

# *Toward Experiencing Academic Mentorship*

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## **Abstract**

The idea of mentorship has become rather fashionable in academia today. Indeed mentorship is claimed, promoted and even mandated as something we can expect to experience as graduate students. Yet what is it really like to experience it? Drawing on concrete descriptions and phenomenological reflection I attend to graduate students' actual experiences of mentorship (and not mentorship) to uncover aspects of the mentee experience for what it is rather than how it is claimed to be. Graduate students' experiences reveal ways that mentoring moments variously escape us as somehow deficient or in excess of what we expect them to be. From a vantage that attends specifically to the mentee experience, points of reflection are offered for reimagining what the mentorship experience could become.

## **Introduction**

A few years ago I was struck by a colleague's account of her relationship with her doctoral supervisor. She said it was "debilitating" and explained:

Feeling so lost and disconnected, I tried several times to change supervisors, but mine was the Chair ... I got stuck with her and I felt so trapped. ... It took me years to finish. What hurts me most is that I feel like I really missed out on that chance of being mentored.

I began to wonder what it was about her experience that she identified and interpreted as *not mentorship* and what it might have been that she was expecting. Where did the feelings of being "lost and disconnected" arise from? Less than a year into my own doctoral degree, my own expectations of mentorship were called into question, leading up to the following experience:

For months I felt the moment coming and for weeks I rehearsed what I would say. That day I anxiously endured a three-hour workshop with my supervisor and her students, awaiting the moment I would finally tell her of my decision. As the last student left the room we sat down at the corner of the long table, enveloped in a familiar, yet acutely awkward silence. I can't recall the words I used as I looked at her unsuspecting face and expressed my decision to change supervisors. The words just barely off my tongue, I could feel the weight start to lift. I took in a deep breath: I had done it. But then came her response ... she asked me to reconsider, she promised to change. I never imagined this: I sat there dumbfounded as she

went on. I guess I agreed to think about it. I left that meeting through still and silent halls onto the empty street and I just walked, with no real destination in mind.

The above anecdote describes my experience communicating “my decision to change supervisors”. Indeed I thought I “had done it”, yet in a moment my decision seemed to come undone by my then supervisor’s response. I have reflected on the layered and interconnected experiences both preceding and following this particular moment in an effort to make meaning of my own lifeworld as a becoming academic and a member of the academic community. This singular moment that left me “dumbfounded” has preoccupied me the most. I had *felt* the need to *change supervisors* for months, yet somehow my supervisor’s response to hearing my decision reconfigured the outcome of our meeting and the *change I had in mind*. Perhaps, like my colleague, I too became trapped as I was left “with no real destination”.

In graduate school I seemed to hear more and more stories of scenarios where expectations of academic mentorship seemed to misalign or reconfigure in the playing out of various relationships between professors and graduate students. My curiosity about what the experience of mentorship — something *I assumed* and *expected* to be part and parcel of supervision — might be like, was piqued. I began to wonder if, as graduate students, we have a tendency to conflate the role of supervision and other institutionalized forms of guidance with desires or hopes for some kind of mentorship. How do the ideas evoked by our expectations of mentorship impact our actual experiences? Are we all talking about completely different phenomena when we use the word mentorship? Is there something different about the experience of academic mentorship that sets it apart from something like coaching, teaching, counseling or graduate supervision?

## Arriving at the Phenomenon of Academic Mentorship

My time as a graduate student has been transformative and my academic relationships continue to shape the person I am becoming. Yet I find myself struggling to discern the ways in which mentorship has actually influenced my course of life and those around me. This led me to ask *what is the experience of academic mentorship actually like?* I ask and re-ask this question since I want to better understand how to navigate my own mentorship relationships and because I want to contend with the larger question of *what is at stake for all of us who engage in academic mentoring relationships?*

For van Manen (1997) phenomenological reflection demonstrates a will *not* to explicate but rather to describe in order to understand the human experience *in situ* (1997). In other words, it is about how people go about understanding the worlds in which they live (van Manen, 1997; 2014). In this way phenomenological questions can bring us closer to the meaning of the phenomenon we are called to by drawing us sensitively toward the bodily meanings of the lived-throughness of the experience by holding multiple stories together to flesh it out (van Manen, 1997). It is in this way that I endeavor to show the phenomenon of academic mentoring by drawing upon personal experiences, in conversation with stories offered by those who have variously lived it. I seek to open up to it and the surprises it reveals by being with it. Beginning with my own experiences, by making them explicit, helps to reveal how they shape my understandings. From there, we can embark on a journey to understand how mentorship is variously interpreted and lived so that we can begin to see what of the phenomenon is covered over.

Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962/2005), “the phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences

intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears" (p. 28). Similarly, I came to wonder about mentorship in relation to my own and other fellow graduate students' stories about striving for, desiring and questioning its elusive possibility. A doctoral student, having been mentored as a masters student and ever seeking mentorship, I was called, out of deep concern, to the mysterious and evasive possibility of academic mentorship and the forms it might take. I came to the phenomenological method as an activist/scholar with a community engaged creative research/practice. Through collaborative research I engage with youth through activism, an attitude that takes an *any medium necessary* approach to creative *being* and *doing* in the world (artivists 4 life, Robinson, & Cambre, 2013; Asante, 2008). My activist pedagogical practice is guided by the proverb *each one teach one*, thus my interactions with Others always hold simultaneously the possibility of giving/receiving mentorship. I chose phenomenology because I take up activist Asante's (2008) credo, "to make an observation is to have an obligation" (p. 203). I felt *obligated* to question and reflect on the potential of academic mentorship. I engage phenomenology because it offers me an avenue for reaching out to the academic community by creating a text that brings readers to a sense of wonder about the phenomenon that *obligates* me, inviting them to resonate with it. Phenomenology holds the possibility of moving toward new possibilities of understanding mentorship because it involves the search for fullness of living, for ways we can possibly experience the world (van Manen, 1997), and in this case, how graduate students might experience mentorship relationships.

## Attending to the Mentee Experience

Following an elaborate review of literature on mentorship Roberts (2000) discerns that the concept of mentorship is intangible and that the experience of the mentee is consistently overlooked and rarely attended to: It is the role of the mentor that is emphasized and as a result we have very little understanding of what actually takes place in mentoring relationships and how the mentee experiences them. Indeed, studies that examine the experience of mentees in the academic mentoring process are not prevalent (Gibson, 2004). Widespread promotion of mentoring has served to normalize practices and programs by endorsing expected outcomes and goals, believing naively in a well-intended *feel good* practice (Gomez Riquelme, 2012). More research is necessary to understand the possible negative impacts of mentoring scenarios (Simon & Eby, 2003). Colley (2003) calls for the demystification of mentorship by calling into question the discourses and assumptions that circulate around mentoring rhetoric so that we can see past them and reconsider the potential of mentoring relationships from multiple perspectives. Why is the mentee's experience so often left out of the literature on mentoring? What might we uncover by attending to this experience? And what about those who have *missed out on that chance of being mentored*, what might we learn from their experiences?

