# What Would Jim Do?

Jim has many skills, but where he has most influenced and impressed me is as a mentor, a connector of people, and a bridger of fields. He became a mentor to me, whether he knew it or not, more than 13 years ago, before either of us had joined Microsoft. Jim is a phenomenal mentor. He invests deeply in understanding the problem you are trying to solve and always has time for deep discussion and debate. Later, I discovered that Jim was an uncanny connector. He knows everyone, and they all want to show him the details of what they are doing. He sees a vast amount of work and forwards the best broadly. He is a nexus for interesting papers, for valuable results, and for new discoveries across many fields. Over time I learned that one of his unique abilities is a bridger of fields. He can take great work in one field and show how it can be applied in others. He knows that many of the world’s most useful discoveries have been made in the gap between fields, and that some of the most important work has been the application of the technology from one field to the problems of another.

Back in 1994, Pat Selinger decided that I needed to meet Jim Gray, and we went to visit him in San Francisco. Pat and I spent an afternoon chatting with Jim about database performance benchmarks, what we were doing with DB2, compiler design, RISC System 6000 and hardware architecture in general. The discussion was typical for Jim. He’s deeply interested in every technical field from aircraft engine design through heart transplants. His breadth is amazing, and the conversation ranged far and wide. It seemed he just about always knew someone working in any field that came up.

A few months later, Bruce Lindsay and I went to visit Jim while he was teaching at Berkeley. Jim and I didn’t get much of a chance to chat during the course of the day—things were pretty hectic around his office at Berkeley—but he and I drove back into San Francisco together. As we drove into the sunset over the city, approaching the Bay Bridge, Jim talked about his experience at Digital Equipment Corporation. He believed a hardware company could sell software, but would never be able to really make software the complete focus it needed to be. He talked of DEC’s demise and said, “They were bound and determined to fail as a hardware company rather than excel as a software company.”

The sunset, the city, and the Bay Bridge were stretched across the windscreen. It was startlingly beautiful. Instead of making conversation with Jim, I was mostly just listening, reflecting and contemplating. At the time, I was the lead architect on IBM DB2. And yes, I too worked for a hardware company. Everything Jim was relating of his DEC experience sounded eerily familiar to me. It was as though Jim was summarizing my own experiences rather than his. I hadn’t really thought this deeply about it before, but the more I did, the more I knew he was right. This was the beginnings of me thinking that probably I should be working at a software company.

He didn’t say it at the time, and, knowing Jim much better now, I’m not sure he would have even thought it, but the discussion left me thinking that I needed to aim higher. I needed to know more about all aspects of the database world, more about technology in general, and to think more about how it all fit together. Having some time to chat deeply with Jim changed how I looked at my job and where my priorities were. I left the conversation pondering responsibility and the industry, and believing I needed to do more, or at least to broaden the scope of my thinking.

I met Jim again later that year at the High Performance Transaction Systems workshop. During the conference, Jim came over, sat down beside me, and said “How are you doing James Hamilton?” This is signature Jim. I’ll bet nearly everyone he knows has had one of those visits during the course of a conference. He drops by, sits down, matches eyes, and you have 110% of his attention for the next 15 to 20 minutes. Jim’s style is not to correct or redirect. Yet, after each conversation, I’ve typically decided to do something differently. It just somehow becomes clear and obviously the right thing to do by the end of the discussion.

In 2006 I got a note from Jim with the subject “Mentor—I need to say I’m helping someone so…”  While it was an honor to officially be Jim’s mentee, I didn’t really expect this to change our relationship much. And, of course, I was wrong. Jim approaches formal mentorship with his typically thoroughness and, in this role, he believes he has signed up to review and assist with absolutely everything you are involved with, even if not work-related. For example, last year I had two articles published in boating magazines and Jim insisted on reviewing them both. His comments included the usual detailed insights we are all used to getting from him, and the articles were much better for it. How does he find the time?

For years, I’ve read every paper Jim sent my way. Jim has become my quality filter in that, as much as I try, I can’t cast my net nearly as wide nor get through close to as much as I should. Like him, I’m interested in just about all aspects of technology but, unlike him, I actually do need to sleep. I can’t possibly keep up. There are hundreds of engineers who receive papers and results from him on a regular basis. Great research is more broadly seen as a result of his culling and forwarding. Many of us read more than we would have otherwise, and are exposed to ideas we wouldn’t normally have seen so early or, in some cases, wouldn’t have seen at all.

Jim’s magic as a mentor, connector and bridger is his scaling. The stories above can be repeated by hundreds of people, each of whom feels as though they had Jim’s complete and undivided attention. To contribute deeply to others at this level is time-consuming, to do it while still getting work done personally is even harder, and to do it for all callers is simply unexplainable. Anyone can talk to Jim, and an astonishing number frequently do. And because his review comments are so good, and he’s so widely respected, a mammoth amount is sent his way. He receives early papers and important new results across a breadth of fields from computer architecture, operating system design, networking, database, transaction processing, astronomy, and particle physics. The most interesting work he comes across is forwarded widely. He ignores company bounds, international bounds, bounds of seniority, and simply routes people and useful data together. Jim effectively is a routing nexus where new ideas and really interesting results are distributed more broadly.

Over the past year I’ve received no papers from Jim. There has been no advice. I’ve not had anything reviewed by him. And, I’ve not been able to talk to him about the projects I’m working on. When I attend conferences, there have been no surprise visits from Jim. Instead, I’ve been operating personally on the basis of “What would Jim do?”

Each of us has opportunities to be mentors, connectors and bridgers. These are our chances to help Jim scale even further. Each of these opportunities is a chance to pass on some of the gift Jim has given us over the years. When you are asked for a review or to help with a project, just answer “GREAT!!!” as he has so many times, and the magic will keep spreading.

This year, when I face tough questions, interesting issues, or great opportunities, I just ask, “What would Jim do?” And then I dive in with gusto.

James Hamilton, 2006-01-16.