

The RWJ Executive Nurse Fellows Program, Part 2

Mentoring for Leadership Success

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This article is the second in a 3-part series describing the RWJ Executive Nurse Fellows Program, an advanced leadership program for nurses in senior executive roles who aspire to help lead and shape the US healthcare system of the future. Part 1 (October 2005) described the program, its core leadership competencies, and the primary components. This article discusses the mentor experience that is a cornerstone of the 3-year fellowship program. Fellows are encouraged to have this experience with senior-level executives outside of healthcare in order to broaden their leadership perspectives. Examples of these mentor experiences are described from the viewpoints of both fellows and mentors, including successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Part 3 (February 2006) will explain how fellows are required to create a business plan for their leadership project because it is so important for nurse leaders to offer a strong business case for proceeding with a new initiative, service, or program.

Mentoring, which in Greek means “enduring,” typically refers to a relationship in which a seasoned senior person guides and encourages the development of another, usually more junior, person. As noted in Part 1 of this series (October 2005), an experience with an executive-level mentor is a

cornerstone of the RWJ Executive Nurse Fellows Program, one that complements the formal leadership seminars, leadership project, and other experiences of the program.

Historically, there has been a lack of emphasis in the nursing profession on being mentored or on mentoring others. Although new nursing graduates often have the advantage of being precepted—and ideally mentored—by a more experienced nurse, once the orientation period is over, most nurses are essentially on their own. Nurses who advance in their careers to leadership positions, whether middle manager or executive level, rarely have opportunities to benefit from formal mentoring by more seasoned leaders. Thus, the mentor experience of the program is often the first time that fellows, all senior nurse executives, have been exposed to a formal mentor experience.

The mentor experience is intended to provide fellows with opportunities to gain insight into and hone their leadership competencies in such areas as strategic visioning, risk-taking, interpersonal effectiveness, and inspiring and guiding change. Mentors are expected to have extensive leadership experience; serve as coaches, advisors, and role models; willingly share their knowledge and experiences; and commit time and attention to mentoring for a defined period agreed upon between mentor and fellow. Although there is flexibility in the length of the mentorship, it is expected to afford fellows significant opportunity to interact with the mentor, including on-site time in the mentor’s own leadership environment. Such environments may be the mentor’s organization or other professional venues, such as board meetings, fundraising events, and community outreach. In some cases, fellows may choose to have more than one mentor, either concurrently or in serial fashion.

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NOTE: The RWJ Executive Nurse Fellows Program is seeking qualified nurse leaders to apply for the 2006 cohort. The application deadline is February 1, 2006. More information, including eligibility requirements, selection criteria, and the online application process are available at <http://www.enfp-info.org>.

Generally, fellows are expected to engage in mentor experiences for at least half of the 3-year fellowship period, and for at least 6 months with individual mentors. Most fellows have chosen to have 1 or 2 mentors over the course of the fellowship period.

Benefits of Mentoring and Being Mentored

Mentoring can benefit nurse leaders in myriad ways. These include learning how to identify one's development needs and take the initiative to seek a mentor or mentors who can offer guidance, role modeling, and feedback on one's leadership development. An effective mentor relationship can also open doors to new learning and career opportunities through connections to other organizations and networks. One of the greatest benefits can be the exposure to new and different perspectives for dealing with leadership challenges and opportunities, and is the primary reason for urging fellows to seek mentors outside of nursing and healthcare.

Mentoring also benefits mentors; specifically, serving as a mentor in the RWJ program provides mentors with opportunities to share their own leadership successes and challenges with a developing leader, connects them with the full network of the program, offers them new perspectives on their own work, allows them to make an investment in the future of nursing and healthcare, and is personally satisfying and rewarding.

A Nontraditional Experience

As noted previously, the program subscribes to the belief that fellows will have a more challenging mentor experience—and therefore, learn more from the experience—with a seasoned and successful leader who is not in nursing or healthcare. Working with leaders in other fields helps fellows “enhance their leadership capacity through exposure to leaders in diverse sectors, while also helping them recognize the challenges that are common to executives regardless of who and what one is leading.”¹ As one fellow commented, “When I began the program, I assumed my mentor would be an expert nurse executive. I quickly learned this was not going to be ‘in the box’ mentoring. My mentor was going to come from a completely different walk of life and challenge me to see leadership from a wholly different venue than my usual path of nursing and healthcare.”*

*Note: The RWJ Executive Nurse Fellows Program retains the copyright to quotes by fellows and mentors that appear in this article.

