

## FOREWORD

I remember vividly where I was standing when I first met Jim. I was an eighteen-year-old prospective student touring Lafayette College with my parents. We were in the lobby of the Alumni Hall of Engineering, and I was trying to decide whether Lafayette was a place where someone like me belonged. Jim, in his characteristically understated way, convinced me that it was—not with a polished recruitment pitch (which would have been entirely appropriate), but by asking thoughtful questions about my interests and genuinely listening to my answers. I left that meeting wanting more of that kind of personal interaction (which you will read about in chapter 1). I enrolled.

As a first-generation college student majoring in chemical engineering, my first year was deeply humbling. I struggled academically, questioned my abilities, and seriously considered leaving engineering altogether. I may have been my high school valedictorian, but at that point I felt like nothing more than an imposter. At the time, Jim was Director of Engineering, and in my third semester I met with him to ask for permission to drop the

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major. Once again, he asked questions. Once again, he listened. He didn't lower my expectations or offer platitudes to make me feel better. Instead, he helped me reframe my purpose and reminded me why I had chosen this path in the first place—and why I was capable of walking it. I stayed.

That conversation changed my life. I found my confidence, performed better, and eventually went on to graduate school, where I fell in love with teaching. A few years later, I returned to Lafayette as a faculty member – a testament to what can happen when a student has a mentor who has confidence in their abilities, shows them respect, challenges them to master complex material, and supports them in their learning. (Mentoring is the topic of chapter 4.)

In my first year back, I found myself teaching one of the two sections of Lafayette's introductory materials science class. Guess who was teaching the other section? Yes Professor Schaffer, the guy who had written the textbook and won every teaching award Lafayette offered. I couldn't decide if I was thrilled or petrified. But Jim quickly put me at ease. He and I spent a lot of time together that semester discussing how best to engage and support our students. I thought he would share specific advice about lecture mechanics and test design. Instead, we talked about the importance of making frequent deposits into students' emotional bank accounts and reinforcing critical concepts with memorable stories. We also discussed ideas that had nothing to do with materials science, like the value of students learning engineering in a liberal arts environment. These are some of the central themes of this book, and also the lessons that have guided me as a teacher ever since.

Over the years, Jim continued to support me through every stage of my career, offering steady guidance as I navigated tenure and grew into leadership roles. You'll meet Dean Shepard in Chapter 2, and like Shep, Jim rarely offered his opinions directly. Instead, he masterfully asked questions that prompted me to reflect on my core values—almost always leading me to decisions I could sleep comfortably with. In Chapter 5, Jim asks, "*How does one make*

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*high-quality, self-consistent decisions on both routine matters and in critical moments?”* I invite you to read this chapter more than once. Bring a highlighter.

At a time when skepticism toward higher education is high and the value of college is frequently questioned, this memoir reminds us of the unparalleled power of education to unlock a student’s full potential. Jim pulls back the curtain on the ivory tower, offering glimpses of how colleges actually operate through witty and honest accounts of committee work and institutional service. You do not need to understand the strange world of academia to appreciate the message. We can all benefit from the personal growth that comes from reflecting on questions of equity, equality, and purpose.

The pages that follow are full of lessons learned—not just in academia, but in life. In Part II, you’ll meet the most important people in Jim’s life and see how his professional North Star, *Do what is best for the students*, takes on new meaning. Beneath a layer of self-deprecating humor, you’ll find the qualities Jim brought to his teaching: wisdom and insight without pretense, seriousness about ideas without ever taking himself too seriously, and a profound commitment to the people around him.

I am deeply grateful to have walked alongside Jim for part of his journey through academia and for the impact he has had on my life. Whether you are an educator, a student, a business professional, or simply a curious reader wondering why the answer is always false, you are in the right place. I know you will find something here that inspires you—and makes you laugh.

It is an honor and a privilege to introduce you to my professor, colleague, mentor, and friend—whose greatest fault may be his unwavering admiration for Duke.

Lauren S. Anderson, Ph.D.

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