

BOOK REVIEWS

CAN A BOOK ABOUT MENTORING BE A MENTOR?

by Jean Waltman

Carolyn S. Duff, *LEARNING FROM OTHER WOMEN: HOW TO BENEFIT FROM THE KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, AND EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE MENTORS*. New York: American Management Association (AMACOM), 1999. 172p. bibl. index. Hardcover out of print, ISBN 0-8144-0455-3; available as electronic book through netLibrary, ISBN 0-8144-2422-8.

Marian Wright Edelman, *LANTERNS: A MEMOIR OF MENTORS*. Boston: HarperCollins, 1999 (hardcover), 2000 (paper). 208p. bibl. pap., \$14.00, ISBN 0-06-095859-6.

Barbara Quick, *UNDER HER WING: THE MENTORS WHO CHANGED OUR LIVES*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2000. 228p. \$13.95, ISBN 1-57224-1977.

Emily M. Wadsworth, *GIVING MUCH/GAINING MORE: MENTORING FOR SUCCESS*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002. 128p. \$24.95, ISBN 1-55753-291-5.

"I guess I got my mentoring from books."

— Diane Leslie, as quoted in *Under Her Wing* (p.16)

"You don't have to have a mentor outside your own mind to reap the enormous benefits of being taken under her wing."

— Barbara Quick, *Under Her Wing* (p.17)

Most people probably have a pretty clear sense of what a mentor is and what a mentor does. People who study the subject, however, have been unable to agree on what constitutes a mentoring relationship: mentoring for whom? for what purposes? by whom? and in what formats and kinds of situations? Adult development theorist Daniel Levinson, author of *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, defined mentoring as an intense, multifaceted, one-to-one relationship by which an elder man (Levinson included only men in his research) leads a younger one on the

passage to adulthood. Researchers have since concluded that few men or women actually have mentors in Levinson's all-encompassing sense.

At the other end of the spectrum, some people claim to have been mentored by strangers during chance encounters, by the biographies of famous people, and even by characters in novels. While researchers often discount strangers as mentors because such situations lack reciprocity, others contend that if mentoring means offering advice or serving as a role model, then books can "mentor." In this sense, the authors of self-help books

are mentors, especially self-proclaimed ones like Emily Toth in her popular *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*. I sense the slippery slope we are approaching. Talking about feminism, Nancy Cott warned that "defining feminism ever more narrowly, as if to find its very qualifications, risks losing sight of relevant episodes; but expanding it to cover every worthy or new endeavor women take up equates the term with 'what women did' and renders it meaningless."¹

I apply Cott's interpretation to mentoring as well. Certainly not everything that women read about and

learn from constitutes mentoring. And certainly not all authors are mentors. Yet in the case of the four books I'm discussing here, a fair question for assessing them seems to be, "How effective is the author in mentoring her readers about the value and process of mentoring?" Under this rubric, I conclude that three of these four books do offer enough to be effective mentors for the audiences for which they are intended — either, as in Marian Wright Edelman's, in the form of role modeling and specific advice for life or, as in Barbara Quick's and Carolyn Duff's, in the form of advice about the value of a female mentor and suggestions for finding one.

Barbara Quick bases *Under Her Wing: The Mentors Who Changed Our Lives* primarily on the stories she heard during focus groups with thirty women "from widely divergent backgrounds and ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-four" (p.5). She combines comments from those thirty women with her own experiences and the research of social scientists to conclude that women seek out female mentors as "idealized versions of what girls are supposed to get from their mothers" (p.4). The theme of female-mentors-as-mother-figures runs throughout this book. Beginning in childhood, says Quick, women long for women — either their own mothers or model substitutes — to show them how to live their lives as strong, independent adults who don't have to compromise their feminine qualities. They seek acceptance and validation for their ambitions.

Combining the focus-group voices with references to Bruno Bettelheim, Nancy Chodorow, Natalie Angier, and others, *Under Her Wing*

offers a few suggestions about finding female mentors, but it primarily explains why women do — and should — seek out other women. The book describes women mentors as good listeners, essential role models, nurturers and prodders, teachers, and facilitators — all aspects of mentoring that have been identified by prior research.

