

PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS

OP-ED -- MY MENTOR QUILT

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In the 1960s, when I was a child, my mother was always pointing out remarkable women who had achieved unusual things, encouraging me to aspire to do the same. Once, when one of my brothers was hospitalized at Johns Hopkins University Hospital, my mother came home to tell me with enormous excitement that not only was there a woman physician on the faculty, but that she was pregnant! Many years later, when I gave Grand Rounds at the same institution, I shared that story with the faculty. They helped me discover that this woman – who had been my “fantasy mentor” and professional role model, despite the fact that I never met her – was a pediatric endocrinologist, the kind of physician I eventually became. For years, I was inspired by the vision of a female physician who was a mother and had a family.

When I graduated from medical school in December of 1979, there were relatively few women who had achieved both the personal and professional objectives I wanted to pursue, and I didn't know any of them personally. I understood that it would be important to find mentors to teach and advise me along my journey. But I soon realized that no one person would ever be a perfect fit for that role.

Over time, I developed a concept I call “My Mentor Quilt.” Rather than depend on a single mentor, I developed a patchwork of mentors to guide, advise and nurture me throughout my career and life journey. Today, I have an amazing quilt stitched together by remarkable individuals from a range of careers and experiences, and all stages of my professional and personal life.

Numerous outstanding scientific mentors guided my research career. They not only taught me the scientific method, but promoted my hunger for discovery. They taught me how to be resourceful, how to ask questions and answer them using the scientific method, how to challenge the status quo without alienating my superiors and colleagues, and how to pursue new knowledge.

My best clinical mentors taught me the importance of compassion and empathy. They taught me how to listen to patients. They taught the value of the physical examination and a well-developed differential diagnosis. They emphasized the importance of reading journals and staying up-to-date on clinical and translational research. They modeled a holistic approach to medicine. I learned that the best physicians value every member of the care team, especially non-physician members.

When I became a medical and hospital administrator, mentors taught me that although I was the same person I had always been, my colleagues would soon think I had crossed to “the dark side.” They taught me the importance of learning the science of medical school and hospital administration so I would be competent in my new roles. In addition, they taught me about the importance of learning the new language used in administration, but they warned me to be careful how I used this language so that I would not come across as arrogant or “out of touch.” They taught me the importance of humility, effective communication and adherence to the purpose of our organizations – and, most importantly, to be true to my own conscience.

The most wonderful years of my life were when I became a mother of three children. Juggling a dual-career academic marriage, child care, and work-life balance during the time of expected peak academic productivity was extremely challenging. The guidance I received from my mentors was invaluable and continues to serve me well to this day.

One snowy afternoon, when my husband and I were each at the pinnacle of our careers, he was killed in a car accident. In that single moment, our family’s life was shattered. My children lost the father they adored and I lost my beloved husband of 31 years.

The grief that followed was overwhelming. The way I managed was by plunging into my work. After my husband’s death, work challenges seemed less stressful because I had greater perspective of what truly matters. I gained a deeper level of gratefulness for my family, and for serving others. I benefited from recognizing that many patients suffered more than I did. I also realized that I had more resources than many other people who, too, suffered great losses.

Fortunately, for me, amazing widow-mentors seemingly came out of nowhere to help me navigate my grief. At first, I thought I could never experience joy again. My mentors taught me to take life one day at a time, and to start a gratitude journal. Widow-mentors forced me to accept help from others. And as my mentors assured me, joy slowly returned to my life.

Today, I am a university president, and I have found a new rhythm in life. Every day, there are new challenges, additional rewards and grand opportunities. I still count on My Mentor Quilt to guide, advise, and comfort me. I never discard any mentor patches on my quilt, and regularly add new ones. Whenever I need support, I wrap myself in my warm, wonderful Mentor Quilt, grateful and secure as I take on the next challenge that lies around the bend.

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