

The Road More Traveled by The Dotis (Apologies to H. Scott Peck)

Mark Chapin Johnson
Chapman University

Recently when humbled by an invitation to contribute to a Festschrift volume honoring Jim and Lynne Doti, I inquired of Daniele Struppa, Chancellor of Chapman University, what range of submissions might be appropriate. Primarily opinion or scholarly was the consensus. Since any scholarly contribution I might make would be so far removed from the Doti's academic fields of expertise (not much joy in another essay on Syria or ISIS at the moment), I concluded that an opinion on the unique and unparalleled impact of their decades-long presence at Chapman University and the lives they've touched through their passionate contributions there might be meaningful.

"Interwangled" (coined by Ted Nelson) is a wonderful concept that revolves around the idea that there are no subjects, only knowledge cross-connected together. In reflecting upon the many intersections between Jim Doti and the world around him, his endless energy and profoundly unique and deep life skill set, I realized that Jim possesses that unparalleled ability to remember and connect everything in his world, and always to the betterment of the people and institutions around him.

Jim is a University of Chicago Ph.D. holder, student of Milton Friedman, has received accolades as a professor and is a possessor of all the traditional academic honors that are bestowed on bright and productive scholars. But that's not what this essay is examining. What do a man and his wife do with the decades they are allocated by the cosmos? The Dotis somewhere early in their ambitions decided to invest their talents in something beyond themselves, and they appear to have done so in an "interwangled" manner, connecting their knowledge and abilities across all opportunities and situations in their paths. In the midst of their formative university years, such strategic thoughts may not have been conscious, but in hindsight, the outcomes have been spectacular.

What abilities are required in a leader to transform an old and venerable, but unimposing, small, unknown college from obscurity to national prominence in a

single career and still be energetically productive? As I considered the career of Jim at Chapman, it struck me that he possesses an almost unknown attribute that so very few ever do — virtually everyone that comes into contact with Jim genuinely likes him. He has that unique ability to make everyone around him feel as if they have his undivided attention and that he “hears them”. The follow ups of personally written notes or almost instant email responses are wonderful reinforcements of his attention. It is said that if one has even one true friend in life, then their life has been successful—what then does it say about a man that has many?

Over time it became clear to me that Jim had a dream, and not a small one! Transform Chapman College into a renowned university!

Throughout the past 25 years the widely seen public persona of Jim Doti is that of unending energy and movement—running marathons or climbing the highest peaks in the world, attending constant public events representing Chapman or presenting yearly economic forecasts to business, community leaders, and faculty. An Energizer Bunny of sorts, Jim is always in motion and seemingly everywhere all the time projecting an inviting image of a growing and exciting university. Woven into Jim’s unique style of promoting Chapman is a sense of humor that can show itself in the most unusual ways. I remember one year when, for an economic forecast, Jim wanted to find a memorable way to convey how the Federal Reserve was dumping reserves into the banking system, so he thought it would be fun to video tape us lifting a large trash can beneath a helicopter then dumping it as it took off, representing the Reserve’s actions. It was most memorable and left the audience laughing. This seemed to be a natural evolution for Jim from the previous year where he had simply used a golf cart to take his home trash cans out to the curb symbolically showing the same concept. Then there are the lunches, dinners, receptions, parties, and endless administrative and faculty meetings he has attended to represent the university.

Over time I came to a more nuanced understanding of what was really transpiring through my observations of Jim’s management style. It is a very rare and effective style, yet very subtle. For all of the passionate, visible, and active motion going on in his visible efforts to guide Chapman through the years, a remarkably focused and entrepreneurial strategy was being pursued thoughtfully—to transform Chapman University.

So then, what have the Doti’s done and how did they do it? Therein my interaction with Jim over the years may be illuminating. In a career far away and long ago, I was an entrepreneur busily building businesses and chasing the “American Dream”. As those efforts bore fruit, I became involved in community organizations so that I might give back some of what I had been blessed with. My first contact with Jim, like many people, was when he appeared at a community event I was also attending. He graciously introduced himself and invited me to visit Chapman sometime. It seemed like a wonderfully personal and warm invitation — which it was — but only later did I realize that Jim does this with everyone!

