

Mentee to Mentor: A Process of Professional Growth, Development, and Hope

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Abstract: This personal narrative reflects my experiences involving mentoring and life transitions. The narrative begins when I was a young social work student mentee, and progresses through various stages in the social work profession. It explores the influence of mentors who impacted my career path at various points in my life course: as a social work student, as a social work intern learning play therapy, as a social work educator and author, and as a practitioner. It examines the process of mentoring through the perspective of someone who has been mentored and who now aspires to successfully and formally mentor others.

Keywords: mentoring; mentor; social work; student; professional practice; writing; career

At the mentoring mixer that I recently attended, we needed to complete a form upon entering the elegant university suite that overlooked the city. On that form we were required to check little boxes to assist the program coordinator in matching us with our appropriately assigned mentee. Was I most like a squiggly line, a square, or a circle? Did I enjoy working with objects, mathematical concepts, people, or “other”? For recreation, did I prefer spending time with family, with friends, or reading a book? These were the questions posed to everyone attending the program for new mentors and mentees, designed to pair us together by interests, hobbies, and other similarities.

This particular meet and greet was organized by the university’s mentoring coordinator. Its purpose was to unite at-risk students with successful university and community members. Students are deemed at-risk for a multitude of reasons including socioeconomic status, minority group membership, or first generation college student status.

I related to the mentees on a variety of levels. I am a woman whose parents did not attend college, and reside in an area of the United States that once thrived in manufacturing but struggled economically over the past thirty-five years because of the decline in the steel industry that was so embedded into the fabric of our blue collar lives.

Little did I imagine that by answering a question with the response that I enjoy working with “other,” that this would pair me with such a unique group of three young women who were first year college students. They also were first generation college

students, as I had once been. I chose the category of “other” because I love to write, although I enjoy working with people, too.

We had so many similar interests and aspirations; it was almost baffling that we connected through an answer to such a basic question. One student also aspired to be a writer, another to be an editor, and another a musician. Somehow, through the socialization exercise, we had found one another. We were kindred spirits in the world of “other,” or perhaps in the mystifying world of the creative arts. As we talked about their current situations and career goals, I reflected upon my own career aspirations as a young college student. I, too, was fortunate enough to have had a wise mentor during these formative years. He was the first of four mentors who influenced my personal, academic, and professional development. I will share with you my story of growth through mentoring, as a student, as an intern, as a social worker, and as an author.

Formal Mentoring at the University Level

The university that I attended had an established formal mentoring program. Being a severely nervous, unconfident, frightened university student whose parents also had never attended college, I took full advantage of the program. As I reminisced, I realized how lucky I was to be paired with someone fairly high up the university ladder in an upper level administrative position. Nick was a man with a kind heart and high intelligence. He had a background in counseling and had parents who had never attended college. He had once aspired to become a physician, but he had not realized that in order to become one, he needed outstanding grades.

He was the first mentor that guided me toward my career in the helping professions. As we began our discussion surrounding career choice, social work was mentioned. I wanted to help others, and he thought it would be an excellent career choice for me. He helped me to focus my dream, and as I reflect I now realize, "Dreaming is at the core of what we do in higher education" (Byrnes, 2009, p. 121). He also encouraged introspection and reflection and would ask questions of me, such as "Why is it important for you to help others?" and "What would you like to be doing in your life five years from now?" He suggested looking inward at times to find answers to these and other important questions, thus contributing to my growth and development, as well as providing pragmatic support.

Nick encouraged me throughout my entire college career, although the formal requirements of the mentoring program were only for one year. He assisted me in choosing courses that would be appropriate and that he thought would enrich my university experience as a social work student. Although not a social worker himself, Nick espoused many of the beliefs, values, and ethics that social workers hold dear to their hearts. He was honest and hard-working. He cared about others, and perhaps most importantly, he believed in me and in my current and future success as a social worker, and as a person.

As a first generation college student, I encountered numerous obstacles and challenges. Nick's assistance was crucial to my success. How to schedule for classes at the university felt overwhelming to me, but his patient guidance was essential. He at first scheduled classes with me, and then taught me how to schedule them on my own. He fostered trust, and nurtured seeds of independence in a young adult who was afraid to grow.

When I lost my job as a shift monitor in a telecommunications office, he offered to facilitate the process of gaining student employment in the university setting. This was vitally important to my success as a first generation college student at a rudimentary, fundamental level. If I did not work, I simply could not afford to attend school. I was funding my tuition on my own, without any

assistance from my parents or family. This was commonplace at the university I attended. Within weeks, based on Nick's confidence in me, and a subsequent letter of reference, I had obtained employment as an office assistant at the university's Office of Admissions. In this environment, valuable lessons were learned regarding internal functions, relations, and operations of university life. Still today, I continue to reflect on and learn from those lessons.

