

Editorial: A Good Day: Reflections on My Mentor, Mike Knight

Robert D. Mather, Editor

Sitting in my Biosocial class my first year in graduate school, Mike Knight walked into the room, locked the door, announced that his class was like an airplane and if you missed take-off you were out of luck, walked to the front of the class and said, “Today is a good day to die.” Fairly intimidating actions for any professor to take, but even more so coming from the esteemed department chair of many years. What were we in for?

I have written this editorial to provide insight into my relationship with Mike Knight. I have not written it for a general audience—I have employed a writing style full of the things that entertained Mike and I when writing together. I have written this for him.

Mentor

I was fortunate enough to have Mike as my teacher for my Professional Career Planning class during my first summer of graduate school. Mike rarely taught that course, but on this occasion a faculty member had left and he took the class. One of the first orders of business was to create a degree plan. I was in the counseling program, ready to change the world. Our assignment was to meet with him individually and tell him what our degree plan was and what we wanted to do with our lives. So, that first week I made my way to his office. Sitting behind his desk, he asked me what I wanted to do. “I kind of want to do the experimental program,” I said. “Then why are you in the counseling program?” he replied. I informed him that I had always been told that my grades weren’t good enough for an experimental program, so I had never pursued it. With a look of frustration at what I had heard from who knows where (likely older students) he said, “Give me that” and signed a little sheet of paper that changed the course of my professional career. Ordinarily, that would be influence enough over a person’s career to make them indebted. I had no idea that he was nowhere near finished with me.

At the end of my first year, he called me into his office. Actually, he called me “Golfer Bobby,” as he had nicknames for everyone. He liked to pull that nickname out periodically even years later. In his office, he said, “I have a book I want you to read.” The book was *Survival of the Prettiest* by Nancy Etcoff (1999). Fairly perceptive, I interjected, “I needed to talk to you. I need to come up with a thesis idea.” He responded with, “Ha! Yes, you do.” So, I read the book over the summer and came up with a research idea. When I came back for the autumn semester, I went to his office and told him the idea I had come up with, involving mate preferences of symmetrical and asymmetrical faces. He told me it was a great idea, and that in fact, he had plans to test that but it was a four year idea—four years away from being testable. No, he told me, I needed to get something tested quickly and get on to a doctoral program. He told me he had an idea that was ready to go and that he would like me to test for my thesis. He offered the support to launch that idea quickly and made sure that I graduated on time.

After graduation, he hired me to teach an Industrial/Organizational psychology course. Completely terrified at the idea, I was not in the business of turning down great opportunities out of fear, so I accepted. At the age of 24 in January of 2001, I launched my teaching career with full control of several classes as instructor of record with the title of Lecturer. How cool was that! I started off with the usual growing pains, and at one point during the first year I decided that I needed to dress more casual to earn the students trust (on the advice of Nicole Weber-Diehl a graduate student in the program I had just graduated from). Within a week he called me into his office and said, “You’re wearing jeans.” I told him my logic and he said, “Yeah, don’t do that. Always dress up and remind them that you are not like them, you are in charge.” To this day I can’t wear jeans to teach in, as I hear his voice quite vividly.

Teacher

Mike’s classes were nothing short of spectacular, eye-opening, personal awakenings where students’ core ideas were challenged and they learned to see the world differently. Even if they held on to their ideas, they viewed the world differently. Daily assignments were to outline the designated readings, rather than having tests. Those

outlines took a tremendous amount of time and forced me to read and understand the material—far more sadistic than tests! One semester, he decided to award a “Best of Show,” each week for the best reflection paper. Needless to say, many of us competed vigorously for the honor, which was a big hand-scrawled star on the paper and photocopies distributed to our peers. Other regular features of his classes were debates. Each class was divided into two groups and spent the day battling over a controversial topic. The more vitriolic the discourse, the more he was amused. We learned to think logically, and to do so quickly on our feet.

His intersession courses (compressed courses), one week 8 AM to 5:30 PM, were equally transforming. He developed a College Bowl format that I still use in my intersession classes. Students divided into teams and compete against each other, writing questions over the material for use in the competition. Such a public stage for competition led students and teaching assistants alike to be on top of their game, as public embarrassment was on the line for poor effort. The questions, written by students, survived an intricate selection process that served as a Darwinian metaphor in his Evolutionary Psychology courses.

All of this aside, Mike was never better than when he was in front of a class just telling a story. I have never seen a speaker who, in his prime, could so captivate a room of listeners and intellectually entertain them with his complex ideas and the stories that he used to communicate them. Over the past few years, he moved away from this type of public discourse. However, his command of ideas in front of a group, *getting to watch him think*—These can only be described as a gift that was much appreciated by any audience.

