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The Legacy of Relationship

Meditations on Mentoring

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My earliest memories of Barrie Thorne are when, as a first-year graduate student, I went with her as she explored the Oakland elementary school that became the site of her last ethnographic project, a school she ended up calling "Oakdale" (e.g., in Thorne 2001).[1] She had already decided to take me on as part of her research team, and while I was a former journalist, I had little idea of how to be an ethnographer, although I knew I was with one. And yet what was this thing called "ethnography"? We wandered around the school and its neighborhood, the glare of the afternoon sun unrelenting on the pastel sidewalks. Nothing was irrelevant and Barrie made note of it all—from churches to the local parks and recreation outpost to the private schools that dotted the area—keeping up a commentary out loud about the availability of public resources, the structuring of private ones. To me, who lived with my own young kids just a few miles away, it was a thoroughly alien experience, and one with no rules to contain it that I could see. I now understand that I was watching, for the first time, someone making the familiar strange.

Barrie ended up spending years there, and while I was deployed mostly to interview parents as part of a school-choice project, her own pleasure was clearly in observing the kids. She sent long emails punctuated with capitalized themes and observations ("CHILDHOOD IS A TERRAIN WHERE DIFFERENT ORDERS OF TIME COME TOGETHER, SOMETIMES COLLIDE, AND ARE CONTESTED [POWER IS AT STAKE] . . . THERE IS A POLITICS OF TIME") that were like a window into her active and constant theorizing. While I do not think she particularly enjoyed her new role of managing a large fieldwork

team, it was clear that she relished coaxing sociological meaning from the chaos of everyday life. At Oakdale, she was in her element.

I was lucky that this consummate ethnographer took it upon herself to induct me into the craft. Barrie took the practice of mentoring seriously, bringing her fierce commitment to it as she did to all of her relationships. When I think back on what I learned from her, much of it is about research: starting from that first day at Oakdale, where she narrated for me her approach to new sites. But some of the most important lessons she had to give, I learned by example: how to guide and shape another person's intellectual journey. In preparing this essay, I consulted my own memory (highly selective, of course), as well as the raft of emails I had saved from our exchanges from 1995 to 2005, that tell a story of wise and generous counsel, collaboration, respect, humor, anxiety, and care.

I have since cultivated my own crop of students, building another community of young scholars spread out over the years and dispersed over the miles. At the University of Virginia, I have served on forty-five-some-odd dissertations so far, chairing eleven of them. While each one is as different as the person who writes it and the connection we forge, I bring to each the lessons I learned from Barrie, lessons in what counts as "data," how to collect it, and how to think about it once we have it—but also lessons in the oft-intense, sometimes-complicated give and take of relationship.

Mentoring as Oral Culture

We do not usually teach "mentoring" in academia. Perhaps this is not much of a surprise, because we rarely teach future professors how to teach, either. Yet there are pedagogical supports at many colleges: teaching resource centers, sometimes small grants for course design or improvement. There is usually nothing about becoming a mentor, barring a brief handout or two. This is not to say there is not scholarship on mentoring, as there is. Most of it is in the fields of education and psychology, proving how doctoral mentors increase a sense of belonging (Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove 2013), forestall attrition (Golde 2005), and lead to more and better jobs (Eby et al. 2013). Scholars have dug into the details of successful mentoring, identifying different types (e.g.,

instrumental/technical, sponsorship/networking, and expressive/psychosocial, in Curtin, Malley, and Stewart 2016). Yet that research rarely makes it into explicit guides for mentors in academia.

The silence follows a larger societal pattern about the kind of work that involves connecting to other people in order to bring them along on their journey: an emotional journey, an intellectual or cognitive one, or some combination (Pugh forthcoming). This connecting work is part of a much wider variety of jobs than just that of the mentor: the therapist obviously deploys the same toolkit, their eye on the same journey, but so too do wildly disparate jobs such as that of the funeral home director or the hairdresser. Core lessons for the clinical work of helping someone else move forward are rarely identified or discussed. Some fields—often those in counseling—offer training through an apprenticeship system, in which learners get to watch, and then do, under supervision and discussion. In academia, however, there is no such explicit system of passing down the practical wisdom of mentoring. If graduate students are apprentices, the apprenticeship is for research; the articles and books we ponder, the papers we write, are all in service of honing our research craft. Mentoring is an oral culture trapped in a textual world.

