

ACADEMIC

THE ROLE OF FAITH

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Lindsay: Would you mind sharing a little bit about your journey, any leadership lessons you learned along the way, and how you got to where you are today?

Costin: I was raised in a home where faith was important to my parents, and they demonstrated in word and deed why it should be important to me. I grew up seeing the best leadership example I have ever seen in the person of my dad, who owned a small floor covering business. My dad was born during the Great Depression, raised by a single mom, barely finished high school, and started a business in his early 20s, never having had a single course in leadership. His only instruction in leadership came from the foundation of the Bible. I had the privilege of watching him sometimes struggle as a small business owner, lead a team of two different crews who understood that their primary job was to do whatever it took to satisfy their customers. What most impressed me, even at a young age, was the way my dad balanced people and mission. As I would later learn at the Air Force Academy, this is the most basic leadership model of all time, an approach my dad knew instinctively and practiced religiously.

When it came to people, my dad would give them second, third, and fourth chances. His crews, who would never have had any real economic opportunity otherwise, were important to him so he taught them how to lay floors, serve customers, give people value for their money, and be proud of their work in ways that nobody had ever done for them. He made a point of paying his crews a lot more than they could have otherwise made in any other kind of job because he wanted them to know that the work itself is valuable on its own, and that we all ultimately work for Someone greater than ourselves.

I realize that everyone is not religious, but I'll frame it from my perspective as a person of faith. Between baseball practices in the summer, I was gopher number one growing up. The way I earned room and board the rest of

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the year was “gophering” for my dad. “Go to the truck and get this tool. Go back into the house and clean up that room. Go find us a pack of crackers.” During these formative experiences, I saw my dad on multiple occasions, after sanding a floor and applying finish, back away to the edge of the room and admire the job he had just completed. Whether or not anyone was in the room, he would say to himself—and to God—in an audible voice, “Pretty work.” In that sacred moment, he was acknowledging that he had done a job first to please the Lord, and in so doing he hoped to have pleased his customer. For him, his work was an act of worship. That’s a lesson his only son will never forget.

I learned as a young boy that being a leader means that you answer to Someone higher than yourself or some cause larger than yourself—whether you are leading an organization, your family, or yourself. If you can frame your life and your work with that mindset, all of your problems don’t disappear, but it gives you a perspective on life that fosters resilience, regardless of the difficulties you face. Many of us have spent the better part of a lifetime packing bags and travelling the globe in defense of the Nation, usually not at times or places of our choosing. A lot of what I packed in my rucksack from the Air Force Academy, and why I am so grateful that I was allowed to spend time in that crucible, is learning that life will be challenging at times, but the grit that you develop as a cadet stays with you long after graduation. That grit drives growth. Along the way, you develop a capacity to accomplish more than you ever thought you were capable of doing.

Neither of my parents attended college, so going to college was just not something our family discussed. As I mentioned, my dad barely finished high school. My mom attended a two-year secretarial school and became a bank teller upon graduation, but the thought of me attending a traditional university never entered our minds. So, as my high school years wound down, it just wasn’t part of our family’s lexicon. The only reason the subject ever arose was because my high school guidance

counselor told me late in my junior year that “Our valedictorian usually goes to college.” I said, “Okay, I guess that is something we could talk about. What do I need to do?” One thing led to another and I wound up attending North Carolina Boys State. Back then, one of the summer programs for rising seniors at the Academy was serving as a Boys State camp counselor. The first time I heard of the Air Force Academy was during a special session at Boys State hosted by a Firstie from the Class of 1983. What I took home to my mom was, (a) I should probably go to college, to which she replied, “Probably not a bad idea.” And (b), there is a school in Colorado that will let me attend for free. She said, “Now we’re talking. Tell me more.” All I can say is thank God for Jay Dunham from the USAFA Class of 1983!

