

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS IN THE CREATIVE ARTS

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*“Reading, conversation, environment, culture, heroes, mentors, nature—all are lottery tickets for creativity. Scratch away at them and you’ll find out how big a prize you’ve won.”*

—Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*

When I was asked to contribute to this book, I sat down and made a long list of all of the jobs I’ve had during my lifetime. What I noticed when I looked at that list was a common theme of the importance of mentors in my life. The definition of a mentor is “an experienced and trusted adviser,” and without a doubt, the people I’ve met throughout the years helped me become successful in the entertainment industry. I lucked into my mentors. It was never a conscious decision on my part to have these people as mentors. It was proximity. They were always people who had something I admired. The word ‘mentor’ was never spoken between us. They took me under their wings, and I was happy to be there. It’s only in retrospect that I think of these people as mentors. They gave me advice. They looked out for my interests.

These mentors may not have always been people I liked, but I

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learned nonetheless. I think people generally think of mentorship only in the corporate setting, but I feel it's equally important in the creative arts. Blacksmiths, glassblowers, and other artists traditionally learned by apprenticeship. I would argue that in the 21st century, guidance and teaching are just as important. Today, in my job as Head of Content for Mill+, US, my department makes TV commercials, Web commercials, virtual reality experiences, TV show title sequences, and website-specific content. My role is to supervise the live action production of the work out of our L.A., Chicago, and New York offices, and I feel strongly that this includes mentoring my staff as well. It's a challenging, and rewarding job. My path to get here was one filled with hard work and great mentors, and below I'd like to share how it looked.

Initially, I was not a great worker. I didn't have a good work ethic, and I whined when asked to do chores and any kind of project. I started working when I was 12 or 13, painting my dad and stepmother's front porch. I distinctly remember one of them giving me a compliment about being a good worker, and that sticking with me and causing a shift in my attitude. Encouraged by that feedback, I would find odd jobs through friends, or my high school guidance counselor, who would get requests to have students go out to people's houses to do odd jobs. I stacked wood. I did brush removal. I was still under the working age to have a steady job, but the motivation and desire to do well and earn money was sparked.

When I turned 15, my dad and stepmother, the same two people who had given me the positive feedback for painting the porch, really pushed me to find a job. We would go through the Help Wanted ads in the newspaper together and they would drive me around to fill out applications. I got one job as a dishwasher and prep cook, but they let me go when they realized I was only 15. I spent the summer washing dishes at the Union Coach House Restaurant in Saratoga Springs, New York. In retrospect, it was a great first job because the staff was fun, and while it was a hard job, you felt good about the paycheck you earned. That same summer, my dad and stepmother

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got a VCR. (Funny to think how excited I was about that at the time and how much the technology has changed since then.) I would get home from work late, around 1:00 a.m., and stay up even later to watch a movie. All kinds of movies. Really bad sci-fi movies, foreign movies, cheesy action movies. This is when the film bug bit me. I was already into comic books, and film was a natural extension of this. I also found a book called *Getting into Film*, by Mel London. It talked about the different jobs on a film set and gave descriptions of what you did in those positions. It also said to “go for it.” It advised you to badger everyone you know who might know someone working in the business already, and then go work for them for free. It was common sense, but often the most obvious is not what we first try.

This same summer, 1986, I took a film production class at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I was obviously passionate about this field, as I did this on my own while still in high school. Remember, this is pre-Internet, and my parents weren’t pushing me to do this. This was all me. Find the class, register for the class, pay for the class, go to the class, and finish the class. The experience was eye-opening for me. I was in way over my head, and my fellow classmates were all much older than me but very kind and generous. I think they saw me as their little brother and helped me out. Mentored me. For our final, we made a two-minute film and had to pull an all-nighter to get the editing done. Normally, my mom didn’t notice what time I got home, but my grandparents were visiting. We were editing late into the night and someone started knocking on all of the doors down the hallway, eventually getting to our room. It was the campus police. My mom had called them in a panic. They put my bike in the trunk of the cruiser and drove me home. Getting lost in a project and working long hours is often part of this industry, but I found that because I was passionate about creating and learning, I didn’t mind, even though my mom did!

My grades in school were never very good. I was in special education classes until my sophomore year of high school. I had mild dyslexia and had trouble focusing. Despite this, I knew I wanted

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to go to a college that offered a film major, so I applied to several schools in the Northeast. I got into several, and the decision ultimately was between NYU and Massachusetts College of Art. NYU was very expensive and Mass Art, being the only State art school in the country, was not. Money talked and I chose Mass Art. In retrospect, it was a perfect fit for my self-sufficient nature. There were no dorms and we were responsible for finding our own housing. I was 17 when I started college, and wasn't actually old enough to sign a lease, but my responsible, go-getter nature offset any worries I had about this huge undertaking of starting college and moving to Boston from quiet Amherst.

