

Gadflies and Guardians: Mentors as Sacraments

by

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When I hear the word “mentor,” sometimes a wizened old man in a simple brown robe appears in my consciousness, an austere guru humiliating me for my greenhorn’s incompetence and instructing me rigorously in ancient meditation practices and martial arts. Other times I get a romanticized picture of a rosy-cheeked schoolteacher warmly peering over her spectacles at me as she cuddles me with good grades and homemade oatmeal raisin cookies, someone who follows the storybook cliché of believing in me with unquestioning fondness and helping me to believe in myself.

The first of these mentors we do not want; the second we do not need. One is too abrasive, the other too tender. Yet there is something prickly and nevertheless alluring about healthy mentorship. The intimacy we have with our mentors can be pleasing when they listen to us and help mold us. But this intimacy can become unsettling when our mentors see us with penetrating insight and gently expose not just our finery but our faults in order to teach us. They act as gadfly and guardian. Their calling is to speak to us with truth and love. They may bring us a balm or a blade, depending on which is the most effective tool at the moment for our healing.

Mentors can be sacramental signs, guides who point beyond themselves to God’s divine guidance. They are imperfect, yet helpful, miniature manifestations of the Wonderful Counselor and the Good Shepherd. As they listen, correct, or teach us, mentors can fulfill a priestly role as representatives of Christ Himself. Mentors can also be a sacramental means of grace, vessels through whom God nourishes and teaches us. Mentors may teach us implicitly by simply living according to different conventions, or they may teach us explicitly by passing their insight on to us. Every interaction with them bears a pearly treasure for us if we have the tenacity and insight to pry it out.

Mentors channel grace to us through their otherness in their teaching and encouraging. C. S. Lewis writes of “the rough, sharp, cleansing tang” of his wife’s distinctness from himself, a tool that shocked him out of the familiar patterns of his own mind, testing and refining him (*A Grief Observed* 22). People who are so decidedly

themselves and not us sometimes grate against our personalities, but they can become burnishing instruments such that iron sharpens iron. Mentors are living sacraments, emblems of our heavenly Teacher and conduits of divine grace that purify, sculpt, and refresh us.

Mentors convey grace to us not only by offering the otherness of their perspective, but by imparting the vitality of a tradition to us. With characteristic clarity and vigor, G. K. Chesterton writes in one of his essays about tradition and our need to know and learn from it:

The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living. Without some such contrast or comparison, without some such shifting of the point of view, we should see nothing whatever of our own social surroundings. We should take them for granted, as the only possible social surroundings (qtd. in *As I Was Saying* 239).

The traditions that history brings us help us to see where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going. Tradition orients us and provides an ordered context in which we can operate, a perspective from the wisdom of others who have gone before. Older, trustworthy people are a tie to this wisdom from the past. Our modern society's fetish for anything labeled "progressive" tends to steer us away from any such ties, but mentors embody and convey a tradition that is an essential part of who we are. Mentors put something of themselves and their past into us to help us become fully ourselves. Amid the clamor of new fads, we can be enriched when we humble ourselves and pause to learn from older mentors.

Rather than being the irrelevant sort of thing that we grudgingly pull out and dust off only on ceremonious occasions, tradition both grounds us and lifts us. We need not treat it like a restrictive chain that imprisons us in the past. Instead, it is an anchor that

binds us to our heritage and a foundation on which to expand. The church carries on the enriching teaching of the apostles and saints that give our faith its foundation. Parents pass on a moral and cultural framework that provides stability and order for their children. Teachers instruct students about the ancient and modern channels thinkers, rulers, and authors forged, where they ran aground and where they advanced. Without squelching the distinctive creativity of their apprentices, artists perpetuate customs of designing and crafting beauty in paint or clay or words. And tradesmen train novices in the skills that turn crude materials into a useful product in order to reap a profit.

These spiritual, social, intellectual, artistic, and vocational traditions are all avenues of truth. With the help of our mentors, we can evaluate these avenues, altering them in some places where they have erred, but accepting them on the whole. Striking out into the wilds to blaze our own entirely new trail usually leads to our ensnarement in thickets or to our discovery of a path someone else has already cleared. And sometimes a road is less traveled because other travelers know to avoid the cliff at the end. Rather than limiting us, the cumulative wisdom of a tradition forewarns us and beckons us forward into the happiness of following and extending the trail. Many times the road often taken is the one that makes the difference.

Spiritual Mentorship

Dr. Cary begins our first Faith and Philosophy class by laying out the rules. “Rule number one,” he booms. “Coffee is allowed.” He holds up his blue mug as if he is toasting the class, and we chuckle. “Rule number two: interrupt me. This class is not about my ideas and what I think is true as the professor, but it’s about you exploring your own ideas and finding out what you think. We have to learn from each other, so feel free to interrupt and tell me why you think I’m wrong. Just be aware that I will

probably try to tell you why I think you're wrong, too." Dr. Cary punctuates his sentence by banging his coffee mug on the table for emphasis.

I once watched him do this at someone's home during a Bible study he was teaching. His mug was resting on a table with a lamp. With every tap of the mug, a short in the lamp made the light flicker on and off rhythmically. But Dr. Cary was so engrossed in expounding the wonders of Genesis to us that he was oblivious to the blinking. His zeal for teaching the truth makes him unconscious of everything else—except infuriatingly dry whiteboard markers. They spitefully interrupt him almost every class period as he scribbles down thoughts he wants to communicate to us. He growls and hurls them across the room, fumbling for a brighter color and continuing his rapid line of thought.

Depending on the texts we are studying, he sometimes shouts out ideas and questions to the class and other times lowers his voice to an awed whisper. I love to hear him read a psalm or proverb to us with an earnest, hushed wonder at its meaning. The pages of his Bible are dense, heavy with insights and cross-references packed into the margins. And yet, for all his knowledge, he is not afraid to admit his ignorance in the face of mystery. "I don't know," he sometimes tells us. "I've spent 45 years with this question, and this is as far as I've gotten."

Despite these deep questions, Dr. Cary does not let the complex theological arguments we discuss eclipse the purpose of theology. "Some preachers preach only about proofs and starve their congregations," he tells us. "But theology is not about proofs. It's about preaching the gospel." In his role as a philosopher, Dr. Cary explains intricate proofs to us; and in his more crucial role as our teacher, he aims with all of these explanations to point us to Christ. His teaching makes clear that proofs and arguments are never ends in themselves. They proceed from and direct us back toward the gospel.