Fellows are expected to identify a *new* mentor (or mentors) in order to gain experience in negotiating a mentor relationship, an important competency for senior leaders, which they can carry forward in their careers. Although fellows may be assisted by the program office, or members of the program's National Advisory Committee, in identifying potential mentors, ultimately, it is the fellow's responsibility to initiate, develop, and nurture the mentor experience as a component of the leadership development plan for the 3-year fellowship: “It quickly became apparent that this was not to be a passive experience. I suddenly realized I was responsible for creating my mentoring experience.” Further, the mentor(s) selected must be an appropriate fit for each fellow's particular leadership development goals.

The process of formulating a learning plan for the mentor experience, contacting the mentor and sharing ideas for what the fellow wishes to gain from the mentor relationship, as well as what the fellow can bring to the relationship that may be of value to the mentor, are strategic aspects of the fellowship experience. Such an approach reflects the belief of the founder of Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers—“Instead of waiting for someone to take you under his wing, go out and find a good wing to climb under.” Doing so is easier for some fellows than others, depending on their prior experiences with mentors as well as their own natural style in reaching out to others. Nevertheless, it is an expectation that all fellows will gain at least basic competence in successfully finding “a wing to climb under.” Once they have done so, they are expected to appropriately and effectively leverage the mentor relationship and experiences for their own leadership development. Fellows are coached and guided by the program's core faculty team in strategies and tips for negotiating and sustaining a successful mentor experience. They also are encouraged to use available resources on mentoring, including books and Web sites (<http://www.mentoringgroup.com>; <http://www.growconnect.com.au>) to prepare for and get the most from their mentor experiences.

In the 7 cohorts thus far, fellows have had mentor experiences ranging from highly successful and satisfying, in some cases, resulting in what is likely to continue as a lifelong relationship, to disappointing and even failed mentor relationships. Mentor experiences that were most successful were those in which the fellow devoted careful attention to preparing for and initiating the relationship, was clear about communicating expectations and goals, and persisted in nurturing the relationship over

time. The mentor's commitment to the fellow and the mentoring relationship was also a critical factor.

Feedback from mentors over the years has revealed that many find the mentoring role to be a rewarding one. Specifically, mentors have expressed the fulfillment they experienced from sharing their own experiences, including both successes and missteps, with the fellow, and being able to offer advice and guidance for the fellow's own development. Many also have noted that time spent with the fellow offers a welcome change in routine and allows them to gain new insights about their own careers and leadership beyond what they are "giving" to the fellow. They see the mentor experience as a 2-way street, with both the mentor and the fellow contributing to and benefiting from the relationship. Successful mentor experiences have, by and large, been those in which both the mentor and the fellow understood that the fellow could best learn from the mentor's life journey and leadership wisdom rather than the mentor's specific expertise or industry skill set.

Outcomes and Perspectives

In summer 2005, the program office conducted an online survey of fellows from 4 cohorts (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003) about their mentor experiences, and received an impressive response from 79% of them. The survey asked fellows to identify their mentor's formal position at the time of the mentor experience as well as the mentor's type of business, and to answer 3 questions: (1) "What were the two or three best aspects of your mentor experiences?"; (2) "What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?"; and (3) "What leadership lessons did you learn?"

Mentor Profiles

As noted earlier, fellows are encouraged to identify potential mentors from outside the field of nursing as well as outside the healthcare industry as a whole in order to ensure their exposure to the larger context in which healthcare operates, as well as a broader vision of leadership. Although approximately one-quarter of the mentors for the 4 cohorts surveyed were at high levels of leadership in the healthcare industry (CEO of a health network, state director of rural health, CEO of a health foundation, president of an academic health center, director of a healthcare research agency), the majority were from a variety of organizations outside of healthcare. For the cohorts surveyed, mentors came from such private sector areas as manufacturing, transportation, utilities, banking, airline, publish-

ing, and communication industries; public and private education (K-12 and higher education); the military; government (local, state, and federal, all branches), including careerists and elected officials; and nonprofit foundations.

