The life goals of Dr. Robert Zimdahl are eloquently expressed in the Christmas note he composed in 2013: “To find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, bring peace among the people, and make music in our hearts.”

Bob was born February 28, 1935 in Buffalo, New York. Though he spent much time playing ball games, working in his father’s pharmacy, and running paper routes, he discovered his calling when he got a job working on a dairy farm east of Buffalo. “I loved being on the farm; it was just a wonderful time,” he recalls. Though he thrived on the farm, Bob struggled in the classroom. He remembers being required to write book reports for school and how he would, instead of reading the book, read the flyleaf summaries of his mother’s book club novels and then base his report on that snippet. “There was never any discussion about going on to school, as I recall... It was the motivation derived from my experience as a young boy on the farm. That’s what I wanted to be.”

Accepted into the four-year dairy husbandry program at Cornell University, Bob also ran on the cross country team and worked as the head waiter for his fraternity, serving tube-steaks and whistle berries (hot dogs and beans). He also served as first and second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. To explain that the military was a good experience, he humorously likens the ordeal to “hitting yourself on the head with a hammer because it feels so good when you stop.” After graduating, Bob pursued his dream of becoming a dairy farmer in central New York State by working as an Assistant County Agricultural agent with the Cornell University Extension Service, in Columbia County. In 1963 he moved with his wife and three children to Genoa, NY where he and a partner began Genoa Farm Service, a small fertilizer and animal feed business. It was the worst decision of his life. In 1967, a professor from Cornell offered him a pickup truck and $7,500 to do weed control research on a project to determine the feasibility of growing sugar beets in central New York State. “It was another one of those serendipitous happenings,” he explains. He went on to complete his master’s at Cornell, in 1966. His thesis was The influence of weed competition on the growth, yield and percent sucrose of sugar beets. He completed his doctorate at Oregon State University in 1968 with a dissertation A kinetic analysis of herbicide degradation in soil.

He was offered eight different jobs, some in the herbicide chemical industry. However, after his 1968 interview at CSU, his airplane flew over the magnificent Front Range, and he recalls the moment. “I looked down at Fort Collins, and thought, “That’s my place.’” Although CSU was not Cornell - an Ivy League university, his department head and colleagues were helpful and supportive.

“I never worked at CSU,” Bob insists with playful irony. “It was never work like milking cows... It was always enjoyable.” After 37 years, Bob completed roughly 100 journal publications, well over 100 reports and proceedings, ten book chapters, and thirteen books, one in a second and another in a fifth editions. Besides earning full professorship, he has visited forty countries, lived in three, created courses on world population and food and on agricultural ethics. Both were taught after he retired. Over time, Bob saw his research shift from methods of weed control in agronomic crops to the ethics of agriculture. He explains, “Agriculture has an operative moral stance, a clear ethical position: the primary goal is to produce food.” When he probed the moral implications of this productivity-focused mindset, he earned some animosity among colleagues. However, he still declares, “I wish I had known when I began how important it is to think about what we ought to do as well as what we can
do.” Challenging imbedded ideas, became and remains his intellectual quest. “It is essential to keep learning.”

Though CSU has been a wonderful place for Bob, he worries that “the teaching role has been transferred to adjunct faculty.” Because one of the greatest rewards of his career was “becoming and remaining intellectually alive.” He hopes that the university will continue to offer this privilege to any and every student through employing expert, full-time faculty. Dr. Zimdahl celebrates “the continued quest to be better” and declares about CSU, “It’s always been good, but now it’s very good.”