A few weeks into the semester, we start studying Peter Berger, a philosopher who ponders why a mother comforts her child by saying, "Everything's okay."

"The mother is affirming order," Dr. Cary explains. "But why is there an ordered universe? On what basis can the mother tell her child that everything is okay when lots of children in the world are abused and raped and killed? Why isn't the mother lying?"

The class is silent. Dr. Cary continues, "A belief in a just, merciful God justifies the idea that everything is okay. Otherwise this is a lie. Why is it a lie if we don't believe in God?"

Dr. Cary waits, searching for someone who will dare to answer. "Come on, people. Somebody tell me why it isn't a lie that everything is okay." His voice is taking on urgency. "As Christians, we believe in a God who defeats death," he says. "But this is too abstract—we have to tell a story to know this. And please don't just use the word 'God' in your story. Somebody tell me a story to say why it's true that everything is okay." He paces tensely.

My friend Dan risks a simple reply. "Christ died for us on the cross and rose from the dead."

"Yes!" Dr. Cary explodes, nodding with his whole body. "We tell a story and we *sing* at Easter." He breaks into a hymn with a roaring volume that swallows up the room: "'Christ died and is risen again!' If this is not at the center of your faith and your thinking about God, then put it there. Give me Jesus Christ or give me nothing! I don't give a hoot about all this experiential garbage that the churches are teaching nowadays." He slows the tempo of his speech and his voice draws back from its crescendo in sound but not in force. "Julian of Norwich was a wonderful medieval woman who had visions of Jesus in which He said, 'All is well. I will keep My word and all will be well.' Don't be surprised that terrible things happen. This world is a terrible place. That's why Christ died on the cross."

An abrupt rustling of papers and zipping of backpacks signals the end of the class. The students file out. I linger, watching Dr. Cary sit down and thrust his elbows forward on the table, resting his head in his hands.

He turns to me suddenly. "Allison, was I too hard on people by yelling at them today?"

I remember for a moment the wisdom that the octogenarian pastor emeritus at my church taught his parishioners once. Pastors should never preach at or even to the congregation, he told us. "We preach *for* them," he said, "for their good."

"No," I answer Dr. Cary. "You weren't yelling *at* us; you were yelling *for* us."

After the service is over at our church on Sunday, the congregation funnels out of the sanctuary. The silence gathers as the organ postlude fades. I see Dr. Cary move closer to the front of the church and sit down alone in a pew. He rests his fingers under his chin, apparently in quiet meditation. He gazes beyond the altar, arrayed in its draperies of green and gold, and looks at the carved image of Jesus dying on the cross—stark, severe, and beautiful.

The image of my professor looking at the cross fills me with regard for him. I am tempted to marvel at his deed, his devotion, his character. But he knows that he must decrease and Christ must increase. The aim of his teaching and his example is to point not to himself, but to the Man on the cross. His contemplation invites me and all his students to follow him in marveling at our Savior.

My mother asks me to drop off a projector at the Sacketts' house one January evening so that Miss Joyce can practice with it before giving her presentation at my mother's garden club. Although I would normally be reluctant to run an errand like this, I am curious to see Miss Joyce's house, and the projector is a convenient excuse to go. I remember talking with Miss Joyce one day at church, and she found out I was an

English major. She told me she had written a few books and articles, and she encouraged me to keep writing. Her simple, supportive words were like an open, beckoning hand to me then. I am eager to see her again.

The last time I saw her was at a church event celebrating the publishing of her newest book. She looked stately and compelling standing in the pulpit with her curled silvery hair and her turquoise dress. But she spoke to us of her weakness, her helplessness to speak were it not for the power of God palpably bearing her up, something she could feel in her bones. Miss Joyce's book tells the story of how the Sacketts lost their daughter Jeanine many years ago when she hung herself in this very home I am now going to visit. Jeanine had been depressed, and her parents hadn't realized how bad the depression was. They suffered deeply after her death, wrestling with shame and guilt. They gradually took hold of the truths that they were not at fault for Jeanine's death, and that God had forgiven them for the mistakes they had made in parenting Jeanine.

"We are more sinful than we are wounded," she told us at the book ceremony. "Jesus is more concerned about our holiness than about our comfort. We need rescuing. We need to look beyond the pain to see our Savior." Miss Joyce recorded the tragedy of her daughter's suicide and its wrenching impact on her faith and her family with insight and candor. She wrote of God's faithfulness and comfort throughout her grief, telling how He refined her through that time. "I think God wants to say something to all of us in the grief we share," she writes. "I pray we can hear it. The foundations of our faith have been sorely shaken, but not destroyed" (51).

Although it was late when my mother and I returned from the book publishing celebration, I skimmed every page of the book until I was finished, enthralled by its truth. In my twenty brief years, I have never known the kind of upheaval Miss Joyce describes. But I want to imitate the divinely given fortitude she showed in speaking before our church and, even more, in persevering in faith through her grief.

I drive up to their home, and my headlights illuminate a painted wooden sign that says "Blessing Hill." Miss Joyce and Mr. John welcome me.

"Come inside and let me show you around," Miss Joyce says, not content to let me stay in the foyer. She leads me into a spacious, warmly lit living room with wide windows overlooking their land, sprinkled with green and red Christmas lights in the darkness. "This house was once a horse barn." She gestures to the deep amber-colored wood that supports two door frames into the room. "A tree fell on our house about eight years ago, so John put on this addition. The windows make me feel like I'm outside even in this weather! And John used the tree that fell to make those four doorposts that you see there."

I contemplate the dark timbers with their wildly etched lines swirling upward to compose a stable resting place for the house. Something that was once an instrument of destruction became a support that is incorporated into the structure of the Sacketts' lives. Likewise, God took the unexpected hardship of their daughter's death and turned it into something that gradually strengthened the grief-torn fibers of the Sacketts' faith into a better dwelling place for Him and His blessing.

Instead of leaving Dante to stumble through hell, purgatory, and heaven trying to decipher spiritual mysteries by himself, God sends Dante first Virgil and then Beatrice to lead him on his pilgrimage and hold him to the heavenly path. *The Divine Comedy* details Dante's sanctification, how God burns away his impurities and sets his will aflame with desire for Himself. Virgil, a pagan poet, teaches him using natural revelation and Beatrice, a saintly woman he admires, is a representative of divine revelation. Dante humbly recognizes his spiritual poverty without their direction. Beatrice especially is a vessel through whom God calls to Dante and through whom Dante journeys toward God. Her virtue and wisdom expose Dante's depravity, lead him to cleansing, and heighten his vision to see God's radiance.

