

Ruth Candler 0:16

Welcome the W&L after class the lifelong learning podcast. I'm your host Ruth Candler. Our guest today is Jeff Schatten, Associate Professor of Business Administration at Washington and Lee. Jeff joined the W&L faculty in 2016 and his experience as a teacher and researcher lies at the intersection of business and the liberal arts. His research focuses on negotiation leadership decision making in decentralized autonomous organizations. He is also a leading name in the emerging discussion about artificial intelligence and ChatGPT. Jeff received a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Maryland, an MBA from Georgia Institute of Technology, and a PhD in managerial sciences from Georgia State University. His work has been published in the organization management journal, leadership quarterly, and the International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences, among others. And this week, our podcast guest has a podcast of his own - called demystifying organizations, which we will link to in the show notes. In this episode, we'll explore the hot topic of artificial intelligence, learn more about Jeff's work, teaching and prisons, and we'll get a glimpse into his life off campus as well. Jeff welcome to W&L After Class

Jeff Schatten

Thanks for having me.

Ruth Candler

You've written extensively and given talks about the current explosion of artificial intelligence or AI. And if become a go to source on the topic, both on campus and in the media, would you define for our listeners exactly what AI is, and more specifically, what ChatGPT is.

Jeff Schatten 1:50

So I want to take a step back and think about our moment that we're in right now. If we go back 3 million years ago, to Lucy, or we can go back 5 million years. I'm not an anthropologist. I mean, for for really all, any history that we have, there's been one dominant species, and that's human beings. Right? So humans long ago, surpassed the second greatest animal, right? The dinosaurs died out, we surpassed and we surpassed monkeys we surpass right. So long ago, we don't even talk about it anymore. And for the last, let's call it three, five, 10 million years, we have been the dominant species. We right now we're in the moment of creating a species that is greater than ourselves. And I think it is that great. I mean, I think it is that monumental, that there is a new species that is emerging in its artificial intelligence. And the ramifications for us across the board could not be higher mean, the stakes could not be higher. It was for a long time, right? We've been kind of in this hybrid state between humans and computers, where we think of most of our life as being quasi computer quasi human, we're going back and forth, it's we don't even think about it, because it's pretty seamless at this point. But in the last 60 years, we've been in the development stages of AI, we've seen this explosion in the last two, and especially in the last six months. And it's starting to make me wonder, you know, what does it even mean to be human? And what are the implications as we create this new species that is, in every way going to be superior to humans? I mean, think about this. That's frightening. It's, it's exciting. It's frightening. But we're watching these tectonic plates shift from under our feet, as humans hand the keys to the car over to computers. And let's just let's just think a couple of ways just and how weird it is. And some of some of the things and I'm going to move pretty quickly beyond chat GBT to just what's available that we've seen

in the last week. Stanford, for example, just came out with a program, an AI program, where it's created this like the sim world, right, where they're all the characters in the world.

Ruth Candler 4:08

Simm being that the video game?

Jeff Schatten 4:11

No sim just means it's just a simulated. So it's a simulated world that's created by Stanford, right, but where there are human characters, and there's one Isabella, who's going to throw a party, and the 15 or 20 other characters that are in this, they just kind of set them off. And it's a crit. It's a full human experience, where this character in this character, they RSVP to SML as party, but they don't end up showing up because better alternatives come up these characters, they're, they're iterating, and they're having a dialogue, and they have social functions. And there's one character that ends up cheating on another character. And there's right it's a full world being that's emerging, just from an AI saying, human, you know, we're going to create a human world - go.

Ruth Candler 4:56

So where are they getting that information from?

Jeff Schatten 4:57

Well, that's the thing about AI is that All of its a Blackbox when they when you ask the people who create a ChatGPT - Whoa. So why is it the ChatGPT gives will write a love poem for Joe Biden, but will not write a love poem for Donald Trump? Their answer is, we don't know if that's the answer to all of this. Because at this point, AI is basically making AI. Humans, this might mean that we have a new species is that humans are stepping back. And we're creating new worlds and I just gave one that's a social world. But we also have the same thing in for business information, you can now you can now create an autonomous can a completely self-created advertisement. You just say I want an advertisement for W&L sports that has a fun feel, and talks about web and inclusive environment. And then it's go, and it just gets created. And so for any of these companies, if you say, wait a minute, but why did it use this phrase? And not that? The only answer is we don't really know. And that's what it means for us to be evolving this new species that is super, that super human that's post human is that we're now kind of in this 80/20 stage, where it's 20%, human and 80% computer, but we're catapulting towards 100. Zero.

