

PREFACE

The Ending and the Beginning

Oxford, Mississippi 2014

“You need to see this!” My colleague in the Office of the Chancellor opened my door even as she knocked. She knew I was feeling low and didn’t want to be disturbed, so I figured whatever she needed must be important.

I was already rising from my desk chair. “What’s going on?”

“Just come see!”

I followed her down the hall toward the large-windowed room that overlooked the University of Mississippi’s Circle, the beautifully groomed, grassy lawn with its expanse of oak trees. I wondered if some students had gathered, as I’d heard rumors that a protest was being planned—challenging my imminent dismissal. Before I even reached the window, I could hear crowd noises, chanting being led by someone with a bullhorn.

“See?” she turned to watch my face as I peered down. The entire Circle was filled with people—not the dozen I was prepared for but a throng, as many as the area could hold and more running over even as I watched. There were students standing on the lip of the fountain, faculty with their small children on their shoulders, staff and alumni holding posters. I gazed, unbelieving, as their chant reached me: “I STAND WITH DAN.” A TV crew pulled up, more people joining the fringes wearing T-shirts scrawled with “Dan is the Man,” a group hurrying over with a banner flapping overhead.

“I STAND WITH DAN”: the chant swelled in volume, and my heart swelled with it. I leaned my forehead on the window, the glass slightly chilled and reverberating with the chant. Though normally a fairly unemotional physician-turned-chancellor, I had to squeeze my eyelids shut, but my tears still leaked out the sides.

Later *The New York Times* would estimate as many as three thousand people were in the Circle that day. Prominent alumni who raised their voices to protest my dismissal included former Governor William Winter, author John Grisham, and football great Archie Manning. The protest was sparked not only by the fact of my dismissal but the manner in which it was done. The twelve-member Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) board voted 9–2 not to renew my contract. This IHL board, which governs higher education at all eight Mississippi public universities, had made this decision without consulting the faculty or other university stakeholders. This lack of consultation was unprecedented for a leadership change of an apparently well-functioning university. The people protesting that day, deeply invested in our university, felt silenced and angered by this decision that they believed was not in the best interests of the university.

Just six years earlier, this board had selected me from among group of well-qualified candidates to lead the university. At the time, I’d been head of the University of Mississippi Medical Center, located in Jackson, about 150 miles from Oxford. During the seventeen years I’d been at the medical center, including six years serving as vice chancellor for health affairs and dean of the school of medicine, I’d been observed closely by the IHL. When they selected me as chancellor, they knew my leadership style well. Many, including those in the Circle that day, wondered what had changed to cause them to reverse course on my leadership.

None of the usual reasons applied. Declining enrollment? No. In the face of declining enrollment in universities nationally, our university had experienced an unprecedented 26 percent growth during my six years as chancellor. Lagging academic performance? No. Most markers of academic performance were improving, including graduation rates and freshman to sophomore retention rates. Failure to recruit underrepresented minority students? No. The university was seeing unprecedented numbers of African American students, especially from our own state. Maybe I simply wasn’t popular with the students, faculty, and donors? No. Private giving was robust. On the heels of the termination announcement, the faculty senate, the student government

association, and the alumni association board all published strongly worded letters of support. Heck, even our football team was winning.

The publicly stated reason for nonrenewal of the contract? “Mismanagement of contracts at the university’s medical center.” And in fact, the medical center was undergoing a transition that occasioned a few bumps. My successor there, Dr. James Keeton, was leading the transition from archaic manual contracts to a modern, computer-based system. It was a big job with a \$1.6 billion budget at stake, and Keeton had to manage without the proper financial support or human resources. The challenges that the transition occasioned were many, but they were being resolved at the time of the board’s decision.

Many questioned the IHL Board’s stated reason for my dismissal. In their reporting of events, *The New York Times* noted: “Although Dr. Jones had been praised for his successes at Ole Miss, including record enrollment figures and for improvement of the school’s academic and cultural reputation, his approach to managing the university’s medical center frustrated the board and was said to be central to the decision to end his tenure.” The article continued, “But Dr. Jones and his supporters, while acknowledging some troubles at the medical center, countered that the board’s action to dismiss the chancellor was draconian. Many people suspected, without firm evidence, that Dr. Jones was a casualty of a political vendetta.”

