My Mentor/My Self: Reflections On Professional Relationships

Thank you for your kind introduction. I am amazed to be here today, and those of you who regularly come to these things are amazed to see me here, too, I’m sure. From the roster of persons who have spoken here before, as far as I can tell, I don’t fit. However, I am very honored.

I think that I may be the only person who has come here because of retribution rather than opportunity, and it happened like this. Three or four years ago Dr. Kimball showed me a list of the persons who had spoken at the Midcontinent Perspectives. It was titled “MCP Speakers” and I noticed right away that the speakers had a couple of things in common. One was their distinction and the other was their gender. So I sent back a joking note that said, “This is pretty aptly titled.” And he said to me, “Well, one day you may speak there if you amount to anything.” So I can only assume that I must have begun to amount to something or I wouldn’t have been invited today. Either that or he is paying me back for making fun of the MCP lectures! I think most people who come to this platform probably do so at Dr. Kimball’s request and I would like to be here today in his honor. Dr. Kimball, this one is for you, my mentor and my friend.

Today I want to talk to you about enablement, and I want to ask you, Do you feel fully enabled? That sounds like something a TV preacher would say, but sometimes I wonder if we do say it to ourselves. Do we feel fully enabled? Do you ever have the feeling that you are going somewhat to waste? Or maybe, do you know someone who is going somewhat to waste? Are you somebody who has touched someone else’s life in a way that would enable that person or in a way that would channel that person’s strengths and interests? I think the concept of enablement, of being enabled, of enabling, is what mentor and mentee – which is a really strange word to me, but people seem to be using it – are all about.

To start with, I will tell you something about myself. I am clever, and I am strong willed, and I am, as you can see, not particularly humble. But I would have gone to waste completely if it had not been for mentors. I was raised in a Southern town, in a teensy-weensy backwoods of a nowhere town, in the time when girls were supposed to get married – the girls I graduated from high school with have children through college, and I have a friend who is about to be a grandmother – and there really would not have been the future for me that I have now had it not been for mentors. So I am pretty rabid on the subject. I think you are likely to get more of a preaching than a speeching today.

My first real mentor was my Latin teacher, Mrs. Clayton. Those of you who have studied Latin probably remember the verse,
Latin is a dead language,
it’s plain enough to see.
It killed off all the Romans,
and now it’s killing me.

This aging lady, who looked like she belonged on a Roman coin – she was so patrician – made Latin live. It was the first time that I can remember being touched by something intellectual. I wanted to grow up like her, and I told her that I wanted to be a Latin teacher. I thought that she would be thrilled but she said, “You can’t. It’s dead.” And I said, “You’ve been telling us for three years that it is not a dead language.” And she said, “The language is not dead but you would be if you taught it.” She said, “Go out and use the language as a foundation for your own and I will have done a right thing by you.”

Do you know how hard it is for a teacher to turn away someone who says, “I want to be made in your image?” And she was a retiring teacher in a tiny little Arkansas town. Once I grew up and became a teacher, I looked back on that and I realized that for her to turn me away must have been a tremendous sacrifice.

I think that mentors are people who look farther down your road than you can, and they pick a good route for you.

Then there was the Rotary. Even today Rotary does not admit women as members. At the time that I was in school, Rotary did not give scholarships to women. Rotary did sponsor girls to Girls State and Rotarians helped me. They chose me as their Girls State representative, and they gave the first formal dinner I ever went to. Steak was served and as I told the Rotarians downtown here recently, I was so glad that the Rotary instead of the Elks sponsored me because Elks served chicken. Steak was served and I was sitting across from this gentleman, when he stuck his fork in his steak and the steak flipped off the plate, zoomed across the table, and landed in my lap. I was 16 and didn’t know what to do, so I stuck my fork in the steak and handed it back to him. And he said, without missing a beat, “Well, we had planned to have a stake in your future but this is not it!”

The Rotarians sent me to Girls State and they managed over time to finagle a college scholarship for me. When I got ready to go to college, there was not any money in my family for that. I would not have been able to go, but the Rotarians basically took up a collection and I went to college. In exchange, I spent two years giving speeches to the Rotary.

I think that mentors are people who make an exception for you. There wasn’t anything in their by-laws that allowed them to take on a girl at that time, but they took on me.

In the course of visiting with the Rotary I spent a lot of time in receiving lines. I don’t know how much you all know about the South, but what the South can do is “receive.” We are receivers from way back. And at that time girls growing up in the South learned to preface everything with “why” – as in, “Why, Captain Butler, how you do talk!”

