

Got a Minute?

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered Mother's Day, May 10, 2015

Are you my mother? That's the title of a classic children's picture book that's been read to kids for nearly 50 years. It's the story of a baby bird who hatches into an empty nest and sets off in search of its mother. The chick doesn't have much success, first asking a kitten, a hen, a dog and a cow, "Are you my mother?" Then it asks a car, a boat, a plane, and finally a steam shovel. At last, the bird recognizes its mother and the answer is obvious, "You are a bird, and you are my mother."

While I hope it's not as frustrating as this bird's quest, how often have we been on our own journeys and wondered, "Are you my mentor?"

As we just heard in the story, a mentor is a decidedly different thing than a hero. The author realized the difference was that heroes were inaccessible, they weren't connected on a personal level, they were beyond reach and possibly even objects of worship. She, in a mothering and mentoring role, was entirely different from that.

There is a distinct difference between heroes and mentors, and then there are role models, which might even overlap with heroes or with mentors, but not both at the same time.

Marketing and branding guru Seth Godin, whose blog I like to read, says this about mentors and heroes:

"Mentors provide tailored guidance. They take a personal interest in you. On the other hand, heroes live their lives in public, broadcasting their model to anyone who cares to look.

The internet has created a long tail of heroes. There are tens of thousands of musicians, artists, entrepreneurs, social leaders, politicians (okay, maybe not thousands of these), and colleagues to find and emulate. WWHD, or rather WWMHD. What would my hero do?

I find heroes everywhere I look. I find people who speak to me over my shoulder, virtual muses, who encourage me to solve a problem or deal with a situation the way they would. This is thrilling news, because there are so many heroes, so freely available, whenever we need them.

For all the people out there using the fact that Jeff Bezos, creator of Amazon, or some other huge figure, for all the people out there using the fact that they won't be their mentor as an excuse for inaction, there are a dozen who realize that their example is enough.

Like a custom made suit (he says), a mentor is a fine thing to have if you can find or afford it. But for the rest of us, heroes will have to do."¹

I have to say that I'm glad for the heroes and the role models that I can find so many of, watching their videos on the internet, reading their stories and ideas in books, and yes, I've

¹ http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2010/10/heroes-and-mentors.html

even read the book *The Everything Store* about the life and entrepreneurial magic of Jeff Bezos. Like Seth, I've found lots of heroes and folks that I look up to. Mentors, and those who have mothered us and shared their wisdom, mentors are quite a bit fewer in number, but that much more precious.

Relationship, wisdom, and guidance were key features in the first-ever mentor, well, I'm sure she wasn't the first ever mentor – there've been mentors as long as there's been sentient life, but the first time the word Mentor is used. It's in Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, when Telemachus gets ready to go out in search of his father, Odysseus, he is visited by a rather helpful figure whose name is Mentor. As the omniscient third person in the tale, we get to see that Mentor is really the goddess Athena in disguise, sharing the wisdom and guidance that she is known for.

Now it's probably the rare mentor that accompanies someone on an epic quest whose story will be read for thousands of years. Most mentors are a bit more on the scale of real life. But there are a variety of types of mentors.

One commonly thought of type of mentor is a professional mentor, someone who specifically helps someone else advance or grow in their career. Sometimes it's a formal or prescribed arrangement and many times it isn't. Most often this is what folks think of when they think of a mentor.

I've had a number of folks that are this type of mentor myself. I have one official mentor – this is actually a denominational requirement for me as a new minister, to have an official mentor for my first three years as a minister. And I've had many other non-official mentors and guides along the way, too. From my time as an elementary school teacher, I had mentors – experienced, long-time teachers that took newbies under their wing to help us find our feet and thrive during our early years.

Then there are mentors that we might call life mentors. When I've asked folks to talk about their mentors, it's often these life mentors that they talk about first.

I turned to my mother very specifically as a mentor for me after my daughter was born. I remember the question that opened this facet of our relationship: "Uh, Mom, how do you dress a baby?" Here I was, surrounded by a pile of a wide variety of clothes, some more appropriate for winter despite the fact it was May. Diapers I got down quickly, but I rapidly learned that helping to take care of my younger siblings and babysitting as a teenager hadn't quite prepared me for parenting. And so my Mom became my mothering mentor in a way that all the self-help books in the world would never be able to do.

Someone once asked if there was such a thing as a negative mentor – probably not thinking about a bad mentor but rather someone who demonstrates what NOT to do. Know anyone like that? I think they're probably more a negative role model than a negative mentor.

Professional or career mentors, life mentors, and then there's one last kind of mentor I want to talk about today – our spiritual mentors. They are guides along our spiritual journeys, folks who

challenge us and provoke us and help us to find our path. They might be dream guides, journaling teachers, or maybe spiritual directors. Sometimes spiritual directors are formal relationships that one pays for and sometimes they are not. But I do want to point out that spiritual mentors are different from spiritual role models or folks who are sources for inspiration, authors of our favorite books or our favorite radio shows. Being a mentor implies a relationship and intentional personalized guidance, although I hope that we have many sources for spiritual inspiration as well.

