

Hands in the Clay: Mentoring, Students, and Criminological Reformation

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INTELLECTUAL WORK, if it is to be first rate, requires fresh and iconoclastic thought. Otherwise, it is apt to become prey to the technicians, who vie with each other in attempts to do the same thing, only better. They never question the endeavor itself, never ask whether in truth they are tackling the most important problems or, indeed, whether they are examining a problem that is of any importance at all. Their single-minded aim is to accomplish the task with consummate skill, and to awe their fellows who might have done the same work less satisfactorily. (Gilbert Geis 1992). "Foreword" to *Myths That Cause Crime*.

In this brief commentary I share insights on the faculty-student mentoring relationship. This endeavor finds its origin in an essay by Gilbert Geis (2012). Aptly, then, I will allow myself to meander, as he does, through various tales of experience on the topic that together comprise, to a significant degree, the path of my own understanding.

First, some relevant disclosures. I am a "product" of the University of California-Irvine School of Social Ecology and Department of Criminology, Law & Society. My doctorate was earned under the supervision of Professor Emeritus Gilbert Geis. This association certainly makes me less than objective about the man as man, scholar, and mentor. On the other hand, it also permits me perhaps more depth in discerning aspects of his message.

By way of self-appraisal, as a mentee, I have often found myself somewhat thin-skinned and aloof, and thus

maybe not the easiest person to mentor. Since these qualities are not rare among academics, insights derived from my experiences may be of more than parochial interest.

A final acknowledgement is that I am a reformed felon and a founding member of the Convict Criminology group. This may mean many things, but principle among them here is the suspicion that my GRE scores alone may not have sufficed to place me in graduate school, just as the number and quality of my scholarly publications did not seem enough to land me a tenure-track job. What I mean to imply is that entering into a mentoring relationship with me, or people like me, for that matter, may not be for the risk averse.

In this regard, to this day I applaud both my alma mater and principal mentor for their courage. I suspect, however, that the stresses and strains of mentorship we endured were not ours alone. I have found, in fact, that beneath the surface of many students of crime and justice (professors included) lays a perhaps unwieldy, fiery passion to contribute and be of service. Maybe this passion is directed at understanding human behavior. Maybe it is as simple as striving to "put away the bad guys." Either way, it is this underlying energy to serve and to know and understand, that may be as intimidating as it is inspiring. Today, in the classroom, I face the inspiration carried by students of my own. At times their contributions may appear latent, but it is their energy that uplifts me nonetheless. This is so, even as my awareness of the often hard realities of law and society anchor me to solid ground.

GRADUATE SCHOOL

At UC Irvine, and in Gil Geis, I found a meritocracy fused with doses of generosity and deep compassion (in the case of the department, this was true most of the time). In that environment, I was able to thrive. The university setting was itself something of a continuation for me, as I had long resided in institutions. Still, the social and learning environments were quite a change. At times I felt ill at ease, out of place, and wondered if I really fit in. Like for many, I suspect, graduate school for me was a time of being “re-formed” (many have had a hand in the clay; Gil’s mark, deeply felt, is I hope unmistakable).

The mentoring of a criminologist or student of criminal justice carries burdens not so evident in other fields. I say this because criminal justice, by and large, deals with pain, intentionally inflicted and otherwise. Our so-called “offenders” very often act out of pain—think of the child molester who was himself a molested child; or think of the gang member raised in structural and interpersonal violence and relative deprivation. So too, crime “victims” are, by definition, recipients of harm.

But it is the criminal justice system itself that is most problematic. It does its work ostensibly on behalf of citizens and in the name of justice, yet its methods and outcomes leave much to be desired. Phrases well known within the field, such as, “malign neglect” (Tonry 1995), “the pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958), and “penal harm” (Clear 1994), give voice to a reality stated by countless others: that criminal justice dispenses pain, harming individuals and certain groups terribly. This understanding informed the work of Gil Geis, as it does my own. This awareness was something we shared, a source of our bond, and something we agreed was important to pass on to students who may lack this sensibility. I noted in Gil a commitment to discern and name harm and suffering, whatever the source, and to be judicious in presenting it to students and readers. Gil modeled the dictum to make the suffering apparent, but not to lay it on too thick.