In the absence of training or even much conversation about it, most people probably mentor the way they were mentored, give or take a few refinements—while those with toxic mentors vow to do it differently, motivated by the negative example echoing within. A department can feel like a tower of Babel, the many different versions of mentoring milling about without intersecting or informing each other. I have witnessed faculty who enact an intense and dyadic interpretation, their student a constant figure across their desk, murmurs and queries and chuckles emanating from their office as I walk by. I have seen faculty who seem to have a more competitive vision, where students are not quite sure of where they stand, and worry about not being the one taken to this conference or coauthoring on that project. I have seen faculty who give and withhold their time as if in some behaviorist experiment from the 1950s, refusing to work with their advisees anymore unless they pass this or that milestone. Mentoring is viewed as being as personal, and as idiosyncratic, as parenting; its specifics are rarely articulated, and short of outright abuse, it is rarely monitored or counseled or even discussed. In some fields and some settings, this cloak of privacy—just like

in families—can foster exploitation, harassment, and cruelty (Hatton 2020). But even when the circumstances are not as dire, the way to improve the personal, clinical practice of accompanying and shepherding another person through their journey, as teachers and therapists know, is to have regular, routine conversations about it.

One problem is that academia most commonly sets up a system whereby your committee chair stands as your primary, if not lone, mentor. The National Council for Faculty Diversity and Development dubs this "guru mentoring," and—speaking of newly hired faculty—argues that it is not just impractical but impossible for one person to serve all of one other person's needs. Their arguments apply to graduate students as well. We are best served by a variety of mentors, they note, and should seek out a variety of people to fill needs such as professional development (how-tos and tips on how to navigate academia), emotional support, a sense of community, accountability, institutional advocacy, access to networks, and project-specific feedback.

While these are all important, when I look at that list, I see little of what I got from Barrie. From Barrie, and from other mentors (particularly Arlie Hochschild, Christine Williams, and Nancy Chodorow), I learned less of what to do or who to know, and more of how to be—with myself, with them, and in community with others. From these feminist foremothers I learned how to ask particular questions, and how to manage particular tensions, in the reflective guiding of another person.

An Interpretive Sensibility

The most important of these lessons was how to cultivate what we might consider an interpretive sensibility, an awareness of the multiple layers of meaning in a given moment. "The imperative for the investigator," writes the theorist Isaac Reed (2011:106), "is to grasp a world of communicated sociality: the meanings that make up relations, script rituals and performances, inflect messages and gestures, and give weight to social ties; the meanings that constitute the 'space' upon which social action proceeds." Reed argues that this world is made up of "landscapes of meaning," and it is the ethnographer's task to capture and convey these landscapes, and their meanings.

Barrie reveled in this task. She learned how to do this signification and resignification in part from Everett Hughes at Brandeis, and used to cite him in her graduate seminar on field methods, particularly his line about drawing "far-out" comparisons—the doctor and the plumber, the psychiatrist and the sex worker (Strauss 1996). In her own work, of course, she was particularly taken by the landscapes that kids traversed. Her notion of "borderwork," the compelling concept from *Gender Play* for the practice of actively making and remaking gender segregation, is a perfect example of an interpretive sensibility, one that divines the patterns that matter around us. In this case Barrie saw and named the everyday processes that give an intense, powerful salience to some kinds of meaning and not others, e.g., gender as opposed to age, or height, or location. At Oakdale, she would pepper her conversation with references from the kids' lexicon, for example, the "Pokémon kids" and the "Chinese girls," which later became the title of one of her articles (Thorne 2008).