The reason many in the university community suspected a vendetta is that I’d disagreed with the IHL board frequently and publicly: we seemed to be straining in different directions. The cultural and political ethos of the board had grown increasingly conservative, as had public higher education in many other Southern states. Politically active board members held conservative positions on race, sexual orientation, and other diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. During my time of leadership, I continued the work on racial reconciliation of my predecessor and mentor, Chancellor Robert Khayat. In addition, the years of my leadership coincided with rapid changes in legal and social acceptance of those in the LGBTQ community both at the national level and at our university. While the conservative political community—including governors, legislators, and governing boards in public higher education—resisted those changes, I supported efforts to improve social injustice.

When I think back, I often return to two different events for the ways they illustrate our conflicting views. The first occurred in 2014, when the

Mississippi legislature, with support from Governor Phil Bryant, passed a bill allowing for discrimination against members of the LGBTQ community if a religious reason was offered. Soon after that bill was signed by the governor, he was scheduled to deliver the 2014 spring commencement address at our university. I'd invited him a year prior, following a tradition established by the earliest chancellors to invite the governor during his first term in office to deliver the commencement address. Now, members of the LGBTQ community and their allies called on me to withdraw the governor's invitation and to publicly denounce the new discriminatory law. I made the university community aware of the tradition of inviting the governor and the fact that I'd invited him before the controversial legislation, but emails kept pouring in. I publicly and enthusiastically voiced support for the LGBTQ community, yet in the same speech I announced that, in the spirit of freedom of speech, I would not withdraw the governor's invitation. The LGBTQ community announced plans to protest at commencement, asking all faculty and students to march out when the governor was introduced.

As soon as the plans for protests were announced, the phone rang, and it would keep ringing, as members of the governor's staff called, urging me to quash the protests. "Dr. Jones," said one staff member, "This will not do. We expect you to put your thumb on these people and stop it from happening."

I replied, "Free speech and freedom of thought is something that is a given in university life—as it should be in all of life in our country."

Shortly after the first call, another, more senior staffer called: "If you don't prevent the protests, we'll have to advise the governor to withdraw from the speaking commitment." I responded that the governor was free to make any decision he felt necessary.

As if commencement wasn't already tricky enough, the dinner before commencement was presenting its own source of tension. Mississippi's leading and best-known chef is the James Beard Award-winning John Currence. Aside from owning multiple successful restaurants, John is a social justice advocate. Not only had John publicly criticized the governor's support of the discriminatory law, he had also organized a fundraising event to support the LGBTQ community. Proceeds from the barbeque he hosted in a New York City park would help fund a legal challenge to the new law. The fundraiser brought much national attention to good Mississippi barbeque and bad Mississippi laws. The Governor and his staff, it is safe to say, were not happy with John.

In the same way that I invite the commencement speaker months in advance, I plan the dinner to honor the speaker months in advance. The dinner is hosted by my wife Lydia and me at Carrier House, the on-campus home of the chancellor. Choosing the right chef is an important decision. Wanting to be sure our governor felt sufficiently honored, I'd asked a personal favor of John to prepare that meal.

The next call was from the governor's chief of staff, just a handful of days before commencement. This conversation was the most interesting of all. He was adamant that I prevent a protest that would embarrass the governor. Again, I pointed out the issue of freedom of speech. The staffer pointed out that this was a state-owned university, that I was in charge, and that I had the authority to assure the governor that he was respected; students and faculty could be forced to behave.

I pointed out to him that on commencement day, after the main event, each school would have its own ceremony. I went on to tell the staffer, "The invited speaker for the School of Law commencement ceremony is Congressman John Lewis. Because of his vote for the Affordable Care Act, the student Republicans were planning a protest during his commencement address. Do I understand you correctly—that you would also like me to prevent the Young Republicans from protesting the presence of Congressman Lewis?"

There was a long pause. "Of course not," he finally said. "That will be a legitimate protest by a fine group of students."

My response to him—"Now I think I understand you better"—was not well received.