By focusing on the experiences of mentees, particularly graduate students, I aim to engender dialogue and reflection that emphasizes the perspectives of those who have been overlooked by dominant discourses around academic mentorship. I hope to uncover aspects of the mentee experience for what it is rather than what it is so often claimed to be. Phenomenology brings with it an ethical stance that encourages a change in practice for the benefit of people or groups (van Manen, 1997). It is in this sense that my *being* as an activist intersects with a phenomenological stance: The ethical *obligation* manifests as reflection/action upon academic life — to open up new pedagogical possibilities that might help us become more fully human (van Manen, 1997).

## **Wandering with Possible Mentorship Moments**

Acknowledging that the elusive word *mentor* may indeed get in the way of doing phenomenology, I wandered in multiple directions with particular lived experiences around the possibility of mentorship. To glimpse at what phenomena around mentorship might be like, while remaining sensitive to its elusiveness, my wondering drew me to lived experience descriptions that involve reaching toward, hoping for, or somehow recognizing or misrecognizing mentorship. Examples of graduate student experiences where expectations of mentorship were brought into question seemed to offer insights for bringing us closer to what actual experiences of receiving mentorship may be like.

### **Mentorship Mistaken**

A fellow graduate student shared a description of an interaction with her supervisor that may offer us one way of considering how expectations of academic mentoring are variously experienced:

I recall the day, during my first year of doctoral studies, when my supervisor commented about the growing numbers of students who fail to complete their PhDs. She explained that she had learned, at a recent Faculty meeting, that some students have even attempted to sue their supervisors for not “pushing them through”. In light of this, she told a fellow graduate student and I that she would be expecting official reports from us to track our progress. She added assertively: “following your first committee meeting I expect a formal report summarizing your progress and the plans and commitments that are agreed upon”. I froze, completely stunned, not so much by what she said about other students, but how she seemed to relate it to us. Not sure how to respond, I kept quiet as other matters were discussed, anxiously waiting for the moment I could leave the room. As I walked home that day I could not get her comments out of my head. Does she even trust me, believe in me? Am I just a number that she plans to *push through* the program? I was worried: this was not the kind of relationship I had been expecting.

This student’s understanding of her place as a graduate student is altered as her supervisor’s comments leave her “stunned”. The student feels that the topic of those who “fail” and others who “attempt to sue” is somehow related to her, through the supervisor’s demand for a “formal report”. After the encounter, the supervisor’s comments remain with the student as she calls into question the very nature of their relationship. The demand to write a report about her “progress” seems to signal a relational binary akin to an employer-employee relationship or some other kind of transactional arrangement. The context of increasingly corporate-style administration of universities challenges faculty members to maintain student-centered relationships, even encouraging them to see their relations with students in ways that are anti-pedagogical. In this sense the “individual is denied his or her uniqueness and individuality” (van Manen, 1991, p. 211) in a collective effort to shift the purpose of education toward training students to serve the economy. Perhaps then, the student’s experience should not come as unexpected: her supervisor was doing her job to *push her through* for the sake of a greater societal whole.

Or we may recognize the student’s experience as a moment lacking pedagogical tact: Often “we may become aware of tact only when we experience situations where tact was sorely missed”

(van Manen, 1991, p. 137). If this experience and other experiences of seeing one's self/being seen as "just a number" suggests a pedagogical failure, concerning the "personal relational and ethical aspects of the pedagogy of teaching" (van Manen, 2013, p. 14) we may wonder then what *kind of relationship* was this student *expecting*? What would mentorship that instills *trust and belief in one's self* actually be like?

The following anecdote describes another graduate student's encounter with her supervisor: one we might also recognize as an example of what is *not* a mentorship *kind of relationship*:

I am sitting surrounded by professors and fellow graduate students at a routine meeting. We had gathered like this for years since I was an undergrad. At one point my PhD supervisor announces that one of his students was offered a tenure track job. After a bit of conversation around this, he concludes, "yes, all the amazing ones are getting snapped up". I choke out a few words and the meeting carries on. I wonder what this says about me and I feel my blood boil and my heart sink.

When we finally finish, I go straight to my office and the tears begin to fall. As I try to process what all this could mean for me, the questions pour out: Do I even want to become a tenure track professor? Do I even want to begin applying for jobs? I try to recall why I wanted to do a PhD. Did I even ask myself these questions four years ago? I don't have answers and my sobs and tears intensify.

My supervisor's words from the time I was an undergrad come flooding back: "of course you are going to do your masters" and from the time of my masters "of course you are going to do your PhD". Just then I hear a knock on the door and he comes in asking me what is wrong. Looking at him in the doorway I recall how he was once my cherished mentor, the person I wanted to be just like, in a career I imagined myself in. I tell him I don't know if I want to seek a position in academia. "Well of course you are going be an academic" he replies. In that moment my perception of him shatters and my heart falls to my feet. Crushed.

The supervisor's announcement somehow functions to interrupt and re-set the graduate student's awareness of self. The comment about the "amazing ones" is not *about* the student, yet it penetrates her. As self-doubt arises so does her temperature. Not "snapped up" herself, she feels indirectly marked as *not* among "the amazing ones". She manages to contain her emotions until *finally* she reaches her office where they *pour out* in the form of a self-interrogation. She calls into question the career path she finds herself on, wondering if it is in line with what *she* wants. But what actually does *she* want?

A chorus of accolades echo in the student's head: "of course" she will pursue an academic path, "of course". We may wonder how often students internalize a taken for granted plan for their education and their future. It feels like there is a set of standard expectations and justifications concerning who should and shouldn't pursue an academic career and how this trajectory should unfold.

Mentors, ahead of us in their journeys, can help us to prepare for what is to come. Yet for this student, it may be that her expectations are not in line with those of her supervisor who makes an assumption (again): "of course you are going be an academic". The affirmation seems to rupture the student's affinity with the person who once held an exemplary position in her imagination, "in



a career I imagined myself in". Yet through this dissonant encounter her own views appear to change as she calls into question her supervisor's role in her life and his idea for her future. Indeed her conception of her supervisor "shatters".

For the student, her once "cherished mentor" is no longer, yet we may wonder what has changed in reality. The student's supervisor may recognize her potential: certainly in some way, "over the years", the student has been shown and supported along an academic trajectory. Yet we may wonder what kind of relationship is being modeled in this scenario. Perhaps the relationship experienced here is more in line with that of role modeling or coaching. Or perhaps like the notion of *pushing through* graduate students, the underlying intention here is aligned with the institutional expectations of graduate student supervision. It may be that the supervisor has the best intentions in mind. Van Manen (2012) reminds us that even though teaching is generally approached with good intentions, teachers cannot avoid pedagogical failures at times. Unfortunately, such failings often occur in those instances when the teacher assumes he is acting "out of caring responsibility" (p. 15).

We might wonder then if a professor can be a supervisor, even a "good" one who successfully *pushes students through* the academic trajectory, but still not actually a mentor. It seems we can misrecognize mentorship or conflate it with other relational paradigms. Perhaps we tend to accept too quickly or eagerly a relationship as one of mentorship: Longing for the cherished experience or relation, we attach to it prematurely. It seems we can even be deceived into assuming we are in a mentoring relationship when in reality the relationship is of another kind. Or, could it be that one's yearning for mentorship is contingent upon a certain maturity or readiness for growth? At times along our life journey we may be contented by the kind of support that moves us along a given path, yet other times we desire to be supported in the creation of a new path. Perhaps the student is "crushed" not by a major change in her supervisor's comportment, but rather by her own shifting desire for the kind of guidance—guidance that is not about becoming like someone else, but being supported in becoming her true self.

