The Flapping Butterfly Wings of Gifted Mentorship: Ruth Richards and Saybrook University

Denita Benyshek

Abstract

Denita Benyshek is a professional artist and doctoral candidate in the psychology of spirituality and consciousness at Saybrook University. Benyshek shares the life events that led her to study at Saybrook. She describes the serendipitous meeting with her future mentor, Ruth Richards, an eminent scholar on creativity. A metaphor from chaos theory, the butterfly effect, illustrates how one comment from Richards led Benyshek into an international network of scholars, conference presentations, and publications. Mentors are compared with gifted educators and gifted mentorship is discussed. Saybrook University’s role, as a gifted institutional mentor, is considered and recommendations are made, including an endowed chair in creative studies, teaching assistantships, conference travel grants, courses in professional practices, and additional support for the essay and dissertation proposal process. Benyshek also proposes a new, innovative program for Saybrook – a master of fine arts degree in transpersonal, humanistic, and socially transformative arts. Finally, ideas for future studies of mentorship are offered.

Key Words: mentor, gifted adults, gifted mentorship, graduate students, Saybrook University, Ruth Richards, Stanley Krippner, MFA, transpersonal art

The Beckoning Sunflower

Once upon a time, an artist drove across a bridge. She appealed, in desperation, to the psychologist for whom she worked for in her 20s. Seeking escape from a verbally and emotionally abusive marriage, the artist wondered how she could earn a decent income for herself and her three-year-old son. She drove, felt the deceased psychologist’s presence near, and called aloud for help, “Doctor, what should I do?” Running away was not enough. The artist wanted something to run towards. Something good, even great, where she would be welcomed, appreciated, and nurtured.

Upon waking the next morning, the artist knew what to do. She would develop her natural gift for psychotherapy by earning a second master’s degree – this time in psychology. To accommodate caring for her young son, a wise, older friend advised her to find a distance learning school.

One web search brought her to the home page of Saybrook Graduate School, upon which a golden yellow, sunflower radiated like a mandala and looked like home. The artist was from rural Kansas, where sunflowers grow wild along dirt roads traversing fields of wheat, sorghum, and alfalfa. She longed to be amidst her family, surrounded by prairie, to return to a time and place of beginnings from a time and place of endings.

I was that desperate artist. Because of the sunflower, I applied to Saybrook.
Serendipity
At Saybrook’s residential orientation, I joined students in the dining room. An elfin woman with sparkling eyes and short strawberry-blonde hair sat down on my left. She peered at me quizzically, with a kind smile, and introduced herself as Ruth Richards. Ruth asked questions, getting to know me with genuine interest. When I told her I was an artist, she responded with her characteristic “Aahhhhh...” simultaneously conveying delight, enthusiasm, and the “bingo!” of recognition. Then, Ruth told me about Saybrook’s creative studies certificate program.

My fascination with the psychology of creativity is longstanding, beginning during my undergraduate studies in art. I spent my free time in the university library, laboriously searching through heavy volumes of peer reviewed journals for information on creativity. What was this power, this capacity that I had? What about women who are highly creative?

I hungrily devoured the publications of early pioneers in creative studies, including Frank Barron (1963; 1965a; 1965b; 1972), John Dewey (1958), Abraham Maslow (1971), Rollo May (1975), and – very importantly – the early research on women and creativity by Ravenna Helson (1965; 1966; 1971).

But, at that pivotal moment at the orientation, instead of searching for research about creativity, an internationally recognized scholar on creativity sought me out. Ruth Richards is a Harvard trained psychiatrist, a psychologist, a certified art educator, and the author of numerous, publications on creativity (Richards, 1996; 1997; 1999; 2007; Richards et al., 1997).

How Ruth and I met could be seen as a serendipitous event. Serendipity, that “gift for finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for” (Serendipity, 2002), that “faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident” (Serendipity, 1989), was found to affect the career choices “of prominent academic women in counseling psychology” (Williams et al., 1998: p.379). Seemingly “chance events” changed women’s career paths and profoundly altered their self-concepts. As will be seen, my chance meeting with Ruth did shift my career path and my
self-concept was nurtured and strengthened as well.

My Butterfly Mentor: Ruth Richards
However, I do not consider my meeting with Ruth Richards as only an example of serendipity. Perhaps Ruth sat next to me because “Artist” is tattooed across my forehead in florescent colors, making me look like a potential convert to creative studies. Then again, perhaps our meeting is also evidence of chaos theory and “the butterfly effect.”

