

## Working with and Learning from Eminent Mentors

Srivi Kalyan. April 5, 2013

My friend, Lalitha Sridhar sent in a beautiful message when I started teaching her daughter,

“We are blessed when good teachers happen in our lives...truly.”

I have been blessed many times over to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from so many eminent mentors across my life, who have trusted my thinking and valued my spirit, who have nurtured my ideas and encouraged me to grow. And now as the number of my own students grow and I am constantly wondering how to respond to the richness of their minds, ideas and passion in the field, I reflect back on my own mentors over the years. As more and more of my students talk to me about mentorship and their own need for what I believe is a guide to their spirits, I feel deeply for the gaps they feel in finding the right mentors for themselves. I hope this will be a thought provoking article for my students and others to find their own mentors over time. This list is detailed and yet does not cover all the people who fill my heart and soul. I could write an entire book talking about every one of my teachers. For the purpose of this article, I have written only about those who have contributed to very critical shifts in my thinking and work. I have also tried to provide links to people/ organizations wherever possible for those of you interested in knowing more about them and their work.

How do we find our mentors and why do we choose them? These are tough questions to ask of ourselves. Here are a set of people

that I am writing about, but there are so many more who have touched my life. In these people, however I have found moments and energies that were aligned. With them, I have found connections that have eluded me in several others. And in finding these mentors, there are years of hard work that I have spent in reflecting and understanding my own work, practicing everyday and learning with integrity and commitment. It is only as we raise our own awareness about ourselves and our work that we can even recognize a mentor when one comes by our lives. And for that awareness, we must put in several years of hard work and sustained reflection.

It is not that our mentors will spend hours with us teaching us things from scratch. It is that they exist and they have done remarkable work and in watching them, we learn. If we are lucky, they will also be able to share their valuable time with us. Even as we grow and move on, their energies and faith in us will continue to guide us through difficult moments all through our life. And even as they are our mentors, our opinions, thoughts, and ideas will change over time, may not always align, and we will grow in our own respective directions. And these are all important things to understand and remember.

When you go to a mentor, be prepared with what you want them to help you with. Work with yourself before reaching out to them, because every minute of their time and yours is precious. No one can guide you any further than you yourself are willing to be guided. I believe each person can be an eminent mentor to another one across the journey of their life. And in both teaching and learning, we are touched by compassion and nurturance.

And this article I write

To Miss Auntie Faylene, my Kindergarten teacher, who lives in my memories as the kindest, most beautiful, passionate teacher and whose warmth, love and gentleness continue to guide me as I work with children. For the trust she placed in me, and her ability to see the wealth of what I could do in the years to come. For the gifts she gave me that I continue to safeguard and cherish when I left the school after UKG, at 5 years. I am still trying to trace her, so that I can thank her. She taught at Mount Carmel Convent, Ahmedabad. I was there from 1983-85. Anyone who remembers her or knows where she lives, do get in touch with me.

My teachers in first grade at Maharishi Vidya Mandir, Hosur, who gently gave me leadership roles, responsibilities that were far beyond my reach as a five year old, but who again placed in me immense trust to rise and rise yet again, giving me the opportunity to learn how to solve problems, listen to others, teach, respond with care and build classroom cultures as a class leader. I especially remember our principal, a man with a remarkable vision, who was building a school in simple thatched roof structures.

My teachers from 2-7<sup>th</sup> grade at [Shri B.S. Mootha](#), Chennai, who brought extraordinary passion, and hard work to every class. It is here that I blossomed in the arts, as we had an exceptional integrated arts program and we were given excellent opportunities to create art, choreograph dances, put music performances together, act, and expected to deliver high quality work. Without these formative years with these incredibly talented, warm, loving and strict teachers, I would not have inculcated the strong work ethics and passion for excellence that I have today.

My dance teachers, Mrs Chandrakala Jagannathan and late Mrs. Shuba Kalyan, without whom, I would not have found the creative lines of my visual arts.

