Brian's acceptance remarks:

I want to end the suspense right now. I did not win this morning’s Joe Marks Fun Run. Wouldn’t that have been something? The ACE Professional Award and the 2018 Joe Marks Fun Run Champion?

Thank you. It is a great honor and privilege to receive the ACE Professional Award. Thank you to the ACE board and all those involved in making this happen.

Despite my showing in this morning’s run, I always wanted to be the kind of leader that men and women would follow anywhere. If only out of curiosity.

And so has it come to pass.

If you’ve ever applied for a writing or reporting job, you know the age-old question often asked by the search committee: “When you must decide between being a perfectionist and making the deadline, how do you choose?”

Today I’m going to answer that honestly. I want to be freaking perfect, thank you.

That, obviously, is not the correct response. Especially if you want to be hired. And that is not the correct response to what’s demanded of each of us in our daily communications work.

But over the years, I found a way to deliver on time and get an inch or two closer to perfect — even if it was only in my mind. Even if it was in ways that only I noticed. Even if perfection was a sentence. Or rather, a revised sentence. Or rather, a revision of a revised sentence. I could keep going . . .

Perfection isn’t even the right word. Better. Improved.

For many years I worked for a dean whose favorite compliment to me was contained in a one-word email message: “Perfect.” It was never true. But it helped me to hear it. It made me want to keep trying to get better.

So, if you’re like me, what you really hope to get from your abilities in communications is a feeling of completion, maybe not of satisfaction.

E.B. White once wrote that a writer, almost by definition, is a person incapable of satisfaction.

I chose a hard profession. Maybe you did, too. I am a word person, and yet words have failed me more times than I care to admit — or that I care to remember.

That’s why I need ACE. That’s why you do, too.

Coming to ACE taught me about caring that much. And caring deeply enough to keep trying to get it right. We should not be satisfied.

And no, it’s never about perfection. That’s unattainable. It’s about trying your best, adding to your skills, blooming into your gifts. Then applying and sharing them. ACE helps make all that happen.

It’s never about perfection. It’s about constantly trying to raise the bar — in our work of communications and, also, in our work of relationships.

When people ask me how to describe what my office does, I usually say it’s all the “relations” words: Public relations, media relations, alumni relations, donor relations, stakeholder relations, government relations, internal relations, external relations.

Much of it boils down to building relationships: communicating on behalf of our institution and delivering our messages to many audiences every day. And inviting them to listen, to trust and to support.

W.H. Burke was a Michigan editor in the early 1900s. He was a guest lecturer in the first agricultural journalism class taught at the University of Illinois in 1907. Here’s what Burke told that class:

“Your work here is to study nature in her manifold aspects. But when you go out to engage in your life work, remember always and everywhere that the most important thing on earth is human nature; and human nature should be our chief study and the service of [humanity] our highest earthly aim.”

So, we need to get the relationships right, too — the human nature side that’s part of everything we do. And because it is, it gets messy sometimes. Humans: They’re the worst. They’re a muddy cocktail. And in the dregs are contradictions, irony and sometimes even paradox.

(Saying that, by the way, also will not get you hired.)

That’s why there’s ACE. That’s why there’s been 105 years of ACE.

I come to ACE to keep figuring out how to do communications better and how that translates into building those important relationships.

I come to ACE to learn how to be present at the table when decisions are made. I know many of us have struggled with that simple fact: Being invited into the room and knowing a chair with your name on it is waiting for you.

ACE has helped me prepare when the eyes around that table turn toward me. Which is scary. For years I’ve been practicing how to remain calm when everyone around you is waving their arms up in the air and speaking in tongues. That’s years of me imitating ACE members who I know do it well.

I’ve been blessed to know some of very best practitioners of communications anywhere. They’re ACE members. They’re in this room. I’ve learned a lot from these masters — people like you.

This summer it struck me that I’ve been an ACE member for half my life. In my first year working at Iowa State University, I joined ACE and went to my first national ACE conference. I was 28. The conference was in St. Paul. That very first conference set the template for me, encapsulating what professional development was all about and what it would mean to me.

I felt welcomed. People came up to me and introduced themselves. I was happy to see Jack Sperbeck reached 50 years as a member this year. Jack was the ACE president when I went to St. Paul. He welcomed me warmly. So did Gary Hermance. And Joe Marks. And Linda Benedict. They were like ushers, leading me in to the church of ACE. Bidding me partake in the holy sacrament of professional development.

From St. Paul, I brought home a notebook full of ideas and a short list of things I really wanted to try. That, too, became part of the template that was set my first year.

