Mentors and Muses

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Abstract
The author examines the role of mentors and muses in graduate education, illustrating from his own experience. Mentors are teachers, doctoral committee chairs, or other faculty members who take special interest in a student, guiding him or her through the difficulties of graduate training, and imparting special knowledge about the profession that they do not learn through formal education. Mentors may also defend or protect their students until they are sufficiently mature to take care of themselves in the professional world. This article also discusses some important ethical issues in the relationship of the mentor and the mentee. Muses, unlike mentors, are persons who inspire a student or young faculty member toward rewarding directions in their personal and professional growth.

Key Words: education, ethics, graduate school, graduate training, mentor, muse, student

Graduate School
My first experience with graduate education came at the University of Florida in the mid-60s when I had traveled there from Ohio to work with Sidney Jourard, one of the leading figures in the new field of humanistic psychology. I arrived, however, to discover that he was away for a year’s leave of absence in England, and the rest of the faculty were pretty much all hidebound behaviorists. They did not like the new directions psychology was taking, and they did not like Sid or his students. I understand the situation was just as bad at Brandeis University, where Abraham Maslow was the chair of psychology, while the other faculty resented him and made fun of his students. Maslow was not an easygoing guy himself; a “humanistic Nazi” as Michael Murphy, the cofounder of the Esalen Institute, calls him even today. Michael would know, because Abraham was a frequent visitor to Esalen, where Fritz Perls had set himself up as Resident Scholar. At least one confrontation between the two is now famous in the annals of psychology. But telling that story would take me far afield.

Anyhow, back in Florida it took them the better part of the year to kick me out, along with several other sacrificial students (and one suicide), all to prove that despite being in the South the faculty there were as rigorous as the famous and enviable universities in the North. Before leaving, however, I managed to take a couple courses with Sid, who also introduced me to his friend, the new chair of philosophy, Thomas Hanna. Tom was a brilliant young existentialist, all full of Nietzsche. My friends and I loved to drop in on his lectures. Once he gave an evening talk on Camus’ The Stranger, arriving sun burnt and disheveled from a day of scuba diving in the Atlantic. We loved him! And, as some readers will know, Tom was soon to travel to California where he and Eleanor Criswell created the

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1 It seemed that no one had the will to force him to move on!
2 In 2005 I was given the gratification of returning to the University of Florida as an honored scholar and “wisdom keeper,” hosted by the Center for Spirituality and Health there.
Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training, and where he also became the Director of the Humanistic Psychology Institute (now the Saybrook University). But, back to my own story.

I reappeared a year or so later at the University of Georgia, in those days a place rife with science money, where I found my first and most important professional mentor, a young faculty member by the name of Ed Mulligan. I had taken a course with him on psychology of perception, though I can’t imagine why because in those days I still wanted to become a clinical psychologist and personality theorist. But I was soon to be in trouble again on that front. A new faculty member had come to Georgia from the University of Florida and carried with him the news that I was a student to be avoided. According to him, I had already developed opinions of my own and was not entirely malleable. Mulligan listened to all of this, then offered me a full research scholarship in his own laboratory where he was studying the nature of human audition. This was the first of several occasions in which he defended me against the criticisms of this faculty member, at one point actually calling him out and questioning his integrity in an open faculty meeting, an assault from which he never fully recovered the respect of his faculty peers, and which finally put an end to questions about my own competence as a student.

Thus, I learned a very important role of a mentor, which would later convert to my understanding of the role of a doctoral committee chair: defending and shepherding one’s students so that they do not fall prey to the attacks or foibles of other faculty or staff who have no positive investment in them. I have tried to remember this message throughout my career. By now I have chaired many graduate students at Saybrook University, and more recently at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), as well as a few other schools, and in each instance I consider the relationship between myself and my student to be one of trust and confidence, in which both participants commit completely to their roles.

Such commitments are indeed often necessary to the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. Completing a dissertation is one of the most demanding and strenuous undertakings that students will ever engage in. The chair, acting as a mentor, becomes something like a father or mother to this process. And, as in adolescence, when the student’s work is becoming ripe but is not yet finished, the demands that must be made by his or her chair can be especially difficult for the student to manage. Most, if not all, of my students have been though this difficult passage with me, and there were times when simple trust and commitment were all that held things together. One recent student actually contacted our program coordinator to request paperwork to withdraw from school. She refused to send it to him, and now, hardly a year later, he has obtained an excellent faculty position at a thriving university in Asia.

Another thing Ed Mulligan taught me was the personal commitment of time and energy sometimes required of a mentor and committee chair. I was a poor writer in those days; worse than that, an awful one. He, on the other hand, was an excellent writer who had worked professionally as a reporter and correspondent earlier in his career. I have no idea how many hours he spent editing and working with my efforts to produce quality research proposals and reports. As a writer I didn’t really “get it” until about the 5th or 6th complete re-write of the dissertation, itself a huge document with over 35 tables and figures, and a hundred and some odd pages of dense descriptive text. It was as if, after all that work, something snapped inside me, and I started making sense on the page.

Nevertheless, he always claimed, ironically, that master’s level students are more work than doctoral students who, in most instances, are better writers than I was. Later, in my own experience as a faculty member I have found this to be entirely true. By the time most students are ready to start writing a dissertation they usually have mastered the basics of descriptive prose, and also have learned something about APA format, or whatever style they are using.