We are shaped by our experiences and education, but mostly we are shaped by the people in our lives. I agree with the writer who said that who you are five years from today is based on the books you read and the people you associate with. It’s certainly been true in my life. I have been shaped by those places of worship, teachers in school, my USAFA squadron buds, and supervisors during every military assignment who saw more in me than I saw in myself. But in the grand scheme, apart from my parents, the single most influential teacher in my life was an eighth grade teacher named Mercedes J. Newsome. For perspective, I have an undergraduate degree from the Air Force Academy, five earned Master’s Degrees, and two earned Doctorate Degrees, including a Ph.D. in Leadership. In all that schooling, the question of “Who was your most influential teacher”, the answer is easy. Because she had such high standards and was a taskmaster by nature, she was not-so-affectionately known as Gruesome Newsome. While I wouldn’t necessarily recommend her teaching methods to everyone, she motivated me to excel like no other teacher I ever had. At the end of every graded event, whether it was a project or an essay or a test, she made the entire class collect our belongings and back away from the desk at which we had been seated. In her hand would be the stack of graded materials. Then, as the class waited

with great dread, she called out each student's name—from lowest grade to highest grade—and re-seated every student around the room from last to first. Let's just say that USAFA isn't the only institution to have discovered Tail-end Charlie. Everyone knew everyone's class rank until Mrs. Newsome held another stack of graded materials in her hand. Depending on your perspective, it was either public humiliation or private motivation.

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At the beginning of this exercise in academic torture, I was timid, unsure of myself, and more than happy to be seated midway through the class. Right there in the so-called Gifted and Talented Class, a place I never wanted to be in the first place, I contracted an early case of “cooperate and graduate.” Midway seemed about right because I was not in last place, and I wasn't too far from the front. Good enough for government work. But Mrs. Newsome wouldn't stand for it. She called me aside on more than one occasion and said in her most intimidatingly caring voice, “You know, Mr. Costin, you don't have to sit in the middle. You have what it takes to be up front. If you work harder than the others and do what I tell you to do, you can earn a seat at the front of the class.” Because she believed in me, I began to believe in myself in a way that I never had before in the classroom. Like most Air Force Academy cadets, I made pretty good grades along the way. But the turning point, the hinge, the pivot point in my life was Mrs. Newsome's direct motivation. Academically, she pushed me to be all I could be long before the U.S. Army came up with the idea.

As a hardheaded human, there were other occasions on which I would learn that lesson down the road. The next time was during my initial assignment as a Second Lieutenant. Looking back, I was at best a middling Lieutenant for most of the first couple of years. However, a crusty old Major named Milt Clary took me aside and blessed me with what my mom would have referred to as jerking a knot in me. But he did it without being a jerk. He did it by running with me and

mentoring me through the miles. The great thing is that he took the initiative. Like Mrs. Newsome, he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. “I know you have this fancy Air Force Academy education,” he said, “but this is the real world. Let me tell you how the real world works.” He, too, was a person of faith. He told me

that I really needed to perform better if I was to be the kind of professional that God intended me to be. It was a life changing revelation that redirected the course of my professional life because somebody who had nothing to gain by helping me—he wasn't even in my chain of command—cared enough about me, the squadron, and the Air Force to push me to perform up to my potential.

Decades later I retired as a Major General, but it would never have happened without Mrs. Newsome and Major Milt Clary believing in me and motivating me not to settle for mediocrity. Those two wake-up calls came at critical points in my development. Others could have allowed me to meander toward mediocrity, but these two chose to direct my steps in life-altering ways. I am who I am today in no small part because they did so.

I could go on and talk about mentors like Chaplain Charles Baldwin, a 1969 Academy graduate who flew rescue helicopters in Vietnam. When I got to the Academy in 1982 as a Doolie, he had fulfilled his Academy commitment, gotten out of the Air Force, gone to seminary, and come back as a chaplain. As it turns out, he was the answer to my mother's prayers. Beginning months before I turned 18, Chaplain Baldwin mentored me in several seasons of my Air Force life that didn't end until I was Air Force Chief of Chaplains, nearly a decade after he retired from the same position. In the Providence of God, he retired to Charleston long before Vickey and I were called to serve here, so he mentors me to this day. I say that to say this: I can point to people all along the way who told me

that leadership is mostly about building relationships and serving others. In many ways, investing in others the way that others have invested in you is what life and leadership are all about. I could go on and on, but standing on the shoulders of giants is how I got here.

