

ON THE IDEAL OF MENTORSHIP

— dedicated with appreciation to Hippocrates G. Apostle —

*The author's note on this article is as follows: "I have been looking for ways to **bring** the humanities more into discussions of advising. Mentorship seemed a likely way, it having grown out of my long-term interest in the use of dialectic in advising conversation (and a long-term interest in Plato). Even I am not so eccentric as to try a paper on dialectic and advising, but mentorship afforded a convenient jumping-off point, even if I may have been jumping in a direction different from everyone else!"*

This article began as a formal presentation which, according to the author, was "warmly received," and elicited the following comment: "Thank you for reminding us that what we sometimes think we have been doing for only about 10 years has been going on for 2500."

Mentorship as an advising topic is about ten years old. It has been a shared concern of both business and academia—strange bedfellows—and the discussions have been spiced up by feminists concerned that mentorship has seemed to be a "male thing." I am not going to pursue any of the usual themes I have read on mentorship except to take as my starting-point the nearly universal belief that mentorship is a good thing. So universal is this view of mentorship that I have noticed that any writer who studies it seems to feel obliged to show how the happy effects of mentorship have been appropriated to his or her special situation, which may range from a human resources and development program in an insurance company to a freshmen-year program in a small college. What is usually left out of the formula is a developed definition of mentorship. The definition is avoided, I think, because most of the experts in studies of this kind apparently feel adequate to define their subjects only after an empirical study of the phenomena they think are appropriate. The logical problem, of course, is that in order to determine what phenomena are appropriate, we must start with a working definition of the subject we wish to define. Rather than be caught openly begging the question, most writers tacitly assume that it is possible to discuss whether or not mentorship "works" without really defining what it is, or by saying what Daniel Levinson thinks it is, and then rushing on to one's particular case studies.

I think that mentorship is hard to evaluate as a phenomenon because it is more of an ideal, like "true love," existing keenly if somewhat confusedly in the imagination but only rarely in daily life. And the problem is not just in the programs we establish to generate mentorship;

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sometimes we pitch our best stuff to people not ready to catch it. The poet Hesiod summed this up well:

That man's completely best who of himself
 Thinks of all things . . . and he is also good
 Who trusts a good advisor; but the man
 Who neither of himself can think nor, listening,
 Takes what he hears to heart, this man is useless.

[Quoted by Aristotle, *Selected Works*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell: Peripatetic Press, 1982), p. 422.1

So despite the difficulties with which mentorship is fraught, it **does** exist, if only in our imaginations—and I should apologize for saying "only" because such an existence in our imaginations, like the ideal of "true love," enlivens hope in us and forces us to be on the watch for better things in life. For this reason, I choose to look at mentorship as an ideal, as a phenomenon of the imagination worth knowing and cherishing. The legitimate occupants of the imagination are worth knowing; they sometimes become realities.

The academic subjects I know something about are philosophy and literature, and I am particularly fond of the classical Greeks. I have chosen several texts from Homer, Plato, and Aristotle to help me with my discussion of mentorship as an ideal because this subject, like so many other subjects in our professional life, is territory along the intellectual and academic frontiers marked out by the Greeks themselves.

Let us begin with the name "Mentor." Mentor, of course, is a proper name. In Homer's **Odyssey** Mentor was the friend of Odysseus in whose custody he left his household when he went off to fight against the Trojans. In the so-called Telemachy books of the **Odyssey**, Mentor ratifies the burgeoning manhood of Odysseus' son Telemakhos when, in coming of age, Telemakhos begins to assert control over his household and decides to search out the whereabouts of his father. More importantly, the goddess Athena frequently takes the voice and form of Mentor when she wishes to communicate with Telemakhos directly. The fact that the concept and name "mentor" has established itself in our language suggests a relationship which has some of the earmarks of father-substitution, but there are even more important suggested meanings if we examine carefully Mentor's place in that poem. More significant, it seems to me, is Mentor's role in guiding Telemakhos out of adolescence into the responsibilities of adulthood; more significant still is the way he is depicted as a kind of medium for divine guidance. I do not wish to base an argument unduly upon allegorical interpretations of Homer, but Mentor as a figure in that poem expresses symbolically both the nurturance of love and the power of wisdom—qualities which we rightly associate with the ideal of mentorship.

The type of love represented in mentorship gets rhapsodical treatment in Plato's masterpiece, the *Symposium*. The occasion of this extremely influential dialogue is a banquet in which Plato's mentor, Sokrates, and an assortment of friends and associates fashion speeches in praise of the god Love, or Eros. Those who have read it will realize that the dialogue contains two examples of mentorship: one which has succeeded, and one which has failed. The failed relationship is that between Sokrates and Alkibiades. Although Alkibiades had not been a member of the group who gave speeches in praise of Love, he crashes the party in an advanced state of inebriation after the speeches have pretty much concluded, and proceeds to disclose, in the kind of candor which only wine can elicit, his relationship of love with Sokrates.

