

Mentors

Antronette K. Yancey, MD, MPH

Mentors are critical to all of us, as they teach us what can't be learned from books or in the classroom. They provide a concrete example of "how to get it done," and, sometimes more importantly, what to get done, when to do it, and whom to engage in the effort. Their encouragement often carries us through when nothing else does. One of the great fortunes of my life is to have Lester Breslow, MD, MPH, as my mentor. I was one of Lester's preventive medicine residents 15 years ago and, the one time he met my father, they traded a few World War II stories about the time they spent in Okinawa. My dad was 1 year older than Lester, and has been gone now for more than a decade, but that experience allows me to recapture a little of my father's spirit in Lester. Perhaps, for that reason, the lessons Lester's taught me as my mentor surface in my poetry. Or maybe he inhabits that most intimate space because of the indomitable spirit he shares with others I've long admired from afar—Martin, Malcom, Marcus, Shirley, Barbara, Audre, Wilma, JFK, Jimmy, and Bill. Having had an opportunity to observe him engage with "paupers" and "kings," I can attest to his treatment of all with respect and appreciation for their humanity, abilities, and contributions. I can also attest to his refusal to accept anything less than the best, from others (like me!) and, particularly, from himself.

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Did you ever have a mentor?

Did you ever have a mentor?

The question came to me
Because I have the best
And his *name* is Les

Did someone ever see you
In a way no other has?
See **you** as supremely able?
Having a place at every table

Did someone ever teach you
About wielding power in a way
That focuses on the mission
And leaves egos to go fishin'?

Did someone ever give you
That ultimate resource so freely
Because time is always precious
Its passing ever more conscious

Did someone ever guide you
In charting out a course?
Show such belief in your ability
That he doled out praise quite stingily?

Did someone ever reach you
To let you know the score?
Quietly convey you're off the mark
When others might let you chase that lark?

Did someone ever allow you
To grow and evolve unfettered?
In surrounds quite loving
Shared passion always forthcoming

Did you ever have a mentor?
Friend, guide, torch carrier?
Hero, beacon, companion?
Emanation of spirit?
Walking here with us!

Antronette (Toni) Yancey, MD, MPH

For Lester,

3/17–18/05, after his 90th birthday party

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