

Why Do I Want to Be a Mentor and How Do I Get Good at It?

Friendship as a Model for Mentoring

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Why or When?

The panel title, “Why Do I want to be a Mentor and how do I get good at it?” poses a two-part question. I’d like to take up each part in turn. The short answer to why do I want to be a mentor is “because that’s the profession we are in.” Part of our job as academics, I presume, is to mentor at least some of the students we teach. Some aspects of mentoring are formalized: we advise undergraduate majors and supervise graduate students as part of our routine. Of course, advising and even supervising do not necessarily constitute mentoring. I have mentored students for whom I have not formally served as faculty advisor or dissertation supervisor. And conversely, there are advisees, even dissertation advisees, whom I can’t really claim to have mentored, especially in any kind of “thick” description of that word, which I take to mean faculty members who have profound influence on the students’ intellectual development and vocational formation, within their formal education and beyond. The answer to “why mentor?” is simply that it can be enormously gratifying and beneficial to both faculty and student alike.

Still this prior question, “why do I want to be a mentor?” suggests that some pause be given before jumping headlong into this pool. For me, an equally pressing question, in addition to “Why do I want to be a Mentor?” is “When do I become a Mentor?” The pressures to fulfill tenure requirements, especially in the arena of research and publications, can be enormous, and time and energy spent working with students on *their* research and professional development is time and energy *not* spent of the professor’s own research and professional development. Should a non-tenured faculty supervise a doctoral dissertation? Or advise an undergraduate honor’s thesis? I’m not sure there’s a “one-size fits all” approach to these issues, and institutions will vary in their expectations. Junior faculty, to the degree that they have some autonomy in the matter, will want to weigh the local demands for tenure at their institutions over against the investment of time and energy required to mentor students.

How do I get good at it?

Assuming the time is right for the heavy lifting of mentorship, what does it look like and “how do I get good at it?”—this is the second part of our question. Those committed to the mentoring task will want to be cognizant of issues of professional protocols involving power, gender, and ethnic dynamics (the recent professional conduct policy distributed by John Kutsko is a good reminder in this area). Working within those institutional and professional protocols, let me suggest one way to think about “good mentoring.”

While reading James McClendon’s volume on *Ethics*, published in 1986, during my first year at Baylor, I stumbled onto an example that has remained with me my entire career (McClendon 1986, 41). McClendon cited a passage from Gregory’s *Panegyric*, an encomium to his teacher, Origen, in which he praised Origen’s habit of making friends with his students. McClendon used the story as a way to justify beginning his three-volume *Systematic Theology* with ethics rather than dogmatics. For me, however, the example, however flawed, permanently

lodged in my mind as one way to conceptualize the mentor-student relationship. Here is Gregory's description:

And thus [Origen] continued to do with us, until, by pouring in upon us many such argumentations, one after the other, he at last carried us off somehow or other by a kind of divine power . . . and established us (in the practice of philosophy), and set us down without the power of movement, as it were, beside himself by his arts. Moreover, *the stimulus of friendship* was also brought to bear upon us—a stimulus, indeed, not easily withstood, but keen and most effective—the argument of a kind and affectionate disposition, which showed itself benignly in his words when he spoke to us and associated with us. . . . his desire was with . . . a most benevolent mind, to . . . make us partakers in the blessings that flow from philosophy. (*Pan.* VI)

For Gregory, Origen's mentoring fit within the rubric of "friendship." Friendship in late antiquity, of course, took on many forms (about which both my fellow panelists know abundantly more than do I!). Here in Gregory's encomium of Origen, it is significant that the friendship described takes place in the context of an educational academy (rather than say another kind of political or social institution). Gregory imagines teacher and student side-by-side engaged in the study of a discipline, bound together by affection both for each other and the subject (for a modern advocate of this scenario, see Palmer 1997).

Note well: Gregory is not describing a situation in which he and Origen are "BFF"s or "chums." Friendship in late antiquity did not necessarily presume emotional intimacy or even equality between friends. But it could, and often did, involve *paideia*. According to Cicero, friendship "in the form of advice and instruction, was long institutionalized between the young [men] and older, influential and experienced persons" (Fiore 1997, 74; cf. Cicero *Cato major* 9.28-29). This version of friendship also involved "frankness of speech" (*parrhēsia*) or "candid criticism," (Fitzgerald 2007, 288), at least on the part of Origen, the teacher. In fact, this "frankness of speech" separated friends from flatterers, according to Plutarch. In the mentor-student form of friendship, of course, the candid criticism tended to move mostly in one direction, as Gregory notes: "And whenever [Origen] perceived any element of infirmity or baseness in our mind . . . he pricked it with his discourses" (*Pan.* VII). Elsewhere he compared being on the receiving end of Origen's frank speech to being "pierced by an arrow" (*Pan.* VI). Evidently, Origen's "benign words" occasionally included some stinging critiques! It is this kind of friendship, in which student and teacher are devoted both to each other and to the discipline and grounded in "candid criticism" that provides a useful model for mentoring.

