

"The Chicken is the Egg's Way of Perpetuating Itself" Or How Proper Perspective Promotes Personal Professionalism

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2002 Swanberg Award Address

One of the few activities I have pursued longer than medical writing is to train in the Japanese martial art of *iaido*: the art of drawing and cutting with the Japanese sword. My purpose in studying sword drawing is not to kill imaginary opponents, although I do that a lot. Rather, the purpose is to train my body to move efficiently by learning to do the forms correctly. Briefly, I draw the sword in any of several ways, dispatch those imaginary opponents in any of even more ways, perform a ritualized move that simulates removing their imaginary blood from the blade, and then return the sword to the scabbard.

I am fortunate to study *iaido* under the instruction of a most unusual man. In addition to a thousand things I do not have time to relate to you, Don is unusual because he knows what he is doing. That phrase needs explanation. We often say that any expert "knows what he or she is doing." But I mean the phrase in a more exact sense; a sense that is absolutely critical to being a true professional. Don "knows what he is doing" not because he can do *iaido* extraordinarily well but because he "knows *what he does*" to do the art so well. Because he knows the what, when, where, and why of each movement, he is also a gifted instructor. Any skill I have in teaching, as well as in *iaido*, comes from following Don's lead in striving always to "know what I am doing."

One class, many years ago, comes to mind. I was just learning to draw a real sword from a scabbard and was having the usual difficulties. The sword is as long as your arm, and getting it out of the scabbard on your left hip can be difficult because you run out of right arm before the tip clears the mouth of the scabbard. The blade is also curved, so the scabbard has a say in where and when the sword is drawn. My struggle to free these last few inches of razor-sharp steel from the scabbard was resulting in a lot of (let's call it variability) in my draw. Don – from a safe distance I might add – then told me the secret of drawing the sword. "The secret," he said, "is to draw the sword with your left elbow."

Now, this could be a Zen coen, those answerless questions asked by masters of the novitiates, like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?," but it wasn't. It was his way of telling me to focus not on the sword, which to me was the obvious thing to focus on, but rather on the movements that made everything else happen. On my next draw,

I pulled my left elbow back, which pulled the scabbard off the last 4 inches of the blade, and the sword snapped into place, almost in spite of me.

Thereafter followed a long discussion on the biomechanics of sword drawing. "Movement never originates at the point moved," he told me. "You see the sword cut; less obvious but more important is what makes the cut happen. We all want to focus on the sword, which is what is being moved, but we forget that *something else is moving the sword.*" In this case, the something else was my right arm drawing the hilt out and around and then extending, my hips turning slightly, and my left elbow pulling the scabbard off the tip of the sword. "Perspective makes a difference," he said. "The chicken is the egg's way of perpetuating itself. You have to look at swordsmanship with the proper perspective. Look at what you have to do to move the sword, and the sword will take care of itself."

If you've made it this far into the article, you are probably wondering what Japanese swords, left elbows, and chickens have to do with medical writing or the Swanberg Award. The Swanberg Distinguished Service Award is the highest award AMWA can bestow on one of its own members. As such, the recipient is one who has come to embody what AMWA stands for. As this year's recipient of the award, I have the honor to stand before you, to receive your attention, and to offer you whatever insight I might have into medical writing. All eyes are on me, just as my eyes were on that sword so long ago. Remember Don's words? "Movement never originates at the point moved. If you want to learn *iaido*, you must pay attention to the forces that move the sword, not to the sword itself." And that is what I want to do this evening. I want to tell you about "what moves the sword"; to help you focus not necessarily on me but on the more important, if unseen, forces that have brought me before you this evening.

I became a technical writer in 1975, at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. So much for my BA in Social Science. I joined AMWA in the fall of 1978, when, as a new freelance writer, I teamed up with a health educator to write a college text on personal health. The text was to cover life from "sperm to worm, birth to earth, womb to tomb, and lust to dust" and all points in between. I had become, in fact, a medical writer. A lone medical writer in a small, rural college town 100 miles from the nearest real airport, but a medical writer, nevertheless. To help solidify my new professional identity, I joined AMWA.

