

When Your Friend Is Also a Mentor: The Mentrix Identity

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My mentor killed herself in 2003.

Just about everyone in the realm of feminist academia who had encountered her fabled generosity thought of Carolyn Heilbrun as a mentor, sometimes their mentor. Everyone, that is, except for Carolyn—and me. Only after she died did I begin to refer to Carolyn as my mentor. Until she died, she was to my mind, a great friend, an older friend, a friend. Although we met at Columbia University where rank and position might have suggested a mentoring relationship between us, she too always described me as a friend, a younger woman often in need of rescue, but never, as would be expected in a university setting, a *disciple*. Disciple, rather, was a word Carolyn invoked in her vision of the celebrated literary critic and brilliant teacher, Lionel Trilling.

Carolyn longed to be recognized by Trilling, the man who might have played the role of mentor when she was first a graduate student and then a colleague of his in the English department at Columbia. Might have but did not. Carolyn evoked that failure in her 1979 *Reinventing Womanhood*, a book she wrote on turning fifty, as she reflected on the shape her own life and those of other women of her generation had taken. She sought to understand the pattern of their paths to achievement and, in particular, the role played by male mentors in their success. As she traces the Greek origin of the word “mentor” (Mentor, an elderly companion of Odysseus, became the teacher of young Telemachus), she reinterprets the role from being solely a matter of education and pedagogy, “a mere teacher,” by adding an affective dimension: “a guide or exemplar in dealing with the central concerns of one’s life.”¹ That is what Carolyn was to me: the person who helped me deal with the central concerns of my life, not solely in school. This was not a role Trilling was remotely interested in playing, at least not with her. He preferred their male colleagues.

Who would Carolyn have had to be in order to get Trilling’s attention? She reflects in *Reinventing Womanhood*,

Most women for whom male teachers become mentors turn to them with a devotion either daughterly or loverlike. I was neither attractive nor submissive enough to have made either role possible, and Trilling had no sense of my discipleship. The word disciple was his, and the role was filled by several men,

some of whom became my colleagues and, in interpretations of the process of the moral life, my adversaries. (p. 126)

Either or, neither nor—doubly decisive binaries. Although it is clear that Trilling's failure to recognize the intellectual value of his talented younger colleague wounded her, it is also the case that Carolyn did not in fact imagine a "close relationship of mentor," invariably male, "and woman follower" as a plausible configuration in academia (p. 51). In 1979, the model of female mentor and "woman follower" did not appear in her sketch of institutional relations, not even as a horizon of possibility within the male-dominated ether of the university.

I have often wondered whether Trilling's snub made Carolyn reluctant to embrace the label of mentor later in her career when she was a feminist icon, despite her legendary support of young scholars, especially women. Trilling, she writes, seemed not even to know she existed: "During all the years we were colleagues he never once talked to me, except in the most routine way of politeness. I used to fantasize that we would one day engage in dialogue—this ponderous phrase exactly explains what I aspired to" (p. 127). The power of dialogue is at the heart of Heilbrun's argument in *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) about female friendship, what she calls the "untold story" of women's lives, "sustaining but secret."² Recalling the extraordinary emotional intimacy between British writers Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, she notes: "Only death could halt the friendship and its constant and continuous dialogue" (p. 99). But can this kind of dialogue unfold within the conventional boundaries of mentoring?

"He never once talked to me."

When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, Trilling (2002), Carolyn's last book, is a memoir of her career at Columbia, from graduate student to named professor, and the three teachers who influenced her years there: Jacques Barzun, Clifton Fadiman, and Trilling. Two decades after *Writing a Woman's Life* and two years before her suicide, Heilbrun returned to her "disenchantment with Trilling," his unwillingness to acknowledge her existence as well as, more damning, his skeptical view of "actual friendships."³ Here, looking back from the vantage point of her seventies, Carolyn offers another way of experiencing the world and the life of the mind. Mentorship no longer figures in the picture of academic relations, which she paints in somber colors. Rather, a new model emerges for her through feminism: life-sustaining friendships with women. What she could not get from Trilling, she gave in friendship to the women who did not count in his world view: concern with their lives, their lives as women.

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I have arrived here at the entanglement announced in my title, the affinities between mentoring and friendship. If, for example, over more than twenty years, Carolyn focused on me the care she defined as central to mentorship, am I now saying that my friend was also my mentor all along? Kind of. I have come to think that because Carolyn had not been mentored herself, she did not see herself, did not want to see herself, in that paradigm. She was happy, though, as we will see, to assign the name to me. For Carolyn, what feminism had instead made possible was friendships between women that support each other's ambition and, in the case of the academy, mitigate the pain of a female intellectual odyssey.

