

Presidential Address

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS

A PEOPLE SERVING PROFESSION

Presidential Address of Stanley C. Rossier¹

One hundred thirty-five years ago today, five civil engineers gathered at the United States Hotel in Boston to unite for professional growth through self-development. They were dedicated to improving the value of life by creating public water supplies, transit systems and structures to meet human needs of their time. They shared common experiences in using the materials and forces of nature, educated one another concerning the application of mathematical and scientific principles, and worked to improve their leadership skills.

That informal meeting on April 26, 1848 sparked a professional and human endeavor that took root in the Boston community and grew rapidly. Their first regular meeting occurred just 68 days later on July 3, 1848, and by 1851 the state legislature chartered the Boston Society of Civil Engineers in recognition of our pioneer founders' dedication to professional development.

In some respects the world has changed dramatically since those founders of professional engineering served their fellow citizens through dedication to a creative environment in which a better life could be achieved. Technology has become very complex, and the process has become the object of our attention. Our minds are absorbed in many details, while our professional outlook tends to focus upon the intrinsic value of applied technology.

In other respects the world has changed very little. As a part of society we continue to proclaim self-fulfillment as the reason for serving people, not serving people as the reason for self-fulfillment. We see economic growth as the reason for our professional service, not professional service as the reason for our economic growth.

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We can and must dedicate ourselves as professionals to do no less than those founders of BSCE under whose heritage we labor. The technical challenges of our nuclear space age, though awesome, are surely solvable through the systematic application of scientific principles and our will to accomplish complex tasks. Our ability to apply logic, reason with elements of a problem, and place the solved pieces within a larger framework leading to a solution of the total problem has been demonstrated over and over again.

Leadership challenges of our age remain in greater question, for they may not be solved without a level of individual and personal effort beyond that which any of us has demonstrated. Our knowledge of leadership skills, our imagination, and our expertise in dealing with complex human interactions must continue to develop, through a greater understanding of our very selves, if we are to move forward in providing the professional leadership desperately needed by fellow citizens.

There is a strong creative drive in each of us to bring about new concepts and to solve problems that are complex and overpowering. Creation is an ongoing process viewed as a challenge we cannot leave alone. Our world is a dynamic environment where human souls continually struggle to create, as well as to destroy. Each of us, as part of this process, is faced daily with decisions on how to invest our time, our talent, and ourselves.

When we ponder a course of action by asking what type of project should our firm pursue, what type of job should we seek, or what assignment shall we accept, do we ask ourselves: Should I participate in creating a safe disposal system or a toxic tumult, a space structure for scientific research or a satellite for spying on others, a new town to support human life or a supersophisticated bomb to destroy life? Such questions appear too simple and their answers become dismissed as obvious. For many engineers working in areas of "high technology" the answers take on shades of gray and are by no means clear. Many of us working as civil engineers now face this dilemma.

How can I effectively contribute my own time and talent in pursuit of a necessary step toward a stable world order? The daily decisions each of us makes may seem but a tiny

element in such a complex world, and yet each personal as well as corporate decision in answer to such questions can be vital in helping to develop the ultimate environment we simply must create.

As engineers, we often discount the importance of our part within the process of creating human acceptance, human understanding, and eventual human trust on a scale that can become large enough to attain world peace. We are a profession capable of providing a unique measure of leadership, as well as technical talent! Witness if you will the role played so successfully by our student chapter at Northeastern University over the past dozen years in discerning a human need, citing a means of serving others, conceptualizing a total project, identifying the key elements involved, finding sources of funds, seeking solutions for each element of the project, and creating the total concept. Their leadership and talent provided an outdoor development facility for autistic children, constructed play therapy facilities for the Boston Children's Service Association, and created a playground for children at Kennedy Memorial where children now develop motor skills and sensory stimulation. The list goes on and we cannot stand by, for we must acknowledge these examples and learn from our students!

I believe that as professionals we are called on to apply our unique talents, not only in the solution of technical problems, but in filling the leadership needs of our time through deliberate actions that build trust in a world of fear. There is an unknown and unmeasured potential within each of us. Our greatest reward can come from exploring that potential while striving to provide a unique service of leadership in meeting the needs of others in a divided world.