## **Mentorship versus Supervision**

The following anecdote was offered by the student who shared her experience around the issue of *pushing through* graduate students. It offers us a different example that may take us further toward possible experiences of recognizing what may and may not be mentorship.

Almost immediately following my first committee meeting my supervisor sent me an email reminding me to submit a detailed report. Feeling very uncomfortable with the idea I resolved to send her a very short point-form summary. She responded by asking for something "more formal ... a word file that I can save for my records with the exact date". This was going too far: I felt like she was bossing me and that I had little input in how the structure of our relationship was unfolding. The next day I dragged myself to her office to confront her in person. After the usual small talk, which was now awkward, I expressed that I was not feeling comfortable with the arrangement she was imposing. She responded by asking me to be sensitive to the fact that she is not only working with me in this capacity but with several grad students — with more to come — along with the many other responsibilities that come with her position. She added that this requires of her certain strategies "in order to manage all of you."

After mustering up my courage I admitted to her that I felt as though the process was a “butt covering strategy” and a “one size fits all” approach. I explained that it made me feel as though she didn’t trust me or believe in my capacity to achieve the degree. As I sat there sweating and awaiting her response, it was becoming clear to me that I could no longer trust her. After a long silence she sighed and said: “I can appreciate you are highly motivated based on your ideals ... I wish I could say the same, but alas, I am just a cog in the University wheel”. Those words were the final blow, I lost my respect for her.

The student’s account describes a certain degree of tension and frustration around the “structure” and “unfolding” of her supervisory relationship. She seems to resist the “formal” procedures her supervisor attempts to put in place and the prospect of being *managed*. Yet the technical and rationalistic arrangement the student describes seems to align with the definition of supervision, including the process of directing what and how someone does something (“supervision”, n.d.). We might ask then: Is it the formalities themselves that unsettle her or is there something more? While her account may offer us a glimpse at what it may be like to receive some kind of direction, we seem to be no closer to accessing what it may be like to receive mentorship. We may wonder then what is the correlation, if any, between mentorship and supervision, or even “management”.

The Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGSR) at the University of Alberta offers guidelines and protocols for graduate students and Faculty including a “Presentation on Supervising Students”. The document offers the following advice to supervisors: “develop a system for tracking the progress of your students up to completion” (“tracking progress”, FGSR). In the above account, the student’s supervisor seems to be working toward this goal through her intention to “manage” all of her students. Yet the student perceives this as a “one size fits all” strategy. We might wonder then how such institutional frameworks cover over the complexities of actual lived experiences of being or not being supervised or mentored. The same FGSR document includes a “tips for success” section, advising supervisors to “provide mentorship by providing guidance on such matters as scholarship applications, presenting at conferences and getting published, and on general professional development;” the supervisor is counseled “to facilitate the development of the student as a junior research colleague”. In such discourses, mentorship is construed as inherent in supervision, perhaps as a synonym for guidance. We might then ask if mentoring can be institutionalized? Or perhaps there is something that sets mentorship apart from just another entity or “cog in the University wheel.”

## Tracing some Meanings of Mentorship

If our supervisors are not necessarily or always our mentors, how then can we recognize mentorship in our academic lives as graduate students? Looking to the etymology of “mentor” may offer us an opening for considering mentoring experiences from a vantage that is not necessarily bound to contemporary discourses around supervision and other institutionalized framings. Dictionary sources refer to Homer’s *Odyssey* when discussing the original meaning of “mentor” (see for example “mentor” (n.d.)). Such sources adopt the supposition that the character Mentor, a friend to the King Ulysses, was protective, guiding, and a counselor to Telemachus, the king’s son. A critical look at the *Odyssey*, however, reveals that it was the goddess Athene, sometimes disguised as Mentor, who embodied the qualities that we sometimes associate to mentorship today — particularly the notion of mentor as wise counsel *in the course of life* (Homer, 2009; Roberts & Chernopiskaya, 1999). We might then consider how the characteristics of a

Goddess have been subsequently appropriated into a vocabulary for describing mortals. Perhaps the widespread definition of mentor as *an experienced and trusted advisor* has always carried with it a certain susceptibility toward idealization or exaggeration.

A popular reconfiguration of mentorship rooted in mythology seems to be the re-appropriation of the term to suit more specific and often short-term purposes. Coinciding with current market forces, a prescribed interpretation of mentorship proliferates: one that might be seen as an attempt to accelerate certain human relations toward immediate outcomes and achievements (Johnson & Huwe, 2003). Indeed some discourses around mentorship construct it as a sort of catch-all remedy for the various symptoms of an increasingly mechanized and individual-outcomes driven education system. Current terminology, such as *mentoring-to-the-task*, suggests a streamlined reconfiguration of mentorship in the service of *professional excellence* or some other marketed rhetoric of individual success. Yet it appears that, while the notion of mentorship seems to be applied to short-term relationships focused around particular goals such as the completion of a degree, the qualities associated with the origins of mentorship are assumed possible and promoted: even at times to be expected as a return on investment. In this way, it is as though the already god-like attributes of Homer's Mentor are simply being re-sold three millennia later in a newly packaged highly visible ready-to-use format.

Yet it seems that graduate students have inherent senses of what they expect from the mentor-mentee relationship. Some find themselves disappointed by the formal structures they actually come to experience: they are seeking more, or something other than what they receive. But what is this *more*? What type of relationships, of the lived kind, are graduate students looking for? Perhaps we hope for mentorship like we yearn to fall in love: We desire to experience it not knowing what it will actually be like, only that it will be "good".

## **Mentorship that Goes Beyond Duty**

The next set of anecdotes takes us further toward accessing what possible experiences of mentorship — as something somehow distinct from other phenomena such as supervision — might feel like.

I had been having a terrible time getting my proposal to work so I sent it to my supervisor to take a look. He agreed to read it and we proceeded to set up a meeting to discuss it. When I met him a week later in his office we settled in around a small round table. After chatting briefly, my supervisor began taking me through the proposal page by page, section by section, offering his feedback. I soon realized that it had taken way too long to get to my question. He even made a light-hearted joke when *finally* we reached my research question. He said, "this should be up front. Keep everything else prior to this for your dissertation". Yes, he's right, I thought, and I wondered why I didn't see that before. Just to be sure, I asked: "so I should move that forward?" "Yes! Within the first two pages" he assured me.

After a pause, he asked, "Are you okay with this direction?" I was, and I told him so. We then turned to the rest of the proposal. After discussing a few more points, we both suddenly realized our time was up and we quickly wrapped up the meeting. "Thanks so much" I said, packing up my stuff, adding "this *really* helps". I left with a clear sense what to do.



Acknowledging that she had hit a roadblock in her writing process the student turns to her supervisor for help. He attends to her call by reading the proposal and offering concrete advice: the extraction of a significant section of her proposal. The student accepts her supervisor's feedback with only the slightest hesitation. Yet, we may wonder how often this may be the case among graduate students: are we always so ready to accept such a drastic change to the fruits of our labour? Perhaps there are certain conditions that must be in place for the student to be "ok with this direction?" She may be simply looking to be told what to do, or perhaps her ability to "see" his point made it easy to trust her supervisor's guidance. We may ask at this point if the student's experience with her supervisor is one of being simply supervised, or is she simultaneously being mentored? The student's consequent experience takes us further.