In college, it wasn't a professor who was a mentor, but the Video Lab technician and maintenance man, Joe Briganti. He wasn't that much older than me, but he seemed like a full-fledged adult. He was encouraging of my pursuit of internships and working while I was in school, as he realized that the key to success in this business was getting out there and learning on the job, and he encouraged us to create our own career path. Having a career in the film industry was not something that my professors at art school ever mentioned, but Joe felt it was important to go beyond book learning and really experience the world of film.

That Mel London book I mentioned also discussed how important an internship is. I found one at a camera rental house, where the owner, Eric, wasn't much older than me. The man who managed the rental house was named Drew and he was very nice, and later, when we had a mishap while borrowing equipment for a school project, he modeled for me what cool under pressure really looks like. We had made a big mistake while filming; we broke a lens, and instead of getting angry, he encouraged us to keep shooting and do what we needed to do to finish our project.

While I was in college, I was a member of the Student Government Association, a monitor at the Video Lab; I acted in fellow students' movies, and I worked on the production of their films, which led to meeting more and more people, and during my junior year, one

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of these friends started getting production assistant (PA) work around Boston. He was a bit older than me and he asked if I wanted PA work also. Of course, I said “yes,” and he promised that if he got a call for a job, he would pass my name and number along. (A Production Assistant is an entry-level position on any set. You do pretty much whatever is asked of you, while earning the lowest pay, working the longest hours, and often being viewed with the least respect. BUT, it is an extremely important first step. You are getting your foot in the door, learning on the job, and meeting so many people, and from there you can go into the positions that you want: lighting, grip, assistant director, wardrobe, etc.).

A few days later I was in the shower, when one of my roommates said there was a woman on the phone who wanted me to work on a TV show the next day. I thought he was pulling my leg, but it turned out that he was serious. I jumped out of the shower and took the call, and accepted my first PA job. I was so excited! The next day, I went to a courthouse in Cambridge, MA, and met another Production Assistant and a British man named Daniel Lupi. My first day of glamorous work on a TV show consisted of cleaning out years of clutter in the garage of a courthouse. Not very fancy, but it was the introduction to my first production mentor. It turned out Daniel was the boss and he liked the way I worked, and he called me for more work. The TV show was called *Against the Law*, and it was the pilot episode that we were making for this new network called FOX. He was a tough-love mentor. He was loud, brash, and smart as a whip, and could give a shit what you thought about him. We all admired him and he was like a pied piper—we all followed him. It was a work environment unlike anything I had experienced prior or since then. He hired me on and let me join the parade that he was leading. Here was a guy who was in charge of millions of dollars and he came to work in sweatpants, swore at everyone, and partied like a British rock star. He didn't tolerate fools and he had a work ethic like nothing I had ever seen. He worked seven days a week and had a bounce in his step like a little kid the whole time. His title was Production

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Manager and he oversaw the budget and personnel for the project. Every third word out of his mouth was a swear word. He would not hesitate to yell at you if you messed up. He liked to party. He liked to laugh and he had boundless energy. At some point he told me to give him a call for more work in the future if the show got picked up to be a series. This was near the end of my junior year of college, and as the school year was coming to a close, I started leaving messages for Lupi at his apartment in New York, and I didn't stop. I called all summer long. Over and over.

He didn't call back, so that summer I found an internship on a low-budget feature film, and I got this because of the prior internship at the camera rental house. The hard work and networking paid off. And guess what? In the fall of my senior year, Lupi called me back. He asked me to come back and work on the show *Against the Law*, as it had gotten picked up by FOX! I was now working 14–16-hour days, three days a week, and fitting classes in around jobs, and as you can imagine, my grades were pretty bad. When it was time for graduation, I was short one paper for a class. I was allowed to participate in the ceremony, but since I still owed that paper, I hadn't technically graduated, but I already had a job in my field, the goal of college, so the lack of a diploma didn't seem so important. I was regarded as one of the best Production Assistants in Boston, and even if it was slow, I still had a fair amount of work because I had a good reputation. Let me be clear. I was freelance. You go from job to job, hired by word of mouth and recommendations. In this business, people don't ask for your college info, and it wasn't until a few years ago that I had the interest in making up that class. It makes me laugh to see that I “technically” graduated in 2009.

During these couple of years, I also did the line production on a few short films with friends around Boston and the director had a lot of connections around town. His godfather was Jan Egelson, the same Jan Egelson who directed the show *Against the Law* that I worked on! Through his connections, I got nominated for a Sundance Institute Producing Fellowship, which is the opportunity to

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work directly with a producer on a feature film. At the same time that the nomination process was going on, I was working on the biggest feature film to come to Boston. *Blown Away* starred Jeff Bridges, Tommy Lee Jones, and Forest Whitaker, and the director's assistant, Kris, ended up writing me a recommendation for the Sundance Fellowship. I made it to the final round, which was an interview in Los Angeles, and didn't get the fellowship, but about a month later, I got a call that the person they selected wasn't working out and they wanted me now. I was overjoyed. The next decision was, should I move to Las Vegas and work on a Martin Scorsese movie called *Casino*, or should I move to Los Angeles and work on a movie called *Pie in the Sky*? The Fellowship only gave you a small stipend, and since I had a free place to stay in Los Angeles, I picked *Pie in the Sky*. The Fellowship was not what I had imagined, and in retrospect, I learned an important life lesson from this experience. A big opportunity doesn't always equate to a life-changing opportunity, or a free pass, if you will. While an extreme honor to have been chosen, it didn't automatically catapult me to the higher echelons of Hollywood. I still had to work my way up the old-fashioned way.