I wanted to put an end to this barrage of phone calls with their veiled—and sometimes not-so-veiled—threats. I said, "Allow me to lay out the facts that will not change. Despite strong pressure from many in our university to withdraw the invitation to the Governor, I will not do that. And despite repeated requests from your office to suppress protests at commencement, I will not do that, either." I took a breath and continued, "And here's one final piece of information that may be of interest. Just as I invited the Governor to speak months ago before any political controversy about LGBTQ discrimination was being discussed, I invited a celebrity chef to prepare the dinner to honor the Governor. That chef is John Currence. There is no point in asking me to withdraw that invitation as I won't punish him for his opposition to the new law."

In the end, commencement was peaceful. Many faculty and students wore signs protesting the new law or the Governor on their regalia—some on top

of their mortar boards. A few stood and turned their back to the podium when the Governor began his address, but no one walked out, and there were no verbal protests. At the dinner, all enjoyed Chef Currence's amazing food. Instead of following my usual custom of having the chef come to the table at the end of the meal to accept the appreciation of guests, I arranged for the governor to slip away between the main course and dessert to meet privately with John in my library. Both avoided the pressure of a confrontation in front of other guests and were able to exchange a few cordial words.

The second event that really put me at loggerheads with the conservative political leaders in Mississippi happened later that same year. At the time, across the nation, many universities were deepening their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). One way universities made this commitment permanent was by creating a DEI position in the upper levels of administration. On our campus, a committee focused on this issue recommended elevating the position of chief diversity officer from the status of special assistant to the chancellor to a newly created position of Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion. I supported this suggestion. As soon as this support was covered in the press, my phone rang. Several conservative political figures, some active and some retired, berated me in quick succession. It felt organized. The first caller was calm but direct: "This is just wrong for our university. Don't you know that people are tired of your liberal decisions?" I explained that this was an important and necessary change for our university in particular, given that officials in our state and university offered unprecedented resistance to the racial integration of the university in the 1960s and that for years after campus culture made many nonwhite students and faculty feel unwelcome.

The next caller was not calm. "Don't do it, damn it!" He was yelling so loudly I moved the phone further from my ear. "Stop this foolishness!"

The next caller's tone was sly, hinting that my time in leadership would soon be drawing to close: "You need to stop and think about your own future. Don't you want to continue as chancellor? You can't expect to make everyone angry and keep your job, can you?"

I had been on the phone for three hours when the worst call came: I was informed that the governor had requested a visit in his office.

The next morning, I drove the two and a half hours to Jackson, the whole time rehearsing in my head how I would explain to the governor why this change was needed.

I never got the chance.

“What were you thinking?” he asked as I walked in, swinging his boots from his desk onto the floor.

Over the governor’s shoulder I could see his bookshelves, nearly devoid of books but instead adorned with knickknacks and a photo in which he had his arms around President Bush. He jabbed his finger at me. “Do you really think you can get away with this liberal crap?” His cheeks were red, and when his administrative assistant came to the door, he flicked his fingers to dismiss her. “We didn’t hire you so you could jerk us around.”

“Governor,” I began, “the university needs—”

“I know exactly what that university needs! It doesn’t need you coming in and yanking it in some liberal direction! It’s probably not even legal, using university money! No other university has a position like this—”

Now it was my turn to interrupt. “Respectfully, sir, our university would be the ninth among the fourteen SEC schools to elevate the chief diversity officer to the vice chancellor or vice president level.”

“That’s not how we do things in Mississippi!” He pounded his fist on his desk.

“Actually, it is. Mississippi State has already made this change. In fact, I patterned my restructuring based on how they elevated their chief diversity officer. As is often the case, we’re behind other universities concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Not long after this I was invited to leave the governor’s office.

And then I was invited to leave the University, my home for the last six years.

The process was drawn out and emotionally exhausting. In November of 2014, a member of the IHL board came to my office. Although the message he was delivering was not a surprise, somehow his words still struck like a punch to the sternum. “Chancellor,” he began, his tone already ominous. “The board has made its decision. Your contract will not be renewed beyond the current contract end date of September 2015.”

In the pause that followed, as I was gathering words that felt as heavy as boulders, there was a knock on my door. We both looked up as my office assistant stepped inside, looking somber. “Excuse me, but—” she took a breath, meeting my eyes—“You have a phone call.”