In the early '80s, I attended one of the first Asilomar Conferences, in Monterey, California. Instantly absorbed into the AMWA family, I eventually found myself in somebody's room playing guitar and singing with a dozen or more new friends. At one of those wine and cheese receptions that the conference is known for, we started about 8 pm and ended about 3 the next morning. A very good time was had by all; the conference was great; and we all went home for the better.

Later that year, I received a call from Lilian Sablack, AMWA's legendary (nay, infamous) Executive Director (and, years later, my sister-in-law. But I digress). The health book finished, I had taken a job as a grant writer in the Office of Institutional Pandering of that small, rural college. Ah, I thought. My talent as a writer and teacher has finally been recognized; they want me to teach at the annual conference! Imagine my surprise, then, when Lil inquired about my willingness to provide background guitar and vocals at the New Member reception! Clearly, whoever had told her about my musical talents had forgotten to mention that most of the songs we sang that night were somewhat, er, naughty, and not likely to be appreciated by professionals attending a conference – and who would be listening to me while sober. Thus, I declined the first opportunity offered to me by AMWA.

The Asilomar conference has figured prominently several times in my career. One year, a speaker from the Society for Technical Communication, Dr. David Carson, gave a moving "Come to Jesus" lecture on the need for medical writers to learn about the research being done on written communication. I never forgot his impassioned plea to learn and apply this research. It would be several years, however, before I offered a workshop titled "Improving Readability: Theories and Research Findings." You see the workshop; less obvious but more important is what made the workshop happen. AMWA introduced me to David Carson.

Another year, I found myself walking along the beach with a fascinating and proper British gentleman talking about "journalology" and the unique issues of scientific publications. We walked and talked uninterrupted for more than an hour, and I was spellbound the entire time. The gentleman was Dr. Stephen Locke, at the time, Editor-in-Chief of the British Medical Journal. Our conversation was fascinating enough that I studied that very topic when I took a master's degree in Communication at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California. You see my degree; less obvious but more important is what made the degree happen. AMWA introduced me to Stephen Locke.

Soon after taking a position as Manager of Medical Editing Services at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, I found myself wondering why I skipped over the statistics in the articles I was editing. I had taken several AMWA statistics workshops, and while all were good, none really helped me to do my job as an editor. I was sharing this thought with Lil, who was now my sister-in-law, and I made the mistake of saying that AMWA needed a more appropriate workshop. Lil agreed (or decreed; I don't remember which), and I was scheduled to teach such a workshop at the annual conference in November. It was then late March, and the materials had to be completed by mid August.

Slowly, it dawned on me that I had better come up with a whiz-bang workshop or find a REALLY GOOD witness protection program. Lil would not allow the

conference to be soiled by a bad workshop, even one led by her nephew's loving stepfather. (Talk about incentive!) So I read and I asked and I discussed and I wrote and I revised and I wrote some more and created what has become "Statistics for Medical Writers and Editors." You see the workshop; now you know what made it happen. AMWA challenged me to create it and allowed me to teach it.

The handout for that first statistics workshop was a 20-page glossary titled "The Statistical Flora and Fauna of the Biomedical Research Article." I was very proud of it. Even had a cartoonist illustrate the cover, which I duplicated on Astrobright paper. At the time, I knew but two statisticians at the Clinic. One was too busy to review my masterpiece, but the other, a bright young woman named Michelle Secic, agreed to look it over. Her review was thorough and, to my chagrin, resulted in extensive changes, but the final product was accurate in her world and clear in mine. Six years later, we published our book, *How to Report Statistics in Medicine: Annotated Guidelines for Authors, Editors, and Reviewers*. Only much later did I learn that she had felt compelled to help me write the book because my draft handout was SO WRONG that she didn't want me publishing anything about statistics on my own!

