

2000

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Recommended Citation

Thurston, Nancy S., "Reflections on Mentoring" (2000). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 120.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/120

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Reflections On Mentoring

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Reading Julie's article was a wonderful opportunity for me to sit back and reflect on the evolution of a cherished professional and personal relationship. I still recall being on the admissions committee at Fuller Seminary that considered Julie's application to the psychology doctoral program. I now look back on those early days of getting established at Fuller as my "tired years" (A few years later, my first baby was born, while tenure review loomed ever closer. I look back on those years as my "very tired years"). I state this in an article on mentoring because in those early years at Fuller, I dare say I was not a particularly fine mentor. I allowed myself to be consumed by what I thought were tasks of survival in academia: obsessive over-preparation of lectures, frantic bursts of empirical research, and seemingly endless committee service—always gearing myself at some level to impress the administration that I was worthy of tenure. In many ways those were exhilarating times for me as well: presenting papers in exotic locations like the Bahamas and Sweden, getting my first articles published, and teaching at the institution of my dreams. That exhilaration, however, came at a price—both for me and for those students whom I mentored.

Mentoring as "Hospitality"

Back in 1985, I had a wonderful opportunity to co-lead a Wilderness Adventures backpacking expedition with a church youth group. We got a late start on our first day on the trail, and we would only reach our campsite on Lake Michigan before nightfall if we didn't stop for breaks. I still remember my co-leader Kent asking me, "So, Nance, do we keep our plans to have the youth group stop mid-day for devotions and contemplative journaling? Or do we skip it and push on?" I replied, "Let's push on." Ironically, we didn't reach camp before nightfall, even with no breaks. But worse, my hasty decision seemed to set a pressured, harried tone to our trip. The very purpose of reflection and personal growth for the kids seemed to get lost in the scramble to reach our daily hiking goals. Something literally got "off-track" for our Wilderness Adventures trip.

Sadly, I think that I repeated that mistake in my early years of teaching and mentoring students at Fuller. I typically worked in my office until 7:00 or 8:00 each night, but paradoxically I was chronically too busy to be available to my students. That unavailability was perhaps encapsulated by how often I chose to keep my office door closed, so I could press on at my work without interruption. Oh, I had short bursts of "mentoring moments" when I'd come up for air and visit an advisee in the hospital, or host my fledgling shame research team for retreats at my home. But in the larger picture, that was precisely what was missing in my overall mentoring of students: hospitality. Not necessarily hospitality in just hosting students at my home, but in a deeper sense.

Henri Nouwen (1996) wrote of the ministry of hospitality as coming out of an inner at-homeness that we cultivate through God's transforming presence in our

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hearts. Such hospitality means being relationally available to others, ready to “receive” them, in every sense of the word. For me it involves an empathic attunement that is steadily aware of my advisees, even during brief encounters in the halls where I work. Just last week I saw an advisee in the hall, and vaguely sensed that something might be troubling her. When I went back to my office a few moments later, I deliberately kept my door open as I worked, just in case she might stop by. Indeed she did, and after confiding in me what was upsetting her, she added that she was thankful that I had had my door open and appeared available to her. Indeed, she added that had my door been closed, she would not have knocked on it.

I was fortunate to have had a mentor during my graduate training (Don Beere) who modeled this sort of hospitality. Don had excellent interpersonal boundaries and took ample time for self care, which I think helped him to seem so emotionally available and so safe for me to interact with. I smile as I think back to how he used to unplug his phone and grin at me as he deliberately draped the unplugged cord over his desk chair each week as we’d begin our supervision meetings. He sensed (correctly) how much his undivided attention meant to me, and how it would (and did) facilitate my trust in really “going deep” with him as we reflected together on my clients. I used to leave those sessions feeling relationally nourished, as if I’d taken a deep, satisfying drink from a clear pool of water. Now, all these years later, as I prepare to receive students in my office for supervision (or other meetings), I keep a pretty box filled with herbal teas on hand, along with some teacups. As I offer my tired, Oregon-rain-chilled students a steaming cup of tea, I often pray a brief, silent prayer that God would help me to “receive” these students in a way that they could leave feeling the same sort of relational nourishment and hospitality that I used to feel years back in meetings with Don.

