CSSA President’s Message

Where Have All the Mentors Gone?

One of my most influential mentors, Arden Baltensperger, passed away on 6 Oct. 2015 after a very brief illness. He was 92. His memorial appears on page 35 of this magazine. While I would enjoy being more reflective, in my day-to-day existence it is difficult, or at least I make it so, to spend time doing anything beyond tasks at hand. The passing of a mentor, however, is frequently the initiator of such reflection. I shared Arden’s passing with my fellow Society presidents, and Carolyn Olson, SSSA president, commented, “When someone like that dies, it is a significant and lasting loss, almost like that of a parent.” I quote Carolyn because I am confident I could not have captured that thought any better.

True mentors come in many forms. Author Brendon Burchard has a great quote that puts where mentors might come from in perspective: “My best mentor is a mechanic—and he never left the sixth grade. By any competency measure, he doesn’t have it. But the perspective he brings to me and my life is, bar none, the most helpful.” For many, the first mentor is one or both of your parents or other elder family member, including siblings. Although the mentoring of older siblings, coming from a family of seven children with me in the middle, may not always be in the best interest of the mentee!

In the professional arena, I am a strong believer in the relationship between mentor and recipient as a developmental process that should never be forced and must be centered on trust. Early in my first academic position, I was informed by a senior faculty member that Dr. X was not an appropriate mentor and simply associating with Dr. X would compromise my chances for tenure. This was followed by “I would certainly be willing to serve as your mentor because I am really good at it.” Perhaps I should omit the quotation marks because I have embellished the comment a bit. Two thoughts went through my mind: “There is no way I would want this person as a mentor because they were unprofessional in how they volunteered and were a tad narcissistic in their delivery” and “I think I need to see why Dr. X has been deemed an inappropriate mentor by someone who is unprofessional and self-absorbed.” I became very close to Dr. X, and over time, he became a great mentor as well as an advocate. Interestingly, he never volunteered to serve as my mentor, nor did I ever ask him to.

I titled this column not as a foreboding opinion but as a possible call to action. American business executive, Mike May is quoted as saying, “The fun thing about getting older is finding younger people to mentor.” For those of us who have been privileged to have great mentors, it is now our time to return the favor. Do so, not to create someone in our own image, but rather to help someone create themselves to meet and exceed their genetic capacity, for the human spirit never ceases to amaze! For those in need of a mentor, choose with care and trust and heed well-intentioned advice. Where have all the mentors gone? To modify a quote by cartoonist Walt Kelly, delivered by his character Pogo: We have met the mentors, and they are us. RIP, Arden.

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Book Review

Cotton, 2nd Edition

Agronomy Monograph No. 57. David D. Fang and Richard G. Percy, Editors

This comprehensive monograph on cotton contains 25 chapters and covers cotton exceptionally well. It effectively delivers up-to-date information ranging from the history to molecular breeding and will be a good source of information for anyone new to cotton as well as for experienced scientists with cotton. The monograph will serve students, teachers, researchers, and producers well, and each will find information of value. Authors are world class, and the only major production topic not covered is weed control.

Cotton breeding, genetics, production, and fiber to fabrics are all covered. Conventional breeding as well as molecular breeding is covered. This monograph is an excellent reference for anyone interested in most aspects of cotton history, anatomy, breeding, genetics, production, ginning, diseases, arthropod pests, nematodes, economics or fabrics. It spans a great breadth of topics with good coverage of the latest breeding and production technologies. Once purchased, it will become the go-to publication for students and practitioners who own the book. Each chapter has a good and lengthy section on literature relevant to the topic. This alone is worth the price of the book.

—Reviewed by Johnie N. Jenkins, Research Geneticist, USDA–ARS

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