Reflections on Mentoring

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There were two small trees in the garden behind my library. I pass between them every day on my way to the cafeteria. One April I noticed that the one on my left had no sign of pale green leaves like its neighbor’s across the path. We had a severe drought that previous summer in Nashville and I’m afraid it, like many other trees in our area, didn’t survive. So, of course, I wondered why the tree on my right had “weathered the weather.”

Then I noticed that the big tree on that right side of the garden is just far enough away to give the little tree a bit of shade in the hottest part of the day.

It doesn’t crowd the little tree. It doesn’t keep it from growing in its little spot. But that tall tree offered just enough shade, just enough protection, to keep the little tree from having a heat stroke in the weeks of 100 degree temperatures with no rain.

Now, isn’t that a great mentoring story?

Here are some of the “big trees” who “shaded” me.

First, there was Judy Shrewsbury (now Judy Altis). When I was a student clerk in the library of Free Will Baptist Bible College, she recognized that I fell in love with library work. As my first librarian friend, she let me see behind the scenes. She took me with her to her grad school class on microfilm one night when she was completing her MLS degree. She allowed me to work on projects and employed me over the summer and at nights. She let me wade in the water to determine if this was a career I could survive. My dear friend and Sunday School teacher tried her best to discourage me from library work; I’m sure she thought I was too loud for it. But Judy’s insights and openness about her work provided me a model and a mentor that really were pointers to the Lord’s will for me.

Then there was Lorene Francen. Now, I never worked even one day with Lorene. I had graduated, married, and begun a family before she came to the college where I now work, following Judy. But I talked with her from time to time (she always whispered…) and my husband worked with her. When she heard of Peabody/Vanderbilt’s great fellowships in their library school program, she thought of me and called me. She encouraged me to apply, sent information home with my husband, and followed my library school work with interest. I didn’t get the big fellowship, but I did get a good internship and enjoyed my work at Peabody.

The next thing Lorene did for me was to leave. She stepped out of the job at Free Will Baptist Bible College in June before my husband returned there to teach in August, leaving a place for me. I think that her timing was not a coincidence. I know she had other reasons to go – elderly parents who needed more care, a distant drive – but I think she would have stayed if I hadn’t been coming and needing a job.

While in Library School, I met other mentors – maybe a whole family of mentors. I did my internship at Owen Graduate School of Management of Vanderbilt University. This was an endowed library. Truthfully, its collection was underwritten each year by a million dollar endowment. So, when Vanderbilt divided its library budget each year between the nine libraries on campus, the Management library could spend all of its money on staff. So there were five librarians plus support personnel working there. They supported a subscription Business Information Service in addition to their graduate MBA degrees. They worked me hard. But they modeled excellent service to their clients and students. Keep in mind that this was 1986, pre-internet days. But all of those librarians were searching databases, and daily reading the Wall Street Journal, and talking with each other about search strategies.
They were doing Bibliographic Instruction sessions for the classes in the grad school and for business clients. They fed me my first bagels and first Chinese food. Sylvia and William instructed me and assigned me and monitored my work. They were all constructive in their criticism and generous in their praise. They advised me about career choices and followed me when I graduated. I could not have asked for a better internship or better mentors to prepare me for the work ahead of me. Others like Fay Towell gave me chances, gave advice, encouraged my work, and demanded my best. I am the sum of their investments.

Now, the pendulum has swung back the other way. I’ve tried to count the kids who fell in love with library work that have worked with me. I know Barbara has been the librarian at a small Bible college. Lesa is a high school librarian in Alabama. Stacey is an elementary librarian in Joelton, Tennessee. Misty J. is a high school librarian here in Nashville. Misty R. finished her MLS this past summer. And Lance Williams, my friend and co-worker, moved from student clerk to library manager last year. When you’re on this side of the clock, when the mentored becomes the mentor, you do several things.

First, you cast the vision. You help people see the possibilities and understand what the job is about. Really, we don’t just stamp books. And we didn’t choose this profession because we like to read. You tell the story like it is so kids know what and how and why before they sign up.

Secondly, you let them get their feet wet. You introduce them to the tasks that occupy your time, consult them for their opinions, assign them parts of your job, and let them make their own mistakes. You are a parent, a cheerleader, a consultant, a corrector, a protector. Sometimes you clean up after them and sometimes you hand them the broom.

Thirdly, you push doors open for them. Sometimes when you point to doors, they open – like at supermarkets when you step on the magic mat and the door automatically opens – but most of the time you have to push the door, make the way, even shove on through. Opportunity and accountability will make a big difference in the success of those you mentor.

Then, you follow. You follow their schooling, their job placement. You follow their promotions, their problems, their personal lives. And at some point, you follow them. You let them take the reins, you let them take the lead, and you become the follower into the next phase of this profession, knowing that you have done your job well. You have offered the seed and the shade until their roots could grow deeper and their trunks could grow stronger and their branches could reach further and that forest of the next generation of trees could take over. And you are proud.