

# When Mentors Pass

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**Abstract:** The process referred to as mentoring and mentorship is an important facet of the academic and practice world. Many definitions of mentoring abound, but in general most refer to an older and more experienced mentor who helps shape and guide the career of a younger and less experienced individual known as the mentee. Developmental models of mentorship describe a process that evolves from the formative stages of the relationship to one characterized by collegiality. Missing from these models is a final stage - when mentors pass. This narrative discusses the evolution of mentoring relationships over time, and the impact and reaction to this loss of mentors.

**Keywords:** Mentoring, mentee, higher education.

Resting in a far corner of my desk drawer sit two well-frayed spiral bound books that I have owned for over a quarter-century. In the electronic age these are now relics from another time. The cover proclaims that these are grade books, and about once a year I pull them out and reminisce. In my first days as a college professor I would painstakingly copy all the student's names in the far left column, and then record the score for each assignment over the course of the semester. For all teachers, at all levels, this was once standard fare.

A wide range of memories are provoked by simply scanning them. Some students' names and faces have faded in the background; others produce the fondest of memories, and frankly a few produce slightly unpleasant recollections. Sometimes it is truly hard to grasp how much time has passed since my first full year as a teacher. In reality some students from my early days in the classroom are now deep into their careers with many having watched their own children graduate from college.

There is a certain cadence to life in the academy, with time marked by passing semesters and each new class outline boldly proclaims that a new year has arrived. When I look back I often think about the process of getting here and those days when actually landing a job at a university seemed like a distant and almost impossible dream. Then there are the other landmarks that go with academic life such as the first published articles, the promotion and tenure process, and changing jobs. I find that as I age and ponder the end of my career that I have increasing gratitude for the many people who offered significant help along the way. I have also been confronted with

a new reality - those very people who were instrumental in shaping my career are passing. It's a facet of professional practice and academic life that has seemingly garnered scant attention.

For many the college years produce the fondest of memories. Indeed, colleges and universities thrive on nostalgia. Musings of being young, free and irresponsible are the basic building blocks of reunions, alumni days, college football experiences and even the desire to make gifts to your alma mater. Often it is the institution as a whole that is the draw. Yet, for some of us the emotional attachment goes beyond the exterior and extends in a deep way to the faculty who had the greatest impact on our lives. We often refer to such people as mentors, and while for some the period of mentorship is circumscribed by college years, for others it is a relationship that lasts for a lifetime. This work takes a close look at the process of mentorship, buttressed by a personal recollection of important interactions with mentors over an extended period of time. Additionally, it is argued that there has been limited attention to this special relationship as it evolves from apprentice to colleague, and in particular the final phase, the death of mentors.

Like my grade books, long apprenticeships in a trade or craft may also be remnants from another time. Will the process referred to as mentoring and mentorship remain an exception to this rule? Sadly, this too may also become a casualty in an age pushing us so boldly into on-line education where relationships, at best, are mediated by technology. Increasingly we seemed driven by a reductionist urge to distill everything down to skills and technique, leaving less room for the power of the story or the spontaneous teaching moment. In

turn the field has become enamored with those measurable bits and pieces of data that all drive one to reach some mythical threshold level of competency. By virtue of their unique approach to teaching I'm not sure if the professors who were the most important to me would find a comfortable niche in today's classroom, or if students are as eager to develop a deeper relationship with the faculty who teach them.

So what is mentorship, why does it matter, and how is this enacted in academic and professional settings? A review of the literature on mentorship generally reports that it is a function that has been recognized for centuries, but a concept that lacks a precise definition (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Merriam, 1983; Wilson, Valentine, & Pereira, 2002). Indeed, following an extensive review of the literature, Crisp and Cruz (2009) note that over 50 different definitions of mentoring can be found. From a research perspective this lack of precision creates messy methodological problems. It is difficult to study and research a topic, let alone draw meaningful inferences if basic concepts lack a consistent operational definition. Nonetheless, when one examines the body of work on mentoring common elements emerge, and it is clear that most definitions found in the literature capture these themes. For example, Roberts (2000) defined mentoring as, "a formalized process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning with a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that persons' career and personal development" (p. 162). Two decades ago Collins (1994) described mentorship as:

an interpersonal helping relationship between individuals who are at different stages in their professional development. The mentor - the more professionally advanced of the two - facilitates the development of the protégés - the junior professional - by serving as a source of social support beyond what is required solely on the basis of their formal role relationship (p. 141).

