

A REFLECTION ON THE ART AND PRACTICE OF MENTORSHIP

By James E. Hughes, Jr.

Mentor appears for the first time in the Western Canon as a character in the *Odyssey*.^[1] We are told by Homer that he is an old and deeply respected man into whose hands Odysseus has given the kingdom of Ithaca, while Odysseus goes off to fight the war with Troy. We are also told that Mentor has the duty of bringing up Telemachus, Odysseus' son, so that should Odysseus not return from the war, Telemachus can eventually become the king in Odysseus' stead. Thus, Mentor represents two roles. First, that of Regent, a person of deep trust who can safely hold the space for another, while the other goes on a journey or quest; second, the Elder Teacher who can instill knowledge in another, particularly knowledge from an elder, a person of wisdom, to another person about the other person's journey of discovery of self. No sooner, however, in the *Odyssey* does Mentor appear in these roles than Homer changes Mentor into a masquerade. Homer does this by having Athena, the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, take over the shell of Mentor's body, and from within gave advice and assistance to Telemachus in his journey of personal growth. Finally, at the end of the first part of the *Odyssey*, Mentor appears again in the masquerade of a wizened old man but is in reality Athena, and in this case as the peacemaker giving critical advice to all parties on how they may end their war and attain the riches of peace. Here is yet a third role of Mentor, the role of the elder person of wisdom assisting a whole country in its journey to achieve peace.

In these three roles we begin to see what the art of mentorship may be. I find it fascinating that Homer in Mentor, combines the historic male virtue of intelligence and the historic female virtue of intuition in the same character. I find it even more fascinating that the interior and thus senior virtue of the masquerade is, Mentor as intuition, as epitomized by Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, rather than, Mentor as intelligence as would be epitomized by Apollo or Zeus. I suggest you keep this metaphor in mind throughout this reflection since my study and practice of mentorship confirms, what Homer knew, that true mentorship is the expression by a mentor, of wisdom through intuition in guiding another, a mentee, toward greater self-awareness and freedom in the mentee's journey in pursuit of happiness.^[2]

In this article, we start by looking at the four forms of human relationships that would not qualify as mentorship, i.e. teaching, coaching, being a best friend and eldering, and then turn to the true nature of mentorship. We then turn to the six functions that a mentor and a mentee must fulfill in order for their relationship to be mutually successful, and conclude with two simple admonitions.

Mentorship is not ...

If one knows what true mentorship is, what then is it not? It is not teaching, or coaching, or being a best friend, or eldering. Each of these roles represents an important relationship but none is that of a mentor. Why? Let's deal with each of these and see why they are not mentoring.

First, **Teaching**: Teaching consists of one person, the teacher, having data and information and sometimes knowledge, which is sought by another person. In this relationship the parties are most often exchanging data and information, and rarely knowledge. In other words, the teacher has things to recite to the student, who as passive listener attempts to memorize and integrate this data and information. This process is rarely dynamic or experiential, that is, learning through Socratic questioning and case study. Even more rarely if questioning is involved, do these questions emanate from the student. In those rare instances when the learning comes from the student's questions and experiences and when the questioning continues until the student feels that she or he has fully integrated the answers to the questions do we reach the boundary between teaching and mentoring. Perhaps this is why the "Teachers" who receive the highest marks from their students are often, in my experience, those whose teaching methods replicate this process. By teaching, using this method, they come close to being mentors because they come close to what I will argue later is the process of mentorship. Finally, in a teaching situation normally the teacher does not expect to learn from the student, nor does the student expect to teach the teacher.

Second, **Coaching**. Coaching consists of the coach, who has specific skills to transmit to the trainee, who wishes to learn these skills to enhance an area of the trainee's life. The coach normally uses a special set of skills developed to master a particular practice to train the student.

The nature of coaching assumes an active practice by the student so the process is always a dynamic interchange between coach and trainee, with the trainee doing most of the work. The trainee expects the enhancement of his or her skills so as to practice the particular skill in a more masterful way. In very rare cases the student may transcend the coach, but rarely, if ever, and even in such cases of transcendence, will the coach expect to learn from the trainee. In the case of the greatest coaches they will seek before beginning to coach the trainee, to determine how the trainee learns. In Hindu practices for the development of a Yogi,^[3] the first effort of the guru, to whom the aspirant turns to learn this art, will be for the guru to learn how the aspirant learns. The guru does this to determine if he is the proper coach for this aspirant and will refer the aspirant to another guru if appropriate. Great coaches always follow this procedure. They know that they cannot coach every trainee, because their method of exchanging skills and practices cannot meet all learning styles. They, like the gurus of old, know their own individual strengths and weaknesses. Lesser coaches take all comers with a concomitant lessening of the possibility of learning by their trainees. Great coaches seek to know the trainee as a unique vessel for skill building, and as they do they move toward another of the arts of mentorship.

