To See Life Grow:  
The Meaning of Mentorship

Teaching is a familiar yet elusive, common yet extraordinary, prevalent yet esoteric human phenomenon. It is an everyday experience, but its secrets have never been exhausted even in voluminous studies over the years from varied perspectives. As James (1899/1958) succinctly put it nearly a century ago: “Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application by using its originality” (pp. 23-24). The mystery lies in the inventive mind that weaves a fabric of complex pattern in the name of teaching. One of the many yarns that goes into this effort has been called mentoring.

That is to say, all teaching worthy of the name contains an element of mentoring, which brings to teaching such unique dimensions as trust, vision, and a sense of immortality. The essence of this special yarn in the fabric of teaching is captured by Fromm (1956):

While we teach knowledge, we are losing that teaching which is the most important one for human development: the teaching which can only be given by the simple presence of a mature, loving person. In previous epochs . . . the teacher was not only, or even primarily, a source of information, but his function was to convey certain human attitudes. (p. 117)

To Be Seen

One noticeable characteristic of Homo sapiens appears to be the twin needs to see and be seen, both literally and figuratively.1 To begin with, a newborn must be able to see the authentic presence of a grownup to form a fundamental sense of trust in a seemingly chaotic world. According to Buber (1965), this is indeed the key in education for humanness.

Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists—that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because this human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one’s fellow-men the great Love. Because this human being exists: therefore he must be really there, really facing the child, not merely there in spirit. (p. 98)

On the other hand, the fact that the infant is seen and taken seriously as a miracle and gift of life by a caregiving person, whose presence the child can see, confirms the new arrival as a being welcome to the human community. “The old Berkeleyan motto, esse est percipi—to be is to be perceived” (Bateson, 1958, p. 96), seems to apply here. That is why Moustakas, too, noted as follows (1966):

The significant adult must exist for the growing individual as someone there, to be met, related to and affected by, as a real person whose very

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presence helps to evolve awareness and beauty, stimulates and challenges potentialities, and provides an opportunity for expansion of self in the aesthetic and spiritual realm, as well as in intellectual pursuits. The adult can be present as an alive, genuine person. To the extent that this presence fits it will have a bearing on the emerging feelings and values of the child. (pp. 14-15)

The seed of basic trust so sown in the young life blossoms, it is hoped, into both the sense of trustfulness in the other and a parallel one of trustworthiness of the self (Erikson, 1980). While the seminal need to be seen may be salient in infancy, it continues to be important throughout one's life. In other words, a person remains in need of recognition and appreciation by a significant other (or others) so as to affirm oneself as a human being. Everyone yearns to be known, understood, and respected, not merely for who one has been and who one is, but also, and probably more critically, for the emergent self—who one can be, who one is going to be.

The need will be felt particularly poignantly by those who have tended to be ignored and forgotten. It is thus not surprising to hear both the old and young "wall because they are dead serious in a world which finds them either too young or too old to take seriously" (Blythe, 1980, p. 72).

What is sought is not praise, reward, or pity, all of which are accounting for past deeds. Rather, it is regard—an acknowledgment of one's personhood as well as trust in what is and is to come—that is desired.

No wonder, therefore, that the central character of a celebrated novel by a Black author three decades ago had this to say about the experience of not being seen (Ellison, 1952): "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds" (p. 7). No wonder, also, that women, especially those with talent, may respond particularly sharply to the experience of being regarded, being seen. As Sangiuliano put it (1980), "it is indeed heady to be affirmed and recognized for gifts that not even she has recognized in herself. It is exhilarating to suddenly discover something so deeply lodged in you: the unborn you that had been stoppered and plugged" (p. 293). The sentiments are echoed by another woman (Dinnerstein, 1977): "What female talent tends to be deprived of, starved for, is the quasi-parental nurturant support that most of us, male and female, still need in adult life from other adults" (p. 194).