Finally, distilling things down to the basics, in discussing mentorship in education, Merriam (1983, p. 169) notes that "the mentor is a friend, guide, counselor but above all, a teacher." Merriam's focus on education is germane to social work at all levels. For practitioners, mentors come in the form of teachers, field supervisors, and later experienced clinicians who guide them in the early stages of their career. In social work education, mentorship is generally an important aspect of doctoral work and often extends to the help of senior faculty when the first academic position is secured (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Oktay, Jacobson, & Fisher, 2013). For some this mentor-mentee relationship extends over the lifespan of a career (Wilson, et al., 2002).

As the definitions offered above indicate, mentoring is posited to serve a wide range of functions from emotional support, role modeling, career advice and even protection from potential traps and missteps. Accordingly, Schockett and Haring-Hidorb (1985) separate the tasks of mentoring into psychosocial and vocational domains. Extending this work, Dominquez & Hagar (2013) note that research on mentoring is organized around three theoretical frameworks, developmental, learning, and social with the emphasis squarely on the process by which a mentee adapts to and thrives in their host environment and chosen field.

The widespread interest in mentoring, both as a formal and informal process, is easy to understand as it appears to produce tangible benefits for mentee's, mentors, and organizations. For the mentee a productive relationship with a single, or several mentors appears to enhance one's career trajectory (Collins, 1994; Kram, 1983; Tenebaum, Crosby, & Gilner, 2001; Slivinske, 2012; Welsh, Bhavé, & Kim, 2012), positively impact personal development (Kram, 1983), and help's one discover and build upon latent abilities (Roberts, 2000). For the mentor, offering guidance to another provides a source of self-fulfillment (Roberts, 2000), and satisfies the desire to leave a legacy (Dominquez & Hager, 2013). Finally, for the organization mentorship is associated with improved employee performance (Collins, 1994; Roberts, 2000), increased commitment to the field (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gilner, 2001) and

formalized programs appear to increase staff retention rates (Roberts, 2000).

Because it has seemed to be such an overwhelmingly positive endeavor, many organizations have initiated formal mentoring programs. Formal programs can be more inclusive given that efforts are extended to ensure that all newcomers are matched with a more experienced member who is poised to offer needed support and guidance. This may be of particular importance in settings where, consciously or not, informal mentoring may only be extended to certain individuals and groups. This links the organizational neophyte with someone they can turn to as they adjust to a new situation that is naturally replete with new demands. The downside is that there are no guarantees that the two parties thrust together share interests or are compatible. To that end, Merriam (1983) feels that in formalized arrangements mentors are less likely to “exert the more intense, pervasive influence characteristic of classic mentoring” (p. 107).

The truth of the matter is that people often serve as mentors without ever knowing it. Welsh and associates (2012) found that both mentor and protégés were poor at noting where informal mentoring was actually at play. Furthermore, de Janasz and Sullivan (2004) feel that the sole mentor-apprentice model is insufficient when considering the complexities of contemporary organizational life. They contend that a far better strategy is to have a network of mentors who possess differing areas of expertise and reflect different perspectives. This network of mentors become critical when addressing the three key competencies in career development - knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). However it plays out it seems clear that some form of mentorship is an important ingredient to success at least for some, and may lead to the development of a powerful, deeply personal, and lasting relationship.

Kram (1983), who has conceptualized the developmental stages in the mentor-mentee relationship, notes that:

A young adult, in the first stage of his

or her career, is likely to be engaged in forming an occupational identity, forming a dream, forming intimate relationships, and forming a mentor relationship. It is a time when questions about one’s competence, one’s effectiveness, and one’s ability to achieve future dreams are most salient (p. 609).

This period of life is marked by many why and how questions. As a young student I had vague ideas of where my education was headed but it appeared through reading the overall program and course descriptions that social work might be a match. Every class was a test of that choice. To this day I can recall the material and the faculty that captured my attention and when things fell flat. Nonetheless, once the decision was made to go forward with social work I never wavered on that choice. Looking back at how my career unfolded it is clear to me that many of the observations and theories about mentorship offered above hold true. First, I have had one primary mentor for many years; it is a relationship that is now well over three decades long, and appropriately, I am now viewed as a colleague. Second, as suggested by de Janasz and Sullivan (2004) I have benefitted from the help of many that I consider to be mentors, people who offered the perfect guidance needed at a particular stage in my career development. Finally, in so many cases the process was decidedly informal and it is doubtful that key individuals ever considered what they were doing as mentorship - they were simply doing what an involved member of the faculty should do.