To illustrate the effect of subtle changes on weather systems, Lorenz (1972) used an example that became known as the butterfly effect: in Brazil, flapping butterfly wings cause a chain of events that sets off a tornado in Texas. Given that Ruth often wears flowing garments with wide sleeves of silky fabrics, she often resembles a butterfly. Perhaps this garb is more than mere chance, too.

Of course, if you consider the larger context of nonlinear equations that converged at that orientation, reaching beyond the circumscribed space of the orientation dining hall, outside the finite schedule of the orientation conference, encompassing our individual histories of passionate engagement with the arts, psychology, creativity, education, plus science, multiplied by qualities associated with our individual gifts, and factoring in our sisterhood as single mothers – then what resulted from that meeting, the sum total of all that occurred since that single event, does not seem like chance at all. A form, a structure, a pattern becomes evident.

Indeed, chaos theory, much beloved by Ruth Richards, explains the workings of dynamic systems, sensitivity to initial conditions, bifurcation, strange attractors, phase space, fractal patterns, and transformation. These concepts might serve to describe what led to, happened during, and developed from my first meeting with Ruth. But, I am not adequately knowledgeable about chaos theory to accurately analyze our relationship with these concepts.

I do know, in a deep, personal, experiential way, how Ruth’s challenging and nurturing mentorship helped develop my skills and identity as a scholar. Ruth is not an authoritarian leader providing instructions that must be followed absolutely. Like another passionate, unconventional, science-loving red head, namely Ms. Frizzle of The Magic School Bus series (Cole, 1990; 1994; 1999), Ruth allows time for students to muddle about, get lost, get dirty, explore beyond the edge of chaos, enter unknown territory, make original observations, and discover previously unseen patterns. At the same time, she will not abandon a student flailing in the swamp of not-knowing-what-to-do as crocodiles swiftly approach.

Ruth has a gift for seeing the core of an issue and offering just the right words, no more and no less. For example, at one point I shared an insight with her. I realized that I was blocked in my academic progress because I did not want to leave Saybrook. Why? Because, at Saybrook, I do not need to hide my spiritual being, intellectual brilliance, artistic talent, and psi capacities. I can marry my passions for art and psychology, pursue my fascination with shamanism, and integrate art, collage, and poetry into my psychology assignments. The faculty and students of Saybrook are an exceptionally gifted group of individuals, highly intelligent, innovative, brave risk takers, and devoted change agents who care for individuals, communities, and the environment. As many students have said of Saybrook, “I feel at home here.” I walked through the corridors of the conference hotel, passing students, faculty, and administrators who were embracing, laughing, in passionate conversation – and I saw joy-yellow sunflowers growing on either side of a road. I did not want to leave.

To which, the wise Ruth simply flapped her butterfly wings and replied, “You should start attending conferences.” She understood that I needed something to go towards, to enter into. So, I followed her advice.

Another extraordinary mentor at Saybrook, Stanley Krippner, regularly sends a printed newsletter with a report on his activities, information about developments in psychology, and opportunities for students. He mentioned a scholarship competition for the Society of Shamanic Practitioners conference in Santa Fe. With
Stan’s support, I applied and won. I loved the people I met, the conversations, the rituals, the lectures, and the setting. I met David Cumes (2011), a urologist who trained as a sangoma (shaman) in South Africa, Sidian Morning Star Jones (Krippner and Jones, 2011) who is a leader in the open source religion and personal mythology movements, and Larry Dossey (1993; 1999), an allopathic physician promoting alternative medicine and healing prayer.

With David, I could discuss precognitive dreams. On Sidian’s website (http://www.opensourcereligion.net), I started a discussion entitled “Art, Consciousness, and Spirituality” (Benyshek, 2008) that eventually filled 38 web pages. Larry Dossey’s (1993; 1999) books are directly relevant to my dissertation topic.

A few months later, I attended the 26th Conference on Shamanism, Healing, and Transformation started by Ruth-Inge Heinze (1982; 1984; 1984; 1985; 2005; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1997), the anthropologist who introduced me to shamanism at a Saybrook residential conference. I studied how researchers made presentations. The next year, I attended as a presenter, giving an academic lecture/performance artwork on the contemporary artist as shaman. Then, at the following conference, my son and I gave a presentation on the spontaneous shamanistic healing of a boy. This year I will give a lecture on the art audience as shamanic community. The president of the shamanism conference, Jurgen Kremer (1997; 1999; 2004; 2005; 2008) is also an instructor at Saybrook and an editor at ReVision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation. This journal will publish my early research on contemporary artists as shamans (Benyshek, In Press-c) in the next issue. I also presented at two festivals, sharing information from my research with artists and art audiences – where the research could be used and put into practice.