Since Nick realized I was responsible for funding my own tuition, he also connected me with pertinent information regarding every scholarship opportunity of which he was aware. With much encouragement, cajoling, and convincing, I applied for many. With his support, I applied for nearly every scholarship or contest that I encountered. With a combination of ability, insight, and good fortune, numerous scholarships, contests, and fellowships were earned. I learned by example how to connect others with needed resources and to serve as a liaison for those in need, elements so very salient to social work practice and education.

To put it bluntly, he cared. Simply because of that, he was an outstanding mentor, and that helped me to graduate from the university as a social worker. Sometimes, simply caring about other human beings can propel them forward in their lives or guide them through difficult transitions (Slivinske & Slivinske, 2011).

In addition, mentors may serve as a protective factor to buffer against risk factors such as lower socioeconomic status or illness of family members during young adulthood (Matto, 2011). As United States Congressman Tim Ryan stated, "Higher education in this country began as a deeply reflective and contemplative activity..." (2012, p. 84). In my experience as a mentee in the university setting, individuals like Nick helped me to gain insight into self through contemplation and reflection, instead of simply listening to and following rote instruction. They served as mentors by encouraging growth and further development of intrapersonal emotional and cognitive awareness. Thank you, Nick, for helping me to graduate from college as a first generation college student, and for encouraging me to pursue my dream of becoming a social worker. I hope that I am encouraging

students to achieve their dreams in the same ways that you patiently encouraged me to achieve my dreams. This was just the beginning of my experiences as a social work mentee.

Field Work as Mentoring

Then there was Candace, who believed in the power of music, art, poetry, and literature to heal. She took a hands-on approach to mentoring. As my field instructor, she taught me the basics of play therapy at a non-profit agency serving children, adolescents, and families. She explained how important it was to play with children who were hurting, and that children and adolescents often expressed themselves through play or stories. I was an intern, and we as social workers realize that sometimes our internships shape our careers.

Mentoring remains a vital component of the fieldwork or practicum experience. It serves as an inherent part of the learning process (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2007). She was mentoring me for free, as Nick had done, to guide me toward becoming a better, well-seasoned social worker. She was patient, she was kind, and she was creative, with a love for the use of expressive arts, play, and bibliotherapy in treatment.

I fondly recollect facilitating a therapy group with Candace that was designed to aid clients toward building confidence and overcoming past traumas. Leading the group rarely felt like work; it was simply too enjoyable to be considered labor. Once, while helping clients to solidify their identities, we made plaster casts of their hands. Of course, we participated in this activity as well, making plaster casts of our own hands. I have kept mine all of these years. I was unaware at the time that as Candace taught me how to interact with clients, she was also building *my* confidence and shaping *my* professional identity as a social worker.

On many occasions, Candace encouraged using creativity, artistic therapeutic endeavors, and bibliotherapy. We would read relevant books, as would group members. She felt that this promoted self-disclosure among members, and was a positive therapeutic venture that was well received by clients. She led by example, often integrating music, art, fragrance, and relaxation into the therapeutic experience. I could not imagine a field

instructor more naturally matched for my personality and interests.

The agency itself was progressive, with a fully equipped play therapy room accessible to therapists, clients, and families. In fieldwork supervision, we often discussed the application of professional knowledge and the implementation of directive as well as non-directive elements of play therapy. With toys, books, therapy games, and perhaps more importantly, competent professional guidance from Candace in-hand, my professional journey had begun down a winding avenue of creativity.

I did not recognize at that time how deeply she had influenced me. It was not until years later, until after I had co-authored my first book about storytelling in therapy, that I fully realized how much of an impact she had on my professional development and personal growth. Her love for the creative arts was a perfect complement for my creative inclinations, and she fostered development in that area. We were kindred souls, and a fire had been lit for a melding of the creative arts and social work practice, which is something that I am still continuing to explore. Thank you, Candace, for planting the seed that it was not only acceptable, but wonderful, to combine the creative arts with social work practice.

Mentoring in Social Work Writing

Jump ahead several years to balancing my social work career with child-rearing. I was teaching at the university and raising my young daughter. I had dreamt for several years of writing a therapy book for children, and had even written some preliminary stories, an outline, and conducted some research in this area. My confidence levels were low, however. I had never written a book, nor had anyone in my family. Could I really write a book and have it accepted for publication? David, a social work professor at my university, knew that I was very interested in writing this particular book, and encouraged me to do so for years. He would ask about “the book.”

Had I written lately? Was I ready to submit a proposal? If you get rejected, you should just resubmit it somewhere else. These were the types of questions and statements he would continually, almost relentlessly, put forth to me. He was a well-published author, and he knew I lacked self-

assurance. He realized what so many mentors realize – that I needed to be gently challenged in order to succeed so that I would not give up. And challenge he did. Almost every time I would see him he would ask about “the book.” I also asked questions of him about the publishing process, and he was glad to divulge his specialized knowledge and understanding with me. When I would become discouraged, I sought him to bolster my confidence and to reinforce the principles that patience, diligence, and fortitude were required to see a project through to fruition. Today, I pass these same beliefs down to students who aspire to write and publish, and am delighted when I hear them say to me, “I want to write a book like you did.”