Immediately after my meeting, as I was walking down the hallway and thinking about the work ahead, I heard my name being called from behind. I stopped and turned to see my supervisor running toward me. Had I left something behind? I wondered. But a quick check revealed I had my bag, coat, scarf, gloves, and hat.

When he reached me I could see his face was full of concern. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Are you okay with what I said in the meeting?"

"Yes. I'm fine," I replied, a little confused, not knowing why was he asking me this. I wondered if I did I not look okay.

"I don't just want you saying that. ... If you are *not* okay with it ..." he trailed off. I was surprised that he was worried — there was no need to be — and I tried to assure him. I explained that I knew my proposal wasn't working and that was why I asked for help. "Your feedback was good. I now know how to begin to revise it," I told him.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, as if not quite trusting my response. "Yes" I asserted. After a pause, he said "Okay..." still not looking convinced, so I nodded. We wished each other a good afternoon and I continued on my way. I was comforted to know that my supervisor was that attentive.

The supervisor's expression of concern for his student, immediately following their encounter, confuses and surprises her. Although she felt ok with "what was said in the meeting," she perceives in her supervisor's response that he needs affirmation. We can only guess why he was concerned: perhaps to him she did "not look okay" or maybe he was second-guessing his direct and consequential feedback. Whatever the case, his gesture of checking on the student seems to impress upon her some level of concern for her well-being. Indeed the student was struck by his running after her: a gesture that for some might exceed the norms and expectations of supervisory role. Without having taken this extra step, had the supervisor not *already* responded to his duties? He read her proposal and offered concrete feedback, arguably guiding her toward *professional development*. Yet we might wonder how the student's trajectory of "thinking about the work ahead" might have begun to unravel differently without this interjection that "comforted her" and somehow heightened her perception of her "attentive" supervisor. We may also ask if this gesture may have brought the professor and student somehow closer together, perhaps beyond supervision toward some other relational configuration such as collegiality, or even mentorship. For the

student, her supervisor's *attentiveness* was unexpected, yet we might wonder out of what kind of intention did it emerge on the part of the supervisor. Van Manen's (2012) understanding of practicing pedagogy as modes of contact may offer us one way of reading this experience: "pedagogical contact means both that the teacher is 'in touch' with the student and that the teacher 'touches' the student in a manner that is experienced as encouraging and respectful" (p. 28). In this sense we might think of the gesture the student described as one that nourishes closeness, a kind of familial contact that is built on and conditioned by trust (2012). We may see this experience as one that goes beyond the technical notion of supervision toward the relational and pedagogical. This might lead us to consider the potential of mentorship to take us somewhere beyond candidacy, graduation or other indicators or *metrics* of academic success.

### **Mentorship that Recognizes Us for What We Might Be or What We Might Offer**

In University life today, with the popularization and promotion of mentorship strategies and discourses, graduate students are led to expect or anticipate some variation of a mentor figure in their academic life. Still some students may never have been or may never be mentored — indeed some *miss out on that chance of being mentored*. Others may not even be aware that such a possibility exists. This later scenario was the case for the central character in John Williams' novel *Stoner* (1965/2003). William Stoner, born into poverty in the late 1800's in Missouri, knew only a hard farming life until his father sent him away to study agriculture at university. In his first year of studies Stoner approached his courses much like he approached the farm chores he was required to do at his home stay in exchange for his room and board: with neither passion or disdain, nor ease or difficulty. His first year English class, however, proved to be an exception to this pattern of complacency and indifference. The course challenged and unsettled his sensibilities. One unforgettable day Stoner's teacher, Arthur Sloan, reads aloud one of Shakespeare's sonnets and asks the class what it means. Receiving only blank expressions, he recites the sonnet word for word again, this time without even looking at his book. His exasperation turns to anger and he directs an outburst at Stoner. Recounted, in what follows, this particular moment signaled the beginning of a new trajectory in Stoner's life:

"Mr. Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr. Stoner; do you hear him?"

William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloan about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their hard grip on his desk-top. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously from his fingertips through his body.

Sloan was speaking again. "What does he say to you, Mr. Stoner? What does his sonnet mean?"

Stoner's eyes lifted slowly and reluctantly. "It means," he said, and with a small movement raised his hands up toward the air; he felt his eyes glaze over as they sought the figure of Archer Sloan. "It means," he said again, and could not finish what he began to say. (Williams, 1965/2003, p. 13)

Following Stoner's response, Sloan dismisses the class. Stoner moves slowly out of the room and onto the school grounds. He seems to perceive the world around him as though he is in some sort of haze or altered state:

He looked at [his fellow students] curiously, as if he had not seen them before, and felt very distant from them and very close to them. He held the feeling to him as he hurried to his next class, and held it through the lecture by his professor in soil chemistry, against the droning voice that recited things to be written in notebooks and remembered by a process of drudgery that even now was becoming unfamiliar to him. (Williams, 1965/2003, p. 14)

What meanings can we uncover from this encounter, which seems to alter and shift Stoner's embodied existence? For Daloz, "Mentors give us the magic that allows us to enter the darkness: a talisman to protect us from evil spells, a gem of wise advice, a map, and sometimes simply courage. But always the mentor appears near the outset of the journey as a helper, equipping us in some way for what is to come, a midwife to our dreams" (2012, p. 18). When William Stoner is confronted by his teacher about the meaning of Shakespeare — for which he has no words — his sensory awareness is heightened, he *holds his breath*. "It means ..." is all he can say. It might seem as though he is momentarily paralyzed by some *dark* unknown. Indeed it may appear as though Stoner is being called out or put on the spot. A closer look, however, shows that his response is not one of fear or embarrassment. Instead, as his fingers *unclench* he seems to be preparing to move toward a response. As he marvels and *feels the blood flowing*, he may be surrendering to the unknown, toward a dream that he cannot yet imagine, but one he seems to be called to. Indeed it may be that Sloan's access to some other knowledge, and his passionate rapport, move Stoner. A new "feeling" overtakes him as he re-enters the world of the school grounds transformed, with a new lens, a new curiosity. The "process of drudgery" that he had so long been accustomed to is interrupted as Stoner awakens to a new way of seeing the world. Perhaps just as he is unable to discern what the sonnet means, he can't know where his teacher's passion and understanding is coming from or where it is going, but he feels drawn to the "figure of Archer Sloan". Here at the *outset* of Stoner's journey, Sloan's speech invites his student into the *darkness*, and a new journey is born. What then might we learn from Stoner's experience, one he was perhaps unable to name, but one that he sensed and felt? Can it tell us anything about mentorship?

In the following semester of that first year of studies, Stoner changes his major from agriculture to English. It seems that the "feeling" instilled in Stoner that fateful day opened him up to this dramatic turn. Indeed he comes to excel in his English courses. Looking further into the trajectory of Stoner's academic life and into his relationship with Sloan offers us a way of considering the possibility of mentorship as the accumulation of interconnected moments. In the following interaction, four years later, Sloan calls Stoner to his office to inquire about his future plans. After admitting to not having thought much about his future, Stoner finds himself realizing, deciding, that he has no plans to return to the farm. He is then confronted by an entirely unthought possibility:

“If you could maintain yourself for a year or so beyond graduation, you could, I’m sure, successfully complete the work for your Master of Arts; after which you would probably be able to teach while you worked toward your doctorate. If that sort of thing would be of interest to you at all.”