Lindsay: Can you imagine a Mrs. Newsome in a classroom today and the fallout from her approach?

Costin: Not a chance, but, for whatever reason, her approach worked for me. Come to think of it, our baseball coach at that same school in the 1977-1978 time frame still used a wooden paddle on students who misbehaved, and his motivational methods didn't seem all that odd. People said that he was tough because he used a paddle, but nobody complained about it. No one ever said that we should get a lawyer and sue him. We just behaved better so we could avoid the paddle. As with Mrs. Newsome's methods, I certainly do not advocate the use of wooden paddles as behavior modification tools. But they worked for us. Looking back, maybe that's why the, shall we say, stringent disciplinary methods at USAFA in the early- to mid-1980s did not seem over the top. As far as I know, my mom never called my AOC to complain about them. She must have thought that whatever was happening to me could not have been worse than a wooden paddle in the hands of a junior high baseball coach.

Lindsay: I agree that those relationships shape us and can direct us. When you graduated from the Academy, you started as an analyst, but then when you were a CGO, you transitioned to the Chaplaincy. Can you talk a little bit about how that occurred?

Costin: I graduated as an operations research major, which is industrial engineering in non-military circles, and spent the first six years as an operations research analyst. For the first three years I evaluated precision guided air-to-ground weapon systems in an operational test and evaluation squadron. I spent the second three years conducting a variety of studies and analysis

projects on a major command headquarters staff. Along the way, I was called into the ministry. As a second lieutenant, about the same time Major Milt Clary was pointing me in the right direction on the running trails, I was reminded of something that I hadn't thought too much about since high school. When I was 15 or 16 I felt a calling to the ministry, but the one thing I knew was that I was scared to death to speak in public. In my teenage brain the calculus was pretty simple: Being a preacher means you stand in front of people and talk two or three times a week. Since I was deathly afraid of standing in front of people and talking in any setting for any reason, I was sure God had called the wrong guy. So God, as has happened on many other occasions in my hardheaded existence, said to me in so many words, "You want it your way, huh? Fine. I'll let you have it your way for a little while, but I'll be back when you've matured enough to understand that God's way will always be the best way for you."

Fast forward until I was a Second Lieutenant, which brought with it a renewed sense of calling to the ministry. But there had been relatively little progress in overcoming my fear of public speaking. By then, thankfully, the Academy had worked some of that fear out of me, but it wasn't something that I enjoyed doing. Rather, it was still something that I avoided every chance I got. At the time, I was doing a lot of running. Then as now, a lot of revelation happens to me while I am running. It always has and likely always will. To this day, people who work with me hate it when I run because they know that long runs generate lots of ideas. One day while running as a Second Lieutenant—I can remember this like it was yesterday—God reminded me of that old calling to be a pastor. For me, it was an immediate, no-questions-asked call to be an Air Force chaplain. There was never a smidgen of a doubt about the specificity of that call. I loved the Air Force, I loved Air Force people, and now there was this calling to be a chaplain.

So, I started going to school, which became a mad dash to complete the educational requirements to become a chaplain, a 96-semester-hour Master of Divinity degree. I first completed a Master of Arts degree in Counseling, which was closely followed by a Master of Arts in Religion degree. But these two degrees still meant I was short of the requirement. I had to find a seminary to cross the finish line. At the six-year point of my Air

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Force career, I said to God, “If you want Vickey and me to stay in the Air Force, then place us near a seminary for our third assignment. If you don’t want us to stay in the Air Force, then give us an assignment that is impossibly far away from a seminary. In that case, I will seven-day opt, leave the Air Force, go to seminary full time, and return as an Air Force chaplain sometime in the next five to 10 years.”