In the course of standing in a receiving line one evening, I was saying, “Why, I am so glad you could come,” to everyone who came through the line. As I got tired, I guess, over the course of the evening, this gentleman came through the line and I said, “Why did you come?” And he said, also without missing a beat – leading me to believe that Rotarians are generally very good on their feet – “I came to see what might be made of you.” That one line impressed me more than anything that the Rotarians said to me over the time that they had me in their grip.
I went to Girls State after one of those receptions. I ran for governor. I was elected. The week I was to go, it had never occurred to me that I would campaign with three thousand girls and get elected, but somehow the Rotarians expected that I would.

I think mentors are people who set expectations for you. They create a set of expectations, and over time you learn to live up to them.

In college I had a philosophy professor whose name was Dr. Ware. He taught me to think, and it was, I have to say, a difficult and painful process, and I got to be pretty dependent on him. On the day I graduated, when I came down off the platform; he was standing at the bottom. He had a small white envelope which he handed me, and in it was a single wing feather and a note. And the note said, “To fly with.”

I think in the end a mentor is someone who sets you free.

Mentoring is a concept that has gotten to be something all of us are talking about. It is suddenly a buzz word and it seems as though maybe the Baby Boomer work force invented it.

In fact, as far as I can tell, mentoring is as old as God. Some people treat it as though it is still that relationship.

In concept it is as old as God. It is a fundamentally creative relationship whereby someone is energized and set free. Guides, guardians, sponsors, teachers — I think that mentoring has existed as long as there was someone who knew and someone who needed to know. Primitive tribes we know assign young people to persons who are not their parents and I believe in that is a seed of mentoring.

Mentoring and parenting are not the same thing. It is true that there is some crossover in the way that caring is done, but parents are not generally good mentors for their children. You tend to remember how your child was when he was six and what expectations you had at that time, and I don’t think you cut free from that enough to really be a mentor. I think that mentor and protégé relationships occur between adults, generally young adults and older adults, sometimes older adults and still older adults, sometimes, but rarely, peers.

In the Middle Ages, guilds put apprentices to work with masters, and there are time honored mentoring traditions in medicine, law, in academia, and the sciences. In fact, mentoring has also been a big part of business, but it just has not been as obvious as it has become in the last six, seven, ten years — I think since 1980. We will talk about why I think this is in a minute.

Mentoring has really become a hot topic in business, and there are a lot of sociological descriptions for mentoring. I picked out a particularly dry one for you to hear: Mentoring is an “HRD.” Have you noticed how different disciplines pick out letters for things? It is sort of like, if you know my letters and I know your letters then we know something about each other so we must be on the same track. Well, I fooled these people; I know what an HRD is. It is a “human resource development method.”

So mentoring is a human resource development method used for learning in specific disciplines and for obtaining skills in noncognitive areas, such as leadership or judgment. This is real dull, but I tell it to you simply to show that sociologists are talking about it. They are making surveys, and they find that surveys of successful people show that there are no successful people without mentors. Almost without exception. In fact, I couldn’t find any studies that talked about
the exceptions. Leaders seem to be made by other leaders. Success seems to be made by other successes. That is simply the way that it works.

Here is a definition that I like better. This is from Yale University psychologist, Daniel Levinson. He says mentors take younger people under their wings, they bring them into a new occupational world, they show them around, they impart wisdom, they care, sponsor, and criticize, and they bestow their blessing. Teaching and sponsoring have their values, but the blessing is the crucial element.

Today mentoring has become a buzz word, and the way that people used to want an M.B.A. in the last decade they want mentors today. As I said in the now too frequently quoted line, “It is not a course that you can enroll for.” It is a special, strange, delicate relationship that arises between people. And from it you get more than a degree, more than just a career boost. You get a blessing in the oldest and most traditional sense. You get a combination of good wishes, and you get a commandment, “Go thou and do likewise.”

The word that bothers me most in this whole jargon that has been thrown around about mentoring is mentee. I think that is because for a long time I thought a mentee was an endangered species of sea creature off the coast of Florida. But it seems to have supplanted “protégé” So you are going to have to hear me talk about mentees here.

A real mentor is someone to live up to. That is my definition. I will can the sociological stuff here for you and say only that a mentor is simply someone to live up to.