Although the concept and the phenomenon of mentorship admittedly remain elusive (Merriam, 1983), many protégés have identified "the mentor's belief in and support for" them as "the most crucial aspect of the learning experience" (Moore, 1982, p. 28). Thus, some have described the mentorship as the "more hierarchical and parental, more intense and exclusionary" relationship than the "peer-palship, sponsorship, or guideship" (Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978, p. 56). If that is the case, the recognition and affirmation by a mentor may be expected to have a profound influence on the chosen few.

On the more general significance of being seen, Bettelheim (1975) noted:

It is not maximum security measures but our importance to others that keeps us going on living in our most desperate moments. Or rather, knowing how important one is to others who have come to play a significant role in our life is maximum security. (p. 162)

To See

Lest the whole process be seen as merely passive in nature, it should be remembered that the powerful effects of recognition, acknowledgment, and regard hinge upon one's actively seeing being seen. This constructive stance of the creature is at the basis of the unique human culture, of which the most important artifact is the shared "system of symbols and meanings" (Dolgin, Kemnitzer, & Schneider, 1977, p. 33). In that culture, it means much for a person to be able to see, and to feel in control of one's own life. Even when one is seeing things on the strength of the cumulative heritage, the experience of seeing with one's own eyes is critical if that person is to continue to grow. The dynamics here is captured in the English title of Piaget's book, To Understand Is to Invent (1974). In other words, "the essential thing is that in order for a child [or any other person] to understand something, he must construct it himself, he must reinvent it" (Piaget, 1972, p. 27).

In mentoring, as in child rearing, this need to see on one's own has to be carefully, if subtly, preserved and enhanced so as not to deprive the individual, who is momentarily under guidance, of motivation and dignity (Yamamoto, 1986). There must be, in both the guide and the guided, a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen. One complements the other, and the two together
help each person retain and develop his or her own idea of self as a unique, competent, and worthy being.

Often, unfortunately, the dialectic fails to hold and the desired synthesis does not take place. Among those who are in the protégé’s position, either actually or potentially, an overemphasis on the receptive need of being seen often results in such a statement as, “No one makes it in an organization without a mentor.” In fact, I know of a couple of well-meaning young academics at a medium-sized institution who, heeding an admonition of a senior colleague of this persuasion, went shopping one afternoon for a mentor at a large university nearby! Not to deny the postulated or experienced importance of mentorship (e.g., Kanter, 1977; Levinson, 1978), such a stance not only trivializes the nature of mentoring interactions but also cheapens the person who is seeking support and guidance. This can be particularly damaging to the aspiring novices, who may center their “hopes on the way things should be rather than on the way they are” (Hennig & Jardin, 1978, p. 214), thus becoming diverted from the pursuit of those goals that involve “trust in their own competence, unconcerned about whether they have a role model, mentor, or sponsor” (Speizer, 1981, p. 712).

A person has to see, and the seeing individual has then to be seen, or vice versa, to sustain development. One cannot define oneself in a satisfying and satisfactory manner either solely through recognition by others or merely through solitary efforts. In Buber’s (1965) words, “as an originator, man is solitary. He stands wholly without bonds in the echoing hall of his deeds. . . . Only if someone grasps his hand not as a ‘creator’ but as a fellow-creature lost in the world, to be his comrade or friend or lover beyond the arts, does he have an awareness and a share of mutuality” (p. 87). The paradoxical juxtaposition noted here has been observed in all sorts of creative endeavors in human life (e.g., Bruner, 1962; Fromm, 1970; Henle, 1962), which certainly include the mentoring interactions.