It’s a long, miraculous story, but when my next assignment RIP appeared, I was assigned to teach Air Force ROTC at Texas Christian University, which was less than 10 minutes from the denominational seminary that I wanted to attend all along. This was before the Internet existed, but the seminary was just beginning to cater to working adults. Thankfully, they had classes at seven in the morning. I would attend class in uniform four days a week at 7 A.M., and be at work by 8 A.M. I would sometimes take a lunch-hour class and then take classes at night. All the while, I wanted everyone to know that my number one priority was doing my Air Force job so well that my colleagues—and especially my students—would never be able to say that I shortchanged my day job for the next big thing. Which is why I am perhaps most thankful for being named the Air Force ROTC Company Grade Officer of the Year during that assignment. Awards come and go, but this particular

recognition was evidence that the immature Second Lieutenant of a few years prior had finally learned the lessons my dad, Mrs. Newsome, Major Milt Clary, and others had tried so hard to teach me along the way. You don’t get paid to prepare for the next thing. You get paid to do the current thing well.

By miraculous events, I was able to complete a competitive category transfer from the line of the Air Force into the chaplaincy without separating from the Air Force, which almost never happens. By the grace of God and a bunch of others, I was a line officer one day and a chaplain the next.

When I talk to young leaders about leadership, I tell them the number one rule of thumb is to bloom where you are planted. I wasn’t doing that early in my career, but Major Clary ran that out of me. The mistake I made as a Second Lieutenant, especially when I decided to become a chaplain, was preparing for the job I was going to have rather than doing the job I actually had. That is no way to live. Not only is it miserable living, it is selfish living. Your job is to bloom where you are planted by doing the best possible job you can do right where you are. If your character and competence are shaped as they should be, then good things are likely to happen.

One of the reasons that I wound up as Chief of Chaplains is due to the weirdness of my career path. People told me all along that there was no possible way I could ever be Chief of Chaplains since I had spent so much of my career in the line. They said I didn’t have enough time left to have the right jobs in the right order to finish at the right place. That didn’t bother me one bit because, after eight years of night school and getting ministry experience on the weekends, I just wanted to be a chaplain. It was everything I prayed it would be. I had no conscious thoughts of wanting to reach a certain rank, but I knew that blooming where the Air Force planted me could lead to other opportunities down the road. My job was to do my job; if good things happened,

great. In the end, the “fact” that I never had a chance to be the Chief of Chaplains was liberating. “If you are telling me that I can’t be the Chief of Chaplains, that works for me. I don’t have to do anything but be the best chaplain I can be for as long as they let me stay.” No pressure other than the pressure to serve Airmen and families as effectively as possible.

Fast forward to my 30th year on active duty, serving as the Pacific Air Forces Command Chaplain. If you think being a chaplain is the world’s coolest job, as I do, it doesn’t get much better than being a chaplain in Hawaii. And since I had known all along that I could never be the Chief of Chaplains, I had to pinch myself every day to make sure this “chaplain in Hawaii” thing was real. I just could not imagine a better career ending than that. Wrong again.

As you know, you have to be selected for Brigadier General before your 30-year shot clock expires. If you aren’t, you have to retire. As a result, I assumed I would be retiring at the 30-year point, just as I had been told. Although I wasn’t ready to go, I knew all along that was the deal. But due to a maximum-age rule that forced both the sitting Air Force Chief of Chaplains and Deputy Chief of Chaplains to retire in a four-month period, the Air Force had to fill both roles in one fell swoop. In my 30th year, with no expectations beyond retiring 30 years and three days after my USAFA graduation, I was selected not to be the Deputy Chief of Chaplains, but the Chief of Chaplains. For the first time since the first Chief of Chaplains was selected in 1949, an O-6 chaplain skipped Brigadier General and pinned on Major General. I had nothing to do with the circumstances of that promotion other than blooming every place I had been planted, having been freed from any careerist notion that there was anything I could ever do to position myself to become Chief of Chaplains. As they say, timing isn’t everything, but it sure is something. It was timing, it was Providence, and it was the result of a gift early on of people telling me that I could never be Chief of Chaplains, so don’t even try for it. Therefore, I

didn’t. I just tried to do the best job that I could every step of the way, and I wound up with the great privilege of being the Air Force Chief of Chaplains. I look back over that strange sequence of events, and even telling it now, it was like threading 14 different needles back to back to back. It was impossible, but God allowed it to happen. Once again, I was simply the beneficiary of God’s amazing grace.