Historically, Alkibiades was a brash, young aristocrat who became a general for the Athenians and later betrayed them in their war against Sparta. As a sort of Benedict Arnold, his youthful association with Sokrates hurt Sokrates when, as an old man, he was brought before the court on charges which lead to his infamous trial, conviction, and death. The Symposium, however, depicts a time before all of these events when Alkibiades was a fair youth with many admirers and Sokrates was one of them.

Now Sokrates was not the most prominent of Alkibiades' admirers; he was a poor man, a stonemason by trade, with the appearance of a satyr. His appearance was ironic because satyrs were normally depicted as having ravenous sexual appetites, and one of the things Alkibiades described in his drunken disquisition on Sokrates was his master's astonishing temperance. I should state at this point that the Love which the banqueters had been praising before Alkibiades' arrival included both sexual love (whether hetero- or homosexual) and a deeper, more non-physical love which we have come to call, for better or worse, "Platonic love." Most of the speakers had suggested that the relationships they would most prize would be friendships between males, and the norm here would be a mature man befriending a boy at the threshold of adulthood, the age when the Greeks, at least, found young males to be the most attractive. For the most part, the speakers do not suggest that such a relationship involves any sort of physical consummation, nor do they suggest that such a relationship is at odds with heterosexual love-making and parturition. I believe that such men would be mystified at our notions of "sexual preference."

I do not mean to say, however, that there is really no hint of physical homosexuality in the Symposium because Alkibiades describes in one episode of his depiction of his relationship with Sokrates his attempt to seduce the older man into having sex with him. Alkibiades tells of ploys he used to force Sokrates to spend the night—having his servants, for instance, serve their supper so late into the evening that Sokrates would have to stay over—and of how he shamelessly set the stage for the seduction. In the end, Alkibiades admits, to his own personal shame, that he had played the suiter to Sokrates instead of being pursued by him and that sleeping with Sokrates was like sleeping with a brother or an uncle. He complains bitterly of how Sokrates would chide him endlessly about his foibles and intemperate behavior. The attempt to seduce Sokrates was, as it were, an attempt to validate Alkibiades' own immoral temperament by invalidating Sokrates' moral inclinations.

Indirectly, Plato uses the Alkibiades episode to illustrate the character of Sokrates. He uses it to show that the attraction of Alkibiades' physical beauty and corresponding capacity to love in only a physical way fades into insubstantiality when compared with the inner beauty and caring of Sokrates. Beauty of an inward kind is a theme in another part of the Symposium in which Sokrates describes what he had learned about a more non-physical love as a young man from the priestess Diotima of Mantinea—the example of mentorship that succeeded.

Diotima had explained to the young Sokrates that there is a heavenly love and an earthly love. The earthly love produces offspring and offspring represent a kind of physical immortality. The impulse to generate springs from the attraction of beauty, and Diotima says that all creatures desire to procreate with the beautiful. But what of the heavenly love and the heavenly beauty? We also desire procreation with heavenly beauty, Diotima says, but obviously only if we come to know it first and feel its irresistible attractions. And we can learn to know it only after seeing many physical manifestations of beauty and learning to intellectualize instances of beauty into a universal idea. Diotima is a little vague about how one does this: does one force oneself all alone to intellectualize Beauty, or can one find a teacher to help? I infer that teaching is the easier way, and much of what Diotima goes on to say supports this.

Diotima explains that wisdom is the immortal offspring of an intellectual friendship and it stands to reason that typically an older and wiser mentor can help a younger friend to understand the nature of intellectual beauty indirectly when true learning is shared between them. The younger friend receives the benefit of this procreation of wisdom, so to speak, and becomes simultaneously more intellectually beautiful in the eyes of his or her mentor. Diotima is a luminous figure in the *Symposium* and although the relationship between herself and Sokrates is not described through Sokrates' narrative, she is by inference a significant teacher and mentor to Sokrates in just the manner in which she describes the mentor as an intellectual lover. The fact that Alkibiades' narrative actually serves to heighten the reader's awareness of the maturer Sokrates' inner beauty confirms Plato's implicit depiction of Diotima as a mentor of godlike distinction.

