# The Problem with Letters of Recommendation

Agnes Callard

December 26, 2019

Twenty-five years ago a secretary made a mistake, and a letter of recommendation that should have gone to a fellowship program got sent directly to my house. The professor who was recommending me—my undergraduate adviser and mentor—immediately rectified the situation: he had another letter sent and instructed me to trash the one I had received. But I couldn't. Not because I wanted to read it. God forbid. I didn't even like touching it. And if someone had forcibly opened it and started reading it, I would have covered my ears and hummed loudly.

I kept the sealed envelope in a drawer for many months, until that professor happened to be in town for a visit. I suspect he did not remember having written the letter, let alone the fact that I was sent a copy, so he was deeply puzzled by the fact that I sought him out in order to insist that he relieve me of it.

The letter was a kind of sacred object: the professor's opinion of me mattered so much that it would have been unbearable to learn what he had written—indeed, it mattered excessively, irrationally. I could tell I was venerating something beyond the bounds of reason and self-respect.

Nowadays I sit on the other side of the desk, and I am regularly approached by students shyly, apologetically asking me for letters of recommendation. They launch themselves into long, awkward speeches anticipating all the reasons I might not want to write them a letter—and I cut them off. Yes, I will write you a letter. No, don't thank me. This is part of my job.

A letter of recommendation is a description of how a student's virtues (and those of their work) make them suitable for the task at hand. It is not a compliment, a favor or even an endorsement—whether it would be a good decision to accept/hire/honor this person depends on what the letter-reader's other options look like. A letter of recommendation is a document I feel strongly about disenchanting—though not because I'm against enchantment. Precisely to the contrary.

A lot of the time, the rambling, maybe-I-am-unworthy speech is not or not only a practical request. Often, it is a disguised way for the student to ask: "Do you think I should go to graduate school"? or "Will I succeed as a philosopher?" or "How do I compare to others in my cohort?" or "What do you really think of me?" Most students don't want to ask these questions explicitly, which is a good thing, because I don't want to answer them.

If I had absolutely nothing to say in response to such questions, I couldn't write letters of recommendation. The situation is, rather, that I have something to say, but I don't want to say it to the student. I don't want to be straight with them. In fact, I think something stronger is true: I owe it to the student not to be straight with them. Let me explain.

Here is an email I received a week ago from a student who graduated six years ago, took some time away from school and has just begun a graduate program:

I get to the cafe at approx. 7:00 to read philosophy until approx. 12:00, perpetually floored that I get to do so. The poor undergraduates who work there definitely think I am very weird, because I am always already on the corner when they open.

I was going to email you after my grades were listed. I know it's a small thing, but I made As in 2 courses, and so I thought to tell you that your faith in me is not, at least on this metric, entirely displaced.

Some of my students care what I think of them more than I've given them reason to. These students mythologize me, as I mythologized my own teachers; they tend to be the students I am in the best position to help. They push themselves harder than they thought they could, and they do this partly in order to earn my respect, to make me proud. They want to become the person they think they can see reflected in my eyes—and this desire actually moves them, and they actually transform. It's amazing that this works. College education, at its best, provides a framework for this kind of magic, which the rest of the world seems to think can be bought with aspirational slogans from detached, self-important well-wishers.

This magic is real, but it is also dangerous, because I actually know so much less than I seem to my students to know. I do not know who they should become. I do not know what they will succeed at or whether "success," as they currently conceive of it, would make them happy. Of course I have a few guesses and predictions, and some of them may be of use to graduate admissions committees. (Even there, as a reader of many such letters, I have my doubts.) To the student herself, however, these educated guesses threaten to take the place of the vague and fuzzy representation they have as to what I think of them, what I hope from them, what they have to do to make me proud. I can't clarify the situation without invading Mental Agnes's turf, and that would be a big mistake.

This may strike you as somewhat high-minded and self-important; perhaps you would like to cut through the aspirational fog and concentrate on the letter-requester's practical predicament. For instance, they may need to choose between me and my colleague as letter-writers. Wouldn't it be useful for them to know how strong a letter I'm prepared to write them? When students pose that question, I direct them to all the concrete evidence they have accrued over years studying with me: grades, comments on papers and, most importantly, our many conversations in class and in office hours. That is much more data to go on than some use of the word "strong" that none of the faculty has convened to calibrate.

Just as it is not my job to decide whether my student is the best candidate for the position—that's up to the recipient of the letter—likewise it is not my job to make the comparative assessment that would underwrite the student's choice of letter-writer. There are limits to what I owe in my capacity as letter-writer, and these limits are crucial to protecting my more important job as teacher.

College is plugged into a larger world, and the letter of recommendation sits at the point of contact. But college also *is* a world, and we should be wary of optimizing the efficiency of the outer world at the cost of compromising the workings of the inner one.

The kind of positive feedback sought at a letter request cannot mean much, precisely because it has been asked for; what matters has been freely given all along, and it has taken the form not only of approval and encouragement but, more importantly, of spontaneous reactions such as excitement, interest, curiosity, surprise, joy, amusement and, yes, pride. The real feedback is wrapped up in the aspirational fog.

If a student were systematically deprived of any such positive, spontaneous engagement she might end up indifferent to professorial opinions of her—so indifferent that she could, without any risk of "undue influence," read a set of possible letters and select the one she thinks of as strongest. Full transparency would be of no danger to such a person, because she would see what professors think of her in purely instrumental, informational terms. But that would itself be a mark of just how much the educational system had failed her.

Some people figure in your life in such a deep and positive and transformative way that you don't want to think about who you would now be if you hadn't met them. The professor behind the mismailed letter is one of those. But that doesn't mean I became the person he wanted me to be. In fact, as I was only to learn much later, he hoped I would turn in a literary rather than a philosophical direction; he harbored deep suspicions about the excesses to which logical argumentation drives a person. On some level, I believe he even blamed my "hyper-rationalism" for my divorce, which disappointed him deeply. After it, he wanted little to do with me.

His rejection of who I became broke my heart, but it did not change all he had done for me. In fact, through it he taught me one important final lesson: a teacher's visions for her students cannot help being blinkered by her own limitations. That is okay, because the teacher's vision is not the one that matters.

I stand by my refusal to "be straight with" my students. I reserve the right to protect them from the narrowness of my own mind. They are capable of so much more than I can conceive of.

Agnes Callard
The Problem with Letters of Recommendation
December 26, 2019

The Point Magazine, Examined Life. <www.thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-problem-with-letters-of-recommendation-agnes-callard/>