Important to Gil as well, perhaps ironically, was to have fun. He told me your life is yours alone to live, so not to be overly concerned with the opinions of others. He also said that if an opportunity to do something fun, exciting, or different came along, to go for it. As academics, our years often blur and pass quickly; it is important to enjoy the ride, and to make memories that will endure. Gil coauthored rich and varied publications with over 120 persons, and much like his travels to over 120 countries, he did so for “fun”: to keep learning and growing, as a criminologist, and as a being on the planet. It seems he knew that, as professors, our students are our most numerous colleagues, and so perhaps the principal agents of our continued growth and reformation.

AS MENTEE

I began at UC-Irvine as the student of Paul Jesilow, a paraplegic and, I suspect, owing much to the pains of that condition, an especially insightful man. Paul was himself a student of Geis. This made me right from the start a third-generation Geisian. Jesilow allowed me much leeway in navigating my first two years at Irvine, but after I roamed the campus taking courses in most every discipline save criminology, he felt it time to rein me in. Jesilow asked what I might like to undertake as a dissertation focus, and whether or not it included primary data collection. I hedged on choosing a research topic, but felt I could say with certainty that the thrust of my work would be theoretical. No, I did not plan to administer surveys or perform quantitative analysis. Upon hearing this, Jesilow said that I ought to find another adviser.

I bumped around a bit meeting with faculty and looking for a good fit. None made itself apparent. I was offered placements in other departments by faculty who thought I would find a congenial home there, but I persevered in holding on to criminology, not least because of my incarcerated past and my commitment to contributing to justice system reform. One day Jesilow asked if I had yet met Gil Geis. When I replied that I had not, he suggested that I should. And so I was passed up a chronological and criminological generation. One lesson I take from this occurrence is that Paul understood that his interests, and perhaps temperament, were not a good fit for mine, and that perhaps a mellower soul—an elder—might be better for me.

Gil seemed to know that I might be awed by his reputation and did much to put me at ease. We met over lunch in unpretentious places, him buying always. He asked me open-ended questions concerning what I wanted to study, and he approved of everything. It seemed that if the topic was interesting and important to me, then it was to him as well. What I gained from this was the feeling that he placed much more importance *in me* than in the subject matter.

I settled on a fascinating study of interpreting the beginnings of what would come to be called “mass incarceration.” I thought to do so through the lens of postcolonial theory. Gil thought that sounded great. Soon I was off to Berkeley for a conference on Critical Resistance and the Prison Industrial Complex. There, I attended a session on private prisons. I was quite disturbed by what I heard. At our next lunch I described some of this to Gil. Not long after, he asked if I was interested in co-authoring a book chapter on private prisons with him. Of course I said yes, but not without some unease.

Besides the daunting prospect of having my work instantly assessed by this master of the craft, the project also put me in the awkward position of producing something useful to the mainstream. I had become comfortable in my student’s way of habitually attacking

and deconstructing from the sidelines, sometimes reveling in the feeling of hopelessness. That we would be contributing to the body of applied knowledge was both troubling and exciting. I agreed to go for it because I trusted Gil. My trust came in part, I think, because I felt he trusted me.

I found myself ennobled by the task. And, to add to my good fortune, Gil insisted I be named first author (Mobley and Geis 2000). In all honesty I can say that his contribution to the piece dwarfed my own. But he was adamant that my insights into the nature of imprisonment and the vulnerabilities of especially cost-conscious penal regimes were paramount. Who was I to argue? The piece did indeed make a contribution, as it has been reprinted and cited a respectable amount.

Our research into prison privatization produced no shortage of treasures. The material was so compelling, in fact, that I changed course and made it my dissertation topic. Gil and I (along with David Shichor) produced another related piece that attracted some controversy (Geis, Mobley and Shichor 1999).

The issue was “conflict of interest.” We had discovered a Florida professor and criminologist, Charles Thomas, making substantial profits from his activities advising and essentially advocating for a private prison company. The principal insight of the article was that privatization, with its profit incentives, had the potential to corrupt, or appear to corrupt, the impartiality of academic research. This point was well supported by the evidence. The article was published in *Crime & Delinquency* and generated some professional discussion, including a testy response from the entrepreneurial Florida professor and some colleagues (who appeared, I should add, not to share in his financial largesse) (Lanza-Kaduce, Parker and Thomas 1999). It was then that I understood why this time Gil had *not* offered me first authorship. He knew that the subject matter could bring controversy. Rather than expose me to the brunt of any backlash, he put himself first.

