“Things Have Changed” is the title of a song, written by Bob Dylan, some fourteen years ago. Well, that song title could easily describe the veterinary medical profession today, for certainly, things have changed and are continuing to do so.

In the first line of the song, Dylan says, “I’m a worried man, got a worried mind.” Well, on the cusp of assuming the presidency of this organization, that phrase pretty well, sums up my own frame of mind. Let me tell you, I am worried! I am worried about any number of issues affecting our profession. I’d like to share with you just a few of those topics keeping me up at night.

Number one on my list is the continually increasing costs of a veterinary medical education and its consequent large student debt. Moreover - we must also consider that our salaries are neither commensurate with that education nor reflect the true value that we provide society. Along with the seemingly ever-increasing numbers of new graduates, and the concomitant decrease in consumer demand for veterinary services, I really start to wonder, beyond some potentially very difficult times for many of our new graduates, what will be the long-term effects on our profession?

Next, as the largest and most influential organization for the veterinary medical profession, are we, the AVMA, truly listening to our members – do we really know what they want, need, and value from their professional Association and a corollary to that, how do we communicate credibly to our members, all that we are doing for them?

Then, how can we increase the number of women and minorities in AVMA leadership, so that our leadership more closely resembles the demographics of our profession? Further and perhaps of even greater significance, how do we increase the numbers of underrepresented groups within the veterinary profession, so that we more closely mirror American society?

Are we missing the boat by not more actively promoting, our profession directly to the consumer? If so, where are the resources for us to do the job required to improve the public’s perceptions of the value of veterinary medicine?

Finally - I have the concern that we are not taking full advantage of the opportunity to support the one health concept, a real opportunity for this profession.

Wow, with all of that, it’s no wonder I’m losing sleep!

So how should I cope with all of this angst? Well, to begin with, I know that while I certainly don’t have all of the answers, I don’t have to. There are many very bright people in this profession and AVMA already has initiatives and tactics to begin addressing some of these issues.

Before we venture down that path however, we must recognize a substantial truth. That is the fact that the AVMA can never fully design nor control the future for our profession; at best, we can only hope to exert a strong positive influence for what we believe is in the best interest of our members. In reality, our professional destinies are primarily determined, as they have always been, by the wishes and desires of the global society, which we serve.

To begin, to more effectively battle against the devastating effects of that two-headed monster of educational debt and profession wide economic adversity, more than a year and a half ago, the AVMA created the Economics Division. We are just now beginning to learn the economic facts of life for this
profession. I am confident that our newly found economic knowledge and understanding will help us to begin formulating solutions to our conundrum. While those efforts are certainly a reasonable start, we must do still more.

Who here believes that veterinary medicine is the same profession as it was, even ten years ago? Show me your hands. Well, to keep up with the needs and demands of an ever-evolving society, we must expect and encourage experimentation and evolutionary changes with the process of veterinary medical education; and, we must be willing to readily accept those necessary innovations. In fact, it may not even be about doing things in new ways, but actually about doing new things. As human beings, we have a tendency to complain whenever old customs must give way to the new. Nevertheless, change is natural and we must learn to embrace it, rather than to fear it. The very process of transformation and adaptation strengthens us.

I also believe that our professional organizations, including our colleges of veterinary medicine must have the vision, courage, honesty, and determination to see the “big picture” of what is happening with our profession. While we may not have comprehensive control over the shape of our future, we do have a shared responsibility to try to alter what we can, to aid our members and our profession.

Secondly, seven months ago the AVMA put into motion what we are calling our new Strategy Management Process or simply the SMP. This major initiative has the exciting potential to answer many of those concerns, which I earlier voiced about whether AVMA is listening to our members. Through this undertaking, AVMA is reaching out, in an ongoing manner, and asking our members, “How can we best meet your needs and what do you value most about AVMA.” This process has the ultimate goal of helping to direct where you think your Association should be concentrating our limited resources and energies. Thereby enabling us to provide those services, products, and outcomes, you, our members truly want and value. If we really listen and do this well, and it will certainly take courage, judgment, integrity and dedication, by those of us on the Executive Board, we will ultimately remodel the AVMA into an Association of which we can all feel a proud ownership. During my nearly 20 years of service to the AVMA, this is probably one of the most exciting and important projects ever attempted. As author James Baldwin wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” So, stay tuned for SMP progress reports and I challenge you to keep us accountable.