Third: **Being a Best Friend.** Best Friends are normally relationships of the heart. Both parties seek a place in which they can trust the other to keep their secrets, to keep their promises, and to value each other as the highest friend of the other. Normally, both parties believe that they can raise and discuss with the other their most intimate feelings and questions. While best friend's relationships are intact, their levels of intimacy are extreme and the relationships remain fundamentally non-hierarchical. Many of these relationships are life long. Finally when these relationships end they equal in the intensity of the feelings often expressed in divorce. While in many excellent mentoring relationships both parties learn from the relationship and both have important questioning as a part of their process, a best friend relationship is not mentoring. Why? Because in the mentoring relationship it is the mentee's questions which form the basis of the dialog. This is the sacred bonding of the mentor/mentee. However great friendships may develop out of mentorship relationships. The best such friendships should, however, in my opinion, grow up after the mentoring is completed so as not to confuse the boundaries of mentor and friend.

Fourth, **Eldering**: Eldering is a relationship between someone to whom we have granted authority over some part of our lives to give us advice and to assist us in maturing. All tribes grant to certain members authority to hold their sacred space. They are the keepers of the tribe's stories and rituals. It is to them that the tribe looks when difficult decisions must be made about the roles and relationships of the members of the tribe. Frequently, within our internal family tribes and within our intimate external communities, we look to certain people as elders because we perceive that they are wise. We grant them the right to guide us in the correct paths, because we believe that their lives exemplify journeys in which they appear to have been able to learn life's secrets. We believe that their wisdom about life will enhance our ability to mature well. We ask them to help us with the rituals of moving from childhood to adulthood, from the learning to the doing stage of life. We also ask them to help us with the rituals of moving from adulthood to elderhood, from the doing to the being stage of life. Relationships with elders improve our individual journeys toward happiness. Elders are like mentors in that they ask us questions and use story and metaphor to teach. Unlike mentors, they are not pro-active and normally have responsibilities that are tribe-wide rather than toward single individuals.

The six functions of a mentor

Now that we understand what a mentor and is not, and why teachers, coaches, best friends and elders are all important relationships but are not the same as mentors, what are a mentor's particular functions?

First – **Mentoring is about asking questions not about giving answers** – questions that guide us to the deepest possible learning about ourselves. .

Great mentors seek to know us as individuals. We grant them the right to ask us the questions we least want to answer. With mentors we share our deepest passions and dreams. When, as with Dante, and I paraphrase, “we find ourselves sitting in the middle of a dark wood with nowhere to go.”⁴¹ When we need a person who can help us form the questions that will lead us from a profoundly stuck, empty place then as with Dante, we can all hope that our Virgil's, Dante's Mentor will appear and offer to lead us but only if, as with Dante's Virgil, we are willing

to go to the depth of ourselves with our individual Mentor Virgil's as our interlocutors. Then we can follow in our own ways, our journeys as human beings as we discover ourselves. Here is mentoring at its highest calling and in its most profound application. Being mentored, we learn how we learn and then design a process of learning unique to ourselves. As I mentioned earlier, the Hindu process of becoming a Yogi^[5] has as its crucial first stop the guru, as mentor's duty to ascertain how the aspirant/mentee learns. Great mentors understand this fact instantly. They too seek to know the mentee's way of learning in order to ascertain if they can in fact mentor this individual. No mentoring relationship can work without clarity on this point.

Next, **successful mentoring is a dialogue where both parties learn something essential.** Unlike all the other four forms of relationship I discussed, mentoring involves joint learning. I have not found this point often addressed. I don't know why but I do know that whenever I have been asked to mentor, I have learned much more than I imparted. In talking with the people whom I have been lucky to have been mentored by, each has made this same observation. This isn't surprising. Since mentoring is on many intuitional planes I can imagine how both parties at such a level of intimacy would deepen their individual self-awarenesses.

