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Mercer Law Review Symposium Luncheon Remarks: Conversations with Jack Sammons

by Daisy Hurst Floyd*

While this Symposium is about Jack Sammons's teaching and scholarship, I am going to exercise a speaker's privilege to focus on the personal. However, I am going to do so by borrowing from Jack's scholarly work because I, too, am going to talk about conversation. Not in the way that Jack and others have so provocatively used the word to characterize lawyers' work. But, rather I use it in a more literal way. When I think of memories of Jack, many of them are around significant conversations.

I first met Jack in 1996, when my husband Tim Floyd was invited to be a speaker at the Texas Tech Law Review banquet, where I was on the faculty. As Tim mentioned, he and Jack met each other through a shared interest in Law and Religion topics. Jack wrote an essay for a special Faith and the Law issue of the *Texas Tech Law Review*, which Tim co-edited. Out of that relationship, Tim suggested to our law review students that Jack would be a wonderful speaker for the end of the year banquet, and indeed he was. The presentation included baseball, legal ethics, and a number of the other topics that we have been learning about today.

Jack, I apologize for this, but it is not your talk that stands out in my memory today about that event. Rather, it is what I learned about Jack during his visit. What I do remember about that visit has to do not with Jack's discussion of the lawyer's conversation, but rather with Jack's conversations with those he encountered during that trip.

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Let me digress for a moment and say that, of course, the first thing one notices in talking with Jack is his lovely middle Georgia accent, especially if you are, as I was, a native Georgian transplanted to live among the nasal twang of west Texas. Among its other charms, Jack's manner of speaking reminds me of my father. Jack's father and my father share the hometown of Fort Valley, Georgia, a legacy that reveals itself in Jack's pronunciation and cadence and was very welcome upon that first encounter.

But I also remember the content of what Jack said on that trip.

There were his conversations at the law review banquet, and in particular, I remember Jack's attentiveness to each of the law students he met. He was interested in them, what their plans were, what their hobbies were, et cetera. I was still a relatively young faculty member and just beginning to get my own invitations to speak. Jack provided a wonderful role model for how to conduct oneself in that role. He made the law review banquet not about him, the keynote speaker, but about the students.

Then, there were his conversations with my children. Because of Tim's relationship with Jack, we hosted him that weekend, which included Jack joining our family for some social time and for church. I remember again Jack's attentiveness to our family and, in particular, his forming a friendship with my then ten-year old son, Will. That happened through conversation about two areas of shared interest. Not surprisingly, if you know Jack, those two shared interests were baseball and Bob Dylan.

Two other memories stand out about that weekend, both examples of non-verbal conduct that yet carried the quality of conversation. First, the youth of the church that day were selling flowers (I don't remember why) and as we were leaving, Jack gave me a rose. His thoughtfulness helped the youth earn their money for a trip or a mission or some other, I'm sure, equally noteworthy project—and made me feel sufficiently worthy that I remember it to this day.

The second memory was the trip that Tim mentioned last night—he and Jack left early for the airport so that they could visit Buddy Holly's grave on the way out of town, a shared homage that was just one basis for a developing friendship.

From Jack's conversations that weekend, I learned how to be a lovely guest and to be attentive to others no matter the context.

Little did I know, of course, in 1996 that Tim, Jack, and I would become faculty colleagues.

My next memory of conversation with Jack was eight years later, at the beginning of the process that made us Mercer colleagues. A conversation with Jack led me to apply to become dean at Mercer and

to have early contact with the search committee and the search firm that the school was using.

There were many conversations with Jack during that process that stand out in my memory, but two in particular.

The first was early on in the process, when Jack spent an hour or two advising me on the faculty and administration and what the school needed from its next dean.

The second was several months later, at the end of a lengthy process, when the president asked me to meet with Judge Griffin Bell, former United States Attorney General, Mercer's most noted alumnus, and a formidable figure. I was a bit intimidated and a bit frightened about that meeting—I knew that it was going to make the difference in whether I would become dean—and it was indeed a challenging one. Jack perhaps knew Judge Bell better than anyone at the law school did. He once again gave me candid and very helpful advice that stood me in good stead with Judge Bell. I was delighted to have been offered the job within hours of having met with Judge Bell, which I think might not have happened without Jack's guiding hand.

In both of those conversations, Jack expressed wisdom, stewardship for the law school, an understanding of the various personal and institutional dynamics involved, and kindness towards me, even in some painful honesty about my shortcomings, all the while making it clear that he was supportive of me but not necessarily skewing the process in my direction. He did so in such a cogent way that my notes from those conversations, which I recently found, look like well-edited outlines. Those conversations with Jack taught me about effective mentoring and care for both individuals and institutions.

And, then, of course, since I joined Mercer in the summer of 2004, I have been privileged to have a number of conversations with Jack. Those included times that I went to him for advice, times when he came to me to point out something that I needed to know (translated—was getting wrong), and times that he gave me feedback on an idea or something I had written.

I have a number of memories of walking into Jack's office when I was feeling distressed or maybe just perplexed over something that was troubling me, of being invited to sit in Jack's comfortable armchair that was in the corner of his office (usually requiring Jack to move a stack of books or papers before I could sit down), and then being allowed to talk through whatever was on my mind in that moment. On many of those occasions, I went in the door thinking that I was seeing things clearly but then was offered a different perspective by Jack. When I left, I always knew that whatever actions I ended up taking were better

informed as a result of those conversations. In fact, as I stop and think about it, I probably should have gone to Jack even more often than I did.

From those conversations with Jack, I learned about collegiality. Jack's willingness to listen openly and then help me work through to a solution was the epitome of offering himself as a colleague. Jack listened, often saw the issue in a way that I hadn't been able to frame it, and then offered a broad perspective that supported my own process of getting to where I needed to go. I have tried—and I'm sure that I've often failed—to base my own conversations with colleagues on that model. My failure to live up to Jack's example is my own, but I am grateful that Jack offered me an example that was worthy of attempting to emulate.

It is no wonder that Jack was able to so effectively use the metaphor of conversation with regard to legal ethics. He is an expert conversationalist, skilled at dialogue that makes people feel important, that improves others' actions and their lives, and that holds individual and collective concerns, often competing ones, in the same space. That is a truly remarkable gift to offer to others, Jack, and I want to thank you for what those conversations have done for me, for Mercer Law School, for legal education, and for the profession.

And, now it is time for us to enjoy some conversation over lunch.