MENTORING THE SOCIAL WORK ACADEMIC: Oops, I Broke Alice's Lookin Glass

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In this essay, I tell my history of what mentoring has meant to me and what mentoring has done to "grow" me into the professional I am. This autobiographical narrative is written in dialogue with the literature on mentoring in an effort to make sense of recurring themes and experiences leading up to my most recent academic assignment. Although mentoring has an established body of knowledge in business, education, and medicine, a cursory review of the literature reveals the discipline of social work as a late adopter in understanding and creatively embracing it as an integral process of educating educators. I conclude my story by highlighting what I want my college, profession, and higher education in general to understand about mentoring practices for female faculty of color in social work education.

Chapter One: Learning how to be Human

When I was young and my parents had the primary responsibility for teaching me the meaning and methods of being human, there was a beautiful, brown-skinned woman named Essie Lee who was to me an angel, a gift especially and just for me. My wellintentioned parents, bereft of understanding the needs of internationally adopted children, were limited in how to grow Korean American children in society's racially-fired kiln, especially in rural Midwest America. Like the velveteen rabbit who asks "what is real," I fled from the existential identity question that demanded an answer but never received one from me-diverse responses to "who am I" always came from others holding up a mirror that reversed, contradicted, or usually ignored my actual reality. I was left feeling a bit like Alice after she went through the looking glass wondering if I was only a figment of other people's imaginations. Who exactly owned the looking glass and with whom would I discover the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's looking glass self or the ability to see my self as others do (Yeung & Martin 2003)?

Without specific words of instruction or wisdom but rather through unspoken, nonverbal gestures and soft guttural sounds of unconditional acceptance, Essie Lee was my first mentor. In contrast to my parents' role which seemed like the worn out, poorly fitting suit that one is obligated to wear to formal occasions only, Essie Lee joyfully served a role free of judging what was right or wrong, or evaluating performance against an unattainable bar. As I would discover from future formal and informal professional mentors and as is borne out in the literature, the voluntary nature of informal mentors is characterized by the deep learning I gained and internalized. Such profound lessons occurred as a result of the commitments of the informal mentors which were deeper and sustained over longer periods of time than those made by formal ones (Greene et al. 2008). Essie Lee freely taught me how to choose to be a kind human being when my parents' limitations emerged and when the racist environment of the 1960s insisted there was no place that I belonged.

"Why don't the kids let me play in the sandbox? Why can't I hit them when they hit me?" I screamed my rage against the ignorance and the learned meanness of blonde-haired, blue-eyed children. Instead of judging or punishing me for vulnerably baring my soul, Essie Lee injected me with courage and encouragement to experiment and learn for myself while growing up, and slipped me taunting and delicious hints about her own lessons in life. "Will hurting the other kids give you what you want? Why don't you try asking them-one more time? Did I tell you about the time when I ...?" Today, Essie Lee's strength and silence breathe through me and are transformed into patience when I encounter all that is beyond my control.

Through her subtle but very powerful example, Essie Lee mentored me from childhood into adulthood. She was an example of Wasburn's (2007) simple definition of

a mentor who provides guidance, support, knowledge, and opportunities and, as Haring (1999) identified, occurring during a time of transition, change, or crisis. My relationship with Essie Lee bears characteristics of traditional mentoring which involves a one-to-one, unidirectional, asymmetrical relationship in which a junior and lessexperienced individual is paired with an experienced person (Blackwell, 1989). But this relationship departs from the traditional model because it was not an intentional mentoring relationship-Essie Lee was our hired housekeeper who came to our home every Thursday to do laundry and clean house. This precious 90-year old woman resides peacefully within my heart. Essie Lee renewed my "S(e) oul Self' so that I could create connections to my humanity and to others.

Lacking Essie Lee's foundation, I could not have embraced social work practice with genuine compassion, empathy, and competence. Later, it was serving soldiers who lived in constant pain and re-connecting them to a shared humanity, albeit off the battlefield, where I experienced the second chapter in this life's voyage on the good ship "Mentorship."

Chapter Two: Learning How to be a Professional Social Worker

HOO-AH! This affirmative shouted with the greatest respect in the United States Army echoed throughout my first day's graduate field placement in social work services. Referring to or meaning anything and everything except 'no', it is believed the origin of this term might be related to the acronym HUA- or "Heard-Understood-Acknowledged." I had selected my graduate field placement with the U.S. Army's mental health and family advocacy programs believing it was a field of social work I would not pursue after graduation. Army social work was a field of practice I needed to understand if I was to make competent, informed future referrals or if I was to serve veterans. I also was curious about the world's largest bureaucracy outside of the Vatican.