Why did I retire? Because they made me retire. Having been a chaplain in the Air Force was incredible. Along the way, my wife, Vickey, and I would occasionally try to imagine what the next chapter might look like. How could you possibly duplicate what we found in the Air Force? Let me reiterate that what we found in the Air Force was a pure demonstration of both fundamentals of the simplest leadership model of all time: People and Mission. In the Air Force, you have people who are dedicated to serving their country at all costs and dedicated to a mission that is far larger than themselves. Airmen are selfless, ambitious, servant leaders who embody the Core Values of Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in all We Do. Those are the kind of people you get to be around all the time. When you are in the Air Force, you tend to take for granted that you get to be around such high-caliber people day in and day out, all around the world.

Then, there is a mission that is compelling beyond words, which for me was compounded by the exponential effect of not only being in the Air Force but being in the Air Force Chaplain Corps. When your job is to care for people who raise their right hands and demonstrate their willingness to put their lives on the line for citizens whose names they will never know, it just doesn’t get any better than that! Hanging out with those people is life-changing and life-affirming. I got to do that at home stations and deployed settings in every corner of the globe. How do you duplicate this brand of people so committed to a mission so compelling? This was the question Vickey and I asked ourselves over and over again. While not exactly the same, we found that higher

education was the best next place, a place where people are dedicated to serving people in pursuit of a cause far larger than themselves. It has allowed Vickey and me to do in the civilian sector what we had done together for so long as chaplain and wife. So, that is what we get to do here. We serve essentially the same demographic, because a large portion of the Air Force is in the 18- to 25-year-old range. We get to serve alongside colleagues who are called and committed to a cause greater than themselves. We get to do it in a place where we can see the fruits of our labors as lives are changed change. That is what we loved so much about the Air Force Chaplain Corps and what we love so much here.

Lindsay: You said that you were the beneficiary of all of those needles being threaded, but there was also a willingness to do the work and answer the call. Had you not done that, then I don't think those opportunities become possibilities. You get to appreciate the moment, versus just trying to think about what you needed to do next or where you needed to go next.

Costin: Exactly. If there is a corollary to "bloom where you are planted," it is "don't burn any bridges." Whenever I have the chance to speak to young Second Lieutenants and young chaplains, I say, in so many words, to "bloom where you are planted" and "don't burn any bridges." You must understand that in the Air Force, and this is likely true in most corporate settings as well, your career is built one day at a time. Practically, it is built based on what is written in your performance report. There are rough equivalents, of course, in the civilian sector. Your career is based on what you do day after day and week after week, but it's evaluated down the road based on what is recorded in your personnel file year after year. When it's time for your promotion board, people who have never seen you in the flesh will judge the fruits of your labor as recorded in a stack of government documents bearing your name. Blooming where you are planted is doing the kind of work that is worth recording. Part of not burning bridges is being diligent in the recording of that work in terms that a set

of highly qualified strangers (who know fluff when they see it) can use to decide which leaders get to lead at the next level.

Lindsay: I think people often struggle with that balance. People will sometimes sacrifice the moment in looking for what will be a potential down the road. It goes back to something that you mentioned earlier about the work being valuable and answering to someone higher than ourselves. I want to follow up on that a bit. When you were at the National Character and Leadership Symposium a few years ago, you spoke about the relationship between one's work and one's faith and belief systems. Often, I think we have difficulty having those discussions because we don't want to offend anyone or say the wrong thing. Do you mind talking a little bit about that, the importance of spirituality, and how that can shape us as leaders and as people? Not so much about a certain belief system that someone has, because as a chaplain you care for people with many different belief systems. But the importance of spirituality in our personal development and our development as leaders.

