

The Frances Maitland Memorial Lecture **Presented by Patricia Spencer, PhD**

Selected excerpts from Dr. Spencer's Presentation at the 32nd Alliance Annual Conference

I am honored to receive this award because Frances was both a cherished friend and a major influence in my involvement with the field of CME. She led by example, yet I believe she would tell us she only did what she thought needed to be done. Years after her death, as we look around us—at this meeting, in our CME homes, and in health care in general—we see the effects of Frances: her work, her joys, her kindnesses. Each of us has benefited from Fran whether or not you knew her. She set a tone of collaboration and caring that continues, as many things do, with a life now nurtured by others.

I confess I was puzzled when I received Bruce's call informing me of this honor. If memory serves me correctly, I responded with, "But Bruce, I'm not a mentor!" Through discussions with friends and colleagues, however, I came to accept that although my take on mentoring is quite different, it is still mentoring after all.

A New Look At Mentoring

I will share a different perspective from the more formal idea many of us carry of mentoring—that it is a tool in our toolkit or something we enter into an agreement about; a planned activity; one person as mentor, the other as mentee.

For me, mentoring is a way of being in the world. It is a reflection of a particular way of living our daily lives. In my world, mentoring is not something we pull out or put on for specific situations, events or people. It's making intentional choices about how we live and then living into those choices through all our experiences with everyone we encounter. Otherwise, we may miss our important learnings—the ones we might dismiss as not being related to the issue at hand. Paying attention is of primary importance! Recognize that important lessons can come from any quarter, any experience, any being and not just during meetings or interactions at work or only from those your senior.

One of my favorite and most helpful lessons from Frances came during a time when I didn't expect to experience anything life-changing. We were at an Alliance Board retreat and had done the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI). One of the dimensions addressed by the MBTI is that of introversion and extroversion. Those of you who watched Frances at meetings may understand my overwhelming surprise to learn that she was practically an off-the-scale introvert. This woman, who almost literally danced her way through large crowds acknowledging everyone, helping out where needed, smiling constantly, and seeming as comfortable as any extrovert I'd ever seen, was an introvert's introvert! We talked about it on a long walk later that weekend. I shared my surprise with her and she spoke of how she'd managed to exercise her extroversion enough to be comfortable with groups. Over time, I watched her and set my own intention to exercise my extroverted side. I brought my awareness to each situation that gave me opportunity to practice. What a lesson for me! It changed my way of being in the world. Although I used to be anxious when my job or a task called on me to participate in large groups, I practiced being extroverted. My students tell me I do a convincing job of it, since they learn during our work with the MBTI in the Leadership class I teach that I'm actually a very strong introvert. While it isn't always easy, it is doable. Thank you, Frances.

A [Really] Different Kind of Mentor

That's a different way of looking at mentoring—by living into it. Now consider this: if you had an opportunity to be with someone who models for you and teaches you more about living in the present rather than the past or future, about having phenomenal power and strength and only using as much as it takes to make a point, who encourages you to refine your skills, challenges you to push yourself and to go further than you think you can, and who provides continuous, honest and accurate feedback for you—is this someone with whom you'd want to spend time? I sure do, and I've had the opportunity to spend the last 13 years in this situation. I've learned much about work, play and life in general. The

kicker is that this *mentor* has 4 legs, weighs about 1,400 pounds, stands 5 feet 7 inches at his shoulder and could destroy me on a whim. His name is Kathmandu and he is a 16 year old thoroughbred.

I hope you'll bear with me and my example. I really am learning all that I described before I told you he was a horse, but just think, if I hadn't been open to lessons coming this way, there is so much I would have missed. As educators, we know that learning needs to come in various forms and formats. It needs to be reinforced, to be applied in various and different settings, and be generalizable. Yet, we also operate with certain mental models or frames of reference that help to establish appropriate sources for that type of learning. Horses are generally not on that list.

The reason I chose to tell you about Kathmandu and briefly describe my experiences with him is actually because of Frances and our time together at the barn. Fran was one of those people interested in everything, and when I say interested, she was *really* interested. Not just that, ". . . Hmmm, that's interesting" kind of interest, but a genuine, "How does it all work?" kind of interest. She asked questions, connected something in one area to another in a very different, sometimes seemingly unrelated area. She was a true educator and learner! Back to the barn.

Fran had heard me talk of Kathmandu and she wanted to meet him. She came out to the barn one day and we played a bit. I rode him, then we just hung out for a while watching all the goings on. At one point, I glanced over at Fran, saw a smile start and then develop into laughter. When I asked her what was so entertaining; she said being with Kat reminded her of some of the work-related meetings she'd been in throughout her career. For example, she needed to try and talk with someone whose language she didn't know (eg, the differences in communication styles between men and women). Unless she found the right way to approach something, these same people would totally ignore her. What's more, they had the power to change her life if she didn't find the right way to approach things. I'd always joked with people at work that there were parallels between the office and the barn. The biggest difference for me was that when I stepped in a pile of manure at work, sometimes I didn't quite realize it. At the barn, it became immediately obvious.

Seek Out Mentoring—It's All Around You

One of the difficult issues in the entire mentoring and learning arena is that we may have to look at things within us that we aren't too fond of seeing! It's so much more pleasant when we're working to improve a skill or ability that we value than when someone holds up the mirror for us, and we don't particularly like what we see. Our response can be ameliorated by the way the information is presented to us. We have as big a responsibility in choosing our ways of giving information as we do in receiving it.

In *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives*, Theodore Zeldin gives a description of the kind of conversation he enjoys. His description could be applied to my sense of mentoring. It's "one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk." David Whyte, a speaker at one of our meetings a few years ago, jokes about our willingness to explore, yet wanting a guarantee that things will work out OK. There is a theme of risk reluctance throughout much of the writings about living and being in this world.

The kind of mentoring I describe and in which I participate involves risk. It's hard work and it takes practice to stay aware and intentional. I confess, there are times when I just want a break from the intensity that can accompany all this *being present*. Then I take a deep breath, reflect on the benefits, and plunge forward. With each iteration, it becomes easier. Not easy, just easier. When I take time to acknowledge the benefits, I'm energized to begin again. There's a line in *What the Bleep Do We Know* that talks about the fact that when neurons fire together, they wire together—I struggle with that one—when neurons fire together, they wire together. I don't want it to be true—some days it feels just fine to be unaware and unintentional—yet I recognize that when I *practice* that—I learn it—it becomes comfortable. So, too, when I practice carrying intention in what I do, when I practice awareness—and pay attention—I learn it—and it becomes comfortable. It's about choices—and our willingness to be creative in identifying and then exercising them. I've learned a lot from the horse world, partly because I

spend time there—when I think about practicing, I hear one of the clinicians saying, “Only perfect practice makes perfect—otherwise you’re just firming up your mistakes.” Ray Hunt talks about setting up the situation so that what we want the horse to do is easy for him and what we don’t want him to do is difficult, “Make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult.” One of my favorites, actually, has to do with double loop learning—although Tom Dorrance would never have identified it that way—when you interacted with a horse and had trouble, Tom, in essence, talked about doubling back, he’d ask, “What happened before what happened happened?”

You see, it’s all around us—if we can allow it. As I prepared my remarks, I questioned the wisdom of including my horse-related examples. What would your reactions be? Would we get past the horses to the message? As I reflected on this, I realized that these examples *are* my message. Mentoring opportunities abound for us. We can be mentor one minute and mentee the next, and it can all occur in the same situation! It may be anywhere, in anything, from anyone. It’s equally exciting and challenging.

The poet Yeats once said, “The world is a source of revelation, not a problem to be solved.” I urge you: Watch and wonder!