A mentee for the mentor provides something, too. The mentee provides an exercise in futurity. Most people who have developed expertise in a field over time do want it to be passed on. They do want to share. They do want to care over generations. And the only way to do that is to develop younger people to come after them. All of us need these kinds of relationships. I don’t care how self-sufficient we have gotten in business. And there has been a lot of talk about developing self-sufficiency, particularly in women in business. You don’t get self-sufficient enough to do without this because we all need models. And I really believe that when humankind has done well at whatever it’s tried, it is through seeing, and being models, good models, and that is what mentorship is all about.

What does a mentor do really? I think there are three things. A mentor’s job is to inspire; to educate; and to facilitate, or to connect, or to make connection. It does not just mean introductions. You read a lot about mentors – how they can introduce you to the right people. This only really works when everybody benefits from the introduction – not just the person getting introduced but also the person being introduced to – and when there is some kind of connective fabric being made, then it all starts to make sense.

There is an image that I particularly like out of Hungarian folklore. When a “magus,” one of the magi, one of the wise men of Hungarian folklore – the whiz kid – was identified, the old people in the community would make a garment and on the garment each of them would embroider the experiences each had had that meant the most to them in their lives. And the young wizard would go forward, then, wearing a cloak of everything that the community knew. It is the idea of a person who has potential going forth cloaked in wisdom. That seems to me somehow to be what mentors and sharing are about.

Mentors can teach hard lessons, too, of course. We all think of being thrown in when we cannot swim – and I think that is some of what is happening here today, frankly – but I think
there is a place for hard lessons and for criticism and that is part of what makes mentors valuable. I heard a joke recently which I am going to tell because I almost never hear jokes anymore, and it made me think about mentoring. It seems that there was an old fisherman who had such phenomenal luck that no one could figure out where he got so many fish. The fish and game commissioner got considerably concerned about this, and they sent a young warden out to check up on the guy. So early one morning the warden pulls his boat up beside where this fisherman is and says, “Is it okay if I watch you fish for a while?” And the old fisherman says, “Sure, that’s just fine.” The fisherman then proceeds to reach down to the bottom of the boat and get a stick of dynamite, light it, and throw it out into the lake. Kabam! It brings forty thousand fish to the surface. The game warden is really undone by this and he says, “Wait a minute, you can’t do that. People don’t fish that way.” And the old fisherman takes another stick of dynamite, lights it, and hands it to the game warden and says, “Are you going to just sit there, or are you going to fish?” And that, I think, is something of what the hard lessons of mentoring are all about.

But mostly what I think mentors do is create a small calm. This goes against everything you are going to read about mentoring – where mentors sort of take you under their wings and rush you from one great place to another and you meet all of these fascinating people and your career takes off like crazy. Well, if you read Ms magazine, that is what is supposed to happen to you: In fact, I think mentors do the opposite thing: they create a shelter. Mentors do not make the spark, they don’t create the right people, they don’t take a nothing will and make it into an ambitious one. What they do is shelter a spark; you know, shelter it so it can flame.

You will hear business people sometime say – if you ask them how leaders are developed – “Well, cream rises.” I have to tell you, those people have not worked on a farm, because I have milked some cows in my time, and I know this about the cream. It does not rise when you shake the milk can. The only way that cream rises is if you keep the can still. Otherwise, it stays in solution and none of it ever comes to the top. And then you have a real thick milk and no cream at all. So I think that part of what mentors do is keep the milk can still and then the cream does rise.

A mentor makes enough space from the hustle and the bustle of change that a protégé can get on his feet and stand on his own. Maybe that is the big problem that comes with mentoring, and there are problems. I don’t want to make it sound like it is just the ideal relationship. When the mentee starts to stand on his own, there are sometimes problems. It is a hard time for both. Sometimes the mentor wants to keep the mentee his own special property. Sometimes the rending between the two is very painful. I think the important part of mentoring is letting go and being let go, and it is difficult on both sides.

There is an oft-quoted study on managerial styles by a Boston University professor and it talks about the phases of mentorship from the beginning to the inevitable separation – and they do use the word “inevitable.” Over a period of years they followed a bunch of executives who were mentors and mentees and they found several phases. One was the initiation phase, which was the getting-acquainted and finding-the-common-bonds and sharing-the-insights phase. Then there was the cultivation phase, which was a time when most knowledge and insight were shared and the young person developed. Then there was a separation phase as the mentee began to go his own way. This was followed by a transition phase that was painful for everybody. And finally there was a redefinition phase and the mentor and mentee became friends, or they separated completely.
Now, here is where we get into true chauvinist piggery. I think women have it all over men in this department. I think part of the reason you sometimes will hear people say that women make good mentors for other women is that when they are mentor and mentee to each other the separation, as I have observed it, is not so painful. I am just telling you what I have seen after talking with business people over the last seven or eight years in a lot of interview situations and in working inside various businesses. My personal theory is that it is because of mothering.