Stoner drew back. “What do you mean?” he asked and heard something like fear in his voice.

Sloan leaned forward until his face was close; Stoner saw the lines on the long thin face soften, and he heard the dry mocking voice become gentle and unprotected.

“But don’t you know, Mr. Stoner?” Sloan asked. “Don’t you understand about yourself yet? You’re going to be a teacher.”

Suddenly Sloan seemed very distant, and the walls of the office receded. Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask, “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Sloan said softly.

“How can you tell? How can you be sure?”

“It’s love, Mr. Stoner,” Sloan said cheerfully. “You are in love. It’s as simple as that.” (Williams, 1965/2003, p. 20)

The young Stoner leaves the office in a dream-like state with an acute sense of his surroundings:

He went out of Jesse Hall into the morning, and the greyness no longer seemed to oppress the campus; it led his eyes outward toward and upward into the sky, where he looked as if toward a possibility for which he had no name. (Williams, 1965/2003, p. 20)

No longer “mocking” but “gentle and unprotected,” perhaps through a recognition of Stoner’s transformed self, Sloan opens up another door for Stoner, toward a life of teaching. Indeed he comes to “see” Stoner in a way that is beyond or unrecognizable to Stoner himself. Stoner receives the suggestion at first with a sense of disbelief, even *fear*, asking for clarification. But for Sloan, it is clear: he recognizes a dedication bound up with feeling, with “love”. He guides Stoner in a completely new direction, toward the life of an academic. As Stoner takes in a new way of seeing himself and his future he becomes “suspended” — as though in transition between what he once was and what he could be. Once again, Sloan points Stoner toward “a possibility for which he had no name” yet one that Stoner is inclined to embrace: perhaps offering that *magic* that shows one toward undreamed *dreams*.

At this point we might wonder what is the significance of Sloan’s offer to guide Stoner into academic life? How might this scenario be different from the common practice today of assigning academic supervisors?

## The Latency of Mentorship

As we have seen, institutionalized arrangements such as graduate supervision can offer frameworks that may lead to mentorship. Yet mentorship can be sparked before such relationships are assigned, such as in the case of Stoner, or in other ways somehow adjacent to the supervisor-student paradigm. A professor of mine spoke to me about her one and only mentor. She admitted that he was never her official supervisor and added that “I think it was actually better that way!”

Often a mentor has already been in our life for some time, perhaps as a professor, a colleague, or an employer, and over time we begin to see him or her as a mentor. In the story of William Stoner “the figure of Archer Sloan” gradually appears as Sloan becomes Stoner’s mentor over years of academic life. For many of us it is easy to name our professors, our supervisors and our bosses, yet when it comes to identifying our mentors, we often find this more difficult. Whereas we may recognize the very moment a teacher became our teacher, such as the first day of classes, it seems to be only in hindsight that we come to see someone as a mentor. In this sense mentorship is a phenomenon that has latency; its full meaning can only be (partially) understood and felt afterwards.

Through the consideration of various interpretations of mentorship in relation to students’ actual lived experiences we have considered the question of what receiving mentorship may be like. In many ways we moved away from conceptualizations of mentorship as a means to an end or a strategic formula for channeling students toward some fixed achievement by shifting our attention to instances of living through mentorship relations. Indeed some of the experiential descriptions around academic mentorship have uncovered that there is often a rift between our expectations of mentorship and the various ways these and other related relationships are actually experienced.

The disjuncture of our various expectations of mentorship and the ways it is actually experienced begs the question, how do we come to know that we have been mentored? Are there unique feelings specific to the experience of mentorship by which we might recognize it? Again, following van Manen (2012): “We may recognize the consequences of pedagogy [in this case mentorship] when we become aware of the latent, lasting, and lingering effects of the events that make up the innumerable often-forgotten experiences, foggily fragmented and half-remembered pedagogical happenings” (p. 9).

In *Tao Mentoring* (1995) Huang and Lynch respond to popular discourses on mentoring by calling for “individualized, tailored, one-to-one environments for giving and receiving the gift of wisdom — the time-honored process of mentoring” (p. xi). These authors encourage a paradigm for a patient mentorship that is about guiding mentees to discover their own capacities and to “help them follow their integrity as they reawaken to the inner truth of who they are what they can do. ... [through] a process of instilling mentorhood rather than embodying it” (p. 14). Mentorship in this way entails letting go of control and guiding without pushing one’s agenda, while creating a space that encourages mentees to “think and accomplish for themselves” (Huang & Lynch, 1995, p. 103). This understanding of mentorship is akin to the pedagogical teachings of renowned educational philosopher Maxine Greene and her legacy of mentoring countless academics and other teachers throughout her prolific life. Recollections written by those whom she touched share a common theme of encouragement. They attest to Greene’s way of supporting and validating emerging scholars to become who they could be (Lake, 2010). Many stories from Greene’s mentees describe how she *instilled mentorship* by awakening them to their own possibilities, or as she has written: “to go beyond where they are” (1995, p. 173). In most cases, these testimonies by



Greene's mentees were written after life-long relationships. How then do we discern such an intangible (yet known through its effects vis-à-vis the context) phenomenon?

In recognition of the evasiveness of mentorship I shift the focus to points of traction where we can understand there is a becoming mentored in progress as revealed through moments where awareness of certain aspects of the mentorship reveal themselves. From here we can begin to imagine how the layering of such moments might come together to conjure up a larger whole of a possible mentoring relationship.

One of my professors recently shared an insight about mentoring relationships that has stayed with me. He said that to truly encounter another one should not seek to describe the person in his or her taken-for-grantedness. Instead, one should encounter that person in his or her difference and singular otherness. Reflecting on my relationship with my own mentor I recall a vivid moment 15 years ago:

I am seated in the class among fellow students around a bunch of tables jammed into a large square. She enters the room with gusto and exuberance in her usual frenzied yet composed manner, juggling a stack of books and assignments. She is wearing her typical dress: long skirt and a cardigan, something more akin to what I'd expect a kindergarten teacher to wear, yet this is contrasted by what seems to me to be rather outlandishly bright pink lipstick. With much enthusiasm she begins briefing us on the day's program. Then suddenly, her feet captivate me!

I lose track of what she is talking about as my gaze becomes fixed on her two different shoes. Both are slip-ons, but otherwise distinct in every way ... one is blue the other red. I pass a curious note to my neighbor and soon others are also looking at her feet. Eventually she catches on to our growing sense of distraction. She looks down past her long skirt and notices the miss-match. An animated and genuine laugh escapes her; she then goes on with her lecture seemingly unfazed. I am held in a trance-like state, aware of my own heartbeat. As I leave, taking the feeling with me, the corridor and the halls shine with possibility.

As I was *held captive* by the magic animating my then instructor. Eventually she'd be my masters supervisor; unbeknownst to me, she was already becoming my mentor. Her response to her "miss-matched" shoes altered my awareness. My taken-for-granted conditioning of what is important ruptured, shifting my consciousness. Perhaps like Stoner I surrendered to the unknown, or unthought, toward a way of seeing and being in the world that was entirely new to me, one that was *shining with possibility*.