Next, I believe it is essential to the sustainability and continued success of our Association and the veterinary medical profession as a whole for us to embrace and increase all aspects of diversity and inclusion. I want to remind you, that diversity is about neither quotas nor lowering standards. Diversity is about providing opportunities. Given a chance, diversity outperforms uniformity. For AVMA, that means, actively supporting programs such as the Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative. And, it also means educating members of under-represented groups, about the many positive aspects of a veterinary medical career. Through achieving a profession-wide demographic more similar to that of society, we increase our trust and widen our appeal to many consumers who today either underutilize or simply do not avail themselves of veterinary services. We must embrace diversity and inclusiveness not only because it is good for business, but because it is right.

I am very happy to say that over the past couple of years, the Partners for Healthy Pets have created a solid and effective coalition encompassing organized veterinary medicine, industry, academia, and private practice. One of their goals is to promote the companion animal segment of our profession directly to the veterinary services consuming public. The Partnership has also identified that by encouraging appropriate preventive care for our patients we can not only prolong happy lives and
increase the demand for veterinary services. Much as the dental profession of the past was forced by fluoridation to evolve from a paradigm of drilling and filling to one of preventing oral disease, we too must shift from our current focus of curing disease to one of preventing it. It is imperative for those of us in private practice and clinical education to follow-through by joining the Partnership, using the tools provided and promoting the concept of annual checkups for our patients.

However, when it comes to promoting ourselves to the public, I think we need to take one further step. While it is certainly beyond the scope of the current coalition, I firmly believe we need to broaden the scope of our marketing efforts to encompass the breadth of our profession, beyond just companion animals. We especially need to embrace production agriculture. I would love for us to have a campaign emphasizing an appreciation of the veterinarian’s role in the production of an abundant, wholesome, and above all safe supply of animal protein. While there is obviously still much left to do, we are on our way.

Finally, to increase the value of our profession to the world, we must constantly pay homage to that immutable bond that exists between animals, humans and the environment – a world of one health. Only as a cohesive forward thinking organization, willing to collaborate broadly with other groups and other professions, can we begin to accomplish the promise of One Health. By increasing our support of One Health and working more closely with groups such as the One Health initiative Team and the One Health Commission, we can potentially provide new career paths for veterinarians. In addition, a very positive and not so accidental side effect would be to increase the public’s appreciation for our profession’s role and possible future roles in the protection and maintenance of human and environmental health.

I believe that for us to find success with endeavors, we must have the determination to do our best each day and be willing to persevere in that effort and yes, perhaps even sacrifice of our time and energy, in pursuing our goals.

Furthermore, for the sake of our profession, we must always be willing and able to bear the burdens of change, no matter how problematic, no matter how painful, no matter how provocative. We must not only acknowledge that change is upon us, but we must be willing to accept it as well. While change is never easy and may often be painful – it is necessary for survival and progress – just ask the dinosaurs. Do you know what they would say? Well, they would answer us with a myriad of sounds; for the dinosaurs evolved into birds; and who amongst us wouldn’t rather soar with the eagles than to become extinct?

To the entire veterinary community in this country, I say, we are an infinitesimally small profession – we comprise only about three hundredths of one percent of the entire US population. There are nearly as many lawyers in Washington, D.C. as there are veterinarians in this entire country. And while I don’t expect you to always agree with the AVMA, nor with me personally, I do expect as professionals, we can and will address our differences with civility and respect, and work together to assist this great profession. AVMA works for us all, but will only be there for us, if we are there for AVMA. I am positive that divided, there is little we will accomplish – united there is little we cannot do.

Lastly, one thing that I have learned over the years, and exemplified by a quote from author Carlos Castaneda is, “We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves happy. The amount of work is the same.”
So, as my term as AVMA President quickly approaches, I’m going to get down to work, quit worrying so much, and maybe get a little bit more sleep.

Thank you for letting me vent and for allowing me to serve you.