Literature and the Real Meaning of Mentorship

by Vigen Guroian

Mentors engender 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.

Recently “mentor” has become a much-used word in the popular culture. 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.

“Mentor” has a long and venerable history with an ancient etymology. Our English word is a derivative of menos. The Greek means mind or spirit and connotes a strong sense of purposefulness and agency. In Homer’s epic poem The Odyssey, Mentor is the guise and name that the goddess Athena assumes in order to counsel Odysseus’s son Telemachus. Odysseus, king of Ithica, has been gone from home much longer than expected and is feared lost. Telemachus is confused, unsure, and despairing, while unscrupulous and ambitious suitors aggressively court his mother Penelope. Familial and civil order is jeopardized and Athena decides to act. In her disguise as Mentor, she fortifies Telemachus to oppose his mother’s suitors and inspires him to search for his father. Significantly, her instruction also prepares the young man to succeed his father as a good and just ruler.

Homer’s narrative and delineation of character introduce two essential characteristics of mentorship. First is the element of freedom and choice. The mentor initiates the mentorial relationship. He chooses the one whom he will mentor for reasons that are his own. Second, as distinguished from ordinary friendship, the mentorial relationship is hierarchical. It is characterized by inequality of experience, knowledge, and skills. The mentor is the superior and the mentee willingly submits to his mentorial authority.

It is noteworthy that our contemporary usage ignores, even contradicts, these defining characteristics of mentorship. 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.

The office of teacher is inherently suited to the role of mentor, but we have so democratized and bureaucratized it that genuine mentorial possibilities are nearly precluded. Genuine mentorship is scarce in our day. Not so surprisingly it still occurs in the performing arts, such as in dance or music. The market and a hyper-egalitarian ethos have chipped away at the master and student relationship, but not completely eliminated it. Most anyone with the financial resources can purchase ballet or violin lessons, but in the end the master still chooses the protégé for special attention and instruction. It is hard to imagine how these arts would survive if this could not occur.

The mentor's selection of the pupil is the crucial and defining act of the mentorial relationship. As I have suggested already, the relationship from the start 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.

Our forgetfulness of the true meaning of "mentor" has a cost. True mentorship is vital to culture and the growth and flourishing of education and the arts, in particular. We need to recapture the pristine meaning of mentorship if for no others, then for our children. We do our children no favor by raising them in a milieu bereft of real paideia (or, development of intellectual and moral virtue) and genuine mentorial relationships. One path to recovering the meaning of mentorship is through reflection upon great literature, and especially literature for children, in which the mentorial relationship and its value are portrayed. Thus, I will turn in a moment to several great stories that can serve as guides to mentorship.

The Difference Between Mentor and Friend

In a society that is as egalitarian as ours, we lose sight of the important differences between mentorship and ordinary friendship. So I want to say something right at the start about that difference. In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle defines friendship as preeminently a relationship between equals who are drawn together by a common purpose or set of interests. He stresses the necessity that the parties who enter into a friendship are of equal status. Thus, under ordinary circumstances it would not be possible that master and slave could be friends. Aristotle, however, qualifies this judgment with an exception to the rule. "There is another kind of friendship," he writes, "that which involves 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." In this respect, the mentorial relationship may indeed assume important characteristics of friendship. E. B. White's Charlotte's Web and Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Books illustrate what Aristotle had in mind.

Charlotte and Wilbur. We are bound to say that Charlotte A. Cavatica knew much more, was far wiser, than young Wilbur the pig. She was the adult in his life; he was the child. She was the teacher; and he was her pupil. Charlotte was able to give to Wilbur far more than he could give to her, except for his love. Indeed, Charlotte devised a way to save Wilbur from the fate of most other barnyard pigs, slaughter for human consumption. Equally important as regards the difference between a mentorial relationship and pure friendship, Charlotte picked Wilbur out to befriend and unilaterally made the decision to play an exceptional role in his life.

Wilbur was not capable of teaching the teacher; nor was he able, given his limited experience, to share in Charlotte's mentorial perspective. Charlotte could envision the whole of the process, while Wilbur could not. Wilbur loved Charlotte by a measure greater than her affection and care for him, for there was so much more in her that he could love and admire. Wilbur's love for Charlotte was indeed proportional to her "greatness" or superiority, and nothing Wilbur could do

would alter his fundamentally subordinate relationship to Charlotte. Indeed, his salvation depended upon it. Only when Wilbur grew up and cared for Charlotte's children and grandchildren was the playing field leveled, so to speak. Yet, by then Charlotte was long gone, though with the poignant irony that "none of the new spiders quite took her place in his heart."

Mowgli and His Animal Mentors. In Rudyard's Kipling's Jungle Books, Mowgli, the "man's cub" raised by wolves, is the subject of our interest. Mowgli's wolf parents were not, however, the true mentors in his life. His real mentors were, rather, Baloo, the brown bear, Bagheera, the black panther, and Kaa, the rock python. As close as Mowgli was to these three wonderful characters, his relationship to them was never so intimate as with his wolf parents. And, although the bear, the panther, and the python were his nearly constant companions, Mowgli's relationship with them was as mentee, until the time for his return to human civilization neared.