One strength of this well-researched and engaging book is its voice, a conversational tone addressed to women readers searching for mentors. While Quick bases her advice on her own research, she admits it's neither definitive nor "generated from a scientific perspective" (p.5). She distinguishes herself from those who focus on corporate or professional mentoring, even though many of the women she quotes do speak of their workplace mentors. In the end, Quick's book stresses the importance of mentoring to enrich a woman's life experiences and validate her values and aspirations. Quick tells us that she hopes the women she quotes provide clues about how to find a mentor. "Great," I thought, "I'd like to read more about that," since I know from my own work with women in academia that it is much easier to explain why they need mentors than to tell them how to find them. Unfortunately, Quick does not provide easy answers, beyond a few suggestions in the chapter "Do You Carry Mentors Here?"

Like *Under Her Wing*, Carolyn Duff's *Learning From Other Women: How To Benefit From the Knowledge, Wisdom, and Experience of Female Mentors* is about women mentoring women, and is based on the author's conversations, in this case with more

than 200 women, on career and life issues. As Quick does, Duff concludes that women mentors offer other women the chance to discover their "true natures," connect with their "authentic selves," and identify and reflect their values (p.xiv). Although male mentors can also be very helpful, they have not shared the female experience and thus are not able to be guides to the "wholeness of the female self" (p.xiv). Both books are approachable, conversational, and aimed at women seeking mentors.

The cover illustrations demonstrate the primary difference between the two books. *Under Her Wing* features a photo of an older woman with her arm around the shoulders of a younger woman. On the cover of *Learning From Other Women* is a large picture of two women in business suits — one with grey hair and one with black — shaking hands. Another indication of the authors' different perspectives on mentoring is that Quick is a novelist, essayist, poet, and dancer who claims writer Jessica Mitford as her "fairy godmother" and mentor, while Duff is president of WomenWorks, Inc, "a consulting and training business focused on workplace gender issues," and her book is published by the American Management Association. As these details suggest, the two authors advocate mentoring for different outcomes. While Duff, like Quick, believes that women with female mentors have the potential to enrich their whole life experiences, her focus in *Learning From Other Women* is almost exclusively on mentoring for women's career success and fulfillment. Duff's is a much more practical discus-

sion of how women can develop and maintain helpful workplace mentoring relationships with other professional women.

Duff skillfully blends stories from the women she interviewed with her own experiences, supports those narratives with lots of references to the findings of other mentoring researchers, and provides helpful bibliographies of key mentoring literature at the end of each chapter. She creates a rich, thorough, and persuasive discussion of many aspects of mentoring, such as the myth of the “queen bee” and other problems with same-sex mentors and the variety of types of relationships, including peer-to-peer, networks, and formal mentoring programs. More so than Quick, Duff describes her book as a guide to finding a mentor. As she explains, “You don’t have to wait to be chosen by women who will be your mentors. This book will encourage and prepare you to take the initiative in forming learning connections with women” (p.11).

In addition, Duff provides self-inventories a reader can use to determine whether she is ready for a female mentor and to identify the traits she expects that mentor to possess. The book also includes extended suggestions for preparing for, initiating, maintaining, and even dissolving a mentoring relationship. Overall, *Learning From Other Women* is a very practical overview of the whys and

hows of woman-to-woman career mentoring.

Can a respected, successful woman be a mentor simply by writing about her life? Marian Wright Edelman, in her short book *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*, certainly aims to be. *Lanterns* is primarily Edelman’s memoir — from her childhood as the daughter of prominent religious and social activist parents to her college years at Spellman and Yale and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. The central points for



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Edelman’s descriptions of these phases of her life are the mentors who guided her and served as role models in each period.

In each chapter of *Lanterns*, Edelman weaves stories from her past around her relationships with different mentors: her parents, community elders, teachers, and friends who taught her essential moral lessons. She counts among her mentors both famous people she has known — such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Robert

Kennedy, William Sloan Coffin, and Rosa Parks — and famous Black women from whose earlier lives she draws inspiration — Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary McLeod Bethune. The stories Edelman tells do two things. First, they allow readers to witness, for example, the passion and danger of sit-ins and voter registration drives during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Second, they illustrate how the author drew strength from the people along her way who nurtured and inspired her — thereby making clear the important role

Edelman believes mentors play in any person’s life.

