

Great Leap Forward: A Mentoring Journey

Anne Caldwell

Anne Caldwell is a writer and literature development specialist who currently works as Professional Development Manager for the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) and the National Association for Literature Development (NALD). She is launching her first poetry pamphlet collection in the autumn with Happenstance Press, and is involved in writing and editing a book of creative non-fiction on the theme of mothers and daughters with Route Publishers. She organises training, mentoring, coaching and one to one sessions as part of her current work as well as running workshops in schools, libraries and community settings.



Introduction and context

Mentor – a definition:

'In Greek mythology, Mentor was the son of Alcumus and, in his old age, a friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he placed Mentor in charge of his son, Telemachus, and of his palace. Today mentors provide their expertise to less experienced individuals in order to help them advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks.' (Wikipedia)

In 2006/7, I took part in the Arts Council's Invigorate initiative which encouraged individual artists to apply for funding under the banner Space, Time, Money. The project was particularly aimed at mid-career artists who wanted to take some time to examine an aspect of their work or reflect on their work life so far in order to develop their future career path. The first stage of this process was to put together a Grants for the Arts Application proposing what I wished to concentrate on for the life of the nine-month project.

At present, I work freelance and part time for both NALD (National Association for Literature Development and NAWE (National Association of Writers in Education) as a Professional Development Manager, organising training, mentoring, residencies and career development projects for writers and literature activists. The rest of the time I work as a poet, and run a company called Sources that specialises in linking literature and new media. A challenge therefore for me (which resonates with other writers who juggle income streams) was to prioritise areas of work and look at how to develop them to the best of my ability.

The balance between my work as a writer and literature development specialist had become out of kilter in the last few years. I thoroughly enjoy supporting the careers of others but in a typically female fashion, I had neglected my own publishing track record and specialised in becoming an expert facilitator of others.

I realised that in order to develop as a poet in my own right it was time to address this imbalance and take some time out to develop a substantial body of work. At present this writing seemed scattered throughout the house, in varying states of readiness for publication, and I felt detached from shaping it into a body of work. I did have a track record in publishing material both in magazines and anthologies but a career break to have a child and my other income streams had meant this publishing record was uneven and needed development.

The project

I took part in two very different styles of mentoring as part of this Time Space Money project alongside other initiatives such as research in Europe and Canada, taking time to write and perform, and a multi-art form Laboratory week where I worked alongside artists from different disciplines. I decided to include mentoring in this Grants for the Arts Application because I identified that I have a tendency to work very much on my own, without a large amount of support. If I wanted to make a major change in direction and the scope of my working life, I thought that mentoring would help facilitate that change.

The first mentoring scheme I applied for was based in Canada at The Banff Centre and was called the Wired Writing Scheme. It involved visiting the Banff Centre for two weeks in October 2006 and then working on line with a writing mentor called Marilyn Dumont until April 2007. The scheme was designed for busy people who could not take the time to attend Banff's other professional development schemes which involve a much longer stay at the centre.

About the Banff Centre:

For over 70 years, The Banff Centre has provided professional career development and lifelong learning for artists and cultural leaders in performing, literary, new media, and visual arts. Work is showcased throughout the year in public concerts, exhibitions, and events, culminating in the Banff Summer Arts Festival.



Tunnel Mountain with Wired Program Participants

Photo by Ross Belot

Mentoring online

Marilyn Dumont was an exceptionally interesting poet to work with. She is from a French/Native American background (Métis) and her work is political, lyrical, and experimental in form. I loved the way she explores the territory between landscapes, cultures and individuals.

The first stage of our mentoring relationship involved meeting face to face both on a one to one basis and with a small group of three other writers whilst I spent time at The Banff Centre. Before meeting, Marilyn asked me to show her a draft collection of work. I had an assorted collection of sixty poems at varying stages of completion to share with her at the beginning of our journey together and I must admit I felt very nervous at handing this over to a respected Canadian poet who I had only just met.

An example of the work of Marilyn Dumont:

Not just a platform for my dance

this land is not
just a place to set my house my car my fence

this land is not
just a plot to bury my dead my seed

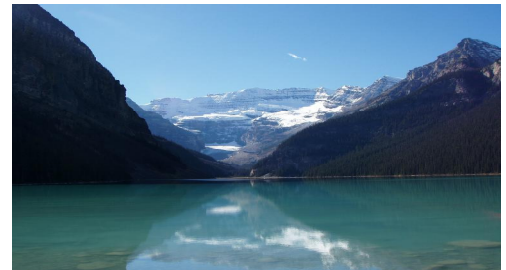
this land is
my tongue my eyes my mouth

this headstrong grass and relenting willow
these flat-footed fields and applauding leaves
these frank winds and electric sky

are my prayer
they are my medicine
and they become my song

this land is not
just a platform for my dance.

