

Letter from the Editors

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Abstract: This Letter from the Editors is published on the occasion of the second issue from the new publisher, Cleveland State University School of Social Work. Responding to the lessons of this issue, the Editor reflects on mentoring as it has touched his life recently and over time.

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Reflections is a journal in which we read – and for which we write – narratives that illuminate our professional helping, our personal lives, our social milieu, and how they are intertwined. We seek to understand how social workers help in our own unique ways, as Bertha Capen Reynolds suggested we do. But Ms. Reynolds also suggested that social workers need to take exercises in being helped. In order to sustain our roles as helpers, we need mentors who can share their experience and help us to clarify our hopes and realize our potential. Reynolds shared examples of the roles people who we today call mentors played in her life (Reynolds, 1991). Her mentors were her seniors, but they were also the young clinicians and community organizers who studied at Smith College School of Social Work. She learned from them and they learned from her. Mentoring is a multifaceted thing, as her life and this issue shows.

In this issue, co-editors Mark J. Hager and Jennifer Bellamy present submissions they received following the initial Call for Narratives, while *Reflections* was published at California State University Long Beach, as well as submissions received after it was announced in May 2012 that *Reflections* would resume publishing as an online journal. The patience and perseverance of the co-editors and authors have paid off with this long-awaited issue. Like Volume 18, Number Two, this issue is back-dated to reflect when it would have originally been published. The journal will publish issues in as timely a fashion as possible until – sometime during the 2014-2015 academic year – the journal publishes the first issue that is back on schedule, such as Volume 21, Issue 2 (Spring 2015). In order to achieve that, we need narratives. I would encourage you to see the several Special Section Calls and the General Call re-printed below and available on our website. Please also see the

Call for Proposals for Special Sections on our CSU website at www.csuohio.edu/class/reflections. This issue is the last Special Issue to be devoted entirely to a particular theme. In the future, Special Sections – which can be as long as the special issues of the past – will be published within issues that also contain general submissions. The cover title and art will still reflect the special section theme. The guest editor(s) will still write introductions and have autonomy in selecting manuscripts, which are reviewed by both a special reviewer chosen by the guest editor and experienced *Reflections* reviewers.

In this issue, the co-editors call on us to reflect upon our own mentoring relationships, both as a mentor and mentee, and to consider writing our mentors to share our gratitude. As a *Reflections* reader and author who is now privileged to serve as Editor, I will do so. When I had finished reading the introduction to this issue, I thought of several mentors who are no longer living. I realized that although it has been years or even decades since they passed away, their impact on the world they left remains. There was something about the way Irving Miller spoke to his students which spoke to me. There was also something about the direct way in which he would speak to you which made it hard to hide from what you needed to face, about yourself and the world around you. Not a month goes by without my recalling things he said to his students at Columbia University School of Social Work. I often share them with my students.

Recently, specific things I learned from Irving influenced how I spoke out on three issues, one within the university, one within the profession and one within the community. As veteran *Reflections* author and reviewer John Kayser points out in this issue, faculty often feel constrained or are discouraged from speaking out. But the mentoring I

have enjoyed here at CSU and over the course of my career has enabled me to find my niche and voice. True, it helps when a university has administrators who actively seek out faculty input as well as a strong faculty association. It also helps to work and live in Cleveland, where the social work community has found new ways to work together, the labor movement is standing up for the rights of immigrants, and the civic and philanthropic community are renowned for innovation. This may seem like what Kayser calls blatant university or self-promotion. For me, it is a recognition of things I have to be thankful for at this rare conjunction of Thanksgiving and Hanukkah.

Clearly, mentorship has more of an impact than we often realize. Before there was Irving, there was Jules Shrager. In Ann Arbor in 1969, Jules hired me at his group home. Later, he invited me to his monthly poker game. In 1975, while I was working as a community organizer in New York, he recommended me to the Adelphi BSW program. In sort of a casual way, Jules told me, "You seem to have found your niche." Isn't some of the best mentoring done in an understated way? Irving used to say about therapy that by the time you give an interpretation, it is no longer needed. The same thing might be said about the role of advice in mentoring relationships.

Sometimes what a mentor gives you is a booster shot. "Do it!," Maryann Mahaffey said about organizing the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society. "Be political, not politicized," Verne Weed said, on one of her flyer-laden visits to Columbia's McVickar Hall. Things said in passing that stick with you are a mentor's most treasured gifts, our Graduate Assistant Steven Leopold said. It does help to jot them down.

As I read this issue, I thought about some of the mentors I have had who are still living. I realized that there are more than a handful of mentors I could write, as Mark and Jennifer suggest we do. For instance, there is Phil Coltoff, whose comments on my first social welfare policy paper in 1976 planted the seed that led to my entering the Doctoral Program in Social Work and Social Science at Michigan. Comments from mentors count. They are often remembered.