While Dante is leaving purgatory on his supernatural journey, he sees a glorious procession of angels, elders, and apostles accompanying Beatrice. She is clothed in white, green, and crimson, colors that represent faith, hope, and charity. Her “high, piercing virtue” excites both admiration and terror in Dante. The height of her character exposes the lowliness of his character. But he senses her love for him and is comforted in his remorse (Pur. 30:39-41). Her raiment and her reproof fill Dante with shame for squandering his literary gifts. She turns “the sword point of her words” toward Dante, trying to make him “match his guilt with grief” (Pur. 31:3; 30:108). She unsheathes the blade of truth, and the hurt she inflicts on Dante is not for his harm, but for his healing.

Overcome with guilt, Dante faints and finds Matelda, one of Beatrice’s attendants, leading him through a heavenly stream so that he can be cleansed. Dante’s cleansing continues as he “bathe[s]” in Beatrice’s “gaze of joyful light” (Pur. 31:111). Because he is now clean, he can participate in Beatrice’s joy unhindered by the sorrow of his guilt.

Dante’s cleansing purifies and increases his power of sight to see the revelation Beatrice brings to light for him. Her eyes are a recurring symbol of this divine revelation. The nymphs in Beatrice’s procession bid Dante to look upon her eyes, “those emeralds / from which Love once shot loving darts at you” (Pur. 31:116-7). Through Beatrice as a sacramental means, divine Love sought Dante and his love in return (Par. 28:11-2). The darts imply the pain of Dante’s contrition and also the pang of desire that God elicited in him: “A thousand yearning flames of my desire / held my eyes fixed upon those brilliant eyes / that held the griffin fixed within their range” (Pur. 31:118-20). Beatrice’s eyes reflect the griffin, and its two natures as lion and eagle signify Jesus’s divine and human natures in one being. Through Beatrice, Christ has lovingly pursued Dante, and Dante now lovingly pursues Christ as He reveals Himself through Beatrice. As an instrument of grace and a pointer to the Source of grace, Beatrice is the personification of a sacrament.

Beatrice's eyes are strong enough to gaze upon God's brilliance, and she strengthens Dante's eyes to gaze upon Him also: "Like a ray, her act poured through my eyes / Into my mind and gave rise to my own: / I stared straight at the sun as no man could" (Par. 1:46-8; 52-4). Beatrice's eyes have sacramental power to capture Dante's gaze and invite him, through her, to fix his eyes on God. Her grace-given power of sight flows over into Dante and allows him to marvel at God. She is a channel through which God pours Himself out to Dante, and she is also a siphon by which he is drawn toward God. She teaches him to free himself of weights that hinder him and to ascend like a "living flame" toward the heavenly sphere in which God dwells (Par. 1:141).

Because he sees her as a source of wisdom, Dante asks Beatrice many questions on their journey toward God's dwelling. She is like the embodiment of wisdom in Proverbs 8, who cries out, "Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right" (vv. 5-6 NIV). Dante feasts on her words and is satisfied while at the same time growing hungrier for truth (Pur. 31:127-9). Similarly, Lady Wisdom in Proverbs says, "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding" (9:5-6 NIV). Like Lady Wisdom, Beatrice understands that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding," so she instructs Dante in knowing and revering God (9:10 NIV). As a mentor to Dante, Beatrice is God's ambassador to him on his supernatural pilgrimage. Like Beatrice, our mentors can be a means through whom God seeks us and a means through whom we seek Him.

Social Mentorship

While I am home for the summer, my grandmother invites me one day to lunch at her apartment. I come in to find her making strawberry jam in her tiny kitchen where she and my two sisters and I crowd in with boiling pots and batter-covered spoons to produce a bumper crop of seven kinds of Christmas cookies every year.

“Oh, hello, love!” she greets me. “I thought you were coming tomorrow, so I thought I’d make the jam today. Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay, Mom-mom. I’m just glad to see you.”

She sends me down the hall to buy lunch from the dining hall in her retirement home. I know better than to try to argue with her about who’s paying. It is that same assertive, determined personality of hers that helped her get the Maryland Meals on Wheels program for the elderly started in the ‘50s. She set up an office, recruited and trained workers, and persuaded people to help her for free.

“I was too naïve to know better then,” she says, referring to her presumptuous boldness, “but I told communities, ‘If you want Meals on Wheels here, you’re going to have to provide me with the office space, a telephone, and a secretary.’” By being endearingly pushy and drawing on her energy and charisma, she pulled together the people and resources to make Meals on Wheels happen. She is retired now, but her friends tease her that she has more time to get into trouble now than she did before.

I bring back a salad and sandwich for us. While we talk, the seals on the jam jars start to pop one by one as they cool. She tells me about her friend Viola with Alzheimer’s who doesn’t recognize her daughter sometimes, and then she mentions her friend Claire who is bedridden and complains about everything. My grandmother’s stage of life is foreign to me because of how many of her friends are sick or dying. It is sobering to listen to her talk about them. Even the assortment of multi-colored pills that sit by her plate at every meal and her tense, tired features after she puts her feet up disconcert me sometimes. These observations force upon me the inevitability of frailty and death, both hers and my own. These realities are not something I’m often confronted with as a twenty-year-old.

But my grandmother is tranquilly prepared for her declining health in the future, and she even keeps a comedic view of it. She gave instructions to my mother and my

aunt about how to take care of her as she loses some of her capability. "I might turn out to be a real lulu!" she told my aunt.

"Turn out to be?" my aunt mocked.

My grandmother jabbed back, "I'm going to write you out of my will!"

My grandmother starts telling me about Eddie, her grandson and my cousin, who is working now as a chef in a fancy hotel in Hawaii. "I tried to talk to him about getting help for his ADD before he left," she says. "I went to a seminar years ago when we found out that he had ADD so that I could learn more about it. One of the symptoms is that people get bored easily and move from one job to the next and one relationship to the next." Eddie has changed jobs frequently in the past few months, shifting back and forth between three states and having a variety of girlfriends.

"I said to him, 'Eddie, have you ever thought about getting some help for your condition?'" my grandmother continues. "He said to me, 'My ADD makes me fast, and that is what has made me successful as a chef. If somebody doesn't like the way I am, that's their problem.' He didn't talk to me for about three weeks after that. It hurt me, but I didn't let that get to me. He was getting ready to leave for Hawaii, and I heard he was going out to dinner with his family. So—you know me—I called him up and told him I wanted to come." My grandmother likes to say she is "shy and retiring," and then she chuckles at the absurdity of the description.