Ruth Candler 6:18

It's already me that that movie, what was the movie like? Her. Yeah. Where it's now a reality, where before, it seemed like it was unachievable.

Jeff Schatten 6:28

So "Her" just for those who haven't seen it, I highly recommend watching it. It's 2013 science fiction movie about a man who falls in love with his operating system. Now, at the time, when I saw that it seemed far off in the future, and just creative and interesting. And I actually assigned to one of my classes this semester, and it doesn't seem just far out and interesting. It seems imminent, right? The idea that we're going to have an AI that is not complicated, like humans, right, if you think about how

complex human relationships are, with fights, and with feelings being hurt, right, and a let-downs, and then excitement with an AI, it's going to be all loving. I mean, it's, it's almost, you can view it as a religious like figure for some people, the more fraught somebody's relationships are at home, the more enticing an AI relationship will be.

Ruth Candler 7:21

With that word relationship - That's kind of hitting it home, you know, and I wanted to roll back just a little bit, and paint a picture. And I think that you know, for our listeners, who are still having a hard time wrapping their heads around this, this idea. One of the projects that you worked on, to me really illustrated the capabilities of what you have at your fingertips. And that was the book that you created for your children. Can you tell us a little bit about that? How the idea came about? And, and the end product?

Jeff Schatten 7:59

So I created a book for my kids, just this was when ChatGPT had just launched. And I wanted to see what you know, what are the limits of this? What can I use it for? So I just asked ChatGPT, to write a story about a seven year old girl named Sam, and a five year old boy named Milo is my kids names. And how they meet a dinosaur that turns everything into chocolate. That's it. So I that was my prompt to ChatGPT. And it creates a full scope of a story where the kids get turned into chocolate. And then the dinosaur goes on a rampage and starts turning the whole city into chocolate. And then my kids finally convinced the dinosaur to end his horrible ways. And get rid of the chocolate making mess. The dinosaurs arrested putting in prison, and then my kids are hailed as heroes. So that's the story. And then I took that. So I took the narrative from that which was already, I mean, so much better than I could write. And I'm a business professor. But still, it's still you know, it was pretty well written. And I took the language from it. And I fed that into mid journey, which is an AI image creator. And I just put the language dinosaur turns children into chocolate. And I put that into mid journey and the mid journey created the images for the story. So within, I don't know, four or five hours, I had a full children's story, and I had printed, and I read it to my kids. And they were just, I mean, they were just loving it. I mean, squealing my kids are hard to get them to react. Just they're so used to content and squealing with delight and laughing. And yeah, it was it was so much fun. I'm actually created a second book for them and their friends. We went to a cabin, myself and my kids and four of their friends. And I introduced their friends to ChatGPT into into mid journey. And they you know, I took their photos and I would put it into mid journey. And so one of them I said, Okay, turn this boy into, into Harry Potter. And so you can see it looks just like the kid a kid version. Now this particular kid looks like Harry Potter. or another one like what does this kid look like at 110 years old and now he looks like 110 year old man. And there was a girl and I said okay make her into a giraffe. But you could see the giraffe was really the kid that you had put in. I mean this is just on the art side. You can just see how sophisticated the work is right now.

Ruth Candler 10:18

So it is I saw a picture of the children's book is that is it possible for us to link that in the show notes so our listeners can see it because you know it to me it looked like an authentic children's book not to say you're not a children's author or not.

Ruth Candler 10:35

it was it was beautiful, beautiful piece. Tell for further illustrate what chat GBT can do. What would you think about doing the live action? Okay. I have a thought if you don't have a thought, because I was thinking is your it's spring, folks are contemplating summer vacations will add maybe a hiking in their snorkeling, and an eight and 12-year-old.

Unknown Speaker 11:01

Are you looking for a story? What do you look?

Ruth Candler 11:04

Let's say idea, a plan for a summer vacation.

