My Imaginary Mentor

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Maybe I’m a late bloomer, but I never needed an imaginary friend until I started graduate school. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t go around the lab talking to myself, or blaming failed experiments and empty reagents on this figment of my imagination. But I think that, as a kid, I didn’t know what I was missing – until now. Let me explain...

I grew up in a small town where almost everybody knew everybody else. Kids of all ages from the block would meet up on our street and make up games and sports, or just wander through each other’s yards, eating rhubarb that we picked from random gardens. There was always something going on, kids to meet up with, some game or pool-party in progress. But even without all the neighborhood kids, my sister, two brothers and I provided enough entertainment for ourselves that we often didn’t need any extra participants. We always had two players on two teams for whatever game or sport we wanted to play, four actors for skits we performed for my parents, and guaranteed peers on all holidays and vacations. All this social contact was a bit much at times, especially if you enjoyed a bit of privacy once in a while, but you were never at a loss for someone to talk to or hang out with. I suspect this is why I never had the desire to create an imaginary friend. I’d heard about kids having these, but I didn’t see the need, having grown up two kids shy of The Brady Bunch. But if you’re from a small family and don’t live in a community where there are a lot of other kids, or you just don’t get along with the ones that are around, this concept could be very appealing. In fact, studies have shown that most kids with imaginary friends are lonely children, only children or first-borns (1). But like I said, I’ve never been in the market for one myself.

I didn’t revisit this concept until graduate school. Mentorship of graduate students is an important issue that keeps coming up in university graduate programs – for example, the past two issues of Hypothesis have had an article each on the subject. Peter Stogios pointed out in his article that some graduate students in large institutes feel their training is lacking in this regard (2). Karun Singh suggested finding a mentor in a senior graduate student or postdoc (3). You’re very fortunate if you’ve developed this kind of relationship with someone in the lab. However, there might be times in your career when you find yourself without proper guidance or a suitable mentor among the senior lab members and this can be quite isolating. Maybe the lonely kids had it right. Why not create an imaginary mentor? This can be as simple as invoking a mentor spirit that will be supportive of you when needed, but also kick you in the butt when you need a little motivation. They can go with you wherever you go and you never need to make an appointment.

Not for lack of a wonderfully supportive supervisor myself, or actual real-life peers with whom to discuss science and life, but sometimes I find myself daydreaming about what a certain British scientist would say to me in various stressful situations. I read the book Rosalind Franklin: The Dark Lady of DNA (4) a while back and really enjoyed hearing about the life story of the great woman scientist that took those famous X-ray photographs of DNA. I found her story quite inspiring and see traits in her that I’d one day like to possess. From what I’ve read about her, I imagine she was a very confident scientist with little tolerance for passivity. At a time when even fewer women were in senior science positions than there are now, she pursued her chosen career as though she wasn’t aware of this disparity. She belonged in science and it never occurred to her, as it does to some people even today, that it was not a place a woman should be. So when I’m less confident than I would like to be in the face of...
new challenges, or when I’m feeling overwhelmed with project woes, I think to myself, *What would Rosalind say to me right now?* This mental exercise allows me to get out of my own head and think creatively from a different perspective – by seeing the problem through her eyes, it doesn’t seem so insoluble.

Your imaginary mentor might also be a great scientist you look up to from the past or the present. They should be someone you admire and serve as a good example of what you’d like to aspire to. Reading some biographies of famous (or not so famous) scientists may help you find one that you feel an affinity with. At the very least you’ll learn something about the history of science through an engaging, personal account. Now if anyone makes you feel foolish for having a figmental mentor (or “figmentor”), just let him or her know that having an imaginary friend is a predictor of creativity. And isn’t creativity a great asset of scientists? If anything, it’ll make you think about what advice someone else might give you in difficult situations and help you approach problems from different angles. While an imaginary mentor is by no means a substitute for the real thing, think of him or her as an interim advisor – a little guardian angel in a lab coat sitting on your shoulder whispering supportive words in your ear. Just remember that you’re never really alone, not with the spirits of great mentors awaiting invocation.

**References**