From the Shade into the Sun: In Search of a Mentor

Rachel Hammer, BS (Biochemistry)

Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Rochester, MN, USA.

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“**H**ow do you know which ones to select, Mizz Hammer?” my student David asked me, the teacher of his New Orleans high school plant lab. I stopped thinning the forest of sprouts stretching like green arms up from the soil. Hmm. I hadn’t given my selection process much thought. Sheer impulse is what it was. I plucked, absently humming “Killing Me Softly,” and wove through the lab benches, which in addition to plants, teemed with student papers I would later pluck, sort and spruce with feedback. Not all of the plants would have room to grow deeper roots, I explained. Sometimes, there aren’t enough resources to feed all the baby chicks in the nest, so you pick a few of the strongest and work with them. Nature can seem cruel and very random, can’t it?

On a Monday Mystery Beer Night, I met a high-eyebrowed college senior excitedly gushing on about her summer research at the Mayo Clinic. “How did you get hooked up with that?” I asked, when I managed to hold steady her darting blue eyes. She recounted how a physician at Mayo posted a comment on her personal blog on health policy. The connection became a Facebook friendship. She was invited, or perhaps she invited herself, to visit the Clinic, had dinner with the physician’s family, developed even more passion for a summer project, and now plans to go to medical school. “Isn’t that amazing?!” she sang (to no one, everyone), while twittering, literally, like a techno hummingbird drunk on nectar.

It really was, if that was the whole story. All of a sudden, I felt as if my body weighed three hundred extra pounds and that my feeble efforts at networking toward success were the equivalent of swimming laps in molasses with an anchor roped to my ankle. She launched all that from a blog post at 3:14 in the morning? Can we count on such lures?

As I sat shackled to notebooks, snacks, technologies, and stress among the other heavy-burdened travelers waiting to fly from the San Diego airport, a Hawaiian man sat right next to me with nothing but his iPhone. “My life just blew up, like two days ago,” he soared, rocking on ischia. “What do you mean?” I was worried, curious. He was on his way to Cabo to attend the award ceremony for a fishing competition. The winning team had used his blown-glass lure to land two million dollars in prize money and offered him ten percent of the prize. He

wiped salty mist from his brow. “I know. Whoa. I mean, it’s crazy. I just started making these lures, like, a month ago. And I was in line at Baskin Robbins, a couple of these dudes were talking about fishing, and I was, like, ‘Hey, take one of these babies with you for luck. Here’s my card.’ Forgot I even did that. And then, next thing I know, yesterday, I get this call.” Wide-eyed, he waved his phone at me like it was a Golden Ticket. He showed pictures of his artful lures to all us captives waiting to fly. You couldn’t help but catch his high. The lures were glass tubes swirled in silvers, reds, and spirals of gold. They shimmered and flashed. So did his eyes. Meeting him was like getting fin flap splashed with cold saltwater.

I shiver at how baited and dazzled I am by possibility, the chance we all have for a bright future, and yet haunted by the dulling threat of selection. The forces that jostle medical students, or any of us for that matter, toward success, may as well be Brownian. A blog. Standing in the ice cream line. The books we open. How our parents’ sperm and egg happen to meet. In the tossing sea of opportunity, these, the most random of assets, can buoy equal if not greater weight than our degrees, curricula vitae, publications, and more formal qualifications.

You can’t teach luck on the Rota Fortunae. But you can teach students to seek good mentors, though mentors can be the slipperiest fish. My medical school doesn’t have a “speed mentoring”¹ program, which is an amalgamation of musical chairs and elevator speeches, and Facebook is hard on my suspected ADHD, so I personally resorted to good-ole’ barbecue buffet line networking at the Internal Medicine Interest Group potluck. Drawn to a guy with a lobster baseball hat and peculiar round eye frames no more than two centimeters in diameter, I met a physician who had lived a festive season of life on the Gulf Coast, as I had. We talked about Mardi Gras and crawfish boils. He knew how to get a hundred pounds of shrimp and crawfish delivered fresh from Louisiana to Minnesota, and in admitting so, won my respect. He had an idea for a play he’d wanted to organize with medical students. Later, we wrote the play. Later still, I published it, made a presentation in Scotland at a medical education conference, and decided to be a hospitalist, like him. The direction in which we grow is not such curious tropism, after all.

I’m outgoing. I guffaw in packed lecture halls. I talk to fishing lure salesmen in airports, blonde, bright-eyed strangers in bars, and guys with lobster hats. My mother tells me that sometimes I stand too close to people. She is worse. She’s Lucille Ball, in color. But we get noticed, we get included, and I might argue, are often left to grow while others are weeded out.

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In contrast, a classmate and close friend of mine *doesn't* asphyxiate a room. She's a fresh breath of air. She'd rather listen to you. She's not going to talk to a stranger, if she can help it. It embarrasses her that I do. With all her extroverted colleagues bragging about their research mentors in such and such a field that they met at the library counter reaching for the candy dish, she is frustrated for not yet having found someone special to mentor her. She's brilliant, works hard, is interested in public health, but feels threatened and thwarted by the prospect of competing or professionally prostituting for attention. Exasperated by the search she says, "I just want to find someone that wants me!" A good match made between mentor and mentee is a romance, indeed. A curious chemistry, and hardly ever "speedy." Maybe medical schools need Yentas.

Mentoring relationships are critical in the cultivation of healthy, fruitful doctors. Eden born, I idealize. I wish the gardens were better organized; the fertilizer and soil more fairly distributed so there weren't so many forlorn shoots among the grateful sprouts. That spring afternoon in my

classroom after David's comment, I looked into the expectant faces of my students as their teacher and mentor and worried about the choices I made every day out of necessity, impulsively, consciously, with limited resources, biases, and many Darwinian defenses. I know what a privilege it is to be found, to be pulled from the shade and into the sun. So even if we aren't all crawling up walls and leaning hoggishly into the light, we all want to feel loved, to feel heard, and to feel a part of something greater than ourselves. What a duty, this creative challenge, to make room for healthy roots.

Corresponding Author: Rachel Hammer, BS (Biochemistry), Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, 200 1st Street SW, Rochester, MN 55905, USA (e-mail: Hammer.rachel@mayo.edu).

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