Costin: That very issue was foremost in my mind during my tenure as Chief of Chaplains. We had been through a period where it seemed to me that faith had become a four-letter word. But if you look at the data, roughly 85% of Americans claim a religion of some variety. So, whether you are referring to a particular religion or not, you can't escape the fact that people are, and always have been, spiritual beings. In many ways America is actually an outlier because of the way we tend to approach spirituality and religion. Most of the rest of the world doesn't have a concept of separating your faith from your person, from your work, or from your family. It isn't even a category they can understand. As Americans, we have this very special relationship between religion and who we are. From the very beginning of our country, as evidenced by its prominence in the First Amendment of our Constitution, religion and faith were considered crucial for most people. The First Amendment is first for a reason. In the same breath, of course, the Constitution

acknowledges the freedom to express your own faith as you see fit without being attacked or overly limited by the government. The First Amendment is amazing because it powerfully prohibits the government from picking sides where religion is concerned, while at the same time making it clear that religious liberty frees citizens to express their religion. In other words, it's not limited to the four walls of one's house of worship.

The significance of faith in the life of the warfighter is recognized in the Comprehensive Airman Fitness idea, but it's not always clearly understood. Comprehensive Airman Fitness (CAF) is an ancient idea in modern language because it speaks to the holistic nature of humankind. As philosophers and theologians have discussed from time immemorial, humans are comprised of physical, mental, social, and spiritual elements. But some of those elements are more easily discussed than others, while some are more awkwardly discussed. During my time as a chaplain, I found that commanders were very comfortable talking about the physical, because it's an essentially neutral concept that is easily understood and easily measured. You do these exercises and run this distance in this length of time, and a chart tells us if you pass or fail. That is easy. It isn't threatening to anybody. Commanders are a little less comfortable discussing the mental aspects of CAF, so it's often reduced to reading books, taking courses, seeing a counselor, or earning professional certifications as measures of merit. But at least there are metrics, things we can count, although we can debate how accurate those metrics are in measuring one's true mental health. It gets a little more challenging when you talk about the social element. But the fact is we were made for relationships, to be in community with others. When I talk about this concept, I talk about three things we were made to do. We were made to believe, belong, and become. Belonging captures the idea that we were made to live in community. The believing aspect really speaks to our faith, that there is a Being and/or a cause greater than ourselves. I come from a Christian background, but as a chaplain I spent a lot of my time

helping people from all kinds of faith groups and those who expressed no particular faith at all. But what all of them expressed was this longing for meaning and purpose, even if they expressed it using different terms than I used. I never shied away from my faith because it is such a game-changer for me, and I found that people were more than willing to talk about the meaning of life from my perspective as long as I allowed them to do the same from theirs. In this way, I encouraged individuals to get in touch with that very important aspect of their life, because to neglect it is to miss a key component of meaning, purpose, and resilience. Can you help someone whose religion is different than your own, or someone who claims no religion at all? Absolutely.

When I was the Chief of Chaplains, this being the topic de jour, we launched a program called Faith Works. The idea was to consider the thousands of scientific articles produced in the academic literature every year that show an unmistakable relationship between devout spirituality/religion and every aspect of one's health (physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual, etc.). There are direct correlations in the literature between devout faith (as opposed to nominal faith) and health. Even apart from the supernatural element recognized in most religions, there are countless statistically significant benefits in joining routinely with others of similar faith to dissect life's big questions, discuss life's common challenges, and find solutions to those challenges in ancient Scripture and active communities that have stood the test of time. The appeal of this approach in the military context, in which warfighters and families represent every imaginable perspective, is that this reality is not limited to a particular religion or faith tradition. The intent of the Faith Works campaign, simply put, was to demonstrate that there is great value in working one's faith because your faith can support you in becoming a better warfighter, a healthier person in every way, and a more resilient human—everything commanders want for their Airmen. Even for those who don't profess a particular religion or don't see value in religion at all, I would encourage them to examine the academic literature because there are lessons to be learned that can help address

how to find meaning in life, belong to a community with whom you can build relationships, and become the kind of person you want to be.

For example, something as simple as riding motorcycles with a group of like-minded friends can keep you in the orbit of others who might love their work but know that there is more to life than going to work. If you like riding motorcycles and find that your motorcycle group is the place where you feel you belong, take advantage of every opportunity to hang out there.

