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As I look back on the people in my life that have made a truly lasting impact, Dr. James Vardaman quickly comes to mind as a singular teacher and role model. I am sure many others will have a similar view. Perhaps the most important thing a teacher can do is open new vistas for his students, and I can say Dr. Vardaman did this for me in many ways.

He did this first in the classroom. His lectures were dramatic, stirring and dense with information, leaving me both enlightened and hungry for more. More than just the “facts” of history, these lectures painted vivid and colorful images of people and events, providing an important narrative scaffolding that allowed me to grasp the complex arcs and connections of history. I think Dr. Vardaman did this by combining mastery of the material with a consistent passion for his subject that allowed him to see every new undergraduate as a potential convert to the “cause” of history. Indeed, Dr. Vardaman’s lecture on the Industrial Revolution in Britain stands as the most moving and inspiring hour I spent in college. Although my memory may be clouded by sentimentality, I remember the entire class rising to applaud when he finished that day. Whether my memory serves or not, it was a performance that deserved a standing ovation.

In addition to the knowledge gained in Dr. Vardaman’s classroom, I developed a personal confidence and sense of belonging that came from his unique ability to make a student feel that he or she was a valued and accomplished person with enormous potential. Whether deserved or not, this tendency to see the best in his students spurred us to try and live up to his high opinion of us. This is not to say that Dr. Vardaman suffered fools benignly, but he never used his knowledge to browbeat or humiliate others. He is an edifying intellect.

Apart from the classroom in Waco, Dr. Vardaman encouraged me to go on the inaugural Baylor in Maastricht program. The experience was formative for me — I got to learn about modern European history while travelling the European continent and learning about the wider world firsthand. Among many important pearls, I gained an understanding of the complex events that led to World War II and an abiding suspicion of jingoism in all its forms. Dr. Vardaman loved reminding us that “every devil loves the swamp he’s born in.” Most importantly, I met my wife during my semester in Maastricht, so I must also thank Dr. Vardaman for that. The shared memories of our time there have been, in many ways, the bedrock of a very happy marriage.

Wittingly or not, Dr. Vardaman was also a role model for me. His love of learning, appetite for books and suspicion of received wisdom and authority were all instructive. However, it was his approach to his individual students that most apply to my own work

today as I teach and train resident physicians. I hope that I bring even a measure of what Dr. Jim Vardaman gave me to their personal and professional development as doctors.

Best wishes—

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