

# THE ART OF MENTORING: TEACHING THAT ENGAGES THE SOUL

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the important educational issue of the art of mentoring in education, particularly regarding teachers. Using a biographical example to illustrate, I focus upon nurturing and the soul, emotional and pedagogical qualities in mentoring, and draw attention to paradoxes and issues that make mentoring an endangered activity.*

## INTRODUCTION

When I think of a mentor, an image of the individual with whom I had a special relationship immediately comes to mind. While undoubtedly people imagine a variety of traits and characteristics when they ponder upon the mentors of their life, there are nonetheless qualities in common that most mentors are likely to possess. Kerr (1996) suggested that, "the cultivation of selves" (p. 48), or nurturing, is central to good teaching. This ability to encourage growth in the soul as well as the intellect seems to be a common thread in mentors.

Kessler (2000) used the word soul to call attention to the depth dimension of human experience; to students' longings for something more than an ordinary, material, and fragmented existence (p. x). Miller (2000) supported Kessler saying that, "in our soul live our deepest feelings and longings" (p. 26). Miller (2000) further postulated that, "soul connects ego and spirit" (p. 24). This comment refers to the soul as being some sort of intersection between the conscious mind and the inner and often unconscious workings of the emotion and spirit.

Both hooks (1994) and Palmer (1998) affirmed the importance of caring for the soul of the student and provided some valuable insights on ways in which this might be accomplished. I would suggest that nurturing and caring for the soul spring from deep within a mentor's well of emotional qualities. Hargreaves (1998) proposed that, "good teaching is charged with positive emotion" (p. 835).

Furthermore, mentors commonly possess certain pedagogical qualities, like vast amounts of knowledge and masterful teaching techniques. However, Palmer (1998), is quick to confound all those who would argue that good teaching is only a set of techniques, actively rejecting such a narrow technicist model.

Despite the common elements of mentorship it is notable that the characters and backgrounds of mentors are diverse and unique. The majority of mentors' students do not share their unique character and varying backgrounds, yet mentors generally select apprentices with such similarities (Mockros, 1996). In addition, there is a paradox that a subject of mentorship faces in that he or she may learn from a mentor, but cannot be the mentor, which may be the aspiration, especially if there is already significant similarity.

Finally, it is apparent that mentors are an endangered species. Mockros (1996), almost mournfully exclaimed, "mentorship has become disturbingly scarce" (p. 26). Investigation of this issue heightens the issue of exploitation, where individuals are valued only to the extent they contribute to the production process. In such a soulless civilisation the space for nurturing and emotional

qualities has shrivelled, leaving room for little more than superficial, technical education (Kerr, 1996).

## **NURTURING**

I would suggest that nurturing is those behaviours that contribute to the evolution of the soul of the student. When I think of the nurturing of a plant, I think of the activities connected with helping that plant to grow, such as watering, fertilising and providing light. However, with regards to the nurturing of the human soul, the understanding of the behaviour that brings this about is much more limited and unclear, for individual needs are as variable as the genetic pool from which they originate. Kerr (1996) confirmed this quandary saying, "we collectively know little of the nature and conditions of nurture" (p. 40). Despite this, I will endeavour to illustrate that nurturing is a principle that permeates all of the qualities of mentorship, for mentorship and evolution of the student seem to go hand in hand. Hence, it must at least be suspected that nurturing is occurring in such relationships.

As I reflect on the mentor of my life who will symbolically be referred to as Solomon, I am filled with memories of his nurturing nature. Like a lighthouse beacon to a ship being tossed about on turbulent seas, Solomon selflessly listened and taught in a way that enriched and guided me through some of the storms of my life. I always recall feeling cared for personally, in fact on one occasion during an emotional interview, tears were shed, and in the context of a comforter he embraced me and kissed my cheeks. I can think of no better word to describe this behaviour than nurturing.

In mentorship there is a fine line between nurturing and domination, for the student in his reverie of the mentor is likely to encourage as much input as possible from the mentor which could quickly turn to control. Kerr (1996) highlighted the difficulty in determining the difference between nurture and domination saying, "we are commonly hard pressed to discern the difference. It [nurture] has something to do with love, but then domination sometimes masquerades in the cloak of love" (p. 40).

## **THE SOUL**

The soul is the obvious source and destination of nurturing behaviour. It is interesting to me that hooks (1994) spoke of the importance of teaching in a manner, "that respects and cares for the souls of [the] students" (p. 13), while Palmer (1998) referred to teaching as engaging the soul of the teacher. Firstly, both recognise the necessity of soul. In addition, while hooks referred to caring for the soul of the student and Palmer suggested teaching requires the soul of the teacher, they are both essentially saying the same thing. If a teacher engages the soul in teaching, the student's soul can subsequently be cared for and communicated with, as "deep speaks to deep" (Palmer, 1998, p. 31).