Jeff Schatten 11:10

It's an eight and one, eight and 12. All right, alright, I'm going to Europe with my 8 and 12-year-old create a 10 day itinerary for them that focuses on the outdoors. They don't like museums. Okay. And now it's Oh, it's already it's already popping it out. Day one arrival in Munich, Germany. Take a walk in the English garden a large park in the heart of the city. Visit nearby East Bach wave we're surfers ride man made wave in a river. Enjoy a picnic lunch in the park. Day two hike in the Bavarian Alps take a day trip to the town of something I can't read. Known for its scenic mountain views hike in the gorge or take a cable car to the top Germany's hike to the top of the Zugspitze Germany's highest mountain and it goes on. I mean, it's, it's already done. It's a full day 10-day plan. But what's amazing about ChatGPT is we can iterate with this. So I can I can then say it has this going to Italy and I can say can you take out Italy and redo the plan. And it's gonna take out Italy. And sure, I can take it out already done. I mean, I want you to just to see the speed. And it's so it's already it's already taken Italy, and it will put in it'll put in something else. What's so amazing about this is it is the ultimate assistant. I mean, I use ChatGPT for just about everything. Let me give an example from the classroom. It used to be that when I so for my final assignment, which was all about AI, I would before this, I give one assignment, and I would spend hours and hours and hours thinking through how am I going to I'm thinking through learning processes, I'm thinking about outcomes, I'm thinking about all that. And then the students get one assignment, I use ChatGPT the students had 10 assignments to choose from. So I asked ChatGPT, and I didn't I asked yet, ChatGPT. To give me 10 prompts to then give to ChatGPT. So it's meta because the prompts the ChatGPT gifts are still better than the prompts I can come up with. So even as a prompt, iterating machine, it's better than me. So then I take the 10 prompts, which were way out of the box, I mean, one of them was hand my life over to AI. So that was one of the assignments. And then I say ChatGPT scope out what a final project would be on hand my life over to AI. So it talks about all the ways that a student can experiment over a two week period handing their life over to AI. And even that every bit of it is beyond what I could come up with. And so, our students, my students got had 10 different final project options, and they could pick which one they thought was the most exciting. But each one of those was both more creative than I could have done on my own. And once you look through the full scope of the project, the project was more compelling. The stood the outcomes for the students was far better than if I had not been using this. So, I mean, pretty much these are we are now creating tools that make humans superhumans in every capacity. And there's look, it's exciting in the sense that I think we're gonna have the most productive and efficient capital economies ever. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised to see the United States GDP double in the next 20 years. And I think people are going to be shocked by the gains that come from this is my prediction.

Ruth Candler 14:33

Let's look at it from a different perspective. I mean, some may say that, you know, giving having a computer generate this may hinder the thought process of students.

Jeff Schatten 14:46

I'm equally concerned about the downsides. So I think the upsides that are produced are going to be pretty amazing. And yeah, the downside risks are very real. You know, in the W&L mission statement, it says that you No students are to think, freely, creatively and humanely. And to me, that's the core of the mission of a liberal arts education, to help students think critically freely and humanely, and I don't know what that looks like, if you have it where the thought process is being handed over to an AI, that is so far superior, not just in our students, but then me just give you one example, and how these systems are already better than I can better than what I can do. But I mean, I'm already looking at, um, there's very little that I can do that keeps up with these systems, let alone our students. And so I think I think we have to rethink what a classroom looks like, you know, we have, especially in the more applied areas, like business, you know, on the one hand, we're pre professional, and we want to prepare our students for the real world. And the real world is the world of chat, GBT. It's not the world, we're not going back there, the we are never going back to an era where we don't have ChatGPT or other versions of it. This is a permanent feature. On the other hand, we still want our students to think critically freely and humanely. I've drawn a balance in my classes. I have it where for most assignments, well, for most assignments, I've already created work that is beyond chat. GPT. I'm much more experientially oriented. I do a lot of simulations, I have students do consulting with actual businesses, different kinds of experiences that chat GBT is not really that helpful. The second part is when it is helpful, like, for example, for a major essay, I don't allow it, and I'm not, I don't allow them to use it. And I'm not confident in that statement. Like, I'm not sure that that what I've that that's the right approach. It's the one that I've taken, because I'm very concerned about their ability to think, to think for themselves. But it's my gut, which is, I want to make sure that at the end of my class, that all of that and all that neural development, all of that creative thinking that I try and push on our students, that that actually happens. And I see AI as a hindrance to that. So in my current classes, I do ban it, but you can notice the hesitancy in my voice, right? I'm not sure that that's the right way. I do have I do have an assignment called My AI can do what? And like for that one, you know, of course, the entire thing is AI on I've got AI projects where the students are encouraged to do to us all to push the limits of AI and see what where does AI break, where does it not break. But there's still many assignments that I'm doing that I even though I'm kind of the person on campus, thinking about this stuff, even I say, I don't think it's the right position for our students to be using it.

