

Early Career Members

Set Loving Relationships as Your Highest Priority

I am honored to be invited to provide some advice to early career members. Many years have passed since I was an early career member. I am now completing 35 years as a soil science faculty member. During this time, I served as major professor for several Ph.D. students and post-docs who now have established careers in soil science. In fact, the favorite part of my job has been mentoring graduate students and post-docs. My goal is to help each student grow as a person and as a scientist in preparation to successfully move to the next stage of life. I count it a blessing to have had the opportunity to mentor many outstanding persons. Before I offer specific advice to early career members, I will provide some background information on myself to share how I discovered soil science and how I came to view an emphasis on loving relationships as my highest priority.



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proposals, projects, students, courses, and publishing. It was a seemingly infinite sink of time with no clear endpoints. My approach was basically to go to work all day and to go home to rest a bit, so that I could do more work in the evening. My highest priority was on my work and work productivity. As a married man with

young children, this was not a good top priority. In 1985, I quite suddenly became aware of the shortcomings of my priority choice. One day, I received a phone call at work. The caller identified himself as a police officer, and he told me that there had been an accident in my home. It turned out that my one-year old daughter had somehow managed to pull herself into a bucket of water. She landed head first and was trapped. She did not recover and was pronounced dead two days later. This led to a dark time within me and a difficult time at home. In light of this tragedy, my sense of the relative importance of my work diminished, and I decided to re-evaluate the priorities of my life.

Through my pain and sadness, I thought about the meaning of life and death, and I decided to pray simple, honest prayers asking for God's guidance and help. My first prayer was something like, "God, if you exist, please reveal yourself to me." I began to experience God's presence and love, and I made a personal decision to put my highest

priority on God. I decided to set boundaries or limits on my life commitments. I wanted to live for God first, family second, and work somewhere after that. It did not mean that my work was not important. In fact, over time, I discovered how to do my work as though I was working for God. By putting God first, all other things began to come into proper order and balance.¹

"I have a Google Scholar profile, but it does not quantify my relationships. The greatest joy of my career is working with graduate students and young scientists."

As a youth, I did not notice soil, and I had no idea that soil science existed. Following high school, I attended Texas A&M University, but during my freshman year, I did not expend much time and energy on my studies. While working on a summer job, I felt restless about returning to college because I did not have a major focus of study. I considered dropping out of school. However, some soul searching helped me to realize that I had a strong desire to help to feed the hungry. Looking in my college catalog, I discovered a major called "agronomy," a term I had never heard before. With a piqued interest, I enrolled in the courses. I liked the crop courses greatly, but the soils courses really grabbed my attention. I was fascinated by the beauty and wonder of soils. I learned that soils are as vital a natural resource for sustaining life on earth as are air and water, and so I decided to major in soil science.

Several years later, I was hired as an assistant professor at Iowa State University. When I was a young professor, I did not set healthy priorities and boundaries. Because I was insecure in my ability to succeed as a professor, I allowed my job to nearly become all consuming with research

Integrating Faith and Science

I am now a person of faith and science, and I see no conflict between the two. I am thankful for God's gift of creation, including a mind that can reason, analyze, choose, emote, explore, and believe. I believe the earth belongs to God, and that God has entrusted its care to humans. Soils

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¹ For more details on my personal story, you can listen to the podcast of a 2015 interview I had on a Catholic radio program at <http://bit.ly/1UemLw0>.

are a part of this, and they require special care, which can be one way to demonstrate love of God and neighbors (present and future generations).²

If you are a person of faith and science, I advise you to find ways to integrate your faith into your work. One way I do this is to lead a weekly noon-hour “Bible study” meeting in my department. Through the years, more international than domestic colleagues and students have attended the meetings. I have learned firsthand the vulnerability of those from other countries who are living far away from relatives and friends. Here are a few examples on how people have been served through this weekly gathering:

- An international student was scheduled for surgery, but his wife did not drive. I drove them to the hospital and comforted them while waiting.
- An international student was stressed over studies and the fact that her daughter was still in their home country. Another woman in our group provided her support and friendship.
- A U.S. student received a call at work informing him that his pregnant wife had just been taken by ambulance to the hospital. There was concern about a premature birth. I drove him to the hospital and waited with him and his wife.
- An international student phoned with news that her visiting father-in-law just had a heart attack and collapsed. He died a short time later. I was able to support her and her family.

² More on this topic is in Laudato Si, On Care for Our Common Home, a 2015 Encyclical Letter by Pope Francis: <http://bit.ly/1Gi1BTu>.

- Difficulties in work relationships (students and professors) and family relationships occur. These are opportunities to encourage patience, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Another piece of advice is for early career members to carefully consider and set life priorities. Set and keep a reasonable work schedule. Do not succumb to the temptation to use all of your time to do work. Be intentional about building relationships—family, work, church, and community. Commit to serving others. For the past 15 years, I have visited my city’s local men’s homeless shelter on Saturday mornings to listen, talk, pray, and eat with the residents. I receive much more than I give.

Do not work only for personal recognition. When I began my career, I was the boss of my group. I gave the orders and others followed. Later, I chose to serve others by listening to them and empowering them. Helping others is more fulfilling than glory seeking. Being faithful to provide your best effort is a better goal than striving for success, although the two are not opposed.

My greatest advice is to seek to love God and love others in the workplace. It may appear strange to read the word love in a context of work. But finding ways to express love (seeking the best of another) in the workplace are worth the time and effort. True happiness is not based on accomplishments, income, or awards. It is based on loving relationships. I have a Google Scholar profile, but it does not quantify my relationships. Each journal paper involves many hours of work primarily with young scientists. The greatest joy of my career is working with graduate students and young scientists. Effective mentoring is a labor of love, and it’s fruit helps to form the next generation of scientists.



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