To pull out the threads I have somewhat carelessly woven (it cannot be helped, the situation is complicated), I turn to Italian feminism's challenging concept of *affidamento* (entrustment): a style of relationship between women (often between an older and a younger woman) that resists hierarchy and negotiates, is even strengthened by, conflict and differences.⁴ *Affidamento* is one way of thinking about how women can withstand the often devastating, competitive impulses of academia with its zero-sum logic, about what female mentorship might look like.

Reinventing Womanhood was the first of her books that Carolyn inscribed for me: "In Cambridge and New York," she wrote, "in friendship and with admiration." (I was in Massachusetts for the semester while Carolyn was in New York). We had taught a graduate seminar together and had begun our weekly dinners. I do not remember what I thought about the inscription at the time (I imagine I was flattered by "admiration" while doubtful that I deserved it), but as I reread the inscriptions from this book and the many others Carolyn published, I am struck now by the concurrence of both words: friendship and admiration. The fact that she expressed admiration I take as the working of *affidamento*, her refusal to measure me by her accomplishments, discounting the chasm of age and achievement.

Is there a word in English for a female mentor that expresses the affect animating Italian feminists' *affidamento*? Not in English but, as it happens, in Dutch: *mentrix*. The definition of "mentrix" (in the Dutch Wiktionary) includes an expansiveness similar to Carolyn's gloss on the role of the mentor as focused on "the central concerns of one's life," a mode of relation that extends beyond pedagogy: "help or guidance for matters not related to the content of the course."⁵ Although "mentor" has Greek roots (akin to "menos" meaning mental strength), "mentrix" is a feminine formation following the Latin adoption of the word—like *aviatrix* or *dominatrix*—and therefore tempting to hijack to feminist purposes.⁶

In 1994, when she was sixty-eight and I was fifty-three, Carolyn argued in an autobiographical preface to a volume about aging for which we both wrote forewords that feminism, along with the benefits of aging, could transform relationships between women. For her, differences—like that of

age, which characterized our particular bond—did not matter for women within feminist friendships:

I have three children, she has none, and were we youthful, we might regard each other's state with more envy than accord. Our parental condition today, on the other hand, is remarkably similar; I delight in my grown children, Nancy in the young women she has mentored with a devotion and affection greater, I have no doubt, than that possible to their natural mothers.⁷

I have never loved the analogy that links mothering and mentoring (in fact I hate it), but I want to leave it in place long enough to keep pressing on the question of what mentoring and friendship have in common—for Carolyn and me but more broadly for female friendship.

(Clearly, I am finding it hard to parse the distinction between mentorship and friendship since the two modes of connection compelled both of us. Not least because in writing about these subjects here, I continue to think with Carolyn—in remembered dialogue with her, sometimes against her, and through the legacy of her books and the biography of her journey.)

In the unacknowledged role of mentor (or, as she saw it, friend), Carolyn first guided me through a decade of confusion and anxiety by inviting me to team-teach with her, to create a book series with her, and in general, by warding off the evil spirits that wanted to prevent me from getting tenure at Barnard College. She championed my books and quoted from them. Above all, she imparted the lesson of her loneliness at Columbia: never be sentimental about the institution. And know that the personal is the political in academia (yes, people's likes and dislikes are folded into power structures).

What Carolyn could not imagine flourishing in academia in 1979 was fact by 1994: female teachers with female colleagues as followers. I did not, however, think of myself as a mentor to graduate students in 1994, and only recently have I come to acknowledge that role. In part, my resistance has been due to the fact that I cannot see myself as I saw Carolyn, as an "exemplar" or "guide." My life and career to me seem chaotic and accidental, certainly not an example to be followed. My curriculum vitae is a chronology that only in retrospect resembles a path of ambition. Nor do I feel possessed of wisdom that I might dispense to others about difficult life choices and institutional dilemmas. And of course, I have never enjoyed the influence and audience that Carolyn did during her lifetime. That said, little by little, I have had to recognize that through my relationships with graduate students over the years, yes, I have morphed into that role, while also trying to change the model by destabilizing the power differential from within. At least I hope so.

Put another way, while I cannot make the difference in age separating me from my students (far greater than it was between Carolyn and me) disappear, I have finally been able to feel aligned with the mentor assign-

ment by deflecting its conventional expectations, being transparent about my own struggles with career and institution, and acknowledging the inevitable anxieties about making our way in a world not entirely happy that we are there.