At the time, Major P ran his "shop" with an iron fist and an eagle eye, literally. He had only one eye remaining from previous years of combat duty abroad. Seeing Major P dressed in BDU's (battle dress uniforms), holstering a sidearm, and oozing an extreme of self-confidence during my interview for this field placement, I half expected him to break out in a chorus of "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble...". Worried that I would be required to live up to U.S. Army standards in ALL ways, I feared that daily pre-dawn 3-mile sprints and weekly sessions on a firing range were in store for me that year.

In my role as graduate intern and under the close supervision of the clinical staff, I was expected to apply what I learned in my clinical assessment and treatment classes to clients who were admitted for hospitalization in the psychiatric unit on the base. Confronted with the range of all possible mental health experiences in their full-blown DSM symptoms, I witnessed that year the glory and gore of what it means to be human and how to request an invitation into the lives of people whose constant companion is pain. As I observed Major P in action with soldiers and their families, I re-discovered how much I did know about being human and how to let my fear of not knowing what to do step aside for compassion. Through informal conversations woven in between official supervision sessions, Major P kept a steady pulse on a newbie's experiences in the trenches. Major P listened patiently to my fears that were typical among my fellow grad students: "Calgon-take me away! I'm a failure. I'm no good at this." Major P's response: "Look, you haven't killed anyoneyet. Try once more. I know you can do this." Major P would never accept desertion of one's post or command, even though every day I toyed with that seductive question. "Well, what if I went AWOL?"

The task of immediate supervision fell upon other clinical social workers in the department, but the mentoring of the social work soul was embraced by Major P. He submerged himself in the rewarding interactions of supporting, educating, and more importantly, affirming the lessons learned by a soon-to-be-practicing master's level social worker. He even confessed that he learned "a thing or two" from the new kid on the block. Major P's rare confessions of the benefits he received from his role as a mentor reflect research identifying reciprocal benefits for both parties (Stalker, 1994).

Seventeen years after my indoctrination vis-a-vis Major P style into the profession of social work I can, without equivocation, confess that Major P had a greater influence on me than even my adoptive mother, who still reminds me to eat my peas. I hear Major P ordering me to replace anxiety with confidence as I muster up the courage to face clients who make self-destructive choices or confront students texting their 1000 and more "bff's" (i.e, best friends forever) on their cell phones in class. "Let's think about this. If you do 'this', then what could happen? What are your choices? What do you really want in life?" Major P-I salute you, with all fingers unfurled, this time. You and your backbone live within me as I rise to meet the challenge of each new client. Strange, the courage you nurtured in me looks exactly the same as Essie Lee's. The lessons from learning how to be human and learning how to be a professional have all been really the same so far: remembering courage and compassion.

Chapter Three: Learning how to be a Good Colleague

This new chapter in the voyage of the good ship "Mentorship" finds me drifting and bereft of courage and compassion in the third year of my doctoral program. The monsters that have haunted and stalked me since my arrival to the U.S. reappear, raise their ugly heads demanding my attention, and require that I return to a safe haven of humanity. I struggle with vestiges of racist content in the social work curriculum that repeat insidious and ignorant messages. I struggle with finding academic support for a dissertation topic unfamiliar to faculty at my institution. I struggle with securing adequate finances to support my food, shelter, and daily expenses because there is little funding for graduate assistantships. I struggle with creating support among colleagues in a doctoral program that fuels a hidden value that competition breeds excellence. I struggle to remember why I chose this struggle!

The faculty advisor assigned to me has little time to offer counsel, seems uncaring in her communication with me, and directly asks me if I would consider discontinuing. She quotes a statistic that half of all doctoral students drop out after the required coursework and choose not to continue on to successfully complete the dissertation phase. I feel as if the rug has been yanked out from under my feet. I've landed flat on my back and can't move from the shock and trauma of this blow to my self confidence. Paralysis sets in and I start to write.

At critical times in my life, writing becomes the wings I've needed to lift me above and beyond what seem like impossible situations and environments. I write about my experience in order to understand my experience. One day, I seek out a respected social work professor and ask if he would read and comment on my manuscript, trusting that his honesty and wisdom will help produce a document that can be shared and benefit others. Dr. K steps in and immediately engages in a dialogue that quenches my thirst for human affirmation of experience and creative problem solving. Dr. K offers what Eddy and Gaston-Gayles (2008) found as necessary for academic success, whether for doctoral students or new tenure-track faculty. The ability to integrate work-life responsibilities and stressors has been found to be an outcome of effective formal and intentional mentoring programs (Daley et al, 2008; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Thompson, 2008).

