



Mentors Matter: A Few Words Can Change a Life

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A few words from a mentor can change a life. I'm living proof, and I don't want to forget it. Yet, I already did. It took me years to fully understand how a mentor's words altered the course of my life. As a mentor, you may never fully know the impact of your words and exactly how they can alter a life. It is my hope this reflection will help you understand—in your head and your heart—the power of a few words. Mentors matter, and we need them now, more than ever.

It was an unexpected conversation my senior year in high school, after a Tuesday night basketball game. I wasn't a star player or even a starter—I didn't even warm the bench. Keeping stats was a better fit, and I was thrilled to do that. Then Coach Dutcher called me into his office.

He asked where I was going to college. I didn't have big plans—likely it would be a nearby state school. In matter-of-fact tone he said I should go to “one of those Ivy League Schools.” I balked—they were expensive, and worlds away from the rural Michigan community that was home. As we talked, Coach kept glancing up at the black and white clock built into the cinder block wall behind me. His wife and young son must have been wondering why he was delayed. Still, he persisted, encouraging me with a vision beyond my limited perspective.

He didn't know I had received an unsolicited application from Harvard. Up until that point, I wasn't planning on applying. Coming from a town of only 4,000 people, it felt like too big a reach. My mother had encouraged me to apply, but I hadn't taken in her words. The application was gathering dust on a shelf in my bedroom, ignored—until that night.

Coach met every objection I had with earnestness and practical strategies. Too expensive? Get a summer job and help pay for it. Nothing I said could diminish his conviction and his confidence in me. Near the end of the conversation, he looked me in the eye and said seven words I've never forgotten: “*Your education is an investment in yourself.*” I was stunned...and inspired. I'd never thought of it that way.

Sharing his perspective and his years of wisdom cost him a few minutes of time, and maybe a bit of flack at home. For me, it was priceless.

Because of him—because of that conversation—I took the application down from the shelf and hand wrote the essay.

After graduating from Harvard, I went on to medical school, and then a faculty appointment at a major medical center. It's been a bigger life than I ever imagined. Tears are welling up as I write this, recalling how he extended himself in an act of kindness and care. With just a few words he altered the trajectory of my life, and I am forever grateful.

After more than 30 years, I finally sent him a letter of thanks. Outlining the above story, I closed with this: “I'm sure you've done many great things in your life—influenced many young people who needed guidance. I know for a fact that those 20 minutes after a Tuesday night high school basketball game forever changed my life. Bless you Ed Dutcher. . .and thank you from deep within my heart.”

He got the letter and called me, his voice full of energy and emotion. He said he saved the letter and showed it to many. “You made my day, my week, my month, my year!” To give him some joy after his priceless gift had compounded in incalculable ways was more than satisfying.

We met in person later that summer and have stayed in touch ever since. It's a relationship I cherish. Funny thing is, he didn't remember that meeting in his office over 30 years ago—the one that changed the course of my life. I think it's because he did those kinds of things so often, for so many. For him, it was no big deal. For me, it was life changing.

Seemingly small moments like these—just a few words—can have great impact. Know your perspective and encouragement can provide enormous benefit to medical students, residents, and fellows, as well as patients and their families. Even though you might never know the full meaning and details, trust that the time is more than worth the effort.

In the past few years, I've been inspired to learn more about gratitude practices, like a daily or weekly gratitude journal, and the benefits they bring. (1,2) Just such a practice helped me connect the dots and see how Coach Dutcher's words changed my life. Gratitude practices have become a part of my life, a daily reminder of all the good that exists, and that's so easy to overlook. Interestingly, a “gratitude letter” has been studied by investigators. It can have much more than a fleeting impact on both the giver and receiver (3). That's certainly been true in my case.

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As a physician, perhaps you've received a letter of gratitude that touched you. Maybe you'd like to write a letter to someone who made a difference in your life? Perhaps memories of a mentor or two are bubbling up as you read this. Why not write a letter right now? Let the good flow both ways—it's waiting to work its magic. Writing such a letter will energize you, and likely will do even more for the one who receives it.

Please don't wait as long as I did—your mentors, teachers, and coaches won't be around forever. COVID has been a stark reminder of the unpredictability of life. I was lucky—Coach was still around, and it wasn't difficult to find him. A letter or two is a very real way to flip COVID—to use it as fuel to help someone that made a difference for you. The author John U. Bacon has written movingly of such an experience with a coach of his, and his regret (4). While it may seem deceptively simple, a gratitude letter is a very potent opportunity. And it's available right now—literally at your fingertips.

A letter of thanks just might make their day, their week, their month, and their year—and yours, too. It did for Coach Dutcher, and for me. Dormant relationships just need a few words to spring to life. Please do send out some words of gratitude. You just might enjoy their impact for years to come.

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