

## A Letter to a Mentor

Dear Paul,

This letter is long overdue, so please accept my sincere apologies. I was never very good at letter writing but I thought I would share with you a few things that have been on my mind. I am constantly reminded how we often fail to take full advantage of our professional and personal relationships. I can't tell you how many times I meant to call you over the years to thank you for the many things you did for me. I suspect you never realized the impact you made on the life of one, R53.

I received a call from Bob Rapp a few months ago and he informed me that I was the recipient of this year's Paul F. Parker Award. It is truly an honor for me to be associated with your legacy. You have been such an integral part of my life that there is rarely a day that goes by in which I don't incorporate into my daily activities a lesson you taught me. Lessons like:

- Never go to "the meeting" not knowing what the outcome is going to be  
– I never realized how many meetings were necessary to prepare for "the meeting." "The meeting" was of course the event that would

represent the “tipping point” of an issue. You taught me that concept long before the term “tipping point” was introduced into our vernacular.

- **Don’t be afraid to fail. If you believe in it, go after it – risk should be managed not feared.**
- **Put your faith in people, not systems. Recruit, hire, retain the best – give them the freedom and the support to succeed and good things will result.**
- **Exploit peoples’ strengths and interests. People will be far more productive if enabled to pursue their passions.**
- **Convince me. You always put the burden of proof on the advocate of change; it took me a while to understand that you were not apposed to a certain position, you just weren’t convinced – but you could be. We call that today “playing the devils advocate.” You were masterful with this skill. For example, I never thought you would ever support our Clinical Pharmacokinetics Program, you just didn’t seem interested. That was obviously not the case. Once convinced, you turned out to be the program’s strongest advocate; it just took me some time to make the compelling case.**
- **And of course, the infamous “five year plan.” Simply, I have learned to live by it. It has served me well, thank you.**

**The older I get, the more I value the dedication, intelligence and wisdom you brought to your job.**

**I began today preparing for my talk that I will be giving at the ASHP Residency Luncheon in New Orleans. I am experiencing a bit of writer's block, so any divine intervention you can bestow upon me will be greatly appreciated.**

**The first time I met you was on February 14, 1975, Valentines Day. To this day, I don't know what you saw in me. I often ask myself the question, "Where would I be today if I had never had the opportunity to meet you?" As you well know, I was a naïve pharmacy student with a whole lot more hair – coming to you from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, a school certainly not known as the mecca of contemporary pharmacy education. At the time, I was struggling to find some direction in my own professional life. I can still remember the first question you asked me during my interview, "How will this residency program help you make a difference for our profession?" I was in shock. I thought you were going to ask me something about the mechanism of action or side effect profile of some new drug. Little did I know at the time, you didn't know very much about drugs, a shortcoming that I have grown to appreciate and accept for myself.**

Certainly, one of the most exciting days of my life occurred on the evening that I received the call from Kentucky informing me that I was accepted into the Pharm. D. Residency Program. I will never forget it – Maureen and I were attending our church’s marriage preparation class and I received a message to call Dr. Ann Amerson of the University of Kentucky. Never at a loss to find a good excuse to abbreviate my religious training. Maureen and I rushed home to return the call. It was an easy decision for me, for I had applied to only one program. Kentucky was the best and that’s where I wanted to go. It was Kentucky or nothing.

There were so many times in my professional life whereby you made the difference. Do you remember when I came to you during the middle of my first year and told you that we were homesick and were planning to return to Massachusetts? I don’t know exactly what you said to me but you were able to reassure me that everything would work out for the best. You were able to convey to me, on a personal level, your appreciation of what we were going through. Your personal, even private, reflections regarding many of your early career challenges put many of my problems and concerns into perspective. Your words of comfort were all we needed to recommit ourselves to the Kentucky program.

**You always had the ability to see untapped potential in people. Often they were little things that, in the end, made a big difference. For example, you told me I was a good teacher but that I could be a great teacher. You encouraged me to take over the Biopharmaceutics/Pharmacokinetics class. I told you that I would never be effective teaching to a class of 100. I preferred the small classroom setting where I could be more engaging. I was comfortable and reluctant to change. You told me rubbish or something like that. Some ten years later, long after your retirement, I took over that class and enjoyed every minute of it.**

**You were the first person to tell me that I was a bit “analytical.” I wasn’t sure if it was a complement or an insult. You told me it depended on how I used the talent. It would be bad if I became cold and over calculating; good if I used it to organize thought toward the development of effective strategies.**

**As I reflect on the many ways in which you touched my professional life, it was your vision, scholarship and selfless mentoring that influenced my personal and professional career the most.**

**Most people would be surprised to know that you were an excellent writer. You were the first to introduce me to the concept of “the draft.” It was during my dreaded administrative rotation that I learned the most about you.**