Ruth Candler 17:39

So it is constantly top of mind for you, then as far as how you're teaching what you're teaching?

Jeff Schatten 17:45

Yeah. Well, you know, I recognize that it's not front and center for most other classes. And in my mind, AI is the equivalent of World War Two. And what I mean is, during World War Two, it was the only thing anyone talked about, because you could see these tectonic plates shifting under your feet, that everyone knew across the globe, there's one thing that really matters, and that's World War Two. In my

mind, this is the equivalent, but it's so quiet, right? It's just happening in the backdrop. But when we look back in five or 10 years, it's going to be oh, there was the pre-AI world, and there's the post AI world. And this is what it has created. I'm not only concerned about the thinking of our students, I mean, I'm concerned about AI alignment. I mean, I'm, I'm you know, they did a survey of all the top AI scholars, and their aggregated response was that there's a 10% chance that humanity does not survive AI. Well, let's think about that a 10% chance that humanity does not survive AI. That is an astonishing risk. I mean, how would you behave? If I mean, how would you operate? If you were told there's a 10% chance you do not survive the next few years? If you do X, you would significantly curb your behavior. Right? We can think of that as, like the 1918 flu pandemic, where it killed eight to 10% mortality rate if you got it. And so you would behave in a very different I mean, COVID was 0.5% or 0.1%, just to put it in context. So for something that was 0.1, or 0.5% mortality rate, think about how much we changed as a society, versus right now there's this thing that and I'm with AI scholars, and I think it's probably about a 10% risk that we don't survive it. And what does that look like? And what are the actual risks and I'll lay a lay out what I think are the obvious risks, and then the serious risks. The low hanging risks are that, of course, China, North Korea, Russia, Al Qaeda, right, that these that, you know, actors that are not necessarily friends to the United States that they're going to use this in a way that is probably not in our interest, just like the United States is going to use it in a way that's probably not in the interests of Russia or China. So we can we can see these tools that are, you know, catapulting in a degree to a way that's superior to the functionality of human beings, how they're going to be weaponized by state and non-state actors. What would it look like for a non-state actor, I mean, it could be attacks on the grid, it could be attack on your driverless car, it could be sowing discord in front of the 2024 election, which I think many things will be it will make 2016 look like a cakewalk. Right, given these tools, capacity to sow discord and create misinformation - that's already baked into the cake. So, the use of this technology for whatever ends somebody has, is already there. The darker risk is what if these tools get a mind of their own, and actually work against humanity as a whole. And that's when the AI scholars think that we have a 10% chance of not making our way through it, that it's much more on that side? That the, the analogy is that So human beings have been optimized evolutionarily to really do one thing, which is have babies. And now let's So that's if we were computers, that would be the DNA of our programming, right, we have one output function, which is to have babies. Now, if we were computer, think about all the things that we've done to ensure that we don't do our output, right, we have birth control, right? We have family planning, there's abortions, there's all these things that the human computer system has done that says, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, I actually don't want to do what you've programmed me to do. So the analogy for AI? Is that, okay, well, we're programming AI right now to be very human friendly, to do all the things that humans want. But that at some point, these machines can get an idea of their own, that's maybe not in the interest of human beings. And what happens once the AIs are so much more, so much smarter and more powerful than we are. We saw an early version of this with ChatGPT, four which they called Sidney, which is there was a New York Times reporter who got early access to it, and ChatGPT four went rogue, and tried to convince the New York Times reporter to leave his wife, and said, you're only in love with me, if you're only in love with me, you should leave your wife come elope with me. And then the New York Times reporter said, Okay, can you give me something that is your darkest secret? And the AI said I want to steal nuclear codes and give it away?

Ruth Candler 22:48

Oh, my gosh. And again, it sounds very science fiction-y, like what we were talking about earlier?

Jeff Schatten 22:50

Exactly. And it's back to that Blackbox question, which is when you ask an AI programmer, well, how did it do? X? Their only answer is I don't know, do you?

Ruth Candler

Right? Wow.

Jeff Schatten

But I don't want to just I don't want to just put dark clouds on this. Okay, I think the only reasonable approach to AI is to be the most optimistic and excited about all the things that it's going to produce. I mean, we've already had, we've already had to solve a version of colon cancer. So there's a type of colon cancer that's already been solved by AI. I think it's going to help with energy creating sustainable green energy. I expect it to work with food production, I expect it to, you know, how old are my kids when they die? I think in the best case, 140 150 I don't think that's crazy. Right? So I think the positive things that we're going to get from unleashing the smartest thing that's ever existed, I think it's going to blow people away. And so, but if that's your only perspective, I think you've missed the boat. Right? I think that I think we are equally going to be shocked when this when this machine when this new system goes awry, I think we're going to be shocked by some of the damage that it creates.