Dr. K's example of informal help, generosity of time, and sharing of wisdom reappears with each new collegial relationship I create: instances when I can offer a word of encouragement, report an affirmation of excellence, share in a moment of art and beauty, or think out loud with another about a puzzling situation. If I am viewed as a good colleague in academic circles, it's because I observed, experienced, and learned from a "good colleague" through Dr. K's perhaps unintended mentoring. Dr. K never formally defined or declared this role to me; he simply was; I simply accepted and gratefully received. Just like Essie Lee who never judged or punished me for vulnerably baring my soul,

and just like Major P who lifted me up with courage and encouragement to experiment and learn for myself, Dr. K's subtle but very powerful example mentored me from being a social work practitioner into a social work educator who strengthens her own capacities in the face of adversity and more importantly seeks to build capacity in others. Being a good colleague will be a central theme as I learn in the next chapter of this voyage how to be a peer mentor to my colleagues.

Chapter Four: Learning how to be a Peer Mentor

"At last, my fulltime position has arrived!" Time for taking photos for new faculty ID cards and the department website. The social work program never looked so good: one African American female, one African female, one Asian American female--myself--and one Native American female. We were never Charlie's Angels, but for the few years we taught together as the new cohort of tenuretrack faculty, we experienced a rare moment in professional academic circles--genuine collegiality and ongoing co-mentoring of each other. We created these relationships from the basic need of sheer survival in what often felt like hostile territory where predators shed their sheep-like disguises to devour naïve newbies.

The vehicle responsible for cultivating our scholarly potential was a social work department divisively demarcated by traditional patriarchy versus radical feminism; MSW versus PhD; people of color versus members of the dominant white majority; post-MSW practice experience versus no post-MSW practice experience; worker bees versus privileged administrators; male versus female; heterosexual versus homosexual; the list goes on and on. Major P would have thrived in this environment, where battle lines were constantly re-drawn between the haves and have-nots of academic tenure. Were we the sacrificial "young" to be eaten alive for the sustenance of the parent institution?

We took long walks trying to figure out. the undertow of political agendas reflected in heated faculty meetings. We ate our lunch together in each other's offices just to check on our own humanity and sanity. We blasted our favorite music through the sterile, institutional halls that housed our offices. We shared different teaching strategies to find out how to reach and engage with a new generation of students whose capacity to focus in the classroom seemed negatively correlated to their focus on technology. We danced to each other's music when the going got tough. And equally significant for psychosocial support, we carved out community niches that built on our previous practice experiences. We began to identify and create opportunities for each other's projects of scholarship and service.

This cohort was an example of what scholars call peer mentoring, which involves participants who are roughly equal in terms of age, experience, rank, and/or position along hierarchical levels within their institution (Kram & Isabella, 1985). The strength of our relationships certainly enhanced our psychosocial well-being in critical ways, but our positions as untenured faculty limited our ability to offer career-enhancing functions to each other. We sadly lacked support from senior faculty who had institutional power to remove or diminish obstacles.

Our peer mentoring relationships diverted from formal peer mentoring models at the point where they emerged naturally and received no formal sanction within the respective institutions. And in New England, the peer mentoring was not limited to matched dyads or triads but took on the characteristics of a peer support group. Sadly, because of the toxicity within the department, our group slowly disappeared as members sought different outside opportunities. As a result, we didn't experience the shortcomings scholars have observed in peer mentoring relationships (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002). For example, because we were all hired in the same year and we all witnessed immediately the political dynamics among the senior faculty, we consciously avoided hierarchies and focused on the deep need for cooperation, collegiality, and support. In fact, the division between the tenured and non-tenured faculty contributed to the solidarity and cohesion that emerged naturally within our peer mentoring cohort.

Relying on the skills of reflexive social work practice, I pause to consider my voyage so far. The informal mentoring relationships beginning with Essie Lee have all sustained my growth and development as a human being. Major P specifically fueled my growth and development as a professional social worker. Dr. K created the necessary space for me to learn how to integrate the stressors and strengths between the academic rigor of the doctoral program and life's exigencies. The informal mentoring of the New England cohort gave me the opportunity to experience the power of peer mentoring, which nourished this group worker's soul. All these experiences of informal mentoring were characterized by outcomes identified in Stalker's (1994) review of the literature, including personal development and professional identification. Because of the informal nature of these relationships, there was no career advancement as an immediate outcome. For most formal mentoring programs, career advancement or success in the promotion and tenure process seems to be a common desired goal.