Mentors' particular executive positions included community college system chancellor, director of government relations for a professional sports organization, US congresswoman, US Senator (retired), state governor, state lieutenant governor, federal court judge, general manager of a major metropolitan airport authority, president of a major philanthropic foundation, motivational speaker and author, vice president of an independent policy think tank, vice president of marketing for a major commercial airline, senior corporate compliance officer, corporate vice president of merchandising, CEO of a publishing firm, and chief risk officer of a major bank.

Fellows structured their mentor experiences in several ways, based on negotiations with their individual mentor. All had at least one face-to-face meeting with their mentor, and many got together with their mentor regularly (eg, monthly or quarterly). Some face-to-face meetings extended over several days or a full week, whereas others were more time limited (half-day, over lunch, a board meeting). The vast majority also relied on telephone calls as well as regular e-mail exchanges.

Several years ago, based on feedback from mentors from the first 2 cohorts, the program office began inviting mentors to attend one of the fellowship seminars with their fellow, as a guest of the program. A number of mentors have taken advantage of this opportunity to not only spend more face time with their fellow, but also to engage more directly with the program itself.

Best Aspects of the Mentor Experience

Fellows cited a myriad of benefits they derived from the mentor experience. These encompassed such "best aspects" as learning to stick to core values in times of crisis and personal challenge, having a safe haven for exploring difficult leadership situations, gaining breadth of perspective—learning to "think bigger," acquiring competence in speaking and persuasion, and in general, benefiting from the mentor's wisdom and counsel. The examples below illustrate what the fellows identified as some of the best aspects of their mentor experiences.

Learning from my mentor's wisdom and experience in moving from technical expert to broader leader, as well as his encouragement to be patient with myself relative to change and growth.

The importance of sticking to values and staying on message even when subjected to intense political pressure.

Being able to confide some of my more difficult challenges without fear of disclosure or judgment—having a safe place to express my views, share openly, and ask questions that I would not ask at my home institution.

Having a sounding board for my ideas, for which she provided further clarity and guidance.

Several fellows commented on the value of observing their mentors in action. Mentors often provided fellows with opportunities to shadow them at board meetings, executive management meetings, and various other events, and even to become actively involved: “She involved me in executive meetings across a wide venue of settings, and charged me with taking an active role in meetings and follow-up activities, rather than just observing her.” Other comments on the value of the experience included:

The opportunity to spend time observing her working with her board of directors and vice presidents, dealing with complex situations with no easy answers, was eye-opening.

I saw my mentor during September 11th and watching him in action with his employees was inspirational. I learned the value of staying focused on mission during a crisis.

My mentor allowed me to get very close to the work she was doing, and was very candid in sharing her personal experiences. She stretched me to think bigger.

This aspect of “thinking bigger” was a common theme among the fellows. They often commented on the benefits of getting out of their daily routines to focus on the larger landscape, while also gaining insight into their own leadership behaviors: “It was helpful to see a leader in a non-healthcare business because the leadership behaviors were transferable even though the circumstances were different from my own.” Another commented, “I enjoyed having the opportunity to take the ‘balcony view’ from a perspective other than nursing.” One fellow noted that her experience with a mentor in “a totally different type of business challenged me to look at nursing in a very different way. I learned that fresh solutions may be found from those who don’t live the healthcare experience everyday.” Most importantly, many fellows found that the mentor experience broadened their outlook: “My mentor helped me focus on the larger context of my work and not just the day-to-day management of my job. I best

remember her advice: ‘You have a job, and you have a career—don’t let the job interfere with your career; you have a great deal to offer so use your time wisely.’”

Many of the fellows commented on specific benefits relative to their own particular development needs, in such areas as business planning, finance, networking, entrepreneurship, strategic risk-taking, negotiation skills, political savvy, and work-life balance (“Being mentored by a woman who, like me, is challenged with balancing work and family demands”).

A number of mentors assisted fellows by introducing them to other leaders and resources, playing the role of “connector”² by sharing their own networks, and thus, providing opportunities for fellows to expand their leadership connections. As one fellow noted, “I had opportunities to connect with people outside my own realm of contacts that would not have occurred without my mentor’s association with them.” Another observed that her mentor “opened the door to a larger network of influential people and created an opportunity for me to serve on two national corporate boards of directors.”