Kram (1983) speaks of the initiation phase in the mentoring relationship. Here the novice scans the environment and finds people who they admire and wish to emulate as they take the first shaky steps in their career. If the relationship becomes established it is often because a more senior faculty or staff member saw something promising in the newcomer. Yet it seems to me, particularly given the more recent suggestions of de Janasz & Sullivan (2004) that long before anything more concrete develops that the shrewd student, junior faculty, or newly hired staff member is wise to look for a wide range of role models.

For me one of the most vivid of memories was a meeting with my undergraduate advisor on a rainy morning. I had declared social work as my major and this was perhaps my first real face to face meeting with a member of the faculty. Before I tapped on the door I noticed he was sitting at his desk reading, and classical music was playing in the background. To me he looked like what I thought a college professor should look like. In contrast I stood there in faded jeans, long stringy hair and a scruffy beard. He looked up and said, "Yes. Hi. Come in and let's look at your folder." He pondered my transcript, pointed at one item that caught his eye and while tapping his finger on the paper looked up and said "Say, you knocked down that Philosophy class!" It is true that I had earned an A in an introductory class, and I recall working hard to do so, but why, I pondered, was he so interested in that one outcome? It would take over a decade for me to understand why he felt it noteworthy, but when I did he was standing in front of me teaching a doctoral level policy course. Later, as a graduate student I had a question about some work and he invited me to lunch to discuss it. During lunch he looked up and said, "You know, I have always seen you as a person who could take over as the head of the Social and Rehabilitative Services Administration." I laughed out loud. It was a remark I had totally forgotten until one day, another decade later, that I was walking into my office for the first time as a State Director of Mental Health. In short, he saw something then that I simply did not.

This is but one of several faculty members who had a key role in shaping my career. Even today there will be random moments when I remember antidotes, words of advice, and feedback that was offered. So much of it made more sense as I moved into a faculty role. For example, once when I was frustrated with how a paper was shaping up I remembered a faculty member in my first doctoral level class proclaiming "scholarship is slow." It was a memory that offered reassurance. Sure there has been the instrumental help, such as pointing to possible job or grant opportunities, offers to collaborate on papers, opening doors for further networking. That was all vitally important. However, in my case it was the emotional connections that

mattered most of all. Things like believing in you, and providing room to develop skills and take on additional responsibility.

After several years in the field after receiving a Bachelor's degree I returned to pursue an MSW and had just completed my first year. One day there was a note in my box to stop by the office of a faculty member who had overseen my practicum. In my practicum a new innovative model of case management that he had designed was launched as a pilot project. As I stood at the door he enthusiastically waved me in. "I have a possible deal for you," he proclaimed, "I think I am close to getting a grant from NIMH and I want you to lead a project for me next year." I was floored. In my mind I was an ordinary student in a rather large class at that. I had been singled out and offered an opportunity that few ever receive. The support didn't stop there. Upon graduation I accepted a position in a rural community mental health center and tried to continue the work we had pioneered at our school. One day the telephone rang. "Pat, I have a deal for you. I would like you to come back to the U and run another project for me." In my mind there was little choice. Here was a request from someone who had not only offered me a chance to be a part of an exciting project, but who had essentially paid for my education. "One more thing," he said with a wry laugh, "You have to enroll in the PhD program." It was another career changing moment.

Kram's (1983) oft-cited stages of mentorship nearly speak to a parent-child relationship that eventually leads to a separation, that may be followed by a phase of redefinition where the relationship is less hierarchical and more collegial. Certainly not all mentor-mentee relationships follow this path. However, it is likely that when the relationship follows this blueprint that both the mentor and mentee experience high levels of satisfaction and a greater emotional bond. In the end these are powerful relationships, and because this is so, the final stage, one rarely if ever mentioned in the literature, is equally important to consider.

I recently returned to my alma mater to give a short address during an alumni event. It was a predictably fun and meaningful day, and that

naturally lead to some reflection. As I looked at the historic building that housed my former school I realized that I harbored a bit of a fantasy. In the fantasy I have changed and moved forward in my career but all those key people in my life were just like I left them. For me it was somehow easy to think of these mentors as just like the monuments and building on campus. All the familiar landmarks are still there, and because everything is in place it's easy to feel like you are home. So in your mind nothing much had changed. I realized that I felt I could climb the stairs, turn the corner and walk right back into my advisor's office and find him at his desk, classical music in the background, and offering a welcome. The truth is he has long since retired. That's one level of loss. Then, this summer two of the most important people in my educational life died weeks apart. It was then that I realized that I had never considered the emotional impact of losing your mentors.