Chapter Five: Learning about the Potential of Peer Mentoring Communities

Driving our big yellow moving truck to our new home in the Midwest, I was struck by the unending flatness of miles upon miles of corn, soybean, and wheat fields. With no geographical landmarks to differentiate my perspective of sameness, I wonder if I have come full circle and am returning to the rabbit hole of my childhood. A small child's irrational fears set in: Will I be the only Asian in town? Will my white peers throw me out of the sandbox? Must I become Alice's looking glass in order to survive? Who will accept me for who I am? These fears taunt me as I engage once more in re-creating for myself a network of support at a small college, my most recent teaching assignment.

Prior to the first week of classes and during new faculty orientation, I meet my assigned mentor. Girding myself, I keep an open mind at the prospect of having a reliable source of support to help me join with my new college. Suddenly, I crash headlong into a brick wall. My mentor *does not contact me* after our initial meeting. Later, I discover from others that my mentor truly has too many other responsibilities to sustain a relationship with me. Disappointed but not yet defeated, I'm on the prowl, once more, in search of caring peers who can guide and/or support me through this phase.

As I attend the formal orientation to the organizational structure and shared governance as specified in the faculty handbook, I learn that two white male administrators officially bear the direct responsibility to mentor me. According to the faculty handbook, their primary roles are proscribed to evaluate teaching as well as service to the program, college, and community. Unfortunately, these persons' time and ability to support the professional growth (i.e. mentor) of someone with different professional and educational experiences seem limited.

I face difficulties in preparing too many different classes, and dealing with poorly prepared or unmotivated students in general education classes. I also face challenges in teaching this new "generation x, y, or z," and experience a lack of collegial relations, inadequate feedback, recognition, and affirmation, and a lack of balance between work and personal life. As the outsider to both the small college and the small town, I am given subtle but very clear messages about where my place should be in a well-preserved, rigid, and complex male hierarchy.

There are studies that provide evidence that pretenure women and minority faculty report acute feelings of personal isolation. especially with administrators who provide little mentoring (Boice, 1992). Both Boice and Sorcinelli (1994) suggest that new faculty benefit significantly from a collegial, intellectually supportive environment. My experience during this tenth year of fulltime teaching bears evidence to Sorcinelli's finding that over time, new faculty will report lower levels of work satisfaction and higher levels of work-related stress because of inadequate support (1994). Also, my experience echoes the findings from Gibson's research that gender [of mentors] matters to a female protégé (2006) and fits with Olian, Carroll, Giannantonio, and Feren's findings (1988) that women are more sensitive to, and react more negatively to, a manager who is deficient in interpersonal skills. At a college that seems to be steeped in the traditions of a dominant WASP ideology, I have not met a senior faculty who could address issues that are particularly salient for women, let alone for minority women. And mirroring what Australian scholars are finding (Buchanan, Gordon, & Schuck, 2008), in this small college mentoring appears more like monitoring, and performance-enhancing relationships appear more like performance evaluation when left to the vagaries of senior faculty who have successfully competed and won their tenure through rugged individualism. I am left wondering if the mentoring process at this small college is intended to welcome the protégé to the place or put the protégé in their place? As Zumeta (1998) argued, in such situations, academic freedom is jeopardized by intrusive forms of academic micromanagement typical of patriarchal, paternalistic institutions.

Chapter Six: Remaking the Looking Glass Reflecting Back

I've stepped back through my looking glass and find the same overlapping and intertwined questions that accompanied me from day one in academia: Where does one turn to for guidance in a culture that assumes every faculty is highly competent? When can one ask a question without being viewed as "weak" or "unable"? Who offers encouragement versus gives advice or issues commands? How can new, untenured faculty become real, like the Velveteen Rabbit? How do academia's hierarchies affect definitions of being real? Who is/are Cooley's proverbial looking glass/ es by which new faculty come to know their unique selves? How do one's minority status, identity, and experiences interact with the dynamic process of mentoring? Must Alice's looking glass continue to have me always wandering and roaming in search of support? How will I know when I have regained my "muchness"?

The 2010 Disney film version of *Alice in Wonderland* shows the Mad Hatter observing that Alice, as an emerging adult, has lost her "muchness", her fullness of self and thus, well-being. This film's writers depict that Alice regains her muchness only by reconnecting with her childhood. I close my eyes and slowly return to Essie Lee, the initial and foremost mentor in my life. I need to understand so I can forgive, so I can contribute to positive change, so I can regain my muchness and return to find an authentic self reflected back in my looking glass.