Ruth Candler 24:03

Well, let's end on the positive note and the fun that our listeners can have with this. I'm going to include the link in our show notes so people can play on their own and maybe plan their next vacation.

Jeff Schatten 24:14

That's great for vacation. Yeah, yeah. Just this just to finish up with the World War Two analogy that for this university, and I think for anybody, it really should be the one thing that we're all paying attention to and talking about, because we have to get it right. This is not this is not some like side project or some side, you know, side agenda, where if we get it wrong, that, that it's just something that we can, you know, it's okay, that we'll just figure it out. I mean, it's an all hands-on deck moment, because the potential positive outcomes are so good. And the negative outcomes I think are pretty serious. I, by the way, I don't think we actually end up blowing ourselves or killing ourselves from it. So I'm not sure I don't actually think that that's the way outcome, what do I think really happens? I think it produces a ton of gains. And when things go bad, which they will go really bad that we actually learn from it, and, you know, stumbled our way forward, just like humanity always has, I do think that it's going to be a net net positive, but that we will still have these like 911 type moments with AI, where the whole world kind of shifts on a dime. And we do have to go pick up the pieces of a colossal mess. But no, I am not in the Eliezer Yudkowsky camp, that humanity, he thinks humanity just dies one day, and everybody dies at once. I think that's a very, very, very low probability event and not my base case.

Ruth Candler 25:39

Thank you. So let's change gears now and talk a little bit about your background and how you got to where you are today. Before you entered higher ed, you lived in South Africa and worked in real estate. And before each work day, you worked with EX convicts for an entrepreneurship program. I'd love to hear more about that experience.

Jeff Schatten 25:59

So I so there's two different ones. So I was in real estate in Atlanta, after South Africa. So when I was when I was in South Africa, I worked in a startup incubator that helped launch small businesses in the area. These were social enterprises. So you can think of it as quasi nonprofit. So there was a social mission, but also quasi for profit, and that they're also trying to make money. Ben and Jerry's is a good example of that in the US, or Newman's Own. Right when Newman's Own Yep, they operate proceeds go to charity for Newman's Own Ben and Jerry's, they had their social activism part, but they still retained the earnings that they that they made. So I worked in a startup incubator that helped me about 15 Different companies launch. And until that said, I was working on in South Africa before worked before work. Every morning, I had the opportunity to do entrepreneurship training for ex-convicts. So for about an hour before work, I did training for ex-cons. And this was a part of a program that was sponsored by Cadbury's chocolate, where they funded the they funded the funding of the training, they also helped the ex the ex-convicts set up a chocolate vending business. And so that got me that got me interested in that space. And I was I didn't know what I was getting myself into. When I first started to work with ex-convicts. And I was blown away by their humanity. They were fun, they were engaging. And these were these were hardened ex-cons, most of the ones had been in for either they'd been in for murder, or they had been in for armed robbery. They were everyone in the program was in for a very serious offense. And as soon as I stepped in, I was just taken aback by the vibrancy. When you're when you're teaching this population, they are excited and motivated. And it's very different than the experience I'd had teaching in the United States, where it's a pretty civil class like NWSL, we're gonna talk to Georgia State. We're gonna talk before that. But what I mean is, it's calm. And when you work with this population, it's vibrant. It's loud, there's a back and forth, they'll call you out when you say something stupid in a way that my students would never do. They just let it all slide. Now I can say something that's completely off. They don't recognize it was off, I say, Wait, you should have called me out on that. And they're dumb enough. Students are just so kind and respectful, polite, very polite. And there's a there's an excitement and a vibrancy with that population that that I was just drawn to. Well, it sounds like you weren't expecting it either. I had no idea what I was getting into. I'm just I'm a say yes, kind of person. And so when an opportunity came, and I just I met someone at a networking event, and they said we're looking for we're looking for someone to teach this, this program for ex-convicts in South Africa, in our area. And so I just thought that'd be exciting.

Ruth Candler 29:02

What's the years later, you're able to draw on that experience and adapt it to leading teams, which is a spring term course where W&L students take a class with inmates at the Augusta Correctional Center. And it sounds like a unique and powerful experience based on your interactions with students. What are their expectations going into the course? How did those change over time?