That sense of shared struggle—at whatever stage—is, of course, not enough to banish the insidious and omnipresent workings of hierarchy, but what compensates for the classic student/teacher imbalance, in my mind at least, is my gratitude for what the students bring me. They are full-fledged citizens of twenty-first-century culture, for example, where I feel like an interloper (not for nothing do we distinguish between digital natives and digital immigrants). I think they know that I need their help as much as they might think they need mine and not solely as a matter of technology (though that is part of it), which is a convenient metaphor for intergenerational exchange. Maybe this is what Carolyn meant by “with admiration.”

I hope I am not deluding myself by also emphasizing, from my perspective at least, the “in” of the inaugural book inscription: “in friendship.” Is this remodeled friendship still tributary to mentorship? Or is friendship a magic trick that makes institutional differences disappear? In my relationship with Carolyn, despite all the time that has passed since her death in 2003, I cannot resolve the conundrum. No more than I can speak for the students I indeed mentor. Do my “mentees” feel my friendship for them? It is not possible for me to say how they experience our connection. I cannot know whether Mentor still rules.

Of course, we must struggle against the classical legacy of Mentor, the man. Even though in the *Odyssey* it is the goddess Athena taking the form and shape of the human character Mentor, who periodically swoops down in a rescue mission, there is no eluding the masculinity of the role—male bonding, as we used to say—and its comic book heroics, even if Carolyn sometimes took an Olympian tone or leap on my behalf. (We also, I should note, owe the Mentor aura to its seventeenth-century avatar in François Fénelon’s political treatise *Les aventures de Télémaque* [1699; *The Adventures of Telemachus*]. There Mentor’s role is to prepare a young man of privilege to rule, as was the case for the ancients.)

The concept of the “mentrix” helps me accept the mentor role, but it does not go all the way. What I have come to mean by—and love about—mentoring (mentrixing?) is its kinship with friendship. It is not a good idea to fully collapse the two modes of relation, but it is worth continuing to explore their affinities in thinking about women in academia. I am not friends with all the students I engage with, of course—that is a matter of affinities—but there is for me always the reciprocity that is at the heart of friendship. Reciprocity in academia does not mean replication, nor will it necessarily mean symmetry. In the best cases, reciprocity undoes the one-sidedness of the guidance mandate, laying bare the possibility of exchange

and surprise. Telemachus cannot help Mentor (much less Athena)—they are not friends, never will be—but students help me.

There is another advantage to unfixing the solidity of the classical model, and this will circle back to my point of departure: Carolyn's suicide at seventy-seven. At one of the Modern Language Association conference sessions devoted to Carolyn's memory, the late feminist scholar Nina Auerbach, in her remarks, explicitly linked the burden of the mentor position to the suicide. In her view, which I have come to share, despite the fact that Carolyn did not use the word "mentor" to describe herself, she embodied the role for many and over decades. Carolyn, Auerbach thought, could not separate herself from the impenetrability of Mentor. She was unable to shed the accretions of authority and unburden herself, acknowledge, until it was too late, her vulnerability and anxiety as a writer. She could not seek solace from her many friends and call on the reciprocity of the friendships she cherished.

I take this as a lesson for my old age.

There is no goddess of friendship, not to mention friendship between women, who will descend from Olympus when we need her help, but it is more than time now to invent one. We can call her Mentrix as we wait.

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NOTES

¹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York: Norton, 1979), 164. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988), 98. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Heilbrun, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, Trilling*, *Personal Takes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 66.

⁴ For the context in which the concept of entrustment was developed, see Susanna Scarparo's "In the Name of the Mother: Sexual Difference and the Practice of 'Entrustment,'" *Cultural Studies Review*, 11, No. 2 (2005), 36-48.

⁵ WikiWoordenboek, s. v. "mentrix," accessed 16 September 2019, <https://nl.wiktionary.org/wiki/mentrix>. Translation provided by the author.

⁶ Classicist Gregory Nagy emphasizes the “connection between *menos* and ‘mentor.’ *Menos* is mental strength, and a mentor is someone who gives mental strength to someone else”; see Nagy, “*The Odyssey’s* Millennia-Old Model of Mentorship,” interview by B. R. J. O’Donnell, *The Atlantic*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/10/the-odyssey-mentorship/542676>.

⁷ Heilbrun, foreword to *A Certain Age: Reflecting on Menopause*, ed. Joanna Goldsworthy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xv-xvi.