



Director's Corner

Wo-mentoring: How a Mentor Shaped my Career and Helped me Find my Voice

By Adina Kalet, MD MPH

In this week's Transformational Times, and in celebration of Woman's History Month, Dr. Kalet reflects on the role one of her most beloved mentors played in introducing her to her best self and to the work of other women who guided her growth and development ...

We must never forget the role of luck.

- Jo Anne Earp, ScD, March 20, 2022

I hadn't anticipated feeling so lost. After a very taxing three years as an Internal Medicine resident, I had finally become a confident, albeit junior, physician. Despite this accomplishment *I was struck dumb*—literally unable to speak—while sitting around a conference table with my new colleagues, the cohort of Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars. The fellowship program faculty, all men, were sharing their expectations that we become “influence leaders” and “change agents” as we learned to “ask and answer only the most important questions.”

What was I thinking? *I have no important questions!* Why had I imagined that being a good clinician wasn't enough? Why had I chosen to become a novice once again at the age of twenty-nine? What was I doing, here among all these brilliant people?

I lost some sleep those first few weeks. Yoga and meditation didn't help, nor did alcohol (I am not much of a drinker anyway). Meetings with various potential mentors to clarify my “important” research questions just made the anxiety worse. I started experiencing episodes where my heart raced, and my breath shortened. I could not relax. I felt terrible. I could not speak in seminars. I was certain I knew nothing.

Later that summer, I connected with [Professor Jo Anne Earp](#). As a public health social scientist, JAE, as we came to call her, taught a very inspiring survey methods seminar in which she asserted that conducting excellent research required exquisite relational and communication skills. She insisted that a researcher must be rigorous in seeking trustworthy data. To accomplish this, she must get to know her subjects. I was instantly drawn to JAE, as a role model researcher. Somehow, I instantly knew she could help me find my way forward.

During our first meeting in her office, she noticed I looked “concerned.” She listened intently as I shared my nascent research ideas. She glanced down and then up again and said, “I agree with you, physician-patient communication skills are critical. We must study them.”

I thought to myself, *she said “we”!*

Then she said, “You know, important ideas almost always travel along with intense emotions. Reframe your anxiety as excitement. It’ll help you sleep.” *I hadn’t mentioned my sleeping trouble! How did she know?* And then, she figuratively pushed up her sleeves and “got into the muck” with me by saying “Okay, so what do *we* think the important questions in this area are?” Her consistent use of the collaborative “we,” ability to see, and willingness to address the connection between thoughts and feelings allowed me to breathe deeply for the first time in weeks.

From that day forward, we met for one very hardy, engaged hour each week. I prepared mightily. I read everything I could. I thought deeply and wrote reams of unintelligible notes. Each week, we refined research questions and eventually designed studies. We talked about ideas, our lives, and the books and papers she handed me off her piles and out of her file cabinets.

Research is “Me-Search”

JAЕ pointed me to the work by several authors that shaped my work and helped me gain confidence. First, she handed me a well-worn copy of Peggy McIntosh’s 1985 white paper, [“Feeling Like a Fraud,”](#) which sent me down a reading “rabbit hole” for two years. McIntosh’s piece—one in a series of Works in Progress from the Stone Center at the Wellesley College—describes how academic culture can feel toxic to those who highly value connection and relationship building (Me!) and emphasizes that paradoxically fraudulent feelings are both important sources of humility and noxious consequences of internalized oppression. Her foundational work on [privilege, diversity and inclusion](#), has reverberated through the past [forty years](#).

McIntosh’s paper pointed me to psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller’s 1976 book, [“Toward a New Psychology of Women,”](#) which laid out a premise for understanding the self-doubt women experience when creative conflict with men consequently keeps them (us) from being authentically present in our work (Me!). And then to the collective of moral psychologists Mary Field Belenky, et. al.’s 1986 book, [Women’s Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind](#), which expands on the ways that existing (at the time) developmental theories did not fully address experiences common and significant in the lives of women. They describe an epistemological position they called “silence,” in which a few women whom they interviewed felt disconnected from knowledge, the sources of knowledge, and their relationship to knowledge (Me!).

