Science Societies

Small in space and time: Musings from a leisurely walk

By Aaron Lee M. Daigh

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This month, SSSA President Aaron Daigh revisits a collection of unfinished ideas that he has been thinking about over some of his daily walks and discovers a common theme: scale. From the gaps between professional

successes to the long-term impact of teaching, research, and extension, he reflects on how changing our perspective can change how we see our work and ourselves.

I keep a list. Okay, I actually keep an excessive number of lists. But the one I am referring to now is one that has been running since 2014, shortly after I wrote my first article in *CSA News* magazine. It is a list of articles I want to write someday for this magazine. Some entries already have two or three times as many words as a finished article needs … ever notice that I can be a bit “long winded” ? Others have a full paragraph of scope and half an argument already worked out. Some are four words and a question mark. Most of them have never been written, and a fair number likely never will be. But it is September, the semester is underway, the proposal deadlines are stacking up, and I wanted to try something different this month.

In my May column, I made the case through Covey's Grid that our most impactful work lives in the "Important and Not Urgent" quadrant and that the SSSA Grassroots RFP was one way to offer that quadrant for our members. A walk is the smallest version of that same idea. It is an hour or so with no deliverable attached to it, and it is where most of my thinking tends to happen.

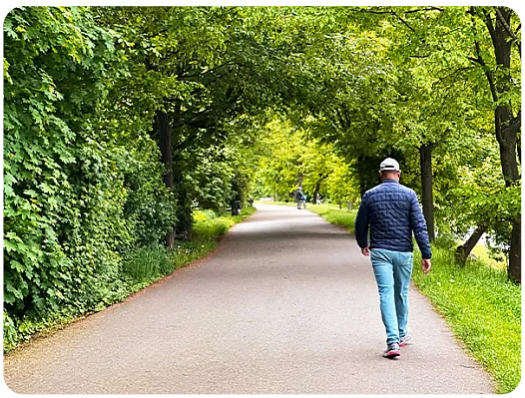

Photo courtesy of Shutterstock/Continentalleo.

I take a walk or two most days. My favorite runs through the older streets and neighborhoods, where the trees have had time to get big, the flowers are something worth slowing down for, and the sidewalk turns into a loop around a park. I put in my earbuds, let my watch count whatever it wants to count, and let my mind go wherever it was already headed or drift into seemingly random realms. What I like most is being able to look up. The clouds are moving, and somewhere behind them are all the stars I cannot see because it is the middle of the afternoon. It is hard to hold that thought for very long without also embracing the fact that we are very small—extraordinarily small … fantastically small—in both space and in time. When something interesting floats into the recesses of my mind, I then dictate it into my phone, and later that evening it goes onto the list and perhaps gets organized a bit.

So, on one recent walk, I pulled several items back off that list to think about. Now, keep in mind that none of them are finished arguments. A few of them are also about feelings that come up while you are chasing "metrics" or norms in any profession. Those feelings are common, and I think it helps to know that, so I am including them here. Take whichever ones are useful to you, and leave the rest.

Why everyone else seems to be doing better than you

There is a statistical idea called the inspection paradox, and once you see it, you will likely start noticing it everywhere.

Here is the version I like best, which comes from Allen Downey (2023). Ask students at a university how big their classes are, average the answers, and you will get a number well above what the registrar reports. Both numbers are correct. The registrar counts each class one time. The students count each class once for every student sitting in it, so the large classes get counted many more times than the seminar with six people in it. Nobody miscounted, and the student average is the more useful of the two if what you want to know is how a semester feels from a seat in the room. The general form is that your chance of observing something rises in proportion to its size.

Your professional life runs on the same arithmetic, twice over. You do not see a random sample of your colleagues' careers because people announce in proportion to magnitude. The grant funded, the paper accepted, the promotion, the award, and the keynote all get posted. The small win that took a year of steady work does not, and the rejection never does. What reaches you is weighted by size the same way the student survey is, and it arrives from everyone you have ever met, compressed into one timeline.

