

**Closing Remarks: 2010 Joint Conference of the Society for Public Health
Education & the Prevention Research Centers Program**

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Conference Theme: "ACT: Advocate, Communicate & Translate to Enhance
Research and Practice"

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(Note: Final version as presented. Ad libs appear below with <Aside>)

Good afternoon. I have two brief messages to deliver, and then you can go
home.

The first message is from the PRC Directors.

<Note: Pull out small scrap of paper from pocket, unfold it, and read the following
message from it.>

We would like to thank all of you who worked on, or participated in, this
conference. We hope it's been as positive experience an experience for you as it
has been for us. Also, we want you to know that we greatly appreciate the work
you do on a daily basis as health educators.

<Pause>

The second message is from a friend of mine who is sitting in the back of the
room. At least I hope she's still here. She is a shy, multi-colored elephant who's
been following me around since the 60's. Every once in a while she whacks me

on the side of the head to get my attention and whispers something in my ear. When she heard I was doing the closing remarks, she became very active the past two weeks and gave me about an hour's worth of material. Last night I told her that's not fair since I only have 5 minutes. So around midnight she dictated the following message after I promised to deliver it as she wrote it. So here goes.

"I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

<Aside> She told me to yell this twice and then ask you to yell it, but in the interest of time, we'll skip this part, and I will continue with her remarks.

A newscaster chants this refrain night after night on national television, and then rants about banks going bust, the depression, homeless people, violent crime, air unfit to breathe, and food unfit to eat. Does anyone know whom I'm referring to?

<Note: A few hands were raised.>

No, this is not Fox News. This was Howard Beale, a fictional character in a movie called *Network* released in 1976.

<Aside> It was written by Paddy Chayefsky who did a few other award-winning movies including one call *Hospital*. You might want to check them out.

So here we are 34 years later and in the same predicament. How did we get in this mess?

If we were to ask Obama, he would blame the Republicans. If we asked Bush, he'd blame the Democrats. If we ask Dennis Kucinich or Barbara Lee, my Congress person, they would likely blame the excesses of capitalism coupled with a political system controlled by economic elites.

In 1968 Garrett Hardin published a classic paper called "The Tragedy of the Commons." The commons was a publically owned area in the center of a medieval European village where herders grazed their cows. Hardin observed that although it was in the interest of individual herders to graze as many cows as they could, if everyone did this the commons would be destroyed due to overgrazing, and all the cows would die. He argues that in order to sustain this limited common resource, the village has to adopt policies to constrain its use. This paradigm has many applications in our world today.

An equally serious problem is privatization of the commons. Since the 1970's, we have been selling off pieces of our commons. We have reduced real per capita funding for public institutions and social programs, especially in the areas of health, education, and social welfare. Resources for state, county and city governments have shrunk making it increasingly difficult to provide basic services and maintain critical infrastructure. With lowered taxes on the rich and cuts in social programs, poverty has increased, disproportionately afflicting women and children and people of color. Multinational corporations have responded to the global economy by eliminating many well-paying blue collar jobs thereby shrinking our middle class. As income inequality increased, so did health disparities along with morbidity and mortality and social problems. Meanwhile our criminal justice system and military-industrial complex have become booming industries.

<Aside> I come from California which is in bad economic shape. Over the past few decades we've seen a slow erosion of the commons that has accelerated in recent times.

No wonder many people are upset with our government. Nationally, one in three, or one in four depending on how the question is asked in different polls, currently

support the tea party movement, a movement which wants to further shrink government.

Although I too have concerns about how government functions, reducing government spending or privatizing its functions will exacerbate, not solve our problems. Our quality of life will continue to diminish, and we will become less competitive in the global economy.

Our nation spent \$2.3 trillion on health care in 2008, about \$7,700 per resident or more than twice what the next most extravagant nation spent. Yet we spend only a tiny fraction of our health dollars on prevention. Policy makers expect preventive interventions to be cheap or self-supporting even when we can demonstrate they are cost effective. When we succeed in developing effective programs, we often can't find adequate funding to sustain them, let alone disseminate them.

Based on an African proverb, Eldridge Cleaver reminded us in 1968, "you're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem." So what can we, as health educators, do to become a greater part of the solution?

First, I think we need to live our lives and do our jobs to the best of our ability. In the last two days, we have been reminded about all of the things we need to consider and do in order to accomplish this. But that isn't enough.

We need to find ways to communicate effectively to others not only why it is critical that they support what we do in public health, but also why they should support public education and safety net programs. The argument can be made in terms of the social determinants of health.

Analogies may be another way to reach people. George Lakoff, a UC Berkeley linguist, suggests reframing issues. For example, he argues if you join a club

you would expect to pay dues that would enable the club to function. Taxes are simply the dues we pay for living in a community. If we dialog and collaborate with each other, perhaps, we can come up with better arguments to convince people that everyone benefits by restoring the commons. Collectively, we need to ACT: “advocate, communicate and translate.” We can do this as private citizens if our jobs do not permit us to do this. We must take back the power from the economic elites and help our government serve the public interest.

<Looking somewhat puzzled, read> “Good night and good luck.”