It is not very popular to say this because I am supposed to look at business and not tell you about motherhood, but I really think that most women are in mothering roles. Even if they don’t have children of their own, they have siblings or aging parents who need care. And when you are a mother you learn to understand a lot about phases. You begin to see people come and go from each other and both stay strong. Men are either cheated, or spared very often, depending on how you think about it, having to deal with this too closely. Not to say that fathers don’t lose children or don’t gain children. It is to say that on a daily basis they are not as used to it sometimes as women are, and I have seen a lot of women mentors turn into good friends simply because they have a common bond of understanding about comings and goings.

Men and women together do pretty well in mentoring relationships as long as they draw the hard line and don’t slip over into romantic attachments. The true mentorship never does that. Mary Cunningham to the contrary notwithstanding, no matter what you have all heard, it doesn’t work like that. You know it may become something else then, but mentorship stays professional. When those lines are drawn, together men and women are very good mentors and mentees for one another – and not necessarily men only as the mentors.

Men and men have the most trouble that I have seen, and some have talked to me about this. I think it is inevitable. No matter what their ages, what their experiences, something about being fathers and sons creeps in and they go through a period in which it is very hard, in which the younger man feels he must push away and the older man feels he must have control; in which the younger man feels he has to show off his strength and the older man feels he has to conserve his. So when you hear unhappy mentoring stories, nine out of ten have been about men and men. It doesn’t mean that they should stop trying it; it maybe just needs to be tried more carefully, because mentoring is crucial.

Problems and inevitable separations only deepen the power of what I believe is a primal connection. People want mentors, they need mentors. Think of any occupation today that you can in which this relationship works – academia, medicine, law, manufacturing, communications, volunteerism, even religion. There is a mentoring, there is a bringing along. Each of those fields now has such a sophisticated culture that if you hope to prosper in it you have to be led along. I think – this is me again, not any sociologist research that I did – that once mentoring was crucial because there wasn’t enough knowledge to go around, and mentors were the intercessory force between what could be known and what could only be guessed at. Now I think mentors are necessary because there is much knowledge to go around. And mentors once again are an intercessory force to help sort out what must be known and what can be skirted or avoided or done without. But mentors were in the beginning, are now, and ever shall be.

Mentors often do sort out who gets to know from who doesn’t, and that is why people want them. They can make or break careers. When I first began to work on this idea of mentoring, I had a theory which I pulled out of the air – which is where I get most of my
theories, I guess. I believe that I said to you earlier that M.B.A. was a buzz word of the 1970s in business and that mentoring has become a buzz word of the 1980s. I reviewed the periodicals in the library and this is what I found out. Between 1980 and 1986 in the popular press, not one quarter went by without at least two and as many as eight articles on mentoring, in journals as widely divergent as *Family Circle* and *Forbes*. Between 1965 and 1979 the word mentoring did not appear one time. The first use that I could find was in 1979 in the *Harvard Business Review*, and in it there was a line that went: “A notion of a mentor is one of the best kept secrets in business today.” Only now are mentors being recognized for their importance in helping shape corporate lives.

So for whatever reason, we were not talking about it in the 1970s. But when the 1980s came it seemed for a while that that was all we could talk about. Now I submit that there were mentors before you, and I know some of you were before 1980, and some of you were being brought along by some. I am one of those people.

But here is my theory and once again it is unfounded in anything at all except my own observation and some informal research. You can judge for yourselves whether it jibes with your sense of what works in the working world today. Mentor became a big word in the popular press not just because someone invented it but because new groups were emerging in the business community who needed it, and those new groups who needed mentors were minorities. They were blacks and women. I think it is significant that the first mentoring articles in the popular press appeared in *Jet*, *Essence*, *Ms*, and *Glamour* – four magazines targeted specifically to blacks or to women.

Now this is not to say, as I said, that there hadn’t been mentors, because in the traditional way there had been. It was the “good of boy” way. And the young people did not need to talk about it so it did not appear in the popular press as a buzz word. They didn’t need to talk about it because talking wouldn’t have done any good. Mentorship was formed by chemistry, by school ties or family ties, and all the screaming around that you did wouldn’t get you a mentor. There was no point in writing articles about it. But a startling thing, an ironic thing, happened. Business has undergone seismic changes in the last twenty years. I don’t need to tell you about this, I’m sure that you know. Markets have slipped, markets have soared. Entrepreneurship has made a radical difference in the way that America does business. Administrative development inside corporations has become much more formalized rather than random, partly because of a response to EEOC guidelines and partly because giving good people an equal chance at good jobs is good business. And a lot of corporations were recognizing that, so some of the traditional ways, the good of boy ways, the mentoring ways, of advancing people were slipping.