Remember, all of us “clinical jocks” with our belt held beepers and HP-calculators, rejecting the notion that an administrative rotation offered any value to the development of a clinical resident. Those types of experiences might work for residents at Ohio State or Wisconsin but not at Kentucky. Of course you decided to pair me up with Duane Kirking, an administrative resident disguised as a clinician (the proverbial wolf in sheep clothing). You told me that you had a challenge for me and you thought it would be in my best interest to get started immediately. Through our many conversations, you knew of my love for clinical pharmacokinetics and in your own way saw the value of such a service. But, being the pragmatist that you were, you also saw the importance of finding a way to pay for our fledgling service program. The administrative assignment - draft a proposal to Blue Cross Blue Shield that will result in the hospital receiving compensation for this new pharmacy program. This seemed fairly straight forward to me and I began my assignment with tempered enthusiasm. Within a week, I had a draft of the proposal on your desk. I can still remember you sitting in your chair wearing your signature blue sport coat telling me that this was probably the worse proposal you had ever read and that I needed to spend more time with Duane. Duane you said would help me clean this proposal up. You made a few inconsequential suggestions and I went at it again. Draft #2 was received with less enthusiasm than the first. As you may well remember, we did not finalize our proposal until draft #10 was successfully revised. We submitted

it to hospital administration and later to Blue Cross Blue Shield. Ultimately it was approved. I always wondered how you, a man who didn't know the difference between zero and first-order elimination, could facilitate the creation of a new Clinical Pharmacokinetic Drug Monitoring Service Program. Perhaps the fact that the program has endured for nearly 30 years says it all. What I appreciated most from that experience was that you included me in every high level meeting relevant to this project and that you always gave me the credit (despite the fact that I was only a lowly resident).

As a resident, I never thought much of you as a visionary or a scholar. I regret that and I apologize for never telling you how much I have grown to appreciate that aspect of your professional life. I recently had the chance to review an old copy of your CV and discovered that you were a rather prolific writer. You published well over 60 manuscripts. This was a great achievement given the complexity of your job responsibilities. However, the real fascination for me was not so much in the number of publications you produced but rather how far ahead your thinking was compared to the rest of the pharmacy thought leaders of the day. You may not remember some of these titles so I thought I would refresh your memory. Again, what struck me most was the year you published these papers.

1. "On Accompanying Physicians on Rounds" (1957)

2. **“Poison Control” (1957)**
3. **“Handling Investigational Drugs” (1958)**
4. **“Criteria for Establishing Minimum Standards for Pharmacy Practice in Hospitals” (1958)**
5. **“Dynamics of Research in the Pharmaceutical Sciences” (1960)**
6. **“University of Kentucky Drug Information Center” (1965)**
7. **“Unit Dose Dispensing Today” (1968)**
8. **“A Comparison of Medication Errors Under the University of Kentucky Unit Dose Systems and Traditional Drug Distribution Systems in four Hospitals (with Cliff Hynniman)” (1970)**
9. **“Who Will Pay for the Pharmacists Clinical Practice” (1972)**
10. **“Commentary on the Millis Commission Report” (1976)**
11. **“An Integrated Pathology – Pharmacotherapeutics Course for Doctor of Pharmacy Students” (1979)**
12. **“Bridging the Gap between the Basic Sciences and Clinical Practice: Teaching, Research, and Service. The Importance of Defining Institutional Goals” (1982)**
13. **“Quality Assurance Program for a Clinical Pharmacokinetic Service” (1982)**

**Although you did not acquire your national and international reputation solely on the basis of being a visionary/scholar, you certainly were one. You**

**had the ability to create and apply new knowledge in innovative ways in order to attack contemporary pharmacy problems and most importantly you shared those ideas with our profession and society at large. You didn't just talk about a vision. You were constantly engaged in your vision. This is clearly evident by your successful commitment to the development of new and innovative programs in:**

- **Unit dose**
- **Drug Information**
- **Drug Utilization Review**
- **Decentralized pharmacy**
- **Pharmacokinetic Drug Monitoring**
- **Pharm.D. Residency training**
- **Clinical Pharmaceutical Sciences Graduate training**

**Of the many qualities I have learned to grow to respect and admire in you, the one that made the biggest difference in my life was that of a mentor. You epitomize to me the ideal qualities and characteristics of a mentor. Those qualities and characteristics that were most important to me were:**