Where there is learning and where learning is part of our inner development, we may profit much from Plato's portrait of intellectual friendship in the *Symposium*. Another important ancient document on friendship derives from the most famous pupil of Plato, Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* pauses in the systematic development of his ethical theory to discuss the nature of friendship. Some students of Aristotle have looked upon the two books on friendship as a dispensable part of the total ten books in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or as an interpolation never meant to be included in that work. If, however, one thinks of Aristotle as a pupil of Plato, as people sometimes forget to do, it is unthinkable to suggest that the understanding of true friendship is irrelevant to ethics. All of the values and good things we have and desire in human life are things which we can and must share in some sense, and learning and understanding are the highest of these good things and in one sense the central focus of Aristotle's ideas about the finest form of friendship.

Aristotle distinguished three different species of friendship deriving from his observations of the utility of usefulness of certain relationships, from the pleasure attendant in other types of associations, and finally from his understanding of a higher form of friendship in which friends value for each other the same ideals and virtues they value for themselves. For convenience, we refer to these species of friendship as friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue.

Friendships of utility are, in a way, the foundation of social order. Within a society people have various tasks, providing goods and services to each other so that every member of a society can have the benefits of the total resources within the society. I may be sufficient to fix people's motorcycles for hire, but I am not sufficient to manufacture the replacement parts. My customer, who is not sufficient to fix his motorcycle, pays me money to do it which I in turn use to pay tuition on my daughter's university education. Each of the relationships established in this commerce Aristotle would call a friendship of utility. When the grounds for the relationship no longer exist, the "friendship" ceases.

Friendships of pleasure and virtue are much closer to our usual notions of friendship. Friendships of pleasure are the most common, answering the need we feel for satisfying the whole range of activities, good or bad, which give pleasure. Such friendships and the need for them are different, naturally, at different stages in life. Aristotle remarks that the elderly have very few friendships of pleasure; they grow somewhat suspicious and rely more on the friendships of utility. The young, however, fall quickly in and out of friendships of pleasure which more or less dissolve when the occasions for pleasure dissolve. This is not to say that mature friendships do not give pleasure but that the pleasures accompany other qualities which are the source of the friendship's enduring nature.

These qualities of endurance distinguish friendships of virtue. All friendships of virtue are pleasant, but not all friendships of pleasure are virtuous. In fact, what Aristotle means by "virtue" tends to comprehend pleasure and even utility, since one could argue that one

needs friends and that the pleasure of friends is one of the goods of human life. But a deeper understanding of Aristotle's meaning of virtue requires a look at his basic ethical theory.

The Greek word which is usually translated "virtue" carries connotations different from those we give the word "virtue" in English. For Aristotle it has none of the special religious senses we might give the word, as, for instance, the opposite of vice or sin. For Aristotle it means excellence, completeness, not-defective. When things approximate their natural state of wholeness and avoid extremes of excess or defect, they have virtue intact. Aristotle's use of the word presupposes ends and purposes toward which species metaphysically strive, as it were. Virtue means the approximate attainment of those ends and purposes.

For Aristotle the purpose of human life is to apprehend what is good, to enjoy what is good, and to be good. All are necessary to living the life according to virtue, but knowledge and understanding are goods of primary significance. One can be "moral" by acting according to precept and establishing habits in accordance with virtue, but one takes pleasure in and really accomplishes one's purposes as a human being by coming to some understanding of what we are and what we are meant to be and to know. To paraphrase the Delphic inscription, the unexamined life is really no life at all. Friendships of virtue are those friendships which are distinguished by a shared apprehension of the goods of human life. Virtuous friends in this sense wish for their friends the same good things they wish for themselves.

Now friendships of pleasure generally grow among people who are more or less equal to each other. Friendships of virtue may naturally grow out of such friendships, and such friendships are naturally and by definition far fewer than the other kinds. Bad people, Aristotle notes, do not have friendships of virtue because they can share no more than the occasions for certain kinds of pleasure. They do not desire much of what is good for themselves or for their friends because the principle of good is more or less blotted out in themselves. (This "principle of good" is a kind of ethical and intellectual predisposition, important in Aristotle's ethical theory, but subsidiary to this discussion.)

Friendships of virtue entail a higher development and cultivation of life because, in desiring those good things for another which one desires for oneself, a person demonstrates a comprehensive view of the human condition. It suggests the cultivation of conscience, fellow-feeling, and moral awareness. Aristotle says that "friendship in the primary and principle sense will be that between good men just because they are good, while those between the rest will be in virtue of some similarity" (Aristotle, *Selected Works*, trans. H. G. Apostle, Grinnell: Peripatetic Press, 1982, p. 508).

