



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Literature and the Real
Meaning of Mentorship
(*Friendship*, pp. 76-83)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2008 The Center for Christian Ethics

The Real Meaning of Mentorship

Mentors give themselves over entirely to engendering in their chosen pupils essential qualities of character or skills that are crucial to the continuance of a practice or way of life. In our Christian churches we must recapture this original meaning of mentorship if for no others, then for our children.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 13:1-20

Meditation[†]

To speak of friendship with God can sound so cozy and consoling, as if we are all snuggling up to God; however, there is no riskier vulnerability than to live in friendship with God, because every friendship changes us, because friends have expectations of each other, and because friends are said to be committed to the same things.... Any friend of God is called to faithfully embody the ways of God in the world, even to the point of suffering on account of them. There may be grace and glory in being a friend of God, but there is also clearly a cost.

Paul J. Wadell

Reflection

Even though mentorship is an especially valuable form of friendship, it is increasingly scarce today. Our consumerist, individualist, and hyper-egalitarian ways frustrate and weaken mentorship relationships, Vigen Guroian notes. We continue to use the term "mentor" widely in education, business, and popular culture, but "our contemporary usage ignores, even contradicts...the defining characteristics of mentorship."

To understand why genuine mentorship is scarce today, consider how this relationship differs from ordinary friendship.

- ▶ *For reasons that are their own, mentors freely initiate the mentorship relationship with the persons they choose.* We see this clearly in the performing arts when a master selects a protégé for special instruction. Their relationship "is asymmetrical and discriminative. The mentor has a vital stake in choosing the right pupil. And she gives herself over entirely to engendering in the pupil essential qualities of character or skills that are not merely private or personal but ultimately crucial to the continuance of a practice, special art form, or way of life."
- ▶ *Mentors are superior in experience, knowledge, and skills to those whom they mentor.* While the intensely personal relationship makes a pupil feel special, he or she willingly acknowledges and submits to the master's authority. The learning is mostly one-way, as the pupil masters the wisdom, virtues, and practical skills that the mentor is so generously sharing.
- ▶ *Mentors introduce pupils to a world of life that previously was beyond their ken.* Since masters share ways of being, seeing, and acting their pupils could never gain on their own, masters are indispensable. They are not making up new ways of life, but are living and sharing mysterious disciplines and complex practices. "Mastery



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2008 The Center for Christian Ethics

of the art” the mentor shares “is equivalent to participation in a mystery much greater than the self or of any one generation.”

“Our forgetfulness of the true meaning of ‘mentor’ has a cost,” Guroian warns, since “true mentorship is vital to culture and the growth and flourishing of education and the arts, in particular.” This is why he favors teaching children at an early age the meaning of genuine mentorship “through reflection upon great literature, and especially literature for children, in which the mentorial relationship and its value are portrayed.”

Mentorship, of course, is also vital to Christian discipleship. Jesus mentored the Twelve – “his own who were in the world” (John 13:1) – to know him (and, through him, to know the Father) and to re-present God’s love in the world. Even as he reminded them “servants are not greater than their master,” he washed their feet. It was a sacramental act – for it enacted God’s grace that transcends his simple deed – and a mysterious one. To Peter he said, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand” (13:7). By his simple act Jesus exemplified God’s love for them and called them to love one another.

Study Questions

1. How is mentorship different from ordinary friendship?
2. As you review its defining features, discuss why genuine mentorship is growing scarce today in our consumerist, individualist, and hyper-egalitarian society.
3. In what ways is becoming a disciple of Christ a mentorial relationship? Who has mentored you in faithful discipleship?
4. “The office of teacher is inherently suited to the role of mentor,” Vigen Guroian writes, “but we have so democratized and bureaucratized it that genuine mentorial possibilities are nearly precluded.” Do you agree?
5. What great literature does Guroian commend for teaching our children the meaning and value of genuine mentorship?

Departing Hymn: “Savior, Teach Me Day by Day” (verses 1, 4, and 5)

Savior, teach me day by day
love’s sweet lesson to obey;
sweeter lesson cannot be,
loving him who first loved me.

Love in loving finds employ
in obedience all her joy;
ever new that joy will be,
loving him who first loved me.

Thus may I rejoice to show
that I feel the love I owe;
singing, till your face I see,
of his love who first loved me.

Jane E. Leeson (1842), alt.

Suggested Tunes: POSEN or ALETTA

† Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 10.

