
Mentors and Tormentors

Author(s): Meryl Altman

Source: *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Women, Tenure, and Promotion (Fall, 2007), pp. 182-189

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40071235>

Accessed: 15-05-2016 11:19 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *NWSA Journal*

Mentors and Tormentors

MERYL ALTMAN

Reflecting on the legacy of the late Carolyn Heilbrun, and on her own experience as director of Women's Studies at a small liberal arts college, a forty-something feminist academic asks, what did my generation learn about mentoring from the women's studies pioneers who taught us? And what could we do better? Self-awareness, abstinence, and a healthy sense of irony may help.

Keywords: mentoring / graduate school / feminism / pedagogy / affirmative action

A small, wiry woman, always moving, always thinking, she stopped for emphasis at the corner of 113th and Broadway and punched a short, sharp line in the air with her cigarette. "You've got to get past this," she said. "*Carolyn Heilbrun is not your mother.*"

A quarter of a century has passed. . . . My fellow graduate student, Peggy Brawer, who gave me that good advice, died young of cancer, her brilliant books unwritten. And Carolyn Heilbrun too is dead, by her own hand, a vivid absence at the Modern Language Association convention where I first sketched out some of these remarks. Many who had known Heilbrun personally, many more who felt they knew her through her work, struggled with her legacy: some on public platforms, others in private turbulent groups, some in sorrow, some in anger. Sometimes "survival" is more than a metaphor. The questions I'm left with are hard but simple ones: Is the academy today more hospitable, more *fair* to women than it was when I was a scruffy, unruly presence in Carolyn Heilbrun's class? What have the "survivors" done to make things better, and what could we learn to do differently now?

Like many people, I am skeptical about the idea of "waves" within twentieth-century U.S. feminism. Perhaps we'd like a comfortable way to historicize, distance, explain away a dynamic between women in the academy that has not always been . . . loving. The thing is, what I'm hearing (on WMST-L, for instance) does not seem all that different from some things (spoken and unspoken) that I remember from around 1981. On the one hand: "You young people have it so easy, you can't imagine what it was like, you're so ungrateful for what we did." On the other hand: "But you don't understand us, what we're facing now; you don't understand our different lives, especially you don't understand our sexuality: and who are you to talk about 'having it easy,' when you have tenure, and I'm supposed to be grateful for the opportunity to teach freshman comp?!"

I'm now a tenured faculty member at a small liberal arts college where we've been lucky enough to do a lot of hiring. We've been thinking quite intensely at DePauw about the need to mentor and support new faculty, both on general principles, and as a way of working against gender inequities and other forms of discrimination (Abraham and Altman 2005). People who, like myself, did not feel well-mentored in graduate school and in their first jobs are feeling a particular pressure to work against the "compulsion to repeat" experiences that were wounding and damaging. Some ways to do this may be obvious: teaching workshops; offering to read the work of junior colleagues; suggesting conferences that look good; arguing institutionally in favor of junior leaves rather than saying "we managed without them, why can't they?" Things like that. But the main point I hope to convey with the story I am not quite telling here is that the call for more and better mentoring needs to be accompanied by a critical analysis of mentoring practices.

Anyone who has tried to help a struggling student to succeed, only to be faced with that student's anger at receiving a low final grade—"I thought you were on my side!"—has confronted the role confusion that is inevitable when the same person responsible for "mentoring" also serves as the institution's evaluative gatekeeper. This can only get worse when the "mentee" is a graduate student who desperately needs not just a glowing letter of recommendation, but a phone call to the advisor's friend on the hiring committee to make her application jump out of a pile of hundreds; or when the neophyte faculty member seeking sage advice from the only veteran woman in her department will need the older women to fight for her at tenure time. When the mentor has many graduate students, or many junior colleagues, and has to deal fairly with them in a competitive environment—or perhaps choose whom to help and whom to leave behind—the situation becomes, or at least *feels* acute in a new way. There is no reason to think this is any better in Women's Studies or any simpler when both parties are women. It may even be harder because both parties have higher expectations of emotional and practical support.

It is a common metaphor to compare academic mentoring to parenting. German students still affectionately refer to their advisors as "mein Doktorvater" or "meine Doktormutter," and our dean, a scientist in his mid-fifties, likes to refer to the cohort of talented, diverse faculty we've recently hired as "my kids." More darkly, I've sometimes been tempted to analyze my own graduate experience using the "toxic parents" model—those who, despite professional success, carry forward deep grievances and feelings of being unloved from their own early experiences, those who may not be emotionally well-equipped to nurture a new generation.