- **Sincerity.** You genuinely cared about us as individuals; not just the professional part of us – all of us. I will never forget the time you heard that my parents were in Lexington and you wanted the opportunity to meet with them. You invited us to your home and we had a wonderful time. However, during their visit you gave them a gift that they could never repay – the gift of pride that they now had in their son. Although my parents never fully understood why I came to Kentucky nor why I stayed – after talking to you they understood the importance of my work and the difference I could make.
- **Unbiased.** You always had that unique ability to assess a situation without allowing your own bias to influence you. I have learned that this is one of the biggest obstacles to the success of many administrators. You took every new idea and assessed it on its own merit. You gave everyone in the organization the opportunity to make a contribution - every day.
- **Selfless.** It was never about you. It was always about us. At times, even to the detriment of the organization, you would find a way to help create an opportunity for one of us that was clearly important to our professional development but not necessarily in the best interest of the organization. Somehow, you made it happen.
- **Good listener.** You liked to ask probing questions. I have learned that it's not sufficient to simply ask questions but rather to ask the right

**questions. This skill served you well over the years. It put you in a position to quickly understand:**

- What were they thinking?**
- What motivated them?**
- What did they like to do?**
- What did they dislike doing?**
- What was their ambition?**
- How could I help?**

**In doing so, you could more effectively develop strategies to solve a problem, particularly people problems. And finally,**

- Empowered people to do. You took highly motivated people and you put them in a situation in which they would be challenged. Their success was their own success. You sought no credit or recognition for it. Your reward – to see a young, resident mature into a committed professional who aspires only to make a difference in our profession.**

**For those of us who were fortunate to be around you during this portion of your life, we realize that you gave each of us an incredible gift. You gave us the tools to be mentors. For those receptive to accepting them, you gave us the opportunity to pay this gift forward. You realized early in your**

**professional life that you could never pay back the gift of mentoring that your mentor, Dr. Don Franke, bestowed upon. Instead of trying to pay it back, you chose to pay it forward. Yes, long before the movie “Pay It Forward” hit the cinemas, you and Don Franke were advancing the profession of pharmacy by giving your unique gift of mentoring to others, one resident at a time.**

**There was a piece you wrote back in 1979 in the *American Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* that is worth reflecting on today. It was your public testimonial honoring the memory of your mentor, Don Franke. I would like to share it with you now because the words you used, your own words, capture the sentiments your residents have long felt about you. And I quote:**

**“His personal influence upon my professional career was very real and greater than that of any other individual. It is difficult to enumerate specific ways in which he did so, but as time passes I seem to attribute his influence to one or another aspect of my professional development. For, instance, he caused me to develop a philosophy of professional practice. His motivation gave me commitment to try to change the pharmacy profession... I believe that his support of my ideas and long-term interest in my career developed because I was one of his residents. One of the most satisfying aspects of my professional life is having the opportunity to work with outstanding pharmacy residents. I often think this opportunity would never have come**

**my way if I had not had him as my preceptor... Even though I will miss the opportunity to call him on the telephone to get his reaction to an idea, I can always continue to have ideas which are either directly or indirectly attributable to his personal and professional influence. He had a significant professional influence upon a lot of people. Although I am proud to have been one of his residents and pleased to have had a long and close professional relationship with him, I never assumed this relationship was unusual for him. Perhaps his professional relationships with people were as important to pharmacy as his ideas and writings... I hope the history of pharmacy will treat him well as his ideas and many years of hard work come to fruition for the profession.”<sup>1</sup>**

**End of quote.**

**Paul, all of us who were affected by you, owe you a debt of gratitude. A debt we can never repay. For those of us who carry the moniker of being a Kentucky resident, we owe it to your legacy to pass this gift forward. Just as Don Franke did for you, you did for us, we must do for future generations of pharmacists.**

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<sup>1</sup>Originally published in Am J Hosp Pharm 36:462-485(Apr) 1979. © 1979, American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

**Well, I guess I should let you go now, Your vision, scholarship and mentoring is sorely missed around here. I almost forgot to mention to you but I accepted a new job as Dean of the University of North Carolina, School of Pharmacy. Leaving Kentucky after 28 years was difficult but the opportunity was just too good to turn down. I know that one of your goals in life was to see the day when your residents would populate leadership positions around the country. Toward that end, I hope that I can be successful in my endeavors and make you proud of me.**

**I really should get started on my talk. I'm not quite sure what I'm going to say. I hope it makes a difference.**

**Sincerely yours,**

**Bob**

**PS. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the selection committee for this tremendous distinction. To be associated, in any way, with the legacy of Dr. Paul F. Parker is truly an honor.**

**I would also like to acknowledge a few other people who are here today. To Dean Ken Roberts, I would like to thank you for your unwavering support,**

**guidance and friendship. The opportunities that you afforded me during the three and one-half years we worked together were incredible and greatly appreciated. To my wife, Maureen, everything that is good in my life I have you to thank. Your life long support and encouragement is only surpassed by the selfless love you constantly give to me, our children, Colleen and Daniel, and yes, our dog, Smokey.**

**Presented by Dr. Robert A. Blouin at the 2003 Paul F. Parker Award Luncheon on December 9, 2003 at the ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana**

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