When I was a graduate student, Mike had a group called the “Psyence Society” that ultimately developed into the *Journal of Scientific Psychology* (Mather, 2008). I am honored to have followed him as Editor and look forward to continuing his work.

Colleague

It was my privilege to work with Mike as a colleague. As our department chair, he regularly listened to my ideas, made suggestions to me, and candidly shared his vision for our department, journal, etc. I visited him daily and learned greatly from his shared wisdom, though the topics in 2010 changed to include a daily report of his health. We regularly e-mailed each other throughout the day. Here is an excerpt from one of our exchanges.

Me:

As a senior professor, what do you think is the most important thing that you do in your role as a professor (excluding Chair duties)? Is it teaching content? Teaching how to think? Teaching how to do research? Actually doing research? Publishing? Preparing students to enter the workforce? Preparing students for graduate school? Mentoring students? Going to meetings? Checking your mail? Dealing with parents? Lunch with the dean? What is the most important thing that you do? What will be your legacy? What is this all for? What is the point of all of this?

Mike’s Response:

Got it!

Teaching research. Preaching science. Building programs and hiring faculty that teach research and preach science. Protect faculty from the slings and arrows of bureaucratic mud so that they can....

But mostly I just have fun being a student

I am lucky to have had him participate in my professional development at all phases of my career to this point. His influence on me as a colleague to others will always be visible.

Co-Author

When Mike was recruiting me for the Assistant Professor of Experimental Psychology position at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), we had quite a few revealing talks regarding his vision for the department and my place in it. His biggest argument for me to come to UCO and withdraw applications from post-doctoral research fellowships was that I would get to play with him. “Be a big fish in a small pond” was always advice he would give to classes. It turns out his personal advice wasn’t much different from his advice to the masses. He promised that if I came to UCO, I would get to write books and articles and answer research questions that I would never have the opportunity to pursue at a Tier 1 research university. He assured me that he had no intentions of retiring, and we could write books and articles together over things that were interesting to us—to play for 15 years or so. This was one of the biggest selling points of the job for me. We could even finish the book we had been working on!

Ah yes, the book. Mike and I co-authored the book *The Analysis of Variance: An Integrated Approach to Experimental Design*. My first introduction to the idea of the book was in autumn of 2001. Having just taught our department's introductory statistics course, I was set to teach Advanced Statistics in the spring of 2002. Mike brought me into his office and told me that I could teach the class however I wanted to, but he would love it if I would try out some material that he had. He produced three chapters for a book that he had been working on writing since the 1980's. A few months later, I read the chapters and determined that given my time constraints, I could not use them in the course that semester. He agreed that was fine and that his feelings were not hurt. Then he put the chapters away. He had been quietly working on that book for many years, hence the rather dated movie references that proliferate the text to this day.

In the autumn of 2003, Mike visited me at Texas Tech. I was in the second year of my doctoral program, and over drinks that evening in Lubbock I smiled and asked how the book was coming along. "I'm just waiting on you to help me finish it," he replied. I politely tried to encourage him to finish it up without me, but he assured me that he really did want to write the book with me. So, I agreed and the next day I awoke and wondered if it was all a bizarre dream. It was not, I discovered at 8:21 AM on Monday morning, when my e-mail's inbox received an e-mail from Mike that read, "I would love to have you work on the stats book. I just continually get burned out on it. I will send along copy to the three chapters I have so far and some ideas about where we should go from here." By 8:39 AM, he had sent a table of contents, three chapters, and a series of questions for me about my thoughts on what he had. I set out to make the book worthy of his name, to preserve his legacy and life's work. My small contribution to his legacy, I told myself. Oh, and I was going to publish a book!

The book developed quickly. I polished up what he wrote, wrote a tremendous amount on my own, and since it was a statistics book, we both spent a great deal of time working through the excruciating details of the examples. Most people don't realize what happens when a book is written, but I have files full of as much of what we wrote that is not in the book as what is included in the book. Some of the best material, in our opinion, was the stuff that he and I "got" but other people didn't "get," so it was dropped.

As the project neared completion, I told him that he needed to come up with a dedication for the book because I had mine ready. I assumed that Mike had never even thought of such a thing, so I was surprised when he told me that he had the dedication ready since the start of the book many years earlier. His dedication reads, "To Bill Frederickson, from John." Bill was his mentor, and had called him John when he was a student. Mike never used his first name, so it was his highest compliment to his mentor for all that he had done for him, hiring him back to Central Oklahoma for the position he held for so many years. I am very sorry to say that Bill passed away while the book was in the copy editing stage and Bill never knew about the dedication. Mike had wanted to surprise him with it when the book came out, not before. The book came out several months after Bill's passing with what most people believed to be a well-timed dedication to his former mentor. He had written it as a long overdue dedication to his *current* mentor.