Teachers have the ability to touch students pedagogically with their gestures, idiosyncrasies and outlooks on the world, or in short, their ways of being and thinking (van Manen, 2014). This recalled moment resonates with what van Manen describes as *pedagogical love* (2012): I fell for her. When we encounter someone who *captivates* us, we can't help but feel moved by their presence: "We recognize something in this other person that is uniquely special and that we must respect and protect — not for ulterior motives but for the sake of self and this other" (van Manen, 2012, p. 30).

It took years for the experience I have recollected to strike me as a possible mentorship moment. Perhaps the moment in isolation is not a mentorship moment at all. Yet if mentorship has latency, how might we come to discern mentoring moments? It seems that mentorship is not a one-time experience, but a conceptualized relationship out of which we can only refer to examples.

The experiential moments we have reflected upon throughout this paper are not descriptions of mentorship as a phenomenon itself, but rather certain aspects of it; moments that open us toward it, and even instances of (mis)recognizing what mentorship may or may not be. Moments such as these seem to be only partially accessible and discernable. They take on new and changing meanings as our perspectives evolve and shift in correlation to the student-mentor relationship as a greater whole. Perhaps I have described a moment of inspiration, while other anecdotes have related moments of feeling comforted, awakened or supported.

How then does mentorship arise from the amassing of moments? It is only in retrospect that I can relate the blue/red shoe moment to the relationship I now consider to be mentorship. Yet, perhaps like in the case of Stoner's moment of becoming drawn to his English teacher, such experiences open us up as students toward the possibility of receiving mentorship. Indeed the power of the mentor to influence the very identity and future of the student — when a formal mentor-mentee relationship hasn't been established — is important. This is imperative to pedagogical relationships: students are attuned to the teacher's presence, whether they realize it or not. Pedagogical moments that precede mentee-mentor relationships can set the stage for the becoming of a mentorship relationship.

Van Manen (2012) describes ways of practicing pedagogy through modes of contact. The mode of *devotional contact* can shed light on one way we might distinguish mentorship relationships from other pedagogical ones. Like my falling for my mentor, devotional contact describes a relationship that ignites a kind of falling for the mentee, in this case the student, who feels special: She is chosen, she has captured the mentor's care. This may be the “most complex and subtle way” (van Manen, 2012, p. 29) a pedagogical relationship can manifest.

### **Mentorship by Being there for me as I grow**

The next experience description shows us one way that mentorship relationships hinge on other interconnected pedagogical moments, those prior and those to come:

I thank the other presenter and the audience and then they all proceed to exit the room. Now the only person left in the room, I feel a sense of relief. As I pack up my laptop, my script, and my notes, I ask myself: Did I really do this? Did I really just present my very first academic presentation? That's it? It's finished? Yet, how was it? Suddenly, my supervisor peeks her head in the doorway and re-enters the room. With a smile, she approaches me: “That was great. Even the professor next to me leaned twice toward me saying you are great”. Looking into my eyes she teases: “See, it is not enough that I say you are good; but when others notice too, then you know it was *really* good”. Some easy words, but they strike me deeply. I am speechless, barely believing what I have heard. But her face is so genuine and proud. It convinces me and clears my long-standing self-doubt.

How many of us, after giving a presentation, have found ourselves in a similar state of mind: somehow suspended between disbelief and “relief” about having *really* done it? Indeed we live through such intense moments, but we do so *through* ourselves and out of a headspace that is entirely different from that of the onlooker. Such moments can leave us yearning to know “how was it?”

Almost immediately following the presentation, the student receives a response. The answer comes not only from someone in the audience, but from someone she knows, who knows her, and the source is “genuine”. Indeed, the student’s supervisor was there.

What can this story tell us about the power of “some easy words” to attest that “it was *really* good?” And what can the potential of one gesture to erode abiding “self-doubt” tell us about mentoring? Mentors can help mentees by instilling self-reliance and confidence through their capacities to both validate and affirm (Huang & Lynch, 1995). Indeed when a mentor asserts something, it can carry more weight, than if said by another.

The following excerpt from a letter to Maxine Greene takes us further. William Reynolds (2010) recalls an experience, 15 years after it occurred, of eleven words Greene said to him after an educational research meeting. He was with his own graduate students when an opportunity arose to meet Greene:

When I turned to notice the entrance to the courtyard, I saw that you had arrived. I had read your works, of course, but had never met you. I decided I would introduce myself and my students ... I walked up and introduced us. I noticed you were looking at me and thinking. After the introductions, there was a pause, and then you looked straight at me and pointed your finger at me and said words that echo in my memory. Here is how I remember it: You said as you gently waved your finger, “Yes, I know your work, and your writing keeps getting better.” Then you walked on to meet and talk with other people. I will never forget those 11 words. Not only did they encourage me, but you said them in front of my graduate students. Maxine Greene actually knew my work. Those types of kind words stay with us. (p. 117)

As in the case of the previously discussed student’s experience, Reynolds shows how words from a mentor figure can have long-standing impact. For Huang and Lynch (1995), a mentor has the ability to use “her influence to give her partner exposure and visibility” (p. 15). Thinking of mentorship in this regard can turn us toward considering aspects of mentorship that are contingent on the mentoring relationship’s intersection with our relations with others, in this case, with other academics. We might wonder how mentorship experiences might support our passage into academic communities and the world at large.

### **Mentorship that Turns us Outward Toward the World**

When we consider mentorship as a relational construct with the potential of supporting us in academic life, we shift away from the time-bound objectives and tangible goals that are often associated with interpretations that see mentorship as a job that can be accomplished. In doing so, possibilities around mentoring necessarily widen to encompass aspects of our existence that go beyond tangible outcomes such as research proposals, candidacy exams and graduation. The following account offers an example:

One evening, following the class my supervisor taught, he asked if I had a few minutes to talk. After the other students wandered out he said “I want to talk to you about what is happening in this Faculty. You need to know that with the way this Faculty is going, you won’t get a job here”. I was taken aback by this. It was not the conversation I had expected and it seemed to come out of nowhere. I sat down and listened, fully attentive.

He went on to explain the changes that he saw happening around him; changes that were antithetical to his work, the work of his students, and to his mind the purpose of education. He confided in me the difficulty he had convincing the Department to preserve the program he had worked so hard to develop over many years. He was certain that it was losing all sense of the larger understanding of pedagogy, becoming a market-driven institute focused on training. He was visibly distressed. I remained quiet, listening. As he pointed things out, I could suddenly see them for what they were. This place was changing.

“I want you to be able to teach my class. I want there to be a space for you to do the kind of work I am preparing you for. But you won’t be able to do that here. You will have to go elsewhere.” He looked genuinely upset by this, possibly angry, and I was surprised. Not so much by his reaction, but by the fact that he had confided this to me. I was struck by how his consideration of my future prospects was steps ahead of my own planning. He is genuinely concerned, I thought. He *really* cares.