Are you my mentor?

What is it that makes a relationship a mentoring one and not any of these others – coaching, role models, heroes, and the like. What’s unique to mentoring?

At its foundation, it’s a personal relationship. As Seth Godin noted, this is completely different from heroes or even role models that are more personally distant – a mentor and a mentee have a personal relationship. And it’s a relationship where the mentor takes a personal interest in the growth and development of their mentee.

The question “are you my mentor” isn’t really all that effective, because if someone is actually asking that question, then it’s likely that they aren’t. Kind of like the chick who asked a variety of animals and then other objects, are you my mother. The question changed into a statement when the chick actually found her: “you ARE my mother.” Often the mentoring relationship begins without the words actually getting attached to it, with the result being instead a realization at some point in time – oh, you’ve been mentoring me all along. You ARE my mentor.

It’s usually the mentor that takes interest first and begins to guide rather than the other way around. In fact, some folks find mentoring requests to be awkward. Oprah Winfrey, who has surely had hundreds of requests for mentoring admits that it’s uncomfortable for her when someone asks her for mentoring. Instead, she sees it as her initiation – she once said, “I mentor when I see something and say, I want to see that grow.”²

But that growth doesn’t always come easily. Instead it’s usually a mix of support and challenge. I once had an unusual moment when a hero of mine turned into a mentor for a brief moment – then later back to hero status again. I was in a UU theology class taught by Rebecca Parker – then the president of Starr King seminary and largely the reason I chose to go there. We were preparing the first in a series of short papers, and we were asked to bring our draft to class where we would break into pairs and critique each other’s papers. As chance had it, I was the odd person out, so my partner to review my paper ended up being none other than Dr. Parker. The mentoring she gave me over the next twenty minutes proved to be invaluable as she critiqued and thoroughly tore apart my paper, which was admittedly a rougher draft than I really should have brought to class. Yes, I was embarrassed but more importantly I was

² Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In*, from chapter 5.

challenged, guided, and motivated – that’s the mentoring part. Folks commented for the rest of my seminary how well my papers were written – thanks to that tiny moment of mentoring that she gave me.

There’s something in a mentoring relationship for the mentors as well as those they are mentoring. At its heart, it’s a reciprocal relationship – each side is getting something different out of it, but both are benefitting from it. One of my greatest pleasures is getting to mentor other folks – I love to see their growth and changes and know that I was a little part of that. To me it doesn’t even matter if I’m the only one that knows it – just to be able to see the difference I may have made is enough for me. Some might describe it as a sense of fulfillment or of pride or perhaps of having seen a little of themselves in the person they invested their time and attention in – that’s one of the useful sides of projection!

The attention, the sensitivity, the sharing of experiences, the challenges, the reciprocity – mentoring could be described as love – as love in action, loving someone in a constructive way. I think all of these were what Jennifer Reagan McCleery experienced as her father opened her to the world of reading. Here’s her story:

“I was not a good reader as a girl. It’s not that I had a disability; I just couldn’t muster the interest to tackle anything too challenging. My tastes ran to Archie comic books and the *Sweet Valley High* series, with a healthy dose of *YM* and *Teen Beat* magazines thrown in.

When my mother began to despair of my ever becoming a serious reader, my father took matters in hand. Every evening, we would sit on the white couch in the living room, and he would read to me.

This was our ritual: He would read for twenty minutes or so, then take a break to prepare a cup of coffee. (Occasionally I would be allowed to join him with a cup that was mostly milk.) Then he would continue reading, stopping periodically to take a sip. In the summers we moved to the screened-in porch, and his hot coffee was replaced with iced tea.

We worked our way through much of the children’s canon: *The Secret Garden*, *The Yearling*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Watership Down*, *Treasure Island*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Alone, I still struggled through books, but listening to him read, I was able to savor them.

A large part of what I enjoyed was getting to sit close to my father, feeling his reliable presence, smelling the coffee on his breath, and knowing that this was time carved out for just the two of us. That he must have enjoyed our time together as much as I did didn’t occur to me until years later.

The last book we read together was *Gone with the Wind*. I am almost embarrassed to say how old I was at the time. No other sixteen-year-olds I knew were being read to by their fathers.

My father did for me what I couldn't do on my own, and when he finally stopped reading to me, I was able to go it alone, to read well and with joy."³

Mentoring is a form of love.

A favorite chalice lighting here at First U reminds me a lot of mentoring, the one by Albert Schweitzer. "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."⁴ Mother's Day is a time when we appreciate our mothers and the impact they have had with us. Let us also reach out to our mentors today. Let us think of those who have lighted and nurtured the flame within us and hold them with love and gratitude. May we also appreciate the relationships where we are the guides and the nurturers, lighting and even fanning the flame in others. May we hold these moments of love in action and these relationships where love guides us through. May it be so.

³ Jennifer Reagan McCleery, from Readers Write In, *Sun Magazine*, October 2012.

⁴ *Singing the Living Tradition*, #447.