"When I said I wanted to go to dinner with him, there was a pause. He told me he had been avoiding me because I had said he should try to get some help. I told him, 'Eddie, if you don't think that I want the best for you and your relationships because I love you, you're not as smart as I thought.' He seemed to understand that, and we had a lovely time at dinner.

"He called me after he got to Hawaii and said he didn't like being so low in his company. He was qualified for a higher position than some of the mediocre chefs above him. 'But Mom-mom,' he said, 'I plan to pay my dues.' That was his way of

letting me know he would stick with it instead of running off to some other job. He told me, 'I'll give cooking demonstrations to my co-workers to help teach them what I know.' I said, 'Eddie, that's brilliant.'

"I'm about to put my foot into it again," my grandmother continues. She can get away with her benevolent meddling in our family. The seamless gift of love and truth that she offers us has given her influence that cannot be dismissed, no matter how the admonition might sting at first. She shifts the subject of her next intended exploit to my other cousin, Jeannette, and her son Riley. Despite his four-year-old cheer and liveliness, my grandmother often mentions her fear that Riley will become "a little nomad." His parents are unmarried, and he often spends weekends shuttling between houses and having to adjust to the series of boyfriends or girlfriends his parents respectively have. My grandmother presses her lips together and narrows her eyes as if she is gazing resolutely at a target. I watch the scheme to give Riley some stability take shape in her mind. "I have to think about how to get your aunt to take Riley to Sunday school. Not if, but how." Her fierce gaze breaks as she looks at me and grins.

My grandmother sends me home with a jar of fresh strawberry jam. Its lingering heat radiates into my palm as I walk to the car, meditating on our conversation and her guidance.

My dad takes my younger sister Stephanie and me into Baltimore city for a family outing one day. My short six-year-old legs lag with weariness as we walk back to the car, so my father trims his stride to match me and my sister's trudge. But the memory of the bright orange cheese curls and the swiss chocolate rolls with sleek white filling that are waiting in the backseat of the car spur me forward.

The environment of the city is foreign to me. I enter it from the world of tidy suburban houses and pruned hedges. Tattered saplings stretch timidly from the desert of stained gray concrete. Soggy newspapers with bleeding print clog the street gutters.

I notice crumpled masses of red and blue cloth in the middle of the sidewalk. To my surprise, two men are asleep inside them. Their hair hangs in dark points that pierce the pallor of their faces.

Why are those men asleep on the ground? I want to know. My dad can explain any question my young mind can think to ask. He can tell a tiger swallowtail butterfly from a monarch; he can unravel the mysteries of grown-up words like “insurance” and “budget” that I’ve never heard before; he can tell us stories about pirates and princesses and enchantment. He can tell us why we should never look at the sun so that it doesn’t damage the little rods and cones in our eyes, and he can make a model with a plastic container full of juice that shows us how the liquid in our inner ear always tells us which way is up. These men sleeping on the sidewalk are homeless, my dad explains, and a lot of homeless people sleep in the day time because they don’t have jobs. They wake up at night because it’s safer for them that way here in the city.

We cross the street to reach our car. But instead of leaving to go home, my dad takes the plastic grocery bag of the long-awaited cheese curls and swiss rolls out and turns back across the street again. What are you doing, Daddy? Stephanie and I clamor. He is taking the snacks—our snacks—to the homeless men so that they will have something to eat when they wake up, my dad tells us. He does not listen when we whine about not getting to eat the goodies. We can have some other snacks when we get home, he promises us.

My dad does not wait for our stubby legs to keep pace with him now. He moves purposefully toward the bulky caverns of blue and red fabric. My sister and I catch up and watch him tenderly set the grocery bag on the sidewalk near the sleeping men’s heads.

My mother has always wanted an old farmhouse, “something that has character,” she says, a home for us to enjoy, a space so that we can invite lots of guests over and

host missionaries and do foster care. We have been looking for a house for a few years. The one on Franklinville Road was just too expensive, even after my four-year-old sister Rebecca found a penny in the front yard and brought it to my parents. “Here,” she said. “Put it toward the house.” And the last one we looked at had flower gardens and an ornate iron gate at the entrance—but also termites and far too much wood that would need endless repainting. My mother is getting discouraged, and she tells us that she asked God to take away her dream of an old house if it is something He doesn’t want for her.

But our real estate agent has just found a house called Windy Brae that was built in 1852 and has almost six acres of fern-fringed garden paths, towering cedars and pines, and thick blackberry patches. As an imaginative twelve-year-old, I like the sunroom with its panorama of windows and the spacious closets full of nooks for reading or playing hide-and-seek.

My mother is delighted when we get the house after much negotiation and shuffling of legal papers. Although my father grumbles good-naturedly about all the mowing and repairing and maintaining he will have to do, we know he is teasing her. He has come to love the charm of the house and its property, too. My mom tells us that she wants to call the house “The Gift of Windy Brae,” because it is a blessing from God that we will use to bless other people. She invites our pastor and some friends to our new home for a house dedication ceremony. We pray over it for safety, for it to be a haven for our family and for all who visit it, for it to be a fitting dwelling place for Christ.

The house becomes the setting in which my sisters and I grow up, but also in which my family, at my mom’s initiative, extends hospitality to a multitude of people. Combing the fringe on the rugs, scribbling out meal plans for company, and scouring cold muck out of casserole dishes drains my mother sometimes. But hospitality is her gift, and she takes pleasure in it.

After I go to college, my mother tells me that, as a leader at a Christian middle school club, she has established a friendship with a girl named Amber. “She’s kind of heavy and she smells a little funny, and the other kids don’t talk to her very much,” my mother explains to me over the phone. “But I really like her. She told me that her mom died and that she lives with her grandmother along with her brother and sister. I want to invite her to come over sometime.”

I meet Amber during a middle school retreat that I attend as a leader, and gradually I learn her story. Her father physically abused her mother and kept her from getting the medical care that she needed. When Amber’s father was put in jail, her grandmother took in the children. The grandmother—their Didi, as her grandchildren call her—has to work long hours as a shuttle driver for the elderly in order to keep up with the bills.

Over time, my family meets Aaron, Amber’s older brother, and Ashley, their younger sister. Although the demands of homeschooling my sisters, working as a clinical social worker, and organizing and attending garden club and book club events keep my mother busy, she invites these siblings naturally into the cadence of our activities. They accompany us to the plays my youngest sister Rebecca performs in. We set our alarms a few minutes earlier on Sundays to leave time to pick them up and bring them to church with us. They forsake the borders of their small row house to revel in the freedom of our backyard. They love jumping on our trampoline and feeding our two goats, giggling at the animals’ voracious consumption of whatever plant life is in reach.