Besides, "nurturing" has its limitations. The favorite student who is expected to be or become "a little me" may experience as much or more stress as the frankly despised outsider, who may be better equipped to

design her own research agenda and live her own life. From the other side, too, mentoring is not always *welcome*; I remember agonizing over how to help a young colleague who was struggling with her teaching but who greeted my carefully crafted official letter by telling me to mind my own business. ("You wrote too much" was what she said.) When I presented an earlier version of these remarks, several accomplished academics in the audience responded with stories of how they had successfully *resisted* being mentored by advisors who were trying to manipulate and control them, or who hoped to take credit for their work.

I suggest we recognize that as teachers and students, the needs we have of one another are partly rational in origin and unreasonable in intensity, and that these are *transference* relationships, comparable to what develops in classic psychoanalysis when the analyst begins to stand in for the real (childhood) source of the analysand's distress. The obligation of the teacher, or the more experienced faculty member, then becomes to "master the countertransference," or become aware of her own investments and needs, in order to hold them to one side. When working with undergraduates especially, or with people in great pain, this "abstinence" is an essential ethical principle. But at some point, surely even "mothers" are people with careers, lives, and legitimate needs that do not end at tenure, although most of the available academic advice literature would lead one to think so. Since it's difficult for those who do not feel supported to provide healthy support, we should realize that placing resources (including emotional resources) at the disposal of new faculty that are not made available to all is a recipe for intergenerational jealousy, another disaster waiting to happen. More broadly, I'm coming to feel that the intense focus on dyadic mentoring relationships, which resemble parenting, may not be the best thing *for either person*. In other words, what I'm looking to suggest is not better "mothering," but something different. I have three main suggestions, each of which may look somewhat paradoxical.

Less Professionalization, More Genuine Professionalism

My undergraduate education at a small liberal arts college did not prepare me very well for graduate school. I thought I was signing up for more education; instead, I was entering a machine for manufacturing distinction. Without wanting to recite grievances, I can name some things that were not useful to me: pressure to conform to discursive and behavioral norms and a focus on "how to get ahead" that could substitute for actual learning. Everyone wanted to talk about how to get the dissertation done, how to "place" it, how to make time with people who could help one, what sort of topic would get one a job, but few people had much time to discuss the actual ideas in the actual dissertation. That would have been helpful.

Reading lists would have been helpful. Comments on drafts would have been helpful. Especially in the early stages, I didn't so much need mentors as I needed *teachers*; but the prestige networks by which that institution functioned didn't reward teaching.

What I mean by genuine *professionalism* is that the mentor has an obligation to remember that teaching is the job, and that this involves an obligation not just to the "special few" but to all students. The same information, the same help, the same opportunities, need to be made available to everybody. Otherwise "mentoring" is just another word for favoritism, another excuse for power games. One of the hardest things, I now see, is balancing the desire to mentor and encourage with the need to evaluate and, in some cases, signal clearly a need for improvement. Some kind of professional distance, some norms about that, could be very valuable.

This is connected to a basic tension, or paradox, in feminist theory: are women more harmed by the devalorization of personal relationships, or by the over-emphasis on the personal? (A much bigger question than I can discuss here.)

Be Aware of, and Fight Against, "Cultural Cloning"

Philomena Essed's work with David Goldberg suggests that many of the approaches taken to diversify the academy and the workplace have not worked because they have been limited by a basic "cultural preference for sameness" that enforces conformity with respect not just to race but other more diffuse qualities:

It seems to me that converging discriminations against particular groups are also indicative of normative preferences for clones of imagined perfections of the same type and profile: masculine, white, and European. Processes of exclusion, in other words, cultivate the preservation of racial clones (racial purity) and concomitant socio-cultural cloning (normative systems of aesthetics and cultural behavior favoring—idealized images of—whiteness and masculinities). With the concept of cultural cloning the gaze of inquiry shifts from difference, diversity and un/equality to problematizing sameness and homogeneities. Cultural cloning is predicated on the taken-for-granted desirability of certain types, the often-unconscious tendency to comply with normative standards, and the subsequent rejection of those who are perceived as deviant. . . . Non-dominant groups or communities too can be essentialist in choosing for their own kind, whether or not as a reaction against exclusion. . . . Preferences for sameness, whether gendered or racialized, are historically part and parcel of the social fabric of our societies. Race as an ordering principle has been interwoven in the very nature of and in the making of modernity. . . . The same holds true for gender, where modern manhood required the construction of dominant rational, emotionally suppressed identities and the imitation of these images of manhood over generations. (Essed and Goldberg 2002, 1070–1)

