

# Faithful friends

July 8, 2011

I've been spending my "spare" time during these lazy, hazy days reading about a couple of personal heroes who have blessed many thousands of people across the decades.

[Virginia Connally, M.D.: Trailblazing Physician, Woman of Faith](#) by [Loretta Fulton](#) describes the life and times of the first woman to practice medicine in Abilene, Texas. [James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom](#) by [Aaron Douglas Weaver](#) chronicles the tenacious career of one of Baptists' foremost ethicists, activists and religious liberty champions.

They're both terrific books, and I recommend them to you with gusto. I plan to review them in upcoming editions of the *Baptist Standard*, and the reviews also will be published on this website, of course.

Reading about Virginia and James has reminded me of God's blessings—on countless people, but on me, too. I thank God to call both of them dear friends, but that doesn't make me special. My number is legion. And even a good number of folks can count not just one of them, but both, as friends.

## **Mentor & cheerleader**

James factors into one of my earliest memories. In my mind's eye, I still see this skinny young man standing in front of the Baptist Student Union building at West Texas State University, waving vigorously at my dad and me as we drove away. That was the spring of 1960 or '61, and I was only 3 or 4 years old. James was the BSU director at the university. Daddy and I drove to the campus in Canyon, where James set up interviews with students who applied to be the "summer youth director" at our small church.

Through the years, I've wondered why I remember that day—and James—so clearly. Most certainly, it's because James is the kind of grown-up who pays personal, direct, animated attention to people, even little children. I'm sure I remember him so well because he spent time that day down on my level, talking and joking with me. Not many people do that, but James did.

(By the way, James says his first memory of me goes back even further. He says he changed my diapers when I was even younger. Well, that's pre-memory for me, but I wouldn't be surprised if his recollection is accurate. Not many men change other people's kid's diaper, but James would.)

Years later, when I became a journalist and started working for the Baptists, James became a mentor, cheerleader, story source and friend. We shared our common Texas background, penchant for barbecue and Tex-Mex, and mutual friendships and affection. Beyond that, James cemented my passion for religious liberty. Before I entered seminary and began studying church history, James taught me about our spiritual forebears who suffered persecution and even death, but who championed cherished principles of soul freedom and separation of church and state.

Through the years—at the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (now Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty) and Wake Forest University School of Divinity, James has been the foremost advocate for the rights of all people to worship as conscience dictates. And he still marches on at Wake, teaching a rising generation of ministers about valuable faith principles.

### **Friend & inspiration**

Even though we didn't know it at the time, Virginia and I crossed paths at First Baptist Church of Abilene in the fall of 1975. She was a highly respected community and church leader, whose beloved husband, Ed, had just died. I was a whippersnapper freshman at Hardin-Simmons University.

Too bad I didn't come down with laryngitis or an ear infection; maybe I would have met her much sooner in my life.

We became friends not long after I returned to Texas and joined the staff of the *Baptist Standard* in the fall of 1995. I quickly learned one of the most faithful, generous and quietly influential Texas Baptists was this retired physician out in Abilene.

One of Virginia's great gifts is making people feel completely at home in her presence. Soon, I felt as if we actually had been friends since my freshman year at HSU. She has that impact on people.

Now, almost 16 years later, I doubt anyone has given me more books than Virginia has. One of her great legacies, even at age 98, is that she never, ever stops learning. She's always reading, and when she likes a book, she buys a big stack and gives them away.

Virginia inspires me. Not only to keep learning, but to commit all my days to the Lord and to serving others. She never has wavered from that commitment herself. And she inspires me to keep moving, because people half her age would do well to keep pace with her.

### **Lovely & lovable**

Well, I apologize if you feel I've been rambling about folks you don't know. I wish you knew Virginia and James. I love them, and you would, too.

When I "grow up" I want to be just like them!