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My Life as Co-Author: Reflections on Mentoring

*Mark R. McMinn
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This is one of three journal articles I have authored alone since 1991. During the same time span I have co-authored 26 journal articles for peer-reviewed journals with a total of 40 different students. In one sense, these numbers mean very little—many psychologists are far more prolific than I, and some have provided much more direction and positive influence through one or two strategic articles. But in another sense these numbers reflect my life calling as a mentor. The tools of my mentoring trade include research, professional presentations at national meetings, and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, though the product cannot be measured by lines on a vita—it has more to do with the lives and stories of those with whom I am privileged to work.

Some of my students refer to me as the “king of disclaimers,” so I will begin with one more. Joint research provides one means for mentoring, but there are other ways—probably better ways—to mentor. My sociologist spouse, Lisa McMinn, is also on the faculty at Wheaton College and is also committed to mentoring. She builds her mentoring around lattes at the coffee shop, building trust through empathy and availability, meaningful conversations in her office, contemplating the big questions of life inside and outside the classroom, and so on. When her students graduate she gets amazing words, cards, and letters of affirmation about how she has touched their lives. There are many paths to effective mentoring—research is only one way.

I offer three categories to contain some reflections about mentoring: work as a means and an end, mentoring and friendship, and accessibility and exclusivity. Each of these categories carries an implicit tension or paradox that deserves consideration.

Work as a Means and an End

Katheryn Rhoads Meek wrote a generous description of me as mentor for this issue, and I had the privilege of reading her article before crafting these words. Her entire description of our relationship was gratifying, but one of the sentences that inspired me most came near the end of her article: “I always sensed from Mark that he had nothing to prove, that he did what he did because he loved the work” (Meek, 2000, p. 323). Katheryn knows me well. I love my work as a researcher, teacher, and scholar. Sometimes I feel astonished that I am paid for doing what I love, though I try to keep this information away from the senior administrators who establish my salary level each year.

Martin Katahn, my advisor and mentor in graduate school, once said to me, “We all need challenges to keep life interesting, and our work keeps us challenged.” Katahn’s simple words freed me to see work as good. God ordained work before

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the Fall (Gen. 1:26-28). Work has value apart from its rewards—it is not merely a means to the ends so inanely glamorized in our capitalist societies. Indeed, finding intrinsic value and goodness in our work may be a prerequisite to effective mentoring in the workplace.

Yet there are tensions here, because work also reflects the brokenness of a fallen world (Gen. 3:17-19). Mentoring requires balance, and loving one's work sometimes draws one away from a point of balance in life. It was evident in reading Katheryn's article that she observed my commitment to family and spiritual growth, though these were rarely the direct content of our conversations. As in all forms of teaching and learning, mentoring includes observational learning. If my love of work becomes obsessive, then my ability to mentor is compromised because I model imbalance.

It is tempting for scholars who love their work to build empires—to work toward being the most published, most renowned, or most respected. These motives may incline us to trample and exploit our students, seeing them for what talents they can offer us. When empire-building is the goal, students are merely resources. This stands in stark contrast to the servant leadership modeled by Jesus (see John 13:12-17). When effective mentoring is the goal, students are humanized and valued.

Thus, I attempt to see my work as both a means and an end. Research is an end in itself. It has value because God made work to be good, and charged humankind to understand creation. The products of this work—articles, lectures, books, professional presentations—have value. But work is also a means for effective mentoring. It takes longer to co-author a research paper with students than to write it myself, but in the process I have invested in a relationship and in the next generation of psychologists. The products of this work are found not only in print, but also in the priorities and character qualities of tomorrow's leaders.

Mentoring and Friendship

We psychologists place a great deal of emphasis on boundaries and avoiding multiple relationships. We do this to keep from exploiting people. Our cautions about multiple role relationships are wise and appropriate for most of our professional work, but I have found it challenging to do good mentoring without venturing into some multiple roles. With some uncertainty and a good deal of trepidation, I have tentatively concluded that effective mentoring is often enhanced by a relationship with multiple facets. Henri J. M. Nouwen, a sort of spiritual mentor for me (through his writings—I never had opportunity to meet him), writes: "If there is any area that needs a new spirit, a redemptive and liberating spirituality, it is the area of education" (Nouwen, 1975/1996, p. 229). Nouwen believed that the relationship between student and teacher should be "seen as a model for a creative interchange between people" (p. 229). This sort of creative interchange sometimes calls us outside the classroom walls.

