

MENTOR REFLECTIONS

Mentoring: A Retrospective

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*The following is an adaptation of my presentation on **Ignatian Mentoring**, part of a panel with Debra Mooney, Rich Mullins, and Stephen Yandell at the Heartland-Delta Faculty Conference at Spring Hill College (in Mobile, AL) in February 2008.*

Since we've talked about the value of stories this weekend, I'll share a bit of my own story. I had a dramatic faith awakening when I was 18 that eventually led me join a lay community in my twenties. It was there that I met my first Jesuits. The church group I'd been part of earlier viewed higher education with great suspicion, believing that it would lure a person away from God. The three Jesuits in my community helped me to see that there didn't have to be a separation between having a deep spirituality and a lively intellectual life. I was 25 at the time, just returning to college after some hardships, so the timing was perfect for me to encounter the idea of "finding God in all things." The Spirit was present not just in church services or a private prayer life—but in all things—books, study, nature, even secular professors! I earned my undergrad degree at a Jesuit university and relished the opportunity to learn in a faith-oriented context.

In the following years I went on to earn two master's degrees and Ph.D., all in state schools. When I entered the job market, I was very intentional about ending up at a school that shared my belief that spirituality and an intellectual life were intertwined. When I was being interviewed at Xavier back in 1987, the mission statement was what convinced me that I wanted to be at XU rather than elsewhere.

Then over the many years as a junior professor, I came to the harsh realization that the academic structure and reward system doesn't often support the ideal of spiritual wholeness. For at least a dozen years I struggled with loneliness and the feeling that I shouldn't talk about God or spirituality. It seemed ironic—the very values that had drawn me into higher education now made me feel like a misfit. Also during these years, the demands of tending to a young child and aging parents made me feel even more out of sync with my workplace. The Jesuit ideals had grown abstract and remote.

Then five years ago Debra Mooney invited me to take part in the AFMIX program (Assuring the Future of Ministry and Identity at Xavier). That marked a change in my whole sense of what it meant to be part of Xavier. For the next two years I met with a group every week where we read articles and heard speakers. The leaders set the tone for what Gray and Appleyard call "honest dialog and reverent conversation" about a wide range of topics.

When I finished AFMIX, I jumped at the chance to become a faculty mentor. I've been a mentor now for three years, to three different faculty members, in three different departments—a Muslim, an agnostic, a Roman Catholic. This program has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.

My commitment to teaching—to Xavier’s mission—has been revitalized because of the mentoring experience.

In the course of mentoring, I found a pattern that worked for me. First, at the start, I made it clear to my new mentee that I didn’t have an agenda, rather that she (or he) should lead the way; I would take my cues from her, what she wanted to talk and learn about. We used the five core Jesuit values as starting points (Magis, Cura Personalis, Finding God in all things, etc) but with lots of leeway. I also made it clear that I didn’t want to convert her to a certain way of thinking. Rather, I wanted the relationship to be mutual, a give-and-take where we both valued the insights the other brought to our conversation. Our conversation focused on shared questions, not fixed answers.

Second, it was important that we both be able to be honest. I have many areas of struggle and disagreement in regard to the Catholic Church and Christian tradition, as well as areas of agreement. I wanted the freedom to speak frankly about struggle, doubt, and anger, and to offer the same freedom to my mentee. I wanted us both to be able to let our guard down. In all three relationships, we mostly met off-campus, at my home or in a coffee shop or restaurant, every three or four weeks (usually for about 90 minutes). Being in an informal place, a place without fluorescent lights, let us talk more freely. This candor and trust seemed to be mutual.

Third, we cultivated a feeling of reverence. Talking about big life questions and time-tested traditions set the tone for an attitude of reverence. I learned from Shelagh Larkin, one of my mentees, that the field of Social Work has a phrase: “unconditional positive regard.” Social workers try to extend unconditional positive regard to their clients, no matter what hardships they are encountering. I’ve embraced this ideal in my family life, and also in my involvement with mentees. Faculty expend so much effort in the early years trying to prove themselves, being observed and critiqued, that it felt very freeing to simply be able to listen and enjoy the other person. We also generally avoided “shop talk” about university or departmental politics.

These three values—mutuality, honesty, and reverence—opened the door to wide ranging conversations. My mentee would choose a focus for each session, and we’d find relevant reading material in advance which served as a springboard. Usually I would supply readings dealing with Jesuit history or spirituality (supplied by Mission and Identity Office) but sometimes other sources; sometimes the mentee would supply the readings. In the course of discussing Ignatius and Ignatian values, many other topics also came up: writing and overcoming writing blocks, Ramadan, mental illness in the family, aging parents, helping teenage children make good decisions, what constitutes “the good life”, marriage, what happens after death, worklife balance, forms of prayer, breastfeeding, childcare problems, money management, why we love literature, world events. The starting questions were often lofty—what is the purpose of life?—but the ensuing discussions focused on the nitty gritty. There was not a dichotomy between the spiritual and the intellectual, nor between the personal and the professional. Woven through all this were pedagogical questions—how to introduce Jesuit values into class discussions? How to find fresh language for introducing religious questions?

Each of the three different mentoring relationships have had their own special flavor but they all have offered me a sense of freedom. Freedom to let down my guard. Freedom to talk frankly about the interplay of education and the rest of life. Freedom to learn about a new field of study. At the end of a recent session with my mentee, one of us remarked, "This is what I hoped being a professor would be like!"

For those just now becoming mentors, here is what worked best for me and my mentees:

- ▶ Mutuality (not trying to proselytize or defend the faith)
- ▶ Honest dialogue (openness about struggle and disagreement)
- ▶ Reverence (unconditional high regard for my mentee, avoiding shoptalk or gossip).
- ▶ Meeting off campus every 3- 4 weeks, starting with an article as a spring board. I usually reserved about 90 minutes or so to meet.