Such mentoring does not demand a particular shape or form. Two undergraduate professors were significant mentors to me, but represent very different modes of mentoring. Dr. M was my undergraduate academic advisor. His door was always open, and he was always available for counsel on any variety of topics. He simply sparkled in the classroom, and he was an exacting and demanding teacher. But it was his availability outside class that was unique in my experience. His home, which sat just on the edge of campus, was always open to students, and we played Spades or Hearts at his house once a week. Between hands, we discussed pre-Socratic philosophy or Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom or whatever else had been the subject of lectures that week. We saw him interact with his spouse and kids in the rough and tumble intimate space of his home. As a first-generation college student from a rural area in NC, Dr. M. was the first intellectual I had ever encountered. His influence on me was profound and permanent. What I learned from Dr. M. was that mentoring requires an enormous investment of time in students.

My second undergraduate mentor could not have been more different than Dr. M in temperament and style. Prof. C taught New Testament at the university I attended in the UK. I never met Prof. C.'s spouse; I was never in his home. He was not a "warm" person. He was an eccentric academic. He smoked a pipe (even in the classroom), wore a trench coat regardless of the weather, rode a scooter everywhere, and donned a cleric's collar at every academic and social function—the only Baptist minister I've ever known to do so. But he took a special interest in my intellectual development. He prodded me to go deeper in my thinking. He suggested books for further reading. He critiqued my arguments and interpretations in tutorials. What Prof. C modelled for me (other than how to scare the crap out of students) was a love for his discipline that was infectious. His syllabus was the old fashioned kind—full lectures on the topic typed and mimeographed. He delivered them from memory almost word for word, rarely stopping to entertain questions. You would think that would be the recipe for the worst kind of pedagogy—certainly advocates of interactive and student oriented learning would tell us that today. But the clarity of his thought and the brilliance of his rhetoric were spell-binding. He was a mentor of the most unusual sort. I learned that mentors need not have an "open door" policy to be effective, but they must have a prerequisite love of, and expertise in, their discipline. Mentors must be fully invested in their academic fields, or they may have nothing to share of substance or permanence with students. My graduate school mentor brought these same commitments to student and subject together in equal measures.

Mentoring that is grounded in a dual commitment to subject and student will take differing shapes depending on whether the student is an undergraduate, theological, or doctoral student. In my own context, I deal regularly with undergraduate and doctoral students, so I will focus my remaining remarks on those two relationships.

Mentoring undergraduate students in my context is a challenge because most of them are pursuing majors other than Religion. Almost every student is required to take two religion classes. So the majority of students I encounter in the gen. ed. Religion course are not pre-professional Religion majors, but Pre-med, pre-law, engineering, English, Classics, and Philosophy majors. My mentoring of these students, when it occurs, revolves around exploring questions raised in class in more depth, making connections to other disciplines, or providing counsel regarding graduate or professional schools. The shared subject with undergraduates is usually not the academic study of the Bible, but the tools of critical analysis of texts that such study requires.

Mentoring doctoral students typically takes on the shape of an apprenticeship. Here the discipline squarely takes center stage: 1) Working with students to refine the style and substance of a seminar paper or dissertation, or 2) dry runs listening to early versions of presentations for professional meetings, or 3) helping them find their "academic voice," or 4) co-authoring essays or presentations, or 5) introducing them into the professional guild, or 6) guiding them through the maze of the job search. Such mentoring can extend well into the early years of a former student's career; the challenge is nurturing that relationship into a higher form of "friendship between equals" (cf. Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 9.4.5), in which the "frankness of speech" now flows more or less freely in both directions (Konstan 1997, 152).

This shared love of the discipline is undergirded by what Gregory called a "benign and affectionate and most benevolent" attitude toward the student, or what one of my students remarked when asked what makes a good mentor, "empathy—the ability to remember what it was like to be a graduate student!" The dual focus on subject and student, in the shared academic discourse of "candid criticism," keeps the relationship from being an arid and bloodless

enterprise, on the one hand, and from deteriorating into a vacuous personality cult—a toxic relationship grounded in the emotional needs of the mentor, on the other.

Two closing comments. First, students increasingly are the ones who initiate the choice of mentors, and not vice versa; in other words, in many cases, the wand really does choose the wizard. In those cases, the mentor will need to discern whether that relationship is worthy of the requisite demands. Second, as I hope has become clear, in my opinion, there is no “how to” handbook to mentoring. It is not a “cookie cutter” technique but a habituated pattern of academic life. Again, Gregory notes this of Origen: “he stimulated us more by the deeds he did than by the doctrines he taught” (*Pan.* IX).

Mentoring is costly in terms of time and energy, and time and energy are finite commodities. One must discern how that time and energy are best spent and with whom and on what. But mentoring is also enormously rewarding and a gift—to the students, to the guild, and ultimately, I would submit, to the mentors themselves.

Works Cited

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