We invite Aaron, Amber, and Ashley over to our house for dinner one evening. The two girls fight over who will get to sit next to Rebecca, so we shuffle our customary seating arrangement. I get displaced to the side of the table opposite from where I always sit. The shifted perspective feels alien to me, and the presence of our guests adds to the peculiarity of the meal, so different from our ordinary pattern. I wonder if

Aaron, Amber, and Ashley feel out of place sitting at our table—biracial, parent-less kids coming from a neighborhood of jammed-together row houses into a white intact family’s historic farmhouse.

Stephanie and Rebecca and I help our mom carry the platters of honey-glazed ham, macaroni and cheese, yellow squash with apple butter, spinach cheese casserole, and crusty French bread to the table. We set them down reverently like offerings on an altar. Eating meals together is a sacred event in my family, a simple ritual of table fellowship. My father prays for us, asking God to “bless this food to our use and our conversation to Your glory.”

We heft the serving dishes with thick hot mats in a cordial exchange around the table. Our guests mound first and then second helpings on their plates, eating rapidly.

“Can I have some more of that spinach stuff?” asks Ashley. “It’s really good.”

“Yeah,” Amber agrees. “Our Didi never makes stuff like this at home.”

“What kind of food does your Didi make?” my mother asks them.

“Soul food,” says Amber in between swallowing hunks of French bread.

“And what is soul food?” my father queries.

“Fried chicken,” Aaron answers.

“And mashed potatoes,” Ashley adds, devouring another mouthful of the spinach casserole. “We never eat together like this,” she continues. “We don’t really even have a dining room table.”

“Really?” my mother says.

“Yeah,” Amber replies. “We just make our plates by ourselves and go eat in our rooms or by the TV.”

Amber starts chattering jovially about school, Mr. so-and-so her history teacher and how much he bugs her and how badly she’s doing in his class, and how much she loves her art class and the interesting weaving project she’s doing in it now and how she wants to be an architect one day because she thinks designing buildings and making

floor plans would be fun and she knows it will involve a lot of math but she doesn't mind geometry that much. Then she pauses mid-stream and asks, "Am I talking too much?"

But her question is not an anxious one. Her tone discloses her confidence in us rather than her fear of our perception of her. My family, following my mother's example, has learned that part of hospitality is silence, leaving space for guests to talk and hosts to listen. And Amber has found an inviting reception in this space we give her.

We finish our meal and start clearing the table. Aaron, Amber, and Ashley thank us for the evening as my father leads them out to the car to take them home.

"This was the *best* dinner!" Ashley marvels, and her eyes glow.

My mother and I discuss our evening together as we put away the small leftover servings that the kids didn't eat. "I've noticed that food is their friend," my mother comments to me as we work. "That's where they get their comfort. I try not to offer them too much because they just keep eating. And did you hear what Ashley said about never eating dinner together as a family? That's so sad." Compassion twists lines into her face.

My mother continues making arrangements to take Aaron, Amber, and Ashley to church with us. When summer comes, my mother asks Rebecca to invite them to go swimming and play volleyball at the teen nights a nearby Christian camp hosts. When Amber gets accepted into a magnet school for the arts, my mother and sisters take her to Baltimore's Visionary Art Museum to peruse the work of amateur artists.

Our phone rings one day that summer, and I answer it to hear Amber's bouncy teenage voice say, "Hello, can I talk to Miss Lois, please?"

I hand the phone to my mother. "Hey girl! How are ya?" she says. I see now that this is Amber's soul food.

Academic Mentorship

I open Dr. Van Leeuwen's door to find him hunched over pillars of papers with Bach humming smoothly as he works. The serenity of the music calms me as I drop my backpack and sink into the rocking chair he gestures to.

"What can I do for you, Allison?" he asks me.

"Well, I've been thinking about studying abroad in the fall, and I wanted to get your opinion about which programs are good. I'm especially interested in Oxford, but I've also been looking at Lithuania and Uganda. And the Oregon Extension program sounds kind of interesting, too."

"I think you should definitely get out of the country," Dr. Van Leeuwen tells me. "An important part of being educated is having contact with other cultures. A lot of Americans combine arrogance about their own culture with ignorance of other cultures, and this is dangerous. You really should take advantage of the chance to go to another country and see that the American way of life is not all there is. You should take the opportunity to do something like this, or you'll never do it."

He pauses, seeing my hesitation. I fumble for words. "Well, yeah, that all sounds really good." My gaze wanders uncertainly around his office. "I guess I'm just nervous about going by myself. I thought two of my friends were going to go to Oxford next semester with me, but they just changed their minds and decided to go to the Oregon Extension instead."

Dr. Van Leeuwen intertwines his fingers underneath his beard, looking at me piercingly. "First of all," he begins slowly and thoughtfully, "there is no place that is safe except with God. The experience of being alone may be good. Times of loneliness might be enriching for you." He lets me ponder this, then asks, "Do you have any siblings?"

I don't see what this has to do with my worries about venturing out alone into the vast, terrifying unknowns of Europe. "Yes—two sisters," I reply.

"And you're the oldest, right?"

"Yes."

"Are your younger sisters the playful ones who do wild and crazy things, and are you the older, responsible one?"

"Yes."

"You seem to have a tendency to want to control things that are your responsibility and to have all your ducks in a row, Allison," Dr. Van Leeuwen observes. "Go be mischievous in Europe!"

A smile starts to unfold across my face.

Dr. Van Leeuwen continues. "Everything in life is a gift in some way, so see life in this way and appreciate these gifts. Take some risks. Go explore—this will consume most of your energies in Europe. Make sure you see some of the wonderful museums there and take the time to go to cultural events. Especially concerts—there are so many opportunities in Europe to hear classical music performed live with a beauty that a recording can't replicate."

Streams of Bach follow me as I leave Dr. Van Leeuwen's office, lightened by his words. His insight into my dull duck-arranging habits and the excitement it will steal from me prompts me to turn in my application for the Oxford Study Abroad Programme soon afterward. Dr. Van Leeuwen's words recur in my mind, weaving through my thoughts like a familiar melody as I mold my steps to the unfamiliar tempo of British life. I gradually orient myself among Oxford's daunting Gothic spires and imposing intellectuals. I remember his instruction to take advantage of concerts when I see a string quartet performance advertised in town. The open rehearsal is free, so I go and listen to the musicians practice, giving fervent life to the notes and disputing among themselves the best way to play a certain measure.