One of the most powerful aspects of the mentor experience was the extent to which fellows learned from their mentors’ own life stories and leadership journeys: “Her insights into people and her willingness to spend time with me, to simply talk with me, to speak openly and honestly with me about her own successes and failures, was immensely helpful in thinking about my own career trajectory.”

As part of the final narrative report of their fellowship experience, fellows are expected to write a thank you letter to their mentor. Comments from some of those letters further reveal the benefits the fellows derive from this experience:

You have helped round out my perspectives and anchored many of my more naive approaches for rural health care reform. I also have you to thank for inspiring me to think bigger and more analytically.

Your wonderful wit and wisdom not only served me well during the fellowship but will continue to serve me throughout my career. You taught me how to know what I want and how to go after it. As a result, I ended up changing jobs and career paths.

I learned that while change is certain, purposeful change requires leadership. You are so skilled in leading your group and getting them to consensus. Best of all, they thought it was their idea. You knew where they needed to go and managed to

get them there without them knowing you had influenced that direction at all.

You have helped this extreme introvert learn how to do public presentations more persuasively and almost enjoy it. You have sensitized me to remember that how people feel is as important as what you have to say, especially when dealing publicly with a highly charged, controversial issue.

Your role modeled the ways a leader can use introspection and thoughtful rehearsal in preparation for 'fierce conversations'. Perhaps most importantly, you helped me understand and practice strategic leadership—keeping my vision focused on the future and avoiding the temptation to fall into the fray of operations.

Because of the stories you shared and your willingness to let me get close to the work you do, I feel better prepared to take risks, to stretch myself, and to stay the course during the challenging times in my career.

Your generosity of time and wisdom allowed me a glimpse into the qualities and skills that define you as a leader. By helping me reframe some of my leadership challenges, you gave me an entirely new platform for responding. Thank you for your inspiration—observations of others confirm my realization that I have become a more confident and courageous leader.

Clearly, the fellows have benefited from the mentor experience in ways that will continue to encourage and support them as they advance their own leadership agendas. However, the mentor experiences have not been entirely smooth or without complications.

Challenges and Obstacles

The major challenges and obstacles to developing and cultivating successful mentor experiences related primarily to time, structure, and distance. Specifically, both fellows and mentors were challenged to find time for the experience in their respective schedules, as reflected by their answers to the question, "What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?":

Finding enough time to meet or talk.

Scheduling difficulties with both of our busy schedules. We finally decided to put monthly breakfast meetings on our calendars for regular updates—this worked very well.

My mentor was extremely busy so it was difficult to pin down times when we could meet. It required persistence on my part to schedule visits and conference calls.

He was really busy, so it was hard to get time with him, although when he was with me, I had his full attention, often for several hours.

Geographic distance—having a mentor who is geographically closer would have made it easier to get time together.

Generally speaking, the more successful mentor experiences were those in which the fellow and the mentor were in the same metropolitan area or geographic locale, making it easier to connect in person for coffee or lunch on a regular or semi-regular basis instead of having to carve out one or more full days to travel and spend time with the mentor. Often, the mentors themselves commented on time and geographic constraints.

Many times, fellows expressed concern that they were imposing on the mentor's time: "At times I felt like a nuisance but I think this was my problem and not hers." Most often, this was simply a matter of the fellow having the courage to ask the mentor for time as well as wisdom, as most mentors—once they agreed to serve in the role—were eager to work with fellows and make time for them in their busy schedules. A number of mentors have agreed to serve again for future fellows, while others have declined primarily because of time or distance—"The program is a 5-star experience! Unfortunately, I found that my time limitations became an insurmountable hurdle."

Occasionally, there was a lack of "chemistry" between the mentor and the fellow, and in other instances, a disconnect between the mentor's desire to more narrowly focus and the fellow's desire for a broader perspective. As one fellow noted, "My mentor was totally focused on identifying a specific next career step for me. While that is something I need to do, it is not an all-consuming concern. I was more interested in identifying my future direction rather than a specific position." However, one fellow indicated that what she initially perceived as an obstacle—"we held divergent world views"—became a strength: "I learned to appreciate how those different from us have much to offer us."