In The Jungle Books, Baloo, Bagheera, and Kaa each have a special gift to give to Mowgli that helps him to survive and thrive in the jungle and make a successful return to the human world. Baloo teaches Mowgli the Law of the Jungle and "the Master Words of the Jungle" that would "protect him with the birds and the Snake-People, and all that hunt on four feet, except his own pack." Bagheera was born and raised among human beings. Thus, he is familiar with their ways and passes this knowledge on to Mowgli. Kaa, whose age reaches back to days not counted, is the embodiment of the religious symbol of serpent as wisdom.

Obviously, we cannot cover all of this in detail. But let's look briefly at the story "The King's Ankus" in which Kaa and Bagheera collaborate to teach Mowgli important lessons about human psychology and behavior. We have learned from the stories that precede it that Mowgli's human powers are coming to blossom and that by now "the other Jungle People" universally regard him as "the Master of the Jungle." Even Kaa no longer "makes fun" of Mowgli as he did when he was a mere child. Kaa, Bagheera, and Baloo were aware from the beginning when Mowgli first entered the jungle that he was inherently superior to them all. Nevertheless, these three act as his mentors right to the end, in order that the boy is ready to successfully return to his own kind when he makes up his mind that that is what he wants to do.

One afternoon as Mowgli is resting comfortably in the rings of Kaa's coils, as in an armchair, the wise old python questions Mowgli, "So the Jungle gives thee all that thou hast ever desired, Little Brother?" Mowgli answers that he still has unfilled desires. But these "desires" turn out to do with jungle life and hunting, and so Kaa persists. "Thou hast no other desire?". Mowgli is confused. So the old python tells him about the blind cobra of Cold Lairs who guards a long forgotten hidden treasure buried beneath the jungle and takes Mowgli to meet the ancient serpent in his lair.

An ankus is an elephant goad or prod used in India. Mowgli is attracted to the exceptional beauty of one bedecked with precious stones, which lies in the midst of the treasure store. In spite of the cobra's warnings that the objects he guards bring death to any man who lays claim to them, Mowgli takes the ankus with him to view in the sunlight. The cobra gives no explanation why the objects he protects bring death, but the wise Kaa sees into the heart of the matter. He knows that "desire" is a powerful force within human beings, and growing from it are greed and avarice.

Mowgli seeks out Bagheera, who he is sure will know the identity of the ankus and what it is for. When Bagheera explains that the ankus is used to prod elephants and draws their blood, Mowgli is repulsed and throws the ankus into the jungle. Later, he returns to the spot to get one last look at the ankus, a reminder of Mowgli's human proclivities and the danger that he is in. But the ankus has disappeared. Bagheera tells Mowgli that "a man has taken it" and shows him the trail. Thus begins a round of jungle detective work, as Bagheera and Mowgli track several men whose dead bodies tell a grizzly tale of greed, deception, and murder. Mowgli and Bagheera eventually find the ankus near the bodies of three men poisoned by the man whom they themselves killed. Six men have died in all, and Mowgli wants to bury the ankus in order to make certain that there is no more death. But Bagheera interjects: "Little Brother, I tell thee it is not fault of the blood-drinker. The trouble is with the men".

The Mentor and the Religious Spirit

Of all the children's stories with which I am familiar, none quite equals Felix Salten's Bambi: A Life in the Woods for its powerful portrayal of the mentorial relationship. Unlike the Disney version, there is not a shred of sentimentality in Salten's story. Bambi's relationship to the mysterious old stag is central to the narrative, not a romantic attraction to Faline, the young doe, as in the Disney film. The old stag selects Bambi to mentor and succeed him as guardian and protector of the deer herd, strictly according to his judgment that Bambi has the potential to fill that role. With a stoical objectivity and dispassion, he acts to repose in Bambi the knowledge and special skills necessary to continue the line of princes.

The deer call the stag the Old Prince. He is the complete embodiment of the wisdom, virtues, and practical skills that are needed in a leader to secure the deer's safety and prospering, especially in the face of their most dangerous enemy, Man. The old stag has perfected practices of attentiveness and watchfulness. He has learned the habits of Man. He has studied and put to memory the physical topography of the woods so as to avoid and escape the danger Man poses. "He uses trails none of the others ever use. He knows the very depths of the forest. He does not know such a thing as danger."

In the depths of the forest, the old stag introduces Bambi to an arcane discipline. The stag comes and goes at his own choosing and not according to Bambi's wishes. Yet he teaches Bambi all that he knows, and he engenders in the youngster the patience, vigilance, cunning, and courage that he must possess to watch over and protect the deer.

