

The Power of Mentorship

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Thank you, Billy, as John Cauble always called William Ivey Long.

When I was asked to share some thoughts with you I should have followed my instinct and said, "Gee, gosh, golly...no." And, alas, my serious lapse in thinking has brought me to you, so you only have yourselves to blame.

I went online—this is my first mistake. It's like your doctor says when you're diagnosed, "Do not look online." I looked online to see who else had done this address, and then I got weak in the knees. And then, foolishly, I said to my assistant, "Print up some of the former addresses so I get a sense of it." Big mistake. A lot of smart people have come before me and I really have no business speaking to you. In particular, I look at all of you, and you are not only trained professionals, but you're actually the people who would not necessarily have given me good grades. And, of course, there's no question I'm a relative newcomer here.

But I do have a couple of things I want to address today, mostly inspired by my beloved John Cauble.

I, probably for many of you, represent the very standard of gross, over-commercialized entertainment that passes for theatre. And although I have little or nothing to do with Disney Consumer Products or Princess Dolls or Theme Parks or the like, I carry some of that baggage for many of you. That being said, the current state of affairs is really one of the most dire situations any of us has seen, or certainly in a very long while. The current administration's assault on art, literacy, beauty, language, and more is nothing short of appalling. And this is not news to any of us. We're all living in it every day. The suggestion of cutting funds to the NEA and the NEH is certainly nothing new and is certainly something that we all have seen before.

But I worry, in a sense, more about the national dialogue itself. The rising tide that art means elite means not mine means evil. I worry about the silencing of voices, and I worry frankly about raising a generation in a world that is coarse and vulgar and devoid of grace and beauty. And perhaps most of all devoid of appreciation for the wildly talented among us in our community, who create and shape and perform and elevate us in the theatre, as artists have done for two millennia.

And while I feel a great darkness in my soul about this, the only way I can truly face it is to face it personally. And locally. And one person at a time. And I suppose I endeavor to enlist all of us and all who we touch to do the same.

Person by person. One by one.

I would like to address a little bit of that today. This year, two things will happen for me; one, I will turn 60 and two, I will pass the 30-year mark of working with The Walt Disney Company. And these two things — when you reach the half-point in your life and you spend half of it in one organization, are moments to reflect. And as you all know, milestones, if they are tall enough, give us an extraordinary chance to look backwards and perhaps a chance to see the next horizon.

As a little bit of personal biography, and to the surprise of most of my close friends in New York, I'm actually a fourth-generation Californian.

I was born in Southern California (shockingly, two miles from Disney Studios and on Walt Disney's birthday...), but I was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. And there my desperate need for attention, my fascination with wigs and make up and all forms of physical transformation, my overwhelming need to be with story tellers and my well-tuned ability to lie to everyone to cover up my tracks made me into what passed for an actor. And as you all know, acting is the gateway drug to the theatre writ large; it stayed in my bag of tricks for a number of years.

John Cauble fixed that, but more about that later.

I had never seen a professional production of theatre until I was in the seventh grade. And then on two back-to-back school trips into San Francisco, I saw productions that changed my life. Two of them.

The first, surprisingly, was directed by our pal Jack O'Brien. And it was his restaging of Elis Rabb's production of *You Can't Take It With You*, which I remember so clearly. And that was quickly followed within a month by the extraordinary Peter Brook staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

So, imagine my little seventh grade head, because I'm seeing at ACT Bill Ball's glorious repertory company do Jack's production of *You Can't Take It With You* with antimacassars on the chair and escutcheons on the door and naturalistic furniture. And then it's juxtaposed with Peter Brook's production featuring Sally Jacobs' white set, circus acts, people spinning plates, actors on a trapeze. The fact that theatre could be both what Jack portrayed, with antimacassar covered chairs, and then this big white box, changed my life in extraordinary ways. And much to my surprise, I got to work with each of these men later. My high school years, like many many of you, were theatre, theatre and some theatre on the side, and yet it never occurred to me, or to those close to me, that I could pursue theatre as a profession. And I have no idea why not.