In the early 1990s, evidence-based medicine practitioners became appalled by how much published research was poorly conducted or poorly reported. (Remember that evidence-based medicine is literature-based medicine.) In response, the Council of Science Editors, which still includes many AMWA members, created a working group to develop standards for reporting biomedical research in scientific journals. Several distinguished journal editors, researchers, medical writers, and statisticians convened at Asilomar, during AMWA's Western Regional Conference.

Having begun my own review of statistical reporting guidelines by then, I sat in with the working group and was able to contribute to the guidelines they were developing. When the Asilomar Working Group consolidated forces with the Standards of Reporting Trials (SORT) group and became the CONSORT Group, I went along and have been a member ever since. You see my participation in CONSORT; less obvious but more important is what made my participation happen. AMWA introduced me to the members of CONSORT.

I had also brought an early draft of my book on statistical reporting to this particular Asilomar conference. One participant was so taken with the draft that, after a quick page turning, asked if his organization might be allowed to publish it. The participant was Dr. Ed Huth, then Editor-in-Chief of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, which is published by the American College of Physicians. You see the book; less obvious but more important is what made the book happen. AMWA introduced me to Ed Huth.

At yet another Asilomar conference, I met Dr. Joseph Lau, one of the foremost thinkers in meta-analysis and the co-originator of cumulative meta-analysis. That meeting eventually led to a job offer at the New England Medical Center in Boston, where I spent a wonderful year working with Joseph and his team at the New England Cochrane and Evidence-Based Medicine Centers. Although personal concerns took me away from Boston, I continue to collaborate with Joseph as a consultant. AMWA introduced me to Joseph Lau.

Given the importance of the Asilomar Conference in my professional development, it should come as no surprise that I wanted to create something similar in the Midwest, where I then lived. So was born the Deer Creek Conference, held in a rural, state-operated conference center, away from all distractions, as informal as Asilomar, and as inexpensive as possible to attract interested people to the profession of medical writing and to AMWA. Deer Creek was to be a place where we could develop new workshops and new workshop leaders in preparation for regional and annual conferences. It has always offered scholarships to students in professional writing programs at universities in the Ohio Valley Chapter. Professors from these same universities have also described their programs and new developments in the field to conference participants. You see the Deer Creek Conference; less obvious but more important is what made the conference happen. AMWA provided the model for me to create it.

I want to thank many people for their support throughout the years. There are more than I can name, but several stand out. Toni and Colin Sablack spent fully half of our 12 years together sharing me with the statistics book. Six years is a wide confidence interval indeed. Martha Tacker, Howard Smith, and Max Losi inspired me to contribute to the development of the profession and to the Association. Susan Eastwood had much to do with those early and important Asilomar Conferences. Art Gertel introduced me to the key people in the European Medical Writers Association and thus expanded my teaching opportunities to Europe. Barbara Gastel recruited me to teach in her program in China, which, among a great many other opportunities, has also resulted in both an English edition and a Chinese translation of *How to Report Statistics*. (Some say that the circle of statistics is now complete: from Chinese to plain English and now back to Chinese again . . .)

I also thank Jessica Ancker, whom I hired and trained (and who has been teaching me ever since), for her enthusiasm and skill in preparing the next generation of medical writers.

My last thank you goes to the late Gerry McKee, a Past President of AMWA, co-founder of the Asilomar conference, and story teller without equal. Years ago, Gerry told me the secret of medical writing, which I make a point to pass along to other

medical writers every chance I get. (No, it has nothing to do with your left elbow.) The secret? Have something to say. Say it. Stop.

In closing, I thank you for this award. It has been an honor to be the sword that has captured your attention. I think it more important, however, to focus on the personal and professional opportunities that AMWA makes available to us all. Knowing what I made of these opportunities is of momentary interest. It is what we collectively make of AMWA's opportunities and challenges that will have a lasting impact. I encourage each of you to look for those opportunities on which you can capitalize; to meet those challenges that will advance your knowledge and skills and, with them, the profession of medical writing. Thank you.