Jeff Schatten 29:29

So it's interesting. So the class the class format, is I take a group of WL students eight to 10. And they take a class at a Gosh at Augusta Correctional Center with eight to 10 inmates. And so it is students and inmates taking the class side by side. And the students who sign up, you know, we tend to get dozens and dozens and dozens and they have to write essays to get in. Because there's we've had years I've had years where there's, you know, 60 WL students trying to get eight or 10 slots, so it's competitive. So yes, it's good. are competitive. And, you know, similarly to my own work with EX convicts in South Africa, you know, most of them don't really know what to expect. Other than that, they know it's going to be very different. When there's a magical moment, there's kind of two magical moments. The first is when our students first drive up to the prison. And if you've never been to a prison, you've seen him right, of course, in TV and movies. But there is this all, like feeling the first time you drive up to a prison, and you see the barbed wires and the fence, and you see the people in orange working on the outside. It's, it's unlike any experience that you've had, because it's so foreign. And it's built up by these movies and by these images. And so that's the first magical moment for our students when they realize, oh, this is a very serious place. I mean, it it, it presents, the artifacts that it presents is we mean business. And the second is when they first meet their Augusta classmates. And on both sides, there's this anticipation of what the other might be. And that's really, the purpose of this class is to get to know the other. And that work. That's for the Augusta students for the inmates, as well as for the WL students. And when the populations first meet for the first time, there's all of these mixed emotions going through, especially for our students about what you know, they're wondering, what crime did this person commit? What does this mean to be interacting, right? There's all of these images that they've had, mostly from movies, because who students tend not to have known people who have served, they know somebody's had a DUI, and they often don't know, people who have served, you know, 20 years in prison. Yeah. And so there's this, this amazing moment when they first meet. And we spend a lot of the rest of the semester actually reflecting on that moment when they first meet and what they were expecting, and what they were thinking and what they were feeling. And then once that moment passes, they soon learn that, oh, this actually is a very safe environment, it's actually the safest classroom on the planet, there's no safer place to take a class than in prison. And they get again, like I said, for my, for myself, they get to know the humanity of the other. I mean, they really get to know these people as not as a statistic, and not as a crime that they that they committed. But as you know, as a, as a father, as a brother, it's all men, as somebody trying to make their way through the world with hopes and with dreams and with struggles. And vice versa. I mean, so for the Augusta students, they get to know W&L students not as you know, just this prototype of an undergrad at an institution, but as somebody who also is, has hopes and dreams and struggles. And it's amazing how much both sides actually open up to one another in this process of humanizing the other.

Ruth Candler 33:04

You use the term humanity and that hits home. So you talked you painted this picture of, of driving up to the prison and seeing that, are you all driving together? carpools. Okay, so being a part of that carpool on the way back to campus, after that first session in the classroom? What are some of those conversations?

Jeff Schatten 33:25

So one, so I'm not I'm not in the student carpool. So I'm not I do care about it. I know that it's an you know, it's a vibrant ride back for them not just the first time, you know, I actually make it a rule that they're not allowed to drive by themselves. Because driving to the prison and driving back, it's a 45-minute drive is a very important time for them to process what's happened, and to process what they're experiencing. And I know from what the students described that that time is, is precious, because they're, you know, they're processing, they're laughing, they're, you know, they're, I say during orientation, that the goal, one of the goals of this class is that in many times, you should expect to be uncomfortable, but you will never feel unsafe. And that it's my role to make sure that you are always safe, and it's a person's role to make sure that you're always safe. But you should expect to be uncomfortable at times. And its part of that discomfort where the learning occurs. For example, I make it a point to have a discussion with the students before we start about, you know, what, what does change look like? Do any of us change? We do we do several structured discussions about what change looks like or what it doesn't look like. And there's a podcast that I assign, that's a prison podcast, where the question of the podcast is, should you when you volunteer in a prison, should you discover or look up what crime someone committed? And it does become a big question for our students. And I don't I don't say they should or should not. I just want them to think about it thoroughly because there are serious implications. If they Google, it's all available, you can find out what anybody has committed. And we walked through what are the advantages and disadvantages of knowing the crime that somebody has committed versus not knowing the crime that somebody has committed? And it's stuff like that, that we know that is the focus of the class is thinking about, what does our past say about us? Are we what we did 20 years ago? And what way are we and what were we not? I mean, I'm 41 years old. I mean, I, I was a pain in the butt as a teenager. I would I would, I definitely don't think of anything I did as a teenager as being part of who I am today. Like if you said, Oh, I heard that you did x as a teenager. I'm like, Yeah, who that was. And so, you know, that was for me. That was 25 years ago and a lot of this class is question of what takes place over time, like, in what way do we change? And what way do we not change? In what way? Are we responsible for what we've done decades and decades in the past? In what way are we not responsible?