I had followed a normal academic path. As noted by Kram's (1983) model here separation can be expected, and this break can be marked by ambivalence and in some cases even a bit of anger. Because of the nature of academia the separation can have spatial dimensions, as many begin their careers miles away from where their formal training was completed. Like that sometimes painful separation process that comes with adulthood, if the relationship had been a healthy one it is likely that this is viewed as a positive step. If there had been friction it is still possible that a reconnection will occur. When it does, the once grandiose views of an admired mentor is often tempered by a more realistic appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, but by then the mentee may have also developed an important level of self-awareness. In the best of all scenarios this ultimately leads to the formation of a collegial bond. As de Janasz, & Sullivan (2004) suggest,

Ideally, the dissertation advisor/mentor would help guide the protégé throughout their career. The mentor would teach the new academics much like apprentices learn their craft from masters in the field. Usually, as the protégé progressed toward tenure, the

two would co-author articles, and the mentor would help the protégé gain status and visible positions in professional organizations. As the protégé obtained tenure and moved toward full professorship, s/he would mentor newer scholars (p. 264).

For some this may seem like a Pollyannaish view of how such relationships proceed, but it was my experience, and I suspect it was the same for many others. Furthermore, there was little of the messy stuff that came with separation. Once I did return as a candidate for a position, which I subsequently turned down because of my deep history with the institution. I had been in the program at all phases of my life and remained unsure if some could make the transition and see me in a different role - as a peer rather than a former student. That was my anxiety, and my own sense that I could not come home again. Yet, the closest bonds remained intact.

It is nearly embarrassing to ask, particularly as years pass and one climbs the academic ladder, but how many of us are still driven by a need to please our former mentors? Even now I read some of the published work of those who influenced my development and I find myself saying "brilliant" out loud, and nearly sighing because of a sense of never being able to measure up. Perhaps this is a silly notion, but it is no less real for me.

So in many ways my mentors had always been larger than life figures. Furthermore, they would always be wiser, and what's more, they would always be there to guide. When the first jolt of reality hit home it was nearly impossible to come to terms with on an emotional level. I had returned to the University for a retirement party and I saw her sitting in the back of the room. It provoked an instant memory. I remembered the first time I had walked into her classroom, which was one of the very first she taught at the school. She seemed cold, distant and brilliant. It was complete intimidation. When I had returned for doctoral work many years later she was in charge of the program - and that alone convinced me that I had a short shelf-life. I remember a day she walked in my office, scrap a paper in her hand, and with a laugh she said "You do this all the time. Here

maybe this will help you.” It was simple reminder of the difference between the word it’s and its. It is a piece of paper I left taped on my computer for years. It was the laugh, the joke, and the human interaction; in short it was a side of her I had never seen. Later that year I was making a presentation in class and described the work we had been doing in mental health. In the midst of my remarks I noted in an offhand way, “We try to focus on strengths.” It was here that she perked up and said “Say more about that.” Shortly after she stopped by my office and said, “Let’s explore this idea further. I think this is important.” What followed was an offer to contribute to a paper that would eventually change my life. Now the relationship became truly collegial, and through the mutual work she was guiding me in so many different ways. Scholarly writing, the research process, and even the politics of publication were lessons I was receiving up close and personal. Everything had flipped. Most of my early impressions were turned soundly on their head. She wasn’t cold, she wasn’t distant, but she was indeed brilliant. Now, over twenty years later I looked at the back of the room as I talked and I knew something was terribly wrong. A call once I returned home confirmed what I felt. The feeling was one of emptiness. It seemed too cruel to be true. The sharpest of minds was dulled by an insidious disease, and worse, the prognosis was poor.

The second blow was equally hard. The scenarios were nearly the same. He was a newcomer in my academic life, accepting a position at my school when I was relatively deep in my doctorate program. He was funny, quick, and had a rare intelligence that covered incredible ground. In my first memorable interaction he was pointing at a computer on his desk, looked at me and said “what am I supposed to do with that damn thing.” No, computers were not yet a part of his world and as the relationship developed his sharp wit always underscored that learning could be fun. He helped organize an early conference that centered on what we were now calling the strengths perspective. His presentation was spellbinding. We worked together for years following my departure on what were, at least to me, meaningful projects that captured the attention of many in the social work community.