How can predominantly white institutions in rural America take affirmative steps to facilitate the success of minority faculty who often get caught in a "revolving door" syndrome (Blackwell, 1988) where they are kept for several years, evaluated negatively for tenure, and then are required to leave (Tillman, 2001, p.321). Tillman and others' research (Dixon-Reeves, 2003; Gibson, 2006; Waitzkin, Yager, & Parker, 2006; Wasburn, 2007) indicate institutions must do more than just recruit minority faculty-they are also responsible for maximizing their chances for success. Researchers point out that turnover is higher for faculty of color than white faculty (Thomas & Asunka, 1995) and those institutions whose faculty are predominantly white should openly have a commitment to sustaining campus climates where faculty of color feel valued and are successful (Piercy, Giddings, Allen, Dixon, Meszaros, & Joest, 2005). I do know I get tired of treading water in the seas of white faces.

Scanning the here and now

We know from the literature on mentoring that the following characteristics of effective mentoring initiatives hold true for all new faculty regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, physical ability, or sexual orientation. Mentoring initiatives should include 1) clearly stated purposes and goals with a focus on the professional growth and development of the untenured faculty (Files, Blair, Mayer, & Ko, 2008; Thorndike, Gusic, & Milner, 2008), 2) planned activities that socialize new, untenured faculty (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008), and 3) scheduled meetings to assess the protégé's progress in the areas of teaching, research, and service (Berger, 1990; Valentasis, 2005). I still have no idea what the purpose or goal of my new college's mentoring program is, was, or can be.

We also know that how the mentor-protégé pair is formed is a critical issue (Ewing, Freeman, Barrie et al., 2007; Rose, 2003;). Factors such as personality match, research interests, and personal and cultural interests should be considered (Daley, Palermo, Nivet et al, 2008; Tillman, 2001).

Wilson, Pereira, and Valentine pointed out that whether a mentoring relationship is developed formally or informally will influence the outcome (2002). These authors and others (Kram, 1985; Kirk & Reichert, 1992) identified a potential for exploitation in mentoring relationships that formally assign pairs and where mentors resent the extra responsibility. Given this, institutional compensation of mentors for additional duties associated with formal mentoring should be recognized as a potential influencing factor of the success of any formal mentoring program. This is a situation in which social work's value of empowerment speaks to creating formal mentoring programs. When all faculty have voice and power in defining their work (i.e, academic freedom), then those who are committed to mentoring new faculty seem to be the logical ones to create, develop, and implement formal mentoring in institutions that provide real support for such programs. Compensation and recognition for service in the role of mentor should not be understated or overlooked, especially if the institution claims to value mentoring.

Reflecting forward

If the goal of mentoring is facilitating longterm professional growth and development of new faculty, then a critical issue to address is how formal mentoring relationships are monitored and evaluated. This issue is intricately tied to the issues of matching mentors and protégés, goals of mentoring, who serves as mentors, and the clear definition of the mentor's role. Critics denounce traditional programs that only perpetuate paternalistic ideologies within the institution and prefer that informal mentoring relationships emerge naturally (Gibson, 2006). These critics identify that these formal, traditional models reproduce "an unavoidable homogeneity and sameness within the institution" (Stalker, 1994, p.367) which in

turn leads to recycling the dominant ideological power within workplace relationships (Darwin, 2000). These processes "sanction elitist patron systems where the academically marginalized (marked by age, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) are often excluded and/or limited in their access to appropriate mentors" (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002, p. 198).

Considering the extensive criticisms of formal mentoring programs and a scarcity of reports on mentoring programs for faculty that work, I am heartened to learn that Australian researchers are demonstrating that positive outcomes are achieved when flexibility, choice (i.e, protégé choice of mentor), responsiveness (critical, reflective approach), and collaboration are built into formal, structured mentoring programs (Ewing, Freeman, Barrie, Bell, O'Connor, Waugh, & Sykes, 2008).

Chapter Seven: Oh, Social Work, Where art Thou?

The absence of mentoring of social work educators is echoed in one out of three articles published by social work faculty during the last decade of this new millennium. Mentoring remains a new phenomenon in academic social work (Maramaldi, Gardner, Berkman, Ireland, S'Ambruoso, & Howe, 2004). Consider that almost a decade after Wilson, Pereira, and Valentine's (2002) research, these authors' implications for future scholarship on mentoring for new social work faculty remain unfulfilled. Social work needs to do much more to inspire, support, and celebrate the diversity, creativity, and success of its future educators so that the power of social workers as agents of change is fulfilled in a vision of social work working itself out of a job. Mentoring is a critical strategy for fulfilling this vision. My voyage resumes.

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