I’d asked to be told immediately if my physician called. In the past few months, I’d been experiencing what had become debilitating pain in my stomach and my back. At first, I believed the stress of battling with the IHL

board was to blame. But in recent weeks the pain had increased, and so the day before I'd had an imaging study done.

Now I excused myself from the IHL board member to step into another room to take the call.

My physician didn't waste time with pleasantries, time neither of us had to spare. "Dan," she said. "The news isn't good. It looks like cancer."

She explained a bit more about the images and that the cancer seemed widespread, and she laid out a plan for the further evaluation that would begin almost immediately. One part of my brain was listening to the familiar medical terms—terms that I had used often in my years as a physician when discussing treatment with my own patients. Another part of my brain was marveling at the timing. How much bad news can one absorb in a single moment? Heart, how far can you be asked to stretch?

We ended the call, and I walked back into the meeting with the board member. I sat silently reeling with my news as he picked up where he left off. "At our next IHL meeting, the board will announce the non-renewal of your contract."

I looked at him at a loss for how to respond.

He continued, "Our search for the next chancellor will begin immediately."

After he delivered this staggering blow, I ended the meeting so I could turn my attention to the more urgent issue: my health. I drove home to break the news to my wife, Lydia. Within two days I was back in Jackson at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, that same place where I began in 1971 as a medical student, that same place where I trained as an internal medicine physician, that same place where I taught and researched as a faculty member, that same place where for several years I served as chief executive. Now I had a new role: patient. I was treated by my friends. It can't have been easy for them to deliver the news they delivered: I had Burkett's Lymphoma, an uncommon form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma that grows and spreads rapidly. They told me the cancer stretched from my brain to my knees, "with heavy involvement of the abdomen and spine." My chemotherapy treatment, they warned, would be brutal. "But the good news is that if you have a good response to therapy, the cancer can be cured."

Days later, soon after completing my first round of chemotherapy, I received a phone call from a representative of the IHL board. He reported that, in their monthly meeting, the board voted to renew my contract for another four-year term. I knew better than to take this at face value. My

cancer diagnosis not only upset my life, but it also complicated the board's decision and the timing of their communication plans—they must have known that firing me the week my cancer was announced wasn't a good look. Between dealing with uncertainties about my cancer and the mixed signals from the board on my future as chancellor, my mind was exploding.

Soon after, I entered the fog of intense cancer treatment, where I remained for the next six months. As promised, the chemotherapy was brutal. For the first two months, I was too ill to leave the hospital. I had five days of chemotherapy followed by a wait of a few days for the bone marrow to respond before the next round. I had no appetite and over the months of treatment lost forty pounds. I felt weak and moved slowly. First, I tired after a visit from the grandkids, then I tired from simply a walk to the mailbox. The medical journals I subscribed to piled up on my desk, unread. I found myself unable to concentrate or think much. Maybe this was a blessing for a while.

For these six months during which I was so ill, the board was completely silent to me. The contract I'd been told to expect extending my term for another four years never arrived. Neither did any explanation for the delay. When my colleagues from the university leadership team visited, they could see the toll the chemo was taking on my body and powers of concentration, and they usually tried to spare me from worrying about my future and the future of the university. But, when I insisted, some were frank: "The sense of all of us is that as soon as you recover, the board will change its public position to that of terminating your leadership." I knew not just for my health but also for the health of the university that, as soon as I was physically able to return to work and engage the board in meaningful conversation, I needed to learn whether the board indeed planned to extend my contract. This tense embargo wasn't helping anyone.

In March 2015, I completed my chemotherapy and said my grateful goodbye to my friends at the UM Medical Center. Though still quite weak and hairless, my prognosis was good. I'd used the time away to gain clarity on both personal and professional issues, and I was ready to roll up my sleeves. I asked the board to resolve once and for all the question of leadership of the university. After an executive session, three members of the board delivered the news: "The board has voted to end your service as chancellor at the end of this contract period in September 2015. There is absolutely no pathway for reversing that decision."

