

America just elected a new President. If you believe the pundits, the electorate was ready for a change after the eight-year administration of George W. Bush. So, while America was trying to replace a Texan president, ASCE was diligently working to get a Texan as president. My goal is to be at least as popular when I complete my one-year term as W. is as he completes his eight years. Obviously I believe in setting goals that I can meet.

I stand before you as the fifth ASCE president from Texas. In actuality, all four of my Texas predecessors were from Houston, my hometown. I have the privilege of knowing each of these men. They stand as giants in the civil engineering profession, and I am keenly aware of their legacies. My pledge is to do my best to uphold their high standards.

You are aware that I have defined my priorities as ASCE president as “ABC”. Those letters stand for where I believe we should focus our efforts: Advocacy, Benefits and Change. We have 12 months to work on our ABCs. This morning, I have 12 minutes to share an idea with you that will get us started in this important work we have to do on our ABCs.

Here’s a story. The story is about a man who came upon a group of masons working beside a road. He asked the first man what he was doing. “Stacking rocks,” was the

immediate reply. Finding that response inadequate, he inquired of the second man. “I am building a wall,” was the second answer. Again, our traveler was not fully informed of the nature of the work he was observing. Asking the third mason, he received the definitive response. The third worker proudly proclaimed that he was “building a cathedral”. What a contrast. Three masons working together with totally different ideas of what they were doing. Which one was right? Which one understood the value of his work?

Ask most practicing civil engineers what they do for a living. You will hear all sorts of responses. “I design water lines.” “I review subdivision plats.” “I prepare environmental permit applications.” My favorite answer, which I really heard about 20 years ago, was “I am into sewers”. Most of these answers fit into the stacking rocks or building walls category. Is it any wonder that we must work so hard to convey the critical need to increase funding for civil works to our elected officials? Many of us do not seem to believe our profession matters, that it is critical to public health and safety, to economic strength, to our way of life. We do not seem to believe it ourselves. Well we better believe it!

Civil engineers are curious people. We are not all nerds and geeks. We live interesting lives. However, we are also not self-promoters. Proclaiming the true value of our contribution to society makes us uncomfortable. We tend to be self-deprecating when it comes to our work. Our preference is to let our work speak for us. Unfortunately, that

approach does not adequately inform our friends and neighbors about the value of what we provide every day.

I am here today to change all that! I am here to declare that infrastructure is the “cathedral” of modern civilization. Each of you is being deputized to spread the word. Modern civilization does not and cannot exist without the work of civil engineers. Let us explore the truth of that statement.

All of us remember the hype around the turn of the century. Y2K was shouted from the rooftops. Of course, we were never certain whether the new century started in 2000 or 2001. What you may not remember was some of the rankings of significant accomplishments in the last millennium. Do you recall one of the greatest accomplishments of mankind during the previous 1,000 years? Clean Water. That’s right. Clean water allowed civilization to move past waterborne epidemics. We could now live together in good health and combine our work to create greater opportunities for more people. Who provides clean water? Civil engineers!

When my children were young, I would look for significant engineering structures to show them. I pointed out bridges, elevated water tanks, roads, bayous, and all sorts of things. After pointing to an example, I would ask “Who builds water towers?” My kids knew to shout “civil engineers”. Like you, I had one child who had to be a nonconformist, who chose other answers, such as dentists. But I digress.

Clean water is essential to sustain life. Civil engineers deliver clean water. We find it, clean it, disinfect it, and deliver it into people's homes, businesses, industries. When the public finishes with it, we civil engineers pick it up, clean it up, and put it back where we found it. No community of any size would exist without clean water, nor can any strong economy. To those civil engineers who are in the water resources business, you are the sole reason that people can live in a community and maintain their health. Thank you!!

Transportation is the next gift that civil engineers give to modern civilization. Our economy is based on the ability to move people and products. The larger the community, the more complex the transportation equation becomes. Over the last few months, we have heard our entire society discussing how the economy was affecting them. How many of them included transportation in that conversation? We all know the answer. The facts remain clear, however. If you cannot move people to their jobs, you have no economy. If you cannot move your products to your customers, you have no economy. If the transportation system becomes clogged, so does your economy. To those civil engineers who are in the transportation business, you are the reason that your friends and neighbors can participate in the economy to support themselves and their families. Thank you!!

Structural engineers enable modern civilization in yet another way. Shelter is necessary for human survival and development. We want strong and safe dwellings and public spaces. People do not want to wonder if the building they are entering is safe enough for them to exit in one piece. Living in a community means living, working and functioning

in structures. Imagine your hometown with no safe structures. As Dr. Phil says, “how is that working out for you?” Simply, your hometown would not exist. To those civil engineers who create habitable safe structures, you are the reason that people can live and congregate safely. Thank you!!

I could create the same scenario for each of the many disciplines within civil engineering, but you get the idea!!

It is time for us to celebrate civil engineering. What other profession provides a product that benefits literally millions and millions of people every day and needs to last for generations? What other group of professionals can say that modern civilization could not exist without them? Can you name another profession that exists solely to improve the lives of their fellow citizens?

The question that I ask is whether we believe it ourselves. I believe it is time for us to build cathedrals instead of build walls. I believe that our citizens really do want to know what impact civil engineers have on them every day. The recent reconstruction of IH-10 in Houston proves this point. Many of my friends commented repeatedly that they had no idea what we did until they watched a freeway being built while it maintained full traffic loads. Your friends will feel the same way if you take the time to explain the significance of your work.

ASCE has made enormous strides in raising awareness of the value of sound infrastructure to society. And now the public is ready for action.

We all need to help lead the direction of public dialogue at this critical time for our nation's economy. The best people to do so are all of you. Expand the audience to include your next section meeting or institute gathering. Broaden your own horizons so that you can bring other civil engineers with you. I am not exaggerating the importance of this initiative. And remember that we will never convince others until we believe it ourselves.

We have been using the term "civil engineers" for short. But today, I declare this to be the Year of the Civilization Engineer! To do anything else would diminish our contribution to society. You better believe it. If you don't, my goal is to make sure you do by the time I finish my term.

That is my goal, and it is a goal that we can realize by all working together. I bet that if we can fulfill this goal during my term, I *will* leave office *at least* as popular as when I *started*, and you will be part of transforming our profession's future.