The importance of the intertwined experiences of being both active and receptive applies to the person in the guide’s position as well. An appreciation of this mutuality is sometimes expressed in rather simple, utilitarian terms (Halcomb, 1980; Levinson, 1978). Bloom (1982) summarized this view as follows:

While the talented individuals desperately need great teachers to complete their training, it is also highly likely that great teachers need talented individuals to teach—if their reputations are to be maintained. This symbiosis between great teachers and great students is likely to gain from the mutual interaction—one to teach well and the other to learn well. (p. 665)

However, the mentoring relationship touches upon something more fundamental than a fair trade of commodity or service between two parties as in business transactions. Moreover, mentoring is not a matter of a binding obligation one owes the other. Certainly, to cite but one example, a few male leaders of science in the American academe of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who dared to sponsor women of unusual promise under one guise or another (Smith, 1983), could not have done so primarily out of any burning sense of indebtedness, or simply “because it’s in their own interest” (Halcomb, 1980, p. 18) in the sense of career enhancement or personal glorification. For one thing, “True mentorship, far from being a showy form of emotional sympathy, is always part of a discipline of outlook and method” (Erikson, 1964, p. 174). It involves an intimate, painstaking guidance of, and an accompanying rigorous expectation for, the student to learn “how to see” (Lightman, 1984, p. 90).

To Care and to Live

Granted one may still speak of the mentor’s self-interest, the self that is relevant here is centrifugal in nature, and transcendent over time and space. In other words, what mentoring involves at its root is the matter of accepting, carrying, and giving of the torch of Life itself. Individually, “those who barter nothing of themselves become nothing” (de Saint-Exupéry, 1979, p. 30), since “life has a meaning only if one barters it day by day for something other than itself” (p. 26). Ortega y Gasset (1957) echoed this observation when he wrote:

Human life, by its very nature, has to be dedicated to something, an enterprise glorious or humble, a destiny illustrious or trivial. We are faced with a condition, strange but inexorable, involved in our very existence. On the one hand, to live is something which each one does of himself and for himself. On the other hand, if that life of mine, which only concerns myself, is not directed by me towards something, it will be disjointed, lacking in tension and in “form”. . . . If I decide to walk alone inside my own existence, egoistically, I make no progress. I arrive nowhere. I keep turning around and round in the one spot. This is the labyrinth, the road that leads nowhere,

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which loses itself, through being a mere turning round within itself. (pp. 141-142)

That nowhere is the antithesis of life. Thus, Erikson (1964) went so far as to suggest that "adult . . . is so constituted as to need to be needed lest he suffer the mental deformation of self-absorption, in which he becomes his own infant and pet” (p. 130). There are enough examples of such self-preoccupation to make his hypothesis plausible. Whether smothering or abusive, for example, some parents desperately yet unconsciously seek to fulfill their own needs through their offspring. In such cases, adults are as dependent on children as the latter are on the former, and the symbiosis often becomes quite destructive (Fromm, 1956; Young, 1964).

Given the particular social structure and cultural dynamics, furthermore, growing older seems to aggravate the devastating sense of not being needed by anybody (Blythe, 1980) and thus adds to the tendency toward narcissism. Since wealth, fame, or knowledge has little to do with a person’s maturity as a human being, self-absorption and aggrandizement are no strangers to the realm of mentoring interactions. Many an individual under the alleged nurturance and guidance of a senior has come to realize that “you are not really ‘seen’ by the one who purports to love you” (May, 1973, p. 242).

Thus, at its worst, the one who follows is merely being exploited by the presumed guide to quell the latter’s sense of stagnation and desperation. Instead of being encouraged and guided to explore and see on one’s own, the protégé is merely indoctrinated into a true believer (Hoffer, 1958) in the cult of the alleged mentor. If such a scheme of subjugation for the sake of self-glorification backfires, the result may be a violent rejection and bitter negation of a (former) student by the teacher (or for that matter, of a child by the parent), with a feud ensuing. Needless to say, the damage done can be extensive.

Unfortunately, in the experience of being guided, “proper evaluation can perhaps only be made after the spell of a powerful teacher has worn off, in the former student’s maturity, when in tranquility he can recollect influence. Influence is subtle, sometimes accidental, often mysterious” (Epstein, 1981, p. xiii). When such assessment of the experience finally arrives, the student may come to see an example of stagnation in the guide. Meanwhile, generativity, the opposite of the stagnation of self-absorption, reflects a recognition of “the irrevocable responsibility of being alive and about” (Erikson, 1962, p. 253), and requires transcendence of self-preoccupation.

