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## How I spent my summer vacation

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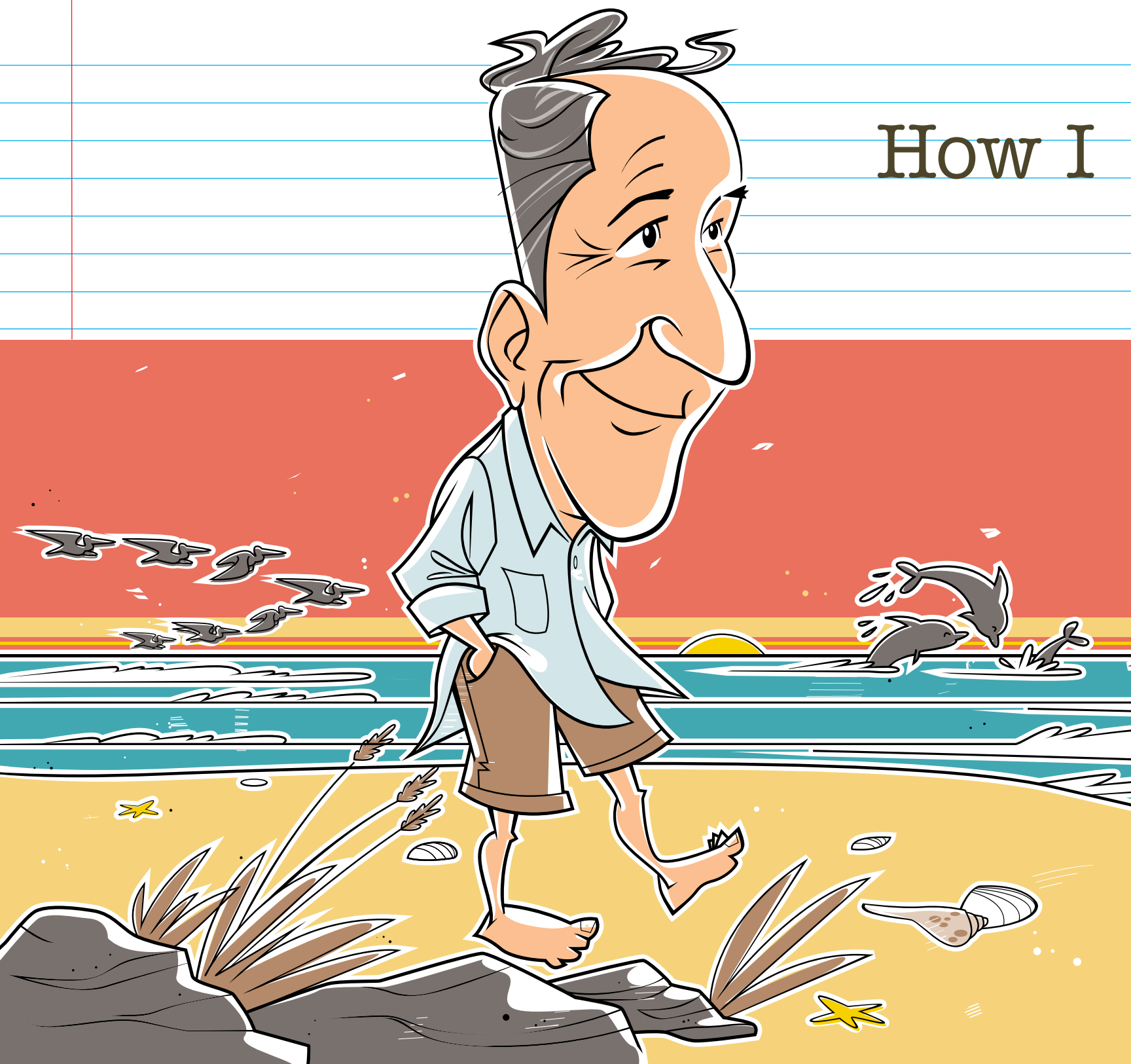
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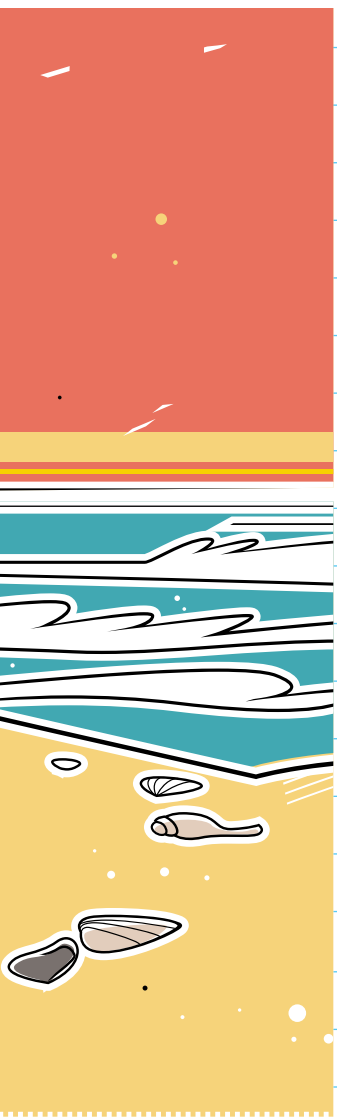
# How I



Illustrations by Julie Speer

By Rodney A. Smolla

# spent my summer vacation



**I**t is mid-June, and I am on summer vacation. In two weeks I will be assuming the presidency of Furman.

For the moment, however, I am with family and friends in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

I had promised to write this essay for *Furman* magazine and had been counting on the reflective quietude of two weeks by the ocean to bring me inspiration and profundity.