Marilyn Dumont
A Really Good Brown Girl, Brick Books, 1996



Lake Louise, near Banff, Canada

Our first meeting

Diary extract - October 2006, Banff Centre:

I met up with Marilyn yesterday and we had a great talk about putting writing at the top of my work-list and also talked about the importance of music and cadences in poetry. I printed out my whole manuscript and tried to get it into some sort of order. I think she likes my work. A good start.

Even though we were from very different backgrounds, Marilyn and I managed to find common ground and she liked the strong sense of voice in my work which I think is an essential starting point for a good writing/mentoring relationship. In preparation for the first meeting, Marilyn had asked me to describe my life in reading so far, and where I am up to with my writing.

In our first meeting we looked together at my poetry's overall themes, and picked out poems that were weak or needed more attention. She came up with a fascinating perspective on my poetry which I think I would never have seen myself, being too close to the work:

Quote from Marilyn:

'You are able to identify the sound of broken things; bones, bodies, minds, dreams. Your language is precise and you discover the right vowels for tenderness, disappointment and clarity. I hear your voice when I read your work and the tone is compassionate, frank and funny, but most of all wise; aware of our human shining and dullness.'

I think the only drawback in this first meeting is that Marilyn was perhaps too kind, and very gentle in her approach. But I am quite a hard taskmaster and it was refreshing to get some support and personal interest. I rushed back to my hotel room and began to lay the whole draft collection all over the floor and bed to see if I could shape it further and explore themes within the work.

The online mentoring relationship

I think the strength of the Banff approach to mentoring lies in the fact that a group of 22 writers and their mentors work together for two weeks in a very intensive residential setting before beginning the on-line part of the programme. This gives the email and group discussions a grounding, and a sense of a personal voice that must be difficult to generate without this start. Over the course of the next six months I had access to working with Marilyn for up to 4 hrs per fortnight and a set of deadlines to submit work from this draft collection and new material to her for comment.

We were given guidelines about

- not sending 'green work' i.e. material that is unfinished
- what to do in case of illness or need to take a break
- technical problems with the net, etc. who to contact
- timeframes
- amount of work to send and not to set an impossible challenge

I was given training in Microsoft Word's editing programme and how to take part in the on line discussion forum that ran alongside the mentoring scheme.

Marilyn and I began a very fruitful relationship that managed to critically examine at least thirty individual poems. An example of Marilyn's comments on my work can be seen in the appendix to this article.

We also talked about where I might submit work to in the UK and in Canada and my future career goals as a writer. Marilyn herself had had two collections published in Canada and was struggling to

place a third and I realised that the trajectory of a poet's career does not go in a straightforward progression. She was also juggling teaching, residencies, writing and work in higher education. I knew this, but it took a close relationship with a mentor to bring some of this knowledge to the forefront.

The ending of the professional relationship

The Wired Writing Programme came to a close in April 2007 and Marilyn and I finished the close working relationship that we had built up over that time. I now had a body of work that I was happy with submitting to publishers as a first collection, and a substantial amount of new work to develop further. I had reached the point where I did not always agree with Marilyn's editorial comments on my work which showed a maturing in our critical relationship. I also felt that my skills as a poet had taken a leap forward as I was no longer writing from a particularly autobiographical viewpoint, beginning to include more contemporary events in my work and exploring other characters' voices. I had also developed a strong interest in prose poetry through reading Marilyn's own work and those of other Canadian writers.

The following month, a piece of prose poetry that I had written won a competition in Yorkshire judged by Joolz Denby: (the first prize was a chocolate shoe!!) It was described by her as 'a lovely short narrative, compact, rounded, dark in places yet with a hint of humour and a nice twist on an old tale'.

Glass Slipper

Would you cut off your toes for the love of a prince? Slice through sinew, hear that knuckle-splitting crunch of the kitchen knife, use your whole weight, nearly pass out? Would you squeeze this stump into glass, watch it fill with blood like a donor's syringe, smell red darkening, congealing around your instep?

And the prince? What would he make of your ample hips, your outsize nose, your huge heart pinned on the bodice of your pantomime gown?