Only he who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being, by necessity, the originator of others and the generator of things and ideas—only he may gradually grow the fruits of these seven stages [of human development]. I know no better word for it than ego integrity. (Erikson, 1962, p. 260)

Thus, integrity and wisdom presume the development of generativity, which Erikson called elsewhere “the human form of an instinctual drive to create and to care for new life, whether in the form of progeny, of productivity, or of creativity” (1977, p. 59).

To speak of new life is to go beyond the here and now, to see what is yet to be seen. Of the several aspects of this extension of self, a familiar one is the phenomenon of hope, namely, that of hoping for the other and, through that, hoping for the self. The experience “of seeing and being seen” is “basic for a sense of hope” (Erikson, 1977, p. 144). In turn, “hope is the ontogenetic basis of faith, and is nourished by the adult faith which pervades patterns of care” (Erikson, 1964, p. 118). That faith, and that hope, mentors offer by seeing those under their care and by guiding and encouraging the latter to see.

Bettelheim (1976) recounts a fascinating story about a child finally coming out of the suffering of infantile autism, one of the human conditions marked by hopelessness and despair.

When one such child finally emerged from her total autistic withdrawal and reflected on what characterizes good parents, she said: “They hope for you.” The implication was that her parents had been bad parents because they had failed both to feel hope for her and to give her hope for herself and her future life in this world. (p. 125)

“‘The fact is that no person can live, no ego remain intact without hope and will’ (Erikson, 1964, p. 118). More mature humans, which authentic mentors must be, thus hope and will for their charges. In so doing, the mentors themselves may catch a glimpse of their own immortality.

To See Beyond

A sense of one’s immortality may be sought and expressed in several different modes (Lifton,
The most obvious is for an individual to live on through and in one’s progeny. Ideally, this biological mode expands itself into a more social mode to encompass not only one’s own family, but also other communities, groups, and peoples and, ultimately, the whole species. An awareness of the interrelatedness of human fate can make a person of ego integrity generous in the sense of not hoarding developed skills, knowledge, and wisdom within the narrow confines of an isolated organism and, thus, of not restricting one’s care merely to those familiar and close. That person will have learned “giving and receiving in giving” (Peterson, n.d., p. 326).

Another conspicuous mode is immortality through one’s accomplishments, one’s work. “Nothing so bolsters our self-confidence and reconciles us with ourselves as the continuous ability to create, to see things grow and develop under our hand, day in, day out” (Hoffer, 1958, p. 38). Even here, however, the character of the experience of creation would change as the individual approaches the level of generativity.

In the initial phases of one’s vocational endeavors, a person is expected to show what he or she can do, often in comparison with others. Hence, the emphasis is on solo performance or on creating by oneself. As the person proceeds further, the importance, and sometimes the inevitability, of coordination and cooperation becomes clearer, thus a recognition of the significance of creating with others. Finally, if she or he continues to mature, the person may come to recognize the crucial process in any mentoring relationship, namely, that of creating through another.

This vicarious manner of creation requires the individual to see things from a higher plane than that of simple cooperation or competition for the moment. If she or he remains preoccupied with creating alone or even with others, but not trustingly and catalytically through others, it is unlikely that the person will develop into a mentor. When, in contrast, the right perspective is there, the collective result may be such an astounding phenomenon as this: “Of the 286 Nobel laureates named between 1901 and 1972, 41 percent had a master or senior collaborator who was also a Nobelist” (Lightman, 1984, p. 95).

 Granted that a master continues to work and create, the scope of that creation is well beyond the individual and his or her immediate cohort and way past the present time. In this experience, the person serving as a mentor has the satisfaction of a teacher described by Henry Adams: “A parent gives life, but as parent gives no more . . . a murderer takes life, but his deed stops there; a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops” (Peterson, n.d., p. xvi).