A second aspect of this experience was that our article contained a factual error, albeit contextual. We had erroneously identified a study of juvenile corrections facilities as dealing with adults. Even though this mistake was unrelated to our main points regarding the relationship between supposedly independent researchers and for-profit companies, it provided an opening for attack to those wishing to defend their interests. As the researcher most immersed at the time in the topic of privatization, I blamed myself for not exhaustively fact-checking everything about the piece. But I also relished the opportunity to now redouble our efforts by responding with another article that might expose additional potential improprieties. Gil would not hear of it. Bringing the issue of privatization and conflict of interest to the attention of the field, he said, was what mattered. Rather than continue digging, he suggested we compose a follow-up “letter to the editor” of the journal in question. In that letter we would admit our error

and urge readers not to be distracted by it—or by the case study of Thomas’ activities itself—from seriously considering the financial conflicts of interest that increasingly challenged (and still challenge) the discipline.

Through these experiences, I always felt myself the junior colleague. I felt both lifted through “colleague” status, and sheltered by being a “junior.” My views were respected, my areas of contribution well defined, my learning the craft through apprenticeship transparent, and my future prospects made a priority. I also learned not to get drawn into personal squabbles or led by my own sometimes fervent ambitions. We were scholars for reasons that did not include individual “takedowns,” or even elevating our own professional profiles. Our purpose was to serve society, and especially those least served. How to do so remains for me an area of cautious deliberation.

ON THE JOB

Now, as a faculty member myself, I try to put into action the lessons I learned from Gil—and it’s not easy. In my graduate seminars I ask my students to form a circle and invite each to talk about their research interests. Although this may seem a simple matter, I have found that most have seldom, if ever, been asked this question. I find the exercise consciousness-raising, as it gives the students a chance to see themselves and be seen by all as researchers. I believe this reminds us to take seriously not only the subject matter, but also ourselves.

If I run across materials or opportunities that align with a student’s interests, I will bring them to their attention. Sometimes this includes opportunities to publish. Before I was awarded tenure, I found myself tempted to list myself as first author in these collaborative ventures, for obvious reasons. Still, I put the student first. In one instance, a short book review, the publisher informed me that only one author was allowed. I removed my name. As I say, none of this was easy. My application for tenure was shaping up to be a marginal case, and I found a small voice in my head telling me that even book reviews could matter. But in the end it was the voice of Gil Geis, via his example, that reminded me of my position as teacher, and of my responsibility to put the interests of my junior colleague before my own.

Another insight provided by Geis was acquired simply by pouring over his vita. Gil had hundreds of publications spanning dozens of subjects. The variety of his research, and his penchant for interdisciplinarity, meant that whatever the particular subject, his writing was informed by the whole of his body of work. In other words, the span of his knowledge gave him the ability to “see the big picture,” and “connect the dots.” Even so, he did not feel the need to be heavy-handed about it. For example, in the introductory paragraphs of our book chapter on private prisons, he writes that although we discourage the use of

prisons, if they are to exist we think they ought to remain a function of the state and not private industry. As state concerns, prisons might remain relatively free of motives frequenting the pursuit of profit. I note that as a scholar of white-collar crime and thus knowledgeable of the ways of business, how could Gil feel otherwise?

I will conclude with a few more lucid lines from Gil's contribution to Jesilow and Pepinsky's (1992) *Myths That Cause Crime*. May his words continue to inspire scholars, young and old, to reach beyond themselves and touch the lives of others in a good way.

Occasionally, though, scholars will stand aside from the passing parade and begin to ask fundamental questions: Are the suppositions that guide the research themselves supportable? Is the received wisdom of the field merely folklore entrenched by years of repetition? Whose interests are served by what propositions and are those interests necessarily commensurate with the well-being of the entire society? What, after all, is going on here? Where does truth lie? (Gilbert Geis 1992). "Foreword" to *Myths That Cause Crime*.

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