

Women mentors are hard to find

In my various writing assignments and in my personal enrichment activities over the past few weeks, mentorship and its importance to women have come up several times.

The latest was at a SWAN (Support Women Artists Now) Day event on March 28. A panel of female theater artists and moderator Judi Jennings, executive director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women, led a conversation on women in the arts. One of the first points mentioned when the panelists were asked about the joys and challenges of being a female artist today was the lack of female mentors and the presumption of support among women artists already in the field.

When I graduated from college with the thought that I might want to pursue a

career in writing instead of in what I had spent the past four years studying, I sought out mentors. If a local or regional, black female writer's work appealed to me, if I attended the speaking engagement of a non-local, black female writer, or if her show was being produced locally and I knew she was in the audience, I would talk to her or write to her after the event. I would tell her I was interested in doing the same thing she was doing, ask about her route to getting

there and, in some cases, I would tell her I was looking for a mentor.

Why ask other black female writers? I didn't ignore female writers of other races; if I liked the work, I would ask about the work. But layers of race and gender lead to different layers of challenges, and when seeking out a mentor, I wanted advice from someone who was more likely to have faced the same challenges that I might encounter. The presumption of empathy guided my choices.

That's why I was so shocked at how mean most of the women were.

There were the e-mails that evaporated into cyberspace, even when the prospective mentor invited me to send them. And responses that said, essentially, "I'm too busy to mentor anyone and, no, I can't even think of a good book for you to read about your craft"

There was the generic advice, "Just keep writing," always accompanied by a grandmotherly, yet fake smile that made me feel like a pat on the head

and a glass of warm milk should have followed.

And I will never forget the playwright who, when asked how she managed to get her plays produced, looked at me as if I had two heads.

"An artistic director would be the best person to answer that question, not a playwright," she said. "There are plenty of (assistant directors) here; why don't you ask one of them?" She returned to the woman who had stepped aside to allow me into the conversation, and who now wore an expression of surprise and pity.

The generic advice and the playwright's answer didn't come from a sense of humility or from cluelessness about how to navigate such a serendipitous career. The women I asked didn't want to be bothered.

Their aloofness makes sense to me now. "Diversity" is still a catchphrase. Every organization and every field that wants to appear progressive has to look all-inclusive, and if more black

women enter a field in which there aren't even enough spots for every white man who wants a spot, the black women who already have spots fear being forced out. As a SWAN Day panelist said, there's more competition than support when competitors feel like there's a smaller piece of the pie.

It's sad because support is critical. While there's nothing wrong with males mentoring females, woman-to-woman support in a patriarchal society invites a different perspective into the picture. It builds a network of women and gives the collective a stronger voice, which leads to more opportunities.

And if a panel of accomplished women can say they struggle to be seen, more opportunities for all of us are needed. ♣

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