I think of Dr. Van Leeuwen's counsel on a weekend trip to visit my French friend, Violaine. She tells me how to take the bus to the Louvre while she is at work, and she goes through the stops and the ticket-taking procedure in detail to safeguard me in my American ignorance. She entrusts her cell phone to me as a final security, and I bury it thankfully in my purse.

Past the glass pyramid and stately pillars at the museum, I marvel at sculptures and mosaics and paintings even though I cannot decipher more than a few words of their French labels. When it is time to return to Violaine's apartment, I dial her work number to let her know that I am on my way. A recording spews a flurry of French words at me, apparently inviting me to press a certain number to leave a message. Why did I convince myself in high school that Spanish would be so much more interesting to study than French?

After getting vague directions from a polite woman at a tourism desk, I bumble my way outside to a guard, using my only full French sentence to ask timidly if he can speak English. No, but he looks at the bus number I point to on my map and starts waving me in a direction using the massive gestures of an air traffic controller guiding a plane on a runway, as if my confusion will be allayed by the enormity of his motions. It is dark and starting to rain. I try to quell my panic with a wobbly pretense of amusement at my predicament. I smile my thanks stupidly and wander off, still having to ask the assistance of an irritable shopkeeper to finally reach the right bus stop.

Buses with a variety of route numbers trundle by. I finally see one with the right number, and a woman standing next to me flags it down. I look down to fish the ticket out of my purse. I look up. The bus door is sealing the woman into the clump of warm, dry passengers inside and whizzing past me.

I chastise myself and learn my lesson for the next bus, whipping out my hand in a frantic attempt to get the driver's attention and charging through the door. After I finally reach the eighth floor above the disarray of Parisian streets and step inside the

welcoming haven of Violaine's apartment, I collapse on the couch. Never mind having all my ducks in a row. True, there is no place that is safe except with God.

To end my adventures abroad, I plan to visit New College, one of the colleges within Oxford University, on my last day in England. The porters that keep watch over the college gates have posted a sign that I see as I approach the lodge: "NO VISITORS. EXAMS FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS IN PROGRESS."

I decide that I am a current student of this university, not a visitor. The porters are conveniently occupied with directing potential students inside to interviews and testing rooms. I sneak past the gate quickly and then stroll nonchalantly through the college, exploring gardens, courtyards, and corridors, and furtively snapping photos along the way. I smile, glad for Dr. Van Leeuwen's perception of the tendency of my character and his challenge to me to check its dangerous inclinations. I imagine his grin not only at the cultural education I have had, but at the mischief I have gotten myself into in Europe.

"Come in," Dr. Guelzo says after I knock on his office door. He swivels away from his computer and leans back in his creaky leather chair. Somehow his leaning does not detract from his great height, and my standing position makes me feel no taller than he. His intellect, like his frame, dwarfs me. But I have learned not to let him intimidate me, dean of the Templeton Honors College that he is and puny freshman that I am. There is surprising gentleness and wisdom beneath the genius that expertly and sometimes caustically demolishes the poorly-devised arguments and complacently-held beliefs of his undergraduate charges. I take my seat before his prized Lincoln paraphernalia and baseball artifacts that have gradually bred behind him on the mantle. Columns of books encircle the room, marching on paths to battles of warring ideas.

"I'd like to choose a major soon and I wanted to ask you what you think about some of the different departments at Eastern," I tell him. "I've been thinking about social work, but now I'm leaning more toward English and secondary education."

He scowls thoughtfully and listens as I outline my choices based on the course catalogue. I finish presenting my case and await his advice. He mentions his suspicion of each of my options, throwing scathing comments at each possibility. He plucks the course catalogue from my hands and begins to flip through it.

"You aren't interested in math, are you?" he asks. I make a face. "I didn't think you were. Hmm...business? That's just crunching numbers. Anyone can do that and make a profit."

My expression of distaste sends him flipping pages again. "No, I'm much more of a humanities person than a math and science person," I explain.

"What about history?" he says tantalizingly. Dr. Guelzo is a history professor, and he assures me that I will receive excellent training in his department.

"Well, I like history, but not enough to major in it," I tell him. My firmness apparently persuades him not to press me further.

He finishes his inspection of the course catalogue and returns it to me. "Well, Allison, I guess you'll just have to be an English major," he says in a dismal tone, as if I am recklessly ignoring his warnings and consigning myself to the lesser of many evils.

Although I am slow to realize it, Dr. Guelzo has given me odd help in stripping away options and starting to solidify my decision. In his endearingly cantankerous style, he has bombarded me with questions and made me argue with him about what I most certainly will *not* do. He tells our class later, "No one was accepted to the Honors College on the grounds of being a dupe who would be pliable to the agenda—however nefarious—of the dean." He has no real interest in making me agree with him. But with some provocation he has exposed my thoughts to myself, prodded me to articulate

what I want, and forced me to prop up my decision with good reasons so that I will carry it out.

“Hey, what do you guys think about taking a trip to visit Dr. Guelzo?” Megan asks my friends and me as we near the end of our junior year of college. We are relaxing late at night in her apartment, and she is in the mood for some mischief. She looks up his secretary’s email address, and we start scheming.

Dr. Guelzo left his position as dean of the Honors College after we finished our freshman year, heading for a place at Gettysburg College as a professor of Civil War history. Despite his arduous assignments and merciless grading, my friends and I miss him. He pounced on our intellectual laziness and our inconsistency in professing to believe certain truths without acting on them. His expectations made us strain almost to the breaking point. But we grew under his stretching.

“We want to find out if there’s anything rising in your little oven,” he colorfully told our class once. “You know, your wheel is turning, but the hamster is dead.” We felt dead sometimes that first year, finishing papers in a caffeine-drugged stupor in the early morning and stuttering out replies to the exacting questions Dr. Guelzo fired at us in class. But somehow our “hamsters” kept up the galloping pace he demanded of them, and our wheels kept turning. He hammered us our first semester with eleven books to read and eight papers to write. His fountain pen filled each grading sheet with elegant script giving incisive comments on my not-so-elegantly-written papers and almost always checking the box that said, “Style is laconic and un compelling.”

I was used to getting good grades in high school, and it took much repeated explanation from Dr. Guelzo and many wandering attempts from me before I began to learn how to present a specific problem in my paper, explain an author’s argument, give a shrewd analysis of it, and recommend a solution so that my readers would be ready to snatch their coats and dash out the door to do something about it. As

frustrating as it was to think I had at last achieved these goals and then trudge into his office yet again to find out why I hadn't, his critical remarks helped to dismantle my freshman overconfidence. He pruned my thinking and writing. His fountain pen slashed my cumbersome wordiness to make room for nascent ideas to emerge and ripen.

