

Through the Undulations of a Long Career — A Mentor's Legacy

Ranjana Srivastava, F.R.A.C.P.

As my son and I walk up to the house, he regards us from the top of his driveway with a bemused expression, but it's replaced by recognition as we come closer.

"Now tell me," he says, kissing me on both cheeks with transparent delight, "how long has it been since we met? Five years or 10?"

My heart sinks.

At least the dog knows. Though Tiger initially goes mad, he settles quietly at my feet as we move inside, as if to say, "Oh, it's just you again." It is just me again. Back for the third time this year — not nearly often enough, I know, but better than nothing.

Some months ago, his wife fretted that his memory wasn't the same. Warily, I dismissed the thought. He was her husband, but he was also my earliest professor, and I felt a claim to the part of his mind that had taught me and mentored me. When we met, I was a first-year undergraduate medical student who had quickly concluded that I would fail medical school after scraping through my first biochemistry test.

Walking across the parking lot, I was wondering how I would survive the next 6 years, when the physiology professor rolled down his car window and said, "I loved your essay, you really deserved that high distinction." I could only mutter an astonished thanks before he drove away, but I was resuscitated by his compliment in the way of a 17-year-old student who tends to catastrophize what adults recognize as routine life events.

Two years later, still searching

for direction, I made my way to his office, thinking I might spend an elective term with a professor who had spotted some good in me. To my surprise, I had to stand in a queue. His office was mobbed by students seeking advice: it turned out that no matter what you were interested in, from population control to cancer and breast-feeding to malaria, he knew someone who could help. Students loved him because he wasn't just erudite but also humane. His concern for and interest in the whole person were plain to see.

He encouraged me to return to the modest Indian city where I had grown up, to work with the local surgeon — who also turned out to be the local internist, social worker, and all-around counselor. Confronting the myriad unfilled needs of a whole population was a moving experience that left me pondering what it meant to be a doctor. When I returned from India, my professor encouraged me not to bury these thoughts, and when I began writing about them (among other things), he generously read and reread dozens of my essays. I often struggled with good titles and tidy endings; he always found time to help — but was 10 times as delighted when I got there on my own. His clear pride in me was my impetus to do better.

In the ensuing years, I became an oncologist, had children, and performed the familiar juggling act of all working parents. My professor kept writing important books, winning awards, delivering lectures, and inspiring stu-

dents who looked up to him just as I had. I kept thinking that one day I wanted to be a mentor like him, somebody who was invested in her students and asked for nothing in return.

At first, the slowing was barely noticeable. A year of awful tinnitus drove him to distraction, and then a brush with cancer exhausted him. With both conditions successfully treated, it looked as if his powers of intellectual curiosity and endless goodwill were back in force. He turned 75, 80, then 85. When he gave up his office and started working from home, it seemed only reasonable.

Now he's nearing 90, and his wife's concerns about his memory have been troubling me, so for this visit I have fished out a copy of the very first essay he helped me polish. Published 20 years ago, it has turned yellow, but it used to be his favorite essay.

"I have a surprise for you," I smile, feeling a little self-conscious. I smooth out the double-sided paper on the dining table.

He looks at it with interest but no immediate recognition. "Shall I read it?" he asks politely.

"Yes," I say, with a catch in my throat.

As he reads, I look over his bent head to the fridge, where I spot my name in capital letters under "Today's Visitors." My sadness feels complete.

He finishes reading and looks up somberly. "I should remember it, but I'm afraid I don't."

I smile, although my heart is breaking. "It doesn't matter, but it used to be very special," I say.

"I see." His response feels like the end of an era.

Tiger and my son are tugging at the same piece of rope. It's easier to watch them than to focus on the tugging of my heartstrings. My professor scolds Tiger; I caution my son.

He suddenly exclaims, "Gosh, isn't your son the spitting image of his dad?"

I look at him in agreement and amazement, cursing the fickle nature of the mind.

Soon we have run out of things to say, and I gather up my essay.

"It's so lovely to see you, come back soon," he says so longingly that for an instant it's hard to believe there was a time when he couldn't keep students away if he tried. Feeling suddenly protective, I wish they would come back to visit, but yesterday's keen students are today's hassled physicians, too busy to see their own families, let alone find time for an old professor.

"I will," I smile.

When I depart, my next stop is my old medical school to give a talk to the incoming class. Twenty years after graduating, I find myself in the lecture theater of my memories. The students sit in the same seats as I once did, and I stand where my professor once stood. In a fit of nostalgia, I wonder what my own legacy will be, at a time when so much of medicine feels transactional.

I think of all the meetings in my office with students and train-

ees that seem to focus on things missed and forgotten. How did the surgical referral go astray? How many consults piled up over-

ing a mentor. Always grateful for the gift of my own mentor, I tell them to find someone who can help not just with a particular project or paper but through all the undulations of a long career. It doesn't seem as easy as it used to be, but it is more important than ever.

We might be tempted to question whether a career increasingly spent battling the incessant demands of protocol-driven medicine even requires a mentor, but our survival might well depend on finding someone prepared to steer us away from things "missed and forgotten" and ably return us to contemplating the true meaning of being a physician. It is not enough to celebrate such rare mentors: we must strive to emulate them.

Later, I call my professor's wife at work to let her know I visited, that he is okay.

"Did he remember you?" she asks worriedly.

"Yes," I say lightly. "Yes, he remembered me."

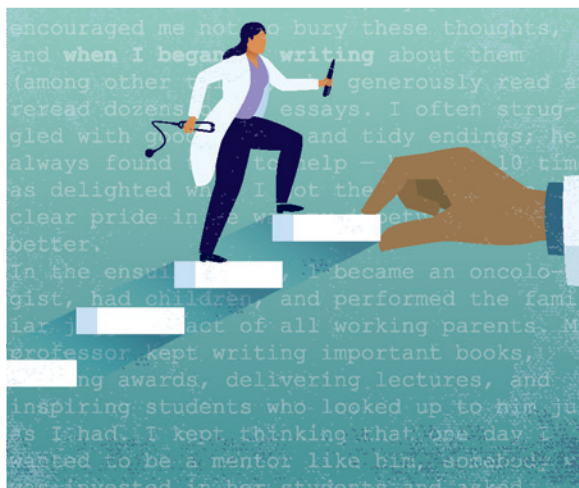
I don't tell her about the distracted welcome. Or the essay. Instead, we simply reflect on his legacy, and as we talk, I silently hope that in my remaining years in medicine, I can be the kind of mentor I had the privilege of knowing.

Disclosure forms provided by the author are available at NEJM.org.

From the Department of Medical Oncology, Monash Health, Melbourne, Australia

DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp1812613

Copyright © 2019 Massachusetts Medical Society.



night? Why was the pulmonary embolism missed? Has the paper been submitted? Are the forms up to date? Whose job was it to check the bloods?

By the time we're done, goodwill seems exhausted, and there is precious little time for the kind of genuine, interested discourse that gives them the courage to persevere and the inspiration to dream. It turns out that plowing through the business of medicine leaves scant room for being human. Yet I know the value of having known someone who was less interested in pointing out my shortcomings and fixing my defects than in helping me find my way. When I slowed down, he persevered. When I found my feet, he stepped into the background. As a result, I am a better person and a more contented physician.

At the beginning of every academic year, the checklist for students and trainees includes find-