From the time I was very small though, teachers and institutional theatre-makers gave me a structure and a discipline that served as my guide and my foundation. Everywhere I turned as a child, there was a dedicated, passionate, generous, demanding, usually funny, warm, engaging, loving adult extending a hand to me. Each of whom worked in the arts.

I ended up at UCLA, originally to become a drama therapist. I thought that fit everything I wanted to do (except that I wanted to talk more than the patients most likely). I sort of slid into

being a theatre major. And while at UCLA, my epiphany came following a summer of summer stock where I played many leading roles—not well, but I did play them.

And I just didn't like doing it and I realized that I was much more comfortable in the skin of a producer, or a director, or a theatre-maker and supporter somehow. Acting did not bring out my best qualities (many other actors might want to explore that among themselves). But it did not bring out my best qualities. And I also realized there was no way that I was even close to being the best on that stage. And, it hit me, oh I should do something else.

So, I headed back to my senior year at UCLA and scheduled an appointment with my beloved John Cauble. He had been my professor for an introduction to producing class. I said “I want to focus my studies now on producing. I want to leave all of this acting behind.”

And at that moment John switched, as probably so many of you have, from teacher to mentor. And whether he is in the room or not is beside the point, because he is here on my shoulder. And that's what matters.

And it's been a tricky year for me because John passed and Gordon Davidson passed. My shoulders are getting very crowded with mentors who are constantly in my ear. It's a lucky position to be in, but it says we have to pass that along. It's gotten me to thinking about who mentors are, what they do, and most importantly the importance of being one.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Our chief want in life is somebody who will make us do what we can.”

The American Psychological Association did a mentoring study and came up with this definition of a mentor. Hold with me—it's dry, but it gets us somewhere:

A mentor is an individual with expertise who can help develop the career of a mentee. A mentor has two primary functions for the mentee. The career-related function establishes the mentor as a coach who provides advice to enhance the mentee's professional performance and development. The psychosocial function establishes the mentor as a role model and support system for the mentee. Both functions provide explicit and implicit lessons related to professional development as well as general work-life balance.

It's bone dry, but it does get to the point. Then I went reading a really great woman, Kathy Kram, some of you may know her at Boston University, who specifically studies mentoring. She says a mentor is: “An individual higher up in the organization who provides developmental support including guidance, coaching, counseling, and friendship to a protégé.” Again a bit too dry for me, but I like the friendship part. So then, I was reading the *Harvard Business Review*. And it listed the five key components to mentoring, and two of them really struck me: “Shout loudly

with your optimism, and keep quiet with your cynicism.” The second one, and this is in regard to selecting a mentee: “Focus on character rather than competency.”

Now, clearly, John Cauble did that with me, because my competency was nil. I know that everybody in this room gives thanks to mentors, and for the most part, formally or informally, you all serve as mentors today. And this obviously came up a number of times last night. The word “mentor” comes up all the time in our business. I do think that we in the theatre are particularly special, and better at this than many many other professions. But we need to lead a mentoring campaign. We need to extend what we do into every other field.

As a bit of professional background: There are 23 Disney productions that I have produced around the world playing tonight. I tell you this because when I arrived at Disney, it was actually to produce animation and not theater at all.

And this was particularly odd because I had no experience in film of any kind. I was the first person brought in from outside the culture of Disney, with the title of producer for an animated film. I didn't go to films in those days. We didn't have home video, and I spent my nights in the theater. I was working in the theater. But, so few people wanted to work at Disney Animation, they could only find people from the theater who were willing to take a pay cut and go work there. Now what's crazy about this is that I ended up either producing or overseeing the creation and production of 20 of the big animated movies that your students grew up with. Well how? How did I go from not knowing anything to being able to do this? I went seeking a mentor. Somewhat unwittingly, but I did.

