

# Perspectives in Infant Mental Health

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## Losing Mentors

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In the last two years, several major figures in the field of Infant Mental Health have passed away: Dan Stern, Peter de Chateau, and Kathryn Barnard. This issue of *WAIMH Perspectives in Infant Mental Health* is dedicated to each of them.

They were three very different people, known for their research, their writing and clinical skills, with a huge number of studies, books and papers that have had an enormous impact on the development of our understanding of infant mental health for so many years. But their loss is so much more to us than studies, books and papers...for we have lost our early teachers and mentors, many of them our colleagues and friends.

Teachers and mentors may be viewed like parents, and for many of us, the relationship with each was, in a way, parallel to an attachment relationship with an early caregiver. Whenever we felt insecure in our work, we turned to them for advice, support, regulation of strong affects, reassurance, as well as limits and rules. Together, their containing capacity enabled us to hold our small patients and their parents, for, as Selma Fraiberg said, "one must be nurtured to be able to nurture."

When a loss affects our mentors and friends, such as Robert Emde's loss of his wife, Joyce, it affects us deeply, too. It is a reminder that everyone, even our teachers, are vulnerable. We grieve beside them, too.

At first, we can't believe those we have learned from may become sick and not recover...as a child cannot believe his parents are not omnipotent. With their deaths comes the feeling of loneliness and responsibility. Now it is our turn to teach, to hold and contain, to advise, to regulate. This is when transgenerational transmission comes into play. We internalize what we have learned from our teachers and mentors, perhaps asking, "What would Dan say about this new mother?" or "How would Katherine handle this baby?" or "How might Peter reflect on this relationship?"

In this way, we feel a bit less alone and they can rest knowing that we hold them in mind and do not forget them and their great ideas and contributions to the field.

And still I feel sad....