By the end of the 1970s the good of boy system was not working like it used to, and neither were corporations that had hired M.B.A.’s in the 1970s. A lot of those M.B.A.’s found that their company’s directions had wandered or galloped off the path that they had planned and so there was no clear-cut direction for all those M.B.A.’s to go. Sometimes the things that they had been hired to do fifteen years earlier no one needed doing anymore. Sometimes entrepreneurs were doing it better. Sometimes the market had disappeared. What happened was that a lot of very nice young fellows found themselves in a very nice homogenized layer – like a cookie filling – sandwiched somewhere between the top and the bottom. There was no way out except to leave, which many did. When the boom in new business started in the last six years, some changed companies or became entrepreneurs, and some found mentors and were taken up
through the next layer by that person. However, there were never enough mentors in the traditional sense to go around.

So meanwhile the plot thickens. Minority people were coming on line. There were more blacks and women in business. Take women, for example. Today women fill nearly two-thirds of the management positions – up from 17 percent in 1972. It is amazing – 17 percent to 66 percent in only fifteen years. Sixty-six percent of management positions are filled with women, but only 2 percent are executive positions; only 2 percent are top management positions. A recent survey followed 1,300 executives. Two percent were women. There is one woman executive of a Fortune 500 company. She is Katherine Graham of the Washington Post – and her family owns the business.

What does all this mean? It means that now there are a ton of women in that middle layer along with all those young fellows, and it is really crowded there and they are all looking the same way, which is up, because no one came this far to look back. So it is not a wonder that mentor has become the word. You hear it over lunches, you read it in magazines, and those of you who are more experienced and in a position to be mentors must feel the pressure. As I am thinking about this, you all must feel like it feels walking past the puppy shop window. All those little faces are pressed up against the glass going “Ruh! Ruh! Ruh! Take me! Take me!” As I said before, there is not enough to go around. There is not an owner for every puppy in business.

There are leadership programs designed to help the situation and some of them do. There are formalized development tracks inside companies and some of those help. But it does seem to me that there is a tremendous potential waste of talent, of energy, and there must be some ways of letting more potential loose. There must be some ways to make room, for renovation, for some excitement, for drive. There must be some ways for enabling.

Now some of these ways do exist in getting past the idea of a mentor. I have been telling you how great mentoring is. Well, now I’m telling you to some degree we have to get past a traditional mentor, the idea that only a few people can mentor. Only a few who can in the very special ways. Those relationships can’t be replaced but they can’t be mass-produced either, and there won’t be enough of those people ever to go around. There are other supportive working relationships that can take their cues from mentoring and they can provide some of the sustaining help that mentors do. There are caring bosses who encourage promise in their subordinates, there are caring peers who don’t try to hamstring each other’s progress, there are caring sponsors who can see past their own career goals to the futures of those around them and to the futures that they can help to build.

Whatever name these relationships are called, they are crucial. If I have learned anything from listening to people in business over the last seven years, I have learned one thing, and it can be summed up by E.M. Forster’s line in Passage to India: “Only connect.” Only connect. You hear a lot about high tech and how we need “high touch” to offset that. It doesn’t mean that business has to become warm and fuzzy. Business is never going to be warm and fuzzy. It does mean that communication becomes our most important product.

Until now the challenge to humankind has been to make things – to advance ourselves through making things. Now, I believe that if we are to endure as a people our challenge is to make sense.
I have studied literature and studied business and I am going to tell you a basic difference between the two. Literature humanizes – it raves, it rejoices, it weeps, it transcends, it shows man in relationship to himself, to his fellows, to creatures, to the cosmos: man relating. Business has the capacity to dehumanize. It doesn’t always but it can. It shows man gaining – progress, products, profits: man gaining. There is nothing wrong with man gaining as long as there is some of man relating as well. And that is where mentors and mentoring relationships have something to teach us all.

Executives have been telling us for years that it is lonely at the top. The other day I got a letter from the vice president of a corporation here in town. He said, “Please do an article. It is lonely in the middle.” Business relationships are not just for career advancement. If I have learned anything from talking to people without and within the world of industry for the last seven years, I have learned that relationships in business are for the advancement of real human values in business. And there is no other way to transmit values except by modeling. There is no other way except to show how it is done and that means all of us mentoring each other.