What could I have been thinking? Since when have two weeks with scores of rambunctious kids, relatives and friends in a rambling beach house been a time for reflection?

With the deadline for this essay pressing on me, I took a long walk, alone, along the shore. From all the books I'd read on the topic, I knew that this is what you do for enlightenment when you visit the beach.

And it worked. I had not walked a hundred yards before I experienced a brilliant flash of inspiration. With pelicans flying low in V-formation, dolphins rolling languidly in silver silhouette against the slate-blue horizon, and the shell-strewn sands crunching beneath my bare feet, it came to me. The title of my essay would be: "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."



OK, now, I hear you thinking, “How cliché! What a dumb title! This is the brilliant insight of our new president? Couldn’t he at least have tried walking another hundred yards?”

Don’t worry. I’ve thought of these objections (that’s what I did over the next hundred yards), and I have answers for all of them.

**T**here are good reasons for recounting how we spend our summer vacations. It’s no accident that this is the stock essay most of us were asked to write some time in middle school, just as it’s no accident that we treasure our summer vacations as precious and powerful restoratives to our energy and sanity.

In my case, the story of how I spent my summer vacation has a moral to it. Now, I don’t think a good story requires a moral. I’ve read many books and seen many movies that had no particularly discernible moral, and some of them were darn entertaining. But I do think that a great story requires a moral. And as Ron Collins, author of the inspirational book *From Good to Great*, reminds us, the real prize resides in the relentless push to true greatness — in not settling for the just good.

Yet can there be a moral to a story about a summer vacation? Or is that, as Mark Twain would say, “a stretcher?”

I believe a story about a summer vacation can have a moral — though I must let you be the judge. But first, here’s how I spent my summer vacation.

**Playing Games.** We played board games, card games, pool games, beach games, court games, even couch and dinner-table games. A lot of the games we just made up on the spot. The highlight for physical sports was a marathon wiffle ball game played on the beach in treacherous winds. ESPN

commentators noted that our game was probably the most memorable sporting event played in high winds since the 2006 British Open.

Our son Miles, a rising sophomore at Furman, was the only lefty in the lineup, which he exploited to pound hit after hit into the sand dune, our beach equivalent to Fenway Park’s Green Monster. (Maybe baseball coach Ron Smith should take a look at him.) My wife Michele, who was recovering from a knee injury, was banned by the team doctor from playing in the field but was allowed to be the designated hitter, provided our son Dylan ran the bases. She proved she could still hit for power, sending a ball deep into the second set of ocean waves. Dylan circled the bases three times before we got the ball back. Under our version of wiffle ball, which has certain rules that have been influenced by cricket, all three runs counted.

**Watching Games.** We watched World Cup soccer, the Stanley Cup and the NBA finals. It was a thrill to see Furman’s Clint Dempsey score the first goal for the United States in the World Cup. (See page 32.)

We had ordered an official World Cup Team America jersey with number 8, Dempsey’s number, for Dylan, and he was wearing it when Dempsey scored. After the goal Dylan refused to take off the jersey, not wishing to jinx the team. It was a thoughtful gesture but one that got a little gamey for the rest of us, and by the fourth day we had to sneak into his bedroom and slip it off while he slept.

It was also a thrill for the Smolla family to watch the Chicago Blackhawks win the Stanley Cup. I grew up in Chicago, and much of my family still lives there. A large family contingent

came to spend the first week with us at the Outer Banks, which, to be honest, is a lot more picturesque than the shores of Lake Michigan.

When the Blackhawks won we set off fireworks which we'd purchased just down the road from Furman. We weren't entirely sure about the fireworks laws and whether South Carolina fireworks could be lawfully ignited in North Carolina, but we figured there was probably an exception for the one or two times in a century when a Chicago team wins a major sports championship.

**Reading Books.** Michele finished *South of Broad* by Pat Conroy, which I had given her for Mother's Day. I started reading, but did not finish, *The Museum of Innocence* by Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish writer. I was impressed by all the books our kids and their friends read, and how quickly they all seemed to finish. I worry about this, to be honest. Sometimes I worry that I'm too slow a reader. Other times I worry our kids read too fast. What's the point if it's all a rush, and do you really remember it as well?

**Singing Songs.** My four siblings are all talented musicians, as are several of our children. I am chagrined to say this talent skipped me, but that doesn't keep me from appreciating music, or encouraging it.