Next, **mentoring requires both parties to commence their work together as apprentices** in the Zen sense of having "Beginner's Minds."^[6] We must be willing to admit at the most profound depths of our spirits that we don't know and that we are willing and ready to learn. To begin every session with our mentor, with the wonder of the beginner is to give ourselves the greatest gift imaginable toward successful learning. Asking someone to mentor us and then starting every session "knowing it all," "arguing at every turn," "trying to be the master of the subject when we haven't left the apprentice place;" these are the actions of a fool and simply make it clear that we are not ready to be mentored. For the mentor the beginners mind is crucial to success. The mentor never knows at the beginning of each session where the mentee's questions will lead. The mentor can only know that by being open to the mentee's questions, the mentor may be able to deepen those questions and by doing so open new pathways for learning. Keeping a beginner's mind offers an opportunity for deepening. This process provides the mentee with the awakenings needed to enhance the mentee's individual journey of happiness. This state of mind will also provide the greatest learning to the mentor as he or she deepens his or her calling to this act of service to another.

Next, **mentorship includes three ways of learning:** First, the path of **Data → Information → Knowledge → Wisdom**; Second the path of **Seeking → Journeying → Listening → Exchanging → Integrating**; Third, the path of **Breaking Away/Differentiating → Pausing/Listening/Learning → Integrating**.

Each of these paths offers the mentor and the mentee a process of successful learning. To me each says the same thing but with words that are sufficiently different that they will and should resonate differently to the listener. Hopefully one of these paths will resonate so well that it will emerge as the learning process to be used for a successful mentoring relationship. Hopefully, too, these three ways illustrate my point about the importance of deciding at the beginning of the mentoring relationship how the mentor and mentee can best learn together recognizing that here I am describing a process of learning and earlier I was describing the need to discern the mentee's individual style of learning.

Next, **mentorship requires that both parties begin by agreeing on how it will end.** In a companion Reflection called "A Reflection on Mentoring" ^[2] I have discussed this point at length. Here I will simply say that a mentoring relationship must have the cleanest and clearest possible boundaries. As Robert Frost said and I paraphrase, High Stone walls (Boundaries) make good Neighbors (mentors/mentees). While at the beginning of any good relationship we do consider boundaries, we rarely consider how such relationships should end. The mentor/mentee relationship presupposes that it begins because the mentee has questions which she or he perceives must be answered if her or his individual journey is to be successful. Equally, the relationship assumes that when the mentee has found the answers within herself or himself, that the role will end. This last boundary is critical for both parties' success and well---being. New questions in the journey of the mentee will require new mentors. This is not to say that the former mentor is not the right person to continue the dialog on these new issues. Rather, it is to both parties' benefits to recognize that the mentee must, in honoring the mentoring relationship properly, consider who the best person is to help with her or his new questions. Honoring the relationship by ending it and opening a new search honors the relationship best. To do that well, the relationship must begin with a clear process for knowing how it will come to an end.

Finally, for a successful mentoring relationship, **each party to it must be able to answer with an open heart and mind the following questions:**

For the mentee when seeking a mentor – For the deepest questions I now have in my life who will best be able to help me form these questions and help me dialog with myself to find those answers that will most enhance my self-awareness in my journey in pursuit of happiness? For the mentor when asked to be a mentor – In what way can I enhance the self-awareness and thus enhance this particular individual’s journey in pursuit of happiness and what will I learn about myself in doing so?

In my life, when seeking a mentor or when being asked to be one, these are the two questions which I have found offer the greatest possibility for a successful mentoring relationship. I hope they will help you as they have helped me have successful mentoring relationships.

Willingness to be mentored is the greatest gift we can give ourselves. To be asked to be a mentor is the highest gift we can bestow upon another. To act as a mentor is the highest calling to serve anyone of us can render to another. To do this well is as complicated a process as human nature knows because of its intimacy and because it risks damage to another human being should it go awry. It is, therefore, the relationship that is of the highest order based as it is in the giving of complete trust one to another with the nakedness and openness of spirit such a gift entails. Not to have a mentor is to risk finding oneself in a dark world with no place to go and without Virgil’s deep love to see us safely out.

In short ... Personally I cannot live without mentors. Beginning with my Aunt at age 6 and the many who have followed, I thank each of them from the depth of my heart. Each of you has made an indelible difference in my self-awareness and thus in my personal journey of happiness. To each Namaste and to each of you readers the same.

It is my hope and my prayer that each of you will find, through the courage each of you exhibits, in a mentoring relationship:

- the happiness of living on the enlightened plane that a mentorship relationship represents, and
- through such a relationship, find the way to greater self-awareness and the freedom it brings, as each of you journeys in pursuit of your individual happiness.

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[1] Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1996.

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, revised by Hugh Tredennick. London: Penguin Books, 1953.

[3] Yogananda, Paramhansa, *The Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1998.

[4] Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Dorothy Sayers. London: Penguin Books, 1949.

[5] Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

[6] Suzuki, Shunryu, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill Inc., 2000.

[7] Hughes, James E., Jr., "A Reflection on Mentoring."