What's appealing about Essed and Goldberg's approach is that it shifts the focus from the underrepresented to the overrepresented, that is, it looks away from "diversity," something that's supposedly characteristic of members of non-dominant groups who are trying to assimilate to a dominant structure, and looks instead at the mechanisms by which the dominant structure replicates itself in spite of the often sincere efforts of individuals and even institutions to transform it. Part of that mechanism involves a feeling of comfort, warmth, even pleasure, that can come as a welcome moment in a grueling day of interviewing strangers: this person shares my background, my interests, this person will be easy to work with, this person *sounds like me when I was young*.

How does this apply to "mentoring?" This may be hard to hear, but it is only too easy for "mentoring" to fold back into an older system that might more honestly be called "patronage." Certainly the expectations, the anxieties, the needs of the junior partner for signs of approval (not to mention tangible professional support) pull such relationships in that direction. If today's profession is still more homogeneous, more class-stratified, and more intergenerationally conflictual than (three decades ago) we would have hoped, perhaps it is because the affirmative action principles that shape our formal policies, reminding us to treat everyone equitably while still respecting "difference," have not filtered through to what feels like the more intimate spaces of one-on-one teaching and advising. Helping a younger person shape her (or his) career and thereby hoping to shape one's own "legacy" can feel extremely fulfilling. But (as in ordinary teaching) it can come into tension with what's fair, and also with what could be truly and more broadly transformative.

Awareness of One's Own Actual Power, but also Humility about One's Ability to Predict and Control the Future

One insight of an intersectionalities approach is that the same person can be powerful and powerless, marginal and central, at the same time, depending on the axis along which one is looking. But somehow academic life today is particularly hospitable to discourses in which it is necessary to claim marginality in order to position oneself as politically or ethically central—"You think *you've* been silenced, shut up and listen to how silenced *we* have been!" Feeling powerless is not the same as *being* powerless; and it is a commonplace, in these discussions, to remind white women in particular to be aware of privilege and use it wisely and generously.

But this is not enough. As someone once said to me in what we thought of as "the trenches" (though they were, it must be admitted, quite warm

and clean ones): "the problem with the senior people is that they believe that power is knowledge." Now that I'm one of "the senior people," I think I know the difference. But it's still awfully hard to say those three little words: "I don't know."

Some of the most damaging things that have ever been said to me, in graduate school and since, have been couched in the form of helpful advice meant for my own good. A typical sentence might take the form, "You'll never get anywhere if you. . . ." What's especially funny, in retrospect, is that much of the advice turned out to be *wrong*. We were told not to use the language of theory because theory was going to turn out to be "a fad"; we were told that it was a career-ending move to do gay scholarship—people made us cry about this. . . . good thing we didn't listen to them, since queer theory was actually the next big thing. Sure, this is funny now. But it's a cautionary tale about over-solicitous advice, and about over-generalizing from one's own early career experience.

Margaret Simons tells a story about Simone de Beauvoir and *her* mentor, which is illuminating along these lines. "Beauvoir's study of philosophy began in 1926 at the Ecole Normale Libre in Neuilly, under Mademoiselle Mercier, one of the first women in France to pass the graduate *agrégation* in philosophy. It was Mlle. Mercier who encouraged Beauvoir to pursue a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne" (1999, 109). That Mercier provided personal sympathy as well is clear from Beauvoir's student diary:

July 7 1927. To think that last Thursday I spent all morning and afternoon at Mlle Mercier's sobbing from nerves. What a fine success in life, I thought! oh! emptiness! nothingness, vanity. (2006, 275)

"But" (as Simons continues)

even the comfort of friends is not immune from the annihilating powers of consciousness, nor free from conflict. In the important passage dated July 10 . . . Mademoiselle Mercier responds to Beauvoir's anguish over the exam by "trying to convert" her. Beauvoir, though "tempted" by a nostalgia for the Catholicism of her childhood, characterizes faith as "the most desperate act there is" and vows to keep the "lucidity of her despair" and not "lie to myself." The passage concludes with Beauvoir's affirmation of her determination to do philosophy and her identification of the theme of the "opposition of self and other." The temptation to conform to the direction of one's cherished mentor, whose guidance is necessary to help one find one's way in life, is challenged by the necessity of being true to oneself and defining one's own philosophical position. (1999, 20)

Much later Mercier would attack Sartre (and through him Beauvoir) from an orthodox Catholic position.