The task of cultivating an interpretive sensibility in another gives rise to a whole series of questions that I have faced as an advisor. First among these is the question, How do you quiet yourself to hear others? Without staking a claim for "objectivity," I would argue that getting out of the way is the qualitative researcher's first task, that we are there to hear what others have to say, to understand their perspective. But while that may sound obvious, doing so is tricky, as the qualitative researcher is both instrument and analyst.

Yet Barrie would probably argue that the task is less getting out of the way than it is simply making room for the other; I can hear her even now advocating for a both/and rather than an either/or. When I worked on the Oakdale field site, part of my discomfort there was that in listening to parents anxious about charting their child's path through the thicket of schools that faced them, the discourse so strongly resembled that of my own neighbors. I had trouble stepping back to see or analyze its contours. Barrie saw my own experience as relevant, however, as much as that of the people we spoke to at Oakdale, and welcomed them both with her characteristic warmth (from one generous email of the time: "Your interviews and insights are fabulous; your thinking is synergistic with my own; and everything you do on this will enhance the rest of the vast [but getting-focused] endeavor."). She excelled at articulating

the interweavings of one's emotions and analysis, and at noting and observing the ensuing tensions.

Another key question that arises in cultivating an interpretive sensibility is about the tension of being at once humane and analytical, or how to honor the imperative of care in doing research with integrity. How do we help students keep their compassionate selves and their critical selves engaged simultaneously, to both appreciate the informants' gift of their participation and to think about what it might mean sociologically? Barrie crossed that rickety bridge continually. Her commitment to ferreting out sexism and racism was fierce. One of my favorite pieces of her writing was a beautiful memo, which I still remember, pointing to "the ghosting of Jamal," capturing an African American mother's account of the terrible stages by which her son moved, in the eyes of her white neighbors, from cute to invisible to dangerous. Yet her dedication to understanding kids' perspectives meant that sometimes she discovered their own forms of racism or bullying. She did not shy away from these difficult truths, but also took pains to understand their origins and costs (e.g., Haavind, Thorne, Hollway, and Magnusson 2015). Here Barrie also lived the both/and: at once empathetically deriving and understanding her informants' perspectives, and divining and naming the processes of inequality and hierarchy that they themselves enacted.

A third question comes up frequently in my mentoring of students, and it is one that also bothers me more than it seemed to bother Barrie: How do we tolerate the chaos of the early stages of a project? As in the opening vignette, I never quite got my hands around the Oakdale site in all of its variation, but Barrie seemed to love it. I quote at length from one of her 1998 emails, which can still—almost twenty-five years later!—bring back for me the sense of being inundated by the flood of data, ideas, details. Barrie wrote,

> I keep returning to the broad and starting notion of practices (and processes) through which parents, children, and others construct particular childhoods. Practices grounded in varied fields of knowledge, values, reputation-construction (eg of schools—such amazing disparity in how Oakdale is regarded); beliefs and feelings re class, gender, race, safety/danger; differing beliefs re what kids (of different ages, genders) need, generically, in conjunction with parents' specific "diagnoses" of their chil-

> dren's "natures" and "needs" (current and projected); and differing beliefs re what sort of person they are helping to shape (including how much control parents may have in the shaping, vs peers, school, etc.).

"Now all of this is far too complex," she noted blithely, just as my chin slipped below the waves. "The challenge is to articulate a basic focus, a simpler and clarifying starting point or skeleton on which to hang arguments and data. Any ideas you have re that (overly complex) way in to the process of 'musing the data' would be appreciated. Now comes the 'honing ideas in the data,' 'building grounded theory' fun part." Barrie looked forward to surfing the data tsunami.