So was that vibe you got off people as they talked about what they loved to do. I was reminded of that yesterday in the remarks by Jack Dykinga, our Reuben Brigham Award winner. He made you want to grab a camera and light out for the territory with him.

Much of ACE for me has been wrapped up in the national conferences. Every year I enjoyed being face-to-face with people I looked up to and from whom I could be inspired.

I never liked calling it networking. It was friendships.

In one of my conference notebooks of the past, I brought home this statement from one of the presenters: “Professional development is finding out about who you are.”

That’s what ACE has been to me. Many have helped me discover who I am or what I could become. It became a year-round thing, not just something that happened at the annual conference. Colleagues were always willing to take a phone call, reply to a question or confer on a common issue.

That work of relationship building? We practiced on each other.

Jack Dykinga, the Reuben Brigham recipient, yesterday spoke about “transcendent moments” captured in his photographs. I’ve had plenty of those kinds of moments as an ACE member. Definitely not as spectacularly lit as the subject matter depicted in his photos, but still indelible.

In St. Paul, I remember a multistate group of us walking out into the night to have dinner at a French restaurant called Forepaugh’s. That was my first experience with French cuisine, made more memorable by the hypnotic French spoken by our waitress.

I drove a car to Indianapolis, eight hours there and eight hours back, with a 90-year-old ACE member going to his last ACE conference. How I wished I would have had a dashboard camera to record that whole trip, so I could remember his every word.

I ate grits for breakfast with author and reporter Rick Bragg in Savannah, before introducing him as the Hermance Speaker. He was charming, arrogant, amusing, full of himself — and a great speaker and storyteller.

At an ACE writing workshop in Ames, I wrote a novel with 16 other ACE members in 48 hours. Still the only ACE novel in existence. As far as we know.

One night I walked the monuments on the Mall in Washington DC with ACE colleagues from every part of the country. Together we felt that wordless emotion you’re struck by, standing in front of the Vietnam War Memorial in the near dark.

I celebrated my first child’s first birthday on the beach at Asilomar, holding on to his hands as he wiggled his toes in the sand.

One of my favorite ACE photos shows another multistate group taken in Rapid City, in one of those tourist-trap photo studios. The end result was a sepia-toned picture of us dressed as cowboys, barkeeps, gamblers and dancehall girls, with a saloon in the background. And each of us striking a pose with a super-solemn face. Janet Rodekohr was in that photo. At the following year’s conference, Janet came up to me and said: “Remember me? I was that hussy in South Dakota!”

I was in the audience in Washington for the now-legendary ACE story about the plenary presentation by someone who billed himself as a futurist. We were awe-struck. Dumbfounded. And not in a good way. One image sums it up: The speaker pulling overheads out of a backpack on the fly. I remember many of us looking around at each other and nodding. This is not how it’s done. If not transcendent, certainly a teachable moment.

Like that futurist, we, too, chose a hard profession. It doesn’t get easier.

We live in difficult times — strange times — for those committed to doing communications well. Sometimes it feels like we’re lost in a fog of noisy jackassery and unfathomable pinheadery.

Well, we need to keep countering with some “communication excellence” badassery. That’s why we need ACE, and more than ever.

We can help lift the fog. We need to care enough to keep trying to get it right: to keep raising the bar on the message, the image, the technology, the delivery and the research-based education.

That’s why we’re here. We are the unsatisfied. Stay unsatisfied, my friends.

I read through some of the remarks delivered by past recipients of the ACE Professional Award. They’re quite wonderful. Some are posted on the ACE website. I wanted to end with a quote, so I looked to see whom these past winners had quoted.

Elizabeth North quoted Shakespeare. Frankie Gould quoted Bob Dylan. Robert Casler quoted Ira Glass. Dave King, memorably, quoted Jimmy Buffet. What Dave realized, of course, is that you can’t spell “communication excellence” without coconut.

What I’ll close with is a very short poem by Sheenagh Pugh, a British poet and writer. I looked up Ms. Pugh online before coming to Scottsdale, just to refresh myself on who she was. I discovered that she had practically disavowed this particular poem. She’s sick of it; it’s been anthologized too much; and some have criticized her for not using more inclusive language. Ms. Pugh is unrepentant. Some have tried to change the language, which pisses her off.

It’s still a favorite of mine, though. I think it’s pretty close to perfect. It is a poem, so you can read into what you will. But I find it hopeful about our daily struggle to cut through the fog: To find the right message and have the courage to deliver it, knowing that there’s an audience — there’s someone — who needs to hear it.

This is called “Sometimes”:

Sometimes things don't go, after all,

from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel

faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail.

Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war,

elect an honest man, decide they care

enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.

Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best intentions do not go

amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.

The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow

that seemed hard frozen; may it happen for you.