

## Bob Weller Supplies the ‘Cork’ to Keep His Staff Afloat

By Bill Grigg

*“If you wait for perfect conditions, you’ll never get anything done.”*



That’s a “thought for the day” from [Bob Weller](#), and so an interview begins amidst packing boxes. The cheerful chief of CSR’s [Health of the Population Integrated Review Group](#) has been packing up to move back to renovated offices from temporary ones. His eyes sparkle. He chuckles as he talks. He looks like a hardy, bearded, short-cropped farmer from Funkstown, Md. He indeed was born there and raised in a house overlooking the National Highway, the first federal freeway. He remembers the military convoys pouring down it in World War II.

He and his wife, a Methodist minister, now live in Columbia, Md., from which he often carpools, “sleeping when it’s not my time to drive,” or spotting bumper stickers with quotes he can pass to his staff in his thought-for-the-day e-mails.

The thought he sent last July 1 was *“Most conflict is rooted in unmet needs.”*

He knows both. His dad, rejected for military duty, moved to Washington to do his part by working at the Navy Yard on timing devices for bombs. He later preached among the coal miners in a very small, very poor town called Sundial, W.Va. “You had to drive ten miles to go to a store,” Weller says, “and the families did feud and shoot at each other.”

*“Mean what you say. Say what you mean. Don’t be mean when you say it.”* — is a Wellerism from last Sept. 13.

On leave from teaching, Bob Weller was with a United Nations regional commission in Beirut in the 1980s, at the height of Lebanese “unrest,” as they called it – a full civil war during which the U.S. embassy was bombed. “I got shot at, my wife got shot at, we were in an air raid and someone blew up a part of the building where we were rehearsing Gilbert & Sullivan – a part of the building we had just vacated.”

The show did not go on. *“Life is not like a clock—you can’t turn the hands back,”* Dr. Weller wrote last Nov. 10.

Overcoming his first academic year—“I flunked kindergarten and had to go to summer school”—young Weller got a Ph.D. in sociology. He taught briefly at Brown and then 21 years as associate and then full professor of demography and sociology at Florida State. (His two years with the UN was during leave from the university.)

He now manages 13 standing study sections reviewing grant applications for projects in population studies, epidemiology, nursing science and behavioral genetics, among other fields.

*“What signs of hope and encouragement can you offer someone today?”*— last Sept. 12.



Bob Weller (first row, center) and his staff.

Dr. Weller started sending these thoughts out about five years ago when his Integrated Review Group was formed “and we didn’t have enough good people and felt overburdened.” Believing a happy staff produces more than an unhappy one, he passed the daily thoughts along to them, a practice he continues to this day with only an occasional lapse “when things get too hectic.” Now, as before, he spots a bumper sticker or a line in a book or composes his own thought and passes it along.

“And we have great morale now,” he says, “and that makes my job easier.”

*“To whom will you offer encouragement today?”* he asked on Nov. 17, 2005. Seven days later he added, *“The best way to be understood is to be understanding.”*

*“Relationships are always worth restoring,”* he wrote on June 30, 2005.

*“‘Life is not a rehearsal,’* I read in a pulp fiction book. I’ve forgotten the book, but not that line, because it’s true,” Weller says.

Dr. Weller once considered the ministry long and hard, “but I didn’t follow through. My son had just been born with brain damage and my level of faith wasn’t, I thought, sufficient at that time.”

*“Trust, like fine china, once broken can be repaired, but it is never quite the same.”* Dr. Weller passed that along last Nov. 15. Last July 7 he emailed his recipients, *“What happens outwardly in your life is not as important as what happens inside you.”*

The boy, one of three children, lives at home and has limitations “but is not angry or unhappy, as I think I might be. He is a pleasure. He has taught us a lot.”

Dr. Weller steers clear of religious sentiment in his daily sayings. He views his daily thoughts as “my little pieces of cork . . . Just as you can’t predict which straw will break the camel’s back, you never know, do you, how much cork you’ll need to keep afloat.”

At the end of the interview, Dr. Weller says to come back anytime. “Time is not as important as people,” he adds.

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