When the book finally was accepted for publication by a major publishing house, he became my biggest supporter. Whenever others were around, he made it a point to say, “Did you know she wrote a book?” I think I am just beginning to understand why he would always ask that question of others. I believe that to David, my success was his success. He was my mentor and he knew it. There was no formal mentoring contract, no weekly meeting, and no official internship. But he was my mentor and I was his mentee. Thank you, David, for mentoring me when you had no obligation to do so. If it were not for you, “the book” may never have been published.

Listening and Sharing

Jump ahead again a few more years. Career confusion, self-doubt, and the need for clarification begin to creep back into my psyche. Where will I go from here? Will I continue to write about social work practice? Will I even continue to write? Will I continue to teach social work students? Will I continue to practice social work? In what areas will I continue to practice – disability, children, or older adults? Will I branch out into other disciplines? Will I return to graduate school? The options and decisions seemed overwhelming for a while.

Samuel then entered into my life, a wise practitioner and professor with years of social work experience behind him. I trusted him and, because of his admirable character traits, felt comfortable enough to seek his guidance regarding vocational aspirations. How did he mentor me? He told me to take a deep breath and he listened. The art of listening continues to be underrated by the general

population and still by some in the helping professions. He listened as I poured out my heart regarding career indecisions and challenges. He let me sort out my issues myself, knowing when to advise, and knowing when to back away. His timing and pacing were perfect. Like I mentioned, he is a seasoned practitioner and teacher. He knew that I had to find the answers myself, in my own way, in my own time. And eventually, I did find the answers.

Not only did he listen, but he *shared* as well. We talked about *his* life experiences. We discussed times in *his* life when he had experienced confusion or doubt regarding his direction in the social work field, and how he crossed those impasses. By self-disclosing, he helped me to realize that we are all only human, and that it is okay to question, even desirable at times. It keeps us thoughtfully engaged in the profession of social work, and propels us forward in our life's journey. In fact, working through our challenges in a positive manner may even be considered a strength that may lead to opportunity (Saleebey, 2002). The process dimension of being mentored by Samuel and so many kindhearted people in my life's journey has taught me to ask for directions when navigating uncharted territory, which has enabled me to learn and lead by example regarding how to be a better leader and professional helper.

Through thoughtful listening, reflection, contemplation, and sharing, another mentor had supported me. Thank you, Samuel, for helping me to find my way through the perplexities, mazes, and uncertainties of the social work profession that so many of us encounter at some point in our professional lives. I value your guidance as well as your patience. Without your guidance I may not have continued to write in the social work field and expand further into the creative arts.

Full Circle

In a few weeks I will receive my phone call or email officially pairing me with a first year, first generation college student. I am secretly excited about that call or email. The student does not know where I have been or what I have experienced in my life yet. She does not know that I worked my way through college, and earned scholarships and grants in order to attend. She does not know that my

parents never attended a university or that they did not grasp how to navigate the system of higher education. Nor does the student know what lies ahead in her young life.

There will be obstacles and challenges. The struggles and sacrifices may be great, but the joys and benefits are worth the effort. But I know that she can accomplish anything that she desires if she is tenacious, determined, and asks for help when she needs it. I also know that I can play a significant part in guiding her to overcome obstacles in order for her to reach her goals, just as I had so many mentors propel me to accomplish my goals.

As I think back to the end of the day of the mentoring mixer, I recall the time that Malisha, the young lady who wants to be a writer, approached me. I had given her my card earlier in the day. I asked her to contact me if she needed any assistance or career guidance.

She nervously asked, “Ma’am, is it all right if I still email you about being a writer? Can I email you even if we aren’t matched together?” She anxiously awaited my response. “Yes, definitely email me. I expect to hear from you,” I said excitedly yet firmly, with a smile on my face.

I do expect to hear from her. I also expect her to achieve great success as she realizes her goals. I already believe in her, as my mentors believed in me. I am eagerly awaiting her email, her college success story, her first book, her professional accomplishments, and her bright, wonderful future. As a mentor, I can only hope that I mentor her and others as well as Nick, Candace, David, and Samuel all have mentored me.

As I reflect on the four mentoring relationships that have so profoundly influenced me, I realize that all of my mentors had complementary techniques of mentoring. I hope to provide the guidance and encouragement of Nick; the kindness and creativity of Candace; the gentle yet firm confrontation of David; and the supportive self-disclosure of Samuel. In essence, the wisdom passed down to me from my mentors will empower me to guide Malisha, and others, through their academic and professional journeys. Although all of my mentors were different in certain regards, they all share a common

thread that will eternally bind them – they all believed in me, as I believe in Malisha.

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