As a mentor guides a student across the stage of life, the soul dances in the light cast upon the stage by a deeper understanding that shines out of the mentor's counsel and care. Kerr (1996) confirmed this, suggesting that the, "self is nurtured by having a place to learn to recognize and cherish one's own experiences . . . Only in such a space can the soul dance" (p. 47). Perhaps, only such a person (as a mentor) can reveal such a place. Palmer (1998) suggested that good teachers are the source of the students' ability to interpret their own

experiences, saying good teachers, "are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p. 11). In their efforts to offer such insights and open such spaces, mentors employ various emotional and pedagogical qualities.

## **EMOTIONAL QUALITIES OF MENTORSHIP**

It is no secret that humans are creatures of emotion (Peck, 1978). Anyone that would question this has only to turn inwards for a moment to become aware of the numerous currents of emotional energy that flow in and out of consciousness. In light of this truth it might with some measure of accuracy be supposed that students who are not educated emotionally by instruction and the modelling of advanced emotional behaviour will find themselves reeling on an ocean of unregulated emotion. Unfortunately, emotional intelligence has often been overlooked or undervalued. If or when this occurs, society itself suffers from the lack in this area.

Despite this ominous admission, it seems that mentors possess the ability to fuse their teaching with emotion, which adds to the emotional understanding of the student, enabling him or her to unravel meaning from experience and behaviour. When this occurs, the dance of the soul has begun. Thus mentors, like "good teachers are not just well-oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835). Some of the emotional qualities that might be employed in the production of the aforementioned environment include passion, dedication, intuition, and a caring disposition.

### **Passion**

Passion is the cornerstone of mentorship in my opinion. It is this emotion that ignites and inspires the intellect of the mentor. It is this emotion that is made manifest in the dedication, intuition, caring, and overall emotional labour of the mentor. Without passion, dedication dissipates to punching in and out of work. Without a passion for the subject, caring is condemned, for caring is found only for valuable things, and passion is a powerful indication of value. While the student may still be valued, despite a lack of passion for the subject, there is little to care for. The fundamental reason for the student/teacher relationship - even the subject matter, which provides the opportunities to care, is not valued. Without passion, intuition conforms to the expectations and ideas of an institution. Without passion, emotional labour will be motivated only inasmuch as it ensures job security.

### **Dedication**

In one study on inspirational teachers, 100 preservice teachers were asked to recollect memories in support of the best teacher in their educational experience.

It was found that, "without exception these inspirational teachers actively demonstrated a strong commitment to students and their needs" (Burke & Nierenberg, 1998, p. 349). Solomon, my mentor introduced earlier, was always available to deal with the needs of his students. The extent of his influence and the

degree of his dedication would have him assisting students, often until the early hours of the morning. Mathews (1988) suggested that, "special teachers succeeded because they extended themselves" (p. 218). I believe this extension of self has its roots deep within the soil of altruism. Jaime Escalante, a teacher who achieved remarkable results with underprivileged students was willing to sacrifice. "He ate with them. He agonized with them . . . He would not leave them until it was dark" (Mathews, 1988, p. 213).

### **Caring Disposition**

In the Burke and Nierenberg study (1998), caring was perceived by participants to be the most important quality of an inspirational teacher. This makes sense when it is understood that the most important need the average individual seeks to satisfy, is the need to feel important. This feeling of importance is quickly experienced when a teacher shows care, for the teacher is saying through such behaviour that the student is valuable and hence qualifies to be cared for. Solomon would frequently take time to sit with his students and simply listen and talk to them of things unrelated to his subject. These encounters made me feel important and nurtured my sense of self-worth, for "nurture has something to do with listening carefully to each others' stories" (Kerr, 1996, p. 41).

### **Intuition**

Mentors and good teachers seem to possess the ability to sense the needs of the student, and in "reading the inner life of their students, know when to engage . . . and when to keep a distance from them" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 836). Solomon was masterful in the way that he could read his audience, and meet its needs. On one occasion when the class was waning, he picked up a student on the front row by the collar and proceeded to shout into his face, "Do you understand me?", much to the amusement and consequent arousal of the rest of the class. While this was undoubtedly risky, he was able to pull it off because his students knew that he genuinely cared for them and were also aware that he was joking. Furthermore, his unwary participants were carefully selected from among the more confident students. His unorthodox, lively approach made every teaching experience an emotional roller coaster ride that would take me from sidesplitting laughter to tears. This intuitive teaching style enabled Solomon to gauge and meet the needs of his students amidst the fluctuating milieu of emotion.