In Katheryn's article, she writes, "Mark modeled 'realness' to me in many different arenas" (Meek, 2000, p. 321). She describes the various intersections of our two families—my daughter babysitting for her, getting together for dinner with our spouses on one occasion, my incompetence as an electrical consultant, and so on. She could have also disclosed that we exchanged small Christmas presents on occasion (e.g., homemade cookies, books), that her oldest daughter sometimes watched VeggieTales in my faculty office while Katheryn and I were meeting, and

that I now play basketball with her husband twice a week. These are examples of creative interchanges that have resulted in what Nouwen would call a hospitable relationship. Are Katheryn and I friends? In a cautious sort of way, I think the answer is yes. A cautious friendship did not hinder the mentoring relationship, and in fact her article suggests that the multifaceted nature of our relationship actually enhanced mentoring by increasing authenticity.

This question of multiple roles in mentoring is not limited to my relationship with Katheryn—it is one I confront continually in my work. I recently spent nine days in Ukraine with a student I mentor. He and I flew together, shared a room, ate meals together, taught together at two Ukrainian seminaries, toured the markets together, got lost after dark together in a city where we could neither read the street signs nor speak the language. My wife and I spent 7 days in Korea with three students, again combining friendly sorts of activities with professional activities. I walked the freedom trail with several students at a recent American Psychological Association (APA) convention in Boston. Students with whom I work closely sometimes stop by my office just to talk, and often these conversations are not directly related to our academic work. Any of these activities could add risk for mentoring to devolve into an exploitative multiple role relationship, but if done with beneficence they also have the potential to enhance a mentoring relationship. I am opting to persist, enduring the tension these multiple roles create, because I believe the best mentoring calls us into authentic relationships where we can know and be known.

Being the “king of disclaimers,” I hasten to add that this should not be used to justify sloppy or imprudent relationships that neglect the power differential inherent in mentoring relationships. Any professional relationship that exploits the other is unethical (APA, 1992). Despite the multiple facets of our mentoring relationship, I have heard Katheryn describe me as one who is cautious about boundaries, and I found her to be cautious also. Looking for creative and flexible methods of mentoring does not justify activities that introduce risk of exploitation. I find it helpful to meet regularly with a peer to discuss (among other things) the nature of my mentoring relationships with students. This helps keep me accountable to standards of integrity, fairness, and beneficence, and thereby reduces the likelihood of unintentionally harming students.

Accessibility and Exclusivity

Mentoring requires accessibility, and accessibility requires vast amounts of time. This is not a chore—it is the greatest privilege I have as an educator to enter into the lives of students in order to help them articulate and achieve their professional goals. My pattern has been to mentor students who show commitments in research and practice areas consistent with my professional and scholarly interests. We plan and conduct research together, present our findings at professional meetings, publish in academic journals, and so on. In any given academic year, I typically work closely with two senior graduate assistants and also try to bring in several other students to participate in various research projects. Most years I hold weekly or bi-weekly research group meetings that are open to all undergraduate and graduate students. I find myself doing more mentoring than classroom teaching these days. It requires a great deal of time.

The effective mentor is the accessible mentor, but this creates a tension because time is a limited resource, and those of us who mentor do not have enough time to effectively mentor all those who express an interest. We have to limit our availabili-

ty in some way—should we set strict limits on the amount of time we spend with any one student, or should we set strict limits on the numbers of students we mentor? I have tended to limit the number of students I mentor, which means that I deliberately include some students in my mentoring work and exclude others. It sounds harsh to put this into words, but it accurately describes the most persistent tension I face as a mentor—to be accessible to one student means that I am being somewhat exclusive toward another. I cannot resolve this tension, but only acknowledge my uneasiness with it.

Conclusion

As a new assistant professor facing my first class, I pondered the strange irony that the many years of education required to become a college teacher included virtually nothing about effective teaching. Teaching now seems comfortable after 16 years of facing crowded classrooms, but careers evolve and priorities sharpen and so I find myself mentoring more than teaching in the classroom. How much formal education have I had in mentoring? The same as I have in effective teaching—none. It feels vaguely familiar to that first day of class as an assistant professor in 1984.

We need to be thinking, talking, and writing about teaching and mentoring, and so I commend W. Brad Johnson and others involved with the special issue of *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* for their insight and initiative. Perhaps some of Katheryn Meek's observations about her experience and some of my descriptions of the rewards and tensions I face as a mentor will make a small contribution to an ongoing dialog about effective mentoring.

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