Perhaps the greatest obstacles to having an effective mentor experience were the fellow's failure to prepare adequately for the experience by clarifying goals and desired outcomes for the experience, and having unrealistic expectations of the mentor or the experience.

Leadership Lessons Learned

Fellows are constantly encouraged to tie their learning and development to the program's 5 core competencies, and their responses clearly reflect

their doing so. The fellows surveyed identified a host of “lessons learned” from their mentor experiences. Figure 1 highlights some of the most prominent and profound lessons learned by the 4 cohorts surveyed and Figure 2 offers an important “take away” message for all nurses who aspire to leadership roles.

Mentor Perspectives

At the end of each cohort’s fellowship period, the program office surveys those who served as mentors. Their feedback has been immensely helpful in gaining insight into the mentors’ views of the experience, which are used to continually improve this aspect of the fellowship. Their responses reveal the

extent of their commitment and interest in the program and in the fellows they have mentored, and show the powerful impact of the experience on both themselves and the fellows. It is important to note that the mentors give of their time, energy, and effort without monetary compensation, but it is clear that many believe they are compensated in less tangible but nevertheless highly rewarding ways.

A primary outcome of the mentor experience for many fellows was increased competence and confidence as a leader. Comments from mentors reflect this change:

At first I thought the match could be a mistake. But she convinced me that I had the insight to hold a mirror to her so she could really see how much