It has been said that the opposite of a profound truth is often another profound truth. Having just discussed the benefits of hospitality and availability to students, I must add that I only have the energy to do this when I am balancing it with ample times of solitude and personal renewal. I strive to model for my students an ongoing creative tension between availability to them and good boundaries of self-replenishing absence.

“Terrycloth Monkey” Mentoring

In a recent conversation with Alvin Dueck on mentoring, he reflected that we ask our psychology doctoral students to do a good deal of deconstructing their paradigms in the service of personal growth. He added that in order for that to be a safe experience for these students, they need a mentor who is more like Harry Harlow’s terrycloth monkeys than wire monkeys (personal communication, March 15, 2000). His reference to Harlow’s classic experiment on attachment (Harlow, Harlow, & Suomi, 1971) struck a deep cord in me. The wire monkeys functionally produced their product (milk), but they did not nourish the young monkeys in the deeper, relational ways that they needed. In their choice to cling to the terrycloth monkeys in times of stress, I find a metaphor for how my advisees want an attachment with me that goes beyond that which I functionally produce.

“Organic” Mentoring

In my development as a mentor, a pivotal moment came for me as I attended a workshop by Parker Palmer and read his book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring*

the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life (1998). Palmer underscored how much of our behavior as teachers and mentors insidiously stems from fear. This includes fear of having students expose what we don't know (which shakes our perfectionistic defenses), to fear that we won't get the next promotion (which shakes our need for academic survival). He suggested that such fear is contagious, and that it can escalate similar fears that our students also have. Palmer believed that an antidote to such performance-related fears is to have the teacher ignite in students (as well as themselves) a genuine, passionate curiosity about the subject at hand. Instead of rote learning about disconnected bits of information, he advocates a teaching style that I would best describe as "organic." It involves more dynamic experiences like in-vivo cases that make the subject come alive for the student. Then, instead of students vaguely resenting the anxiety-provoking rote memory for exams, they are intrinsically motivated to take on more creative work in investigating the subject.

Encountering Palmer's ideas has palpably changed my approach to mentoring. In the classroom, I have, to some extent, thrown away the script. I do make photocopies of my extensive sets of lecture notes (written in my earlier 'obsessively over-prepared' days) and give them to those students who want them. However, I only use those notes now to provide a skeleton on which to frame more real-life examples of the subject at hand. For instance, in my Projective Assessment class, I recently gave my students a mystery Rorschach case and a mystery TAT case. I asked them to interpret the cases and then take a stab at identifying whose protocols they were. The following week in class, the students were greatly empowered to discover that nearly 25% of them had correctly guessed that the Rorschach was that of Sirhan Sirhan (assassin of Robert Kennedy), and that the TAT was that of a Nazi war criminal. After they had begun this course with varying degrees of skepticism and resistance over mastering the cumbersome Rorschach, now these students drop by my office, excitedly sharing with me their most recent fascinating Rorschach protocols. With my competency-based grading system for the course (permitting re-writes of reports before a grade is given for the best version), students' preoccupation with grades in this course has given way to intrinsic, energizing joy in mastering this complex and powerful instrument.

I see a similar initially fear-based mindset in my students over the daunting task of writing their doctoral dissertations. Using an organic approach to mentoring, I am intentional in helping advisees to shift away from a mindset of this task as one to dread. Occasionally, a student will approach me and ask me if I would advise them to use a data set that is already gathered to do an expedient dissertation. I always ask such a student, "Is this a topic that you passionately care about? Are you intensely curious about it? If not, don't waste your precious life energy on it. Life's too short to do that." However, I balance this conviction with the belief that even deeply fascinating dissertation topics for students can turn toxic if not restrained in scope. For these students, I offer the mantra, "The best dissertation is a done dissertation. You'll have the rest of your career to make your contribution to the field—as long as you can wrap up your dissertation first to enable you to launch that career."

