CHAPTER 21

STRANGERS, MENTORS, AND FREUD

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The teacher who makes a difference sometimes shows up in one's life in decisive but unexpected ways and at a time that could not be anticipated. Moreover, such a person may not even be a teacher in the professional sense of the term, and the influence that makes a difference may not be understood fully until years later.

This is a story about fortuitous influence. It is a story about the decisive role that individuals have played in altering the trajectory of my life, although I am hard-pressed to call some of them teachers, nor can I even remember the names of some of them. So much for making them eternal. This story also is contrarian to the main thematic intentions of this volume. In truth, I am hard-pressed to nominate a single teacher, not one that "made a difference" during my formative adolescence in the sense required of this volume.

I did, of course, have good teachers growing up in the Steel Valley of Pittsburgh. Mrs. Sexton, my sixth-grade teacher, spent a long day teaching us how to take notes in outline form to better prepare us for when we went to college and had to sit through the impenetrable lectures of fast-talking

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professors—a skill that paid dividends, indeed, when I went off to college. My tenth-grade civics teacher, Tom Tyskiewicz, adroitly combined high expectations with easy familiarity. Earning his respect was important to me, and over the years we became close friends (although he has since left the teaching profession). I look back fondly and with gratitude to my undergraduate years at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where I received by B.A. degree in Psychology.

But my narrative locates the decisive influences elsewhere. Here's one example. Just before I made the transition to junior high school, my friends and I often played basketball at the outdoor courts of our elementary school. Afterwards, we would walk up to the nearby gas station to find water and to hang-out, sometimes for hours. One day there was a young man there waiting for his car to be serviced, and we struck up a conversation that soon turned to the events of the Vietnam War. We got into an argument. In retrospect, I was unusually knowledgeable about world events for my age. I read voraciously. I studied the newsmagazines. And I was a hawk on the war. I wonder if there is something about young adolescent boys that finds the trappings of military and presidential power irresistible. I supported President Johnson but cried when he decided not to seek re-election. I read Richard Nixon's *Six Crises* and judged him heroic.

And I defended the Vietnam War. I believed strongly in the "domino theory" of Communist conquest, stood up for our treaty obligations under SEATO, railed against the naked aggression of North Vietnam against a sovereign state. My interlocutor took the other side. He was a college student (but he seemed much older), and I wondered if he was a draft dodger. When his car was ready he said something to this effect: You are an extraordinarily bright lad. Have you thought about going to college? I should definitely go to college. He then asked me (for reasons unexplained) if I had read Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and how much I would enjoy it—but implying, too, that I was up to it. I was in sixth-grade.

I walked home as if striding mountains. Imagine this stranger urging me to go to college, wondering if I've read Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. I met my father when I got home and told him, somewhat joyously, what this man had said about me. He was nonplussed, but I don't remember being particularly disappointed by his flat reaction to my story. My father, after all, had stocked the house with subscriptions to newsmagazines and, at one point, to poetry and writer's periodicals. If my father sensed that I was college-bound it was all news to me. When I reflect on the course of events that have led to my present station in life, the encounter with the stranger at the gas station looms larger than any teacher, larger than anything that happened in any school. The stranger at the gas station planted an idea, raised a possibility that had not occurred to me. He gave me information

about myself that was opaque to me. It made me feel special, talented. It was grist for the identity work that was now before my rising adolescence.

This clear, vivid memory I have never shaken. And I credit this encounter, this stranger, with setting me on the path that was unusual for kids in the steel town of my birth, the path "less traveled by" that led towards academic life, and (in the words of Robert Frost) "*that has made all the difference.*"

I sometimes tell this story to undergraduate students in my classes on adolescent development to caution them in what they say to youngsters. Here was a random fortuitous encounter with a stranger that proved to have enormous consequences, in a way that could not have been anticipated, and from which I took strange gain away. But imagine the consequence if the stranger's reactions to my muscular defense of American foreign policy was not one of bemused admiration and encouragement but one of ridicule, sarcasm and belittlement; if my reaction to serious discussion was not exultant satisfaction but anger and humiliation. There are enough occasions for humiliation and discouragement in adolescence without adults piling on; and one can never really know the far-reaching consequence of simple encouragement; or of simply mirroring to the child his or her own sense of possibilities, even if fantastic. The dreams of adolescence should not have to bear too much realism.