Believing and Belonging leads to the third B, Becoming: You becoming the person that you were meant to be. To complete this line of thought, I often encourage people to read a 28 October 2016 USA Today editorial written by Tyler VanderWeele and John Siniff. This brief editorial is a good introduction to the Faith Works concept, in which the authors capture their evidence-based thesis in the editorial's simple title: Religion may be a miracle drug. Tyler VanderWeele is a public health professor at Harvard, and he spoke at one of our annual Air Force Chaplain Corps conference while I was Chief of Chaplains. His talk, like his editorial, referenced in clear terms some of the countless benefits that accrue to people who are devout in their faith. The operative word here is devout, which is in sharp contrast to those who are people of faith in name only. From a public health perspective, VanderWeele observes that the scientific evidence is overwhelming, in that even the most casual observer would have to conclude that the effects of devout religion on health in all its aspects is the same as if a miracle drug had been injected into the population. If you think about it, this makes perfect sense. If you are a person who takes your family at least once a week to a building where other people have brought their families and who share your faith, and you sit around and talk about life's big questions and how that relates to your faith, and then raise your family according to those principles, and you keep coming back week after week, the data clearly indicate that those people will have better relationships,

better resilience, and better physical health, among other benefits too numerous to mention here. The great thing is that this is not new stuff. My point to commanders was simply this: Why would we withhold from Airmen that which is so demonstrably good for them?

Lindsay: There does seem to be a hesitancy of people to share about their belief systems. But it really goes back to the connectedness to those around us and a cause higher than ourselves.

Costin: It does. For example, if I were to go to a commander and say, "I see that your squadron is not doing very well on the run portion of the fitness test. Here is what I am going to do. I am going to coach all of your members, and I promise you that based on this schedule of workouts that I am going to lead, and understanding that there are people with different metabolisms and body types and motivations, I promise you if you follow this plan of development, everyone in your squadron will improve their run times. What do you think about that?" The commander would likely say, "When do we start?" I could also do the same thing for mental fitness by developing a plan that would all but

I would remind commanders that faith is not a four-letter word. Americans do it better than anyone because we are a heterogeneous society that revels in the freedom of religion.

guarantee broad-scale improvement. I could do the same thing for social development and spiritual development. I would base it on the fact that people are different. People have different faith groups, and some have no specified religion at all, but if we understand what faith refers to and develop a plan for each individual based on evidence-based practices that can help your people be more resilient, develop better relationships, and be better warfighters, would you be interested?

I would say to commanders that I am aware that you are a little bit scared of this, but let me ask you this question once again: “Why would you withhold from your Airmen that which is so demonstrably good for them?” You don’t hold back when it comes to physical fitness. You don’t hold back when it comes to mental fitness. You don’t do it when it comes to social. So, why is there this fear when it comes to helping Airmen and their families experience the evidence-based benefits of faith if they choose to do so for their own good? I would remind commanders that faith is not a four-letter word. Americans do it better than anyone because we are a heterogeneous society that revels in the freedom of religion. We understand pluralism like no other culture. I can believe what I want to believe, and you can disagree with every fiber of your being, but we can still work on a jet together. We can have a conversation, hang out together, and go to lunch together. Things went sideways somewhere along the way because we became afraid to even talk about faith. You cannot talk someone into believing something that they don’t believe, so genuine proselytism is a non-starter from the get-go. But the evidence could not be clearer that the expression of religion and the practice of faith that is consistent with an individual’s own belief system is critical to holistic health. This is precisely why leaders at all levels should not be scared to talk about every element of health in ways that move the needle in Comprehensive Airmen Fitness.

Lindsay: I think that approach is important because everyone has a belief system about how we make sense of the world around us. Importantly, such an approach incorporates everyone, which is vital. It doesn’t keep people out of the conversation because they do or do not believe a certain thing. For example, most of us had a calling to serve and that calling can be influenced by many different things.