My papers often kept him busy slashing away at unfocused ideas and fuzzy arguments, and the fruit of my work felt painfully slow in coming. Dr. Guelzo praised the introduction I wrote for my first paper for him, but when I let other ideas clutter the original topic, he wrote, "Okay—but we're straying from the point announced in the opener—don't play the overture to *My Fair Lady* when you're going to open the curtain on *The Sound of Music*." On one of my worst papers he wrote, "I don't necessarily disagree with what you've said here, but I do lament the many lost opportunities for putting more point on it...You needed to hit hard in the intro (we have a problem), define the problem...demonstrate the effects, explain the causes, recommend the solutions, then conclude." In another paper, my attempt to give solutions came out as vague moralizing: "And there was a superabundance of hortatory *must* and a real shortage of *how, why, when, and where*," Dr. Guelzo wrote.

Just as he expected us to make specific recommendations in our writing, he expected us to form specific plans to act on our learning. He was never content in our classes to let us piddle around in academia with idle, speculative talk that saved us the trouble of having to do anything about our ideas. "There are no compartments in life," he emphasized to us. "Truth comes to reign and brings changes to all of it. Ideas have consequences!"

Our class complained to him once of the college administration's less-than-good response to an incident of racism that happened on campus. As a warning to students and as an attempt at prevention, the administration required us to spend time in silence journaling about our thoughts and feelings. But my class and I thought that an

opportunity to dialogue with fellow students about the issue would have been far more profitable than mere individual reflection.

Dr. Guelzo listened to our protests. "I think the issue now is, what are you going to do about it?"

I composed a letter to the administration soon afterward, trying to avoid the temptation to bash what I saw as an ineffective attempt to mend the problem. "Although I am glad that you took the measures that you thought were necessary, I would like to voice some respectful suggestions for how the university might be able to better deal with situations like this one in the future," I wrote. "Discussing these topics together in a respectful, loving way would give students a chance to share their feelings and thoughts and learn from each other while looking at the subject from a Christian perspective in community."

I stopped in Dr. Guelzo's office to let him read the letter before I sent it. He would have better insight than I would about how to wisely point out a problem and propose a change. I coveted his counsel. He peered through his glasses expectantly at my letter and then returned it to me.

"You didn't throw down the gauntlet," he said. "You voiced your objections in a respectful way that shows you aren't trying to pick a fight. Find people, faculty and students, who can do some provocation with you. Let them challenge you not to 'change channels' and think about something else, which has become a habit in this age, but to go ponder what to *do* about an idea."

Dr. Guelzo's exhortations resurface in my memory as five of my friends and I drive the two hours to Gettysburg College. We enter his office, so different from the one we were used to seeing him in. His familiar Lincoln paraphernalia is rearranged in his new space. A look of bewilderment rests on his face for a moment as he tries to remember our names. But he recovers by pulling out his old grade book from our freshman year

and lightheartedly reminding us of what we earned so that he won't be the only embarrassed one.

My friend Ariana brings up one of his recent articles in *Books and Culture* on Jonathan Edwards. Drawing on his history training, Dr. Guelzo constructs a picture of Edwards' character and explains how abrasive this character is to modern readers.

"Lots of people today want therapy and nice parking," Dr. Guelzo says disdainfully. "Edwards wouldn't fit very well into our modern sensibilities. We would be put off by him. But if people are picking up stones because of something you're saying, you're probably doing something right. That's what the gospel is like." It is good to hear him teach again and to listen to the gravity and the challenge in his words.

"Well, you're all probably hungry after a long trip," he says after we have chatted for a while. "Why don't we make our way on over to Tommy's Pizza for dinner? It's near the Soldier's National Cemetery. At the top of the hill is the spot where Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, the greatest speech in American history, and at the bottom of the hill—there you have Tommy's Pizza," he says with a smirk.

We squeeze around a table in a corner booth and pull stringy bites of mozzarella off the pizza.

"Can we contribute something for this?" we ask, reaching for our wallets.

"No," Dr. Guelzo replies in a tone that says he will entertain no arguments, as if we have just asked if we can borrow his credit card.

He tells us about his next book on the Lincoln-Douglas debates and about the massive renovations he has made to the Civil War studies program at Gettysburg. Then he reminisces about his work with the Honors College.

"Starting the Honors College had a lot of potential to make me look stupid," he tells us. "I had to go out there like I was in the middle of Harvard Yard and I knew exactly what I was doing and it was going to be a success. I wanted you all not to turn on me but to tell me it was what I'd promised." We assure him that it was, and even more.

“Your adjustment to the Honors College was a lot like exercise,” he continues. “Big insights don’t just happen. You tried to do chin-ups and sometimes you didn’t make the chin! But if you only play from the grade 1 piano book, that’s all you’ll ever do. When you try something by Chopin with five flats, even if you make a colossal mess of it, at least you’ve done something. It may hurt your ego. I saw the pain and agony on your faces,” Dr. Guelzo says, knowingly sweeping his finger around the table at us. We grimace at the memory. “But it was a delight teaching every one of you, and it was fun to see you stretch like rubber bands.”

The words “colossal mess” well describe my freshman year, full of the discordant tones of a young piano student trying to bang out Chopin’s impossibly elaborate melodies. Although he winced at his students’ attempts sometimes, Dr. Guelzo knew that a mess was all he could expect from us at first. He taught us and re-taught us patiently, never lowering his expectations but helping us to heighten our efforts so that we could grow.

“To whom much has been given,” he often reminded us, “much will be required.” Dr. Guelzo recognized how much we had been given, and because he required much of us, we gave much. He challenged us not only to think well but to act well on our thinking. Slowly, under his tutelage, our messes became less messy, and our once jarring notes resolved into resonant music.

Artistic Mentorship

As we sit in the living room overlooking her garden, Miss Joyce tells me about the discipline and the joy of writing. She teaches me that the ordinary events of life are food for art and perfectionism is poison for it.

“I find life so interesting that I want to record everything in my journals,” she tells me. “When I look back on them, sometimes there is a mundane description of a familiar event on one page and a profound insight on the next.” She encourages me to

keep up with my journaling because many authors use their journals as material for their writing. Sometimes I fall months behind, I confess to her, but I have been trying to record events more artistically so that I keep up my interest in writing.