Barrie's tolerance for chaos might have been unusual, but all qualitative projects, I have found, have a similar moment, and most of my students have had at least one occasion in which they have come into my office a little wild-eyed, overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of meanings. It is a common, even inevitable predicament, especially for qualitative researchers: when it feels as if you could use the data to tell any story a little bit, but no story very well. How to engender calm, when the seas threaten to engulf? I do not have an answer to this perennial question, except—like Barrie—to reassure students of its inevitability, and that this too shall pass, that some larger narrative will bubble up, and they will somehow find the story that they and their data want to tell. But I recognize their panic and dread.

Sometimes, of course, the interpretations do not want to come, which is the source of a fourth question: How do we enable students to give themselves the emotional and cognitive room to think creatively about what might be going on? There may be some innate quality to interpretation, but it can also be taught. To be more precise, actually, I find the interpretive sensibility needs less to be *taught* than it needs to be *freed*.

In my experience, it is not that most students do not have the ability to find novel patterns or plumb the interpretive meaning of a particular practice. It is that their capacity to do so is curtailed. They find themselves pinioned by the demands of the program's normative time pressures, the glares or dismissal of faculty given to hostile pronouncements about "me-search," or perhaps worst of all, the censorious weight of self-doubt. Interpretation is creativity: a powerful metaphor, a felicitous comparison, a concept that folds disparate units together. And like

creativity, it needs to be coaxed in deftly, with a light touch; if it deigns to come at all, it will be on its own terms, not dragged in because we want it to be but instead invited with whimsy, or playfulness, or a sense of possibility. The only way, I think, is to approach it with lightness, even a sense of pleasure, or as Barrie put it, "'the honing of ideas in the data,' 'building grounded theory' fun part." Sometimes that has meant approaching it sidelong, rather than with a sense of panic or urgency. Deadlines are deadly here. Like Luker's (2009) invocation of salsa dancing, more than once when a student has been stuck and facing down an impending due date, I have told them to go gardening.

Giving and Receiving: Confidence, Care, and Humor in Feedback

The second domain where Barrie's legacy of relationship pervades is in the interactive dance of feedback, editorial and otherwise. She was one of those rare mentors who offered line edits, who could clean up copy deftly but also react to ideas and respond in the margins. Years as a reporter inured me to tough critique, but also allowed me to recognize when someone was as unusually good an editor as Barrie. Feedback is pretty standard fare for mentors, and included on every list of what a good advisor should do. Less well known and more pertinent for our discussion here, I think, is that good feedback requires good relations behind it, involving practices of giving and receiving. Barrie shows us that we should care not simply *that* feedback is given and received but also *how* it is.

The questions that come up for me around feedback are mostly about independence. How do my mentees find their own voices? When do I let them make mistakes? How much feedback is too much feedback? As I write these questions out, however, I can see that they are the questions of someone who is convinced they have the right answer, who wonders simply how forcefully to communicate it. But Barrie was humbler than that, more open to the give and take of relationship, and in that way she made me feel like a true partner, even when I was a nascent researcher, with very little experience. Just a few months after I arrived at graduate school, she was writing me encouraging emails about fieldnotes and memos ("I love your flairs of language, e.g. Tiffany 'flouncing' even tho

in baggy t-shirt and jeans; and re another girl, a 'certain loping gait peculiar on someone of her size.' YOUR NOTES ARE REALLY HELPFUL; PLEASE GIVE THIS PROJECT AS MUCH TIME AS YOU CAN!").

This encouragement meant that I assuredly got ahead of myself more often than not. In one email that I now wince to read, I wrote that there was so much variation in our data that it was hard to find an effective frame for it, and suggested that an article we were working on should instead be a book of case studies, with a particular title ("Getting to School"), conceptual frame ("communal childhoods"), and our article as the lead chapter. My, the confidence! In particular, anyone who knows Barrie would know she would likely hate the phrasing "communal childhoods" because of its rosy eliding of power and inequality. Yet Barrie responded with her characteristic generosity, saying that while she did plan on making a book of this, we should stick with the journal article for now.

