

## TEACHERS OR MENTORS?

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By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

[Note: this blog is also available as a video here:]

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS-wgca28\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS-wgca28_k)

They are not often the same thing. Mentors and life-experience guides have been the single most important factor in my spiritual education, perhaps because I systematically have been so difficult to educate. My mom told me that I even played hooky from kindergarten. They found me standing at the edge of a construction site watching the heavy earth-moving equipment.

And this learning disability started when I first went to public school. The school had concerns about my learning abilities, worried enough to call in my parents and talk to them about it. The result of those talks was that I underwent a series of tests to determine what my problem was. Of course, I had no idea what was going on. I was just a little kid.

As it turned out, the results of those tests showed the school that instead of being slow, I actually had a high IQ and the problem was boredom, not lack of means. Apparently I found the curriculum and the teachers not interesting enough to hold my attention.

And this is where my own memory clicks in. At that time my interests were all about nature study. Bored by school, I could not wait each day to get home from school and go out in the fields and streams to witness what nature was so perfectly presenting to me. This is what I was learning. I was fascinated by natural life and found the school environment (and its teachers) suffocating and simply beside the point.

There was one exception and that was the 4th grade and Mrs. Althouse, a wonderful teacher that I responded to. But 4th grade was soon followed by 5th grade and mean-old Mrs. Ryder, who quickly erased whatever gains the 4th grade had accumulated. I was bored again and my mind soon glazed over.

My point is that I have real trouble learning from teachers I don't respect as human beings. Don't ask me how a young kid makes these distinctions, but they can, at least I apparently did.

And fast-forwarding that mindset into my teens and young adulthood changed not a thing. Indeed I felt like a stranger in a strange land and searched for mentors (and guidance) like an underwater swimmer tries to find air.

One serious result that came from my alienation from most educational environments is that I was forced to decide for myself what was best for me. I was on my own. Of course

this makes sense, and the apathy of and boredom with many of my teachers made it imperative that it was up to me to protect myself from them, from being like them. This had some unfortunate side effects.

Perhaps the worst side effect was that I fell into the habit of judging on-sight my teachers by their appearance, their demeanor, how they handled themselves, treated me, treated others, and so on. Of course I had little choice, but in the long run it made things more difficult. I hadn't been trained or educated enough in what society wanted of me, so there I was, in a Catch-22 -- an infinite loop.

I know now that we cannot judge the value of a teacher on his or her appearance or personality, but only on whether we can learn from them. That's the long and the short of it. What this meant for me is that my mentors, most of them anyway, had to not only be able to teach me (and I learn from them), but they also had to have the appearance of goodness, wholesomeness, and all the other virtues. This combination proved hard to find.

If a teacher lacked these personal attributes, I was afraid to learn from them lest I end up being just like them – taking on whatever I saw as their personal defects. This was a huge handicap for me, especially time-wise. It set me back a long way. Had I been taught to measure a teacher only by whether or not I could learn from them (and not by their appearance or mannerisms), I would have been much better off. And that die must have been cast very early on.

I should have focused on a teacher's ability to teach me (and take note of whom I learned from), rather than focus on their personality and shortcomings. But I had somehow missed that lesson (and probably many others). In a way I was like one of those children that are raised by wolves. What I knew of life experience was almost exclusively what I learned from Mother Nature (her rules), and not what society suggested I learn. I was Mother Nature's wolf cub and did not trust the educators I had met unless they showed me a certain savvy and life experience.

Because of all this I learned to look very carefully at those I would accept as a mentor and teacher. But it was already too late. In the end, I never finished high school and chose instead to just go into the outside world and experience life for myself. And I did make one other effort, probably more to please my parents than myself. Even though I had no high-school diploma, I applied to be accepted at the University of Michigan as a freshman. And amazingly enough, after taking some tests and being interviewed, I was accepted! But that is the end of the good news.

The problem was that once I became a college student it only took me a few weeks to verify that college professors were no better, and often much worse, than the teachers I had encountered coming up. It was basically the same old stuff in a fancier wrapper. I left college of my own volition after only a few weeks because I decided I could not (would not) learn from these folks. Apparently I had a very clear idea of just what I was looking for in a teacher. I needed a mentor. My parents were really disappointed, big

time and I apologize to them now for getting their hopes up, and for the rollercoaster ride I took them on.

Anyway, that is my background. I will spare you the details of my journey to find my life teachers (at least for now), and just fast-forward to my point here, and that is the value of real life teachers, mentors.

For me a life teacher or mentor is a way forward into my future, perhaps an open window I can see through is a better analogy. Life teachers are transparent so that I can see through their personality (instead of at it) and into not what they are, but what I might become. Mentors are transparent, despite their appearances. Their personality and behavior is not an obstacle and does not obscure or constantly demand my attention. And they are also reflective enough for me to see myself in them.

And real teachers tame us, help us transform or transmute our liabilities into assets. It is alchemy in the true sense of the word. And the thing I remember most about my first true spiritual teacher is that it was clear to me that he cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. This insight stopped me cold and allowed a kind of transfiguration to occur. My fear of other people's personalities finally caught up with me and was gradually extinguished.

As the Tibetans say, it only takes one match to end the darkness of a thousand years. It only takes one mentor to end our search for ourselves, a clear enough mirror to get a reflection, to see ourselves in them. And it reflects as well on the seeker.

It is one thing to have a dream of a teacher (or any dream), but quite another to make our dream come true and have a teacher appear in the flesh within our lifetime. It is a sign of our own good karma that such an event is permitted.

Having finally found a true teacher in my life, like a pebble dropped in a pond, the ripples of that event spread concentrically outward, embracing more and more people and situations with clarification, and I began to have faith in others, and in myself.

I feel that many of us in this world have been waiting (for who knows how long) to be found and recognized for who we are. Without that confirmation we can wait virtually forever. With confirmation, we are empowered to move forward with our life. True life teachers and mentors are empowering.

I am reminded of what one of my mentors (a poet) told me. I asked him why he had not written any poems lately and his response was "Michael, my best poems these days are walking around."

[Photo of Andrew Gunn McIver, my first true mentor and life teacher.]