“Start writing—just get your hand moving,” she tells me. “It’s a lot of blah, blah, blah sometimes. But then the gold comes.” I know the “blah” writing well. Sentences meander off with a mutinous disregard for my intention to conform them to the flow of a paragraph. Ideas remain submerged in my consciousness, stuck just beyond my ability to bring them to the surface and articulate them. But sometimes I unexpectedly strike a golden vein of insight that I can mine and purify, setting the riches on display for readers to enjoy.

“I don’t think I’m a great writer; but I’m a good writer,” Miss Joyce says. “And I have some things to say that God wants said.”

I try to keep this in mind as sentences coalesce in my thoughts. I try not to seize on their defects or how they reflect on me, nor to disown any phrase that falls short of profound. My sentences may be clumsy in wording or dull in meaning, but sometimes they are burning with truth waiting to be voiced. Miss Joyce helps me to believe that even their ordinariness can illuminate myself and my readers, and patient revision will enhance their blaze.

Vocational Mentorship

My family takes a trip to Longwood Gardens in July to see the summer blooms. We stroll along tranquil pathways beside the flowers, gems of lustrous color. A room full of countless exotic varieties of orchids especially captivates me. Some orchids have slender, arcing petals; others full, lacy ones. Some flame with exquisite color; others have quieter hues with dark, filigree veins.

“They’re all so beautiful,” I say to my dad. “I can’t choose my favorite.” My own words resound in my mind. On the brink of entering my senior year of college, I have

let the exasperating question of “What are you doing next?” from adults, peers, and myself begin to plague me. My friends, with their myriad personalities, all seem to have found distinct callings that fit their insights and skills. But my own personality and gifts seem dull as I admire the treasures they have to offer. I indulge in the poison of comparison, and I feel barren, unable to contribute anything. But the striking beauty of these orchids makes them far too different to compare or to name one as intrinsically better than another. Just as I delight in the disparity of each patterned petal, my Creator delights in the varied array of His people. I savor the vision of the orchids as we continue meandering along the garden paths.

Later that week, I drive up to Blessing Hill for the second time to see Miss Joyce. I re-wrote my email to her earlier that month at least three times, fiddling with the wording and the length. I wanted to ask her to meet with me a few times as my mentor. I am hoping to find in her a model of faith to imitate, but something about her personality also intrigues me. In contrast to some of the other female examples that make up my family, Miss Joyce has a quieter, thoughtful, artistic temperament, one more like my own. I sense a kinship between our personalities instead of the complementarity that I see between my family members and me. There is something about Miss Joyce’s depth of character that invites me to uncover the pearls hidden in it.

As we sit in the lovely room supported by the timbers that once damaged the house, Miss Joyce begins to share her life with me. She talks of God’s call to her to marry her husband and to join the Navigators, a ministry devoted to multiplying disciples of Christ. She tells me of her time in Holland, how she steered through cultural adjustment and language acquisition and how her family never went hungry during the time friends supported them through the Navigators. Bright yellow, red, and blue painted flowers and European print fabrics adorn her home, trimmings of Dutch culture which she has assimilated into her own artistic style.

“Knowing what God has revealed to you and writing that down is important for being able to articulate it and pass it on to other people,” she tells me. “That way you’re not teaching a new theory, but something personal.” The stunning simplicity of sharing her life with people is Miss Joyce’s calling, something that she does in her writing and in her interactions with people who visit her home.

This simplicity makes an imprint on me. Miss Joyce has written books and spoken in front of hundreds of people, but she is merrily indifferent to visibility or significance. Visions of renown and importance crowd my thinking about my own calling, and I let the pressures of competing with classmates, getting into a prestigious graduate school, or landing an impressive career sway me too easily. I imagine achieving a certain image as a professional clad in a smart business suit standing at a podium to present a scholarly paper at an academic conference. But Miss Joyce confronts me with a far humbler and yet deeply attractive image. Whether standing in the pulpit at our church to deliver a nourishing message to her listeners or standing at her kitchen table to offer nourishing food to her guests, she is an artful, generous hostess. She invites people into her home and her life and refreshes them by passing on the truths that God has revealed to her. From God’s clear calling to her to get married and to join the Navigators to His clear providence for her family on the mission field, Miss Joyce testifies to His faithful care and guidance. This testimony of God’s call and His supply of grace to fulfill that call is life and peace to me.

“Now I have to show you my orchid,” Miss Joyce says as I am getting ready to leave. I smile at the delicate flower, exulting in the wealth of sunlight. Two elegant blossoms bloom on Miss Joyce’s patio in an ecstasy of violet.

Mentors fulfill multi-faceted roles for us: they point us to Christ and model faith and strength in hardship. They intertwine hard messages of truth with compassion; they notice need and make sacrifices for the sake of other people; they show hospitality by

making space for guests. They use their insight into our character to steer us away from our flaws. They stretch us until we grow, and they stir us to translate our ideas into actions. They inspire us to cultivate our creativity so that other people may enjoy the truth and beauty of our art. They invite us to heed God's calling, carrying it out in His grace with humility and simplicity.

Finding these kinds of mentors is difficult. People who seem wise at first may prove to be untrustworthy or manipulative. They may try to meet their own needs for affirmation by using another person to make them feel needed, or they may be engrossed in having the power to influence someone else. But often our greatest difficulty is not so much in finding a mentor but in submitting to our mentors. It is a flagrant affront to our do-it-yourself cultural mentality to accept correction and training with humility. We may be tempted to sidestep this sticky process by being finicky as we evaluate prospective teachers. Yet we do ourselves far more good when we consider our own faults rather than the faults of potential mentors. However imperfect they may be, their words and their examples bear a message for us. And our attentiveness to it is vital.

When we heed our mentors, it should not be only for the utilitarian purpose of fixing ourselves and our work. Although refining our character and our skills is part of the reason we should listen to wise people, they have more to offer us than just a few helpful tips. As living sacraments, they channel streams of love and truth to us, streams that well up and spill over from their divine Source. They are like teachers who help schoolchildren learn to read and write. The most obvious purpose teachers fulfill is to give the children practical knowledge to perform a task. To this end, they read to their students and enclose the students' hands in theirs in order to shape the letters. On one level, the teachers do something useful by correcting mistakes and imparting skills to the children. But on a deeper level, they are carriers of knowledge, leading their students to grasp and articulate truth in written words. Likewise, mentors not only

train us and fine-tune our young skills, but they lead us to the Living Word Himself. Mentors are ambassadors of Jesus, bearers of His grace and truth who direct us back to Him.