You are good for a laugh or a pint. You're one of the boys, a 'strapping Yorkshire lass', they say, when they're being kind.

He's no match for you really. A foppish sort of chap. He's got a look of in-breeding about him: sallow complexion and an irritating tendency to toss his hair. So whilst the rest of this town swoons with celebrity stars in their eyes, waiting for the knock, that butler with the slipper smirking on its blue velvet cushion: Resist. Let your so-called sisters scratch each others' eyes out. Pamper yourself with a stiff drink. Light a cigar. Five little pinkies. Pad each one with cotton wool. Paint your toenails crimson.

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I don't think I would have developed my work to this standard without the close scrutiny on my mentor and the chance to explore and experiment with new voices and styles of work.

Advantages and disadvantages of working online

Advantages:

The Banff Programme is in its seventh year and is well-structured and coordinated by professional writers who have a track record in their own field. Therefore, the amount of time allocated to the mentoring relationship and its structure was clearly explained and ran to a tested formula. It also enabled me to work with an international writer from a different culture and country and test the boundaries of my own subject matter and styles.

Disadvantages:

It was difficult at times not being able to meet up on a face to face basis and question some of the written comments on my work. I think the scheme fizzled out a little towards the end and it would have been great to have met up and celebrated achievements so far. I had not been involved in choosing my mentor and so it was pot luck whether we would work well together. On this occasion I think we did but talking to other writers who took part in the scheme showed me that the value of this very intense relationship rests as much with the compatibility of people as with the standard of critical feedback and wider support given as part of any scheme.

Conclusions on Banff Centre project

Using Microsoft word's editing programme on line meant that feedback on individual pieces of work was concise, productive and formed part of a dialogue with my mentor. Maybe this would have worked equally well by email or post, but we were able to communicate internationally and very quickly. The discussion forum aspect of the Banff Scheme enabled the 22 writers who took part in it to also keep in touch with each other and debate a wide range of subjects that were of interest to writers. I very much valued this aspect of the project. This would not have been possible by post or email.

The second mentoring project – UK based work

From the beginning of 2007, I set up a second mentoring project for myself in the UK to work alongside poet Jean Sprackland. This involved me issuing Jean with a contract from me and paying her directly from my Arts Council Grant.

Jean Sprackland was born and brought up in Burton-on-Trent and now lives in Southport, Merseyside. She studied English and Philosophy at the University of Kent at Canterbury and then taught for a few years before beginning to write poetry at the age of 30. She has held residencies in schools and universities and is a tutor for the Arvon Foundation. She also works in education, training and consultancy for organisations including the Poetry Society and the Poetry Archive. In 2004 she was one of the judges of the Arvon International Poetry Competition. Her first poetry collection was *Tattoos for Mothers Day* (1997), which was short listed for the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize (Best First Collection), and her second collection, *Hard Water* (2003), a



Poetry Book Society Recommendation, was short listed for the 2003 T. S. Eliot Prize and the Whitbread Poetry Award.

Here is one of my favourite poems from Jean's second collection:

Learning to Love Money

It may not be to everyone's' taste
but this girl found money delicious.
during the sermon, she'd rub the collection coin
sniff her fingers, lick them,

she'd slip the coin in her mouth
sucking very quietly and stopping
to give her mother a holy sort of smile.
All the filthy hands, the pockets,

think of the germs. But foreignness
was what the girl liked: the flavour
of other peoples' lives lived somewhere else
in unimaginable ways
(she loved the word change
and would say it in shops whenever she could.)

She brailled it with her tongue,
pressed it to the roof of her mouth
felt the brain's circuitry
arch and prickle. News from beyond.

Jean Sprackland

The aims for this mentoring relationship were different to the Banff Centre project which had involved detailed scrutiny of my first draft collection. With Jean, I aimed to focus on a wider set of issues:

- to identify key goals and aims to develop my career as a practising poet as well as development specialist
- offer me support in putting this goals into practice
- give me feedback on my current work

Choosing a mentor

I set up the mentoring to run for nine months and to meet Jean on four face to face occasions during this period (paying her a fee of £250 per meeting). I chose Jean because she was someone whose work I respected, and she has a track record in mentoring writers. She also came from a similar professional background to myself but had prioritised her writing career to great success. I knew her professionally and therefore had faith in us developing a great working relationship during this period of time.