And that would seem to you easy given the legacy at Disney. But, in fact, a great crisis at Disney was that the legendary Nine Old Men, those animators who followed Walt Disney, were completely uninterested in mentoring and much of the animation craft had completely fallen apart. So much so, that they had to reach to our community, the theatre community, to revive it.

There was such a big gap in the history of animation in the 20th Century, and it's because they didn't raise a generation to follow them. They didn't think anyone was interested, and they drove the business into the ground while protecting their own accomplishments rather than raising a generation to challenge their record.

And there were only a handful of guys between the eighty-somethings and the thirty-somethings who went on to helm films in those days like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* and on and on.

So, as I said, I went seeking mentor. And I found two.

The first was a guy named Glen Keane. Glen is the son of Bill Keane of *Family Circus*. He went to Cal Arts to be a painter and they miss-matriculated him into the animation program. Glen went there to be a painter, and he became probably the greatest animator of his generation. He took me under his wing.

On Fridays, we would review portfolios of artists who wanted to join the burgeoning studio. I had studied Renaissance Art and theatre design studies, so I had the basics, but it was Glen who said, "Sit by me and we'll flip through portfolios together." And over a year or two, I learned about line and form, things not just about animation, but about color and value, and art in general. I learned it by sitting with him at these various portfolios. He taught me what to look for.

And then he invited me to sit with him while he would draw. And keep in mind an animator is drawing 24 drawings per second of animation. It's a tedious, long process. But sitting with him, I got to understand both his process and the population of artists that I was intended to be leading. He gave me the experience to see how it was done. I couldn't do it myself, but he taught me how to do it.

And he would narrate this process for me so that it lived inside of me. He wasn't an elder. He was a peer. We were precisely the same age.

With my first film under my belt, I actually went out and hired my second mentor.

His name was Joe Grant. Joe actually worked on *Snow White*. He was the head story man on *Fantasia*. He created *Dumbo*. Lady, of *Lady and the Tramp*, was his dog. He was referred to by *Time* magazine as the next Walt Disney while Walt Disney was out of the country making a film. He was promptly thrown out of Disney Studios. Thrown out, as he would have said, on his keister in the 1940s and didn't return. Walt, just as he had trained the Nine Old Men, was great at many things. But nurturing talent to replace himself was not one of them. And Joe became my animation whisperer. Not a film got made during our era without Joe's imprint on it, and he came back to us when he was over 80 years old and stayed until he was 93 and passed at his home desk.

He would stroll into my office, without an appointment and without regard to who was in there, and throw a drawing on my desk. He wanted me to benefit from what he had learned in his time, and he regretted that the culture that gave rise to this revival of Disney Animation that didn't do anything to prepare us, and he made it his mission to do so. He hated talking about yesterday, but he was happy to use his extensive yesterdays to get us into tomorrow. And without resentment or fear that we might do something better or more lasting or with a deeper reach. He gave us this gift.

That is a mentor.

I had two of them at animation, in fact. A peer and a legend. I couldn't have done any of it without them. They weren't a bonus, they were essential.

But it was not a culture of mentorship. And we (with my colleague Peter Schneider, who really built this animation company up) had to formalize mentorship. We had to teach mentoring. We had to begin a mentoring program so that we could play catch-up and get our work done.

And eventually it worked. But it wasn't a given.

Now, is it in our nature to do this? In the theatre, obviously. You know that this is part of us. But is the pool of mentees that we all touch large enough and diverse enough? That troubles me.

What is it about this nature to lean towards a strong tradition of mentorship in the theatre?

And how, for most of us born before 1960, is this landscape of mentorship shifting even in our business? We were all raised in a school of apprenticeship, and now we work with young people who are in the program of “immediate progress”. Is it different for artists and art-makers in our time? And how has this dynamic changed? And how might we, and by extension those we know, change it?