One person, then, who made a difference in my life, was not a teacher at all but a stranger who passed the time in conversation with me while his car was being repaired. A second person was Sigmund Freud. This must sound peculiar, yet I don't know what would have become of me had I not encountered Freud's remarkable, terrifying theory. I was in the habit of checking books out of the school library that were quite advanced now that I fashioned myself quite the little intellectual. I did the best I could with these works on politics, poetry and philosophy, but the real effect was simply to show-off to my friends as I lugged them around.

But one day in junior high school I checked out from the library a short biography of Sigmund Freud. And my eyes could not believe the words I was reading. Infantile sexuality, penis envy, castration complex, defense mechanisms, libido, erotogenic zones, unconscious motivations, dream interpretation, incestuous desires, Oedipus complexes—oh my! So shocked was I that I wanted to validate what I was reading by pulling an encyclopedia off the shelf to read the entry on Freud. Sure enough, it was all there. I suppose it was like throwing a match into a gas can for a pubertal adolescent boy to read Freud's account of psychosexual development, but it was not just the shocking sexuality revealed in these pages that captured my interest: it was the fact that Freud, by means of psychoanalysis, appeared to have occult knowledge of the secret inner lives of individuals. And I wanted some of that!

After putting down Freud's biography there was nothing else that I wanted to do except study whatever it was Freud was doing. Of course, at that age, I knew nothing about the difference between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and psychology. But the die was cast. For the remainder of my high school years I fashioned myself the resident expert on all things psychological. This amused my friends but it became a predominant pose that preoccupied my identity exploration, and when I went off to IUP there was no doubt that I would be studying psychology as a major. But I knew this back in eighth-grade.

The trajectory of my life, then, took two decisive turns, and both before I entered high school. The encounter with the college student at the gas station oriented me towards something other than entering the steel mills upon graduation from high school; the encounter with Freud gave sense and direction to a possible future self.

The third decisive turn does indeed involve a teacher (in a conventional sense) whose influence made a difference. I first met Robert Enright when he was a new visiting assistant professor at the University of New Orleans (UNO), and I was a new graduate student entering a terminal masters degree program in its Department of Psychology. How I ended up in New Orleans and what happened next is crucial to the lesson I want to draw.

I managed to graduate from IUP *cum laude*, and with my interests still rooted strongly in clinical psychology. Like most undergraduate psychology majors (to this day) I wanted to be a working clinician, and gave no thought at all about the professorate. In retrospect, my naiveté about postgraduate careers in psychology was boundless. My attempt to gain admission to graduate programs in clinical psychology was not going well (given a rather mediocre quantitative GRE score), and my advisor told me to apply to southern schools where the competition might not be as keen as the "prestigious northeastern schools." I took down the big APA book of graduate programs and found an entry for UNO that listed a degree program in *applied behavior analysis*. I did not know what this meant, but I saw the word "applied" and that seemed as close to clinical as I was going to get. So off I went to the Crescent City.

The program turned out to be a rigorous study of basic experimental and behavioral science (for which I was grateful). Some of my professors wore lab coats and ran rats through mazes. It occurred to me that I was being trained to impose reinforcement schedules on mentally disabled or mentally-ill patients in residential settings that manage patient behavior by means of "token economies"—and probably in some far off bayou community. The meaning of "applied behavior analysis" was now clear to me, and it was not quite the heroic career that I imagined for myself.