The student is “taken aback” by her supervisor’s “out of nowhere” illumination of a subject with both political and personal connotations. The serious tone of his account compels her to sit down. As he divulges his assessment of the department’s current state of affairs, the student notices his *distress* and “suddenly” her own grasp of the situation appears to have shifted. For Daloz (2012), mentoring involves the sharing of wisdom in a way that helps open us up to new ways of seeing, “inviting a more spacious consciousness” (p. 252). Mentors, in this way, are able to discern a given reality “that we recognize to be true but for which we have somehow lacked the language” (Daloz, 2012, p. 252). Indeed as the supervisor shares his view of the “way this Faculty is going,” he unleashes a warning with a disposition of “you need to know”. As graduate students, many of us may be unprepared for the type of warning that hits so close to home. By relating his criticism of the Department to her own future prospects — with repeated emphasis on “you” — he is, to a certain degree, “enabling ideas to root in the mind of his student, which is a caring act not without risk” (Daloz, 2012, p. 242). The construct of mentoring promoted within universities is one of helping the student, and in turn, the organization (Roberts & Chernopiskaya, 1999). Perhaps in this regard his gesture may suggest a violation of his professional allegiance to the university and an overstepping of the boundaries of a supervisory relationship. Indeed the student, seemingly aware of this tension, is surprised that he *confides* in her. The student’s account suggests that her supervisor may feel compelled to guide her, through a kind of warning stance, about what lies ahead — something that she *ought* to know. Indeed he offers her an opening, “a way of knowing just ahead of where we are” (Daloz, 2012, p. 252).

We may wonder what such a gesture of forewarning implies about their relationship. That the supervisor revealed his own vulnerability seems to insinuate that he respects and trusts his student. We might even get the impression that he feels a responsibility to advise his student that the “purpose of education”, including her education, is somehow being undermined and that this may impact her.

Huang and Lynch (1995) suggest that a sign of good mentorship is the mentor’s willingness to risk taking a stance to advocate for the sake of the mentee caught in a hard place. Here, the scenario seems to be one that threatens the student’s prospects of doing a certain kind of work. While the supervisor’s account of the circumstances is arguably cause for concern, one that calls the student to “see them for what they were”, it also serves to communicate something else. The student comes

to see that “he *really* cares”. Indeed the student’s account impresses upon us that she recognized her supervisor’s sense of care for her and for her future. For van Manen (2012) pedagogical relations nurtured by familial contact *spark* feelings of care: the student experiences trust and being worried about.

While the anecdote seems to show a caring attitude toward the student, we might wonder if the care is also intrinsically wrapped up in something more. What might we make of the particular political or ideological stance of which both parties have a stake, “the purpose of education”? Considering the political opens us to an interpretation of mentoring not as action orientated toward some form of return on investment, such as successfully supervising a student through her degree. Rather, it presents mentorship as an opportunity to share one’s own gifts toward some sort of contribution to larger society such as enhancing the “larger understanding of pedagogy”.

For David G. Smith the first quality of a mentor is to be someone who is also engaged in the work, which is different from the concept of an expert. For him, not all experts can be mentors: Indeed for an expert or another to go beyond their duty, this requires making a turn: recognizing that it is not about *you*. When it comes to mentors, for Smith, there are no experts, no shortcuts (personal conversation, January 10, 2014). In this sense we might consider how the mentor-mentee relationship is focused on “the work”. In what ways is mentorship comparable to the notion of apprenticeship, where novices learn a trade or an art through practical experience (“apprentice”, n.d.)? The one-on-one aspect of mentorship distinguishes it from apprenticeship, which is often more group oriented, yet what might we learn from the emphasis apprenticeship places on working together?

Rogoff (1995) has shown how a metaphor of apprenticeship can help us to understand sociocultural activity focused on work and learning. She describes apprenticeship as a scenario where newcomers to a community are encouraged to develop skills and understanding through participation with others, including those with specialized skills. In the process, they become more responsible participants. In this sense apprentices engage in the work through culturally/institutionally-oriented activities — toward certain purposes that connect those involved to others outside the group (Rogoff, 1995). This interpretation of apprenticeship, which acknowledges that interpersonal relations and the social are contingent on each other, can inform how we think about graduate student mentorship. Indeed we might consider mentorship as more than a binary relationship between two individuals and, rather, as a synergetic and expansive relationship, interconnected to something larger. Mentoring relationships with graduate students, in this sense, are embedded in academic culture, and by extension involve a responsibility to the greater human condition. We might understand mentoring relationships of this nature to be about sharing one’s common humanity with another, as a “gift of birth, not of training” (Daloz, 2012, p. 241).

The following anecdote explores the interpretation of mentoring as gifting a bit further.

I met with a former professor and member of my supervisory committee to discuss possible directions for a paper I was working on. After an hour or so, feeling satisfied with the insights he offered, on a whim I changed the subject. I asked him how, in this current moment of the university’s history, emerging scholars like myself might respond to the consequent turn away from intellectuality toward training. After a rather long pause, he emphasized discernment and the importance of “reading the Western tradition”. He also spoke of fear, both his own and the fear he recognizes in others, when it comes to



challenging the institution. He called this “a moral failure”. And then looking at me in the eye and nodding slowly and pensively, he suggested that I organize an open session for talking about this important issue. And he offered to “kick it off”! I was both surprised and inspired by this gesture. I walked away from that meeting motivated, head spinning with ideas. I promised myself I would work to make this thing happen.

The student, “satisfied” with the “insights” she gathered from her interaction with her professor, takes the opportunity to seek a different kind of help or advice from him. She lays before him a philosophical question about the changing nature of academic life, including herself there within. As she opens up to him, an opening emerges for the professor. He falls into a speech, engaging with her by speaking to the problem that he too recognizes and that he too falls within. In a moment — “after a long pause” — he moves from the role of teacher to one of guide in the journey of life. He recognizes a seed and turns it into something else by calling upon her to act, to “organize an open session”. Yet he does not simply suggest what to do, he offers to be a part of it, to “kick it off”. It is not so much his *recognition* of the problem, but his response to it *motivates and inspires* her. She leaves the meeting “head spinning with ideas,” with new courage and a plan validated and supported by someone she trusts and respects. Yet what compels her to commit to making “this thing happen?”

Often as graduate students on the receiving end of mentorship, we find ourselves desiring to meet and even honour our mentors’ expectations of us. We often strive to merit the wisdom and the insight offered by the mentor. In this sense we engage in the work — not out of obligation as though paying a debt — but out of respect and gratitude for the mentor’s art of showing us the way (Gehrke, 1988). Perhaps the student desires to rise up and be that person her professor imagines her to be, one capable of acting and indeed intervening in the problem at hand. It seems that her recognition of having received a gift inspires her to “commit” to actually responding to the “moral failure” with a newfound way of doing so. This exchange is in line with Tao mentorship, where the mentor responds to advice sought by giving “a blessing and permission to ‘fly’ when one is ready” and in turn, the mentee “trusts that it’s safe to move forward” (Huang & Lynch, 1995, p. 15).

We might now draw a parallel between this encounter and the one described previously — “what is happening in this faculty”. It seems that, in both scenarios, at stake is a “moral failure” with regard to the “purpose of education”, whereby all parties are somehow implicated. Surely mentorship does not occur independent of the political context in which we struggle. In this way, mentorship becomes a moral endeavor. Even so, it is a subjective one: one can be mentored into the Tea Party, the Green Party, the ministry, the local community league, “a market-driven institute focused on training”, and so on.