One of the brightest members of the Disney Theatrical team in New York said to me when I told her that I was coming here to make a few remarks about mentorship, she said, “Well you know it all comes down to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.”

“What???” I replied.

“Through others we become ourselves.”

Now I had no idea that Vygotsky was my guide, but through others, I have become myself. And I'm sure many of you have shared this experience. As a boy, I didn't know what a mentor was nor would I have ever asked for one. But they appeared, they came to me. And in some cases, I, by their own definition, surpassed their achievements. But nothing for me would have happened without them. And for me there have been some remarkable unlikely consequences of this mentorship. And I'd like to share some of these examples of theatrical mentorship with you and then talk a little bit about my own commitment to it.

The aforementioned Kathy Kram of Boston University says there are four phases of mentorship:

Initiation

Cultivation

Separation

Re-definition

My first proper mentor was actually an actor turned director who by virtue of his job working for the city that I grew up in outside San Francisco, had to, like many of you, produce his own work. He needed help; I wanted to learn. He leaned on me and I delivered for him. And I was in high school.

He literally taught me every single thing he knew. And I use what he taught me every day. Still. He was my prime. He was my start.

And we went through all of the stages of mentorship that I just described. But in fairness, in this relationship, I just became a mini-him. Or was a mini-him, and he saw that in himself. He selected me, he picked me, because I was like him. That may be a failure in the mentorship

structure, to see yourself in someone and then pull along. Because from that, we will not expand. We will not reach another group.

And then there was John Cauble. And I think that was my most formal mentorship relationship that I've had.

John was, obviously, a teacher (you all, or most of you, knew him). He had a fantastic passion for raising generations of theatre-makers. He was so committed. His whole life was spent to raise a generation. He loved students, which makes me think about that “shout loudly with your optimism and keep quiet with your cynicism” approach to mentorship. He was the most encouraging person I had ever met by the time I threw myself at him at age 21. And he fit two of the most essential aspects of mentorship.

He was an individual with expertise who could develop a mentee. Now, that's the easy part for all of us. But he was also a sponsor, using social capital on someone else's behalf. John got UCLA to hire me, immediately after I graduated, to be a carpenter of all things. And then, to simultaneously run sound for the University's Resident Theatre Company. It was an Equity Guest Artist summer program that John had started on the UCLA campus. It was my first genuinely professional gig and it started the day after Commencement.

I knew nothing (nothing!) about running sound. But he wanted me to get a credit working on something real.

And he knew that my big goal was to get a job as a production assistant at The Mark Taper Forum. Somehow, I knew that if I worked for Gordon Davidson, I'd be able to someday run my own theatre company. I do not know why. I don't even know, pre-internet, why I even knew so much about Gordon Davidson. But I knew that if I threw myself, somehow, into the Taper, that I could get somewhere.

After spending that summer after graduation with a tool belt on by day and my finger on the tape player at night, the season ended, and we had to strike the set and clear the theatre before the incoming students were coming in the Fall. And that night of the strike, going into the wee hours as you all do all the time, I was carrying a giant piece of lumber through a hallway past a payphone. It was near midnight, and the payphone began to ring. And I answered the payphone and it was a former graduate of UCLA who knew that we were striking the set and that there would be a lot of unemployed people. He said he was working at the Mark Taper Forum and needed a driver for Joseph Chaikin who was coming to LA for two weeks to do *Tongues and Savage/Love* at the Taper Lab, and would I like to do it.

I had a beat-up Volkswagen with no seat belts, I was certainly qualified. So, I took the job on the spot. I started as Joe's driver (Joe Chaikin, for those of you who knew him, he was extraordinary). I had been raised at UCLA in the 70s so I knew more about Jerry Herman than Joe Chaikin, so he had a lot of teaching to do over our two weeks together. And it became a very intimate relationship between the two of us.

At the end of it, Joe turned to Gordon and said, “You should give this kid a job.” And the next day, I was the PA on the Mainstage at the Mark Taper Forum.