Edelman, who has spent much of her life as a children’s advocate and is founder of the Children’s Defense League, means for *Lanterns* to be more than a memoir. In the last few chapters, she exhorts adults to learn from the wisdom of children, to follow their examples of curiosity, courage, and honesty. She also extends the message from her previous book, *The Measure of Our Success: A*

Letter to My Children and Yours, by presenting twenty-five “lessons that parents must pledge to instill in their children,” including “Keep your word and commitments,” and “Watch out for success. It can be more dangerous than failure” (p.161). *Lanterns* is a very clear example of book-as-mentor. And, because Edelman is both an eyewitness to an important era in recent American history and a strong personal role model, this book about her life and her advice to the world has value for adults and children.

Can a respected, successful woman be a mentor simply by writing about her life?

It is more difficult for me to say who will benefit from Emily Wadsworth's short book, *Giving Much/Gaining More: Mentoring for Success*. Wadsworth is a former director of formal mentoring programs for female graduate and undergraduate students in Purdue University's Engineering School. She draws on her professional and personal experiences to identify twelve pairs of "opposing actions" that "exist together in everyone and which push and pull us in different directions" (p.5). By recognizing the tensions these polarities present, Wadsworth believes, people can better understand and control the events in their lives.

"Trusting/doubting," "accepting/rejecting," and "forgiving/condemning" are some of the polarities Wadsworth identifies and then illustrates with both her own life stories and those of twelve young women members of the mentoring teams she created and directed at Purdue. Each chapter takes its title from one of the

twelve polarities. Wadsworth first briefly defines the two conflicting concepts and then describes an event in her own life that demonstrates how she grappled with and overcame a dilemma. For example, in "Accepting/Rejecting," she writes about feeling alienated by the people in the small town to which she and her husband once moved. Over time, however, she realized that, although they were different from each other, the villagers "came to accept me and I in turn came to appreciate their skills and personalities" (p.30).

For each chapter, Wadsworth then asked a different woman who participated in a Purdue mentoring program to describe how the program helped her to understand the meaning of that chapter's particular polarity. In "Accepting/Rejecting," Lena talks about learning to appreciate "how important it was to create an environment of acceptance for participants in the [mentoring] program" (p.33).

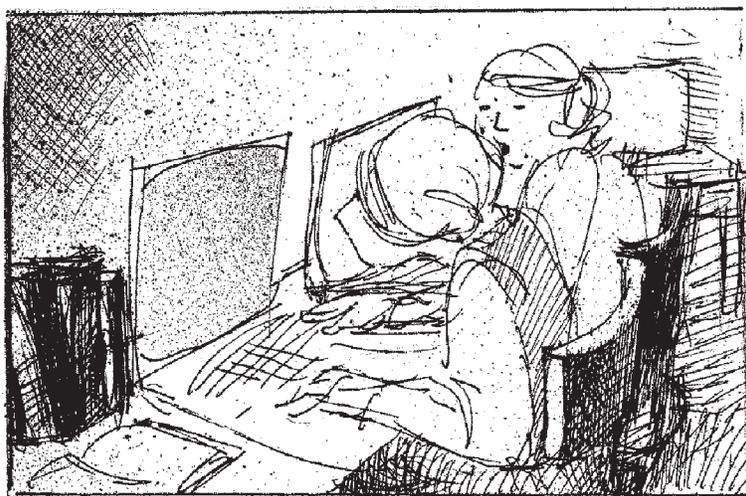
The themes in *Giving Much/Gaining More* are very broad and generalized. Wadsworth and her twelve co-authors say they learned about the

twelve polarities through their experiences in the mentoring program, but the stories they tell do not specifically identify which aspects of the program led to their learning. Anyone looking for "how-to" guidance for establishing a mentoring program will be disappointed that this book does not contain any particular advice about how to conceptualize, design, or run a formal mentoring program. Nor does it offer pointers to ensure the success of such a program. Instead, *Giving Much/Gaining More* is primarily a series of personal reflections from the various narrators about the lessons they learned about life through their association with Wadsworth and the Purdue programs.

Note

1. In *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), p.9.

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