Over the course of several years, I also made presentations at the residential conference meetings of the creative studies group. Carl Hild (2006; 2007), a doctoral student in organizational systems, observed my presentation on artists and shamanism. After Carl graduated, he emailed me regarding an upcoming conference in Anchorage, Alaska, suggested I attend, and put me in touch with the conference organizers. Two weeks later, I shared my research on artists and shamanism with members of the International Society of Shamanistic Researchers (ISSR). The society’s president, Mihály Hoppá (1996; 2007), recently recommended my research to a colleague in China, who is editing a 12 volume Encyclopedia of Shamanism. My work (Benyshek, 2011/In Press-a, 2011/In Press-b) will be published in volume 2, Contemporary Art and Shamanism. This year, I will offer two presentations at the ISSR conference, Shamanhood and its Arts, at the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, Poland.

One suggestion made by Ruth Richards - one flap of her butterfly wings - resulted in a storm of productivity, presentations, publications, and professional relationships. The serendipitous meeting with Ruth led to knowledge from creative studies informing my dissertation research, which will result in a unique contribution to our understanding of creativity, artists, and shamans. One suggestion - one seed planted - grew into the multiple bifurcations of cause and effect, branching and branching and branching again.

Ruth Richards and Stanley Krippner also enthusiastically supported my scholarship applications through letters of

Gifted Mentorship
My interest in creativity extends into the arena of education for gifted individuals. Exceptional teachers of gifted students are also gifted. In several studies (Freehill, 1974; Hansford, 1985; Newland, 1962; Torrance and Myers, 1978), gifted teachers were found to be characterized by emotional security, positive sense of self, superior intelligence, curiosity, cognitive agility, openness, flexibility, strong communication skills, and a constant search for new experiences. Gifted teachers were also found to have a sense of mission, empathy, drive, rapport, enthusiasm, creativity, high expectations, frequent innovations, and respect for students (Dorhout, 1983; Ferrel, Kress, and Croft, 1988; Maddux, Samples-Lachmann, and Cumming, 1985; Renzulli, 1969; Wendel and Helser, 1989).

After considering the properties of gifted teachers, I thought about what additional characteristics and actions would be typical of a gifted mentor. Using my “artistic license,” I heavily modified the National Association for Gifted Children’s (1990) list of characteristics indicating the presence of giftedness, then synthesized the list with my personal experiences of high quality mentorship, describing characteristics of a gifted mentor:

1. Initiates contact with students, gets to know students.
2. Is responsive and open to new and different ideas; welcomes critique of ideas.
3. Shows persistent intellectual curiosity and cognitive flexibility.
4. Asks searching questions (also known as Socratic questioning) that encourage students to go deeper into their research process.
5. Has outstanding problem-solving ability and can help define problems but leaves the final problem definition – as well as the solution – to the student.
6. Demonstrates interest in the nature and techniques of education, research, adult development, and lifelong learning.
7. Is continually learning, adding to knowledge, and staying abreast of developments in chosen field.
8. Shows initiative and originality in intellectual work; has a wide range of intellectual interests; has developed one or more interests to considerable depth.
9. Constructed an ongoing trajectory of research studies in key interests.
10. Succeeded in publicizing studies through peer reviewed publications and professional conferences.
11. Understands the historical development of the field and is open to further evolution that may be stimulated by student work.
12. Applies superior skills in writing, speaking, and critical thinking to improving the quality of student assignments, presentations, and dissertations.
13. Recognizes the talents and strengths of individual students and builds on these qualities.
14. Supports the efforts of exceptional students to receive funding through grants and scholarships.
15. Notifies students of employment opportunities in the field.
16. Appreciates, supports, and helps structure imaginative, artistic, personal expressions in student research.
17. Sets realistically high standards for students that are raised as student progresses through program; either teaches required skills or knows where students can learn the skills necessary to meet higher standards.
18. Shows social poise and an ability to communicate with students in a mature, empathetic, positive, noncompetitive, and encouraging way.
19. Is inspired by teaching and interacting with students; sees teaching as a creative endeavor and as an extension of research activities; is devoted to nurturing future scholars as a means of
further contributing to the mentor’s chosen field.

