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Professor James C. Rehberg: Colleague and Friend

by Joseph E. Claxton*

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.
Henry Adams

They came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War and went on to build modern America—men and women whose everyday lives of duty, honor, achievement, and courage gave us the world we have today.

Tom Brokaw
The Greatest Generation

Academicians, as a breed, are somewhat prone to navel gazing. We find great significance in topics we cannot remember clearly (if at all) a few years or even a few months after they have ranked at the top of our agenda. We regularly suffer from a “crisis-of-the-week” syndrome that can cloud our sense of what we are about and cripple our ability to take a long-term view of our professional endeavors. Sometimes, in fact, what we need most is a simple reality check.

My personal “reality check” occupies the office next to mine at the Walter F. George School of Law of Mercer University. His name is Jim Rehberg, and he is a colleague and a friend. He also just happens to be the faculty member who has positively influenced more students, is remembered with affection by more alumni, and is respected more universally than any man or woman who has served on the faculty of the Mercer Law School in the institution’s 126-year history.

* Professor of Law, Mercer University School of Law; Emory University (A.B. 1968); Duke University (J.D. 1972). Member of the State Bar of Georgia. In this text, I often refer to Professor James C. Rehberg as Jim Rehberg, or simply as Jim. Although I greet him everyday in just that way, I must hasten to admit that deep down he always will be *Professor* Rehberg to me. No Mercerian was ever more deserving of the title.

Jim Rehberg instinctively understood the concept of “lawyer professionalism” long before that term was popularized by lawyers and judges seeking (at times almost desperately) to restore the bar to some semblance of its character in the days before “Rambo” litigation tactics, the curse of hourly billing, and a general incivility of conduct and attitude combined to wreak havoc in the legal profession. Three generations of law students have seen in Jim Rehberg a model of hard work, preparation, commitment, probity, and dignity. First, and always, Jim Rehberg is a true gentleman.

Yet the Jim Rehberg with whom I have served at Mercer is no marble man. On the contrary, he is one of the most genuinely human individuals I have ever encountered. The Jim Rehberg I know matches an intellectual enthusiasm for future interests, of all things, with a deep-rooted passion for baseball in general and the Atlanta Braves in particular. He is the epitome of restrained conservatism in dress, word, and deed, yet he is an unrepentant New Deal Democrat to the very core of his being. He can joke about almost any aspect of his work, while never failing to perform it with complete seriousness of purpose. He is a genuinely tolerant man who demonstrates that tolerance simply by being himself.

Over twenty-five years ago, when I was a very young faculty member, I could not understand why Jim seemed so unperturbed by many of the issues that to me appeared likely to determine the entire future of the Law School. What Jim knew, of course, is that one issue or combination of issues never determines the Law School’s fate—and, in any event, any issue occupying center stage today almost certainly will fade into obscurity tomorrow, only to reappear for “additional review” in five years. Like so many members of his generation, Jim understands that the really important things in life are the most basic, a guiding principle that he has applied in both his professional endeavors and his personal life.

Professionally, Jim Rehberg cares about his teaching, his students, and the writings and service activities through which he has made such a huge contribution to the bar over the years. In his personal life, he is a man for whom faith and family always have been top priorities. Indeed, one of the most salient aspects of Jim Rehberg’s character is that he is a genuine, old-school, traditional Baptist. In other words, he is an adherent of the priesthood of the believer, not the priesthood of the preacher. Jim’s late wife, Leda, was a woman of charm, grace, and intellect. It is no surprise that Jim and Leda produced a son (Ches) and a daughter (Jeanne) who are stable, grounded, bright, and high-achieving—and who obviously love their father very much. Jim’s special grace is to know what really matters, and then to act on that knowledge.

Jim is one of the least materialistic individuals I have ever known. In an era when it seems that almost everyone is engaged in a race to acquire the most “toys,” it was not until 1991 that he purchased his first new car. He is attempting to compensate for that extravagance by continuing to drive the car almost a decade later. Yet Jim always seems to be looking toward the future rather than the past. Indeed, in 1997, at an age when many people would be seeking an apartment in a retirement complex, he sold his home of forty years and bought another house. He even took out a fifteen-year mortgage. I recall Jim saying that he felt very confident about being around to pay that mortgage in full, but that perhaps a thirty-year mortgage might be a little too optimistic. On the latter point, I disagreed then and disagree now.

Jim Rehberg is remembered—and revered—by his former students as the toughest law professor of them all. As recently as two weeks ago, I listened through an open door as he blistered a student for inadequate attendance and preparation. What was most striking about that conversation, however, was the way it ended—with Jim telling the student (very convincingly) that he knew the young man could get the job done. My guess is that like hundreds—indeed, thousands—of other students before him, the young man will do exactly that. If Jim Rehberg believes that you can do it, then you can do it.

I have known for years that Jim, like millions of other young people of his generation, was in military service during World War II. What I did not know, until what began as a very casual conversation about a year ago, was that his service consisted of three years as a member of the first crew of a minesweeper that spent most of the war in the Mediterranean Sea area. As the great Mediterranean military campaigns unfolded, that little ship and its crew earned three battle stars. Jim told me of one particular episode, a bombing attack on the ship that had bloody and fatal consequences. I listened, riveted, as this quiet man recounted just a fragment of his personal story of a time when young men from Georgia and every other part of the United States fanned out across the globe to fight a war that literally had to be won. For almost eighty-two years, Jim Rehberg—my friend and colleague—has been in the vanguard of the greatest American generation, the generation that gave us the world we enjoy today. He has taught not only the many students who have faced him in classrooms over five decades. He has taught me. He has taught all of us.