And then there was Carol Gilligan's 1982 book, [*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*](#). In this slim red volume, Gilligan explores why people raised female in those days were socialized to prioritize connection over separation and investigates why women never, in her opinion, reached the "highest, principled levels of moral reasoning, which were based on existing models developed from studies of 1950s male Harvard graduates.

The work of these woman scholars substantively changed the world and reading their work rocked mine. Their ideas—although some have significantly evolved—empowered and challenged me to trust my own voice and thoughts and put me on a career-long path studying the therapeutic nature of the relationships between physicians and patients, professional identity development, and moral reasoning of physicians as seen through the lens of character and caring.

When the time came, JAE taught me to write, or more accurately as I have described before (in my Director's Corner of [October 29, 2021](#)), she coaxed my inner writer out into the open in a one-hour session. When the need arose, she spent another hour or two each week editing my work with a distinctive bright red pen. This process was commonly known as "being Earped."

I was not left alone. She partnered with me, helped me learn to build and sustain a team, and introduced me to her large network of colleagues as the need arose. When I graduated and moved away, she never stopped being my mentor and friend. It has been over thirty years.

JAE's story

JAE worked for civil rights in Mississippi in the 1960s. A self-described "fighter by nature: ... a rebel and a beatnik," she married young, had a baby, held a series of support staff jobs that, by luck, led to a research assistant position which motivated her to apply to graduate school. When her first husband left her as a twenty-six-year-old single mom with a toddler, she hunkered down and pursued her doctorate in medical sociology in an all-male department of behavioral sciences in a school of public health. She describes herself as "self-mentored" but learned to build supportive social structures around her and her son. She studied the satisfaction of older working-class women with their achievement, or lack thereof, with their lifetime goals, eventually moving with her second husband to the University of North Carolina, where she took the job available to her, in an almost all-male school of public health, the only female faculty member in her department at that time.

Over the course of her career, she faced and strategized around many obstacles. In her words, "I chose to take any critique or naysaying as an invitation to go the other way." She advises:

You must do the work you want to do, and do it with creativity, agility. Don't sacrifice rigor ... it is not worth it. And be humble—avoid being a 'holier than thou,' sanctimonious know-it-all. To have a successful life you need to be liked and trusted.

Have a sense of humor. Have empathy and create a can-do atmosphere. Make meaning from everything you do.

As the years went by, JAE noticed that:

Lots of young women were coming to my door. I wasn't sure what I could give them, but I tried. I was appreciated. ... I started seeing how lucky I was in mid-life, that I kept landing on my feet; a "glass half full" perspective helped me make it through the harder times.

When I asked her how she poured so much time into so many people she sighed and said:

I don't know what to say to people who want work-life balance... For me it was always about difficult tradeoffs. Make sure you choose your life partner carefully. And say "yes" when you think you should say "no"; the payoff is worth it. My mentees are making the world a better place.

JAE suggested to me that pouring her life force into being such an involved mentor has, in some ways, been selfish. "It has given me a huge network of wonderful daughters." She collects and shares such people generously with each other. Whenever she asks me to reach out to someone else, I do. It is always profoundly satisfying.

JAE is now seventy-eight years old. She had a successful academic career in all the standard ways with grants, papers, books, awards, and chairmanships. She has had a hand in educating some powerfully important influence leaders, who are changing our world for the better.

I believe that her superpowers have always been her ability to collaborate and be generative.

JAE has several hundred "daughters," and I am one of them. If it weren't for my relationship with her, I would not have as rich and satisfying a career as I have and continue to have. And I would have been deprived of a great friendship.

Having had such a mentor I, too, am driven to pay it forward. In honor of National Women's History Month, I encourage you each to find a mentorship relationship that enriches your career and experience. You never know how many lives you will touch, and how they might go on to change the world for the better.

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