20. Continues mentorship relationship after the student graduates.

21. Has formed a network of professional relationships, nationally and internationally; introduces graduate to network of scholars and leaders outside of school setting.

22. Involves graduate in collaborative studies; cites graduate’s research; invites graduate to contribute to publications edited by mentor.

Some of these actions were also included in Mullen’s (2005) analysis of “alternative mentors” who “strive to make a profound difference in the development of students, colleagues, and others” and “mentor beyond the demands of their position, seeking to enhance the development and education of protégés outside the traditional supervisory or advisory context” (p. 37). Mullen recognized that mentoring is a “separate or superordinate function because it requires an ‘above and beyond’ effort” (p.37).

Alternative mentors also support mentees even against colleagues or authorities and “sensitively reveal their thoughts to the mentee about his or her performance, work habits, and other relevant areas, even where this may feel uncomfortable” (Mullen, 2005; p.37). Ruth Richards once telephoned me to discuss an ethical issue troubling her. Although the problem turned out to be a misunderstanding, I appreciated her effort and concern. Conversely, alternative mentors request feedback from mentees, “as a reflective strategy for improving themselves, modeling authenticity in the relationship (p.37)”, and modifying the mentoring relationship itself as needed. In addition, alternative mentors continually learn and creatively reinvent themselves. Concerned with justice and sociopolitical activism, the values of alternative mentors extend into integration of feminist ideals, nonpatriarchal structures, critical democratic perspectives, and advocacy for disadvantaged students.

After considering outstanding mentors, I noticed many similarities between characteristics of mentors and characteristics of gifted individuals. Mentorship appears to be a creative expression of giftedness through actions made in relationship with mentees.

The Care and Feeding of Butterflies: Institutional Mentorship

Not surprisingly, the expression of giftedness depends not only on the inherent talents of students, but also on the educational environment (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). Beyond the efforts of individual professors who serve as mentors, I believe that the educational environments of universities can also function as mentors. Universities can create a culture of gifted mentorship where such practices become the norm, with the institutional structure providing mentorship to faculty and students. Such institutional mentorship is necessary to produce gifted scholars, who do not suddenly appear fully formed, ex nihilo.

Indeed, many goals and methods of education for the gifted are expressed in Saybrook’s Mission and Values (2009): to provide “rigorous graduate education that inspires transformational change in individuals, organizations, and communities, toward a just, humane, and sustainable world (Saybrook Website).” Moreover, Saybrook, as an institutional mentor:

1. Applies humanistic values to higher education to cultivate the highest potential of each individual
2. Honors multiple ways of knowing and being.
3. Celebrates diversity and encourages authentic expression.
4. Emphasizes scholarship with empathy, compassion, creativity, and integrity.
5. Manifests the courage to explore the new and the different.
7. Nurtures optimism and responsibility for the future of our communities, our world, and ourselves. (Saybrook University, 2009)

As noted in the position paper of the National Association for Gifted Children’s Website (2010), “Exceptionally capable
adults are among those most likely to contribute to the advancement of a society and its scientific, humanistic, and social goals.” Such adults “comprise a large proportion of the leadership of the next generation in the arts, sciences, letters, politics, etc.” Supporting future leaders contributes to the well being of society. Saybrook can support gifted mentorship of future leaders by establishing an endowed chair in creative studies – a program that quickly grew from a certificate to a master’s degree and, very soon, will also include a doctorate degree.

Another means by which Saybrook could provide institutional mentorship is through establishing a teaching assistantship program. Perhaps doctoral candidates could assist with teaching masters level courses, not replacing current instructors but assisting with teaching responsibilities. This is an important learning experience for students who want to teach at a university or college, providing much needed teaching experience.

I also recommend instituting a scholarship and grant database through the financial aid webpages, as well as a modest conference travel grant similar to the funding offered by Northwestern University Graduate School (u.d) and the University of Washington (2011).

Institutionalized mentorship can also be provided via seminars and courses on professional practices, consistently structured through a learning guide, including how to: submit research to journals; write presentation proposals for conferences; make conference presentations; apply for teaching positions; write teaching philosophy and syllabi; conduct a private psychotherapy practice; organize curriculum vitae; write research grants; create office systems to support increased productivity; and formulate the important “elevator speech.” Such practical skills are required to successfully share one’s gifts with others.

Current students also need easy access, through the library, to dissertation proposals written by former students and structured guidance, perhaps through a learning guide, regarding the essay and proposal process.