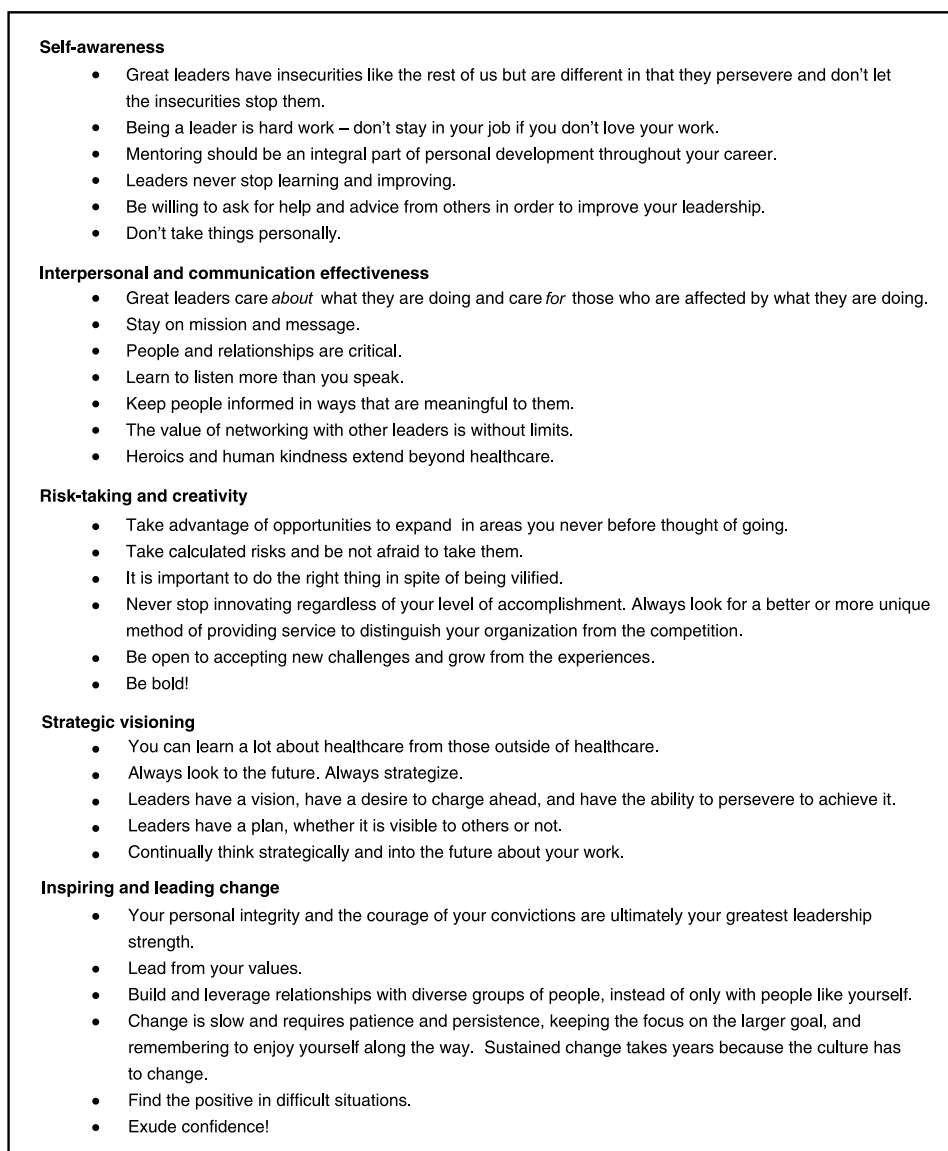


Figure 1. Lessons learned.

I was scheduled to pick up my mentor, an airline industry executive, at the airport, and her flight had arrived 45 minutes early. I ultimately found her in the lost luggage area talking with the employees. She was asking them what they liked about their jobs, what they would change, and what the company's leaders could do for them. After 20 years with the company, this executive was leading with knowledge about the business as well as leading by example. She reminded me again and again that we are all in the business of taking care of people.

Figure 2. Inside a mentoring relationship.

she had accomplished. She is an incredible woman! I think she will carry that affirmation with her from now on.

We discussed issues related to transitioning from governance leadership to policy leadership, which I believe were helpful to her in framing a new perspective for her own way of leading.

She has shown initiative and courage by engaging with a higher level of leaders in her organization, as evidenced by her new key role in a strategic partnership.

She has learned how to take more risks and to trust her ability, and has gained the confidence to handle the consequences.

She learned how to value her professional worth, and negotiated a new position and compensation package commensurate with her worth.

Many mentors commented on the opportunity to not only share their own experiences and wisdom with fellows, but also the benefits they derived from the relationship as well:

I signed on with the idea that I would give and also get from the experience. That is exactly what happened. Our ability to relate to each other worked well, even when we did not agree on an issue.

We bonded with each other, talked out situations, laughed, and learned from each other.

Her openness to learning helped me be responsive, supportive, challenging, and interested in her development. In turn, I developed a sense of responsibility and commitment to her and to the program.

Further, the opportunity to “give back” through mentoring was echoed by a number of mentors:

“I felt like I made a lasting difference not only in her life but also in her entire organization as a result of her development.”

Several mentors noted the specific impact of the fellowship program on the leadership development and potential of the nurse executives. One observed, “Without the stimulation and support provided by the program, many of these nurses would not maximize their potential. Your investment in them is truly an investment in the future of the nation.” Another noted, “The fellowship gave her access to resources, information technology, best practices, and leadership training, which will have an impact on her thinking and her approach to problem-solving for the rest of her career. Moreover, as a result of this program, she was able to refine her vision for the future and develop the self-confidence needed to make that vision a reality.” One commented about the difference the mentoring experience, and the entire program, is making in these nurse leaders. Finally, one mentor pointed out, “It could be that nurse executives spend a lot of time in running the business, and not enough time in changing the business.” This mentor from the public higher education sector went on to say, “Don’t forget that [nurses] are the only ones who can get this done!” This final comment is indicative of a serendipitous but powerful benefit of the mentor experiences to the program and its network of executive nurse leaders. The exposure of these seasoned and successful mentors, especially those outside of nursing and healthcare, to the contributions made by nurses to healthcare and the health of the public widens the circle of influential leaders who know about and can help champion nurses as leaders and shapers of the future.

Perhaps most importantly, the mentor experience has enhanced the fellows’ own awareness of the importance of “giving back” through formal or informal mentoring of others in their organizations and communities who show leadership promise. Letters from fellows to their mentors at the end of the fellowship period reflect this desire:

I hope to provide the same mentoring for someone in the future as I pass your gift forward.

You have such a wonderful way of making people feel important and valued. I hope to be able to give to others the way you have given to me.

Finally, one fellow from an earlier cohort shared her own experience in agreeing to serve as a mentor:

I received a call from a colleague in another public health agency who was attending a leadership

institute and asked if I would consider being her mentor. Of course, I told her I would be honored, and since then I have shared my time, my thoughts, and my writings with her. By sharing with her, I have become clearer about where I've been and where I'm going. Mentoring is not only a gift to give, but one to be received as well.³

Acknowledgment

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