Over the years, I saw Jim at a wide variety of Orange County gatherings — it seems as though he is everywhere all the time — and he continued to invite me to Chapman events which I enjoyed occasionally. Twenty years ago, when visiting the then small campus, I was struck by the sense of energy and focus in everyone I met—an

awareness of a very unique style of leadership was becoming obvious to me. What also became clear much later were the parallel processes I was observing along the journey with Jim. I was building my businesses while he was transforming Chapman, and he demonstrated the best economic planning which ultimately led to his success.

In this decade, there are approximately 2500 four-year colleges in America educating somewhere around 11,000,000 students at any given time. Out of such a universe, how does one institution like Chapman transform in a few short years and have such tremendous growth and success while certainly hundreds of national universities are all striving for the same outcome?

Chapman is a university, but at its core, it is a business. A business possessing all of the same basic attributes of any business: a mission, facilities, employees, and products which it sells into the marketplace. No matter how noble or inspiring its mission and vision may be, it is subject to all the same market and managerial issues any business in any industry is faced with. As with any enterprise, if well done, success will follow. If not, bankruptcies and failure result, or even worse, long term mediocrity and stagnation; not a dead business, but a non-descript one just barely staying alive.

As an entrepreneur, I learned that we're all different — not good or bad different — just different. Our skill set is to dream, create, plan and strategize how to build new businesses and make profits. Many of us screw it up by trying to manage our creation by also operating the business (definitely not one of our better skill sets), so then we search for talented operations executives to help us manage our business. Then we frequently discover that hiring and identifying talented executives is not one of our stronger skill sets either. So then what we end up seeing are many initially successful businesses slowly failing as their creators reach the limits of their management abilities (the essence of the Peter Principle). Then there are the excellent operating executives that can and do manage mature and successful businesses well. They are invaluable and are the life blood that keeps an organization humming if it's successful. Both of these types and styles have to effectively mesh with a Board of Directors or Trustees — just another tactical challenge in the strategic quest for long-term success.

Because Jim drew me, an entrepreneur, into his world at Chapman, I initially viewed him and the university through the lens of my life experiences and skill set (which early on was myopic). A significant obstacle that the Dotis faced, which may not be frequently recognized, was that they didn't just have to work entrepreneurially towards improving and financially guiding Chapman, they were actually transforming an existing business into a whole new creature. It was a little like performing maintenance on a Boeing 747 engine while in flight — no easy task.

What I didn't and couldn't see from my limited perspective many years ago was the varied set of talents Jim possessed and how he used them differently, depending upon the circumstances at the time. Over time, as my horizons and insight changed, so did my understanding of the very different way that Jim interacted with different constituencies, and also how he wove those constituencies together for the benefit of his long term strategy to transform Chapman University. The university, under Jim's leadership, developed, over the years, a succinct and clear vision and mission statement:

Chapman University will be a preeminent university engaged in distinguished

liberal arts and professional programs that are interconnected, reach beyond the boundaries of the classroom and work toward developing the whole person: the intellectual, physical, social and spiritual dimensions of life. The mission of Chapman University is to provide personalized education of distinction that leads to inquiring, ethical and productive lives as global citizens.

A daunting statement for sure, but then how is it realized and successful? And that is where observations of Jim and Lynne become pertinent.

Many in our community originally met Jim and developed our relationship with Chapman because of Jim as the promoter and fundraiser with unlimited enthusiasm for Chapman and its future. And therein one of his remarkable skill sets became obvious — salesmanship! Many in Orange County years ago had no idea what Chapman University was, could be, nor might have even been interested, but Jim's infectious personality, graciousness and ever-present passion for Chapman drew many to the university to see and favor the opportunity Jim presented.

