

The Role of a Mentor

by Stan Crow, Founder of Rite of Passage Journeys

I am frequently in situations where people discuss mentoring as a great idea. "We could solve a lot of our problems with youth if we could just find mentors for them." Perhaps we could, but first, we've got to understand what a mentor is, what one does -- the purpose and responsibility of mentoring.

A current popular idea of a mentor seems to amount to someone to hang out with. Mentors are seen as persons who will share great wisdom based on their own life experience, teach by example, be a good friend, and make the young person feel comfortable. I find that many people who come to us to learn to be mentors (as a part of the leadership teams in our summer programs) come with many of these images, especially the idea of being a good friend.

From my experience, these commonly held ideas contain many pitfalls.

One can be a mentor or one can be a friend, but not both! Friendship is developed as people go through trials together. A real trust and an ability to be honest with each other must be nurtured. The mentor's role is to be a journey master, a "sensei" -- one who takes a measure of responsibility for this other person. As arrogant as this sounds to take responsibility for the life journey of another human, this awareness must be present.

There's nothing wrong, I suppose, with an adult who tries to "be a good friend". Adult friends are good to have, as long as they're not excusing inexcusable actions or encouraging irresponsible behaviors.

The mentor archetype that most people are familiar with is Yoda, from George Lucas' "Star Wars" trilogy. Yoda's task was to train a thinking/reflecting Jedi Knight, not a mindless foot soldier. (You'll forgive the military references -- the dynamics would be the same if he were guiding a novice chess player.)

Yoda performed his role by setting difficult challenges for his initiate and while we saw his compassion, we also saw an unwillingness to compromise. He demanded performance of the task, a trust in the mentor and the initiate's belief in himself. He challenged the initiate to figure out ways to accomplish a task -- he didn't demonstrate and then say copy me.

He was training the mind and soul of the initiate. The performance of the body grew out of the initiate's inner resources. Yoda's training ground was a swamp. His training methods were not always straightforward. He set trick problems in front of his trainee and raised questions to help Luke Skywalker process the experience.

Yoda also shared his feelings and concerns openly. He did not try to sugarcoat problems he saw in his young trainee. He talked directly about the things that concerned him.

Yoda provided both the training experience and the testing. The testing was designed to demonstrate to the initiate that he was either ready or not ready. It was another chance to reflect on the realities of life he would encounter after his training

Initiation is about reflection. The role of the mentor is to set up situations -- preferably real, but hypothetical ones will work -- in which the initiate is challenged to deal with something she/he'd rather not. Frequently, boldness is called for. I know a mentor who was trying to help a group of young people whom he considered selfish and unaware of how well off they were. Their only contact with suffering people was on TV. In discussions with them, he saw they weren't seeing the pain which many people in their community were experiencing. He arranged a "sleep-over" and about 11pm got everyone into cars and headed for the charity hospital. They sat in the emergency room waiting area watching victims of heart attacks, drug overdose, knifings, shootings, and auto accidents being rolled-in on a busy, icy Friday night. The next day, after a little sleep, the youth had a chance to talk about the difficult experience. They had encountered real suffering, and their reflection was no longer theoretical. Several years later, I met one of the young men who told me it was a life-changing event for him.

We use intentional reflection as a major tool in all our rite of passage programs. As mentors, we start out with the understanding that our role is to be aware of what is happening with the initiates and utilize the daily challenges as starting points. Disputes between participants, poor preparation for the day's hike, abuse of someone else's property, mistreatment of the environment, along with many other happenings become opportunities for individual, small or large group dialogue. I call this the Curriculum of the Moment. This dialogue offers a chance to guide participants through a reflection on the event and its effects and to create plans regarding alternative approaches in the future.

A major presupposition I use for mentoring is, "My role is to provide an experience which takes this person beyond their comfort level." Physical activity, honest dialogue, initiative games, rituals, and councils in which real issues are raised and dealt with are all discomfoting. I often find myself uncomfortable as a mentor, wondering if I'm on track, with some of what I do. Then, I think, if I'm not uncomfortable I'm probably not really taking my role of mentor seriously enough. There is no script, no set of tactics which always work. In fact, one of the risks is that you will fail to connect. When this becomes evident, a good mentor will yield to another mentor.

In many traditional societies, the parents were not allowed to initiate their own children. Today, some parent groups organize rites of passage for their own children. Yet, someone else must do the mentoring, because for a parent to mentor is a conflict of roles. A parent cannot be a mentor.... and that's not bad! A parent's role is to protect and nurture. A mentor's role is to push and challenge. One of the major functions a mentor plays is to introduce a different adult voice -- a differing worldview for the young person to relate to -- perhaps even in the Devil's advocate role. A mentor offers the initiate an opportunity to try out ideas or ask questions in an accepting environment. The mentor's task is to give the young person permission to quest beyond his or her customary borders and to help process the journey.

Mentors have the possibility of being more objective than parents because they don't have the full experience (or baggage) of parenthood. I have seen young people who "heard" something a mentor said and made some life changes, even though the parents had been saying the same thing for years. I remember a family which treated their fifteen-year-old daughter as if she were seven (perhaps because she often acted that way). The daughter complained to the mentor about her "not being allowed to grow up". Her mentor's response was to ask, "Is there anything that you think you might be doing to perpetuate this?" The mentor continued to probe, "How would you respond if your brother was old enough to take responsibility for his own things, or demanded that things always be his way and never appeared to be grateful?" "Would you be ready to give him recognition and more privileges?" ...She got it!

I also know another similar situation in which the young person turned to the mentor and rebutted, "Who do you think you are, my psychiatrist?" No guarantee comes with the job.

I recently had a person I had mentored tell me, "You know why I changed? Because you told me what I needed to hear. Other people may have been thinking it, but no one else said it. And you let me know that you cared about me and wanted to see me change so people wouldn't treat me like a child anymore." I know this person's parents had done a good job and had said similar things, but I had a chance to help him hear.

One final caveat. Robert P. Eckert, director of the Learning Institute for Functional Education (LIFE) in upstate New York, says, "We lose the power of initiations because the adult initiators attempt to put themselves across as 'having it all together'. This is exactly what happens in cults."

Mr. Eckert's caution about cults rings true. How easy it is to pontificate -- and how ineffective. Initiation is about individuation, not about learning to follow the flock.

As mentors who are on journeys of investigation and discovery ourselves, our role is to assist the initiate to discover his/her own answers, to teach by question and by encouraging the initiates to risk in situations which drive them to reflect on meaning and relationships. We must ask, how can we assist them to have an experience that pushes them beyond their comfort level and into a recognition of their personal power.