That was John Cauble. Literally putting me in the path of the telephone that was going to ring. And that was the unlikely consequence of his mentorship in my life.

I ended up being associated with the Mark Taper Forum for five years. And, in fact, I have never gotten a job in the theatre or the arts at all that wasn't connected either to that phone call or John's continued intervention. I should never have even printed a CV or a resume, because I've never gotten a job with one. It has always been a connect the dots to John and the Taper back to John. While I was ensconced at the Taper as a production assistant, then assistant stage manager, then program coordinator etc. etc., there was a period where the work was mostly on the weekends, and John called and asked what I knew about The Ballet.

And I said, “Nothing.”

He said, “Good. I want you to meet another former student who is the general manager of The Los Angeles Ballet. He needs a hand and you need to learn how to run a small non-profit.” John, again. “You'll clean toilets, you'll handle payroll, and you'll manage the school and anything else they need.”

There was no job interview. I just turned up to work as the assistant manager of the Los Angeles Ballet.

And I learned and I learned and I learned. And John knew that he was sending me there, as sponsor, he was putting me literally in harm's way. And I needed to figure out how to prevent that from happening with a company that was going bankrupt. And, you see, there could be no better experience. Also, the unlikely consequence of his mentorship is that I met my husband who was a ballet dancer and we just celebrated our 35th anniversary. I give John credit for that too. Now, when the Ballet no longer could pay me, I was ready to go back to The Taper in a bigger role. And in so doing got assigned by the Taper to be on staff for the Olympic Arts Festival of the 1984 Olympics.

And there I met my next great mentor. The insane former president of Cal Arts, former dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia, Robert J. Fitzpatrick. If some of you know him, you realize I've underplayed the insanity part.

Bob was simply the most demanding person I had ever worked for. And after working on the '84 Olympics, I became his associate director for the ongoing Los Angeles Festival of the Arts. Because he assumed everything was possible, I assumed everything was possible. He believed in it, so I believed in it. And in my mid-twenties, I was suddenly driving Peter Brook all over Los Angeles looking for a venue in which we could put *The Mahabharata*. I even spent a night camped out with ranger approval in Griffith Park (you never want to do this), because Peter said, “At four in the morning, what happens in the park?” And I had to report to him, “Actually at four in the morning, a squadron of police helicopters fly right over the big quarry in

the park that would match the quarry in Avignon where we had all seen the first production of *The Mahabharata*.” And then we found an indoor venue for it. If you've met Peter, no one has ever said no to Peter Brook.

And through this festival I was able to go to Quebec City to see a scrappy little group of performers that you now know as Cirque du Soleil. We did a deal in the course of a weekend and I put them in a parking lot in Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles. I also got to meet and work with John Cage and create his 75th birthday celebration, which was a week-long series of concerts. In my twenties. Because Bob Fitzpatrick thought I could.

His technique of mentorship was to throw me into the deep end and not listen for sounds of drowning. And it couldn't have been more perfect.

These extraordinary forces in my life, my first mentor as a high school student, our beloved John Cauble, Gordon Davidson who taught me mostly by example and by love, and Bob Fitzpatrick who mentored with seeming almost cruelty— these were the perfect combination and made everything possible for me.

And without them I am nothing. So what do I do now?

As William said at the top, I teach at Columbia. The reason I teach at Columbia is because I want to meet students in the hopes of finding some bright light. I feel a little bit like Willy Wonka looking for Charlie Bucket. One of these kids is going to be the one.

And as all of you in academia know, these bright lights are very very rare. And you have spent your lives looking for them, and when you do find them, nothing is really more thrilling.

I've picked a few and I have them scattered around different projects on Broadway. And I'm so proud of them.