Mike and I also wrote many articles together. A few empirical articles, but we loved writing book reviews together. Each time, we would both overtly revel in the fact that this was why I was at UCO—so we could play intellectually together. We wrote so easily together, and often discussed how in our writing we could rarely figure out who wrote what by the time it was done. There were a few things that were hallmarks of each of our styles and experiences, but mostly we could not tell the difference. We never argued about anything, but we did have one point we disagreed on in the very first article review. Titled "Psi Phi" and pronounced "Sci Fi" like the short-hand for science fiction, he had found an obscure pronunciation for what is normally pronounced "fee." It fed right into our theme and narrative, and was a fantastic hook for the review. However, he wanted to use the Greek symbols for the title. Yes, our first article together almost looked like the symbol for the singer formerly known as the singer formerly known as Prince but now just known as Prince. APA balked at the title, and I helped to broker the compromise—words and symbols. How he strong-armed APA into using the symbols in the title I'll never know, but it was quite an effort and he did not back down (and he was *very* proud of his victory!). My argument was that different software packages would not display the symbols. That was APA's argument, too. At some point, APA and myself both lost our only real arguments with Mike Knight. He had more gas left in the tank than I had thought!

Mike was fantastic at taking care in every word but still seeing the big picture in everything he wrote. I can best describe his writing process as tinkering with the ideas and wordsmithing—cobbling together the big picture of something small in the setting of the philosophy of science, all woven together into a beautiful narrative. He was the only person besides myself that I have known who valued the "create" in creativity—writing papers for the enjoyment of creating something. Creating something because he believed it needed to be created, and it wasn't it until it was just right because it wasn't it until it was it. I have written this editorial in the same fashion that he and I wrote most of our works—title, first paragraphs, last paragraphs simultaneously developed; the rest of the paper

works to get from Point A to Point B. As you can see, there are several levels of complexity to this editorial as you will soon learn about “beginnings!”

Friend

Mike was an extraordinarily impatient person—one of the most impatient patient men I have known. We regularly talked baseball over the years. We regularly watched baseball games from our homes and texted each other throughout the game. The problem was that he didn’t like commercials, so he waited about 30 minutes into the game and watched it on delay over DVR. He did that because he was impatient. I watched the games as they were played because I couldn’t stand the thought that the rest of the world was ahead of me in the game. I did that because I was impatient. So, most of the time our text messages were encrypted in such a way so that I was speaking from the future to him without tipping my hand too much and ruining his game. He texted me from the past, so we were communicating from different points in time. It was quite an amazing experience now that I think about it.

We discussed many things, most of which are best left private. I even know some secrets of Ragnarok, which I will not divulge here, out of respect for the Ragnarok illusion. As I told our students after he passed away, first and foremost, above all else, he was just a guy. He was many things to many people in many professional settings, but his essence was that he was just a guy. He was fun to hang out with and always a good, loyal friend. He genuinely cared for people and was always comforting to me in my times of need. He was also mischievous and always as ready to verbally elbow me as I was him in the way that guys do.

Beginning

From Mather (2003)

“Finally, I am grateful to my mentor, Mike Knight, for encouraging me and providing me with academic opportunities for which I will always be appreciative.”

Those words ring as true today as they did when I wrote them. In some ways, that could be the abstract for this editorial.

When I graduated with my Ph.D. from Texas Tech University, Mike wrote an e-mail to me congratulating me. Odds are that most of it could have been a form letter he sent to students under such circumstances, but the first and last parts were different—and that adds a higher level of complexity to his wisdom.

His e-mail:

Dear Dr. Mather,

Better known in a past incarnation as golfer Bobby. Yes, it seems like only a short time ago that you were a fledgling student. It has been a long journey for such a short time. But remember it is only the beginning. As my Dad used to say, “What you are I was, what I am you will be”. Really there is no end as there is no beginning, only a becoming, or as we said at Ragnarok one time, a beginning. I hope you enjoy the journey as much as I do. The academy is our golf course.

With pride and admiration,

Mike

There is comfort in reading those words, as his passion for the science of psychology is evident. Indeed, I am enjoying the journey and the academy was our golf course together. However, my parting words to my mentor, teacher, colleague, co-author, and friend: It may have been a good day for you for you to die, but it was not a good day for me.

To Mike Knight, From Golfer Bobby

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