

## **A REFLECTION ON MENTORING<sup>III</sup>**

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As I seek to help families to preserve and grow their human and intellectual capitals, I search for the stories of individuals whose histories reflect successful life-long learning. I am interested in individuals whose lives reflect successful journeys in Aristotelean pursuits of happiness. As I study these individuals, I rediscover, through their words and actions, that many of them attribute their success, at each successive step in their life's journey of learning, to the mentors who helped them. Since I have been lucky enough to have mentors in my life, I find it easy to agree on how correct they are to make such attributions.

What is the foundation and process for a successful mentoring relationship? The ancient Greeks had a saying, "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear". In my experience, the Greeks were absolutely right. I keep finding, in my practice that in some magic way, when the about-to-be-student announces his or her readiness to learn, the teacher does appear. In addition, I find, deep in the statement of readiness, the true humility of the person ready to become an apprentice to a master and, with it, the ability to honor another's wisdom. More and more I have come to realize that a critical virtue for a successful life is humility, the antithesis of hubris. Humility permits a human being to know what he or she does not know and to seek out other individuals, who we call teachers, who can provide answers to his or her questions. This process of seeking is a ritual which is ancient and at the same time absolutely modern. It is a ritual that must, in my opinion, precede any successful learning endeavor.

I believe learning best takes place using the Socratic method of questioning. Being provided the answers by teachers is helpful, but, being led by the teacher to the answer through questioning, deepens the students integration of the learning. Questioning makes it far more likely that the learning will remain in the students useful memory. Great mentors, unlike teachers, almost never provide answers. They rather seek to provide their mentees with the questions which they believe will best lead to the learning that is unique to the individual being mentored. A generic answer to a mentee's question will help the mentee's overall education, but rarely does it lead to useful

learning which the mentee can integrate immediately into his or her life. A successful mentoring relationship will lead the mentee to discover through the mentor's art, a process of learning that will be unique to him or her and which can be used throughout his or her lifetime. It is the discovery of the process of how I learn, not how anyone else learns, that is the deep learning found in every great mentoring experience.

Having now understood the foundation and process of mentoring, how does one find a mentor?

**First**, the mentee must ask him or herself what exactly, at this stage of his or her life, is he or she seeking to learn? Is it a body of knowledge; is it a deeper understanding of him or herself? In other words, in my life journey, am I at a point in which I wish to learn more about my intellect and my role in the world and look outward; or do I want to learn more about my intuition, my interior self, and look inward? Often we believe we are seeking something external when in fact we are really changing internally and it is there we should be looking first. Many of the mystic traditions tell us that the intellect is the product of the intuition, that our minds are the reflections of our spirits. In my own life, I frequently find that when my intellect tells me I am at a crossroads in my own journey, and must make a decision, that in fact I have already, through my intuition decided the question, and am well down one of the paths and looking backward at the receding crossroad. Understanding what question we are really asking, is it exterior or interior, is it a question of intellect or spirit, is critical to knowing as a mentee where to seek a mentor.

**Second**, when the mentee has established the question for which he or she is seeking an answer, the next critical stage in finding a mentor is to begin to ask those we most trust that question. At this point in the journey to seek a mentor the mentee must have the courage to be vulnerable. The mentee must be willing to surrender his or her natural anxiety about asking others for help and the often feared sense of owing that comes from asking someone for help. As long as the mentee is consciously resisting this act of surrender, he or she is not truly ready to learn and the mentor will, in my experience, not appear. When the mentee has let go of this fear and opened him or herself up to the conscious commitment to another necessary to be successfully mentored, the mentor will appear. Why should this be? Simply because those we trust

the most, our inner circle, know when we are ready for our next learning. When we can convince them we are truly willing to begin that learning, they help us find the mentor.

Often the members of the mentee's inner circle, at the beginning of the process, have no more idea of where to find the mentor than the mentee does. Working together, and using the multiple external relationships every group has, the mentor is almost always found. In today's world this process is made easier by the information systems which our society has at its command; imagine how much more difficult this process was for people in small towns and villages before such systems existed. In the process of seeking a mentor, I am frequently challenged by individuals who state that they have no inner circle. Thus far I have always found that this is not true. In each case I have found that a few gentle questions lead to a list of helpful people; a list which seems to have been hidden from the mentee by his or her anxiety about asking for help. Again, one cannot begin the journey of learning without asking for help; it is the crucial act for learning to occur.

**Third**, the honoring of the relationship by the mentor and the mentee may, and frequently does, lead to the relationship expanding as new questions arise. Ultimately the life-long learning journey of the mentee will lead to new issues for which different mentors will be needed. At the beginning of this Reflection, I cited the ancient Greek saying "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear". I would now like to add some words of my own--"when the student is ready, the teacher will disappear". All successful mentoring relationships depend on their ending on the same note as they began. The great mentors, I have known, always seem to know instinctively when the mentee is ready to move on and the learning they have offered is accomplished.

These great mentors prepare the way for the ending of the relationship in the same way that great chess masters are always looking three to four moves ahead. For the mentee this process is opaque, and should be, if the ongoing learning process is not to be interrupted before its proper conclusion. Sometimes the ending of the mentor/mentee relationship is tempestuous. This is a risk of the ending of any relationship deep enough for real learning and partnering to occur. Great mentors may even decide that for the particular mentee a tempest is the only way for the mentee's spirit to free itself from the relationship so it can move on. However the relationship ends (a bear hug and a wave is

certainly better than tears and threats) the mentor and mentee must always be ready to acknowledge, from the relationship's beginning, that the relationship is by the nature of the mentee's life-long learning journey, temporary. Acknowledging the transitory nature of this relationship at the beginning gives the greatest promise for its successful conclusion. For the mentee, awareness that he or she will need many mentors to meet the various stages of his or her journey is a critical part of the relationship. For the mentor, his or her awareness of the bittersweet role of the true teacher is crucial to the objectivity necessary for the mentee to obtain all the wisdom the mentor can offer. The mentor, who can offer all of him or herself to the unique learning process which has led the mentee to choose him or her as mentor, while knowing that eventually the mentee must move on, is the true mentor. Like a parent, the mentor is an intercessor, providing questions and wisdom for life's journey. It is my life's experience that a successful mentoring relationship represents the highest relationship two human beings can create. Each party must enter the relationship with complete trust, with faith in the possibility of a successful outcome, but, without any certainty thereof; and with the profound humility of the novice seeking wisdom and the even profounder humility of the sage who knows how truly little he or she knows.

When I work with families there are two questions to which I seek answers from each family member at the beginning of our journey together. What are you passionate about; and who is your mentor?

The first question is designed to discover the unique journey to which each individual family member is called. The second question is designed to learn how each family member is pursuing his or her calling, since I am certain that no one can successfully pursue his or her journey of life-long learning without the mentor needed for that stage of the journey. King Phillip of Macedonia understood this fact when he called on Aristotle to mentor his own Alexander to prepare Alexander to be the King of Macedonia. Phillip knew that he had taught Alexander all he could as his father. For the young man to move to the next stage of his journey, he needed a mentor. Little did Phillip know that by choosing Aristotle the mentor would turn the boy not only into a king but into the Emperor of the World, Alexander the Great.

Mentoring is a calling. When seeking mentors look for one who is called to such a role and who is most importantly called to the unique questions of that stage of your life. Be wary of people who suggest they know much, be attracted to people who, through your own intuition, suggest they know much but profess to know little.

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<sup>[1]</sup> I wish to dedicate this Reflection to John O'Neil with thanks for the many profound questions he has put to me and to so many others.