My teachers from 8-12<sup>th</sup> grade at [Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan](#), who taught us with dedication, and incredible passion and as I went back to teach for a few weeks, I marvel at them for the amount of effort and hard work they put into every single day to make our lives richer and the love and affection they still hold in their hearts for every student they have taught. And here amidst brilliant exposure to international writing contests, leadership roles through the years to being the school pupil leader in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I learnt much about working with others, writing and practice. Through watching and observing my teachers, principal Mrs. Hamsa Ramdas and [Dr.Mrs. Y.G.Parthasarathy](#), I learnt much about leadership, tenacity and hard work. Even as it would be very difficult to single out any one teacher as special, since every one of them has gifted so much to me, I would like to mention Mrs. Annapurna. In grade 8, when I joined PSBB, she saw my work and told me, that I knew how to create art, and did not have to learn from anyone. I just had to keep working and learning from myself. In that, she freed me of years of searching and led me back to myself.

My undergrad and post grad, five years at Stella Maris College, Chennai, my formative years in the visual arts, design and art history. In these lecturers, I found a remarkable wealth of knowledge and expertise, once again an exceptional commitment to young women and the field of arts. Often, as I go back and teach the students now, I feel deeply for my teachers. These teachers have a wealth that I believe students do not often understand how to use, learn from and take forward. Once again, each of these teachers has made a remarkable difference to my

life. To mention specifically I owe a great deal to [Dr. Ramaa Narayanan](#), who guided me in my Master's thesis on a tough and complex area of research that I had chosen, [Dr. Alamelu N](#), who guided me in my undergraduate project for designing children's books, media and other resources. It is this very project that was my first step to building Fooniferse, and today, it is a very living, growing organization. [Dr. Margaret Thomas](#), who was my graphic design teacher in masters and from her, I have learnt excellent principles of design, approach to design, an uncompromising attitude towards creating good design and my critical understanding of space and form in design. [Dr. Ashrafi S.Bhagat](#) helped me expand my thinking in modern Indian art and the essence of understanding its context in building conversations around Indian arts. [Mangai](#), my theatre teacher, from whom I have learnt the power of an expressive body and many insights on the strength of being a woman! And to all the others, that I have not mentioned here in detail, [Sister Angel Mary](#), [Dr. Lakshmi Priya Daniel](#), [Janaki](#), [Dr. Swapna Satish](#), [Dr. Anne Samuel](#), [Rajny Krishnan](#), [Dr. Sumithra Dawson](#), [Ms. Mallika Madhavan](#), [Dr. Razia Tony](#), I owe much in helping me craft my thinking, insights, art, design skills and quality work.

My year of working at Amber Valley Residential School, Chikmagalur – here I met, some of my best mentors in the field of education, who trusted greatly, my work as a teacher, encouraged me to continue building my knowledge and skills and guided me through my work, helping me craft programs, class room sessions, and ideas for creating teaching-learning material with much depth and intensity.

Dr. Roxy Pestello, Jayshree Oza and Sheba Maini along with several other teachers especially Amulya Malaki and Nalini Oliver

taught me a lot about classroom teaching, innovation and about myself.

[Dr. Roxy Pestello](#), when I quit teaching at the school the first year, told me in very clear terms, that I may be a wonderful designer and artist, but my calling was in education, and that I had to follow it. With his guidance and several conversations over the years, his continued belief in my work, I have grown much as a teacher.

[Jayshree Oza](#) founder and former director of CEMD(scroll down the link for interview) will always be close to my heart. In her, I found a teacher that I had long been searching for.

[Geeta Dharmarajan](#), founder and executive director of Katha, brought to me the gift of seeing my first illustrated book in print. She recognized the intellectual nature of my thinking, and in sharing her vision and ideas for Katha, and in the year I worked as a workshop consultant with them, and in the two other books I illustrated for Katha, she taught me much about deepening my perception of illustrations in the larger context of Indian publishing.

[Dr. Anita Rampal](#), Dean, Department of Education, Delhi University, who worked closely with me, in illustrating for math textbooks from grades 2-5, giving me my first break in educational design. She has over the years taught me much, made me think deeper about the Indian education system and the kinds of changes that I can build and contribute to within and beyond the system.

My masters at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge was a year of expanding my thoughts, deepening them and building them into visible work material. My mentors here with

their rich field experience, based in cultures of research and excellence simply changed my life. Here, I found the conversations, the meaning-making processes and the richness of thinking in arts and media education, the deepening of cultures of thinking, role models and learning about mentorship, warmth and friendship with my professors that I had been seeking for a long time. Their wisdom, openness and guidance to abundant wealth of resources and knowledge continue to nurture me in many ways.

