

The Good Guys Made Me Do It

K. Robert Kern

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Abstract

Kern's remarks at the Awards Banquet, National ACE Conference, where he received the ACE Professional Award.

The Good Guys Made Me Do It

K. Robert Kern

A comedy character created by Flip Wilson explained her every sinful act by saying, “The devil made me do it.” Well, if there have been instances of merit in my 36 years of professional work in agricultural communication, it’s because the GOOD GUYS MADE ME DO IT.

First there was Hadley Read. When an undergraduate listened to the siren song of this authentic genius, he was likely to be captured for life. That happened to me in the summer of ‘47.

Then Dutch Elder. A quieter, more disciplined genius. Probably the most developmentally innovative leader we have known in land-grant agricultural communications.

Lester Schlup, the inheritor in USDA of the mantle of the fabled Reuben Brigham. Les was himself a greater communicator and unstinting advocate of the young people in the field.

Bry Kearl, who early epitomized the creative union of communications as science and communications as practice.

Time won’t accommodate this list which could go on and on and on, if full disclosure were to be made.

K. Robert Kern is a communications consultant, and from 1981 through 1984 was communications officer of the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR), The Hague, Netherlands. These are his remarks at the Awards Banquet, National ACE Conference, Washington, D.C. June 27, 1984, where he received the ACE Professional Award.

But I will add one more. That droll and quiet giant from Purdue, Ralph Reeder. He knew more clearly than most—and convinced many others—that communication is really all about people, only secondarily about media and technology.

Those were the good guys who made me do anything good or useful that I have done. They inspired the professional love affair that continues to hold me captive. With these mentors, my world was lively and changing. For that I'm forever grateful; I was spurred to avoid sameness, repetitiveness, absence of change—those enemies of creativity and probably of productivity.

In her letter that conveyed word of this marvelously unexpected award, President JoAnn Pierce said I would be expected to say a few things on a professional topic of my choice. An enticing opportunity; one to frighten me as well as you.

These last four years away from most of you have shielded me from knowing much about what you've been doing. Both my work and work places were far removed. And it is a different river into which we have stepped again this week. With so little time in the water, my few observations may not be trustworthy. But let me test them.

There is much about ACE to impress the hunter who has come home from the hill:

- ACE is a brighter, more intellectual, more sophisticated group. The leading edge seems surely to be populated by the youth. That's exactly as it should be in a developing profession.
- The quality of your specialization would have astounded and thrilled the bottled-in-bond media advocates of the recent past. And well it should: this is an age demanding specialization.
- Your easy literacy in the buzz words of the day is fantastic. You speak of computers, telecommunications, of bits and bytes, and satellites. And it must be so. That's the way our civilization moves.

I'd guess that the average professional today can research, prepare, and deliver more efficiently a more compact and attractive piece of communication than could the average professional of an earlier day. It appears to me that ACE members have pushed the standards of individual performance to higher and higher levels.

Yet I sense in many that there is a professional malaise. Few among you seem really high on what you're doing, thrilled by the self-assurance that your work is really making a difference.

We have been back only a short time, and only a small part of the river has flowed near us. So our sample of observations is limited. Yet I can't push away the feeling that there's stress in many of the organizations you serve. Relations seem tense; some administrators seem less satisfied than previously with your performance overall; and many performers seem unfulfilled.

If that observation is reasonable, one hypothesis comes to mind in the search for reasons why. That hypothesis is that the *excitement* of the search for excellence in technology and technique has perhaps surged ahead of the reason for the search. Seeking to know how to do something better may overshadow (even overwhelm) the search to know why or whether something should be done.

It is easy to see great advances in the technical minds and productive hands of our profession. It is not as easy to see evidences of a deepening heart and soul in our profession.

It is tempting to hypothesize that some of the restlessness that comes to the surface in quiet conversations reflects a growing sense by many that there must be something more they should be doing. This is the area in which my own set of good guys kept me in touch with the heartbeat of the profession. None of them was, in my opinion, a truly gifted producer in any skill area of agricultural communication. But each knew *why* our profession was important.

Like the Tin Man on the way to the Land of Oz, many in ACE today—in my opinion—are ready to set out in search of a heart. I must say quickly that I have no map that leads to a Yellow Brick Road. But I do have an idea that might be worth some thought, perhaps by the ACTION Committee or some group in ACE.

A generation ago, ACE set out on a search for Oz or something like it. Some of my own good guys were in the advance party. ACE didn't find the Great Oz who could solve all contemporary problems. But many of us in ACE found heart and soul and a stronger base for the concept of communication as a human process. The label for the search was NPAC—the National Project in Agricultural Communication.

Through the soft focus and dimming lights of memory perhaps, some of us think of those as halcyon days in which

the base was laid for our professional respectability—for ourselves first and then for those we wanted to work with as well as to serve.

Some eight years ago, ACE endorsed the need to look again to our professional roots. ACE gave support to a group of latter-day good guys who worked at it over a period of several years. With some financial support from USDA (under auspices of Jim Webster and Hal Taylor), we proposed a project, one that called for a million dollars. We didn't find a million dollars in a time of recession; we could not return in triumph to the land of Oz we'd once visited.

I do not believe today that the need has gone away. Nor do I think a million dollars is any more likely to be shaken now from a friendly source.

But must we continue only to wish?

I believe there is something useful and creative to be drawn from the concepts we found and diffused in the years of NPAC. The concepts have not been lost, but in an era of primary attention to technique, technology, and individual performance, we hear little of them from the speaker's platform or in conversations in the hallways.

There are within ACE a few of the people who helped create NPAC, who were centrally involved in planning its agenda and carrying out its work. Not many, but a few remain who espouse the values. My idea has to do with making use of the seasoned expertise of such people—with less than a million dollars.

One way to do that could be this: Francis Byrnes, now retired, was a main architect of NPAC and its associate director from the first to the last days of the project. Hal Taylor, now retired, was one of the first of a distinguished line of graduate students who gave the project muscle and blood. Ralph Reeder, now retired, was netted in the first crop of professionals in NPAC training programs; a born-again communicator, he has kept and spread the faith.

I suggest that ACE work out a way to bring these three packets of yeast together with a mandate to generate, from the residue of NPAC and their own years of experience, what they think would be worth laying out for the present generation of ACE. Who knows what they might create as content and method? Perhaps they would take over a day on every regional ACE program; or devise a new round of train-the-trainer activities. I would be the last person to try to predict—or in any way constrain or direct—what could come from their

interaction.

There are a host of other things I'd like to mention in this matchless moment. All would relate to my theme of believing that the communicator serves fully only when he can in confidence know why and whether as well as how to communicate. Under such a professional discipline, he does not have to have anyone there to remind him often of the lessons my good guys taught me: Communication has principally to do with people.