For Jim and Lynne this “salesmanship” talent was, as I learned, but one of several abilities that would become obvious over time though the possession of salesmanship/marketing or whatever one may call the process, is an indispensable attribute of all successful entrepreneurs like the Dotis.

It is one thing to be successful in raising very substantial funds for a university, but then what? Enter the next skill set: strengthening and expanding a vibrant, passionate, connected, capable Board of Trustees to support the university vision and mission. Many, if not most, trustees of universities have little or no real involvement or even ties to the university boards they serve on and therefore, there is little passion or personal understanding of the institutions they serve. As an example, there is a local, very renowned graduate university that has a Board of Trustees of about 25 individuals scattered around the country. The board is made up of very successful titans of industry, CEOs of multinational firms, or politically and socially connected people of great wealth, yet about 23 of the 25 have no connection to the institution personally at all. They themselves didn't attend, nor has anyone else in their family, but they sure look great on the letterhead. The outcome? The university is always in very difficult financial circumstances and does not have a coherent long-term strategy for success, nor a vision or mission statement of any significance.

Jim recognized early on in his tenure that successfully raising funds for Chapman was only a part of what needed to be done in order to achieve strategic success — he needed a board that was unique, involved, and equipped with individual skills that could actually be used by the university (not typical of many university boards). How to do this? From the beginning of his 25-year plan, Jim connected the dots and encouraged his donors to follow their investment in the university by serving on the Chapman board while simultaneously doing something else — as Jim brought donors with real skills onto the board, he very skillfully “sold” trustees on the importance of their children, their siblings, their friends, and family attending Chapman. Given Jim's concurrent emphasis on improving the educational outcomes of Chapman students, this approach with trustees was very successful and deepened the connection of board members to the university. The result of this strategy over time is that there are now

just over 50 trustees with real-world, valuable skills serving Chapman, each deeply connected to the university and with many family members who are students or alumni. One of the excellent outcomes of such board building has been the single focus of trustees on the work of Chapman — it is not a “networking” board people serve on to develop business relationships — as many boards are. A wide and diverse group of people are drawn together by a common passion and vision, that of the continual betterment of the education and life skills of students. So what can be added to “salesmanship” skills is the strategic strengthening of the board to support the vision and mission of Chapman at a very real and connected level for the future. The skills to manage the growth and effectiveness of a board of university trustees is far different from those of “salesmanship”, and so, add this unique skill set to Jim’s dossier.

What Jim and Lynne have done over time is to weave together (interwingle, if you will) a remarkable set of varied entrepreneurial abilities that have resulted in the dramatic transformation of Chapman University into one of the most remarkable success stories in university education in the United States.

This article could end here and it would be an accurate and fitting reflection on the astonishing outcomes of the Dotis’ decades-long investment of their time, talents, and passions in Chapman — but it would be incomplete. The transformation described above illuminates the extraordinary economic expertise and entrepreneurial talents of the Dotis that would make Milton Friedman proud back at the University of Chicago. Yet, there is another important dimension of their contributions which needs to be illuminated that transcends even their remarkable economic outcomes.

As significant as transforming Chapman has been over the many years, the ability to transform lives along their journey has been epic (yes, big word used intentionally). Over the years, those fundamental economic abilities that have allowed the Dotis to succeed at their vision for Chapman have also benefitted countless students, professors, administrators, trustees, friends, and others to grow in their lives dramatically beyond what they may have ever anticipated before they met this unique couple. Those that have been fortunate to be in the acquaintance of the Dotis over the years have come to recognize that those “reach for the stars” expectations of theirs for transforming Chapman also extended to those around them. The unexpected, although in hindsight, predictable, result is that along their journey of transforming Chapman far beyond traditional expectations have been many, many lives — such as mine — that have reached levels most of us never would had imagined had we not had the good fortune to tag along with Jim and Lynne for much of our life journey.