I believe that Saybrook will also benefit from providing students with an anonymous means of offering feedback on instructors and courses. An online feedback form could also assess what mentoring occurred in the context of the course. Since mentoring also occurs outside of courses, as professors nominate students for awards, recommend publications to submit articles to, etc., perhaps there could be an established way to inform the administration about exceptional mentorship.

Towards furthering individual and institutional mentorship for highly gifted, creative individuals, I propose the addition of a master of fine arts (MFA) degree in transpersonal, humanistic, and socially transformative arts. As far as I know, this kind of art program does not exist elsewhere. Moreover, there is little support in academia, and, far too often, active discouragement to artists creating spiritual, transformative, and healing artworks. The new MFA program would support social transformation through the arts and make visible the spirituality long present in art (see Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Balkema and Slager, 2002; Beuys & Harlan, 2004; Burnakova and Nyssen, 2005; Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998; Drury and Voigt, 1996; Eliade, 1965; Flam, 1973; Funk, 2000; Furst, 2003; Gablik, 1992; Hackett, 1998; Hardin, u.d.; Jung, 1974; Kandinsky, 1977; King, 2005; Korp, 1991; Lommel, 1966; Looseleaf, 2002; McNiff, 1992; Petten, 2008; Raine, 2005, 2009; Rhodes, 1994; Rushing, 1987; Shanes, 1989; Spirituality and contemporary art, 2002; Wark, 2006; Watson, 2006; Weisberger, 1987; Weiss, 1995; Werness, 2003).

The MFA program would support student growth from deficiency creativity to being creativity (B-creativity), defined by Rhodes (1997) “as motivation by higher level growth needs that may result in products and experiences that have intrinsic meaning for the individual and therefore bring a high level of transcendent satisfaction and understanding for both the originator and the audience” (p. 252).

The Saybrook MFA could be modeled on existing low residence MFA programs, such as the interdisciplinary MFA offered by Goddard College (2011), where current...
Saybrook president Mark Schulman previously served as president.

With a little modification, such as how assignments are “slanted”, as well as a few additions to required reading lists, many Saybrook courses would contribute towards the College Art Association (2008) requirements for “applying critical skills” to “meaning and content.” Saybrook courses could contribute towards the “comprehensive examination and critique of the function and role of art from a variety of views and contexts, in areas both in and outside the visual arts, guiding them to explore cognate areas to enhance their total educational experience” (College Art Association Website).

In addition to the courses on creativity, imagine how Saybrook courses – such as Personal Mythology and Dreamwork, Socially Engaged Spirituality, Cultural Criticism, Transpersonal Psychology, Psychology of Shamanism, Sustainability, Healthy Communities, Violence and Nonviolence, Peace Studies, or Race, Class, and Gender - could inspire and inform artists! An MFA program created to fulfill Saybrook’s mission statement would become another protected breeding ground for nurturing butterflies, eventually releasing powerful storms and gentle breezes of deeply meaningful art created for the benefit of individuals and communities.

**Conclusion**

Individuals and institutions can provide mentorship. Saybrook University’s mission statement expresses values that represent an optimal educational environment for gifted adults. Saybrook could enhance institutional mentorship through teaching assistantships, conference travel grants, courses on professional practices, anonymous feedback by students, and an endowed chair in creative studies.

An MFA degree in transpersonal, humanistic, and socially transformative arts would create a new venue for expressing Saybrook’s humanistic values, giving much needed mentoring to spiritual, socially conscious artists, and honoring art as a way of knowing, an expression of authenticity, a means of courageous exploration, and a source of inspired transformation for individuals, communities, society, and our precious planet.

This article introduces the idea of gifted mentorship. Characteristics found in gifted individuals are also found in outstanding mentors, whether through individual mentorship or institutional mentorship.

Ruth Richards, M.D., Ph.D., an eminent scholar on creativity, provides an example of gifted mentorship. In addition, Saybrook University demonstrates many qualities of gifted, institutional mentorship.

I recommend additional research on gifted mentors, studying those professors who students identify as Saybrook’s most effective, most inspiring mentors. In addition, research on students who respond to mentoring, follow up on recommendations, flourish as scholars, and succeed in contributing to the field will provide more insight into the mentoring relationship. Perhaps we will gain a deeper understanding of what characterizes gifted mentees and how universities and professors can support the development of these traits in more graduate students – nourishing, exercising, and strengthening the flapping of their butterfly wings.