So far, however, Aristotle's theory of friendship presupposes that friendships of pleasure and virtue occur primarily among people who perceive themselves to be equals. But if **mentorship** is a kind of friendship, one of its distinguishing marks is that it takes place among people who are not in fact equal. Fortunately, Aristotle expends some energy in discussing the implications of equality and inequality in friendships, and this, I believe, helps to make Aristotle's entire discussion of friendship germane to the subject of mentorship. Equality or inequality can have to do with anything that can be measured in human life. We can say that people may be unequal because of merit, just as we can say they are unequal because of salary. (The American ideal that "All men are created equal" I understand to be a theological credo rather than a statement of fact because creation is a divine activity. Jefferson had not wished to be understood as saying that all men *are* in fact equal.)

It might be possible for a pauper and a king to be friends because of an equality of merit, but it would be difficult because of their vast inequality of wealth. They might still be friends, but the inequality would be an impediment to be overcome. One of the most powerful scenes in the *Iliad* has Priam, the King of Troy, whose sons have been killed systematically over the

course of ten years of war by Akhilleus and whose city sits upon the brink of complete ruin through war, arriving by stealth at night at the tent of Akhilleus to claim the corpse of the last and best of the sons whom Akhilleus has killed. This Trojan warrior, whose name is Hektor, had killed Akhilleus' best friend, and the pathos of the scene is heightened as the result of earlier prophecies Akhilleus had heard that his own death would follow not long after Hektor's. Akhilleus also realizes that Priam could not easily have made it to his tent without the blessing of the gods, so that it is with a kind of wonder that he remarks to Priam how fate has reduced two men of such different station and age through misery to a kind of equality.

The recognition of merit and the disposition to befriend those who have it helps to "equalize" people who would not otherwise have the occasion to be friends. Aristotle explains in a couple of different places how the recognition of merit can begin this process of equalization: by "loving rather than being loved . . . according to merit . . . unequals . . . can be equalized" (Apostle, pp. 513-4) and "whenever the feeling of affection is shown according to merit, then in a sense there arises an equality, which is indeed regarded as belonging to a friendship" (Apostle, p. 512). Now Aristotle's reference to friendships between unequals includes relationships like that between parents and children or rulers and subjects as well as between mentors and proteges; in fact, he means any relationship in which one party is in some way superior to the other. With mentorship this superiority, for the most part, will be the result of differences in age, but only because age is the matrix, as it were, of experience and wisdom. Through mentorship the inequality of the mentor and protege is resolved through a mutual regard for merits which are capable of being shared.

The friendship which mentorship represents stems from this exchange of benefits if **mentorship** fits the pattern of friendships among unequals which Aristotle describes. I would go further to say that mentorship must also be a type of friendship of virtue as Aristotle defines it because the mentor and protege value each other precisely for their virtue. This is not to say that the mentor and protege are in every situation sterling characters without mixed motive or foible, but that the relationship represents to themselves one which calls out the best they have within them. There is in the very idea of mentorship the implied apprehension of good things, and the best and finest thing for men and women is knowledge and understanding, Aristotle would argue. Thus, the idea of mentorship we have been developing implies also that the relationship is a very special type of teaching relationship, or, it might be better to say, a learning relationship, because both parties gain something of knowledge and understanding at their particular levels.

Unaccountably, almost none of the present literature on mentorship discusses what a mentor gets out of mentorship. By the account we have drawn here, it is reasonable to infer that to the mentor a potential protege represents unsullied prospects, the capacity to duplicate or expand already-valued achievements, and the more general hope of a future shaped at least in a limited framework according to the mentor's influence and seasoned judgment. The protege's aptness represents to the mentor a kind of paradise regained, and the protege's affection represents a pleasing validation of the mentor's merits. Sokrates referred to his capability of drawing philosophical truths out of his young friends as a kind of midwifery; there is in true mentorship something analogous to the generation and procreation of immortal things.

To sum up. Mentorship is an ideal of human friendship which could variously be described as an intellectual love relationship, whose offspring is the generation and sharing of wisdom and understanding. Although the friends in mentorship are unequal in some way, their shared values give them an equality necessary for friendship. For academic advisors it would be virtually impossible to put into practice a program of true mentorship. Most such attempts, whatever they might be called, turn out to be lofty examples of what Aristotle would call friendships of utility, just part of "doing one's job." In most mentorship programs I suspect

that there are probably few experiences of mentorship in this ideal sense; indeed, I suspect that real mentorship is not really the intention of such programs. Most organizers of such programs are sensible enough to realize that no one can legislate friendships, particularly friendships among unequals, and I certainly have no quarrel with anyone wishing to propose a program which mimics the qualities of true mentorship. But the best way to initiate a program of mentorship in the ideal sense, whether one is an advisor, professor, or insurance seller, would be to groom one's inner self, to make oneself intellectually beautiful by seeking to know people who have this intellectual beauty, and then learning from them and being like them, doing what they do and knowing what they know, and letting the light shine.