

SHARING OUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES



Laying the groundwork for solving problems

BY TIMOTHY J HOLZHAUER, SR/WA, MAI, MRICS, JD

“Should I tell them the story about the dog?” Those in the class that had already heard the story would laugh quietly.

Over the course of his extensive career as an appraiser and educator, Harry Holzhauser, my dad, had countless stories. He told the one about the dog in nearly every class, and I’m sure many other times over the course of his teaching and appraisal career. Harry was full of stories, some that he experienced himself and some that he co-opted from other instructors and colleagues. He always made sure to tell me that, “It doesn’t matter whose story it is, as long as it demonstrates your point.” I’ve heard the same notion repeated by other facilitators and instructors and believe that this illustrates how, collectively, our industry learns.

PROBLEM SOLVERS

As right of way professionals, our goal is not always about finding the best answer. Often times, we must first identify the right question. It’s not uncommon for our clients, whether they be agencies, engineers within your own agency, private parties or

attorneys, to be unclear as to exactly what they need. So we need to listen to what they are asking for, listen to the reasoning and help them figure out what we can really do to help them.

For us to creatively find the right question and the best answer, we must relate it to our experiences, education and knowledge base. Sometimes that comes from our own stories. Sometimes it comes from the stories of others. When we collaborate, we have more stories to draw from, more experiences, more questions that were found correctly or, in some cases, incorrectly. Every story gives us a different perspective. A perspective that can help us find the question, as well as a solution to the question.

Harry’s stories always had a point, and he told them to help give someone else a different perspective. They were drawn from more than 30 years of industry experience, from collaborating with other professionals and from everyday life. He shared the story about when he and I appraised a natural hot springs resort, and we had to analyze the effect on value of the natural springs that would have limited value without the resort and vice versa. He told the story about when a jury agreed with him and

concluded that an appraisal is an opinion, and an opinion can never be wrong. And the trial where the judge concluded in pre-trial motions that a parcel of vacant land with off-site curbs was effectively improved and could not be compared directly to raw land without curbs, thus throwing out seven of ten comparable sales on the eve of trial.

Each of these stories would lay the groundwork for solving a client's problem. Yet, his stories weren't just about professional assignments. He would speak frequently about his grandkids, telling stories about my two sets of twins, and how they had to learn to share from the start. Or about how much fun it was to watch them learn, like the time he performed electrical experiments using a science kit he had bought for them. The joy of watching children learn would always lighten his day. The joy of seeing adults learn was just as good, but it was more frequent and obvious with children. Either way, every experience would help him see issues from different perspectives.

BRINGING HOME THE POINT

"Should I tell them the story about the dog?"

Regardless of where he was or who he was teaching, Harry would ask and those who had heard the story would laugh. I don't know whether he co-opted the story or if it really happened to him. Either way, Harry would tell the story like this:

I was testifying in a trial for an attorney that was new to eminent domain. The attorney was not familiar with the appraisal process or the terminology. Although we met before trial and talked about the process, the attorney was still struggling to understand how the pieces fit together. So on direct exam, his questions were not getting to the point of what I was trying to say. So I answered in long, narrative answers, circling back to the point.

"Objection! Non-responsive!" exclaimed the opposing counsel.

"Sustained." The judge looked at the jury and asked, "Should I tell him the story about the dog?" The jury laughed a little to themselves.

The direct examination continued, and the attorney asked more questions that weren't quite on point. So I answered in a narrative that went on for some time. Opposing counsel once again stated, "Objection! Non-responsive!"

"Sustained. Should I tell him the story about the dog?" The jury giggled a little more.

After a couple more rounds of this same sequence, the judge finally told the story. The judge said, "If I were a salesman knocking on your door, and you came to the door with a dog standing next to you, I would ask you the name of your dog.



Your answer would be "Rover." It wouldn't be, "Well, funny story about this dog...I was walking by the pound one sunny day, and I heard dogs barking so I went into the pound a looked at all the dogs and this one was cute and another not so much so I took the dog home and he fit right in..."

The judge said, "Please just answer the questions that you are being asked."

So I looked up at the judge and said, "But what if you asked me the name of my dog, and standing next to me was a cat?"

This story is a parable for finding the right question. Harry was good at looking for the right question, as we all should be. To keep growing as an industry, to keep improving on our processes and our service, we need to keep sharing our experiences and borrowing from each other and from our lives outside the profession to find creative solutions and help each other grow.

Back in February, an unfortunate boating accident took my father's life (see page 62). A reporter covering the accident said, "It sounds like we lost a good one." I know he is right, and I feel the loss intensely. While my family dearly misses him, I know that everyone who met and worked with him does as well. From the nationwide outpouring of support from not only friends but also colleagues, co-instructors, former students and professionals that were positively affected by Harry's infectious love of appraisal, public real estate and teaching, I know that Harry's stories will live on.



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