Living up to my mentors

When the holiday letter failed to arrive last December, I worried. And I recalled two letters from decades earlier. I received the first during my sophomore year of high school. In it, an early-career scientist I’ll call Dr. E told me another candidate had received the summer research opportunity I had sought. He ended the letter by saying he hoped he could accept me the next year. I took that as an empty pleasantry. Yet a year later, the second letter arrived, offering me the spot. Little did I realize that remembering others and following through on commitments were typical of Dr. E. Nor did I imagine that those letters would start relationships that would last much of a lifetime and shape my own mentoring.

Arriving that summer to work with Dr. E, I found laboratory benchtops nearly up to my chin and glassware cabinets beyond my reach—the lab had been built to suit 6-foot-7-inch Dr. E. I learned to look atop the refrigerator for protocols and appreciated the kick stools located throughout the lab. Even more, I appreciated how Dr. E helped us students reach a higher level in science. As well as instructing us himself, Dr. E had senior trainees guide junior ones, reinforcing their own knowledge and boosting their teaching proficiency. He trusted us, giving us room to develop our problem-solving abilities, technical dexterity, and communication skills.

Dr. E also integrated us into the lab’s social life. At the department picnic, I met Dr. E’s wife, also a scientist, and we quickly bonded. The next year, to broaden my learning, I applied for a summer research program at her institution, where she arranged for me to work in her lab.

Those summers, I developed not only my scientific skills, but also a valued relationship with the Drs. E. One Dr. E or the other often gave me a ride to or from work. Sometimes we talked science, but often we simply talked about everyday things. I enjoyed my first taste of lime pie when the Drs. E invited students to their home. My glimpses of their lives as a two-career couple reassured me that, with kindness and flexibility, a marriage of two professionals can flourish.

After heading to college and beyond, I stayed in touch with the Drs. E. When visiting my parents, I would call or see them. I watched as their careers developed and their family grew. Soon after I married, Mr. Dr. E met my husband and me for lunch—even though for medical reasons he was restricted to fluids. He also came to pay his respects after my father died. The Drs. E stayed interested in my work even after I chose a career that employed mainly the pen rather than the pipette. They became true mentors rather than simply advisers.

I have been privileged to return some of what the Drs. E gave me. During college, Mr. Dr. E’s university asked me to write a letter on his behalf, probably for tenure or a teaching award. I knew little of such things then, but I valued the chance to reciprocate after the recommendations he had written for me. Likewise, I felt honored when Mrs. Dr. E called to request my advice about a family member’s education.

Now, as a mentor myself, I try to live up to the example of the Drs. E. I see reflections of their mentorship in mine—whether I am supervising trainees, hosting students for dinner (with a special dessert, of course), supporting mentees regardless of career path, or just trying to follow through on what I say.

Over the years, my contact with the Drs. E came to consist largely of exchanging holiday letters. When last December passed without a letter from them, an internet search confirmed what I had feared. As I prepared to send Mrs. Dr. E a condolence card, an abbreviated holiday letter arrived from her, from a new address, near offspring. Now, as I send my holiday letter this year, I am thankful to have known the Drs. E—as scientists, as individuals, and as a couple—and I try to honor their example as I exchange good wishes with current and former trainees of my own.

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