The point here is, in a way, *imagine the course of twentieth-century feminist history if Mercier had succeeded!* But having now read through

the diaries myself, I can testify that this was a real possibility, a very near thing. I also can't help noting that the problem that sent Beauvoir sobbing into Mercier's office was not that she had failed her exams, but rather that she had passed them a bit too brilliantly. In an era when an intellectually serious and accomplished young woman was regarded as a monster, and was likely to become an unmarried pariah, "fear of success" might seem a reasonable and realistic response.

Under the heading of humility, it might be worth remembering where the word "mentor" comes from. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Mentor turns up to reassure and advise the young Telemachus, stiffens his resolve, arranges for him to have the ships he needs, tells him about where to go, who to talk to, and how to speak to them—what to say in his job interview, in a way. Mentor pretends to be, looks and sounds just like, some aging pal of Telemachus's father Odysseus. But in fact he's the Goddess Athena in disguise, and Athena has already had a word with *her* father, Zeus, and therefore knows what's going to happen before she suggests anything. "She spoke in prayer, but she herself was bringing it all to fulfillment," as Latimore has it (1991/1965, II:62). (Role conflict doesn't bother goddesses, who mostly only have one student at a time in any case.) I found a weird echo of this in Michèle le Doeuff's book *the Sex of Knowing*, from (of all places) Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*. According to le Doeuff's account of Kant, the only true prophets are the administrators, because they are the ones in a position to make their prophecies self-fulfilling—especially the negative ones (le Doeuff 2003, 18–9).

Now surely the basic ethical injunction of mentoring, for feminists or more generally, is the same as it is for teaching: *don't play God*. But I'm making a more practical point: There is a particular injunction not to play God unless you are sure you *are* God. One might also remind the would-be "mentee" (repulsive word) to remain somewhat skeptical, or at least realistic, about who is and isn't God, lest she find herself in Kierkegaard's account of Him—or Kafka's.

But really, all three injunctions can be boiled down into a single maxim: *first, do no harm*.

Meryl Altman is Professor of English and Women's Studies at DePauw University. She has published articles about Djuna Barnes, William Faulkner, William Carlos Williams, metaphor, and sexuality, and she writes periodically for the Women's Review of Books. Her most recent publications focus on Simone de Beauvoir.

Acknowledgments

This paper was originally delivered at the Modern Language Association convention, Philadelphia, December 2004, on a panel, "Perception, Power, and Promotion: Seeing Women's Authority in the Academy," which was sponsored by the MLA's Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession. An earlier version was presented at the Great Lakes College Association Women's Studies Conference, "Acting Up, Acting Out: Living Critically Within the Academy," Kenyon College. April 16–17, 2004. I am indebted to my co-panelist, Barbara Steinson, and also to Marnie McInnes, Laurie Finke, Warren Rosenberg, and Joan Straumanis, for helpful discussion on that occasion, as well as Julie Abraham, Chris Castiglia, Mary Dearborn, Kate Ellis, Susan Gubar, Judy Hallett, and Karen Hornick, for various other sorts of collaborative "working through."

References

- Abraham, Neal, and Meryl Altman. 2005. "Transforming Institutional Culture: Programs Plus Policies." In *Gender Equality in Higher Education. Miscellanea. Third European Conference. Genoa, 13–16 Aprile 2003*, eds. Valeria Maione. Edizione Franco Angeli, 13–30.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. 2006. *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, eds. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir, and Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Essed, Philomena, and David Goldberg. 2002. "Cloning Cultures: The Social Injustices of Sameness." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25(6):1066–82.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1798/1996. "The Conflict of the Faculties" trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor. In *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and eds. Allen M. Wood and George di Giovanni, 297–309. Cambridge University Press.
- Lattimore, Richard, trans. 1991/1965. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Le Doeuff, Michèle. 2003. *The Sex of Knowing*. Trans. Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code. New York: Routledge.
- Simons, Margaret A. 1999. *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.