In both of these encounters, the professors offered openings for their students to see not only beyond the status quo, but to dare to act upon the world toward more just circumstances. They not only offered advice or counsel, they themselves intervened toward change. Implicated in the political circumstances their students are facing, the professors’ mentorship seems to arise through “an embodied knowing of the radical interdependence of all life” (Daloz, 2012, p. 261). This kind of mentoring relationship might be seen as a partnership, a form of solidarity, whereby both parties — in and through their contingency with the political — come together to confront a profoundly endangered world. In this way, the line between learning and healing blurs as “the passage of the gift binds people to each other ... [and] becomes a vehicle of cohesiveness in the culture” (Gehrke, 1988, p. 191).

So what can we learn from the gift-giving interpretation of mentorship? Much as in the case of more structured mentoring relationships, it is the student's future prospects that seem to be of interest. The concern is not only with education in the formal sense: it becomes more widely about the cultivation of wisdom in the student: wisdom about navigating the precarity of academic life. These lessons aren't only reserved for the protégé: they also and necessarily include the mentor (Dalo, 2012). Mentorship may be understood in this sense as a relational experience where support and other human offerings can flow in multiple directions. Still, if the relations between student and mentor can be likened to aspects of a gift exchange economy, then the process does not end with student's own *awakening*. The gift is necessarily passed along to another or others, otherwise it loses its nature as a gift that gives (Gehrke, 1988). In this way mentorship holds the possibility of "self-transcendence"; the mentor-mentee dyad becomes a partnership that helps both parties "to cultivate an open heart-mind, enabling us to experience our interdependence with the world" (Huang & Lynch, p. 21).

### **Toward a Conclusion: Mentorship as Beyond and Becoming**

As Merleau-Ponty (1962/2005; 1948/2008) has shown, the ways we come to understand our relationships — most of which are *master-slave* relations — and thus conceptualize our world are reflected in the way we see ourselves and other selves as human beings interacting in the world. Although conceptions of mentorship hold many promises, even the possibility of horizontal relations premised on genuine reciprocity, these ideals — when superimposed on an institutional structure predicated on corporate style management — are at risk of being stillborn. As graduate students move into academic mentoring relationships — with those ahead of them, those sometimes called their "superiors" — they enter a power differentiated terrain. This territory is already structured to disable them from exerting their rights with the same degree of power as their more privileged counterparts. As it appeared in various scenarios of mentorship mistaken, some graduate students are seeing or being seen as subjectivities "lost", "trapped", "disconnected", "dumbfounded", "stunned", "crushed" and otherwise held in static positions, as one student put it, with "no real destination in mind". In this way, like van Manen's (1991) notion of pedagogical tact, mentorship is a phenomenon that reveals itself more readily in situations where we experience that it was greatly lacking.

The student anecdotes shared in this paper describe moments of interaction with academic supervisors and/or professors. It cannot be said that all were about or exemplary of mentoring. Indeed, as these anecdotes show, it cannot be assumed that anyone tasked with mentoring or who wants to mentor can actually do so. Nor is mentoring what necessarily happens to mentees, at least not all of the time. Perhaps it may have been more accurate to entitle this paper "experiences of academic supervision or guidance". Yet, graduate students' actual experiences of supervision (and other comparable academic relationships) reveal the expectation of some kind of mentorship, despite not necessarily knowing what it is like. The experiences described in this paper also seem to suggest a tendency toward some kind of lack or even excess of those various expectations of mentorship. Mentorship escapes, in each unique encounter, as something other than simply expectations met. Sometimes mentoring moments fall short of our expectations, in other instances they go beyond the call of duty. At times they reveal openings that "shine with possibility". Such excesses hold the potential to take us toward the unknown or the not yet, "as if toward a possibility for which [we have] no name".

It seems that distinguishing mentorship from graduate supervision (for example, by calling out those institutional claims that position supervisors as distributors of mentorship) is an appropriate response to what has been revealed through this exploration of students' actual experiences around mentorship. Thinking about mentorship as a relational paradigm rooted in pedagogical intent rather than a set of more technical duties may help us to avoid conflating our expectations of a supervisory relationship with those we can only hope for or welcome from a potential mentor. It is in this sense we might interpret mentorship as having some sort of capacity to guide us to become the best we can be — even if this means along a pathway that is not like that of the professor or institution or some other predefined existence. In this way we might consider mentorship not as a static relationship we enter into, but rather, as the layering and intersecting of various relational moments through which we see ourselves, and are seen, becoming.

Thus, considering that mentorship may not be an experience we can simply orchestrate, anticipate or expect to achieve, it may be impossible to distinguish it in concrete terms. Rather, we may be better served to consider its potential to manifest in the beyond ordinary, in the realm of the exceptional: in those special relationships that build around mentoring moments that we recognize as such only in retrospect. Mentorship from this heuristic angle becomes fluid, holding the potential to impact one's life journey, but not always explicably or even recognizably so and often in ways we cannot foresee. It does not seem to arise out of obligation or duty, but freedom, through encounters that somehow transport us out of ourselves toward someone or something that calls to us. In such instances we need not know where we are going, yet we are compelled to follow. In such mysterious ways, two souls in the making come together, creating what seems to exceed the sum of what was shared. It is in this sense that mentorship might indeed carry an aura of magic and mystery, defying any tangible or held meaning, each special manifestation singularly different and other.

If indeed mentors are special kinds of teachers who can show us who we are, what we can become and how we are seen or regarded (Greene, 1995; van Manen, 2012), then an emphasis on perception is particularly pertinent when it comes to guiding these pedagogical relationships. Following Merleau-Ponty (1948/2008), to better understand the potential of academic mentorship, let us “not find excuses for ourselves in our good intentions; let us see what becomes of these once they have escaped from inside us” (p. 68). It is with this in mind that I do not conclude with a well-intended list of ways to develop mentorship scenarios. I opt instead to offer a final point of reflection for those of us who might be, or might come to be, in positions to do the mentoring. I do this from my own mobile state of becoming academic and from my activist stance, that is, from a vantage that is interested in shifting power through the creation of new relationalities premised on the possibility of harmonious co-existence. My understanding of graduate student mentorship is informed, as always, by only partial and fragmented understandings of the phenomenon in question. I have not studied the lived experiences of academic mentors, and am not one myself (certainly any phenomenological study from this vantage would be beneficial). Thus my vantage is one that comes from below. With my biases, now re-thought and re-made, stated again, I offer a final provocation from this moment and place where I think and do.

Since the situational particulars of each pedagogical moment with graduate students hold simultaneously the possibility of mentorship and mentorship missed, it seems imperative to me that aspiring mentors attend to the challenge of shifting academic desire away from the standardized and standardizing tendencies of institutionalized relations. To this purpose, I propose a passage to reflection on mentorship premised on an ethic of responsibility toward those who are in positions of less power. Such vigilant reflection might bring into view that which the

corporatization of academic life has masked and normalized. It is to see the singularity of graduate students, our/their agencies and vulnerabilities, and to accept to be guided by our/their perspectives toward re-imagining what mentorship could be; It is to reflect upon those instances of mentorship that have escaped us, and allow them to inspire us to become pedagogues who can guide and be guided.

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