

## Lessons Learned: SURPRISES & SERENDIPITY

by Rosemary M. Magee



Rosemary Magee has been a member of the College community for nearly thirty years. She came to Emory in 1977 as a graduate student in the Institute of Liberal Arts, and after earning her Ph.D in 1982 took the job of assistant dean. Made senior associate dean of the College in 1996, Magee left that position this spring to become Vice President and Secretary of the University.

**In spring 2000, I had the privilege of** interviewing the well-known literary scholar, Sally Fitzgerald, a few months before her death. When asked about the interesting path her life had taken, Fitzgerald replied without a moment's hesitation, "I never expected to be in any of the places I found myself."

These places included a farmhouse in Connecticut where she and her husband Robert Fitzgerald hosted a young southern writer for many months. At the time, Fitzgerald could not have imagined that her

long conversations about literature and theology with Flannery O'Connor over the dinner table would one day lead to important contributions to American letters.

Over the course of more than two decades at Emory College, I have been regularly reminded of the important role that diversions, accidents, and serendipity play in all of life, even in the academy. New ideas, whether in the laboratory or library, don't always occur in a straightforward linear fashion. In fact, the worlds of art and science reveal many stories of

accomplished people who set out in one direction, only to find another path to discovery altogether.

The pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron discovered her visual style by "embracing accidents." In early experimentation, her portraits were consistently out of focus. Even when she later developed more precise techniques, she continued to play with the focal point to create portraits that became known for capturing the essence of her subjects.

I've learned that ideas may come to us at any place, in any moment, but also that they need time to evolve, meander, and develop.

David Lynn, an Emory chemist, describes how the researchers in his lab "stumbled" into a completely new way of copying DNA that has led to a different concept of synthetic biology and a better understanding of the origins of living systems. According to Lynn, such surprises happen frequently in the lab. Not all of them may change the world, he says, "but they always change the scientist."

Students, too, may begin a semester with one major in mind, yet find new meaning and a sense of direction in a course taken primarily to satisfy a requirement. Suddenly a professor of anthropology or music provides a fresh perspective on life that points the student in an unanticipated direction.

As for me, I started out with the expectation that administrative work would be a temporary diversion from my academic fields of study, literature and religion. Twenty-three years later, I find myself still intrigued by the unexpected challenges of managing complicated processes that also provide opportunities for rumination and creativity.

Several years ago, before the grand opening of the Donna and Marvin Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts, a student reporter asked me what I was looking forward to the most. After a moment of reflection, I realized that I was eagerly

awaiting the surprises, those events and epiphanies we couldn't have known about in advance. Spaces we spent so many hours designing would soon shape our shared lives.

Through my experiences in academic administration, I've learned that ideas may come to us at any place, in any moment, but also that they need time to evolve, meander, and develop. Time, that rarest of all commodities, is essential to the art of creation. The poet and naturalist Diane Ackerman writes that we must strive to transcend daily urgencies in order to move into a more timeless and engaged awareness of ourselves in the world, a process she calls "deep play."

Fortunately, the academic community is based upon a model that still respects time for reflection. Sabbaticals and summer breaks remain vital to our enterprise. Even in this era of Day-Timers and Palm Pilots, faculty and students do not have classes scheduled every hour of the day, every day of the week. The campus quadrangle itself, which continues to resonate as a powerful symbol of Emory, looks inward, allowing for reflection and unplanned daily encounters. Here students and faculty, like seemingly random particles, converge at specific moments to form units of activity and thought. Layers of meaning and intention overlap with

hopes and dreams to create something totally expected on the one hand (the process of education) and completely unexpected on the other (new ideas and approaches). Plans and surprises unfold before us.

A college campus can teach us to embrace both intention and innovation. If we can occasionally create space and time for the unexpected, then we have indeed collaborated with the ongoing miracle of learning and living. The careful planning required to shape a quadrangle, laboratories, and dance studios also inevitably creates a place for serendipity. Our campus, like the education we hope to convey, relies on structure and rigor. But it also provides room for those special unplanned moments, leading us toward new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. ∞