The torch, in other words, is entrusted in different hands, but the flame continues to burn. Perhaps Mao Tse-tung’s story of the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain serves as a relevant parable here. The man lived a long long time ago in northern China. His house faced south, but two great peaks blocked the way. Whereupon, the old fellow picked up a hoe and, accompanied by his children began digging up the mountains. His determination was admirable, but the task appeared impossible to any onlooker. As was to be expected, the Wise Old Man came along to ridicule the Foolish Old Man for such a silly attempt. Undaunted, the foolish one replied, “When I die, my children will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandchildren, and then their children and grandchildren and so to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower!” (Sidel, 1973, pp. 81-82). One can indeed affect eternity by acting through others.

The Paradox of Mentorship

Mentoring involves an experience of transcendence for the mentor and one of transformation for the protégé. The latter represents a shift in perspective, a restructuring of Weltanschauung. It follows that one of the critical functions of a mentor is iconoclastic in nature, so as to throw the person under guidance off his or her comfortable and customary perch. In other words, the mentor must make the familiar unfamiliar, thus inducing in the protégé a reexamination of the known world, a broadening of the perspective, and a bearing of the attendant sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. In this embodiment of the very spirit of human inquiry and development lies the perennial challenge for any mentor.

There are, to begin with, not many masters in any given field of human endeavor. Of these, only a fraction would qualify as mentors worthy of the name, that is, as individuals of virtuosity, vision, and wisdom. First, they need to be able to see a person yet to be born in a would-be protégé. Further, mentors must anticipate and guide the protégé to see what is yet to be seen. And, finally, mentors ought to see the world they themselves can only dream of through their faith and trust in the guided.
No wonder, then, the true mentorship is hard to find.

Unfortunately, nevertheless, mentoring has come to mean in many quarters little more than remedial tutorials for academic deficiency, provisions for therapeutic catharsis, assistance in social networking, coaching for professional skills, or apprenticeship for career advancement. In such a context, we must acknowledge that yet another human phenomenon of profundity is being threatened by a misguided attempt at popularization and standardization.

Meanwhile, the singularity of mentorship remains, deriving its uniqueness from the fact that members of the peculiar species, Homo sapiens, are “not born” human (Dubos, 1982, p. 17). To become a human being, they need to transcend the mundane realm of profane experience to attain the broader and deeper reality of the sacred. In other words, to become fully human, each “must die to this first . . . life and be reborn to a higher life, which is at once religious and cultural” (Eliade, 1959, p. 187). The ultimate significance of mentorship may rest in the assistance it renders in this critical passage. Like Socrates, mentors themselves would claim “to do no more than exercise the art of the midwife,” as they help to “deliver’ the true man that each man [bears] deep within him” (Eliade, 1959, p. 200). Inasmuch as “mankind’s greatest achievements are the products of vision” (Dubos, 1968, p. 238), a mentor helps the person under his or her care to see beyond oneself and become more fully human. At the same time, mysteriously, the mentor is being helped to fulfill further his or her own human potential.

The wondrous paradox of the whole mentoring experience is well summarized in the following words of Fromm (1958):

What does one person give to another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives of his life. . . . he gives him of that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness—of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in him. In thus giving of his life, he enriches the other person, he enhances the other’s sense of aliveness. He does not give in order to receive; giving is in itself exquisite joy. But in giving he cannot help bringing something to life in the other person, and this which is brought to life reflects back to him; in truly giving, he cannot help receiving that which is given back to him. . . . In the act of giving something is born, and both persons involved are grateful for the life that is born for both of them. (pp. 24-25)

Note
1. A similar observation was made by Mead (1978) who closed her book, Culture and Commitment, with the following words: “Today the demand that everyone listen and be listened to is the hope of an endangered but potentially self-healing world” (p. 157).

References