And, of course, the chair must be available. I don’t mean available every minute or even every day, but no faculty member worth his salt would simply take another job, or leave for an extended visit to
Paleo-Siberia or the Congo, without working out something definite to take care of his or her students. This was a point that Mulligan emphasized again and again. And I have been frankly appalled to see this ethical rule broken by a few, though fortunately not many, of my colleagues.

**Mentors and Muses in the Life of Scholarship**

For me Ed Mulligan was a classic example of a mentor. A successful older professional who takes an aspiring younger person under his or her wing and teaches them the essential skills of the trade they could not have learned in their formal education. As noted above, mentors such as Mulligan also take a personal interest in their mentees, providing a safe haven for them to learn their craft and develop their ability to protect and defend themselves as they grow in the profession.

Sidney Jourard, on the other hand, was not a mentor for me for the obvious reason that we never worked together, at least beyond the fact that I took a couple courses with him. He was, however, a muse. A muse is someone who provides inspiration. Sid inspired me in two ways. First, his enormous joy of life, and the ease with which he carried his teaching and scholarship. He was the kind of university professor I wanted to be someday. Second, was his encouragement to me to develop my skills in exploring the inner dimensions of human experience and to write about them.

I told you what a poor writer I was. I had practically never been encouraged by others to write anything. Sid, however, was standing in front of me at the cash register of a local diner, in the wee hours of the morning, telling me to write. But, he also said, “Write in singing English!” He said this three times. It is the one thing he said that I never have forgotten. And I take it very seriously. I believe it is a wonderful skill to write with grace, poetic style, and the thoughtful selection of words chosen for balance and clarity. This, perhaps more than anything else, is what made William James such a great American intellectual figure. It is what, with Gertrude Stein’s friendship and advice, made Ernest Hemmingway a great writer, and it is something I have strived for in all of my work ever since. It is time consuming but deeply rewarding to pursue the editing necessary to produce clear, readable, and graceful wording. Often I have not had time to do it, but it is always my ideal.

I later was to meet David Loye, Riane Eisler’s partner, who became another mentor, introducing me to an even greater mentor, Ervin Laszlo, cofounder of the Club of Rome, and a man twice recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize. Between David and Ervin, and a growing friendship with the remarkable scholar, teacher, and researcher, psychologist Stanley Krippner, the world was to open up for me. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Way back in the early 80s, before I met David Loye or Ervin Laszlo, I was teaching at a four-year liberal arts college where I had a considerable amount of time to read and reflect. This was in part because the Internet, email, and cell phones did not yet exist. And in part because I was still unknown, and thus had my time to myself. I had stumbled across a book on the habits of highly successful professional scholars and researchers. Hmm, I thought, “I’d better read this!” Today I no longer recall anything in the book but the single statement that virtually all significant scholars and researchers carried on prodigious correspondences with like-minded colleagues.

I took this to heart, and began to develop my own lines of correspondence, especially about the nature of consciousness. I wrote to leading figures in this field, beginning with long and reflective letters, and then trailing off to shorter postcard messages very much like modern email notes. I tried to make these interesting by choosing quality cards with art motifs. Among my friends I was becoming known for this style of communicating, but these cards were not cheap and eventually the

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4 In Greek mythology, the muses were goddesses who delivered inspiration in the arts and even astronomy. Today the word has taken on a more relaxed and broader meaning.

5 Author of The Chalice and the Blade, etc.
increasing rate of correspondence was becoming something of a financial burden. Fortunately I was saved by the advent of email; first the primitive “BITNET”6 and later the form we know today. As I was discovering, becoming part of a common community of interest is an essential part of being a successful scholar. It brings professional collaborations, opportunities to transmit and publish one’s work, and up to date knowledge of what is going on outside your own office or laboratory. And it brings friendships and encouragement.

Needless to say, it is a great gift to introduce students to such communities. My first mentor could not do this for me because I drifted off into areas of scholarship and research different than those of his own and his colleagues. Had I stayed in his field of research, the nature and physiology of audition, he would have done so. For me, it was several years later when David Loye and Ervin Laszlo introduced me to the worldwide systems science community, and Stanley Krippner introduced me to members of the community of consciousness scholars and, perhaps more important, worked with me on many co-authored papers that made my name familiar to a wide range of psychologists and philosophers interested in many aspects of consciousness studies. My book, *The Radiance of Being*, combines my experience from both of these communities in what is probably the most complex work I will ever write.

**Styles of Teaching**

Styles of teaching are quite dissimilar at different levels of education. Without going into a detailed discussion of what education really is or should be, I think most would agree that undergraduate education is about helping students acquire basic knowledge and skills. I claim that at a deeper level it is about developing schemas or productive patterns of thought and action that amount to working intelligence. In recent years, however, I have been working with graduate students, especially at the doctoral level. At this altitude it is about becoming something like a guide or even a mentor in a way that both instructs and facilitates student learning and growth.

This kind of teaching never stops. After acquiring the basic skills of research and scholarship while in graduate school, I have learned a great deal more from co-authoring papers and books with generous and masterful colleagues such as Stanley Krippner, Ervin Laszlo, and others. In this sense they continue to be mentors and muses for me, and a constant inspiration and model for my own life of teaching and scholarship.

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6 BITNET was a way of corresponding with other university colleagues in which messages were transferred from university computer to university computer as they made their way across the country, and later across the world. You could watch the announcements feed back from each of these nodes onto your own screen as letters sped on towards their destinations.
References