I spent seven years as an official mentor with Wendy Wasserstein's Open Doors program. You may not know what this is. William's dear friend Wendy created a program before she passed whereby prominent people on Broadway are assigned eight kids, each of us mentors, there are seventeen of us, we're assigned eight kids. And my kids are always economically disadvantaged kids of color who have never met anyone like me or frankly like most of you. And we go to the theatre eight times a year together. We see a show, we have a dialogue about it over really bad pizza. And then they write an essay, and then I read the essays and then I comment to them about it. And over the course of the year, we form a relationship. I learn from them, they learn from me. I choose to spend my final night taking them all to dinner at a restaurant in a private room. We learn what napkins do, which fork is which, which glass is which, which plate is which, and we learn how to order off a menu. I do this because these kids have never been given the cultural capital to even enter your world. And you know this.

Who is reaching out to them? This program is a huge piece of my life. A recent study that my aforementioned Vygotsky colleague handed me makes it abundantly clear that it is “better to be rich and mediocre than poor and bright” when it comes to career advancement.

I'm going to argue that mentorship is the only way to reach them. And that we need to somehow shift this dynamic.

Through this program, there are a number of kids who use me as a touchstone. And like you, I get the emails, usually when they've gone off to college before their first final—they just want someone who isn't their mom or dad to tell them that they can do it. And particularly with my Open Doors kids, I don't think I've had one whose parents went to college. And I have one kid who lived in a one- room apartment in the Bronx with his mom and his sister. His dad had children by three different women in New York (he has siblings spread all over) before he was deported. And this kid is sharp as a tack. But if he didn't have someone to literally take him out to eat and spend time with him and help him go to France for the summer, he would not have the cultural capital to be at Waterbury in Vermont where he is right now (feeling very alone on a very white campus). But the mentorship goes so far beyond academic; it's really about confidence and about how someone's going to be there as a backstop. And I know, like all of you know, that you have to wait for them. They don't want you to crawl all over them. You just have to be their stalwart. It might be two months, it might be six months, before that reach comes.

I know you all know Shakespeare's second sonnet.

This line haunts me:

This were to be new made when thou art old.
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it
cold.

And that is what we get to do as the unlikely consequence of mentorship.

As I mentioned, I met my husband Matthew when John got me the job at The Los Angeles Ballet.

So about ten years later, I'm about to start my second picture at Disney and Matt says, "What's it about?" And I said, "Well, it's this thing with lions." And he said, "Well, what do they do?" And I said, "it's only a four-page treatment, so right now they don't do much." And Matthew said, "Well, the lions better sing." And I said, "Matt, this isn't a fairy tale. They don't sing." And he said, "The characters sing in the Disney hits, and if you want it to be a hit those lions have to sing."

So, I go back to the studio, I tell Jeffrey Katzenberg who was running the studio at the time. And he says, "Well, if you want to try it, here's enough rope to hang yourself." So I went and I hired Tim Rice as a lyricist and we went on a hunt to find a songwriter. Needless to say, we eventually did find someone who had had some success before that.

And the film became a hit. Matt was right. They did need to sing. Then a few years later I called my pal Julie Taymor and said, "What about adapting *The Lion King* for the stage?" We added more music, they sang more and 90 million people have seen *The Lion King* around the world. And I think John Cauble should probably get a bit of credit for that too.

These are the unlikely consequences of mentorship and sponsorship.

So, what am I thinking today?

I'm thinking we need to shepherd the fiercest generation in contemporary history. We need to use all of our creative muscle and social capital to leave behind us theatre-makers who can continue to transform narrative, break ground, shape a dialogue and eclipse anything that we have done. And we need to advocate that our friends in every field do this.

We need to reach out to corners where people think they're ignored and bring them in. Whether it's into our theater, or whether it's into our neighbor's business. But if we do not all take part one by one, and all of our friends, in teaching the mentorship that we have all been raised in, I fear the worst.

Boy Scouting (yes, I was a Boy Scout) taught me to leave a campsite cleaner than I found it. And now I want to leave our world smarter than I found it with mentees from all of us.

Thank you.