

February 10, 2017

Spirit Guides?

I am feeling very introspective this week. I hope you'll indulge me.

Last week, I read a charming tribute to Mary Tyler Moore that spoke about her impact on a generation of girls AND boys growing up with her image before them (<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/mary-tyler-moore-here#.WJCi5N2w2ls.gmail>). The essay speaks to how the character of Mary Richards (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) may have encouraged so many young women in its depiction of a smart, capable, single, successful woman who did not have, and did not need, a man to be whole. Remember, we were coming off a television era of women in the very visible (and supportive) role of housewife and mother (*Father Knows Best*, *The Ozzie and Harriet Show*, *Leave It To Beaver*, and even *The Dick Van Dyke Show*). The author's point was, in part, that the character of Mary Richards wasn't only important to the mindset of young girls who watched the show, but also to young men who unconsciously incorporated the idea of a smart, capable, single, successful woman into their minds, as well. The subtitle of the article is "Role Model."

Then I saw another piece about the importance of having a mentor to help you in your career – and I thought of all the other areas where mentors can be important. I know schools that have established mentor programs for their students, to help them learn from upper classmen how to navigate through the institution. There is a local organization in my area for parents of school-aged children with disabilities. They offer a mentoring program, pairing parents of very young (or newly diagnosed) children with a parent who has shepherded their child through the K-12 special ed system and lived to tell the tale. Other examples abound.

I got to wondering about the difference between a role model and a mentor, so I went back to the dictionary:

Role model: a person whose behavior, example, or success is, or can be, emulated by others, especially by younger people.

Mentor: an experienced and trusted adviser

In thinking it through, with those definitions before me, it seems to me that a *role model* is someone who gives you something to strive for simply by watching them BE who they are. They teach by example. A *mentor* is someone who purposefully teaches or guides you on a path that leads you to be that person you want to be (just like your role model). As I reflect on it, I realize that I have had plenty of role models and mentors in my personal and professional life.

My academic career was spent in the field of Speech Pathology. During my undergraduate career at Purdue, I took three or four courses from Dr. Betty Ann Wilson. She was a wonder. She spoke from experience with real live people and

explained concepts in a way that you HAD to understand. It has been almost 50 years since I heard some of those explanations and I can still tell you how she taught us the meaning of the term “perseveration.” One of the best lessons she EVER taught was by giving a test in the class on childhood language development that included an audio recording of a child interacting with a speech clinician. Based on what we heard, we were to place that child on a scale of speech and language development, and speculate on how old the kid was and to what his unusual speech pattern might be attributed. Only after the class had spent considerable time and energy applying everything we had learned to the task did she tell us that it was a recording of a myna bird. It was a very humbling experience, but I cannot think of a better way of saying to new, fresh-faced professionals, “there is more to this field than what you can read or learn about from books. You have to KNOW the person you are working with!”

My major professor during my time at Purdue was Dr. Kenneth Burk. He was my role model. I wanted to BE him. He was an amazing teacher, he was a wonderful clinician, and he was the most patient man I have ever met. He was beloved by all, and everyone felt comfortable with him because he LISTENED. He was never too busy to make time to talk about whatever you needed to talk about. The man didn’t have office hours – he didn’t need them because he was always available. (At one point, the female students threatened to start a petition requiring the male students to stop following Dr. Burk into the restroom when we had to stop at the door; we didn’t want them monopolizing his time when we didn’t get equal access!)

I followed my role model to Wichita, Kansas. By the time I was ready to work on my Ph.D., Dr. Burk had relocated to Wichita State University. I went out there and spent two years more, learning from his example, while I worked on my Ph.D. As I look back on my career as a teacher (seven years at Ohio State University in Speech Pathology), I am pleased to recognize that in a lot of ways, I DID become Ken Burk. I would guess that anyone who knew us both would see the stylistic resemblances immediately.

When I was working on my dissertation (in that final push for the Ph.D.), I had the dedication worked out in my mind long before I had the research study finished. The first page of my bound dissertation reads:

*To Dr. Betty Ann Wilson, who taught me the profession I love.
To Dr. Kenneth Burk, who taught me to love that profession.
And to my parents, who taught me to love.*

If Dr. Wilson was my mentor, and Dr. Burk was my role model, then what role is assigned to my parents?

Idol – A person who is greatly loved, honored, and revered.

I find that description fits nicely. Of course they taught me and guided me (mentors). And I certainly tried to follow their examples in all that I did (role models). I

may not have chosen the same path (my mother never worked outside the home after she was married), but I tried hard to follow my own path in a way that I thought she might have done herself. But I didn't want to BE my parents. I wanted them to be proud of what/who I was.

Recently, someone I was speaking with on the phone about a challenge to her policy regarding ESAs said, "That's exactly what I put in my policy and I am SO glad I did. Having it there saved the day. I am so glad I am smart enough to pay attention to my mentor when she tells me these things." Hey... that was ME she was talking about! I was happy to be recognized as such (especially since she seemed to feel that the advice I'd given was good!).

It was even more of a shock, though, when a few days later someone brand new to the field (who is taking my class on Back to Basics) sent a private post telling me that the person who had encouraged her to take the class with me (a long-time acquaintance from DSS circles) had told her that I was his role model, and after only two days in class, she knew what he was talking about. Me? A role model? How can that be, when I don't do what most of you do? I have never been an active disability service provider facing the challenges you do head on. Then I realized that what she meant was that she admired the way I thought about these issues, and wanted to learn to do the same. OK. I can live with that. But I never set out to be anyone's role model.

The third piece fell into place when I reread the words I, myself, had written for an article in the most recent edition of AHEAD's *HUB*. There is a very nice tribute to Ann Ito, the Director of KOKUA (the DSS program) at the University of Hawaii – Manoa. I was asked for a quote to sum up the article, as I have known Ann for almost 35 years. I said:

Ann is one of those "unsung heroes" and pioneers in our field. She has done more good, for more students, for a longer time, than anyone else I know. She has done it through her calm, outwardly mild demeanor, covering a fierce determination to see things done right. She is my idol.

I don't want to BE Ann. But I am in awe of who she is and all that she has accomplished, and I want her to be proud of who I have become over the course of our friendship, as well.

My guess is that as you think about your own life, personal and professional, you can identify those that have served as your mentors and role models along the way, just as I can. And I hope when you identify your idols, you'll find yourself as happy as I have been to recognize that the folks who mean so much to me would, I think, be proud of who I have become. But perhaps it is important to also remember that YOU are someone's mentor, someone's role model, and to always strive to act the part.

Janie

He didn't tell me. He showed me.

Be the role model you needed when you were younger.

Your words matter. Your actions matter. We look to each other for inspiration, so being a role model isn't optional. Live well.