Bob Enright joined the faculty just as I entered the program. He seemed unimaginably young for a professor. He had just received his Ph.D. in hu-

man development from the University of Minnesota, and he signed on at UNO on a one-year visiting basis (this was not entirely clear to me at the time). Bob was personable and ambitious. I heard he was looking for graduate students to help him with his research, so I stopped by his small windowless office. It was a mess, papers everywhere, and mostly on the floor. As I waited for him to get off the phone, my attention drifted towards some reprints on the floor—and they had his name on them. This astonished me. Here I am sitting in the office of a published author! Seeing Bob's name in print on published papers galvanized a radical reappraisal of my aspirations and career. Whatever Bob was doing to get his name in print—I wanted some of that!

I did work with Bob on a number of his projects, publishing some of them with him. My very first publication was a small idea that I brought to him which paid off with good data and favorable reviews. One project required me to write an extensive literature review, which Bob highly praised. The first summer I took a night job in a private mental hospital so my days could be free to work on research with Bob, a commitment that endeared myself to him. Bob left UNO to take a position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I followed him there after receiving my master's degree. The UW-Madison was never on my radar screen, and I would never have had the courage to apply there to such a prestigious research university were Bob not there. He became my mentor and friend. We collaborated on many papers. He is my "professional father" and nothing in my present academic life would have been possible had I not met Bob Enright.

There is a difference between being an advisor and a mentor; and, on the other side, between an advisee and a protégé. I think the main characteristic that makes for a mentor-protégé relationship is the shared sense of common purpose. We were working to advance each other's careers, certainly, but there was a personal element, too. I knew always that Bob would hear out my ideas, no matter how ill-formed, and he would yield when it was warranted (which was not often!). Add to common purpose, then, a sense of mutual respect when only my unilateral respect for him was required.

What lessons, then, do I draw from this narrative? I often think about the odds of meeting Bob in New Orleans. Here I was a new graduate student coming down from Pittsburgh meeting Bob at UNO as he took his first academic job after graduating with his doctorate from the University of Minnesota—two paths crossing in a place far from our homes. What are the chances that I meet a guy at a gas station whose good opinion of me opens up possibilities not envisioned? Or that I read a biography that sustains an avocation across adolescence? There is something fortuitous about each of these examples, but the lesson is not that random chance is the most important influences in one's life. Rather, the lesson is that one cannot see very far into the future. The trajectory of one's life is open to altered

courses in ways that cannot be anticipated. And what seems like fortuitous interventions are possible only if one is in a position to capitalize on the seemingly lucky things that happen. It is often said that "Luck is the residue of design," which can only mean that cultivating one's talents in continuous learning is the only sure way to catch a break. Meeting Bob in New Orleans would not have paid off like it did unless I brought something to the table—an ability to write well and to work hard.

A second lesson is that at least some important elements of education during adolescence do not place in schools, are part of no formal curriculum and are not the object of instruction. The fabric of adolescence is richly appointed with occasions for teaching-and-learning, and researchers are paying increasing attention to those that take place in contexts other than the formalities of classrooms. We should be careful what we say to adolescents because we are all potential teachers of life-altering lessons.

My final thought concerns what is owed to mentorship. Shared purpose, personal investment, mutual respect, these were some of the qualities that described my relationship with Bob Enright, my mentor. I owe Bob simply everything, but this is the sort of debt that cannot be repaid easily. It is rather like what Origen said of the debt of love: "The debt of love abides for us and never ceases; for it is good for us both to pay it everyday and yet always to owe it." The debt that I owe my mentor is best paid in those occasions when I can be a mentor for others.

And what of the debt owed to the other two decisive influences on my life? My debt to Sigmund Freud was paid (I like to think) when I wrote an entry on Freud for the Encyclopedia of Human Behavior. As for my interlocutor at the gas station many years ago—one of these days I will get around to reading *The Divine Comedy*.

SUGGESTED READING

Bandura, A. (1982). The psychology of chance encounters and life paths. *American Psychologist, 37*, 747–755.