"I don't think that 'communal childhoods' is the best overall phrasing," she said delicately, "since it suggests 'communes' and harmony." She continued, "Conflict and avoidance are at work (e.g. in white flight; conflicting views of whether or not it's a good thing that Oakdale school is not officially Title I, or 'low income'). As is bonding (as with the white parents and their pact [to send their kids to the school en masse, instead of opting out], or the Latino mothers getting together to complain about the first-grade teacher and location of the classrooms)." Gently, she said, "Let's keep reaching for a vivid organizing concept." At the end of her reply (which went on for many more screens), she concluded not with "let's not get ahead of ourselves here" or "get back to work" but with "What do you think? Thanks for passing the ball further down the field, Allison." Her generosity was a constant.

Feedback is not worth much if it is only positive, and Barrie did not shy away from giving criticism, but she did so (clearly) within a relationship that built confidence, with her characteristic care and good humor. Some of her wise counsel stays with me to this day, partly because of the way that she shared it. For example, the other members of my longtime writing group have heard Barrie's wisdom about writing introductions so often that we repeat it to each other whenever someone gets too declarative in their opening pages. Here is the story: Consider a book introduction like a dinner party that you are hosting, Barrie once told me.

When someone comes to the door, she said, you invite them in, ask for their coat, show them their way around, introduce them to the other guests. You don't open the door and shout (and here I remember Barrie calling out into the distance, and roaring with laughter while she did so), "WE'RE HAVING STEAK! AND MAYBE DESSERT LATER! YES IT'S STEAK!" I have striven for a greater narrative subtlety in my introductions ever since, while those roars of laughter still reverberate, joyfully.

Weathering Conflict and Disappointment

Like all relationships—and particularly like all intense ones—mentoring relationships will involve disagreements or disappointments. I have been lucky with advisees who are feminist, interpretive, critical, and exceedingly smart, while also being caring contributors to our collective culture of shared wisdom and support. That said, a student or two has tested the waters and decided against signing on with me as an advisor, and I have turned away a student or two for whom the fit was not ideal. Part of avoiding conflict and disappointment is making sure your strengths are what they need, and your weaknesses are what they can manage.

Some of Barrie's legacy of relationship is in how to manage conflict: a domain that I am still learning to navigate. In truth, when I read the emails left in my old inboxes, I am haunted by the ways I disappointed Barrie. She was so encouraging on the Oakdale project, so early in my graduate career, and yet my own involvement petered out, as I became overwhelmed by the demands of my own research, while raising three kids and starting a charter school. I had plenty of excuses for not fulfilling the promise of our early collaborations, but I don't remember ever sitting her down and being straightforward with her about the sense of overwhelm.

In reality, that sense stemmed not only from competing demands but also from issues internal to the project. As is probably evident from the slew of examples throughout this essay, I had trouble with the everything-is-grist approach to ethnography, and if there is a continuum of how to approach an ethnographic field with or without preexisting questions—a continuum represented by everything from grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) to abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) to the extended case method (Burawoy 2009)—I am probably

somewhere in the middle. I share with Barrie her dedication to kids, her outrage on their behalf, her feminist commitments, her love for the writing craft. But Barrie's lessons to me are also about how to build and experience a mentoring relationship despite an awkward stylistic mismatch, or perhaps an intellectual one: when our approaches to the world of data do not perfectly align.

I now try to avoid that sense of haunting disappointment in my own relationships with advisees by being direct—and encouraging them to be direct—about expectations and limitations. Yet this directness can certainly be threatening to advisees, given the hierarchical relationship. Thus when I told one advisee she needed to respond to my comments on her draft ("You need to take my comments seriously because they represent my work for you, and when you ignore them it makes me feel like I am wasting my time. I'm sure it was just an oversight on your part, but I'm just letting you know what it feels like."), it took several subsequent interactions before we could move past her apology and my reassurance to an easy exchange again. The incident was undoubtedly smaller than all that emotional work would suggest, but I was indeed thinking about Barrie, and how to avoid that haunting feeling. In retrospect, I suppose, I needed to use a lighter touch in conveying the message; a little more Barrie is what is needed here.