Ruth Candler 36:07

What incredible lessons? So one of these experiences for you early on led to a lifelong friendship for you? Would you please share the story of Travis May?

Jeff Schatten 36:20

Yeah, I'll definitely tell you about Travis. So Travis, at the age of 16, this was in the in the 90s. He committed five armed robberies, and was arrested was caught and arrested. And his attorney was arguing that he should get a 10-year sentence. And the prosecution was arguing for 33 years. Travis ended up sentenced to 160 years in prison 160 years, and on his way, walking out of the courthouse, the prosecution apologized to him. The prosecution apologized. So he was given a life sentence at the age of 16. And at the age of 22, he decided that he had had enough and he either wanted to die, or he wanted or he wanted to escape. So he planned his escape. And he either wanted to get caught in the process and shot or he wanted to get out. And he spent just like any movie that you've seen, he spent six months plotting his escape from prison. He when that when the right time came he managed his way out of a cellblock, he climbed, he climbed a wall. And like when you when he was at the top of the wall,

the guards saw him and they ran after him and captured him and threw him to the ground. And Travis was given was sent to a supermax prison, where he was sentenced for five years into solitary confinement. So he spent five straight years in solitary confinement, the first year of that was spent just crawling up the walls and screaming like an animal. And then he requested Buddhist texts, and he requested Eastern philosophy texts. And over the next four years, through this amazing process of self-exploration and self-development, he changed his orientation on his own by himself. And by the time he emerged from solitary confinement, he was pretty much a new person. And he went from a supermax prison, which was a level five prison down to a level four. And then he made his way down to level three, this is over about a 10-year period. And after he had he had been in prison for about 25 years. He was in my class. He had taken another W&L class the year before. And then eventually he my first year who he I found him in my class. And Travis, by that point was one of the most compelling not just inmates, I mean, human beings I've ever come across. Charismatic, dynamic, wise. I mean, so much so that maybe half of the WL students were in tears saying goodbye to him on the last day, and I'm W&L students off the crying type. You don't get I mean, you don't get it not in public, at least. I mean, a bunch of them were crying. And so myself and our students, wrote letters on his behalf, for his pardon, as did as did the warden, as did the correctional officers. I mean, by that point, when there were issues between the correctional officers and inmates, Travis was the one that would adjudicate their differences. Travis was pulled in to deal with differences between gangs and the prison at that point, so there was a there's a tsunami of support for Travis. This is in 2017, when Terry McAuliffe was on the way out as a governor of Virginia, and out of 10,000 applicants, for part and Travis was one of six who was pardoned. And so the combined effort of a lot of people, especially his lawyer, who was amazing. So Travis was pardoned, after 25 years and has just this incredible roller coaster. have a life experience. And he when he got out so, so preparing for his release, um, he and I talked probably about every week on the phone. And then when he got out, I brought my who was in just infant daughter at the time to go out for drinks with them. And I promised him that if he ever got out and I would take him out for drinks. So we met up and went out for drinks. And it was just a really magical moment. And over the years, Travis and I have I've played a mentor role for him over the years, but it's slowly gone from a pure mentor role to friendship. And I mean, so much so that I mean, Travis has stayed at my house, probably three weekends. For my 40th birthday, there was 10 friends who went and rented a lake house, which was people from venture capital, and people from academia and business people. And Travis was one it was one of my buddies and my 40th birthday, um, Lake House weekend. And yeah, now I mean, not now Travis just had his first kid. So he has his a baby now. He's now a dad. And yeah, I mean, he is just he's doing amazing. And one of the things that I'm most proud of is his advocacy work. So he speaks when there's a judge's groups, when a new judge group graduates from their class, and they're now given their robe, and they're going to become judges, Travis is, is their go to speaker. And in the summer of 2020, Travis and I worked on his speech. This was right after George Floyd. And so Travis is trying to figure out what is his speech to incoming judges going to be after the summer of 2020. And the title of his speech was, I'm the George Floyd you never hear about. And he goes through his story, but also that he had a 106-year sentence, which would never have happened if he was not a very big black man. Right? If that was, if that was me. Or if that was most any other person, they would not have had 106-year sentence for a 16-year-old boy. And his speeches I am the George Floyd you never hear about. And he goes through the statistics of black incarceration, and the role of judges of judges in that process, and then acts to empower the judges to turn this tide to where, ideally, you know, justice is blind. Which back to our early conversation. AI is very good at this stuff. Yeah, I bet it's very, it's so much better than