The word mentor is getting tired. Speaking as a person who likes language, I think we need another word because we have just beat the word mentor to death the last five or six years. And by this time this afternoon you are probably getting pretty tired of it, too. But no matter how overused the word becomes I think the practice must go on because by it experience is shared. By it we are enabled, and by it, I believe, we are ennobled as well.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: What if there is a mentee in the audience who is seeking a mentor? How would he or she go about it?

ANSWER: Well, someone came up to me the other day and said, “Do you ever do any mentoring?” Kind of like, “Do you do any scuba diving?” I know people who do. I could give you some names – like, who does your nails? I have been thinking about this because I thought someone would probably ask me today how do you find them. I kept thinking about the advice you get out of the Seventeen magazine about how to get a date. It is really the same deal. It always used to say, be knowledgeable about something – you can’t get a date unless you have something to talk about. I don’t think you can get a mentor unless you have something to offer back. It is not good enough to be cute or hopeful or even willing. You need to have something to share back. My sense of mentoring is that you don’t go out looking for people to look after you until you can to some degree look after yourself.

And then you have to put yourself where you want to be. You need to know a lot of people. Seventeen used to say, go where the boys are. You go where the mentors hang out – and I don’t know for sure what bar that is! But you must do this if you have an interest in a particular discipline, even if it is not the one you’re in. I am a good person to talk about that. My resume looks like a crazy quilt. You go where what you want to do is being done and you meet those people. One of the advantages of living in Kansas City is that the people are enormously hospitable. People will take you in. They do understand neighborliness and perseverance and sharing and good frontier virtues. And you will be looked after if you show yourself willing and get ready to commit yourself and your skills.
From there on it is luck. Dr. Kimball taught me to say, “Chance favors the prepared mind,” and I think once you have your mind prepared and you put yourself in the right place – you’ve got to hope for some degree of luck. That is what I mean when I say there aren’t enough traditional mentors to go around. All of us have to be more caring and more sharing with what is around because there is not going to be one for everyone. That is just the way it works. But I think you can put yourself nearby experienced people and gain experience by it.

**QUESTION:** What is the difference between networking and mentoring?

**ANSWER:** As far as I am concerned, they have only one thing in common. And that is they are both made into bad verbs from good nouns. But this is something any English teacher would say.

To me, networking means getting a pocketful of business cards, and mentoring means a relationship that develops over time where there is a give and take on both sides. Out of networking, over time, you may meet your mentor. I believe that mentors are few in a life, and network connections are many. There are people all over town that I trade favors with. I will call them and ask them for something and I know that they will call me and ask for something back. Networking is where I call you up and I say that I know that so-and-so is looking for such-and-such and I know that you have some of that – can you get in touch with him or her and provide it. Mentoring is when I simply focus on the person who is doing the looking and I say go about it in these ways, and I critique everything that that person is doing from the resume to the clothes. It is a much fuller and more lasting relationship. Sometimes it comes out of networking.

There was an article in one of these journals that I read – it was not the popular press, it was a business thing, I think, a magazine called *Business Horizons* – that said networking per se is kind of on the wane. It was really hot when women didn’t know each other very much, but now there is a pretty strong bond between women who have been in business, say, ten years in the community, and they all have younger people they’re bringing along. That is not quite true in Kansas City yet because we haven’t been doing it long enough. So there are still networking gatherings here with guests with business cards and everyone trades them. The problem is you can wake up the next morning with a pocketful of cards and you can’t remember whose faces went with them. Sort of “morning-after” networking. Then you’re afraid to call up somebody because you don’t know if she was the one with the loud voice that you wouldn’t dare bring to your meeting, or if she was the one with .... you just can’t remember.

Networking is kind of casual. Mentoring is a long-time thing. I think that it is a love relationship. People mix it up with romance, and that’s not it. But it is love in the platonic sense, where a person sees in another person a perfectible self, where you see the potential in somebody else’s becoming what you never will. Networking, on the other hand, is a bunch of phone numbers – good, but quick.

**QUESTION:** Are there other ways of enabling besides mentoring?

**ANSWER:** I think there are some formal ways. Some of what the Central Exchange has done is a good example of enablement, an organization that will enable its members. There are formal development tracks now being formed inside companies; I know the most about the inside of Hallmark. They are working on this pretty seriously, so that good people in a big circumstance have a relatively straight shot, or at least are put at the starting line and then if they
go fast enough make it to the finish. Everybody kind of gets into the gates at the same time at least.

