

The legacy of Mentor

The protégés of today are the mentors of tomorrow.” ~ Marilynne Miles Gray

THE AGE OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

The eighteenth century saw a major revolution creating conditions that were not so conducive to mentoring. Pope, with a few strokes of his poet’s pen, demolished the patronage system. The next century, glorifying the Age of the Common Man, saw the beginnings of the public school concept in England. Commoners were less likely to expect to be mentored. The school replaced the monastery as the point of educational infusion. Mass education meant that people were, for the most part, focused to work in factories not to be leaders, artists or expert professionals. Exceptions would be in universities where tutors still functioned largely as mentors and in medicine and science, which still relied on a system akin to apprenticeship. When the age of the common man arrived, it brought with it a demand for individual rights.

This then is **LESSON #4**: today, we insist that mentoring programs be open to all. In fact, one of the key reasons for inventing our contemporary mentoring programs is to ensure that those who don’t have access (to whatever), now have access. Proper access. Training. Insightful access. Not access by intimidation or force. Role-modeling. More than simply meaning well for which allows an incompetent do-gooder to carry the mentor’s role in the place of the competent.

But back to the settlement process of the 1700s and after. In America, the myth of the self-reliant pioneer and the push westward coupled with the rise of American industry on the eastern seaboard, created the mentality of the self-made man who had pulled himself up by his bootstraps and who did not need to credit anyone else with influencing his success.

Much has been made of the fact that the United States and Australia were populated by misfits, mavericks, black sheep and non-conformists. One would think these were not the easiest mindsets “to sit at the master’s feet and drink in his wisdom”. One would think little mentoring could have flourished in such locales. Curiously though, “nonconformists” who ended up in prisons would have found themselves where some of the most successful forms of mentoring occurred. Similarly, it took little intelligence to figure out that to survive in hostile new worlds, one had to collaborate, mentor and be mentored, or die.

Even the ethos of settlement had an impact upon mentoring. America (but not Canada) had been founded upon the ideal that people came to those shores to be free of restrictions and persecution. Undoubtedly, to be in the charge of a master, patron or mentor could well be publicly viewed as being antithetical to the American dream of the individual man. Yet, much more mentoring occurred during this period of history than is credited. The self-made man mindset seems to have inhibited many people from attributing even a part of their success to a mentor. However, quietly, in the background, mothers mentored their daughters and fathers their sons. Apprentices still learned the ropes, the bricks, the loaves of bread, the growing of wheat, the pulling of teeth, the sewing of clothes – the everyday basics that made life work.



Conjecturing even further, it may be that as life has become increasingly complex and as the world has become increasingly interdependent in terms of economics, education, cultural influences, and technology, so too ordinary people resorted more and more to a variety of means of educating themselves and getting ahead rather than relying on just one expert source. Reading books, attending salons, traveling, corresponding with others, setting up small

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scale experiments like public schools – activities reserved to this point or the wealthy and nobility – became much more the norm for the average person.

THE INCOMING TIDE

Why then, during the twentieth century, has there been a resurgence of interest in mentoring?

Research suggests that the resurgence of mentoring may be attributed to at least six different factors: (1) the desire of the individual to be more than just a cog in the wheel; (2) the need for companies to reduce employee turnover and to attract the best candidates for the position; (3) the legislated ethic that minorities and women deserve a place in the upper echelons of corporations and institutions; (4) the recognition that perfectibility, as an ideal, just won't work; (5) the failure of institutions of higher learning to guarantee automatic success and (6) widespread media reports and publicity.

Over millennia, the profile of mentoring seems to have waxed and waned, somewhat like a stock market chart:



But is this, if fact, what has happened?

Just as the first formal mentoring programs were being created in the late 1970s, Levinson and his colleagues looked far back in time and invented a mentoring myth drawn on apprenticeship concepts claiming

"...mentors seem to appear as we enter times of impending change in our lives, stay with us through the transition, and then depart. They help form a dream of who and what we want to become, offering us support, advice, challenge, and a sense that the dream is indeed attainable."

The fact is that for most of us, much of the time, mentors are not there when we need them -- hence the conscious crafting of the mentoring program concept in the late 1970s. Levinson drew on recollections of those interviewed years after the events had happened and quite probably drew on some wishful thinking that has not been supported by later research. He also gave the mentoring concept a peculiarly American twist in that the element of the pivotal dream has been added. For many, mentoring was not like that at all.



IN PART 5 OF THE LEGACY,
WE REVEAL THE NEXT BEND IN THE ROAD