Remember when I mentioned bad mentors? After the film was over, I became the assistant to the producers from the Fellowship. This was by far the worst job I have ever had. I was miserable. No matter how I tried, I couldn't make this job good. I was a horrible assistant. Going to work every day felt like something heavy was weighing on me. Like I wanted to run. But, I learned from them. I learned what I didn't want to do. I didn't want to produce feature films. The producers I worked for were miserable. They had their hands in dozens of projects, hoping that maybe one of them would actually move forward. The movie I worked on, *Pie in the Sky*, was never released. The director had spent two years of his life working on this movie for no one to see it. Then my boss did a truly "Hollywood" thing. She fired me from her cell phone while at the Sundance Film Festival, and aside from my wife and kids, this was the best thing to happen to me, and the only time I've ever been fired.

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Not one to sit still, I jumped back into PA work, thanks to a friend, and soon I was working on all sorts of different projects in Los Angeles. I rose through the ranks of production, moving from PA to production coordinator to production manager, and finally, producer. There is a lot to learn in each of these positions, and I always had to feel very comfortable and grounded in my position before I felt ready to move up. During this time, I had the good fortune to work with a man for several years whom I think of as the quintessential mentor, Peter Keenan. First of all, he was very loyal to the people who worked for him. Especially in Hollywood, that is rare. Another of his fine attributes was his temperament. On one job, I made a huge mistake that could have cost the company a lot of money. He didn't yell or scream. He focused on solving the problem as quickly as possible without fireworks, but what he did next was even more amazing. He continued to hire me. In the world of freelance production, this is unheard of. He was under no obligation by any sort of contract; I was freelance, and that could have been my last job at that company, but instead he continued to hire me.

Finally, Peter was always honest and upfront. He never beat around the bush, and you knew where you stood with him. I feel that, too often, confrontation is avoided, and can grow, unnecessarily, into something ugly. If he thought you had screwed up, Peter would politely let you know that he expected more from you. He wanted those who worked for him to advance, do good work, and be happy. All of these traits epitomize the definition of a mentor.

So how did I find all of these mentors? I never seek them out; we just find each other. I gravitate toward people who are forthright and kind. My mentors are always people I respect, and on some level, want to be like. While everyone we meet changes us a little, I think a mentor is someone whom we let influence us more than other people. Someone whose advice we will consider more than others.

Almost 30 years since that first PA job, I find myself in an executive position, and it's my turn to be a mentor. It's a role I take very seriously. Now that I'm in a position to be a mentor, I take it



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seriously. I have people who work directly for me, and by default, that is a mentor-mentee relationship. My nature is to try to be helpful and give people opportunities. When I get a well-written e-mail from someone asking for a meeting, I try and take the meeting. If they are prepared and seem to be serious about what they want to do, I try to help them. If I directly give them an opportunity and feel that they have done well, I give them more responsibility and more opportunity. I am happy to give advice and dispense knowledge, as long as I don't feel like my time is being wasted. If someone isn't respecting my time, I won't respect them.

If I'm going to take someone as a mentee, I look for passion, for seriousness, and for willingness.

Being a mentor today is tricky, in that you have to manage the mentee's expectations and your own time. I get asked to do a lot of things for a lot of people in my work and personal life. I've accepted that I may not get all of them done and that it will probably take me longer than I would like. Mentoring means adding to your workload, and you have to be thoughtful about what your commitments already are. The biggest difference I find today compared to when I was starting out has to do with technology. Of course, it impacts the actual work I do, but as it relates to mentoring, it greatly expands your opportunities. Twenty-five years ago, I was somewhat limited to those I came into contact with directly through work, but with LinkedIn, Twitter, Vimeo, and a host of other Internet and social media outlets, you have potential access to people around the world. A quick tweet of "I loved your latest commercial. How did you do that shot?" could start a dialogue that leads to connections and introductions that never would have happened pre-Internet.

I hope that the people I have helped go on to have successful careers and are able to inspire others along the way. I tend to have a rosy outlook, but I am also a realist, I know that there is only so much help you can give someone. Ideally, if you have picked your mentees well, they will do you proud and you will remain in touch for many years.

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If you are thinking of entering into this field, three things will help put you ahead of your peers: hard work, networking, and having a mentor. I wasn't the best student, but I often was the hardest worker. Sweat equity still goes a long way, and I find that encouraging because it is something each of us controls. At the same time, I couldn't have gotten to where I am today without the support and guidance over the years from so many people: my parents, former bosses, friends, and co-workers. Build your network. Be prepared to work hard. Ask for help. Be curious. Help others. Everyone is creative. Everyone is an artist. What they do with their creativity is key. How they share their art is what makes the difference.