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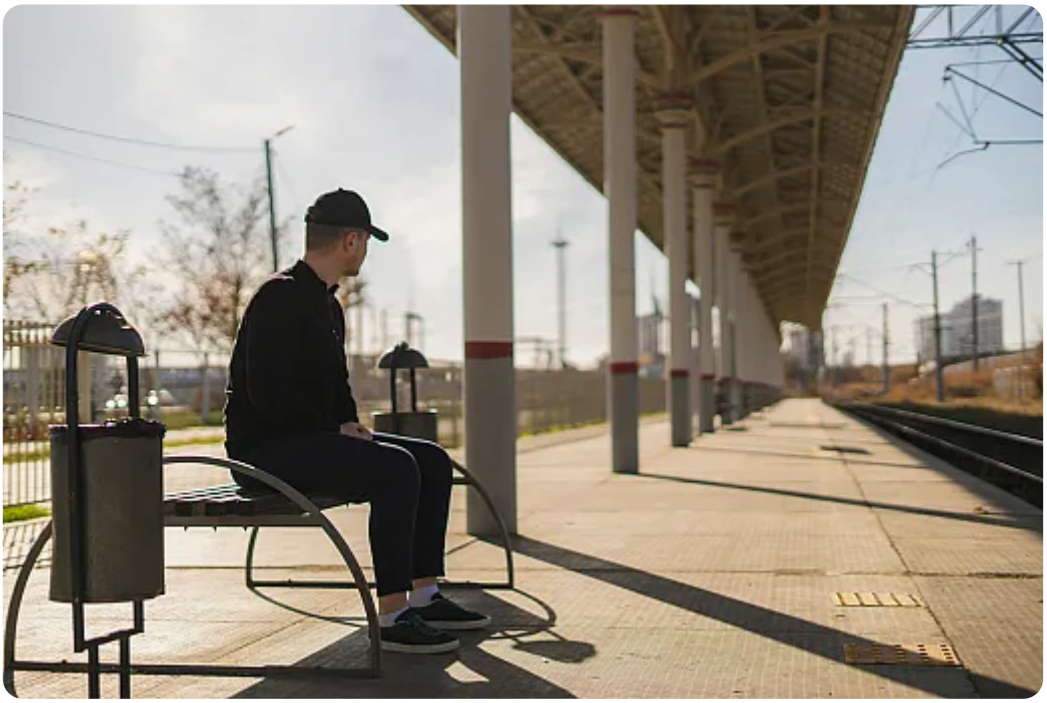
Downey runs the same logic through time with the wait for a train, where your wait runs longer than the average gap between trains because you are more likely to arrive during a long gap than a short one. Long intervals take up more of the day, so they catch more of the arrivals. Now consider your own career at full resolution—the rejected proposal, the field season the typhoon took, and the manuscript that has been in review since last December. Sample a random Tuesday, and you are more likely to land inside a long stretch between wins than a short one. Your dry spell is not unusual, but you are more likely to be standing in a long one whenever you stop to look.

That is worth knowing at any career stage, and it is hardest on our graduate students and early career members because their peaks are furthest apart in those years. I am not going to tell you to stop comparing yourself to others because we are going to do it anyway. What I will ask of you is that the next time a student tells you nothing is working, you tell them what is sitting in your own interval right now—the proposal that came back unfunded and the review that has not moved since December. They already have your announcements. Give them the gaps.

The hangover after the good news

Here is the other half of that: When the good news does come, the happiness is real, it feels like a biochemical party or explosion of fizzy water raving in your head, and it lasts shorter than you expect.

The grant gets funded, the paper is accepted, the tenure letter arrives, and you feel wonderful for a day, maybe two. Then a flatness sets in that feels ungrateful and is hard to share with others. It's like your mind is bottoming out as the biochemical residues of the rave wash out. I have felt it, and from enough late-evening conversations at enough meetings, I am confident most of you have too. Psychologists have a name for the general pattern. They call it hedonic adaptation, which is our tendency to drift back toward a baseline level of well-being after both good events and bad ones (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Later research found that the drift back is often incomplete and that good events tend to fade more fully than bad ones do (Diener et al., 2006).



If you have stacked your satisfaction onto a few big and infrequent moments, then you have built a life with long stretches of waiting in it. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock/Mike_shots.

I do not take from this that goals are pointless. Goals are how a career gets organized, and they set a trajectory for the work that gets done. What I take from it is a bit different. If you have stacked your satisfaction onto a few big and infrequent moments, then you have built a life with long stretches of waiting in it. And a long stretch of waiting is where people start to tell themselves that the waiting itself is the virtue and you need to find work that is worth doing for its own sake (i.e., something that is autotelic); however, waiting well is its own skill, one I have written about last year (Daigh, 2025).

Refusing to glorify the grind

Somewhere along the way, many professions started treating exhaustion as evidence.

You know the conversation. Someone mentions the 60-hour week, or the vacation they have not taken in three years, and there is a small pause where you are expected to be impressed. I have watched students take the wrong lesson from that pause because they are taking note.

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The work is demanding, and there are seasons when it takes everything you have. Field season is one. The week before a proposal deadline is another. I am not arguing for a soft version of this profession. In July, I made the case for desirable difficulties and for letting a student stand in a pit long enough to get confused, and I think that is where a great deal of the learning happens.

What I object to is the part where the exhaustion gets held up as the accomplishment, as if hours were a good measure of contribution. There is a real difference between a hard season and a hard life. The first one is normal in our line of work. The second one is usually a choice somebody made without noticing they were making it, and the students watching us deserve to know which one we are showing them.

Finding what puts you in flow

If the satisfaction is not going to arrive reliably from the peaks, then it has to come from the work itself, which means you have to know which parts of the work do that for you.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) called this state “flow.” It is when the difficulty of the task and your ability are matched closely enough that self-consciousness falls away and time stops behaving normally. Athletes describe it as being in the zone. Musicians describe it as being in the pocket.

What professional activity is rewarding in itself for you, irrespective of any outcome? What puts you in a state of "flow" or in the "zone" or in "the pocket?" Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Konstantin Yuganov.

