
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Tracks to the Future

Let me tell you about one of my favorite movies.

“Under the Tuscan Sun” is the story of a writer, played by Diane Lane, who loses her husband—and her home—to a younger woman. Finding herself creatively and emotionally blocked, she accepts a friend’s offer of an Italian vacation and, on a whim, ends up buying a 300-year-old villa. She rebuilds her life amid new and eccentric friends, unique challenges, and more romantic heartbreak.

Yet, the story is really one of hope and inspiration.

The 2003 movie, directed by Audrey Wells and based on the memoir by Frances Mayes, captures the resilience of the human heart—and the importance of optimism coupled with hard work. A key moment in the film comes when Lane’s character expresses her fear and frustration at being far from home in an old house she doesn’t even like. She says how she wants a real home and a family, but is afraid all the time.

That’s when she’s told the story of the Semmering railway.

When tracks were laid across the Semmering Pass, which connects Italy and Austria, nobody knew if there would ever be a locomotive built that could use it. Not only was the railway the first true mountain railway in the world, but it was also the first to use standard gauge, and its curves and grades would prove too difficult for the trains of the time. But, they built the track anyway. They had faith that a new type of locomotive would be designed to use the pass, and they were right.

The answer was an articulated locomotive, one that swivels on its frame.

More than 150 years later, the tracks are still in use. Not only that, but the railway was among the first attempts to harmonize technology with the natural landscape, and has been recognized as a world heritage site.

I think often of that story about the railway when I’m confronted with challenges that seem impossible. Success comes down to knowing where you want to go, even if you don’t know how to get there. Desire alone won’t get you places, and existing technology may fall short, but if you work hard and prepare yourself for the opportunities to come, you will succeed.

It must have been a bit like what the founders of Emporia State had in mind when, in the midst of the Civil War, the legislature authorized a state normal school to be located here. There were no school buildings in 1863, and the town itself was hardly more than a notion, just a few years old. But opportunity came.

What will the future hold for our community, our state, and our nation?

Nobody knows.

But I see higher education as the tracks over the Semmering Pass of the future.

Just as digital technology has changed the way we live and work in just a few short years, so too will new and currently unimagined technologies shape our destinies. We must prepare ourselves, to learn new ways of doing things, and when there isn’t a new way, to roll up our sleeves and find one. The challenge will be to embrace change without forgetting where we came from, or where we’d like to go, and to build a path that is harmonious with our spirits and the natural landscape.

We must keep building, keep preparing, and keep dreaming.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu.
