

On Any Given Day at Baylor

BY ELIZABETH VARDAMAN

Elizabeth Vardaman is associate dean for engaged learning in the College of Arts & Sciences. In this First Person essay, she looks back over two decades of helping Baylor students discover their calling and be the best they can be.

"Everything I know I learned at Baylor." I've said that for effect more than a few times, and it is mostly true. Any vestiges of knowledge I have gleaned come from "he who knows all things," my husband. A Baylor Master Teacher in history, Dr. James Vardaman may — even while I brew my tea on any given morning — riff on issues great and small from British history. Thus, I learn quite a lot about Churchill, Stalin and Hitler on one end of time and about the Magna Carta on the other, often before breakfast.

Additionally, since being invited to join the Dean's Office staff in the College of Arts & Sciences in the mid-1990s, I have had a 20-year, privileged view of the inner workings of the unit that remains the still point in the turning world of Baylor.

This past year, however, as allegations and revelations of tragic wrongdoing have surfaced, we have all been stunned by the headlines in the papers and the realization that there were countless concerns to be addressed, asked forgiveness for, and rectified. These

revelations boggled our minds and tarnished the idea of Baylor. They also airbrushed out of existence the beautiful and poignant stories that don't necessarily seem newsworthy but "walk in our blood." Those stories are vital components of the vibrant day-to-day life our academic programs, staff, students and faculty experience as we just go about the business of being Baylor — that is to say, being points of light one for another.

I use that term intentionally, for this is a place full of enlightenment and discovery, where students "find themselves." (Welcome Week T-shirts here a few years ago proclaimed, "I Found Myself at Baylor." I loved those shirts!) Andrew Delbanco, a noted public intellectual, would surely approve of that sentiment, too. He says college should be "an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others." He also reminds us

that college should serve to show students "how to think and how to choose."

We do those things, every day, at this school. Taking pains to pay attention to our undergraduates' questions and callings is the mission under the mission here and is as important as air to the culture on this campus. Indeed, it is part of our own calling to do so. Faculty may or may not choose to speak explicitly in their classrooms about this life mentorship or indeed about their Christian faith, but they are anchored in these things.

Make no mistake — the love and commitment binding our work that was alive and well here in the past remains a felt presence among us. In fact, it may be even more intense now in important ways because so many here are focused on intentionally giving their expertise and their best efforts to our students in the midst of the University upheavals. We feel keenly responsible to support our University and those entrusted to its care. And on any given day, a conversation,

a research discovery, a laboratory “aha” moment, or an encounter with a text — shared between a student and a mentor — elevates them both and reaffirms this place yet again as one where caring, giving, and receiving combine to create a treasured way of life. Maybe the pursuit of knowledge, the quality of students, and their interaction with the scholars who teach them is standard fare at countless universities. Maybe. But I am tempted to respond by paraphrasing Bum Phillips’ famous retort regarding another situation entirely: yes, there may be some other schools in Baylor’s league, but “it probably don’t take long to call the roll.”

Otherwise, why would there be such an outpouring of concern for our school this year? We note the looks of endearment in the eyes of alums who return to Burleson Quadrangle and give tributes to other special touchstones and memories of their professors and their time here. They may not articulate in words what this school has meant to them, but something about Baylor reverberates for them in the deep heart’s core.

As a dean, I’ve had too many privileged moments to count with students. In fact, I imagine almost all of us here have had such interactions that adhere to our souls, too, as students think, pray, wrestle, meditate, contemplate, push again, deny failures, weep, startle to attention with epiphanies, embrace success and jump with joy. They make us feel younger than we have a right to feel, and when student faces morph into something new, or bright lights seem to be going on and off in their heads, they reaffirm for us why we went into teaching. As they have interior, perhaps life-altering, conversations with themselves guided by their faith, sometimes we have the honor of being in the room, or on Skype, when it happens. Many of us could list hundreds of such moments. Here are just a few:

Luke, who had struggled to discern his best path forward — should it be philosophy or Russian — called from St. Petersburg to say, “This is the place. This is the thing I am supposed to be doing.” We both shouted jubilations.

Anna searched and searched and finally figured out a way to love mathematics but also love “complexity science” that can address social issues —through analyzing cell phone data to see how contagion or epidemics move or solar power works.

One student found herself through writing a grant proposal to explain why she needed to read Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in manuscript form in Dorset, England — and she ultimately won the grant and the trip to England.

Jalen bid for a public health degree because his brother was turned down for health care when they were children, and he never wants anyone who comes to his medical clinic to be turned away again.

Marissa wants to start a nonprofit organization in Waco to provide children’s books to after school programs. She realized not long ago that this interest has turned into a passion and into a lifetime plan.

Many other Baylor students have bid for national and international scholarship opportunities, knowing that all the work they invest might still leave them outside the winners’ circle. Still, they go hammer and tong at the challenge — and sometimes they prevail! They send us postcards from around the world. Last week, one of our students at Oxford sent me a text and invited me for tea! We jubilate with them at the moment, and then through the mind’s eye, for years afterward. (If you would like to see some of their stories online, they can be found on the SPARK website at baylor.edu/scholarships).

Finally, I am still watching **Jared**. He is interested in international development and agriculture, but also has an abiding love for the French language, and for Africa, and for theatre. Will he become a professor? A farmer? An ambassador? A teacher in Rwanda? Or all of the above? I hope he someday returns to be a professor here at Baylor.

All this is to say, across the campus, every day, our faculty encounter students who are seeking

their own defining passions for their careers and lives. We help them figure out who they are, their callings, their talents, their purpose. Faculty, staff and administrators meet the terms of their contracts in dynamic classrooms, in research, and serving on committees here and within the larger Waco community, but they also spend other hours helping students take first steps toward aligning their skills, interests, aptitudes, values — and joys. As an institution, we have always been famous for that. We always will be.

Why am I so sure? Well, among other things, I’ve read countless well-crafted recommendation letters during my tenure here. They are astonishing. The men and women who pen those missives make me cry, on any given day, because their devotion to their students is smart, energized and unwavering.

So on we go, sometimes against the current. After our students find themselves through the rigorous courses and the mentorship available here, we hope they then learn to lose themselves into complex things that are larger than their selfhood, yea, perhaps even transcendent. The years when students are undergraduates here should give them a sense of the complexities of the real world and the ways in which they, as thinkers, leaders in their profession, and committed citizens, can contribute themselves and their resources to it.

We are not perfect. Indeed, we are all standing in the need of prayer. But as Leonard Cohen sang to us, “There is a crack in everything — that’s how the light gets in.” So as the world needs our graduates, their alma mater forever needs them, too. Stay the course with us. Archibald MacLeish concludes in his play *J.B.*, with lines that seem right for us now: “Blow on the coal of the heart And we’ll see by and by....” ■