
MENTORING - A PRICELESS GIFT

William L. Winters, Jr.

From Methodist DeBakey Heart Center and Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas



Websters Dictionary defines a mentor as an instructor, guide or coach. *Random House Dictionary* defines a mentor as a trusted advisor. Neither has a definition for "role model." My own would be a description usually applied to one with admirable characteristics: someone with attributes to emulate, who may provide a passive influence on one's life. Mentoring, however, implies an active, ongoing participation. Many role models may in fact become mentors with characteristics that may overlap. Perhaps it may be said that a role model is who we are, mentoring is what we do.

If you were to reflect upon your career, your life, you might find literally dozens of people who have influenced and guided you. As professionals, we tend to consider a mentor in a more restricted sense - as one who has shaped our professional career. But mentors are present at every stage of our lives. Some of us are fortunate to

have had many influential mentors, although the number is not as important as the quality. As physicians, we are all mentors and role models to some degree because medicine is a universally respected profession. So what we do and say, and how we do it and say it, tends to influence in the context of our knowledge base (and sometimes even in the absence of a knowledge base).

Mentors come in many forms: teachers, friends, colleagues, family, etc. Parents may be the largest group of mentors, though some would classify them as role models. I think they are both. In our early lives they set the rules, influence our personality, define integrity and establish the inquisitiveness that patterns the rest of our lives. In short, we tend to become what our parents are or were: teachers' children reach, physicians' and nurses' children heal, actors' children act, and so on. My father was a physician who showed me

the fascination of an electrocardiogram when I was in high school. Small wonder I became a cardiologist. However, that same influence on my own children has not produced a physician, although I take pride in what they have become.

Aside from my father, I can identify mentors in every phase of my life. In medical school, a general surgeon nearly steered me into surgery because of the unique rapport he was able to develop with patients on short notice. I thought all surgeons could do that. He taught me the value of pain control in postoperative patients. Dr. Thomas J. Durant entered my life while I was an intern at the Philadelphia General Hospital. His physical diagnostic skills at the bedside were legendary, and I still recall many of his admonitions. Dr. Lewis Soloff, who I mentioned in an earlier expose, had an extraordinary analytical mind the likes of which I had never seen. In the early days of cardiac

catheterization, when potentially suspect physiologic data didn't always jibe with clinical findings, he was invariably correct in judging which action to take. After a shore course in the refinements of heart surgery on dogs, Dr. Morron J. Oppenheimer, chairman of the Physiology Department at Temple University School of Medicine, gave me license to create atrial septal defects in dogs to show how these defects could be demonstrated by the intravenous injection of carbon dioxide. (An injectable agent in the late 1950s, when properly administered, was safe and temporarily useful for detecting pericardial effusion.)

A mentor's influence comes through things they say or do, by way of a lifestyle, how they treat and interact with others, what and how they teach. In essence, mentors indulge in translational medicine. In the literary world, "translation is the process of interpreting an extant body of written work and converting it into a new language."¹ In the scientific world, "translation is the application of fundamental discoveries in basic science to clinical medicine with a goal of developing new treatments for debilitating diseases."¹ Mentors influence the raw potential of people and mold them into individuals capable of pursuing new information, whether it be original or a new aspect of old knowledge.

The stimulus for this essay is the perception that a shortfall exists of physician scientists participating in clinical research, in both private practice and academic settings. Dr. J. Edward Hill, president of the American Medical Association, has clearly articulated the looming shortage of physicians in general.² That shortage is multiplied many times over in academia as physicians leave academic medicine for the perceived benefits of private practice. The challenge to capture new, young physicians and retain them in a scientific endeavor occurs as financial support for clinical research dwindles. While most of us have little influence

on funding resources, we do have the means to influence young minds, and that brings me back to mentoring.

The challenge is to identify those with the ideals, passion and knack for investigation before they are corrupted by the siren of private practice. (With all due respect, I was in private practice for 25 years before returning to an academic environment, and many private-practice physicians engage in very meaningful clinical research.) Pursuit of an academic career is demanding, often frustrating and politically challenging. It also can be extraordinarily rewarding. Once an individual is identified, mentoring should begin in earnest. Liken it to a pastor in a church: show him/her the way; provide a sense of belonging; demonstrate the excitement of problem solving; pique the imagination. A mentor may be provocative - critical or supportive, demanding or resting - but always the beacon with a purpose in mind. Some students may collapse under harsh criticism; others may languish under the "nice guy" approach. Good mentors consider the personalities of their students and find the approach most likely to forever imbue that person with the mystery of inquiry.

The Methodist DeBakey Heart Center has a golden opportunity in this regard as we create and develop a new cardiology training program. We intend to attract the best candidates and expose them to the excitement and satisfaction of investigational medicine. We hope to influence their future career choices by setting superior standards as role models and by personal and intellectual direction as mentors. There are superb resources available; we have sound, ongoing research in cardiovascular imaging, interventional procedures, heart failure and heart transplantation under the direction of proven mentors and a very strong departmental *esprit de corps*. So much so, in fact, that I predict within five years the art of mentoring will prove to be a priceless gift for all involved.

REFERENCES

1. Chien, KR. *Herceptin and the heart - a molecular modifier of cardiac failure*. *N Engl J Med*. 2006 Feb 23; 354(8):789-90.
2. Hill, JE. *Physician shortages pose a risk to the nation's health*. *American Medical News*. 2006;49(1):1.