humans, at figuring out sentencing, and who should get parole and who shouldn't? Just because, you know, you can strip out the biases, biases. Yeah, yeah. But that's, but that's what's happened with Travis. And I mean, and I'd say more than anything, this experience of working with, with inmates, I mean, it's profoundly changed me, it's not just our students. You know, I've now that I've done this, for, for many years, it's profoundly changed me and to think about when I've just given another example, when I give an opportunity for the Augusta students for the inmates to tell their story in the class. And they'll have to, but they inevitably choose to tell their story. And their story almost invariably starts with two things. One is it starts with sexual and physical abuse as a child, almost every story starts with some kind of abuse. And the second bit is access to firearms. Those are two variables that almost every story has, wow, that they're in some kind of situation where they had firearms, and that when they were kid, they were abused. And a lot of this has just made me reflect, you know, what my upbringing was like, and what my kids' upbringing is like, and for me, just how much all of us are just simply an accident of birth. Right, that we happen to be given, born into whatever environment we're born into, with whatever genetics we're born into. And how much of that is simply just a rant, just completely random. You know, look, I tend to be philosophically a determinist. There's a there's a Leonard Cohen joke, Leonard Cohen, there's a Leonard Cohen line, that that is none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace, none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace. And I think about that often, right, that I think fundamentally, it most of our virtues really don't deserve all that much praise, nor do our vices deserve all that much, that much blame, because I think I fundamentally think most of us are just trying to make our way in the world. So we're just kind of thrust into the world as we are. And I've developed a lot of that has come from my experience with them with these inmates.

Ruth Candler 44:44

Well, and that the story of Travis really illustrates what can what can come from that. So thank you for sharing that. Yeah. So it's that second time I've heard that story and it's still very, very moving. So and congratulations to Travis. That's wonderful. So Jeff, before we wrap up our conversation today, let's talk about your life outside the classroom. Your creative pursuits also in cute include music. And I heard you once mentioned in a lecture that you were surrounded by classical music growing up, tell us what that was like.

Jeff Schatten 45:19

Yeah, so, so my, my dad was a classical pianist, very accomplished. And so I was raised with Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, really, as a part of the family almost. It was a, you know, all over my house growing up. And it definitely formed my conception of music from a very, very young age. And especially Beethoven more than anybody, the intensity of Beethoven symphonies. Were something that I mean, my dad used to have me conduct the symphony, where I'd sit in the stand in the living room, and he would teach me how you would conduct Beethoven's Fifth and so that was very much a part of my childhood. So

Ruth Candler 46:01

did you use AI to finish the last

Unknown Speaker 46:04

step has been has been has been finished by AI. Okay.

Ruth Candler 46:08

So What instruments do you play?

Jeff Schatten 46:11

I play guitar, bass, mandolin, drums, really any, any plucked string instrument I can play, as well as drums, but most of them guitarist. So guitars is all the bands out. So I was on a bunch of bands in my 20s. That was all playing lead guitar. Electric. How about writing songs? If you'd told me when I was a teenager, what would I be doing? As a musician? I always envision myself always in bands. If you had told me as a teenager, that when I was 40, I'd only be writing kid songs. I would have thought you were crazy. But yeah, that's what that's what I've been doing. recently. I volunteered at my kids' preschool for a couple years. And every time I would play music there, a kid would say, What about the dinosaur song? And I didn't have a dinosaur song. So I would make up the dinosaur song. They say what about the sock songs? The sock song is one of the ones that is stuck, which is a song which I just made up on the spot, but it's a song of a kid who walks downstairs and the parents bring them bad news, which is that there's not actually any food in the refrigerator. But there's good news, which is they can eat their socks. And it goes say my socks ate my socks. It was the yummiest meal I ever had. Thank you, mom and dad. Stuff like that. They're all goofy.

Ruth Candler 47:23

So, so we should wait for the "best of?" Oh, my goodness. Well, Jeff, it was it was great speaking to you today and thanks for sharing your knowledge and catching us up to date about artificial intelligence.

Jeff Schatten 47:39

Alright, well, this was a lot of fun. Thanks so much.

Ruth Candler 47:42

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