But I really think that if we put our minds to it – this sounds high flown, but I believe it – on a one-to-one basis we can enable each other in business. I believe that the 1970s taught us to put blinders on and go like hell for the end, and in the end we’ll be at our own career goal. People talk about the Me Generation. I really believe that was the case in the 1970s. I think in the 1980s we’re understanding that we only all get there together, which is what has to happen if the city is to flourish, if a company is to flourish, if a nation is to flourish. We’ve got to all be there together. Like sack racing – if I’ve got one leg on the ground and one leg in the sack and you’ve got one leg on the ground and one leg in the sack – we had better get those legs coordinated or we won’t both get there.

So to me, enablement is a personal hand to the person next to you. If you are a boss, it means bringing your subordinates along any way that is good for them. I am losing one of my best writers. He is going to a great opportunity. He came to me and said, “What do I do?” And I said, “It is the right thing for you. You must do this,” and I said, “so shut the door when you leave. I am going to cry.” I am so tired of telling people that that is great for you; it is killing me, but it is great for you. But if you are a boss it is what you have to do. I think it is right because it is enabling, and I think peers – “peer power” makes me think of sororities and I don’t like to hear it in business – have to say to one another, “What can we do for each other? What can I do to help you?” Not, “How I can get you out of the way so I can get a promotion?” Or we are not all going to get where we need to be.

One of the interesting things about working on Corporate Report is that I have had a chance to see inside of first one company and then another as we have profiled different ones. I have had a chance to see how these things are working in the city, and I think there is a new spirit of enablement in Kansas City. I think that people now are working together – toward downtown, toward education, toward a lot of projects that we all believe in – in a way that five or ten years ago they really were not. I can only think it is because some enablement is being shared.

QUESTION: Is there a typical duration for a mentoring relationship?

ANSWER: The things that I have read suggest two to five years and that was from following people who had had them. I don’t think that was prescriptive. I think it was descriptive. They did a survey of 1,300 people and that was the mean of how long a relationship lives. Some lasted ten years and some lasted six months, because that is how you get a mean. Like all connections of the heart, these relationships find their own times. Some mentoring relationships go on for lifetimes; I know people who have died out of them. Some are short and intense, and then both of you agree it is time to move on. This philosophy professor that I told you about? I know that he is still in the world because I can feel him somewhere. I know that he hasn’t died although we haven’t communicated in twenty years, but he is there in my mind like he was standing there yesterday, and we only knew each other for two years. It was a tremendously intense, helpful thing to me.

Margaret Mahoney came and gave a good talk on developing mentor relationships with disadvantaged young people, and she stressed over and over that it cannot be a commitment of months. One has to be willing to see somebody through some years because lives don’t really
turn around in months. I think even in business that’s true; careers are not made overnight. Mentors have to be willing to stick with someone through a while of time.

There have been some articles lately on how to get rid of your mentor. It shows you that it is coming full circle. Savvy did a piece a year ago on “Fifty Ways To Leave Your Mentor” – you know, “Go out the back, Jack.” It suggests now that the concept has been around long enough that some people want to shed theirs like a skin and get on to the next one. I don’t know how that works really. I think like all other human relationships they find their time and when they’re over, they’re over. Or if they go on they transmute or transmogrify, depending if they become terrible or become something else.

QUESTION: Is it possible for a competent mentor to have a relationship with more than one mentee?

ANSWER: Mormons know more about this than I do. I think so, yes. It comes from my bias as a teacher, but teachers do it because they can’t help themselves. I think mentors “ment” – whatever the word is – because they can’t help themselves. I think there is an outflowing of what they know. And you know, once you start caring it is like if you have one child, do you have enough love for two? Well, people who have fourteen can tell you that there is plenty to go around. That is what they say. I think once caring starts there is an outpouring and you can get tired in terms of time, so I suppose the restriction would be somebody’s time and energy. But it seems to me that you can mentor different people different ways and prosper.

What I don’t think is possible is to have two simultaneous mentors in the same environment. There are people who serve me as mentors in one way and people who serve me as mentors in another, but they don’t sit in the same office. I don’t think that can work. Once or twice in academia and in the newspaper I have seen that trying to happen, but what really happens is that you get a triangle and no triangles ever work in human relationships. All the edges are pointy and someone gets stuck. It is just inevitable. So my sense is that you can mentor many people, but you need to keep your mentors separate from each other because people get jealous and unhappy. There are women who serve me as role models that I depend on and admire very much, and there are men who serve me as role models that I depend on and admire very much, but they do radically different things.