My brother Dan from Chicago is a semi-professional folk-rock singer and composer (he also has a day job), and Jim Gibson, a friend from Virginia, is a guitarist. It has become a beach vacation ritual for us to spend at least a few nights in hootenannies (some of you may know that word) in which we sing just about every song we know, and many we don't. My principal contribution is as lead vocalist, particularly on blues numbers, in which feeling can compensate (some) for voice quality (meaning lack of it).

Our repertoire included the Rolling Stones, Woody Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Leadbelly, Van Morrison, the Beatles, Paul Simon, and traditional blues, bluegrass, folk songs and spirituals. Our high-school daughter Corey and her friend Melissa handled high

harmony and, in a showing of the continuity of modern American culture, actually knew most of the words of songs from other generations. After midnight we honor all requests, but we ask that you look generously at the tip jar and remember your wait staff. Call us corny if you want, but when you get grandparents, parents, college students, high schoolers, middle schoolers, toddlers and the family dog all joining in rousing harmony, it makes for a lasting "Kumbaya" moment.

**Debating Politics, World Affairs and the Meaning of Life.** We did a lot of this. We are fortunate to have among our dearest family and friends both starry liberals and stalwart conservatives.

Our daughter Erin, who is a rising senior at Duke and was with us for only a few days because she was spending the summer in a service project in Tanzania, was caught poignantly in these cross-fire hurricanes, as she spent her previous summer working for the Virginia Democratic Party, while her current boyfriend is a committed Republican. As both a dad and political advisor, I had the good sense to stay out of this issue and let her figure it out.

Our family discussions tend to be as competitive as group Monopoly or beach volleyball, and as intensely soulful as a night at the hootenanny. In the end, they are a large part of what life is all about and what a university is all about. At both the beach house and the university, we believe in the vibrancy of the marketplace of ideas and the common bonds of decency and dignity we share as family, friends and colleagues.

**Cooking and Eating.** As you might expect, I savor the role of family patriarch and commander-in-chief of the barbecue grill. My grilling is better than my singing, and if things don't work out at Furman I'm going to open a little place in downtown Greenville.

As much as we emphasize that it's an exhibition and not a competition, there's

something about the beach environment that brings out the chef adrenaline in many of our guests, and if you watched some of our dinners being prepared you'd think you were watching the Iron Chefs competition on the Food Channel.

The challenge, of course, is the clean-up, after everyone is satiated from the food and sun and fun. We have hit on a great solution: We crank up the soundtrack from *The Big Chill*, and suddenly everyone in the house gets filled with the spirit, washing dishes, taking out garbage, and wrapping food in foil while dancing like *The Temptations*.

### **OK, so where's the moral?**

As graduates and friends of one of the nation's great liberal arts universities, you understand that this is largely left to each of us to discern through the prism of our own sensibilities and experiences. Let me offer a few suggestions.

My mom passed away this year, at the age of 84, joining my dad, who died seven years earlier. They never had much money, and Lord knows the idea of renting a beach house in a lovely place like the Outer Banks to host all their family and friends would have been beyond their wildest dreams, let alone their practical means. But they taught us how to do all that we did on our family vacation. At weddings and funerals, at Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays and Easter, at summer cookouts and neighborhood fests, they taught us what really matters.

When I traveled to Greenville with my family last December to accept the Furman presidency — the highest honor of my professional life — I took a moment to address the students about my own view of "what really matters." I told them that there is a sense in which everything that surrounds them on the stunning Furman campus is all about them. The lovely buildings, the fountains, the sports facilities, the music venues, the science labs,



the devoted faculty who serve as teachers, scholars, mentors and counselors, the dedicated staff who labor conscientiously to provide the myriad services that support them in their education and well-being, the alumni, trustees and other friends of Furman who donate their money, time and energy to its service — all of this is done to create an extraordinary experience for the students in their bright college years.

And so it may well seem, I told the students, that “It’s all about you.” Yet the secret to the good life, the core value that is at the center of Furman’s mission, as I told them, “is to help you realize, deep in your hearts, that this experience is not about you.”

I also said, “The most important lesson you can learn while you are here is that for your life to have authentic meaning, fulfillment and consequence, you must learn the importance of connection to forces larger and greater than yourself: to larger causes, and to the greater community.”

Back to the beach. Of all the songs we sang, few meant more to us than an old bluegrass/gospel spiritual, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”

Spending time at the beach as a parent, as I contemplated taking on the responsibilities of leading Furman, I realized the importance of keeping the circle unbroken. I realized that as an educator, I want for our students much the same things that, as a parent, I want for my children. I want them to grow intellectually. I want them to achieve academically. But more than anything, I want them to develop their character, their sense of the preciousness of the bonds of family and true friends, their connection to things larger than themselves, their ability to find their way on the journey to lives of consequence and meaning.

That’s how I spent my summer vacation. And that’s also, it seems to me, the moral of the story. |F|

*Rod Smolla’s inauguration as the 11th president of Furman will be held Friday, October 22. More details, page 41.*



JEREMY FLEMING

# Ready to make Greenville, Furman home