Those are the words I was brooding over in my office that day when my colleague led me to the window to show me the massive crowd gathered in protest over my dismissal. The support from the community was deeply healing to my wounded heart. It also seemed to get the IHL Board's attention. Over the next few days, as major donors promised to withhold funding, students threatened continued campus disruption, and influential state business leaders promised to seek ways to restructure the IHL board's unrestricted power, several board members contacted me privately. They told me that they would reverse the decision and offer an unrestricted four-year contract. Instead, the offer that came to my office was for two years, with no opportunity for another renewal, regardless of my performance or the success of the university.

I responded in a written statement to the board and the university community: "I feel strongly, as do most of my advisors, that serving two years as a lame duck would make it difficult to recruit and retain key leaders and continue our momentum in private giving. More importantly, it is clear from the board's position that the board would not support my leadership during my extension. For the university to thrive and succeed, the university needs a leader who has the support of its governing board, which I clearly do not enjoy."

What a difficult time this was for me and for Lydia. During our years of leadership at the university, Lydia gave every bit as much as I did to the success of UM. And during my illness, as much as the skill and compassion of the great nurses and doctors, her care provided the edge for me to fight and survive. Together Lydia and I faced a roller coaster of emotions: dealing with a life-threatening illness, and losing the opportunity to continue leading the university, while also experiencing an amazing outpouring of support and love.

In the immediate days following all this turmoil, my focus was on the university. I wanted to take every step possible to protect some of the programs so important to my goals, including new service initiatives by students and a scholarship program for our brightest students willing to major in education and commit to a minimum service of five years in Mississippi public schools. Most important was my desire to safeguard the Ole Miss Opportunity program. This program offers a full scholarship—tuition plus room and board—for any Mississippi high-school graduate with a C average whose annual family income is less than \$30,000.

Lydia and I packed our books and photographs and clothes, preparing for our move from the Carrier House. But, in fact, it was difficult for me to move on, mentally and emotionally. I said little to the press, trying to take the high road, but there were things I wanted to say. I wanted everyone to know how the beautiful goal of educating young women and men had become subject to the petty ambitions of a handful of self-serving people. I wanted everyone to know how I'd been pressured to avoid addressing issues of social injustice. I bit back those words, but I felt sadness, I felt anger, and I felt deeply misunderstood.

As the days turned into months, I struggled not to give in to despair, but I spent too much time circling and circling around the wrongs that had been done. The IHL board announced a new chancellor, and he was given a vote of "No Confidence" by faculty senate, indicating, I think, the senate's frustration with a governing board that would not listen to the university faculty and other constituencies, their sense that the proposed new chancellor did not seem a fit for our university, and, perhaps, still the sting of their having lost a trusted chancellor. At my lowest point, I took a bitter comfort from that "No Confidence" vote. And I hated myself for it. How could I move forward when I was nurturing my grievances? I needed to forgive and move on.

So then, as I've learned to do, I brought my struggle to God. That's a statement some in the world of public education wouldn't make, a statement that will doubtlessly make some uncomfortable. In fact, when I showed an early agent an early version of this book, he wondered if I should try to tell my story without discussing my faith. I tried. I went through my manuscript and removed every religious reference, Bible verse, or spiritual reflection. And found that without God, my story is nothing.

My story is not a crisis of losing faith. I have no doubt of God's love for me and His protection of my immortal spirit. My story is the story of struggling to love those who are difficult to love. My most challenging time—my dismissal from the job I'd believed was my spiritual purpose for that phase of my life—was the impetus for the book you hold in your hands. But don't we all struggle with challenging relationships? For me, this is especially true when decisions by others made it necessary for me to recalibrate the path of purpose for my life. Luckily, I've had many guides to model for me how to love, starting with my father. My desire to live with purpose has led to an interesting life, including serving as a physician in rural Mississippi, working in South Korea as a medical missionary, consulting with a North Korean

medical school, offering humanitarian aid in Iran and Russia, then returning to the US to teach as a medical school professor and dean before becoming chancellor. These experiences—many of them unplanned and unexpected—have enriched my life immeasurably by providing me with other spiritual pilgrims who seemed to come along just when I needed them most. I'll tell you some of their stories and stories of the other I've found along the way, including those pilgrims I've found in books, such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. I invite you to join me as I walk behind them, endeavoring to follow in their footsteps.