The ideas that I just mentioned involve responding to different students in varying ways. This is yet another aspect of what 'organic' mentoring means for me. It requires an appreciation on my part of the unique needs/strengths/growing edges of each of my students. For example, 'Jane' wants to fly solo in her dissertation, only checking in with me for brief, solution-focused updates about her project. She

has the intellectual brilliance and overall competence to create an outstanding product. 'Mary,' on the other hand, while equally as bright, feels cautious and tentative about trusting what she knows to apply it to her dissertation. She seems to blossom more as an emerging researcher in the security of supportive team meetings and in more process-oriented contacts with me. It would be a mistake for me to try to mentor both students in the same way. What Mary would gladly receive as supportive, hovering, mentoring from me would be experienced as irritatingly confining and smothering for Jane. Conversely what Jane would gladly receive as my respect for her autonomy would be experienced as disappointingly unsupportive or even abandoning to Mary.

“Candy Store” Mentoring

For my advisees who do dissertations on shame, I keep a library of books on shame handy in my office. I have also collected articles, comic strips, videos, and other multi-media resources on shame. I allow students to sign out any of these materials as a way to cultivate enthusiasm about shame research. I like to think of my office as something like an academic candy store, where I hand out liberal 'free samples' in hopes of whetting their intellectual appetites for more. I have compiled similar sets of books and resources for those students whom I mentor in the area of psychological assessment. Yes, these students could sign out such materials at the university's library, or go and purchase them. However, I've noticed that students can lose precious momentum on their projects as they dissipate their energy tracking down these resources. Instead, I try to keep an ongoing pulse on my students' emerging needs and interests, and fuel them with resources that will hopefully help them stay focused and even buoyant in working on their projects.

Lifespan Mentoring: The “Family Doctor” Model

I grew up in a town where our family doctor oversaw our family's health for several decades. Through births, illnesses, and deaths, he was a steady, helpful presence in our lives (and, yes, he made house calls). As a psychology mentor all these years later, I find myself wishing that I could be more like that family doctor. My temptation is to think of mentoring as something that stops when my students graduate. However, it is precisely then that mentoring is perhaps most needed. Navigating the passages of post-doctoral clinical hours, sitting for state licensing exams, and landing a job to pay off student loans can prove as daunting as any of the passages faced in graduate school. The more that I grasp how important mentoring is post-graduation, the more I am currently striving to be intentional to remain available as a colleague/mentor to my graduates. A first step for me was to track down current addresses of my grads, and send them Christmas cards. I try to drop some of them a note or article or e-mail as they come to mind, and to celebrate their professional passages with them. I deeply respect those of my faculty colleagues who regularly correspond with their grads, offering them the ongoing touchstone of a family doctor style mentor.

Mentoring as Creating Opportunities

Some of my most memorable mentoring experiences have been presenting papers at professional conferences with my students. I have relished watching them transform from students to professionals in such moments. It reinforces to me how helpful it can be to look for ways to include my students in my ongoing profes-

sional work. For me this has included co-authoring articles, sponsoring their membership in professional societies, and inviting them to present something at one of the APA convention division hospitality suite programs which I chaired for several years. Most recently, it has meant grooming advisees on my shame research team to become dissertation committee members on this team after they graduate. I am immensely pleased to have had Dr. Julie Cradock, former advisee and now colleague, fly up to Oregon a few weeks ago to serve as a committee member on three of my current advisees' dissertations on shame. I especially loved giving these three students a palpable message that when they graduate, they, too, will be able to step up to bat and serve on dissertation committees. For Julie and me, having me create opportunities for her initially involved my decision to ask her to be a co-author on my projective test of shame. Now, it is clearly "our" test of shame. I am deeply grateful for Julie's contribution to the test, which is an exponentially better project than it would have been if either of us had attempted to produce it alone. As a mentor, it is the ultimate joy for me to find both a colleague and friend in Julie, as we encourage and help each other toward our ongoing professional goals.

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Author

Nancy Stiehler Thurston recently joined the faculty of George Fox University as an associate professor of psychology, after nine years on the faculty of the Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary. Her scholarly interests include shame, psychological assessment, personality characteristics across church denominations, and integrative teaching/mentoring.