Thanks to this desire for air clearing, however, I actually considered it a win (if a sorrowful one) when another advisee wrote me to say she could not continue on a coauthored article because of her other work ("It is not fair to you, as a collaborator, for me to continue in this way."). At the very least, I viewed the email as testament to her own self-awareness and integrity as a scholar, a combination I could not muster twenty years ago. I did not accept her withdrawal, and when I told her I would be keeping her on as second author anyway in light of the enormous contributions she had made earlier, she was moved ("I'm a little blown away by it."). These can be compelling relationships of mutual care, as long as there is room made for our inevitable limitations.

I am sure that Barrie was more sensitive to power differentials in the mentoring relationship as she withheld her own criticism. One email I have from the end of the Oakdale project, asking me for some last remnants of data analysis, is again, characteristically gentle. "Not guilt-loading, my dear; just a bit of querying and prodding. There's back-up

skilled help [another graduate student] if for some reason you can't get to it." These are complex relationships, often extremely rewarding, but sometimes intense and even difficult. Barrie's acute awareness of power suffused her approach to mentoring, so that she was solid in her support, unstinting with her care, and gentle with her regrets.

Despite my failings, Barrie was kind enough to serve on my dissertation committee, and indeed, she was a continual source of support and encouragement even after I graduated, advising me at various junctures, sponsoring me for awards and jobs and other plums of academia. We shared lunches at my infrequent visits to Berkeley or yearly ASA meetings, the periodic moments of connection like pearls on a strand, and in those early years—marooned so far from Berkeley and its environs—I was probably a bit desperate for them. Indeed, I drew even closer to her intellectually then, when I taught sociology of childhood myself, and came to really grapple with and subscribe to her argument that age inequality is akin to other forms of socially constructed structures of power (Pugh 2014). But it is in my relationships with students that I can still hear her voice—musing, probing, in laughter, in sardonic commentary—as I contemplate her legacy of relationship.

Conclusion

As a culture academia does not often articulate the components of what it means to be a strong mentor. While Barrie's care and dedication made her support palpable to me as an insecure graduate student, she also offered a practical demonstration of mentoring skills that were not articulated as such, but instead modeled in a way that I continue to return to today. In three domains—cultivating an interpretive sensibility, giving and receiving feedback, and managing and weathering conflict or disappointment—I find myself thinking about how Barrie did or would respond to similar situations. This essay is to make these internal musings transparent, part of saying out loud what mentoring should be, what it could be, what it ends up being—in the hopes of generating a conversation about relationship.

I became a mother at the same time that I became a graduate student. Both experiences involve massive transformation, a total metamorphosis in self-concept and everyday practice. For many academics, these are

separate processes. The fact that they were conjoined for me meant that my mentors served as midwives to the person—and the parent—that emerged.

I know the maternal metaphor is a dangerous one. Barrie was the first to note that we need to make sure the mothering language includes those who are not mothers, and to make room for those who have damaged relationships with their mothers, and to be clear we are not taking for granted the caring labor that mothers do, and to be careful about the power that mothers wield, especially over kids. In short, we must neither essentialize nor underestimate mothers' work and its consequences. Yet my mentoring is nonetheless inextricably entwined with my mothering: I cannot escape what feel like strong similarities in the support and shepherding of someone on their journey. The primary way in which it might be different—the leavening of intellectual and political commitments in PhD advising—seems but to add yet another layer of intensity.

As a graduate student, I felt the same entanglements coming from Barrie, and I mean that in the most complimentary fashion: both fierce and loving, Barrie lives the both/and tensions she interrogates. While her conceptual bequest may be abundant, for me her legacy of relationship abides.

NOTE

1 This essay is dedicated to Barrie, and to all of my advisors and advisees, links in a generational chain of care. I am grateful to Andrea Press and Steve Sellers for feedback on earlier drafts, and to the volume's editors, Freeden Blume Oeur and C. J. Pascoe, for their inspired decision to pursue this project.

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