Seemingly out of nowhere I received a handwritten note in his imitable style; full of laughs, quips, but with a very somber message. He was very ill. Another call led to another confirmation, the condition was likely terminal. I returned to my old school again, the reason was to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the very paper I had been asked to contribute to as a student. It was viewed by some as a watershed moment for the program, He was there, but he was very ill. In my short remarks I recognized his efforts to bring what we had started as a small pilot project to a larger audience. When it was over he looked me firmly in the eye and simply said “Thank-you.” It was poignant because I knew it was likely the last time I would ever see him.

Only weeks apart both individuals, giants in the field, had passed. It is a loss that was difficult to put into words. It was noteworthy that I received many messages of condolences from current and former colleagues and even former students. There was an innate sense that this was a personal and deep blow, much like the loss of a parent, but also unique in its own way. Like all events that can move one off of their moorings, how I viewed the world, and in particular my career, had changed. People of ideas, of depth, real difference makers were nearly immortal in my irrational mind. After all, weren’t they really still there, sitting at their desk as they had always done, and working diligently on masterful ideas and projects? It was an illusion that was pierced to the core.

Where does loss of the mentor fit in with Kram’s (1983) or any developmental model of mentoring? Is it assumed that at this stage in the relationship, by virtue of age alone that the importance or the significance of the bond has waned? Perhaps for many that holds true, but I realized I felt very different. I consciously re-read papers that both and written, and even assigned a work by one of them that had only peripheral contact with the class I was teaching. With their passing it felt as if they had now been relegated to those old volumes one found hidden in the darkest recesses in the University library or as a historical citation on a summary paper that traces the evolution of ideas. There is comfort in knowing that at some point an eager graduate student will stumble on one of their works and realize that they were somehow linked

across time intellectually - but then, the people I knew were living and breathing human beings.

On a personal level the impact of these losses were reasonably predictable. I was forced to reflect on everything from approaching the end of a career and even my own mortality. It is an easy thing to keep out of mind, particularly in some environments. In university life you are constantly among the young and thus feel perpetually young as well. The grade book in the back of the drawer confirmed what I only could grasp intellectually. Yes, I had been doing this for a very long time, I was far from young, and at some point I too would depart, and my published work would be found on yellowed pages or as mere footnotes in a current article. As time progressed a writing project required me to delve into social work literature as far back as the 1920's. I found myself wondering about the life and work of those who had made this contribution, and even took the time to search the internet to learn more about them. This exercise, along with the deaths of mentors also made clear anew that somehow universities and the rest of the world will soldier on without me.

A whole new set of challenges and decisions were at hand. Should one just retreat and turn inward, or simply reorder priorities? Does a legacy matter, and if so, how is that best secured. How do you leave your mark, and is that even important? Is a legacy secured through a series of articles, and/or by the students and colleagues you touch along the way? All this suggests that a study of the process of mentorship in all its phases may be an important addition to a very important topic. Others, I suspect, have experienced lifelong mentorship, and have found it to be helpful at all phases of their career. How can this kind of relationship be encouraged and nurtured, and does new communication technology help sustain such bonds long after the last days of formal instruction have ended? Finally, how do mentees deal with the loss of powerful personalities in their life, and is the significance of such losses truly recognized?

For me these are interesting questions and topics that I will likely pursue. Yet more than anything, as I have grappled with the loss of two powerful

personalities I have come to realize that they remain with me, and as juvenile as it may sound, I still feel motivated to make them proud.

And there has been another reaction. Mike "Doc" Emerick is one of the most respected play-by-play announcers in sports. I read a recent article where he reported that he tries to write a letter every day to someone who has touched him or done something nice for him in even the slightest way. It seems such a simple and yet so powerful thing to do. I can't keep up with Doc, but I have tried to reach out to key people, other mentors in my career. There is a psychiatrist where I worked after my undergraduate years that encouraged me to go on to grad school. Then there is the teacher in the first college class I ever entered who made a simple notation on one paper that was monumentally important feedback. The motivation is really simple. I hope that I had truly expressed my gratitude to my mentors before they slipped away. If I didn't make it clear to them what they had meant to me then I am certainly trying to make up for that now. Even so, thank-you seems so inadequate.

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