**APA DIVISION 17 FELLOW ADDRESS OF BELLE LIANG**

I am deeply humbled to have been nominated and supported by my respected colleagues (Drs. James Mahalik, David Blustein, Lisa Goodman, and Janet Helms), and to be awarded APA Fellow status in Division 17. What a privilege it is to join the ranks of those who champion the transformation of individuals and systems—to promote human flourishing and social justice. The ways in which Division 17 members have taken on this charge are innumerable. Yet, we can draw common learnings from this body of work; and I would offer two observations: first, people can be resilient; and second, relationships that draw out this strength lie at the heart of human transformation. My own experience from working in various settings and with diverse populations has led to my fervent conviction of these truths.

Beginning as a postdoctoral fellow, my early research and practice focused on trauma recovery and resiliency. My work with traumatized individuals and communities ranged from homicide bereavement therapy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the reintegration of former child soldiers in Gulu, Northern Uganda. Too many times over those earlier years, I witnessed the depth of suffering that ensues from interpersonal violence and betrayal. And yet, nearly as frequently, I saw that even one redemptive relationship—sometimes a grandparent, a therapist, a mentor, or advocate—could provide a lifeline of hope, healing, and miraculous transformation. The operative principle that surfaced time and again was that transformation occurs in the context of relationships that transcend “fixing” people and instead focus on finding their strengths and fanning those flickers into sustained and warming fire.

In 2008, I encountered one striking example of this kind of relationship-driven transformation while visiting the World Vision Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Programme, which had assisted in reintegrating hundreds of children and youth who had been abducted by Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), forced to witness and participate in horrific atrocities, then managed to escape through the jungle – only to find they either had no families left to which to return, or were no longer welcome in their traumatized communities. I learned of one former child soldier, “David,” who was only

16 years old when rebels invaded his village in Gulu, beating his father to death as he

watched, and forcing him to execute his own mother as an induction into the LRA. David was abducted, tortured, and brainwashed into becoming a killing machine. Over time, he became an LRA commander, leading murderous raids of his own. During one such killing spree, he attacked the village of a girl named “Serena,” slaughtering her family,

and leaving the girl to bleed to death, her body maimed and her nose sliced from her face.

Years later, David escaped the LRA and made it back to his village, but found himself ostracized by villagers who no longer trusted him. Unable to depend on the community for protection – indeed, fearing for his life – David ran off again. This time, he found refuge at the Children of War Center, where he was accepted and cared for with compassion. Rather than ignore his past, the staff helped David remember who he was and the goodness of which he was capable. He was even enlisted to help other children

and youth who had escaped the LRA to open up about their experiences and trust the staff at the Center. Instead of receiving judgment, David was offered healing relationships

that transformed his self-image to the point where he desired forgiveness from those he had harmed.

Ironically, and unbeknownst to David, these same staff with whom he had entered healing relationships were simultaneously working with Serena in the same Center. She had miraculously survived the attack on her home years ago; and now, with an infant of her own, she was also receiving counseling and support at the Center. The trust and confidence she had gained from her relationship with staff and other survivors at the Children of War Center had strengthened her to point that she was prepared to offer forgiveness – even to those who had perpetrated immense suffering on her.

Ultimately, the Center brokered a meeting between David and Serena. And in an event movingly captured in a grainy photograph pinned to a wall in the Children of War clinic, David tearfully held Serena’s baby, as she offered the forgiveness that he needed

to receive, and she needed to give. Just as importantly, David and Serena both went on to play important roles in contributing to the harmony and peace of their communities. Their story dramatically illustrates how empowering relationships can heal individuals and whole communities.

Stories like David’s and Serena’s have inspired my ongoing research on the role of mentoring relationships in positive youth development. For while thankfully the majority of youth in this country do not typically endure the atrocities experienced in places like Northern Uganda, youth in this country nevertheless hunger for relationships that lead for some to healing, and for all to transformation from children to flourishing young adults. Currently, I have focused specifically on mentoring relationships, and have endeavored to identify the transformative aspects of mentoring *vis-a-vis* youth from different backgrounds. And interestingly, one of my early lessons was that successful mentoring usually does *not* follow suit with ontology of mentoring!

To wit, the notion of “mentoring” arises from the Greek myth of Mentor, the overseer, teacher and substitutionary father for Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. Stemming from these origins, traditional “mentoring” has emphasized the hierarchical passing of technical skills and information from an older generation to the younger. However, my research suggests that great mentors build mentor-protégé relationships that are mutually beneficial. These adults behave less like Mentor and more like a muse: acting as sources of inspiration to draw out the genius and artistry of their charges. My work has taught me a great deal about the power of recognizing and eliciting the inner strengths and

potentials of young people, rather than focusing on their deficiencies and teaching them

what they do not know. This is not unlike the process I witnessed in Northern Uganda.

This view of mentoring recognizes that one size does not fit all, and that each partner in a mentoring pair brings a unique and valuable background and contribution to this mutual relationship. Like other love relationships, perhaps the most transformative aspects are the mutual liking and chemistry at the heart of long-lasting mentoring

connections. Indeed, the greatest transformation occurs when youth feel they have contributed to the lives of their mentors and others, that they are wanted, needed, and deeply valued. As ee cumings muses:

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

Mentors can do this for us. A mentee put it this way to me: “You see me, and tell me what you see. And I believe you, because you know me.”

Moving ahead, as an APA Fellow, I look forward to contributing to the work of Division 17 by continuing to explore ways in which mentoring relationships can help foster human flourishing and social justice among youth across the globe. I hope to continue the tradition and charge that you, my colleagues, have carried so well for the past fifty-two years. Again, many thanks, mentors and friends.