Among my mentors are also those I have failed. For instance, I haven't yet published the results of four years of dissertation research which my advisor David Tucker and my committee patiently oversaw. Living up to mentors isn't easy. It takes work to mentor and be mentored, as Jerry Watson points out in this issue. Mentors and mentees believe in each other, as Johanna Slivinske points out in her narrative. With mentoring comes mutual obligations, which should be respected.

After reading this issue, I thought about a couple of folks who did what might be called gruff mentoring. "Never assume," one union leader said, shortly after I arrived at the National Maritime Union hall in New Orleans for my first post-M.S.W. position, "that you know more than the person you report to." Luckily, I reported to Dan Molloy, M.S.W., D.S.W., in New York, and he has proven to be an important mentor in the years since (Molloy, 2010).

Lately, I have wondered, am I doing enough to be available for mentoring? Is having an open door policy enough, or does it take hanging out in the hall and arriving earlier for class? It's not just individual faculty who should ask such questions. There are questions for administration and faculty governance as well. Where does mentorship fit into service, especially given the unique mentoring needs of women, students of color, and – as shown by Sr. Kim's article – immigrants and international students? At CSU, off-campus mentoring is counted as service, but how can we distinguish mentoring from advising and recognize the unique mentoring duties of many faculty of color?

Recently I attended a meeting in my role as an Elder for the local Children's Defense Fund (CDF) and its New Abolitionists Association, here in Cleveland. I planned to leave early so I could attend an event where I could get feedback on a policy brief recommending that universities increase work-study pay by 1/3rd and reduce work-study hours by 1/3rd, thus giving students more time to study, at no cost in state or university funds. I had even made my excuse in advance about the need to leave early. After introductions, we engaged in a pairing process. Next, there was visioning. Several young persons talked about how important mentoring was for young people in their communities. Others strategized about short-range and longer-range

aspects of working to dismantle the cradle to prison pipeline. For these young people, mentoring and social activism went hand in hand. Suddenly, I realized that leaving the meeting would be turning away from suffering and struggle, which is exactly what I teach students to avoid, by playing the Pink Floyd or Richie Havens version of *On The Turning Away* each term. I stayed and listened. I realized I was now engaged in the kind of values-based single issue activism to which, in a recent narrative (Dover, 2010), I said I wanted to return.

Being in that meeting and reading this issue are helping me re-think my outlook on mentoring. Mentoring provides essential bonds, without which it can be hard to sustain one's social work and social justice commitments. Often, such mentoring relationships are intergenerational in nature, although not always. In recognition of the centrality of intergenerational relationships, next Spring's 4th Annual Cuyahoga County Conference on Social Welfare (CCCOSW) will address the theme, *Renewing our Commitment: Building Partnerships Across Generations*. My commitment to this annual Conference is fueled by something the late Chauncey Alexander said to me, namely that in the years before N.A.S.W. was founded in the 1950s, "We demanded unity." We need to demand unity today, locally and nationally (Dover, 2002).

The March 2014 conference will include a pre-conference intergenerational mixer and a World Cafe-style discussion, both suggested by Jason Eugene-Boarde, B.F.A., now an urban planning student. Both will involve intergenerational conversations about our commitment to social welfare. Clearly, it is important to reach out beyond our typical circles and establish new relationships. I know it is important for me to do this. Mentoring can and should be integrated with organizing.

Often, perhaps, it is integrated, but we don't realize it. Recently, I completed an exit interview with Jason, who has a new job, but will remain active with the conference leadership. I took him to lunch, and he referred to me as his mentor. "I'm your mentor?" I said, actually quite moved after my initial surprise. I can't remember what he said next, across too many divides of difference to mention. But I recovered to say, "I guess I am. I look forward to continuing to be your mentor." Also

recently, Maggie Nash (née Iverson) returned to a CCCOSW meeting for the first time since she was the Conference's 2011-2012 Policy Issues Coordinator and a plenary session speaker. Maggie announced that she was married and was expecting a child. She had returned from her leave from the university and was about to graduate. Might Maggie be a mentee as well? Have there been others I never thought of as mentees?

Reading this issue has helped me see the relationship between my academic work and activism and the process of mentoring. It will prompt me to regularly ask myself: What role should mentoring play in my life? In writing this letter, it occurred to me that there is a relationship between mentoring and the quote from Eugen Pusic I recently began using in my email signature: "We must ask ourselves who are in a better position and more called upon to act collectively, politically and responsibly for the goals of welfare than those who have made welfare their profession, that is, the dominant occupation of their lives." I used that quote in the 1976 paper for Phil Coltoff mentioned earlier in this letter. Thirty-seven years later, mentoring by Phil, sustained by only one visit and occasional exchanges in the decades since then, still influences my daily activity. I'll have to get back in touch. Clearly, mentoring matters. There is nothing like the present to re-contact one's mentors or to try to reach out to those who have been our mentees. One way to do so might be to suggest that they read and write for *Reflections*! Or if appropriate, why not give them a subscription or make a Friends of *Reflections* donation in their honor?

References

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