Salten's story is evocative of the religious background of mentorship in human culture. Homer's invention of Mentor as Athena's disguise is early testimony to this. At the close of the story, just before the old stag disappears forever into the forest and leaves Bambi to fulfill his own destiny, he leads his young charge to a poacher who has been shot and killed.

'"Do you see, Bambi," the old stag went on, "do you see how He's lying there dead, like one of us? Listen, Bambi. He isn't all powerful as they say. Everything that lives and grows doesn't come from Him. He isn't above us. He's just the same as we are. He has the same fears, the same needs, and suffers in the same way. He can be killed like us, and then he lies helpless on the ground like all the rest of us, as you see him now."'

‘There was silence.’

‘“Do you understand, Bambi?” asked the old stag.’

‘“I think so,” Bambi said in a whisper.’

‘“Then speak,” the old stag commanded.’

‘Bambi was inspired and said trembling, “There is Another who is over us all, over us and Him.”’

‘“Now I can go,” said the old stag.’

This is the final crowning lesson that the old stag instills in Bambi. It is a lesson about the order of Being in which all creatures participate, including Man. At one level, this knowledge - this wisdom, really - is the ground of the courage Bambi must draw upon. Yet even more than this, the old stag opens Bambi to a mystery that lends meaning and even transcendent purpose to his calling as a new prince.

Sam Fathers: The Mentor-Priest

“The Old People” of William Faulkner’s mythopoeic classic Go Down, Moses is a haunting tale that sets the stage for the famous novella that follows in this collection, “The Bear.” It is about young Isaac Macaslin’s tutelage under Sam Fathers, the old Indian chief (half Negro, half Chickasaw), in the art and ritual of the hunt.

The title of the story symbolizes something wholly different from geriatric science. “Old People” alludes to a numinous presence and participation in that reality. It is similar to the personification of wisdom in the Bible. Like the old stag of Salten’s tale, Sam Fathers lives alone and practices an arcane discipline that he passes on to his pupils. His memory is of ancient lineage. His knowledge of the woods is deeper than and surpasses even that of the most accomplished hunters of the white race, Walter Ewell, Major de Spain, and old General Compson. From Isaac’s early childhood, Faulkner writes,

‘He taught the boy the woods, to hunt, when to shoot and when not to shoot, when to kill and when not to kill, and better, what to do with it afterward. Then he would talk to the boy, the two of them sitting beneath the close fierce stars on a summer hilltop while they waited for the hounds to bring the fox back within hearing, or beside a fire in the November or December woods…The boy would never question him; Sam did not react to questions. The boy would just wait and then listen and Sam would begin talking about the old days and the People…’

‘And as he talked about these old times and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew, gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy’s present, not only as if they had happened yesterday, but as if they were still happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth that had not quitted. And more: as if some of them

had not happened yet but would come tomorrow…and that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Father's voice the mouthpiece of the host.'

In this musical mystical passage, Faulkner captures the numinous and transcendental dimension of the mentoring process. Through the steady cadence and poetic pulse of his prose, Faulkner evokes the power of liturgy and eschatological time. He draws us into that transcendent moment in which the initiate realizes in reverence the eternal form of the art that he has learned. Mastery of the art is equivalent to participation in a mystery much greater than the self or of any one generation.

At the close of "The Old People," Sam Fathers leads Isaac, who has reached the symbolic age of twelve, to a secluded spot away from the rest of the hunters that are in pursuit of a buck. A shot rings out and the sound of Walter Ewell's horn signals a kill. Isaac is disappointed that he will not get his turn. But Sam commands Isaac to stand still and wait.

'Sam was looking over the boy's head and up the ridge toward the sound of the horn and the boy knew that Sam did not even see him; that Sam knew he was still there beside him but he did not see the boy. Then the boy saw the buck. It was coming down the ridge, as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its death…'

'Then it saw them. And it still did not begin to run. It just stopped for an instant, taller than any man, looking at them…And Sam standing beside the boy now, his right arm raised at full length, palm outward, speaking in that tongue which the boy had learned from listening to him…while up on the ridge Walter Ewell's horn was still blowing them in to a dead buck.'

'"Oleh, Chief," Sam said. "Grandfather."'

Though the hieratic gesture certainly is a clue, we are left to wonder: Is this the same buck that Walter Ewell supposedly killed or is it not? Is the buck verily present in the flesh or is this a vision of a mystery even more profound than death itself, the presence of the Old People?

The religious dimension of the mentorial relationship that both Salten and Faulkner depict defies the one-dimensional secularist view of reality that life is a flat screen. In this view, so pervasive in our culture, there is no going "further up and further in" as the noble, fallen defenders of Narnia in C. S. Lewis's The Last Battle are beckoned to do when they pass through the stable door and enter the new Narnia. Perhaps there still exists in our Christian churches the belief that this world has sacral depth and sacramental meaning. If it does, then there is hope that in our religious education and community life the rich vision of mentorship found in the stories we have discussed might be restored.