I had to think about this for a good while before I could answer it for myself. A few things routinely do it for me. One is working with data, where I look up and two hours are gone and I could not tell you where they went. Another is a hallway or coffee-shop conversation with a student or colleague, where we end up improvising, chasing an idea that neither of us walked in with. A third item is reviewing a manuscript, which I know is a strange thing to admit to enjoying, but there it is. And, of course, walking itself is yet another, out among the trees and flowers. Psychologists call an activity that is rewarding in itself "autotelic," meaning that it is worth doing for its own sake, and Csikszentmihalyi (1997) placed these at the center of a life with flow in it.

Not one of those four examples shows up anywhere on my annual review form, but each is a big part of the reason I am still doing this. Take a walk and work out what yours are. Then protect them on your calendar because in the seasons when the funding news is bad and the institutional news is worse, those are the things that will keep you in this profession.

It depends

Somebody is going to ask you a hard question in the next month or two, whether it is a grower at a field day, a reporter, a congressional staffer, or your neighbor over the fence. Is the ground safe to build on? How long before that spill reaches our drinking water? How much carbon will that practice build in my soil? Or any other combination of questions that can come from farms, construction sites, contaminated lots, wetlands, forests, or gardens.

The true answer is almost always "it depends," and on its own, it lands like a dodge. In my April column, I mentioned a Pew survey finding that only 45% of Americans consider scientists to be good communicators, a nine-point drop over five years (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). I suspect "it depends," delivered badly, is part of how we earned that number.

Here is what I have found works when you have about 30 seconds. Give the two bookends first, and then the depends. Think of someone asking whether to add more eggs to a custard. At one extreme, too few and it never sets, so it pours off the spoon instead of slicing clean. At the other, too many and the silkiness turns rubbery. The right amount lives somewhere in the middle, and where that middle sits, depends on the custard they are making. Is it a crème brûlée that you eat from the ramekin with a spoon or a steamed Japanese purin that firm enough to flip onto a plate or a quiche that you can cut into wedges?

The same holds if someone asks whether to put an oversized camshaft in an engine. The bookends do the work because they show your listener that you are not hedging. You are telling them the answer moves, and here are the two ends of the range it moves across. Then you ask the one or two questions that locate them inside that

range, such as their texture, their drainage, their rotation, and what they are trying to accomplish. In half a minute, you have given them a real answer, and you have taught them that their question was more interesting than they knew.

The 50-year view of our three missions

This last one has been on the list the longest.

Our land grant universities are built around three mission areas, which are instruction, extension, and research. We staff them separately. We evaluate them separately. We fund them through separate lines, and we negotiate the percentages in every appointment letter as if we were dividing up an estate.

The three mission areas of land grant universities at the scale of an annual review are distinct, but those distinctions tend to fade at the scale of 50 years. AI-generated illustration courtesy of Adobe Firefly.

Now stand back and look at 50 years instead of one. The student you taught in 1976 became the extension educator. The question that educator carried in from a producer became the research question. The research finding became the lecture, which trained the student, who became the educator. At the scale of an annual review, the three missions are distinct, and they compete with one another for hours in the week. At the scale of a career, they are a single loop. At the scale of 50 years, I am not sure they are three different things at all.

I do not have a clean recommendation here. What I notice is that we design our hiring lines, our program plans, and our promotion criteria at the annual scale, and then we

act surprised when the 50-year loop gets lost or forgotten. The Morrill Act in 1862, the Hatch Act of 1887, and Smith-Lever in 1914 established these three missions one at a time across 52 years, a model that went on to influence similar systems around the world, and our institutions have spent a great deal of energy since then accounting for those three parts separately. This is only an observation so far, but it is one I want to share rather than leave sitting on the list for another decade.

An invitation, and a preview

That is a handful of items from a walk, and there are still plenty more on the list from hundreds of previous walks.

Reading them together, as I am now sitting down and editing my dictated notes, I notice a common thread that weaves along the topics. Every one of them is a question about scale. Whose careers you are sampling. How long a good feeling lasts. What a hard season costs against what a hard life costs. Where the hours go when the work absorbs you. How wide the range of real conditions actually is. And what 50 years does to three mission areas that look so distinct on a single annual review. I guess it is what happens when you do your thinking outdoors, under a sky that keeps reminding you how small the scales are that we spend most of our days worrying about.

Next month, I get to write the column I have been waiting all year to write. The Grassroots RFP proposals came in this past July, the SSSA Board of Directors reviewed and ranked them through August, and by the time you read the October issue, our first member-driven Working Groups, Commissions, and Consortiums will be named and underway. That program exists for the same reason this column does. The ideas that end up mattering rarely arrive on a deadline. They arrive when somebody makes room

for them, and they last when somebody else gives them a structure to grow inside of. The RFP is our attempt at the second half of that.

So take a walk. And if one of these topics is a column you would want to read, write and tell me which one (adaigh2@unl.edu). Whichever one draws the most interest, I will write it out in full in 2027 as a bonus, once this chair belongs to your next SSSA President, John Kovar, and I have the time to do it properly. And if none of these particularly interests you, is there another topic you'd like to hear my thoughts on? Let me know!

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