



Today I was sitting in the pre-dawn morning enjoying a cup of coffee and reading a little book about some of the Buddha's teachings called the Abhidharma — an ancient philosophy concerning the nature of the mind. I am not a scholar of Buddhism (or any other “ism,” for that matter), but now and then, I enjoy contemplating things along these lines, as well as modern physics — they are both just about as difficult to grasp.

The house had a bit of chill, so I decided to make a fire in the woodstove instead of just turning on the heater. I went out to the wood stack to get some firewood, gathered some kindling and proceeded to make a fire — I thought. I laid the fire with care, positioned a bit of crumpled newspaper as an ignition source and carefully positioned the logs and kindling. I lit the fire, which flared up nicely, and settled back down to read my book.

After a few minutes, I noticed that my nice cheery fire was out! I got up and found that my newspaper had burned, but that was about all that had happened. So I proceeded to put more paper in, rearranged my kindling, and tried again. This time, it got to the point where I could hear the satisfying crackle of wood burning. I was sure of being successful — only to shortly discover that while the logs had ignited, that quickly died down to just glowing embers. I had failed once again.

Not wanting to give up, I went back to the stove to see if I could find a better solution. While looking at my layout, I recalled a lesson my older brother had given me decades ago: “The logs need to be close to a partner log so the air flows briskly between them, and the heat of the fire radiates to their partner log.” I realized that I had positioned the logs too far from their “buddy” logs for this to occur. I moved one of the logs about a half-inch closer to the other and went back to my chair to see what would happen. Within a short time, I had a really pleasant fire — meeting my intention perfectly. About that time, my wife came into the room and complimented me on building such a “romantic” fire! I killed two birds with one stone that time around.

You might wonder what this has to do with system safety or my normal TBD offering.

I realized that the fire-building exercise might be an almost perfect analogy to what I have been hoping to foster within the International System Safety Society (ISSS), the system safety profession or anything else applicable to this journal. Let me try to explain the connection.

For the past few decades, I have been hoping to do something to assist the ISSS in growing and becoming an organization that is as important and influential as I know it should be. I am convinced that the system safety process is highly effective and efficient at reducing risks while adding important fiscal and social value to products and systems of all kinds. I believe it is the duty/role of the ISSS to foster that process and help expand it into all industries and processes worldwide. The dual approach of integrating engineering and management practices into the process of designing, implementing and “fielding” products and systems holds the promise of a better, safer, more environmentally appropriate future. In short, I think it is a big deal.

However, I have noticed a rather disappointing trend over the years, whereby we (the ISSS) continually go through waves of enthusiasm and discouragement.

Our history seems to be littered with groups of people and individuals who take up the task of reinvigorating (or perhaps invigorating) the ISSS, expanding the scope into many industries, or otherwise promoting and providing training that matches the potential importance of the process.

Things get started, excitement builds to “do something,” meetings are met, papers are written — and then it dies down once again. Our membership grows to more than 1,000 individuals and then decreases back to a few hundred. (It is my firm opinion that to properly reflect the importance of the approach, the membership should be in the tens of thousands, rather than a few hundred.)

This brings me back to my experience with my woodstove. Like the stove, we work at gathering the fuel, laying the fire, putting in the starter and kindling that we think is necessary, light the process and watch it blossom for a little while — and then die out again. I have watched this happen three or four times in the past 30 years; it is a frustrating and disappointing cycle. We keep looking for better logs, better fire-starting materials and better kindling. We get out the bellows in an attempt to blow fire into the Society — but with little ongoing success.

Perhaps we have gathered the correct materials; perhaps we have them ready to go; perhaps we haven't been wrong in our overall approach — perhaps we just need to make a small adjustment so that we create a chimney between the forces of supply and demand.

There is an obvious demand for the kinds of things that we do, hence the plethora of standards and guidelines based loosely upon the “system safety approach.” These are created in many industries around the world, but they keep getting it wrong — while they like the ideas, they don't see the entire picture of what it is we

do. They take pieces and parts of the process, but not the whole thing.

There is a supply of people (our members and those in the profession who are no longer members of the Society) with the skills and knowledge to make it happen, but they are unable to find effective ways to work with the demand. We (the ISSS) are perfectly situated to provide the training, expertise and mentoring that leads to the skills and knowledge required to meet the demand. However, we have been unable to get past the “hump” of making that happen. Perhaps we just need to find the right thing(s) to shift a very small amount to get the fire burning vigorously — finally giving off the light and heat that we are offering to the world community.

I don't know what that might be. It is not clear to me what “logs” need to be rearranged to bring this about. But there might be much more effective ways than our cycle of gathering the wood, laying the fire, and watching it dwindle. Maybe we have the fire already lit — we just need to find a way to let the air get to the fire, and for the fire to bridge the gap. ●