My mentor's feedback

First Session:

'You sketched out the shape of the coming year. You are currently committed to two days regular paid work per week, plus other bits and pieces. This leaves you with two days a week for your own writing between now and July 07. However, you also mentioned three other major commitments: a visit to Europe, a cross-art form collaboration and a three-month residency with IOU theatre. This led us to talk about workload and the need to restrict further commitments so that you can make the most of this opportunity to focus on your own writing. Just say no!!

We talked about your first collection and some of the issues involved including:

- confidence
- internal blocks
- the voice of the inner critic and how to bypass it
- achieving a consistent level of quality in the work
- which poems should and should not be included
- what themes and concerns are 'legitimate' or relevant
- how to present the work to potential publishers'

Quality of the relationship

The success of this mentoring relationship for me centered around Jean's ability to listen very carefully to what I was saying, and, because of her own background, empathise with the path I was trying to follow, its challenges and trials. I hit a big psychological block about submitting a first collection and was able to get over this by talking it through with Jean. I discovered for myself that it is easier to stay on the brink of success rather than take the plunge and put your work out there for scrutiny. Being a professional woman with a track record in other areas of my work life, I was shocked at how much of a block this was and how it was tied in with a sense of identity and exposure.

Notes on a second meeting

STRATEGIES

to help achieve goals

- Confidence and clear communication to ensure that your contribution to the Creative Laboratory is given full value
- Think about possible applications for pieces of freelance work with writing time built in (e.g. to the library service in St Helens)
- Concentrate on getting more readings into the diary
- Aim to make more of your work poetry-related

ACTIONS

specific steps you intend to take

- Spend half a day per fortnight on sending out work, etc
- Keep up with networking, e.g. the writers' groups you are involved in
- Explore the possibility of having regular meetings with one other writer
- Start charging a more reasonable rate for freelance projects, aiming for less, but higher quality, work

Notes on a third meeting

'You described the huge progress you had made since our last meeting:

- you had made a selection from the poems you showed to me, and had sent this selection to three potential publishers, along with a covering letter
- you had sent some individual poems to magazines
- you had been writing new work

We talked about other publishers you would consider approaching, and other magazines you might send to. You were thoroughly enjoying the chance to spend time writing every week, and had organised a retreat for yourself and some colleagues at The Hurst (Arvon) in the summer. You were conscious of the need to keep other commitments under control in order to protect writing time. You were also thinking of further opportunities to read and perform.'

Reflections on the end of this project

I have decided to extend the mentoring relationship with Jean because I feel we have not had sufficient time to explore how to set up a set of future goals for my work and where to go next. I also really appreciate the support that this structure has provided. The Grants for the Arts project has finished, my formal relationship with Banff has come to a close and I wanted one aspect of to have a natural life span of its own, and for me to control when to stop.

So much of my freelance life is about meeting other peoples' criteria, working in partnerships and working to other agendas. The luxury of having a small slot just to focus on the more private act of writing and where it could go is something I have come to value very highly indeed.

Conclusions

As I am writing this article, I have strong interest from two publishers in my work, have performed three times in the last month and made space to write every week for approximately 8-10hrs. I remain committed to my literature development role and active working life but the balance between public and private is much better.

Mentoring has been a key to achieving this balance. I am now used to setting goals for writing and for sending work out for public consumption. Internally I see myself in a different light. I think any writer would benefit from taking part in a mentoring relationship at any stage of their career.

Taking part in an organised scheme means that you are challenged to perhaps work with someone you would not have chosen yourself. This was especially true of working internationally and I learnt about how my work may translate outside a UK environment as well as understanding the cultural context of writing in Canada. Working with Jean Sprackland was a safer option for me and one that was very supportive but I did have to set it up myself and that maybe involved more planning that many writers would want to set aside time to undertake. If you are used to working in a freelance environment or multiple projects, I would say this option would suit you well. If you want someone else to take care of the administration for you and just concentrate on the mentoring meetings, I would advise looking for a scheme to take part in.

Working in literature and developing a writing career at the same time is a juggling act and it is great to feel that someone is sharing some of the peaks and troughs with you along the way.

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Links and useful contacts

www.banffcentre.ca/programs - for details of Wired Writing Program

www.nald.org – National Association for Literature Development

www.nawe.co.uk – National Association of Writers in Education

Mentoring a guide for creative writers, Sara Maitland and Martin Goodman, literaturetraining, 2007 (available as a free download from www.literaturetraining.com and in printed format)

The Write Guide: Mentoring, Martin Goodman and Sara Maitland, New Writing Partnership, 2007 (www.newwritingnorth.com/mentoring)