The Real Meaning of Mentorship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how mentorship is a distinctive form of friendship, and to consider why genuine mentorship is scarce today.
2. To consider how mentorship is essential in the Christian life.
3. To discuss how we might use literature to teach our children the meaning and value of genuine mentorship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Friendship (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Savior, Teach Me Day by Day” locate the familiar tune POSEN or ALETTA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“Recently ‘mentor’ has become a much-used word in the popular culture,” notes Vigen Guroian. “Celebrities on radio and television urge us to join in community service by volunteering our time to be mentors to children who are in need of grown-up company and guidance. Businesses and schools institute mentoring programs in which experienced persons are assigned to instruct junior colleagues and coworkers in job skills.” Yet he notes that this “contemporary usage ignores, even contradicts...the defining characteristics of mentorship” (*Friendship*, 76).

What are we missing today about the true meaning and value of mentorship, and what does that lack reveal about our culture? More importantly, how can we recover this special kind of friendship in our lives?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by seeking God’s blessing for mentoring relationships in members’ lives—to give thanks for masters who have mentored members as disciples, and to seek God’s enabling grace in guiding individuals whom members are called to mentor.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 13:1-20 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Mentorship is a distinctive form of friendship linking people of unequal knowledge, virtue, and authority. It is characterized by the pupils’ obedience toward their master. In this study we trace Vigen Guroian’s exploration of the real meaning of mentorship, its continuing value for education and discipleship, and some reasons for the scarcity of mentorship relationships today.

In “Literature and the Real Meaning of Mentorship,” Guroian sketches the rich literary portrayals of mentoring in E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books*, Felix Salten’s *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*, and William Faulkner’s “The Old People” in *Go Down, Moses*, because these winsome stories can help children grasp the significance of mentorship. If members are familiar with some of these original stories (rather than the cartoon versions), you can focus discussion on them. Encourage members to explore Jesus’ washing his disciples’ feet as a crucial mentorship experience for the Twelve.

Study Questions

1. Ordinary friendships differ from mentorship in regard to each of the defining features of mentorship outlined in the study guide. The central difference is that friends in an ordinary friendship are (approximately) equal in knowledge, virtue, and skills. Thus, they can mutually care for, instruct, correct, and assist one another. This mutuality is evident in other aspects of the relationship: ordinary friends discover or choose each other. Ordinary friends help one another grow in knowledge, goodness, and ability. They will respect and obey the other friend who has more expertise in a specific context, but over the course of their friendship this obedience and respect does not go (primarily) one way.

Guroian reminds us that Aristotle believed friendship may involve “‘an inequality between the parties, for example, that of the father to son and in general of elder to younger.’ In this kind of friendship, the love that the lesser party gives to the greater makes up for the difference. In other words, ‘when the love is in proportion to the [individual] merit of the parties, then in a real sense there arises equality which is certainly held to be characteristic of friendship.’” Guroian says mentorship is such a friendship between a master and pupil.

2. Mentorship may seem elitist from the perspective of contemporary culture. A mentor’s personal attention and instruction is not for sale to everyone who can afford the tuition. “Most anyone with the financial resources can purchase ballet or violin lessons,” Guroian notes, “but in the end the master still chooses the protégé for special attention and instruction.” Mentorship is not egalitarian: the mentor is not one’s equal. While a mentor may tailor her guidance to one’s knowledge and abilities, the pupil does not select or determine the course of instruction. This goes against the trend of thinking of students (in advanced courses of study, at least) as consumers who determine when and what they will study.

On the current usage of “mentor” in business and education, Guroian comments: “The institutionalized nature of mentoring programs in business and education disqualifies them as true mentorship. The relationships they establish are forced, rather than freely formed. In mentor programs for youth, the egalitarian bias of our democratic culture cuts against the characteristic of mentor as authority. Rather, the mentor is supposed to be a friend or buddy to the youth. It seems that everyone is a “guy” in our contemporary world.”

3. Christ, mediated through the lives and teachings of influential Christians, is our mentor. Let members name individuals who have instructed them in faithful discipleship. Apply the distinguishing features of mentorship to those relationships: someone, who was superior in Christian knowledge and practice, chose to teach us and to open our eyes to see ourselves, the world, and God in ways we previously could not see or appreciate.
4. Discuss how teachers’ roles are changing in primary and secondary schools, and in colleges and universities. Do these changes affect the teaching office in congregations? How does your congregation *mentor* young Christians? Or do you teach them in other ways?
5. Guroian refers to E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books*, Felix Salten’s *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*, and William Faulkner’s “The Old People” in *Go Down, Moses*. Ask a few members to review the stories in advance and report on them to the group. Do members know other stories that introduce children to the real meaning of mentorship?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.