QUESTION: Is a mentor one of those things that, as you pursue it, it moves away and you never find it?

ANSWER: Dr. Kimball and I have talked about this. He has applications from people who want to be mentees: “Here is my resume and I am great. Please take me under your wing.” I don’t think that it can work like that. I do think that there is a way you can put yourself into an environment where the chances are better that you will find someone who cares about you and you care about them. It may be one of those things which the more you run after it, the more it runs away; but the more you give, the closer it gets. It is like loving in that way. If you yourself become an enabler, and you put out the time and you put out the effort and you care and you look after and you sponsor and nurture and all that sort of thing, it does comes back to you. I truly believe that. I have heard the people with a lot of money say that the more you give, the more you get back. Well, I don’t know how that works because I don’t have a lot of money, but I do know that in terms of time, when you give, it does seem to come back to you. In my own relationships I have found that when I put out caring, more comes back to me. I have never actively solicited a mentor in the sense of “Please take care of me,” but I have sought advice and
I have offered skill in exchange. I have said, I will take notes on this for you if you will tell me how it works when we finish. And out of that, relationships have grown. So I do not think you can apply, but I do think you can receive and you sometimes do that by giving.

QUESTION: Can you have a mentor and not notice it?

ANSWER: Absolutely. Some of the very best ones don’t ever let you see how they are covering for you.

QUESTION: If you looked back now to some degree, is there anyone who especially mentored you without your realizing it?

ANSWER: The image that sticks the clearest in my mind is one of those that were totally casual. I had a French teacher, who has remained a good good friend to this day. She was the first woman I had ever seen who had done it all. She had three children, a full-time career, and an extremely demanding, temperamental artist for a husband. Once I was in her kitchen in the late afternoon, and there was a big round oak table and she was making bread. Her sleeves were rolled up and her arms were all floured up to above her elbow, and there was Proust in French open on the table in the flour and two babies underneath the table and we were talking in French – she sort of leading me through because my French is not all that great – about the concept of the petite Madeline and how you remember things by taste and sense and that kind of stuff. At the time I never realized that it was one of those moments that Proust himself would have been proud of. It is in my mind: This woman with her floured arms and the book open in the flour and the babies, and the wisdom that she had. She had it all. She really had it all. I was too young to know then that I was getting some inspiration from that, but it has served me like a beacon. And when I get really tired and think that I cannot make one more cookie for tomorrow’s school party, I know that Nicole would have. She is out there somewhere today baking bread and talking to students. So I think sometimes you don’t know it, but it just gets in your mind and it stays there forever.
JANE MOBLEY is one of an emerging group of women journalists whose analyses of business and community life are being read and appreciated by ever-widening audiences. As a former *Kansas City Star* editor, and as a communications consultant to business and to nonprofit organizations, she has acquired a special insight into the way many companies and institutions work. Her articles (published under a variety of pen names) have become familiar over the last several years, particularly since she became editor of *Corporate Report/Kansas City*.

After receiving a Ph.D. in English from the University of Kansas in 1974, Jane taught at the State University of New York-Binghamton and then returned to the Midwest to pursue a writing career. She has written for local and national periodicals, and is the editor and author of several books.

---

**MIDCONTINENT PERSPECTIVES** was a lecture series sponsored by the Midwest Research Institute as a public service to the midcontinent region. Its purpose was to present new viewpoints on economic, political, social, and scientific issues that affect the Midwest and the nation.

Midcontinent Perspectives was financed by the Kimball Fund, named for Charles N. Kimball, President of MRI from 1950 to 1975, Chairman of its Board of Trustees from 1975 to 1979, and President Emeritus until his death in 1994. Initiated in 1970, the Fund has been supported by annual contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Today it is the primary source of endowment income for MRI. It provides “front-end” money to start high-quality projects that might generate future research contracts of importance. It also funds public-interest projects focusing on civic or regional matters of interest.

Initiated in 1974 and continuing until 1994, the sessions of the Midcontinent Perspectives were arranged and convened by Dr. Kimball at four- to six-week intervals. Attendance was by invitation, and the audience consisted of leaders in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The lectures, in monograph form, were later distributed to several thousand individuals and institutions throughout the country who were interested in MRI and in the topics addressed.

The Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, in cooperation with MRI, has reissued the Midcontinent Perspectives Lectures in electronic format in order to make the valuable information which they contain newly accessible and to honor the creator of the series, Dr. Charles N. Kimball.