### **PEDAGOGICAL QUALITIES**

Active participation as defined by hooks (1994) was an important aspect of effective teaching, however I can scarce recall a time when Solomon invited active participation in his lessons. Frequently he would speak for up to two hours non-stop. Surprisingly, I found these experiences incredibly interesting, and was often drawn into deep, life altering, internal thought and analysis by the material he presented. I echo the words of Palmer when he said, "he generously opened the life of his mind to me, giving full voice to the gift of thought" (Palmer, 1998, p. 22). Solomon frequently shared personal experiences that illustrated how the material applied to reality. The material he was teaching was religious doctrine, which I had been learning for as long as I can remember, but somehow he revealed age-old doctrines to me on a whole new level. The profundity of his teachings and

his uncommon amounts of knowledge invigorated and refreshed my mind and spirit.

Palmer affirmed the possibility of having this type of experience despite the apparent neglect of interactive methodology when he proposed that, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique" (Palmer, 1998, p. 10). Perhaps the passion he had for the material and his depth of knowledge in the field, coupled with the love he had for the students, produced a desire to convey his wisdom in a way that might help us to grow.

Solomon had a voice that could captivate an audience regardless of the content of his message. It would range from soft, gentle tones, to levels that would impress Pavarotti. He also used gestures, body language and facial expressions to entertain and accentuate his ideas.

Solomon allowed his personality to overflow into every aspect of his teaching. Who he was, was the way he taught. This made him susceptible to personal attacks, for any criticism of his teaching would essentially be an assault on his personality and character, and it also exposed his character to those he taught. Palmer also reinforced the necessity of connecting with students and how this was dependent on him trusting himself and making his selfhood, "available and vulnerable in the service of learning" (Palmer, 1998, p. 10).

## **APPRENTICE SELECTION AND THE PARADOX IT PRODUCES**

Mentorship appears to be a phenomenon that occurs when the teacher/student relationship is intellectually stimulating to both, and where there is an emotional bond. Evidence of these elements of mentorship can be seen in the relationship between Plato and Socrates. This is the point where mentorship separates from good teaching. It is only natural to assume that an emotional bond is most likely to arise as interactions expose commonalities. Hence, "mentors typically choose to work with apprentices who are similar in character and background to themselves" (Mockros, 1996, p. 27). Alas, most undergraduate students do not encounter rich and sustained mentorship during their tertiary studies. Thus, the majority travel the academic information highway isolated from close relationships with esteemed professionals. This is sad, but is nonetheless the natural order; like friendship, mentorship cannot be manufactured indiscriminately.

Tangled up in this issue is the paradox that, while students may learn from a mentor, they cannot be the mentor. This is paradoxical because in the first instance there already tends to be similarities between the student and mentor, thus it appears the student is already well on the way to becoming the mentor, and has only to add a little learning to the equation. Secondly, the information shared is a part of who they are. Therefore, one might understandably imply that sharing a part of oneself with another makes the other a little more like oneself. Despite this apparent contradiction, the paradox remains true, for while a student can be similar to the mentor, and learn much of what is a part of the mentor's nature in the course of their relationship, the dance of the soul takes place amidst the student's perceptions, which are a product of their personal life experience. Thus, the student cannot be the mentor and the mentor must never suggest the student should try. For the moment such an effort is made the mentor leaves the land of nurturing and enters the dark domain of domination.

## MENTORSHIP - AN ENDANGERED OCCUPATION

It is becoming increasingly evident that mentors are sliding swiftly down the slope of extinction. One reason proposed for this problem was that, "there are simply too many young people relative to the number of senior professionals available to mentor them" (Mockros, 1996, p. 26). Perhaps the vast increase of young people in tertiary institutions has produced demands well beyond the capacity of the mentor 'market'. The evolution of the soul seems desired only to the degree that it contributes to production power. This is undoubtedly a level that does not mandate mentoring. As the soul dances in such a civilisation the only light cast upon the stage of life from which to draw meaning is, "our experiences as they would enhance production and consumption" (Kerr, 1996, p. 44).

This produces substantial strain on those mentors that persevere, fighting against this trend. When talking to Solomon I would sometimes feel guilty as I thought of the demands on his time and how I was adding to the pressure in his life. Like a dollar-a-day donation to feed the starving millions of the world, there was simply not enough of Solomon to meet the demands of the masses over which he had influence. Mockros (1996) endorsed this difficulty saying, "the demands on successful older professionals are extensive and overwhelming" (p. 26).

## CONCLUSION

Hopefully it has been made evident that the emotional and pedagogical skills of mentoring are in deep need of finding their way to fruition in the lives of students, as they seek to find meaning in life. Unfortunately, it is also apparent that there has never been more strain or threat to mentorship. Thus, those who have basked in the light of mentorship must cherish such experiences and those who seek it must be willing to risk searching in vain.

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