

Mentors

The dictionary tells me that Mentor was the friend Odysseus trusted with the education of Telemachus, Odysseus' son. The contemporary meaning is a "trusted counselor or guide." My own connotation alters the meaning a bit to refer to a person who serves as a model, generally without conscious design. I have been influenced in making that definition by the persons I regard as my mentors. In so defining the word I exclude parents and most teachers. Perhaps if we look at two whom I consider my mentors the meaning will become somewhat clearer.

One of my first mentors was Henny Caldwell, who served as a guide through her everyday life as wife, mother, and friend. I met Henny as a neighbor when Paul and I first arrived in Chapel Hill to begin graduate school. She and George were living on his G.I. bill income of, as I remember, thirty dollars a month, plus the small stipend he received as a teaching assistant in the Math Department. Paul had a similar stipend, and I know that we would have had a rough time trying to live on that income even though our rent was only \$30.00 a month and groceries were nowhere near as costly as they are today. We also had my salary as an instructor in the English Department.

Henny shopped once a week, buying coffee one week and a carton of cigarettes for George the next week. The Caldwells were popular hosts who always had a pot of coffee for visitors, some of whom occasionally brought them a pound of coffee. They were the only parents in our group, so we held most of our cook-outs and parties at their home. Naturally, all meals were communal, but Henny almost always managed to have a delicious angel food cake to share with us.

Because I had never had any luck making an angel food cake, Henny invited me to watch her make one. I learned how to make a cake every bit as good as hers, but I learned more in the process: the cup of egg whites that served as the basis were achieved by Henny's taking a teaspoon of egg white from each of the breakfast eggs that she prepared three times a week for her, George, and the three boys. The required amount of whites accumulated in two weeks!

Her coffee was not quite as good as mine because she saved part of each batch of used grounds and reused them in the next pot. She had worked out the precise amount she could salvage without seriously damaging the taste of the coffee in the fresh pot. If someone brought her a two-pound bag of coffee, she would indulge in all-new materials for the next few pots!

One of the reasons the Caldwells could manage on so little was that they had no car. I was more than happy to take Henny with me for my weekly shopping, benefiting by learning a great deal about checking unit prices and taking advantage of weekly loss-leaders to plan the weekly menus. I also absorbed a great deal of information about how to deal lovingly but firmly with the children I would have a number of years later. In none of these activities was Henny a conscious, active teacher. She didn't need to be, for

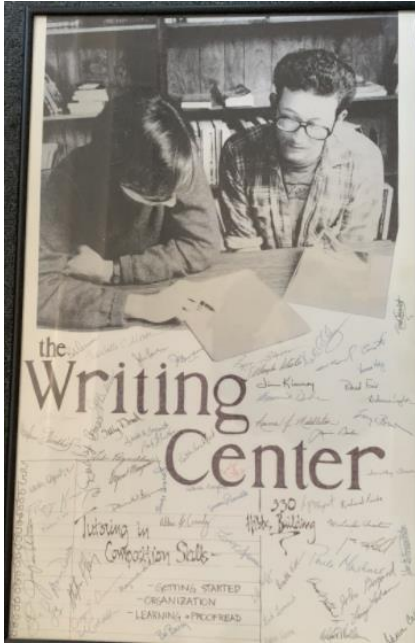
her examples were vivid and helpful. It's been more than forty years since Henny served as my mentor, but the lessons I learned from her example are as helpful today as they were back there in Chapel Hill. I don't save a teaspoon of egg white from each egg we use, for we don't eat eggs at our house any more; however, I seldom shop for groceries without Henny's unseen presence up and down the aisles of Ukrops.



During the time that I was well aware of Henny's example, I had another mentor whom I didn't recognize as such for many years. I suppose I should exclude my husband from the role, but he has been such a constant and successful mentor over the years, without apparently meaning to in most instances, that I want to try to acknowledge a part of his role as my mentor.

Paul's private praise I could and did discount as a conscious effort to make me feel good. But what I heard in his voice privately and publicly eventually filtered through my consciousness to make an impact. He's encouraged all my endeavors and explained away most of the failures - all the ones he was aware of. It can't really be completely true but, nevertheless, he has convinced me over the years that whatever I want to do I can do and that that is what he would like to see me do. He's been especially supportive when I've ignored his advice and tried something he thought wouldn't be good for me. For example, when my chairman asked me to take over the directorship of the Writing Center, he advised me that it was a dead-end job that had defeated all former directors.

I didn't think they had really seen the possibilities of the Center or even tried very hard. I found the efforts to reorganize and train the tutors exhilarating, especially when the chairman and I were able to find teaching assistantships for beginning graduate students. Paul supported me wholeheartedly even to tolerating cheerfully the missed and choppy meals and helping with the often-neglected household chores, while he continued with his own. He was my biggest fan, often recognizing good ideas before anyone else did.



I can't begin to name all the areas where his positive support has been vital. His experiences in the classroom and in administrative work provided me with guidance in every area of my professional career. Another area where he was heroic in his support was in seeing me through my knee replacements several years ago. Despite a heavy work schedule of his own, he was always there when the post operative discomfort was really bad; moreover, he walked on one side of me, with the physical therapist on the other, during the frustrating hours as my dyslexic feet learned to coordinate with my crutches in my relearning how to walk.

It's been tremendously invigorating living with a never-flagging fan - a mentor without equal.