It's a Family Affair: The Professional Family, Mentorship, and Development

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There's a lovely line, attributed to Twain, about how when he was a boy, his father was so ignorant, he couldn't stand to have him around, but when he reached adulthood, he was astonished at how much the old man had learned.

It's a tender and wry reminder of how the conflict between adulthood and childhood—a mutual distrust, a pessimistic capacity to think the worst and an instinctive contempt—is a two-way street (David Bowie captured another side in "Changes": "And these children that you spit on/as they try to change their worlds/are immune to your consultations/they're quite aware of what they're going through").

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After working for a couple of months with Jack McDermott as the inaugural John F. McDermott Assistant Editor-in-Residence, I sent him a piece of my writing for feedback. Not long after, he responded. Because of the time difference between New York and Hawaii, Jack's responses always popped up when I least expected them, which, along with his amused and amusing enthusiasm, gave his emails a jester-like quality. I opened the email without much worry. It was the first piece of my writing that I had asked him to edit, I had been pleased with it, and all our previous correspondence was light and genial. The piece felt tight, polished, sound, and relatively straightforward, qualities that my writing naturally tends to lack. I was not surprised that Jack's feedback began with praise. He was full of praise, and so practiced in it that he could make it sound easy. You almost couldn't tell that the praise was delivered with the type of skill it would take years of parent–child interaction therapy (PCIT) to develop in most of us: labeled, specific, clear-cut, reinforcing, and proud.

What I was not prepared for was what came next: the exquisite precision and accuracy of his critique. It was delivered in the same casual, unforced tone as the praise; it was just as authentic, and it was just as crisp. He had found some mistakes, weaknesses, in my argument; more than that, he had not only found important weaknesses, he found ones that could be addressed and should be addressed. A two-sentence analysis from Jack was the editorial equivalent of the Serenity Prayer. (I was later to see similarly succinct expertise from another editor when a friend submitted an essay to a different psychiatry journal. I had edited the submission for him and liked it, and watched the piece go through the editing process. At the end, I thought it was good but not great. My friend received word from the editor-in-chief that the piece had been accepted, but told my friend they would be deleting the last sentence. My friend, playing the diva that all writers at some point play, was furious, feeling that the very last sentence was the pinnacle of the essay, the moment of genius, the *pièce de résistance*. After learning of the editor's comment, I just stared at the essay, unable to believe how much better it was when that last line was cut out. Editorial carpet-bombers like me have much to learn from those editors who see so concisely and deftly what needs to be done.)

At the time, though, what most struck me was not just the quality of the editorial intervention itself; it was that it was coming from the Jack I had known up to that point. Friendly, encouraging Jack, very much the beaming emeritus figure. Reading that first critique, I lived the Twain experience in a flash: I was amazed at how much the old man had managed to learn since we first met.

A subtle prejudice, but a real one, had been exposed. Mentorship belongs to a time of life—the mentor's and the mentee's. The relationship can carry with it, and in it, the stereotypes and bigotries we hold against other generations, as much as it can be one of the great forms of intergenerational support. Some might call these stereotypes and bigotries a form of transference.

Dr. John F. McDermott, Jr.

Reflecting later on that email from Jack, I noticed that Jack shared a quality I had seen in my grandparents: whatever I did interested them. When I was younger, I thought it was because I was so incredibly interesting. As I grew older, and as I was able to observe my grandparents' and then Jack's enthusiasm for those around them, I realized that their interest was much more a reflection of how interesting *they* were. Their interest was cultivated by their curiosity, by their wisdom (which allowed them to be so patiently amused by the prancing, preening young princes and princesses around them). Being interested in something is not a passive admiration, or a fawning intellectual passivity: it comes from bringing your own experience to bear on somebody else's in an exciting way.

Winnicott said there is no such thing as a baby; there is no such thing as an adult either. We are co-created and co-creating throughout life. Our developmental models, so exquisite in some regards, are so primitive in others, especially when used roughly. We apply motifs to ages as if they belong to the age: ego integrity vs. despair, for example, putatively belongs to a certain age group, generativity vs. stagnation to another. And yet there is a certain absurdity to the notion that ego integrity, despair, generativity, and stagnation are not a function of relations, of mentorship, of what we do to and for one another across generations. When there are losses in the professional family, we do not just lose people, experience, and knowledge; we lose something of ourselves. But something of them remains in who we are, something they added, something they brought to us, the words they've written in the margins of our lives. This leads us to an epitaph for a mentor, a friend, a professional grandparent, and an editor who loved Emily Dickinson, from her poem "Death sets a thing significant":

> A book I have, a friend gave,
> Whose pencil, here and there,
> Had notched the place that pleased him,—
> At rest his fingers are.

About the Author

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