Costin: Exactly. In the military, that calling for some is patriotism. The sense of patriotism gives them a purpose that is higher than themselves. In fact, almost

everyone who has ever worn the uniform can understand the pull of patriotism. But for most, in my experience, it doesn’t stop there. I found as a chaplain that young Airmen would come to me for many different reasons. Sometimes it was by their choice, sometimes it wasn’t, at least not completely. For those with whom I met, not all had a particular faith, but they all had a belief system of some sort. They had a belief system they constructed that included all kinds of things that were important to them. It comes back to believing, belonging, and becoming. As an example, when the First Sergeant would send someone to talk to me, they were really saying that this person is having some belonging challenges and these belonging challenges are getting in the way of them becoming who we need them to be. In almost every case, it became two adults talking about life’s most important things from different perspectives in order to help understand each other so that we could move forward. My point is that anyone can have those conversations with those in their circle of influence, including commanders and supervisors who should understand the value of faith to others even if they adhere to no particular faith tradition themselves.

Lindsay: Are there any closing thoughts you would like to share about leadership and character?

Costin: When I talk about leadership, there are really three elements that are primary. The first of those is character. Who are you? What do you value? It’s the old saying that character is who you are when no one is looking. Who are you when you are not trying to impress anybody? It’s who you really are, not who you pretend to be. You can work on your character in all kinds of ways.

The second element is competence. How good are you at your job or your technical skill? If you are a person of strong character but you are terrible at your job, you likely aren’t a good follower and won’t be respected by others. It will be a challenge for you to be a good leader because people aren’t going to respect you in the way

that you should be respected.

So, character first, competence second, and then chemistry. How well do you fit in this organization? As you know, these things are so tied together. If you have strong character, you will do everything that you can to get better and more competent at your job. I have always appreciated Jim Collins and his book *Good to Great*, the central theme of which is level five leadership and its grounding in humility. If you were to ask the average group of people to name the number one leadership quality, few people would start with humility. But companies that moved from good to great in Collins' research were led by humble leaders. Part of being a leader and a team player is the ability to say that I am here to serve others, not require others to serve me. It isn't about me, and it never really was.

When I talk about leadership, I typically say that I have been a student of leadership for a long time because I have always wanted to understand it better so I could do it better. That is why I earned a PhD. in organizational leadership. What I have discovered after a PhD. in leadership, a lifetime of studying it, doing it in a number of different places, reading hundreds of articles and books on leadership, and writing thousands of pages on the topic, is that character, competence, and chemistry are the essence of effective leadership. In one sense leadership is leadership, and the principles that work in one organization will work in another if applied appropriately in context. Along those lines, all leadership books worth reading say exactly the same thing, though they may say it a little differently or use more words to say it. At the end of the day, however, it all comes down to those three fundamentals.

My own philosophy of leadership is based on a Biblical story called *The Parable of the Talents*, from which I derive seven principles that form the not-so-creative acrostic L.E.A.D.E.R.S.:

- The Lordship Principle: Your job as a leader is not to lead for your own good, but for the good of somebody or something higher than yourself. For

me, that Someone is the Lord.

- The Environment Principle: The leader's job is to be a keeper of the organization's culture, creating the conditions for every team member to flourish.
- The Accountability Principle: There will always be an accounting, and part of good leadership is letting people know up front what the standards are and then holding them to that standard.
- The Development Principle: My job as a leader is to develop those around me so that they can become better leaders themselves. A rising tide lifts all boats.
- The Execution Principle: Leaders must create systems in the organization that rivets our focus on getting things done.
- The Results Principle: Your title may be impressive, but you are evaluated on results. It doesn't matter where you come from, what your background is, or how successful you were in your last job. What matters is what you have done for the organization lately.
- The Shepherd Principle: As leaders, we are to be a shepherd of the flock that has been entrusted to our care. We need to care for the people and the mission we have been given, knowing that we answer to someone higher than ourselves.

Lindsay: There is a tie in to what you talked about before between character, competence, and chemistry with believing, becoming, and belonging. Believing is the character part. What do you believe in and how does that guide you? Competence is the idea of becoming. Who do I need to be and how good am I? Chemistry ties into belonging in terms of how I fit and make those connections in the organization. If you overlay the framework that you just talked about, that is the doing of it. That is how you get it done and enact your leadership. Thank you for sharing that.