[Prof. Steve Seidel](#), Prof. Joe Blatt, Dr. Tina Grotzer, Dr. Shari Tishman, Dr. Veronica Mansilla, Dr. David Docktermann, [Dr. David Kahle](#) and all the exceptional teaching assistants have encouraged me, taught me much and pushed me to discover the ever-expanding limits of my own creativity. To [Radhika Rao](#), one of our teaching assistants, and a dear friend, I owe much.

[Steve](#), who is one of the most wonderful mentors that I have met, has taught me to look at student work with such great depth and passion and to see so much in them. I have also found much resonance with his language and his ability to 'wonder' at life. And with him, our conversations on silence and nurturing silence will remain my favorite.

[Tina](#), who has been there as a friend and a guide during difficult moments, engaging deeply in my writings and works and giving me critical feedback, her openness in sharing emotions and thoughts with such integrity will be one of my best learning experiences to take forward to my own students.

[Joe](#), in whose classes, I could bring alive my passion for design and media and integrate my interests in art education with media education, I have learnt a great lot about narrating stories through

media, the concept of time management and storytelling in media, and to him, I owe my five years with Sesame Workshop India, two as creative director, and three as consultant.

[Veronica](#) with whom I worked as a designer for the website on the interdisciplinary studies project, I learnt a great deal about bringing interdisciplinary thinking and best approaches to creating curriculums, working within a global context.

[Shari Tishman](#) and her work in thinking cultures that first attracted me to apply to Harvard and my time with her, where she pushed me to deepen my research skills, will always be a powerful turning point in my work.

[Dock's](#) classes were fun and deeply engaging. He taught me to be lighthearted in very stressful moments of educational design that I have faced over the years.

David Kahle's classes on information design for web based learning, is just beginning to grow in my work and the potential of what I began thinking about in his classes is just incredible.

Others from my years of working, colleagues at Sesame workshop India, each one of them with their wealth of ideas and knowledge from different fields, Heer Chokshi, Aditi Mitra, Priyanka Zutshi, Sagorika Kar, Deepika Singh, Ira Joshi, and others.

[Sashwati Banerjee](#), executive director of SWI who gave us creative freedom, letting us explore much, creating a space for open dialogue and discussion and let me nurture my vision for my own organization teaching me invaluable skills in the two years I worked with her.



And in recent years,

Mr. Nagabushanam, 'Buushy', my friend's father and an expert in consulting for organization building for his wonderful advice in helping me build up the profile for Fooniferse and all the hard questions he made me ask myself about what I wanted for the company and where I wanted to go personally.

[Valli Subbiah](#), founder and principal of [Kids Central](#), with her openness to discussing ideas of entrepreneurship, creative teaching, setting standards of excellence in India.

Marc and Anne from Auroville, for their great friendship, immersion in Kabir's poetry and expansion of so many ideas, hearts and souls; for their love for nature. For a remarkable experience of working together!

[Lalitha Sridhar](#), Senior Journalist and friend, who has gifted me 'many wisdoms' in learning to observe myself in relationship, in writing, and in taking care of myself. Her integrity, passion and clarity of thought have been source of great healing and growth.

[Shekar Dattatri](#), wildlife filmmaker and Conservationist, who has given me much to learn from about nature, environment conservation and teaching about the environment to children. His work and his openness of sharing, reaching out and raising a strong voice for conservation, and willingness to discuss ideas have opened a great wealth of learning experiences for me.

[Mr. A.V. Ilango](#), eminent artist and arts educator, who has for the last 9 years, trusted my work, encouraged me, given me breaks in illustration, teaching, doing workshops when I came back to Chennai after 5 years, supporting my work in arts education and now in co-authoring his book, I owe much. And with his intuitive

spirit, he has always seen the many faces of my soul, and guided me to keep them alive through my life and my work.

My incredible network of friends, who have been mentors and supporters at different points of time, guiding me through rough patches, holding me, helping me move forward!

My students who have shared much wisdom, joy and love with me!

[My parents](#) and my [sister](#), who will always be my first teachers, in whom I found the passion for teaching and learning, and who continue to be my strongest mentors and support network. It is the teaching methodologies of my parents, their love and passion to open the mysteries of our minds and spirits to ourselves that I take to my classrooms and my design products today. Even as I have deepened my learning from several other experiences and mentors, the seed and years of tender care in nurturing me, will always be the greatest gift from my parents.

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