, but I certainly looked like one. When I think back to the really bad memos and reports that I wrote and all of the corpses left in the wake of my attempts at management, I wonder why I'm still employed today. My Uncle Slats would have had a great time spinning yarns about my adventures in business.

The point I'm trying to make is a simple one. No actuary would undertake a job for which he was not qualified. We even have a rule of conduct that specifically forbids us from accepting assignments for which we are not specifically prepared by education, training or

experience to perform. I wonder how many of us accepted the role of supervisor or advisor to management without the tools necessary to fill that role like a professional?

Odds are if you're reading this, you've already made the commitment to grow in these "soft skill" areas. I commend you for that. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to improve ourselves. But

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beyond that, each and every one of us also has a responsibility as an actuary to promote the good name of our profession as well. Why couldn't the stereotype of the actuary change to something far different from what it is today?

As I think about the last three years serving with this SOA Section, I think that I've learned that the secret to remaking ourselves lies in these four simple questions:

1. *How do others see me?* It doesn't really matter if I think I'm a good communicator or a good leader because I don't get a vote. Ask your peers, your superiors and your subordinates where you fall short. My guess is that you'll be very surprised. In my case, the things that I considered to be my greatest weaknesses were viewed by others as strengths, and my strengths in many cases were not as I thought either. I

wonder why that is? I think it's partially because we're by nature a critical group, tending to judge ourselves harshly and therefore we work on those areas. But if these aren't the trouble areas, I will never grow and never change.

2. *Who in my world is the best where I am weakest?* It doesn't do me any good to learn from people who aren't any better at my trouble areas than I am. If I struggle with public speaking, I need to learn from someone who is good at it. Who is that person? Find them and ask them how they developed that skill. You may well be surprised at their answers.

3. *Am I really willing to change?* Uncle Slats used to say that the more times you run over a dead polecat, the flatter it gets. Change is frightening. Growth is painful. They force us to venture into areas where we're not comfortable, but if we don't go, eventually everyone understands that we are one-trick Ponies. If we want to succeed and indeed survive in today's business world, we have to acquire all the tools.

4. *How do I get started?* Slats would often say, "Everywhere that's worth going is uphill." Even though that's true, I think that the hardest part is behind you by the time you get to this final question. One great thing you can do for yourself though, is to attend one or two Management and Personal Development sessions at the next SOA meeting you attend. That's why we're here!

I have enjoyed my time with this section more than I can say. If you have a burning desire to influence our profession, then take my advice and become part of this leadership group. Run for office, write an article or mentor a young actuary, but get involved. Your own career and your profession will benefit from it!

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